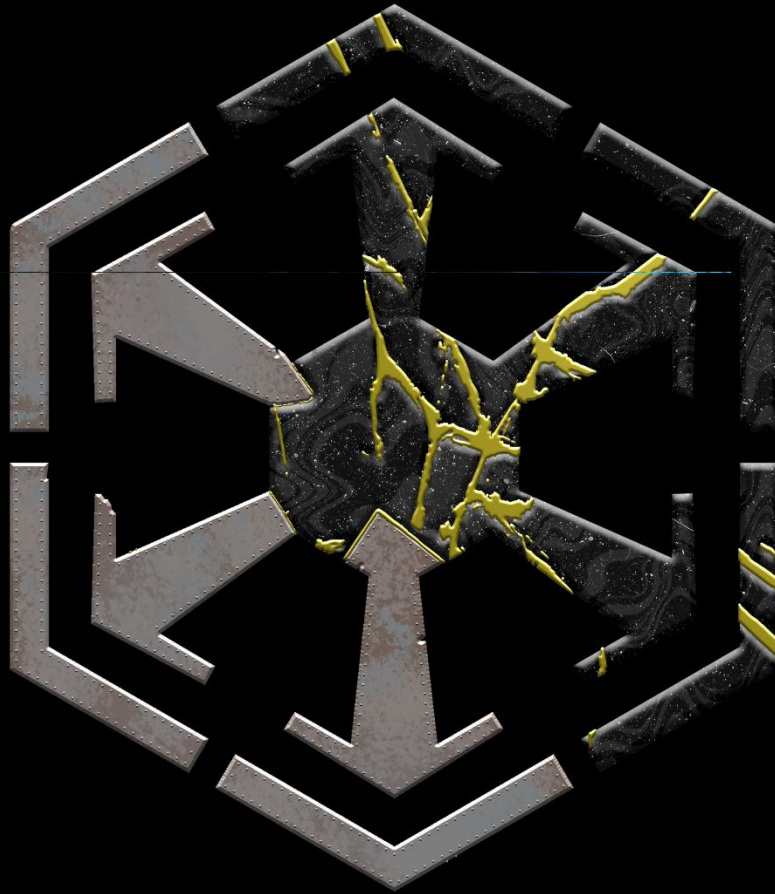


LODESTONE



a SWTOR AU by brightephemera



sigil by kabeone

Titles

LODESTONE AU

An alternate universe for Wynston and Ruth
a SWTOR fanfic

by brightephemera

Edited from the SWTOR official forum's Alternate Universe Weekly Challenge thread,
with epilogues originally published in other SWTOR forum threads
2nd edition
145,000 words
sigil by kabeone (horrendous photoshop by bright)

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.

LODESTONE is an alternate universe following both Ruth Niral and her ally Wynston. Near the end of the class line, at a moment of critical vulnerability for both people, the alternate Wynston and Ruth come together. From there they stand as the Emperor's right fist and his most stalwart resistance...with everything that means.

Lodestone is structured with one book a recounting of Wynston and Ruth's dealings in canon, then three books dedicated to the alternate timeline.

Dedication

For frauzet, who kept me honest

Acknowledgements

The Bright!verse was not written in a vacuum. It was a product, one of many, of the Short Fiction Weekly Challenge (SFC) and Alternate Universe Challenge 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.

Lodestone 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 Spoiler Warnings

Angst, but less than before.

Sith Warrior and Imperial Agent spoilers are pervasive. Book 4 has heavy Jedi Knight Act 3 spoilers.

Sith Warrior/Malavai Quinn and Sith Warrior/Imperial Agent appear.

Foreword

I always liked Ruth with Wynston.

They existed in the same universe because they were the only remotely compatible people to list as allies in the newfangled Legacy system. Once I thought about it I realized he would try to sleep with her. And probably succeed.

But then Ruth fell in love with someone else, and, well, Wynston doesn't do attachments. That need just isn't in him, and when a link snaps all he wants to do is move on. It is one of his defining features, and it saw him through the entire main plot of Ruth Means Compassion.

Only...what if he had that need, and persuaded Ruth to listen?

This is that story.

Dramatis Personae

RUTH NIRAL, Sith Warrior, Emperor's Wrath, daughter, and mother;
WYNSTON, Imperial Agent, spy and traveler;
Ruth's son COLRAND NIRAL, Force-sensitive;
the Jedi Knight LARR GITH;
and the disguise ORPHEA.

Supporting companions VETTE, MALAVAI QUINN, JAESA WILLSAAM,
LIEUTENANT PIERCE, KALIYO DJANNIS, VECTOR HYLLUS, and
LORD SCOURGE.



Ruth

LODESTONE



Colrand

Larr Gith



Orphea



Wynston



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BOOK I: Canon

L-527: An alien and a Sith

"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.

L-499: Ruth's resources

"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." *And don't say –*

"My lord." He bowed and left.

She finished up and made a quick attempt to straighten her hair with her fingers. 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."

Oh. "Suit yourself. Now, then. You're my first formal subordinate. How can I use you?" Apart from the rather distractingly obvious, and wholly unwelcome judging by every indication he had given thus far in their brief acquaintance.

"My lord, I have an education from the Imperial officers' Academy on Dromund Kaas and eleven years of field experience." Oh hello that would make him more than a decade her senior. "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 on Balmorra – 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."

"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 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 stern handsome face. Had she just lost respect? Gained it? Marked herself for a tragic friendly fire incident?

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."

Useful, useful, and patriotic to boot. "I think we're going to get along. Now come on, there's work to do."

L-499: Wynston's tools

"Wyn, I'm just saying it's idiotic."

"Kaliyo, you can stop calling me that."

The partner that Imperial Intelligence had assigned to the man who sometimes called himself Darnek but more often thought of himself as Wynston smiled maliciously. "I could do Wynce instead. Both fit. Winning, wincing, I honestly haven't figured out which one you do more of. The point is, that thing you have against packing real heat is stupid."

"It's bad form to haul a blaster rifle around everywhere. You can do it, you're a mercenary and you don't care who knows it. I have to have a little more social mobility."

"A rifle earns you social mobility." Her smile was full-lipped and lazy. "Believe me."

"The holdout blaster's enough." Wynston palmed the snub-nosed blaster he kept hidden on his person for most assignments. "Or the standard-issue pistol when I get to open carry Imperial gear."

"You keep a perfectly good rifle on the ship. Ever stop to think you could use it for more than your once-a-month long-range hit if you would just carry it with you?"

"It's bulky. It's conspicuous. It's slow to bring to bear when a situation goes sour. It's more trouble than it's worth."

"I might adopt the poor thing. It's too good for you, the way you treat it." Kaliyo's silver eyes gleamed.

Wynston took a few steps toward her. "Maybe you should do that. My attention's occupied elsewhere."

"I don't remember inviting you to this party. I like the rifle more."

"Like hell." He slid his arms around her waist. She leaned easily into him, running her palms down his chest and around his sides. With a look half scornful, half teasing, she turned aside from his kiss, but tolerated him nuzzling along her jaw.

He touched the point of his vibroknife to an indent in her spine before flicking it on. "What I do carry is good enough."

Her hand under his arm suddenly sprouted a knife of its own. He hadn't marked its approach under her fingers, but here it was, already pressing into his side at a point his medical training told him would get very bad, very fast.

"Ouch," he admitted, and hoped that would be enough to soothe her ego before a whim closed the distance between her knife and his artery. Kaliyo still wasn't a fully known quantity. He doubted she ever would be.

She pulled her head back enough to let him see her grinning. "Carrying the rifle doesn't mean you leave the other toys behind, Wynce. You bring every weapon you can."

A secondary thought process was increasingly demanding his attention. He kept his face close to hers as he frowned. "Kaliyo. You should know that literally everything about you is in some way arousing."

Her smile widened further. "*Every* weapon you can."

"Everything about you. Even the horrifying parts."

She laughed and shifted her free hand against his stomach. "You know, sometimes I get the feeling you're not a hundred percent fake when you say that stuff."

"I've been known to tell the truth when it suits me."

"Good to know." She withdrew the vibroknife and pushed away. "Now scram. I'm getting bored."

He did scram, and willingly, because keeping Kaliyo happy seemed like the correct course of action for the moment. She was every imaginable kind of bad idea and Wynston had no clue why his supervisor Keeper had insisted on keeping her on as a contractor. Her significance and intended use were thoroughly unknown. Wynston did know that so long as she was here, he wanted to keep her favorably inclined towards him. Since he wasn't likely to be doing that on the job – something about being categorically denied every destructive opportunity for "fun" seemed to annoy her, go figure – he knew he had to find other ways of staying in her good graces.

And he knew that, alarmingly enough, he was going to enjoy it.

L-494: The professional

Ruth Niral, Apprentice To Darth Baras, was on a mission: to kill a spy.

Her efforts and combat skill had drawn the manipulative Baras's eye at Korriban Academy not four months ago. She was aware of the man's reputation for cruelty and for condoning cruelty in his minions, but she hadn't had much choice in the matter: she passed her Sith trials under his supervision, and from there she was his apprentice.

So here she was, on Nar Shaddaa, come to silence a spy that Baras had marked for death.

Ruth ventured out with Captain Quinn. Quinn's deference still shocked her. His dedication still held her fascinated. She had a staff. A real staff. To do good things with, maybe even above and beyond the Sith machinations she knew her master would demand.

Ruth's contact on the surface gave Ruth and Quinn a rundown of the planet – interesting place, and not one where she had the convenience of the Empire's authority. Then Ruth was given someone else to handle the briefing about the rival Sith Lord who was protecting her target.

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

A man in the uniform of Imperial Intelligence marched smartly in. He was a Chiss. Darnek.

Intelligence? Ruth did her best to conceal her surprise. He returned the courtesy. Operating in 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–"

"We've met," she said warmly.

Darnek 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." She didn't see what the captain did, but Darnek gave a cold, barely perceptible nod and moved on to the table. Their minder bowed and withdrew; 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.

"Your mark is under the protection of one Lord Rathari," Darnek explained in a cool crisp voice. He was neat, his dark blue hair immaculate, his frame trimly matched to hers, and the physical presence of him was a continuous minor distraction. "We've been tracking him for some time. He has a longstanding claim staked on Nar Shaddaa, but it's difficult to pinpoint the man himself..."

His rundown included several recommendations for how to start drawing Rathari into the open. Quinn 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. There's nothing I like more than dumping work on somebody else's department."

He raised his eyebrows. "That was a joke?" he said mildly.

Quinn's presence stopped any silly comeback. "Yes," she said instead. "I can do that with Intelligence, right? Joke?"

"That really depends on the mission, doesn't it?" He smiled a curiously controlled smile and flicked a look toward Quinn. "Good hunting, my lord."

"I'll keep you updated, Darnek. Take care." As Ruth turned back toward the door she caught Quinn sneering at the alien.

So when they got clear she pulled him aside. "Captain, is there a problem?"

"My lord?"

"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. Once the job was done she returned to her ship to pick up Vette.

Vette she had met on Korriban; the Twi'lek was a treasure hunter who had been captured and enslaved while Ruth was at the Academy. Darth Baras had handed her to Ruth as a personal servant. Ruth had promptly released Vette's collar and asked her where she wanted to go. Now Vette traveled with her, offering company and a running commentary less formal than Quinn's. She was thrilled at visiting Nar Shaddaa – an old haunt, it seemed – and so Ruth 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 darkness and dull twilight blue. Nar Shaddaa was alive with color: flashy signs, garish fashions, avenues festooned with

brilliant holo trees and golden statues. Vette supplied her with animated narration; Quinn trailed, looking pensive.

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." On a whim Ruth took out her holocommunicator and called Darnek. His fine-featured image flickered into view. "Good evening, Darnek. I've been chatting with some Hutts and I picked up some hearsay 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.

"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 stupid 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."

*

When Darnek and Kaliyo reached the Star Cluster they found Ruth leaning against a table at a distant booth; as they got close he saw a slim Twi'lek girl seated behind a large colorful drink. Introductions all around: Ruth, Vette the "good friend and co-conspirator," Darnek, Kaliyo the "good friend and co-conspirator." He would have liked to draw Ruth out more, but she was busy volunteering information he might find useful, and after less than two minutes of her report Kaliyo and Vette started exchanging vocal opinions on pop culture. Kaliyo shot him a knowing, malicious glance every time he tried to angle the conversation back toward the young lovely Sith.

At last the music changed to a different rhythm. Kaliyo looked over, made a face, but then shot a look at Vette. "Think it's time we hit the dance floor, you could show me your moves."

"You're on." The Twi'lek bounced to her feet and followed Kaliyo out to the floor.

Leaving him alone with Ruth. Subtle Kaliyo wasn't, but at least she had changed her mind about blocking him.

Bright-eyed and fair-skinned, Ruth looked him over and smiled. "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?"

Darneke 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 again. The conversation went on to nothing important; nothing but a girl, slightly shy about his species, but waxing eloquent on anything to do with the Empire. The kind of girl he'd be glad to support.

She trailed off in a while and looked out to the dance floor. "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.

He watched her as she approached Kaliyo and Vette. For a woman who claimed not to dance a month ago she was graceful enough on the floor now. There would be no point in his waiting; he rose, exchanging meaningful looks with Kaliyo on the way out, to tap Ruth's shoulder.

She spun and smiled. "May I cut in?" he said with a smile of his own.

The Twi'lek Vette whistled before slipping away. Darneke grinned without looking at her and took Ruth in his arms, close and warm. She moved with him as if she already knew every step he meant to take with her. Knew it and liked it.

"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. Lord Baras has been grooming me for great things."

His hand at the small of her back pulled her closer. "You'll be careful."

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 be careful."

"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." His eyes slid down to her lips and back. "And its beautiful ones."

"See, I like that much more than I like being 'my lorded.'"

"That's promising," he murmured. 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.

That had the sound of a lie, or wishful thinking. It was probably the hound she'd had at heel during their briefing, and he had all the sexual presence of a wall. He snorted. "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. Her eyes were huge and blue, her steps still matched to his, her hands warm in his hold. His movements drew her a little closer.

She didn't resist. Instead she took a deep breath, pressing into him. "You don't fight fair," she murmured.

"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. Actually, you know what? If he doesn't ask, don't say anything. But I'm fine."

Vette took this in with only a small smirk. "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."

*

Much later that night, Ruth got around to assembling her clothes in one place. "I should get going."

"Roads aren't too nice this time of night."

Ruth stopped with one leg in her pants and one out. "Darnek. I'm Sith."

"Just giving the polite warning. I really don't mind if you stay." He sat up and leaned in to nuzzle her neck. She briefly struggled to remember how the getting-dressed thing worked.

Well, she had left warning with Vette, so Vette wouldn't mind. Quinn would either have a stroke at the outside-standard-protocol behavior or not care at all. Probably a stroke if she wasn't there to sign off on combat reports or something. Darnek's hands slid down her arms. Terrible idea, thinking about Quinn in this context. Better not think. One warm night couldn't hurt.

She twisted around before Darnek could quite reach her earlobe, grabbed his shoulders, shoved him back to the mattress. "You win. This time."

He grinned up at her. "I'll try to be gracious in victory."

L-493: Ruth's responsibilities

Wynston held still when he woke up. Name: Darnek. Inventory: unclothed, well rested, no injuries, mildly thirsty; surroundings, some hotel bed, clean but far from upscale; no unusual sounds, just the low ambient hum of the

hotel complex; a thread of the outside reek of pollution hanging in the air; much more to the point, a woman beside him, her back turned, her body feverishly warm. A moment's listening confirmed that she was deep asleep.

Good. He stayed aware of her steady breathing while he rolled over and reached down for the holo at the bedside. Two new messages there; he flicked the voice-to-text option and read. His contact Watcher X, more recitations of thoughts so scattered Wynston doubted any sane genius could connect them. He didn't trust the insane genius to do a much better job. The other note was from his connections down in the network access district, delivering him a lead on the whereabouts of the elusive Lord Rathari – Ruth should be pleased with that. As assignments from overbearing Sith went, "assist my apprentice with her search" – and such an apprentice, too – wasn't all that bad. He would have to keep Darth Baras in mind as a potential ally of Intelligence; he was devious and cruel but he might prove useful one day.

He punched the holo off and dropped it when he heard Ruth's soft sigh. He stayed there, relaxed, until she moved over to touch him; then he stretched and rolled over to face her.

She was pretty, this girl named Ruth, with bright blue eyes, a rosebud mouth, short brown hair currently in charming disarray. She was pretty, and if not for her fighting on Dromund Kaas he would never have guessed what a powerhouse she was. There were potential allies that could be useful, and then there were potential allies he truly wanted. This, her, Sith though she was, perhaps in part because she was Sith and still good...

"Hello there," he said.

"Hey." She yawned and smiled.

"How are you feeling?"

"Mm. Good."

"You look divine." He kissed her, gentle and slow. "If there's some point in your daily cycle where you're anything less than breathtaking, you've been very successful in hiding it."

"Try me halfway through a fight to the death," she said with a little smile. "I'm pretty sure that doesn't end up glamorous."

"I'll take your word for it, but you may be being too hard on yourself." She was casting about for the sheets, so he drew them up to her shoulders with one hand and lightly stroked her cheek with the other. "You know I'm considering sabotaging your job so you're stuck here searching for a while yet?"

"Don't even joke, Darnek. You know I need—"

"I know. I wouldn't. You need." He kissed her, caught her full lower lip in his teeth. "You need," he repeated softly, sliding his hand over and around her lean smooth body, listening for the catch in her breath, finding it, searching for another. "And I am here, to give you, what you need."

One of the better ways to start a work day, all things considered.

*

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. Huh. Note to self, don't cross Imperial Intelligence.

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 salute and addressed her coldly. "My lord. Good to see you've returned safely."

"I let Vette know I would be away. She passed that along, right?"

"Her comment was less than informative."

Oh, 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. Hmph. 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, clearly unsatisfied. "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 definitely had not come from the ship's stores. 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. You're not the only one with effective methods, gorgeous. "Let's go, then."

L-481: Teasing

Kaliyo sauntered onto the bridge and leaned against the navicomputer, blocking the big nav chart. "I really thought you were going to take her home with you," she drawled.

She had been teasing Wynston about the young Sith Ruth all week: his nights had been devoted to the girl but his days by necessity had been working at Kaliyo's side. He had to expect a little grief. Now that they were off Nar Shaddaa with nothing better to do, he was expecting a lot.

"Just what would I do with something that sweet?" he said blandly.

"The same thing you do with all the others?"

"I believe I already did." There, Kaliyo's level of class. Jarring after Ruth, but he spoke both languages. "So, what do you think of the odds that our lead on Tatooine is a trap?"

"Guaranteed," said Kaliyo. "We might get a good fight out of it, though. - Ooh, I got an idea, we take Miss Sith and get her to ask nicely. Maybe that'll work better."

Saying 'let it go' would only encourage her. "We're not adopting 'Miss Sith.'"

"You want to."

"Stars, no." The pretty idealist was certainly more to his liking than, say, Kaliyo, but he didn't do long-term partners. Even looking to just the next job or two, Ruth was well out of his pay grade; she might be kind to amusing Force-blind aliens but she must have limits somewhere. And, while wonderful and promising and a valuable ally to call on in the future, she didn't belong in his world. He wasn't quite sure where a creature like her did belong. Dead, he feared. Someplace bright and influential, he hoped.

"I bet she wanted you to talk idealistic to her. Better Empire, humane something-or-other, blah blah, allll the way to the finish."

"Something along those lines," he said dryly.

"I knew it. Bet you meant it, too." Her eyes gleamed, waiting for the response which, he knew, she expected to be disgusting by her standards.

"Jealous?" he said instead. "I could talk policy with you, you just don't seem to enjoy it very much. So I get my kicks elsewhere."

"Real cute. You really would wax Imperial with the girl you picked up off the street, wouldn't you?"

He grinned idly. Kaliyo was still something of a puzzle. She claimed to be a get off and get out type, but she wanted something else on top of that: she

wanted to feel like she was getting away with something. He had put some thought into what advantages he could let her think she had over him. He wanted the question answered sooner rather than later, both for his safety and for the recreational possibilities unlocked thereby. Until then he could sling absurdities and wait. "I still come home to you, don't I?"

She threw up her hands. "Please. I still say you and me should blow this gig, find a job with better benefits. It'll be fun. Maybe fewer easy Sith, but fun."

He shook his head. "Stick with me." He had been charged with keeping her around. Dangerous, with the payoff to Intelligence unclear, but he had to try. "The pay's good and the benefits just fall into your lap on some planets."

"What, like her? She's so far down 'vanilla' she's fallen off the menu."

He shrugged. "All right, maybe something comes your way next time." He looked her over and smiled with practiced carelessness. "We could sync that up for convenience' sake."

"You'll have to try harder than that, agent."

"Well, from now until the next easy Sith comes along my time's all yours, or could be. Think about it. Tonight? Over drinks?"

Kaliyo snorted. "Try that again when you don't stink of schoolgirl."

He shrugged again, grinning now. "If that's how you want me." The pretty Sith didn't belong in his world, but there were diversions to be found without her. Kaliyo, sooner or later, would be one of them. And, crazy though she was, his motivations in keeping her occupied were more than just a self-preservation tactic.

"You should be so lucky," she said, but she was preening.

L-481: Methodology

"Was it really a good idea letting Lord Rathari go?"

"I thought you'd be on my side for this."

Vette lounged in the doorway of the practice room. "I like sparing nice-guy lives. Not sure Rathari qualified."

"He'll understand, if he thinks about it. Mercy can't really do any good if I kill all my chances to demonstrate it. So I let him go. He'll stay out of my way. In the future, when the chance comes, he's likely to support me."

"Yeah," said the Twi'lek. "Baras? Not going to love that. Especially the part where Rathari offered to be there *when* you smacked him down."

"That's the usual assumption about a Sith servant and her master, isn't it?" Ruth hoped her look was as loaded as she meant it to be. "I'll deal with that when I have to." There was only one way it could go, especially with a master as coldly destructive as Baras. She hadn't had much choice becoming his apprentice. Sooner or later, though, the terms would change. "Until then, yes, I'll make friends instead of killing everything in sight."

"Did you see the look on Captain Stuffy's face when you let him go? He was practically green."

Ruth regretted that much. She found herself wanting the intense officer's approval, very much, and she feared she had damaged her standing by giving in to Darnek's advances. She would just have to impress him going forward. "He's still not used to my methods. He'll adapt. Sooner or later I'll convince him that there's more than one way to win a war."

L-467: Daring

Wynston could tell himself that sleeping with Kaliyo Djannis was a calculated decision.

It was. The calculation was how long he could keep this maniac entertained before she cut his throat or he succeeded in working out why Intelligence had shackled him to her. He didn't quite want to get rid of Kaliyo at this point. If they saw something in her, it was up to him to work out the details of keeping her under control, and everything about her made him want to

take that challenge. The woman worked up every competitive instinct he had. Around people like that he tended to want to demonstrate he could hold his own and then some.

It was a very bad tendency.

He kept it under control, finished the job and walked away, with most people who had that effect on him. But he was stuck here. On a ship with her. He had been for weeks and HQ had shown no signs of taking her off the assignment. So sleeping with her was really just opening another front on what might turn out to be a protracted war.

The woman did know what she was doing. In something other than murder and forgery, which was something of a relief to discover. He'd been paying attention for hints of those other two the whole time, but, no problems. No problems at all. Pure exhilaration, in fact, quite possibly either the best sex he'd ever taken as a challenge or the best challenge he'd ever taken as sex.

That didn't remove the basic problem with Kaliyo. She was, in all probability, certifiably insane. She was selfish, cruel, manipulative, with no respect for life and less than no respect for the organization he worked for and the worlds it served, and he wasn't even confident the generous pay would keep her on good behavior. If he thought Keeper had a sense of humor he would have wondered whether this assignment was some kind of joke; Kaliyo was about as far from a partner as he could have asked for. Apart from possessing the body and voice of a minor goddess. But he was pretty sure there were goddesses out there with more reliable credentials.

And yet, if he had to have her here, he had no intention of missing out. His own enjoyment aside, it would give her something to think about that wasn't "how much havoc she could wreak landside."

When he had awakened she'd been occupying three-quarters of the bed's real estate and quietly snoring into the mattress. She hadn't stirred when he got up. Noted.

He experimentally bumped the drawer a little bit when finding his clothes. No response he could see or hear from her. Also noted. This wasn't even

for any particular purpose, he was just gathering data. One way or another, he was sure she had been doing the same for him since day one.

Across the room to pick up a comb, fumbling his grasp to let the comb clatter to the vanity; there. She finally took a sharp breath and groaned. Her silver eyes snapped open – and she did have gorgeous eyes – and her full dark mouth eased into a little malicious smile – and she did have gorgeous lips. Without stirring from her sprawled position she focused on him and the smile widened. “Hey. Agent. Get a girl something to drink?” That rich sarcasm livened her voice from the start.

“Get it yourself, sweetheart,” he drawled, and headed out without listening to her growling response to the previously-objected-to endearment. Lesson one, he wasn’t the obliging boy toy. He could play that role, but not for her.

A very bad tendency.

L-448: Ruth on Alderaan

Ruth’s mission had stalled. She was seeking the family of the padawan, Jaesa Wilsaam, that her master was bent on destroying, but they were proving elusive. For the time being she had her allies in House Kendoh looking into it. There were rumors of a possible target in the enemy House Organa, but nothing substantive yet. She could only wait.

So she was back on her ship in the cargo bay, running through unarmed exercises. She was interrupted by Vette clattering in. “Hey!” said the Twi’lek. “You’d never guess who I ran into in the Thul cantina.”

Ruth tried to think of a snarky 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. "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 your shock collar end up?"

"I dunno."

"I should buy you a new one. So I can shock you on occasions 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. He's all yo...wait. Hmm. Now that you mention it..."

Ruth grinned. "Do it."

Vette tossed the faux deliberation aside. "Nope. You need him more."

"Do not."

"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." Even if she felt something of a blush just thinking about him.

"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.

*

It was worth calling. The man who called himself Alexis was delighted to hear that Ruth was in town. Even without the personal excuse they might be able to benefit each other professionally again.

She smiled wordlessly when the holocall opened. "Ruth," he said. "I have it on good authority you've made your way to Alderaan."

She arched an eyebrow. "Since when was Vette 'good authority'?"

"One takes one's sources where one can."

The smile wavered a little. "Listen, there's something she probably didn't tell you that you should know up front." Was that really anxiety? From a Sith? "I'm...not on the market, so to speak."

Unsurprising, given a woman as remarkable as she was. He didn't let his cheerful demeanor waver. "I understand. I hope that means things are going well for you?"

"Yes, actually. You?"

"Staying busy. Listen, I'll understand if you're no longer interested, but would you have time for supper tonight? So long as we're all on planet I'd love to see the team." Professionally, of course. He would be glad to give

her a hand again. If the chance came up. Or even get a hand from her, should things get difficult.

"I'd like that," she said. "But my contact here is hosting dinner for my people."

"Ah. I understand."

She shook her head, her eyes widening a little. "You know what? I'm Sith. I can request another two seats."

"Make it..." Should he include his unusual contact on this planet? "No, two."

"All right. If there's anything else I can do for you while I'm in town, let me know."

Wonderful. "There might be. Early-morning task tomorrow. We'll talk."

*

Ruth did the right thing, turning Alexis down. She let out a heavy breath. He was attractive. But she had responsibilities to think about now, and it was dangerous to run off alone. Dangerous for her. Dangerous for him. Dangerous for her crew. And, honestly, given the choice, Alexis wouldn't be the one she spent her nights with. Not anymore.

She didn't want to sleep with anyone in front of her captain.

She spent the afternoon conferring with her host, Duke Kendoh Thul, a petty self-important man but the one that she had to work with. She could in fact arbitrarily command two guests for dinner; with any luck Alexis would leaven the conversation some. So she went in, ushered by more servants than she could imagine becoming necessary, to Duke Kendoh's dining hall.

The moment she saw Alexis enter was a surprise and a relief. The attraction was there, instant, instinctive, but the feeling of Quinn beside her was more compelling.

Alexis was accompanied by the ever-suspect Kaliyo, if that was the name she was going by. She winked at Ruth on her way in. A servant entered with the two. "My lord," he announced to Kendoh, "Vora'lexi'senndo, Alexis, of the Cobalt Raider mercenaries, and his second in command, Kaliyo Djannis."

Alexis bowed crisply. Kaliyo just smiled. Ruth noted the way Kendoh's eyes lingered on her. If it were someone she liked any more she would warn him here and now. Instead she smiled pleasantly and waited for Alexis to be seated opposite her, the Duke at the head of the table near them.

Food started appearing here and there on silver plates; the servants moved in silence. Alexis, meanwhile, turned to give Ruth a dazzling smile. "My lord. Pleasure to see you."

"Likewise," she said.

Kendoh cleared his throat. "I imagine you're here looking for work."

Alexis' manner was crisp. "No, my lord. I'm under contract for Baron Cortess. You would have to pay very well to overcome the exclusivity clause. I was, however, intrigued by the possibility of speaking with someone of rank in House Thul. It never hurts to get the lay of the land."

"Yes, your Sith friend was quite insistent that you be allowed in."

"My lord is too gracious." He grinned at her with a knowingness she thought the whole table must have picked up on.

"I've taken Alexis' services before," she said, and instantly kicked herself for it. Alexis' red eyes danced. "So long as I have work to do here I would prefer to coordinate with him," she finished weakly.

Kendoh made a vague self-important gesture. "Yes, well, I'll see that he is kept informed of the progress of your search."

"About that," said Alexis. "I'm given to understand you're searching for the parents of a former handmaiden here. Do we have any information on their whereabouts?"

They didn't, but Ruth let Kendoh say it. Alexis kept him talking, and he was all too happy to talk. Ruth watched, fascinated, while Alexis extracted information on the political climate – skewed heavily through a lens of Kendoh's own blundering ambition – and local military dispositions. When the conversation threatened to wander he let it go for a few minutes, then eased back, exploring, gathering.

Ruth exchanged looks with Kaliyo. Kaliyo rolled her eyes in exaggerated boredom, but with the exception of the occasional irreverent interjection she held her tongue.

Quinn, on the other hand, had opinions and sharp questions for every usable piece of intelligence Kendoh spilled. By the time the third course had arrived he had isolated and skewered every troop disposition from here to three valleys over, and his disagreements with Alexis on the advisability of said dispositions was pointedly phrased. Alexis stayed unruffled. Every now and then he pulled out some local area knowledge Quinn didn't have to back up his point. Quinn stayed cold, controlled, and displeased. It was oddly...lonely?...to see his intensity trained on someone else for once. She stayed quiet and let him put his formidable mind to work, speaking only when one of the participants appealed to the Sith. All three of them deferred to her word when she did speak. One of the perks of being Sith, though she thought things might go more smoothly if she got fair arguments.

"Rumor has it that House Cortess has locked its doors to outsiders and gone to high alert." Kendoh watched Alexis shrewdly while he spoke.

"Killik problems," Alexis said dismissively. "My men will have that cleared by the end of the week."

"Ah, Killiks. Loathsome beasts."

"They have quite an impressive civilization of their own. They don't exactly speak our language, but--"

"They are vermin."

And Ruth was lost. "Killiks?" she said.

Quinn leaned a hair's breadth toward her. "A native species, my lord," he said in the quick professional tone he used for all briefings. "Insectoids that infest human holdings and extend burrows everywhere."

"Their attacks against the noble houses are unending," blustered Kendoh. "We exterminate them where we can, but they're persistent animals."

"They're sentient, actually," said Alexis. "I'm not saying I would hire one but they do have a respectable collective intelligence."

"There is nothing to respect," insisted Kendoh.

Alexis held his ground. "I'm given to understand that the Imperial Diplomatic Service has gone so far as to try to open negotiations with them."

"And in reply they absorbed our diplomat! My lord, these things take any weakened human they can find and brainwash them, turn them into mindless servants. It's a horrifying process."

"Some Join voluntarily," said Alexis. "And I think they're our best chance at coming to an understanding."

"And a new alliance," Ruth said. Usually she liked that prospect, but..."With insectoids?"

"Sentience comes in all sorts of packages," said Alexis, absently stroking one blue cheek. "We may make this an endless war, or we can try working with them."

Kendoh scowled. "I thought you and your men were going to 'clear that,' Alexis. It seems to me you're hardly much of a mercenary if you're opposed to killing what you're hired to kill."

"Oh, we'll resolve the situation. That's what I get paid to do."

"Perhaps negotiation will be possible," said Ruth. "Maybe with this diplomat."

Alexis smiled directly at her. "I have high hopes."

Quinn scowled. "Whatever hopes we have, my lord, I suggest we keep our weapons ready."

Ruth waited only a minute or two after the last course was served before excusing herself. "Duke," she said, "thank you. I must go for now. I think a walk is in order."

"Of course. Simply call for one of my servants when you're ready to be shown your quarters."

"Thank you."

As they left the dining room Vette and Kaliyo started conferring, not bothering to keep their voices down. Quinn shadowed Ruth's steps out to the balcony.

Alexis fell into step on Ruth's other side, casually ignoring the officer. He looked to the stars, numerous and brilliant on this Core world. "Ah," he said. "Politics. Forgive me for coopting your hospitality. He didn't strike me as the most pleasant man for casual conversation."

"No," she said, "I'm not sure I would've wanted to keep his attention for long."

"Well, then." He crossed his arms over his chest and gave her a sidelong smile. "You're looking well, anyway."

"Yes. Things have been good."

"I'm glad to hear it."

"How have you been?"

"Busy. Which is exactly where I should be. Thank you for the opportunity. It wasn't the reason I accepted your invitation but it at least justifies my time when I make my report." He paused. "I'm sorry we didn't have the chance for much direct conversation."

Ruth gave Quinn a discreet staying gesture and took a few steps away before she could answer. "I was just glad to see you. Is it...is it all right? Cutting the most direct part."

Alexis kept pace, but at a respectful distance. "Yes. Absolutely. I still think we can do each other a lot of good - and frankly, seeing you always improves my day. Are we on for tomorrow?"

"If you need...what is that, anyway?"

"House Cortess. We need to get in. Believe it or not, we're on the Killiks' side for this."

"I see."

"The lady of the house has been funding a terrorist network I need to neutralize. The Killiks, along with our own Imperial Diplomatic Service contact, are prepared to deal with that. I think you'll like our diplomat, if we happen to get the chance to talk. Anyway, the house is well defended. That's why I thought your presence might be helpful. If your authority can't get us in bloodlessly, then...well."

"I'll do anything I can."

"Thank you." Alexis took a quick look around. "I should get moving. Goodnight, Ruth." He nodded cordially and headed out.

*

Was it all usefulness? Was he just that glad to keep the professional advantage even after he'd lost the physical? She didn't think so. He'd been warmer and more relaxed during his brief exchange with her than he'd been all evening. And maybe that was just to get her to come back to help him with his work. But maybe...maybe he just liked her.

I didn't have to matter. Her captain was waiting on her dismissal, and she should retire for the night.

"Walk with me, Quinn." She started back into the stuffy hallways. He followed her only a short while before slowing. "Quinn? The guest quarters are this way, I think."

"I'm staying in the barracks with the men, my lord."

"Oh." Of course. "Well, there's one thing before I go. We are helping Darnek - Alexis - tomorrow. I owe him that much."

"If you believe so, my lord," he said grimly.

"And in the interest of you having some idea where I have or haven't disappeared to, I'll say I'm staying here tonight. Without him." Did that sound too much like begging for his approval? "What's left is strictly professional. A favor for a favor." Going into the friendship angle, if even Alexis wanted to, didn't seem relevant, not now.

"Understood, my lord." He didn't lighten up by so much as a glimmer. "Permission to be dismissed?"

"Dismissed, Quinn. See you tomorrow morning."

L-447: Killik encounter

The blood was everywhere.

Wynston had expected to fight the guardsmen of House Cortess to reach its traitor baroness, but Baron Cortess had opened his house and surrendered, claiming no knowledge of the credit-laundering network that had fed the terrorist cells.

There on the spot before they could talk through the situation, the baron ordered his wife executed. It might have ended there. It should have. But Alexis' Diplomatic Service contact, the Joiner Vector, had unexpectedly summoned his Killik brethren and demanded the possession of House Cortess - killing or absorbing its staff and family - as the price of the nest's cooperation during the terrorist hunt.

Wynston's efforts to negotiate were cut short by a panicking baron. Vector came down on the Imperial side, and so it came to pitched battle, Alexis, Ruth, Quinn, the Cortess staff, and the Joiner Vector against waves of soldier Killiks followed by an enormous one.

The Killik queen had bladed front legs and sharp mandibles, and she had no shortage of targets. The blood was everywhere.

There were too many allies around for the small explosives he carried to be usable. The monster was too big for the sedative darts he favored. All he had was his knife and his blaster. The queen's strike was a long lick of fire. Alexis struggled to concentrate as he fell to the ground. Long wound, maybe shallow. It would need tending, but not now; he took aim as best he could with spots covering his vision and fired. Again. Again.

She wasn't paying attention to him. Instead she limped around to strike at Ruth. The Sith was holding her own, but that might not last.

And indeed, even as Wynston placed another shot on the queen's front leg, the other leg swept forward, splitting down the length of Ruth's forearm. A second kick caught Ruth in the stomach and sent her flying.

Dammit. Charge, fire. Charge, fire. Quinn was over by Ruth now, facing away from the fight; Vector was the only one left standing near the Killik queen. The Joiner spun and leaped, now striking at the beast's face. Alexis kept on firing.

Then the queen twisted and slammed a front leg downward again. This time she caught Vector's clothes and bore him down. The queen's huge buglike head descended – and then jerked back.

Ruth lay some ways away, but she held one shaking hand in the air. The Killik queen's whole head was being forced up and backwards, like one colossal Force choke. It would have to be enough.

Alexis and Vector exchanged looks. They each nodded. Alexis started dragging himself to one side. Vector struck up at the bug's throat, and the moment the beast's head was released from Ruth's hold, it fell throat-first onto the staff and, in an acrid burst, died.

Time for cleanup. Alexis started arranging his own jacket to stanch the bleeding of the hideous cut the Killik had inflicted. Quinn was yelling furiously at the staff, somehow looking even paler than usual while he tended to Ruth. The officer cared. Must stop bleeding. Spots in vision. What really mattered was that the job had gotten done.

L-446: Recuperation

When Ruth woke up she didn't have a weapon and she was numb but something was pressing on her and things might still be near. She twisted and flailed, seeking something to grip. Glass and water all around her. Mask on her face. Kolto tank. Safe? Maybe not. The Force slid through her addled mind like sand through a sieve. Too late.

She suppressed her panic, or tried to. A kick propelled her to the best-lit side of the tank. She peered out to see a white room, blank but for a man in a white variant of Thul livery seated in one corner studying a datapad.

She kicked to the surface, got her good arm over the edge of the tank, tugged the mouth release and swung it free. "You. Where are my people?"

"My lord!" The nurse, a broad-shouldered dark-skinned fellow, leaped to his feet. "Please return to the tank. You mustn't stress your abdominal muscles."

"Information first."

A yelp sounded from the hallway and Vette bounded into the room, fast enough that Ruth half expected her to slam into the opposite wall. She skidded to a stop and grabbed a chair from the wall, pulling it close to Ruth's tank. "You're awake! Do you have any idea," said the Twi'lek, "how hard it is to talk your way into this place without some kind of letter of introduction?"

"Don't tell me Quinn wouldn't help."

Vette rolled her eyes for answer, then sat down. "I shoulda been there."

"That Killik had legs and fangs enough for everyone; I don't think more bodies would've slowed it down much. Where are the others? Alexis, Vector? Quinn?"

"Busy." Vette wrinkled her nose. "Alexis said he would be back tonight."

"Tonight? Was I only out a few hours?"

"A day, actually. Anyway, Kaliyo and that bug guy went with him. Captain Coldblood went right back to work trying to get some dirt on the Organas or something. Because he's reeeal effective when you're not around to do the heavy lifting."

"He draws less attention than a Sith does, and that can open doors to where answers are."

"Still not as important as making sure you're okay. They won't tell me how long you'll be stuck here."

"Not long, I'm sure. I hope you can find something to do. Alderaan is only really famous for its dinner parties...if I'd thought of it beforehand I would've gotten maimed someplace more exciting."

"That would've been considerate, yeah." Vette bit her lip. "I am glad you're alive."

"Me too." Just then the nurse coughed. Ruth scowled at him. "I'm not supposed to be still and silent for the rest of the day, am I?"

"It would help," he said.

"I'll take it under advisement."

Vette took her leave. Ruth started a slide back into submersion when the nurse spoke. "We should sedate you for now, my lord."

"Absolutely not. I'm still waiting on reports." She clipped her mask back into place using only her good arm, then fell back into the water to meditate. There was plenty of fear and embarrassment and annoyance to meditate on.

It was that awareness that let her feel the flaming fury before Quinn entered the room. He had a head-sized box in one hand, a datapad in the other. He set the latter aside and pulled something out of the former while Ruth surfaced. "Captain. Good to see you."

He opened his mouth, hesitated, his face blank. "And you, my lord."

It occurred to her to be self-conscious, more or less. She had some minimal bodysuit on; that wasn't the problem. Quinn had already seen most of her bruised, bloodied, and burned. But she couldn't even tell what kind of injury he was looking at now, only that he was deeply upset about it, and that worried her.

"Be careful. You shouldn't stress your abdominal muscles." He scowled and climbed the step stool by her tank. He had a breathing mask in one hand. He lowered his voice. "You'd think these people had never heard of a comm mask. This and its mate should let you speak without surfacing. *Don't raise your hand.*"

She stopped mid-gesture. Quinn was unstrapping her current mask, expertly manipulating the air valves and fitting the new mask into place. "That bad, huh?"

"That bad, my lord." His jaw clenched hard for a moment. "With the facilities they have here, it's a wonder we could save your arm at all."

"How about the internal organs?"

His eyes flicked down to her belly. She wished she could curl up enough to see. "You'll live," he said quietly.

"You're starting to make me nervous."

"You will recover," he said, more firmly. He met her eye with an intensity she hadn't thought him capable of. "I must say, my lord, I am...relieved that you survived. Lord Baras would be hard pressed to find another apprentice of your caliber."

Truly the kind of heartfelt sentiment to bring a smile to a girl's face. "It's sweet of you to say so," she said dryly.

He didn't respond. Instead he gave a last tug on the tubing for the new mask, then climbed back down and affixed some device to the front of the tank. "Fall back, my lord."

She let herself drop back down. The officer fiddled with the new device. "Can you hear me?" he said.

And she could. "Loud and clear."

"Good. Now. I've spoken with an Organa informant." He started pacing. "I have located a weak spot in the defenses of our target. The attack itself will have to wait while you recover. There is a possibility that we can exploit that weakness before then to avoid the need for a frontal assault."

"Be careful verifying that. You can't take on an Organa patrol on your own."

"I'll get the information you need. If I require firepower...the *agent* owes us a favor at this point."

"Ease up, captain. You know that any mission could end up like this."

He stopped dead, facing her. "The ones I've planned didn't."

His anger would strengthen him, but he wouldn't want to hear that. "I know. But he's still a friend." And one she trusted, even if she couldn't explain it. She could put it in terms he would understand. "And in the future, if we need to use him, we use him."

"I'm sure he will do the same for you."

L-441: Farewell

Wynston in his guise as Alexis had free run of House Thul, and he took advantage to invite himself into their medical facility. It was time for him to leave this job behind and disappear, but he had one matter to handle first. And it was in the room where Ruth Niral floated in kolto, looking helpless for once.

"You," said a cold nasal voice.

Wynston turned on his heel to see Quinn. "Me," he agreed breezily. "I had hoped to find your commander awake."

"She requires some rest yet," clipped the uniformed officer, his blue eyes hard.

"I have the whereabouts of the people she's seeking. I can arrange exfiltration myself--"

"My lord will handle it," said Quinn. "Assuming your information here is better than it was at House Cortess."

Alexis had had no way of seeing the Killik betrayal coming. He was just grateful that Vector had chosen the right side. It must have been hard for the man joined to the hive consciousness, but in the end Vector had made the right choice.

He turned away from the scowling officer to look at Ruth. It was one thing to see a woman undressed of her own accord, smiling, at ease; it was quite another to view her ravaged flesh through transparisteel and kolto solution. "How long?" he asked. The fervent follower must know.

"If you're wondering when you can make use of her again you need not bother," said Quinn. "It will be a matter of days from now."

"She fought bravely. I hope Baras is aware of what a treasure he has."

"Are you quite finished?" said Quinn.

It wasn't like Alexis could talk to her. He handed Quinn a datacard. "Your targets are here. Notify me if there's anything else I can do."

"I think you've done enough."

Alexis thought about apologizing. But he wouldn't do it to Quinn. He nodded curtly, cast one last glance at the unconscious Ruth, and left. She couldn't be his problem anymore. It was time to leave this planet anyway.

L-397: Unsaid

"There's not much to tell, my lord." Quinn rested his hands on the banister and looked out over Vaiken Spacedock. "I was inducted into an accelerated training program at fourteen, graduated at seventeen, went directly into military service." A muscle in his cheek twitched. "After that there is little to say."

"I'm sorry," she said, reading his anger without knowing why. "I didn't mean to..."

"No need to apologize. It is...an old frustration, that's all."

"Anything I can help with?"

He looked startled. "You did. It was Baras who enabled my promotion in recognition of my service, but it was you who accepted my assignment. I'm poised to do much more here than I ever could on Balmorra."

"Good. I hope you're liking the change of scenery." Against her better judgment, but in concord with her impulses, she slid her hand toward his.

His brow finally relaxed. "My lord, it's been an honor to—" And then he noticed her hand, and hastily withdrew his, his jaw snapping shut.

She spoke to fill the unpleasant silence. "Quinn," she said, turning her face up to his. She screwed up her nerve as tightly as she could. "I don't want to play games. If you're not interested, all you have to do is say so."

It had been weeks, and he had scarcely said three words to her since. Those words being "yes, my lord," in response to direct questions. Any ground she had gained in his eyes seemed to have been lost with that one request. He assisted her in the field and in reconditioning her mending torso, but kept conversation perfectly on the job. Even Vette found it unnerving.

In addition, she was stuck waiting for her professional target to reveal herself. In the absence of anything more constructive to do Ruth decided to return to Dromund Kaas. Vette declined to take in the sights; 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 a long time in exile...but it is as impressive as I remember.”

When she sought further she could feel the longing in him. It seemed an intrusion to sense it. “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.

It was the most he’d said to her in weeks. She already missed him.

L-387: History

“Would you stop talking already?”

“—your fault for asking, sweetheart. The Black Sun, the Chiss delegation to Coruscant, the Free Traders Alliance, the Confectioner’s Guild, the—”

“Forget it!” Kaliyo grabbed a pillow and hit Wynston with it, hard. “Jeez, I thought you were all Intelligence all the time.”

“No, I get subcontracted quite a lot in some creative ways. What about you? What’s your list of employment conquests?”

“Wouldn’t you like to know.” Kaliyo made herself comfortable, her pale sculpted limbs splayed over the bed, draping over Wynston just to let him

know he was only borrowing the bed space. "There were these guys once out on Brentaal V, anarchists. Cell was probably me and a dozen other guys. We blew up holorelays, robbed banks, kidnapped politicians and corporate honchos...did a lot of damage." She shot him a knowing look. "I've mellowed. The Brigade let me blow stuff up and call it progress. I wasn't really in it for the philosophy. Even so, there's times I look at who we work for now, and...well, I never thought I'd end up helping a bunch of dictators. You know?"

Dictator could be another word for administrator with teeth. Not necessarily bad, but by Kaliyo's lights it was no doubt disgusting. "My dear, is that a scruple showing?"

"What? Nah. Just saying, it was fun while it lasted."

"Mm. That's my cue to find something entertaining to do." Wynston struggled briefly against Kaliyo's contrarily stiff arm before giving up and brushing his lips down her shoulder instead. "I can think of a few things."

"You just make this shit up as you go," she growled, but she turned toward him with a gleam in her silver eyes that told him he had her, if only for a little while.

L-351: Meet the Padawan

For some time Ruth's work had been building toward drawing out the Jedi padawan that, she finally learned, was named Jaesa Willsaam. But when Jaesa finally made contact to arrange a meeting, it was Jaesa's master, Nomen Karr, who awaited at the meeting site. The man wasn't the Jedi Master she had been cautioned to expect. He was unstable, meeting her not with focus but with furious hatred. Subduing him was a matter of beating a rabid animal.

Ruth's master sent a few guardsmen as escort. They healed what they had to, bound him, then tended to the smaller injuries. Nomen Karr wriggled and drooled. Dark Side corruption boiled across his face in uneven waves. 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. 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 asked. "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."

"His own hate did this."

"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."

"I don't want things to work 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."

Vette was smiling lopsidedly. Quinn looked...confused, bordering on distressed, but he said nothing.

"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."

In a somewhat less elegant way, Ruth supposed.

"I want that conviction. And that purity."

"Then come with me." Let there be one more Sith who wasn't on the crazy side. "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 great deal to talk about." And she had to figure out what to do with an apprentice.

Still, it was good that she'd listened.

L-350: What's in a name?

The destruction of the terrorist network proved far, far stranger than Wynston had guessed. In the end, though, he had once again managed to protect civilian lives over the doings of both anarchists and Sith. He made his report on the preparations that would have to be laid against the culpable Sith's probable return, then closed the book on that operation with a fierce satisfaction.

His next assignment was deep cover in Republic space. He had visited the Core Worlds several times before – in fact, he'd been on Coruscant before the end of the war – but this one was different. This was walking straight up to the Strategic Information Service and shaking their hands.

There was little to do in preparation. Brief his people, brush up on his Coruscanti accent in case the SIS wanted him to use it. Oddly, he found himself thinking of Ruth. He had given her only a cursory apology and a little relevant situational information after her ordeal on Alderaan; he had never followed up after. Something in him wanted to say hello and goodbye now.

The Sith looked surprised to receive his holocall. "Hi there," she said warmly. "I haven't seen you in a while. What's up?"

"Just checking in. How are things, Ruth?"

"Downright triumphant, in point of fact. Not only did I get the target I've been seeking for the longest time, I got her to join me."

Of course she would. Remembering how warm and welcoming she had been for him, Wynston had no doubt she could charm any target she wanted to. "Impressive."

"I haven't the faintest idea what to do with an apprentice, but at least she isn't fighting me now."

"I know you'll come up with something. In the meantime, I have a small report regarding the Dark Council that may be of interest to you. I'll send it along shortly." He needed the likes of her on guard against the return of the Sith he had foiled.

"I appreciate it. How are you doing, Agent?"

"Wynston."

"Your new name?"

"My real name, actually." There. He'd said it. He wasn't even sure why, he just wanted to give her something in token of their association before he disappeared. "I haven't told anyone in a long time."

"Wynston. I like it."

"I'm glad. I can't exactly go back and change the original. Well, I can, so far as anyone will ever find out, but that's not the point."

"I won't tell anyone either way."

"I know. That's why our relationship works." He gestured vaguely with one hand. "I have a new assignment. Long-term, deep cover. This holofrequency won't be available and I don't know when I'll be able to surface again."

"Really," she said solemnly. "Be careful. I doubt I'll have any influence wherever you're going. I know you can fend for yourself, but...be careful."

"I will. Watch out wherever you go next. Without me you'll be flying blind."

"Don't I know it." They exchanged brave smiles. "I...thanks for checking in. I look forward to seeing you when you return in triumph."

"I'll see what I can do." He smiled and bowed. "Wynston out."

L-314: Careful and safe

"My lord. A word, if I may?"

"Certainly. Have we finished the repairs that'll let us go on to Taris 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 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."

After giving up on active flirting she had gotten used to the 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 bullshit 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.

L-312: For the Republic

The Republic infiltration went wrong.

It was wrong from the start. The minute the Republic's SIS had Wynston alone they had activated...something. A keyword that forced him to obey. Over and over again he tried to run, to yell, to fire, and couldn't. He would not harm the SIS team he had 'defected' to. For once he truly had no choice.

But he could plan.

Some combination of hunch and fever dream got him his first lead: a mind-control serum course someone had programmed into him. 'Someone' had to be Imperial Intelligence, but, one problem at a time. The SIS had his keyword now.

If it were just a leash for an agent who had flouted Sith orders one too many times he might not mind that much. He still trusted Imperial Intelligence as an organization. But with the keyword compromised he was poised to do unutterable damage with no recourse.

He narrowly resisted jumping when Vector and Kaliyo clattered onto the bridge. Vector gave him an unreadable look. It was those black Joiner eyes that left him unable to interpret; he was forced to judge Vector on his actions.

"Are you all right?" said the Joiner. He had proved surprisingly level-headed once he was off Alderaan. In the showdown between Empire and Hive he had chosen the Empire and so far that hadn't wavered. In fact, compared to Kaliyo he was a voice of blessed reason.

"Yes, fine." Wynston could lie to him anyway.

Kaliyo scoffed. "You've been playing space cadet all week. Staring off into space like you're expecting it to start paying you. Sure you didn't hit your head or something?"

"Sweetheart, I'm one hundred percent here." He was more than used to lying to her. It was like having something normal.

L-274: Peace, love, and keeping your head down

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. But 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."

L-254: A friend in need

It wasn't merely exhausting to be unable to speak or act as he wished. There were hallucinations, too, voices. When his SIS supervisor let him go to 'shore up his cover' with Imperial Intelligence, Wynston went straight for the Imperial Intelligence archives.

He found the formula for the serum. And noted, as he went, where the files were located and where their copies and backups were. This was one tool that was unconscionable. Anytime, anywhere. Someday he would be back to remove it.

With the formula for the brainwashing serum in hand, he went on to the sole Imperial base on Quesh. It was there, in the courtyard of the main Imperial base, after he had gathered all resources except some that were supposedly stored outside town, that Ruth unexpectedly fell into step with him. "Hi there," she said. "Would you happen to know where the cantina is?"

Of all the..."Hello," he said carefully, trying to smile. "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."

"Much obliged." Then, more softly: "Not to be pushy, but let me know if you could use a freelancer while I'm in town."

Wynston nodded. Ruth turned back toward the cantina.

She really would just help, wouldn't she? He felt a surge of warmth at the prospect of friendly company. And since he didn't know whether he would be able to walk under his own power once the serum course was activated, she might be the only thing to save him from a nameless death on a trackless world. "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. "It would mean a great deal to me."

"Absolutely." She didn't even hesitate.

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He found the abandoned lab he had read about where the rest of the chemicals he wanted was stored. He mixed the serum then and there, only occasionally remembering that Ruth was fidgeting in impatience while she

watched the entrance to the cavern. Voices whispered in his head. He ignored them.

"Please," Ruth said uncertainly, "let me know if I can do anything."

He nodded sharply. "I'll tell you when the time is right."

And he did. He called to her while he seated himself next to the lab bench. He lined up the needle against his vein. "Ruth," he said, "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.

Voices. Words. "Can you feel it?" said the voice that had been speaking to him almost since this ordeal started. "The serum begins its work. Bonding to spinal fluid, retracing neural pathways. Painful. Effective."

He was already aware of the pain. "I'm not worried about the symptoms," he said. "I want my mind back."

The voice continued for a little while; Wynston struggled to grasp the words as they washed over him. Then it was dark.

The return to consciousness hurt. He struggled to sit up. Ruth was at his side in an instant. "Welcome back," she said, pulling him closer when he winced and sagged. "Easy." She cradled him in her arms, radiating anxiety. "I really want to ask how you're holding up."

Any person who cared would. Caring. How strange. "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."

She didn't demand answers or even tell him that that motto was patently false. She just held him. Part of him wanted to stay there forever, resting.

She spoke after a while. "I...sensed I needed to be here," she said softly. "On this planet, in that courtyard, today. I didn't ask why. It's rare enough for the Force to tell me anything at all...so I came."

He wanted to dispute the significance of that, but he was tired and in pain and her arms around him were a comfort he didn't want to push away. Instead he rested until he knew the delay was too much. He stirred and 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." He wasn't sure he was going to survive this mission. He hoped he could last long enough to complete it, but he wasn't sure. "Goodbye."

Her brows knit together. "What the blazes is that supposed to mean?"

"No questions." He touched a finger to his lips and smiled, almost wistfully. Wherever he was going, if he did survive, he would miss her. He trotted down the road, putting as much distance between the two of them as he could.

L-251: Permission granted

There had still been no word from Darth Baras after Ruth finished her errands on Quesh. Vette and her Tarisian recruit Lieutenant Pierce seemed happy to play pazaak or busy themselves with the Holonet. 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." The past months had been hectic, with grueling days in the field and plenty of planning to do during off time.

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."

What? "Denied."

He frowned and seemed to struggle for words. "Then I must speak freely."

"Please do, captain."

"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 remarkably 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."

"No." Without looking away from her, he set the datapad aside. "I'm an idiot." He looked her in the eye with that calculating expression he had. "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 was worked up enough to return 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.

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"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. She didn't care. 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.

"Give yourself some credit. It was a good evening." A bit much of a reaction for just a kiss? Maybe, but she wasn't ashamed of it. She smiled and continued before he could try to dismiss it. "Come on. I think this den is clear, but we've got a ways to go."

L-216: The Ensign

"Sir! I was wondering when I might find you alone. I...have a purely professional question for you, if you don't mind my asking."

Wynston turned away from his thoughts to face the pretty new ensign who somehow managed to know both too much for safety and too little for utility. After the current crisis was resolved Ensign Temple could grow to be a very valuable team member; she had both good intentions and professional promise, and it was that thought that upheld Wynston's friendly demeanor when her voice pattered against his bloodied nerves.

Open manner, relaxed body language. "So long as we're not under active fire I never mind you asking," he said. "Go ahead."

She settled in a formal pose, her standard haircut short, her uniform neat, her little smile the only nonregulation thing about her. "When you lie to a woman over the course of a mission, make her think you're interested...does it bother you?"

How was this on her list of...? He hadn't even...not since before Temple had come on board, anyway...had she read something into his automatic banter with that girl from Dorn Base? Or was the reputation of Ciphers in general and Cipher Nine in particular just coming around to bite him?

In any case the woman was still staring at him. He raised his eyebrows, let his smile turn conspiratorial. "Getting close to our targets is one of the perks of the job."

"Sir," she said archly, "you are a cad."

"If you think that's a bad thing you've never seen it done right." Reflex, this, glib words; something that allowed an easy end to the conversation.

"Stick around, watch me at work, you might learn something." But not just yet. Right now he had bigger things to worry about. The SIS control. His mission.

"Hm," she said. She didn't budge. "Don't mistake me, I've been involved with plenty of the wrong men, but going in, there was always the chance they'd work out. I don't know how I'd handle living one life in the field and another back at home. It must be exhausting."

"You learn to adapt," he said. Or you burned out. As he was close to doing, but Temple didn't know that; no one could know the full extent of it. In spite of all previous criticisms what was doing it to him wasn't a woman after all. Not the point just now. "The trick is to set your plans in place and then free up a little enthusiasm, wholly independent of larger concerns, for just living in the moment. With luck, practice, or both you'll spark the same from your partner. It doesn't have to have long-term potential to be worth the time."

"Spoken like a true hedonist. So, I should abandon my dreams of romance?"

The undercurrent of that question could be unfortunate. Better discourage it. "Adjust the standards, maybe. This crew doesn't contain a great deal of romantic potential."

Damnably, she perked up. "I haven't gotten the impression that, um, Kaliyo—"

"Ensign." His statement was not to say that Kaliyo wasn't competition. Kaliyo was the very antithesis of romance and was still a more desirable partner than this girl whom he had only taken because her other fate would have been death. That the Ensign's life had been worth saving, something good to salvage from the rest of this mess, Wynston was fairly certain; that she didn't hold a candle to Kaliyo in any nonprofessional aspect he was entirely certain. Kaliyo was the only enjoyment independent of larger concerns that he still had the energy for. "I can teach you the business. I can tell you where to go for pleasure. If there's anything else, I'm not the man to ask."

That finally dampened her enthusiasm. "Right. Well, I'll leave you be then, sir." Her disappointment, he noted with an unwelcome twinge, was nonregulation too. "Thank you for your help."

He let her go in silence. As damage-control efforts went, Wynston had a whole lot that were higher priority than this.

L-200: Warming up

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. "That agent has been a thorn in the Empire's side for too long."

"Not anymore," said Ruth. "Good job tracking him down."

He frowned and didn't look at her. "He had too many years on the loose."

"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. 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. "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 is this 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."

"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.

L-200: Relationship status

Wynston was in bed going over some reports on his datapad when Kaliyo stuck her head in. "Hey. Wynston."

He set the datapad aside and smirked at her. Even when she was picking through heaps of her own stuff on his bedroom floor she managed to look beautiful. And, he reminded himself, she was still deadly. "Kaliyo?"

"Let me ask you something. You get around, you end up with lots of girls."

"Yes, that's not particularly a secret."

She looked troubled. "I know it's just the job or a night off, whatever, but...that ever mean much to you?"

He didn't let his casual smile slip, but inwardly he cringed. This was the lead-in to a bad conversation. He had been with her long enough to think that it wouldn't have to happen at all. "Not that I'm avoiding the question, but would you care to explain where this is coming from?"

"I'm not trying to get you in trouble, I don't care about who you're with. I just...I'm like you, you know? We squeeze guys or girls for whatever they're worth, then toss 'em." She pressed her lips together for a second. "Creeps me out a little to do things different. You know?"

He stared her down. This couldn't be happening. He couldn't let it happen, not with a menace like her. Time to reassert what they had agreed on a

long time ago. He let his smile fade, let one eyebrow lift a bit. "Is that where this is going? We talk about our feelings together?"

Her nervousness crashed to hostility. "Hey," she blurted. "You want to keep it physical, great. I'm not the one who started clinging around."

There had been no clinging. That was what he had liked so much about the arrangement. Kaliyo wasn't meant for anything else. Neither was Wynston. "Physical works very well for both of us," he said coolly. "If you ever got the impression I'd be suited for or interested in anything more...well. Then it's for the best that we get this conversation out of the way."

"Yeah." She stepped back; her lip only quivered for a second. "Not a whole lot of conversation needed."

"Good. I'm occupied here, but if you're up for work or play later you know where to find me."

"I know where to find a lot of guys, agent," she spat.

He nodded acknowledgement. "None like me," he said.

"Yeah. That's a good thing." She backed out of the room, never turning her back on him until the door was shut.

Wynston stayed put. Of all possible ways for Kaliyo Djannis to turn on him, he did not expect an emotional approach. Kaliyo had lusts and rages, not feelings. That was one of the things that fascinated him about her.

He didn't know whether she had been angling toward the monogamy talk – probably not, she liked her diversions too much; although, she might have wanted to strike an agreement and then just cheat regularly on the side and congratulate herself for having so neatly double-crossed her little housebroken agent...it was likely either that, or the one about how meaningful repeated sex got. Repeating sex made you better at sex. Repeating it with one person had the particular benefit of making you much better at sex with that person. Nice, but the mythology surrounding the associated out-of-bed significance wasn't something that interested him. That was for people who fell in love, and neither he nor Kaliyo fell into that category.

But if it wasn't just a play to put a leash on him, if something in her chaotic mind really wanted to "do things different"...why? Was she still not satisfied? He made their existing arrangement as good as he knew how, and he was a very knowledgeable man. The whole setup was both enjoyable and stunningly effective. Work. Sex. The carefully balanced pastimes that might amuse her without destroying everything else in the vicinity. Drinks, dancing, playing lethal pranks on the worst of the predatory scum encountered on assignments – that last was scarcely an optimal use of his time or talents and often came out far messier than it needed to be, but it made her happy, which made it both fun and an important element of his personnel management plan. More sex. Gifts selected and presented to delight or annoy. Perfect back-to-back combat support. Managing her temper, making her laugh. Waiting for her to finish spinning her wild stories before making his playfully derisive commentary, because even when she was rattling off outright fabrications or (badly) explaining galactic history he already knew, she liked to talk and he liked to listen. Exploring grimy cantinas on days off and running sarcastic commentary, him and her against the world.

At no point in that had he ever indicated in any way that he was interested in some traditional romantic relationship. Exclusivity was out of the question. And she knew full well what he thought of her ethics, her methods, all that substance that would theoretically go into a personal partnership and that was, to him, with her priorities, immeasurably distasteful. Even his sweet nothings were wrapped in ten layers of sarcasm most of the time. Hell, he'd been calling her a torque wrench (in Sullustan) as an endearment for months; her reaction when she found out had been priceless. That was not the style of a man who took her seriously.

Wynston took a controlled, stabilizing breath, sharp in, sharp out. It would have been prudent to let her keep talking. Just agree with whatever she said, give the illusion she wanted; even if it was commitment, minimize danger by keeping her happy. That was what one did if one wanted to reach so much as even odds on staying on Kaliyo's good side. But he liked their existing arrangement. More than he had ever expected to. Nobody played games quite like she did; the thought of turning it into a run-of-the-mill charade now was...repugnant.

That blustering response to what he'd said meant she was hurting. Lots of things hurt her like that, though. Failed scams, a missed or botched chance for revenge. She'd get over it. He hoped she'd get over it. Losing her would be...

...what he had been looking forward to all along? Because she was by nature one of the bad guys, and always would be?

No, she was better managed than that. And she wanted him too much to not get over it. And anyway, hurting her was only as bad as hurting any other aggressive sadist out there: ethically neutral at worst. He didn't enjoy it any more now than he ever did, but it was nothing to lose sleep over. Clearly.

He set aside his datapad. He wasn't getting anywhere here. He was in the mood for someone sweet, someone who could benefit from the kind-and-gentle style he'd fallen out of practice with since Kaliyo started occupying his nights; he was in the mood for it, but Kaliyo probably wouldn't take it well if he ran out for someone else just now. And he had hurt her enough for one night.

Set the whole problem aside and go talk to Vector, then. There were some work matters he could use a sounding board for. Further damage control could wait until morning.

L-123: Changing terms

"So," said Ruth. "You all saw the comms there, I take it. Baras's attempt to have me killed. The Emperor's Hand, whatever they are. The new, non-Baras direction our careers are about to take."

The crew nodded, quietly, with varying expressions of glumness.

"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 dismissively. Ruth smiled, very briefly, at his tone.

Quinn seemed a shade paler than usual. "So there it is. Lord 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."

L-122: House Niral

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. "Broonmark." 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."

L-100: Life is short

The assassination attempts had persisted one after another for weeks, Baras' agents throwing themselves against her at every opportunity. This one nearly succeeded. Ruth checked in on her battered crew, then returned to the medbay to meet Quinn.

The bruise on his forehead hurt her to look at. He drew her into his arms without a word and kissed her, hard, urgently.

"Malavai," she whispered, "I won't let them take you."

He squeezed her closer for a moment, then drew back to take her hands. "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."

A strange uncertain feeling came over her. "Go ahead."

He took her hand. "You and I have been incredibly successful together."

"We certainly have."

"And we love each other."

"We do."

"I...I wondered if you would want to do me the honor of marrying me."

Her jaw dropped. "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."

L-47: Skimming through Voss

It was in a teahouse in Voss-Ka that Wynston waited for word on his current investigation. In the meantime Vector came back from a look around the city looking cheerful. "Wynston," he said, "we saw someone on the streets in the alien enclave."

His enthusiasm was understated but unmistakable. "Who might that be?" said Wynston.

"Lord Ruth. We wondered whether you would want to invite her to dine with us this evening."

"I think that's a brilliant idea. Let's do it."

Vector handled the arrangements while Wynston returned to some analysis he could do on his wrist console. The moment he got the word here, he would have to drop his personal life and run.

But Ruth did show up for dinner, without any of her entourage. She smiled brilliantly as she approached his table.

He stood. "Ruth," he said, returning her smile. "You would not believe how things have been going."

"Can I ask?"

"Well, no."

"How are you personally, in a nonspecific way?"

They caught up for a little while. Eventually Wynston asked about her associates. Including "the captain."

"I married him, actually."

Wynston did his best to control his face, managing a thin smile as he inclined his head. "Then he warmed up after all. Good news."

"It's been good, Wynston. It's everything I wanted." She seemed ready to skitter away from the topic. "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 a little. "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 native trials. Quinn was waiting for 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," said Vector tactfully.

"Yes," said Ruth. "We should."

Her vision 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 sternum. 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. You should have joined us, captain," said the Chiss, "you might've gotten something useful about the miseries to come."

Quinn scowled at him. "I have enough to plan for without seeking trouble in visions, agent."

*

The mission led them both further into a strange twisted wilderness. Ruth 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 shall 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. "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. 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. *Dammit, man, when did you turn suicidal?*

“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.

L-12: Wild creature

The power Wynston was chasing had more influence than he had suspected. For as soon as he closed on one lead, he received word: Imperial Intelligence was to be dissolved, its resources distributed to the military and the Sith. Wynston was without a home.

And, just as a personal jab, Wynston was sure, Kaliyo was placed under arrest.

Watching two burly soldiers march her out the door left a flaming hole in him. And there was nothing he could do about it, not now. What mattered was the powers behind this coup. The job came first, now and always.

He had hunted those who harmed the Empire's people. He had taken down anarchists, terrorists, sadists, people who tried to hurt innocents, people who tried to hurt the Empire's core. This was the first time it had ever felt like someone was hurting him.

The Star Cabal, the organization that seemed to have strings everywhere, had neutralized several of Intelligence's most critical agents – including the Keeper who had been Watcher Two, whom Wynston had long been fond of as a colleague and a person – and had Intelligence itself cut apart by the military and the Sith. Now instead of doing real work Wynston was to take a low-grade military rank and proceed under the orders of a Sith.

“As you will, my lord.” Wynston hadn't been listening to the commander's Sith Power speech; instead he mechanically bowed. The motion rasped at his nerves, but he knew this kind of Sith. Obey or die. He couldn't run damage control on bad orders if he was dead. He would find a choice or make one, sooner or later; for now he bowed.

How had this happened?

He would find the Cabal's center and destroy it, and take everything they had to start using it for good. All his life he had thought that what was Imperial was personal, but now he understood that the things before had only been the former. This, now, was both.

Time to fix it.

L-11: A distant cry

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 simply.

He stared at her for a long moment. Then he turned to Pierce. "Go on ahead. Take us to Corellia."

*

"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."

"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.

L-11: Career move

"Keeper," Wynston said carefully, "you're sure about this? "

The woman he still thought of as Watcher Two had recovered from the Star Cabal's strike; now he was in contact with her as they moved to disrupt the

Cabal's operations on Corellia and, he hoped, gather the information necessary to neutralize the cult entirely.

The proposed disruption to operations was the planting of false information to unbalance their efforts at keeping Corellia a swamp of a contested zone. Such disinformation was common. The particular method, though, here, in a war zone, could only really be one thing: interrogation. And they weren't in a position to plant that on just anybody right now.

Which meant that Wynston was going in, drawing the Cabal's attention, and doing anything it took to make them believe that he didn't want them to have the information they were going to beat out of him. He had trained for torture scenarios. It was in the portfolio of things that might one day have to be withstood. So it was for every agent.

"It's the only workable solution under the circumstances, Cipher." When even Keeper's voice developed sympathy he knew it was bad. "If there were another way...but there isn't."

"There's always a choice," he said, "it's just that neither you nor I are going to take the 'giving up' option."

There was silence. The Cabal had no reason to keep him or anyone alive once the information was given. Wynston didn't know where their agents were physically located or whether rescue would be able to come. It was only safe to assume it wouldn't.

But it would deal a critical blow to the Cabal even as the rest of what Keeper could trick out from under the Sith and military were closing on the Cabal's big players. If Intelligence had to bleed a little more in this process of mending itself, well, Wynston was expendable. That had always been the case.

"All right," he told Keeper. "I'm going in."

*

The gambit worked. With the pieces in place Wynston could reach the Cabal's center of power. And it worked. It worked.

“All that power in something so small?”

The question was rhetorical. Wynston had successfully, believably been ‘broken’ by Star Cabal interrogators, then had been dumped and left for dead by the same. He had dropped off the radar again, taken Keeper’s lead to a secret facility, and here, at last, he had come face to face with the enemy called Hunter.

Wynston’s patience for interrogation had worn thin. The moment Hunter identified the sleek holocron-like device, the Black Codex, as the repository of the information Wynston wanted about the Cabal, about a great deal more than that, Wynston made an end of the man. Imprudent, perhaps, but it was all the regard Hunter deserved.

The rest could be opened by his contacts in Intelligence. Or, better, a handful of agents in something new outside the crippled Sith-ridden remnants of Intelligence. Wynston would have to talk it over with Keeper and the Minister of Intelligence. But this, this tiny thing, might be the hope he had thought was gone for his organization and his people.

The Cabal, its zealots, its sadistic Hunter; the Sith, their power games; the military, its fractured leadership; Wynston had something on all of them now. This might be where his career started.

Better report back to his colleagues. There was a lot of work to do.

L-10: Heaven has no rage

It was difficult to feel hurt with Quinn, and so Ruth stayed in his arms, a little in awe as always that he was here, with her. “You’re attentive tonight,” she told him.

After some time, he paused in kissing her. “I have no explanation.”

She laughed. “You don’t owe me one.”

“I love you, Ruth.”

“And I love you, Malavai. More than anything.”

She couldn't see his face in the darkness, but he kept caressing her, holding her so tightly as to seem like he was trying to absorb her whole.

At some point while it was still dark she woke up alone. He was probably researching some aspect of the Corellian operation. Of course scouring the holonet for details was more important than sleep.

But not, she reflected with some satisfaction, more important than her.

*

The Corellian operation, as it turned out, had a hitch, as Quinn explained once the crew was awake and ready to move: "There is a martial order in effect in the Corellia system. All ships entering must be fitted with a certain special transponder. Anything entering the system without that transponder will stick out like a sore thumb. And be treated as an enemy."

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

"I have been monitoring the comm channels," Quinn said coldly. "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. That's why I keep you around. 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."

"What, I finally get to be involved in these stealth operations? How exciting. With any luck the only guards we meet will be just smart enough to automatically obey a Sith."

Quinn nodded. "Perhaps, my lord."

"Relax. We've got this."

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. I felt I should be here to witness your fate."

"My...fate." *What's this?*

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."

"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. "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 came a thunderous burst, the yelping of blasters, the clank of battle droids. Ruth disabled the first turret and turned around, nearly stumbling facefirst into a droid's swinging vibroblade.

In the mist of fear and anger 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 energy that would knock him unconscious. Maybe it was gentle enough for him to survive. She didn't have time to check.

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 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 unidentifiable 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 didn'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, viper. 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.

*

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 an insane 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, please 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, please 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 precise, practiced fashion 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 present.”

“Don’t.” *Don’t tempt me.* “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.

