

# RUTH MEANS COMPRESSION



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a SWTOR  
fanfic

## Titles

SWTOR fanfiction

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RUTH MEANS COMPASSION is the story of Ruth Niral, patriot, idealist, and Sith, following her life from the beginning of the Star Wars: The Old Republic class timeline through laughter, love, and loss to a point more than sixteen years beyond the end of the class line.

RMC was written in August 2012 *and as such diverges from SWTOR canon after the Sith Warrior's Act 3*. The expansions, from Makeb onward, never happened in this continuity. Thus one timeline covers the Sith Warrior Acts 1-3, one covers the years of despair, and one covers a new and compelling quest – one that requires her to team up with Jedi Knight Larr Gith and Imperial Agent Wynston.

The appendix Ruth on the Move collects every canon story starring Ruth throughout the Short Fiction Weekly Challenge thread. The appendix The Light From Dromund Kaas tells the fragmentary story of her father's time as a Jedi Padawan.

## Dedication

For kabeone, whose correspondence is a cascade of wonders and soaring ideas, and who has been my muse and co-conspirator for several marvelous years

## Acknowledgements

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

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

## **Content and Spoilers**

Heavy angst and dire peril.

Spoilers for Sith Warrior Acts 1-3, Vette and Quinn conversations, Imperial Agent Acts 1-3, Jedi Knight Acts 1-3, and Lord Scourge conversations.

Sith Warrior/Quinn pairing.

## Foreword

You always remember your first. As an experiment in form, as an emotional journey, as an act of creation in arc form. This is where it all started. (NDOW was more a series of accidents than a constructed story. RMC required intent.)

Ruth was a character in game before she was in fic. She walked into the Quinncident blind. The resulting fury sent me to the forums, where people asked about my headcanon for that scene...and a monster was born. I answered that scene in several ways, but Ruth was the serious one. She didn't have the heart to kill Quinn like I wanted her to. Why? This novel answers why.

The parallels and cycles of her rise, fall, and rise were too powerful to ignore. And her recurring interactions with Wynston? Blame SWTOR's legacy system. When it first rolled out I had no two characters who would really interact in one world...except the spy guy, I guess? They could try to be nice together. So in a nudge of the Force, there they were - the longest and most dynamic relationship in the Ruth!verse.

I had the opportunity to revisit the story a few months ago. I didn't change any major lines. She was first. That's all.

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I enclose the appendices as the first-ever compilation of Ruth stories across platforms and writing prompts. In combination with the upcoming Captain, Cipher, Soldier, Spy and Nights Errant collections it will represent the entire canon Ruth!verse. RMC as presented in the main body of this document also acts as the springboard for the three Ruth AUs to be published in later volumes: Dialogues, Knights of the Waking Alliance, and Lodestone.

## Dramatis Personae

RUTH NIRAL, Sith Warrior, Emperor's Wrath, daughter, wife, and mother;

her parents the Sith COLRAN NIRAL and the Force-blind Imperial Agent DOLARRA REYNE NIRAL;

her ally MALAVAI QUINN;

their Force-sensitive son RYLON NIRAL;

her ally WYNSTON, a Chiss Imperial Agent;

and the Jedi Knight LARR GITH.

supporting companions VETTE, JAESA WILLSAAM, LIEUTENANT PIERCE, VECTOR HYLLUS, KALIYO DJANNIS, KIRA CARSEN, DOC, LORD SCOURGE, and T7-01.



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Ruth, n.

1. Mercy, compassion.
  2. Grief.
  3. Remorse.
-

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## RUTH MEANS COMPASSION

### T3-0. The Little While That I've Been Long Away

September, 27 ATC – 16 years after the confirmation of the Wrath

*Deep space*

"Did you really have to go there?" said Ruth.

Rylon Niral scowled. He had a tremendous scowl for a fifteen-year-old, a fact that Ruth was powerless to change. "I was going to see the tombs, Mom. Lord Elric's orders. I didn't think we were gonna get boarded."

"The son of the Emperors' Wrath is always a target!"

"Too bad you weren't there, then," he said.

Her heart cried out a little. "I came as soon as I sensed it. I only wish it had been soon—" Ruth spun and raised one of her two crimson lightsabers. A blaster bolt hit, reversed at an angle, and struck the commandeered ship's wall. She raised her free hand and the blaster-wielding brigand in the doorway dropped his weapon and drew upright, pulled by a force at his neck. The effort was second nature to her. She had raised anger to an art in her years as Wrath. Now it scarcely burned at all.

"If anyone else," she yelled to the cargo bay in general, "fires at my son, I might make it the airlock next time." Her hand clenched. There was a harsh pop and the man fell. "Honestly," she said, turning back to Rylon, "you'd think they didn't expect me to come."

"You were working, though. Killing stuff the Emperor doesn't like. Right?"

"The job doesn't come before you. Not ever. Now, I see you scarcely needed the help with the crew here."

Rylon looked a little pleased. "I just didn't know how to pilot the ship after," he muttered.

"Ah. You should learn. You never..." her cheek twitched beyond her control ... "you never know when you'll be the only person around who can do it. We'll practice the next time you get leave from Korriban." She gave him a once-over. He looked well enough for a Sith student. "Well, you're in one piece. You're getting a little tall for those robes, aren't you?"

Rylon rolled his eyes. "They're fine."

"Maybe they fit six months ago. I'll order something. Are we—" she stopped. "I must tell your father, of course."

Now Rylon's expression was truly pained. "He'll just worry. It was bad enough when you two weren't together..."

"I should think he'd be proud. Any child of Quinn's who can stop a group of hostage-takers using only the training blade he stole back from one of their brutes..."

Rylon shrugged impatiently. "I just did. No big deal."

She deactivated her saber and clapped a hand on her son's shoulder, a gesture he seemed to tolerate only reluctantly. "Let's go home."

## **Triad 1: Different Dances, Different Times**

### **T1-1. Your Beauty Effulgent**

January, 10 ATC - 1.5 years before the confirmation of the Wrath

*Dromund Kaas*

~

*My dear Ruth,*

*I'm proud of your earning an apprenticeship with Darth Baras. Be sure that you make friends outside his influence as well. It may save you someday. Then again, you don't need me to tell you that.*

*Love always from your father,  
Colran*

~

*Dear Father,*

*I've already made an unexpected friend on Korriban. I'm bringing her back to Dromund Kaas – no time to visit with you, but keep an ear out for great things. Baras is every inch the Dark Lord but he leaves me a little creative room. Time for me to be a Sith of the world.*

*Much love,*

*Ruth*

~

*"You don't think Lord Baras is gonna have any more apprentices in here, do you?" said Vette. "If we have to kill one of those every twenty minutes..."*

*"I hate to think what that means for my career as apprentice," said Ruth. "But we'll be ready. Today I make myself indispensable to Baras. Tomorrow we can teach people a better way."*

*"That's your career plan?"*

*"Of the only kind that a Sith is allowed to make. Maybe we'll team up with the next apprentice instead. Don't worry, we'll be fine."*

Her Twi'lek companion looked around, rubbing the spot on her neck where the slave collar used to be. They were in a tall hallway hewn of dead-grey stone. Things echoed strangely here, and slithering things stirred out of sight. The dead air crowded both their nostrils and Vette huffed, again, trying to get it to move. "Fine," she said. "Yeah. That's the word I would pick."

The turn of the hall brought them back. It shouldn't have. But here it was: a vast space of dust and foreboding, dominated by a statue caught in a soundless scream. Ruth felt a whisper as of something trying to use her mind to escape. She shuddered and suppressed it.

She felt a presence creeping around the pillar opposite.

"Sh," she said to Vette, raising a warding hand, and stepped forward.

"Uh. This isn't someone...you know...eaten by darkness, or whatever, right?" said Vette. "Because they keep making us kill them in self-defense."

Ruth had killed one inadvertently, trying to use the Force to knock him out. While she had an ever-growing command of the Light Side, fine incorporeal work was no specialty of hers. She didn't relish the next encounter. But the Dark Temple bred some driving, aggressive kind of madness. She needed to finish her task here quickly. She stalked across the vast space in the middle, fitfully lit by high windows to the stormy sky beyond.

She drew her saber, one of two trophies from the academy at Korriban, and pointed its inactive handle at the subtle life force she saw. "Who goes there?"

A stealth field wavered green and dropped. A short blue-skinned Chiss in a black ensemble put up his hands. He didn't seem to be carrying any gear – or, as she might expect from an intruder, spoils.

"Are you all right?" they said.

Ruth recovered first. "I'm fine," she said, trying and failing to determine where the alien's red eyes were pointed. "What are you doing here? You're

no Sith." In the presence of restless ghosts she was worried enough about Vette, much less some stranger who had no experience with the supernatural.

"No, my lord," the Chiss said smoothly. He bowed and returned to a shrunken stance, his head tilted a little down, his arms drawn in. "I'm on a mission for the city works."

"Oh." That might actually make sense, even if a solo job was stupid. "It's dangerous for a Force-blind."

"I came prepared," he said levelly.

"Oh, well, prepared," said the Twi'lek. "This one won't go crazy and die for sure."

"I need to finish my job before anything happens," said the Chiss. "Stay safe."

"Wait," said Ruth.

He raised his eyebrows in bland interest.

"If you discover anything. Any piece of...purplish stone, molded or cut cleanly." She gestured vaguely, then reached into her pack to bring out an example stone, coarsely shaped into a cone. "Would you bring it to me?"

A noise, and Ruth shoved the stone back in her pack. Someone was running. It was a huge man sprinting from behind a column, his rough workman's clothes askew. He held a stone in his hand. A sharp one.

"Hold!" snapped Ruth. She pushed one hand, palm out, and the Force shoved the stranger almost to a halt. "There, stranger. Don't be afraid. You're among friends."

"The mask speaks to me," snarled the stranger, pushing against her barrier. "I have to do what it says!"

"Can you knock him out?" said Vette.

"I only know one way to fight," Ruth said miserably. It was the Korriban defense. The Sith one. So hers, really, whatever she thought of it. The man was putting a serious strain on her effort. Finally his eyes rolled back and he cut around the side of her barrier – launching himself toward Vette.

Ruth darted between, two red lightsabers swinging. There was a time to subdue and that time was not when her friends were under attack. The man stopped on her blades, jerked, and fell over. She turned away. That was all the consideration enemies got here in a stronghold of the Sith.

Ruth looked back at the stranger. He held a small blaster in his hands. He was staring. "Did he hurt you?" he said.

"No. He's not a threat anymore, anyway." Ruth stooped to claim the stone she had dropped and its purple twin from the attacker's hand. She had gotten most of them this way. "Vette, what was our count? Six?"

"Of people? Ew," said Vette.

"Of Ravager parts," said Ruth. "Ravager" as an ancient interrogation device seemed less than promising, but it was the reason she had been sent here, the prize she was to take home. The Empire had enemies, and one confession at her master Darth Baras's hands could save a lot of Imperial lives.

"Oh, that," said Vette. "Six for six. One creepy peg for every creepy hole. Ew."

The Force worked in mysterious ways sometimes. "Then it's time to go." She turned back to the unknown quantity.

"My lord, I need to finish my job before..." he looked back to the corpse, wide-eyed. "I'm sorry, my lord."

"Don't be," said Ruth, keenly aware of his anxious attention. "This place drives people past saving." But mortal peril was a fact of the Dark Temple as it was on Korriban, and she knew that. He didn't. "Listen, if you need the help...."

"I'm afraid I can't, my lord. People are watching to be sure I do this right. I'm sure you understand."

"Ah. I do." Sith oversight was like that. "I could help you anyway."

He had a startling, world-fading smile. "In another time and place, you might. Thank you, my lord. But I have to go."

"Go on. Don't take too long."

But, though he turned, he didn't start walking. "Can I ask you something?"

"Of course."

His mouth twitched a frown, then returned to mere strain. "Just in case I make it out of this, I could use a change of subject. Let's assume I don't lose my mind before this is done...I'll be getting some dinner in the city. Would either of you care to join me?"

"Oh, oh, not me," said Vette. "You should go, my lord."

Ruth stood in flat-footed confusion. People didn't ask Sith lords out. Force-blind people didn't ask Sith lords out. Force-blind people in this hellhole didn't ask Sith lords out. People weren't this unafraid.

All this, but a meeting in a public place couldn't be so bad. If nothing else he had good looks and courage. And honestly, she hadn't taken an evening for herself in a long time.

"Don't you want to know our names first?" she said archly.

The Chiss gave her a blank look, followed by a chuckle. "I'm ahead of myself. Darnek, at your service."

"Ruth."

He pulled out a holo and gave her an arch look. "Not Lord Sturm und Drang?"



She couldn't read the red eyes, but he had an incipient smile seemingly waiting for her to start. So she did. Anyone with the nerve to say that to a Sith had to be worth talking to. "Just Ruth."

"Charmed."

"Charmed, too," said Vette. "I'm Vette."

"Very nice to meet you. Exactly which one of you is bodyguarding the other?"

"Oh, she's definitely mine," Vette said loudly. "I'm kind of a big shot in the underworld. Sith bodyguards, one for every day of the week, plus extras for special occasions."

"I just take orders," Ruth said, her lips twitching. "And bail the lady out of danger, of course."

Darnek laughed, a pleasant rippling sound. "Then I'll get out of your way before danger finds us. The Nexus Room? Seven?"

Vette elbowed Ruth. "Count on it," said Ruth. "Until then...be careful." She didn't know how to advise a Force-blind. Only encourage.

He bowed, then seemed to shrink back to the nervous creature he had been at first appearance. He reactivated his generator and made not a sound. She could just feel the little bundle of subdued emotions moving away.

\*

Ruth owned one dress. She hadn't worn it since leaving her childhood home for Korriban. It was silver shimmersilk, low in the back, and had no room for weapons. Reckless choice, maybe, but she doubted anyone more powerful than her was going to be scouring the Nexus Room for victims. The place stayed in business because the peace was kept and some powerful Sith liked it that way.

Darnek caught her before she reached the bottom of the Nexus Room Cantina's entrance stairway. His finely chiseled mouth was smiling. The

fear from the Temple was gone, leaving him upright and casual, a far more pleasant look for him. "You look stunning," he told her. "Shall we?"

She didn't think about the Ravager's new place in the Citadel. That was her master's business, and was there to protect the Empire, and she didn't think further. "Let's."

Darnek was chatty. He was charming. He was complimentary. He had obviously done this before. Many times. Ruth felt transparent, and transparent felt firmly approved of.

"I'm just having trouble," he said, "seeing you in the scary role. Not that you have to demonstrate."

"I wouldn't. I like you, Darnek. Simple as that."

"What, no 'this one will serve well' or 'I think I shall vivisect him for my own amusement'? Are you entirely certain you're Sith?"

"I'm just an apprentice. I'm sure I'll learn."

He leaned forward, looking serious. "Don't."

She smiled. "Now that's a piece of career advice I've never heard before."

"Take it from a humble Force-blind. The world doesn't have enough beautiful, charming, sane Sith."

"Your shamelessness is showing."

"Just calling it like I see it. Let me know if that's a problem."

Ruth made a happy little exhalation. "You're very good at not being a problem."

He raised dark blue eyebrows against pale blue skin. "I should be flattered?"

"I think so."

They went on. More food, more drink, more talk, a sequence utterly unlike the things she had seen and done in these wild last six months, first on Korriban and then under Baras's tutelage here. Once dinner had settled, Darnek tilted his head. "Do you dance?"

She cocked her head in turn. "No."

He smiled crookedly. "Would you like to?"

It flustered her and she wasn't sure why. "Sith don't dance."

"Are you sure? It's easy with the right partner. I've taught Ithorians to dance, you can't possibly be that much trouble."

"When did you teach an Ithorian to dance?"

Darnek extended a hand. "Come with me and I'll tell you."

In his capable hands seemed like a good place to be. Ruth played along, taking every suggestion that came her way, and loved every minute of it.

But she left his hotel room that night. She went for the refresher and then her dress while Darnek lounged in bed. "I'd better get moving," she said. "Worlds to burn, you know how it is."

He took it in stride. "I'll call you next time my job takes me this way."

"I'm flattered, but I travel a lot." Or she expected to, on this job. She smiled. "Maybe we'll run into each other again sometime."

The moue of disappointment was small but gratifying. "Fair enough. Good to meet you, my lord."

She made a face and threw the nearest available small object at him. That happened to be her underwear. "Ruth," she corrected, in a tone that would've been commanding if they both weren't so thoroughly aware of what she was and wasn't wearing at the moment.

"*Very* good to meet you, Ruth."

What a very pleasant man. "You, too." She set off with a swing in her step. Facing Dromund Kaas as an adult was already feeling like a good thing.

## **T2-1. Thy Firmness Makes My Circle Just**

June, 11 ATC – four weeks before the confirmation of the Wrath

*Fury-class vessel – Deep space*

When Ruth woke up, the Fury's engines were growling. Hyperspace outside, she was sure. She always had places to be. Quinn was standing at the console, deep in what looked like research. Of course he would find that important upon coming to a new planet. But not, she reflected with some satisfaction, as important as her.

The previous day's loss hung heavy around her. She could not dismiss it, only acknowledge and hope that the next endeavor went better. It was a good day for a new start. Corellia ahead, with the promise of blocking Baras' master stroke...it was time she came into her own.

Quinn bowed his head for a few moments and turned around. "My lord," he said. "Good morning."

"Good morning, love." Something ran over his face every time she said that. It was so rare she saw moments of incomplete control. She treasured it.

"My lord," he said again. "It occurs to me that I have never taken you dancing."

Ruth sat up, curious and somewhat anticipatory. "Would you like to? We could, even here." It would be a welcome change from the hide-and-seek she had been playing with the minions of her treacherous former master.

"Someday, when there's time." He looked aside. "We have work to do first."

He sounded tired. "Quinn? This isn't like you. Why are you worried now?"

"Worried? No. I know exactly what I have to do. And you, my love. And you."

Her heart took up residence in her throat, as it did when he looked at her like that. "Then let's do so," she said.

### **T3-1. And Dropped My Eyes, Unwilling to Explain**

November, 27 ATC - 16 years after the confirmation of the Wrath

*Deep space*

The fortress of the Voice of the Emperor orbited a small star well outside the galaxy's outer arm. The vessel was a bulky construct of black metal and white light that hurt the eyes without illuminating anything.

Most of Ruth's assignments were given via holo by the Emperor's Hand. Her personal visits here were rare, which was fine by her. When she was in her master's stronghold, she felt less like a protector of the Empire and more like...darkness. She used the Dark Side as the Wrath, and commanded it from within rigid focus, but even in her worst moods she didn't care for these depths. But she had been summoned, and so she came.

The Emperor's Voice, the manifestation that dealt with Ruth personally, sat on his great black throne and blinked at her with red eyes that she knew could see straight through her mask. "Wrath," he said.

She knelt. "Master."

"How are you?" he asked mockingly. He worked to answer his own question by pressing his presence into her mind. It slid over her thoughts, oily and cold. It sampled her memory here and there, rushing to cover the warmth of emotion that was Quinn's recent return to her life after their long separation. The Emperor's vileness made everything about it feel unclean.

He laughed, an eerie thin sound. "I see. He is...suitable."

The scan continued, bringing as it always did a sense of shame for something she couldn't identify alongside anger for the intrusion. It was an old dance and a familiar one, with a partner who was if nothing else reliable.

Finally the Emperor's presence withdrew. He described her assignment in cold distinct words and she hurried out. He summoned her only rarely: once per year, maybe, sometimes less, and only for the big jobs, the jobs that mattered. She could carry them out, but that didn't mean she enjoyed the briefings.

She returned to Dromund Kaas and her family's estate outside Kaas City. When she got in, she was somewhat surprised to find Quinn there.

"Good evening, Ruth," he said, with that rare smile. "The operation tied up early. I thought I would take the opportunity to steal a day at home before I ship out for the next stage."

By "steal time at home" he meant "work from the console in the office at home," but still, it was nice. "Good. I'm glad to see you."

He kissed her, then gave her an odd look. "Are you all right?" he asked.

"Yes, of course."

"You seem a little preoccupied." He touched her cheek. "Not to say depressed."

"No, I'm fine. Have you eaten?"

"Not yet. I can get that started." He brushed past her to get to the kitchen, where he started entering orders for the kitchen droid. She drifted to follow him, and he gave her another troubled look. "May I ask what you were up to today?"

"Working."

"A difficult kill?"

"No, not at all. I had an audience with the Emperor."

He seemed impressed. This was, she recalled, the first such meeting she had had since Quinn had come back into her life. "That is a great honor. I hope it went well."

"Yes. I have my orders for tomorrow."

"Anything I can help with?"

"No."

He poured drinks for both of them and walked with her to the dining room. He set them down and, rather than sitting, wrapped his arms around her. He kissed her again, this time slow, almost seeking. It was nice. She tolerated it until it was over.

He frowned, again. "You're sure you're all right?"

"Yes, of course," she said. "Shall we eat?"

He kept trying to engage in conversation throughout dinner and the evening. It was nice. She tolerated it until it was over. Then she fell asleep beside him, thinking of the mission.

She headed out early the following day. The kill itself was a powerful and influential Jedi, but Ruth had intel on where to find him in transit, and she crushed the man with little trouble. Everything seemed brighter when she got home.

Quinn was in the big office at Ruth's house, working as per usual. She strolled in and trapped him in his chair, covering him with kisses until he laughed outright and pushed her to stand up. "You're looking happier today," he said.

"What's that mean?" she asked. She didn't recall any particular happiness change.

He looked troubled for some reason, but the expression passed quickly and he kissed her again. "Good to have you home."

"Good to be here. Especially with you around."

And it was a good day.

## Triad 2: Advisement

### T1-2. The Native Hue of Resolution

February, 10 ATC - 1.5 years before the confirmation of the Wrath

*Fury-class vessel*

~

*My dear Ruth,*

*I'm sure Korriban taught you that the Light Side is not normal for Sith. Normal Sith rule through fear. It's one reason why the allies you secure as friends will be your greatest asset in your fight – whatever fight you end up choosing.*

*I trust you to choose, and as the next generation the galaxy is yours to choose from. I only hope that it benefits those beneath you as well.*

*Love always,  
Colran*



~

*Dear Father,*

*I can't talk about what Darth Baras has me doing. But it will pay off in security for the Empire.*

*I think I'm finding more allies where I am now. It's one thing to have a ship and Authority, it's quite another, more pleasant, to have friends to share the work with.*

*Much love,  
Ruth*

~

"My lord." Day two of having the fanatic from Balmorra on her ship, and Ruth already knew what was going to break her sanity by the time this operation was over. She looked up from her breakfast to see Malavai Quinn standing, straight and tense, by the mess door. "When you have the time, I ask permission to confer with you about my role on the ship – and under your command."

"Good idea. Please, meet me in the conference room in five minutes." Now if she could just stop him from saying–

"My lord." He bowed and left.

She finished up and made a quick attempt to straighten her hair with her fingers. A general sweep back to her nape was the best she could do. Into the conference room, where the officer was standing like he was auditioning to be a statue.

"Lieutenant. Captain?" She wasn't sure of the paperwork status.

"Lieutenant at present, my lord."

"Have a seat." He hesitated. "Please."

"As you wish, my lord." He sat stiffly on the edge of the nearest chair.

Ruth moved to sit across from him. "You can address me as Ruth, you know. I'd prefer it."

"I wouldn't presume to such familiarity, my lord."

While she had always known she would end up in command as Sith, the reality of it was more than a little disorienting. And oddly disappointing. "Suit yourself. Now, then. You're my first formal subordinate. How can I use you?" Apart from the distractingly obvious, and wholly unwelcome judging by every indication he had given thus far.

"My lord, I have an education from the Imperial officers' Academy on Dromund Kaas and fifteen years of field experience." Oh hello that would make him nearly twice her age. "I've seen action during the war against the Republic and in multiple operations against the Balmorran resistance. I'm a top-notch pilot, military strategist, combat medic, and a deadly shot."

"As well as being familiar with surveillance technologies, comm systems, and - to some degree, based on what you handed me and handled remotely - demolitions."

He nodded without a trace of self-consciousness. "I can fly this ship, plan your battles, assess your enemies, and kill them. You won't find a more tireless and loyal subject."

"Of that I have no doubt. What you're saying is, I can place you in any support or combat capacity and you'll have both the training and experience for it."

"That is a broad statement, my lord, but I believe I can live up to it."

Better and better. "You say you've been in the field. You impressed me with your support work; are you really willing to come into the line of fire?"

"It has been some time since I served in that capacity." His blue eyes sparked. "I look forward to it."

Ah. Under the insane surface, the man was completely insane. She was faintly disturbed to find that that didn't make him any less attractive. "I look forward to seeing what you can do. – A medic? Really?" Quinn nodded. "What luxury." She stood up, took a few steps to work off some nervous energy. "I'm going to be quite frank, Lieutenant. My field experience is limited. I learned tactics in the out-of-the-way corners of the Sith Academy, and apart from Vette I've never had a partner or a team. I don't apologize for any of it. But if you've functioned in an active unit before, I'm counting on you for your counsel and your discretion. You've demonstrated at least a subset of your skill, and I respect it. Don't hesitate to show me what you've got."

"Of course, my lord. I will do my utmost to apply my talents to your mission. And to advise you as necessary."

Damn, it was impossible to read that face. Had she just lost respect? Gained it? Marked herself for a tragic friendly fire incident? She meant to rule from a place of gentleness, not fear. Would he respond to that?

No way to tell just now. "One more thing. You're really here for the Empire? To serve her, to extend her influence?"

"I live for nothing else, my lord. I served Darth Baras for that cause. Now I serve you. I would choose no other assignment." And, more quietly, "I did choose this one."

Ruth snapped back to herself after what she dearly hoped was no more than a second's fascination. She hurried to look elsewhere. Useful, useful, and patriotic to boot. "I think we're going to get along. Come on, there's work to do."

## **T2-2. A Darkling Plain**

June, 11 ATC – one month before the confirmation of the Wrath

*Fury-class vessel – outskirts of the Corellia system*

Ruth had to go forward. She had to go forward. There was so much to do.

"My lord," said Quinn, turning from the console in the holo room where her crew had gathered. "We will be unable to approach Corellia as we are now. New regulations in place require a specific transponder to be mounted aboard every ship that approaches the planet."

"I never heard of such an order," grumbled Pierce.

"I have been monitoring the comm channels," Quinn said coldly. His interactions with the bluff Lieutenant Pierce averaged below freezing. "Baras implemented the order only recently, doubtless to keep us away." He turned his attention back to Ruth. "I do, however, have a solution."

"Of course you do," she said, relieved. "You're my problem solver."

"It is a job that has come with great rewards," he said softly. "Now. There is a Class A starship that has recently entered the system, currently in wide orbit. It would be outfitted with such a transponder system. I know the schematics of these ships by heart. If you came with me to extract it, we could get in and out quickly and be on our way."

"And fight through our own people to do it," growled Pierce.

"A necessary evil," said Quinn. "If against Darth Baras's claims we cannot invoke the authority of the Wrath, we have little other choice."

Something prickled between Ruth's shoulderblades. Her new masters, the strange Emperor's Hand, would accept nothing less. And she couldn't hold them to account before she'd finished battling her original master. "We'll do it," she said. "Quickly. Quietly. Just you and me, Quinn."

"Watch your back," said Pierce. "Unless you think he can do it for you."

"I do, Pierce."

The big soldier shrugged. "Less competent people have done greater things before. Occasionally."

## **T3-2. The Likelihood that Redemption Awaits Us**

December, 27 ATC - 16 years after the confirmation of the Wrath

*Deep space*

Ruth traveled with Quinn as far as the spaceport. They always took different vehicles to the front. One never knew when Ruth would be called elsewhere.

"The campaign has never been popular," Quinn said briskly when they reached his command ship. "The Dark Council sees it as too risky, and certain factions question the value of the region once we hold it."

"But you don't."

Quinn stood fiercely. It was a talent of his. "Everything in my research says that this area would be a prize for the Empire, if only we can hold it. And I believe I have the means to secure the systems with a minimum of resources."

"So do it. I'll provide cover."

"You haven't even seen the briefings, Ruth."

"I don't have to." She shot him a smile. "Do what you do, Quinn. You have my backing."

## Triad 3: The Man Who Returned

### T1-3. Less Brave Perhaps than Trusting are the Fair

February, 10 ATC - 1.5 years before the confirmation of the Wrath

*Nar Shaddaa*

~

*My dear Ruth,*

*I know you can't and shouldn't tell me where you go. I just hope we can sit down sometime and compare notes. My job has kept me on Dromund Kaas for a long time, but I wasn't always a clerk.*

*That's one fate you'll never have to worry about. Dangerous for you, maybe, but lucky.*

*Love always,  
Colran*

~

*Dear Father,*

*Planets are already whizzing by. I recognize now where some of your trinkets come from and I've picked up a few more for when I'm safely back. There's so much going on – I'll update you when I'm closer to Darth Baras's goal.*

*Whole armloads of love,  
Ruth*

~

The man Ruth was to silence for her master was hiding on Nar Shaddaa on the turf of local heavy Lord Rathari. Darth Baras's local contact gave Ruth a quick overview of the situation and then, to her surprise, started transitioning matters.

"We've put our heads together with Imperial Intelligence for this one," the woman said. "We have part-time support from one of their agents." She pressed a button on the desk and looked to the door.

The Chiss Darnek marched into the room.

Intelligence? Ruth did her best to conceal her surprise. He returned the courtesy. Operating around the Dark Temple on Dromund Kaas...that made sense now. Well, she had said they might run into each other again.

"My lord, may I present Darnek--"

"We've met," she said warmly.

He bowed. "Good to see you again, my lord."

When she quirked a smile he returned it, ever so slightly. Something to think about later. "Quinn, this is Agent Darnek, Imperial Intelligence. Darnek, my XO, Captain Malavai Quinn." Funny to have a crew, but nice. She didn't see what the captain did, but Darnek gave a cold nod and moved on to the table. Their minder bowed and headed out; Ruth joined Darnek at the table and Quinn set up station behind her shoulder, as far from the Chiss as he could get while still observing the console.

"We've been tracking Lord Rathari for some time," Darnek said in a cool crisp voice. "He has a longstanding claim staked on Nar Shaddaa, but it's difficult to pinpoint the man himself..."

He gave a brief rundown. Quinn, to Ruth's surprise, proved vocal in coming up with sharply worded questions and criticisms. Darnek stayed cool in response. Ruth would have elbowed Quinn good and hard if he weren't genuinely extracting useful information.

Darnek finally satisfied even the officer's concerns and backed away from the console. "This is my secondary assignment while I'm on planet, but leave a message and I won't be more than twenty-four hours behind. This data should be adequate to get you started, and possibly to bring you right to Rathari." He bowed. "If you need anything, my lord."

"I'll call. Thank you, Darnek. Take care."

As Ruth turned back toward the door she caught Quinn sneering. When they got clear she pulled him aside. "Captain, is there a problem?"

"My lord?" he said blandly.

"You seem a little put off by our contact."

"The alien? Apart from his evident belief that he's the most knowledgeable person in the room..."

"He's Intelligence. Knowledge is his job."

"...and his decidedly disrespectful attitude..."

"Smiling at me is disrespectful?"

"So long as he behaves, there won't be a problem, my lord."

\*

Ruth put in a work day that would have to draw Rathari's attention, even if she couldn't hit him directly. Minimal blood, but significant business interruption. As evils went it wasn't so bad. Better than a day on Korriban. Once the job was done she let Vette tow her around the Promenade for a while. It was spectacular. The greatest city Ruth had ever known was Kaas City, and that was a place of shadow and twilight blue. Nar Shaddaa was alive with color: flashy signs, garish fashions, more species than she could name, avenues festooned with brilliant holo trees and golden statues. Vette supplied her with running commentary; Captain Quinn trailed, eyeing everything with suspicion.

The streetlights were entering their artificially orange sunset phase when Vette got around to suggesting dinner.

"Ship, then?" said Ruth.



Vette gave her a Look. "Are you serious? Star Cluster lounge. We're going."

"All right." Ruth took out her holocommunicator and called Darnek. His image flickered into view. "Good evening, Darnek. I've been chatting with some Hutts and I picked up some hearsay from the upper industrial sector you might like to know. Also I'm starving. Would you be available for supper at the Star Cluster?"

"How much of this is work, my lord?" he said lightly.

"Ninety-five percent work. Promise. My people will be here." She made a face. "Not that I'm not enthralled by their close and exclusive company for weeks on end, but we'd love to see you."

"Hey," mouthed Vette. Ruth grinned at her.

"Count me and my associate in," said Darnek.

"Absolutely. See you soon!" The call cut off.

"That work for you two?" she asked as she stashed her holo away.

"You're treating," Vette informed her.

"And you, Quinn? Dinner? Dancing? I'd very much like to see you there."

"My lord." That was definitely his "I'm extremely offended and wish you would stop asking such awful questions" inflection. "I should return to the ship and catch up on some correspondence."

"You do eat, captain? I hope?"

"Of course, my lord."

"Good." She sighed. "Take care of yourself."

"Likewise, my lord."

\*

The casino was quieter than most local cantinas, but no better lit. Ruth threaded her way among the sabacc tables to a booth and leaned against the table, watching the floor. Vette scooted into the booth and flagged down a droid for a drink.

Darnek and a swaggering Rattataki woman entered not long afterward. Introductions all around: Ruth, Vette the “good friend and co-conspirator,” Darnek, Kaliyo the “good friend and co-conspirator.” What her true role was Ruth didn’t know and doubted she would find out. They ate and chattered; Ruth got about two minutes in about the information Darnek might find useful before Kaliyo and Vette started exchanging vocal opinions on more facets of pop culture than Ruth knew existed.

At some point the music changed. Kaliyo looked over, made a face, then shot a look at Vette. “Think it’s time we hit the dance floor, aren’t Twi’leks supposed to be good at that?”

“You’re on.” The Twi’lek bounced to her feet and followed Kaliyo out to the floor.

Ruth found herself alone with the Chiss. “So ordinarily I would make polite inquiries about your line of work,” she said. “But my mother worked for Intelligence – I think – before she died, so I’ve learned I’m not supposed to ask. Right?”

“Quite right, I’m afraid,” he said evenly.

“And casual conversation on politics is right out.”

“Correct.”

“How about the weather?”

Darnek shot a look at the ceiling. “I am not at liberty to comment on any persistent patterns or local irregularities in the weather of Nar Shaddaa, Dromund Kaas, or any of several dozen other systems.”

She laughed...and wondered how much of that was serious. They chatted, him smiling and pleasant, her hoping she was at least as pleasant. He didn't seem put off, anyway.

"I really must say, though, I hope we can keep in touch, should you ever need to call on me. Or I on you."

Darneek oozed casualness. "I can't make promises, my lord, but I'll keep it in mind."

Right. She never could own them. "Fair enough." She finished off her glass and looked again toward the dance floor. Vette and Kaliyo were both grooving, the Twi'lek in rapid energetic movements, the Rattataki in slow sinuous gyrations. "That's it, I'm not letting them have all the fun." She shot to her feet and bounded across the long hall to the floor.

Kaliyo didn't stop her mesmerizing motion as she turned to face Ruth. "The Sith dances, does she?" she drawled.

"Your friend made me try last time we met." Ruth raised her arms and let the music guide her. Kaliyo looked her over and smirked eloquently. Well, let her.

"You've come a long way," said Vette. "From Korriban and recreational acolyte-smashing, to semi-normal partying. I'm proud of you."

"That was strictly professional acolyte-smashing, I'll have you know." Ruth had a ridiculous urge to stick her tongue out at the Twi'lek, but refrained.

"Even so. I like the social Sith."

"I'll believe a social Sith when I see her drinking the interesting stuff," said the Rattataki. "Speaking of." She headed back in the direction of their booth.

"Ever get the feeling she's laughing at you?" said Vette.

"Did you ever get the feeling she's not?"

Ruth jumped when somebody tapped her shoulder. She turned around to see Darnek, his eyes seeming to glow in the dimness of the dance floor.

"May I cut in?"

Ruth could've sworn that Vette whistled before slipping away. Never mind that. Ruth let Darnek spin her into his arms, where he held her just at the edge of too close for comfort.

"Enjoying the evening?" he inquired.

"No reason to complain. Though you've been awfully formal."

"Well, it seemed appropriate now that you're commanding staff."

"All two of them. Darth Baras has been grooming me for great things."

His hand at the small of her back pulled her closer. "You'll watch yourself."

She arched back just enough to meet his eyes. "Of course I will. You don't go into this business if you're not prepared to keep an eye out."

"Good."

"You're worried about me." She grinned. "You're actually worried about me."

"I told you on Dromund Kaas, the world needs its sane Sith." She wasn't sure how she could tell that those pupilless eyes were sliding down to her lips and back, but they definitely were. "And its beautiful ones."

"See, I like that much more than I like being 'my lorded.'" Which unfortunately just reminded her of someone else.

"That's promising," murmured Darnek. For a few long moments there was only his steady rhythmic lead. "Come with me tonight."

She blinked and dropped her gaze. "I'm seeing someone," she said softly. Or at least she would be if the new unknown quantity on her ship would allow it.

His exhalation could almost have been a snort. "Could've fooled me," he said. He moved his hands a little across her back. "One night, then you can see anyone you like."

She studied his face. There was a certain gentle expression in those red eyes after all. And he had a very, very nicely formed mouth. He kept moving and pulled her a little closer.

Unreasonable creature. His scent was familiar and he was much, much warmer than anybody else she might have had on her mind. She couldn't back off. Probably didn't want to. So she pressed into him instead. Yup, perfect fit in his arms. "You don't fight fair," she informed him.

"I'm Intelligence. If I get into a fair fight, I haven't done my job." She didn't reply. Darnek tilted his head to reach her ear. "Was that a yes?"

"Mm. I'll have to make my excuses to the crew."

"I understand." Quickly, easily, he slid aside, keeping one arm around her waist, and escorted her back to where Vette and Kaliyo were chattering.

"Aw," said the Rattataki, smiling slyly. "Do you have to tell your mommy before you stay out late?"

"It's not the mommy I worry about. Vette, I'll be back by, I don't know...late. Very late. Let Quinn know I'll be fully ready for combat and paperwork tomorrow. Promise." Better hurry on, because thinking about Quinn in this context left her dangerously wobbly. "Actually, you know what? If he doesn't ask, don't say anything. But I'm fine."

Vette nodded, lekku waving. "Gotcha."

Kaliyo eyed Vette. "That mean you're free tonight, kitten?"

"Sorry, I don't do crazy."

"No? You're missing out."

Darnek steered Ruth away with a sudden urgency, whispering as they went, "Better go before she starts angling for an invite here."

\*

The following morning Ruth took an hour or so to get ready for the day, and at least five minutes of it actually involved getting ready for the day. She blew Darnek a kiss and hopped into a taxi for the spaceport. The Chiss did know how to make her smile. Hell, after her time at the Academy on Korriban it was nice to know someone who could treat her like a woman and not an assassination target.

Probably. Hm. She made a note not to cross Imperial Intelligence. She was too small for them to use, she assumed, but nobody was too small for them to harm if they wanted to.

The sight of the Fury's gangplank opening shook her smile, and Quinn's appearance wiped it off her face entirely. He straightened into a cold salute. "My lord. Good to see you've returned safely."

"I let Vette know I would be away. She passed that along, didn't she?"

"Her comment was less than informative."

Yeah, no passive aggression in that stance. "Her word is sufficient when I stay out."

"My lord, I do not mean to criticize your methods, but I must express my concern over...disappearances. In sensitive operations such as the task at hand, if anything were to happen--"

She raised a hand to cut him off. She wasn't sure whether to be impressed or annoyed. He had a point. A stupid, judgmental, uptight point, but a point. Her fault for soliciting his advice in general, she supposed. She centered herself on her irritation and pushed against the urge to tell him that she had been in good hands. She wouldn't be able to keep a straight face for that one. "I'll call next time." After excusing herself from Darnek or

any other fellow's presence; calling the man back home didn't strike her as the most politic of mid-flirtation moves.

He nodded sharply, his jaw set. "Do as you will, of course, my lord."

"I intend to." Enough of that. "Is Vette up?"

"I believe so." He stepped aside to let her pass up the gangplank.

Ruth found Vette in the mess, eating some confection that she must have dragged in from the promenade. The Twi'lek smirked at her. "You look happy."

"Funny, I feel incredibly annoyed. You told the captain there was nothing to worry about, right?"

"Sure did. If looks could kill...tell me it was worth it, at least?"

"Oh, yes."

Vette held up her hand. "No details, though. General sympathy happiness only."

"Of course." Ruth lifted her chin. "Now let's go make some trouble."

\*

Quinn was waiting outside the ship when Ruth headed out again. "My lord. Now that you have time to consider the mission..."

None of that. "Problem, captain?"

"Not at all, my lord. I merely note that your schedule has left limited time for the investigation."

"Rathari has an operating base in the Network Access district. His remaining two apprentices guard the place when he's out, which is most of the time." She had to hand it to Darnek: he made his pillow talk count. "He has appeared in at least two locations in the last twenty-four hours seeking

material support; both gang leaders turned him down on the grounds that an angry Sith is cutting down anything associated with him; one gang leader survived this conversation. But the word is out. Whether I seek his location or not, Rathari has to come to me soon."

Quinn pressed his lips together and processed that for a moment. "I see, my lord," he said, clipping every word. "Your conclusion is sound. I await your order."

She couldn't help but grin. "Let's go, then."

### **T2-3. The Center Cannot Hold**

June, 11 ATC – one month before the confirmation of the Wrath

*Fury-class vessel – outskirts of the Corellia system*

Decisions had to be made, and quickly. Quinn was right that the Wrath would probably not sway a system so contaminated with Darth Baras's influence. She just wished she didn't have to fight Imperial soldiers to make the alternative work. They were just following orders. Someday they might be following hers. Until then, she hated thinking of them as enemies.

But what else did she have to bring to bear against Baras? She had her own network, in a way. Most of her Sith sympathizers had left Imperial space in self-imposed exile. Her father would have held no sway here. Darnek-Alexis-Wynston...Wynston was probably a long way away. Of course. She missed the Chiss intelligence agent, his easygoing smile, his conviction in the face of all odds. He might find a way to get in without bloodshed. For all she knew he and his crew might be able to synthesize their own transponder. Combine forces, combine ships...

But he had his own job to do, and she had hers. It would be her and Quinn. She hated putting him in danger, but then, their whole life together had been danger. She could protect him, she prayed.



And it was time to go do so.

### **T3-3. And All Ye Need to Know**

January, 28 ATC – 16.5 years after the confirmation of the Wrath

*Deep space*

Twice. Twice in two months Ruth was summoned before the Emperor. She didn't like it, but she set aside her personal projects and obeyed.

The dark lord slid his heavy shuddering presence through her mind, again, seeming to pause here and there to partake of her thoughts; it was a relief when he withdrew and got to talking. "Wrath. Your mission begins on Nar Shaddaa. You are to pick up the trail of the Jedi known as Larr Gith. You are to destroy her. And her associates. And her loved ones."

"It will be done, master," she said.

"Good." The darkness shivered through her once more, and then the Emperor turned his face away. "Go."

She was always glad to get away from that ship.

\*

Ruth pulled up the files that Imperial Intelligence and the military had on Larr Gith and the Jedi order's resources on Nar Shaddaa. Some of her personal guard would have to come, definitely; let's see, safe houses here, there, some wholly owned businesses thinly veiled by private "owners"; a number of locations a woman on the run could hole up. Nowhere defensible, of course. A Jedi wouldn't be that smart.

By the time she hit the ground, her servants had a fix on one particular building where supposedly the Jedi was meeting with a number of allies. Ruth donned her characteristic black-and-silver mask and said a few words to her troops before she went in. "Larr Gith is supposed to have up to five

Jedi in there. I'll draw them out if I have to. Do not go in after me; the word is that at least one of her allies is capable of formidable mind tricks. Secure the perimeter. I must go in alone."

The antechamber had three Jedi. One was reasonably powerful; the other two were jokes, suited for little more than ornamental flourishes before she got to their master and dispatched him, too, her red sabers dealing efficient death.

Ruth went for the inner hallway, but a flash of awareness prompted her to sidestep just as a blaster bolt tore through where her head had just been and impacted in the far wall.

She looked up to find a sniper crouched on a high shelf. A quick Force yank brought the man crashing to the ground; he fired on the way down, but the shots went wide.

By the time Ruth closed the distance the sniper was on his feet, running gracefully along the wall, bringing out some small device Ruth couldn't identify and didn't care about because the saber attack was going to render it irrelevant.

The small irrelevant device fired a pair of darts, which Ruth didn't recognize until one had nipped her leg and another had embedded itself in her hip. Her first swing at her opponent missed. She slashed again with both sabers. One strike to her opponent's hip, one to the knee. Nicely symmetrical between the two combatants.

There was a small sparking popping noise as the stranger fell. He...rippled...and then the holo image of a human dissolved to reveal a small, neat Chiss with a broken cybernetic implant spitting sparks from his hip.

Ruth hardly felt it when she fell to the ground. Her legs were heavy. Her shock was something else entirely. "Wynston?" she said. "By the Emperor's own name. Wynston. I was sure you'd gotten yourself killed ages ago."

"Ruth," said the Imperial agent, in something approaching a friendly tone. Then he smiled crookedly. "I should kill you. I'm supposed to kill you."

"I thought we agreed not to do that."

"Not quite. We tactfully skirted the subject, as I recall."

"One of these days I'm going to find a man who doesn't have to tactfully skirt the 'let's not kill each other' issue," she said.

"And if you're anything like I remember, you'll despise him for having no conviction greater than himself. Listen, I know you're here to kill Larr Gith. But you mustn't do it."

Her will hardened. She had left Wynston on poor terms, exactly because he complained about her targets. "I have my orders. This one matters."

"Yes. She does. This is more than the average hit, Ruth. Do you have any idea what the Emperor's planning to destroy? You can't, or you wouldn't go along with it."

"Our enemies. All of them. Seems simple enough."

"Your friends, too. He intends to ascend to godhood and he'll do it by killing the rest of us."

"That's ridiculous," she said, but she remembered the creeping malice of the Emperor's contact.

"Larr Gith is leading the team to stop the rituals that are going to make it happen."

"Which means killing me?"

"You're not one of the ritualists the Emperor needs. Larr and the others want you out of the way, but you're not on the absolute kill list. You don't have to be our enemy."

Larr Gith had to die. Ruth knew it to her very core. "I really do."

"Are you telling me you're with the Emperor over all the rest of us? Even knowing he'll kill you?"

"I swore service to him, not you."

"He'll take your son, too."

Her blood turned cold.

"And your – whatever the general is to you now."

"How do you know about Quinn?"

"I'm well-informed. Ruth, please. Listen to me. Turn back. Don't kill Larr Gith. I can help construct convincing circumstances for your failure, if you need. But then you must leave this place."

Her resolve snapped back into place. "No." Somehow she couldn't give another answer.

"I remember when you could hardly stand to hit an armed madman. Now you're telling me you don't care that all life we've ever known will be destroyed?"

"Caring doesn't enter into it. I don't believe you, Wynston."

"I think you do believe me. You know I'm telling the truth. I think caring does enter in, but you're choosing not to."

She was quiet.

"You had a better survival instinct than this. What has he done to you?"

"The Emperor? Given me direction, a purpose. Been a better master than any other I've known."

"If that's the case, you need to get out more."

"I will not be mocked by you."

His pretty face was strained but set in every line. "All right, I won't mock. Will you at least let yourself be saved?"

"No." She couldn't feel her drug-heavy legs, but she raised one sluggish hand to remind him that a Force choke would be easy for her. The Dark Side urged her to it. "For the sake of our friendship I'll let you live. That's the best I can do."

"If you let me walk, it only means I'll be fighting at Larr's side."

"Damn it, Wynston. I have a job to do."

"So do I. I feared we might come into conflict someday, but I never dreamed you would be so completely in the wrong when it happened. I'm fighting for everyone I've ever known here. What are you fighting for?"

"Duty."

He scowled. "Since when did you of all people join the school of stabbing others in the back to fulfill your duty to an unworthy master?"

"Don't you dare."

"And not backstabbing just one person, but the whole galaxy."

Something nagged at the back of her mind. "The galaxy has never been my friend. My master must come first."

"You know, I just might not wait for Larr and company. I'm half tempted to throttle your Emperor myself."

"I won't disobey his command. You don't know...you haven't felt his presence. Nothing you can say would matter, not for this one."

Half his anger dropped into visible shock. "Nothing I can...stars. Is this even you? I had heard...from the Jedi...do you even realize what you're saying?"

She suppressed the definitely not doubt that was definitely not there. "Yes. Cut the theatrics. I'm leaving as soon as your damned drug wears off, and you won't stop me. Larr Gith will die. My master's plans will proceed."

"If that's what you're set on, then I can't afford to worry about what power he has over you." He leveled his blaster. "I'm tired of losing friends like this. But the mission goes on. I'm sorry, Ruth."

"Blast it all. Not you, too." She used the Force to swat the blaster from his hands. He scrambled to his knees, winced at the deep wound in his leg, looked around as if seeking some weapon he could use without having to walk to it. She didn't give him the chance. Her Force choke brought him high, but not too high to bang his wounded leg against the ground. Hurting him was easier than she had expected. His theatrics had her good and mad.

Rather than resisting, Wynston whipped out a second little dart gun and placed two more shots, one falling wide, one planting itself in her neck. The surprise broke her Force concentration. The dizziness followed soon after.

"That's not fair," she said, childish in her lightheadedness.

Even struggling from where he had collapsed to his hands and knees, wounded and breathing hard, he managed a warm, wistful smile. "I'm Intelligence," he said. "If I get into a fair fight, I haven't done my job."

Wynston crawled to her side and drew a slender vibroknife. Her mind was cloudy, but something about the world was gradually warming up, growing more colorful. It was as if part of her were waking up while the rest was falling asleep.

He flicked a switch and the vibroknife hummed to readiness. She couldn't move her limbs to get it away from her throat, but he stopped before it touched her anyway. "Don't you remember anything about fighting the good fight?" he asked quietly.

"Of course I do." She wasn't sure why he would think otherwise. But it didn't matter anymore; his outright war with the Sith was finally in place, it seemed, and she had lost. "You'll look after them for me, won't you? Our Empire. Everybody."

"I always have. Why didn't you?"

Good question. She blinked, frowned. It was hard to think. But she remembered she had a mission, and the mission wasn't to protect anybody. "I can't."

A film of tears glistened in his red eyes as he studied her face. He reached over and deactivated the sabers in her fast-numbing hands. His touch, near as she could tell, was gentle. "It won't end like this," he murmured. "Go to sleep, my friend." She felt him press something small, maybe a scrap of flimsi, into her palm. "I wish I could do more. Just please consider not trying to stab me next time."

You started it, she tried to say, but her voice wouldn't even begin to obey her. Honestly, I should preemptively kill every man I...know. She tried to giggle, but her lungs were too tight. Then shadows overtook her.

Her troops revived her some time later. The Jedi, if she had ever been there, was gone without a trace, as were her allies.

Ruth dismissed her own people and returned to her ship to set course for Quinn's command ship. The compulsive focus on the hunt had faded, and she had promised to help him out if she had time after work. Also she could really use a hug. How she could ignore a direct threat against him and Rylon as she had...she couldn't explain.

She read the flimsi Wynston had left her over and over. It just said, in square precise letters, Darnek Amun. One of his old cover names. Meaningless. Meaningless, but for some reason he had spared her life, given this to her, and made a request for "next time".

It would seem she had a lot to think about.

## Triad 4: Duels

### T1-4. The Enemy Within, Ruth vs. Ruth

March, 10 ATC – 16 months before the confirmation of the Wrath

*Tatooine*

~

*My dear Ruth,*

*Sometimes I think I sense your worry from a distance. Other times I remind myself that I was never that strong a Force sensitive. Maybe I'm imagining it.*

*Or maybe you could use a friendly word.*

*Whatever problem you find, whatever conflict wraps itself around you, always remember who you are and who you're fighting for. Note that I say who, not what. I serve the Empire as well as the next person, but in the end it's the people I'm here for. That includes you.*

*Love always from your father  
Colran*

~

Ruth stood by the edge of a still green lake enclosed by the stone walls of a grotto in Tatooine's desert. The smell of the sand demon's ritual blood still clung to her. Her path on this planet had unfolded only a step or two at a time thus far. She was seeking direction here.

The Force moved in gentle currents around her. Gentle, but with an underlying tension ready to break into storm.

"Get out," she told her companions. They had followed her this far, but would be of no use in her next step.



"Huh?" said Vette.

"I wish to meditate. Alone. Get out, get back to the ship. I'll catch up."

"If you say so."

"As you wish, my lord," added Quinn.

Ruth turned from them both to face the placid water. Something was waiting for her. Ruth knelt to meet it.

Her meditation was uneventful at first. She settled down on her knees, bowed her head, let her hopes and fears join with the flow around her. Minutes passed. Hours. Something was here. In time, it would show itself.

Time faded. Ruth felt only her own breath and a still anticipation. Somehow, at last, she felt someone rise from the pond itself.

She opened her eyes. A woman was walking towards her. Shadows crawled in wreathing tendrils of black-red smoke around her form. Ruth stood to meet a creature that, within that unquiet darkness, was her own twin.

The apparition stopped only a few paces away. "Try not to blink. Soak in what true power looks like." Lovely voice. Her voice. "I'm the embodiment of your true potential. I am what you could be if you had the guts to follow the dark path faithfully."

Ruth looked around the grotto. Everything else looked normal, ordinary. "This is some kind of trick."

"A deadly serious trick," said the apparition. "The kind that can kill you." There was one difference. This apparition had a scar twisting her upper lip. "Shall I prove that I am you? We seek Nomen Karr's padawan, who can see anyone's true nature. If she isn't stopped, she could bring down our master's network of spies among the Republic and Jedi."

Ruth hadn't said that to anyone. "This isn't something to be discussing openly."

"I know your local guide may have crept back within earshot. If she learns too much, we can kill her. Or does that offend you?" A small, derisive laugh. "Don't you see how limited you are by denying the dark? Give up your mercies and embrace the full meaning of the Dark Side of the Force, or you will be destroyed."

"My mercies are what define me. Do you presume to threaten me?"

The apparition sneered. "Yes." She took a step closer. "You are Sith. You walk among Sith. The stench of the light in you will be like rot in their nostrils. Our master will smell it on you and strike you down without mercy."

"I don't fear Baras." His tyranny would only last until she was strong enough to dictate her own terms.

"Then you are a fool. Baras already plots against you. The light blinds you to the truth of your fellows. Baras and the other Sith will have the advantage of deception – deception you allow."

"So they hide? So can I. I can see the darkness I do not share. What else do you have to throw at me?"

"Think this through. This Padawan Baras has had you chasing all this time can destroy him. He has seen it. What if you can seduce her instead, claim her for yourself? Corrupt her. Control her. Add her power to yours. A true master of the dark side could turn this Padawan and use her to destroy Baras, and claim everything he has."

"Aren't you full of helpful ideas. I could work with her better in the light."

"Fool!" snapped the apparition. "One day, the darkness that you reject will overwhelm you."

The vision went for her sabers as Ruth went for her own. Perfectly mirrored motions, perfectly familiar hums. The only part of the apparition that didn't come with that creeping shadow cover was the pair of crimson saber blades.

Ruth tilted her head. "I'm better than you," she said.

She fought.

She would have expected such a twin to match her strike for strike, but it was soon obvious that the shadow didn't have Ruth's speed or focus. Ruth flowed with the will of the Force around her, feeling only warmth, the primal happiness of being in motion, and the steady sense of security she drew from those she traveled with. The shadow was ferocious, but it wasn't keeping up. Ruth turned, danced, felt her opponent's weaknesses as much as seeing them, and – there.

Midstrike, the thing brightened and melted into a white mist. Ruth heard her own voice again, this time from nowhere. "You have proven your way is strong. With this victory, our essence is purified. In this clarity, we shall see."

She had just enough warning to kneel before the vision overtook her. Blinding white; then an encampment in the deep desert, past a Forbidden Pass. She perceived the whole path to it all at once.

"Our journey ends there. Farewell."

The light faded. Ruth opened her eyes and saw the ordinary grotto: no extra shadows, no extra light.

She stood up and pulled out her holocommunicator to dial the ship. Quinn answered instantly.

"My lord. Status?"

"I'm quite all right. I know where to go. Get Sharack and meet me back at these coordinates."

"Right away."

Vette, Quinn, and their guide Sharack awaited Ruth when she reached the ravine. The three dismounted from their speeders. Quinn grabbed a sizeable canteen and presented it to Ruth with a look that almost resembled

concern, except Quinn never expressed personal concern. "My lord. Do you require anything to eat?"

She took a sip to cover her confusion.

"You were out of it for close to a day," Vette said helpfully.

"Interesting." She felt good. Better than good. "I'm ready to work. Thank you." She handed the canteen back. Quinn bowed, then ceded the driver's seat of his speeder to her.

## **T2-4. I Killed the Albatross, Ruth vs. Other**

June, 11 ATC – one month before the confirmation of the Wrath

*Fury-class vessel – outskirts of the Corellia system*

Quinn and Pierce stayed at the controls to send fake docking codes and maneuver the Fury into a hangar. Ruth checked her sabers and met Quinn at the ramp. He took her hand and pressed it, once, then walked beside her to the hangar floor.

He didn't hesitate. Out one of several unmarked doors, down a hallway, into a cross hall, through wide-open blast doors to a large empty chamber. The doors, to her discomfiture, closed behind them.

She stopped to consider that fact. Quinn kept on, falling to parade rest at the center of the room.

"My lord, I regret that our paths must diverge." The moment hung, nonsensical. "I felt I should be here to witness your fate."

"My...fate." What did that mean?

Quinn turned around and leveled his gaze at her. "There is no martial law and no special signal emitter. Baras is my true master. He had me lure you here to have you killed."

With a crisp clarity she felt the room falling down between them. "That's a poor joke, Malavai."

"I fear it isn't a joke at all."

Serious as ever. Perhaps more serious than usual; hard to say. She pulled her lightsabers from their loops. Absurd. Ridiculous. But Baras was his old sponsor, and Baras was a master of shadows. No. Quinn's defining attribute was loyalty. "And what about us? Is there nothing to the vows we've sworn?"

"I have older commitments, my lord." Did his voice shake for just a moment there? "I act today with a heavy heart. But without Baras, I'd have no career. I didn't want to choose between you. But he's forced my hand, and I must side with him."

"Like hell." She scanned the room, looking for an indication of traps or hidden forces. She had to stay on top of the situation. Think, not feel; that was how Quinn always got things done. If she felt right this minute it would break her. "You say you're Baras's man? Walk away now and I'll spare you."

"I cannot do that, my lord."

"Malavai. Walk away." She would not beg. But if it had to happen, she didn't want it to happen like this. She didn't want to be the one to strike him down. She didn't want to activate her lightsabers. But she did anyway.

Wordlessly he touched a button on his wrist console. A rippling series of clicks and hisses accompanied the opening of a dozen or more doors around the chamber. She counted three bulky battle droids and a number of small gun turrets. "I have had the opportunity to observe your fighting style, your strengths and weaknesses. I programmed these droids myself specifically to target you. In case the crossfire alone doesn't cut you down."

No use waiting. Calm focus was beyond her just now; she opened herself to red rage and it propelled her to the nearest turret before anything started firing. Then a thunderous burst, the yelping of blasters, the clank of battle droids. Ruth disabled the first turret and turned around, nearly stumbling face first into a droid's swinging vibroblade.

In the mist of fear and fury she felt the blow before it came and swerved to avoid it. The Force was a nimbus around her, fed by fear, strengthened by a growing hurt. Quinn was still there in the center of the room. He was fiddling with some small metallic thing - likely a repair probe. He was going to force her to finish him first, wasn't he.

When she charged he watched her, his face blank but for cold determination. He drew his blaster, his movements quick and controlled - how often had she admired that precision? - and took aim. Calculation - save as much Force power as she could for the droids - she deflected a flurry of blaster shots until she got in range for the blossom of Force energy that would knock him unconscious. Maybe it was gentle enough for him to survive. She had never been good enough to be sure of that.

She cleared the droids, one at a time, leading them in front of the turrets when she could as she knocked out every mechanical system in the room.

This wasn't right. It wasn't right. Quinn was supposed to be her partner. She was supposed to moderate his harsher inclinations, and they were supposed to make an Empire to be proud of. It had all seemed so simple. They were better than this.

He was already climbing to his feet. She had been too easy on him. He raised his blaster halfway before she slapped it out of his hand. "I should have known," he said. "But I took such pains to calculate correctly."

"You underestimated me when we first met, as well. I would never have called you a slow learner...yet here we are."

Quinn hung his head. "I am at a loss. I have betrayed you, at the behest of your worst enemy." With a very small shudder he forced himself to look

up at her, his expression one of tightly controlled pain. "I don't expect mercy."

She got in close and backhanded him across the face. "Bite your tongue." It was easy to throw him high across the chamber to slam against the opposite wall and rebound to the floor. She walked slowly now, in no hurry. A little concentration, a lot of anger, and she raised him with an invisible hold around his neck. And squeezed.

Suspended in air, clutching at his livid throat, he struggled like any other man. How ordinary he looked. How pathetic. How little like the man she had thought he was. His face turned red and redder while he gasped for breath. This was what it was to want, really want, to kill someone. She had always wondered. She tightened, just because she could, glorying for the first time in the pain she was inflicting. Malavai Quinn wheezed towards death.

Some small thing brushed against the edge of her screaming Force awareness. Her will wavered. She let him drop.

She closed the distance between them and used her boot to roll him face-up. For a few moments he only coughed, gagged, and let his hands twitch. "Get up," she snapped.

The moments were ticking faster now. They couldn't stay undetected forever. Quinn climbed to his feet and instinctively dusted himself off. Appearances above all, she reflected bitterly. "My lord...am I to live?"

"I can make you wish you hadn't." The Force pulsed in her with a rage she had never known. It was intoxicating. It was excruciating. "Give me your hand."

"My lord?" He blinked and offered her his right hand.

"No. The other one." She raised her left hand and tugged the wedding ring off to demonstrate.

He paled a little, but obediently extended his hand. She removed his ring without any of the crushing demonstrations her emotions howled for. She

now held a matching pair of rings. Quick as losing hope she whipped around and threw them into the smoldering heap of droid parts.

She avoided looking at him now. "You made me weak. As no one ever has before, and as no one will again. I shall take your lesson to heart. Come. I have questions for you."

"Of course, my lord."

Before he could take up his accustomed station at her right hand, she rounded on him and punched him in the face with all her might. "Shut up."

He struggled back to his feet, nodded, covered his newly bloodied nose, and fell into step beside her.

### **T3-4. The serpent's tooth, Ruth vs. Rylon**

February, 28 ATC – 16.5 years after the confirmation of the Wrath

*Korriban*

The Jedi Larr Gith had made herself scarce; Ruth had underlings on the trail, but nothing had come up yet. Wynston, too, had been silent. So much the better for him. Ruth passed the time with her own projects, lesser jobs from the Emperor's Hand, dropping in on one or another of the units under Quinn's command to lead them into overpowering victories. She was the unofficial mascot of the regiment Quinn had commanded prior to his promotion; nobody acknowledged this because that would be undignified, but they got more than their share of surprise appearances from her in her spare time.

And then one day the scheduling lined up such that Ruth and Quinn had the chance to visit their son Rylon on Korriban.

Rylon was just about to reach sixteen years of age and a year and a half as a student at the Korriban Academy. He was tall, fair-skinned, identical in



looks to his father apart from the absence of moles and the fact that he wore his black hair shoulder-length and somewhat messy. Ruth had raised him mostly alone; Quinn had been permitted for occasional, usually supervised visits when Ruth was out of town, but Ruth was the parent Rylon knew well.

They met with him in a small side room within the Academy proper. The planet's dry air was no welcome. "Hi there, stranger," said Ruth. "I'm glad your schedule finally opened up."

Rylon made a face. He had clearly been practicing proper Sith hauteur. "Yeah," he said.

"How are things?"

"Okay." He looked over at Quinn, then back to Ruth, and radiated insolence.

"Sabermaster keeping you busy?"

"Yeah."

"Classes are going well?" ventured Quinn.

"Yeah."

"Any interesting courses come up?" said Ruth.

Rylon shrugged. "Not really. I guess I got pulled into an advanced program for some Force meditation stuff. That's been kinda cool."

"Force meditation. Does the mystical side of things interest you?"

He shrugged again. "It's all right."

Ruth stroked her scarred lip to hide the smile. Ladies and gentlemen, she reflected, my son, the great orator.

"I prefer the lightsaber," he added.

"I always did, too," said Ruth. "Beats old tablets and memorized names any day."

"Yeah, your reputation around here isn't really scholarly."

Ruth thought Quinn made a sound, but when she looked, he was innocently studying the far wall.

"Can't get away from your name here," continued Rylon. "Half the acolytes want to kill me just for being your son."

"It gives you practice, doesn't it?"

He rolled his eyes. "You could say that."

"Tell me you're dealing with them harshly," said Quinn. There was genuine concern in his voice.

"I don't leave many survivors, Dad," he said, and for the first time he smiled, proudly.

"I remember how that goes," said Ruth. She disliked wastes of life, but Sith acolytes tended to insist on spending theirs.

"You didn't have half as much to deal with."

"You're probably right. I had it easy, I was nobody."

"Which is why I hear your name a zillion times a day?"

"Well, I didn't stay nobody."

"Yeah. I guess."

"I don't suppose you'd have time to spar with your ageing mother before we have to head out? Training sabers only."

"Nervous about the real ones?" he asked, a dark sly note entering his voice.

"Your father would never forgive me if I killed you, even as a family-bonding activity."

"We'll see if you can."

The three walked over to the yard and, to the curious looks of a number of passersby, selected three training sabers. One for Rylon, two for Ruth, and Quinn stayed on the sidelines, straight and proud as ever.

Rylon set his stance like a textbook model. She recognized the form. The rest she could figure out on the move. She catapulted towards him and got to work.

Where she drew on the Force through a blend of hunger, pleasure, focused determination, and a carefully managed oblique anger, she sensed her son plunging directly into raw fury. The Dark Side surged around him as he flowed from form to form, attacking her. It turned out his textbook was pretty useful. He did a superb job of not being where her two sabers were; he blocked, dodged, spun, managed to keep an attack up without being seriously inconvenienced by her two weapons.

But that anger...she didn't know where it was coming from, only that it was battering. She sought breaks in his defenses, dodged his attacks, used the Force for some acrobatics he wasn't prepared for. He raged.

"You're good," she told him, trying not to let her own confidence waver in the face of that raw, dark, decidedly unchildlike energy.

He didn't respond. He just attacked her.

She lost all interest in gauging his strength, or teaching him defenses against new moves, or enjoying a duel. She wanted to stop this. She struggled to tighten her focus rather than just dumping the full (and eager and straining) power of the anger within her; unmoderated Dark Side pushes were for emergencies, not for her child. She redoubled her physical efforts, finally catching and blocking his blade with one blade of her own. Rather than spin away as usual he bore down on her, hard. Before his

strength could crush her resistance, she brought her other blade to strike his side. "Blood," she said.

He was a ball of Dark Side energy, frustration, anger, something that felt suspiciously like hatred. But after a few seconds he stopped pressing against her straining arm. They held their pose, a grip, a frozen strike.

"Well fought," she told him.

For some reason he responded with a surge of rage. He snarled and withdrew, letting the training saber fall to his side. "Thank you, mother," he said through gritted teeth, and bowed formally.

"Any time." She wanted to give some advice or something, but she was feeling too heartsick to say anything intelligent. "You're strong. But we already knew that."

"Yeah. I gotta go now."

"Take care then, Rylon. We love you."

Rylon looked over her shoulder to Quinn, then back at her. "Yeah. Bye." His turning away was a complete dismissal.

Ruth returned her sabers to the rack and walked out alongside Quinn toward the landing pad.

"He was pushing you hard," observed Quinn.

"Yes," she said unhappily.

"There'll be no stopping him someday." He made it sound like a good thing.

Ruth forced herself to smile. "He's our son. Of course nothing could stop him."

The automated shuttle lifted them away from the planet. Ruth tried to think about something other than Rylon's aggression, but the only other

subject that came to mind was the memory of Wynston saying that the Emperor's plan would kill Rylon. And Wynston condemning her for not caring about that, about anybody. Was that why Rylon was coming out so...so hateful? Because she didn't care? She had never wanted him to hold the Dark Side so close. Was it her fault he was doing it now?

"Malavai?" she said.

"Yes?"

"Are we good people?"

There was a momentary pause.

She continued. "The things we do to support the Empire. What we do in raising Rylon. We're doing the right things for the right reasons. Right?"

"Those are unusual questions."

"Just answer me. Are we good people?"

Quinn reached across the cabin to take her hands in his. "Ruth, you're the best woman I've ever met. And, with one glaring behavioral exception, I'm satisfied with myself as well."

An exception that after many years apart they had learned to live with it. It hadn't been all bad; she used the anger from it to power her fighting prowess to this day. She loved him anyway. She crawled across the cabin to settle beside and partially on him, curling up against his chest. "Good."

## **Triad 5: Fate and Reversal**

### **T1-5. This Heart Within Me Burns**

April, 10 ATC – 15 months before the confirmation of the Wrath

*Fury-class vessel*

~

*Dear Father,*

*Why don't ships have better artificial gravity? At least an anti-shaking feature. Is that too much to ask?*

*Love,  
Ruth*

~

*My dear Ruth,*

*The Force can mitigate it. Staying out of fights helps, too, though I won't tell you how to do your job.*

*Take care of yourself.*

*Love,  
Colran*

~

"I think I'm gonna heave," said Vette.

"Please don't," said Ruth. "We've got enough to clean up around here as it is."

"I avoided what damage I could, my lord," said Quinn.

"I know." They couldn't have expected the Republic fighters that had decided to try to take down an Imperial target of opportunity. And Ruth couldn't really have expected that Quinn would immediately take the pilot's seat and start the most gut-wrenching evasive maneuvers she had ever been subjected to.

He was really good at gut-wrenching evasive maneuvers.

"Where do we go for repairs?" asked Ruth.

"There is a large Imperial fleet nearby gathered around a space dock that will likely have the necessary facilities."

"Take us there, then."

"I'm gonna heave. Seriously. Sorry, Ruth, can't get around it." Vette hustled off.

Ruth followed Quinn onto the bridge; she took a seat while Quinn laid in a course. "Thank you," she told him. "That could've been a lot messier. But when things get demanding you never lead us wrong."

His eyes were all keen satisfaction, as they usually were after a victory, but his delivery was crisp as ever. "I do my best, my lord," he said coolly. How could he speak from all the way across the room when he was standing right there?

"Quinn," she said, and her tongue stuck to the roof of her mouth. "It was a little exciting, wasn't it?"

"We were never in any serious danger, my lord."

Now or never. Now or never. "Isn't it ever exciting anyway?"

She could see the spirit fleeing from his eyes. "My lord?" The title was a wall.

And she was tired of trying to think of ways to bring it up. "I don't want to make this a game. You know I rely on you and you know—" She at least had the pride not to say it. "If you're ever interested, tell me. Otherwise I won't waste your time."

"Of course, my lord." He wasn't even looking at her. He was staring past, at Duty or whatever it was he liked watching so much.

"Of course," she echoed, and made her own retreat.

## **T2-5. Heaven Has No Rage Like Love to Hatred Turned**

June, 11 ATC – 4 weeks before the confirmation of the Wrath

*Fury-class vessel – outer edge of Corellia system*

The docking bay was as she had left it; her signal opened the door and she hurried inside. The crew had gathered in the holotransmitter room.

She had to speak quickly. Her combat power was ebbing and a strangling desire to weep was rising. “There is no transponder. There is no standing military order or system-wide restriction. This trip was a trap orchestrated by him and his master Baras to get me alone and kill me.” She heard several gasps, plus one deep gurgle from Broonmark. “It failed. I still have questions for him, and so he lives. Pierce, restrain him in the cargo bay. No need to be gentle, but I need him lucid and with all his parts attached for questioning. Vette, dig out your old slave collar and put it in the conference room. Jaesa, set course for Corellian orbit. All of you – no medical attention and no cleanup for him. That’s an order.”

Pierce nodded grimly. “Done, milord.” He moved to Quinn’s side lightning-quick and took the captain’s arm, twisting it in a practiced motion until a crack sounded throughout the room. Quinn gasped. Vette and Jaesa winced. Broonmark blipped a small sound of approval.

“Wanted to do that for a long time. I’ll question him if you like, milord.” Pierce glowered down at his prisoner. “And do what needs doing after. You don’t have to be there.”

“Don’t.” It was too tempting. “We’ll discuss this another time. Dismissed, all of you.” And then she fled to her quarters.

The pillow smelled of him. So did the mattress. Ruth choked, sobbed, and settled for the floor. Now, at last, with him gone, with the door closed and her anger locking it tight, she could finally admit she was wounded.



She drifted to sleep after minutes or hours of tears. She awoke feeling torn, inside and out, and she half choked on the fresh bitter awareness that Quinn was still alive.

Something had shaken her will after the previous day's battle. Something that wasn't just her weakness for the man she loved – at least, she didn't think so. Something had saved his life. That something had to be silenced.

She let herself cry while she tried to return to the height of Force awareness she had had in that moment of fury. One warm thick layer of rage for a betrayal that made no sense whatsoever. Then, meditation. Watching, feeling, hating. This for Quinn. This for Baras. Still nothing at the roiling edges of her awareness. This for being a fool. This for Quinn saying "It is a job that has come with great rewards" ever so coolly before leading her in. This for the tears hot on her face, this for the sudden searing realization that every time he had touched her, it had been a lie.

