



DIALOGUES



Titles

SWTOR fanfiction

Dialogues AU

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Diverging from the game's canon after Act 3 and Ruth's canon (but childless) five years after the events of the class line, the Dialogues AU consists of the conversations between Emperor's Wrath Ruth Niral and Hero of Tython Rho on the way to Rho's execution.

Dedication

To all awarders of kudos on AO3

Acknowledgements

Dialogues is a non-profit fan made work. Star Wars: The Old Republic and the characters associated with it are the property of BioWare and LucasArts

Content and Spoilers

Class story spoilers for the Jedi Knight and Sith Warrior through Act 3 appear throughout.

Foreword

Who doesn't love a Hannibal Lecter? I could take or leave the cannibalism part, of course, but the chained power who has nothing but his words to escape with...it's alluring.

I wondered about that. And I wondered, too, under what circumstances a disillusioned Wrath named Ruth would really sit down and talk to someone about life, the universe, and everything. She wouldn't trust someone on her own side, not after the events of the game (Timeline 1 and part of Timeline 2 of the canon Ruth Means Compassion)...and yet, why would she let someone on the other side live long enough to start communicating?

That's where the Emperor's order, and a pesky ship breakdown, came into play. But you're about to see all that. Here, characters from disparate worlds find an AU where there's nothing to do but talk. And talking, as we all know, is both tactical vector and a soul's best chance to be known.

Dialogues was written to answer one very specific question. So here goes.

Dramatis Personae

RUTH NIRAL, the Emperor's Wrath, a warrior on behalf of the Sith Empire;
MASTER RHO, the Hero of Tython, a Jedi champion of the Galactic Republic.





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Dialogues AU: Book 1

Day 1 – 19 Days Remain

Rho woke up with his hands bound in front of him. He was curled up on his side, and it was agony.

The Jedi rolled to his back and the pain abated, a little. His head still throbbed. He looked around. Forcefield surrounded him on three sides. Gunmetal grey above, below, and as one wall.

The Sith. The Emperor's Wrath. How fast, how...deadly. He had fought her to a standstill for what had to be half an hour before she had gained the upper hand. Why hadn't she finished him?

Where there was life, there was hope. He struggled to sit, decided that was a bad idea, and rested against the wall. Before him his green hands and forearms were still smeared with the sawdust of the battle, partly covered by the metal cuffs linked by a dishearteningly sturdy chain. Beside him was a shallow bucket, clean and empty. His cell stood in an otherwise empty black room lit only by strips of glowing oblong lights in rigid vertical lines. Her ship, all right. It must be. She wouldn't hand him over to anyone else. Not that many people were ambitious enough to keep a Jedi prisoner. Especially not, and he knew better than to pretend the reputation didn't have its effect, the Hero of Tython.

He extended his Force senses. They felt oddly dampened here. He mentally crept up and down the walls, seeking some break in the tedium, some hint at a control panel or loose piece. Nothing presented itself.

Something sounded from beyond the locked door. It opened to reveal the Wrath herself, all in form-fitting black armor with a black half cape, a black and silver mask fitted tight over her head. Just as she had been during their battle. She walked like death, certain and smooth.

She stopped before his cell, close to the forcefield. She said nothing.

"Wrath," he said, rolling back his aching head to look up at her. "I see you got the best of that scuffle."

“Yes.” She stood straight, shoulders back, immovable in her black boots. “I see you succeeded in surviving it.”

“You or your people must have tended to me. I’m only sore.”

“That was my intent in combat. Not something I cleaned up after the fact.” She sounded proud of it.

As well she should be, if she really hadn’t been fighting to kill. He revised his assessment of her capabilities. “Your control is admirable.”

“Your conduct equally so. You are a worthy enemy. As I had hoped.”

He wasn’t sure how to deal with a compliment from this woman, and she wasn’t giving anything away. He shifted. “You’re taking me somewhere?”

“To my master.” The Sith Emperor. “He wants me to deal with you in person. His will. My hand. You will not find it so easy to escape this time.”

“I see.” What Emperor, he wondered, since he had already killed one? Was this how it ended? Facing someone he had already fought once? “I...thought your master was a legend at this point.”

“Strike him down, he will rise again. This I have seen. It is he, Jedi, and he remembers your face.”

She sounded just like she had in their extremely brief conversation prior to their fight. “Do you always talk like that?”

She hesitated. He wondered whether she was arranging another burst of bombast. She was formidable, yes, but he had to at least ask.

“I say what I want to say,” she said, clipping every word. “I believe it gets the point across.”

“Oh, yes, no doubt about that. So, um. Is this your personal ship?”

“You don’t need to know that.”

“Is it just us?”

“Absolutely not. I know my capability and your limits, but I’m not fool enough to sleep on them.”

Like his captors had before, the last time he’d been held against his will among the Sith? It would be impolitic to bring it up. “How long until we reach your master?”

“That, too, you don’t need to know.”

She was giving him precious little to formulate an escape plan on. “If I might—”

The ship rocked. Rho gritted his teeth against the pain while the shocks tore at his bruised side.

The Wrath took a rapid look around, then seemed to focus on him. “Reflect,” she said, “that my master only wants you killed where he can watch. If you attempt escape, I will give myself all the time I require with you *before* you die.”

“Hadn’t you better see what’s wrong with the ship?”

She whirled and strode out, her half-cape fluttering behind her.

*

Ruth broke into a sprint as soon as she had left the Hero of Tython’s presence. She pounded to the bridge, barely keeping her balance against a series of jumps and swerves. Whatever was going on, they weren’t in hyperspace anymore.

“Pierce!” Her guard-captain was standing behind the pilot’s seat on the bridge. One of Ruth’s guard had the helm; another was pivoting out of the navigator’s chair.

“Report!”

“Droid must have come in in the Jedi’s things. Told Nevet to search that bag, must not have searched hard enough. It’s fused our comms and sabotaged the hyperdrive. We came out just in time to hit an asteroid field.” He leaned to one side at the next hard turn, but didn’t look for a moment like he was going to fall. “Going to be touchy.”

Ruth braced herself. Out the front viewport was an assortment of rocks. Real space indeed. “How long until we get out.”

“Turned around,” said the pilot through gritted teeth. “Under two minutes.”

The whole ship rocked, not from the pilot's maneuvers. "Get it under control," she snapped in spite of herself. She liked these people well enough, as much as she liked anyone, but she had a rank to maintain. "Where's the droid," she said.

The navigator held up a hand to display an off-brown ball hardly more than two fists together. It was waving a number of little metal legs.

"How did we miss this?" said Ruth.

"I'll talk to Nevet," Pierce said darkly. "As far as we can tell it's only hit the hyperdrive and communications."

"It's only that we're stranded here with nothing but sublight and the toolbox in the closet."

"It'll be handled, milord."

Another crash.

Ruth snarled. "Get. Us. Out."

Day 2 ~ 18 Days Remain

The upheaval passed. So did several hours. Finally the Emperor's Wrath came back, still in her black armor and mask. Rho wondered whether she sat down to her meals like that. Or slept.

"Wrath," he said, struggling to his feet. "Is there something I can do for you?"

"Your little droid friend wreaked merry havoc on our systems before we caught him." She showed her other hand, where LR-43 struggled ineffectually. She tossed it to the ground before Rho and drew her saber. "Enough." She ran it through.

There went a loyal being, and welcome company at times. Had LR gotten a distress call out? Rho would have to be an idiot to ask.

"It made no communications," said the Wrath. "We are adrift but for sublight engines...but you are no better off than you were."

"Well, I'm not dying in the next twelve hours." That was an improvement.

She hesitated. "Don't be so sure." It was just too long a silence to be witty as such.

Well, he had at least one thing to get to. “I’m a little thirsty,” he said apologetically. “Could I request some water?”

She raised her voice without turning her head. “Pierce. A drink of water for our guest.”

The look he hazarded was half innocence and half genuine surprise. “Is that what I am? Your guest?”

“You are in my domain and still breathing.” He could swear there was a smile in her voice. “So yes, you must be.”

“I...guess I’m just going to stay put, then.”

“Very insightful.”

“Will I even see your face before this is over?”

She stood in silence for what felt like half a minute.

Finally she reached up and released something at the back of her head. In a smooth deliberate motion she pulled her mask up and forward, peeling it away. A pale Human face, slightly marked across forehead and cheekbones by the tight fit of the mask. Her eyes were a startling light blue, her hair chestnut, a couple of well-pressed strands falling free while the rest swept under her tight black hood. She was young. No older than he was, surely, even if her expression aged her.

“This isn’t because you want it,” she said, a curl twisting her small full mouth to derision. “But I’m not afraid to face you.”

“No. You’re not afraid of much.”

“I have no reason to be. What about you, Jedi? Are you afraid?”

A serious question, and one that deserved a serious answer. “Strangely enough, no.” In the end he’d met his match, and then some. “I’d like to have done more. But I did all I could.”

“It looks like you’ll have some time to make peace with the Force.”

“I always have.”

“Hm. How inspiring.”

How did she live, not being in harmony with the Force? How did anyone who could feel it? He opened his mouth and stopped.

She frowned up at him. Even in her boots she was a few inches shorter. Her presence was greater than her form.

Someone knocked in the doorway, someone enormously tall and broad. “Milord.” He swaggered in, giving no more than an infinitesimally raised eyebrow at the sight of her exposed face, and offered her a tall glass.

“Thank you. Dismissed.” She turned to a small metal frame set into the forcefield at floor level. She drew and activated one of her lightsabers. “Stand back, Jedi.” Rho complied. By some mechanism he couldn’t see the forcefield inside the frame vanished and she slid the glass through. Then she withdrew her hand and the forcefield closed once more. She deactivated her saber and stepped back.

“Thank you,” he said.

“I will provide a meal shortly.” She turned away. “You may yet die tomorrow.” She stalked out.

*

Ruth ate her own meal. She restored her mask and hovered over her guardsmen as they pored over the considerable damage the wretched little droid had done, compounded on the damage sustained in the asteroid field. She gathered some minimal rations on a tray - everyone would be on cut rations until they had the means of reaching the hyperlanes again. Until then her navigator had identified the nearest inhabited star system and their sublight engines were straining to deliver them. It would be days.

The tray she brought to the prisoner’s cell. The Mirialan Jedi was lying down, his eyes closed. Good. She didn’t feel like conversation anyway. She pushed dinner through its slot, reactivated the forcefield, and slipped out.

Pierce was in the hallway. “Milord. Prisoner’s playing nice?”

“So far. He knows he can’t take me in a raw contest. All the more so for the ritual bindings we had done on that cage. It can’t deny him the Force but it weakens him while it’s in place.”

“We could probably get some good intelligence out of him, while we have him.”

“I’ll consider it.” She eyed his big hands and their brief twitch. “I don’t want any of you talking to him. He is dangerous, Pierce, possibly the most dangerous enemy I’ve ever faced.”

“Seems to me he gave up fast enough.”

She grinned under her mask. He was among the few who could make her grin. “I may have made it look good, but that was a workout. No, whatever you could get out of him, he will get more out of you. And what he might do to your mind in the process...he’s a Jedi. Controlling people is a specialty of theirs. I won’t risk it.” She wouldn’t risk any of her people against this, the most bluntly powerful of her opponents.

Pierce gave a nod. “Yes, milord.”

Day 3 ~ 17 Days Remain

Rho woke in pain. His side felt maybe better than it had yesterday, but that perspective wasn’t as helpful as he might have hoped.

He stirred and opened his eyes. There was a red forcefield practically in his face. Beyond it, crouching low, was the Wrath, her pale face intent on him.

“No repairs yet,” she said flatly. “Your reprieve is still on for today.”

“Good news, then,” he said. Out of some polite desire to even the scales he added, “Is the ship in any danger?”

“No. Only inconvenience.”

Well, good. “I see.”

She kept staring at him. His tattoos, just under his eyes and cutting from cheekbone to chin? Or something else?

“What are you looking for?” he said.

“Just studying. You’re my enemy. I should be able to point you out anywhere.”

He sat up, crossing his legs and noting that she stayed crouched, her forearms on her knees, her position tense but stable. “I’ve already studied you some,” he said. “As a Sith I might run into someday.”

“Our paths had to cross. You know this.”

“So I did. Study you. Our records are a little contradictory. Several Jedi who met you a few years ago reported you were a very friendly individual. Approachable. Constructive, even sometimes when a Sith wouldn’t be expected to be.”

Those eyes shut down. “Don’t trust reports from the front lines, especially in that mess leading up to the war. My life started on Corellia.”

Odd phrasing. “Then what was before then?”

He saw now why she wore a mask. Pain showed raw across features that looked outright girlish when she wasn’t remembering to stiffen her lip and draw down her brow. “No one.” She brought up her chin. “And I know you. Your illustrious career from some incident on Tython to the present day. You’re a famous warlord, Jedi. Do you enjoy the reputation?”

“I don’t think of myself as a warlord. I’ve assisted in leading troops for objectives before, but – “

“You’re a general and a highly skilled killer. One might almost think you and I had that in common. Only you have the further quality of persuading Sith you meet to abandon their cause and turn on their countrymen. I’ve considered just gagging you for the rest of the journey, just to be safe. But frankly I believe you’ll be more useful talking.”

“Many of those Sith came to me,” he said carefully. “Questions of the Light Side are not something I just spring on anyone.” Unless he thought they would be open to it.

She smiled sourly. “Of course not. You’ll find I don’t need your lectures on it.”

“I’m hardly in a position to be lecturing you on anything right now.”

“Correct.” She opened the small forcefield frame long enough to nudge through a tray. “Eat. You may yet die tomorrow.”

Day 4 – 16 Days Remain

Ruth disliked the prospect of taking out Rho's bucket but she didn't trust anyone else in the room with him and she wasn't going to make him sit in his own filth for the days it would take them to get anywhere. So she ended up with the unpleasant job.

When she came back he was kneeling in the center of his cell, hands at rest in his lap, black hair half covering his face, wrists still chained securely together. He seemed to glow. She surreptitiously hit the control to open the cell's access slot and slide the shallow bucket through.

Nothing about him moved, except that his eyes opened and his murky green gaze swept up to her. "Thank you," he said.

She checked the edges of the forcefield slot, tracing its now-active lines, wondering whether there was anything wrong with it. No. He wasn't being smug, just polite. "Consider it my investment in minimizing strain on the ship's filtration systems."

"You seem to be going out of your way to keep my imprisonment...I would almost say painless." A little humor sounded in that velvety voice.

"Would you prefer the alternative?"

"No. I just wanted to tell you I appreciate the absence of torture."

"Bound and bruised and locked away, on half rations – as the rest of us are, for the nonce, but still. You have a peculiar standard for hospitality."

"You're not taking out your excess aggression on me. Sith have tried to imprison me before. They were rarely this considerate."

"Or this successful."

He shrugged as if to concede the point.

"So long as you are under my control I have no need to watch you suffer. I thought you and I might even talk."

His calm was perfect. "What about?" It made her want to break it. If it were anyone else in the galaxy she might indulge that desire, flex her muscle, make it show. That

was what the Wrath did. But with the infamously aurodium-tongued Hero of Tython it might pay not to give in to her first impulse.

So she smiled, pleasantly. “What do you know of my master?”

*

Rho stood up. For this question he wanted to be at her eye level, or close, anyway.

“What do I know of your master? First of all, I’m not sure he’s what you think he is.”

The Emperor's Wrath took up a comfortable stance and eyed him coolly.

“Elaborate.”

“The Emperor I encountered five years ago was an ancient Sith of incredible power. He had extended his life for hundreds of years, and he planned to extend it further. More than that he planned to rise to essential godhood, by snuffing out all life in the galaxy to fuel his master ritual.”

The Wrath looked unimpressed but for an eloquently raised eyebrow. “How dramatic.”

“I know it sounds crazy. It was crazy. That’s what made your predecessor Lord Scourge turn away from him. That’s what drove the attack we mounted on him. He destroyed himself in combat against me.”

She...grinned. “Destroyed himself? Don’t tell me you didn’t even get the killing blow.”

“I wanted to help. He was at my mercy, I couldn’t just...”

“*Just kill him like you were supposed to?* You couldn’t stomach executing the man who you thought was carrying out a plan to murder you and literally everyone you ever loved? I use the verb loosely. How you manage to wriggle out of your own moral code long enough to win battles I will never know. Please, continue.”

He considered correcting her on the matter of justified killing but thought better of it. Onward. “Whatever you serve, it isn’t the thing we killed that day.”

“Hm.” Dark amusement played about the corners of her mouth. “If the Emperor is dead, then long live the Emperor. Maybe this one will upset you less.”

“Can he be reasoned with?”

“I wouldn’t know. That’s not my job.”

“Judging by what you’ve done on his orders, I’d say he’s no improvement.” Just how much did she know? She hadn’t been there for his incursion into the Dark Temple. She might not even have been called at that time. So who did call her, and why? Maybe he would get those answers before the end. Then again, maybe not. “He wields you like a weapon and he probably never tells you why.”

“That is his prerogative.”

He stared. She stared back, her composure porcelain perfect.

“If you really believe that,” he said, “why do you serve him?”

“I was called. It was a great honor.” She seemed to falter for a moment. “And in the end we serve or we die. Even you should know those terms by now.”

How bare a sentiment. “Is that all the choice you were given?”

“Only a fool would call it a choice.” She recovered her bitter hauteur. “I serve.”

“He won’t repay you in any coin you’ll be alive to use.”

“That’s all I require from you for today.” She drew her saber. “I’ll take your cup. Stand back.”

Then that was all the chance she would give him. He couldn’t afford to stay here and wait for more information. He nudged his empty glass to the forcefield slot and obediently stepped back. She deactivated that little metal slot, red forcefield giving way to empty air.

He reached for the Force, damped though it was. He reached out and sent his will ahead to seize her wrist and pull her, hard, up against the forcefield frame. She slammed to the ground, following her pinned and dragged arm.

She didn’t cry out, only twisted to face him. Like a force of nature she raised her hand from the elbow. And squeezed.

The grip on his throat felt like pincers, not only pressing but stabbing. He hit back by reflex and didn’t shake it. Maybe if he were better rested, better fed, but he wasn’t, he

had only his reserves of will – and the Wrath, flaring bright with anger, had the will to match his.

She hadn't been on half rations all this time.

He let her push his head back against the wall. He let his hands continue their reflexive, ineffectual scrabbling. All his focus had to be on relieving the crushing force on his throat. It came with darkness, heavy, blinding. He opened himself to the other side, the Light like a fine sharp instrument in his mind, cutting through darkness and pressure alike.

Her assault closed behind his focus as it moved. He choked and gagged, begging for air coming up or down. He couldn't see her eyes from here. He only felt her anger like an ocean bearing down on him.

And then he didn't feel anything.

*

Ruth had started out hoping only to find the limits of Rho's knowledge of her master. She hadn't expected his fantastical tale of world-destroying madness.

The Jedi believed it. That much was clear in every line of him. Maybe the former Wrath believed it, too; either that or he had hoodwinked the Jedi by feeding him a line that fit his own assumptions. Lord Scourge clearly wanted the Emperor dead. That might just be Sith ambition speaking. Who better to assist him in overthrowing his master, than the strongest up-and-coming Jedi in existence? The story that served that purpose must be false.

Were it true that would be a different matter. Her master had not died in Rho's attack. Only his Voice, wielding his powers, exposed itself to the galaxy. The thing that rose as the new Voice *was* the Emperor, only a little transformed. If he'd had a plan, something before her time, he wasn't executing it now. If the Empire were burning whole worlds she should be at the forefront, and right now she wasn't. Besides, she knew better than to take testimony from a Jedi.

How exactly Lord Scourge went about defying the Emperor, she didn't know. Her will came solidly second to her master's in every domain where he chose to exercise it. That was just reality. Scourge's rebellion had...disturbing implications. But it was out

of her hands. If nothing else, that betrayal had raised her to this status. She should be happy for it.

Rho's insubordination might have sprung directly from the urgency he clearly felt about this matter. The attempt didn't surprise her. Nor did it especially alarm her. She would reach her destination, with him in tow, and he would come face to face with the supposed architect of the galaxy's destruction. All would become clear then.

Fool. Damned fool. He was so pleasant when resigned to his fate. No begging, no whining, no threats, none of the undignified theatrics her targets had displayed in the past. Just courtesy and a way of asking and paying attention like he actually gave a damn about his surroundings. She could almost believe the calm Jedi act. The white-hot rage she'd felt hadn't even been for him, not really, just for his arrogance in trying to test himself against her again. With that faded, she couldn't summon any hatred for him. He was just a man. A brave one, and almost tolerable. A...new face, someone perhaps close to her equal. Crippled by Jedi philosophy, something she would love to tear down given time, but oddly approachable nonetheless.

All right, so anybody might seem approachable once tied up and thrown in a jail cell. The point stood.

She wondered how he was doing. Being choked to unconsciousness rarely had a lasting effect except on morale, which she would just as soon keep down. Still. She wondered.

Day 5 ~ 15 Days Remain

The Wrath burst in just as Rho was coming out from his meditation. She waited for the door to fall shut before she pulled her mask off and tossed it aside, her hair tousled in the action. He stayed kneeling, his hands bound before him. She approached until she almost touched the red forcefield.

"Any more stupid ambitions you want to get out of the way?" she said acidly.

"No." It was good practice, holding his composure in such a thoroughly disadvantaged pose. "I recognize that I'm stuck."

"Good." She eyed his neck some more. Checking for her handiwork? "Your purity leaks into the rest of the ship," she said. "How fine it must be, to be a child of the Light."

He relaxed. Evidently she had forgotten her earlier threats about his fate should he rebel. “I can sense your presence as well. It’s of another nature entirely.”

“We’ve worked for those auras, you and I.” She crossed her arms and stared down at him. “I so rarely find occasion to talk with a Light Side devotee. They seem to resort to violence very quickly when I come around.”

“Usually when you arrive on the scene everyone knows your mission. It would take someone of uncommon nerve to try to talk you out of it.”

“Then they fight because they are ruled by fear. How predictable.” She sneered. “I’ve never known a Light Side user who didn’t fail.”

“Conversely, I’ve never met a Dark Side master who succeeded. I think we shape our own samples.”

Her eyes narrowed. “Exhibit the first. Right here.”

“But you can’t win in the long run. You can kill me, I don’t matter, but as long as people of conscience –” he ignored her exaggerated eye-rolling – “exist to oppose you, the side of life can’t be put down.”

“Life,” she said. “You say it like it’s a justified cause. Life is *for* something, Jedi, or it isn’t worth the effort it takes to get up in the morning.”

“Then what is life for, Wrath?”

She hesitated. “That really depends, doesn’t it? Work. *Love*.” She put venom in the word. “Excitement. Victory. Whatever it is you Jedi think you’re following.”

“And for you?”

“My master’s will is reason enough.” She tilted her head. “Have you any comparable cause?”

“Life is its own cause. The protection of people. Ordinary people, extraordinary ones for that matter, anyone. From places like the Empire. From beings like your master.” She didn’t seem impressed. “Don’t you think it’s limiting, submitting your will entirely to one person who may have only his own agenda in mind?”

“Is it any less limiting submitting your will to coalitions of weaker beings who spend their time arguing over which of their petty agendas you should support?”

“It helps that I think of them as people,” he said mildly.

She gestured impatiently. “So they’re people. They still hardly seem worth your time. You would make a fine Sith, if you let yourself. You have the raw power to make yourself – anything you desire. Is that something you’ve even considered?”

“Not seriously. Asserting my own power doesn’t seem like a very worthy goal in itself.”