L-10: Restoration

Powers hid behind powers on Corellia, and when Wynston was recalled it was not to Dromund Kaas, but to the *Tenebrous*, a ship chartered by some of the remains of Intelligence, Keeper at the helm.

And when he came on board, Kaliyo was waiting in the hangar.

Some Fixer was saying something irrelevant. Wynston walked straight past him to where Kaliyo lounged against the wall, his heart pounding double his fast steps.

“Kind of sad operation, huh?” she said, her silver eyes sparkling. “These guys can’t even play a decent game of sabacc.”

He would tackle her then and there if that that weren’t a dead giveaway on his feelings. He had a thousand questions. All of them came back to: how was she free, and here, and with him?

He pushed it aside; she wouldn’t give a straight answer anyway. “Nice of you to join me,” he said. “Let’s finish this.”

L-9: Ruth’s dream

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.

L-6: Kaliyo's tool

Victory. Imperial Intelligence would have to be re-formed, probably with changes, probably with elements outside the Sith chain of command. But for a day or two Wynston had time to do some things for his own people. Including accompanying Kaliyo for a politically sensitive meeting with some old friends.

It went sour.

In the melee he wrenched a bulky blaster rifle from one of the anarchist thugs. When the last anarchist went down, he turned his weapon on the woman who had brought him here.

Kaliyo Djannis grinned at him from where she stood on the other side of her fallen contact Wheezer and his dead friends. "Finally got yourself a real firearm, huh?"

"You bring every weapon you can," he said.

"Yes, I do." Kaliyo grinned approval. "You worked out nicely. Anyway. I really thought the old man wanted to meet you to talk, not pull something. Guess it worked out." She lowered her rifle.

Wynston didn't.

She frowned at him. "What?"

"You've been selling information to these anarchists."

"Well, yeah."

Again he had to ask himself, what had made Intelligence insist on hiring her? He had never figured it out. Firepower, but they could have gotten that anywhere else. An enjoyable mistress in every possible sense, but his employers weren't known for assigning priority to that. So why? What justified letting her using his agency – sometimes going over his head to do so – for the destruction she did? Stay calm, he reminded himself. Cool. Professional. "How long?"

"Since I signed on with you," she said breezily. "I sold him some stuff on Dromund Kaas and it just became a regular thing. He pays better than you do, and it's not like it got you in trouble. You guys keep all kinds of goodies at your fingertips, they were going to waste." When he failed to return her smile she huffed impatiently. "Come on. I never talked about the missions, I'm not stupid. This guy was into bombing spaceports and raiding transports, not high espionage."

"You of all people should have known not to sell out the Empire on my watch." He had been her meal ticket for a long time. He had offered good pay, good sex, challenge, entertainment, pathetically devoted backup. He had done everything in his power to keep her satisfied and he had loved every minute of it...but then, in the choice between grasping for more and offering whatever nonrecreational use she was supposed to be good for, what had he really expected out of her? "I knew you were made for backstabbing, but you were supposed to betray *me*. You'd find some way to sell *me* out, I'd get out of it, I'd take down anyone who was foolish and crooked enough to take whatever bargain you'd offered. We'd fight. We'd have fun. You could've made it something forgivable. But instead you did this, helped your terrorist friends kill my people. Innocents, Kaliyo."

"Credits, Wynston," she said impatiently. "You should know by now that I am never going to care about the Empire and its capital-P People. Not like you do, not at all."

"This went too far." It didn't matter what purpose she was supposed to serve. The only correct course of action now was a trigger squeeze. Wynston had catalogued a thousand projected situations in which he might have to kill Kaliyo Djannis: when it came to this one, he realized, he couldn't do it.

"I'll be returning to the ship," he said instead. "You won't. Get moving."

"Oh, yeah? And just how am I supposed to get off this rock?"

"Credits?" he suggested coldly. He didn't trust his composure to hold at cool anymore.

"Huh." She nodded slowly, her eyes flicking between his rifle and his face. "You really mean it, don't you. You're just gonna cut me loose."

"Yes. Settle your accounts with Intelligence on your own time." Let them sort out her purpose. Or let them admit she had played them all. "Don't come after me. I promise I'll leave you be so long as you walk away now."

Anger hardened her voice. "You can't ditch me that easy. You don't get to make that call."

"I just did. You started this. I'm telling you where it stops."

Her lips pulled back from her teeth. "I can wreck you, Wynston. I can tear down everything you ever built."

True. That was why he had to stop it. That was why he was cursing himself for being unable to end it. "I'm aware."

"'Aware' but you'll still turn your back on me? You owe me better than that, you slime."

Calm, he reminded himself. Cold. Professional. "You want my respect, you have it. You're the most dangerous woman I ever met and that was before you learned enough to shred me and everything I've worked for. I know all that. Still, it's you." All right, maybe not a hundred percent professional. "I can't let you keep using my resources, but I will let you go."

Now her voice was rough-edged, her sneer pronounced. "So what, am I supposed to be grateful that you've deemed me worthy to keep breathing? You're never gonna stop being that self-righteous *karking* prick, are you? Newsflash, blue-freak, I don't need your blessing to exist."

Calm. Cold. Professional. He nodded down at his blaster rather than taking his aim off her to gesture with it. "You really do. Prior to today I never considered revoking it."

"Come off it," she spat. "Like you haven't been paid to do worse yourself. You're as dirty as I am." She rolled her eyes in exaggerated disgust. "So fine. Let's call it even, we go back to the ship, you can still save the Empire – it's not like my side deals were gonna bring the whole thing crashing

down, and I'll stop doing it anyway. Just skip the bullshit about punishing me over your stupid schoolboy principles."

The abuse didn't bother him; verbal punching bag was just one of the many services he had offered her, and with every fresh temper tantrum she took full advantage. It didn't matter anymore. He edged backward toward the courtyard gate. "I won't punish you. Just don't follow me."

She took a step towards him anyway. When he failed to fire, she raised her hairless brows. Her aura of rage settled into a calmer arrogance. "You haven't shot me yet. You're not going to. I don't think you can do it, agent." She even managed a dark smile. "Those big professional balls aren't up to it this time, are they?"

"I'm giving you a chance, Kaliyo. Take it." He had to break down for one of the words they never said to each other. "Please."

"Aww," she drawled. "Is that where this is going? We talk about our feelings together?"

That stung. It was he who had first thrown those words at her the one time she had tried to talk about something that was neither work nor play. She got what she wanted out of him, and uneven though it was, he got what he wanted out of her; he had refused to let that dynamic change. The refusal was supposed to keep things under control, keep them clean. It hadn't worked.

"Go," he said.

"No," she replied, and started her play. She wasn't stupid enough to bring the rifle up to aim; instead she let it fall to hang by its shoulder strap as she approached him with a lazy sway-hipped gait. "Look, Wyn, I know you're mad. I was a bad girl. But I'll make it up to you, promise. This ride is too good for you to give up now and we both know it. Plus, I will make the very short remainder of your life hell if you leave me on this rock. So let's just go, yeah?" She edged in to touch him, ignoring his own rifle.

He let the weapon drop. Kaliyo's rages could pass as quickly as they came. She knew he knew that. Hell, she knew he liked it, the crash from reckless

abuse to reckless other things, the game of provoking or preventing either or both. This close she smelled of plasma, sweat, scorched armor, with the sharp edge of blood. Around anyone else that meant unpleasant cleanup; around her it meant foreplay. He settled one hand against the perfect warm curve of her waist.

"I can be good," she purred. Of course she would think that he would be suckered into an embrace right after an exchange like that. Wynston would very much have liked to be suckered into it. Instead he leaned into her, swept a dart out of his pocket, and planted it in her side. It was the only trick he had that wouldn't kill her. He knew she carried no corresponding mercy. She never had.

Her eyes widened. "That was my move."

"Got there first," he said softly, pushing aside the black-nailed hand that had been both caressing his back and slipping a knife from its sleeve sheath. The sedative would take another few moments for full effect, but he already had the physical advantage.

She bared her teeth again. "You always fell for that before."

"I always wanted to fall for it before." He caught her when she swayed. "But you can't play me for everything." With practiced care he eased her to the ground.

She grasped at his jacket and stared up at him, her streaked ivory face warping with fury. "I'll kill you," she said hoarsely. "You think you've beaten me? I'll hunt you down and I will kill you."

"Don't try." He considered a last kiss, decided it was too late for that. "It's been fun, love. Goodbye."

Kaliyo's silver-tipped eyelashes fluttered a few more times before she lost consciousness completely.

Wynston got up, walked briskly over to his former partner's dead anarchist friends, and started searching them for items of interest, anything he could bring home to report on. Calm, he reminded himself. Cold. Professional. He went through the motions of gathering evidence for this meaningless

side task and then started back toward the ship, leaving his uncorrected mistake behind.

L-6: Questioning

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," 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 a dead man. Meet me in the conference room when you're ready."

He nodded smartly. "Yes, my lord."

The slave collar was still on the conference room table where Vette had left it. Ruth wasn't sure why she 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.

"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."

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 flinched. "As you wish, my lord. What we were doing for the Empire, for Baras, it was true. It was right. 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 Draahg 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 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 that ambush on Quesh."

"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 never thought I would 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.

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 small 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."

L-6: New plan

Wynston took the ship's ramp at a fast walk. He found Temple and Vector in the holo room playing pazaak at a little table set up right next to the medbay.

"Kaliyo won't be returning," Wynston announced evenly. "Temple, take us to Vaiken Spacedock, it's time to get back to work. If Kaliyo does show her

face, don't let her get close. She'll be out for blood. I'll be in my quarters, I have some matters to arrange."

Then he retreated. It was time to...to sort something out. He was off balance and he didn't like it.

He considered calling Vector in to talk. But talking to someone that close might be unwise; Wynston needed time to sort out what to say and what to hide, both in the facts, which he might end up being honest about, and the feelings, which he certainly wasn't ready to lay out before his own crew.

Still, he wanted to talk to someone. The mere superficial fact of exchanging words might calm him somewhat.

He briefly considered going out to pay for someone to look after him for a change. But no, he wasn't in the mood. Anger didn't do it for him, and he was, in spite of his efforts to keep a fence around the feeling, furious with himself. As for just finding someone to talk to, his address book was extensive, but when it came to contacts that could both offer good company and understand when to stop asking questions the list was short.

Ruth was an obvious candidate. It wasn't often a woman stayed on speaking terms with him after marrying someone else, but Ruth was still warm. Friendly, genuine, trustworthy. Unavailable, but that didn't matter so much. She still brought out the best in him. She was everything Kaliyo wasn't. And maybe a hands-off kind of girl would do him some good.

He called and she answered quickly, coming up in an imposing set of black armor. That was a switch. She used to favor a modified Imperial uniform that gave her a charmingly ordinary aspect.

"Wynston," she said. She didn't smile.

"Ruth," he said cordially. "I've finally had time to come up for air. I thought I'd call in, see how things are going with you."

"Busy," she said.

"Busy where, exactly?" he asked. Something felt off.

"Corellia." There was a defiant sound to it. "You can tell your masters if you like."

That would be a reference to the chunk of Imperial Intelligence that had been handed to her former master Darth Baras. Surprising that she thought he would accept Baras's leadership. Very surprising that she thought he would inform on her. "I wasn't planning on it. You know, I was on Corellia not long ago." He tried a smile. "It seems we just missed each other."

"Yes. Interesting timing, you calling now. What do you want?"

Giving the usual glib line about simply wanting to see her would be either well received or...disastrously not, given the brittle sound of her. He had never seen her like this. He liked to follow a woman's moods, map out what she wanted, provide what he could, at least until the job called him elsewhere. It was fun, even with the crazy ones. It was rewarding. It was...hard, when someone gave him a turnaround like this. He decided to give her the truth. "I'd like to catch up. I'm between jobs. Things have been eventful, things I can talk about for once."

"Oh?" she said warily.

"Crew shakeups, mostly. You may be glad to know that Kaliyo's gone."

Somewhere in there, Ruth winced. "Crew shakeups," she repeated quietly. "Um, Kaliyo. I'm sorry. I know you were fond of her."

He shrugged. "I wouldn't worry too much. We all knew it was coming sometime." He pushed away the thoughts of every kind of trouble she could wreak due to his having been unprepared when the time did come.

"Yes," said Ruth. "Yes, at least you saw it coming." For a second her mouth just hung open; then her jaw clenched convulsively and, after a quick breath, she moved on. "I'm afraid there's not much I can do about it."

"I wouldn't ask you to. But I would like to see you, if you have the time."

"I don't," she said. "Sorry."

Upset wasn't a good look for her. "Ruth...what's happening? What did happen?"

"I told you, I'm busy. For once it's me who can't give you details, I'm sure you understand."

"No, I don't. Is there anything I can do?"

"No." Her lip curled in a decidedly unnatural way. "It's nice that you're newly single and so very anxious to help. You can just keep fighting the good fight wherever you are."

"Something's obviously gone wrong where you are, and I'm not calling to pursue you like that. I'd like to do whatever I can, just tell me plainly what the matter is."

"Plainly?" She lifted her chin in that way she had when she was reminding herself to be commanding. And she was commanding, regal in a chilling way. A familiar way, but familiar from others, never from the pretty idealist of Dromund Kaas. "I don't want you anywhere near me, agent."

The Sith Lord cut the signal.

Of all possible reactions to his call, Wynston hadn't even imagined that one. He held the immediate sting of her rejection at arm's length for the moment; dwelling on that would be beyond counterproductive. Even if he couldn't get her alone for a tête-a-tête, he had hoped for some work or some favor-working to take his mind off things just then, something constructive, something good. But evidently his favorite partner for these things, his only regular one outside his own crew, was busy.

Worse than that. What had worked that change? He wanted to know, wanted a problem he could work on. Had Baras picked up too great a victory? Crew shakeups. Had the lieutenant or the Talz finally run too far out of line? Had Vette or Jaesa run afoul of a Sith even Ruth couldn't handle? Not likely, that. Had Captain Fullofhimself managed to run through her infinite goodwill? That also seemed unlikely, but if anyone could succeed in souring a love that extravagant it would be that walking irritation machine.

As if Wynston were in a position to criticize people for their taste in lovers.

A soft beep indicated a call coming in on the main holo. Wynston headed out to answer and was relieved to see the person he still thought of as Watcher Two. Just what he needed: something to take his mind off actual women.

He remembered the correct title when he spoke. "Keeper, I could kiss you right now."

"You really couldn't, Cipher," she said with her familiar refrigerated disdain.

At least someone was reacting as expected today. "Well then, what can I do for you?"

"Something's come up and I think we should have that talk about what you can do for Imperial Intelligence in your new capacity sooner rather than later."

"Certainly. By the way, you should cut Kaliyo Djannis's accounts as soon as possible."

"What?" She started forward, then shook her head and consciously relaxed. "Finally. She beat all projections we set on her in terms of useful life. I suppose we had you to thank for that, if 'thank' is the word." Her brows knit together. "I don't suppose you can remove her once and for all?"

"She got away."

"Understood. That's quite unfortunate...and, something of a surprise. I wouldn't have bet on her against you."

"You don't have to finish that analysis." By raw capability, Keeper was right; Wynston should never have lost. It was the motivation that had failed. The last thing he needed now was his former boss lecturing him on the weakness he had cultivated.

She did her superior eyebrow raise. "The analysis from your new information is already done. But it seems a little late to berate you over it."

"That's very kind of you. As for a meeting, just give me a time and place and I'll be there."

"Will you be ready to work?"

"Absolutely. And just think, this time you'll have my full attention."

Her voice was exasperated but her half-smile was tolerant. "You'll never change, will you, Cipher?"

"Not if I can help it."

L-5: Ruth's mercy

Weakness drew Ruth back to Quinn's quarters the following day. 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 Broonmark 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?"

"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. 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 still think 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 most expedient way." At least, she used to think so. Even as she said it she considered, again, just ending him; 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?"

"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.

L-4: Wynston and the Minister

When Wynston entered the conference room on the vessel *Tenebrous*, the Minister of Intelligence was already there, pacing with his hands behind his back, examining the walls as if determined to find a security problem in this ship he hadn't personally designed. Watcher Two – no, Keeper – stood at the table console; she looked up and smiled when Wynston came in.

It was the Minister who spoke first, turning to face Wynston in a rigid pose. "Agent," he said coolly with the barest of nods. This was the distant mentor Wynston knew. Knew, and admired for his determination and skill if not for his methods.

"Please, call me Cipher. For old times' sake." Admiration notwithstanding, Wynston had stopped the formalities with his commander long ago; flippancy was just so tempting.

"Hm," said the Minister.

"We're glad you came," said Keeper. "There is a great deal to do, and the two of us have considerable demands on our time from the Sith and the military as they attempt to reconstitute some kind of Intelligence puppet."

"I'm sorry." He meant it, too. Keeper could deal with anything, but it was still a bad situation, and the Minister had worked too hard for too long to be reduced to this kind of squabbling. They deserved better.

"It is what it is," the Minister said sharply. "The fact is, the Dark Council is rapidly destabilizing and it is making an effort to bring Intelligence and half the military with it. The loose ends left by the Star Cabal are almost too many to name and we must seize as many as we can before they go to waste or are detected and taken by the Republic or the cartels. We have transferred what resources we can to these efforts without drawing the attention of our masters, but we can't do everything at once."

"That's what I'm here for." It was good to be appreciated somewhere.

The Minister nodded. "If you can take a subset of our resources and institute a secondary Intelligence apparatus outside official sanction, starting with the *Tenebrous*, we may be able to accomplish something in

spite of Sith leadership. I expect much of your time in the immediate future may be occupied by administrative work here, but your attention should also be on Corellia. Much of the Dark Council has made the planet its battlefield; two nights ago Darth Thanaton was killed by a minor lord and as we speak Darth Baras is actively hunting what it pains me to call the relatively moderate Darth Vowrawn."

"Do we want Baras to win?" Painful though the question was, it was a legitimate one; Baras was shrewd and his vision for the Empire was solid. The only question was whether his brand of Sith crazy was something Intelligence could compensate for.

"No. He is too unstable; he'll tear resources down as quickly as he raises them, as you well know. He must go, and he must go before he cannibalizes the remainder of our war machine. Now, his other target on Corellia is the so-called Emperor's Wrath. That status could be tremendously useful."

"Yes, it could be."

"This is no time to play coy, agent," snapped the Minister. "She is your friend. I want Baras removed, I want her talking to Vowrawn if you think she can influence his views, and I want her on our side while we work to stabilize the rest of the situation."

"I have reason to believe that may be complicated, but I'll do what I can."

"This is no time to start hiding behind 'complications.'"

A long time ago Wynston would have been intimidated by the Minister's impatience, shamed by the mere fact of it. Now he was old and self-supporting enough to simply answer. "I spoke with her just yesterday on a personal matter. The situation may be complicated. Nevertheless, I'll try to calm her down. I'm certain she's closing on the Baras issue, if nothing else." And as soon as he found a way to help, he would.

"The longer game is just as important. Having the Emperor's Wrath in any capacity will be as great a boon as any Star Cabal position we've been able to identify."

"Agreed. I believe she'll come around." The accusations she hadn't quite thrown at him indicated problems with Baras and with her friends, not with her overall pro-Empire goals. He hoped. He dearly hoped.

"Good," said the Minister.

Keeper spoke up. "While we're busy on Dromund Kaas, we'd like you to take command of the *Tenebrous*. Keep her out of sight while you build up the resources you'll need for independent operations."

"Certainly," said Wynston. "I've put some thought into it." They had laid out their requirements; time to lay out his. "I'll receive full records on any staff you send my way. There are a handful of specific agents I know I can use if you can spare them; keep me informed. Find me Watcher Three if he's available. I and I alone have discretion over the use of the Black Codex. You will keep me apprised of the research and development surrounding the Old Man's disguise technology as well as anything we scrounged from Belsavis and anywhere else for that matter. I'll do what I can to render the operation self-sufficient; the last thing I want is to hamper your work. Give me this much and a little time and I'll build you the finest intelligence apparatus this galaxy has ever seen." He set his hands wide on the table and leaned forward. "We'll see that the Empire stays where she needs to be, in spite of every effort her leadership throws at her."

"I knew we could count on you," Keeper said warmly.

"Of course." Mischievous habit prompted him to keep going. "I don't suppose there's any place on this hulk to drink to the new resolution?"

Her smile widened a tiny bit. She was used to the offer. "No," she said, "but I'm somewhat resigned to the fact that you'll remedy that by the next time we visit."

"Count on it."

The Minister of Intelligence cleared his throat. "Thank you, Keeper, you're dismissed." He looked at the floor, tracking her from the corner of his eye until she left. Then he turned to Wynston. "There remains the matter of Kaliyo Djannis; Keeper reports that you and she had a falling-out and she

has since fled Nal Hutta. Furthermore I am given to understand that you will not be disposing of her." He scowled. "Rest assured, the matter will be handled."

Something unfamiliar tightened in Wynston's insides. Then again, someone had to do it. "Acknowledged and understood," he said quietly.

"The experience is never comfortable," said the Minister. "But it is necessary."

The experience of sitting still while somebody else handled the job he hadn't had the nerve for? Or the experience of losing a lover who had managed to mean something by the end? "I know." It led to an interesting thought, anyway. "Minister?"

"Yes?"

"As I stand here contemplating the fact that you're going out of your way to tell me about a kill that we both already knew you've arranged, it occurs to me that I may sometimes be more motivated after some discomfort, not to say pain. More focused. Perhaps more effective, it's difficult for me to tell."

The Minister didn't blink. "You are. Your record amply demonstrates that, if you know what to look for."

Wynston reminded himself who he was talking to. He thought along the useful lines, not the sentimental ones. "You could've chosen a less rampantly destructive irritant than Kaliyo."

"Could we have?" The Minister cocked an eyebrow. "Would you have tolerated any other irritant for so long? She appealed to your vice enough for you to stay with her and your virtue enough for you to keep trying to make up for her. She was a calculated risk; it turned out to be one of the more productive partnerships I've ever arranged."

For all that he had spent his whole association with Kaliyo thinking of ways to use her, this particular application and the fact that he hadn't been informed of it galled. "She's still out there. Did you calculate that?"

The older man's mouth thinned further for a second. "It wasn't the eventuality we would have chosen," he said. "But all may not be lost. She hasn't started trying to sell what she knows yet."

"I'll make a note to take comfort in that."

"All things considered, she was worth what we paid for her."

"The money, I can agree." This was the job. "But if you were orchestrating matters to that degree you must have had some say over the information she gleaned for her side jobs, selling secrets to her terrorist friends. You could have controlled what she found to sell. She was worth the money. Was she worth the blood?"

"Do you really need to ask that question? Just look at the workmanlike but frankly ordinary career you led before she was assigned to you. Compare it with everything you accomplished once you had her alternately supporting and driving you. Finding and taking down the Star Cabal? I would pay a few dozen lives on Brentaal for that."

"Next time you want me to work miracles, try just asking nicely."

"If I thought that would work, I would have done it."

"You know, the organization I build here may try the least twisted approach first on some matters, just for novelty's sake. Minister, I have the utmost respect for you, but I am glad I won't be working for you anymore."

"Not coincidentally, Cipher, I'm glad I am no longer formally responsible for your behavior." His frown cleared a little, and something like a sad acknowledgment gathered in his grey eyes. "You're about to take the weight of the Empire on your shoulders. I no longer have to pressure you."

They watched each other for a long moment.

"So. The mission?" prompted the Minister.

The part that mattered, in the end. The thing that had first brought Wynston under the Minister's tutelage and the thing that would likely bind

them together as long as they both lived. "Ordinarily I would insist on kissing and making up before work continues, but I'll let it slide this once." Wynston grinned at the Minister's expression. "The mission goes on. I'll see what I can do about the Wrath. And I'll get you your start here."

"Good."

So certain. "Out of curiosity, what if I couldn't handle all this? Or if I had lost to Kaliyo much earlier. I would die young and you would just look for someone more durable, is that right?"

"That's correct."

"Your theory of management is undeniably effective, but I'm really coming to appreciate why you don't print it in the recruitment pamphlets."

After a flicker of irritation the...not kindness, not quite sympathy, but the clear knowledge...came back to the Minister's eyes. "This isn't glamorous work. I told you that."

"I remember." Wynston considered, then nodded. "Thank you. You've been a great help, and I intend to make sure the new organization lives up the vision you once held. The Empire you once hoped for. Just one more question. You've referred to your wife once or twice, always in situations where you might just have been making banal conversation as cover noise. Did you ever actually have one?"

The human expression in the Minister of Intelligence's aspect vanished. He walked away without answering.

Wynston lingered alone in the dark conference room. In the end it didn't matter what had brought the Minister here; this place was Wynston's. Soon he would build it up into every good thing Intelligence had been - he hoped - and everything it should be. He would take his place as an equal to the professionals who had taught him what protection meant and what it was likely to cost, and he would manage that cost better. He would get back to helping people. A moment's gratitude was easier and safer than anything else he could hope to earn from others. Might as well earn as many of them as possible.

It would have been good to talk about this all with someone, someone a little more fun or starry-eyed or both. But Kaliyo wasn't here. Neither was Ruth. The former was probably out of his life for good; the latter had just made herself a dangerous unknown quantity, and he knew what to do with dangerous unknown quantities. Treat with care. Approach when matters were more stable and he had something concrete to offer. Play it safe.

He badly wanted someone to talk to. He would ignore that, though, for as long as he had to.

~~This is the point where Lodestone diverges from Ruth!verse canon.~~

He took out his holo to make a call.

BOOK II: A different course

L: Faith, Hope, and

It took a couple of days' hunting. Vette, the only crew member Wynston had a personal holofrequency for, cut him off with a regretful but hard-eyed finality. Instead he hit the ground on Corellia and, with the certainty of a Cipher agent, followed the trail of the Intelligence employees that Sith bosses had tracking her.

At some point he wondered, why was he doing this?

He couldn't bring himself to kill Kaliyo when she finally sold him out and left. She was out there. He couldn't quite wrap his head around that disastrous moment of weakness. When he'd called Ruth for a friendly face she had answered in some dark hard mood and almost instantly cut him off. There was no companionship to be found there.

He had tried to sleep that night, and he had failed.

So he went looking. Ruth had seemed distressed. She could take care of herself, and always had, he knew that. He wasn't even wanted. But he wanted to talk to her. It wasn't that she knew him, not really. No one did; no one should. But, more than anyone, she accepted what he gave. If for once he was off balance, it might be that she could accept that, too.

He would never have caught her passing in Coronet Spaceport if she hadn't been walking with Lieutenant Pierce. Pierce was in that distinctive armor of his; Ruth was in, not only the black Sith-style armor he had seen via holo, but a tight blank mask. Ever since he had met her, the assurance of her carriage had been tempered by a friendly look, a terribly un-Sith tendency for her rosebud mouth to curl up at the corners. That was hidden now, bound up in something dark and unreadable.

She stopped in place when she noticed Wynston. He held up his empty hands and held what he hoped was eye contact.

Pierce leveled his blaster rifle and watched.

"My lord," said Wynston.

"Determined," said Ruth in a voice about to freeze over. "Aren't you."

He disregarded Pierce entirely; this was to be made or broken on Ruth's will. "You looked like you could use a friend. I'm unarmed. No tricks. I tracked you down by finding and talking with your enemies, but for what it's worth none of the ones I spoke to are left alive. If there's anything I can do. Tell me what happened."

She hesitated, and Wynston wished he had been able to prepare better. He wished he knew what he was supposed to prepare for. He wished he knew what had made him believe that she wouldn't hurt him. "If you insist," she said at last. "Walk."

She gestured on ahead and walked behind him, Pierce at her side. No chance to observe or talk. Ruth just called turns to the right or left to guide him through the crowd into her Fury's hangar.

Once on board Pierce searched Wynston; the big man stayed silent apart from a mild surprised grunt when he came up with nothing. Wynston had dressed with the suspicion that bringing a weapon near Ruth in the mood she had demonstrated over holo would be fatal. Ruth dismissed Pierce with a word and brought Wynston into a fairly large bedroom. There were strange blank spaces in it, some shelves cluttered, some bare. Several weapons stored in plain sight.

She faced him then and took off her mask, staring at him with blue eyes frozen and ready to shatter. She was pale, rigid, but she swept her fear out of sight in a breath and what was left was only anger visibly debating which way to go.

"My lord," he started.

"Don't call me that," she snapped.

"I'm sorry. I...Ruth?"

"Wrath will do."

"Of course, Wrath." Bad sign. "Can we talk? I'd like to help you if I can." He meant it. Right now he powerfully wanted something he could get

right. "I'm between jobs. I don't know the details here but if you tell me what's going on I'm yours to try to solve it."

She sneered and looked him over. He wasn't out of danger yet.

And then she seized his sides, pulled him close, and kissed him, a hard hungry kiss that wasn't a request and wasn't their old game. Her armored body was cold and hard to the touch, her grip painful.

He pushed the stranger away. "Ruth, wait. I didn't mean—"

She pressed against his warding hands. "You can do what you came for, Wynston, I promise I won't put up a fight, not with you. But this first." Her anger slipped into hurt. "No questions."

No questions. The thing that cemented their trust in the past, on Quesh when he couldn't say what his problem was, only that he needed help.

No questions. The raw plea in her eyes made something in him ache. This wasn't what he had come for. She had told him long ago she wasn't interested, had meant it, and he had let her fade from thought, one among many opportunities that were simply past their time. He wanted to talk now, to find out what was wrong, to tell her what had driven him here. He wanted to sort things out. He wanted to understand.

Habit answered her need anyway. He kissed her; the rest could wait. There was nothing of softness left to her, nothing of gentleness, but she moved with him. The rest could wait.

When she took off her black gloves he found that she didn't have her wedding ring. Little by little he uncovered her marks and scars, so many more than he remembered from eighteen months ago: signs of the hard road that had brought her here, signs that even as he traced them felt like the least part of her pain.

Her returning touch was rough, and kept on being rough. He could take bruises but he didn't want them from her. "You're hurting me," he said quietly.

She opened her eyes. Something of the girl he knew offered a silent apology. She was gentler after that. And he matched her, gave her what he could, took what she offered.

She didn't push him away after. She rested her head on his chest instead, keeping her arms tucked close to his sides. It was good to feel her relax into him. It wasn't what he had come for, but this kind of thing had substituted for closeness with enough people on enough occasions in the past. It wasn't bad.

She didn't look at him, and her voice when she spoke was hard. "Who sent you?"

He kept one hand on her back, the other resting on his own chest where it could toy with her short sweat-stiff hair. "I did. My former colleagues in Intelligence will be interested in discussing matters, but they're on your side at the moment and, more importantly, neither they nor anyone is in any position to tell me to harm you."

"Former colleagues."

"Yes."

"That's convenient." She traced a nonsense pattern on his side. "You came to me right after Darth Baras made me his apprentice. You were sweet, helpful, inviting. So inviting. You didn't...you didn't hand me off until I was hooked on the other. You checked in now and then, just in case. Now you're here again. His opposite number, his...his backup. Right on schedule."

Quinn. It had to be. The details weren't there but the name surely was. "Tell me what happened."

She shook her head violently. "I don't think you really need to hear it. If Vette and Jaesa couldn't be corrupted, you're the closest one left." She seemed to collapse a little. "If you came all this way for me I'm not going to fight you, too. I'm too tired." She whuffed a weak dry laugh. "Still, thanks for the sex. I've been missing that."

"I'm not here to fight you, darling." The endearment was more habit after these motions than anything, but it sounded pleasing so he kept it. "I can't prove anything but I hope you know that I'm not the kind of fool who would take Darth Baras's orders and I'm not the kind of sadist who would string you along first for fun."

"I don't *know* anything about you," she said.

Part of him had hoped she would never apply that lesson to him. "If I were here to hurt you I would make it quick, if only for efficiency's sake. But I'm not." Against that paranoia he thought about trying honesty. "I came here because I needed you."

"You needed me." She tested the words on her tongue. She didn't kick him out, though, or laugh, or fight. "I wouldn't have expected you to come to me."

"Sorry." He risked a smile. "Am I ruining my mystique?"

She looked up and smiled back. It was the warmest thing he had ever seen. "It's still you." She dove to hide her face against his neck. "But everything else is wrong." A few silent breaths. "My father is dead."

Darth Baras's pattern, cutting down the support network. Wynston wondered what her father had been like. "I'm sorry. He was your only family, wasn't he?"

"Yes," she said. "He's gone now. Him, and then..."

He stroked her gently, rhythmically, but she didn't continue. "Now will you tell me what happened?" he prompted.

"Not yet."

"I see."

"But you called for a reason. You said things happened. Kaliyo. Is it something you want to talk about?"

"If you want to listen."

She raised her head and pushed up to settle where she could see his face, resting her head on her hand, her elbow on the pillow. "Yes. Tell me."

So he laced his fingers in hers and he told her.

"I had her in my sights," he said when he was nearly done. "And I couldn't kill her. I didn't even find another way to minimize the damage. I always find another way if the job isn't acceptable, but I didn't this time. I didn't even try. I couldn't harm her."

He had settled on staring at the ceiling somewhere on the way, but then he heard a tear hit the pillow beside him.

"Ruth?"

"I'm so sorry, Wynston." She leaned into him, tightening her arms around him. "I understand, and I'm sorry."

He touched her hair, ran his fingertips along her jaw, gently guided her head up to face him. There were too many details that led back to Quinn and his absence. "Where is he?"

"He's alive," she whispered. "On the ship, locked up."

He kept stroking her hair, her shoulders. He waited.

"He was Baras's all along. He got me alone into a trap. He fired at me himself. The look on his face when he was shooting..." She trailed off.

He should never have read his own respect into the fixation the man had had on her. That was a novice's mistake. "If I'd known I would have come sooner."

"I didn't want you to know."

Of course. He held her for a little while. A few ideas drifted to mind, none of them useful. Finally he said "I'm moving outside the old Intelligence chain of command. I have resources that will let me operate independently."

She sniffled and took a deep breath. "That sounds promising."

"In spite of the current upheaval we have a few still focusing on stabilizing the Empire in a good way. That includes cutting your old master out of the picture."

"I would be useful to you in that effort." She said it like it tasted bad. He was sure it did.

"You would be useful to me," he agreed. "It's not the sole reason I came today, but it's the reason I would have come sooner or later." He nuzzled her hair. "That's the cold transaction. Does it help to know?"

"It does."

They were quiet for a while longer. He wanted her to be sure of him but he couldn't force it. Softly he asked "Do you remember our first night together?"

"Yes."

"It was a considerable risk on my part. I kept wondering whether you were the type to kill some no-name alien scum once you were done with him. And then you would smile again and I thought, at least I'd die happy." He wanted her to be sure of him, but his words always came back to the old memorized formulas.

"Careful," she murmured, and he heard a smile in it. "Your shamelessness is showing."

She still liked it. "Just calling it like I see it," he said, just as he had said then. He squeezed her. "There's no one left in this galaxy who can order me to hurt you. Until I get an assignment that makes sense elsewhere, I'll help you any way I can." She was a good partner. One who didn't make everything a contest of wills or a game of lies. Not thrilling, but then, look where thrilling had gotten him. "If you want him gone, you don't have to be present."

"No." She shook her head violently. "He stays."

"Ruth, he betrayed you. I know you care for him but love shouldn't be staying our hands, not if it didn't stay theirs. Why let him live?"

To his surprise – and with a small hurtful inrush of cool air between them – she pushed away from him. She curled one arm protectively across herself and looked away. “Because,” she said.

He didn’t like that implication. “Tell me.”

She bowed her head toward the pillow and her hand settled flat on her abdomen. When she opened her mouth only a sob came out.

He reached out to touch her belly near her hand. He looked up at her, questioning, and she nodded.

He didn’t say anything. Instead he closed the distance between them again, took her in his arms, let her hide her face against his shoulder. He felt a tear or tears running hot onto his skin.

“I’m such an idiot,” she sobbed.

“No.” He moved his cheek a little against the top of her head while he kept his arms tight and still around her.

“You were right about him,” she said.

“I really wasn’t. I thought he was disagreeable but I didn’t think he would turn on you.” He should have known better. He shouldn’t have been blinded by his native dislike of the man and his assumption that anyone close to her would end up under her warm careless impossible charm. “I’m sorry.”

She squeezed him tighter for a few moments, then fell limp.

After a while she spoke again. “I’m sorry,” she said. “About her.”

“Thank you.” He wasn’t sure he wanted to know what thoughts had brought her back around to that. “You can lecture me if you like, I’ve earned it. But it was good to talk about it.”

“No lecture,” she said. Then, a while later, “You did everything you could.”

“I rather conspicuously didn’t. She’s still out there.”

"No. I mean you did everything you could for her. Made things fun. Tried to keep her and all her grabby selfishness amused. You weren't obvious about it but I could tell you tried to make her happy."

"I don't think amusing her improved anything in the end."

"You channeled all that destructive power into something good for a while. Think about it. You managed to get Kaliyo Djannis to accomplish constructive things for the Empire." She reached up to brush his hair away from his forehead. "Her deciding to throw away everything you gave her, in the worst way she could, that was her failure. Not yours."

"I know that," he said automatically.

She gave him a gentle look that didn't quite call him a liar. "And realizing, when the time came, that you couldn't deal as harshly with her as she could with you. That wasn't your failure, either."

"It is, though. People will die because I let her back out there. That's not something a positive affirmation can change."

"People will die because she's dangerous, cunning, and determined to hurt. She rigged that battlefield. It was her decision and her fault."

The other person's determination was never an excuse; she meant to comfort him, but he'd been a fool. He tilted his head. "So what if I say the same back to you?"

She smiled a small sad smile. "I'll say you're wrong. I'll say his determination is no excuse, I was a fool for letting it happen."

"You did everything you could." He kissed her.

"Don't blame yourself." She kissed him.

"Can I tell you something, Ruth?"

"You still feel terrible?"

"Huh. Good guess."

She half smiled. "I do, too."

"But you're talking to me."

"I'm talking to you," she agreed. "If you're lying you're being very nice about it." She blinked hard. "I do believe that if you were here to kill me you would've gotten it over with by now."

He kissed her. And again, slowly, tenderly, until she pulled away with a smile that was close to steady. Without saying anything she curled to settle her head on his chest again. He lay back and rested.

They were still for a while. The timed lights dimmed. He let his hands rest on her sides. Her body was warm, unarmored. Scarred. She was too young to be carrying those scars.

"Are you asleep?" she asked a long time later.

"No," he said quietly. "Are you?"

"Hm." It was almost a laugh. "No." She nuzzled his chest a little, then spoke in a thoughtful tone. "I don't...I don't love you."

"I would be a little worried if you did," he said. "That was never us."

"Will it be easier this way?"

He hesitated. The honesty policy was rapidly getting him lost. "What do you want to hear, darling?"

She tensed. "Somebody already told me what I wanted to hear," she rasped. "Tell me the truth if you have one."

"Ah." He sighed. "Truthfully? I'm not the best person to ask. You know what I am. Love's a word for me, a tool, a game at best. I know it means something to people but I've never felt what they're supposed to feel and I've never felt the worse for its absence." Until recently. "I have a few years on you, but I think you've been more in love than me."

"For all the good it did me."

He guided her chin up so he could look into her eyes. "I wanted better for you. When I saw the way you were with him I thought that if anyone in this galaxy could make that word real, could make it more than a story, it would be you. You deserved that much."

He truly had hoped for Ruth's sake that her pretty otherworldly vision would make it. Her chosen partner seemed to be from a more straightforward walk of life than Wynston's; he might suit, even if he was a little thick in matters of emotion in general and love in particular. But no. Her vision and passion couldn't work. Love was a word, a tool. In the end, it turned out that Malavai Quinn understood love perfectly.

That cutthroat son of a bitch.

He suppressed the thought and kissed her. All he could do was be here. "I'm sorry."

"Would it be..." she whispered. "I know it takes time. But would it be different with us?"

No. That was too much for one night. He couldn't even summon up the polite evasion; he was past lying to her, even by indirection. "Ruth, I can't answer that except to say that the myth doesn't happen. Isn't that what brought us here? Falling in love by definition would be either you playing me or me playing you and I don't like either of those options. Love gets used. It gets in the way of what has to be done." Honesty sounded pretty bitter. He was still angry at himself. And at Kaliyo, and at Quinn, but himself most of all. He stroked Ruth's cheek. "But for what it's worth, I would rather have this than what I've seen of the real thing."

She didn't get mad. Instead she nodded thoughtfully. "I think I would, too."

"Thank you," he said at last. "For hearing me out, and for sharing the rest. I'm afraid I've definitely ruined my mystique, but I...I needed this."

"Hmm," she said with an odd variation on smugness. "My Sith power, political clout, terrifying combat skills and all-around utilitarian value are truly irresistible."

He smiled but shook his head. "Minor details." He kissed her and studied her eyes, which somehow cast her endless blue back at him even in the dark. These later things weren't what he had come here for, either, but he thought it might be better. "It'll be all right, darling."

She took a deep breath and nodded. "I believe you."

L+o: Dream and watchfulness

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."

The blaster brushed the back of her neck, its touch steady and cold.

"No." She pulled him tighter. "Don't. 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."

Quinn, hard-eyed, opened his mouth

"Wake up, sweet." It was a different voice, gentle and insistent. "Look at me."

When Wynston's finger brushed Ruth's cheek she seized his wrist, heart pounding, and grabbed at the - nothing in his hand. She frowned at the absence of a weapon for a moment, then looked up at the Chiss.

"You're safe," he said, then leaned down to kiss her nose. "Are you all right?"

She didn't answer that.

"What is it, darling?"

"Nothing," she said, purposely calming her breathing, and sat up. "Go back to sleep. I'll be back."

"All right," he said. It was a question, but she was already busy. Moving with certainty in the dark room, she grabbed a fresh slip and a robe, then headed out to the shower. Might as well wash him off of her while she figured out what to do with him.

She knew what to do with him. She should kill him.

Pleasant though it was to have that friendly solicitous presence, someone experienced and sympathetic to offer an illusion of safety and affection, this was nauseatingly obvious. She hated that she was such an easy target. One big bundle of needs, that was her, and they had had Quinn's entire time with her to record what was likely to work.

After cold weeks on Corellia she truly had been craving just a little more of the pleasant lie. But that was all she could afford. In the shock of first seeing Wynston's face, after a long day in the field, after more hunting and blood long after she had lost what she loved, then it was easy to say she would suspend disbelief, take his offer and not care about the cost. Now that she felt rested, more alive, refreshed from avoiding the agonizing end of that recurring nightmare for the first time, she found that she did care about surviving.

He showed up offering exactly what she wanted. Of course she was supposed to tumble into his arms. Was this really what he thought of her? Show up, make a speech, lead her around by the nose thereafter?

Practical: kill him.

That would leave left her with the team she had been struggling to keep it together for. Vette and Jaesa, whom she trusted, mostly. It was difficult that they knew little of the logistical and political challenges she was working so hard to navigate. Pierce, who was probably hers so long as she could keep him amused and look better than the canny opportunist's other options. She was playing the "I require a loyal soldier as a direct contrast to Quinn" as hard she could and thus far he was staying in line. Finally she had Broonmark, who would stay in all his bloody facelessness no matter what. A weapon, not a friend.

It wasn't enough. It wasn't enough, but there was no place she could find more.

What about Wynston's claims? Kaliyo, lost? He had given Ruth his sob story before he had heard hers, but surely he had known enough at the start to guess that 'lover went wrong, how saddening and difficult this is' would be a sound angle of attack.

Then there were his employers. Intelligence meant Baras; no matter how much she wanted to think otherwise, every Intelligence employee she had identified on Corellia was Baras's. Wynston had consistently expressed distaste for tyrannical Sith since the day she'd met him, but a man could express distaste for a lot of things he had no problem serving. And Wynston favored a strong Empire, too. Practicality, victory. Baras's song.

He was so much the same as the last one. Even the differences were calculated. She briefly, bitterly wondered if Wynston had come cheaper than Quinn because he was just an alien. A second attack at a discount must've been an easy decision for Baras. She herself had tried buying people with kindness, but that currency had failed; better to just stop him. Stop them all.

She layered her robe over her slip and returned to her quarters, taking one of the lightsabers from the shelf nearest the door as she did so. Wynston had spent enough of his life taunting Sith one way or another; she thought he would be satisfied to die at a Sith's hand. Either that or very surprised. Coming to her this directly really did mark him as the soul of arrogance. Well, it would be nice to surprise the other person for a change.

She stood in silence, letting her eyes adapt to the darkness. Wynston was curled up on the warm patch of the bed where she had been lying. Just sleeping.

He doesn't even think you're a threat.

His hair was tousled beyond all reason, which was her doing. She could just barely make out the shape of his lips, relaxed for once with neither the stiffness of his business demeanor nor the smile he gave so easily to her.

His smiles mean nothing. His kindnesses mean nothing. Everything he has ever said to you, it means nothing, except for this: He said 'You know what I am.'

She could crush him right now and he couldn't stop her. But then, she had always been taught that having power over people gave her the responsibility not to abuse it. She had the prerogative and the ability to break this man; that didn't make it right to do so.

You know what happened to the person who gave you those lessons? He was murdered. This is self-defense. This is what your life as Sith is to be.

She had never spilled blood in her own home before, and never someone she felt like this about.

What you feel when you look at him, it means nothing. It isn't worth dying for. The terms have changed, girl; learn that, and let Baras know you've learned it. Send his latest gift back to him in pieces. That's the game.

That was disgusting. Both sick and wrong.

Do you truly believe these people wouldn't do the same to you?

She didn't want to believe it.

Stop hoping.

"Ruth," Wynston said in a low, level voice. He didn't move. "Will you be coming to bed?"

Her heart sank. "How long have you been awake?"

He sat up and swung his legs off the bed. "I haven't slept yet tonight."

"I see."

"You don't have to do it. I'm hoping you don't want to."

"Yes, I'm sure you are."

"I brought neither an argument nor a weapon for this particular situation, though believe me when I say I've been looking for ways to improvise both since you brought me here. I had no idea it had gotten this bad for you."

"Well then, you learned something useful."

"You were talking before I woke you up. You said...someone...didn't have to do it. Don't shoot. Just be with you." He looked up at her, red eyes dull in the darkness. "That's all I'd planned on doing."

"You'll talk to Jaesa tomorrow," she warned. "I'll see what she and her insight make of you."

"That's fair. I can't worry about talking to her, she seems like a good person."

"Her nature isn't in question."

"Will you come to bed, Ruth? Or should I leave?"

She hesitated.

"I would mention option three but I really don't like it. If you're still worried...I can only say I haven't done it yet. And I won't."

He had listened, and the dream hadn't ended with a blaster shot this time. Something might come of it. She wanted something painless to come of it. "Let me have tonight?" she forced past a catch in her throat.

"It's ours."

She crawled into bed beside him, took him in her arms. Maybe. Maybe he meant something, even if she wasn't sure what. "Now I feel a little bad for threatening your life," she said.

He laughed wryly. "Hm. It's nothing new for me, darling."

"No, I guess it isn't." She ran her fingers through his hair and squeezed him tighter. "I won't be like that. You can sleep this time," she said softly.

He kissed her collarbone, his mouth warm and soft. "You know? I believe I will."

L+1: Integration

Wynston stayed still when he woke. He took a moment to mentally inventory himself – unclothed, not fully rested, sore bruises on his wrists and elsewhere, nothing that would slow him down – his surroundings – comfortable sheets, smell of Ruth, Ruth herself sitting up beside him – and the local sounds. Just her.

He sat up and stretched, watching as she cast him a small smile and went to pull out clothes for the day. He just watched while she selected an outfit and took off her slip.

She set the slip aside, then stopped and made a face at him. "Having fun?" she said.

"You're very pleasant to look at."

She frowned, but she didn't bother hiding the messy latticework of scars that stretched across her torso. "You've got an interesting idea of beauty."

"Not every square centimeter has to be standardized beautiful."

"Oh? What's the minimum prettiness before I get unpleasant to look at?"

"Smile."

"What?"

"This is a critical part of my answer, darling. Smile."

She obligingly smiled.

He held up his hands in imaginary framing of the resulting look. "There. That surface area would do the trick. Scar up the rest all you like, just don't ever lose that."

She actually blushed. "I bet you say that to all the girls," she said quietly.

"I don't wish extensive scarring on most of the women I meet, actually. You're special."

"I read that more as permission than active wishing...and you're definitely just trying to delay my getting dressed."

He smiled. "Maybe."

"There's work to do," she said, and got back to dressing. "I'll explain to the crew while you're cleaning up. They may not all be happy, but we'll manage."

"Yes. I suppose that, our Voss encounter notwithstanding, I look like a rank newcomer."

"Vette at least remembers you from Nar Shaddaa and Alderaan."

"She remembers me getting you into the fight that gave you your finest scars there. I'm not sure that'll count in my favor."

"She'll listen. They all will." She paused and gave him a more genuine smile. "I was getting into trouble with you before I met any of them. Well, except Vette."

"I don't have a problem with them considering me the outsider, but it'll be something to be aware of when you're making assignments."

"We'll manage," Ruth repeated. "Go on. Meet me in the holo room when you're done."

*

Ruth and the crew were assembled in the holo room when a freshly washed and combed Wynston emerged from the refresher. Vette was shuffling in just ahead of him.

The Twi'lek turned and blinked at him. "Wow," she said. "I really don't know where to start. Nice to see you, probably?"

"Good to see you, too, Vette. Still avoiding early mornings?"

"Hey. Someone's gotta work the sleeping-in shift."

Wynston nodded to Broonmark. "Broonmark." Then Pierce. "Lieutenant."

Lieutenant Pierce crossed his arms and eyed him.

"Master Wynston," said Jaesa. Her sweet winsome smile hadn't changed since Voss. Which made her unique in this crowd. "Welcome."

"Hello, Miss Jaesa. – Lord Jaesa? You're not Lorded yet, are you?"

"Not lorded," she smiled.

"Well then, Miss Jaesa. I'm to submit to an inspection of some sort. Do I need to do anything?"

"Already done," she said.

He hadn't felt a thing. That worried him. "All right. Did I pass?"

"Both nature and intentions are bright, master. Not just focused. Good."

Ruth nodded. She wasn't looking at him; she seemed more interested in appeasing the crew. Fair enough.

"That's reassuring," added Wynston. "I would be rather distressed if I turned up evil."

"More'n distressed, I promise you," rumbled Pierce.

"Anyway," Vette said loudly. "Wynston. Breakfast?"

"Sure. After that I'll need to pick up my kit from my ship, Ruth. – My lord." Around her crew he wasn't sure which way to go.

"Ruth," she said.

"Ruth, then. I was entirely serious when I said I hadn't brought any gear to see you."

"We've got blasters to loan," Vette said cheerfully.

"Yes? How about pants?"

"Okay, maybe you should go to your ship."

"I can escort him, milord," said Pierce. "Keep things on the up-and-up."

"All right," said Ruth. "Do."

"Ruth," Wynston said, "can I beg a statement on record that you disapprove of my mysteriously dying on my way through the spaceport?"

"Now why would you think that'd happen?" said Pierce.

"My highly cultivated spy sense," Wynston said dryly.

"Pierce won't start anything," said Ruth. "You're with us now. Pierce...if anything does happen to him, I will require evidence of a reason."

"Sure," said Pierce. "All right, Blue. Eat up and then we go."

*

Pierce stayed beside and half a step behind Wynston as they proceeded through the spaceport. Fair enough.

Of all Ruth's people, this one was the most dangerous. Broonmark liked shedding blood more, but would obey Ruth's commands to the letter; Jaesa and Vette probably freestyled around the rules more, but had no desire to hurt Wynston; Pierce had no problem enforcing the greater concern at the expense of the lesser rules.

"So," said the big man. "What's your game?"

"She's the best bet against Baras. And Baras has angered more than one person around here."

Pierce snorted. "Try again, Blue."

Wynston was familiar with that delivery of the nickname, the tone that turned it into a slur. It changed precisely nothing about the situation except to say something about Pierce. "I don't believe I will," Wynston said levelly. "The man has been trying to control Intelligence, to the detriment of our people and our effectiveness, for years, and he's finally succeeded in tearing out a bloody chunk of it; I'll be damned if I let him keep it."

"And the Wrath?"

"That's between her and me."

"Not sure you entirely understand your position here."

"I'm not trespassing, am I?" Wynston said mildly.

"Ha! No." Pierce quickly cleared the amusement from his face and voice.

"But you're not a trusted ally by all our lights. A little fieldwork on Voss proves exactly nothing. A good lay proves the same."

"Your oracle seemed satisfied with my intentions."

Pierce shrugged. "I'm sure Jaesa thinks she saw something. Seems to me she didn't call the last one that well. So. You're here to help in a personal way, goody for you. 'f you try to tell me it's because you're in love with the Wrath I might just wring your neck."

"I'm not in love with her. I'm an operative, not a puppy."

"No part of that reduced the chances of me wringing your neck."

"I'm an operative who prefers sane employers. At this political level that makes her very nearly the only game in town. I want her to be well and happy, yes, but she understands I have practical reasons. I'm not in this for true love."

"This one of those 'she understands because the subject didn't come up so I didn't have to lie about it'?"

"Oh, no, I told her outright."

"Really. Was that before or after you bedded her?"

"After, in fact. She took it pretty well; actually, she said it first."

"...Wait, really?"

"In so many words."

"And that worked?"

"Seemed to come easily enough to her. She's been in an odd mood lately, I don't know if you've noticed."

Pierce snorted. "So what would you do if she weren't so happy to see you?"

"Sleep in the guest quarters, I imagine. Or get beheaded, depending how not-so-happy we're talking about."

"Hm." Pierce let him walk in silence for a few moments. Then: "Don't suppose you brought any of your Intelligence friends in on this?"

"Dangerous times. I have one I trust implicitly and I'll call him as soon as I get Ruth's approval. There are others who have a high-level view of the situation and will be very glad to have a high-ranking Sith's sympathy. Knowledge, I can call in easily. Materials and personnel may be more trouble."

"In short the officials don't even know you're here."

Wynston craned his neck to look Pierce in the eye. "The ones who need to know where I am and what I'm doing know."

"So the officials don't even know you're here."

"Perceptive of you. So long as I get the results we need, it won't matter. I'll report to them when it's appropriate."

"You've got some nerve, Blue."

"I'm aware. The Wrath needs people with nerve. You're impressive so far, but there's only one of you."

They had reached his hangar; Wynston paused at the ramp. "I'll have to ask you to wait outside."

Pierce snorted. "Not likely."

"Well, it was worth a try. Let's assume you signed the promise-not-to-look-at-classified-things form?"

"Not likely," he repeated imperturbably.

"As you like." Wynston wasn't in a position to argue. "Come in."

He proceeded straight to his quarters. It wasn't like the more sensitive equipment was lying in plain sight, anyway. He grabbed his blaster pistol, med kit, a couple of changes of clothes, a small case of more specialized tech. Pierce didn't stoop to asking. Wynston enjoyed not explaining.

After a second's thought, he took his disused but carefully maintained blaster rifle. Just in case.

He settled his bag strap over his shoulder and faced Pierce. "Just a question. Isn't there anything we can do about him?"

"Nah. She told me and Broonmark to lay off breaking things."

"Sod breaking things. Did she explicitly forbid killing?"

Pierce crossed his arms. "Yes. How thick do you think I am?"

"Just checking." Wynston passed Pierce to head out of the ship. "You seem bright enough thus far, but I'm not taking anything for granted."

"Nice," Pierce said dryly. "Appreciate the flattery in general, but if this is the win-me-over session, you're not getting off that easy."

Fine. If he wanted to keep things unfriendly for now, Wynston could work with that. So long as the man was solid he didn't have to be cozy.

"Lieutenant, apart from a very short acquaintance on Voss I don't know you. I only know you came to her after Baras started in on her, you're very good at your job, you've played nice so far, you're one of the coolest killers she knows, you've considered how to neutralize everyone on that ship, I'm quite sure you'll do it if you think it's necessary, and even though she trusts you, sometimes she trusts things that aren't good for her. Need I go on?"

Pierce was quiet for a moment. Then he growled "I wouldn't turn against her."

"Nor would I. She's special. If you know that, there's hope for you. I want to work with you, Pierce, because I really am inclined to believe you're one of hers and we need every reliable hand we can get. If you want to keep an eye on me while we're at it, do so. It should put us just about even."

Pierce paused in the doorway that led back into the concourse. "Fine. Wynston. Are we finished here?"

"Yes. Let's go."

*

There were seven Jedi in the room along with a scattering of Republic guards. Everyone turned when Ruth entered. She took off her mask and signaled for Jaesa, Pierce, and Wynston to stay by the doorway while she walked a little ways in and permitted the Jedi to surround her.

"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 designed to pit the Jedi against some of Baras's Imperial enemies. The agent's entire purpose seemed to be tipping off and leading the Jedi like that: practically Baras's personal strike force against his own rivals. That had to go as part of Ruth's bid to cut his support 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 Injaye...?"

Injaye smiled. "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."

Ruth's voice transformed, suddenly thick with something Wynston didn't recognize. "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 Injaye went for her weapon. Ruth struck her down before she could raise a defense.

Wynston prepped his rifle but held steady while 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."

One Jedi raised his saber. Ruth charged.

"Master, no!" shouted Jaesa, starting forward.

Pierce barred her path with one arm. "Let her go," he said quietly.

Some Jedi were standing back, Force throwing things in Ruth's direction. Wynston aimed. He fired.

Jaesa still talked. "But they aren't--"

"She finally figured out we're at war," said Pierce. "And she needs to fight. Let her go."

Wynston aimed. He fired. Ruth's frenzy tugged at his attention. He had no problem with her killing Jedi, but it wasn't like her to do so without any kind of negotiation. Without finesse, or precision, or mercy. Darkness visibly curled around her as she battered down the defenses of her opponents and dealt savagely powerful killing blows. The ugly pained fury he knew from lesser Sith's expressions looked utterly out of place on her face.

She could have negotiated. They could have been useful against common enemies. She didn't have to make it slaughter.

The situation being what it was, Wynston aimed. He fired.

"Go on in, Jaesa," said Pierce, taking a shot himself. "Wynston and I will clean up the edges, then go watch the perimeter. You let her do what she needs after."

Jaesa nodded and pushed into a rapid sprint toward the battle. Wynston glared at Pierce. "Are you out of your mind? Ruth's in pain, I'm not leaving her like this."

Pierce shrugged, then took aim and picked off one of the Jedi. "She gets the job done. And unless you've got some way to halt lightsaber hits, you're not going in there 'til she's calmed down. Come out with me. We'll watch the entrance. Jaesa will mind things here. Standard."

Wynston aimed and took the next opportune target to separate itself from the melee. Large in Wynston's sights, a snarling Ruth beheaded one of her opponents.

A few moments and a few shots later, Pierce grunted. "That's all we'll get clean shots at. Come on."

Wynston reluctantly followed Pierce out to the lobby. The big man took up watch behind the counter, eyeing the doors and stairways. Wynston stood beside him.

Pierce threw him a bored look. "She's been like this, if you're wondering," he said. "Ever since. Maybe a little wilder each day, hard to tell."

"That can't continue."

"Is what it is. She's stronger than ever. Finest Sith I ever saw."

"I didn't come here for a Sith! I—" He got a hold of himself and shut up. He had come here for a Sith. That was the whole of his defensible reasons.

Pierce gave him a long hard look, then grinned darkly. "Don't know what you're after, but you won't find it here anymore. You want your ally against Darth Baras, you've got her, and when she gets close enough to strike it'll splatter for parsecs. Just enjoy the show."

A show. He thought this was going to be a show. "I've seen her be reasonable. More reasonable than that. It's safer for all of us if she chooses to be."

"Sure. Good luck with that."

He had only had one night to try so far. Surely a little time, a little more safety, would bring her back out of hiding. Out of that darkness. Actual,

physical darkness. Around her. She was supposed to be hope for the Sith and the Empire and herself. Not this.

It took several minutes more for Ruth and Jaesa to emerge from the building. Jaesa looked miserable. Ruth looked red-eyed and weary.

She added shame and something like dread to that expression when she looked at him. "This is how it is now," she said quietly. "No questions."

"There are questions this time," he said.

Her shoulders slumped. She didn't otherwise answer.

"Tell me what I can do."

"What you can do? Don't ask. Failing that, just come with me." She slid her mask back on. "We can talk tonight." She moved on past him.

Jaesa reached out to squeeze Wynston's hand on the way by. She smiled in an anxious way that was probably meant to be encouraging. He couldn't summon anything in return.

*

After work Ruth went straight to her quarters. She felt more than heard Wynston behind her. Damn him. He tried to hide it, but with the heightened sensitivity of her barely-harnessed turmoil she could feel the disgust in him. She walked well into her room and didn't turn around. "She had it coming," she said, releasing her mask. "From a practical standpoint, they all did."

"Practical?" he said. His voice was very calm. "Look at me. Please." He didn't say anything else, and so, heavy with dread, she turned around. "That was butchery, Ruth."

You don't understand. The Jedi were fools, all fools, they never saw the traitor in their midst and they deserve to die for that failure. "It's how I fight now," she said. "I derive quite a lot of power from anger. More than anything I've ever felt. It works."

"I remember you being quite effective the other way."

You remember a child. "You don't know what I'm up against now."

"If you take this strength, there's a cost. Maybe no one else cares. I do think some of your friends do. But say that no one else cares. You're still hurting yourself."

I still don't know what to do with you. Is this the game? Try to break my will to fight with a kindness I didn't expect? Credit where credit's due, I would never have thought of that. "That doesn't matter for the Wrath. That's all I've got time for."

"Does it matter for the people close to you? I realize this anger helps you stop thinking. Perhaps that's a comfort." He pushed up his sleeves to show a set of dark purple bruises on his wrists. "I should count myself lucky this is all you did when you were trying not to think last night."

Guilt lanced through all the conflicting things she felt toward him. "Stars. Wynston, you should've put kolto on those."

"I'm finding the warning more useful."

No. Don't use that against me. "You don't have to warn yourself against me."

"If these weren't here I might agree."

"I wouldn't do that to you again!" *Not unless I had to.*

"I don't know what you would and wouldn't do anymore, darling." He was still so terribly calm. "I'm yours either way, at least until the job's done, but if today is any indication you've become more dangerous than I think you know."

"Don't do this. I can't take it, not from you."

"Don't do what?" When he approached her, the desire to keep him near won out over the defensive impulses. He put his arms around her, and the scent and warmth of his closeness was both comforting and painful. She turned her head to avoid looking at him; he just whispered in her ear

instead. "Don't care for you? Don't want you to be happy and whole? There are some orders I can't follow."

She sobbed in spite of herself. "Part of me still doesn't believe a word you say."

"Well." He stroked her back and whispered slowly. "Some truths stand on their own. Your hair is brown. Your skin is pale. You're in pain. And you can heal."

"No." She tried to put her crumbling resolve into words. "You don't understand. My father was the healer. Quinn, in his way, was a healer. One is dead and the other's a traitor. I'm not the one who fixes things. I never was."

"You survive. You protect. If you want to, at least." He stroked the fine hair at the nape of her neck. "If you don't, darling, then I'm yours until the job is done, and after that I won't watch you do this." He kissed her hair. "But you have friends either way. You're not alone, I promise you."

She didn't resist when he led her to the bed and settled behind her, his body molding to her, his arms securely around her waist. "Can I ask you something?" he said.

She wiped her eyes, a pointless gesture against the flow of tears. "If you must."

"I don't know what you focused on before. What it was that made you move the way you did, let you close combat with that precision. Without crying. Is it still there somewhere?"

"After what happened? I don't know."

"All right."

"Is it really something you expect me to pick up again?" *If you are here to wreck my morale, recommending a second viable combat technique the moment you ruin my taste for the other one is...kind of stupid.*

"That's up to you. I think it might help."

She lay there, trying to not cry, until her stomach growled. Loudly. Wynston immediately squeezed her and let her go. "I'll get you something," he said, jumped out of bed, tucked her in, and was gone.

Hm. I'm going to bet he was hungry. It was such an ordinary thought. She found herself smiling.

He came back a few minutes later with a tray of food. "Jaesa and Vette say hello," he reported. "The lieutenant says harrumph, but I think it was in a good way."

She found that she actually did have an appetite, and so she cleared the tray while he settled behind her again and provided quiet warmth. Then she rested in silence again.

Eventually she was moved to speak. "You're being very nice," she said.

"I am."

"You seem to have put a lot of thought into the details of being very nice." *You're manipulating me and I sort of like it and I hate that. After the last one, I hate that.*

"I do have some experience with helping strong, competent people through rough spots." He sounded a little amused. "It may not be obvious from our shared history, but my skill set extends well beyond killing and lovemaking. The most important thing I can do for you is make sure you're in a position to handle matters yourself."

"Mm." *Well, maybe I don't hate it that much.* She settled her hands on his wrists and squeezed affectionately. To her horror, he gasped. She jerked her hands away from the bruised finger marks. "Please," she said. "Let me get something for that."

He tightened his arms around her. "No, darling. Everything you do matters. I'm not wiping this one out."

"What happened to being supportive?"

"I don't hate you for it. But everything you do matters." He kissed her neck. "Even when you're having a hard time."

She turned to press her forehead to the pillow. After this kindness she really did hate having hurt him. "So why are you here if I'm so disgusting?"

"Well, one, I've repeatedly mentioned that there's a job to do. Two, I don't find other people's wounds inherently disgusting. And three, I do believe in you. I've seen malice, Ruth. And cruelty, and brutality, and what for lack of a better term I'm forced to call evil. Your anger isn't that. And if you're willing to try, you'll never be that." He let a few moments pass. "Rest now."

But she stayed awake for a long time.

L+2: Remonstrations

Ruth woke up feeling stiff. Upon moving, she figured out that this was due to the full clothing and body armor she was still wearing.

Ugh. She had lost control yesterday. Those Jedi. Those poor, stupid Jedi. Those poor, hapless...no. No, stop it. They were enemies of the Empire anyway. Nothing worth thinking about.

But perhaps she should have saved her anger for Baras and his agents. His other victims, no matter how infuriatingly stupid, were too numerous to sustain rage against; save it for Baras and his agents.

She groaned when she felt Wynston stir beside her. She also made a mental note to tell 2V to prepare Quinn's old quarters for habitation. She should've done that the second Wynston came aboard. She shouldn't have let him aboard. This was hard enough without him taking her to task for what she already knew were her failures. Seeing him both disappointed and hurt because of her was too much.

It shouldn't be too much. She shouldn't even care, not about the convenient newcomer. He should only matter to her as a security consideration.

He mattered to her.

She wanted to go back to bed.

“Good morning,” Wynston said quietly.

She forced herself to turn and face him. He had his patient-neutral face on, the one with just a touch of inoffensive concern. “Hi,” she said.

“How are you feeling?”

Several possible answers flickered to mind, but she couldn’t think of a full sentence to complete any of them. “I’m not even going to answer that.” He was already fully aware of how bad the previous day had been.

He sat up and reached for her hand. “Anything I can do?”

She snatched her hand away. Her sore muscles objected; she really shouldn’t have left the armor on overnight, but it was a little late to undo that. “Stop asking that, for one thing. Go get ready. Eat. I’ll refocus here and then we’ll figure out the plan for the day.”

“All right.” He didn’t move yet, though. “Anything off-limits in the mess? I was safely supervised yesterday, I don’t want to go in alone now and accidentally eat something the lieutenant was saving. It would be a very unglamorous way to die.”

“What are you going on about?” She stared for a couple of seconds before softening enough to decide to answer his question. The man had a point, whether he fully knew it or not. “Vette can explain the property markings, it’s a little complicated. Go on. I’ll be out later.”

He smiled. For a moment there wasn’t even a speck of caution in it, just affectionate cheer. “Later, then.”

She sprang out of bed as soon as he was gone. She stripped off the stiffer components of her outfit, stretched, and then knelt on the floor, sinking into a very unpleasant physical awareness of herself and her surroundings.

She had been charging through each day for weeks, locating, killing, trying not to think. Trying to think of everything, because that was what was needed to stay alive. Trying not to think.

And yes, she had lost control.

She got up to seal the door. Maybe she was among friends, but she had something to do before she felt right about facing them. She sealed the door, then knelt again and settled into a focus exercise her father had taught her long ago.

The meditation didn't last very long. Even if she ducked aside from her anger and let it flow past, there remained an urgency pressing her to get going. Well, a little calming was better than none. She sighed, stood, stretched, and went for a quick shower; dressed, then proceeded to the mess.

Wynston, Jaesa, and Vette were gathered around the table there. They smiled cheerfully at Ruth when she entered. In fact, the atmosphere was warmer there than it had been in quite some time.

Wynston spoke up right away. "Jaesa and I were just discussing some of the nicer parts of Alderaan. She insists anything the Oroboro nest occupies doesn't qualify as nice, but we have some human-city places in common."

"I see," said Ruth. That was very sweet and natural and Ruth was certain it wasn't what they had been talking about.

"We finished gossiping about you a good ten minutes ago," volunteered Vette.

Ah. There it was. "Anything juicy?" Ruth asked stiffly.

Wynston was glaring at Vette. It was Jaesa who spoke up. "They say you're going to be okay, master."

"The rumormonger was light on details," added Wynston.

"Oh, but I did check for safety's sake," said Vette, "and he doesn't have any plans involving Killiks this time."

"Ah," said Wynston with a theatrical touch of nervousness, "that's actually an interesting point."

Vette blinked. "It is?"

"Yes, in fact." He looked to Ruth. "If you're willing, I'd like to call in Vector Hyllus to support your bid against Baras."

"Nope," said Vette.

"His skills may be useful as you maneuver into place politically."

"Nope. Last Killik you invited ripped Ruth's guts out."

"Master Hyllus isn't going to rip her guts out," said Jaesa.

"Yeah, only because somebody else got there first this time."

There was a moment of silence. Ruth didn't look at anybody until Jaesa took in a small audible breath. "I think he would really sympathize with us on this one," the apprentice said softly.

"No," said Ruth. She didn't want a bigger audience of uncertain motive. Vector was kind, but she didn't know him well, and he had a history with too many masters. "I want to minimize staff changes right now."

"I trust him implicitly," said Wynston, as if everyone didn't already know that. "But I'll defer to you."

"Yes, you will, Wynston. You'll be staying with the ship today. Jaesa, you too. Look after things."

Jaesa and Vette exchanged looks. Ruth knew they knew that when she dismissed them, she was about to do something particularly violent. Never mind that; she would try to get it right today, but Jaesa still had to stay behind. Someone needed to watch Wynston, and Wynston needed to not be watching Ruth. If she slipped up she wouldn't have him sitting in judgment on her for it. She couldn't take that.

"I won't be much use to you here," Wynston said, frowning.

"I'll get you Holonet access; I can meet with my ally here on Corellia, Darth Vowrawn, and you can pull any information you can access about him for my review tonight. If anything happens, call me."

"Likewise," Wynston said emphatically.

She left the mess before remembering that she needed to eat. Before she could turn back, Wynston followed her out and stopped her in place.

"Ruth," he said, "if this is about last night, I didn't mean that I would try to slow you down when work has to be—"

"Just stay here. If you're on my side, do as I say. I need your data access more than anything else anyway." She sighed and tried to push aside the generalized frustration that was rising. "I'll remember. I promise."

"Watch your back out there."

That statement seemed to rank somewhere between absurd and cruel given recent weeks. "You mean that?"

"Yes. Losing you, too, would be hard even for me."

"You're not..." She stopped. She hadn't fully thought through the selfish motivations for him, the ones apart from physical safety, in their earlier discussion. Whatever she felt toward him, part of her didn't want to deny him this. "You're not losing me."

All the same, before she left she instructed 2V to prepare a bedroom that wasn't hers.

*

Wynston, having no reason to demonstrate his wrist console's full capabilities in front of Jaesa, accepted the console she gave him access to in the holo room. He got to work mapping and gathering certain files on the allies Ruth had today and may not have tomorrow.

Jaesa passed back and forth a few times. Finally the dark-haired Human stopped and called Wynston's name.

He looked up. "Yes?"

"I'm going to bring Captain Quinn through in just a moment. I have to ask you not to start anything."

"Very well."

She disappeared in the direction of the cargo hold and came back only moments later with Quinn in tow.

He looked thinner than Wynston remembered. In fact, between the civilian clothes, the hollow cheeks, and the haunted eyes, he was only confirmably Quinn by process of elimination. The rigid poise hadn't changed, and he was still immaculately groomed. But there was a slave collar on that stiff neck. It was an enjoyable sight.

He didn't look Wynston's way as Jaesa escorted him across the holo room toward the refresher. On his return trip, though, he slowed and faced Wynston with eyes that spoke of desperation shaped into something fine and brilliant and deadly. "Agent Wynston," he said calmly.

Jaesa stopped. "Captain, you shouldn't talk to him."

"She's right," said Wynston. "I have nothing to say to you."

"Come on." Jaesa gestured back down towards the cargo hold and its improvised brig.

"I have something to say to you," Quinn continued, "and it would be to your benefit to hear. I assure you, I have no intention of starting trouble."

"What makes you think I won't?" said Wynston.

"The Wrath's goodwill is too precious a currency to spend on harming me. Come." He tilted his head as if inviting Wynston to a place that he owned instead of a prison cell he had been cast into.

Unfortunately he was right about the inadvisability of harming him. Curiosity prompted Wynston to follow. "Miss Jaesa, I give you my word I'll behave. You realize, Quinn, I'll be reporting anything you have to say."

"I expect no less." His gaze flicked to Jaesa. "Some privacy, if you would, Jaesa."

Jaesa accompanied them both to the cargo hold partition that served as brig anyway. She gave Wynston a startlingly hard look. "I know you mean well, just...remember, if anything happens to him, it won't be good for her."

"‘Anything’ won't happen," Wynston assured her. "Thank you."

She closed the door, leaving the two men alone.

Wynston crossed his arms and faced Quinn across the cramped space. "Talk."

He settled into a professional stance and spoke quickly, crisply. "I don't know what the Wrath has told you about my actions and I have no interest in hearing your impression. I betrayed her. At my former master Darth Baras's command I prepared an ambush, lured her into it, and attempted to kill her. I failed. Now I am held here, and she as before is occupied with her struggle against him."

How dutiful a recitation. "I really don't know where to start commenting on that. What's your point?"

"My point is that I still possess knowledge of value regarding Baras's methods and resources. The Wrath is not disposed toward listening; neither is her crew. It's far from my preference to deal with you, but you are in theory a professional and as such should be pragmatic enough to recognize that a tainted source is sometimes better than none."

"Hm. No, not really, I have trouble imagining how you could be better than none of anything." Wynston gestured to forestall Quinn's defense. "You say you know things? Fine. Tell me something I can use against Baras."

"I have no explicit lists of resources, names, locations. I didn't need to know those things. My familiarity is with his methods; give me what data you have and I'll give you a better prediction and recommended counterstrike than anything her staff could produce."