There it was.

It was a living presence. Tiny. Weak. Too close. Far too close.

She wanted to reel back, but the rush of horror only illuminated the new life more brightly. A mere week ago she would have been glad of it, but now she only wanted to distance herself from her womb, as far as she could.

"No."

But it was alive, and Quinn was alive, and in that moment Ruth hated them both with her whole being.

### **T3-5. Not All Those Who Wander are Lost**

February, 28 ATC – 16.5 years after the confirmation of the Wrath

*Deep space*

"Well," said Ruth, "we made it." Departure from Korriban could be slow, unless you were a ranking Sith. Ruth ranked. Now safely in hyperspace, Ruth and Quinn sat on the bridge. Ruth had twisted in her navigator's chair to where she could see Quinn. She held her mask in her hands, though she hadn't worn it all day.

"I need to leave soon," said Quinn.

"Let me drop you off." She smiled, because it was hard not to smile when talking to him. "We'll catch up soon. With him, too."

He frowned. Hard. "No," he breathed.

"Malavai?"

He blinked rapidly, frowned at Ruth, looked away again. "I saw this. Years ago, on Voss. I saw you say those words, just that way." He shook his head as if to dislodge something. "I always assumed that that vision was wishful thinking, some sorcery to tell people what they wanted to hear. But at the same time, part of me hoped it was true. That someday, after all that had to happen, you would be catching up with me. And smiling at it."

"You told us you didn't see anything."

"That was safer." He reached for her hand. "I expected nothing. I deserved nothing. That a vision should gainsay that...I had to think about it before I revealed anything. Who was 'him'? After I found out about Rylon I fantasized it could be he, but...it was safer never to believe that I could deserve that smile again. It was safer to put no stock in what was after all a backwards planet's arcane rituals."

"I thought they were credible."

"You trusted a great deal, my love." He didn't blink. He didn't smile, either until she did.

"Okay," she said, "maybe no points there. Well, what does it mean now? My vision came to pass years ago. Are we flying blind now?"

"We have our plans," he said. "We have our precautions. Our intentions, their resources properly lined up and accounted for. We have a galaxy to impress our will on."

"So, flying blind."

He smiled. He stood up and came to lean over her chair. "I think I know exactly what's going to happen next."

She blinked, assailed by sudden giddiness, and smiled up at him. "I believe you."

## Triad 6: Self-Reliance

### T1-6. Some Work May Yet Be Done

April, 10 ATC – 15 months before the confirmation of the Wrath

*Alderaan*

~

*Dear Father,*

*You've talked about Alderaan. I'm going to see it. This is all part of a Plan, one I hope to see through to conclusion. Hunting the Empire's opponents takes us to odd places. Even when progress seems slow.*

*Much love,  
Ruth*

~

*My dear Ruth,*

*Enjoy the stars. It's like nothing we citizens of the galactic rim ever get to see.*

*Love,  
Colran*

~

Vette clattered into Ruth's room, shocking Ruth out of her concentration. "Hey!" said the Twi'lek. "You'd never guess who I ran into in the Thul cantina."

Ruth tried to think of a clever guess and failed. "You're right, I wouldn't."

"Darnek. Blue Agent-boy, from Nar Shaddaa?"

"Yes, I remember who Darnek is."

She smirked. "I guess you would. His name's Alexis this time around. Sooo, I took the liberty of letting Alexis know you're in town and he should call you."

Ruth jerked upright, still resting one hand on her target databank. "You did what?"

"No need to thank me. I thought, hey, after a few weeks watching you moon over a droid, maybe you could benefit from human - uh, Chiss - contact."

"You twit! Where'd that shock collar you were wearing end up?"

Vette grinned. "I dunno."

"I should buy you a new one. So I can shock you at times like this."

"I'm just looking out for your best interests here, my lord." The faint irony Vette gave to Ruth's title blew up into howling insincerity when the two of them were alone.

"I should return the favor," said Ruth. "Maybe I'll grab the next Twi'lek I see off the streets, give you an introduction."

"Pfft, please. I have standards."

"I could grab the next non-ugly guy. That good enough?"

"No."

"I know this hot Chiss secret agent, I could give you his holofrequency."

"Oh, no. This is all for you. Your current sad sad fixation doesn't care about you." Vette jerked her head in the general direction of the bridge. "Caring? None."

"I'm not fixated."

"Uh-huh. Right. I'll just remind you of that the next time you start actually drooling while you're staring at him. So, since you're 'not fixated' and he doesn't care, you really oughta get out and talk to someone with a pulse. Like Blue-boy."

"Fine. I'll call him."

"Yes!"

"And tell him I'm not interested."

"My lord, why do you never let me help you?"

"Go away," said Ruth, and picked up her data spike again.

\*

She caught up with Vette over dinner. "I called 'Alexis.'"

"You diiiid?"

"I did. I arranged a meeting."

"Did you, now."

"Yes. Nocturnal activities will be involved."

Vette jerked back. "Wow, don't lay all your cards on the table at once or anything."

"You and Quinn are invited."

"...Come again?"

"I told you," said Ruth, smirking, "I wasn't about to jump Alexis. But he may need some firepower for a job he's got tomorrow. So, since my own task is stalled right now, you and me and the captain are going out to work very, very, pre-dawn-early tomorrow."

"You and the captain are. I didn't ask to suffer like that."

"You started this."

Vette matched her stare for stare. "I'll get out someplace where your Organas might be found. A Twi'lek in servant mode can hear a lot. While you're helping Alexis, I might pick up some information on where to look for those people we're actually on planet to find."

"Coincidentally, this plan lets you sleep in."

"It's true! A modest perk, but a big win for morale."

\*

Alexis had more allies, perhaps unsurprisingly. In the predawn light outside the fence of House Cortess he presented the tall and harshly handsome Vector, an ambassador to the sentient Killiks of the countryside. The mission: extract or eliminate the traitor Baroness Cortess. Alexis laid out the plan with cool professionalism. The infiltration was to be fast and decisive. A Sith on hand practically guaranteed victory.

Kaliyo gave an oily purr. "Try to save a little for me," she said, and, seizing Alexis' shirt, kissed him with visible tongue. She gave Ruth a feral little smile, then peeled off for her actual job, providing a distraction for the rest of them. Ruth just kept pace with Alexis.

Quinn stalked along beside her. When he spoke his voice was pitched for her ears alone. "The alien will be shredded in minutes, my lord, and their guards will be alerted to our presence. You can't imagine we'll break in unmolested."

"This is Alexis' show," she whispered. "I trust Kaliyo to make trouble for long enough."

He stepped on a branch, letting off a crack that drew a jump from Vector and a furious glare from Alexis. He didn't seem to care, treading just as though he were racing through a ship. "At least she was assigned a task suited to her abilities."

\*

Baron Cortess seemed surprised that his wife was a traitor to the Empire. It didn't slow him down from ordering her summary execution in the hall where Ruth and Alexis met them. Ruth didn't have the full background, but the sight of a Cortess guard killing an unresisting woman made her sick.

That's when the Killiks closed in.

Ruth drew her sabers but didn't activate. Four monstrous bipeds had entered from the hallway: two legs, four arms, the bodies of insects, their heads antlike, their abdomens hanging behind.

Alexis clearly hadn't had this in his plan. "We're standing in a woman's blood," said the agent. "Can't this wait?"

No, thought Ruth, though she didn't quite know what was happening. "No," said Vector. "House Cortess will make a perfect extension of the hive. These rooms will become egg chambers and membrosia pools. The family can become Joiners."

More Killiks filing in. What had Alexis signed up for with this Vector? Quinn was giving her a look that had the faintest shade of "I told you so." His hand was on his blaster.

"House Cortess opposed the Empire and must be subdued," said Vector. Well, he had a point there. "The nest is growing and must expand its territory."

"I never agreed to anything like that," said Alexis.

"You agreed to an alliance, surely?" The Joiner's tone was mild. "By allowing the Killiks to absorb House Cortess, both the Empire and the nest benefit. Why would you object?"

A surprise change in terms...for mutual benefit, with the added bonus of destroying a proven traitor. Strange people, these Killiks. She eyed the drones around her. She couldn't feel anything from them, apart from the gentle whisper of life that all beings gave off. No emotion, or at least nothing recognizable at the surface. Ruth turned her attention to Alexis. He had the lead in Imperial interests here.

The Chiss scowled. "I won't let you absorb our ally. Would you be satisfied with allowing his people to evacuate while taking his estate?"

"You can't be serious," sputtered the baron. "I have lost enough today! I will not be ejected from my home, from--"

"The Empire will compensate you. I seek to settle with this hive in a way that doesn't result in you becoming one of them."

Vector nodded. "We are not pleased, but we will accept the land without the people."

"Over my dead body," yelled the baron, raising his blaster and opening fire on the nearest Killik soldier.

"Defend the baron," snapped Alexis.

"We stand with you, Alexis," announced Vector. Good enough.



Ruth sprang for a Killik soldier, cutting it down before it could raise a weapon. She felt the tickle of a kolto probe at her back, then saw the sickly red of Quinn's blaster shots coming in over her shoulder. Good. The Killiks were hefty and well armored. Ruth focused on striking at their joints and their heads. Alexis and Vector were nowhere in sight; no matter.

Her stomach twisted when the first wave of drones rose from the tunnels that the vanguard had left. If they came in faster than she could kill, House Cortess was going to be absorbed after all, and possibly her along with it.

She was adapting to their weaknesses, but they were also adapting to hers; their strikes were coming closer, their defenses tightening up. Were they communicating in real time? She didn't care to face a learning enemy with a hundred hands.

The ground shook, throwing several soldiers to the ground. Ruth took advantage and delivered several kill shots before turning to face the newcomer. The monster she found was five times the size of its friends, a bug out of nightmare. Killable. She hoped.

"Stop this," yelled Vector, "and they will retreat." For the first time she and Vector had the same target. The man wielded a sturdy electrostaff with a peculiar grace. He started on one of the behemoth's legs. Ruth moved to take another. Alexis, swift as a bird, darted to a third leg and started a furious but likely doomed operation with his vibroknife. Quinn held back, still firing.

Alexis dodged wild strikes from one of the Killik queen's bladed front legs while Vector danced around the other. Ruth got one middle leg down, slashed and limp. The queen staggered. Quinn scored a powerful burn on the last joint of a back leg. The queen chittered and swung its head low at the nearest target, dealing a long wet-sounding slice to Alexis. The Chiss fell.

Ruth tried to distract the Killik with a punch of raw Force power. It worked; the queen limped around and directed a slash at her. Ruth went into a defensive mode, driving the beast's mandibles away with hard saber slashes.

Then one of its front legs swept in, splitting down Ruth's arm, shocking one lightsaber from her hand, slamming her whole body with pain. She staggered backward. The next swing slashed her belly once and reversed to bite deep. In a final sharp motion it flung her clear of the battle.

Wall. Floor. Pain. Ruth could only pray Vector and Quinn had it together. Um, or not; Quinn strode into her cloudy vision and shifted her to a less twisted position on the floor. He actually unwrapped with a kolto pack. Bad time.

"Not me. Go. Vector."

"Vector is unharmed," muttered the captain.

Ruth watched, though. The Joiner spun and leaped, now striking at the beast's face. Yes. Good. Perfect. Alexis had managed to pull out a blaster. He was dripping blood, but firing with calm determination. Damn. A blaster would have been wise.

The pain in her stomach and arm was starting to ease. Painkillers. Good. Clever. Her vision was still a little shaky, but she might yet be able to help.

Somehow the queen twisted one of its last useful legs around, slamming downward at Vector. Ruth had nothing but panic and pain to work with, but she raised a hand to start Force choking the monster. It was difficult enough with the Light Side even under easy circumstances; here it took her utmost strength. She shoved its head up and back; its legs started working wildly – wildly but blindly. Did bugs even have windpipes to crush? She had to keep its head still.

"Quinn," she gasped. "Vector. No time."

The medic finally sprinted back to useful range, adrenal needle in hand.

Her will gave out moments later and she let her head fall back. She didn't see much of the next minute, but she felt the shudder of the beast hitting the floor. She wondered whether Alexis was still alive. She wondered whether any of her internal organs were spilling out, and whether her left arm was going to work properly.

Something stung her good arm and she twitched. "See that the Killiks are down," she ordered irritably. "See that everyone's okay."

"The situation is under control, my lord," said Quinn. He pulled her shirt away from the gut wound, and his sharp intake of breath scared her more than anything she had seen or heard that day. "I don't have the binder for this," he muttered.

Things faded for a little bit. She thought she heard Quinn yelling, but that made no sense so she ignored it. At length some large presence scooped her up – in spite of the anesthetic, that hurt – and she was carried someplace at speed. Someplace, somewhere, finally to a bed. A nice bed. She was probably going to bleed on it.

"If you don't have those supplies here inside of five minutes, you'll wish the Killiks had gotten to you first." Huh. Quinn was nearby and angry. She gathered her focus and looked around.

Some sort of room, which was nice. Rooms were nice. A massive man in servant's livery was standing by the door. His nice uniform was drenched with blood. "I'm sorry," she said vaguely.

Quinn was a bright glow of some muddled but definitely bad emotion at her side. "Hold still, my lord. You've lost a great deal of blood. We'll have you stabilized and at a kolto facility soon."

"Alexis? Vector?"

"Both alive. They'll heal soon."

Soon and soon. Good. "I'm glad they're being nice about us breaking in."

Somebody else said something in a diffident tone and Quinn looked up with a snarl. "If you have nothing to offer I'll bleed *you*. You must have the factor suppressants at least."

"Don't take their blood," slurred Ruth. "They need it."

He screwed his eyes shut. "Shu- save your breath, my lord. I'm putting you under."

"No. No." Too much going on. Danger.

Too late. Something bit her shoulder. She slept.

## **T2-6. Nor Hell a Fury Like a Woman Scorned**

June, 11 ATC – three weeks before the confirmation of the Wrath

*Fury-class vessel Scorned, formerly designate FS-421A-3C33 – high orbit over Corellia*

Ruth spent a solid forty-eight hours working, pressing against Baras's agents on Corellia, before she gave in to the desire for answers back on the ship.

The cargo bay was pitch dark when she opened the door. Only the smell of sour sweat suggested anyone was in there. She turned on the light to find Quinn beaten, still bloody, and twisted in the attempt to lie down with his forearms bound tightly behind his back. He had taken additional damage since she had seen him last. Pierce's tender handling, no doubt, and no worse than Quinn deserved.

"Can you stand?" she said.

He nodded once and commenced the effort. Most movements, and there were quite a few involved in standing without the use of his arms, looked painful for him. It both hurt and pleased her.

"Have you been fed?"

He nodded. "Jaesa's been bringing rations, my lord," he rasped.

Of course she would. Ruth came around to undo Quinn's bonds. He stretched his arms out and winced at the effort.

A pause.

"I don't suppose it would help to express my regret again," he said.

"Your regret will be the main topic of the rest of your life. If you want to say the words, feel free. Now we're going to talk, but I won't have this smell for it. Return to your quarters. Wash up. Touch a console on the way and you're dead. Meet me in the conference room when you're ready."

He nodded smartly. "Yes, my lord."

She called for Pierce to watch him, and let them go. Meanwhile the slave collar was still on the conference room table where Vette had left it. Ruth wasn't sure why the Twi'lek had decided to keep it in the first place, but it would be useful now.

She paced along one wall, letting her emotions boil. Shoulders back, head high, hands behind her back. And, most importantly, a stiff upper lip. She had every advantage. She would not falter.

Quinn showed up only a couple of minutes later, freshly washed, combed, and immaculate in his uniform. Only a little unshaven. It looked good on him. Bastard.

"Hello," she said.

"My lord." They faced each other, standing at parade rest at opposite ends of the room.

"Do you understand why you're still alive?"

"You indicated that you require information, my lord." He tilted his head ever so slightly. "I also believe you are not yet prepared to kill me. It goes against what you are."

"True." She hated that he knew that. "But you were prepared to kill me. Congratulations, you've got less heart than a Sith Lord. No wonder Baras valued you so highly." She hesitated. He just watched her, expressionless. "Stars, you should've been the Sith, not me." She found herself reaching

out to touch the slave collar. "Start from the beginning. Baras salvaged your career after the Battle of Druckenwell. Secured you an assignment on Balmorra- no plum job, but it was a place where you could exercise your talents for the Empire and be Baras's eyes and ears. Yes?"

"Yes, my lord."

"When did he decide to assign you to me?"

"The moment he sent you, my lord. He forwarded me your dossier before you stepped onto Balmorra."

"And then he told you to leave with me."

"He wanted a close eye on you. Reports on your activities, your day-to-day attitudes. The details of your problem-solving methods. I jumped at the opportunity - to be off Balmorra, making a difference with one of Darth Baras's most effective agents? It was an assignment such as most officers can only dream of." He paused, frowned, calmed his face.

"Continue."

"My lord, reporting your progress soon became a thing of pride. Your dedication, strength, resourcefulness, efficiency...your methods may be unusual, but it was a pleasure to work with you and to ensure that Baras was fully apprised of your accomplishments."

Unusual. What a summary of everything she had tried to show him. She folded her hands behind her and watched.

Quinn looked off to one side. "I didn't want to get involved. I always knew the day might come when I would have to remove you. This is a given when you work for a Sith lord. It took a long time to accept that your loyalty was as true as mine. We served the same master, the same cause. There was nothing we couldn't do together."

"Yes, I remember that phrasing."

He shut his eyes. "You must understand how fortunate I counted myself. To have this mission, this purpose...and the devotion of this woman." His looked to her, the clean dark blue of his eyes painful to behold. "I fell in lo-

"No," she snapped.

He jerked, very slightly. "As you wish, my lord. What we were doing for the Empire, for Baras, it was important work. But when Baras's order regarding you came down, I could not ignore him. I continued to report your whereabouts. The identity of your new handlers."

"You helped his agents track me down."

"Yes."

"Why didn't you make a direct attempt earlier?"

"My cover was still useful. To watch you, to watch the Hand and the Voice especially. The agent blocked any move on Voss. After that, I could not risk revealing myself until I could be sure that you could be disposed of discreetly."

"You've wanted to kill me since Draagh's ambush."

"I didn't want to kill you at all, my lord." How calm a statement it was.

"I assumed when you asked to marry me that your loyalties would lie with me from then on. You know I serve the Empire's good, above any one Darth's personal ambitions. I thought it was what you wanted."

"I hoped I would never have to make that choice. But when the time came...I had a debt."

She took a deep and shaky breath. "Very well. I appreciate you appearing to be honest about the direct questions I know to ask you. I think this is progress." Heat stung behind her eyes. No. She had to control herself. "As for your immediate future. You've never seen me angry for more than a few minutes at a time, so this should be instructive for you. If I recall what I



observed in my Academy days, I can keep you alive and somewhat lucid for the first ten or twenty punishments I can think of." She walked slowly, taking up the slave collar, approaching him. "I can reach into your mind and force you to tell me about the medical solutions that would prolong your life even further." The prospect felt good. She hated that it felt good. She stood before him and reached up with one hand to push the hair away from the back of his neck. "Did you not understand what strength I could have turned on you, but chose not to?" Raise the slave collar into place, move in close, face turned up to him. His breath was warm. His fear was ice-cold. It wouldn't take much to push everything aside and turn this into a kiss.

She clamped the collar down. It hissed, hooked. He didn't make a sound.

She forced herself to stay slow and deliberate in backing away. "You will stay on the ship. You'll submit to being locked up at the order of any of the crew. They all have permission to strike you down if you misbehave or attempt to use a console or holotransmitter, but out of respect for all we've shared I've asked Pierce to actually wait for a new infraction before executing you. Consider your future, Quinn. You don't have a whole lot of it left, but you can make it minimally painful."

"My lord," he said quietly. "I'm sorry."

"Don't be. Your failure was a matter of poor planning and inferior strength, that's all. You served as Sith do. Now I shall exact the price of failure, as Sith do." Words and more words, but she couldn't even begin to express her rage. She pressed the shock button. The collar crackled into action. This was the first time she had ever activated one, but she had seen its like used before: flashing arcs, first just around his neck, then leaping around his hair and shoulders, his chest. Quinn's mouth opened, just a little, but he did not cry out. She was tempted to hold on until he did.

But just watching his involuntary tics sickened her. She released and moved on to the last weapon she had in hand. "One more detail before you're dismissed," she said. "Something I discovered just a couple of days ago. I'm carrying your child."



His pale face flushed. "My lord..."

"My love," she said mockingly. "Congratulations on the good news."

"If I had known...."

"You'd have done the same thing. Play your part to the end, like the dutiful monster you are. I'd have spared you the knowledge, but I want you to understand what you threw away." She turned away. "I leave you to meditate on your happy fatherhood. I have work to do."

*~~~~This is the point in Timeline 2 at which the Lodestone Alternate Universe diverges from Ruth!verse canon. (The entirety of Timeline 1 is common to RMC and Lodestone.) Lodestone is collected in another volume.~~~~*

## **T3-6. Myself Not Least**

February, 28 ATC – 16.5 years after the confirmation of the Wrath

*Dromund Kaas*

Ruth was, temporarily, without staff and without family.

She kept the mask.

She went through lightsaber forms, practicing the rigid focus in flowing application. The Dark Side, yes, but always with a muzzle on. Always. The exercises helped her avoid thinking. They always had.

But thoughts came. Wynston? Alive? Unexpected. Good or bad? She turned, swung, crouched, leaped, feeling only because she was waiting for it the slight resistance of her scarred torso. Why was he fighting her? He had belonged to the Empire as surely as she, and since then she had only grown and confirmed her allegiance. So what did that say about his? Coil, sprint, scythe.

For preparation Ruth had this: she was the best warrior in the galaxy.

Give or take. Thus far she had measured against minions, bodyguards, rivals, masters – a good cross section of her world. But she was sure there would be someone, someday, with greater proficiency with the lightsaber, or else greater fortitude in resisting attacks. Someone, someday, would turn her weapons back upon herself. Someone, someday, would overcome the Wrath.

She trained to keep that day as far away as possible.

## **Triad 7: Friends Silly, Strong, and Secretive**

### **T1-7. And Every Fair From Fair Sometimes Declines**

May, 10 ATC – 14 months before the confirmation of the Wrath

*Fury-class vessel*

~

*Dear Father,*

*I was injured but I got prompt medical treatment. The immediate prospect of death...well, it makes you think. I am where I need to be, and I'm out of immediate danger. I guess that's what matters. I can't be more specific right now. Maybe in person.*

*Don't worry about me. I'm not alone in this.*

*Lots of love,  
Ruth*

~

*My dear Ruth,*

*I worry. Bleeding is something a Sith must cover above all. If it comes down to it, come back to me. I know we don't want to advertise our correspondence but I'd rather be a target with a live daughter than a safe father of a dead child.*

*Love always, your father  
Colran*

~

Alexis had apologized.

While Ruth floated in her kolto tank he'd given another name as some sort of recompense. Wynston, he'd said. He said he would be traveling for a long time, and it would be nice if someone in the Empire knew his real name.

Whether that was true she didn't and might not ever know. But people didn't keep running into people like that by accident. Maybe they would meet again.

Now safely on her ship she tilted her portrait mirror and pulled up the edge of her shirt to look at the damage. Her torso had gotten the best restoration technology available during Alderaan's own civil war – and, by Quinn's scathing account, their poor supply chain. Now she had a puckered field of pink with a definite seam running from under one breast to over one hip. It didn't even look like her, not really. The rest of her was still symmetrical at least. Her arm was healing well. Small victories.

She didn't register the first knock until she heard the second. Hastily pulling her shirt down, she called, "Come in."

It was Quinn. He stood in the doorway, a limit he had held firmly in all circumstances. "My lord." He stopped and looked over her awkward posture. "Are you in pain?" he said sharply.

The overtone was either revealing or wishful thinking. "There's no shortcut to fixing some things. I'm fine."

Quinn managed to look furious without moving a muscle. "You've returned to your feet faster than I expected. Perhaps the agent didn't set us back that far after all."

"Captain, any one of our missions could turn out like this. You know that."

He smoldered. "The ones I've planned didn't."

"I see."

They stood in silence for a few moments. She realized he was trying to formulate another statement about how angry he was at Alexis, Alderaan, Killiks, or possibly all three. "You didn't actually bleed the staff, did you?"

His cheeks colored. "No, my lord."

"Or feed them to the Killiks?"

"The opportunity did not arise, my lord."

"Good. But you didn't come here to..." Check on her? Care? Had he? She didn't have the right to ask. "I mean, why did you come here?" She could hope.

He collected himself and adjusted his posture even more tightly. "It's about Vette. Somehow she's gotten the name of the Moff who blighted my career in the last war. Now she drops it nonsensically in conversation just to bother me."

Ruth rushed to reframe her thoughts. "Broysc, wasn't it?"

"Indeed. She isn't wired for military precision, and there's no filter on that Twi'lek mouth of hers."

It hung in the air a moment too long. "Are you objecting to Twi'leks in general or her specifically?" Ruth said quietly.

He noticed, and retreated. "Specifically, my lord."

Alas, the conflict she couldn't seem to fix. Incurrigibility met intransigence and nobody won. "You might try talking to her informally from time to time. She doesn't bite. She barely even nibbles."

"My lord," he said, pained.

"As you wish. I'll talk to her."

"Thank you, my lord." He bowed, which was as close to entering her quarters as he dared, and seemed to stop himself earlier than usual. He spun on his heel and moved on.

Ruth went to see Vette's little cabin. The Twi'lek was stretched out on the bed, flipping through something on her holo. "Hey," she said brightly when Ruth knocked in the doorway. "How's your life as a medical demonstration?"

"Improving daily. I need to ask you something."

"Make it an easy question, wouldja? I'm not completely woken up yet."

"Broysc," said Ruth.

"Broysc?" said Vette, perking up.

"Broysc," confirmed Ruth.

"Broysc! Broyscety broysc! Has kind of a poetry to it, don't you think?"

"Not in the slightest." Ruth hugged her chest to suppress the painful laughter.

"Jeez! Are you okay?"

"I'm fine. It's nothing I can't walk off."

Vette sobered. "You were really ripped up," she said in a small voice.

There was little to do but agree. "I won."

Vette sat up, then bounded forward in one movement and hugged Ruth gingerly around his shoulders. Ruth hugged her back. But, business must be business. "Broysc?" she added.

"I'll let up. But only because you were laughing, too."

## **T2-7. The Heart Asks Pleasure, First**

June, 11 ATC – three weeks before the confirmation of the Wrath

*Fury-class vessel Scorned, formerly designate FS-421A-3C33 – high orbit over Corellia*

Ruth paced in her bedroom. She had removed all signs of Quinn's residence. Now it was just her, and a series of empty spaces that she had been a fool to let fill.

Love. Friendship. She'd thought they would be enough. In a world as harsh as Korriban and its far-flung children, kindness and fairness were supposed to make a difference.

And yet she'd been stupid enough to think it was enough to change him.

He had always been vicious. He had always been cold. He had always been Baras's. Only her own stupidity had blinded her to those facts. And she had moved worlds for him. Moved anything.

"Ruth?" The sound was from outside.

She didn't want to deal with this. She didn't want to deal with anyone. Yet she set aside her father's lightsaber, the one taken from Baras's minion's corpse. She set aside the red crystal she was substituting for blue.

"Come in, Jaesa," she said.

Her apprentice let herself in and let the door close behind her. "Are you okay?"

"Do you think I'm ever going to be okay again?"

"He was determined to lie to you. But it's just him. We'll still back you up."

"Until when? Until my career takes a turn you disagree with? Until the Emperor's Hand disavows me? Until somebody decides I've outlived my usefulness? How long are we friends, Jaesa?"

She stepped forward, her eyes equal parts sorrow and something Ruth wasn't ready to face. "For good."

### **T3-7. Promises to Keep**

March, 28 ATC – 16.5 years after the confirmation of the Wrath

*Korriban*

Ruth had taken the *Scorned* out to the border of Hutt space, knowing that she would receive interim orders soon. The Emperor's Hand corresponded by holo. Different numbers at different times, but the Servants always congregated around the firm-willed Servant One. It was he who gave Ruth the orders not personally overseen by the Emperor. They had a straightforward relationship. They asked, she answered, in the language she had been trained all her life to speak. Now was no exception.

"What progress have you made in the hunt for Larr Gith?" said Servant One. Servant Three lurked at his shoulder.

"My people are still searching," she said. "She escaped me once on Nar Shaddaa. That will not happen again."

"Of that," Servant One said darkly, "I have no doubt." He exchanged looks with Servant Three. Servant Three made a strange clacking sound, to which Servant One nodded. "There is work to do within the Empire's borders until Gith surfaces again. You would do well to tend to it."

"Point me," she said. This was simple. It was correct. It was what she had been shaped for since she was a child. More or less.

## Triad 8: Lectures on Mercy

### T1-8. A Light From the Shadows Shall Spring

June, 10 ATC – 13 months before the confirmation of the Wrath

*Fury-class vessel*

~

*My dear Ruth,*

*The war ended, but the Jedi remain enemies. Do you meet many? I admit the Jedi are irrevocably locked with the Sith in struggle, but there are men and women of reason.*

*Are they smart enough to negotiate with you? Only time will tell.*

*Your father,  
Colran*

~

*Dear Father,*

*I don't know about reason. But I know about worthwhile.*

*They don't usually negotiate. I don't know what to do about this. Sometimes I think I could fight alongside them, given the right reason. Then I remember: every*



*last Jedi exists to tear down the Empire. The thing I am here to protect. There is no common cause in that. I guess I could try, but...I'm not holding my breath.*

*Missing you,  
Ruth*

~

Alderaan and its injuries were weeks in the past. Ruth gathered her crew – all two of them – in the holo room to view the recorded message that had come in while they were out on errands.

A pretty girl in plain Jedi robes appeared. “Sith,” she said, “I’m Jaesa Willsaam.”

Seeing the face of Baras’ target abruptly hammered home the murders Ruth had committed to draw her attention. She reminded herself that it had been necessary, and Jaesa remained an active threat. A person, sure, but an active threat.

“My Master, Nomen Karr, has no idea I’m sending this message. Let’s be real – we both know this isn’t about us. Our masters pretend otherwise, but this is personal. You and I are only pawns in their private war. And those I care about are caught in the middle. It has to stop.”

“Wow,” said Vette. “I gotta give it to her, she sure has guts.”

“That she does,” said Ruth. It was cause for respect.

“I appreciate directness. Your brutal actions have my attention, but this indirect foolishness is intolerable. This message includes coordinates where I’ll be waiting in my ship. Let’s discuss this face to face. No more nonsense.” The message ended.

It wasn’t the lead Ruth was expecting. It was even better. “Thoughts?” she prompted.

“It may be a trap, my lord,” said Quinn. “Nomen Karr may have put her up to it.”

"Hey, don't listen to Captain Paranoid here," said Vette. "I don't think it's a trap. She sounds real."

Ruth could hope, but she was more inclined toward the trap idea. Still. It could turn up something useful. "We'll go. I think anyone trying to spring a trap on the three of us is tragically misguided."

\*

There was in fact a ship at the designated coordinates, and it let her dock. Naturally two Jedi awaited Ruth in the airlock. Naturally they were total, unfriendly-looking strangers.

A sour-looking blond man addressed his partner. "Well, well, we're going to have to thank Nomen Karr after all. The Sith showed."

"I have an appointment," Ruth offered cheerfully.

"Stand down, Sith," said the other Jedi, a tall dark-skinned man. "The padawan you seek is not here. Master Karr has convinced her to remain in safety."

"That's a pity. She might have learned something."

"A pity for you, too," said the blond. "You were expecting one lowly little padawan to crush, and instead you get us."

"You people and crushing," said Ruth. "I know Jedi are infamous for putting words in other people's mouths, but really, couldn't you choose more original words?"

Vette, behind her, stifled a giggle. The Jedi exchanged uncertain looks.

"I am Ulldin," said the tall man, "and this is Zylix. We are fully trained Jedi Knights and more than your match. You should submit."

"Of course," said the blond Zylix, "we have yet to encounter a Sith who had the sense to surrender. You all seem bent on having us destroy you."

Aggression? He was halfway to living a little already. But also halfway to getting himself killed.

"My quarrel is not with you," she said. "Let's just go our separate ways."

"And we would agree to just let you go...why?" said Zylix.

Uldin raised a cautioning hand. "This Sith hasn't engaged like all the others we've met. If she isn't trying to fight..."

"No," snapped Zylix. "She'll keep hunting Nomen Karr and his padawan. We must end the threat for good."

Ah, time for her favorite reversal. "True Jedi don't attack to kill, friend," she said innocently. "The light side demands temperance."

"Who are you to lecture about the light side? The Sith force us to take measures like this!"

Uldin spoke up. "You pose an exception, Sith. Your vile attempts to hurt Nomen Karr and Jaesa Willsaam are provocation enough."

No. No, the tall man was supposed to be the steady Jedi here. "You seem desperate to justify a fight," she told him.

"That's enough out of you!" yelled Zylix. "It's time to end this."

"No," said Uldin. "I'm not sure. Master Karr claims this Sith means Jaesa harm, but...we have no proof." Yes. Good. If he saved them both he must ever after remember that it was no code-blind Jedi who made peace this time.

"Master Karr's word is proof enough. And she is Sith; it's safe to assume she means no good."

"That's an assumption I cannot make, my friend," said Uldin. "I will not engage. I must walk away, and I urge you to do the same." Then he retreated. He actually walked away, back into the ship.

"You may have fooled him, but your luck ends here," snarled Zylix. Heedless of the odds, he attacked.

"Subdue," she ordered her own people, and leaped to engage. Quinn and Vette fanned out enough to get clear angles of attack. The Jedi was skilled and passionate, but not skilled or passionate enough. She slammed him to the ground before long and kicked the lightsaber from his hands.

"I yield," he yelped, fury hot in his voice. "Damn Uldin for abandoning me. I yield, Sith."

She stayed on guard. "Were you really surprised that a slave to the Code would prove unreliable for his own friends?"

"You're right," he growled. "And it's maddening. But your strength...is there such power in the Dark Side?"

"There's power in freedom, I'll say that much." She smiled as she deactivated her sabers. "And in all your passions, light and dark. I leave you to ponder your future, friend."

Quinn closed in formation as Ruth headed back to the ship. "Was it wise to let him live, my lord?" he said softly.

"In his state? Oh, yes. He'll go home a changed man. Weakened, according to his peers. Ripe with doubt. It will never be enough to kill Jedi as they come, Quinn. We must break their chains and let them destroy their own order."

"Whatever doubts they have, they still fight us."

"That one won't. And his friend will hesitate. Perhaps avoid future battles. Perhaps reflect and begin to see the beauty of shadows."

"Your methods are...unorthodox."

"There's more than one way to win a war, captain."

He tilted his head and didn't say anything. But he seemed satisfied.

## T2-8. Not a Question

July, 11 ATC – two weeks before the confirmation of the Wrath

*Fury-class vessel Scorned – high orbit over Corellia*

Days were speeding by on the blasted Corellia. Ruth returned to orbit every night. Weakness drew her back to Quinn's quarters, where he had been imprisoned for days. She knocked once and let herself in.

He bolted upright. "My lord." He looked all right; bruised here and there, but Ruth had told Pierce and Broommark to lay off the actual bone-breaking and had permitted some medical treatment. She couldn't bring herself to execute the various tortures she kept thinking of, but Quinn still wasn't living comfortably. The shock collar saw to that.

"Sit." She settled on the railing opposite the bunk. "I was just thinking. Here you are, all sad because you failed to kill me and now your master rejects you. And I thought, you might be able to redeem yourself by listening around the ship, putting together what you know of my conversations and movements, divining my plans, sending that information to your master, and then using your position here to finally kill me like you were supposed to."

She watched him closely. At length he spoke: "The thought had occurred to me, my lord."

He wasn't stupid enough to lie. Good. "Do you want to do it?"

"What I want is immaterial at this point."

"So you figured out that much. What's holding you back? Locked doors, collars, even Pierce watching for an excuse to kill you, all that wouldn't stop you. Is it only the fear that Baras will punish you for your delay?"

"No, my lord."

"What's driving you? The notion that he's good for something? The belief that the Servants and my role as Wrath are somehow false or bad for the Empire? Is it Baras's virtue or my inferiority that brought you to this?"

He took her question seriously. He always had, and she'd thought that meant respect. "Baras is a patriot, a powerful man, a man to whom I owe a great deal. He brings order. Efficiency. He knows how to use both cunning and force to resolve a situation. Within the Sith order he is an unparalleled general. What have your Servants done? What has the Emperor done but lend some shadow of fear with his name? The Emperor is distant, faceless, useless in battle. Baras is here. Now. Effective. Worthy of respect."

"An effective general uses his best people. He doesn't move up the expiration date out of paranoia."

"He had his reasons. I merely serve."

"And you thought he was more worth serving than me?"

"My lord," he said, pained. "Your intentions are admirable, but you have enough weaknesses for me to question."

She watched him.

"You've done well." He slowed, seeming to pick his words more carefully now. "But your inexperience will lead you to ruin, and there is one habit in particular that you seem determined to cling to until it destroys you. You keep thinking a talking-to will neutralize your enemies. You subdue them but then let them go – always with some flimsy cover excuse, but those excuses always rang hollow. Mercy for one, for fifty, for a hundred – how many did you simply release? Enemies, my lord. Not innocents. What was the purpose?"

There was a question he had flicked at the edges of but had never dared to directly press in all their time together. "Life, Quinn. Life creates the Force, makes the galaxy vibrant, makes it sing. It gives us our powers. To kill is to diminish it. Let the enemy be broken. Let them be demoralized. But don't

kill in cold blood, not when there is another way." His confusion was writ clear on his face. "Have I not served the Empire? Have I not given us spies, allies, grateful communities to annex, Jedi turned from the fold to a middle way?"

"You have accomplished much. But too often you have allowed powerful enemies to go free."

"I cannot enjoy death. Even when it seems the fastest way." At least, she used to think so. Even as she said it she considered, again, just ending him, on the grounds that the Force contribution of a bastard like that couldn't possibly be that great. Kill him and then rescue a venomous snake somewhere; it would balance out. Instead she sighed. "We never talked like this before."

"I know."

"Does it disturb you?"

"It...explains a great deal, my lord."

He still couldn't understand. Abruptly she felt sick. She stood to leave.

"Do you realize," he asked without looking at her, "what you could be if you set aside those ideals and truly served?"

And what did know of truth? "Yes. I would be a monster, and the Empire I served would not be one worth living in." She stepped into the doorway. "I have to go. A lot of killing to do today, I don't think there's another solution this time. I hope that makes you happy." He just looked at her. She took out the shock collar remote and, holding his gaze, deliberately pressed the button. She held it down while she spoke. "Wait, that last part was a lie."

The spitting, arcing shock went on for some time. He never cried out during these sessions. She hated that strength of will. When she was almost as disgusted with herself as with him, she released, locked the door behind her, and hurried away.

## **T3-8. Dumb Because You Know Me Not, or Dumb Because You Know?**

March, 28 ATC – 16.5 years after the confirmation of the Wrath

*Dromund Kaas – the Niral estate*

Ruth's orders remained the same: kill Larr Gith. Her informants still had nothing for her. It gnawed quietly. She had to go on anyway.

But now, the incoming holocall was tagged Darnek Amun.

Ruth's stomach lurched. She was home alone between meetings. Quinn was out in the field; she had the place to herself. Nervously she accepted the call.

The figure that came up wasn't Wynston. It was a handsome dark-skinned human with big brown eyes and a fashion sense that might have been tolerable somewhere in Republic space, she couldn't be sure.

"My lord Wrath," he said, "thank you for taking my call. Do you remember where we danced on Nar Shaddaa?"

She blinked. What? Oh, but Darnek was supposed to be Wynston's name. Wynston, last she had seen, had had a device that had changed his appearance...and here, Darnek with an unfamiliar face was asking obscure trivia from Ruth and Wynston's shared past. "The Star Cluster casino," she said.

"Anything for me?" he prompted. Identity confirmation.

"Do you remember who we worked for on Dromund Kaas?"

"Obscure question, my lord. You're lucky I have a good memory. That was the city works."



"You look good, Darnek," she observed.

"Don't I, though? And, transmission secure. Now that that's up, please, just call me Wynston. The other names are mostly for routing holocalls and the like."

"I see. Wynston." She eyed her old friend suspiciously. "What's going on?"

"I wanted to talk. Please don't hang up on me, because there's a kill order on you unless you and I can reach an understanding in this conversation."

So he was opening with threatening posturing. Brilliant. "I bet you say that to all the girls."

"Only the ones I care about. Now, you remember what I talked about on Nar Shaddaa?"

"Quite clearly."

"Do you remember the part where you didn't seem to care about your own husband and son being killed by your boss?"

"Yes," she said cautiously. "I don't want to talk about that."

"That's the point. What if I told you we know that the Emperor can lay short-term compulsions, and if he has contact he can override every reservation you've got for a specific task?"

"I would say that's an interesting story."

"I think he's doing it to you to reach Larr Gith. And I don't know where he's going to stop."

She shook her head. "If the Emperor feels like I need an extra layer of motivation to do my job, I don't see how I'm supposed to argue."

"Your job is threatening us all."

"I don't know that."

"I do. I've been a lot of places the last few years, and I've seen very many strange things, and I believe the person who told me about the Emperor's plan was telling the truth. I believe the Emperor will make an effort to destroy all life in the galaxy to maximize his own power. I believe you, and I, and everyone we fight for, will die, if we don't stop him. And I believe Larr Gith is the best chance we have at doing so."

"That's a lot for me to take on faith from a man whose only contact in the last decade has been to try to kill me."

"Try? I could've done it. I'm fond of you, but not fond enough to let you live if I thought you couldn't see reason. Even if you're not one hundred per cent sure about my claims, are you really willing to risk the galaxy for it?"

"This falls a little outside the scope of my job."

"Screw your job. I thought you were interested in helping people."

"I am," she bristled.

"Like who. What has been your contribution to the wellbeing of your fellow sentients lately?"

"Multiple kills on Republic targets."

"That's exactly the opposite of contributing to wellbeing, Ruth."

"It hastens the end of the war, and that's what matters. I've helped General Quinn take several objectives."

"Bloodily. No wellbeing."

"I've...I take care of my son."

"Who spends his time depopulating Korriban Academy. But, you do provide for him. Bravo. What else do you have? For that matter, when's the last time you so much as talked to a friend of yours who isn't named Quinn or Rylon?"

"I spoke with Jaesa a few months back." Not that it was any of his business.  
"Look, I don't know what you're getting at, but I don't like your tone."

"I'm getting at the fact that in your pursuit of a career as Wrath you've become a piss-poor human being. I've seen your campaigns. For a while you avoided collateral damage, at least; nowadays you scarcely seem to notice that either. So tell me, are you the Ruth I could call a friend, or are you the Wrath I have to kill?"

"I'm Ruth. I've always been Ruth."

"You're close to losing it. Any time you're not out murdering something you're hiding away in your own little bubble with only Captain Cardboard for company. Nobody cares if he remains a two-dimensional drone, but you...you were somebody. You can be so much more."

She crossed her arms. "Nice sermon. I liked you better when you were just trying to sleep with me."

"I liked you better when you weren't the Emperor's puppet."

She swallowed hard. It wasn't like that. It wasn't like that at all. She was...she was involved, somewhere, with something good. She was. "You seemed fine with the Wrath for the first few years," she said resentfully.

"Back then you knew how to live with both his orders and constructive efforts. That's no longer happening."

"Ergo you want me to go cuddle up with a Jedi I have direct orders against?"

"Ergo you must at least step aside. Larr Gith and her team must continue."

Her heart sank. "Even if believed you, and even if I wanted to get out of the way to let you have your galaxy-saving adventure. He'll just command me again. If it's a compulsion like you say, I couldn't stop myself."

"You might be able to," he said. "There may be a way. But you'll have to trust me."

"We're not that close anymore, Wynston."

"You're not that close to anything anymore, Ruth. That's your problem. Do you at least believe I care about you?"

"No."

He looked genuinely wounded. Wynston never let slip an expression he didn't want seen, but even knowing that, she felt a quick tug of the heartstrings. She thought about the Emperor's malevolent presence, about Rylon, about the delusions of decency she used to have.

"Still," she said, "I'm willing to hear more. What's the plan?"

"For now? I hang up, you stop chasing Larr, Larr's people don't chase you. I'll call you when I have what we need on this end to arrange a meeting to discuss a resistance method. It should be soon."

"And if the Emperor sends for me before then?"

He smiled crookedly. "I'll keep the tranq gun loaded."

## **Triad 9: The Padawan**

### **T1-9. Thoughts Serenely Sweet**

July, 10 ATC - 1 year before the confirmation of the Wrath

*Hutta*

~

*Dear Father,*

*In the end I've been hunting a person. I have torn down so much of what she relies on, and I wonder...will some Sith do the same for me?*

*Be careful, Father.*

*Much love,  
Ruth*

~

*My dear Ruth,*

*If anyone tries you will stop them. As for your search, an implacable enemy can only be dealt with one way. Don't hesitate if it comes to that.*

*Love,  
Colran*

~

Some Jedi could be dealt with words, as in the trap young Jaesa had laid. Days later when Nomen Karr was located on Hutta and Ruth went to confront him, she found the type of fight she couldn't avoid.

Nomen Karr's Dark Side disintegration was too fast for Ruth to follow, much less encourage. She had come to the end of her long search to kill a Jedi Master, but she found herself dueling a man who was reaching deeper into the Dark Side with every minute, ranting about his enemy Baras and about how fate decreed that he, Nomen Karr, was meant to kill Baras's protégé. The Jedi launched himself at Ruth with nothing short of roaring hatred, and she sank into the flow of the Force to deflect his attacks. And return her own.

Finally he was subdued. "Damn you," he spat, but the blow she had dealt his shoulder kept him even from raising his lightsaber. "Damn you. At least I'll die knowing you'll never find Jaesa."

A clattering from the hall grabbed her attention. Vette turned with her. Quinn was already watching at the door; he gave them a calm nod. Imperial troops entered.

"My lord," said the leader, "Darth Baras sent us in case you..." he checked out the scene... "needed...help. That doesn't seem to be the case."

A uniformed medic hurried in to start tending to Nomen Karr's wounds. "No!" snarled the Jedi. "Baras be damned! I want to die. Then Jaesa will be safe."

"You're past having a say in this," said Ruth. Here it went, after all the questions, all the traps. The padawan who could read a person's true nature must be neutralized for Baras's – for all the Empire's – agents to be safe.

The troops healed what they had to, bound him, then tended to the smaller injuries. Nomen Karr wriggled and drooled. Dark Side corruption was actively boiling across his face from time to time. He was a white-hot fountain of anger, of hatred, of an ugly brittle pride.

"I was going to expose Baras and open the Jedi Council's eyes to his danger. It was my destiny! I will not be reduced to this! I will not be the bait that draws my padawan to you!"

Quinn tilted his head, listening to his earpiece. "My lord," he said, "the guards outside indicate that the padawan is approaching."

"Thank you." Now for the tricky work. Now for what might not have to be murder.

The girl she had seen in the holo – and by "girl" she meant "Ruth's own age," but there was a soft youth to that face – walked in with confidence. "I have come," she said, "and it seems your guards were expecting me."

"Welcome. As I have said before. I have no wish to kill you."

"Release Master Karr." The confidence was only a little brittle. "Your efforts to draw me out have succeeded; I am here."

"Jaesa!" barked Nomen Karr. "No! I told you to stay put! How dare you defy me! All my sacrifices for nothing, you stupid child!" Whatever color

his eyes had been before he had started his desperate effort against Ruth, they were red now.

Jaesa stared at him with evident anguish. "What have you done to him?" she said. "Can this have been inside him all along? No. No one could hide such darkness. You've turned him mad somehow."

"I only exposed what was already there," said Ruth, "and believe me, it was a surprise."

"Is that what you call what you have been doing? You killed my Master Yonlach and my parents. Now you've twisted my Master Karr into some abomination."

Two of those were truths, but had answered her express orders. She had seen no other way. Nomen Karr, on the other hand..."His own hate did this."

Her fear was almost imperceptible. Almost. "Now that you have me, I've no doubt you intend to kill him. I will not let that happen."

"Listen to me, Jaesa. Surrender. I will spare his life. You have the courage it took to come; have the wisdom to ensure this works out for all of us."

"There can be no good end to things working out for you, Sith." Jaesa drew a double-bladed lightsaber.

"Don't engage," Ruth snapped. Vette squeaked and moved aside while Ruth drew her sabers and stood to meet Jaesa's attack.

The girl was...amazing. There was fear in her, anger, disgust, and yet she fought with focus and will, never letting her turbulent emotions get the better of her. Ruth couldn't have balanced it better herself. It was admirable. It might have been effective. But Ruth had more raw strength.

She finally forced Jaesa to her knees and disarmed her. Jaesa stared up at her for a long moment, her bearing proud and fearless even now. "You hesitate to kill me?" she said.

"No one has to die here today," said Ruth, and felt like this was the millionth time she had said it.

"Really." Jaesa regarded her with an unsettling, calculating, wondering stare. "Your actions...reflect only light. You wear a mask, Sith."

Ruth shook her head. "I am what I am. If you cannot reconcile the name to the action, you misunderstand."

"There is nothing to misunderstand about the Sith." She shook her head and looked to the trembling Jedi master. "Both of you wear masks...but his deception is a far uglier one."

Opportunity. "I can show you a better way, Jaesa. Toward the good we know, not the good we are told. Beyond your preconceptions and beyond Jedi lies. You know my power. Let me show you how to wield yours."

The girl was shaken, but there was a quiet core Ruth still couldn't be sure of. "All my life I've put up with deceit and denial," she said thoughtfully. "I thought the Jedi would be different. But you've shown me otherwise. You exposed Master Karr for what he is. It is your power that reveals a person's true nature."

Ruth waited with bated breath.

"I want that conviction. And that purity."

"Then come with me. There's more than darkness to the Sith Empire if you're willing to look and willing to work."

"That's a purpose I can believe in. Let me come with you, then, and learn from you." She paused, looked over at the writhing Jedi Master. "What will you do with Nomen Karr?"

"He must be returned to my master." That was one Ruth doubted she could get around.

"Isn't that a death sentence?"



"As a Jedi he has failed. With the Sith Baras would be glad to let him learn to live."

"I'll defer to you, my lord," she said doubtfully.

"Come," said Ruth. "We have a lot to talk about." And she had to figure out what to do with an apprentice.

But Jaesa had listened. That meant everything.

## **T2-9 The Thousand Natural Shocks**

July, 11 ATC – two weeks before the confirmation of the Wrath

*Corellia*

The conquest of Corellia almost kept Ruth from drowning.

There were seven Jedi in the room along with a scattering of Republic guards. Everyone turned when Ruth entered. She signaled for Jaesa and Pierce to stay by the doorway while she walked a little ways in and permitted the Jedi to surround her. Nobody outside this room mattered. Nobody and nothing, and she had to focus now.

"What is this?" asked one of the Jedi, his clothes and bearing suggesting leadership of some degree. "Sith, stop where you are. You're badly outnumbered."

She spoke to the room in general. "Darth Baras's spy – identify yourself so you don't die with these Jedi."

"Are you suggesting that one of us is Sith?" said the Jedi leader.

"A pathetic trick," said another Jedi. "She's in over her head, and so she makes a desperate play to destabilize us."

Ruth had intelligence that one of Baras's deep cover agents was such a Jedi and was leading this party into a trap. Anybody on Baras's agent list was on Ruth's hit list at the moment. She had to cut as much of his support as she could before striking at him. "Last chance, my fellow Sith. Speak now or die with your pretend brethren."

"Hold. I must speak." A middle-aged brunette stepped forward and bowed slightly to Ruth. "You're becoming a legend among us, my friend. I am thankful you've given me a chance to save myself."

The Jedi leader struggled for words. "Master Inyaje...?"

Inyaje smiled. She smiled with the same smug look Quinn sometimes had. "All these years, right under your nose. I was to lead you to your deaths today. Instead I'll watch my new friend destroy you."

"You really won't, traitor. Did you think I was here to save you?" Ruth drew her saber; a murmur ran around the room, but the Jedi did not move to intercept. "You chose the wrong master. I'll be sure to let him know you failed."

Too late Inyaje went for her weapon. Ruth struck her down before she could raise a defense.

Ruth's awareness burned bright with hatred while she stared at the fallen Sith. From off to one side, the Jedi leader spoke. "She was leading us into a suicide mission, then. We'd be walking to our deaths if not for you."

"Spare me your gratitude," she said. "It sickens me you couldn't see her for what she was. Have you Jedi ever gotten anything right?"

"I think it would be best for us to part in peace. Now," said the leader.

"We should arrest her," said another. "Whether she saved us or not, she's a Sith Lord, and no friend of ours."

She was sick of this kind of jabbering. And she was sick of these "gentle" people who kept picking the wrong fights, then letting themselves get

butchered through their own shortsighted weakness. When one Jedi raised his saber, she ignored the active discussion and charged.

"Master, no!" shouted Jaesa, starting forward.

Pierce barred her path with one arm. "Let her go," he said quietly.

"But they aren't--"

"She finally figured out we're at war. And she needs to fight. Let her go."

Ruth cut down her first opponent. It was so easy to hate these people. She stepped into the churning heat of the Dark Side and wondered why she had made herself stand out in the cold for so long.

"We should help her," said Jaesa.

Pierce considered the circle of Jedi moving around Ruth. "Yeah, let's clean up the edges. After that I'll go out, watch the perimeter. You let her do what she needs."

Ruth killed. No finesse, no precision, no mercy. None of that was necessary. They were fools, all of them, blind fools, and sorry inferior fighters, and Ruth hated them for it. They had let themselves be fooled. She hated herself for it. And so she killed them.

Then there was only her and Jaesa.

They faced each other across a short space strewn with fallen Jedi and soldiers. The horror on the young woman's face brought Ruth up short. "The spy is dead," said Ruth, out of a sudden desire to justify herself.

Jaesa didn't say anything.

Ruth looked around at the dead once more. She knew she had hated them, passionately, less than a minute ago. She knew they had been lied to. She knew they had tried their best for what they believed in, and they had all lost because something bigger and crueler just felt like denying them today.

She turned away so they wouldn't see her crying.

She heard the hum of a deactivating saber and then Jaesa was beside her. They knelt together. Ruth expected Jaesa to attack, for vengeance or punishment or something, but she didn't. She just held Ruth wordlessly for a long time.

### **T3-9. You Come Too**

March, 28 ATC – 16.5 years after the confirmation of the Wrath

*Dromund Kaas – the Niral estate*

Wynston's shocking news about the Emperor still felt fresh after days, but what could Ruth do? She finished coordinating with her lead enforcers via holocall and let them go. She was getting tired. A missed call showed on the holo, and she checked the name: Jaesa Brindel (née Willsaam).

Ruth called back and Jaesa came online almost immediately. As ever, she wore modest robes and had some kind of domestic work in hand. Synthweave something or other. She quickly set it aside. "My lord Wrath," she said, smiling. "Hi."

"Jaesa," said Ruth. "I was a little surprised to hear from you. What's going on?"

"Nothing important, I just thought it's been a while since we chatted."

"I see. I don't suppose you were reminded of this fact by any old friends who may have called you recently?"

Her sabacc face was as bad as ever. "I'm not sure what you mean."

"Handsome Chiss, notorious cradle-robber back in the day, showing up out of nowhere to tell you to pester me?"

"It's not like calling you now and then is a bad thing."

"I'll kill him. I will actually kill that meddling nitwit."

Jaesa's eyes widened. "Don't do that."

"I'm joking. But if he gets in my way again I will. Why don't we change the subject. How are the twins?"

They had talked about their children during sporadic correspondence in the past; Ruth wasn't really sure when that had stopped. Freezing temperatures tended to creep up on you. But Jaesa's Force-sensitive daughters had plenty in common with Ruth's Force-sensitive son, and that meant their respective parents had plenty to talk about.

Somehow she had missed a lot in Jaesa's life. The chatting came as easily as ever, though. The only silences were when Ruth struggled to come up with some non-killing life events of her own to discuss.

"So," said Jaesa, "if a certain Chiss asked me to call, why would he do so? He just said you might need it."

"He's staging an intervention having to do with my supposed awfulness," said Ruth.

The flurry of expressions on Jaesa's face spoke volumes. "That seems a little dramatic," she said weakly.

"Are you going to help me on my return to being a good girl?" inquired Ruth.

"You know I'd love to, if there were anything I could do. I can keep in touch." Jaesa paused. "I've missed you."

"Oh," said Ruth. "To be honest, I've spent most of the last year and a half re-learning how not to hate my ex-husband. Re-husband. I still haven't figured out the vocabulary. That and work were a little overwhelming. I couldn't manage much beyond it." She didn't say that it didn't occur to her to try.

"Tell him I said hi."

"I will, thanks. If Wynston calls you again, tell him he's a blasted nuisance."

"Go easy on him," said Jaesa. "He's still cute."

"Jaesa, I had no idea you were into him."

"Me? Hardly. I'm just echoing your opinion. Reminding you why you like him."

"What can you know about it? He and I were over before I met you."

"Tell that to the look on your face any time he was around. Second worst crush I ever saw the Emperor's Wrath showing."

"You're terrible."

"You're smiling," said Jaesa. "My work here is finished."

"Don't call it work. Let's get together sometime."

"Count on it."

Jaesa hung up.

Ruth wandered the house aimlessly for a little while. She hoped Wynston had better things to do than continue to prod her. She hoped Jaesa wasn't just talking to her out of pity or something.

She felt like she had something to prove, and she had to prove it to herself first. She went out and sat on the veranda that faced the pond and the lily gardens. She thought about the old old times, back when she could trust Wynston enough to dance with him. About talking with Jaesa, the two of them reinforcing each other's connection to the light. About Quinn, the times they were alone ignoring work, the patience and humility he had shown in getting to know her again. She thought about not grasping and clawing for all of it this time.

The Light Side was there, like a song that had never stopped playing in the other room. Her connection was tenuous at best. But she meditated long into the evening, slowly reacquainting herself with the love that ran alongside her bitterness. She wondered why it had taken her so long to notice it.

## Triad 10

### T1-10. Conscience does make cowards of us all

September, 10 ATC – 10 months before the confirmation of the Wrath

*Dromund Kaas*

~

*Dear Father,*

*Some days you win. I'll report.*

*Worlds of love,  
Ruth*

~

Jaesa came with Ruth. It was startling but surprisingly natural. All the same, Ruth left her and Vette on the ship when they traveled to Dromund Kaas for a much-needed resupply.

The visit must necessarily be short. Ruth would meet her father briefly in the city; then she had homework to do.

Quinn came down to the planet with Ruth. He stayed quiet on the shuttle ride down, and stayed close but silent as she parted the Force-blind crowds in the spaceport to get out to the broad outer stairway.

He stopped there at the top of the stairs and took up that taut pose that seemed to take the “rest” out of “parade rest.” His nostrils flared with

some deep breath; beyond that he was motionless as he looked to the dark skyscrapers rising over the rain-lashed jungle.

She hesitated to interrupt his thoughts, but this seemed off even for him. "Captain?"

"The Citadel, my lord," he said. A lightning flash brought out the blue of his eyes for a fraction of a second. "I've been more than ten years in exile...but it is as impressive as I remember."

When she sought further she could feel the longing in him. It didn't seem like something she was supposed to see. "Welcome home," she said quietly.

"Thank you, my lord." No expression. He turned very slightly to look at the floor near her feet. "When you need me again, call for me and I will come." He bowed and strode off toward the taxi stand.

\*

Ruth caught her own taxi to the Kaas City western transit center. There was a long passenger exchange curb there, and she stood just outside the shelter of its plasteel roof, letting the rain soak her hair while she waited for her father's shuttle. Kaas City had a smell like nothing else: rain, durasteel, ozone, and ashes, all heightened by some indefinable energy. She loved it.

The shuttle with her father's license markings finally landed and Ruth bounded to climb inside. Colran Nirral leaned out to offer her a hand in and, laughing, closed the door against the rain.

Colran was rail-thin, of average height, his straight black hair falling about his long face; his eyes were a muted grey, his Sith robes grey and red. There was little resemblance between father and daughter except in the fair skin and something of the shape of the nose and ears.

"I have been dying to talk to you," she started.

"No doubt," he said warmly. "And I to you. Do remember you can contact me if it's an emergency."



"I know. It hasn't been so far, so...comm silence it was."

Colran nodded. "So long as Baras is your master, it's safest for both of us if we minimize the communications he gets the chance to intercept."

"He seems to be as cunning as you said. Almost insane in the level of scheming."

"Sane or not, it's effective. I only know him by reputation and results, but that's enough to...well. I'd like to pick apart everything he's ever said to you, but first things first. How are you?"

"I'm good. I'm really good. I'm a lord now. I mean, the next Lord Niral. The last few months have been exciting. I've learned a lot. Done some great things out there. Done some other things I'm not so happy with, but I'm figuring out how to minimize the damage of my orders."

"That's a balance all Sith have to strike if they care about the damage at all." He leaned forward and clasped her hand. "Do what it takes to maintain your position. You can't help anybody after you've been executed for failing your master."

"I know. He does do great things for the Empire, I'll give him that, but his methods...well. The day will come when that servant-master thing will come up, and then I'll be free of his commands. I'm getting stronger every day."

"I know. Don't rush it, please. Baras is powerful."

"I know. I'm watching him."

Colran nodded. "When I first sent you to old Tremel to fill in his need for a powerful student, I didn't think you would get swung into things quite this quickly."

"Has he been in touch?"

"Only once since you arranged to have him disappear rather than die at Baras's command. He is alive and he is out of Imperial space. We've agreed

not to do any more favors for each other for a while." He smiled wryly. "Thank you, though. He's an old friend, and he deserved better than to die as some casual errand. So! Tell me about your ship. Tell me about your team."

She chattered for a while while her father led her on with questions. Eventually the shuttle came to rest in a small hangar of an estate in the jungle; Colran gave Ruth a hand down from the shuttle, even though she didn't need it, and conducted her inside.

"It sounds like you have a promising group to work with," said Colran. "Earn their love and you'll be well protected."

"'Love' is too serious for Vette. She's a friend, though. Our only real trouble is maintaining Sith Lord dignity while people are around."

"A Sith Lord can laugh with a slave if she wants. Though higher-ranking Sith may not appreciate the joke."

"That's true. As for the captain, again, 'love' isn't the word." Though it might be nice to be. "But I can reason with him, and we get results together. We both respect that. We're in it for the Empire, and that goes a long way."

Colran smiled fondly. "Remember what I said. A greater cause is the single most reliable bond any two people can ever have. Or any group of people, of course."

She nodded. "There's nothing we can't do. You should see him in action, it's incredible how he adapts, how we can cover each other's weak spots, how it...I've got a good team."

His stifled exhalation might have been a laugh. "Good. You'll need it for what's to come."

"I'd like to introduce you to all of them when we have more time."

"I'd like that. For all of them. Listen, if you need any advice about Jaesa. I haven't taken an apprentice in a very long time but I do recall the highlights."

"I'd like that."

Colran sobered. "And your soldier. Has he...is he." He clasped and unclasped his hands. "I know you don't want me to ask this, but is he encouraging you?"

"Not for a minute. - Oh!" The blush showed up both promptly and warmly. "No, he would never. I wasn't...I haven't...."

"I'll be the first to admit I don't know much about courtship," Colran said gently. "Your mother did most of the courting. The only thing I as a Sith could grant her was freedom. Freedom to be herself for a few minutes a week, support for her choices whatever they might be. Freedom to not have to be afraid, even for just a little while, that she's being watched and ordered. Maybe it's not much, but it's something you and I are in a unique position to give."

"I'm not sure he cares about freedom at all. But I'll think about it. Father, I'm trying not to bother him."

"I know. If he's got the least sense--"

"You don't have to start. Um. Anyway, they're really coming together as a crew. Even with our differences. If we're careful we can beat anything."

\*

"My lord. A word, if I may?"

Ruth started. "Of course." Having managed to stop her gushing, she was back on her ship and anxious to go. "Have we finished the maintenance yet?"

"No," said Quinn hesitantly, "that isn't it."

“Oh?”

He looked down at the floor and then seemed to expend some effort to look at her instead. “The fact is, you’ve caused me some difficulty, and I wish to confirm that it was unintentional.”

“I rarely intend to be difficult. Go on.”

“Forgive me if I’m mistaken, but some time ago, it seemed you expressed an interest in me beyond our professional relationship.”

Oh. “I did. Has it been on your mind?”

“Yes, actually.” His voice actually shook. He hurried on. “Which is why I bring it up. I should have said from the beginning that any personal involvement between us could cloud our judgment and compromise your campaigns.”

She had gotten used to their silent stalemate – when had he ever responded to her efforts to convince him he was a human being whose opinions mattered? – and she wasn’t expecting an update, ever. This was a sad excuse if she had ever heard one. How nervous he looked. What courage it must take, to stand up to a Sith Lord and his direct superior, and say anything other than yes. How easy it would be to call his bluff or, failing that, just coerce him.

Yet whatever his reasons, here he was, hiding behind his wisp of an excuse. Asking for it to be enough.

She smiled, trying to stay gracious. She had not been raised to own people. “As usual, I can’t dispute your logic. I am interested in you. If you’re ever more comfortable, I’ll be here. But I will not ask you for anything you’re not willing to give. Not now, not ever.”

What was going through his head just then? She couldn’t tell. “You’ve given me much to think about, my lord,” he said. He gave a small bow and fled.

She leaned on the viewport railing and looked out at nothing. This, giving him what he wanted – in truth, the first thing he had ever requested for his own sake – it was the right thing to do. When someone offered so much of himself so freely, it would take not only an ingrate but a bully to demand the one thing he was keeping for himself.

It would be so much easier if she didn't want him: slim, straight, deceptively understated, utterly fearless. Her strategist. Her pillar of support.

Not hers at all.

That settled that. She watched the stars for a while. The stars went about their business without caring.

## **T2-10. My Unconquerable Soul**

July, 11 ATC – the confirmation of the Wrath

*Korriban*

Corellia was dealt with. There was only one thing left in Ruth's ambition.

She was assigned a landing pad within sight of Korriban Academy. The prize location wasn't for her sake, it was for the sake of a temporary ally, a Dark Council member who had welcomed her into the upper echelons of power. A successful Emperor's Wrath would boost his career nicely. And now, when Darth Baras announced himself to be the Voice of the Emperor and the hand of his will, now, was the time for the Wrath to strike down the impostor.

The Imperial guards in the hallways genuflected as she passed. The students looked in curiosity, the instructors in furtive wonder. No one greeted her as a friend. What few Sith she had left on good terms had left for neutral space or gone to ground, hiding out of her reach. Ruth walked with only Vette, Jaesa, –not anymore–, and Lieutenant Pierce. The former two were quieter than usual. The latter wasn't quite smiling.

"Hold," said the Imperial guard, extending a red and armored arm. "The alien must stay."

"Vette is my personal retainer," said Ruth. "I know for a fact that there's a Mirialan already in that chamber."

"The Mirialan is of the Dark Council."

"And the Twi'lek is of the Wrath. Get out of my way, before I take offense."

And then her ally was there, all smiles and insincere compliments. How fearsome she looked today! Such history she would write!

"Yes," said Ruth. "Shall we?"

The door to the chamber of the Dark Council was metal, inlaid with elaborate patterns inspired by the ancient temples of the planet. One would have to be a fool to think that old meant weak here. It was flanked by a triple row of Imperial guards, who now were kneeling to her ally. They did not rise after.

Her ally raised his hand, and the door swung open.

The chamber of the Dark Council on Korriban was the heart of the Empire's power. It was a high chamber but not an airy one; the air was warm and close, not unlike the classrooms elsewhere in the complex. Perhaps not unlike that, but everything else had changed.

Imperial banners hung ceiling to floor, alternating with bowed and hooded statues. Red lamps hung from high above. And in a lightly curved double row twelve high thrones stood facing one another. Some were empty, some peopled by holo images from elsewhere, some were occupied by flesh and blood, clothing and circuit. The Dark Side of the Force lived here, clouding the diffuse lights. Ruth felt like she could do murder in that atmosphere and barely even feel it.

Good.

Ruth leaned in toward Jaesa. "Kill anyone else who moves." Vette started, but said nothing. Was her trio a credible threat? Maybe not, but if a second Dark Councilor decided to get involved in this fight Ruth wanted to slow them down by any means necessary.

As she walked up behind where Baras stood silent there was a ripple of displeasure among the Council; Ruth waited for it to die down. She wasn't here for their benefit, except to demand the respect of her rank. And that she could not ask of them until Baras was dead.

"You're a very quiet Voice of the Emperor," she said silkily. "Didn't the Emperor warn you of this?"

"I'm merely amused, young one," said Darth Baras. A year and a half ago that might have been a fitting address. No more. But he still wasn't facing her. "My fellows," he said in his best ringing voice, "this is my former apprentice. No doubt you're acquainted with her defiance. She was unworthy of me, so I excised her. Now assist me in destroying this rabble."

Again, dissent, but the voice that carried the most sway said to let Baras fight his own battles.

"Fine," said Darth Baras. "The master will grant the slave's last wish. The Emperor calls for your death. Attack me if you dare."

And did anyone here doubt that he dared? Ruth drew her sabers. "I was never, nor shall I ever be, your slave."

She leaped. The Dark Side welcomed her, but she felt its treacherous currents supporting her enemy, too. If she could have gathered every scrap to herself and starved him of it she would have. He defended himself with one lightsaber and one hand seeming to wield pure energy. Rage fueled her counterattack: rage for every apprentice he had discarded, every fool he had enslaved, above all for the man he had suborned before she even had a chance. He was there in every blow. He gave her more strength than she'd ever had as his dupe.

Even so, she could never be motivated by these again. The Empire was her cause. The people didn't matter.

She stumbled.

Baras pulled his mask aside, revealing for the first time a pale, corrupt visage, withered somewhat from a weight it clearly used to have. Before she could gather her thoughts he dropped his saber and sent twin streams of purple lightning at her. She caught them on her sabers, barely.

And then, with a weight like inevitability come walking, he bore down on her.

"Had enough, child?" he shouted. "Can you feel your grip on life slipping? Why persist in this futile gesture of vengeance? Let go. Embrace your death."

She fought her way up the screaming Force lightning and struck, knocking one of his arms down. Baras had always cultivated hatred and paranoia in his apprentices. He was nothing if not a leader by example. And he was a master of their applications in the Dark Side, practiced since before she was born.

His counterattack wasn't fast enough. He had taken her home, her family, her sense of safety, her illusions of happiness, her love, her love, had taken it all, and she wanted to rip all the corresponding loves away from him too.

Only, he didn't have any.

She was young and strong, and he was afraid. She wasn't supposed to survive Draahg. She wasn't supposed to survive Quinn.

Now, here, she wasn't supposed to survive Baras. But she did.

She stabbed, sometimes biting through his armor, she was sure of it. And after another two swings he staggered. "My powers abandon me!" he cried. It had all the confidence and authority of his every edict. And he believed it, just as much.



She pitched her voice now for everyone. "Confess that you are not the voice of the Emperor."

"No! I call upon the Dark Council to kill this fool! Now! The Emperor commands it!" But the watchers did not stir. Baras turned back to Ruth. "You think you can silence the Emperor's true Voice?"

"I think I know my duty better than that." She wanted to condemn him in stronger words than these. She wanted to tell him he had blighted a year and a half of her life and she wanted to take it out of his own mortality. She wanted to scream the hatred that had seared her every night and poisoned her every day for the last four weeks.

But instead she cut his head off. And it was the single greatest moment of her existence.

She reached to a drawn-faced Vette, who handed her the mask she had had crafted on Corellia. Black and silver and featureless, it was to be the face of the Wrath, now decisively earned.

She took the bows of the Council as her due. She would do good with her power, too, of course. Defend the Empire, all those things she had aspired to. But she was finished with offering mercy to those who stood in her way. And she would do her work alone. At best she would keep servants. Moments like this, dealing out the executions people deserved, she couldn't count on anyone but herself.

### **T3-10. Beauty is Truth, Truth Beauty**

April, 28 ATC – 16.5 years after the confirmation of the Wrath

*Deep space*

It came out of nowhere, in between the minor commands of the Hand. The note from "Darnek Amun" simply had coordinates for a place and time.

Ruth struggled with planning, but ultimately decided to go alone. Depending on how this played out, bringing her own people – Emperor-loyal people – might do more harm than good. And she had some small hope that Wynston wouldn't lead her into a trap after having spared her life once.

She gave Quinn a last kiss for the morning. "I've got one of the hush-hush ops today. I expect to be back tonight, but if it runs late, don't worry." She hadn't yet mentioned Wynston's claims, nor even her contact with him. It didn't seem wise just yet.

"Come home to me soon, my lord," he said lightly.

"I will. I promise."

She knew she had no idea what she was walking into, or who would be on her side.

She left his ship to take her own. She reached the rendezvous point to find a battered-looking Defender-class vessel. She docked, checked her mask, ran her hands over her lightsaber hilts to steady her nerves, and opened the airlock seal.

Wynston in his disguise stood alone. Human, taller than his original self, black-haired, slightly freckled brown skin. Still done out in absolutely horrible-looking street clothes. "Welcome to the Prodigy Burst," he said. "Glad you could make it."

"Glad you haven't shot me yet," she said.

