**Identities of a lost soul**

Posted originally on the [Archive of Our Own](http://archiveofourown.org) at [http://archiveofourown.org/works/10350030](http://archiveofourown.org/works/10350030).

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Rating:</th>
<th>Teen And Up Audiences</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Archive Warning:</td>
<td>Choose Not To Use Archive Warnings</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Category:</td>
<td>Gen</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Fandom:</td>
<td>Star Wars Legends: Knights of the Old Republic, Star Wars - All Media Types, Star Wars Legends: Knights of the Old Republic II: The Sith Lords, Star Wars Legends: The Old Republic</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Relationship:</td>
<td>Darth Malak/Darth Revan, Carth Onasi/Revan, Revan/Malak, implied Darth Revan/OC</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Character:</td>
<td>Female Revan (Star Wars), Female Darth Revan, Darth Malak, Bastila Shan, Carth Onasi, Canderous Ordo, Mission Vao, Zaalbar (Star Wars), Juhani (Star Wars), Jolee Bindo, HK-47, Dustil Onasi, Mekel, Belaya (Star Wars), Yuthura Ban, Zhar Lestin, Vrook Lamar, Darth Bandon, Vandar Tokare, Kreia (Star Wars), Vima Sunrider, Nisotsa, Talvon Esan, Meeta Surik, Cariaga Sin, Xaset Terep, Kavar (Star Wars), Atris (Star Wars), Uthar Wynn, Kel Algwinn, Nayama (Star Wars), Ulic Qel-Droma, Nomi Sunrider, Exar Kun, OC - Character, Atton &quot;Jaq&quot; Rand</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Additional Tags:</td>
<td>Slow Burn, Angst, Science Fiction, Action/Adventure, Complete</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Stats:</td>
<td>Published: 2004-03-18 Completed: 2018-08-09 Chapters: 116/116 Words: 956582</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Identities of a lost soul**

by [ether_fanfic](#)

Summary

Originally posted on fanfiction.net. Moving to a03 in 2017.

**KotOR: A quiet scholar onboard the *Endar Spire* suffers a head injury that changes everything. Dragged unwillingly into a battle for the fate of the galaxy, the real struggle is a three-way conflict of emerging identities struggling for dominance, and fragments of the past that cloud the present.**

[Knights of the Old Republic re-telling with deviations and twists.]
The Force is sentient. Some believe it's the subconsciousness of all living beings combined.

Yes, yes, I know what the masters say these days: that attributing a sentience to the energy that binds us all is misleading, but pshaw! I've been around a lot longer than those young bucks who think they rule the galaxy. I have my own ideas and experiences that aren't going to buckle to some fancy talking robe with a glow stick, who believes that a mere half-century of breathing equates them the right to inform others what to think.

I was like that, once. Centuries ago, when I still held the position of Chronicler.

These days, I spend my time talking to ghosts and any padawan like you that comes searching for the crazy old coot haunting the back of the Enclave.

I suppose you've come looking for wisdom, or maybe a story? Well, if it's the former, you must know that's better drawn through experience than advice. Who'd want to do what a wrinkly old man tells them? But if you want to hear a yarn or two... I can help there. I'm a geriatric, now, but I still retain a gift unique even amongst the Jedi.

The masters may have advised you to avoid me and my tales. I can guess at their disapproving words: don't listen to the kooky fossil whose mind wanders off on tangents as tangled as a spiced-up spacer. His accounts are inaccurate and unbelievable; they contradict the archives and embellish the mundane.

But I tell what I see. And you can see, too, through my eyes - if you have the patience and the inclination.

For people leave echoes in the Force. Like psychic little footprints, I've always thought. And the more attuned to the Force, the greater the imprint. Well, I can see those memories, those reverberations, those ripples from souls who breathed long, long ago. 'Tis a rare gift, and one not understood by many, even from within the ranks of the Jedi.

I can show you a story, if you like. For that is what I do - I share the visions I pull from the eddies of the Force. And as I haven't come across you before, I shall choose one of my favourites. The Force has its favourites too, you know, and one of its greatest was Revan.

I suppose you will have heard of Revan. For what scholar of the Force hasn't, be they light, dark, or tiptoe along the middle-ground. Even millennia later, and Revan's story still fascinates.

But the transcripts and archives do not tell the whole tale, and some of the absolute fundamentals are just plain wrong.

What, you don't believe me? You think holo-footage and secure-linked archives are infallible, and cannot be edited by technology? But history is changed all the time: by conquerors, by agendas, even by simple translation errors. Events may be exaggerated, transformed, or hidden, due to someone's desire to change the past. And while the essence of Revan's story has travelled through the ages, it has not come through exact.

But where to start, ahhh... for Revan's story is a long one, with many facets. Hero, saviour,
conqueror, villain… perhaps the very contradictions of Revan's life is the reason it is such a venerated fable.

I like to start at Revan's second beginning.

For how many people really get a second chance? If you had one, would you do things differently? Or would you choose the same path?

The echoes I see… they are snatches of Revan's life. And when you are dealing with someone as powerful as Revan, those swept into the same orbit leave ripples in the Force as well. So this is not just Revan's story, but also those who were betrayed, saved, transformed and destroyed by Revan.

So sit back, young padawan, and share these visions with me. Witness Revan's rebirth, and see what wisdom you can glean from living someone else's second chance.

xXx

[Below is an Author's Note, Character / Mando'a Glossary, and POV listing. This is not necessary to read, especially if you are just starting this fanfiction where it will confuse rather than aid.]

In short, if you are here for the story, scroll down to the end and click 'Next'.

[I couldn't fit this into the End Notes!]

Author's Note:

Things you need to know about IOALS (Identities of a lost soul):

1\ IOALS began as a tribute to the game I loved so much in 2004, before blowing out of proportion and turning into a full blown saga. I had a ten-year break between chapters 45-46, which is partly why it's taken me so long to write. You could call this a multi-novel series, if you will, with each arc bridging to the next by the Hyperspace chapters. IOALS deviates from canon in both minor and major ways as the story progresses - because it wasn't canon when I first began the story, or for greater realism - or sometimes simply to make a well-trodden story more interesting. If you have any questions of why I have done something, drop me a line! I do always try to swing the plot back to canon - to stay true to the underlying story.

2\ I have not played SWtoR. This saga is a precursor to KotOR 2, and has ties-ins, nods, and some K2 characters making brief appearances, but it is not compliant with the Revan novel, nor with SWtoR. If I write the sequel, that won't be either.

3\ IOALS is an experiment at switching first person POV's. Character list is below, followed by Mando'a Glossary, followed by the list of POV's per chapter.

4\ I love reviews. I think every writer does. Encouragement, comments, constructive criticism, makes our writing feel more worthwhile - to know there are people out there reading it. I'd love to hear from you! Even if you having nothing to say other than that you are reading it. Honestly, a ping in my inbox from a review can make my day :-)

xXx
**Character Glossary:**

Each character will have the suffix [species, gender, OC] - 'OC' is only there if they are a non-canonical character. Species and gender are there if known. Characters are listed either by their current location when they first appear in this saga, or their affiliation, depending on is the most relevant. Some important historical characters follow afterwards. Very minor characters are omitted.

**Endar Spire:**

*Bastila Shan* [Human, female]: Jedi Padawan with overall commanding privileges on the *Endar Spire*. Known for her famous battle meditation used in the current war, and her role in the downfall of Darth Revan.

*Carth Onasi* [Human, male]: Republic Captain and commanding navi-advisor to the *Endar Spire*. Veteran of the Mandalorian Wars, and commended multiple times for valour.

*Galdea* [Cerean, male, OC]: Jedi Master in charge of the Jedi squad aboard the *Endar Spire*. Member of the Dantooine Council. Known as a master of the psychic side of the Force.

*Jen Sahara* [Human, female, OC]: Civilian scholar in ancient archaeology, attached to the Jedi squad.

*Kylah Aramai* [Mirialan/Human, female, OC]: Jedi Knight, part of the Jedi squad, close friend to Padawan Bastila Shan.

*Neann Dallash* [Zabrak/Human, male, OC]: Republic Lieutenant, senior navi-pilot and intelligence operative.

*Trask Ulgo* [Human, male]: Republic Ensign attached to the Jedi squad.

**Taris:**

*Brejik* [Human, male]: Leader of the Vulkars.

*Calo Nord* [Human, male]: Bounty-hunter with ties to the Exchange and the Sith Empire, and Davik Kang's second-in-command.

*Canderous Ordo* [Human, male]: Mandalorian mercenary working for Davik Kang. War General of Clan Ordo during the Mandalorian Wars.

*Davik Kang* [Human, male]: Exchange Head on Taris.

*Gadon Thek* [Human, male]: Leader of the Hidden Beks.

*Gurney* [Human, male]: Assistant to Dr Zelka Forn, has links to the Exchange.

*Lina* [Zabrak, female, OC]: Friend of Mission Vao.

*Mission Vao* [Twilek, female]: Member of the Hidden Beks.

*Rukil* [Human, male]: Old man in the Undercity encampment.

*Sancha* [male, OC]: Barman in Javyar's Cantina.

*T3-M4* [astromech droid]: Custom-built droid ordered by Davik Kang.

*Zaalbar* [Wookiee, male]: Best friend of Mission Vao.


*Zelka Forn* [Human, male]: Doctor in the Upper City who mans the Free Clinic.

**Jedi Order - Dantooine Enclave:**

*Belaya Linn* [Human, female]: Jedi Knight who disappeared to find Juhani after her failed Knight trials.

*Dorak* [Human, male]: Jedi Master who trained Dak Vesser amongst others. Chronicler of the Dantooine Enclave.

*Jai'lel* [male, OC]: Powerful Jedi Master of Dantooine, who accompanied Padawan Bastila Shan in the stealth strike on Darth Revan, and fell in the ensuing battle.

*Juhani* [Cathar, female]: Jedi Padawan who disappeared after believing she killed Master Quatra during her Knight trials.
Karon Enova [Zabrak, female, OC]: Jedi Master who initially trained Revan Freeflight. Most of Jedi life spent attached to the Coruscant High Temple. Member of the Dantooine Council.

Kester [male, OC]: Powerful Jedi Master of Dantooine, who accompanied Padawan Bastila Shan in the stealth strike on Darth Revan, and fell in the ensuing battle.

Lars Thorstan [Twi'lek, male, OC]: New padawan to Master Karon Enova.

Nemo [Human, male]: Jedi Master to Belaya Linn.

Quatra [Zabrak, female]: Jedi Master who trained Juhani.

Vandar Tokare [male]: Jedi Grandmaster who trained Yudan Rosh amongst others. Regarded as a master duellist. Leader of the Dantooine Enclave, member of the Dantooine Council, and absentee member of the Coruscant High Council.

Vima Sunrider [Human, female]: Jedi Knight with near-master status and a powerful command of the psychic side of the Force. Known for her nomadic lifestyle.

Vrook Lamar [Human, male]: Jedi Master to Padawan Bastila Shan. Some of Jedi life spent attached to the Coruscant High Temple. Member of the Dantooine Council.

Zhar Lestin [Twi'lek, male]: Jedi Master who initially trained Malak Devari. Most of Jedi life spent attached to the Coruscant High Temple.

Dark Jedi of the Sith Order (excluding Korriban Academy):

Bandon Stone [Human, male]: Shadow Hand to Darth Malak, stylizes himself as Darth Bandon, upper-ranked Dark Jedi.

Darth Malak [Human, male]: Formerly Malak Devari, now Dark Lord of the Sith Empire. Originally apprenticed to Darth Revan, before betraying the Sith Lord above Deralia and claiming the title of Dark Lord of the Sith for himself. Also see entry under The Jedi Thirteen.

Nisotsa Organa [Human, female]: Recruitment Officer and former Intelligence Head, upper-ranked Dark Jedi, recruited Dak Vesser. Also see entry under The Jedi Thirteen.

Sharlan Nox [Anzati, male, OC]: Recruitment Officer, upper-ranked Dark Jedi. Recruited Dustil Onasi and Mekel Kadoni.

Yudan Rosh [Twi'lek, male, OC]: Supreme Fleet Commander of the Sith Empire, upper-ranked Dark Jedi, leader of the Sith Front in the Rodian Corridor. Also see entry under The Jedi Thirteen.

Tatooine:

Griff Vao [Twi'lek, male]: Brother to Mission Vao, travelled to Tatooine (amongst other planets) to make his fortune. Currently employed by Czerka Corporation.

Lena Torand [Twi'lek, female]: Ex-girlfriend of Griff Vao and current partner to Komad Fortuna. Followed Griff to Tatooine.

Komad Fortuna [Twi'lek, male]: Hunter on Tatooine.

HK-47 [protocol and combat droid]: Custom-specced droid in Yuka Laka's shop.

Yuka Laka [Ithorian, male]: Runs a droid shop.

GenoHaradan:

Ajax Zarr [Zabrak, male, OC]: Senior data analyst in the GenoHaradan, reports to Spymaster Gaalin.

Eridius Talav [male, OC]: Overseer in the GenoHaradan.

Gaalin [male, OC]: Spymaster of the GenoHaradan who reports to Overseer Eridius.

Hulas [Rodian, male]: GenoHaradan recruiter based in Ahto City, Manaan.

Jeebra Noob [Rodian, male, OC]: Senior data analyst in the GenoHaradan, reports to Spymaster Gaalin.

Rulan Prolik [male]: Shapeshifter and retired Overseer, predecessor to Eridius. Currently based on Kashyyyk.

Tealia [Zabrak, female, OC]: Personal assistant to Overseer Eridius.
Manaan:

Gerith [male, OC]: Senate liaison stationed at the Republic embassy in Ahto City.
Kono Nolan [Human, male]: Lead research scientist for the Republic. Stationed on secret underwater kolto-harvesting base.
Laconi [Human, male, OC]: Republic Ensign stationed at the Republic embassy in Ahto City.
Roland Wann [Human, male]: Commander on the Republic Embassy in Ahto City.
Waltzar [male, OC]: Republic Lieutenant attached to the Embassy, mans the Salvage Craft *Oceanic Bounty*.

Korriban:

Allen Bala [Human, male, OC]: Mandalorian mercenary based in Dreshdae, younger brother to Jagi.
Dak Vesser [Human, male]: Adept of the Sith Academy. Originally from the Dantooine Jedi Enclave and a good friend to Belaya Linn and Juhani, before leaving the Jedi in dissatisfaction. Part of Uthar Wynn's faction.
Dustil Onasi [Human, male]: Adept of the Sith Academy, son of Carth Onasi, survivor of the Telos bombing. Affiliated with Uthar Wynn's faction, and secret protege of Uthar.
Ergeron Jangar [male]: Mandalorian mercenary based in Dreshdae, old friend of Canderous Ordo.
Jagi Bala [Human, male]: Mandalorian mercenary based in Dreshdae.
Jorak Uln [male]: Original Headmaster of the Sith Academy when opened by Darth Revan. Was defeated by Uthar Wynn in a coup and believed to have been killed by him.
Kel Algwin [Human, male]: Adept of the Sith Academy, part of Yuthura Ban's faction.
Mekel Kadoni [Human, male]: Adept of the Sith Academy, survivor of the Telos bombing, part of Yuthura Ban's faction and favourite of Yuthura. Was once good friends with Dustil Onasi.
Selene [Human, female]: Initiate of the Sith Academy, disappeared two years ago, close friend to Mekel Kadoni and Dustil Onasi.
Shaardan [Human, male]: Initiate of the Sith Academy.
Thalia May [Human, female]: Adept of the Sith Academy, recently disappeared, part of Yuthura Ban's faction.
Lashowe [Human, female]: Adept of the Sith Academy, part of Uthar Wynn's faction and favourite of Uthar.
Uthar Wynn [Human, male]: Headmaster of the Sith Academy, upper-ranked Dark Jedi of the Sith Empire.
Yuthura Ban [Twi'lek, female]: Second to Headmaster Uthar Wynn of the Sith Academy.

Republic officers - Mid Rim and Outer Rim:

Adashan [Mon Calamari, male, OC]: General of the Republic Army, veteran of the Mandalorian Wars, and commander of the dreadnought *Lightstar*.
Forn Dodonna [Human, female]: Admiral of the Republic Navy, veteran of the Mandalorian Wars, and commander of the heavy cruiser *Meridus*.
Fulmosh [Rodian, male, OC]: Gunner to Jordo Merrix, and Republic Ensign.
Jordo Merrix [Human, male]: Republic Captain and Wing Commander. Telosian native whose wife and daughter died in the Telos bombing. Old friend of Carth Onasi.
Davis Tar'coya [Sullustan, male, OC]: Commodore of the Republic Navy, veteran of the Mandalorian Wars, and second to Admiral Dodonna.

Kashyyk:

Boda [male, OC]: Mandalorian mercenary working for Czerka.
Chorrawl [Wookiee, male]: Young passionate Wookiee sold into slavery.
Chuundar [Wookiee, male]: Current chieftain of Rwookrokrro, older brother of Zaalbar, and first son of former chieftain Freyyr.
Da'thok Kelborn [male, OC]: Mandalorian mercenary hired by Czerka that Canderous Ordo meets.
Dan Fett [male, OC]: Mandalorian mercenary hired by Czerka that Canderous Ordo meets.
Drawwlog [Wookiee, male, OC]: Aide to chieftain Chuundar. Years ago, Drawwlog and Ruubarg confided in Zaalbar what they knew of Chuundar's secret tach trade. After Ruubarg died of illness and Zaalbar went public with Chuundar's dealings, Drawwlog denied all knowledge.
Freyyr [Wookiee, male]: Zaalbar's father and chieftain of Rwookrokrro before Chuundar exiled him to the Shadowlands.
Growwhul [Wookiee, male, OC]: Old One of Rwookrokrro, life-mate to Tasharr.
Jabakka [Wookiee, male, OC]: Oldest of the Old Ones of Rwookrokrro.
Jacen Ordo [Human, male, OC]: Mandalorian mercenary hired by Czerka. Cousin to Canderous Ordo, and regarded as an up-and-coming Ordo leader during the Mandalorian Wars.
Jernnin Lok [Besalisk, male, OC]: Mandalorian mercenary hired by Czerka that Canderous Ordo meets, Third of the Lok Clan during the Mandalorian Wars.
Ruubarg [Wookiee, male, OC]: Years ago, Ruubarg and Drawwlog confided in Zaalbar that Chuundar was involved with the Czerka tach trade. Ruubarg became very ill and died shortly afterward.
Tasharr [Wookiee, female, OC]: Old One secretly sold into slavery by Chuundar, and life-mate to Growwhul.
Trallia Kelborn [female, OC]: Mandalorian mercenary hired by Czerka that Canderous Ordo meets. Known for risky basilisk manoeuvres during the Mandalorian Wars.

Sith Officers - Mid Rim and Outer Rim:
Delia [Sullustan, female, OC]: Lieutenant of the Sith Empire, and second to Admiral Karath.
Sara [Sullustan, female, OC]: Admiral of the Sith Empire, and veteran Republic officer from the Mandalorian Wars who followed Darth Revan to join the newly-created Sith Empire. Second-in-charge of the Sith Front in the Rodian Corridor, reports to Dark Jedi Yudan Rosh.
Saul Karath [Human, male]: Admiral of the Sith Empire, and veteran Republic officer from the Mandalorian Wars who followed Darth Revan to join the newly-created Sith Empire. Commander of the Leviathan. Telosian native and original mentor of Carth Onasi.

Jedi Order - Coruscant High Council:
Atris Surik [Human, female]: Jedi Master on the High Council, half-sister to Meetra Surik.
Kavar Kira [Human, male]: Jedi Master on the High Council, known as a master duellist, and originally master to Meetra Surik. Has links to the royal family of Onderon.
Lonna Vash [Human, female]: Jedi Master on the High Council.
Zez-Kai Ell [Human, male]: Jedi Master on the High Council, originally master to Nisotsa Organa.

Other:
Dillan Starsson [male, OC]: PR Agent to the Outer Rim worlds for the Exchange.
Marlani Gerrant [female, OC]: Senior Marketing Overseer and PR spokesperson for Czerka Corporation - Intergalactic news.
Serina Star [Human, female, OC]: Intergalactic actress who shot to fame due to her notorious holo-flicks loosely based on the life of Revan Freeflight. **OC from kosiah's fic 'Memory'**.
Suvam Tan [Rodian, male]: Sole operative of an abandoned space station orbiting Ýavin IV, that runs a trade in illegal goods and ship repair, predominantly for the Exchange but also with some Sith contacts.
Ularic Gren [Human, male, OC]: The Republic Senate's official correspondent to the Intergalactic
Sith Officers/crew of the Star Forge:

Atton Rand [Human, male]: Sith strikefighter pilot.
Beso [male, OC]: Commodore of the Sith Empire, head of Internal Defence.
Carly [Rodian, female, OC]: Ensign of the Sith Empire, maintenance tech. Reports to Corporal Kampton. Impersonated by the shapeshifter Rulan Prolik.
Inon Daelidar [Zabrak, male, OC]: General of the Sith Empire, Commander of the Star Forge, and veteran Republic officer from the Mandalorian Wars who followed Darth Revan to join the newly-created Sith Empire.
Jha'hasi [Human, male, OC]: Lieutenant of the Sith Empire, communications technician and liaison to Commodore Beso / General Daelidar.
Kampton [Rodian, male, OC]: Corporal of the Sith Empire, and second-in-command of Maintenance. Reports to Commodore Beso.
Slayers [multiple]: A Force-blind shadowy group of assassins created by Dark Jedi Jonn Dan to hunt down and either kill or turn Jedi with the aid of Force-suppressing technology. Members include: Jaq, Min, Ran, Ros, Tor.
Troystar [Human, male, OC]: ID of a Sith captain and starpilot from a stealth-capable Aurek-class snubfighter. Both ship and captain were captured by Admiral Dodonna's forces at the culmination of the battle above Kashyyyk.

Republic officers/crew - Unknown Regions:

Rickard Gant [male, OC]: Admiral of the Republic Navy, veteran of the Mandalorian Wars, and commander of the dreadnought Astral Pride.
Joss [male, OC]: Republic Ensign and starpilot.
Lilani [female, OC]: Republic gunner to Ensign Joss.
Sammy Tobards [male, OC]: Republic Ensign, gunner to Corporal Tensey, and expert marksman.
Tensey [female, OC]: Republic Corporal and starpilot.

Historical Figures - The Mandalorian Wars - The Jedi Thirteen (also known as Revan's Guard of Twelve):

Alaki Vash [male, OC]: Turned to the Dark Side under Revan's leadership. Killed by Bandon Stone shortly after Arran and Bandon's betrayal at Deralia.
Arran Da'klor [Zeltron, male, OC]: Worked closely with Nisota Organa and her younger cousin Neiza Organa. Turned to the Dark Side under Revan's leadership. Arran Da'klor was killed by Darth Revan on Deralia due to his betrayal.
Cariaga Sin [Human, female]: Died during the Mandalorian Wars.
Jexer Te'reda [male, OC]: Turned to the Dark Side under Revan's leadership. Died sometime during Revan's war against the Republic.
Jonn Dan [male, OC]: Turned to the Dark Side under Revan's leadership. Original creator of the Slayers. Killed by Yudan Rosh.
Malak Devari [Human, male]: Grew up in poverty on Talshion, little-known planet along the Outer Rim. Reputed to be the most powerful Force-user found in centuries together with Revan Freeflight. Recruited to the Jedi Order six years beyond the usually accepted guideline of ten Standard years. Shot to galactic fame during the Mandalorian Wars as one of the most pivotal members of the Jedi Thirteen. Turned to the Dark Side under Revan's leadership. Betrayed Darth Revan above Deralia, and claimed the mantle of Dark Lord of the Sith.
Meetra Surik [Human, female]: Along with Revan Freeflight, Malak Devari and Yudan Rosh, Meetra Surik was one of the four most famous knights in the Jedi Thirteen. A Force-empath that was well-regarded by all, Meetra was known as a competent ground general during the Mandalorian
Wars who worked closely with Revan, Yudan, and Xaset Terep. Meetra and Xaset were pivotal to the destruction of Malachor V that ended the Mandalorian Wars. Having not been sighted publicly since then, both Jedi are presumed dead by the galaxy at large, but still hailed as heroes of the Republic due to their actions and leadership during the Mandalorian Wars.

**Nisota Organa** [Human, female]: Intelligence Expert who worked closely with Revan Freeflight, Malak Devari and Arran Da'klor. Turned to the Dark Side under Revan's leadership. Known as 'The Quiet Death' as a Dark Jedi, due to her cautious nature and inclination to strike from the shadows. Agreed to betray Darth Revan in the Deralian trap with Arran Da'klor, Malak Devari and Bandon Stone.

**Rab Vooktari** [male, OC]: Turned to the Dark Side under Revan's leadership. Died sometime during Revan's war against the Republic.

**Revan Freeflight** [Human, female]: Grew up in poverty on Talshion, little-known planet along the Outer Rim. Reputed to be the most powerful Force-user found in centuries together with Malak Devari. Recruited to the Jedi Order six years beyond the usually accepted guideline of ten Standard years. Although already notorious within the Jedi Order, Revan Freeflight shot to galactic fame when she thwarted the Jedi High Council and joined the Republic war effort against the Mandalorian invasion, bringing twelve experienced Jedi Knights who followed her - and, later, many more. Revan was promoted to the position of Supreme Commander of the Republic Forces, and was considered to be instrumental in turning the tide of war around to culminate in a Republic victory at Malachor V. Revan, along with a fair swathe of the Republic Fleet and near-all of her Jedi allies, disappeared for months after the final battle. It was widely believed the missing forces were engaged in mopping up the remnants of the Mandalorian Clans along the Outer Rim, right up until a surprise attack shocked the Republic and the galaxy alike - and hailed the birth of Darth Revan, a self-proclaimed Sith Lord set on conquering the Republic. Darth Revan then launched a war of attrition against a stunned and battle-weary Republic. Revan is believed to have died above Deralia, either due to her Shadow Hand Darth Malak firing on her ship, or the actions of Jedi Padawan Bastila Shan who was duelling her at the time.

**Talvon Esan** [Human, male]: Half-Telosian, half-Onderonite, Talvon Esan became a formidable Fleet Commander. Turned to the Dark Side under Revan's leadership. Regarded as an expert duellist. Executed by Darth Revan due to rumours of insanity, after the botch-up on Telos.

**Yudan Rosh** [Twi'lek, male, OC]: Royal native of Kala'uun, Ryloth. Recruited to the Jedi Order two years beyond the usually accepted guideline of ten Standard years. Informally trained Revan Freeflight and later Malak Devari in lightsaber combat during their padawan years. Along with Revan, Malak and Meetra, Yudan was one of the four most famous knights in the Jedi Thirteen. Regarded as a master duellist and one of Revan's best Fleet Commanders, particularly against the Mandalorian Fett advances. Turned to the Dark Side under Revan's leadership.

**Xaset Terep** [Human, male]: Regarded as a formidable ground general during the Mandalorian Wars. Xaset Terep and Meetra Surik were pivotal to the destruction of Malachor V that ended the Mandalorian Wars. Having not been sighted publicly since then, both Jedi are presumed dead by the galaxy at large, but still hailed as heroes of the Republic due to their actions and leadership during the Mandalorian Wars.

**Historical figures - The Mandalorian Wars - Other:**

**Arren Kaee** [Human, female]: Jedi Master and member of the Coruscant High Temple who engaged in a forbidden love affair with the Echani General Yusanis. Gave up her daughter to remain with the Jedi, but was later thrown out when she changed her mind.

**Cassus Fett** [male]: Head of the Fett Clan, and second-in-charge to Mandalore the Ultimate, Cassus led a number of decisive victories against the Republic. Died during Malachor V.

**Dereck** [male, OC]: Mandalorian commander who was second to Mandalore the Ultimate in his duel against Revan Freeflight.

**Kreia** [Human, female]: Master of the Force who swore allegiance to Supreme Commander Revan
Freeflight during the Republic-Mandalorian battle at Duros. Advised both Supreme Commander Revan and Darth Revan, before later disappearing of her own free will.

**Mandalore the Ultimate** [Taung, male]: Mandalore of the Mandalorians, died in an honour duel against Revan Freeflight on Malachor V.

**Morgana Onasi nee Balon** [Human, female]: Wife of Carth Onasi who died during the bombing of Telos.

**Historical figures - Revan Freeflight's youth:**

**Devari** [Human, male, OC]: Older half-brother to Malak, only guardian of Malak when he was young. Presumed dead after he was captured by the Enforcers on Talshion. Revan gave Malak his brother's name as a surname when they left Talshion.

**Freeflight** [Human, male, OC]: A blind middle-aged man who was the only guardian to Revan when she was young, and taught her meditation, history, politics and most of all - to dream. Died of septa-lung disease a few years before Revan was found by travelling Force-users. Revan took his name as her surname when she left Talshion.

**Jonohi** [Twilek, male, OC]: Childhood friend of Revan and Malak. Oldest friend of Revan, who also taught her Ryl.

**Ness** [female, OC]: Childhood friend of Revan and Malak.

**Staria** [female, OC]: Childhood friend of Revan and Malak.

**Historical figures - Exar Kun's War:**

**Andur Sunrider** [Human, male]: Jedi Knight who trained under Master Thon. Went against tradition by marrying, a custom that was being more and more frowned upon in the Jedi Order. Died during a Jedi mission, leaving his wife Nomi Sunrider alone with their baby Vima. The Force awoke in Nomi during this time, and she was then trained by Master Thon.

**Exar Kun** [Human, male]: Powerful Jedi Knight who later led a war against the Jedi and the Republic as a self-proclaimed Sith Lord. The first to use the name Sith in centuries. Killed at the close of his own war.

**Nayama Bindo nee Da-Boda** [Human, female]: Sister to Nomi Sunrider. Married Jolee Bindo and the Force bloomed in her unusually late. Was tempted by the teachings of Exar Kun when the Jedi High Council refused to teach her, and later fell to the Dark Side. Her fate remains unknown after the fall of Exar Kun.

**Nomi Sunrider nee Da-Boda** [Human, female]: Married the Jedi Knight Andur Sunrider. The Force bloomed in her late, despite her adult age, upon her husband's death when she was protecting her newborn daughter Vima. Rediscovered the lost art of battle meditation, and was instrumental to the Republic's success against Exar Kun. Stripped Ulic Qel-Droma of the Force after he killed his twin brother. Died many years later of septa-lung disease.

**Thon** [male]: Jedi Master of Dantooine who decided to train Nomi Sunrider against Jedi convention (due to Nomi's adult age). The Coruscanti High Council, in contrast, refused to train Nomi's sister Nayama who also awoke late in the Force. Some saw this as hypocritical; while others saw Master Thon's actions as bordering on seditious. When Nomi Sunrider rediscovered battle meditation and became a rallying point and galactic heroine, the Coruscanti High Council's disapproval of her training died down. By that stage, Nayama Bindo had already disappeared.

**Ulic Qel-Droma** [Human, male]: Powerful Jedi Knight and twin brother to Cay Qel-Droma. Lover of Nomi Sunrider. Later fell to the Dark Side when attempting to infiltrate Exar Kun's forces and was captured. Stripped of the Force by Nomi and exiled by the Jedi Order despite the Republic Senate's demands for him to be put on trial.

**Historical figures - Ancient Sith Lords:**

**Ludo Kressh** [male]: Powerful Sith Lord who was at loggerheads with Naga Sadow, and seen as the more cautious of the two with an interest in relics.
Naga Sadow [male]: Powerful Sith Lord who was at loggerheads with Ludo Kressh.

Tulak Hord [male]: Known as the 'Master of Hate', he discovered the ability to drain life from sentients and increase his own life-span.

Starships of note:
Astral Pride - a *Dreadnought* -class heavy cruiser often referred to simply as a 'dreadnought'. One of the Republic's most prominent command ships, and helmed by Admiral Rickard Gant.

Ebon Hawk – a *Dynamic*-class freighter owned by the Exchange crime lord on Taris, Davik Kang. With an upgraded sublight drive and hyperdrive, a customised navicomputer and reinforced hull, this smuggling vessel can outperform near-all freighters of similar size and core specifications.

Endar Spire – a *Hammerhead*-class cruiser serving with the Republic Navy, and helmed by commanding navi-advisor Captain Carth Onasi - although full commanding privileges rest with the squad of Jedi stationed onboard.

Invictus – a *Destroyer*-class warship that was regaled as Darth Malak's flagship, and outfitted with experimental stealth technology.

Leviathan – an *Interdictor*-class heavy cruiser noted for its defensive clout, planetary-range turbolasers, and hyperspace-interdicting capability. One of Darth Malak's prominent command ships, and helmed by Admiral Saul Karath.

Lightstar – a *Dreadnought*-class heavy cruiser often referred to simply as a 'dreadnought'. One of the Republic's most prominent command ships. Commanding privileges currently rest with General Adashan.

Meridus – a *Dreadnought*-class heavy cruiser often referred to simply as a 'dreadnought'. The *Meridus* has been customised to include hyperspace-interdicting capability. One of the Republic's most prominent command ships, and helmed by Admiral Forn Dodonna.

Nexus – a *Destroyer*-class warship that was regaled as Darth Revan's flagship. Destroyed above Deralia by a sneak attack from the *Invictus*.

Ruby's Claw – a medium-sized *Hyperion*-class troop carrier. This model of carrier was seen as a hybrid between a frigate and a freighter, and often used to transport small squads of ground troops into and out of warzones. Helmed by Republic Captain Jordo Merrix.

Mando'a Glossary:
*aay'hen* - bittersweet remembrance - of joy, celebration and mourning

* *aay'hen fest* - festival of remembrance, of feasting and toasting to ones lost in combat, and singing their battle songs

*ad'ika* - kid, boy/girl, darling, pet name for child of one's clan

* *akaanir dala* - a matriarchal, quasi-clan of warrior women who have left their clan and eschew the raising of children. (lit. fight woman)

*aruetii* - outsider

*beskar* – Mandalorian iron, or sometimes short for beskar’gam

*beskar’gam* – Mandalorian armour suit made from beskar

*chakaar* - corpse robber

*dar’jetii* - Forsworn or Dark Jedi

* *de haa'taylir be ka'ra, galar be ner tal, bal nuhoy be vheh, ner ijaat sonsol ti ibic Mando'ade* - by the witnessing of the stars, the shedding of my blood, and the resting of the earth, my honour stands in agreement with this Mando’ade. (traditional phrase for a second to use in a blood duel)

*di'kut* - idiot

*ge'hutuun* - bandit, petty thief, low criminal
haar'chak - damn it!
hu'tuun - coward, cowardly
ib’tuur jatne tuur ash’ad kyr’amur - today is a good day for someone else to die
ik’aad - toddler, young child
jetii - Jedi
*kar’tayl gar aru’e - Understand your enemy (lit. know/awareness, you/your, enemy)
*kar’taylir sah ad – I/To hold in the heart like a daughter
laandur - weak, fragile
Mand'alor - Title of the overall leader of all Mandalorians
Mando’a - Mandalorian language
Mando'ad draar digu - a Mandalorian never forgets
Mando'ade - sentient vowed to the Mandalorian way
mir'osik - dung for brains
ne'johaa - shut up
olarom - welcome, greeting
ori'vod - big brother, older brother, someone you look up to
osik - dung
rangir - to hell with it
ret'urcye mhi – goodbye (lit. maybe we’ll meet again)
shabuir - jerk
su'cuy - hello
su cuy'gar - hello, after a separation (lit. I see you're not dead.)
utreekov - fool, idiot (lit. empty head)
vod - brother, clan-brother, someone you see as a brother
vor’e - thanks, thank you

* phrases created solely for this fic, although they contain words from canonical Mando’a. Everything else is taken directly from canonical Mando’a online.

xXx

Chapter POV listing:

Chap No: Title: POV:
Chapter 001 Prologue & Author’s Notes, Character Glossary, Mando’a Glossary, Chapter Listing n/a
Chapter 002 Hyperspace: I Neann Dallash, Carth Onasi, Neann Dallash, Bastila Shan, Neann Dallash, Jen Sahara, Neann Dallash
Chapter 003 Broken Recollections Jen Sahara
Chapter 004 The art of convincing Carth Onasi
Chapter 005 Battling one's thoughts Jen Sahara
Chapter 006 Blaster Boy Carth Onasi
Chapter 007 Tricks of the mind Jen Sahara
Chapter 008 Restless Mission Vao
Chapter 009 Control Jen Sahara
Chapter 010 Into the dark Carth Onasi
Chapter 011 A pair of sneaks Jen Sahara
Chapter 012 Rescue Zaalbar
Chapter 013 The Vulkars' guard Jen Sahara
Chapter 014 A deal Mission Vao
Chapter 015 Race day Jen Sahara
Chapter 016 Resolve Bastila Shan
Chapter 017 Mandalorian gambit Jen Sahara
Chapter 018 Journey of the mind Zelka Forn
Chapter 019 Infiltration Jen Sahara
Chapter 020 A plan of action Canderous Ordo
Chapter 021 Hyperspace: II Zaalbar, Malak Devari, Mission Vao, Davik Kang, Jen Sahara, Carth Onasi, Canderous Ordo, Zelka Forn, Bastila Shan, Calo Nord
Chapter 022 Refuge denied Carth Onasi
Chapter 023 Compulsion Bastila Shan
Chapter 024 Past relations Zaalbar
Chapter 025 Acquiring: Master HK-47
Chapter 026 Fallen to the darkness Juhani
Chapter 027 A turning point Jen Sahara
Chapter 028 Half truths and part lies Bastila Shan
Chapter 029 Into the dunes Jen Sahara
Chapter 030 A discovery Canderous Ordo
Chapter 031 A darker turn of mind Jen Sahara
Chapter 032 Sibling loyalty Mission Vao
Chapter 033 Hyperspace: III - part one Bastila Shan, Calo Nord, Canderous Ordo, Mission Vao, Overseer Eridius Talav, Zaalbar
Chapter 034 Hyperspace: III - part two Carth Onasi, HK-47, Karon Enova, Juhani, Saul Karath, Yudan Rosh, Jen Sahara
Chapter 035 Desperate Measures Jen Sahara
Chapter 036 Rescuers Zaalbar
Chapter 037 On the run Jen Sahara
Chapter 038 Jedi Talk Karon Enova
Chapter 039 Echoes of the past Jen Sahara
Chapter 040 Into the deep Juhani
Chapter 041 Objective: Evacuate HK-47
Chapter 042 The power of a name Jen Sahara
Chapter 043 Neutrality be damned Carth Onasi
Chapter 044 The horror unfolds Bastila Shan
Chapter 045 No more running Jen Sahara
Chapter 046 Topside Canderous Ordo
Chapter 047 Hyperspace: IV - part one Roland Wann, Juhani, Lars Thorstan, Kylah Aramai, Zaalbar, Spymaster Gaalin, Jen Sahara, Bastila Shan
Chapter 048 Hyperspace: IV - part two HK-47, Canderous Ordo, Belaya Linn, Mission Vao, Bandon Stone, Carth Onasi, Uthar Wynn
Chapter 049 Past and present challenges Jen Sahara
Chapter 050 A scout around Mission Vao
Chapter 051 Conversations with the crew Bastila Shan
Chapter 052 Dark Side doubts Dustil Onasi
Chapter 053 A fractured mind Jen Sahara
Chapter 054 An old friend Juhani
Chapter 055 Brushes with death Jen Sahara
Chapter 056 Blood duel Canderous Ordo
Chapter 057 Torture's victim Jen Sahara / Ness Jonohl
Chapter 058 A trustworthy stranger Zaalbar
Chapter 059 Tracking the crew Carth Onasi
Chapter 060 Targeting: Fetid Cave-Dweller HK-47
Chapter 061 Flashpoint Jen Sahara / Ness Jonohl
Chapter 062 A master's betrayal Dak Vesser
Chapter 063 Showdown Jen Sahara / Ness Jonohl
Chapter 064 Hyperspace: V - part one Juhani, Belaya Linn, Yuthura Ban, Mekel Kadoni, Data analyst Ajax Zarr, Carth Onasi, Canderous Ordo, Kel Algwin, Yudan Rosh
Chapter 065 Hyperspace: V - part two Dustil Onasi, Zhar Lestin, Zaalbar, Dak Vesser, Jen Sahara / Ness Jonohl, Nisotsa Organa, Mission Vao, Atris Surik, Bastila Shan
Chapter 066 A false name Jen Sahara / Ness Jonohl
Chapter 067 Apologies Dustil Onasi
Chapter 068 To be a Jedi Juhani
Chapter 069 Secrets and small talk Jen Sahara
Chapter 070 Brotherhood Zaalbar
Chapter 071 A shifting in the shadows Jen Sahara
Chapter 072 Analysing: Holo-Map HK-47
Chapter 073 The merge Jen Sahara
Chapter 074 Exodus Mission Vao
Chapter 075 For what is real Revan Freeflight
Chapter 076 A second encounter Jolee Bindo
Chapter 077 Conviction Revan Freeflight
Chapter 078 Clan and honour Canderous Ordo
Chapter 079 Breaking Chains Bastila Shan
Chapter 080 Homecoming Zaalbar
Chapter 081 Flight Carth Onasi
Chapter 082 Hyperspace: VI - part one Nisotsa Organa, Forn Dodonna, Revan Freeflight, Rulan Prolik, Canderous Ordo, Bastila Shan
Chapter 083 Hyperspace: VI - part two Saul Karath, Dustil Onasi, Revan Freeflight, HK-47, Kylah Aramai, Mission Vao
Chapter 084 Hyperspace: VI - part three Carth Onasi, Kavar Kira, Vrook Lamar, Revan Freeflight
Chapter 085 Hyperspace: VI - part four Revan Freeflight
Chapter 086 Hyperspace: VI - part five Jolee Bindo, Davis Tar'coya, Juhani, Revan Freeflight, Suvam Tan
Chapter 087 Hyperspace: VI - part six Zaalbar, Yudan Rosh, Revan Freeflight
Chapter 088 Hyperspace: VI - part seven Mekel Kadoni, Malak Devari, Revan Freeflight
Chapter 089 Friendships Mission Vao
Chapter 090 Overlay Revan Freeflight
Chapter 091 Faith Carth Onasi
Chapter 092 Shadows of history Juhani
Chapter 093 An abrupt awakening Jolee Bindo
Chapter 094 Intermesh Revan Freeflight
Chapter 095 The greater good Bastila Shan
Chapter 096 Intersect **Revan Freeflight**
Chapter 097 Chase **Canderous Ordo**
Chapter 098 Precipice **Revan Freeflight**
Chapter 099 Primary Objective: Locate And Defend Master **HK-47**
Chapter 100 Aftermath **Revan Freeflight**
Chapter 101 Sunrise **Yudan Rosh**
Chapter 102 Reckless **Vrook Lamar**
Chapter 103 Nexus: Convergence **Bastila Shan, Zez-Kai Ell, Malak Devari, Jordo Merrix, Revan Freeflight**
Chapter 104 Nexus: Advent **Sharlan Nox, Jolee Bindo, Rulan Proluk, Revan Freeflight, Vrook Lamar**
Chapter 105 Nexus: Furtherance **Revan Freeflight, Mission Vao, Canderous Ordo, Jaq, HK-47**
Chapter 106 Nexus: Shatterpoint **Carth Onasi, Inon Daelidar, Sammy Tobards, Revan Freeflight, Dustil Onasi, Bastila Shan.**
Chapter 107 Nexus: Catharsis **Zaalbar, Yudan Rosh, Bastila Shan, Forn Dodonna, Revan Freeflight**
Chapter 108 Nexus: Fulcrum - part one **Revan Freeflight, Canderous Ordo, Revan Freeflight, Mission Vao, Revan Freeflight, Bastila Shan, Revan Freeflight, Zaalbar**
Chapter 109 Nexus: Fulcrum - part two **Revan Freeflight, Jolee Bindo, Revan Freeflight, Dustil Onasi, Revan Freeflight, Carth Onasi, Revan Freeflight, Yudan Rosh, Revan Freeflight**
Chapter 110 Nexus: Bonds **Revan Freeflight**
Chapter 111 Nexus: Dissonance **Sharlan Nox, Dustil Onasi, Inon Daelidar, Mission Vao, Davis Tar’coya, Jolee Bindo, Rulan Proluk, Carth Onasi, Yudan Rosh, Revan Freeflight**
Chapter 112 Nightfall **Revan Freeflight**
Chapter 113 Hyperspace: VII - part one **Canderous Ordo, Forn Dodonna, Eridius Talav, Carth Onasi, Yuthura Ban, Kavar Kira, Yudan Rosh, Meetra Surik, Atton Rand**
Chapter 114 Hyperspace: VII - part two **Vima Sunrider, Dustil Onasi, Selene, Sharlan Nox, HK-47, Lena Torand, Zaerdra Leno, Mission Vao, Revan Freeflight**
tbc Chapter 115 Hyperspace: VII - part three (Multi-POV)
tbc Chapter 116 Epilogue & Author's Notes n/a

xXx

Disclaimer: Based on the computer game - Star Wars: Knights of the Old Republic. World/characters belong to Bioware / LucasArts, as does the game dialog I have incorporated throughout the saga. I lay claim to my own OC's, dialog and sub-plots that have come from the depths of my own murky imagination, although certainly some are inspired by the wealth of the Star Wars: KotOR fandom.

xXx
Neann Dallash:

"Ten points!" one of the soldiers crowed, his shiv-blade vibrating as it dug into a massive holo-poster pasted on the far wall. The tip of the shiv wedged into the torso of a smiling robed figure. "I got that bastard dead centre!"

I smirked, leaning back against a bulkhead as I surveyed the off-duty common room. A dozen or so Republic soldiers milled about, non-alcoholic beverages in hand, as they enjoyed a few hours respite before their next shift onboard the Hammerhead-class cruiser, the Endar Spire. Some hapless twit had tacked up an unauthorised poster of the Jedi Thirteen - the Jedi crusaders who'd been our heroes against the Mandalorians, back when our enemy was a horde of barbarians in beskar.

Back when we could still trust the Jedi.

"You wanna play, Neann?" the Rodian lounging next to me asked in passable Basic, one antenna twitching.

His name's Tal Jonson, my mind supplied. Ensign, two years' service, ground trooper. Recruited after his homeworld was bombed and his family killed. No black marks on his record.

In my line of work, it paid to remember the details.

"I'm happy to watch," I replied, taking a sip of the fruity fizz-pop the Endar Spire supplied in lieu of alcohol. "I'm still trying to work out the point-scoring system."

The soldier next to the holo-poster retrieved his shiv, handing it hilt-first to his neighbour. Frankly, I was surprised to see any of those bootleg posters still around. The Jedi Order had been pretty adamant in their decreed blackout of what they referred to as 'illegal glorification of renegades not condoned by or associated with the Jedi Order in any way.'

Ah, but the Republic worlds had loved their renegade Jedi heroes, once. Without them, we'd likely all be speaking Mandalorian.

Without them, we wouldn't now be fighting a losing war against Darth Malak.

"It's not difficult," Tal burbled, large black eyes blinking at me. "Ten points for any torso hit, twenty for a head-shot. Double if it's one still alive, triple if it's Malak himself."

My gaze skimmed over the grandiose poster. Not like there's many of them left alive, thank the stars. Each figure stood tall and proud, most clad in the beige robes of the Order they'd spurned when they joined the Fleet.

"I'm gonna win this round," a nearby soldier boasted, shooting us a jaunty wink as he took a step closer. A second man followed more slowly in his wake. "Hey, Neann. Is Tal roping you in for a
I eyed over the newcomers, a perfunctory smile pasted on my face as the first one slumped inelegantly against the durasteel wall. *Dakkos Bal’tal*, my mind whispered. *Ensign, three years' service, snubfighter co-pilot. Comes from a military family in the Core, and has a propensity to indulge in gree-spice when on leave.* Easier to ingratiate myself with the grunts, when I already had some inkling of their background.

"Yeah," I offered. "Seems like harmless enough fun."

The other Human in his shadow gave us a brief smile, tipping his head in silent greeting. *Trask Ulgo. Ensign, seven years' service, ground trooper. Classified records, but the crypt-keys hide nothing of note other than a commendation for bravery. Odd he's still languishing as an ensign. Also, of note: Ulgo is one of the select signed onto the Jedi detail.*

Someone groaned, loudly, and my attention was drawn back to the far wall. A spattering of sniggers resounded through the room, and my gaze narrowed on the shiv-blade. It had caught on the shoulder of a holo-painted woman near the centre of the poster.

"Oh, that's right," Tal added, nudging me conspiratorially. "Minus ten if you get one who died against the Mandos. *They* never turned into traitorous bastards, eh?"

"*Meetra Surik,*" I murmured, staring at the image of the blonde Human. She wore a beatific smile, having been stylized with an almost ethereal golden hue around her proud figure. I let my lips curve with fond nostalgia that wasn't feigned. "I used to have a crush on her, back during the Mando Wars."

There was a stifled grunt from the quiet Trask â€“ I couldn't tell if it was from surprise or agreement â€“ while Dakkos snorted in dismissal. "Nah, Nisotsa was the hottest of the Thirteen. Meetra didn't have anything on *her.*"

_Ah, but you never saw them in the flesh._ I'd met Meetra Surik, once. Holo-stills didn't encapsulate the gentle grace and calm confidence the older woman had exuded.

"Never seen the appeal in Human flesh myself," Tal muttered. "So big and beefy. I mean-" He cut himself short, shooting Dakkos an embarrassed glance as he rubbed a hand through the bristling hairs on his green scalp. "Er, no offense Dak-"

Dakkos sniggered over his words good-naturedly. "The day I see a Rodian and a Human together is the day I dig my own eyeballs out with a spork." His gaze slid to mine. "Zabraks and Humans are almost as weird, Neann."

I shrugged. A half-breed myself, I didn't see the point in quibbling over the delineation of species. Having held down a career as a silent operative most of my working life, I'd never had the inclination or opportunity for any relationship beyond the most primitive. Far as I was concerned, as long as all parties were willing, it was nobody's business but theirs.

"Dakkos!" someone called. "You're up!"

"Watch this," Dakkos bragged. "I'm gonna get that chivhole Malak dead-centre." He shot us all an easy grin, before swaggering back towards the centre of the room.

"He's never won yet," Tal muttered in an aside. "Good thing he's not a gunner, with his crap aim. Mark my words, he'll flub his throw somehow."
"I'm gonna take down Darth Malak!" Dakkos yelled, before wrenching his arm back to throw the shiv-blade. I watched the arc of the weapon with a half-smile, tracing its trajectory towards the centre of the poster.

The shiv quivered as it missed Malak by mere inches. Instead, its point dug deep into the faceless mask of the central figure.

A loud cheer resounded throughout the room.

"And right into the brain," Trask muttered. I glanced sideways, to see an odd grimace twisting his broad face. He was staring fixedly at the poster, eyes narrowed.

Tal, on the other hand, was cackling gleefully. "Forgot to mention what happens when you land on Revan. Get that piece of betraying scum, and you owe everyone in the room a beer. Well, a fizz-pop, but we can pretend, right?"

*Revan Freeflight. Darth Revan.* Revan Freeflight had directed the Republic forces as Supreme Commander, against the Mandalorians. Darth Revan had started the current war by leading the vanguard against the Republic. Now Revan was dead, and Malak was the evil bastard out there burning our worlds in the name of the misbegotten Sith.

"Hah! That makes it your round, Dakkos!" someone gloated. "Pay up!"

My eyes narrowed on the flamboyant poster as Dakkos pulled out his shiv with a rueful shrug. The artist had taken definite liberties. Every figure, no matter the species or gender, stared righteously into the room. In the middle of the fallen heroes stood the now-defaced form of Revan, a spectre of mystery the other rogue Jedi cloistered around. Cloaked and masked, Revan was brandishing a single lightsaber that flared golden above all their heads. Not accurate, for I knew the dead Sith Lord had always used two.

Still, the sweeping brushstrokes of holo-paint represented how the galaxy had once seen the Jedi Thirteen. They really *had* been larger-than-life heroes: saviours of the Republic, defenders of the innocent, guardians of the peace. Revan's Guard of Twelve, the Fleet used to call them, honouring Revan above all.

If only they'd *all* died at Malachor V.

The hatch behind me opened with a pneumatic hiss.

"Oh, you've *got* to be kidding me-" a voice grumbled. I turned, to see an exasperated expression on the face of Captain Carth Onasi, Republic leader of the *Endar Spire*.

He was staring hard at the offending holo-poster. A muscle twitched in his jaw.

*Ah, crap. Can't think he's going to approve of this type of off-duty entertainment.*

The hum of genial conversation slowly stuttered into silence. A Bothan standing next to Dakkos gave him a rough nudge, before jerking his head in the direction of the hatch. Dakkos turned, his swarthy Human face twisting in sudden embarrassment.

"Get that poster down," Onasi ordered, striding into the room. "Have you lot forgotten who's in command of this ship?"

"Er-" Dakkos muttered, his gaze sliding away from the irate captain. The sheepish silence of a dozen grunts mulling over their actions hung thick in the air.
The *Endar Spire* was a Republic cruiser, but Captain Onasi didn't hold true command. One of the reasons I was here was to find out exactly *why* the Jedi Order had appropriated jurisdiction of this starship. And exactly *what* manner of ruins they planned investigating once we reached the desert world of Tatooine.

*Mystics and their damn secrets.* The Jedi Order were heavily embroiled in our war against Darth Malak's Sith Empire. Flipside of the previous war, when the Order had refused any sort of direct involvement, leaving it up to Revan and the rest of the Jedi Thirteen to aid the Republic against the Mandalorian threat.

The brass hadn't forgotten. Revan Freeflight's name might be black as tar-mud *now,* but once Revan had been the first to join us, to lead us, to throw the mighty power of the Force behind the Republic front.

Once, the Jedi Thirteen had been heroes.

"If one of the Jedi onboard walk in here and see that blasted poster, your ears will be ringing into next week." Captain Onasi folded his arms as he levelled a stern expression at Dakkos, who was artlessly trying to conceal the shiv-blade behind his back.

"Sorry, sir," Dakkos muttered, free hand reaching up to pull at the holo-poster. It crackled as he unceremoniously ripped a large segment of it clear from the wall.

I couldn't deny a flare of inner satisfaction as I saw Malak's holo-form torn haphazardly in half.