"I'm sorry, I thought you were talking to me because I would recognize a *good* idea when I heard one. You're not getting one word about what we're doing now."

"You would force the Wrath into the greatest battle of her life blind?"

"I was never the one blinding her."

"I don't have time to elaborate on how false that statement is, though I will ask you to recall how long it took you to tell her your real name. The fact is, the Wrath still stands at a disadvantage in her struggle against Darth Baras. I think even you have enough familiarity with the situation to know that she will need every available resource to win the battle ahead. I know you don't have enough familiarity with the situation to be all the resource she needs."

"So long as we're discussing resources, you seem to be talking right around the fact that you dramatically threw in your lot with the other side. It's somewhat undercutting your credibility here."

Quinn tightened his jaw. "I no longer serve him."

"Easily said. Easily gone back on once you're free. I'm not giving you a second chance to carry out your orders."

"That's not your decision," snapped Quinn. "As the first wasn't mine. I served what I believed best for the Empire. That meant Baras, in all his power, experience, and projected influence. Circumstances have since changed. The only correct thing to do going forward is to support the Wrath."

"Support her? You think anything you could possibly do, apart from dropping dead, could influence her for the better now? Your wife won't forget your effort to tear her to pieces as quickly as you seem to. Do you have any idea what you did to her?"

The officer's expression stayed frozen. "More than you could know."

"Than I could know?" Quinn wasn't the one who had seen her fighting like blood and darkness. Quinn wasn't the one who heard her begging in her

sleep for a mercy Quinn's confrontation would never give. Quinn had never once asked her to dance any place that wasn't a battlefield. He had never tried to know the girl and he wasn't caught watching the fury. Wynston struggled to keep his voice level. "My understanding of the matter isn't in question."

"Quite right; it's no use questioning what isn't there. Your priorities render it singularly difficult to present an argument that will sway you."

"I'll take my priorities over yours any day."

"Of that I have no doubt. Tell me, agent, what was the first thing you did when you came here? Defeated her enemies, perhaps? Offered some intelligence of value? Presented her with some critical resource?"

"Picked off several of your master's trackers, actually." Quinn was assuming some kind of sexual pursuit; Quinn was, from a certain point of view, accurate in his guess; Quinn was going to get an alternate subset of the truth rather than having his assumption validated. "Do you think I'm less at what I do just because I don't pointlessly backstab on command?"

"I think you're less for a number of reasons, none of which are relevant to the matter at hand except to say that you categorically lack the expertise to counter Baras's agents. The rest of the crew wouldn't know where to start, Darth Vowrawn has his own agenda, the Emperor's Hand has no credibility beyond what the Wrath has earned for them..." Quinn stopped, studying Wynston's face, and developed a worrisome hybrid of smile and sneer. "...oh. You were unaware of the Emperor's Hand?"

Damn. Wynston had tried not to react. "I'm still coming up to speed. I haven't been here long."

"How can you expect to win a battle when you don't even know who's fighting it? The situation with the Hand, with Corellia, and with Baras, will not be resolved by your approval or disapproval alone, and every moment of hers you waste – which is to say every moment since you came on board – brings it all closer to disaster. Recognize your limits, for her sake. You must convince her to allow me to serve."

Wynston shoved aside his initial reactions to the weighty-sounding term Ruth hadn't mentioned. This wasn't the time to back down or get sidetracked. "I won't. She wouldn't listen even if I asked. She's too wounded to hear. In case you've forgotten why you're not allowed to serve, I'll remind you that *you tried to murder her*. You were good for two things in your life and those were service to the Empire and support to her. You willfully failed at both."

"I did what I had to."

"What you had to? For whom? The Empire you keep claiming to work for? What better champion does it have than her? There's no authority with legitimate cause to remove her and even grasping scum like you should have recognized that! Or, to use a line of reasoning you may find exotic but I'll try it anyway, she was your wife. She trusted you. She loved you. She saved your life time after time and – to return to your world – she granted you a greater career advantage than anyone you've ever known, for no reason more than that she thought you were worth something." He leaned in. "That was her mistake. You take advantage of your enemies' mistakes, not those of your friends, agent."

"Captain," snapped Quinn.

"'Captain' isn't the job that put you in here."

"I wasn't free to dictate friend and enemy. I obeyed my commander, which is what responsible people do. The Empire works because that authority is clear."

"And who checks authority's responsibility? You're called to kill a woman like Ruth and you just do it? You don't look for another way to accomplish the objective? Death is never a goal in itself, not for any sane mind. It's only used to further some other cause. What goal would Ruth's death have served? What lives would it save? What secrets would it safeguard? Did you even ask?"

"I grow tired of your talk. If you walk out of here too full of self-righteousness to present my case and she is defeated because of something

my knowledge could have prevented, you'll be the one who voluntarily finished the job I unwillingly started."

"You're not understanding this. You are no longer relevant, Quinn. You chose your side. You did your damage. You're out. There is no way you can possibly help."

"The campaign isn't finished yet. Even if she holds to her determination that my part in it has, tell me, has 'my damage' strengthened her?"

"That doesn't help! If she uses the pain of your betrayal to finish the fight, the Wrath that wins won't be the woman you supposedly loved."

"My feelings for the Wrath are less conditional than you seem to think, agent. So long as she is victorious I shall count myself satisfied."

"Do you think that justifies what you did?"

"No. But it's something to salvage from what I was forced to do." He paused, examining Wynston's face. "You've heard my offer. If you truly desire her victory, you'll take it."

Take, from him? Wynston wasn't proud of the techniques he'd been trained in for extracting information, but he remembered them very well. He was past hoping he could break Quinn's arrogant façade by words alone but he could at least remind him of Intelligence's reputation. "If I thought you knew anything of value I would already have taken it from you, and not by asking nicely. Ruth tries to protect you, but she's too good a person to even imagine all the things she would have to forbid before I ran out of ways to hurt you."

"You were never the one who could hurt me." Quinn's mouth sneered, but his eyes were empty. "I do hope she succeeds. I hope that when your operation ends and you have no further use for her, your disappearance from her side will cause her less distress than mine did." An indefinable something cast a shadow over his face. "I have not forgotten that the closest she ever came to defeat was in one of your operations based on your faulty intelligence. If you are all the servant she is to have, you had better start living up to your own opinion of yourself. *Do not fail her again.*"

"I never failed her. On the occasion you mention, I was fighting on her side." Wynston stepped back to the doorway. "I'll mention our talk and make my recommendation. And she'll earn her victory, regardless of what happens to you or me. Good day, agent."

*

Jaesa stood up hurriedly when Wynston returned from Quinn's cell. "What happened?" she asked.

"We talked," Wynston said shortly. "He wanted the chance to make himself useful again. Useful to whom remains unclear. I'll talk it over with Ruth when she gets back."

"I see."

Wynston settled back at the console he had been allowed access to; Jaesa seated herself opposite him. "One thing did become clear," he said, "and that's that I don't have the information I need to effectively support Ruth here. So long as I have you today I'm hoping you can help provide the background that'll allow me to focus my efforts appropriately. "

She pressed her lips together for a moment. "I'd like to, Wynston, but Ruth's said that she's told you what she wants you to know."

"Jaesa, she gave me about twelve words' briefing before going in to fight yesterday and next to nothing before or since."

"Then that's what she wants you to know," she said apologetically. "I'm not going behind her back."

"I can't very well use my resources to contribute intelligence if I don't even know what intelligence base I'm contributing to." That was entirely false but it sounded plausible, so she might go for it.

Jaesa tilted her head. "Question for you first."

"All right," he said cautiously.

"How did you meet Ruth?"

Of all the...he reminded himself to be patient. "Has she never told you this?" he said with an air of mild surprise. "We worked together on Dromund Kaas."

She raised her eyebrows. "That's it?"

"I'm not eager to 'go behind her back' to discuss personal matters that are as much hers as mine," he said gently.

"I'm trying to understand you," she said steadily. "Vette says you and Ruth were involved."

"Yes, for a time. It ended amicably." He didn't have time to keep this up. "Question for you. What is the Emperor's Hand?"

"I can't. Please, just track what she asks you to."

"I understand your caution. But this is one matter where I need you to trust me. If I were here for harm I would already have been briefed on this background, but I'm not and I haven't."

She shook her head. "You don't understand. I believe you, but going against her orders right now is dangerous."

"Not knowing how to resolve the situation because I don't know what the situation is is dangerous."

"It's already touch and go. She won't let Vette and me in half the time. If she finds out we ignored her orders..."

"I'll handle it."

"You didn't see what she did to Quinn."

"What she...what does it matter?" Wynston very much wished he had seen it, but that was beside the point. "He earned it. She's hardly going to copy that on you." Jaesa stayed quiet. He felt a sudden chill. "She hasn't hurt the rest of you. Has she?"

"We haven't given her the excuse." She shifted uneasily. "Question for you. If she got mad at you for stepping out of line, do you really think you could stop her?"

"I have to try. I've risked life and limb for less worthy ends before. Question for you. Please. Tell me about the others who are claiming to be our friends."

She talked. Finally. What she said was of a piece with the strange Voice of the Emperor matter he had helped Ruth with on Voss; this stuff about the Hand added a lot while illuminating little. He didn't like the Voice then and he didn't like the Hand now. Ruth had trusted their direction even before the disaster, but high-level Sith were high-level Sith, and hidden ones were guaranteed trouble.

"They're evil outright," Jaesa finished, shuddering. She leaned forward to cradle her head in her hands. "Even when I see it I can't stop her from getting involved with it. What good is my power if I can't use it to change anything?"

"Jaesa." This distress wasn't just about the Hand. "You've been there for her. That's more than any Force power or anything else you could contribute."

"I'm supposed to contribute more than just being here."

He got to the point. "It wasn't your fault."

"Isn't it? My power should have detected something wrong months ago. I was the only one who could do that and I failed."

Wynston was half inclined to agree, but it was too late now. A morale boost for her would be of far more use than recriminations. "Quinn never gave any of you any reason to distrust him."

"I looked. Once, early. He was never light, but he was pure in what he was. Ruth said it was enough. She said with her directing him it'd come out good in the end. I shouldn't have taken her word for it. Maybe, maybe my power didn't work. Maybe he was shielded somehow. Or maybe I just didn't read it right and that's how I let it happen."

"It's not your fault. That was a plan laid out before you ever came here, driven by a malice that nothing in the world you came from could have prepared you for." He leaned forward and waited for her to look up at him. "All we can do now is press on. End the threat. And let her know that trust is still worth it, and she is still loved." He tried a small smile. "She relies on you, even now."

"I try." She returned the smile, weakly. "You know, I'm glad you're here to help. But I'm a little surprised, you've been a lot more...intense...than you were on Voss."

"Most times you've talked to me I wasn't depending on you to help me do something this important."

Just then the main holo beeped. Jaesa threw Wynston a troubled look, then flitted over to open a receive-only line.

It was a masked Sith standing over two bound, kneeling prisoners, one in an Imperial trooper's uniform, the other in street clothes.

"The Voice sends his regards," rasped the Sith, "and requests an update on how your mission of *protection* is going."

He drew his saber, struck twice, and the prisoners fell.

The holo cut out.

"She's been getting those," Jaesa said quietly. "They'll just call in, execute random people, and leave. He's only doing it to hurt her."

"I see."

"She's had us recording them. She insists on watching them all, even when it drives her crazy."

"Erase this one."

Jaesa shook her head. "There's been at least one a day since we came here. She'll know what you're doing if somehow mysteriously none came in."

Wynston nodded reluctantly. "Save it, then. But nothing else comes through." He looked back down at his console. "I should get to work now."

Jaesa peered alternately at him and his console screen. "More files?" she asked.

He shook his head. "Earlier this morning I gathered all the information I can access on Darth Vowrawn and his people. I'll step Ruth through it tonight. Right now I'm hoping to set up monitoring on certain comm channels, issue some inquiries in certain specialized circles. I want to know who's watching the Wrath and what they intend to do about it."

"I see." She edged around to get a better look. "You do this a lot?"

"Honestly? No. There are individuals in the agency who are specifically selected, trained, and in some cases bred to analyze data streams like this. But I can't demand their time right now."

"Did Intelligence send you here?"

Did this surprise her? "I requested the assignment," he said; it was pretty close to true. "When I heard she was in trouble I had to come. And they recognize the importance of the Wrath, so they approved it."

He wished he could go out. Social engineering, not slicing, was his specialty. But he had orders to stay here, so he did what he could. A throwaway identifiile got him into some basic military comms. Some clearances he had arranged while tracking Ruth down via Baras's Intelligence resources were activated once more to take chatter there. One of the dataspikes Kaliyo had left behind was directed toward cracking the outer circle of a CorSec info feed. Little by little he opened up datafeeds and attempted to set basic monitors to flag items of interest. He wished he did have a Watcher on hand; this was really the sort of thing they were good at.

Alternately, someone else. "I wish Ruth were here," he told Jaesa. "She'd be better than I am at writing something to ID worthwhile pieces of chatter. She used to do some slicing in her spare time, I don't know whether she keeps that up."

"She does, at least until recently. We haven't really had spare time."

He nodded. "And, there. First-pass monitoring in place."

"What happens now?"

"I'm staying right here; the automatic system won't be enough. Now I watch and listen."

"Can I help?"

Sweet young woman. Exactly the kind he wanted to make sure Ruth could call upon. He moved aside a little and gestured for her to settle next to him. "Let's get to work."

*

The route to the rendezvous point with Vowrawn's people was as tense as Ruth had come to expect from Corellia: patrols of Imperial and questionably loyal CorSec forces, more than a few Sith with their own retinues. Some recognized Ruth and deferred to her. Some haughtily ignored the whole party.

Enemies, many or all of them, one way or another. She didn't pick fights, though. It would only be a waste.

The next mission: Locating an ancient Entity of vague description. Darth Vowrawn said Baras had trapped her some time ago and used her Dark Side power and visions for his own ends. Her exact location was still a mystery. That meant going back into the chaos for field work.

It was getting late, and no leads from friend or foe, when the Republic unit waylaid them in a broad valley of rubble where a road had once been. In the opening bedlam of blasters she had little thought but to close to the nearest target and get going; once things were under way she realized she was up against a sizeable team.

Her people had gotten accustomed to fighting as a five-person squad: herself, Vette, Jaesa, Pierce, Broonmark. The Republic commandos were

focusing fire on Ruth, but as they noticed Jaesa's capability they started splitting efforts.

Ruth worked as best she could, fighting with careful focus. Vette staggered to cover and didn't come back up; Ruth recognized her own swell of rage but let it pass, struggling instead to keep a controlled flow as the battle roared on. The engagement was sizeable, yes, but they were making progress. This could work.

A commando positioned someplace where none of Ruth's people were pointing suddenly dropped. Moments later a second yelped in pain, one arm dropping limp. Seconds after that he went down, too.

The battle burned to an end far faster than Ruth had first expected; all but the helpful sniper were accounted for. Ruth glided towards cover from the direction the shots had most likely come from, and she watched.

Wynston emerged from a shadowed arch and trotted down the nearest scrap-metal slope. He carried a sniper rifle with a Republic logo stenciled on the side in one hand. He tossed it at Pierce. "For your collection," he said. "Prime condition."

"Not bad," said Pierce, eyeing the rifle.

"Should be two more up around there and there if you like, owners dead courtesy of the piece you're carrying." Wynston pointed quickly to a couple of vantage points above the scene, then looked around on the ground. "Vette. Where is she?"

The Twi'lek in question was making an effort to stand up or crawl out from behind a large metal scrap. "Leg kind of awkward," she reported. "Doesn't look bad as deep plasma burns go. And I'll have you know that I never knew that before I started working for you, Wrath-lady."

Ruth felt like she was supposed to return what passed for humor there. "All part of a well-rounded education," she said uneasily, "which wasn't supposed to come with much personal bodily harm." She watched anxiously as Wynston took over tending to Vette's wound. He looked focused but not distressed; he always looked like that during the

mechanical parts of operations. She wondered what he got like when he lost a patient.

Pierce was turning the sniper rifle over in his hands; he shot Wynston a look when the Chiss stood up again. "This is special issue," he said.

Wynston nodded. "SIS provides for their people. Unfortunately for them, their operational methods and certain tracking signatures aren't quite as sophisticated as their rifles." He looked around. "Anyone else hurt?" Pierce, Broonmark, and Ruth all made negative noises. "Good."

She smiled cautiously. "I didn't expect to see you." Her instincts were glad he was there, but it was exactly what she had told him not to do.

"I worked as promised," he said. "I've pulled some files on Vowrawn for your review, we can go over them at your leisure. After that, I caught some chatter on certain channels. SIS and spec ops team flew in especially to meet the Emperor's Wrath. I tried to call you but you weren't picking up. Local jamming, it actually gave me a beacon to home in on should I choose to give chase." He grinned sheepishly. "So then I left the ship. Sorry."

*

She had looked all right fighting. Not exactly contented, but not berserk, either. Wynston was a little disappointed to find that she hadn't made any solid progress in her investigation, but there was something to be said for just getting through the day.

He spoke idly with the crew on the way back to the ship. He even coaxed a small preoccupied smile out of Ruth, eventually. She used to balance work and play so well. She used to a lot of things, he supposed. She'd been doing so well, bringing something not only reasonable but lovely into circles of power that didn't have nearly enough of either. And in return Quinn and the rest of them had battered her to the point where she feared her own friends and some of them feared her.

There were ways to fix this. There had to be. It wouldn't be instantaneous, and it wouldn't even be one of the nice situations where a careful setup and quick hit would put the whole system back into sustainable balance; it

would require care, and there were so very many factors actively working to break it. Working to pointlessly, wastefully, willfully, savagely break it.

He grinned idly and tossed a joke into the conversation and wished the rocket tram would go faster.

*

The moment they got back to the ship Wynston turned to Ruth and said, very casually, "I hate to be an inconvenience, but can we talk?"

The round of knowing looks around her was over almost before it had begun. Never mind that. She wanted to know exactly what had led up to him deserting his post.

She saw him into her quarters and shut the door. "What's wrong?" she asked. Or, actually, more like "What's wro-nf," because he closed quick and hard and kissed her. For a few moments his hands seemed to be everywhere at once; then they settled with one cradling her neck and the other fitted to her waist. He smelled of sweat and plasma and tasted of something sharp and chemical, something left over from the battle or its preparations, something that said he wasn't prepared and polished this time.

When he broke away he held her face close. "You've got a bloody lot of people determined to hurt you, you know," he said.

"I know."

"I won't have it." He touched her brow, her hair. "If it were me I'd wipe name, change style, disappear, but I like your identity and you're doing very well with it and – they will not break you." He pressed his face to her neck and squeezed her so tight it hurt even through her armor. When she hugged him back she felt almost close enough to him.

He let her loose, a tiny bit, and flashed a hard grin. "I suppose you hardly need me to tell you that," he said, and kissed her again.

She pulled back moments later. He was hardly even trying to hide his own bright sharp deep and terribly surprising feelings. "You're angry," she said.

"Not at you," he answered. "Not at you, I promise."

Either he was winding up to do something bad or he was hurting, or possibly both, and she found that either prospect was powerfully upsetting. If there were something she could fight she'd do it. If she had the words she would talk things through, but nothing very intelligent was coming to mind. She stared into his eyes and instinctively matched her breathing to his. He was upset. That wouldn't stand. And so, unable to help any other way, she found herself saying "How do you want this?"

"With you. We can sort out the rest as we go."

*

Two nights ago she had been near silent. This was the first night she ever called his real name. It was good to hear it in her voice. It was right. It was devastating.

*

He seemed content not to move after. She rested a while and tried not to let the cold thoughts start up again while her hands stroked his hair, brushing it clear of his face. She noticed that his eyes were open, staring at the wall. "Wynston?"

"Yes, darling?"

"Preoccupied silence worries me."

He focused back on her with a lazy smile. "It's nothing very verbal, sweet."

Her chest tightened. "You're lying."

The smile dropped. "No. It's nothing like that."

"You have never been nonverbal for more than two minutes at a time. Tell me what's going on."

"Happiness?" he offered, in what was probably meant to be a disarming tone. "Warmth?" She didn't return his grin. "I was just thinking you have a ruinous effect on me," he said softly.

It didn't have the playful tone of his usual flattery. "Is that a problem?"

He stared at the ceiling for a second with an expression she couldn't read. Then he shrugged. "Not in any way that puts you to blame. Are you sure I can't just kiss you and return to afterglow-y silence?"

She looked at him.

"Darling..." he said softly. "I just came here from getting too attached. Please understand, this isn't your problem and is in fact less important than any of the things you have to deal with. It was just on my mind, that's all."

"I wasn't going to attach." As if she were dumb enough to become solely dependent on someone again so soon or cruel enough to do it to someone she liked so much. "You're here now. That's what matters."

He backed off a little bit while his gaze trailed down to the sheets and fixed there. "I am here now. When I leave, you'll have advance warning, and for goodness' sake I'll see that you're better off than you were."

When he left. How matter-of-fact. She tried to give it no more emphasis than he did. "I'm already better off," she said.

"There's room for improvement."

Which suggested he would stay a while. She liked the idea. "So if I keep my life in shambles will you have to stick around?"

"Probably not, darling. I could conspire with your loved ones to improve your life beyond the telling of it whether you like it or not."

Him and his claims. "No you couldn't."

"I really could."

"Not if I didn't want you to."

He reached for her, and the smallest sliding touch at the right spot on her neck drew a gasp from her before she could remember to be contrary. He smiled mischievously. "I can." Then suddenly he fell away, rolled off the bed and cast about for his pants. "But first I'm getting something to eat."

Ruth felt a surge of annoyance. And, upon realizing the absurdity of that reaction, a welling-up of giggles she had to stifle. "That's not improving my life at all!"

"Long-term investment, darling. I'll make it worth your while."

On an impulse she dropped the joke. "You don't owe me that."

The way he slowed, something in the parting of his lips, told her that that was exactly the right thing to say. "Ruinous," he said, as if reminding himself not to do something.

"Go on." She waved and then relaxed back into the warm bed. She didn't think he would make any trouble out there, and it would be a couple of minutes before she'd be steady on her legs anyway.

*

Wynston, having rounded out the evening with some food and crew conversation and cleanup and so on, now lay back and let Ruth use his chest as pillow.

Busy day. Quinn had been every kind of unpleasant and should remain silenced and out of sight for the time being. Wynston's talk with Jaesa had been tremendously encouraging; everything he saw of her confirmed his early impressions that she was a good sort. He wondered whether more pretty young sane Sith could be arranged in general. It could only be a good thing for everyone involved.

As for the rest of the day, charging in after Ruth probably hadn't been necessary, but he had been restless after hours of monitoring; the exercise had been good. And after that there was simply her.

He wasn't pleased at having had to be so blunt with her. He wished she weren't so insistent on having everything explained openly and part of him

wished she didn't undo him to the point where he went along with it. Some women genuinely preferred direct admission of relationship terms, even the unglamorous end conditions. Ruth? Probably not one of those women. But lying to her would've been beyond disastrous and truthfully promising to stick around was something he couldn't do. So he'd told her.

Oddly, she hadn't been angry.

Riding this chemical glow was something he was used to, something he liked. Arranging, enjoying, managing, disentangling as gracefully as possible. Women were wonderful like that. He wouldn't say it was fake just because it was short-lived. This, though, this feeling was too much. He'd known Ruth for too long. The consequences of falling out would be too severe. The consequences of not only wanting to stay, but staying, were...hard to predict, given the total absence of comparable history, but would definitely be bad.

There were ways to fix this. There had to be. He couldn't afford to spook right now. For all the reasons he had listed, and for reasons outside him and Ruth, too. He would just have to manage this.

At least she hadn't rejected his casual mention of her loved ones. Good. If he could clear the hint of fear in her eyes when she looked at her own friends, that would be a triumph. It'd be enough to sustain her when he left.

He held still in the darkness, absorbing her slow strong heartbeat and savoring the way she had said his name. Until the job was done, he would hold her as close as she would let him.

*

When Quinn's 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."

“Darling? Wake up.” Wynston’s breath was warm on her ear. “It’s all right.”

And, as the nightmare fell away, it was. If she weren’t so completely comfortable there in place she would have twisted around to kiss her lover. Instead she found his hand, laced her fingers with his, and went back to sleep.

L+3: Review and redirect

Wake up. Inventory: normal sleeping clothes, mild aches here and there from the close-range engagement with the SIS sniper the previous day. Nothing that would slow him down. Surroundings, warmth behind him, lovely lean-muscled arms around him. Sounds, her breathing, and someone moving past in the hallway. Crew was already up.

He rested for a little while anyway. Work could wait a little while.

In time, though, he turned around. Without leaving the warm circle of her hold, of course. Her eyes opened as if she had been waiting for him all along. For a little while they just looked at each other. She ran a hand around to stroke his cheek and jaw. He leaned into it while trying not to break eye contact. He very much didn’t want to break eye contact just then.

“I like waking up in your arms,” he informed her.

She smiled drowsily. “I like it, too.”

Alas, time to move. He pushed up to get closer to her. “Ready for the day?”

She looked thoughtfully at him. “Yes,” she said after a few seconds.

He leaned into a slow kiss. “I’ll be with you.”

It was with some reluctance that he got moving; he followed Ruth out to join the crew at breakfast. Jaesa pulled her aside when that was done. Wynston settled at his console to skim Holonet and comms chatter until such time as he was called to work.

A long time later, he looked up and around. The ship was dead quiet; nobody had passed through in quite some time.

He found Pierce settled in the armory, checking weapons over. The big man grunted greeting.

"Are we moving today?" asked Wynston.

"Once the Wrath's ready," said Pierce. "She's in the conference room. Goin' in there would be hazardous to your health."

He cocked an eyebrow. "Why?"

"Don't know. I only know the degrees of worried Jaesa gives off. Max power and humming when she stepped out of there."

"I see. Thank you." That sounded bad, and so naturally Wynston made straight for the conference room.

He found Ruth was sitting at the head of the conference table. She had been crying. She was staring intently at a small holoprojection of a recording of Wynston himself facing Quinn.

Quinn's image spoke. "My feelings for the Wrath are less conditional than you seem to think, agent."

She tapped the console. The recording skipped.

"Do you have any idea what you did to her?"

"More than you could know."

Skip.

"You must convince her to allow me to serve."

Skip.

"Jaesa recorded it," Wynston said quietly. "Prudent."

"Yes," she said distantly, not looking at him. "She thinks ahead."

"I do hope she succeeds," said Quinn's image. "I hope that when your operation ends and you have no further use for her, your disappearance from her side will cause her less distress than mine did. I have not forgotten that the closest she ever came to defeat was in one of your operations based on your faulty intelligence. If you are all the servant she is to have, you had better start living up to your own opinion of yourself. *Do not fail her again.*"

Skip.

"It isn't what he says about you," she said leadenly. "Just the way he says it. He was that passionate all the time. He sounds so much like he cares."

"If you've only ever learned one act, you get to be good at it."

"I wanted him."

"I know."

She wiped her eyes. "This is why you were angry last night."

"Yes." He took a step closer. "Ruth, I told him I would talk to you, and here I am to say that no good can come of his survival. He'll only repeat the one lie he's got, and it'll only keep tearing you up."

She stiffened. "Should I feel better if he's dead?"

"It will hurt. I know that. But you've got to remove the blade before the wound can heal."

"You're less interested in that than in revenge."

As she would be if she were hard enough to really understand the concept, and for once he thought she could use that level of hardness. "Revenge by itself is a waste, but with some people you'll find it becomes a very satisfying thing to layer onto threat elimination."

"I'm not eliminating him." Her eyes finally moved up to him while the rest of her stayed still. "This isn't open for discussion. He will not die by my hand or yours."

"He doesn't deserve that mercy."

Her lip curled. "I thought you people wanted me to stay merciful."

"Not with him! He'll only come after you again sooner or later. We both know he doesn't give up at anything once he's sunk his claws in."

"You don't know anything. You haven't understood a thing he was doing or saying since day one." She lifted her chin and took on that air of command she used on other people. "This isn't something you talk me into, by argument or by charm, so don't try."

Her insistence was too cold to be childish, too childish to be cold, and too much of both to be anything he thought she would've called love for Quinn. Love, as had amply been demonstrated of late, was simply that which made a mark act against its own best interests; Wynston never thought it would look this harsh from her.

With an effort he got a hold of himself. "I didn't mean to presume, darling. I'm sorry. If you could see the hurt on your own face right now you would understand. We all hate seeing it. And he's the one who did it to you."

"Then he's mine to deal with. Isn't he?"

He shouldn't keep talking. She was only getting more defensive. "He's a monster and still a threat," he said.

Her whole face twisted. "I know what he is! Better than you ever did, better than you ever will, no matter how hard you're trying to be a point-for-point replacement!"

"I'm not a replacement," Wynston said, with more calm than he felt. "For one thing, I'm here—"

"To do a job, you've said repeatedly. I'm on good terms with your masters so far. Shall we just hope that continues?"

"I told you they're not my masters anymore. Neither they nor anyone can make me hurt you."

"And I'll believe you just because you're good to me? Because I want to? You think I'm that stupid?"

He didn't have proof of his goodwill. There was none he could have and they both knew it. "You're not stupid, Ruth. Believe me because what we've given each other is real. When I'm with you--"

"You enjoy it, I'm sure." Her lip twitched again. "So do I. I can't think straight when you get close, you know that. But you're not controlling me, Wynston, not in anything. Especially something you understand as little as this."

How could she be that willfully wrong? "I understand he tried to kill you. How can anything else matter?"

"You don't get to ask that question! I won't take his offer if that's what you're worried about. But you don't get to harm him." Her gaze flicked back to the frozen holorecording. She activated it again.

"My understanding of the matter isn't in question," said Wynston's image.

"Quite right," said Quinn. "It's no use questioning what isn't there."

She stopped playback. "You sounded like you care, too," she said.

"Yes. I do."

"I want to believe you." Her blue eyes sparked when she looked up at him. "But that's attachment, isn't it? You're good at this. The comfort's been nice. Perhaps I needed it. Now it's time for you to get out."

His stomach turned inside out. "No," he heard himself say. "Don't ask me to leave you." He started towards her, struggling to marshal an argument centered on her. "Don't try to do this alone."

The force on his throat ended his progress and shoved him backwards. "Stop trying to manipulate me," she spat. "Get out and don't come back."

The only manipulation he was trying was for the good. He wanted to argue he wasn't trying to manipulate at all. He was trying to...he stopped. Save? Patronizing. Love? Irrevocable. Help? Not enough. Not nearly enough.

"You take direction so well when it's something you want," she said in a low hard voice. The next Force shove slammed into his heart and propelled him almost to the door, leaving him to stagger the last couple of steps.

"You're so kind when I do what you say. So sweet as long as I act like the harmless child you enjoyed."

"Ruth, I care for you any way at all."

"I care enough to repeat, get out. That's the last chance you get."

It took everything he had to step backwards and let the door fall shut between them.

He stood still for a few moments. He felt dizzy for no good reason. There was almost nothing he could do. But he had to do something. Perhaps a quick walk over, around the corner, and he could end the source of the seeping poison. It would destroy all hope of going back, but in the end it would be better for her.

Except that her hate would remain for Intelligence and the new organization, too. The Wrath might come around to stability, but she would never be their ally. It'd be a failure of one mission and total prevention of many more. And it was the mission that mattered. Yes. The mission.

Fool. If he was going to pretend this was about the mission he should've sent Vector. Or any other Cipher Keeper could direct his way. Or anybody at all, because if Ruth was going to lash so hard at anyone who came, it would've been better for the person who came to not care.

He went back to Ruth's quarters and picked up his bag. He was always packed to move.

He ran into Vette on his way back out. "Uh, hi," said the Twi'lek, eyeing his luggage. "You going somewhere?"

"Yes." He kept his voice cool and steady. "I'm glad I caught you first, I'll need your holofrequency."

"Oh, no. You're not leaving now. There's still more crazy than me and Jaesa can beat."

"I'm not being given a choice. Give me your holofrequency, I'll be in touch." He spoke quickly to discourage the hurt she was doing a good job of not showing anywhere but in her eyes. "I'm not giving up, Vette."

"Yeah," she said in her flat unconvinced tone. "Well, look on the bright side. You're better off than the last guy she dumped." She took out her holo and tapped it. "Call any time you want, as long as it's soon."

He hurried out of the suddenly stifling ship into the hangar bay. His mind raced along safe colorless practical lines. He'd better get back to his own ship. Pick up any extra gear he needed. Continue the situational monitoring he had started. The Wrath still had a job to do and he had to help. It wasn't in his nature to do anything else.

*

She just let the recording loop for a while. Jaesa had told her she should see this conversation. What Jaesa hadn't said was that this was Wynston going behind Ruth's back at the first opportunity. How excited the Chiss was. And how terribly, terribly determined Quinn was.

He always had been. The passion, the focus, the arrogant way he stepped in because there was simply no one who could do it better. She hated that. Near the end it hadn't been so arrogant at all, just...right. She hated that, too.

Damn Wynston. Damn him for being here, for being determined, for being almost perfect only to turn around and start making demands. He didn't have any right to meddle in Ruth's affairs, with the father of her child least of all. Quinn was a liar, a traitor, a threat and a thief, but even so, even knowing she had to cut him out of her life the moment his master was eliminated, she couldn't lose him to such a final thing as death. And it didn't matter how much Wynston offered her if he was just going to turn it

to whatever murky combination of his precious job and his patent grudges he was angling for.

She pulled herself together before anyone else could barge in. Time to go, before someone else decided an intervention was a good idea.

She barged out to the refresher and scrubbed her face raw. In time she gave up on waiting for the tears to stop. It would all go under a mask anyway.

What she had been delaying all morning was the search for the Sith Entity. Once it was cut away from Baras, Vowrawn had – not said, but heavily implied – that she could turn her attention to Baras himself. Damn heavy implications, too. She wanted straight answers.

She headed out to the hallway; Vette was loitering near the ship's exit.

"Oh," said the Twi'lek, looking almost suspiciously neutral. "Hi."

"We're going," said Ruth.

"No Chiss-boy?"

"He's out," she growled.

"Huh. I kinda thought so. You know that you're kind of an idiot?"

"Door's right there if you want to join him."

"Looks to me like we're all going out that way. It's the same fight waiting."

"No, it isn't. It never was."

"You do know he really really likes you?"

Jaesa and Pierce finally showed up, drawn by the sounds of conversation. Broonmark ghosted behind them. Ruth steeled herself for the next round.

"It's time to go," she said, turning for the door.

"Where's Wynston?" asked Jaesa.

"He won't be returning. Come on."

Jaesa paled. And, to Ruth's chagrin, took a step toward the conference door as if expecting to find him in there.

"What's wrong with you?" snapped Ruth. "He's fine, he just left. We're going."

"What happened?"

"I saw what you wanted me to see, Jaesa, and I talked it over with him. We had some differences regarding how the captain is to be disposed of. At my suggestion Wynston left."

"I just wanted you to know what was going on while you were out. I wanted you to see how he was sticking up for you."

"I did."

"Then she got an attack of the stupid," said Vette, "and kicked him out."

"Why are you on his side?" demanded Ruth.

"Beeecause he's on your side?" said Vette. "And I'm on your side. It's a big side. Good for a whole crowd when you're not *kicking people off it*."

"Silence." Vette had always taken Wynston's part anyway. She probably liked the company of fellow judgmental whiners. "Lieutenant, we've got more tracking to do today. Any word from Vowrawn's people?"

Pierce nodded, ready as ever for business to start. "Couple of messages came in this morning, milord. We have a starting point for looking. Still quite a few Republic blocks between us and anything that might help."

"We know what to do with those." She shot Vette and Jaesa dark looks before slipping her close black mask on. "Follow my lead. Let's play it quick and as clean as we can. We're after answers today, not fights." Because she could do that to get this over with. Get the Entity over with, get all of it over with, just get it done, finished, Baras and Quinn and all the rest. She didn't even want blood right now, she just wanted an end.

And she could play it clean. She didn't need Wynston around to get things right. She could be something that was neither as pliable as the ingénue he was hallucinating nor as ugly as the butcher he was mad at. And she could do it without the string-laced help he offered.

*

Ruth made little progress that day. She kept herself under control, even if she wasn't cordial about it. When she returned to the ship that evening she found her room as she had left it, minus one bag: clean and bare but for her own possessions in the half of the room she had kept for herself the whole time. She should have kept more.

It was a relief to sense no one else nearby when she lay down. It was simpler this way. Cold, difficult, but simpler. No surprises.

*

Wynston kept a stiff upper lip on his way through the spaceport concourse. There was work to do and he couldn't afford to sabotage it further through another lapse in self-control.

He shouldn't have pushed. He shouldn't have challenged her, not on anything that wasn't absolutely critical, not while things were so delicate. It was just that he thought they were working well together. She was so reasonable about everything else, just not Quinn.

Then again, hadn't that always been the way?

Enough. He should check his correspondence. Call Vector, see that the *Tenebrous* was prepared for when Wynston...finished? Gave up? For when his business on Corellia was concluded. See that Ensign Temple was staying out of trouble; he still hadn't decided what to do with that sometimes alarmingly by-the-book creature now that he was going off the books entirely. Check in with Keeper.

Find someplace to dance and drink.

Stupid idea, that. Too much to do. He had a lot to catch up on and then he had to negotiate a re-approach. Ruth knew she could trust him, and he

knew she knew it. It was just a matter of...of something. Getting over the defenses again. Finding the right leverage. It wasn't enough to just be himself, cute though that idea seemed. It never had been enough, never would be, and he was old enough to know that.

There was a way to fix this. There had to be.

Don't draw rash conclusions from what had happened back there. Think clearly, dammit, if he had to think on the subject at all. Rejection was nothing new. This one hadn't even involved knives, projectiles, or legal action; it should be easy. So much for the girl, move on. The only matter left to resolve was the job. If support was required for any practical end, there were ways. He considered. Extravagant repentance involving gifts and flowers, not likely to work. Torrid forceful approach, definitely ineffective. Crawling servility she wouldn't accept. Straightforward professionalism with a brief apology for trying to make it personal, she wouldn't go for it even if he could stomach saying it. She didn't think she needed professionals.

None of the scripts were likely to work, and going off script had made her suddenly decide he was being manipulative. He was out of tricks. Time to send in a contrasting agent to take over the op? He didn't have a whole lot to draw from. And nobody else knew her, her strengths and weaknesses, the things he couldn't just put into a briefing and the things he wouldn't. Nobody else would be there for her sake such that they could come close to the transparency that would keep her from shutting them out.

Right. Because his honesty had been so bloody effective.

What the hell was it about Quinn that had set her off like that? Even she had to know that Quinn's continued existence was a bad thing. Wynston couldn't just pretend otherwise. If he had registered the opinion and then just stopped pushing...that would've been the smart thing to do. Don't let anything, even something that significant, get in the way of the op.

"Op" didn't feel like the right word, but he wasn't ready to deal with that yet. Instead, as he reached his own hangar, he turned his attention to the perimeter and ship-exterior check: nothing new or unusual. A little wear showing on the ship's underside; he made a note to have that looked at.

For that matter it had been a while since the auxiliary power system had gotten a once-over; he should look up whatever Fixer Keeper could recommend as non-Sith-owned and have them take a look. Yes. And, on the topic of keeping the ship in order, he made a note to restore Imperial ration type D bars to the droid's regular supply shopping list. Kaliyo had hated the stuff, hated even the smell of it, to the point where she'd made a policy of throwing any such ration bar she could find directly at Wynston's head until he gave up trying to stock it. Well, she was gone and he could have them back now.

He wished his own base didn't have these associations. It left very few safe topics to think about.

He made a round of the ship's interior, not really doing anything, just checking that everything was as he expected. Then he headed to the holo to make a call.

"Keeper," he drawled as soon as she came up, "you're a sight for sore eyes."

"Cipher," she said crisply. "How are you liking Corellia?"

"About as much as I did the first time around," he said. Pyromaniac bosses and torture interrogations had been bad for his physical health, but at least they hadn't been personal.

"I'm sorry to hear that." As well she might be, given whose idea the interrogation plant had been. "Any progress securing an alliance with the Wrath?"

Steady, he reminded himself. "It's touch and go. Her attention is fully occupied in the Sith infighting game, tearing down Darth Baras's people." Then, the number one takeaway he had to hand Intelligence so it wouldn't actively line up contingency plans for an uncontrolled power as big as the Wrath: "I'll have something by the time he's down. She is understandably gun-shy, it may take time."

"Time isn't on our side. Matters with the Dark Council are moving quickly. There's a short list of targets I'd like to point her at if we get the chance. But of course Baras comes first."

"Absolutely." After that it was Ruth's call. He wasn't going to tell Keeper that right away. "In the absence of any better way to prove our goodwill, I'm working on resolving the Baras situation as fast as possible. Keep me informed as to what resources you can scramble on Corellia without bothering your own neighborhood Sith."

She sighed. "That may as well be nothing, but I'll do what I can."

He cracked a smile. "I know you will. I can tease what I need out of my own neighborhood Sith, so don't let my priority weight interfere with holding the rest of your duties together." It wasn't like anything she could arrange for him could change the part that mattered to him anyway.

"You know, when you move on I'm going to miss having an agent as low-maintenance as you," she said.

"You can call anytime. Not many people get to do that, you know. At least, not many I'd pick up for."

That finally got a returning smile, albeit an anxious one. "I'll call if I have to. Otherwise I expect your attention is needed more in the field."

The conversation wandered to lesser logistical details for a little while; then, eventually, he bid Keeper farewell and ended the transmission. There. That was one person who thought he had it together. The knowledge that someone was falling for it made him feel better.

Now for Vector. The Joiner couldn't see his aura over holo, and if Wynston was careful he was pretty sure his aura was the only thing that betrayed disquietude.

Vector picked up the holocall in short order. "Wynston," he said warmly. "We hope the situation has improved on Corellia since your last visit."

"The Empire appears to be slightly worse off than it was," Wynston said levelly. That applied to the larger strategic situation, too. "I'm working on it."

"We would be glad to join you. Our vacation, while pleasant, has done very little to improve matters for others."

"No. If you're going back to work I need you on the *Tenebrous* getting things in order for when my assignment here is finished."

"Ah. And how is the Wrath? She seemed nearly as popular with rival forces as we were on Voss."

Of course Vector would think to ask. He, being both decent and sane, genuinely liked her. Which made evasions feel a little wrong. "She's getting by." Not so wrong that Wynston wouldn't give them. "Darth Baras isn't pulling his punches, but he can't keep this up forever, not at the rate we're hitting his power base." Never mind the absence of apparent progress over the past three days. "She's cautious about newcomers right now, which is why I think you're better off elsewhere. I can say hello for you, though."

"Please do. We look forward to seeing her in less stressful times."

"Don't we all." Wynston steered the conversation away then, to Vector's off time, to plans for the *Tenebrous*, to the changes in operation that would happen when Wynston was fully set up with an out-of-the-way base of operations and a disguise generator that would let him remove the last trace of himself from his dealings. Good material, all of it. Promising. Disappearing sounded really good.

When he was satisfied with all that, he cut the line. That made two people he could still work normally with. Now it was time to get to his own task, identifying and removing major elements of Baras's support. He wanted to be near Ruth for it. That, he reminded himself sternly, was impossible. The only thing he could do was help with the job.

*

The following morning: wake up. Inventory: normal sleeping clothes. Pain: heavy, choking. Spiking now that he was paying attention to it. Nothing physical. Nothing that would slow...nothing that would...nothing that would slow him down, idiot, he was perfectly capable of finishing that sentence, he lied for a living. Move on. Surroundings, his own room, cool, clean. Sounds, nothing at all.

Ruth, his brain added unhelpfully, missing. In pain, hiding all her brilliance and warmth, and definitely, emphatically not wanting him. Himself, torn. He had opened up to her for a few short moments, more than he had to anyone since he was half this age and a thousand times this stupid. And she had tugged it all out, demanded more, taken a hard look, and decided she didn't want it. Necessity had driven him to perform a dazzling variety of chemical and surgical operations on himself in the past, but he didn't know how to stitch himself back up this time.

Stop it. Irrelevant to the status report, to side support activities, and to leisure prospects. Not actionable. Move on.

He moved.

L+4: Separate ways

There was little Ruth could do. She avoided Vette's accusations and Jaesa's efforts to talk. Darth Vowrawn's people were actively investigating the next target; her own skills weren't in intelligence gathering. She spent days building alliances with middling level Sith Lords and with Vowrawn himself, doing favors by virtue of the firepower that few others could match. Monsters and Imperial loyalists alike, she made connections, laid preparations for the future. These alliances would be important as she took her place in the upper echelons of Sith society.

It felt cold. She held it together, for her friends' sake, for the sake of the self that her father had always encouraged her to preserve in clarity. It was all...necessary, she supposed. If nothing else, she had to arrange for her child to be born in safety. No one else was going to care about it as much as she did.

She shouldn't talk to Quinn. She had already interrogated him on the history of his use of her. The reasons for betraying her, despite her vocation, the one they were supposed to have shared. There was nothing more to say. As soon as his master Baras was dead and he had no further orders to harm her she would return him to military service. He was a great soldier. He always had been. The Empire could use him. He just had to be away from her.

She was curious on one point.

He shot to his feet and bowed when she came to his cell in the cargo hold. "My lord."

"Sit down, captain. My answer to your request is no." She would have none of his support in the planning and execution of the coming days. Or ever.

"Ah." He sat gingerly on the sole bunk. "I must confess I'm surprised the question reached you."

"Jaesa made sure of it. Did you know you had an audience?"

"I expected I might."

"Why did you insist on picking that fight? You already knew I have no further use for you." Bastard. But an oddly insistent one.

"I wish to assist. You've forbidden me to give the reason, my lord." That was as close to a claim of love as it was physically safe for him to make and they both knew it. Maybe part of her still wanted the assurance. "I have said it is your strength that will shape the battles to come. I do not wish for your cause to be lost now."

Well. As she had expected. Time to give him the treatment he had earned. "Your wishes mean nothing."

"Of that I am aware." He looked at her in that way she loved, intense, questioning, the way that threatened to overwhelm her senses every time. "I can still aid your cause."

"It's too late for that," she told her world, and turned away.

"Don't trust him." He almost choked on the words as she reached the door.

"A man who serves that many masters is of no use to any of them."

"You would know. That threshold starts at two, captain."

"I'll tolerate that comparison if it forces you to see him for what he is."

"You'll tolerate anything I dictate," she snapped, "or had you forgotten your position?"

"No, my lord," he said, subdued. "I have not forgotten."

She left, and felt her head clearing even as she stepped out the door.

That hadn't been very helpful. Nor very smart.

Funny, that even after everything that had happened Quinn still both hid himself and evaluated others in terms of master and servant. While Wynston was unrelenting in his pursuit of the mission, it always seemed he answered to no authority beyond his idea of right. What was more certain, between him and Ruth there had never been a master, nor any pretense of one.

Odd, that. The Empire bowed to Sith. She received deference by default from Force-blinds. Coming as she did from a very informal household, she liked encouraging ordinary citizens to treat her as an equal, but only a few close friends really tried that. Vette. Jaesa. Sometimes Pierce.

Wynston.

Hell, the reason she had gotten to know him was that his reaction, upon finishing some day labor outside Kaas City, was to ask the strange Sith out to dinner. She had often wondered whether it was just that he wanted the notch on his bedpost. It hadn't felt like that. It never felt like that with him.

It must have been terribly easy to play on her feelings.

She liked him as he had been between lectures the last few days. Cool and expert in support, warm and...almost tentative...when they were alone.

Tentative wasn't quite the word. He really seemed to be trying to express something he hadn't shown her before. He gave her answers, like Quinn hadn't, like every Sith she'd ever met hadn't. He gave her what she craved and truly seemed to like it.

He knew just how to get to her. And she wanted the illusion he offered, wanted it so much it hurt. If only he could keep it perfect, not let the real parts of his agenda show through.

As the days passed she had to admit that she would throw everything away if he would only keep that illusion whole.

But self-preservation had held, and he was gone. There was little more she could do. She avoided Vette's accusations and Jaesa's efforts to talk. Darth Vowrawn's people were actively investigating the next target; her own skills weren't in intelligence gathering. She spent days building alliances with middling level Sith Lords and with Vowrawn himself, doing favors by virtue of the firepower that few others could match. Monsters and Imperial loyalists alike, she made connections, laid preparations for the future. These alliances would be important as she took her place in the upper echelons of Sith society.

It felt cold. She held it together, for her friends' sake, for the sake of the self that her dead father had always encouraged her to preserve in clarity. It was all...necessary, she supposed.

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He moved. In the confused hierarchies of Sith forces and regular military suddenly burdened with hundreds of haphazardly placed Intelligence émigrés, it was possible for a fast talker with a high clearance to get more information than he gave and then get out without having to actually take on assignments from anyone. Nobody was happy to see him – most assumed he was a taskmaster sent by new military or Sith authority to inspect the new operations and deal out punishment – but they really didn't have to be happy to see him. That wasn't the point.

Queries out. Rumors in. Small favors given. Small blackmail scraps gathered. The little transactions Corellia could so richly provide. Nothing

was direct here, nothing certain. He could play those difficulties. What he wanted was information on closed spaces, stable in ownership for at least a couple of decades, that Baras or his proxies consistently defended or showed interest in. He let slip, by means not likely to be traced back to his face, that some powerful treasure of Baras's was on planet, ripe for the taking; a few middling-level Sith Lords were seeded with the word. Let them help in the search; either they would weaken Baras's forces in finding it or they would die in getting close to it, and some degree of location fix could be acquired either way.

He sought out the most crowded of cantinas in which to take his meals, but he ate alone. Socializing with strangers was too much right now. He knew his limits, if only by the sound they made on the too-frequent occasions he went sailing past them.

Time, space. Perspective. These would make matters easier. Wynston had gotten too invested in the job, or else picked up a job where he was too invested to wisely start, and either way, giving himself some distance while maintaining acceptable work throughput was the thing to do. He had told Ruth he would help; they hadn't exactly signed promises but at a minimum it seemed prudent to help her clear Baras out. That seemed like a solid basis for future work with Intelligence and the new organization.

He would transition Vector onto the job. She would understand. No ambiguity that way; she wasn't likely to accuse Vector of having dark personal motives. The man invited trust. Far more than a member of a potentially competing civilization's hive mind ought to. That was in no way a bitter observation; it was just one of the amazing things about Vector. Furthermore he was the one for long-term arrangements such as Intelligence wanted with the Wrath. Vector wasn't one to show up, strike, and vanish; he kept one name, one persona, and used it to build truly lasting relationships and alliances.

Wynston wasn't the one for trust, not in the long run.

So there was a plan in place. Short-term delivery. Transition to an appropriate contact. Long-term cooperation via the liaison she wouldn't blow up at. She would be fine. She would be fine.

This hadn't started as a job. Somehow it had turned into one. That had seemed right, it was what she expected, what got her to let him in. It was the thing he could do. It was what worked. Now he doubted there was anything he could say to change it back.

Well, he could guess at what to say. It was just that he was pretty sure she would say no.

The more he tried to push the thought of her away the more the scent of her haunted him, a whisper of leather and lilies, slamming his thoughts for fractions of a second any time he turned his head. The bright-eyed thoughtful and not at all derisive way she looked at him when he laid out what he was thinking. The way she moved with him, subtle and natural whenever they were in the same room, like a dance partner who'd been practicing with him every day since the first time he'd coaxed her onto the floor.

The look on her face when she snarled that he was trying to control her.

If he kept it a job he could fix it. He would get a usable lead for Ruth's crew, and then he would call Vector in and move on. Women had stayed on his mind before; it would fade. Once he got started the small unique beauties of other people would crowd it out, remove it to the considerable hall of things past their time and past their power to hurt.

Days. Queries out. Rumors in. Small favors given. Small blackmail scraps gathered. Rivals manipulated into doing his scouting for him. Time, space. Perspective. Walking wounded was half the fun. It kept things interesting. He still wasn't used to falling asleep alone.

L+10: Enemy and ally

Another special shuttle. They seemed to have more shuttles off the books than on these days, and there were enough on the books to carry out on full-scale war. The rest constituted the most turbulent, noisy, comically high-profile shadow war Wynston had ever observed, and he'd been on Nar Shaddaa during Hutt flare-ups.

See? Right there. Perspective. Also she was doing fine. Someone would've called if she weren't.

The shuttle's chosen landing spot confirmed the area of interest that had come up amidst the grasping Sith Lords' investigations. Wynston still wasn't entirely sure what was arriving. So, as it came in for a landing, he went to find out.

He made his way up the huge block of a Corellian skyscraper to the rooftop where the shuttle was set to land. There were guards on every level; Wynston kept his stealth generator up and his movements quiet.

The shuttle that touched down was blatantly emblazoned with Sith emblems: no specific office, but the thing was made to look Distinguished. The ramp hissed and lowered, revealing a tall, broad-shouldered man. Bald. Robed. Cyborg, more by way of repair than of choice judging by the scarring. Very slightly stiff carriage, but he carried a lightsaber; combat capability should not be discounted.

Wynston had minimal chance to evaluate that. As the guards came forward to challenge the newcomer, said newcomer waved one hand and swept them like so many leaves off the edge of the roof, multiple meters away.

Hm. One of those types.

Wynston trailed at a distance as the Sith stalked downstairs, wordlessly flattening anyone in his path, ignoring the rest. Once on the street he made straight for one particular building within Wynston's marked area of interest: a broad one, low by Corellian standards, and currently guarded by some of the regular troops earmarked by Baras.

Noted.

Wynston headed to an out-of-the-way corner, released stealth, and called Vette. The Twi'lek answered oddly quickly.

When she spoke, of course, her voice was bored. "You. Up to anything fun lately? If so, please share, the Wrath's been kind of a drag."

"I witnessed an interesting landing. Individual agent, cyborg. Big. Sith. Powerful in the Force. I have every reason to believe he's Baras's and he's heading for a location that I have reason to believe houses your Sith Entity."

Vette's look turned appraising. "Out of curiosity. Do you actually have hobbies?"

"Helping my friends remove murderous neighbors is a perfectly valid pastime."

"Uh-huh. Well, send me the coords, I'll let her know. We'll see you there, right?"

"I was going to scout in the area, keep things clear for you, and stay out of the way." he said. "Wynston out."

He didn't want to show his face around Ruth; nor did she want to see it. He could still help. Store up at least a little goodwill to hand off to Vector or someone she could stand to talk to. He couldn't get on site to rig the battlefield, not with the cyborg there, but he could keep the perimeter clear. And if things got bad, he could step in to bring some attacks to bear on the big guy. The Sith had been pretty heavily modified, enough that anti-droid equipment might be appropriate. Necessary, even; Wynston needed every advantage he could get against Force users.

He turned his steps toward the spaceport. Time to grab the appropriate gear and get to work. Everything was clearer now that the objective was in sight.

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"And you got this information where?" Ruth said sharply.

Vette stuck out her chin. "Anonymous tip."

Ruth scowled and gestured. "Is 'Anonymous' about yea tall, dark blue hair, in the employ of a highly questionable organization?"

"Might be a trap," said Pierce, "but not likely. Any tip's better than none at the rate we've been going, milord."

"It's Wynston. It's not a trap," said Jaesa.

Ruth hadn't exactly left him good reason to want to work with her. Then again, the job was the one thing he never gave up on.

What job, though?

No. She already knew she was going to investigate this possible Entity location. She called Darth Vowrawn, arranged the rendezvous, and hit the road.

With Vowrawn and her crew she entered a broad, relatively squat building in Corellia's government district. She descended with them into a sub-basement, where they found an enormous hall, lavishly draped yet bare of furniture.

In a column of red light hovered a woman's figure, an image that absorbed the light and released nothing but a velvety heat of Dark Side energy.

"Is she not beautiful?" Vowrawn said happily.

"I've never sensed anything like it," Ruth admitted.

The answering voice seemed to rasp from multiple directions at once.

"Come closer. You are here to aid. Baras knows. I cannot resist." Her captor sensed that so soon? "I am bound. Every extraction pains. If you fail, he will punish me. For welcoming you."

Ruth wouldn't let that happen. Not to another. But it was Vowrawn who spoke. "Don't fear, Entity," said the Pureblood. "The trial is over. I know the incantation. Now it is a simple matter."

"No. You do not understand. We are not alone."

Ruth and Vowrawn turned in unison toward the newcomer they sensed. A big man, seemingly more cybernetics than flesh, but something of his ruined face was familiar.

He extended a hand and Vowrawn crumpled under a cloud of red painful even to Force sense.

"At last," said the cyborg, and the voice was that of Baras's old apprentice Lord Draahg. "I've caught up to you again. I told you, I cannot be killed."

She didn't know how he was back. She had killed him months ago, after he had announced Baras's displeasure with her. She couldn't let fear cloud her senses now. Sheer returning arrogance seemed to be the way to go. "Are you not tired of failing yet?"

"Pain sustains me," he said thickly. "I ate of suffering as you watched me burn. I drank of anguish as Baras rebuilt me. My eyes are no longer flesh. I see in a new way now. And the sight of you sickens and delights me."

"Hm. I can return half of that."

"In minutes the great Darth Vowrawn and his hard-won knowledge will disintegrate. Then the Entity will forever be in Baras's control."

"Truth," grated the Entity. "The death field is powered by the machinery of Draahg's."

"But I'm forgetting myself," added Draahg. His face twisted and puckered around the dark cybernetics when she smiled. "Your father sends his regards. I must say, he didn't put up a very impressive fight."

Her heart seized up. By arrogance alone the statement might just have been a taunting lie, but she felt truth in it, the truth that had robbed her of her father the day before she had come to this forsaken planet.

Combat preparation was not a breath, not a focus. It was red.

Draahg laughed when she raced in to meet him. She deflected his first push of raw Force energy without thinking and was dimly aware of something collapsing some ways to one side as a result. She swung into battle at Force-enhanced speed, observing a couple of very slight stiff elements in the big cyborg's motions.

She found out quickly enough that his raw power more than made up for that weakness.

Everything blurred. He struck at her. He struck at her friends. He struck because she hadn't stopped him the first time. And although she fought back, he was bigger than she, and he hated as much.

Somewhere after she knocked him away from Pierce and closed to lock him down, he suddenly reached in and grappled with her, seizing her mask. She tried to back away; he gripped and pulled, tearing the mask away, and when he saw the look on her face he laughed aloud.

A blaster yelped from the doorway. She maneuvered quickly to find – Wynston interfering again. He was actually walking toward the melee combatants. If he was planning something stupid she could neither help nor hinder him, not right now. She had her hands full with Draahg.

She made sure his hands were full with her. She threw everything she had into twin saber strikes, bludgeoning Force blows. He was still laughing, but at least, at least she had him in one place.

Suddenly he yelled and arched backward, nearly toppling. Sparks arced from some device planted on the exposed circuitry of his back. It was enough to get her an opening. Not even the savagery of the Force pushback that flattened her friends could stop her when she went in for the kill. She swept, struck, knocked him to his knees, kicked him to the ground, struck again. She felt it with her whole being when Lord Draahg died.

Ruth stood over him and let her hatred boil. None of this could make up for losing her father. But at least she had torn away another of Baras's tools.

Just in case, and she kept a shield of fury up because she knew she would break and get sick if she left its protection, she started dismembering the fallen foe. Good luck coming back from being cut limb from limb. She cut, nudged aside, cut, nudged aside, keeping herself not numb but angry. As a last stroke she severed Draahg's metal-shelled head. Then she kicked it away and looked up. People were waiting.

As, for example, Wynston, who met her eyes when she turned to him.

He was some ways away, holding a blaster pistol at his side. When she faced him he took a few steps towards her, stopped. If there was an

expression on his face it was sorrow. Stars. He was going to yell at her again. She did what she had to, the only thing that made sense, and he was going to hate her for it all over again. That shouldn't hurt, but it did. A lot.

Before she could turn away he held forth one hand, just as if inviting her to take it.

She stared. The battle was over. With the last of the slashing done she already felt some of her rage draining away. He was here, and he wasn't shying away or getting angry from having seen her. Instead he was waiting.

Maybe things would be all right.

"Oh, Wrath," called Vowrawn, "don't cool down just yet. That connection will be necessary; I'll require your assistance to complete the ritual."

Of course. The Dark Side and its continued demands were waiting. Neither Wynston nor the crew would understand it, but it was necessary. She surged with something that felt like shame. She turned away from Wynston and stalked over to contribute whatever it was Vowrawn needed to release the Entity and push the mission onward.

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Ruth turned away.

Wynston clamped down on his gut reaction before it could overwhelm him. The reaction to losing her. Enough. She was alive and she had the day's objective; he would contact the crew for further instructions later. For now he was useless. This was a Sith matter, and he was useless.

He turned away from that skin-crawling dark tableau and headed toward the exit. His holo beeped before he had exited the great hall.

Vette, who he knew was standing not more than twenty meters behind him, wrapped one arm across herself while holding her holo with the other hand. "I will kick your ass if you take another step," she said.

"My task here is done," he said flatly.

"I'm a good enough shot to take out both your legs at this range," she informed him.

"Are you really going to force the stress of my presence on her at a time like this?"

"You're really bad at basic instructions. Do I have to start a countdown here?"

"If she says go, I go. That's not negotiable."

The Twi'lek just made a face and hung up. So he turned around and started grimly toward her and the rest of the crew.

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Vette pocketed her holo and watched the Chiss approach. "If she says go I'll kick her ass too," she announced.

*

When Wynston got close he noted something off in Pierce's stance. "You intact?" he inquired.

"Mostly," said Pierce. "One leg's hit, was going to patch it up when we got back to the ship."

"Let me take a look."

It was a bad saber wound, the product of one of Draahg's spinning strikes. "One moment." He started unpacking his medkit, his movements swift and sure and familiar and therefore soothing. Well, as soothing as looking at lightsaber-slashed flesh could be.

Vowrawn, Ruth, and the strange dark figure had some interaction Wynston couldn't make much sense of. At length the figure...dissipated; Vowrawn took his leave; and Ruth came to face the crew. She avoided eye contact with them.

"Let's go," she said, and walked past.

Wynston stayed a step behind her. She was still radiating something disturbing. "Are you all right, my lord?" he said carefully.

"Yes, thank you," she said distantly.

"With your permission I'll see the lieutenant back to your medbay, make sure he's taken care of."

"That would be most helpful." She scowled at the doorway ahead. "Any further commentary?"

"No. No, that's not what I'm here for."

"Good." She sped up.

Wynston hung back with the crew. Vette kept giving him looks that seemed to indicate any flight attempt would be met with deadly or at least seriously inconvenient force. Jaesa made a couple of quiet attempts to engage Ruth in conversation, but Ruth was having none of it. Pierce stayed silent and alert. Broonmark stayed, at least, silent.

On the ship Wynston took advantage of Ruth's medbay supplies...once he figured out how the hell they were organized...to finish patching Pierce up. The big man grunted thanks and headed back to his quarters.

Ruth was loitering in the holo room when Wynston came in. She tilted her head after Pierce and said, with admirable cool, "Thank you."

"You're welcome. Unfortunately Pierce may be slow in action for a day or two." His mind was either racing too fast to follow or stopped in place, he wasn't sure which. "It's a bad time to be down a fighter. This mission, Baras, it's still to everyone's advantage to see it resolved in your favor."

"Are you offering to help?"

"I'd like to. If there's room on the ship. Quarters. It's a question of professionalism."

"Naturally. I think that's for the best."

"So do I."

This was fake. Their earlier talks hadn't been fake, but this definitely was. How was the wrongness of it not driving her crazy right now?

She had her own problems, he reminded himself.

She left the room; he stayed behind, settling at the console he already had credentials set up on. He could get some work in before bed. Work made sense. It was something he could do.

Jaesa showed up not long afterwards to sit opposite him.

"Good evening," he said. He had a bad feeling about this.

She gave him one of her lovely doe-eyed looks. And said "You're a coward, Wynston."

He smiled blandly. "I've been called worse." It didn't change what was necessary. Nor did it change the limits in place.

"Thank you for helping with Lord Draahg. That was very nice. It's also practically a footnote in the list of what's wrong right now."

"I'm not sure I agree. It was challenging for a footnote," he said, looking significantly over toward the medbay. He didn't know whether Jaesa could read Chiss eye directions – it didn't come naturally to most humans – but he guessed she would figure it out.

"Combat power isn't the point right now. She can get that anywhere."

Not so; reliable staff wasn't that easy to come by. "Disingenuous doesn't suit you, Miss Jaesa," he said coolly.

"You're scared to do the important part."

"I'm not qualified to do the important part. Ruth does need a friend. She trusts you. She hasn't attacked you. You've been here the whole time and I know your intentions are true. More to the point, she knows it. If anyone should be with her right now, it's you."

"I've tried."

"So have I," he said, allowing sharpness into his voice.

"She's changed the last few days, you know. It's hard, but until this evening she hasn't...lapsed. If there were a Force signature for stubbornness she'd have it, and it wasn't there before you showed up. You did something."

"I'm glad for that, but I don't think I can do more in any personal capacity. Do you really think she needs more things to be conflicted over right now?"

"She's conflicted over literally everything. Only a few of those things spend any time making her happy."

"Jaesa. In my professional evaluation the probability of improving anything by trying to get closer to her again is low enough that any action beyond field support would be inadvisable."

"And your personal evaluation, Wynston? Or are you going to tell me you don't have one?"

He was tempted to tell the young woman just that, but she was glaring at him in a way that suggested she would inflict some Jedi mind trick if he didn't cooperate. "In my personal evaluation any action beyond field support is the worst idea imaginable." No matter what good it might do, or how much some kind of reassurance might help, or how much he wanted to see her turn back to him, or how much he wanted her to want to, or...he turned his attention back to the console and waited for Jaesa to go away.

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Wynston finished up with his work on the console, grabbed a ration bar, and then went to the spare quarters Vette helpfully indicated. Bare: a bunk with a thin mattress, a faint smell of cleaning chemicals. He sat for a while. He thought. He couldn't start with convincing Ruth of his own intentions until he had helped her through what had clearly been the raw ordeal of the day. But she wouldn't let him talk about the ordeal until she trusted his own intentions. If he tried to start on the day's events it would turn into

work again. If he tried to start on himself...well, there was nowhere to start. No way to win.

Ruth, in spite of her efforts to meditate, kept coming back to the way Wynston had reached out to her, quiet, steady. Pained but not angry. The one good thing in that damned chamber. It seemed he was ready all over again to help her, whatever his reasons, and the thought that the requirements of her path might have cut off the last real chance – how cold he had been after she had finished the Entity’s Dark Side ritual! – was far from the relief that her suspicions said it should be.

Wynston moved fast in an effort to stay ahead of his own doubts. He darted out into the hallway and around the corner, where he very nearly ran facefirst into Ruth.

Her hand bumped into his and she shied back, intensely aware that he had frozen in place. “Oh,” she said, her voice too loud in her own ears. Frozen, cold, not safe, pointless, she shouldn’t have come. “I was just...looking for you. I just wanted to say that, once the Baras matter is resolved, we should talk about future arrangements. With Intelligence, like you mentioned, because I do owe you.” The job. The job was safe to talk about.

“I just wanted to say that I want this to go differently,” blurted Wynston. Ruth looked startled. But she wasn’t stopping him, so he raced to get it over with. “This isn’t about work and it isn’t even just about wanting you and as soon as I figure out what it is about I’ll tell you. I want it to go differently.”

She did, too. It was just strange to hear it this way from him of all people. With an effort of will she held her head high and maintained eye contact. “How would we make that happen?” she asked quietly.

We. She hadn’t even hesitated in saying it. He pushed a hand across his hair, fiddling with the part. “Is there someplace private we can talk? That doesn’t have a bed?” A new statement coming from him, but that easy natural thing would be a bad sidetrack. A useless script, albeit a tempting one. Being out of an actual bedroom context would force half a second’s thought before falling into anything and he needed that.

That was a new statement coming from him. She wasn't sure what it meant, but it was Wynston asking, so she didn't hesitate to answer. "We can go to the bridge."

He followed her there. They sat on chairs a couple of meters apart, turned to face each other. Wynston leaned forward a little, resting his forearms on his knees and clasping his hands tightly to keep them from shaking. She looked pale and anxious and...intent. At least she was paying attention.

She watched him just sitting there. Being alone with him made her feel terrible all over again. "I'm sorry," she blurted, bringing a hand to her throat, where she had Force shoved him away days before.

"It's all right," he said reflexively.

"No. It's not." Everything about the tension in him now confirmed that. "You've only been looking out for me. It was a poor way to repay you."

Continuing to dismiss it was the practical low-maintenance thing to do, the thing that made people comfortable, that let him keep operating. "Please don't do it again," he said instead.

"I won't." Unless I have to, her mind added, but that was a reflexive echo she didn't feel like listening to right now. She didn't think she would have to do it again. She didn't want to.

Wynston silently ran through a number of increasingly nonsensical possible starting points in his head. Ruth was watching him. Finally he muttered "Sod it" and cleared his throat. "I don't know where to start," he said. "Just stop me if I've convinced you I've gone completely insane because I don't want to waste your time. I've asked you for something quite selfish on my part twice before. At times and places where you had the power to do me serious harm. Do you remember?"

Of course she did. "You said coming to me just recently was something you needed."

She'd been paying attention. He was a little surprised, given how understandably preoccupied she had been with her own problems. "That's right, and that's one."

Odd way to look at it, she thought. "It wasn't all that selfish, Wynston. I got something out of it, too."

"I'm glad. It meant a great deal to me. All of it, your listening especially." Not the work. And not just the sex. Listening, like she always did. Well, he was about to find out just how much needy rambling she could tolerate. "Do you remember the other time?"

"Quesh," she said immediately, and saw his red eyes dimming in confirmation before he said a word.

"Yes," he said, carefully suppressing specifics of the recollection. "Quesh."

Ruth remembered that he had bid her stand watch while he did something with some kind of chemicals in an out-of-the-way lab. He had asked her not to ask questions. She had done it, of course, because she had been trusting like that. And he, looking wearier than she had ever seen him, had finished his errand, thanked her, and walked away. "You never told me what was going on there."

"No. I never did. I'm not at liberty..." He cut the usual line short. "That's not true. I don't want to talk about it, darling. Maybe someday, but not yet." One tremendous humiliating and potentially painful rough edge at a time. "Suffice to say that your being there was what convinced me you were more than just a happy accident. You helped me, with no hesitation, at no benefit to yourself, at a time when...I didn't think that could happen. Now I'm asking you, a third time, for something very selfish, that would make a very great difference to me." He took a deep breath. "I want you to believe that what I'm about to tell you, however nonsensical, is as real as I know how to make it."

Ah. A lot of people wanted that. "Belief is hard to come by nowadays," she said.

Wynston hated that her smile didn't touch her eyes. Eyes like those were too pretty for pain. "I know. I can back off. I'll do the job if you can use me and shut up about the rest."

"No," she said hurriedly. He was on to something. She didn't know what yet, but she wanted to know, wanted to know why he was afraid. "Talk."

"Very well. I want you to understand this. It's very important that you do." He passed his hand over his hair again. "You said I've been manipulating you, trying to control you. It's the nature of our world for things to work like that, but it's different with you, and has been for a long time. Listen. Yes, I've thought about how to affect you. I've done it in what I hope are benign ways in the past. I've thought through how to make you smile. I know, as I observe with most people, what authorities to invoke over you, what guilt to invoke behind you, what dreams to invoke before you, to nudge you toward doing what I want. I know a dozen ways to hurt you before I've started moving and several more after. I know how to make you laugh, how to turn you on. I know what to apply to get any result I desire, except...you."

She stared. That whole oration was consistent with every comforting calculated move he'd made since he had come on board, but she couldn't see why he was telling her now.

Wynston blinked hard and took another deep breath. This, well past the point of no return, was where he realized for sure that he had no way of redeeming it, not to her. It was just a practical way of seeing things, but it couldn't possibly do her any good to know about it. "I forget where I was going with this. But...I know all these things and they're tools. They're things I've used on people to get results. It doesn't mean I'm insincere every time but I am always at some level aware. If that alone damns me in your eyes, there's nothing I can do. No matter how I feel about you, the ways I have to say it can all look like that. Because they can all be that. Maybe that makes them multipurpose. Maybe to you it just makes them inadequate." Another deep breath. "The truth is this: I know how to use you. And I don't want to. I don't want this to be a transaction or a trick. If there's any way you can believe that, darling..."

She sat in silence.

"May I still call you darling?"

She liked it better than most things people called her these days. In fact there were few things she would rather hear more. "I like it when you say it."

"I'm glad." Her. Stars. Sometimes the raw simplicity of the way she accepted him was...probably not going to last, he reminded himself. This wasn't what she wanted. Even if he tried being what she wanted he wouldn't have the expertise to make the experience right. Better to retreat. "So you know now. It doesn't have to change anything. I've always been on your side; I can still be your dashing secret agent. I'll make it as enjoyable as you want, you know I'd be happy to--"

"Don't be an idiot," she said. The old way wouldn't work anymore. It couldn't, not after the last few weeks. She wanted the charade but she knew she couldn't really keep it.

His heart sank. "I don't know how to be what you're looking for," he said softly. "The way I've been with you lately, just saying things, answering you as you come to me, it's probable I'll do something wrong. That's bad for business. You may get hurt. I may get hurt." He paused, examined his hands. "More than I care to think about." Then he looked back up at her. "If I stay tonight, if I try, I'm asking you to not make me regret it. It'll be in your power to do so."

Ah. Right. Humble begging was a technique. It was a good one. He'd never used it on her before, but he was clearly adapting to new times. Ruth swatted the thought down. If this was the story he wanted to tell, she would listen. For him she would listen. "Very well," she said with a small smile. "Permission to not be sure what you're doing, granted."

He blinked. "I didn't phrase it--"

The corners of her lips curled upward. Phrasing was adjustable. "Permission to have no idea at all what you're doing, granted."

The woman was actually teasing him. He didn't know whether to laugh or cry. "Stop that! It isn't that simple!"

She felt a little jolt of guilt for setting him on the defensive. "You're not done letting down your guard, Wynston," she said gently. "I don't know enough about this to know what button to press. But I want you to be with me—" an understatement too vast for words— "and I won't punish you for it." She tilted her head. "So what do I use to make you stop worrying?"

The question slightly alarmed Wynston. She wasn't supposed to embrace the alternative worldview quite that enthusiastically. "That isn't something I traditionally let other people do."

Of course not. In most matters he probably never worried in the first place. "There must be something. If you know all these ways of doing things to me you've got to know what to do about you."

He shifted. "Hm. Get me out of the room with the crazy woman in it?" he muttered. He was joking. Mostly.

Her heart skipped a beat. He was joking. Right? "Not going to happen," she ordered. Just in case.

He looked at her, and stood up and extended a hand again.