That smile was acutely diplomatic. He beckoned. "Come on. There are introductions to make."

He led her up a narrow stairway and into a big circular room, in which she only noticed one thing.

A statuesque blonde stood in the middle of the room, or what seemed like the middle of the room because she was in it. She wore a long green dress with golden lace here and there. Her flax-colored hair spilled in glossy

waves to her waist. And she was eyeing Ruth with nothing short of amusement.

Ruth wanted to kill her.

Wynston spoke into the silence. "Larr, this is Ruth Niral, the Emperor's Wrath. Ruth, Jedi Master Larr Gith."

Maybe the wanting to kill her was just residue of the Emperor's last order?

"Charmed, I'm sure," said the Jedi in a lilting contralto. Big lustrous eyes, more amber than brown, gave Ruth a slow once-over. "I thought you'd be taller."

No, no, it was just Larr herself.

"So I hear you're helpless against the Emperor's suggestions. I guess we need to fix that."

"I won't be of much help to you until we can block it," said Ruth, then clamped her mouth shut to avoid saying anything foolish. She wanted to kill. She controlled herself.

"The Wrath's expertise will be most useful in the battles to come," Wynston said carefully.

Another voice, rich, smooth, masculine, sounded from the doorway behind Ruth. "I should hope so."

She turned to see a huge Sith Pureblood decked out in black armor and pride. Incredible, profound pride. He was tall, bald, crimson-skinned, handsome as Purebloods went. She had an insane urge to bow.

Once again Wynston took up the slack. "Ruth. Lord Scourge, formerly the Emperor's Wrath."

"Wrath," she said, settling for a nod.

"You may call me Scourge," he said. "I think one active Wrath is enough."

The palpable waves of appraisal were now attacking Ruth from both sides. "So," she said. "Larr. I heard you may be able to assist me in concealing knowledge and shaking off commands. Color me interested."

"Marvelous," purred Larr. "You're here with two of the only people who have thrown off the Emperor's compulsion within close range. That's really more our talent than our training, but maybe you'll manage." She beckoned Ruth to one of the crimson couches along the wall.

"When did you ever face the Emperor?" said Ruth.

"When I killed him," said Larr proudly.

"You killed him, did you?" This must be the Jedi who had inconvenienced the Emperor's Voice back when Ruth was starting out. She must have been staggeringly young at the time. "You didn't do a very thorough job."

Larr shot a quick nervous look at Lord Scourge, then recovered her composure. "Then we'd best be prepared for next time. There's a simple meditation you can start with, and if you can figure that out we can start on the real work."

Better get it over with. Ruth sat facing the Jedi. "Lead me, then."

"Close your eyes. The beginning of a shield is pure intent, a focus from which you can work with...spite, or insecurity, or whatever it is you people use."

If she was trying to work up Ruth's ire, she was succeeding.

Ruth spent a while obeying Larr's instructions, which the Jedi continued to phrase as insultingly as possible.

"Focus," repeated Larr.

"I know how to focus," said Ruth.

"Then do it, Wrath. I never had to do this, but if you need a crutch of some sort, think of some specific desire to focus on."

She bolted to her feet. "You know what? I'll just practice this at home. Thanks for the fun."

"Not so fast," lashed Larr, standing to look down on her. "You're not going anywhere until I'm sure you won't be calling home to him."

"Don't be ridiculous. I wish to practice on my own, well away from you. That's all."

"Your hostility isn't helping matters."

"Neither is yours."

"I don't have anything to prove, Sith. Wynston, I'm trying to work with this one, but she isn't even bothering to cooperate. It was a mistake to bring her."

"No," said Wynston. "It wasn't."

"If you didn't intend to help, Wrath, why did you show up at all?"

"The galaxy's going to blow up if you fail. Isn't that reason enough?"

"Altruism?" Larr scoffed. "I can smell the rot of the Dark Side from here. Give me a more convincing excuse."

Her son. Her husband. "I have my reasons. I don't have to explain them to you."

Lord Scourge caught her eye and gave a very small nod. Something about the corners of his mouth suggested he was pleased.

"Enough," said Ruth. "I'll learn what I have to if it will help, but today's lesson is over." She stalked back out towards the airlock and onto her own ship.

Wynston followed. "Ruth."

She crossed her arms. "This is ridiculous. How did you get mixed up in this circus, anyway? And where did you find that harpy?"

"Ah." Wynston scratched his head. "There was a party on Coruscant, one of my days off, and I...ran into her. One thing led to another, and I heard about this mission she's pursuing now and realized it considerably outweighs my other projects."

Amusement started elbowing out Ruth's irritation. "Just lucky?"

His return grin was knowing. "It led directly to my working on saving the galaxy, didn't it? Force guidance, serendipity, whatever you care to call it. This job falls into the mission statement I've been working at all this time, namely, not getting huge populations of innocent people blown up." He paused. "Ruth, I'm a facilitator. I get people to talk and I get them to stop talking. These rituals, vast life-draining attacks, Force coercion and resistance, it's not a battle I'm equipped to fight. But I'll do anything it takes to bring together the people who are qualified to work on it."

If indeed they were. "I just kill stuff," said Ruth. "I'm not sure what you were thinking there."

"You don't 'just kill stuff,'" he insisted. "If you 'just killed stuff,' one thing would never have led to another back on Dromund Kaas, ages and ages ago."

"Oh, that's sweet. You only sleep with heroes?"

He laughed out loud. "I can't quite say that, but the heroes are the only ones I call back." He leaned forward, patted her shoulder. She permitted the contact. "Tell me you'll stick with it? I know Larr is a handful, but we're talking about the destruction of all life in the galaxy. What's at risk is bigger than one woman's ego."

"Which woman's ego are you worried about?"

He opened his mouth. Hesitated. "Tell me you'll stick with it?" he repeated.

"Yes. I want to...I don't know. I want to have something again."

He nodded. "I'll get you a holofrequency you can call if you need to get in touch with us. You understand we can't leave you the house key."

"I know. Anything I should keep in mind for work in the coming weeks?"

"Think twice before killing Jedi. Better yet, run assignments by your husband to determine the military relevance. If there is none, you can bet it's part of the Emperor's power play."

"All right. Thanks."

"We'll arrange another meeting soon, all right?"

"Sure."

"I'm really glad you came."

"Yeah. Think about ways to keep me away from her throat."

"Ruth," he chided.

"Emperor's compulsion. I can hardly help myself."

"She's teaching you to resist that."

"She's really not convincing me, Wynston. Go on, I've got places to be. I'll get some practice in and we'll continue this later."

## **Triad 11**

### **T1-11. 'Tis Not Too Late to Seek a Newer World**

September, 10 ATC – 10 months before the confirmation of the Wrath

*Taris*

~

*Dear Father,*

*I'm trying to lead. I guess that's something that can't be taught. I know how to be good, because you showed me. How to be in charge? I don't know, but having power inevitably means having power over others.*

*I hope I can do the right thing.*

*Much love,  
Ruth*

~

*My dear Ruth,*

*I know you will. You would never do any less.*

*Love,  
Colran*

~

The time for rest was done, and the padawan Jaesa had settled in, comfortable despite the similarity in age and difference in power. Ruth's work carried on.

The Imperial base on Taris consisted of a landing pad and a large, tattered but potentially structurally sound two-story building. The whole thing was surrounded by a toxic lake that gave off a powerful stench. Beyond the lake Ruth could only make out uneven cliffs composed of broken buildings and vines. A lone ruined skyscraper stood at the center of the base; its doors were blocked off, no doubt because the thing would collapse at the slightest excuse.

"You have got to be kidding me," said Vette.

"Just watch your step," said Ruth. "I'm sure nothing inside the base is both corrosive and deep."



“Keep your corrosive and deep. I’m more worried about the falling.”

A droid directed them from the shuttle pad to the basement door of the active building. She gave it hard consideration and decided that it almost certainly wouldn’t fall down on her. Only a few of the beams sticking out were actually warped and snapped somewhere along the line.

The basement, at least, was set up as a reasonable-looking bunker. Ruth made straight for the largest conference room, which the droid had indicated would be her meeting place.

A wisp of a man was seated at the conference table. One soldier stood guard: a massive fellow with a scarred face, red hair, and a close-cut pointed beard. “Moff Hurdenn,” he said in a deep voice that seemed to shiver the floor, “the Sith is here.”

The little man looked up. “Ah. You must be Lord Niral. Welcome to Taris.”

Lord Niral. Her. The promotion was still recent enough to surprise. “Moff Hurdenn. It’s a pleasure to meet you.”

“I have never had cause to assist Darth Baras before, but I have long been an admirer of his work – and yours, of course.” Ah, right, bootlicker. Disappointing, but it could make her job easy.

“I doubt she came all this way to be fawned on,” said the big soldier in a neutral tone. She liked him already.

“Of course. May I introduce Lieutenant Pierce, on loan from one of our notorious black ops divisions. He is hands down my finest officer. I give you exclusive use of him while you’re on Taris. I trust this will accommodate your every need.”

Ruth and the soldier exchanged looks. There was an energy about him, something pleasingly raw. “What say you, Lieutenant? Are you ready to accommodate me? I can be quite rewarding.” She absolutely didn’t look at Quinn while she was talking; Quinn didn’t so much as blink. Which she didn’t notice because she wasn’t watching for it. That twinge of disappointment could have come from anywhere.

"Rewarding is good," grinned the big man. She would have been unimpressed with the simplicity of the phrasing, but conversation wasn't the thing she had been missing out on.

"Stick with me, then. We may get along. What's our first order of business?"

"Heard we're going after the War Trust. Did some homework. If that is the mission, I'm fully prepped."

"Let's hear it."

He gave her a rundown of the situation on the ground, along with an immediate suggestion for where to start. Some hardware had to be grabbed in the field. "I could triangulate the data we need once we get a few transponders. Moff Hurdenn can't spare the manpower, though."

"I am the manpower. Can you handle the tech here?"

His calculating once-over was over almost before it began. "I can. Got your coordinates here." He handed her a small datapad. "Snag the transponders, I'll figure out where they're going."

"People like you make my job easy, Lieutenant. I'll see you when I have the gear."

"Good hunting, milord." Oh, he had a nice dark grin.

## **T2-11. Nor All Your Tears Wash Out a Word of It**

August, 11 ATC – one month after the confirmation of the Wrath

*Corellia*

As recognized Emperor's Wrath Ruth had spent some time setting up matters on Dromund Kaas, scrambling to grab a share of Darth Baras's intelligence network and killing anything that argued. Now she was back

on Corellia seeking a coup that would help secure her status in the eyes of her fellow Sith. Rescuing (the cooperative subset of) the civilian population was involved, which made it justified.

Now Lieutenant Pierce, whom she had grudgingly accepted as additional firepower with the reasoning that she could keep her eye on one ally at a time, was radiating ire.

"What's on your mind, lieutenant?"

Pierce glared at the city skyline. "Should've been there, my lord. When he led you in. Shouldn't have trusted his word, not when I knew that story he gave us was off."

Ruth shrugged. The anger boiled in her. Her mask itched. "I survived."

"Would've liked to get a shot on him, that's all." Pierce rolled his shoulders and turned, scowling, to face her. "I still could, just say the word."

She hesitated to speak, but eventually decided to risk it. "Should I have seen it?"

Pierce sighed. "No. He was always a pain in the arse, and more interested in regulations than in getting things done when they needed doing...but turning you in? For Baras's sake? I thought you were almost as important to him as his duty was. And I thought his duty lay, however annoyingly, with the Empire - our Empire, not Baras's power grab. How a man can do that to someone he says he loves is beyond me."

"Yes, well. Love's not much of a Sith quality anyway. Certainly not something I'll fall for again. Let's clean up Corellia, hmm? It'll make me feel better."

He scoffed, not in an unfriendly way. "Yeah. I can do that."

### **T3-11. Something There Is That Doesn't Love a Wall**

April, 28 ATC – 16.5 years after the confirmation of the Wrath

*Fury-class vessel Scorned*

If people were going to be meddling in Ruth's personal life, she figured she should preemptively hit at least something. It was like having an illusion of control.

She called Major General Pierce, who had faithfully managed her personal guard and her troops through the years and through all her doubts. She had kept him at a distance most of the time, but he was still quick to answer her call.

"Milord," he said. "Pleasure to see you."

"Likewise. How are the kids?" Never mind the wildly varied ages of Ruth's personal guard; Pierce insisted on calling them kids.

"Doin' well enough. They satisfy in the field, don't they?"

"Oh, yes. The elite guard deserves a raise after some of what I've put them through lately."

"Noted. So what's the occasion for the call?"

"I thought I might talk face to face instead of via secretaries and memos. And I was wondering whether you'd take a jaunt out into the field with me."

He hid his shock well after the first half second. A small smile warmed his face while he considered what to say. "Milord," he drawled. "Thought you'd never ask."

\*

The op was an assignment from the Emperor's Hand, a particularly obstinate installation on a planet at the edge of the Core Worlds. There was no one to intimidate here, nothing to talk about; this was a smash and occupy. Pierce and Ruth didn't exactly talk about their feelings on the way out, but their planning for the attack was companionable enough. Was he personally loyal? Well...he hadn't let her down yet.

The target was an installation inside a high wall; shields protected the place from aerial bombardment. The turrets lining the flat roofs were, they soon discovered, not jokes.

"Got some long-range assault cannons we can tote in," growled Pierce.  
"It'll take a while, though."

"They'll already have put out the alarm from our first attempt," said Ruth.  
"I want to make this fast. One person could start taking those turrets out one by one if they can just get in close."

"Got a plan for that?"

"Yes." Ruth grinned. "Remember that thing we used to do where you would give me a hand up to get that last bit of distance on a Force leap?"

Pierce looked over at the rooftop turrets and back at her. "That's a hell of a distance, milord."

"Yes, it is. Right around the edge of my ability. Hence the extra meter or two from your push would be appreciated."

"Not supposed to catapult you to your death."

"I'll be moving too fast for them to target. Do it."

He looked back up at the rooftops. "Can't believe you made a habit of this maneuver."

"I didn't. It's been years. I always saved it for you."

That got a grin out of him. "Just like old times, eh?"

"Like old times."

He looked around at the waiting guard, examined her expectant face, and laughed. He knelt and laced his fingers together to give her a step. "Let's see it, then."

## Triad 12

### T1-12. I Cannot Say I Love You Not at All

September, 10 ATC – 10 months before the confirmation of the Wrath

*Taris*

~

*My dear Ruth,*

*It's hard, hiding feelings. This is the perpetual difficulty of being a Light Side Sith. You can afford to be open with your closest advisors; if you don't have faith in them, you don't have faith in anything. And that is the one thing worse than Dark Side corruption. Too often the two go hand in hand.*

*Your father,  
Colran*

~

*Dear Father,*

*My inner circle is so small. I'm afraid I can only build so much over time. But I will try.*

*Much love,  
Ruth*

~

Taris, ugly though it was, was rich in targets. Ruth hunted down the first Republic general of the elite War Trust and sent him in chains to Dromund Kaas. Now she had an unexpected lead, a Project Siantide, that the war leader had seemed pleased about. She didn't know why. She moved on to pursue a lead to a second general, who made his stand in the depths of a power plant beneath a particularly dense metal ruin.

His guards opened fire before she could speak. They were laughably easy to defeat. She left the general for last; oddly, he gave up firing as soon as she struck down the last of his people.

"Wow," said the Rodian. "You took them all down?"

"Yes, I did. You're a sorry soldier, General Minst."

"If you've come for Project Siantide...."

So it was important enough for it to spring to mind the moment an enemy burst in. "A sorry soldier but a clever little man. Talk."

But the little Rodian only managed to babble for a few seconds before trailing off and gulping. "Stars, I'm not going to die for this. I'm not General Minst. I'm a standin. He just wanted me to delay you here while the power plant's self-destruct counted down. He had me mute the alarms, then try to stall you." He tapped a button on his wrist console and a PA system stated, calmly, "The system will self-destruct in two minutes." "Minst is in the blast vault with the Project Siantide files."

The thought of surviving this far only to die in a mechanized self-destruct tightened her chest. "How do I get in?"

"Access code sequencer. I have one. H-here." He handed it over. "Please, let me go."

The poor little twerp. "Get out before I start getting upset."

The Rodian didn't have to be told twice.

Quinn was wrapping a kolto press around a shock of a leg wound. "I'll be unable to keep up with you on foot, my lord," he said. "Get to the surface alone before it's too late. You can clean out the vault once you have support."

Was that calculation really his first thought? "Not likely. We're both going for the vault now. I'll start on the entry sequencer. You catch up at whatever pace you can."

Ruth sprinted in the direction the Rodian had indicated. She found the computer terminal beside a big blast door and inserted the code sequencer. The screen came to life and started scrolling a nonsensical stream of numbers. Then started prompting for manual entries. Great. Ruth scanned the screen for confirmation codes and started entering them.

"The reactor core will self-destruct in sixty seconds."

Quinn limped up beside her. "How long is this entry sequence supposed to take?"

"I'm not sure. Just sit tight. I've got this." She could almost believe herself.

"Of course, my lord."

No time. She could keep up with the manual entry parts, but the damned sequencer was dragging while the countdown continued. Of all the stupid places to die, it would be here, against a reactor explosion she couldn't even raise a lightsaber against. Type, hurry, type.

Thirty seconds. Twenty. The console hiccupped. Unacceptable. An oddly funny question floated to mind as she worked. "Any last words, captain?"

Tap tap, tap tap tap went her fingers on the console. "I believe you know how I feel about you, my lord," Quinn said quietly.

Her fingers finished the sequence on their own, which was good; her brain fuzzed out for a moment there. Only the sweep of the vault door pulled her out of it.



"Vault lock disarming," said the console.

She sprinted alongside Quinn into the vault and the great door crashed shut again. Quinn stumbled on his injured leg and fell, but he was inside and safe. Behind them they heard the roaring blast of the self-destruct.

A uniformed Rodian stood before them. "That was reckless, Sith," said the alien. "You could have killed us all."

*I believe you know* – right, her target. "We'll talk later, hmm?" She walked straight up and punched him, hard. He fell.

Her heart pounded so hard she could feel it all over. Even with the mortal danger gone. She was safe, she and the captain were safe, they were safe. *I believe you know* how I feel about you. It could mean anything or nothing.

Quinn had seated himself with his damaged leg stretched out before him. He avoided eye contact. Of course he would. She stood awkwardly for a long moment.

"What did that mean?" she asked.

"You...know I hold you in the utmost regard," he said. A few things seemed to show around the edges of his tense expression. The only one she could identify was fear. "And it is an honor to serve you."

"I see," she said. His statement was either a disappointment or a lie, and the act of lying would be disappointing, too. "Let's get moving." She approached, intending to help him up and on his way.

He recoiled. "That won't be necessary, my lord."

"Don't be ridiculous. I'm not going to hurt you."

"Th-the general," he said. "We'll need to move him, too. That means calling in support, unless you think you can assist me and carry him at the same time."

"Ah. You're right. I'd rather wait for reinforcements to bring him out...we'll need to keep him subdued until then."

"Sedatives. Here." He pulled something out of his satchel and handed it to her. He winced from the effort of holding it up.

"What's wrong?" she said suspiciously.

"Nothing, my lord."

She sedated General Minst while Quinn got to work on his wounded leg. When she started watching him, she saw his movements definitely betrayed a problem with one arm. She walked around him to see a large blackened blaster wound behind one shoulder.

"Damn. Quinn, why didn't you speak up?" She knelt to take a closer look.

"That's not necessary, my lord. I'll tend to it when we get back."

"You won't be able to use your arm by the time we get back." She grabbed a medpac from his satchel.

He jerked away before she could touch him. "My lord, please."

"You're no good to me bleeding out," she snapped in a particularly irritable variant of her command voice. "Hold still."

The site was mostly scorch mark and blood. "The jacket comes off," she said. He hurried to start the process himself, but he didn't have the mobility to finish the job. She helped peel the soaked uniform jacket away from the wound and off his arm. "Shirt, too."

"No," he said in a strangled tone. "Cut away what you must."

"If you insist. Vibroknife?"

He offered it to her in silence.

In the past when Vette or other allies were wounded and there was some time to explain, Quinn had taught Ruth some proper first aid. She cut enough of that thin synthsilk shirt – armor in his mind, it seemed – from around the wound to evaluate the damage and start her work. This shot had struck deep. It would need real attention when they got back to a medical facility, but she could at least numb and patch the worst of it. She worked quickly, carefully, silently. Her mind was still racing. It unhelpfully supplied every possible way she could touch him from here, every contour she could trace while she had him, every way she could reassert being alive just then. It echoed: *I believe you know how I feel about you.* He held very still apart from the occasional shiver when she reached away for a moment and then set her fingertips back on his skin to work. His whole manner screamed of the desire to be out of her reach, anywhere but here. She made an effort not to let her hands linger too long, not to make this, whatever this was, harder for him.

She did what she could for the wound. “I hope that wasn’t too painful,” she said.

He didn’t say anything. But when she stood, he reached up with his good arm to grab her hand. He pulled himself to his feet, then let go. “Thank you, my lord,” he said quietly.

For patching him up, or for not asking or doing any of the things he must know she...? “You’re welcome.” He finally looked her in the eye, if only for a moment. She decided to continue. “You know I hold you in the utmost regard, Quinn. And you know I feel...” she paused deliberately... “that it’s an honor to serve with you.”

He nodded. “That’s it exactly,” he said gruffly.

Wrong. Why was he doing this? Ruth took out her holocommunicator to call in support from Lieutenant Pierce. *I believe you know how I feel about you.* This time when the big man greeted her she had nothing flirtatious to say.

## T2-12. And Hid His Face Amid a Cloud of Stars

September, 11 ATC – 2 months after the confirmation of the Wrath

*Dromund Kaas*

Ruth looked around the Citadel conference room. It was an adequate place to conduct cleanup business before her work as Wrath took her back out on the move.

Just some cleanup business.

Right on time, somebody opened the door and escorted Malavai Quinn in. Ruth didn't even process who the somebody was; she only knew that the door closed and left her alone with Quinn. He was uncollared now. Between the two of them they knew where ownership lay; the shock collar was redundant. She could afford him the dignity of leaving it behind.

They faced each other in silence across the length of the conference table. When she was sure she could keep her breath steady, she started.

"Your master is dead, and I am sick of revenge." Her thoughts shattered at the look on his face. She fixed her eyes on the wall and found herself still talking. "It's meaningless to talk of forgiveness between us. If I set you free you will come for me, soon or late. You will watch for weakness. Call me a liability to the Empire. Exact your revenge. This is your nature. Nevertheless I must free you. The war effort needs you alive, Quinn. The Empire needs you. The enemy is out there and I will not destroy a man so well qualified to fight it. So you shall live. I've unfrozen your accounts. I shall write a recommendation for any post you desire. When the time comes – when the time comes, you can see the child. Under supervision, of course." The terms were too generous. They hurt less than the prospect of the alternatives. Even now she couldn't deny him that.

He was calm. Steady. "Will you be resuming your campaign against the Republic, my lord?"

"Yes."

"And if I asked to serve you? Knowing how well we work together. Knowing what a difference you and I could make. Knowing I would submit to your command without reservation."

"If you asked, I would spit in your eye." He flinched. "Any other stupid questions?"

"No, my lord."

"Good. Coordinate with Jaesa for your passage offworld and any other resources you require."

She jerked her chin toward the door and he obeyed, heading to the doorway. "One final thing," she said. "I love you. I'll go to my grave loving you. And for that above all, I will never forgive you." An ugly truth, and something she didn't care to carry alone. "Dismissed."

## **T3-12. All That Is Gold Does Not Glitter**

April, 28 ATC – 16.5 years after the confirmation of the Wrath

*Fury-class vessel Scorned*

It wasn't Wynston who contacted Ruth again. It was the big Pureblood named Lord Scourge.

"Wrath," he said. "We should talk. Alone."

He spoke it like an order. "Is there a reason I would want to do so?"

"Hmm. So you have a little sense. I wish to discuss matters with you without the Jedi around."

"You know I'm not supposed to talk details before we've ensured I won't just be spilling everything to my master."

"I have an idea in mind for that," he said coolly.

Strange man, who spoke so to someone who admittedly had been her ranking equal. "I'm listening."

"How soon can you reach these coordinates?" A console at the base of the holoprojector lit up.

She checked. "Under three hours. I can come now."

"Good. There is no time to waste."

It was a back room in a third-rate casino in Nar Shaddaa where Scourge met her. He handed something off to the valet and closed the door. "You weren't followed?" he said shortly.

"I wasn't. I didn't bring anyone to the planet, either." She had left her mask on her ship. A woman alone drew less attention than an individual wearing the mask of the Emperor's Wrath.

"Good." He stood facing her and folded his arms over his chest. "Your friend thinks we should work with you. I think we should remove you."

"Is that so. Who do you think would take my place as Wrath? At least I am sympathetic to your goals."

"You're worse than useless if he gains knowledge of us from you." Scourge leaned forward. "Make no mistake. If the Emperor summons you before I believe you are ready, I will strike you down."

"You'll try. Did you just bring me here to threaten me?"

"No. Let me explain the history of the matter at hand. Long ago I had a vision of a Jedi Knight who would strike the Emperor down. Long ago, I thought it was someone...but that someone failed. Larr Gith is the one I brought to her fate, and I brought her because I knew of the Emperor's

plan for destruction. That was sixteen years ago. The fight went quickly. Perhaps too easily. I stayed with her for a time out of suspicion. But when no further signs of the Emperor surfaced, I left her...less than desirable...company."

"What, are blondes not your type?"

Lord Scourge sneered. "She is selfish. Petty. Vain. But useful. When rumors and ritualists started coming up again, I took the field. I found the same pattern, the same plan as before. Somehow the Emperor has returned. I must stop him. Whatever I think of her, Larr Gith retains the gifts she had. She is indispensable. Your Wynston invited himself. He has proved useful in stymieing several operations already. Now he invites you. I am not convinced you are needed and I know that in the Jedi's eyes you're not wanted. Yet here you are."

"If I wanted to be wanted I would up the makeup, lower the neckline, and stop by the local cantina. If all life in the galaxy is at stake, my place is with the people trying to stop it."

"Why?" he demanded.

"I happen to enjoy existence," she said dryly.

He shook his head and grabbed her, first with his red red eyes, then with a hard grip on her shoulders. He pulled her close, half lifting her to get nearer. She was too startled to fight back while he stared down into her, seeking.

"You're in love," he murmured, his lip curling.

She wrenched herself free. "What I am is of no concern to you."

"It is very much my concern. But this is intriguing. He has spared you."

"Spared me what?"

"Emptiness," he said. "I do not love, Wrath, and I did not expect the Emperor to allow my successor to nurse that weakness. It was pure

necessity that led me to the Jedi the first time, and again now. Requirement. Survival, the bare fact of it. But you are here to defend something, with passion." He kept studying her face, her eyes. "I wonder how that will change matters."

She stepped back. He had no right to search her. None. "My feelings are my own. Do not lay hands on me again, Scourge."

He seemed amused. "I like your tone. Letting you leave this room alive may not ruin us after all. Be warned that the Emperor will suspect obvious Light Side walls, and he can see through most Dark Side passions. They are his native element. Yet with enough intensity you can hide some things if you must. Hide my face and those of my associates. Hide your knowledge of his plan. Hide it in that interesting defensive anger that feeds off your love. Cover it well." He quieted down and sank into thought.

"Do you even understand how he returned?" she asked him.

"No."

"Your Jedi killed the Emperor's Voice. A vessel, nothing more. A vessel for a good amount of his will and power, yes, but so long as his true form exists in safety, he cannot be killed."

"I had long suspected something like that. Continue."

"I don't know where this form is kept. I am led and commanded by his Voice."

"As was I, if this is how things always were. Though I expect he may have invented this in response to my duplicity."

"Two things can seriously inconvenience him: the destruction of the Voice, which can be compensated for by a ritual to imbue a new vessel, or the imprisonment of the Voice. He had to get me to help him for that once."

"You saw him imprisoned? Where?"



"Voss. I don't know the details of how Darth Baras did it, but he was trapped by an entity called Sel'Makor in the depths of the Dark Heart there."

Scourge made a face she couldn't quite read. "We will not be able to replicate that trap."

"Why not?"

"Larr Gith killed Sel'Makor, or rather witnessed his destruction."

"Oh. Well done, that was very helpful."

Scourge gestured dismissively. "He didn't seem useful at the time."

"We'll have to find another way."

"Why? Inconveniencing the Voice will only be a holding measure."

"It'll buy us time to locate his true form, yes?"

He didn't say anything. He just looked at her for a while.

She met him stare for stare. "Was there something else you wanted to accomplish here, Scourge?"

"No. This has proved illuminating. I will inform the others of what you have told me. You will meet with Larr Gith soon to continue your exercises. I am...curious...to see you in action."

"That curiosity is mutual."

He favored her with a dark smile. "Prepare yourself. Meet with us tomorrow."

"I intend to." With that, Ruth walked out.

Back on her ship she had a missed message from Quinn. She called him.

"Ruth. We had dinner planned; you missed it. Is everything all right?"

"Oh! Oh, yes, I'm sorry, Malavai, I...work ran late. I should have called."

"It's no trouble. I know they've been keeping you busy lately."

Trouble? It was all trouble. And it would only get busier. "That's no reason to neglect you. I'll be home in a couple of hours. See you then?"

"Of course."

"Malavai?"

He paused in leaning toward his own holo control. "Yes?"

"I love you."

He smiled. "A fact I am always grateful for. I love you, too."

Something to keep in mind the next time she thought she was alone in this strange and thus far thankless effort. She laid in a course and started homeward.

## Triad 13

### T1-13. Hang a Lantern Aloft

October, 10 ATC – 9 months before the confirmation of the Wrath

*Neutral space*

~

*Dear Father,*

*My formal education doesn't matter for much these days. I was a student who learned things, but I'm now an apprentice who kills things. I doubt I could hold down a philosophical conversation with anybody these days.*

*Not that that'll keep me from trying.*

*Lots of love,  
Ruth*

~

Jaesa followed Ruth out of the holo room. "I can't believe you let Vette win."

"Who said anything about letting her win? Maybe I'm naturally bad at holochess."

"Maybe you knew she was having a rough day and decided to sneakily throw the game." Jaesa crossed her arms. "I can tell, master."

"You have everything it takes to be a real nuisance, you know that?"

Jaesa only smiled. "There is joy on this ship. Yet you hide it in darkness."

"That's just the Imperial aesthetic for you." She scanned the black-and-gray walls and the dim red piping that served for illumination. "I'm used to it. Good things aren't restricted to the realm of sunshine and flowers."

Jaesa stared at her for a distressingly long time. "You are not Sith, master."

"Yes, I am. Sorry to disappoint."

"No. The Light Side is strong in you. You have clarity and kindness. You hide among the Sith, yet spare lives and leave places better than how you found them."

"None of that excludes being Sith. What part of our code says I have to put on billowing robes and kill children? 'Peace is a lie.' Just look at your own people, at Nomen Karr who was a respected master. There was no peace. 'There is only passion' – a matter I refuse to deny or apologize for. Love is a passion, yes? And joy as well. Unpopular, but not un-Sith. 'Through passion, I gain strength; through strength, power; through power, victory.' Victory for my master, for my personal interests – and for the things and

people I care about. For my Empire. 'Through victory my chains are broken. The Force shall free me.' My identity as Sith is what permits me to make a difference in the galaxy."

"I...think I understand, master."

"Don't tell yourself I would make a good Jedi. 'There is no emotion, there is peace'? When has silencing your emotions ever helped you, Jaesa? When did trying to deny them benefit any Jedi? 'There is no ignorance, there is knowledge'? Only the knowledge you seek and seize yourself. Ignorance does exist, and it kills. Sitting there meditating won't give you the insights that let you survive, nor the information that will preserve the ones you love. 'There is no passion, there is serenity'? Perhaps for the dead. Looking at you, at my crew, at my homeland, at a sky full of stars - everything excites passion. As it should. 'There is no chaos, there is harmony'? Not in any world I live in. It's in the strife and the chaos that one learns one's own strength. The only harmony is that imposed from above, as the Jedi Council tries to do, and that is a coerced silence, not a true peace. Better chaos than that. 'There is no death, there is the Force'? That I cannot speak to; but given how the code has performed so far, I have little reason to place faith in it."

"If your way is Sith, then why are there so few like you?"

"They didn't have my teacher. They never saw anything but the violence of the hardline Sith, and they learned what they saw."

"But you could teach more. Perhaps more are out there, in hiding."

"It's difficult enough to survive without going looking for others. Perhaps there are those who stay inactive because they can't defend themselves, but what can we do about it? Let it be enough that their hearts are in the right place."

"We should find them, Master. Show them they're not alone."

Ruth stared. "Do you have any idea...no. You've never lived in Imperial space. The Sith would destroy you for such an effort. Learn to hide yourself

first, Jaesa. Learn to survive. If the Dark Siders suspect you, the best intentions in the galaxy will not be enough to save you...or your friends."

Jaesa's look was almost calculating. "You've thought about this."

"Lessons my father taught me, that's all. In time, if it's safe, you may meet him. He's a good man and a proud Sith. I think he'll like you."

## **T2-13. What's in a Name?**

September, 11 ATC – 2 months after the confirmation of the Wrath

*Dromund Kaas – the Niral estate*

"Rylon?" said Vette.

Ruth looked up from her half-finished battle plan, one of an endless progression for the Wrath, and laid a hand on her rounded belly. "Yes."

"Wasn't that the name of that secret agent for Baras that you hunted down and killed on Balmorra?"

"That's the one."

"...Want to elaborate on your reasoning here?"

Ruth's mouth turned down, hard. "He's the person who brought me and the father together. I thought it was romantic."

"You just out-sarcasted my last six months of talking."

"With this name for this child I can honor not one, but two living lies. Plus, the name will be a perpetual reminder of the first warning sign about both the deviousness and the fate of Baras's servants that I ignored because I didn't want to see it."

"Well," said Vette, "that's certainly...unhealthy and kind of disturbing."

"It expresses my feelings on the subject well enough. Besides, 'Peace is a Lie' is too many words for a legal name. It's a pity I never intend to get close enough to see the father again, because now I won't see the look on his face when he hears what name I chose. – I don't suppose you could take a holorecording of his reaction?"

Vette let her head fall to one side while she glared. "No. You need help, my lord."

Ruth looked back down at her console and scowled. "If you're not going to contribute, go away."

### **T3-13. The Fell Clutch of Circumstance**

May, 28 ATC – 16.5 years after the confirmation of the Wrath

*Deep space, Defender-class vessel Prodigy Burst*

Quinn was safely away, and Ruth was ready to meet again with the crew of the *Prodigy Burst*.

"Welcome," said Wynston. He was standing in the middle of the holo room; the crew sat on the couches around the walls. "We've got a site to clean up today. A ritual location with a well-established permanent cultist staff. Powerful arcanists. One, they're working up a ritual of unknown but highly guessable nature, and two, they have considerable records in artistic form – scrolls, murals, that kind of thing. If we can interrupt the one, and get some Jedi translators working on the other, this could be an extremely profitable expedition."

"Anything I'm not supposed to hit?" said Ruth.

"I'd like the walls intact if possible," said Wynston. "That's about my only requirement."

"Gee, that leaves wholesale slaughter on the table. The Wrath's specialty," grumbled the redheaded Jedi called Kira.

"That particular skill will serve your purposes well enough," said Lord Scourge coolly.

"We ready?" said Ruth.

When they exited hyperspace and landed on the target planet, Ruth happened to be first on the way out the door. Before she hit the stairs, a little orange astromech droid zipped up from belowdecks and stopped just short of ramming her shins. It was beeping wildly.

Ruth looked up at Larr. "I don't speak droid," she said.

"Ah," said the Jedi, "T7 finally finished up downstairs. He's saying you're a horrible person and you killed his friend Ko Raden, among many others."

"Well, yes," said Ruth. T7-01 kept spinning in tight circles, blipping. "He...feels strongly about this."

T7-01's beeping reached hysterical levels.

"Your astromech thinks I'm evil beyond redemption," said Ruth. "Doesn't he."

"He's not wrong," sniffed Kira.

"This is ridiculous. Jedi actually issue judgmental astromech droids to their field agents?"

"T7 is special," said Larr.

"Oh. Special issue. That's better, then. Can we go?"

At a gesture from Larr, T7-01 got out of Ruth's way. She walked out into a forest whose evergreen fragrance wasn't quite enough to overwhelm the stench of righteousness the ship was belching behind her.

Larr Gith took point. Her hair was done up in some excessively glamorous braid that was arranged, Ruth reluctantly conceded, in a way that might not present a weakness in combat. Her armor was close-fitted, gleaming with russet and gold. She looked like a damned princess. Kira, Scourge, Wynston, and Ruth followed behind.

She intended to prove the others wrong about something.

The ritual site was inside a labyrinth of high stone walls. Larr Gith paused just shy of an inner archway from which several raised voices were heard. Ruth closed her eyes and summoned up the old habits, the ones more in line with focus, cooperation, protection, a matter of Force guidance instead of domination. Then she flowed into motion, rounding the corner and joining Larr's people in combat.

They were up against six robed Sith Purebloods, all of whom seemed to skew towards the Force lightning side of things. Ruth could work with that. Some of her best revenge kills had been against arcanists like that. But no. Today was calm and focus. Through strength, power, but from a start of immovable calm.

Premonitions were different on this side of the Force-contact divide. Her sense of where to strike shifted, from a place where she was forcing to a place where she was following. Focus, yes, and the thought of seeing this area safe. Of vindicating Wynston's belief in her. And, ultimately, of making sure her people would be all right.

She caught her opponents' Force lightning with her sabers and absorbed or deflected them, sometimes managing to fling them back entirely. She danced among the Sith, somehow sensing her allies' swift purposeful movements alongside her own. Balance. Control. Yes. Yes, it was right, and she wasn't even angry about it.

It felt good.



A blaster shot from Wynston took down the last of the badly battered Sith. Ruth came to rest, deactivated her sabers, and took a moment to catch her breath before looking around.

Wynston already had a holoscanner out and was imaging the elaborately carved walls. Lord Scourge seemed to be examining something high in one wall. Kira and Larr Gith were staring at Ruth.

"What?" said Ruth.

"I was expecting a little more...fire and brimstone," said Larr. "To be entirely frank."

"That was something else," said Kira. "That was...pretty okay. You know, for a Sith."

Ruth bit back a hostile response. "Thanks," she said. "You fight all right, for a Jedi. You should model for their recruitment posters or something."

Larr snickered. "You have no idea how delicious that would be."

"Moving along," said Kira quickly, "Hey, Wynston, you find anything?"

"Far more than I can categorize right now. I'm going to continue around this loop, keep grabbing pictures."

When Kira walked away, Ruth knew the minor truce of that exchange had just expired. She backed off and was surprised to find Lord Scourge waiting.

He was still pretending to study the wall. "You crippled yourself," he said. "Voluntarily. Why?"

Avoiding the Dark Side rush? "We all choose how we want to fight."

"We fight to win. Or we die." Scourge's red eyes gleamed. "I'm not here to watch your personal development, Wrath, I'm here to see that we win this war. Use the power you have earned. Don't indulge yourself with a midlife crisis on the way."

Midlife? She mentally flared. She was only thirty-six and that drippy-faced brute had to know it. "Your advice is noted and will be given the consideration it's due."

He raised one eyebrow, very slightly, too calmly.

"I intend to win, Scourge. I'm under no obligation to win it your way." She walked away to find Wynston. "Hey, you. Anything I can do to help?"

Wynston was bent over a low panel in a piece of statuary. "Depends. When's the last time you had to slice into somebody's archive?"

"Wow. I'm a bit out of practice."

"You were good at it, though." He brushed dust off the console's surface. "And somehow I doubt these individuals were using state-of-the-art database security."

While her allies continued investigating around her, Ruth got to work.

## **Triad 14: Treason**

### **T1-14. When You Have to Go There**

October, 10 ATC – 9 months before the confirmation of the Wrath

*Quesh*

~

*My dear Ruth,*

*You followed the path I was never any good at. It's somewhat comforting to know that you can stare down any physical threat you face. My skills always lay in less concretely applicable pursuits.*

*Be that as it may, the Force does speak to all of us. It may guide your path when you do not yourself understand it. Trust it. Trust me.*

*I remain your doting father,  
Colran*

~

Quesh. Ruth was between errands. Something had told her to be here, something hiding at the edge of vision when she meditated in the Force. Something had told her to be here. She just didn't know what, yet.

She was crossing the Imperial base's courtyard when she caught sight of a small, possibly familiar Chiss weaving across the courtyard on his way to the taxi station.

Here? Now? Why? For his sake she had better play this contact casual. She headed over. "Hi there," she said. "Would you happen to know where the cantina is?"

The man who turned to her was Wynston, assuming Wynston had been put through the wringer a few dozen times and denied sleep for a month. He gave her a weak and somewhat absent smile.

"Hi there," he said in an unidentifiably generic accent. "Cantina's right around the corner - there." He indicated the only building in sight. "Can't miss it, it's the only doorway that reeks of something stronger than Quesh venom."

Well, that was a dismissal. "Much obliged." Then, more softly: "Not to be pushy, but let me know if you could use a freelancer while I'm in town."

He nodded. Ruth turned back toward the cantina. No use making this look any weirder than one person asking another for directions.

"Ruth. Wait."

She stopped.

"I need to ask you a favor. It should be fast. It should be simple. I can't let you ask questions." He met her eyes. The man looked half dead. "It would mean a great deal to me."

"Absolutely."

\*

Wynston moved with the air of a sleepwalker as he led Ruth to the Imperial forward base and beyond, to a hillside cave a couple of clicks from the nearest path in the endless red-orange swamp. No questions. She kept quiet.

The cave had a cobwebby lab bench against one wall, and Wynston set up a lamp and started pulling an assortment of tubes from around his person. No questions. Ruth kept quiet.

Mixing, shaking, flicking, sometimes pausing to shake his head hard. "Let me know if I can do anything," she said.

He nodded sharply. "I'll tell you when the time is right."

The curiosity gnawed at her. She sauntered back to the cave entrance and surveyed the red-brown valley. A few lobels pulled sluggishly through the muck. Nothing else in sight.

Wynston's voice brought her back. "Ruth. I'm ready."

He had seated himself next to the lab bench and he had a syringe in hand, the needle lined up against his vein. "I can't tell you what to expect. If I die, I'm dead. No special tricks once I'm done breathing."

"Wynston--"

"No questions." He smiled dully. "Thanks for everything." He injected himself.

His head fell back against the wall and he stared at nothing for the space of several slow breaths. "I'm not worried about the symptoms," he said slowly to nobody in particular. "I want my mind back."

"Wynston?"

He didn't respond. He just relaxed, more and more, until that stare was nothing more than two red slits in the darkness.

Ruth settled in a spot where she could watch both the cave entrance and the slumped Chiss. A shallow meditation, enough to be aware of his sluggish life force, enough to pass the moments and the hours.

Idiot better know what he was getting himself into.

Idiot better wake up.

Wynston's return to consciousness was a blossom of pain in her mind. "Welcome back," she said, hurrying to help him sit up. He winced and sagged. "Easy." He didn't resist when she pulled him close. His whole presence seemed diminished: small, weak. "I really want to ask how you're holding up," she told him.

"I know you do." He screwed his eyes shut, turned his head, murmured into her chest. "Ask me no questions, I'll tell you no lies." A weak laugh. "Official motto of Imperial Intelligence."

Not knowing what else to do, she held him. No questions.

Some time later Wynston shook his head. "Sun must be down by now. We should move." He struggled to his feet, staggered, righted himself, then led the way out into the twilight.

He stopped her just before they reached the main road to the Imperial base. "It's done. You never saw me here, Ruth, and you haven't heard from me in a long time."

"You got it. Take care of yourself out there."

"You don't know how much this means. Thank you, my friend. Goodbye."

Ruth froze. "What the blazes is that supposed to mean?"

"No questions." He touched a finger to his lips and smiled, almost wistfully. Then he trotted down the road, putting as much distance between the two of them as he could.

## **T2-14. I Cannot Rest From Travel**

November, 11 ATC – four months after the confirmation of the Wrath

*Hutta*

"Jaesa. Where are you going?"

Jaesa whirled, her bag swinging free from her shoulder. "I had an errand on planet."

Ruth planted her feet and her uneven weight at the top of the ship's ramp. It was as if Jaesa expected unquestioning endorsement. "And you just weren't going to mention it, hmm? Every time you've had one of these excursions it's been to offer aid to a Light Side Sith."

Jaesa stood up straighter. "You know I won't apologize for it."

"Can I share something I realized recently? The Light Side is fundamentally incompatible with the workings of the Empire, Jaesa. And I need you at my side."

"I can't just turn off my ability. I should be out there. I can be out there. With your approval, of course. I'm not keeping this a secret."

"My *approval*? For abandoning me? I doubt it. For the sake of our friendship I won't immediately turn you in."

"I won't give you a reason." Jaesa tilted her head, a startlingly girlish gesture for one who...well, was young, after all. But youth wasn't an excuse. "As the Wrath you are in a unique position to good among us--"

"As Wrath I deal with threats to the Empire. Internal and external. Don't say anything else, Jaesa. Not something I can't hear."

Jaesa said something else, albeit quietly. "Are you sending me away?"

"That depends. Do you want your friends or do you want an intelligent Wrath governing your actions?"

"You can still turn back from that darkness. You would be hope to so many."

"And master of none. Isn't that what matters? Do what you want to, Jaesa. Just be sure you don't cross me."

"I will not close that door," said Jaesa. "I will never close that door. You will always be welcome on the path you first showed me."

"That path ends in a cliff. I'm sorry you haven't seen that yet."

"Please. I can't let you go like this."

"I thought you had a friend to save?" Ruth said dryly. "I'll buy you tickets for two off this planet. Now go."

"Ruth!"

Ruth raised a finger, jabbing it in the general direction of Jaesa's throat. "Master," she said. After that was silence.

### **T3-14. I Am Half Sick of Shadows**

June, 28 ATC - 17 years after the confirmation of the Wrath

*Dromund Kaas - the Niral estate*

The weeks after Ruth returned from the *Prodigy Burst* were an exercise in suspense. After the Emperor's summons finally came, Ruth spent hours preparing. Meditating, first on the shielding Larr Gith had described, and then, by instinct, something calmer and warmer, something Light Side.

She still wasn't great at that part. The thought of just selling out the whole Jedi crowd occurred to her while she meditated. Hand them all over and watch them die. It wasn't like they were any friends of hers.

But no. That was not the way she had chosen to turn her will. Patiently she directed and fortified herself. For Rylon, for Quinn, for all of life, even the parts she didn't like that much. She had to be ready.

When she returned from constructing the layered mental shield, Quinn was in the room, watching her. He gave her a thoughtful smile when she opened her eyes.

"Have I ever told you how astonishingly beautiful you are?"

That was...unexpected. Ruth's brow contracted. "Uh. You might have said it once accidentally while under the influence of a mind-altering-gas leak some time ago. But I wasn't sure whether you were referring to me or Broonmark."

"I hope there is no ambiguity this time when I say that you are beautiful. Whatever you were doing, you were...different. Something I haven't seen in years. I never thought to comment on it then. I never expected to see it again."

Light Side meditation, that was all. "I've still got it." Ruth stood up and hugged him, hard. "That look on your face. You have no idea how much I needed that." What she had to do, she was doing for him. For him and for their son, she would handle both the Emperor and the bratty little toy soldiers who oppose him.

"I live to serve," he murmured with a smile in his voice, and kissed her ear.



"I have to go report to the boss." She kissed him. "I'll be home soon."

\*

She made one more call.

"Jaesa?" she said to the holo.

Jaesa leaned forward, looking owlishly worried. "What's wrong?"

"I didn't say anything was wrong."

"That's nice, Ruth. What's wrong?"

"I have to go into darkness," said Ruth. "I think I can hide well enough to keep him from questioning me. I think I can pretend to be what I've been as Wrath."

"You know I first admired you for your absence of deception," said Jaesa. "But I think you can do this."

"Can you use your power on me over the holo?" What she had in mind was the talent that had first brought Jaesa into Ruth's sphere: the ability to sense one's true nature, light or dark.

"I can't," said Jaesa. "But the fact that you're even asking suggests something."

"Then will you remember, if no one else does, that I walked into this with the Light inside?"

"Ruth, don't talk like that. I always will. But you're going to be fine."

"Maybe I just had to hear it. Thank you, Jaesa."

"The Force will free you, Ruth."

Freedom. What a hopeless word. But now it was time to earn it. She could keep her secrets. She had to.

\*

To the dark fortress, alone with its cold dim star in the boundless night. She held her determination in mind and covered it with thoughts of her work as Wrath, her military work with Quinn, her ordinary life.

She docked, passed through the silent hallways to the Emperor's throne room. She knelt as usual. "Master."

She physically shivered from the intrusion of the Emperor's mind. Did that cold presence proceed more slowly than usual? It slid and pressed, touching on her thoughts, investigating aspects of her emotion. "You are excited, Wrath."

"Pierce's return has opened...possibilities, master," she said as a cover story, and did her best to mix lust into the idea.

"I see. Consume him as you will."

He was already used to the surges of disgust she evidenced at statements like that. They seemed to please him. "Thank you, master."

"Now tell me. Why have you failed to kill Larr Gith?"

"She is elusive, master." Just thinking of the woman gave Ruth a realistic swell of anger and frustration.

"Find her," hissed the Emperor. "Tear the galaxy apart until she has nowhere to hide. Kill her." Finally his presence withdrew from her mind. "Go. Return to me when it is done."

She strode back to her ship with her usual confidence, stepped in, let the door close behind her.

"No," she said. "No, I don't think I will."

She felt alive, vibrant. Awake. Simultaneously terrified and relieved. She had survived the encounter, at least. She laid in a course for home, then curled up right there on the bridge and held herself, shivering.

## Triad 15

### T1-15. A Better Fate Than Wisdom

October, 10 ATC – 9 months before the confirmation of the Wrath

*Quesh*

~

*Dear Ruth,*

*Some things you don't get a choice in. I'm not talking about the things possessed by the great and powerful. I'm talking about the things that the people weaker than you claim. To take because you can is theft, and theft is the most basic of crimes.*

*I know you're good to your followers. I want you to be aware of why you are. At the end of the day people are people, and they have the right to seek, even if they aren't automatically granted the right to succeed.*

*Ever your loving father,  
Colran*

~

There had still been no word from Darth Baras after Ruth finished her errands on Quesh. In the evening she went to check on Quinn. As expected, he was on the bridge, playing the consoles like they were his life's work. Which, arguably, they were.

"Still nothing?" asked Ruth.

He turned his head to acknowledge her with a nod. "Still no word, my lord. It seems we have some time to breathe."

"I suppose I can't complain about that."

He stood up straight and tugged at one sleeve cuff. "My lord. Might I have a word with you in private?"

"Of course." She gestured back out toward the conference room and followed him inside, closing the door behind her.

He faced her at a taut parade rest. "Thank you for your attention. I must officially request to be reassigned."

Ruth's brain tried to wrap itself around that information and failed. "Denied."

He frowned and seemed to struggle for words. "Then I must speak freely."

"Please do, captain." Wasn't this the place for speaking freely? Wasn't it always? Didn't he know that by now?

For once he wasn't looking at her. "I am...compromised. Thoughts...of you...have begun to distract me. My feelings affect my ability to concentrate. I cannot in good conscience continue to serve."

He sounded utterly miserable about it. So it came to this. He would rather run away than risk dealing with her. That was some fine praise. The hell of it was, she already knew she would do anything he asked. "Captain, I'd hate to see you go." Then, against the weight of her feelings: "But if it's what you want, I'll grant it."

"Thank you, my lord." His relief was painful to hear. Quinn produced a datapad and presented it. "I just need your approval here."

Reassignment papers. All ready. He was that eager. She tapped her finger, signed her approval, shoved the datapad back in his hands without looking at him.

"My lord, you understand why I—"

"Don't make this harder," she snapped. "That's an order." In the half light his eyes were bottomless and dark. "I imagine you'll be recalled to Dromund Kaas while they figure out what to do with you. I'll set course

immediately, I don't want to delay you. I'll submit a recommendation shortly." She finally had to breathe, and it was shaky. "I wish you luck." Why wasn't this night over yet? "I'm certain you will excel."

She kept breathing, somehow. At least she managed that.

"No." He set the datapad aside. "I'm an idiot." He looked her in the eye with the same intense expression he brought to everything he cared about. "Permission to kiss you, my lord."

She hadn't realized she had any guts left to sink. "Stop toying with me!" It came out as a shout. "Go, stay, kiss me, leave me, anything you want—" her lip curled as the truth spilled out – "name it and it's yours, but if you're trying to drive me insane, just stop."

He seemed taken aback. "It was never my intention to cause you distress. Believe me, my mind is made up." She didn't believe that at all. But with a sudden startling assurance he stepped in, wrapped his arms around her, and lowered his face close to hers. "Say the word, my lord."

"Promise you'll stay."

"For as long as you'll have me."

The smallest movement opened the kiss. He was fierce. She returned it. He was warm, strong, pressing, much much much better than her thousand daydreams.

He pulled back and took the warmth with him, too soon. "No," she whispered, and pushed up to press her lips to his again. He had a hand on her waist, another sliding up to tangle in her hair, dizzy sweet. In time, though, even she had to breathe.

He waited for her to open her eyes, and he smiled. Quinn actually smiled.

"It took you long enough," she told him.

"It was dangerous. I told you. You're a distraction."

"This'll increase work efficiency on the whole. You'll see." She tried to think of something else to say and failed. Instead she just smiled and retreated, stumbling on her own elation on the way out.

\*

"Two behind you!" barked Quinn.

Ruth felt them already, additional glowing presences in the coruscating fury of the cavern. The great catlike prowlers resisted only for a moment when she drew them in to join their fellows. Then a spin, her twin lightsabers slashing through air and flesh alike; thrust, cut, she dodged a claw swipe and shoved the offender to the wall with enough force to break it. Something else hit her side. She hardly felt it. Everything was light and movement, the Force warping at her command, the bodies of the beasts crumpling around her. Euphoria drove her from form to form, her sabers etching perfection in the space around her. She felt the wilting of her last attacker like a shadow in her mind. Victory.

Now that she could only sense herself and Quinn, she eyed the battleground. Eight prowlers dead. In retrospect, that could have been bad. If any of them had attacked her medic...but no, she had kept them all near her. The Force roared in her ears, shivered in her muscles. The fight was won, and truly it couldn't have gone any other way.

Quinn strode up to her with his eyes fixed on the fallen animals. "My lord, how did you...?"

"You make me stronger. You always have. There's just more, now. 'Through passion, I gain strength.' It's more than words, captain."

"I see that." He scanned the scene again. "I shall keep it in mind in planning future engagements."

"Recalculating? Haven't I been gaining in power for as long as you've known me?"

"I have never seen a change this significant, literally overnight." He met her eyes and hastily dropped his gaze.

"But you know why." He brought his head back up and she smiled, the only possible reaction to being so close, to knowing he had kissed her and would again and nothing had ever been so right. She reminded herself to continue before he got uncomfortable. The last thing she wanted to do was cause him the least difficulty, not now, not ever. "Come on. I think this den is clear, but we've got a ways to go."

## **T2-15. The Art of Losing Isn't Hard to Master**

February, 12 ATC – seven months after the confirmation of the Wrath

*Corellia*

Ruth was having one of her difficult days. Too much thinking on betrayals that still felt fresh. Perhaps they would always feel fresh. Well, it lent her power, if nothing else.

"Pierce, that building's going to have to go. I know who's laid claim to it and frankly I've never made him any promises. If he's surprised that's his own problem."

"Heavy civilian casualties, milord."

"Republic civilians. Besides, they're what, one to one with troops in there? It's worth it."

"There's families in there, my lord," said Vette, making a face. "Just wiping it out would be terrible."

"I didn't ask for your opinion."

"Yeah, but you oughta listen to it."

"It's for the greater good, Vette. Shut up and get out. I'll call on you when I need you."

Pierce stayed. "One dead elite Republic squad plus hangers-on, coming up."

"I can't stand Vette's whining. I'm starting to think I should've sent her, not Jaesa, on the get-out-of-my-face remote assignment. Now that she's gone – no evacuation warning for the civilians this time. It just wastes our resources and lets more hostiles slip away."

Pierce nodded, taking it in stride. "Noted. Once this op clears, what's next?"

"After, we need to talk a more permanent assignment. I don't want you hanging over my shoulder all the time."

"Milord?"

"I've got some offers for guardsmen, troops and the like. And I'll need someone to whip Baras's leavings into shape, the agents and soldiers I swept up. You offered to do some training, maybe staff management like that if I ever needed it."

"I did."

"Then do it. But know that if you turn them against me, I will make quite certain you live to regret it."

"You think I'd turn on you, you're thinking of the wrong guy." He crossed his arms, taking up a stance that most would consider threatening and Ruth regarded as rather petulant.

"I don't want to discuss this. Get out."

As for today's operation, the deaths were acceptable losses for the objective. All of this was working toward the end of the war, which made the little acts of destruction all right.

She was feeling angry today. She checked her correspondence for opportunities for little acts of destruction.



It wasn't until she returned to the ship the following night that she saw a console active showing an initial news report of the civilian casualties from her operation. Beside it was the blinking notification of a holo message.

Vette's image showed up on the recorded message. "My lord. I can't watch you do this anymore, so, I'm heading out. Call me if you need anything normal, huh? Bye."

The console went dead. "I'm only doing what's necessary," Ruth told it, and left.

### **T3-15. The Road Goes Ever On and On**

June, 28 ATC – 17 years after the confirmation of the Wrath

*Dromund Kaas – the Niral estate*

The demands of the mission were accelerating. The real mission, the positive one. The one with the really annoying coworkers.

Ruth was finally ready and qualified to join them. There was no other option; she didn't think she could afford to spend her nights at home more than an hour from the spaceport and any emergency response anymore. And she couldn't handle certain risks.

So she sat Quinn down after dinner. Again. It seemed like she had just finished patching this together yesterday. "Malavai."

"Ruth?"

"I'm afraid I need to leave. Indefinitely."

He didn't so much as blink. "I'm coming with you."

"I can't allow that."

"I won't leave you."

"You leave me all the time. Work aside, we had a patch where every time we got into a screaming match you walked out. Which was the safe and rational thing to do."

"...all right, so that may be a flawed sentiment given our history. But I have no intention of giving up on you. Don't tell me to go, or if you must, at least tell me why."

"I can't. Events are coming and I have to face them, and I have to do it without you."

"If something poses a danger to you, my place is with you."

"If you're with me, you will be the greatest threat to me." Asking him to choose between her and a higher authority of the Empire? Certifiably awful idea.

"What could possibly happen that would cause me to threaten you again?" He stared at her, calculating, and then his eyes narrowed. "Are you going to do something to Rylon?"

"What? No! Stars, no! I'm doing this to protect him. And you."

"From what?"

"I can tell you when it's over." She stood up. "I don't have anything else to say."

"Ruth. After all we've been through, have I earned no better than this?"

She hated the hurt in his voice. But picking a side, whether with or against her, would make him a traitor all over again. "It isn't just a question of physical safety. This would risk your legacy, your record, your good name. In addition to your life."

"Is that what you're giving up?"

"Not necessarily. I only know I can't shield you from disgrace this time. Or from death."

"I have never asked you to."

That brought her up short. "No. I guess you haven't."

They watched each other for a little while.

"What if I told you," she said slowly, "that the Emperor's interests have diverged from those of the Empire. That he is planning to actively harm our people for his own glory. And that I have to stop him."

"I would say I am with you."

"Just like that?" She somewhat expected the words right away, honestly or otherwise, but the conviction behind them sounded surprisingly genuine.

"His assignments have grown beyond bewildering in their apparent pointlessness, my lord. More importantly, when you return from your audiences with the Emperor – except for yesterday, somehow – you're...different. Faded, withdrawn. Like some part of you has died. You seem to recover once you've finished the mission, but...I don't care for what he does to you."

"I can't say there's a great chance of success. I don't even know exactly how to achieve success."

"What damage can we expect if we fail?"

"According to my reports? Every living thing in the galaxy. If you scale that back to the immediate effects of the preparatory rituals, we may only be talking a few planets, stripped completely of life. Not strategic targets, not by any standard the Empire cares about. Just selected for maximum death."

He took her hands and squeezed. "I'll need to arrange for my responsibilities to be covered. I know the right officers for it." He frowned at the look on her face. "I told you, my place is with you. The war must

continue. I'll see to it that my people do that. But the war is being waged to win something, and I would be a poor servant of the Empire if I didn't ensure there was something left to win."

"It won't be easy. I'm working with a Jedi."

He frowned, but nodded. "If it must be, it must be."

"And with Wynston."

She could have sworn his hands went a degree colder. "The alien who nearly got you killed? He's alive?"

"Yes."

"And you've been in contact with him? You didn't tell me?"

"This was about once again forcing you to choose between me and a higher authority. Do you think I was in a hurry to bring it up?"

"You're working with him again."

"Yes. It's the mission that matters, Malavai."

"I am with you," he growled. "I will stay at your side. And if he plays us false he will die before the first excuse makes it out of his mouth."

"I trust him," she said.

"You know what I think of that. But, you are my general, now and always. I will back you up."

"You're sure?"

He looked into her eyes for a long moment. "I'm sure."

## Triad 16

### T1-16. One-Two, One-Two, and Through and Through

October, 10 ATC – 9 months before the confirmation of the Wrath

*Hoth*

~

*Dear Ruth,*

*A leader can have a great impact on her followers. By the same token, a follower may have an great influence on a leader.*

*Be careful, then, in who you are leading. I don't accuse you. I know how level-headed you are. I'm just trying to press in...so much. I had eighteen years to tell you everything and I don't think I did a good job.*

*You're very kind to indulge my letters.*

*Love always,  
Colran*

~

"Hey, my lord." Vette's voice on the holo was scratchy; Hoth wreaked havoc on communications. It was almost enough to make Ruth miss the miasma of Quesh. "What's your status?"

"Blech," said Ruth, pawing aside part of her facial cover and casting a look over the vast, burning-white lightscape. "Also, cold."

"No surprises there. Any luck with your Jedi Knight?"

"I haven't found the big guy. I caught up with his apprentice, though." Her usual policy was to talk with Jedi. Argue, negotiate, confuse, sow doubt, break their resolve, send them away. But for some reason it hadn't been working lately. "He's dead."

“And the fluffy guy’s buddy?”

The Talz Broonmark’s grudge quarry Fetzellen. “Dead.”

“I see. And the Ortolans who ran that power plant?”

Republic troops had burst in and opened fire before she could begin to calm the situation. “They’re all dead. I don’t want to talk about it.”

“Harsh. I, uh, I think I’m gonna hang up and just enjoy the safety of the ship. Be careful out there, my lord.”

“Sure. I’ll be back as soon as I possibly can, I promise.”

Ruth hung up, shoved the holo back into her pocket, and sighed. She was trying to keep it together. She was trying to keep things civilized. But more and more tasks seemed to be collapsing into blood before she could get a grip on them. She wished her father were around to help her sort out minimally horrible solutions, but Colran was on Dromund Kaas, and she was hip deep in a snowbank, about to go plunge into another pointless-feeling fight.

“Jaesa?” she said.

Jaesa looked over from where she had been conversing with Pierce. “Yes, master?”

“We’re going back to base after this. Hot chocolate will happen. With marshmallows.”

Pierce shifted, rifle in hand. “Milord, why didn’t you say so earlier? Let’s get a move on.”

## **T2-16. Zero at the Bone**

June, 12 ATC – one year after the confirmation of the Wrath

## *Deep space*

"Milord?" said Pierce.

Ruth was sitting in the shower. The water was running cold. She hugged herself, and rocked. The inside of her brain felt as if someone else had dirtied it.

"Go away," she yelled, and hugged herself tighter.

"Milord."

Ruth had finally been summoned to stand face to face, or rather kneel before, the Emperor himself. His Voice, the one whose path she herself had laved in blood. The encounter left her skin crawling. The Emperor had been so, so...amused, at her feelings for the child she had borne. Amused when he stared at everything in her and laughed. At least Rylon was safely born now. What would that stamp of darkness have done to him? She would love him until he was well, of course, but...she was glad the summons had not come during her pregnancy.

The water faltered and returned. Ruth rocked. The Emperor had laughed at what he'd seen in her head. Then he had sent her to kill. And was this to be her master from now on? No other. No matter how high she rose, there was always a master. He would press into her mind again, and again, searching and compelling. That was what it meant to be the Wrath.

She was the commander of forces now, a leader to her people. She commanded hosts whenever she wanted to; as Wrath she was entitled to any military unit she desired, so long as it didn't interfere with the Dark Council's plans. And even then. She wasn't beholden to them. In the end, though, even her master had withdrawn from her mind. She was alone. She just had to make the best of it.

Even with Pierce's cheerful belligerence, as Wrath she was alone.

~~~~This is the point in Timeline 2 at which the Knights of the Waking Alliance Alternate Universe diverges from Ruth!verse canon. (The entirety of Timeline 1 is common to RMC and KotWA.) KotWA is collected in another volume.~~~~

~~~~This is the point in Timeline 2, minus Rylon, at which the Dialogues Alternate Universe diverges from Ruth!verse canon. (The entirety of Timeline 1 is common to RMC and Dialogues.) Dialogues is collected in another volume.~~~~

### **T3-16. I Must Follow, If I Can**

July, 28 ATC – 16.5 years after the confirmation of the Wrath

*Defender-class vessel Prodigy Burst*

Ruth paused just before the airlock door and clasped Quinn's hands. "It'll be a hostile audience."

"We've had worse."

"Don't be so sure. Wynston's had a lot of time to think about how much he hates you."

"I'm aware. I don't expect a friendly room." Quinn smiled sadly and touched her bare cheek. "Ruth...my lord. You and I should not pretend that you kept all this secret out of concern for my wellbeing. You kept it secret because you could not dismiss the possibility that I would simply turn you in for plotting against your master."

She could think of nothing both honest and positive to say to that.

"I am accustomed to being doubted. I can offer no promise that would change that, no grand gesture that would remove it. So let me be clear. I



don't care what anybody on the other side of that door thinks. I do care that there is a stubbornly rational part of your mind that will never be convinced again, but I can do little about it except to serve you in the task at hand, the task of keeping the Empire alive. So I will serve." He jerked his head toward the door. "Let the audience do its worst."

The airlock hissed open. Ruth stepped onto Larr Gith's ship with Quinn at her shoulder.

The Jedi stood at the top of the entry stairs. She pursed her lips, gave Quinn a once-over, and smiled a predatory smile. Then again, all Larr Gith's smiles looked predatory. That or smug. Or both.

"Please, come in," purred the blonde, stepping aside to permit Ruth and Quinn to enter the holorealm where the crew had gathered.

Wynston's brown eyes were fairly blazing. Ruth had already told Quinn about the permanent disguise Wynston had donned, so the officer knew to match him hateful glare for hateful glare.

"You brought him?" said Wynston.

"She brought who?" said Kira.

"Everyone," said Ruth, "this is General Malavai Quinn, my advisor and husband. Quinn, this is Jedi Master Kira Carsen - " Quinn nodded coldly - "Jedi Master Larr Gith - " likewise - "you know Wynston - " nothing at all - "and Lord Scourge, my predecessor as Emperor's Wrath." Quinn blinked and bowed deeply at that.

"Ruth," said Wynston, "I can't believe you led him here. Does he know?"

"Of course he knows. I've fully briefed him."

"My lord knows what she's doing," said Quinn.

"When it comes to you, that is consistently not the case," said Wynston.

"You don't belong here. Forget what you saw and go back to shivving your own kind." Wynston's gaze ran from Quinn to Ruth and back. "Or run

right along to prepping your report on us so you can get a shiny commendation for selling your wife out again."

"It's your word that lured the Wrath here, agent, and I still have no reason to believe you did it for her health."

"I'm smelling history," said Larr Gith with a small malicious smile.

"Your powers of deduction are truly overwhelming," said Ruth.

"Gentlemen, save the personal grudge match for later."

"It's not about me, it's about the mission," chorused the two, and shot dirty looks at each other.

"He's a menace," said Wynston.

"He can't be trusted," said Quinn.

"Quinn, disengage. Wynston, I believe you indicated we might finally make time to give me the full strategic rundown?"

"Yes," the agent said stiffly. "Now that we're...all...together."

"We are here to save all living things in the galaxy," prompted Ruth, "which will have to overcome any differences we may have."

"And override old bad habits, I should hope," said Wynston, glaring at Quinn.

"I think that applies to both of them," said Larr Gith.

Ruth bristled. "I have always served the good of humanity as I found it, Jedi."

"Right, so you spent all those years camouflaging your pure intentions by...killing everybody. Very clever, I would never have thought of it."

Wynston cleared his throat, very loudly, and got going. He described the threat, indicating that cultist cells in multiple locations around the galaxy

were making efforts to stage massacres on a planetary scale to serve as the initial spark for the Emperor's ultimate ascension. He talked briefly about their target himself, the Emperor, indicating that every intelligence network Wynston had access to – and there were several – were seeking a location fix, mentioning the distinction between the Emperor's true form and his main conduit the Voice.

Quinn shook his head impatiently. "I know that part well. My lord, I'm sure you've considered this, but why haven't you simply killed the Voice already?"

Lord Scourge answered. "An admirably direct sentiment, but if we kill the Voice we do not know what form his replacement will take. We need to know at all times where the Voice is, and that means either trapping him – which we lack the means to do at present – or allowing him to operate and continue to issue orders to the Wrath, unaware of our activities."

"If it comes down to it," said Kira, "we'll try to hit the Voice shortly before a final assault. Late enough that he can't make a replacement, early enough that the current vessel isn't sitting out there ready for the Emperor to step the rest of the way into the moment his true form comes under pressure."

"You'll have to be the one to strike the Voice, my lord," Quinn told Ruth.

"I know."

He was transparently calculating tactics and odds. "You have the access. I won't be able to help you. Getting people apart from you out there will attract so much attention we would have to bring a full task force, which would bring its own host of problems."

"We know," said everyone else in the room. Ruth continued. "We've all thought through much of this. I'd like you in on future planning sessions." She stared at Wynston.

Wynston nodded reluctantly. "Very well."

"Good. Now, if the briefing's done, I'm getting back to my ship. It's time I took up full-time residence on board; we should fly together until this gets sorted out."

"You could just stay on this ship," said Kira, almost sincerely.

"I want a real bed," said Ruth.

Larr Gith arched her eyebrows. "Ah. So that's why you brought him."

"Wynston, just call me when something needs killing." Ruth glared at Larr. "Something I'm allowed to kill, that is."

She got back to her ship and took a moment in the holo room to breathe.

"My lord," said Quinn quietly.

"Yes?"

"I truly dislike the exercises the agent attempts to drag you into."

"I know."

"That blonde woman is a terrible Jedi, if she's a Jedi at all, and I seriously doubt red is the other woman's natural color."

"What?"

"Was the Sith at least telling the truth? About being the former Wrath?"

"Yes. He left his post to stop the Emperor's earlier attempt at this killing-everyone maneuver."

"I see."

"The danger is real," she assured him.

"I do believe you in that. Removing the threat to our people, to our son, is paramount."

"Even if it means working with them. We've put up with worse when we had to." She struggled a moment to recollect exactly what and when. "I think."

"Ruth," Quinn said, "I love you. I trust you. I am sworn to serve." He paused. "And having met our allies, I will do everything in my power to finish this mission as quickly as possible."

## Triad 17: With Friends Like These...

### T1-17. The Moving Finger Writes

October, 10 ATC – 9 months before the confirmation of the Wrath

*Hoth*

~

*Dear Ruth,*

*The galaxy will always ask you to prove yourself. Being Sith is a battle for justification that would make philosophers weep.*

*Prove to yourself, and no further. That's all you owe the world.*

*Ever yours*

*Colran*

~

*Dear Father,*

*Myself is a harsh judge. I'm doing the best I can.*

*Love from distant places,*

*Ruth*

~

Ruth was tired, and the Talz in front of her was very tall. She kept her chin up and her weapon ready. Broonmark had joined with her to kill a clan enemy here in the wastes of Hoth, not far from her target Jedi's corpse. That goal complete, she wasn't sure where the Talz would turn next.

Broonmark's eyes blinked, giving away nothing of its thoughts. "Sith clan kills many enemies. We will join Sith clan."

"'Sith clan' is leaving Hoth," said Ruth. "I don't know when or whether we will return."

It stood like a pillar of snow, girded around by a tangled leather harness. "We are not afraid."

"I don't want you," she very nearly said. But a Sith Lord needed her supporters, didn't she? Even the fallen Jedi relied on allies. The living Sith, all the more so. And she could keep it under control. If she could moderate Quinn, then she could moderate Pierce; if she could moderate Pierce, then she could moderate Broonmark...right?

"You serve me," she said, hardening her voice to an edge. "You will obey my orders to the letter. If you want to be a weapon, I will be the one and the only one to direct your blade. Do you understand, Broonmark?"

The Talz's proboscis described a slow circle. "Yes, Sith clan."

A strange name to hang on a lone woman. Ruth didn't go looking for titles outside that of Lord. But it seemed this title had come to her.

Quinn hesitated at the orbital station. "The alien, my lord?"

"The alien," she said, too tired to argue his tone. "I've tested him."

"Of course, my lord."

## T2-17. The Pale Cast of Thought

October, 17 ATC – six years after the confirmation of the Wrath

*Deep Space*

The job of the Wrath spanned years, and Ruth never stayed in one place for long. She didn't make many friends along the way. In fact, she tended to lose them.