“But it enables–” she waved one black-gloved hand – “anything. Anything. Whatever you want, whatever vice, whatever pleasure, whatever fulfillment in impressing your will on the galaxy – as Sith you don’t have to ask permission. You can give your life whatever meaning you want. A man like you, no one could stop you.”

There was one glaring hole here. “Except you. And your master. Who I believe are about to stop anything I was going to do.”

“The flip side,” she said, shrugging. “Make whatever life you want, until it crosses the will of someone stronger. The fact remains, you’d have been a lot happier as a Sith.”

“I don’t think that’s true. I think I’ve been more fulfilled as a Jedi, with a life of service, than any personal path could have offered.”

“How would you know?”

He didn’t have to know. He didn’t have to ask. He didn’t know how to explain this. He could only turn it back on her. “Do you know? Do you think you’re happier serving the Emperor than you would have been helping people for their own sake?”

The flurry of expressions on her face was too fast to follow. It resolved into a shrill cackle. “Oh, you have *no idea*.” She pushed her hair back and coughed. “Goodbye, Jedi. You may yet die tomorrow.” Then, still laughing, she donned her mask and strode out.

*

Ruth let her Jedi prisoner wait until nearly noon shipside time. She did bring him food, eventually.

“Thank you.” Rho’s velvet baritone sounded from the back of the enclosure while she nudged the tray through the slot and reactivated the forcefield. “May I ask you something?”

The question prickled at her skin. “You may,” she said cautiously.

“I was thinking about what we talked about.”

“Ah. I can’t imagine you’ve had much else for entertainment lately.”

“You said I would make a good Sith. It isn’t true, I just don’t have and don’t want the mindset for it. But I’m starting to think you would make a good Jedi.”

“Don’t insult me.”

“I mean it. Your attunement with the Force is undeniable. And you’re not like other Sith I’ve met.”

Oh, please. “Do you have any idea how many people have tried that line on me?”

“Specifically? No. I imagine quite a few people have noticed it before, though.”

“Noticed what?” she said sharply.

“You face me. And are willing to have an actual conversation.”

“You’ve seduced Sith like that before. You’re infamous for it.”

“They were unusual, too.”

She suppressed her laugh, barely. This wasn’t going anywhere surprising. “So tell me how much like your unusual Sith I am.”

He stepped forward, rapidly overtopping her. “Not like them, either. You’re so much younger than I expected when I heard about you. So much...how old are you?”

None of his business. “How old are you?”

“Twenty-six.”

A scant year older than her. “So young, for such a hero.”

“Things started happening early. You can’t be much older than I am.”

“Does that surprise you?”

He studied her features, his murky green eyes intent. “I don’t know,” he said. “I could believe that you’re the greatest fighter in the Empire. A lot of Sith think they are. I think you might really be. But it’s more than that. There are bloodier and more brutal Sith than you. Some of them enjoy breaking everything they encounter. Not you. You do the job cleanly and then you’re done. You fought me on fair terms, and when you took me prisoner – here I am. All parts attached. You have honor. No small number of Sith do. But you also have some brand of decency. And that’s rare.”

The recitation bothered her. He was clearly drawing a conclusion from it that she didn’t share. “Am I less of a Sith just because I don’t wallow in it?”

“You’re more of a something else. Something with promise.”

“Moving on to the next victory pleases me more than sucking blood out of the current one. If you think I should put that front and center on my Jedi application I’ll take it under advisement.”

“You’re the Emperor’s Wrath, the most feared enforcer in the galaxy, chosen for your prowess and your ability to get anywhere and defeat anyone – from that job description alone I was expecting an unreasoning killer. Not you.”

He did make it sound impressive. She had, in all her long journey, made a point of not descending to the level of her fellow Sith. She was Sith, oh yes, born and bred to the code, but she wasn’t the animal people expected. That gave her some pleasure. – And he must know this. She peeled her lips from her teeth and shook off his flattery.

“Then once more, the Jedi fail to understand their opponents. There is room for a woman like me in the Sith ranks. Can the Jedi say the same?”

“We might surprise you.”

“Somehow I doubt you will.” She shot him a hard smile and left.

*

“Do you think your Republic misses you, Jedi?”

“You can call me Rho. I’d prefer it, actually. The honorific isn’t really necessary under the circumstances.”

The Human's lip curled. "I don't say it as an honorific. Do you think your Republic misses you?"

Rho considered. "My friends may have noticed by now. I'm rarely out of contact for long."

"Do you think they'll be afraid when you fail to come back?"

"Will my disappearance be that quiet? I would expect you to trumpet the news far and wide once it's done. It must be a morale coup, to kill such a famous Republic agent."

"Ah. Do you expect your execution will make the evening news?"

"That seems to be entirely in your hands."

"Correct. But to return to the question, again. Do you think your Republic misses you?"

"Not today. Not right this minute. Sooner or later they may find a situation where they wish I could intervene."

"Ah. They'll miss you when they want to use you but can't. How bleak."

He paused, taken aback. "I didn't mean that. As I said, my friends will have noticed long before then."

"Do you think they'll come to save you?" He could only call that gleam in her eyes predatory.

"I hope they won't put themselves against you trying."

"No. They'll lose. Now, if they oppose me, and tomorrow, if they oppose me, and forevermore, if they oppose me. Do you realize that? You were the best of them and you lost. The remainder of your allies will fall, in time."

"You can't take on the entire Republic by yourself."

"No. Someday they will surrender to save themselves." She adjusted gloves over small hands, first one, then the other. "The sooner the better for all involved."

There was a surprising sentiment. "Are you interested in preventing bloodshed?"

“Why shouldn’t I be? As you said, I simply don’t have time to take on the entire Republic by myself.”

“Don’t you have superweapons in development for that kind of thing?” Come to think of it, if he did survive this, that was a valuable question to have the answer to.

She wrinkled her nose. “The military does, I’m sure. It’s not a trustworthy mechanism; they have a damnable habit of misplacing these things. No. Mass death is not my department.”

An opening? “You think it’s distasteful.”

“I think there are precious few points you can prove with a billion that you can’t prove with a hand-picked few. Then again, perhaps that’s just a Sith struggling for relevance against the monsters of technology.”

“Perhaps it’s that you don’t like the waste.”

“Need I remind you, Jedi, that a distaste for wasted lives is not evidence of hidden Jedi sympathies.”

“You make that abundantly clear. Still. It’s something.”

“The Dark Side is my ally. You can’t put a good spin on that.”

“Was it always?”

Whatever he’d been expecting, it wasn’t the sudden widened eyes and parted lips and uncertain brow. “Why the hell wouldn’t it be?” she said roughly.

Then the reputation she’d made before...what had she said, Corellia?...before then wasn’t entirely erased. “I just wondered,” he said. “Your self-control is more than the average Sith’s.”

“You say that. You don’t know.” She was already stooping to take her mask and don it.

“There’s always the chance to prove it,” he said.

She jabbed a finger in his direction. “I. Have. Nothing. To Prove. *Jedi*.” She didn’t even bother with the death threat on the way out.

Day 6 – 14 Days Remain

Ruth talked with Captain Pierce at least long enough to verify that morale, while flagging, would hold some minimal level until they got back to civilization. Good. The last thing she needed was her crew going stir crazy while all her energies were devoted to containing the Jedi in their midst.

It was containment she sought, which made it reasonable for her to come back.

She slipped in the ration bar and water glass, then reactivated the small frame forcefield. Rho, muddy-eyed and calm, watched her.

“How long have I been in here?” he said.

“Six days, minus a few hours. Is it so hard to tell?”

“I don’t have a clock outside your maintenance. And I’m not convinced you do that regularly.”

“Hm.” She hadn’t been. The thought that it might disorient him further was a little encouraging. It wasn’t torture. Just a way to put him on edge. The Jedi deserved it.

Rho composed his hands in his lap. “What would you like to talk about today?”

“I wasn’t necessarily going to talk about anything.”

“Ah. Sorry if I’m overeager. I don’t have much else to do in here. Nor...you out there, I imagine.”

She rolled her shoulders uneasily. That was too true. “I had some questions,” she said.

“About my predecessor. Did he truly come to the Light Side?”

“Well...no. Not exactly.”

She waited.

He brought his eyes up to hers and summoned that calm smile. “He came to me for help in fulfilling his vision and stopping the Emperor. But he never intended to forsake the Sith way. He has fought at my side, as a trusted ally. I think that in spite of his reliance on the Dark Side he has saved more lives than any Jedi I’ve met.”

“His assistance springs from his own self-interest.”

“That’s certainly what he thinks. I think he’s selling himself short.” He looked her over, oddly friendly instead of insolent. “You said once that the Jedi would have no room for a woman like you. There are still ways you could do good.”

“Who ever said I was interested in doing good?”

“You’ve expressed nothing but disgust for mass destruction. In the end I think there are noble reasons buried in your service to your Empire. And if you care about her people, if you care about people, it isn’t that much further to go.”

“The Empire’s people never did anything for me.”

“That doesn’t necessarily mean you don’t care.”

She scowled, nettled at the near truth of it. “What are you hoping for? That I join your little menagerie of converted Sith?”

“You make it sound like I collect them.”

“They’re on your side because of you, aren’t they?”

“They’re individuals. Men and women of great courage and character. I wouldn’t diminish them by calling them trophies.”

“I wonder whether they take the same view?”

He just smiled. “It goes both ways. Do you realize the Jedi had a number of noticeable incidents involving Jedi you had encountered and spared early in your career? It seems you shook their composure. And, in some cases, their morals.”

“Really?” That sounded satisfying. “I always did enjoy throwing them off guard. If you’re losing philosophical conversations with an eighteen-year-old girl you deserve whatever fate you end up walking into.”

“So were you collecting them?”

“That was different! I...well for one thing I got around to killing my enemies.” Her cheek spasmed. “I imagine your Master Timmns gave a full report of my early failures in that regard? He was the worst out of all of them.”

“He’s a personal friend.” Oh, that just figured. The self-satisfied characters had to stick together. “His encounter cooperating with you did leave an impression.”

“If I had known then what I know now, your personal friend would be just another corpse on Belsavis.”

He raised his eyebrows. “What do you know now?”

“Everyone lies. Friendship is temporary, and he ends up ahead who ends it first.”

Rho just looked at her. When he spoke again it was in a changed voice, quieter, deeper. “It doesn’t have to be that way.”

“Maybe not for you.” And there was the maddening part. Surely anyone in his position must have been betrayed a hundred times. So where were his scars? How could he be sailing so easily through this life when she had been beset by harsh cautions and harsher penalties since childhood? How...? She tightened her jaw, annoyed at the prickling around her eyes. “Good night, Jedi. You may yet die tomorrow.”

Day 7 – 13 Days Remain

“I’m going to ask you a personal question. Whether you answer is as yet a mystery known only to you.”

Rho stood up to face the Wrath at a short distance broken only by the cell’s forcefield. Even through the reddish cast, her eyes looked very blue. “I’ll try, anyway. What is it?”

“Your tattoos.” Her gaze took in the little triangles under his eyes and the twin tessellated-diamond slashes cutting from the center of his cheekbones to the corners of his mouth. “I don’t meet many Jedi with body art. Ninety-nine out of a hundred people with those – triangles, diamonds, the geometric things, they’re Mirialan.”

“Yes, they’re traditional.”

“But you weren’t raised Mirialan.”

“I got them before I came to the Jedi.” This story was old and comfortable. “My parents brought me to an artist in the village, I must have been four. Ordinarily Mirialan tattoos are specific symbols of one’s accomplishments. But my parents knew I wouldn’t be living on Mirial or anyplace like it, so they said they would get me some in advance for what I would grow up to do.”

“How uncharacteristically ambitious.”

“They had big dreams.”

“The things you learn when you make conversation before killing somebody. I’m sure they must be satisfied.”

“I hope they are.”

What little good humor she had drained as her mouth drew down. “You really don’t know, do you?”

“What they think? I don’t correspond with them as such, no. It’s – the Jedi discourage that kind of attachment.”

“So your own mother and father only...what, hear what you’ve been up to when it makes the holovids? I hold a very low standard for Jedi but that seems bad even for them.” Oddly, the tone didn’t hold the disdain that the words did. “You let them take away your family. Why?”

He knew the recitation. “As I mentioned, that attachment can be dangerous to a Jedi’s focus. We voluntarily give up these ties so we can better concentrate on our duties.”

“Screw that. Blood’s one of the only links that means anything. If you’re not there to protect them you’ll never be able to fight your way back.”

“Of course it doesn’t work that way. Fighting as a solution, I mean.”

“Turning your back isn’t such a hot solution, either. That you wear the symbols tells me you do care where you came from. It was a gift of love, and I suspect even you care about that. So why cut them off otherwise?”

Those doubts weren’t new to him. In her voice, though, hard-edged and final, it sounded a lot worse. “My loyalty is to the Jedi first,” he said faintly.

“A man who puts his ideas before his people can’t be trusted with either.” She looked through him when she said it. “You must understand, Sith take these ties seriously.”

“Except the ones who kill their families.”

“Idiots. That *loyalty* is a source of strength. One that cannot be replaced.” Her lip twitched. “Though it can be taken away. Regardless, denying it or destroying it is

equally counterproductive. And I regard the one approach as very nearly equivalent to the other.”

For a blank moment the illogic of that statement silenced him. “They’re not, not really,” he managed.

“Oh? Either way you’re alone, Jedi. Any way at all...no. Either way, you’re alone.” She turned away, not before he saw the cracks in her composure.

*

Rho wasn’t kneeling in meditation when Ruth stepped in that evening. In fact he seemed frozen in the middle of some exercise pose, lunging, arms extended. He stretched his hands above his head and let them fall as he turned to her.

“Good morning,” he said. For a moment the Jedi’s murky green eyes caught what there was of the light in there. Green skin and diamond tattoos aside, he really did have a stereotypically pleasing face.

“They should put you on recruitment posters,” she said, and half meant it.

His eyebrows went up. The rest of his expression went down. “They do,” he said sheepishly.

She grinned. “They do it to me, too. Mask on, of course.”

“You must love the fame.”

Not especially, as such, but it was part of her service and if it helped the cause her opinion didn’t matter. “You must hate it.”

He shrugged modestly. “It’s part of my service. If it helps the cause, who am I to argue?”

“Hm.” That parallel didn’t sit easy with her. “Ever stop to think that your service really isn’t that different from mine?”

“People have called you my opposite number before. I believe we have different motivations, but I suppose the record of action might look very similar.”

“Similar? Crush our enemies, lead troops in certain strategic engagements, throw around our respective aspects of the Force whenever the situation calls for it – all

right, yours is to peacefully defuse physical threats and mine is to horrify witnesses into submission, but who's counting? Our Councils let us do as we please. They can't stop us. All that freedom and we still end up modeling for propaganda posters. That's the public life for you."

"We hold up our ends of the bargain. Maybe it's just accident that we ended up defending such different things."

She shrugged. "I told you you would make a good Sith, too."

"You could have been..." He looked at her shoulder instead of her and left his mouth hanging open a moment. "I know what you think of the Jedi. But hypothetically speaking. I have plenty of friends. Allies, brothers and sisters in arms. I think you'd be the one person I wouldn't feel even slightly guilty about asking to stare into death with me. Because I know you can take care of yourself better than I could take care of you. Isn't that odd?"

"A partnership of people pretending to be equal is a recipe for catastrophe." She had tried that charity once. She would not again. "Of people who truly are equal...we could have made the galaxy very interesting." Something tugged at her mind. "But that's a what-if larger than I care to deal in. Get some rest. You may yet die tomorrow."

The mask felt uncomfortably tight when she put it on. She secured it nevertheless, and went on her way.

Day 8 ~ 12 Days Remain

Once more the Wrath came with rations. Not nearly as much as Rho's aching stomach desired. "I'm not starving you on purpose," she said, as if reading his thought. "But our rations are limited until we reach another planet."

"Which planet are we bound for?" he said around a ration bar, in what he hoped was a casual tone.

"Not your concern." She nudged her mask with her foot. "I was thinking about your Jedi, having a place for any Force user who doesn't show up dripping in blood. I don't buy it." Her eyes were blue and frank. "My father was a Jedi, you know."

"I...didn't know that, actually."

“He studied as a padawan for eight years, from when he was fifteen. He taught me everything I needed to know about you.”

She seemed to think this made sense. “There are...significant gaps in that statement.”

She settled on a sneer. “His Jedi Master never gave him the knight’s trials, never a chance. She felt he was too dangerous. He was raised by the Sith, permanently tainted. She kept him close. Stifled him. She tried to bleed away everything human about him, every source of laughter, of happiness. She tried to tell him that a life of service without rank or opportunity was something to aspire to. In the end he didn’t believe her.” A hard smile won out. “So he came home.”

“I’m sorry your father’s master was overcautious. The Order encourages people to cultivate their potential.”

“Master Zauvien wanted nothing more than a perpetual dependent to show her Jedi superiority off to.”

Rho blinked. “Master Zauvien? Not...not the Togruta, the master healer?”

“It might be. Don’t tell me you know her?”

“Not well. She stays on the Jedi Temple, on...”

“Tython?” she said dryly. “Yes, that’s a poorly kept secret.”

“She stays with the Jedi Temple,” he said limpingly. “She works in the infirmary there, she’s one of our best healers.”

“I’m sure. Tyrants like Zauvien get tenure while good men like my father get cast out and chewed up by the Sith machine.”

And she hated it. She hated that loss. Who wouldn’t? “I’m sorry,” he said.

Her eyes widened. “It’s done,” she said gruffly. “As a Sith at least he got the chance to live before he died.” She nodded toward the tray she had provided him. “I’ll be back.”

*

Ruth wondered why she had brought up her father. It seemed to make a salient point, a strike against the Jedi. But it was also personal. The look on Rho’s face at the end,

the utter sincerity of his condolences, chafed in her mind like a piece of grit out of place. No one pitied her. She had never done anything pitiable, except perhaps survive.

She found him meditating, again. Meditation on the Dark Side might not be a bad pastime in these empty days. But she preferred the conversation.

“Tell me truly,” she said while the Mirialan stood to meet her. “Did you ever expect to end up here?”

“Honestly? No. I never thought any Sith would take me alive.” He shivered, suddenly and clearly elsewhere for a moment. “I was wrong about that twice.”

“This isn’t how you saw yourself spending your time, when you were young.”

“Well, partly. I always assumed I would serve as a Jedi Knight in whatever capacity I was best suited for.”

“That was your ambition? To hold down a job in the Jedi Knight work pool?”

He smiled a little. “There are worse aspirations.”

“There are a hell of a lot of better ones. Didn’t you ever think about being something normal? A pilot, a firefighter, the sole conquering vanguard of an unstoppable Republic army?”

“No. I always knew I was going to be a Jedi. That was enough for me.”

“All your life. Ever since you came to the Jedi as a little one. In all that time, didn’t you ever have a choice?”

He eyed her shrewdly. “Did you?”

Answers to that swirled and clashed in her head. “I asked you first,” she made herself say.

“My parents willingly brought me to the Temple for training. After that I never wanted to leave.”

“Even a little bit? Fantasies of running away, finding adventure, companionship?”

He dropped his gaze. “Nothing that ever tempted me to action.”

“Ah, but something.”

“Everyone has stray thoughts. You don’t have to act on them.”

“Sometimes you really ought to. If only to remind yourself you’re alive.”

“You...seem to want that reminder a lot,” he said mildly.

“It’s in the rulebook, you know. ‘There is only passion.’”

“I never would have placed you as one for rules.”

“What is the Wrath but the law’s strong arm? Since you asked, I didn’t have any choice in becoming Sith. But I’ve historically kept it on creative terms.”

“Did you ever expect to come this far?”

“There was never any clear boundary on where I expected to stop. I’m rapidly running out of ranks to exceed, so perhaps Wrath is it.”

“No desire to upstage the Emperor?”

“No. Not ever.” She didn’t want the job. She especially didn’t want whatever transformation it took for the Emperor to be what he – what it – was. And, too, she wasn’t sure she could lift her hand against him if the opportunity came.

She shook her head, hard. Thoughts of her master never sat well. “I’d better go. Sleep. You may yet die tomorrow.”

Day 9 – 11 Days Remain

Rho was still lying down when the Wrath came in with breakfast. He levered stiffly to his feet while she opened the forcefield slot, slid the tray in, and closed it again.

Rho coughed. Then, self-consciously, sniffled.

“Something wrong?” said the Wrath.

“I might be coming down with something,” Rho said uncomfortably.

“With what? What in the galaxy would wait this long before showing symptoms?”

“A few things,” he said. Alas, the galaxy was exciting like that.

Calculations flashed across her face. “I don’t have any medical gear for most alien species...”

“Standard Imperial kit antihistamine group seven should clear it up.” He took her raised eyebrows in. “When you’re prone to respiratory infections you get to learn what treatments are closest to hand.”

“I’ll see what I can do.”

To his considerable surprise, she strode back out. She returned with a white plasteel kit in hand, and knelt to open it on the floor. “Give me your word you’ll behave,” she said crisply.

“You have it.” He presented his wrists to the low panel and let the Wrath undo his bonds. Then he shuffled off his outer robes –ripe-smelling by now – and rolled the short tunic sleeve up. “I promise.”

“That’s...oddly reassuring.” Her look was not friendly, but it definitely wasn’t hostile. She knelt and leaned over. Awkwardly he slid down to his back and did his best to give her a stretch of his upper arm in the slot’s frame. “Inside of your elbow,” she said. She peeled off her black gloves and then swiped his arm with a damp tissue while he tried to shift his weight away from an awkwardly twisted shoulder. She grabbed his upper arm with one small white hand and started touching and prodding the crook of his elbow with two fingers.

He caught his breath and shivered. “Don’t get excited,” she said coolly.

“It’s not so much excited as ticklish,” he admitted.

She shot him a wide-eyed look and definitely didn’t dimple. At least, he would never tell her so. She returned her attention to his arm. “There.” She picked up a little syringe and checked the needle. “I’m not terribly experienced with these, being that I’m neither sick nor aiding the sick very often, but it’s supposed to be self-explanatory.” She picked a spot, seemingly at random, and jabbed him. One cautious motion, then she brought up some gauze with one hand and quickly removed the needle to press the gauze down. “There. According to the label that should have an effect within the hour.”

“Yes, this stuff is fast-acting.” He flexed the hand on his stuck arm. “Thank you. This is...a kindness you didn’t have to give.”

For an instant her brows drew together, and then her face closed. “I only want you at your best when my master makes you kneel.”

He frowned. “Are you serious when you say those things?”

No response in those blue eyes. “Quite.”

“It’s just, one minute you’re talking like a reasonable person, and the next, the instant the Emperor comes up...”

Her answer was one quick lash. “My opinions end where his start.” She stood. “Enough. You may yet die tomorrow.”

“But I’m safe with you until then.”

She hefted the syringe and left.

Day 10 ~ 10 Days Remain

Ruth dropped her mask, letting the metal faceplate clang on the floor. She walked up to the red forcefield behind which her prisoner knelt. She sat down, cross-legged, and faced him.

“Are you bored?” she said.

He eyed her curiously but didn’t question the change in stance. “A little.”

“What would you ask for if you could have something right now?”

“A removal of the death sentence would be nice.”

“Yes, besides that.”

“A shower. A square meal.”

He meant it, too. “You Jedi have no imaginations.”

“I don’t really need much else.”

“And you recommend his lifestyle to unsuspecting Sith. I can’t imagine forcing everyone to such self-denial.”