"Easy, soldier," Captain Onasi grumbled, his voice calming as his gaze roamed the room. "I won't begrudge you downtime. Just be mindful that we report to the Jedi. Revan's Guard used to be *their* people. No one likes a reminder of traitors, even in harmless fun."

There was a general murmur of agreement around the room. Captain Onasi was seen as a fair sort around the *Endar Spire,* sharp under pressure and well-liked by most. This was an odd posting for the likes of him, but I hadn't heard any of the grunts remark on it. *No doubt they're too busy wondering why the Jedi are calling the shots to think on his recent transfer.*

The man himself turned to face me, brown eyes shadowed with the heaviness of war.

"Lieutenant? I'd like a word."

I nodded in compliance, and slipped out of the room behind him.

xXx

**Carth Onasi:**

Lieutenant Neann Dallash stood at ease, an expression of mild deference pasted on his lightly ridged face. Dallash was my senior navi-pilot; a man both competent and experienced. He was the type of officer sharp enough to do his job, benign enough to stay out of trouble, and genial enough that every soldier underneath him agreed he was a good sort.

*If only he didn't turn into a love-struck imbecile in front of Jedi Bastila Shan-*

I reached over my private desk to disable the room's surveillance. Holding back a sigh, I suddenly felt every parsec of my thirty-eight Core-standard years.

"We're exiting hyperspace in four hours, Lieutenant," I said, getting straight to the point. "It's time
you knew our intermediary destination."

This blasted mission had been a covert one from the start. The squad of robes onboard let slip nothing I hadn't already been briefed on, but it was their jittery behaviour that put me on edge. Sure, Jedi were well-known for being cryptic and mysterious, but this lot had ramped it up a notch, with the way they kept jumping at shadows and snapping at anyone who dared linger in their proximity.


Dallash wasn't the sort to dig for reasons why I'd kept our docking point classified; I was glad of that, at least. The Jedi had put so much emphasis on secrecy that I was starting to doubt everyone. "We're docking at Mavis III."

"Mavis III," the half-Zabrak echoed, brow ridges lowering in thought. I wondered how long it would take him- "Taris," he breathed. "That's- that's a tad on the risky side?"

Yeah. Yeah, it was.

"Not my call," I bit out, trying to edge my tone into impartiality. Mavis III was a neutral docking station run by the Exchange, but its proximity to Taris hardly made me leap for joy. Still, orders were orders, and we simply had to make the best of them. "Mavis III is the most direct route to Tatooine. Yes, Taris is Sith-controlled, but more in name than any meaningful force, these days. Our signature's forged, we should be in and out of the sector before any alarm is raised. The Exchange might sell our docking info later, but we'll be long gone by then."

Lieutenant Dallash hummed, his dark gaze clouding in thought.

The Endar Spire was flagged as a support and supply cruiser; even should the Sith learn our identity and location, the 'Spire wouldn't be seen as a particularly tantalizing prize. Not unless they found out who was really onboard.

The Jedi may have concealed their presence for the first few days of hypertravel, but hiding a famous war figure like Jedi Padawan Bastila Shan was always going to be a losing game against time.

Near-on three hundred souls onboard with a fistful of Jedi. Who thought this was a good idea again?

The Jedi. The blasted Jedi. Couldn't they actually disclose their objectives and work with us in good faith for once?

Admiral Dodonna believed whatever they were up to might be instrumental in the war we were slowly losing. I doubted the greying Admiral had little more to go on than the faith of the Jedi Masters - and sure, the Jedi often had a trick or two up their robed sleeves, but they also had a tendency to get blindsided by the more practical and visceral elements of war.

Or, fall, and turn into murdering Sith bastards.

"Who else knows our refuelling point, sir?"

"The Jedi. Myself. Now, you." I sighed. "Report to the bridge in two hours, Lieutenant. I need the sharpest dock and refuel you can manage. Frankly, I won't be resting easy until we're enroute to Tatooine."

"Yes, sir." Lieutenant Dallash snapped out a tight salute. "Is that all, sir?"
I felt my mouth twitch. Neann Dallash was a likeable sort, but he'd rather embarrassed himself last time the Jedi had infiltrated the main bridge. "Don't talk to the Jedi, Lieutenant. Commander Shan already believes you're a blundering idiot. I'd rather not be forced to list your credentials again."

"Sir." Dallash bowed his head in overt contrition, his chagrin stark enough that I regretted my words. But he'd made a right fool of himself over the uptight young Jedi, clumsily stumbling into her and stuttering like an awed greenhorn. Out of character, for an experienced officer like him. Ah, well. I've seen enough soldiers turn into halfwits over a pretty face. I expect Dallash will keep his head down, now.

"Wait a minute." The lieutenant shot me a sharp look, all traces of discomfort gone. "Sir. Did you just say commander?"

"I did." I felt my mouth tighten, and leaned over to toss a datapad across the table. "Read this."

Dallash's frowning countenance focused on the utilitarian datapad. I gave him a minute to digest the official command order - the order that'd been signed off by the Jedi Master leading the six-man squad of robes on board.

"Sir." Dallash's head lifted, fixing me with an intent look. "This is dated four days ago."

"Yes." The word was almost a growl. I'd been giving the Jedi a chance to redact the damn order, but, just like with everything else, they were intractable.

The Jedi here consisted of one master, a quartet of seasoned knights, and a lone padawan who was as gifted as she was inexperienced and socially awkward. And now, inexplicably, she was also in possession of full commanding privileges over a cruiser from the Republic Navy.

Again, I fought hard against showing my distaste of the whole mission. Too many things just weren't adding up. Even Commander Shan had looked like she'd swallowed a sour-plum when that master informed me of the change in manifest command.

Dallash placed the datapad back on the hardened plasticeel table-top. "Is she going to be snapping out orders on the bridge, sir?"

"From what I've been told, Lieutenant, Jedi Master Galdea will retain command in actuality." Which made the directive nonsensical - it had the feeling of a technicality, but for the life of me I couldn't figure out why. Maybe it's a sop to Shan's famous battle meditation. But, then, why had the Jedi Order sent Bastila Shan out on a clandestine operation, when her talents would be far better put to use on the frontlines?

I had no idea, and the Jedi certainly weren't enlightening me. Admiral Dodonna was going to be highly unimpressed at my next grilling, and for the umpteenth time I wished she hadn't pulled me out of a snubfighter to place me here.

"That will be all, Lieutenant." I gave the man a perfunctory nod. "I'll see you on the bridge in two hours."

Lieutenant Dallash cracked out another efficient salute, before turning on his heel and departing silently.

xXx

Neann Dallash:
Two hours to do some much-needed digging.

I stepped out of my private quarters; mind clear, an automatic smile on my face, and one hand slipping a modified datapad into a pocket.

Stars, but I wished Onasi had briefed me earlier. It'd been an irritation, not knowing our refuelling point until now, but I'd held back from running my own routines in the 'Spire's navi-system. My portfolio didn't require those details, and I'd been ordered to follow Onasi's lead.

The inane command order from the Jedi, however- that would have been useful to learn four days ago. If only Onasi knew we reported to the same person, then he might've been more forthcoming.

"As far as everyone onboard is concerned, you are simply the Endar Spire's senior navi-pilot."

Admiral Forn Dodonna's expression had been stern, the last time we'd spoken in person. "Captain Onasi is a good man, and a good front. The Jedi will see him exactly as what he believes he is: my agent to find out what they are up to."

Captain Onasi was a good man. I'd read his dossier numerous times before boarding the 'Spire, and already had his personality pegged. Commended for valour during the Mandalorian Wars, he was a staunch Republic loyalist with a strong moral code and a streak of honesty that would hinder him climbing much further up the officer ranks.

Onasi had adapted well to his assumed role of advising the 'Spire's navi-pilots and leading the troops onboard, while failing spectacularly at drawing any information from the closed-mouthed Jedi. He'd be highly pissed if he knew the truth: he was no more than a feint, a distraction for the Jedi to dodge, while I did the discreet digging.

"Which I have little time to do before we spit out next to Mavis III."

I glanced down at the chronometer on my wrist, a shiny alusteel replica of a famous Coruscanti brand. The latest model from Republic Intelligence, it housed a hidden processor that could interface with my ocular implants, and send intel directly to my retina.

With a tap on the pretend chron, a set of tracking coordinates flared briefly in my vision.

::Starboard training sector, blue corridor, floor 4E::

I began walking.

It was my batch-routine in the 'Spire's surveillance system throwing Shan's last known public location to me. No audio, though. With the lack of holo-cams in the Jedi quarters, and the fact that my discretely placed comm-tracker had shorted out with Shan's last sonic ablution, I was blinder than I was comfortable with.

Hadn't harvested much before the comm-tracker bit the dust, either. Padawan Shan recited the Jedi Code a pinch too obsessively, Knight Seris had a disturbing interest in parasitic diseases, and Master Galdea's pep talks were about as riveting as a holo-doc on bantha farming.

Still, there'd been two words of note. Two words I'd caught in an uttered aside from Shan, before Galdea had shushed her. Star Map. It sounded like a kid's astrological project, but it was Galdea's immediate censure that piqued my interest.

It'd be going into my next wire to Dodonna - and I had to hope the lead made up for Shan now viewing me as a stumbling oaf enraptured by her presence. Her vexation at my clumsiness served its purpose, though: Shan had been too busy sticking her nose in the air to notice the bug I'd slipped into
her ornamental hair-braids.

I couldn't chance playing the same trick twice, and especially not around that chubby master. Dry and dusty Galdea might be, but I hadn't missed the sharp glance he'd thrown my way the last time we met. If I could just catch Shan alone-

My thoughts flat-lined into nothing as a pair of brown-clad Jedi slowly cleared the corner ahead and strolled in my direction. Two women; both young, attractive and wearing identical expressions of serenity. The one leading the pair looked up at my approach, red lips pursing in recognition.

**Jedi Knight Kylah Aramai.** The name rose in my mind, but I kept it small. Always paid to keep the thoughts hidden, around Force-users. *Human, suspected mix of Mirialan ancestry given the yellowing skin and tawny eyes. Well-known spokesperson and confidant of Bastila Shan.*

My eyes slid to her companion: the battle meditation champion herself.

I ducked my head, stumbling to a stop within arms-reach.

"Master Jedi," I squeaked. "Er, it is good to see you." I let my gaze rise to Shan's, before dropping it deliberately back to the grilled flooring. "Can I- can I help you in any way?"

"I am a knight, soldier," Kylah Aramai drawled. Her tone lilted with amusement. "And I am certain you must be aware that Bastila is a padawan."

"Lieutenant," Bastila Shan acknowledged. Her enunciation was crisp, cold and stiff. "We do not require any assistance."

"I, ah, I was looking for you," I admitted, running one hand briefly over my fore-horns, while the other fingered the datapad in my pocket. "Captain Onasi has informed me of your change in rank. I have a set of operating protocols for you to peruse - at your leisure, of course."

The ice on Shan's face hardened further as I pulled out the standard-issue datapad, now loaded with all manner of Republic Navy procedures and policies. Let her take the implication this was Onasi's doing - if he called me on it, I would merely bluff it out as the initiative of the hopelessly enamoured.

"This is hardly necessary, Lieutenant." The frost in her voice could've frozen a Zeltron in heat.

"Er, sorry, it's just that it's standard operating procedure, Master Jedi- or, or should I call you ma'am, now?"

"No!" she snapped, before her eyes closed briefly in defeat. A thin hand rose to snatch the proffered datapad. "Fine," she managed in a carefully modulated voice. I had the distinct feeling she was biting back curses. "I shall review it when I have time. Thank you."

Somehow, I doubted Shan would get past the first twenty pages of dry discourse, but so long as the datapad made its way to the Jedi quarters I'd have one more set of ears to scan. The bug nestled in the 'pad's processor emitted on a low frequency that wouldn't be picked up by any orthodox scanner.

"I, er, understand we'll be briefed on the main bridge shortly," I continued, allowing a hopeful smile to emerge. "I can offer you an escort?"

A caustic snigger from Aramai rang down the corridor, one sec before Shan's porcelain skin flushed an embarrassed red. "I do not require anything from you, Lieutenant," she bit out, lips thinning. "In future, I would prefer it if you kept your distance and focused on your job."
"Yes, yes, of course," I mumbled, rubbing a hand over my face. "I- ah, I am sorry to have taken your time, Master Jedi."

Aramai snorted. "Come, Bastila. Let us move on before you completely short-circuit this one's brain."

I bowed my head in fake contrition as the Jedi departed. But, rather than following the amber sidings that eventually led to the command deck, I saw them turn sharply into a side corridor. That leads to the crew quarters. I allowed a frown to form after the Jedi had disappeared from sight. It was an interesting destination, this close to a hyperspace exit.

Might be worth following up - although this time I'd wait until Shan had left the area. Somehow, I didn't think she'd appreciate yet another encounter with me.

xXx

Bastila Shan:

"It is hardly amusing, Kylah." My shoulders stiffened uncomfortably. Certainly, I had been acquainted with my fair share of Republic soldiers during my tenure, but most stayed a respectable distance away.

There was a barely repressed giggle from my oldest friend. Peace, but sometimes she behaved like five years my junior, rather than the opposite.

"That poor half-breed is completely smitten. I'm starting to think he's stalking you around the Endar Spire."

"Perish the thought," I muttered, earning another giggle from my erstwhile friend. At least the behaviour of that incompetent lieutenant halted any further tirades from Kylah. Master Vrook always admonished me to search for the silver linings, so to speak, and Kylah's terse enquiries into the true nature of our mission were becoming both tedious and awkward to deflect.

"He's right about one thing, though," Kylah continued, and already I felt myself tensing in apprehension. "You should be heading to the bridge. Honestly, you don't need to micromanage our support staff. Leave the underlings to Galdea."

"Master Galdea," I murmured. Avoiding Kylah's no-doubt exasperated eye-roll, I focused on placing one leaden foot ahead of the other. I had a duty, an obligation, a shackles on my soul that I dearly desired to share with my oldest friend- but I could not. "Are you certain you do not wish to accompany me on the bridge?"

Kylah snorted. It was odd, but her character had certainly devolved into something more irreverent of late. We are all tense, I scolded myself. No doubt Kylah would espouse that I am more uptight than usual.

"I'm sure Galdea will look after you adequately, Bastila." Her tone edged into frostiness. "That is, unless you plan to take charge."

My lips pursed. It had not escaped me that Kylah felt belittled, perhaps even thwarted, by the token rank of commander bestowed upon me. After all, she was the knight, the Jedi who had shielded me from the holo-press when Master Vrook could not, the friend who had always kept a watchful eye over me-

Kylah is a true Jedi, and will know to accept even what she cannot understand.
For the first time, I felt something akin to relief as I closed in on my destination. At least the upcoming conversation would distract Kylah from her ill-feeling.

I knocked firmly upon the entry hatch to one of the standard crew bedding quarters. A utilitarian, durasteel door that was commonplace throughout the starcruiser, and yet this one always seemed so ominous.

The hatch opened, and a hesitant, plainly clothed woman blinked in the entrance.

"Jedi Shan," she murmured in greeting, before devolving into a poorly executed bow that was as unnecessary as it was patently ridiculous. "What- what can I do for you?"

I bestowed her with what I hoped was a benevolent smile. "I have come to remind you that we exit hyperspace in little more than three hours, Jen. I know you are ill-used to hypertravel; as long as you remain safely secured during the transition you shall be fine."

Jen Sahara's bright green gaze darted to Kylah. "I- I'm sure I'll be okay. Thank you."

She looked so young, freshly scrubbed and ill-at-ease as she hid behind a short mop of dark brown curls. Sometimes, I found it hard to remind myself that Jen Sahara had a couple of years even on Kylah, that she was-

I reined my dangerous thoughts back in with habitual precision, and kept my attention firmly fixed upon her. "You have everything you need?" I asked, searching around for a conversation starter that would not discomfit the shy scholar.

She glanced back to me, holding my gaze for only the briefest of moments. "Yes, Jedi Shan," she answered quietly. "Everyone has - has been kind."

"I notice you have downloaded many archaeological journals in the last few days," I continued doggedly. Force, but she was difficult to befriend. Even like this. "If you have need for more information, do not hesitate to ask me."

She nodded, her expression downcast and demure. She sees me as someone she can trust. Jen Sahara has never left her homeworld before. I must remember that, and be the soul of empathy. With a step forward, I rested my hand gently upon her shoulder.

"Do not be afraid to talk to me, Jen Sahara. I promise I will not bite."

Kylah, in my shadow, did a poor job of stifling her snort of disparagement. I saw the answering burn of embarrassment on the scholar's wan face, but her glance back to me was grateful.

"Thank you, Jedi Shan. I shall."

I allowed the forced smile on my face to grow, and counted our interaction as a minor victory. Next time I seek Jen Sahara out, I shall ensure Kylah is not with me.

With a nod of farewell, I retreated from the room, motioning Kylah to follow.

"Honestly, Bastila, she is just a simple scholar," Kylah drawled in a quiet murmur. "Why you feel the urge to check up on such a quiet little mouse, I do not know."

The hiss of the hatch closing behind me was audible, and incriminating. I pinned Kylah with a stern frown, even as I doubted it would have any effect on my somewhat cavalier friend. "Kylah, she likely heard that," I admonished. "Jen Sahara is one of our crew, and we have an-"
"-obligation, I know," she huffed. "I am little concerned with the opinions of Force-blind academics, Bastila, and this constant hovering of yours distracts you from your studies." She loosed a pent-up sigh, before patting me on the shoulder. I was not sure if the gesture was meant to be apologetic or commiserating. "Perhaps hypertravel is wearing me down somewhat. I shall retreat to our meditation chamber - you'd better head to Master Galdea and the bridge. You'll want to be there early, if you're going to lead the hyperspace descent."

"I am not," I replied, somewhat tartly. I had certainly taken note of the disbelief in Captain Onasi's countenance when he perused the official command missive, and had no desire to tread on the toes of either the experienced Fleet officer or Master Galdea. "But I shall seek Master Galdea out, now. Have a restful meditation, my friend. May the Force embrace you."

Sometimes, even in conversation with Kylah, I still had the impression that my words came across as pious instead of supporting. Sometimes, I dearly wished for my earlier days on Dantooine, before—before everything.

"The Force is with us all, Bastila," Kylah murmured, her face breaking into a warm smile of camaraderie. "I'll catch up with you during the refuelling."

xXx

Neann Dallash:

::Crew quarters Red-7A. Designated occupants: Republic Ensign Trask Ulgo and civilian Jen Sahara.::

Maybe Shan's brief detour wasn't that odd, considering Ulgo and Sahara were both part of the Jedi support staff. While Ensign Ulgo had sworn his oaths to the Republic Navy, he'd been inserted as one of the soldiers who reported directly to Shan and that Jedi Master, Galdea.

Frustratingly, I hadn't found anything of use on the dozen soldiers attached to the Jedi. All were experienced, loyal Republic grunts with impeccable service records. They'd undertaken a stint of active duty on Dantooine, before swearing into Jedi service for the duration of the mission.

The civilian academic, also, seemed to hold no mystery other than a tragic past. Her dossier was brief: a childhood in some religious Outer Rim commune followed by years of archaeological study at a backwater academia. A refugee from the Sith bombing of Deralia, and stars knew that mess had been almost as ugly as the decimation of Telos, even if the holo-press had barely picked it up.

The only point of interest I could garner about the bint was her expertise in the Massassi era. Surely, that was a tip-off regarding the nature of the ruins on Tatooine - why else would the Jedi drag a wide-eyed civvie along on a covert mission?

Ah, well. It was another jot of intel to pass along to Dodonna. Might as well see if I can glean anything else from the recalcitrant scholar, while I'm here.

I knocked firmly on the entrance hatch. It was almost a full minute until she answered.

"Hi there," I said, keeping my voice non-assuming and friendly. "My name's Neann. I hear you're a civvie stuck onboard with all us troopers?"

The woman called Jen Sahara blinked at me owlishly, before biting her lip. It was an insecure expression echoed in the hunched set of her shoulders, more at home on a pimply teen than a twenty-something scholar.
"Um, hi. I'm Jen. Do you need something?" Her voice was hesitant, and her gaze dropped from mine. It gave me time to appraise the woman properly. She was tall, but not unusually so. Her skin was pale and wan, with the dusky look of too much time spent indoors. Give her a season or two in true sunlight, and I'd wager Jen Sahara would bear a natural olive tone. Cropped dark curls framed a face that looked older than her service records - which was an incongruous observation when contrasted with her behaviour.

"I understand you know something of the Massassi era?" I asked, immediately ditching my first instinct to ask the woman out for a drink. Somehow, I didn't think the overly timid Jen Sahara would reciprocate well to a friendly gesture from a stranger.

"Er, a little bit. I mean- yes, yes I do. It's my area of study." The woman looked up again, and a genuine spark of interest deepened the moss-green of her eyes. "Why do you ask?"

"Oh, I've always been interested in pre-Republic times," I lied. "The Massassi - fascinating creatures. Connected to the Sith, weren't they?"

"Well, there's records suggesting they were a sub-species of the Sith." Her nose wrinkled in thought. "It's all a bit muddied in fragments of records, though, because the Sith are seen as a religion or doctrine, not an actual species. We know the Massassi built temples and effigies on Yavin IV and Korriban, but those planets are notoriously difficult to fund expeditions to."

"That's... very interesting," I said faintly. Far as I was concerned, the Sith were a bunch of murdering bastards, same as the Mandalorians - both consisting of a vast cross-section of species all united under the same banner of inhumane bloodlust. The only difference being the former filled their upper ranks with Dark Jedi. Frankly, the idea of a Sith species seemed slightly on the absurd side. "Did the Massassi ever inhabit Tatooine?"

"Tatooine?" Jen Sahara blinked, visibly startled. "Oh, no. The Massassi didn't expand very far, even at the height of their empire. And Tatooine- that's always been a remote location. Other than the indigenous Tusken Raiders, the only sentients who have settled there are the recent colonists and trade conglomerates."

I faked a smile. Diffident and overly shy Jen Sahara might be, but it seemed I'd discovered the way to reach her. "Well, the upcoming expedition will certainly be fascinating," I offered. "Guess you'll be one of the lucky ones shuttling down to Tatooine's sandy surface?"

"No." Jen shook her head, eyes widening in alarm. "No, I'm an academic. I don't ever plan on leaving Deralia- I mean, um, I didn't plan on it." She blushed, then, and looked even more uneasy than earlier. "I'm sorry, Neann, but I have research to attend to. It was, um, nice to meet you."

She took a step back, gave me an awkward wave of farewell, and swished the hatch shut in my face.

It was my turn to blink, at the grey durasteel staring me in the face. Smooth, Neann. Real smooth. Looked like even the mere thought of stepping outside the Endar Spire had shy Jen Sahara scurrying back to her bunk.

With a rueful sigh, I turned on my heel and made to depart. If I wanted to befriend the introvert, I'd have to brush up on my ancient history. I was still debating the merits of that when a muted beep echoed from my chron.

A ping, detecting a captured transmission outside the parameters I'd set in my tracking software.

Over an hour before I'm due on the bridge. I concealed a frown at the unusual source of the alert. I
should have enough time to check this out, send that report to Dodonna, and get to the bridge before Onasi frowns at my tardiness.

It'd been a busy day. After the dock and refuel, once the *Endar Spire* was safely tucked in hyperspace towards Tatooine, I might actually let myself have a nap.

xXx

**Jen Sahara:**

I leaned back against the closed hatch, feeling the comforting press of hard metal at my back. The Zabrak, no doubt, was walking away and leaving me in desired solitude. *I wonder if his horns ever catch on his clothing?* It seemed a bizarre thought. He'd been friendly enough, but I'd never met a Zabrak before in my life. Deralia was populated almost entirely with Humans, descended from the Godsworn missionaries who'd travelled there some centuries back.

It had been hard not to stare at the dark ridges on the man's face, and I'd felt like a stumbling teenager navigating the throes of conversation with the opposite sex.

*Opposite... species. If there is such a thing.* I'd spent years researching different cultures and peoples, but meeting them face-to-face was something entirely different. My whole experience onboard this intergalactic starcruiser had been, so far, overwhelming.

*It's good for me; good for my career.* I knew that, and the compliment of the Jedi Order seeking out my services still stunned. But I couldn't deny the yearning to be safely ensconced back home, away from this melting pot of sentients, away from dangerous desert planets that were a lot more interesting reading about from a holonet screen than actually setting foot upon.

*Jedi Shan has assured me I will remain on the Endar Spire. I have nothing to be alarmed about.* World-wise people like that friendly Zabrak might jump at the chance to visit Tatooine, but I knew enough about that planet to ascertain it was hardly safe.

Deralia was a peaceful, remote world, and the Godsworn commune even more so. There was no overt crime, no violence, never had been until- until-

My mind blanked.

*Until... what?* The sting of nausea assailed me, and I laid a shaky hand against the durasteel walling. Metals were scarce, back home; most of our dwellings were made from a patchwork of native timber and hardened clay. *Until nothing. I have nothing to be alarmed about. There's never been war on Deralia. I'm fortunate to hail from a planet far removed from the ugly violence so rampant elsewhere.*

The dizziness subsided, leaving only a residual exhaustion in its wake. My gaze darted to the utilitarian bunk as a deep lassitude settled achingly into my bones. I was so often tired these days. *It's the onboard food. I'm simply not accustomed to the synthesizers here. Mass-produced food like that, it's probably deficient in half a dozen vitamins.*

The dreamless safety of my bedding called me, and before I knew it I was already seated on the hard mattress. There was a second bunk on the opposite wall; Trask Ulgo's, the soldier who'd been assigned to look after me. Between him and Jedi Shan, I knew I was well taken care of. As long as I followed their lead I'd be just fine.

I lay back, resting my heavy head on the flat pillow. Trask had been called out for the hyperspace exit, but he'd assured me he'd be back as soon as it was over.
"...as long as you remain safely secured..."

Jedi Shan's words rose in my mind. Hyperspace exit was meant to be as disconcerting as the initial jump, and I'd slept through that. With the way my head was starting to pound, sleep was becoming more and more desirable.

My hands fumbled for the safety harnesses attached to the underside of the bunk. The clips were some sort of electronic mechanism; back home, we just used simple hooks and eye-loops for fasteners. I grimaced as the enclosures refused to affix, and another wave of exhaustion submerged me.

*I'll just lie back for a minute. So tired.* Jedi Shan had said... what, three hours? I had slept so much recently that surely all I needed was a quick moment of shut-eye.

The restraints fell from my limp hands. I'd sort them out in a minute. Just, first...

My eyelids dropped closed, and I allowed the headiness of slumber to embrace me.

xXx

**Neann Dallash:**

The report of the captured transmit was unusual. It came from the Jedi communication quarter, having been sent over half a day ago - but my routines only did a sweep there every twenty hours, hidden in the sub-function of a maintenance backup. Caution balanced with risk - I didn't want the Jedi finding out I was tracking their communications if I could help it.

So far all their transmits had been encrypted with Jedi protocols I'd been unable to crack, and sent directly to the Dantooine Enclave. This one... went somewhere else. And the encryption matrix used was simpler, as if it'd been hastily done.

I was required on the bridge within an hour. The Jedi had a habit of settling there early; this seemed a fortuitous time to sleuth in their comm room. I made sure to seal the hatch locked behind me.

I twisted an upgraded spike into the central console, and input the batch routines that would grant administrative access. The comm records were quick to pull up, and it only took a minute to run the decoding program alongside the offending transmit.

With bated breath, I launched the execute command.

The transmit was text only. A set of coordinates. My gaze narrowed. *That's... that's the jump point for Mavis III.* An icy shiver coursed through me as the implication hit with the force of a ferracrete brick. *Someone's sent our refuelling location out... somewhere. More than half a standard day ago. Well before Onasi briefed me, before anyone else knew-

*A Jedi.* My breath caught. *A Jedi sent this.*

Why? Why would they do that, unless-

I had to tell Onasi. Frakk it, I had to move, *quick*, before he pulled the *Endar Spire* out of hyperspace.

With a mash of fingers on the keyboard, I erased the screen and logged out, jumped to my feet and-

The locked hatch opened behind me. A robed figure stood in the doorway.
"My my, what do we have here?"

Instinct warred with the hot adrenaline that fired through my bloodstream. *I'm an engineer,* I thought wildly, ducking my head and dropping my gaze. Years of intel training had taught me exactly *what* to do in cases like this, and exactly *how* to think fake thoughts around any Force-user that might employ mind-reading. *There's a logged fault with the computer, but I can't find it, and I've given up and just want a quiet cup of caffa-"

"Excuse me, Master Jedi," I mumbled, hunching my shoulders in an attempt to emulate that meek Jen Sahara. Internally, my thoughts still whirled. *A quiet cup of caffa with the other grunts, before my superior tells me what a crap engineer I am. "I was called in to investigate a fault, but I'm afraid-"

In the periphery of my vision, I saw a hand raise. Immediately, my words stopped of their own volition.

"This is the Jedi's personal communication bunker," the woman drawled. "What are you doing, snooping in here?"

"Um, is it?" I squeaked. *I don't want to upset the Jedi.* I forced the thoughts to the forefront of my mind, ignoring the hot rush of fright that spiked in my gut. *Maybe I got the room wrong? My superior's gonna fry my arse! "I was sent to comm-room A3, Master Jedi. If I've offend-"

Another swish of the hand, and my words died again. I had to do better-

"Why, I do believe it's Bastila's little stalker."

*Oh, frakk!* The expletive shattered my internal monologue, and my mind raced like a stimmed-up junkie, trying desperately to formulate a plausible excuse-

There was a clacking noise as the Jedi strode deeper into the room. Clacking, as if she wore damn heels under those brown robes, and wasn't that the most absurd thought?

"I despise loose ends," she murmured. "And with so little time left, I can afford to take a risk."

The *snap-hiss* that echoed through the room froze my mind with a real, genuine terror. I wrenched my head up, to see tawny eyes glinting at me from behind an amber beam of plasma. Painted red lips curved in malicious pleasure. "You chose the wrong room to snoop in, Lieutenant."

I jerked to the side, one hand wrenching futilely for the blaster at my hip- but my limbs were suddenly frozen, as frozen as my mind, as damned as the *entire ship was about to be-"

The Jedi's- the Sith's- eyes creased in satisfaction, and somehow, I knew the bitch had picked that last thought straight from my mind.

xXx

Chapter End Notes

Many thanks to kosiah for the beta, and suggestions as to what works and what doesn't.
Pain.

A dull throbbing emanated like a gong bashing inside my head, shattering my peaceful oblivion. Faint voices, whispering in tense and urgent tones, filtered in from distant shadows of my semi-conscious mind.

…

"Do not be alarmed. It is done, now. The rebuild is complete," someone said in a low, tired voice.

"What if she... what if she remembers something? Anything?" The reply was clipped, uptight and very feminine.

"She will not. And you will be there to ensure she does not. Have faith, Padawan. It will work out. It has to."

…

I prised open eyelids to see nothing but darkness. The voices fled, as if fearing the onslaught of consciousness. Just a bad dream. That's all. I have nothing to be alarmed about.

A lance of red hot pain seized the side of my head with cruel fingers, biting deep before slowly fading away. I became aware of the cool press of metal against my cheek, and realized I was lying prone on the ground. Wait. Where am I?

A faint booming in the distance roused my awareness to the eerie wailing of sirens. The darkness was cut through by a flickering orange light, indicating an emergency system kicking in. I stayed still for a moment, processing what my vision could make out in the flashes of amber. There were two raised stretchers and a handful of lockers lining a vented, durasteel wall. I'm on a starship, I realized slowly. What am I doing here?

With a groan, I pushed myself up on shaky arms, and dizziness threatened to overwhelm me. The ground shook violently beneath my hands; it took me a moment to realize that it wasn't my own unsteadiness – the ship was being fired upon.

"All hands to the bridge!" a crackly voice emanated over the ship’s intercom. "We're under attack!"

No kidding, dumbass. The thought was sarcastic and grouchy - even if unwarranted - and more a reflex reaction to my own situation. And yet, it felt wrong, or at least, not what I should be thinking. That was uncharitable of me, a voice whispered. I winced, dragging myself to a seated position and leaning back against a wall, clutching at the side of my head.

It was wet and sticky.

I must have fallen against something, I realized. Cracked my head open. I pulled back a shaky hand,
and under the luminescence of the warning lights realized it was covered in blood. *Blood on my hands.* Somehow, it seemed a familiar sight.

A door swished open, and I heard someone rush in, panting.

"Jen, there you are! We've been ambushed by a Sith battle fleet – you need to get up!" The voice was young, strong-sounding and very earnest. I tilted my head slowly to face him.

*Jen. Jen Sahara. That's who I am.* Until he'd said my name, I hadn't realized I hadn't known it. *Head injury. Sithspit, this is bad.*

*Father would tan me if he heard such language,* I thought, appalled.

"Jen?"

*Like I give a ronto's arse what some misogynistic old coot thinks.*

"Jen!" The man was crouching in front of me now, wholesome blue eyes staring at me worriedly. With a concerted effort of will, I forced my concentration back to him. Human, muscle-bound and handsome, he was obviously a soldier of some description. I picked him to be in his late twenties somewhere, younger than me and in optimum condition.

*Wait. Younger? I'm only twenty-six galactic years.* I was raised in a peaceful commune on Deralia, working on my father's farm before spending the last eight years studying at the local academia. The job contract from the Jedi Order had come out of nowhere, and still seemed like an impossible dream.

But… none of that *felt* right. I wasn't a scholar. And I sodding well did not work for the Jedi.

Sweat broke out on my neck and head, and I heard the harsh pants of my own breath. A feeling of vertigo threatened to overcome me and I struggled anew to force myself back to the present.

"You're hurt," the man said softly, placing a hand against my head. "Can you stand? We have to get moving."

I pushed his arm away instinctively. "Who are you?" I snapped, glaring at him.

The man's eyes flared briefly, a shadow of some dark emotion skimming over his otherwise intent expression. "That knock's done some damage to your head. I'm Trask, a soldier for the Republic and your roommate." He withdrew his hand, his entire posture tensing in readiness as he crouched over me. "Do you... do you know who you are?"

The surreality of the question mirrored the dizziness of my own thoughts; still, there was something about the line of inquiry that had my hackles rising. "I'm Jen Sahara," I muttered. *I'm Jen Sahara.* The words echoed, a hollow sound in my mind, a reverberation that felt off-key. The man in front of me seemed to relax, even as my own confusion peaked once more. "And you're Trask Ulgo."

*Trask. Ensign Ulgo.* Blurred memories slowly emerged as he leaned forward to help me stand. *Trask has been helping me adjust to life onboard this overwhelming starcruiser. My thoughts stilled for a moment, as my gaze narrowed on him. Trask was good at running my life, informing me where to go, and what to do, and saving me from making gizka eyes at the captain. Wait... what sort of simpering coward am I?*

Trask was a soldier for the Republic. And yet, he'd been assigned to bunk in with me – a nobody scholar hired by the Jedi to investigate some archaeological dig. Why would a combat soldier be
sharing my quarters?

I'd never thought to question it before, which was strange in itself.

Things were coming back to me now; the hurried departure from Deralia – *odd, that my father let me go* – the week of dazed orientation on the awe-inspiring *Hammerhead*-class cruiser – *not like it's that sodding spectacular* – the studying of classified archaeological extracts that had certainly never passed clearance back at the Deralian Academia. I hadn't understood exactly what the Jedi were looking for, but I'd been quietly content to do their bidding whilst onboard the *Endar Spire*, en route to Tatooine.

Quietly content. To follow some Jedi to a smuggling destination.

*What the frell is going on?*

I winced as pain stabbed deep into the side of my head yet again, my thoughts unraveling in desperate confusion.

Trask had turned back to my sleeping quarters, locating a pair of track shoes which he threw unceremoniously in my direction. "Here. Put those on quick and we'll head out."

They tightened to fit my feet with a barely audible hiss. I was vaguely aware of my attire; plain clothes I'd been resting in while the cruiser had been attacked. Nothing protective in the least. Trask had the right idea though; the ship quaked beneath another barrage and I barely kept my balance. We had to move.

Trask unbuckled a blaster which he promptly handed to me, handle first. "The Sith have already boarded. Have you ever used one of these before, Jen?"

I stared down at the Echani M4 bolt blaster; Trask had kept the standard Republic issue gun and handed me a lighter weight, yet infinitely more accurate model. Definitely my preference. I powered it on, checked the thermal batteries and charging light before raising it experimentally to test the weight.

"Yep."

"Okay," he replied slowly. He looked a bit taken aback. "Well, let's move out. Stay behind me, and we'll make our way to the bridge. Our first priority is to find Bastila."

*Bastila.* I should know that name. I must have appeared blank, as Trask's frown deepened.

"Jedi Shan. The commanding officer here on the *Endar Spire!*" he said urgently. Recollection unfolded, like access into a secure databank suddenly being released. *Jedi Shan. She's in charge of our mission.* Funny, I'd thought the commander had been a guy. And wasn't this a Republic ship?

Trask was waiting by the door, tapping his foot impatiently like a petulant child while I struggled with the cobwebs of my hazy mind.

"*Jedi Shan can take care of herself,*" I answered finally, leveling a serious look at him. "We should be heading to the escape pods."

The crackly voice from the earlier broadcast spat out another ship-wide message. "The Sith have overrun our position! Evacuate immediately!"

I raised my hands to indicate that even Mr. Crackly agreed with me, but Trask was shaking his head
urgently. "You signed a contract with the Jedi, and Bastila will be able to look after you, Jen. I must get you to her!"

There's something else going on here, I realized with mounting suspicion. He may be a Republic soldier, but he's been assigned to me. I bet he reports to Jedi Shan, not the Republic. Why would an anonymous scholar like Jen Sahara warrant a guard? I stared at him intently. There are ways of making a soldier talk. And scream.

That was a different inner voice. Dark and malicious, shocking me with it's implied cruelty.

Focus. Focus! I pushed down the venomous thought with an internal wrench. I needed to do the smart thing, and concentrate on escaping. I can find out why my mind is a spice-addled mess later. I've got to get out of here first, especially with the Sith crawling around.

Sith… and the Republic. Why did I feel like I couldn't trust either side?

With an effort almost beyond me, I slid a mask of calm competence over my frantic, derailing thoughts. "Alright, let's go soldier," I said briskly.

Concern momentarily creased Trask's strong face. "I know you're not used to fighting, Jen, but I promise you we'll get out of here alive. Stay behind me, and aim that blaster at any Sith we meet."

I followed him quietly out of the door – and straight into the enemy.

Two black-clad soldiers turned shiny visors in our direction. Trask was already charging, a vibrosword brandished in both hands, halfway to the nearest one before a weapon was even pointed in his direction. The armoured Sith yelled in pain as Trask smashed his blade hard on an upraised limb, following it with a powerful swing into the Sith's side.

My hands held the Echani pistol steady, sighting the second soldier as I was vaguely aware of the first collapsing to the ground. Always aim for the centre of mass. Hot on the trigger, I unleashed a flurry of bolts directly at the man's upper chest.

He'd been focused on Trask, right up until my shots hit home.

The Sith grunted, wildly swinging his blaster to sight me. He's got one of those frelling energy shields, if he's still standing! I fired again, holding my position, as a foreign voice squeaked through my mind-

I've never shot at anyone in my life! Suddenly, I was drenched in an appalled sense of horror, as the barrel of the enemy's blaster flared at me. This is-

An agonizing burn stabbing into my shoulder punched me to the ground; black spots invaded my vision as I stared up at the vented ceiling, stunned.

The hiss of blaster fire sounded fuzzy, distant... Kath crap, two Sith mooks should be child's play. If this is my end then... it is really quite embarrassing. My tenuous control over my thoughts was fading, and the sensation of sinking deep into an abyss began to overcome me. Those pathetic gravel maggots aren't fit to lick my boots.

"Jen, you have to get up," Trask panted, his face appearing above me. "They're dead. We have to go. Just- just stay behind me. I'll protect you the best I can." He pulled me up roughly, and vertigo danced a dangerous samba through me once more.

Nausea reared. Trask's face was shingly earnest, and all I could think was that I was one step away
from puking all over him.

_We have to keep moving._ Trask’s grip was firm on my upper arm as my head began to clear. "Right," I rasped, before clearing my throat. "Right. Lead on." My shoulder burned and throbbed. I yanked my arm back, sending Trask a firm nod as I strove to ignore the blaze of pain.

_Use your pain,_ a voice taunted. _Use your anger._

A second after that insidiously dark thought, there was something else. Something _else in my mind_, some sort of presence or consciousness beyond the conflicting thoughts that had been tormenting me.

Something that didn't belong to me _at all_-

Trask was already striding away, stepping over bloodied corpses without a second look as he turned into an unoccupied service corridor.

I followed in a daze.

Now that I'd noticed this... thing – and it was sentient, I knew it was – I could sense flashes of panic emanating from it. Not my own panic.... no, this was separate to my own maelstrom of emotions, I was certain. But then a cloud of calm and lucidity enveloped the... person... and their attention was abruptly swung on me.

It felt like a halogen light was shining directly inside my head.

Ice froze in my spine, and self-preservation took over; I pointedly thought and felt absolutely nothing.

Nothing.

Nothing.

It appeased the presence; how I knew, I couldn't explain, but a sense of relief emanated from it briefly before it slowly faded away.

"...hurt, but conscious. I'll take her directly to the escape pods. May the Force protect you."

I was biting my lip so hard the coppery taint of blood filled my mouth. Vaguely, awareness returned: Trask had been busy speaking into a personal communicator, and now he was turning back to face me.

"We're going to the nearest escape pods, it's not far from here – just past the bridge."

_Well, that's a change of heart._ "Given up on Bastila, huh?" I said, with a flippancy I didn't feel.

"She'll wait for us there as long as she can," he informed me, briefly looking down at the communicator inset on his Republic armour. _That was her he was just speaking to_, I realized with a cold clarity.

_That was her in my mind._

…and _I bet she expects me to act like meek little Jen Sahara_. I was thinking about myself in the third person. Wasn't that a sign of insanity?

_I have to stop freaking out._ But it felt more… natural… to consider Jen as someone… someone who was not me.
Whether I'm Jen or not-Jen, it's in everyone's best interest if I pretend to be her. A cool shaft of logic cleared the tumultuous confusion of my spiraling thoughts. Sweetness and light. I'll play this out until I have a better handle on everything.

I took a deep breath. Control. Rise above the emotions. No, that's not Jen, I realized. Panic, trust in the big tough guy. I looked up at Trask, practicing my best hero-worship expression. I'd better keep this up. I've a funny feeling my life may depend on it.

Trask motioned me once more to follow him, and we cut through an empty conference room. Datapads littered the chrome-topped plasticeel tables, and a body slumped lifelessly over an office chair. Without comment, we moved briskly into the adjacent hallway. Red and amber sidings indicated this as a restricted area - we were nearing the bridge. Through the next door and…

…my minds eye was overcome with a vision of a Jedi battling a Dark Jedi, lightsabers whirling and crashing. Bright green hissed and sparked against blood red like a display of electro-lights in the night's sky. Focus! I've no time to wallow in dreams right now!

"It's a Dark Jedi!" Trask hissed, pushing me backwards. Dizziness surged through me. "This fight is too much for us – we'd better stay back. All we'd do is get in the way."

With a startled jolt I realized this was reality. The two feinted, dodged and parried – faster than normal sentients, their reactions obviously aided by the mystical power that only the very few could wield.

And I could sense it. Or… something... crackling between the two of them. The female Twi'lek, a brown-clad Jedi, raised her arm and I felt a torrent of energy pushing out from her and striking the Dark Jedi Human, who fell and rolled to the side. He counter-attacked by deftly manipulating the power buzzing around the two of them, wrapping it about her neck and squeezing.

This is a dream, this isn't real. I want to go home! the meek voice I was beginning to associate as Jen blubbered. Yet part of me was eyeing the fight critically as the Twi'lek flung aside the psychic power and advanced once more on her opponent. The 'sabers clashed again and again, and the man's technique had a fumbling edge to it that indicated he was the inferior.

She'll finish him soon.

The female struck a killing blow, and the Sith staggered to his knees, coughing up blood in his dying throes. I felt terrified, revolted... and simultaneously detached from the whole spectacle. The ship rocked again and a power conduit exploded behind the woman. Arcs of lightning spat from the electronics, catching the Jedi off-guard and electrocuting her instantly.

Even the Jedi were mortal.

She crumpled to the ground, an anguished moan expelling the last of the air from her lungs.

Trask cursed audibly. "That was one of the Jedi accompanying Bastila! Stang, we could have used her help!"

Acting on instinct, I scurried forward and quickly rifled through the still-warm corpses, eager the grab one of the lightsabers.

"Jen, we don't have time!" Trask grabbed my arm and dragged me toward the exit. Blood pounded through my head, a jagged slice of pain cutting through any instinctive resistance, strong enough to keep me momentarily pliant. "We need to get out of here – if there's one Dark Jedi, there's going to be others!"
Rage exploded from within, surging through my veins like a maelstrom. No one grabs me like that. I was hyperaware of the blaster in my hand, and how easy it would be to raise it and shoot Trask point-blank in the face.

At once, the entity… or was it Bastila? honed in on my mind again with a razor-sharp awareness that had me freezing in surprise. My anger drew her attention, I realized with a chill. This is some sort of mind-link.

_Sweetness and light_, I thought numbly. _Control the rage… for now._ I quashed my anger with a controlled ease I didn't dare dwell on, and let Jen's feelings come to the fore. Panicked... but safe in the presence of big strong Trask. _Ugh._

The focus of the presence turned away from me imperceptibly. Then, in a sudden rush, it disappeared from my awareness altogether.

"Lead on Trask," I said in a sweet voice. "I'm right behind you." _With a blaster pointed at your head._

The ship rumbled ominously, and we picked up our pace. The cruiser didn't seem like it would hold together much longer, and it was with relief that I noticed we finally made it to the bridge.

It was deserted now; two corpses hung over bucket chairs, and I saw Trask grimace as if in pain. The flight control computers were dim, and one was charred and cracked. _A lightsaber did that._ Outside the ferracystal window, a nearby blue planet rolled alarmingly past our visage; the _Endar Spire_ was no longer under any steady flight pattern.

"Escape pods," I muttered, as my shoulder throbbed a painful rhythm in sync with my heartbeat. The side of my head replied in a lacerating echo. "Where are they, Trask?"

"This way," he answered, and we left the bridge via the starboard exit. The next hallway had a side door. As we neared to pass, we both heard a sound from behind – an ominous _snap-hiss_ some part of me recognized all too well, accompanied with a malicious laugh.

"There's something behind here," Trask warned in a low tone.

"Well, duh," I muttered. Trask shot me a surprised look. _Oh. That's not really a Jen response._ I schooled my face, and clenched the blaster tight in my hand.

The door opened and from deep within the room beyond a man faced us arrogantly, fitted in a sturdy exoskeleton that well exceeded Republic issue armour. He held a lightsaber which radiated blood-red, reflecting sparks of colour across chrome walls. I felt the same power surging from him, but eons more potent that the Jedi fight we witnessed earlier. It almost made me stagger back in its intensity.

Fear struck hard in my gut. I was in no state to face anyone half as powerful as this guy.

"Damn – another Dark Jedi! I'll try to hold him off; you get to the escape pods! Go!" Trask shoved me backwards and ran through the opening, slamming his hand on the door controls as he crossed the threshold. The last I saw was the Dark Jedi sauntering toward him, a cruel smile playing across bloodless, amused lips.

_Was he frelling crazy? He just committed suicide!_ To say I was startled was an understatement. We may have been bunkmates for awhile, but to give his life for me… _Stupid idiot._ Unless... _He's been ordered to get me out of here alive, at any cost._

_Preferably to Jedi Bastila Shan._
"Well, let's not waste that," I muttered, and broke into as fast a sprint as my head injury would allow. Another door on my left, hopefully leading to the escape pods. I heard the clanking of a Sith group marching in that awful armour just beyond the wall.

*Sounds like about four of them. No way I can take them all on.*

There was a computer terminal mounted on the side of the room, which was next to useless for me. A broken assault droid that might have been helpful had someone not smashed both its arms off. A Sith body behind it clutched a vibrosword in a dead hand.

Adrenaline pumped an urgent tempo in my veins. I had to keep moving away from the Dark Jedi, yet the next room meant certain death. I glanced erratically around the area, but no salvation was forthcoming.

Irrational fury was growing, hot and heavy in my gut. *I will not go down like this.* It was slicing though the fear, surging through me and revitalizing aching muscles. The pain of my injuries dimmed as anger overrode everything, demanding an immediate outlet. *I will not go down like this!*

I snatched the vibrosword up with a snarl, stuffing the blaster in my belt before slamming my hand on the door control. There was barely time to register four armoured Sith before I charged in, vibrosword primed. The nearest one hadn't even turned when the blade of my weapon smashed down on that weak join of their shiny armour, that place where shoulder plate and neck brace met. He crumpled beneath a shower of red droplets.

Feral instinct took control. I stabbed sideways, blade piercing through the visor of the next Sith. Leaping back, I dodged behind the side of the door as blaster fire pinged past. I pressed myself hard against the wall, dropping one hand from the vibrosword and pulling out the Echani blaster.

Two figures side-stepped into view, firing even as my finger was hot on the trigger. The first fell from my barrage, just as a deep burn seared into my already mangled shoulder.

The pain was intense. It scythed through the berserker rage, dissipating it like smoke on the wind. Weapons fell from my suddenly limp grasp. *Kath crap,* I thought inanely.

But luck was on my side – I heard a couple of blasts and the last soldier collapsed. Looking at me from beyond the corpses with something like shock was a Republic officer, if his uniform was anything to go by.

"You've made it just in time!" he said in a commanding voice. "There's only one escape pod left. Come on, we can hide out on the planet below!"

I recognized him, I realized numbly as he advanced. Captain Onasi, some hotshot flyboy in charge of the ship. Although Trask had said this Bastila had been. Either way, the captain seemed competent on first glance; probably the sort who didn't leave people behind. Belatedly, I remembered sweet little Jen had a crush on him.

Oh great. Well, whether I'm Jen or someone else, I'm certainly not going to act that one out. I remembered blushing and scurrying away the one time he had spoken to me. You have got to be kidding me, I thought in vague irritation.

I nodded at him, took a few steps and dropped to my knees. Blood pounded through my head, and I heard a loud rushing noise.

"Stang!" someone cursed, and I felt myself being lifted. My grasp on consciousness, and sanity for that matter, was slipping away. Faces and images sparked through my mind like chaotic shards of
lightning shearing through the gloom and destroying all in its path.

A robed Zabrak wielding a cyan blade. A handsome man with eyes the ecru shade of Corellian whiskey- no, no, they were a poisoned yellow. A wry grin from a blind guardian. Yellow eyes burning with passion. Blood. Terror. Darkness. Yellow eyes burning with hate. A yellow Twi'lek offering his hand in unbending loyalty.

Yellow eyes and black death. So much death.

There was a sharp prick in my arm, and I was vaguely aware of being placed on a seat.

"A shot of kolto. We'll get you more when we land," a voice said. Something tightened around my waist like a belt, but all I could feel was this sense of nightmarish horror.

_It wasn't meant to end like this!_ I could see light above, but it would be too much of a struggle to reach, and I would only bring the shadows with me.

I let myself drop, sinking into a welcome darkness.

Then sweet, sweet oblivion claimed me.

xXx
The apartment was pretty beat-up, considering it was located on the upper echelons of Tarisian society. Murky crimson blotches marred the drab plasteel walls, marks that told me this environment was not as safe as I would have liked. But it's in the alien quarter. The Sith don't come here much, and that's the important factor. I sighed. I was sick of sitting here like a blind target, and there were only so many times I could play pazaak by myself. With an imaginary deck.

Damn the Jedi. Damn them for getting me into this mess. And damn myself for not being able to walk away.

And what a mess it was. The ambush of the Endar Spire happened so quickly we'd barely had time to react. We'd stopped to refuel at Mavis III, a neutral space station near the Taris system. A cruiser the size of the Endar Spire had significant logistical needs; for all that our mission had been done in stealth, it wasn't so easy to sneak around hyperspace with that much manpower to support.

Even so, the officer in me pointed out that only the Jedi team - and myself - had been cognizant of our intermediary destination. I'd only informed my senior navi-pilot a handful of hours before hyperspace exit - and he'd never even made it to the bridge.

Yet a fair portion of the Sith armada had been lying in wait when we entered realspace. That had to be the work of a traitor - a Jedi traitor.

I closed my eyes when I considered how many had been slaughtered onboard. All the escape pods had launched towards the Sith-controlled planet of Taris, but we hadn't been close; not all of them would have survived. And only one Jedi even made it to the pods. The rest had perished, vanquished along with so many of my comrades by those Sith monsters.

To think that once we'd thought the Mandalorians had been the real threat.

So here I was, hiding as a fugitive on Taris with an injured academic, my only hope that Jedi Bastila Shan might have survived and I could mount a rescue before the Sith found her. For whatever her mission had been, it was considered highly critical to the Republic war effort.

And how the blazes was I, a star-pilot and fleet captain, to achieve a feat better left to scouts I had no idea.

Yet.

I'd blundered into this apartment complex surprisingly quick after the landing – if one could call smashing into several buildings before grinding to an explosive halt outside the local cantina a landing. Still, the resulting smoke and gawking drunks allowed me to hightail it without attracting notice. I'd been lucky it was night, and that somehow the Sith patrols had missed me vanishing into the crowd.

There'd been a poorly dressed Ithorian who’d seen me slip away from the escape pod, and for some unknown reason taken pity on our predicament. Despite the language barrier – he spoke no Basic and I didn’t understand his home tongue – he’d led me to this complex, indicating this very room –
mercifully empty - before disappearing. If I’d been a Jedi, I would have considered it the will of the Force. As it was, I’d been both gratified and surprised at my fortuitous good luck.

I'd carried the injured scholar with me, who'd been out stone cold, but a traitorous voice in my head suggested things would be a lot easier if I was on my own.

My eyes slid to the comatose figure on the ratty bunk, as I mentally berated myself for that unwelcome thought. I'd never left anyone behind in all my years of service, and I wasn't about to start now... but I'd seen her onboard. A shy academic who blushes if someone so much as looks at her. But she had, at least, some fighting ability. I'd seen the tail-end of her brawl with that group of Sith near the escape pods. Her fighting ability had been wild, unhinged, and surprisingly accurate given her service records.