Dar Llaneth's vessel was a fast corvette. According to the Emperor's personal command Ruth had to waylay it at a star base. Once her people cut the way in, though, it was anyone's game.

She stalked the hallways of the little vessel. It wasn't far to search. All the same she missed Broonmark's senses. She could have sworn he could smell fear. It used to be a potent counterpoint to her own abilities.

She rounded a corner into a large room–

The flash bomb caught her like a hammer to the face. She swung up her sabers and staggered backwards. A second bomb brought up a veil of smoke. Blaster fire strafed the hallway. Ruth flattened herself against the wall and waited for something comprehensible to hit.

Something stepped through, blaster rifle first. And that something was Wynston.

He stopped. "Ruth," he said, frowning.

"Wynston," she said, dreading. "Are you here for Dar Llaneth?"

"In a manner of speaking. I'm here to protect him."

What? "Unacceptable."

"Ruth, please, Dar Llaneth must live."

Ruth walked toward him, toward the meditating Jedi at the porthole. "Get out of my way, Wynston."

"This matters. I mean it."

"Are you fighting for the Empire? Or something else?"

"This benefits everyone, I promise you. In the short term alone he is positioned to save five thousand Imperial lives."

"A Jedi seeking to ingratiate himself with Imperials? It doesn't sound like you can trust him."

"He protects life wherever he sees it. I could have said the same for you once."

"I was very stupid once. Get out of my way, Wynston."

"I can't do that."

"I can kill you with a thought."

"You're not the woman who would. Even after what that bastard did to you, you're not the woman who would."

Ruth waved. Wynston all but flew aside, hitting the wall. The Jedi was standing now, finally realizing his danger, stood and whirled.

Behind her, a second lightsaber buzzed.

"Stay clear," she barked at Wynston. A Force-blind could make a difference in a fight like this. And she didn't want to have to kill him.

She fought the Jedi master and his Jedi master friend. Her sabers were independent arcs of destruction, her body a fluid chain that bent and moved and snapped hard to deliver strikes to her enemies. And she blocked them. Oh, she blocked them.



One of her opponents stumbled. She tossed her left-hand saber, crushed the man's throat with the Force, and finished the gesture in time to catch the saber again.

As she turned the Jedi came roaring from above. Something incomprehensibly hot bit her upper lip and she jerked backwards, feeling more than hearing her own scream.

The Jedi didn't get another swing.

Ruth looked around. Her face was on fire and she had no means of tending it here. Wynston was staring up at her with conspicuous neutrality.

"You should go," she said. "Before I have to call you traitor."

"Have you listened to a word I've said?"

It drove her like a dull drumbeat in her limbs. Her words thrummed agony against her wounded lip. "I have a job to do. And if you've turned on the Empire, you're not part of the solution anymore."

"I'm trying to save the Empire! And everyone in it, which is the part you don't seem to grasp!"

"Stay out of my way, Wynston. This is your warning."

He pushed up to his knees. "I don't accept that. Ruth! If you get back on that ship, I don't think you'll like where it takes you."

"That course is set for me. Do not follow." She turned away. Her cheeks were wet. She could not remember why.

### **T3-17. Pursuing It With Weary Feet**

July, 28 ATC – 17 years after the confirmation of the Wrath

*Another mission planet*

Strategy sessions and crew conversations surrounding the planets that needed saving were nightmares, but Ruth had to admit that Larr Gith and Kira Carsen knew their stuff in terms of combat. When sabers were out and everyone was keeping their mouths shut the triad managed to intuit remarkably tight coordination: Kira with elegant self-control, Larr Gith in an effortless yet annoyingly effective technique, Ruth in what she struggled to maintain as a focused use of guarded feelings.

Once all targets were down, it was back to bickering.

Lord Scourge was the strange fourth corner of the Force users' battle plan, and while he participated in the bickering, he mostly stayed out of their way in combat, choosing to sweep up and crush his own targets rather than getting too close to the dense center of the mostly-Light-Side trio's fighting.

The crew stayed overnight in an abandoned temple set amidst half-forested hills near where their latest strike had landed. Ruth woke up early and went out to a grassy practice yard, where she centered herself in the calm of the morning sunlight and, unarmed, began a series of martial forms.

The zapping extension of a saber behind her seemed not to interrupt, but to redirect her efforts. She ducked, turned, drew, activated, was already moving for a counterattack against Lord Scourge.

"Good morning," she said. She blocked a second swing from him and backed off to watch the big man's movements.

"Wrath. If you are to be tested against the Emperor, I must know what you are capable of."

"Very well." She danced into action, swinging and sweeping in an effort to plant a touch here, there, his shoulder, his arm.

The big Sith knocked her first efforts aside. His black armor glistened where dew had fallen or splashed. His presence in her awareness was vast, dark, old, oddly fascinating. She slid away from where he concentrated his power and applied her strength elsewhere.

"You're playing," he grumbled, and stepped up the speed of his attacks. She could sense the anger in him. And the contempt. She admired it from a spiritual distance and kept on with a disciplined, measured enjoyment of the morning, the pleasant movements of her own muscles, a blocking defense, a powerful but careful counterattack.

Not careful enough. His hand lashed out – she felt the surge of disdain and pride before she felt the impact – and her main hand saber flew from her suddenly nerveless hand. She felt his hate singing a familiar song, seeking an answer from her, while he parried her offhand saber efforts, grabbed her, casually ignored her attempts to kick him off balance, and bore her down to the ground.

He knelt over her, struggling to get one hand to her throat. His other hand still held the saber that was locking her left arm down. Neither of them could quite land a hit. "You're wasting time, Wrath," he said, quietly, intensely. "I know you feel it."

She knew. The Dark Side wasn't what she was trying to be, though. She held herself back and summoned up a steady compassion for this creature so bound, so limited, so anxious to make her like himself. She could overcome him, as she could overcome all things.

She kicked him away in one tremendous surge. She leaped to recover her lightsaber, then faced him again. He growled and raised his free hand to slam her with something dark and cold, some Force hit she hadn't thought him capable of.

"Are you not afraid, knowing I will kill you if you fail here? Are you not angry, knowing you can never measure up to the Wrath that was? Why do you deny yourself?"

"I'm not denying my feelings. I'm just busy with better things." Calm. Ruth let him attack, stepped gracefully aside, turned, feeling him like something tragic and uncontrolled, something she could pity as she struck. Within the flow of action there was no room for the anger and hatred she knew – and oh, she knew them well, but they were not welcome, and they stayed in their places.

Strike, strike, block, turn, retreat – not fast enough. Stars burst in her vision when his elbow slammed into the side of her head. He kicked her leg, bore her down to the ground again. “You die here,” he pronounced, and raised his saber to make good on it.

He meant it. Focus wasn’t enough. No time. Fury here, her faithful sentry, always waiting at the edge of her mind. She used it.

The Force push shouldn’t have come together with enough intensity and precision to deflect Scourge’s saber strike, but it did. She kicked him back again, but this time it wasn’t a great surging effort, it was the smallest shrug of a power he could not possibly withstand. She brought the fight to him while he recovered his balance. He laughed somehow in the midst of that red haze. Their sabers clashed and hissed again and again. He slowed her offensive, battled her nearly to a standstill, almost but not quite capable of holding her in her full fury. There where her anger met his hate she felt pleasure rising. She wondered whose it was.

She checked herself. Not hers. She Force pushed him back further, caught up, ripped his saber away using her mind, knocked him down with a strength made of equal parts shame and rage. She hated that this arrogant hack had gotten her to resort to the Dark Side so easily. She hated him, hated that she needed this Sith for the task to come. She forced his head back, planted her feet on either side of his hips and set her sabers to his throat.

“Satisfied?” she snarled through her tears.

Scourge peered at her without lowering his chin onto the tip of the nearest saber. “It is a start,” he said softly. She eased her guard a little and let the flush of victory soothe the sting of having lost control. He panted in time with her, red eyes locked on hers. In time, feeling gracious, she deactivated her sabers and allowed him to move.

Lord Scourge didn’t immediately sit up. Instead he placed his hands on her calves, running up the outsides of her thighs to her hips, his touch certain, his eyes brilliant. This was power, power that could challenge her like nothing she had ever met; power, and victory, and she knew he hated her

for her strength as much as she hated him for demanding it. "Wake up, Wrath," he whispered, firming his grasp around her hips and sitting up to meet her as he started pulling her down onto him.

Again she checked herself. She answered him with a backhand blow, the hardest she could deal. The impact stunned him long enough for her to step free. "I am not your toy, old man. In case you didn't notice, you lost this fight."

No trace of irritation showed in his face or manner. He stared up at her and laughed a low rich laugh. "No. I didn't."

## Triad 18: Coming Around

### T1-18. Like Gold to Airy Thinness Beat

December, 10 ATC – 8 months before the confirmation of the Wrath

*Fury-class vessel – High orbit over Duro*

~

*Dear Father,*

*I'd like to visit home soon.*

*Things change, even in my inner circle, sometimes too fast to track, while other things stay stubbornly in place. You're a steady light. That helps, even if you don't always know it does.*

*Yours,  
Ruth*

~

Every place was warmer than Hoth. When Quinn requested work on Duro Ruth jumped to comply. And when it was over, the airlock finally closed behind Ruth, shutting out the last stale whiff of Duro's orbital city.

"I'm glad that was finally settled," said Quinn. "Moff Broysc has been a blight to the Empire's goals for too long."

"Not anymore," said Ruth. "Given the last few reports of his activities, I'm glad you tracked him down."

He frowned and didn't look at her. "He had too many years in power ruled by his own whims."

"But you finished him. I'm going to set course for Dromund Kaas now. If you need the ship for any errands, just let me know. Otherwise I suspect Vette will claim it."

"Yes, I imagine she will," he grumbled. "May she and the Talz make the most of it." With that he headed to his quarters.

Ruth played a couple of rounds of pazaak with Vette and Pierce; after that she headed to the bridge to look out at the stars.

The day had been another kill. This one was directly constructive for the Empire, and that was good. They were at war now. The rules were new.

It didn't feel right, though. Ever since Hoth, the death had seemed endless. Master Wyellett, who had spoken of peace. She hadn't given him that chance. Xerender. Fetzellen. Broysc. More and more, on and on.

All of it. It was all coming apart, and now that Ruth thought of it, perhaps she had never had it together. She had nothing to show for her time as Sith but a trail of corpses. They had trained her well.

"My lord."

She started and closed her eyes in a stupid effort to hide her thoughts before turning to Quinn. He must never have anything other than her best. "Captain."

"I request an audience when you have the time."

He never changed. It was oddly sweet. "I always have time for you. Here, or the conference room?"

"Here will suffice." He took up station at the rail beside her. Then stayed quiet.

"Speak your mind, Quinn."

He set his gaze on the stars before them. "You have been of tremendous assistance to me, my lord, in multiple matters since I came into your service. Things I never thought I would have the opportunity to do. Wrongs I had nearly given up hope of setting right. You gave me the opportunities I needed and desired, above and beyond any commander's obligation."

"You've earned every inch of it."

"I am grateful." A pause. Then: "My lord, some time ago, it seems you expressed an interest...and I've held back long enough."

"What?"

Two things happened at once and very quickly, and that was Quinn seizing Ruth's waist to pull her close and Ruth suppressing the combat reflex that would incapacitate him long enough for her to make a full tactical evaluation. Turning her face up to his seemed natural. Feeling his lips touch hers again was...different. *What the hell, she thought, and I did not authorize and you wouldn't dare anyway, and this isn't like you, and don't don't don't stop.*

He stopped. "My lord." Terrible. She pushed up on her toes to kiss him again, but only caught the corner of his mouth. "You know how I feel about you."

Her whole body sparked against his. "I've heard conflicting reports on the subject, actually." His lips stiffened against hers. "That was teasing, captain."

"You're quite justified in--"

"Quinn. Get back to the not-holding-back part."

"Yes."

And yes, and yes.

## **T2-18 Sir, I Exist**

August, 26 ATC – fifteen years after the confirmation of the Wrath  
1.5 years before the Wrath is called to kill Larr Gith

*Dromund Kaas*

Years and blood, they flowed with equal inevitability. Ruth cared for her son, who grew up quiet and secretive. And she put the fear of the Empire into the hearts of enemies everywhere. Sometimes she followed it up with a lightsaber.

She stretched and yawned when she reached the door of her Dromund Kaas apartment, her waypoint before her own house in the country. A long-planned assignment had fallen through and she found herself with a day off.

Her aide looked up from his desk as she passed through. "My lord. I thought you would be off planet today."

"Plans didn't work out."

He licked his lips nervously. "General Quinn will be visiting with Rylon within the hour."

Ruth flinched and tried not to show it. "Oh. Ugh. That's just perfect. Let me know when he's gone, I'll be in my room."

"Yes, my lord."



Ruth retreated to her sparsely furnished bedroom. Ever since Rylon's birth, she had managed to be a sector or more away from Dromund Kaas during her former husband's visits. If he was already in the city, though, hiding was safer than fleeing.

She tried to calm herself into a Force meditation. Eventually she managed an unquiet approximation thereof. It was enough to dissolve time for a while.

A wild stirring two rooms away brought her out. She sensed a powerful gathering of the Dark Side, something no one around here could manage except her son.

She strode out to the den and threw the door open.

Rylon Niral had his father by an invisible Force grip and was raising him off the floor, choking him. Perfectly matched faces, except one was a purpling red and the other was pale and smiling.

"Stop!" Ruth rushed forward and slammed the teenager's hand down.

"You do not raise a hand against your father. Not now, not ever."

"Let him defend himself if he's so great," said Rylon.

"Wrong answer," snarled Ruth. She turned to check on Quinn. He was slowly pushing off the floor, breathing hard. She gave him a hand up without meeting his eyes.

"What good is he to you?" said their son.

"He gave you life," said Ruth. "Isn't that enough? He does more for the Empire in a week than most people you'll meet do their whole lives. I can't believe I even have to say this: you will not harm him."

"Strong words from someone who hates him. You know this is the first time I've ever seen you two in the same room, and you can't even look at him? Are you going to pretend you haven't despised him with every breath since before I was born? I can tell him some of the things you've said about him."

"Believe me, everything I've said about him, I've already said to his face."

"You will respect your mother," Quinn ordered. "And stop this line of questioning."

"You're a worthless traitor," recited Rylon with something approaching glee. "Even by Sith standards you're a vile backstabbing snake. You never loved her for a minute, but you gave her every false promise you could think of to keep her close. You took the best of her for profit and for pleasure, and then you tried to break her. That's her favorite song, father. Do you know all the verses?"

"Stop it, Rylon," hissed Ruth.

"Even you wanted to kill him. Why blame me for starting?"

"Because as your father he deserves a modicum of respect, and as your mother I'm telling you to *stop it*."

"Respect." Rylon scoffed. "For him. Why you bother defending people who hate you so much, I'll never know." He flipped an obscene gesture at both of them as he stormed past Ruth and out the door.

Ruth held very still for the space of three breaths. They were supposed to be calming breaths, but they failed. Reluctantly she looked at Quinn.

At some point in the years since they had last spoken, grey had taken over at his temples and started scattering back through the rest of his hair. He had gained weight. He was still impeccably groomed and dressed. He held himself with pride, and the lines beginning to set in his face did nothing to mar the handsomeness she so hated. He looked well older than forty-nine, but strong as ever.

(And what was he seeing? She hoped she didn't look tired. She was wearing appropriately imposing Sith robes, so that was good. If she could have concealed the scar on her lip, she would have. He had always hated it when she failed to get injuries tended to in time to prevent scarring. Had he ever seen her unmasked on the holonews? No point in hiding now.)

By unspoken agreement they took another moment to reinforce their composure and hide their frustration at how little a few seconds' examination could really tell them about each other.

Then they both talked at once: "He was inaccurate in saying I hate you," he said. And she said "I didn't teach him all that on purpose."

Both of them broke off. Quinn recovered first. "I appreciate you taking my part," he said.

"I try to cultivate respect." The statement seemed laughable under the circumstances. "What he said, I didn't--"

"Nothing, I, haven't, heard, before, my lord," he said quietly. "No explanation is necessary." Then he shook his head. "I didn't know you were in the area today."

"Plans changed at the last minute. I was meditating when I...felt. What were you fighting about?"

"Nothing significant."

"He isn't always like this with you, is he?"

"No. We get along on most topics. That was by far the worst outburst I've seen."

Did you earn it? she didn't ask. "I'm sorry. I try to teach him patience, but he's difficult some days."

"He is fourteen years old and Sith. Neither factor is conducive to the development of self-control." Quinn shifted to parade rest, as he often did when he was uneasy. "If he were like me, I would ask you to send him to the officers' academy. That would straighten him out quickly enough."

"He'll be going to the Sith Academy soon enough."

"He should have gone years ago. My lord."

"You've never been there. It's a slaughterhouse. I'm in no rush to throw him into it."

"He has everything it takes to survive. And he must go, sooner or later."

Quinn was right, of course. Ruth stared at him and tried to get her heart to catch up to her head. "Rylon is my son. If I were to lose him, too..."

"The decision is yours, of course, my lord. But there is no better place for him. If he's half the warrior you are or half the tactician I am he will thrive. And butting heads among his own kind will teach him a thing or two about his own strength and how to wield it." He clenched his jaw for a moment. "We could go on as we have been. But you won't be there to stop him next time."

And that was the deciding factor. "I know."

Now that they were face to face, she could think of a great many things to ask or say. Most of them would invite a needless fight. So instead she lifted her chin and reminded herself that she was the Emperor's Wrath, the greatest warrior in the galaxy, and not easily hurt.

"It was you," he said.

"What?"

"Rylon and I were quarreling about you. I pressed him about your status, perhaps more than I should have, and it escalated. A great deal. He's very protective of you."

That was news, but not unpleasant. "Yes. He is."

"Perhaps I didn't have the right to ask about you in the first place."

"No. You didn't."

He was definitely frowning at her scar. She wondered, very briefly, whether he was just annoyed that she hadn't kept herself pretty enough for

his taste. He had never liked the injuries that left marks. Not until he decided to try his hand at it himself.

"Let's keep this about him," she said. "I'll talk to him and I'll make the arrangements for Korriban. I can keep you updated, if you wish, when he goes."

"I would appreciate that, my lord."

"Very well." And then, just like the day she had banished him from her life: "Dismissed."

He looked hurt this time, too.

She didn't know what to say to Rylon just yet. She didn't know what to say to herself. Quinn was necessarily a part of her son's world, but he was never, never supposed to cross her path. She couldn't name what she had felt the moment she saw Rylon hurting him. She only knew she had felt a lot of it.

Had Rylon really picked all that up from her?

It didn't matter. If her son hated Quinn, it was because Quinn deserved it. Even though Rylon wasn't supposed to have overheard all those condemnations for all those years, they were all true, and Quinn had personally earned every word of them.

But that back there, beating on a man who for all his cruel strength couldn't really defend himself against a Sith, that was unacceptable.

It would seem she had a lot to take care of.

### **T3-18. That Which We Are, We Are**

August, 28 ATC - 17 years after the confirmation of the Wrath

*Another mission planet*

"Wynston," yelled Ruth, surprising herself with the steadiness of her voice.

The black-haired agent disengaged from combat with the milling crowd of blank-masked troops and ran to where Ruth was shielding a wounded and already only half-conscious Quinn. "Can you stabilize him?"

"Yes," he said shortly. He was already pulling out the necessary supplies. "See that he and I don't sprout any new injuries, would you?"

"Done." She looked back down at Quinn. "They won't take you," she said, firmly, quickly, and then she stood up to throw herself back into the fray.

The battle cleared. The ritual elements were smashed, scattered to the winds by Ruth's team, and then Ruth gathered Quinn up and the whole group returned to the Prodigy Burst.

"He'll have to go in kolto," reported Wynston. "I don't think it'll be long, but there was internal damage."

"All right." Ruth ducked her head to kiss Quinn's forehead. "You'll be fine," she whispered, and let him go.

Larr Gith wandered into the medbay before Wynston finished setting up. "Wynston, I had no idea you would bother saving the general's life."

"I do my best to avoid sabotaging my own side," Wynston said mildly.

"He doesn't," said Larr Gith. "From what I've heard."

"Never mind what you heard, Jedi," said Ruth. "But thank you for your help, Wynston. I know he's not your first choice for crew to save in a pinch."

"Frankly, from all I've heard I'm surprised he's yours," purred Larr Gith.

"I love him," said Ruth. "You're familiar with the concept, I hope?"

"More than you think, Sith. Only with me, murder attempts were never involved."

"If you've never faced challenges in your love, I congratulate you. But don't imagine you're better just because you never had to try."

"If it feels like trying, maybe you're doing it wrong. Even I know that."

Which is why she was alone now? "Every day, every moment I have with him justifies every struggle we've been through. What do they teach you Jedi, anyway?"

"Jedi try to avoid that kind of attachment," Kira said as she walked by.

"Even I could do it better than the Wrath," said Larr Gith.

"And yet instead you're here, bothering me. – Hell, Quinn and I are the only committed couple on the ship, aren't we? I don't know how the rest of you manage."

"The same way you did for so long," said Wynston. "I must say you look happier now than you did then. I don't understand it, but good for you."

They all felt the subtle tug when the ship reentered hyperspace. Lord Scourge came to join them. "There is another lead on a planet not far from here. They are far too close to success."

"Already?" said Larr Gith.

"Cultists," said Wynston, shaking his head. "I hate cultists."

Ruth sighed. "They're really endless, aren't they?"

"Yes," said Lord Scourge. "They will try, and try, and try again, and no matter how many we hunt, more will rise. The only permanent solution is the removal of the Emperor."

"Then I look forward to doing it," said Ruth.

"If you can," Lord Scourge said smoothly. "Right now you appear to be distracted."

"Nothing you need concern yourself about, Scourge."

"Are you so dependent on one creature of flesh?"

"Don't knock what works," she growled.

"What would you do without him, I wonder?"

She rounded to face him fully. "Hope for your sake that you never find out."

## Triad 19: Other Reliance

### T1-19. Things Fall Apart

April, 11 ATC – 3 months before the confirmation of the Wrath

*Fury-class vessel*

~

*Dear Father,*

*I've had a good run, all things considered. Maybe things aren't as clean as I would like. But I'm learning to live in the balance.*

*So sometimes I wonder, when is the other shoe going to drop?*

*But I'm preparing. No surprises for me. I will let cynicism point the way and a more sober head do the rest.*

*Worlds of love,  
Ruth*



~

"So," said Ruth. "You all saw the comms there, I take it. Baras's attempt to have me killed. The Servants, whatever they are. The new, non-Baras direction our careers are about to take."

The crew nodded, quietly, with varying expressions of glumness. The past six months had been halcyon by any measure. Well, that was over.

"I can't say I'm all that surprised," said Ruth.

Vette relaxed a little. "Whew. I wasn't going to say it."

"Never cared for old man Baras anyway," said Pierce. Ruth smiled, very briefly, at his tone.

Quinn seemed a shade paler than usual. "So there it is. Darth Baras is now our enemy."

"This is what Sith Masters do. I think we're in a good position to strike back and then get right back to making a difference out there. I think Baras is insane to waste resources on infighting right now...there's a war on, and that matters far more than he does...but be that as it may. We can handle it. Jaesa, your impression of the Servants who contacted us about the job opening of Emperor's Wrath? I don't know what to make of them."

Jaesa shuddered. "They are...pure, master, and their words did not feel like lies. I believe they are truly close to the Emperor."

"Interesting. This could turn out to be a positive thing." Ruth considered. "But one thing at a time. We've got this, people." She caught Quinn's eye. He did look pale, and sadder than she had ever seen him. She felt bad for him. Standard Sith backstabbing was bad enough for the participants; it must be hell for someone standing by trying to track the chain of command.

"Don't worry," she told him, smiling. "We've got this."

Vette piped up. "So what are we gonna do now?"

"Now?" said Ruth. "We're going to see my father."

## **T2-19. Deep Roots Are Not Reached by the Frost**

August, 26 ATC – 15 years after the confirmation of the Wrath  
1.5 years before the Wrath is called to kill Larr Gith

*Dromund Kaas*

She called Quinn a few days after he had left her and Rylon. She wasn't sure where to start, so she stayed in authority mode.

"My lord," he said, bowing in the holo image.

"General. I'd like to dine with you sometime. If you wish." Okay, partial authority mode.

"I would like that," he said slowly. It was hard to read that tense face. He was clearly thinking hard, trying to keep up with...something.

"Kaas City. The Black Command. Three days."

"I'll be there, my lord."

\*

She wore plain black street clothes. No armor, no embellishment. Belt with lightsabers, of course, but that was her only concession to the realities of war. She brushed the smallest wave into her forelock, considered but rejected makeup. So she was thirty-five. He already knew that about her. And ornamentation above and beyond concealing her age didn't feel right.

She had asked to meet in a public place, a restaurant where she could command a private booth if things went well or armed guards if things went poorly.

Quinn was already seated when she arrived. The waiter brought her to the tiny table and pulled out her chair; Quinn stood, drinking in the look of her like a man who had just rediscovered water. He bowed. "My lord."

She sat and waved the waiter away. "Good evening, Quinn."

Quinn was uniformed, as ever. The formal uniform, embellished slightly beyond his everyday one. Little else to say; he was freshly clean-shaven, his hair neat as always. He made greying hair look good.

He frowned at her. "Is it wise to come out unarmored?"

"I wanted the symbolic gesture, Captain Practical. - General Practical, rather."

"Its significance is not lost on me."

When the maître d'hôtel came by with wine recommendations, Ruth didn't even look at the proffered menu. "Organa, 10 ATC," she said, keeping her eyes on Quinn. "One of the whites, if you have them."

"I imagine their production was somewhat curtailed that year," Quinn said after the maître d' had bowed and left.

"We didn't damage the vineyards."

"The conflict with Thul still likely disrupted operations."

She didn't dare smile, not just yet. "When's the last time you were out on the ground?"

"I command from the forefront whenever I can. There is little satisfaction in holding an armchair during the battle."

"Good. You were always meant to be in the thick of things carrying out your own plans." The curiosity that surged up was inappropriate, but irresistible. "Are you happy?" she blurted.

He looked at his napkin. "That's a rather complicated question, my lord. The campaign goes on. It has successful days. It has failures. There is little else to say." He looked up. "Are you?"

A moment where thought failed her. Then she decided to be honest. "No. Sometimes, with Rylon." Which only reminded her. "Quinn, I am so sorry."

"He never mentioned our history before," Quinn said, almost vaguely. "I can only assume he was startled to see the two of us together." His attention sharpened. "He knows what you taught him. But only because you know what I taught you."

"I'm sorry. It wasn't fair of me."

The old mechanical control was tapping back into his manner. "You had every right to say what you said."

"I didn't come here to exercise my rights. Not like that. I came here to talk. As between two people who, for all their history, maybe still wonder how the other is doing."

"I am grateful you did."

Somewhere in the pause Ruth noticed movement beside them. A waitress quietly cleared her throat. "Is my lord ready to order?"

"Oh! I hadn't decided on it," said Ruth. Or started thinking about it.

"Jellied sleen for the lady," said Quinn. "Hossberry glaze or the closest savory thing the chef can recommend." He looked to her. "Diced greenbells on the side?"

"Yes," she said. "Please."

Quinn gave his own order and let the waitress go.

"You surprise me," said Ruth. "Of all the things to remember."

"You ordered it more than once, my lord."

She tried to think of a subtle way to get her napkin to her eyes, but failed. So she turned aside and wiped her eyes unsubtly instead.

"My lord?" he said gently.

"I'm sorry. I am struggling to hate you and see you like this both at once. There is a great deal that should...that could be discussed. And I don't know how to be near you before it happens."

"If there is something I should be doing..."

"No, be you. Like this. Let the rest of it wait. Remember things if you want to. It's just overwhelming." She had to say something different. "Do you remember the Citadel? That day I just had us eat up on the observation deck and you thought I was crazy because it's official space that isn't for eating? It might have been the first time I ordered jellied sleen with you around."

"It was. I remember the day very clearly." He pointed toward the window. "You could see the deck from here if it weren't so stormy out."

"It was clear then. Or as clear as Dromund Kaas gets. The whole city lay before us."

"You remember it was my first time in the city since before Druckenwell. It was a homecoming I had not dared to hope for."

"Is it home now?"

He hesitated. "It was less so after our falling out, once you started living so near here. I don't need a fixed home."

And that was just sad. "You don't have to answer this if you don't want to, but...did you ever meet someone?"

"No," he said emphatically. "Short-term, sometimes, rarely, but never for long."

They were quiet for a few long moments before Ruth decided to spare him the trouble. "I never started, myself. Call it trust, call it what you will, but I never developed the interest."

"I thought the agent..."

"No."

He looked far more relieved than she would have expected. "I really believed you would go back to him."

She shook her head. "He always felt like he needed to look after me. But no, I never, not with him, not after."

He nodded with some difficulty. "I know I haven't any right to feel pleased with that..."

"I told you. Tonight isn't about who's got a right or who deserves."

Things were quiet for a few seconds.

"My lord," he said. "If I had the day to do over..."

"We don't have that day to do over," she said, and was sorry to hear the truth of it.

He dropped his gaze. "Indeed."

She swallowed hard and, trying to suppress the butterflies in her stomach, placed one hand on the table, pushing halfway across. She turned her palm toward the salt shaker in case she had to de-awkward a rejected gesture.

But, after a long moment, he raised his own hand and slowly, gently, caressed the back of her hand before sliding around to hold it.

"Ruth," he said. "Why are you doing this?"

"Because I saw you. And...I've spent fifteen years thinking about the other part. I thought I could at least listen now. If you want me to go, I will, and I just won't mention it."

"No. Stay." He ran his thumb over her hand. "You are beautiful, and I have spent a long time regretting the bitterest cruelty and the greatest folly of my life. I thought you would never want to face me. I couldn't blame you for it." He cleared his throat. "I don't want you to leave again."

"We'll see. If it makes sense."

"If it makes sense, of course."

They ate. They arranged to meet again. They parted. One step at a time.

### **T3-19. All That's Best of Dark and Bright**

August, 28 ATC - 17 years after the confirmation of the Wrath

*Fury-class vessel* Scorned

Ruth awoke feeling slightly, pleasantly sore from the short time she had managed to steal with Quinn the previous night. She still had a few hours before the Defender returned from whatever errand it had gone on overnight.

There was something she needed to do.

She crept silently to a drawer and pulled out a velvet bag. Inside was a small blue crystal, bright in the Force. It had belonged to her father, and she had locked it away.

No more.

She opened her father's lightsaber, moving as silently as she could. She pried out the red crystal that she had adopted on Corellia. She slipped in the original – well, the one that had belonged to the last generation. And when it was done, she took the hilt in both hands and meditated. She settled into a secure, comfortable clarity. A happy one.

When she opened her eyes again, Quinn was watching her. "Good morning," he said.

"Good morning."

"I am no Sith, but...can I ask what you've been preparing so determinedly since you started this venture? It's different from what you've done in past years. More...controlled, but I can't say exactly how."

It was rare for him to ask about Force matters. "That? Retraining my contact with the Light Side of the Force."

He blinked. "Why?"

Ah. He was an amazing partner, but he had some limits that would never change. Concern for a morality outside his duties was one of them. "It's who I choose to be. It's more compatible with what I originally set out to do, which was help people. In service instead of domination."

"Will it be as effective as the alternative?"

It was getting there. "Yes. You'll recall, especially from back when I was starting out, the resources I preserved by seeking minimally fatal solutions instead of traditional slash-and-burn. That was all Light Side inclination."

"I see. Can I help?"

"You already do." She reached out to touch the corner of his questioning smile. "You already know about the other way, how I fed on you hurting me, but you help this way, too. You ground me. Remind me what I'm fighting for. Days when I wake up and think the whole galaxy can just go to hell, I remember that I love you and Rylon, and that love is enough to go on."



"I prefer you to think of me that way."

"I thought you might."

He considered. "This Light Side practice of yours is the source of your rather obvious conflict with the former Wrath. Who otherwise strikes me as the most pragmatic of the lot."

"He is bound by the Dark Side, and he thinks I should be, too."

"I could have told him that opposing your will is a fool's errand."

"You can try. He wouldn't listen."

"Well, that's why I don't usually question Sith."

"You question me all the time."

"You're a very unusual Sith."

They kissed, briefly, and then the ship's comms beeped.

"Rrg," said Ruth. "That'd be Wynston getting back. Ready to hear all about the world-destroying cultist plot of the day?"

"Always. I know how much you enjoy it."

Quinn brought the Fury in to dock. The Defender's crew was already gathered when Ruth and Quinn came on board. Wynston was ready to present something. A stone device, shaped like a little standalone obelisk, no more than three feet tall.

"This is a Rakatan mind trap," he said. "It was used to house the most dangerous of Rakatan prisoners. This one is now empty...and that was a costly victory. When it comes to the Emperor I can think of no better candidate for imprisoning him."

"We are meant to destroy him," said Lord Scourge.

"Historically that hasn't worked so well. This is our backup."

The Sith crossed his arms, but said nothing.

"Ritual activity isn't slowing down any, and we need as many fight-ending ideas as we can as soon as we can. I've had scouts checking out a few candidate locations for the Emperor's true form. Nothing has panned out, it's all cultists or long-abandoned ruins. We'll keep looking. Ruth, next time the Emperor summons you in person, I want some recording devices on your ship. Spectrograms, comlinks on every frequency we can possibly catch, the whole nine yards. There may be comms between the Voice's fortress and other places. If you get the chance you could even smuggle a dataspikes into the fortress's main computer, get us a real feed."

"I can certainly try."

"It'll blow your cover. But I think...I think we're close. Would you be ready to remove him the next time you see him?"

"So soon?" She thought about the whirlwind of the preceding weeks. She had learned a lot. Learned some things all over again. Rediscovered a discipline that would serve her well. Rediscovered, if only in Wynston and brief encounters with old friends on specific missions, a reason to try. And every day passing was another chance for the Emperor's plan to go forward. "Yes. I can."

## **Triad 20: Family Found and Finding**

### **T1-20. Drink And Be Whole Again**

April, 11 ATC – 4 months before the confirmation of the Wrath

*Dromund Kaas*

~

*Dear Father,*

*It's happened. I'm coming home.*

*Stay safe.*

*Love,  
Ruth*

~

Colran Niral sent one of his household staff to pick up Ruth and her crew from the spaceport and shuttle them back to the Niral estate some ways west of Kaas City. Baras had officially disowned Ruth, and it was time for her father's modest resources to come into play.

He awaited them in the hangar. Here, in front of witnesses, he limited his greeting to a warm nod while Ruth bowed.

"Father," she said. "Thank you for taking us in on such short notice. This is my crew: my executive officer Captain Quinn." Quinn bowed. "Lieutenant Pierce." Pierce nodded amicably. "My apprentice, Jaesa Willsaam." The girl also bowed, giving Colran a gentle curious smile. "Broommark." An unidentifiable gurgle. "And Vette, whom I finally managed to drag back on planet."

"Hiya," said Vette. "I was arguing for a birthday party visit but she said no."

"Everyone, this is my father Lord Colran Niral."

"Welcome, all of you. Please, come inside. Drinks?"

He and a pair of servants got the crew situated in the living room. Then it was time to get down to work.

"So, Father. I'm here because Darth Baras has shifted his preference to another apprentice and decided to remove me."

"As we always knew he would. He's a fool to do it to you, but...if the man had one weakness, that unwillingness to cultivate upward talent is it."

"He's going to come after you as a way of striking at me. Sooner or later."

Colran nodded. "I know. I'll have measures in place."

"I like how you're all talking about this as if it's totally normal," said Vette.

"Well," said Ruth, "it is." Disappointing, but normal.

"It was only a matter of time," said Colran. "I'm glad you all are here with her for it. I feared she would have to face him alone."

"Never," said Jaesa.

"It will not be so simple for him," Quinn confirmed quietly. Ruth smiled at him.

"Your daughter's got a way with people," said Pierce. "Particularly the bit where she doesn't stab 'em in the back. I must say, that's been a nice employment benefit."

Broonmark, standing over by the door, bubbled agreement.

"Now, I can't stay for long," said Ruth. "But I'd like to talk strategy. I'm higher on the political ladder than I really expected to be when the event hit, and I could use your advice."

They talked well into the evening, Pierce and Broonmark making rough direct recommendations, Jaesa and Quinn advocating more roundabout, less belligerent maneuvers, Vette stating the obvious and satisfying yet impractical notions. Colran gave his own advice from his decades' experience among the Sith. He also made a point of drawing Ruth's individual crew members out with a few targeted questions each, and he paid very close attention to their answers.

Later in the evening Colran called a droid in to give Pierce and Broonmark a tour of the estate's neglected armory. Vette opted for an early bedtime, leaving Ruth, Colran, and Jaesa to "talk Sithy stuff."

When Quinn excused himself, Colran followed him just down the hall. Ruth followed as far as the bend in the hallway, signaling Jaesa for silence.

"A moment, captain." A second's pause. "I don't know exactly what your relationship with my daughter is," Colran said quietly, "and I won't be so crass as to ask specifics, but I will tell you to be kind to her. You know what she does, what she means to the Empire. And I expect it's obvious what she means to me."

"It is evident, my lord."

"I will press my authority for one question. Do you love her?"

Silence for the space of a long breath. "My lord, that...that's an enormous question. I have no immediate answer."

Ruth's insides curled up, but she couldn't blame him. It was an enormous question. And he would never in his life give an insincere answer to it.

Colran spoke next. "These aren't circumstances to be uncertain, officer. She can no longer afford to rely on someone who isn't sure about her, so if you don't love her you had best get out of the way."

"I won't leave her, my lord," Quinn said hotly. "I swore myself to your daughter long before the question of love came up, and whatever comes of it, I serve her."

There was a moment's silence. "See that you do, Captain Quinn." Another pause, a whisper of a labored breath. "I worry about her."

## **T2-20. For He on Honeydew Hath Fed**

September, 26 ATC – 15 years after the confirmation of the Wrath  
14 months before the Wrath is called to kill Larr Gith

*Korriban*

Rylon had been on Korriban scant weeks, the fallout of Ruth's meeting with Quinn. Ruth navigated the dimly lit warren of the Korriban Academy's dormitories with ease. The hallways were busy with armed hall monitors and passing students; they all made way for the Emperor's Wrath with her unmistakable mask cradled in one arm, and she proceeded directly to one particular cell, where her son Rylon was currently stretched out on the narrow bed fiddling with a shield generator.

"Good afternoon," said Ruth.

Rylon set down his work and pushed up to sit with his back against the wall. "Mom."

"I just got through with some Council business. I thought I would drop by and see how you're settling in."

"Dad's on planet, you know." It was somehow funny to hear that from such a perfect copy of Quinn's own face.

"Yes, I know." In fact, Ruth had arranged to meet Quinn here, since they both already had plans to visit Rylon in his new home. "I'll likely be seeing him later."

The teenager stiffened. "Really."

"You're welcome to dine with us. Since I saw him...you know, on Dromund Kaas...we thought it might be constructive to open communications again."

His anger flared warm in her awareness. "Are you fucking him?"

"Rylon! That's a hell of a way to--"

"You're my parents. Don't I get some kind of right to know, especially since you felt you had to kick me out of the house to start whatever you're doing? Are you fucking him?"

Ruth always tried to answer her son's questions directly and answer them honestly, even when she didn't want to answer at all. Honesty with her kin was important; it made her better than her ex-husband. "No."

"You gonna start?"

"I don't know yet."

They glared at each other for a moment.

"Would you like to come to dinner with us?" said Ruth.

"No," he said sullenly. "I don't want to see you two together at all."

"I see. Until your father and I decide whether we're going to reinstate the shooting war, perhaps it's just as well you stay clear. But that's all beside the point. I wanted to ask how things are here. Whether there are any questions you had that a veteran might be able to answer."

"No."

"Are you liking it here?"

He shrugged. "It's okay."

"Anybody try to kill you yet?"

"A couple."

"Are they still alive?"

Rylon scowled. "Yeah. They got witnesses."

"And you didn't pursue and engage? Good. If you must kill, make it discreet; otherwise don't even start."

He slouched a little more. "I know, Mom."

"But, this being Korriban, you should watch for the chance to finish them. Enemies never just wander off and forget about you." Half consciously she touched her scarred lip.

Rylon rolled his eyes. "*I know*, Mom."

"I get to repeat tired advice, because I'm your mother and I worry about you."

"You're worse than Dad."

"I cannot possibly be offering more tactical direction than Quinn would."

Rylon glowered expressively at her.

"Just keep your blade ready and your wits about you, all right? And for hate's sake take good notes in Overseer Tethran's history class. I wasn't joking when I described the fatal field work he assigns to the students who fail his tests."

He shrugged. "Yeah. Can I get back to work now?"

"Be sure to write. Especially if anybody hits you with any interesting murder attempts. Students come up with some amazing tactics, I like to stay informed."

"Yeah."

"I love you."

Rylon rolled his eyes once more and picked up the generator, turning the whole of his presence away from her.

Ruth made her way back out into Korriban's pitiless daylight. First the Dark Council, now this. She took a deep, steadying breath and tried to steel herself for the evening ahead.

Quinn, with all his solemnity, had a good shot at being the friendliest person she would interact with today. And that prospect terrified her.



## T3-20. The Bludgeoning of Chance

August, 28 ATC – 16.5 years after the confirmation of the Wrath

*Fury-class vessel* Scorned

Having spent a day preserving her job by killing war-relevant, ritual-irrelevant targets for the Emperor's Hand, but still lacking information on the Emperor's whereabouts, Ruth and Quinn returned to dock with the *Prodigy Burst* and talk strategy. This time the thing that sent Ruth storming back to her ship was a comment Larr Gith made when Quinn left the room for a moment, and that was "I've been meaning to say, Sith, you caught a pretty one. I bet he had a body to die for, oh, twenty years ago."

Par for the miserable, Jedi-laden course.

Ruth went to the bridge of her own ship and stared out at the stars. Pretty soon she would have to go back in to work, but she had a little time to sulk.

"Hey. Uh, Wrath."

Ruth turned to find Kira Carsen. "Uh, Kira."

"I wanted to apologize for Larr."

"You what?" The red-haired Jedi had been slowly unwinding in the presence of Ruth's less-barbaric-than-expected ways, but this seemed a bit much.

Kira rolled her eyes, but her voice was more or less friendly. "Don't make me repeat it. I know, she's insufferable, but we're doing our best."

"Her best is terrible. What is her problem?"

Kira leaned against the wall. "You really wanna know?"

"I really do."

"She's a natural born bitch." Kira shrugged. "Okay, I don't know that for sure. But she was kind of a child star on Tython. Prophesied for all kinds of exciting things, the details of which I'm sure she can recite for you. It just messed her up a little."

"A little."

"You try saving the galaxy at seventeen while keeping your head on straight."

"I wasn't that much older when I started carving up the Dark Council."

"Eh. A couple of years can make a big difference. She was kind of difficult back then, but at least Doc could handle her. He was a medic we had with us for a while. Kind of creepy, given her age, but they got along really well, and she behaved herself for him. More or less. After 'the Emperor was killed' he and she hit the party circuit big time. All over the headlines. It wasn't long before she started making the Jedi look bad. You know, sex, drugs, everything somebody newly rich and famous and not too bright would be getting into. She had a thing where she tried to demand a seat on the Jedi Council. It was a mess."

"She's not on the Council now, I notice."

"Yeah, she never got that wish. Some stuff came up. She went too far. They had a big meeting, I don't even know what they threatened her with, but in the end she decided to leave the Core Worlds. Doc stuck with her for a bit, I think. But I lost track. To be honest, as soon as I got out from under the padawan thing I wanted her out of my life."

"But you came back."

"Scourge's fault. The guy may be creepy but so far all his 'we're all going to die' tips have been right on the money."

"You should be flattered he chose to seek your help."

Kira considered and smiled. "Yeah, I guess you're right."

"Just, between him and Larr...ugh. Why are the critical ones always crazy?"

Kira raised an eyebrow. "Do you smell any irony here? I'm smelling irony."

"Hey, I'm perfectly reasonable. By somebody's standards. I think." She grinned. "So, not to be cynical, but what's with the nice?"

"Wynston's been on my case," admitted Kira. "Also, I have it on pretty good authority that not all born Sith are hopeless."

\*

It wasn't long afterward that Ruth finished an evening's soothing unarmed practice forms and settled down to listlessly poke around the holonet. She had her work cut out for tomorrow. Always she had her work cut out.

The *Scorned* was docked with the *Prodigy Burst*; Wynston wandered to her quarters' doorway and leaned against the frame. "I've been meaning to ask," he said. "Most of your old friends are accounted for, but my intelligence apparatus has limits. Whatever happened to your Talz?"

Ruth looked up. "Broonmark? He finally picked a fight bigger than him. He was attacking a rival Sith's forces and got in too far. I didn't catch up in time." She shook her head. "What about Kaliyo?"

He took the question in stride. "We parted ways. A very long time ago."

"I'm sorry. I know you cared for her."

He shrugged. "Nobody in their right mind would care deeply there." He walked in and settled on the bed beside her. "As for the others, Vector –" and here his face spasmed in genuine pain – "Vector was killed years ago. Doctor Lokin is gone. I won't say he's dead, because he almost certainly isn't, but he no longer amuses himself by following me. Temple's doing a brilliant job heading a division in the organization that looks after affairs in Imperial space. She's one of the people looking for our Emperor."

"And the droid?"

"SCORPIO is still...under analysis. And will be for a long time."

"Ah. You might know better than I, is Vette doing okay?"

"Yes. She's actually something of a major player as a smuggler. For the most part I leave her to her business. She's a hell of an operative, though. I'll be calling on her before this job is done, almost certainly. I can direct money her way."

And Ruth had no right to try to contact. She wouldn't be surprised if Vette never forgave her. "Is she happy?"

"You wouldn't know it from her jokes half the time, but yes. She is."

"Good."

They sat for a while in companionable silence.

"Can I ask you something, Wynston?"

"You can."

"Why the disguise?"

He touched his brown face. "Anonymity. Freedom to move. Something I can easily deactivate and walk away from. It's quite useful."

"Does it even work in hand-to-hand combat? You know, when you're physically interacting."

"Try me." He clasped her hand. His flesh felt warm and solid and looked quite dark-skinned and Human. "It's amazing what you can do with forcefields these days. I'm as convincing as the real thing, in all possible ways."

"I liked the way you looked. Chiss."

He squeezed her hand and dropped it while the guard over his features tightened. "There are advantages to presenting as Human. As an alien you find everyone weighs you in the balance and finds you wanting before you so much as open your mouth. You draw curious stares everywhere you go. You get caught between people who make a fetish out of your skin tone and people who make a blanket hatred policy. Thank you, by the way, for doing neither."

"I was a little distracted by you being you. It blew me right past the preconceptions part."

"I used to dream about being Human, all the time. About really blending in. Since I found this disguise technology, I can."

"That's awful."

"That's life." He shrugged. "Larr, her people, they've never seen my true face. I save the disguise changes for other jobs, other places. I figure their ignorance is an advantage I have in case of emergency."

"That doesn't exactly sound healthy. Have you ever noticed what a miserable lot of misfits we are?"

"I tried putting together a socially and professionally functional team, but nobody passed the audition." He smiled wryly. "It's on us."

## **Triad 21: Communion**

### **T1-21. To Tell the Laity of Our Love**

April, 11 ATC - 3 months before the confirmation of the Wrath

*Medium orbit over Hoth*

~

*My dear Ruth,*

*You look so like your mother. It shows on holos but ten times more so in person.*

*What happiness we had, and there was a great deal, we took. In the world of Sith entitlement that may not sound like much, but it's everything.*

*Your loving father,  
Colran*

~

*Dear Father,*

*What happiness I can find, I will take. I think there's a lot out there. I hope so.  
Even with everything...even with everything.*

*Love,  
Ruth*

~

Ruth stepped out of the lift into the airlock passageway leading back to her ship. The smell of it was off. The man who stood to greet her was tall, handsome, familiar.

"You're looking well for someone I blew up," said Lord Draahg.

Baras's prize apprentice...the other one, that is...had already struck at them once, luring her and her people to the depths of a mine and detonating it. It had been Baras's first notice that she was no longer preferred. She had survived, obviously. She had warned her father. And now she was here.

She scanned the scene. Fires burned here and there, but nothing seemed ready to blow. Her crew...her crew lay scattered on the floor, unconscious. Or dead.

"Your slaves put up a good fight," he continued. "They'll have a fun few months before Baras is through with them."

Anger lanced through her. "Not likely."

Draahg followed her gaze to where Quinn had fallen. "Oh, but you could simply fail right now...." He strode to stand over the officer and raised his saber.

Ruth cried out and thrust one hand forward, letting her inchoate rage fly at the Sith. This was her fight, hers and his, no one else's. Her strike sent him crashing to the ship's side.

She snapped herself under her habitual control, but her movements were swift and merciless: he had hunted her down, hurt her friends, and although he was strong and skilled she was stronger. She never enjoyed killing, but she had no qualms about the death blow on this menace. So she made it.

She ran to make sure Quinn was breathing. He was unconscious but alive. She moved to check the rest of the crew was up. Most were already stirring. They seemed well.

Ruth returned to kneel and lift Quinn's head to her lap. His eyes finally fluttered open. She breathed wavering relief.

"Lord Draahg is dead," she said, perhaps unnecessarily, and looked around at her friends. "I will not permit Baras to take you." She bent her head over Quinn. "He will not have you."

He closed his eyes and turned his head to press his face to her for a moment. She squeezed him tight. Then they both stood.

The crew cleaned up in the medbay. Ruth stayed behind with Quinn after they scattered.

"There's something important I've been meaning to ask you," he said, "that I am coming to realize I shouldn't delay any longer."

"Go ahead."

He took her hand. "You and I have been incredibly successful together."

"We certainly have."

"And we love one another."

"We do."

"I..." he straightened his jacket and took a long moment to bring his gaze back to hers..."I wondered if you would want to do me the honor of marrying me."

Ruth's mouth fell open. "I never thought about...that's...yes. Of course, yes. A thousand times yes." She threw herself forward to embrace him.

"I believe once will suffice, my lord." He settled his arms around her and pulled tight.

"A thousand times," she insisted. "You're too wonderful to say yes to only once."

He either sighed or laughed. "Very well. Now, elaborate arrangements are impractical in light of our chaotic situation."

"We can wait. Put it off until the matter of Baras is settled."

He shook his head almost violently. "I don't want to delay."

"Why's that?"

"I think we've waited long enough already."

"Ah. Good point."

## **T2-21. Oh Frabjous Day**

December, 26 ATC – 15 years after the confirmation of the Wrath  
13 months before the Wrath is called to kill Larr Gith

*Dromund Kaas*



Ruth and Quinn continued to get together for dinner now and then, when work permitted. Careful, noncommittal conversations. A polite avoidance of why they were on speaking terms again at all. She didn't know his reasons. Nor did she ask herself why she wanted to see him.

They didn't come back to the subject that had separated them for so long. They had each rehearsed that conversation so many times over the last fifteen years, saying it now to each other seemed redundant. Nothing could be changed, nothing soothed, nothing erased. At the same time, some unexpected things can coexist with anger. There developed an odd warmth in discussing the here and now, their campaigns, their son, an increasing number of insignificant day-to-day details. Weeks turned into months. During most meetings they tried not to pick fights, even the tempting ones, and that made things pleasant: like getting to know a friendly stranger, except each happened to already know the other stranger's likes, dislikes, ambitions, weaknesses (which they avoided most of the time) and strengths (which they encouraged most of the time). They knew what distance to keep, what not to talk about, what not to put too much faith in. It was far from the heat Ruth had tried to stop dreaming of. But what they had was nice.

She told Quinn that last part on his way out the door one night. "And after careful consideration," she informed him, "I think I have come to approve of your continued existence."

"I should be flattered?" he said. He didn't look displeased.

"You should. I think it's past time we declared a formal truce. Don't you?"

He nodded. "Truce, my lord."

"Ruth," she corrected.

He picked up on what her voice couldn't say. When he hesitantly reached out, she took his hand. All of a sudden he pulled her close, burying his nose in her hair for a long moment before answering. "Ruth."

Finally. Yes. This. She tucked her head under his chin and spoke to his collar. "Tell me it's fifteen years ago and you want me to love you."

"I regret to report that it is not fifteen years ago. And it has been a long, long time since I imagined you could love me."

"You've gotten very bad at following orders."

"I apologize. I want you to love me. The other part remains impossible."

"The other part doesn't matter."

\*

In the past they had been fierce and frantic every time, she because she was nineteen and in love for the first time, he because, she could only imagine, he already knew it would have to end.

Now they were cautious, deliberate, unsure of the familiar roads. There were new scars, new hesitations, a thousand changes, each muscle and curve slightly different from what they remembered. They could navigate, though, slowly, carefully. They had learned patience.

Not that that could make her forget the other half of her feelings. She took a long moment, once they were finished, just to hold him; and then she gave in to her doubts. "It was good?" she whispered.

"Yes," he said. He stroked her sides, nuzzled her hair. "Yes."

"I'm glad. Now get out."

He froze. "What?"

She sat up and tugged a corner of the sheet up to cover herself. "Get out. I won't sleep while you're here."

"Ruth..."

"I like you. I want you. I don't trust you." She decided against saying something about how he had no right to complain about surprise changes in terms. "Don't make me make this an order. Just go, sleep elsewhere, and we'll talk later."

He looked her in the eye. "No."

She had no idea how to react to that.

"I won't leave you again," he said.

Malavai, she didn't say. I am not safe with you, she didn't say. If I fall asleep with you here I don't know what I'll wake up to, and most importantly if I let you stay you'll see how completely, how hopelessly, how foolishly I love you, even after all this time, even after everything. If you stay I am lost, and I am terrified of what you will do when you realize that. She didn't say.

He touched her hand, very gently, and looked up at her. "I won't leave you again," he repeated.

She tried to look calm while she lay back down and allowed him to gather her in his arms. "Stay, then." She hoped he couldn't feel her shaking.

Once, she knew, he would have given a speech. He would have laid out policy, sought official guidance, and offered extravagant reassurances that might or might not be outright lies. This time, though, he just pulled her close. The gradual calming of his heartbeat lulled her to sleep.

She woke up when he started and tensed. It was still dark. She scrambled to where she could meet him eye to eye. "Am I dreaming again?" he said, crisp-clear in the night.

"No." She could be sure of that. "This dream always hurt a lot more, at least for me."

He nodded thoughtfully. "You're right. It did."

"I'm here." She kissed his forehead. "Go to sleep."

They slept.

### **T3-21. Let Us Be True to One Another**

September, 28 ATC – 17 years after the confirmation of the Wrath

*Fury-class vessel* Scorned

“Are you actually in love?” said Larr Gith.

“Hello,” said Ruth, “how are you doing today, I’m fine, thanks. How’s the space weather?”

“Oh, because Sith are such paragons of social graces. The question stands. Are you actually in love?”

Still a galaxy to save, still an Emperor’s location to wait for in readiness every day, still ritual murders to stop on a dozen worlds and more every day, and *this* was what Ruth’s fellow warrior felt was important. “Do you have reason to believe I’m not?”

“Other than the ‘Sith’ label you wear on your forehead? Let’s see. Captain Stuffy gives you smoldering looks from time to time and otherwise – “ she made a vague hand gesture – “nothing. You’re practically as close with the other Human male on board.”

“I’m closer to Quinn,” Ruth said dryly. “He could tell you, were he a little less discreet. I’m in love. I’ve been in love. I expect I’ll always be in love. He seems to return it.” But enough of the Jedi’s interrogations. “Don’t you have a boy toy somewhere you could bring along?”

Larr Gith gave that a moment’s flabbergasted thought. Absolutely worth the price of admission, decided Ruth. “Well I could,” said the Jedi. “I mean, obviously he would be right there with me. He was with me through a lot of shit. What’s one more bucket of it?”

“You don’t seem like the type to be tied down.”

"Oh, wouldn't you like to know," said Larr Gith, reviving. "He was a little old for me. You know how it is. Great time while it lasts, but nobody's shedding tears."

"Do you miss him?"

"Do you miss sunlight after three straight months spaceside? I mean, surface sunlight, not - blech - starlight in general." Larr Gith tossed her wavy cascade of hair. "Yeah, I wouldn't say no if Doc asked nicely. But we don't exactly have time for personal lives now. Except you, Ms. Husband Plus Concubine."

Ruth choked on air. "My what?"

"Oh, you heard me." Larr Gith turned away, smiling catlike. "For a woman who never blames herself for anything, you're shit at looking innocent."

It was sometimes hard to tell whether she was being completely ridiculous or only mostly ridiculous. Ruth settled on the former.

## Triad 22: Things You Just Don't Say

### T1-22. Design of Darkness to Appall

May, 11 ATC - two months before the confirmation of the Wrath

*Deep space*

~

*Dear Father,*

*My new masters may be no kinder than my old one. Their authority flows from the Emperor himself. Isn't that a good thing? And yet, I have to hide or their darkness will consume me. I feel that they must know what I am. And yet they let me use my own methods. Is this the kind of safety I can expect?*

*I'm being careful. Please, do the same.*

*Love,  
Ruth*

~

"Wrath."

It wasn't a name. It was an archaic title. It played on the second worst of her available passions, second only to fear. How was this her? How had it become her?

She needed the Emperor's Hand and the consequent protection of the Emperor. It might free her to benefit the Empire in ways she never could as a mere Lord. And yet for now...for now she was still taking orders, just from a higher authority. Maybe that meant doing more good. She could hope.

"Servant One," she said. The holo had two robed and hooded fingers, one tall and thin, one broader and dark in a way that wormed into Ruth's core. "What can I do for the Empire?"

"You must continue your campaign against Darth Baras," intoned Servant One. "He is no more a servant of the Emperor than the Jedi themselves are. We will give you a name and a planet. And you will bring the Emperor's will."

"Can they be reasoned with?"

There was a moment's silence.

"The Emperor's will," repeated Servant One. "It brooks no alternate interpretation."

"Bring the light," said Servant Two. "The only light is fire."

She brought her hand to her saber without thinking. "I understand," she said.

When she turned away her husband – her *husband* – was there. “Is there a problem, my lord?”

“We have our orders,” she said. Knowing him he might take that as assurance that everything was right. Was she ready to tell him it wasn’t?

Not yet. Not just yet. For him, only courage would do.

## **T2-22. April is the Cruellest Month**

December, 26 ATC – 15 years after the confirmation of the Wrath  
14 months before Ruth is ordered to kill Larr Gith

*Dromund Kaas*

Ruth stood with her back to a river of blood. The stench tempted her, but she mustn’t swim. She stood and awaited the hunters: faceless, innumerable. Stepping into the blood would be shame, would be failure. Fleeing would do her no good. She had to stand her ground, and she would. She would.

The ground shook and dissolved into the river. She fell and was drenched. Blood was hers, and always would be. She screamed. Only a fool would have been dumb enough to rely on the ground.

A different, gentle shake brought her out of it, to a safe place where Quinn’s arms were wrapped firmly around her. His gaze steadied her. He seemed to drink in the sight of her, as he had a habit of doing. The last few weeks had been fraught, to say the least, but it was worth it for the look he had just then.

“Good morning,” she rasped.

“Good morning,” he said.

"Thanks for waking me up."

"Of course. You seemed distressed, and that is unacceptable."

"So you went and straightened things out for me."

"Always." He brushed a lock of her hair to one side. "I l-"

"Don't." She hurriedly covered his mouth with her hand.

He frowned and waited for her to lower it. "Why do you keep doing that?" he asked. "When will you permit me to say it?"

She hesitated before deciding to answer. "You don't want to ask that question, Malavai. Just don't say it at all."

He frowned. "I do want to ask. You've kept this bizarre behavior up long enough. Why can't I tell you I l-"

"Silence!" He actually raised his voice to try to talk over her, but a short hard Force choke arrested him before he could finish 'love.'

He recoiled, sat up, stared warily at her.

"Get dressed," she said.

He held still, watching.

"Get dressed. That's an order, Quinn." She started toward her closet.

"We'll want to be armored for this one."

She put on her own clothes, then her black body armor, and felt slightly better. Slightly. In deference to Quinn she left the mask off. She wondered whether he appreciated it.

Quinn finished pulling on his uniform and sat back down on the edge of the bed. "And now, my lord?"

"Do you remember the last time you told me you loved me?"



He blanched.

"We were in our quarters," she said. "The ship was headed away from Voss."

"I know," he said, white-lipped.

"You were uncommonly attentive that night. I commented on it and you –" the memory brought an unbidden genuine smile – "of all things, you reported that you had no explanation for it. It was so you. And I said you didn't owe me one."

"I know."

Smile, gone. "And then you told me you loved me."

"I know."

"Twelve hours after that you opened fire."

He looked away. "I know."

"I don't want your declarations, Quinn."

He had the supremely rare look of a man who wasn't planned for this. "Then why am I here now? You've welcomed me back. Why?"

She had thought that through plenty of times. "Because I can't stomach that line, but I like the rest of it. You gave me everything, once. Word, deed, the whole package. All of it turned out to be a lie. But even knowing it for what it is, I want that lie back more than I've ever wanted anything in my whole life." She gestured hopelessly. "So here we are."

"And that's what this is to you? A lie?"

"Yes," said Ruth, and wished she weren't so numb to the idea. "It'll snap again when circumstance or ambition demands. I don't blame you. This is the closest thing to love you know. It's actually admirably Imperial. And it's enough for me. Just don't mislabel it."

"I thought you were happy."

"I am. I told you, it's enough."

"Believing that none of what I have to offer is real? That's nowhere close to acceptable."

"Why not, dearest? We eat together, sleep together, talk, laugh, feel happier with each other than without. What else matters?"

"I want to be able to tell you I-" He brought himself up short. "How I feel about you."

"Tell me you enjoy me," she said flatly. "I think that covers it."

"If I try to say the other thing, will you attack me again?"

"Yes. I'm sorry. I told you not to ask why."

"But everything else can proceed as normal? That's a twisted game you're asking me to play."

What little patience she had left for his indignation snapped. "It's more than you deserve after what you did to me."

Ice slammed down over the hurt on his face. "I see. Dealing punishment for a living must be quite strenuous, Wrath. It must be a relief to come home and hit the easy targets. You know I would do anything to prove myself to you."

"What? What proof can there possibly be?"

"So you continue to strike at me for failing this test I can never pass. You pretend to be disgusted, but you'll endure my presence anyway if it means you'll have someone around to hurt at will." He raised a hand to his throat, stood. "Enough."

"So go." It was wrong, all of it, wrong again, but at least she had made sure he was dressed to go. "I told you to get out."

"And I told you I won't."

"Cuddling can't fix this! And you have a *job* to get to. Get out."

That white face flushed. Quinn strode out and slammed the door behind him.

\*

He stopped outside and took a long moment to compose himself. He turned back and pressed one hand against the door. "I love you," he said quietly. His face spasmed. He hurried away. He had tried, and he had failed. The link he would fight forever for had never existed. He couldn't take another surprise like that.

The blind retreat stopped short when his jacket caught on something in the front closet. He braced himself and pulled again, hard. Finally it jumped free, bringing a burst of assorted small objects with it. He reflexively caught what he could with one hand, then headed for the door, resisting the urge to give Ruth the telling off she deserved. That furious child, selfishly weaving a web he had fallen for, and now she was trying to cover her own faults by being unfair to him, even though if she had a tenth the brain she gave herself credit for she would...no. Shut up, man, and walk.

He headed to the hangar for the house shuttle. Ruth's inevitable anger be damned, it was raining like doomsday out there and he wanted to be gone quickly.

It was about time to give up on this farce.

Get to the city. Send the shuttle back. Deal with Rylon directly from now on. Deal with work by himself again, because in truth her counsel and encouragement weren't really all that useful. He could make it stick this time. Any time he missed her, or wanted her, or thought she might have something valuable to say, he could just mentally replay the bit about how he would never prove himself.

He set course for Kaas City and then, leaning back, took a look at the little items he had caught from the closet. Two mismatched buttons, a blue

crystal that might or might not mean anything, and a small, ornate golden datacube.

The latter didn't look like something Ruth would favor. She wasn't one for trophies, either. A gift?

He tapped it active and was greeted with a long index of dates, each marked with one or the other of Ruth's parents' names. Colran, whom Quinn had met only once. Dolarra, whom Quinn had never met; she had died when Ruth was very young.

The dates spanned an eight-year period centered on Ruth's birth. Quinn opened and scanned the first pair of letters. Plain text files: early getting-to-know-you correspondence in a format suited to frequent travelers.

What had they talked about, the Sith and the mystery woman? It wasn't in his nature to ignore this kind of information trove. He selected another date, well into their acquaintance.

~

Colran,

*The mission goes. Ever have one of those where you know you won't be getting a shiny gold star at the end? It matters, it'll help, but I don't have a shiny gold star to look forward to. Still, if all goes well I'll see you after this ties up. And that's almost as good. Almost. (I love you, but just think about it. Gold star.)*

*About that. Love in this our big bad demanding galaxy. I've been giving it some thought, and I think it counts, even with our jobs.*

*I know our tasks separate us a lot, Colran, and I know sometimes we even seem to work at cross purposes. Yet we keep on with the mission. That's who we are. And just because we are committed to our work, I don't think that means we can't be in love. Does the willingness to sacrifice for the greater good diminish you or me? Are we worth less for knowing what we would be willing to pay it all for? Think about this one big thing we serve. The Empire. Think of all the good she does. If there were only you and me, is there some grand love we could carve from the chaos that would somehow be better or more pure than what we're working for now? Could I*

*even love you as much as I do if you didn't give so much of yourself to our common cause?*

*No. Duty is what we live by. But what we have, just between us two, it still matters.*

*I hope that helps settle the question. I imagine you might like something more cuddly, but you're involved with a high-power no-nonsense Imperial femme fatale now, and I won't lie to you if I can avoid it. Our lives, our missions are uncertain. My feelings for you aren't.*

*I haven't forgotten, I'm still on the hook for "how would a Force-blind even begin to handle a Force-sensitive child" (hello? I would, hypothetically speaking, have a nine-month head start on bonding!) and "how can I justify drinking Graylian ale anywhere ever." The latter isn't even a question, but I'll assume your Jedi training stunted your development such that you need these basic things explained to you. Later. For now I'm out of time; there's work to do, gold stars to dream wistfully of. I love you, madly. Be safe and be well –*

*Ever yours, Dolarra.*

~

Some time later, the shuttle halted outside Kaas City's west transit center. Quinn shook himself and pocketed the little datacube again.

Had Ruth ever read them? Did she care?

It was, of course, a strained comparison, and Ruth's awareness of her parents' correspondence would certainly be on the list of things she didn't want to hear him ask about any time soon. In fact, everything was on the list of things he had better avoid asking about. He should just return the datacube. Make sure she knew he hadn't stolen it, then be out of her way.

He dismissed the shuttle, held the datacube in his pocket, and headed down the street, heedless of the hammering rain.

## T3-22. Nearer to the Heart's Desire

September, 28 ATC – 16.5 years after the confirmation of the Wrath

*Fury-class vessel* Scorned

The *Scorned* undocked from the *Prodigy Burst* and headed into neutral space, where Ruth received the holocall that gave her the day's assignments from the Emperor's Hand. She called in to Wynston and got clearance to pursue one of the targets. Just enough to keep her cover.

She arranged to rendezvous with Pierce for combat support, then she laid in a course and joined Quinn at the holo. Their efforts to get Rylon met with silence, though.

"Busy again," sighed Ruth. "You know, it seems the more I work the more I miss him."

"I know," Quinn said softly. "I'll just forward some scheduling information, as much as we can commit to. He'll let us know when he's available." He finished tapping something into the console, then faced her and settled his arms around her waist. "We have been working a very unusual schedule. I trust it isn't too difficult?"

"No. It's meaningful work. And it's exciting. I'm terribly close to thriving on it."

"Good."

"What about you? This arrangement is working for you?"

He frowned. "It is...a change from what we had grown accustomed to. We haven't worked this closely with a team in a long time. You haven't."

"I've had my personal guard."

"It isn't the same, unless you socialize with them."

Ruth laughed. "Is that what I do with Larr Gith's people?"

"We stay in close quarters."

"I wouldn't call the atmosphere intimate. I'm getting by, at least."

"The agent hasn't...made unwelcome advances, has he? I know he pulls you aside to talk at times."

"Advances? No, Malavai. Our friendship left that behind long ago."

Quinn nodded as though filing that information. "And the other Wrath? He seeks to provoke you. Any way he can."

"You're perceptive," she said quietly. "He sticks to platonic antagonism when he knows others are looking."

"I know. Does he bother you?"

"Only as much as a stray stinging insect. Do his efforts bother you?"

He looked over her face, looked away, thought. "We haven't worked this closely with a team in a long time," he repeated.

She cupped his chin and gently brought him back to face her. "Have I mentioned lately that you're the only man in my world, and the only one I want there?"

He nodded reluctantly, blue eyes deep and clear. Then he moved on.

"There is another matter, a very serious one."

"What is it?"

"Believe me, I am applying my resources to these...errands...we must keep up with while the search continues. But it still leaves me time to wonder. I understand this mission, as much as anyone can understand an endeavor of this scale. But once we have deposed the corruption that is the Emperor...matters will only get more complicated. The power vacuum may not be immediately obvious, and much of the Empire may simply

continue as before, but I fear for her direction over time if there is no greater force guiding the Dark Council. I fear that the Jedi will make a move against us the moment Larr Gith reports to them. I fear that though the Emperor's survival may mean total destruction, his demise will mean total chaos." His jaw clenched for half a second and he looked intently into Ruth's eyes. "When that time comes, will you still fight for the Empire?"

"What? Malavai, of course I will. How could you think otherwise?"

"We're working with two Jedi, a Sith who willingly recruited them, and a man so changeable that 'turncoat' seems too static a term to apply. We're doing it to destroy our own ruler. And you...you're not quite the woman I came back to. The past months have changed you. I love you, and your happiness is undeniable, but I'm forced to wonder if it comes at the cost of leaving our Empire behind."

"Never," she said firmly. "How long have we served? Half a century between the two of us, isn't it? I fight for you. I fight for Rylon. I fight for innocent lives. For these, yes, I will enter into alliances as I must. But the Empire is my home. Our home. And every cause I have ever taken has sought to make life better within it. When the Emperor is dead I will be foremost among those seeking to preserve our people. I will not abandon them. I will not turn around now to tear down all we've worked for."

He considered for a little while, then swallowed and looked back to her. "Then we stand together. Forgive me for doubting you."

She responded with a kiss. It went on for a while before she clasped his hands and took a quiet breath, staying a hair's breadth away from his lips. "There is nothing to forgive," she whispered. "Tell me your doubts. Tell me what you wonder about. Tell me what you need. That's what I'm here to take care of."

He squeezed her hands. "I had feared, if only briefly, that the task or the people driving you to it would alter your resolve beyond what I could follow."



"No. You're my anchor for all of it. You're...Malavai, do you imagine that anyone or anything could take me away from you?"

"When we're together like this," he admitted, "nothing seems further from the truth."

"That's right. Does hearing it you feel any better?"

He smiled in response. "I love you."

"And I you. That's how it's going to be." She took his hand to draw him towards their quarters. "If you're willing, dearest? We have some time."

## Triad 23: Things That Have to be Said

### T1-23. Summer's Lease

May, 11 ATC – two months before the confirmation of the Wrath

Voss

~

*My dear Ruth,*

*The Light waits with more patience than any mere person. It shows up in the oddest places. And it will lend you grace. Never forget that and never doubt it. Anger can be found anywhere, and it's easy to abuse. The Light Side requires a stronger focus – and by the same token provides greater benefits.*

*You are seeing so many worlds. I hope they welcome you as Dromund Kaas could not.*

*Your doting father,  
Colran*

~

It was in Voss-Ka of all places that Ruth spotted a familiar face on the street.

"Vector!" It was the first time she had seen him since Alderaan. "Fancy meeting you here!"

The Joiner stopped and smiled warmly at her. "Lord Ruth. This is a surprise."

"Places to be, Imperial interests to protect." A mission from her new masters, a strike against Darth Baras. "Are you still working with our mutual friend?"

"Yes."

"Then he's alive. And well?" After all, she had last seen Wynston on Quesh, when he had been in crisis.

Vector's forehead creased. "Quite well. Did you have cause for concern?"

"No more than his usual job hazards," she lied. "Bring me up to speed. What work is there around here for concerned patriots? More importantly, would you and Wynston plus associates be up for dinner?"

"I am afraid we won't have time. But if you want to see him, he may still be in the city."

And as it happened he was. Vector conducted her to a teahouse where she was relieved to find a perfectly healthy-looking Chiss.

He smiled a brilliant, crooked smile. "You would not believe how things have been going."

"Can I ask?"

"Well, no."

"How are you personally, in a nonspecific way?"

"Well, look who the consular ship dragged in," came a loud lick of a voice behind her. Ruth turned to see Kaliyo strutting in. "Empire finally decide to clear this place out?"

"Not with me," Ruth said. She didn't smile.

"Really? Too bad. Well, don't let me slow you down." She smiled with black lips and bent to nip Wynston's ear. That accomplished, she strolled out again, a maneuver that required a few hundred degrees of articulation. Wynston had to notice it. So did Ruth.

"She hasn't gotten you kicked off planet?" Ruth said politely.

Wynston gestured a bright patterned Voss over to accept two small cups of a strange savory tea. "We've reached an understanding," he said, quite neutrally. "Here, drink this."