His eyes gleamed green. “Can’t you? I know how minimal your work is. And I bet if I went outside right now I’d find a ship as spare as this.” He gestured around at the empty room. “And a crew you hardly talk to. When’s the last time you indulged anything, Sith?”

She took a moment to gather her thoughts. “I came to talk to you, didn’t I? That’s well outside my job. I do it because I want to.”

“But is there any strong feeling even in that?”

“Strong feeling?” Stars, he really didn’t know, did he? “You’ve never seen me hate.”

“No. Don’t you think that’s strange?”

She paused, taken aback. “Not at all.” He had never wronged her. “I hate what you stand for. I hate that as long as you live the Empire will never know peace. But I don’t hate you, Jedi. You’re not worth the effort.” She wondered whether it sounded as hollow as it felt.

“Is that what you want?” he said in a strange voice. “Peace?”

“I did,” she said softly. “I...want the threats to the Empire gone. Isn’t that the same thing?”

“When the threats outside are gone the threats within will remain. By the time you finish dealing with those will there be anything left?”

That was the sort of thought that haunted her emptiest moments. “That is my master’s decision. Not mine.”

“Are you really acting on *your* passions, then? Or his?”

“I don’t have to answer that.” She cleared her throat. “How did we get here from talking about your inability to enjoy anything? Are you so anxious to talk away from it?”

“No. I just got sidetracked talking about you.”

“Well, don’t.”

“Sorry.” His velvet voice was warm. “If you don’t sympathize with self-denial for individual improvement, can you at least understand it for the greater good? As you yourself try to?”

“What good is served by stifling pleasure and the motivation afforded by anger and the excellence driven by pride? What can you accomplish in dry discipline that couldn’t be done equally well in a blaze of glory?”

“My focus lends me strength.”

“And binds your hands.” She leaned closer, her nose nearly grazing the forcefield. How lonely he must be in his self-imposed isolation. How terribly lonely. And yet oblivious to it. “Don’t you wonder what it would be like to let go these chains you cling to and *feel*?”

He didn’t back off. Two neat parallel lines formed between his eyebrows.

“Sometimes,” he said. “But that’s an easy path to start on, and a very hard one to leave.”

“So you’re afraid? You. The strongest of them – the best. Afraid of one little idea.”

He brought up his chin, an odd mirror to her occasional mannerism. “I don’t think I’m the only person here afraid of feeling something.”

She threw up her hands. “Whose side are you trying to corrupt me to, here? Are you *trying* to make me angry?”

“Your anger never seems to stay for long. There has to be something else. I don’t think it’s just your work ethic.”

“I’ll show you a damned genuine feeling when you show me one. Fair’s fair.”

His lips quirked up. “All right. How’s pleasure in a good argument?”

“You–nuisance!” He only laughed. “You want angry, I’ll– I’ll–” mutinously her diaphragm spasmed – “stop laughing!”

“I will when you do,” and he chuckled. Again.

“I am not– you smug–” this was not a giggle, it was not – “smug– *Jedi*!”

He wiped his eyes. “See? No self-denial required.”

“You hateful thing.” She stifled herself against the back of her wrist. “If you breathe a word of this to anyone...”

“I’d die first.” He paused thoughtfully. “Won’t I?”

“Mm. Good point.” She sobered. “I...yes. I. Have work to do. And you may yet die tomorrow.” Hurriedly she stood to turn away. She didn’t know what expression to have on her face.

Day 11 – 9 Days Remain

Out of nowhere, Rho was in someone’s arms.

Not only was her body lithe and strong against him, her slender arms were tight, and one small gloved hand trailed hot on his cheek, her fingertips moving like spots of radiance. Her mouth throbbed sweet and firm against his, teasing his lips apart, and he resisted her for only a moment. He belonged here.

The Emperor’s Wrath was soft, and so very gentle...gentle but not shy. She pushed him down to his back and he wrapped his arms around her, desperate to enclose her, to...yes, yes...and her eyes were wide and eager while her hand slid down their fused bodies to help him with his belt

He sat up in a chill of horror. Not quite enough chill to calm himself. These dreams were made to be ignored, to be meditated away. Ten times the more so when the woman was – when it was – this wasn’t only disrespectful, it was *wrong*.

He had nothing with her except a week and a half of trial. It was because of her that he was hungry, dirty, doomed.

All those words had double meanings.

He lay down and kept his hands stiffly at his sides. He supposed it was only natural to have her on his mind after the stress of the last days. She was compelling. She had to be, being who she was. She was a light shining at an edge, whether she knew it or not, and he felt even if she didn’t the draw from the right side of that edge. So bright and so close. He could not call her beautiful – not as a Jedi, and not as a man facing one who had committed the crimes of the Wrath – why was it so easy to forget that? – but she was so close to becoming. So close, the possibility glimmering in her every

fugitive smile. If he could have some small part of bringing the best of her out he would be, and gladly.

Platonically. Platonically.

*

Ruth put serious consideration into cutting some of her ration bar off to give to Rho. A couple of things held her back. One, her crew was on cut rations and if she had any to spare it should go there first, and two, she still needed any physical advantage she could get over a dangerous prisoner, meaning she got full meals and he didn't.

It would just be nice to feed him, that was all.

She filled out the tray with a bowl of clean water and a box of wipes. Not quite a shower, but it was something.

"Not much longer now," she announced as she walked in.

"Ah." Rho kept his eyes on the tray while she slid it through. "Thank you."

She closed the slot's forcefield and seated herself opposite him again. He didn't look her in the eye. His cheeks looked a little flushed. "Are you all right?" she said.

"What? Oh! Yes. Thank you. I'm fine."

"Really." Somehow her suspicion came out as a smile.

"Yes. I am. Just...I didn't sleep well."

"You're a poor liar." She raised an eyebrow. "If you're contemplating escape, I need hardly remind you that any such effort will be met violently. No matter how well we're getting along."

"I know. I do." He flushed deeper. "I...do you, is there someone waiting for you? Out there?"

She pushed herself backward. Where had he...? "That is a *hell* of a question, Jedi."

"I just wondered. You're so bottled up in other considerations. There's...it just seems like I'm missing a piece."

“A piece of a whole you’re not entitled to.” And yet somehow she hated to leave it there. “You first. Anyone waiting for you at home?”

“No. There never has been. I mean, I think some people have been in love with me, but...I never let it happen.”

He sounded like being an object of desire was something to be ashamed of. She had to poke at that. “You? Tall, handsome, well-built, well-spoken, not to mention record-breakingly strong and heroic? I can’t imagine why someone would choose you, or try.”

His cheeks had deepened from green to nearly black. “I never worked for any of that.”

“Add to it effortless and humble. You’re not helping your case.”

He squirmed. It was a delight to see. “I wouldn’t expect you to notice. You’re an Imperial. I’m an alien.”

“Must I be that predictable?”

“It would help.” He swallowed hard. “Wrath, are you f-flirting with me?”

The stutter sounded like sweeping victory. She smiled, startled at how much she was enjoying this. “Would you try to stop me if I was?”

“I can’t—that is—it’s inappropriate for two people of our, um, position.”

“Force save me from the appropriate. Never fear, Jedi, I’m not here for your innocence.” Except in the philosophical sense. Obviously. Oh, how she wanted to shake his calm before this was done. “But consider what it means that you’re so terrified of the beginnings of a real bond with someone.”

“Is this how you start your bonds?”

Of course not. Absolutely not. Not after what she’d been through. But the time for confessions was past. She kept her grin and enjoyed the panic in his eyes. “Only the fun ones.”

*

The Wrath had nothing to say when she brought him dinner and took out his bucket. In the morning she seemed a little more relaxed.

“You were quiet last night,” she said.

“I assumed you would start the conversation.”

“Ah. I was remiss, then.”

“Can I start now?”

She sat opposite him. “Do.”

“All right. Turn and turn about, Wrath. Were you ever in love?”

Her face clouded. He felt an unaccustomed pang when she stood up and turned away. “I thought everyone was, at one time or another.” There was an edge her voice had when she was being Wrath that kept slipping away when she talked like this. “Of course I was.”

“This isn’t something you...obviously. Talk about.”

“No,” she told the far wall. “It’s really not.”

He stood up as if that would bring him closer. “What was he like? This person who earned your regard.”

She turned back to him, looking pale. “He was a good Imperial. A model Imperial, up to and including maintaining loyalty to the motherland over loyalty to anyone or anything or any promise or any...” Her mouth twisted down. “I would have given him the galaxy. But he didn’t want that from my hands. He betrayed me at the man who was then my master’s command.” She took a quick shallow breath. “He tried to kill me. Personally.”

“I...had no idea. That must have been terrible for you.”

She glared. “You can’t imagine the loss. Somehow I don’t think you’ve ever invested so much of yourself in someone else.”

“Doing so would go against the vows I swore.”

“Love has a way of getting around vows.” She blinked hard. “But only sometimes, and only for some people.” Her brow drew down. “Spare me your oaths, Jedi. Words are worthless.”

“I think many people can be taken at their word.”

She shook her head and made a cutting gesture. “That’s what I can’t understand about you. You’re so innocent it hurts. You trust people. I think you would even trust me if I made you some promise right this minute. Knowing I am what I am, knowing I have every reason to lie to you. I think you’d still believe.”

“I find most people are all right, if you give them the chance.”

Heartache suffused girlish features while she tilted her face up towards his. “Don’t you understand? I did.”

“I’m so sorry.” As if unconsciously he brought his hand up to splay against the forcefield between them, the contact warm and faintly prickling.

And as if unconsciously, she brought her hand up to meet him, her fingers entirely eclipsed by his. “You’re sorry for me a lot.”

“Yes. You’ve lived your life surrounded by such cruelty, such brutality. It’s no wonder you don’t trust anyone. I could show you worlds where that isn’t the basic assumption of life. Where you don’t have to be the strongest every minute of every day just to stay alive.”

“Those worlds aren’t mine,” she said softly.

“They could be.”

But her face crystallized again. She jerked her hand away and whirled. “Do the words ‘too late’ mean anything to you?”

“It isn’t. Not for you, not yet.”

She grabbed her mask and donned it on the way out the door, leaving him alone.

Day 12 ~ 8 Days Remain

“I’ve been thinking,” said the Wrath.

Rho stood up, wavering for half a second as he did so. He could really use a full meal.

“What would you have done,” said the Wrath, “if I had lost our battle?”

Involuntarily he looked around the bleak Imperial aesthetic, and contrasted it with his warm golden vehicle. “Taken you prisoner and returned you to Coruscant for trial.”

She arched her eyebrows. “For what, exactly?”

“You know what. War crimes.”

“I never struck a target that wasn't military. What crimes are you referring to?”

“I don't know the specifics. But the Republic has a full list of charges.”

“And didn't tell you their reasons for attacking me?” She scoffed. “You don't even know what they sent you to die for?”

“They didn't send me to die.”

She shook her head. A lock of hair fell down her cheek and she let it lie while she stared at him.

“Every man sent to me was sent to die. I'm sorry you didn't realize that.”

“It isn't like that,” he said. The Republic would never throw him away. It had to be a fair fight. “You know, if I were in your place, and you forced into prison, I'm not sure I would even talk to you.”

“Yes, you would have. It isn't in you to leave an opponent in silence. If nothing else you need the audience.”

“I don't do what I do for the audience.”

“No. You do it for someone's say-so.”

He had to fight her sneer. “Like you do?”

She had the grace to look away. She brushed her hair back and changed the subject. “Would you have given me a comfortable room with a soft bed and easy Holonet access?”

“No.” The thought of her in any bed at all was— beside the point. “You know I can't.”

She nodded. “Would you have chained me, as I did you?”

“I don't see that I would have a choice.”

And she cocked her head. “Would you apologize for following orders?”

He felt himself frowning and wished his answer didn't sound so lame to him.

“I...I can't.”

“Then we are not so different.” Her composure curled up again and she looked away. “But if our positions were reversed, I would hate you.” Her gaze lashed up to his eyes. “You...”

He opened his mouth.

“Never mind,” she said loudly. “Let's keep this civil.”

“But I—”

“Shh.” She slid her mask on and left without looking at him.

“Don't hate you,” he whispered to the room.

*

Major Pierce was lounging in the holo room, drinking, when Ruth passed through. She slowed, unsure whether she wanted the company or not.

He nodded companionably at her without standing. “Spending a lot of time with the prisoner, milord.” He was smart enough not to load it as a question.

Ruth swallowed. “He has yielded a wealth of information on how Jedi operate.”

“They fight. They die. Not so complicated.”

“Oh, Pierce. I prefer the simple jobs. Name a target, kill a target, all for a clear and present requirement.” He toasted her with his glass as she went on. “Now...what are we doing?”

“Taking the galaxy's most valuable prisoner of war to get I'd pay good money to see what treatment from the boss?”

“Ah. True.” He was so affable about it. Good old Pierce. “Still. I would rather have something to fight.”

“We'll get 'round to it,” said Pierce. “We always do.”

Day 13 – 7 Days Remain

Rho sat this time. Meditation wasn't working very well. This journey must be nearing its end.

“May I ask you a professional question?” he said while the Wrath loosened her mask and pulled her sleek skullcap back.

“You may,” she said, in a not unfriendly tone.

“How are you going to kill me?”

“With a lightsaber.” Absolutely dry. “I'm not that creative.”

“No, I mean. How. I'm not going to beg for my life. But I'm not going to let it go without questions, either.”

She considered. “Stand up.” He did so. She pointed at the center of his chest. “One through the heart. Withdraw.” A second gesture, higher. “Up through the throat. It's quick.” She frowned as if fretted by an outside thought. “Unless my master requires something slower.”

“Do you often dismantle unarmed opponents?”

“You're different and you know it,” she snapped. “And I will carry out my master's will.” Her brow worked. “I have saved your lightsaber. If you wish, I will ask that he permit you to be armed.”

Rho blinked. She continued to look serious. “I think you meant that to be kind, but I don't think it would improve my execution any.”

“I see. I have no other kindness to give you.” The blue eyes blinked and slid away.
“I’m sorry.”

What could he do to follow up? A direct strike might still be disastrous. “You know, I always imagined you took pleasure in killing.”

She frowned. “In a hard-fought battle, maybe. But the end is just an end.”

“It’s just that you do a lot of it.”

“I am the Emperor’s Wrath.” Again, bone-dry.

“But that’s not all you are. I-”

She snarled, the arrogance of her station suddenly back in full force. “Back off, Jedi. I know how you’re going to die, down to the smallest muscle. That’s not the stuff of polite conversation.”

“Are you saying you’ll regret doing it?”

“There are no regrets in my master’s service.” But her voice quavered. “Come here.”

He obeyed without knowing why she asked. She frowned, tugged the glove off one hand, and raised her hand to the level of his heart, pushing it against the red forcefield bare inches from him. She did so, and stared.

“The first strike will deprive the brain of blood within seconds,” she whispered. “The second is to blot out consciousness faster. Rho...” his name was a prayer in a language he didn’t yet understand... “I will take no pleasure. But you may yet die tomorrow.”

“You can only do what you know is right,” he said. She just turned away.

Day 14 – 6 Days Remain

“Let’s not make it personal,” said Ruth over breakfast. “All right?”

“All right.” He was blushing again. “I’m s-sorry if I upset you.”

“It isn’t you.” Whatever he’d blundered into, she knew the boy wonder – or idiot savant? – hadn’t meant harm. “But we should really get back to politics.”

“If you like.”

“You seem reasonable. Thoughtful, even. So I have to ask. Why serve where you do?”

The Jedi didn’t look quite as innocent as he had when he’d come on board.

Thoughtful was the word now. “What do you mean?”

“Why prop up the Republic? They would fall if the warriors of the Jedi Order recognized their own strength and went their own way.”

“We do recognize our own strength. That is why we stay. In service. We can do more good helping the Republic than any of us could accomplish on our own. Look at the Empire. Can you imagine what the Sith could do if they pulled together, as the Jedi do?”

She smiled unpleasantly. “Can you imagine, Jedi?”

He didn’t take the bait. “It won’t ever happen. The same philosophy that makes you Sith prevents you from uniting for a higher cause. There is no concept of selfless service to you. No idea of self-sacrifice. Nothing that tells you that what you do for another may define and elevate you.”

“What you do for another always has a price. Accepting that cost up front without regard for the consequences is a strategic blunder beyond compare.”

“Giving it without reservation is...I don’t know what it is strategically. But it’s the right thing to do.”

“So you submit to the command of the wealthy and corrupt instead. That government would topple if you let it. And give way to something that would almost certainly be better, especially if the strongest of you stepped in to shape it.”

“I don’t believe corruption is unique to Republic officials. In the hands of a few strong Jedi it would result in a society no better than the Empire’s.”

“You say that like the Empire has no redeeming qualities. Like our purpose, efficiency, strength – I could go on.”

“Yes, but where in all that is your heart?”

“Where it has always been. In my work. My people will win this war, Jedi, unless your people dramatically adapt. Because we *are* capable of self-sacrifice for one cause. We just include a lot more resources when we say ‘ourselves.’ Renegade Sith may threaten but they can never stop us.”

“I have to disagree. Your leadership remains fractured, your master mostly silent, and your people, beaten and abused by the very higher-ups who should be protecting them. Maybe you do something for your people, but you’re only one Sith. The Republic will win this war. And we’ll bring democracy to the rest of the galaxy.”

The world had faded under his voice. She leaned in, anxious to keep the moment. “Absorb it into your bloated bureaucracy, you mean. The outer worlds will be no better off than they were before, while the wealthier Core worlds will find themselves taxed right into line.”

“As if the Sith don’t strip the worlds they conquer?”

“Adjustments are made either way.” She silenced herself, thinking. “I once believed it was possible to reform the Empire. Not just lead Force-blind soldiers to mass deaths in the name of freedom, but change the culture from within, by using my powers for good. To protect people.”

“What changed?”

“Everything I’ve talked about. Everything I’ve seen, everything I’ve...done. I don’t regret it. But the vision my father had, that I had once, it can’t work. The Empire will survive because she is what she is. The Republic can’t defeat that. And individual reformers only waste their lives trying.”

“So you support the Empire because you think it’s inevitable?”

“Because I gave my life. I offered it to reform and it didn’t work. So I’m offering it to power instead. There’s nothing else for me to do.” She tilted her head. “You may yet die tomorrow. Someone’s calling,” she lied, and turned on her heel, and left.

*

Rho was going to die. That was the thing he was trying and failing to resign himself to. He was going to die.

He accepted the risk of death in every combat assignment he was given. His communion with the Force should already have opened his mind and arms to that possibility. It was just different when he sat a stone's throw away from the most feared killer in the galaxy, knowing she had plans for him.

He could suspend himself in unity for a long time, but these hours would trail on to madness if he didn't have her irregular visits to look forward to. He did look forward to the conversations. She could put aside the question of execution long enough to talk. Quite apart from its being his only hope of survival, and a small hope at that, he found a certain interest in dealing with someone who didn't take his benevolence or rectitude for granted.

Why she should be willing to participate he was less sure. Maybe she liked to rub in her victories. Maybe she was genuinely curious about her enemy. Or maybe she talked to him because there was no one else she could talk to. That was a tragic idea.

It was also probably true.

He would draw her out regardless of the circumstances, if only he had the time. She was fascinating in her own right. Wounded, conflicted, misguided, but sharp, striking – intellectually, of course – also she was the sole gatekeeper to the outside world and his hope of survival – but that clearly wasn't the most important thing here, not as important as someone's soul.

Stars. What a soul.

He was going to die. In light of that, of the days or hours left, how much good could he really do? For either one of them?

Maybe he was going to die, but he wasn't helpless yet.

Day 15 – 5 Days Remain

The Emperor's Wrath sat crosslegged to face Rho. "Tell me about Tython."

He sucked his breath between his teeth. "Is that...common knowledge, where you're from?"

The corners of her mouth curled up. “Pretty much, yes. But I know nothing about it beyond its existence. I imagine it’s all soothing grey stone and desert beauty or something.”

“No, it’s rich. It’s alive.” It was so far away from this barren cage. “Trees everywhere, waterfalls, scenery to break your heart if you let it. – Not that I ever got so excited about it.”

“Naturally,” she said, still smiling. “It must be very peaceful.”

“Well, there are the Flesh Raiders.”

She perked up. “Flesh Raiders? Animals?”

“No, not at all. Semi-sentient bipeds.”

“Flesh Raiders. Why not Grievous Injurers or Ravening Monsters?” She scoffed.

“What do they call themselves?”

Startled, Rho gave it a moment’s soul-searching. “I...don’t know.”

“You don’t know? Really? I thought the Jedi extended their protective wings over everyone.”

“They fought us. Tooth and nail. We can’t make peace with them.”

“Did you try?”

“Someone did,” Rho said weakly. “The Jedi Council. I’m sure.”

Ruth raised eloquent eyebrows. “When I was first introduced to the Killiks I was told they were barely sentient enough to carry a blaster. It took the Imperial Diplomatic Service a very great price to uncover the truth. It turns out their civilization is as rich and as old as ours is.” Her forehead twitched. “Mine is. Regardless, despite my disagreement with some of their larger representatives...they’re great allies.” She frowned at him. “What?”

“Nothing,” he said hastily. “I just never figured you for a defender of sentient diversity.”

“I only call it like I see it. Tell me about your Flesh Raiders. Surely the padawans were

kept insulated from their depredations.”

“You'd be surprised.”

She tilted her head, shaking off a small smile. “You’re joking.”

“Some days I was the first line of defense. Only in out-of-the-way areas.”

“Sixteen and the hero already? I’m surprised it took you so long to be titled Hero of Tython.”

“Many, many more helped.”

“Isn’t that sweet.” The Wrath stretched and Rho, to his own discomfiture, didn’t look away for a moment. “Tomorrow,” she yawned, “I’ll tell you about Korriban.”

“Is there going to be a tomorrow?”

Surprise and something else chased across her face. “Yes.” She stood and stepped back. “You may...yes, Jedi.”

Day 16 – 4 Days Remain

“Good morning,” said Rho.

“Good morning,” said the Wrath. “All things considered.”

“You were going to tell me about Korriban.”

“I spent all evening thinking about it. It’s a mass of history. Hot by day, frigid by night. I’ve traveled to a hundred worlds and never found another quite so austere.”

“You learned to use the Force there?”

“No.” She frowned. “I learned from my father on Dromund Kaas.” After a pause she took a breath and hurried on. “Korriban was for polish. And networking. I needed a master stronger than my father. More softly: “I never found one. Korriban. Mostly tombs and dormitories. It was a dangerous place. No native life beyond k’lor’slugs and the rumor of terentateks. The rest...teachers hoping to sponsor the next great Sith and students hoping to be that Sith. I was lucky. I had the capability. Many who didn’t

died, usually in dark corners or as class demonstrations.”

Rho wasn't sure exactly when to recoil, so he gave up on it. “That's horrifying.”

“That cultivates the strongest, the most merciless, the ones with victory bred in their bones. It makes the body strong, even if some cells die.”

“They're not cells, they're people!”

She had the grace to look away. “I couldn't afford to care.”

“This was normal to you?”

“There was a time I found it tragic.”

“What changed?”

Her jaw clenched and released. “I was reminded what merciless means. You know what I remember about Korriban? The stars. Dromund Kaas was all clouds. Korriban was always a clear sky. But it was so far from the Core...starlight dies before it reaches a place that distant. You could see a few, if you found someplace secret and safe and dark. But who has time to do that? I marveled at them on day one...and forgot, not long after. After a while on that planet nothing seems remarkable.”

He wasn't sure what to do with the silence. So he let it go on.

And the Wrath filled it. “Korriban was hell.”