A berserker, I'd thought in surprise; either with some experience or an amazing amount of luck to survive that encounter. I wasn't sure how helpful that would be, though - berserkers weren't necessarily the best at keeping a low profile.

The woman was moaning quietly in her sleep. She'd had a shot of kolto back on the 'Spire, and the standard medical kit from the escape pod had been useful in patching her up, but... more kolto is what I really need. The wound on her head looked serious. I cursed under my breath.

I'd had a bit of a scout around last night, attempting to orientate myself with this foreign world. The urbanized planet consisted of multiple levels of sprawling buildings, integrated into vertical suburbs. Having crashed on the topside "surface", I was currently hiding out in what was known as Upper Taris, the relatively high-class governmental district. It seemed travel to the lower levels was strictly controlled. I'd been quite surprised at the lack of air traffic until I'd heard about the planet-wide quarantine.

It makes sense. The Sith will be searching for any survivors. I'd followed the war as much as any soldier fighting for the Republic, and I'd known about the Sith presence on this planet. Not quite an invasion – Taris had been decimated in the Mandalorian wars, so was first a willing economic partner with the Sith, and over time a not-so-willing base for their forces. Apparently the Tarisian government was neutral in the ongoing conflict, but as I oh-so-casually checked out my immediate surroundings, I'd realized that the Sith were really the ones in control here.

The place was crawling with them. Men garbed in shiny black armour haunted the entrance to any accessible turbo-lifts and patrolled the vast courtyards that graced the commercial sectors of Upper Taris. I could only hope that they had not found Bastila Shan.

For Bastila's Jedi gifts were one of the few advantages we had left in this monstrous war. To think that the Sith leader, Darth Malak – and his master before him, Darth Revan – had once been the shining heroes of the Republic. I, like so many others, had admired them and followed them to victory, before they viciously turned on the people they had saved. They weren't the only traitors, a bitter voice reminded me.

But I wasn't going to dwell on my resentment about betrayal; I had a mission to complete. I'd managed to find a medical centre, headed by a doctor I'd wager had Republic sympathies, considering the grim way he scowled whenever I'd mentioned the Sith. He wasn't very forthcoming with information, but he'd promised to get me some kolto by morning, for what amounted to candy money – which was frankly all I had. I don't like trusting strangers – especially when they offer salvation for cracklenuts. But what other choice do I have? I doubted my injured companion would last long without kolto, and I didn't exactly see any spare bacta tanks lying about, either.

I glanced around the tiny apartment. A hard bunk lined the dank room on one side, and a grimy,
minimalist kitchenette on the other. The place had been stripped of any items, other than a few fraying blankets and a handful of dirty clothes. The latter was actually a shining piece of luck; although musty and ill-fitting, the clothes were certainly more appropriate than either the commander's uniform I'd been wearing, or my lucky old flight jacket I'd grabbed while fleeing the *Endar Spire*.

But I was starting to feel edgy and claustrophobic; worn out from anxiety over my comatose comrade, and aggravated at the lack of action. I hated to be sitting around doing nothing, waiting for that damn scholar to wake up. *Well, there's no reason I can't go out for a bit. I need to see Zelka anyway, and I may as well get my bearings.*

I figured it was heading on to early dawn on Taris, and the chances of the woman waking in the next few hours were slim to none. I jammed my well-used blaster underneath the cast-off shirt I'd pulled from the apartment's cupboard, and cautiously headed out. The resident aliens threw me curious looks as I walked past, but didn't approach. *They are just as wary as me.*

I strode past a merchant Twi'lek who'd set up a kiosk in the building, and avoided his gaze. He had that eager salesman look, completely at odds with the locals who lived here.

"Well, I don't see too many of your kind around here," the fellow boomed at me as I tried to edge surreptitiously past. "Most of the residents in this old rundown apartment are illegal aliens. My name is Larrim, by the way."

"Uh, hi," I said dismissively in response, and continued walking.

"I know it's really none of my business, but you look like someone who might need to purchase one of these new energy shields. They're the latest thing, you know. Very high tech."

I sighed inwardly as I stopped to face him. "Maybe later."

"Come on, at a price of one hundred credits almost anyone can afford them! They'll absorb at least four direct blaster hits before depletion – this could save your life in a fight!"

"Unless you're up against vibroswords," I said dryly. *As if I had the credits, anyway.* The Twi'lek looked ready to burst into another enthusiastic spiel. The technology behind energy shields had revolutionized ground combat during the Mandalorian wars – and brought back an almost extinct form of engagement: melee fighting. *Vibroswords* - swords that emitted ultrasonic vibrations to increase their cutting edge - sliced straight through energy shields.

"Look, I don't have any credits, sorry!" I told him quickly as I strode off. His extroverted zeal was an anomaly – most of the aliens kept to themselves here and I couldn't blame them, considering the rampant xenophobia on Taris. I'd already heard several comments about those 'filthy non-Humans littering our streets' when I'd been out scouting earlier.

I walked outside into the morning sun, a public courtyard stretching magnificently before me. Other than a handful of rundown, disused buildings, Upper Taris gleamed and glistened with wealth. A few early-risers dotted the pathways, and their attire was a far cry from grubby clothes I was sporting.

I grimaced, feeling more out of place here than on Coruscant itself. *Though at least here I'm not forced to wear that hideous ceremonial uniform the Republic is so keen on.* Coruscant had never been my favourite destination.

As I strolled towards the medical centre, I started mulling over my predicament. I knew Jedi Shan
had escaped, and I also knew that she was the only Jedi who'd managed to. My duty demanded that I do everything possible to rescue her, but it wasn't going to be easy.

If only I knew what this mission had really been about. We'd been en route to Tatooine, and all I'd managed to squeeze out of the Jedi onboard was that it had something to do with ruins. Admiral Dodonna herself had organized my transfer as an advisory captain to the starcruiser's navi-pilots.

It was not my usual role.

"I need someone I can trust onboard the Endar Spire, Captain." Her dark eyes were serious and intent on me. Admiral Dodonna was a superior I had a vast amount of respect for. She was not my usual reporting line, though - she'd bumped me to her staff for reasons she was now expounding upon: mysterious and irritating ones, it was beginning to seem.

"I want to be on the frontlines, Admiral, where I can be useful!" I protested. This all sounded about as pleasant as paperwork groundside. "I don't see how carting around a bunch of Jedi from planet to planet is going to help the war."

"The Jedi are not particularly forthcoming with information, but I do understand this stealth mission is critical." She sighed, as a look of grim - almost bleak - determination added another ten years to her already lined face. "Technically this is a mission from the Jedi Order, so you'll be accountable to them even though you will report to me whenever possible. Carth, you've spent your lifetime fighting and have more experience at adapting to changing situations than most. I know you, and I trust you." She paused for a moment before her voice returned, quieter than before. "We are not winning the war, Carth. You know this."

I felt the corners of my mouth turn down as I was forced to acknowledge that statement with a brisk nod. Darth Malak's armada was expanding with foreign ships that seemingly came from nowhere. The Republic was losing... and losing hard.

Admiral Dodonna sighed again. "Whatever the Jedi have up their sleeve may be our only chance."

I could understand her reasoning, but my skills would be wasted on this trip. I was a snubfighter pilot, a Wing Leader; stang, there'd even been times I'd fought on the ground. Captaining large starcruisers was not something in my resume, and it being an advisory role made me feel all the more useless. "Yes, but surely there is someone better suited for this position, Admiral? I can help on the-

"You have your orders, Captain." Her voice rang with the steel of authority, and I subsided, feeling both frustrated and thwarted. It was Dodonna's trust and high opinion that hobbled me here: implied was the need for both a listening ear and a persuasive voice that could wring details from the Jedi and squirrel those details back to Republic HQ.

I revised my earlier thought: paperwork on base sounded infinitely more appealing than dealing with secretive Jedi.

Dodonna's grey eyes softened an infinitesimal amount. "Find out what they're up to, Carth. And good luck."

So there I was, a decorated war hero bowing to every Jedi whim. And there had been enough of them, though that Bastila one was the worst. And the most important, unfortunately. I grimaced. Her
battle meditation alone had made her a vital asset to the Republic war effort, but her snooty attitude I could have lived without.

Then there was this Jen Sahara; a meek scholar who'd hid behind one of the ensigns onboard for the most part. And yet, she was able to put down three Sith soldiers in an angry rage, despite the injuries I'd later discovered she'd been sporting.

*I don't get why she was on the ship.* I'd checked out her service records, and they were disappointingly brief. Jen Sahara had grown up in a commune on Deralia. Studied ancient archaeology and anthropology at the Academia there. Apparently, the Jedi had requested her services to check out some mysterious ruins on Tatooine. *That doesn't gel, though. Most of the Jedi on the Endar Spire would know more about ancient ruins than some unknown scholar. They spend all their life farting around with historical texts and old artefacts. And if they wanted scholars, surely they'd hire more than just one? According to Jen's records, she'd never even left her home planet before. Something doesn't fit, and I'm going to find out what.*

xXx

A few hours later I was on my way back to the apartment. Zelka Forn had loosened up a bit, downloaded a Tarisian informational package to my datapad, and informed me that a couple of escape pods had crashed into the Undercity. Which was happily populated with diseased infectious mutants.

*I'll worry about that when we get there,* I told myself firmly. *One step at a time, Onasi.*

My biggest problem was credits – or lack thereof. I was hoping Jen Sahara would be intelligent enough to bounce ideas off, as getting down to the lower levels was starting to look incredibly tricky.

I became aware of a slight commotion as I drew close to the hideout. A Duros was hurriedly dragging what looked like a Sith corpse into the apartment next to mine, and judging by the blood on the floor there had been more than one. *Blast it, the Sith are here already?*

"What happened here?" I asked the Duros quickly, stepping in front of him. He jabbered back in his own language, and tried to drag the corpse around me. I wasn't falling for that, however; most aliens understood Galactic Basic even if they could not speak it. *Maybe aid is the way to loosen his tongue.* I grabbed the other end of the Sith corpse, and nodded to the apartment when the Duros gave me a surprised look.

"So, what happened? If you can speak Basic, I'd like to know. I'm just as keen to keep a low profile as you are," I said, once we were inside. This apartment was identical to the place I'd claimed, apart from obvious pile of corpses.

The Duros stared at me unblinkingly, and then sighed in defeat. "This isn't the first time the Sith have come in here to cause trouble for us, but hopefully it will be the last," the Duros answered, his voice halting and tripping over the words. He lowered his head sadly. "Poor Ixgil. He should never have talked back to that Sith."

"What were the Sith looking for?" I asked cautiously.

"Anything. They like to bully," the alien responded. "It would have meant my death, too, if not for that crazy Human."

I blinked. *Crazy... Human? I thought there were only aliens around here?* A sinking feeling in my gut made itself known. *Stang, it couldn't be, could it? *I- uh, Human?*

"This Human female walked into the middle of it and killed them all. I am astounded a Human
would come to the aid of a Duros, but she ran away before I could thank her."

"I, uh, I've gotta go," I mumbled as I ran out. I sprinted down the battered corridor to my apartment, hurriedly switched the door open and... nothing.

The room was empty.

*I swear, some omnipotent force is watching me, and having a good ole laugh.*

"Damn!" I cursed in frustration, slamming my hand against the wall. *I shouldn't have left her. She must have woken up with no idea where she was and panicked. But to run out and attack Sith..."

"What now, Onasi?" I sighed to myself. "Find the crazy chit, or leave her as dead?"

I couldn't do that, but my priority had to be Bastila. I forced myself to think rationally. *I have to get some leads on Bastila... find out more about this Undercity. There's a cantina nearby, and I can ask around if anyone's seen Jen. If the Sith haven't captured her yet.*

I opened the apartment's only closet to grab my lucky orange flight jacket, but it was missing. Shock assailed me for a moment.

*She stole my jacket? Oh, this is personal now.*

xXx

The Upper City cantina was overrun with pazaak players – a common way to make easy credits – but I didn't have a deck. Although with the way the Alpha Squad boys back at base kept kicking my arse, this might have been a blessing in disguise.

My mood was steadily declining. Being forced to rescue two females, both of whom I disliked, was enough to drive any sane man up the wall.

*Calm down, Onasi. Cantinas are always a good place for easy credits and information. Best place to start.* I could admit I was seriously annoyed that Jen had run off. Annoyed at myself, too. I shouldn't have left a severely injured comrade alone, with no idea where they were. *But I didn't expect her to run off as soon as she woke!*

I grabbed a chair and sat down, surveying the area cautiously. The cantina seemed out of place in Upper Taris, as it was mired in drunks, card sharks and disreputable spacers. *I wonder how many of them are trapped due to the quarantine.* Still, while I'd expected a classier joint, this was just the sort of place liable to provide information – for the right price.

A drunken male laugh caught my attention from the opposite corner.

"You're shure pretty! Yer shirt's gotta go, but you can shtay!"

Some seedy guy hitting on an unsuspecting girl, no doubt. *Though she'd have to be pretty simple to fall for that one.*

"An' fer an' off-worlder, you can shure handle Tarisian ale!" The guy was slurring so much he could almost pass for a Selkath.

"It's not bad," came the response; a woman’s voice. "Helps to drown out thoughts."

I narrowed my eyes suspiciously, trying to spot its source, but the inebriated fellow was in the way.
The man moved around her then, and I had a clear glimpse at the woman's face, shadowed under a mop of curly dark hair. I can't believe it, I thought in stunned disbelief as my mouth dropped open. That's Jen. She ran off to get drunk?

I was by her side before I knew it, staring down into surprised green eyes as I tapped her on the shoulder. "Are you drinking, Jen Sahara?" I hissed at her.

"Hey, leave her alone!" the fool blustered at me. "She's mine!"

I turned to glare at him. "Get out of here, this doesn't concern you," I said in a low voice, hoping the idiot would do the smart thing and leave.

Jen squinted at me, a blurry expression of confusion twisting her face. Her eyes were glassy and unfocused.

She is drunk. Great. That's just great.

"I'm getting you out of here, Jen," I said in warning, and then pulled her to her feet. I was once again surprised at just how little she weighed, despite her years. Looking at her I realized she had to be deep into her thirties. No, wait, her records said she was twenty-six galactic years. Well, health professionals had always lectured me on the aging properties of alcohol before I'd given it up for good.

"Hey, she's my date," the guy burbled at me, shoving my shoulder hard enough that I stumbled, losing my grip on Jen's arm. "You're spoiling my fun!" He had an ugly scowl on his face, and I didn't need to hear exactly what his fun would have been.

This could turn ugly. I need to get Jen out now. My blaster was in my free hand before I realized it. "Back off."

The man raised his hands in surprise, and tripped backwards. "I don't wan' any trouble!"

So much for keeping a low profile. I inwardly cursed myself. That was stupid. Starting a firefight in the local cantina is not the best way to hide from the authorities. Fortunately for me, the drunk was stumbling away, muttering under his breath. I turned back to Jen, nudging her towards the exit, but she pulled away from me in protest.

"I can walk! Don't touch me!" she hissed, and I realized that dragging a drunken woman through the streets of Upper Taris was about as conspicuous as pulling a gun on a drunk. I raised my hands in appeasement, and she lost her balance, abruptly stumbling against me.

Steadying her with a hand, the thought of her inebriated state once more flared my irritation. "I can't believe you ran off to get drunk!" I condemned, glancing around to make sure no one was in earshot. There were definitely enough spectators watching our little scene, but fortunately all of them were viewing from a distance.

"I said don't touch me!" Jen snarled viciously, and slammed the palms of her hands into my gut. The air left my lungs in a whoosh and I fell backwards, hard on my arse, shock assailing me at her physical outburst.

The ugly look of violence on her face was enough to keep me sprawled there, silent, in the middle of the cantina. I heard a few sniggers from the nearby patrons, and my face warmed in angry humiliation.

As quick as lightening, Jen's expression changed to remorse, and then embarrassment. She looked
"Are you alright, Miss?" A nearby patron came up beside her, shooting me a filthy glare. "Is this man giving you trouble?"

"No!" she said suddenly. "I overreacted. Sorry." She turned, fixing apologetic green eyes on me. "I'm sorry about that. I don't know what came over me." She offered me a slim hand to get up, and I stared at it as if it were a diseased gizka.

This woman is completely crazy. She's going to get us both killed.

I pushed myself to my feet and eyed her suspiciously. She still had that contrite expression pasted on her face, but the sheer venom of her earlier attack made me wary.

"I, uh-" I began, not entirely sure how to start.

"I guess we should talk," Jen muttered. "You're Onasi, right? Sit down, and I'll grab us some drinks."

"What?" I stared at her. More alcohol? My anger slowly burned back to life.

"Drinks as in caffa." She grinned suddenly, impishly. "But I almost got you going again, huh?"

I could only blink at her. First she's as violent and temperamental as a Sith, then she's all apologetic, and now she's cracking jokes?

Somehow, I was left gaping at crazy woman’s back while she strolled nonchalantly towards the bar. When Jen promptly returned with two steaming cups of caffa, I realized with a jolt I was still staring.

Jen glanced at me curiously. "Shall we have a seat?"

"Uh, sure," I muttered awkwardly, following her to an empty table. The noise in the cantina had resumed to its earlier hubbub of normality. While I would have preferred our initial conversation to have taken place in the hideout, it seemed relatively anonymous in here.

And I'm not sure I could get her back to the apartment. I hate not being able to read people. What happened to the shy scholar back on the Endar Spire?

"I guess I should also apologize for running out," Jen muttered, staring into her mug.

"What, as well as for getting drunk, and causing a scene that could have brought the Sith down on us?" I grumbled.

She scowled at me, and I could see her struggling to remain calm. Despite myself, I actually felt a vague stirring of amusement as I watched her scrunch her face in a clumsy attempt to rein in her temper. It seemed to work.

"I've only had one drink. I'm not drunk, although I'm planning to be." Jen sighed, her eyes dropping back to the plasteel table. It was scuffed with beer rings and smears of grime. "I guess I owe you my life. Thanks."

I inclined my head, but wasn't prepared to let it go just yet. "Exactly why did you run out anyway? You're still injured. That knock to your head looked pretty serious." It did. Her hair was matted on one side of her head. The darkness of it hid the dried blood, but I'd seen the wound earlier. I wouldn't have expected her to be so mobile. I frowned. "I didn't think you'd wake up so soon. I, uh- I
wouldn't have left, otherwise."

Jen grimaced. "Well, I'm definitely not feeling the best. As to why-" She lowered her head. "I woke up and heard shots outside. I thought people were coming after me."

Something in her voice didn't ring true. And she was avoiding my gaze.

"Before I knew it, I was in the middle of a firefight," she said in a soft, placating voice. "I just... panicked, and ran - and ended up here. I was planning to go back to the apartment."

Right. *About as plausible as her sugar-sweet tone.* "When? Before or after you got drunk?"

"After, I guess. I really am sorry, I just haven't been thinking straight." She caught my gaze then, big luminous eyes as if appealing to my better nature. "Oh, that's *not* going to work on me, sister. I shifted uncomfortably in my seat, lowering my gaze to the cracked cup of caffa nestled between my hands.

Jen continued quietly. "All I remember is waking up and grabbing this jacket and vibrosword, and running."

"No kidding," I muttered, but for the first time she really did sound genuine. I glanced back up at her. "And it looks like you've got ale all over my lucky jacket, thank you very much."

She spluttered on her caffa. "This orange monstrosity is a lucky ja-"

I cut her off. "So, injured and panicked, you decided to rush madly into some firefight, with no idea who or how many possible enemies there were?"

Jen actually blushed at that, a sign that my statement was accurate to some degree. "Yes, not the brightest thought, I'll admit."

"And then you decided to go down some Tarisian ale for the heck of it?"

She looked away once more. "It seemed like a good idea at the time," she muttered sulkily.

"You're not just reckless, you're insane," I said flatly. "Well, from now on, we'd better do things my way."

I regretted the words as soon as they came out of my mouth, but there was no taking them back. *Well done Onasi, lets just fire her up again shall we?*

"We? Since when is there a 'we', Republic?" Jen demanded, her meek act vanishing like juma juice in a merc bar.

Republic? That *almost* sounded like an insult.

Jen's eyes flashed green daggers under her short mop of dark brown curls. Her face was pale beneath a natural olive tone, a handful of freckles across the bridge of her nose standing out in stark relief. Her sharp jaw was set stubbornly, and I reminded myself that she'd only just woken up. Dumb luck had kept her alive, but Jen probably had no idea what was going on.

"Taris is under Sith control," I explained. "This planet is locked up tight; I've heard the Sith are even arresting citizens carrying weapons without an approved permit. There's no way the Republic will be able to get anyone through the Sith blockade to help us. If we're going to find Bastila and get off this planet, we can't rely on anybody but ourselves."

Jen frowned at me, looking as if she was trying to figure something out. Her fingers tapped softly
against the plasteel table. "You don't like the Sith, you want to rescue this Jedi girl, and you need to get off the planet. Fair enough, I get that. But where does this we come into it?"

My mouth dropped open in shock. She was one of the crew, dammit! "You swore an oath to the Republic, and to defend Bastila!"

"I never swore an oath!" Jen hissed. She breathed in deeply, and seemed to wrest control of herself once more. Her eyes squeezed tight, and the next words were forced out, hard and cold as ferracrystal. "I was hired by the Jedi Council to go to Tatooine on the Endar Spire. The ship's destroyed, so I consider that job complete. Besides, I'd just as soon get away from any Jedi."

"Your job isn't over – Bastila is still alive," I informed her coldly.

"I was never paid," she retorted, eyes open once more as she leaned back on the stool and folded her arms defensively. "As far as I'm concerned it's over."

She really would walk out, I realized, as I took in the obstinate expression on her face. Just another traitor to the Republic... but the Jedi Council requested her specifically. For some reason they need her, and I will not fail in my duty if at all possible.

"I saved your life, Jen." I hate emotional blackmail... but I don't really have a choice here. I need all the allies I can get, and so do the Jedi. "Even if you have no honour or decency, you still owe me a debt for that."

She visibly cringed, and for the first time genuinely looked like the unassuming academic I'd originally pegged her as.

"Help me rescue Bastila, and we'll call it even," I finished. This unpredictable loose cannon could then be the Jedi's problem, not mine. She bowed her head, refusing to look at me. "Fine. I guess I owe you that much."

Relieved, I slouched back and had a gulp of the caffa. Terribly weak, I was surprised they could get away with selling it. Well, at least Jen's agreed. I hope that's the end of that conversation.

"How do you even know Bastila's alive?"

So much for that. "I don't. But Bastila's young, and she has a powerful command of the Force. We survived the crash landing, so I'm willing to bet that she may have, too."

Jen had raised her head once more, frowning at me. "Did other Jedi escape the Endar Spire then?" she asked.

"Some Republic soldiers did, but no other Jedi made it to the escape pods. Bastila was the only one." My shoulders slumped as I recalled the battle. I hadn't wanted to captain the Endar Spire, I'd wanted to pilot and lead snubfighters on the frontlines, going head-to-head with the enemy directly. And now, the Endar Spire was in bits, and near all the soldiers onboard dead.

"So it is her then," Jen whispered, seemingly to herself.

"What is her?" I asked suspiciously. She had a vague look on her face, but it disappeared as her attention snapped back to me.

"Uh, nothing," she mumbled.
Yeah right. Just who are you, Jen Sahara?

xXx
I felt like a spectator watching a duel. The pacifist versus the evil punk. Ten credits as to who would win, I thought sourly, but neither identity actually seemed to resonate with who I thought I was.

The only history I had – the past of meek Jen Sahara – was real. It had to be. I could almost taste the kakasi trees in bloom, and I remembered hero-worshipping my- no her- oppressive father. But in all those thoughts and memories, the way I interacted was so wrong. I couldn't imagine cowering and bowing to every whim of my family, and trying to please anybody but myself. Running from confrontations, and always trying to hide in the shadows like a helpless little tach. It was as if I'd been inside someone else's head, watching them as they lived out their life, but having no say in what they did.

And not even aware I'd had no say, until now. That was a terrifying realization that I was only beginning to grasp – the idea that I might not actually be who my brain was saying I was.

My recollection of the last year was where it all disintegrated. I could vaguely recall some Jedi contacting me and organizing a study expedition onboard a Republic cruiser. I struggled to remember what I’d been doing for the past six months; it felt like a dream – numb and almost forgotten. In between a history I didn’t want to claim as mine, and a present as hazy as a spice trip, it didn’t seem feasible that I could be Jen Sahara.

It wasn’t just the knock to the head on the Endar Spire, was it? A head injury couldn’t… change what you thought your personality was, could it?

Earlier, I'd had the instinct that it had liberated me - the real me. But what would that mean? That I was actually some sort of sadistic freak who wished to torture countless people for sheer enjoyment and power? I'd only felt brief flashes of this persona, but they'd been so sharp. Visceral, intense. Insane and inhumanely cruel. That identity wasn't me, it simply couldn't be.

And this isn't even counting in that Bastila woman, I mused bitterly. So who was I really? The only explanation I wanted to consider was that I was a third person, who'd somehow lost her entire memory and had two others programmed in instead. Hmm, that sounds really plausible. I'm not sure I could even get the drunks at the cantina to believe that one. Not to mention that if I did entertain an idea so ludicrous – then the implications were shattering.

For it meant my mind had been royally messed up. By some very powerful people.

That heightened my terror further.

If there was any truth to it – and I then added in the additional factors of my Jedi guard and Jen’s mission to look at ruins – then it all had something to do with the sodding Jedi Order. But, could the Jedi do this sort of thing? Change someone’s history, someone’s personality, so thoroughly that they didn’t even realize it?

Isn't that against their ethos, or something?

Jen Sahara knew nothing about the Jedi, other than that they were an almost mythical organization.
with fantastical powers who helped those in need. The least likely sort of people to deliberately do this to someone. It just didn’t seem plausible.

But I'm already involved with the Jedi. And I bet they don't want me remembering anything other than Jen Sahara, the pushover. I shivered.

The thoughts spun around and twisted in on themselves, a dark spiral of fear and anger and overwhelming confusion that battered against my psyche. I needed to act, to focus on the present, and leave this mental quagmire under wraps until a better time for reflection. A time when I wasn’t a fugitive on a Sith-controlled planet, hunting for a Jedi I had no desire to see.

Why did I agree with Captain Flyboy anyway? Part of me still logically reasoned how easy it would be to slip away and disappear, but my own code of honour wouldn't allow me. He did save my life after all. Hah! If I have a code of honour, then I can't be the sadistic evil bitch.

I couldn’t be. It was worse than being Jen Sahara. I utterly rejected the idea that might be me, except…

…that power. It was another thing I was desperately trying to ignore. I’d sensed something back on the Endar Spire, something that Jen had never felt in her life. And I was certain – dead certain – that I could bend it to my will, if only I remembered how.

Instinct had me reaching for it earlier when Onasi grabbed me in the cantina, but my metaphorical grasp had closed on metaphorical empty air.

Is it the Force? The idea was fanciful, frankly unbelievable. But what else swirled liked electric energy around Force users? And if it is the Force, do I really want to wield it? If it was, then that linked me straight back to the Jedi, pointing another accusatory finger at their involvement in my current situation.

And once more, the horror reared up inside - accompanied with an anger vicious enough that all I felt was the desire for bloody vengeance.

Onasi was watching me now, his face clouded with suspicion. I’d pick him in his late thirties somewhere, with a strong handsome face and eyes the same rich colour as his chestnut hair. He had a guarded, combat-ready look about him, and I had the feeling he’d seen more than his fair share of action.

I took a deep breath in, filling my lungs with the re-circulated air of the cantina, and focused on him. I’d figure this all out later - for now, it was time to appease Onasi and start on this frelling Jedi hunt.

He was saying something about Bastila Shan, and despite my conviction to listen, the Jedi's name had my thoughts derailing once more. For I remembered being told about Bastila Shan back on the Endar Spire - a capable young Jedi who was one of the leading figures in the war against the Sith. I could even recall, somewhat hazily, talking with her on a few occasions. Each time, cowering in front of her like an awe-struck Jawa.

Yet I had been convinced, during the mad exit from the Endar Spire, that we were mind-linked. I didn’t even understand what that meant, not really, but the thought had come unbidden – stark and resolute and shining with certainty. I’d sensed her psychic emotions. She’d been alarmed at my fury.

Again, another conclusion that seemed wildly preposterous.

But it’s still there! She's still there! In my head. Flashing with anger and fright and desperation. Emotions coming from someone else, being felt by someone else. It was confusing enough that I
I genuinely had panicked when I’d woken up in the apartment and heard a commotion outside.

My head throbbed, reminding me of the injury at the root of these revelations. Brain damage, a dark voice mocked. Was that why I was hearing voices? Was that why I thought I was three people?

Carth was still frowning; if I couldn’t win him over, I doubted I could make a powerful Jedi believe all was well. And the last thing I wanted was her noticing the fractures in my mind.

For if I was aware of her... then surely, that meant, she was aware of me.

But suddenly the presence, Bastila’s presence, in my head froze. Like all emotion had been abruptly halted. What happened now? Some Rodian hit on her? I blinked. No... it's like she's fallen asleep suddenly... or been knocked unconscious.

The mind-link was real. I was convinced of it, now.

"Hello?" Carth said. "Are you even listening to what I'm saying?" He was frowning at me again from across the cantina table, arms folded. At least none of the patrons were staring at us anymore, although earlier I'd wondered if the uptight bartender was going to refuse me caffa.

"Uh, sorry," I muttered.

"Yeah, I know, your favourite word," he grumbled. "Are you sure you only had one drink?"

"Yes." Calm. Stay calm. "But my head's been hurting a lot since I injured it. I've just been feeling really confused." That, at least, is the truth.

He didn't seem to buy it, judging by the wary look in his eyes.

"Look, I know I've been acting quite..." I sighed, trailing off in defeat. "Is there any chance we could just start over? My head is killing me, and I'm not sure how much more I can take. I haven’t felt... normal since I hit my head." Even now it was throbbing with a dull ache. It had been reckless to run off, but I’d woken up in a strange place, bombarded by someone else’s feelings, and I’d bolted.

I hadn’t even realized what planet I was on until I’d started sweet-talking the sloshed local for information and a complimentary drink.

A look of concern crossed over Carth's face. Hah, I will get you eating out of my hand, I swear.

"Ah, I forgot," Carth said suddenly, and grabbed something out of his pocket. "I managed to get a shot of kolto. You'd better take it now; you still look pretty wretched."

I eyed it over suspiciously; the disposable hypoderm with the automatic needle could contain any manner of substitute disguised as a life-saving healing medication. For kolto was superior to bacta in strength, swiftness and shelf-life, and its synthesization was still in its infancy. The Selkath had only started mass-produing it during the Exar Kun conflict, and they held onto their monopoly tightly with their fishy little tentacles.

I froze. Jen Sahara knew nothing of this. Although kolto was heard-of on Deralia, it certainly wasn’t a topic of interest for the meek scholar of ancient civilizations. I'm not Jen Sahara. That was starting to become abundantly clear.

I’d taken too long; Onasi had sighed, dropping the tiny cylinder of doubt on the plasteel table, close to my hands. “It is kolto, I purchased it from a medical centre. I don’t blame you for being wary, but the doctor seemed reputable. I was lucky he managed to source any at all with the Sith quarantine
starting to hurt trade.”

Seemed reputable. It wasn’t exactly a shining endorsement, but then again I had the feeling that Onasi wasn’t an overly effusive sort of guy. And reckless had been working for me thus far… I shrugged, picked up the hypoderm, and injected it into my exposed forearm.

A warm sensation hit my bloodstream, rippling slowly through my limbs. It felt familiar; my muscles loosened and the pounding in my head dulled almost instantly. While I doubted I’d be up to anything too intense - like, say, jumping into one of those betting duels next door that I’d heard cantina patrons gossiping about - at least I was starting to feel vaguely normal again. Kolto wasn't miraculous, but it wasn't far off: it had an amazing ability to vastly increase wound healing. I’d always compared it to a full-body bacta suit on adrenastims.

Again, my hands stilled. Definitely not a Jen thought. Again, another indication that I was living in someone else’s body with someone else’s past. If I needed any more.

"So," I began, pushing the maelstrom of thoughts to the back of my mind. "Any idea where we should start looking for Bastila?" I took another sip of my caffa, but it was now cold. I grimaced in disgust.

"There are reports of a couple of escape pods crashing down into the Undercity," Carth commented quietly. "That's probably a good place to start. But the Undercity is a dangerous place; we don't want to go there unprepared."

The Undercity… Carth gave me a brief rundown, which was essentially the same information I’d drawn out of my inebriated admirer earlier. Taris was an ecumenopolis, a planet-sized city that had squandered its resources centuries ago and started building upwards. The Undercity Carth referred to were the dark, polluted depths tens of klicks below us – beneath even the gangs and crime that ruled over most of the subterranean levels.

Once, the Undercity had been the surface. A very, very long time ago. The drunk I’d spoken to said it was pitch dark down there, and the only inhabitants were mutant zombies that feasted on the homeless.

Although he’d also said he was the Tarisian swoop champion three years running.

I took a deep breath, and focused on Carth again. "Okay, so time to make some credits, buy some armour, avoid the Sith and find the girl?" I tried hard to come across as positive rather than derisive, but the entire quest sounded a bit suicidal. I'm Jen, remember? Play nice.

"Nobody will be looking for a couple of common grunts like us," Carth retorted defensively. He’d caught the sarcasm then. "And if we’re careful, we can move about the planet without attracting notice – a luxury Bastila won't have."

Bastila was still frozen in my head, and I was beginning to doubt she’d be able to move at all. Carth was right, though, it should be fairly easy to stay inconspicuous provided I stopped acting like a stimmed-up thug with too much testosterone. Although I hadn’t been the one to pull out a blaster in the middle of a busy cantina.

On the other hand, all the patrons were now leaving us alone.

I shrugged off my internal monologue. “So, the Undercity. How do we get there?”

Carth hesitated before answering. "It's a long way down, and there's not a straight route. Because air traffic has been restricted by the Sith quarantine, we'll have to use the patchwork of turbo-lifts to
descend. But... the Sith control the ones I've seen on the Upper City. They won't let anyone past without authorisation - and they'll be on the lookout for Republic fugitives. We'll have to find a way to get around them."

“Okay,” I said slowly. “I get the feeling we may need some more resources. I have absolutely no credits, Flyboy. You?”

“Very little.” He looked at me seriously. “And even if we do get past the Sith, we’ll have to go through the Lower City. From what I’ve heard, the swoop gangs and the Exchange rule the tunnels down there – and there’s been a lot of unrest since the blockade. I don’t fancy going there without a bit more equipment – food, a medical kit or two, a spare weapon.”

I nodded in agreement. And some cash reserves, I thought silently. In case we need to buy intel or bribe someone. Never hurts to have a little extra on hand. "So, we need to find an easy way to make some creds. There's a dueling ring next door I wouldn't mind trying when I'm feeling a little more alive."

Carth raised an eyebrow. "Yes, uh, I was pretty impressed with the way you took out those Sith soldiers back on the Endar Spire."

I could feel myself blushing. Stop it, already! Act like Jen, don't be her. "I think I get a little crazy in battle," I mumbled. My only evidence to back that up was the desperate fight on the Endar Spire, and yet... yet it felt true. Jen doesn't get crazy in battle. Stars, Jen doesn't even watch holo-flicks about battles.

"Really? I hadn't noticed." Carth's tone was dry. Very dry. I glanced at him sharply, but his face was an inscrutable mask.

"Anyway," I continued, "got any other ideas for credits? Or should we think about looting what we need?" I immediately wished the words back, groaning inwardly. "I shouldn't have said that. Judging by first impressions, Carth was a pretty straight-up sort of guy. Standard Fleet military - not accustomed to imaginative solutions.

A look of distaste crossed his face. "I'd rather not, but we may not have a choice. Unless you're any good at pazaak?"

I had a vague recollection of the gambling game. Mostly revolving around luck and psychology. "I'll give it a bash, but I need some cards."

Carth nodded in assent, and we left our table for the pazaak den. An old fellow named Garouk sold us his deck for fifty credits, which had Carth grumbling. When I took his last forty for wagering, he almost expired on the spot.

"Hey, it was your idea," I snapped, as he glowered at me.

"Okay, okay, you're right," he conceded. "Just-you better make that back. We're totally broke now."

"Just watch me, Flyboy." I winked, and walked off. I didn't feel the confidence I was portraying, but the game couldn't be too hard, surely? Garouk had explained the rules, and I was certain some part of me had played it before. If only I could remember. Somehow, muscle memory had kept me going since I'd awoken on the Endar Spire, and thrust into circumstances well beyond Jen’s capabilities. As long as I didn’t stop to think, luck seemed to be riding with me.

Pazaak was a simple card game that required players to get as close as possible to a score of twenty, without exceeding it. But it was by using the sidedeck – cards that added bonuses and specials – that
the game became interesting.

I did not yet have a sidedeck.

There was small change to be had in the junior group of players who clustered around a circular table near the front of the room. Garouk had pointed me there as a starter, and I calmly introduced myself and watched for the first round before being challenged by a wide-eyed Rodian.

There were more non-Humans in the cantina than outside, that was obvious. I wondered how many of them were planet-stranded by the quarantine.

I was cautious with my play, inwardly trying to calculate the odds even as I found myself irritated by the simplicity of the game. None of the juniors had a side-deck, so we were all evenly matched. There was a Twi’lek in the group doing the best, crowing over a pile of tokens that seemed to be about a hundred credits’ worth. Soon, I found myself up forty or so – due to no more than dumb luck - while some of the others began to look distinctly crestfallen.

A large figure approached the table.

“Alright, pissants. Who’s game enough to wager against me?” the stranger taunted, crossing his arms and smirking at all in turn. The Twi’lek scooped up his pile silently and scuttled away; I blinked in surprise as the rest followed suit. Even the Rodian who’d played me at first - the only other one to be up a significant amount – was quick to disappear.

“Wow. You sure know how to clear a room,” I said dryly, shooting him an unimpressed look.

“You were playing against a bunch of pathetic aliens. Of course they run when they see their superior coming.” He smiled and sat down across from me. I felt a surge of intense dislike towards the xenophobic idiot. “My name’s Niklos. Let’s play a game or two, huh?”

I’d almost made back the initial deposit on the cards. We still needed credits. And yet, this patronizing Human was obviously well-versed in pazaak if the juniors were so reluctant to play against him.

“Don’t be a coward,” the man cajoled, the corner of his mouth twitching in a sneer. “Since you’re new here, I’ll even double my bet to sweeten the game. You’re not going to scurry away like the rest of those sewer rats, are you?”

My eyes narrowed. That was a good deal, and yet I felt suspicious. Let’s try one game only. I won’t do anything stupid.

“Ten credits,” I said briskly, slipping two 5-cred grey tokens out from my pile to the centre of the table. “Let’s play.”

He laughed, a sound as irritating as a slag grinder, and nudged four greys to meet mine. “Alright,” he acquiesced, eyeing over my small pile of credits as if working out how much I had. Niklos began the match by turning a card face over, and after a few deals was up to a score of 13.

He held, flipping no more cards.

That’s overly cautious, I realized in surprise, and the next deal saw me up to 16. With a barely restrained smirk, I gathered in the tokens.

“Let’s play another,” Niklos offered, and he didn’t sound upset at the loss. “I’ll put in forty to your twenty, this time.”

My eyes narrowed on him. If I win, that’ll net me a neat one hundred creds, I realized. If I lose, I’ll
be back down to forty. The odds were good, and I inclined my head in agreement.

He played the same as before, standing on a low 14. It was curious, considering the way the others had left so prematurely. He’s a jerk who verbally abuses aliens. Maybe they just don’t like him. My 15 trumped his, and I couldn’t contain the smile as I surveyed my growing pile of credits. Maybe this would do something to improve Onasi’s opinion of me. I glanced over to the far corner of the room where he sat nursing another cup of caffa, throwing the odd inscrutable glance in my direction.

“Thanks for the games, Niklos,” I said mildly, standing.

“Don’t run away like that spineless tailhead,” Nikos said, his voice oily and condescending. There was a twisted look of derision on his face, and I felt my jaw clenching in irritation. “I took you for someone with a little courage. Sit down, and play one more deal with me.”

“I’m smart enough to call it a good day, Niklos,” I said, my eyes narrowing.

Nikos spat to the side. “Pathetic. You’re as pathetic and cowardly as those disgusting non-Humans you hang around with.”

I could feel the anger stemming up inside. He’s a worm that I should grind beneath my boots. My hand twitched in a desire for violence that was insidiously dark and ugly in its intent.

I am not Evil Bitch. I will not lash out at such obvious provocation.

Not to mention that we were trying to remain inconspicuous. I took a deep breath inward, and pushed the rage back down.

“I’ll triple my deal,” Niklos offered, pulling out three hundred-cred tokens. “One last match – your winnings versus mine.”

It was too good a deal to refuse, and I found myself seated once more. As the game started, though, Niklos’ posture changed from guarded watchfulness to overt confidence. And as he pulled out his side-deck, I realized with a humiliating wave of emotion that I’d been played.

This was his plan all along, to clear out my winnings. Sithspit! My vibrosword was still at my side. It would take one motion to slice him open from throat to navel, and pull out his intestines in front of his horror-filled eyes.

No, no that’s awful! Jen whispered in shock. No, no that’s suicidal, I countered. The Sith, remember? The stars-cursed Sith. But the fury didn’t dissipate. There was a buzzing in my ears, and I felt almost detached from the situation as an electric sensation began to resonate within me.

It sharpened as Niklos used a special card to bring his total to 18. He smirked in victory.

The hairs on my exposed forearms lifted, as if a static cloud had engulfed me in raw energy. Words tumbled out of my mouth, unbidden and instinctive and laden with meaning. “You should try for twenty. I bet the next card’s a two.”

"I – I think I’ll try for twenty,” he told me, in his thick accent. His eyes were round and slightly glazed. “I believe the next card is a two.”

It was a 7. The charge I felt in the air vanished, and I suddenly felt less alive.

And afraid. Surprised, and a little afraid.

“Thanks Niklos, I’m out,” I said hurriedly, grabbing his tokens and standing. Goosebumps rose on
my spine. Niklos was staring at his pazaak cards in utter confusion. I brushed past an Aqualish who’d been watching, and ignored his startled glance as I rushed back to Onasi.

My heart was thundering. *That’s not normal. I did something, there.* My fists were clenching, fingernails biting deep into the flesh. Niklos would likely trail after me soon, trying to bait me into another game. I wanted to get out of the cantina, *now.*

I jerked my head towards the entrance, and Onasi followed me as I cashed in my credits, his brows raising in surprise.

“Whoa, sister, that’s a fair haul,” he murmured, looking vaguely impressed. “I, uh, I was worried when you started playing Niklos. One of the patrons told me he liked to prey on the new players.”

I didn’t respond, heading silently out of the pazaak den and towards the cantina proper. *Did I use the Force without realizing? I wondered in bewilderment. Is that sort of thing possible?*

“You didn’t tell me you were a card shark,” Onasi prompted, a question in his voice.

"I- well, I was lucky," I muttered. He shot me a disbelieving look. *Parlour tricks and diversion,* a voice sneered. *That was child’s play, you moron.*

I flinched, and accidentally bumped into a seated Human dining near the front of the cantina. She turned to glare at me, surrounded by a handful of well-dressed friends.

"Hey, watch where you’re going, cantina rat!” she snapped. Coloured ferracrystal gleamed from her lobes and around her neck. “I thought the help here was supposed to be in uniform, not dressed as gutter trash! Where are my drinks, you useless waiter?”

Heat pounded through my veins, surging from before, an electric darkness that all too easily overwhelmed rational thought. “Shut up, you spoiled brat!” I hissed. My fists clenched as I glared. Her gaze dropped to the visible vibrosword at my side, and she stood, backing away.

“How dare you speak to me like that!” She took another step back, face whitening in outrage. Her friends gathered to their feet, soft and rich and all edging away alongside her. “You will regret this, you low-born schutta!”

"You know, when I said nobody would be looking for us-" Carth’s voice in the background slowly dispelled the red rage consuming me- "it went with the assumption that we’d be acting inconspicuous. Silly of me to assume that about you, I know.” He sounded- well, more irritated than anything else. As the anger fled, it irked me that he was right yet again.

"I'd apologise, but you'd probably just complain again," I muttered. To my surprise, he actually chuckled.

"At least things don't get dull around you," he commented. "But in all seriousness, you- we- need to look and act like common Tarisian citizens. Yelling at aristocrats is not the way to go."

"I'll get better control of my temper." The annoying part was that he was right – these flashes of irrational anger were dangerous. To our mission, to our survival, and maybe even to my own mental health. *And I’d prefer not to receive another lecture from him.* But the noblewoman had taken me by surprise – the pazaak game had taken me by surprise – nothing made *any frelling sense.*

"For someone who's fairly shy, you sure do have one heck of a short fuse." He said it like a question. I knew he was wary of me, with good reason. He didn’t know the half of it.
I just stared at him in mute response, and he raised his hands in entreaty. "Okay, okay! I'll drop it – for now."

_Hah, that almost sounded like a threat. Bring it on, Republic._

_xXx_

...

"Keep your eyes closed. And sit still!" the man admonished as I wriggled my toes. With effort, I stilled once more, attempting to block out the discomfort of sitting in one position for too long.

"Focus on what you can hear. Only your hearing. Stretch your senses out," he continued. He’d have me reciting all the various noises I could pick out, and then chastise me for missing half again as much. But with my eyes closed, it was hard to ignore the stench: the refuse and the rot and the unwashed stink that permeated every corner of Altizir's Western Underground. My sense of smell overpowered my hearing no matter how I practiced.

My best friend didn’t understand why I stayed with the man. Everyone thought blind old Freeflight was just another crazy – mind gone to rot under the shackles of poverty and desperation. We were all trapped in this miserable slum, penned in like bantha behind automated turrets that cut down any Uncitizen who dared dream of escape. It wasn’t uncommon for a sentient’s mind to break – and crazies didn’t usually last long, after that.

But Freeflight was different. He wasn’t crazy. Just... fascinating. His strange stories, his odd exercises, his dreams of a galaxy far, far away from this miserable place that drove desolation into everyone’s soul.

Sometimes, I felt like I was breathing his dreams in, tasting them in my mind, visualizing myself out there in the stars, somewhere.

My best friend thought hope was dangerous, but I didn’t care. And I didn’t care if it was me supporting Freeflight these days – scavenging for scraps that couldn’t really be called food, or dragging him to safety during another Enforcer raid. I didn’t care.

It hadn’t always been this way.

If not for Freeflight, I would’ve died a toddler, squalling over my mother’s corpse. He was the only family I had, and I loved him as fiercely as a true daughter could.


“Good,” he murmured, giving my shoulder an affectionate squeeze. “Now list at least another six.”

...

I woke with a start, breathing in audibly as I sat bolt upright in bed. _What was that?_ I wondered in shock. A dream? It was the most vivid dream I could ever recall having, sharp and intense with both emotion and clarity... and yet, as I struggled to focus on the details, they were already slipping through the cracks. _Something about hearing an old man? An old man I cared for? In a slum?_ The dream blurred, fading into the soft forgetfulness that was common with consciousness.

But... the feeling of _caring_- of wanting to make someone _proud_- lingered, even as I scrubbed tiredly
at my face and urged myself to focus on the present.

My shoulder ached and my head throbbed, demanding my attention away from the fragments of the
dream. I groaned softly, rolling my shoulder. *Ahhh, what I'd give for an adrenastim. A drink would be
almost as good.*

Carth was asleap on the floor, after insisting that I take the bed. *He's one of those traditional heroes,
probably likes to open doors for ladies and rescue helpless victims. If only I could reliably act like
one,* I smirked to myself, *then I might have a better chance of getting him onside.*

I glanced down at the chronometer – Jen’s personal one, attached firmly to my wrist and now
adjusted for Tarisian time. There were hours until dawn, and I highly doubted I’d be able to fall back
into restful slumber. *Moving about might loosen my muscles.* With a nod to myself, I slipped out of
bed quietly, so as not to wake the Republic pilot.

Silently, I changed into a set of drab clothes Carth had given me after sulkily grabbing his flight
jacket back. I rolled my eyes at the memory. *Republic pilots and their lucky charms.*

Thoughts like that still struck me by surprise. Jen had never met a pilot before, other than the odd
crop-duster. Until the Jedi came, of course. But if my head injury had caused some sort of mental
delusion, then why did all my reactions scream of a life completely at odds with Jen Sahara’s?

*Because I’m not Jen Sahara.* I knew that now, but it seemed I needed constant reminding. *Because
the knock to my head freed me, or at least cracked the prison wall enough to let the light shine in.*

Bastila was still out cold in the back of my head, like a frozen ice-pop, occasionally reminding me of
her existence. I wondered briefly what this Jedi was like. *She seemed snooty, all high and mighty,
from what I heard of her. And very young, to have been given command of a Republic cruiser.* I
sighed, and turned my thoughts to other things. Bastila was one of the many topics I had no plausible
answer to.

*Well, time to scope out this building,* I told myself as I stealthily walked to the door. There was no
way I was going to wake Onasi up for this one, as I fully intended to loot whatever I found. I’d
filched a low-grade tech spike from the inebriated lout who’d bought me a drink, and I was starting to
wonder if I’d been a thief or street kid of some description. *I feel like I know how to break into
places. I can't remember it though. Jen wouldn't dream of breaking in anywhere, and I can't imagine
Evil Bitch fiddling around with a lockpick. It'd probably be beneath her,* I thought sourly.

The dark circular hallway was abandoned, and I walked up to the nearest door, listening intently for
any sounds. *Nothing. Either nobody's home, or someone's asleep.* It didn't bother me greatly either
way, and some dim part of me realized I was acting rather recklessly. *But hey, we need the credits.*
Ever since I'd woken up with a head injury and contradictory personalities on the *Endar Spire,* I'd
been taking the crazy road. It seemed like the best way to stop thinking.

With a practiced hand, I automatically keyed into the tech lock and bypassed the security. The door
knew the truth.*

**xXx**

An hour or so later, and my mind was disintegrating once more. I leaned against a corridor wall,
shaking, sweat beading down my forehead. *I can't go on like this. I keep hounding myself for
control, and I keep failing miserably.*
It had been fine - the first three apartments. I hadn’t really expected to find much, and other than a small stash of credit chits and a long, concealing coat I fancied, I’d walked away from the first two places empty-handed. The third, however, was the jackpot. Obviously some shady dealings took place in this grimy excuse for a building, as I was fortunate enough to stumble on somebody’s rather impressive stash of weaponry. I’d noticed a small pile of stims on the table first – those I’d be keeping secret from Onasi. From there, pilfering a pair of blasters, a vibrosword, and a handful of grenades was automatic; I’d hesitated on what looked like some sort of modified Mandalorian assault rifle. Honestly, it was amazing what some people left lying about.

But the next apartment...

The findings had left me careless; I’d waltzed in without checking the place was empty. Reckless. I’d woken a couple of Bith who’d mistaken me for an Exchange thug, and immediately started begging for their lives. The sense of superiority and rightness that had swamped me overwhelmed any other thought. One of the Bith had cowered from his small bunk, pleading in a high-pitched tone for more time. Whatever their problem with the Exchange was – I hadn’t cared; all that mattered was that they feared me. From somewhere came the conviction that this was how the galaxy should be. I am to be feared, and obeyed.

“Don’t hurt us!” one of them had begged. And as quick as a kath hound, my feelings had changed. How could I do this? Break into some poor creature’s apartment, and terrify them so? I should be begging their forgiveness, offering to somehow make up for this slight!

I’d settled for running out of there.

Anger, hate, and self-loathing swirled through my mind in an explosive mix. I was losing control; my mind was waging war with itself and no matter how it turned out – I’d lose. I shuddered against the wall. Staying here – not far from the Bith’s apartment – possibly wasn’t in my best interests, either.

I closed my eyes and swallowed. I need to put more effort into this. I need to be Jen, until I’m in a safer place and have time to work it all out. I can do it, if I just try a little harder.

With shaky new resolve I took a deep breath, and opened my eyes again. Time to head back and drop off this loot.

I lifted my chin, and began the trek back.

It was second-nature to avoid the gazes of others, while remaining aware of their presence. In the alien quarter of Upper Taris, sents were treated like scum, and wariness was inbuilt into every resident. Being Human, I stood out.

So did the sobbing woman who sprinted past me before mashing her hand against an apartment door-control.

Guess I’m not the only one with issues. Still, there was something about her tearful state and desperate posture that pulled at me. Maybe… maybe, I wanted to prove to myself that I was one of the good guys. That I wasn’t Evil Bitch.

“Are you okay?” I called out, as the apartment door swished open under the woman’s trembling hand. “Do you need help?”

She shot me a wild look over her shoulder. Attractive and well-attired, she seemed a strange prospect to be roughing it in this rundown complex. She’s hiding. Running from something. Just like me.

“Do you want to talk?” I asked, lowering my voice.
“I-” She closed her eyes, shoulders sagging as she leaned against the open doorway. “All I want is my life back.”

Her voice was crisp and well-enunciated. Core accent. Chandrilan, maybe Coruscanti. I’d guess well-educated, too. Probably stranded on Taris because of the quarantine. I felt my fist curl tightly against my side, recognizing yet again another observation that Jen Sahara would never formulate. Like she could recognize Core accents.

“Well, the offer’s genuine,” I said, suddenly aware of exactly how I appeared when the woman’s eyes re-opened and appraised me. A cagey expression crossed her face as her gaze lingered on the vibrosword strapped at my waist. Not even the long coat fully concealed it. “Or, I could just leave-”

“You’re a merc,” she guessed, blinking. “Trapped on Taris, just like me. I- would you like a job?”

“I-” I halted, my eyes narrowing. “A job?”

Immediately, my mind sharpened on the thought. We need the credits. Doesn’t hurt to hear the woman out. She was nodding at me, a sudden eagerness brightening her dark eyes, even as she was still sniffing back tears.

“Yes. You- you can stop people for credits, right? I- I wouldn’t ask… and I’ve only got fifty-four credits left… I mean, I wouldn’t dream of asking this… but he said- the bastard said-”

“Whoa.” I held up a hand, forestalling any further explanation. She wants me to kill someone for creds. A bounty. A murder. For creds. The thought should have rattled me more than it did.