They sat and caught up for a little while. Eventually Wynston asked about her associates. Including "the captain."

"I married him, actually."

Wynston's face only twitched a little before he inclined his head with a thin smile. "Then he warmed up after all. Good news."

"It's been good, Wynston. It's everything I wanted." Time for a subject change. "Anyway, I'm sure neither one of us is here for pleasure. As always, call me if there's anything I can help with."

Wynston relaxed. "Don't you ever get tired of slumming it with us Intelligence types?"

"When you get tired of my company I'll get tired of your piddling Empire-preserving concerns."

"Oh, make it contingent on my liking you. This is how you buy friends now?"

"Hmm? I simply meant it could never ever happen." She winked, just to be sure they were on the same page.

"You're probably right. I do enjoy your company."

A Voss approached the table. "Wynston. It is time."

"Ah." The Chiss stood up and bowed to Ruth. "Off I go. If you need anything, call me."

They encountered one another before that was necessary. A ritual at a mystic Voss shrine found them in the same room, fresh off a series of traditional trials. Quinn was waiting with Ruth in the ritual room. Wynston and Vector emerged from their trials together.

"Hello again," said Ruth.

"Hello," said Vector.

Quinn was silent.

"Ruth. Captain. I understand congratulations are in order." Wynston nodded coldly at Quinn. Quinn nodded coldly at Wynston.

"We should proceed to finish the ritual," Vector said tactfully.

"Yes," said Ruth. "We should."

Kneeling and closing her eyes was enough to invite the vision she had earned. It was short and distressing. A flash of Baras gloating while she struggled to tell him how much she hated him. She didn't like the sound of it. She didn't like the sound of it at all. But before she could resolve anything, a force shoved hard at her chest. She stumbled backwards while the colors of her world flurried from gold back to the plain brownish colors of the normal room. Frustration and a peculiar chill kept her shaking.

Quinn caught her, eased her down to a half-sitting position. Baras's voice was like a...like something that made her extremely angry. Purple afterimages taunted her.

Quinn was stroking her cheek, and she reminded herself that there was work to do. With an effort she focused on his face.

"It's all right, my lord," he said softly. "What did you see?"

"Baras," she said. "Who else?"

Quinn would have asked something else, but Ruth pulled herself to her feet and looked at the Voss who stood guard in one corner. "Can these visions be changed?"

"No. You see what will be."

"Like hell. He had me at his mercy, Quinn. It won't happen."

Wynston seemed to have been monitoring her; now he turned toward his Joiner friend. "Vector? How are you?"

Vector rubbed his forehead. "Distressed. We see no clarity in the vision. Only darkness without stars. The hive sings out of harmony."

"Does that mean anything? Can it?"

"We do not know."

"Disasters all around, then. Except you, captain?" said the Chiss.

Quinn's jaw worked. "I saw nothing," he said, and snapped his mouth shut.

Ruth felt a chill related to nothing she could see. "That doesn't mean anything," she said stoutly. "Of course some people might not get the full effect."

"Yes," said Wynston. "Of course. Some limited minds...oh, never mind."

"You have a future," Ruth insisted. No one answered.

But the mission led on.

It led Ruth on into a strange twisted wilderness. She and Wynston carried out a peculiar investigation that would have extremely useful results for the Empire. It was pleasant to be accomplishing something understandable alongside her work for the mysterious Emperor's Hand.

The Hand wanted her to locate and free the Emperor's Voice, some kind of entity that acted as a conduit for the Emperor's will. She wondered what could be powerful enough to trap it. She needed to free the true Voice to counter Darth Baras's claims of being the Voice himself.

And so, when the last of the clear Imperial mission was done, Ruth stopped before mounting her speeder. "Did you need to tie up anything else in the area, Wynston?"

"No, I think Vector and I are finished here."

"Very well. I have one more thing to deal with."

"Can I assist?"

Could he? "It's a sensitive matter. And I do not know whether I can protect you if...things do not go to plan."

"When has that ever stopped us?"

She had to smile. "If you come with me, you will be doing a great service to the Empire. And I'll try to protect you from what we find."

"With an offer like that, how can I refuse?"

While Wynston went to his speeder, Quinn approached to touch Ruth's arm. "My lord. You know I must express my concerns with bringing in nonmilitary personnel."

"I'm nonmilitary, Quinn. Intelligence is perfectly trustworthy."

"Whatever matter we face is well beyond their agency and may be too sensitive entirely. We don't know."

"I want a full team there, captain."

"They scarcely constitute a team."

"We are all going," she snapped, frustrated by this obstinacy he had developed since Wynston showed up. He had been tense for weeks now, but this was a problem. "Fall in line. That's an order." She got moving. Quinn followed close behind. Wynston and Vector trailed them as they followed a dark path that led deeper into the blighted hills.

She recognized the half-ruined stone building, though she had never seen it before. There was a will within. It was partly disciplined and all hateful.

She turned to Vector. "I must ask to go on with only these two. There are secrets of the Sith, of the Empire. Things I cannot permit the hive to see, regardless of its intent. Do you understand?"

Vector bowed graciously. "We understand. We could withhold this information, but if it will set your mind at ease, we will stay and stand watch. No one will disturb your mission."

"Thank you."

Further in. Ruth knew the way.

A square chamber lay at the heart of the ruin. It was intact, surprisingly well lit. A Voss man in the robes of a Mystic awaited them.

"Wrath. Come to me. I am your Emperor."

Ruth and Quinn approached and genuflected. Wynston seemed to hesitate.

"Wynston," prompted Ruth, kicking herself for skipping the briefing. "This is the Voice of the Emperor himself, his own embodiment."

The Voice turned its glowing eyes to Wynston. The Chiss stared right back. "I'm not familiar with any Voice of the Emperor," said the agent.

"When do I need to speak to those below the Council?" The Voss sounded...amused. "Here I have found a loyal servant, but this knowledge is her secret. And now yours, Chiss."

"He will serve, master," said Ruth. "He always has." To her considerable relief, Wynston did opt for a deep bow.

"No doubt." Those Voss eyes trailed back to Ruth. "Darth Baras plays the old games. He maneuvered me here, knowing this body could be bound to this place. This vessel must be destroyed for me to be freed."

"What's binding you?" asked Wynston flatly.

"An entity known as Sel'Makor. A great and ancient evil. But I sense the bulk of his attention is elsewhere. Strike me down quickly, Wrath. I will not oppose you."

"Will I meet your new form?" asked Ruth.

"In time."

She drew her sabers and made a swift end of it. She was an expert in quick, painless deaths. The Voss folded and she felt a strange clearing of the air.

"We're done," she said shortly, and started leading the other two out.

Wynston kept up beside her, shouldering Quinn out. "Ruth, I'm trusting you that that thing is what he says he is."

"If you could feel it...the Voice is power. I will be watchful, but I do believe that that was the closest contact with the Emperor that you or I will ever get." Ruth took a deep breath and shuddered. "Rather intimidating, actually, I hope to do something a little more relaxing soon."

"After Baras is dealt with."

"Yes. After Baras is dealt with. How much of this will you have to report to Intelligence?"



"I think this one is best left as a Sith matter."

"I appreciate your discretion."

"Ruth."

"Yes?"

"I hope you know what you're doing."

She looked away. "A Sith learns to trust her instincts. This feels right, and so I must continue."

Sometimes there was no choice.

## **T2-23. The Man Hath Penance Done, and Penance More Will Do**

May, 27 ATC – 16 years after the confirmation of the Wrath  
6 months before the Wrath is called to kill Larr Gith

*Dromund Kaas – Kaas City*

Quinn read the whole datacube's worth of old letters. Ruth's parents had corresponded regularly throughout their time together; Dolarra was often traveling for her work (Intelligence, obviously, though he could tell maddeningly little beyond that from what she said) and Colran, from the sound of it, was a habitual letter-writer to many of his friends.

For eight years they avoided hard facts, details of work, traceable names, and yet still managed to write volumes. About life, about the Empire, about each other; about Ruth, when she came along; about the planets Dolarra saw, though she seemed to put intentional delays and vagueness in describing them so he couldn't trace her exact routes; about the Force, where Colran's descriptions sounded much like Ruth's always had, only better articulated.

Quinn envied both the love and the purpose that threaded through every letter. He envied the father who had gotten to be there for his young child. With every glowing passage, Quinn envied the years he had almost had.

It took him a couple of weeks to work through the full index of correspondence. When he was finished he tried to think of who to contact to return it. Calling Ruth directly was asking for a fight. Secretaries seemed wrong for a trust like this. So he called Jaesa Brindel, née Willsaam.

When she came up on holo, she smiled the smile he had heard others describe as winsome. "General Quinn. This is a pleasant surprise."

"It's been a while." Several years, in fact; Jaesa had supervised his visits to Rylon for years, but eventually he was allowed to see his son with non-combat-capables, and from then on his sole contact with Ruth's camp was done through her secretaries. "I need to get something valuable to Ruth. Do you think you could arrange for a pickup from Kaas City?"

"I'm in town myself today. I can take care of it."

~

*Dearest Dolarra,*

*Things at home are good. Ruth has fallen in love with her toy saber, even if she hasn't quite figured out how to keep a grip on it when she hits things.*

*I wonder what she'll grow up to be. I hope she'll continue our work, saving the little guys from the big bads of the galaxy, including my brethren the hardline Sith. She is the most sweet-natured four-year-old I ever known, so...we can hope.*

*Thank you, again and always, for being with me in this. In all of it. Any time I get discouraged with my work I look out there and remember that, even when you and I are apart, we're working for one Empire, one cause, one people. Our people.*

*And for Ruth.*

*I'll have hot chocolate ready for you when you get home, Lara. See you then.*

*Ever yours,  
Colran*

~

She met him in the office he kept at the city's military headquarters. She looked much as she always had: mousy, nonthreatening, though even with the slight rounding out of the years she moved with a certain balance that suggested it would be difficult to take her by surprise.

"Thank you for coming," he said. "How are you? How are Kaeve, the twins?"

"All of the above are doing well," she said. "How are things with you?"

"Acceptable, thank you." He didn't ask about her weak bordering on pacifist political aspirations. She didn't ask about his unending push for total victory in a war he would never compromise on. They were polite like that.

He had never been friends with the gentle former Jedi; all they had in common was Ruth, and Jaesa's primary goal there was to encourage the softest, most dangerously vulnerable parts of her. But when Ruth had collared and imprisoned Quinn after his betrayal, Jaesa was the one who, unbidden, had thought to feed him and, in those first few brutal days, tend to the worst of Pierce's physical retribution. Jaesa was, to reduce it to two words, inexplicably gracious, and since the falling-out with Ruth that had helped matters a great deal.

"I'm glad," she was saying. "I heard you and Ruth were back in contact, but she's pretty tight-lipped about you."

"Really."

"Yes. Sometimes glowingly so - " she smiled - "and sometimes...not...but she doesn't say much either way."

"I see. I just need an item returned to her. It would help if you could let her know I didn't intend to take it, it accidentally fell into my things." He

produced the datacube, an ornate golden thing scarcely two fingers' widths to a side.

Jaesa's eyes widened. "Is that what I think it is?" She snatched it out of his hands, tapped it active, looked over the text index that it projected. "Where did you find this?"

"It fell out of the coat closet while I was on my way out one day. I happened to catch it."

"This is great! I put it together for Ruth some time ago. You know how much she loves anything to do with her mother, but she never had time to finish sorting through her father's files after he died. I pulled this all together, but then the cube vanished before I could give it to her. I was convinced the whole thing was lost." Her eyes sparkled when she smiled. "Did you read any of it?"

"Yes."

"It's wonderful, isn't it?"

"It explains a great deal about her," he said cautiously.

"She was lucky, having parents like that."

"They were lucky, too."

"I know. Some of it sounded just like..." She caught herself. "Well. Other things."

*Don't touch the thought of her and me. That's mine.* "There aren't many other things like the relationship laid out in those letters."

"I guess you're right." She paused. "Are you all right?"

*In front of you?* "Quite. It's kind of you to ask."

"I'll get this to her. And I'll let her know you didn't mean to walk off with it. Anything else you want me to pass along?"

He considered, decided to risk the small personal touch. "Yes. Tell her I said happy birthday."

### **T3-23. One Equal Temper of Heroic Hearts**

September, 28 ATC – 17 years after the confirmation of the Wrath

*Defender-class vessel Prodigy Burst*

T7-01 passed by the airlock and beeped resentfully in Ruth's direction.

"I'm working on it," she said, annoyed.

T7-01 beeped something else and zipped off.

"He's telling you you're a terrible person," explained Kira as Ruth came on board.

"I guessed as much. Do I ever undo that with my new good deeds? I don't know what a droid's interpretation of redemption is."

"It'd take a lot of good deeds," said Kira.

"You did it in his eyes."

"You've got a little more than 'being in Sith space as a small child' to make up for."

They naturally gravitated toward the bridge. "He expects me to apologize for all I've done. Larr Gith does, as well. And you, I think. I don't intend to do it. All my life I have served."

"You served pure evil."

"I did what I had to. I do what I have to now, as well."

Kira managed to eye her askance while looking straight at her "And...you see no distinction? Between 'you have to kill everything' and 'you're saving the galaxy'?"

"My understanding of what's right changes." Ruth shook her head. "I regret the necessity of death. For a time I lost track of that, and if there is anything to be ashamed of it is that I stopped caring. Would I have changed my actions? Perhaps, perhaps not. I would defend the people and the worlds I love regardless of how harsh the necessity is." Ruth studied her gloves. "The assurance that I found it necessary doesn't bring your friends back. But it's all I have to offer."

Kira shook her head. "When they talk about the arrogance of the Sith, they aren't kidding."

"Would it change anything if I felt bad? Would an apology somehow make the present day better?"

"It might make us more inclined to trust you."

"Words don't make trust. Actions do. Nothing I say could substitute for being here when the battle comes. So I won't bother trying to find the words."

"You know, despite all your advertised differences, in a messed-up way you remind me of Lord Scourge."

Ruth stiffened. "And what is that supposed to mean?"

"He talks all the time about how he won't apologize. He's a proud Sith. He's done all the big bad Sith things and he doesn't care about his past crimes and he doesn't want to be one of us. But just the same. When the crisis comes, he's there at the center of it, getting it right."

"Perhaps." She didn't care to be compared to that man. "I don't trust him."

"Hey, words don't make trust. Actions do."

Ruth winced. "Oh. Well played, Jedi."

Kira grinned. "Now, I really don't think anything you say or do is going to make Teeseven feel better about you. But you're with us out there, and that's what matters."

## Triad 24: Never Lack for Allies

### T1-24. Our Little Lives

June, 11 ATC – four weeks before the confirmation of the Wrath

*Fury-class vessel – High orbit over Voss*

~

*My dear Ruth,*

*The time for my inoffensive quiet is over. I am no great warrior nor an influential politician, but what abilities I have, I will use. I will contact you again when I have news. But Darth Baras will find that you do not lack for allies.*

*You will never lack for allies.*

*All my love,  
Colran*

~

Ruth had just reached her ship in orbit above Voss when she felt it. An emptiness, a distant cry. Unfamiliar but somehow unmistakable. She stumbled before she could control herself.

Quinn was there in a heartbeat. "My lord. What is it?"

She shook her head, hard. "My father is dead," she said. It was an emptiness she had never believed possible, like her lungs had suddenly gone missing. And the rest of her body continued as though nothing had changed. As though nothing had changed.

Quinn looked at her for a long moment. Then he turned to Pierce. "Take us out."

## **T2-24. After Doubt Our Love Came Back Amain**

June, 27 ATC – 16 years after the confirmation of the Wrath  
5 months before the Wrath is called to kill Larr Gith

*Dromund Kaas*

"My lord?"

"Jaesa," said Ruth, startled by her holo. "Is something wrong?"

"No, not at all. I'm going to be on Dromund Kaas soon."

"You're welcome to my resources." She hoped Jaesa wouldn't take her up on it. An illicit Light Side Sith could use all the help she could get, and Ruth owed Jaesa more than a debt of gratitude. It was just that they hadn't done this in a very long time. Ever since Ruth had given Jaesa her full opinion of the odds of the Light.

"I'd like to visit. Socially. Otherwise I'll keep out of your hair."

"Whatever you want. I look forward to it."

Jaesa smiled. The years had not worn the winsomeness out of that look.

"Until then, Ruth."

Ruth sent a droid-piloted shuttle to bring Jaesa directly from the spaceport to the Niral estate.

It was pouring rain, and Ruth beckoned from the mouth of the tunnel that brought visitors into the big house's basement.



"I'm so sorry," yelled Ruth over the hammering of the rain. "I swear it's not always like this."

"I remember," Jaesa shouted back. Then they were inside and the noise level dropped to a soothing background patter from above.

"Something to drink?" said Ruth as they went upstairs.

"I'm fine, thank you."

Something in it made Ruth nervous. "Have a seat, then."

Jaesa settled in a cushy armchair. "How have you been?"

"Nervous and impatient," said Ruth. "What brings you here in so much mystery?"

Jaesa laughed, though her eyes didn't keep up. "It's nothing bad. I made you something while I was helping sort through your father's files, years ago."

"Something I didn't know about?" she said sharply.

"I don't think you had the time. Anyway, I misplaced it before I could give it to you. So imagine my surprise when General Quinn found it falling out of your closet."

Displeasure was seeping out around her goodwill. "And he just walked off with it?"

"I don't think he realized what he had." Jaesa paused. "Ruth, Quinn approached me to give this back to you because he wanted you to have it. I hope you'll take that into account."

"And just what did he want me to have after he'd stolen it?"

Jaesa took something out of her pocket. It was a cube, no bigger around than thumb and forefinger joined at the tip. It was inlaid with ornate designs.

"Memory bank?" said Ruth.

"Yes," said Jaesa. "I should really go. Someone's meeting me soon and this is a bad time to be late."

"Wait! You can't just go, you only just got here."

"And I want to get out of your way." Jaesa stood. "I'll be in touch, Ruth."

"Jaesa!"

"Yes?"

Ruth sighed. "Safe travels. And thank you...I think."

Jaesa smiled. "I really think you'll like it."

~

*My dear Colran,*

*Let me say up front, I am so glad you're in this for the people of the Empire, not for the whims of the Sith. Having seen what I've seen out there...it makes a difference. It makes all the difference in the galaxy.*

*I wonder how you came to the conclusion, though. You told me once that your father and all your brothers were true dark Sith. Treachery was their way, their nature. Did you love them? Did they love? Did the word have any meaning to them?*

*I could never understand how people live in that culture, that world. Do you just stop wanting love? Do you shut away that fundamental aspect of sentience, of what we in our species-limited way call humanity? In a society where everyone's out for themselves or out to serve a different malicious master, do you simply stop hoping?*

*I love you, Colran. And I'll never be able to express how glad I am that you got away from them long enough to come down to the world the rest of us know.*

*Yours in a trust that is too rare in this galaxy,  
Dolarra*

~

It was weeks of agonized waiting. Weeks of neither censure nor welcome. But when Ruth called, it was with dewy eyes. "Can we meet?" she said.

"I'll send coordinates."

Quinn was on his ship when Ruth came for him. Privacy was limited, and she knew it.

"General," she said. "I received your message."

"I thought some of it might be news to you."

Ruth smiled a little and looked down. "I know. I owe Jaesa a debt of gratitude."

They were silent, watching the door.

"I can't think of anything to say that they didn't say better," said Ruth.

"But you agree with it, by and large?"

The smile trembled. "Do you?"

"I must be very careful in saying yes." He waited for her to look at him again. "Grant me one more chance."

"Yes," she said. "I understand now. Yes."

### **T3-24. Love believes all things**

October, 28 ATC – 16.5 years after the confirmation of the Wrath

*Defender-class vessel Prodigy Burst*

"This is a big operation," said Wynston, "with big potential consequences. My people are still searching elsewhere across the galaxy. In the meantime I've called Jaesa in to help us with the interrogation we're going to need."

"Jaesa?" said Ruth. "But, the twins. You can't just call her away from home."

Jaesa Willsaam emerged from a side room of the *Prodigy Burst*. "Saving the galaxy trumps normal child care. I hired a babysitter."

"Quinn," said Wynston, his face clouding over. "Take it."

Quinn stepped forward and summoned a big map on the holoprojector. "The critical artifact these cultists will be using to awaken the 'volcano spirit'...whatever it is...will be in this complex here." He pointed. "Vette will need to infiltrate by whatever means she can to move it from its ritual location, and capture it if possible. The agent will assist. The second part of this ritual is kept very well hidden from offworlders. Capturing the right cultist, whichever one may be vulnerable to our questioning, is a matter for Jaesa. Ruth, Scourge, you can get her well in while keeping the cultists convinced you belong to their own Sith. Larr Gith, Kira, in the absence of the ability for that impression you will need to make an obvious diversion elsewhere. Jedi crusaders are expected...but I expect your power level will surprise them." He looked to Ruth. "I will accompany Larr Gith and Kira to offer tactical support. The strike teams should rendezvous with us here when their missions are complete."

The group scattered to do their individual preparations. Ruth fell in with Wynston briefly. She smiled against his evident annoyance. "This should be exciting," she said.

"Yes."

"What's wrong?"

"I know we're supposed to deal with Quinn's plans," Wynston said quietly. "And I checked this one over, it's solid. He's no fool. But that doesn't change certain facts."

"Even now? I'll vouch for him."

"I know you will." He shook his head. "And you know exactly what I think of it. I can't get used to him. I still don't understand how it came to this, Ruth. He almost destroyed you once."

"You worry about me more than I do. It's true that I'll always hate what he did to me. Neither of us pretends otherwise. But I've chosen to believe in the man he is now, and he has proved completely worthy of that trust."

"I'll admit the difference with you since he came on board is amazing. The energy, the focus. To put it bluntly, the passion. What he does for you...it helps, I can see that." He frowned and touched his hair. "But if it turns wrong again, you won't have time to stop me."

"It won't turn wrong. If someone as troublesome as you can save the galaxy, why can't he?"

## **Triad 25: Committing**

### **T1-25. Every Hour is Saved From That Eternal Silence**

June, 11 ATC - 4 weeks before the confirmation of the Wrath

*Deep space*

Ruth sat down at the console, but there was no one to write.

She went to Quinn's arms instead. "I should have known. I did it to Jaesa. I should have known. I warned him. I thought he was going to get out in time."

They sat on the bed facing one another. Quinn stroked her hands. "It isn't your fault, my lord. You of all people know how extensive Darth Baras's reach is."

"Father is supposed to be clever enough for this. He's survived worse. I know...I know I have work to do. But I shouldn't have left him alone. He was on Dromund Kaas and alone, any one of Baras's apprentices might have...he was strong, in ways Baras will never understand, but in combat he just wasn't...he wasn't..."

"Tell me what I can do."

She leaned in to let him hold her for a while. For some reason she couldn't cry just yet. Instead, after a few minutes of warmth and pain, she sighed. "There's so much to do."

"I am confident you can handle it."

"I don't want to think about it yet." She straightened up a little, took his shoulders, kissed him. "Please don't make me think about it yet." He looked nearly as distressed as she felt, and she wanted that to stop, too. She closed her eyes and guided his hands to where she wanted to start. "Just us. Please."

The ship's lights dimmed into night, and with every passing moment Corellia drew closer.

A/N. Following this timeline 1 chapter the next scene, chronologically, is T2-1, Ruth waking on the way to the Corellian outskirts.

## **T2-25. And Makes Me End Where I Begun**

August, 27 ATC - 16 years after the confirmation of the Wrath  
3 months before the Wrath is called to kill Larr Gith

*Dromund Kaas*

Ruth greeted Quinn at the door. "How was work? Two weeks always feels like a long time away."

"It does." He took off his jacket and carefully hung it up. "Talay won't be won with a central battle, but we're taking it one small victory at a time. The system was ours once. It will be again. How are things here?"

"Rylon sent three words home to let us know he's still alive."

"I suppose we should be grateful for that much."

"And Pierce finally let slip that he doesn't know why I'm letting you back in."

"Are you worried?"

"No. Not at all. Otherwise I've been in the field, mostly. It's going well. Hungry?"

"I ate on the shuttle home."

"Excellent. I get to skip to kissing you."

"You would do that anyway," he managed to say before she closed the distance between them.

"Well," she said between kisses, "this way" - "I don't" - "feel" - "guilty about" - "starving you in the process."

"That's considerammfmhmm." He pulled her close and let her set the pace until a pause came up.

"Not a problem. I actually - " she stepped back and tensed up a little. "I actually wanted to ask you something, something very important."

"Anything."

She led him over to the couch and sat him down. His expression was edging towards a frown by the time she started talking again. "This may sound nonsensical, but I was wondering if you'd like to get married again."

His frownward progress halted. He stared at her for a long moment. When he spoke his voice was perfectly clear and steady. "Yes. I just never expected you would."

"Hey." She laid her palm against his cheek. "We've worked hard to come this far. I am with you, all the way."

He nodded, recovering some of his briskness. "How are we going to tell Rylon?"

Her face fell. "I don't know. I don't think there's a way he'll be happy about it, so it may be safest to present it as a fait accompli. At least he'd respect the decisiveness."

"I would rather he accept our status...but you're right. It can't be a matter of permission or negotiation." He squeezed her hands. "What sort of ceremony do you want?"

"Simple. Very simple. Minimal. We can sign the paperwork, otherwise everything that matters is right here."

He tensed. "We won't keep it a secret, though."

"No. Absolutely not." She twisted around to reach a side table, produced a small box. Opened it to reveal a pair of plain gold rings.

He let out a soft laughing breath. "You are an astonishingly impatient woman."

"Not impatient. Just prepared for good things to happen. You liked that about me." She ran her fingertips over and around his hand, strong, smooth but for a few calluses on the palm and trigger finger. "May I?"

"Do as you will, my lord. I'm just trying to keep up."



She laughed, raised his hand to her lips to kiss it, slipped the ring on. “No conflicts this time. Just us.”

He took her small white hand in turn, studied it. “I’ll be there for you this time. Sometimes it feels like I’ve waited all my life to be here, with you.” He set the ring on her finger and kept hold of her hand when he leaned forward to kiss her.

“I didn’t prepare vows or anything,” she said. “Just know that I’m yours. Now and for the rest of my life.”

“For the rest of my life,” he echoed. “May ours both be long.”

“We’ll get it right this time.”

He didn’t try very hard to suppress his smile. “I know.”

A/N. Following this timeline 2 chapter the next scene, chronologically, is T3-0, Ruth intervening to save Rylon from a kidnapping attempt at the beginning of the story.

A/N. The final Timeline 2 chapter name is part of a couplet from John Donne’s Valediction Forbidding Mourning, which compares two lovers to the legs of a drawing compass that remain joined even while one travels. TL2’s first chapter featured the first half, united here:

*Thy firmness makes my circle just  
And makes me end where I begun.*

A/N. The remaining triads belong to Timeline 3.

## **T3-25. Lo! The Bird is on the Wing**

October, 28 ATC – 17 years after the confirmation of the Wrath

*Defender-class vessel Prodigy Burst*

Ruth boarded the *Prodigy Burst* with Quinn. "He has summoned me," she reported.

Wynston nodded, his face blank. "This is our chance."

Kira tossed her hair, looking more casual than she sounded. "Already?"

"We don't know when he'll call her again," said Wynston. "After Ruth gathers some information from the Voice's base, I don't doubt we can find the true form in a matter of days. That means we're clear to kill the Voice without worrying a new one will be active for our final strike."

"Where by 'we' you mean the Wrath," said Quinn.

"Yes. By 'we' I mean the Wrath." Wynston spoke directly to Ruth now.

"We'll set up the instrumentation on your ship, enough to monitor comms and some nonstandard frequencies, do some imaging, let us see whatever the fortress sees. If you get the chance, plant a spike on board the Emperor's vessel. If you don't, don't worry about it. The important thing is to get to your audience with the Voice of the Emperor, and kill him."

She nodded. "I'm ready. What about that target he wanted me to hit today? Ellan Ong?"

"We'll arrange something. Frankly, we're not sure who she's operating for, Jedi or Sith, but it sounded like she was interfering with ritual plans. Supposedly the Imperial Guard has her besieged but can't get her out of her little tower."

"Which is why the Emperor called me in."

"Right. But now the rest of us are going to liberate her instead."

"Be careful. She's not guaranteed friendly."

"I know. We'll have Jaesa to help ascertain that one."

"You do your part with the Voice," said Kira. "The rest of us can handle the little Imperial Guard/Ellan Ong mess."

\*

Ruth landed in the echoing hangar, walked through the cold painful white light and the chilling shadow of the Emperor's domain. Came to the throne room where he sat, hooded and white-faced, still and silent as death.

She knelt. "Master."

He greeted her with that oily mind probe, sliding through her head, poking here and there. She bubbled with the thoughts she was allowed to have, the ones she had arranged over the mental shield she had prepared on the way here.

"Wrath. How goes the siege against Ellan Ong?"

"I was unable to get out to the field yesterday, my master, but she is still trapped in place. She will fall."

He withdrew the chilling intrusion of his presence. "You should have paid more attention, Wrath. She did fall."

"Oh? When?"

"Very recently, or perhaps any minute now. The friends you sent rallying around her are too late. They will find much more than a dozen Imperial Guard there. And the faithful servants I first sent to destroy Ellan Ong may, thanks to your efforts, also have the honor of killing Larr Gith today."

She scrambled to her feet and struggled to catch one of the thoughts racing by. "Master, I'm not sure what you mean."

A different voice answered her from a shadowy doorway in the wall behind the Emperor's throne. "He means, Mother, that the jig is up."

Rylon moved with silent, menacing grace in the black leatheris armor he wore. It made him look older. She thought, for the millionth time, that he

looked just like his father. He seemed almost unhealthily pale. Like his father. He was springing a trap, she thought, with hysterical amusement, like his father.

The youth walked up to stand at the Emperor's right hand. "I told you I was accepted into an advanced program at school. I've been doing very well."

"And is proving a better servant than you, my little Wrath," said the Emperor. "Did you think I had not noticed? You can overcome my commands, yes, but your mind remains an open book. And you didn't do a good job of smudging the letters."

"Rylon," said Ruth, "come with me. Now. We're going home."

"No, we're not," he said.

"All right. We need to destroy him first. After that, though, we have to leave."

"You will not strike my master, Mother. If anyone is destroyed here today, it'll be you."

The Emperor laughed, shrill and violent like strips of steel during a long collapse. "The boy is zealous, is he not?"

"Let him go," she said. "Order me around all you want, but you keep your claws off him."

"I did," the Emperor said gleefully. "I've compelled nothing. Everything you see here...is the boy's choice."

It felt true.

Rylon shrugged with a small smile. He was all confidence and pride, youth and certainty, and no part of it was forced or fake. "I found something real, mother. You changed. You changed as soon as you got rid of me. And now? You, here, now? That sad little effort? Is that what you couldn't share with me?"

"I can teach you, anything--"

"I have teachers. Ones who don't apologize for my existence. There's opportunity here. I intend to take it."

Ruth struggled to get her voice working. "There's only death here, Rylon. The Emperor intends to kill you, to kill us all."

"Right," said Rylon, "yes, the story your ex told you. Have you ever done anything that wasn't motivated by the man you were screwing at the time?"

"Stop this. We need to go home."

He drew and activated his saber. "Home's here."

Her mind broke through the cold tangle of her fear into something approaching a focused combat state. She couldn't harm her son, but she could subdue him, yes. Fight to a standstill, then reason with him. Something. She took out her sabers and stood to face him.

"Why are you fighting me?" She moved in a small impossible calm between the thrashing movements of her own fears while her son descended on her.

"You failed as Wrath. I have the chance to do it better." His fighting form was excellent. Somewhere along the line he had grown *strong*, physically and mentally, and she found herself tightening into a desperate defensive state while he pressed the attack. "Look at you. Your life is at stake and you're about to break and go cowering in the corner."

"You could make peace by joining us," suggested the Emperor. "You were a worthy servant once. You could be one again, with the strength of your son at your side."

"Never," said Ruth. "Not with you."

"Can't you just force her, master?"

The Emperor waved dismissively. "I could, temporarily, but this pain is so much more enjoyable when I don't tamper with it. And she has so many reasons to come around on her own."

Rylon subtly changed stances, started an entirely different line of attack. Ruth adapted, defended, sought ways to disarm or immobilize him. He didn't give her the chance.

"Rylon, listen to me. We can't waste time here. Your father is in danger."

"He should've been dead years ago."

"How can you say that?"

Rylon's next swing sent Ruth staggering back, her defenses overwhelmed for one blinding second. "You hypocrite. All my life I've only ever heard two things out of you: My horrible father deserves to die, and you love my good strong father so damn much. All my life you told me to look for the constructive, the reasonable solution, and then you went out and exterminated whole cities. All my life you've lied to me, and as I learn your history I'm finding you lie to everyone else, too."

In combat against him she could hold. She could hold, but she couldn't overcome without letting herself go, and if she let go her fury might kill him as easily as knock him out.

She blocked, parried, flung him back. "Don't do this, Rylon," she said. "I love you."

"Stop it! Stop it! Stop it!" Rylon stayed where he was rather than pressing the attack. "I never asked to be your sweet bonny baby, okay? I never signed up to be part of your weird spun-candy fantasy. I am Sith, mother, and this is my birthright."

"If you stay you will die. And not by my hand. Please. Rylon. We need to destroy the Voice. We can sort this out, I promise you, but he must die first."

"She's almost on to something there," said the Voice of the Emperor.

"Come, Rylon. There is still hope for your mother, if not today. Come to me. Strike me down, as she did once. She couldn't be bothered to follow up with the rest of it, but you have the chance to see my power, to partake in the ritual that will see me rise again. Yes. Kill this vessel. Let her watch her little victory – let her watch you take it. I think you will find it...instructive."

"And after?" asked Rylon, looking at Ruth.

"We can be generous. After, you should let your mother go for a little while. After all, she has a husband to bury."

Oh, stars. Quinn. The other trap.

Rylon smiled grimly. "That she does. Be glad, Mother. You were looking forward to Father's death for a long time. Someone finally stepped clear of your handwringing long enough to arrange it."

"Come with me," pleaded Ruth.

"You're a capable person. You can manage the funeral without me." Rylon turned away.

Ruth ran with the sound of the Voice's shrill eerie laughter behind her. Suddenly, very suddenly, it cut off, and she had nothing but her own pulse to accompany her to the ship.

She slammed open a comlink and tried to raise Major General Pierce. The closest of her bloody partners and the least idealistic of her friends, he had been left out of her secretive preparations so far, but she was out of options. She waited forever for him to answer.

"Milord?"

"Pierce. Do you trust me enough to do one thing on my word alone, no matter what you see or encounter on the way?"

"Yeah."

"Take as many of my guard as you can get on thirty seconds' notice. Go to the coordinates I'm sending you. General Quinn will be there, possibly with friends. I don't care who he's fighting, who tries to countermand your orders, or what you have to do to get him, but bring my husband home." She rubbed her head. There was something else. "His friends, too, if any still live. Go."

She turned off the comlink and got out of there.

\*

Her battered companions met her on Pierce's command ship. They had been surprised and outnumbered, but Pierce leading Ruth's personal guard had made it in time.

Ruth ran straight to Quinn. "Rylon. He has Rylon. The Emperor has Rylon, Malavai, he has our son."

"That's bad, then?" said Pierce.

Wynston jerked his head to one side. "Follow me, I'll explain."

"He has him. He has him and I don't know how we're going to kill him with Rylon standing in the way."

Quinn looked grim. "We'll find a way. Or make one."

"The Voice is dead, though." She sobbed, almost laughing. "He did my job. We got that much."



## Triad 26: Against the Void

### T3-26a. Take Arms Against a Sea of Troubles

June, 28 ATC – 16.5 years after the confirmation of the Wrath

*General Pierce's command ship*

With the Wrath exposed, there was no reason not to keep Pierce and his picked set of guards – the ones he knew would answer to him over the Emperor – ready for an offensive. It was in a conference room on the destroyer he used as a command ship that the conspirators gathered. Ruth sat still, stared at the table, and tried to pay attention.

It had been eighteen hours.

“Vette’s out there now streaming data as fast as she gets it,” Wynston was saying. “Based on the signals Ruth’s ship picked up at the moment the Voice went down, we have a direction; Vette’s out there narrowing down a range.”

“How long will that take?” said Jaesa. She had joined the crew of the *Prodigy Burst* in the operation-turned-trap that they had just been rescued from.

“There are physical limits to how fast you can traverse the distance it takes to pick a reliable location fix off a point source. But it may be a matter of mere hours. After that, we’ll need to case the place, determine its defenses.”

“And get in to Rylon,” said Ruth.

“It’s no use charging in if we don’t know what we’re up against. We’ll need time to observe –”

“She’s right. We should go,” said Kira. “Be ready to ride the minute we have coordinates.”

"We will, to go in and observe," insisted Wynston.

"Your caution is misplaced," said Lord Scourge. "We do not have infinite time for this endeavor. If the Emperor comes within our reach, we must strike."

"Everyone," said Larr Gith. "Lord Scourge is right. The Emperor is no joke. If we get an opening we have to hit it, hard."

Things were quiet for a moment.

"Quinn," asked Kira, "your opinion?"

"At the risk of agreeing with the agent, we ought to tread carefully," he said. "Scout the location, skim its communications, determine both its defenses and its structural and internal system weaknesses, lay a plan of attack, and act only when we have adequate reinforcements." He paused. "We will not do so. Anyone who tries to slow me down for such considerations will be met with deadly force."

Ruth, without looking away from her spot on the table, reached over to squeeze his hand.

"Once we have landed," said Lord Scourge, "Ruth and I will locate the Emperor. Larr Gith will come with us. We must face him alone; we have proved able to resist his command. The rest of you would only be a danger. However, the Emperor will have warriors near to hand wherever he stays; no doubt he'll send enough to keep the rest of you occupied."

"If we have to split up," said Quinn, "anyone who finds Rylon, contact me immediately."

"And me," said Ruth.

Lord Scourge caught Ruth's eye.

"I already know what you're going to say," she said. "Don't bother."

"You cannot afford distractions. I have only one concern here. So should you."

Ruth made a face, then turned her head to Quinn. "If I can't be there to talk, take care of him."

"I will. You have my word."

She smiled slightly at that. "I'll save the galaxy. You save the part that matters. Nothing will stop us."

"Nothing ever has."

She loved him in that moment, again, still, and though she was sick at heart at least she wasn't in it alone.

Larr Gith sighed loudly. "Saving all life in the galaxy was kind of difficult, people. Let's just get it over with."

### **T3-26b. Though Hell Should Bar the Way**

July, 28 ATC – 17 years after the confirmation of the Wrath

*Pierce's command ship*

Vette finally called in to report the location of a cloaked space station hidden in the vast black shadow of a nameless gas giant. Pierce took the destroyer *Big Brass* (which had everything to do with musical instruments in military bands, he insisted) and brought the seekers to the coordinates Vette reported.

The boarding party crowded onto the *Scorned*: Ruth, Quinn, Larr, Scourge, T7-01, Wynston, Kira, Vette, Pierce, Jaesa.

Quinn declined to pilot for once; he sat beside Ruth and watched the wall. They didn't say much on the way over. Vette and T7-01 took them into the hangar firing; the initial wave of red-robed guards was cut down in moments, and the *Scorned* settled down.

"Ready?" Ruth asked quietly.

"Absolutely," Quinn replied. He stood and offered her an unnecessary hand up; she took it, rising to meet him. Under the bustle of the crew's movement he whispered "I love you."

"And I love you. We'll bring Rylon home."

"Of that I have no doubt."

The crew gathered on the station floor. "Listen closely," said Lord Scourge. "Myself, Ruth, and Larr Gith must face the Emperor alone. We can resist his will. We will bring the Rakatan mind trap and kill him outright if we can, lock him away if we must. T7, you may accompany us but would be more valuable outside. The rest of you must see that we are not disturbed. Clear out his guard and wait for us to complete our task."

Imperial guardsmen, both Sith and Force-blind, contested them at every intersection as they worked their way into the austere grey station. It wasn't a problem until they reached a long curved path that seemed to form a full ring of the place.

There waited three lean figures in voluminous black robes.

"Wrath," said Servant One, hovering off the ground. Lightning crackled around him.

"Wrath," said Servant Three, withdrawing into shadows that seemed to spring into existence around him.

"Wrath," said Servant Two, and his voice was a knell of death.

"Behind me," said Ruth.

"At your side," said Lord Scourge.

The Servants moved as one. The net of lightning they created lashed and sent Lord Scourge hard to the wall. Ruth jumped in, only to take a slug of raw force to the belly. Ten yards back she rallied and fell in beside Lord Scourge. They were on a timer. She couldn't let these idiots delay her.

How much they had said to her over the years, and how irrelevant it was now. Ruth slashed the connection between Servant One and the others. The Pureblood staggered backward, and Ruth followed, leaning in with both her sabers bracketing him.

"I have an assignment for you," she said. "And you will answer it."

"My lord commands me," breathed Servant One, his eyes the red of madness.

"Die," she said, and cut.

Ruth looked up. Servant Two lay in a heap. Servant Three was fighting a losing lightsaber battle against Larr Gith and Lord Scourge. That ended soon. Only one thing left in this galaxy would try to give Ruth orders.

And not far down the way, they found a radial corridor that lead to some great chamber dimly visible beyond.

Quinn leaned in after them. T7-01 rolled up to the access port by the door and plugged in a data line.

"I see five other doors in there," reported Quinn quietly. "The way they're set, there may be a total of eight evenly spaced doors around the chamber. We need them guarded, sealed, or both. Teeseven, anything?"

Eight doors = confirmed // door controls = encrypted

"Jaesa, everyone, go on," said Quinn, his eyes locked on the center chamber. "I'll monitor the room from here."

"Quinn, if you go in there, he'll have control of you like that." Wynston snapped his fingers. "Go with Jaesa. Clear out any outer guards."

Quinn shook his head "I see Rylon in there. I won't step inside, but neither will I walk away." He readied a blaster rifle. "Go."

Wynston seemed ready to argue, but Jaesa raised a cautioning hand. "It's his son," she said softly. "If Parvin or Grega were in there I wouldn't budge, either."

Wynston scowled. "No time to argue. You and Teeseven need me, call." He followed Pierce and Kira down the curving hallway. Jaesa and Vette went the opposite way. Quinn braced himself against the wall of the inner corridor and watched.

\*

Rylon greeted them, as Ruth had feared he would. The station's center chamber was a huge open space, round, shadowy, with a dais in the middle and a throne on the dais and a monstrous, vaguely man-shaped shadow on the throne. Rylon stood at the base of the dais and smiled. "Hello, Mother."

"Rylon. Step away."

"My son," rasped the shadow. "I sense your mother is nearly ready to join us. Why don't you keep her busy while I deal with these two."

"With pleasure." Rylon saluted the Emperor and turned back to Ruth.

"Lest you get any ideas," said the Emperor conversationally, "the boy doesn't get a choice this time. I enjoyed our previous session, but today you will submit or you will die. You'll find he's quite incapable of accepting any other solution."

Rylon seemed unaffected by this announcement. "Let's do this, Mother." He saluted her.

She raised her sabers and instinctively returned his salute. "Don't do this, Rylon. No grudge is worth this. He's going to kill you."

"I don't care," he said, and charged.

\*

Larr Gith tossed back her hair and turned away from that confrontation. "The distraction will not avail you," she said with her best proud confidence. "We two can take you."

"Why the rush? There's someone I want you to meet first," said the Emperor. He beckoned and an emaciated man emerged from a doorway nearby, escorted by two tall Pureblood Sith. They threw him at Larr's feet.

The thin man shuddered and looked up at her with big dark eyes. In bizarre, crisp contrast to his tattered clothes and neglected air, he had freshly groomed facial hair, a mustache and a small tuft of a beard.

"Doc?" squeaked Larr Gith.

"I collected him some time ago." The Emperor laughed. "I hoped you might come to visit him someday."

"Larr," said Doc in a low creaky voice. "I waited for you. Why didn't you come?"

"I didn't know." Tears started in the Jedi's eyes. "Doc, honey, I didn't know."

"Remember yourself," warned Lord Scourge.

"Little girl," oozed the Emperor. "You are surrounded by people who despise you. You see before you the greatest failure of your sorry life. And you could scarcely face the barest thimbleful of my power even before you gave up on the discipline that might have made you into somebody. Do you expect to achieve something here today?"

The Purebloods who had dragged Doc in didn't give her a chance to respond. They attacked as one. She drew up to meet them, amber eyes blazing.

Scourge observed but didn't engage. He set the mind trap he had been carrying at his feet, then turned his attention to the Emperor. "And what do you have for me?"

"I have already taken everything but your sad, grasping attempt at relevance. I hardly need more. You were never strong enough to overcome me, my old slave, and these frail children you pin your hopes on will be unable to help you. Do you still intend to invite your death here?"

Scourge said nothing. He raised his saber.

The Emperor stood and half walked, half floated to the edge of the dais. He lifted one hand, palm outward, and Scourge froze mid-movement. A film of shadows sprung up to cover the great Sith, holding him in place. This battle would be in the mind.

### **T3-26c. The Place and the Hour and the Secret Dread**

July, 28 ATC – 17 years after the confirmation of the Wrath

*the Emperor's fortress*

Ruth tried to control her racing thoughts as she deflected her son's attacks and tried to land an immobilizing blow. "Rylon, why are you doing this?"

"You have to die," he said. "I'll be a great Sith, Mother, you'll see."

"I can't see that if I'm dead."

Rylon's brow tightened briefly. "Be quiet! Fight!"



Control. Control. She summoned up her love, her focus, her need to protect and her need to prevail. She met her son's attacks with precision, with a steady strength that countered his furious aggression. She could disarm him. Knock him out. Leave him someplace safe. Then get to her work against the Emperor.

Ten Sith in crimson armor charged in from one of the outer hallways. "Ignore the others. Preserve the young Wrath," called one. "There are plans for him." They drew sabers as one and rushed to engage Ruth. She gestured toward them with her off hand saber; a little movement, a little will, and the whole group blew back like leaves. She had to keep this fight between her and Rylon, contain his violence, perfect her guard.

Rylon sneered. "I suppose that means my master doesn't think I can destroy you on my own."

"He doesn't think much of either of us. Help me stop these before they turn on you."

"Oh, I don't think so." Rylon kept fighting, and Ruth felt the angry stares of the regrouping Sith at her back.

\*

"Damn it, droid," whispered Quinn as he watched the red Sith guard pour in, "we need those doors sealed now."

Command protocol = almost accessed

Quinn was at the outer end of the throne room corridor, staring in at the battle between Rylon and Ruth. He didn't see exactly what happened when something surged from the computer interface. He only heard a long crackle, a pop, a hiss, and then T7-01 stopped so much as whirring.

He looked over to where the droid was still and slightly smoking. He kicked T7-01 free of the wall plug, but it didn't revive. Quinn shook his head, turned away, raised his blaster rifle, braced himself against the wall of the corridor, and watched.

\*

Lord Scourge remained frozen, arms raised to hold his saber before him. His every muscle trembled. "Larr Gith," he shouted, with some effort. "Ruth. Attack. Now." Something shuddered through him, an impact no one but he and perhaps the still silent form of the Emperor could see. "Larr! Ruth!"

Larr Gith finished her last opponent and stooped to touch Doc's hair. He stared up at her with slightly unfocused eyes.

"I didn't know," she said. "I didn't, I didn't fail you. I won't."

He rolled his head to one side to look at the Emperor. "There another crisis going on?"

"Yeah," said Larr Gith.

"Then go show 'em how it's done." He took a deep, rattling breath and tried to smile. "Don't worry, I'm not going anywhere."

The Emperor did not turn his head when Larr Gith charged. He simply raised his other arm and she, too, froze in place, shadows leaping up to wrap around her like a second set of armor.

\*

Quinn couldn't afford to get in closer. If the Emperor noticed his presence he would die or, worse, immediately be coerced into attacking his allies. He could only stay at a distance and fire.

When Ruth flung the ten red Sith back, Quinn took a shot on the nearest one. A second shot, then a third, before the Sith stopped moving. The others didn't seem to notice; they were entirely focused on regrouping around Ruth and Rylon.

They formed up in a half circle around the fighters. Two Sith stepped in to join Rylon in active fighting. Five hung out of the way, waiting for an opening.

The remaining two actually walked to where Larr Gith stood suspended and attacked her. Their sabers glanced off the darkness that coated her. Wherever Larr Gith was, her physical presence here was protected by the same shadows the Emperor held himself in.

Which just meant that the red guards returned to watching Ruth face Rylon plus backup. Quinn's heart sank. Ruth fought with the power and grace she always did, but some kind of Force push from one of her opponents threw her off balance too early. Though her face spoke only of focused determination, he knew she must be terrified. She could make something of that fear. She always did. But she might not be able to make overcoming a full Sith squad plus her beloved son out of it.

He needed to get Rylon away from the Emperor. He needed to get Rylon out of that room.

He took aim and downed one of the waiting Sith guards. The Sith's fellows saw the fall, looked around, spotted Quinn. Two started running towards him. As they got closer, the one in front extended his hand for a Force push that took Quinn in the chest and knocked him flat on his back, several meters away; but the push that hit Quinn's chest missed the thermal detonator he had tossed in the direction of his attackers. He recovered from getting knocked over faster than the two red Sith recovered from taking a thermal detonator explosion to the face.

\*

Ruth was outnumbered and already wounded. But she had to fight. She had to protect Rylon, and that meant subduing him. The Force would show her the way, if she was careful, if she listened. She struck at the Sith around her, blocked their own attacks, leaped, descended, remembered at every moment that this fight, this necessity was born of love.

A saber thrust white-hot pain through one shoulder. Ruth cried out and struggled to spin free of her attackers, to regain some defensive footing. She sensed their hate and she sensed some of their strikes in advance. There, another guard down. But Rylon was pressing the attack again, striking fast and hard, and still she was surrounded.

\*

There were four guards pressing Ruth around Rylon and another one standing by, saber drawn, eager to go in. She had lost one saber. Six people trying to kill her, where Rylon by himself was very nearly her match, and she was losing both blood and power by the minute.

There was no way Quinn could clear the rest of the guards fast enough. And if Ruth entered the Emperor's trance now there was no telling where Rylon would be swept to. He had to get these attackers away from Ruth so she could go on to fight the Emperor, but no demonstration he could make would distract more than one or two. He had to get Rylon clear, too, lest these strangers lead him elsewhere. Rylon. The guards had talked about preserving him. They valued him. Rylon was the center of these guards' mission. The Emperor had plans for Rylon.

Ruth took another hit. One of the Sith slammed down against her guard and bore her to her knees. Another brought his saber down on her right arm. Rylon himself prepared for what was to be a finishing blow. No time left.

Quinn charged up the reserves of his blaster rifle, took careful aim, and shot his son in the back.

Once. Twice. The blasts cost him, but he knew how strong Rylon was. The teenager cried out in shock. Everyone in the melee looked over to where Quinn stood. Then several things happened at once: Rylon fell down, Lord Scourge roared "Ruth, NOW!", several of the guards yelled things, and Ruth herself, wounded, staggering, howled something he couldn't make out. "Trust me," he shouted, as loud as he could, but he didn't know whether she could hear.

## Triad 27: The Void

### T3-27a. A Frightful Fiend Doth Close Behind Him Tread

July, 28 ATC – 17 years after the confirmation of the Wrath

*the Emperor's fortress*

Lord Scourge stood in an emptiness apart from the physical world. He leaned into the lightless void of the Emperor's presence, directing hate and will like twin blades against the ancient being's spiritual form. Opposite him he finally felt Larr Gith joining them. She burned with a purpose he hadn't sensed in her in years. For perhaps the first time she seemed to have it under control: a brilliant, fine control, as she took up her place and began to oppose the creeping darkness.

"He calculated that reveal to weaken you," Scourge said.

"He calculated it for a teenager who never saw what devotion looks like. Mighta gotten me to melt down last time I faced him." She flared brighter, and Lord Scourge sensed the Emperor's pain and anger at the attack. "Not now. Let's clean this up."

"I am not convinced the two of us can. But let us begin."

\*

Ruth struggled, but she was holding. She would not break. The Force would guide her, and she would preserve what had to be preserved. Even through Rylon's overpowering hit, the strike that burned feeling out of her good arm, she could hold on to something. She could manage.

Until Quinn shot her son.

The last shred of her discipline was consumed in turning to answer Lord Scourge's desperate call. She forced herself to limp to join Larr Gith and

Lord Scourge in surrounding the thick dark mostly man-shaped cloud. Her heart shrieked for blood.

She forgot her focused defenses, her mental shield. Those were useless. Quinn had turned on her, again, as she had always known he would. Straight past reason, straight past her own knowledge of the Emperor's advantages, straight past any assurance she could give herself about his motives, beyond argument or defense, she had known. Of course he would murder his son before jeopardizing the mission. Of course he would do it like that, a cowardly shot in the back. Trying to love him in spite of that inborn treachery only made her a fool.

She couldn't even kill him yet, not until she had removed the reason that had forced that treachery back to the surface. The Emperor. He had taken Rylon; now she had only fury. She threw her awareness forward at the Emperor's darkness. Absolute rage fueled her – rage for whatever manipulation he had done, for knowing exactly how to hurt her. Rage because maybe he hadn't manipulated anything at all.

Light Side be damned. "Let us end this." She wasn't sure whether it was Lord Scourge or herself talking.

\*

"Get the young Wrath to the medbay!" one of the red Sith was repeating. Ruth, too wounded to lift a saber, limped off toward Lord Scourge and the Emperor. Quinn aimed and gunned down the guard who followed her. The remaining four were clustered around Rylon, who was suddenly, furiously fighting them, struggling to get free of their restraining hands. "Let me go! Let me at her!"

"Kolto pack here, somebody, now," yelled one of the guards. "He's bleeding hard, he'll kill himself at this rate."

Not what Quinn had intended. The injury was meant to be alarming, yes, but something that wouldn't kill Rylon outright. Just enough to grab attention and stop combat temporarily.

"Come with us, my lord," said another guard. "He wants you alive and whole."

"I'll kill her," yelled Rylon, twisting and kicking while they dragged him toward the far door.

Quinn could do no more good from back here. Ruth was covered by the dark film of the Emperor's engagement; the red guard was about to carry off Rylon, he didn't know where. It was possible the Emperor would be too distracted to pull additional people under his command. Quinn had to hope. He raised his rifle, shot one of the guards clinging to Rylon. The boy freed an arm, seized someone's lightsaber, cut down a guard himself, practically foaming in his fury. "Let me go! I'll kill her!"

Quinn kept walking. Two guards left, and Rylon was armed and furious. Wounded, not quite standing up straight, but armed and furious. Quinn shot another of Rylon's opponents.

Rylon ran the last guard through and then smiled a bright brittle smile. "Father," he said in a scratchy voice, "much obliged." He turned, seemingly only a little inconvenienced by his gaping injuries, to pursue Ruth.

Quinn was faster. He took another few rapid steps, raised a dart gun at short range, delivered a shot of a sedative. Not much, not dosed for a Sith, but enough to temporarily inconvenience. Rylon kept on toward Ruth. Quinn grabbed his arm and hauled back. The boy seized his wrist and nearly snapped it forcing it away, but in a few more seconds he would be weak enough to work with. Quinn pulled Rylon's saber from his hand, eased him to the ground, and brought out a kolto pack to tend to the blaster wounds.

"I'll kill her," Rylon said groggily.

"I can't let you do that, son," said Quinn. "Hold still."



### **T3-27b. I Am the Captain of My Soul**

July, 28 ATC – 17 years after the confirmation of the Wrath

*the Emperor's fortress*

Ruth's awareness fell into a place that felt separate from the physical throne room. Larr Gith's presence was bright gold here, imbued with something stronger and steadier than Ruth had ever sensed from her before. Scourge was a hungering darkness with a tinge like dried blood. The Emperor was deeper than black, a cold hole in the world.

She flung her will at him, a streaked collection of shades of blue. She sensed surprise, a sharp pleasure that almost instantly turned to concern, while she pressed her attack into the Emperor's essence. Everything around her was fuel for this fire, this hatred. Everything within her, too.

His counterattack lashed at her, cutting her with a pain more than physical. His will was ancient, malevolent, strong as the ages. Hers joined with Scourge's and Larr Gith's, determined. No, more than determined. Her companions weren't doing enough. Ruth threw more of herself into the assault. She felt herself warping, blurring into the darkness before her, but her will was hurting him more than he could hurt her. She would tear him apart.

"Be careful," cried Larr Gith.

"Burn him," urged Lord Scourge. "Burn him to ash."

Ruth felt the Emperor's darkness stripping away her very sense of self, layer upon cracking, crumbling layer. She went on screaming her hate, pouring it into shredding his mind. Her comrades worked their tiny attacks; they didn't matter. She held the Emperor's attention and broke him apart, piece by piece, feeling every painful snap as he did the same to her. He was weakening. Every wrong he had done her, every life he had taken, every day he had congratulated himself for controlling her, she hated him



for it. He had corrupted her husband and claimed her son. She would avenge what it was too late to protect.

While her enemy crumbled, Ruth kept screaming. She thought at some point her physical form joined in.

\*

Quinn dropped what he was doing when he heard Ruth's scream. Hurriedly he recovered, pressed Rylon's bandage, then ran to kneel where Ruth had just collapsed in a thin, rapidly dissipating puff of the Emperor's binding shadows. She lay motionless with an expression of almost comically light concern on her face. Quinn checked her neck, her wrists.

The stone Rakatan trap was shaking. Larr and Scourge stood on opposite sides of it, mesmerized by the darkness between them, concentrating, doing something the Force-blinds couldn't perceive.

Then the trap flashed once, brilliant white, and fell to the ground, inert. Scourge fell to his knees. Larr reeled but stayed upright. "There," she gasped.

Wynston burst in, blaster rifle in hand. "I felt the...something...from out there. Is it clear now?"

"It is done," said Scourge. "I sensed a core we could not destroy, but the Wrath scoured it to nearly nothing. What remains is both crippled and trapped."

Wynston looked to Ruth. His expression froze. He moved to kneel opposite Quinn, leaning over the still form. Quinn swallowed hard but didn't block the false-faced man from touching her cheek, her throat, the bandages that Quinn had pointlessly applied to the worst of her physical wounds.

"Quickly," said Wynston. He fumbled in his satchel. "A resuscitation stim, something."

"Do you think I didn't try?" said Quinn hoarsely, gesturing at his own open supply bag. "She's dead. She died believing I had betrayed her again."

Wynston met his eyes, briefly, then looked down. "I see." He stroked her hair, then snatched his hand back. Half a minute or more passed. "She was my oldest friend."

"She is my wife."

Rylon was wobbling on hands and knees toward where Quinn and Wynston flanked Ruth. "Mom?" he said. He settled at her head and stared down at her, looking confused. "Mom. Mom?"

"Rylon," Quinn said helplessly.

All trace of arrogance had drained from the teenager. "She looks...I didn't think...Mom, no. I didn't mean it. Not like this. Mom, get up."

Quinn sought his son's hand and took it.

"Stars. Dad, I tried to kill her."

"I tried to save her," said Quinn leadenly. "I'm sorry I couldn't."

The others filed in: Vette, Jaesa, Kira, Pierce, a scorched-looking T7-01.

"So," Vette called brassily, "did we win?"

Wynston swiped at his eyes with his sleeve. "Yes," he said. "We won." Quinn shot him a venomous look, but stayed silent.

Vette noticed what they were gathered around. "Oh. Oh, jeez."

Jaesa covered her mouth and stared. Kira studied the three gathered around Ruth as if hoping to find something she could do. Pierce clenched and unclenched his fists and tried to look calm.

\*

Larr Gith knelt by the emaciated man the others hadn't noticed and propped him up in her arms. He looked up at her with a sleepy smile. "Hey. Beautiful. I had the strangest dream."

Larr hugged him tighter. "You're safe now."

He noticed the voices from over by Ruth and looked at the trio gathered around her. "Oh. Friend of yours?"

"Yes," said Larr quietly.

"I'm sorry."

"Thanks. At least she managed to bail you out."

"Only one I see bailing me out here is you, gorgeous."

Larr Gith smiled. "Well, I helped."

"The lady shares credit," he murmured. "What will they think of next."

\*

"The Emperor," said Scourge in a voice pitched to carry. Everyone but Rylon and Quinn looked up at him. "I will take charge of the mind trap and hide it where it will be well guarded. He will not be freed in my lifetime."

"Take it and go, Scourge," said Wynston wearily. "Thank you for...for bringing us this far."

Scourge looked down at the other center of attention. "She died a warrior," he said calmly. "And the people she fought for are safe. All two of them."

"She fought for more than that," said Kira.

"Don't be so quick to idolize, Jedi." He hefted the stone device. "Then again, don't dismiss the bonds of one or two. Now, I will find my own way off. You will not see me again."

T7-01 beeped diffidently.

This place = unsafe // Heroes = go home

"You're right," said Kira. "We should get back to the ship, guys."

Quinn nodded jerkily. "Yes. I need to get her home."

The others gave him space when he took Ruth up in his arms and started back toward the hangar.

### **T3-27c. To Make Me Sad to Go**

July, 28 ATC – 17 years after the confirmation of the Wrath

*Pierce's command ship, Big Brass*

The *Scorned* returned to the *Big Brass*. Scourge had disappeared rather than boarding; he had probably stolen his own ship elsewhere. Quinn laid Ruth out in the destroyer's medbay; now he stood beside her, keeping vigil. Rylon lay nearby, turned on his side so the compress on his wounds could stay in place. He stared at his mother, wide-eyed, as if death were something entirely new and strange to him.

Pierce ordered a course for neutral space and came to join the others outside the medbay.

Wynston spoke. "I'm going to go ahead and call this our last planning session. You won't be seeing my face after this; I've got to disappear to prepare for the next crisis. Larr, where are you off to?"

Larr Gith took a deep breath. "I've got some things to figure out." She squeezed a subdued Doc's hand. "And he's going to need help. You can call on me if you ever need me."

"Thank you. Best of luck to you."

"I'm bound for Dromund Kaas," said Pierce. "Got a perfectly good fighting force. Better figure out where it fits into things now that the Wrath is gone."

"Yeah," said Vette. "The Wrath. You know, she turned out okay. Guys, you have my holofrequency. I've gotta go do something less depressing now." She hesitated for a long moment, then took a few rapid steps toward Quinn and reached up to hug him tightly. He squeezed his eyes shut and hugged her back, stilted but swift. Then she broke away and ran off.

"I'll be returning home. Coordinating with Light Side Sith seems more appropriate now than ever," said Jaesa.

"Good luck," said Kira. "It's a good cause."

"And you, Kira?" said Wynston.

"Until you need me again, I was gonna go back to my day job. I'm a Jedi when I'm not being a superhero, you know."

\*

Wynston joined Kira, Vette, Larr, and Doc in taking the Prodigy Burst to Nar Shaddaa, but when they reached the spaceport he took charge of a couple of Ruth's possessions that had been left on the ship and went his own way. His companions were contractors, allies of convenience; they would go back to their real jobs now, their real lives. They didn't operate at the level he did.

He headed to one of his safe houses and slept through the night and much of the morning. As soon as he woke up he got to work.

A short tap sequence at his hip caused the visage of the black-haired human to warp and vanish. In its place was a Chiss, short, skinny, crisscrossed and textured by scars.

He discarded the physical profile of the Human Wynston that Larr Gith and the others had known, took a moment to study his natural face in the mirror, then turned away and pulled out his holocommunicator.

\*

Quinn set up the funeral pyre in the stone courtyard where Colran Niral's remains had been burned, and those of Colran's brothers, and their father and mother, and the Nirals before them, on and on. The bier was overshadowed by a narrow roof-high shelter to block rain from directly above, so the fire was free to burn. Quinn stood with Rylon and watched the flame for some time. The youth broke down and ran back inside long before Quinn's nerve gave out.

He turned away from the pyre and headed to the veranda looking out to the rain-battered pond. After some time he asked, very quietly, "How many times must I start over?"

His holo beeped. After a long empty moment he answered. Wynston came up. The old Wynston, the blue one, the one who looked subject to time and fatigue.

"Quinn," he said. "I'm sorry to intrude, but we found some of Ruth's effects on the ship. I can come drop them off if you want."

"Perhaps later," he said. He was too tired for it now.

They looked at each other.

"There's a place for you here," said Wynston. "You do good work. There's still a lot of people that need help when the great powers go bad. My organization has a whole department for Imperial affairs. If for whatever reason you're not ready to go back into the system."

"Let me look after Rylon first. After that...I'll think about it," said Quinn. "For her sake I'll consider it."

"Take your time. And, Quinn...I'm sorry."

\*

Inside the house, Rylon had locked himself in his room. He spent some time pacing, vaguely waving his holocommunicator. Eventually he swallowed hard, pushed his hair back, and entered a call.

"Lord Jaesa?"

"Rylon," she said uncertainly.

"I was wondering." He looked at his feet. "Do you...could you try maybe teaching me the ways of the light side?"

Jaesa's lips parted and it took her a moment to answer. "Really?"

"Mom kept trying. She thought it was important. I want to honor that. And...Larr says she snapped clear Dark Side in the end, uncontrolled. Lost her defenses that way. Mom ended up angry, and that anger destroyed her."

Jaesa sucked in a breath. "Did she tell your father that detail?"

"No." Then, more confidently, "And no one ever will. He's got enough guilt. Besides, I think it was mostly me she was angry at."

"It wasn't. Nothing you could do or say could ever shake her. She saved her hate for the Emperor. As for you, Rylon, you're always welcome with me and mine."

\*

Wynston brought up his wrist console's projection screen and pulled up the available disguise profiles. After flicking through a few gallery pages he selected another Human face: handsome, young, with neither a scar nor a worry line in sight. He loaded it into the cybernetic disguise generator.

He didn't activate the disguise yet, though. He pulled up a different, older file on the projection screen. A silly thing, but he had held on to it for a number of years now.

“GALAXY SAVED”, it read, “III”. Wynston smiled to himself, a little mistily, and drew in another tally mark.



## Appendix A: Ruth on the Move

*This appendix contains Ruth drabbles and one-shots that never made it into the wider narrative.*

### Pre- and Timeline 1

#### Remembering Mother

circa 5 ATC – 6 years before the confirmation of the Wrath

*Dromund Kaas*

“Ruthie?”

“Hm?”

“I’ve...never really asked. Do you remember much about your mother?”

Ruth looked up from the couch. “Some. Flashes.” She thought about it. “I remember one day, the sky was brighter than usual, the rain was lighter than usual. We were out on the veranda. She was in the hover chair just holding me, and rocking, and singing. It was perfect.” A slow smile lit up her face. “And then you came out with cookies. Which made it an even more perfect day.”

“We had a lot of those when the three of us were together.”

Ruth got up and went to hug her father. “I wish we’d had more.”

“Me too.”

She held him for a little while. Then she smiled impishly. “All this affection. We’re very bad Sith, aren’t we.”

“Who loved and were loved by a very bad assassin, by that measure.” He squeezed her tighter. “I wouldn’t have it any other way.”

## The Mind Trick

December, 8 ATC – 2.5 years before the confirmation of the Wrath

*Dromund Kaas*

“There’s one more thing I need to teach you before you’re ready for Korriban.”

Ruth set her practice blade back on the rack out of reach of the Dromund Kaas drizzle and gently let go her Force focus, turning her attention to her father. “What’s that?”

“Something I’ve been delaying for seventeen years because I couldn’t figure out how to teach it.” Colran’s smile started wry and ended sad. “I believe it’s not the right solution to most things. But it may someday save your life. Use it responsibly, Ruthie. Or, better, avoid using it at all.”

“Don’t use it. But you’re teaching me anyway?”

Colran’s features clouded, but to his credit he didn’t take his grey eyes from her blue. “It may save your life.”

“What is it?”

“A...mind trick, my Jedi brothers used to call it. That sounds much more benign than Force coercion. Against a weak-minded target – not stupid, and not laughable, just not as strong as us – you can learn to plant a suggestion, one they’re likely to instantly act on. It takes careful concentration but if it’s done right you can save yourself from a serious fight, or worse.” He shook his black hair back from his face. “There’s no one you can ethically practice on but me. The good news is, I’m resistant and I’ll be able to sense your progress. So raise one hand and concentrate...”

\*

Ruth waved her hand, making a concerted effort to weave her focus into the raider commander's temples. "You will order your men to stand down."

"Ow!" barked the commander, and shook his head violently. His next words were for his comlink. "Men, step it up!"

"Ugh," growled Ruth, and dropped the insufficiently-practiced effort, and spun her new but natural-feeling lightsaber. "Vette, look out! We're going to have company!"

"Uninvite them!" Vette yelled back from around the corner.

"Trying!" yelled Ruth. Blaster fire sounded from Vette's direction. Ruth cut down the commander while he was still fumbling with a grenade. What she lacked in Force nuance she made up for in strength. Then, hearing the chaotic thunder of more raiders than she really cared to count coming down the tunnel, she sprinted down the hall to rejoin her Twi'lek friend.

"More coming?" said Vette, placing a few more shots at the original knot of frenzied raiders and darting back to cover.

Ruth popped up long enough to deflect some blaster bolts, then slid down next to Vette. "Afraid so."

"Are we getting out with the artifact?"

"Of course we are. It'll just be busy."

"I figured you were going to turn the reinforcements back, like you love doing. What happened?"

"There was no time for reasoning," she said glumly. "I tried awing him with my presence."

"Huh," said Vette. "Out of curiosity, has that ever worked?"

Ruth sighed. "No."

"Better luck next time," Vette said briskly, and tossed a flash grenade before turning her back and shielding her eyes. "Let's get out of here so there'll be a next time."

## **Teachers and Heroes**

October, 9 ATC – 1.5 years before the confirmation of the Wrath

*Korriban*

"Overseer Tremel."

Ruth waited for the greying Sith to look up from his desk. He eyed her for a long moment before he spoke. "Has Lord Baras sent you back to me already?"

"Yes. Hear me out. Lord Baras got to work the moment the introductions were over. As a first task, he has asked that I kill you and bring him your hand as proof. As I understand it, cutting off a hand is in no way fatal, so it would seem that Lord Baras is watching to see whether I have the stomach to kill my own mentor."

"Really? I did not expect him to be this direct, even with his authority. Either I die here or he forces me to slay the apprentice I had hoped to back against his. A master stroke."

"He hasn't demanded any meaningful proof of death. He's almost daring me to spare you."

"That would be very foolish of you."

"Foolish? It would be a waste for all your experience and wisdom to be lost as part of my homework assignment. It seems to me your skills could still be put to use somewhere far away from here, if you were to vanish leaving nothing but the hand Baras has demanded."

"There is no point in such thinking. Baras has made the superior play. You as an acolyte will obey his will or die trying. It's absurd to imagine anything else."

"I don't wish to kill you, Tremel. You've been a good teacher. And a friend."

"If you call me or any Sith a friend, I have taught you nothing." Tremel stood and faced her across the desk, scowling. "Stop trying to talk yourself out of doing what is necessary. I have attempted to show you the ways of the Sith, but even now you prove resistant to the most critical lessons." He shook his head. "I should not have been surprised. Your father didn't have the nerve either. That's why he fled the Academy when we were young. That's why he has lived as a virtual recluse on Dromund Kaas ever since he returned to the Sith. That is why I was shocked that he sent you to me."

"You gave me the practical lessons he couldn't, Overseer. My father gave me what advice he could, but he knew it would take someone more in touch with Korriban's pulse to guide me through the Academy. I've learned a great deal. Even the parts you've never seen me emulate. So don't make me end it like this."

"End it, girl?" He drew and activated his saber. "I don't think you're capable. Not to someone you've been foolish enough to name a friend."

"Hold." She drew but didn't activate. "To fight me is to throw your life away and you know it. You can survive this, just not if you do what he expects. Let me take your hand. Disappear, remake a life elsewhere. Baras will learn something about me and he will think it's a weakness. He will not realize, at least not today, what I am capable of toward those who don't listen to reason. You'll live to see his game go on. I'll give you your victory." Her jaw tightened for a second. "Or you will die here, now. Because I am capable, regardless of what you think of me."

The older Sith faced the young woman for a long time. Then, slowly, he deactivated his saber, set it on the desk, and offered his right arm.

Ruth bowed formally. "Thank you, Tremel. For everything."

She struck.

## **Weirdo**

November, 9 ATC – 1.5 years before the confirmation of the Wrath

*Korriban*

The little Twi'lek slave crossed her arms and looked at Ruth with enormous blue eyes. And continued her interrogation.

"You like being nice."

"Yes."

"You like the Empire."

"Yes."

"You like being nice."

"Yes."

"You like the Empire."

"Is this going somewhere?"

"Do you not see the disconnect here?"

"There are many ways to live in the Empire. I just choose a less destructive one."

"And these guys hate you for it. You know, where I'm from they have a whole club for Force users who aren't total bastards. They call 'em the Jedi."

"Don't push it," Ruth snapped. "I've no interest in being a Jedi."

“Ooo-kay. If being the speciallest kid at the party is that important to you  
“

“I don’t have to be nice.” She waved the shock collar’s remote. Honestly, who did Vette think she was, anyway?

Vette looked at Ruth. She looked at the remote. She looked at Ruth.

“Yooouu gonna press that button or something?”

“I’m getting there.” Never mind that actually shocking the poor girl was an incredibly distasteful prospect. “I’m still in the brandishing stage. I can make you eat your words any time I want.”