After a pause he had to supply his reaction. “Can I tell you something about Tython?”

“Go ahead.”

“Tython was terrifying.”

She raised her eyebrows. “You lived there for years, didn't you?”

“With Flesh Raiders at the window. And every conversation with a master was a test. In a weird way, I couldn't show weakness. Doubt or dissension were signs that you weren't a good Jedi.”

“Surely you never doubted, Hero.”

He licked dry lips. “I've never told anyone before...some days I thought I wasn't doing it right. Some days I felt like an absolute fake. If it isn't perfect it doesn't count, you know? Am I living up to my master's teachings? Or am I in the hero business just so I can be someone?”

“You're purer of heart than that, Jedi. Believe me. You're no glory hound. You're doing the wrong thing, but you're doing it for all the right reasons.” She half smiled. Not someone saying yes because he was a Jedi. Someone saying what she meant. It tugged at his heart. “I know a little something about living in a world that's waiting for you to fail. Let it strengthen you. Make it the background noise in the music of your own making. Courage isn't courage without opposition, even when that comes from your own side.”

“I won't need advice for living soon. But thanks.” He shook his head. “But we got away from Korriban.”

“Maybe for good reason,” she said, seeming to fade a little. “I tried to make friends. I had a lover, for lack of a better term. He died. That place tried to strip you of everything but hate. It was good practice for the real world.”

Then, like a hammer to the face, she looked into his eyes. There was a smile or a tremor. “Was there something else you wanted to know?”

Everything. “Would you do it differently, knowing what you know now?”

Wrong choice. “I would be a perfect Sith.” She picked up her mask. She stood. “You may yet die tomorrow. Because that's what I'm good at, isn't it?”

*

It was evening, and Rho thought he needed more answers about where he was going. He sat attentively while the Wrath took off her mask and sat cross-legged opposite him.

“Can we talk about your master?” he said.

Her face clouded. “I'd rather not.”

“Why?”

“I'm going to watch him flay your mind, and then on his order I'm going to kill you. Everything else seems like trivia.”

He thought hope glimmered there. “Are you having second thoughts?”

“No,” she snapped, and looked away. “These are your last free moments. Wouldn't you prefer to spend them talking about something else?”

“What did you have in mind?”

“I don't know. You start.”

“I did. The Emperor.”

“I don't want to talk about this.” She seized her mask, stood, and stalked toward the door.

“Wru-ath, wait!”

She turned back. “You idiot. I have kept you restrained for weeks and you still don't understand what that means. I am the instrument of your destruction. I am the last person who will ever shed your blood. I am the hand of a mind beyond your darkest dreams...and I do not have to speak to you!”

“Don't you see what you become when he—”

But the door was already slamming shut.

Day 17 ~ 3 Days Remain

The following morning Rho was awakened by another slam, this one hard enough to shake the floor. He scrambled up only to see the giant guardsman, Pierce, carrying a tray.

“Here you go,” he said, sliding it through the little window. “One half ration bar. Hope you don't like variety.”

“Where is the Wrath?”

A grin flashed from his beard. “Wouldn't you like to know. Listen, Jedi. Maybe she doesn't count the minutes in here. But I do. She's not your way out. Men have died on that delusion before, and will again. Long after you're gone.”

“All I'm doing is learning. Your master is a great Sith.”

Another grin. “Yeah, I know.”

The realization was sudden and strangely cutting. “You're in love with her.”

He arched an eyebrow. “Pish. What are you on about? I just know a good thing when it kills a few hundred rebels with me. She hasn't used the L word in five years. Yeah, think about that. But don't ask her, or she will kill you.”

“She already told me about the man who wronged her.”

Pierce's confidence slipped. “She did?”

“She was quite forthcoming. It's a hard story. I don't blame her for taking it badly.”

“She doesn't give a damn about your blame.” Pierce backed up. “You've got three days. Enjoy.”

Day 18 – 2 Days Remain

Ruth didn't miss him. She didn't miss him.

She was standing outside the forcefield cell. The rest of the room was gone, a vast featureless plane of white. Before her, still safely in the cell, was Rho, and he was looking down at her with those green eyes.

“Let me out,” he said.

“I can't,” she said. The idea stung.

“Why not?”

“Because when I let you out He'll take you. Don't you understand? As long as you're in there you're safe.”

He nodded his usual thoughtful acceptance of what she said. But then, “You have to let me out.”

“Rho, listen to me, it doesn’t have to be this way. I could...I mean, you could...I mean...” Her meaning was looming in the outsize shadow of her words, and she couldn’t quite bring it into the light.

“You have to let me out,” he said gently. “It’s all right.”

“Stay,” she said desperately. “Don’t go to Him. Stay here.”

His hands, unbound, trailed to the edge of the forcefield. There was a switch there now, one red glow away from his finger.

“Don’t,” she begged.

“Ruth,” he said. “You’ve done everything you need to.”

“Don’t leave me.”

“Ruth.” He nodded toward the switch. “It’s okay.”

Her lightsaber was in her hand, cool and malicious. She stepped back. She activated it.

“I’m sorry,” she said, to herself as much as him, and struck.

The forcefield vanished. Rho stepped forward, his mouth tracing a brief smile. He leaned down towards her, reaching out, warm and perfect, and took her chin between his fingers, turning her face up close to his, unbearably tender. “Think about it,” he said.

And before she could wrap her head around that one point of contact, he disappeared. All around her was only white and emptiness.

She fell to her knees, buffeted by loss. Her lightsaber hummed unpleasantly. And he was gone. He was gone.

He was gone, and time kept going on.

“Rho!” she screamed. Was her job really done like this? Was here where he stopped, forever?

She tried to sort out what had just happened and couldn't. There was an answer looking for her and she couldn't see it yet and she didn't know why. Older voices and older nightmares rose. She kept thinking someone was at her side, but when she looked, he never was.

*

Day 19 – 1 Day Remains

Ruth listlessly flicked her console off. She had only one thing on her mind after three days of silence. Talking with Pierce and the crew hadn't helped. The HoloNet hadn't helped. Meditation on her comforting Dark Side hadn't helped.

So she went to him.

Rho shot to his feet when she entered. He waited for her to talk, though.

"I lost my temper," she said.

"It's all right. I was leaning on you." He scuffed the floor with one boot. "I'm glad you came back."

She half smiled. "Is Pierce not to your liking?"

"He had less to say," he said, deadpan. "Are you and he close?"

"I don't know how to interpret that. We've served together for the better part of a decade. He's as loyal as an Imperial gets."

He tilted his head. "What does that mean?"

"I still sleep with the door locked. But he's a good soldier."

Right on schedule, the pity. "How do you pick your troops if you don't trust them?"

"Referral and inheritance. I often pick up the elite of competing Sith who fall. They consider it an honor. And you?"

"The Republic assigns troops where they think best. I've never really kept in touch with most of them."

"Who would have your back if you called?"

“Captain Rusk. Or my old padawan.”

Ruth had to process that for a second. “Old padawan? What, were you three?”

“They were unusual circumstances.”

“Who was he?”

“She. She was my age...like I said, unusual.” Whatever he read on her face, it gave him pause. “She would come for me, if she knew. Though...we've grown apart, in recent years.”

She had to prod. “She too much woman for you?”

“She’s not a woman,” he said hastily. “Not like that, not to me.”

“But she wanted to be.”

The hit showed in his big green eyes. “How can you know that?”

“This may surprise you, but I know a little about the dashing hero type. And how one is tempted to react.” It suddenly seemed like a good idea to not be looking at him. “So you drove her away?”

“We grew apart, a little.”

“You broke her heart.”

“You can't know that.”

Oh, yes she could. “All love ends in heartbreak. You were wise not to start.”

“I never asked her to love me.”

“It doesn't come and go for wishing. Believe me, I wish it did.”

“Isn't there something I can do? For her, I mean. Without getting...close.”

“I don't know her. I couldn't say. I'm afraid my insight into strangers is limited.”

He fixed her with something like disapproval. “You seem to get under my skin easily enough.”

“Oh?”

“Don’t play with me, Wrath. I say things to you that scare me.”

“Because they’re wrong?” She gave it the appropriate scornful emphasis.

“Because they’re true.”

He shut his mouth then, but he never looked away from her eyes. “I won’t tell anyone,” she promised in spite of herself. The Emperor would crack his gentle pure mind open regardless, but Rho wouldn’t be betrayed by idle gossip.

“Do you have to do this?” said Rho.

“Yes,” she said shortly. “I’m sorry.”

“Oh.” Whatever it was he saw on her face, it made him move on to a different point. “Will you remember when I’m...gone?”

She nodded. “Every word,” she promised.

Day 20 – Time’s Up

Ruth checked with what passed for the ship’s mechanic, who at this point was just trying to keep the remainder of the ship together. She checked with Pierce, who stood unflappably on the bridge, ready for the morrow.

Why wasn’t she ready for the morrow?

She checked with the guardsman keeping glum watch in the mess. The promise of full meals for all seemed to cheer him up. She checked with the last three crew members while they played dejarik on an informally rigged table between bunks. Everywhere everyone expressed enthusiasm to be landing and returning to normal operations.

She did not check with her brave doomed prisoner, because that would be stupid.

She checked with the mechanic, whose status was unchanged. She stared absently at the navicomputer for a little while. She checked with Pierce, who said he was ready to take everyone off the ship when the time came for her to make the final hyperspace jump to the Emperor’s domain. She always took that last step alone.

She gave up. She went to talk to Rho.

*

“We’re getting close,” said the Wrath. “I should give you the chance to wash up.”

Rho’s heart skipped a beat. Did that mean leaving this cage? All his escape fantasies began there. And all his hopes.

She walked right up to the forcefield, for once leaving her face covered by its black and silver mask. “Undo your bindings,” she said.

“What?”

“Your wrist bonds. Undo them.” Her tone brooked no argument. She knew he could do it, then. He couldn’t surprise her with it later. The small mad hope that he could use this at the first opportunity seemed suddenly much smaller. Maybe the thought of escape had always been mad. If he could do it by lowering her defenses she wouldn’t be wearing that mask right now.

With a gesture of the dampened Force, he hit the release on the bindings and both manacles and chains fell to the ground.

“Take off your shirt,” she said. “You’ll have the chains back on while you walk, you can carry your shirt until then.”

“If we just established that these don’t stop me, why would I...?”

“Because I told you to,” she said coolly. What had ruined all his progress like this? Maybe it was the mere fact of getting closer to her master. For the past three weeks he had ruminated on the Wrath killing him...but in the end, it was really the one behind her decisions, wasn’t it? She continued. “It will inconvenience you. If you should take it into your head to try to escape on this ship, I want you to encounter every inconvenience possible. Until then, take off your shirt. You can wash it in the refresher.”

He complied. Once his shirt and upper robes were draped over his forearm he picked up the bindings and nudged them into place. She reached out with the Force to secure them herself. “The rest I think you can handle as you are?” she added.

He couldn’t tell what she was looking at. That unaccustomed exile from her transparent thoughts tugged at his nerves. “Yes,” he said.

“Good.” She drew two sabers, activated them both. He didn’t see the mechanism by which the main forcefield hummed down.

She pointed toward the doorway. “Go.”

The awareness of the Force hit him like a wave of life. The suppression of the cell had left his spirit so strained for so long, he almost staggered now with the immediacy of it.

The Wrath did not look impressed. He moved ahead of her, feeling the weapons lit at his back. The door swung open. The hallway beyond was broad and black and grey. In doorways at intervals, all the way down, uniformed Imperial troopers had rifles trained on him.

“To your left,” she said, loud enough for the others to hear. “Through the big room, then the second door on your right.”

It was one of the stranger walks he had made in his life. He proceeded among his captors, back straight, pace measured, intensely mindful that he was the only representative of his people here. Down the hall, past a blaster barrel at every opening, and into a large sparsely appointed refresher.

The Wrath walked in behind him. “The laundry slot’s on the left wall,” she said, pointing with one saber.

“Er...yes. Thank you.” He faced her, perplexed as to his next move. Disrobing in front of her was, though tempting if it meant he could get clean after, not his first choice.

He could not read her mask, nor her emotions. She turned around, keeping her sabers at the ready. “If you try anything you will regret it,” she said loudly. “Now go on. I’ll wait.”

“You could guard just as easily outside,” he said nervously. That might give him more options.

Or...or not. The solution hit him like a physical blow.

The Wrath didn’t realize it. “I don’t trust you that much,” she said. “Hurry up, you never know when the crew will come knocking. This is our only facility.”

He struggled out of his clothes and dropped them into the slot, then hit the little lever to activate the vibrowash cycle. He himself, sneaking looks at the Wrath all the while, proceeded to the shower stall and saw the water option was powered down. No wonder, given their resource situation. The vibroclean was still available, so he punched in a cycle and raised his arms to let the sonic cleansing work. He felt like he'd been rolling in sweat and sour hopes for weeks.

He peered through the clear head-height strip of the stall. The Wrath was still standing, sabers ready, staring at the door. He didn't have a prayer of fighting her; he was having enough trouble just standing up straight over the knot of his stomach. He finished a brisk cycle and retrieved his clothes from the chute. They were pleasantly warm to the touch. He dressed with care, then said what needed to be said.

"Wrath?"

She didn't turn around. "What?"

"This is my last chance to resist. I'm starving. I'm dizzy. I'm weak. But if I'm going to fight back it's got to be now."

"I know," she said, holding her sabers low but steady. "Please don't."

"I have to. You would do no less in my place."

"I will stop you. It'll hurt you."

"Not as much as you killing me will."

"Can we not talk about this?"

"No, Wrath. We have to. Because this is my escape attempt, all right? Do you trust me?"

"I never trusted you, Jedi."

"Listen to me. You've thought about setting me free."

"No," she said acidly.

"Not even a little? To shut me up? Listen to me. I think there's a reason you've never even considered it. And it's the reason for a couple of other puzzles, too. Do you trust me?"

“No.”

“What if I told you I wanted to do a Light Side ritual, with your involvement.”

“Before or after I died laughing?”

“And if I swore to you it’s not planting suggestions, it’s not laying traps, it’s not going to hurt you – Light, I swear I won’t let it hurt you. All it does is sever outside control.”

“I’m not being controlled, Jedi. Do you think so little of me?”

“I think the subtlest strings are the ones you would’ve moved with naturally. But at some point the role crystallizes over what you were doing. And then you find one day through no fault of your own that you can’t just choose to go back. I think you’re finding that day. And I can help you.”

“Jedi mind tricks?”

“Hope. For both of us. Because I won’t be alive to talk to you tomorrow unless you do something.”

He dearly wished he could see through that mask, but she kept it on. She sounded a little stifled when she spoke next. “Keep talking. Please, if you keep talking around it then this train of thought won’t go to its logical conclusion and if it does that, oh, *Him*, I think I know what’s going to happen. Keep talking, Rho.”

“It’s all right, it’s all right. It isn’t a very complicated ritual. A friend taught it to me once with the hope that I would never have to use it.”

“I thought you said it wouldn’t hurt me?”

“But the situations it’s made for might. Do you trust me?”

The Wrath deactivated her sabers and pressed her palms to her ears. “Yes. Hurry.”

He rushed to focus as he never had before. He had to make this stroke count.

*

Ruth reeled. The Force burned around her, too bright to bear; not the safe shadows she had learned to bend to her will, but something searing and rough.

“What have you done?” she said thickly.

“Just what I promised,” said her prisoner, tall and unrepentant. “It's made to block outside control.”

Her world was spinning and she was exposed in the middle. She felt empty, not with controlled loneliness that could fuel her, but instead hideously incomplete. She glared through her mask at her tormentor, who was letting his hands fall to his sides and eyeing her in fascination. “Undo it,” she said. “Undo it!”

His look was pitying. “I don't know how,” he said. “And I don't think I should.”

She raised her saber and closed the difference, laying the blade beside his cheek. She was alone and screaming on the inside. “You bastard,” she managed. She had hoped for an answer. What she had instead was sheer devastation.

“Whatever it is you're feeling,” he said, “that's what it's like to have nobody but you in your head.”

“Give it back.” What a fool she had been. She had thought him under control. She had thought him friendly. And he returned that trust by ravaging her mind. “Give it back.”

“Tell me about your master.”

“Give it back!”

“Talk to me.”

“He knows everything. He knows you did this to me. He'll blame me for being careless. He'll kill me, Jedi, and he'll do it because you had the nerve to put your hands on me.”

He raised his hands. “I never-”

“I hate you!” she burst. Damned Jedi and his damned tricks. “And I hate him. Is that what you wanted to hear? Is that what your stupid stunt did to me? I hate him. I hate that I couldn't even think of hating him. I hate that he turned me into something so completely...” she struggled for words in the midst of her panic “...broken.”

“You're not broken.”

Then why did standing without her familiar darkness feel so horrific? “I’m not your friend! Do you understand that? I don’t care what you did to me, my loyalty is already pledged and I will bring you to your execution and *you will deserve it*, you son of a bitch.”

“But it’s you talking. Not him.”

“It was always me! Was that not good enough for you? Did you have to put the Jedi stamp of approval on any woman deemed worthy to be let in? How’s that working for you?”

“I had to give you this chance. Every time you talked about how dangerous your life as a Sith had to be. Every time you shut down at the mention of your master. Every time you looked at me and saw right through the Jedi to insist on the person. Through all of that, this is the only gift I have to give you.”

“I wanted to give you a chance, Jedi. If there was a way I could be permitted to think of your freedom, I wanted to try it, because you mean something to me. But you just ripped half my head off.”

“You’ll recover. You’ll be stronger for it.”

“Or maybe I’ll put things to rights when I take you to my master. Get moving, Jedi. Don’t try anything else. I’ve had enough mind tricks for one night.”

“Okay,” he said. She strained her Force senses to the maximum and felt no other assaults on the way. Rho picked up his wrist bonds and slipped them on. “I’m ready to go.”

Right. Outside, her staff, waiting with blasters ready. They must immediately see the new hollow in her head. And she didn’t know what they would do about it.

But they watched in silence as she walked her bound prisoner back. They let her through.

*

Ruth made for the bridge, where her crew had gathered in laughing excitement. The landing on the grubby little agricultural planet was a swell of relief. Ruth went outside with all her crew, leaving the ship’s automated systems to take care of the Jedi for at least a few minutes.

But the joy of open air and stable ground didn't last. With a heavy heart Ruth oversaw her guards loading supplies and ushering repairmen onto the *Scorned*. Her head was splitting, not just from the Force reverberation. She sensed that what was about to happen was to be the most costly move of her life. Whether that cost was to her physical safety or her soul she wasn't sure yet.

Being the Wrath was good for getting fast repair service. The guards scattered; she waited for Pierce to return with supplies. The last step, to the Emperor's remote station, she always took alone.

Pierce caught up with her late at night. "Everything shipshape, milord," he said.

"Thank you. Everyone's settled?"

"Yes. Prisoner's not giving any trouble?"

"None. Thank you. I'll be in touch after this is dealt with." She felt...afraid. She had since the darkness had been sliced free of her thoughts. Everyone must know what had changed. Everyone must call her faithless now.

"For the Empire," Pierce said, smiling wolfishly, and Ruth cringed within her mask. He saluted and left. Ruth watched him go. With that her prime watchdog was gone, and she had space to breathe.

She set course and took the ship into hyperspace. Then she just stared for a while.

After that she moved from the seat to kneeling on the floor. Acutely aware of every passing moment, she took a breath. Her focus eluded her, that self-refreshing current of rage she was so used to. The white-hot concentration wavered and failed for attempt after attempt. She couldn't fight like this. She could barely even breathe like this. Had he robbed her of her strength permanently? Or just long enough to scare her? She paced in a circle instead. For a long time.

*

Rho hadn't meant to sleep, but after the long night and longer, silent morning, he gave in. He woke up tense from the too-loud steps in the doorway. The Wrath came in with measured tread, pale in the low light.

"We're on our way?" he said.

“Yes,” she said hollowly. “Very soon.”

“You’ve been an honorable opponent,” he said tiredly. “Thank you for making this time worthwhile.”

“We’re not going to the Emperor,” she said.

Rho’s mind fuzzed out. “What?”

“He will not have you.” Her mouth kept moving but the syllables hardly seemed to make sense. “The galaxy is a better place with you in it, and I will not be the one to end that.” She stood as if expecting an answer; when he failed to give one she made some tiny gesture and the cell’s red forcefield vanished on all sides.

“Wrath...”

“Step out. You’re free.”

He Force manipulated his wrist bindings off, fascinated by its falling motion. “I’m going to live,” he said. The thought was a fire in his veins. “I’m going to live.”

“Yes.” She said the obvious with a little smile.

“I’m going to—” It was un-Jedi-like and he knew it but his elation was like a flood, and he stepped forward and flung his arms around the woman’s shoulders –

Or tried. She leaped back to the far wall, snarling, hands tense at her sides.

“No,” he said. “No, no, no. Please.” He reached for her hands. Her chest rose and raggedly fell. Slowly she brought her hands for him to gather and clasp. “There,” he said quietly. “You saved my life. I hope you’ll forgive my being a little relieved.” He squeezed her cool gloved hands. “And grateful.” Again he moved, this time to skim up her arms and draw her in, and with a curiously frozen expression she let him pull her close. Only after a firm squeeze did she rest her cheek on his chest and lean into him.

“I’m not doing this because of what you did to me,” she said quietly. “I’m doing it for who you were before. Who you’ve always been.”

He touched his nose to her faintly fragrant hair. It was nice to be hugging someone. It was nice to be alive. It was...complicated. Of course.

“What’s your plan for you?” he murmured. “If you don’t bring me to your master...”

She pushed away, keeping her hands on his chest, not quite breaking free of his arms. She looked...confused. “Worrying for me already?”

“This is a risk. I can’t imagine what it will cost.”

“That would mark my first failed mission. He will deal with it as he deals with any servant’s failure. That’s why I’m not going back.”

“At all? But then...”

“I’ve thought about this. I’ve thought about nothing else since you did...what you did. It’s like I’ve been trying to think this for years and wasn’t allowed to. I can make myself useful to the Empire without being the Emperor’s. The advantage of his silence is that only a very few initiates will ever get direct news that I am in disfavor. And I’m not afraid of assassins.”

“Make yourself useful...? But wouldn’t it be better to leave the Empire, go to safety?”

“Is the Republic safe for me, Jedi? Don’t be naïve. I know where I need to be.”

“Come with me. You would be safe when I vouch for you.” It spun out dizzily before him. “We could change worlds, you and I.”

“I have no desire to see your worlds, or live by your rules.”

“Then one thing before you go. Let me come with you. We can destroy your master. You and me together. Nothing could stop us.”

Her hands stiffened, driving gloved tips into his chest. “Are you out of your mind? I said I might question his regime, not that I wanted to—”

“It would keep him from hurting you. And leave you free to place the Empire on a better course.”

“No! The answer is no! Even if I could just turn around that quickly on the one employer who hasn’t stabbed me in the back, the fact is that—” she stopped, mouth working for a few seconds – “I’m not sure your little ritual could stop him when we got there. And besides, if, if you and I risked ourselves to reach the Emperor it would

not do what you imagine it would do. What little we could accomplish isn't worth it. And I'm not teaming up with a Jedi to assassinate the Empire's backbone!"

"I had to ask."

"I'll gather my resources and sort out where I need to be. You just need to go home." Her hands were creeping up his chest, slowly. "I suppose it's too much to ask that you take some time off from the front lines?"

"I'm needed."

"Go clean up Hutt space. Or track down corruption in your own ranks. If you fight the Empire, sooner or later you'll be fighting me. I...do not want that."