We need the credits. Fifty-four isn’t a lot, but we need everything we can get. And- she’ll just ask someone else if I refuse.

With a wary glance down the empty corridor, I motioned her inside. “Let’s take this somewhere a little more private, alright?” I couldn’t forget the Sith I’d run into, minutes after waking up on this planet.

“O-okay.” She walked inside, stumbling a little, while leaving the door open for me to follow.

The apartment beyond looked similar to mine and Onasi’s – small, brown, and bereft of furnishings other than a bedroll and a torn cushion in the corner. The kitchenette was streaked with dried stains of caffè grinds, and the only visible crockery was a sole plasteel plate on the bench.

She hadn’t been here long.

I glanced back to the woman; she’d dropped down on the battered cushion, hugging her legs to her chest.

“A fighter like you, you probably think I’m pathetic,” she muttered. “It’s just- I was only on Taris for a brief academic flyover- then the quarantine forced me to stay and… I thought he was so charming! Interested in my mind! And then- then the bastard wouldn’t stop pawing at me and…” she trailed off, dropping her head onto her knees.

“You want me to kill a man who took advantage of you,” I said flatly, laying out the specifics. We need the creds, my mind repeated coldly. Besides, last thing this galaxy needs is another creep who won’t keep his hands to himself.

“I want you to kill him because he put a four-hundred credit bounty on my head!” she burst out, her head jerking up and her dark eyes blazing fiercely at me.
My mind froze over. My muscles clenched. *Four hundred credits. That would double what we have now.*

“He wouldn’t keep his hands to himself, even when I asked him to stop!” she raged. “I pulled out his shiv from his belt- I didn’t mean to cut him, just make him back off. But Holdan’s a spiteful little Hutt-slug! And now I have every wannabe bounty-hunter after my head, and I just want to get off this cursed planet!”

Dark thoughts raged like wildfire. *Four hundred is a lot more than what she’s offering… and she’s standing here right in front of me! There was a trembling in my limbs, a tearing in my head. No! She’s an innocent woman! The drab apartment blurred in front of me. I felt my hands hit the floor. But I need the credits, and if I don't kill her someone else will, so what's the problem? Cool plasteel pressed against my face. I should be helping her get out of this, the poor lady! How can I even contemplate something like that?*

I could feel someone shaking me. "Are you alright? Wake up! What's wrong?” I opened eyes to see the woman I’d been talking to shake me gently. Her face was taut with concern.

*Concern for someone who is thinking about killing her. That really puts me in my place.*

"I'm sorry," I mumbled, and pushed myself up. "I really am – forgive me. I've been sick recently, and obviously not recovered."

"What are you doing up and about then?"

"Overdoing things, I guess." With her help, I scrambled to my feet, and my head cleared. The voices fled, leaving only a residual nausea. I sucked in a shaky gasp of air. "I'm sorry about your plight. I wish I could help, but I'm not the merc you took me for."

"Oh." She swallowed, unmoving. An easy target. The look in her large eyes was unbearably sad. "Well, thank you for listening at least. My- my name's Dia, by the way."

I stared at Dia for a frozen moment, before a hand moved to my belt on automatic reflex. I’d hooked one of the blasters there, back in the apartment that’d yielded so much weaponry.

Her eyes widened as she caught my movement. She scrabbled back, horror tightening her face-

“Have this,” I said, my voice coming out cold and calm. I strode towards her, offering the blaster grip-first to the cowering woman.

Dia blinked, before tentatively clasping her fingers around the weapon.

“Bounty rules,” I said flatly. “If the victim kills the one who placed the bounty, the deal’s off. Bounty-office keeps the creds, but at least you get your life.”

Where were these words coming from? Cold and calculating, even as the burn of emotion raged through me. I didn’t want any part of this. Not even to help Dia. I didn’t trust myself not to turn on this academic from a Core world, this soft woman who was a lot more like *Jen Sahara* than I seemed to be.

“I- thanks,” she said, swallowing again. The blaster hung limply in her grasp, and although I found myself wishing for her survival – I didn’t believe in it. Not truly.

*She’s got a better chance by herself than with me.* There was a sour taste in my mouth.
“Go- go see a doctor, okay?” Dia suggested, throwing me a weak smile.

I gave her a short nod, turned, and left the apartment.

xXx

It wasn’t a bad idea.

Dia’s last words kept repeating in my head as I dumped the loot back in the apartment. Fortunately, Carth was still soundly asleep, snoring gently in the corner. I certainly wasn’t up to any sort of grilling about my whereabouts; not yet.

_Go see a doctor, okay?_

But what the frell would I say? _Hi, I think I’m three people, and I’m going crazy?_ Yeah. That’d go down well.

_No, I can’t tell anyone about this. If I have to keep it from a Jedi then I’d be stupid to let a doctor know._

I was wide awake still, and far too edgy to stay lurking around a sleeping Carth Onasi. _A walk. A walk outside might clear my head._ Before I knew it, I’d completely cleared the apartment complex, and was striding out into the Tarisian courtyards.

Other than the odd patrolling Sith and a couple of drunks harmlessly singing off-key, Upper Taris was pretty empty. Dawn was just starting to pink the horizon.

_I need to control this, _I thought determinedly. _I can fight these thoughts. I know I can._ I had an intuitive belief that I could do whatever I set my mind to, provided I was determined enough. _I’ll beat this. And I’ll convince everyone that I’m still sweet Jen._

I felt a little more at peace. A little. _I’d better head back before Onasi wakes._ With a deep breath, I turned, and started heading back to the hideout.

_I can do this. No problem. I’ll be fine._

A voice from the dark depths of my mind whispered something. _Overconfidence. You were always too.... _but I couldn’t recall the rest.

xXx
The endless black of space was scythed through by the sparking of blaster turrets; I banked the snubfighter sharply, and a Sith starship materialized within torpedo range. My eyes narrowed, and my grip steadied on the controls.

I depressed the firing button, and a second later the enemy ship detonated in a bright flare of victory.

Consciousness slowly trickled in. I stretched drowsily, eyes still closed, feeling a yawn split my face as the image of the frontlines receded. It'd been a restless night. My sleep was normally the dreamless slumber of those who'd spent their life in the military: bodies and minds trained to draw in as much rest from whatever hours of downtime one could snatch. I was accustomed to waking instantly, alert and ready for action.

Taris, I'm on Taris. My mind slowly kicked into gear. Chasing down a Jedi with a Coruscant-sized ego, and babysitting a lunatic whose personality changes more often than her clothes. Thank you, Admiral Dodonna. I opened my eyes and stretched, loosening the kinks from my spine. The floor was hard and cold beneath the ratty blanket I lay upon - but I'd insisted on Jen having the bed. I wouldn't dream of forcing an injured comrade to kip on the ground - although her look of sardonic disbelief when I said as much almost made me consider it.

I turned my head at the thought of her. Empty, rumpled sheets met my gaze.

"No way," I groaned hoarsely. Something lurched in my gut. "You've got to be kidding me!" I should've anticipated this- dammit! Maybe part of me did. The disappointment gritting my teeth didn't exactly feel unexpected.

I heaved a great sigh as I sat, running a hand through my hair in irritation. I had no idea if Jen would return- if she was off drinking again or simply done a runner- but I had to focus on finding Bastila. I couldn't afford to waste precious time scouting around for a firebrand who could very well endanger any rescue attempt with her unpredictability. Right. I'll check the cantina, and if she's not there, then I'll have to move on. The thought made me sick to my stomach.

I stood in grim determination, kicking the blankets to one side. After splashing some water on my face and grabbing my jacket from the locker, I noticed a pile of gear on the floor. I frowned - that hadn't been there last night. What's this?

A backpack, about half full with 'frag and flash grenades. A spare blaster and a vibrosword sticking out of it. A dark sort of resignation settled in my heart. Is this Jen's way of apologizing for disappearing? Sorry I'm running out on the Republic, but here, have a grenade?

I sighed. I knew she wasn't trustworthy, I thought sourly. Damn you, Jen Sahara.
Suddenly the door opened, and the very scourge of my thoughts walked in.

I stared at Jen in surprise. Her short dark hair was a mess, sticking outwards as if she'd never heard of a hairbrush, and the tatty beige shirt she wore hung untucked over loose-fitting trousers. "I thought you'd run off!" I blurted out.

Jen shot me a smile, small and peaceful.

"I just went for a walk," she answered. The intonation of her voice was serene and subdued, but her face was pale. She had the dusky skin tone of someone whose natural dark tan had faded from months spent indoors.

_Just a walk. Right._ "Are you okay?" I asked suspiciously. I didn't believe her when she was acting meek, angry, or peaceful.

"Yeah. Had a stroll around Upper Taris."

The explanation was vague, and I didn't buy it for a second.

"Picked these up on your stroll, did you?" I muttered, pointing accusingly at the backpack.

"I- well," Jen hedged, evading my gaze. A faint colour flushed high on her cheeks. "It's amazing what you can find lying around."

_Uh huh. A thief to top it off. Although – let's face it – we could use the gear._ I was unsure whether I should lecture her or inventory her loot.

"I know what you're thinking," she told me flatly, green eyes meeting mine. "But the sooner we're equipped, the sooner we can find Bastila, and surely that's what you want?"

"I guess," I grumbled, trying not to frown. "Not sure I really approve, though."

Jen rolled her eyes, one shoulder lifting up in a dismissive shrug. "Fine. I'll stop stealing then."

Yeah, right. _I'm not buying that either, sister._ "Okay," I said slowly, remembering the old adage to pick one's battles. At the end of it, Jen _had_ obtained what looked like a useful amount of gear. I could only hope the acquisition of it would not bring us any unwanted attention. "How about we start the day with breakfast?"

There was a sudden growl from her stomach, and the side of her mouth twitched. "Guess I'm with you on that one, Flyboy."

Jen was ready to go after pulling on a concealing dark coat I didn’t recognize. I took a few minutes to make myself presentable, and then we left, avoiding the food synthesizer in the public corridor by mutual consent. As an almost-free source of nutrients it was likely something we’d become familiar with – after all, a mere one-cred fee for a meal couldn’t be ignored by those tight on cash. But the grey slop from the machines was highly unpalatable, and the cantina had boasted in-house fare for five credits the previous day.

We had Jen’s pazaak winnings, so a hot meal at the cantina was definitely on the cards.

As we wandered outside, Upper Taris still impressed with its grandeur and sweeping architecture. Modern buildings stretched deep into the morning sky, which was strangely bare with the lack of air traffic. But below… below was the real Taris. We couldn’t see it, protected as we were by the corrupt trappings of wealth and privilege that cloaked the Upper City - but it was there.
We'd almost reached the cantina when a shout rang out over the courtyard. I turned, my gaze immediately honing in on a lavishly dressed Human gesturing at us. A Rodian and an Aqualish flanked her. The latter appeared to be cracking his knuckles.

Stang! I recognized the woman - the noblewoman Jen had threatened yesterday. *I suppose it's too much to hope they'll leave us in peace.*

Next to me, Jen stiffened, like a kath hound bristling to attention.

"That's the cantina scow!" the woman cried, still pointing. The thugs advanced, the Rodian smirking in crude anticipation. I couldn't see any weapons on them, but this was Upper Taris, after all. The Sith were liable to arrest anybody waltzing around with a visible blaster – even the supposed bodyguards of whoever this noblewoman was. My own weapon was concealed, strapped to my side, hidden under the trusty jacket Jen had been pulling faces at.

"I don't want any trouble," I warned, in a tone I hoped would convince them that I was the real trouble. The Rodian laughed, a mocking trill of disbelief. I'd been in enough brawls to recognize the inevitability of this one. *Here's hoping we scare them off quickly – before we attract any attention.*

"You should be more polite to your betters, gutter scum," the Aqualish hissed in passable Basic, directing his comment to both me and Jen.

Jen tensed at my side; I had an irrational moment of worry for her safety before reminding myself of the fight I saw on the Endar Spire. *Two thugs won't be an issue for us. It's catching the eye of the Sith that's the real danger here.* At least we were round the side of the cantina in a small cul-de-sac, partially hidden from view of the open courtyard.

I glanced at Jen; by unspoken agreement I took a step forward to face the stockier Aqualish. He launched himself forwards, closing the distance in five strides, and I held my ground right up until the moment his fist punched out in a roundhouse. I side-stepped, grabbing his arm and using his own momentum to hurl him to the ground. As I jumped forward to straddle him, his legs kicked up deep into my midsection. The air burst from my lungs as I staggered back, momentarily winded.

There was a gurgled scream to my right; jerking my head sideways, my eyes widened as they fixed on Jen. She was snarling. And- and- wielding a vibrosword stuck in the Rodian's side. *In a Sith-controlled area!*

The Aqualish, struggling to his feet, gasped audibly as he, too, turned to look.

Snatching the opportunity, I jumped forward and crashed my fist into the Aqualish's jaw.

There was another shriek from the Rodian. My guard was raised, my eyes on the Aqualish- but, to my surprise, he retreated swiftly to his friend's side, who was now clutching at a bloody wound along his ribs.

"Aww, what's the matter?" Jen taunted. "Two ickle Humans too tough for you?"

"Jen!" I snapped. *First she pulls out a vibrosword in broad daylight, and now she's egging them on?* The Aqualish growled, his face contorting in anger, but he stayed still as the other thug leaned heavily on him.

"If we see you again, you won't be so lucky," the Aqualish spat, supporting his friend with one hand and cradling his bruised face with the other. For all that I was trying to avoid this sort of scene, I couldn't deny a twinge of smug satisfaction at the reddening visible on the Aqualish's face.
Jen laughed; a cold, malicious sound. “Go on, run like the little cowards you are.” She gave a
dismissive, insulting wave with one hand.

“Jen, stop it!” I stormed over to her, ready to shake some sense into the crazy woman. “They're
leaving! We don't want the atten-”

My words died as her gaze snapped to mine. The look in her eyes... rage. Senseless rage. I took a
step back at the insane glow of bright green. She's a berserker. Don't charge a berserker in full
swing, idiot!

In my periphery, I was aware of the Aqualish retreating, dragging his wounded friend along with
him. The aristocracy had run off a long time ago. But my attention remained fixed on Jen. The battle
lust storming through her face was enough to - if not scare me, then at least make me very wary.

Jen shuddered, and the rage fled. Shock, followed by something akin to anguish, crossed her face.
Her gaze dropped, to stare numbly at the bloodied weapon still clutched in her hand.

“Put that away – it’s broad daylight!” I hissed, deciding it was safe to berate her again. The thugs had
now disappeared, but already I could see two gaping Tarisians eyeing us from a distance.

She didn't reply, still staring unblinkingly at her weapon. A small spark of concern inched through
my anger.

"Jen, what is it?" I asked sharply.

"I could have sworn..." She looked up at me, brow furrowing in confusion. "I could have sworn my
blade glowed red there for a minute."

"With the way you go berserk, I wouldn't be surprised if everything you saw was red," I muttered,
striding down the cul-de-sac. “Let’s get out of here. Now.”

"Well, at least we managed to scare them off." She laughed weakly as she followed me around the
cantina building.

"You're lucky the Sith weren't around," I grumped at her. "That was inordinately thick of you. All
those idiots wanted to do was rough us up a bit – all we needed to do was get the first blow in. But
no, you had to shove a vibrosword – how in the blazes did you manage to hide that, anyway? We're
not in the Lower City yet-"

"Onasi-"

"-stang, the Sith rule up here Jen, so much for being blasted inconspicuous-"

“Onasi!”

“What?” I snapped, stopping to unleash a furious glare at her. To my further annoyance – and
perhaps even mortification – she looked amused. Amused.

“You’ve walked right past the cantina entrance,” she said mildly.

I opened my mouth, processed her words, and snapped it shut again. She nodded to the door – which
I had indeed strode right past – a smirk curving her lips.

“Anyone ever tell you that you curse more when you’re angry?” she teased.

My brows lowered further. In some alternate universe - if things hadn’t been so dire - maybe I would
have laughed with her. Maybe. “This isn’t some sort of game,” I made out between clenched teeth. “This is serious. Dead serious.”

She stared at me mutely for a minute, before an exasperated look crossed her face. “Okay, so flashing around a weapon outside is probably worse that pulling out a blaster in a cant-”

She at least had the sense to refrain from completing that sentence. I stood glaring at her silently until at last her expression eased into something approaching resignation. She sighed softly. “You’re right. I’m sor-“

"Don’t!" I bit out. Not another apology! Peace, I think I like her better when she's angry. "Look," I sighed, my hand on the cantina door. "Let's just go eat something, alright? And then I might take part in some of those duels."

"You?"

"Well, who else?" I said sharply. "I happen to be pretty accurate with a blaster. And if you think I'm going to let you partake in those duels when you'd probably kill everyone in sight, then think again."

Her brows slammed down. There was an intense look about her narrowed eyes, as if she was struggling between anger and compliance. She really doesn't like to be told what to do, does she?

"Fine, you do the duels," Jen muttered, after a drawn-out pause She almost sounded- sulky.

I couldn’t help a small, victorious smirk.

We both calmed down over the bland cantina meal; a plate full of root vegetables smeared in a hot brown sauce, but infinitely preferable to synthesizer slop. I kept an eye warily on the exits, not quite forgetting the Tarisian citizens who’d noticed our stand-off with the thugs. I assumed Jen was making an effort to behave, what with the sickeningly meek act she kept up as we ate. The shy, polite comments she issued were both forced and annoying.

_Better than the rage, Onasi, _I reminded myself. I’d known a berserker, once. A Bothan trooper I’d fought alongside when my squad had been grounded on Rodia, holding back a Sith advance. The Bothan went completely crazy in battle, his strength and speed impressive even by his species’ standard. His commander later told me that they all stood clear of him during combat – but outside of it, he was the quietest and most polite person she’d ever known.

Jen was quiet… sometimes. But I didn’t buy it. Her sassy, irreverent comments were more genuine than the shy ones. And distinctly less annoying.

We lapsed into silence as we finished our meal, and then headed next door.

The organizer of the duel ring was a Hutt named Ajuur, and he seemed pretty eager for fresh meat in the ring. _Of course he is, more credits for him, Sithspawn Hutts, the lot of them._ But if I was cautious and played it right, it should be good money for us, too.

Ajuur was busy laying down the law of dueling in Basic, with a thick, garbled accent. According to him, there hadn't been a fatality since death-matches were outlawed some years back. Permanent disfigurements and disabilities, on the other hand, he glossed over, and instead diverted the conversation to weapon selection.

"We like to encourage variety, but most duelists prefer melee combat as the ring's small," Ajuur slurred. "There's some who stick to ranged. The best fighters, ahhh- the best ones are flexible. Anything goes, really, as long as it passes our health and safety regulations. We even allow grenades
"Grenades," I said flatly. "Are you sure no one ever dies? Why do I get the feeling you're trying to take us for a ride?"

The Hutt laughed. The fleshy rolls of his gut shuddered with each booming chuckle. "Ho ho ho! The duel ring has energy suppressors. Your choice of weapons will be examined and limited before you enter the duel, but we keep a medic droid on hand in case of serious injuries." He paused, leaning over to grab a juice lizard from a nearby pail. The glooping noise as he slurped it into his wide mouth made me grimace. "So, Human. Are you interested?"

Jen nudged me from the side. "Here," she muttered, waving a blaster at me grip-first. "Want to use two?"

I stared incredulously at her. "You had a blaster hidden on you as well?" I ignored the mental voice that pointed out the gun strapped underneath my jacket; I wasn’t hiding a vibrosword, ready to whirl it around outside where the Sith could spot us as soon as we waltzed into the first hint of trouble.

She shrugged, not answering as she looked down at her coat. It was then that I realized just how concealing it was. She's probably hidden a whole arsenal underneath that, I thought sourly. If I didn't know better, I'd swear she was Mandalorian.

I took the proffered blaster. "Thanks," I muttered, before turning back to face Ajuur. "I'll do it."

"Good – new blood for the ring!" he rumbled. "But you need a nickname, like Ice or Deadeye or Twitch. Good nicknames make sentients bet more. Hmmm... what's a good nickname for you?"

"Anything will do."

"Well, you're new here. People won't recognize you." Ajuur shrugged, looking over me dispassionately. "Sents like a handle that has a certain mystique to it. How about 'Mysterious Stranger'?"

Jen snickered. Cliché. But I suppose it could be worse. "It'll do."

"No, call him Blaster Boy," Jen suggested. There was a teasing glint in her eyes as Ajuur swung his beady gaze on her. "If he’s going to use two guns it’s perfect."

"Really?" I countered, raising an eyebrow in disbelief. That sounds like some cheap action holo-vid star. “I think I’d prefer Mysterious Stranger.”

Jen was holding back a snigger, her face cut with a wide smile of glee. Ajuur grunted in what sounded suspiciously like consideration. “We’ve used ‘Mysterious Stranger’ on the last two off-worlders, it's losing its appeal." Ajuur nodded to Jen. "And 'Blaster Boy' does have a certain ring to it."

I groaned, rolling my eyes at Jen. “Honestly. Could you think of a tackier name?”

"Stop arguing, Blaster Boy." Jen was still grinning. I mock-glared at her. "Time to get ready for your first duel!"

xXx
Well, I suppose I could call it a productive day, I thought, as I limped slowly out of the arena. I hadn't expected the last duel to be so tough, though.

I'd taken out the first two duellists with no real problem, but that Ice had been a rough challenge. Best to quit while I'm ahead... and between these six hundred credits and Jen's pazaak winnings, we should be set for the Undercity.

The day was almost over, and I felt like crawling back to the apartment and closing my eyes. You're getting soft, Onasi. The medical droid was quick to heal any deep damage, but I was left with some superficial bruising and burns. The tiredness was the real kicker though. I felt exhausted.

Jen was having a drink by the bar as I walked slowly over to her.

"You're not trying to get drunk again, are you?" I asked in suspicion.

"Why not?" she countered. "We're set for credits now - tomorrow we can buy our gear and find a way down to the lower levels." She took a long swallow. "Seems like a perfectly good reason to have a few drinks."

"No way, sister," I said coldly. "You lose your temper easily enough when sober. Getting drunk is just begging for Sith attention."

"You're pretty obsessed with the Sith, you know that?" Jen drawled, raising her eyebrows in what appeared to be disparagement.

"What, because I'm trying not to get caught?" I snapped. With an inward sigh, I lowered my voice. "We're fugitives, remember? Attracting notice is not a good idea."

She shrugged. I wasn't sure if her apparent unconcern was genuine - but it was definitely dangerous.

"They've left us alone so far."

"Out of sheer luck more than anything else," I returned, trying to hold her gaze and impart the seriousness of our situation onto her. Blast if she isn't the most frustrating woman-! "Look, Jen, that fight with the woman's thugs earlier? That's the sort of thing we need to avoid. That's the sort of thing the Sith will notice."

Jen's gaze dropped to her hands, resting on top of the stained bar. An introspective expression crossed her face as we both dwindled into silence. Let her actually take me seriously for once, I thought. I can't deny she's useful in a fight, but I can't help but think she's more of a liability than an asset.

A quiet sigh escaped her lips. "Onasi, what... what made you decide to join the Fleet?"

The unexpectedness of her query had me stiffening. I looked away, uncomfortable. "I've always been a military man. My homeworld's a member of the Republic – but even if they weren't, I'd still have joined. It doesn't take a genius to figure out which side is the right one."

"You think it's all that black and white?" Her voice was surprisingly neutral, for such a question.

"Oh come on," I said, exasperated. Where is she going with this? "It's obvious that Darth Malak's a ruthless tyrant who'll crush anyone who gets in his way... just like his master Revan had been. Experience has shown that the Sith won't stop until the Republic lies in ruins. Malak and his forces don't respect anything except raw, brutal power."
"Sounds like Malak and the Sith have the right idea," she muttered.

My jaw dropped of its own volition, and I stared at Jen in shock - which quickly gave way to blistering incredulity. "How can you even say that?" She can't be serious, surely? Not even someone as crazy as her could really mean that? All the colour drained from her face, and I dimly recognized it as something she clearly hadn't meant to say. Didn't stop my tirade, however. "The Sith are butchers! Soldiers, civilians, I mean they don't care who they kill! Even... even children!"

"I didn't mean to say that!"

"Then why did you?" I snapped. I can't believe she would even think it! Maybe things would be better – and safer – if I was just by myself.

"I don't know," she sighed. "I guess I was just trying to hassle you again."

"Yeah, well, sometimes you go too far," I said coldly.

She started to apologise, then thought better of it and stared silently at her empty glass.

We didn't talk for the remainder of the day.

xXx
We’re getting nowhere, I thought resentfully as we trudged through Upper Taris. *I really annoyed Onasi last night, and we still don’t have any clue how to get down to the lower levels.* I scowled at Carth’s back as he stalked ahead of me. We’d spent most of the morning investigating any turbo-lift within reasonable distance – all, without exception, were guarded by black-clad, unmoving guards.

Carth had been at a loss on how to get past the Sith, but hadn’t appreciated the idea of knocking the guards out. *Spoilsport,* part of me muttered. Okay, so attacking the Sith in broad daylight was a fairly dim-witted suggestion, but the angry side of me was just clamouring for some action – *besides,* I thought to myself, *it wasn’t like Blaster Boy over there had any better ideas.*

We’d taken a detour earlier to visit the nearby ‘Adventurer’s Emporium’ – which, considering the empty shelves, had once seen better days. The owner, a Kebla Yurt, spoke to us at length regarding the Sith quarantine on Upper Taris. As we already knew, public inter-level movement was currently prohibited, be it by air traffic or turbo-lift. And the Sith were offering hefty rewards for information regarding any Republic fugitives, which caused Carth to tense, and me to smile politely.

The lower levels, however, had erupted into gang fighting, and the Sith presence down there was all but overwhelmed. Kebla informed us that the two largest gangs – the Hidden Beks and the Vulkars – were engaged in a messy war for supremacy. Even the Exchange was involved, acting as hired thugs or bounty hunters for both sides, depending on which offered the most credits that particular day.

But perhaps that wasn’t surprising. The recesses of my brain that definitely did *not* come from Jen Sahara knew about the Exchange. As the largest spice smuggling, slave trading and bounty hunting criminal organization in the galaxy, they had either political or economic clout in most systems. Before the Sith had gained prominence, the Exchange had been the true rulers of Taris, hiding behind puppet politicians and corrupt aristocracy.

But the gang war… that changed things, and could, perhaps, present opportunities. When coupled with the lack of Sith presence in Lower Taris, I wondered whether it would be safer to permanently move our hideout downwards.

*If we could actually find a way to get there.*

We’d stocked up at Kebla’s, and now both carried rucksacks full of ration bars, medpacs, and utility tools such as light-rods and spare datapads. Unfortunately she didn’t have anything really useful – like a decent tech spike or bio-scanner – as the Sith came in every now and then to audit her stock. From the way the woman’s mouth had curled when she explained that, I assumed they did more than just audit.

It was my third day conscious on Taris, and today – with luck – things would start happening. Carth and I were both determined to find a way down to the Lower City and start our mission proper. No matter that Kebla warned us the place was overrun with warring gang members - if anything, it would only make things more interesting.
Interesting? A meek voice squeaked in my head, both alarmed and appalled. I felt my mouth tighten. It wasn't like any pathetic gang minion would pose a threat to me. Reckless, a thought whispered. Maybe it's the direction we have to go, but there's no point being a frelling idiot about it.

An abrupt surge of dizziness slammed into me like a vibro-ax. I've always been labelled reckless, haven't I? Speckles of darkness clouded by vision, and I could hear my heartbeat, fast and furious, in my ears. Someone said something rudely; I was vaguely aware of stumbling, of being shoved, of falling from a great distance...

…”

“This is reckless,” a man muttered behind me, as I stared at the large doors inset deep within the cave. The blue light radiating from his lightsaber illuminated the barrier in front of us; my eyes were fixed on the unfamiliar sigils inscribed around the edges of the door. “Stars, you've always been reckless, but we’ve no idea what’s beyond this other than some ancient technology we don’t understand. Are you sure the threat-”

“Yes,” I cut in, mildly exasperated at the same conversation replaying once more. “What I found suggests this leads to something powerful enough to aid us.” My concentration remained anchored on the door. There would be some mechanism that would let us through. I had but to find it. “This is the perfect time, when those scared fools believe we are merely here to gloat about our success.”

He sighed, and rested a hand on my shoulder. “I know. They’re angry with us, all of them. They won’t even stop to listen, to consider how badly things could have gone, had we sat back and done nothing-”

I huffed, my focus temporarily broken, and took the moment to lean back against him. “I’m still furious at them. Years of blood and tears and sacrifice and finally the Mandalorian Wars are over – and yet they treat us like errant children. Like - like we did the wrong thing! How can they even think it?”

I felt his lips press into my hair. “Because we disobeyed them. You knew this might happen; we both did. Should they let us stay, we’ll be separated for sure. I won’t let that happen. Not again.”

"We won't be staying," I murmured, stepping away from him to concentrate once more. My hands pressed lightly against the cold door; it was made of some metallic substance I didn't recognize. My companion moved to flank me, the dark blue of his 'saber our sole light source. "This place is my one objective for coming to this planet. I only need to figure out how to open the door."

"Jen?" A voice called distantly.

"Have you tried just giving it a push?" he asked. There was an obvious smirk in his voice, a teasing tone I hadn't heard in far too long. The sound was welcome, but deep down inside, an insidious voice told me not to get used to it. For the dark paths we had already walked were about to get darker.

In the end, we would do what we had to do.

…”

"Jen? Wake up!"

"Oh," I groaned. "Of course I tried that, jackal-brain."

"Say what?" Onasi's puzzled voice shot through my sluggish thoughts. "What's wrong with you?"
I blinked as Carth’s features slowly swam into view. The faint glare of the Tarisian sun stabbed into my eyes. Somehow, I was lying on the ground. "Uh, where am I?"

"In the middle of Upper Taris, giving me quite a scare," he said wryly. His eyes were warm with concern as they stared down at me. "What happened?"

"I – I fainted," I muttered, sitting up and clutching at my head. It was pounding with renewed force, as waves of nausea washed through me. What was that? That wasn't Jen, and it couldn't be Evil Bitch... was that the real me? Sun and stars, I don't understand any of it.

"That was quite a faint, then." Carth’s expression warped to suspicion. Again. "You were muttering something about a door."

"I think I was dreaming," I replied woozily. A dream? A vision? A... glimpse of the real me? But the details... so stark and crisp and clear at first, had begun to unravel with mounting speed. Something about the Mandalorian Wars? Had I... had I fought in them? It might go some way to explaining my reflexes back on the 'Spire. There was a man in the... memory, too. He had a lightsaber....

The specifics of the memory-dream were fuzzing at the edges, blurring rapidly the longer I tried to clutch onto them. But if I could just hold on to the core details-

"Give me a hand up, would you?" I snapped as Onasi continued to eyeball me in frowning concern. He reluctantly helped me to my feet. I noticed people staring, and glared at the crowd defensively.

"Let's get some lunch first," I muttered. "I probably didn't have enough to eat. Then we can work out what to do next."

He nodded briskly at me, and thankfully dropped the subject.

xXx

We sat eating in the cantina, another bland meal of colourful vegetables I didn’t recognize. The sauce was white this time, and tasted faintly of socks. I grimaced, and vowed to try the public synthesizer next.

"So," I began, "there's got to be entrances to the Lower City not guarded by the Sith."

Onasi had been watching me like a Roonish hawk since I'd fainted. I couldn’t work out what was stronger – his concern or his mistrust. I was grudgingly aware that my behaviour warranted both.

"I doubt it," he responded slowly. "They've locked this planet up tight; they're taking no chances with Bastila getting away. We need to somehow get past the Sith."

Bastila was still unconscious inside my head. It unnerved me, the thought of her waking, the idea she might be able to sense me... to sense the conflicting emotions I was failing to master. She might know what's wrong with my mind, Jen whispered. I scowled. She might be the root cause of it.

CARTH noticed my glowering face and quirked an eyebrow in question. I hastily schooled my expression, shrugged, and muttered sarcastically, "we could always jump off one of the platforms."

"Oh yes, you're such great help," Carth snapped.

I really should stop saying things like that to him. He's such a nice guy. I scowled again. Shut up.
"Well, I don't know," I grumped. "We could try buying our way past."

Carth actually seemed to mull that one over, which surprised me. I'd picked him as being too straight-laced to consider bribery, but obviously he was adjusting to the environmental parameters – which was a good thing, too, if we were to have any chance of extracting Bastila successfully.

"That would possibly work," he said at last. "But I don’t think we can afford the time required to build up a big enough sum. Small change won’t be enough. Not to countermand orders from high up."

I rolled my eyes in exasperation. *Maybe that’s true for the soldiers you’ve fought with, Onasi. But corruption is rife anywhere if you just look hard enough.* "Alright, let's just steal some Sith armour, and pretend we're on their side then." It was a jest, mostly. That Sith full-body armour was very concealing.

Carth frowned at me. "Lunatic ideas I could do without."

"Got any better suggestions?" I shot back tartly. *Because so far, I haven't heard much from you, Republic.*

He raised an eyebrow at me. "Why don't we try talking to one of guards?"

I sat back, considering. We’d only spot-checked the turbo-lifts from a distance, unwilling to come close enough to engage in conversation. I hadn't seen any Tarisian citizens lurking next to the formidably armoured guards, so they likely didn't welcome idle chitchat. But that didn't mean it wasn't worth a shot - who knew what information we could garner if we were clever about it. "Good idea. Let me do the talking though – you're too conspicuous."

Carth blinked at me. "Say what?" He sounded genuinely befuddled.

“Everything about you screams military, Flyboy,” I drawled, eyeing him over. “I suppose you could pass for an Exchange thug with a soldiering background, but it’s risky, considering that the Sith are on the hunt for Republic soldiers.” I allowed that logic to sink in for a moment, before adding, “let me find a guard to sweet talk.”

A highly disbelieving look crossed his eyes which set my hackles rising. “Sweet talk? You?”

“What did you think I was doing when you tracked me down in the cantina?” I snapped.

“Getting drunk.” The reply back was quick, succinct, and pretty darn truthful, actually. But I had been gathering intel about a strange planet under the guise of drinking, with a head injury to boot. *My instincts took over.* It certainly wasn’t the behaviour of a meek scholar.

I pushed my plate away, and stood. “Watch me at work, Onasi, and *learn.*”

I turned and stalked away, trusting the Republic pilot would catch up to me. By the time I’d entered the outside sunshine, he was once more walking at my side. My stomach full and my head clear for the first time since the *Endar Spire,* I had a good feeling about the rest of the day. Hopefully that would be enough to stop me having another spell. *Faints and visions I can do without,* I thought grimly. *It's just confusing me all the more.*

The sunlight reflecting off the marbled buildings and ferracrystal windows showcased the city's urbanized soul, and hid its true depths beneath. The people strolling quietly along the grand...
courtyards gave the place a peaceful feel.

But cracks were evident, if one looked close enough. Sith patrols skirted the edges of the commercial plazas, causing nearby Tarisian citizens to scurry away in caution. Multiple soldiers guarded every turbo-lift we came across - anywhere from three to six of them - which made me wonder if the Sith had any sort of standard operating procedure, or were still scrabbling to tighten their hold on the Tarisian transport network.

Instinct propelled me to keep moving, to keep searching. Somewhere, I hoped, would be an exit to the lower levels with a smaller guard. A sole soldier we might be able to find a way around, but three or more was getting beyond tricky.

Our path took us through a maze of towering apartment buildings that were emblazoned with the insignia Czerka Condominiums. Tinted windows rose up majestically on all sides, but also blocked out a fair amount of natural light as we silently cut between them. Carth rested his hand on his hip warily, above where his blaster was concealed.

It was effectively a small maze of alleys, and with surprise we found them to be deserted. Turning a corner, I could see the sunlight ahead that signified the end of the high-rise buildings.

A few metres into the bright light, a pair of armoured Humans loomed menacingly over an old man. My muscles tensed in reflex, halting any further movement, keeping me safely concealed in the shadows while I took in the unfolding confrontation.

Carth stilled at my side, the briefest puff of air his only indication of surprise. I sensed rather than saw his finger slowly unclip the gun at his belt.

To my astonishment, one of the Humans up ahead raised a blaster. In full daylight- in an obvious, overt motion. Their audacity was surprising - there might not be any Sith around right now but that didn't mean they weren't lurking beyond the next corner. Yet these thugs – both wearing heavy combat suits that were jarringly out of place in the Upper City – hardly seemed concerned about starting a firefight in broad daylight.

_They're Exchange thugs. Garbed for combat the way they are, they've probably come up from the lower levels. Which immediately posed the question - how are they getting around the Sith quarantine?_

"But I don't have that much!" I heard the old man cry. "How can I give you credits I don't have?"

I moved to evade the incident, giving them as wide a berth as possible to get past – more because of Onasi’s continued hounding at staying inconspicuous than any real desire to. Part of me wanted to barge up to the creeps and tell them to sod off and leave the harassed man alone, while another part just wanted to join in what looked like an oncoming fight. I thought I was rather restrained in ignoring both desires.

"That's too bad," one of the thugs responded in a sinister voice. "You brought this on yourself, you know. Davik can’t afford to let you run free for no cash return. But don’t worry, I promise it’ll be quick."

_Ah, Davik, the Exchange boss Kebla warned me about. These guys probably paid the Sith to turn a blind eye to their operations. That's how they get around._ If they were Exchange agents, then it made sense to ignore the confrontation altogether. To my surprise, Carth nudged me surreptitiously.

I quirked an eyebrow at him, and he nodded sharply towards the old man.
"Look, I know we have to be careful about drawing attention to ourselves," Carth hissed, "but are we just going to let them drag this guy off?"

Well, he doesn’t need to convince me.

"No – help! Somebody help!" the man yelled, glancing around frantically. “They’re going to kill me!” He spotted us further back in the shadow of the apartments, and his eyes gained the fervent glint of the desperately hopeful. The armoured goons followed his gaze just as Carth’s hand inched underneath that ghastly jacket.

I really had to dispose of that orange eyesore soon.

"Well, well," one of them drawled, as he eyed us over. "Looks like we got ourselves a witness here."

The second guy sneered. “Davik doesn’t like witnesses.”

I could feel a smirk forming on my face, and reckless took over with swift ease, dominating any caution or reason. "I don't like your attitude," I mocked. "I'd better teach you a lesson!" With the words flowing from my mouth, my hand shot underneath the dark coat and withdrew my vibrosword.

"Guess we have to teach you to mind your own business!" the first man yelled, swinging his blaster away from the merchant to point to me. Hazily I was aware of Carth edging over to the right to get a clear shot, but my mind was mostly focused on one thought: I need more time. The distance between me and the thugs was about twenty metres, and they were already aiming ranged weapons at me.

I need more time.

My muscles tensed as I began to sprint towards them, and suddenly everything around me seemed to slow down and stretch. The first Human had already loosed a blaster shot in my direction, and I saw the laser beam coalesce toward me like a slow-motion holovid replay. I dodged to the right, just in time. It seemed an eternity until I reached the thug. He was halfway to drawing out a stun baton when I stabbed my blade into his throat. His scream ended in a drawn out gurgle. Music to my ears. I turned to face the other guy. No! Killing is wrong! He was already falling to the ground, shot fatally by Carth.

My surroundings snapped back into place instantly, and I staggered as time took on its normal speed.

What... what the frell just happened? Carth walked over to me, shoving his blaster back underneath his jacket. He doesn't look alarmed. That speed... that eerie feeling... it happened to me alone.

"Wow, you're fast," Carth said in amazement. Something close to respect passed over his face. "Crazy, but fast!"

I forced a fake smile on my face, struggling to contain how unsettled I felt. Better not mention it to Onasi. He already thinks I'm nuts as it is. It had possibly saved my life, though. I couldn't ignore that.

"Thank you – I owe you my life!" the old man gushed in disbelief. "Those bounty hunters were going to take me away and kill me! My wife warned me not to take a loan from Davik."

My eyes shot to the man; he was positively shining with awe and gratitude. You should have listened to her, then. What kind of idiot borrows credits from the Exchange and then can't pay them back?

"Now I can't pay him back. It's not good to owe a crime lord money." Well, duh. "He’ll just keep
sending more bounty hunters after me until I'm dead!"

*I shouldn't judge him,* Jen commented piously. *Maybe I can help.*

"You already helped me by saving me from those bounty hunters!" the man continued. I blinked. *Sithspit, did I say that out loud?* "So unless you have a spare hundred credits to give me so I can pay off Davik, there's nothing else you can do."

*We do have spare credits, now.* My hand was delving in my pockets automatically, coming out with a handful of plastic, disposable chits. "*Here's a hundred credits, take them.*"

*No! I'm a brainless space slug! What am I doing?*

The man lifted his hands up, a look of stunned awe creasing his worried face. I stalled as I made to release the chits into his grasp.

*He needs them more than we do,* Jen whispered.

*He needs a blaster shot to the head. The best use for a moron like this one is fertilizer!* Evil Bitch sneered.

*That's... that's simply despicable!*

I shuddered, and dropped the plasteel tokens into his grimy paws. *Shut up. Just shut up – both of you!* There was a faint easing in my mind, as if the conflicting voices backed away a few steps. My breath released in a rush, and I forced a friendly, fake expression on my face.

"You're giving me a hundred credits? Just like that?" the man spluttered. "I- I don't know what to say! Thank you! Thank you!"

"Generous," Carth murmured at my side, and the old man smiled tremulously at us both before slipping the credits into a pocket. He bowed and left, muttering something about paying Davik. My gaze slid to Carth, who was looking at me in vague surprise. *Maybe this will assist at convincing Flyboy I'm one of the good guys. Maybe that's a silver lining, at least.*

For we might be kitted up for the Undercity, but we certainly weren’t in a position to be throwing away credits on any needy passerby we crossed paths with.

I nodded at Carth, not willing to let myself talk. My mind was in turmoil. I'd given that money away without thinking. It seemed I needed to control Jen as well as Evil Bitch. *I'm going mad. I need to get out of Taris, off this planet.* Carth began striding away, and I followed him in a daze. He was keen to leave the area - and the corpses - well behind. *I will. I will get out of here - just as soon as I rescue Onasi's girlfriend.*

Would it be that simple, though? Would a Jedi let me go? *Maybe killing her would be the better option.* No, that'd be suicide. *That'd be wrong!*

My mouth twisted and I rubbed at the side of my head, overcome by a sudden surge of dizziness. *I said, shut up!* I had to stop thinking. I had to stop my mind warring with itself.

And I wasn't going to kill *anyone* unless I had to.

"Jen?" Carth's low voice caught my attention, and I belatedly realized I'd halted in the middle of a smallish retail courtyard. "*You okay?*"
I smiled, half-aware it likely looked like a pained grimace, and nodded abruptly. "Just a headache. I'll do."

He was frowning, eyes dark with worry. "Maybe we need a rest day, Jen. Maybe we should head to the Free Clinic instead." His gaze trailed up to the side of my head.

No, I didn't want to think. I wanted to act. And not just for my sake- "Every day risks Bastila, Onasi. I'll be fine." I looked away from him, surveying the boutique stores that lined this open area. In the middle stood a carved statue of a grim-looking Human, either made from ferracrystal or a cheaper variant of transparisteel. It sparkled in the golden Tarisian sunlight. And beyond, across the other side of the plaza, wound a small cul-de-sac that ended in the familiar durasteel shaft of a turbo-lift.

I saw the shape of one, sole, black-clad Sith soldier.

I felt a genuine grin curve my lips, and nudged Carth. "There," I murmured. "It's time our luck changed." He glanced in the direction I indicated, and his tight expression eased. When he glanced back to me, he was almost smiling. "Leave this to me, Onasi."

The conflicting emotions vanished like quicksilver as a sharp focus rose to cut through my mental turmoil. I strode forward, mind clear now apart from a thrumming confidence. I could do this. Chin up and shoulders back, I walked through the narrow cul-de-sac and approached the guard with a friendly expression.

The Sith spoke before I had a chance.

"Move along, citizen." The words were monotonous and bored. His tinted visor turned to face me.

"I just wanted to talk to one of our heroes," I gushed, stepping closer. I beamed at him. "How are you finding Taris? The streets are so much safer now you're here!"

There was a lengthy pause, and I felt a prickle of foreboding.

He's not interested in flirting. And I'm too old to be playing the part of a worshipful teenager. The confidence dove-tailed into a flare of anger.

"This elevator is off-limits," he told me stonily. "And you need to learn the art of subtlety. Only Sith patrols and those with the proper authorisation are allowed into the Lower City."

I could just imagine Carth's knowing expression further behind me. My failure was embarrassing, but even more so- I felt angry. It shouldn't be so hard to just talk to the guy. In fact, getting past him should be a frelling cake-walk. The anger flushed heat into my cheeks, and I was suddenly aware of a charged prickling in the air. I hurriedly pasted on what I hoped was my most beguiling smile.

"Where can I get authorisation?"

"If you were supposed to have it, you'd know where to get it!" he snapped. My frustration peaked and the static sensation intensified - almost as if I'd zap the first thing I touched.

"Now quit wasting my time and move along." The Sith flicked his hand in a dismissive wave.

Use the power at your command, you blind idiot. Instinct eclipsed my consciousness, and then I was speaking without any forethought at all.

"We wouldn't cause any trouble down there," I said, my words slow and deep.

"I – I guess you wouldn't cause any trouble down there," the guard returned, this time in a hesitant voice.
The hairs raised on my exposed forearms, and still the dark instinct prevailed. “So you can let me and my friend through.” The words dropped in the air like invisible ferracrete bricks, each one solid and powerful and commanding.

"I can let you through," the guard echoed in a dull tone, and stepped aside.

A hot rush of confusion swamped me, clouding my thoughts and emotions. I felt beads of sweat break out on the back of my neck, and yet somehow I was cognizant enough to just keep moving. Sun and stars. This is the Force. What else could it be? I glanced over my shoulder to see Carth, jaw dropped, staring at me as my hand pressed on the elevator control and the doors opened. Carth would have been too far away to hear the actual words spoken, but I’d still need to explain my success. Somehow.

I threw Carth a tight smile and motioned him into the lift. He strode forward, and we were silent until the doors closed and the lift began a slow, creaking descent.

He cleared his throat. I raised an eyebrow at the brown eyes staring guardedly at me. “What in the blazes did you say to him?” he asked, his voice a blend of suspicion and confusion.

“I told him we wouldn’t be any trouble,” I replied, inwardly wincing. Somehow, I had the feeling I was usually better at cover stories. Although, it was the truth. I forced a grin that I hoped was impish rather than false. “I dunno. Guess he thought I was cute or something.”

There was a loud grinding noise from above, and we paused, staring warily at the elevator’s ceiling. As the lift continued to decline without any difference in its velocity, we both relaxed.

Carth turned to face me again. “Seriously. Even the Sith have standards.” But his mouth was twitching, and I threw him a pretend glare. “What exactly did you say?”

*It wasn't what I said, Captain Flyboy. It was how I said it.* It had to be the Force. The speed earlier, against those thugs. The final pazaak game. I had no idea what I was doing, and it was overwhelming.

"I already told you, Onasi." I shifted uncomfortably. "I don't know why he let me past. But it's a good thing he did."

We lapsed back into silence, and I was aware of Carth taking my measure, staring at me from behind those damn wary eyes of his.

"Do you know," he said slowly, "I've seen Jedi talk their way past people in a similar fashion. And you were onboard the *Endar Spire* due to a specific request by the Jedi." Carth drew in a breath and looked away before continuing. "I learnt a long time ago that something which looks like a coincidence probably isn't. Especially when the Jedi are involved."

I snorted. “What, you think Jedi Shan took me aside to teach me Force tricks every rest day?”

“I, uh, no-”

“I saw her a handful of times, Onasi,” I said flatly, speaking over him. The memory was fuzzy and indistinct, much like the rest of my time onboard the *Endar Spire.* “The only other Jedi I saw was that hefty Cerean who kept throwing archaeological extracts my way. Stars, all I did there was read the sodding archives.”

I couldn’t remember the Cerean’s name, other than he was old and a Jedi, like Bastila Shan. But I wasn’t interested in recalling details right now – I was interested at throwing Carth off-balance
enough that he’d stop questioning matters. For, I knew, he had every right to be suspicious.

His eyes narrowed. “Look, it’s just a lot of things about you don’t add up, okay?”

“Like what?” I snapped defensively. He certainly wasn’t prepared to believe I could sweet-talk my way past a Sith guard. That actually rankled a bit.

“Well, uh- I don’t know, how about the fact you survived the crash?” His words were low and irritated, and I could sense he was slowly getting wound up.

I stared at him blankly, confused. Isn’t that just as odd as him surviving? "You'd rather I hadn't?"

"Don't be ridiculous," he shot back. "It just seems odd that someone Bastila's party specifically requested to transfer aboard happened to survive."

What is he saying? My brow twisted in annoyance. Carth’s suspicion was warranted, but I couldn’t follow his logic here. Why was it less trustworthy that the survivor had been contracted by the Jedi? I looked away, stonily refusing to respond.

The turbo-lift descended further and further in the bowels of Taris, and I realized I had no idea where this one would end. I hoped Carth did.

I kept hold of my anger, though. It made me feel alive and whole, like my senses were peaked by a glitterstim high. And honestly, Onasi was being unreasonable.

As the lift’s descent began to decelerate, I turned to glare at him.

"Are you implying I had something to do with the crash?"

“No!” he answered quickly, and the lift stopped with a shudder.

The doors opened, and I walked out. We'd exited into a warren of artificially-lit corridors, decorated with tattered holo-posters advertising various goods. Graffiti was scrawled haphazardly along the walls; gang slogans or general profanities in varying shades of colour. The place was filthy – rubble and waste littered the ground, and the posters were grimy and damaged in places.

And behind me, Carth mumbled, “Well, maybe.”

"Oh thanks!" I yelled, turning back to glare at him. My muscles clenched, and I could feel the all too familiar fury taking hold again. Must calm down. I gritted my teeth, and forced in a deep breath. "It doesn't make any difference. Go ahead and be paranoid."

"I'm not trying to be paranoid!" he snapped, and I could see the anger crease his face also. He's getting just as pissy as me. Faint shouts drifted from around the corner, but the noise barely registered.

"I'm probably wrong, and this is probably nothing, I know. But I learned a long time ago not to take anything at face value. And I hate surprises."

The shouts became louder, and my annoyance with Onasi vanished as I looked ahead. Sounds like blaster fire. If we’re running into gang fights already, then Kebla wasn’t exaggerating. Carth whipped around in the direction of the noise, then turned back to glance at me. We nodded briskly at each other, argument forgotten, and both drew weapons before slowly edging down the corridor. As
we rounded the corner, I spotted three aliens standing over a pile of corpses.

One of them looked up. "(More strangers!)" he hissed in a foreign dialect. All three were garbed in similarly coloured armour - red slashed with black - and as one they began to raise their weapons.

But I was taken aback. *I understood that. I have no idea what language he just spoke, but I understood that.*

Carth opened fire, and I raced towards them, vibrosword raised. The same battle rage once more consumed me, expanding through my body in a blazing heat as I lost control of my senses and any rational thought. The gang members surrounded me, each with stun sticks and blades, and I could dimly hear Carth shouting at me to get out of the fray. I dodged the first swipe, and swung my blade towards a neck, but the guy stepped backwards. The alien on my left snarled, jabbing a blade towards me. I jumped forward just in time, knocking the first gang member down with my sword.

I felt a piercing pain glance my shoulder, and numbly realized the third creep had pulled a blaster on me.

"Jen, get out of there!" Carth yelled.

*I'm not going down to this scum! Thoughts raged through my head. These imbeciles should be afraid of me!* An unbidden sense of power surged through me, uncontrollable. Two of the gang members instantly gave out synchronized yelps, dropped their weapons, and ran. A sense of shock assailed my fury, but battle sense prevailed and I turned to face the third guy. *He looks as confused as me.* Nonplussed, he stood stock still as Onasi shot him in the side. He crumpled.

"How odd," Carth said as he walked closer. "Why did they just run off like that?"

"Beats me," I said distantly, wondering myself. *I'm using the Force without realizing it. Without any understanding of what I'm doing.* There was a crawling sensation under my skin. *I guess I can't let this power worry me too much, it seems to save my neck,* the rational side of me pointed out. *And it's so much fun,* a darker side added. *Not if I can't control it!*

Carth shook his head in guarded disbelief. "Your luck is amazing, Jen. I was certain that was your end. Look, your battle sense is non-existent, and it's driving me crazy with worry every time we get into trouble. Could you please not run into the middle of fights like that?"

"I'll try," I muttered, kneeling down next to the gang member and searching him efficiently. The corpse held nothing of use – I didn’t need a stun stick and the blaster was one of those five hundred cred Czerka models that were guaranteed to overheat in the middle of a firefight. I stood up in disgust.

"Frankly, I don't understand why you're still standing." Carth was still frowning at me.

*Because I'm good, you idiot.* But was I, really? I'd raced into the fray, there, when we could have fired from a distance. I'd allowed myself to be surrounded, rather than taking out the first one I approached. It was as if some dark, sick side of me relished the challenge - and believed in my own immortality.

I shuddered, and Carth's frown deepened. Once more, his concern seemed to war with his mistrust, and he sighed, before dusting himself off. "Well, we're not hurt, so let's get our bearings and find out what to do next."

I nodded, and we proceeded further down the large walkway. We passed boarded-in openings that once, eons ago, were windows. Halogen lighting framed the ceiling, but in many places the lights
were off – some smashed, some blacked out due to a likely electrical fault. Somehow, I didn’t think building maintenance was a lucrative career choice in the Lower City.

As we walked in silence, both listening intently for any sounds of further battle, I became aware of a foreign consciousness returning to my thoughts. Bastila, I realized with mingled irritation and unease. Great. She’s waking. There was a sense of drowsy frustration.

**I will not be silenced again!**

I stumbled in surprise. That wasn’t my thought, was it? A sense of shock echoed mine, and Bastila’s presence focused on me, like it had done back on the Endar Spire. I felt the familiar taste of fear and confusion, and tried to back off mentally. Obviously something else caught the Jedi’s attention, as the focus seemed to dissipate somewhat. But she’s awake now. A chill prickled down my spine. I can’t afford to lose my temper again.

Carth was looking at me expectantly, and I realized he’d said something.

"Sorry – what?"