She was free to take it this time. He was still waiting for her and so she came to him, and in the second they touched it felt like for once nothing at all stood between them.

"I'm sorry to be doing this to you now," Wynston said soberly. "You have enough to worry about."

No. Whatever this was, she cared too much to push it aside. Besides, it was something that didn't drain her like the battle did. "Compared with everything else, it's...it's sort of a nice change of pace."

"Watching a glorified con man's psychological meltdown is your idea of a 'nice' change of pace?" She really was crazy.

"That's what this is?" she asked him, feeling a little smile coming up. Maybe this degree of control qualified by his lights. "A meltdown?"

He thought that one was self-evident. "I really don't have any other word for it."

She looked him over. "You look fine to me."

He grinned a tiny bit. "Well, it's a very handsome meltdown. That can't be helped."

She smiled and hugged him. He hugged her back, tightly, while she pressed one hand to his chest and the other to his back. "Hm," she told his neck. "Not to be crude, but your heartbeat's been more relaxed than this during intercourse." By a dramatic margin.

"Not to be crude, but I knew what I was doing during intercourse." The sound of her answering laugh was comfortably cheerful. Which, under the circumstances, almost reduced him to tears on the spot.

Ruth held him close for a few moments, enjoying the closeness of him, then backed away. "It's getting late," she said. She kept her hand loosely in his and drew him down toward the door to her own quarters. She paused outside and gave him a questioning look.

No. No, no, that would still be a mistake. "I don't...it would confuse things again, Ruth."

Maybe it would. She didn't think so, but she could understand worrying. "We don't have to do anything. But I like having you there."

As did he. Always. Even when it was a terrible idea. "You're sure?"

She opened the door and led him in.

Wynston didn't look at Ruth, much, while she changed. He stripped off his own shirt and boots, then climbed into bed and wrapped his arms around her. Anything more would be a sidetrack, again, short-term sweetness that might very quickly turn into ruinous instability.

She settled snugly against him. His lean wiry body was always far more comfortable than it looked. It was something about the way he moved with her. "You do want me," she murmured.

"Well, yes. You do that to me." No use denying that one. Furthermore if he was going to go transparent it was no use stopping now; he had a feeling she liked it. "I want you pretty much regardless of the circumstances, up to and including, I suspect, my being physically on fire. That's just you."

She smiled. "So here's your flattery. And the other thing, offering to stay away, that was you establishing trust by foregoing the obvious exchange."

It seemed sad coming from her, but she delivered it so lightly. "That is certainly one way to look at it," he said.

She wondered. "Is it how you see it?"

"I see a lot of things, darling, though I don't put equal credence in all views. I see that this could be building trust. It could just be saving us some exertion at the end of a trying day. It could be some kind of test where I'm secretly trying to determine how much you want me and being disappointed that you haven't jumped me already." He smiled crookedly. "It could be that it really is enough that you're here, because you are everything I want, at a time when I'm desperate for it, and while that raises a great many questions I cannot find a single angle from which it makes sense to leave your side right now."

She blinked rapidly for a few seconds while attempting to get her brain back out of puddle form. "What I want to hear, very nicely crafted to make me putty in your hands," she said, faux sternly.

"Crafted from the truth." Choosing the wording didn't automatically corrupt the idea. He needed her to believe that. He had been choosing wording all his life. "Is the result mutually beneficial?"

When he said these things? "Mm. Yes."

"Then is it wrong?"

The convenient words, the advantageous result...it did make her suspicious. It sounded too nice. Then again, she wasn't sure what the real thing would sound like, if not this. She was quiet for quite some time.

"No," she whispered at last.

They fell silent. Wynston consciously relaxed as much as he could. She didn't believe him yet. Not entirely. The knowledge was a small stabbing pain with every breath. But it was a pain that might yet be removed without major damage. Maybe.

Ruth didn't believe him yet. Not entirely. It felt like progress – at least he was playing on some of her new understanding instead of the old material – but it couldn't be as simple, as terribly direct as he made it sound. It couldn't be that simple, but he made it tempting.

This entire exercise was both terrifying and stupid, but he couldn't stop himself. No. Not true. He was choosing it. Not even because it felt good, because right now it didn't, except in the way she felt in his arms. He was choosing this because...because it was the only way to get her to let him in? And that was important. But there were too many unknowns and too few of them were protecting him. This was a mistake. He was dying to know what would come of it.

Wynston's heart rate wasn't slowing any. Ruth wondered why. She didn't think he was afraid of much. Was this whole session preparation for another dramatically reluctant betrayal, one that he genuinely felt bad about? Or was there some other risk going on? Was this latest batch of words, tools for a man like him, something she could do real damage with? Every possibility but one made her want to pull him closer and assure him that, absolutely, he was safe and wanted with her. But she couldn't just make the one possibility go away. Instead she held still and drifted toward sleep.

He told himself that her hesitation stemmed from her own situation, not anything about him. And he wished she could know that, absolutely, she was safe and wanted with him. But there was nothing more he could do to make her believe it. Instead he held still and drifted toward sleep.

L+11: Onward

Wynston woke up the second Ruth moved. Hold still. Status: half dressed, physically fine. Surroundings, perfect. Less certain than they had ever

been, but she had stayed in his arms. Perfect. Her lips brushed his forehead before he admitted to being awake.

As he opened his eyes she smiled dreamily. "That was a very strange conversation we had," she said.

"We can forget about it," he drawled, keeping his manner casual. "I thought it might be nice to take your mind off other things temporarily, that's all."

"That's not all. You were serious. You jerk me around all the time, and you think feelings are all cause and effect, and you tease all this sympathy out of me at the same time you're admitting that you see it all as something useful." She traced the hollow of his throat with a fingertip. "Also you say you don't know how to be sincere. But then you're there when you're needed. For things you believe in. For me. You do so much good and that's the one thing you haven't admitted to yet."

He didn't trust his voice for speaking. He squeezed her tighter instead.

She considered his face. "What you said. It was hard for you. If changing to be what I'm supposed to want is too great a risk, you don't have to do it."

He suddenly felt very awkward. "That...honestly never occurred to me." He was too used to morphing into what was desired for the scene, too used to seeking the satisfaction of a pleased partner. He was entirely too used to responding to her.

"The effort is nice. You're giving me answers like nobody else ever has. I need those."

He kissed her. She was sweet, and soft in ways that that lean-muscle scar-laced body couldn't account for.

She backed off a tiny bit. "When did you stop lying to me?" she asked in a tone of nothing harder than curiosity.

"About a week ago," he admitted. Whether she would buy that, he didn't know. "I didn't tell any active lies on Voss but even there I left out a lot of significant context."

"I guess we didn't exactly have a lot of heart-to-hearts there, either."

"True. Your heart was rather decisively elsewhere. Which you had every reason for."

Her lip twitched in a momentary, bitter sneer. "It was stupid."

"It was amazing to see. I've been from one side of this galaxy to the other and I can tell you that almost every individual I've ever met will live and die without ever knowing something like that." He ran his fingers through her hair, studied her eyes. Once again marveled that anyone who knew her could try to break her. "I've been from one side of this galaxy to the other and never met anyone who'd be stupid enough to throw that away once they found it."

"I met one," she said quietly. "What I had was nice, but I'm not sure I could do it again."

"Not to worry. Nobody's asking you to."

"Oh?" She started to say something else, then stopped and smiled a little instead, not quite meeting his eyes. "Well. At least tell me, does it ever feel real again after the innocence goes away?"

"I've told you I'm not the person to ask. If anyone could do it it'd be you, but that will take time. And the right partner."

"I see," she said. It sounded like she knew he wasn't referring to himself.

He looked away. He shouldn't have let the conversation turn this way. Whatever this was, he still knew that love implied not leaving. He couldn't make that expectation. He wanted her to have it with someone someday; she was made for loving. He wasn't. He knew his limits.

"This, now, is good," she added tentatively.

"I agree wholeheartedly." Steer away. He ran his fingertips down her forearm to clasp her hand. "Did you sleep well?"

"I did."

"Good. I was worried about you. Not quite worried enough to skip dropping all my problems on you at once, but I worried."

"It's better with you here. And you're better with you telling me what's going on." She squeezed his hand. "It was a hard day before that. I'm hoping I can work my way around any future...similar requirements."

"Me too." He kissed her forehead. "If there's anything I can do..."

"You're doing a lot already," she said. "In theory at some point I should start being nice in return."

"Tolerating the mess that was last night counts for a lot."

"You letting me see it came out in my favor."

"I'm not sure I understand how that was in any way good for you."

"I thought we established that." She gave him an arch look. "It further cemented trust. Established vulnerability so I would have the comfort of not feeling alone. Presented an interesting thought puzzle that might keep me occupied. It was in every way ideal for making me feel included, and important, while challenging me enough to keep me from rejecting it as too perfect."

He reminded himself to keep breathing. She was going to string him up with the rope he had handed her. And this was why one should never ever talk without having one's cover story in place.

She looked more thoughtful as she went on. "I think you were giving me something you don't give out lightly. You were right, that it wasn't about work and wasn't just about wanting. It was something you could do to tell me that you're trusting me, and that's...it's an honor to know." She was so very still. "This is a lot of readings to think about at once."

"It is," he said hoarsely.

"Not all of them were necessarily your intent."

"Not all of them."

"It's unwise to pick out just the ones that come naturally. That feel right."

It was unwise to push conspicuously self-interested interference into this delicate line of thought. "Do it anyway. Here at least." He pulled her a little closer.

She focused anew on his face. "I want you here no matter what." She dipped in to touch her nose to his. "I'm glad we talked. I'm glad you told me. And I'm glad you're with me now. That said, when you look at things like this, how does the bad possibility not drive you insane?"

Hedge against it. Learn to ignore the weakest odds. Plan against the others. Never stop looking over your shoulder. Learn to cut your losses. Give up on feeling bad about it. "You get used to seeing both sides," he said lightly.

"And it stops tasting bitter?"

He hesitated. That question depended wholly on the person. For the people in his line of work who were sensitive to start with, it didn't stop until they burned out and gave up caring about much of anything. Effective colleagues, but he had to watch them. "Ruth...it took me years, and I never want you learning your way around it the way I had to. There are more comfortable ways of looking at life, comfortable ways that still work. You don't have to see it this way."

"Worried I'll catch up with you?"

More than she knew. "You were made for better things."

She smiled bleakly. "Remaking is happening these days, or hadn't you noticed?"

He stroked her cheek to make sure the tiny instinctive beginning of a real smile was still there when he touched her. "Then you'll remake yourself for better things, darling. What we talked about last night, that's just what I am." He was a particularly high-functioning sanitation worker, not a philosopher; he could let her see the machinery he lived with but he couldn't grant her the perspective necessary to live with it herself. "It's not what you have to be, not if it hurts you."

"This is a better start than I have on anything else," she said. "It's something to keep in mind, at least. Besides. You think that way, and I still think you're amazing. You do a lot of good."

"Just think how much more you'll be doing in the days to come," he said warmly. "Can I double-check something for my own peace of mind? You heard all this rambling. And you know that everything I say and do could very reasonably be construed to be hiding a horrible motivation. And...you're letting me near you anyway."

"Yes," she said firmly.

Even as she acknowledged the other thing. It was as close to trust as he was going to get. He only hoped the strain on her didn't hurt. "I'm grateful. Deeply grateful. But out of fairness I should point out, if it's too great a risk you don't have to do it."

"That...honestly had occurred to me," she said with a small smile, "but I think we're both better off this way."

Yes. Yes, they were. He took a minute to just enjoy the look and feel and everything of her. "No matter what happens today," he murmured, "you'll have me." He very nearly swore it as a promise outright. "Also I'm dying to kiss you right now."

"Mm. That's acceptable."

He was better at expressing himself this way, and the lessons were far, far better for her spirit. Or, from an alternate perspective, she simply felt good.

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Ruth kissed Wynston a last time – well, not last at all, not if she had any say in it – and the two of them headed out to breakfast. The crew turned in unison to look at her as she entered.

"Are you all right?" said Jaesa.

"Yes," she said. "Thanks. It's good that Draahg's gone. I hope it'll send Baras a message."

"We can deliver that one in person," rumbled Pierce. "Least I hope so; these hoops we've been jumping for prep aren't getting any more exciting."

"We'll check in with Vowrawn," said Ruth. She wanted it over with, too. She had better things to be thinking about.

"If he tells us we have to get his groceries before we're ready for the showdown, I can't be held responsible for my actions," said Vette.

"Groceries wouldn't be entirely amiss," Wynston said mildly, scanning the shelves. "For us, at least. Am I reading this right? Is this entire shelf earmarked for the lieutenant?"

"Don't you forget it," Pierce said happily.

"Let him eat," Ruth told Pierce. "We need him."

Wynston grinned and waved one dismissive hand. "No, there's enough non-Pierce property." He grabbed a small tray and headed for the microheater. "So how do you people contact Vowrawn?"

"We call him directly," said Ruth. "He's good about picking up."

"Either he really likes her or he really doesn't trust his secretary," said Vette. "Either way, hey, direct line to the Dark Council. The part that isn't trying to kill her, even."

"But we're checking in with the Hand first," said Jaesa. "Right?"

"Right," said Ruth. She was hoping they wouldn't hold her back. Or push her in the wrong direction.

"I see," he said impassively, and moved on to other things. He kept on with easygoing conversation, catching up now that the crew was together in something approaching a relaxed way. She found herself more than once almost fuzzing out to the sound of his voice. She liked the way he acted here. Confident, not arrogant, contributing at least as much as he absorbed.

Slightly sweet, sometimes almost teasing toward Vette and Jaesa. Cagey with Pierce, but not quite in a hostile way. Furthermore he seemed to understand Broonmark's occasional blipping without difficulty.

They finished breakfast. Wynston passed close to her on the way out the door. She reminded herself that she wasn't going to kiss him in front of the crew. He gave her a knowing smile, one that told her he liked her anyway. A lot. Then he moved on through.

They gathered around the holo, all but Wynston, who hung back out of cam sight. He suddenly had his business face on. She nodded at him and placed the call.

The two Sith Servants appeared, two figures in dark robes, little more than their red Pureblood facial spurs showing under their hoods. Servant One, as ever, took the lead, looking down at her with that air of calm command. It wasn't the command of someone at the top of the ladder, but it was certainly his idea of authority over her. "Wrath. Baras's leverage is gone. Vowrawn preserved. Baras's bid to be named Voice of the Emperor will be crippled. What remains of Darth Baras is yours. He has gone to Korriban. Do as you must."

Korriban. It seemed fitting. She nodded. "He doesn't have long to live."

"Darth Vowrawn returns to Korriban as well. Baras dares not strike at him within sight of the Dark Council."

"The hinges are gone from the door," croaked the hooded Servant Two.

"Vowrawn will authorize your clearance to land. From there, the battle is yours."

"Unleash the Emperor's Wrath," said Servant Two, in a voice that sent a creeping cold up Ruth's spine.

They ended the transmission.

"Clear enough," Ruth told her crew. "Lay in a course, Pierce. It's time to finish this."

Pierce grinned and headed out to the bridge. Wynston moved to join Ruth.

"Tell me that second one isn't calling the shots," he said.

"No. Orders come from higher than that."

"I see." His smile was a little strained. "Well, I'm yours to command."

"You're going to be conducting an independent review of my employers the second this job's done, aren't you." That was so very him.

The grin took on a little mischief. "Someone's got to do it, darling. This is going to be very, very important going forward."

Her stomach twisted up. "When you draw conclusions, let me know. Before you decide to do anything dramatic."

"Oh." He sobered. "Ruth, yes. Absolutely. I wouldn't...I can reason with you. I know if the cause is right you'll listen. Targeting you would be both a waste and a crime." He stepped forward to take her hands in his. "You are not the enemy. Nothing's going to convince me otherwise."

She reminded herself she wasn't going to cry in front of the crew.

The ship's engines rumbled and whined in the transition to hyperspace. Wynston squeezed Ruth's hands. "Where do you want me?" he asked.

On her side. "It's time for a gear check," she told him. "We're about to go to work again."

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It came down to single combat under the eyes of the Dark Council. Upon seeing Ruth's old master again, hearing his dismissive words, and knowing how much he had taken from her – for no reason, in spite of her loyalty, in spite of everything – she joined battle swiftly and brutally.

He met her in kind.

Her rage rushed in from all sides, feeding off everything Baras had done to herd her here. Every cut, every lie, all of it. She raged, and he met her with a dark implacable hate that made her fresh fury seem like the weakest wave of irritation.

Something to learn, she told herself, fighting. Something to break and take for herself, because that's the way it's done. But she found that her frenzied attacks weren't breaking through Baras's defenses. He held, and struck, and held and struck. It was with an almost bored gesture that he swatted her saber aside with his own and flung a searing purple lightning that slammed through her energy defenses to char armor and flesh.

She twisted free, intercepted the stream with her saber, but her neck and chest were screaming pain and the raw power of his attack hadn't lessened any. When she staggered back a step, the old Sith laughed. "Had enough, child?" he bellowed. "Can you feel your grip on life slipping?"

No. It won't end like this.

"Why persist in this futile gesture of vengeance?" he continued. She could barely hear him over the crackling of pain. "Let go. Embrace your death."

Vengeance? That wasn't all she had going for her. She flicked her gaze to the crowd of her crew. Her friends. Their Force signature was bright in Ruth's awareness; Jaesa pulsed with small intentional warmth when Ruth met her eyes.

Something rose up beyond the anger.

Ruth returned her gaze to Baras. She had many more years' training in focus than in rage. In control than in aggression. And in protection than in revenge.

It was much more than just her that pushed him backward, steadied her on her feet, drove him back in a shower of sparks and light-warping Force waves. But hers was the will and the direction. What was lost, her hate could not recover; but there was love yet to work for.

She felt the small stab of Baras's fear when she flung his lightning back at him. He was a master in the hatred he had fed her, but he wasn't ready for anything else.

She fought. She prevailed. And before the eyes of the Council and the Empire, she gave Darth Baras his execution.

She stood straight, not bothering to watch as Baras slumped and fell. Instead she turned slowly to meet the eyes of the Council. This was her vindication.

"At last, the end of Baras." Darth Vowrawn's easy conversational tone made less sense than ever, but at least there was respect running under it. "The air clears, and my lungs breathe deeply again. You have proven that you are truly touched by the Emperor. The Dark Council knows that the Emperor's Wrath has free rein."

Darth Marr's words were dim in her roaring ears. "You are acknowledged, Wrath. Your actions will not be challenged as long as they do not contradict our own."

Vowrawn beamed. "You are answerable only to our ultimate master."

She wished her father were here to see it. She had meant to climb to get to where she could do more good. This was it.

No one could stop her.

She owed the Council some acknowledgement. "I look forward to working with the Dark Council for the Empire's benefit," she announced. And working in spite of it if she had to. She would deal with that as it came.

She held her head high and let her friends fall in behind her as she left the strongest masters in the Empire. Her peers.

She headed straight to Darth Baras's offices. She remembered starting here. It would make a statement to take it again.

She did a quick check around the room, sharply dismissed a cringing acolyte who had been doing something in the hall – cringing didn't mean harmless – and shut the door once her friends were in.

Wynston was at her elbow in an instant. "Your burns. How do I take the mask off?"

She helped him start on removing her mask. The flex panel that sheathed her neck came next, and that's when she was harshly, vividly reminded of the pain pulsing down her neck and shoulder. Wynston's movements were quick and precise as he picked away the rest of the armor necessary to reach her Force-burned skin. His hands were warm, the kolto jarringly cool against her flesh while he worked.

He met her eyes. "You did it, Ruth," he said, slowing one pass of kolto application into something like a caress.

"And a sight it was," opined Pierce.

Jaesa just smiled at her.

"You're not completely roasted, are you?" said Vette.

"I'm still breathing," said Ruth. She laughed a tiny bit. And sobbed. Both motions were painful.

Wynston put a free hand on her back. "Steady, darling," he whispered.

After her effort to maintain rigid pride before her rivals his manner seemed overly familiar. Ha. Sith thinking, that. She leaned into him a little and let her adrenaline rush slowly wear off. He was quick in getting her patched up, alternating between frowning at the damage and flashing gentle smiles at her. When he finished and backed off a little, Ruth straightened and looked around; she saw Vette was examining the furnishings of Baras's office.

The Twi'lek examined a vase. "So can we sell this stuff?"

"Sure," said Ruth. "I don't want it."

"Have I mentioned you're the best Sith I ever worked for?"

Ruth's laugh was less edgy this time. "I'm glad someone approves. I've just officially earned an Empire full of people who will eat me alive if they get the chance."

Pierce snorted. "Think they'll find chances are tougher than expected."

Wynston gestured back toward the Dark Council chamber. "Anyone who tries to take on the Wrath in the near future is rather badly slow on the uptake."

"That...would describe some Sith I've met," said Vette. "See a chance to kill? Why let a little thing like self-preservation get in the way?"

Ruth took a deep breath and clipped her armor back into place so as to look impressive for the walk back to her ship. "Come on," she said. "We're going home."

L+12: The Niral estate

The Niral estate lay west of Kaas City, settled in the jungle at a distance from civilization that really shouldn't be possible on a capital planet. Even at midafternoon the whole landscape seemed dark. The estate was an old place, some stone architecture mixed with the durasteel. Built to last, from the outermost wall to the low rain-streaked house within.

The transformation Wynston witnessed from the jungle's gloom to the house's interior was stunning. The indoors was brightly lit, touched but not cluttered with an eclectic mix of elements gathered from more areas of space than Ruth by herself could possibly have had time to visit.

Vette barreled past him, clearly on her way somewhere. "Uh," said Ruth, looking over from where she had been greeting a guard by name. "Vette?"

"I'm starving and you've got the most normally stocked kitchen on the planet," said Vette, making a beeline for the named room.

"I should've known that," said Ruth. She met Wynston's questioning look with a wry smile. "My father spent three years on Nar Shaddaa, and he ate like it," she explained. "This is apparently the only thing Vette noticed when she last visited, and she apparently appreciates it more than the subtleties of eating sleen."

"Yuck," yelled Vette from out of sight.

Ruth led the rest of the crew into a spacious room arranged to focus on a huge archaic fireplace. "Sit," she said, gesturing.

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Ruth vanished somewhere. Wynston talked shop with the crew and accepted food and drink from a polished droid. It was some time before Ruth reappeared, and when she did it was to slip along one wall to get from one doorway to another without getting near the conversation. The crew exchanged glances but let her be. Wynston, however, felt drawn to check on her. After a couple of minutes' effort to stay still and stay busy, he gave up, got up, and went after her.

The hallway he found himself in ran parallel to a verandah. He spotted her standing outside a window well down the way; he found his way outdoors, acutely aware of the chill of the misting evening, and made a slow approach.

She was looking out into a thick-grown garden. A couple of cobbled paths were visible from here, winding down toward a pond unquiet with rain. There was an eerie beauty to it in the gathering gloom. Nothing he would seek out on his own, but it was a sort of beauty.

Ruth cast a low-lidded look in his direction and turned very slightly to invite him closer. Her face was streaked with tears, but she had a little smile for him.

Instinctively he put his arm around her and looked out across the garden, side by side in silence. After a little while she slid an arm around his waist. Still she said nothing.

It didn't seem like the time to talk business. Nor even matters between them. Instead, after a while, he casually said "Your father. He was Sith, too?" So much background Wynston didn't have yet. And some he did, but he should let her tell him rather than remind her he had a dossier on her.

"Yes. From a long line of Sith." She shivered. "The house is wrong without him."

"I'm so sorry." He pressed his nose to her hair, let a little time pass. "I would have liked to meet him."

"Mm. He would've loved you. Anyone dedicated to the best parts of the Empire..." It took her a moment to go on. "He taught me everything I know. I wanted him there today."

He bit back the culturally-tailored platitude about a happy afterlife or, better for Sith, presence and will and pride and power after death. If there were ever a time to tell her comforting things he didn't believe it would be now; instead he turned a little, wrapped his other arm around her, and said "He left a legacy to be proud of."

It took a long time for her hug to loosen. She pulled back a little, raised one hand to stroke his hair, smiled weakly. Then she took his hand and turned away to face the garden. "Hm. What do you think of our rain?"

It probably wasn't very politic to give his real opinion. But, she had asked. "Given the chance I'd engineer the mess out of existence. It may be necessary but I don't have to like it."

She laughed softly. "I see. I won't ask you out into it, then."

"No, if you want to walk, I'm with you. Rain hasn't actually been known to kill me yet."

She started out onto one of the garden paths, stopping to check a drizzle-spotted lily. "My father loved this place," she said. "He took good care of them. He said they were what my mother liked best about this whole estate."

"They're lovely," he said. Less for rain-soaked vegetation and more for what it meant to her.

She continued, stopping frequently at one blossom or another. Like she was checking up on old friends. Their scent was heavy on the air, rich and sweet with something he had always associated with her. Ruth paused, touching a recently pruned stem. "It's been weeks since...he left home. I can only imagine the housekeeper must've tried to look after these." She straightened, frowning. "My droids, they seem untampered with."

He waited. She seemed to be thinking.

She shivered. "At least they haven't done anything yet."

"I'm getting the impression that your family's staff have every reason to love you."

"That doesn't mean anything," she said.

"No." That was just Quinn. "No, it means a great deal. Ruth, judging everyone by the standard of the worst you've met is a quick way to drive yourself out of your mind."

"It's hard not to look at it that way."

"I know. But don't make it the only possibility you consider."

Her mouth worked for a second. Then she shook her head. "Never mind. Let's not do this."

"Not-?"

She kissed him, her lips startlingly cold in the rain, her hands damn near frigid. He hadn't kissed her halfway back to warmth before she pulled back. She didn't look tired or scared. Just determined. "There's more going on out there than I could sort out in a lifetime, Wynston, and I have to clamp it under control by next week or so. Here, now, it's just us. No policy statements. All right?"

"As you wish," he said softly, and let her lead him onward.

She didn't seem inclined to talk after that. She just kept checking the gardens, working her way around the unendingly rain-fretted pond. She moved on to a patch of lower plants with some kind of red flowers that seemed to glow in the dim weather's light.

They were pretty, actually. For plants. "Do you ever pick these?" he asked.

"Sometimes," she said. "You're free to, I can show you where we keep the vases when we get back in."

"That wasn't exactly what I had in mind." He leaned past her to go for a crimson blossom that seemed like it might have enough stem to be usable.

"Wait—" said Ruth.

He was already moving too quickly. And grasping a very large thorn. He jerked back and made the thousandth mental note of his lifetime to stay away from nature.

"Sorry, I thought you would be going for the other ones," she said. "Are you all right?"

"Yes," he said, allowing her to take his hand and wipe away the blood. "I'll have you know I was being romantic."

"You were." Instead of laughing she let his hand fall and turned to claim the flower he had tried to pick. She snapped it off somewhere upward of the offending thorn and presented it to him. "Better?"

"Hmm." He brushed her hair back and tucked the blossom behind her ear. "Brilliant. The flower's not bad, either."

She smiled self-consciously and looked at the ground. "I don't usually get these directed my way."

"Don't tell me a man's never gotten you flowers."

"Years and years ago, boys. There weren't any flowers to get when I went to Korriban, at least none that wouldn't kill you once you found where they were hiding. And since then, no."

"That's criminal." What lives these Sith led. Maybe not all of the game was real, but Wynston knew that these little attentions, the affirmations of individual charms – and, stars, every woman had something about her worth admiring – these things made life a lot more pleasant. "I'll have to find you some that I didn't just steal from your own yard."

"The jungle's right that way," she said, with wide innocent eyes and a small wicked curl of a smile, pointing out over the pond.

Wynston suppressed his instinctive reaction to that horrible suggestion and smiled. "I'll check Kaas City," he said lightly. "The florists there take the thorns off."

She smiled. Then blinked hard and let the smile fall away. "Right. Check the city."

"What is it?"

She stroked his hand for a while without looking at him. In time she said "Wynston?"

"Yes, Ruth?"

"What happens tomorrow?"

He lined up a number of possible answers to that, but most of those answers would be intentionally missing the point. "Tomorrow I should go retrieve my ship from Corellia. I'll need to be able to move as we push things into place for you. After that I can get to work checking out Baras's resources, clearing the way for you. Get you reports on what's where; we can talk about what use it can be to you and whether there's anything you'd be willing to spare for Intelligence. I can do a little quiet work here and there to smooth out any difficulties with potential rivals." All solid work. "That's what I would recommend professionally." And the only thing he should be recommending. "Or...I can stay with you. For a little while. Obviously I'd help to–"

"Stay," she said.

He kissed her to cover the urge to say more than he should. When he was feeling steadier he turned to kiss her cheek instead. "For a little while," he reminded himself out loud.

She nodded. "I know." Then she half smiled, turning her face into the hand he had rested on her other cheek. "I'm afraid my bed here only sleeps one," she murmured. "I'll arrange something tomorrow. In the mean time I'll set you up--"

"I've slept in some very limited spaces," he said. "If you don't mind. Otherwise, certainly, I'll settle elsewhere for the night."

"Stay," she repeated.

He smiled, rested his forehead against hers. "As you wish," he whispered. Another gathering of tiny raindrops on her face got together the mass to start rolling down. He was just about sick of the rain doing that. He held her close, traced the curve of her spine with his fingertips. "Let's go warm up then, shall we?"

That was, after all, the one good thing about getting caught in the rain.

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Lots to do tomorrow. Take charge of Baras's Dromund Kaas offices; that seemed like a well-placed base of operations for the days to come. Home was too long a shuttle ride away from the action. Lots to do. Say hello to more than a few military officers over whom Baras had had power. Take Baras's Intelligence assets for a test drive before deciding whether to repatriate them to Wynston's people. Talk to Pierce about recruiting for her personal guard. Make a show of power for the Sith who had served Baras. In short, take charge of the power base whose master she had destroyed.

Find an obstetrician. There was a strange thought.

Wynston's breathing had slowed behind her, but she was never really sure if he was asleep. She thought back to the half-breath of hesitation he had let

show before saying he could stay at her side for a while longer. Heartbreakingly tempting. She had seen hesitation like that before.

Wynston was different. Still, she wondered. The big goal, Baras, the one who had required a powerful coalition of interests to take down...he was dead. Now that that was accomplished, did Wynston's interests still coincide with hers?

Did he have any further use for her?

She suddenly wished she were better covered. There was always one obvious answer there; not enough to change his real plan, but enough to turn her into a commodity in the plan as it stood. It was the same thing that had been aching in the back of her mind for weeks. Everything, everything with Quinn felt cheap and dirty in hindsight. The easy takings he got on the job. The bonus thrown in on a transaction that had been kept hidden from her. At least with the boys on Korriban she had known the nature of the arrangement. She hated that she had wanted Quinn in a different way, hated that it had been, for blind months, better than she knew how to describe.

Hated that she wanted it again and she didn't know what her lover had over her.

Stop it, she thought. Wynston and I both asked for this. He never put fake decorations on that point; we saw, we wanted, we took, and there's nothing wrong in it.

There's nothing wrong in it.

She sat up fast and shook off his hands to go find something to put on.

"Ruth?" he murmured.

She kept her back to him while she rifled through her old wardrobe in the dark. "Hush." She found a nightshirt and tugged it out.

He was stirring now. "If you're cold, darling, the covers are..." He started shuffling the blankets, which in fact had already all been covering her to

some extent; as she pulled the shirt on and turned around she found him flip-folding one to double cover her side at his own expense.

"Yes," she said, relenting. "I'm a little cold."

"Come here." He moved to gather her in his arms but she shook her head and made him turn instead, then climbed in to hold him from behind. It was a little safer this way.

He seemed to sense something wrong in her insistence. "What can I do?" he pleaded.

"Keep your promises," she said quietly. "Now sleep."

As ever with him, the moment her thinking brain let go she felt unreservedly happy. Desire always met desire, but when he was with her it felt like more than that. She met him.

L+13: Checking with HQ

Wynston did leave in the morning. He really did need his ship either way. "I know some hyperspace lanes that'll bring me back to you faster than anything else can," he told Ruth. "Until then, darling, watch your back."

Vette offered to fly him out to Corellia. Quoth she, "The sheer amount of Sith Business that's gonna be going on in Kaas City pretty much obligates me to be anywhere but here."

He left Vette in the Coronet City spaceport and headed to his rented hangar. His heart lifted to see his vessel there. The ship looked fine from the outside, untouched within. Good. He felt sharper already. Here was home. Here was one of the few constants in the galaxy he really loved, the source he returned to when the assignment ended and normal matters picked up again.

He would go back to the assignment this time. He wanted to go back this time; this place was familiar, but the sharpness of his professional clarity cut both ways. The strings it was ready to cut this time might hurt.

There was already a distance between him and what he missed, he reminded himself, no matter what he did. A very small distance but one that already imposed the pang of separation, no matter how close or far he was physically. Enough of that. He left the chaos of Corellia behind and parked in orbit to set up a secure holo line to Vector.

"Wynston," said the Joiner. "You're looking well."

An unusual opening. Wynston had no reason to think he looked any different. "The Dromund Kaas climate. What can I say?"

"How goes the mission?"

"Under thirty-six hours ago one Darth Baras, while appearing before the Dark Council to receive recognition of his status as the Voice of the Emperor, was interrupted mid-speech by the Emperor's Wrath. An altercation ensued." Wynston smiled slyly. "Baras did not survive."

"And the Wrath?"

Given what he had seen of the fight and the control she had finally asserted? "Better than ever. We'll be consolidating matters over the coming weeks, I want you or Keeper in touch. This is our chance to recover resources, and if our claim to them isn't convincing Ruth's will be. Things are still a little delicate but I think she's inclined to help."

"We are glad to hear it. Do you know when you will be returning to headquarters?"

Wynston stopped. He considered. He stayed very calm. "I'll see how matters develop, but let's set a target withdrawal date." An anchor, as much for himself as for Vector, to remind him of when real life would go on.

He picked a figure. He gave it. The conversation moved on.

"As we pick up staff," Wynston said a little while later, "of course some may have to know I'm on assignment and some of those will know I'm dealing with the Wrath. None of them are to know the nature of that relationship." No point introducing extra risks.

"You can count on our discretion."

"Good."

He finished up business, along with inquiring after those of his crew who had already returned to the *Tenebrous*. Then he bid Vector farewell and prepared for the jump to hyperspace. He hurried back to where he couldn't keep quite secure and he couldn't think quite straight. He hurried back to what hadn't healed, to the distance he would do anything to close. He hurried back because every minute with her was perfect, and there could only be so many of them.

L+15: Two partings

Wynston gave Ruth a warning look before she departed for the Citadel. She would have none of it. "Don't start," she ordered. She wasn't going to let him comment on this again.

He turned back to his console to get to work.

Ruth went to Baras's old offices in the Citadel, set up in the conference room there. 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. She shouldn't get closer. Even now, hating him as she did, she shouldn't get closer. 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 an appropriate post." She gathered the will to look at him. "You will not contact me, and you will never know the child."

He was calm. Steady. "Will you be resuming your campaign against the Republic, my lord?"

"Yes." He knew that, or should. Ending the war was paramount.

"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 again, 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 conducted him to the door. "One final thing," she said, pausing in the doorway, struggling once more to hold up under his brilliant blue stare. "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."

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"Hey, Secret-Agent-Man."

Wynston looked up from his console and, from habit of security, turned off the display. "Vette. How are things? – Did you get your lekku done? You're looking very vivid."

Vette made a face. "You are so full of it."

He grinned. "I only do it because you call me on it." That kind of girl was always fun.

"You do it because you're hoping I'll get a head injury bad enough for me to start falling for it."

Pierce, seated not far away at his own research, snorted.

"Funny," said Wynston, "it looks to me like it didn't take a head injury to bring you here just now." A tiny bit of malice in his grin. He loved that she didn't take him even slightly seriously. After a moment he turned to amiable innocence. "What can I do for you?"

"Well, I was going to thank you for helping Miss Wrath but I'm starting to think I shouldn't bother."

"Thank me when she's really established. We're not in the clear just yet."

"Missing the point. We were not exactly having a great time trying to pull her head out of her angst after Captain Turncoat did his thing. I'm glad you showed up." She fidgeted a little. "Woulda been nice to make this happen way back on Alderaan, spare us all a whole lot of 'What the Captain says goes,' but better late than never, I guess."

"It might have been nice, but I do have a policy of leaving women alone when they tell me to." Off the job, anyway.

Vette glared at him. "Liar."

Wynston set his bland expression at odds with his tone of voice. "You haven't told me. Just say the word, you'll find I can be very, *very* well-behaved."

Over the sound of Pierce's laughter, Vette half yelled "You are *so* full of it."

Wynston grinned and let Pierce's laughter run its course before speaking again; this time his delivery was friendly-serious. "Vette, I am glad to be here. The two of you deserve considerably more credit for having been

there the whole time, but I'm glad to do my part. And I'm very glad she seems to be doing better."

She looked down at the console he had turned off. "So what're you doing after this, anyway?"

"Working," Wynston said levelly. He didn't consider walking around spilling long-term plans to be good policy. "The situation's complicated. I expect I'll be in touch."

"Wow. We've got Mister Commitment here."

"I am committed. To the same cause you are. I just won't necessarily be working in this neighborhood."

"Right." She gave him a sharp look. "That means I get to handle background checks on her next boyfriend myself."

"Not necessarily. Direct any names my way and I can get you any dirt on him that's ever touched the HoloNet or certain more specialized networks."

She examined his face. "And that doesn't bother you at all. Does it?"

"No, it doesn't." He wasn't qualified for the long run, not like that; no point blocking the way for someone who was. "Did you have any other questions?"

"Yeah. Like exactly where do you expect me to find normal guys around here?"

"'Around here,' 'normal' high-ranking Sith are everywhere; you can't stab a wall hanging without hitting one."

"Not what I meant."

"I know." He smiled thinly. "I really ought to get back to work. Right this minute, this is the sanity restoration I can do."

L+20: At the Nexus Room

There was a huge amount of posturing to do in the Citadel, not to mention assorted other government buildings in Kaas City. Ruth, having been told by the Servants to concentrate on her own affairs, was keeping busy.

It wasn't terrorizing by any real Sith standard. It was more showing up, flexing theatrically, and then offering constructive working relationships under terms better than Baras would've offered. It worked in her favor that everyone knew the ultimate end of the terms Baras would've offered.

Her people mostly played guardsmen; Wynston and Vette semi-frequently peeled off to observe movements in the city and, at times, check security on meeting locations that kept mysteriously sprouting explosive charges and the like. Everybody was formal when they reported back to Ruth in public. The chin-up command style she had been trained to was going to be a full-time affectation in her capacity as Wrath. She really enjoyed getting home in the evenings, tossing aside the mask, and settling in for a little thinking time by herself on the verandah, or else talking with some subset of her people over hot chocolate inside. A little thinking or talking, then returning to a console to run over a slowly growing stream of reports from Baras's old people and brainstorming strategy.

It kept her moving. Over the next few days she slept through the night, every night, and what nightmares there were were mundane and forgettable. Wynston was affectionate, attentive. Endlessly practical counsel and sweet, open company. He was good at what he did. Really good. It helped.

Business in the Citadel ran late one evening; Ruth was tired enough to be a little annoyed when Wynston stopped her on the party's way out to their speeders.

"If we have a few minutes to spare," he said, "the two of us might stop by the Nexus Room. While we're in town."

Ruth cast a look at her companions. Vette was rolling her eyes as loudly as she could. "That's a little...abrupt," Ruth said self-consciously.

"It's almost certainly not what you're thinking." He smiled. "Just an hour or so. Or we can just go home if you prefer."

"No." She did have a little time, and she was curious in an acutely alert way. "Let's go."

Ruth's crew went on ahead. Ruth herself headed to the cantina and parked her speeder beside Wynston's. He kept a little distance leading her in. Enough to satisfy propriety.

Which only doubled her consternation when he spoke to someone at the desk, handed over a cred stick, and beckoned Ruth to a lift that led up to one of the private suites.

The lift delivered them upstairs, and she followed him off to the nearest doorway. "This is not what I was thinking?" she said skeptically.

"Well, I don't read minds as such. I could've guessed you wrong." From the antechamber they could still hear the dining room's music. Suddenly he looped an arm around her waist and whirled into what she was considerably surprised to find was a dance hold. "There," he said, grinning. "Guess that one?"

No, but it was good for a very pleasant rush. "I'm not convinced this is your whole plan."

The Chiss studied her face. "I'd have stayed downstairs but we probably want to minimize the publicity of your less formal associations. We'll have been observed no matter what, but I'd rather..." He settled into a slow rhythm with the music floating up to them. "I'd rather save this for us."

The last time they had danced here it had been out on the public floor downstairs, as two nobodies. Just a chance encounter, that first night together. "It's been a while," she said. Only a year and a half, she thought. Only a year and a half.

"A long while," he agreed. "At no time did I expect that I would ever be back here with you."

She enjoyed being here with him. As breaks from the job went, this was...nice. "I never expected to see you at all," she admitted. "After every time we ran into each other, we'd split up and I'd think, that's it. That's the last I'll see of him."

"I hoped it wouldn't be. Every time." His hands tightened in small caresses at her waist and hand. "My work doesn't encourage connections, but that didn't stop me hoping."

They were quiet for a while. His eyes were warm, his expression gentle, his arms steady, his lead as sure and natural as always. When she smiled he slowly matched it with his own, and that was every bit as dizzying as it had been their first time. She had been so much younger then. He was, when he looked at her like this, just the same. Only closer than ever.

"This was a good idea," she whispered.

"You keep saying that when I throw ideas at you. It's very flattering."

"Mm, it's true. The first time was a good idea, too."

"I had no idea how much. Just imagine, if we had finished that one odd job and then you'd turned me down for dinner. We'd have gone our separate ways, into our separate trials, and never known what we were missing."

Just the thought of it made her ache. "I wouldn't have turned you down. I liked you. You were good company." Easygoing, not at all intimidated by her. Did that just mean he had been sent, he already knew her face and social profile, and he had gone the route likeliest to pique her interest, namely, nervy novelty? She had wondered of late. But she didn't think it was like that. "Did it matter to you even slightly that I'm Sith?" she asked. "Does it now?"

"That's a complex question. When we're alone? No. You don't make me put it front and center at all times." His eyes were brilliant. "You never made me do that, even though you could."

She grinned. "Somehow I doubt you'd listen."

"I do. I have. I've survived as long as I have in part by behaving for Sith, sometimes even when I couldn't undo their will behind their backs. That's part of why I so very much appreciate what I'm allowed to be with you."

"What you're...? Wynston, I boss you around all the time." Perhaps more than she should sometimes.

"It is true you make me back you up in doing the right thing in the field. And you do keep ordering me to tell the truth, support you, give you...give you myself instead of the plan." He squeezed her hand. "All that is still allowing me to be a better man than most authorities like to permit."

The connection between them sang with the ongoing music, and she felt his happiness as surely as she knew he must feel hers. "You being anything else would be a loss for both of us."

He laughed softly. "Darling, you may be the only person who ever meant that."

"I do mean it," she said. "You're the only person who ever bothered trying to teach me to dance."

L+25: Facing the future

Wynston woke when Ruth sat up. "Hm?" he said.

"I was just thinking," she said in a gravelly voice. She still sounded sleepy. "You're the one setting your schedule. Have you decided how long we have?"

"A little while."

"How long is a little while?"

Wynston ran a quick check of his mental calendar. "Two weeks," he forced himself to say. "I'll have to leave in another two weeks."

"Two weeks," she repeated. "That's..." She lay back down, not touching him, staring at the ceiling. "All right. After that, your job's going to need you elsewhere."

"That's right. You've been doing brilliantly; with the battle won here, you won't need me as much as other matters will."

"That's true," she said distantly.

"Obviously the new organization has every reason to stay in touch with the Emperor's Wrath in coordinating Imperial operations. I would be your primary contact. When your schedule permits we could meet to talk. Frequently."

"Certainly. At the same time, it would be dangerous to let that interfere with our own tasks."

"Definitely. While we're working..."

"Working apart does make sense, of course."

"Yes. You're accustomed to command, I'm accustomed to nearly complete autonomy in operations - sooner or later those habits would start clashing."

"I know, Wynston. Shut up."

"Only if you do."

To his considerable surprise, she took his hand and held it in the silent dark.

"You know something?" she said after a while.

"What?"

"I'm happy here. Even with everything. Happy with you." She suddenly shuffled down to bring her face in close to his. "Is that weird, under the circumstances?"

"I've never been one to reject happiness due to improper circumstances. I'm happy with you, with everything. I think if we knew the galaxy was going to burn out tomorrow I'd still be happy because you're near." He wished he could see her expression better. "You mean it?"

"Yes. I know I can be difficult, but...what you're doing. I do believe you care. I believe you're with me for the right reasons and...I'm happy for it."

That seemed to undo something in his chest, a tension he had briefly forgotten was there. He slipped his arms around her and took a moment to force his lips to stop trembling. "Then believe also that these have been some of the happiest days of my life."

"Even with everything."

"Even with everything."

Crafty woman, getting the practical cooperative words out of the way before bringing around the devastating counterargument. She liked him. She liked him and she could still do the job for the right reasons. She didn't want to, but she would. She was strong enough. And he would be back, if she would have him. And just now everything was as perfect as the galaxy ever was. He kissed her, drowsily, lazily, over and over, and fell asleep that way, her breath warm on his lips, and his on hers.

L+32: Nameday

"So's your kid have a name yet?" inquired Vette.

"It doesn't have a gender yet, Vette, of course I don't have a name ready."

"Come on. You must've at least been thinking about it."

Ruth's look at the Twi'lek sharpened. "I did. Some. I talked...we talked. A little bit about names, just in theory, before I knew." She touched her belly. "Before I found out. I can't do those names now."

"Oh. Right." It only took Vette a moment to perk up again. "I can deal with not naming 'em after Quinn or anything he stood for."

"And unfortunately there aren't many other people that are worth naming it after."

"Vette?" Vette looked innocent.

"I'm not sure 'Vette' is an ideal Sith name."

"It's a great name."

"Yes, but then when I was yelling at her for misbehaving I would have to scream at Vette. All day, every day."

"And this is different from normal how?"

"I don't scream at you!"

"Check yourself, hon."

Ruth scowled.

"So. What do we have. Evilspawn? After his or her dad, of course. Wynnies?"

"What?"

"Just try it, I wanna see the look on his face."

"I'm not naming my baby Wynnies. I could just do variations on my parents. You know. Lara, for a girl. I suppose a boy would just be Colrand."

"That's not very exciting."

"Thanks for the opinion, Vette."

L+39: Split

Wynston set an alarm for early. Separation tended to go quick and clean when it had to be at the spaceport by an hour after sunrise.

He kissed the woman who had shared his bed for the last month. It was a continuous want when he was with her, a craving for contact, its own reward.

He snapped out of it and picked up his bag. "Thank you, Ruth. For everything."

"You, too," she said, staying still as he stepped away. Her voice was low but admirably steady. "This would have been a lot worse without you."

"I'm always glad to help you."

She smiled. "I'm always glad to have you."

He nodded. "I'll be in touch."

She frowned a little. "You'll be...in touch."

"Yes." It didn't seem nearly adequate. "Ruth, there are roughly five people I have sincerely said that to in my life, and you're the only one of them who wasn't handling my paychecks. If it's not enough, forgive me. There are very few promises I'm free to make."

"You're self-employed now." She sounded like she was trying desperately not to beg, and not quite making it.

He hurt for her. "The mission I serve hasn't changed. You know that this, us, wasn't just a job. Don't ever think that's all it was. But I told you, I go where I'm needed, and right now other battles need me more." He reached out to take and kiss her hands, stepped away, let them drop. "I'll be in touch."

"Wynston," she said, before he escaped.

Against his better judgment he paused in the doorway.

"I do want you."

He turned to look. Her expression was a little plea and a lot of trying to keep her chin up. He smiled once more. "Likewise, darling."

Then he got moving.

He packed up his concern for her as neatly as he could in its mental compartment. She would be fine. The crisis had been resolved, her social situation stabilized, her professional situation put on an upward trend. She would be willing to work with him and with Intelligence again. Everything had run right and, on a personally comforting level, he knew she was ready to take care of herself.

He reached his ship, took it up into orbit and from there sent it leaping into hyperspace. He leaned forward over the bridge console, allowing the hidden lines of the world made visible to rush at and over him. He could breathe here. Cold, scentless breaths, and they ached a little. He reminded himself that that was just the feeling of having gotten out in time.

BOOK III: Far afield

L+2 months: The new balance

All things considered, Ruth shouldn't miss sleeping alone. She had done nothing else for most of her life.

But Wynston stayed with her, his smile, his confidence, his long deft fingers, everything. Their parting had resolved nothing. No word that he meant to come back to her...but then, no word saying he wouldn't.

It wasn't what she was supposed to think about.

She shook her head and got back to the task at hand, which was packing assorted minor housewares she had retrieved from storage. Jaesa had bought a house outside Kaas City, and both Ruth and Vette were working overtime to see it furnished and homelike.

And after that it was time to take the field. She had people looking into strategic objectives along with opportunities for some more protective missions on Imperial border worlds, the ones overlooked by authority that still needed a strong hand against the Republic's incursions. A strong hand was something she could provide.

L+3 months: Researching the Hero

Wynston spent a lot of time on the *Tenebrous* studying the glut of information surrounding the breakout of the war. Learning, analyzing. He wasn't just a Cipher agent now; he had greater decision-making responsibilities and he needed the background for them.

"Another failure at home," his guest Keeper said frustratedly, referring to the nearly year-old incident they were studying. "The Hero of Tython's campaign was, bar none, the greatest failure of Imperial security of our lifetime."

"Her strike on the surface of Dromund Kaas was the doing of one renegade Sith, this Lord Scourge. That kind of internal threat is scarcely a surprise.

I'm more interested in the activities leading up to the event. The Emperor's forces gathered on Belsavis, Voss. Those were highly specialized task forces and we knew nothing of them. What does that mean? And how did the Jedi find out about them? Once she did, was she attacking on general principle? Or did she know specifics of an initiative we never uncovered?"

"It's a little late to ask," said Keeper. "The Hero of Tython is extremely high-profile right now, and also deep in Republic space. Unless we sent someone in as a whore or a spice dealer we wouldn't be able to get an interview at all, and good luck getting her to talk business with that kind."

"What about the Sith? Lord Scourge?"

"He seems to be following the Jedi for the time being. We have no idea what their relationship is. Capture would be impractical; as the former Emperor's Wrath he remains one of the most powerful Sith in the galaxy."

"We have a Wrath, too."

"Would you stake her against her predecessor when the battlefield is Coruscant?"

"No," Wynston admitted. "I wouldn't." Though she would be brave enough to try. He briefly wondered how she was doing. He missed her.

"With the Emperor's incarnation dead, assuming your source is correct about that...arrangement, there's little we can do. I'm not authorized to put resources towards 'chasing more conspiracies,' but perhaps your people can monitor for any future unusual Imperial Guard activity."

"I'll do that. I don't think I like this mystery. But I think we have nothing to go on right now." Wynston straightened up and smiled. "Thank you for your time. Good luck dealing with the Council's latest initiatives; if you need a minor intervention from outside the system, either to help their plans succeed or see that they fail, you know where to find me."

L+5 months Life and letters

The Emperor's Hand remained silent, and so Ruth continued her work in the losing battle for Corellia. It was only with reluctant recognition of the sheer numbers that she finally withdrew and focused her efforts elsewhere. This war had to end.

It took Vette and Jaesa's insistence to get her to slow down for her advancing pregnancy. Instead she managed intelligence from home, and tended the lilies, and counted the days.

She spent some time working through her father's files. He had extensive records on his work on Dromund Kaas as a mid-level Sith administrator. He had correspondence, too. Volumes of it.

Then one day, out of nowhere, Wynston called.

He was in the street clothes she knew he liked best, vaguely Huttese-Human fashion. He looked well. "Hello there," she told his holo image.

"My lord," he said with a bow. "Can we talk?"

"Yes, Wynston, we can, and don't call me that again." She made sure her disapproving look wasn't too mean. His caution was understandable; a public conversation was a formal one, and he didn't know where she was.

He broke into a smile. "As you like, Ruth. How are you?"

"Good. Very slightly bored." She put a hand on her belly, which really was filling out enough to inconvenience her at this point. "That should change soon enough."

"I suspect it will. Sources tell me you've retired from the field. I thought we might talk about security in the coming months."

"I...that's my problem, Wynston. You don't have to do anything."

"I'd like to. My people have every reason to want you in one piece. I can stop by for a few days to help plan what resources I can contribute. If you like."

Her heart leaped. "I like," she said.

"Good. Just tell me when and where—"

"My place, right now or as close to it as you can get?"

His smile was wider this time and it warmed her through and through. "As you wish. I'm on my way."

*

Ruth met Wynston at the gate; her hair was plastered to her head and her loose dress to her body. She never did do anything to gear against the rain. She looked radiant anyway. Wynston abandoned his speeder in the road to rush back to her arms.

"You look incredible," he informed her when he finally took a break from kissing her.

"I look soaked," she corrected sternly.

"You look incredibly soaked. Let's get indoors."

She led him straight to the living room where the fireplace was going. He wondered whether it ever went out; it hadn't during his previous stay at the estate, and that was during the season of warmer rains. "I'll get some dry clothes," she said. "Be right back." She headed out with a gait that seemed to have adapted well to her new balance.

Wynston immediately headed to the kitchen to sort out warm drinks. He was experienced in scavenging desired resources on short notice; he had something brewing by the time she came back out.

She accepted a mug and sat on the floor before the fire, gesturing for him to join her. Her whole body was cool in his arms. "So," she said happily. "By the way, hello. It's good to see you."

"Wonderful to see you." He kissed her ear, letting his lips linger to warm her.

"How have you been?"

"Busy," he reported. "I get to be an invisible agent these days. Nudging things here and there, both to help the Empire against the Republic and help it against some of its own leadership. I've told you about that."

"Yes," she said. He hadn't even told her some of the things his Sith taskmasters had attempted or done, but she'd heard enough to sound genuinely disturbed when he brought it up. "It's going well?"

"Stars, yes. I've never been so pleased with a job in my life. I was excited to hear about you pulling things together on Corellia. I know the outside threat won, but you shut down a lot of the infighting first. We all feel it when those fires get put out."

"I'm glad it helps." She leaned in to kiss him again. She was warming up nicely. She had a ways to go, though.

"Tell me you weren't waiting out there all day," he said suspiciously.

"No, I actually spent the morning indoors. Reading."

"Anything good?"

"You wouldn't believe me if I told you."

"Now I'm intrigued."

She stiffened. "It's really not that interesting."

Her discomfort piqued his interest. And he was used to hearing everything on her mind. So he listened and waited.

The playful smile on her face gave way to real distress. "This isn't me making the broadest hint in history, I promise. I was just reading my father's old correspondence. He used to write letters to my mother all the time."

Nothing wrong with that. "You mentioned her once a long time ago. You said you thought she had worked in Intelligence?"

"She did. She was a Cipher agent. She corresponded with Father for years and years, since before they got together until just before she died."

"What does a Cipher agent find to correspond about? Without getting fired?"

"Home, with minimal incriminating details. The future. Me, once I came along. Each other. Some weeks it was just reminding each other they loved each other."

"That's...unusual. Given the demands on a Cipher, much less a Sith trying to keep a Force-blind out of his politics." He ran a hand up and down her arm, briefly forgetting to suppress a frown. "And this lasted?"

"For eight years."

"A Sith and a Cipher agent," he murmured. "That's promising. Sort of. That little contact and that much danger isn't exactly what I would expect for a happy relationship." Security was what people wanted. Time together. Not what that combination could offer.

"They loved each other. Madly. It shows through in every letter, and those letters were only written because they were apart, and this is getting to the point where I should stop talking."

He smiled and stroked her hair. "I've seen so many definitions of love the word has very nearly lost its meaning, but I'm glad it worked for them. And it's nice to think that a Sith and a field agent can keep a good arrangement." He considered further. That wasn't what he wanted for her. It wasn't what he knew was possible with warmer men than himself. "Still. In the long run, does that really count?"

"Some people might not see the appeal, but—"

"You're the only—" he stopped himself. "Do you think it counts?"

"Definitely. If you'd met them you wouldn't even have to ask." She paused. "It isn't how much you have," she said gently. "It's who you have something with." She smiled, once, and then looked away. "Sorry. This wasn't supposed to be some kind of guilt trip."

"No offense taken, darling. Let's...well. Let's talk about what my people can do for you while you're physically out of it. I can only stay here a few days, but I'll send everything I can."

She nodded. "Let's do that."

That didn't quite seem to cover it. He almost felt like an apology was in order. "Have I mentioned you look amazing?" he said.

"You did. I doubt I'm at the height of my attractiveness right now—" she touched her belly again – "but I'm flattered anyway."

"You're attractive. Trust me." On paper, pregnant didn't sound too appealing. But it was different with her. "Now. Let's – " he squeezed her waist – "get – " a finger's width lower before he stopped – "down to business." There was work to do, and perhaps other things to be done after. Everything he could do.

L+6 months: Correspondence

It was a few days after Wynston left again that Ruth received a message, text only.

Thinking of you, it said. Stay safe. – W

L+8 months: Birth

Ruth kept in touch, less than she would like but more than she could really expect from someone she knew was giving his all elsewhere. There was the occasional holocall. More often there were short notes, almost comically bare of anything that might compromise operational security; she answered in brief affectionate kind rather than risking scaring him away with longer missives.

Would he really scare? She didn't want to test the point.

What third-party security he had offered stayed well out of her way when the time came for her to deliver her child. A midwife Jaesa had found was

there, with Jaesa herself standing by and Vette hovering at not quite line of sight.

Labor was long, and labor was painful, and yet there was an end to it; she just wished that the end weren't discovering that Colrand Niral looked just like his father.

She got to pretend that her crying was due to continued physical pain, and her attendants granted her that. She held her son and loved him. She loved him instantly, completely. His face broke her heart all over again.

L+12 months: Meeting

Wynston worked hard to maintain his operation, spying, finding places to intervene for Imperial interests. Finding places to intervene for the interests of Imperial civilians, too. He worked hard, but in spare moments his thoughts often returned to one woman. The one he didn't have time to see.

He made time for it.

She was waiting in the rain again when he reached the gate. She bounded to meet him when he arrived. "Hello there," she said, hugging him without taking her eyes off his face.

"Hello. Don't you own a rain repulsor?"

She looked up and beamed. "I like the rain."

He laughed. "Let's get inside."

They got as far as the entry hallway before she locked her arms around his waist and kissed him, welcoming him back, dizzy-sweet. He returned the favor until she stiffened and set a hand on his chest. "Hold on," she said. "He's crying."

It took Wynston a moment's concentration to pick out the faint wailing from another room. Ruth hurried on ahead, disappearing into one room or another and coming back jiggling a chubby and newly quiet baby in her arms.

"This is Colrand," Wynston said calmly.

She nodded and flashed him a smile. "Yes. Cole."

Wynston had no idea what to say. The baby looked like Quinn. No way to work around that; he should risk facing it. "He's already looking better than the last model," he drawled.

She laughed a strained little laugh. "He costs me less on food, too."

What mattered was that the little one was Ruth's child. Wynston strode up and offered his arms. "May I?"

She carefully transferred little Colrand to Wynston's steady hold. The baby kicked his way a little bit upwards, seized Wynston's jacket, and punched him in the chin.

Well, points for spunk. Wynston grinned and asked bemusedly, "Is that good?"

"Um." Ruth was suppressing a giggle. "I don't think he's done that before."

"I see. I'm already earning special treatment." He laughed at the look on her face. "Don't worry about it. A warrior's got to practice somehow."

Wynston liked babies, so long as they were other people's. Babies were too young to know how to hate yet, too young to lie about being driven by selfishness, and forever appreciative of kindnesses. Also they were terribly, terribly cute. Sure, sometimes they punched you in the face, but they were cute.

Colrand, having paused to reevaluate his situation, spent a minute staring up at Wynston's red eyes. Wynston stared right back down. "He's never seen a Chiss before, has he?"

"No. You're the first."

"Well, he isn't screaming. That's a good start."

"Just count yourself lucky you don't have lekku. I'm surprised Vette hasn't snapped and left me forever, given his fascination with the things."

"Now, Cole," said Wynston, "there's a time and a place for grabbing, but it it's rarely the optimal opening move when a woman—"

"Wynston!"

"What? I'm giving him important advice."

"Run these lessons by me first?"

Colrand burst in with an earsplitting exclamation of total nonsense. He looked ridiculously cheerful about it. Wynston grinned down at him. "If I had any reason to believe that was intentional Huttese I would have to wash your mouth out." He looked back up at Ruth. "I can do Huttese lessons, too. Are those bad?"

"Almost certainly," she said, fake-glaring.

"Look, Cole, I'm trying to help, but your mother is—"

Colrand followed this up with another swing at Wynston's face. Ruth gave up and collapsed into giggles. Wynston bounced the little hellion, just a little bit, while Ruth gathered herself and set the child in a crib by the fireplace.

Wynston rubbed his jaw, more for show than anything. "That boy will be a great Sith, mark my words. He already knows exactly what to do with his operatives."

"You okay?" asked Ruth, her smile dimming slightly.

He grinned. "Yes. Come on, what would you like your evening to be?"

*

Ruth had the kitchen droids serve them dinner at their couch, and afterward she and Wynston talked work. They talked about the progress they were making in the Empire's interest. She talked about Colrand. He drank in her voice, stored it up for the days to come.

He wondered, briefly, whether her taking him to bed was a matter of habit at this point, something she did because he expected it. That doubt lasted exactly as long as it took her lips to reach his again.

Afterward she kept chattering, increasingly drowsily as the night went on, seemingly reluctant to let the evening end. Eventually, though, she did drift off, and he let her warm steady breathing lull him to sleep.

She awoke at some point in the dark. He ran inventory: undressed, pleasantly fatigued, in Ruth's familiar room, her nearby – and sat up as she stole toward the door. "Ruth?"

"Baby's crying," she said, belting a robe around herself. "He isn't used to sleeping without me. I'll be back in a little while."

"You can bring him back here." He would rather have her close. "I really shouldn't be muscling him out."

"He's squirmy. Good luck sleeping if you're not used to it."

He could do with a night of bad sleep with her. "I like the two of you. Bring him in."

So she glided out, and came back before long with Colrand clinging to her breast. With admirable coordination she got into bed on her side, keeping him in place, and relaxed.

Wynston edged close enough to take her hand. "Settled in?"

She yawned. "Settled in."

"Good."

"I could die happy right now," she murmured.

"Please don't."

"All right. I won't." Ruth shifted her other hand on Colrand's back. "I think he would be badly put out if I did."

"I would be, too, darling. Not to sound jealous of your attention or anything."

"Hm." It was close to a laugh. "You, jealous."

"Your time's precious, sweet. But I can share."

"There's always time for you." She closed her eyes. "Mmm. After sleep."

Just another situation he never expected to enjoy. *If this isn't love, he thought, I don't know what is.*

Caution kicked in. *That's the point, man. You've never known what love is.*

She's happy. With me.

That just means she's got a hook. A pleasant one, but a hook. You've seen how that ends.

Fine. Drop the word. The fact remains, she's happy here. And so am I.

At some point in the night, Colrand rolled over and punched him in the face again. He found Ruth's hand and slept in an unexpected kind of contentment.

*

Ruth woke to find Colrand asleep, snuggled against Wynston's near arm. The sight gave her a pleasant glow. She had worried, a little, that Colrand wouldn't like Wynston. A baseless fear, really; Cole liked everybody. Still, she had worried.

Looking at them now, she had nothing to be worried about.

But Wynston would disappear soon, with no guarantees on when he would be back. A matter of weeks to her was an age to her son. Would Wynston end up a stranger?

Was he too happy with being elsewhere to care?

Silly doubts, she told herself. But important ones where they affected Cole's wellbeing. Was Wynston out...seeing other people, while she

worked with her staff or stayed at home alone? Did he really care about staying? Did she really want to ask?

No. It would have to be enough that he was here. And, at the moment, he was laid out with one hand engulfing her son's, both of them resting peacefully. And today at least she knew was going to be good.

L+15 months: Exclusivity

Ruth seemed preoccupied when she met Wynston at the gate, and he didn't think it was just the stifling warmth of the day. She was lovely, as ever; the unusually light rain left her hair and eyelashes gemmed with raindrops; but something was wrong.

She curled up a little apart from him on the couch and inquired with subdued friendliness about his health and travels. She talked a little about her own. There was a distance about it, a hesitation every now and then.

Finally he had to ask. "Is something wrong?"

She sipped her tea. Her face twitched into a frown and back. "When's the last time you had sex?" she said abruptly.

Every alarm in Wynston's system went off at once. "With you, or in general?" he asked mildly.

She watched him. "In general."

There was no safe way to evade when she had that look. He wasn't supposed to evade anyway, he reminded himself. "About three weeks ago," he said.

"Was she pretty?"

Bloody hell. This kind of questioning always led to exactly one ultimatum. "I won't answer that. Darling, it was a job, I wasn't taking notes and now it's over."

"And before that?"

“What?”

“The woman before that.”

“I won’t answer that, either.”

“Why not?”

“Because it cannot possibly do either of us any good, Ruth. You want to know something about the last woman I slept with for the mission? She doesn’t know my name. She hadn’t the faintest concept of loyalty to a nation or a cause. Discretion wasn’t her strong point, which is how I know that she considered the part I played for her to be ‘a red-eyed freak but at least he made her laugh.’” He checked the look on Ruth’s face and consciously cleared his impatience. “Things like that don’t matter. It’s about the role, not me. The woman before that liked to take her amusements with slaves. Any reminder the fake I played there let slip about his being a sentient being provoked severe dissatisfaction, but if he was careful she could be nice enough.” He stood up and took an aimless few steps. Ruth was listening raptly; she didn’t look friendly but she had backed away from anger.

“Yes,” he said, “there are brief entanglements when I’m traveling. When I’m on the job. For what it’s worth, those women meet with the job, not me. They sleep with the slave, the diplomat, the courier, the nurse, the low-level manager and meal ticket, the stranger in some no-name cantina. You’re the only woman who’s slept with me.” The exception had been years ago, before he was old enough to know better, and he was so different then it didn’t count.

Ruth frowned, seeming thoughtful. “That’s the best you’ve got?”

“Yes. If it isn’t enough, I’m sorry.”

He had gotten kicked out for that one before. He had used it to get kicked out before. Once or twice he had come to this point, chosen for whatever reason to be honest about the limit, and yet found himself wishing he didn’t have to leave. None of that changed what he could say.

“I’ll have to think about it,” she said softly.

Ah. And that's how that ended. Nearly a year and a half; not a bad run. Downright rare, in fact. It wouldn't have gone on that long if he didn't always find himself wanting to come back to her. He shoved the impact aside. "As you wish," he said, and was once again glad to have nothing more than an already-packed bag to carry away.

She took a sharp breath in as if readying to say something, but no words followed. Instead she watched him, her eyes big and dark-looking under furrowed brows.

"Goodnight, Ruth," he said, and forced himself to turn away.

L+16 months Going forward

Ruth wanted to call Wynston.

It had been weeks since he'd left her home, driven by the talk she knew she shouldn't have started. Of course he wasn't going to commit to her. That was never him. It never ever had been and she knew that. He had never told her anything else.

She wanted to call him. When she was at home with Colrand and the house droids, she missed him. When she was in the field with those of Pierce's guard judged necessary for any given exercise, she missed him. But she couldn't call. They weren't exactly colleagues and they surely weren't friends. They had managed friendship for a while only because she had turned to someone else and he wasn't local long enough to start stressing the issue.

She didn't have time for a love life anyway.

Pierce was around; generally he worked on training her guard at one of Baras's old facilities, but he came to town to report regularly.

"Milord," he was saying. "Wanted to update you on the guard. Bringing a few more troops on board. You'll find they're up to snuff."

"Thank you," she said absently.

She didn't realize Pierce was still waiting until several long vague moments later. "Milord," he said again.

"Yes?"

"Want me to take him out?"

Startlement rimmed her eyes as she looked up to him. "No," she said. "He's fine where he is. We're fine. Leave it be."

He nodded. "You go easy on your exes," he observed.

"My—" She couldn't even argue. Pierce was right about Wynston's status.

She should move on, and not call him.

"Your fighting's been off, these weeks," Pierce said quietly. "My boys and girls can handle themselves but it's a bit more than they should have to take on."

"You're telling me I should do better?"

"Telling you you could. Just a fact." He shifted. "I'll say it straight. You're happy when you're in love. But stayin' out might be better for you."

"Yes," she said. "Thank you. Now get the hell out."

He was right, in a way. It was time to move on.

L+17 months: Hazards

"You've been drinking," said Vector.

Wynston stood up very straight in the briefing room and put his flask in his pocket. "Only a little," he said. Some hours went by much better with a little to drink. The hours with thoughts of Ruth in them, chiefly.

Vector cleared the surprise from his face and reported. "Keeper contacted us. There is a rogue Sith lord causing trouble. He is untouchable through the regular channels."

"Ah. That's where we come in. Do we have an analysis on what his removal will do?"

"Already awaiting your review."

"Excellent." He called up the console and accessed the waiting file. His eyes glazed a little as he flipped through. "Remember when the enemies of the Empire we fought were...well, not Imperial?"

"We meet both kinds."

"I know. It's just...do you realize how unthinkable it would have been for me five, ten years ago, to just say 'That Sith is doing wrong and I'm going to stop him'? It's delicate, though. I can't hit the field for this one. No one can recognize me on what looks like Imperial sabotage. If word gets back to Ruth, and to Ruth's employer...no. We assign this to plausibly deniable agents."

Some hours went by much better with a little to drink: the hours with thoughts of Ruth in them, chiefly. The hours with work were what kept him going.

*

The Emperor's Hand finally called again.

The two Sith stared down at Ruth from the holo in her home. She clutched Colrand a little closer and met them stare for defiant stare.

"Wrath," said Servant One. "The time has come, and the Emperor's new vessel is prepared."

"The will has a Voice once more," said Servant Two.

Colrand started crying.

"You are to meet with him in person," Servant One said steadily. "There he will prepare you for the next step in your service."

"Send me the coordinates," said Ruth. "I'll go there immediately."

Servant One just stared at her until his image dissipated.

Ruth stroked Colrand's hair, fine and soft and deepest black, and rocked him until he hiccupped and calmed. She set him to rest, buckled armor over her still-adjusting torso, and strode out to the shuttle that would take her out into the Wrath's galaxy.

*

Ruth's directions took her to a small star well outside the galaxy's outer arm. It was a long, cold ride. When she left hyperspace she found a fortress made of something so black she could only pick it out by contrasting it against the light of the galaxy beyond.

A hangar opened silently for her when she approached. No one showed up when she stepped out; she found her way into a hallway that was all black metal and white light that managed to hurt the eyes without illuminating anything.

It was dark here in spite of the harsh lighting. Her spirits sank with every step, and the Dark Side crept thick in every breath. Instinctively she formed a little tight focus within herself, a tiny knot of clearer energy to light her way.

The hallways and open doors led her in one direction, winding in toward the center of the fortress. Her path finally opened into a huge black room, lit only by one orb fixed at the top of a massive black throne. A broad-shouldered humanoid figure sat there, hooded and swathed in black robes.

He raised his head a little, enough to reveal blood-red eyes and a pale-lipped smile. "Wrath," he said.

She would have knelt with or without the sense of compulsion she felt. This was a power too overwhelming to think about displeasing. This was the heart and source of this whole place's darkness.

"Master," she said, and wished it weren't true.

Something thrust into her awareness, shattering what focus she had. It was a heavy oily presence, vile as it pushed over and through her thoughts. It

was cold as it spread, seeming to push into every memory at once and render disdainful judgment. It went on, and on, and Ruth realized at some point that the only reason she wasn't retching was that she was too busy sobbing.

Too long afterward the presence withdrew, leaving her empty and stained. She fell to hands and knees and waited for her head to stop spinning.

"Welcome," the Voice of the Emperor said mockingly. "You have come to serve, Wrath. And I know you will serve well."

She forced herself back to her knees, then her feet. "What do you wish of me?" she said, as steadily as she could.

"You will carry out my will. As you have done on Corellia and on Voss. You will strike, and my enemies will fall."

"It will be as you say." Anything to get her out of here.

"In many works my Hand will direct you. In some, you will come to me, and I will make you my instrument." He leaned forward. "As you will be today, Wrath."

He gave her a name she had never heard, a place she had, even though she'd never been there. He sent her away with a mirthless smile. It was all she could do not to run.

She left that horrible place and made straight for the location she had been given. The mission drove her, the only living thing in her mind; this was the job. She found her target, scattered his security like so many leaves, struck him down. Another enemy defeated, as it was meant to be.

Everything felt brighter when she got home. Colrand cried inconsolably in her arms, for hours, but Ruth held on tight.

L+19 months: Better this way

Wynston smiled until the blonde left his bedroom. He got the prints and DNA signature he needed from her for the job. That was the important part.

It was fun. He liked the game, he always had. And it was better this way. He would get over Ruth, in time, as he'd gotten over everyone before. If he could move past Kaliyo, the woman who had soaked up his attention for nearly two years, he could move past a few weeks with Ruth.

It was better this way. She was free, and a woman as beautiful and generous as her deserved to be free. She could find someone worthwhile. A man who could be there for her. She was made for committed loving, stability, reliability. Anything but him.

He wouldn't leave his work. Even if he were willing to do so, he couldn't serve her master. Given that...it was impossible. The only other way was if she could come with him. But he couldn't ask that of her. Even she wouldn't survive saying no to the Emperor. And she did so much good even with her current job, sometimes in spite of her current job. The Wrath as a warrior of protection was a force he could never have imagined when he first started in this business; she made it hers and she was perfect at it. Besides, his organization is all about skulking in the shadows. It would be no place for her light or her child.

It was better this way.

L+25 months: The resistance

The Servants gave her the task of killing a Sith who had been negotiating with the Jedi, and Ruth went forth for that job. The man's complex was populated, though, by a number of Sith, many of whom were hiding rather than fighting. It was curious, and Ruth had a feeling that once her target was down the solution to the rest might not be bloodshed.

But she had to get the target down.

She made her way unopposed, flanked by some of her personal guard, to the big house at the center of the complex, and up the broad hallway to its center room. The door was already open, and inside the brown-robed Sith waited.

He raised a hand. "Greetings, Wrath. There's no further need for violence. I cannot withstand you, and I have ordered my students not to get in your way in a misguided defense of me."

"All but your friend there." She nodded past him to the doorway, where a man in black had his hands on an inactive saber.

"Kaeve!" said her target. "I told you to withdraw!"

"I stand with you," he said simply.

"So be it," said Ruth. She could try to reason with him again once his master was down.

