



Captain,

Soldier,

a SWTOR fanfic

Cipher,

Spy

by brightephemera

Titles

SWTOR fanfiction

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After the events of Ruth Means Compassion, the Ruth-verse took a turn for the silly. Here, two experienced Imperial operatives face the biggest problems of the galaxy...and each other. Every day. It's awful.

Dedication

For every QuinnWyn shipper who egged me on

Acknowledgements

The Bright!verse was not written in a vacuum. It was a product, one of many, of the Short Fiction Weekly Challenge (SFC) on the SWTOR forums. I am deeply indebted to each and every writer and commenter there. They're the ones who told me I had stories worth telling. It is only a partial list when I wave to the earliest authors, Magdalane, Kalterien, Earthmama, iamthehoyden, elliotcat, Tatile, Eanelinea, Striges, kabeone, Morgani, Crezelle, irishfino, many more...from their inspiration and encouragement all stories grow.

Captain, Cipher, Soldier, Spy is a non-profit fan made work. Star Wars: The Old Republic and the characters, settings, and dialogue associated with it are the property of LucasArts and BioWare.

Content and Spoilers

Content warnings: unauthorized erotic fanfic (mentioned in story, rarely shown)

Spoiler warnings: Imperial Agent Acts 1-3, Sith Warrior Acts 1-3, Ruth Means Compassion

RMC is not required reading. It is a dramatic presentation of, among other things, Quinn and Wynston's original associations, plus the reason for Quinn to sign on with Wynston.

Captain, Cipher, Soldier, Spy, while goofy, is Ruth!verse canon. It occurs after Timeline 3 of Ruth Means Compassion.

All romantic pairings are OC here. There are no pairings with NPCs, because that's ridiculous, why would you ever. Nope, OC all the way here. This is not the ship you're looking for, you can go about your business. Move along.

Foreword

This entire book contains spoilers for Ruth Means Compassion's ending. RMC is a much different work, arc-focused and serious. Captain, Cipher, Soldier, Spy deals with its wacky hijinks fallout, but RMC is not required reading.

With that said...

Ruth Means Compassion was satisfying to me, but man, was it a downer. Ruth's quest to protect the Empire - the galaxy - had succeeded, at the cost of her own life.

I wrote that Wynston offered bitter rival Quinn a job in future work because pity. It was an impulse and an empty gesture, nothing more. Then I started thinking about what that future would look like.

The answer? Silly.

Captain, Cipher, Soldier, Spy, originally titled Ruth-less, is the story of two Imperial operatives brought together by a woman and a pesky galaxy devourer. After the big bad is defeated, what is there left to do? Their adjustment to life as secret agent galactic do-gooders is captured here. Cerulean contours and an air of noble tragedy only get you so far. The rest requires teamwork.

Welcome to the *Aegis*. Welcome to the Organization.

The Story So Far

Background as established in Ruth Means Compassion:

Class plotlines happen as in game. Warrior Ruth Niral sleeps with Agent Wynston early on, but settles as friends and allies after that. Wynston and Malavai Quinn's interactions are hostile due to their being excessively similar except for where Wynston is a) an alien and b) has a pulse while c) still getting the job done. Within a year of the class line ending, Ruth has a falling-out with Quinn (and, not coincidentally, stops playing Ms. Nice Sith). She carries and raises a son, Rylon, by herself while Quinn proceeds with a solo military career. Meanwhile, Wynston wanders out of Imperial Intelligence in favor of a galactic watchdog agency trying to take care of the general population of all factions, protecting them from authority gone bad.

Some fifteen years after the class line ends, Ruth re-encounters Quinn face to face and begins a long slow climb toward Light Side; the following year, Wynston sets her off on an adventure that culminates in facing down the Emperor himself, over the objections of her corrupted son Rylon. Quinn attacks Rylon in order to keep him from killing Ruth under the Emperor's compulsion; Ruth dies anyway at the hands of the Emperor himself. The attack reduces the Emperor to a small greasy residue in a Rakatan mind trap; we leave that in the Sith Lord Scourge's keeping. Meanwhile, Rylon survives and rejects the Emperor's ways. Quinn gets to survive knowing that the last thing Ruth saw of him was him shooting their son in the back. Way to go, Quinn!

And with that...

Dramatis Personae

WYNSTON, *hsin'bo*, Darnek Amun, Vora'lexi'senndo, Gath'rando'nuor, Chaf'alc'endan, Cipher Nine, Lieutenant, Commander, Director and recent savior of the galaxy;

MALAVAI QUINN, an Imperial soldier and recent savior of the galaxy;

Supporting crew RYLON NIRAL, QUINN's son by RUTH NIRAL; PIERCE JUNIOR; HAZARD; and occasional other companions.

Captain. Cipher. Soldier. Spy.

September, 28 ATC: Getting a job

"Heavy fire on our left, sir."

Malavai Quinn stood in the command center and scanned the real-time map of the sprawling city. The interface on this control system was criminally bad. One would think they would've figured out more than one color by now. "I'm well aware. Bring up our center reserve, I want to keep the others on hold in case the Republic tries to sweep clear around the end."

Which it did. The left reserve was available to counter the Republic's move after they thought they had skirted the whole Imperial line. The Republic was thoroughly crushed on that flank.

He was about to transition to wrapup activities when news came of multiple fresh Republic squads stabbing at the battle's center. Oddly, irrelevantly, he thought of a sunny afternoon among the mountains of some Core World about six months ago, standing outside the brilliant mixed crowd of his wife Ruth and her Jedi and Sith allies, taking out yet another circle of the Emperor's planet-killing cultists. Stopping another planet from dying. It had been a triumphant day. And here he was now, reduced to spending a week in a titanic struggle to secure another square mile of another pointless planet.

"Sir! They're slamming our artillery. Two guns already down."

He turned to his aide. "You know something? I don't care."

"Sir?"

"I'm finished. This war can drag on perfectly well without me." And had, while he was on a leave of absence to assassinate the Empire's own head of state. It had been necessary, but still: so much for patriotism. He raised his chin a little, called over to his subordinate, Major General Vance.

"General, you have the command." And with that, Quinn turned on his heel, headed to the spaceport, and took his personal ship out.

*

He had hyperspace coordinates he hadn't really planned on using, given to him by an ally he hadn't really planned on seeing again, after a conversation he hadn't really planned on allowing. The agent Wynston was Ruth's friend, not Quinn's, and it was Wynston's mysterious galactic-protection organization that had dragged Ruth into the hunt that had killed her.

Plus, the man was just annoying.

Still, in some ways the work it offered was the closest thing Quinn could have to carrying out Ruth's wishes out there. She had always favored protecting people, all populations, regardless of affiliation. She had wanted a galaxy where people were safe from the whims of the Sith as well as other major powers. Quinn knew Wynston's agency sought that goal as well. And the prospect beat another twenty years of crawling through infinitely repetitive battles that simply could not keep his mind busy enough to avoid the discomfort associated with the aforementioned saving of the entire galaxy.

Quinn got automated clearance to land in a hangar of the massive Imperial cruiser he dropped out of hyperspace next to. When he left his Fury, one person stood in the hangar waiting for him.

The Chiss wasn't quite the scarred Wynston he had last seen, the natural, real one. He was similar, still rather short, but this greeter was a little more muscular, with a different, finer-featured, scar-free face. Not for the first time, Quinn found himself envying the permanent disguise technology Wynston had integrated into his cybernetics.

"General," said Wynston.

"Agent," said Quinn. "You mentioned something about a job opening in your organization?"

"In *The Organization*. Yes. Welcome."

"Let's not mince words. Why exactly are you welcoming a 'perfidious bastard' who 'can't be trusted outside shiv range and, for that matter, can't be trusted within shiv range' and furthermore 'constitutes the single most irritating liability to a cause you've ever met'?"

“What, are those all the lines you remember from our illustrious joint career?”

“I could continue reciting, but I don’t want to be here all night. The question stands.”

The Chiss didn’t demonstrate a trace of self-consciousness. “Ruth believed in you. And I think, by the end, I trust her in that.”

“Just like that.”

“If you want to call ‘hunting down and killing the Emperor’ ‘just like that,’ then yes.” He shrugged. “Effective operatives are rare. Effective, experienced, and endorsed by the likes of Ruth? If you want the work, I’ll take you.”

“Hm.” Quinn looked around the hangar; it was unremarkable in every way. He wondered what was set up elsewhere in the ship. “Very well. Where do I start?”

“Well, I was going to be courteous and say we can play this two ways. You can work with me. I show you the ropes, do some ops with you. Or, I hand you off to Imperial Affairs and we just don’t talk to each other. You still get meaningful work and we don’t have to endure each other’s company.”

Phrased like that, it was a hell of a choice. Not working with Wynston would be a relief and a pleasure. At the same time, it meant learning his way around a new organization, surrounded by strangers who outranked him, who had no idea why some greying set-in-his-ways soldier was looking so moody all the time.

Working with Wynston would mean working with Wynston, which was terrible; but the Chiss knew him, knew his methods, respected his intellect if not his ethics, and most importantly, had known and valued Ruth. Quinn wasn’t quite sure he was ready to be alone in that mourning.

“Better the devil I know,” he said at last.

Wynston grinned. “I’m flattered. I’ll try not to ‘toss the mission out the window the next time some pretty thing in a skirt wanders by’ or otherwise demonstrate the ‘flagrant lack of professionalism’ that will ‘compromise everything for a moment’s cheap pleasure.’”

"It would be appreciated."

"Come with me. We might have a couple of hours to look around before the next crisis hits."

September, 28 ATC: Ruth-less

The tour was coming to a close. Quinn, however, didn't enter his offered quarters. Instead he planted his feet and glared down at Wynston.

"Something must be settled if I am to work here," he said.

"Oh, this should be good. What did you have in mind?"

"Simply? The chain of command. Where do I fit?"

"Chain of command?" Wynston cocked his head. "Well, I'm in charge of everybody, and you're not."

"While I am willing to serve in an advisory capacity, I am not, nor will I ever be, your employee."

"Fine with me. Given your track history I wouldn't want to be the one giving you orders anyway. Advisor is fine. It's just that my word goes."

"Only when it makes sense."

"I always make sense, Quinn."

"As your advisor I am obligated to inform you that that is flagrantly untrue."

"Well, well, aren't we adapting nicely."

Quinn showed his teeth. "There's more where that came from."

"Good. You've got training. You've got strategic acumen, after a couple of notable false starts, and tactical expertise. You've got legendarily selective morals. This work should come naturally to you."

"And is the self-righteousness a requisite for command in this organization?"

"If it were, would you start cultivating it? I mean beyond the baseline stuffiness."

"I'm merely seeking to understand the command structure." It was said with a wolfish eye-glint.

"Look, wherever you are in that chain, it's not next in line, so you can stop looking at me like that."

"Understood," Quinn said crisply. He did not stop looking at Wynston like that.

"My, would you look at the time," said Wynston. "I've got important things to do, er, elsewhere. That happens when you're in charge, which as I've noted, you aren't."

"Quite." It was pronounced oddly like 'yet.'

Wynston turned on his heel and, still uncertain as to whether he had won that round, strode out.

September, 28 ATC: A lady friend

"And our hub in the Ilum sector is in the asteroid belt surrounding Star C284. From here our ships can reach-"

Quinn squinted at the galactic map Wynston had zoomed in on. "Where do you refuel from there?"

"Fun question, isn't it? That difficulty is what keeps this out of the military considerations of the major powers. We actually have a major refinery on a larger asteroid, here, from where we can periodically resupply in huge quantities. The expense is worth it to maintain our things where nobody thinks it's worth looking."

"I see."

When Wynston had offered to brief Quinn on the broad lines of the Organization's operations, he hadn't expected quite this much enthusiasm or attention to detail. Wynston had the feeling that Quinn would be able to

run the whole thing himself, from a logistics perspective, after no more than another six or eight hours' study. *Ruth couldn't keep track of her own shoes. No wonder she relied on him so heavily.*

Someone knocked at the conference room door. A willowy young Twi'lek, blue, lovely, with the flat black eyes of a Killik Joiner, stuck her head in. "Wynston. We would like to speak with you when you have the time."

"Of course, Hazard. I'll be along shortly."

The Twi'lek smiled, blew Wynston a kiss, and withdrew.

"All right, Quinn. I'll leave you access to the files on the rest of this supply stuff. Find me tomorrow if you want clarification on any of it."

Quinn was still looking at the door, though the Twi'lek was already gone. "Hazard?"

Wynston quirked his eyebrows. "In more ways than one. It was her street name from her pre-Joiner days."

"And what does she do?"

"She's a Dawn Herald of the Oroboro Killik nest. Vector's job, once upon a time. She's been working for my organization as a goodwill gesture by the hive."

"Very good will."

Wynston shrugged modestly.

"That girl can't be a day over twenty-five."

"Oh? Is that a problem, Mister Fifteen Years Older Than His First Wife?"

Quinn made a face. "My only wife. And you're talking a twenty-year gap here. She's far too young for you."

"Do I need to bring up Lieutenant Grace?"

Quinn's eyes widened. "You know about Lieutenant Grace?"

"I kept tabs on you through the years. In case you ever tried to...you know. If you ever tried to hurt Ruth again. I had the dossier to destroy your career."

They let the awkwardness sink in for a few seconds.

"I had one on you, too," admitted Quinn.

Wynston flashed a white smile. "Bet mine was better."

"That's because you cheat. You and your however many pseudonyms. I still managed to get enough to seriously inconvenience you if I had to."

"We should compare notes sometime. I could point out what you missed. Now, as I was saying, if you want to criticize my sleeping with women too young for me, I can remind you of Ensign Rhona, Lieutenant Qurek, Lieu-

"Your point is made," said Quinn hastily. "It just looks much more disturbing when you're doing it."

"I could ask the hive to fix you up."

"That won't be necessary. I'm sure you can handle the twentysomething population of the galaxy without me."

"That's very generous of you. As long as we're on the topic, you holding any claims on the thirtysomething and fortysomethings?"

Wynston enjoyed these surges of outraged disapproval from the officer. "No," huffed Quinn.

"Excellent. That makes my life easy. Now, if you'll excuse me, I'm going to...I'm going to resist saying something unbelievably cheesy about communing with the hive."

"I'll pretend I didn't hear that."

"...Yes, perhaps that's just as well. Anyway, good night."

September, 28 ATC: Tatooine handoff

Gorath Jin was an uncommonly mean-spirited smuggler, well known in Hutt space and the Outer Rim. When he picked up a shipment of certain rare materials that Wynston's espionage operation could use, Wynston decided to kill two birds - or rather, one supply problem and one infamous thug - with one stone.

And, since Malavai Quinn was still learning the ropes in this industry, Wynston brought him along.

"Do I get a disguise generator like yours?" said Quinn.

"No. It takes a while to produce them. We'll issue you one when we can. Besides, I doubt you'll need it just yet."

"Oh?"

"You'll want it to hide your face when you operate in Imperial space. But in the Outer Rim? You're fine. To be frank, you're in the luxurious position of being able to elicit positive social responses with your natural face."

"Positive...social responses."

The scarred Chiss looked him over and let one corner of his mouth quirk up. "You've done a much better job of preserving your looks than I have. You look striking, bordering on distinguished with the greying-hair thing, and quite possibly still handsome enough to sweep young Sith Lords off their feet if you had to."

"Don't joke about that."

"Ah. Sorry. It...may take a while to sort out how humor works here."

"Quite."

"For one thing, I am never hitting on you. You can set your mind at ease there."

"That is a relief to hear."

"I thought it might be. I'm as flexible as I have to be professionally, but I don't go after men in my spare time. And I won't be offended if you tell me I'm not your type."

The cargo was set to be handed over on Tatooine. Wynston put on an unremarkable Twi'lek likeness. Both Wynston and Quinn picked out street clothes, some light body armor, nothing that would stand out in a crowd of mercenaries. The warehouse stood in a deep desert canyon, with only the smallest of landing pads available alongside. Wynston and Quinn quietly infiltrated the warehouse, observing the Exchange crew that had brought the shipment that far and was now waiting for the handoff. Wynston hid in the shadows, Quinn settled on an out-of-the-way packing crate, they activated their respective stealth generators, and they waited.

Finally the lead Exchange thug got a holocall, grunted a few times at his correspondent, and nodded for his people to haul open the great cargo door. Gorath Jin walked in alone.

The ugly smuggler scanned the warehouse with a critical eye. "I see, I see." A few gunmen entered behind him and started walking up and down between packing crates, periodically prying one open to check inside. Eventually they gave their boss the all-clear. Gorath walked up to where the Exchange crew waited. "One credit stick for you, sir."

"Eh," grunted the Exchange leader, and accepted it.

Gorath beamed and backed off. "Now," he sang.

The gunmen who had examined the shipment opened fire from all directions, joined by another two from outside. The battle was short and one-sided; Gorath's men cleaned up while only losing one themselves.

"Nice an' neat," announced the smuggler. "Swipe their identicards and let's take this stuff home."

"I'm afraid that will be quite impossible."

Quinn strolled out from behind a pile of packing crates, his hands folded behind his back. He took up his distinctively military parade rest. "The shipment we have a use for. You, Gorath Jin, we do not. As of today, your bloody trade is at an end."

Gorath grinned a gap-toothed grin. "You don't want to be crossing me, buddy. I have powerful friends."

"They won't miss you," Quinn said scornfully. "I suppose eventually some of them might wonder where you went, but I can continue to supply them with their goods. As long as that's assured, I really doubt any of them will be sentimental enough to ask after you."

Gorath looked off to one side and beckoned. "May get hairy, boys. Come on."

The gunmen formed up around Gorath, blaster rifles and one assault cannon trained on where Quinn stood alone. The smuggler chuckled. "You still thinking you're in charge here, buddy?"

Wynston, without saying anything, stepped into the open behind them and tossed a thermal detonator.

"Yes, actually," said Quinn in a friendly tone. And the detonator blew.

Between the two of them, Quinn and Wynston rapidly cleared the survivors of the blast. Wynston holstered his pistol and spoke in a stage whisper.

"Formal pose, stiff neck, accent, plus gloating?"

"Well, yes."

"Bloody hell, Quinn, try to remember you're a mercenary, not a...well...an Imperial officer."

"The gloating needed to happen," said Quinn defensively. "The opportunity was right there. Besides, it's not like anybody survived to get offended over it."

"You'll never get anywhere acting like that."

A cool feminine voice sounded from the staircase leading up to the second floor. "Well, that was unexpected."

Wynston took his blaster back out, but he was smiling. Quinn trained his blaster on the dusky beauty who was sweeping down the stairs, her intriguingly thin green dress billowing behind her in the slight air currents of the warehouse.

"Gentlemen, I have been waiting longer than you can imagine for somebody to clear that pig out of my warehouse. Are you planning on setting up...business...here?"

Quinn appeared to be calculating rapidly as he watched her. Wynston also appeared to be calculating, but he was clearly concentrating on a different data set. "Madam, I'm open to setting up business any place you like."

"Hm." The woman gave the false Twi'lek a dismissive once-over, then turned back to Quinn. "Nice moves during that little showdown, sugar. I like your style. And I wanted to say, you're missing out if you only take the parts of the shipment at this warehouse."

"And what does that mean?" asked Quinn.

"The Exchange always stashes the good stuff elsewhere." She jerked her head toward an undistinguished corner of the warehouse. "Come with me and I'll show you."

The woman took a step and waited expectantly. Quinn raised his eyebrows at Wynston and mouthed "Never get anywhere?" Wynston rolled his eyes and cleared out to let Quinn do his job.

*

Wynston, having finished directing the lifting droids to load up the transport, was waiting in the blissfully air conditioned cockpit when Quinn finally climbed in.

"Never ask me to do that again," said Quinn.

Wynston grinned. "Ask? Sir, you volunteered."

"No, I didn't."

"The minute that woman showed up you were ready for playtime."

"No I wasn't! I only did what was necessary to secure the shipment."

"*Every* last part thereof," Wynston said slowly.

"You are an extraordinarily unpleasant man."

"You're a real professional. Take it from someone who knows." Wynston's grin widened. "So, you go through with it?"

"Of course not."

"Backing out early raises a lady's suspicion."

"Not as such. She led me into a closet that, I regret to report, had no additional smuggled goods, and, once she was sure we were alone, she tried to stab me."

"Really?"

"Really. So I killed her and went back out to help load the true cargo. No intercourse required."

"I stand corrected, Quinn. You truly are a professional."

Quinn sniffed disdainfully. "I found this resolution considerably more tasteful than the alternative." He hopelessly brushed a little of Tatooine's dust off his sleeve. "Tell me these materials are worth it?"

"Absolutely. Instead of benefiting a Hutt, they're going to benefit scum like us."

"We're not scum."

"Quinn, you've been calling me scum for the past twenty years. Give or take."

"Fair point. *I'm* not scum."

"Whatever you say, sugar."

September, 28 ATC: Bugging Quinn (Insomnia edition)

"Mind if we join you?"

Quinn looked up from his breakfast to see the Twi'lek Joiner known as Hazard. She had passed by a number of tables in the mother ship *Aegis'* cafeteria to reach him.

"By all means," he said, redundantly gesturing to the seat she was about to take.

"We like to keep up with the recruits," she said. Her voice had that strange evenness Quinn remembered from Vector Hyllus: sweet, almost musical, but on a single note. "At the same time, we realize not everyone is immediately comfortable with Joiners."

"Oh, no, I'm quite familiar with Killiks. A Killik eviscerated my wife once."

Hazard looked stricken. "Um. Oh. We, uh, we are sorry to hear that."

Quinn waved dismissively. "She got better. In the end, the primary significance of the experience was that it forced me to realize, for the first time, that I cared for her." He considered. "The secondary significance was dramatically reduced liver function, but it never caused her any trouble."

"Oh," she said awkwardly, fiddling with the blue lekku she had draped in front of her.

"Vector was there. Do you...can you, as part of the nest, remember?"

Hazard tilted her head. "Perhaps."

She closed her eyes for a few seconds. Then a few more. Quinn got back to eating while he waited.

Her black eyes opened. "We recall. She was beautiful, for a human." She stared off into space. "Vector thought she was an idiot to leave Wynston for you."

"What?" Quinn scowled. "Vector can keep his opinions to himself."

"The opinion is shared with the nest. Tens of thousands of us, and the hundreds of thousands that will come after, for all time."

"That's intolerable. Can I register a dissenting opinion with your hive mind?"

"Vector was the only one who knew her. The only one of us who could judge," she said distantly.

"I take back what I said to start with. I'm not immediately comfortable with Joiners and I do mind if you join me."

Wynston showed up with a tray heaped with what appeared to be wampa jerky. "What's the subject of the day?"

"I was just noticing," said Quinn, "that everything comes back to Ruth, and that everyone really enjoys volunteering criticism of my relationship with her."

"Well, it was a terrible idea on her part."

"Do shut up."

"No, I sympathize. After Kaliyo died it seemed like everything reminded me of her. Every explosion, every obvious opportunity for dealing in stolen goods, every flask of Corellian whiskey, every angry ex and bounty hunter and debt collector - and let me tell you, they had loud opinions on our relationship. Particularly the linked finances they imagined we had."

"It's not the same at all," sniffed Quinn.

"I suppose not. For one thing...hm."

"You were saying?" grated Quinn.

"I was debating being tactful for a moment. I'm wavering on the subject, though."

"Please be nice," Hazard said softly.

"Oh? What do you care?"

"We just found out that the nest attempted to cut out his wife's entrails once."

"Oh. Right. You did, at that."

"We feel bad about it and wish to be kind to Quinn for now."

"That's a mistaken conclusion, sweetheart, but for you I'll behave."

"I appreciate your consideration," Quinn told Hazard. "But not your taste in men."

"Full circle," murmured Wynston.

November, 28 ATC: Talk the Talk

"Quinn. Lesson today. Much though I enjoy hearing an Academy-trained drill sergeant every time you open your mouth, it's about time you started broadening the horizons of your speech patterns."

"I don't see the point."

"Improved disguises."

Quinn shrugged, unimpressed.

"The ability to operate in Republic space."

"I manage as I am."

"The hope of hitting on some accent or vernacular pattern that fewer women consider a turn-on."

"I'm in."

"I thought you might be." Wynston jumped into a different accent, heavily Republic. "Now, then. I can start with this here. Your vowels will be a little different - all of them will - and - star, sterling, horror, roundabout, heart - you'll handle 'r's differently."

"What did you just say?"

"You'll handle 'r's differently?"

"You're not speaking Basic."

Wynston flipped back to an Imperial accent. "Yes, I am."

"Whatever that mishmash of noises was, it wasn't Basic."

"Quinn, it's Basic in a Coruscanti accent. One trillion people speak it as their native dialect."

"One trillion people are failing to speak in anything approaching a civilized language. Sleens in mating season sound both more comprehensible and more pleasing than that."

Wynston went Coruscanti. "You're a real snob, you know that?"

"Ugh. Can't I just speak Huttese or something?"

"We'll work on it. Coruscant first."

"If I must." Quinn took up a very different vocal style. "Look at me, I'm an ignorant lout who can't be bothered to enunciate my consonants or do any of my 'o's right; furthermore I don't have a speck of education or class and am probably going to waste my entire life haring after the idiot dreams that the Republic instills in its masses."

Wynston stared, wide-eyed. "Quinn, that was perfect."

"That's the problem! It's disgusting!"

"If you could say something that doesn't make you sound like a complete arse, but keep that accent, you would be all set for undercover work in Republic space."

Quinn tapped his fingers on the table and watched.

"All right, so everything you say makes you sound like a complete arse regardless of the accent."

"I was waiting for the inevitable commentary."

"Happy to oblige. Now just remember. Chicks dig the Imperial upper class style. Drop that and they'll be more likely to actually pay attention to your personality, which will translate directly into less unwanted attention for you."

"I wish I could believe you. But the fact that there's a stable population of one trillion on Coruscant indicates that men are still getting female attention there. Even with the accent."

"That's where your personality will make the difference."

Quinn scowled and leaned back. After a moment he spoke up with the Coruscanti accent. "I can't believe you actually want me to talk like this. I can't believe anyone would want to talk like this."

"You're a natural. If you've already got that down, we can move on to Huttese."

"Thank the stars for that. Please, let's get started."

November, 28 ATC: What's in a name?

"Do you have a last name?"

"Sure. Wynston."

"Then do you have a first name?"

"Sure. Wynston."

"Wynston Wynston."

"No, just the once. Single word, means it qualifies as both first and last."

"You could just say you don't want to tell me. It's not like I haven't heard that from irritating colleagues before."