"I said, do you want to try this cantina for some info, first?"

I glanced up ahead, and spotted a lurid neon sign brightly proclaiming ‘Javyar’s Cantina’ to all and sundry. It looked somehow out of place in this dark corridor. "Sure."

"Good, you can try your hand at pazaak again." He grinned at me.

I felt a little uneasy at the thought. I’ve got to practice this, though. Each time I’m reacting on instinct – whether it’s in combat or conversation. I need to learn how to control this. It was pragmatic and true, and I gave Carth a nod of assent.

The bouncer outside the cantina gave us a quick once-over before allowing us entry.

It was a far cry from the Upper City cantina. The entrance room split into a dance area at the back and a pazaak den to the left. Thick cigarra smoke mingled with giggledust steam, and I guessed the air recirculators here weren’t the most efficient. Soulful music from a trio of Bith brass players undercut the murmured conversation of busy patrons, most of whom wore some variant of armour.

The Upper City cantina had been scruffier and more low-brow than the rest of the Upper City, but Javyar’s cantina was a step down further. Nothing too overtly illicit – most of the people here seemed at ease and jovial with one another. I found myself liking the place.

Carth nudged me expectantly, indicating the pazaak den.

"A drink, first." I replied.

He frowned at me. "No drinkin-"

"Just one, I promise," I laughed at him, and turned back to the bar that graced the centre of the cantina. Behind the bar I spotted three gang members walking towards a mercenary, in that forced casual stroll that just screamed violence to any experienced eye. They wore scuffed red armour slashed with black, the same colours as the aliens we encountered earlier. My, the action is certainly thick and fast down here, isn’t it? The bartender, a thickset older Duros, looked on in alarm, his dark red eyes widening.

"Go away," the mercenary said loudly. His armour, a customized blue-and-white exoskeleton,
looked formidable, and I could spot three different blasters on his person. The man unusually short, but his ready stance coupled with his equipment immediately showcased him as an experienced fighter. Inwardly, I pegged him as the superior to the three thugs who were spoiling for a fight.

"Hey, you not talk like that!" one of the gang members – a Rodian - said jovially, in broken Basic. "We just want say hi to big, bad bounty hunter Calo Nord!"

"Nah, this can't be Calo Nord," a Human piped up from behind the Rodian. "He's supposed to be tough. This guy's nothing but a runt!"

I kept my eye on the ensuing confrontation. They're just asking for trouble. I could sense Carth tensing as he recognized danger. This is not the sort of guy I would taunt lightly. Even if he is short.

"One," Calo Nord said ominously. He had a hand tucked into a bulky utility belt, I noted with suspicion.

"One? What that mean? You be funny, tough guy?"

Oh, so they're stupid as well.

"Two."

"Me no understand." The Rodian shrugged. "One? Two? Why he count? He trying to count how many of us against him?"

"It's three against one, Calo," the Human sneered. "What do you think about those odds?"

"Three," Calo finished, and his hand whipped out from his utility belt. I instinctively pulled myself back into the pazaak den as a bright flash sheered through the place, followed by the sound of three blaster bolts.

By the time I poked my head back into the cantina, I saw Calo Nord re-hook his blaster to his hip, kick the casing of the flash grenade to the side of the room, and nonchalantly step over the corpses on his way out. I couldn’t help an involuntarily snigger as I eyed over the remains of the three brainless thugs.

Carth shot me a disgusted look. He’d ducked back into the pazaak den also, unlike some of the cantina patrons deeper in the main room who were rubbing their eyes and cursing in a variety of languages. The barman was scowling at the mess on the floor. "Did you just find that funny?" Carth demanded.

"No." Yes.

"Really? I heard you laugh," he said in a sarcastic tone.

"I didn't laugh!" I sniggered.

"It sounded like a laugh to me."

"I had something in my throat, okay?" I snapped.

"Right," he said coldly.

Suddenly I didn't feel like a drink anymore. "Let me just go and play some pazaak. Give me your credits."
"You sound like one of Davik's thugs when you say that," he groused, but handed over his money anyway. In total, we had just over two hundred credits left. I did well enough against the juniors in the Upper City, before I faced Niklos. Now, if I could just figure out how to replicate that mind trick, I'd be one step closer to understanding my own abilities - and I'd be able to make us a small fortune.

xXx

I couldn't believe it. I simply couldn't understand. Why didn't that work? Why couldn't I feel anything? My mind was screaming with frustration.

"You- you lost all our credits?" Carth looked flabbergasted. "How? You won everything in Upper Taris!"

"I guess luck just wasn't with me!" I snapped back.

"Then why didn't you cut your losses? You threw away over two hundred credits!"

"I tried, alright?" I scowled. Gelrood just laughed at me when I suggested he stand with 13. Why? Why? The second player I tried just told me to stop acting like a juiced-up spacer! That energy, that charge all around me – it simply wasn't there anymore. Have I been using the Force, or not? If so, why has it suddenly failed me?

"So we're totally broke, great going Jen." Carth obviously felt he needed to make me feel even worse.

"Not totally," I shot back at him sweetly. "I have just enough left for a whiskey, so excuse me."

I stormed off in the direction of the bartender.

xXx
I was getting restless again; I could feel it in my bones. The desire to go out and explore, to meet new people, to have an adventure - it was beginning to consume me. It didn't help that Gadon refused to let me join in on any of the Hidden Bek assignments. I could help them, I really could! Why do they always treat me like a kid?

Big Z would say it's 'cause I was a kid, but he was the only one who could get away with that. Although I did throw my dinner at him last time.

"(Mission, you're fidgeting like a lice-ridden cub)," he suddenly complained.

I looked up from the spare utility belt I'd been tweaking. It didn’t carry as many tech spikes as my usual one, but was totally more comfortable to wear.

"Let's go explore the Undercity again!" The thought had only just crossed my mind as it erupted out of my mouth.

"(No!)" he exploded in a fierce growl. "(It's too dangerous. Listen to Gadon!)

I had to laugh. How many times have we been down there with no trouble? “Come on, it's not like we can't avoid the rakghouls! 'Sides, I wanna check out those escape pods!” I grinned hopefully at him. “There could be some really cool stuff down there!"

Just thinking about it stirred excitement in my belly. We might find some Republic gear! Think of the creds that would bring us! The Undercity wasn’t a place I went to often – it was dark, depressing, and the rakghouls were actually pretty scary. But they stayed outdoors and were slow and lumbering. As long as we kept our wits about us, they were pretty easy to avoid. Big Z and I had explored the sewer tunnels down there a couple of times, and my bio-scanner had never picked one up in there.

Though I didn’t like the strange, faraway roars I heard sometimes. They were downright creepy. Big Z said it was the sound of the planet’s soul slowly dying, but he could be poetically dramatic like that.

"(There are Sith patrols down there, Mission!)" he was scolding sternly. I’d always found it surprising how strongly he could convey disapproval when howling in his native tongue.

"Bah, they won't bother us," I waved a hand dismissively. Our ‘scanners would pick up the rakghouls and the Sith before they came too close. And worst case scenario: Zaalbar would just grab me and run. It was amazing how fast a seven foot Wookiee could sprint.

"(No, I'm not going)," he said firmly, shaking his shaggy head.

I gave him an affectionate look. "Yes, you are!"

"(Mission)," he whined, "(you are too impulsive for your own good. Let us just stay here)."
"No way!" I retorted, shaking my head in denial. "Live a little, Big Z! Come on, it’s boring round here!"

Besides, this would be a way for the Bek to take me seriously. If we found something important, maybe something that the Sith up top wanted, then it could really give the Bek some leverage. And maybe Gadon would finally let me compete in the swoop races.

"(What are you up to now, Mission?)" A female voice said in Ryl. I glanced up to see Zaaerdra, Gadon's second-in-command, enter the Bek storeroom we were seated in. Zaerdra insisted in speaking purely Ryl to me - as if I was gonna lose my heritage or something if I didn’t hear it daily. I enjoyed ribbing her by always answering back in Basic.

Okay, okay, I knew my Ryl wasn’t fluent, and I only understood the rudimentary basics of the lekku sign-language, but I’d been born on Taris or close to. I was a Tarsian, first and foremost. It wasn’t like I was going to immigrate to Ryloth anytime soon… it wasn’t like I’d ever have the chance.

"Nothing, just talking ‘bout our next adventure,” I answered chirpily, hoping she’d drop it.

Zaerdra pinned me with a glare. "(What adventure? Really, Mission, there’s a gang war going on at the moment. You need to stay put, grow up and have a little more care)."

"Grow up?" the cry was ripped from my lungs as I jumped to my feet. She’s always mothering me – as if I need it!

While gang fighting had erupted into the tunnels and alleyways of the Lower City, it didn’t mean I couldn’t evade all the action if need be. I knew all the secret shortcuts, and had all the gear to warn me of any incoming danger. And worst case scenario: no one was tougher than Zaalbar.

"I take care of myself perfectly fine, and always have! Why do you always treat me like a little girl?"

"(Because you-)") Zaerdra pursed her lips, sighed, and then began again. "(You are still young and spontaneous, and I worry you put yourself in danger. Especially with all the Vulkars out there right now)."

"(Mission can take care of herself)," Big Z growled in Shyriiwook. Good old Zaalbar. He may lecture me to death when we're alone, but he'll always stick up for me. Sometimes I reckon I can't count on anyone else.

"Well don't worry," I said firmly, crossing my arms. "I know the Undercity better than any Bek alive!"

"(The Undercity? Oh Mission, you're not going there again?)" Zaerdra frowned, her brightly waxed lekku twitching in disapproval. She sniffed. "(Gadon will talk some sense into you)."

"Look, Zaerdra, if Gadon doesn't want me along on Bek jobs, then that’s fine. I'll just keep myself busy." I tried to say that in a snooty voice, but considering Zaerdra's scowl I didn’t think it worked. "Let's go, Big Z."

The Wookiee faithfully followed me out of the Hidden Bek base. I grinned and waved merrily to Dane and Lizza who were standing guard at the base entrance, but I was still annoyed inside. I could help the Beks – I’m the best splicer they’ve got - why does Gadon still coddle me? Big Z tried to tell me it was ‘cause they cared, and ‘cause Zaerdra thought she was looking out for me, but I didn't buy that. No one's looked out for me since Griff left, and I've been fine!

But I wasn't gonna think on my brother. Better to contemplate finding all sorts of exotic Republic gear we could flog off to the rest of the Beks.

"(Can we get something to eat first, Mission?)" Zaalbar complained as we wandered down a
shadowy back alley. There was a convenient shortcut between the Bek base and the cantina, and sometimes I wondered at how those brainless Vulkar oafs had never found Gadon’s hideout. Or maybe they know it, and just don’t dare a full out attack. The Beks had more men, it was true, although those nasty Vulkars had been recruiting an awful lot lately.

"You and your stomach!" I poked Zaalbar in his furry side, and made a mental note to nag Zaalbar into having a bath. "It's a good thing I can bring in the creds, Big Z, with the way you eat!"

He growled at my teasing, and I laughed again. "Alright, let’s go get some cantina grub. I might play a bit of pazaak, too."

I recalled the Rodians who'd been there last night, eager to play me – but I'd had to dash. Newcomers that want to challenge the pazaak queen of the Lower City – I'm going to have some fun kicking their scrawny green butts! It'd taken me years to build up this deck, and I was rather proud of it. Some of the cards I’d collected were worth drukloads on the open market.

I skipped along the corridor in anticipation with Zaalbar trudging behind me. A flickering neon light announced the cantina, and I stopped to chat briefly to the bouncer, who all but ignored Zaalbar. Big Z tended to be quiet in other company, and it always amazed me how easily people could forget he was even there. Except when he gets angry. Hard to ignore a seven-foot growling shag carpet!

I waltzed into the cantina and waved cheerily at Sancha, the barman. Glancing around the place, my eyes lit up on a napping patron. A Twi’lek dressed in Vulkar colours, slumped unconscious on the beer-stained bar.

Someone's had a few too many drinks... ooh, this could be fun. I heard a slumbering snore escape him, and grinned.

The Black Vulkar was alone, head resting on limp arms. Sancha gave me a warning look as I approached, but turned to hide a grin. He knew me well, and wasn’t the biggest fan of the Vulkars, anyway. They’d trashed his place three times in the last month – despite the unwritten code of the Lower City. Leave the gang war on the streets.

Zaalbar nudged me. "(Mission, what are you doing?)"

"Big Z, shush!" I whispered. "Go eat something. Your breath stinks."

"(You are getting into trouble again. I cannot let you walk into danger)."

I rolled my eyes at him, pushed him softly away, and hopped onto the stool next to the Black Vulkar. The thug didn’t move; still head-planted on the bar. What sort of trouble could an unconscious punk bring anyway? I leaned nonchalantly against the Twi’lek – he gave a soft snort, but other than that stayed motionless. My wandering hand strayed into his pocket. My, I wonder what this plasteel chit could be. If my luck held, it’d be loaded with creds I could download before the drunk Vulkar woke and cancelled it.

I congratulated myself and jumped off the stool, wandering around the other side of the bar. Zaalbar was shooting me worried looks. "Sancha, dinner for my friend please," I asked cheerily.

"(Mission...)

(Zaalbar moaned. I grinned at him, and motioned to a free table in the corner.

"Easy money." I beamed, grabbing out my datapad to insert the chit ready for download. But there was something stuck to the side of the chit; I peeled it off, considering. It was a crumpled piece of paper.

"Bit odd to have something on paper. It looks like codes of some sort," I commented, tracing a finger down it. “What do you make of it, Big Z?”
"(I don't!)" he wailed when I showed him the writing.

I shot him an exasperated look, and glanced at the paper again. There was a Vulkar insignia hastily scribbled on the top, with the phrase ‘BlackAccess01’ written underneath it in scrawling Basic. *Some sort of password?* I mused, wondering. Further down the page were the hexadecimal codes I’d first noticed. *Weird. Why wouldn’t he have recorded this electronically?*

An idea hit me – only last week I’d stumbled across a system I couldn’t crack. And Gadon’d said he thought the Vulkars had hidden their base in the same place. “Hey! Big Z, d’ya reckon this could have something to do with that security system in the sewers?”

Zaalbar groaned audibly as I felt excitement swell once more through my stomach. My gaze roved hungrily over the page again, but I had the sense to lower my voice. “I reckon it is. I bet ‘blackaccess01’ is the passphrase to login, which means the codes could be...” I trailed off, my eyes widening. “The deactivation sequence to that forcefield we saw! Stuff the escape pods, let’s go check it out! If this‒” I shook the bit of paper to stress my point, “‒is the key to breaking into the Vulkars’ base, then we should make sure it works!”

And if it did, then I could just imagine what Gadon would think. Maybe, after all these years, he might finally relent and admit me as a full Bek member.

I’d been lucky, in a way, that the Beks had taken me in so young. I knew how hard it was to live out on the streets of Lower Taris. But the downside was that Gadon still saw me as no more than the kid he’d rescued years ago – despite all the slicing I did on his behalf.

"(No! Too dangerous! No! I will not allow you to run into a heavily guarded base if I have to tie you up myself!)") Zaabar yelled angrily.

Well, *it's a good thing no one round here can understand Shyriiwook.* "Geez, Big Z, calm down would ya? You sound like a wampa in heat! "Sides," I whispered, "I'm not crazy enough to break into their base. I just want to see if I'm right before I give it to Gadon."

"(No! We will not go!)"

"Calm your friend down, would you? He's scaring the customers," Sancha warned as he strolled over, Zaalbar’s dinner resting on a tray clasped in his hand.

I grinned apologetically at him. "He's just hungry, is all. Saying how he can’t wait for your food!"

Sancha gave me a disbelieving look as he handed Zaalbar his food – typical Lower City cuisine of rehydrated gima beans and cast-off meat from the Upper City – but strolled away without further comment.

"(Mission, I will go with you to the escape pods, if you promise we will not go near that forcefield),” Zaalbar offered hopefully.

Now that was a surprise. Last time, we’d come a teensy bit close to a rogue rakghoul, and Zaalbar had sworn he wouldn’t let me near the Outside again. I beamed at him. *Once I've got him down there, it'll be easy enough to drag him into the sewers. ‘Sides, it's safer in the sewers than the Outside.*

"It's a deal!" I said cheerfully, quickly downloading the Vulkar’s creds before standing. There was only slightly more than one hundred unencrypted, and I was of a mind to make a bit more than that this evening. "I'm gonna hit the card tables, Big Z." I patted his shoulder reassuringly and waltzed off to the card room, cred tokens from last week’s winnings still secure in my belt. I discarded the
Vulkar’s empty chit in a disposal bin along the way.

The pazaak den was adjoined to the main bar under a large archway, and occupied with the usual assortment of drunks, lowlifes, and anyone looking to make a quick buck. Which pretty much included every inhabitant in the Lower City. I liked it here though; most people were too busy looking out for themselves to hassle me for being so young.

Lina, a Zabrak female who frequented the pazaak den more often than me, spotted my entrance and wandered over to embrace me affectionately. She was a spice junkie, and more often than not I’d see that awful glazed look on her face as she rode out another glitterstim high. Today she appeared crisp and coherent, and smelled only of watered-down beer.

"Mission, come to wipe the floor with those Rodian jerks?" she grinned, still hugging me warmly.

I nodded enthusiastically as I stepped back, glancing around the room. Gelrood was holed up in his standard corner, a smug look creasing his face, and the Rodians were playing at the end table.

"You just missed out on an easy catch," Lina told me.

My gaze shot back to her. "Lemme guess, Gelrood thrashed someone? He's looking happier than normal... did he cheat, d'ya think?"

Lina let out a tinkle of laughter. "Not this time. Some crazy new woman lost a whole bunch to him. She kept telling him to stand, or keep going when he was on nineteen."

"Threats?" I raised both eyebrows. It happened, but not often - and usually from the Vulkars or the Sandsnakes, a smaller gang who was just about as nasty. That was the reason most of us refused to play them.

"No, no," Lina giggled, her dull eyes twinkling with mirth. "I was listening to most of it. I don't think she understood how to play the game properly. It sounded like she was making suggestions. Gelrood’s certainly richer, though!"

I grinned, wishing I'd been there. All sorts of sents ended up in Javyar’s cantina, and I personally bet it was some Upper City brat who'd been forced out by the Sith. "Shame I missed out! Anyways, I'm off to try the new guys."

Lina nodded in farewell, and I made my way over to the end table. One of the Rodians looked up as I approached, his large black eyes narrowing in recognition.

"(Hey look, a little girl wants to try a grown up game)," he sneered in Rodese. The other two spotted me next, stopping their game to eye me over.

"Hey, I'm not a little girl, ronto breath!" I glared at them. "Are you afraid to play me? You said last night you wanted to play the champion."

"(This place is easy credits if the champion’s just a little girl)," a second one chimed in, nudging the first. I was starting to get annoyed - but I knew just how much psychology factored in with pazaak. Besides, if my deck didn't treat me well tonight, I'd just cheat to win.

"Maybe you should stop talking, and start playing. Or are you scared?" I challenged, a hand on my hip.

"(Let's see how many credits you have to lose)."
A short time later, and I walked out of the card room smugly, my purse full of tokens just waiting to be cashed in. I'd lost a few games to those smart mouths, but won more. *My lucky deck never fails me.* Well, it *usually* didn't, and certainly hadn't tonight.

"(Little girl cheats! Little girl's asking for trouble!)*" the slurring voice of the Rodian I'd just thrashed drifted after me into the main bar.

I whirled around, glaring through the archway back into the pazaak den. "I do not cheat, gizka brain! Face it, I won fair and square, you sore loser! Now, beat it."

I stalked over to the bar, my eyes narrowed in annoyance. *Would people stop with the age thing already?* I wondered briefly where Big Z was, he must have had four dinners by now.

"(Hey, little girl! You better give our money back. We don't like cheats)," another one of the mouthy runts taunted, dogging my heels. I glanced back to see two of the Rodians had followed me out, their beady eyes intent on me.

"I told you to leave me alone – so give me some space, bug-eye!" I retorted. *These guys just can't handle losing.* "Your breath smells like bantha poo-doo!" It did, actually, and I'd struggled to concentrate on the game at times. *They'd give Big Z a run for his money. Far out. Haven't these guys ever heard of personal hygiene?*

"(This ain't no place for a little girl like you. If you're smart, you'll run away home)." The closest Rodian pointed a finger at me.

*Do they think they can scare me? Hah! I've seen scarier Twi'lek dancers.* "Who you calling a little girl, chuba-face?" I countered, folding my arms and staring daggers at them.

"(Looks like someone needs a lesson in manners!)*" the second Rodian threatened, stepping up level with his friend.

I saw a large shadow loom behind the Rodians, and stifled a satisfied smirk. "And I suppose you creeps are going to give me one? Gimme a break!" I goaded.

Both of them took a challenging step closer. *As if I'm going to back down!* "What?" I struck a pose. "You want to beat up on little ole me?"

"(You asked for it!)*" The first exclaimed angrily, flexing his arm. At once they were both lifted three feet into the air, and I watched happily as their expression turned from rage, to shock, and then finally fear.

"(You want a fight? Then have one with me!)*" Zaalbar roared, and shook them both by the scruff of their necks.

*What a sight! Two annoying insects totally outclassed!* The Rodians yelped in surprise, and Zaalbar growled a second time before throwing them savagely. One of them let out a high pitched squeal as he thudded against the cantina wall.

"Had enough yet?" I taunted.

"(Little girl's lucky she has a big friend)," the larger of the two muttered as he got to his feet. Zaalbar
snarled, and the two Rodians all but sprinted out of the cantina. I poked my tongue out as they passed. Worst case scenario: I always had Big Z to back me up.

When I glanced back to the bar, I saw Sancha was scowling at us. I winked gleefully, and my eyes caught on a Human female laughing at the exchange. I wondered if she spoke Rodese – an’ it wasn’t like she needed to know Shyriiwook to understand a snarling Wookiee meant. I grinned impishly at her and sidled closer, curious.

Another stranger. First the Rodians, now this Human and her sidekick. For another Human was standing a bit behind her, scowling at her back. Her grumpy sidekick, by the looks. Huh, I wonder what they’re doing in here.

"Say, I don’t recognize you and I know pretty much everyone in this part of the Lower City. You must be new down here," I said brightly, smiling at them. "I guess that makes me and Big Z your official welcoming committee!"

The woman grinned in response, and inclined her head. Her green eyes seemed to sparkle with mischief, and I took an immediate liking to her. In the corner of my eye, I spotted Zaalbar losing interest as he turned back to his food.

"Hi, my name's Jen," the Human told me. She had a mop of curly dark hair and wore tattered armour. A vibrosword was strapped to her side, and the other guy was resting his hand on his hip, where I’d bet fifty creds a blaster was concealed. I found it hard to tell age with Humans, but they were much older than me, and had a sort of battle-ready look about them.

I pointed to the man; he had a highly irritated look on his face. "Is that guy with you, or does he just like glaring at the world?"

The woman laughed. "That's Carth. I seem to have a habit of annoying him."

The man named Carth hissed something I didn't hear, his face a picture of heightened frustration.

"What?" She shot him a puzzled look. "You're paranoid, you know that?"

"Anyway," I chimed in, not wanting to witness an argument between the two. "My name's Mission Vao and that big Wookiee over there is my best friend, Zaalbar. I'd offer to give you a tour, but the streets down here aren't safe - what with the gangs and the Sith these days."

"You showed a lot of guts dealing with those bullies, kid," the older man commented. He was probably trying to be polite, but I bristled at the word. Jen looked at me – I wondered if she sensed my irritation, for she quickly spoke again.

"How do a Wookiee and a Twi'lek end up as best friends?" she asked curiously.

I relaxed, warming up to the subject. "We just kind of fell in together. It ain't easy on your own here in the Lower City - everyone's always looking to get the best of you."

"We’ve noticed that," Carth commented in a droll voice. "Still, you seem like an odd pair."

"When I met up with Zaalbar it seemed like a good match," I volunteered. "I knew we could look out for each other. With my street smarts and his muscle, we make a great team." I couldn't ask for a better friend.

The Humans nodded at me, and I wondered again what they were doing at Javyar’s Cantina. Not many of their type came here. I suddenly recalled Lina’s earlier comments, and wondered.
"Say, you don't want to play a game of pazaak, do ya?" I asked brightly.

"No she does not," Carth said quickly through clenched teeth. Jen's face flushed red, and I had to suppress a giggle. So it was her!

"I'd like to ask you some questions," Jen said in a rush.

*I suppose I could let her change the subject.* "Well, you came to the right person!" I told her. "If you want info on Lower Taris, I'm the one to talk to! Davik, the Lower City gangs... I've even got the scoop on that bounty hunter Calo Nord!"

She gave me a considering look. "Calo Nord? He's the fellow I saw earlier. What do you know about him?"

"Calo Nord's one of the most famous bounty hunters in the galaxy!" I enthused. "He's killed more people than the Iridian Plague! I've seen him kill people just for looking sideways at him!" He was pretty scary; I sure as heck didn't try talking to him. He didn't usually turn up here unless he was hunting down a bounty. Bad for business, Sancha would grumble. "Calo hangs around Zax's bounty office, but I don't think he's looking for work there. I reckon Calo's been hired by Davik to do a special job for the Exchange. I'd wager a thousand creds that as soon as the quarantine ends, he'll be getting off this rock."

"A thousand big ones – that's some amount," Jen murmured. Carth scowled at the mention of credits, and I grinned. *I reckon they're flat broke now. You gotta be some sort of head-case to lose that much to Gelrood.*

"Well," Jen continued. "I'm mostly interested in finding a way down to the Undercity."

*Ooh, I bet she's going down there because of the escape pods! I'm almost tempted to join up with them... but I work better alone. Alone with Zaalbar, anyway. "You'll have a tough time getting past the Sith guard," I warned. "They don't have the manpower to control the streets down here, but they've set up an outpost next to the Undercity entrance." I knew a few other ways around the guards, but they were my secrets alone. "Why d'ya want to go to the Undercity, anyway? The rakghouls attack anything on sight!"

"Just want to check out a few things," she said lightly.

I let out a grin. *Yep, definitely going after the escape pods.* "Well, good luck getting there. If you need help, have a chat to Gadon Thek – he's the leader of the Hidden Bek's."

"I don't know if we want to get involved with the gang wars," Carth murmured.

"Gadon's a good guy!" I jumped in quickly. "And a great leader! This gang war is totally the Vulkars fault! They're the ones who started killing everything on the streets – just 'cause of the Sith trying to wrest control. Between those two, everyone's gone insane out there."

"Sounds a good reason to stay out of it then," Jen commented drily.

"Well, maybe," I said, shrugging. "But I don't reckon you'll be able to get to the Undercity without Gadon's help."

Gadon always liked to check out strangers himself, and he usually helped the good ones... if they helped him, of course. *He'd want to meet these two.* Both of them looked pretty tough and, despite their wish to stay away from the gangs, I knew that was easier said than done. The Vulkars would even harass *me* on sight these days.
Except in the cantina, of course - that's off-limits. Usually. The Vulkar I'd looted earlier was still passed out on the bar. Well, he was asking for it. Sheesh… who passes out drunk with their pockets loaded?

"This dive is boring," I complained. "I'm gonna go find some action. Nice to meet you, Jen."

"And you," she smiled at me. I grinned back. *I've got some creds, Big Z's been fed - it's time to hit the streets.*

"Come on, Big Z!" I called out to the corner where Zaalbar was probably onto his fifth meal already. "Let's get going."

He complained, but followed me loyally to the door.

*Time for an adventure!*

xXx
The Twi'lek girl was right; the Sith were vigilantly guarding the Undercity entrance. In a snide tone, Carth suggested I should talk them into letting us past, but I put that down to bad temper and ignored him. *I'm not trying that again, not after my spectacular failure in the pazaak den. Maybe we should try talking to Gadon first - Mission was fairly insistent.*

She seemed like a sweet kid, although I wouldn’t call her that out loud. *Unlike Flyboy - great tact there. Bright, impulsive, good-natured... she reminds me of someone. I don't know who... maybe she reminds me of what I'd like to be.* I blinked, surprised at my own train of thought. *No, there was something a bit naïve and enthusiastic about her. She'd probably stick her neck out to save gizka,* I thought sourly, *just like Jen.*

"So, not interested in chatting up the Sith?" Carth muttered. He was still pissed at our lack of credits, and his mood was becoming more than a little tiresome. But – loathe as I was to admit it – Carth had a valid reason to be angry. Our dire money situation was an issue. I’d probably have to sell the stims I’d been hiding so we could actually eat for the next few days.

"I think we should speak to Gadon," I said in a measured tone. "I haven't got any other ideas, and Mission strikes me as a genuine sort. If she suggested going to the Beks, then it's likely a good start."

Carth muttered something under his breath, but followed my lead - back to the cantina. Fortunately, getting directions to the gang base from there wasn’t difficult – obviously the Beks were used to visitors. A quick walk from the cantina on one of the main pipelines through the Lower City brought us to the guarded entrance of the Hidden Bek base. I briefly wondered what genius had given the gang their name.

The guard was poorly armed, but quick to protest as I tried the door – an old-fashioned, swinging door made of a thick plasteel compound, and likely bolted from the inside seeing as I couldn't budge it at all.

"Hey, you can't just walk in here!" the guard yelled indignantly, shoving me away from the resistant door. A flash of fury fired in my gut; part of me knew that anger so quick to flare was both dangerous and unhealthy. I clenched my teeth and pushed it away. *Calm down, she's just doing her job.* I swear I could feel Carth smirk behind me.

"I want to talk to Gadon Thek," I said, struggling to keep my tone pleasant and non-threatening.

"And how do I know you're not a Vulkar spy sent to kill him?" the guard sneered, her face twisting in dislike as she eyed me over.

"Uh, well, you don't?" I offered without thinking. Her expression darkened.

"Look," I appeased quickly, inwardly kicking myself. "I'm not a Vulkar. I just want to get into the Undercity. Mission suggested I talk to Gadon."
She was still glaring at me in distrust. "Mission Vao? Well, I suppose it's not like you can do anything to harm Gadon in the heart of his own base. Not with Zaerdra watching his back." She paused for a minute, her lips twisting as she thought it over. "Go in and speak to Gadon if you want. Just remember to be on your best behavior... the Hidden Beks are watching you."

*She has no right to talk down to me like that!* My thoughts tumbled over one another, rage and logic vying for dominance. *No, I need their help. Anger will do no good here.* I felt my fingernails dig into my palms as I struggled for calm, struggled to push aside the unreasonable anger.

The guard knocked loudly on the door, and a small panel slid open in the centre. I could just make out a shadowy face stare at us from behind a pane of grimy transparisteel.

"Strangers," the guard called. "Claim they want to see Gadon about the Undercity."

A grating noise indicated the bolting mechanism was being dismantled, and a minute later the door opened. Considering the lax security – we hadn’t even been searched! – I was becoming more and more surprised that the Sith hadn’t conquered these Lower City gangs. Carth shot me a disbelieving glance; he was thinking along the same lines then. *I guess the Sith are just as incompetent on Taris as everywhere else in the known galaxy. These gangs are ripe for the taking. The Sith? Incompetent? Why would I think that? I tried to chase down the origin of the thought, but it slipped away into the shadows, another secret locked in the recesses of my unstable mind.*

*Don’t just stand there like you’ve swallowed a Bothan stunner, idiot.* The guard was getting suspicious at my pause; her brows had lowered into a full-fledged glare as I stalled in the entrance, wearing a glazed look like a stim junkie. Carth nudged me towards the open door, shooting me a concerned look.

I shook my head to clear out the cobwebs, nodded curtly to the glowering guard, and strode into the Bek base.

The main hall of the base was rather large, and armoured gang members lurked against the walls, staring at me as I walked through. A few of them stroked their displayed weapons overtly as I caught their eye. *Gang members and their egos. As if a bunch of poorly dressed thugs with vibroswords could intimidate me.* But most of them were content to size us up from a distance – apart from a Twi’lek female stalking toward us, her eyes shooting daggers and her stride purposeful and that of a competent fighter.

"Hold it right there - who are you and what is your business with Gadon?" she demanded, hands on hips as she blocked my way. My hand twitched towards my vibrosword instinctively. The woman’s eyes widened as she caught my move and she snarled, drawing out her weapon in a flash.

*Damn my gut reactions!*

"Spies!" she yelled, and a chorus of gang members bellowed in response. The noise of multiple blades being drawn rang through the hall, and fleetingly I hoped none would pull out blasters. *Stop this, before I get hurt!* My hand held the hilt of my vibrosword tightly, but sense stopped me from lifting it. *Before I get hurt? This ragtag mob is no match for me!*

"We’re not here to fight!" Carth called out desperately next to me.

"Everybody stop!" an authoritative voice shouted above the din. All around us Hidden Beks stood watching warily, blades – and blasters, I noted – aimed directly at us. All because of my gut reaction to that Twi’lek’s hostility. *I hope Carth didn’t see that – or I’ll never hear the end of it. If we get out of here alive, that is.* My eyes flicked around the large hall; perhaps forty gang members surrounding us, and at least ten had blasters.
...I really need to work on my instincts.

The man who'd called a temporary halt to the proceedings was strolling towards us. He was Human, I noted in surprise – the only Human Bek in the room. I wondered if he was their illustrious leader; his authority coupled with his nonchalant stance seemed to suggest so.

"They're spies, Gadon, sent by the Vulkars!" the Twi'lek insisted, eyes glaring into mine. *Say something, before this Gadon loses control of his troops!*

"No, Mission suggested we come talk to Gadon," I said in a rush.

"Lies!" the woman hissed. She raised her vibrosword higher, pointing it threateningly at me. I swallowed down the urge to fight back against her challenge; to slash open her throat and end her defiance. *I will not lose control. Not here, otherwise I may as well just sodding shoot myself!*

"Calm down, Zaerdra," Gadon said in a soothing voice. "If Mission sent them here, I doubt very much they'd be looking to attack me. It would be a suicide attempt, at any rate."

"Gadon, you're too trusting! I saw that sneak-"

"Zaerdra," he cut in, his voice a warning.

She glared hatefully at me and stood down, but did not sheathe her weapon. I felt the eyes of everyone on us, ready for one false move. *If I ever needed to control Evil Bitch, it is right now.* Carth stood in a defensive pose next to me, his eyes flicking from person to person.

"Now, what did you two want?" Gadon asked in a friendly tone, as if I didn't have forty weapons primed at my head.

"We're looking for a way to get into the Undercity," I replied blandly. His eyes bore into mine in inquiry, the strange violet colour of ocular implants. They were an expensive way to restore eyesight, which made me wonder, idly, just how profitable the Hidden Beks' operations were.

"And Mission sent you to see us?" he questioned. "Why do you want to go there?"

I hesitated. *May as well tell the truth - I can't think of anything believable to invent.* "I want to check out the escape pods."

Gadon took my measure, eyeing me over in consideration. "Well," he said in a lower tone, too soft for anyone bar us and Zaerdra to hear. "You're not Vulkars or Sith. If you were working for Davik, I'd expect you to find your own way to the Undercity. You're with the Republic, aren't you?"

*No.* Carth's face tightened in discomfort. "We're looking for someone," I hedged. Carth turned to glower at me, and I realized belatedly that perhaps I wasn't being as evasive as I'd hoped. Gadon had a little smile on his face.

"I don't mind telling you what I've learnt. The Vulkars stripped the pods clean some time ago, and I know for a fact they took a Republic Officer captive."

"Who?" Carth demanded, his voice loud in the now-quiet room. Gadon shot him a startled look.

"Relax, Flyboy." I scowled at him. I'd only just drawn myself back under control, I didn’t need him jumping the gun too.

"What's the name of this person you're looking for?" Gadon replied. *Thinks he's got the upper hand,*
"A woman called Bastila," I muttered.

"Jen!" Carth hissed. His face turned red with anger. "What are you doing?"

"Calm down, Flyboy." I shot him a quelling look, but from his expression I knew there would be words later.

Gadon chuckled, his strange eyes glinting. "I had to see some trust before I went further."

"I don't trust anyone," Carth said, but he was glaring at me.

Gadon's eyebrows lowered.

And here I thought I was the one who made things worse. "Don't pay any attention to him; he's just my version of Zaerdra." I appeased. I heard a low noise from Carth. *Be quiet, Flyboy!* Zaerdra hissed, a new level of malice crossing her face. Somehow, I didn't think Zaerdra would ever be a friend of mine.

*Sod it all.* I turned back to face the leader of the Hidden Beks. "So, Gadon, can you help us?"

"Perhaps we can help each other," Gadon offered. I inclined my head in curiosity, and he continued. "Ever ridden a swoop before?"

I blinked. *Have I?* "Uh, once or twice," I bluffed. "Why?"

"Bastila is the officer Brejik – and his Vulkars – captured. He's offered her up as prize for the annual swoop race in a week's time," Gadon continued.

"Prize?" Carth said in a sort of squeak. *Heh, no wonder she's always unconscious. Sedated, probably. I can't imagine an uptight Jedi standing for any of that.* Though she had been awake the last few hours, and very, very angry. Her presence radiated heat in the back of my head.

"The only chance you have of getting Bastila back is at the annual swoop race. But you need a gang sponsor to enter." Gadon smiled at me. "I could be persuaded to sponsor your entry."

I raised an eyebrow. "All of this is sounding like a bit of a long shot. And exactly what sort of persuasion are you after, Gadon Thek?"

His smile broadened, like he'd caught a fish wriggling on a line. I wasn't particularly impressed with the thought of myself as a harmless aquatic, and felt a scowl forming.

"The Vulkars stole an accelerator prototype from our swoop bikes. Get it back for me, and I'll get you in the race," he said. My eyes bugged out with disbelief. *That's a little something? Well, this will be interesting... and I wonder if really was theirs to begin with."

Zaerdra snorted in derision. I saw Carth's mouth drop open in the periphery of my vision.

"Think they'll just let two strangers waltz on in and nick it?" I said, hearing the sarcasm in my voice. "This doesn't really sound like help."

"You're in no position to bargain here!" Zaerdra growled. One of her lekku twitched and my eyes followed automatically. *What did she just call me?* Confusion followed – maybe I really was losing it if I thought a Twi'lek’s headtails were insulting me.
"The Vulkars will win the swoop race hands down with that prototype," Gadon added.

"Why is that so important to you?" Carth asked. He was frowning in suspicion.

Gadon shrugged, but seemed content to answer our questions. "Prestige and power goes along with winning. If the Vulkars win again this year, more of the smaller gangs will flock to them."

*Well, breaking into their base does sound like fun,* a dark voice commented. *No - without a sound plan and appropriate gear, it sounds flat-out insane.* I gritted my teeth, pushing the thoughts away. "All right, Gadon, say we do this. Where is it?"

"The Vulkars have a nearby base whose entrance is *very* heavily guarded. The thieves were spotted absconding into that stronghold, but it'd be suicide to retrace their footsteps – especially since there’s reports of a back entrance in the sewers." Gadon paused, staring at us. "I know of one person who might be able to find that entrance: Mission Vao."

"Mission? Gadon, you can't be serious!" Zaerdra burst out in a horrified tone. "She's just a kid - how is she supposed to help them with this? I thought you agreed to keep her out of the Undercity!"

Gadon tensed, but kept his eyes on me and Carth. "Zaerdra, the Vulkars are making gains with all this fighting. You know this. We need to win the swoop race."

"But you've never involved Mission before, and -"

"Zaerdra, I don't have a choice!" Gadon said, his voice rising with heat. "And she’s not just a kid anymore!" He sighed, briefly closing his eyes before continuing his instructions. "You should find Mission in the Undercity, according to the latest rumours. Do not let her enter the Vulkar base, or you will become an enemy of the Beks. This I vow."

I felt my expression freeze. *Is that a threat, little man?* I took a deep breath. *No! He's a good man, don't get angry! Please!* I settled for nodding slowly at Gadon, not trusting myself to speak.

"Wait a minute," Carth whispered to me. "If we're breaking into a Vulkar base, and they have Bastila, then why go through the rigmarole of a swoop race at all?"

*That* was a valid point. Gadon’s hearing was better than I – or Carth – expected, for the leader chortled. "If you think that’s the only Vulkars’ base – or this, the only Beks’ one – then you are misinformed about the size of Taris. Your officer Bastila will be imprisoned deep into their territory across the other side of the Lower City. The only reason they haven’t moved the swoop part there is the Beks."

"We live up to our motto," Zaerdra added in a cold voice before elaborating: "The Hidden Beks are watching you."

As far as gang catchphrases went, it was pretty meek. I held back a smirk.

Gadon was nodding in agreement. "Either bring the accelerator back, or destroy it. Our riders will beat the Vulkars without it."

"You're forgetting one thing," Carth interrupted. "Just how are we supposed to get past the Sith guard down to the Undercity?"

Gadon grinned wickedly and held out his hand towards me. Clasped in it, he offered a large electronic data-chit. "Sith authorisation papers, access to the upper, lower and bottom levels of Taris. That's my sign of trust."
Zaerdra still wore a stony expression. I nodded my thanks. *If nothing else, he's an honourable man. I'll be back once I've dealt with the accelerator.*

I turned and headed out of the base, staring aggressively at every Bek that met my eye. I also made sure to slam that archaic door on my way out.

"Thanks, Jen," Carth muttered, opening the door to let himself out as well. *Oops.*

It was late, and we started the walk back to the hideout in silence. Inwardly, I blessed Mission Vao, as I clutched our ticket to Tarisian freedom. If nothing else, we now had a way to roam the levels freely. *Gadon must pay a pretty cred to the Sith to have papers like these readily available. Or maybe it was a mutual arrangement - tentative cooperation between the gangs and the Sith. It was the lower levels where the vast majority of the population lived, after all. If the gangs didn't keep the masses in check, they actually *could* overrun the surface.

"How could you just come right out and say Bastila's name?" Carth condemned a minute later. "You think they won't sell us out to the Sith for a few credits?"

"I think we had no other option," I replied.

He sighed noisily. It sounded like he wanted to lambast me further, but knew, perhaps, that I had a point. "Maybe you're right, Jen. After all, it's our first genuine lead for Bastila."

The concession surprised me, and I turned to stare at him. Carth was still frowning in thought, but his anger seemed to have disappeared. He caught me looking, and the corner of his mouth twitched.

"We're a step closer due to your instincts. For a moment there, I thought that insane Twi'lek was about to start a firefight."

*I'm instincts... He hadn't noticed my pre-emptive move towards the vibrosword, then. Good thing, too, otherwise he'd be damning my instincts rather than praising them. I felt slightly uncomfortable.

"Still, I wish we didn't have to trust a gang leader," he continued as we walked along.

"He won't sell us out to the Sith," I muttered. *Well, not until we've dealt with the accelerator, my cynical mind added.*

xXx

Darkness reigned, and I prowled through an empty apartment; for once feeling unwatched and alone. My connection with Bastila had vanished an hour ago, just as I'd given up on the idea of sleep. All evening I'd been swamped with her anger, her frustration - and at times a sly sense of satisfaction - which had all the more aroused my curiosity. *What has she been up to? I swear I can tell when she's using the Force, and it seemed like she was making an escape attempt. The last emotions I'd sensed had been rage and denial, before her presence seemed to fade into drowsiness. Obviously she'd been sedated once more, I'd thought, but then her presence vanished completely from my mind an instant later. Like she'd been cut off from the Force. Like she'd never been linked to me. Or- killed?*

But no, I didn't believe that. I would have felt her life-force draining away if she had died. *Would I? How would I know what I'd feel?* While I was still curious about the Jedi's predicament, I'd decided to stop thinking and enjoy my new found freedom from her mental presence.

I'd left Carth snoring back at the hideout to go on a looting mission. *I may have promised not to steal again, but he clings to his mistrust so fiercely that I'd hate to disappoint him. I'd sold those stims to buy dinner, which had only annoyed Carth further. Would he rather starve?* He was irritated - presumably because I hadn't told him about my hidden stash.
I was deeper in the alien quarter, a remote apartment block that was as rundown as ours. I was interested in credits, to once more fill my depleted purse. *That's not the only reason. I'm trying to chase down a memory.*

Picking locks, and sneaking through people's homes... felt familiar. *Was I a street kid? A street kid with morals, perhaps, it didn't feel right to clean out a place out entirely. Just take a little bit, only what I need.*

A street kid who'd fought in the Mandalorian Wars, and whose close friend wielded a lightsaber.

I needed to know... to know more. I wasn't Jen Sahara, and I couldn't be Evil Bitch. Maybe here, by doing what felt natural, I would uncover some further details.

The grubby apartment I was looting was deserted for the night, and I flicked on a bedside lamp. The place was stark and empty, with living quarters deeper in the room and a refresher to the right. I saw a stack of holovids in the corner, and a handful of plasteel chits. *Silly sents leaving these here for the taking.* I palmed them, turned towards the exit, and froze as the door swished open-

"Who are you? Thief!" an armoured Trandoshan yelled in Basic. He charged into the room, drawing a pair of vibroblades, and I only just had my 'sword raised in time. Behind him, two other thugs in combat armour were framed in the doorway.

*Kath crap! I've been looting some Exchange jerk's hideout!*

Knocking the man's knives to the side, I feinted left and sidestepped right, lunging towards his torso as I did so. He twisted back, and my blow glanced against his armour. One of his allies was flanking him, now, wielding a vicious-looking vibro-staff.

An icy sliver of desperation shuddered down my spine. *Use the Force, you moron!* I ducked and rolled to the right of them both, jabbing the second one in the leg. I felt his armour give as my blade cut deep. *I don't know how!* The thug screamed, wilding swinging the staff at me. It caught on my wounded shoulder, and I let out an involuntarily shriek, scrambling backwards.

*Use the pain!* I gritted my teeth, dropped a hand from the vibrosword to pull out a blaster, and shot the man in the face. Twice.

Another scream from him, this time his last.

A glancing pain scored against my hand, and my gun dropped to the floor in reaction. *The third bastard shot me in the hand!*

"You die now!" he yelled, pointing the gun at my head. The Trandoshan was still on my left, advancing with a fierce gleam of ferocity.

*I'm not going down to this scum!* Thoughts raged into a blistering storm, and something strong surged through me, uncontrolled. I could suddenly sense the environment around me as power, particles to be manipulated – and, once more, muscle memory reigned supreme. I snarled, and raised my wounded hand towards the first thug, and clenched it despite the pain.

I could *feel* him as he was raised off the floor, propelled into the air... right in front of the next blaster shot fired at me from the third man. *These bugs dare to hurt me?*

The Trandoshan gurgled in midair, and I mentally shoved. He was thrown backwards into the other man, so they both crashed to the floor, one on top of the other. *I will not be stopped! No one can challenge me!* The sheer power of ultimate rage tasted so sweet.
I stalked up to the two bodies in the doorway, and viciously stabbed my blade into both. A cut-off scream from the body underneath. A sweet melody.

I looked up, and another shadow flickered across my consciousness, further down the public corridor. No one can escape me. The residential spectator was backpedaling away, futilely trying to escape. I ripped my vibrosword out of the prone corpses, and threw it down the hallway with inhuman speed. It hit the bystander with a thud, sinking deep into an unarmoured chest. He slowly crumpled.


An icy rush as the blazing power deserted me in a flash.

I ran to the body, fell to my knees, and clutched at his shoulders. He was a Rodian, clad in the tattered rags of an alien trying to survive the xenophobia of Upper Taris. Oh no, no, no... what have I done? His body convulsed once before stilling. Blank eyes stared up at me, accusing. Bright red blossomed against the blade that stuck out awkwardly from his chest. I've just murdered an innocent! Someone who was no threat! A noise in my throat. What have I become?

Numbness enveloped me. Distantly, I could feel a wet trail of shame edging down one cheek. There was anguish, lodged hard in my chest... but a thick cloud of detachment, too. What's another to my tally?

The empty eyes of the stranger still blamed me as burning bile rose in my throat. I fell backwards against the wall, dry-retching. What sort of monster am I?

I can't control this. I'm turning into something... repulsive, loathsome. I can't keep doing this. Funny how quiet Evil Bitch was all of a sudden. I didn't feel any glee at all, from any side of me.

I need help; I've got to turn somewhere. Before I slaughter anyone else.

I could use the Force again. Why this time, and not before?

I need help.

Dia told me to see a doctor.

Maybe the doctor who gave Onasi that kolto could help me.

I left my vibrosword where it was and scrabbled to my feet. Horror still pounded through my head. I was walking, stumbling, running... I didn't notice my surroundings, my thoughts were too rampant. Death. Do I bring death wherever I go?

xXx

Somehow, I stumbled into the medical facility a few hours before dawn, just as it was opening. A shifty looking individual stood by the entrance, waving me in with barely a second glance. Inside was a stark foyer lined with chairs, and a handful of closed doors that likely led to treatment rooms.

A dark-skinned Human dressed in tidy white clothes was bent over a console. He looked up as I approached.

"Welcome. My name is Zelka Forn, and this is the Central Free Clinic,” he greeted. “What can I do for you?
The man was middle aged and greying. His face was lined, his gaze steady, and he somehow exuded a calming presence with his expression alone.

"Hi," I began.

"What do you need? Healing? Medical Supplies?" Zelka asked.

"Well, advice more than anything," I said.

"Of course," he murmured, tilting his head in acknowledgment. "What seems to be the problem?"

I'd tried to rehearse this in my head during the last hour. It hadn't helped. "I hit my head severely a few days ago, and ever since then I haven't been thinking straight."

Zelka peered at me through wizened eyes. "You may have concussion. Would you like me to examine you?"

"I don't think that's it," I replied. "I've been having some strong thoughts that are totally out of character, and I can't seem to control them."

"Can you elaborate on these thoughts?" he questioned. His bushy eyebrows raised as he continued to stare at me searchingly.

"Well, I'm usually a shy person," I lied. "But lately I've been having violent… urges. Like, someone's been rude to me, and I've had to restrain myself from pushing them." Pushing them. Yeah… nice euphemism. Let's not tell him about my murder pangs.

"I see," Zelka answered, and then looked at my hand. "Pushed someone recently, have you?"

I flushed. "Uh, a fight I couldn't get out of." A fight where I killed an innocent.

"Hmm." Zelka picked up a pot of salve and started seeing to my hand as he continued the conversation. "And you've been having these thoughts ever since you hit your head?"

"Yes," I replied, "and I really need to concentrate on what I'm doing right now, but my emotions keep making this difficult."

A frown creased the older man’s face as he cleaned my hand. I tried not to wince. "Can you recall the events leading up to your injury?"

"Well, not really. It's all hazy." Like the last year. "I woke up on the ground with my head split open. Everything's been crazy since then."

Zelka was silent for a long time. "It could be your conscious self has forgotten something," he said slowly. Hah! And the prize goes to the good doctor! "Strong emotional outbursts after a head injury can be indicative of short-term amnesia. If some incident occurred that your conscious mind finds too traumatic to recall, your sub-conscious may have protected it as a defense mechanism. That could perhaps explain the emotional outbursts – your inner emotions manifesting in other ways. Are you sure your head injury was an accident?"

"Um, yeah." How would I know, if I can't remember it?

"Hmm." He didn't look convinced. "Well, I'm not a psychoanalyst. My advice would be to go to your family or loved ones, and spend some time recuperating there."

"I-I can't," I hedged, "not for awhile, anyway. I just need some advice on how to deal with this. I've
tried controlling my emotions, but that doesn't seem to work."

"That's probably because you are battling rather than resolving them," he countered. "I would also suggest meditation as a method for calming your mind. There are many tutorials on the holonets that can help as a starting point if you do not know how."

I nodded. "Anything else?"

"If it's getting out of control I can prescribe you some medication, but the side effects are strong. Drowsiness, passivity, and reduced brain activity. I would not suggest taking it unless absolutely necessary."

No, I'd rather not. That sounds too much like the last half-year has been, scurrying around silently on the Endar Spire like a scared tach.

Zelka tapped his fingers on his desk. "Is there anything that brings you serenity? An activity that grants you peace of mind? Something you can focus on?"

I thought for awhile, struggling to remember what hobbies Jen liked. But would Jen's hobbies work for me? I sat down on the chair opposite Zelka, and closed my eyes. 

Peace, serenity... what would make me feel like that? I took in a deep breath, and tried concentrating inwardly.

Focus on your breathing, a voice whispered. Focus on the Force all around you. A mild vertigo that was becoming all too familiar swept up from my gut and engulfed me.

…

I could see a wooden board in front of me, with figures of carved stone on different squares. They each had a different rune engraved on them, all indicating different tactics and specials that applied to each piece. It was a favourite pastime of mine, and certainly beat meditation. We'd brought the game from our homeworld, eschewing the more traditional dejarik in favour of it. Years ago, Freeflight had carved me a rudimentary set, back in the desolate alleys of the Western Underground.

The focus the game required forced all emotion from my head as I concentrated on pure on tactics.

I moved the Chandrilan Peace rune forward. It was seen as one of the weaker pieces, which was why so many often underestimated it.

"Match," I murmured, a smile curving on my face. A restlessness claimed me once more as my mind released the focus required to win the game.

"Nice move. You won't catch me out that way again," a handsome young man sitting across from me said.

The scene faded, and the last thing I saw was the rueful grin lighting up the man’s face as he stared at me affectionately.

…

I opened my eyes as the present flooded back in.

"And'zhai runes," I answered Zelka slowly. I remembered the name, but not the rules. I hoped I hadn't been sitting there too long. "It's a strategy game, similar to dejarik."
"I know neither game," Zelka said, "but strategy is a good focus for calming the mind. It is like a beast, you know. The mind can be trained. If such exercises bring you serenity, then I suggest focusing on them whenever you feel your emotions going out of control."

I nodded, but my mind was still whirling from the flashback. *That was another glimpse of who I really am... and it's certainly not Jen or Evil Bitch.* But the clues seemed contradictory in themselves... a street kid, who played tactical games and fought in wars, and whose best friend carried a lightsaber. *How can any of that make sense?*

"Got another rakghoul case," a different voice interrupted my reverie, and I glanced up to see the man from the entrance. "Some woman outside is begging you to look at her daughter in the Lower City. I don't know how she got past the Sith patrol."

"Rakghoul case? What's that?" I asked.