"That day isn't here yet." His arms settled more securely around her body, a steady shape in his topsy-turvy world. Slim, with only the slightest of devastating curves.

"Stars. I'm going to live."

"And make trouble for me." She checked his expression and sobered. "I don't care. I want you alive."

"You're risking your life for me."

"You knew I would when you did that."

"I couldn't be sure. I knew the Wrath. I only had hopes when it came to you." He studied her eyes, blue and close. "Does it still hurt?"

"Like missing a limb I didn't know I had."

"I'm sorry."

"It paid off, didn't it? Maybe I can't fully explain why. Maybe I just really liked talking to you. —We will talk in the future. Won't we? Holo, something?"

"I'd like that. Very much."

"I...good." She smiled, a shot of warmth and light, and then tucked her head under his chin and rested her cheek on his chest. "You're going to live, enemy of mine."

He leaned down again to touch his nose to her hair. It was startlingly soft. "Not your enemy."

“Yes, I am. I tied you up and starved you in solitary confinement for three weeks. You realize any relationship we have now is going to be as unhealthy as it is positive.”

“You’ve changed.”

“Only because you tricked me.”

“You were ready before then. I just took the obstacle out of the way.”

“Not healthy, Rho.” He liked the way his name sounded in her voice. “But I should let you eat.”

“Oh! Yes.” That sounded like the best idea he’d ever heard, and the Wrath was giving it to him. He let her go. She smiled at him, dazzlingly, and took his hand, and led him out into the hallway and down to a spacious mess.

“I didn’t know what you liked,” she said. “So I got five or six things. They could probably use reheating by now.”

It turned out that ‘things’ were enormous platters, from which he selected a Tionese spread fit for two. He didn’t bother reheating; that would have taken too much time. The Wrath just watched, unselfconsciously smiling, while he scarfed it down. He started in on the Coruscanti Human platter as well before his stomach finally signaled satiety.

“Thank you,” he said.

“You’re welcome. Come on, you should rest.”

He followed her down one hallway and through an unmarked door. He stopped dead in the doorway.

The bed was big enough for two. The remainder of the room was of ascetic simplicity: weapons, a set of drawers. A bed. The bed was big enough for two.

“You could try the crew quarters,” she said, “but they’re not nearly so comfortable. Come on.” She beckoned, her face all business. “I for one need the rest.”

He kicked off his boots but kept his outer robes on. Cautiously he lowered himself to the yielding mattress. His hands were shaking, but his whole body otherwise sighed

contentment. He watched, comfort warring with nerves, as the Wrath strode around to the other side and stretched out, propping her head on one hand.

“How are you feeling?” she said.

“I don’t think I’ve ever felt better.”

She smiled. “That’s just because of what you came directly from.”

“Maybe.” He let his head sink part way into the pillow. When was the last time he’d had a good night’s sleep? Three weeks ago, most likely. “Listen, I’m not sure it’s appropriate...”

“To?” she said slyly.

“I just don’t want to impose,” he said.

“You’re not. To be blunt, I don’t want you running around here unsupervised, but I don’t want to lock you up again. This is the best compromise.”

“I’ve never spent the night in a woman’s bed before.”

“It’s not nearly as bad as you might think. Promise.” Smiling, she slid her hand toward his, hesitated, then turned away. She waved the lights down to black. “Turn around.”

“I can’t see anything.”

“That’s nice. Turn around.”

So he did. He started hearing sounds: sliding, clinking, something coming undone, something getting pushed or pulled. Things falling. Then, perversely fascinating, something like a rustle. Rho held still while the Wrath lay down behind his back.

And, doubt notwithstanding, he fell asleep.

Day 21 – After

When Ruth woke up somebody’s arm was around her and somebody’s breath was brushing her neck. The room was still, the covers light, the presence behind her warm and solid. For one hazy moment she was content.

But he didn’t smell like Qu– like what she remembered. In one sharp moment she recalled where she was. And when she was. And who she was. And who *he* was.

She stayed still, all the same, just for the feeling.

Too soon the rhythmic breathing behind her stopped. The hand on her silk-clad belly flexed and closed. She took a moment to wonder whether the clothing would bother him. She didn't own any other night clothes.

"Good morning," she whispered.

"I— uh— I'm sorry," Rho said, too loudly.

"Don't be." She twisted around to face him. "I thought the waking up was very nice." It was, too. Shockingly so.

He stuttered, but his hand stayed where it had slid to her back. "Th—this— I—"

"Sh-sh. Relax. Personally I can't remember the last time I slept this well." She brought her hand up to rest at his waist. The motion felt right. Stars. Since when had tumbling into bed with someone felt this...comfortable? She reached to cup his cheek, and he did not shy away. "How are you feeling?"

He smiled wryly. Without the red blur of the prison forcefield she could see his eyes were a deeper, clearer green than she'd thought. "Dizzy," he said in his velvet baritone.

"Good dizzy or bad dizzy?"

"I d—don't know. I woke up in bed with my sworn enemy and she's...soft."

"I woke up with my sworn enemy." She edged closer, laying herself against his tense muscular body. "And he is...oh. — Sh, sh-sh, don't be nervous. If I woke up in your arms it's because you wanted me to. That's nothing to be nervous about."

"Easy for you to say." For a moment he seemed fascinated by the chemise she'd slipped into last night. "You've — done this."

"Done what? ...Do you want to?"

His breath caught. "It's not...proper."

She felt her lips peeling back from teeth before she could stop herself. "Do not use that excuse on me, Rho. Anything but that."

“I...don’t have anything else.”

“Oh?”

“I’ve never...” She silenced him then, pressing her mouth to his, thrilling to the tension in every inch of contact between them. He was shy, but he didn’t draw back. Far from it.

“There,” she whispered, and touched her nose to his. “Now you have.”

“You are b–beautiful,” he breathed, and closed to kiss her again. Why this man, and why now? Did she just enjoy having broken him down this much? He was free now. And she was free, with a new plan away from her master’s heavy hand. And right this minute they were both far, far more alive than they’d had any reason to hope.

“You’re not thinking straight,” she informed him in a whisper.

He took an unsteady breath. “No. I don’t think I am.”

“Don’t start now.” When she eased his mouth open he seemed briefly confused as to which side to keep kissing. She distracted him from the decision-making with her tongue. He pressed hard against her, leaning over now to push her to the mattress. She sank in willingly. Part of her wanted to question him – was it good? Was it right? Part of her knew very well that he was fine, as his lips and hands could attest. Part of her was too urgent to care either way. She let go his thick black hair and guided one of his hands to her hem. It was just Rho, no one more and no one less, desirable not because he was forbidden – nothing was forbidden to her, not if she didn’t want it to be – but because he knew her, and because his eyes widened in a flare of innocence with every new caress. As he pressed her down she slid her hands to help him with his belt. That was the problem with the morning thus far. He was wearing too much.

Time for that famous armor to come off.

*

“Tell me this was wrong.”

“It...is not wise to cultivate an attachment, even one that feels good—”

Rho’s breath hit a hitch while Ruth lightly nuzzled under his ear, down the tendons of his neck to his shoulder. “Tell me it was wrong, my Jedi.”

“No,” he sighed.

She kissed his shoulder. She traced across his chest and side to his hand and laced her fingers with his. They just breathed for a little while. He felt...different. All over. Like someone had scooped his everything out and replaced it with something bright and trembling. He had always assumed he knew what guilt felt like, and this surely wasn't it. This didn't have a label.

“I didn't know you knew my name,” said Ruth.

“I told you I studied you. I just thought you didn't want to hear it.”

“I liked the way you said it.”

“I liked saying it.”

“Mm. Yes.”

A tone sounded from the console. Rho tensed. Ruth frowned. “Navicomputer. We're getting close.”

“Close to where?” He could think of no safe answer to that question. She was going to push him away. This spell was about to break.

“A little bolt hole just inside Hutt space. From there you should be able to arrange passage...home.”

His heart sank. “Oh.” Home meant away. It meant going back to...everything he'd been. Including distant. Especially distant from her.

“Can't I help you?” he said.

“No. It isn't your world, where I'm going. You wouldn't like learning the rules.”

Ruth was skinning on her armor, already walking for the door. Rho pulled on tunic and pants and followed. She sat in the pilot's chair and pulled up the controls. “Care to check comms?” she said crisply. He took the seat in front of her. The controls were neatly labeled in tiny print.

“There's no traffic control here,” she said. “Just listen for anybody else passing through.”

Comms revealed only static. Rho watched helplessly while the little blue planet floated closer. There was his ticket home, and away from her.

Which was smart and right, because she was an enemy combatant and she hadn't exactly treated him well over the past three weeks. He was her prisoner of war, not her...her...was 'lover' the right word? For a few glorious minutes he had been.

The faint tug of gravity told him they were close. He hunched over the controls and watched.

"Are you glad to come home?" Ruth said quietly.

Home. Friends. Safety. Food. His work, his calling. Everything, and he to be delivered to it. "Yes."

"Ah."

Disappointment? "It's not too late. You could come with me."

"It was always too late. I won't leave my home. – Well, it won't be safe at my actual house. But I belong in Imperial space."

He twisted around. "Please. Give it fair consideration."

"I can't do it. Not even for you. I'm sorry, Rho."

"I need to see you again."

The corners of her mouth turned up further. "Beautiful, you're seeing me right now."

"More than this. It has to be more than this."

"I'll be in touch. That's a promise."

The landing pad she aimed for was small and unstable-looking over a sheer stone drop, but it took the weight of the ship. Ruth donned her mask before stirring. A heavy-coated Rodian was walking out of a domed building toward them even as the ship's ramp deployed.

"Tennet," said Ruth. "I have a job for you."

"My lord," the woman said. "What is it?"

“Paying, for one thing. My friend here needs to get to Republic space. Planet of your choice, Rho.” Ruth tossed a credstick Tennen’s way. “That’s all.”

“Wait!” said Rho.

She stopped in place. “Yes?” she said, almost gently.

He couldn’t unburden his heart with the stranger standing right there. He hardly knew where to start. “This isn’t goodbye,” he said lamely.

“No. Until we meet again, Jedi. May our battles take us elsewhere.”

She turned and walked back into her ship. Rho stared, probably longer than he should have. Then, shaking himself, he turned to the pilot.

“Destination?” she said, sounding as crisp as Rodians got.

“Tython,” he said automatically. “I’ll download the charts on the way.”

“Core world, right? It will take a while from here.”

“I have time,” he said. It was her last gift to him. At least, until they met again.

*

Fin

Book 2

Author’s Note

Book 2 was not published with Book 1, and appears here in its first and only form. It’s not in me to let a scenario like this lie...so time continues, as it is wont to do. The realities of living, and of loving, must close in after the suspension of deep space is revoked...

2.1

Somehow Ruth made it into orbit. She got two steps out of the pilot's seat before she went to her knees and cried. She tried to think why. Something to do with Jedi, war, the Emperor, her career options, her love life's few spectacular intersections with said career options, Jedi, and the absolute devastation of feeling safe with someone, however briefly.

Great. The one shining leader of everything she opposed, and he'd been to her what no one had been since...well, since the last time she made a stupid professional move under the influence of a personal concern.

She gave up thinking. The crying went on for a while.

And when it was done, she was still there.

It was a struggle to keep her mind off her job and on her rebellion, but she had the discipline to do it. New job? She needed to find a direction of her own to support the Empire. She had good working relationships with a number of authorities, some of whom might be persuaded to overlook her differences with her employer. Former employer. *Former employer*. Everything he'd done to her, everything she had amended on the side of cruelty for him...*former*. Home? Would probably have to be trapped and left, at least for a while, while any agents her former master sent got the delusion of relevance out of their systems and stopped trying. Friends? Well, she could postpone dealing with that. She had for the last five years.

It all seemed so surreally simple. The number of things that could go wrong seemed so few: coming into the Emperor's sphere of influence again, somehow letting an assassin slip through...coming up against Rho in her pursuit of her duties. Rho pursuing his duties. Dammit. Rho pursuing his duties.

She wouldn't stop him. She had known him only three weeks, under strained conditions, and she already knew she wouldn't change him for the galaxy. All right, maybe this one thing. This one little thing. This one little core he had, just as she had hers. Maybe, if only she could change this one thing...and really, just because she hadn't delivered him up didn't mean she had lost. At least she had shaken that famous Jedi arrogance.

She went to the refresher to rinse her burning eyes and clean off her face. What was in her power to do, she would do.

It wasn't over. Not by a long shot.

2.2

Rho was a bad Jedi.

He had always thought he was a relatively good Jedi. He understood the rules and willingly followed them. He avoided temptation, corruption, bribery, pettiness, base...desires. He'd always done so well. He didn't lead women on. He didn't let them believe he was something he wasn't. He certainly didn't wrap his arms around them and...anything.

Did the Emperor's Wrath qualify as a woman? Yes. He didn't think he could get out on that technicality.

He didn't need technicalities to justify himself. At least, he hadn't until now.

Rho walked across his cramped yellow cabin. He turned around and walked across again. He *was* a bad Jedi. A good Jedi wouldn't even be capable of this pleasure.

The very word shouldn't have this frisson to it. He wasn't supposed to want it. It was antithetical to his entire calling and career and *the way she melted into him, deft hands, disheveled hair, the small unguarded sounds, the delight in her eyes...*

Rho walked across his cramped yellow cabin. Really, just because he had been captured so completely didn't mean he had lost. At least he had shaken that famous Sith arrogance.

He fled out and up a dingy staircase to the open door of the bridge. The Rodian Tennet sat in the pilot's seat, feet up on the desk, navicomputer monitor overridden by some HoloNet vid. She cocked her head, ears swiveling toward him when he reached the doorway. "Problem?"

"No." He reminded himself to be the calm authority. "The Wrath. You've worked with her before?"

Tennet's shoulders hunched. "Her people more than her. I got the 'honor' of a contract with her a couple of years back."

"How is she?"

Tennet shrugged, making some mysterious noise with her proboscis. "She's not choke-happy. She pays. That's good enough for me."

Not the most ringing endorsement. Consistent with the lonely image Ruth projected, though. "Well, I guess it's something."

"I will say she's never showed up with a Jedi before. You're a lot more alive than I would've thought."

The laugh started in his unquiet stomach and bubbled up. "Yes, me too."

2.3

Ruth watched the soldiers filing onto her ship and was glad for her mask. They looked at her with questions. She had no answers.

She had gone, and then come back, and the Jedi was gone. It was that simple.

"Dromund Kaas," she said loudly, and was rewarded with a general cheer. She saw the last guard in with a nod and led them scatter to their respective stations.

Only Pierce held still. He waited for the others to file past.

"Milord," he said. "A word?"

Ice traced someone else's hands over her skin. "Yes," she said calmly. "The conference room."

She shut the door behind her. Pierce stood in profile. Grinning. "Milord," he said.

She didn't invite him to sit. "Pierce." And, after a loaded pause, "The Jedi is dealt with."

"Alive, milord?"

"He is dealt with," she said sharply.

“Tell me something, milord. As an old friend. You didn't go back to the Emperor, did you?”

The hands gripped. “Is that what you’re telling other people?”

“Not yet.” He angled his face toward her. The grin hadn’t changed. “Just like to know when I'm on a sinking ship. You're not going to get the chance to explain yourself.”

“I'm going to make myself useful. If the Sith don't want me the military will. Pierce, nothing has to change.”

“Oh? Lover boy won't mind you shredding his friends and family?”

She got a couple of false starts over her tongue. “He never-”

“Don't look so surprised. You think I don’t remember you in love? You took your mask off.”

“I can get you an assignment, Pierce. A transfer, anywhere. The Emperor's Guard, if you want.”

“Just in time to fight you?”

She winced. “No. I'm shaken, not crazy.”

He chuckled grimly. “Just for the record, the Wrath I know would've killed me by now.”

The terms of her service. The terms of every good Imperial’s service. And the terms he had built a life on. “Do you want to preempt me? You could get me by scuttling the ship, but believe me when I say that you'll be in too many pieces to get to the airlock.”

He snorted. “The Emperor’s Guard is the only up left to go, but I’m not sure about the standing in one place doing nothing for ten hours a day.”

“You must have had an exit in mind.”

“Strangely enough, milord, I assumed your loyalty would keep me covered for a lot longer than this.”

“And when I died? You have a plan.”

“Figured I would transfer to the guy who killed you. Never really believed it’d be a Jedi.”

No. Neither one of them had. “You, would never consider...”

“Not for a moment, milord.”

“Then I need to let you go. I didn’t want this today. I didn’t want this for a long time.”

“Decision’s been made, milord.”

“I know.” The shape and extent of it was unknown but the beginning was a line clear-cut as a cliff’s edge. I don’t know what’s going to happen, Pierce, but I don’t think you can be there for it. Take my blessing. Take my...thanks. For everything.”

“And that’s how seriously you take me? Thanks, so long, goodbye?”

“Do you want me to say you’re too dangerous to let live?”

“It’d be easier on the ego, milord.”

“The Pierce I lost sleep over would have killed me by now.”

“Losing sleep? You?”

“I never learned how to fight my friends.”

“I know. Job security for me, until you cross that line.” He looked up and away. “Say the word, milord, and I get off this wreck.”

2.4

“Thank you for taking the time to see me.”

Jaesa Brindel, keeping one hand on her rounded belly, regarded the Emperor’s Wrath with as much charitable cordiality as she could. Her old master Ruth had sworn off her Light Side Sith project and decisively gone her own way years ago. She trusted no one, Jaesa included. And these days Jaesa wasn’t sure she should try to extend trust back.

“Of course I would,” said Jaesa. “How have you been?”

“I...would like to delay that question,” said Ruth. “How is your Academy? How are you?”

“Both thriving, I’m glad to say. Kaeve and I are expecting in three more months.”

“I hadn’t even heard.” Of course she hadn’t, they never talked. “Congratulations.”

Jaesa enjoyed the glow of recognition, belated though it was. “Thank you.”

“I can’t see you again after this,” said Ruth, reaching up as if to adjust a mask that wasn’t there. “My enemies will be closing. It may not be safe.”

“Then something in the big game has changed?”

“You could say that.” Uncharacteristically Ruth flushed and looked away. “Jaesa, if I asked you to use your power on me, what would you see?”

Jaesa kept her mouth shut and her concentration ready. She already knew what was there. “Shadow,” she said. “Shadow in blood.”

“Is that what I am? Or is it all I can be?”

“Ruth. You know it goes both ways. People can change.”

“I see.” She frowned. “Sort of. It’s...I met someone.”

From Ruth Niral, the virtual hermit and, these past years, career misanthropist, that was a shock. “Really? Who?”

Ruth bit her lip. Even when Jaesa had known her, in earlier and considerably more youthful years, she’d had more composure than this. “A Jedi,” she said at last. “That’s the problem.”

...No kidding. “How could any Jedi possibly—”

“Put up with someone like me? I don’t know. It’s not...a real relationship. It’s just...I need to see him again. And I don’t know how to reconcile that.”

“I think that depends a great deal on your work. And how you do it.”

“I am out of practice with the Light Side. I’ve started trying, but it’s hard. I still don’t know...I don’t know. I don’t know where to start. I don’t know whether anything changes. I don’t know how I can do my job. I didn’t report to the Emperor after – I can’t now that I’ve failed. I still want to help the Empire but with my employer mad at me and my enemy being – being himself...I don’t know.”

“This is the most upset I’ve seen you since...” hastily she adapted that...“I’ve never seen you at such a loss about being upset.”

“We’re at war,” she said miserably. “We’re at war and I’ll go crazy if I can’t see him again.”

“Do you love him?”

Ruth’s eyes widened. “I barely even know him. I’m dying to. But we’ve only known each other for three weeks and it wasn’t exactly on equal terms.” Her hands fluttered. “For all I know he was lying the whole time. For all I know he likes embarrassing music and laughs at sexist jokes and thinks he’s putting one over on me. But I want to find out. –What are you smiling at?”

Caught, Jaesa didn’t try to suppress it. “You’re bubbling.”

“I am not! This is serious! He could ruin everything, Jaesa. And all I can think is whether I’ll be able to talk to him.”

“So go talk to him,” said Jaesa. “You can both take a little time away from the fighting if you have to. Long enough to...is there any chance of his coming to our side?”

“None. He’s Jedi to the bone.”

“Is...there any chance of you going to his side?”

“Jaesa. Never.”

“Then it’ll be hard.” Not the most useful advice but maybe it would help Ruth to know she wasn’t crazy for having difficulty over it. Okay, she was crazy for the instigating setup, but not for thinking it was a hard problem. “Can you focus on fighting mutual enemies? Instead of going up against each other?”

“I don’t know. I would, willingly. Keep the cartels in line, or lean on internal threats on each side to protect people. I just...am I crazy?”

“I married a Light Side Sith. It isn’t that much further to a Light Side Jedi.”

“You can say that. Kaeve’s never going to pop up on the opposing side in a battle.”

“Ruth, would you like to sit down?”

Ruth looked around, wide-eyed, and shook herself. “Yes, of course.” She sat down hard on the divan nearest the door.

“Now,” said Jaesa, “start from the beginning.”

2.5

“Master Moic. I’m so glad you had the time.”

The Human Jedi clapped Rho’s shoulder. “For you, always. What happened? No one could get a hold of you for weeks! Ever since Cato Neimoidia...we thought the Emperor’s Wrath had killed you.”

“Not killed. She took me prisoner. They got me off planet, but LR-43 damaged the engines and communications so they had to run without hyperdrive.”

“And here I thought droids weren’t that useful. So what happened?”

“I just...the Wrath and I talked. I think we came to an understanding. I think she’s...she’s nothing at all like everyone says. She’s proud, she’s prickly, but she’s a *person*, I think I started to reach her. If I’d had more time...”

“You *wanted* more time with her?”

“Yes.” He felt himself blushing. “She wasn’t just a Wrath with me. She’s...there’s a decent woman in there. If I could just talk to her again I really think there’s a chance she might...maybe turn it all around.”

“Rho?”

“Yes?”

“Do you have any idea how crazy this sounds?”

“I – don’t know. It must.” He laughed. “She does that.”

“If she did something to you...”

“To my mind? No! No! She was terrified – no, nothing terrifies her. She was ready to fight back if I ever tried to do something to her. She thought mind meddling was exclusively a Jedi vice. She wouldn’t turn that back on me.”

“Are we talking about the same implacable killing machine?”

“She can be placated. She is so...so wounded. But everybody’s warnings were exactly about things that aren’t true. She’s not a monster.”

“Rho...maybe you want to talk to someone about this.”

“I am. That’s you.”

Moic’s brow worked. “Maybe someone with a little more perspective.”

“I’m fine. I am.” With an effort he tempered his smile. “I’m just glad to be alive.”

2.6

A big thank-you to the stirge for answering a research question.

Ruth cleaned up affairs around her house and activated the automatic defenses. When the Emperor’s Hand sent people to punish her defiance, they would not find her there. She attached herself to a military unit engaged in annexing an unaligned world near Hutt space. It would keep her away from the Republic. That was the important part.

And when she could bear it no longer, she called Rho.

She met him on a hilltop on Ord Mantell. He came over a rise from the direction of the village and wended up the trail to her, his cloak rippling and snapping in the stiff sea wind.

“I thought you might not come,” she said, stepping forward to take his hands. “It sounded too much like a trap.”

“The thought had crossed my mind. But you...we...wouldn’t. I know that now.” He touched her cheek. “I’ve seen your soul.”

Strange sentiment, that, and a little uncomfortable. “I wanted to apologize. Not over the holo. Your first time should have been special and I didn’t do anything to make it so. I owe you more.”