"Quinn, I've been in this line of business for just about thirty years - Chiss start young - and I've had perilously close to four hundred names. 'Wynston' is enough to keep track of in my down time."

"What you're saying is 'blah blah blah I'm too cool to have a first name, just like all the other goons who are trying too hard to be special.'"

"...Pierce really got under your skin, didn't he?"

Quinn, rather than responding with irritation, suddenly perked up. "Wait. You have the most powerful intelligence apparatus in the galaxy here. Did you ever catch Pierce's name?"

"Why, yes, we did."

Quinn's eyes fairly sparked. "What is it? Where's the record?"

"The record, sir, is right next to the file that has my original full name."

"...Either you're making this up or I have reason to be extremely annoyed with you."

"Is that an either/or, or is that a both?"

Quinn glowered. "You tell me. Wynston."

"I don't believe I will, Agent Malavai Quinn." Wynston stood up, shoved his hands in his pockets, and sauntered off, whistling.

December, 28 ATC: The Wingman

"Quinn, I have a practice session for you."

Quinn looked up from his holonet research. "Oh?"

"Got a target back on Nar Shaddaa."

"Ah, my favorite place to be with you."

"Yes, I remember. Simpler days, eh? Hunting down and killing an agent just like yourself, watching me simultaneously get the intelligence you couldn't find and-"

"Distracting my commander from doing the same? Yes, I remember very well what you were doing," said Quinn, fiddling with his wedding ring. "So what's the mission?"

"Jedi, a rather corrupt one, smuggling privileged information to contacts in the Duros resistance movement. I have reason to believe the dirt she's carrying could destabilize not only the system, but the sector, and give the Republic a leg up that will – according to predictions – only invite an extremely messy Imperial counterattack. Best take that information ourselves, disseminate what's necessary, remove the rest."

"Simply killing one Jedi, then?"

"Alas, she's got connections. No kill. Straightforward seduction and theft, with a datacard swap so she has something less volatile to deliver to her

contacts.” Wynston paused. “It’s about time you got into this game, you’re by far one of the best qualified candidates to keep your wits about you.”

“I can’t seduce a Jedi.”

“You already seduced the galaxy’s most soft-hearted Sith. It’s practically the same thing.”

“I didn’t seduce her,” Quinn said resentfully.

“Right, you merely wrapped her around your finger, somehow made yourself the object of her undying adoration, then slept with her. Seduction was not involved.”

“It’s not like I set out to do it. If anybody is seducing anybody in this job, it’ll be you and that Jedi. Leave me out of it.”

“Quinn, I have no use for an agent who can’t hoodwink anybody into certain varieties of physical interaction. Let me deal with her, but you’d better be observing, at least to start.” Wynston studied Quinn’s face and frowned.

“You realize this isn’t a terrible assignment, right? Normal people would be delighted to have the chance?”

“Then find a normal person.”

“Just observe. Just once. You’ll have to observe without the ring on, though.”

*

Wynston selected a ruggedly handsome human visage, not too childish, not too weathered, and got to the target cantina to take a booth with Quinn and wait.

The target entered a little after dinner time and went straight to the bar. She was thirtysomething, black-haired, Mirialan. She wore an interesting hybrid of dress and (in a vague design sense) robe. Cut low for a Jedi, covering a tragically large amount of leg for a civilian. She ordered a blue drink and started watching one of the big neon screens on the wall.

Wynston walked up to the bar. “Telos Twist, extra rathan juice.” He looked over at the Jedi and her drink. “Excuse me, miss. Word of advice? As long as you’re on Nar Shaddaa you should really try the Huttese version of that

stuff. Best place in the galaxy to sample it, you don't want generic Core liquor here."

She gave him a wide-eyed look and a small tentative smile. "Is that so?"

"It surely is. Here, have a sample on me." He ordered a shot and started casually chatting about the meaningless fluff she had been watching on the big screen.

She sampled the shot he had ordered her and pronounced it "really amazing." Then, with a charming smile, she changed the subject. "Hey, if I might ask, who's your friend?"

"I'm sorry?"

"I noticed that man you were sitting with earlier. You going to just leave him there?"

Wynston blinked. Then smiled casually. "I was going to, but if the lady has other ideas..."

"Hey. I'm just after respectable conversation, sir."

"I'm happy to oblige." Wynston offered Nasya his arm and escorted her over to the booth, where Quinn shook himself out of his moroseness to straighten to Imperial-grade-board stiffness and watch them.

"Nasya, meet my friend Goryn Shei. Goryn, the Jedi Nasya."

Her eyelashes fluttered for a second as she looked him over. "Pleasure to meet you." She smiled slyly and slid into the booth opposite Quinn.

"I wouldn't have expected to see a Jedi in a place like this," he said, his manner bordering on ice. Wynston cringed.

"I like to explore," she said breezily. "You new in town?"

"Hardly." Quinn blocked further speech by pretending to sip his drink.

"This is my first time through. You'll have to tell me all the can't-miss places around."

"You'll have to narrow it down by your preferred pleasure," said Wynston, "or else plan to spend a few years straight here."

“Is that so,” cooed Nasya, looking at Quinn.

“Mm,” said Quinn, pretending to sip his drink.

“Unfortunately he’s incapable of appreciating anything that isn’t stock trading,” said Wynston, his air theatrically tragic.

Before he could continue, Nasya interrupted. “We’ll have to fix that.”

Quinn shot Wynston an imploring look. Wynston cleared his throat.

“Wait a minute,” said Nasya. “Hold on. I don’t mean to be forward, but your collar’s crooked.” She leaned across the table, exposing a nonnegligible quantity of bosom, and ran a couple of fingers along Quinn’s collar, ending with a slight tug and a thoroughly unnecessary touch of his throat. “There. Better.”

“Thank you,” said Quinn, with only the faintest timbre of talking through gritted teeth.

“Any time,” she purred. She looked at Wynston. “Does your friend ever smile?”

“Not that I’ve seen.”

“We’ll have to fix that, too.”

It went on like that. Wynston found it extraordinarily difficult to get a word in edgewise. Nasya permitted Quinn to say “Hm” and other monosyllables, then took up the slack the rest of the time.

Finally she excused herself for a moment, smiling brilliantly at Quinn and sashaying off with a hell of a lot more sway in her hips than she had had showing up.

“Make her stop,” muttered Quinn.

“I’m trying,” growled Wynston.

"Can I just announce that I'm gay?"

"This late in the game? Absolutely not. Remember, we have a job to do here."

“We have a job to do,” Quinn repeated, in a tone of dread. “Should I be warming up to her, then?”

“Oh, no. Don’t start smiling now. She’s clearly lapping your natural disposition up.” Wynston shook his head. “I will never understand that.”

“Believe me, I have never once wanted it to work.”

“You never exaggerated that for a lady’s benefit?”

“I don’t see how I can possibly exaggerate being this unhappy.”

“Hsst, she’s coming back. Think brooding thoughts.”

*

Quinn got more and more laconic as the evening wore on, and Nasya got more and more bubbly about it. By the time she was talking about getting a safe escort home, she seemed to have forgotten Wynston was there.

And she did request an escort home. Quinn looked impassively at Wynston. Wynston gave a brief indignant glare, a resigned shrug, and a tap on his own jacket to indicate where in the woman’s dress the datacard they were after was most likely to be. Quinn gave a hair’s-breadth nod to acknowledge the information, then got back to glowering while he allowed Nasya to seize his arm and lead him away.

*

Wynston followed at a distance, enough to verify where they were going, then meandered into the nearest public restroom to await word, doing some busywork on his wrist console while he waited. Eventually, as expected, Quinn walked in.

“There,” said Wynston, “that wasn’t so bad, was it?”

“You do this for *fun*?” Quinn demanded.

“...Okay, maybe it was so bad?”

Quinn proceeded to the sink and scrubbed at his mouth with the help of one hand while the other fished in his jacket and handed Wynston a datacard.

"Wait, you got it?"

"Of course I got it. That was the objective. The swap went off without a hitch. So did everything else, technically. I don't think I raised her suspicions apart from being perhaps overeager to leave." He touched his stomach. "I didn't think I could hold out much longer."

"Was she that awful?"

Quinn shrugged. "She wasn't Ruth." He fished his wedding ring out of his jacket and put it back on. "Can we go?"

"I didn't think it would bother you that much."

Quinn headed out the door.

Wynston hurried to keep up. "I do appreciate you getting the card."

"I always get the job done. But, if I may suggest something, agent, you try brooding next time."

December, 28 ATC: The devil hath power to assume a pleasing shape

"Quinn! Ready to be someone else?"

Quinn looked up from his console. "I...wasn't planning on it."

"And that's your problem. You still don't have the secret-agent mindset." Wynston grinned and waved a flat metallic device. "Your disguise generator is in. You can look like anybody you want now. With some very convincing forcefield tricks to tangibly back it up."

"I, too, can officially deny my age and species?"

"And gender," said Wynston.

Quinn scowled at him.

"Or not," said Wynston. "I'm just saying, it would save you the trouble of warding off adoring women."

"I'm hoping there are less extreme methods. All right, show me how it works."

"Just loop the strap over your shoulder for now. Ideally we do some surgery, get this implanted, but, first things first. You see these lights here, indicating control buttons. Once a profile is selected - and there's one up now - "

"What?"

"Hm?"

"What profile will be showing up when you activate that on me."

"...It's not important."

Quinn pulled the device out of Wynston's hands. "I'm not giving this back until you agree to give me something dignified."

"You're a cynic, Agent Quinn."

"You're untrustworthy, Agent Wynston."

Wynston raised his wrist console and hit a few buttons. "Fine. Transmitting Generic Soldier Number Three Thousand and Two now."

"The image will be clothed," specified Quinn.

"Wow, I hadn't even thought of tampering with that," said Wynston. "Missed opportunity. - Well, not really, most illusion profiles let you show your own clothes over them. Here. Tap the green button twice, firmly, then green and yellow together."

A few faint green lines slid across Quinn's vision. He opened a nearby cabinet to check a mirror therein.

It was, in fact, a fairly generic soldier staring at him. Blond, grey-eyed, still seemingly dressed in the pseudo-uniform Quinn favored.

Quinn touched the stranger's face and watched his own motions in the mirror. "Fascinating," he said. "It even feels real."

"Remarkable technology. It took us years to develop it to this point, and we had the luxury of starting from a very convincing version of the tech."
Wynston reached out for the device, hit a few buttons. "Try this one."

Quinn hit the activation sequence and saw his image change, shrink, to a petite brunette Zabrak...a decidedly female one. In a short red dress. "I don't like that one," he said, in a voice that came out disturbingly squeaky.

"I think you look quite nice."

Quinn shuddered. "Don't start."

"Images smaller than yourself have limits anyway. You can look the part, but we can't forcefield away your basic body mass. So it's risky to operate like that."

"I see." Quinn hurriedly tapped yellow, yellow, yellow-plus-green, and saw the image dissolve to reveal his true face (and clothes) again.

"Good guess on the deactivation control. Now, we have an extensive database of physical profiles to choose from; you can load a few into the device at once and choose among them in the field. You're not obligated to walk around with one active all the time. I do, obviously -" he ran a hand over his delicate features, his unscarred blue skin - "with a few rare exceptions when I'm around people who knew me before; but a lot of us only use the disguises for specific assignments. Now, if you're satisfied with the basics, we're going to want to implant the device."

"Where?"

"Usually we drill a slot into the pelvis. Easy button access; the control lights are visible under the skin for your convenience, and it doesn't look much different from other cybernetic gadgets; and the bulk of it is protected by bone."

Quinn shifted uncomfortably, touching one hip. "I'm using that iliac crest."

"You've got another one just like it," Wynston said, gesturing at Quinn's other side. "I don't see the problem."

"Will you be performing this surgery?"

"Yes, in point of fact."

"See? That's the problem."

"What, you think I'm going to do something underhanded while operating on you?" Wynston's smile went beyond malicious. "I could tell you stories about my old Intelligence colleagues..."

"Really. I didn't think you could talk about that."

"To you? Sure I can." Wynston clapped Quinn on the shoulder. "Our work unites us in bonds of trust, comrade. And now you're going under the knife."

"Bonds of trust do *not* figure into our relationship, agent."

Wynston produced a scalpel out of nowhere and smiled winningly. "Let's get started."

January, 29 ATC: Quinn's World

"Quinn! I've got just the thing for you."

"I'm not going to help you test any more energy weapons until you can assure me the failure mode is less...incendiary than last time."

"No, no, a job you're perfect for."

"And by your interpretation that would be, what, rules lawyering?"

"No. For stars' sake, play along, this one should be good. Infiltration of an Imperial command ship. We need to get on board, grab one of the bridge or associated terminals and slice the archives of what we have excellent reason to believe is an altogether corrupt officer. Swipe the data, then get on home in time for snootiness competitions or whatever it is you officers do in your spare time."

"You're in a good mood."

"This one looks exciting. I always did enjoy putting one over on the military. Now, as our resident soulless cog in the machine, you should be the one to

work out the details of how we get on board and how I access the vault we have in mind."

Quinn decided on a surprise inspection, the whim of an overbearing higher-up; the commander in charge of the target vessel couldn't say no. General Malavai Quinn had abruptly resigned the service four months ago, but with a different human face and a made-up name he could still pull on the old uniform and take up the air of command.

He and Wynston faced each other aboard the Fury, one small slim human and one man who was a simple face replacement for Quinn. They wore identical grey and red uniforms.

"All right," said Quinn. "Fake identifiers are in place for this vessel. I get on board the target, storm about, criticize - I have yet to see a ship this size that didn't have some significant failure. You find an excuse to do some minor task on one of the bridge consoles while I cover for you. When you give the signal I finish up and we go."

"Sounds right."

Quinn reached out and snapped the bottom row of squares off Wynston's rank plate.

"What are you doing?"

"Demoting you, Colonel."

"I make a perfectly good general."

"So long as we're on an Imperial vessel, I outrank you."

"The organization's own command ship is an Imperial vessel, hotshot, and I rule it."

"Yes, but you stole that one." Quinn smiled a small cool smile. "In active service, you simply aren't at my level."

"Well, I'm relieved to see that your uptight jackass manner is as polished as ever."

*

Wynston strode at Quinn's side off the Fury and into the hangar bay. Commander Oznyk, their suspect, was there to greet them with a few hangers-on. Quinn made the introductions - General Hett with the unassuming Colonel Vym - then talked military-ese with Oznyk on their way up to the ship's bridge.

Oznyk slowed as they stepped onto the command deck. "Now, one thing, gentlemen. I like to check the profiles of visiting officers, especially surprises; really helps me get a sense of where I fit in the service in these tricky times. So I found it odd that I could not find your records at all, 'General Hett,' nor yours, 'Colonel Vym.'" He gave them a small menacing smile. Behind them, the doors to the bridge slammed shut.

Quinn turned to Wynston, looking haughtily annoyed. "Pierce?"

"Pierce," said Wynston in a similarly irritated tone. Even though he had no idea what Quinn was talking about.

"Who?" said the commander, his confidence suddenly wavering.

"Major General Pierce, commander, perhaps you've heard of him." Quinn fairly dripped exasperation. "He's notorious for never promoting slicing technicians unless they perform some act of vandalism, which, for the *third time this year*, appears to be the removal of my identity in the official databases." He bared his teeth. "Academy friends. You know how it is. I'll have to resubmit my data backup when I get back. Again."

Wynston quietly snickered.

"He got you, too, colonel."

"Maybe, sir, but that inconvenience is worth it for the look on your face right now."

Quinn conspicuously bit back what looked to be a really good enraged outburst. "Get yourself a console and start restoring those records, Vym. If you're lucky, the Central Identity Authority will let you past the automated holocall tree before tomorrow night."

Wynston's smile dimmed. "Uh, Sir, yes, sir." He scurried off to the nearest unattended console.

"I apologize, sir," Commander Oznyk said politely. "I have heard of General Pierce and his...policies. I didn't realize."

"No matter. I'll deal with *him* later. Now please, tell me something around here is operating within regulations."

*

Some time later, Wynston, datacard safely in pocket, caught up to Quinn and Oznyk, who had finished a tour of the facilities and were now conferring on the bridge. "Sir? General, sir. I made it through the holocall tree back at the Identity Authority."

Quinn looked down his nose at Wynston. "And?"

"They're going to need confirmation from you, sir." Time to work on extricating themselves.

"What good is getting my personal confirmation going to do if they don't have a record to verify 'me' against?"

"I don't know, sir."

They exchanged very very small nods, enough to confirm that the data was good. Everything after this was theater. "Very well, let's see this call."

"Oh. I hung up, sir."

"You did what?" Quinn said, quietly, icily.

"They wouldn't put me on hold, so they just told me to hang up. We'll have to go through it again." Wynston's composure wavered for a second as a laugh visibly struggled to escape.

Quinn picked up the cue. "Is something in this *funny*, colonel?"

"No, sir! No. No, we should definitely just move on to trying to call them again, sir."

"I will do so from my own ship, colonel, without your 'help,' since your efforts seem to have been a total waste of time." Quinn turned the full force of his scowl on Oznyk. "I won't take any more of your time, Commander."

I'm satisfied with the state of your vessel. Now I must return to my own command ship to repair General Pierce's damage personally."

"Of course, sir. Is there anything I can do to assist?"

Quinn considered, then jerked a thumb toward Wynston. "Yes, actually. Store this dead weight in the brig or something until I can stand to let him back onto my ship." He glowered at Wynston. "Should only be a few days."

"Uh, sir?" said Wynston, his eyes widening in genuine alarm. "Is that wise?"

"You're a smart man, colonel. You figure it out." Quinn turned on his heel and stalked back out to the *Fury*, leaving Wynston to the mercy of the officers Oznyk had signaled to escort him to the brig.

*

Wynston made it back to the *Aegis* less than a day later. He was back in Chiss form, slightly scraped up, missing his shirt, and oddly redolent of cheese, but he strode in with an assurance bordering on belligerence.

Wynston found Quinn in the command center. "Do you have any idea what I had to do to get out of there?" blustered the disheveled Chiss. "That was considerably less than professional on your part."

Quinn raised his eyebrows and spoke very mildly. "We got the job done. I took the opportunity to make your life hell. This seems like precisely the modus operandi you have been encouraging me to observe and replicate ever since I started studying the ways of the operative."

Wynston took a deep breath.

Quinn smiled a small yet radiant smile.

"That may be a fair point. Quinn. But fair's not what we're here to do."

"Oh, yes, try to change the victory condition on me, that'll slow me down."

"The next excuse I have to sell you into slavery - for the mission, of course - you are going down."

January, 29 ATC: Wynston and the Sith

"Agent Wynston. There's an interesting mission on this week's list."

"Oh, getting what we want out of that Darth? A little delicate, but in the end it's basic social engineering."

"Yes, and since it's a Sith I think I can take it solo."

Wynston's brow wrinkled. "I was going to take care of it. It's no trouble."

Quinn gave Wynston his signature critical look. "You're the worst-qualified liaison to the Sith I have ever met."

"No, I'm not. You've met Vette."

"You're the worst qualified one here, then."

"I can deal with Sith just fine."

"You practically dare every Sith you've ever met to kill you."

"That's not true."

"Let's take your behavior with the female Sith of the galaxy. Have you met one female Sith Lord that you didn't immediately proposition?"

Wynston scoffed. "Of course I have."

"Who?"

There was a long pause.

"Well?"

"Hold on, I'm thinking. Darth Lachris I did. That incredibly disagreeable woman on Nar Shaddaa, definitely. Thana Vesh I didn't succeed with, but I did try. Darth Zhorrid, same."

"Darth Zhorrid?"

"Yes."

"*The Darth Zhorrid?* You went after *The Darth Zhorrid?*"

"It's complicated."

"I fail to see what's complicated in 'see woman, compulsively request sex with woman.'"

"All right, so maybe it wasn't very complicated."

"And your record with your own sex is, if anything, worse. Didn't you spend a month in an infirmary getting your brain pieced back together after you refused to kneel to some Dark Council member?"

"Well, yes, but he was an unusually angry one."

"And I believe it's on record that a Chiss of your description located the Dread Masters imprisoned on Belsavis and, rather than freeing them, told them to, quote, 'shove off,' informed them that, quote, 'the galaxy is better off without filth like them,' and then - again, rather than freeing these extraordinarily powerful Sith as ordered - you double-reinforced their cells, collapsed the cell block entrance, and left again."

"I didn't realize anybody had records of that."

"And then there was that time you decided it wasn't necessary to kneel to the Voice of the Emperor because you hadn't seen his credentials."

"He let me off the hook."

"Only because Ruth jumped in to intercede on your behalf."

"Ruth! That's it!"

"That's what?"

"Sith Lord I didn't try to sleep with."

"That is the most stunningly shameless falsehood I have ever heard you utter, agent, and that's saying something."

"She wasn't a Sith Lord when we got involved. I didn't try after she became a Sith Lord. So from a certain point of view, she meets the qualifications you named."

"The point is," huffed Quinn, "I would send a circus clown to deal with a Darth before I got desperate enough to send you. Let me handle it. I'm ideal for this sort of thing: quick, obedient, and thoroughly forgettable."

There was a pause.

Quinn's manner dropped several degrees colder.

Wynston scuffed the floor with one foot. "You will kill me if I make the joke I'm thinking of. Won't you."

"Yes, I imagine I will."

"That's what she said' jokes will be unsafe for quite a while. Won't they."

"Yes, I imagine they will be." Quinn smiled sourly. "If you showed a tenth this much discretion with Sith Lords, I wouldn't be so concerned about your ability to carry out the mission."

"If Sith Lords were a tenth as scary as you when you think someone's disrespecting your wife, I would take a knee and obey with the best of 'em."

Quinn showed his teeth. "You're too kind. Now please, let me handle the Sith. Take the opportunity to go do a task more suited to your...inclinations. You know, while I'm not there to draw female attention."

"Oh, well, why didn't you put it that way in the first place?" said Wynston. "The Sith's all yours."

January, 29 ATC: Peacemaker

Malavai Quinn stood straight and proud, decked out in a tastefully conservative variant of the clothing of Alderaanian nobility. A number of noblemen were in attendance in House Rist's audience hall that day; Lord Rist himself sat at a table on a dais at one end, and it was he that Quinn was matching stares with.

"I've laid out the polite arguments, Lord Rist. Are you still quite certain you wish to leave the Celadine Consortium?"

"Entirely. Now skitter along to your Organa masters and tell them not to bother me again."

"I only ask because, the stability of this hemisphere and the good of the common people aside, I happen to possess ironclad documentation of certain contracts you have taken for both the Thuls and the Ulgos, in direct contravention of the agreements you had previously signed with those houses."

The room got very quiet.

Lord Rist sneered. "Even if such documentation existed, no paperwork is completely ironclad. A true Alderaanian would know that."

"Furthermore," said Quinn, dropping suddenly to a deadly voice just above a whisper, "my associates know precisely where your illegitimate daughter is fostering and how to reach her. The Rists aren't the only house that can arrange accidents."

The color drained from Lord Rist's face. He stared at Quinn, who looked calmly back, the smallest of smiles playing about his lips.

"Simply reaffirm your loyalty to the Empire," said Quinn, "and I'll be on my way."

Lord Rist looked confused. "The Empire? Who said anything about the Empire?"

Quinn frowned. He turned and looked over at Wynston, who was standing at the foot of the dais, dressed as an ordinary house guard. "Did I say Empire again?"

Wynston rubbed his temples. "Yes. You said Empire again."

"I've been making a real effort not to do that." He turned back to Rist.

"Simply reaffirm your loyalty to the Celadine Consortium, and I'll be on my way."

"I'll reaffirm my loyalty to anything it takes to get you out of here, you strange man."

"*Anything* it takes?" Quinn looked suddenly hopeful. "If that's the case, the Empire really would be-"

"Quinn," snapped Wynston.

"Ah. Fine. The Celadine Consortium it is." Quinn sighed, pasted a slight smile back on his face, and presented Lord Rist with a datapad containing a formal proclamation of intent for him to sign. Then Quinn gave him a small ironic nod, turned, and walked away, radiating pride and power as he went.

Wynston fell into step beside him. "The Empire? Again?"

"We got what we wanted," muttered Quinn, "I don't see what the problem is."

"The problem is that if I had half your stage presence I would push you off the nearest bridge and do these negotiations myself. It's ridiculous. Nobody does softspoken menace like you do, but could you please at least try to pay enough attention to remember who you're strongarming people into allying themselves with?"

"Calm yourself. I'll get it next time."

"You'd better."

February, 29 ATC: Narrow escape

The op went perfectly until Wynston discovered that he had miscounted the terrorists.

Quinn and Wynston had rigged the safehouse and its dangerous contents to blow sky-high, out here in a half-abandoned industrial district where nobody would get hurt. They had split up in the interest of covering more ground faster; they dispatched enemy thugs as they went, and Wynston had thought he was clear by the time he armed the last batch of explosives, started the timer, and yelled for Quinn to start the countdown on his side.

He thought he was clear, but a surprise vibroknife under the arm proved him wrong.

The fight was short and embarrassing; Wynston couldn't even bring his blaster to bear against his knife-wielding opponent. The man stabbed him again, threw him to the floor, crushed his ankle in one full-weight stomp, and ran for it.

The countdown on the explosives was running. "Quinn!" yelled Wynston, knowing that if the man had any sense he was already out of the building. Wynston felt blood pumping out from under his left arm, but this wasn't the time to worry about that. He still had one good leg, and that was what mattered. He started a weird bobbing trot, full sprint power with his good leg, a pained combination of leaning on the wall and pushing along with his bad leg.

Quinn came around the corner from the direction Wynston's attacker had appeared in. The dark-haired man scanned the hall, holstered his blaster, grabbed Wynston's support arm to pull around his own shoulders, and started off at a pace that half suggested he didn't realize he was dragging an extra three-quarters of his body mass with him. Not quite dragging; Wynston did what he could.

They passed the body of Wynston's attacker and got out of the building. Rather try to make the distance to safety over clear ground, Quinn located a sunken bulkhead by a nearby building, let Wynston down on the stairs, and darted back up to secure the door only seconds before an earth-shaking rumble indicated that their target was going up. Wynston pulled out a medpac. His ankle was throbbing. His left side didn't feel like much, except wet and very warm.

He handled his supplies in the pitch dark; he was familiar enough with his medical kit. It was Quinn who brought up a bright hand lamp.

"Some people don't call the explosives countdown while they're bleeding out," Quinn said irritably.

"Yes, well. I had a surprise change of plans immediately after calling it. I like to liven things up sometimes."