"It is a terrible affliction that has plagued Taris for many generations," Zelka replied. His voice was heavy. "It is spread by bites or scratches from rakghouls - beings who were once sentient, before the disease rotted most of their brain away. They live in the polluted Undercity, the open surface of Taris far beneath the great skyscrapers you see in the Upper City. We do not know how the disease first originated, but those infected mutate into rakghouls themselves, becoming no more than a wild beast attacking anything on sight."

_Sounds like me_, a forlorn voice whispered. "Is there no cure?" I whispered.

"Not a widely accessible one. I heard that a group of local scientists base here on Taris had perfected a vaccine, one that would stop the disease from taking root - and even halt its progression if caught in the early stages." A scowl formed on the Human's face. "Then the Sith imposed their quarantine. We have had a Sith presence on Taris for some years, but they *had* left academic institutions alone. Not any longer. They overran the laboratories, and now refuse access to anyone but their own forces. The Sith have copies of the prototype serum, but will not to distribute it. If I could just get my hands on a sample then the rakghoul disease could be wiped from the face of Taris forever!" Zelka declared in obvious passion. He sighed, then, the fierce emotion draining from his lined face. "But I don't see how that's going to happen."

I wanted to help this man. "Maybe I could find a way to get that serum for you." *Jen, go away.*

"I don't see how anyone could get their hands on it," he concluded, and his manner had returned to the brisk clinician of earlier. "The labs are crawling with Sith guards. Breaking in there would be tantamount to suicide. And now, I'd best see this lady waiting outside."

"Thank you for your advice, Zelka," I responded. "I appreciate it."

"I hope it helps. You can always come back if you are still having problems. There are a few hypnogenic techniques we can try, but there are risks involved."

_Hypnosis? No thanks. I've already had someone screw with my mind._

Zelkalooked at me steadily. "I can sell you that medication if you think you may need it."

"It couldn't hurt. How much?" _Always good to be prepared, I guess. The passive side-effects are slightly worrying... but you never know when drugs could come in handy._ Zelka gave me a small bottle of meds, plus a few sedation hypodermics, for about half the credits I'd lifted that night.

Zelka nodded farewell to me, and walked away to greet his next patient.
I stood up, and stretched. *Onasi's probably scared silly I've run off again. I should head back.* But as I passed the assistant, he nudged me. It was about as subtle as a ferracrete brick.

"Psst! You there," he whispered loudly. "Wait a minute. I need to talk to you about the rakghoul serum. I've got an offer you might want to hear."

"An offer?" I quirked an eyebrow in question. There was a greasy sort of look about the man I didn’t quite trust.

"Zelka isn't the only one who wants to get his hands on the rakghoul serum. The Exchange will pay you ten times what Zelka can afford if you get the cure."

"Um, no thanks," I mumbled, edging away. *I don't want to start my raging thoughts going again!*

"Don't be stupid!" He followed me, his voice insistent and grating. "We're talking a thousand creds here! Just remember, if you get your hands on that serum, take it to Zax at the Lower City bounty office. He can get you in touch with an Exchange agent."

I fled outside. But... *a thousand credits? That'll be enough to get me a trip outta here after we rescue Flyboy's Jedi girlfriend.* I recoiled. *No! I know what the Exchange will do... they'll start selling it. To desperate people, for exorbitant prices. Zelka's the sort who'll do it for no profit. But I needed the creds... there was no denying that. What about the people suffering from the disease? Most of them will be screwed by the Exchange, unless they're rich! My thoughts swirled dangerously... rage and need and empathy crashing together in a nauseating vortex.*

I swallowed as Zelka's advice came to mind. With a wrench, I strained to concentrate on a single And'zhai piece. All those rune stones in different places. I couldn't remember how to play, but I could sense the tactical possibilities, the calm concentration needed.

The anger and the fear slowly dissipated, like smoke dispersing into the wind. *Serenity.*

*Wow, that actually worked.*

Yet, as I walked away, I realized that a thousand credits had its’ own allure.

xXx
She's gone again. I frowned, and tried to concentrate on blaster I was repairing. The thermal battery was completely shot, so I was busy pulling apart our spare to get a replacement.

I wasn’t sure if I should worry or not. Jen was obviously still affected by her head injury; there were enough times I’d caught a blank, almost dizzy look on her face. And she’d fainted in the middle of Taris with no warning at all. Part of me felt like she needed to be tucked up in a medical bed, recuperating – and yet, it was due to her that we now knew where Bastila was.

It was due to her that we’d even made it to the Lower City.

I wished I'd heard that conversation. Jen had sweet-talked her way past the turbo-lift guard quicker than she'd lost the credits in Javyar's cantina. It'd been verging on the ridiculous for me to suggest it had anything to do with the Force… but I found it hard to believe Jen could be charismatic enough to make a Sith soldier look the other way. These guys were meant to stop unauthorised traffic – traffic, that might be Republic fugitives in disguise. Maybe I'm not giving Jen's charm enough credit. Or maybe she has a secret stash of money put aside, earmarked especially for bribing corrupt enemy soldiers. After all, she’d kept those extra stims quiet from me. But… surely, the amount required to make a Sith look the other way had to be obscene, considering they’d be court-martialed for that sort of infringement.

The Republic Navy didn’t look too kindly on bribery and corruption – I highly doubted the Sith Military was any more lenient.

Our situation was about as capricious as Jen’s temperament. We were flat broke, but with unrestricted access to all of Taris. We knew where Bastila was – but first we had to break into a heavily guarded gang base. And follow that up with winning a local swoop contest.

As a boy, I used to race swoops on an underground track. I’d been particularly mediocre at it. Turns out that swoop skills aren’t quite the same as piloting, thank the stars.

The door swished open, and my hand tightened on the disassembled blaster.

"Oh, you're awake," Jen commented as she swept into the room. The relief that hit me was mingled with annoyance.

"Yes," I responded bitingly. "I take it you don't believe in sleep?"

"Are you getting testy again?" A small smile curved her lips, but it didn't look genuine. She walked in further and sat down on the unmade bed. I strongly doubted just how invested she was in our mission. Stop thinking about it, Onasi. She’s here and we have an objective. Things aren’t hopeless.

"I don't get testy, I get angry," I returned, "and if I was angry, you wouldn't need to ask me."

"Fine!" She threw her hands up in mock defeat, and I noticed one was bandaged. My eyes
"Have you been in another fight?" I demanded. A dull red colour suffused her face. *Let me guess, she’s been out 'acquiring' things again.*

"I don't want to talk about it," Jen answered in a cool voice. "Fine!" I parroted her sarcastically. Why am I so grumpy? Maybe I was being unreasonable, too. We only had each other to rely on, and despite her recklessness and unreasonably short temper, we *had* made a surprising amount of progress. And a lot of it was due to her.

I sighed, and Jen echoed me. She looked tired. “Shall we just get on with things?” she asked.

I nodded and reassembled my gun. “Okay, so let’s aim to get down to the Undercity today. The lift we’ve been using down to the lower levels goes quite deep; hopefully we won’t need to descend much further. I downloaded a public map when we first landed – it’s incomplete, but I’ve found a couple of routes I think go all the way down.”

I sat down next to her after retrieving my personal datapad. It wasn’t easy making sense of the warrens of turbo-lifts that interconnected Taris, particularly not on a small, two-dimensional screen. *If only we had a holo-map reader.* It didn’t seem to be an issue for Jen, though, who’d nabbed the datapad five minutes in, and was scrolling through it like a navigational expert.

She shot me a frown. “Why didn’t you show this to me earlier? Y’know, when we were hunting for turbo-lifts the other day?”

“I- uh, well, our main purpose was to find an unguarded lift, if you recall.” I hadn’t actually noticed the holo-map until this morning, when I trawled through the informational package Zelka had downloaded for me days ago. It was an embarrassing oversight.

Jen had a disbelieving look on her face, but turned back to the map for several minutes of silence. Finally she sighed, looking up at me once more. Her green eyes were serious.

“There’s lots of black spots riddled through the lower levels. Some are marked as condemned buildings – usually filled with permacrete to grant additional support to the higher levels. But there’s other places the maps don’t cover. And there’s almost nothing on the surface. The true surface, I mean.”

“They call it the Outside,” I said quietly. “Vast areas of polluted space underneath all of Taris. That’s where the rakghouls are.” I’d never heard of a disease both so debilitating and quick to infect others. I had a hard time believing every horror accredited to these rakghouls, but it was obvious we’d be best to avoid them.

“I heard about them,” she whispered.

“We only need to find a way to the sewers,” I reminded her. “Can we get there without encountering these rakghouls?”

She traced a finger over the datapad. Looking over, I saw her turning various filters on and off the map. “Effluent tubes all travel down to the sewers, but they’re too small for sentients our size. I don’t think the ducting’s connected in any meaningful way – well, if it is, it’s not charted. According to this map – which is incomplete in many areas – the only way is via the Outside. There *is* a small outpost next to a turbo-lift though - check this out.”

A habitation marker on the Undercity level blinked at me. I looked over to Jen, and saw resolution
fire in her eyes. The side of her mouth quirked.

“That’s where we start, Flyboy. See if they’ve encountered Mission.”

Finding our way to the Undercity habitat and questioning the locals made sense. It was entirely possible that Mission Vao had gone back to the Bek base or elsewhere by now, but scoping out the area down below was a good starting point. I felt a renewed purpose, and stood, ready to get going.

Jen didn't follow. I looked back, remembering she'd been out for at least part of the night, and felt a mingled sense of irritation and concern. There were deep lines of exhaustion on her face.

"Are you ready to go?" I prompted. "Is... is something wrong?"

“It’s just-” she sighed, before turning a scowl on me. “You said a lot of things about me didn’t add up. But I know next to nothing about you – or even about Bastila. You know, the Jedi we’re risking our necks for daily.”

“She’s our commanding officer, Jen,” I said warningly. Jen's getting cold feet. Again.

Jen choked. “Excuse me? You've got to be frelling joking...”

I winced, and shook my head. “Afraid not. Look, I don’t have all the answers. Republic HQ and the Jedi Order work together sometimes, particularly on the more sensitive missions. Bastila was in the company of several knights and one master. I think her command was a token gesture rather than a real one, but regardless – we were there to obey the directive of the Jedi.”

She looked at me like I'd grown two heads, still muttering padawan under her breath. I sighed. "Look, Jen, even you can't deny how significant her battle meditation is to the war effort. Combine that with her fame since her strike team killed Darth Revan a year ago, and you can see why she was the popular choice to lead the Endar Spire."

In truth, Jen's reaction had been similar to mine, when I'd first heard about the insane directive that put the young Jedi hero in command. Bastila Shan – for all her reputation – was inexperienced at leading troops. And while it'd been the Cerean Jedi Master accompanying her who'd made the decisions, just the fact that Bastila held the authority on a technicality was enough ridiculous and dangerous.

It just made no blasted sense.

Jen was grimacing, clutching at the side of her head. The head injury had been a severe one, for all that it was no longer noticeable through her dark curly mop. It must be healing well. At least, Jen's barely made a peep about it. I couldn't deny that Jen Sahara was one tough customer - especially for an academic.

There was a dazed look on her face. “Battle meditation?” Jen asked weakly.

At once I felt a surge of anger at her obvious deception. There was no one alive who worked for the Jedi Order and didn’t know about Bastila’s rare Force gift that boosted morale and improved the
reflexes of entire armies. They said it’d been a lost Jedi art, forgotten through the ages until Nomi Sunrider had manifested the ability. Nomi Sunrider was a hero of the previous generation and long gone now – and Bastila was, apparently, even stronger. Her remarkable psychic prowess had helped the Republic score a few key victories in the devastating war we were slowly losing.

Jen was staring at me, an uneasy look on her face. Suddenly, I wondered if she truly didn’t know, even though that didn’t seem remotely possible.

She stood before I could say anything, her expression dropping once more a composed mask. “Let’s get some breakfast first,” she murmured.

I nodded, retrieving my two working blasters, and eyed her over. “Where’s your vibrosword?”


"Grab the spare one." I pointed at the blade she had lifted from her first looting mission. The grenades were still sitting in a spare satchel. "And Jen-" I paused, as her wary eyes met mine. "Uh, the rakghouls are pretty dangerous in the Undercity, you know."

Her expression was derisive. "Yes. I know."

"What I mean, uh, is that you should, well, be a little more careful." I felt awkward, stammering like an idiot – but her penchant for running head-first into battle bordered on the suicidal.

"I'll try." She smiled falsely at me, and I felt my ire returning.

"Look, all I'm trying to say is, use a blaster would you?" I snapped. She's going to get bitten, I know it. And if what they say is true, then it only takes one bite and you're infected. It was hard to separate fact from fiction, but I did have faith in what the doctor had told me. There was no readily available cure. Stang, if only I could check out the Undercity by myself!

Jen had closed her eyes, and was taking in a deep, audible breath.

"Are you trying to control your temper?" I asked, my irritation warping into something close to amusement.

"Yes, actually. I thought you wouldn't appreciate me cutting your head off, but do let me know if I'm wrong," she snapped.

Well, there went my sense of humour. "Look, let's just get going, alright?"

After a pointedly silent breakfast we headed back down to Lower Taris. I certainly wasn't in the mood to converse, and so far Jen was following suit. Of course, the chances of Jen staying silent longer than ten minutes were considerably lower than that of winning a Hutt's lottery, but one could always hope.

"Carth, can I ask you some questions?" she asked as we walked down the Lower City corridors.

I struggled not to groan. "Oh? You want to argue some more, is that it?"

"I'm always up for a good fight," she quipped.

I laughed despite myself. Damn woman. I actually couldn’t remember the last time I’d laughed. I glanced at her, and saw that mischievous twist to her mouth I was almost becoming fond of. Her
eyes still had a bleak cast to them, despite the humour dancing there. I wondered what had happened to her last night. "I suppose a few questions can't hurt. What is it?"

"Well," she began, "I was just wondering if you knew about the ruins that the Jedi onboard the Endar Spire were investigating."

*She was the one hired by the Jedi Order, not me!* I frowned at her. "I'm sure you'd know more about their quest than I."

She avoided my gaze. "I know they were looking at ruins, which was why they hired me. But they refused to tell me anything about them in advance. Confidentiality clauses, and all that."

"Jen, I was onboard as an advisor to the navi-pilots. The Jedi certainly didn't tell me anything I didn't need to know. They like to be mysterious." I couldn't quite stop the bitterness from reaching my voice.

She arched an eyebrow at me. "You really don't like the Jedi much, do you?"

I shrugged, in what I hoped was dismissal of the subject. *What self-respecting Republic soldier does like the Jedi? For all that they're on our side, they have this nasty habit of sweeping in where they're not wanted, and up-ending everybody's carefully worked-out battle plans. Oh, and keeping you in the dark.* "I don't dislike them. I just don't particularly trust them much."

"You don't trust anyone much," she muttered.

"I have my reasons." I frowned at her from under lowered brows. "Look, I'm not overly fond of the Jedi because I've seen firsthand just what damage they can do."

"Damage? Jedi?" She sounded incredulous.

"Have you never heard of the Dark Side?" I said impatiently.

"Oh, you mean the Sith."

"Yes, and most of them used to be Jedi." I sighed. "I fought in the Mandalorian wars, under Revan and Malak. They were heroes. No one expected them to turn on us the way they did. Think about it... if you can't even trust the best of the Jedi, who can you trust?"

Her bright green eyes clouded with a faraway look, and once more we lapsed into silence.

xXx

The trip to the Undercity was fairly uneventful, and quicker than I'd expected. Other than two gang brawls – both of which we’d heard in advance, and managed to deftly avoid – we were able to navigate the maze of dilapidated tunnels and grinding turbo-lifts with surprising ease. Jen’s chosen route was both efficient and successful, despite her misgivings about the accuracy of the map.

The Sith guards we encountered let us pass without any comment, validating the authorisation papers Gadon had granted us. I’d wondered about their authenticity, until Jen had pointed out - with a political astuteness unusual for a scholar - that behind the scenes, the Sith and the gangs probably worked together to control the population flow. If that was true, then it explained how Gadon Thek could so readily gift strangers with the ability to traverse the full depth of Taris. Jen also commented that the Exchange likely had the same freedom.

I really did not like Taris.
The lower we descended, the less guarded the lifts were. Some were deserted, some no longer operational, and one was surrounded by a handful of Vulkars. It hadn't taken Jen long to backtrack and find another route. She seemed at ease in this environment, which led me to wonder if her service records were missing part of her history. Reconciling this operation with her years spent in an academic institution was difficult at best.

The map only showed one lift that hit the Undercity – right next to the small community Jen had pointed out. The lights in the elevator had long gone, and I was thankful for the small light rods we’d obtained from Kebla’s shop the previous day.

When we finally hit rock bottom and the buckled durasteel doors grated open, the smell hit my senses before anything else. *Ugh, people live in this stench?* I supposed they had no choice, I'd heard that the gangs forced the homeless down here permanently.

The scene was frankly dismal. Small shacks made out of rubble – mostly broken bits of plasteel and durasteel – lined the open courtyard. A few shuffling sentients lumbered about, the denizens of this bleak world. Everything was bathed in a grimy brown light, which was probably the only version of sunshine that reached this shadowy corner of Taris.

"You there! Upworlder!" A man dressed in filthy rags stumbled towards us. "Anyone using this elevator has to pay the toll!"

"I don't believe this planet!" I muttered incredulously, deactivating my light rod. I heard Jen stifle a laugh. "Look, we don't have any credits." *Unless, of course, Jen lifted some during the night.*

A second drifter joined the first. "You're lying, you're an upworlder! It's our elevator, if you use it you've got to give us something!" They didn't look at all threatening, being empty-handed, gaunt and obviously desperate. And yet, I wondered at their bravado, knowing that the Sith would have already been down here to search for escape pods. *I bet they didn't tell the Sith it was their elevator.*

Jen stepped up beside me, lifted her blaster, and declared loudly, "get out of here you filthy beggars, or I'll use my blaster to end your suffering permanently!"

The beggars squawked, clutched at each other, and ran.

I stared at Jen in shock. "What, picking on the homeless now?" *Is she angry again?* But no, she seemed to be composed. I felt my mood coalesce into disbelief – though frankly, nothing Jen could do these days should surprise me anymore.

"Hey, I was using the blaster, isn't that what you wanted?" She quirked a brow at me, but her expression turned sheepish under my glare. "To be honest, we don't really have credits to give them. They would have stuck around harassing us if I hadn't threatened them."

"Uh huh," I responded suspiciously. Sometimes, when it came to Jen, it was really hard to know what to believe.

I turned my attention back to the Undercity. Most of the inhabitants were content to leave us be, staring warily from a distance - possibly after witnessing two beggars flee from us as if their lives depended on it. One young woman was bold enough to approach, and let slip a little about the area. We were far from the only visitors here, she informed us. In fact, the Undercity seemed a meeting place for all the sorts of people I wanted to avoid. *Exchange mercenaries. Vulkars on a looting mission. Oh, and let's not forget the Sith.* But as for an adolescent Twi'lek and an overgrown Wookiee, no. The young woman knew them, though - which at least spoke of Mission’s notoriety if nothing else.
I thanked the girl absently, and wandered through the ramshackle village with Jen at my heels. The place was surrounded by titasteel gates to keep the rakghouls out and grant the hopeless dwellers some semblance of safety. Presumably there were other camps scattered around the place, and the idea of being forced to live in such filth and darkness made me pity all the dwellers down here.

We were stopped briefly by a shaky old man, who latched onto Jen with a crazed expression on his wrinkled face, proclaiming her loudly to be the encampment's saviour. I bit back a chuckle at Jen's embarrassment. The nearby residents were watching the proceedings with a knowing look – obviously, this colourful character made a habit of gushing over outsiders.

Jen scowled at me when she finally managed to shake the old coot loose – I did my best to hide a grin, but judging by her glare I wasn't successful. She stomped off in the direction of the outpost's leader.

After a brief conversation, we found that he had seen Mission Vao. Late last night, but she hadn't yet returned through the locked gates. Jen and I looked at each other, both silently wondering the same thing: was the young Twi'lek stuck out there somewhere? Or did she know of another way out of the Undercity?

Considering the kid’s apparent resourcefulness, I suspected the latter.

Jen started stalking towards the high barricade that encircled the habitation, making a beeline for the guard. The gate had to be at least ten feet high, made of a resilient looking mesh that connected to titasteel pillars spaced no more than two metres apart. The gate was reinforced with additional durasteel beams, but we could see through the mesh. Beyond lay a murky, desolate nothingness. Jen can’t seriously be thinking of going out there yet, can she? I strode to catch up.

"What are you doing, Jen?" I asked. “We’re not going out there, not until we find Mission-" A scream from beyond the gates caught our attention - and that of the guard. “Let me in! Please, there’s no ‘ghouls around!” a young girl’s voice came from the darkness beyond. The ambient brownish light didn’t extend far, and through the gates we saw a figure emerge at breakneck speed, running directly towards the gate guard.

He held up a blaster, scanning the area competently before quickly opening the gates. My mouth dropped open as I recognized the form of Mission Vao herself. How coincidentally fortuitous. The girl was frantic; even as the gates closed behind her, she’d turned, scanning hopelessly back into the depths of the Outside.

Her hands were empty, clenched tight at her sides. Her headtails were flicking around her shoulders in distress, and a utility belt hung askew from her waist. Where's her Wookiee friend?

“Mission!” Jen called, and the Twi'lek spun around, her eyes lighting on us in desperation. “Jen! I remember you two!” she gasped, and ran towards us. This close I could see the fear in her eyes. “Please, say you’ll help me!”

“What happened?” I asked in concern. Her face crumpled.

“They took him!” she sobbed. “They took us, but I managed to escape. I can’t leave him there, but the Beks won’t come to the Undercity. Not even for me. Please – you two know how to fight – please help me!”
A loaded look passed between me and Jen, before we both turned back to face Mission.

"Whoa, slow down, Mission," Jen said in a calming voice. "What's wrong?"

The Twi’lek hiccupsed, and her bright eyes filled with tears. "It's Zaalbar. It's all my fault. I hassled him to go into the sewers again – we've been fine there before, but my 'scanner was playing up and we didn't spot them. Please – I'll pay you – we've got to go back for him. Those ronto-turds will sell him into slavery – or worse!"

"Mission," I said slowly. "Deep breaths. We need detail here. Who took him?"

She sniffled. "Gamorreans. I've seen them before in the lower levels, but never in the sewers. Maybe the stink reminds them of home – I dunno. They caught us both – they're slave hunters, probably running a trade through the Vulkar base or something – but we have to hurry! Please!"

"Of course we'll help you, Mission," Jen soothed. She glanced back at me. "We actually need your help in return."

I tensed; Gamorreans were tough and mean - tusked humanoid creatures that were often hired as brutes for the Exchange or anyone with enough credits. But they were also notoriously thick and slow. Our advantage would be to catch them from a distance. This could be exactly what we need. Luck or chance, this is a surefire way to win Mission's aid.

"You'll help me?" Mission's eyes were now shining with hope. She sniffed, and turned back to the guard. "Great!" she called over her shoulder. "Thank you! Let's go!"

Jen made to follow. Part of me didn't like how quick the two of them were ready to jump straight into danger - without a plan, without preparations, with barely a discussion of our destination. Although, if it was my friend, I'd be racing back too. And the longer we take, the more chance the Wookiee gets moved.

"Jen, wait a minute," I called. "Look, before we head out – I need to say something."

Jen turned back to me wearing a frown of impatience. Mission was all but tapping her foot, panic and hope vying for dominance on her young face.

"It's just, uh, what I said earlier today," I muttered. "The rakghouls sound pretty crazy. Almost as crazy as you, heh." I coughed as her frown deepened. "Look, I just get this feeling you're going to get bitten by one. Just- just try to be careful? For my sake?"

Her face smoothed before transforming into a saccharine smile. "Aw, Flyboy, I didn't know you felt that way." She stalked away, motioned to the guard, and strode out of the gates with Mission at her heels - leaving me staring at her departing back.

"Argh!" I groaned in frustration, and followed her out. "Damn fool woman!"

The gates squeaked as they shut behind us. Jen stopped, lifting her blaster while she canvassed the area. As I stepped to her side, she threw a grin at me, but it looked forced. Just like it had all day. Something's been bothering her since last night.

I held my blaster defensively, visually searching the barren landscape. No rakghouls in sight, just darkness and rubble. "Where did you go last night, Jen?"

"I don't want to talk about it," she responded, an echo of this morning’s conversation. Mission was looking between the two of us apprehensively.
“Did you go on a looting mission again?” I persisted.

“Is this really the time?” she asked in a sardonic tone, her eyes still darting at the shadows that encompassed us.

“I-uh, well-” Probably not, I realized in embarrassment.

“Okay, yes,” she said shortly. “Yes, I did. Yes, I broke my promise, and yes, we have more credits. Oh, and no, I don’t want to talk about it.”

I guess I deserved that. The Twi’lek looked uncomfortable, and I noticed she was still empty-handed. I turned my attention to her.

“Mission, do you have a weapon?” I asked quietly.

She shook her head, her lekku curling around her neck defensively. “The Gamorreans stripped us clean. They left my belt – although they emptied it first. But at least I still got that.” She fiddled with it and I heard an unfamiliar click. Suddenly Mission’s figure blurred, encased by a reflective shield that almost hid her from sight.

Jen blinked in surprise. “Stealth fold generator,” she said in awe, echoing my disbelief. “Those are rare, Mission. How’d you get your hands on one of those?”

A click and Mission reappeared in solid colour. She had a faint grin on her face as I turned my attention back to the surroundings. “It helps to be friends with a gang leader. There’s not many of these around, but they’re useful in the Undercity. The rakghouls can’t see me when it’s on.”

Stealth fold technology was still emerging, and only useful in low light as it was glaringly easy to spot the blurry outline of a stealthed person. Possibly that was why stealth belts hadn’t really taken off on the open market – it’s benefits were limited, and the wearer had to move slowly to stop the field from being disrupted.

“The rakghouls must have poor visibility then,” Jen was murmuring. “That’s good to know.”

"Take a blaster, kid." I handed one to Mission. She was quick to grab it, even as her face contorted into a hot glare.

“I ain’t a kid!” Mission snapped.

"Sorry," I muttered, struggling not to roll my eyes. Note to self: don’t call the kid a kid. Although, to be fair, she probably felt like I was talking down to her – something I’d detested as a kid, myself. "Do you know how to use a blaster?"

She nodded, the annoyance vanishing from her face. "Yeah, but we relied on our bio-scanners to stay out of trouble. You guys have ‘scanners, right?"

“Uh, no,” Jen admitted. “So you need to lead us quickly to the sewers. Can you do that?”

At the girl’s nod we headed out, leaving the safety of the gates well behind us.

The Undercity smelled like burnt rubbish and rotting flesh, a rancid sort of stench that reminded me sharply of past battles. I’d fought in the Mandalorian Wars, but usually in the skies, behind the safety of a swift snubfighter’s guns. I’d been good at it, damn good, but there’d been a few occasions when I’d been involved in ground battles.
They were nastier and bloodier. Deaths were more personal when one had to raise a gun and shoot the enemy in the face. And I found, as we walked along, that cauterized flesh and burning machinery smelled an awful lot like the Outside of Taris.

Jen and I flanked Mission, guns drawn as we strode through the desolate environment. The ground was a hard-packed clay, littered with broken slabs of permacrete and fallen titasteel cables. I’d heard that sometimes parts of Taris would collapse, creating sinkholes in amongst the mid-levels of the ecumenopolis, causing carnage for whatever inhabitants were in close proximity. The great Tarisian machine would plow on, rebuilding over the rubble in a piecemeal fashion.

“You said you wanted my help?” Mission whispered at one stage, leading us past a towering pile of plasticeel off-cuts. On her face was a fragile look of hope that was almost heartbreaking to see. *She is just a kid, no matter that she hates the label. A kid who is racing into danger to rescue her friend.* If nothing else, this Mission had guts – but it would’ve been nice to acquire her help without charging down a bunch of slavers.

"Yeah,” Jen responded. "Gadon said you'd help me get inside the Vulkar base."

"The Vulkar base?” Mission's lekku twitched. "You're going there? Cool! Sure, I can help. Big Z and me both, once you get him out of the sewers.”

Cool? Cool?! I stared at the girl in dawning horror. She’s going to get on well with Jen. Far too well, I suspect.

A shout up ahead had us all tensing in readiness; we stopped, blasters aimed, as a company of men slowly materialized from the brown gloom. As it became obvious they weren't rakghouls, Jen and I slowly lowered our weapons. Mission was still clutching hers awkwardly until I nudged her.

When the closest stranger came into range, he raised a rifle and called out to us in a nervous voice.

"Don't... don't move! I'm... I'm not afraid to use this blaster if I have to!"

An armoured man from further behind strode up next to him, laying a cautionary hand on his arm. "Settle down, kid,” he said gruffly, in a thick accent I knew all too well. *Mandalorian.* An instinctive feeling of dislike wedged itself in my gut. I had to remind myself that that particular war was now over.

The Mandalorian turned to face us, eyed us up and down, and dismissed us with a glance. "By the looks of you I'd say you're down here for the same reason we are: to salvage something from those downed Republic space pods. Let me give you some advice: forget about it. Do yourself a favour and just head back the way you came.” He issued it like a command. *Heh, that's going to annoy Jen.*

But as I looked at her, a strange expression crossed over her face.

She said something back to the leader, something foreign and incomprehensible – but the sounds were all too familiar. *She can speak Mandalorian?* A sharp look of surprise crossed the weather-beaten face of the lead merc. He snapped something back at her in the same tongue.

*They’re having a conversation. Jen’s having a blasted conversation in Mandalorian!*

I’d caught enough phrases during the war to recognize a battle greeting of sorts, followed by the man introducing himself as Canderous – but the rest was an unintelligible garble. The man gave Jen an almost respectful nod which she returned, before calling the rest of the mercs to follow him as he strode briskly away.

"Wow, he looked pretty tough!” Mission whispered as the group disappeared from view. “Did he
"Say anything interesting?"

"Hang on, sister," I said warningly as Jen started moving away. "You can speak Mandalorian?"

"Well, um, I learnt languages when I was studying," she muttered.

"I thought you studied archaeology," I countered. I could feel myself frowning.

"Cool, did ya go to a university or something?" Mission cut in. "Where you from, Jen?"

Jen looked at me blandly, and turned to answer Mission instead. "A planet called Deralia. I studied mostly archaeology, anthropology, and languages."

And languages? Now why does it sound like she tacked that on to the end for my benefit?

"But Mandalorian?" I muttered skeptically. I've had my doubts whether she's loyal to the Republic before. This just seems to confirm it.

"Hey, is that an escape pod?" Jen pointed further ahead. As a way to stop my questions, it was pretty effective. And true, too - a cone shape was embedded deep into the ground from the direction that Canderous' group had emerged. That caught my attention, and I mentally let the conversation go. Why Jen could speak Mandalorian was something I'd find out later – for now, I decided, I'd best just keep my mind on our surroundings.

"Let's go have a quick look," I said.

The cockpit of the escape pod was mostly intact, door included, but the remainder was a pile of twisted metal and scorch marks. We searched through the rubble only to find it had already been stripped clean.

Mission started poking about in it curiously, but Jen was keeping watch, eyes tight on the environment.

"There's something up ahead," Jen muttered, going rigid. My eyes snapped up, and I could see three lumbering figures heading towards us. Rakghouls. That must be rakghouls. My gut clenched, my muscles tensed, and my blaster raised into the air.

Mission squeaked and, with a click, transformed into a fuzzy blur. I stepped next to Jen, weapons primed and targets sighted, and fired when the first was in range.

Although slow and easily staggered by a blaster bolt, the mutants were resilient and required multiple shots before they fell. They're tough. Without armour, a single blaster hit to the torso would down most sentients. Tougher than I expected. Jen and I fired in unison, and the second one dropped about ten paces away from us. Damn, they must have a weakness. I squinted, and steadied my aim. This one's going down, I thought determinedly as it lurched closer.

The wind was knocked from my lungs as something slammed into my side, knocking me to the ground. Mission screamed. What the...? I struggled to move, but a heavy weight pinned me, snarling. A fourth rakghoul? I'd been concentrating so fiercely on my aim that I'd been caught unawares, I realized in self-disgust.

I grunted, twisted my arm free and shot it in the head, just as its teeth dug into my shoulder. Red hot pain lanced through my side, and I heard it shriek from the blaster wound. It swiped its claws through my armour, and bit down on my other arm. One shot in the head is not enough? I screamed as its jaw clamped down a third time on my arm, and the smell of rotting flesh invaded my senses.
Blood filled my eyes, and with a desperate grunt I rammed my blaster into the growling mass of fur, firing again and again. *What does it take for these things to die?*

The weight was lifted off me and I gasped, opening eyes to see Jen. Her face was pinched was obvious fear. And worry. *Hah. She’s worried – about me, of all people.* Dull horror pounded through my head as I abruptly understood *why* she was so worried. *I've got the rakghoul disease*, I thought numbly. *I'm a dead man.*

"This is bad, Republic!" she muttered, trying to drag me up into a sitting position. A sudden pain sheared through my arm. I glanced down; the bites left ragged wounds that were bleeding hot red liquid over my limb.

My vision blurred and my shoulder throbbed. My fingertips prickled with numbness. "Don't call me that," I said through clenched teeth.

"Mission – how long does it take for someone to transform?" Jen demanded.

"Um, I dunno! A day, maybe. But he's been bitten heaps, Jen! It'll be, like, way less time!" Mission’s voice was shaken, scared. "There's no way to stop the rakghoul disease!"

*Poetic justice. I was so certain Jen would be the one to get into trouble.*

"You've got to go," I rasped. *This is the end.* Horror curled in my stomach. Those rakghouls had been vicious, mindless beasts. Agony was burning in my shoulder, and I imagined the venom slowly circulating through my system, a ticking countdown until death. *Worse than that. I could kill Jen and Mission. I might transform. You need to go!*

"Sith patrols carry the serum," Jen told me. *Serum? I haven't heard about any cure for the disease.* Jen was crouching next to me, pulling apart one of Kebla’s medpacs before hurriedly dressing my arm and shoulder. I couldn’t hold back a grunt of pain. “This 'pac only has that cheap gree-bacta salve,” she muttered. “We’ll get you more kolto in the Upper City.”

“Jen.” My good arm raised outward, stopping her ministrations. Serious green eyes met mine in the faint glow of Mission’s light rod. “We don’t know how long I have. I—” I shook my head, and pushed her away gently, clambering to my feet. A sudden surge of dizziness had me stumbling back to the ground.

Pain stabbed deep into my shoulder, and I groaned, vaguely aware that Jen was wrapping something against my arm again. The ground was rocky and uneven underneath me. “You should shoot me,” I mumbled. *I'm going to transform into one of those monsters. No!*

I felt my eyes closing, and my entire limb was throbbing a painful ache with every beat of my heart. Pushing the disease deeper and deeper into my body. *I thought we’d been doing so well, too. Should have known it would go belly up. "I'll kill you, if I transform. End it, before I kill you!"

*Funny, I always thought my end would be on the frontlines. With enemy snubs in the viewport, firing on as many as I could, while some black-hearted bastard got a lucky shot on me-

“Onasi, get up,” Jen snapped, one arm underneath me and the other pulling on my good side. “Stop being such a baby."

*What? Outrage at her unjust name-calling had me glaring at her. "Baby?" I spluttered, struggling to my feet as she yanked me upright. My good arm tingled. My bad arm burned. But Jen wasn't looking at me - she was staring at the escape pod, her jaw set with determination. She*
gave me a push forward, and pain blossomed down my side as I stumbled, only staying upright because most of my weight was leaning on her. I wasn't... I wasn't quite sure exactly how badly I'd been hurt, but I didn't think mere flesh wounds should be this debilitating.

I've got the rakghoul disease. I'm a dead man.

“What are you doing?” Mission squeaked.

I half-walked, half-staggered as Jen continued to propel me forward. I only understood her intent when she motioned Mission to open the hatch.

“Can you get in by yourself?” Jen asked, gesturing to the escape pod with the hand that wasn't holding me upright.

It wasn't a bad idea... but the hatch door wouldn't keep me contained forever.

“If I turn, this won’t keep me,” I said quietly, my hands resting on the cool durasteel of the Endar Spire’s escape pod. With a grunt and a grimace, I clambered inside. By the time I was seated, I'd broken into a sweat and was shaking from the throbbing of my shoulder. Is that a fever setting in?

No, surely that was paranoia. It couldn’t happen that fast.

“We’ve got some time, Flyboy,” Jen said seriously. “I'll get that serum. Hold on, okay?”

"Just make sure you find Bastila," I said weakly. My fingers felt numb and prickly. Fuzziness was drawing in around the edges of my vision. Bastila's the only hope left for the Republic. I can't really trust Jen to go after her, but I have no other choice.

"I'll rescue her, I promise." Her voice was soft.

"Heh, like you promised not to steal again?” I joked feebly.

I closed my eyes again, and heard the door shut manually above me.

xXx
Panic was gnawing at the edges of my control. I strode away from the crash site, eyes searching dark corners and darker courtyards up ahead.

"You locked him in the escape pod?" Mission squeaked behind me. I was glad she'd joined us, somehow her presence made it easier for me to stay calm. She follows me for now; I must be strong. While the focusing trick Zelka suggested had helped, it only subdued my inner turmoil. The rogue emotions were still there, deep in a distant corner of my mind; a mingled fear and fury I could ignore but not entirely forget.

"Seemed like a good idea. He doesn't have time for us to move him to a safer place."

The entire Undercity felt like it had a presence all of its own. Dark, cloying, decaying. If I hadn't seen Zelka last night, I would be mad by now. I tried to shrug off that thought. I must stay rational. Onasi needs me, Mission needs me. When did I become the strong one? Jen was the very antithesis of strength, whereas Evil Bitch... well, it was obvious she used terror as her strength.

It's the real me again, isn't it? The flashback I'd had earlier was about more than just a game. I'd elevated my psyche to a detached state, where my entire focus was on the puzzle unfolding in front of me, allowing no peripheral thoughts or emotional distractions to filter through. That's a Force trick. Somehow, I was sure of that. Was I some sort of trainee Jedi? I'd thought I'd been a street kid. Maybe I had. Maybe that boy taught me how to use the Force.

But the last few times I'd touched it I'd lost control. It was hard to ignore the power out there, all around me. At times, it felt like it wanted to be used.

Jen's voice was quieter now. Ever since the ambush on the Endar Spire, it seemed like her core personality was no more than a fading whisper in my mind, a nexus of thoughts and feelings slowly dispersing into shadows. In her place, I had grown in strength and dominance. As had Evil Bitch.

And yet, Jen's childhood memories were still there. Daydreams of quietly teaching ancient archaeology to eager students, and living out a peaceful existence amongst rural farmland. Some of her studies had actually been fascinating, in particular her research on civilizations that pre-dated Republic times.

Yet... Jen wasn't an expert. There was no logical explanation for the Jedi to specifically request only her along for a secret expedition. Headed by Bastila Shan, a key Jedi involved in the Republic war effort. I'd forgotten those details about Bastila, until Carth had dropped them like a thermal detonator earlier. Battle meditation. Her defeat of Darth Revan. Sharp pain had stabbed deep into my temple when he'd said the words. I wondered if that'd always be the case, when recollections I'd once known slammed back into my consciousness.

My intuition flat out said these symptoms were due to Force damage – somehow. Due to my unwanted bond-sister – somehow.

Focus, Jen. I had no other name for myself. Fix Onasi, rescue Bastila, then split. Break it up into simple objectives, and get the job done.
Movement up ahead caught my attention. I stopped walking, and aimed both blasters in determination. I was glad I’d had the foresight to relieve Carth of his weaponry before shutting him inside the pod.

I heard a click beside me. Mission, stealthed again. Who’d have thought a stealth belt – rare, and generally not worth the credits – would be so useful in the Undercity?

We held our ground as the rakghoul lumbered towards us. At least there’s only one. I wasn’t sure if I could handle another group of four – and this time, without Carth’s help.

I waited tensely until the creature came within range, and then started firing. Mission followed suit, and the monster soon dropped with a piercing shriek.

"I normally just hide from them," Mission whispered. “The sewers aren’t far, and our ‘scanners show us where they are.”

She doesn’t like killing despite growing up in a gang, I realized. Somehow, living on the streets had not yet eroded a naive innocence that was at the Twi’lek’s core.

"Hiding’s good, in case something happens to me," I said calmly. Why am I so calm? So detached, so logical? Battle rage usually takes over by this point. Going berserk right now would kill me. "But I really need your help."

"You mean it, don’t you?” The startled tone in Mission’s voice took me by surprise. “I don't know if anyone's ever said that to me before.”

I looked at the girl, reconsidering her abilities. Sure, she was young, and probably too impulsive, but her street skills alone made her a worthy ally. I gave her a quick smile, one I hoped would be taken as reassuring.

Walking closer to the rakghoul corpse, I checked it quickly for life signs. Dead. The mutated head was scorched with fatal blaster shots, and gluey white eyes stared back at me. I shivered, and then my gaze caught on another body nearby. Not a rakghoul. No, that’s a Human. I ran over to it, almost tripping in my haste. But searching the second corpse availed little.

"A medpac and a data-journal,” I murmured, clicking on the datapad. It mentioned something about a Promised Land, and I remembered that crazy old geezer, Rukil, ranting after me in the Outcast Village. Just another chance for Onasi to bust a gut laughing at me, I thought sourly. Sod it all, I will find that serum!

"Before you ran back to the village, did you happen across any dead Sith?” I asked Mission as I stood, walking away from the corpses.

"Not today,” she answered, hurrying to keep up. “But the bodies are usually stripped clean anyway. D'ya really think they'll have serum on them?"

"I-" I don't really want to answer that. "I have to try. Blaster Boy saved my life."

Mission blinked before giggling weakly at the pet name. I smiled at her, but my heart wasn't in it.

"We could look up north, I've seen patrols round there before,” she offered. I nodded to her, and we set off again.

Corpses littered the area, mostly half-eaten. I forced myself to frisk all the bodies we came across, but with each fruitless search I was becoming more disheartened. The smell of the place curled like bile
in my stomach. No time to be sick. No time to be angry!

We managed to avoid a number of nearby rakghoul groups by skirting alongside rubble or broken walls. I was starting to get a feel for predicting the mutated monsters - they stuck to open areas, and usually huddled in groups of three or four. Their primary long-range sense appeared to be visible movement, and by silently sneaking within the shadows of dilapidated framework, our progress remained unhindered.

I was dimly aware that Onasi's time was running out. Part of me was panicking, scared and afraid he would die. Another side was demanding coldly that I return and kill him before he transformed. I scowled, and instead focused on the bleak landscape.

"There's some bodies up ahead, looks like Sith armour," Mission whispered, stealing back my attention.

"Good spotting," I murmured back, and she smiled brightly at me. She's not often encouraged, is she? I knew the girl was struggling to hold her own fear at bay; panic for her friend, anxiety for the environment we were in.

"We'll find the serum, Mission. And then we'll rescue Zaalbar," I said staunchly, heading over to the bodies. I could almost feel her spine stiffen in renewed resolve. Why bother with trite, meaningless words? Fear is a better motivator. I blocked the thought out, but could not dissipate my edginess. Realization of my own mortality was setting in – if Carth could go down so easily to the rakghouls, then so could I. Why am I wasting time helping a Republic pilot that could mutate into a threat? His true loyalty is not with me; his value as a tool is almost nothing. But he had saved me, and I could not – would not – leave him to die.

Fool. Attachments lead to vulnerability, to a weakness that can be exploited.

The edges of my calm unravalled; I could feel my emotions starting to spiral out of control. Gritting my teeth, I closed my eyes briefly and recalled the vision I’d had yesterday. A board covered in rune stones; the Coruscanti Staff rune was in the front, vulnerable on it’s left flank, but the potential for offense was there. A gap in the opponent’s line of attack – if I moved the Corellian Dagger forward, I’d be able to break right through.

The voice dimmed to a barely audible whisper. I opened my eyes, pursed my lips, and strode forward.

Mission was right; the corpses were Sith, and hope flared in my belly. I ripped off the tattered armour quickly, checking the pockets as I did so.

"Cool, an energy shield!" Mission was searching the second corpse. I found a handful of credits, and a shot of kolto, but no serum. Sithspit. I need this!

Mission stood, indicating she was finished, and shot me a despairing look. We were thinking the same: Carth's time is running out.

But ahead... ahead, was a sentient-sized lump resting motionless next to a darkened wall.

Walking closer, with my weapon gripped tight, the lump slowly morphed into the recognizable shape of a humanoid: seated, slumped, with armoured hands resting limply in its lap.

Rakghoul damage along the body's recognizable black armour became noticeable as I took another step closer.
"Another Sith corpse," I said in relief, crouching down next to the once-sentient.

A hand shot up towards me; quick, hard and fast. It slammed into my throat, armoured fingers grasping hard on my windpipe. "Not a corpse!" a voice rasped.

Shock sparked through me like wildfire. It was followed immediately by hot rage as the enemy hand tightened enough to cut off oxygen. Kill! With a gurgled snarl, I yanked my blaster up and shot the Sith twice in the face. His plasteel visor shattered as he shrieked, flailing backwards, and the rancid scent of melted flesh and fresh blood hit the air.

The hand dropped, and the body shuddered once before stilling.

"Are you okay?" Mission gasped, voice high-pitched and panicked.

I drew in a series of deep, shuddering breaths. *Imbecile! That was too close!* My throat was tender, but otherwise undamaged. *He's dead. I'm okay. I'm in control. I'm not angry.* But the anger was sitting there, hot and heavy in my gut, demanding an outlet.

"I'm fine," I forced out through clenched teeth. The Sith corpse was bloodied and lifeless in front of me, and yet I'd assumed it was a corpse before. With a grimace, I lifted the blaster and shot the body twice more. Mission jumped. "He just took me by surprise."

*Focus. I can't let my emotions control me. Not here!* With an inward wrench of concentration, I forced myself to search the fresh body. There were deep gouges cracking through the leg armour of the Sith, obvious results of a rakghoul attack. With a despairing groan, I spotted an empty hypoderm lying on the ground next to him. *Just my luck. He had the serum, and the bastard already used it.*

With growing despondency, I continued to frisk the body as Mission moved closer to me.

"Imperial cred chits," she murmured, palming the plasteel tokens as I drew them out of the corpse's utility belt.

"A couple of stims," I muttered, squinting at a pair of hypodermics the Sith had also been carrying. "Hang on..." I jerked back to the empty needle I'd left on the ground, grabbing it swiftly and holding it next to the two unused ones. Slightly larger and more elongated than standard-issue stimulant, they all had an identical housing and plunger mechanism, with a matching barcode identification on the side.

*These aren't stims. These aren't stims!*

"Mission," I whispered in awe. "I think... I think this is the serum. The guy must have nabbed his friends' share. He used one; we have two left. Come on!" I scrabbled desperately to my feet. "This is it - let's go back to Captain Flyboy!"

Mission stood; her bright eyes shining with hope as she grinned at me. "Captain?"

"Yeah, he's a pilot," I answered, distracted, as I began to jog back the way we'd come.

"Pilot? Who are you guys?"

*Sod it all. I've said too much again, haven't I? * "Questions later, okay?"

The landscape passed in a blur. I broke into a sprint, stopping at corners to check what was up ahead. Mission stayed silent behind me, and the only noise I could hear was our footfalls and my own heavy breathing.
Luck or good fortune kept us from any encounters, and I found myself breathing a heavy sigh of relief as the escape pod once more came into view.

The sense of reprieve collapsed a second later.

"The door's open," Mission whispered.

Fear iced through my veins. No, we can't be too late! I ran to the escape pod. The seat was empty. No! I'm the one who does the disappearing act, dammit! I glanced around frantically. He can't be gone, not like this!

"Jen... We have to- he could be anywhere-"

My gaze snagged on a body close by. Without thinking, I ran towards it.

Onasi. Barely breathing.

I ruthlessly jabbed the first hypoderm into his arm, emptying it. No response from him. He looked bad; the skin around his lower neck mottled to a black that wasn't natural. There was a sweet, sickly smell of festering flesh in the air. I pulled out the kolto I'd looted, and injected that into his upper shoulder. Onasi hadn't so much as twitched with the prick of either hypoderm.

Mission stood a few feet away, eyes wide on the scene. I rolled Onasi on his side, ripping off the earlier dressings before tearing into a medpac and pulling it apart. More smelly gree-bacta salve to smear on his shoulder and arm, even though I knew it would do nothing if the actual disease wasn't being countered. Should I use the second 'derm? If one isn't enough, would two be?

"Flyboy, wake up, damn you!" I cursed, kneeling down and shaking him. "I'll kill you if you're dead!"

A sudden cough racked his frame, and a second later his eyes opened. "I won't ask how you're going to achieve that," he said weakly. "What happened? I feel like I've been put through a slag grinder."

Mission laughed breathlessly. My panic dissipated, chased away by a hot relief. "How'd you get out of the escape pod?"

He blinked and looked at me in a daze. "The pod? The rakghouls! I- What are you doing back here?" He gulped, brown eyes widening in desperation. "Jen, leave here at once! I might transform!"

The surge of relief was almost painful, now.

"You're sounding better already," I said dryly, "if you're bossing me around again. Relax, Onasi, I found some serum."

He stared at me in shocked disbelief. "I, uh," he coughed weakly. "I don't dare believe you. I feel awful. Are you serious?"

I grinned. My eyes trailed to his exposed neck. Were the edges of the black mottling already beginning to fade? Carth might bemoan his pain, but there was no denying the keen awareness returning to his gaze. It's working. The serum is really working. "Yep. I saved your arse, Flyboy. We're square."

"Oh, heh." He closed his eyes again.

"We need to get you outta here, Onasi. You can rest in the outcast village," I said briskly, motioning
to Mission. She nodded at me, and together we dragged the protesting Republic soldier to his feet.

xXx

Mission was stretching her shoulder in grumbling complaint. Mine felt a bit stiff from lugging Onasi back to the village as well. We'd got him walking, but he leaned heavily on us most of the way. I'm just relieved we were so close to the village. We would have been defenseless had the rakghouls attacked.

While Carth was still badly injured, the remnants of the disease seemed to have left him. He was weak and grumpy, but no longer dizzy or delirious. His injuries had reverted to a painful red colour. Much better than black.

The outcasts had been too panicked to let us in until I'd shown them the Sith serum. Even then, they'd suggested locking him up with some infected villagers. I think I'd scared Mission by threatening to behead the healer. Either way, we'd come to a compromise. Carth hadn't appreciated being tied tightly to a pole, but at least the resident healer promised to see to his injuries.

We're even now. This means I don't have to rescue Bastila. I was trying to ignore that little voice. It was the same one suggesting I sell the extra serum to Davik. I sat down against a wall with a heavy sigh. Too many things to think about. Not to mention that encounter I'd had earlier with the mercenaries.

…

"(This is not our battlefield; now is not yet our fight)," the words came out unexpectedly, in a foreign language, and I had to resist clamping my hand over my mouth in surprise. A vague recollection from the twisted archives of my mind told me that it was a traditional Mandalorian warrior's greeting. Mandalorian?

"(I have no fight with you)," the heavysset man responded. That's not the standard answer, I realized. But then, I'm not Mandalorian. "(I am Canderous Ordo)."

"(As they die upon my blade, my adversaries know me as Jen of clan Sahara)," I returned. Again, in Mandalorian format. He glared at me quizzically.

"(You intrigue me. But not enough to stay here and chitchat – the rakghouls have picked off enough of my men. Again, I'll repeat my advice: get out of here)." With an almost respectful nod, he led his men away.

…

The earlier flash of memory, back in Upper Taris... I'd recalled a handsome man, talking about the Mandalorian Wars. Did I fight in the Wars? I seem to be able to hold my own in battle, true enough. But... whose side was I on?

"Jen?" Mission's voice, tremulous and soft, disrupted my reverie.

"What's up Mission?"

"I'm worried about Big Z." She was biting her lip, her shoulders tense with worry. “We need to go after him; the Gamorreans could sell him any minute!"

"Mission, don't you think we should wait until Onasi's healed up a bit?"
He was cursing in the centre of the village. *Heh, Flyboy's not used to being tied up. Obviously he hasn't been meeting the right women.* Every now and then he’d turn to glare at us, but I figured he’d forgive me eventually.

"That'll take too long, Jen! Carth will probably still be too hurt tomorrow, even with kolto!"

*She's right. But just the two of us, heading into the sewers? *"I don’t want to encounter another group of rakghouls, Mission, after what happened to Onasi. How *did* you and Zaalbar avoid them so easily?"

"Well-" She crouched down next to me. "The 'scanners, as I said. And often I just hid. Big Z's pretty quiet when he wants to be, y'know. People often forget he's there. Of course we couldn't always avoid 'em, but he can rip them to shreds easily enough. He- he’s immune to the disease. *Don’t* ask how we figured that one out. Look, I can't just abandon him there!"

"Fair enough." Stealth *did* seem to be fairly effective, and if we headed straight for the sewer entrance we wouldn’t be Outside too long. If I was honest with myself, leaving now appealed to the bloodthirsty side of me. And the rational part added that it would be a good way to stop thinking. *I didn't lose control with Mission out there. Well... I almost did, but I stopped myself. And surely going after Mission's friend is better than sitting here, arguing inside my own frelling head about whether I should rescue Bastila, sell the serum, or why I can speak Mandalorian.*

"I know!" Mission said brightly, unclipping something from her belt. "I've got a spare stealth belt. Ever used one?" She handed it to me, and I climbed to my feet.

I felt my mouth drop open. "You have *two?"* I looked down at the device, and a blind sort of recognition dawned. *Yes. Yes I have used these before.* But stealth belts weren’t common, I knew that much. Nor were they particularly useful… except in the Undercity of Taris, it seemed.

“Good thinking,” I said at last. “Should be easy enough to avoid the rakghouls. Let's go, then."

She beamed at me, and we strode towards the exit. I heard Carth shouting weakly in protest behind us, but did not turn.

xXx

We slowly and silently crept through the deserted landscape, Mission leading the way towards the sewer entrance. I could barely make her out in the low visibility, and my opinion of stealth fold technology rose a notch.

It was easier to avoid the rakghouls like this, and I surprised myself by making as little noise as Mission as we snuck along. *I must have grown up on the streets; I'm used to sneaking around where I'm not allowed.*

Mission walked up to an open entrance in the wall, and waited for me there.