The leader put up a valiant fight. Ruth and her two guardsmen struggled to keep control of the room as he used table and shelves alike for cover. But he went down, and Ruth called "Hold." The man in black didn't comply. Ruth parried his attack, made with more spirit than skill, and set her sabers to his throat.

Now that she had a moment she looked at the table and the ancient print books piled there. One carried the name of a Jedi philosopher she recognized from her father's studies. "Not exactly on the approved Korriban curriculum, is it?" she said to her captive. She looked around to her black-uniformed guards. "Dismissed."

They filed out. Ruth withdrew her sabers. "Stand," she said. "Don't be afraid. I am an ally."

The man wobbled to his feet. "My lord Wrath," he said, and waited, jaw tight, eyes wide.

"What's your name?"

"Kaeve, my lord."

"Quite the group you have here. A school, isn't it? Not one I'd heard of before today."

"We don't widely advertise, my lord."

Despite the fear rolling off him he never bent his neck too far. He might be considered handsome, black-haired, dark-eyed. He might, but she didn't feel it.

"I've been making a career out of proving that decent people aren't a threat to the Empire," she said. "And that includes Sith. If it's really alternate philosophy you're interested in, I've no wish to disrupt you further."

"You say that after you killed Lord Revil?"

"I have orders. I may not carry them out as messily as a Sith should. I couldn't avoid killing your master. However I can decline to kill the rest of you. You'll need to hide, again. But somehow I think you'll be able to manage that."

"Then you'll let us go?"

"One better than that. If you're interested in the brighter path. you should know you aren't alone. And it isn't just me. I can introduce you to some people."

Such a natural ally should be irresistible, but he wasn't. Well, it was enough for her if he could help Jaesa with her work. As for the mission itself, the Emperor had seen her violate the spirit of directives before; it seemed to amuse him when he crept through her mind to find it. Kaeve might be safe.

So she let him go.

L+28 months : Contact

Ruth's heart fell over and resumed with a limp when Wynston called.

She brought him up on the big holo. "Wynston," she said.

"Ruth." She couldn't read anything from his voice but careful cordiality. "I've heard reports that you're involved in accepting the surrender of the Nestor system."

"That's true," she said. "What about it?"

"I've heard other reports that there may be trouble. Before I heard you were going I was going to send an agent along to do a little work behind the scenes, make sure the location is secure. I...can send someone else."

"No," she said hurriedly. "I want your best."

Ordinarily her decision on what to wear was dictated by how best to project authority while maintaining combat flexibility. This time she wanted something that trimmed her waist a little more, let her braided hair show. She flipped through her closet, twice, and settled for close-fitted grey armor and a ponytail.

Her heart pounded as she stepped onto the station, but she didn't see him during the negotiations. In fact, in her presence things went perfectly smoothly. It was the most nerve-wracking success she could remember.

She finally separated from some of the negotiators at the end of the day and started down a hallway toward the hangar. She rounded a corner and there in uniform, his head modestly bowed, was Wynston.

She felt his eyes move, though he didn't bring his head up. "Wynston," she said.

"My lord." He smiled crookedly. "Good to see you."

She beckoned and made for the nearest side room, what seemed to be an office with half a dozen consoles and people working at them. "Excuse us," she said loudly. "Now."

The startled workers stood and filed out, an air of fear hurrying their steps. She didn't care to reassure them. They were irrelevant.

Wynston had followed her in. Now he took a step toward her. She took a step toward him. He leaned forward, the restrained energy of him reverberating invisibly off everything in the room. He said nothing. She waited until she could bear it no longer - two heartbeats at least, maybe three - and then she ran to him, threw her arms around him while his pulled tight around her, and sought his mouth with hers. His kiss was

home, home at last, and she clung to him as though he might disappear again at any moment. "Come with me," she whispered. "I don't care. I don't care, just come."

She felt more than saw the twinge of pain in his smile before he whispered in her ear.

"Darling, you should know nothing's changed, I can't--"

"I don't care. Come with me."

He broke away and pressed his forehead to hers, cradling her face in his hands. "I'll make arrangements."

They walked together, the blandly uniformed alien alongside the triumphant Sith. He stopped her at the ramp to her ship. "Ruth...we need to settle some things before this goes any further."

"I told you I don't care. If I don't hear about it I--"

"Darling, it isn't that simple. This will drive you crazy if you let it - crazier than being apart does. And if it's hurting you we can't do it again. What you do, what you bring out in me and what you let me be - myself - no one else does that. As for what I do elsewhere, it's a fake, a tool. It's one of many but it's one I can't afford to just cut out. If that isn't enough for you tell me now."

"I know I can't have all of you. No more than you can have all of me, given our jobs." There it was, plain and simple. "I know, Wynston, but I want everything I can get. I want to give you everything I can give."

He gathered her in his arms, and she pulled tight to squeeze him. Disbelief hung about his smile. "I can breathe again," he whispered, and kissed her.

She brushed his lips with her own when she spoke. "Let's make the most of it."

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In time they got home, the shuttle easing into the little hangar at the edge of the property. From there a tunnel gave them a well-lit and dry path to the house proper.

She got quiet as they approached the house. Preoccupied. He squeezed her hand and she smiled, but it didn't last long. He followed her inside to the living room and let her curl up against him on the couch nearest the fireplace. He waited while she got comfortable. And waited some more for something he didn't have the information to name.

"Ruth?" he said at length.

She had her head tucked against his neck, and she was staring at the fire. "I'm glad you're here," she said quietly, "but there's something you should know."

"I guessed as much." He stroked her hair and waited.

"I met the boss," she said throatily.

His heart sank. "The Emperor?"

"His Voice. That's the one. He's...stronger than he was. I think Voss had made him soft."

"I see." There was an unpleasant thought. The entity that he had helped Ruth free on Voss two years previously had been far from benevolent.

She stared at a spot on his shoulder and was quiet for a few moments. "I think," she said slowly, "his commands are in the Empire's interests. Of course. But it is dark, and he...he was crawling around my mind, Wynston. Laughing at what he found. I don't think I could hide anything from him."

One implication jumped out at him. Anything such as the arguable treason he committed to deal with Sith authorities who get destructive ideas. "It's a good thing I serve the Empire, then," he said, "as I always have." And as he'd better be able to corroborate.

"Yes," she said.

It might make things interesting. He could hope the Emperor saw the greater good over the individual Sith Wynston was forced to sabotage. He felt Ruth shiver and he set aside the practical line of thought for the time being. "This was hard for you."

"Yes."

"What can I do?"

She led him over to sit before the fire and tugged his arms firmly around her. "Tell me something good," she said.

"You're here with me," he murmured impulsively. "Your son is healthy and rather entertainingly self-assured. Uh, also yesterday I turned a certain corporate board meeting inside out such that future weapons deals in certain critical systems are all very suddenly going to start favoring Imperial allies. The whole region has been a death trap; this adjustment should straighten it out in our favor. And save a lot of lives."

"Good," she said. "I like that you do that. Most of my life-saving is in the form of stomping on the biggest threat in the room, casting dirty looks around, and repeating until the survivors promise to be nice."

"It works," he said, smiling, "among Sith."

She quieted and watched the fire. He held her, savoring the smell of her hair, the firelight's play on her small pale hands.

She shuddered again. "I can't describe what it felt like, having him in my head. Like I couldn't...nothing was..." she curled tighter. "I didn't feel like me, and I couldn't stop it."

He settled his arm more securely around her shoulders. He breathed deep, silently asking her to go along, to relax her body language with his. He remembered things. In time, he spoke. "Can I tell you something?"

"Of course."

"This isn't to trivialize what happened to you. I can't imagine the violation that must have been." He laced his fingers in hers and stared at the fire. "I never told you what was happening when you saw me on Quesh."

She stiffened. "You never explained, but I remember, when you injected that...whatever it was. You were talking to empty air, you said you wanted your mind back."

"And I did. I very much did."

Slowly, haltingly, in terms less clinical than the report he had filed when kicking off the private initiative to locate and free the other victims of that Intelligence program, he described the ordeal of the IX serum and the Castellan restraints. The brainwashing applied as a 'safety measure' after the Dark Council heard of his defiance of Darth Jadus. His failure in understanding, his treason in servitude. He laid it out, after a year and a half of silence and evasively worded professional notes, and she listened, because Ruth always listened.

"Is anyone who was involved in doing that to you still alive?" she said in a hard clear voice when he was done.

The physical perpetrators, Imperial Intelligence, he had forgiven; they did what they had to do to assure the mission and save both Wynston and themselves from the ire of the Dark Council. The SIS agents who had used the keyword over and over and over, though..."No. I saw to that."

"Good."

"They couldn't read me. They didn't have that...presence...that such a Sith as the Emperor must have. But if they commanded I obeyed, and that...it was vile."

She lifted his hand and spread his fingers, gently tracing his outline in the glimmering firelight. "You've been doing the right thing at the expense of what any higher-up says since the day I met you. I hate that anyone..." she kissed his hand and was quiet.

"I got the better of it in the end."

"I'm not sure I have that option against my own boss."

"He hasn't compelled anything. Right? Just looking, outrage though that was?"

"Just looking," she agreed. "I hope that's all."

"I hope not even that happens again."

"I can take care of myself, but if for whatever reason he doesn't like what he sees about you in my head. If a conflict comes up..."

"If a conflict comes up, I'll run for it." He forced humor into the statement.

"We'll work something out, Wynston. I won't let him hurt you."

"And I won't allow certain confrontations. I told you you're not the enemy, darling. You never will be."

L+30 months: A mother and a Wrath

The Wrath's personal guard was out spreading the impact of the Empire. The Emperor's Wrath herself was taking the day off.

The plush X-70 fighter Wynston had presented at their last meeting – "since I somehow doubt we should trust him with any more expensive tech just yet" – was, in Cole's chubby hands, engaged in an aerial action with a somewhat grimmer-looking plastoid Fury piloted by Ruth. Every time she caught him she crash-drove the whole mess into his tummy, to his riotous amusement, and every time he caught her there were extravagant explosion noises.

Colrand had plenty of doting admirers in the Niral and Willsaam households, but she never felt quite right unless she was with him, feeding him herself, rediscovering the fact that dark blue eyes were entirely enchanting. He was a sweet baby, Force sensitive at a level she could already feel. Endlessly happy to be handed around. Endlessly happy to be with her.

She wondered, sometimes, whether he missed having a father. She would gladly have claimed Wynston as one but Wynston was rarely here and besides that would lead to awkward questions once Colrand started learning about genetics. She didn't have a father for him. But she could give him a mother and a home, and he seemed happy enough.

L+33 months: Aesthetics

Wynston double-checked his holo disguise in the speeder's mirror. He looked very slightly off to himself, which was ridiculous because he'd had his face modeled in all possible detail for this replica. Well, it would have to do.

Ruth was out at her estate's gate, again, heedless of the rain, again. "One of these days I'm showing up an hour early and intercepting you before you go out in this," he informed her.

"One hour more for me. I'll accept this plan." She beamed at him, appearing wholly unashamed of her weather cluelessness, and led him inside.

They got to the living room, got comfortable, caught up. Spent a little time in the playroom with Colrand, who decided that Wynston's blaster was the most tempting toy ever. After stowing that out of sight and letting the child play around more safely for a while, Wynston returned with Ruth to the couch. And that in turn pleasantly progressed into making out.

Ruth stopped when she put a hand on his face. She frowned. She tapped a couple of fingertips across his cheekbones. "Wynston?"

Damn. "I knew it was off." He grinned and deactivated the holo disguise via his wrist console. He saw the flash cross his own vision as the image dissolved. Now, instead of him, he knew she was seeing him with an ugly star-shaped chemical burn near his ear.

Her voice got a lot less friendly. "What the hell is that and why the hell wasn't it showing?"

He decided to cover the interesting and possibly distracting part first. "I've told you about the disguise generators we scavenged some time ago and started research on. This is one in action. I guess it didn't sync perfectly with my motions, even though the static look was correct. We're working on fixing up forcefields to give convincing tactile feedback along with the illusion, but we're not quite there yet."

She pulled back and glared with newly icy eyes. "Do not ever use that with me again."

"All right." He was honest with her in everything that mattered. This, here, was just keeping the status quo to keep her from worrying. She looked miserable now. "I'm sorry."

She raised her hand to the point on her cheek corresponding to his scar. "Now what's this?"

"A souvenir," he said. "I ended up with a confrontation in a lab that had some very exciting caustic substances. It wouldn't have been an issue if the bloody technician hadn't gone right for my face. The stuff that did this – " he pointed at the mark, a textured darker blue against his skin – "is supposedly worth millions of credits on the potency of its formulation."

"A confrontation. Everyone got out all right?"

"The good guys, certainly."

"And you got this looked at right away. Right?"

"I treated on site as best I could. Instantaneous kolto filler injections might've helped, but that seems to have been one of the things their lab didn't stock." He shrugged. "So the damage was done by the time I reached a real facility."

She crept closer to him and brushed his hair away from his forehead. "I should have been there."

"Darling, I'm perfectly capable of handling one small bioweapons lab by myself."

She cast an accusing look at the mark on his face. "You shouldn't have to."

"You have your job, sweet. I have mine." He turned so she wouldn't have to see the damaged side of his face. "This was nothing important. It happens. If you don't want to look at it I'll look into options for reconstructive surgery; they're not going to get it perfect but –"

"Stop." She shifted her weight, leaned in to take his face in her hands. He didn't look at her. This was pretty much exactly what he didn't want to get hung up on, and what he didn't want her to see when she looked at him. "You're gorgeous, you know."

His heart temporarily forgot how pulses worked.

"I may not ever have listed out everything I like about your eyes, and your hair and your jaw and your very very distracting mouth and everything, but Wynston, you are drop-dead gorgeous and a scar doesn't change that for me."

"That's because you're being nice," he said, smiling at her reality-defying tact even as he kept looking away.

She stroked both sides of his face with her thumbs and kissed his nose. Then leaned around to –

"No," he snapped, jerking away before she could kiss the mark. "Don't do that."

"I'm sorry." She backed off. "I just don't want you to think that you are in any way less wonderful than you always have been." She pressed her lips together for a second. "And I don't want you ever to think you should hide things like this from me."

"I won't," he said reluctantly. "All right?"

"Thank you. I mean it." She took his hands. "You have to be a lot of things to a lot of people, Wynston. Here, I want you to be you."

"I want me to be intact," he said dryly.

She shook her head, visibly distressed. "I want you just as you are."

He gathered his nerve and faced her directly. "So here I am. Happy?"

She met his gaze and smiled. "Yes. With you, always yes."

L+40 months: Difficult position

Ruth hadn't yet figured out why the Emperor summoned her when he did, for the jobs he did. The ones he considered important, no doubt...and, she supposed, having her in person let him examine her mind from time to time. Insurance, for a woman who didn't behave as Sith were supposed to be have. He would know if she ever tried sedition outright.

And the rest of the time she was out of his way and he was free to do...whatever it was he did.

Could there be someone who wouldn't be endangered by knowing her, whom she could still respect? Wynston walked a knife's edge in his service to the Empire, as he surely knew; if there was anything he did that went against the chain of command – no. She couldn't even think about it.

And that stood between them, cold and immovable. The only thing less likely to fold was the fact that she wanted him anyway.

L+47 months: Statement

He met her on an unremarkable semiaquatic planet for a mission that could use a respected and potentially ultradeadly diplomat. Sometimes these days he caught himself making excuses to set these missions up.

She was good. She was passionate. They could set things in order together, by diplomacy if possible and swift strictly bounded violence if necessary, and she had started growing out her hair, her light brown locks still short enough to slip the hair tie and blow free at odd moments, which absolutely wasn't the point.

He wasn't in her everyday life, nor she in his. He stopped by Dromund Kaas when he could. Colrand seemed to grow by leaps and bounds when he wasn't looking; the child had graduated from hitting him at every opportunity to attempting to climb him at every opportunity, then hitting him again once it became clear that Wynston was unscaleable. Wynston felt unreasonably attached to the little one, Quinn-face and all. But these visits were brief. The rest of the time Wynston was changing names and faces, sneaking here and there to do any and every job he could execute on his own.

This time it could reasonably be argued that he needed the backup, and so Ruth came with him to a great shining complex on the shore of a broad green sea. He had information and the protection of his holographic disguise. Ruth had Sith authority. She came perilously close to losing her temper at the Sith experimenter who fancied himself a scientist when she heard what he was up to...but the situation was resolved to almost everyone's satisfaction.

After he finished the supper offered by a profusely apologetic and highly cooperative host, Wynston was ready to leave. A holocall stopped him short, prompted him to find a little balcony where he could close the door behind him and answer in relative privacy.

"Keeper," he greeted the figure that came up. "What can I do for you?"

"Cipher." He doubted she would ever get out of the habit of calling him that. "I've had some news."

"Nothing bad, I hope?"

"You know that a significant quantity of records were damaged, filed erroneously, or never filed at all during the upheaval around the battle for Corellia. We've been working through certain matters of record from Lord Razer's time in power." Wynston nodded acknowledgment. That had been the mad Kaleesh who had briefly commanded a military unit with embedded Intelligence recruits. "We've located and correctly identified several sets of remains...including those of Watcher Three."

"I see." Not a surprise, this long after his disappearance. It wouldn't have been a surprise the moment it happened, not with a master such as Razer had been. "He deserved better than that."

She nodded. "We can close that file now, but...I wanted you to know."

"Thank you."

Wynston pocketed his holo and turned his gaze back out over the water to the gleaming ranks of towers and arches standing against the tide. It wasn't a surprise, but Wynston had still hoped the youth had somehow survived. There was so much more work left to do, and Watcher Three, Watcher Ordinary Guy who wasn't bred, just discovered, for this work, was the kind who would do the right thing for its own sake.

He didn't hear Ruth until she was just a couple of steps behind him. She came up beside and rested her hands on the railing. "Bad news?" she said quietly.

"An old comrade who disappeared some time ago. They've confirmed his death." Wynston watched the waves breaking against the walls. "He was one of the good ones."

"I'm sorry." She slipped an arm around him and gave him time.

He set an arm around her to feel her steadiness. "It shouldn't have happened the way it did. We needed him."

"He was important to you."

"We weren't best friends, but still. He saw some of the worst of the road right along with me and he never gave up doing the right thing. It was hard losing him."

A little while later she said, "I don't often hear you saying someone matters to you personally."

He cracked a grin. "I'm an independent sort of man. Besides, it's bad business advertising your friendships."

"That's true. Still, I'm sorry." She squeezed his waist ever so slightly as if to tell him what she thought of advertising.

Bad business. Against one's own best interests. He knew he wasn't around much, but had she really been surprised to hear that he cared about anyone? The years were fragile things, but by now she should have had enough of them to know.

She turned a little to meet his eyes and she smiled a comforting smile. The years were fragile things, and she, unlike so many, was still here.

"There's something you should know," he said. He touched his wrist console and let the illusion of a pale human face dissolve to give way to his real one. She had been listening for so long; she should be hearing this from him. "I love you," he told her. "Everything you are. Everything you do." The sound of his own voice steadied him. He cupped her chin with one hand, pulled her close with the other. "Ruth, I love you. You know all about what I haven't been and what I didn't do for you. You deserve to know this." Because, whether it was good enough or not, it was true.

He shouldn't have been surprised to see the beginnings of tears in her eyes. Not after what it took to get here. But he was surprised and worried until she spoke. "I love you, too, Wynston," she said. And smiled, and kissed him in a way that might have melted him on the spot if he hadn't felt so deeply, completely, unshakably right just then.

He thought her trembling might just be from the wind, but it didn't stop. "Darling?"

"It's the good kind of freaking out," she said, and though her voice shook her smile didn't. "Promise."

He was suspicious of her claim that there was a good kind. "You don't 'freak out.'"

"I don't get things this nice. Until right now."

"You've had me for quite some time, Ruth."

"Not like this. Maybe I just like hearing it. Nothing else has to change, what we have is perfect. But knowing matters."

Surprising. Sweet. He wished he'd done it sooner. If he'd known it would feel like this he would have. "Well then," he said tenderly. "Know that I love you."

She nodded, gave him a kiss that broke into a smile against his lips. "I do."

L+68 months: Cole's question

Colrand looked up from his toy mech walker battle. "Where's my dad?"

Ruth's tongue roughly tripled in size for a few moments. She hadn't been expecting to start that conversation this way.

Colrand stared at her, his eyes blue as the leading edge of dusk. He had his father's eyes.

"Your father did a bad thing," she said carefully, "and had to go away. That's why he isn't here."

"Is he coming back?"

"No."

Colrand frowned and thought about it. "Doesn't he like us?"

"Oh, Cole. Baby, he loves you very much." Whether that was true or not, her son deserved to believe it.

"What'd he do?"

"Something bad, sweetheart. It'll make more sense when you're older. We can talk about it another time."

She hoped that kind of act would never make sense to him. It didn't to her.

Colrand clearly wasn't satisfied, but she wasn't ready to talk more. Instead she examined his battle setup. "Cole, who's going to stop the gundark tanks from just cutting around that side?"

The boy scowled. "There's buildings there." He pointed at the offending exposed flank, clearly indicating that there were buildings there she couldn't see. "It's safe."

"Good," she said. "You always keep some kind of cover in the way." Or in a pinch, she thought, you improvised some.

"Yup," agreed Colrand, and commenced the attack, his black cowlick waving in total defiance of gravity as he moved.

He was his father's son.

L+6 years: Observing on the job

Ruth's smile when she answered Wynston's holocall was a little subdued. "Hi," she said.

"Ruth. I'm a ways out from Dromund Kaas yet, but I've got a little time on my hands. Would you happen to be around?"

"I'm working, actually."

"Ah." That happened sometimes. "Anything I can help with?"

"If you like," she said distantly. "The target's vessel is due to pass through a certain space station in about eight hours. Meet me there." She cut him off.

All right. Ruth preoccupied, bad. Ruth not minding his coming anyway, good. Wynston got moving.

He met her on a barely-inhabited space station out in the middle of nowhere. She was already in the control room, accompanied by Lieutenant Pierce and several of her personal guard in their service-of-the-Wrath

variant on red and black armor. The people she brought when she anticipated trouble.

"Hello," said Wynston as he stepped in.

"I anticipate his arrival any minute now," said Ruth in his direction. "This is a direct Emperor's mark, there won't be mistakes. Pierce, I'm going to hangar three. Stay here, monitor matters, and if anything unusual comes up that isn't in hangar three, deal with it."

"Yes, milord." Pierce nodded smartly. Ruth stalked out to the hallway, nearly knocking Wynston over when he came too close.

He jogged to follow her. He was no Force sensitive but he felt the cold about her just then. She had a work ethic, but this was something else.

Or maybe not. She was allowed to have her own work style, and when the Emperor called the mission was probably urgent enough that she didn't want to play around. He had never been around to observe the immediate effects of one of these missions before; maybe this was just how she dealt with the Emperor's intrusions before she had calmed enough to call him or otherwise unwind. Maybe.

The target landed and disembarked. Ruth strode out and wasted absolutely no time laying into her. Wynston hung back to shoot at the stranger's guardsmen. He kept an eye on Ruth; she had eyes for nothing but the mark she had named.

In the moment she landed the killing blow, her face was utterly blank.

She finally turned to the remaining guardsmen and helped Wynston clear the rest of them. Wynston shivered as he holstered his pistol and headed over to meet her. "All set?"

"Yes." She shook her head briskly, then smiled at him. "Easy."

"And you're...feeling all right?" She looked all right, all of a sudden. He wasn't sure what signs to check for of any lingering wrongness.

"Yes, I'm fine." She shot him a curious look, as if he were the one behaving strangely, and then stepped over the dead woman and reached out to take Wynston's hand. "Come on, tell me you've got a little more time to spare."

"For you? Always." She would want warming up, once she had returned to normal. He only wished he knew exactly what she was returning from.

L+7 years: Girl Talk

"Jaesa," said Ruth. "You're doing it again."

"Doing what?" Jaesa said innocently.

"Losing your focus into the middle distance while grinning? And humming."

Vette snickered.

"Criticizing that these days would be the height of hypocrisy, master."

"Let the record show," announced Vette, "that Ruth called Jaesa on it first today. By the way, this is why I'm leaving you all next week."

"Again," said Ruth. "I hope your museum people appreciate the time you put in."

"They appreciate the artifacts I put in more. We've got a good thing going. But, I'm not gonna let that distract me from mocking – see!?"

Jaesa started and looked guilty.

"Goo goo eyes," said Vette. "She had 'em."

"She definitely did," said Ruth.

"When are you due for your next boy-fix?" inquired Vette.

Jaesa blushed prettily. "I'll be seeing Kaeve this weekend."

"You can do all the nice-guy Sith activism-y things together. I'm gonna vote 'skeptical' on the meeting guys through work thing, but you're clearly having a good time."

"He's a good man," said Jaesa.

"A good googly-eye-inducing one. I am glad somebody on Dromund Kaas knows how to have a good time." Vette rounded on Ruth. "Speaking of. Where's Blue Power this week? I did not drag him on board kicking and screaming on Corellia just to have him wander off every time I turn my back."

"He wanders at will, Vette. It's one of his defining characteristics. People do that when you don't nail them down."

"So get naili...I am not going to finish that sentence."

Ruth grinned. "I'll see him when I see him. Googly eyes will be had, if it makes you feel any better."

"He still sending you love letters?"

"Oh. Stars. Vette, don't even--"

"Because I think that was the best dirty tidbit I ever found on him in files you may have accidentally left open." She spread her hands in the air across an imaginary console screen. "'Things are busy. Take care. W.' Hey, are you up to a full-name basis yet?"

"Vette, shut up."

Vette waved her hands again as if opening a new message. "I can see it now: 'Hi. Can't talk now. W.' Ooh, ooh, or the classic 'Thinking of you. Try not to die. Love, Wynston.'" – Is that too personal? Are you not there yet?"

"His last note had a whole ten words at least, possibly more. Happy?"

"Were they dirty?"

"No!" Ruth giggled and looked over to where the kitchen droid was entering. "Hey, look, a distraction."

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It was much later in the evening, and the conversation had wandered far and wide, when Jaesa made noises about leaving and Vette stretched and finally set down the deathglow she had been nursing.

"Jaesa, before you go anywhere, should we, I dunno, say a few words or something?" suggested the Twi'lek. "About, you know. That thing I was out of town for a few weeks back. I'm not saying Broonmark wasn't a horrifying walking pile of bloodshed, but he was with us for a while."

Ruth sobered. "He fought well. The Sith who laid that trap for me weren't intending to leave survivors, but he broke the line before they got him...fearless to the end. Terrifying, even by Sith industry standards, but he brought us a long way."

"Would you believe," said Jaesa, "the first thing he did when we first talked was to give me a lecture on staying warm? He thought 'Sith clan apprentice' was going to freeze dressing the way I did."

"I was too busy hiding from him to get that lecture," said Vette.
"Continuously. For the entirety of his stay with you, Miss Wrath."

"He stood by me," said Ruth. "That makes up for all." She raised her glass, feeling a sharp dual twinge as a backhanded toast came to mind. "To Broonmark," she said. "He was still nicer than Quinn."

L+7 years: Wynston Abroad

Wynston hated fighting the Dark Council, but he had to do it a lot anyway.

It was a shadow war against the most powerful Sith of the Empire, any time one of them got delusions of grandeur severe enough to threaten galactic stability. These were the big ones, and at the same time the ones he had to keep away from his favorite and most powerful partner. Such were the risks of working at the level they did.

When a Sith high up enough said something bad enough, somebody had to stop them.

The disguise generators he had extracted from an enemy long ago were being continually improved by his people; he relied on them heavily to be different people in different places, never quite traceable. Never quite him while he was out in the galaxy. There was a time and a place for him to be himself: with her.

L+8 years: Lessons

"When do I get Juyo form?"

"When you're ready, Cole. Come on, Soresu guard up. Without a balanced defense you won't be alive long enough to use the aggressive moves."

Colrand raised his training saber. Ruth had given him a live one once or twice, just to heft it, to get used to the flash and subtle discomfiting shiver the weapon did during activation. The rest of the time it was training sabers.

She matched her attack to his defenses, concentrating at first in letting him identify and block her swings. She didn't have to slow down all that much; Colrand was quick and coordinated. He followed forms even better than she usually did; give him a rule and he would master it in minutes.

"Excellent," she said after a little while. "You're really in tune with what's going on."

"Focus, like you said. I'm...sorry I called it boring a lot."

"It's all right. I know it isn't all that glamorous. Now. You think you can use the Soresu style attacks to get me?"

Colrand's face lit up. He spun into an offensive almost before she could bring her training saber up to stop him. He was fast, he was good. She held her ground, let the Force guide her as she knew it was guiding him. She watched, and when he made a mistake she sidestepped and swatted his side with her saber. It unbalanced him after his reckless attack; he stumbled and fell, grunting loudly when he hit the ground.

She reached to help him to his feet. "Watch your right arm," she warned. "It feels like there's more power behind that strike the way you tried, but it leaves your side open."

"Rrrrg." Colrand made a face.

"Frustrated?" she said gently.

The boy scowled at her.

"It's easy to let that anger overwhelm you. It will give you access to the Dark Side, guide you for a while. But it may fail you when you need it most. And using the Dark Side for too long will cloud your judgment in everything, not just in fighting."

"And that's why Dark Side Sith keep blowing up."

"Yes, exactly." The phrasing was less than sophisticated, but the idea was sound.

"So why do they keep doing it?"

"Because it's easy. It's tempting, especially when you're feeling bad. And it's what's expected among most Sith."

"But not you and Aunt Jaesa."

"Not me and Aunt Jaesa. Not your grandfather, either." Ruth smiled a little in spite of herself. "He favored Soresu, when he had to fight."

"Huh." Colrand always seemed fascinated by anything about his grandfather. Or families in general. "Okay." He hefted the practice saber. "Focus," he said. "And watch my arm."

One thing she could say for him, she never had to order the same correction twice.

L+8 years: Other Options

Ruth and Wynston lay haphazardly on the bed, staring at the ceiling, talking about nothing in particular. A half-empty bottle of brandy was lined up next to a couple of empty glasses on the nightstand; it wasn't an everyday thing, just the occasional evening's indulgence. Now they were just chatting.

After a lull Ruth said, very casually, "Have you really not met anyone more interesting than me by now?"

"I really have not," Wynston said steadily. He found her hand and squeezed it. "You'll recall it took quite a bit of trauma for me to let you close."

"Well, you might get traumatized more while I'm not looking."

"Trust me, you hear all about it when I report back. It helps."

"Surely there's someone on the *Tenebrous* or somewhere who can actually be around for these things."

"And surely you've met a suitable consort by now. Someone who can stay around here looking handsome and—" Wynston touched the scar on his face and grimaced – "minimally damaged. Who can give you more children." He turned his head to look at her. "Who can be wholly yours, Ruth. Everything about you is fitted to that, and yet every time I come back to that gate you're there, waiting for me."

"You're the one I want."

So simple. So direct. He had always loved that about her. He had always known it was going to get her hurt. "I always want to come back. When I'm out there some part of me or you or both is always calling me home." He stroked her hand, the inside of her forearm, and when he spoke again he was quieter. "I love you, but every time you compare yourself with the imaginary beauties I meet out there, you remind me of the man I can't be for you. I love my work. It's right. It's necessary. But by its very nature it means that between the two of us, you're the one giving something up. If

anything about it bothers you, talk to me. But don't think I feel like I'm missing out, because I'm not."

"Don't think I feel like I'm missing out," she repeated, smiling. "Because every time you come back to that gate, I see a man worth waiting for."

£+9 years: Disconnect

The Emperor called, and Ruth answered. She went to his fortress in the blackness of deep space. He burst into her mind, her memories, pawed through it at will, withdrew. He gave her a name and a location. She went out and made the kill.

She felt a little better once the job was done. The world got a little more vivid. She still felt dirty.

She tried not to go running to Wynston with everything. The man was busy, and he was busy doing important things. But she couldn't shake the chill that had come over her in the Emperor's fortress, and so she activated her holo and called.

It was Vector who appeared, crisp in his usual semiformal wear. "Wrath," he said with a welcoming smile.

Ruth quickly rearranged her wording. "Vector."

"Wynston had his holo forward to me. He is currently on a delicate assignment in the field."

"I see. Do you know when he'll be back?"

"The current estimate is one week, but you understand that these matters may change unexpectedly."

"Of course."

"If there's anything we can do, Wrath..."

"Ruth, Vector. Ruth. Just wish him luck for me, all right?"

"We'll do that." He smiled. "Give our regards to your family."

"'Family,' hmm?" A grandiose word. "Is that including Vette or not?"

He was a master, not of the straight face, but of the small ambiguous smile.

"We will leave that to your discretion."

"Excellent. I'll go tell her you said hello to everyone but her."

"By all convention that sort of slander is your prerogative," he said unflappably, "but..."

"Fine, I'll be nice. Just...just tell Wynston good luck for me, and take care of yourself, all right?"

"We will. Take care, Ruth."

She hung up and went to watch Colrand in the nursery. He yelled an inarticulate upset something at her approach and threw a couple of toys at her, but she stayed put, and in time he returned to normal play.

L+9 years: Subterfuge

The job was throwing a planet to Imperial interests, and Wynston's organization had the pull to do it. He just had to walk in and seal the deal.

"You're going without the disguise?" Agent Temple nodded to his hip, where the latest generator design had been cybernetically implanted. Implanted, but currently inactive.

"Ruth knows I do conspicuously mysterious things for the Empire. That means He knows, if he chooses to look - and I must assume he does. So I want to be seen doing the Imperial part of my job here and there. Enough for the careful observer to notice."

"It seems like a difficult balance to maintain."

Wynston shrugged. "Difficult. But worth it."

L+10 years: Worthy

Ruth and Wynston lounged fully clothed side by side on the bed, relaxing wordlessly for a while. It was Ruth who broke the silence.

"Have I ever told you you occasionally show signs of confidence problems?" She tried to make it gentle.

"What?" Wynston turned his head without raising himself from the mattress. "Darling, I've been running the show since I was eleven. Confidence has never been a problem."

"You still don't think you're good enough for me."

The Chiss took a sudden interest in an unspecified point above Ruth's shoulder.

"Wynston?"

"Hold on," he said with quiet damage-control evenness, "I'm coming up with a flippant response. It's...taking a little longer than usual."

"I love you, and you me. Do you understand that that's all I need?"

Wynston looked past her shoulder, quiet for a long moment. "Must we talk about this?"

"We can talk about anything. Can't we?"

A pause. "We don't, darling. I try, but..."

He always hated facing his own doubts on this. She rolled onto her side facing him and pushed one hand across the sheets to touch his arm. "I love you," she said.

"I know," he said.

She waited. Was he still worried that she felt abandoned? Was there anything she could do to shake that feeling? He spoke low and slowly. "I know you welcome me here, darling. I...feel you, calling me home. Every spare moment and then some. But I will ignore that call for as long as it

takes to assure the mission. And every time I do that, I'm failing you. If that's a confidence problem, then yes, I have problems."

As if he were the only one who couldn't quite reach halfway. "And when I go to hand over my mind to my master, instead of keeping what secrets you may need me to keep? I'm not exactly a hundred percent available to you. It doesn't have to matter. We still have this. And I don't hold any of your dedication against you."

"No. You're too good to hold that sort of thing against anyone." He sat up and, settling forearms on his knees, stared at his hands. "You are too good, Ruth. But don't you ever think about the opportunities you have, the people you know who can stay close to you, give you what you deserve?"

"Don't you have your own opportunities?"

Confusion fled across his face before realization furrowed his brow.

"Oh, Ruth, no. Stars, no. I've never met anyone – never like you. No matter how far apart we are, we're never that far."

"I know." She was grateful to hear it. "And I don't need someone waiting on me hand and foot."

"You need...." He looked at the rumpled sheets. "You want me to stay."

"We both know that can't happen."

"That's not what I asked. You want me to stay."

She didn't like the question. She was used to suppressing ones like it; sitting alone with them was a fast route to nowhere good. But she wondered now about the thoughts Wynston kept with him on the road. She wanted to sweep them away. "It would be wonderful," she admitted.

"And I can't do it. Ruth, I know what you want, what you deserve, but there is always something that tells me I should be out there. I could no more leave the *Tenebrous* than I could stop breathing." He swallowed hard.

"And I could no more stop loving you than I could stop my heart from beating. How do I reconcile that? And why aren't you with a man who doesn't even think it's a question?"

She considered her words and didn't realize she'd been holding her breath until she tried to talk. "I do...miss you. When we're apart. But every time I see you, every time I hear from you...I fall in love all over again. I couldn't stop if I tried. I did try. It always comes back to you. The moments you can give add up to something better than anyone else could ever do for me."

"Look at an empty room through rose-colored glasses, darling, you're still sitting alone in it. That's all I've ever given you."

"You think I'm alone, when you go?"

"I'm not around to help you. Three-quarters of the time I'm not even available to call."

"You're where you're needed. I have a life, Wynston, and it isn't an empty one. If I need things such as meaningful work, friends, a safe home for my son - I secured them. And everything I can't do for you, all the times I wasn't able to lend my sabers or my authority, I know you managed. Perhaps it came close to driving me crazy being unable to help, but...we do what we do best. We take care of the half we can do. Now we're together. I'd go through it all again just for tonight."

He shook his head. "I love you. Stars, Ruth, I worship you. Inside and out." There was finally an unmixed smile forming on his lips. "Believe me, if I had the ability to pull that back to rational levels I...wouldn't. Ever. But when I think of everything I want for you, I'm not enough to fill that. I'm not sure what could be, but it isn't me."

"You don't have to be everything for me."

"I don't like to leave a job half done, darling."

"You trust your partner to manage the other half, don't you?" She sat up and slid a hand over to cover his.

He tangled his fingers with hers and looked down at the result. "I trust you to do anything."

"Sometimes you're here with me. Sometimes you're far away, living by the conscience I trust. Either way, I don't need you to be everything. I need you

to be you." She shifted even closer to wrap her arms around him while she kissed him, her eyes open and bright. "Beloved. Do you believe that this is what I want, and everything I want?"

"When we're like this, I can believe anything," he said softly.

She kissed him again. "You are good enough for me," she said, firmly, gently. "You're good. You're strong, and principled, and clever, and handsome, and worthy, and kind to me, you are loved, there is no one else I would rather be with, and believe me, I am with you no matter where you go or what you face."

He settled an arm around her waist and grazed his lips against hers.

"Thank you," he whispered. "For everything."

"Thank you for coming back."

"Always."

"I love you."

"It took me too long to catch up with that. I love you."

She nodded and slid a hand up to stroke his hair around and behind his ear. "And I worship you. Inside and out."

"There is no one else I would rather be with." He kissed her a little more firmly. "No matter where you go or what you face."

After that they didn't speak for a while, except in kisses, caresses, and more of what they both craved from each other and were glad to give.

L+11 years: Loss in the field

Wynston didn't slow down to greet Ruth in the rain. He was in no mood to stay out getting soaked. She seemed to understand, as she always did; she walked beside him while he stalked into the house, straight to the bedroom, and slumped on the edge of the bed.

"Wynston?" she said gently, sitting beside him.

"Trouble at work," he understated.

"What happened?"

"The *Tenebrous* is gone," he said. "Not even from an outside threat, Ruth, this was a power play from within the Dark Council. They extracted certain information from the Minister of Intelligence and from there it was all but ordained. After everything we've done to stabilize the situation, we finally had everyone looking at the war at once, and then - this." He hated these people sometimes, these masters of the galaxy, the worst of the Empire and yet somehow its most respected leaders.

"Stars. Your people?"

"Vector and I had enough warning to get the place evacuated. That's the best news I can report." It was a closer call than it should have been. "My organization has done more to hold this Empire together than some of those squabbling maniacs have done their whole lives, and I have to do it with them actively opposing me."

"Anything you can point me at?"

"No. We can't...that isn't how we can get things done, though some days I wish it were." He should have stopped talking right around 'trouble at work,' but she was still listening, wrapping an arm around his shoulders and giving him a place to get the rant out of his system.

"I'm sorry," she said. "We'll rebuild."

"Yes. We will." He clasped his hands so tight it hurt. "This isn't a total loss. Very soon my people will be commissioning the *Aegis*. The mission goes on." He clenched his jaw for a moment. "No matter what."

"Even if I can't hit anything, my resources are at your disposal."

He shook his head. Her help was in keeping him sane. He wanted her to do more, but he could never be sure of her employer. "I don't want you getting tied up too closely in this." He squeezed his hands tighter for a moment. "I'm glad your employer has given us breathing room thus far."

Believe me, we're still getting the right thing done, in spite of the Council." He took a short controlled in-out breath. "Come here."

She wrapped her other arm around him, and he buried his nose in her hair and took in the scent of her. It didn't make the situation any less infuriating.

"One step forward," he muttered. "Half a parsec back."

"You take big steps, beloved."

She always seemed to have something nice to say. He caught her waist and brought her down to the bed with him. "I love you," he informed her.

She curled up against him, tracing nonsense patterns on his chest, and he rested for a while. There was nothing he could do right at that moment. He let his mind drift, and she let him be.

It was better than a safehouse, being here. No matter what happened, she was always ready to welcome him home. Having that to come back to made all the difference in the world.

"I've always known," he said slowly, "that one way or another, in some form, with or without me, the Empire would go on. You make me feel like I have a place in that." He traced the curve of her cheek. "I never thought the galaxy I work for was one I was cut out to live in. I just make it safe for others, I'm not meant to keep it. But with you, I can live in it. And that has been..." he broke off and laughed softly. "You've given me ideas beyond my station, darling. I hope you're pleased with yourself."

"I'm pleased," she said. "With us." She kissed him. "You were the one giving all the ideas to start with. Don't think I've forgotten."

"Mine weren't all that original."

"I thought the implementation was very good."

He laughed again.

"I love the way you smile," she murmured.

"I should hope so. You make me do a lot of it, I'd hate to think you don't enjoy the result."

She kissed him again, lazily, using one hand to slowly muss his hair in that way that had annoyed him for years but had at some point just come to mean that he was hers. "Can you stay tonight?" she whispered.

"Yes."

"Good. I'll try to supply enough hugs to last you the next stage of the plan."

Weary though he was, he was glad to settle his arms more firmly around her to return the favor.

L+13 years: Family and friends

Colrand was tall for twelve, whip-lean and whip-fast. Ruth waited at the edge of the patio and watched while he faced off against Jaesa. She had filled out over the years since her twins came along, but she was still balanced and deadly. She had the edge of skill over Colrand for now. In another couple of years he might well pull even.

Ruth stood by Wynston and watched. Cole's form was textbook-perfect, for a very fast-moving textbook. One that kept skipping chapters as the boy flipped between techniques, adapting as quickly as Jaesa's defense.

Even more quickly. He finally managed to touch his training saber to the base of her neck. "Hit," he sang.

"Yes," acknowledged Jaesa, lowering her own blade. "That was very well done."

He flashed a buoyantly happy grin at all and sundry, then started back toward the edge of the patio. "Who's next? Wynston?"

Wynston looked patient. "I'm afraid that apart from giving you the basic blaster-fire-deflection exercises there's not much I can do against you in a stand-up fight these days."

"You beat up Force users somehow."

"Only when I have to. When I go after Force users I rig the battlefield or at least bring cheats to prevent a fight."

Colrand shook his black hair away from his face. "Like what cheats?" he said suspiciously.

"If I tell you I can't very well use them, now can I?" Wynston grinned. "It's something of a long list, if you want to know."

"Yeah, I want to know."

"Well, first of all, there's manipulating the target's social, financial, and political environment in an effort to 'naturally' bring their goals more into line with my own. No fight required. Next, persuasion, negotiation, diplomacy. Asking nicely. Asking nicely with bribes. Asking nicely with bribes and threats from any force you can bring to bear."

Colrand looked at his training saber. "I'm not seeing the fighting yet."

"No. It's in my best interests not to fight you. If you're a very serious threat it'd be wise for me to arrange for you to come to blows with someone more qualified to face you, a Jedi or a Sith, and then just monitor that fight and intervene only if necessary. Failing that, perhaps rig the environment. An accidental shuttle explosion, a building collapse, a sudden migratory stampede – you laugh, but I've seen someone get away with that one."

Ruth and Jaesa exchanged looks. Wynston kept going.

"Alternately, smaller-scale disasters. A minor explosion. A broken power conduit. Poison. A fast-acting infection combined with the very badly timed failure of any transport that might've gotten the target to treatment. Allergic reaction, if the target has any known allergies. Stealth approach for a knife to the back, if you're very confident in both your silence and your ability to maintain a cap on your emotions – we could practice your detecting that, now that I think of it. Moving on, a sabotaged droid modified to deliver some kind of killing blow. Sniper shot. Airlock malfunction. A hefty shot of tranquilizers or a very fast carbo-spray job, if

the target's to be taken in alive." He smiled slightly. "Lightsaber combat isn't my area of expertise. Preventing lightsaber combat is."

Colrand took a moment to digest all that.

"Mom?" he said.

"Yes, Cole?"

"Remind me why I'm not supposed to just punch Force-blinds in the face the first chance I get?"

"First of all, most of them have no idea how to do what Wynston just listed, and second, many of those who do are on our side. Be sure of the threat before you start throwing your weight around."

"Believe it or not," Wynston said helpfully, "I favor asking nicely."

"I hope so," said Colrand.

"If you like I'll show you my baseline kit, the things I always have in the field. There are ways to deal with a lot of it once you know what to expect."

The boy looked to Ruth. "Can I?"

"Sure." She was usually strict about lesson hours, but she could let him set the saber aside early today. "Go on."

Colrand put the training saber back on the rack and went to join Wynston indoors.

"Jaesa," said Ruth, watching where they had disappeared into the house, "I think my boyfriend and my son are bonding over neurotoxins."

"It sounded like it, yes."

"Ever look back and think this isn't where you expected to be when you were younger?"

"You say that like we're old ladies."

"We've got two marriages, a divorce, and three children between us. That's respectable old-lady material. And not at all where I expected to end up."

"It's good?"

"It's good."

"Cole is really coming along. The offer to go to the academy on Arrend is always open, if you like. You can visit any time, and Kaeve and I have dozens of students there, it's a good environment for us non-traditional Sith."

"I'm keeping him," Ruth said with a smile. "I plan on keeping him for quite a while."

L+14 years: A problem job

The Emperor called, and Ruth answered. She endured the creeping study of her mind, received her assignment, and went forth to work.

They intercepted the target's ship, an unregistered frigate, in deep space, and secured a boarding action. Ruth left Pierce to make sure the place was locked down while she proceeded to the bridge.

Where she was very surprised to find Wynston standing next to her target.

"Ruth." Wynston's look was happy but questioning. "It's good to see you."

"I'm here on assignment, Wynston. Step aside."

His smile vanished. "Ruth, this is Lord Vrayen. He's one of ours, he's been instrumental in disrupting certain highly destructive fringe groups in—"

"Step aside, Wynston."

"I'll vouch for him."

"That isn't the point. Get out of the way."

He was rapidly settling into his business mode, the serious intense one that meant he wanted something done and he wanted it done now. "We can talk about this. We're fighting planet-killers here, and Vrayen is--"

She drew her sabers and started for the target.

Wynston moved to intercept. "Ruth, wait!"

She Force pushed him aside and into the wall, giving the subtle force adjustment at the end that would slam his arm in particular to shock the blaster out of his hand. He would not stop her. The Sith she was descending upon raised his saber but he was too slow, and she was far, far too powerful.

It was over quickly. She shivered when the target fell, and rolled her shoulders uneasily. The kill felt bad. She shoved the thought aside; this was her job. She turned instead to Wynston, who had gotten to his feet and was edging toward her with frozen-faced caution. "It had to be done," she told him. "I'm sorry. Don't get in my way like that again, this is serious work."

"It is," he said stiffly. "Quite serious. Were you listening to me? He was--"

"It's done, Wynston." He wasn't usually like this. "Please. Don't make this difficult."

"This was one of the Emperor's personal jobs. Wasn't it."

"Yes." She shifted uncomfortably. She felt cold. "I'm sorry. I'd better get going. There's work to do."

"That there is." He rubbed his shoulder and frowned. "For one thing I've got a planet to save, and Vrayen's no longer in a position to take care of it." He gave her a long, searching look. And then, when she turned toward the door, he again made to intercept her, only this time he kissed her, hard, untying her hair to run his hands through it while it fell to cover her neck. He kept his forehead against hers and stared into her eyes. "Do you feel even slightly different now than you did a few minutes ago?" he asked.

"Not really? I'm a little cold."

He looked grim. "I know that. Be careful, Ruth. I'll be in touch."

L+14 years: Wynston starts research

The matter of Vrayen's mission was solved in short order. Wynston made sure of it. He had other places to be.

Even now, after having severed most ties with old Intelligence, Wynston maintained an authorized Cipher agent identity with appropriate face and personnel records. The nice thing about Cipher agents is that their relative autonomy in the field meant that very few people expected to know them or see them around all the time.

Once through the doors, he passed unchallenged into the archives and gathered everything he could find on the Jedi who had once resisted the Emperor's will and the Sith who had betrayed the Emperor once before. They knew something, had something Wynston didn't, something that had to do with those audiences and the blank killing that followed them.

It was time to talk.

L+14 years 6 months: Father

When Ruth got home she found Colrand on the big console, staring at a still holo image that looked a lot like him. Older, and in an Imperial uniform.

Yes, older. Perhaps a little more tired around the eyes. The set of his jaw was still just the same. Not a single hair had moved from its severe style, though a few had changed from black to grey. The mole on his cheek gave him a little merciful distinction from her son.

Colrand's voice trampled her thoughts. "He looks like me."

"Yes," she admitted.

"I dragged some information out of military records. He's a big deal. I couldn't display all the commendations at once on this thing."

"I don't doubt it. He was always very good at his job. And very dedicated to it."

"I've heard you talk about him when I wasn't supposed to be listening. I know he sold you out somehow. I know you said that he lied to you all the time. Used you." He looked up and half smiled. "Then you always backpedal and say one good thing came out of it."

"It's true."

"Do you ever worry I might turn out like him?"

"You couldn't. There's not a malicious bone in your body."

"Right, and he's a liar. A fake. A traitor." He looked back up at the holo display. "I don't see it."

Seeing the mirrored images like this? Neither did she. Then again, she never had. "He always made sure we see him looking good. Cole, you're worth ten thousand of him because you're good on the inside, too."

He brought up some different text, leaving the portrait in place beside. "It says he worked for you for just a year and a half."

"That's right."

"What'd he do there?"

Um. "Multiple jobs. As a lowly apprentice I had very little in the way of crew when he was first assigned to me. Vette was traveling with me because she liked me. That was it." She drifted toward an armchair and sat down, still looking at the holo. "He had been in the service for years; he had a vast understanding of politics, tactics, the military in general, the history of many planets we visited, and he knew just what information to bring up when I needed it." She wrenched her eyes away to give Colrand a shaky smile. "Understand, I was eighteen with some homeschooling and half a year's experience in an accelerated program on Korriban. His knowledge was invaluable. He piloted the ship, supported me in the field – he was a good combat medic, a killer shot, a superb tactician. And an able administrator. He kept things running, kept us supplied, kept our papers

in order so I could save my energy for what mattered. And he...he believed in the Empire. He wasn't cruel or wasteful or concerned with his own pride at the expense of the mission or anything like too many people are. He knew what we were fighting for, he gave it his all, and even when he disagreed with my approach he obeyed because that's what he was sworn to do. Stay at my side, advise me if he thought I was making a mistake, but in the end do what I needed him to do. I could...I could rely on him." Until she couldn't. She swallowed hard. "So that's what he did when he worked for me."

"And then he pulled something."

"Yes. He undid it all."

"For your old master? Darth Baras?"

"For Darth Baras. Quinn attempted to kill me, on Baras's order. He failed."

"Well. Obviously." Colran stared at the floor, then shot one furtive look at her. "He tried to kill you?"

"Yes. He did."

"Huh." He looked at the holo image. "I thought you and he were married? But that isn't on the record."

"No." She had had that removed. "It isn't on the record. But we were."

"And then he tried to kill you anyway. Did he know about me?"

"No. Neither of us did."

"Huh." He looked at the floor. "Maybe if he did it would've been different?"

"Probably not." What was a little thing like one's child against Quinn's precious orders? "He always put the job first. Ahead of everything. Everything he had, and everything he claimed to love."

"Yeah. I guess it's working for him, judging by the awards." He watched his own foot tapping for a little while. "Does he know about me now?"

"Yes. I informed him before I had him transferred back into the service."

"He knew the whole time?"

"I haven't allowed him to contact us."

"Oh."

"Colrand, he can't be trusted. He never could. I didn't just keep him away on a whim."

"Yeah. I know. If...I know you do things peacefully, Mom, but if he's that dangerous why didn't you just kill him?"

A good question. "I didn't want to kill him. He was dear to me once. And he's your father, Cole." She nodded toward the display with its long list of commendations. "In regular service, if nobody gets close to him, he can do a lot of good. He has done well. But he is never coming near me, nor you."

"I don't think my father being alive is that helpful if I never get to see him."

"When you're old enough to defend yourself," she said softly. "Not before." She looked back at the holo in spite of herself. "Now please take that down."

He frowned. "I haven't gotten to see this. I'm not done reading."

"All right." She couldn't say no to him. She also couldn't think. Instead she hurried to be elsewhere, her heart pounding a rapid retreat.

L+14 years 6 months: Orpheia recruits

Wynston didn't know how long this mission was going to take. And he didn't know how the major players were going to react. Whatever happened, the person doing this couldn't be Wynston. That left too much unprotected.

He constructed a disguise, Human because Humans could blend in in more places, get away with more, and besides he liked the way people treated him when he was Human. Female because he would rather be

female if and when he started dealing with the Jedi hero, given her known proclivities, and given how much (that is to say, not at all) he suspected he would enjoy playing along with that with such a woman. If there was no other way to reach her he could just try again with a male disguise.

He made the construct, set his disguise generator to activate. Wynston had better keep a low profile. In his place, Orphea was going to find answers and bring them home.

*

The big Sith had been climbing the mountain path for some time. The slim brunette had been following him, slowly closing the distance. In a cave section cutting through the mountain the Sith stopped in place. "So," he said, his voice ringing in the cavern despite being delivered at a conversational tone. "Hunter. You've finally caught up."

That wasn't a promising start. Even this many years after the fact, the name 'Hunter' was enough to set teeth on edge. Orphea took another few steps before halting. With a face that could pass as some relative of Ruth's, she smiled a bland smile. "I'd be obliged if you never called me that again."

"I have tolerated your clumsy efforts at tracking me long enough, hunter. I should crush you where you stand."

Orphea stood her ground. "Lord Scourge, fifteen years ago you spearheaded an effort to stop some effort of the Emperor's, an effort so dangerous that you were willing to work with a Jedi and risk an openly treasonous return to Dromund Kaas to end it. Whatever it is, it's happening again. I think you know why and I think you could use the resources I have to stop it."

Lord Scourge turned around. He was huge, seemingly even bigger in the confines of the passage. He wore battle-ready armor despite the fact that there was no sentient presence within hundreds of clicks of this forsaken mountain. His eyes seemed to flash a brighter red as he looked Orphea and her plain, utilitarian leathers over. "*I think* you should scurry away and leave this to your betters."

"Rituals on Tatooine and Embaril. Confirmed planetkillers in varying stages of development located on Aargonar and Rodis. There's a reason, and I don't think indiscriminate destruction is it."

"Actually, it is, or close enough." Scourge made a very small laughing exhalation at the look on Orpheas's face. "So you know a little about a few insignificant planets. I do not think you realize the magnitude of what you are meddling with. What is this to you, little hunter? Is there not some smaller quest that would get you killed as easily?"

"This is the only one that matters. I have trackers. I have credits. I have manpower. I have experience in going where I'm not wanted and doing what my opponent doesn't want done. I can go a long way toward foiling whatever plan he has. But I need to know what that is...and I need to know why he can no longer command you."

Scourge raised a brow ridge. "Then you already know his powers of control?"

"I know more of it than I'd like to and less than I need to. You got free somehow. Furthermore you know someone who threw off a direct mental attack from him. I need that information."

His sneer was dark and somehow thorough. "There is nothing in you that will ever be capable of facing the Emperor's will."

"No. But if anyone alive has what it takes, I know who could do it." Orpheas crossed her arms. "So. Do you think we can talk?"

He considered. "Perhaps we can work together," he said. "If you have resources to offer, I would be a fool to turn them down. The galaxy is at stake."

That was news to Orpheas. She was a little surprised that her immediate impulse was to file it away and get back to seeking the interesting information. When Lord Scourge got moving, Orpheas followed. This Wrath was free, and she would do anything it took to ensure that the new Wrath was, too.

L+14 years 8 months: Warning Cole

"Colrand. Hello."

"Wynston." Colrand looked briefly to the door behind the Chiss. "Mom's not around, is she?"

"No, she's still out on assignment. I wanted to talk to you."

"Yeah, sure." The teenager gestured toward the living room. "Uh, something to drink?"

"Water, please." He considered whiskey instead, but this wasn't a time for social drinking and it sure as hell wasn't a time for nerve-deadening drinking.

Colrand sent the nearest droid on its way to the kitchen and went to perch on an armchair opposite Wynston. "So, uh, what's up?"

"It's about your mother. What can you tell me about her in-person audiences with the Emperor?"

"Not a lot. The Servants call her, she packs up by herself and goes. It's hours and hours away, wherever it is. She comes back to prep, seems kinda depressed – or she goes straight to the job – gets it done, comes home, sits by the fire a while." Colrand fiddled nervously with his hair. "I mean, the Emperor is a powerful Dark Side presence. Really powerful. I've sensed stuff that'd give me nightmares and Mom says it's not a tenth what this guy puts out. So, yeah, she's in a bad mood after."

"I think the effect on her between when she gets her assignment and when she carries it out is more than just a reaction to his presence."

Colrand shook his head. "If you knew the half of what you can see walking around the Citadel while Force-sensitive? I know it's freaky seeing her like that, but sit under a heavy Dark Side presence for long enough and you're gonna feel bad. I always just figured that's how she gets when she gets that close."

A kitchen droid whirled up with a glass, and Wynston took it and sipped. "Cole, I've seen your mother neck deep in the Dark Side and believe me,

she was nothing like as dead inside as what she seems when she comes home from these audiences."

The teenager watched him intently. "When did you see that?"

"A long time ago. Before you were born. I've seen her get angry, I've seen her hate, and for that matter I've directly observed her talking to the previous incarnation of the Voice, and she was never like this. I think when he gives her these jobs in person he lays an outright compulsion, and I don't think she knows how to stop herself."

"It's still just her job, though, right? She does it, because she's supposed to do her job anyway, then she gets to come home."

"Her last couple of targets – the forced ones, the ones he made sure of personally – have been people I know for a fact were serving the public interest in important capacities. If there are more mistaken assignments like that the Emperor's orders could start doing real damage." He sipped his water. "Furthermore I hope you'll agree that Ruth shouldn't be getting coerced into anything."

"We're Imperial. We don't really get a choice about that."

"There's always a choice. If you don't see one you make one. There are people in this galaxy who have resisted the Emperor's command, which brings me to why I visited you today. I need you to contact me when she's called to him again. I know he doesn't keep a perfectly regular schedule but by the averages it's about time for another job to come up. I've found people I think can help, but I don't want them introduced until *after* the Emperor gets his close look at her head."

"I see," Colrand said cautiously.

"I don't like hiding things from your mother, but every secret I keep in this matter I'm keeping for a reason. We have no other choice, not until we're sure she's free."

"You just said there's always a choice."

Wynston stopped short. The kid was good about picking up on inconsistencies. Sharp, quick, and he'd always been fiercely loyal...just what was needed. "The other choice is giving up and losing her, one command at a time." Wynston set down his glass. "That's never going to happen. I love your mother very much, Cole, and I will not allow harm to come to her. Or to you."

Colrand's dark blue eyes narrowed a little at the declaration. Which was, admittedly, more than Wynston usually directed at people. The teenager looked thoughtfully at Wynston. Then he looked thoughtfully at the floor. Then he nodded. "I'll call," he said. "Next time she goes."

"Thank you."

"It'd be nice to have her not coming home like that."

"Then I'll see to it it stops." Wynston stood. "I have to get moving. Please keep this quiet until the time comes."

"Yeah, I get that. Wynston...be careful."

Wynston nodded. "I will."

"It'll be good to have both of you home."

"There's nowhere I'd rather be, Cole. Take care."

L+14 years 10 months: Larr Gith

Orpheia had a beat-up Mantis-class freighter with an out-of-date Huttese registration. Lord Scourge sneered at the accommodations, but he sneered at everything, so far as Orpheia could see. At least he had agreed to come aboard.

Under any other circumstances Orpheia might have doubted Scourge's story of an Emperor bent on consuming the life of the galaxy, one planet at a time, to make himself all-powerful. That wasn't the will that had brought the Empire this far. Was it? Was the Council of squabbling madmen ruled over by nothing better than one madman on a larger time scale?

Well, even if that was the case, that's what people like Orphea were there to counteract. Like Orphea, and like Ruth, one way or another. There was planning to do.

"My sources indicate that Larr Gith is...occupied...on Corellia," Orphea told Scourge. "Primarily with spice and talking about the glory days. I think it's time we got her off the streets."

Lord Scourge waved negligently. "It will be best to introduce the Jedi only when we must. She was less than useful during our preparations the last time."

"She's got something that can stand up to the Emperor's will. That's useful."

"An intrinsic quality, hunter. You are not going to somehow capture or transfer it."

"The current Wrath could likely pick it up. Better than leaving her under his thumb in the battles to come."

Scourge waved a hand. "We can divert her elsewhere or kill her when the time comes."

"You're joking, right? She would be much more valuable on our side."

"That cannot be done. We should concentrate on foiling the rituals the Emperor seeks to use to offer up mass death to his own plans. And once your...people...locate his true form, we should take the Jedi in to do what must be done."

"I think you'll find the Wrath can't be so easily dismissed."

"Do not insult me. The Wrath he appointed in my place is a mere girl, little hunter, and she will not slow me down. Enough. I am more interested in seeing this *Aegis* you claim."

"I want the Jedi first. Getting her in touch with the Wrath is not negotiable."

"The Wrath is irrelevant," Scourge said impatiently.

"You or your Jedi helps return the Wrath to normal, or you can say goodbye to my people and my assistance."

"Withdrawing your support serves no one, hunter. If I fail, you will die."

Orpheus's voice stayed perfectly level. "If the Wrath doesn't go free I will let you, me, and the rest of this blighted galaxy burn." It was a bluff. Mostly. Sith were supposed to be ruled by their passions; Scourge would understand. Orpheus held his gaze with her false dark eyes until she could see he was starting to believe her. "If there's no kind of shielding you know how to use, you're going to take me to someone who can."

Lord Scourge sneered. "She is dear to you."

A fact Orpheus wouldn't have had to bring up if the man hadn't argued so damn much. "Yes," Orpheus said. "She is. And we need her. Bring me to someone who can begin to free her and then I'll help you save your own skin."

*

The blonde slouched in a booth of her own, watching the dancers with glassy eyes. Orpheus hadn't recently looked up the newest fads in spice, but she recognized the general effect. The blonde was beautiful in spite of the care she wasn't taking of herself. Even through the glaze those eyes were a distinctive amber hue. Wonderful figure, dressed to advantage in a dark dress that, while not particularly clean, was cut to show off. She was lovely, and she was hideously out of it.

The blonde raised her head and scrunched up her nose when Orpheus approached. "You can just move along, sugar," she said in a husky contralto.

A ridiculous urge rose to obey, but Orpheus stayed in place. Seconds later Lord Scourge placed a heavy hand on her shoulder as if to make sure she didn't wander.

The blonde squinted up at the Sith. "Uggh. Why have you not died in a fire yet?"

"I ignored that directive, Larr Gith, as I have always ignored the frivolous orders you gave."

"Did you find your boyfriend?"

"I assume you mean the Emperor. His activity has resumed. You are needed again."

"Hmph. Who's your friend?"

"This is Orphea. You will find she brings slightly more utility than the allies we had last time."

Larr Gith broadcast arrogance in Orphea's direction. "The allies we had last time could at least..." She scrunched up her nose again. "I just had a great idea, Lord Scourge. How about you die in a fire for real this time?"

"If that occurs, it will be in the same blaze that claims you." He looked around. "Come. I doubt you have much to pack before we depart."

"I'm not coming with--"

"Larr Gith," Orphea said in a respectful tone. The woman had an ego. That much was known. "I've heard the stories about what you did to break through and stop the Emperor, at a time nobody believed it was possible. He's back, but we understand more about his power and how to stop him for good. You resisted him once. We're all waiting for you to do the impossible again."

Larr Gith glowered even harder at Lord Scourge. "And you brought the second coming of all my Jedi bosses ever?"

"We can arrange to make this minimally inconvenient," said Orphea. "I can arrange any creature comfort you care to name on the go. Just teach the Wrath – the current Wrath – anything you know about blocking the Emperor's influence. Coordinate with her to end his threat. And afterward – well, I'm given to understand that the Jedi Council cut you loose, after

everything you accomplished, merely because you didn't dance to their tune." Technically the Jedi's destructive hard-partying ways had gotten her labeled a disgrace, an embarrassment, and a pernicious influence on the young. Orphea had worked with worse. "I treat my allies better than that. We finish this quest, you can name your pleasure, starting with getting this one—" she jerked her chin up at Lord Scourge – "out of your life for good."

"Will he die in a fire?" she said hopefully.

"I'm not at liberty to discuss that at the present time," Orphea said slyly. She felt Lord Scourge's glare boring into the top of her head.

"Come," Scourge growled. "The Emperor's plan makes more progress with every moment we waste here."

"Have I mentioned how much I didn't miss you?" snarled Larr Gith. "Fine. Fine. You want your Hero, you'll get her."

The Jedi stood, stretched, drew herself into a pose that was nothing short of regal. She was a statuesque creature, taller than Orphea, possessed of a poise that would be stunning if she were clean.

She half-smiled, half-sneered at Orphea. "All right, sugar. Arrange whatever it is that makes you feel important, and I'll arrange to save your ass. Again."

BOOK IV: Drawn

L+15 years: Assignment

The oily creeping of the Emperor's attention pushed into Ruth's mind, sampled here and there, reviewed her job and her home and laughed at them. She had been through this intrusion enough that she could stay standing and outwardly calm, but anger and a baseless shame bubbled in the Emperor's wake.

Finally his focus withdrew, back to the physical form on the throne. "Wrath," said the Emperor. "The war shifts. The show continues on the front lines, as it must...you are needed elsewhere."

"What do you require?"

"My Hand will direct you, and you will be assigned servants as necessary. Your campaign must be swift, precise, and complete. To begin, one death is critical..."

She received her assignment.

*

Orpheia answered a call from Colrand in private; Wynston took a sleek silvery ship from the *Aegis's* hangar, alone, to call Ruth and arrange introductions.

He called Ruth on the main holo and got an answer right away. She looked straight-backed but a little dull-eyed. "Hi," she said coolly.

"Ruth. It's good to see you."

"You as well."

I was wondering whether you're busy? I'd like to see you."

"I'm on a job. Are you anywhere near Hutta? You could help if you like."

"I can arrange that."

She said she could pick him up in grimy Jiguuna and they could proceed from there. He suggested a meeting in his old ally Nem'ro the Hutt's palace. Then he leaped for hyperspace.

Nem'ro the Hutt's palace was a sprawling complex with arched hallways connecting a maze of cantinas, gambling halls, markets, and more.

Wynston avoided the crowded cantina, instead waiting in a curving hallway, empty at the moment. He had arranged to keep out visitors. He had arranged a few things. When a footstep sounded at the far end, Wynston perked up. Ruth strode into view, bright-eyed, proud in every line.

Wynston made eye contact. He touched a button in his pocket.

"I'm sorry," she said, and leaped.

The blast door would have caught her in the face if she didn't twist at the last moment to seize the closing edges. Even she couldn't force them apart. His heart started beating again when they finally closed.

A resounding slam shook the edges of the door. The gas should be pouring in now, enough to slow down even her, and the blast door behind her must be closed already. But she wouldn't go quietly.

Another slam on the door. "Ruth, if you can hear me," he called, "don't do this. You're being controlled. This isn't you. Fight it."

"Wynston." Another slam, and another. "I have to."

The next impact forced a dent. How long could she stay unaffected? Powerful Force-users could draw on a single breath for a long time, but that had never been a talent of hers. He was depending on that.

"Seems you expected this," called Ruth. She had stopped hitting. His stomach twisted when he saw the discoloration growing from a point about chest height.

"I knew it might happen. I knew if you were willing to go out of your way for me, it was me you wanted. I promise you I won't hurt you, Ruth, just stop this." The words wavered on his lips, not for lack of truth, just for lack

of belief in the situation. "I love you."

"I love you, too. But I have to do this." The tip of her lightsaber finally burst through the blast door. He knew the gas that followed wouldn't be visible. Was there still enough inside to stop her?

He couldn't be here to find out. He had promised Nem'ro's security wouldn't have to deal with an angry Sith, but things might not turn out that way. Nem'ro's surveillance feeds would give him a better idea of when she succumbed to the gas, if there was enough to suffice. After that he could sedate her and get her home.

His head swam as he ran. How had this happened? He'd been careful. His operations out on the Rim had been done under disguises, with misdirections, several names, all of them fake. Why was the order on him? He hadn't told Ruth or any of the Emperor's servants anything about Scourge's story. Had Colrand mentioned he was up to something? Had Scourge intentionally dropped the wrong word somewhere now that he thought he had the shape and the use of Orphea's connections?

He ignored the security guard in the surveillance room, reserving his attention to the feed from the closed-off section of the entry hall. Ruth was still pressing her saber to the door, but she was kneeling now, her saber angled awkwardly up. Then, finally, she dropped the weapon and fell to hands and knees, then over on her side. "Give it a minute," he said to the guard. "Then start venting."

He retrieved her as soon as the trap had been vented and opened. He had to pay one of the braver locals to help carry Ruth back to her ship. There he lay her down in his own bed and drugged her again.

As soon as the practical actions were done he gave himself over to shaking. It took him a few minutes to get his thoughts in order. Ruth, once she awakened, would kill him on sight. Orphea would be no safer. He should take her...take her home; so long as she was incapacitated he didn't want her anywhere near Lord Scourge, not while he still thought she was a problem. Home and in his arms were the only two places in the galaxy she could safely be weak, and one of those was no longer possible. Wynston

should take her home, then let Colrand know to expect Orphea with guests soon.

He put her to bed once he had her patched up. He tucked her in. Drugged her some more. Set course for home.

When he reached the Niral estate he drove his covered speeder past the gate and right up to the door. He still couldn't prevent a little rain from hitting her when he carried her in. The grounds were quiet, but he didn't have time to explore and see whether that was due to trouble. She was going to wake up sooner or later and he couldn't be there when that happened. He called out in the hallway: "Colrand? 4P?" Nothing. "Cole. Colrand! Where are you?"

He rounded the corner into the living room and reflexively, protectively tightened his arms around Ruth's unconscious form. There before him Colrand, looking worried but healthy, was standing to one side of the fireplace. Opposite him was his older image.

Father and son turned at Wynston's entrance. Cole looked openly scared; Quinn, rigidly poised in a uniform more decorated than Wynston remembered, looked like his first calculation was recommending blood.

"Quinn, stay where you are," barked Wynston. "Cole, she's all right. Are you?"

"Yeah." Colrand was on his way over. "Yeah, I'm fine. What happened?"

"Sedatives." Wynston brought Ruth to the nearest couch and laid her down, letting Colrand move in to take her hand. "They'll wear off before long; it takes a lot to keep your mother down. You remember what we discussed?"

"Yeah." He was doing a good job managing his fear.

"She has orders on me. She can't disobey. I couldn't avoid a fight but she will be all right, and I will send help." Wynston straightened and jerked his head at Quinn. "Now what is he doing here?"

Quinn hadn't moved from his station by the fire. He just turned to look down his nose at Wynston. "My job, agent."

That arrogance. Always the arrogance. "I don't know why I bothered asking. That's all you've ever done with her and hers." He turned back to Colrand. "Listen to your mother, all right? I'll keep out of sight and someone will be in touch to get that order lifted. Look after her for me. And don't take what this one says at face value."

"It would seem you're the one with the death mark, agent," Quinn said quietly. "Step away from the Wrath. And stay clear of my son."

"You weren't invited here, Quinn. Try talking to the master of the house before you make yourself comfortable."

"Step away from the Wrath." Quinn laid a hand on his blaster.

"Father, don't," said Colrand.

Wynston was tired. He was tired, the job was left undone, and there was nothing he could do but retreat. He would gladly have shot Quinn where he stood, but not with Colrand watching. "Today isn't the day we resolve this, Quinn. Watch yourself. Cole, look for the orders he's following. They're the only reality he knows. Look after your mother. I love you, and her. No matter what happens." He forced himself to take a step toward the door. Then another.

Quinn started raising the blaster. Quick as thought Colrand jumped between the two of them. The boy Force shoved Quinn back against the nearest wall, clumsily pinning his limbs in place.

"I can hold him," Colrand said with some effort. "Go. Find what it takes to bring Mom back."

Wynston ran.

*

The hatred Colrand saw on Quinn's face as the older man watched Wynston go was chilling. It receded behind Quinn's normal stern solemn

expression the moment Colrand released him. This was a contained man, a tremendously controlled one. One with a history Colrand shouldn't forget. Since Quinn's appearance a couple of hours ago he had been softspoken, almost meek, but this was the one person Colrand's mother feared.

"Father," said Colrand. It was a good word, no matter what. "Do you know anything about those orders?"

Quinn looked at him. "No." Then he hurried to Ruth's side and knelt. Colrand chewed nervously at his cheek while Quinn checked Ruth's pale hands, pushed her sleeves up a little, checked something about her neck. He traced a small red needle mark there. "I don't have the tools for a proper diagnostic," he said in a low hard voice.

"She's fine," said Colrand. "If Wynston says she'll be okay, she'll be okay."

"That man is not a reliable source. – She seems stable but she needs to warm up. Are there covers available?"

"Her room's right over this way." Colrand kept an eye on Quinn while the officer took the unconscious Ruth in his arms. He wished again he could read Quinn's expression better. It was intent, serious. Worried? Quinn didn't take his eyes off his charge while Colrand guided him down the hall to Ruth's room and turned on the light.

Quinn tucked her in and straightened, hardly so much as blinking while he looked at her. "We should bring or have a droid bring some water. She'll want it when she wakes."

"Yeah, sure."

"How is she?" He hadn't asked that question yet. "In general."

"We shouldn't talk here. You'd probably better not be the first thing she sees when she wakes up."

That snapping blink might qualify as a wince. "Of course," said Quinn.