Quinn watched Wynston dabbing under his arm with the antiseptic. "You're missing the worst of it. Here. Keep your arm up." He moved in to do the cleanup himself. "You're lucky I was too principled to just leave you back there."

"Inconvenient sometimes, being a hero, hm?"

"You wouldn't know."

"Quinn, you wound me. Didn't we clear out a superweapon that would've annihilated five billion people last week?"

"We weren't heroic about it."

"You're only saying that because you think you have to take the stage and do some smug victory thing to make it count as a real operation. True heroes aren't above sneaking through the sewers, hiding for a while, shivving the problem, and sneaking back out without thought of reward."

"Monologuing is its own reward." Then Quinn coughed. "I mean, service. Service is its own reward."

"Service. Uh-huh. But the public recognition that comes with a good stage performance really helps, by your lights. You have no respect for the skulking aspects of our chosen career."

"How's your ankle?"

"Not as bad as my side."

"Your side is patching up easily. How's your ankle?"

"Thoroughly crunched. I'm not sure we can properly line up the remnants without a medbay. I'll wrap it for now. Worry about it when we get back to the ship."

Quinn nodded sharply and finished taping something over the covered, pleasantly half-numbed wound in Wynston's side. "You can drop your arm." He retreated across the narrow stairs, pulled up his own jacket and shirt, and started tending to a damp black mark on his torso.

"Bugger. You got hit?"

"That would be the logical conclusion to draw here," grumbled Quinn as he worked.

"You should've said something."

Quinn scowled. "Where I'm from, severed arteries are considered higher priority than blaster burns."

"Where you're from, Mister Dromund Kaas, severed arteries are considered acceptable on the grounds that if you weren't fast or smart enough to avoid it yourself, you probably had it coming."

"That's...actually a very good point. I hadn't thought of it that way."

"Anyway, I'll check the door. Things should've settled by now, I'll wager we're clear to go."

Wynston, after a moment's effort, pushed the bulkhead open, dislodging a couple of metal sheets that had come to rest against it. The house they had rigged was gone, and with it the materials the terrorists had planned on using for much larger-scale destruction.

Quinn came up beside him. "Mission accomplished."

"Looks like it. Time to go home." Wynston touched his side, looked up at Quinn. "Thanks, by the way."

Quinn sneered. "Don't think this makes us friends."

"Friends? Please. At no point in this operation did I hit my head *that* hard." Wynston started walking, doing his best not to look like he was limping on the tightly bandaged ankle. "All the same. I'll see if I can find us a mission that'll let you speechify a bit."

February, 29 ATC: Friendly concern

Wynston caught up with Quinn where the human was leaning on the railing over the *Aegis*' observation deck.

"Rodia tomorrow?" said the Chiss.

"Yes."

Things were silent for a little while.

"What's the matter?" said Wynston.

"I should think that's obvious, agent. I miss her."

"Ah. Yes. About that."

"Something to say?" Quinn asked pointedly.

"Yeah. You've been awfully preoccupied with this."

"No more than could be expected."

"Not really. It's been seven months, man."

"Well, yes. That's not nearly adequate time to get over anything."

"It's three times as long as your original marriage lasted."

Quinn's stare stayed fixed on the stars as it sharpened into a razor-edged glare. "Wynston, I thought people like you were supposed to have social skills."

"I do. I'm great with people."

"You're working on the verbal equivalent of beating my existing head injury with a heavy blunt object, you cyanotic wretch."

"You're not people. I don't have to be tactful."

"Don't you have work to do?"

"I did until you cleared the entire quadrant's data analysis tasks, then sorted out orders for nine surrounding quadrants so our agents could go on their way with optimal resource allocation, then automated report handling to the point where we only need one employee to do the opening sorting on twenty agents' worth of correspondence. You did my job and about three dozen other people's for the week and it's only two PM on Tuesday. When you're depressed, your productivity is prodigious."

"So what's the problem?"

"I just think you should consider filling your spare time with something less...mopey. Have you considered a hobby? Fly fishing, pazaak, hookers, alcoholism?"

Quinn turned, very slowly, to give Wynston the angriest disbelieving look he could manage.

"What? It helps."

"Wynston, have you never lost someone you cared for?"

"Look at my line of work, Quinn. I lose people I like all the time."

"Well, then. To phrase it differently, have you ever felt even slightly bad about losing someone?"

"Sure. A few times. It didn't take me this long, though. I got over it."

"Oh? And how did you 'get over it' so quickly?"

"Well, in the case of, say, Vector, I drank myself into unconsciousness, woke up, rinsed, and repeated until the headache was such that I couldn't think straight enough to feel emotionally bad. Just physically."

"That was your plan?"

"It worked. I can't remember enough of that two-month period to recall whether I was sad as such, but I figure I got adequate mourning in. Now I'm fine."

Quinn shook his head and looked away again. "Why are you so interested in this?"

"It's...no reason." Wynston cast shifty eyes around. "I'm trying to help here. It's just that you're really depressing to be around when you're depressed." He ran his hands through his hair and frowned. "Also, the sooner you ditch the air of noble tragedy, the sooner women will stop clinging to you like mynocks on a circuit breaker."

"I don't have an air of noble tragedy," Quinn said indignantly.

"According to my interviewees, you really do."

"You interview the women who follow me around on jobs?"

"Just analyzing where I went wrong since you showed up."

"I thought the difficulty was supposed to be resolved when I started selecting hopelessly unattractive disguises."

"That was the theory. But even the leprous Houk got a girl or two pining from afar for no evident reason."

"You must be joking."

"So get a hobby. Lighten up. Ditch the brooding. I really think it'll make the difference."

"Go to hell."

"Quinn, I find myself in a galaxy where I can no longer command female attention at will. If that isn't hell, I don't know what is."

Quinn, for no reason Wynston could intuitively sympathize with, threw up his hands and stalked away.

February, 29 ATC: Fan Service

"Quinn. Suit up. Casuals. We've got a cantina to watch for a while. I expect a certain transaction and we need to intercept."

"Seems easy enough."

"You keep me on the straight and narrow, I keep you on the straight but single, it works."

"Can we just go, agent?"

"Sure, sure."

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"You neglected to mention that this was a gay bar."

"Blame the target, not me. We'll take a booth, no one's going to bother us." Wynston grinned, then sat down on one side of a table that could be termed "intimate" or "wildly inadequate for holding two full-sized plates." He

ordered a drink for himself, then a drink for Quinn after the latter attempted to request water.

"Now we relax and wait. - I can't help but notice you picked out the single most hideous human disguise you could find."

"It's a safety measure, agent, whenever you drag me out to social settings."

"I'm afraid the air of noble tragedy is still there."

"Would you stop saying that?"

"Sure, when you stop being nobly tragic."

A slim red Twi'lek strolled up to the table. "Haven't seen you two around before." Although he looked them both over, it was Quinn he smiled for.

Wynston buried his face in his hands. "I don't believe this."

Quinn made a sudden, intense effort to vanish into the wall.

Before the Twi'lek could get another word in, Wynston reached out and covered Quinn's hand with his. "Do you mind?" he growled at the stranger.

"Ah, my apologies. Have a nice night, both of you." He backed away a step. Then winked at Quinn. "Do come back sometime."

Wynston scanned the room. "Now that I'm looking, I see two more prowling," he said. *"What the hell is wrong with you?"*

"Tragedy, I'm told. I assure you, if I could undo it I would."

"Never mind. I have an idea to get them off your case."

"I'm not going to like this, am I."

"We just need a shield composed of highly visible vibes."

Quinn snatched his hand back. "There will be no vibes." He looked around the room to see if anybody was watching. As soon as he had done so, he wished he hadn't. Several were looking his way. He settled for glaring at Wynston.

"Have I ever mentioned," said Wynston, "that that look of passionate, concentrated hatred you do has been described by more than one woman as smoldering?"

Quinn quickly directed his gaze elsewhere. "I'm not smoldering!"

Wynston leaned across the table, smiling dreamily. "That's good. That's perfect. You are a natural at this."

Quinn leaned backward. "At what?"

"Playing hard to get. Looking convincingly distressed at being seen being...overly demonstrative."

"That isn't a new phenomenon for me."

"You're falling back into the swing of things very, *very* nicely."

"Cease the eye contact. We're supposed to be watching for our mark."

"I'm watching."

"Not while you're looking at me like that, you're not."

"I'm better than you might think at processing through my peripheral vision. You're stuck, I-"

Quinn broke in hastily. "If you utter an endearment you'll be leaving this room on a stretcher."

Wynston leaned back and shrugged. "Suit yourself, swe-"

"Stretcher."

"Look, I'm doing this for your own good. Would you rather continue to be showered with the attentions of strangers?"

Quinn eyed Wynston's smile with a look of pure horror. "Yes. Yes, at this point I would."

"I don't think you really mean that," purred Wynston, inching his chair forward. Quinn, for some reason, also tucked closer. Then Wynston started and smirked. "Well. Is that a blaster in your pocket, or are you happy to see me?"

"I'm not happy to see you. You can figure it out from there. And yes, I am excited enough to fire the second you try to get closer."

Wynston looked down at his belly and the thing pressing into it under the table. "You're being literal."

"Have I ever intentionally joked with you?"

Wynston jerked his head to one side. "Mark. Game face." He snapped into cool, attentive professionalism and turned to observe the floor and the individual walking across it.

Quinn looked at their mark, looked back at Wynston, marveling at how quickly the Chiss' entire manner had changed into something non-vile.

Wynston caught the movement, looked over, blew Quinn a kiss, and got back to work.

March, 29 ATC: Backstory

It was eight o'clock in the morning by the clocks of the mission destination.

It was one of those missions that required riding in a small shuttle for several hours.

Wynston took another deep swig of Duros deathglow.

Quinn frowned at him. "Most days you wait until the job has started to get inebriated."

"I'll go insane if I wait."

Quinn leaned back and conspicuously, callously didn't ask.

"There was a girl," said Wynston.

Quinn rolled his eyes. "There always is."

"Over in Imperial affairs. And Agent Temple overheard her calling me 'Wyn.'"

Quinn stiffened. "That's a stupid nickname."

"It's not my fault. I've always had this name. But then...then..."

Quinn stared at the wall and conspicuously didn't ask.

Wynston set down the flask and buried his face in his hands. "Then Temple giggled and said 'QuinnWyn.'"

Quinn opened his mouth, but no sound came out. He swallowed hard and radiated outrage.

"She called us *partners*. She said we *had a lot in common*."

"We most certainly do not," huffed Quinn.

"I know! I mean, it wasn't always this way, but..."

"Agent Temple had a momentary lapse of reason. It's nothing that bears thinking on."

Wynston took another swig of deathglow. "You have no idea. You have no idea. Do you know what I was before I met you?"

"I seem to recall neither asking nor even slightly caring."

Wynston drank again. "I was the perfect little obedient operative. I said yes, sir, no, sir, I was quick, quiet, compliant. I always got the job done with a minimum of waste and zero extraneous commentary. Merciless, yes, but effective. I fell in line, I unquestioningly followed the rules. All for the Empire."

"It almost sounds like you were tolerable once." Quinn sniffed. "I suspect you're lying."

"I ignored women. I didn't engage in any of the many carnal vices life has to offer. I bowed and saluted on cue and was always very very accommodating for Sith. And my bloody nickname rhymed with 'Quinn.'"

"The degree to which you copied me is rather disturbing."

"This was before Ruth came along! I didn't know you!" He drank again. "I didn't know you. So then, so then we met."

"Sadly, yes."

"And I thought, if that's what I'm going to end up like, I need to change my life as of yesterday."

Quinn looked at Wynston's flask. "You did succeed in changing."

"Ha," said Wynston bitterly. "You made me what I am today, you monster. I've been having a great time since I decided to develop a personality, but it's you who started the process, and it's you who motivates me every time I see you doing something obnoxiously protocol-compliant."

Quinn reflected silently for a minute or two.

Wynston sniffled and stared at his feet.

"Is there any of that deathglow left?" Quinn asked quietly.

Wynston nodded and handed the flask over.

May, 29 ATC: Paying (selective) respects

"Quinn. Surprise job, high-priority, Sullust sector."

Quinn tugged at his satchel strap and frowned. "I'm taking the day off," he said.

"I...hadn't realized you were familiar with that concept."

"I'm going to Dromund Kaas. For a memorial."

Wynston thought for a few seconds. "It's Ruth's birthday, isn't it."

"Yes. She would've been thirty-eight."

"Ah," the Chiss said thoughtfully. "Still far too young. On the plus side, at least she was spared the indignity of turning forty."

"Forty wasn't bad."

"Oh, you remember back that far, do you?"

Quinn glared.

"Forty felt like the end of the world to me." Wynston rubbed his chin. "Or maybe that's just because the planet I was on that day was going to blow up if I didn't find a way to reverse the tectonic destabilizer before midnight." He let his hand drop. "Ah, well. Out of curiosity, did you ever actually spend a birthday on speaking terms with her?"

"Yes," bristled Quinn. "Four of them."

"And the other fifteen or however many there were, you were at each other's throats."

"No, we were ignoring each other. Only one of her birthdays actually involved combat against me. And it wasn't really combat so much as shouting and throwing things."

"I'll be the first to admit that my understanding of romance is a little superficial, but I never could comprehend how your notion of true love could involve so much argument and projectile weaponry and attempted murder."

"There wasn't all that much attempted murder."

"A little goes a long way."

Quinn crossed his arms and gave Wynston the evil eye.

"I understand these things better than you might think," said Wynston. "Although when I break up with a dangerous mark, I generally succeed in killing her."

"You are a repulsive human being."

"No, you're a repulsive human being, Quinn. I'm a repulsive Chiss. Now go, take all the time you need; I'll manage things around here 'til you get back. Bring some flowers to her grave for me, would you? Those lilies she likes."

"*I'm* getting her lilies," Quinn said stiffly.

"So get more of them."

"I'm not giving you credit for copying my tribute, agent."

"Fine, then. Get her some velvet flame-rods."

Quinn scowled even harder. "Velvet flame-rods are notorious for secreting a contact poison that starts by causing painful, disfiguring skin lesions and then gets worse from there."

"Ah. I was hoping you didn't know that. It was the whole point. Please, handle them with bare hands. And sniff deeply."

"I'm leaving now."

"Am I going to have to come with you to pay my respects?"

Quinn gritted his teeth. "I'll get her some more lilies."

Wynston nodded, satisfied. "Good man."

March, 29 ATC: Clothing

Wynston perched on the bench opposite Quinn in the *Aegis* cafeteria and twisted to face him. "Quinn," he said, "it's about time you took your uniform off."

Quinn didn't look up from his rations. "I'm not going to dignify that with a response."

"I mean it. A significant amount of what we do falls into the 'secret' category, and an Imperial uniform is among the most conspicuous markers in the galaxy."

"Surely there is work I can do in my capacity as an experienced officer."

"Apart from being stuffy, you mean? Because stuffiness, while you have it in spades, isn't much of a resume builder."

Quinn looked up. And glared.

"Listen," said Wynston. "There's an opportunity for a job on Tatooine. I can get myself and one other on site as mercenaries, but we would have to go in in plain clothes. Scum-of-the-galaxy plain clothes."

"Then I suggest you find an agent to do that."

"It's a straightforward sting, which is why I want you along to observe. You can wear the stuff over your bloody uniform if it makes you feel better but you will have to blend until such time as we spring the trap."

Quinn's hard-eyed resistance slipped. "A trap?"

"A trap for a man who's been spitting in the Empire's eye for years." Wynston watched Quinn waver. "It's a good cause. All you have to do is wear street clothes and back me up."

"Not one, but two unreasonable demands," growled Quinn. "Is this operation necessary or is it all some ruse designed to humiliate me?"

"If I wanted to humiliate you I would make it something far grander than this. Come on, there's work to do."

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"So. You survived the job? Clothes and all?"

Quinn, having returned to the bridge after a stop in his quarters, smoothed his uniform jacket over his chest. Then he glowered at Wynston.

The Chiss, still wearing his dust-caked street clothes, smiled amiably.

"Honestly the costuming part of our job can be great fun. You'd be surprised what you can get away with just dressing the right way."

"An Imperial citizen would be surprised at what someone in the right uniform or robes can get away with?"

"All right, maybe you wouldn't be so surprised." Wynston took a moment to admire the rush of hyperspace. "It's a little different outside the Empire. Foreign places take foreign measures. I spent six weeks as an exotic dancer on one of the Core Worlds once. That was hell."

"That is a piece of information I could gladly have done without." Quinn covered his face in his hands. "But I will ask, was that you finally discovering something beneath even your dignity?"

"Oh, not at all. The scrap of an outfit was a bit silly, but the awful part was that I wasn't allowed to touch the clientele. No matter how pretty."

"How terrible for you," Quinn said flatly.

"It really was. I've tried to keep to the less exciting undercover jobs since then."

There was quiet for a few moments.

"The mercenary disguise was acceptable," conceded Quinn. "All things considered."

May, 29 ATC: Jealous

Quinn stumbled out of the apartment complex looking more than a little miserable. He had stopped along the way to straighten out his clothes and hair, so at least he was presentable when he reported back to the safe house.

"I got the data," he said. "In addition to the names of two kingpins associated with this particular slaving ring, data on the leisure activities and financial weak points of nearly a dozen of its members, notes on a truly intriguing way to exploit a security weakness in some casinos, and sufficient blackmail information on our mark back there to keep her in our pockets for all time without my having to go back in there."

"The assignment was just this one file, Quinn. The rest is...impressive, bordering on unnecessary."

"I swept up all the data I could." Quinn gestured in the general direction of the apartments. "If I have to endure that, I'm going to make the most of it."

"Endure."

Quinn leaned back in his chair, closed his eyes, and rubbed the bridge of his nose.

"I'm half inclined to leave you at home on these ops," said the Chiss.

"You need me when it gets difficult, agent. No one else in the organization can pick up this reliably, and no one else is as effective when things go wrong and you need to concoct new strategies in the field." He shook his head. "Believe me, if I could hand off the personal work to you with any assurance that it would get done, I would."

Both men sulked for a couple of minutes.

Then Quinn spoke up. "They never used to gravitate to me like this. You know, before."

"Before, you were standing beside the most dangerous woman in the galaxy. And she had a possessive air about her."

"Hardly. She was almost unnaturally insistent on letting me do as I wished."

"Possessive air. Believe me."

"It can't just be that. I spent decades as a bachelor not getting this much unwanted attention."

"Do I need to list your Pretty Young Officers' Club membership roll again?"

"They don't count. I could order any of them to stop at any time. And did, rather often. But that doesn't work on civilians."

"Yes, well, remind me to feel sorry for you at some point."

Quinn tilted his head and looked thoughtful, bordering on smug. "On the other hand, I do derive some satisfaction from the fact that I don't even have to try to make you jealous of me."

"I'm not jealous."

"You are. And you always were."

"No, no, I wasn't jealous until you started this insane irresistible lady-collection field. Which I'm still not jealous of."

"You were always jealous about Ruth."

"That's ridiculous, Quinn."

"You had very strong feelings on my seeing her."

"Well, yes, but that's because you're a contemptible weasel and I wouldn't wish you on any woman, much less one I liked. It didn't mean I was jealous."

"In fact, you were actively seething every time you saw me with her."

"Because I hate you and don't want you to have nice things! She had nothing to do with it!"

"And you would've seduced her the second I turned my back if you could."

"Well, yes, but that's entirely separate. I wanted her away from you, and I wouldn't have said no to her as such, but that doesn't mean I was jealous."

"Keep telling yourself that, agent. If that's the level of obliviousness you insist on cultivating, your staggering failures in social situations stand half explained." Quinn smiled very slightly. "The other half I must attribute to your natural talent."

Wynston, desperate for some counterattack, frowned and shook his head. "I just cannot wrap my head around how these marks keep falling for you. Looking at you, there's no rational explanation. And that you follow through without tripping disaster? It boggles the mind. I'm trying to imagine enjoying having sex with you, and it just...it just..."

Quinn's glare could have vaporized durasteel.

"I just remembered I have somewhere else to be," muttered Wynston.

"Yes," Quinn said coldly. "Yes, you really do."

June, 29 ATC: Save the Date

(Historical note: In Ruth Means Compassion, Ruth perished while slamming the Emperor into submission before he could carry out an Evil Plan to extinguish life in the galaxy.)

"You know what today is?"

"Perhaps." Quinn scowled at Wynston. "Do you?"

"Today was always 'Ruth alternates gorging on candy and bingeing on alcohol until she can't stand up' Day."

"She didn't drink."

"Oh, yes, she really did."

"And she certainly wouldn't have binged."

"She was seriously upset about your assassination attempt. I offered to bring her your head on a platter every year, but she wouldn't let me."

"Ha. I would have loved to see you try, agent."

"You wouldn't have seen me, soldier."

Quinn gave him a skeptical look.

"Anyway," said Wynston, "I wanted to be sure you got this little helping of guilt in for the day."

"I would've remembered on my own."

"I just can't believe that wasn't a relationship-killer. I know you had the decade and a half hiatus, but then she got over it. Sort of."

"I only shot her the once."

"Still a problem."

"Just one time! The only time! You've shot your girlfriends on dozens of occasions."

"Marks aren't girlfriends, and most of them shot first."

"Ruth shot first. Well, swung a lightsaber. Before I personally started shooting at her."

"I don't suppose your battle droids opened fire before she swung her lightsaber?"

"I don't see why you insist on bringing these technicalities up. The point is, you're hardly in a position to criticize unhealthy relationships."

"And you know what kills me?"

"You finding a woman with better aim, I hope."

"Oh, very witty. No, what kills me is that that whole twisted thing you had going on with her is what powered her last push against the Emperor. If she hadn't kept flipping between that completely inexplicable attraction and, well, soul-rending hatred, all her life, I'm not sure she would've had the passion it took to win. What's even worse is that the very last element that propelled her to that victory was you shooting your son. Actually shooting her son with you, in the back, as she watched."

"I only did it to subdue him," Quinn sulked. "The Emperor would've forced him to kill her otherwise."

Wynston waved to shush him. "Shot. In the back. It's completely unfair. Your lifelong pattern of betrayal probably saved the galaxy. I sell a girl out, I get angry letters, police warrants, multiple violent revenge attempts, the whole nine yards. You sell a girl out, it directly fuels the salvation of all life in existence. Even your most monumental screwups turn up gold."

"I think there was a silver lining in there, but you did a good job of making it sound bad."

"When describing your behavior, that's not hard." Wynston checked his chronometer. "Ah, there, and that's my baseline making-your-life-miserable quota for the day."

"I knew you had one!"

Wynston's eyes got very wide. "Did I say that out loud?"

"You did. It wouldn't be the first time you've stated the obvious, and I'm sure it won't be the last."

"Hey. Quinn. This conversation was about attacking you."

"Oh, really? Don't start what you can't finish, agent."

"Says 'I tried to kill my wife, but just the once'-boy."

Quinn's mouth worked silently for about three seconds before he gave up and walked off, scowling his most ferocious scowl.

May, 29 ATC: Glories of the Empire

Quinn caught up with Wynston in the hallway. "Agent. Have you considered my proposal?"

"We're not turning this agency into a 'total victory for the Empire' machine."

"It'd establish peace quickly enough."

"We ran the cost-benefit. Not going to happen. We're preserving the balance of the great powers more or less as is."

"That is to say, you don't have the means or the ingenuity to bring it to a decisive conclusion."

"No, I don't have the coldblooded willingness to sacrifice trillions to bring it to a decisive conclusion. We're going to steer the war towards a cease-fire, not total victory for one side."

"You read my proposal. One point three trillion is completely acceptable for bringing order to the galaxy. No strategist the officers' Academy has produced in the last fifty years could make a more elegant, less expensive plan."

"We're guiding the galaxy to minimal bloodshed, Quinn. It's what Ruth would've wanted."

Quinn wavered, very briefly, then settled on a scowl. "Ruth would have wanted a puppy for every sad child, but I don't see you campaigning for that."

"We're not going to sweep the Empire into crushing victory. That's final."

"If you're not going to pay attention to my strategic genius, I don't see why I should stay here."

"You realize I like knowing that there are places in the galaxy where aliens aren't treated like dirt?"

"That's because you're unfairly biased and also have a limited, alien brain. I've chosen not to hold it against you because you're useful."

"You hold my imaginary faults against me all the time, you pretentious prat. It's people like you who make me wonder why I supported the Empire for so long."

Quinn sneered, then spotted Hazard walking by. "Excuse me. Hazard. You consider the Empire a worthy place, right?"

"No," said the Twi'lek Joiner. "They treat aliens like dirt, and all their top-level strategists think that the sacrifice of trillions is a worthwhile cost to get what they want."

"You people are so short-sighted," Quinn said resentfully.

"You could just go back to working for the Empire yourself, Quinn," suggested Wynston.

"You can't be serious. Working directly under them again? They treat Force-blinds like dirt, and the sacrifice of perfectly good officers' careers is considered a worthwhile cost to...why are you looking at me like that?"

Hazard spoke into the awkward silence. "Wynston, we had a job come up."

"Great," growled the Chiss. "I could use a change of subject."

June, 29 ATC: Operation: Stilled Stream

Wynston examined the holo feed, reading over the reports several times.

"Well, Quinn. It looks like our little operation of the last few months is coming together."

"Time to tip off the Republic?"

"Time to tip off the Republic."

"I do enjoy the fact that this plan involves having their detail in this system completely crushed."

"It's necessary to maintain the balance in this sector. Don't think I'm doing it for you."

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Quinn and Wynston split up once they reached the Imperial base on Devneth V. Quinn had been playing the role of chief inspector for the preparations of the Empire's secret project; Wynston had, in a Human guise, been playing the part of an Imperial defector, feeding mostly-accurate information to the Republic.

It was under Quinn's encouragement and planning that the project had proceeded so far ahead of schedule. He strode into the Imperial base unchallenged and came into the command center, which was bustling with activity.

"Commander," he said to the appropriate officer. "Report."

"Reports are in of a sizeable Republic force coming this way, sir. It's possible they got wind of the project."

Quinn flashed a white smile. "A little late, wouldn't you say?"

"Yes, sir. It's ready."

The commander and Quinn monitored surveillance as the Republic detachment came up the road to the base. The guards had orders to allow them to approach the main building. When they got close enough, Quinn,

flanked by armored troopers, went out to stand at the top of the stairs at the front entrance.

The Republic contingent marched up and stopped. "Hold your fire," said the Republic leader. "Imperial. You've let us come this far. You must know what we're here for."

"Project Stilled Stream, I believe."

"We know all about it. The knockout pulse that uses massive amounts of geothermal power to send magnetic interference to destroy air traffic within a huge radius."