"This is the entrance we normally use," she whispered. "It comes out into a room, and I always lock the door behind me so it's safe."

"Did you lock it last time?" It was currently wide open. And, after all, she'd been pretty panicked when she’d run from her captors.

"Uh, no." She sounded sheepish. I wondered briefly if Twi’lek's could blush.

"Let me go first," I said softly, pulling a blaster from my belt.
The hole led into a small chute, and I gingerly held onto the sides to stop myself from slipping. I saw the room below; dark, dingy, but empty. I jumped the short distance down, and stood facing the exit with my blaster raised as Mission joined me.

I wrinkled my nose as my olfactory senses submerged in a stink of musty decay and rotting sewerage. "Ever get used to the smell down here?"

"Nope," she responded in the darkness. There was absolutely no light down here; I activated a light rod and passed it to Mission.

"I didn't think it could be worse than the Outside. Guess I was wrong."

She giggled softly.

We moved out, myself taking the lead as Mission gave directions. I didn’t bother with the datapad map – the sewers were full of uncharted areas, and Mission was an infinitely better guide.

"So," Mission whispered as we walked down a dark corridor. She was clutching the light rod in one hand and it threw up shadows along the paper thin walls. I wondered what they were made of; it certainly wasn’t plasteel. "Are you gonna tell me who you guys are? Or do I have to guess?"

_Stars, I was hoping she'd forget. "Guess away, kid."_ I made sure to stress the last word.

"Let's take a leaf out of Onasi's databook, and see if this works." I said mildly.

"Hey, I ain't no kid!" she squawked indignantly. "Why does everyone keep calling me that?"

I grinned to myself. _That's one point to Carth, I guess._ "Well, you're pretty young to be on the streets by yourself, you know," I said mildly.

"I'm not that young! Far out, I've been looking out for myself for years!" she grumped, but my words had the desired effect - Mission wilted into a sulky silence, and the subject was happily dropped.

I slowed as we neared the end of the corridor, listening intently for any sounds. I could hear some grunts far in the distance, but nothing close by.

"Which direction from here?" I whispered.

"Into the big chamber up ahead, then the first door on the right. That leads down another corridor, and we were at the end of it when we got ambushed."

I nodded and took a few steps forward. The chamber looked empty as we entered it, and my eyes searched the corners. One was too dark to make anything out.

The rakghouls liked to stay outside – but Mission had left the door open when she’d escaped. I felt a sense of premonition stab in my belly, and once more let my gut instinct take over.

"Wait here," I hissed, and took a few quiet steps into the room. With the light source behind me, it took a few long seconds for my vision to adjust. This part of the sewers was obviously no longer in production otherwise we’d be wading through excrement or something equally unpleasant, but unknown rubble from previous times still littered the area. My eyes landed on the different shadows around the chamber, and one didn’t look benign.

I heard a vague snuffling, and froze.

_There's something there, alright. Could be asleep, could be waiting._ I holstered the blaster on my
belt, and slowly drew my vibrosword out. As I gingerly moved closer, the shadows transformed into a sleeping rakghoul. *It must have followed someone in here. Best to kill it silently, if possible.* I took another step, raised my blade with both hands, and then threw it at the slumbering body.

A cut-off wheeze. I smiled as I retrieved the weapon.


We headed down the next corridor, alert for noise and movement. It was eerily empty, but I could still hear the grunts up ahead.

"That doesn't sound like rakghouls," I observed.

"No, it's the Gamorreans," Mission told me.

I nodded to myself. "How many were there?"

"Four, I think. I didn't really have time to count y'know," she replied tartly.

Four. I had a vague recollection of Gamorreans; semi-intelligent beasts that could speak and trade on a fairly basic level. *Not* something Jen would have encountered. "How were they armed?"

"Vibro-axes," she whispered.

*Damn. Oh well, here's hoping we see them some distance away.*

We reached the end of the corridor which tapered off into two closed plimsteel doors. I heard grunts coming from the left, and tensed. *It's times like these I'm really glad I'm a thief.* I smirked, grabbing a 'frag grenade from my pack.

"Ready?" I whispered softly. "I'm going to open the door and throw a grenade. After the blast, I'll charge in with my blade. Back me up with a blaster."

"Yep." Mission sounded like she was struggling to keep her confidence intact.

My shoulders knotted, and I forced myself to stay calm. *Use the Force.* No, I couldn't lose control in front of Mission. With a deep breath, I primed the grenade, and switched open the door. I mentally counted four hog-like faces as I lobbed the grenade in the centre of the room, before slamming my hand back against the controls.

The door slid shut. Snorts of surprised alarm echoed beyond the thin plimsteel just as the grenade detonated with a thundering cacophony.

The sound dug painfully into my eardrums. I winced, and fought against the desire to press my hands against the sides of my head. *Listen, imbecile. What can you hear?* A chorus of pained squeals, barely audible over the ringing in my ears. *Now. Strike now!*

I opened the door and charged.

Three Gamorreans lay on the ground, stunned, and I left them to Mission as I faced the last one. He growled, leaping forwards with a vibro-ax hefted in his grasp. My hand raised in reflex as static pricked the hairs on my arms. *No. No! I will not use the Force!*

With a wrench of self-control, I ducked and rolled as the Gamorrean’s axe lunged at me. Ending in a crouch at his side, my vibrosword struck out to the back of his leg, hacking deep into his calf.
He screamed as he fell forward. With a grunt, I pulled the blade upright before plunging it into his ill-armoured back.

His screams stopped.

I jerked back to the doorway. Mission was hovering there, three corpses at her feet. She was panting; her face pale and drawn, and her blaster shaking in her grasp.

The bodies at her feet all showed signs of frag damage – torn chunks of flesh that left a bloodied mess on the floor. The face of one had been ripped viciously open. Mission glanced up at me, shock evident in her eyes. She let out a small whimpering noise.

*She's not used to brawls at all,* I realized. *This might even be her first kill.*

A loud roar from a neighboring room made us both jump. It came from beyond a closed door deeper in the room.

"That's Big Z," Mission whispered. Her expression cleared a little, and I could see the hope bloom. She gave me a tremulous smile.

“Let’s get him then,” I said, motioning towards the door. She rushed past me, and began fiddling with the lock.

I felt the grin grow on my face. Something eased in my chest. I wasn't sure if it was hope, or relief, or just the sensation of a job well done.

*Finally,* I whispered to myself. *Finally, I've done something right.*

xXx
The metal clawed into my fur. Resolutely, I ignored the pain and tried once more to yank the thick chains apart. They would not yield, no matter how I struggled.

*I will not be a slave; not if I have to fight until my last breath!* Slavers deserved to die, all of them. Capturing those less fortunate and using them like dumb animals. I’d fight against these rabid kinrath with all of my will; I’d done so before. But that brought up painful memories.

*No, thinking about what cannot now be changed is fruitless.* I must be strong; I must escape. *Who else will look out for Mission, if not me?* I continued straining at the chains around my wrists. *If ever I needed your skills, my rambunctious young friend, it is right now.*

She was the only one who accepted me for what I was; the only one who looked past the appearance of a towering off-worlder that could not speak Basic. *Such a bright, mischievous cub.* Who else would keep her from the trouble she always sailed head-first into? Zaerdra would endeavour to, yet her efforts did naught but spur Mission on. *Just tell me that she is safe; that she found a way to escape.*

I gritted my teeth, and pushed such sentimental thoughts aside. *Not the time to reflect upon such matters. I must find a way to break free first.* The room was small, and smelt of rotting corpses. My feet could just reach the door when I kicked with all my might; I’d tried again and again, but the door held firm. Although, with my hands tightly shackled, breaking the door would do little more than appease my temper.

Hunger gnawed at my insides, and I realized that soon the Gamorreans would be back to sedate and then transport me. *I shall not let them!* And yet already I heard the grunts of my captors - they were returning. It sounded like less of them this time. I did not understand their language, and was glad of it.

They stayed outside of my prison, snorting at each other for some time. Desperation creeped insidiously into my furious resolve; I could feel myself turning despondent. No matter how hard I tried, I could not even bend the thick metal clamped around my wrists.

A rumbling blast from outside hammered at my ears; caught unawares, I staggered backward and crashed against the side of my cell. The walls were vibrating with aftershocks. *What was that?* I could hear pained squeals from the Gamorreans. *They are under attack?* A confused howl ripped itself from my lungs.

Deadly silence followed in its wake. I lurched off the wall and kept my eyes trained on the closed door – whatever had happened might still be to my detriment. I could no longer hear the Gamorreans.

A minute later the door swung open. Stunned relief flooded through me as Mission's happy face peeked into the room. Her eyes lit up as she spotted me.
"(Mission!)" I cried in utter shock. *She is alive! I am free!*

"Big Z!" She grinned happily and bounded inside, jumping up to hug me. Clumsily, I tried not to fall over. I was still not used to her effusive displays of affection. *She is safe! And so was I.*

"(Mission)," I complained, as she continued clutching at me tightly. "(My hands are bound. But you are a sight for sore eyes, as the Tarisians say)."

"You didn't think I'd forget about you – Mission and Zaalbar, together forever!" she replied emotionally. Her big blue eyes were blinking at me. She stepped backward and grabbed my paws, fiddling with the restraints. "Let me get those for you, Big Z. Phoaw, you smell!"

It was then that I noticed a Human female had followed her in.

"(Who's that with you?)" I asked warily, eyeing over the newcomer. I did not like Humans in general, and this one in particular raised the hackles on my neck. She was poorly dressed, but by stance alone I could tell she knew how to use the vibrosword she wielded. I wondered just how my young friend had managed to acquire her aid.

The stranger snapped her head up to look at me full on. "My name is Jen Sahara," she answered. Surprise swamped me and I did not take my eyes from the Human. "(You understand the language of my people? That is rare among your species; I am impressed)," I answered slowly. I had not met anyone on Taris who did; it had taken Mission months of dedicated practice to understand me on a basic level.

"Whoa!" Mission shot this Jen Sahara a speculative glance. "First Mandalorian and now Shyriiwook? You sure did learn a lot of weird languages!"

"(Weird?)" I grumbled.

Mission finished playing with the handcuffs, and they opened with a click. I rubbed my wrists thankfully.

"Well, y'know what I mean Big Z!"

"We should probably get out of here," the Human said, glancing back to the exit furtively. "There's still rakghouls crawling around."

"(I owe you a debt, Jen Sahara)," I said solemnly. "(You and Mission together have saved me from a life of servitude and slavery)."

"I didn't really do much," Mission chimed in. "I mean, I'd never have got this far without Jen."

"It's nothing; we made a deal," Jen said flatly.

"(A deal?)" I asked. A feeling of trepidation slowly uncurled in my stomach. Just what had Mission agreed to?

"Yeah, Jen needs my help to break into the Vulkar base," Mission added.

Alarm tensed my nerves; I felt my muscles bunching up in anger. "(No, Mission! We cannot go there, it's too dangerous!)" I demanded. Suddenly, I did not like the Human so much.

"I have to, Big Z, I promised! And besides, she rescued you!" Stubborn indignation was something Mission did all too well.
"I only need access to the entrance, Zaalbar," Jen added. "Mission won't accompany me inside."

"Hey, I'm quick and plenty smart! I can help!" Mission protested.

Jen raised a hand to quell Mission’s impassioned plea. "I believe you Mission, but I don't wish Gadon for an enemy."

"Gadon? What's he got to do with this?" Mission demanded, folding her arms stubbornly.

The Human shrugged at her. "I talked to him, like you suggested. He also warned me not to let you inside the base if I cared for my life."

"He threatened you?" Mission gasped. Her eyes widened, although I wondered why Mission was so surprised. Gadon might not be as... enthusiastic as Zaerdra, but he had always tried to look out for the young Twi’lek. With all of us struggling to keep Mission from danger, it is a wonder how she always manages to elude safety. One day, I was going to lock her in one of those Upper City apartments and throw away the key.

It was unfortunate she knew how to pick locks.

"You could call it that." Jen was grinning impishly at Mission. *Humans are odd,* I reminded myself. *Why would she find a life threat amusing?*

"Gadon's not running my life for me. I do what I want!" Mission declared hotly.

I groaned. Trying to talk reason to Mission was like taming a kinrath: dangerous and ultimately a waste of time. But I had to prevail. "(Mission, please, be sensible. I will help Jen inside the base, in return for her rescue)."

Jen looked at me in surprise. "Thank you, Zaalbar. We’d appreciate that."

"Oh, so you're going to take him along, and not me?" My young charge was getting angry. And stubborn. I would have a fight on my hands to talk her out of this.

"Mission, I do not want the Beks for enemies," Jen said wearily. "But we will need a lookout at the base entrance."

Mission sulked.

*It's a compromise, but I do not have to like it.*

"Please, Mission," Jen said softly.

"Fine," she muttered. "But only because Big Z would never let me hear the end of it!"

The Human smiled warmly at Mission. "Alright, let's head back."

xXx

The journey to the outcast village was fairly uneventful. We ran into a few solitary rakghouls that were killed by Jen's blasters before they came close. I was beginning to respect the fighting abilities of the Human; she was tough and capable. *She also made sure no harm came to Mission during the rescue attempt.* I would do my best to help her in whatever foolhardy plan she had inside the Vulkar base.

The villagers let us through the gates and I noticed they acted wary of Jen. Mission had told me Jen's
Human friend was hurt; healing inside the camp. I followed the females to the centre of the dark courtyard.

"You're back. I'm surprised you're not both dead," a male voice directed at Jen and Mission. I saw an injured Human, tied up tightly to a pole. This was rather puzzling – I did not realize the Outcasts imprisoned people.

"No faith in me?" Jen asked. I could hear the humour in her voice.

"You should have waited until I could help!" the man responded in frustration.

"I would have asked you, but you seemed a little tied up."

Mission burst out laughing. *He is tied up. What is so funny?*

"Ha ha," the Human male answered, but he did not sound amused. "Care to get me out of this mess?"

“I dunno, Onasi. I kinda like you better this way.” The merriment was obvious in the female's eyes, as obvious as the growing irritation in the male's. Finally, Jen Sahara threw her hands up in capitulation.

“Okay, okay!” she said, her voice still shaking with suppressed mirth as she started untangling the ropes. “At least you sound a lot better, at any rate.”

"Hey! You can't do that!" A female villager ran up to us. Jen whirled around to face the stranger, and the interloper took a few steps back hurriedly.

"Just watch me," Jen said menacingly. I could see rage on her face, and I tensed in wariness. Something about this Human was a little... off. Even Mission looked alarmed.

"I – well, I guess we can tell he doesn't have the rakghoul disease anymore," the healer stuttered, backing away.

"You have the social skills of a rancor," the tied up Human muttered. I saw amusement chase away the anger on Jen's face.

"Oh?" she responded, smiling mischievously. *She gets the same contrary look as Mission.* "You'd prefer me to leave you here?"

"No!"

Jen grinned, and finished untangling the man. "Zaalbar, this is Carth." He nodded at me, and I returned the greeting. "Zaalbar's offered to help us break into the Vulkar base."

I grunted in confirmation. *I may not trust her, but I owe her that much.*

The man looked surprised. "Uh, that’s great. Thanks, we could do with the extra help."

"What do you guys want in there, anyway?" Mission piped up.

"Gadon's asked us to do something for him," Jen told her. I noticed the man named Carth frown at Jen. "What?" she snapped at him. "They're helping us, they deserve to know something."

"Lighten up, would ya Carth?" Mission said. "Jen’s refused to tell me anything at all, other than you’re a pilot."
"What?" Carth spluttered. He was still leaning against the pole, flexing an injured arm. It looked painful.

Jen groaned. "Thanks Mission."

"Oh. Oops." Mission giggled sheepishly.

The male Human was frowning at Jen again. "I can't believe you, woman!"

"Right. I'm getting out of here," Jen stated baldly. "We can't go back to the Upper City with you in that state, Onasi, the Sith will get suspicious." I wondered briefly who Onasi was. Jen was still speaking, in a hurried monotone as if she wanted to get her piece out before anyone interrupted. "I think we should camp down here tonight, and hit the Vulkar base tomorrow if you're up to it. Zaalbar, do me a favour and make sure Carth doesn't leave? He really needs to rest and recuperate."

"Hey!" Carth objected, his brows lowering. "You're not ordering me about, sister!"

Jen ignored his protests, facing me as she spoke. "He's hurt and grumpy. The last thing he needs is to be moving about."

I eyed the injuries I could see. Most had been bandaged, but judging by the way Carth was balanced against the wooden pole, he looked to be in a lot of pain. He was favouring his left side, and could not stand up straight. Kolto had some instantaneous effect, but injuries as severe as his would need at least a night’s rest to heal considerably. *Jen Sahara speaks sense.*

"(I will do as you ask, Jen Sahara)."

Carth turned to look at me, frowning. "What did you just say?"

Mission started laughing again. "He said that if you even think about moving, he’s gonna wallop ya one! And Big Z always says what he means, so you'd better get comfortable for the night, Carth!"

"(Mission, you are making my words sound stronger than they are)," I complained.

"(It's the only way he'll listen)," Mission responded in Ryl.

"I'll be back later," Jen muttered, and dashed off.

"Where are you going now, you reckless woman?" Carth called after her, and made to follow. I walked in front of him and barred the way. He scowled at me.

"(It is for your own health, Human)," I tried to explain.

"If I wasn't so hurt, I'd take you on, Wookiee," he muttered at me. It was a token protest, I felt, for the Human looked irritated rather than genuinely angry.

Mission guffawed in disbelief. "I'll go after her," she said brightly. "See you guys later!"

"(Mission!)" I lamented loudly. She had already run ten paces. "(Get back here!)"

She flashed me an impish grin. "No, you promised to look after Carth! I won't be long!" With that, my roguish young friend turned tail and ran after Jen.

I howled in frustration.

"Yeah," Carth commented next to me. "I know exactly how you feel."
Depression weighed down on my soul as I gulped another swig of Tarisian ale. Mission had disappeared into the pazaak room beyond, and I'd leapt at the opportunity to finally imbibe some much-needed alcohol. *I'd like to see you try and stop me boozing now, Flyboy.* Unfortunately, rather than relaxing my tense nerves, the alcohol seemed to be sinking me into introspection – what I'd been avoiding ever since I woke up with a splitting headache and multiple personalities.

I was almost convinced that neither Jen nor Evil Bitch were really me. But the detail with which I could recall studying - the days spent poring over electronic databases and archives - convinced me that Jen must be real, somehow. I could list specifics about the founding of the Republic, or posit a theory regarding the true origins of Coruscant's first colonists. Anything that hadn't happened in, oh, the last millennia or two. *I can see my father's face so clearly. He scares me; he protects me. Not my father... hers.*

Evil Bitch's identity, in contrast, was more just a mass of seething emotions; rage, a lust for power, hatred, and at times, an undercurrent of grief so immense I could barely fathom it. The feelings were so vibrant and overpowering that they must belong to me. *Or to someone.*

If a stranger asked me to describe myself, I'd say I was confident, cheeky at times; quick to anger, but quick to forgive. I wanted to understand people and their motivations, and the foreign intrigued me. Perhaps I had an inclination to be reckless and take chances, but overall, I felt like my heart was in the right place. *That description is about as far off Jen or Evil Bitch as possible.*

I sighed morosely, and took another swallow. My glance caught on the mirror behind the bar, and I latched onto my own reflection. It didn't look familiar. *Curly dark hair, cropped short. Wide-set green eyes, tilted nose, plainish face. A fairly normal looking female Human, really.* Was that face really mine?

I downed the remainder of the glass, and ordered another. A hopeful Twi’lek tried flirting with me, but disappeared after I threatened to tie him to the ceiling fan by his headtails. *I just want to be with myself. Whoever that is.*

I continued drinking, and my thoughts edged into wooziness. *I wonder who this face belongs to... doesn't look freaky enough to be Evil Bitch. I giggled. I bet she's really ugly.*

I finished the next glass, and rested my head on the damp bar. My eyelids drooped closed, but I was still dwelling on my appearance. *I've never been vain; I've never obsessed over my looks. Have I? A comforting sense of tiredness conquered my wayward thoughts, and I let them slide away into oblivion.*

*...*

*I could smell the fritla blossoms as I knelt next to the river. I love spring. Everything comes back to life. The afternoon was mine to do with as I wished; I had completed all of Father's chores, and he hadn't wanted me at home with the Minister around. So here I sat, at my usual spot, next to the*
gentle trickling of water. Even if it was a man-made canal, I still loved it.

My reflection smiled shyly back at me as I leaned over the bank. Wavy dark hair framing hazel eyes. I wish I didn't have freckles. I wish I was pretty. Although, Father told me to be glad I was plain, for beautiful girls attract the attention of troublesome boys. And I certainly didn't want that.

"Jen!" A masculine voice called out, irritated. I jumped to my feet, a little fearful. Better run, Father wants me.

…

The cold stars in the distance winked at me as I stared through the ship’s space-strengthened transparisteel. Almost back in known world. We'll build a better galaxy. A stronger one, that will withstand any threat. Amazing how the anger hadn't left me. If anything, it had strengthened. They never taught us that, no; they wanted to control us. Didn't want us to realize the sheer power in embracing one's emotions.

I caught a glint of my own face on the window, and I stared at it absently. A white flaky complexion surrounded by greasy lank hair. Two eyes as black as space. Good thing I never cared for how I looked. I grinned and an evil rictus reflected back at me. And it always helps if you appear intimidating. With that thought, I reached for the steel mask that provided an even better front than my corrupted features.

…

I searched the edges of the cracked mirror. Gotta be a safe in here somewhere. My reflection frowned back in concentration as I ran my fingers behind it. I grinned as I felt the catch. Easy target, easy credits.

I paused, and stared into my own eyes before lifting the mirror. I don't look too bad. I wonder if he'll ever see me differently? I'd never particularly cared how I looked; dark curly hair, green eyes, olive skin; the fact that I was healthy and had all four limbs was enough to keep me happy. But lately... I scowled at myself. Great time for vanity, in the middle of a heist. Stupid, get back to work! I clamped down my thoughts, and started dismantling the safe.

…

"Jen? Hey Jen!" A young voice cracked through my swirling dreams. "Wake up! Gee, never took you for a drinker!"

My cheek was glued to something. As I slowly prised open a sticky eye, I saw a blue grinning face tilted to one side. Oh. My face is stuck on the bar. I groaned as I slowly raised my head.

"Ugh," I moaned.

Mission laughed. "Wow, you musta’ bin busy while I was pulling in the credits! Heh, I bet your grumpy friend isn't going to be too happy with you."

Reality sank slowly into consciousness. "He doesn't need to know," I mumbled. "I need some sleep."

"We should head back to the others," Mission agreed. "But can you walk? You're as drunk as a spacer on lockdown!"

Well, I am from space. And this planet is locked down. "I can walk, just watch me," I grumped
determinedly, sliding to my feet. I squeezed my eyes shut as dizziness set in, and heard a giggle from the teenage Twi’lek.

"Laugh at me, would you?" I murmured. "Bet I could drink you under the table."

She sniggered loudly. "Says you now, when you're already sloshed."

"Mmm," I replied, with my eyes still firmly shut. "Lead on."

"We'll go a different way, though," she said brightly. "I don't wanna run into any Vulkars, not with you in such a state." She giggled again. I opened my eyes to shoot her a filthy glare, but followed her in silence.

As we wandered through the grimy corridors of the Lower City, my head began to clear. I hazily recalled the dreams I'd had, and it brought on another case of contemplation. I look most like the street kid. My skin's not as tanned, but then, I've been indoors. I'm also a lot older. That'd make sense though, my vision of both Jen and Street Kid seemed to be when they were young teenagers. It was a lot harder to tell with Evil Bitch, whose dreams of power and grandeur seemed so far-fetched and delusional they were almost amusing. If they weren't so violent, at any rate.

I sighed to myself, and shadowed Mission around the next bend. That's it, then, isn't it? I must be Street Kid. Right?

Theories swirled hazily through my head. I still don't know why I have three identities, other than it has something to do with Bastila. I seemed to know a little of the Force; perhaps I'd fought Evil Bitch. Doesn't explain Jen, though. Maybe I'd been a Jedi apprentice who'd got dragged into a duel, and somehow Evil Bitch's memories, or soul, got trapped inside my own. Bastila… or someone… must have done something. Something with the Force. Perhaps Jen had also been involved. Maybe she'd been caught in the middle of a Jedi duel.

This is getting me nowhere.

Bastila would have the answers, but did I really want to hear them? The bond had not yet returned, but somehow I was certain it would.

Should I really continue with this rescue… should I really let her anywhere near me?

And yet… if I didn’t find out the truth, would I ever learn how to safely navigate the minefield that was my head?

With a sigh of drunken irritation, I quelled my thoughts and silently followed Mission back into the depths of Taris.

xXx

I woke up the next morning, groggy and nauseous. It took a moment to re-orient myself; I vaguely remembered stumbling after Mission into the outcast village. Our makeshift camp was really just shelter under a rat-infested building, but it was enough for me to sleep. Thus far, I seemed to find it easy to sleep just about anywhere.

As I crawled to my feet, I noticed the others eating some sort of stew by the entrance. I wondered briefly where the food had come from; Onasi must have sweet-talked some of the villagers. I don't see many supplies around here. And the only animals are vermin. I shrugged when I realized that
might very well be a viable food source. If it wasn’t killing the outcasts with food poisoning, then I should be alright.

Somehow, I had the feeling Jen Sahara would be feeling substantially more squeamish.

Mission saw me first as I slowly approached the group.

"Bet you’re feeling awful today!" Mission exclaimed brightly, grinning. Carth shot me a small, disappointed frown before turning away, and the Wookiee grunted in acknowledgement.

"Mm, I’ve been better," I said noncommittally, ignoring the thumping in my head.

"Want some?" the Twi’lek offered. My stomach rumbled loudly, and I eagerly took a portion. Chunks of unidentifiable brown cubes floated into an equally brown sauce. *Well, it certainly matches the Undercity.* I slowly ate a spoonful; it was warm, filling, and about as bland as the Upper City cantina fare. So far, my opinion of Tarisian cuisine was decidedly average.

Carth was still injured, and by mutual consent we decided to wait another day before infiltrating the Vulkar base. Mutual, all apart from Flyboy himself, who wanted to get it over and done with. *We have six days before the swoop race; five if we get the accelerator tomorrow.* To my surprise, Carth didn’t argue too loudly. In fact, he seemed to be ignoring me. *I saved his life, and he’s pissy with me?*

I spent the day hanging around the Lower City. Mission tried to cajole me into a game of pazaak, and by the look on her face I surmised someone had told her about my awful last performance. *Thank you, Flyboy.* I was vaguely aware that we were driving each other crazy. *It’s a good thing Mission and Zaalbar are here to diffuse the tension, even if not for long.* I expected we’d part company after the Vulkar base raid.

I had a quick trip back to the apartment, picking up the few grenades I’d left behind. Hopefully I wouldn’t be back; all going according to plan we’d acquire the accelerator, rescue Bastila, and then I’d be off. *I don’t want to be around her. Just fulfil my deal with Onasi, and then disappear.* I wondered if it would be that easy. I quenched the traitorous voice that pointed out I’d already done enough by saving his life.

We were all kitted up and ready to go the next day; even Zaalbar emerged with a vibrosword strapped to his back. Mission had disappeared briefly on a shopping expedition, whether she actually paid credits for her equipment I wasn’t sure. Regardless, she’d come back with a couple of bio-scanners and lowlight sonic visors for us all, excluding Zaalbar whose night vision, it turned out, was as incredible as the rest of his species.

*Bio-scanners and sonic visors. Stars,* I realized ruefully, *we were terribly equipped last time.*

I’d dallied with the idea of delaying matters one more day – we had the time to spare, and Carth was still in pain despite his protestations to the contrary. Somehow, I doubted he’d listen to reason. *Besides, I want to finish this as much as he does.*

Heading to the Outside, we kept Mission between us as she scouted on the ‘scanner, her other hand grasping the sole light-rod we’d need in the sewers. Even sonic lowlight visors wouldn’t help in the absence of all light, but the faint glow from just one rod would be enough for technology to grant us full vision.

There were two small groups of rakghouls it was difficult to avoid; I stuck with my blaster, while Zaalbar charged in and dispatched them. He’d assured us that Wookiees could not get the rakghoul disease, and I was glad he didn’t have to prove it, as we made swift progress towards the sewers.
After Onasi’s close brush with death, I was particularly appreciative of the extra muscle. Wookiees were tough.

The decomposing, fetid stench of the sewers swamped me as we entered, and I struggled not to gag. Our light-rods illuminated a similar expression on Carth’s face; we shared a silent look of disgust at the smell, and then followed Zaalbar into the bowels of the Undercity.

"So guys," Mission whispered as we journeyed through a long, dank corridor. The light-rod threw up shadows along the walls; I could see what looked like green slime oozing down one side. "What are we doing inside in the Vulkar base?"

"(You are not doing anything inside the Vulkar base, Mission)," Zaalbar growled, prompting a sulky pout from the Twi’lek.

*They deserve to know, no matter what Onasi thinks.* "Gadon’s asked us to retrieve or destroy a prototype accelerator," I told her, my eyes searching the sewers for any hint of danger. I sensed Carth stiffen in annoyance next to me.

"Really?" Mission squeaked. "I thought he was going to send some Beks after it!"

"I daresay we're more dispensable," Carth said. His voice was very dry.

"(That is a dangerous task)," Zaalbar commented. "(Gadon is doing something for you in return?)"

"Yes he is," I confirmed. "But I shall say no more, in fear of Flyboy's blasters."

“Jen,” Carth said sharply. “Do you- are you answering the Wookiee? There’s no way you can understand those howls-"

“(Shyriiwook is as much a language as your Galactic Basic!)” Zaalbar growled in annoyance. “(What is it with Humans and their self-absorption?)”

Carth glanced back at Zaalbar, chagrined as he realized the noise was directed at him. “Er, sorry Zaalbar. I didn’t mean to offend- it’s just that, Jen? Can you really understand him?”

“Gee, Carth, don’t be such a dumb nerf-herder,” Mission cut in. “I can understand Shyriiwook.”

In the dim light of glow-sticks, I was sure I could see the faint red of embarrassment flush on his neck. I grinned, refused to answer, and walked on.

We journeyed further into the sewers without incident, skirting to the east of the rooms Zaalbar had been kept captive in. He looked that way numerous times, and I wondered if it was nervousness, or a desire for vengeance should any Gamorrean slavers make an appearance. As long as there weren’t too many, I was fairly confident we could handle them. *The four of us make a great team.*

Eventually we reached the forcefield Mission had told us about. It glowed a faint, shimmering blue, and halted access to a solitary tunnel. A terminal was bolted on the wall, looking decidedly out of place.

Mission skipped ahead, retrieving a datapad out of her utility belt. By the time I’d walked closer, she was already running commands through the system with practised ease. Either she was the fastest splicer on Taris, or she’d somehow gained access through another method.

Regardless, the Twi’lek obviously knew what she was doing with computers. A minute later, a slithering hiss sounded as the azure forcefield deactivated.
“Easy as kassi-loaf,” Mission chortled. “I’ve been wanting to get past here for ages. Lucky I lifted those codes when I did.”

She’s only just acquired the deactivation sequence, I realized. How coincidental is that? I shivered, and felt a familiar faintness creep in around the edges of my sanity.

…

A robed Zabrak woman was staring at me intently through intelligent turquoise eyes. "The Force is the energy of all living things, padawan. It surrounds us, it binds us. It is life in its purest form," she said. Her voice was quiet, yet strangely compelling. "And it works through us all, Jedi and non-Jedi alike. In the end, there is no such thing as coincidence."

…

Something nudged me and I gasped. A sharp pain stabbed deep into my head from where I’d banged it on the ‘Spire, before fading into a dull throb.

“Jen, are you okay?” Carth asked in a low voice. I realized that Mission and Zaalbar were some steps ahead, looking back at us in confusion.

“I’m okay,” I muttered. “Just my head playing up.”

He was frowning at me, his eyes dark with concern, when a roar in the distance grabbed everyone’s attention. I noticed warily that the walls shook slightly with the vibration.

"What in the blazes was that?" Carth asked. He’d raised his blaster, pointing it down the shadowed corridor that was now accessible. He was standing in an alert, military stance, feet apart and hands steadily aiming his weapon. He certainly is the archetype Republic soldier, I thought in half-irritation, half-admiration. He made it look good.

"I dunno," Mission replied in a quieter voice. “You hear the roars down here sometimes, but I’ve never known what creates it.”

"Maybe it's the Vulkar door chime,” I muttered. Mission giggled.

“(It is the planet slowly dying),” Zaalbar howled mournfully. “(Of death and disease and decay).”

While I didn’t doubt that Taris was a chivhole of a planet, I didn’t think Zaalbar had the right of it. Regardless, we had to move on – and if the Vulkars came this way, then they must have a path that didn’t encounter whatever made that noise. I hoped.

Gripping tight my blaster, I followed Zaalbar into the unknown. We reached a large chamber that was eerily empty.

My boots crunched on something, and I looked down. A pile of old bones, the final resting place of some poor sod. I crouched, and moved the rubble aside. Huh, a journal of some description. The words 'Promised Land' caught my eye. That's the second one I've found. Well, I suppose I could make a loony old man happy.

There were two exits, and we veered off to another long, empty, dark corridor. The creepy atmosphere seemed to affect us all; no one had spoken a word in quite some time. I wondered if I could hear faint munching noises in the distance, or if the atmosphere was beginning to fray my focus.
The passageway emptied out into a vast cavern, half of it in lightless shadow. The room was huge, far bigger than any we had come across so far. I peered suspiciously at the far end of the catacomb - anything could be hiding there.

"There's something wrong with the ‘scanner," Mission murmured, following Zaalbar into the room. Carth and I were some steps behind as Mission picked a path through piles of rubble that littered the area. “Again. Sheesh, there ain’t nothing that big. This ‘scanner is scrap. Who’s got the other one?”

It was an enormous room with large heaps of debris dotted throughout it. Deeper in the bowels of the place we could see the outline of a door on the left, and an open entrance on the right. But further still, there was nothing but shadow. The meagre glow from the light-rod would only travel so far, it seemed.

Movement caught my eye; I turned to see a gigantic shadow enlarge from the darkened end. I froze. Nothing could be that big. Nothing!

A deafening roar slammed into my eardrums, and the obscure shape lumbered towards us in a sudden move. Mission shrieked in panic and ran to the side of the catacomb. I caught a glimpse of her struggling with a door that did not budge. Zaalbar sprinted after her, skirting past the monster. It hadn’t seen them, and instead was heading straight for me.

It roared a second time.

I stared at the oncoming mass in a sense of bewilderment and growing determination. I will not flee! Nothing frightens me! My throat clenched.

"Run!" he bellowed. That broke my trance, and the two of us turned and bolted to the only other exit. Adrenaline spiked a fire through my veins as the beast howled. An eerie, bone-shaking noise of death. I could almost feel its hot, sticky breath brushing my neck.

Carth reached the doorway, turning his head to yell something at me. Another roar, and something whisked along my back, barely making contact. I stumbled. I won't make it! Hot desperation lurched me forwards. I need to move faster!

I screamed, and jumped the last few metres.

The air around me stretched. I was suspended forever as time telescoped into nothing. A faint buzzing tickled my ears. I hadn't thought my leap would carry me to the doorway, but now it seemed like I was going to crash into the wall beyond. I raised my hands belatedly.

As my limbs collapsed against the hard surface of freedom, there was a loud crash from behind. It took a dazed second before I realized the monster had barrelled straight into the doorway. Pellets of rubble spat fierce arrows into my back as my hands steadied against the wall.

I threw a frantic look over my shoulder to behold a horrifying sight. That's a rancor, a voice muttered. The monster snarled, thrusting a giant head against a doorway too small to fit through. A chunk of torn panelling ripped free from the side of the doorway.

Sun and stars! This is too frelling close! My horrified gaze slid sideways, catching on the prone figure of Carth. Crumpled and lifeless, in a heap on the ground. Sithspit!

Another piercing howl had me jerking back to the rancor; it had retreated just far enough to drive a claw through the damaged opening. Sharp talons scrabbled at the sides, tearing through framework
that wouldn't hold it back for long.

Fright vanished out of necessity. I jumped into action, grabbed Carth's unresisting arms, and yanked him fiercely down the corridor. With the heat of need adding strength to my grip, Carth didn't even feel heavy. My skin prickled as I focused on only one objective: get further down the narrow corridor where the monster cannot follow.

The illusion of safety slowly, slowly calmed my thundering heart. I stared back at the distant entrance - a gaping hole that had been a door-sized aperture moments ago. *It's still far too small for a rancor to get through. And it can't follow down us down here.* The rancor seemed to agree, for it retreated again, this time disappearing entirely.

Muffled grunts and growls of annoyance reverberated through the ancient stonework as the rancor moved back into its prison of a chamber. I expelled a shaky sign, and knelt down to check on Carth.

*I just hope Mission made it through the other exit.* Carth groaned as I searched for a pulse, mumbling something incoherently. *If they didn't make it out-

The high-pierced shriek of a girl iced my heart. The familiar sound of a Wookiee howling immediately followed. *Oh no.* My stomach lurched. *They're still there.*

I stood. I ran. I was back at the damaged doorway-

The rancor roared from further back in the cavern. My mind had frozen over, but my legs were sprinting forwards. I was metres deep in the cavern when I saw them. Trapped in a corner, Zaalbar standing protectively in front of Mission.

*They're going to die. This is their end.*

…unless I did something.

"Come back here, you filthy beast!" I shrieked, running into the room.

*I can't let them die.*

*If they can't take care of themselves, they deserve to die for their weakness.*

*I must get out of here! This is too terrifying!*

*I can't let them die.*

"Turn around, you flea-bitten kath pup! Are you too scared to face me?" I had no idea where the words were coming from. The rancor ignored me as it advanced on the others. Zaalbar stepped back, growling, pushing Mission deep into the corner behind him.

My eyes caught on a fist-sized rock, and I scrambled to pick it up. I hurled it with all my might, and watched numbly as the rock bounced harmlessly off the rancor's naturally armoured back. The monster lurched within swiping distance of the Wookiee.

"(Run, Mission!)

"I can't!" she sobbed.

*Speed.* Desperation laced my steps as I sprinted towards the creature, drawing my blade as I ran. Everything around me lengthened. Each step took an eternity, but the others appeared frozen in time. The rancor had a claw upwards, the start of a killing blow aimed at the Wookiee. A long, deep
scream erupted viciously from my lungs as I hurled my vibrosword at the rancor's leg.

With a soundless snap, my surroundings clicked back into place. Reality shortened.

The rancor stumbled as the blade dug into its lower limb. It screeched and turned around to face me.

"Run!" I bellowed at the others.

They gathered their wits, and made a dash for the exit I had come from. The beast shook his leg in annoyance, and my vibrosword went whirling into the dark. I resisted the insane urge to go collect it.

The creature drew itself up to its full height, the top of its head brushing the ceiling of the extensive cavern. It roared in anger, huge red eyes glinting with madness. Focused solely on me. Terror tightened my limbs, as I stared in stunned shock at the monster. A small voice whispered, *bring it on!*

I could vaguely hear screaming from the recesses of my fragmented mind. The rancor crouched back onto its massive limbs, preparing for the kill. *Get out of here!* I twisted on the spot, and sprinted for my life.

The beast lumbered after me, bellowing in anger. My muscles pulsed and burned. *Use the Force again!* I saw Mission and Zaalbar sprint into the broken doorway, and out of sight. I reached out mentally and clutched at the power I was beginning to recognize, and once more everything took on that surreal, stretched look as events were frozen in time for an instant or two.

The rancor smashed head first into the broken doorway, as the Force propelled me around the corner. The foundations of the sewers rumbled in discontent as the monster howled and tore through ancient stonework. My vision was speckled and mottled, my lungs burned as I panted, and as I stumbled into relative safety from the rancor's claws, I could feel the shaky weakness of my limbs.

*Well, that was fun.* I tried desperately to control my breathing as I caught up to the others. *I could have killed it, no pathetic rancor frightens me!* I closed my eyes as the panic slowly ebbed. *I was pretty frightened, alright.*

"Jen!" Mission sobbed, and clutched onto me. Adrenaline still burned fire through me, along with a simmering senseless rage, and I was quick to disentangle myself. I gave her a cursory pat on the shoulder. "I thought it got you!" she wailed.

"I think it almost did," I muttered.

"Whatever possessed you to run back in there?" Carth was awake, and speaking in a very quiet voice.

"Just my daily dose of lunacy," I quipped, somewhat breathlessly. My vision had cleared now, and normality was slowly seeping back into my bones. I sucked in a deep, calming breath of air.

"(You have saved my life again, Jen Sahara)," Zaalbar rumbled, walking over to me. "(And now Mission's, as well)."

I shrugged uncomfortably. Gratitude was not something I particularly wanted. "Forget it," I mumbled.

"(I cannot. You put your own life in jeopardy twice to save mine. There is only one way I can repay such an act: I will swear a lifedebt to you)."

I froze; my muscles clenched in surprise. *A lifedebt?* I felt like the rancor really had wallop me. It was still roaring furiously back in the chamber. *A Wookiee slave, that could be useful.* I swallowed. *I
I don't want anyone around; just finish the quest and get out of here. I heard Mission squeak in surprise. But Zaalbar is such a nice guy. What's a lifedebt?

"A lifedebt?" Mission whispered. "Are you sure about that, Big Z?"

"A what?" Carth sounded puzzled.

"(This is an issue of great importance to me, Mission)," Zaalbar rumbled. "(Jen Sahara has twice now saved my life; once from slavery which I consider worse than death. She has also rescued you, when I could not)."

"Wow – this is major." Mission turned to face me. "Do you realize what this means?"

"I don’t need this, Zaalbar," I told him seriously.

"What are you all talking about?" Carth asked. "And Jen, I suppose you learnt Shyriiwook during your study as well?" he ended sarcastically.

Zaalbar bellowed at Carth, who glared in response.

"(Nevertheless, Jen Sahara, it is my decision. You have kept Mission from harm, and saved me twice from death)."

"But I don't know where I'm going! I don't know what my future holds.” I didn't mean for my voice to sound so desperate. And Carth was looking at me strangely. I bit back a scowl.

"(Then I shall follow, and endeavour to help you)." Zaalbar took a deep breath. "(In the presence of you all I swear my lifedebt. Forever after I will be by your side, Jen Sahara. My honour and my strength are yours. May my vow be as strong as the roots of the great wroshyr trees of Kashyyk)."

My head had bowed during Zaalbar's speech, whether out of dismay or respect I could no longer tell. The vow is done now; Zaalbar cannot take it back. I should at least accept it graciously.

"I am honoured to accept your vow, Zaalbar."

"You know this is a sacred, irreversible vow?" Mission interrupted. I nodded at her, and she continued. "I guess this means you're stuck with me, too. Wherever Big Z goes, I'm going. I almost lost him once - it's not gonna happen again."

I blinked. Well, if I get the walking rug, I may as well take the snot-nosed kid too, I thought sourly. Stars, Onasi is going to have a fit.

"Stuck with....? Just what's going on?" Carth had folded his arms, frowning at us all.

"Geez, Carth, you're so slow!" Mission rolled her eyes. "Big Z's just sworn a lifedebt to Jen. So I guess we're all one big happy family now!" She beamed.

I felt slightly nauseous.

"Family?" he echoed weakly. He blinked at me. "Lifedebt? Why?"

"While you were snoozing, Jen ran back in and saved our lives!" Mission enlightened him. "We'd have been Mr Rancor's dinner if not for her!"

Carth's mouth dropped open, and he stared in confusion at me. Heh, I think I worry him when I do the right thing. "Oh," he said quietly, his dark eyes searching mine.
I turned away. "Let's go find that Vulkar base, it can't be far. I want to find out which gang member had the bright idea of using a rancor as a guard."

*And then I'm going to castrate him.*

xXx
It seemed like I'd been waiting there forever. I couldn't even hear blaster shots or screams anymore. *I could go in*, I thought suddenly, *see if they're okay.* Problem was, I'd promised to stay put. *'Sides, I liked Jen, and didn't wanna to get her in any jip.*

*Though it ain't like Gadon would kill her or anything. Not if I talked to him.*

I was waiting outside the base, tucked in the shadows behind a crumbling sewer wall. The back entrance to the Vulkar base was totally unguarded, and our only snag had been a terminal-locked durasteel door that a novice could slice. So, after rocking *my* skills, the rest of the gang'd sent me away to hide like a little kid while they went and got the job done. I could feel myself pouting. *I still thought I'd be safer with them.*

A Vulkar had run past me earlier, back into the sewers. I'd stayed hidden, but even if I'd been smack bang in the centre of the corridor I didn't think he'd've seen me. He'd looked like he'd peed in his pants or something. Funny thing was, he'd headed straight towards Mr Rancor.

The rancor made me think of Big Z's lifedebt. That was *big.* It had me excited, too, because I had a funny feeling Carth and Jen weren't gonna be sticking round on Taris forever. *Earth's gotta tell us what's going on now- we're part of it!* Honestly, I never thought I'd find a way off this place. Since Griff'd gone, I'd felt chained to Taris with the rest of the Lower City. I'd dream that maybe one day, when I lifted enough creds, I could buy a ticket off-world for me and Big Z.

Dreams to make me smile, but I never really knew how good my chances were.

But now.... They were off-worlders, and they were doing something important. I couldn’t help but wonder if they had something to do with the Republic escape pods, too. *Jen said Carth was a pilot*....

I figured since we were all on the same team now, I should be with them. I'd been out here long enough. Sure, Zaalbar would howl at me for a bit, but he'd get over it - he always did. And earlier, when they'd all disappeared into the Vulkar base, my gaze had landed on a terminal inside just before the door had closed.

*I could slice into that, an' access the vid-feeds. I'll be able to find them and spot a clear path to catch up.*

I grinned to myself, and took a silent step forwards. A couple of halogens shone bright on the durasteel entrance, lighting up the door against the shadows of the sewers. It was unlocked, now - all I had to do was depress the controls.

I pulled out my bio-scanner and ran a quick check. It was *usually* reliable through a door's thickness of durasteel, and the malfunction I'd thought from earlier was actually just a clear reading of that freakish rancor. I shivered. I'd never seen *anything* like that thing. Not unless I counted those horror vids Griff used to like, the ones he'd trick me into watching just to snigger at me when I screamed. I'd always thought the monsters from those dumb holo-vids were just special effects of some producer.
high on gree-spice or something. Now, I wondered if they'd gotten their inspiration from real-life creatures.

The scanner was beeping back at me in reassurance: *No sentient life detected.* Its accuracy range was well beyond the door before it started to plummet, so I bit my lip, darted forward, and slammed my hand on the door control before I lost my nerve.

The entrance to the Vulkar base was empty.

I ran forward to the terminal, hurriedly inserting a tech spike from my belt. The OS was IntelSec, an earlier variant of the IntelliiSecurity system the Beks used, and I'd sliced that enough times I could do it blind-folded. *Okay,* so usually I bullied one of Gadon’s utility droids into helping, but even so – it was child’s play to hack into the back end, disable the holo-interface, and go straight to command input. Inserting my datapad, I ran a couple of quick batches that soon gave me master control.

*First things first – schematics.* With a couple of taps, I found and launched a holo-map of the base. It was smaller than I expected, with a couple of vertical shafts that rose deep into the Lower City. The bulk of the base was closer to the Undercity, though, which explained why the Beks could never place this base on their sonic mapping devices.

The Lower City was a mess of corridors, tunnels, and collapsed sinkholes. Any schematic that was near to accurate soon become less so – certain parts of Taris were just plain dangerous to exist in, and that wasn’t even counting in the gangs or the Exchange. I’d had a bit to do with the sonic mapping - me and Big Z were *wizard* at modifying comm gadgets to include sonic transmitters that sent data back to a mapping program. But even with all that info, we’d never been able to place the nearby Vulkar residence. Oh, the Beks knew about some of their other heavily guarded strongholds further away, but this one… it'd bugged me for months, ever since one of the Beks had come across the guarded front entrance in the centre of Lower Taris.

Our sonic tech had thrown contradictions when we'd tried to map it from a distance - there just didn't seem to be enough sheer space to house a stronghold of Vulkar scum. And that’s why I’d wondered about the sewers – if their base went deep down into the depths, it’d make sense. Tarisians shied away from the Undercity, for good reason. Looked like the Vulkars had capitalized on *that* real estate.

I was changing the output to the holo-cam network when a bright red error flashed across the top of the screen. A second later, a piercing siren cut through the air. I squeaked at the ominous words blinking at me.

*Alarm activated by unauthorised access.*

*Bantha poodoo!* *Was that me?* My fingers flew over the keyboard as I desperately hacked into the security functions.

The back of my neck felt suddenly hot. The stupid warning wasn't disappearing from the console. *Unauthorised access? Far out, I'm not the one charging in with guns blazing!* Wasn't that just the luck, though- the others could barge in, somehow without tripping a single alarm- I do the *teensiest* bit of slicing and suddenly every dumb siren in the place starts ringing-

The wailing noise cut out with a strangled whine. I blinked, tapped one more key, and the flashing red message vanished from the screen.

My breath caught in my throat. *Please, let any nearby peeps think that was just a false alarm.* I turned the door, listening for any sounds. Maybe there was a faint yell in the distance, but definitely
nothing close by. Huffing in relief, I bent back over the screen and hooked into the vid-feeds again.

There were no sents anywhere near me, but I spotted a couple of patrol droids in nearby rooms. With a wrinkle of my nose, I shut down the access doors and locked them in. If they had security specs they might be able to slice through the doors, but it'd give me some time at least.

I had no idea where the others had gone. I'd heard blaster shots when they'd first left me, which had petered away into silence after a few minutes. Scrolling through the feeds, I spotted a maintenance room that housed a backup generator and server system by the looks. Piles of broken blasters and swoop bike parts littered the floor. On the far end, there was a workbench with a slumped Vulkar corpse laying over it. Jackpot! They went this way!

From there, it wasn't too hard to follow their trail. I was briefly side-tracked by unlocking the armoury, idly wishing I had time to explore it, and then continued to track the gang through the cams. I switched the feed to a large training room, and the cam threw up a scene of havoc to my surprised eyes.

Turrets were firing at three figures stuck between the guns and a mob of sentients. One of the three looked distinctly tall and hairy. Poodoo! They're trapped! How the Vulkars had caught them in front of the guns I didn't know, but it looked nasty.

I gotta do something. They'll die otherwise! Turrets.... I quickly switched to the gun access control.

**Turrets deactivated.**

I watched the screen tensely.

Half a minute later, and they ran around the corner. A blinding flash of light exploded right in the middle of the mob running after them. *Grenades. Good one, Jen!*

I searched the terminal intently for any survivors, and saw only one Vulkar struggling to get back on his feet. Jen's head reappeared through the doorway. She quickly scanned the room, shot the sole remaining survivor, and then vanished.

*She scares me like that. I know it's better to be safe, but sometimes Jen can act so bloodthirsty. I guessed battle rage must get to her; she was really nice otherwise.*

I decided it was time to catch up with them, so quickly tied up loose ends by hemming in a couple more patrol droids, and unlocking the doors directly in Jen’s path.

With a deep breath, I checked my path once more on the vid-feed, and then darted deeper into the base. I grasped a light, but accurate, Senturi blaster, and stayed tight behind each corner before stepping out to clear it. When I ran into the maintenance room, I took a moment to quickly rifle through the corpses' pockets, slipping the loaded chits into my belt. There was no point turning down easy credits, after all.

I made it to the training room, stepping over Vulkar bodies as I passed. *I wonder just how close the others were to dying.* I shivered. It had looked pretty grim, from the terminal.

The thought of that incident made me realize they might still be in trouble. *They might need my help.* I raced down to the lower level of the Vulkar Base. Broken droids and smoke greeted me.

*Sheesh, what happened now?* I walked through the clouds of smoke, scouting around for any movement. *Nothing here. Where are they?* I crept onward, further into Vulkar offices. Dead gang members met my eye. I heard voices, followed by a howl that was distinctly familiar. *Big Z!*
I dashed into the next office, and saw all three of them, standing over a pile of corpses. Carth was clutching his side, and blood was splattered gruesomely over Jen’s armour. I grinned stupidly, and ducked back behind the entrance, keeping an eye out for any unwanted arrivals.

"Crazy reckless woman," I heard Carth mutter back in the room.

"(You continue to surprise me, Jen Sahara)."

"Do you think this is it, guys?" Jen asked in a muffled voice. It sounded like she was bending over.

“That’s a swoop accelerator,” Carth confirmed, in a confident voice that said he knew what he was talking about. “Here’s hoping it’s the right one. Grab it, and let’s get out of here.”

Wow, they actually found it!

I could hear Jen grunt, before Zaalbar interrupted her. "(Let me carry it. It will not be a burden to me, Jen Sahara)."

In my spare hand, I pulled out my datapad and flicked to the base schematics. We weren’t far from the shaft to the Lower City, here, just down a hallway and through the only exit. The base was eerily quiet, and it made sense to extract quick, before Vulkar reinforcements arrived. I put the ‘pad back and retrieved my ‘scanner: still no nearby life-forms.

"It was pretty lucky how the turrets turned off like that, don’t you think?" Jen was saying in a considering tone.

"Luck follows you around like fleas on a bantha,” Carth muttered. “How you manage to survive daily is beyond me.”

Far out, he's as grumpy as Big Z on a diet.

Jen laughed in response. "Lighten up, Onasi," she said mildly.

"Lighten up? You just stormed a whole room of Vulkars in a crazy rage!” He sighed. “Look, I know you’re good, Jen. You have the skills of an elite commando, and your speed in battle is more than impressive. But luck, and luck only, has stopped you from dying multiple times since I’ve met you! It’s driving me crazy.”

"(Carth Onasi is right)," Zaalbar agreed. I blinked in surprise. Sheesh, she must have done something nuts for Big Z to speak up. "(You should have waited for us. I cannot protect you if you run off)."

"I've survived this long without anyone protecting me!" Jen flared. I know what she means. Though I never thought I'd see the day when Zaalbar tried to coddle her! Usually, he reserved that just for me.

"(You have said that we are on a quest together. That means we should help each other. If you run off, you endanger the whole mission)." Zaalbar paused for a minute. "(I am sorry, Jen Sahara. I should not lecture you so. But you are headstrong, and I worry you will get into danger where I cannot be of assistance)."