Vette looked unimpressed. **“You are so weird.”**

## **January, 10 ATC**

T1-1. Your Beauty Effulgent

## **The Morning After**

January, 10 ATC – 1.5 years before the confirmation of the Wrath

*Dromund Kaas*

Ruth couldn’t believe she just did that.

The “Sith take what they want” thing was something she didn’t tend to act on when it came to sex, no matter how tempting. It was just that this stranger Darnek had been friendly and attentive and sweet and funny and – was that even normal? The politics of sex on Korriban – darkly interesting, sometimes terribly tempting, rarely hazarded – didn’t really have a place or explanation for Force-blinds walking up and introducing themselves.

She couldn’t believe she just did that.

Less than a week off Korriban and this was what she did when she got back to home territory. This wasn't being an adult, this was, this was

Fun. Probably nothing to repeat, but fun.

She was right to run out after, though. No matter what the circumstances, falling asleep around a near-stranger was a bad idea. At least the parting of ways wasn't "him dropping out of sight to probably plot her murder," like with most boys who didn't call back after a date on Korriban.

Fun. She'd spent a whole evening with a Force-blind, an alien, someone older and easygoing and charming and more interested in dancing than in power plays. Someone who made her feel good about something other than her combat prowess. And who was more than capable of reminding her of why she took these risks with anybody in the first place. A novelty multiple ways at once. How one thing had led to another that quickly, that comfortably, she didn't know. Once or twice she'd even forgotten to keep an eye on ways to defend herself. It really shouldn't be this painless.

Ruth shook herself. She had work to do. Sith Apprentice. Grr. Lying around all day daydreaming (about someone who would likely be endangered just by knowing her, no less) was exactly not what she was supposed to be doing.

She hummed a cheerful tune and went about preparing for the day.

## **Well, He Sounds Friendly**

February, 10 ATC – 17 months before the confirmation of the Wrath

*Balmorra*

The Sobrik barracks door slid shut. Ruth and her co-conspirator Vette put their backs to it.



"Wow," they said in unison.

"I didn't think Baras's minions got crazier than Dromund Kaas," said Vette.

"I think he's actually serious," said Ruth.

"An indelible impression on the state of things'," said Vette.

"And I look forward to it'," Ruth echoed dazedly.

"What did all those poor consonants ever do to him?" said Vette.

"I think he wanted me to keep asking questions just so he could demonstrate answering them. I really believe he could go on all day."

"I think he glared himself crosseyed somewhere in there."

"Did he really have to 'my lord' me in every breath?" said Ruth. "I think every other one I could take, but..."

"Do you think his hair's just gelled like that, or fossilized?" said Vette.

"Give me ten men like him and I'll remake the Empire," said Ruth.

"Wait, what?" said Vette. And, "Do you mean ten guys exactly like him? Because ew."

"You can't buy that kind of passion, Vette. You can only earn the respect of the people who have it. That's the sort of command I need to learn. All right, maybe he's a little uptight..."

"A ton uptight?"

"...but he's smart, he's informed, and he cares - that's exactly the kind of person I want on my side."

"Yeah, I bet he'll get right on that, after he's done assaulting any other underlings he sees."

"He can learn not to take it out on our own people. Maybe that's something I can show him before we part ways."

"Heh. You know you get glowy when you're plotting to make the galaxy a better place? Glowier than usual."

"Must be the weather," Ruth said, looking hurriedly away. Her heart picked up with the shrieking sweep of bombers over the base's tenuous shield. There were plenty of perfectly professional reasons to be excited here, at the edge of a beginning - her career, that is, of course - whose scope she was just beginning to sense.

And new allies in that were always very welcome.

## **February, 10 ATC**

T1-2. The Native Hue of Resolution

T1-3. Less Brave Perhaps than Trusting are the Fair

## **March, 10 ATC**

T1-4. The Enemy Within, Ruth vs. Ruth

## **April, 10 ATC**

T1-5. This Heart Within Me Burns

T1-6. Some Work May Yet Be Done

## **May, 10 ATC**

T1-7. And Every Fair From Fair Sometimes Declines

## **June, 10 ATC**

T1-8. A Light From the Shadows Shall Spring

## **July, 10 ATC**

T1-9. Thoughts Serenely Sweet

## Confessions: Vette

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August, 10 ATC – 11 months before the confirmation of the Wrath

*Fury-class vessel*

“Vette

?” As Ruth spoke Vette intercepted her arm and dragged her toward the crew quarters.

“Jaesa!” snapped the Twi’lek. “You, too!”

“Wha?” said Jaesa. Vette grabbed and dragged.

Vette put her back to the wall, gasping. “Anybody hear from Quinn this morning?” she whispered. Muffled thumping could be heard from the far side.

“No,” said Ruth. “Should I have?”

“Vette, you monster,” said Jaesa.

“What?” said Ruth.

“I can’t tell you,” said Vette. “Just listen! He’ll probably recover soon and then it’s Captain Grumpypants again.”

“Recovered?” Ruth said sharply.

“Was that really necessary?” said Jaesa.

“Vette what did you do to my captain *answer me now.*”

Vette wiped her eyes. “I switched itching powder for starch in Quinny’s kit,” she said. “Listen, he’s still trying to get away from it!”

And this was

completely within expectations. Ruth succeeded in not rolling her eyes. She wasn't sure why she was trying, though. "Did anyone in this room not see that coming?"

"Vette," Jaesa said, her mouth trembling a little, "that wasn't very nice."

"Yeah," said Vette, "but you're laughing."

## **Steering Clear (then and now)**

Summer, 10 ATC - 1 year before the confirmation of the Wrath  
*Fury-class vessel*

*He doesn't want you.*

The thought shouldn't come up. It shouldn't have to come up. Ruth tried, hard, to give her XO the terms he wanted. Proper terms, appropriate for their respective stations. She wasn't the formal Lord he had walked into her life expecting, but neither would she ever abuse his trust.

And walking up to someone and offering them one's career was trust.

She already needed Captain Quinn. That wasn't a question of her immediate feelings, that was his making himself indispensable professionally. It was easier to be a Sith, and to do what needed doing, with someone there to take care of the details. And keep the ship running. And provide intelligence. And explain history in that voice that made her regret every ending.

All he wanted was to serve a Sith who could be a commander, who would grant him a little basic space.

She turned over in bed and screwed her eyes shut. It was very, very difficult to come out of heart-in-the-throat physical exertion and turn around to come face to face with this intense serious man who wanted her

wanted her to succeed. That was all. He would be equally if not more thrilled, she told herself sternly, if she were a proper killing-machine man. With scary spikes and

and anything, just not a moonstruck young woman, which was what he had.

He would still be awake now. She never meant to track him but it was hard not to be aware. He would be working, pursuing his military interests. Anticipating problems. Making her victories possible. She could make some excuse to join him. Just to talk, just to listen. No one would fault her for finding ways to be near him. It could be any number of practical reasons. And maybe, somehow

She rolled back and tried to distract herself by not reviewing running into him on the way out of the briefing room today. Her first insane urge had been to lean into him, but he had danced away from the contact with a speed and grace that suggested he wasn't just a

*you were admiring him running away from you. Let's repeat what he's made clear: he doesn't want you!*

When she had discussed the potential difficulties of managing staff with her father, somehow this had never come up.

She gave up on sleep and went for a shower instead.

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Summer, 27 ATC - 16 years after the confirmation of the Wrath

*Ruth's command ship*

Ruth sat on the bed, disassembling her saber to clean it; Quinn poked at a holoprojection of force disposition, filing through his options; both were familiar enough with their respective tasks to talk while they worked. They

were alone together, which made it a domestic scene by the standards of life in the field.

At the moment, Ruth was blushing. "All right, I was...you know how young I was. And I...even then, Malavai. I tried not to bother you."

"You made a creditable effort."

She heard the smile in his voice and felt her cheeks warming further when she looked up to see it. "Was I that bad?"

"In my presence? The strain was visible, and not lost on me." He rearranged ships as he spoke, preparing for some imaginary onslaught. "Out? It wasn't my place to comment, but from the energy usage profiles on the ship I had always assumed you *preferred* your showers cold."

"Ha! No, only...only once you showed up."

For a few moments they worked in silence. Quinn finished one layout and saved it before returning to the beginning of the scenario. "I worked late, those nights, to escape thinking about you. About warming you." His motions were quick, precise; his voice was slow and thoughtful. "The command you would never give."

"I couldn't make you. I wouldn't try." Her hands were careful, gentle; her tone was earnest.

"It might have simplified things if you did."

She stopped, her chest suddenly tight. "You wanted me to?"

He stared at her, visibly trembling on the edge of an answer. A moment later he dropped his gaze. "Only in daydreams. In truth..." he took the effort to meet her eyes again... "if you had loosed that self-restraint, pressed against my objections until I gave in...I would have submitted to you. I might even have admired you. But I wouldn't have loved you."

"Then I'm glad we waited." She shared a smile with him and then picked out her lightsaber's crystal heart to run over it with a soft cloth. "Honestly, for a long time I didn't think it would ever happen."

"Really? I wondered, at times, how certain you were along the way." He saved the holo simulation, restarted it with another few gestures' worth of changes. "Was I to be one of your converts, sent astray by some unexpected kindness so you had only to wait for my change of heart?"

"That...that was never what I meant--"

"I know. You made it clear that so far as you were concerned I was a free man." He swept his simulation aside with a wave and turned his attention to her. "It was humbling. You are, you always were, an incredible force. To see you prepare to take the weight of the Empire on your shoulders, command, fight, bleed, conquer, to know your triumphs and your wounds...to come face to face with you at the end of day after grueling day and know what comfort you desired, that you turned away from without conscious hint or complaint for no reason more than one servant's wishes? In all our journeys together I never saw you let anyone stop you...except me, with a word."

She set her work tray aside and reached for him. "Your words mattered to me."

"As they never had to anyone." He closed the space between them and kissed her hand, cradling it in both of his like something precious. "If I had hopes above my station it was because you made them possible. And I loved you for it." Slowly, carefully, he turned her palm up and ran his fingertips up the inside of her forearm, leaving nerves tingling in his wake. When he spoke again his voice was lower, as soft as his touch. "What did you think about?"

"What do you mean?"

"Those nights alone. If you thought about me, what I would do." A strange note had entered his voice, and his look now, while still touched with wonder, was intent. He reached for her cheek and she leaned into his touch

as naturally, as irresistibly as she always had. "I didn't fulfill it then. I couldn't, then. But I'm free to now. If...you wish to tell me."

## **September, 10 ATC**

T1-10. Conscience does make cowards of us all

T1-11. 'Tis Not Too Late to Seek a Newer World

## **Fangirl: Exploring Taris**

September, 10 ATC – 10 months before the confirmation of the Wrath

### *Taris*

When Ruth announced her intention to do some scouting on the ground herself on Taris, she expected someone to argue. Vette did argue, technically, but it was a 'you can go do what you want, I'm staying in the burnt-out building that's least likely to collapse on me' kind of argument. Quinn, who had spent most of the last thirty-six hours pacing in the lake garrison's briefing room awaiting word from the local support team, eagerly took a speeder alongside Ruth to strike out beyond a nearby Imperial outpost.

By night Taris seemed to be dominated by the great skeletal buildings that civilization had left. By day it was dominated by the creeping green that nature was reasserting. Pathways were uncertain, intact doorways were hard to see, but at least rakghoul activity was down.

She kept her speeder at a slow pace while she scanned the terrain for signs of recent human activity. When Quinn slowed down she slowed and stopped beside him. "What is it?" she asked.

"Historical note, my lord." He pointed at a vast ridge that, now that he noted it, was too straight to be natural. "That's the Endar Spire. It was shot down during one of the critical points of the Jedi Civil War, some three hundred years ago."



She examined it further. It was a huge ship, and the crash hadn't done it any favors. Now that she was looking she could see a vast Republic icon brushed onto one side. "Really?" she said.

"Yes. This was the transport carrying Revan after his capture by the Jedi during the Jedi Civil War. In seeking to recover or kill him, Imperial forces shot the Spire down just prior to the bombardment."

"Revan walked around in there. Wow." Without thinking about it, Ruth dismounted and started walking toward a yawning gap that looked like it might offer a way in. "My father admired Revan a great deal. He was a seeker, someone who could find strength in more than the extremes."

"I am not surprised you favor him, my lord. - Stop."

Ruth hesitated at a lopsided threshold in a tangle of metal. "What?"

"The wrecked ramp there may collapse that entire mass. I wouldn't advise going in; it's less than safe and there's little likelihood of enemy activity within."

"Perhaps, but I want to explore." She held his gaze for a moment and, since he didn't seem to be weakening, she dropped into her colder command demeanor. "I intend to explore."

He gave an oblique nod. "Very well. Follow me, I have an idea where the original doors would have been."

Quinn found her an entrance, then produced a brilliant hand lamp by which to navigate the slanted deck of the ruined ship. "The fine lines at waist level on the wall were lit navigation guides. It was a convention on a number of Republic ships: blue to guide to the medical bay, brown to the crew quarters, yellow to engineering."

"That would make my life so much easier on our capital ships."

"My lord, that would ruin the aesthetic. Besides, you have me to show you the way."

Well, if I got lost anyway, maybe we could have red and, um, darker red, and darker darker red nav lights. That way we wouldn't ruin the Imperial theme."

"Or you could have actual support staff, my lord."

"Creative contingency planning, captain. Roll with it. - What is this?" She darted into a low room filled with row upon row of equipment racks. About a quarter of them held a scattering of blaster rifles. The other three-quarters..."Vibroblades? Why so many?"

"Combat was very different in those days, my lord. Their blaster technology was next to useless in close-quarters fighting. Once an enemy had closed, vibroswords were far and away the best defense." Quinn held the lamp aloft and looked around. "Many are missing. That suggests the crew was prepared for or actively defending against a boarding action."

"We were sending our people on board while shooting it down?"

"We would have boarded first; our fire would have focused on disabling their turrets and engines. You only shoot to destroy once you're sure your forces can't wrest what they want from within...or once they've already gotten it." He stepped back into the hall and started walking in what appeared to be a random direction. "I didn't see the boarding breach from outside. We'll have to seek signs in here."

And he was off. He described any tech she asked about that he recognized, to her delight; but his primary concern was exploring the area and piecing together the events that happened just before the ship had broken up and crashed. Somehow some parts of the antique broken mess were distinguishable from other parts of the antique broken mess in significant ways, which he laid out in a manner that made the exercise sound more or less sane.

They stopped before a massive blast door just behind the bridge. It was partially submerged in churned-up dirt and durasteel: the door itself had won the fight with the ground, and had stayed intact. Quinn examined the edges, checked the nearest control console, briefly hooked up some

contacts from his blaster's ion cell to attempt to power said console, scowled, gave up. Glared at the door again.

"Report, captain," she said gently. That was usually the best way to bring him out of these fits.

"Multiple holding actions were fought on the way here. It's possible that the Imperial forces were working their way forward to seize control of the ship entirely, but this door indicates they didn't make it. Or..."

"Or?"

"This path leads to the bridge, but it also leads to the escape pods. If the Republic forces weren't just defending the helm, then they shed a great deal of blood to make sure that someone got off this ship alive."

"Revan."

He nodded. "I suspect so." He looked up and around the old hallway. "I don't think there's anything more to be extracted without proper tools."

She stooped to grab a hydrospanner he had left beside the control console. "It takes a certain kind of person to look at a three-hundred-year-old hulk and think 'Hey, I'm going to reconstruct the events of its last hours by myself using only an ion cell and a hydrospanner.'"

He plucked the tool from her fingers with a somewhat hassled look. "Well, said hulk isn't doing anyone any good while it lies here unexamined, my lord."

"I know. Thank you for showing me through. I learned a great deal."

"You're welcome."

She realized she was grinning like an idiot. He was so ridiculously passionate, and she had just gotten over an hour's worth of listening to him and getting to look at him without combat getting in the way. And he was definitely getting suspicious. And he had definitely told her less than three days ago that she shouldn't get ideas.

It was that last recollection that wiped the smile off her face. She cleared her throat. "We should get back to scouting, then."

"Yes, my lord." Quinn, having traversed the winding path once, made the ship his; he remembered every trick step and every unstable corridor, and he guided her safely and surely back out into daylight. Quinn never led her wrong.

## A Name

September, 10 ATC – 10 months before the confirmation of the Wrath

*Fury-class vessel*

Ruth went to see Vette's little cabin. The Twi'lek was stretched out on the bed, flipping through something on her holo. "Hey," she said brightly when Ruth knocked in the doorway. "How's your life as a surgery patient?"

"Improving daily. I need to ask you something."

"Make it an easy question, wouldja? I'm not completely woken up yet."

"Broysc," said Ruth.

"Broysc?" said Vette, perking up.

"Broysc," confirmed Ruth.

"Broysc! Broyscety broysc! Has kind of a poetry to it, don't you think?"

"Not in the slightest." Ruth hugged her chest to suppress the painful laughter. "Don't tell him I was laughing."

Vette snorted. "Why not?"

## **September, 10 ATC II**

T1-12. I Cannot Say I Love You Not at All

## **October, 10 ATC**

T1-13. Hang a Lantern AloftT1-13. Hang a Lantern Aloft

T1-14. When You Have to Go There

T1-15. A Better Fate Than Wisdom

## **Canned Responses on Hoth**

October, 10 ATC – 9 months before the confirmation of the Wrath

Hoth, and Ruth had been using Lieutenant Pierce as her right-hand man. Captain Quinn had been content to stay off the frigid planet...more insistent than content, really...and Vette had overcome her distaste for him to stay on the ship as well, reasoning that even Captain No-Fun was better than Hoth. Ruth worried about Jaesa, even though she probably shouldn't. Ruth couldn't help but think the young and relatively inexperienced new Sith would have a hard time out there, so she had been finding lighter and safer work for her around Hoth's main base. Meanwhile, Ruth had Pierce in the field.

In previous operations she had mostly sent Pierce on solo side jobs, anything that required lots of firepower and little finesse. Hoth reminded her why. His every piece of counsel was "blow it up" or "sod the rules, kill everyone in our way." At least he kept this advice private; in front of others he was a model soldier, supporting his commander with unshakeable (if sometimes strangely grinning) dedication.

But when planning one-on-one: No, Pierce, we can't just blow up the power station. No, Pierce, we can't just gun down the Ortolans. No, Pierce, I'm not going to giggle at your impression of the Chiss guy's accent...much. Stop that.

He was an Imperial, and a good one, that's what mattered. But beyond that they were scarcely compatible. This was the difficulty of her military

support: Ruth lived for the peace of a victorious Empire. Quinn lived for victory in the Empire's war. Pierce lived for the war.

She could accommodate him when enemy territory was held beyond hope of negotiation. So when they decided on a mission in a minor White Maw pirate stronghold, Ruth let him take the gloves off. (The outer outer gloves. The gloves and the outer gloves were still necessary on Hoth.) At least it would mean some exercise. She disliked the necessity of killing, but if killing was necessary, well, the fight itself could be a real thrill.

"Time to go all out," she informed Pierce as their speeders approached the base.

"Finally," he said. **"You won't be disappointed."**

She dismounted, stalked around the last massive snow wall between them and the base entrance, and launched herself at the first set of guards.

It took three or four seconds for Pierce's first rifle round to impact on a guard. **"Should have prepared first,"** he barked.

"What," she yelled over the music of her sabers, "you worried?"

He answered that with a hard focused rifle burst that dropped the last standing guard before Ruth could get in range.

"We're prepared now," she said. "Right?"

**"Just say the word. I'll show you what I can do."**

Into the bunker and its winding hallways. They had looked over a floor plan before they left the Imperial base; Ruth hadn't had quite the time she had wanted with it, but Pierce had spent fifteen seconds examining it and been ready to go with a recommended attack plan. The attack plan had, of course, involved a lot of explosives.

"That shouldn't have worked," she informed him, after the second major blast took out a full utilities corridor.

"Ha," he said, and cocked his head, and kicked open a nearby door to reveal a dozen White Maw ruffians. "Hel-lo. Draw 'em out and **hit 'em hard!**"

She ran to where she could attack the pirates as they streamed out. "That may not have been – "

"What," he called. "You worried?"

She got to work.

The fighting was glorious, she couldn't deny that. She and Pierce cleared room by room, never minding the parts where they were wildly outnumbered. Everything was motion and adrenaline and the occasional guttural battle cry from her lieutenant. She couldn't remember the last time she had swept through an operation for this long without stopping to confer or call home or reiterate the plan or...well...fuss.

They rounded the corner to their last stop, the command room that contained the computer data they needed. The floor was abuzz with activity, armed guards and assorted staff preparing for whatever their response to this attack was going to be. A catwalk above had several snipers who were actively on guard.

Pierce considered the scene. "**Don't like my odds here,**" he muttered.

"Explosives?"

"Snipers'll get me before I can deploy anything."

She considered. "If I keep the snipers off you, can you blow the floor?"

"Yeah," he said, "but they're there and you're here."

"I can just about make that jump. Want to give me a boost to start?"

Pierce looked up at the catwalk. He looked at her. He looked at the catwalk. He looked at her. He chuckled. "**Like your style, my lord.**"

On her mark he laced his fingers together and let her step up into his hands, then pushed. The Force and her own legs did the rest as she sprang up to the catwalk and got going, downing one sniper before he could raise his rifle, whirling toward the next few in a flurry of saber and excitement. A series of explosions beneath her shook the whole room and let her know that Lieutenant Pierce was hard at work. She cleared her catwalk and bounded down the narrow metal stairs to meet him on the floor, in the nook where their target computer awaited. She slid in a datacard and extracted the information they needed while Pierce worked on cleaning up a small smoking blaster shot in his armor.

Neither task took long. Ruth was still breathing hard; the frigid dry air of the bunker ripped like shrapnel in her lungs. But oh, the fight had been thrilling. "There," she said, "we got the slicing codes for the first part of our little operation." They stood there panting for a little while. Her muscles burned. And perversely ached for more. "If you're tired," she told Pierce, "we can call it a day."

His grin was downright feral as he wiped sweat from the edges of his helmet. **"I'm not even warmed up."**

## **Tauntauns**

Well, this beast is certainly...large. I'd prefer a transport with a heated interior, but if this is what it takes, it'll do. It's something new to try, anyway. I'd better make sure the others can deal with this; if any of them needs to stay back where it's warm I won't blame them.

Ruth climbed onto the saddle and looked around for confirmation from her crew before covering her face and urging the tauntaun into motion. Time for the search to begin.

## **October 10 ATC II**

T1-16. One-Two, One-Two, and Through and Through

T1-17. The Moving Finger Writes



## T1-18. Like Gold to Airy Thinness Beat

### **A Morning After**

October, 10 ATC – 9 months before the confirmation of the Wrath

*Fury-class vessel*

Quinn stirred before the timed lights of Ruth's cabin had reached "vaguely considering dawn" levels. He was halfway dressed before she managed to assemble a full sentence. "You're not really getting up at this hour."

"I always get up at this hour, my lord. It's an ideal time to handle correspondence and review the major holonet news."

"Have I ever told you you're insane?"

"I don't believe you have, my lord." Yep, full-on reproachful tone. The man couldn't take a statement of fact.

"Ruth. Not 'my lord,' not here. We went over this."

"Ruth," he muttered. Reluctantly, but more or less tenderly.

He looked pretty good, wrapping himself back up in his uniform; but the insides of her eyelids looked better. "See you at normal-hundred hours," she yawned, and went back to sleep.

\*

When Ruth reached the mess, Pierce had his back to the door. He whirled when he heard her come in, gave an eloquent harrumph, and stalked out of the room.

Vette was at the counter, digging around in one of the cabinets. She turned to toss Ruth a scornful look. "Ew."

"Good morning to you, too."

"Just have to register this: Ew."

"What, I can't share the juicy details?"

"Ew."

Ruth laughed in spite of herself. The buzz wasn't dying down. Not even close. "Pass the kuat fruit."

\*

"Master."

"Don't you start, Jaesa."

"What? I...no, master, I'm happy for you."

"You are?" That would be a first for the day.

"Yes. This has been tearing at you ever since I met you."

"It was?"

"You weren't hiding it."

"Oh."

## **Best Day Ever**

December, 10 ATC – 7 months before the confirmation of the Wrath

*Fury-class vessel*

"Major Ovech called this afternoon to confirm," Quinn reported. "The operation was a complete success; cleanup went through without a hitch."

Ruth beamed. "Excellent. I'm glad I was able to help. And if he wants a strong arm again, you know where to find me. The time I spend on Sith

politicking is valuable, but...I prefer to be making a difference against the real enemy."

"And you do, my lord. Thank you."

They walked side by side but at a respectable distance on the way back to their quarters. "The more I look at the sheer scope of this conflict," said Ruth, "the harder it is to see how we're going to bring it to a close. If they hadn't built up such defenses so quickly I would say we should just swarm Coruscant again and end it this time."

"As we should have the first time," said Quinn. "That avenue may be closed now, but a few decisive actions elsewhere may make as much difference as the Coruscant offensive did."

"And then, peace. Darth Baras should just figure out where to point me so I can end it. It's a waste of lives, drawing out a slow war when you have the weapons in hand."

Quinn triggered the door open and stood aside to let Ruth pass. "If you intend to singlehandedly storm Coruscant, my lord, I must advise against it."

"Not singlehandedly. You'll be there. That makes all the difference."

The door fell shut. Quinn smiled helplessly and here, at last, took her in his arms. "I'm grateful to have such a partner in you."

"And I in you." She looked up into his eyes. "I mean it. The way we work together, the things we're working for. Everything. The way you kiss me." She smiled impishly. "The way you immediately fluster."

"I'm glad I amuse you, my lord," he said in his most tolerant voice.

"You should be. You should be very very glad."

"I am." He pulled away from her a tiny bit. "To tell the truth, I'm falling in love with you."

Ruth's eyes widened as she studied his face. He looked precisely as earnest and steady as always. He also looked a little happy and a lot questioning.

"Glad you could finally join me," she said. "I love you, too." She kissed him. Then she kissed him again. "No one's ever told me that before." She laughed and looked away, smiling sheepishly. "I must sound like such a child."

"No. You sound like you."

"You like Commander Sith-me better." She arched an eyebrow and used an exaggerated commanding tone. "I accept your tribute, captain. Of course you owe me as my due: your love, your respect, your many and various skills and services, your body, your lunch money - "

"They're yours," he said quietly, smiling.

Ruth's affectation dropped. "...I just completely lost my train of thought."

Some time later he paused, and nuzzled her neck, and contracted his brow for no obvious reason. "I wish we could make this day last forever."

She backed off enough to eye him thoughtfully. "I didn't think you went in for wishful thinking, Quinn. We're much more the 'make it happen' types. So we'll just have to work out how to stop time before the day's out." She looked over at the console. "My chrono says we have two hours and ten minutes. Go."

Rather than take any steps toward figuring out the mysteries of temporal manipulation, Quinn swept her up and made for the bed.

"What are you doing?" she asked, laughing.

"Everything I can, Ruth."

\*

Thirty-seven minutes later - and Quinn cursed the dispassionate awareness that would never soften that count into heartbeats or breaths, could never

extend its experience a moment past its allotment - he lay with a sleepy Ruth's head resting on his chest and he played the morning's holocall report over in his head.

*"Captain Quinn, I am anxious to know what my apprentice has been up to. Is she still busy with side tasks?"*

*"Yes, and she is most enthusiastic about the odd jobs, my lord. Her loyalty to you is unquestionable; she brings up your name more than I do in laying plans."*

*"And grows more dangerous with every plan she executes."*

*"My lord, she is far too busy with patriotic volunteering to build her own support among the Sith."*

*"But she is earning military sympathy with your projects."*

*"That is routed exclusively through me, my lord. Her military contacts will not act against you if a conflict should arise. She thinks she's sharing credit; in truth, with a word from you I can stay their hand."*

*"I see. She is most fortunate to have such a safe sidetrack between tasks for me. Even her most irrelevant victories do contribute to my glory. And you are proving resourceful in keeping her occupied there. She may not become a threat for some time yet. You had better be ready when the day comes, Quinn. But that day is not today."*

Quinn stroked Ruth's hair until she slid a hand up and clasped his fingers in hers. Then he tried to relax into sleep. If staying awake could stop the rest of it from happening, he would have kept himself alert forever; as it was, he would need the rest.

At least he had won her one more day. And she had chosen to spend it with him.

In spite of the heartache, he fell asleep smiling.

## Quinn Considers Ruth

February, 11 ATC - five months before the confirmation of the Wrath

*Fury-class vessel*

In Quinn's arms, Ruth Niral seemed very small indeed.

She carried a commanding air even when she was alone with him, but somewhere in their intimacy she lost it – and the abandon that might have been repulsive in public seemed a rare gift in private. Now in sleep she looked as young as she was. Her power was invisible here, her body slim and scarred, mostly by careless trust. Here she seemed defenseless. Defenseless but for him, anyway.

Only someone this strong could go through life this weak.

He still thought it when he saw her bargaining, sparing enemies, smiling to make friends. When it came to the test she could strike down any fighter she'd ever met; that was what bought her the leeway to deal in kindnesses. It was oddly fascinating to watch. In a complex and treacherous world she blazed a straight trail; simplistic, he thought, yet strangely effective. The opponents she didn't neutralize with her blade she left reeling with doubt, struggling against their own assumptions when she faced them as an honorable opponent, so plainly idealistic as to be un-Sith...

...and yet unfailingly victorious, as a Sith should be.

It was his privilege to serve her, and not only because she was so painfully, so unreservedly partial toward him. She was a merciful mistress, one who respected his intellect; though the final decision was always her own, she did listen to his counsel. She even gave audience to his misgivings about her riskiest actions. It still astonished him that these actions kept on turning out in her favor; in the end, even when her verbal arguments seemed flimsy, her justification was in her results.

She was generous, thoughtlessly kind, and, in defiance of calculated predictions, undefeated. If she served well enough she would go far. If she

served well enough she would survive, strange philosophy and all; while it might not occur to her to take precautions, he made sure their superiors were kept fully informed of her results and her value. She could win a full career, a full lifetime.

He meant to be there for her every step of the way.

She stirred, her skin shifting against his in a small full-body caress. He settled his arm more firmly around her; her eyes fluttered open and she smiled, raising her head to invite a kiss. He obliged. The tenderness of contact was forever a surprise, one of those wonders she gave only for him. "You should get some sleep," she whispered, turning her face to nuzzle his neck.

"After you," he murmured. Someone had to remind her to look out for her own interests.

## **Watching the Stars**

February, 11 ATC – five months before the confirmation of the Wrath

*Fury-class vessel*

Hyperspace, sarlacc-like, swallowed down the Fury. It would be some time before it disgorged them again.

Ruth looked around the bridge. It was late. The muffled sounds of living had quieted from the holo room. She wanted to stay at watch on the bridge - well, more accurately, Quinn wanted to stay at watch on the bridge and Ruth wanted to stay with Quinn. Their time between Baras's commands had been kept busy by Quinn's suggestions, and the busyness was nice. Now, a few hours off. It was all the vacation she needed.

There were two steps down from the pilot's seat to the lowest level. Ruth beckoned. "Quinn. Over here."

"Ruth?" He hardly hesitated at all on the address. Maybe that was a silly mark of intimacy, but it was a satisfying one.

"Just sit," she said. He did so, stiffly, on the uppermost step, and Ruth settled on the floor, leaning back. He caught her shoulders. She trapped one arm and hooked it around her neck, resting her chin near his elbow.

"Tell me about the war," she said. "The old one."

"What is there to say? We fought. We prevailed. Strategists of some stripe chose to settle rather than pressing the advantage that Darth Baras had secured for us."

She kissed his arm, or at least the thick uniform sleeve on it. "You're still angry about that."

"I have no feelings whatsoever on the matter, except as it affects the Empire's wellbeing today."

"I see." He would maintain that to the death. Did he believe it from saying it so much? But that wasn't the point today. "Were you in many battles before Druckenwell? I mean, six years' service..."

"Several," he said. "Seven full-scale engagements, twelve offensive actions, and an arguable eighteen skirmishes."

Something in the way he said it..."You remember every one, don't you. In detail."

"I was paying attention, Ruth." As if to soften the words he kissed her hair.

"Did you fight in the Core Worlds very much? I mean, Republic territory?"

"We pressed their frontier. The deepest incursion prior to the Coruscant strike was on Duro. The population was beyond restive, we had no space support for a day and a half's travel. It was five Republic corvettes and a carrier against our five frigates. Admiral Dace Vorhek against Commander



Roh Hogen. That battle was the origin of the Vorhek Maneuver, which while tactically brilliant was insufficient against our forces."

"Insufficient? But you were outnumbered."

"And practically evenly matched, tonne for tonne." Quinn's free hand slid a little on Ruth's shoulder. "He was innovative, but he underestimated Roh Hogen. And his subcommanders."

"Including you?"

"Including me," said Quinn, not bothering to hide his satisfaction.

"What were the stars like?"

"My lord?"

He always did that when startled. She let it pass. "The stars. Outside. You were by a Core world, it must have been spectacular."

"I confess I wasn't looking very closely. They were bright."

"Like Alderaan?"

A pause. Light and shadow chased one another through the bridge.

"There has never been anything like Alderaan," said Quinn.

Ruth set her hands on the arm wrapped around her neck and turned a little. "What does that mean?"

"Alderaan was when I knew," he said. "When that animal hit you, when you fell...I knew then that I needed you. That, if you lived, my life was to be tied to yours. That I must never, ever fail you again."

"You've never failed me."

He nuzzled her hair. "Tactically brilliant," he murmured ruefully, "but insufficient against some forces."

"Mostly just brilliant," she said. "Do you miss it? The life I took you away from? The chain of command, running a ship, ordering your own troops for your own plans?"

"No."

It was clear and complete. She twisted around, eyebrows high. She scanned his face in the fitful light. "Are you sure?"

"Yes."

She slid free of his arms, stretched out up and down the steps. "I'm glad," she said. "I know this isn't really what you went into service for, but

I hope it's good?"

He leaned down over her, succeeding in minimal touching of the floor. "I have no regrets," he said quietly, and kissed her. She was getting better at remembering which way was up when he did that, but it gripped her in a deeper way, too, more every day. "No regrets."

## **Sometimes Recovery is Easy**

February, 11 ATC - 5 months before the confirmation of the Wrath

"Given the extent of your injuries I suggest you not exercise that leg too strenuously for another thirty-six hours." Malavai Quinn checked Ruth's medical readout and nodded sharply. "If it were anyone else I'd call them down for the week."

"But it's me," said Ruth. She was twisting the new ring on her finger. She was glowing.

"Does the pain mean nothing to you?" he said with a small smile. He was allowed to ask these things now.

"You can survive pain. It's not that hard." She let the ring alone to peer up at him. "Honestly nothing could hurt me right now."

He smiled and dropped his gaze. She was always like this with him. As though he had opened a bottle of water and gotten a riot of champagne.

"Do you remember," he said, "when I asked to be reassigned?"

That doll-smooth brow wrinkled. "Yes, very clearly. Why?"

"Because you granted my request at once. When you signed that datapad and handed it back...I had seen you take hits, but that was the first time I ever saw you wounded."

"So you stayed," she said softly.

"So I stayed," he agreed, and her attention was radiant. "If something as simple as serving you could pay such dividends..."

"It's not about service," she said. "I don't think it ever was."

He reached out to touch her hair, to take in the reality of her, and the closeness, and the surge of feeling that he didn't have to be a Force user to sense. Oh, it had been, but that was one long persuasion ago. "No," he said. "Perhaps not."

## **April, 11 ATC**

T1-19. Things Fall Apart

T1-20. Drink And Be Whole Again

## **Synchronicity on Belsavis**

April, 11 ATC - 3 months before the confirmation of the Wrath

*Belsavis*

"Get the feeling we're getting farther from where we're supposed to go?"

Ruth joined Vette at the bridge railing. "Yes. Now more than ever."

Vette looked down at the green-splotched planet. "Then again, if he has a sister locked up down there..."

"If Baras has a sister she would turn on him as fast as anyone else. If she's anything better than completely insane I would almost want to release her back on the playing field."

"Emphasis on almost," Vette said gingerly. "Right?"

Ruth sighed. "Right. I know. A Dark Side Sith of her power wouldn't help anyone. I just...I want this over."

"Korriban's right in the navicomputer."

"I know. Sometimes I think it'd be nice to just walk up and challenge him. But...I've never seen him fight. I don't know what he's capable of. He wouldn't have this much influence over this many people if he weren't powerful in his own right."

"Or rich," said Vette. "But then, nobody talks about how their retirement was paid for by Lord Baras."

"No," said Ruth.

"In fact," Vette said, faux-thoughtfully, "he probably saves a lot by never having to pay out a retirement plan."

"I know." Ruth rubbed her temples. "I didn't think it would be this soon. Not me. Not with the results I gave him. Did he cut me loose while he knew I couldn't beat him? Or did he cut me loose because he knew I could? I have to know which before I come into the same room as him."

"You've made a great career on not having to care," said Vette. "Usually you walk in and the place cleans itself up. Besides, for my money? He can't go the distance. I mean, you're Miss Galactic Enforcer, Year 10, and in the running for the tiara for Year 11 too. That's gotta scare even him."

Ruth cracked a smile. "I don't think he's ever earned the tiara."

“Darned right he didn’t. Can you imagine him with the sash, though?”

“All silver-sparkly with those tibanna threads? Definitely.”

“You would so win in the dress department.”

“Oh- don’t even- we could kill a whole room of judges putting Baras in the fashion show.” Ruth gave in to giggles. Laughter was something she could keep and share with her friends. It was something to hold against the darkness that she always seemed to be aimed toward. Even against Baras.

## **April, 11 ATC II**

T1-21. To Tell the Laity of Our Love

T1-22. Design of Darkness to Appall

## **May, 11 ATC**

T1-23. Summer’s Lease

## **Friends on Voss**

May, 11 ATC – two months before the confirmation of the Wrath

Wynston settled down to dine in a Voss tea-house with Vector, Jaesa, and newlyweds Ruth and Quinn. Ruth seemed impressed that Wynston knew the owners; he didn’t bother telling her that he could make or fake a friendly contact anywhere on half an hour’s notice if he had to. Anyway, Kaliyo opted to spend the evening elsewhere, which seemed to put Ruth at ease; conversation was easy and pleasant due to several factors: Vector’s cordiality, Jaesa’s friendliness, Ruth’s charm, and her hound’s silence.

It was by an accident of refresher runs that Wynston found himself alone with Ruth for a few moments. She was relaxed in his presence, and more confident in her skin than she had been when they’d first met. She had grown, and not in a bad way. “It is good to see you again,” she said. “We didn’t really get a chance to talk on Alderaan or...you know.”

"Quesh," he said for her. A memory he would just as soon never return to. "No, we didn't. I can't thank you enough for your assistance on both planets."

"I'm glad you're looking better."

"I'm glad I'm feeling better. Work hasn't really slowed since then, but it's been less personally punishing." He half smiled. "You look happy yourself."

"I am happy."

"I'm glad. We've come a long way from Nar Shaddaa, haven't we?"

Her brow wrinkled. "Is there subtext here I'm missing?"

"Oh, no, not at all. I didn't mean to imply..."

Her smile warmed away any possibility of ill feeling. "I'm glad you kept in touch. After what by all rights would have been a one- or four-night stand. I'm...a little surprised you did."

"I'm glad I had the chance to keep in touch. Relationships change terms all the time, Ruth. Trust levels, time together, physical aspects. I'd have to be an idiot to cut ties with you just because the physical side no longer made sense. As it happens, I like you."

She glowed. "Thanks. I like you, too."

He smiled crookedly. "I do hope I can still say that you look fantastic. Happiness agrees with you."

"Thank you."

"Never waste your time on anyone who tells you anything less."

She gave him a look that he struggled to interpret as warning. That was probably what she meant by it. "Is that commentary?" she said, her voice

suddenly cool. She knew what he thought of her self-important prat of a husband.

He raised his eyebrows and kept his voice even. "I never said he didn't say those things." The look on her face told him all he needed to know; he hoped she would think about it. She deserved better than a droid. "Now then. Do you think we can pressure Jaesa into trying the *vla-na*?"

She took the bait. "If you can get Vector to sample it I'm sure she will. I thought it was nice, personally."

"Yes, but I think we all agreed that you have odd tastes." She didn't ding him for that one. And he could resist additional such barbs if he had to. Honestly, it was nice just to have a friend around. A strong Sith ally, yes; but more importantly, a friend.

## **Thoughts on Voss**

May, 11 ATC – seven weeks before the confirmation of the Wrath

*Voss*

### **Wynston, re: Ruth and Quinn**

She...married him.

Interesting.

Hats off to you, Ruth, I didn't think your career could get any more improbably precious. You are sweet, and perhaps more importantly very strong-willed, and I dearly hope this arrangement works out for you. I just thought that...surely there's some more emotionally functional man out there you could have chosen? Or some plastiboard box somewhere more worthy of love? I've met a few with more personality for sure.

He's Imperial, at least, and serious about that. Trust Ruth to decide that's enough to go on. Still, if I'd known I was to be the last interesting sexual

experience of her life I would have tried to arrange a few more hours off work with her back on Nar Shaddaa.

Ah, well. Treat her well, Quinn. Most people live and die without ever seeing the kind of looks she gives you, without ever coming close to that legendary capital-L Love I think she might actually be capable of realizing. I'm betting it's wasted on you. I'm hoping for her sake that I'm wrong. Be good to her; even a first-rate prat like you must recognize how remarkable she is.

Ruth, my friend, I wish you every happiness.

### **Quinn, re: Wynston and Kaliyo**

Every time he is in the sector, it's to be in my way.

I don't have time for this. Even Ruth's mission doesn't have time for this. Agent, I would have thought you would lose interest when she stopped responding to your heavy-handed advances, but it seems you just substituted the tramp you bring around for backup in that regard and never missed the difference. Only you would fail to recognize a distinction between the two. And even now you still think yourself entitled to demand Ruth's time and energy on the basis of "friendship."

And she, inclined as ever to cultivate favor with even the most useless of individuals, will give it. Her generosity is wasted on the likes of you.

But that's how you and your alien whore get through your careers, isn't it? Finding the right authority to sponsor or at least shelter the day's excesses. If you couldn't get my lord's attention yourself you'd be sending Kaliyo to make the attempt; as it stands you're free to bed your equal and still get the benefit of your better's professional efforts.

If I saw the opportunity to remove both you and Kaliyo along with...along with what must happen, I would. The strike itself because it is necessary. You two because finally putting an end to the joyriding abuses you call your lives would be a public service. If I had personal feelings in the matter



I would say such a clean sweep might stand as some solace against what must be done.

### **Ruth, re: Wynston and Kaliyo**

She's still there?

I suppose that makes sense. It wouldn't be polite to even ask what they are to each other. "Partners" seems to cover it in Wynston's mind. They're not exactly exclusive? But not really separate, either. They play little verbal games, power games, teasing...I think it's teasing. Far more than there was when he first introduced her as a "friend" on Nar Shaddaa.

Were they together then, one way or another? Well, probably one way. I should have thought of that. She didn't seem annoyed at him taking me out, though. She has never singled me out for any kind of awfulness because of it. So that's probably normal, I guess. For them.

There's obviously a great deal between them now. It just doesn't seem very...loving. And while Wynston treats her differently from how he treats everyone else, she laughs at him and the rest of the galaxy in the exact same way. Does that really work for them?

It must. He's every bit as cheerful now as he's always been. It just seems odd sometimes. Like on her fiftieth joke about casual murder. I guess she fits the bill for an assassin or whatever Imperial Intelligence wants her for, but Wynston always seemed better than that. I know he can be warm and gentle and sweet and all kinds of good things. Any woman would be lucky to have someone like that.

So why did he choose someone like her?

We're not really close enough for me to ask. He knows what he's doing. And I could be wrong about her. I only know what I see, and what I see is them working together, with his sanity in command, and no matter what words are exchanged the job gets done. So that's...a kind of relationship.

It just seems like that would be very lonely if there's no more to it than that.

Wynston, my friend, I know you don't need me to look after you, but

I do hope you're happy.

### **Kaliyo, re: Ruth and Quinn**

Pffffffftahahaha, Imp dupe, you finally got to marry Imp drone. Now you can settle down and have boring Imp dronelings. You two deserve each other.

Ugh, but Wynston won't relax the scout's honor routine until they're gone. Like he really needs to impress these people. We don't need them for work and he knows no amount of (boring) good behavior is going to get her to put out again. Note to self, call some more exciting friends for the next outing. Only invite Wynston if he begs. If he won't beg, remind him that his other social option is currently wrapped around Captain Asshat as tight as she can go. If he still won't beg, start suggesting visuals on that statement.

### **Happenstance**

May, 11 ATC – two months before the confirmation of the Wrath

Voss

"It was more than a little lucky, running into you again."

Ruth smiled almost coyly.

Wynston grinned. "My goodness. You're refraining from lecturing me. You, wonder that you are, are refraining from lecturing me."

"I'm not saying!"

"I know you're not saying," he chuckled. "You are very kindly not bringing notions of supernatural influences into our conversation, even though a younger and more hotheaded me--"

"--addressing a younger and less married me--"

"--would say everything about you is a supernatural influence."

Ruth wasn't sure who laughed first, but they did it until her ribs ached.

Wynston wiped his eyes. "You think the Force keeps dragging our paths together."

"I think it certainly doesn't hurt. You can't explain Quesh. You can't."

"Dumb luck has done enough horrific things, I imagine by sheer random chance it must strike upon a good one now and then."

## **Baras Considers Agents**

May, 11 ATC - two months before the confirmation of the Wrath

*Korriban*

Darth Baras looked down over the private practice yard, its high walls casting a dusty red shade over the yard proper. He did not like to advertise his experiments.

Here a single battle droid squared off against four acolytes, their vibroblades stinging a certain sourness into the air. Yesterday they had been children. Today they were Sith. Tomorrow, if they lived, they would be his apprentices.

The programming was written for a much, much more formidable Sith; Baras simply observed the bugs being worked out before it graduated to more serious hardware and more serious opponents. A more serious opponent in particular. Her time had not yet come.

The droid had taken one acolyte down nearly instantly. Two more were charging it. When the blaster fire started one darted behind the other, the better to get a few steps closer out of the line of fire.

And so two were down. They had performed well in the other trials, but it seemed that their potential wasn't worth the time it would have taken him to cultivate it. Ah, well. There was always someone else willing to step forward and be tested. This was the proper forging of a Sith: not practice rounds, not blunted edges, but competition and victory or death.

His mind strayed to his three most promising apprentices in the field, now Lords in their own right but solidly within his power network. The first had died recently, an annoyance but not unrecoverable. There were already more vying to take her place. Lord Draahg still served him faithfully, though he was having trouble in his given task of tracing the disavowed third apprentice, Lord Niral.

Baras, of course, knew exactly where Lord Niral was and what she was doing. That information was funneled regularly back via her new husband, Malavai Quinn, the asset from Balmorra. Baras would not grant Draahg that information until it was advantageous. In actuality Baras was in no hurry for that chase to progress just yet; Quinn had found a use for Ruth Niral even after Baras's dictum that she was to die. For when Baras made an enemy of her, some fascinating players made her their ally. And Quinn was feeding him every minute of it, all while preparing for Ruth's death. When the Emperor's Hand was where Baras wanted it to be, Baras would paralyze it. He had made their Wrath. He could unmake her as easily.

All in good time. For now, he watched and he waited, gathering information on the Hand's resources and goals. He summoned Quinn for face-to-holo reports where he could; the man was capable but he was under increasing strain from what might laughingly be called Ruth's charisma, and though Quinn had belonged to Baras since Ruth was just a girl, it was best to check in frequently to remind Quinn of his ultimate loyalties. He had proved to be a good operative, one of the best. Thanks in no small part to Quinn's expertise Ruth had delivered Taris, had delivered Vengean, would yet deliver the Emperor's Hand. He could die satisfied in his service. And would, once Ruth Niral was used up.

The fourth acolyte was still moving. She hid behind the still forms of two of her competitors while the droid unleashed a stream of blaster fire; the instant it let up the girl sprinted, twisted, leaped, and bodily dragged one of the droid's blasters into firing line with the other. She rolled away before the resulting fire detonated both plasma canisters. She took up her vibrosword and looked around, poised and ready for the next attack.

Oh, yes. She would do. Quinn would have to fix that vulnerability in the next round of programming. Baras left the window and returned to his desk to issue orders.

## **June, 11 ATC**

T1-24. Our Little Lives

## **Timeline 2**

## **June, 11 ATC**

T2-1. Thy Firmness Makes My Circle Just

T2-2. A Darkling Plain

T2-3. The Center Cannot Hold

T2-4. I Killed the Albatross, Ruth vs. Other

T2-5. Heaven Has No Rage Like Love to Hatred Turned

## **The Dream**

June, 11 ATC – 4 weeks before the confirmation of the Wrath

Ruth was standing, somewhere, nowhere, she couldn't tell. It didn't matter because Quinn was there with her, kissing her, his arms securely around her, his mouth warm and tender as it was the day he had first held her. It was impossible to hurt when he was here like this, and so without thinking too hard about why, she poured herself into it. She ran a hand through his

hair, down around his neck and arm, thrilling to his touch. When his hand slid up her back she felt the snub-nosed blaster moving up to nestle against her neck.

She kept running her hands around his shoulders and back, kissing his lips, his cheek. "Walk away now," she whispered, not for the first time, "and I'll spare you."

His free arm stayed firmly, comfortingly around her waist. He kissed her nose. He repeated the familiar words. "I cannot do that, my lord."

"Malavai. Walk away." She should have said better words, smarter words, more persuasive words, but she didn't have any.

"There is only one way this can go," he reminded her.

"No. That wasn't true." She kissed him and left the script behind. "It isn't true, you don't have to do it. Don't talk. Don't shoot. Don't anything, just be with me."

He looked off to one side, in the direction she knew was the cargo hold and its prisoner in some world outside this dream. "Is that what you want, Ruth? I'm right there."

She shook her head. "Not with him, not anymore. Not ever. For him and me, after what he did, there is only one way it can go."

The light in his eyes dimmed a little. "So be it," he said, quietly, coldly.

She pulled him tighter. "He hurt me too much. But this isn't real. You haven't done it yet. We can still be together, I can still love you, at least until I wake. Let me have tonight. Please."

He kissed her, pressed her close to him, lightly nuzzled along her jawline to her ear. "No," he whispered, and fired.

## Jaesa Tends

June, 11 ATC

4 weeks before the confirmation of the Wrath

Fury-class vessel *Scorned*

The cargo bay was locked and dark, and had been for hours. Quinn winced in spite of his determination not to when the door creaked open. Every sound pulsed loud in his ears, a counterpoint to the pain in his arms and rib and face and everywhere. He squinted, hard, while what proved to be Jaesa turned on the stabbing light.

Here to minister to the prisoner? How like her. "I don't need your pity," he said, and wheezed in spite of himself. He set about trying to get upright to a kneeling position, and did so with only a few pauses for pain. His arms stayed bound behind his back.

"Pierce and Broonmark are giving you what you need, according to some people," said Jaesa, hefting a basket of medical supplies. "I'm just making sure Ruth doesn't regret it."

He peered uncertainly at her through his own bruises. The round-cheeked young woman was trying to look severe. He would have laughed if it weren't all so serious. "Leave the supplies, my lord," he said. "You don't know what to do with them."

"I do," she said quietly. "You never noticed?"

Notice? Ruth's mousy Jedi convert? She was passable with a lightsaber, quick with an overly trusting diplomatic proposal based on some nebulous Force ability that hadn't saved her. She was of no further tactical interest. Now she was approaching him with a gel adrenal and big dark eyes. "I'll start with your nose."

"You can start with my rib, my lord." It was only partly to be contrary.

She flinched. "Did they really...?"

"I can catalogue in order," he said, working hard at keeping his voice steady. The chorus of pain really was surprisingly clearly articulated. Just like a medical school chart, only more...immediate.

Jaesa seesawed between gentle ministrations and dramatic horror, but she applied treatments with tolerable competence. For the first time since being bound and thrown in here Quinn almost felt ready to rest. Right. He would have the rest of his life to rest, assuming Ruth had the steel to keep him here.

Would she? He didn't know. His ability to predict her had broken the moment he'd shot at her *and she'd struck back*. That wasn't supposed to happen. That wasn't...

"I'm going to untie you," said Jaesa. "I can't get to your wrists any other way."

"I won't resist," he said. This would have been a lie, only she was still Sith, and he couldn't take one of those down with his bare hands. Under other circumstances he might have tried.

She carefully undid the knots binding his hands behind his back. His wrists stung with every touch until she brought the soothing ointment up. To his mild disappointment, she then retied his hands in front of him. The knots were clumsy but solid.

"Hold still," she said, bringing a damp wad of cloth to bear. "There's a lot of blood."

"I'll take it, my lord," he said, raising his bound hands toward hers.

"You'll just miss spots," she insisted. Her touch was soothing. He didn't fight it further.

Curiosity, though, was gnawing at him. "Why didn't you say something?"

She looked him in the eye, an act startling for being new. "I did. She said an Imperial military officer needs a little darkness in him. She *defended* you."



"I see."

Her face hardened. "Do you want to know what I see now?"

"Will it make a difference?"

Her lip curled, not prettily. "I see you deserve every last hit," she said. "But someday, somewhere, Ruth may want you safe. So here I am." Finally she turned away. "I brought some food, too." She unpacked the remainder of her little basket. "Are you feeling well enough to eat?"

"Yes," he understated. His eye twitched in the effort not to stare at the offering.

"All right."

"You don't have to watch me, my lord."

"You know she's having the door watched anyway."

"I would be slightly insulted if she didn't."

"But I can't stop them," she said quietly. She didn't mean the watching.

"I never asked you to."

Jaesa's brow worked. "Did anyone ever tell you you're very brave?"

Everyone. Everyone said that. Captain Quinn, the brave soldier. How well that virtue had served him. Now the one conversation he wasn't sure he was brave enough for had been taken out of his reach. There was no conflict left for him to face. Only consequence.

"Jaesa, there are things you need to know." He couldn't ask how Ruth was doing. He had forfeited that right. It hurt. "She is self-conscious about the scars on her belly. If she's wounded there don't uncover it, especially not in public; let her tend to it herself. She has difficulty sleeping until she or someone she trusts has made the rounds of the ship, checking that all rooms are in order, lights out. And you shouldn't leave her alone after

she's killed a sentient being. She'll never say it but it troubles her. Just being near helps."

Jaesa looked stricken. "Why are you telling me this?"

"Someone should know." And no one else would listen.

They were silent while she gathered the discards of the medical care.

Jaesa made it back to the door and cast a heavy-lidded look back.

"Goodbye, Quinn."

"Goodbye, my lord." There didn't seem to be anything else to say. Did she expect thanks? Pierce and Broonmark would be back, he didn't know when. And Ruth wouldn't stop them from taking their vengeance. This was a reprieve at best.

He pulled in the food tray and set about the first meal of his new life.

## **June, 11 ATC II**

T2-6. Nor Hell a Fury Like a Woman Scorned

T2-7. The Heart Asks Pleasure, First

## **July, 11 ATC**

T2-8. Not a Question

T2-9 The Thousand Natural Shocks

T2-10. My Unconquerable Soul

## **Mea Culpa**

July, 11 ATC - three days after the confirmation of the Wrath

*Dromund Kaas*

In the northeast corner of the Niral compound was an old courtyard of mossy stone, centered on a stone bier overgrown at the moment with creeping vines. It served one purpose in the Niral household; it was not often called for.

Ruth had nothing to burn here. She didn't know where her father's remains were. She had felt his death, she knew the hour; she had received Lord Draahg's taunts, she knew the hand; but she did not and might never know the place.

Now, weeks later, after her great adversary's death, she had the time to come here, to where the preparations would have been.

Colran Niral was gone. Her friend, her mentor, her father. She had agreed to keep a little distance from him when she set out from home. Foolish pride, that effort at independence. She should have stayed in close touch, should never have let him go off to challenge her enemies. If she had known his intent she wouldn't have let him go alone. He had wisdom, yes, but she had the strength. She had the strength. If only she had been there to use it.

The words crept up on her, a name she hadn't spoken except in private since she was old enough to learn the beginnings of caution. The name came unbidden now. "I'm sorry, Daddy."

Ruth had nothing to burn here. She turned away to attend to her work: there was blood to spill before nightfall. It wasn't what she had wanted. It wasn't what he had wanted for her, what he had taught. But she had no choice now. And anyway, she couldn't disappoint a man who was already dead.

## **August, 11 ATC**

T2-11. Nor All Your Tears Wash Out a Word of It

## **September, 11 ATC**

T2-12. And Hid His Face Amid a Cloud of Stars

T2-13. What's in a Name?

## **November, 11 ATC**

T2-14. I Cannot Rest From Travel

### **Teaching Jaesa**

January, 12 ATC – six months after the confirmation of the Wrath

*Dromund Kaas – the Niral estate*

The darkness seeped in as Ruth let her awareness of it open. She extended her saber, the double-ended one she used to demonstrate for her apprentice. Beside her Jaesa held out her saber at the same angle. They activated in unison.

“Now. The third defense is specifically made to maintain a guard against more than one saber. Withdraw, like this, then turn as you extend back out.”

Jaesa dutifully performed the motions. Her focus was a thin bright conduit in the Force. Ruth felt a surge of disdain for it. “Open to your feelings,” she said impatiently. “It’s the only way to solidly back this.”

“Ruth– master, you’re talking about the Dark Side. I don’t think this is superior to your old focus.”

Impatience spiked again. “Jaesa, my old focus doesn’t work. You must have noticed that. Everything I’ve taught you so far came from one source. My father. He had fine ideas. And he was killed, because his way isn’t good enough. It doesn’t earn the kind of respect that matters. It certainly can’t go toe-to-toe with the Dark Side. It’s useless, Jaesa.”

“I don’t believe that’s true, master.”

"Your *beliefs* can't bring my father back!" Just saying it emptied her of breath. Darkness swirled around her, an awareness she wouldn't let go of. Never again. "And they can't win anyone's loyalty. I always told you that I'm still learning, that I wasn't a perfect master. Well, I understand more now. Everything I have I took from someone else. Even you. And everything I lost, I wasn't watching closely enough. Those are the rules. The faster you embrace it the better off you'll be."

"I think you're strong enough to make the other way work. You've survived this long because you had power and faith in the Light Side."

"Survive. I wanted more than that. But it doesn't work that way. How much stronger will I be when I really open to what I feel? How much stronger could you be, Jaesa?"

"I can't follow you down that path."

"If you can't stand what's necessary then leave." Her throat worked uselessly for a second before she mastered it. "Or strike me down, if you think you can."

Jaesa shook her head. "Never. We're friends, Ruth. I won't give up on you."

Ruth deactivated her saber and looked away. Vette, gone, Quinn, gone, her father, gone. She'd loved them, she'd trusted them, they'd failed her. "Everyone else has."

## **February, 12 ATC**

T2-15. The Art of Losing Isn't Hard to Master

## **June, 12 ATC**

T2-16. Zero at the Bone

## **Missing Person**

July, 12 ATC – one year after the confirmation of the Wrath

*Dromund Kaas*

"One more thing, Captain." Ruth hated saying the word, but if she said it enough it would be just a rank again. Just a rank, one that thousands of people held. Just a rank.

Pierce stayed in his unflappable position, arms crossed, dark eyes attentive as they had been throughout the briefing. "Milord?"

"Where did Vette get off to?"

"Can't say I've been tracking her, milord. You want her found?"

"No. I just

it just occurred to me, it's been a little while. She always knew how to make us laugh."

Pierce snorted. "Heh. In the most annoying way possible."

"Yes," Ruth said faintly. "I suppose that's true. Dismissed, Captain." It was like thorns in her mouth.

She let the pride drain from stiff shoulders and aching neck as she drooped to lean on her desk. Vette had always been the ordinary one, the one noticing absurdities, the...the fun one. And Ruth had driven her off in a cloud of – not even righteous fury. A cloud of outraged decency. So she was gone.

Ruth looked to check that the door was closed. Then she laughed. This wasn't her life. This insane series of executions, this deadly game of intimidation and coercion, this endless competition with the bloodthirsty and the cruel, this silence where her friends should be. This couldn't be her life. It was something somebody had made up as a joke, as a caricature of the Sith. Nobody in their right mind would live like this. And if she wasn't in her right mind, well, that was funny too.

She laughed until she felt the tears streaming down her face. That had to stop. The Wrath didn't cry.

And she didn't go looking for people who didn't want her anymore.

## **Anniversary Celebration**

March, 15 ATC – four years after the confirmation of the Wrath

*Port Nowhere*

Vette raised the bottle. "More whiskey? Anyone?"

"You're unstoppable," said Corso, impressed. "Here, hit me."

"I will take more as well," Akaavi said coolly.

Vette beamed. "If you think you can outdrink me, you're terribly mistaken."

Risha nodded. "Bet you anything she was a better drinker at eight years old than half the grown men we've met."

Vette perked up at the sight of an approaching droid. "Ooh, cake's coming!"

Corso and Akaavi examined the cake, which had no particular markings on it. "I was hoping that'd be a little more informative," said Corso. "I'm gonna have to give up. What exactly are we celebrating?"

"My second liberation from slavery," explained Vette, and raised a glass to the occasion.

Risha raised, sipped, and set down her glass. "How did you get out the second time, anyway?"

Vette shrugged. "I asked the lady I got handed as a gift to take off the collar. She did."

"Just like that?"

"Just like that."

"That's kind of heartwarming," said Corso, smiling the smile he usually used for puppies and rainbows. "Who was she?"

"Brother, you wouldn't believe me if I told you."

## **Starting Over**

April, 15 ATC – four years after the confirmation of the Wrath

*Dromund Kaas*

Virinos Geth had a face made for sensuality, all curving bone spurs and pouty lips, and Ruth had never seen it missing its leer. Ignoring his invitations had not been enough to put him off her trail. She had to deal with him eventually. Even he must cave under the weight of enough disappointments.

She sat stiffly in an armchair in his offices – or rather, his luxurious lounge – in Kaas City. He was draped over a couch, his glossy black hair loose, his robes open to the navel, sleeves draped everywhere in an excruciating imitation of casualness. Did he think he fooled anyone? Ah, yes, but he always thought so.

"My Emperor's Wrath," he said in his resonant baritone. "Come into my parlor at last."

"Said the spider to the fly?" she said drily.

"But such a fly."

And such a spider, she refused to say. Darth Nox didn't qualify.

"Won't you take off your mask?" he continued.

"No."

"Ah." He gestured negligently, seeming to brush aside the poor beginning. "I was so pleased," he said, "that I could finally snare some of your time. You can't know how I've wanted this."



"I know exactly how you want this, Nox."

He patted the couch in quiet applause. "Ah, those who call you a blunt instrument do you a grave disservice. Come. I wish to discuss certain things we may do for one another."

"The Wrath doesn't do favors."

"But she could. And receive some in return. It's no secret that you consider yourself above the Dark Council's politicking. Any one of us would do murder and more to change that."

She knew the enticements, in all their variety, and they turned her stomach. She was already regretting coming to hear more of it. "Should I tell you what Ravage has offered? Or Mortis? Or Scythia?"

Darth Nox smiled, his red eyes intent.

"I won't," she clarified. "I take no side but the Emperor's."

"And I work tirelessly in the Emperor's interest, Wrath."

Oh, how well she knew his effort. As she did all her most dangerous enemies'. "Daral III? Grand Moff Sherrin? That...spree...at Geonosis? Those are the acts of a child, not an Imperial."

Even that rolled off his back. "Don't you understand? The flex of power to clear out the unworthy is precisely what this Empire needs. Let the survivors fear. Let them wonder when their Empire will demand them. Let us harvest that fear and press it into the wine of life. I am not a child. I'm a master."

The skin of Ruth's hands under her black gloves was crawling. "You are mad."

"Let me show you the method in it!" He sat up, letting his open robes fall over his sculpted-rust chest. "Wrath, you already turned from some tender-hearted wanderer into the enforcer of an Empire. You're not happy with it,

your mask can't hide that from me. I feel it with every Council meeting. It's why you come to me now, isn't it? So reinvent yourself once more."

"At your side?"

"I swear you'll find no more loyal companion."

Ruth threw her head back and laughed, louder than she meant to. "Given the competition I can't say I'm impressed."

He looked nothing short of enthralled. "Your power sings when you do that. Why stand alone, take no sides, offer no alliances, live no life? What imbecile told you that sorrow is passion enough to live on? I'm not asking you for much. Just join the Dark Side as I know it. As we could know it."

We. He didn't give it the theatrical emphasis. But then, he didn't have to. "What sins do you want from me?"

He leaned forward, smiling with yellowed canines. "Have the Emperor's orders made you forget what it is to live for yourself? It very much depends on what you want to do."

What sins, indeed? All the passions she had suppressed to feed out only in short controlled bursts? Friendship, desire, all the things she couldn't have anymore? Or more, the heady draught of power poured out without economy or restraint? Let the survivors fear

survivors not just of her duty, but of her whim. She could do that now, for any reason or none, because she was that strong, and need fear no one. The restraints on her exercise of power were purely optional.

"My master calls," she said, standing. "I will think on what you have said."

Nox's cheer vanished. "You'll ignore what I've said. Remember when the time comes that you could have had me at your side."

"Nox, when the time comes I want you where I can see you. Just like everyone else." She stood. Reinvention? If she had it to start over again,

this wasn't the direction she would jump in. Never in a hundred disasters, never in a thousand lifetimes.

Not even in this one.

## **Loneliness: Personal Logs**

April, 15 ATC – four years after the confirmation of the Wrath

27/4/15: My transfer request was finally approved. I, Lieutenant Syra Grace, am going to work for the Tuk'ata himself.

They say Colonel Quinn drives right through demanding to psychotic. They say he doesn't tolerate the slightest weakness or imperfection. But he heads up the most effective brigade in the Imperial Army. One of two things happen to the officers who take this post: they catapult up or they burn out. There's about a 2:100 record on those results, but I'm told that Colonel Quinn knows how to put the best to use.

I intend to be the best.

I wonder about the nickname. Tuk'ata are clever, vicious hounds. Hard to outsmart, hard to outrun, very hard to take down in a straight-up fight. They used to be ordinary, they say, before the Sith did something to them. Now? Now they're weapons.

Then again, they say he earned the name Tuk'ata purely on the strength of his friendliness.

**27/4/15: Operations normal.**

28/4/15: That may have been the single most terrifying experience of my life. And yes, I'm including the time Darth Mortis pulled a surprise inspection back on Dromund Kaas.

Our base is the only scrap of land we hold on this planet, and it's under attack 24/7 from both local resistance and Republic forces. The streets themselves, though, are clean, orderly, eerily quiet between the bombing runs that impact on the big shield. When I arrived at the spaceport I thought that was the air of everybody knowing what they're doing.

No, that's the air of the fact that the Tuk'ata will kill you with his stare alone if you screw up.

He oversees the floor in the command center. He saw me into his office – big place, weirdly empty apart from the desk – and then started questioning me. Background, knowledge of the war in general and this planet's operation in particular, my attitudes toward and belief in the Empire's chances in this war. Then some strong language about drinking or fraternizing. He talked like he already hated me, and I have this feeling that that's his neutral-to-approval tone.

His listing of what my duties would be was insane. It read like a small squadron's mission list.

I'm on this.

*28/4/15: Transfer Lt. Grace arrived. Operations normal.*

1/5/15: I was brought in to directly replace one of the colonel's support staff, and as such I get the...honor?...of dealing with him personally, a lot. I think this is where shell shock comes from.

I've met some good people, though. Lieutenant Doreah Briggs has been friendly. The male officers seem to steer clear of us. There are ominous rumors of what happens to officers who get physically involved.

*1/5/15: Operations normal.*

4/5/15: I worked up the nerve to ask Doreah more about the colonel. She laughed...a lot. Then she started talking.

I'm not sure how much to believe. He married the Emperor's Wrath? (The Wrath was married? The Tuk'ata was married?) Then he survived divorce? The Wrath's not known for leaving survivors once someone crosses her. Weird stories they tell here.

*4/5/15: Operations normal. Lt. Grace demonstrated neglect of weapons maintenance. Refer to monthly status report for other operational details.*

11/5/15: Too tired to write much. I got bundled off with half the junior officers for some physical training. It's the least forgiving possible reading of the training manual. My everything hurts.

*11/5/15: 14-day review: Lt. Grace's performance is adequate. Operations normal.*

13/5/15: I and a few other officers stayed up late with the colonel planning what's likely to be our final offensive in the area. He laid out the prime plan and an exhaustive contingency set. I never realized how many creative ways things could go wrong, but he left no disaster un contemplated.

He's so passionate about the campaign – but there is a deep sadness to him, an emptiness in every place that isn't the mission. Sometimes when I look at him I get the sense that he thinks he's already lost.

*13/5/15: Offensive to be executed in two days. Notable contributions from Capt. Orr and Lt. Grace. Operations normal.*

16/5/15: Wow. The past 48 hours have been an incredible rush. I was helping to coordinate from base, and the number of teams we were juggling, the amount of information coming through, the situational info feeds from everybody on the ground...but we dismantled Republic security in amazing time and gutted their garrison. It was awesome to see the plans I had sweated over coming together like that. So this is winning. This is working and winning a big prize. I think even the Tuk'ata was pleased. (Not that he smiled or anything, but we could tell.) As for me, celebrating with the junior officers was a nice wrapup.

*16/5/15: Offensive successful. Will finish securing the area, then hand the base over to a permanent garrison.*

25/5/15: The colonel had Major Reynard oversee operations while he went off planet all day. Word on the street is it's "family obligations" of a recurring nature. Most people agree he has a son somewhere. I'm not sure I believe that.

*25/5/15: Visitation day. Major Reynard reports no problems.*

*Young Rylon is well. He may have my face, but he has his mother's laugh. I do not yet know when I can see him again.*

4/6/15: The brigade moves on. The new planet's Imperial presence consists of a spaceport and a gun-studded perimeter. The place is far from welcoming, but the work is incredibly exciting. I've learned more about

strategy in the last month than the academy taught me in four years. The Tuk'ata pushes us hard, but the result is undeniably great.

I'm told he approves of my work, too. This mostly seems to mean he picks apart my plans first and foremost. Oh, but it's worth it to see him look good-ferocious when I get it right. It's by far his rarest mood. 99% of the time he's bad-ferocious or coldly blank. But I can get good-ferocious.

*4/6/15: The new planet is resistant. Will make an example of some of the locals tomorrow. Work toward a more permanent base proceeds on a satisfactory schedule.*

9/6/15: The colonel's latest tirade burned one of our captains out. The guy was okay – the captain, I mean – but he hasn't demonstrated the proper level of obsession, and some small fault of his set the Tuk'ata off. I would be worried about that kind of expectation, but frankly, getting wrapped up in the mission here is rewarding enough that I don't care if it's crazy.

*9/6/15: 6-week review. Lt. Grace's performance is promising. She requires only seasoning. Operations normal.*

15/6/15: The colonel took the afternoon off to do nothing. Doreah says he does this every year.

I went out behind the spaceport in the evening to enjoy the rain. It runs off to a cliff overlooking the forest; it's a pretty little space. That's where I found him, in a dark spot between the spaceport floodlights. He was just standing there, looking up at the sky.

I stayed well away, but he must have heard me, because he said – without looking over – “Leave.”

Call me crazy, but I didn't. He was so very alone. I came up to stand next to him. And I looked up, even though there was nothing to see but clouds. I asked him what was out there.

For a while I thought he hadn't heard me. But ages later he said "What was lost."

It seemed right to do something. I don't know. I had to. So I got close enough to put my hand on his shoulder.

He stiffened. I mean crazy tense. And turned his head a tiny bit, not quite enough to look straight at me. He seemed more interested in looking at my hand. Eventually he looked at me instead. He just seemed...hurt.

He said "Not today. Of all days..not today." And he took my hand, gently, and pushed it away. "Dismissed, Grace."

He might just be insane.

***15/6/15: Four years.***

16/6/15: The colonel gave me a funny look when I showed up at the command center today, but after that he was all business. Long day planning. I remotely oversaw some field operations, then went in for the regular evening wrapup.

I stayed after everyone else had gone. I was curious. He looked at me for a minute. And then he said "You may stay, if you wish."

I shouldn't be surprised that he wastes neither time nor words.

The man is not gentle. He wasn't overly self-centred or anything. There was just...need.



**16/6/15: Operations normal.**

19/6/15: He works the same as ever. I'm not even sure he feels anything different. That hasn't stopped us for the last three nights. When we're alone, he's intense. But we don't talk much.

I'm not really sure why I'm breaking the rules for this. I guess this is the only time he isn't all work or emptiness. I keep thinking, in just one more moment I'm going to figure out what made him so sad, or else I'll make it so it doesn't matter.

Anyway, it's nice to be wanted.

**19/6/15: Operations normal.**

25/6/15: Doreah's getting suspicious. She's asking where I've been staying out late. I gave her something about planning an upcoming operation I can't talk about yet.

If anybody finds out, it'll be a court-martial for me. As a best-case scenario.

**25/6/15: On this subject it is wiser not to think. But it takes little analysis to observe that this dulls pain. Perhaps the memories that cannot be escaped can be eclipsed. The prospect is not unpleasant.**

***It is wiser not to think.***

26/6/15: It's technically 27/6 by now. Tonight was...unlike anything, ever. I don't know why.

He was tender, for some reason. Gentle, slow, seeming to savor every motion. He said my name, asked me to say his. I never knew anyone, much less he, could be so warm, so reassuring. He was with me. I don't know how else to describe it.

Afterward he just held me for a while.

I don't understand him. But I want him.