"I'm impressed. You have some understanding of the matter."

"You have a leak. Seems not everybody in your cozy home is happy with your plans." The Republic commander grinned a dark grin. "So I'm afraid we're here to break your toys before the project is complete. Us and our completely functional air support. Say goodbye to your pet project."

"Ah," said Quinn, coolly, smoothly. "It seems you were well informed except for one small point." He looked up to the sky. "Your air support won't be coming, or rather, they won't be in any condition to drop ordnance when they arrive. The project is already finished. We need only activate the knockout to drop everything on rotors or wings."

The Republic commander looked to his second, then back to Quinn. "You're bluffing."

"I invite you to wait and watch. I think I hear your fighters coming now...you can try ordering them back, but I suspect they're already in range."

"Jenks, call in the warning. Where did Raif go? Dammit, there's a reason we brought our miracle informant with us! He's bad after all...where'd he go?"

Overhead, seven Republic fighters flew in close formation. Quinn tapped his earpiece once. "Take them down," he said in a calm voice pitched to carry.

A great green burst of energy blossomed from the highest point in the Imperial base. The seven fighters all cut out sound at once and shot over the base without control, crashing into the forest beyond.

Quinn raised his eyebrows in faux thoughtfulness. "Air superiority gone," he said. "And you never had ground superiority. You may surrender now, if you like."

"Death first," snarled the Republic leader.

Quinn looked a little surprised, but he shrugged, acquiescent. "As you wish."

Imperial troops poured out of both front entrances, blasters blazing. Quinn himself set up a small energy shield and started firing over it, neatly, precisely. Less than a minute later, Wynston in the disguise of a human once named Raif deactivated a stealth generator and opened fire with his blaster rifle.

The battle was short; even with a messy start, the Imperials outnumbered the Republic forces, and had turret emplacements to back them up. A cheer went up as the last of the Republic people raised their hands in surrender.

The Imperial base commander sought Quinn out and saluted. "Success all around, sir."

Quinn inclined his head graciously. "It was a pleasure to work with you to bring the project this far, commander."

"I look forward to copying the knockout technology. With this, the Empire will be able to hold a base on any planet they choose, and render fighters irrelevant throughout planetary occupations."

Quinn shook his head. "Unlikely. The unique magnetic and geothermal properties of the planet are what permitted this project to work. I doubt you will be able to engineer its like elsewhere any time soon." For a moment Quinn seemed to be thinking of something else; then one corner of his mouth flicked up for half a second. "But we have this planet. My work here is done."

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"You know," said Wynston, "I've lost track of the number of times I've 'defected to the Republic' as double agent and/or informant."

"They continue to fall for it."

"They are known for their optimism." Wynston gave an exaggerated sigh. "Poor sods."

"You realize if they ever caught on, it would not go well for you."

Wynston laughed a small laugh. "Hardly. They would detain me for trial, and that's plenty enough time to escape. Again. Summary execution's the only way to stop me and they're too decent to do it."

"Ah." Quinn considered. "You're right. What a shame. But then, I suppose they don't know you like I do."

Wynston examined Quinn's expression very closely. "If you turn informant just to turn me in to their least forgiving representatives, I will kill you."

"Damn."

June, 29 ATC: Blame

"Everyone always blames me for everything," grouched Quinn.

"That's because everything is your fault," said Wynston.

"No, it isn't. You don't even know what I'm being condemned for."

"Everything. You said. And it's true."

"No, it isn't. You've said yourself, even my 'most monumental screwups' have positive results."

"That's also true. You work twenty-three hours a day, you have time for both. You're responsible for every bad thing, you're responsible for half the good things, and in short you're insufferably meddlesome."

"Of course you would say so. Regardless, I'm not the one who got Vette recollared."

"She got collared again? She was on a simple enough job."

"Yes, I know. But she got captured and resold. And according to our contact for her, it's somehow my fault."

Wynston peered over Quinn's shoulder. "Oh, her! Yes, we were just catching up last week. Your name did come up."

"And?"

"Well, I explained how you're the architect of all things terrible. I'm glad she remembered." Wynston scanned the mission correspondence on the console and frowned. "Wait, is that her asking you for a date 'to talk it over'?"

Quinn hurriedly covered the console. "No. Anyway, the failure of that agent and Vette's mission, and our subsequent need to buy Vette again, was not in any way my fault. Furthermore, I never had an affair with Jaesa as some have started insinuating."

The Chiss snorted. "Like hell you didn't."

"What? Who would even think that I would ever..."

"She's cripplingly compassionate. I could see her taking pity on you back then."

"That did not happen! I am not in any way to blame!" Quinn scowled. "What do you mean, pity?"

"At the time, it was screamingly obvious what you needed in order to loosen up, but nobody wanted to be the one to do it. I could see Jaesa taking care of that."

"I was never involved with Jaesa!"

"Mm-hm. Sure."

"If you think I would ever have hurt Ruth like--"

Wynston raised his eyebrows. "Oh, you would never hurt Ruth?" he said in a voice like a nexu getting ready to pounce. "You don't want to start that while I'm in the room."

"Moving on," said Quinn hurriedly, "I've also heard accusations that I went on a killing spree on Tatooine. Which I didn't do."

"Are you sure? The description sounded a lot like you."

"'Tall, pale, and really bitchy-looking' does not describe me. And I couldn't have Force choked all those people. I can't even use the Force."

"I'm sure you would've found a way. I'm perfectly happy to pin the blame on you."

"Leaving aside that ridiculous allegation, the budget shortfall for this fiscal year isn't my fault."

"You're the one who put out the memo requiring everyone to update their jackets with expensive duraflex trim immediately."

"It was a necessary change. It's better armoring and it looks more official."

"And then the other memo six hours later requiring it to be gold-plated instead of silver. Since the silver-plated stuff made our standard jacket indistinguishable from that of the notoriously brutal and hated secret police of Tyrannus V."

"It's not my fault their secret police have such excellent taste."

"The resulting scramble to fix everyone's clothes before you went on the dress-code-enforcement warpath was the direct cause of shipping disruptions at every office the organization has, plus that horrific slam to our budget. Your call, your poor fashion judgment, your fault."

There was a long pause.

"All right, that one was my fault."

"Damn right."

"One thing. One small thing. But the other accusations people sling my way are just ridiculous. I wasn't even at the battle of Talay, I couldn't have lost it."

"That's not what Moff Broysc said."

"Moff Broysc was a lunatic."

"You killed him just to shut him up, you monster."

"No, I killed him out of a perfectly professional and constructive desire to...well, shut him up, I suppose, technically. But he was still wrong about me. I never allowed the Jedi targets to flee Taris before the bombardment."

"They fled, didn't they? You didn't stop them. Sounds to me like you allowed it."

"I wasn't born yet!"

"Quinn, you always tell our people that excuses are unacceptable. Jedi got away. You didn't prevent it. Moff Broysc's accusation was right on the money."

"That's idiotic, agent. If you want further proof that Broysc had no idea what he was talking about, I'll point out that I never sabotaged the Glory space station."

"Yes, you did. Last week."

"...He was talking about a different one. My sabotaging last week's space station was a good thing."

"Your fault."

"It was on your orders!"

"I can still blame you," said Wynston. "Oh, hold up, missed call on the holo."

They went over to the holoterminal to check its blinking light.

"Looks like your son called," Wynston said cheerfully, examining the console readout.

"Why didn't you--"

"Me? I didn't hear it beep. I was too busy listening to you rant."

"I'll need to call him back."

"Don't bother. Message he left says he's already on the move. Going in for the Mystic Ritual of Pain, he should be back in two weeks assuming he doesn't die. Looks like you missed your chance to chat."

"But the investigation I conducted into the ritual after Rylon mentioned it revealed it to be one big fraudulent deathtrap. Not only is there no meaningful reward for surviving it, they got tipped off to my face and my suspicions which means they'll immediately recognize him as an enemy, and I was...going...to warn him...as soon as he called."

"But you were busy ranting," Wynston said helpfully.

Quinn pinched the bridge of his nose with a pained expression. "Don't say it."

"Quinn, it's my responsibility as the only person in earshot." Wynston clapped his shoulder. "This is your fault."

July, 29 ATC: Old blood is new blood

"Quinn! Sorry to interrupt the intense parade rest exercises - which, by the way, are rather pointless, since you're perfectly capable of impersonating an officer nowadays without staying in practice this rigorously, and the pose is actively counterproductive for all other cover disguises - but anyway, there's someone I want you to meet. Our latest recruit."

Quinn stayed stiffly at parade rest and glowered. "I thought you said recruits were too impressionable to be left with a menace like me."

"This one's special. Come on."

Quinn followed the Chiss to a conference room; Quinn went in first, at least as far as the doorway, and stopped dead. It took Wynston's shove to force him into the room so the door could close.

The room was empty but for a table, a few chairs, and a very tall, broad-shouldered youth with short dark red hair and well-worn street clothes smudged with signs of previous acquaintance with combat and fire.

The youth eyed Quinn with cheerful curiosity, only the slightest hint of calculation around the edges. "Huh," he rumbled in a rich bass voice. "Who's this, then?"

Wynston's smile was almost bright enough to counteract the cloud rapidly developing between Quinn and the recruit. "That, Pierce, is your uncle Quinn."

"'Uncle' is incorrect on every imaginable level," Quinn said tightly. "I take it you are General Pierce's son."

"Oh, picked that up from the face and the voice and the name, did you? You're a sharp one," Pierce Junior said happily. "Quinn. Who knew my father. I've heard of you. This is just too good." He stroked his cleanshaven chin and looked Quinn over. "Dad never mentioned you were this good-looking, though."

Quinn turned a blossoming shade of crimson. *"I will kill you both."*

"He did mention you were that unstable."

"I was never unstable! He was the demolitions fanatic!" Quinn stood up straighter and looked at Wynston. "Did you really agree to hire this individual?"

"He's good. He was engaged in a career path I won't share with you because you would only use it for blackmail, but I think the opportunities we offered here will put his skills to very constructive use."

"I see," grated Quinn. "Do you have a first name, Pierce?"

Pierce's smile split his face wide. "No, sir."

Quinn clenched his teeth and took a moment before changing the subject. "'Uncle,' Wynston? Really?"

"You and Pierce Senior were brothers in arms, weren't you?"

"Hardly."

"Well, he was like a brother to Ruth. So, you're more or less related by marriage."

"If this boy and I are related, agent, it is through the fact that you seem determined to torment us both." Quinn scowled. "You're older than I would expect, Pierce."

"Dad did have a life before the Wrath picked him up. I'm not surprised he kept quiet about me, being that high-ranking Siths' loved ones and their families have a very poor survival rate."

"So," said Wynston, "Junior here will be joining us as an expert slicer."

"Ah, that's good. That means he can stay out of the way on the *Aegis*, correct?"

"And sniper."

"...Sniper?"

"Sniper," confirmed Junior. He unslung a rifle that would've seemed excessively large for an average-sized man. Most of it appeared to be plasma cells and scope.

"You want our people to go into battle while somebody of Pierce's bloodline sits in some advantageous position and trains a sniper rifle on their backs?"

Wynston gave Quinn a meaningful look, but Junior spoke before Wynston could say anything.

"I only ever hit what I mean to hit, sir," said Junior, "and I'm not inclined to hit the guys at the Organization." He looked around. "Might change, but I like what I've seen so far." He gave Quinn a flickering once-over and a small grin that could be interpreted any number of ways.

"Keep him away from me," Quinn told Wynston.

"If I need you both on a job, I'm taking you both on a job, Quinn. I just thought you should meet now so you can get used to the idea."

"And so you can be absolutely certain you're present when we do run into each other, rather than letting us run loose on the *Aegis* and risking not being there for the show."

"Yes, that too."

"Think I like your sense of humor," Junior told Wynston.

"Yes, I suspect we'll get along." Wynston smiled sweetly. "As I was saying earlier, Junior, Quinn's the second best we've got, if you don't take off

points for minor considerations like personality and fundamental value as a human being."

"Did my time working for the Empire," said Junior. "I'm used to not counting those."

"Yes, exactly. So now you've met him. Next I'll have Hazard fill you in on operations." Wynston trailed off, his smile fading. Pierce Junior appeared to be entirely distracted by Quinn.

"There's something about you I can't quite put my finger on..." said Junior.

Wynston squeezed his eyes shut and rubbed his temples. "An air of noble tragedy?"

"Yes! That's just it! It's really h--"

"For stars' sake," Wynston said impatiently, "he's straight."

"Ah. Right, then," Junior said affably, and wandered off.

Quinn raised his eyebrows. "Defending me, agent? Against a nightmare worse than any I could have imagined myself, no less."

"I already spend more than enough of my time having to watch people make eyes at you. I will not allow him to start."

July, 29 ATC: Growing Pains

Quinn, Wynston, and Pierce Junior convened in one of the debriefing rooms of the *Aegis*.

"Well," said Wynston.

"You certainly do operate much like your father did," said Quinn.

"Old man taught me everything I know," beamed Junior.

"Regrettably, yes," said Quinn.

"You landed the shuttle *on* their speeder fleet," said Wynston.

Junior smiled wolfishly. "Stopped 'em deploying, didn't it?"

Quinn scowled. "And did you really have to clear their perimeter security by shooting smiley faces into their battle droids?"

"Knocked 'em out with style."

"The literal fireworks show at their armory was utterly gratuitous," said Wynston.

"Got valuable practice in precision shots, choreographing that stockpile clearout one rocket at a time from six hundred meters. Figured I should use their stockpile before they did. And I did save some of their explosives to steal for the real job."

"Yes, your real job. Blowing up the whole office building was thoroughly unnecessary," said Quinn.

"Made a diversion, like you wanted. Never liked their government anyway."

"You never even heard of their government until twelve hours ago!" said Wynston.

"Yeah. Didn't like it then, don't like it now. Said yourself they're tyrants."

"We must make minimal obvious secondary impact with our work," said Quinn. "It was not only imprudent but completely unprofessional to destroy the place."

"And you were late on the trigger because you spent so much time on that demolitions setup," said Wynston. "You must get the job done, *then* screw with people. There's a very strict order of operations in this line of work."

"It worked out, didn't it?"

"Yes, but it's not--" said Wynston and Quinn. They caught themselves. Quinn got a sudden, predatory gleam in his eyes.

"Yes, agent?" he said quietly. "It's not?"

Wynston sucked in a breath. "Oh, don't make me do it."

"No, please, you were quite ready for it."

Junior tilted his head curiously. "Sir?"

"Go on," purred Quinn. "What's the problem with his method?"

Wynston grimaced, but he forced the words out. "It's not proper."

Quinn's smugness suffused the room in an almost visible aura.

"Junior," said Wynston, "you're well qualified to lay standalone tactics and get jobs done, but we're going to need to talk management style and sort out when to play exactly what I say because I said it for a reason and when to...freestyle."

"Sure. I look forward to shaking up the status quo a little bit." Junior found his way out.

Quinn rounded on Wynston. "And now you know how I've felt with every colleague I've ever had. He's disobedient, chaotic--"

"-- messy, cheeky--" returned Wynston.

" --overly concerned with his own amusement--"

" --entirely incapable of sticking to a clean execution of a perfectly good plan!"

"At least you can hold to the mission parameters," said Quinn.

"At least when you improvise you use rational and mostly legal tactics," said Wynston.

"I am also minimally destructive."

"A fact I didn't fully appreciate until tonight."

"What possessed you to hire him?"

"He got results in his old job. And he liked the 'make the galaxy safe for ordinary people, especially the young, pretty and single' line."

"'Especially the young, pretty and single'? You use that line to recruit?"

"If I think it'll work. It's not like he'll be competing with us, he's gay."

"And the fact that this is your thought process just makes it all the more horrifying that we have a recruit whose style manages to disgust even you."

"I had no idea he was going to be that destructive when we gave him such a simple role."

"His father always managed to shoehorn explosives into jobs."

"Ruth always spoke so highly of his father! I thought she had standards! - Catastrophically awful blind spot for you aside. - How did she manage him?"

"By keeping him and me separate, for the most part. Also by sending him to do only the crudest of jobs."

"That may be the approach we need here."

"I'm just astounded that someone outraged your sense of propriety. I'm astounded to discover you have a sense of propriety."

"I am a professional, Quinn."

"Compared to the Pierces, you are. It pains me, but I must concede that."

July, 29 ATC: Ruth's Violence

Quinn, being unable to locate a private holo of any decent quality, reluctantly called from a console in the command room. His son Rylon picked up right away.

"Hi," said Rylon.

"Hello," said Quinn. "How are things?"

"Good, really good. I, uh, I actually wondered if you're, you know, all right."

"Yes," Quinn said unsteadily. "Quite."

"The anniversary of saving the galaxy is probably a good thing," said Rylon.

"How's your back?" said Quinn.

"Oh, fine. You got kolto on it soon enough after you shot me, it healed up without scars." The teenager said it with a little weight, as if especially trying to reassure his father.

"Good," said Quinn awkwardly.

"You didn't have to call. The galaxy in general's still breathing. We won. We're okay."

"Yes, indeed."

"Hey. Dad?"

"Yes, Rylon?"

"Maybe you should consider cutting the number of depressing anniversaries you observe."

"What do you mean?"

"It's just, you get really depressed over it all, but then there were those fifteen years of giving her the silent treatment. It just makes people wonder sometimes how much you actually liked her."

"I loved your mother with all my heart," said Quinn, hoarsely, intensely. He cleared his throat. "From a safe distance."

"Uh-huh."

"Did you ever incur her wrath? You would stay away for a while, too."

"I made her mad all the time. She yelled a bit and occasionally confiscated my practice blade. That was it."

"Really? I always assumed her parenting methods would copy her professional ones. She never choked you?"

"Well, no."

"Shock collar?"

"No."

"Allowed malicious parties to vent their frustrations through violence on your person while forbidding medical relief?"

"Never."

"Oh." Quinn shifted his weight and looked uncomfortable. "I'm beginning to wonder whether she liked me at all."

"All the more reason to maybe not worry about these anniversaries so much. Not that I don't enjoy getting a dozen holocalls a year where you look like somebody just kicked your old division's tail in combat. You never used to be this glum."

At some point Wynston had wandered into the room. "What he's saying is, you should lighten up."

"Nobody asked you," said Quinn.

August, 29 ATC: A ghost

Quinn and Wynston secured the control terminals and started the rewiring that would let Pierce Junior take remote control of the whole facility. While the two of them waited, something started banging down the corridor of the Hutt complex.

Wynston raised his rifle and trained it on the door.

In the last seconds of approach the footfalls got softer, as if a much lighter individual had just stopped exaggerating movements. And then an armored woman strolled in: a Rattataki, black of lip and silver of eye, with a face in which age lines were starting to compete with the Rattataki stripes. Scars crisscrossed over her bald skull and down one cheek. She was packing a blaster rifle, but she kept it down at her side.

"Wwggaaawuh," said Wynston.

The Rattataki smiled. "Glad to see you, too, blue-boy," she said in a rich low voice.

"Kaliyo Djannis," said Quinn in his best ominous-calculation voice, but nobody was listening to him.

"You were dead," said Wynston.

"Nah. Badly shot up, but in the end it wasn't me who strapped on a face-concealing helmet and walked into Vledu's last trap. I suckered someone else into it."

"And you didn't see fit to mention this?"

"It was a security risk," she mocked with an exaggerated pout. "I just couldn't, agent. Thought I'd strike out on my own awhile, leave your brand of intrigue behind. What's more, I liked it. Now here I am, a gun for hire once again."

"Bloody hell, Kaliyo, do you have any idea how much I spent on booze after you died? I don't even remember because I always was too busy downing the next bottle to remember the last! And all that was wasted? I should bill you!"

"Aw, you binged for me? That's cute."

"It wasn't just drinking. I seriously considered blowing up few buildings in your honor. Bad-guy buildings, of course, but still, it would've been very dramatic."

"Bad guys, of course. This is you we're talking about, after all. I can't believe you're still up on the principles thing." Kaliyo leaned sideways to eye Quinn. "That your fault?"

"He has principles?" Quinn said blandly.

"Hm," said Kaliyo. "By the way, Tightpants, you look like hell. You still some kind of officer?"

"No," said Wynston.

"Yes," said Quinn.

"You resigned," said Wynston.

"It still counts as far as she's concerned," said Quinn.

Kaliyo smiled. "I'm just saying, you don't look so stiff now. You've got this air of -"

"Don't you dare say it," hissed Wynston.

"What?" she said, innocently wide-eyed. "I was going to say he has this air of abject, entertainingly pathetic misery. Almost makes me feel bad for making fun of him all this time. Almost." She looked back at Quinn. "You have really let yourself go. In a surprisingly hot way." Then she shrugged. "So you gonna jump me or not, agent?"

Wynston mentally grumbled at Quinn for the hotness comment. "That's a security risk," he told Kaliyo.

"Ooh, yeah, be contrary." She fished a chronometer out of her pocket. "Let's see how long that -"

Wynston took two steps forward and grabbed Kaliyo's collar. "Let's go then, gorgeous."

Kaliyo dug in her heels. "'Gorgeous'? Is that the best you can do?" Her grin tugged at her scars.

He stopped pulling and instead relaxed close to her. "Kaliyo, I'm not being sarcastic when I say that you are every bit as beautiful right this minute as you were the first time I was forced to ask myself whether ravishing you in Nem'ro's front office would make me a bad guest."

Quinn choked on nothing in particular.

"Something to say?" said Wynston.

"You're lying through your teeth as usual, agent. That was a terrible line, and I suspect she only looks good to you because she's the first woman in weeks who has approached you instead of me."

"Women approach you?" Kaliyo asked Quinn skeptically. "That's for slapping purposes or something. Right?"

"It's really not worth talking about," said Wynston. "Can we continue this discussion in private? I'll go for as long as you want, just not here."

"I might want a long time. You up for it?"

"For you? Always."

"I would be most grateful if you two could skip ahead to the 'in private' part," Quinn prompted.

"Ooh, ooh, can we do it on his console?" said Kaliyo.

"No. You might catch the pretentiousness," said Wynston.

"Alternatively you might consider doing your job first, agent," suggested Quinn. "You know, the critical mission we came to complete."

"Oh, you and Junior can handle it," said Wynston. "I'll be along shortly."

*

Three days later Wynston made it back to the *Aegis*. He showered, changed clothes, and walked a little unsteadily into the command room.

Quinn straightened up to greet him. "Where is she?"

"Damned if I know. We split; I wasn't about to bring her back here."

"I see. That may well be the only sensible thing you've done about her." He eyed Wynston critically. Wynston swayed in place. "I hesitate to bring it up," said Quinn, "but you seem...the worse for wear. Far worse than usual."

"I haven't slept," said Wynston. "But I wanted to check in before I go pass out."

"Everything here is operating at close to peak efficiency. It would be peak if not for the terminal Junior managed to blow up using remote console commands alone. - Really? Three days and you didn't sleep? That seems excessive, even for you."

"Oh, we took breaks. She rested just fine."

"But you didn't."

"Quinn, I'm not that big a fool. In all the years Kaliyo and I have known each other, I have never spent one second sleeping in her presence." Wynston smiled dreamily. "Damn, what a woman."

"Ah. For a moment I thought you were going to leave an intelligent statement, but you rescued yourself. Now please find somewhere else to pass out."

"I believe I will." Wynston squinted at Quinn. "Abject misery. I think I see it."

Quinn looked annoyed.

"Yes," said Wynston, "that really makes me feel better about everything. Trust Kaliyo to put things in some amusing travesty of perspective."

"Go away."

September, 29 ATC: Team meeting

Background reminder, Quinn did have to shoot his son that one time.

Quinn paused mid-brief and watched as Wynston strolled into the crowded conference room. "Ah," said Quinn, "Agent Punctuality. Good of you to join us."

"Captain Protocol. I can see your audience is already enthralled with whatever meaningless bureaucratic drivel you've been trying to feed them."

"Yes, well, you'll find most people benefit from agreeing on what we're doing before we go do it, Agent Improv."

"Ooh, Captain Stuffy gettin' huffy."

"Whenever you're ready to give up the spotlight, Special Agent Prima Donna, we can get to work."

"I can't help it if the spotlight actively jumps away from you whenever it sees the chance, Captain Charisma."

"There are a great many things you can't help, Agent Flake, which forces me to wonder why you put forth the effort to show up at all."

"Mostly to make sure you don't ruin everything the moment my back is turned, Captain Friendly Fire. Or was that Major Friendly Fire? General Friendly Fire? It really works with every rank!"

"Tell me, Agent Cheap Shot, did you ever manage to find the concept of discretion in your master database of all galactic knowledge?"

"If I had, would I tell you, Captain Logic?"

"It's a pity they didn't have a Nuisance designation to give you; it would have fit you so much better than Cipher."

"Nuisance Nine? I like the sound of that."

"Or perhaps they could have skipped straight to 'Egomaniac Nine.'"

"Ah, but you'd save the lower numbers for the deserving, eh? You could've been Egomaniac One instead of just Captain Annoying."

"Whereas you will never outgrow being Agent Annoying."

"You can't just repeat one. That's lazy even for you, Captain That's-beneath-my-imaginary-dignity."

"That was pathetic, Cipher Not-Enough."

"Hold up. Junior, what are you doing over there?"

Pierce Junior looked up from the small cart he had been pushing around the edges of the conference room. "Selling popcorn, sir."

"You-" said Quinn. "That-that's completely inappropriate!"

"Pay no mind to Captain Protocol," said Wynston, "I applaud your initiative. Save some for me; I'll be done arguing eventually and popcorn sounds good."

"Better make it fast," said Junior, handing out another bag to one of the assembled agents. "These are selling quick and I don't hold reservations."

"'Captain Protocol'?" said Quinn. "Who's repeating monikers now, Agent Hypocrisy?"

"Who's having a heart attack at the mere sight of unsanctioned snacks, Captain Knickers-in-a-twist?"

"On second thought, go on repeating the old ones, Agent Tries-a-lot. You're not doing yourself any favors with the new attempts."

"With pleasure, Captain Friendly Fire."

"Not that one!"

"Judging by the look on your face right now, I win!" Wynston jogged up to the head of the conference room, snatched the holo remote from an extraordinarily resentful-looking Quinn's hand, and beamed winningly at the assembly. "Ladies and gentlemen, I'll take the morning briefing from here. Junior, toss me some of that popcorn."

September, 29 ATC: Generations

The slim black-haired youth watched in consternation as the Fury interceptor streaked through atmosphere and came roaring to a barely-controlled, recklessly angled landing about five meters away from the house. The near wall of the building swayed gently, then crumbled from the force of the impact. The observer crossed his arms and directed a cobalt-blue glare at the huge red-haired man who swaggered out from the ship.