They went back out to stand by the dead fire. He did look a shade more nervous than he had when he first showed up. He still met Colrand's eyes with a dogged kind of courage, though.

"How is she?" he asked again.

"Good. I mean, work gets intense. With the war." He wasn't going to bring up anything Wynston had said about the Emperor's controls. "But she's been good. She's happy. With..." he looked out the door after Wynston, changed his mind. "Here."

Quinn nodded. "I see. She loves him, then."

"Always has. I can't believe she tried to...but Wynston wouldn't lie about it."

"The agent is a professional liar. He always has been."

"He's a good man." That was something Colrand couldn't doubt.

"It is to his advantage to look that way to you." Quinn fell silent.

Colrand cleared his throat. "I'm glad you came. But with what just happened there, the timing looks funny. Why did you come?"

"I was summoned," Quinn said simply. He sounded sincere; Colrand strained his Force senses but couldn't detect anything useful. "The instructions ordering me here were minimal."

"Do you know if you're staying?"

"I don't know. I suspect that your mother will seek reassignment for me as soon as she finds out I'm here."

"Huh." That was a shame. Colrand had too many questions to answer in just a few hours. Or days. "So is this about the war?"

"Every assignment I've had since the war broke out was directly related to the effort. I could conceivably act as liaison and advisor to a direct military effort spearheaded by the Wrath."

"Maybe. That doesn't explain why she had to stop Wynston."

"Colrand..." Quinn was quiet for a moment. He was such a restrained man, so cautious. He hid a lot. Colrand wanted to know. "That was my first conversation with that man since I left your mother's service. Perhaps things have changed that I didn't see. But he never shows his true intentions, and there is always a purpose to what he does show. And, the moment something he considered entertaining became available, he was always a remorseless opportunist."

"You're wrong," said Colrand. "He's a good person."

"And yet our ultimate master has decreed he must die." Quinn stared at the ashes a moment longer, then looked to Colrand. "Be that as it may. Tell me about yourself. Aren't you anxious to go to Korriban at this point?"

They didn't exactly sit down and make themselves comfortable, but they talked.

*

Ruth didn't understand what she had just done.

Her orders were Wynston had to die, and she carried out her orders. In the most constructive way possible, she did. But how was there a constructive way to kill him?

The paralytic was wearing off, and her arms ached and burned with the memory of raising her sabers against him. She stirred. She met resistance. Blankets. She was in her own room. Wynston had brought her home. She forced herself to her feet, started limping back out toward her ship. She had to give chase. She had to...

What is wrong with you?

She stumbled by the doorway and threw up.

She couldn't press on, not now. The urgency of the hunt had faded, and she was tired. Tired and sick at heart.

There was a glass of water by her bed. She drained it then went to wash up and change. It was full dark outside but she wasn't ready to sleep. She had better go do...something. Check on Colrand. Check the gardens. Check something, make it normal, make her heart stop tearing at her like this. Wynston. She'd tried to kill him. She had to. She mustn't.

She dragged herself out to the living room and stopped, suddenly desperate to balance on her last shred of nerve. Malavai Quinn was standing by the fireplace.

He noticed her movement and knelt, instantly, bowing his head. "My lord Wrath," he said in the familiar voice that seemed to rip the world out from under her.

Seeing a recent picture was nothing like seeing him. Here. In this room. There was more grey in that black hair than she had thought. He had gained a little weight. He was still impeccably dressed. He was here.

After a few long moments, he rose. He held himself as proudly as ever, and the lines beginning to set in his face were more distinguished than sad. He looked well over forty-nine, but as heart-squeezingly handsome as ever.

She shook herself out of shock and found wild anger in its place. "Explain yourself, captain," she snapped.

"Moff, actually, my lord," he said, his voice staying quiet and deferential.

"Explain whatever you are, Quinn. Where is my son?"

"Colrand already retired for the night. We spoke for some time."

"How dare you come here?"

"I am here at the behest of the Imperial Guard. I would not have defied your will for anything less, my lord. I am here to assist you in the Emperor's campaign."

Which she still had no information on. "What do you know about that?"

"Only that my presence is required here for it. I was under the impression that it would already be in progress." One eyebrow lifted slightly. "What battle did you just come from, my lord?"

Something caught in her throat. She forced her way past it to say "An assassination. One kill. I don't need you here."

"So it's true," he said, studying her with that heart-rending intensity he had. "You did confront the agent."

"That's none of your concern."

"It is the only concern I have, my lord." He frowned at an imaginary something just past her elbow. "It seems to border on the sadistic to send *me* to watch you carry out that particular endeavor. Nevertheless, here we are. Consult with your masters to confirm if you wish; I am not free to leave this place."

If the intent of this new campaign wasn't to shred Ruth's sanity, she couldn't explain what was going on. She looked at the fireplace but it had gone cold, and the night rain outside wasn't helping. She had no answers, not until the Emperor's Hand or someone contacted her again.

"I hope Cole wasn't too upset," she said cautiously.

"No. He...welcomed me." Quinn was studying the fireplace now. His voice was quiet. "I always imagined he would look more like you."

Too much. Too much, too much, and she didn't even know where to start retaking control. "No," she said. "He takes after you. In more ways than one."

"He laughs the way you do."

And had Quinn, of all people, already succeeded in making Cole laugh?
"Yes."

"I...I wish to minimize disruption here, my lord, but I hope I will be free to speak with him until such time as our orders become clear. It is...an opportunity I assumed would never come."

One she had never meant to give, but now he was here, and Cole had already seen him. "He's always wanted to know you."

"And I him."

And so Ruth was three for three on breaking hearts one way or another today. And two of those had been drawn out for fifteen years. She shook her head sharply. "So what aren't you telling me about why you came here?"

"If I had more to say, I would. But I didn't ask. I certainly didn't anticipate how...fraught...the situation would be when I arrived."

"You always know the situation, Quinn." It had been so long since she had to drag the truth out of someone in her own home.

"I know the agent finally got in over his head." Quinn slightly adjusted his parade rest. He did that when he was nervous. "I know I have been sent, quite likely to offer the support he is no longer in a position to render, in preparation for a new project. I infer that this project must be of tremendous importance, will likely require all the resources both of us can marshal, and was endangered by the agent's activities."

"You were sent to make it easier for me to kill my partner."

"My lord. Nothing makes that easier. If I can serve you I will, but if it is true that the agent is marked for death at your hand, the only possible comfort I have is to say that I'm sorry."

"Don't bother pretending you feel bad about a kill order on Wynston."

"He means nothing to me, it's you I fear for. The prospect of sacrificing your heart is far harder than that of sacrificing your life, my lord. Believe me, I know." He faced her full on, his eyes nearly black in the uncertain light. "And I'm sorry."

"It isn't like that." She hadn't had a choice. "It isn't like that at all." The look on Wynston's face, the way he'd trapped her. The fact that he'd had to trap her. Her, striking. Why had she done it? Maybe she wasn't that much better after all.

"You were told your duty. You sought to carry it out. In the end you will find that the details don't matter, my lord. We serve. We have no other defense." He looked away again. "And it doesn't make anything better."

"Did they send you to tell me that?"

"No, my lord. That one's personal." He bowed his head and thought a moment before speaking again. "I had expected to support combat and advise you in strategy. I never meant..." He took an unsteady breath.

"Never mind. It meant a great deal to me to meet our son. I should see myself to a room, my lord. I will await your orders in the morning."

"I'm awaiting orders, too," she said past the lump in her throat.

"We always have," he said, at once confident and sad. He bowed deeply.

"Try to sleep, my lord. We can assess the situation in the morning. It helps to stay busy."

She fled that room and went to bed, and Wynston wasn't there, and it was because of her. She curled up around wracking sobs and felt his absence like every caress taken away at once.

*

One of the handlers Wynston had assigned to keep Lord Scourge and Larr Gith occupied on the *Aegis* was awaiting him in the hangar. "Good eve...morning, sir. Any new orders?"

"Keep giving Scourge anything he needs for his ritual-tracking. I'm going to sleep. I'll be busy until tomorrow afternoon. This afternoon."

He stalked to his quarters without greeting anyone else. Once inside he paced. No. No, no, and no. The Emperor's target was all wrong. There were a couple of figures that should've looked more strategically interesting than Wynston; to be honest he'd been watching to make sure of it. He should have had more time. Everything he had told Ruth was supporting the war effort. Everything he had done behind her back was done anonymously, with a different face. He should have had more time.

She shouldn't have been able to do that.

You should know you can terminate anyone if you really have to. He had spared one once, but even a strike like that was possible for some professionals, harder ones....She was never hard.

It wasn't her choice. You saw. Imagine if you'd had that keyword command. Be rational about this.

For fifteen years – no, seventeen – that voice, that mouth, those hands, those eyes have been nothing but –

Shut up. She's an uncontrolled element. It isn't her fault but it is your problem. You have to get Larr Gith to her; Orpheia should be able to do that, easily, she was always meant to. With Jaesa's help Orpheia can manage this. Assuming Quinn keeps his distance.

Why the hell is he there? I can't have him there. Ruth, my people can reason with; Ruth will be willing to go meet with people. Quinn's on the other side. I can't have him watching.

Dammit, I wish Cole hadn't been there. Sod Ruth's orders about Quinn, if not for Cole I would've removed the problem with one blaster shot.

The way she looked at me...

It had been some time since he'd felt iffy enough to drink himself to sleep; his quarters weren't stocked. He stole out into the hall and down to the big stock rooms. A sizeable bottle of anything at all, as long as it was strong.

Vector intercepted him on his way back to his quarters. The Joiner fell into step and smiled worriedly. "Wynston. We didn't realize you had returned."

"I stayed up late to get back," he said.

Vector kept pace with him. "There were difficulties?"

"Worst-case orders," he said. "Well, Larr Gith herself would've been worse. But close enough to worst-case." He took a drink, ignoring Vector's air of mild disapproval. "I wasn't ready."

"I do not think one is ever ready to watch an ally turn. Even knowing it is forced."

"I still have Colrand. If Quinn gets out of the way we proceed just as we would have. If he doesn't..." Wynston tapped the disguise generator implanted in his hip. "If he doesn't I should bloody well move him aside and take his place."

"We have no construct for him, Wynston, and it would be detected from her knowledge of him in any case. It will not be forgiven."

"Does that matter so long as it lasts long enough for her to earn her freedom? I've already lost her, Vector." His head knew that wasn't true. His everything knew otherwise. He reached his own quarters and let Vector in with him. "I knew it might happen like this, and it did, and I wasn't prepared, and she went after me with – just nothing in her eyes, and now she's gone, and my attention *should* be on the mass destruction her master is preparing all around us and all I can think about is her."

"Should we strike directly at the Emperor? This would break his hold."

"First we would have to know where his true form is, and then he would still call her in to confront us. Scourge and Larr Gith would think nothing of striking her down if she got in our way. I can't let that happen." He gestured helplessly. Decided that that was another good opportunity to drink. "I've been failing spectacularly at not letting things happen. I should've just carbonized her on the spot. Frozen in carbonite, not burned to carbon. Freeze her, lock her up until this is resolved." A little more energy abandoned him. "But I need her."

Vector was mercifully quiet.

Wynston took in a breath. He huffed out a breath. Time to start in on the reassurance. "I'm not going to drag Ruth home in carbonite."

"Good," said Vector.

"And I'm not going to try to impersonate Quinn enough to fool her."

"Good."

"I'm also not going to walk up to the Emperor tomorrow and try to stab him myself."

"Good."

"I have never in my life been in this much pain. I can see why people try to avoid it."

"It is rare to hear you acknowledge it."

"Yes, well. My usual sounding board is gone."

"We will prevail. And her orders cannot last."

"Of course." He took another deep draught while gathering his thoughts.

"Anyway, I bugged Ruth's ship prior to her last trip – not onboard audio, just transmissions; I have a little captured data about where her Voice is. I need our people on locating the Emperor's true form. I hate to call in SCORPIO, but if she's still lurking around that data conduit on Nar Shaddaa we should set her the challenge of deducing his location. I'll talk to Jaesa and see whether she's had word from the graduates of her little academy; the Emperor's got to be getting his fanatics from somewhere and if they recruit, sooner or later ordinary Sith in ordinary jobs may hear about it. We should touch base with Vette about artifact hunting, the big stuff. The powerful stuff. Anything that might give us an edge. Then...then I just need to deal with the same meeting I was going to arrange. This is within projected parameters. There's just one unexpected variable and we can work around him." He turned away from Vector. "Go. I've got some prep work to do—" he waved the bottle – "and Orphea will be ready for work by noon."

"We know that she loves you," Vector said gently.

Wynston knew that. He knew. Which was why his throat still wasn't working quite right. "Get out, Vector." He had exhausted the extent of what a listening ear could do.

*

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. Somehow she had forgotten how tall he was, how solid. 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. It was a surprise to realize that her hand at his back gripped a lightsaber.

"Are you ready?" he whispered, and captured her lips for a long few moments before letting her answer.

"No," she said hoarsely.

"Angle the hilt up. You'll want to strike the heart when you activate." He buried his fingers in her hair, gently worked it loose of its ties, kissed her again while she pulled him closer and struggled to drop her weapon. Somehow her hand wouldn't let go.

"Go on," he murmured. "Prepare now and you'll be able to make it quick." His scent had always been subtle, even this close; it shocked her to smell it again. "Wouldn't that have made things simpler?"

With fresh agonizing clarity she remembered loving him. Remembered that this was the way to touch his face with her one free hand, this was the way to arch into him when he ran his hands up just so. Even so, she prepared to kill.

"Ready?" he asked again, very gently.

"No."

The dream changed.

Wynston was shorter, thinner, warmer, and she couldn't meet his eyes. He wrapped his arms around her and waited silently. It was her task to start this scene.

"I'm sorry," she said.

He stroked her hair. "Ruth," he said, "if you can hear me, don't do this. You're being controlled. This isn't you. Fight it."

"Wynston, I have to." She squeezed her eyes shut and kissed him; her saber was still ready at his back, angled to kill him without piercing through to her. "Seems you expected this."

"I knew it might happen. I knew if you were willing to go out of your way for me, it was me you wanted." He hugged her tighter and took a long while to return her kisses before pulling away. "I promise I won't hurt you, Ruth," he whispered into the space between them. "Just stop this. I love you."

"I love you, too." She slid one hand up, mussed his hair in that way he still pretended annoyed him. "But I have to do this."

She activated her saber. She chose to, for some reason, and Wynston went cold in her arms.

Quinn walked up out of nowhere and stopped a few meters away. "You did well," he said gently.

Ruth could finally drop the saber. She cradled Wynston's heavy head on her shoulder and held on to him. It hurt, everywhere, everything. It hurt so much she could barely think, and she still felt that the guilt wasn't complete yet. The real stuff would hit any moment now. "I was never in the dream for the next part," she said to Quinn. "What happens now?"

"Now you wait. Sooner or later it all happens again. That's how this world works." He looked around at the formless white around them. "Or were you asking whether it's going to hurt more than this? It will. Still, you did well." He bowed a small crisp bow, one fitting to one professional respectfully acknowledging another. Or to a distant acquaintance offering what condolences he could. Then he walked away again, leaving her suddenly, wholly alone.

L+15 years 1 day: Rearrangement

Larr Gith yawned. "So am I meeting this girl or not?"

"That's the trick," said Orphea. "If patterns continue she won't be called back to her employer for some time, so we should move now. But she's got a little less freedom to move than we had expected. Also she may read more information from me than we can afford to give. We may not have a familiar contact for her."

"So? I go where I want. Call her, I'll sort it out if you can't."

Lord Scourge shot a dark look at Larr Gith before turning to Orphea. "She is not renowned for her diplomatic skills," he growled.

"Nobody said it was important to make friends in this process." Larr Gith tossed her head. "Too bad she's a woman. I have less pull there. I knew a man once who could talk his way anywhere I couldn't and do it without ruffling feathers, much. But he's not around these days."

"I do not think he would have been willing to talk his way up to another Emperor's Wrath," said Scourge.

"Depends." She looked to Orphea. "Is she pretty?"

Orphea congratulated herself on not choking. *The most beautiful woman I've ever known, and even looking at you in cleaned-up form I can say that.* But Orphea's straight. "She's, um...I guess?" Okay, I could've been more generous than that.

"Good enough for him." Larr Gith flashed a smile and shook her head.

"Never mind. Give me either a holofrequency or some coordinates and I'll go meet your girl. I'd like to see anyone stop me."

"I cannot get you a free walk onto Dromund Kaas again," Lord Scourge grumbled.

"I can," said Orphea. "But let's do this carefully, yes?"

*

It was raining harder than usual in the morning. Ruth put on the heaviest, most shapeless clothes she could find, and then armor, and then a coat. She considered wrapping a tarp over all that, or possibly just going back under the blankets for the day, but decided it would be better to get moving.

Quinn and Colrand were already in the kitchen, talking, smiling. Quinn at least put up some caution when he saw her.

"Morning, Mom," said Colrand. "Uh, how's it going?"

She had scarcely slept and she remembered too much of the sleeping. "Good enough," she croaked anyway.

To her surprise, Quinn reached across to a waiting serving droid to take up a steaming mug, which he pushed in her direction. "My lord. Hot chocolate, if you wish. Cole tells me you take it sweeter than I first attempted to order."

"He was gonna serve boiled bitterness," said Colrand. "With milk."

Which was what she had preferred ages ago. She had forgotten. That, and this bizarre facsimile of family life, made her a little sick. "I'm not hungry," she said, and walked out again.

Her steps quickened as she fled to the garden. The lilies were all slightly bowed under the rain; they seemed to stare at the ground, avoiding her and everything else around them.

It wasn't them she wanted anyway. She followed the winding path down toward the redblazes, all thorns half-hidden beneath nearly-glowing crimson flowers. Wynston loved to surround her with them during his visits. She hated, absolutely hated, that he had to die. It didn't make any sense. Her going along with it didn't make any sense. But it was necessary.

She wasn't going to hunt him. Not yet. Not until something made sense again.

She knelt by one of the low bushes and tested her thumb against the thorn at the base of one flower. She slid up, considered snapping off the blossom

to bring with her, decided it was better off where it was. She shouldn't ruin it.

Her thoughts trod heavily on her aching heart. She stayed in place, wishing Wynston were here. Or even that he were across the galaxy, working his work, so long as he knew he could come home to her. She wished her home contained only her blood family and her chosen, with none of her mistakes.

Words cut through the hammering of the rain. "My lord?" There was a time when she had that interrupting her thoughts every thirty seconds, and a time after that when she had missed it. Right now it just sawed at her nerves. "There is an incoming holocall from the Emperor's Hand."

Ah. Her instructions. Maybe they would tell her which way Wynston had gone so she could keep at her job.

If she could grow roots here to stay, she'd do it.

"I can keep them occupied a few minutes longer if you wish," Quinn said a little while later.

She didn't remember him being this solicitous when they'd been together. What his purpose was now – well, it was to get her to behave. She supposed they might think it effective to choose someone who had already demonstrated a willingness to inflict punishment for the job.

She braced her hands on her knees and struggled to her feet, fighting a wash of dizziness. She had consumed more drugs than food in the last twenty-four hours. She pulled herself to her full height, kept her chin up, and strode past Quinn, only to trip up on a loose flagstone and stumble.

He was at her side in an instant, touching a hand to her elbow. Old habit; less physical support and more a reminder that he was there, ready to discreetly accept her weight if she needed it.

She jerked her arm away. "You haven't the right," she spat.

Silently he fell another couple of steps behind and followed her indoors.

Colrand was nowhere in sight. On the big holo, Servants One and Two were waiting.

*

Orpheia nodded to Vector and withdrew into the corner of the room. She didn't want anyone getting readings on her.

So Vector made the holocall. Colrand answered. "My lord," said Vector, and nodded respectfully.

"You're Vector, right? It's kind of been a while." A vacation or two, maybe a visit when Wynston needed to consult with Ruth on strategy. Nothing for a long time. "You're with Wynston's people, right? Is he okay?"

"He's alive. You understand he can't be around for a while."

"Yeah."

"We take it the Wrath is already back on the job?" Vector watched Orpheia, and Orpheia listened.

"Yeah." Colrand looked somewhere off cam. "She's in a briefing or something right now."

"Is she feeling more herself?"

"Some." His face suggested it wasn't necessarily in a good way.

"We see. We are calling because we would like to meet with her and Jaesa. A friendly gathering. We found someone who may be able to help. If there's a way we can get together..."

"Don't know if he also told you, Moff Quinn's here. He's...kind of Team Emperor, no matter what. I dunno how easy it'd be to explain you being here."

Vector kept his blank black eyes on Colrand now. "It is still the Wrath's house, yes? A visit from friends is not unheard of."

"Maybe." Cole looked away. Shuffled his feet a little. "Listen, uh, Vector. Is Wynston sure about all this?"

"We have compelling reasons, Colrand. We'll be in a better position to talk about it once the Wrath is more herself. If you think it appropriate we will contact her soon for a meeting."

"Okay," he said dubiously. "Yeah. Uh, just...don't ask her about Wynston, okay? And let him know she's sorry. Really sorry."

Orphea's chest hurt a little. "He knows," said Vector.

Orphea wanted to say more. Something encouraging, something that the boy would accept from Wynston. But he wouldn't accept it from a stranger, and Orphea's identity was one more secret he shouldn't have to handle.

One person who could handle it was Jaesa. Time to see if she could finagle an introduction.

Orphea walked back out to the lounge where Larr Gith and Scourge waited; Larr Gith was brushing her shining waist-length hair while Scourge read. Both looked up.

"So are we going somewhere that isn't covered in cultists for once?" said Larr Gith.

"Not yet."

She rolled her eyes. "Right."

Orphea really needed to find something to keep the Jedi occupied. "Have I showed you the *Aegis's* cantina? I think you'd like it."

Larr Gith perked up. "Beats hanging out with this guy."

*

"Wrath. Your servant has arrived safely?"

Ruth gaped at Servant One for half a second. "'Servant' is really not the...ugh. Yes. The Moff is here."

"Good. His forces will coordinate with you. Your personal guard will be placed under the command of the Imperial Guard immediately."

Her stomach dropped. "No, it won't. Those men are mine."

"They are required elsewhere," Servant One said mercilessly.

"Good luck convincing Pierce of that."

"He will comply or be removed."

"The command is one," contributed Servant Two. She hated the sound of his voice, and had ever since the first time he'd upset baby Colrand.

"Your strike against the agent Wynston failed," Servant One said coldly.

"The search will proceed. He threatens the Emperor's plan, and his harassment will not be tolerated."

"What is this plan, anyway?" Ruth asked flatly.

Servant One scowled. "Our master's rituals must not be interrupted. You will stand guard. Destroy those who interfere. Guard his initiates."

"And put an end to treason," said Servant Two.

"That can be arranged," said Ruth. They didn't offer the most satisfying explanation of the situation, but it would have to do. Wynston's people might be able to shed some light; she could get some use out of them before she...before she did what was required.

"While the search for Wynston continues, your first target dwells on a distant planet: a nest of rebellion that occupies a location we require. Root them out. Clear the way."

"It will be as you say."

The Servants hung up. Ruth considered her prospects and didn't like any of them.

Quinn's voice intruded on her thoughts. "My command ship is stationed in orbit; we can leave at any time."

"I'm not going anywhere yet," she snapped. "Now excuse me."

Colrand caught up with her in the hallway. He looked even paler than usual. "Mom. Got a minute?"

Ah, something that wasn't her failure with Wynston or her ongoing irritation with Quinn. "Yes, absolutely."

They stepped into the den. Colrand, looking nervous, shut the door. "Um. While you were doing your thing, I got a call from one of Wynston's people. They had some news."

She stiffened. "They called you?"

"You were busy. Look, they said Wynston's okay."

She let out a breath she hadn't realized she was holding. "I see."

"Some of them want to meet up somewhere. They've got...I mean, did he ever tell you about your orders?"

"Tell me what?"

"The Emperor's command. It's not just advice, we think he's controlling you. You didn't have a choice, about Wynston, it wasn't your fault."

"I don't want to talk about that," Ruth said automatically. "I did what I had to do."

"We both know you would never, ever hurt him if you had the choice. Mom, you've never cared about anyone as much as you do about him."

"I care about you," she said. "Now drop it."

"Vector said that's the Emperor's will. Not yours."

"What does Vector..."

"And he..." Ruth stopped. "Stars. You may be right. It's fading, but I think...but even if it's true, Cole, we don't have countermeasures." She put

her head in her hands. "Even if we can say it isn't my fault, it'll be my hand."

"No, Mom. He's gonna be okay. They said they found some people who can help. We'll figure it out."

Ruth made an effort for a smile. She nodded. "We will. I've apparently got a plan to uncover while Wynston...does what he has to."

She hugged Colrand then, very tightly, and did not talk about the possibility that he might be a target someday, too.

He stepped away without bringing it up himself. "And then Father," he said. "Job aside. Could you...give him a chance?"

No. "I'll think about it."

"When we found out what happened with Wynston, when he heard...Mom, he gets it. You should've seen him."

"No, he doesn't get it. What I did was forced." It was a relief to think that. It really was. "What he did was chosen."

"I kind of...the way he talks, I'm not sure he knows the difference. Not once he's got his orders."

"He doesn't know the difference, Cole. We do. Never forget that."

"He was happy to see you, you know. I know there's...there's a lot of stuff going on, but talking to me, he's grateful to be seeing both of us. Just, please. Give him a chance."

"I did."

"It's different now." He quieted a little. And pleaded. "I just found him."

"Cole." She hugged him again. "I'll do what I can, all right?" She looked up at his face, handsome, familiar, loved. "You are the last person I want hurt by everything that's going on."

"Wynston's in danger. You're torn up about it. My father is here and he's just, we're catching up on everything and we still can't trust him." He smiled weakly. "What's not to love?"

"You know, the whole reason I kept you away from Korriban was to avoid violent political complications."

"Yeah, well. Wrath at home, right?"

"Yes, I'm afraid. Wrath at home." She smiled sadly. "I should call...who did you say it was?"

*

"Wrath. It has been too long." Vector was smooth, cordial. Unruffled.

"You contacted my son," Ruth's holo image said flatly.

"It was urgent. Wynston recommended it."

"Take your calls to me." Impossible, unfortunately, since Ruth was an open book to her potential enemy. She seemed to realize it, too. "Whenever you can," she amended.

"We will. He is level-headed, but it's never fair to involve a youngster." That was patently untrue, or at least, it was often necessary regardless of fairness. Not the point at the moment. "Wynston's all right and he's making sure that as few people as possible know where he is. He won't make it easy to track him down."

"Good. Now, my orders are on him alone at present. You think I can still work with you?"

"We believe so. Your attempt on his life was coerced. All our resources point to the Emperor's influence as a powerful short-term mind control with uncertain long-term effects. We have the word of an expert on that. If we can break that, Wrath, and shield you from the Emperor's investigation, he'll have no hold over you. And then you'll be able to return."

"I'll be able to see your boss without trying to kill him." Ruth sounded like that was more important to her.

"That, too," the agent said casually. Then again, the other consideration was the fate of the entire galaxy. "We think you'll find our reasons for this particular long game compelling."

"Could you be a little more vague?" Ruth said impatiently.

"We need to talk in person. We will bring in Jaesa on this call, if you don't mind; she's a likely introduction point, a believable one, in case certain parties will be watching and reporting."

"Go ahead."

Vector cut Jaesa's call in. The motherly Sith nodded greeting. "Ruth," she said. "Are you all right?"

"Something to discuss later," said Ruth. Pain behind those words. "So, are you going to bring some friends of yours to meet me for a thoroughly casual lunch? Or maybe midnight snack, I'd like to do this sooner rather than later."

"Tomorrow will have to suffice," Vector said. "Is it safe to meet at your house?"

"No. When the Servants aren't yelling at me, Moff Quinn is." A prospect that Orpheia found infuriating. "How's your old place in the city, Jaesa?"

"I don't stay there much since we set up the academy, but it's usable."

"Let's do it."

"One thing, Wrath," said Vector. "The woman you're going to meet...she's a bit of a personality. Please remember that she's well qualified to help."

Ruth cocked an eyebrow. "I will, then."

The call ended, and Vector gathered his thoughts. He knew full well the risks of being the liaison here. But even if he weren't doing it for the galaxy

he'd be doing it for the Human being presently wrapped in a lie, bundled there until it was safe to come out.

*

Pierce came up within seconds of Ruth calling. The big man set his holo someplace stable and crossed his arms. "Milord," he said, "these orders are rubbish."

"I know," said Ruth. "They want me isolated and that means they have to keep you away."

"I'm going nowhere on their orders," growled Pierce.

"I think you should. Whatever's happening, I think the price of disobedience is too high." In what mattered, she physically couldn't disobey. She wasn't sure how they would deal with her soldiers' insubordination. "I need you to stay in command. I need you to go where they're saying and report to me on what they're doing there. And if you ever see Wynston...scuttle the mission. Whatever it takes. Call our men off, don't let them hurt him or his. Do you understand?"

"Will do. Wish I could do more to throw this in their faces."

"Behave now. When the time comes..."

Pierce scowled. "When the time comes I'll be out of range to help, guaranteed."

"I'm pretty sure you'll have one target or another to hit. For now, though, we behave."

"If you say." He shifted his mountainous weight. "You want the other approach, just say the word."

*

The rain lashed at the lilies. Ruth stood on the verandah and thought of Hutta, of trying to crash through and kill. She heard the door rattle but she didn't move. Instead she just hoped he would go away.

"It would be helpful to sleep, my lord."

She stared straight ahead. "Not going to happen." She was tired, but her mind wouldn't let her rest.

"I can offer some sedati--"

"No."

"I have no intention of harming you."

"You very rarely do." She sneered. "It's just your off days I worry about."

"We don't have time to debate this, my lord." Then, more quietly, "I doubt we could ever have enough time."

"Is there that much to say?"

Quinn, having stopped a few paces away from her, sighed. "Maybe not." He set himself at parade rest. "It is only fair for you to know that, this assignment notwithstanding, you are not in my direct chain of command. But we answer to the same will and our goals are aligned."

"I have less than no use for someone else's creature here. And if it weren't for Cole, you walking through my door with that announcement that would end badly for you."

"If it weren't for Cole, I would have seriously considered disputing this summons."

"I suppose that's your idea of a strong statement."

From the corner of her eye she saw that he wasn't looking at her. "You should try to get some sleep."

"Skip the advice."

"I know I am not welcome here, but in this and in what is to come, I am not your enemy."

The statement hit her far harder than it should have. "Do you have any idea how much I hear that?" It came out as a sob.

His composure wavered. "My lord?"

"You are the last person alive I would have wanted for help of any kind, and now they're telling me you're the best I've got." She took an unsteady breath. "You treacherous son of a bitch. You're what I've got."

He took an intense interest in the garden. "You also have your son," he said steadily. "A remarkable son, one whose love for you is clear in everything he says. You have every reason to be proud of him. Furthermore you are in the right."

"If this were right, my real partner would be here to support it."

"Your actions seem to give the lie to that."

"I didn't have a choice," she snapped.

"Nor do any of us."

"No! I mean I didn't have a choice! The Emperor's command, it can't be resisted. He could turn anyone against anyone. I had to, had to watch. Worse than that. I had to carry the fight myself, attacking one of the two people I would never, ever hurt."

Quinn looked at her, frowning. "He...controlled you, such that you truly did not choose your actions."

"Yes."

"My lord, that's a nonsensical claim. Nothing could set someone of your power against herself."

Had he ever had that faith in her? "You don't know his power. That's what he does, and I've only just begun to understand it."

"It may be a comfort to make up something to believe," he said solemnly, "but the exercise doesn't become you."

"I didn't make it up." Did she? No, everyone else agreed with her. Well, everyone associated with Wynston. But Wynston was a marked enemy with every reason to...no. "I didn't."

Quinn examined her face intently. "My lord, when is the last time you slept?"

"Why are you so obsessed with my sleeping habits?"

"Because you're better off sane."

What a joke. "I don't think that happens either way."

"Yes, it does," he said fiercely. "You've survived every hardship thus far and come out stronger for it. You'll survive this."

It didn't feel like it. "You don't know anything, Quinn."

"I do." He straightened out of parade rest, letting his arms fall to his sides.

"I do. I didn't seek out knowing you, my lord, and for a long time I struggled to know you less well. For both our sakes. Matters went differently, and I do know. I am a soldier, nothing more, but what has been asked of us has not been so different."

"I wanted to know you," she said bitterly. "More every day. Now that I do I wish I hadn't tried."

The rain fell kept falling, and Quinn didn't move, and Ruth was too tired to run away.

It was some time before Quinn spoke again. "It comes apart quickly. Doesn't it."

"Comes apart?" She couldn't face the person who mattered. If the compulsion came back full force...she couldn't risk it. She couldn't see him again. "It's already gone."

Quinn faced the rain and was quiet.

The thought of Wynston was battering at her defenses, and it was true that Quinn knew what must be happening, and she hurt. "When I woke up this

morning, for just a moment I thought things were normal and he was here." She bit her lip, steadied her nerve. "And then I remembered he wasn't. And then I remembered why."

His voice had a rough edge to it. "Should I tell you that fades before too long?"

"Is it true?"

"No. But the plausible falsehoods might be of use."

"No."

"Ah. If I find something that is, I will inform you." He turned back to her, and a gust of wind carried his words. "If there were one thing I could have that you could trust my offering to you, it would be that."

She hurt, and the wind was cold. A sudden weakness drove her to step forward and press herself to him, hands on his chest, head tucked under his chin. Swiftly his arms closed around her; he lightly rested his cheek on her head, and otherwise he stayed still.

She couldn't feel his heartbeat through his thick uniform. Perhaps that would have been too much. She stood, and hurt, and he held her without seeking to pull her in closer or talk.

She sniffled. "You still haven't the right," she said forlornly.

"I know. But so long as I am required, I am here."

That got her crying in earnest.

He stroked her hair, running lightly down her back over and over. "I've never seen you cry."

"Things were never this bad." She hiccupped, or whatever it was Sith did when they were too dignified to hiccup. "Besides. Back when I cared what you thought, I didn't want you to see me doing anything this unseemly." Her tears were dripping onto his uniform. "Still think I'm strong?"

"Yes."

"Liar. You always lied."

"Not this time." After that he was quiet again. She still didn't have the heart to push him away.

A long time later she sniffled and shivered. "I shouldn't be doing this."

"Of course." He let her go and held very still, watching her, when she backed away. "Will you be able to sleep?"

"I think so. Some."

"Waking up is the hardest part. But you'll need the rest." He offered his arm, and she took it to proceed back indoors and to her room. At the door he disentangled himself and bowed. "I'll take my leave. Until you need me again, my lord."

"...Thank you, Quinn." Whatever his motives, he had given her a little time of not feeling alone in her guilt.

He nodded formally, his expression as close to kind as she had ever seen it. Then he turned on his heel and walked away.

L+15 years 4 days: Convocation

The Emperor's Wrath was a stringy creature; she looked capable of combat, at least, if not much else. Big blue eyes, a little mouth that might've been cute before those two faint lines started setting in. Womp-rat-brown hair tied up so tightly Larr Gith had to wonder why the Sith bothered growing it out at all. Well-polished, imposing black armor – she clearly cared about impressing someone, assuming that someone didn't mind the Sith's natural looks.

Larr Gith needn't have bothered prettying herself up.

"Hello," said the newcomer, her voice brassy. She walked into the circle in Jaesa Brindel's living room to join mousy Jaesa and the inescapable Lord Scourge.

Time to get this going.

Jaesa stepped forward. "Wrath, I'm really glad you could come."

Larr Gith awaited an introduction.

One was not forthcoming. To Larr Gith's considerable surprise, the Sith walked straight up to Jaesa, made as if to shake hands, and clasped her wrist tightly. Then grabbed the other.

"My lord?" said Jaesa.

"Checking something. Hi, good to see you."

"What?" said Larr Gith.

"Tricks these people use," said the Sith. "Nothing personal, Jedi." She stalked right up to her and extended a hand.

Larr Gith looked at her.

"Please, Jedi," said Jaesa.

No way was Larr Gith letting this crazy woman touch her. "Can I get a name first?" she said coldly.

"I'll vouch for them," Jaesa said quietly to the Wrath. "I promise."

The Wrath gave her a long look, then nodded. "Very well." She stepped back.

"So, this is Lord Scourge," said Jaesa, "the previous Emperor's Wrath. It was the Emperor's earlier actions that drove him away from his job. Scourge, Ruth Niral, the Emperor's Wrath."

Scourge nodded. "So this is the one we are to expend such effort on."

"As I understand it, you could be expending it the other way," the younger Wrath said wryly. She had eased into an exaggeratedly friendly manner, as she were delighted to be friends with everyone here. "That wouldn't be good for any of us."

"No," said Scourge, flashing a white smile. "It wouldn't."

...any day now...

"And this," Jaesa said at last, "is Jedi Master Larr Gith."

"Charmed, I'm sure," said Larr Gith, looking down at the Sith. "I always thought you'd be taller."

That shook the shit-eating friendliness off the woman's face.

"So I hear you're helpless against the Emperor's suggestions," continued Larr Gith. Possibly including the nutcase paranoia on what Larr had been told was a friendly visit. "I guess we need to fix that." A tall order, but she was sure she was up to it. Orphea was obsessed with the idea. Relative? Lover? Unclear; Orphea stayed tight-lipped about that. Whatever the situation, Larr Gith was stuck working on this.

"I won't be of much use to you until I can block it," said the Wrath, and visibly clamped her jaw shut.

"The Wrath's expertise will be very much worth it in the battles to come," said Jaesa.

"I should hope so," said Lord Scourge. It was the only selling point that had appeased him.

"So," said the Wrath. "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 some 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 low grey couches along the wall.

The Wrath followed, but she looked skeptical. "When did you ever face the Emperor?"

"When I killed him," Larr said proudly.

The Wrath's eyes widened. That cutesy little mouth curled upward a little. "You killed him, did you? Not too permanently, I hope."

Larr shot a look at Lord Scourge. That was the whole reason he had come looming back in her life, and she still wasn't happy about it. "Then we'd best be prepared for next time," she said. "There's a simple meditation you can start with, and if you can figure that out we can start on the real work."

The Wrath nodded and shifted a little. "Lead me, then."

The others were on the move, wandering toward a different room. This one was down to Larr's unique talent.

"Close your eyes," said Larr. She remembered the old exercises, the irritating disciplines. She had never really needed them, but they might help this untrained enforcer. "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." Hey, maybe the annoyance would help. She didn't like Ruth's impression of a non-Sith. She would have to be real, really herself, to survive this, and if Larr Gith had to dig a little to get to that, well, it could be amusing.

But as she guided the Wrath into weaving a Force shield, it was the Light Side she felt being directed with a fair amount of skill. And a very good amount of power. Larr started fashioning her own shell just to assert that she could. She hadn't done it in a long time. A very long time. She kept talking, directing, and the Sith kept showing off.

"Of course," Larr said at length, "it takes quite a lot of fortitude to resist the initial blow of the Emperor's will. And I doubt you would ever manage to break his domination from within, so you'd better be sure before you go up against him."

The Wrath had a settled composure about her. "Let me worry about that."

"The more you know about Orphea's little operation – Wynston's, whatever, he hasn't shown his face anyway –" very interesting, how the Wrath tensed at the sound of that name – "the more we all have to worry.

Lord Scourge will crush you if you receive an invite before he thinks you're ready." He was a jerk, but a very pragmatic one.

"Lord Scourge couldn't stop me. Not that it would be an issue. I wouldn't be stupid enough to accept the invitation."

"Lord Scourge would have some words to say about your opinion." Larr Gith stood and stretched, allowing her Force shield to dissipate. "And so would I."

"I'd hate to get us killed in the argument over who's going to be compelled to kill each other," the Wrath said dryly.

How calm. "You know, for somebody who's supposed to be passion-fueled you don't act very passionate."

She emitted a burst of superiority. "It's there," she said softly.

"I hope so. You're going to need it." Larr tossed her long blonde hair. "Anyway. For now, practice. And practice, and practice. The Emperor's raw power is unbelievable."

The Wrath stood. "I'm familiar with it," she said.

"Perhaps, but you're not familiar with fighting back. That'll be the test, Wrath." Larr moved toward the door where everyone else had gone. "Come on, that's it for today. I'd hate to strain you."

Annoyingly enough, Ruth nodded and followed her, unruffled. This was an absolutely terrible Sith.

Never mind. Jaesa stood – Lord Scourge was already standing, having rejected the tea that had been served – and took a step forward looking curious.

"I've got a start," said the Wrath before Larr could speak up. "And I think this visit is it for the day's socializing, which is what Moff Quinn and company will be told it is. I'll be sent into the field, possibly on extended assignment, very soon; I'll make sure to have a secure holo set up. And I'll

practice." She nodded in Larr Gith's direction. "If you see Wynston...well, do you know where he is?"

That was a fascinatingly conflicted statement. This Sith had issues after all. "I haven't seen him," said Larr.

"Nor I," said Scourge.

"Cagey," murmured the Wrath. "It's...it's just as well, really. All right. I'll prepare. You'll..." she looked to Jaesa. "You'll help him. Any way you can."

"That's the idea," she said, smiling. "We'll see you soon."

Larr nodded. "There's advanced work once you're sure of the steps I showed you today. If you're not born with it, this isn't a simple thing to learn."

"I'll work it out," said the Wrath. Then, "Thank you."

Gracious, too. Was she just doing the good-Jedi impression as some kind of annoying joke? Larr only managed to nod.

The Sith walked out. Larr Gith took a look around. People were exchanging hopeful looks. Well, non-Scourge people. Nobody was saying anything; the silence grated on her nerves.

"I really thought she'd be taller," she said.

*

Colrand sat opposite his father in the living room. He was a little surprised to find that Quinn was capable of sitting at all; even now he seemed stiff and uncomfortable, but at least he was at eye level.

"Does the Wrath visit the city often?" Quinn had questions about everything. At Colrand's slightest hesitation he would stop, apologize, and move to neutral subjects, but he was obviously dying to know all about the household he had gotten dropped into.

"Yeah," said Colrand. "When she's in town. You know. Sometimes Citadel business, sometimes visiting Aunt Jaesa."

"She chose an odd time for a social call. The assignment is clear."

"The last couple days she hasn't liked the assignments much."

"Very true." Quinn looked down at his drink. "I understand that the matter of the agent is personal. At the same time, her reluctance to leave yesterday was pointless. She should know that duty overrides personal objections. I fear she is not thinking clearly in this matter."

"Mom always thinks stuff through," he said stoutly.

"Colrand, your mother has a remarkable mind, and her tactical acumen is first-rate." Quinn took a moment to choose his words. "Her strategic-level decisions are not always above question."

Weighty. Colrand took only a moment to think. "That's why you sold her out," he said, and immediately regretted saying it like that.

"Yes," Quinn said shortly. "That is why I sided with her master over her years ago."

"She never talks about it." Her mentions of it were so rare, and he had always been afraid to bring it up.

"That doesn't surprise me."

"So you thought something was wrong with her strategy? I don't really understand her options. Her master decided she had to die. What was she supposed to do, give up and flop over?"

"She could have tried to make amends. Restored alliances that would make her position defensible." It wasn't a real answer. The tiniest tension around his eyes, the smallest flicker of emotion in the Force, betrayed Quinn's anger. And his sorrow.

"Sorry," said Colrand. He wanted to know more, desperately, but if he pushed too hard Quinn might go away again, and the prospect of that

silence terrified him. "I just, that's the whole reason things happened like this, and nobody told me anything."

"It's a matter best left buried," Quinn said quietly. "It was a matter of my duty and her rebellion. That duty is hard, Colrand, especially when one reaches the heights your mother has. She understands the action now. I fear that she has not been afforded the time to recover from it, and she may misstep as a result."

"So what are you going to do?"

"Assist her. That's what I was sent here to do. I..." Quinn met Colrand's gaze head-on. "I have her best interests at heart."

"And your duty," Colrand said carefully. Ruth had warned him.

"Yes. Every person of honor remembers his duty."

Wynston talked a lot about how one's duty was to the right before any authority, but Colrand would have to be a lot dumber than he was to talk about Wynston with Quinn. He would just have to think about it.

Later. Colrand moved on. "When you and Mom do leave. It might be a while, huh? They kept saying 'campaign'."

"Yes. It's likely to be an extended assignment."

"Can I come with you?"

Quinn did a double take. He very nearly smiled. "It should be safe enough on board the *Tenacity*. The decision will be up to the Wrath, of course."

"I should be the one to ask. Just...you know. So she won't turn it down right away."

He sobered. "That would be prudent, yes."

Quinn seemed so...defeated, about Ruth personally. And she, well, she had always hated him. "I'm...I'm sorry," said Colrand.

"None of this is your fault."

"Yeah, but...it's tough. You're still my father."

There was a hitch in his breath. "Cole, I have only met one other person who was so quick and so warm in welcoming an ally." He gave a little corner of a smile. "You are very, very much like her."

*

Ruth was standing, somewhere, nowhere, she couldn't tell. It didn't matter because Wynston was there with her, kissing her, his arms securely around her, his caresses as playful and wicked as they were 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. It was a surprise to realize that her hand at his back gripped a lightsaber.

Surprising, but it had to happen this way. "I'm sorry," she murmured against his lips.

He stroked her hair. "Don't," he said. "Ruth, if you can hear me, don't do this. You're being controlled. This isn't you. Fight it."

"Wynston, I have to." She squeezed her eyes shut and kissed him; her saber was still ready at his back, angled to kill him without piercing through to her.

He hugged her tighter and took a long while to return her kisses before pulling away. "Stop," he whispered into the space between them. "I love you."

"I love you, too." She slid one hand up, mussed his hair in that way he still pretended annoyed him. "But I have to do this."

She activated her saber. She chose to, for some reason, and Wynston went cold in her arms.

Nothing else happened around her. She dropped her saber, held Wynston's heavy head against her shoulder. It hurt, everywhere,

everything. It hurt so much she could barely think. Nothing else happened; no one else came. It was all her.

*

Orpheus was waiting for the party when they returned to the *Aegis*. "How did it go?"

Larr Gith made a show of yawning. "She got a start with the exercises. It's really up to her to bring it up to spec."

"I've no doubt she'll do it." Orpheus caught Jaesa's eye. "How is she?"

"Paranoid," Jaesa said quietly. "But getting by."

"She is...not like I expected," said Scourge. "It remains to be seen whether she can follow through."

"I notice that your refusal-to-meet policy saves you from dealing with her training," said Larr Gith.

"If she recognized me, the knowledge I have, she might kill me. That can't be avoided."

"And what is it you know, I wonder, that is so precious?" Scourge's look was speculative.

That I love her. That I hear the slams of the door over and over, knowing that was her trying to kill me. That I need her anyway. "We knew each other in another life," he said. "It wouldn't go well. Anyway, she's going to have to practice on her own. I have every reason to believe she'll be leaving her own home, for where I don't know. Now we go back into the field. Put out fires. Keep our resources invested in locating not only the Emperor's true form but any tool that might be effective against him." Orpheus paused. "Watch out just in case Ruth crosses our path."

L+15 years 5 days: Flight

Both Ruth and Quinn were up when Colrand got up for breakfast. Surprisingly, they were in the same room, and talking to each other.

Both of them looked up to Colrand. "Good morning," he said.

"Good morning, Cole," said Ruth. "It looks like I'll be leaving on Quinn's command ship today. I'm afraid we don't have a lot of information on the assignment, but I'll be in touch."

"I..." So Quinn hadn't mentioned it. "I was wondering if I could come with you for this one."

She immediately turned to Quinn, her smile vanishing. "Your idea?"

"Mine, Mom," Colrand hurried to say, before the situation could get worse. "I don't want to be stuck here for this. I don't even know when you'll be back. Please."

"The *Tenacity* is defensible, my lord," said Quinn. "He would be in very little danger there."

Ruth considered. For a while. Finally she shook herself and said "Cole, that's not a good idea."

"Do I have to watch both of you walk out on me?"

She looked like he'd slapped her. "No. No, I..." Her throat worked for a moment. "I guess I would have the chance to keep an eye on you. All right." She stood. "Pack for an extended stay."

So he did. He accompanied Ruth and Quinn to the spaceport where she kept a private hangar; the *Fury* opened at a signal from Ruth. Quinn hesitated at the base of the ramp, scanning the ship with a thoughtful look.

"Father?" prompted Colrand.

"It has been some years since I set foot on a *Fury*-class vessel," he said quietly.

"But you lived here for a while before, right? With Mom?"

"Yes." He got moving, following Ruth onto the ship and through to the bridge while speaking to Colrand. "I lived here and operated, maintained, and piloted the ship." He came to rest on the bridge and looked around. His expression was a little wide-eyed; he seemed younger here.

Cole looked around, too, even though he already knew the place. "So you piloted actual stuff. Instead of, you know, point A to point B. Was this in many battles?"

"Several, I should think," Quinn said with a small smile.

"It's hard to think of this old thing as a real fighter. Mom just drives it around."

"It isn't so old. And this vessel was top of the line when it was assigned to your mother."

"I've kept it upgraded," Ruth said suddenly. "Her components are up to date and better experts than me tell me she's fit to fight."

Colrand blinked. "But...why? You don't even use it except to commute."

"Just in case." She quirked a little smile. "Weren't expecting that, were you? Would you like to see what she's capable of?"

"I'm not sure I believe you otherwise."

Ruth looked from Quinn to Colrand and back. "I never do show Cole anything exciting when it comes to piloting. If you want to put her through her paces, there's fuel to spare. And some time."

Colrand watched eagerly. Quinn gave Ruth a troubled look, but then caught Colrand's expression and collected himself. "As I said, it has been some years."

Ruth ignored that and headed to the main pilot's console. "We've got all the standard training sims, of course. The Aurek point defense--"

"The Aurek point defense is for Academy freshmen," Quinn said stiffly, and paced over to take the pilot's seat. At a tiny gesture from him Ruth

backed off. He started to work. "My lord, if you would bring up the copilot display for Cole's benefit." His hands flew across the console, bringing up some glowing display and triggering a subtle whine from the engines. "Cole, buckle up once you're situated. The acceleration during combat cannot be compared to anything you experience in normal operation."

This was more like it. Colrand settled in the copilot's chair and tugged out and fastened the safety harness he'd never bothered using before. Ruth had brought up a displayed synthesis of the space around them and some simulated obstacles in the way; now she was fussing over his harness, tugging at individual buckles with an expression of something approaching fear.

"Mom, I'm fine," he grumbled. "If you go much tighter I can't breathe."

"Keep your head back," she ordered. "I know the impulse is to lean forward to see things, but for stars' sake when we're in a maneuver just keep your head back against the seat. I don't want you breaking your own neck."

"I'm not gonna break my own neck."

"I'm not going to break my son's neck," muttered Quinn from his station.

Ruth made a distinctively motherly face and headed to a chair of her own. "Just a moment while I set the guns to training mode; this close to Dromund Kaas I'd hate for us to misfire and actually hit something."

Colrand blinked. "You're gonna gun?"

"Someone's got to," she said, strapping herself in. "I used to do this all the time. The Force turns out better than a targeting computer once you know what you're doing."

"She would have been a credit to any squadron in the fleet," added Quinn. And, quietly, "If she had applied herself."

"I was busy with other things, Quinn." She didn't sound annoyed, exactly. Colrand couldn't place the tone of her voice.

"I know," said Quinn. He was still brisk. "Sith aren't numerous enough for us to spare them in any capacity so pedestrian as gunnery."

A targeting reticule blinked into being on Colrand's display. Ruth called across the bridge: "Lower control stick, Cole, swing it up and toward you. Squeeze the big red button along with the trigger to fire. I'll grab the secondary turret." She grinned across at him. "Let's see what you can do."

Quinn picked up. "Colrand, the enemy in this simulation is a Republic fighter wing and minefield, with one pass by a frigate. As a rule you'll want to fire at the threat with the greatest power-to-structural ratio; given the manufacture of these specific adversaries, you'll want to clear our path through the mines, then the frigates' turrets if any are in range, then the fighters, and finally any remaining mines."

"Quinn, don't overload him."

"Mines for a path," repeated Colrand, eager to get it right. "Then turrets when the frigate comes up, then fighters. I want to hit what's hitting me hardest and I want to knock out the weakest targets as fast as I can to cut incoming fire before I go for the sturdy ones."

"Exactly," said Quinn. He sounded satisfied. "Ready?"

"Yeah," said Colrand.

"On your mark, my lord."

"Have at it, captain."

The ship jumped so hard Colrand's first thought was that they were going for hyperspace. A couple of the stationary bright points on his opening sim view started streaking towards him.

He took a couple of experimental shots, saw bright red simulated fire streaking from the ship into the distance. A tooth-rattling turn spun his perspective around – head back, head back – and brought more targets into sight.

His senses were on fire trying to keep up with the ship's wild motion. He was taking out targets at a decent rate, he thought, but they kept coming. He felt his will glancing off Ruth's a few times while they flew, their intents overlapping on one target and hers instantly flying away to something else, leaving him free to fire. Gradually he also started sensing things about Quinn's plans. It gave him the chance to anticipate those insanely sharp maneuvers while he was placing shots. Only a stab of neck pain reminded him to put his head back; there was too much else to think about, too much to try to perceive at once.

The sim fighters finally stopped coming, and Ruth and Colrand cleared the last of them out. Quinn carefully placed them back in a tranquil wide orbit. The moment Colrand heard Ruth undoing her harness he started unstrapping his own to hop out. "Wow," he said once he was free. "That was *cool*."

Ruth took a dizzy stumbling step that Quinn seemed about to intercept. He stopped in place. She, flushed, took a second to breathe.

"Those shots were remarkably efficient, my lord," observed Quinn. "No overlapping coverage with Cole's shots whatsoever. And you've never practiced with him before?"

"Force," she grinned. She was smug about it. For that matter, so was Colrand.

"Very well done."

Ruth pushed her hair back and looked at him, wide-eyed. Colrand had never seen her that uncertain while happy, nor that happy while uncertain. She inclined her head toward Colrand. "Thank you," she said to Quinn.

He bowed a little, then turned to Colrand. "I didn't quite reach this vessel's limits, but I hope that gives you an idea of what it was designed for."

Wow. "We're doing its limits sometime. Right?"

Quinn looked very briefly at Ruth. "Everything goes faster than it used to," he said thoughtfully. "But I believe I can arrange that."

"Everything does," agreed Ruth. "Um, I'm just going to let you two deal with the stress test."

"My lord, are you well?"

She grinned. "I'm fine. Just don't take any sharp turns on the way to the mothership." She beamed at Colrand, then suddenly frowned at Quinn, then beamed at Colrand some more, then gave Quinn a tentative smile, and then she very quickly left the bridge.

"That was really neat," Colrand told Quinn. "Thanks."

"That was my pleasure, Cole. I do not know how much time we'll have to spare in the weeks to come, but..." He looked over at the doorway. "I hope we can do more."

*

Wherever Ruth was, at least she had Cole. In a way she'd had Cole for a lot more time than she'd had Wynston. That had to count for something.

Wynston remembered one night years ago. It was the kind of memory he kept for the road, for the days he was far from home. He had come to the nursery, quietly, to speak with Ruth about something. He paused outside the door. Within the nursery, Ruth was singing.

Wynston shied away from interrupting; there was likely a reason she was so quiet about it. But her voice was nice. Low, smooth, without the command that habitually edged her public speaking. He was no musical expert – far from it – but he could tell she carried the melody faithfully, and the flow of it soothed.

He had known her for years, and still she surprised him.

The song ended and Wynston stepped back to wait. Ruth emerged within moments and stopped, wide-eyed, just inside the hallway.

"I never knew you sang," said Wynston.

"I don't," she said quickly. "Or not..." She blushed pink, looking as off balance as he'd ever seen her. And as lovely in embarrassment as she was anywhere else. "Just for Cole."

He stepped forward to gather her warm small hands in his. "The rest of us have been missing out, then."

She squeezed his hands, taking up some of her usual proud carriage but keeping the blush. "You really don't have to say that. This isn't my talent."

"There's enough about you to praise without exaggeration, darling, I hardly need to make things up. You have a beautiful voice."

Her smile turned definite, and she met his eyes for a surging-heart second. When she once again cast her gaze down at nothing in particular, the smile stayed. "I sang more when I was little. My father played the mandoviol, some nights he would teach me folk songs from places he'd been." Her brow and her hands contracted both at once. "It feels like a very long time ago."

He guided her hands to his chest so as to free his own arms to wrap around her. "You'll have to let me hear the start of that song sometime," he said gently.

It worked to ease her away from her discomfort. She met his eyes again. "What, the lullaby? It's really nothing special."

"I didn't recognize it. It sounded like Mirialan?" He didn't know much of the language, but the sound was right and a few words seemed familiar.

She nodded. "Yes. I don't know what the words mean. Father said there was no Basic translation that worked as a song in its own right."

Wynston nodded. The words, whatever they were, were irrelevant to her and him and the loveliness of her voice and the quiet strength of it when she was addressing her son. He kissed her cheek. "Sometime," he said softly, "before I go, I would very much like to hear the rest of it. If it's not just for Nirals, that is." Again, if he had never heard it before, there was likely a reason. Still, he was selfish enough to ask.

"If it's mine it's yours," she said. Her blush was rising again. "But I can't just launch into it. Tomorrow, when I put him to bed."

"Tomorrow, then." He kissed her nose.

*

"Orphea," bellowed Lord Scourge. "We have located another ritual site. Be ready."

He liked the other voice better.

L+15 years 8 days: Let it go

Some scientist had been apprehended by Republic troops on some obscure world. Ruth was to take their base and retrieve the man to drop off in Imperial hands.

She wondered about the real purpose. Wynston was probably fighting assignments like this. But she couldn't help with that, except by practicing the block that would hide her thoughts. For now, she followed orders like a good Wrath.

Quinn did the research to set up a plan, which he laid out with his accustomed brisk professionalism. Ruth checked the map and frowned.

"Conservative," she said. "Let me take this entrance alone."

"My lord, there are several dozen--"

"I'll take it. If what you said about potential reinforcements is true, you'll need the rest of your men blocking that gate over there."

"You never faced odds like that alone."

"I have." It wasn't that remarkable. "You just weren't around to watch."

He raised his eyebrows, but he didn't object further. "Very well. I look forward to seeing you in action."

"Go where you're needed. I can handle this."

*

She did, barely. Her focus never quite came together; twinges of pain kept intruding on her accustomed discipline. Her defenses were poor, her attacks too reckless, and while she worked with the Force it wasn't the steady source she was used to.

She was in pain, and the saber and vibroblade strikes that scored through her armor weren't the problem.

She made it back to the *Tenacity* once the objective was secured. Quinn took one look at her and beckoned her to a small medbay. "We should minimize the publicity of your mortality," he said, shutting the door, and then started efficiently ministering to her wounds.

"Right." It was good policy. And she was too dispirited to argue. She lay back and felt embarrassed instead. "That wasn't my best work out there."

He drew a line of binding gel down her wounded side. "You were nearly outmatched."

"I was distracted. That's all." She examined the nearest wall. "We'll account for that in the future."

He ran a careful hand over her side, then reached over for something to dab at the deep cut on her face. He laid his other hand on her cheek in what might be argued to be a steadying gesture. "Was it really that great a loss?" he said quietly.

She jerked her head away, her limited goodwill toward him vanishing. He wasn't talking about the near-defeat in battle. "Don't. You. Dare."

"My lord, the question is sincere. Now please, let me finish tending to you."

She scowled and held still. He smoothed the cut over and moved on to her wounded arm. "Your distraction carries a cost, my lord. You should know that your distress is misplaced."

"Shut up."

"I fear I must speak freely. The agent did you no favors. If you think he never had any detrimental effect on you, at least think of your son. How has he fared? What has the agent ever taught him of consistency? Of discipline?"

"Wynston holds to his principles."

"As interpreted by him alone at his whim."

"Who led you to that conclusion? Cole?" Cole, who so much loved to talk to Quinn.

"He only answered the questions I asked, my lord. Do not lay blame on him."

"I wasn't going to blame him," she hissed. "Stop turning him against my lover. The man I love."

"That is a dangerous word at a time like this." He finished with her arm and stepped back, pointing toward a box of wipes rather than seeking to finish cleaning her wounds himself. "If you wish to remain capable of functioning, it's time you dropped your attachment to someone who has done nothing but drag you down."

"You would know all about that, wouldn't you?" She didn't wait for an answer. She didn't just leave, even though she should. "It turns out I can't just switch off heartbreak. Knowing I didn't have a choice doesn't comfort me as easily as it did you, so don't start. You're here for the mission, like you always were. Stick to the mission."

"You will face extraordinary difficulty in carrying out the mission while that weight is upon you, as I believe was just demonstrated. And the weight doesn't go away on its own. Do you know how long it took to return to anything like acceptable work performance?"

"No. Tell me." This should be good. She had wondered. "Was it two hours or three?"

"Much more, my lord. At that time duty was all I had, and believe me when I say that I would not wish that solitude on anyone, not when..." He stopped, visibly attempted to gather himself. "If you let yourself doubt your actions, it will drive you mad."

"I'd rather be mad than be..." The look on his face stopped her from saying 'you.' She probably should have said it anyway. "What you were."

"Then should I apologize, my lord?" He met her eyes for only a moment before he turned away.

There was a long moment of quiet.

"What difference would it make?" he said. "I should have prevented it. I should have ensured that the need never came up. But my counsel failed, my predictions failed, my negotiations with Baras failed, and finally attending to the order that was given was merely the inevitable conclusion of every failure I had towards you." Another pause. "For that I apologize."

How could he sound so sad over something he had chosen? "You could have stopped."

"No, we couldn't." He turned back to her, pain etched across his face as the clear sharp source of the lines that had permanently set there. "That's the point. Guilty or not, you had to go through with it. All I can do is assure you that you, at least, were in the right, and if you cannot forgive yourself for having no choice, you must at least believe that you took the correct action. At least for you, you're better off without him. At least he is beneath you."

"You keep saying that. You're wrong."

His eyes flashed cold. "Do you think he misses you? Do you think he knows how? What comfort is he seeking right now, my lord, and with whom?"

Anyone. Ruth would never know. And it wasn't for work's sake this time. "It's natural to seek comfort after a hit like that," she said miserably. "Believe me."

"I see. And for you? What must happen when there is none to be had?"

"You are not recommending yourself."

"Not like that. I recognize that I destroyed that a long time ago. Nevertheless something must be done if you are to keep going. I hope you will accept my sympathy. And my advice."

"No, thank you." She slid off the table and touched her still-tender side.

"Are we done here?"

"Yes, my lord," he said. And, resignedly, as his eyes skipped to her side and her arm, "You'll be fine."

She scowled. "Thanks for patching me up. I'm glad your current orders have you doing that instead of the other thing." Ruth walked out.

Still, his words stayed with her.

*

Orpheia looked in the mirror. She considered lowering the disguise for a moment, but she didn't really want to see Wynston. Sometimes that kind of check was reassuring. Sometimes it wasn't.

She also considered lowering the disguise away from the mirror. There were those aboard the *Aegis* who had made it clear that they wouldn't mind discovering and assisting a breakdown in the Director's self-control. Anything would be better than being stuck here waiting.

No word on the location of the Emperor's true form. No use attacking the Voice in its own location if it just meant that a new Voice would be made somewhere new, somewhere unknown. No safe way to contact Ruth; even a holomessage might be vulnerable to her tracing efforts, or those of her keepers. At least she wasn't pushing as hard as she might. She wasn't cutting through Orpheia's people to get to Wynston.

That's what Orpheia had for optimism.

Ruth had been cooperative, at least, about Larr Gith. More than Orphea might have managed, stressed as she was, as the target of that level of cattiness. Ruth was cooperative. She trusted Jaesa and Orphea's word, she knew control was happening, and she didn't want it. If she knew the rest she would be with them in an instant.

If she could know the rest, if she had that security in her own mind, she could be with him.

Orphea was used to adjusting systems and waiting for the desired result, but she usually had something to do while she was at it. She kept up with some administrative matters, moved here and there to make sure Scourge and Larr Gith didn't absolutely expect her presence at all times between field assignments, but her heart wasn't in any of it. Ruth and Cole were alone in enemy territory and Orphea couldn't do a thing about it.

Once Ruth could join the fight it would be different. They had done more than a few brief joint ops in the past, enough to know how well they worked together. When Ruth had an effective shield against the Emperor's questioning she could finally see the *Aegis*, know all the details Orphea had had to adjust or elide when talking about her work in the past. The precautions taken because an independent guardian of the Empire's people might not always be looked upon kindly by the master of the Sith.

Orphea could drop all that. Ruth could know, and she would love the resulting work. Cole would enjoy touring the *Aegis*. And the future, the moment Ruth became an independent agent, could be so much better.

Wynston could face Ruth. Thinking about her attack hurt at a visceral level he couldn't overcome by himself, but being with her would banish all that to irrelevance. And then...Ruth had offered, so many times, to let him stay with her. He couldn't be bound to service with one master and one blunt mission like she was. But if her master were gone, her mission statement newly flexible, there was a chance she would be willing to come with him.

Operating with a close partner was a wholly different experience. A different rhythm, a different set of considerations. How much more so, he thought, if it were a romantic partner he could trust. It might not

necessarily feel stifling, not with her. If Ruth were willing, if she wanted to come with him...

First things first.

No word on the location of the Emperor's true form. No use attacking the Voice in its own location if it just meant that a new Voice would be made somewhere new, somewhere unknown. No safe way to contact Ruth. Nothing either of them could do right this minute. Stars, he wanted this to unfold right.

Wynston took out his vibroknife, a compact hilt with a thin double-edged blade. Ambiguous make, no distinctive markings, no serial number; an expensive internal generator made its active mode silent, but otherwise it was utterly unremarkable. Which was the point. Ruth had taken a playful delight in giving him the most completely generic gift he could use. It was the sort of thing he could afford to keep with him on all jobs.

She had told him, when she gave it to him years ago, that she didn't mind him losing it; that sort of thing happened in an active career. Something about the way she'd said it made it twice as valuable. He had done some highly inadvisable things in the past to preserve and retrieve it, to make sure it always made it home.

Wynston turned the blade over in his hands. *Don't give up*, he thought. *Wherever you are. There is always a choice, darling. If you don't see one, you make one. And if they try to take yours away I'll bring you whatever it takes to prove them wrong.*

L+15 years 13 days: Tests

The secure holofrequency Wynston's people had given Ruth turned out to be answered by none other than Jaesa.

"Hi, Ruth," she said cordially. "How are things?"

"I'm doing well enough," she lied. "I was hoping to check in with our mutual friend. The really charming one."

"You've been trying out her exercises, then?"

"Yes. I have to say, focus is...difficult, lately. But any trick she has, I can manage. I can pull this off. It's time I learned more."

"Great."

"The only hard part is dragging myself away from the loving attention of the Emperor's Hand, Quinn, and the entire staff of his ship."

"Go off site for training? For Cole, if not for you. If you've got any time at all to spare his lessons shouldn't be neglected. Education is what I do, everybody already knows that."

"I think I can arrange some morning."

"Some morning soon. We'll be here."

*

Arrend was a mild forest world, not heavily populated; Jaesa and her husband Kaeve had set up training for a few Light Side Sith there years ago, and it had grown into a minor academy in its own right as Ruth and others sent along students unfitted for Korriban. Colrand had visited once or twice before, so Ruth was comfortable leaving him with Kaeve for some combat training. She didn't want him around Lord Scourge or the Jedi.

On Kaeve's instructions Ruth headed out to one of the more remote practice yards, one protected from the forest by a high wall. As she approached she heard Lord Scourge's voice from just within the entry arch.

"Her minder isn't here. So I ask again, do we really need this Wrath? Warriors can be replaced. And warriors that grasp at what they cannot conquer are useless."

"Good morning," said Ruth, strolling through the arch. "I'm here to work on the conquering." She looked around; only Scourge, Larr Gith, and Jaesa were present "Were you just talking about Orphea?" She didn't like new players. She already had too many of them.

"What's his name called her off." Larr Gith looked to Lord Scourge. "The bug?"

"Vector," Scourge said distinctly.

"Right. If that's what experimenting with Killiks looks like, I wish you people didn't do it."

"I think it was voluntary on his part," Jaesa said gently.

"Ew," said Larr Gith.

Ruth's heart sank a little; she had hoped that at least somebody from Wynston's crew would have news. "Well then. Let's get started."

"Right." Larr Gith shook out an elaborately embroidered cloak and sat prettily upon it. "Why don't you start with the shield meditation we worked on. If you've forgotten anything we can fix it."

Ruth settled and ignored the first few noises Larr Gith made over her (seemingly disappointing, yet patronizingly salvageable) shield. Finally the Jedi got to the relevant stuff.

"You'll want to place things over your shield. Sitting there in a dome of Light Side energy looks great, but it tells everyone you're hiding things. Covering that baseline with surface thoughts, normal emotions, that's the real trick. That's how you hide your intentions. Come up with everything you can about what you've been doing lately that doesn't matter. And everything you can about what you were supposed to be doing lately."

Ruth followed along. Playing normality over a disciplined core, this was what was needed.

Meanwhile Lord Scourge's sneer got more pronounced with each passing moment. "There is an alternative, Wrath," he said at last. "One that may be less...conspicuous."

"I'm all ears," said Ruth. She didn't want to antagonize him. Distilled Sith pride was an ugly thing to poke at, and she sensed that, while she could

likely counter his power, she would much rather have him on her side in the battles to come.

"The Light Side is an offense to the Emperor, and armoring yourself in it merely invites conflict regardless of how you ornament it. The Dark Side is his native element; he is powerful in it, but even he cannot pierce every lie in its shadows. Hide your secrets there."

"He would notice if I showed up boiling in Dark Side energy, Scourge. He already knows how I operate, and he knows I utilize the Light Side heavily."

"Then it is a wonder he did not destroy you long ago."

"Perhaps he doesn't care. I get the job done. And he seems to command me either way."

"Perhaps also he rests comfortably knowing that when he seeks to break you, your lack of familiarity with the Dark Side will be your undoing."

"I've trained from birth at what I do. I don't have time to pick up some backup familiarity with tools I won't be using."

"No," he said. "You don't have time." He crossed his arms and regarded her thoughtfully. "I would spar with you, Wrath. I would see what your power does when you are at least pretending to be Sith."

Larr Gith perked up with a sly grin. Jaesa just looked apprehensive.

"I can take that," said Ruth. She had a feeling Scourge didn't mean first-blood sparring. But if he insisted on questioning her, she would have to subdue him sooner or later. Once she was winning she could force a bloodless surrender.

He backed onto the field and drew his lightsaber; she drew her two, hefting the familiar weights in her hands. Then she danced into action, swinging and sweeping in an effort to land home, on his side, his shoulder. The big Sith parried, sneering. His black cloak swirled around him, alternately showing and concealing his black armor. His presence in her awareness was deep and old and oddly compelling. She danced free from his

powerful swings and applied her own strength where his guard was weakest.

"You're playing," he grumbled, and took a more aggressive stance. She sensed not only anger but contempt in him. The Dark Side rolled off him in clouds. Against him she held careful discipline, stable defenses, deliberate counterattacks. She stepped up the speed of his attacks. She could sense the anger in him. And the contempt. He was good. But so was she.

In the middle of a strike her focus wavered. Doubt kept returning, a memory of swinging at someone else, a needle of fear.

His hand lashed out – she felt the surge of someone else's victory before she felt the impact – and her main hand saber flew from her suddenly nerveless hand. She leaped backward and rolled, calling it back to her grip, but the failure shook her. Scourge drove her backward with swift heavy strokes, his concentration perfect as he challenged her efforts at defense.

"He will take your son from you," Scourge said suddenly between hits.

The thought was more an incentive than an injury. "He won't get that chance." She recovered herself, slowing and turning him.

He made a small sound, as of curiosity satisfied, and abruptly shoved her back. Everything about him seemed to darken further when he bore down on her. As she locked one of her sabers against his in an extended block, he leaned in and said calmly, "You should know that the Council's assassins reached your Wynston three days ago. He is dead."

Ruth felt her eyes widening until they hurt. That wasn't true. It couldn't be. She would know, she would have felt it. Yet she felt nothing but conviction from the big Sith. Conviction and, as he studied her face, enjoyment.

Suddenly there seemed to be no point in fighting. At the same time, there was every reason to kill. She had to wipe the sudden smile off his face.

She kicked him back, and she wasn't sure whether it was the muscle or the Force that sent him staggering. In any case, she brought the fight to him while he recovered his balance. A rising red haze suffused her sense of the Force around her, and somehow in the midst of it Scourge was laughing.

Their sabers clashed and hissed again and again. He slowed but couldn't stop her furious offensive.

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 fear and rage. When his strike shook her balance she bore down hard, pinning him with all her power, shoving his own arm against his throat with a force just short of crushing.

And he laughed.

Darkness flared all around her when she moved to silence him. Jaesa shouted from the sidelines. "Ruth, don't!"

"Do we need him?" Ruth snarled. "Do we really need him? Warriors that grasp at what they cannot conquer are useless." She leaned closer, fixing his red eyes with her own blue. "Tell me he's alive. If you value your life, tell me he's all right."

"If he lives, you are failing, Wrath. Are you not?"

"I don't care."

"Resistance," he observed. "Better."

As if that were what mattered. "Tell me Wynston is alive or die here."

"I do not know," he said simply.

"Of course he is," said Jaesa. Somewhere in all this she had drawn near, her hand extended in a cautioning gesture. "I know Wynston's alive and in one piece, Ruth, now please. Let him go."

"Yeah," called Larr Gith. "We were using him."

Ruth shook her head. "Don't toy with me," she told Scourge. She tucked her anger back into more controlled channels, let her red-soaked awareness dull a little. She wouldn't kill an ally over an ill-advised test. Even if she wanted to.

She backed off and didn't offer him a hand up. As he rose he looked to Jaesa and said, "Brittle, but not as much as I thought. She may suffice after all."

"I could've told you that," Jaesa said patiently.

"See that you can keep up, Scourge," snapped Ruth. "You'll need more than cheap shots when the time comes."

"And you will need to withstand more than the mere threat of harm." He looked to Larr Gith. "Let us go. I am satisfied here, for now."

Scourge and the Jedi started back toward the academy proper. Jaesa hung behind while Ruth untied her frazzled hair and started re-tying it with shaking fingers. "Ruth," asked Jaesa, "are you okay?"

"No, Jaesa. I'm not."

"If anyone's going to break he wants to know sooner rather than later."

"If anyone's going to get himself broken, he's on track to do it sooner rather than...all right, I know." Ruth made a face. "I prefer Larr Gith's teaching style."

*

Wynston had worked without Ruth before. Hell, he had spent most of the last fifteen years working without her. Yet somehow the knowledge that he couldn't return ate at him more every day. Somehow, for the first time, he was truly lonely.