*26/6/15: [no entry]*

*27/6/15: My console woke me up this morning with a notification of a personnel transfer, effective immediately, to a brigade that's operating on the far side of the galaxy.*

Colonel Quinn was 'unavailable' when I asked.

*27/6/15: Operations normal. Approved Lt. Grace's transfer away.*

*Not again.*

## **Permission withdrawn**

June, 16 ATC - five years after the confirmation of the Wrath

Wynston requested a visit on the fifth anniversary of Quinn's betrayal. He did not describe the date as such, of course; neither did Ruth. She allowed the visit, of course. She got all the anniversary crying out of the way before he showed up, and hid what she could of the resulting puffiness about her face.

Wynston was popularly rumored to be her lover. She didn't care enough to correct that. She allowed him to drop by two or three times a year. They didn't talk about their own agendas, they carefully probed one another to see what they could use for their own agendas, Wynston tried to nudge her

toward behaving nicely without being obvious about it, she ignored him, life went on.

Now the Chiss was in her dining room, leaning away from the table, lifting a cup of tea to safety and staring bemusedly down at four-year-old Rylon, who currently had one leg up on Wynston's boot and was grappling with his hip pocket.

"Does he realize I'm not a terrain feature?" asked Wynston.

"Rylon's vision extends beyond such small-minded thinking. Also watch out, he's going for the blaster."

"I see. Don't do that, Rylon." Wynston snatched the weapon away from the child's fingers and set it on the table.

"Mom," said Rylon, swiveling his head to face Ruth. "Can I have it?"

"No. No blasters until you're older," she said, faux-sternly.

Rylon gave her a heart-stoppingly perfect rendition of Quinn's frustrated face. "Bored," he said, and abandoned his efforts to scale and/or rob Wynston.

A household droid intercepted the child before he could make it out the door. "Shall I take him to the playroom, master?"

"Please do. Make sure – who's on duty today, Niss and Raia? – make sure Niss and Raia are paying attention."

She composed herself and smiled thinly at the Chiss. "Right down to the eye color," she said. "The resemblance is terrifying."

"He may look like Quinn," said Wynston. "But he's a Niral in name and upbringing. And talent." He mimed a quick lightsaber flourish. "Those count for more."

"Right." She rubbed her forehead. "Do you want to know something funny?"

"Sure."

"It just comes to mind every year. Quinn tried to leave, once. Before it all went to hell. We were keeping our distance, you know, for a while. And when that was in danger of breaking he actually went as far as getting me to sign off on a personnel transfer."

"What happened?"

"I changed his mind." She laughed bitterly. "The one decent thing he ever tried to do for me, getting out so when the blow had to come it wouldn't be coming from someone I loved, and I damn well celebrated talking him out of it."

"'Decent' is an awfully strong word to apply to anything that man has ever attempted."

"That's what I like about you. You let me hate him."

"He's a very hateable person."

"I'll need to be careful going forward. Rylon's taken to parroting things. I would rather teach him to respect his father, and that means keeping my grievances out of earshot."

"Why are you so careful with Quinn's reputation again?"

"My son deserves better than a total disgrace for a father."

"I see. About the parroting, is Quinn still visiting such that hearing repeated tidbits is a danger?"

"Yes. I'm never in town for it. I have Pierce or one of the others chaperon."

"Ah." Wynston laughed a little. "I see. I can't decide what's better, the notion of Pierce babysitting, or the notion of Pierce watching Quinn babysit."

"Broonmark is the real winner there. I really ought to cut off Quinn's visits entirely, but

it's hard." Then, very dryly, "You may have noticed I have a weakness for him."

"I try not to hold it against you."

She shook her head and poured herself some tea. "Anyway. You still fighting the top-secret good fight?"

"Saving puppies on a regular basis. Can't tell you which puppies, though."

"That's good." She didn't talk about the kind of fights she had been fighting lately. He wouldn't want to hear. "That's good."

## **Strange Relations**

August, 16 ATC – five years after the confirmation of the Wrath

*Hutta*

Jad kept a grimy sort of joint, and Tennet liked that. His was a little slice of Rodia on Hutta: low-ceilinged, dark, heavily scented with spices that sent other races running. And the music was slow, sibilant, without the hectic quality of galactic fare. It was good for relaxing. It was good for conducting business. How did anything get done in places with a pounding beat from dusk till dawn?

"Jad," she called to the bar. "Got a minute?"

The place was busy at a low hum, not enough to be a bother. Jad finished pouring out a drink and, leaving the bar in the charge of a droopy-eyed six-armed droid that was probably older than the building itself, heaved over to where Tennet sat in her dark and crusty booth.

"What can I do for my favorite adventurer?" he quorked.

"I'm expecting someone," she said. She had the description clear in her mind. "You see anyone in a black cloak, deep hood, walks like death come knocking, you just send her this way."

"You mean like that?" Jad jerked his head.

The figure in the doorway was a woman who managed to make loose black robes look lean. She didn't hesitate on her way in; she just walked, steadily, unswervingly, until she came to Tennet and Jad's booth.

She did not move to sit down. "Tennet," she said. "Are you ready?"

"What's the job?"

She didn't find out right away. Someone had opened the kitchen door. Thick green light fell on the stranger's hood – and the thing beneath the hood. The smooth, black-and-silver mask beneath the hood.

"Oh Maker," croaked Jad, temporarily voiceless. "Oh, Maker. You're th-the Emperor's Wrath. Here. You. Are the Wrath. Here."

"Don't panic," the Emperor's Wrath said dryly. She tugged her hood further forward, then let her hand fall to some inner pocket. "If this place stays quiet for me and mine we may do more business." She slid a credstick out and tossed it to him. "Tennet. Hangar 43. Coordinates where you usually find them. I don't need them delivered tomorrow but I do need you to empty the hangar before morning. Clear?"

"Clear, my lord." Tennet tapped her right ear in what she fervently hoped the Wrath recognized as a respectful gesture. She had always accepted it in the past. "Is that all?"

"Cash up front," said the Wrath, tossing another credstick. "Contact me if requirements change. Before you do anything about it. Good night." She turned in a swirl of black cloak and strode out again. Tennet could practically feel the weight of her holo, knowing that she could call the Sith at any time and the Sith would answer.

"Same words, every time." Tennet laughed, mostly to get her blood flowing again through mysteriously chilled veins.

Jad sucked in his breath. "Tennet..."

"She caught me running some goods a couple of years back. Not for a friend of hers. I gave her a line about how I was forced into it, wanted nothing to do with the guy I'd been running for, just wanted someone who would give some honest pay, you know, the usual. She said if money could buy my talents, then that's what I would receive. And she does pay. Not even much risk, the routes I'm doing."

"This is 'playing it safe'? Do you even know what she has you running?"

Tennet shrugged. "Never asked." That hardly seemed like the important part for someone balancing on Sith approval. "Honestly she's not so bad, as long as you don't try to laugh with her. Or question her. Or look at her. Or be in the same room as her. I mean, otherwise she's totally normal." Didn't other Sith just go around choking everybody? The Wrath never had. She just talked in that calm lethal voice until things started going her way. She was down to a comfortable minimum of words with Tennet now; they could probably do with holo briefings most of the time but for some reason she didn't always. "To tell the truth, I kinda think she likes me."

"She's a Sith Lord. Hell, in Hutt space she's *The* Sith Lord."

"And I'm the kind of person a Sith Lord needs to keep her underthings in order." Tennet stretched and leaned back, enjoying her friend's residual awe. "Isn't that how the worlds go 'round?"

## **I'm Not Done Lecturing You**

September, 17 ATC – six years after the confirmation of the Wrath

Malavai Quinn was thirty-five years old, a colonel in the Imperial Army, and in a very bad mood.

The Chiss agent Wynston had just walked into his briefing room. "What a happy coincidence," Wynston said dryly. "I wondered whether you were working in the area."

"Spare me. As soon as Major Carrick's team arrives, you can brief us and you can leave." Quinn stood by one wall and glared at it.

Wynston settled at the conference room table and swung his feet up to rest on the next chair over. "How's the Wrath? She's miserable, thanks for asking."

"I didn't ask."

"You were wondering. And I can tell you she's having a rough time of it. Certain issues lately made me think of you. So I wanted to talk. For old times' sake." Wynston briefly fiddled with his jacket collar. "It was really touch and go for a few years, you know. I thought she might give up entirely, just dedicate her life to recreational slaughter."

"She would never fall to that."

"What can you possibly know? She's changed a great deal, these last few years. It isn't that much further to fall. When I first met her, she was a wide-eyed innocent." Wynston crossed his arms over his chest and looked up at the officer. "And then you got to her. You and your little stunt."

Quinn kept staring at the wall. "If we must go over this. The Sith don't graduate innocents. She wasn't a child in need of protection."

"She was a teenager, Quinn."

"She wasn't too young for you."

"The worst I gave her was pleasant memories and dance lessons. What was your contribution?"

"Victory. The beginnings of the career that she carries in triumph to this day. I gave her Taris. Legends on Tatooine. Well-guarded secrets on Alderaan. You recall that? The operation where your blind stumbling



nearly got her killed and I had to finish your mission in addition to my own?"

"Do try to remember that this is about Ruth, not your precious mission, and that those are two separate entities. Did you really look at that beautiful, vibrant, passionate young woman and think nothing but 'Yes, this one will be a good worker'?"

"Did you look at that driven, powerful, iron-willed Sith and think nothing but 'Yes, this one will be a good lay'?"

"No. I understood she was a whole person. On the job and off. Did you care whether she was happy? Did you even look?"

"Every day. Where were you?"

"Out getting the job done without destroying the people who trusted me most in the process."

"That's easy for a man no one trusts to begin with."

"I only have to overcome my skin color. You have to overcome your own recorded actions, not to mention the personality. I only wish I had been there to see her put that shock collar on you."

"How sad, then, that you weren't in her life at the time."

"Are you proud that you were when the time came to betray her?"

Quinn took a moment to put together a reply. "Is this where you of all people lecture me on the evils of getting involved with women you meet on the mission?"

"I don't recall marrying...I don't recall leading any of my marks to believe I wholly belonged to them."

"I don't recall calling any of my sexual partners 'marks.'"

"No, 'Ruth' was identifier enough. Do one thing, do her well, is that it? It worked up until you failed at the execution...so actually, it didn't work at all, except to simultaneously enrage my friend and break her spirit. Great job."

"'Friend'? That's less than convincing. I don't suppose all this anger is due to the fact that she is no longer receptive to your advances?"

"I'm angry because I care. I care about the girl I knew before you put your hands on her and I still care about the cold paranoid killer you made her into, and the only reason that marvelous hair of yours doesn't have a point-blank blaster burn in it right now is that she ordered me to spare you."

"I don't suppose she asked you to spare me your attempts at conversation, too?"

"No, I'm free to talk. If you wish to correct that oversight in her command, ask her yourself." Wynston paused. "Or, since for some reason she won't take your calls, you could have me pass your request along next time I see her. Speaking of which, she tells me you've stepped up the visitation schedule with Rylon. Would you happen to know his favorite Rodian lok-shell flavor? I've been meaning to bring some by."

"Don't you dare use my son against me."

"You started it. It wasn't Ruth's staff that taught him 'Yuck, Chiss' as the reaction to blue skin."

A half-smile escaped Quinn's control before he got back to scowling.  
"Perhaps he's just naturally discerning."

"Perhaps you're full of shit. As you always have been."

"I don't have to justify myself to you, but I will say that I loved her more than you can comprehend. Nevertheless, when the order came, I was capable of placing my loyalties above my appetites."

"Oh? Let me get this straight. You can love more than me, and you can be more loyal than me, but somehow I'm the only one here who hasn't tried to murder his wife."

"Do you have the faintest idea what it is to serve a duty greater than yourself and your own pleasures? To pay any price that that duty requires of you?"

Wynston's eyes were a steady red glow. "When the price of the mission got too high, I defined a new mission. Maybe I'm not the expert on integrity, but I've never lost sight of what's worth fighting for, and that includes my friends. And the women I've loved."

"All however many of them there have been, if you even know the count. And then you remember to salvage the greater good afterwards, is that it? After we've all had our fill of partying? A man like you would never understand what I gave up that day."

"I know what you took from her."

"Don't imagine you are unique in that knowledge." Quinn finally turned away from the wall. He gave Wynston a long harsh look before speaking again. "Did you come here to make me feel guilty? Tell me you've never wrecked someone's life in pursuit of our Empire's mission. Tell me, agent, you've never killed someone who cared for you. Tell me you've never broken trust. Tell me you've never had to look at a woman and choose whether to break her heart or her neck first." He laid a hand on the blaster at his side. "*Tell me you're better than I am*, so I can report that you died as you lived: with a lie on your lips."

Wynston didn't move. He only tensed. He sat, expressionless, and watched Quinn. There was more of hatred than of pain on the officer's face, but not by much.

A moment later Quinn let his hand fall. "So, you can be made to shut up. Good. Now, I could describe how I negotiated, pled, fought, and bled for your friend - my wife - but I doubt it makes any difference to you. I could say there is an apology to be made to her, but I won't give you the

satisfaction of hearing it." He started toward Wynston at a measured pace. "I could start a fight, but I am aware that your death would likely destabilize the Wrath further. Much more so if you die by my hand." He stopped, leaning over the seated Chiss to meet his gaze, blue against red. "But listen closely. I know your name. I know your associates. I know your history, and I know you aren't working for the Dark Council. I would be very careful if I were you, Wynston. Because I am eager for an excuse to explore these facts. And so long as Ruth's mercy holds, you can't touch me."

Wynston stared up at him and laughed softly. "Bravo, Quinn. We really do have a lot in common. Enough to make me sick. But no matter what secrets you know – and no matter what I know about you – Ruth wants me alive as well."

"She wishes to protect you, yes. My long and faithful service to the Empire yields me other means of recourse. I can leave the question of your life or death to my superiors. Even if you, even if she tries to stop me." He straightened and backed off a step. "Don't come after me again. And stay away from my son."

## **October, 17 ATC**

T2-17. The Pale Cast of Thought

## **Parenting: Ambition**

August, 18 ATC – seven years after the confirmation of the Wrath

*Dromund Kaas – the Niral estate*

"Mom?"

"Yes, Rylon?"

Six-year-old Rylon Niral stopped his habitual fidgeting to stare at his mother. "How come you can't shoot Force lightning?"

"I never trained the skill."

"Why?"

"Because I spent that time honing my skills with a lightsaber."

"Why?"

"I like saber combat more."

"Why?"

"It gets you more exercise. Gives you more physical followthrough. And, strangely enough, makes less of a mess of your hair."

Rylon shook out his shaggy black hair, grabbed a handful, considered it, looked back up at Ruth. "Why?"

"I'm afraid I'm not well qualified to explain static Force effects to you."

"Why?"

"Already answered that one. I spent my time learning the lightsaber, not studying textbooks."

"Why?"

"To defend myself, little guy."

"Why?"

"Um. Because I like living?"

"Why?"

She half laughed. "This has taken an existential turn I'm not sure I'm comfortable with."

"Why?"

"Because some answers do more harm than good, sweetie."

"Why?"

"If I knew that, my life would be a much different thing."

"Why?"

"Well, I would have all the answers and then I could probably go be the Empress myself."

"Whoa." Rylon scrunched up his brow to consider. "But you have to shoot Force lightning to be the Emperor."

"Not if I were in charge. I would change the rules so you just have to be the best at lightsabers."

"Huh. Show me more saber stuff?"

"Sure." She started toward the playroom, which stored a few practice sabers, including some scaled for little Rylon. "Let's go, kid."

He skipped on ahead. "We can train up and then both be Emperor!"

She laughed. "And why would we do that?"

"Because it's *awesome*."

## **Timeline 2.5**

### **August, 26 ATC**

T2-18 Sir, I Exist

T2-19. Deep Roots Are Not Reached by the Frost

### **September, 26 ATC**

T2-20. For He on Honeydew Hath Fed

## **December, 26 ATC**

T2-21. Oh Frabjous Day

### **Another Morning After**

December, 26 ATC – 15 years after the confirmation of the Wrath

*Dromund Kaas*

For the first time in fifteen years, Ruth woke up beside someone.

It was exactly the someone she wanted, and the someone she couldn't trust. She had meant to dismiss Quinn after

after what? After letting down her guard more than she should have, barely enough to get the contact she'd been craving ever since she saw him again.

Four months since she had first seen him after a decade and a half's separation. Not enough time for her feelings to change. The whole range of them.

She shouldn't have let him stay the night. No matter how much he insisted. She wanted him here, the way things had been once, but the way things had been once was broken beyond repair and it was his doing, and just wanting him didn't change that.

She held very still. He had always been quick to wake the moment she stirred; now she determinedly held herself in place, fighting to keep her breathing steady as the tears came.

It didn't work. He opened his eyes moments later. For half a second he looked as peaceful, as quietly happy as she had ever seen him; then he turned to her and it all crashed into sharp alarm. "Ruth? My lord?"

She quickly twisted to press her face into the mattress. "Go. Now."

"Stop asking me to do that."

A sob ripped free. Fool. She was being an absolute fool, and he was still here to see it.

"Ruth, what's wrong?" He wrapped one arm around her, and it was at once the most secure and the most illusory safety she had ever felt.

She gritted her teeth. "You'll despise me if you stay. So just go." He was supposed to obey her. Those rare times she had to give outright orders, she wanted him to obey her. Like he had back when she thought things were right.

But he didn't go. Instead he stroked her back and she could feel him looking down at her. "I've never seen you cry," he said, very quietly. "You came close once, but never this."

"You must hate me for it. You respect strength." And offered no quarter for weakness. He never had.

"I respect you. Tell me what's wrong."

"You." She felt him tense up at that. Reluctantly she turned up just enough to look at his chest. Not enough to risk meeting his eyes. "You make me weak. Like no one else ever could. I hate being afraid of you. That isn't what you want from me and it isn't what I want either." Weakness was death. It always had been.

"Look at me," he said. She didn't. "Please, Ruth." Reluctantly she looked up at him.

And he looked down at her, and slid his other arm to support her head, and held her for a time. "There is nothing I can say, is there," he said quietly.

"Nothing at all," she said. She couldn't will the tears to stop.

"I don't want to leave you."

It felt like a physical blow. "I don't believe you," she choked, and rolled to hide her face again. She came up against his chest, warm, still faintly



smelling of sweat in a good way. It hurt. It hurt because it had been good before, too.

He tensed up at her words. After the space of six or seven years he said "Perhaps I should go, then."

Instinctively she threw an arm around him and pulled tight before he could move. She held on and waited until she could manage a steady breath before loosening her grip. He was right. They both knew it. They were so close, too much and not enough, but he was right. Her heart ached. "So," she said. "Is this all we get?"

"Must it be?" He turned her face up toward his and wiped a tear away with his thumb. His expression was intent, a little confused, a little pained. "Before," he said tentatively, "I would have known what you wanted me to do. You always wore your thoughts on your face." He traced her cheek, her jaw, with his fingertips. "I cannot tell now."

"No. I learned to hide." His handiwork, in a way.

And he knew it. "You no longer have to, Ruth. Not with me." Rather than giving her time for an answer he kissed her, firmly, steadily, until she moved to come closer to facing him and settle more securely in his arms. Bad idea or not, it felt good, in more than just the physical sense. "I don't want to leave you," he repeated. "And if it distresses you to be seen like this, know that I very, very much regret being the cause of it."

Part of her still wanted to argue, but she didn't. Instead she rested her head in the pillow beside his and wiped her cheek. "Would you be able to stay here today?"

"I had not planned on it. It can be arranged."

"Arrange it." She gathered enough strength to make it an order.

He smiled a little to hear it. "Yes, my lord." Then he went back to kissing her, wandering at times from her lips to her cheek and nose and back, seemingly determined to build all the reassurance she needed one patient moment at a time.

Which, while incredibly sweet, confused her in one respect. "You're not arranging things?" she murmured.

"This first," he said, soft and certain. "For as long as possible."

"Something before work?" She raised herself on her elbow, leaning away from him with a critical look. "Who are you and what have you done with Malavai Quinn?"

He looked thoughtfully up at her. "Improved him somewhat, I hope."

Ruth hoped, too. That was why she let him stay.

## **The Proper Attire**

December, 26 ATC – 15.5 years after the confirmation of the Wrath

*Corellia*

The Sith Lord Ruth pulled her speeder up at a great transparisteel storefront in Coronet City's shopping district. She walked through the resplendent skirts of a holographic trio of dresses to reach the door.

The showroom within was broken up by a number of small podiums, each with a triprojected hologram that could place a natural-looking image of a given dress onto anyone standing in the center. A couple of physical dresses stood on mannequins in the window, their trim glittering in the bright showroom light. Screens at opposite corners of the ceiling paged through the selection, showing the merchandise on models of various species. It was a bridal shop of human heritage primarily, but it seemed to accommodate a wide range of formal wear.

Ruth, plain in her black cortosis armor, made for the center of the showroom. Very soon an elderly woman, elegant but not showy in grey, appeared from nowhere to assist. "My lord," she said, her voice only a little tense. "What can my shop do for you today?"

"You moved this?" said Ruth. "You used to be on Government Plaza."

The shopkeeper blinked. "That was many years ago. We moved to this location after the war broke out."

"After one Sith crashed through your shop in particular. She saw the dresses in the window and wanted to destroy them...so she did. She left the place in flames."

The shopkeeper's eyes were round. She remembered now. "M-my lord, please. What is it you want?"

Ruth produced a credstick. "I want to offer restitution. That, and I threw out my last dress a long time ago." The scar on her lip stretched with a smile as her thoughts leaped elsewhere. "I'd like something new, something to impress. What can I get in red?"

### **Boring Conversation Anyway (prompt)**

December, 26 ATC - 15.5 years after the confirmation of the Wrath

*Dromund Kaas - the Niral estate*

Quinn came to Ruth with caution in his eyes and tension in his hands, but he did come to her. They never managed to stay apart for long.

They settled opposite one another near the head of the dining room's big table at her estate. They talked about work and about politics as they ate. It was something more than companionable; she found herself smiling, and him too. Late in the meal, during a lull, Quinn pointed out a feathered mask mounted on the wall.

Ruth twisted to look. "It was my father's," she said. "Most of the decor here is."

"I see."

"I've nested in the great room, but most other rooms I never fully changed out." Odd now to think it had been fifteen years since the softspoken owner of these trinkets had left her. "You only met him the one time, didn't you."

"Yes. The day you came to seek his counsel, after Quesh."

When they first laid strategies against Baras. She realized then that this wasn't going to be one of the tender evenings. "I suppose you got a great deal of useful information out of that visit."

Wariness sprang into his expression. "I stayed as your guest. I never used anything I observed here."

"Just passed it along, hmm? You're always taking tactical notes for your master, Quinn, don't pretend you stopped here."

"I never gave him a word about your father. Except to say that he wasn't worth the effort."

The sting was as much indignance as anger. "That's what he was to you? Irrelevant?"

"No, but that is what he had to be if he was to be spared. I didn't want to see you torn down by degrees, I wanted no part of that campaign of attrition."

"No. You saved it for one hit."

He shook his head as if doing so could dismiss the point. "If I could convince Lord Baras that your father had no strategic value, not even to you...I thought I could save him."

Her throat worked for a few seconds while she tried to reconcile that. "You didn't," she said at last.

"No. I could not have predicted that he would leave."

"He left home to help me. To take the fight to my enemies. And he died for it."

"I know. Even I could sense your pain when you felt his death. But by then events were in motion."

*Events*, he said. How clinical. "Driven by you."

He regarded her with depthless blue eyes for a long few seconds. Then, deliberately, he pushed back his chair, stood, and paced toward the head of the table. "Driven by me," he said, almost too softly to be heard.

She set down her fork. She wasn't hungry anymore.

"Your father asked me something that evening," said Quinn. "He asked whether I loved you."

No good could come of prodding at that. "And?" she prodded.

He closed his eyes. "I said I had no answer to such an enormous question."

"You always have an answer, Quinn. That's one of the reasons I admired you."

He nodded acknowledgment, to both the words and their past tense, without looking at her. "Under the circumstances, knowing what was to come, how could I say yes? And yet...how could I say no?" *How, indeed? That would have blown your cover.* He seemed to wait for something. Was she supposed to sympathize with his efforts to hide his old treason? She yielded nothing. After a long moment, and a barely perceptible shiver, he started for the door.

"Can you say it now?" she said abruptly.

He stopped dead. Pain streaked across his lips and subsided. "Not so long ago you didn't want me to," he said flatly.

*And whose fault is that?*, she thought, and bit back the words. She didn't want this fight, but it always seemed to happen. She had forgotten how to speak without hurting him.

She could still close the distance, in a way. In silence she could reach across the bitter divide and hold him, redeem the old promises again. It was easier to make love than to live with it. Pride held her in place, though, as she knew it did him. "We'll talk another time," she said.

His face was perfectly still, for all that meant between them. "My lord," he said, and bowed, and saw himself out, and the ache of his absence settled heavy in her chest. Next time. Next time they wouldn't fight. Next time she would sweep aside the old hurts and give him a reason to stay.

Next time she would remember, long enough to govern her words, that she wanted him to stay.

## **April, 26 ATC**

T2-22. April is the Cruellest Month

## **May, 26 ATC**

T2-23. The Man Hath Penance Done, and Penance More Will Do

## **More Letters**

June, 27 ATC - 16 years after the confirmation of the Wrath

*Fury-class designate* Scorned

It wasn't until her third session of reading her parents' correspondence from the little datacube that Ruth realized there was a second folder. It was newer than the one housing the years of plaintext letters between traveling mother and domestic father; new enough, in fact, that it could only have been made by Quinn while he had the cube. He had accidentally come into possession of the collection before Ruth knew it existed; in spite of their latest cold silence he had sent it back to her. She had a feeling he'd read it first.

In the new folder she found a handful of shortcuts to specific letters from within the voluminous collection. Ruth selected the first one and read.

~  
'Lara,

*I was wrong. You'd think at my age I wouldn't be losing my head over these things...I was wrong, and I'm sorry.*

*Is it the job that's been silent, or you? I can live with our separations when we're close at heart. But letting you go without a goodbye kiss makes everything harder. Letting you go without letting you know how important you are to me is outright stupid.*

*I love you. Disappointments don't change that. Fighting doesn't change that. The end of the universe doesn't change that. Maybe that can't erase things I've said but I hope it can balance them. And I hope that coming home still means coming back to me. No matter how far the distance between us it's always your step I listen for, your dear face I half expect to see when I come around the corner.*

*I hope you'll forgive me.*

*Until we meet again, all my fondest wishes,  
Colran*

~

*'Maybe it can't erase things I've said'...done, is more like it. So here was the reason Quinn had given the archive to her. Can it be balanced? Curious as to how this story had played out, she moved to the chronological next letter.*

~

*Colran,  
At your age? Look who's talking...I threw out six drafts of asking whether we're going to make up over this. It turns out for a grown woman and functioning adult I'm still bad at talking about some things.*

*I miss you. And I wasn't exactly blameless in our last conversation. We'd better talk things through when I get back. You must know I wouldn't just leave things*

*where they were or freeze you out. I love you too much for that. Home is where you are, and I intend to come home soon and set things right. With you. Always with you. You're the one I dream about even when not authorized to do so and you're the one I want to wake up with even on the most distant impossible mornings.*

*Mornings are nicer with you than without.*

*Yours, both in hard times and good ones, (you're pretty much stuck with me), (I really hope you're not still mad because if you are then this is just awkward),*

*Dolarra*

*~*

Ruth curled her legs up in the pilot's seat and stared out into hyperspace. Once upon a time, a Sith and a career-bound Imperial had made it work. Even when there were problems. And now somebody was asking whether it could work again.

She wasn't sure she had an answer for him yet. But she took his next shortcut to a selected letter, a letter repurposed for her eyes alone, and read on.

## **June, 27 ATC**

T2-24. After Doubt Our Love Came Back Amain

## **Sometimes love is a decision**

June, 27 ATC - 15 years 11 months after the confirmation of the Wrath

Ruth worked up the nerve to call Quinn on the anniversary of the betrayal, but he didn't answer. She spent a while longer agonizing over what message to leave. She wanted to say something; if they were going to try to salvage a relationship, she had to say something definite to mark the occasion. Definite but short. The details could be hammered out when they met in person. She practiced it until she was sure of it. Then she called again to leave a message: "General. I hope you can take this as a private message." A few seconds to give him time to reach the pause function if he



had to, to clear out the room. "I love you. No matter what. And I always will."

She cried for a little while afterwards, because sixteen years ago she had very suddenly lost a number of her illusions, and she missed both them and the man who had broken them. She cried, and then she cleaned up and went about her day.

He called her, late, just as she was preparing for bed. She hurried to answer.

He seemed a little flushed. "Ruth. Thank you."

She smiled and nodded a warm acknowledgment. "You're doing all right today?"

"It was difficult, until I got your call."

"I wanted you to know. Even when it is difficult. Come home to me soon, Malavai."

"I will. You have my word."

It wasn't forgiveness. But it was a start.

### **Love Letters/Secret Valentine (prompt)**

To: Colran Niral

To: Dolarra Reyne

Ruth had had weeks. Had she read her parents' letters? Had she read all of them? Did she care?

That was the question Quinn could never answer. Did she care? For a while they had tried to make it work, to be lovers again as they had been so long ago. But she turned it into bitterness at the smallest excuse, stinging harsh reactions from him, and time after time she let him go.

And then called him back, whatever that meant. He'd never had the strength to say no to that until his resolution after their latest, fiercest fight, when he'd finally realized it wasn't worth the continued time and hurt. He was ready to reject the next invitation. She wasn't his lord anymore, and hadn't been, not for a long time. He didn't have that duty. To him she was a woman, just like she had always wanted to be, and one whose abuse he was tired of. Once he had marveled at her physical mercy. He hadn't realized at the time what her verbal lashings could be.

So it was that one night he'd left. Again. In a hurry. Some things from Ruth's front closet had ended up in his grip on the way; he hadn't slowed to take a look until he was well clear. That's when he'd found the datacube of letters. Eight busy years of correspondence between her parents, collected in one place.

He'd read one to identify the collection. After that, curiosity drew him on. And as he read he couldn't help but mark those letters that most felt like him and Ruth.

~

My darling Colran,  
People in my line of work are expected to be perfectly reliable for one entity, and to hell with everyone and everything else. Zero caring outside the job. Some days I'm surprised I'm even allowed to make an exception for somebody.

You will always be my exception.

~

When Quinn was done, he had sent the datacube back to Ruth via an intermediary. It was all he could do.

He took a deep breath when he saw Ruth calling. Here she would call him to account for having those files in the first place. Here it would all start again, but he couldn't say no to a conversation.

Her holo image flickered into focus. "Thank you," she started.

An immediate relief, as far as it went. "You're welcome," he said carefully. "I hope you like it."

"You kept it for a while. Did you read any of it?"

"Yes." He braced for impact. A violation of trust, again, as she would see it. One of many.

But she smiled a little. "I'm really glad this wasn't lost to the unfathomable shadows of the coat closet."

His chest loosened some. "I aim to serve."

She was rapidly turning the datacube over in her hands; now she stilled herself. "Would you be willing to talk sometime?"

"I could."

"You free next Tuesday?"

He flinched in spite of himself. "Not then."

"Why no- Oh." How strange, that she didn't know it immediately. It had been sixteen years since he had driven them apart, seemingly for good. "If you'd rather spend the day apart..."

"I think that would be safest."

"In the interest of managing our tempers, I think you're right." Self-aware of her to say so. "Saturday after?"

"That could be arranged." Any day she named, any time, he would be there. It was a condition of his existence, so long as there was the smallest hope.

"Good. I think there's something worth fixing. I'd like to talk about how." She tapped the datacube. "We had something. I think I haven't given you enough credit for just how much."

"We had something. And we'll talk." He took a deep breath. "But first we have an anniversary to survive. I must go, Ruth. I'll call you when I know what the logistics look like for Saturday."

He cut the line.

~

Dolarra, heart's dearest,

I know that the job's demands are the job's demands, wherever they send you, whatever they require. It's nothing to me as long as you're ready to come home when you're done. Love has a way of granting patience to go with its impatience; if I have to wait for you I will, because you are worth waiting for.

~

Ruth met him at the estate gate, a slick yet hoodless silver coat her only concession to the rain.

"Hello," she said uncertainly.

"Hello," he said gravely.

"Come inside." She didn't try to touch him, and he fell in just behind her left shoulder, as he always had.

She stopped in the entry hallway and pushed her damp hair back. "Thank you, again," she said. "For the letters."

"They are yours by right. Perhaps I should not have read them."

"No," she said hurriedly, "it's all right. I'm glad you did. I think it was...maybe something we needed."

He inclined his head. "Perhaps it was. Your parents had a remarkable relationship."

She smiled winsomely. "They did."

~

Funny, the things you find yourself saying when you're far afield. It's like I need to squeeze in all the confessions I can so we can get to the light and fluffy stuff when I come home to you. Okay, fluffy stuff and big decisions. The rest we trust to the abstraction of letters. Honesty, a dangerous policy but a surprisingly nice one with some people.

~

Ruth led Quinn onward, and when he moved to take an armchair she caught his hand and gently led him to one of the couches instead. There she sat beside him and let him go.

"I don't know where to start," she said. He stiffened. After all this time, that was the best she could do? She seemed to sense that it was the wrong thing to say. "Listen, I don't want to talk about what happened. Not here. Maybe not ever again."

"That scarcely erases it." Or the temptation to bring it back up, as she always seemed to do.

"Doesn't it? If I can stop punishing you..."

That prospect lanced through his chest in a strangely welcome way. He looked past her shoulder, focusing now on keeping his composure. "Ruth, I accepted long ago that a fresh start is impossible for us."

Her lips turned down further. "If you accepted it, why did you keep coming back?"

He hesitated, still looking past her, marshaling the resources to stay steady. He had one hope. That was all. "Because you and I have already done the

impossible countless times," he said quietly. "With a history like that, what's one more?"

~

I've been thinking that it's fairly obvious that we're an unusual pair. You picked a Sith, after all. If I exercise discretion about us, it's only in defense. It can't change the truth between you and me. And I think, in this world, standing firm is the best commitment there is, regardless of where and whether it's spoken.

I speak it to you, my love, because I want you to know. I'm glad to be that voice for you no matter what official policy says. I'm honored to be that voice.

~

"I believe you," said Ruth. "When you say you loved me. I do believe you. It was real."

That was new. It ran counter to all her accusations, all this time. He hurriedly ducked his head to hide his face. Silence stretched on.

"Say something," she said in a small voice.

How was he supposed to react? Should he take her in his arms again, once more pretend that their physical intimacy made a working bond? Still she waited. "Is that an order?" In spite of himself the words were clear and quiet and sharp.

"No." Desperation spread red on her cheeks. "I thought you'd be happy."

"I...have no words to suit the occasion. What can we possibly be to each other now?"

~

So shall I get on with the juicy stuff? You are with me, every moment, every place I go, and every good thing I see makes me think "Colran would

love this." You're the sort to love all kinds of good things. Including the whims of one plain woman, one who loves you beyond all reason.

~

"Can't we be two people in love? You are. Aren't you?" Could it be that simple? Could he open that vulnerability again? "Aren't you?" she repeated faintly.

His brow contracted hard while he squeezed his eyes shut. He needed to understand this situation thoroughly, no matter how raw the questions that informed it. "Tell me you love me."

She looked wounded. "I do, you know I do."

"Tell me that the last time I left you was the last time I will."

"If that's what you want. Nothing would make me happier."

Funny she should mention that. He finally looked directly at her. "Tell me I can make you happy, after everything."

"You can. I want you to."

"Then..." He took her small white hand. "Then I believe we can change our fates."

~

I wonder sometimes how we would deal with a direct challenge to us. I think I would exhaust politeness very quickly. Maybe Sith authority would solve it. Maybe pure willpower would. (I entrust that to you, strong and fearless as you are.) I don't intend to let the question come up.

~

Ruth smiled tremulously. "Why didn't you choose someone less painful than me?"

"Why didn't you?" Quinn murmured. "You could have walked away by now."

"I did. We did. A lot. For half a year. It never...you never stopped calling to me."

~

Where I go, Colran, you're with me. Just think how much free travel you're getting out of this. All the galaxy over, and there's nothing, no one that could be to me what you are. Nobody ever was. And if everything goes to plan, nobody ever will be.

Oh, darling, I hope it goes to plan.

~

"What happens now?" said Quinn.

"Tonight? Maybe not much, except we talk. Going forward? I'd like to see you. Early and often. I'd like to be in your life, the way we couldn't be."

"When you say it like that I can believe it's possible."

"One thing. If you have a conflict of interest this would be the time to divulge it." For once her eyes stayed bright. In fact her lips relaxed into that tiny smile she always had at rest. She was listening, but she wasn't baiting a trap.

~

You know, I am glad you're often out and clear of Sith politics. It's a stupid world, Dolarra, and you're too good for it. I would rather keep you for myself, well away from the no-win tricks. Believe me, you're not missing much.

~



Her optimism made it all the harder to say. "You know my responsibilities, Ruth. I still have a duty."

Her voice hardened. "Is that going to call for hurting me or Rylon?"

"No. Absolutely not." It was fair of her to ask. It hurt.

"That's all I ask. I know the rest of it is mostly traveling and working."

~

It drives me mad sometimes to think how far you are. Are you lonely? Swamped by work? Swamped by not-work? Is any friend remembering to take you in from the rain, since somehow I doubt you've figured that one out yourself (and I find that infinitely endearing)?

We must be independent, my love, but part of me still hopes you somehow rely on me.

~

"Listen," said Ruth. "If my duties permit, perhaps I could travel with you for a little while."

Quinn held still, uncertain of the right thing to say. It wasn't quite the same as a civilian tagging along, but it was still...not quite the world they'd had together. Back then with just her ship she'd made it feel like the whole galaxy was theirs for the taking. She'd neatly implemented it, too, in pieces here and there. But now?

~

No matter where you travel or how long you're gone, I will never not hope for your face, your voice, and your very capable way of reducing all obstacles to dust.

~

"You realize I'd be working," said Quinn. "But...the men would be glad to see a Sith at their backs."

"Or leading the charge. I've gotten used to the thick of things."

~

And so, my lord and my love, I leave you with a little blessing the inhabitants of a recently visited planet (you would have liked them) have:  
May the road rise up to meet you (probably physically alarming but interesting),  
May the wind be always at your back (it fits a traveler but it can work for a commuter too),  
May the sun shine warm upon your face (in a diffuse Dromund Kaas way)  
And the rain fall softly on your fields (or gardens)  
Until we meet again. (I have no commentary here.)

Until we meet again,  
Dolarra

~

Ruth reached for Quinn's face, just enough to trace the lines of his brow and cheek with her fingertips. He welcomed the touch. Slowly she leaned in and he met her for a kiss, gentle and brief, deliberate and steady beyond passion. Then she pushed closer to him on the couch, wrapped her arms around his neck, and curled up against his chest. He settled his arms around her as tightly as he dared and pressed his nose to her hair, and they held each other like that for a long time, just breathing and being.

He wasn't sure what else could be said. He hoped the last few weeks had showed her most of what needed saying. In any case, she seemed content. And so was he.

~

My lady and my love (for such is how I think of you),  
I know the blessing. It was made for a sunnier world, but your marginalia

make it fit. Once again you improve everything you touch. I'm not surprised in the least.

Faithfully yours,  
Colran

~

If Ruth was telling the truth, they could start again after all. The way Quinn wanted it to be, that he wasn't permitted to have before. The way they hoped.

If Ruth was telling the truth, she could start to trust again. And he had never known her to lie.

## **August, 27 ATC**

T2-25. And Makes Me End Where I Begun

## **Timeline 3**

### **Provider**

September, 27 ATC

The mining outpost of Rojek VII was a solid little producer in a desirable location. The Republic had garrisoned it beyond all reason, naturally. Ruth was in the area to fix that.

She was in a good mood. Things were going well with Quinn; he seemed happy for the first time in far, far too long. She was doing better at not unleashing the old anger on him, instead saving it for...well, occasions like this, where it bubbled just at the edge of her consciousness, waiting for a good fight.

Her shuttle landed on Rojek VII's pad. Time for work, then.

Ruth put on her game face.

She was greeted by half a dozen Republic guards when she strode off the shuttle; she shoved them to one side - see? anger, mixed with the sharp pleasure of power - and let the numerous troopers she had brought with her take them into custody. Two of her personal guard came with her into the complex proper.

She opted to disarm and knock out rather than kill anybody who tried to get in her way. She was actually curious as to whether she could do a bloodless operation. It had been a long time.

Through the circuitous halls to the outpost overseer's office. The overseer, a lean middle-aged human, was consulting with some irrelevant person; Ruth grabbed said irrelevant person, threw her to one side, and kicked the chair out of the way.

"Overseer," she said. "Your schedule is clear as of now."

"What is this?" he demanded.

"You're going to uninvite the Republic garrison here and welcome in Imperial replacements. Operations will continue as normal. You'll be given fair compensation for your production."

"Who are you? Since when do you make demands? This is a Republic-aligned operation."

"I am the Emperor's Wrath. You don't say no to me. Or you do, and then you die and I take everything you have anyway." She cast an appraising look around the office, more for effect than for the expectation that anything interesting was there. "I'm here to get a gift for someone, and I'd rather it didn't come full of corpses. He likes things in working order." The overseer was managing his fear pretty well for an untrained, unarmed servant. He wasn't talking, but neither was he fleeing. Most civilians started begging for mercy just when they heard the job title. The look on his face here was half pleasing and half aggravating to her. "Do I sound crazy to you?" she asked.

"N-n-no, my lord," he obviously lied.

"Very good. You might be smart enough to come out of this alive. Just give me what I want."

He found his tongue. "I can't. I won't. You Imperials think the galaxy's going to roll over if you just bully hard enough, but your savagery isn't -"

She interrupted him with a Force choke, lifting him slightly off the ground. "Don't start. I've heard every speech you people have to offer, and they all end the same way - with exactly the sound you're making now." She gave him a few moments to gag and claw at his throat, then let him down. "Be honored that I'm even considering granting you your life. Cooperate. Evict your Republic friends. If they argue, I'll back you up."

"They'll never let you take this operation."

"Oh? Send in your guards. Send in your reinforcements. Send in your allies. Send in your army. None of it will avail you." Still he hesitated. "Are you so eager to die for this pile of rocks?" She signaled for one of her guard to place a datapad on the desk in front of the overseer. "A declaration of your intention to hand the outpost over to the Empire. Put your signature or your blood on it; I can go either way."

His lips thinned. He glared up at her, never breaking eye contact as he pulled the datapad to him and tapped in his approval.

"Wise choice. I look forward to a profitable partnership." She nodded to her personal guard and they tapped the comm devices that would summon the beginnings of the new Imperial garrison.

She brought up her soldiers in formation outside, then let her mind wander while she presided over the surrender of the Republic troops. Rylon was almost certainly due for new clothes, again. He was almost finished growing, she hoped; after that she would only have to worry about replacing scorched and slashed clothes, instead of scorched, slashed, and outgrown. The Korriban Academy was awfully rough on a wardrobe. She had better check in and see what he needed.

The mingled hatred, disgust, and fear on the Republic troopers' faces as they filed past was enjoyable. She gave them sneering hauteur in return. With her friends, in private, she could be genuine and kind and all that. She wouldn't have it any other way. But on work days she was the Wrath, and neither genuineness nor kindness were part of that. This was all about power.

She would call Quinn later and let him know that valuable little outpost that had bothered him for so long was secured. The just-because presents took him off guard every time. She loved that about him.

### **November, 27 ATC**

T3-1. And Dropped My Eyes, Unwilling to Explain

### **December, 27 ATC**

T3-2. The Likelihood that Redemption Awaits Us

### **January, 28 ATC**

T3-3. And All Ye Need to Know

### **February, 28 ATC**

T3-4. The serpent's tooth, Ruth vs. Rylon

T3-5. Not All Those Who Wander are Lost

### **Second Chances (prompt)**

February, 28 ATC – 16.5 years after the confirmation of the Wrath

Quinn traced the scar that warped Ruth's upper lip. "This has been bothering me for the longest time," he said. "I can't figure how a lightsaber did that without destroying your mouth entirely or at least hitting your jaw or nose."

"Easy." Ruth cast about the bed for something to illustrate with and had to settle for her hand. "The Jedi is airborne, right? Striking downward. I'm

turning. Pulling my face backwards, not quite fast enough. Saber tip comes down and in, like so, cuts in, corner of the nose to middle of the lip, gets me good and mad, but I pull clear before she can adjust her angle of attack."

"And why was she airborne in the first place?"

"She jumped around a lot." Having finished the tactical illustration, Ruth relaxed back into the crook of Quinn's arm and grinned up at him. "You could ask her why, except she's dead."

"Yes, I guessed as much."

"I'm still mad about her, though. All this time, she's the only one who managed something really disfiguring."

Quinn trailed his free hand down to her belly, an unevenly colored mass of scar tissue, some very old, some less so.

"Nobody sees that," she said. "It doesn't count."

She could see his finger tracing the haphazard ridges, but she couldn't feel most of it. "I don't want to criticize your methods," he said, "but I went to a great deal of trouble to patch you up, and then the moment I turned my back, it seems you embarked on a concentrated campaign of layering additional trauma."

"So my torso's a popular target. I've done nothing to encourage this. Apart from starting all the fights in the first place, I suppose."

"Having seen the number of energy weapons discharged into your gut, and having had to extract a number of sharp objects from the same, I am forever amazed that you managed to carry a child."

"I'm just that good." She chuckled. "The doctors said I could do it again, if I ever wanted to."

"Have you ever thought about doing so?"

"What, having another baby?"

He nodded.

She took a moment to think. "The circumstances never came close to being right. I wanted a partner, and that just...no. I thought about it sometimes, but it didn't turn out that way."

He watched her steadily with those dark blue eyes. "What about now?"

"I thought about it," she repeated. "But even after we started seeing each other, the situation wasn't exactly stable. I decided not to bring it up. It feels like it's a little late to start."

"I see." He kissed her forehead. "I'm glad we have Rylon. I love him. I'm proud of him. At the same time, if you ever wanted, I would be overjoyed to have another child with you. And to be there for this one from the start."

"I think I like the sound of that." She reached up to stroke his hair. He was still far too young for that speckling of grey. "We'll have to talk about how inconvenient it'll be to manage this with work."

"I know. The old contingency plans are slightly out of date."

"I blew off the old contingency plans anyway."

There was a moment's hesitation while they looked at each other and tried to decide whether to be hurt or not. Ruth resolved it with a wry smile. He returned it, and kissed her. "Anyway, I have a little more work to do," he said. "I'll be along to sleep shortly."

Ruth took over the bed the moment he was gone. She was more or less accustomed to sharing when she had to, but that didn't mean she was going to let unused space go to waste.

A baby. The prospect was at once exciting and daunting. There was Wrath work to manage, of course. There was whatever the Emperor decided. It was comforting that he hadn't chosen to interfere with her earlier pregnancy. She wasn't exactly inclined to call him up and ask permission now, but perhaps running it by the Emperor's Hand, the Servants who gave her her everyday assignments, would be prudent. There was



whatever storm Wynston was bringing her way, if he was bringing anything at all, if his claims about the Jedi Larr Gith and the Emperor's plans for indiscriminate destruction were true. Then again, that might not come to pass. She had Quinn to help her now. And she had already managed one child in this uncertain galaxy.

Circumstances couldn't possibly be worse than last time.

## Homemaking

February, 28 ATC – 16.5 years after the confirmation of the Wrath

Ruth curled up in her quarters and took out the little datacube that held the whole of her parents' correspondence. It was a gift Jaesa had put together about a year previously: the huge volume of letters that Lord Colran Niral had exchanged with Dolarra Reyne (later Niral) from shortly after they met to just before Dolarra died, back when Ruth was four years old. Ruth liked to review them from time to time.

~

*Dearest Dolarra,*

*I give up. I have no idea what goes into setting up a nursery. I'm pretty sure the consultant who was recommending custom 'burping fittings' for the nursery droid was just making expensive stuff up. I was the youngest child, I never got to observe these things after I outgrew my own crib*

*it's one, big, inexplicably pricey mystery.*

*I'll put together two or three possible setup ideas, anyway, so you won't have to start from scratch in considering all this when you get home.*

*Any word on when your department transfer will go through? I'll feel better when you're a Fixer doing things from HQ, or at least from wholly controlled outposts. The baby will appreciate it, too. I'm sure you'll reapply for a Cipher assignment the moment you're back on your feet, but*

*well, first things first.*

*At Minder One's request, I visited Program Complex Three again recently, playing tour guide and ranking Sith Lord to another Sith who took interest in the children. And blocking his efforts to steal some away. The Intelligence managers don't always have that power to stop that nonsense, but I do.*

*I don't want to know what most Sith would do with the brilliant young results of this program. They are such strange solemn children, uniformly pale, dark-haired, and quiet, but they still respond to smiles and kind words like anybody would. I suppose your future Watchers are here. In a few years they'll be looking down their noses and analyzing my statistical something or other to six degrees of precision before I so much as say hello. I'm just doing my part to keep them safe long enough to grow into that.*

*Home is quiet without you. The lilies are in bloom, Lara, and on nights like this, when the clouds break here and there, they look up at the stars. I'm thinking of you always.*

*- Colran*

~

Ruth took a little while to think about the gardens back at home, the lilies Colran had prized so, the nursery she had cleaned up and re-furnished on her own for Rylon because there had been nobody left to help her with it. Then she shook her head and passed through the ship's halls, empty but for herself, to return to the bridge. She had work to do.

## **February, 28 ATC**

T3-6. Myself Not Least

## **March, 28 ATC**

T3-7. Promises to Keep

T3-8. Dumb Because You Know Me Not, or Dumb Because You Know?

## T3-9. You Come Too

### **Renewing Jaesa**

April, 28 ATC – seventeen years after the confirmation of the Wrath

*Dromund Kaas – Kaas City*

Ruth's duties as Wrath took much of her time, and now that Rylon was at Korriban Academy she no longer had much reason to stay at home. That, and she was working overtime practicing the mental techniques that might someday shake her free of the Emperor's bouts of control.

But she made time for an old friend.

She met with Jaesa Willsaam in Kaas City, just as they had the first time a couple of weeks previously. Small steps. Friendly visits. The same person who had arranged the defensive training had given Ruth a rather literal wakeup call. Now she was reaching out, regrowing connections she had cut off out of pain or paranoia years ago. And forgiving the meddler his meddling, because it wasn't in his nature to leave well enough alone. Not when it came to friends.

"Ruth?" Jaesa said tentatively.

Ruth smiled, an expression instantly mirrored by her old student. "Sorry. Just wondering why I didn't do this years ago. I've been trying

to come back. To the old habits." She paused, struggling for words. "It's nice to have something concrete to come back to." She didn't dare ask why Jaesa had welcomed her.

"It's nice to have you here. You were the first person who ever believed I could make my own path. And you taught me everything I needed to get started."

Ruth looked back down at her drink, then, on an impulse, raised it. "To friendship. And people who are still crazy enough to answer my calls."

Jaesa raised hers. "To friendship. And plenty of happy calls to come."

## **April, 28 ATC**

T3-10. Beauty is Truth, Truth Beauty

T3-11. Something There Is That Doesn't Love a Wall

T3-12. All That Is Gold Does Not Glitter

## **The team expands**

April, 28 ATC – 16.5 years after the confirmation of the Wrath

Wynston made the introduction. "Wrath. Jedi Master Kira Carsen. Kira, Darth Ruth Niral, the Emperor's Wrath."

The redheaded woman glared at Ruth. "I know who she is. Larr, I didn't really believe you brought her on board."

"Wynston's idea, not mine," said Larr Gith from her seat.

"The monster herself," continued Kira. "Here to help, I suppose."

"Hello. Pleasure to meet you," said Ruth.

"Larr, have you already forgotten how she killed Ko Raden?"

"Who?" said Ruth.

"Master Ko Raden. The Jedi Master you intercepted and murdered six months ago? He was a good man, a great leader." Kira's whole face twisted in pained disgust. "And you didn't even remember his name."

"Does the wind name the leaves it strips off the trees in autumn? Do you name the blades of grass you tread on when you walk across a field? His name means nothing to me."

Kira shook her head in mute condemnation. Ruth scanned the rest of the room. Lord Scourge was watching her with a gleam of approval in his red eyes. Larr Gith was frowning prettily. Wynston...Wynston was staring at her with naked horror on his face.

She felt a little self-conscious, and annoyed that she felt self-conscious. "Standard Wrath rhetoric, Wynston. I do it all the time. Don't get excited."

Wynston shook his head, slowly, and then looked over toward Kira without turning his head. "I apologize for the Wrath."

"Enough," growled Ruth. "I didn't come here to get lectured by Jedi...actually, I suppose I did. But not you, Kira."

Larr Gith smiled a lazy smile. "Did you try the focus exercises?"

"Yes."

"Let's see it."

Ruth let her irritation power the protective ward she worked around herself while Larr Gith prodded, guided, criticized. She would perfect this shroud, if only out of spite.

It was some time later that Larr yawned delicately. "You must be getting worn out, you're getting sloppier by the second. Let's leave off, shall we?"

"Yes," said Ruth. "Let's."

"I hope for all our sakes you won't be called to see the Emperor just yet."

"That's for me to handle, Jedi."

Wynston wandered in from the other room. "Ruth. Did you bring the names of the last few targets the Hand gave you?"

"Sure did, as requested." She gratefully turned away from Larr handed the agent a datapad.

"Thanks. I'll look it over, see who's critical to what. Trace the connections. And either arrange false deaths or give you the all-clear to act."

"Do you think you can locate the Servants themselves?"

He hesitated. "I'm not sure. I have people on it."

"And the Emperor's true form."

"Difficult. But I do have eyes in every corner of the galaxy looking into it."

"Good. Good. I can't put my own people on it without raising suspicion."

"Don't worry. Hand me those names and the rest of the search is mine. Your only part in this is to demonstrate you won't be an information leak."

"You're taking a big chance on me. As everyone else on this ship probably reminds you all the time."

He looked her in the eye. "Ruth. You have never let me down. In a career like mine, that's not the kind of thing a man forgets."

The ship's outer door clanked open. Ruth walked over and looked down to see a Wookiee overshadowing a familiar Twi'lek.

"...What?" said Ruth.

Vette stopped on the stairs and gave Ruth a halfway glassy-eyed bored look. "Hey, look who's here."

"Vette," she said, and risked a smile. "Good to see you."

"Likewise, Wrath," she said flatly. "Brought out the big guns, didn't'cha, Kira?"

"Not my idea," said Kira.

"Good to hear." Vette turned to the Wookiee. "All right, Big B, looks like I'm set here. Get on home, keep Risha honest for me. I'll be in touch."

The Wookiee growl-roared something and left.

"You have a Wookiee assistant?" asked Ruth.

"Friend. The word is friend. He's Bowdaar. Ran into him in my small-fry criminal days. He's all right. Just about the only one of my associates I think can handle hearing about this - " she gestured - "without immediately looking for a business plan in it."

"How do you get a business plan out of 'the Emperor's going to blow up the galaxy'?"

Vette shrugged. "I leave that question to Risha and Akaavi, but I wasn't going to hand them the insider information for it."

"And since when were you in the world-saving business?"

"Since Wynston asked nicely." Ruth must have looked skeptical, because Vette shrugged. "Really nicely."

The agent radiated modesty.

"So, what's the plan?" Vette asked, looking at Kira and Wynston.

"Got some names for you to locate." Wynston waved the datapad. "I'll be uploading this to the usual distribution list. We need to work out who they are, where they are, and what contact if any they've had with mysterious Sith figures."

"Yeah." Vette gave Ruth a hard look for no evident reason. "I can do that."

"Come on in. We should chat." Wynston conducted Vette upstairs and away into the depths of the ship.

"I should get a move on," said Ruth.

"Yeah," said Kira. "You should."

As Ruth turned her back, Kira called out loudly. "So, Larr. Remind me why we invited her?"

Ruth whirled. "Because I'm the most powerful fighter you'll ever meet," she said, equally loud. "You'll want me on your side. And no matter what you choose to throw at me, you can't change the fact that I want you to succeed." She met Kira's eyes and pitched her next words much more softly. "We're stuck in this together, aren't we?"

She always had enjoyed feeling superior to Jedi.

## **May, 28 ATC**

T3-13. The Fell Clutch of Circumstance

### **The Droid You're Looking For (prompt)**

May, 28 ATC - 17 years after the confirmation of the Wrath

The *Prodigy Burst* raced through hyperspace, and on it Ruth tended to her lightsaber.

She sat at the workbench in the cargo bay, well away from her irritating host Larr Gith's usual haunts. Here she could perform some maintenance on her weapon and prepare herself for the next mission.

Beside her was a squat blue astromech droid. Its name was T7-01 and it was, so far as Ruth could tell, still yelling at her. The frenzy of beeping and whirring couldn't be anything else. Trust a Jedi to have a preachy droid for a sidekick. It wasn't even sophisticated enough to lecture in Basic, where she could argue back.

And she put up with this just because her old friend said the galaxy needed saving.



"You realize that no part of whatever you're saying is causing me the slightest remorse?" said Ruth. "Since I have no idea which of my supposed crimes you're dweeeping about?"

The droid beeped angrily and returned to a staccato stream with the occasional whistling interlude.

A red-haired woman stopped in the cargo bay door. "Thought I'd find you two together," she said, her voice rich with satisfied mischief.

"Kira, would you tell him I still don't speak droid? Just like yesterday and the day before?"

"If you want me to translate, he's describing how you betrayed and murdered the Five Sons of Oenos."

Ruth stood and turned away from the table, folding her arms across her chest and glaring alternately at Kira and the droid. "I never betrayed them! I was sent to kill them for the Empire, a straightforward act of war. They offered to negotiate, I agreed to hear them out, and at the summit they tried to poison me. Of course I killed them after that!"

"Ohh, so somebody backstabbed you before you could backstab them. I'll be sure to put that in the 'plus' column on your record."

"Very funny. Why is Teeseven still going?"

"He doesn't believe you. About the Five Sons."

"He doesn't have to believe me! It's the truth, I don't care if some Jedi's coattail won't take my word for it!"

"That's an astromech droid." Kira nodded. "And hero, he just reminded me."

"Yes, I'm sure it was bloody heroic of him to use a Sith's skills and knowledge to get far enough to hide behind his owner's--"

"Hey." Kira looked to one side, then stepped into the room. "Look who made it, the defense attorney."

"I was the best I could find on short notice," Wynston said drily. He stepped in opposite Kira. "Is there a problem here? Ruth, what's going on?"

"Just now? I'm regretting ever having listened to you."

Wynston looked at her.

She glared at Wynston.

Wynston looked to Kira. "Would you excuse us? Teeseven, you too?"

The droid, beeping sullenly to itself, followed the Jedi out.

Wynston shut the door behind them. "I'm sorry about them."

"Could they possibly be any more obnoxious? I can't believe you talked me into this."

"We knew this wouldn't be easy. When the chance for you to join this mission came up it was a matter of listening to me or dying, and every not-me person on this vessel was voting for you dying."

"I think Teeseven is still voting. With his sorry excuse for a vocabulator. And another thing, at least if I were dead I wouldn't have to pick Goldilocks and Red's hair off my cape after every time I put it down."

"We do need you," he said quietly.

"I know. And in the crisis, you'll have me.

But can't we at least replace the droid?"

Wynston tilted his head. "I'm not especially attached to him, but Larr is."

"So I repeat. Can't we at least replace the droid? Memory wipe him? Short out his speakers? Anything?"

Wynston considered. "I can do a little quiet sabotage here and there on the ship. Cosmetic, nothing dangerous, just enough to keep him too busy to follow you."

"Keep the astromech doing astromech things instead of lecturing. I

I can't believe I'm calling in a favor for this."

He smiled. "If it must be done I'll do it. Ruth, I can't wield lightsabers, conduct Force rituals, or command legions, but if I can keep you all from killing each other long enough to do the job, I'll be satisfied."

## **The Droid You're Looking For: Mediator (Prompt)**

June, 28 ATC - 17 years since the confirmation of the Wrath

Another cultist ritual defeated by T7-01 and his Jedi friend Larr Gith. With the help, he acknowledged in descending order of friendliness, of Jedi Kira, Lord Scourge, the red-haired Agent Wynston, General Pasty Imperial, and the Emperor's Wrath.

T7, Jedi Kira, and Jedi Larr Gith had faced many challenges before, and joined forces with many unlikely allies. But T7 couldn't even compute the odds of coming up with a group like this for the mission ahead. He would rather have had Doc and Sergeant Rusk back instead of General Pasty Imperial and the Wrath. Agent Wynston he could accept; it was he who had first brought news of the enemy and he had always been very nice to Jedi Larr Gith. But Pasty Imperial and the Wrath? They didn't even hide their intention to go back to Imperial service the moment this was over. And the list of their previous betrayals and murders was almost too long for T7's memory banks. He didn't understand how Jedi Larr Gith could let them anywhere near.

T7 and the other heroes - and also Pasty Imperial and the Wrath - filed back on board the *Prodigy Burst*. Within minutes T7 detected irregular fan motion in one of the lower decks, near the medbay; he hurried down to look into it.

Agent Wynston was in the medbay sorting supplies. He smiled when the droid came in. "Teeseven. Thanks for stopping by, that fan noise could get very obnoxious very fast."

T7 = on the job

"Good work in the field, too. I'm always impressed at the blaster work you manage to synchronize with the Jedi."

Jedi + T7 = old friends // Jedi + T7 = great team

"And with everyone, really. You gave the Wrath an excellent assist."

Problem.

T7 = doesn't work with Wrath

Agent Wynston cocked an eyebrow. "I didn't mean it as an insult, I thought you coordinated very well out there."

Wrath = monster // Wrath = militant Sith // Wrath = untrustworthy

"Whoa, slow down. You're working off an incomplete dataset, Teeseven. If you'd known her as long as I have you'd know she's capable of greatness." Agent Wynston smiled. "Working with you on this mission is bringing out the best in her, something I had feared she'd lost long ago. Give her a chance and you may see it socially as well."

T7 + Sith = trouble // socializing = bad idea

"Just think about it. That's all I ask."

Thought cycles = complete // T7 + Sith = trouble // socializing = bad idea

"Teeseven. Please. Note that she willingly came, alone, onto a Jedi's vessel, and submitted to our battle plans - note that she has defied a master she served for seventeen years, has risked everything - not for power, and not for the war, but purely for love of her husband and son. To protect them. Wouldn't you say that devotion is worth something?"

Wrath + Pasty Imperial = very happy together // Wrath + Pasty Imperial = so what // Wrath + Pasty Imperial = better off elsewhere

"But they're here. We'll need her strength before this is over. And I think if you give her a chance she'll surprise you."

There was a very obvious change in scope in those statements.

Pasty Imperial = no surprises?

Agent Wynston froze. "He might," he said stiffly. "It'd be wiser to focus the positive thinking on the Wrath."

Pasty Imperial = not a friend?

"I didn't say that."

Agent Wynston = trusts Wrath // Agent Wynston = distrusts General Pasty Imperial // Agent Wynston = inconsistent

"That is far from inconsistent. Teeseven, we need to work with both of them."

General Pasty Imperial + Wrath = no difference // Agent Wynston = inconsistent

Agent Wynston frowned at him. "Tell me, in matters of trust, what's the difference between Larr Gith and Lord Scourge?"

T7 processed. They *were* different, but...

Lord Scourge = helped save the galaxy // Wrath = ??

"I've seen her give, I've seen her protect and I've seen her love. I promise you that she can be more than she was in servitude. Don't reject our alliance now. Scourge proved himself; let her do the same."

Perhaps, if T7 could accept Scourge, he could come to accept the Wrath. Still, there were questions.

Pasty Imperial = ???

"Oh, sod Quinn. He'll follow her, it's best to ignore him."

There were times when humans were confusing. This was one of them. T7 booped noncommittally and returned his processing cycles to dealing with the repair task. Somebody had to hold the *Prodigy Burst* together, and T7 was on the job.

---

Wynston stepped out of the medbay and stopped short. There in the hall stood Ruth, and she looked rather like somebody had hit her very hard in someplace sensitive.

Her mouth worked for a few moments while her forehead wrinkled up. When she spoke it was with forced lightness. "I overheard some. Is that really what you're doing behind my back?"

"Some of it." Easy answer. "Frankly, praising you is one of my easier job functions."

She shook her head. "You didn't have to. You shouldn't have."

"I want this crew working together. He wouldn't take it from you, but he might from me, so I'm here."

"Well. Then thank you. I'm not sure anyone else here will ever believe it, but...thank you."

He took a few steps forward and reached out to his friend, waiting until she accepted his hand. "Ruth, you've never let me down. Except perhaps that one time we tried to kill each other, but I'm willing to call that a mutual lapse."

She laughed, a little shakily. "Deal." She squeezed his hand and dropped it. "Well then. By the way, Quinn's still staying."

"Well, yes, I figured that much." He smiled crookedly. "Take it as a token of the sheer magnitude of the trust I'm placing in you that I'll accept him here."

"It's appreciated, Wynston."

"For you...well. For you."

## **May, 28 ATC II**

T3-14. I Am Half Sick of Shadows

T3-15. The Road Goes Ever On and On

## **Affection fluff (prompt)**

June, 28 ATC - 17 years after the confirmation of the Wrath

*Prodigy Burst*

"How do you pick which sabers to use?"

Ruth looked up from the lightsaber she was tending to where Wynston lounged in the doorway. "I only ever use two," she said. "Darth Baras's and my father's."

One dark, one light, thought Wynston. Still half blood trophy, he supposed, but it could be worse. "That makes sense. I'm glad your father's wasn't lost." He knew little of Colran Niral, but everything he knew was good. "I think I would have liked to meet him."

"He would have loved you. He was an idealist. He always..." Ruth's voice temporarily failed, and she picked up the saber hilt in question to buy herself time. "All I have is this now. It was his father's before him, and on

before that, I think. It's...never changed hands peacefully." Not even the last time, when she took it from his murderer's corpse.

Sorrow didn't suit her. He had an idea for that. "May I?" he said, and walked up to the desk, reaching out to accept the saber. It was a lightsaber, with unusual patterning on the grip. In good condition. There was little more he could say about it; Sith weapons weren't his specialty. "It's a long history," he said, and handed it back. "There." He met her eye and smiled crookedly. "Peaceful transition."

Something unexpected and pleasant burst in her chest and she smiled back at him. "Has anyone ever told you you're wonderful?"

It was a startling question. He didn't go looking for that kind of attention, at least not outside temporary entanglements. "About as often as anyone thinks it, I imagine. You're the one--"

"No, don't turn this back on me." He always did when she tried to compliment him. "Has anyone here even thanked you yet for organizing this effort?"

Thanks weren't on his mind with the galaxy at stake. But she clearly wouldn't be satisfied with a no. "Well, in a way--"

"Liar."

"Ruth, you really don't have to say anything."

"But I will." The way had been composed mostly of challenges so far; he deserved the reminder of the good part. "Thank you for pulling this together. Thank you for figuring out the threat, because I'm sure you did it before Larr or Scourge did. Thank you for finding everyone that needed finding, and thank you for everything you do to keep us running. I don't think anyone else could have brought us this far. You must be the bravest person I ever met for trying."

That was Ruth. Proven by history to be an awful judge of character, but always as concerned with those she deemed her friends as with the job at



hand. "It's what I do," he said. "That isn't so remarkable. But I appreciate the sentiment." Time to move on. "Hasn't anyone thanked you yet?"

"For what? The fighting? I've gotten reluctantly positive grunts from almost everyone here." Even the Jedi had to acknowledge her usefulness in the field, but they didn't have to like it.

He shook his head. That wasn't the part that was hard for her and, knowing her as he did, it wasn't the part that was remarkable to him. "Not the fighting. The way you're doing it."

Did he really notice the difference in how she had chosen to discipline herself since starting down that path? The only other ones who did disapproved, or questioned at best. "How...what do you mean?"

"Your Light Side way, or whatever that change is." The one she worked on every day. As if the preparations for their task weren't difficult enough, she was trying to turn herself around, to recover more than just the social graces of her younger years, the years before she'd grown hard. "I don't pretend to know much about the Force, but the focus you have now, and the effort you sustain for it, doesn't go unnoticed, and I can't tell you how much it means to me that you're choosing to do it like this. The quick and dirty approach may end fights fast, but

if this other way is what you want to work with, for what it's worth you have all the support I can give."

He was sincere, and she was on the right track, and he would back her up in it. The Jedi didn't think she could do it; Quinn didn't think she needed to; Scourge thought she was an idiot to try. Wynston seemed to know what the Light Side meant for her, and he supported her in it. "That makes a difference. Believe me."

He smiled. It was his job to make the difference in some places, but it was critical for her to believe she could do this herself. "You're strong enough in any case." Simple truth. "You never needed me."

He had the crooked smile of his regular equilibrium, but it was covering a lie. "Then why did I turn around when I did?"

For a long moment, Wynston couldn't think of anything to say. He had just said a few words at the opportune time. She'd done all the real work.

Even his misdirection was just covering for the other point. "By the way, you changed the subject again."

Damn. He turned his smile up further to keep it steady. "Yes, I did."

He didn't believe her thanks, not really. Ruth cast a quick look at the door, then stood.

Ruth looked past him for a fraction of a second. Then she was on her feet and if it were anyone else he would have tensed preparation, but it was her, and then her arms were wrapped around him and her head was tucked into the curve of his neck and for once in his life he didn't know what to do about it. He hugged her back, at least. That was proper.

She felt him give a light correct and automatic return, nothing too overwhelming, nothing too personal. But as she refused to let go his arms wrapped tight, and with a hard little sigh he pressed his face to her shoulder, leaning into her with some of the instinctive coordination they had had long ago. "I'm so glad you're here," she murmured, and squeezed him, hoping it was enough to show her gratitude for his existing, for his being here now.

She tightened her hold and he knew she meant it, and so he pulled her a little closer and hid his face against her shoulder. This was different from kissing or conversation, either one of which he knew how to deal with; neither was right, not for her, not now. So he held her and let her tell him that he meant something to her. In his arms she was the girl from Dromund Kaas again, unarmored, generous and warm, grateful for every little thing, and for some reason he would never understand he meant something to her. He held her and let her steady him, trusting that she of all people could be relied on for it.

He felt right in her arms. Even after all the changes and maturation of feeling, he felt right. If goodwill was all she could give, she wanted him to know it was his.

He backed away when she gave him the chance. Time to change the subject again. "Well," he said lightly, making an appropriate retreat to the doorway. "We wouldn't want your husband getting the wrong idea."

"Don't worry about that." That was a conflict she could never fix, but here it was just an excuse. And she almost felt bad about making him uncomfortable enough to start throwing excuses in the way. Almost. Perhaps neither one of them was accustomed to straightforward support. For now, at least, as long as he knew, she could leave him be. "I should let you go. I've got to finish with these and then get some meditation in."

"Of course." He cleared the lump from his throat as quietly as he could. "I should let you go. I'll be on the bridge if anything comes up." After all, he had a job to do.

Then, for the first time she could remember, Wynston ran away.

## **June, 28 ATC**

T3-16. I Must Follow, If I Can

T3-17. Pursuing It With Weary Feet

## **Mysteries (prompt)**

June, 28 ATC - 16.9 years after the confirmation of the Wrath

*Prodigy Burst*

Kira followed Ruth down to the armory after the meeting broke up. "Pretty tense, huh?"

Ruth spun to face her. "These are high stakes," she said, suppressing her impatience. "All of us want to get it right."

"I'm a little surprised you went with Wynston's plan in the end. You seemed to think it's a bad idea."

"What I think doesn't matter so long as we agree on the action."

"That's very...Imperial. But not too Sith." Kira flipped her hair back and crossed her arms. "So, here's the thing. You're the big bad Wrath, you're supposed to bow before no one but the Emperor, stars know you're always trying to put Scourge and Larr Gith in their place – but you treat Wynston like an equal."

"He is every inch my equal. Not in combat, but in other measures."

Kira thought about that for a moment. "If I ask you directly about him I'm not getting a straight answer, am I?"

"No, probably not."

"Hmph. Can I ask where you met this guy?"

"A long time ago. Before I was Wrath. We worked together for a while."

"And?"

"And he's my friend." Ruth didn't bother suppressing her smile at Kira's impatience.

"Come on, spill. He just showed up one day with Larr Gith and Lord Scourge in tow – on speaking terms with each other, which I *never* expected to see – and said we have to save the galaxy. I think he said hello first, but that was it for the pleasantries. Since then he's all work. But you and this mystery guy, there's obviously some history. So, what should I know?"

"What, are you interested?"

"Please. I just like to know who's leading me into mortal peril."

"He's showed you what he wants you to see."

"Great. Closing ranks, thanks."

Ruth laughed. "You want to know what he won't tell you? He's a good man, better than most I've met. Admittedly, by your standards a Sith doesn't get to know many good people, but he's one of them. He's kind. Funny, I don't know if you ever get to see that. And he's brave. So much braver than we Force sensitives have to be. He's spent his life looking for the right thing to do and doing it, or else finding the people who can. He never gets tired. He never gets bitter. He never gets discouraged.

"And he has a way of believing in you. Believing in the best you, the one you wish you were. He supports that, no matter what." With him, once, she'd been a beautiful woman. With him now she was a hero. "Just see him smile, you know things will be all right."

Kira raised her eyebrows. "I'm starting to sense why your husband hates him so much."