"Who are you supposed to be?" demanded the black-haired youth.

"Pierce, Junior."

"I was using that building."

Junior eyed the collapsed wall and shrugged. "Don't you have a whole estate back on Dromund Kaas? You're fine." He stuck out his hand.

"Anyway, Mister Rylon Niral, it's a pleasure to meet you."

Rylon glared at Junior's hand. "You can't just go around wrecking buildings, you know."

"I have a long and illustrious history that says otherwise, my friend." Junior let his hand drop and smiled.

"Furthermore," grated Rylon, "I was expecting my father in person."

"Oh, that. The boss sent me instead. Said something like 'The kid's inconvenience is a worthwhile price to pay for the look on Quinn's face when he finds out I sent you.'" Junior gave Rylon a long once-over, taking in both the dark Sith robes and the ferocious scowl. "My, you're just a bundle of sunshine, aren't you?"

"My house just got knocked over!"

"Take it easy there. Heard you were going down the light-side path of serenity and temperance or rules-lawyering or whatever it is Light Side Sith do."

"I am. I'm practically a master of discipline and self-control."

"Niral, you're Force vandalizing my ship as we speak."

Rylon relaxed his left hand and attempted to look innocent. A noticeable streak of the Fury's paint job, having been mysteriously scraped loose, leaned and fell off the walls. "It was necessary," he said.

"In fact I detect visible waves of sullen annoyance coming off you."

"Disciplined sullen annoyance! This is entirely constructive! And what about you, huh? I'll note the damage I definitely didn't inflict there is dwarfed by the scorch marks already on that ship, no doubt from your reckless handling."

"Those were caused by my *enemies*, you idiot, because unlike some people I stick to teams that don't go in for friendly fire."

"At least I know when to stop breaking things."

"At least I have a sense of humor."

"At least I can be distinguished from a particularly clumsy nerf."

"At least I'm not a walking angst-ball."

"No wonder my father hates you."

"No wonder my father- well, no, Dad always thought you were adorable."

Rylon's eyes bulged. "I am not adorable!"

Junior grinned. "Especially when you're mad."

"Is there a *reason* you came crashing in here, Pierce?"

"Yeah. Was gonna pick you up to bring you by HQ, visit your father, all that stuff."

"I suppose I should be grateful you were paying attention long enough to get halfway through your assigned task."

"I'm always paying attention, kid. Don't forget it. Now, you coming or not?"

Rylon scowled and followed Junior onto the ship. "I'm Sith, you know," he grumbled. "That means I outrank you."

"I'll be sure to give that exactly the consideration it's due."

Junior got the ship under way and then strolled by a brooding Rylon in the holo room to place a call. The Chiss Wynston came up before long.

"Junior, good to hear from you. You found Rylon all right?"

"Sure did." A grinning Junior looked over to where Rylon was glaring daggers at him. "And he is everything you advertised. I do believe history's repeating itself as we speak."

"Ah. Try to avoid repeating it too closely. This time around the Quinn line has Force powers."

Rylon, for the first time, smiled.

October, 29 ATC: Counseling

"Rylon, thanks again for coming out on short notice. All right, Quinn, here's the job." Wynston opened the shuttle door to reveal a blank office door in Kaas City. "You and Rylon are going in."

"What is this?" Quinn asked suspiciously.

"Family counseling. Look, I like a good Force storm as much as the next cowering bystander, but Rylon's last visit to the *Aegis* was a safety disaster, and you yourself have heavy enough issues about Ruth to self-start a black hole."

"I'm not going to—"

"He's got a point, Dad," said Rylon. "Not that I don't love getting a check-in call from you looking miserable on every anniversary of everything that ever happened between you and Mom, but...you need help. And I've got this cruiser-wreck kind of curiosity about how that'll work."

Quinn scowled and trailed his son into the office.

The receptionist waved them into a big bright comfortably furnished room. A pudgy little human in full Sith robes, corrupted blood vessels pulsing across the bald spot on his head, smiled warmly. "Gentlemen, welcome. I'm Doctor Dysagape. I'm a very experienced counselor specializing in Sith family dynamics."

"Hello," Quinn said stiffly.

"Hi," said Rylon.

"Please, have a seat."

Quinn stood rigidly at parade rest instead. Rylon slouched over to the nearest couch and sat. Dysagape settled on a chair facing both of them.

"Why don't you tell me a little about yourselves," suggested Dysagape.

"Malavai Quinn, formerly a general of the Imperial army, retired. This is my son Rylon Niral."

"He has a different last name," observed the counselor.

"Yes," said Quinn. "He has his mother's name."

"She's gonna be a pretty big factor here, Dad. My mom's Ruth Niral, the Emperor's Wrath. She and Dad were married, but she kept her name. Um, she's dead now."

"I see, I see. All right. So the way this works, I want this to be a very open space between us. I can ask you questions to help step you through difficulties in your family life, or you can bring questions to each other or to me. This is a very nonjudgmental space, but the no-combat rule is strictly enforced." Dysagape smiled benevolently. "Now, then, why don't we get the very basic Sith background out of the way. Please answer for yourselves, and then we can discuss, ah, Ruth. Can you tell me how many murder attempts you've made on each other? Rylon, why don't you start."

Rylon slouched further. "Dad once. Mom twice, kinda. One of those was coerced, one was legitimate, all the others were kinda half-assed. Like I woulda been pretty psyched about killing her because, hey, badass, but since it was just sparring at school it wasn't that serious."

Quinn frowned. "Rylon, you never told me you were sparring to kill."

"Sith, Dad." Rylon looked sulky.

"And you, General Quinn? How many times have you tried to kill your wife and son?"

"I don't appreciate the insinuation, doctor."

"We're all Sith or related to Sith here. It's all right."

"Ruth once," Quinn said irritably. "I've never tried to kill Rylon."

"You shot me in the back, dad. Repeatedly."

"I had to be sure you would stay down! – In a nonfatal way!"

"General, I'm going to note that as a nonpremeditated kill attempt. It's perfectly normal."

"No, it's not! I would never harm my son!"

"Dad. You harmed me. I get it, it's okay, so quit flipping out."

"It seems you've accepted your father's role in that incident."

"Yeah. Under the circumstances I would've shot me, too."

"I see. So, if I may ask, what was, ah, Ruth's record?"

Quinn spoke first. "She tried once. Long ago. I think in the end she again came to regret not finishing it."

"She never tried to kill me," Rylon said cheerfully.

"Hmm. And how does that make you feel, Rylon?"

"Pretty good, actually. I know some guys would call it neglect, but Mom always told me she didn't want to hurt her loved ones. So no matter what anybody else thinks, in the end not hurting me except in self-defense was her weirdness, not mine."

"General Quinn, you should be proud of yourself for raising such a well-adjusted child. Now, you mentioned Ruth did make one attempt on your life? Can you describe that?"

Quinn hesitated. "Force choke," interposed Rylon. "Pretty much the same as I did to him that one time. Standard stuff, big argument, dramatic drawn-out Force choke, and then something changed her mind." The teenager shrugged. "My existence changed hers. Years later, her showing up changed mine."

"Her showing up didn't 'change your mind' so much as she hit you until you dropped me."

"Close enough, Dad."

"I see." The counselor kept taking notes. "That's quite remarkable, General, that you've only gotten two murder attempts from your immediate family, and those two were both resolved within the family. Very symmetrical. Very interesting." He paused for a few moments, and when nobody else spoke up he went on. "Now, to work back to something you mentioned, Rylon, you said one of the attempts you made on your mother's life was coerced?"

"Yeah. Emperor. Mind control. It sucked. Like, he recruits me with promises of ultimate power and being better than everyone, and then the second things get tight he's all 'actually you don't get self-determination any more.'"

"So you started in the Emperor's employ voluntarily?"

"Well, yeah."

"And he then sent you to kill your mother."

"Yeah. I mean, she could've avoided it by just joining us, but she gets stubborn. So I think it was kind of half her fault."

"No, it wasn't," snapped Quinn.

Rylon rolled his eyes. "Of course you'd take her side."

"The Emperor was the worst employer you could possibly have chosen and I am saying this as a man who once moved *up* from Moff Broysc's personal cleanup crew to Darth Baras's expendable-extra staff! You should have known he would ask you to do terrible things!"

"Mom did terrible things, too! She worked for the Emperor for seventeen years! The three of us were professional doers of awfulness! How was I supposed to know she would turn around and stab the boss in the back like that?"

"Gentlemen," said Dysagape. "Inside voices."

"He's dodging responsibility," said Quinn.

"He's got the dumbest idea of loyalty I've ever seen, and I'm a graduate of the Korriban Academy," said Rylon.

"No, you're not," said Quinn. "We withdrew you months ago for study with Jaesa. You never completed the trials."

"I was close to graduating. It counts. The point here is that you suck at loyalty."

"So, Rylon, you could say," prompted Dysagape, "that you're disappointed in your parents for attacking the Emperor instead of staying in his employ?"

"It...it ended up kinda making sense, since now we're not all dead, but it was kind of a major switch from Mom's career as I knew it. And they didn't really keep me in the loop while it was happening."

"You wouldn't take our calls! You were too busy doing your Emperor-brainwashing-preparation-whatever-that-was!"

"Maybe if you'd left a note to warn me he was death incarnate, I would've dropped that class!"

"We could have warned you if you'd told us your advanced classes were about taking on the Emperor as a surrogate father, but you didn't! You couldn't be bothered to leave us a message on that because you were too busy getting big and tough enough to destroy your own mother!"

"That's a perfectly valid ambition," Dysagape said imperturbably.

Quinn turned to the counselor. "Whose side are you on?" he demanded.

"I'm not here to take sides. I'm just here to listen and to make sure that nobody starts Force choking anybody. Or shooting them in the back."

"I won't shoot him," said Quinn. "Except under extraordinary circumstances. I love him, even when he's being a completely impossible brat."

"Unconditional love," said Dysagape, raising his eyebrows. "That's...um...a very unusual lifestyle choice, but...we don't judge here. Is that something you've ever considered, Rylon?"

"I would love him unconditionally if he would stop being such a jerk."

"I'm going to write that down as a no," said Dysagape. "Good. So, if you're comfortable answering this, General, did your wife also attempt to practice this, er, unconditional love?"

"Every day," Quinn said softly.

"Except the days you were fighting," Rylon added. "Seriously, that whole mess just creeped me out."

Dysagape kept taking notes. "'That whole mess' being your parents'...nontraditional...home habits as your father mentioned? Or 'that whole mess' being fighting?"

"So, they were split 'til I was fourteen, and then they kicked me out of the house and started—"

"Rylon, please."

"Right, I would love to not go into detail, too. So I could understand the fighting because Mom hated him, a ton, but then they got mushy anyway. It made zero sense."

"It sounds like the last few years have been extremely eventful for you both."

Rylon blinked and frowned. "...um, Dad?"

"Yes, Rylon?"

"Are we paying him credits for insights like that?"

"No, I believe the agent is footing the bill for this endeavor."

"Oh. Good."

Dysagape leaned forward. "'The agent'? You seem to say that as a very loaded term."

Rylon facepalmed. "Oh stars don't get him started."

October, 29 ATC: Counseling 2: Social Norms, Quinn and Dysagape

"You have a lot of difficulty surrounding the event where you and Ruth tried to kill each other."

"Yes," Quinn said shortly.

"Can you tell me a little bit about that?"

"I was first assigned to her as a spy for my master Darth Baras. When conflict broke out between him and Ruth, I was ordered to kill her. I made an effort to do so."

"But you failed."

"Well, yes."

"And that one incident was the source of the all the rest of this difficulty?"

"Yes. She never really forgave me for it."

"So...after your one kill attempt prompted by direct orders from your superior, she withheld both social and sexual contact as well as tightly restricting access to your son for...fifteen years? Doesn't that strike you as a little controlling?"

"I betrayed the faith she had placed in me, every feeling we had declared. She was scarcely out of her teens and I tore her every hope of trust, in work or in love, to shreds."

"And that was a reality check, wasn't it? This is the Empire we live in. You were doing her a favor."

"I ripped out her heart on the word of a worthless butcher!"

"And she didn't see that coming? It really sounds like she was having some trouble adjusting to the expectations of Sith culture. May I ask where Ruth was originally from?"

"Dromund Kaas. She's a sixth-generation Sith."

Dysagape's mouth fell open. After a second he managed "I don't even know what to say to that."

Quinn smiled a little. "Neither did I when we first met. She made her attitudes work, though."

"Evidently not if she felt vindictive enough to punish you for a decade and a half over a very normal, very reasonable professional move."

"Not wholly vindictive. For all her anger, she defended me, too. More than once. She extended her authority to preserve my life even when she didn't need to. And in person she would have given her life for me in a heartbeat, even when it would have been utterly foolish to do so."

"I have to question that, General Quinn."

Quinn frowned at him. "In the end, she did sacrifice herself. I know she was angry but I know...I hope...she still cared."

"I was more referring to your earlier efforts. Think this through with me. You tried to kill her because it was your responsibility."

"Yes."

"And what would have happened if you refused?"

"Well, Darth Baras would have had me killed."

"So in effect it was your life or hers."

"I don't like where this is going."

"She had an opportunity to save you by simply dying in the normal, socially accepted way, but she chose not to, knowing that the price was likely to be your life, because she was fundamentally out for herself."

"She was too preoccupied with having the very assumptions of her world shattered to analyze the situation in that detail."

"That sort of sounds like she was irrational as well as selfish." Dysagape leaned forward. "She was as Sith as the rest of us. You just have to remember that her hypocrisy was not your fault."

"The discrepancy between your insane expectations and her passionate, genuine, freely offered love does not constitute hypocrisy!"

"Ah, it's very interesting that you use the word 'insane.' Because by all Imperial and Sith standards, I'm not the one displaying that quality."

"It was her standard that kept us all alive through the Emperor's threat, not yours."

"And you see, that's another example of her prioritizing saving lives rather than killing her master for some healthy reason like usurping his power. I hope you can recognize that there's a profound disconnect here between your wife's behavior and—"

Quinn slammed from parade rest to a half-salute. "If you'll excuse me, I need to be elsewhere."

"Oh? Keeping busy, are we?"

"Yes." Quinn showed his teeth. "I have a full day of killing particularly destructive Sith scheduled."

"Oh," said Dysagape, relieved. "That's excellent that you're getting out of the house for something so—"

Quinn walked out.

"Killing Sith in his spare time," murmured the counselor, finishing up his notes. "There may be hope for him after all."

November, 29 ATC: Counseling 3, the Trio plus Wynston's long arm

"Gentlemen, have a seat," said Doctor Dysagape. "Now, then. Before we start, were there any questions you two had for me or each other?"

Quinn cleared his throat. "I had a question, actually. I wanted to ask Rylon whether...whether he's all right. After the Emperor's mind control, after what happened with the Voice and again in the Emperor's fortress."

"Uh, Dad? You could've just asked me on the way over."

"As a precaution I prefer to ask in a milieu that will suppress combat efforts."

"What, like Doctor Short'n'round here could stop me?"

"That wasn't the point," Quinn said hastily. "I just...I worry. You must have suffered a great deal."

Rylon shrugged. "It was kinda freaky, but I'll live. The mind control was weird, but I talked it over with Wynston a lot, he really helped put it in perspective."

"You talked it over with...Wynston?"

"Yeah. He's had some experience in the area."

"And you couldn't bring it up with me?"

"Hey Dad, let's talk about those times I tried to kill Mom' didn't seem like the greatest idea."

"Perhaps not, but you might try something less inviting of disaster than confiding in Agent Wynston."

"General, you seem to be afraid of Wynston receiving the attention and trust of your loved ones," observed Dysagape.

"Afraid? No. Infuriated? Yes."

"I get the impression that this is a longstanding grudge. Do you feel that this Wynston has wronged you before?"

"He slept with *my wife* before I got involved with her and now he's stealing my son's trus-"

"WHAT."

Quinn looked at Rylon, startled. "What is it?"

"Mom slept with Wynston?"

"Ah. Well, yes. Frankly I'm surprised Wynston never bragged about it."

"*Wynston slept with Mom?* Dad, the only person she ever talked about with even a whiff of...anything even vaguely like that, was you."

Quinn perked up. "Really?"

"Well, yeah. I'm gonna go ahead and guess that whatever disgusting thing happened with him was bad enough to get swept under the rug..."

Quinn looked pleased.

"...because Wynston's never once mentioned it in all that time we've spent talking."

Quinn frowned. "All the time you've spent talking?"

"Yeah. Any time I'm in the area while you're busy we get to talking. Like I said, there's the mind control thing, common experiences like that. And he's got some kind of running interview thing going, gathering data or something about tragedy and whether women come on to me."

Quinn only twitched a little bit. "Even if I did swear I would not have the obscene vocabulary for, first, what I am thinking right now, and, second, what I will do to that alien when I get my hands on him."

"Could you maybe please not kill him?"

"What, were you also sharing confidences on the importance of me not harming him?"

Rylon's gaze darted around the room. "If I say no, will you not harm him?"

"No."

"Look, Dad, he just wanted to talk."

"I can talk!"

"Well, he can talk without spilling stuff about Mom's sex life! That makes the conversations a lot less disturbing."

"Apart from the freak occurrence mentioned previously, there's nothing to say on the subject."

Dysagape waved his stylus. "Er, can I just make sure we're clear on this, General? You're saying that with your wife, Ruth, there was no sex life to talk about?"

"No! I'm saying there's nothing I'm going to share with Rylon!"

"Much appreciated, Dad."

"I do my best, Rylon."

"So," said Dysagape, "I'll just add that to the already extensive list of things you appear to be unwilling to talk to your son about."

"Uh, I'm the one who expressed unwillingness to talk about trying to murder Mom," volunteered Rylon. "This goes both ways."

"Yes, there's quite a lot we both refuse to communicate about," agreed Quinn.

"Which is why I talk to Wynston sometimes," explained Rylon.

"Bloody—" said Quinn, and took a hissing breath. "Fine. I'll talk. I am entirely willing to talk to you and help you sort through whatever it is you discuss with that alien."

"Um. If you want. So, uh, let's talk about those times I tried to kill Mom?"

“Yes, let’s. It must have been a very dark and difficult time, and I am and always will be here for you, but that doesn’t excuse the fact that *you tried to stab my wife to death*, you ungrateful idiot.”

“Hey, wasn’t this about me confiding in you about how much I must have suffered?”

Quinn looked over at Doctor Dysagape. “Are you supposed to be mediating or possibly doing something constructive or otherwise earning your pay?”

“I wouldn’t dream of interfering with this cruiser wreck,” Dysagape said mildly. “Please, carry on.”

Rylon gave him a suddenly-bored look and stood. “You know, Dad, we could probably do this without the audience.”

“If that is an effort to lure me out of the combat-restricted zone, Rylon, I...I’ll be very proud of you.”

“Hey. Like I said earlier, Short’n’round couldn’t stop me if he tried. The only person who’s ever beaten me in real combat – not that polite first-blood stuff Mom always ordered me to stop at, but real combat – is, well, you. You cheated about a billion ways, but you’re the only one who ever knocked me out of a fight. So really, if I were gonna try to kill you, it being inside or outside is not the part I worry about.” He shoved his hands in his pockets. “So are we gonna go?”

“Yes. Let’s.” Quinn nodded coolly at Dysagape, who seemed disappointed that the entertainment was about to leave. Father and son stepped out into the steady Dromund Kaas drizzle and started walking nowhere in particular.

“That was all very flattering,” Quinn said, “but I still can’t believe you talk to Wynston.”

“He’s all right, Dad.”

“Then you clearly haven’t talked enough to get to know him.”

“We see a fair amount of each other. It’s a way to learn a little about the Operation you two run, and also just get, I dunno, some perspective, about Mom and life and stuff. I...Force and thunder, what thought just put that look on your face?”

"It just occurred to me," said Quinn, "that I am profoundly grateful I didn't have a daughter."

November, 29 ATC: Rylon has two dads

"Hazard, can I trouble you for a moment?"

"Any time you like, Wynston."

"Could you just look at Quinn and tell me whether he's still carrying the air of noble tragedy? It's hard for me to tell sometimes."

The Joiner obligingly gave Quinn a long once-over. "Yes," she said simply. "It's all around him. It just makes you want to take him in your arms, pull him close, and tell him it will be all right, he doesn't to face it alone. You know?"

Wynston crossed his arms and raised his eyebrows. "No," he said grimly. "No, nothing about him has ever given me that urge."

"You're a cold man, Wynston."

"Hmph. You're too young for him anyway."

"He's only a few years older than—"

"Oh, you're too young for me, too, but at least I'm charming." Wynston huffed petulantly. "I thought that counseling was supposed to do something about his wretched mystique."

"Perhaps he is the one you should be talking to."

"I'll do that."

Wynston headed over to where Quinn was consulting with Rylon.

"I think it would really help, Dad," Rylon was saying.

"I am not going to couples counseling with Wynston," snarled Quinn.

"...What?" said Wynston.

"Oh, hi." Rylon waved vaguely. "Look, the only subject that gets him as neurotic as Mom is you. So if he's stuck, maybe you should come along."

"Come along to your counselor."

"Yeah."

"And be trapped in a room with Agent Quinn, telling him about my feelings."

"Well, yeah."

"Rylon, what do you think I've been doing for the past year?"

"It isn't like Dysagape would help the process," muttered Quinn. "The man is worse than useless."

"I dunno," said Rylon, "he gets us onto some interesting subjects."

Quinn scowled. "I'm not going to our next session, you know. I'll be busy."

"Friday next, isn't it?" said Wynston. "You don't have work lined up."

"I mean to find something to take my mind off matters. It's the anniversary...twice over...of...well. I don't intend to elaborate on that."

"And see, Dad, that's something else you should work on. Observing depressing anniversaries. You go way overboard with that."

"No I don't."

"In the past year and a half, we have: Mom's birthday. Your birthday, for some reason. The anniversaries of you and Mom's first everything you won't tell me about and I never want to hear. The day you shot me in the back. The day you stabbed Mom in the back. The day you stabbed Darth Baras in the back."

Quinn frowned. "You make it sound like I made a habit of this."

"The record speaks for itself," said Wynston with a malicious little smile.

"If it's a habit, Agent, you're next."

"You already attempted to have me indefinitely locked in an Imperial brig."

"That's only half the job, I'm sure I could do more."

"And left me with no transport and no supplies on the top of a mesa on Tatooine. And mysteriously run out of painkillers on at least four occasions when I got hit in the field."

"Those occasions were your carelessness."

"You got me convicted of forgery, reckless driving, and homicide in a Rodian court."

"The record," Quinn said with some satisfaction, "speaks for itself."

"It was a falsified record! Mostly. Then there was that time I ended up on the wrong side of a locked durasteel door with a frothing mob of frustrated women after you convinced them all I had stolen your attentions in what has got to be the worst-timed development of homosexual tendencies – even fake ones – in history. You have done just about everything except literally shoot me. My original claim of 'perfidious bastard' stands."

"It isn't perfidy with you. I have always been honest in saying you can't and shouldn't trust me."

"Perfidy aside, you're still a bastard."

Quinn looked over. "Rylon, if you take one more step toward the popcorn machine I will be forced to discipline you."

Wynston looked over as well. "Go for it, Rylon."

Rylon hesitated. "You're not my real dad," he pointed out.

"I had more of a presence in your life than Quinn did, at least in the early years."

"Which is why I thought you coming with us to counseling would—"

"No," burst Wynston and Quinn together.

December, 29 ATC: School of Hard Knocks

The high-priority mission had been handled with the help of an accidentally timed visit by Rylon and a sudden, desperate play involving him making bratty Sith lord demands while Junior, Quinn, and Wynston did a lot of background scrambling. Pitched battle broke out within minutes, but it was enough time for Quinn and Wynston to handle the data transfer before they joined Junior and Rylon in the wildly overheated struggle against the guards and the Sith they had hoped to fool.

"I must say," said Quinn, "Rylon makes a much more convincing Sith than you ever did, agent."

Wynston gestured dismissively. "That's because Rylon's an actual Sith. I maintain that I could've gotten us through that particular scene back there with a lot less trouble."

Pierce Junior chuckled. "Trouble ended up all on their side. Just the way I like it."

"We talked the survivor into giving up what we wanted," Rylon said happily. "Force choking is just about the most convincing trick Mom ever taught me."

"You don't need to tell me that," muttered Quinn, unconsciously tugging at his collar.

Rylon continued grinning. "So do you guys need Sith running around using Sith authority much? Because that was awesome."

"Rylon," said Quinn, "I'm more than a little reluctant – "

"– to encourage you," Wynston's words overlapped in unison before Quinn fell silent, "to engage in Dark Sith rampages in the line of duty."

Wynston and Quinn shot dirty looks at each other.

"You guys kill people all the time," said Rylon. "How is a little Sith discipline any different?"

"I don't enjoy it," said Quinn.

"Unless it's for the Empire," said Wynston, "or you just really dislike the mark."

"I don't enjoy it much," amended Quinn. "We aren't in this business for the kill. We're in it to get the job done as efficiently as possible for the good of the Emp—er, people."

"I can do stuff for the good of the people. And also Force choke jerks. No problems here," said Rylon. "Come on, you guys have got to need a Sith for some stunt or other. Right?"

"You shouldn't be chasing this, Rylon," Wynston said seriously. "It's ugly work, and dangerous. The best thing for you is to go home, get back to your studies, and stay clear."

"Whoa," rumbled Junior. "Hear that, Wynston? I think that was the sound of my respect for you *dropping through the floor*."

"Which is where it should be," said Quinn, "but in this the agent is correct. Rylon, while I was glad you were available to assist with this mission, this isn't where you belong. I'm sure Jaesa's training is keeping you busy."

"Ever think that maybe for once I want to be fighting on your side, Dad?"

Everyone was quiet for a moment.

"Son," said Quinn in a quiet strained voice, "that was a shamefully transparent effort to appeal to my feelings to get what you want. If you knew the first thing about the line of work you're so eager to join you would know that that never works on Imperial officers when their subordinates are watching. *Reason* first. Save any appeal to feelings for the people who experience them."

"Uh," said Junior. "Subordinates?"

"Uh," said Wynston. "Officer? Not for quite some time."

Junior tilted his head. "No, but if he's talking about the officer-style resistance, he's still got that. It's perversely mesmerizing."

"Are you joking? Dragging him around by his feelings is trivial."

"Do shut up," said Quinn.