Rho raised one eyebrow, tentatively smiling. “Is that what you call not special?”

“Yes. I’ve never been romantic. I’ve never met a man I wanted like that. But you’re, this is new to you. You deserve better than a woman who only knows how to beat you up and screw you. You deserve...do you know why I chose here?”

“No.”

“Just an hour until nightfall. You’ll see.”

She sat on the blanket she had bought outside the spaceport, and tugged him down beside her. He offered his arm and she leaned into his side, as naturally as if they’d done this a thousand times before. She wondered whether she would feel this hyperaware a thousand such days from now.

Whoa. That was getting ahead of herself.

“The Jedi didn’t decide you were contaminated and kick you out?” she said.

“Far from it. They’d be interested in meeting you.”

“No.”

“The invitation is open.”

“Noted.” She shook her head, sat up straighter, and reached to turn his face toward hers. “How are you?”

His eyes traced her all over. “Excited,” he said. “I can’t stop thinking about you.”

“It’s been hard to concentrate, these last two weeks.”

His warm hand engulfed her cheek. “All I can think is where are you and are you happy.”

“I’ve been happier than I’ve felt in years. Isn’t that strange?”

“Well,” he said with a smile, “it’s flattering.” He kissed her, unhesitating this time. It was a perfect confirmation of her decision to be here.

“I don’t know where to start,” she admitted softly.

He didn’t pull away. “I think we already have.”

“Oh, funny.” She kissed him again. “Maybe it was easier to ask you questions while you were in jail.”

“Strangely enough I’m feeling a lot better about talking like this. I’ll start. Why did you pick a Republic world?”

“To make you comfortable. Imperial space would’ve yelled ‘trap’ even louder than the invitation to come alone already was. And...I can’t guarantee your safety there, except by force of arms. I would hate to go through everything we’ve done only to lose you to a sniper who sees an attack of opportunity.”

“That is one thing I’ll say for Republic worlds. The chances of someone randomly killing you in the street are a lot smaller.”

“I’ll give you that one. So, where would you pick?”

“You’ll find out.”

“Now what does that—”

“No-o, we’re not planning the next one until we’re done enjoying this one.”

“Dictating terms. Just like a Jedi.”

“That’s what I am,” he said smugly. “Sort of. This is...new.”

“Jedi have taken lovers before. It’s an open secret about your own grandmaster Satele.”

“I have never sought to follow in Master Satele’s footsteps. They’re a little too big for me.”

“Says the galaxy-saving Hero.”

He ducked his head. “Please don’t do that.”

“How can you possibly be uncomfortable about that? Own it. Your accomplishments give you power.”

“Power’s in your code, not mine.” If it weren’t for the gentle turn of the words she might think him actually upset.

“It’s useful. I mean it.”

“It makes it hard for me to be a normal Jedi.”

“But you’re not normal. You’re extraordinary.”

“That doesn’t give me the right to do whatever I want.”

“I never said it did.” Even though it did. “I only mean that you shouldn’t feel bad about excelling. Or about being with me.” He wasn’t looking at her anymore. She reached out to stroke a lock of his black hair. “All right. You’re not a hero for me. Will that make you happier?”

“Frankly, yes.”

“Okay.” She squeezed his hand. He was strange, but at least he was open. “Okay.”

They talked then about little things, the minutiae of their travel and the long flight to Ord Mantell. The cool breeze off the sea carried on, unrelenting. When the sun went down no moon picked up the slack. And finally, Ruth stretched out on her side on the blanket and pointed up. “Look.”

This place, this time, was planned. In the spaces between the stars there had appeared glowing wisps in the sky, green as spring leaves, broad yet delicate strokes slowly spreading across the sky. They moved, cloudlike, if clouds could give off light of their own. She only tore herself away from watching them to watch Rho. He sank to his back beside her and, wide-eyed, seemed to take in the whole sky.

“You like it?” she said.

“It’s beautiful.” He kept on staring, unblinking for the longest time. “I...” He frowned.

“Hm?” she said worriedly.

“I’m trying to remember. So long ago.” His hand trailed to the diamond tattoos on his cheek. “I might not even be remembering it right. It was on Mirial, when I was little. It was so cold that night, but everyone else was going out so I wanted to go too.

Meme bundled me up and carried me out onto the lake. And we looked up, and it was this. All greens and yellows, like giants dancing between us and the stars.” He sighed, staring. “I had forgotten.”

Everything stolen from his Jedi confines was a prize. She pushed up and over to kiss him, finding his lips startlingly warm. He pulled her in hard and kissed her soft, amazingly still willing for her.

“I missed you,” he whispered.

“I know,” she murmured. “Relax,” and she nuzzled down, his cool-skinned neck, his thick shirt. “Just look at it all,” she breathed, but it was she he was looking at when she started to unbutton.

2.7

Ruth produced a bottle from her pack, rinsed her mouth, set the bottle back, and curled up against Rho’s chest. He slid his hands around her and took a deep breath, then another. “You’re wonderful,” he murmured. “You’ll have to show me how you want it.”

She nodded, radiating contentment. “In time. Not out here, are you kidding, it’s cold.”

He couldn’t help but laugh. “You know, it took me until twentysomething to realize that ‘oral sex’ didn’t mean talking about it.”

Her attempt at stifling a laugh was endearingly doomed. “It seems you figured it out.”

“In retrospect I think she was trying to shock me.”

“She, hm? She was probably trying to seduce you.”

Rho let that sink in for a minute. He didn’t remember the conversation in detail, but... “Huh. You might be right.”

“Oh, Rho. Do not ever stop being you.”

“I wasn’t planning on it.” He sat up and stretched, then stood and stretched some more. “This is beautiful.”

She was behind him in an instant, wrapping her arms around his waist. “I think so.”

“Are you even looking up?”

“You’re up. As far as people my height are concerned.”

He laughed, and turned, and kissed her. “Should we get inside? It’s getting cold.” As her hands and mouth had been temporarily successful in covering, but he was ready for some rest.

“All right.” She slung her pack over her shoulder, took his hand, stopped to stare up for a little while, and then, slowly, lazily, they made their way down the road back to the village.

It occurred to him to doubt his choice of Jedi robes as he checked in alongside an attractive young woman in casual, form-fitting clothes. The droid had no comment, though, and Ruth led the way with perfect insouciance down the hall to their room.

He dropped his bag in the entryway. Ruth, ahead of him, shed her bag and immediately made for the far window. She pulled out the curtains and let them fall. She walked back around, scanning in every direction, leaned into the ‘fresher, crouched to check something, inspected the cleanser stall, came back out, knelt to look at something under the bed...

“Ruth? What are you doing?”

She stood up and dusted her hands. “Checking. Bombs, bugs. I doubt I could spot a professional job but at least we don’t have amateurs coming at us tonight.”

“Is this...something you just do? When you’re staying somewhere?”

“It’s that or get blown up by the first enemy who finds out about my bed before I do.” She rolled her shoulders and looked around, unsmiling. “Don’t you do the same?”

“No, I don’t feel the need to do a bomb sweep every place I stay!” He reminded himself to stay calm. It wouldn’t do to have two crazy people in the room.

She faced him fully. “How have you survived this long?”

“I could ask you the same question. Thinking about this kind of thing all day would drive anyone up the wall.”

“Hm. Maybe that’s my countrymen’s problem. Too much justified paranoia wearing at them.” Her smile didn’t have a lot of humor, but when she took his hand her touch was gentle. “Come on. Nobody’s blowing us up tonight.”

“I could have told you that.”

“I like to be sure.”

“Is ‘sure’ what we’re doing here?”

She took a quick little breath and her smile crept back. “You’re the right kind of unknown quantity.”

2.8

“I never even heard of this planet before you suggested we come here.”

“I remembered what you said about your father’s garden. I don’t know if they have the same kind of lilies here, but I thought you might like to find out.”

Ruth fell into step with Rho, comfortably close. “I wish I could show you some of Imperial space that isn’t a war zone. It’s not all bad.”

“I wouldn’t mind seeing some of your cities.”

“It’s just dangerous. The closer to Dromund Kaas, the more dangerous it would be. If the Sith don’t find you Intelligence will. And I am not yet ready to make Intelligence my enemy.”

“I thought Imperial Intelligence was just an arm for the Sith.”

“They are capable of much more, including plenty they don’t talk to me about. I can stop a Sith. Intelligence is another thing.”

“Hence your checking all your hotel rooms.”

“Among other things.” She shivered. “My contacts with Intelligence are out of date. And they never had my best interests in mind. No. We can stick to neutral space. Or

outlying Republic worlds, someplace the SIS and its cohorts can't get their act together enough to watch."

"The SIS wouldn't act against you if you were under my protection."

She barked a laugh. "I'm about as worried about the SIS as I am about stray meteor hits. But I appreciate the sentiment."

*

He asked again. Every time she didn't, he did. "Come with me."

Ruth pulled on her shirt, her way of avoiding him for a moment. "I'm...expected. I think we both are. In different places."

"I can't keep saying goodbye to you."

He would move worlds to see that smile. "My Jedi," she said. "Is that attachment?"

"Yes," he said. No point in lying. "Is this trust, Sith?"

Her face clouded over. Her eyes swept down, and then suddenly up, and her smile was back. "Close enough."

*

"How far is it to the hotel?"

Rho checked his holomap. "Half an hour?"

"Oh, hell with that." Ruth grabbed his wrist and started pulling him back toward her ship's end of the terminal. "Hi, by the way. Wonderful to see you. I've missed you. Are you well?"

He trotted to keep up, then, expertly darting through traffic, took a bit of a lead. "I am. I've missed you. Are we really doing this?"

She laughed aloud. "Unless there's someplace else you'd rather be."

*

Another planet, this one maintained as a vacation world for Hutts. Ruth and Rho avoided the swimming but worked their way through the other amenities, mostly to find out what they liked and give a lot of it to each other.

They kept clear of the hard things until the morning came to leave.

“Come with me,” said Ruth. “If you’re going to find out what I’m doing out there I’d rather it be while you’re on my side.”

“I can’t. The Council is counting on me. And the odds aren’t great that we’ll be sent against one another, right? I mean really. It’s a big galaxy.”

“But we will end up on the same battlefield someday. What do we do then? Just persuade our own forces to pack up and go home?”

“Actually, that’s not such a bad—”

“They’re Imperials, Rho. Be serious.”

“They would follow your lead.”

“No, they won’t. I’ve tried.”

“You could always try again.”

She set her teeth. “I won’t win this war for you. It has to end, but I won’t...stars. Forget I brought it up. Fight well, Rho. I’ll see you after we’ve had some time to...to...”

“Think?”

“Fight.”

2.9

“Coruscant?”

Rho took Ruth’s hands and nodded. “Yes.”

She studied his bright honest face in the hopes of uncovering the joke. “Have you lost your mind?”

He smiled. "You keep asking that. If I have, it wasn't at this particular point in time."

"They would arrest me. Strip me of my weapons. And lock me away for the rest of my life. Or, more realistically, try, and I'll have to carve my way back off planet. Which I will do, Rho. Make no mistake. You may have snared me, but I'm not housebroken."

"That won't be necessary. You could get special dispensation with me. I've already brought one Emperor's Wrath home, and nobody's arrested him yet."

"Rho..."

"I'd like you to see it."

"My people sacked it less than two decades ago. I think you overestimate the warmth of welcome I'm likely to get."

"We can go as civilians. People may know my face but they're not likely to recognize yours. The Wrath was masked. We could just be two tourists, Ruth, or one Jedi and a friend. It's one of the most beautiful planets I've ever been to. I'd like you to see it with me."

"And come home a changed woman, ready to defend the Republic with her life?"

"Nice, but optional." He studied her face. She didn't quite know what she was giving away. "Ruth. Do you trust me?"

"I do, but...not this." If the greater good demanded that the Wrath be suppressed, then Rho would suppress the Wrath. She wasn't stupid enough to think he valued her above his principles. "If I go there I will not be allowed to come back."

"You have my word. As a Jedi and as a person. I will be happy to show you my favorite planet. And when you're tired of it you'll go free."

"You know what your word as a Jedi means to me. Any Jedi."

"And the other part?"

She pulled her hands away and stepped back, steeling herself against the hurt in his face. "I have looked into a man's eyes, and seen him look into mine, while he swore unending loyalty on his word and his honor forever. I looked into that same man's

eyes over the blaster barrel he was firing at me. And, Rho, he was as principled as you. It's why I cared for him. Why I care for you. It's what taught me that words don't mean a thing."

"Ruth, do you know what I've turned my back on for you? How far I've already walked into territory that threatens everything I was made to work for? I don't regret it, not for a minute. When I say I love you I don't mean I love you but other considerations come first. I mean that—"

Stricken, she forced words out. "*Don't* say you love me."

"Ruth? You must know I do. We would never have come this far if I didn't."

Her lips felt numb. "Don't."

"Please." He stepped toward her, bringing both hands up from his sides. "Ruth, please. If not that, then what have we been doing all this time?"

"We've been lovers," she said stiffly, "because it felt good and we can respect each other's strength. It's not the same thing as love."

"No. A lot more goes into love. And I think we have all of it. Don't we?"

"I don't know! You don't know anything about anything, and I, I never understood it either."

"Can't we learn?"

He asked as if they could just do that. She gave up. She fell back into her chair, shoved her fists at her eyes, and sobbed.

"Don't cry. Please. Ruth, please, I didn't mean to upset you." He hovered over her, too close. "Don't. I'm sorry." He was palpably aching for a response she didn't know how to give. For the first time she wished he was away, far away. Anything rather than being here, asking this question, seeing her crumpling like this.

"Do you want me to go?" he said in a lower voice. She didn't respond. "Because I will. If this isn't making you happy. You know I would do anything, even...even stop, if that's what you want."

"Shut, up," she sobbed. "Just, stop— talking."

He receded then, finally, though she felt his concentrated green gaze on her. On and on, and all she could think was what it was like in the moment of realization when loyalties came to the fore. And how very much she wanted that to come out in her favor for once.

“Please, Ruth. Don’t.”

He turned his back. It was like the air draining from the room.

“I do love you,” she whispered.

He turned as if stung. She schooled her mouth to stillness and looked up at him. Two parallel lines formed between his eyebrows. “Are you even a little bit happy about that?”

“Yes. Believe it or not, yes.” She sniffled, then smiled, damply, at the floor. “Oh, beautiful, you could have chosen a lot of women less damaged than me.”

“I don’t think I could have. You’re the one.”

“Okay.” She swiped her sleeve across her eyes, dared one look – he didn’t seem disgusted, only anxious, and when she made eye contact he returned a tremulous smile – and she cleared her throat. “All right,” she said, and took a deep breath, preparing. “You can show me Coruscant, if you like.”

2.10

Ruth followed Rho off his ship into a high-ceilinged port terminal. He led her to the great glassed-in lift that would take them back up to surface level.

“That landing,” said Ruth, “was ridiculous. They realize we could just land near the surface instead of going through an obstacle course in that warren beneath traffic control?”

“Pilots here earn their pay. I think it’s sort of fun, navigating the access maze.”

“Is flying something Jedi are allowed to enjoy?”

His smile stretched the tattoos at the corners of his mouth. “Somehow it happens.”

In the crowded lift Ruth edged closer to Rho, who set a hand at the small of her back and held steady. When they broke surface they found the sun pouring brilliance across a cityscape that rolled and swept into the haze of distance in every direction. Transports streamed in dozens of lanes, ten times Kaas City's volume just in the area she could see from the lift.

They had gotten a good berth, close to the broad garden-strewn multilayered arrangement that gathered around a vast, broad-lidded blue and gold barrel of a building. Rho kept his hand securely at her back in the jostling crowds.

Ruth never dealt with jostling crowds. People gave her a wide berth because she was Sith. Here in plain blue trousers, white shirt and brown jacket, fitted and neat, she might have been anyone. Put another way, she was no one.

She didn't enjoy the change in her traffic status. But she stuck with Rho's lead and kept looking around. "It's so bright," she said. "And clean. I never fight anyplace clean."

"You like it?"

She looked up toward him and had to squint at the glare off a traffic stream above. "It's noted."

He laughed, a luxuriously warm sound. "I'll get you to enjoy something here."

"Again I say, what side are you trying to corrupt me to here?"

The hand at the small of her back slid further, drawing her into the solid support of his arm. "I'm beginning to think the answer is 'mine.'"

Yes, yes, yes. "Oh, I like the sound of that."

2.11

The Coruscant crowds didn't ease, only kept flowing, when the broad road split into wings of a big shuttle transport terminal. Ruth gave in to the urge to elbow an unseen groper hard. As she checked behind her shoulder he went reeling, pure surprise on his lumpy face.

“What was that?” said Rho.

“He was crowding me,” said Ruth.

His broad forehead furrowed. “Throwing your weight around here is...frowned upon.”

“Crowding with his hands,” clarified Ruth.

“Oh. Well...um.”

“I’ll chalk it up to novelty.” Someone shoved her hard into him; they kept their balance. “Honestly I don’t think I’ve bodychecked this many people in my last ten years of living.”

And it was annoying. But then they were out, and the vast barrel’s overhanging lid already blocked out the sun, replacing it with a nebulous blue glow beneath the eaves. Her Jedi guide forged on.

Ruth took an unrestricted breath, then another. “This is...Senate building?” she said, hoping very hard that she wouldn’t start the day by making a fool of herself. Architecture wasn’t her specialty.

“The Senate Building,” said Rho. “I’d like you to see inside. The Senate’s in session today, you could see a little of how the other half lives.”

“I thought the whole point of the Senate was that nothing got done because people only talk about it.”

“Come in. At least you can judge for yourself.”

She eyed him skeptically, but took his elbow and let him lead her into one of the smaller enormous doors leading into a high atrium. “There’s no way we’ll get you in to see the debate chamber,” said Rho, “but they have holofeeds in outside rooms for spectators.”

The hallways were vast. Rho brought her down a curved pathway that seemed to go on forever, then at last turned into a big arch. Beyond lay a broad amphitheater, terraced seats rippling down to a floor with a huge holoprojector. At present it was showing a dizzying array of small roofless booths covering most of an empty sphere. Little figures boiled in and out of the booths.

“This is it.” Rho picked a seat near the front and let her sit first. “The big decision-making of the Republic all happens here.”

“No, it doesn’t. This just where the conclusions get talked about.”

“Oh, debate happens. And representatives of the people work out their differences without assassinations or intimidation or lone dictators.”

“The only differences are between puppets. You know what I see? Cartels bought up that side. Megacorporations that one. The Empire, a few stragglers in the middle. And the rest are idealistic reformers just coming in from home, thinking they’re going to make a difference.”

“That is staggeringly cynical, Ruth.”

“Is it not true?” If the accepted wisdom wasn’t right Ruth didn’t know what was.

“You’ve never even seen it! Of course it’s not. Good men and women work there.” He shifted suddenly. “Here, it’s starting.”

Some Human whitebeard opened the session with completely forgettable words. Ruth listened; it was the tired rhetoric of a man who lacked teeth but wanted to express his concern about the galaxy in general. As his little hover booth returned to a less central location, a Cathar Senator’s booth detached itself from the edge of the sphere and came down to the center.

“Who’s this?” murmured Ruth.

Rho gestured to a text ribbon around the top of the holo. “Senior senator from Cathar, speaking in favor of the new military appropriations bill.”

“Ah. That’s my language.”

“You can’t actually dissuade her from here,” Rho said gently.

“I wasn’t going to.” Ruth leaned forward. The Senator sounded like she had no idea how military appropriations worked; admittedly, thought Ruth, at this moment neither did she. The Republic’s fiscal machine was sufficient for it to operate. She just never wanted to understand how.

A while later a burning pink flashed through the holo blue, top to bottom. The Senator finished her sentence and sat down, suddenly sour-looking.

“What just happened?”

“Time’s up,” said Rho. “Some other Senator will have to cede her the floor for her to get back up.”

“What if she has more to say?”

“It used to be that a Senator held the floor as long as he wanted, or until he chose to step away for meals, sleep, or the ‘fresher.’”

“And they just let him do that? Keep the floor?”

“I think the logic was that if he felt that strongly he deserved to defend his claim with a feat of endurance.”

“That’s the first sensible thing I’ve heard about the Senate.”

“Well, the filibuster rule went away pretty fast,” said Rho.

“What? Why?”

“It turns out fourteen Republic species don’t need to sleep. The filibuster was ruled an unfair advantage.”

“Barbarians! You talk like unfair advantages aren’t there to be exploited.”

“Spoken like a marathoner from the lucky fourteen.”

“Excellence calls to excellence.”

Someone behind them hushed them, loudly. Ruth shot the offender a flaming look; Rho moved to intercept. Ruth’s eyes cut back to him and she smiled, not quite pleasantly. “Shh,” she whispered, and turned her attention to the Senate.

Another booth detached itself from the Senate sphere and floated toward the middle. A murmur ran through the room. Rho sat up straight. “This is what I wanted to you to see. They’ve proposed a resolution condemning Imperial actions around the system of Sarkhai.”

“Resolution?”

“A formal statement with the weight of the Senate behind it.”

“A...statement. So nothing.”

“So recognition of the entire Republic. That kind of pressure changes things.”

“You know what changes things? The Dark Council saying who dies now.”

“We try to keep it more constructive than that.”

“Yes, I’m sure your nonbinding resolutions are very impressive.”

“Hold on. Listen.”

She did. The man had a certain charm. He talked about Sarkhai’s brief history with the Republic, and about how the Republic had gone to great lengths in the past to protect its member states.

“Why doesn’t he stand like the last one?”

“He can’t. Land mine on Balmorra during the last war. His body rejected the cybernetics that would have allowed him to walk again.” Rho jerked his chin toward the action. “Out there, it doesn’t matter. He stands or falls on his ideas, just like the rest of us.”

“What a charmingly exploitative story,” said Ruth.

Rho shot her an exasperated look, which only made her grin.

The man finished his speech. It was a good one. “So will they pass it?”

“We’ll find out in a few minutes. Results will come up in that red ring at the top of the holo.”

“And then we’ll all see.”

“Yep.”

“Rho?”

“Yes?”

“What’s to stop me from just rampaging in there and silencing anyone who supports that admittedly very compelling-sounding resolution?”

“The guards might have something to say about that.”

“Are they trained Force users?”

“No.”

“Then they won’t stop me. – This is something I don’t understand. You allow yourself to be bound by these laws. Even though physically you could shred them at any time.”

“We agree to not just do whatever we want, so other people have the chance to go about their lives. Our laws protect people who aren’t capable of as much.”

“It’s just surreal to me that your law is law because everybody got together and said so. It’s a collective hallucination. – More than that, you got the most powerful people in your society to sit down and play nice by asking them. And they promise, and supposedly it works.”

“That bothers you?”

“I didn’t say that.” Ruth absently started twirling a lock of her hair. “These people are busy, pushy, full of purpose and rife with, with elbows, but...they’re not afraid. In this whole insane crowd, every place we’ve been so far, they’re not afraid.” The twirling stopped. “I could see that being worth fighting for.”

2.12

Ruth and Rho went to their hotel before supper. Rho put on a black ensemble, inexpensive, conservative by Coruscanti standards – at least, so the fellow at the store had assured him – and ran outside for an errand. He returned to the hotel lobby and stepped outside to enjoy the crowded but breeze-brushed balcony sticking out among skyscrapers.

He didn’t know what prompted him to turn back to the entry arch. But there she was.

She was wearing clothes. [A dress](#). Gathered with dark gold medallion strings at neck and waist, falling in fine folds, leaving her sides open, little cutouts of her pale hips, the rest of it blue like ice shadows, her body slim and her shoulders and arms white.