And she was alone out there. Her personal guard scattered by the Hand, her treacherous ex-husband bound to serve with her...she had no one but Cole, and the two were entirely by themselves.

He understood something now. The Emperor hadn't called for his death until he had started tracing the Emperor's own activities. Prior to that he hadn't cared about Ruth's mercies, her Light Side Sith connections. That was why he had never called Ruth to account, or tried to discard her. It was because she was completely irrelevant to his ultimate plan. He had darker

servants; he could use Ruth's raw power when convenient and ignore her and her friends the rest of the time.

As far as the Emperor was concerned, every good thing in Ruth's life was inconsequential.

He would come to regret that impression.

Orphea met Scourge and Larr Gith when they returned from their meeting with Ruth. There was promise there, from what she had heard.

Promise, and an alarming piece of news that really shouldn't have surprised her.

"So you actually walked up to her and told her the man was dead," she said to Lord Scourge. "You're brave, I'll give you that." She wanted to deck him.

The big Sith smiled sardonically. "I did not realize she was so...attached. Now she has advertised that to all observers, but that is her problem to face, not ours."

"But the interesting thing from our point of view is that, orders or no orders, she was opposed to Wynston's death."

"Passionately so."

"Uh-huh," said Larr Gith. "Turns out something can get on her nerves after all."

She could use a solid slap, too. "Yes," Orphea said dryly, "people are notorious for that." She stood. "All right then, with that in mind there's something we should check on."

"Oh?" said the Jedi.

"I want to see what else gets on her nerves."

*

"Wrath. The man who calls himself Wynston has been seen at a transfer station in deep space. We are sending the coordinates now."

Exactly what Ruth didn't want to hear. Servant One looked impassively down at her. "Deal with him," he said simply. The holo cut out.

And she wanted to. Sort of. She knew she had to. This wasn't just like pushing the baseline need to destroy him to the back of her mind; this intelligence was solid. Not a vague search, not an open-ended demand; this was a thing that could be acted on now. That must be acted on.

Resist, you idiot, that's what you do. Just...just leave it.

"Set course immediately," Ruth said to the room at large. "Quinn...select a detail and have them ready when we dock. If Wynston is found he will be brought to me, alive. Is that clear?"

"Yes, my lord." Quinn bowed crisply and strode off to do what he did best: their masters' bidding.

Don't go don't go, make an excuse, just stop.

She could tell. She could tell she shouldn't do this.

In hyperspace she tried to meditate, to prepare. If she found him maybe she could spare him. Transport him out from under her watchers' noses, maybe even take Cole and run away; once she was with Wynston they could handle any reprisal the Emperor tried. If she found him...

He was going to die.

She tried to hold her focus and it wasn't working. *No, I know you can break it. You can. You're aware. Now just stop.*

The *Tenacity* docked at the station and Ruth boarded with a couple dozen of Quinn's troops and Quinn himself. She didn't look at him. She could tell he wasn't quite looking at her. They slowed, just the same, while their men formed up.

"I recommend proceeding to the station's command center, my lord, to check their surveillance data. I will split the remainder of the detachment into teams to sweep the docks and hangars."

"Very well," she said woodenly. "If he is found, he will make it to me alive and unharmed. That's an order."

"Understood." He shut up and moved.

The place was deserted. A few doors were locked; a couple of her troops had slicing spikes at the ready to deal with them. And so she reached the corridor outside the command center. She rounded the corner and signaled for one of her men to slice open the final door.

She sensed nothing in advance, but Wynston's figure was standing there, his back to the entryway. Her heart could have burst from the rush of feeling.

Activating her sabers was the most natural, the most inevitable action in the world.

Something was off, but she leaped anyway, slamming down into the space where he was. Her sabers buzzed through empty air. The lines of Wynston's shape only briefly wavered before returning to a static image.

Two of her people were already on a nearby piece of equipment. "A holoprojector, my lord," reported one. "A sophisticated one, but just a projection."

She pushed him aside and ran her sabers through the device. It was useless to her. Worse than useless, if all it showed her was that she couldn't stop herself.

She looked around the big room. Her people were already swarming over the command console. She walked the deck and looked out at the stars, wondering where her enemy was. No. She knew where her enemy was. He was in a fortress out beyond the edge of the galaxy. Her ally, her beloved, that was the one she couldn't find.

Some uncounted amount of pacing later, Quinn strode in leading the remainder of the search detail. He looked alert, intent. Barely restrained. If he could get his hands on a target Ruth had no doubt he would have shredded it already.

"My lord, we have searched the facility and checked the transit logs. The last ship departed hours ago; it is probable that the agent himself was never here."

"No," she said. She was already sure of that. "He just wanted to know if I would come."

And she had.

She looked back out at the stars. "Don't say anything," she ordered. It came out hoarser than she would have liked.

To her surprise, Quinn stayed quiet. On some silent order her men started filing out, with Quinn's measured step last of all. Outside she heard him giving muffled orders.

She wondered where Wynston was, and when the footage of her attack would reach him. "I miss you," she said out loud, though she didn't know who would hear. "And I am trying."

She turned and left. The path from her transport's door to the bridge was empty; Quinn, at the pilot's console, initiated the jump to hyperspace. He stood and waited for a few moments.

"My lord," he said diffidently.

"Shut up."

He studied her expression. He bowed. Then he left her in peace.

Sitting alone, she tried to meditate. She had to do better than this.

L+15 years 16 days: Prodding

"And who's surprised?" Larr Gith said in her most grating voice. "I told you she couldn't pull it off."

"It's been barely two weeks," said Wynston, outside his disguise. He had to convince these people of his existence sooner or later, and he could do it when Orphea was 'otherwise occupied.' "I need to let Orphea know the schedule can't proceed yet."

Larr Gith took it upon herself to look for Orphea as soon as Wynston left. Eventually she located her in one of the *Aegis's* lounges. Orphea was looking over reports and frowning.

"All right," said Larr Gith. "I have to know. What is it you do in your spare time?"

Orphea looked up from the console. "Spare time?" she said blandly.

"Yeah. You know. While you're standing around waiting for the heavy hitters to get back to you?"

Orphea cleared her screen. "I have correspondence. Research for upcoming jobs. Reports on what else is going on around the galaxy."

"Let me rephrase. Time off. For fun. You don't actually work every minute you're not sleeping."

"Of course not, I take refresher breaks." Orphea gave Larr Gith a little smile. "I go out for drinks when my friends are in town. Sometimes I even talk about not-work."

"Drinks? Thrilling." Larr Gith wagged a finger in a sarcastic impression of banner-waving.

"Nothing stronger, thanks. Spice and I don't get along. We had a long conversation about it once, it turned out to be both painful and expensive with very little long-term benefit." A lie, the claim that Orphea had had any lasting acquaintance with spice, but it might set Larr at ease.

"You really worry about the long term 24/7," the blonde said flatly.

"That's my job."

"Again with the job! Spare. Time. Stars, you are worse than the Jedi."

That was an accusation Orpheia didn't hear much of. She socialized on the job all the time, if that counted. Any time she had away from the main mission she usually spent handling reports remotely. Or catching up with other agents on the *Aegis*, staying in touch. On the rare occasions she had a few days free and no major fires to put out it was always back to Dromund Kaas, its own reward. Perhaps not a thrilling social life on the face of it. Not if you didn't think work chatter qualified.

Ah, well. "What I'm hearing you say," Orpheia said slowly, "is somehow Lord Scourge's company isn't doing it for you."

"Ooh. Did that finally show up in one of those reports you're reading?"

"I'm just not sure why it should be a problem. You had a very impressive operation with him during the last incident."

"Yeah, I think he gets off on 'impressive.' Doesn't make him any easier to talk to."

The more Orpheia knew about the woman the more material she had to work with later; if she was talking, Orpheia had better listen. Also they were in hyperspace and had nothing better to do. "Look, these reports were getting kind of dull anyway. If drinks aren't too un-thrilling for you I may possibly have a minor stash in my quarters. We could commiserate over working for Sith."

"*With* Sith. I don't work for that jackass no matter what he tells you." Larr Gith started moving with that swaying gait she only used when she knew people could see her.

Orpheia kept the unassuming manner going. "Tell me about it."

*

Larr Gith was the kind of woman Wynston would have seduced, or tried to, if he'd met her ten years ago. When appeals to one's better nature didn't work, plainly carnal appeals often would. Sure, she was arrogant, vapid, monumentally self-centered, but he had tolerated these qualities before.

And yet Larr Gith was neither Kaliyo, who could only barely be controlled by such things, nor Ruth, who didn't need manipulating to be wonderful. Larr was a force all her own.

"So then," she said, her contralto voice still clear and controlled after multiple shots, "I just ran him through. All that effort and he crumples over a lousy lightsaber. It wasn't even mine, I had to borrow one off somebody on Corellia after the last battle."

"Maybe the ease of his death should have raised your suspicions."

"Oh, do not start. It was hard enough getting there. Ever try strolling across Kaas City? Now try doing it as a Jedi. Yeah. So sure, I know Scourge was paranoid, but I thought the job was done."

"The job generally has other ideas," Orpheia said ruefully.

"No kidding. Ugh. Case in point? I'm tromping through Sith space again now. For the job. I know that Ruth is important to you, but, just the same, I'm making it the entire point of my career from now on to stop meeting Sith. Ever. Anywhere."

"I can actually sympathize." Orpheia really didn't meet that many good ones.

"The ones I've got are more than enough, thanks."

"They're enough," Orpheia agreed.

"Ugh." Larr flopped back on Orpheia's bed, an action more distracting in its unselfconscious motion than anything the Jedi had ever done on purpose. "...stars, do you actually sleep on durasteel? This is horrible."

The mattress was downright cushy by Imperial standards. "I sleep all right on it."

"Worse than Jedi. Where was I? Right, killing the Emperor. I wonder if they'll throw me a party this time?" She chortled. "The Jedi Council kicked me out of their good graces, you know, after the celebrations were over and they decided my wicked ways were making them look bad. I got

personally harangued by Master Satele Shan. Because they, like you, are all about the long term and the job at the expense of having half a gram of fun ever." She looked aimlessly around the ceiling, her amber eyes gleaming. "I bet they'll have a party anyway. I wonder if Doc would show up."

"Doc?" Larr wasn't one to talk about men in anything other than dismissive terms.

"Old friend, the guy who had 'very impressive operation' and was actually fun about it. We split a ways back, but stars, he knew how to party."

"You must've been very young then." Wasn't everyone for their first mistake? And this was clearly, regardless of what Larr might claim, a still-sensitive mistake.

"Of course I was, I'm not that old now." Larr Gith sniffed annoyedly. "He was way older and 'bad for me.' It was a lot of fun." She sat up fast. "And you know who walks back into my life instead? Overseer Sourface, that's who. You want to be helpful with your whatever the hell it is you do? Dig up a guy who isn't such a hopeless drag."

"Dating service. I'll have to take that back up to HQ, I think they'd like it."

"Not a service. Just me, I don't care what the rest of you people end up with." She smiled fiercely and waved her glass. "Anyway, I gotta say, for a half-assed Force-blind Jedi wannabe you've got decent taste in deathglow."

Charming as ever. "I take only the best in my irresponsibilities."

Larr giggled. "Like me."

If the Jedi kept on solely defining herself as an irresponsible element, Orphea, Ruth, and the whole galaxy with them was doomed. Lectures wouldn't fix it; Lord Scourge and a long history with the Jedi Council had seen to that. "Exactly," Orphea said cheerfully, and offered her another drink.

L+15 years 20 days: Reminisce

Her will was weakest in the evenings.

Ruth had her meditations, her hopes that her next encounter with the Emperor would go well and she would finally be cleared to hear what else was going on with the *Aegis*. She had her work during the day, sometimes being foiled in the strategic goal by elements that might well be catspaws of Wynston's own organization. Wynston. She didn't have him, couldn't. Her master, her career, said she couldn't. If she walked away from her responsibilities here she would be found, or worse, Colrand would be, and punishment would not be a swift thing. Instead she had work here. It filled her days.

Her will was weakest in the evenings.

She was walking by the lounge nearest her own quarters when she heard Colrand's voice. "So why didn't she just bring Jaesa to help sort out who to pressure to challenge the line?"

Ruth edged toward the doorway to see Quinn seated opposite the boy. "I believe she was curious to see Lieutenant Pierce in action," he said. "And we lacked the manpower for her to bring both with her." Quinn's eyebrow twitched slightly. "As it turns out, Pierce's expertise did deal with the Republic troops, just in a far less elegant way."

Ruth shook herself. "Oh, stars," she said, and walked in to face the two. "Are you talking about Taris?"

Quinn shot to his feet. "Yes, my lord," he said, clipping every word.

She considered dismissing him on the spot. But Colrand was eagerly listening. She wanted to keep it civil. "If I'd had time to think about it I would've brought Jaesa," Ruth told her son, "and checked Pierce's performance later against slightly less sentient targets. Negotiating a surrender would have been better."

"You did in fact get your opportunity to evaluate his capabilities," Quinn muttered.

"Yes, me and half that wing of the building."

"But you captured the guy," said Colrand. "Right?"

"Yes, General Frellka did survive." And he had proved a nice bargaining chip once the war was on.

"He tried to run the moment she defeated the last of his defenders," said Quinn. "It was, frankly, disgusting."

"But this one was waiting at the non-ruined exit to nab him." Credit where credit was due, and Colrand looked delighted to hear it. Ruth looked to Quinn. "You never told me you were doing that, by the way."

"You were busy, my lord. I did not have the chance to update you."

"You had time to call in everybody else's status."

Quinn looked innocuous.

Showoff.

It occurred to her that backing out would be a good idea. "Anyway, I didn't mean to interrupt."

"No, Mom," Colrand said hurriedly. "It's okay. We were just – did you know Father was just recommending, before this, General Soru's book about principles of force combinations. Your favorite every time we get into tactics."

Ruth decided to sit down. "Of course he would recommend it. He's the one who introduced me to it." She looked to Quinn while pointing at Colrand. "I had to give this one something when he started trying three-point offenses using his stuffed animal troops."

Quinn smiled, unexpectedly, dazzlingly. "And did he benefit?"

"Well, as I recall we had several long arguments on the respective strength of armored walkers versus plush nexus–"

"Mom!" said Colrand.

“-but once that was settled the actual tactical layouts were quite solid.”

“I just use the console sims,” grumbled Colrand. “We threw out the stuffed animals ages ago. *Anyway*, we were talking about you guys taking on the War Trust.”

*

Colrand asked questions, and he listened. This was history he hadn’t heard, or rather things that he had gotten only an incomplete picture of. When telling these stories in the past Ruth had always focused on the rest of the crew and skipped Quinn’s role.

But it seemed that Quinn had been one of hers once. He had belonged. Ruth’s voice spoke of admiration, the same warm praise she gave to her servants and friends. She stopped herself short now and then as if remembering to be mad; when she did that her gaze bounced off Quinn’s and skittered away, a shot of defensiveness here, a little pulse of grief there. As for Quinn, it was still hard to read him, but compared with his regular impassive self he came alive around her.

Until he didn’t.

Colrand was still drawing his parents out with questions. “Were you around for that?” he ended up asking Quinn. “The Killiks.”

“Yes,” he said. “I was present on that occasion.”

Ruth nodded confirmation. “In fact he was the only one of us in any shape to walk by the end. He stayed with me...I was a little fuzzy from the blood loss but I distinctly remember him threatening hell itself on those poor medics for not working fast enough.”

“I feared for your life,” he said, his eyes fairly glowing as he looked at her. Then suddenly he checked himself. The emotion that had been growing since she’d come in damped to near-invisible levels and he stood, leaving the energy of his manner behind. “Now. I should see to my duties. Please excuse me.” He nodded to Colrand, and, with a solemn expression, bowed to Ruth. Then, while everything about him said he wanted to stay, he walked off.

Colrand turned back to Ruth, feeling suddenly awkward. "Sorry," he said. "That was about Wynston, wasn't it." The Chiss had been there for that one, and that reminder had just ruined things.

She was still staring after where he had gone. "No," she said, a little distantly. "That was just about caring whether I live or die."

"Uh. He cares, Mom."

Her mouth smiled. Her eyes didn't. "Only as a secondary concern. He's here to keep me in line. We were just remembering a time when he could do that and look after me both at once."

"He's got to know better than to try anything now."

"He can be blind when he thinks it's a matter of responsibility. It doesn't matter if he knows better, he'll do it anyway." Ruth took a moment to think. And then she raised a hand to cover her mouth while she shuddered in what sounded a lot like a sob. "He can be cruel when he thinks he's right," she said raggedly.

"Mom," Colrand said helplessly. She didn't stop him from hugging her. "Don't. It's different now."

*

The cruelty part isn't, thought Ruth, but she didn't say that. She squeezed her son's shoulders once and backed off. "Sorry," she said. "I shouldn't have ruined the evening. I'll be in my quarters if you need me, all right?"

"Sure."

She retreated and thought for a long time about seeing Quinn smile, the way he did when he cared.

L+15 years 22 Days: Sith imperatives

The team was giving Orphea some quiet time for once on their way out to disrupt another node of the Emperor's galaxy-spanning web. The place

was being supplied directly by a droid factory nearby; they would need every anti-mech technique at their disposal.

He remembered that day on a forest moon, years ago, when his people were busy directing an incipient civil war and Ruth came in for the critical touch at the head of a droid army – an army that needed reprogramming before it was set loose. He had had to leave just before the battle ended, called elsewhere by a crisis. He hadn't seen Ruth again for weeks.

Orpheia sat up when Scourge strode into the room. "Problem?" she asked.

"No. I am simply tired of hearing our Jedi associate's voice."

"I should be flattered, I think." She fell silent, letting the here and now come back to her. "Scourge?"

"Yes?"

"When did you know you would fight against the Emperor?"

"When I had my first vision of the galaxy as the Emperor wished to render it. At the time I did not imagine fighting him myself. But I knew who would, and knew that I would aid her."

"How simple."

"She did not know she needed to resist him until you spoke with her."

"Until she made a run at Wynston, you mean. Then she knew."

"It seems strange to me that she should cling to the Light Side so, yet fail to challenge the Dark presence."

"She thought she could balance the two in her life."

"Foolish."

"It was her decision. If anyone can make it work, it's her."

"I'll believe that when I see her defying his command."

The proof they were all waiting for. "If anyone can do it...she can."

Scourge raised one expressive brow ridge. "We will see."

L+15 years 23 days: Terms

Quinn found Ruth nursing a mug of something or other on the *Tenacity's* observation deck.

Dread washed over her as she looked up at him. "Here to lecture me on the error of my ways again?" Any time Colrand wasn't around, Quinn's presence was bound to turn out unpleasant.

"No."

She set down her drink and eyed him warily. "I don't believe you."

"Nor have you any reason to." He sat down. She narrowed her eyes. "Your focus on the job is improving, my lord, but my efforts have not contributed to that. It's become clear that I am doing no one any good in pressing you." He seemed ready to say more, but fell silent instead.

"Really. You feel bad about this?"

"I feel it benefits no one."

"All of it? You're already tired of pushing recommendations about 'the agent'?"

"Forget him."

She slammed to her feet.

"That isn't what I meant!" he said hastily. "I will leave it be. Your feelings are your own, I tire of hurting them. I propose a truce."

She hesitated.

"If the most I can do for you outside the bare requirements of field work is to stay out of your way then I'll do it."

"And you tracked me down to tell me you'll leave me alone?"

"Not just that. I must ask about Colrand first. About whether terms will change with him."

"You can keep seeing him while we're living here. Which will be as long as this job lasts; I'm not leaving him behind somewhere alone. He adores you, Quinn. Hurt one hair on his head and I will show you hells you didn't know existed, but I won't keep him away."

"If I were to hurt him I would deserve any fate you could devise. Thank you, my lord." He clasped and unclasped his hands. "When the three of us find ourselves together you go to some trouble to avoid conflict. It is an effort that is not lost on me, though I know you're doing it for his sake and not mine. I can excuse myself in the future if that would make things simpler."

"That's not necessary. He would know what's going on, and...it's really not necessary." He was genuinely better when Cole was there.

"Good," he said. He sounded relieved. "You...smile, when you're with him. Whatever happens, I think that will stand you in better stead than anything I say. You were always that way." He blinked and looked away. "I am abundantly unqualified to provide that affection in any form you can return. If that is all that helps you, it's time I got out of your way." He didn't bother with the usual parting offer of assistance; he just stood and walked away, as quickly as if he had somewhere to be.

L+15 years 25 days: Orphea: Vette help? Pierce checkin?

The Twi'lek treasure hunter Vette swung cheerfully into the lounge next to the strategy room. "Hey, Miss Orphea," she said. "Haven't been by in a while. I talked to Jaesa on my way in. You are lookin' pretty, mister."

Orphea reflexively looked around to check for witnesses to that particular statement. "You're too kind," she said. "What news from the valuable-object stashes of the galaxy?"

"Not a lot. Turns out there's not a big market in sapping or tracking...ancient spirits, I guess."

"I see. Can I get you something to drink? We can find a place to sit down."

"That I wouldn't mind. I've been on the road for a few weeks by now." She followed him out of the hangar and down the corridor, chattering about the atrocious state of space traffic control on Outer Rim worlds.

That changed once Orphea had her in a conference room. "Listen," the Twi'lek said, "I've been working my connections hard, and I've got a lot of connections. But putting the freeze on something's life energy, or soul, or whatever? There's a lot of cranks and not too many results. We might just have to take the classic route of beating him to death. With lightsabers."

"I don't want to force Ruth to do this alone. I'm not sure it's even possible to do it alone."

"She's the brawn of the operation, isn't she?"

"She's the everything that matters. But if there's something we can do to back her up I mean to find it. There's where I need you."

Vette tellingly avoided looking at Orphea straight on. "I'll try," she said. "I want Ruth home as much as anybody. And home not getting blown away by whatever the Emperor's up to."

"I'm counting on you, Vette." That left the room feeling too heavy. "If all else fails, we might need guns."

"Like me holding one, or like me accidentally redirecting somebody else's arms shipment this way?"

"Like you, Vette. Like old times, only slightly higher stakes."

"That I can do. I've been covering her back since she was getting B's on her term papers at school."

"I may have been referring to the matter of the galaxy blowing up."

"Uh-huh. Let's be honest, that's the side benefit." Vette grinned. "I'll keep looking for knickknacks. You just...hang in there, Orphy."

Orphea stiffened when Vette went in for a hug. "'Orphy'?" she muttered.

"We've known each other forever, right? Just go with it." Vette managed to make the barely-breathed words sound mischievously malicious. She backed off and said, louder, "Take care of yourself."

"Watch your back," Orpheia said meaningfully, glaring indignation.

Vette waved. "Will do!"

L+15 years 29 days: Cole begs for status quo

"Mom? When are we leaving?"

Ruth took a moment to compose her answer.

Colrand didn't give her time. "Nobody wants the Emperor in your head. But if you shut him out, you're not really just going back to work like normal."

"No," she said reluctantly. "I don't know the long game, not yet. At least not the details." She didn't have the details, but there was only a limited number of things one would want to do with the ability to say no to the Emperor. "I know that once we're sure he has no hold over me at any distance, for old orders or new, we'll be leaving."

"And Father?"

"I'd like to avoid conflict. But Cole, they sent him to me to make sure I'll behave. He'll act against me if they tell him to."

"Whatever you have to do, there's good reasons. Right? He'd help if it's the right thing to do. Couldn't we get him with us? Or at least get him to sit this one out?"

"No. His duty defines him."

"He might listen to you. To us."

"He never listened to me."

"Can you try? I mean, or maybe Wynston doesn't even know what he's doing. Maybe you can get free but then, still do your job, and not...not make a mess." He tugged at a strand of his hair and looked at it instead of her. "Maybe we could stay here."

She felt a pang, hearing his wish. "Staying here isn't a good idea," she said gently. "I would be glad to leave Quinn alone if he doesn't threaten me, but he would not extend the same courtesy."

"He might. If you weren't...I mean, if you didn't pick a fight. Even if you just split, and leave him alone. Will I have to go for good?"

"I don't want this hurting you, Cole. But if he and I have to go our separate ways it won't be safe for you to see him."

"Father won't let anything happen to me."

"There are better fathers than Quinn."

"Like who, exactly? The one where you don't know where he is, or what he's doing or why?"

He didn't say it with anger, but it stung nevertheless. "I trust Wynston to be doing the right thing. He always has. And he's better for both of us."

"I guess." Colrand's face worked for a moment. "Look, I miss Wynston, too. I really do. He's a great dad...four or five weeks a year. You know I've already seen Father more days in a row than I've seen Wynston at a stretch my whole life?"

She stared at Colrand, suddenly desperately wishing that that didn't have to matter. Wishing she had noticed it herself.

"Wynston's working to protect all of us," she managed to say.

"I get that. It just doesn't make him much of a family guy." He shrugged uneasily. "I hope he can get back soon, but not if it means cutting Father out of the picture."

As if there were any other way this could go. "I was thinking of sending you away," she blurted. "The closer we get to what may be a problem the clearer the need for it seems to be. Wynston's people would see you safe, where neither Quinn nor anyone else can get to you." Even if she hated the thought of not watching over him herself.

Colrand's eyes widened. "No." It was almost a whimper. "You can't do that. I'll be careful, whatever you say, but you're not sending me away just because he might do something."

"I'm not risking your life on a 'maybe.'"

"I'm not leaving just because you say so!"

"Quinn is dangerous, Cole!"

"I'm Sith, Mom!"

"That wasn't enough to protect me!"

"You just didn't know." He deflated a little. "Everyone's dangerous. At least he's got a reason to look out for me."

"It isn't enough." She wanted it to be. Stars, she wanted it to be.

"Maybe it would be if you weren't already fighting. He's got a duty to us, too. And he wants to listen." A pause. "He's still in love with you, you know."

Ruth flinched. "Stars, Cole, you're a teenager. That's supposed to disgust you."

"It's true, though. And his job lets him stay with us. If we're doing the right thing, just give him that reason. Maybe your 'long game' can let you stay here undercover or...or something. Just think about it, okay?"

Ruth thought of all the arguments she still had to make. She could go on forever and not run out of reasons to not let Quinn any closer.

"Please," said Colrand.

"I'll think about it," said Ruth.

*

The day had been back to back crises, and Orphea ended up in the engine room doing some repetitive scrubbing to keep the sublight motivators in shape while they barreled through hyperspace. It let her think, anyway. And what little time to think was all the time she could have with Ruth.

*

Wynston woke up beside her and knew it was going to be a good day. Every day with Ruth was a good day. It was almost unsettling. Not unsettling enough to say no to.

Why was this all still going so well? He still had no explanation for it.

He nuzzled her side just because. She tensed as she woke, but only for a moment; then she rolled and curled around his head, not quite trapping him. "Hello," she mumbled down his back.

"Good morning," he told her stomach. "You know what today is?"

"Hm. Thursday?"

He shifted and wrapped his arms around her in a more traditional pose. "Not just that."

Her eyes widened. "Four years."

"Four years."

"If I were more awake I would've had that right away."

"We can go back to sleep," he said graciously, "you'll get it on the second try."

"Already too awake." She kissed him. "It feels like less than that."

"I know." Counting only the days they had been together it was only a matter of months. "But here we are. I love you."

The raw joy of her every time he said that still astonished him. The steady glow it summoned in him astonished him, too. It was bewildering in a good way...not a phrase he used often...and the feeling behind it had been going on in one form or another for years now. Five and a half since they met. Five since he had...guessed? Realized? Stumbled into? Had begun this, the best partnership of his life.

Scant weeks since he had first risked admitting it for what it was.

She was smiling. "I love you, too," she said. Her gift to him. He more or less understood the things that made him love her; he didn't understand as much about her reasons for this beautiful lapse in judgment that was her loving him.

"Upon review," he told her, "I think I'd like to renew the contract on this."

She tightened her arms around him. "Agreed."

"Good. So, what would you like to do today?"

"Hm. Stay put for a while."

"As you wish, darling."

She studied his features, letting a smile slowly widen. "I love you." The shake of her head was small and dreamy. "Do you have any idea how long I've waited to tell you that?"

"I believe we just established it was four years."

She blinked slowly a couple of times. "Ah. Right."

He grinned. "You sure you aren't ready to go back to sleep?"

"I'm sure." She relaxed and kept her gaze on him, sparkling, happy. "I don't want to miss a moment."

Neither did he. Now more than ever, he was tired of losing time.

*

So tired, thought Orpheus, of losing time. Hyperspace dragged onward, bringing her no closer to where she wanted to be.

L+15 years 30 days: Decision

Ruth was tired. It wasn't like she could get away from Quinn any time soon, or get back to Wynston. That wasn't how it worked. Whatever else happened, her son belonged with Quinn for as long as she could afford it. And she belonged with her son. It was a given that things would end in conflict, but that day wasn't here yet; all she could really choose was how to conduct herself on the way. And perhaps, within all the restrictions reality had placed, it might be time to give up the restrictions she was holding up by herself.

She hurt for Wynston. For his hopes, and for the comfort he had had with her before greater powers got in the way. She hurt because the way she wanted him didn't have the strange solid weight of obligation. She hurt because she wasn't really sure Wynston could win, not if his hopes were on a woman who had already failed him.

It was very late in the evening when she went to Quinn's door.

"A moment," came his voice, crisply, and in under half a minute he appeared in the doorway, uniformed and alert.

He froze, looking at her.

She didn't bother explaining her presence. Instead she looked back up at him and waited. She wasn't going to order him, nor seek his permission, nor even try to talk through what couldn't be changed. There was so very much that couldn't be changed.

His lips parted and a little life returned to his features while he drank in the sight of her. Finally he stepped aside, guided her in with a gentle hand on her arm, and let the door fall shut.

In the limits of her life right now this was what she could have, what she was permitted. Even this was risky but she wanted him, as she always had,

despite knowing it would be taken away again. He knew her, he knew those limits, he understood all of it, he wanted her in spite of the known past and the likely future, and so she closed her eyes and hoped that this, tonight, could be forgiving. And forgetting.

*

Ruth felt better in the morning. Quinn was vividly present, and his frame was large enough to almost entirely envelop her when he woke up and put his arms around her, and any lingering pain seemed far away.

"Hello," she said.

The room was finally light enough for her to really see his eyes, and they shone. "Hello," he said.

"I wasn't supposed to want this," she informed him, smiling in spite of herself.

"I was never supposed to want this, my lord," he replied. "Sorry."

"Ruth. You had it right earlier. If you call me 'my lord' here again I will be very displeased, captain."

"Ruth," he chided, "I should point out that I haven't been a captain in quite some time." He was smiling, too.

"When I see you I forget." She wriggled up to kiss him. "Besides, 'Moff' doesn't sound right between us."

"'Malavai' remains acceptable."

"Malavai." She nuzzled his jaw. "I'll keep that in mind."

"If you forget again, I can accept 'captain' from you," he said graciously.

"Mm."

"Ruth, what are you doing?"

She kept nuzzling. "Stubble," she explained. "I've missed it. Hm." She kissed across his neck. "A lot."

"Then," he said bemusedly, "I'm pleased to be in a position to provide it?"

"I value you," she assured him, "in a great many ways, for many wonderful rare things that nobody else has and this just feels really good right now." It was the little things that could last her forever if she let them. Sudden. Close. Wonderful.

He pushed his hands through her hair, tangling in the waves and giving up before it became pulling. "Yes," he said.

"I missed you," she admitted. "Even when I hated you I missed you."

He waited, holding his breath, but she didn't tread any closer to that subject. Instead she brushed her lips against his and let his cool hands resume running slowly over her scars, new and old.

"I told you," he said at length, "that waking up was the hardest part." He wrapped his arms around her and held her with that dizzying stare of his. "As you described. Long after I should have gotten accustomed to your absence, I would still wake up and think that you would be here, wanting me."

She stroked his jaw with a thumb. "I want you," she murmured. "...in an 'I'm actually sort of worn out right now' sort of way."

Quinn exhaled a laughing breath. "It will suffice."

They were quiet for a while. When he spoke again, he was subdued. "I would not have chosen to come here. I had no desire to hurt you again, nor to face that...temptation." He studied her face. "Ruth, the last thing you said to me was that you loved me. What you meant was that I could never come back."

"Yes," she agreed. "I meant it. But we've learned since then. Things are different now." *Please, she thought, let it be different.* They had their son. Even he had to change for that.

He kissed her. "Things are different. You have come so far. And I..." He clasped her hands tightly. "It will be right this time."

It probably wasn't quite true, but it was close enough in a galaxy like this. She could have this for as long as her responsibilities permitted. Those were the terms of her surrender. She understood them now.

It felt good anyway.

The morning alarm blipped, and Ruth shook herself and sat up. There was work to attend to. She set one hand on Quinn's chest for just a moment and grinned with the delight of contact. "So. Shall I be your Wrath today?"

L+15 years 31 days, part 1: Impatience

"If I have to wait one more minute I might go insane," said Orpheia.

"Our search will yield results sooner or later," Vector said calmly. "After that, Lord Scourge and Larr Gith are likely to take the battle to the Emperor, and it is probable that Ruth will be freed before she has to face him."

"I don't trust Larr Gith to kill a Korriban acolyte. She's capable, but she's got less focus than one of her own hangovers and I can't tease out a motivation more solid than bragging rights. I've worked with worse, but not for these stakes. Lord Scourge doesn't have the raw power and Larr Gith doesn't care, and Ruth is...stuck. What we should do is provoke another call in from her master, put her exercises to the test. She can handle it. She's got to be as impatient as we are."

"We have not found a way to provoke the Voice into issuing such summons before." Vector made it into a slight question.

"Larr Gith can do it. Provocation is her middle name. She should be delighted to make the kind of high-profile disturbance that would give the Emperor a reason to sic Ruth on her. Then if Wynston's lucky only one such order stays active at a time." Orpheia reflected for a moment. "I don't believe in luck, but who knows."

"More to the point, Ruth may throw off the order entirely."

"True. That is the point." Orphea pushed a hand back through her hair. "I want her back among friends. The worst thing you can possibly do to her is isolate her. Everybody who's known her for long knows that she gets her strength from the people she loves." Orphea paused. "I always wondered if I was really helping with that when I was away."

"You were," Vector said with calm confidence. "You do."

"That's good. I don't know when I picked up the habit myself." She gave a small calming huff, in and out. Quieter, she said "More of a dependency." She shook her head. "You have no idea how much I dislike dropping these confessions on you. I haven't had to do it this much since the bad old days." Back when Wynston's mind wasn't his own. "When it was down to talking to either you or the wall to maintain my sanity."

"We will listen. And you will have your regular confessor back soon. Or, should an emergency arise, we have an ample supply of walls on this ship."

Orphea chuckled. "Vector, I really have no idea what I would do without you."

*

Larr Gith stared Orphea down with tawny, blazing eyes. "You want me to wave my arms and yell "Look at me, I'm that Jedi who gave you a black eye and here's my location, I'm messing with you in case you haven't figured that out yet, now send your best."

"Yes."

"And you're hoping his best won't show up to argue with me."

"I'm hoping his best does show up, just on our side."

"Do you have any idea how screwed she is if she shows her face in controlled mode?"

"I have a perfect idea, yes. Wynston took her down once, albeit crudely. We can do it again if we have to." Orpheia shot a look at Lord Scourge. "Alive."

"If she endangers our one proven challenger against the Emperor, there can be no mercy," said Scourge.

"Unacceptable."

"Her survival isn't up to you this time, hunter."

"Stop bloody calling me that."

"Your nerves are wearing thin, little hunter. Still the Wrath is your concern, rather than our battle with the Emperor."

"Yes, she's my concern. Someone's got to look out for her." Long-lost family was about the best Orpheia could claim for a connection that Ruth didn't already know about. She didn't go into it in detail, and happily most conversations to date had been dominated by Larr Gith noisily not caring. "And once we have her, she has an excellent record of looking out for all of us. It'll pay off. So. Let's scoop up an analyst or two, find ourselves a venue for some attention-grabbing."

"Every venue is a venue for attention-grabbing if you know what you're doing," yawned Larr. "But yes. Let's find something good."

L+15 years 31 days, part 2: Family

Quinn came to breakfast with Ruth instead of dining in his quarters or wherever he usually did.

Ruth was practically glowing.

It was a lot more unsettling than Colrand had imagined.

They were formal as ever in conversation, but Ruth wasn't wincing nearly as much and Quinn wasn't retreating behind a mask every ten seconds.

Colrand talked a little and listened a lot. He waited for things to start making sense.

When Quinn headed off for whatever, Ruth turned back to Colrand, sipped her caf, and beamed.

"That was kinda sudden," Colrand blurted.

His mother raised her eyebrows. "Your idea."

"I guess? You hate him. I thought you were gonna try maybe warming up to not giving him death stares every time you run out of the room because he shows up. Maybe. Given time."

"It doesn't have to be that way."

He sipped his caf.

She eyed him worriedly. "I hope this isn't upsetting."

"Hate, Mom. Did you, you know, deal with the killing-you thing?" With an unwilling coworker she was daily warning against it was one thing. He figured closer contact had to mean something got fixed.

"It's been long enough. And we know it won't happen again."

That was promising. "We do?"

"I don't think it will come to that."

...Not dramatically promising. "He's still dangerous? Like you always said?"

"He's still dangerous," she confirmed. "But he may listen."

"Good. That's...that's good." It would save Quinn's life if something were to happen. And if Quinn did listen through whatever was coming up, and Ruth and Quinn stayed together, that would be...it'd be perfect.

"Cole, the master he held that debt to is long dead. That's one reason fixed. Another reason was that at the time I hadn't proved my ability to hold up my side of the argument. That is very much fixed."

Just then Quinn walked back in.

Ruth half stood. "Trouble?"

"No," he said, and the two of them both relaxed some. "I just found a few more minutes to spare."

"Ah." If Ruth had a girlish mode, that smile was it.

"Was I interrupting?"

"No. We were just talking about Corellia."

"I see." Quinn looked gravely at Colrand. "That is hard to explain."

Colrand shrugged. "Not really. You got an order, you did it, because that's what was important to you. And I see how that happens." Even if that didn't make it right. There seemed to be a lot more to explain than that, someday. If it didn't mess things up to try to talk about it. "I just didn't...I didn't want you leaving again. So I kept quiet." What mattered was that it wasn't wrecking things here.

It was Ruth Quinn looked at when he said "I won't leave again. My loyalty, and my hope, is here."

They didn't touch, they weren't affectionate like Ruth was with Wynston. But the space between them sparked and glowed. Yeah. Definitely unsettling.

It was good.

L+15 years 32 days: Orpheus at dawn

Orpheia held still when she woke. Inventory: half dressed, well rested, physical condition good. Location, not at home. Her Mantis-class vessel instead. Expected to be en route to a very old, very obscure Sith enclave in the uncharted regions. Surroundings, just her own bed and the distant hum of the hyperdrive. Pretty normal except that the Mantis had less plush accommodations than Wynston's vessel, the silver one waiting back on the *Aegis*.

Identity, female, midlevel operative so far as her contacts were concerned, name: Orpheia. Priorities, in order: see the Wrath free and the Emperor dead.

She wasn't sure her gambit was the right thing to do, but it was better than the alternatives. Every now and then you had to trust your partner could handle it.

L+15 years 36 days: Checkpoint

The summons came right on the heels of Larr Gith's devastating incursion into a Sith stronghold in the uncharted regions. The summons came, and Ruth prepared. Quinn walked her as far as her Fury's hangar and, in a nook where the posted guards couldn't see, gave her a kiss. He seemed to have these blind corners of the ship memorized and he never missed a chance. She sensed he might be afraid to. She had no problem following where he led.

But the task that waited was hers alone, and so she flew out to the dark fortress as it circled its cold dim star in the boundless night. She gathered her will on the way in, held her determination in mind and covered it with thoughts of her work as Wrath, 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."

"The change in terms with Quinn, master," she said. It was certainly an element.

"I see. He has served well. Consume him as you will."

She knew 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 Wynston?"

"He is elusive." No shortage of genuine shame and frustration in thinking about him.

"He costs us too much," hissed the Emperor. "Find him. Kill him with his friends, the agitators Larr Gith and Lord Scourge." Finally his presence withdrew from her mind. "The Hand has the location of Larr Gith's most recent strike. 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, awake. Warm. 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, trembling.

L+15 years 37 days, part 1: Reunion

Once Ruth was well away from that place, she made a call.

"Jaesa," she said to the holo. "Can you set me up a meeting with those people I'm supposed to kill?"

"That...doesn't sound very good when you say it like that."

"I had a talk with the boss. I'm feeling fine. I'm sure you'll have hunting nets or tranq darts or something at the ready for me just in case. It's time for us to get together. I don't recommend Larr Gith's last known location, more of the Emperor's troops will almost certainly be showing up."

"We're well away from her last advertised location. Tell you what, we'll send you coordinates and we can meet up first thing in the morning."

"I'd love to. Say hello to everyone. Say hello to Wynston."

"I will. See you soon, Ruth."

She turned away from the holo and thought. She would see Wynston again.

That felt complicated.

It would be...it would be...

Better, she told herself. The *Tenacity* was the job, what had to be done; the *Aegis* was...

A place she had never been trusted with, currently occupied by the likes of Larr Gith and Lord Scourge?

No. Not the point. Wynston, the man. She had to apologize to him. Make sure he was all right, make sure he knew she never wanted to hurt him. She never, ever wanted to hurt him.

Too late.

There were things he wouldn't forgive. But those things were cruelty, voluntary treachery, theft from innocents. He would forgive her for her actions as Wrath. He would welcome her. He was her steady source, more constant in his motion than most people had the strength to be in perfectly stable rest. She missed him.

She didn't know how he was going to react. Her place was with Quinn as long as she could manage; now was the time to see how long that would be, see what would have to be done. If she could keep Quinn in the long term, somehow, she could...

This wasn't what Wynston had meant when he said she was free to take lovers of her own. Not Quinn. Wynston might tolerate any other lover in the galaxy, but not Quinn.

So, what, should she stay alone until Wynston was ready to stop by again?

If she concentrated she could smell his hair, feel the precisely etched shape of the scars on his face and body. His voice, his absolute steady support, his openness, they were gifts such as no one else had ever given her. It was he who had been there for her through the years.

'There' was a few dozen parsecs away most of the time. Wasn't she tired of waiting?

Enough. She did love Wynston, and want him. She would be welcome in his arms, probably. And he would understand another period of separation for the mission's sake. She did have to tend to the mission. Maybe the rest of it wouldn't become an issue yet. She could hope.

*

"Temple, thanks again for loaning your time." Wynston touched Raina Temple's elbow. "You've seen me play Orpheus. These people don't need much active oversight. Let Jaesa and Vector do most of the talking. Any problems come up, say you'll need to check information clearance with me."

"Certainly." She put her disguise up to become a pale brunette. "Should be easy enough." She grinned winningly at him and headed out.

Wynston checked himself in the mirror. Him, the scarred Chiss, no disguises. About to see the one person who made him feel most like himself. If he were young enough to get giddy over the mere prospect of things, that's what he would be.

He joined the group in their big conference room: Orpheus, Vector, Jaesa, Lord Scourge, Larr Gith, himself. "All right, everyone. Jaesa, Larr, you can handle immobilization if it has to come up?"

Scourge made a face. A very dignified old-warrior face, but a face. Wynston ignored him. There would be no deadly force today.

"We're ready," Jaesa said. "And so is she. Let's do this."

*

A building on Taris, only remarkable in that it appeared semi-habitable. It was near a large usable shuttle pad and had as such been probably used as a landing site for any number of shady dealings; it was, Ruth reflected, a decent meeting place in case she should turn out to be unfriendly.

Orpheus met Ruth at the door. "Welcome," she said. "Come on, everyone's upstairs."

The conference room was large but sparsely populated: Orpheia, Vector, Jaesa. Lord Scourge, Larr Gith.

Wynston.

Something in the back of Ruth's mind told her to attack, but she shoved it down in a swell of joy. She opened her arms – partly out of a desire to demonstrate to everyone that she wasn't carrying any weaponry, mostly out of a desire for him – and charged.

*

Ruth crushed Wynston against her and he returned the embrace as hard as he could; they didn't really need the ribs anyway.

"Wynston," she said raggedly. "I'm so sorry."

"Don't be." He was dizzy just being this close to her after the uncertainty of the preceding weeks. He kissed her cheek and then looked around.

"Excuse us a moment. We need to talk; after that we can all bring her up to speed on the full extent of the operation." He slid his arm around Ruth's waist and led her into the adjacent room.

They stopped as soon as the door closed and faced each other, closing the embrace. "I'm sorry," she said again.

"Don't. The only part of this that you're responsible for was going up against the greatest sole power in the galaxy to make seeing me again possible. You have no reason to be sorry." He kissed her, first hard and then with conscious slowness, thoroughness, making absolutely certain his lips fit right against hers after their time away. "I love you," he whispered. "I missed you."

She looked away and nodded. "I missed you, too," she said quietly.

It must have been hell on her. "We're clear to operate now. I've arranged quarters for you and for Cole on the *Aegis*. Any time you–"

"I'm not staying," she said. The flush in her cheeks died.

Wynston's entire brain stopped. "What?"

She looked at the floor. "Whatever the mission, I can be of use keeping my cover and sabotaging the operations they assign me. And...it's Cole, Wynston. If I can do equal good either way, I want him to be with his father."

That smacked of too much affection and not enough thought. "Darling, he isn't safe with his father. The moment someone upstairs decides Cole would be effective leverage over you..."

"He won't let anything happen." Her throat worked for a moment. Whatever she was really thinking, Wynston could see he wasn't allowed in. "I love you. But until it's time to strike, my place is with them."

Out of a misguided idea for Cole's wellbeing? Out of some misplaced sense of guilt toward Wynston himself? She was either mistaken or hiding another intention, the one Wynston had acknowledged and let be seventeen years ago, the one he had never been able to fight. Wynston leaned into her and kissed her, and she was sweet, beautiful, tender, nearly perfect. And holding back.

"I can't lose you," he said. "Not again. I'll take care of Cole, there is nothing to forgive between us and nothing I wouldn't do to have you at my side. Come with me."

She shook her head. "You need to be out there," she said, lacing bitterness into the quiet tone, "and I have my own work. And my family. I'm going back."

"For him."

She nodded. "For Cole."

"No." He let his arms drop as he backed off. "For *him*. Ruth, in all the years we've spent together there's only one thing you've never let me do and that's make excuses. Have the decency to give me that much yourself." He wouldn't get angry. He wouldn't.

She was raising her head defiantly, and the look in her eyes killed him. It was admission enough. "Wynston, don't. I'll still be--"

"Ready to do what you have to when the time comes? Think, Ruth. We both know he'll neither side with us nor stand aside when we have to act. You will have to stop him. Are you really willing to take your pleasures until then and tell yourself it's love?" He had to clear his throat. "Last time I checked you were vehemently opposed to that behavior." Too much. Definitely angry.

"Don't. You don't know how much things have changed."

"Evidently not." He squeezed his eyes shut. He wanted terribly much to try to take her back in his arms, but he didn't want to find out if she would reject it. "This isn't right."

"Don't. Please."

Everything in her life was trying to control her, he reminded himself. Just because he was right didn't mean...well, it did mean he should do something, but not what he wanted to do now, which was shake her until she woke up and acknowledged the danger she was in.

"You want to go back?" he made himself say.

"Yes," she said faintly.

"And you think you can get information of value there."

"Yes." She blinked hard. "I can contribute to the mission there, and we can...we'll talk, soon. All right? For now we should work out plans with your people. I've been kept in the dark for a while."

"You don't have to stay there anymore," he told her.

"We'll see what makes sense," she said, and walked on past.

*

Ruth curled her feelings up tight to avoid letting them escape. She was dying to see Wynston, and of course he was blaming her exactly as she had

feared. He didn't understand Quinn, or Cole, or her, or any of her responsibilities. Better to stay away. Better to stick to the people who actually understood what it was to be trapped. She ached for him, but he wasn't ready to forgive her doing what she had to.

Lord Scourge fixed her with a red glare that seemed to hold traces of the amusement from their earlier encounter. "So. You are ready to join us, Wrath."

"Looks like it."

"I hope the resources invested in you turn out to be worth it."

"You saw what I can do."

"The Emperor is a harder target than I am. But we will see."

"About that. Please do tell me why we're killing the Emperor," said Ruth.

Scourge laid out the plan, a tremendous plan and a vile one. Ruth's heart sank even further than it already was when she realized that every operation she had supported had gone toward attempting to instigate mass death to swell the Emperor's power for his final sweep of destruction. This was what lay at the center of the darkness she had served under. This was what her work was for.

"This is why he never cared about any previous...softness of mine," she said, more calmly than she felt. "Because my mercies are irrelevant next to the true plan. Do we have the location of his true form?"

"Not yet," said Wynston. He sounded cool, professional, but he wouldn't look at her. "We have a few candidates, dark spots in space where observers tend to disappear, but there are too many such candidates right now and we're still working on narrowing it down. We're hoping that the next time you head out to the Voice's fortress you can set up some telemetry; perhaps we'll intercept some communication we can use."

"If I'd thought of it I would've observed more closely back when I killed the Voice on Voss. As it is I don't know whether there's any Force phenomenon that could give us direction upon a Voice's death."

"I had nothing more than suspicions when Larr Gith struck down her Voice," said Lord Scourge. "But then, I was not physically present."

"Is there an annoyance big enough to draw him out?" asked Ruth.

"If we haven't already?" said Larr Gith. "Probably not."

"All right. How about a victory big enough to draw him out?"

Orphea blinked. "Was that a joke?"

"If we line up enough planets to die, will he come. Does he need to be physically close to benefit?"

"Not having destroyed enough planets to do this myself, I'm really not sure," said Larr Gith. "If anyone should know it's you, you're the resident Sith."

Lord Scourge glared at her.

Larr Gith waved dismissively. "The one who's still employed."

Scourge's glare didn't lessen when he started talking. "The matter of employment is significant. Wrath, so long as we do not know where to strike, it would be advantageous for you to stay where you have been assigned. Informing us on your activities should give us great insight into his plans, which you may sabotage or we may deal with."

"That's risky," said Jaesa. "She can do just as well with us here. That way her son would be safer, too."

"Her son is irrelevant," said Scourge.

"No, he's not," said Ruth and Wynston. They still didn't look at each other.

"His keeping is of no concern to me," said Scourge. "The Wrath should still remain on assignment."

"He's right," said Ruth.

"Are you sure?" said Jaesa. "Wynston would..."

"Let her go," Wynston said crisply. "She has a point."

"It is a little disheartening," said Vector, "to think that we arranged that effort only to bid you farewell again."

"Thanks, Vector," said Ruth. "But this is really for the best." Away from the boiling tensions here. "I'll go back. I'll sabotage. If you have any kind of sensors or spikes you want me to sneak onto the Voice's fortress on my next trip, now's the time to hand them over. And now I should get back to the *Tenacity*. There's no one there I can bring in on this right now, but you have my secure holofrequency and I will be reporting everything that might be of use."

"Thank you," said Orphea, and stood. "We do have some equipment I'll have our techs bring up. If that's all, I can escort you back to the landing pad."

The rest of the room chorused their farewells. Wynston's face was a stiff mask as he nodded at Ruth. "Watch your back, Wrath."

"Take care," she said. His expression didn't soften any.

She tore herself away and left.

L+15 years 37 days, part 2: Withdrawal

Vector gave Wynston a couple hours' time. Wynston appreciated that. He could only imagine what his aura must have looked like when he got out of that room with Ruth: enough to cause concern, for sure.

But Vector did show up eventually. Wynston made sure to hide the first bottle; the second one was only slightly, acceptably reduced so far.

"Are you all right?" said Vector.

"I'll be fine," said Wynston.

"What did Ruth say?"

"What did she say? They found another way to control her, and she doesn't want to get rid of this one. She decided to forgive Quinn his little lapse in judgment." He shook his head. "I can gather enough legends to shut the Emperor up but I can't do anything about him."

Vector reflected for a long moment. "Will this be a security concern?" he asked slowly.

"Ruth? No." Wynston laughed bitterly. "He'll stop her in place, but if he succeeds in actually turning her she'll give us fair warning. Because she's good. Not like him. Not even like me. If she ever turns I believe she will actually walk in, say 'I can't do this anymore,' and give us a running start." He poured himself another drink. "That is what fifteen years of our grand love buys. Maybe I didn't maintain it too well."

"But without the Emperor's compulsion no one can make her turn. She knows the truth now about his plan."

"On whose word? How long is she going to believe mine now that she's listening to him? – No, it doesn't matter. She wants to go back. She wants to stay with him. She always did. When we were together on Corellia she wanted him even when I was in her bed, why shouldn't she want him when I'm – never mind. Never mind. She isn't going to compromise operations. It sounds like she'll report as long as her conscience lets her. We go on. At least the big mystical problem appears to have been cleared up. All that's left in play is free bloody will." He put his head in his hands. "And maybe I'm wrong. Maybe she can keep her head and bring him around after all. If anyone or anything in this wretched galaxy could redeem someone like that, it's her." Damn it all. "That she's even trying makes him the luckiest bastard that ever lived."

He drained his glass in one go. Vector was quiet.

"Love makes you stupid," Wynston said slowly, "but this is outright self-destruction."

"Perhaps."

"It's terrible! It's stupid!"

"If you will recall, you are on record as having threatened to dismantle all existing efforts against the Emperor's plan and 'let yourself and the galaxy burn' if Ruth could not be helped."

"That's different. I was bluffing."

"You should not lie to us. We have learned to tell."

"I was bluffing, Vector, it was just a lie I told to get the job done." He stood up and waved agitatedly. He was, he thought distantly, far gone. Well, sod clarity, it hurt too much anyway. "I thought she would be here tonight. We've had longer separations, but never when we didn't have to. Never when we didn't have to. And I can't do a thing about it this time except step unforgivably out of line or walk away. There's always a choice and she bloody well made it. Maybe on the terms we had it can't qualify as betraying me, but she's sure as hell betraying herself."

The only solution to this was another drink. Vector was clearly too whatevered to offer meaningful commentary. Sod vocabulary, too.

"Or maybe I'm wrong," Wynston said. "Maybe he isn't the menace he was, and it's a genuine choice, and I was never the one who was going to win that. I promised her years ago that when I left, I'd be sure to leave her better off than I found her. Maybe this is it. I hope I did." Stars. This babbling was doing no one any good and was probably going to destroy his one friend's respect for him. "Sod it." He waved dismissal. "Leave. I'll be ready for work in the morning."

"Things will be clearer in the morning."

"They will. It'll work. The mission goes on." He downed some more.

"She's a woman, Vector, I meet a dozen of those a day. I can make time for one of them. More than I made for her." Against his worthless excuse for better judgment he whipped his glass to shatter against the far wall; the motion felt good. Something he could do. He considered sending the second bottle after it, and possibly the first, and perhaps the others he had lined up just in case he lasted that long. "Go on. I'm actually finding this therapeutic, it'll be fine."

"You are among friends, Wynston. We are here for you."

"Bugger if I know why. Please get out, flying glass is bad for you."

Vector, with a last sympathetic look, finally left.

How Wynston hadn't managed to knock himself out yet, he didn't know. He'd better drain the second bottle before he threw it.

*

Ruth went straight to Quinn when she left her ship.

He followed half a step behind her side, as he always had, her faithful shadow, keeping pace with her until she reached their quarters. She didn't think about the Emperor, or the slaughters she had enabled, or how she was going to prove her case to Quinn. She thought a lot about the anger surging in Wynston the moment he started to think she was leaving him. She didn't think about whether she truly permanently was.

She threw herself into Quinn's arms the moment they were alone. The commanding poise she had been holding abandoned her. He pulled her close and didn't question her tears until she managed a non-sobbing breath and started trying to wipe her eyes.

"What's wrong?" he asked. "Is there...tell me what was commanded."

"He didn't ask for anything I couldn't handle. It's just that the meetings are difficult." She drew him to the bed and let her weariness mold her to the mattress. "Just hold me."

"Done," he whispered.

L+15 years 38 days, part 1: Ruth reminds Quinn

"I have to ask you something." Ruth lay on her side and watched her own finger tracing nothing in particular on Quinn's chest rather than looking at him.

He admired a lock of her hair contrasted against his hand. "What is it?"

"I told you something when you came to me. About the Emperor's command? How it was an actual compulsion, something I couldn't help."

"You told me you believed that," he said cautiously. When she looked, she saw his expression was one of near pity.

"Believe it. You know what mind tricks Jedi practice, what some Sith are capable of. How much more powerful is the Emperor?"

"He scarcely needs it," said Quinn. "You're responsible enough, I believe you have demonstrated that at considerable cost to yourself."

"I wouldn't have done that if not forced. And you saw how I was yesterday when I got home. That breakdown isn't something I ever did in normal operation." It wasn't because of the Emperor, either, but Quinn didn't need to know that.

With a cool fingertip he lightly traced her hairline and cheek, taking a little while before speaking. "You've been under a great deal of stress with the upheaval of this campaign."

"I've been under outright coercion. – Some of the time, not with you. Not ever with you."

He thought some more. "What is there to do about it?"

"There are Force techniques I can use to keep my own will. I'm getting good at them."

He frowned. "You have been opposing this for some time."

"Yes. I want my own mind, Malavai. I would even if he were benevolent...and he's not. He's a Dark Side presence that makes the Council and the ancient temples seem downright sunny."

"He is Sith. And placed even more highly than you, Ruth." There was steel in his gaze. It never really went away, not entirely.

"Is he above question?" she asked.

"Do you really wish to rebel again? Have you not risen high enough?"

"Don't talk about rebellion." Not yet. "I just want you to listen to me. He means harm, to me and to others. And he'll trample my mind and anyone else's for his goals. Do you believe that?"

He shifted, cradled her face in his hands. "I believe he has exerted some power over you. I believe that you do not enjoy that aspect of your service." He sighed and kissed her lips, her forehead. "But, beloved. Twice before I have been forced to watch, and to endure the consequences, as my commanders were consumed by their own paranoia. I cannot bear that fate for you. If there is evidence to justify some course of action I will follow you to the ends of the galaxy, face any trial, offer you everything I am. But you must be sure. I cannot commit treason based on discomfort alone."

It was so much like good intentions. It twisted in her chest. So much like good intentions, but not enough. She had nothing that would convince him of the assertions she was going to make. "And if I commanded you to obey me without question?" An unexpected surge of bitterness prompted her to add "That's your specialty, isn't it?"

"You never did that."

"Would it have made a difference if I did?"

He released her face and covered his own. "I warned you that I am not in your direct chain of command. That warning was itself an indiscretion but you deserved to know. Please, don't persist in chasing shadows."

"He's going to kill us. You, me, everyone. No, he didn't put it in writing, but it's true."

Quinn rolled onto his back and stared upward. She could tell he didn't want to call her crazy to her face.

"And he's hurting me," she added desperately.

He looked back. "That much is clear. How much..." He stroked her hand, gently, and seemed to test the beginnings of several words before continuing. "How much of it has to do with your own defiance, I don't know. I know what you must think of that and I swear to you I'm not saying this to hurt you. If there is some kind of proof, show me. Until then

I'll give him no reason to harm you. Please, I beg of you, for your own sake do likewise."

Just keep working until the pain goes away. His only solution. She could hate him for it. Fighting just then wouldn't help, though; in fact, it might endanger everything. What risk was he taking, letting her tread so close to treason? And what was he going to do once he had some time to think about it, this man who would sacrifice anything to the right authority?

"You're right," she said abruptly, and made herself relax a little. "It's just hard sometimes."

He took her back in his arms. "I know."

He did know. So why was he always so afraid to change it?

She kissed him, slowly, to soothe his fears or her own, whichever came first. This was what she could have for now. If he couldn't know, he couldn't know; the mission would go on. It had to. And she would find a way to save him. He loved her, in spite of the limits all around them, and she couldn't stop loving him in spite of the same. She silenced the chiming alarm and held him down for a few more moments, work day be damned. He gave her that much, at least. He could accept a small rebellion with concrete and believable benefits. It was what she could have, what she was permitted.

Then she got to work.

L+15 years 38 days, part 2: Next objective

Orphea held still when she woke. Inventory: half dressed, one agony of a hangover, experience from earlier harder-living years suggested that she could walk well enough and would, after some water and some mild drugs, be able to pass for functioning within half an hour. Location, not at home. No. At home, because the *Aegis*, not Dromund Kaas, was home. Should've gotten that firmly in the mental file years ago. Surroundings, her quarters, which reeked of a couple of varieties of alcohol. At least one of

them smelled expensive. A mouse droid was doing its best to stay silent as it cleaned the floor.

A temper tantrum. Kaliyo, he thought irrelevantly, would have been proud.

She thought, not he. Orphea, not Wynston. Wynston couldn't be here. Wynston would've gotten himself ripped to shreds if he'd showed his face. Mustn't let that happen. Moving on, identity: female, midlevel operative so far as her contacts were concerned, name: Orphea. Priorities, in order: see the Wrath free and the Emperor dead.

Well. The Wrath was free. Huzzah for victory. Now it was time for the Emperor to burn.

This was no longer morning inventory, this was wallowing. Orphea had no use for this nonsense. The mission went on; it had to. Move. The disguise could be easily tweaked to conceal rather than fitting to puffy eyes and the like. She went to the mirror, fixed that up, downed some water and some painkillers, rehearsed speaking a few dry sentences involving 'the Wrath' until she was sure she could hold her composure going over strategy today. Where was the Wrath, anyway? Was she safe? Was she happy? Would she remember herself? Did she want to? Was any part of her still waiting for – him?

Orphea rehearsed speaking a few dry sentences involving 'the Wrath' until she was sure she could hold her composure going over strategy today.

Then she got to work.

L+15 years 42 days: Mission Not Accomplished

It was a full day's battle in the lightless caverns far beneath a nameless planet, and in the end, the struggles of the ancient Force beasts guarding the nexus of power collapsed the one access tunnel they had. Well, something collapsed it, anyway. Ruth and most of her troops made it out, but the way was shut; it would take a full engineering corps to even begin to approach that underground kingdom again.

Quinn, naturally, already had orders out for exactly that by the same their shuttle got back to the *Tenacity*. Ruth had to hope the delay caused by the convenient rockslide would be enough to protect this particular location from the Emperor's forces for long enough.

She returned to the *Tenacity* and headed to the bridge to check the ship's status. She felt a chill when an aide called her and Quinn to a conference room to answer the holo of the Emperor's Hand.

Servant One looked even grimmer than usual. "Your status, Wrath?"

"The mission encountered a setback. Our engineers are working on restoring the tunnels to the required location."

"The Wrath falters," quavered Servant Two. It was...worse than usual.

"This is a critical time, Wrath. If your focus should fail, much will be lost. And yet losses are all we see of late. Your work is undone on every front; even that which you succeed in, we find ourselves unable to hold. A victory is required, and soon." He leaned forward. "Nothing less than victory will be tolerated."

"The victor rises," added Servant Two. "The defeated will not survive."

"When we call again, Wrath, be ready. Be swift. You live at the will of the Emperor because you are his strong right hand. A hand paralyzed is worthless to us." The holo image winked out.

Ruth looked around to reassure herself that only she and Quinn had witnessed this. He turned his fierce gaze from the holo to her. "We will redouble our efforts," he said confidently. "No task defeats you once you put your mind to it."

That's the best he had against those threats? "It won't matter," she said. "Their victory condition is total destruction. I'm dead either way." Unless they ended this soon.

"This again?" He waited, but she couldn't think of what to say. "We cannot forsake our posts. You know what punishment would be visited upon us for rebellion."

"Don't you see what will be visited on us if we stay? The Hand and its master are in this to kill. And kill, and kill, not for the Empire, not for any of us."

"Don't do this. Nothing they said--"

"Were you listening? They're looking for a reason to execute me." That was, in theory, supposed to move people who cared about her.

"Their focus is on the greater plan. They need their servants to succeed. You can preserve yourself by doing as they ask, Ruth, and I will help you with that. We have no other choice." He approached and offered his arms. She didn't fight him. "You don't have to do this alone," he said quietly. "They will have no reason to hurt you, because I won't let the mission fail."

I don't need help with the mission. I need you to believe me.

She couldn't force the issue. So she kissed him instead. If he insisted on fighting she might not have many more chances.

L+15 years 48 days: Identify Yourself

Lord Scourge stopped in the office doorway. "Wynston."

Orphea looked up. "I haven't seen him today."

"Nor have any of us, I suspect. I ask because I see no reason why Wynston's barely controlled disappointment of five days ago should have broken Orphea's will to fight."

"My will to fight is fine."

"You have an animal's need to survive, yes. Were it not for that you would have given up the moment the Wrath walked away."

"One is usually disappointed to lose one's family like that, my lord."

"Your concern isn't for family. I recognize a loss born of desire when I see one."

"Like hell you do." She hoped she looked sharper than she felt when she narrowed her eyes at him. "You said you don't feel anything."

"I did, as a simplification. Do not be so uncritical. A Sith that truly feels nothing would have no passion to work with, no ability to work with the Force."

"The Force isn't my business. Passion isn't my business. Wynston, off the job, isn't my business. Even the Wrath is no longer my business, she made that clear. Now if you're not in this room to give me news on the mission I'm asking you to leave."

"I will not. I remain curious about your disguise. This is some technology you have developed? Or borrowed?"

Figures she would fail in protecting that, too. Orphea, still glaring, tapped the cybernetics in her hip in the sequence that would let Wynston take over. "Borrowed and improved," he said.

"I see. To those who guard their feelings, and to those who need only fool Force-blinds, it must be quite useful. But in the past days Wynston's passion toward the Wrath is blindingly bright in the Force, a factor you had best account for in what you call your business."

"Thank you for the insight. Anything else, my lord?"

"I find myself curious as to how a creature such as yourself developed such an attachment to one of the foremost Sith Lords of your time. She bears little resemblance to the Sith I know, but even for her, association with one such as you seems unlikely."

"I was in the wrong place at the wrong time. Next question?"

"Your anger is powerful." Scourge sounded like he enjoyed it. "You can make use of that."

"Yes, thanks, I intend to. I've got a galaxy to save, I may enjoy taking out my frustrations on the Emperor."

"You cannot stand in the same room as the Emperor and survive."

"Then I'll pay you to take out my frustrations on the Emperor. We've been over this, haven't we?"

"I do not do this for payment. And neither do you. You are no mercenary. And until recently you have been much more than an animal scrabbling for survival. It was that as much as your claims of resources that first intrigued me about your offer." He crossed his arms and showed his teeth. "Do not burn out so quickly."

"I don't burn out."

"Good. Then let us move on." Something of the malicious amusement faded. "The Wrath's reports are of individual small projects; they have no pattern and offer no clues toward the greater game. We cannot continue this indefinitely. I recommend more direct action, and we will see whether the aftermath sheds more light on where to go."

"I'm starting to agree with you." He did want to hit something.

"Will your Wrath join us?"

No. She was with the person she loved, heedless of the cost to herself. "The Wrath is busy distracting the Emperor's forces," he said. "It's all we can hope for from her."

L+15 years 52 days: Mission Not Accomplished II

Guard duty. This was a populated planet almost within the Core Worlds; it still had its secrets. Guard duty, nothing more; no battle she could throw, no easily excused sabotage. Imperial Guard swarmed around her at the spaceport. She sorted them into order and led them to the compound where the ritual was to take place.

She wondered whether it would kill her, and Quinn, and all their allies there, when it succeeded.

Under Quinn's direction the guard spread out around the complex, protecting the great hall into which hooded Sith were filing. She made a round of the place herself, noting its defenses, inspecting the troops.

After that she waited. She strained her Force senses, wondering what was going on.

When she felt the ritual begin it was a sudden hole in the world. She had guard duty, nothing more; no battle she could throw, no easily excused sabotage. But something was happening in there and if there was no room for subtlety, it might be that the time for subtlety was over.

She turned toward the great door. Quinn, at her shoulder, made a small movement. "My lord?"

"I have to check something. Stay here."

He eyed her warily. "Do not disturb them."

"I sense a disruption, Quinn. Stay behind, it won't be safe for you."

The suspicion in his expression didn't lessen. "Am I to lose you like this, then?"

"Malavai, for once in your life trust me. I will come back to you." But would he do something behind her back? "Furthermore I'm ordering you to stay here until I do return. There are consequences for defying me as well, dearest, and I am not as soft as I was the last time you did so."

Suspicion had given way to something like horror, if only in his eyes; he otherwise seemed impassive. "As you command, my lord," he said crisply. "I will stand guard here."

"And I'll take care of us. I promise."

The entry hall was empty. She stepped into a dimly lit corridor and the Dark Side energy hit her like a rocket train. She reached within herself to set up her shield. A light in the darkness, a warmth in the cold.

There were many doors along that corridor, but the darkness she sensed guided her even as it pushed against her. It was thick, choking. Subtly moving. Something at the center of it was growing.

A shield against shadows, a fire in the night. She had to draw on something to maintain her focus against this. She thought of Quinn. Mixed, and yet she loved him. She needed something clearer, deeper: she thought of Colrand, of the necessity of seeing him again, seeing him safe. She thought of her son.

And, suddenly, spontaneously, of Wynston.

Her feelings leaped up to her defenses before she could put any kind of intelligent control on them. With him beside her she would scarcely even notice the creeping dark. Even if she had lost him, if he couldn't forgive her, he made the galaxy better by existing. He made her life better. And he believed in her.

She reached a staircase and felt a rising fear striking at her shield. It was so very cold here, and she was being watched now. Better to turn back.

No, she reminded herself. Destruction waited and she had to stop it before it consumed her son, her son and so many more. The need to defend Colrand strengthened her further.

But as she reached the lower level something in her started ordering her to give up. She would die here, or die when her betrayal was discovered; in the end she had no choice. Turn back. Give up.

In the end she...that reminded her of something. Something Wynston always said in that voice she loved with the idealism she loved. There was always a choice. Alone she had forgotten, or tried to because it was easier. But it wasn't about commands and the hopeless sense that trust was the first luxury to go. It wasn't about that at all. She was here to fight, and she was fighting for more than just what was permitted.

Colrand. Wynston. Quinn. And much more than that. Her people, her loved ones, the Empire she had always fought for. The galaxy she had always fought for. Against that, what was a little darkness?

Her saber flared crimson in the gathering dark when she reached the ritual chamber. There was no visible disturbance where she felt that aching gap

in the Force; there didn't have to be. She knew it was there and she would deal with it once the ritualists were stopped.

Ruth preferred negotiation. She preferred reason, preservation, diplomacy. When she had to fight, though, she was still the best out there. The circle of Sith adepts shivered and broke to attack her, but the raw Force attacks they threw at her glanced off the passions she had bound about herself while her sabers screamed defiance against the dark.

The disturbance at the center was shrinking. Without malice to feed it it was already fading. When the last of the ritualists fell Ruth made a round of the room smashing the Sith artifacts that seemed to be sustaining the rift. And, finally, it closed. Her senses cleared.

The Wrath's mission was a failure, and it was good.

A kind of euphoria buoyed her up as she left the building again and strode out to face Quinn. The relief on his face at seeing her safe assured her that there was hope even for him. She would have kissed him if they weren't so busy being dignified. Instead she signaled for him to round up the troops. "The job here is done," she announced. "Let's go."

An officer was waiting to greet them on the *Tenacity*. "My lord Wrath. Moff. Your presence is requested on the bridge immediately."

Ruth and Quinn exchanged looks. She led the way. The bridge was newly crowded, studded with red-uniformed Imperial Guard. In the center of the room stood Colrand, and, facing him, a hulking Sith Lord Ruth didn't recognize.

He turned when he heard Ruth and Quinn enter. "Ah, Wrath. I must say you maintain excellent order on the ship. Everything seems to be operating very well, except for the part about *winning*."

Ruth kept her chin high. "Step away from my son, Sith."

"I don't think I will. Now, I was told to expect a very specific result from the day's proceedings, and that result somehow didn't happen. Honestly it was going to be spectacular, I'm disappointed."

"Who are you?"

"Next in line for Wrath, my lord. Our master recognizes your power, oh yes. You've done very well for yourself; I very much admire your career. So we're willing to go to some lengths to ensure that you can do your job." He was looking at Colrand. The teenager stared at Ruth and Quinn with a heroic effort at composure. The stranger went on. "If you were any less valuable I would already have beheaded you. As it is, incentives first."

"Step away from my son. You won't get another chance."

"Come now, we can't have the best of the Wrath succession all dying at once. And you won't survive striking me down."

"I'll take my chances."

It took only a thought. It was a very strong thought, backed by all the emotion she had built up on the planet and a fresh shot of protective fury, but in the end, it was only a thought that smashed through that Sith's considerable defenses and closed his throat for good.

She drew her sabers and sprinted for the nearest red-clad guardsman. Quinn had his blaster out and was barking orders to the bridge crew. Colrand was...he was fighting, and the need to get him out of combat drove her into the frenzy that cleared the rest of the assailants.

At the end of it he was unharmed. That's what mattered.

"Gentlemen," she announced to the crew, "that action was mine and I will make every effort to shield you from the consequences of it. Clean this up. Do not report it until I say the word."

Beside her, Quinn nodded at the waiting officers. She knew that all of them were waiting on that, not her.

She waved Quinn off and beckoned Cole to her. "Cole, pack your things. Meet me in the Fury's hangar in an hour. Stay calm."

He nodded, gave Quinn a wide-eyed look, and headed out.

Ruth stalked back to her quarters and Quinn, her inescapable shadow, followed behind. The moment the door shut behind them he said "Ruth—"

"I can't do this anymore," she said. "They can do whatever they want to me, or try, but they will not have him."

The intensity of his gaze was a humming threat. "What are you going to do?" he said.

"I'm leaving." She set a hand on her lightsaber. "You're not going to stop me. This has to end."

"I agree. Let me come with you."

Ruth had no idea what to think of that. "Quinn. I'm going to kill the Emperor. You're not invited."

"I don't have the means to protect Colrand here without you. That means he can't stay. And that means I should not. You're going to end the threat to our son? I am with you."

"Really. You mean that. Treason and lack of evidence and all?"

"They threatened Colrand."

His conviction was complete. She believed him. He would do it, just like that, to protect their child. And her immediate, selfish reaction was bitter rage. "Why him and not me?"

Quinn dropped his gaze. "Ruth, he is young. Too young to face this alone. Furthermore he is blameless in this matter."

"And I wasn't?"

It took him a long moment to speak. "You and I must live and die by the same duty. It is far too late for us to change the nature and the requirements of our service. But it can go differently with him. It must go differently."