"So...logically," Rylon said slowly, "do you really want to leave my education in the hands of the woman that you've been calling an idiot in front of me – when Mom couldn't hear – ever since I was old enough to know what the word 'idiot' meant? You would leave me with her when I'm old enough now to join a different, perfectly valid way of protecting Mom's ideals?"

"Not a bad try," Junior said thoughtfully.

"Very good start," said Wynston. "Still heavily emotional, but then, Ruth's a trump card no matter what he claims—"

"Rylon," Quinn said loudly, "I'm willing to take you on for some training. But only if you promise not to listen to these two."

December, 29 ATC: Our Lady of Never Tell Me the Odds

"Hm," said Wynston, scanning the big screen in the *Aegis* control room. "We've got some subtle political manipulation to do on Jestik VIII. We've been there before, remember?"

"Quite clearly," said Quinn. "It's where I was captured and slated for ritual sacrifice by the Emperor's cultists."

"That's the one. It's a pity they failed. Remember Ruth barreling into the middle of the whole congregation to drag you out?"

"Yes. It was a touching gesture, but given the odds, I must say it was the most foolish thing she ever did."

"It really was." Wynston touched his chin thoughtfully. "Except for when she started live-lightsaber lessons with Rylon right after he turned six. I think that may have been dumber."

"She *what*?"

Wynston's eyes widened. "...Did they not mention that? Forget I said anything."

Rylon, who had been reading nearby, cleared his throat. "It was great, Dad. To this day, going through basic forms brings me right back to her."

"She handed you a live lightsaber when you were six? She was courting dismemberment!"

"It wouldn't be the first time," said Wynston. "She did actively taunt that Killik queen into cutting her liver in half."

"She did," Quinn conceded, and smiled thoughtfully. "Any time I think I'm going into poor odds, I need only remember how fearless she was."

"And she did love the challenge of the good fight," said Wynston. "Any time I think I'm going into an especially ill-advised plan I think, I bet she would've loved this."

"She didn't love ill-advised plans."

"She listened to you, didn't she?"

"The Killik was your idea, agent."

Rylon, apprehensively eyeing Quinn's scowl, spoke up. "Bad plans or not, Mom could handle it."

Quinn nodded curtly. "She could. Nevertheless, handing six-year-old you a live lightsaber was idiotic."

Rylon smiled. "It was Mom."

December, 29 ATC: Misery hates company

Wynston found Quinn on the highest observation deck of the command ship *Aegis*.

The Chiss coughed. "Quinn, would you mind leaving?"

Quinn, standing with his back to the stairs, turned his head only slightly. "Yes, agent, I would. Please go."

Wynston jerked a thumb at the stairs down. "You've been here for hours. Move it."

"I was thinking."

"You're being melancholy. Again."

"That is my prerogative."

"Hours, Quinn. I was going to be melancholy here."

"You'll have to take it elsewhere."

"This is the best solitary brooding spot on the ship and you know it."

"Why would you even decide to brood, except to inconvenience me?"

"I have perfectly good reasons, I'll have you know," said Wynston.

"Oh, has tragedy befallen? Were you forced to go twelve hours without female company or something?"

"That was only one of my reasons," Wynston said defensively.

"Alternately you merely wish to practice replicating my so-called air of noble tragedy in the hopes of competing with me in said female company."

"Perfectly good reasons," insisted Wynston.

"Go away."

"Another reason is that Pierce Junior seems to have managed entry to the hangar where you keep Ruth's old Fury. He's out for a joyride and I wanted to meditate on what a shame it is that he will inevitably crash it into- "

Quinn was already halfway down the stairs and running.

"Diversion successful," murmured Wynston, and took up parade rest at the railing, staring out at the stars. "Now then, concentrate. Tragedy."

January, 30 ATC: Triggering Wrath

"Wynston! Wynston. Got the perfect thing to wreck Quinn's mind."

The Chiss operative turned to see the big red-haired recruit Pierce Junior, who was at the moment nearly hopping with excitement. "If you succeed in what I've been trying to do for twenty years," said Wynston, "I'll...probably shake your hand, but I may be a little jealous about it."

"Just look at this." Junior tapped the console mounted on his wrist. His appearance shimmered and shrunk, a fine blue line sweeping around him for a moment before his image was replaced by a woman very close to Wynston's height, brown-haired, blue-eyed, scarred on her upper lip, wearing a very impractically cut black dress.

Wynston didn't say anything. He just drew his blaster and fired at the apparition's wrist. There was a small explosion, a spark, and Junior was left to claw the damaged disguise generator off his suddenly-scorched skin.

"What!?" he yelped. "Don't tell me that wouldn't be perfect."

Wynston started breathing again, at least enough to say "It wouldn't be perfect."

"Don't see why the old Wrath isn't in the image database already. Had to construct her from old holo pics. Seems to me the Emperor's Wrath would be the perfect thing to impersonate for some jobs."

"A, I know for a fact there were never holo pics with her dressed that trashily. B, don't call her old where I can hear. And C, she isn't in the disguise database because there is absolutely no healthy application for that particular image."

Junior crossed his arms. "I'll just get a replacement generator, mate. If I get that reaction out of you I can't wait to see what he does."

"Junior, you will never see Agent Quinn's reaction to that because you are going to delete all copies of the file and never attempt to reconstruct it again."

"Says who?" he said defiantly.

Wynston took one step closer. The youth towered over him, but the Chiss didn't appear to care. "Listen to me. I don't get angry, because angry is bad

for operations and it's bad for business. Under extreme circumstances I may get a little irritable, then I calm down and fix the problem."

"You want to tell me your yelling matches with Quinn are a little irritability?"

"Yes. Likewise the attempts to abandon him to mortal peril after arguments break out in the field - after the job's done, of course - likewise the time I single-handedly stabbed a full garrison of war criminals to death, and likewise the time I called in an orbital strike on the son of a Hutt crime lord who committed atrocities I don't even want to recite against his people. I did evacuate the environs first, but I've been told that the orbital bombardment might be considered overkill. I get a little irritable, Junior, then I calm down and fix the problem." Wynston leaned closer. "If you ever, ever show him that disguise, I will get angry. And then I will fix the problem. Do I make myself clear?"

A calculating look gleamed in Junior's eyes. "You realize you're protecting Quinn?" he smirked.

"Yes. I am. There is one occasion in my life where I have caught that man doing the right thing for the right reasons, and that was the day she died. It cost him more than you can bloody well comprehend. You will not ever use her against him, or at all. Erase that disguise file. Find something else to do."

"You really have no sense of humor about this."

"Correct. I'm starting to feel some irritability coming on, so if there's any other commentary you want to get out of your system you'd better do it fast."

"You're not nearly as much fun as I thought when I signed on," grumbled Junior.

"Oh, come on. You enjoyed rigging the entire munitions-production complex on Nektar III to cascade-blow off a single sniper shot. The Operation's the only outfit in the galaxy that would've gotten you the intelligence and resources to do that."

"All right," conceded Junior, "that was good. Still. Doesn't make much sense, how you an' Quinn an' Rylon can mess with each other about the old Wrath and I can't."

"You really had to be there," Wynston said flatly.

Junior nudged the broken disguise generator with his toe. "Once this is fixed up, can I still impersonate Rylon doing embarrassing things?"

"Oh, absolutely." Wynston stepped back and relaxed, grinning. "Please, let me know how mad you can get Quinn over his son's terrible behavior. Whatever terrible behavior you can manage that he hasn't already actually done."

January, 30 ATC: Fan Service Redux: Desperate Measures

"If you say anything," murmured Wynston, "I will kill you."

Quinn smiled almost playfully while he stretched, enjoying the ambient steam's play over his bare chest and back. "And what part of that is new?"

The Chiss hadn't backed away yet. His gaze trailed downward while he set his hands on Quinn's chest and ran slowly toward the tantalizing progression of his abs. "Everything," he growled.

When Quinn stepped closer Wynston kissed him hard, eyes like living embers burning at the tragic shadows Quinn had held for so long, as if one night could make up for all. Those long-fingered blue hands traced, explored, searched, until Quinn gasped softly and pushed Wynston into the wall.

Quinn held the smaller man there, enjoying his slight deliberate struggle as it defined each shifting muscle in glistening highlight and sapphire shadow. He leaned in close. "We should resolve more of our disputes this way."

With a knowing smile Wynston slipped one arm free and, rooting his hand in Quinn's thick black hair, pulled him even closer. He nipped his ear, a hot sharp sting with a flick of tongue. "I told you not to say anything."

"So stop me."

...The narration on the loudspeakers, as read off by a deep and theatrical voice, continued in this fictional vein with no sign of stopping.

Then the door to the Aegis's main comms room slammed inward, the blowtorch sputtering out now that the fused hinges had been cut free.

"Junior," panted Wynston, throwing his mask aside. "What. The hell. Is that."

A small holo image of a panicked-looking Rylon was being projected next to the main console. Pierce Junior stood next to it, one foot on the adjacent chair, grinning at the text-scrolling console beside him, the shipwide announcement system microphone before him, and Wynston.

"It'll stop, and I'll let mini-Quinn there out of that room I locked him in, as soon as he agrees to bring me on his Korriban diplomacy run. If he's going to meet Darth Irrex? Hell if I'm not getting me some of that."

"You're going to blow the Academy up and start a war or something," yelled Rylon. "Dad told me specifically not to let you anywhere near Korriban no matter what."

Junior beamed at Wynston. "I was just persuading him. He gives me what I want, I stop reading out loud."

"Rylon," said Wynston, "you were allowed to cave to that demand."

Quinn entered at a full sprint, stopping just shy of the opposite wall before spinning. "Pierce, you are depraved."

"Rylon could've stopped it at any time," Junior said cheerfully.

"Dad, he was going to wreck Korriban. You always told me to stick to what's needed, no matter the cost."

"Not ever hearing that was needed, Rylon," shouted Quinn. "Merely unleashing Pierce Junior on the irreplaceable-history-laden stronghold of the Sith during this time of critical diplomatic and strategic delicacy was an acceptable cost. That should be common sense!"

"You taught me not to give in. It was a matter of principle," Rylon said unhappily. "Really painful principle."

"Any principle you have," snarled Wynston, "stops where the cerulean contours of my lithe but powerful body start, is that clear?"

"I hadn't even gotten to the good parts," said Junior.

"Why would you even torture him with that?" demanded Quinn. "Couldn't you just break his bones or cut him open like any normal person?"

"Thanks, Dad," muttered Rylon.

"Some trauma is more easily repaired than others, Rylon," scowled Quinn.

"Torturing a Sith in person probably ends with me getting choked to death." Junior shrugged. "Your boy can't choke via holo yet so I figured I'd trap him and torment him from here, and as for the subject matter, well, didn't have anything more painful ready to hand."

"But you had *that* ready to hand," Quinn said disbelievingly.

"You *wrote* that," accused Wynston.

"You're confined to the brig," said Quinn.

"You're fired," said Wynston.

"You two are cute when you're mad," said Junior. "Didn't even think you were in today, but I'm starting to think it's more fun that you are."

"You're dead," said Quinn and Wynston.

"What I am," said Junior, "is going to Korriban, usin' your son's clearance, to meet a legendarily attractive Sith Lord."

"I'm not gonna fight that anymore," said Rylon.

"That's what I thought." Junior pressed the control release for Rylon's holding cell and then headed out with a swing in his step.

Quinn drew his blaster and leveled at the console that was still scrolling Junior's story. He didn't look at Wynston out of the corner of his eye. Much.

Wynston drew his blaster and leveled at the console that was still scrolling Junior's story. He didn't look at Quinn out of the corner of his eye. Much.

They fired until their respective ion cells gave out. And then, without looking at each other, they turned around and left.

January, 30 ATC: The Aegis Ladies

"I don't care about your convention, some of us still speak Imperial," said Agent Raina Temple. She was consulting with the Twi'lek Joiner Hazard while they sat in the main operations center for the Imperial Affairs division of the Organization. This was Temple's domain, and at the moment Temple was critically copy editing a report Hazard had submitted.

"We still think it looks wrong," said Hazard. "'The honourable soldier.' It's odd. The hive is in agreement."

"No, it's not." Temple wrinkled her nose in a prim sort of way. "I'm sure there are formerly Imperial Killiks who still remember how to spell."

"You are indebted to us for writing this transcript at all," Hazard said calmly. "It is our eidetic memory that kept young Pierce's reading from being the only time that file will ever be heard."

"It's just a shame they cut off when they did," Agent Temple sighed. "—No. No, I'm going to have to insist. 'If denying this passion was a soldier's duty, he could no longer stand to play the hono-u-rable soldier.' Republic soldiers and freelancers don't even deny passions, or so I'm told, so it doesn't make any sense to use their spelling."

"Temple. Hazard." Wynston strode up. He rarely ventured into Imperial Affairs these days; the extreme lack of interest he had toward Temple, combined with her extreme interest in him, had rendered things very badly awkward long ago. "Please tell me I was overhearing your discussion of a completely generic romance novel that had nothing to do with the abomination about Quinn and myself that Junior was reading over the public address system yesterday."

"Oh, yes, sir," breathed Temple, "we would never—"

"Agent Temple requested a transcript," said Hazard, "and since we recalled the full text as read aloud, we obliged."

"Hazard," Wynston said in a quiet deadly voice.

"We thought it was rather good," Hazard said with an amiable smile.

"You know I'm crazy about you, but you only think it's good because you're wrong, defective, malicious, and – I don't say this much, but – an alien freak."

"You're an alien freak, too, sir," Temple pointed out.

"No. No, / am an alien civilized individual who doesn't go about distributing – " his eyes strayed to the datapad in Hazard's hands - "'only sweat served to soften the hard grind of stubble on skin, leaving just enough pain to drive another moan from his lips' ...he actually wrote that? I must've missed hearing it while I was smashing the barricades he'd set around the comms room."

"Well, we are pleased to present the full transcript, then," said Hazard.

Wynston yanked the datapad from her hands and crushed it underfoot.

"That was far from the only copy," Hazard said mildly.

"I thought you were on my side!" said Wynston.

Hazard just gave him a wink, a kiss on the cheek, and then trotted off.

"I'm just saying," said a blushing Temple, "we thought it was really good. Is it true that your birthmarks are the color of twilight droplets against your smooth azure skin?"

"They aren't – I don't necessarily have – you're out of line, agent!"

She went wide-eyed. "I hope I haven't displeased you," she said, with a little moue.

"You have. You bloody well have. Honestly, I...wait a minute, why aren't you fixating on Quinn?"

"What?"

"Everybody who has been pretending not to talk about this has been all over Quinn's side of it. Why in the dead Emperor's name would you be paying attention to my birthmarks or anything else about me?"

"I don't know, sir. Quinn never really did it for me."

Wynston blinked. "Really?"

"Well, no, sir."

"But he's nobly tragic."

"He does brood a lot. It's possible to perform your duty without being so dreary about it, though."

"You like me."

"Well, yes, sir."

"And not him."

"Correct, sir."

"And you had to be one of the three women in the galaxy I'm not even slightly attracted to."

Temple slumped. "Understood, sir. I'll just get back to my reading, then."

Wynston shook his head violently. "Oh, no, you won't—"

Temple, bringing up a console folder, perked up. "Ah, Hazard did send me a copy! — With all the 'honour' and 'lustre' and 'flavour' and 'defencelessness' spelt wrong, but I'll fix that before I —

"Defencelessness? Who's defenceless?"

"I'm not telling."

"You're referring to Quinn, right? Because I'm not defenceless. I'd better not be. That's just libel on top of blasphemy, degeneracy, and some kind of assault."

"Maybe Quinn's the defenceless one. Maybe you are. You'll just have to read it for yourself when this gets distributed."

"I'm not reading that, agent, and you definitely aren't distributing it!"

"Sir," she said cheerfully, "you gave me nigh-absolute discretion in running our Imperial operations. If the staff needs some Imperial-flavoured morale improvement...well, you're heroes, sir, and with a few minor edits and

some supplementary information from Pierce Junior on what happens by the end of the scene, this is what I would have to call optimal."

Wynston crossed his arms and glared, wishing that his flame-brilliant eyes really could thrust through her defences like so much illusory mist to penetrate to her vulnerable centre, preferably in a fatal way. He also wished he had a less detailed memory sometimes. "I never asked to have you assigned to me, you know."

"But I get the job done, sir," she said proudly. "I've always done my duty."

"I thought I heard you saying your duty involved denying passions. *Such as this one, agent.*"

"That's an honourable soldier's duty, sir. We're in the Intelligence business now." She smiled wickedly and gave him a once-over that very nearly drove him running. "We don't have honourable soldiers."

January, 30 ATC: Back to work

Quinn kept his eyes locked on the map projection.

"Every sign points to their research bunker being here," Wynston told the far wall.

"Straightforward infiltration and surveillance," Quinn recommended to empty air. "Discovering the reason for that tremendous resource drain is critical."

"I sincerely hope I can get another Czerka executive on board before long," Wynston soliloquized, "so I don't have to keep playing hide-and-seek with their security."

"Perhaps if *somebody* hadn't *shot* the last Czerka contact," Quinn mused out loud.

"Belonging to the Star Cabal was a far cry from belonging to me," Wynston informed the projector.

"As I recall," Quinn monologued, "it isn't a far cry at all; every surviving piece of the Cabal actually has been claimed by—" He cut off rather than saying the direct pronoun. "It's past time to go."

They stalked out of the room, picked up their respective kits, and headed to the Phantom.

*

As they cruised out of hyperspace, Quinn glared at their target planet with truly remarkable intensity. "This mission had better not be compromised by—"

"Failure to communicate? I know," said Wynston, making an effort to bore a hole through the comms console with his stare. "Though I do think—"

"This may well be precisely the level of communication that existed before," grumbled Quinn.

"Except presumably now we'll have less of the 'searing clash of opposing wills that heats the room every time our eyes meet'."

"There is no 'we', agent."

"My mistake, agent."

"And stop quoting that."

"It's bloody difficult to get it out of my head."

"I didn't want to know that. Please return to not communicating."

"Yes. Let's just get the mission done."

"Do not quote his assorted euphemistic plays on that concept."

"I wasn't going to."

Quinn concentrated on the ship's controls for several minutes before coughing. "You couldn't actually quote that, could you?"

Wynston studied the console. "I technically could, or at least everything I could hear over the sound of dismantling the barricades to get to him. Don't tell me it isn't burned into your brain."

"I've been fortunate enough to forget the details."

"Quinn, for once I envy you your cognitive limitations."

*

The mission was executed to tightly coordinated perfection, of course, with each agent anticipating the other's moves and requirements almost before they came up. It was also executed with a record minimum word count and, for once, a total absence of any ocular expression of searing clashes of opposing wills.

January, 30 ATC: Legacy

"Nice day, innit?" Pierce Junior ambled up to where Wynston stood keeping an eye on the Aegis's command deck. "Very starry out."

"Space will do that," said Wynston. "Under normal circumstances, anyway. What can I do for you, Junior?"

"Was just thinking about all this. The Organization, all of it. This is your life's work, yeah? What you mean to leave behind?"

Wynston looked around. "Yes, I suppose it is."

"It's a bit secret as 'things to leave behind' go."

"That's rather the point."

"But it means you're going to vanish one day without a trace, and no one to mourn. Bit of a sad legacy, if you think about it."

"The galaxy still exists with sentient life in it. That's legacy enough for me."

"That's a copout, Wynston." The Chiss, startled, looked up to meet Junior's eyes. "Yeah, I guess you've saved a civilization here and there," said the big man. "All of 'em at once on a few occasions. But at the end of the day, you're still goin' home by yourself. Isn't there something...well, sad, about that?"

Wynston blinked. He frowned. "This is about the transformative power of love, isn't it."

"People wouldn't talk so much about it if there weren't something to it. And when you meet someone who's been through so much of the same hardships, as for instance a certain retired officer now living on this ship..." He looked meaningfully in the direction of Quinn's quarters.

"I don't need a man to give meaning to my life, Pierce."

"Blast it, Wynston. I'm only looking out for you here."

"Bugger off."

January, 30 ATC: Boyfriend?

Rylon found an out-of-the-way bench on the observation deck to slouch in with his datapad. He read listlessly for a while. Then he just stared into space.

Pierce Junior, the image of his father as Rylon was of his, swaggered up and put a foot up on Rylon's bench, setting forearm on knee and smiling genially. "Evening," he said. "You're looking glum. What's up?"

Rylon shrugged. "Went out to dinner with Dad. It was kind of...one-sided."

"You always seemed ready to talk as much as he does. When you're not both brooding."

"It wasn't really that. Just the women showing up. Ever since...well, you know...I may as well be invisible when he's in the room. He's got the noble tragedy thing. I've got nothing."

"You've got a tragic air of your own," said Junior. "It's all blended in with this adolescent anger thing, but it's there. Dramatic. Stormy. Give it a couple years, your father won't be able to peel the ladies off you even if he wants to."

"You're just saying that because I look like him and if he's straight you'll bang the next best thing."

"Would it work? – If I were planning such a thing."

Rylon made a face. "Dunno. I don't usually let my father's fans near me."

"Haven't you been living with Lord Jaesa and her daughters since the Emperor thing?"

"Her underage and completely unattractive daughters? Yeah, I guess."

"Jaesa herself's not bad. Comfortably curvy, I hear. Very, very giving."

"Ew," said Rylon. "Just ew. I never met a girl in that whole household who...just no."

Junior eyed him thoughtfully. "So anyway," he said, "doesn't seem too smart for me to go after your father, since my father would shoot me on the spot for thinking it."

"Your father?" Mischief glinted in Rylon's turbulent blue eyes. "And you're scared of this?"

"Nah. I said not smart, didn't say scared. In fact...let me put it this way. You've always had an easy time of rebelling. Principled parents with rulesets. Want to make trouble? Step one, grab what's sacred, step two, shove a lightsaber through it. Me, I had Major General Pierce for a father. Rebelling against pure chaos is bloody difficult."

"You could be law-abiding, I guess?"

"You can, and I did, and it teed Father off no end when I worked my way up to Head Boy at Dullsville Military Academy, but let me tell you, it wasn't worth the boredom. You got all the real chances for rebellion. Stars. Direct career boost from the Emperor to fly in the face of your parents' plans? Brilliant."

Rylon slouched further. "It backfired."

"Yeah, that'll happen sometimes. It – wow." Junior blinked a few times in rapid succession while looking at Rylon. "Stormy tragedy. Right on. Kid, you are going places with a mystique like that."

"It's not really a mystique so much as I feel bad about stabbing my mom."

"I'm sure she understood. Still makes you very distinguished."

Rylon scowled. "I don't have a mystique."

"You really do. Just because the boring sods we're surrounded by can't see it..."

"Are you coming on to me?" Rylon accused.

"Quite possibly," grinned Junior.

"If we kiss or something my dad'll kill me."

Junior's grin widened. "That's rebellion for you."

Rylon drew back. "It won't work."

"You thought about it, though."

"Did not."

"Stormy tragedy, emphasis on 'stormy.' Especially when you're lying."

Junior leaned in and clapped Rylon on the shoulder almost hard enough to knock him over. "Like I said. Give it a little time – or maybe a little adventure, if you know what I'm saying – your father won't stand a chance." He struck up a jaunty tune and walked off whistling.

Rylon gave up on reading and went to find a practice dummy to beat on.

February, 30 ATC: Do the Math, Fan Service Advanced Edition

"Agent." Quinn approached Wynston where the Chiss was standing still, concentrating on the wall.

"I'm busy," said Wynston.

"Ah. If doing nothing is too much a strain for your mind I'll leave you alone."

"I'm practicing some raw analytical work. Mathematical models. I wouldn't have thought I was oriented this way at all, but it's actually rather enjoyable. At the moment I'm up to running five parallel differential analyses, and I think some of them may even get accurate results."

Quinn coughed in a way that definitely wasn't suppressing a laugh.

"Something to say?" grumbled Wynston.

"I was handling eight by the time I finished the Academy."

"Oh, I'm sure. And how long were you keeping that up? Five seconds or ten?"

"I can go longer than you could manage. Show me your problem set."

"Why would I want to share that?"

"Because if you don't show me yours, you'll never get to see mine." Quinn looked superior.

Wynston rolled his eyes but transferred a display, an enormous array of numbers and symbols, to the large holo. "The interesting one is this model here." He pointed. "I'm right at the edge of – well, something – but I can't quite get there on my own."

"To the surprise of no one." Quinn started examining the equations.

Wynston, beside him, frowned. "Actually, now that I look at it I should have [cross multiplied](#) these two vectors right away."

Quinn, following Wynston's edits, scowled. "That's not [normal](#)."

"Sure it is. Let's see, direction via [right-hand rule](#)..."

Quinn eyed Wynston while the Chiss ran a hand gesture mnemonic. "That is disgustingly amateur technique."

"What, I suppose you do it without using your hands?"

"I'm certainly capable. If this is all you're after I should really have left you to take care of yourself."

"That's what I was doing until you walked in on me."

"I'm sorry to hear your performance is so delicate. Here, you might try a transform."

"Different way of looking at the same thing. May or may not help." Wynston got a suspicious look. "You are actually going to reduce this entire fascinating thrilling experience to a [frequency count](#). Aren't you."

"Yes. It gets results."

"You might enjoy this sort of thing more if you could be bothered to consider it as a series of [moments](#) instead."

"I take whatever satisfies my equation." Quinn scowled and tapped a few things into the console. Some figures on the display rearranged.

"And that will help how, exactly?" scoffed Wynston.

"It offers an opening for this otherwise obnoxious pairing. Look, now I need only introduce the [complex conjugate](#) and that whole package will fit."

"All right, going straight for it like that would simplify matters, but...really?"

"Would you rather continue in [mostly imaginary](#) terms?"

"This is only imaginary if you limit yourself to the numbers, Quinn. Any engineer could perform exactly what you see here in [quadrature](#) with any physical system you care to describe."

"You're scarcely an engineer, Wynston."

"Try me. I might surprise you." Wynston peered at the section Quinn was tweaking. "Wait, what are you doing? Reduce that there." He pointed at a ratio deeply embedded in the math.

"Why?"

"Reduce it, Quinn. It isn't a [proper fraction](#) unless the smaller value's on top."

Quinn's lip twitched. "Improper it will have to be. The numbers don't lie; if the [forcing function](#) puts the larger value on top, that's where it stays."

"Control freak." Wynston edited something minor in the ratio in question.

Quinn gave the result a disdainful sneer. "Oh, [rationalize](#) it if you can't get your way, hmm? I hope that made you feel useful."

"It did. And look, up here you don't have to keep carrying that mess you've been lugging around all this time. [Synthetic substitution](#) should clear it right up."