"Oh, no. No. Not like that." Kira looked unconvinced. But she didn't have to hear the history. "Wynston is...incredible. When he calls on me, I'll be there. But I have one love and it isn't him."

"Nah, he's just the planner who gets to override the Emperor's Wrath."

"I trust him. With my life, with the mission. You can, too, if the recommendation of someone like me means anything to you."

"It's...something to think about, that's for sure." Kira stepped back. "I better go, your 'one love' might try to glare me to death again if he runs into me."

"We wouldn't want that. See you in ten hours for the op."

## **June, 28 ATC II**

T3-18. That Which We Are, We Are

T3-19. All That's Best of Dark and Bright

T3-20. The Bludgeoning of Chance

## **July, 28 ATC**

T3-21. Let Us Be True to One Another

T3-22. Nearer to the Heart's Desire

T3-23. One Equal Temper of Heroic Hearts

T3-24. Love believes all things

T3-25. Lo! The Bird is on the Wing

T3-26a. Take Arms Against a Sea of Troubles

T3-26b. Though Hell Should Bar the Way

T3-26c. The Place and the Hour and the Secret Dread

T3-27a. A Frightful Fiend Doth Close Behind Him Tread

T3-27b. I Am the Captain of My Soul

T3-27c. To Make Me Sad to Go

*Ruth felt the Emperor's darkness stripping away her very sense of self, layer upon cracking, crumbling layer. She went on screaming her hate, pouring it into shredding his mind. Her comrades worked their tiny attacks; they didn't matter. She held the Emperor's attention and broke him apart, piece by piece, feeling every painful snap as he did the same to her. He was weakening. Every wrong he had done her, every life he had taken, every day he had congratulated himself for controlling her, she hated him for it. He had corrupted her husband and claimed her son. She would avenge what it was too late to protect.*

*While her enemy crumbled, Ruth kept screaming. She thought at some point her physical form joined in.*

~~~Here ends the complete collection of canon Ruth Niral stories.~~~

~~Ruth appears in the AUs Lodestone, Dialogues, and Knights of the Waking Alliance.~~

## Appendix B: The Light from Dromund Kaas

This appendix contains accounts of Colran Niral, Ruth's father and scion of the Niral family. It focuses on his time as a Jedi Padawan, a role he took after...well, you'll see.

### Arrival on Nar Shaddaa

Colran was bruised, cramped, tired, agonizingly hungry, fifteen years old without a credit to his name, locked in jail on a strange moon, and elated.

He had enough command of Force techniques to hide well, and that had gotten him as far as Nar Shaddaa. Unfortunately he had always been trained to obtain the necessities of life through money (of which he now had none) or violence (which he didn't want to use). His first effort at stealing a meal had landed him straight in a snug little holding cell. At least nobody had broken anything of his on the way. The cell was great, because there wasn't a Sith in sight, and if he could serve whatever labor or punishment they handed out for theft he could get out after and go on to find the Jedi.

A pair of guards had been shuffling back and forth doing assorted errands; just now one was seated at a table between the rows of holding cells. A second guard came in carrying a dish with a small assortment of somewhat palatable-looking foods. "Here," he said, pushing it through the grate at Colran.

Colran's eyes widened. "Really?" He didn't wait for confirmation before he snatched it well back and started eating.

The guards exchanged looks. "Imperial?" said one.

"No kidding." The other guard examined Colran more closely. "No, better'n that. Look at him. The kid's Sith."



Colran swallowed hard. If they turned him in now... "My business is my own," he said, as steadily as he could. "I have a message to bring to the Jedi. I cannot return to Korriban until I have the reply."

"And I don't get paid enough to stop you," said the first guard. "Turning in a stray is as like to earn me a choking death as a reward anyway."

"Should we get word to the Jedi?" said the second guard.

"Yeah." The first guard eyed Colran's cleared plate. "We can't feed this kid for long."

\*

A couple of hours later the guard shift had changed, but it was one of the original guards who escorted in a weird-looking alien, a female in plain green robes sporting fleshy-looking horns on either side of her head and a trio of thick headtails trailing behind and to either side. If Colran's nerve and will weren't already stretched so thin he would have made an effort to avoid staring.

"Hello, my friend," she said in a high flutelike voice. "I'm told you were looking for me. I am Master Zauvien of the Jedi Order."

Colran had only ever seen Jedi as ragged prisoners, at a distance, on the few occasions when one was getting dragged around Korriban for one purpose or another. Up close he couldn't tell much of anything except that she was a strange, strange alien with a quiet calm assurance to her.

"What's your name?" she prompted.

He lifted his chin proudly. "Colran Niral."

"Colran." Zauvien smiled, then turned to the guard. "Can Colran and I talk alone someplace?" The guard nodded and escorted them to a room with a couple of chairs and a couple of bright cold lights. Habit prompted

Colran to mentally harden himself; nothing good happened in these rooms. Ever.

"Please, sit," Zauvien said. She was still smiling. Bad start. Colran was pretty sure Jedi weren't supposed to smile. Some of the especially sick Sith did, though. He knew that part for sure.

He sat.

"You look tired. Have they been treating you well?"

Indirect. And smiling. Colran pushed his words through a thick layer of dread. "Yes, master. They've been very kind. Considering I got here for stealing things."

She went on. "You were seeking the Jedi."

"Yes. I...I just came from Korriban. I wanted, if you have a school or something, I can earn my way." To be turned back at this point would kill him. "I want to help. I can work. I can learn. I don't know what you people want, but I--"

"Peace, friend," she said. "You came all the way from Korriban to study with us?"

He would rather be staring at the floor or the wall or anything but her, but every detail of her expression and reactions could be critical. "Yes, master," he told her. He had gotten as far as working out that the world of the Sith wasn't one he wanted to operate in. The possibilities outside that were...well, there was only so long he could daydream before he had to go find out what the rest of the galaxy had come up with.

"That was very brave of you," she said.

"Running away isn't so special. What do I have to do to work for your people?"

“Well,” she said, and her smile took on an almost impish quality, “first you ask. And then I take you to the local temple and see about getting approval to teach you myself.”

“Would you do that?”

“Someone who has risked so much to learn is welcome with us. Always.”

Of course. No smart master would turn down a resource. Well, maybe they could work together until he got his bearings. Maybe he could even manage whatever payment she expected out of it. Only one way to find out. “I’d like that, Master Zauvien.”

\*

She reached some understanding with the constable and escorted Colran back out to the dingy enclosed alleys of the neighborhood behind the freight spaceport Colran had come in through. “Have you been to Nar Shaddaa before?” Zauvien asked him as they walked.

“No.” Truth be told, his life experience was limited to Dromund Kaas and Korriban.

“It’s a very complex place. The Jedi can do a lot of good here. Of course, someday if it’s appropriate you may go to train in Republic space instead. Tranquillity isn’t an easy thing to find out here.”

Colran kept his mouth shut. He watched. He listened.

She kept up running commentary about the Jedi and about their surroundings. Her voice was gentle and musical. She kept throwing questions at him and he kept answering in monosyllables. Enough so she couldn’t get angry at him for failure to cooperate, not enough to give her anything she could hurt him with.

She stopped outside a building done out in a huge geometric mural. "Here's where the local Jedi live. Before we go in, do you have any questions for me?"

Usually a trap, that prompt. But she had been kind so far, and he was desperately curious by now. "I'm sorry to ask, master, but what are...what is your species?"

She smiled and touched one headtail. "I am Togruta. My people do not live in the Empire."

"I see. I, I didn't mean to be rude."

"No. Do not be afraid to ask questions. If you were trained on Korriban, I think there is a very, very great deal you can stand to learn."

He nodded. To have ready access to answers would be new. New and wonderful. He was starving for something more than the tired repetitive lines of the Sith.

Zauvien gave him a long thoughtful look, then reached out to cup his cheek. It took a profound effort of will for him to keep from flinching. "Don't be afraid," she said, her voice gentle and motherly. Motherly was another word for not having found the catch yet. "You made it. I know you don't trust me now, and you may not trust me for a long time." Mercifully, she let her hand drop. "But you're not among the Sith anymore. You're safe now. And it will be my honor to teach you what you've come so far to learn."

Maybe she meant it.

She led him inside into a warren of hallways, still talking as she went. "I'll see to it there's a bedroom prepped for you. For now I think I'll leave you to get acquainted with the pantry. Eat all you like, I'm going out to resupply tomorrow anyway." She brought him around the corner into a

brightly lit kitchen with a huge refrigerator in one corner and a tall well-stocked snack shelf in another.

Master Zauvien presented it all with a sweeping gesture. "Welcome home, Colran."

## **Worlds Colliding**

22 BTC

Colran woke up and crept out of his dark little room to find breakfast. The temple's small cafeteria was already busy with a somewhat alarming number of aliens and a few humans. Many gave him curious looks; some smiled and greeted him. He nodded cautiously in return while he gathered food. When a slim green-skinned youth approached him with the evident intention of talking, Colran fled to find someplace quiet to eat.

He settled in a stairwell that wasn't seeing any use and ate quickly, then set about seeking Master Zauvien. He ran into the Togruta back by the cafeteria.

"Good morning," she said. "Have you eaten?"

"Yes, master."

"Then we should get started." She smiled and ushered him into a small room down the hall.

He had to ask something. "Master, how will I be paying for this training?"

"You won't," said Zauvien. "When you have attained some skill, you will be able to go out into the world and serve as a Jedi. But for now the Order will provide for your needs."

That was unexpected, bordering on nonsensical. "Why?"

"It is our way. We understand that by giving a little now – food, shelter, learning – we enrich the galaxy for many years to come."

"Don't your students just go their own way once they have what they want?"

"Sometimes," said Zauvien. "It is rare. Now come. There will be time for general questions later. For now we should attend to your first lesson." She smiled encouragingly. "There are simple exercises a Jedi does to attain centering and peace. Meditation is a way of returning to tranquility, no matter one's circumstances. I'm

going to guess you never practiced that."

"We did. Sort of." Sith were encouraged to spent time turning their own grievances and hate over in their minds.

"Please, sit." She settled cross-legged on the floor, skillfully arranging her robes around her legs.

He scanned the room. One door. He faced it squarely. No windows; that was something comforting about the metal enclosures of Nar Shaddaa. Enemies without tech would have trouble observing anything. It was no excuse to let down his guard, but it was something.

Master Zauvien guessed his hesitation and smiled encouragingly. "Nothing's coming to harm you."

He glowered at her. He wasn't scared, not that he would let her see. "Of course not, master."

"Be at peace, Colran."

She kept saying that. He sighed and tried to do as she commanded. "Yes, master."

"You can call me Master Zauvien. Jedi prefer to acknowledge the individual."

“Why? A lord’s a lord.”

“‘Master’ is a title of respect, but it goes with the person, not the rank. I’m not just a thing that gives orders.” She said it gently.

“Very well. Master Zauvien.” He sat down facing her. Time to work.

“To meditate,” she said in her flutelike voice, “is to open oneself to the Force, to move in harmony with it. To be aware with it.”

He stirred up his own fear and basic anger. The Force was there, a dark stain, the power he relied on. At least he could count on that.

Zauvien’s blue eyes widened. “Calm yourself, Colran. Let go of your fear. Let the Force come to you.”

“But if you don’t grab it you can’t use it.”

“Don’t use. Feel. Don’t act. Be.”

He closed his eyes and tried not to do anything. It was difficult, but he wanted to get it right. He felt along the dark lines of his awareness; there was a comfort in it.

“Don’t reach,” Zauvien insisted. “Just breathe.”

“How is that going to help, Master Zauvien?”

“The Light Side is harmony. It will welcome you if you open yourself to it.”

Colran sat still and tried to concentrate his energies in himself. Let it all come to him. Gather it, trap it. Prepare it for whatever purpose he might need it to serve.

“Calm yourself,” she insisted.

He opened his eyes again, his anger flaring. “What does that even mean? I don’t understand what you want! How does calming anything

serve you?" Frustration and bewilderment together overcame his caution. "All of it. How can you think no one's going to take advantage when you're this open? It doesn't make any sense! How do you people survive like this?"

"We survive by living in a civilized world."

"A civilized world looks like a weak one, master."

Zauvien's voice took on a hard edge. "It's a better one to live in. You'll note we as a people have managed to get this far."

Colran didn't want to know what happened when a Jedi got pushed too far. "I'm sorry. It's just

hard to understand how this doesn't all fall apart. The charity, the carelessness, the

the not-using the power you have. My whole point coming was to see what could work that isn't Sith, but I didn't expect this."

Her demeanor calmed. "Perhaps it's time to let go of your expectations," she said gently.

"Let go? Nobody ever got anywhere by giving up what's theirs."

"You're wrong. The Jedi have."

## **Home Ec**

22 BTC

Colran joined in line with the other padawans to bring in the dormitory and guest quarters' clean linens and start making beds. He didn't like this particular exercise because supervisors demanded that everyone work in pairs, the better to deal with large sheets. He disliked dealing with the other padawans nearly as much as they disliked dealing with the Sith.



He was assigned to work opposite a green alien named Gend. Mirialan, he reminded himself. He was a few years older than Colran, brown-haired, friendly-looking. Colran mumbled an introduction and got going.

They grabbed a basket and brought it upstairs to one of the guest rooms, stripping the old sheets, laying down the new, arranging the blanket and pillows in quick perfunctory motions. This exercise struck him as infinitely less important than learning or working or practicing or watching plasticcoat dry, but Master Zauvien said the padawans did chores, so Padawan Colran did chores.

A room or two later Colran caught Gend half-smiling at him. "Not your favorite thing," said Gend.

"No," said Colran, tugging his side of the blanket straight.

The Mirialan smiled the kind of smile that indicated he was trying to come up with another way to charm Colran out of his supposed shell. "No regard for the venerable profession of sheet-straightening?"

Anyone smiling like that wouldn't be satisfied with short answers and unfriendly hints; Colran had tried. Repeatedly. This time he avoided eye contact, choosing to concentrate on getting his work done right, and he elaborated. "I never did this before I came here. What's the point? You're going to mess it up again in a few hours, practically no one sees it anyway, and it takes up time you could spend doing worthwhile things."

"It's supposed to be a devotional exercise as much as anything," said the Mirialan. "This is service, something calm and simple to do that contributes to the greater good. It's the Jedi ideal in a nutshell."

"Our ideal is arranging blankets on things?" He would have to run that one by Master Zauvien. Times like this he wondered what was so bad about Sith ambition; Jedi simplicity had its charm, but sometimes it felt really, really underwhelming.

"Our ideal is doing all things well in service of the whole and are you actually fluffing that pillow?"

Colran stopped. "What? It was all flat. It'd be uncomfortable."

"You're pretty dedicated to detail for someone who thinks it's a waste of time."

"I'm making the temple look good here," he said defensively. "Nobody wants to stay someplace without comfortable pillows."

"See? It matters after all."

The guy had clearly done his homework in the "Jedi tracking and reversal of the opponent's idea" department. Sooner or later Colran would get the hang of that himself.

Gend carried on cheerfully. "You work good. Partner up next time, too? Assuming we're not lost in the mob next time we both pull housekeeping duty."

"Yeah, I guess. Lost won't be a problem, just look for the Sith." Odd, that the conversation had run for so long without that term coming up.

Gend grinned. "I don't know any. Sith don't waste their time making beds."

## **Music**

21 BTC – Colran Niral is 16 years old.

"Colran," said Gend. "I admire your focus, but I was starting to think you would never wake up."

The human padawan stood up and brushed off his knees. "I meditate this long every day," he said. "Master Zauvien's idea. Is something wrong?"

"Far from it," said the Mirialan. "I was going to invite you to the Holonook, there's a cafhouse as of about half an hour from now. A bunch of us are going."

"There's a what?" Colran said blankly.

"Cafhouse. Some local musicians come in, play for a while? The rest of us have delicious beverages – in moderation – and relax?" He caught Colran's

skeptical look. "It's almost all Jedi or guests of the temple there, nobody's going wild. It's actually a nice way for us to exchange things about the places we've been and things we've learned. I think you might like it."

Colran wasn't so sure. But Gend had been all right so far in their acquaintance. And it would, at least, be something new; Master Zauvien's lessons offered a challenge, but too often it was the challenge of not fidgeting or giving up in the frustration of keeping up with her Light Side discipline demands. He gave his studies all he could, but it wasn't easy and it was monotonous.

"Okay," he said.

He followed the older padawan through the winding halls of the Temple; it was one of the larger ones on Nar Shaddaa, and crowded at that, but eventually they reached the entry hall.

"Padawan." Master Zauvien's voice rang high and clear across the room. "Where are you going?"

"Master Zauvien." Colran approached and bowed. He should probably have checked in with her anyway; she always was careful to account for his whereabouts at all times. "I'd finished my meditations, I was going to go with Gend down to the cantina for a while."

"It's the cultural exchange," Gend told the Togruta. "He won't get lost anywhere, I promise."

Zauvien's expression wasn't quite friendly until she finished some train of thought and composed herself. "Of course. That's a very kind offer, Gend. I hope you both find it beneficial."

"My master always said the more you know about the worlds out there, the more compassion you can learn for them." The Mirialan's cheerful statement seemed to be directed at both of them. "Come on, let's go."

\*

The Holonook was a low poorly-lit cantina down the street from the temple; despite that unpromising start it managed to make itself more cozy

than dirty. Upholstered booths and wrought-phobium tables offered ample seating while a big fireplace and holoprojected fire up near a stage at one end of the room provided much of the light.

Colran followed Gend to the bar, which was for the evening serving approximately everything except alcohol. Colran opted for water: the safest thing. Then he headed to a table to settle between Gend and a fellow human padawan, a boy around his own age who greeted them both with an easygoing smile.

He gave Colran a second, closer look. "Wondered if we'd ever see you off temple grounds. I'm Iroth."

Right. And Colran was that Sith everyone knew about. "Colran," he muttered. "I heard this might be interesting."

"You're in for a treat."

"If any questions come up, feel free to ask – quietly," added Gend. "There's a lot going on."

And, as the milling crowd got their drinks and in some cases card decks or board games and then settled around tables, there really was. The padawans at Colran's table kept up a quiet meandering conversation all the way until the lights dimmed further and the night's first performers – a pair of humans, one with a wooden flute, one with a tambour – took their seats up front.

Outside a few harsh chants on Korriban and the loud opera he remembered playing in his father's house when he was very young, Colran had never really listened to music. Now there was a whole evening built around it; each song was buffered with a minute or two of chatter, but it always came back to the performers at the front of the room. The songs rose and thrummed and ran around in changing patterns, some higher voices and instruments ringing in his ears, some lower ones seeming to sing through the floor itself.

Not only was it great to listen to, it was fascinating to watch. For once he forgot to keep himself invisible; there was too much to ask about, and

Gend and his friend seemed willing to explain in hushed voices. The instruments, the species, the languages; the variety was dizzying and most of them were, one way or another, beautiful. There was a raucous Rattataki chorus that had everyone stamping their feet, and a mixed quartet of humans and Twi'leks telling a spoken story over soft woodwind harmonies, and a haunting ballad sung by a Mirialan girl who made the mandoviol sound like running water and things lost.

By the conversation between songs Colran gathered that Gend and Iroth knew a number of these people. Colran knew a few faces from seeing them around the Temple – there were even full Jedi Knights in some of the performing groups – but he hadn't ever spoken to most of them. And he certainly hadn't ever seen them like this.

The evening went out on a singalong of some kind of thing about brotherhood or something; it was hard to make out the words when almost everyone in the room was cheerfully noising along. Gend gave him a look halfway through as if to suggest that he should start following as well. Colran shrank back in his chair and kept listening.

Which didn't spare him Gend's sharp eye as soon as they all stood to leave. "So? What'd you think?"

"Wow," said Colran. "It's not like the Temple."

"It's good perspective, though," said Iroth. "At least that's what Gend's master is always saying."

"Huh." Colran still had questions. "So the mandoviol." Definitely his favorite instrument of the ones he'd seen. "How do you even start learning that? All the strings." The wind stuff made sense, no more than a stop or two for each finger. The mandoviol was all over the place.

"They tell me it's easy enough after a year or two," said Iroth. "It's definitely fun, though. You can be a one-man performing outfit with it."

"Or woman," Gend pointed out. "Lise – the Mirialan who did *Ta Nalan Sri* – is one of the best players in town, and I think she's got some actual formal voice training on top of that." He looked to Colran. "If you're curious about the 'viol, I bet if you asked her she could show you around some."

Reflexive alarm kicked in. "I can't do that."

"Sure you can. She's given lessons before, she's really good."

"Yeah, but

" talking to additional strangers today was a daunting prospect, much more so if it was a girl who had just dazzled the whole house with her talent. "Nobody wants to talk to the Sith."

"I think that's less of an obstacle than you make it out to be sometimes."

"I can't just walk up and demand music lessons from somebody I've never even met."

"We can fix part of that."

Colran had a sinking feeling. "No need."

"She's walking home the same way we are." Gend paused, suddenly doing his serene-teacher face. "She's a fellow Jedi, Colran. She doesn't bite."

"Jedi surprise you," muttered Colran. "Just established that here."

Gend blinked, then laughed out loud. "Then just don't talk. We're still going; like I said, we're all walking home the same way."

## **Myths and Legends**

21 BTC

Nar Shaddaa

"Of course Force ghosts exist." Colran was sitting at lunch with Gend, Xar, and Iroth. "Half the great Sith – great by Sith standards, anyway – have left some of their own consciousness impressed on the Force when they fell. You can feel the focus of Dark Side energy just walking through their tombs."

"But nothing jumps out and starts talking to you," Gend said, and the other two laughed.

"I've never seen it," admitted Colran, and his embarrassment at their laughter was somewhat lessened by his relief to this day that he had never been asked to venture into those tombs. "I'm just saying, these are sacred stories for a reason and I think it's more than propaganda. Freedon Nadd corrupted both Exar Kun and other weaker minds to the Dark Side long after his body died. Sith don't become one with the Force but all our stories indicate that some of them leashed the Force into oneness with them."

"Colran," came Master Zauvien's high voice from a few paces away. "Come here."

Colran obeyed quickly. Zauvien didn't mete out punishments, but over time he had become eager to follow her orders anyway. Strange, that penalties didn't have to be involved. He found himself wanting to measure up in her eyes, even when she was being difficult about points of philosophy or daily life that he didn't see any sense in.

She looked concerned. "I overheard you talking," she said. "I hope you understand that these are dangerous stories, Colran. They come from a very toxic culture."

"I think everybody knows that."

"Not everybody. Sith live by them as though they were truisms. Jedi do not."

She always did worry about the distinction. Even when it should be obvious he wasn't running some kind of Sith recruitment scam. "I understand. But it's still important for us to know what went wrong about

the ancient Sith, right? I mean, how do we avoid repeating what they did if we never pay attention to what they did?"

Zauvien regarded him in silence for a long moment, then nodded. "Those are valuable lessons that require extremely cautious attention and study," she said. "You're wise to acknowledge that such study must be undertaken with great care." She folded her arms and her expression lightened a little. "I can speak to the archivist if you are interested in recording these things. I can listen as well and we'll see what good we can derive from the Sith legends. Is that something you'd be willing to do?"

"Yes, Master Zauvien." He owed them that much, especially if they really knew as little Sith lore as Xar and the others did. "I'd love to."

"Good. Now, go back to your friends." She smiled. "Force Studies at seven, I expect to see you there." She met his bow with a nod and went on her regal way.

Colran headed back to the table. "She get mad about Freedom Nadd?" asked Gend.

"I'm not supposed to be corrupting you with Sith memories," Colran said lightly. "She said I should help her record this stuff for the archives."

"So you can corrupt everybody for ages to come," said velvet-voiced Xar. "Sometimes I wonder about her planning skills."

"Don't. Zauvien is the best master I could ask for."

"She's all right. I'm just really glad you get some time in your busy schedule for normal people. If it's corruption she's scared of, I've got some legends that'd make her head-tails curl."

"Oh, my stars, don't get her started," said Iroth, turning to face Colran. "Mirialans are freaks. Every story they have is terrifying." Gend the Mirialan was maintaining a very bad innocent face upon listening to this; Xar the Mirialan just laughed.

"Now you've got me curious," said Colran. Iroth made an exaggerated cut-throat gesture, which did not stop anybody.



Xar laughed again and stood. "Sorry, but I've gotta run for now." She met Colran's eye. "Catch me later, I might show you a thing or two." Her green eyes sparkled, and then she left.

## **Combat**

21 BTC

Xar was specializing in combat.

Nar Shaddaa was not the usual training ground for warrior Knights, but Xar's Master, from Hutt space himself, didn't trust the "ivory tower" he supposed the Core Worlds to be. Anyway, he was a weaponsmaster and Xar was a very apt pupil, and that was one thing Colran couldn't do no matter how much he wanted to. He didn't have the raw Force control to keep his thin limbs going in the right ways.

Not that he would be choosing training to stay close to the Mirialan girl anyway, because while he was quite sure their relationship was appropriate, he probably shouldn't get any closer to her silver laugh and velvet voice and wicked sense of humor. This was almost certainly the kind of desire he had been warned against. Having watched the oft-lethal wrecks of teenage relationships on Korriban he understood why unrestrained attraction was such a bad idea.

Colran wouldn't get closer to Xar, but in past months in general he had gotten used to company and started wanting more. He attended the kafehouses every two weeks, let Gend and Iroth lead the way in socializing, learned about the instruments and about the players' home planets. Thought about where and how he might learn more. Some of the information on other cultures was locked in with the Temple historians; not quite as good as first-hand experience but a lot easier to get permission for, and the scholar librarians were themselves very kind and worth talking to.

In truth, Colran was growing anxious to learn some specialization. Something that would impress...that is, would be, in general, impressiv...well, something that would help him develop his innate talents to the fullest, which was a worthy goal. He didn't have the kind of

Force/physical coordination to master combat, but he could study. It was a start, anyway.

## **Refusal**

20 BTC: Colran is 17

"Hey, Xar." Colran knocked at the door to the dorm room the Mirialan girl shared with several other padawans. "You ready?"

"Just a second," she called. There was a muffled bump, footsteps, then Xar appeared at the door. Her hands were behind her back for some reason; she gestured him in by jerking her head. "Help me with this."

He stepped into her room. It had a yellow-gold curtain over the artificial light and a subtle pleasant scent. He could tell which of the four bunks was hers, or guessed he could, by the geometric-patterned blanket thrown haphazardly across it.

Xar had turned her back to him. He saw that her shirt buttoned down the back; she was grabbing the two edges of it and a couple of the buttons were undone. "I can't reach these," she explained over her shoulder.

"Xar, uh..." The skin of her back was smooth, a green slightly paler than her face, and line of her backbone was straight, and - right, she had made a request. He pulled her shirt's edges together and nimbly buttoned them, careful to avoid touching her.

She laughed softly when she turned around. "Thanks," she said, arching an eyebrow. "Now I'm ready to go."

She didn't move, though. Colran noticed now that there was a whitish smudge on her face. He dared to say "Hold up, you've got something on your lip." He raised his hand to his own face to point out the problem spot.

Xar swiped a couple of times and missed. She giggled when he gestured again. "You're just messing with me."

"No, honest." She wasn't getting any closer to clearing it. He leaned in and reached for her, his thoughts rushing a little beyond his hand to reach the softness of her lips.

He stopped himself halfway. It suddenly occurred to him that he was alone with this girl in her bedroom and they were playing, flirting even, and it was very wrong of him to be here doing this.

Colran dropped his hand and edged backward.

Xar tilted her head and pouted. "What, you afraid I'll give you *yennen*?"

"No," he said. "We'd better go."

"I didn't think we were in that big a hurry?"

"It's not that."

"So what is it?" she challenged.

"If you feel anything you must know why we shouldn't be alone together. This..." he gestured around, intensely aware of the bed only a couple of paces away..."it isn't the Jedi way."

Her brows lowered and her voice rose. "Really? I thought you were different from the rest of 'em. That was what made you fun, Colran."

He wanted to be fun for her. But there were rules, and his whole purpose here was to get them right. "I can't do this. I'm sorry, Xar." He backed away further. "I have to go."

He regretted it the second he stumbled into the hallway. He had just hurt Xar, and angered her, and made a fool of himself in front of her, all for - what, a rule they weren't going to be caught in? In a single stroke he had wrecked their friendship, and the breathless possibility beyond friendship, and if following Jedi rules was supposed to give him some kind of satisfaction, well, the rules weren't holding up their end of the deal. He just felt sick.

Usually when he felt troubled he would go to Master Zauvien, but Master Zauvien couldn't hear about this. It would get Xar in trouble. And him, too; he was partly to blame for getting into the situation. Besides, for once the thought of Zauvien's approval for his efforts wasn't much comfort. Instead he headed back to his own dormitory. No way was he going back out

where Xar might walk through. He threw himself on his bed and thought about her in the curtain-filtered light. Squeezing his eyes shut didn't make her go away. He wondered what her lips would have felt like after all. It would defeat everything he had worked for so far to find out. That didn't stop him from wondering.

## **New Paths**

"Colran. I've been called away to serve our efforts on Alderaan. You'll be coming with me." Master Zauvien conspicuously gauged Colran's reaction. "Whatever this trouble you won't talk about is, I hope that a change of scenery will do you good."

"I think it will, Master Zauvien." The Togruta hadn't been pleased at his reticence over what he couldn't help but dwell on, the social disaster as Xar and he started avoiding each other. Colran thought Zauvien had suspicions, but he couldn't do anything about that. He had done the right thing. He just didn't want to talk about it.

A change of scenery would do him good.

"What are we going there to do?" asked Colran.

"I'm to offer Force healing against an unusual malady that one of the lords of House Alde suffers from. It sounds alarming, but our brother there believes my skills will serve."

"Healing." Colran had made one effort with Zauvien, once, on a damaged plant, to do an elementary Force healing. He had had some talent with it on Korriban; that talent had earned him a dubious popularity among the other students, especially those confident enough in their own threats to be sure Colran would never breathe a word of their weakness. With Zauvien he had instinctively called on the Dark Side, a rich flow to force the plant's tissues to knit back together; Zauvien had cut him off within seconds and returned him to far more elementary Force exercises. They had not discussed learning healing since.

“There will be much for you to do,” she said, and then gave him the cool smile that was her way of offering encouragement. “And much to learn.”

Colran ate with Gend and a couple of others that night; Xar was nowhere in sight, which made for the most anxious kind of relief he had ever felt. He stayed awake well into the night, wondering about Alderaan. Did they have a Temple like this there? Was he supposed to dress differently? Was Basic the language of choice with their Lords? What kind of nobility - or Force users - did they have, anyway? Would Xar spread rumors about him when he was gone? When would he see Gend and the others again?

Colran lay still beside the questions of the future and contemplated them until his sleep came.

## **Trio**

NotLP: Culture Shock, 300 words.

20 BTC

Colran held on to his small pack of clothes and Zauvien’s equally modest bag of possessions. The human followed his Togruta master onto the great shuttle from Nar Shaddaa to Alderaan; once they had seats she leaned over a little to confer with him under the sound of the crowd.

“Alderaan is safe for allies of the Republic,” said Zauvien. “It is a proud and ancient planet, not quick to enter into wars. Thus far it has stood clear of this one.”

Colran could understand any of several reactions to the Great War, but he couldn’t explain that one. “Why?”

“As I said, they do not lightly enter into conflicts. Instead they dedicate their resources toward preserving the peace of their own home.”

“But that’s foolish. They can’t ignore it forever.”

“They have survived thus far. In truth there is value to their neutrality: when the time comes for peace talks, people will look for a place not stained with blood to start.”

“Neither side wants a halfway peace. They’d be better off lending their resources to us, ending the war for good.”

“The most direct path to the goal is not always the best one. The Republic would welcome them as allies, but they have the right to hold themselves apart if they believe it is necessary.”

“Sometimes you have to fight. I’m not saying it’s our first choice, but sometimes it’s the only one that makes sense.”

Her gaze stayed steady. “I pray that they are never forced into that.”

She didn’t have to be that serene all the time; there were some topics that Colran really felt she should show concern about. But he accepted this for now. In time she would show him why she thought this way, or else he would find satisfaction in the answers she had already given. It could sometimes be hard to wait, but Zauvien did want him to understand, and for that he could be patient.

NotLP: Climate and Weather. 150 words.

20 BTC

When Colran walked out under the dim sky, something attacked his head. A moment of flurrying confusion, then the hard little impacts sorted themselves out in his mind: rain. He was under an open sky, and it was raining.

It had been a long time. Rain was Colran’s defining memory of his childhood home on Dromund Kaas: Dromund Kaas which, while it had not been happy, had been home in a way that Korriban and Nar Shaddaa never could. To borrow one of Gend’s expressions, though they had never discussed this in particular, Colran had roots there.

“Colran?” His master’s flutelike voice cut into his rising memories.

He tried to summon a more serious countenance. "Rain, Master Zauvien. It's been a while."

"Come along," she said, and this time her voice smiled a little. "There will be time to go outdoors once we've met with our hosts."

And, NotLP: Allies, 300 words.

20 BTC

---text transmission---

~

Gend,

*I hope the Temple's night life hasn't been too wild for you to read a minute. Scheduling a holocall may be a bit beyond me right now - I'm keeping busy.*

*Alderaan is heartstoppingly beautiful. All mountains and forests and grand palaces - the kind of place that would cross the street if it saw Nar Shaddaa slouching down the sidewalk. All these huge open spaces, or even the huge closed ones, make me wish I had some of the home crowd to see it with me.*

*The Force feels subtly different on this planet. Master Zauvien says that if you're attuned enough it does, and will, on every planet we go to - universal Force, but local concentration of life. It's a little more muted here, but a lot more peaceful. Compared to the huge ball of conflicted people that is Nar Shaddaa I guess that makes sense.*

*I've been assisting Master Zauvien in attending to the sick here. I couldn't manage her Force rituals if I tried, but I can do the supporting things. And there are little requests here and there: for a mediator, a caretaker, a guard (more for ceremony's sake than for real danger). Just so someone reliable has their eye on things.*

*Everyone here has been incredibly welcoming and happy to tell me about the planet and themselves. I was worried I wouldn't know what to do with myself, but that hasn't been a problem - Jedi are welcome and they're accepting the padawan as*

*welcome, too. We're helping people. That's what everything I've done has been leading up toward. And it's good.*

*I hope everyone at the Temple is well. You're all in my thoughts.*

*Your friend,*

*Colran*

~

## **Shooting Star**

"Walk outside with me, won't you? There's supposed to be a meteor shower tonight."

Colran wasn't 100% clear on his master's policy on taking walks at night with pretty young women. But his hostess on Alderaan had been nothing but gracious, and after all, it was a mild and deliriously starry night out."

She led him to a bench overlooking them mountain path. "There," she said, pointing. "What do they call them where you're from?"

"Meteors? It's a dead...soul," he said. A dead acolyte, actually, was the story on Korriban.

She made a pretty face. "Little macabre, don't you think? Around here they're just shooting stars. You make wishes on them."

"Wishes? I like that."

"Don't look at me," she giggled, "look at *that*," and pointed out across the landscape.

The quiet immensity of night sat with them, and it was good company.

## **Returning**

15 BTC

Colran would have known Xar's way of moving from ten clicks away. And he avoided her. After these years he wasn't sure what it would be like to



see her face to face, and to be honest he was embarrassed at the circumstances under which they had parted. It was a lot cleaner to avoid her entirely.

But the Temple had limited space, and even though he spent as much time as he could at the clinic the Jedi ran a few levels away, he had to return to the Temple at night.

She looked incredible. She had been a beautiful teenager, and now he was very very aware that she had grown into a beautiful adult. Wide green eyes, full dark green lips, short black hair curling free of what he knew had been her attempts to comb it. She didn't look half bad in her robes, either. And she was here. Here, right this moment, and smiling at him, the clean dark tattoos about her mouth stretching wide with her mouth.

"Hi," said Colran.

"Hi," said Xar. "I heard you came back."

"Yeah. A couple of weeks now. I hope you don't think I've been avoiding you. Because I,"

"Yeah," she said quickly. "I know. And you were right. What you said, the last time we talked. You were right."

"Yeah. That's..."

"Because I don't think either of us was ready to handle any kind of, thing. You know? We were too young."

"Yeah. We were. I mean, in general, we couldn't, so, yeah."

"Yeah," said Xar.

"It's good to see you," said Colran.

Her old wicked smile burst through her uneasiness. "Isn't it, though?"

After that, he couldn't not speak to her.

## Infection

14 BTC. Rrudobar, one of the orbital cities of the planet Duro.

Colran Niral recognized the woman as soon as she entered the clinic. Not the face – pretty, pale – nor the hair – short, brunette, charmingly disheveled – nor anything else about her specifically, but the flushed throat, a certain tremble. She came up to his desk and opened her mouth, but it was a moment before her voice caught up. “Balmorran strep,” she said.

He wasn’t surprised. Refugees from Balmorra streamed throughout the Core Worlds at a staggering rate, and they brought their diseases with them. He couldn’t let this poor plainly dressed and obviously half-desperate woman stick around where she might infect others.

So he ushered her into one of the back rooms and settled her on an examination table. “Nice to have a patient who already knows what’s going on,” he said. Patients who had the wrong idea could be an incredible pain, but this one was spot on.

“I aim to help,” she rasped.

“Easy.” First things first. He washed his hands, then laid them on her throat and entered into the Force meditation that could begin to cleanse and restore.

It was tougher than he expected. He suspected the woman had one or two underlying conditions. Something to check out. But he could at least soothe her throat enough for her to talk.

“What’s your name?” he asked.

“Dolarra,” she said. “Dolarra Reyne.”

“Jedi padawan Colran. Pleased to meet you.”

She rubbed her throat. “For that relief alone, I’m pleased to meet you, too.”

He had to rest and recharge a little while yet. Healing wasn’t exactly his strong point. Growing up Sith hadn’t given him a lot of opportunity for it.

"Fresh off Balmorra?" he asked.

"Yeah. It's

kind of a mess."

"I'm sorry. Got any place to go? The Jedi have some services on station here, we can help fix you up if you need."

"That's very kind, but no, I've got a place."

"Then you're luckier than most. Wait a moment, I'm going to give another round."

"Is that something Jedi usually have to do?"

"Still learning here. You're stuck with me while my master takes a day off."

She tilted her head, scanned his face, and smiled a small smile. "Could be worse, I suppose."

"Lie back," ordered Colran. Dolarra obediently relaxed onto the table and started breathing calmly, deeply. He laid his hands on her stomach and slipped into the Force itself, mending, pushing away the clouds of sickness.

And then he felt something. He remembered it from healing Imperial military, from some dealings with Imperial Intelligence. It was an insidious thing, not just a lump of metal but a feeling, like a slow death.

He jerked out of his meditation before he could control himself. Balmorran? No.

"There's an implant in your spine," he said carefully. "Somewhat less than healthy, it seems."

"Oh, that, it's nothing," said Dolarra. "Cut-rate cybernetics from back when I figured slicing was a viable career option."

"I have yet to feel a commercial piece like that. In fact, I haven't felt anything like it since the last time I was on Dromund Kaas."

She seemed surprisingly calm in light of the near-accusation. "There's a wild idea."

"Wild but true. I know that make and model."

"I didn't figure you for an Imperial type," she said coyly.

"No? You've been watching me close enough."

She gave him a rapid once-over, and he was suddenly, acutely aware that he was unarmed. "Will you let me go?" she said.

"Of course." He immediately kicked himself for saying it. This was an Imp pretending not to be an Imp; that could only lead to bad things. "It's been a long time since I talked to anyone from the homeland."

"I'm a little surprised a Jedi would care about that."

"I'm only an entry-level Jedi," he told her.

Those blue eyes sparkled like sunlight on the water when she smiled. "Dromund Kaas is thriving," she told him. "Everyone's eyes are on the war, but the planet is at peace."

He wanted to ask about his family, just on the off chance

but that was too great a risk. "I guess you're here for Intelligence?"

"I'm here for strep throat."

"You're a cagey one, aren't you?"

She ignored him. "I hear diseases are a lot more difficult than wounds to Force heal. You're not half bad. I know more than one organization that would love to have somebody like you running support. Saving people. Saving the kind of people who have the sense to survive once they walk out the door."

"Killing people. That's what Sith do."

"Depends how skillfully you play it. If the Empire were made entirely of the killing fanatics, we would never have pulled together to get this far. Our real power is in the sane people behind the scenes. The likes of me." She paused. "Maybe the likes of you."

"I didn't bring you in here for a recruitment speech."

"No, you brought me in because you have some kind of ministry. What I'm struggling to understand is why you're doing it here when our own people are bleeding, too."

"These people need my help."

"These people will stagger on, another space station, maybe another two, before they die of poverty or despair or stupidity. The Republic has no idea how to give them purpose. They have no idea how to take care of themselves."

"That's why the Jedi are here."

"To waste their time and their strength. Too little, spread too thin. Why wear yourself out against that? You could do so much more good if you were working with competent leadership."

"Imperial competence is another word for large-scale murder. That's why I'm here and not back on Dromund Kaas."

"But you miss it."

"I didn't say that."

"Sure you did. How long has it been since you saw home?"

He was too off balance to not answer. "Fifteen years. Seven since Korriban, my last time in Imperial space."

"You must've gone to Korriban very young."

"Yeah."

"It's a long time to go without seeing home."

He shook his head. "Home's here now."

"That's not what your eyes are saying. Can it be that your Jedi lifestyle – not that I'm criticizing the digs – isn't quite as satisfying as you had hoped?"

He frowned. "Hold still." And he steeled himself for another Force meditation, sinking into the corruption of that strong but damaged body. Little by little, thread by thread of the finely woven aura. This woman had seen sickness. She had seen pain. But he had the skill to set that right.

"I would chastise you for avoiding me," she said when he came out of it, "except that I do like getting less sick."

"This hit you hard. Don't you people keep up on shots?"

"With the strains going around nowadays? I don't have the time or the vein capacity for the number of vaccines I would need."

"And the war's only making that germ-mixing worse, both accidentally and on purpose. The sooner it ends, the better."

"It'll end when the Empire wins," she said. "You know that. You're sweet, but you've seen how the Jedi handle things. They don't have what it takes to succeed. They're too busy running free clinics to tend to the refugees from the planets they're not strong enough to defend."

"I'd rather go out like this than live in an Imperial world again."

"A world of opportunity? A world where skill and strength win out over rulebooks and empty platitudes? I'm not even upper class, Colran, but I would fight and die to keep the Empire going."

A chill ran through him. "Then maybe I shouldn't let you leave after all."

Twin doors slammed shut in Dolarra's eyes. She sat up. "Thanks for the help. There's places I need to be."

"I can't allow that." He tried to reach for the snub-nose blaster strapped to her thigh under her tunic. She got to it first. He had to resort to Force

bursting a brief stun and trying to wrest it from her grip. For a small and still-sick woman she was hellishly strong.

"I don't want to hurt you," he told her.

"Maybe that's your problem." She kicked, headbutted, wrenched her hand and its blaster away, placed a shot that only his last-minute dodge reduced from a chest wound to an arm wound.

He raised a hand and started manipulating the air itself, pushing her down against one wall. She grunted and struggled, but couldn't get up.

All the same, talking wasn't going to happen while he was concentrating on such a Force effort. Carefully he moved in, knelt on her legs, pinned her arms. He hated being so violent about it, but he had little choice.

Somehow she grinned anyway. Spirit in this one. That was something he hadn't seen since he had come to this hellhole of a city. "What now, Jedi? You going to tell me I'm a bad bad girl and put me in jail? Because that's what your adopted family would do. No victory. No resolution. Only the postponement, over and over, of the struggle that our kind has the strength to win."

"Your kind," he told her. "Not ours."

"You ever miss the rain in Kaas City, Colran? The security of order, the certainty of authority, and the sweet knowledge that if you know better you can damn well take the reins? Our kind."

He surprised himself by releasing her.

They both stood up. She dug out her holocommunicator, tapped a button. "Here's my holo frequency. Call me if you ever want to talk."

He stood still and stared at the space where Dolarra had been until long after she had shown herself out. He was careful. He was always careful around his patients.

But she was gone, and the infection remained.

## Stifling

Master Zauvien was closeted with Master Rivarr in one of the meditation rooms of the small Durosian temple. Colran finished his errands early and went to seek her out to request a reply on some small matter.

By instinct he slowed before he reached the door. The discussion inside was being carried out in voices so clear he could hardly miss it.

“Will you be taking him back to Tython for his knight’s trials, or arranging something out here?”

“That is

a delicate question,” said Zauvien. “Personally I don’t believe Padawan Colran is ready for full knighthood.”

“Really? From all I’ve seen he’s matured very well. He’ll never be a lightsaber master, but he’s put in the work to be passable, and everything else? I would’ve called him ready a year or more ago.”

“But can he ever be ready?” Zauvien’s high musical voice played in a worried key. “Remember that he is Sith. He was born to their corruption and raised to it until he decided to con his way off Korriban, probably without thought for the ship’s crews he endangered on the way simply by virtue of being a fugitive. You didn’t meet him when he first arrived on Nar Shaddaa – he was practically a wild animal. Every time I asked him to touch the Force he would summon the Dark Side to mind too fast for me to stop him. He has worked hard, but the Sith beneath can never really be eradicated. Perhaps there is little more I can teach him, but if nothing else he must remain a padawan to keep him from becoming an uncontrolled agent.”

“Zauvien, I...we never knew.”

“And that’s a test in itself, isn’t it? Colran does well. I’m proud of him. He has accomplished wonders in his years here, when you consider where he started from. But ‘good, for a Sith’ isn’t qualification for Jedi. I cannot in good conscience give a child of Korriban the Jedi trials.”



“Surely the Force brought him to us for a reason.”

“And it was an honor to take him in. He listens to me. He is like a son to me. Even in this his identity opposes detachment. He doesn’t mean to, but it’s in his nature.”

Colran’s anger licked hot in him, but he held it tightly in place. It would not rule.

He knocked.

“Master. I didn’t come here to eavesdrop but I brought a question. I believe it can wait.

“Even now I feel your anger.”

“That happens when someone you trust turns on you. I’ve always admired your compassion and insight, so don’t play dumb about emotions now.

“If you don’t have anything to teach me and you’re only holding on to keep me restrained, why not send me to a master who can show me something new?”

“No other Jedi Master would take you,” she (snapped?) (said firmly?) (said with conviction?) (asserted?) “Do you think just anyone would volunteer to take one of Korriban’s students? And do you expect someone to see more potential in you than I have? You’ve come so far, so very far, but neither I nor anyone can truly take you further. Besides, it is wise to be wary of attachments but the bond between us is real and valuable. Could you replace that with another?”

“What would you do if I walked away?”

She pressed her lips together and took a slow breath through her nose. “I will not stop you. But I fear for you if you follow the path of pride. It is too easy to fall to the Dark Side if you act rashly based on – “

“To reject a years-old pattern would hardly be rash. Maybe it’s a correction past due.”

Resolve iced her manner. "Then you're leaving," she said.

"No."

"Explain."

In truth? He had nowhere else to go. "I'll stay. You've taught me that the ways of the Jedi aren't always easy. Perhaps more credibly, other Jedi have told me the same." He drew himself up to his full height: not much more than hers, but it would have to do. "Perhaps you don't believe your teachings can fully tame me, but I can control myself. And if that hasn't been demonstrated enough over the last six years, well, I've got my whole future to convince you."

## **Decision Point**

14 BTC. Rrudobar, one of the orbital cities of the planet Duro.

Jedi Padawan Colran Niral kept himself busy most days. His superiors considered that a good idea; even seven years after he had voluntarily defected from the Sith, they always seemed anxious to ensure that neither his mind nor his hands were ever left idle for long.

Twenty-three years old, and still having to sneak around to get time away from his babysitters.

The alleyway outside the Jedi enclave in Rrudobar City was dark and confined and powerfully smelly, but it was one place where he could reliably get time alone. Today he had his holocommunicator in one hand, but kept it down at his side as he paced.

There were places out there in the galaxy where he could take some time to think just because he wanted it. Places where his superiors would either make their orders clear or honestly expect to be challenged on them. Places where nobody would be examining his every move for moral correctness. Old, familiar complaints, but they never seemed to get tired.

There is no emotion, there is peace. Start pacing towards the trash heap at the back of the alley. He was safe with the Jedi. The people he ministered to

were safe, because of his work, because where he lived now nobody accepted casual murder or recreational cruelty. People were always glad to see him. Everyone who didn't know about his past was grateful to have a Jedi near.

Peace is a lie. There is only passion. Turn around, start back towards the street. But everyone who did know considered him tainted forever. And he was. He hated the Sith way, the Sith code, everything about it, but it was the soil and corrupted sunlight in which he had grown. He could never change that. Some part of him could never stop responding to raw emotion when he saw it. And, yes, when he felt it.

There is no ignorance, there is knowledge. Turn toward the trash heap. He had admitted his roots to the Jedi Order, to his teachers, to anyone who asked. He had admitted more recent emotional lapses to his master. Most of these authorities forgave him. Most of them thought he could still make something of himself, something good. Starting Sith didn't have to end badly.

Through passion, I gain strength. Turn toward the street. Still, was that the fight he was supposed to be fighting? Do a lot of Force busywork while his primary conflict was explaining himself to some of the very people he was trying to help? He hated being questioned by Jedi Masters who demanded justification for his existence. And as long as he was thinking about unnecessary fights, he remembered a recent struggle with a beautiful Force-blind woman. He hadn't healed the blaster wound she had left on his arm; he found the shame of it was...useful. Back when he was a Sith acolyte he would have flattened her long before she could've hurt him like that. Had his Jedi identity already forgotten what real self-defense was?

There is no passion, there is serenity. Turn toward the trash heap. Dolarra had been an Imperial. Of course she wouldn't know how to deal with anything except through combat. He could be better than that. He had to be. That was the whole point of his defection, wasn't it?

Through strength, I gain power. Turn toward the street. 'Better'? 'Better' might be trying to improve things back on Dromund Kaas. But going home would be costly. His father and brothers wouldn't accept his failure, his

years spent trying to behave like a Jedi. He would have to shed blood just to get back on equal standing among the Sith. And yet, equal standing there had so much more influence than a Jedi Padawan under a thousand stupid restrictions could hope for...

There is no chaos, there is harmony. Turn toward the trash heap. No. Going home was Dolarra's idea, a suggestion thrown at him to weaken his resolve. She was playing on his years of doubts, but he could pacify them again. He mustn't be impatient just because he was young and relatively powerless now. He needed to do what good he could where he was, in his proper place; this was the entire point of his training.

Through power, I gain victory. What had Dolarra said about doing good? Do it by ending the war. And only the Empire had the resolve to do that quickly. Do it by using his power to establish the good that the rabid face of the Sith never thought to. He wouldn't have believed it was possible, but she clearly did. Would it start in blood? Yes. It would have to, especially as he established credibility among his kind.

There is no death, there is the Force. It would likely end in blood, too. Sith careers always did. But was that really something to fear with this opportunity? How much more could he do as a Sith Lord, even a short-lived Sith Lord, than as a mistrusted padawan using the resources somebody else permitted him, on the schedule somebody else permitted him, while thinking the thoughts somebody else permitted him...?

Through victory, my chains are broken. The Force shall free me.

Colran pocketed his holocommunicator without dialing anything. I'll call you, Dolarra. But there are things I need to do first. You see, I never quite finished my Sith training. He exited the alley into the sunless murk of Rrudobar City, and for the first time since taking the title of Padawan he understood where he was going.

## **Homecoming**

"Brigs, what is this?"

Darth Eهران Niral was speaking to someone off the holo camera. Colran waited. Of course his father was going to play up the drama.

“My lord,” said the someone, “when Colran called I - “

“Oh, it has a name, does it?”

Back when he was a Sith acolyte Colran would’ve felt ashamed, would’ve waited for permission to speak. Now, though: “Father. I’m coming to visit.”

Eهران looked at his youngest son for one half-second of withering scorn. Then the holo image snapped off.

\*

The Niral compound was some ways west of Dromund Kaas. Here, amidst his father and brothers, was where Colran would have to start his return to Sith society. The prospects of a Jedi padawan had been less than inspiring; from Dromund Kaas he could begin this crazy plan to start using his Sith influence for good. He could call the strange blue-eyed woman who had challenged him to try, let her know that at least one Sith was ready to help. But first he had to earn the right to reenter his own house.

He crested the ridge above the estate and saw a lot of guard activity around the gate. A welcoming party. He would just as soon skip butchering his own household guards. He parked his speeder and worked his way around the high wall to a back door. The right user could run a slick Force trick to access the catch in the gate and get in.

The estate was oddly quiet. Colran kept his hood up as he slipped into the house proper and started toward the heart of the building, the great Niral audience chamber.

When he first heard the crackle of Force lightning, he started running.

He rounded a corner of one hallway and saw several unmoving figures. Combat crashed someplace further in. Into the great hall’s antechamber: people, fallen, everywhere. Guards in livery. Guards in unfamiliar armor.

People in robes. He didn't have time to stop and examine, not with the sounds coming from the audience chamber.

He ran in and took quick stock. Four people lying unmoving on the floor. One crawling, lightsaber drawn in one hand, toward one of the still figures. No, not quite still. The wounded Sith with the saber was going for a killing blow on - the target lifted his head enough for Colran to see his face - none other than Darth Eهران Niral.

*Father.* Colran didn't hesitate to reach forth and turn the crawling Sith's saber up into its bearer's face. A quick telekinetic push, a quick kill. Defense. Colran strode past the stranger and knelt next to his father.

Eهران was in bad shape. His aged face was livid, his expensive robes smelled scorched from the battle. He scowled fiercely at his son.

"You almost got something right," gasped Eهران. His first words to Colran in fifteen years. "Stripping my support, weakening my name in the city, getting the right people to turn a blind eye. I've been waiting for the blow. But you should've known better than to come yourself. Even wounded as I am, I can take a failure like you."

"I'm not here to fight you, father. What happened? Who are these people?"

"They're true Sith. I know why they're here. You, however, have no excuse to be in my house."

Colran scanned the room with his senses and picked up a poorly-masked ball of excitement nearby. He turned to a shadowy nook behind a pillar.

"Come out. Who are you?"

A slim masked figure in either dense metallic armor or a mostly-cyborg body walked out into the light. "Colran the legendary Jedi," it said in a feminine voice. "I wasn't expecting you. If you're not going to kill your father I'll have to ask you to step aside. I've worked too hard to get here."

"Darth Osetta," said Eهران.

"Eهران. I'm so sorry it took me so long to set up for this."

"After so many years of our little shadow dance, I thought you lacked the nerve."

"Not likely. Your eldest is dead at your gate, old man. Your second is dead in a pleasure house in Kaas City. Your third is dead in the antechamber here. Your youngest will fall soon. Then everything you have will be mine. Last I heard, you and the boy were on bad terms. Would you like to strike him down yourself?"

"I appreciate you leaving me that chance."

"Father, you don't mean that. If we band together we can - " Colran's sentence ended in a grunt as Eهران shot one hand forward with a spear of lightning. It hit like fire and pain and...and life, somehow. Like something he had forgotten a long time ago, something bright and red and right.

Colran didn't strike at his father. Instead he backed off and pulled together the tremendous concentration to Force drag the strange woman into place squarely between Colran and Eهران. The old man's next lightning strike hit her, and she lashed back in kind. Good. Good. This Darth Osetta first, and then...then what had to happen would happen.

She absorbed Colran's initial attacks without so much as flinching, and she kept her attention and her unmerciful Force lightning stream on Eهران. Eهران fired back weakly, his Force demonstration spitting and nearly falling short.

Colran started throwing things. Decorations, the fallen useless blasters of the dead, anything that might damage her.

She put up a shield and sent a devastating, blinding burst of Force power at Eهران. Colran yelled wordlessly and, with a sudden strange ease, tore her shield aside to close crushing force around her mask and helmet. Enemy. Crush. Kill. This was the way.

He let Osetta fall and ran to kneel by Eهران's side. His father's Force aura was weak, getting weaker, with raw damage far beyond what mere blades could have dealt.

"Don't...touch me," said Ehran, before Colran could set a healing hand on him. "I don't know...why you returned...and...I don't care."

"Be quiet. I'll get you fixed up."

*"Don't. touch. me."*

*Stars strike me down, thought Colran, if I ever treat my child as you've treated me.* He had expected he would have to play this by anger. He had been right. "I'm not here to beg your approval, father, I'm here because I finally have a use for this house's resources. I just didn't expect it all to leap into my lap when I arrived on planet. Anything useful you want to tell me before I remake House Niral?"

"It pains me...to die, knowing that...that I have only you to carry my name...*Jedi.*"

"I'll enjoy undoing the horrors you've dedicated your life to, father. Goodbye." Colran laid his carefully practiced control over the running current of his anger, and he set his hand on his father's forehead and pressed rest there. Darth Ehran's wounds would kill him this night, but he wouldn't be suffering for it.

Then Colran reached to his father's side and claimed his lightsaber. *Eight years an apprentice, seven a padawan, and here is the first weapon I can call my own. Jedi build their own first sabers...but Sith take them.*

Brigs crawled into the doorway. "My lord," he said weakly.

Colran wiped his eyes and ran to kneel beside his family's most faithful servant. "Brigs. You okay?"

A little blood was trickling down Brigs' temple. He was an average man of average build, tending into an average sort of middle age, but his determination and loyalty were unmatched. "She knocked me aside. Wasn't even allowed to fight. I'm sorry."

"You couldn't have stopped her." Colran firmly pushed Brigs to the ground and commenced the Force meditation to ease and heal his head



wound. There would be no lasting damage, except to the man's pride.  
"How much can you tell me? Did you see who else came in?"

"Darth Osetta, five apprentices, some soldiers. I summoned the guard. Your brother Fyne fell at the gate. Took two apprentices with him. Your brother Lendlan stood with me, here. But Osetta came in with her three. They knocked me out. If you killed her people in there, then any remaining enemies on the grounds would be mere gunmen."

"I missed my brothers by less than an hour, then." Not that their welcome would have been any warmer than Eهران's.

"Seems that way. I'm sorry, my lord." Brigs examined his face. "You've grown a bit since last I saw you. I don't know what brought you back, but I'm glad to see you. This place needs a Niral."

Colran sprang to his feet when he heard someone running down the hall. But the guard captain who appeared was in Niral livery. He looked uncertainly at Colran, waited until he saw Brigs' nod, then saluted smartly. "My lord. The grounds are secure. Is Darth Eهران...?"

"Darth Eهران has fallen, as have Lords Fyne and Lendlan. But the attacker is dead." Colran finally pulled his hood back. "I don't know if you remember me, captain, but I am Colran Niral. I'm in charge now."

## Letters I

*Miss Dolarra,*

*I hope this letter finds you well. I apologize for not contacting you in person, but I thought this medium might be easier for you to keep up with. It's certainly easier for me. Even when you have access to a holo I'm keeping busy reestablishing myself here.*

*I have given your offer some consideration and would be willing to put in a good word for you with the Sith circles you've mentioned. I would rather not do blind recommendations for others. You'll understand if I prefer to limit my risks for the time being.*

*All the same, thank you for your assistance and encouragement in the matter of my return to Imperial space. I have not forgotten our first conversation, and the goals we both support – sanity in a system strong enough to survive. I hope to keep in touch as we both work to advance that goal.*

*Sincerely yours,*

*Colran Niral*

~

Dolarra waved at a passing Minder in the halls before turning her attention to her companion. “He wrote me a letter.”

“Wait. Really?”

“What do I do with a letter?”

“Burn after reading, traditionally.”

“No, Records will want this for his dossier.”

“Eh, good point.”

“It beats a lot of contacts’ ideas of how they’d like to keep in touch with me, anyway.”

“I dunno,” she said teasingly, “Niral here doesn’t exactly sound cold.”

“The letter? It’s cagey. Then again, he was fairly friendly in person.”

“I don’t know how you do these, ‘Lara. Cozying up to a Sith is taking your life in your hands.”

“Well, that’s why I’m adopting a Jedi instead. The Order could use some more agreeable blood.” She looked back at the console. “Just...no demand for an audience? No holocall? A letter? Nobody writes me letters.”

“Shocking news, Dolarra Reyne manages to find another oddball and convert him to the cause. Too bad he’s not as cute as the last one.”

"Saves me some time. He's nice, though. I hope we can keep him."

## **Legacy**

9 BTC – 20 years before the confirmation of the Wrath

Dromund Kaas

"I'm supposed to leave no trace of my having ever been here, you know."

Colran rested his head at his wife's side and nuzzled the swell of her belly. "Oops," he said.

"'Oops'? How do you think this makes me feel? I was going to perfect the Empire and then vanish like a good Cipher. No muss, no fuss. Then you show up, and next thing I know there's a baby."

"Next thing, five years and several long thoughtful conversations later. One or the other. Don't blame this on me, 'Lara, I was Jedi-ing. I was going to perfect myself and then fade away like a good Jedi until you corrupted me."

"Well, you got corrupted in the most disruptive way possible. My whole plan, always, was just me and my work. Nothing traceable, certainly not a child. That was the career outlook at twenty. And twenty-five. And thirty."

"Thirty?" he murmured. "You didn't suspect anything then?" He had met her by then.

She looked down and smiled as she stroked his black hair. "I wasn't sure," she said. "A baby, Cole. This is tremendous. We'll have to arrange the future she'll be running around in, you know. I've been trying to think of house-y upbringing-y things, but I didn't really have any special family traditions growing up. Did you?"

"Well...I have an ancient and venerable Sith legacy, carried through every generation to date, of murdering, backstabbing, and doing unspeakably vile Force rituals in pursuit of ultimate power."

“Oh. Maybe we should raise her like me, then.”

“Let’s.”

Dolarra rested a moment longer before stirring and pulling at Colran’s arms. He obligingly shifted up to kiss her and lay his head by hers. “It takes courage, darling,” she told him solemnly. “Facing the world we’ve got and saying we’re going to make something of it for our child.”

He smiled wryly. “No one on this side of the fence has ever accused me of courage before.”

“You married me, Cole. You’re brave.” She smiled back, her blue eyes locked on his grey. “In fact you are exactly the kind of man I would choose to be my baby’s father.”

“Well, that works out very nicely, then.” His long pale face got anxious. “Unless there’s something you have to tell me?”

She giggled. “I love you.”

“And I love you.” He kissed her. “And it is far, far, far too late for you to disappear without a trace, no matter what your career plan says.”

Dolarra interlaced her fingers with his. “You’re right,” she said happily. “I guess it is.”

## **Wedding Morning**

11 BTC

Colran waited for his bride to wake up on her own.

She came to life with a lazy smile. “Hello, Mister Niral,” she said, as she had said each of the previous six mornings.

“Hello, Mrs. Reyne-Niral,” he said. “You’re set to be carried away by Imperial shadowcreepers today, aren’t you.” Back to her work as a Cipher agent.

"I am! There are very interesting things afoot in places," she said with the cheerful vagueness she reserved for him. Most people got coolly professional vagueness or just silence. "Oh! But I got something for you first." She rolled over and felt around under the bed, then came up with a small box. She opened it to reveal a pair of rings, both made of a heavy silvery substance, both inset by round red stones that glowed ever so slightly.

Colran looked from his still-new wedding ring to the box. "What are they?"

"Science," she said, her blue eyes alight. "In the most romantic way possible, of course. Look. You see how there's a faint pulse pattern in the light?"

He stared at them. "Yes, there is."

"They're coordinated by nanoscale clocks. Not tied in to the usual galactic networks; these are standalone. They'll drift apart by about a second in, oh, twenty billion years. 'Til then?" She hooked her index fingers together. "Lockstep. Any place we go, we're seeing the same thing on these." She beamed at him. "Your wife was a Fixer once, so you get technical presents."

"My wife is amazing, all the time, and therefore I accept." He kissed her and let her slip one of the rings onto his finger.

She talked while he slid its mate onto hers. "There are only two with this exact design and pattern in the whole galaxy. One is mine, and I am yours."

Colran set his hand beside hers and watched the subtle flicker they made together. "Think of me, then," he said. "When you're out there alone."

"I always do."

## **Communication Breakdown**

5 BTC. The Niral compound, 200 km west of Kaas City.

Colran worked among the lilies in the Niral estate's gardens. The gardens made a pleasant contrast to the turbulence of Kaas City, where he had spent close to nine years bailing against the bloody Sith tide.

He had dreamed last night. The third night in a row, blood on the snow. His dreams had gotten more vivid over the years. Many such dreams were random images; a few were scraps of something that felt like more. People, places, unfamiliar. He had never mentioned them to his schoolmates at the Korriban academy. His Jedi master had downplayed their significance

but always wanted to know what he recognized from them.

Once again, it was nothing Colran could make sense of. Snow was pretty universal. So was blood.

*Where's Dolarra?* he wondered. He wondered that every few hours when she was out on a mission.

As if on cue, his holocommunicator buzzed. The holocall was from some obscured frequency. Likely Dolarra or one of her Intelligence colleagues, then. Colran hurried to the full-size holo inside the house and activated the line.

The image was somewhat sketchy, but it was Dolarra, bundled up in slightly bulky full-coverage clothes. "Hey, stranger," she said. "How's the lap of luxury treating you?"

"Awfully comfortable. Your daughter's enjoying it, too. You should come visit sometime."

She grinned. "What, and miss out on the march of civilization here? I have the honor to be addressing you from a brand new comm station, first one we've ever had around here. It's all very posh." Her tone softened. "We're making progress, love."

*Where? Is it Imperial space, or at least some place we're close to securing?*

"Good," he said. "Let me fetch Ruth, I'll only be a moment."

Their four-year-old daughter was the spitting image of her mother. Colran swept her up out of the playroom. "Guess who called?" he said.

Ruth's eyes lit up. "Mum!" He never brought her to the holo for anybody else.

Colran carried Ruth back out to the holo room, but the image there was fuzzing and flickering, then filling out to a textured white, like snow. Before he reached the base the image flared and vanished.

He took a few seconds playing with the controls, trying to reestablish contact, but he had no luck. He had a bad feeling about it.

"Whoops," he told Ruth, with more cheer than he felt. "Mum went and had to go work more."

Ruth made a face. "Mum should work here."

"Right here? In the house?"

"Yes."

"She wouldn't have a lot to do here."

"I could make Empire enemies. Mister Gundark could be an Empire enemy to fight."

"Bah. I bet she could bring Mister Gundark around in three seconds flat."

Ruth considered. She seemed genuinely torn as to who would prevail. "Maaaaybe," she said doubtfully. "She should work here anyway. I miss her."

"Me too, honey. Me too."

"Can I have a cookie now?"

Trust Ruth to keep her priorities straight and focused. "Not now. Later, before bed, okay?"

"Mph. Okay."

He sent her on her way, then turned back to the holoprojector. He didn't feel right about losing that call.

Some stranger at Imperial Intelligence HQ answered him. "Colran Niral," said Colran, without giving the man a chance to start. "I just got off a holocall with my wife, Agent Dolarra. It cut off suddenly. I want to know why."

"Was this call from HQ, my lord?"

"No, the field. Can't you look up where she's supposed to be?"

"That isn't something I..."

"Something broke my wife's call. I can't reestablish contact. I want to know why. She's a Cipher agent. Dolarra Niral." There was a pause. "Hurry up already."

"My lord, I'm not aware of any comms disruptions involving the agent you're describing. Please calm down."

Colran couldn't seem to stop himself. "It was a new comm post someplace. You guys must have a record, you record everything you people do. It was less than five minutes ago, should be simple to look up, so just do it already." A pause, while the man did something at a console. "Now!"

The man finally looked up. "I'll need to transfer you," he said.

His image gave way to that of a woman. Grey-haired, straight-backed, a creature of poise and determination. Colran had seen her once or twice in the five years since he had married Dolarra. This was Keeper herself, the spymaster of the Empire.

"Tell me she's coming home," said Colran.

"You realize I can only release limited information, but - "

"Tell me Dolarra will be coming home."

"We've lost comms with the location at which she has been working. It'll be eighteen hours at a minimum before we can bring in the resources to



reestablish communications, and that's assuming the area isn't too hot to operate in."

*Blood on the snow. "Where is she? Csilla? Hoth? Ando Prime?" Tell me it's someplace warm. Please, tell me I'm wrong. Tell me it's someplace warm.*

"You know I can't release that information. As soon as we have reestablished contact with her team, we will notify you."

Colran thought back to what Dolarra had been wearing. Maybe it wasn't cold-weather gear. Maybe it was some kind of tool-filled commando outfit. Or something.

Keeper spoke up. "We lose communications with some locations all the time. Simple factors disrupt it, and once supplies are in we fix it up again. There's no reason to be alarmed."

*Yes, there is. "There's more to it than that. She was in a high-risk area, wasn't she?"*

"There's a war on, Lord Niral. Every area is high-risk."

"Where did you send my wife to die?"

"We have no reason to believe that anything has happened to her."

Lies. Lies. Colran raised his hand and found it easy to gather the rush of rage necessary for the effort of Force choking through a visual link alone.

It was with an eerie calm that the choking woman made a hand signal. The comm line cut out.

He stood very still and felt very useless for a little while. Keeper was right, of course. There was no solid reason to worry. Nothing. These people had it well in hand. Somebody would repair a relay somewhere and Dolarra would be right back on holo.

This sick feeling he had couldn't have anything to do with whatever was happening a galaxy away, on the other side of silence.

He shook himself. Checked the time. He had better get Ruth to sleep. He headed back to the playroom.

Ruth was bashing Mister Gundark into the floor. "Take that, Jedi!"

"Oh, sweetheart." Ruth looked up and beamed at him. "I told you, even Jedi have loved ones. You should try talking to him first. Maybe make him your friend." Maybe not shoot out his holo. Maybe not shoot.

Ruth made a face. "Tried talking. He's still mean."

"Oh. Kill him dead, then."

When she was done meting out justice, Colran stooped, ruffled her brown hair, and looked into those perfect blue eyes. Just like her mother's. He hugged her very tightly. "Let's get you to bed."

"You said I could have cookies first."

"A cookie. I did." Colran forced himself to smile. "Come on, then."

His dreams that night were blank, as if there were nothing left to see.

## **0 ATC – Letter Unsent**

*My dearest Dolarra,*

*At last, a quiet moment. It is raining hard and I'm thinking of you.*

*You'd be glad to know that Ruth is thriving. She's still bright, inquisitive, irrepressibly happy. Like you, she prefers exercise and action over book studies. She does her lightsaber forms with more enthusiasm than finesse, but she is advancing rapidly all the same.*

*When I see her practice I can't help but think of the future. I never took back any ambition of being the Sith to change the Sith after I gave it up as a teenager. I am an ordinary man from an ordinary line. Ruth is in another class entirely.*

*She is strong, 'Lara. She must get that from you. She will be a Force wielder such as Korriban only sees once in a lifetime. I'll have to prepare her to handle it. Would I like to see her use her talents to spearhead reform as soon as she's able? Honestly, someday, yes, I would. But that isn't my decision to make. I can only encourage her in her training, and try to teach her to live well and act with love alongside the caution she'll need. Where her career will take her, and how she will navigate the paths of power that the mere possession of power will force her onto, is something I cannot yet predict. Perhaps I should have worked harder, learned more, scouted the way, before we brought her into the world. Or perhaps I would feel unprepared no matter what.*

*I am ordinary, thirty-five, walking a knife's edge of my own, and now I find myself facing a power that promises to surpass anything I've ever met. Our little girl. What guidance can I possibly give that would keep her world safe? I can love her, and I can teach her the warnings. Will it be enough?*

*You never doubted either of us for a moment, dearest. I know you would be proud of our daughter. And, it may sound foolish after these years, but I try to conduct myself in a way that would make you proud of me as a father. Neither Ruth nor I would be here without you.*

*Ever yours,*

*Colran*

*Ten years pass until chapter T1-1, at the beginning of this volume.*

*~~~Here ends the complete collection of canon Ruth and Colran Niral stories.~~~*

*~~Ruth Niral appears in the AUs Lodestone, Dialogues, and Knights of the Waking Alliance.~~*

## Afterword

Ruth grew from the emotional center of my SWTOR gaming experience to the emotional center of a sprawling and multigenerational galaxy. In many ways she and the characters around her are playing out infinite questions of *authority* within the context of the Sith Empire. Who has it? Who is giving the orders, and can they justly be obeyed? Most of her mistakes consist in failing to ask sharply enough. Most of her victories consist of co-creating a more personal ideal. In that respect her final act was a triumph, at the price she had never been afraid to pay.

It was my first OC death. I feel it's fundamentally honest to the question. Hoooweeeverrrr...

Two roads diverge here: one is the canon universe continuation, Captain Cipher Soldier Spy, following Wynston's continued do-gooding and Quinn's irritated attempt to continue his wife's legacy. Later in publishing order, Nights Errant will fill in Wynston's canon stories outside CCSS. That triad, RMC, CCSS, and NE, will encapsulate the canon Ruth!verse. (Three volumes. I love threes.)

The other road is, of course, that of AUs. Lodestone diverges after Timeline 1 and Dialogues and Knights of the Waking Alliance diverge shortly after the betrayal of Timeline 2. They ask different questions and elicit different answers and propose different boyfriends. Lodestone is a cloudy mirror held to RMC in its entirety; the Dialogues avoid outside plot to focus on questions of belief; and KotWA is my first-ever fic foray into the Fallen Empire content. (Three AUs. I love threes.)

Thanks for reading. May the Force do whatever you find most philosophically palatable.

## 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](http://serialephemera.tumblr.com). and questions and comments will be read for as long as the blog is active at [serialephemera.tumblr.com/ask](http://serialephemera.tumblr.com/ask).

The center for Bright's SWTOR fic downloads is

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