“Yes?” she said, starting toward him with her familiar fearless step, one eyebrow creeping up while one side of her rosebud mouth started curling.

There was something intelligent to say to this, but he didn’t know what it was. “You look incredible,” he said.

That broke the amused mask. “I thought you might not like it,” she said, smiling genuinely now. “This isn’t exactly the aesthetic you signed on for.”

“No. I mean, yes. You’re beautiful.”

She looked down, and on the way back up took him in. “You’re not so bad looking, yourself.”

“I didn’t really know what to get. I’ve never tried a non-Jedi look before.”

“I suspect you’re going to get a lot more female attention. You look approachable now. – I mean, in the non-Jedi-take-charge way.”

“Maybe,” he said. He doubted anyone would notice anything about him next to her splendor. “Oh! I got you something.”

“What?” she said, round-eyed.

“I went back to that shop we saw on the way through the market. I saw you looking at it earlier...so.” He pulled out a little velvet box and clattered it open to reveal a pair of pendant earrings, nearly the same light blue as her eyes, crystal closed around a slowly moving arrangement of white stars.

She raised a hand to her mouth. “Rho, you shouldn’t have! The Jedi can’t give you that much spending money.”

“I’ve been saving. Just in case something nice came up. I can’t let you cover everything, you know.”

“You can. I am independently wealthy. You are a Jedi. But...oh, Rho, this is so sweet.” Tentatively she reached for them. “I hardly ever wear these. Could you help me with the piercing?”

With only the smallest twinge about poking holes in people he knew well he located the old piercing marks and pressed the earrings through. She beamed at him.

His mind wandered on the way out the door, in channels it had been running in all the days since he'd first told her he loved her. Not so many days. But so many long moments. He could meet with her on a hundred worlds and tumble into bed and talk about their dreams after, but in a way he had no idea how to pursue a relationship with her. Not a professional partnership, not an affair, but a relationship, deep as his very core. Something he didn't have to hide. Not that he'd been trying very hard to hide, lately.

The crowds gave them a little space. The men were looking at her. Some of the women were, too. A few women seemed to reserve their attention for him. Not in the way people looked at Jedi. He felt exposed, and unsure what to do about it. Still, he pressed on. Ruth's total aplomb was a help. In the private taxi he relaxed a little.

He lifted his arm and stopped. He didn't want to mess with Ruth's hair, now center-parted and curled in a chestnut-colored crown; nor did he wish to mess with the delicate gold points pinning her dress in place. He just wanted to hold her. Very much.

To his startlement she leaned in under his arm and kissed his chest. “Relax,” she said. “You can touch me.”

He relaxed as best he could. She sighed and rested.

At the landing pad for the rotating restaurant he helped her from the taxi, acutely mindful of every draped fold of her dress, and she stayed gracefully on his arm until they were greeted and seated.

She leaned in. “This is beautiful. Have you been here before?”

“Oh, no. This is well out of my social circle.” Almost disturbingly so.

“Outside mine, too. Still. I haven’t had a chance to dress up since...well. I haven’t wanted to in a long time. And I haven’t known a man willing to put up with it for longer than that.” She took a sharp new breath. “Anyway.”

She kept up a low running commentary on the menu as they perused. “What kind of place doesn’t even serve sleen?” she muttered.

“The nerf is very good.” He didn’t know that for sure, but he had to defend his adopted home somehow. She gave him a skeptical smile and opted for the salad.

She peppered him with questions while they waited and while they ate. He found himself trotting out more trivia about Coruscant and the Jedi than he’d even known he’d known. She seemed to like it. He hoped he was doing the subjects justice. Oddness of his present circumstances notwithstanding, he did consider Coruscant a home. He would love for her to know it that way.

A petite Twi’lek slowed down by their table, then darted in beside Rho. “Excuse me, I’m so sorry to bother. But is it really you? The Hero of Tython?”

“Yes,” said Rho, smiling benevolently. He was used to this treatment, at least.

“Oh my stars! This is for you.” She waved a white flute of a flower in his face until he accepted it and dropped it into the centerpiece vase. “It’s just such an honor, Master Jedi.”

“Well, thank you. May the Force be with you.”

She beamed and strutted on. Ruth plucked the new flower out and tossed it into the walkway several paces away.

Rho blinked a few times. “What was that for?”

“It’s bugged. Listening device. She’s probably press.”

“How could you tell?”

“I don’t have to. Her behavior said everything.”

“You know I never had to worry about this before I met you?”

“But I bet you saw a lot of HoloNet articles with an awful lot of personal information about you.”

“It just never bothered me.”

“Well, now you’ve got me to clean it up before it’s a problem. I do try to make myself useful.”

Not long afterward she stood to go to the ‘fresher. He watched her confident stride matched with her flowing draped dress, and the play of muscle at her back and around her shoulders. She returned with a mischievous grin. “Did you know there’s a dance floor on the far side?”

The feeling at the back of his skull might have been panic. Not a familiar sensation. “I’ve never danced.”

“Do you want to learn?”

“This is...well outside the skill list I try to maintain.”

She deflated. “No, then?”

“No!” The panic was prickling hard. “I mean, yes. I mean, if you’ll show me.”

She smiled then, coming to take his hand. “It’ll be fun.”

They threaded among the tables, and Rho was once again aware of dozens of eyes on him and on her. She deserved it. He wasn’t sure what to think about himself.

As they neared the dance floor the song changed to something slow and flowing. Ruth drew him to the edge of the floor and took hold of his hands. He made an effort at placing them the way other dancers held.

“No,” she said in an undertone, “no, put your hands here – mm, yes – and here, and let me rest my hand up your arm. Now when you want to move, just tell me – gentle push, gentle pull, back, forward, side to side. Let the music lead you.”

“I thought I was leading.”

“It leads you lead me. Left foot, then right. Any way you like. I’ll go where you go.”

“Sort of like what we’ve been doing, on and off.”

She beamed. “More on than off tonight.” She did match his movement, and he took small careful steps and felt her swaying with him. He wasn’t doing half of what he saw other couples doing, and would have no idea how to start, but Ruth seemed content.

“There are some things,” she murmured, “that really do take two.” Suddenly she smiled. “Can I tell you something?”

“Anything.”

Her eyes sparkled with the turn. “I put this on so you could take it off me.”

The thought was immediate and commanding. Only his native discipline kept him on point. “Ruth, listen. I’m not in this for your body. You know that, right?”

“I know. I just really enjoy that part, with you.”

“If I could never touch you again, if you left this planet and we never saw each other, I’d still love you.”

Her forehead wrinkled up. “You know, when you say it I believe you. Even if I don’t know why.”

“Why you believe me, or why I would love you?”

“A little of both.”

“I’m saying all this wrong. Ruth, I don’t know how to love you. I don’t want to be your work partner and I don’t just want to be the man you sleep with. I want...”

“To dance?” she suggested, smiling.

“Not that, either.”

Her smile faded. “Then what?”

“I don’t know. I’ll know when I get there. I want to know you. I want you to trust me the way I trust you. I want to know that you’re going to be in my life, no matter what happens.”

“That’s yours,” she said. “The trust...I’m trying. I’m trying, Rho.”

“That means the world to me.”

She looked at his collarbone instead of him. “Maybe I’m better at being a lover than I am at loving.”

“Maybe you are.” He shrugged. “I can wait.”

He realized then that they had stopped moving. Only her shining earrings turned in the low light. “Rho?” she said, looking up once more.

“Yes?”

“I should never have hesitated about telling you...how I feel.”

His heart swelled like something coming to bloom for the first and finest time. “Like I said. I can wait.”

2.13

“Master Satele.” Rho remembered the last time the Grand Master of the Jedi Order met him on his way off the shuttle. It had been a big deal then. It probably still was.

“Master Rho,” said the Human, a little less warmly than usual. “Walk with me.”

“Of course.”

She led him, not down the meditative paths scattered with padawans and students, but directly into the sprawling Temple, and from there into a small high office sparsely furnished with chairs in green and gold. She sat and gestured for him to do the same.

“Master Rho,” she said, “we’re concerned. All of us.”

No way to talk around this. “About my friendship with the Emperor’s Wrath?”

“If it were just another friendship I wouldn’t be this worried.”

“Master Satele, I can explain.”

“You’re going to have to,” she said. “Your association with Lord Scourge was disturbing enough. Entering into a romantic relationship with another unrepentant Sith—”

“You don’t know that.”

“Do I have to go over her record? She is a war criminal, Rho. Killed four unarmed civilians on Brentaal. Broke the ceasefire on Llord less than an hour after ‘negotiating’ it. Personally led the raid to assassinate the king of Shar *and his entire court* after he refused to give in to her demands. And that was just her first six months on the job.”

“I know. But she’s changing.”

“On what evidence? For all you know she’s lying low just to keep you off balance. And occupied away from your duties.”

“I mean it. I checked her SIS record.” Even if he’d been too shy to bring it up with her. “She’s not the Wrath she was. She personally inspected and re-staffed Prison 626 to improve conditions there. Instated and upheld the nonaggression treaty with the Erbal colonies. Cleaned up the excesses of Darth Treij and Moff Olivan.”

“So she’s less brutal in supporting the Empire. I’m not impressed.”

“She’s making progress.”

“For our enemies! The Sith are fundamentally untrustworthy, Rho. The only question is why you’re choosing to believe this one.”

“We believed a Sith before. It worked out to our advantage. As for R— the Wrath, I believe her because I believe in her. She is a great spirit, Satele.”

“I know you think so.” Satele frowned for just a moment. “But is your vision clear?”

“Do you think it’s not?”

“You’ve been controlled by the Emperor before. If you had been brought to him again, after the Wrath captured you, could you even tell us?”

“Master Satele? It’s been months. How could I stay under his control, while surrounded by Jedi who can sense darkness, for so long?”

“I don’t know. But I can’t otherwise explain this incredibly dangerous decision you’ve made. Maybe she does something to you.”

“Well, she does,” he said, involuntarily smiling. “Nothing bad.”

Satele didn't deign to answer that. "After the incidents with Tol Braga and Leeha Narezz I set some of our sages on the project of identifying this control, or the residue from it. I'd like those sages to scan you. Just to see."

"But I was controlled once. They're going to see that. How can you tell if there's anything newer?"

Satele thinned her lips. "We'll have to hope."

"I put myself in your hands. But I really think you're making a big deal out of—"

"Out of your colluding with our most dangerous enemy combatant?" She shook her head, hard. "Come with me."

2.14

The Temple room was round and neatly appointed with a desk and a half circle of chairs. Sunlight from a ring of windows well above head level lent a comfortable glow. Rho knew both figures waiting there: the venerable Togruta Master Zauvien and the dark-eyed Ithorian Master Orollo. The greetings went tensely, leavened only slightly by the calm Orollo radiated.

"Master Satele," said Zauvien, nodding her respect. "Master Orollo and I remember what we saw when we studied Leeha Narezz and Tol Braga. Master Rho, I believe we are to check you for the same."

"It's a very simple Force ritual," bubbled Orollo. "There is nothing to fear."

Zauvien took a chair. Orollo stayed standing, the hanging folds of her robes whispering with the gentle waving of her long head. Rho, upon a nodded prompt from Satele, came to stand between the two. They both closed their eyes.

He scanned their faces, back and forth. It was hard to see any nuances of expression on Zauvien's colorfully patterned face. Orollo's was no better; she could have been thinking anything.

He did catch Zauvien's lips pressing together. "He is touched by darkness."

Rho winced. He and Zauvien had always gotten along in his rare visits to the infirmary. “Yes,” he assured her, “I was under his control once. That doesn’t have to mean anything.”

“Is it recent?” Satele said sharply.

“I don’t know enough about this taint to know. I’m sorry, Master Satele.”

“There’s nothing around him,” volunteered Master Orollo. “The shadow isn’t linked to anything I can see. It’s an old wound.”

“We can’t say for certain that he’s free of influence now,” said Zauvien.

“Look at the way he walks,” said Orollo. “Listen to how he talks. He is our Rho.”

Zauvien all but leaped to cancel out that warming sentiment. “I knew this Wrath’s father,” she insisted. “He was proud and wayward, at least as dangerous for his half-formed convictions as for his native Sith tendencies. And his daughter...we know what daughter he raised. Colran Niral’s child will always be dangerous.”

“She’s not her father. She’s not even the Wrath, not anymore. She’s just a person. A person I can reach.”

It was Satele’s opinion that mattered. He watched the Human while she touched her lips with a couple of fingertips and looked fiercely thoughtful. “Well,” she said at last. “There’s no reason to detain you. But I must request that you cut off your association with the Wrath.”

It hurt, badly, to be here in the heart of his home and have so little regard. “I can’t abandon her now. She saved my life, at risk of her own, in saving me from her master. The least I can do is offer her the chance she offered me. To live in understanding instead of dying on orders.”

Satele scowled. “I realize you’re proud of your track record on bringing Sith to our side, but if she were...no. By letting you go I’m placing trust in you. Don’t disappoint.”

“I am a Jedi first. Always.” He paused, but Satele didn’t look ready to give any more. “Goodbye for now.” Not forever. It couldn’t be.

2.15

Rho made as close to a straight line as he could in the vast curving Temple. He barely had time to react when the redheaded Jedi Knight strolled out of the cross passage. They bumped. He took her arms, gently but firmly, and stood back from her.

She shook herself free, looking him over with a sour expression. "Master Rho," she said.

"Kira," said Rho, head lifting, smiling while he let his hands drop. "It's been some time."

His old padawan didn't appear to share his joy. "Yeah. I've been fighting for the Republic. Kind of a full-time job."

"I hope you've been well?"

"Fine," she said flatly. "What about you? Met any nice Sith lately?"

"You probably already heard. I'm nudging one toward the light. A little at a time."

"Is that what they call it these days?"

"I...don't know what rumors you've heard. Honestly, my relationship with the Emperor's Wrath isn't what everyone thinks it is."

"Don't want to hear the details. Thanks."

"Kira, you and I are Jedi. We forgive. I hope you can give her a chance."

She snarled. "I think I'm going to go ahead and stop taking your word about what a Jedi does." She looked him over again, scathing this time. Not the way she'd looked at him when they were younger and she was interested.

So she hadn't forgiven him after all.

She gasped as if possessed by a new idea. "Hey, maybe you could look up your old rulebook, something about the greater good being more important than personal impulses?" She ran an unsteady hand through her hair. It hurt to watch. "Or are you too important for that now?"

"Kira, I'm sorry. I never meant to hurt you."

“Nah. You’re just best friends with someone who will.”

“Can we talk about this? In private.”

“I’ve got places to be,” said Kira. “Maybe next time. –Don’t hold your breath.” She stepped back, almost running into someone else, then spun and continued on her way.

2.16

Rho met Ruth in the spaceport. She ran into his embrace, thrilling as always. He held her perhaps more tightly than usual.

“I don’t care what they say,” he whispered fiercely. “I don’t care. I love you.”

“Ah.” She wriggled down just enough to get her feet back on the ground. He stared into her eyes as if looks alone could hold her in place. She asked. “You talked to the authorities?”

“They don’t understand.” The Mirialan had never looked so young. “They think what you’re doing now, the constructive things, is a trick. Or just something to do with your infatuation with me.”

“I’m infatuated, am I?” She arched an eyebrow. “Will this fade so easily?”

He squeezed her, surprisingly uncertain. “You tell me.”

“The answer to that is no.” Infatuation would have failed months ago. Just because she still got dizzy just being near him didn’t mean it was unreal. “You’re upset. Come with me. We can talk.”

They could always talk. She loved that about him. He let her go; she leaned into him to let him know she was there. “Okay,” he said, and his voice was tired, tired as it hadn’t been even when he’d had a three-week staring contest with death.

On her ship she led him straight to her quarters. He would be comfortable there. When he sat down, she took his boots – he didn’t try to resist – and gently pushed him down to the pillow, then sat beside him, a hand on his chest.

“You talked to them?” she said.

“Yes.” His handsome face was somber, his green eyes dull. “Master Satele summoned me. She was...not happy to hear about our relationship.”

“They must have known for a while.”

“Maybe.”

“Maybe they just didn’t know what to do about it. That you’re here now tells me they didn’t talk you out of it.” That was a glow in the depth of her troubled heart.

“No,” he said fervently. “Not ever.”

“Rho, you don’t have to listen to them. You don’t have to let what they think determine what you do.”

“I still want to be a Jedi.”

And that was the part they always came back to. She studied his tattoos, which had predated her, and which she wouldn’t change for the world. “These people are your family, aren’t they?”

“Yes.”

“Oh.” No use fighting. Fighting that would only wound him. “The way you want them, and they want you...it sounds a lot like attachment. Attachment is just another word for loyalty. No one should be ashamed of that.” She shifted her hand against his feverishly warm shirt. “Not even you.”

“I don’t know what to do, Ruth. I can’t keep disappointing them. But I won’t let you go.”

“And it hurts you, doesn’t it? Splitting your life like this.”

He nodded, as she knew he would. “I could do it if one side weren’t condemning the other,” he said. “I almost think I could deal with it if they just hated me. But they hate you. And they shouldn’t.”

“I am what they hate. And fear.” She frowned, trying hard to stay on top of her thought. “Given what I am, they should.” And that left him trapped in the middle. Trapped. Hadn’t all this started when she’d tried to set him free?

“I don’t care,” he said, and covered his face with his broad strong hands. “I don’t care.”

“But you do. Dearest, you do, and we have to deal with that.” The idea that sprang forth next hurt. Not as badly as he did, though, so she said it. “Let me talk to them. If I stay with you they wouldn’t dare harm me. Let them question me, if they don’t trust your word. I’ll behave, I promise. I’ll say whatever it takes to put you back in their good graces.”

“Will you promise to switch sides?”

She faltered. “I would say the words, if it came to that. I’m not above breaking a promise made under duress. And defending you against an attack is duress.”

The disappointment cast a light but palpable veil over his face. “Ruth, this is...”

“Do you think it might help? I don’t want to be the one tearing you apart. Maybe I’ve been selfish so far, letting you sort out your life and only thinking about you when we’re...no, that’s not true. I think about you every day. Maybe I’ve been selfish not offering to help you keep your life in order. The way you want it. Whatever that may be.”

“Would you really come with me?”

“Anywhere. Even to the Jedi.” Crazy but true.

Finally an anxious smile visited his lips. He slid his hand over hers, pressing it against his chest. “They’ll understand if they talk to you. They have to.”

“Then we’ll make them talk to me. As long as we’re together I can’t think of anything that could stop us.” That was a kind lie. She could think of any number of ways the Jedi could...no. If he needed this risk then she would take it. Simple as that.

Simple.

2.17

Several days later...

Rho made things turn out all right.

He faced mad Jedi, and made things turn out all right. He faced angry Sith, and made things turn out all right. He faced the destruction of a planet, and somehow, weirdly, he made things turn out all right, at least for the survivors. He put himself up against the Emperor, a folly too great for words, and somehow he came out a hero, and his enemy set back for – well, weeks was more than common wisdom said was possible.

He made things turn out all right. And if he should decide to take a lover, that would turn out all right, too. And if that lover decided to account for herself in the presence of his masters, he would make that turn out all right. They would. Together.

Dammit. She was going crazy in her old age.

Crazy. She looked down the pale length of her arm to the hand resting beside Rho's long comfortable bulk. Crazy was being in love in the first place. Hadn't her first love already thrown her to the wolves? Did she really need to volunteer with the second one?

Oh, but nothing about him was the same. For one thing their relationship wasn't about work. Or ambition. Or duty. Or, or anything she had ever cared about. It was about...about...believing something? Hoping something. Yes. When he talked to her she could hope again.

He did that to people.

This, now, the journey to Tython – why in nine hells hadn't she insisted on a holo interview? – this was to be his greatest test yet. It was her job to convince his Jedi cohorts that she wasn't his damnation in personal form. It was his job to keep them from eliminating that damnation. She wasn't so sure she could do hers. She wasn't so sure he could do his.

But he made things turn out all right, and so she walked with him. Or slept with him. She was good at that.

Stars. What did he even see in her? She was not a charismatic woman. She excited fear, and even that only when she tried. The one other person she'd gotten close to had taken the better part of a year to warm to her direct overtures. Well, all right, there had been a small handful before then, but...nobody who was really interested in anything but her power. Just the one, and that one was eccentric. And undiscerning.

And...just not. What Rho saw in her, it wasn't her power and it wasn't whatever passed for her looks. Maybe it was just her hopes.

Rho twitched and stirred. "Ruth?" he said, startlingly loud. "I couldn't sleep."

"Me neither," she said softly, and fanned her fingers through his thick black hair. "Me neither."

2.18

Tython: home base of Ruth's oldest enemy. Location of the Temple that had remained hidden through the first war and some time into the second.

Not a place Ruth ever wanted to be.

She helped Rho pilot the ship down to a landing pad on a ridge above the Temple proper. The planet was forested, lush-looking, with rivers tumbling picturesquely down rocky faces here and there. The Temple, for all its size and grandeur, was built and colored to fit in.

She stayed at Rho's side.

Tython: the hidden world where the Jedi had maintained their Temple for generations. It was Rho's home; he was a citizen of the galaxy but forever a native of these hills.

It was not a place he had ever wanted to see Sith. And yet here one was, walking beside him. He knew intellectually that she was an enemy, one who should never be here, see this, be allowed close to these people. And yet he felt whole walking beside her, like he was not only coming home but bringing the right person home with him.

He left the landing pad at Ruth's side. She walked with her head held high. She had opted for armor, black and glossy. Lord Scourge had affected much the same thing. Just her way of reminding everyone where she stood.

Difficult? Maybe. But he had made the Council accept one Wrath. He could do it again.

Satele Shan stood on the pathway leading to the Temple. She was flanked by burly Knights.

“Master Satele,” he said cordially. “I want you to meet Ruth Niral.”

Ruth nodded. “Master Satele.”

Satele narrowed her eyes. “Wrath.”

“That’s not really her job these days,” said Rho.

Satele relented with a fractional nod. “Lord Niral.”

“It’s an honor,” said Ruth, and to Rho’s surprise it sounded genuine. “I hope we can reach an understanding today.”

“It’s hard to reach an understanding with a Sith. We’ll see.”

“Should we go inside?” said Rho.

“After me.” She turned, graceful and, it occurred to Rho for the first time, deadly. He walked with Ruth. The two Knights followed them.

He touched his side, where Ruth’s lightsabers had been stowed. He could give them to her on a moment’s notice. Then again, he had a feeling they wouldn’t be necessary. Everyone here had a history of listening to reason. And in this life he was sure of nothing more perfectly reasonable than his bond with Ruth.

She walked by his side with all her confidence, and no one could take that away.

*

Satele Shan led the way to the Jedi Council’s room. They were not in session – not all of them, anyway. But even without its august regulars the room itself should have a sobering effect.

Rho stayed at his Sith lover’s side. Stars, those words should never end up together. They stood by the door, exactly where he stood for audiences on his own. Satele nodded greeting to the two Jedi Masters already there: Orollo, the Ithorian Master, and Riftin, the Council’s youngest and physically strongest. Together their perspective might be of some use. If nothing else, Rho would have to listen to three people who

outranked him. He had always been governed by the Council before. He couldn't break that now.

"Master Rho," she said. "Lord Niral." Maybe Rho preferred the older title but even that one was linked to crimes. There was no clean name for her. "There are questions we ask Jedi who wish to break from the Order to pursue a romantic relationship."

As expected, Rho paled under his tattoos. "Break from...? No. That's not what I meant at all."