"Synthetic substitution," Quinn said flatly.

"It solves a lot more problems than you might think."

"You would think so. One polynomial's much like another to you, isn't it?"

"There's one to fit every curve; what's not to love?"

"You whore."

"The technique consistently does it for me. Now – what is...? I need visuals on your end." Wynston rapidly typed to bring up a graph of some of the intertwined functions. "Wow. That's...hideously [eccentric](#)."

"That's a little [hyperbolic](#), don't you think?"

"Highly eccentric and highly useless. The only remotely interesting part of your figure is the [latus rectum](#), and that doesn't even look straight."

"It is so."

"That's not straight, Quinn."

"You'll find it satisfies your requirements – even within the [constraints](#), which I did not consent to. You can tighten the latus rectum if you must, the only cost is more of what you're rather hypocritically calling eccentricity."

"Hm. You'd better hope you can bend that far."

"If it's required. Next we need to work on this part. There's an [essential discontinuity](#) here."

"That's never stopped us before."

"What are you suggesting?"

"Don't tell me you've never thought about a scenario like this."

Quinn scowled at the graph. "My thoughts stay quite clear of certain [limits](#), and the [asymptotic approach](#) will ensure that you never, ever touch my side of this picture. Just look at the mess you're working on there. Could you possibly have put in more [implicit relations](#)?"

"If you'd care to draw it out [explicitly](#), be my guest."

"Please. I would rather focus on [satisfying](#) some part of our current situation."

"I'm close over here."

"Yes, but yours scarcely benefits me."

*

Rylon finally peeled himself away from the doorframe and edged backwards to see Hazard clutching her sides in silent laughter, tears running down her face.

"I...am trying really hard not to put two and two together," Rylon said unhappily. "I don't want to understand what they're talking about, do I."

Hazard wiped her face and fell back into poorly quieted giggles. "Oh, Rylon. You really don't."

February, 30 ATC: Quinn LF1M

"*Agent.*" Quinn stalked up to where Wynston was working and, by dint of not slowing down, managed to shove Wynston out of the way in the collision of personal bubbles. "What are you doing?" He started typing something on the console.

Wynston already seemed to know what he was talking about. "Making your life hell, with Pierce Junior's assistance. What did you think I was doing?"

"Is this your retribution for my finally resolving the matter of Dyskorn V?"

"Maybe. Why did you drag the Empire in? I had that system in hand! The civil war was almost over, I was going to arrange a sustainable golden age of world peace!"

"World peace was instated."

"Under the bootheel of the Dark Council was not what I had in mind."

"Regardless, you hardly needed to respond by...*escalating* like this." He finally finished bringing up a HoloNet page, a garishly cheerful-looking dating site. He scowled harder when a picture of himself came up. Wynston grinned.

"Malavai Quinn," Quinn read crisply, "species human, gender male, age fifty-one, hair black, skin fair, eyes... 'a deep and soulful blue'...no cybernetics. Education, Dromund Kaas Military Academy, likes, uniforms, brooding and attention to detail, dislikes, frivolity and brunettes. – That last was uncommonly considerate of you."

"I'm not completely insensitive."

"This would be the first evidence I have seen to substantiate that, and it is somewhat overshadowed by the fact that you know full well my reluctance is not with brunettes so much as with women and romantic activity of any kind."

"You're never going to get anywhere with that attitude."

"I don't want to go anywhere! That's the point!"

"I should reiterate, now that it's been more than a year and a half, that I cannot for love nor money get female attention while you're in the room."

"You tried money?" Quinn said in a tone threatening to dip into smugness.

Wynston ignored that. "Pierce Junior's suffering for your effect, too. If you'd only have the decency to pair off I'm sure it would help. Especially if the unlucky woman managed to get you to lighten up a little."

Quinn was only half paying attention. "And what is this portrait?" he demanded.

Wynston arched an eyebrow at the image on Quinn's holo profile. "That's what you look like when you're brooding up on the observation deck all day."

"I don't brood, agent. I'm thinking."

"Thinking brooding thoughts. Which is exactly what women love about you. Hence, I took the most flattering possible shot."

"I look like I just ate something vile."

"Yes, that's what they like. I don't pretend to understand it." Wynston spread his hands. "Junior was going to holographically alter it to make you smile. I couldn't get him to back down 'til I reminded him that it's your air of noble tragedy that gets you women in the first place. Or would, if you would just give any of them the time of day."

"There are chronos enough in the galaxy, agent. They hardly need mine."

"But they really want it. It's obvious the 'random passersby throwing themselves at your feet' approach isn't finding you anyone suitable, so desperate measures are called for."

Quinn made a small annoyed noise and moved on from the profile picture to the text. "'Career military man seeks motivated Imperial for action abroad and long, meaningful chats at home.' I don't 'chat', agent."

"'Long, fraught staring out the window' didn't have the same ring to it."

Quinn returned to reading. "'It takes a precise mind and a very high adrenaline tolerance to keep up with me in the field, but stick around and you may catch a glimpse of the...romantic beneath. I firmly believe that actions speak louder than words when it comes to romance; the gift of a star system or two scarcely qualifies as a grand gesture in my book, but it's the least I can do from time to time for the kind of woman who can appreciate it. Behind my solemn exterior lies a...passionate lover just waiting...for...the right...touch.'" Quinn's eyebrows somehow managed to inch higher, but he continued. "'Though thoughtful at heart I'll be the first to leap into action to defend friends and family.'"

"We chose to posit, for purposes of this profile, that you have friends," Wynston added.

Quinn shot him a dirty look, then continued reading. "I am assertive, no-nonsense, and in thirty years of military service I have yet to surrender...For the right woman, that last point may be negotiable.' 'Surrender'? This was paraphrased from his...fiction. Wasn't it."

"Most likely. I wasn't feeling masochistic enough to ask."

"If he included fabricated details about my..."

"I stopped him before he went that far."

"I would thank you were it not for the fact that you're still complicit in the rest of this. You will remove this profile at once."

"After all the effort Junior went through to put it up, not to mention the days we spent struggling to come up with accurate likes and dislikes that don't make you sound like an insufferable priss? I think not."

"I'll have someone delete it."

"Junior's quite the slicer. He could get it back up in no time."

"Junior is going to find the People's Front of Ryloth knocking at his door if this profile doesn't disappear in the next twenty-four hours."

"Bugger. Found out about that, did you?"

"You're not the only one who can get up to mischief on the HoloNet, agent. If the PFR doesn't deter him I'll find an old grudge who will. A man like Pierce Junior makes enemies." Quinn showed his teeth. "Now. We can get to work on something constructive, or I can start finding ways to make you regret harassing me in this fashion. When one spends as much time 'brooding' on the matter as I do, one comes up with a number of ideas."

Wynston edged away from the quickly-spreading cloud of malice. "All right, let's work on something constructive, then. – That does not involve inviting the Empire to crush the problem."

"That is acceptable. We can send Junior to crush it instead. He obviously has nothing better to do with his time."

February, 30 ATC: My Little Operative: Friendship is Very Advanced Technology

Wynston leaned forward in his chair. "Holiday, believe me when I say that in spite of this loss, you still have a tremendous amount to contribute to the galaxy's knowledge. And, I think, its wellbeing. Doctor Cedrax would have wanted you to continue advancing the cutting edge of science."

The hologram gestured hopelessly. "It's just not the same without him. He came up with so many brilliant ideas."

"My dear, have you ever considered that you have ideas of your own to explore? Not to mention the opportunity to work with the foremost experts in any field of your choice, I can't imagine there's a researcher out there who wouldn't be delighted to work with someone of your talents."

Wynston had been monitoring the AI for years. A patchwork of clever human programming, previously unknown algorithms, and a few things that bore the marks of not fully understood exotech, Holiday's queries had flitted here and there across galactic networks for decades, and the prospect of capturing her knowledge and giving his techs the chance to study her workings was too good to pass up. So when the scientist who kept her died in a freak trophy case accident, Wynston sprung. He had managed to snag Doctor Cedrax's personal ship during the estate sale, and its databanks were now safely on the *Aegis*, along with the pretty feminine holographic manifestation of Holiday.

Holiday hugged herself and sniffled. "I suppose you're a scientist."

"More management, I'm afraid. I own a research and development lab. We have great resources there, with some very talented minds working on problems. We can always use a little more inspiration."

Quinn strode right in, as he usually did when his mind was on how important his job was. "Agent, I have located—" He stopped short when he noticed Wynston's company. He looked at the holo image, the projector, then the image again, with a sharp combination of wariness and curiosity. Inadvertent smoldering occurred. "Holiday, I presume," he said, in the preoccupied voice that had the unfortunate property of being borderline silken.

Holiday stared back. "Yes, that's me," she practically sighed.

"Fascinating." Quinn turned his attention to Wynston. "I had no idea what to make of the reports about her, but if you've managed to locate her..." He took a few slow steps around the holo image and looked over the new databanks and projector. "You're wholly contained here?" he asked her, flicking only a brief glance at her image before going back to examining the hardware. "This is the complete unit?"

"I, um..." She sighed and slumped. "I guess it is now," she said shakily.

Quinn looked questioningly to Wynston. "Her previous associate, Tharan Cedrax, recently passed away," Wynston explained. "She's taking it hard."

"Previous associate'?" squeaked Holiday. "That's the most inadequate phrase I ever...I was his assistant, and he found me, upgraded me, showed me things all over the galaxy. He told me I was the best of his life's work."

"Which is all the more reason why I'd like the chance to look into matters with you. I think he would have wanted his research to continue, don't you?"

Holiday sobbed. "I can't."

"You shouldn't let his genius go to waste," Wynston tried.

Quinn frowned. "Just how long did you work with this Cedrax, Holiday?"

She turned wide eyes to him. "Twenty-seven years, one month, two days, and nine–nineteen– hours." She covered her face and kept sobbing. Wynston half expected to see holographic tears start dripping.

"I see. And I imagine my associate approached you with a job offer immediately upon reactivating you?"

Holiday nodded, still breathing in miserable jagged gasps.

"Work helps," Wynston pointed out defensively.

"Agent, while I assume that, in spite of all recent evidence, some part of your brain still intends to recruit able and dedicated operatives, I am forced to wonder why you seem to have taken to actively hunting down bereaved

persons of interest and attempting to browbeat them into submission. She may be in a better position to assist if you first just *let her mourn*."

"I could choose to be much worse than I am about this," Wynston said, glaring.

"I have every confidence in your resourcefulness in that regard, but the fact that you haven't finished plumbing those depths is not in itself cause for praise." He looked back to the hologram. "Holiday, while I am uncertain how this is going to play out in your programming I assure you that we are willing to accommodate your requirements until such time as you are ready to consider your next move."

Holiday, having been listening in rapt interest, finally wiped her insubstantial face and hiccupped. "That's— that's very kind of you. I don't want to be a burden."

"On the contrary. It is our honor to have an intelligence of such remarkable complexity in our ranks." He looked at the databanks again, clearly running some unspoken calculation on the value of the assets.

"Oh, you're too kind," gushed Holiday.

"I told her the same bloody thing," muttered Wynston.

Holiday looked at him. "Would I be working with him in your research center?" she breathed.

"No," Wynston said bluntly.

"It depends on what algorithms you have available for operational data analysis. I personally am not involved in fundamental research, but I do some hands-on work in our systems modeling and analysis departments." Quinn finally tore his eyes off the processor cores to look at Holiday's face. "I am eager to discover what subroutines you've developed over your own career."

"I don't know why I even bother," said Wynston. "Why don't you make arrangements here, Quinn, since you seem to have the necessary touch for it? For what it's worth, I'm very happy you've met someone you have something in common with, and I feel rather vindicated in discovering that that someone is a machine."

Quinn raised an eyebrow. "Yes, if competence is a trait you feel unable to sympathize with, then by all means, consider yourself excused."

"Oh!" Holiday stifled a giggle. "Good one."

Wynston shook his head and walked out.

February, 30 ATC: Dependence

"Quinn, we need to talk."

Quinn straightened from where he had been leaning over the console. He glared at the wall. "Perhaps we do."

"I've been avoiding you for the most part."

"Not a day goes by that I am not thankful for that fact."

"But, the fact is..."

"...in spite of the considerable relief inherent in neither talking to you nor tolerating the giggles and whispers from certain *Aegis* crew when we are seen together..."

"...you're bloody useful on the job." Wynston nervously checked the part in his hair. "We really need to bring the Lorradian Senate in line."

"You should have done it weeks ago, they're threatening to destabilize the entire sector."

"It's delicate work and I can't do it alone. Frankly, in light of everything that could go wrong, particularly the uncertainty of whether this is going to be a diplomatic job or discreet wetworks, the only agent I think would be qualified to back me up in there is you."

"And though it pains me to admit it, you're the only colleague I think would be likely to successfully handle all eventualities."

"So...maybe we should plan that out, then."

"I've had the monologue lined up for weeks."

Wynston frowned. "You couldn't have focused on preparing something slightly more practical? As, for instance, how we're going to stabilize the situation long enough to deliver a monologue?"

"That much goes without saying, agent, you forget who you're dealing with."

Wynston capitulated with a small sigh. "You know, I almost hope we find another galaxy-scale menace again. You're halfway tolerable when we have a mutual enemy."

"I have often wondered whether that sentiment is motivated purely by the fact that a mutual enemy has a chance of putting one of us out of our mutual misery."

"My projections say it's you," Wynston said slyly, "so yes, I'd say I'm in favor."

"Your projections are wrong, so I favor the idea as well."

March, 30 ATC: Cruelty

Neither Wynston nor Quinn noticed when Rylon and Hazard stopped in the conference room's doorway.

"You're the soulless one," Wynston was saying.

"Neither one of us has a soul by any standard," said Quinn. "You're the one more accustomed to lying."

"You have much more extensive experience in pretending to care about your chosen master's wellbeing."

"I trust you can fake it, agent. When it comes down to it, you have the sadism it will take to convincingly play the role."

"You have the fundamental absence of human response that can place you firmly in their inner circle."

"You have all experience required to murder the sheer numbers of people that will be required for this job."

"You can just blend in by approving any atrocity they require without blinking."

"You possess the kind of mind that can invent atrocities they haven't even thought of. It will secure your cover in no time at all."

"Stars," muttered Rylon. "Are they starting a war again?"

Hazard shook her head. "No. Just infiltrating Czerka."

March, 30 ATC: Comparisons

"Before you ask," said Wynston, "I don't know where Quinn is."

"Oh," Holiday said. "Well, hello anyway."

"You needn't make it sound quite so much like I'm a monumental disappointment."

"Of course you're not," Holiday said unconvincingly. "I was just working on this really amazing...well, never mind. It's very advanced anyway."

"I'd be perfectly capable of understanding it."

"Honestly, this problem might've challenged even Tharan. I'm amazed at the progress Quinn made on it the last time we talked."

"Yes, he's very...clever."

"Isn't he, though?" breathed Holiday.

"You know, I recovered you for your remarkable processing power and innovative data storage. I was not expecting you to develop a crush on my associate."

"Association with him is very nice," she said.

Wynston folded his arms across his chest. "This is beyond absurd. But maybe you, speaking in your capacity as a machine, can give me a straight answer. What does that man have that I don't? Air of noble tragedy aside."

"Well, he's taller than you are," she said helpfully.

Wynston blinked. "All right, yes."

"More broad-shouldered and muscular."

"I suppose that's true."

"And those cheekbones!"

Wynston tested his own cheekbones with his fingertips. They seemed adequate. "If you say so."

"And he's earned dozens of military awards."

"Hmph. Fair point."

"And that romance-holo coloring – the intense blue eyes, black hair." Holiday sighed dreamily. "The five o' clock shadow."

"Fine, if you're going to be speciesist."

"Romance holo sales don't lie. He's also more reliably...him. He's stable."

"I suppose some people might prefer a predictable man."

"The word is 'reliable.'" Holiday sniffed. "And his strength in going on in spite the tragedy of his love..."

"The love he tried to shoot in the face once? That love?"

"He redeemed himself," cooed Holiday. "And now he's carrying on her work—"

"My work. I'm the one who recruited her for this job."

"—and he never gives up no matter how petty his colleague gets," she huffed. "Maybe the question you *should* be asking is, what do *you* have that he doesn't?"

"I'm not an objectively awful human being?"

"Hm." Holiday considered. "None of my files suggest that that's a requirement for romantic desirability."

"With respect, Holiday, you've got some lousy files."

Note from Agent Temple:

Don't worry, Wynston! Quinn also doesn't have your cerulean contours. Or the twilight droplets of birthmarks against your azure skin. Or the sapphire shadows cast by your hair, now madly tousled, dark almost to the point of blackness in this light but still not quite enough to conceal the passionate embers of your eyes. Or the fascinatingly changeable face, flickering from humor to challenge to shock to aching vulnerability to raw desire in the space of a single interrupted breath as you realize that every empty seduction through the years was only preparation for – ow, ow! Okay, I'll stop! ...for now, sir.

March, 30 ATC: Kaliyo on the mind

Coordinates calculated, and the *Phantom Dart* streaked to hyperspace. Wynston leaned back in his chair and smiled. "My spies tell me Kaliyo's in the target sector," he said. "I may call her when the job's done."

Quinn, frowning, looked over from the navicomputer. "You have spies following Kaliyo?"

"If she considered you an ex you'd keep a close eye on her, too. This is self-preservation."

"And yet despite her ongoing threat to your life, your desperation for sexual contact overcame your differences with her enough to reestablish...relations...the moment you saw her."

"That wasn't desperation. Maybe I was just glad to see her again."

Skepticism rolled down Quinn's nose toward Wynston.

"I'm not pretending I care or anything. In fact kicking Kaliyo out of my life when I did did us both a lot of good." Wynston cheered up. "I'll get it right

this time. She doesn't know where I live, what I do, who I work with, what make of personal protective equipment I carry, how to contact me, or when I'll bother to contact her. I think that's the safest way to conduct a relationship with her."

"It's a relationship, now, is it?" Quinn said nastily.

"Loose association when convenient," backpedaled Wynston.

"You really are desperate."

"Hardly." Wynston leaned on the arm of his chair, his red gaze taking on a malicious cast. "You know, I gave Ruth a great deal of grief about taking you back. I couldn't grasp at the time how someone could look the worst imaginable idea in the eye and say, with unfaked conviction, 'Take me now.' Seeing Kaliyo again really set that in perspective."

"Do not presume to compare that tramp to Ruth."

"I'm not. I'm comparing that tramp to you."

Quinn directed his scowl at the navicomputer. "Are we there yet?"

April, 30 ATC: Girls' movie

Hazard showed up to Temple's room with a holoovid, a big bag of popcorn, and a suggestion. "We could invite Holiday," she said. "To make her feel welcome."

Temple frowned. "That hologram who's been sighing over Quinn for the last month?"

"Yes. We have spoken with her; she is a very nice intelligence."

"I didn't think she left her corner of the analysis lab."

"We believe she can project elsewhere on the ship. She has integrated well enough."

"Well, go on then. Invite her. Just...no Quinn-gushing here, please?"

Hazard stared serenely at her.

"Look, with anyone else in the galaxy I have to ask."

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Holiday manifested in a gentle whirl of pink. She looked at the larger holoprojector in the room. "Oh," she cooed, "I'm coming in late."

"Not very," said Hazard, "they are just getting started."

"I see." Holiday settled on the couch between the Twi'lek Joiner and the human. "So what's happening now?"

"Well," said Temple, "these two aren't together even if it's obvious they should be. Right now he's saying that men and women can't be friends because sex will always get in the way, and she's trying to argue that he's wrong."

Holiday checked the holovid. "But that's ridiculous. Just look at her pupil dilation. Anyone with a little medical training could see that she already – hee – responds to him."

"You can tell that?" Temple said, alarmed.

"Everybody already knows about you and Wynston anyway," Hazard reminded her calmly.

"Hm. Right."

"You, now, you're harder to read," Holiday told Hazard. "Joiner physiology is something Tharan never really looked into."

"He tried, more than once, with certain youthful female Joiners," Hazard said. "The nest remembers."

"I'm sure he would have developed some amazing improvements, given the chance."

Hazard took that announcement with aplomb. "You must miss him very much," she said gently.

Holiday sighed. "I do. That's what nobody on the job here understands. Tharan had a sense of humor."

"Yes," Temple said distantly.

"And he loved to take me fun places, not just for work. He was brilliant even when he was just relaxing."

"Yes," echoed Temple, her thoughts clearly on someone else.

"And sure, he would flirt with a lot of girls, but I only had to rig his bunk to give him electrical shocks at unpredictable intervals to get him to stop bringing them home."

"Ye— you did what?"

"It doesn't matter anymore." She sniffled. "And I suppose, it's no replacement, but at least Quinn gives me something to do."

"Sure, if 'staring grimly at your problems until they go away' counts as something to do," muttered Temple.

Holiday straightened up further. "Quinn's brilliant."

"He's a walking sob story too self-absorbed to put aside his own ego and work with anybody."

"There's nowhere for him to push his ego to, Wynston's is taking up the rest of the Aegis!" Holiday's voice was as shrill as her breathy vocabulator would go.

Temple rolled her eyes. "So you're Quinn Fangirl Number Nine Million and Fifty-Seven, congratulations. How special you must feel."

"Don't tell me he isn't worth the attention."

Temple turned up her nose. "I'm more of a Wynston girl myself."

"My, this popcorn is delicious," said Hazard.

"At least you know what I'm talking about," said Temple, looking at the Joiner. "Honestly, you're the luckiest woman I ever..."

"Sleeping with Wynston does not make one uniquely lucky," said Hazard and Holiday both at once, in decidedly different tones. "But," added Hazard, "we know we are fortunate to have his attention for more than twenty-four hours at a time."

"Meaning you're ganging up on Quinn, too," huffed Holiday.

"On the contrary. We can recognize Quinn's virtues. There is that exquisite blend of will-driven strength and veiled vulnerability that many find irresistible."

Holiday glowed. "Ooh, exactly!"

"Hazard! I never..." said Temple. "Does Wynston know what you think?"

"Of course not. We are of the nest; we are also tempted by trace amounts of pheromonic compounds, unusually shapely proboscises, and sugar water. We see no reason to distress him with such observations."

"But you do like Quinn," Holiday said triumphantly.

"We maintain neutrality. It is our purpose as a diplomat and our responsibility as an operative. Now look, the holovid girl is trying to get on with her life."

"It won't work," said Holiday.

"Oh, we know."

April, 30 ATC: Balmorran play

“Quinn! I have good news!”

It would take a trained eye to detect the relief laced through Quinn’s businesslike manner as he turned away from a dewy-eyed cadet. “What is it?”

“With me.” Strategy talk was rarely too sensitive for this area of the Aegis, but Wynston found that some privacy was required to keep Quinn’s fan club out of the way.

He led Quinn to a conference room and shut the door. “So,” he said. “It’s looking like, matters in the sector being what they are, we’ll be throwing Balmorra to the Empire.”

Quinn arched an eyebrow. “Balmorra? I recommend obliterating it instead.”

Wynston stepped back. “That’s...strong.”

“I despise that planet.” Quinn spat his consonants as though his grudge extended to each and every one of them.

“I should think you’d like the place. You met your wife there, didn’t you?”

“After ten years of languishing with no prospects and insufficient bug repellent I was informed that I was to be placed at the mercy of Darth Baras’s favored apprentice there, yes. It was a less than salutary prospect.”

“Oh, right. Being subject to Ruth’s whims must have been terrible for you. We all know what a monster she was.”

“I didn’t know when the fangs were going to come out! All I knew in her favor was that she was our best chance at destroying our opponents on Balmorra.”

“How sentimental. Well, we’ll have to arrange it ourselves this time.”

“Burn it,” insisted Quinn. “Reduce it to glass and ash.”

“If you’ll recall the mission statement of this organization, Quinn, we generally try not to obliterate populated planets. Or any planets.”

“You’ve never written a mission statement.”

“Well, if I did, not obliterating planets would be high on the list. Look, we can arrange an orbital strike on the arms factory if that’s what you’re bitter about.”

Quinn scowled.

The Chiss tilted his head, eyes glittering speculatively. “She liked Balmorra, you know. I’ve never heard her speak so highly of a war zone before or since. All spillover glow from you, I suspect, but the fact remains, she loved her time there.”

Quinn wavered.

Wynston waited.

“We can leave Balmorra intact,” grumbled Quinn.

“That’s the spirit. Orders out, a little subtle manipulation here and there, Balmorra will be the Empire’s once again.”

“Don’t expect me to visit.”

“And here I was hoping to strand you in Sobrik once it was out of Republic hands.”

“Sobrik is burning. That’s not optional.”

“You really are sentimental.”

“It’s nothing personal. It simply—”

“Is?” supplied Wynston. “Personal?”

“You have my recommendation,” snapped Quinn. “Make of it what you will.”

“I always do.”

April, 30 ATC: Peace is a Lay

Larr Gith's hair whipped free while she spun. Ruth pressed a flurry of attacks, her saber blood red against her opponent's gleaming gold. And then with a flick of Ruth's gloved hand Larr's saber went flying out of

control. Ruth smiled, catlike, tossed aside her own saber, and lunged, throwing the Jedi to the ground.

Larr Gith fought hard, rolling over to try to pin Ruth's leg; the Sith laughed, pushing her whole body against the Jedi, and adroitly rolled on top. With a writhing struggle she ran her hands up Larr Gith's arms and finally managed to pin her wrists over her head. Larr squirmed and arched, bringing the whole of her voluptuous body to bear, but couldn't loosen the darkness of Ruth's iron grip.

"Is that all you've got?" panted the Sith, her lips less than a hand's breadth from the helpless Jedi's, her ice-blue eyes sparking brilliantly against Larr's tawny ones. "You could do so much more than this if you only let your passions free."

The blonde laughed, a sultry sound in the hot confines of the practice room. "The woman who's been frigid for fifteen years wants to lecture me on passion?"

"Not lecture," purred Ruth, lowering herself further to press her curves to Larr's. "Demonstrate."

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Wynston rubbed his temples. "I think it goes without saying that that isn't how it happened."

"Maybe, but it's how it should've happened," said Pierce Junior. "My readers agree."

"I never want to meet your readers. For their own safety. Junior, you know I'm going to recommend what I recommend every time your sordid fantasies turn up. Erase them. Forget you ever wrote them. Reflect on the fact that if Quinn ever finds something you wrote about his wife, your life will be over and I'll be the one pinning your arms."

"I'll keep that in mind," Junior said cheerfully, flexing an arm roughly the diameter of Wynston's waist. "Honestly, I don't get why you're so touchy about her. Never heard you talk about any other woman like that."