"Yes," she said, forcing her command tone so her voice wouldn't break. "It must." Suddenly she didn't want to pack, didn't want to set things in order

here, just wanted to be away. "I am glad to learn that something can reach you. But I'm taking Cole and I'm leaving. You don't get to come with me. Do your job here if it makes you happy, do anything, I don't care. When Cole is safe we'll talk again. For his sake, not for yours." She backed into the doorway. "You know I love you. Still. Probably always." It was taking all the willpower she had not to cry. "I only wish that counted for something."

L+15 years 52 days, part 2: Exodus

Ruth strode to the Fury's hangar and up the ramp without looking back. Colrand fell in line behind her, and she sidestepped to at least keep him on the side Quinn didn't station himself at.

"Where's Father?" asked Colrand.

"He's staying behind to manage things here."

"He's coming with us after, right? Or we're coming back here?"

"No and no. We'll talk about you visiting once the fight is over."

"Me. What about you?"

"I won't be returning."

Those dark blue eyes opened wide. "Mom, why? I thought it was working."

"It can't. I'm sorry. He loves you, Cole, more than he or I can say, but I'm not going back to him."

"What happened?"

"I saw what he did about a threat to me and I saw what he did about a threat to you, and the difference between them, that's love. Real, selfless, what you deserve. He has it for you. For me he has affection, and I won't settle for that. I am sorry."

Colrand sat in mute misery for a couple of minutes before speaking again. "So are we going to see Wynston?"

Her throat closed. There was the one who had given her more, before she brushed it aside pretending this mission was like any other. Even parsecs away for months at a time he had given her something better than what she had traded it for. With an effort she said "Just for the mission. We're going to the *Aegis*, you'll be safe there until we can finish this."

She sent the summons to Pierce and Vette knowing their people couldn't reach the *Aegis* in time. Then she and her son sat in silence while tearing through hyperspace. Ruth spent the time berating herself. She was a fool. She knew Quinn was temporary. He had never trusted her, never really believed in her. Even if she could stand to have him near for one more mission, for Colrand's sake, he would never be hers. She should have known it was temporary. She had told herself it was temporary. Why didn't she believe it would be temporary?

Love wasn't that easy to shake.

Enough. She was going to take care of Colrand, no matter what it took. She was going back to where she should have been the whole time, and whether Wynston wanted her or not – and he wouldn't, not after she had so easily, so stupidly struck such a deal with the person he had always warned her against, had always been right about – whether Wynston wanted her or not she would help him with his mission.

"*Aegis*," she said on her approach to the mothership, "this is the Wrath. Can you get me in touch with Wynston?"

"Wrath, just a moment while we try to contact him."

When visuals came up it was Vector standing beside Agent Temple. It was Vector who spoke. "Ruth, we are glad to hear from you. But Wynston has already departed."

"Departed...where?"

Vector and Temple exchanged glances. The Joiner said, with an air of surprise, "To deal with the Emperor's Voice."

L+15 years 52 days, part 3: The offensive

Ruth had handed over the location and some docking codes for the remote station the Voice resided at. Say one thing for the Emperor, nobody was going to stumble across him on a casual stroll around the galaxy.

Orpheia didn't set up a full-scale invasion. Vector stayed home to mind the *Aegis* while Orpheia took Larr Gith, Scourge, two dozen veterans in Wynston's employ, and Jaesa.

They met with stiff resistance in the wide curving outer corridor of the station; red-uniformed Imperial Guard, some Sith, all powerful. Scourge and Jaesa were the meaningful vanguard; Orpheia and her people with their blasters were just cleanup and rear guard. Would another Sith have been useful? Yes, but they didn't have that luxury. Better not think about why. Better to just act.

Every meter was hard and messily won. Orpheia was using her vibroknife as much as her blaster in this melee. But with time and bloody effort they pushed to a corridor piercing inward toward the heart of the station. Orpheia checked the console. "Locked," she snarled. "Someone find me an access card from – those." She gestured back at the fallen Imperial Guardsmen. "Or something." She stared prodding at the console. This was unacceptable, being locked out here. That Voice had to die. Orpheia wanted it over with. If Ruth were here she could just slice – forget it.

All at once, based on nothing Orpheia had done, the door whooshed open, revealing a vast, dimly lit chamber.

Scourge nodded at Larr Gith. The Jedi marched ahead, the Sith at her back.

The door slammed shut between them.

Scourge scowled and tested the door with his hands. It stood as stubborn as before. Orpheia didn't throw up her hands, but she seriously considered it. Something had to give. "Jaesa," she said, "stay with our people, defend this point. Scourge, if you get a chance at that door you know what to do. I'm going to stealth out to find a power substation, control center,

something." Damn the risks, anything was better than waiting. Orpheus flicked on her stealth generator. "See you later."

L+15 years 52 days, part 4: Torn

Ruth stalked the outer corridor of the Voice's station. Several hangars had been occupied; automated docking codes got her into an empty one. Colrand was safe on the *Aegis*; her work was here.

The doors to the station's inner chamber were all shut; she had half an eye on that and half an eye on the fallen guardsmen all around her while she walked. Someone had carved through here. A few people in plain civilian armor lay interspersed with the Imperial guard; Wynston's people.

Halfway down one corridor section, a splash and trail of blood started. Probably another dead soldier at the end. She rounded the curve and instead found Wynston lying flat on his back.

She sprinted the last few steps to his side. He was breathing, rapidly, shallowly, but blood was pooling around him. "Wynston," she burst. "Thank the Force you're alive...hold on. A few bad cuts, but you'll be fine. I...Wynston?"

He lay still but for his efforts to breathe. His red eyes were slitted while he gazed at the ceiling.

"It's all right," she said desperately. She looked at what he had managed to tug out of his satchel and she picked up where he had left off in unwrapping supplies. She took stock: he had a couple of deep crisscrossing cuts on his stomach, another across his chest. One that had broken some cybernetic implant at his hip. Two more that must have rendered his right arm useless. His blood was everywhere.

First the chest wound that seemed to be the worst source of bleeding. She didn't have the expertise to stitch anything up; she just broke open a kolto pack and bound it on tightly. Wynston's breathing was developing a little rasp. "Hang in there," she begged. "I'll get you home."

He was conscious. At least, his eyes were open and tracking her movement. But his face was emotionless and he remained silent save for the harsh shallow gasps. She moved on to the wounds on his stomach. "Wynston, say something. Please."

His head rolled to one side. His breath caught once or twice as if he were readying himself to speak, but nothing came out. Those red eyes never blinked.

She finished what bandaging she could do to at least keep things from spilling out, then took him up in her arms. She suddenly remembered that there was a fight to worry about. But if the Voice was under siege, Scourge and the Jedi could handle it, as they had in the past. And if they couldn't, well, Ruth would be back in a few moments to do it herself. She had a more important problem right now.

She rushed him back to her own ship and the medbay therein. She eased him into the kolto tank, strapped on the breathing mask. His eyes were finally closed. "I love you," she told him, and sobbed. "Don't you dare go anywhere." Then she lowered him the rest of the way into the tank and let him go.

L+15 years 52 days, part 5: About a boy

Back into the station at something close to a run. A brief effort to slice the nearest door to the inner chamber failed; Ruth couldn't think. She settled for a thirty-second raw effort of will that finally dented the door and flung it inward. Nothing could be allowed to delay her. Nothing.

She stepped into the great room where she had gotten her orders for the past fifteen years.

"Your lover is slipping away," announced the Voice of the Emperor. Ruth froze in place, her heart tightening.

But he wasn't addressing her. The robed figure was standing before his throne, flinging lightning and raw Force shots at a shaken-looking Larr

Gith. To one side some man Ruth didn't recognize was crumpled on the floor. She felt a little glow of life in him. Not a lot.

"Little girl," oozed the Emperor. "Your only allies in this world 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."

He sent a shot of Force lightning at the fallen man. Larr Gith yelped and flew to intercept with her saber. Her focus was miserably off, Ruth could feel it from where she stood.

"You have failed him."

Ruth strode quickly to Larr Gith's side. The Jedi shot her a venomous look but had to keep most of her focus just on blocking the Voice's attacks. "Kill him already," hissed the Jedi.

She intended to. But the blonde looked so alone, so...scared, for once. She was actually protecting something. And Ruth had a very good idea of what she was feeling just then. "Work with me," said Ruth. "We haven't failed them yet." She hoped it was true. Stars, she hoped it was true.

Larr Gith gave her a long look. She was still a scared muddle. On an impulse Ruth looked down at the dark-haired man the Jedi was defending. "Huh. He's cute."

That finally dropped something into place over Larr Gith's raw uncertainty. She made a small squeaking laugh and suddenly flung the Voice's attack aside. "Yeah," she said. "You should see him when he's conscious."

They spun into combat together, blue saber and red, gleaming gold and polished black. Ruth had someone on her side, and for now it was enough. When the Voice puffed smoke and raised a dozen identical images of himself, an effortless gesture from Larr Gith dispersed half of them in a sweep of Force power; Ruth slashed through the rest until her sabers caught on the real foe.

Before she could land the death strike he raised his hands and stopped both Larr's and Ruth's sabers in place. They could press through, but it would take a moment. His red eyes shone as he smiled at Ruth. "I must thank you, Wrath, for your poorly hidden information on the conspirators. Once I read from your own mind who was involved and what they hoped for you, my Guard simply waited to obtain the full comm and docking codes for their *Aegis* from your personal ship. Soon your rebellion will be utterly destroyed."

Cole.

The Voice of the Emperor smiled wider. "Now kill me, Wrath. And see what good it does you. I still have your son."

Must she lose someone for every one she saved? Ruth killed the Voice, and it felt nothing like a victory. Enough. She had to move.

Larr Gith was already halfway across the room leaning over the strange man. "Take him," called Ruth. "We have to move fast. The *Aegis* is compromised."

A door slammed open. Lord Scourge led Jaesa and a couple of wounded soldiers in. Scourge took a quick look around the room, then turned to Ruth. "Orphea?" said Scourge.

"Wynston. Critically wounded. I don't know...he's in kolto. I'm no healer, I don't know."

They got moving, the remainder of their forces falling in behind her. She fell into step with Larr Gith and took her companion's other arm to support him. And to speed them up. The man seemed somewhere between exhausted and dead. "Friend of yours?" she asked Larr.

"Yes," said the Jedi. She had fully recovered her composure. "They took him, I don't know how long ago. Just to use against me if I ever tried to make trouble."

"It doesn't seem to have stopped you."

The Jedi set her jaw. "No. It didn't. Someone around here's got to keep a m—" She actually had enough sense to cut off there. She had definitely changed some since Ruth had last met her.

It was in the hangar outside Ruth's ship that her holo rang. Her stomach knotted up. Word from the *Aegis*?

It wasn't. Ruth stared. "...Quinn. What do you want?"

"My lord." He seemed agitated. "Are you all right?"

"What? Yes."

"Where's Colrand?"

"He's with my people." On the *Aegis*.

"I've received an emergency signal from him."

Her heart seized up. "How?"

"Shortly after Colrand came on board I gave him a transponder so he could call home. In case of an emergency. He seems unable to open a full comm channel, but the emergency signal has been issued and its tracker activated. Where are your people taking him?"

"He was supposed to stay put. The Emperor found his location. Where is his signal? Give me coordinates, tell me where to meet you. I'll be there as soon as I can. With reinforcements."

He pulled out a datapad. "Uploading now." Then he set it aside and continued. "I've been forced to withdraw from the *Tenacity*, but my vessel here is faster anyway. I'll meet you as soon as I can."

Meet her to see whether her failure had gotten their son killed. "Quinn," she said, "this isn't what I intended." Obviously. "I'm sorry."

"He would have been no safer here while you worked. We will see him to safety, my lord."

She nodded more steadily than she was feeling. "I'm on my way." Then she pocketed the holo and stalked up the ramp. Lord Scourge shadowed her.

"Can that one be trusted?" said the great Sith.

"In this? Yes." Funny, after all this time, that she could finally say that.

"I will take the coordinates to the nav computer. If we are lucky, the boy is being brought to your master."

"That's not what I would call luck...of course. Do it." She waved him away.

L+15 years 52 days, part 6: Patching

Larr Gith had gotten ahead of Ruth, but she was moving slowly enough with her companion that Ruth overtook them both at the entrance to the medbay. The dark-haired man had a little smile, but it failed just for a moment as he sagged against the doorway. Larr wrapped an arm around his waist, looking uncharacteristically...unselfconscious...as she watched his face.

He grinned at her, then dragged himself on past the kolto tank. "Wow," he said, looking at the Chiss within. "Somebody's in trouble."

"Lie down," said Larr, pushing him toward the nearest cot.

"It'll take more than a kolto dip to fix that guy's innards. Is there a doctor on board?"

"He was it," Ruth grated through her teeth.

"Oh. I guess that means ol' Doc is up."

Larr Gith glared. "You're about to collapse yourself, now relax."

He shook his head and grinned, a smile that flashed defiance through his palpable fatigue. "Nothing wrong with me a little...a lot of...well, I'll

figure it out, but it'll fix things just fine. Right now my patients need me. Someone help me get him out of there."

Ruth released the kolto mask and eased an unconscious Wynston out of the tank and onto the table. Doc looked him over and made several ominous-discovery noises, then suddenly ducked to one side and started rifling through the supply cupboard.

Ruth leaned in impatiently until Doc waved her off. "Relax, honey, I'm a professional." His hands were fairly flying through the cabinet as he picked out miscellaneous supplies and tossed them onto a nearby tray. He frowned. "Or, uh, my lord?"

"You can call me whatever you want, just save him."

He stood and grinned, his brow lightening for a second. "I'll hold you to that."

"He always did recover fast in female company," Larr Gith said. She sounded downright affectionate.

Ruth watched Doc working. "He'll live," she said to him. "Right?"

"Oh, yeah. Might want to get him a good supply of reading material, he won't be leaving that tank for a while., but he will definitely have almost full use of ninety per cent of his - "

"He's going to be okay. Right?"

"Couple of internal organs might, *might*, keep little dents. Nothing that'll slow him down." He spared a quick look at her face and grinned again. "I know, if he doesn't make a full recovery you're gonna kill me or lop off parts or something. Believe me, if anybody can get this guy back to normal operation, it's ol' Doc."

"I wasn't going to kill you," Ruth said sullenly. Though she might if he didn't hurry up and produce some kind of result.

"Well, parts it is." Doc suddenly seemed to be working faster. "Sith, I tell ya. – Larr? Princess? When we get back to Republic space I'm taking a vacation from anywhere that has ever seen Sith. Just for a while."

"I've been to a lot of Republic space," Ruth muttered maliciously.

"Oh," said Doc, not quite paying attention. "That's not as bad as I thought. There, that's one..."

One of the multiple knots in Ruth's stomach loosened. "When he is recovered, you will have my gratitude," she assured Doc.

"I see. What kind of gratitude are we talking? Because I should warn you I'm allergic to – "

"Immunity. Safe transport to your refuge from Sith, wherever you expect that to be. Credits." She paused, looked at his rounded shoulders and still-tired-looking face. She didn't know how long he had been a prisoner.

"Peace, or the best places to find it. I know some of the most knowledgeable realtors in the galaxy."

"Peaceful sounds kinda fun," he muttered. "Now just sit back, honey. Your guy's gonna make it."

L+15 years 52 days, part 7: Guardian

Wynston was unconscious but stable back in his kolto tank when Ruth's transport dropped out of hyperspace into a seemingly random spot between planets of some no-name system.

Ruth opened a comm channel to Quinn's ship. "There's...nothing here," she said glumly, staring into the empty space where Quinn had said Colrand would be.

"Proceed another klick in," came Quinn's voice. "It's a cloaking field. Once you are inside we'll start boarding the facility."

An electric shiver ran through the ship when it passed through the great stealth field. Inside Ruth saw a larger copy of the Voice's space station. A

small shuttle with military markings hovered a little ways outside; it fell in with Ruth's vessel to land in a large hangar that sealed after them both.

She led her people out from her transport onto the hangar floor; Quinn came alone. They came to within a few paces of each other before they stopped themselves. They exchanged nods. She felt his fear, even though he didn't show it, and she knew he must know hers, even though here in public she kept it out of sight. They were both ready to do whatever had to be done.

"Moff," she said firmly, "these are my people. Lord Scourge. Larr Gith. Jaesa you know, and these others are employees of Wynston's." A little more sharply, "I trust them implicitly. Everyone, Moff Quinn, Colrand's father. If the boy is found away from the Emperor—" and oh, that presence was here – "let Quinn attend to it. If he is with the Emperor..." and the control that may imply..." then he's mine. Understood?" She didn't wait for an answer; instead she stepped away from Quinn to take Jaesa aside. "Where did the doctor get off to?"

"After you went to the bridge, he went to collapse," said Jaesa.

"I see. I guess he did his job. Listen, if I should fall and you survive, let Wynston know." She had a feeling she would need it. "Let him know I love him."

"I won't have to, Ruth," Jaesa said stoutly. "But I'll keep it in mind."

Ruth raised her voice. "This should be straightforward. We find a way in. Lord Scourge, Larr Gith and myself face the enemy. The rest of you, survive. And find my son."

They made their way into the stark grey station. They reached the long curved path that formed a full ring of the place. And before long they reached a radial corridor leading inward to the center of the station.

"That way." Lord Scourge nodded. "Our quarry is within. The rest of you, secure this ring, see that we are undisturbed. If you draw the Emperor's attention we will be unable to save you. Larr, Ruth, with me." He strode

down the radial corridor to the great chamber that was dimly visible beyond.

Quinn leaned in after them. "Jaesa, go on, secure the station's control center. I'll be watching here." He readied a gleaming black blaster rifle. "Go."

Jaesa nodded, signaled to the troops, and moved on.

*

Colrand 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. Colrand stood at the base of the dais and looked anxious but determined. "Hi, Mom."

"Cole. Come to me." She saw Lord Scourge and Larr Gith fanning out to either side of her. "It's time to come home."

"That's not gonna work."

The Emperor waved and spoke in an ear-grating rasp. "And here we are, Wrath. Your son is mine. I will spare his life if you aid him and me in dealing with the Jedi and Scourge. Otherwise...I fear he will fight you to the death."

Scourge growled and charged the Emperor himself. Larr Gith activated her saber but looked to Ruth. "Got this, mama?"

"I've got it. You worry about the other guy."

"Just make it fast if you want in in the real glory." Larr Gith grinned and ran on.

Ruth kept walking toward Colrand. "Cole?"

"Kill her," called the Emperor over the sound of an opening Force lightning volley. "And any of her allies who show their faces."

"Cole. Remember those Force meditations we practiced?" He had neither the native power nor the training she did, but he had been around for her practicing her shielding. She could hope.

"Doesn't matter, Mom. Sorry." He readied his saber, the red blade inherited from the grandfather he had never known. "Just...don't argue, okay? Go with this. If we kill them we can go home."

"That isn't true, Cole. If we kill them none of us are ever making it home."

"You fight them or you fight me."

"I won't do either."

He leaped at her.

She had sparred with him any number of times before; he was quick, tall, rapidly growing into his strength. She still had the edge over him in experience and skill. But he was different this time. He wasn't going to stop.

She shot a flash of Force energy, seeking the strike that would knock him out with minimal pain. He deflected it with a wave.

The Emperor was playing Force-storm havoc with his two assailants; in raw power he could easily hold them both. Ruth didn't have time to think about that. She had to keep Colrand occupied.

*

Wynston held still when he woke up. Inventory: mostly unclothed, heavy breathing mask on. Surroundings: kolto. A tank, in a dimly lit room, no staff in sight. Last status he had was Ruth sounding worried. Ruth wasn't even supposed to be here. Something was wrong. Physical status: Pain. Missing some flesh. Light-headed. It seemed he had been badly torn up. This wasn't the stuff of slowing him down, this was the stuff of floating in place for days or more.

Like hell.

*

It took all Lord Scourge's hatred just to stand in place when the Emperor raised the fierce Force Lightning storm. Scourge sensed Larr Gith closing to attack, but the Emperor badly outmatched the two of them.

And the Wrath was still wasting her time.

Larr would survive another few seconds. Scourge turned away from the Emperor and toward the black-haired boy. Ruth had him in a pointless holding pattern; as Scourge watched she made some Force attempt to disarm him.

"No more distractions, Ruth," he bellowed as he raised his saber and charged her son.

"No!" shrieked Ruth. The Force wave emanating from her shoved the boy with impressive power toward the open exit, far out of reach. She turned to Scourge with flashing eyes. "I'll go with you."

And she'd best keep her focus. Scourge snarled at her briefly and they ran back side by side to join Larr Gith against the big shadow figure.

It could put out a lot of power, but between Larr Gith, Ruth, and Lord Scourge, it couldn't hold all of them off at once. The Emperor shuddered when Lord Scourge's first blow struck home. The ancient enemy flung up a hand and suddenly all three of his attackers froze in place, shadows springing up around them. The battle he couldn't carry in the flesh he could still pursue in the mind.

*

Colrand recovered from Ruth's shove and advanced on her again. She stood before the Emperor, sabers drawn, seemingly frozen in place. He screwed up his face and shoved his saber at her heart. The blade just glanced away; the shadows that bound her body seemed to protect her, as well.

He turned around and scanned the scene, and then something kindled in his eyes when he saw Quinn watching from the end of the entry corridor.

He made the approach slow, looking scared. "Father," he said. "It's time. Like you've been saying, about duty."

"Cole," said Quinn. He backed the boy around the corner, out of line of sight of the big chamber, not that that slowed him down. "Calm yourself. Remember the safeguards your mother taught you--"

"Mom didn't do a good enough job. That's why I'm here. Please, don't make this hard."

Quinn's hand was terribly steady when he trained his rifle and started firing at Colrand's legs. The teenager deflected every shot with an effortless grace. Quinn scanned the corridor, found nothing else of use. Kept backing away. Colrand was catching up, reluctantly but steadily.

"Don't do this," said Quinn.

"I have to."

"You don't. You can fight this, it's an unjust command, you don't have to obey."

Colrand shook his head, got to within a couple of paces, brought his saber up. "I was really glad to meet you," he said shakily. "I'm sorry it had to happen this way."

*

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 tinged with dried blood. The Emperor was deeper than black, a cold hole in the world. She flung her will at him, and it was rich and strong, shot through with shades of blue: pale, cerulean, dark. She could hold it with one purpose. She sensed surprise rapidly turning to concern when she pressed her attack into the Emperor's essence.

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. More than determined, in a way. It wasn't just necessity driving her here, it was everything, every hope she had, every joy she'd known. Against his raging shadow she wielded her gift, her will, her power; she was backed by a whole galaxy's worth of good things.

"Be careful," Larr Gith's presence cried.

"Burn him," urged Lord Scourge. "Burn him to ash."

Ruth observed both and then did what she needed to do. All her strength, her father's training, her son's love; the darkness whipped at her but her own will was cracking it in return. Little pieces broke and burned while Ruth and her allies pressed in.

*

Before Colrand could swing at Quinn the boy grunted and spun, flinging aside someone's jacket-clad arm. Quinn scrambled aside and readied his blaster while Colrand turned on the newcomer. An angry red mark had showed up on the side of Colrand's neck.

It was Wynston Colrand flung back against the wall. "Sedatives in," he gasped at Quinn. "Just delay him."

Colrand scowled. "You won't get that chance. I'm sorry, Wynston." He raised a hand and Wynston's chin was forced up while the Force choke took hold. The boy's face worked while he squeezed Wynston's throat. "I'm really sorry."

Quinn had the beginnings of an efficient physical takedown, but Colrand didn't lose strength at the same rate he lost coordination. When Quinn grabbed his shoulder the young Sith turned and flung both the older men back in the direction of the great chamber's entryway, pinning them to the wall with a slow dual Force choke. He was crying by the time he lost his balance and crumpled.

Quinn, no more than bruised, drew himself up straight immediately. Wynston slumped to the floor, wrapping an arm tightly around himself. He coughed hard, several times; blood from reopened wounds started

slowly soaking through his thin shirt. He sat gasping for a few moments before he met Quinn's eyes and said "You'd think...you'd never had to...incapacitate...a Sith before."

*

The corridors of the station were guarded, but only lightly. Jaesa, with the remainder of Wynston's soldiers at her back, had little trouble working their way around. They took the broad dimly lit command center to monitor external matters from there. Jaesa wasn't one to go up against the Emperor, but she could watch and wait, make sure nothing else flew in from without to pressure her champions.

She sensed the Force battle when it started and she stiffened. That would be the deciding factor. She could only watch her friend's back.

*

Quinn looked into the Emperor's chamber and its four unmoving figures. Then he looked at the unconscious Colrand. Then he looked down at the Chiss at his feet.

Wynston looked up at him, and rasped, and bled, and smiled a hard smile. After a few labored breaths he managed to say "So. You win." He pointed a finger toward Colrand and, beyond that, the Emperor's room. "Get it...right this time."

Quinn watched him. The officer's expression was rigid, his eyes calculating. "You dragged yourself all this way," he mused. "How hard it must be, knowing your last act was saving my life."

"Bugger you. Saved Cole from...killing his own father. Saved her...losing the only...only thing she ever...wanted." Wynston's lip twitched hard. "Don't waste it."

What little color there was drained from Quinn's face. "Too late," he muttered. He knelt to check Colrand's breathing again. Then he looked back at a dull-eyed Wynston. This entire uprising, the rebellion, Ruth's involvement in such an insane-sounding plan, it all reeked of Wynston. Colrand had proved unshakably fond of the man. And even now Ruth was

saying, or had in the hangar, that she loved him. ““Bugger, you,”” Quinn quoted thoughtfully. “You always believed she deserved better than me.”

Wynston groaned. “Must I die...drowning in...the obvious?”

Quinn sneered. He looked over at Ruth’s frozen figure. Then at Colrand. Then at the blood slowly spreading around Wynston. “Agent,” he said bitterly, “I don’t care how you die.”

Then he walked away.

*

Closer and closer, Larr Gith’s gold, Scourge’s black-red, Ruth’s multishaded blue converged on the remaining darkness. Piece by piece burned or tore away. Ruth heard Scourge roaring in her mind. And she had others, nearer or farther, Larr Gith, her father’s years of lessons, on and on.

It was with a sudden strange silence that the three wills met in the center and found nothing left between them.

Ruth fell back into herself and staggered backwards. The great chamber felt...empty. Her, Scourge, Larr, here, but the presence and the darkness that bound this place was gone.

Larr Gith was prettily recovering her balance. Scourge had fallen heavily to one knee. Now he looked up at his allies. “My task is done. I feel it.” His eyes unfocused for a moment, a profoundly thoughtful expression on his face. “You will not see me again,” he said at last, and walked out without another word.

*

Ruth saw figures at the far end of the entry corridor but it wasn’t until she got close that she sorted out Colrand and Wynston, both on the ground. “Cole!” She knelt at her son’s side. He was breathing deeply and evenly, but he didn’t stir when she shook his shoulder.

Wynston...hissed. She scrambled to his side and leaned in to hear. "Sedated," he hissed, his eyes still closed. "He's...fine."

Her stomach twisted up as she looked over Wynston, his dark-soaked shirt, and the specks and streaks of red on the trail he had left on the way in. "You shouldn't have come," she said.

"Job's...here," he rasped between labored breaths.

"If the job calls for losing you it isn't worth it."

His brow tensed and his eyes opened just a sliver. "You. Cole. Had to be sure." The last word was almost drowned in a wet cough.

"Hsh. Don't talk if it hurts."

"Talking to you..." he wheezed and turned his head aside. A drop of what didn't seem to be sweat ran down from his eye.

And there was nothing she could do. She didn't have materials for this. She didn't have skill. She had someone to send, at least. Larr Gith was coming up behind her. "Larr. Get to the ship. Get Doc, bring him here. Now."

Something sounded from around the curve of the outer corridor. Ruth pressed Wynston's hands over some of his own wounds and drew her saber. But the man who rounded the corner at a sprint was Quinn, followed by a desperately fatigued-looking Doc.

Quinn slowed to a purposeful stalk. He went straight past Wynston, pointing as he went. "Deal with this one," he barked. "I'm not trained in Chiss physiology." He himself knelt by Colrand with a stim at the ready.

"Well," said Doc, unslinging a pack that looked to have been dropped on his shoulders rather than intentionally hefted, "for starters, Chiss blood's supposed to stay inside the body. When possible."

Quinn, without looking at him, grabbed a couple of datapad-sized bags of some clear liquid from their perch atop his bag and tossed them in Doc's direction. "This should serve."

Doc whistled. "You carry this much synthplasma around in your field kit? Exactly how much bleeding goes on in your average workday?"

"Use it or don't," Quinn snapped. He returned to his pack, which beneath the two hastily thrown-in bags was immaculately organized, pulled out some supplies of his own, and turned his attention to Colrand.

Ruth had edged aside to give Doc some room. He shot her a smile. "Relax, honey, ol' Doc can reassemble your Chiss friend – but buddy, I should warn you I have a strict three-strikes policy in any given twenty-four hour period. After this your spleen is on its own."

"Can you...?" Ruth said shakily.

Doc gave Wynston a critical look. Then made a dramatic face, then returned to the critical look. "Aw, I've fixed up worse. I'll tell you all about it when we're all comfortable, intact, and very far away from here." He got to work.

Quinn was checking Colrand's pulse. "I've given him a stim to counter the sedatives he was put under, my lord. It will take him a minute to fully revive."

"All right." She wanted to hold Cole until he was feeling better, but if she had a few seconds she also wanted to confer with Quinn. She stood up and beckoned him a step away.

"When did he show up?" she asked, tilting her head toward Wynston.

"Shortly after you were...removed, my lord. Colrand was pursuing me. The agent stopped him."

"Even though he had no business walking." She looked around the scene again. It seemed clear that for some period of time Quinn had been alone with an unconscious Colrand, a dying Wynston, and no other witnesses. "Thank you for getting Doc here," she said quietly. "It means a lot to me. More than I really know how to say."

He nodded once, sharply. "I know." His jaw clenched hard for a few seconds. "I should summon Jaesa and let her know we're finished," he said crisply, and turned away.

Colrand was stirring. Ruth settled at his side while he sat up and cast a wide-eyed look around. "Stars," he muttered. "Is everyone okay?"

There was a moment of silence.

Doc pointed at Wynston and said soothingly, "This guy'll be fine if we can convince him to stay out of firefights. The rest of you all probably just need a week or two at the beach and you'll be fully up to speed."

"Wynston," Colrand said thickly. "Did I...?"

"No," said Ruth. "Most of that was the Imperial Guard, and he'll be fine. Are you all right?"

"That was...I tried, Mom. I tried to stop it."

"I know." She pulled him close. "You survived, that's what matters." She caught the look on Quinn's face and beckoned him over, easing up to allow him to put an arm around their son's shoulders. "It's cold for a while. Unsettling. But it passes."

They waited then, Larr Gith joining them to gather around while Doc tended to the Chiss. When the human lifted a sedative Wynston waved it aside. "Rather be awake," he mumbled. "Stim if you...have. For just a minute."

Doc complied, and then finally rocked back on his heels. "And that, my friend, will get you to a kolto tank." He stood and gave Larr Gith an oddly nervous look. "Princess, it's been real exciting catching up. I, uh, I'm thinking of going home and sleeping for a year or ten, but you should call me sometime."

She smiled. "What's your hurry? I'll walk you home."

Quinn and Colrand stood together while Ruth moved to Wynston's side. She looked up at the soldier and her son.

"I have my own ship to return to," Quinn said quietly. "In other circumstances I would offer anew to serve you. Now, at last, there is no authority that could challenge that. But this is not the place, nor the time." His eyes flicked briefly to Wynston. "And I am no longer the person."

"We'll work out arrangements for Cole," she said. She looked to Colrand for confirmation, and he smiled shakily and nodded. "Whatever assignment you seek next, I hope you can make time for him."

"No question of that." Quinn and Colrand exchanged identical looks and identical smiles, weary but warm.

"The Empire does still need its officers," said Ruth. "I'll see that you are not challenged by any higher-up who thinks they can use your actions here against you. And...again, thank you." He simply bowed to her and walked away.

Wynston was making a feeble effort to prop himself up against the wall. Ruth helped him to sit up and then backed off a little bit. Her heart jumped into her throat when she met his tired eyes. "I don't expect you to forgive me," she said.

With a visible effort, he raised and held out his hand. When she took it he drew her in close and whispered, "Forgiven. Anything else is your call."

Her eyes stung. "Let's get you back to the ship," she said hoarsely. She scooped him up once more and let him drape his arms around her neck. "I love you," she said as she walked.

He rested his head on her shoulder. "Again."

"I love you. I love you, and I'm sorry."

"Just the first part."

"I love you," she repeated, and he didn't seem to get tired of it, all the way back to the ship.

Jaesa was already on board working the controls; Larr Gith and Doc were nowhere to be found. Colrand mumbled something about sleep and

slouched off. Ruth brought Wynston to the medbay and started prepping the tank for him.

He watched her. "The stim's already fading. I'm not looking forward to going under again."

"I'm not looking forward to seeing you there," she said. "It's just until you're certified back in one piece." She turned to gather him up from the table.

He leaned into her, but when she lifted he said sharply, "Not yet."

"Wynston, you need to—"

"Ruth, not yet." He took a couple of deeper breaths, holding contact with her. "What's your plan for after we clean up here?"

"I hadn't really..." Her master was gone and she was free, but she hadn't talked to anyone yet. She hadn't talked to him. She didn't have the right to assume anything. "I was thinking of going home," she said uneasily. "For a while. To set things in order." She leaned back and lifted his chin with a fingertip. "And you?"

"I've been thinking. Rather a lot, actually. If you're free I'd like to show you around my spy operation. I should've let a partner in a long time ago." When she started a tremulous smile he smiled back, brilliant and sweet in the suddenly breathless room. "And, darling, there's so much we haven't done yet."

Epilogue

L+15 Years 52 Days: Morning after

The Emperor was dead, and Ruth was worried.

She woke up early, despite having stayed up late the night before. There had been too much to do last night: Escape the Emperor's fortress. See that Wynston's critical wounds were tended to, and that he was placed in kolto to mend. See that Jaesa was ready to keep Doc and Larr Gith from doing any damage. See that Colrand got to sleep. Collapse.

Winning merely felt stressful. Compared to losing, it was a good thing.

She dressed quickly and headed out to Colrand's quarters on her ship. It was yesterday that he had first experienced the Emperor's mind control. It was a hard thing; she had been older, stronger, and more experienced when first subjected to it. Cole had nothing in his favor, nothing but his parents' support, and Quinn wasn't here right now.

Cole answered her knock after half a minute or so. His blue eyes were dull and sunken within dark circles.

"Good morning," said Ruth. "I wanted to check on you."

"I didn't sleep much," he mumbled. He slouched into the hallway and let the door fall shut. Everything about him was tense but subdued. "How's Wynston?" he said anxiously.

"I was just going to check. Would you like to come with me?"

He hesitated, clearly struggling to keep his expression controlled. Remembering the chilling aftereffects of the Emperor's touch, Ruth understood why. She pulled him into a hug, stroking his hair, and waited for him to return it. The warmth would help. The mere presence of somebody who loved him would help.

He did hug her, then turned a little and wrapped an arm around her shoulders. "Let's go."

They walked in step to the medbay and its lone kolto tank. The room was quiet, its lights out until Ruth touched the switch. There in the tank was Wynston, the slashes across his shoulders and torso still an obscene red against the blue of his skin. Rough-edged vibrosword wounds from a fight only hours before the final battle, torn open again when he struggled out to the Emperor's battlefield, damaged further when Colrand, under the Emperor's compulsion, assaulted him. But Wynston was still breathing.

Seeing him like this tied a cold knot in her stomach, but Doc had said he would be all right. Before too long his eyes would open again. Then she could breathe. Then they could see each other without the Emperor, without anyone, in the way. Time after time, year after year, Wynston had left because of his duties; what they didn't talk about as much was that time after time and year after year she had stayed pinned in place because of hers.

But that was over now, and there was no one else to come between her and Wynston. There was only this one transparisteel wall and a great deal of healing.

She couldn't wait for their life together to start.

Cole's voice called her back to the present. "Can...can I call Father today?"

"Yes. Absolutely. You never need my permission for that." She should have thought of that. Cole didn't entirely understand what had happened between her and Quinn, both the brief affair and the sudden cutoff. She would not welcome Quinn into her life again, but she did recognize beyond a doubt that he was good for Cole, and she didn't want the parents' estrangement to ruin their son's chances with either of them. "When you do call, it's all right to let him know if he asks that I'm all right."

"Um. Okay." Cole sounded terribly lost. She knew how much he had hoped she would stay with Quinn. He'd never known how doomed that effort was. "What...happened, there?" he said.

"We can talk about it later." She was too tired to go over it again just now. "It will take a little time between him and me. But what matters is he did the right thing in the end. He did it for you."

"For you, too," said Cole.

Ruth just hugged him tighter. Quinn had never rebelled for her, and never would. But that was a talk for another day.

Cole kept his arm around her shoulders. "I guess you've got things to do today," he said.

She wanted to stay and make sure her son was all right. Of everyone who had been harmed in these last few weeks, he was by far the one least equipped to cope. But necessity called her. As always. "I have to go help Vector retake the *Aegis* from the Emperor's forces. We can't let Wynston's work be destroyed now, it's needed more than ever. I'll want the ship, and Wynston, nearby when I'm done, but if you want to get home right away, go. Jaesa can bring the ship back."

"I'd rather stay here," he said shortly.

"All right." She rested her head against his shoulder, hoping that the contact reassured him as much as it did her. "The cold passes, Cole. And...anything you did under his influence wasn't your fault. Nowhere close." He probably didn't believe that now, but it was true.

"I practiced with you. The same exercises you did to learn to resist him."

"A month wasn't nearly enough, not with the amount of Force training you've had in your life so far. You're powerful by nature but it takes years to learn to direct that. I didn't practice with you with the expectation of your having to resist the Emperor." He took a shuddering breath. She settled her arm further around him as he exhaled. "You did nothing wrong," she insisted. "And nothing the Emperor did through you was irreparable, Wynston saw to that."

"Yeah." He nodded uncertainly and then held quiet for a few moments. "How did you stand it all this time? Those orders. His...will, in your head."

"I didn't realize there was anything wrong when it happened. Not for years. It seemed to make sense until Wynston noticed how I behaved under its influence."

"Oh." He stared at the thin wounded figure in the tank. "I guess he forgave you. Right?"

"The Emperor's acts through me were never what hurt him." Wynston had said he forgave her the rest of it, too. Leaving him. Not the physical separation required by the coerced kill order on him, but giving up. Turning body and heart to the nearest comfort when she knew the nearest comfort would end up an enemy, making herself a hypocrite and above all doing it with the person she did. Wynston had said he forgave her. Time would tell. She had hope. "As far as he's concerned you didn't do anything that needs forgiving."

"You think so?"

"I know so. He loves you, Cole."

"Yeah. He said that. Before he had to leave, when all this stuff started." He scuffed at the floor. "Before I tried to ditch him."

"It's true. He still does." Cole's enthusiasm at meeting Quinn for the first time, his asking and hoping for his parents' rapprochement to last, that wasn't any kind of malice or attack on Wynston and everyone involved knew it. Wynston was too generous a spirit to hold it against him.

Cole just looked forward.

"You know that he didn't save your father for your father's sake," Ruth said gently, "nor even for mine. He stopped what the Emperor was doing through you so you would never have to be the instrument of your father's death. No other reason. He does love you. In fact..." and here she moved around to face him, and set her hands on his shoulders – when had he gotten so tall? – "You're the reason we all came together, in the end. And I don't mean because the Emperor sent you after us. Your father, finally turning down the Imperial Guard's command to come to our side. That wasn't any argument of mine, Cole, nothing I've ever said or could ever say would have saved him. But he made the decision the instant they threatened you. And then Wynston, going out there to see that you were all right, stopping you before the Emperor could make you do anything

permanent. And stars know it was you three I was thinking of when I needed strength at the end."

She hugged him tightly. He hugged her back, pressing his cheek to her hair. He was trembling a little. She squeezed and backed off to smile. "You're in one piece," she told him warmly, "so it worked out for all of us."

He managed a troubled half-smile. "I am. Yeah. And the galaxy, too, right?" He looked over her shoulder to the kolto tank. His voice dropped to a whisper. "I hope he wakes up."

"He will. He'll be all right." She hadn't been sure for a little while the previous day. But Wynston had clung to life through the night, and in time he would heal. "We all will."

Cole took another deep breath and finally relaxed a little. "Mom?"

"Yes, Cole?"

"I'm glad we won."

She took her son's arm and looked with him at the man she loved, the one she only had to wait for this one more time. "Me too."

L+15 years 54 days: Physician support

Wynston was unconscious in the tank, but Ruth stood before him to record her report anyway.

"I took the *Aegis* from the Emperor's remaining forces. Pierce has been itching to get at them ever since they effectively stole his command over my personal guard when Quinn moved in. The ship's in good shape; Vector and Temple have the inventories going but so far it looks like they were far more interested in capturing than in destroying the tech on board. Vector is...you know I've always liked him, but I am amazed to see him in action working the hours he's been working under the pressures he's had. Your people are in good hands." She shifted. "Anyway, I love you and I hope I can line up me being out of combat with you being awake sometime

soon. Until then, Wynston." She ended the recording and left the message ready to play for him.

Then she looked at the tank. Wynston floated, thin, hurt, slowly mending. Ruth kept vigil.

A casual drawl sounded behind her. "If I had a mechanically inclined colleague aboard I'd have him tweak the seats there. Wouldn't take much to put in a bench, let you lean up on the tank all you want, up to and including falling asleep there."

"I can't stay that long," she said, and turned to Doc. Over the last couple of days he had started styling his facial hair into what was shaping up to be a truly ridiculous moustache-plus-tuft. She kept a straight face. "The operation needs me."

"That's what I hear. You know, for all that your Wrath-ing doesn't look too Wrath-ful, it does seem to involve a lot of stress."

"Someone's got to do it. Now, I've secured a location where Wynston here will be able to recuperate safely. Now that I have that you're free to go; just name the port of call and I'll drop you and Larr Gith off." Or rather, Colrand would; he had been quiet the last couple of days, but he liked to be on the bridge and had proved eager to apply the few weeks' piloting lessons he had gotten while Ruth was working out of the *Tenacity*.

"Still not supposed to issue a press release on how we killed the Emperor for real this time?" said Doc.

"Still not supposed to do that, I'm afraid. PR is being handled by a different department." Let Wynston's people sort out the matter of that knowledge and its repercussions. "Either way it doesn't mean your Jedi are going to win," she added. "But I assure you, the sane Imperials won a great victory. And that's better for everyone."

"I have a strict policy of not discussing politics with Sith Lords," Doc said. His voice only squeaked a little.

"Ah, of course." She didn't quite laugh at herself. The man was a civilian, she'd better drop work for now. "Well, in any case, I'll let you and Larr off and you'll be well compensated for your troubles."

"See, last time we were at this it was Lord Scourge calling the shots and compensation did not figure into it. Working with you has been a real trade up so far. I appreciate that."

"I appreciate your working with us. Very much." She turned back to Wynston. His every breath was cause for gratitude.

Doc sauntered up to her side. "He's a lucky guy, having someone like you. The kind who really would sleep on a bench all week just to stick by the kolto tank. You know, if there weren't worlds to conquer, which is completely understandable. You still made time to come by. That's dedication." He paused briefly. "I hear that women like that tend to be very good kissers."

Ruth kept a straight face, barely. "I wouldn't know, I've never kissed a woman like that."

"Oh, well, if you're curious I could check and tell you."

He looked so cheerful. And so ridiculously hopeful. "You remind me of him a little," she said, grinning. "Very brave."

"Admirably brave? Heroically, even? I'm just saying, the way talks've been going I might not be a free man much longer, and, well..."

"Then I wish you every happiness. Larr's a lucky woman."

Doc shrugged philosophically and, still cheerful, looked back at the tank. "And this one's a lucky guy. Not everybody gets to say his lady friend faced down the Emperor."

"And he'll be alive to say it." It was a good thought. It was a wonderful thought. It had come too close to failing. On an impulse she threw her arms around the dark-haired man beside her and kissed his cheek. "Thank you for saving his life."

He accepted the tribute with a steady arm and a blindingly bright smile. "Hey. That's what I do, honey." He gave a courtly little bow. "Now then, I should go figure out where I'm getting dropped off." He headed for the door, musing out loud as he went. "Nar Shaddaa, maybe, see some of the old gang there for one modest welcome-home party before I take my time off from stress. Larr should like that...oh, and I can't skip Balmorra, just a low-key little tour there for old times' sake..."

L+15 years 68 days: Daylight

"It stopped raining."

"What?" Ruth went to join Wynston at the window. Outside the clouds of Dromund Kaas were a pale grey, backlit with sunlight that seemed almost ready to break through.

"Look at that. It's probably just for the day, but still." He stepped back and smiled at her. "Let's go outside."

The day was warm and still, and in the relative brightness the garden fairly glowed, from the white-and-blue lilies to the redblazes. Wynston made it as far as a broad seat by the pond and sat down; that was far enough for now. If he was going to strain himself he would rather save it for after he accomplished something useful on the job.

He really did hate feeling like an invalid.

Ruth settled beside him. "So. Emperor gone, non-rainy day on Dromund Kaas achieved. Happy?"

He settled an arm around her and kissed her, a lazy pleasant warm kiss that wasn't getting water dumped on it for once. "Yes."

"I..." She took out her holo. He saw Quinn's name before she leaped to her feet. "I'd better take this. I'll be right back." She half-ran out of sight.

Bloody hell. Wynston reminded himself that Quinn probably hadn't arranged for Wynston's survival just for the chance to hold his continuing influence over Wynston's head. Probably. Ugh. The man brought out the

most idiotic thoughts. At least he was out of everyday life again. And there was a general understanding that the two would never show up in the same room again.

Ruth flitted back. "Sorry. He was just checking with me before giving Cole a blaster of his own." She half smiled. "He's careful."

"He'd better be."

Her smile faded. "I still do have to talk to him sometimes. We're not going to be long-distance best friends, but...arrangements for Cole."

"I know." Wynston didn't like it, but then, he had never liked anything about Quinn, so that wasn't news.

She bit her lip, something she hadn't been nervous enough to do in ages. "I..."

"We don't have to talk about him." He didn't think he wanted to know anything about what she was thinking.

"Don't we?" She fell silent.

Did they? There was nothing Wynston had the right to say. He took a few moments. Then, slowly, he said "There are a lot of things I never thought I could do or feel before I met you. Jealousy is the first one I didn't like."

Ruth sat beside him and took his hand. "It's over."

"Do you wish it weren't?" he said softly. A big question. Not a fair one, but he wanted to know.

"No." She said it with a conviction that warmed his heart. "I told you I'm not built for...multitasking. What you are, what you do for me, what you, as you always said, let me be...that's happiness. Having seen what's on offer? I want you."

"All right." He pulled her close. She was terribly, terribly quiet. "I'm sorry, darling. There's no blame. I'm the one who nearly ruined everything and I didn't have much of an excuse. You were isolated, targeted, and in pain, I

was just feeling sorry for myself." He kissed her hair. "I should have stuck to drinking. It turns out I get unprofessional when I'm wallowing in self-pity. Reckless. It almost led to my getting two thirds of our fighting power killed by the Voice, running off without you."

"But it didn't. My terrible idea blew up in time for me to come for you."

"My terrible idea was worse than your terrible idea. Galactic destruction here."

"Hurting you here. That makes mine worse."

"Bleeding out in the Voice's station also hurt, so it breaks even damage-wise even before my plan killed the Emperor-qualified warriors."

"My plan's lead actor would have gotten me killed. He might have volunteered to help do the killing if I kept cooperating with you. So there, we're even on killing warriors, too."

"Let's just agree not to do that again, all right?"

"Agreed."

He looked into her eyes, that lovely light blue that seemed of a piece with the newly bright world around them, and when she kissed him again it was sweet and deliberate and complete. She only broke away to swing around and straddle him on the bench, the warmth of her touch rising to heat while she raked her fingers through his hair and down his shoulders. Her body against his – not lost after all, not gone, but here, with him, where she wanted to be – was lithe and strong and so very, wonderfully ready.

She stopped and sighed. "I'm not supposed to wear you out, am I."

He bit back a frustrated cry and instead just slid his hands around her waist. "I don't see any doctors around to enforce that."

Maddeningly, she pulled away. "I'd rather be careful."

"Darling, you know I don't like to argue with you, but why must you choose now of all times to start being careful?" She made a face at him; he grinned and continued. "Tell you what, why don't I behave and just sit around gathering my strength all day and then we'll go to the Nexus Room tonight."

She smiled incredulously. "Really. The Nexus Room?"

"What? It's been a while. Drinks, dancing, then home for whatever comes to mind? It's no coup d'état but I thought it might do as a low-key sort of evening."

"It does sound nice. Are you sure you're up for it?"

"With you? Always."

"I'm serious. Walking for extended periods, much less dancing."

"Yes. I'm not that fragile, darling."

She blinked hard. Then she threw her arms around him, squeezing him close. "I've seen some close calls, love."

He hugged her and kissed her hair, her ear, her face, her lips. "Did you really think I would leave you over a little thing like a perforated lung?"

She giggled. It shook a tear loose from her eye. "It's just that most people do consider that a dealbreaker. Let it happen once and they're gone."

"Not me. Not from you." He wiped the tear away and kissed her. "I'm not that easily discouraged. ...And I do want you. Do I really have to behave?"

"Just for now."

"I'll cooperate, but only because I know it's been a hard couple of months for you and I don't want to give you a difficult time."

"Also because you physically can't disobey my orders yet."

"It wouldn't have to be disobedience as such. I could persuade you."

This isn't open for – mm – debate." She swatted his hand before it could get far. "That's the point."

"Ruth, you can be a cruel woman."

"Wynston, you love it."

L+15 years 79 days: Recovering

"Hello there." Ruth beamed at the newly arrived Colrand and gave Quinn, who had not quite stepped out of the transport, a gracious nod to answer his bow.

Colrand had gotten his hair cut short. Not a perfect match to his father's, but conspicuously close. He took up his station at his mother's side with something approaching formality.

Ruth addressed Quinn. "He's been behaving?" She could have sworn she heard Colrand's eyerolling beside her. Ah, the learned formality hadn't completely taken root yet.

"Of course, my lord," said Quinn.

Suspicion struck. "If he were misbehaving would you tell me?" she said archly.

"Certainly, my lord. I fear I am not qualified to make discipline stick to a Sith." He very nearly smiled. "You are."

"Very true. Well, thank you for bringing him by. Call me whenever you finish your current assignment." That would be the next reasonable chance for him to see Colrand again.

"I will. Until then, my lord."

"Good hunting, Quinn."

He bowed. She nodded. He warmed into a smile for Cole, who waved. Then Quinn retreated into the shuttle and Ruth and Colrand proceeded into the *Aegis*.

"If I were making trouble," Colrand said, "you really would hear about it. That's his usual threat, telling on me." Colrand didn't sound all that worried about it.

"He...usually threatens you?"

"Only when he gets annoyed. - I try not to, honest. I still owe him a few dozen years of good behavior for...you know."

There was hurt in his voice. "He doesn't blame you for the Emperor using you," said Ruth. "I hope you know that."

"Easier said than undone. He's been really nice, acting normal, but..."

"He loves you, Cole. And, believe me, he doesn't blame you for what happened or hold it against you. Once he has declared for you, nothing stops him and nothing changes his mind. You're very fortunate to have that." She managed a smile. "You're incredibly fortunate to have that."

"I guess? I hope it's okay." He perked up a little bit. "Anyway, he's still showing me around and stuff, so it's not like he's been avoiding me. You should've seen the look on his face when I asked him to teach me to shoot. I don't think Sith are supposed to do that."

"No, they really aren't."

"He went with it, though."

"For you? Of course he would."

*

Later that day they went to one of the *Aegis's* practice rooms, a wide clear space with weapon racks around the edges.

"Where's Wynston, anyway?" said Colrand.

"Strategy session. He's crunching numbers and higher-order patterns with his analysts; I'm not going to call it boring but I'm really glad you're here to give me an out until the actual field assignment comes down."

"We going back home anytime soon?"

"Yes. I'll make time for it." The last thing she wanted to do was exile him from Dromund Kaas.

They moved while they spoke, heading to the center of the room, facing each other at a couple of paces. Ruth activated her two sabers, Colrand his one. Colrand's face twitched into a staring frown.

"Are you all right?" said Ruth

He blinked. "I think so. I just..."

He just wasn't enjoying drawing a weapon on her again. She walked around to stand beside him. "Why don't we do the old centering forms first. Calm and focused." She looked at his expression and lowered her saber. "I know it's hard, Cole. But you can come out of what happened stronger. I won't say it's easy, but it's going to be all right."

He stood very still for a little while. Then he deactivated his saber. "What was it like?" he said quietly. "Fighting something that big? And not getting, you know, squished like me."

"It was like pulling together every good thing I've ever known and then punching an ocean of the most caustic stuff I've ever felt with it. It took a lot of punching."

"I felt his presence in my head. It was huge. And old. And strong."

"Lucky for me I've known a lot of good things to bring to bear on it."

"Yeah." He examined her face. "You seemed okay after."

"I felt okay after. Tired, but still, we won. And any darkness that stays has its counterbalance. I have you. I have Wynston. It's hard to feel bad under those circumstances."

"Yeah," said Colrand. He seemed to be thinking of something else. "It would've been a lot worse without Wynston."

She smiled at him. "We won, Cole. You're safe, and things will be all right. You didn't disappoint any of us." She waited. "Are you okay?"

"Yeah. Yeah, I just, swinging a lightsaber at you kind of, it caught me off guard."

"It probably won't feel great for a while. But you'll have to stay in practice to defend yourself."

"Right, because after that we've got so much to be scared of."

"A run-of-the-mill Sith thug might still come after you someday."

"You and Wynston or Father would kick his ass."

"We probably would. Still, it's better for you to stay in practice."

"All right. Centering." He activated his saber and placed himself in form-perfect stance. When he spoke again he sounded steadier. "It's gonna be all right."

L+23 years 9 months: Together

Ruth offered the use of the Niral estate for the wedding, but Colrand declined; he and his fiancée, the human Sith Avanna, were set on a palace owned by a friend on Alderaan.

Avanna was a sweet girl, of the school of decent Sith that Jaesa's Academy had been developing for nearly a quarter of a century. The Empire was still a dangerous world for them – indeed, many of them ended up emigrating to Republic or neutral space – but the enclave was a good community.

Ruth offered to help with arrangements. So did Wynston. Cole and Avanna smilingly, firmly declined. It took considerable badgering for Cole to even accept some credits to help with whatever he was planning, but Ruth was determined to at least do that; he didn't need to start out in debt.

The *Aegis* set course for Alderaan and Ruth prepared at the vanity in the bathroom. For once she didn't put on armor. Cole hadn't made any such request, but he and Avanna were both of a diplomatic bent – not what she had expected from the weaponsmaster Cole had grown into, but he was happy with his chosen work. So today Ruth would not come arrayed for battle.

A blue gown, modest scoop neck, nothing too likely to grab attention away from the bride. Her appearance wasn't what she usually used to command the room anyway. A gold choker set with blue gems, a thank-you gift from a Lorradian businessman after a complicated intervention several years ago. Wynston had offered on several occasions to find her more jewelry she would like, but she found that plenty of it was spontaneously offered to her in a number of dealings anyway and she wasn't accustomed to wearing even that. From him she had accepted the plain gold ring she wore everywhere, and that was enough.

She decided to wear her hair half up for the day, pulling the front locks back to braid them behind her head. She brushed the free waves smooth – it was nice to have an excuse to let it down once in a while – and then, after a last mirror check, opened the door to where Wynston was waiting.

His grey-and-red formals were straight out of the society pages of Dromund Kaas; he had no extra ornamentation outside his own ring, a gold band matched to hers. It was the closest thing to an official mark they kept. He didn't wear it when he was disguised for work, but on a day like this he was free to show it.

The years and the mission had put slightly more in the way of lines and scars on him than they had on her, but his red eyes had lost none of their brightness, nor his lips their expressiveness. He met her eyes and smiled brilliantly. "You look amazing. Would it throw our schedule off terribly for us to undo that all right this minute?"

She seriously considered it. She always did. "I'm afraid it would. They'll notice if we show up late."

"You're quite sure?" Allowing himself a moment to look her over, he walked up close, placed his hands lightly on her hips, and gave her one, questioning kiss.

"Quite sure, I'm afraid. Sorry." She said it with a smile.

He nodded and let his hands fall. "As you wish," he said softly, then returned her smile. "Shall we away, then?"

"We shall." She presented him with a lightsaber. "Carry this for me? I don't want to go for the bristling-weaponry look today."

"You could probably deal with any problem wedding guest even without it," he said, but he pocketed the saber anyway. "For that matter Colrand could probably suppress any rebellion that comes up."

"I'm not expecting trouble. This is just in case." Which reminded her of something less entertaining: the fact that this would be the first time Wynston and Quinn had been put in the same room in over eight years. "You'll be all right with...him, won't you?"

"There won't be a problem," Wynston said mildly. "This is Cole's day, I think even he can recognize that."

"He will." She kissed him. "We all will."

"I love you," he informed her. "Let's go."

*

Ruth had to hand it to the Alderaanians: their idea of grandeur delivered. The long window arch over the great hall had only the lightest silver tracery to support the transparisteel; the sky was blue and close above it, and sunlight flooded the galleries and the broad marble floor. The carpet and banners were of the light green Avanna favored.

A reedy dark-skinned youth, one of the bride's brothers, bowed to her and Wynston and led them down the center aisle towards their seats.

The hall was crowded. For all that Cole had few blood relatives, he and Avanna had a lot in the way of friends. She saw several of the Sith he had met at Jaesa's academy, along with Jaesa herself; the matronly Sith was seated near the front with her husband. Her twin daughters were nowhere in sight; they were likely in the wedding party, then.

Vette had made it, much to Ruth's delight. Vector was listening to her with every indication of enjoyment. General Pierce for once was not alone in looming over the general audience even while sitting; he had his clean-shaven son at his side. Pierce Junior, in turn, had a slim cyborg on his arm – possibly the prettiest man there, Ruth noted.

Her stomach flopped a little when the grey-haired man in the front row finally turned to see who was approaching. Quinn rose unhurriedly, crisp as ever in his dress uniform, and bowed with one hand on his heart. When he raised his eyes he fixed them on Ruth to the exclusion of anyone else. "My lord Wrath," he said quietly.

"Moff." She was aware of Wynston moving past her to take his assigned place two seats past Quinn. "You're looking well."

"It is a happy day, my lord." Cautious, formal. But not cold.

"It is."

No sooner had they seated themselves than Colrand himself emerged from a side door, smiling ear to ear. He was a perfect image of his father, now in

black robes with a touch of light green trim. His eyes were sparkling as he took a few long last paces toward the Emperor's Wrath, swept her up by her waist, and spun her in a near-full circle before setting her down and planting a kiss on her cheek. "You look great," he informed her while she was still breathless with laughter, and then he turned to clasp Wynston's hand and hug his shoulder. Once Wynston stepped back Colrand turned again and hesitated for a moment, facing Quinn, very nearly settling for a respectful nod before the older man enfolded him in a tight hug instead, grey head contrasting with black in a tableau that Ruth would not soon forget.

Cole flitted away after that to confer with his groomsmen, two of Avanna's brothers; and then, very suddenly, the music was already starting.

There were Jaesa's daughters, Cole's childhood friends, side by side in green, coming up to stand opposite the groomsmen and beam at the hall in general. At some unseen signal both Parvin and Grega blew Cole playful kisses, which prompted snorts of laughter from the Pierces and set Cole blushing furiously.

Then Avanna appeared, wearing, in defiance of all Imperial tradition, pure dazzling white. Ruth hadn't realized anyone could make that look good until now. Cole's face fairly glowed as she came to take his hand.

While Ruth listened to the readings her eyes were on her son and his bride. They seemed completely unselfconscious standing up there, smiling at each other and, for all Ruth could tell, ignoring the ceremony around them entirely. She found herself seeking Quinn's right hand with her left. He started when she took hold and squeezed; she met his questioning look with the proud smile she couldn't seem to shake and didn't want to. She held his gaze and nodded toward the bride and groom with a look that said *See? We made him for this.*

And he nodded, and squeezed back, and returned to looking forward, his expression a little brighter than before.

Avanna came close to singing her vows in her flutelike voice; they carried high and clear through the hall. Colrand, in contrast, had to cough through a couple of nervous false starts before he got talking. When he did, though,

his voice was strong and steady – more so than Ruth had ever heard, in point of fact. This ceremony, with these words and motions, was exactly where he meant to be.

Once the readings were read, the vows were vowed and the kiss was lingeringly kissed, the crowd was reasonably orderly in gravitating toward the couple. Ruth hugged Colrand – with less getting picked up and spun this time – and then embraced Avanna, kissing the shorter woman's cheek. "Welcome to the family," said Ruth.

"Thank you," whispered Avanna. She managed to make brimming with tears look gorgeous. She looked so very young, young and radiant. Ruth smiled and took her place down the receiving line.

The reception consisted simply of moving to the other end of the sun-soaked grand hall. Supper passed in pleasant chatter with Avanna's family, which got progressively smoother as the Force-blind parents and siblings got over their slight awe of the Emperor's Wrath. Wynston had assured Ruth a long time ago that she would never be able to really turn off the commanding presence she had cultivated for so long, but she was pleased to find that she was managing something less than "scary". Better yet, Quinn and Wynston, by tacit agreement, kept up a cordiality maintained by their genuine affection for everyone else at the table. Wynston finished and got up a little early to go confer with the musicians; he returned in time for the first dance, leading Ruth to the floor with a smile and a word.

He closed until he was leading more with his chest than his arms. Ruth followed comfortably and kept turning her head to follow where Colrand was sweeping Avanna around, quite clearly lost in her eyes.

"I can't remember the last time you were this distracted while dancing," murmured Wynston.

"Hm?" she said playfully. "I think I got more distracted that time a fire broke out in the Mos Anek cantina."

"Ah. I stand corrected. This is a close competitor, though."

"I can't help it. My son's over there." Where her mind was, her eyes followed. "He's an adult, and he's gotten involved with a Sith, which is terrible for one's health, I can't imagine why he thought that was a good idea."

"Sith women can be all right."

"You're only saying that because--"

"You're amazing," Wynston interrupted firmly, "and I love you. And she is a wonderful young woman, who is obviously crazy about him."

"She is." Her doubt passed as quickly as it had come. "Well then, maybe I'm just admiring how they look together."

"True. Cole's a very handsome fellow, and he is with the second best-looking woman in the room."

"Hush, you, this is Avanna's day."

He grinned. "As you say." Still maintaining a steady lead, he leaned forward ever so slightly to touch his cheek to hers. "They do look very, very happy. As is right and proper."

After that they fell silent and enjoyed their closeness, the instinctive way they moved in sync as they did every time they came together. And Ruth watched her son, and felt a steady little glow.

Colrand made a beeline for her the moment the song ended. "Hello, you two," he said, flushed and smiling. "I hope you're not danced out yet, Mom."

She let go of Wynston. "Nowhere close. Is there time to pick up a drink first?"

"A quick one, sure. - I'll give her back by midnight, Wynston, promise."

"Nobody's 'giving' me at all," Ruth said, faux sternly.

Wynston and Colrand exchanged looks. "Make it eleven," Wynston said seriously. "I worry, you know."

"It's a deal." Cole grinned and sidestepped Ruth's swat. "Come on, Mom."

She followed him. "You've gotten nervy in the last, oh, hour or two."

"I'm a grownup or something now." He laughed and took two glasses of water from the side table, handing one to her. "It's good."

It was with an entirely new assurance that Colrand led her onto the dance floor when the next song started. Avanna was paired off with her father; Cole shot a dazzling smile at both of them and then turned his attention to Ruth. He was surprisingly graceful in adapting to her shorter steps.

"You know," he said, "I never actually believed Wynston when he said knowing this stuff would come in handy."

"Wynston's a resourceful person, you should've listened."

"I did listen even if I wasn't convinced. It worked out; teaching Avanna to dance gave us something to do when we weren't studying."

"See? Wynston knows what he's about."

"Yeah. I'm glad you'll have him."

She raised her eyebrows. "Was this a concern?"

"Well, you know...now that I'm elsewhere, I hate to think you're..."

"You haven't lived with us for quite some time," she said, amused.

"Yeah, but it's different now. At least 'til Avanna and I get a house in order enough for you to come."

"I think your ageing mother will survive, but I appreciate your concern." She grinned. "By the way, today was your last excuse ever to pick up and twirl the Emperor's Wrath."

He made a face. "Yes, Mom."

"Also I am happier for you than I know how to say."

"Thanks. I'm glad..." He looked around, then shrugged and smiled. "I'm glad."

He let her go with a last hug when the song ended, and she retreated to the sidelines to take up a glass and join Vette and Jaesa.

"You're not tired out already, are you?" said Vette. "Lightweight."

"Good to see you, too. Hi, Jaesa."

"Hi, Ruth. You got a nice turnout."

"I had nothing to do with pulling this together. That was all Cole and Avanna."

"Color me impressed. Avanna...never showed the best organizational skills at the academy."

"No? I guess they've both grown up a little."

"Yeah," said Vette. "I can now officially say that I've seen a Sith survive from infancy to marriage. I was never really sure how that ever happens."

"I never allowed murder attempts in the house," said Ruth. "That helps."

"Some would call that a scandalous oversight in your kid's education," said Vette. "Mostly people I don't want to be friends with, but they would."

"He seems to have turned out all right. You know, for a graduate of 'Jaesa's School of Bad Sith'."

"I repeat, you oughta inscribe that over the door."

"I won't," Jaesa said imperturbably. "The school is succeeding just fine."

"At making bad Sith."

"Would you rather we break into a violent power play at the alumni reception here?" Ruth asked archly.

"...When you put it that way, no, I think I'm okay with bad Sith."

"That's what I thought." Ruth looked to Jaesa. "You know, the girls will be doing this themselves before you know it."

"Don't say that," giggled Jaesa. "I'm still not used to Cole changing his own clothes. Personally I vote for those two next." She tilted her head toward Pierce Junior and his date.

"We don't even have his name, do we? I don't see a Pierce marrying any time soon."

"That's because you're a cynic," sighed Vette.

"And this from her," said Jaesa. "Ouch."

"Hmph. This cynic is going for pastries," said Ruth. "Do either of you want anything?"

"Nah," said Vette. Jaesa just shook her head. So Ruth left them to head for the refreshments table.

She noticed Pierce Junior and his cyborg date chatting Quinn up, or possibly just cornering him, where he stood by a pillar not far from the edge of the dance floor. Quinn noticed her movement and gave a subtle gesture that served for a discreet summons, so she approached to see what was going on. "My lord," he said, probably more quickly than was strictly necessary, when she got close. "Would you grant me the honor of a dance?"

She looked at a maliciously grinning Junior and his utterly innocuous-looking friend, but decided to delay questions until after Quinn was safely away. "With pleasure," she said, and took his hand to return to the dance floor.

He allowed her to set the distance of their square formal hold, then took the lead. "Thank you," he said in a low voice.

"I never thought Junior was that bad a conversationalist."

"If you'll forgive the observation, my lord, Junior probably doesn't feel compelled to comment on your attractiveness."

She didn't laugh. Not quite. Even if she felt her eyes going wide while she was busy suppressing a smile. "I'm sorry."

"I'm here for Cole and Avanna," he said with his old harried brusqueness. "I'll survive the evening."

"Thank you for coming. It means a lot to him."

Quinn nodded stiffly.

"And...I'm glad he has you in the first place."

When he pulled her a degree closer she didn't argue. "It has been a great joy to have him in my life, Ruth."

"If I'd known how he would take to you I'd have let you in earlier."

"I understand your reasons," he said roughly.

She disentangled one of her hands to touch a finger to his lips. "Please. Nothing sad today." She brought her hand back to close her hold. "Sorry, I was supposed to be a more pleasant conversationalist than Junior."

That got him to break a smile. "I assure you, you are."

"It is really, really good, after everything, to see you smiling."

He gave her a long look of the kind that had finally matured into deep and undemanding affection. "Then I shall keep doing it."

Whatever else she felt about him, she loved him for being a good father to their son, and so she danced and for a while forgot to look at anything else.

He took a slow step back away at the end of the dance and bowed, smiled once more, then looked around. "I should find Cole. I must depart soon; I am expected in the Sullust sector by morning."

Of course. "Thank you for the dance," she said. "Even if it was just an excuse to get away from Pierce Junior. -But truly, it was good to see you."

"It was good to be here, Ruth. Take care."

"You, too, Quinn."

*

Ruth was startled by the pang she felt when her son left some time later. It was, after all, the natural conclusion of getting married in the first place, but seeing Colrand walk out arm in arm with Avanna made Ruth suddenly, intensely aware that he was building a life away from her.

Wynston slipped an arm around her waist. "Are you all right?"

"Hm? Of course I am." She leaned into him, still watching the empty doorway.

He took the excuse of kissing her to cup her face and brush away a tear she hadn't realized she was shedding. "Good. He's got someone to keep him in line while we're off on missions now, and that can only be a good thing."

"Right. Because Cole was always such a wild boy."

"Always watch for the quiet ones," he murmured, smiling. "What's the plan for the rest of the evening?"

"One more round of the guests?"

"With pleasure. I'm still holding some tiny hope that I can trick Junior's boy into dropping Junior's first name tonight."

"I'm not sure Junior releases that information to the men he dates."

"I have to try. It's my job to know everything; if I can get the elder's name, I'll get the younger's one way or another."

"Maybe Pierce never gave him one."

Wynston scowled. "No, that'd be too easy. He's wilier than that."

"You're never going to forgive him for not putting it on record anywhere in the galaxy, are you?"

"Never? Nonsense, there are no hard feelings that won't be resolved by me winning. Let's go, darling."

*

Once Wynston and Ruth finally did depart the return to the *Aegis* was quick. That was just as well; Ruth discovered a powerful inclination to stay in contact with Wynston on the way, one that did not lessen when they reached their quarters. The energy of the day was still riding high and, after all, none of their dances really ended until they were in bed, the part of their never-ending conversation that was carried out mostly in the singing of nerves and the language of expressive breath and subtle varied motions.

They did get back to words, eventually, once he was lying beside her with a hand resting at her collarbone. "I love you," he whispered.

Pleasant exhaustion made her speech slow. "I love you, too."

"Let's talk tomorrow. About maybe celebrating."

"Celebrating what?"

He slid a hand up her arm to the ring on her finger; he tapped it a couple of times and then laid her hand on his cheek and rested. "We have our private promises, but a party might be fun."

"Copycat," she murmured.

"I'm too tired to dispute that intelligently. We'll see if it's still a good idea in the morning."

"Hmm. I think it might be."

"Did I mention I love you?"

"I love you, too," she said.

"Good. Sleep well, darling."

And so, warm and spent and contented and loved, Ruth slept.

Appendix A. Differences from Canon

Some of the events of Book 1 have been rearranged from the canon timeline, but all of them did happen, including the material new to this story, in the framework of Ruth Means Compassion.

Now, once upon a time, Wynston, instead of staying in the office suppressing his personal issues and prepping careful political maneuvering, just went where his heart told him to go. From there, **how did things go differently** and **why**? Spoilers for Ruth Means Compassion ahead.

Ruth had a friend and a lover in her darkest hour, one with the experience and assertiveness and determination and luck to stay close without getting killed. Thereafter she didn't spend her career as a bitter paranoia monster. She never did the long descent from Light Side to lawful evil. She kept friends (though I had fewer of them heavily involved in this narrative). Her son knew a trusting family environment; Colrand the child of a woman with close connections to her friends and a personal/philosophical continuity with a LS family turned out very, very different from Rylon the near-orphan in a paranoid world.

On the flip side, Ruth's decision to withhold Colrand from his father set up a long-term lack that Rylon never experienced.

Professionally speaking Wynston did just about what he always would've done, because he's Wynston. This time he had to do some long-term secrets management with a long-term entanglement; preserving what's good for the Empire's people against the actions of the Empire's top Sith was a tricky act.

Personally speaking, Wynston challenged his scripts in Lodestone. First in coming to Ruth at all, second in coming to her to say "I want this to go differently" (L+10 days). He took a minute to push at his assumptions of how the world worked in the hopes that the result would be better than his current rules predicted/permitted. In canon he lived and will likely die untouched by anything stronger than that strange disturbing influence that stopped him from putting Kaliyo down. In Lodestone he opened up to

more, to one person, and that lends him a passion and a grounding that makes his career a lot more than just an outsider doing just a job.

Quinn didn't make any such challenge in this universe, not until it was almost too late (he doesn't admit that "it must go differently" (L+15 years 52 days) until his son is in active danger). The circumstances to encourage shaking one's worldview were not naturally set up for him in Lodestone. In canon he came back to Ruth as a father and a human being, and they learned to talk in terms other than that of master and servant, to use something outside the script of commander and underling. In Lodestone Quinn came back on the job. He had neither the time nor the context to re-forge any kind of connection or negotiate lasting personal change. That meant he could only offer the same terms he had always had.

This is also the strong countering force against Rylon/Cole's attitude: Rylon had no use for his Quinn (unfavorable) but that Quinn got to get to know and trust Ruth personally (favorable). Colrand was desperate to know his Quinn (favorable) but that Quinn was showing up as a semi-hostile professional disruption (unfavorable).

The Emperor in both cases did his thing as soon as his Voice and whatever other machinations are in place. That's what the Emperor does, you know. Evil.

There are secondary effects I didn't explore: The degree to which Ruth's resources and influence expanded Jaesa and Kaeve's LS Sith ministry into a full-fledged offworld academy; the fact that Lodestone!Vette never did the game canon Smuggler line because, never having cut ties with Ruth, the opening events never came up (but I'm sure she did get to catch up with Risha sooner or later); the fact that Lodestone!Vector survived due to Ruth helping with the critical mission that killed him in the main timeline; the fact that Hazard, while she may have become a Joiner, never had to become the nest's Dawn Herald and so may never have come to the *Aegis*; the fact that Pierce may have relaxed his secrecy to let Pierce Junior meet Ruth and Wynston, and the fact that Pierce Junior probably promptly tried to sign up for Ruth's personal bodyguard so as to meet all the hot Sith Lords. SO MUCH STUFF. So many possibilities!

In my headcanon, Ruth died on the Emperor's space station and Wynston and Quinn have been blasting their way through middle age shooting dirty looks at each other ever since. But, you know, sometimes a 140,000-word what-if comes at you and you have to write it out. Thanks for reading!

Final Notes

brightephemera has been playing BioWare RPGs since 2009 and Star Wars: The Old Republic since prelaunch, and has always had a bad habit of revising favorite stories.

You can find Bright's fiction blog at serialephemera.tumblr.com. and questions and comments will be read for as long as the blog is active at serialephemera.tumblr.com/ask.

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