"It's what you're asking for, if you wish to stay with her."

Master Orollo raised one spidery hand. "You may of course remain in close contact with the Order," she bubbled. "We will not turn you away. If this is the road you wish to go down, we will guide you."

"Oh, we'll advise you," said Riftin, dark eyes smoldering.

"We'll start with the simple things," said Satele, anxious though she was to get to the important part. "Lord Niral, how did you meet Rho?"

"On the battlefield." Her voice was a brash mezzo, just a breath harder than was natural. "He sought me out on – was it Cato Neimoidia?"

"Yes," said Rho, taking her hand.

"Cato Neimoidia, during a holding action by the Empire. We found each other in the battle. I...I had been sent there, by my master, specifically to find him and capture him."

Rho smiled gently. "So she did."

"And you held him prisoner?" prompted Satele.

"Yes," said Lord Niral. "My ship was damaged, it took me some time to reach my destination."

"So you did bring him to the Emperor."

"Not quite. I had to resupply first. And that's when..."

"When she decided not to deliver me after all," said Rho. They were both smiling.

“You realize, Rho, that this kind of attachment to one’s abuser is something natural. And something that will pass if you let yourself be freed.”

“I tried not feeling it,” said Rho. “It didn’t work.”

No. He was getting defensive. This wasn’t the way this should go. She turned her attention to the woman. Let them think this was an interview. “What attracted you to him?” she said.

“His mind,” Lord Niral said at once. “His hope. He talked to me like there was nothing to be afraid of, no tomorrow to come take him away forever. He talked to me like an equal. I’ve never had one of those.” She swung his hand a little. “Except him, now.”

“We had a lot in common,” added Rho.

“So much,” said Lord Niral. “It became so clear once we were talking. We were cultivated as weapons, he and I. Everything else for me was severed. Everything else for him was starved. I never thought we could be anything else.” She smiled, a little sheepishly. “Until I had the chance to talk to him.”

“I thought I was dying,” said Rho. “Maybe that’s why I was so willing to open up, talking to you. It was the last thing I would ever do, I may as well do it with all my heart.”

“It showed,” said Lord Niral. “And was I so clear to you?”

“From the minute you took off your mask.”

They appeared to have forgotten about their audience entirely. Satele cleared her throat. She didn’t want to know this. Rho had always been so level-headed, so responsible. She would as easily doubt herself as him. Until this.

Orollo thrummed for attention. “Your affection is undeniable,” she said. “But we must determine whether it can last. There are questions we must ask you to answer separately to determine your long-term compatibility.”

Lord Niral heard it. Rho didn’t. “Of course,” he said, innocent as Satele remembered. Beside him Niral’s eyes flashed lightning. How fitting, for a Sith. She whispered

something in Rho's ear, and concern flitted across his face. Concern, but nothing so hard as determination. Then he wasn't a weapon of hers yet. Good.

Master Riftin strode past Lord Niral without taking his eyes off her. "Come," he said. "Master Satele will deal with Rho here." He and Orollo flanked the slender Sith's way out.

Deal with Rho. Yes, she would. It was for his own good. He would understand that in the end.

2.19

Rho held Ruth's and she went on her toes to whisper to him. "If I'm not back in an hour, find me," she breathed. Then, with a parting smile, she followed Masters Riftin and Orollo away.

Which left him with Satele Shan. It wasn't often he felt uncomfortable in her presence. They had operated as commander and soldier, and as respectful friends, for quite some time. That was one of the reasons he thought she might come around.

"She's very impressive," said Satele. "Do you think she loves you?"

Had she not been listening? "I know she does."

"Just not enough to tell you the truth. Not enough to fight by your side."

"She stands for what she believes in. That's the Empire, which is her prerogative. And me, which is my privilege."

"She is Sith," said Satele. "Everything she is opposes us. Not just you, Rho. All of us."

"That's not true. She is capable of more."

"Not from what I can see. She has done nothing but distract you from your duties."

"I manage my duties. If she was in such a rush to unbalance the playing field wouldn't she send someone less useful than herself? Every time I'm tied up, she is, too." His cheeks warmed. "Figuratively speaking."

"Then you part ways and she kills Jedi. Our brothers and sisters."

“She’s been letting them go. You know that. She paroled Knights Abbott and Theed, and others.”

“They’re off the battlefield now because of her.”

“But they’re alive. She’s doing so much more than she was. So much better. If you could have seen her when I met her – Satele, she was so closed. She was in too much pain to let anything in. But now? Worlds different. And that makes a difference for all of us.”

“For you, I believe that much,” said Satele. “The question is whether it’s for the better.”

“Are you just trying to test how seriously I’m taking this? Because I am serious. You know me, Master Satele, you know that in all my life I’ve never questioned the Council’s decisions. If I do so now...”

“Then I’m doubly concerned, Rho. You haven’t been yourself. I find that deeply disturbing.” Surprisingly, she raised a hand to nervously draw her hair back from her face. “I know what a difference love can make. I truly do. But how can this be love? Can you ever settle down with her when you’re not even fighting on the same side? Do you think there’s a future? Peace? Children?”

There was a thought. Adopting or engineering. Of course they’d never talked about it. There was never time in their brief visits. And, maybe, never the belief that they could settle down. He didn’t care as long as he had this.

“Rho?” said Satele.

“I’m sorry. Something you said distracted me.”

“Then we can add your focus to the list of things she’s taken from you. Do we need to go back to the beginning? Pretend you’re a student again, Rho. Go through the Jedi Code with me. You start.”

“I’ve thought about this, Satele. I thought about it for months. I still do.”

“Then there’s some hope for you. Go on.”

“There is no emotion, there is peace. – I don’t see why they have to be separate. I feel as peaceful with her as I have been during my work – and my work took loyalty, took caring about people. The same things I bring to her. It’s not so separate.”

“Compassion without attachment is something you were always good at. You’re getting attached, Rho.”

He shook his head. “There is no ignorance, there is knowledge.” What good is knowledge if it isn’t understanding? As I understand her.”

“She hasn’t told you the whole story. She probably never will.”

“There is no passion, there is serenity. I thought I was breaking that one.” He couldn’t help but smile. “A lot. But it does come down to serenity.”

“Complacency, maybe. You should know better.”

“There is no chaos, there is harmony. I’ve stopped fighting at random since I met her. And so has she. We go where we’re needed and it’s all...bigger than it was. And there is no death...? That hasn’t changed. It’ll never change.”

She went on. And on. It was a defense, but not a conversion. Rho started to wonder whether this was what it felt like to be fighting her on equal terms. In a way, he supposed, it was exactly that.

He snuck a look at his chrono. “Master Satele,” he said, “do you really think you’re going to change my mind?”

“I have to try. For your sake.”

“Or are you just stalling me?”

“We need to have this talk, Rho. I think it’s long overdue.”

“I think it’s over. Which way did the others bring Ruth?” Her lips thinned. “We came here meaning to talk, Satele. Has Master Riftin broken those terms?”

“He is asking her what we need to know.”

“Anything she can say she can say with me around.” Rho took a step toward the door. She took a step to block him. He pressed on by. “I’ll find her with or without your help, Master Satele. Don’t try to stop me.”

She didn't take it well. "Don't you see what she's doing to you?"

He rounded on her. "What I'm worried about is what you're doing to her."

2.20

Ruth followed the slow-moving Ithorian Jedi into the hallway and downstairs into an empty conference room. Or a closet. As the door closed behind her the lights went out. Ruth shot her Force senses into high gear and felt the two Jedi fleeing. Before she could stop them something burned her arm, something sharp and descending – a forcefield, standing now on all sides. She was trapped, alone in the room.

Too slow, fool. Too slow to react to the inevitable...of course. Giving people a chance only took you so far. Only Rho could have made her imagine otherwise. "So," she said, trying to wrap her burned sleeve to keep the screaming skin in. "We come to you in good faith and you return this."

A low light came up in the far wall. A window of sorts, too blurred to reveal much. "A Sith has no good faith," came the Human master Riftin's voice.

"I have no interest."

"You'll speak when spoken to, Sith."

"I'll speak whenever I want, Jedi." She waited. No punishment came. Good. The embarrassment of being caught so easily was somewhat salved by knowing he didn't know what to do with her now. She desperately didn't want to make this a fight, for Rho's sake. But Riftin clearly had his own plans. "So is this to be my execution?"

"I fondly wish it were so. But we want information first."

"Where is your other friend?" she said.

"I sent her on her way. She doesn't have the stomach for some things. Now, then. I must say, I didn't expect Rho to hold up his end of the deal."

"He didn't bring me here to betray me."

"You think he had some other reason to bring you to your most hated enemies?"

“I don’t hate you,” she said, and was surprised to find that it was true. “I could kill you where you stand,” and oh, she was really considering it, “but if I were really the monster you think I am I would already have done so.”

“The question of whether you are a monster I leave to more level heads than mine,” said Riftin. “You’ve killed too many of my brethren for me to view this objectively.”

The tension in her mind between the conciliatory friend of Rho and the older, still-strong Wrath left her dizzy, which didn’t help with the pain. “It’s war. You must know that killing happens.”

“And this is the thing that seduced our best. He always was too forgiving. But we’re not here to talk about him; I leave that to Master Satele. You have the closest connection of anyone living with the new Emperor. You’re going to tell us about him.”

“He’s not my master anymore. Not since I met Rho.”

“A likely story. Who is he? After the last Emperor was killed, something filled that power vacuum very quickly. But we can’t trace any prominent Sith to have disappeared at the right time. So who pulled off such a silent coup?”

“I won’t answer your questions. In coming here I’m a noncombatant. You have no power over me.”

“We have power over Master Rho. Or do you not care about that?”

“You wouldn’t reject him just because of me. You can’t.” Could they? “You need him. I’m only here because he wants to belong to you, and I want him to have everything he wants.”

She could tell them the truth. that only the Emperor’s Voice had been killed, that the ancient Sith had simply found another vessel to continue his orders. Maybe she should have told Rho a long time ago. But that was the Empire’s secret, not hers. There were some betrayals she couldn’t do. Not yet, anyway.

“Everything but the truth,” said Riftin. “You still side with your master over him. And you still fight us. We were his people, Wrath, long before you tried to corrupt him.”

“Corruption? Is that your word for caring? My peers would call the same thing weakness. Which sin is it, Jedi? What’s the word for having the gall to love?”

“This is not a conversation!” Then, for the space of a number of controlled breaths, silence. She had to admit she was disappointed. She’d gotten high standards for Jedi discourse somewhere on the way.

The light above her cell darkened, as did the one at the far end of the room. The forcefield hummed at the edges of sight and hearing, red and unilluminating. Her upper arm pulsed silent pain.

“Keep standing, if you want to make this harder,” said Riftin. “You may be here a long time.”

2.2 1

The room reeked of scorched flesh.

Rho had followed Ruth’s presence, a font of brilliance he had come to love, down to the basement. Master Satele followed but didn’t interfere. He tested the door with his hands. Locked.

He looked at Satele.

“Rho,” she said, “don’t do this.”

“Stop treating her like the enemy.” He turned back to the door. He kicked with every ounce of his strength. It crumpled, tore, and flew, pieces of it fetching up against a forcefield in the center of the room. The rest of the room was dark.

Satele stayed in the doorway.

“Stay out of this, Master,” Rho pleaded.

“I can’t do that.”

Rho went in. He wasn’t sure what he would do about Satele yet but when the time came, he would pass, and Ruth with him.

“Ruth?” The smell was almost overpowering. As his eyes adjusted he saw the forcefield cell in the middle of the room. Ruth was standing, facing him, one arm bracing her opposite elbow.

“Sorry for the inconvenience,” she said. “Tell me you didn’t have to fight.”

The suggestion hit him like a brick to the face. “I didn’t. I *wouldn’t*. Don’t worry. Now I just have to...Master Riftin? Let her go.”

A light popped on at the back of the room, shockingly bright. Master Riftin, tall, Human, muscular, walked through a narrow door with his arms folded on his chest. “The Wrath has been detained,” he said, “with the Council’s blessing.”

“She needs medical attention!”

“It will be provided after she answers our questions.”

“It’ll be provided now!” He started toward the cell. “Ruth?”

“Not going to happen,” Riftin said over Ruth’s voice. He darted forward to intercept, placing himself in front of Rho and his hand on his saber. “She stays,” he said. “Don’t make me do something you’ll regret.”

How could Satele stay silent? “Master Satele, do you agree with this?”

Satele looked as grave as ever. “The Wrath must remain a prisoner until she’s no longer a threat, Rho. I’m sorry.”

But she wasn’t. “Master Riftin, she came here of her own free will. Let her leave the same.”

“So she can go straight back to the battlefield? I think not.”

“We came to you in good faith.” Why was Ruth silent? Did she just think they wouldn’t listen to her? Well, in that she might be right, at least as far as the others were concerned. “And you do this?” He stepped forward again. Riftin drew. “I ask one more time—”

“Rho, don’t.” It was Ruth speaking. He stopped before his hand reached his belt. “Don’t.”

“You need your arm looked at, Ruth. And frankly I think I’d like to take you home.”
He took a step forward.

Riftin activated his saber, blue and glaring. “Turn around, my friend.”

“Master Riftin, you can’t–” He stepped forward. Riftin shifted to keep blocking. If he kept this up...then it might come to combat. And he knew he would win that. If he had to he could defeat Riftin and Satele both, at least if this swell of emotion was any indicator of his strength. He had never felt this much of anything, not even with her.

“Rho, don’t! For Force’ sake, don’t! I’ll do what they want, just stop.”

“You don’t have to answer to them.”

Her hand had left her arm and now pressed against the forcefield. Her eyes were frantic. “Rho, please.”

Riftin flourished his lightsaber. Rho closed the distance between glove and handle.

“*Stop!* Riftin, you want answers? You’ll have them. The Emperor is alive. He has separated his powerful Voice from his true form. It was this Voice Rho struck down. The original Emperor and all his will and maybe all his plans still exist somewhere. I don’t know where, he never told me the bigger picture.”

The room, but for the hum of a single saber, was silent.

“I’ll give you whatever else you want,” she said weakly. “Just leave him alone.”

“You knew?” said Rho, loud over the sudden fuzz in his head. “All this time?”

“Yes.”

It wasn’t what he should care about, but he cared. “You know what he did to me, and you still...*protected* him?”

“It wasn’t my secret to give. Rho, I was trying to do the right thing. That meant not turning on everything I came from. But you...with you...since you...I don’t even believe in him anymore. I have nothing left to be loyal to.”

His head spun. “Why tell me now?”

“If they aren’t fighting me you won’t fight them. And if I give them what they want they aren’t fighting me. I...didn’t consider the angle if I just made sure you didn’t want to fight for me. But I can live with it. I’d rather lose you than see you losing yourself.” Her voice cracked before the end.

“The traitor shows her colors,” said Riftin.

“Shut up,” said Rho. The room went silent again. “Leave us alone,” he said, glaring first at Riftin then at the figure in the doorway.

Their will finally gave way. Riftin sheathed, gave Rho a warning look, and strode out. The door fell shut behind.

Rho walked a slow circuit around the forcefield, not exactly looking at Ruth. “Is that what you were holding back?”

“That was the big one. Rho, I’m sorry. I don’t want to fight this battle anymore. Not if it means fighting you.”

“I don’t even know what to say. I can get you to the infirmary. Then off planet. After that I have a lot of thinking to do. Here.” Alone.

“Oh.” She fell silent while he stalked into the back room and found the forcefield control. He thought she stumbled a little on her first step out, but he didn’t move to intercept and she recovered on her own.

”You know I love you with all my heart,” she said.

The buzzing hadn’t lessened. “You know I never questioned the percentage. Maybe I should have.”

Her heart broke over her face. “Will I see you again?”

He looked at the door, then around. Were they listening? It hurt that he had to make that calculation. Of course they were listening. There had been some time in his past when he hadn’t had to care.

But none of that answered her question. He recalled himself. “They teach Jedi to forgive,” he said. “I guess you knew that’s part of why you wanted me to stay a Jedi.”

“I didn’t want it for my own sake. Well, no. Maybe I do. I just sold out the last of my old life, there’s nowhere for me to go but forward. I want it—” her voice caught a moment – “I want it with you.” In the pause he tried to catch his breath. So, apparently, did she. “So. Will I see you again?”

One word and they could leave this place. Move on with their lives, whatever that might be. He could set himself to mending bridges, and she...?

She would be waiting. Somehow, no matter the time and no matter the distance, she would be waiting. He knew because if this were reversed, he would wait for her.

“Yes,” he said, and went to find the forcefield control.

2.22

“The original Emperor and all his will and maybe all his plans still exist somewhere.” The lich that had violated Rho, stolen his will and volition for months, was still alive, and Ruth knew. She knew and she didn’t tell him, not until it was convenient.

Until it was the only way she had to stop him from fighting the Jedi.

Why hadn’t she said it earlier? He thought they’d shared so much. About their lives, about, yes, what the Emperor had done to them both. About what they cared about, about what they wanted. Well, apparently he hadn’t gone in-depth enough.

His heart thumped hard and lonely. He tried, again, to clear his mind to meditate. It had all come so easily when he’d trusted her. He was starting to understand the reasoning behind avoiding that kind of dependency. No focus could survive this ragged hurt.

Force of personality alone had served to cow the other Jedi long enough to get Ruth off planet. He had never rebelled that baldly before. He hoped he wouldn’t have to again. He himself was still on Tython, in one of the guest chambers: a bed, a table, a high window, a rug. This was home, the one he’d had before he knew her and the one he would still have when their ways parted for good.

He didn’t like predicting the future like that.

“I’d rather lose you than see you losing yourself.” This secret she thought too great to share with him, she’d given it up in an instant to stop him drawing his saber against his fellow Jedi. Was that love?

And would he really have fought Riftin? The answer to that was yes. Absolutely. Riftin had wounded her, trapped her, hated her, and for any of those three Rho would have gone to war. ...Was that love?

He was free to leave, in spite of Satele’s disappointment and Riftin’s smoldering resentment. He wouldn’t, though. Not until he had his balance back. He needed to be whole before he saw Ruth again, because if he wasn’t he would be healing around her and the next crisis would only be worse.

Let there never be another crisis.

He tried, again, to clear his mind to meditate. At this rate it was going to be another long day.

2.23

Rho messaged Ruth to give her the hotel location. Plain text, not a call.

The lift ride was agony. Fifty stories of irrelevance, and everything she’d felt about being comfortable in herself bled away on the way up.

In the room he was sitting at the edge of a chair, and the instant she saw him he rocketed to his feet and swept toward her, wild-eyed. She barely had time to raise her hands before he locked his arms around her, so tightly it hurt. “Ruth.”

She returned the hug, finally letting herself admit how much she’d missed him over the past weeks. “Hello, beautiful.”

He made a small choking noise. “C-can you use my name?”

Bad sign. She pulled her head back to look him in the eye. “Rho.” She looked from eyes to dry-looking lips and back, drifting in. He drifted away. In a moment she gave up. If this was his body language she didn’t want to know his actual words. “I’m sorry,” she said before he could speak. “I’m so sorry. For what I did to you. Not telling you.”

“I understand why you didn’t.”

“Do you? Secrets are kept for survival where I come from. You don’t tell because any knowledge that gets out of your grip may come back to destroy you. It was just so deeply trained, Rho, I know I should have told you but I never let myself. I’m sorry for that.”

“You wouldn’t have even if it wasn’t a valuable secret.” He let go of her. “You’re loyal, and you had some remaining loyalty to him.”

“No!” She had to clear her throat to keep it from closing. “That was wrong. I went part way when I stopped working for him, I should have gone all the way. I’m sorry, I am. Please. Don’t be angry with me.”

“I’m not angry,” he said quickly. “Jedi are taught to forgive. And I can.”

“So...are we all right?”

He looked away, falling back another step. “No. I’m sorry. I...”

What might set it right? She had to put out words before he did. “I’ve worked with your Masters, over the holo. I’ve told them everything I know about the Emperor. I’m not shielding him anymore.”

“I believe you.” He still wasn’t looking at her. “I’ve h-had some time to think,” he said. “I guess you have, too.”

“Yes. Quite a lot.”

“Yes. So have I. I spent a lot of time on Tython. Meditating, talking to my fellow Masters. That’s what I’ve always done when things got difficult.”

“Am I? Difficult?”

“You’re Sith. By definition...what you are...no, what you do opposes what I do.”

A bad taste was rising in her mouth.” And loving you? Does that oppose what you do?”

“How can it not, Ruth? Do you have any idea what my life has been since I fell in love with you? Wonderful. But the mental gymnastics I have to do just to sleep at night, sometimes.... Because you’re an Imperial. Born, bred, by choice and by

promise. Because maybe you've undone all the damage you can about the Emperor, but you're still protecting the rest of the Empire."

He made it sound like a dealbreaker. Maybe it was. She had to convince him otherwise, or try. "It's not that simple."

"It's them or us, Ruth. I've tried to find the way around that, I've spoken with some great minds on the subject, and...that's just the truth."

She didn't know where to look, and so looked at his boots.

He passed a hand over his face. "No. I'm d-doing all this wrong. I didn't come here to lecture you. I came to...to...don't...I can't do this if you're looking at me." He turned away and buried his face in his hands. Moments later he muttered, "Them or you. No matter what I say," and she had to strain to hear him, "I'll regret it for the rest of my life."

She fell back a step. "You regret me?"

His shoulders slumped. "Starting with those words. Listen. I h-have to d-do this. You do what's right, no matter what it costs you. And, s-sometimes, no matter what it costs anyone else." He turned back, and his eyes glistened. He took one deep breath and then rushed. "So I—"

She flung the first words that came to mind. "What if I stop?"

"—need to— what?"

"What if I stop supporting the Empire. And its corruption, and its evil rulers, and the fact that no amount of work inside the system can fix it. What if I recognize all that. What if I leave my past in the past and find a new way. Not as a Jedi, but perhaps as someone a Jedi wouldn't be ashamed of. If I did that, would there be a place for me?"

Those two parallel lines of concentration showed between his brows. He licked his lips and seemed to shape several words before he picked one to speak. "D-don't do this just because I want it."

"I thought about going home, Rho. I went home and saw the darkness, the paranoia, the clawing for secrets and usable lies. I saw the kind of people who own that

world. Yes, I was raised there. No, I don't have to stay there. And I think I don't want to. Not after what you've shown me, those worlds, those freedoms. So, if I left...would you forgive me?"

He answered by rushing to take her in his arms and hug her. Seconds later he seemed to find his tongue again, and the first thing past it was a sob. "I love you. I will never. stop. loving you."

"I love you, too." She had no reason to cry, except that he was crying and she was freshly released from smothering pain. She let the relief flow with the tears. She held him tight to let him know he was safe. Safe and loved: everything a Jedi probably shouldn't aspire to.

She brushed aside his tears and kissed him, once then twice then for a long time. His tenderness reassured her, smoothed away the uncertainty. Told her there was still a home for her to go to, and it was here.

He was shaking. She touched her nose to his and met his eyes. "There is peace," she whispered, and it was true.

-fin-

Afterword

After every Ruth AU I write, I find myself asking...why?

Right. To see what she looks like the day she crosses the line between herself and the Republic.

This remains the only continuity in which she does so. It takes specific circumstances.

Among other things, this means that Ruth's career as a Republic defector is wholly undefined. Heck, I wrote two novellas for this storyline, that's enough even by my standards. But she has so much to learn...

...maybe never as much as she did talking to one grubby prisoner, alone in the stars. Every great thing starts somewhere.

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.

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