"There never was another woman like her. Furthermore you're always going to get her wrong, because from the day Quinn let her in she never

looked at another man. Or woman. I'm not saying it made sense and stars know her taste was nothing short of tragic but fidelity was built into her nature."

Junior's brown eyes gleamed. "You know, since you've got all this insight, you could get a nod in the acknowledgments section if you'd just spill certain facts about the real Ruth—"

"Not. Bloody. Likely."

"Just saying, the readers have needs. Besides, every minute I spend writing the *Peace is a Lay* series is a minute I don't spend with the you-Quinn-Ruth triangle."

Wynston opened his mouth. Closed it. Opened it again. "You know, for a moment there you almost got me to approve the Ruth-Larr Gith rot?"

Junior grinned wolfishly. "I know."

"You're a monster. Also there was never, ever, at any time, a bloody triangle, nor any geometric figure of any description connecting me and Quinn, in bed or out. Ever. Also I'm assigning you to front line duty again this week."

"Looking forward to it."

"Sooner or later I'm going to figure out what bothers you, Junior. You might want to build up a little goodwill before I do."

July, 30 ATC: Age

"Director," said Pierce Junior.

Wynston tilted his head to eye the towering man beside him. "I'm already regretting this conversation, aren't I."

"You," reported Junior, "have a grey hair. It shows up right well in the glare from this terminal."

Wynston scoffed. "This terminal is probably lying to you. Destructive interference in the light waves. My hair's fine."

"It's grey! You're aging! This opens whole new avenues!"

Wynston hesitated as if weighing the possible consequences of continuing this line of inquiry. Finally, very calmly, he said "It does?"

"Silver fox. Ladies pine. Men can't resist. Middle age was never so seductive. Audiences will love it."

"I am not middle-aged!"

"Got hold of some files that say otherwise."

"You don't have files on me."

"You think I didn't figure out where you kept the Imperial Intelligence black files post-"deletion"? Just 'cause you didn't store them where anyone but the best slicer around can find them...you are forty-six if you're a day."

Wynston's glare might well have melted the control panel. "Sod your investigative skills."

"Hey, I keep your secret. Besides, it's not so bad getting older. One year more mysterious. Who knows, you might get a distinctive air of your own."

"I do *not* need to go through the acquisition process for an air of noble tragedy, Junior."

"No, no! I've already sold all the books I can on that premise. Well, not really, but I don't need you as the vehicle. For you I'm thinking more, 'experienced and dangerous.'"

"I'm not developing an air of menace, either."

"Ooh, menace, I like that. Subtle, though. Understated. Irresistible. The greyer you go the hotter it'll be."

"I'm getting back to our actual job here," said Wynston, loudly rapping the console screen.

"All right, but I'll have a draft of *Aged in Passion* out to beta readers before close of business tomorrow."

"If you're going to bloody use me for your romance novels—"

"—serials—"

"—*rags* – you could at least refrain from giving up my age."

"Sex appeal is ageless, my friend. But a little grey hair works wonders."

July, 30 ATC: Wynston Kill Advice

"Target, the Sith on the viewscreen." Wynston paced the length of the briefing room. "This isn't a conversation. It's a kill mission. I'll be luring him to a hulk drifting in deep space, supposedly with something he very much wants on board. Once there—"

"We can confront him," said Quinn, "and end this."

Wynston eyed him with something a little too jaded to be disbelief. "Wrong. We blow it up remotely."

"Then how can you be certain he's dead?"

"Getting blown to smithereens in open space is traditionally considered a guarantee of death."

"You've been mistaken about that before."

"That was an exception," grumbled Wynston.

"It's in our interests to extract what we can from him, then eliminate him. That requires a personal touch."

"So you want to wait on board to strike up a conversation?"

"I shall have safeguards in place."

"And what would that be, more droids? Quinn, safeguards can't save you from a straight-up Force choke. You won't always be so lucky about who's doing the choking."

Quinn's nostrils flared. "I am aware of that, agent."

"But you still want to walk up and shake hands?"

"It's poor form to be absent at your target's death."

"No. No, it's poor form to get killed by your target at their not-death. Obliterating his ship while he's on it, then moving in to blow up the wreckage afterward, that's ideal form. I'm pretty sure there are textbooks about it."

"You can't know what happens in those last minutes. He might have a means of escape."

"How many people have you succeeded in assassinating, Quinn?"

Quinn glared at near-laser intensity.

"Well?" said Wynston. "Do tell me what an expert you are in eradication."

"I have no doubt I've murdered fewer than you."

"Which makes me the resident murder expert, wouldn't you say? And I'm telling you, the only way I've survived to get my hands this bloody is by making sure I'm never close enough to get my hands bloody." Wynston paused, frowning. "Only part of that was literal."

"He should know who is killing him and why," said Quinn.

"Oh," said Wynston. "Oh. I know what this is really about. You haven't gotten to monologue in weeks."

Quinn started, but didn't deny it. "I haven't. All our work has been sabotage or..." his lip curled... "politicking."

"Don't look so put-upon, the female dignitaries of the galaxy love you. Look, we can capture some rogue Jedi and let you speechify at him for a few hours if it makes you feel better, but you're not mucking up this mission just for the chance to lord it over a problem Lord."

"I am not so easily distracted, agent."

"You'll deal." Wynston turned away. "Now I'd better find Hazard, we've got a space hulk to rig."

July, 30 ATC: Hazard Fic Quarrel

When Quinn awoke, it was to find himself curled around Wynston, the alien sound asleep in his arms. The heady scent of him – of them – was strong in the warmth of his bed. He never wanted to leave.

Quinn raised himself on one elbow, enough to see the slumbering alien's face in profile. When Wynston awoke the fighting would start again. As thrilling as it was to do battle with him day after day, in bed and out, there was something unique in seeing his sculpted sapphire features at angelic rest. Here Quinn could believe, for a few moments, that he really had captured this wild thing. The wrong touch might send him running again. Quinn had faced down certain defeat before and never flinched, but the thought of losing Wynston terrified him. And yet, remembering the previous night, the right touch...and last night, with him, everything was right...the right touch could work wonders.

Wynston took a sudden breath, his lashes fluttering dark violet against the embers of his eyes. His voice was thoroughly, knowingly awake. "I would ask whether that's a blaster in your pocket, but I could swear we already threw everything with pockets overboard."

"Almost everything." Quinn draped one arm over Wynston's lean stomach and dipped in to cover the Chiss's shapely lips with his own rough-edged ones, silencing him for one more moment. Wynston chuckled low in his throat, running a lazy wriggle from his wiry shoulders down the length of his lithe torso to where his hips pushed against Quinn's.

Here, for a few moments, where no one else could see, Quinn threw self-denial by the wayside and

“Wynston!” Hazard bounced up from the console with a speed that implied either extreme enthusiasm or driving guilt. Wynston saw text scrolling on the console and had a feeling he knew which.

“Hazard,” he said, “is that what I think it is?”

“Chapter six,” she said serenely. “But we’re finished for the night. Were you going to retire?”

“Yes,” he said shortly, “I will.”

She smiled. “May we join you?”

“No.”

She shook her head hard. “What?”

Wynston gestured at the console and Pierce Junior’s work upon it. “I’m not sleeping with you after you’ve been reading that.”

“Wynston, we did not allow Agent Temple to publish this one as an official morale bonus.”

“Well, there’s a small mercy. But you’re still reading it yourself. Do you think I’ve forgotten a word of that rot from when Junior was proclaiming it aloud? Go try the ‘mesmerizing play’ of *His* ‘chiseled muscles’ if you’re feeling worked up enough to want some action.”

“But we like your cerulean contours.”

“Not as much as I like what remains of my self-respect. Good night, Hazard.”

She trotted after him; when she touched his elbow he jerked away, wheeling to face her. “Perhaps you didn’t notice my initial offer,” he said, “but you could already have me any time, any place, any way you want, with anyone we agree on if that’s what you wish, an availability scarcely anyone living has ever had from me, and all I ask in return is that you leave off the sodding fiction. Is that really so hard?”

“Your aura sings up spirals when you’re angry. Junior can describe your simultaneously commanding and inviting manner and the midnight blending of your hair with Quinn’s all he likes, but his suppositions don’t nearly do you justice.” She tried again to take his arm.

He sidestepped her, scowling. “Contrary to rumor, and contrary to whatever conclusions the nest may have drawn from observing my other relationships in years past, anger doesn’t do it for me. Good night.”

“Wynston, the fantasy does not compare to you at all.”

“Stating the obvious doesn’t do it for me, either. I’m sure I outclass Pierce Junior’s deranged scribbles, but that’s a serious instance of damning with faint praise.”

“Oh, no, he sets a high bar—”

Wynston started walking.

Hazard followed. “Have you tried reading any since that one day?”

“No! On the list of things I don’t get off on, ‘fabrications about me and Quinn’ is literally every entry!”

“Does that mean actual things between you and Quinn are—”

“NO.” Wynston took a sharp left. “Now sod off, I’m going to work.”

“It’s midnight.”

“Yes, and I need to scrape out the brain images with something. Some heavy-duty political analysis should do the trick.”

“Very well. Say hello to Quinn when you reach C&C.”

Wynston stopped short. Yes, in fact, Quinn would be working there at this hour. He raised his eyes to the ceiling. “Hazard, you are very, very lucky that you happen to be beautiful, intelligent, accomplished, courageous, and – usually – pleasant to be around, because if you weren’t all these things I might be seriously put out.”

“We know,” she said beatifically. “Good night, Wynston.”

“Go away.”

August, 30 ATC: Jadus

“I should reiterate that storming the bridge of this vessel before we know who or what is on it is the height of recklessness,” muttered Quinn.

“Every thread led here. Whoever’s coordinating the movements of this vessel is...” Wynston’s jaw tightened for a moment. “He’s building a power base we can’t ignore. We need to stop this ship before it reaches its destination.”

As the turned the corner nearest the bridge, the doors whispered open. A tall masked figure stood like royalty at the bridge’s upper deck.

“At last you have returned,” said an even voice with a cold hum of distortion.

“Well, bugger,” said Wynston.

*

Quinn looked rapidly between the slight Chiss agent and the towering Sith.

“Come,” said Darth Jadus. “Bask in the darkness to which you belong.”

“This is precisely what I was not hoping for,” said Wynston.

“You knew he would be here?” said Quinn.

“From the patterns, I guessed. I just didn’t think he’d be *here*-here. Not after last time.”

“What happened last time?”

“No matter,” said Jadus. “My chosen one has returned.”

“Oh, hell,” said Wynston.

"What?" said Quinn.

"You will once again be baptized in the Dark Side to rededicate yourself to me," said Jadus, gesturing grandly.

"Can we talk about this?" said Wynston.

"*Again'?*" said Quinn.

The tall Sith leaned forward. "Kneel."

Wynston gritted his teeth, but under the creeping darkness that coiled around him he lasted only a few seconds before falling to his knees, then hands and knees. Jadus raised one hand, lazily, gesturing toward him as if to suggest it could be a lot worse. Wynston, straining against something invisible, flattened face-first.

"Anoint him too," Wynston yelled at the floor, and returned to making small uncomfortable noises.

Jadus tilted his featureless silver head. "You speak out of turn."

"Yes, I do. Anoint him too!" Wynston's hand shot up and sized Quinn's wrist, pulling him hard to his knees. "Believe me when I say he is exactly the kind of man I would want working for you, my lord."

"A 'backstabbing prat'?" purred Jadus. "Your thoughts lie open to me, servant."

"...So much for that," muttered Wynston.

"No matter. He will play his part, in time."

"My lord?" Quinn said, with a blank expression perfected from decades of practice.

"In time." Jadus gestured languidly. With some effort Wynston peeled his arms, then his face, off the floor. Quinn stood above him, glaring.

Jadus cut off the incipient lecture. "Your time is quickly approaching," he announced. "My hour is close at hand. All that you have worked for, all that you have created, now belongs to me."

Wynston scowled. "I had rather hoped to keep it. Since it's mine."

"Your hopes are irrelevant. You have been touched by the Dark Side, initiated into my service. I possess you."

"Property laws in the Empire are rather badly skewed."

"I release you for now to consider, and to prepare for my ownership," said Jadus. "Know that everything you are, and everything you have made, belongs to me. I will return in only a brief time. In the end it is you who will betray all you have labored for."

Wynston elbowed Quinn. Quinn elbowed Wynston back.

Jadus turned around to let them leave. Wynston drew his blaster. Without turning around, Jadus gestured with one hand and the plasma cell gave way to a small explosion.

"Fine," grumbled Wynston, and stalked out.

*

"You only told me you worked for him!"

"One thing led to another. You of all people should know that about serving Sith."

"I married mine, I didn't participate in a cult initiation ceremony!"

"Same principle. –Ow!"

Wynston and Quinn sat in the pilot and navigators' chairs of their ship, preparing for the jump for hyperspace.

"To start with, didn't he die?" said Quinn.

"He faked it once," said Wynston.

"And you found him out. And you didn't apprehend him?"

"I'd like to see you walk up and try arresting Darth Jadus."

"In light of your particular policies, I doubt arrest was your first choice. I thought your vaunted Sith-killing ways were well established."

"They are. They're more effective than yours, anyway."

"Yet Jadus lives."

"His dossier never indicated that he was immune to the flaming disintegration of ships in deep space."

"Another failure of information on your part. Regardless, he must be stopped."

"Hmph. I must say at least it's a change of pace to see you reacting to a Sith Lord with something other than abject servility."

"I think you exceeded me there." Quinn brushed some imaginary dust from his sleeve. "You realize he's only returned because the Emperor has fallen." He shot Wynston an accusing look.

"Oh, you were right there with me," grumbled Wynston.

"The assassination was your idea."

"The destruction of the galaxy rated as more important than the power vacuum."

"Well. Meet the first denizen of the vacuum. Do you have a plan?"

"Well, the Emperor being the man Jadus was hiding from was useful, but we killed him."

"Surely you had a contingency plan."

"I did. I had even smarter minds than my own prepare it. But the woman in charge of formulating and coordinating the plan is dead."

"You can still recover it."

"Yes, I can step into that role. But the pocket ace we had, in terms of combat, is...well, you know. And the man I faced him with last time is..." Wynston frowned. "We've outlived a lot of people, Quinn."

"Excuses, agent."

"Oh, we'll manage anyway. How do you feel about sending your son into mortal peril?"

"Absolutely not. Just because you botched the assassination of your life..."

"I've made more critical assassinations."

"More critical than the Dark Lord? The Scourge of Sullust? The man voted Most Likely To Reduce The Galaxy To Gibbering Despair when he was in the same graduating class as the Dread Masters?"

Wynston glared. "Emperor."

"Yes, but you didn't exactly assassinate him, did you? You got more competent hands to do the work. Tell me, agent, who will you use this time?"

"I never used her! She was there because it was the right thing to do!"

"And because you shot, drugged, and berated her into it."

"We were talking," grated Wynston, "about Jadus."

"Ah, yes. The mad threat to civilization as we know it. The man who seems to consider you his own personal akk dog."

"His personnel management tends toward the delusional."

"And how do I know you're not under compulsion now? If anyone could replicate that feat it would be he."

"Would he really compel me to work with you?"

"It would explain why you do so at all."

“And just what makes you so important that Darth Jadus would override every ounce of my own sense to force me to cooperate with you?”

“Me? Perhaps nothing. But your Organization is quite a prize for a man seeking to extend broad influence.”

“He takes this organization over my dead body.”

Quinn gave Wynston his most skeptical look.

“...All right, maybe that’s too easy. How about, he won’t take this organization.”

Quinn tilted his head. “Why did he let you live?”

“What?”

“I’m not stupid. You faced him once before. You survived with the title of ‘chosen one,’ he went into hiding. Whatever happened, it wasn’t your silver tongue winning the day.”

“Who said it can’t be?”

Quinn glared.

“All right, so him disappearing was what he meant to do anyway, for reasons we still haven’t figured out. So what? I’m here now, ready to face him.”

“Yes, you comported yourself in an exemplary manner back there.”

“When the time comes to strike, I’ll be ready.”

“He did some Dark Side...procedure...on you, then left you behind. There’s a reason he’s returned, and there’s a reason he’s returned to you.”

“He didn’t do anything permanent to my head, if that’s what you’re thinking.”

“Since you have such an excellent record of detecting these things in a timely manner.”

“New plan. We don’t discuss this.”

“I need to know whether you’re going to prostrate yourself again the instant you see our single most dangerous enemy. You’re of very little use kissing his feet.”

“There’s no kissing, Quinn.” Wynston folded his arms emphatically. “I haven’t survived this long just to sell out to a hideously powerful Force savant...and legendary tyrant...who’s been dominating minds and breaking wills...and worlds...since I was in diapers.” Wynston rolled his shoulders, then checked the part in his hair. “I’ve got this.”

“Thus far,” said Quinn, “you aren’t exactly inspiring hope.”

“We’re dealing with Sith,” said Wynston. “Hope doesn’t enter into it.”

August, 30 ATC: Rapt

Wynston spoke over the edge of his glass. “A life of luxury, Vaeda. Are you familiar with noxian butterflies?”

Quinn, two steps away, coughed. “Wasps. They’re called wasps.”

“When the hive has chosen a queen-”

“Which butterflies don’t have-”

“-they grant her every luxury. Worship, even.” He spoke slowly, letting every word hesitate and trip from his lips, maintaining an intense red gaze. “Let her sleep in the softest chambers, bring her gifts of the sweetest nectar.”

“They can inject venom up to an inch below the victim’s skin.”

Wynston gestured vaguely without looking at him. “Build the entire hive around granting her shafts of blushing light...”

Quinn scowled. "You made that up. He just made that up so he could say 'shaft' in polite conversation."

Wynston smiled. "Is it stuffy here? Come over to the window, they say the view is breathtaking."

The young woman who had been absorbing the proceedings with half pleasure and half alarm rallied. "Really?"

"Well, it will be, once you're there."

Quinn dry heaved into his champagne flute as the couple moved away.

August, 30 ATC: Wynston Legends

"Is the Director coming? Here? Today?"

"Yes, yes, and yes." Wynston swung into the free space in the cantina booth and smiled genially at the four cadets and their mountain of empty bottles.

"D-Director," said one. "Wow. You're here."

"I am, in fact. I know we have a little time before things get started, I just wanted to say hello and let you know that if you have any questions, feel free."

A much more flushed-looking one leaned forward. "Jance says you've slept with ten thousand women. Is that true?"

The first one elbowed him. "Dobbs!"

"What? He said we could ask."

Wynston blinked. "I...don't count," he said mildly. "Frankly I'm a little suspicious of those who do."

“Yeah, right,” said a third, finally separating his mouth from his bottle. “I heard you slept with the old Chancellor of the Republic at the start of the war.”

“That rumor was a little exaggerated,” said Wynston.

“I heard you seduced the Emperor’s Wrath,” pressed the third cadet.

Quinn had drifted from behind Wynston to stand at the other entrance to the booth, silently watching.

Wynston caught one glance and looked away. “No, not as such,” he said nervously.

The questions came from every direction now. “But you talked the Twin Masters Noola and Nonn into a threesome.”

"I really can't comment on that."

“On the Illustrious Ro Gogo Pleasure Palace Penthouse dome.”

“I...what? The *outside*? I mean, I’ve been to the Illustrious Ro Gogo Pleasure Palace Penthouse, but...you know what? Never mind. You’re far too young to hear about that. – Hold on, I just finished the math. It would take around twenty-eight years of a new woman each day to reach ten thousand.”

The first cadet grinned. “You look older than that to me.”

“I do have a day job, you know.”

“As a Cipher agent. Followed by sexy spy leader of the galaxy. That’s gotta buy you all the pussy you can—”

“I am not the maniac you’re making me out to be.”

“He’s just being modest.”

“Why would he ever want to be modest?”

“He has so much to be modest about,” murmured Quinn, but did not interrupt the cruiser wreck.

"Maybe it's not all a good thing. Is it true you used to strangle every girl you had a one-night stand with with your silk scarf so she couldn't talk?"

"No!" Wynston pushed a hand into his hair and left it there. "Where do you even hear these things? There are exactly two people I've ever informed of my activities and then only insofar as they impacted the mission. And I know for a fact you never pried information out of those two Keepers."

"Keeper! You slept with her. Him."

"Her," said another.

"Them?"

"Her. Right?"

"Absolutely not, and if you meet anyone who claims they have, they're lying. A Keeper requires a certain degree of discretion in their partners."

"Like you."

"No!"

"Is it true you rrrroschbatted Darth Scythia in the Dark Council chambers?"

Wynston let his hand drop to jam it across his chest. "That's not even a word. Spell that. Try to spell that."

"Were you the one who amended Intelligence personnel forms to include options 'trisexual' through 'septasexual'?"

"That was never on our personnel files! I would have noticed! - wait, is this about the Raubaulans? I only documented their unusual biological system, I didn't sleep with them. Well, not all of them. Much."

"Didn't you patent sexual healing in thirteen systems?"

"No, but oddly enough I know who did. He would be crushed to hear I got the credit."

Quinn went from standing rigidly upright to standing extremely rigidly upright, a motion that managed to command attention. "Tell them about the

time you lost an entire planetary government because you couldn't untie yourself from your...associate's...bed fast enough."

"That – is not fair! And also definitely not true," Wynston said hastily, glaring daggers. The cadets were perceptibly absorbing the allegation. Quinn radiated satisfied malice. "It's not my fault if certain individuals turned out to have earned a triple Nexu Scout badge in knot-making. Anyway I do not discuss previous involvements, especially fabricated ones."

"Well someone's gotta discuss them," announced cadet number one. "Inquiring minds need to know how to follow in your footsteps."

"There is no following. There aren't even footsteps. You want success with women? Focus more on the woman and less on the success. I've been rejected by more women than I can count and plain ignored by more than that. It didn't matter, as long as the connection was there with the ones willing to stay. I've had passionate involvements consisting entirely of conversation. I've spent whole nights just sitting on the roof watching the stars turn until the sun comes up, just being with someone. I've exchanged regards with women I never laid a hand on, and meant it. Sex was never a goal, only a possible expression of mutual appreciation. Sod the numbers. You have to care about the people."

The cadets stared soggily at him.

"Yeah," said one, "but did you actually play a professional dominatrix for six months waiting to get hired by the prince of Dubrillion?"

"You know what? This Q&A session is over." Wynston stood. "And honestly, it couldn't have been more than two weeks."

August, 30 ATC: Happy Day

Wynston joined Quinn on the bridge of the *Aegis*, where Quinn had been standing quite still for several hours.

"Nice day out," said Wynston.

Quinn didn't look at him. "We're in space. 'Day' is a rather meaningless concept."

"Not at all, we just have it from a lot of sources at once. Anyway, it's a good day so far; work's never gone better and morale is at an all-time high."

"Oh?" Quinn said. "And where is Junior? It has been suspiciously quiet lately."

"Oh, he met Kaliyo. They hit it off."

Quinn frowned. "Isn't that exactly the sort of menace to the galaxy we're supposed to prevent?"

"I have a cleanup crew shadowing them. I don't imagine their association will last for very long. If nothing else they'll start fighting over custody of the explosives, and I seriously doubt Junior has the finesse to resolve that one with her. Regardless, they're both happy for the moment. - I even got Holiday to bubble some."

"And how did you accomplish that?"

"We found her a cache of Doctor Cedrax's notes from his university days. She's ecstatic. She probably won't come bothering you for days."

"I see."

"Temple and Hazard are bonding over holovids. I'm deathly curious what they talk about during these things, but Temple always dismantles audio surveillance and Hazard won't give me straight answers, she just smiles a lot. Meanwhile your son has found out that with a little shielding he can act

as a lightsaber-wielding training dummy for our sharpshooters; he seems to love it. In short everyone on this ship is some kind of cheerful." Wynston brightened. "Except you and your perma-mope."

"Yes, well. You'll be pleased to know that I've filed all necessary reports for the operation on Geonosis."

"And then got back to moping." Quinn sighed in exasperation. "See, like that! But, be that as it may." Wynston pretended to take an interest in the stars. "Thriving on friendly fire aside," he said casually, "Rylon really is quite happy here."

"Yes," agreed Quinn.

"Oh, and I've finished the survey of the latest crop of agents."

"Indeed. You would only come to disturb me if you were finished."

"They're primed and ready, top marks on their evaluations."

"Quite."

Someone unfamiliar with Chiss eyes might not have detected the shifty motions of Wynston's. "And with the latest upgrades the *Aegis's* engines are functioning at peak efficiency. Peak efficiency, I say."

"You can save your breath, agent, I do read the status reports."

Wynston huffed out a breath. "While moping."

Quinn angled his head to get a partial view of the Chiss beside him. "I took the liberty of amending the report our agent is presenting to the princess of Ontek, mentioning - since she wanted a full dossier on the suitor you're pretending to be - a comprehensive listing of your sexual history over the last six months, which is how long you've been courting her and supposedly only her." Quinn arched an eyebrow. "After all, you did plan on disqualifying yourself."

Wynston had taken on a distinct shade of green. "She can't see that report," he croaked, and sprinted for a console.

Quinn looked out to the galaxy's arrangement of stars and smiled.

Afterword

And so the Organization rambles on, for years. Decades. Maybe forever in our hearts. There is the end of the documentation and beginning of legend. And I can't say either lead 100% enjoys it. But hey, great things have been built on shakier foundations than this.

What started as a clash between chaotic good and lawful neutral became the galaxy's best hope. I don't think there's even one single relationship I enjoy writing more.

This volume comes after Ruth Means Compassion and its appendices. It also comes after a serious turn for Wynston: the upcoming Nights Errant, his solo stories. Wynston and Quinn tangle again in the Lodestone AU. But Captain, Cipher, Soldier Spy is their canonical time to shine.

Cerulean contours and noble tragedy: the enduring legacy of the Ruth!verse. It could be no other way.

Final Notes

brightephemera has been playing BioWare RPGs since 2009 and Star Wars: The Old Republic since prelaunch, and has always had a bad habit of revising favorite stories.

You can find Bright's fiction blog at serialephemera.tumblr.com. and questions and comments will be read for as long as the blog is active at serialephemera.tumblr.com/ask.

The center for Bright's SWTOR fic downloads is

<http://www.swtorshenanigans.net/wordpress/2017/09/11/the-complete-brightephemera-swtor/>



3" Taller

15% prettier

Fifteenth-generation military

Immigrant turned spy

Broke the IQ scale

Sliced to edit IQ marks

Values certain women

Values women, certainly

Rules stickler

Renegade

Better in every way

Better in every way

Together,
they fight crime.

#ceruleancontours