"I don't know what the Wookiee just said, but I'm with him," Carth cut in.

Jen laughed suddenly. I was surprised at the quick change from anger to humour. "Okay, okay, guys. You're right, and I'm wrong."

I heard their footsteps and bit back a grin. Boy, was I going to surprise them! I laid myself flat against
the cool alloy wall, holding my breath.

Carth stepped out first; I was totally unprepared for his military instincts to kick in – his arm swung out, blaster aimed precisely at my head.

“Eep,” I squeaked, staring cross-eyed at the laser barrel that was altogether too close to my head.

“Mission!” Carth cried, aghast. “Stang, do you have any idea how close I was to shooting you?”

Embarrassment chased away the fright lurking in my belly when I realized how potentially stupid sneaking up on allies in enemy territory was. I could feel my cheeks burn.

“Mission?” Jen exclaimed, stepping out next to Carth. Her eyes closed in exasperation.

“(Mission!” Zaalbar roared, pushing past Jen to confront me. “(You should not be here!)”

Jen sighed, “Stars, if Gadon finds out you were in the Vulkar ba-”

“He won’t!” I insisted. “Cause none of us are stupid enough to tell him, right?”

“(Mission),” Zaalbar howled mournfully. “(You promised me).”

“I know, I know, okay? It’s just- I was scared out there. And I knew I could hack into the Vulkars’ system and use the vids to find a clear path to you guys.” I put my hands on my hips in what I hoped was a confident pose, and stared all three of them in the eye, one by one. “Look, I know what I’m doing, okay? And my ‘scanner says it’s all clear to the Lower City lift. Which is that way.”

I pointed a finger smugly, and their heads all swiveled to face down the corridor. Jen turned back to shot me a stare that, I hoped, held some respect amidst the amusement.

“Okay, let’s get out of here then,” Jen murmured, taking the lead and drawing a vibrosword she must have picked up from a Vulkar corpse.

Carth made to follow her, but first glanced at me, and his expression still bordered on horrified. “Don’t- don’t ever do that again,” he said quietly. “Between you and Jen, it's surprising I haven't turned grey.”

Jen snickered. “I’m sure I can see some white hairs, old man,” she teased as Carth stepped next to her.

Carth threw her a half-hearted glare. “I need a vacation,” he muttered to himself.

I glanced up at my old buddy Big Z to see him staring solemnly at me. It had taken me years to decipher the expressions of my Wookiee friend, but I knew that one. Disappointment. I sighed.

“Come on, admit it, Onasi. You’d be bored if Mission and I weren’t around,” Jen said in a light voice, ahead of us.

“I’m sorry, Big Z,” I said quietly. “It’s the truth, though. I was scared. And I don’t do well being left behind.”

“Bored?” Carth replied in a mock-outraged voice. “Bored? Listen, sister, I get more welcome attention from a blaster rifle!”

Zaalbar sighed, and then nodded at me. He almost seemed understanding, then, and my heart lifted a little.
We’d neared the only exit of the hallway; an opening that, according to my schematics, should lead into a spacious room that housed the lifts out of here. Jen halted just before the entrance, her weapon raised and her off-hand sending a shushing motion to Carth. “I named you well, Blaster Boy,” she whispered, “Though I seriously think you need to get out more.”

With a wicked grin, she leapt into the open doorway, Carth hot on her heels with his guns raised. We heard no audible sound of battle, indicating that this part of the base was still, thankfully, unoccupied.

“I get out plenty!” I heard Carth protest feebly.

“(Those two bicker like a mated pair),” Zaalbar grumbled as we turned into the room. He gave me a quick look. “(Although, do not tell Jen Sahara I said that).”

I giggled. “No way, Big Z. Boy, do you get funny ideas sometimes.”

xXx

The trip back was uneventful. The Vulkar lift had groaned and squeaked while we ascended, and we’d all been set to fight battle when the doors opened. Zaalbar even put the swoop part down in readiness. But either the alarm had sent the Vulkars running, or they’d had some other warning. My guess was that the Vulkars had all retreated into one of their other, more fortified, strongholds.

We’d come out near Gadon’s base of operations, and as we crossed into familiar ground I felt the tenseness leave my shoulders. Carth had even put his blaster away, although he did keep his hand glued to his hip.

We were an odd bunch – a Twi’lek teenager, two Humans, and a Wookiee carrying a machine part – but no passerby gave us a second glance. It was the Lower City after all. We got all sorts down here.

"So, you guys gonna spill before we see Gadon, or what?" I demanded, as we crossed behind Javyar’s Cantina. In my head, this marked my own territory. I always felt a bit uneasy at the Vulkar end of the Lower City, but Central was home.

"We're all a team now, right?" Jen posed that to Carth, more as a demand than anything else.

He stared at her for a moment, before nodding agreement.

"Gadon's offered to sponsor us in the swoop race, in return for the accelerator," Jen said. I felt my eyes widen with wonder. Whoa!

"Swoop racing? Awesome!" I cried. “Whoa, Jen, you're a swooper?!”

"Um, I-"

"I always wanted to enter, but Zaerdra will never let me!" I gushed. “Too young, she says, but hah! I can beat nearly all the Bek's on the practice track!"

Jen stopped walking, and turned to face me. "I-

“I love swoop racing!” I burst out- even talking about it made me grin. My favourite daydream was, one day, being a famous swoop racer for the Bek's. I should be out there this year. Other gangs had put forward riders younger than me. “Y’know, there never used to be an age limit until I took an interest in swooping. Zaerdra convinced Gadon to put one in place for the Bek's last year just to stop me entering any of the races.”
“(She worries, Mission),” Zaalbar rumbled. “(People die from swoop racing).”

"So?" I challenged. "There's only about one death a year!" I fell silent. *If only I could race! I had a natural skill for swooping, I knew that much. Gadon would happily sponsor me, if not for Zaerdra!* It suddenly struck me as odd that Jen and Carth were entering the competition. *And Gadon made them go to an awful lot of effort just to race. Doesn't seem like him.*

"Why do you guys want to enter, anyways?" I asked.

"We want the prize," Jen said simply.

I wrinkled my nose. "Ew, a slave? You're gonna set that person free, aren't you?" *Why would they want a Republic officer, anyway?* I remembered Jen's slip about Carth being a pilot. Everything fell into place, and I couldn't believe how stupid I'd been. My mouth dropped.

"Whoa, you guys are with the Republic, aren't you?" I whispered in awe.

Carth was looking ahead stonily; I guess he'd reconciled himself to Jen spilling the beans, but wasn't taking any part himself.

"I guess," Jen said weakly.

"(You are making a habit of rescuing people, Jen Sahara. You have a lot of honour)."

"It's not something I want to do regularly, Zaalbar. After Bastila, I'm heading off this rock."

My head twitched up. *Bastila? Is that the name of the Republic Officer?* I was certain I'd heard it elsewhere. *The Sith!* "She's that Jedi the Sith are after!" the words burst out. Jen nodded at me. *Wow! What a quest!* I loved hearing stories about Jedi and Dark Jedi, although I'd never really been sure how much of their mystical power was true and how much was hearsay. Sometimes I wondered if all that mind-tricking and Force talk was just that: talk to make the Sith scarier and the Jedi more impressive.

Regardless, our future now seemed full of possibilities, and I almost didn't notice when we reached the Bek base.

Jen and Carth hurried to meet with Gadon, and I lurked behind to catch up on the news. Zaalbar had disappeared in the direction of the Beks’ kitchen, which didn't surprise me considering the ominous rumblings I'd heard from his stomach earlier.

When I strolled over to Gadon, I saw Zaerdra wielding her blade and glaring furiously at Jen.

"Sheesh, where's the fire, Zaerdra?" I called. "You look ready to kill someone."

"I am not cheating you," Gadon was saying mildly to Jen, but his expression was tense. "At least grant me the bare courtesy of finishing before you yell at me. In my own base." Gadon inclined his head towards a group of armed Beks. Alarm jangled through me. *What did Jen say?*

Zaerdra turned towards me, her violet eyes boring into mine angrily. "(This human has no respect. If she threatens Gadon again, I will kill her)." Her headtails were twitching with furious threats of bodily harm.

"No! She saved my life!" I burst out. Zaerdra’s glare deepened.

Jen had a look of black rage on her face, but it seemed to settle down when she glanced my way.
She took a few deep breaths, and started talking in a controlled voice. "Gadon, I was under the impression I'd be using the accelerator in the race in return for obtaining it. If I use one of your standard bikes I'll have no chance of winning. I thought that was the deal."

"The deal was that I'd sponsor you in the race," Gadon told her flatly.

"So you get what you want, but I don't get anything." Jen had crossed her arms, and her tone turned low and ominously quiet. Carth tensed, his eyes pinned on Zaerdra.

"(She is asking for trouble. I am quite happy to give it to her)," Zaerdra growled at me. I saw Jen's eyes flick briefly over the Twi'lek.

"I have no use for a Republic officer," Gadon responded. "I had thought to turn her over to you, in return for what you have done for us, after the Bek's win the swoop race. That was before you started threatening me." His expression was hard, unyielding. I don't think I've ever seen Gadon this angry.

Well, not since Brejik turned traitor, anyways.

"Jen." I decided it was time for everyone to chill out. "Don't get so tense – we're all friends here, right? Gadon's a good man, you can trust him. And Gadon, Jen may act a little grouchy, but she's really nice – she saved both my life and Big Z's!"

Everyone turned to stare at me in surprise. "What?" I said, a little defensively.

The corner of Jen's mouth twitched, right before she let out a peal of laughter. "You're right, Mission. I'm sorry Gadon, I guess I'm not used to trusting people."

Gadon nodded at her. "Apology accepted." He said no more.

"So," Jen prompted. "Is this our deal then? If a Bek wins, we get the prize?"

Gadon stared at her hard for a moment, his eyes narrowing, before he finally seemed to relent. "Yes."

"Okay," Jen said slowly. "Then why sponsor me at all?"

"For your sake, rather than mine," Gadon explained. "I don't trust Brejik to give his prize away quietly. The Bek's are only there to win the race, and hence the loyalty of the undecided smaller gangs. If Brejik pulls something with your Republic officer – and I doubt he'll give up such a prize easily – then it's up to you whether you act on the scene. The Bek's will not help. We do not wish to start a bloodbath."

Jen had crossed her arms and pursed her lips, obviously deep in thought. "Fair enough. If all four of us are there then we could be ready for any stunts."

A look of unease crossed Gadon's lined face. "Only riders and mechanics are allowed on the swoop track. I'm afraid you'll be on your own."

Jen's eyes widened in disbelief. "Oh, this will be fun," she muttered.

Gadon smiled; honestly, I couldn't really see why, but at least he didn't look like he wanted to kill her or boot her out the door anymore. "I hope it will all go as planned. But I'm not fool enough to expect it. Now, you are welcome to stay at the Bek base for the next few days if you wish. But a warning - threaten anyone again and not only is the deal off, but you will be considered an intruder."

Shutters fell over Jen's face. She said nothing, but instead threw Gadon a short, sharp nod of
agreement.

"(I still do not trust her)," Zaerdra muttered.

Jen turned to leave, and I pointed her towards the Bek kitchen. As we reached the doorway, Jen paused, just long enough to throw an impish grin back at Zaerdra.

"(The feeling's mutual, sweetheart!)" Jen fired the words with a cheeky wave, before slipping ahead of me into the next room. I stayed only long enough to see Zaerdra blush dark indigo in outrage, and then ran outta there before she heard me laughing. Far out! Jen knows Ryl as well?

"You sound like a gizka, your accent is so bad," I giggled as I caught up to Jen. She threw me a jaunty wink.

Over a free meal in the kitchen, the four of us decided to take up Gadon's offer and camp out at the Base for the next few days. I was pretty excited to be watching my friend in the race, but I couldn't help a traitorous feeling of envy. I could be good.

I caught Jen alone later that day in the same kitchenette.

“So, Jen, you going to do some practice runs on the swoop track?” I asked, jumping up to sit on the plasteel table that carried a dozen dirty eating receptacles. It creaked under my weight.

Jen’s face scrunched up in annoyance. “I asked around, but the track’s been shut down in preparation for the race. Guess I’m going to have to wing it.” She shot me a sidelong glance. “If only I knew how to swoop... or knew someone who did.”

And, once more, Jen stunned me into wonder. “Jen!” I hissed, swinging my legs. “Are you saying what I think you’re saying?”

A mischievous smile curved her lips. “What do you say, Mission? You up for a prank?”

I paused, thinking it over. “I dunno, Jen. It’ll annoy the snot out of Gadon and Zaerdra – which I don’t mind, but she’s shot people for less, y’know?”

Jen snorted. “She doesn’t scare me, Mission. Besides, I wasn’t planning on telling them.”

Holding back a grin of excitement was hard. “How would this work? ‘Cause, don’t you have to be there on the track, for that Jedi woman?”

“Yes – and I want to concentrate purely on rescuing her. It makes senses to have a more seasoned rider racing.” She looked at me slyly. “I need a mechanic, you know. If you can sort that out, then we’ll switch outfits on the day.”

Exhilaration punched hard into my stomach as I started believing that we, really, could pull this off. “And Big Z, Carth? We gonna hide it from them?”

“No,” she said. “Leave them to me. I’ll make them understand I need your skills.”

The nod to my abilities made me blush slightly in pleasure. Jen really, truly, thought I was a useful member of our group. Everyone else just treated me like a wayward kid. She must had read something in my expression, for hers softened with a small smile.

“They don’t realize yet who turned the turrets off,” she murmured. “You saved our butts in there, Mission.”
“Oh. Yeah! I guess I did,” I grinned at her, and then jumped off the table, grabbing her hand impulsively in a handshake. “Before you change your mind,” I said, shaking her hand vigorously.

“Okay,” she replied, laughing, and extracted her limb. “It’s a deal.”

xXx
The days before the swoop race passed slowly, and the sinking feeling of trepidation sat like a lead ball in my stomach. The idle time was messing with my head, and I found myself snapping irritably at everyone while I second-guessed both my objectives and my own emotions.

What I wanted desperately was to be on my way – finished with the mission and everything to do with the Republic.

The Republic… my feelings were mixed, now. Earlier, I’d been certain I detested the lumbering galactic empire as much as the cruel Sith, but these days having been forced into companionship with Carth – quintessential Republic military, if there was such a thing – had me doubting my feelings. A core part of me believed in the ideals of the Republic, the galactic conglomeration of all different cultures and species working together, doing their best to strive for peace.

_A dictatorship is stronger, more efficient, and less corrupt than the Republic Senate._

But it was also crueler. And just plain _wrong_. The drive for collective harmony – even if it was unrealistic to believe the end-point would ever be reached – was an admirable one.

_But an empire with one leader – like, say, the Sith, is more powerful against any threat. The Republic has grown weak. Look how easily the Mandalorians almost conquered the Core._

My thoughts twisted in on themselves, Street Kid versus Evil Bitch, with the occasional cower from Jen Sahara in the shadows. My thoughts jumped around, landing on topics that I couldn’t recall, dredging up facts that I couldn’t back-up. _What did I know about the Mandalorian Wars?_ It had been a precursor to Malak’s rise to power, him and his master both – they’d led a shaky, vulnerable Republic to victory against the invaders that had come perilously close to the vanquishing the largest government in the galaxy. And then- the heroes and half their fleet viciously turned on the Republic.

My mind _hurt_ when I tried to dwell on it, sharp pains digging into the side of my temple where I’d injured it back on the ‘Spire. So I’d flinch away, and think about something else.

_Bastila._ I wasn’t scared of her. I kept trying to remind myself of that, but a confrontation with the very Jedi bonded to me, and who likely had something to do with my identity crisis, left me in a state where fear and anger constantly battled for supremacy.

The bond hadn’t yet returned. For all I knew, Bastila may have already died. _No. I would have felt it. And it would not have been pretty._ It was a dark, confident part of me that somehow knew Force bonds weren’t so easy to wiggle out of. Which made me consider, again, whether I should just run.

_But where would I go? Back to… Deralia?_ The very thought of Jen’s homeworld made me scoff. _I need to rescue Bastila, and then I can slip away. Disappear somewhere in space. I’m self-sufficient, I’ll survive._ But she might be able to help me. Explain things. Jedi were meant to be good, right, so surely I could trust her?
Definitely, she’s a Jedi! Jen thought in quiet awe before I harshly quenched it. No. It’s safer to run once she’s rescued.

But the sinking thought kept returning: Bastila is bonded to me. If she knows something about the fractures in my mind, then will she really be willing to let me just leave? My fists clenched. I will not let some trumped up Jedi brat tell me what to do. I closed my eyes. Some trumped up Jedi brat who has a very powerful control over the mental side of the Force. Why am I rescuing her again?

At least I was starting to get some sort of handle on using the Force. I’d drawn on it to increase my speed a number of times in the sewers, and could almost control it. It was the almost part that had me edging away from experimenting. I slaughtered an innocent when both my fury and the Force pummeling through my body combined.

A deadly combination.

I decided it was time to do something before my emotions transformed into a killing rage. I snuck out the back entrance of the Bek base that Mission had pointed out earlier. Both Carth and the Wookiee seemed aversive to letting me venture out by myself. Fortunately, Mission was used to evading overprotective guards, and had for some reason taken a shine to me. I don’t know why. But I can’t help liking that little street punk myself.

I headed down to the Undercity, using a datapad holo-map that Mission had slipped me as a guide. She’d annotated a couple of her shortcuts, and they were proving to be very useful. It seemed that Mission and Zaalbar had been instrumental in the sonic mapping technology the Beks used, and her maps were second to none in regards to accuracy. Apparently, she made a little profit on the side from selling copies of them – although she complained to me that most of it went straight to Gadon. Considering the maps changed frequently due to ongoing construction in the Lower City and the odd sinkhole, the income was steady. Somehow, I felt that should Mission remain on Taris she’d end up doing just fine.

But Zaalbar was sworn to me now, as incredible as that still seemed. And Mission would follow him. The weight of their lives sat heavy on my soul when I stopped to think about it.

As I neared the dwelling in the Undercity, the villagers spotted me with wide-eyed glances of alarm, scurrying off like insects. For some reason, this increased my irritation. My objective was easy to complete – the half-sane milky-eyed old man, Rukil, who squinted at me as I approached.

"Ahh! Our saviour returns! Have you found success upon your quest for the Promised Land?"

Nice. I will be nice. "I have something of interest to you, old man." I pulled out the two data journals I'd discovered, and dropped them at his feet. Rukil gasped, scrabbling around in the dirt to pick them up. There was a moment’s silence as he peered closely at the first journal, and I turned to walk away.

"It is as I feared, then," he mumbled. "Malya is dead. But although I am saddened, there is yet hope in this discovery," he trailed off, and switched on the second datapad. I’d taken three steps by this time, shoulders tensing.

"You have found my father's journal also! It is a miracle!" His voice turned rapturous. "You are truly marked as our saviour!"

I stopped, turned and glared. "I am nobody's saviour," I growled, my voice low and harsh.

He shook his head in disbelief. "You are marked, up-worlder - even my dim old eyes can see the mantle of destiny that cloaks you. There is but one more journal left."
No. No, damn everything to the Outer Rim and back. I will not play at being a hero anymore than I have to. "I've got you two. Get some other champion to find the third. I am leaving and will not be coming back." I snarled the last words and stalked away.

The rage simmered like a fire in my gut, and I could find no explanation for it. Idealistic words like destiny and saviour sat like sick in my stomach and my sleep that night was restless. I'd made my decision and I wouldn't retract it – but thoughts of the loony old geezer and his missing third journal kept me awake all night.

xXx

The day of the swoop race dawned. All thoughts of the Undercity had cleared from my mind, which sharpened in concentration to the day's upcoming events. Finally, action to keep me engaged and focused, and away from the insidious, contradictory maelstrom of thoughts.

The wrist-comm Carth had forced upon me sat heavy on my arm. I had yet to discover exactly how Mission was planning to exchange places with the mechanic Gadon had assigned to me, but I expected she wouldn't let me down.

"(May fortune shine upon you today, Jen Sahara)," Zaalbar farewelled me as I followed the other Bek riders to the swoop track.

"Good luck," Carth said a trifle hesitantly. "I, uh, well. Good luck."

I raised my eyebrows at him. "Got a speech impediment there, Flyboy?"

He shot me an unimpressed look from behind the chestnut hair that kept falling in his eyes. He needed a haircut. "No. Look, I just wanted to say - thank you. For what happened in the Undercity. I- uh, I never acknowledged what you did. I guess I got a bit too- well, annoyed. But you saved my life, Jen. Thank you."

His words came out genuine and heartfelt, even if the man stuttered uncomfortably over them. I didn't need his gratitude, though. I didn't want it. For some reason, the idea of anyone feeling indebted to me felt bitterly unwelcome.

"Forget it," I said in a cold tone.

He frowned at me. "I can't. I'd be dead, if it wasn't for you."

"Yeah, well, you saved my life first. We're even. Let me get you Bastila, and then I'll be out of your life permanently." I strode off.

"Dammit, Jen!" he cursed after me, but I continued walking.

The group of Bek riders reached the mechanic bay, and Anglu lead me to the swoop I was going to race. Anglu was the Beks' prime swoop racer; a tiny Twi'lek whose slight frame concealed a wiry strength. She was the one chosen to ride the experimental bike.

"Gadon will not be here on the track today," she told me quietly in Basic. "He does not wish a slaughter, and his presence may cause one."

I nodded at her, and eyed over the bike.

"So, where's my mechanic?"
"Jaz should be along any minute."

"Thanks, Anglu. And good luck."

She smiled at me, and walked away. A minute later, a short figure in lime green fire-retardant synthetics with a customized matching helmet scampered up to me.

"I'm here, Jen!" the figure hissed. I turned to face Mission, and could not quite still the impish grin that crawled over my face.

"Nice helmet," I said, aware my voice had turned sardonic.

"It's the only way I could sneak in! Quick, let's duck into the workroom so you can change."

"I hope my clothes aren't that hideous colour," I muttered as I followed her.

Mission had acquired me a set of drab, grimy overalls, with a hood to shadow my face. I changed quickly, grimacing at the pungent smell of the worn clothing as I tugged it over my combat armour. Oil stains and burn marks decorated the drab material.

"I thought you were coming as my mechanic?" I asked.

"Nah, too tricky as Jaz was with some of the others. I jus' slipped a lil sedative into his caffa, and then faked a racing entry pass for one of the small gangs."

My brows shot up. I couldn't help but respect the crazy girl. She may be impulsive, but she sure can get results.

"So, where did you get this lovely pair of overalls?" I questioned, as I fastened the front.

"I just found them lying about," she answered innocently. *Lying about, eh?* I pulled the hood over my face, and my vision dimmed. I had a faint, dizzy sensation, almost like a half-remembered dream, before it dissipated like cigarra smoke in a stiff breeze.

"Let's go, Jen! Oooh, I can't wait!" Mission was practically hopping with excitement. I had to grin at her exuberance. Sometimes she seemed so, delightfully, young.

We headed back out to the swoops, and the minute we were within arm's reach of my competing bike, sitting on standby in the pits, Mission placed reverent hands on the chassis and started gushing over it.

"This is one of those R4 souped-up lithium speeders!" she said in awe. "Did you know, an earlier model of this raced by the Spider Furies won last year's championship?"

I blinked. *No, funnily enough I did not.* I knew Mission wanted to race, but I hadn't picked her for a fan. She was nodding eagerly.

"Yeah, and the Beks came second the year before on one of these – the debut of the technology! Okay, the Ravager series is considered more superior now but-"

Her effusive display halted at my upraised hand. I smirked. "Okay, okay, it's a good bike. I get it. Even if Anglu got the prototype accelerator."

"Well, yeah, but you can't blame Gadon." Mission shrugged. "He needs to win this year."

The Bek racers were moving out to the front of the track, and we joined them. No one paid us a
second glance. As we approached the scene, my eyes flicked over the motley crowd. Vulkars outnumbered everyone, including the Bek's, and a wary disquiet filled me. I spotted a number of other smaller gangs, but none were as prominent as the Bek's or the Vulkars. Far in the distance, I could make out a large silvery arch that heralded the start of the track.

At the side of the hangar near the podium, a cage gleamed under artificial lighting.

"Whoa, that's the Jedi?" Mission whispered quietly.

I stared at the prone form. Chrome glinted around her throat. Neural disruptor. Blocks the Force. That's why I can't sense her. Even from this distance, I could see porcelain skin, a voluptuous form, and delicately braided dark hair. Tight, scanty scraps of black leather clothed her.

Darkness challenged me, and I was transported.

... A door opened, and I stood waiting, expectant. Three Jedi entered the room cautiously, and even from a distance I could recognize the centre figure: Bastila Shan.

...

"Jen, you okay?"

I blinked rapidly, shaking away the vision. "Yeah. Fine."

So Bastila and I have met before. But as friends, or foes?

Mission had turned back, scanning the crowd. But inside my head, the dark thoughts still spun, tripping over themselves in confusion and anger. Of course I've met her before, bonehead. How else would the bond be created?

My gaze dragged unerringly back to the trapped woman. She looked so powerless, slumped inside the cage, hands bound in metallic shackles that crossed at her front. She should be dead, a voice growled softly. She will be dead!

The heat of anger returned in a surge, threatening to shatter through the calm concentration I wanted- I needed- to get through the damn day. I swallowed, squeezed my eyes shut, and forcibly turned my thoughts back to that old tactical game a part of me had once played.

I will rescue her, and then I will leave. The game board rose like a mirage in my minds-eye, like a focus for calm. I will rescue her, and then I will leave.

"I can't believe a Jedi could be so helpless, though," Mission whispered at my side. "Like, makes you wonder how true all those stories about them really are."

There was something... something foreign edging around the sides of my consciousness. Something I was beginning to recognize all too well.

"She's not helpless," I mumbled through cold lips. The calm in my head shook, but this time with alarm. "Not anymore."

The bond was returning. I snapped open my eyes, staring frantically at the prisoner again. Her hands - which had been restrained, or seemingly so - were fiddling at her exposed neck. Fiddling with the
Force-blocking device that kept her helpless - and out of my mind.

I've got to stay calm and collected. I pushed back the anger. The despair. Shoved it all away. I can't let myself lose control, not here, not with Mission next to me. If the kath crap is about to hit the fan, I have to make sure Mission gets away safe.

The Jedi's limbs had dropped back to her front, clasped like they were still constrained by the metallic bands around her wrists. The neural disruptor rested innocently against her creamy skin.

I should have been glad the Jedi had found a way to initiate her own escape. I could have understood if my brief, blazing anger from earlier had returned. But my thoughts were cooling, instead; transposing into a hard-edged wariness, as I dragged my attention away from the semi-bound prisoner and began to survey the area.

"What do you mean?" Mission hissed.

"Stay close," I said curtly. "And wait-"

"Jen Sahara," a gravelly voice at my back interrupted. I tensed, turning in a quick movement to catch sight of a large, armoured mercenary. "We meet again."

"Canderous Ordo," I acknowledged in mild surprise. He recognized me through this disguise? I was impressed. Either he'd been watching me since I entered the pit lane, or he'd had inside knowledge of the Bek's racing list. As a merc, I'd lay credits on him working for the Exchange, but I couldn't be sure.

Whatever the Mandalorian was doing, here, I could only hope his objective didn't interfere with mine.

I felt my eyebrow quirk as I eyed him over in obvious appraisal. He was wielding a formidable repeating blaster slung over his shoulder, with blaster pistols holstered on either side of his waist. His helm was raised to reveal a chiselled, weathered face staring hard at me in consideration.

The rest of his large and, no doubt, heavily muscled body was encased in a full set of heavy armour. Not the beskar'gam his clans had prided themselves on, maybe; but the man was formidably attired nonetheless.

Here was one merc I didn't underestimate.

"I didn't pick you for a swoop fan," I said lightly.

As a dig for information, it worked.

"I'm not." His lips curled at the thought. "My employer has an interest in Brejik's little toy." He indicated the caged Jedi.

Oh great, I thought sourly. I'm going to piss off a Mandalorian.

A controlled flow of anger bubbled at the edges of my thoughts - but it wasn't mine. Not this time. Bastila, rousing, and invading my senses over our stars-cursed bond. She was going to act, sooner or later - I could only hope she had the sense to wait for the opportune time.

::The annual Taris swoop race shall now began!:: An amplified broadcast from the race announcer echoed over the hum of the crowd. ::Please collect your tickets from the race controller, and begin your heats when the number is called!::
"Wait!" a loud, aggressive voice sliced through the cheers. I looked up towards the control deck, where the winners podium had been erected on a dais in preparation for the race's completion. An armoured man strode belligerently in front of the control deck, clad in shining black and red armour. His pose was cocky and sure as he scanned the crowd.

Brejik. The disgusted thought scythed through my mind, and it wasn't - it wasn't mine.

I blinked, stunned. Was that Bastila? Was our close proximity making the bond so frelling powerful? Did I really justâ€¦ hear her thoughts?

"Before this starts, there is one gang here that has illegal equipment, and therefore should be disqualified!" The speaker exuded a combative air of authority, and considering his garb it had to be Brejik. The leader of the Vulkars.

Angry voices muttered from the clusters of swoop racers, loudest from those dressed in Bek colours. They'd been warned by Gadon to expect trouble, but I had the feeling that everyone thought they might actually get a race or two in first.

The armoured Mandalorian next to me looked amused, but his grip was sure on his weapon. He was used to action, and could sense it coming. So could I.

I leaned over to Mission. "Things are about to get violent. You need to get ready to run out of here on my command."

"The Bek racers are cheating!" Brejik hollered over the dissenting crowd. "Investigate that bike, and you will find an illegal accelerator!" An armoured hand raised, and pointed directly at Anglu's bike.

"What? You mean the prototype you tried to steal from us?" a Bek yelled out angrily.

"See!" Brejik demanded. "They admit their guilt!"

Several of the smaller gangs backed away to the edges of the track. Canderous hefted his repeating blaster into a ready position, surveying the scene with interest. My eyes were pinned to the Jedi. Patience. Wait for the right time. Was that my thought, or hers? I couldn’t tell.

"You're a liar, Brejik!" A Sullustan in Bek colours was shaking his fist angrily at the Vulkar leader. That decided me.

"Mission, scram. Now," I ordered into her ear.

"But-"

"Get. Out." My voice was low, dangerous, demanding. She backpedalled before turning and dashing out of the pit lane and towards the Lower City exit.

"You lead your people well," Canderous remarked. My hand crept under the overalls to clutch a blaster. I mentally cursed the fact that I hadn’t snuck a vibrosword in – but at the time I'd thought that smuggling in two blasters posed enough of a risk, considering the race controllers took perverse delight in searching those who hadn't bribed them enough. The Beks, on the whole, were heavily equipped, but as an independent racing for them I wasn’t given quite the same status. Canderous – with whoever his employer was and I’d be putting my credits on the Exchange - had obviously been granted leave to carry in whatever weaponry he desired.

"You dare to question me?" Brejik's face was livid. "You festering scum! Vulkars, attack! Kill the Beks!"
"Everyone, to me! Show no mercy!" one of the more aggressive Bek's yelled. I pulled out both blasters, and stood ready. Canderous stood at my side, legs apart and repeating blaster aimed in front. *That's been heavily modified. Look at size of the barrel, and that recharge therm sure as stars ain't factory made.* I idly wondered which part of me could recognize weapons so readily.

The battle broke out, and many of the smaller gangs on the edge of the pit lane melted away. Some joined in on either side. A Vulkar charged at me with a blade. I sidestepped and shot him twice in the chest. The faint blue of a poor energy shield wearing thin was momentarily visible as he launched a wide swinging blow at me. Jumping backwards, I fired again and again, finger numbing on the trigger as he stumbled and collapsed under the onslaught. The heat of battle pounded through me - an urgent, dark desire for more - and with a snarl I ran forward, shot him in the face, and made a grab for his vibrosword as it toppled from lifeless fingers.

Spinning it slightly in my sword-arm - my off-hand still grasping the second blaster - I only just spotted the grenade as it rolled towards me. I leapt backward as a percussion wave slammed into me, knocking me flat. Rolling with a gasp, mildly stunned, I scrambled to my feet and spotted the Mandalorian, also, recovering. He'd been closer than me to the blast.

"Guess I'm on the Bek's side then." Canderous barked a harsh laugh, and it was a dangerous sound. His grey eyes glinted as he rejoined me. "(Today is a good day for someone else to die!)" he yelled in Mandalorian.

"Ib'tuur jatne tuur ash'ad kyr'amur!" I echoed him, and we charged together into a group of three snarling Vulkars. His repeating blaster took two down; the last was still firing at Canderous as my vibrosword slammed into his side. Brittle armour gave way as the blade sank satisfyingly into flesh; the Vulkar gurgled as I pulled the vibrosword back and shot him with the blaster. The Vulkar gurgled as he fell.

Canderous was staring at me intently as I looked up, feeling the battle euphoria humming in my veins. I could feel the red mist descending, and my smile back was feral. Our attention was caught by two gang members charging at us, and it was instinctive to reach out to the Force... only to find it missing. *What? The beginnings of the berserker rage fled as if a bucket of ice-cold water had been dumped on my head. What's going on? I thought I'd figured out how to use the Force*

My vibrosword was up just in time to parry a blow, and shakily I pushed back, only to have the offending Vulkar crumble in front of me due to some other injury. Looking up, I saw the angry Sullustan Bek from earlier shoot me a grin above his blaster. Canderous was standing over a second corpse.

A renewed sense of purpose flooded my brain, and it took a second to realize it was originating from Bastila. I jerked my head up to see her stagger out of her cage, and face the closest Vulkar. The determination was there, but she felt woozy, disorientated. I became aware of her scrabbling to hold onto the Force, and somehow I knew it was a feeble attempt.

"No! The prize– get her!" Brejik screamed through the onslaught.

"Sithspit," I cursed.

Canderous' gaze followed mine. "You are after her as well," he said in a low voice.

I scanned the room frantically, and my eyes rested on Anglu's swoop bike. *For lack of a better option...* I darted away from the Mandalorian, sprinting through the chaos with only the target of the swoop bike in my vision. I ducked to the side of two gang members brawling, dodged under a swinging vibrosword, and ran directly through a blaster fight, trusting on sheer luck to stop me
getting hit in the cross-fire.

My hands rested on the solid chrome of the swoop bike.

*At least I was bright enough to let Mission show me how to start these fool things,* I thought grimly as I swung my legs over the bike, and carelessly threw both the vibrosword and the secondary blaster away. I turned momentarily to pinpoint Bastila. Five Vulkars surrounded her. I could feel her fumble to do something through the bond, and the scowl on her face said it all. *She's still weak. Her Force powers are not fully back yet.*

I heard Anglu yell in protest as I started the bike. It thrummed a loud vibration under my legs, and I quickly yanked it into gear and squeezed the throttle. The back end threatened to skid out, and my hands gripped the steering column tightly as I aimed the bike directly into the crowded mob, loosing a wild yell that was half-warning, half-crazy.

Sentients jumped out of the way; one was knocked sideways by the bike, and it shuddered in response. A bright flash of a grenade to my right may or may not have been directed at me; I accelerated further and was on the Vulkar mob within seconds.

Braking and pulling the steering column to one side, the swoop bike skidded sideways and knocked two of the thugs momentarily prone to the ground.

"Get on!" I screamed in the direction of the Jedi.

Bastila whirled to face me. Defiant anger melted into shocked horror. I supposed she'd never expected to see me again, but her reaction was hardly complimentary. "You!" she gasped, her cheeks fading to a pasty white. With an admirable amount of self-control, her emotions and expression turned impassive. Her eyes flicked over the scene, and then she ran towards me, leaping onto the bike.

"Go!" she hissed into my ear, her fingers wrapping tightly around my waist and digging in with desperation.

"She's escaping!" The red-and-black clad figure of Brejik was no longer on the dais, but directly in my path, howling. "Stop them!"

I snarled and accelerated. Brejik stood his ground, legs apart, and began to raise his blaster to fire. I opened the throttle as wide as it could go, and pointed the nose of the swoop directly at him. I saw the shocked realization on his scarred face when he understood I wasn't planning on dodging; his expression twisted comically and he lurched to the side at the last possible moment.

*Accelerate,* an inner voice ordered. I responded, and the engine roared underneath my calves. Up ahead, I saw the glittering arch that touted the beginning of the swoop track proper, and the exit from the mayhem behind us. I heard Bastila stifle a scream, and saw the energy pulse of blaster shots fire past in my periphery.

*Jump.* The blackened tunnel of the Taris swoop track enveloped us, and I aimed directly for the launch pad. Bastila's arms tightened, and my ribs creaked in reply.

*Sun and stars, this was supposed to be Mission's task!*
The bike sailed over the jump, and the air whipped through my dark curls. I could feel Bastila pressing her face tight against my back. As the bike descended, the visage of a large obstacle came into view. I jerked the bike to the right in avoidance, and it shuddered under my inelegant control.

*How many people did Mission say die in swoop accidents again?* The impact-suppression system could only do so much; at full speed against a solid wall, both bike and rider would surely be written off.

"There are bikes after us!" Bastila screamed over the wind. "Go faster!"

*I don't know how to ride this stupid thing, and she wants me to speed up?* I saw the flashes of blaster fire spin past me from behind, and realized that heeding Bastila was paramount. We had a head-start, but with the weight of two riders we were at a sore disadvantage. I switched gears again, and the bike lurched forwards. My gloved hands felt unwieldy as I strained to retain my grip, and the high-pitch of the swoop engine increased as I left the throttle wide open.

The track turned into a sweeping right bender, and I aimed for the inside line, weaving slightly to avoid a thick metal plate the protruded from the ground. The corner continued, tightening, and the bike leaned into it, almost kissing against the darkened wall.

The track straightened out and us with it, before we flew over a launch pad that thumped us into the air, boosting velocity with an upward thrust. I heard a squeak from behind. A large, dark wall loomed ahead, blocking most of the track's width other than a narrow gap on either side. Red laser bolts spat against it, and I realized with horror that our pursuers were closing in.

*I need to find a way out of here.* I wrenched the bike to the left, aiming for the slight opening at near-full speed, and slightly misjudged the angle required. As we shot past the barrier, the swoop ground against the outer wall in a shower of electronic sparks before the impact knocked us back onto the track and our velocity dipped.

"Not good! Sithspit, not good at all!" Gasping, I straightened the steering column and accelerated again, but too quickly; the bike jerked and threatened to spin, skidding sideways across the track. I looked up desperately and my gaze rested on an innocent ladder bolted to the opposite wall.

*That's a service exit!* I slammed on the brakes and pulled hard to the left; our momentum plummeted and the swoop screeched to a stop, gently thudding against the ferracrete wall right next to the ladder. Blood pounded a deafening echo in my head, telling me to move, move, move.

"Quick!" I howled, dismounting the bike in a leap and turning back to face the Jedi. She'd understood my intent, for she was one step ahead - jumping in an impressive Force-induced surge and catching herself hard against the bolted rungs of the service ladder. She swung to the side, and then clambered up inelegantly towards a dark shaft near the ceiling.

A loud, hot thrum whistled piercingly close to my ear, and with a horrified realization I recognized a pursuing swoop racer, having cleared the obstacle wall and sailed right past us. *Get a move on, bantha-brain!* I lunged for the ladder, and scrambled up quickly behind the Jedi, feeling the loud swoosh of another bike rocket by. As I pulled myself through the hatch, a deafening explosion rocked the ferracrete foundations and a whirling piece of carnage sailed dangerously close to where my legs had just been.

We were in a dimly-lit tunnel above the track, and Bastila's pale face stared into mine.

"A moment," she murmured, raising her hand beyond me. I heard the ominous creak of metal, and craned my neck to see the roof of the service tunnel fracture and twist before collapsing in on itself and blocking the path behind us.
For a moment, I felt the weaves of the Force as they bent under Bastila's will.

Jerking my head back to face her, I saw her dark eyes fixed on mine.

"I suppose you call this a rescue?" she muttered.

Incredulity swamped any irritation that may have surfaced at such arrogance; I merely gaped at her in shocked surprise.

She shook her head, delicate braids tossing. "No time to argue. Come, we must go." She turned, and moved deeper into the service tunnel.

Stunned at her audacity, I could only follow.

xXx
The blaster wound warmed my side with pulses of agony. I wrapped the pain up in detachment, and continued running. I could hear her footsteps echoing close behind, and my mind screamed at me in fear.

There is no emotion; there is peace.

The service tunnel exited into the back maintenance corridors of the swoop track. I halted, glancing wildly about as I tried to judge which direction to take. Sentients were sprinting past, most garbed in oil-stained coveralls that proclaimed them as mechanics. A few exclaimed loudly, jabbering in dialects too furious or foreign for me to decipher.

The panic made it clear, though: the gang fighting still raged, and I had to assume the hunt for me was on.

My companion nudged me, then; pointing silently to an emergency exit from the swoop complex, outlined in a galactically recognizable red and white. I ran straight for the door, hands grasping tight to yank the chrome bolt upwards, before shoving my weight against the heavy metallic barricade that stood between us and ephemeral freedom.

The exit groaned open as my supposed rescuer barreled into it, adding her strength to mine. An alarm wailed in immediate complaint; I darted through the opening and turned, already raising my hand as my accomplice followed.

The Force surged to my call. Comforting, familiar, powerful. A presence that, when denied to me, had been a more frightening experience than I would have foreseen.

The door slammed shut beneath my desire. Even through inches of whatever substandard metal composite was used on this dissolute planet, we could still hear a loud clang as the bolt dropped into place on the other side.

Followed shortly thereafter by the echoes of coarse yells and blaster fire. We had to move.

My limbs sped forth once more; I barely took in my surroundings as we both dashed forward blindly. Uneven, cracked walling formed the tunnels of habitation. Intermittent lighting threw shadowed ghosts that chased us as we ran into darker alleys. I strained to see, even to regulate my own breathing - and behind me came the hoarse pants of the woman who followed. The sound sent a staccato reminder of what was truly at stake.

You cannot make a person out of a beast. My father's sage advice, after my miserable attempt at raising a kath pup.

Let serenity dictate your actions; emotions simply blur logical judgments. That was from Master Vrook.

I fervently wished I still had my lightsaber.
Three exits beckoned at the end of the narrow tunnel. I choose the left one; a dark, twisting alleyway, and continued running.

My plan had been simple. Wait until some egregious lowlife won that childish competition. Wait until I was led away, submissive and apparently impotent. And then, make my move. All that, ruined by gang members and their precipitous tempers.

The tunnel split in two; again, I choose the left.

"Stop!" the woman hissed behind me. My legs jerked; halting suddenly, almost tumbling over one another. I spun around to see my companion slither into a side exit I had not even noticed.

The spike of alarm was hard to swallow down. Steeling myself, I darted after her.

Blackened walls closeted me on both sides. The artificial lighting of the Lower City had fled in terror from this place, and I could feel the acrid taste of panic rising to gnaw at the edges of my control.

It was a struggle merely to harness the Force, even just to sense the woman.

*I am not prepared.* The truth was more than simply a blow to my ego; it was a damning indictment of my competency - or lack thereof. *I am not prepared to face Revan. Not like this.*

*Faith, child.* Master Vrook may have been sparing with his praise, but his encouragement was always steadfast. *You must have faith.*

I had faced Revan before, in far more alarming circumstances. I had triumphed; surprisingly, amazingly, against overwhelming odds. I would not falter, not here.

The Force drew in deep; steady, assiduous and calming. I breathed in, and allowed it to settle into my core.

"We should be safe here for a few minutes," Revan-Jen whispered to me. Her face was a spectre in the shadows. "We have a lead on the Vulkars now, and I doubt they'd spot this alley if you didn't."

"Why are we stopping?" I demanded, and cursed the waver I heard in my voice.

She uttered no response, and a second later I heard an electronic beep.

"Are you guys there?" Jen hissed. There was a crackle of static, and it took a second to comprehend she was no longer addressing me.

*I am indebted to her. I may have formulated my own escape from the restraints, but it is Revan who extracted me from the swoop track.* The thought was sobering. Yet her own debts to humanity itself were beyond the region of appalling; truly, I owed her nothing.

*But, why? Why has she rescued me?*

::Jen! Dammit, I saw that fight on the holo-screens! We feared the worst - what in the blazes happened?:: a male voice snapped out from what must be her comm-link.

To my utter astonishment, I heard her laugh. A response, in a situation like this, so unlike the shy scholar that an icy horror crawled through my veins. *How much of what remains is Revan?* My mind touched on the ever-present bond that linked us; amusement wafted from her like smoke from a campfire. The emotion was more potent than her fear.

And I wasn't sure - but I thought I had felt her reach out to the Force earlier.
That alone made me want to run away, gibbering. Jen Sahara should not be able to remember such a thing. It was fortunate the bond allowed me to block her access, which had become instinctual - but the very idea she might be actively seeking the Force was, simply, frightening.

*There is no passion; there is serenity.*

"No time for lectures, Flyboy! We need help, and we need it now," Revan- *Jen* said in a low voice. *Jen Sahara*, I reminded myself. *I must think of her as such.*

::*Zaalbar and I are already scouring the alleyways. Where are you?::* the voice demanded.

"No idea, Mission might know. Can I speak to her?"

::*Uh, she's been missing since you left::* A crackling howl of some description followed the response.

"Balls of a rancor!" Revan swore, and I winced instinctively.

*Oh, who am I fooling?* The realization was as irritating as it was perilous. *Jen Sahara would never blurt such an epithet.*

"Never mind," Revan continued, voice deep and intent. "We'll head to the Upper City - see you in the hideout."

::*Don't do anything stup:::* A click, and the comm-link turned off. I sensed Revan turn to face me. I resisted the urge to shrink back from what I knew to be her piercing green gaze.

*You cannot make a person out of a beast.* Why had I even tried?

Because she had been a person, once.

"We need to get to the Upper City. There may be some old maintenance shafts around here - I don't think we can risk going through the main entrance," she was saying, as she shuffled something over her head.

I could not quite tell, but she almost appeared to be *removing her clothes.*

"What are you doing?" My voice, firm and resolved. The Force echoed a deep thrum of reassurance in my grasp.

"Shedding my overalls," she drawled, and the lilt of mirth in her voice was evident. "I don't think you really want to wander around Taris half-naked."

My cheeks burned as I realized the state of my undress. *That- that Brejik. That slimy, good-for-nothing-* I forced the bright anger back under control with some effort. I could not entirely quell the desire to see that degenerate dead, for all that I had endured.

Revan threw me the crumpled clothing. As I hastily searched for the fasteners, it struck me that the leadership role had shifted. *I must take charge. I must postpone the mission, and get her to the masters.* I lifted a leg awkwardly in the darkness, struggling to pull the musty overalls up around my waist. *I must get myself to the masters.*

"Good idea," I offered, as I shrugged the clothing over my shoulders. "Now. What is your plan of action from here?"

There was an odd blast of incredulity from within the bond. I somehow had the sense she was staring
at me in disbelief. "To get away from the guys trying to kill us!"

She moved back to the opening of the narrow alley as I affixed the final fastener. "Who were you talking to?" I demanded, one step behind her.

"Your boyfriend," Revan murmured. Her voice was wry, and once more thrumming with amusement.

"I beg your pardon?" I snapped. Even the mere thought of such set my cheeks burning.

She stifled a chuckle. "Captain Onasi."

The sense of relief was all-encompassing. Captain Onasi! Now this rescue makes sense! If Revan was following his orders, then that confirmed the situation was salvageable. She did not know who she truly was. But I do not believe she is entirely Jen Sahara anymore. Still, there was hope. Everything could still be on track.

"Captain Onasi is alive!" I enthused, allowing myself a small sigh of relief. "That is good news. But we're not out of danger, yet. You must tell me what kind of resources we can draw on, if I am going to figure out a way to extract us from here."

Talk about your all-time spoilt Jedi brats!

I stiffened in hot indignation as her thought crested sharply between us. Revan might have no awareness of our bond, but the Force-link was a constant curse in my mind. Her uppermost thoughts fed through to me with startling ease.

"Look, lady, I'm taking you back to Flyboy, and then I'm off." Her voice was cold.

"Oh, no, you are certainly not. My determination swelled, banking down the fear that battled for supremacy. "My name is Bastila Shan, if you do not recall from the Endar Spire," I said archly. "But we shall discuss it later. For now, we should get a move on."

"Sun and stars, you brought it up!" she exclaimed petulantly. She huffed, before spinning around, and darting deep into the bowels of alley. "Just- just sodding well follow me so we can get out of here!"

There is no chaos; there is harmony.

I would not allow my fists to clench in fruitless anger. For all of her irreverence, Revan's approach was likely the wisest - we should keep moving, and fast.

"Jen!" a kid's voice squeaked deeper in the darkness, and halted our stride.

"Mission?" Revan gasped, her voice laced with surprise. I'm going to kill that reckless girl!

Fright struck hard; the Force responded, swelling in my grasp, ready to stun Revan at my will. I could not- I would not allow her to react with such flagrant and cavalier disregard for life.

"That was so intense!" the voice gushed. The form of a young girl slowly coalesced from the shadows ahead.

"You're in so much trouble," Revan muttered. I was on the precipice of throwing her into a Force-induced stasis when she laughed.
Laughed. Again.

The surprise alone held me back.

The girl called Mission huffed. And at that moment, I fully interpreted Revan's chaotic mess of emotions that echoed through our bond. Fear. Fear, rather than anger. Fear for the girl's safety?

It seemed... incongruous. Hard to believe. But the relief that surged from my bond-mate was now mirrored by my own. For a brief moment there, I had been afraid myself. Afraid of witnessing the return of Revan. Darth Revan.

"Trouble? Look, I did what you asked, okay?" the girl retorted. "I stayed out of the fighting. But, sheesh, I freaked when I saw the race!" She took a step closer. The shadows clung to the girl, but I could pick out a visor strapped around a young face. A set of Twi'leki lekku curled tight around her neck. "So, I hacked into one of the control computers, and tracked you on the holo-cams. I had to switch to the Bek grid when you went out the service tunnel - that was wizard by the way! The swoops behind you were about to-"

"Mission!" Revan spoke over the girl's onslaught, but her voice was warm and amused. "You're the amazing one. But we need to move. Know of a back way to the Upper City from here?"

"The Upper City? But I thought-"

"The Bek base won't be safe, after that slaughter," Revan muttered, cutting the Twi'lek off. Not entirely sure I'll be welcome, after pinching Anglu's swoop.

Her rash thought made me realize just how ill-planned and spontaneous this rescue had been. Either Revan's plan had completely imploded, or she hadn't had one in the first place.

Although, I could have been more tactful with my first words to her, I realized with some chagrin.

"Alright!" the kid agreed brightly. "Follow me!"

The girl led us further down the dark tunnel, and we followed her silently. Revan's emotions had settled down, and all I could sense from her now was an icy determination. I cannot let her get away. I realized I needed to use all my persuasive powers to convince Revan to journey with me. But that could wait, until we were in a safe place.

Mission led us to an abandoned elevator shaft. There was still no light whatsoever, and I wondered how Revan could find her way around. The Twi'lek had a visor, but Revan did not. Her ability to move through darkness disturbed me. She may not be who she once was, but she is not behaving how she should be, either.

"This hasn't been used in years. We can climb up the service ladders - they exit in a junkyard on the bad side of Upper Taris," Mission informed us as she twisted inside the hole. I wondered briefly what had happened to the elevator itself.

"There's a bad side of Upper Taris?" Revan muttered. It almost sounded sarcastic.

"Well, not bad like the Lower City. But generally where the aliens hang out. And some of the gangs."

"I think we had best avoid them, then." I said primly.

"That's the idea," Mission said brightly. I was glad to hear no sarcasm in her voice.
The agility of the girl surprised me, as I sensed her climb up the supporting railings in the shaft. Revan followed more slowly, occasionally muttering to herself. I did not have too much trouble, with the Force as my ally. The pain in my side had dulled to a distant throbbing. *Soon I will take care of that.*

As we ascended, a thin ray of weak light slowly pervaded our surroundings. My muscles ached despite my own strength. *I cannot wait for some time in a refresher unit.* I had been feeling dirty for far too long. I could still feel demanding, violent hands upon my skin, and I inwardly cursed Brejik to the darkest corner of the Outer Rim.

Yet I had to feel grateful that it had been a swoop gang who captured me, rather than the Sith. For all the indignities I had suffered under Brejik, he could have done worse.

*He almost did. That time I escaped from his grasp. That time he realized he was dealing with a Jedi, not a fugitive Republic officer.*

It must have been days ago, now. I had run free from a winded Brejik, and it had only been due to a lucky stun bolt from one of his men that I did not make it far enough. When I woke again, it was to a pounding headache and a disruptor cinched tightly around my neck.

A neural inhibitor could be overcome by Force-strength or inner will, but those kaiburr-based disruptors... they were rare, difficult to procure or purchase, and impossible to disable with the Force. In that moment, I had felt the taste of despair more bitter and bleak than I had ever known. There was no way to stop Brejik from enacting his most monstrous desires, no way to stop him from gifting me to the Sith...

But I soon came to realize that everything had changed with my calamitous escape attempt.

Brejik still continued his preposterous campaign of a swoop championship, but his manner toward me now held a reserve that had been lacking before. Perhaps it was because he feared the reprisal of a Jedi, or maybe he enjoyed drawing out the anticipation, but he did not subject me to any further violations - and certainly not the worst one of all.

*I am lucky. The Force is with me.*

*Brejik decided a local swoop competition was of greater benefit to him than selling me out to the Sith.*

*I managed to free my hands and disable that cursed disruptor enroute to the swoop track.*

*All I have suffered is rough manhandling and lewd remarks.*

I still felt unclean, and abused.

I gritted my teeth, pushed the tumultuous thoughts away, and followed the others.

The climb felt long. Each step was an arduous feat done in silence, broken only by the occasional grunt of effort from one of us. As the environs lightened, I allowed my attention to fix upon the others, while my feet climbed ever upward.

The girl Twi'lek was garbed in vivid green synthetics; a figure-hugging outfit the easily displayed her agility as she scurried up the ladders with the grace of youth. Revan, in contrast, had donned what looked like scale mesh beneath the overalls I now wore. The weight of her armour seemed to hamper her little; either that, or it was a sheer force of will urging her forward, matching pace with the speedy girl in front.
Once, Revan's physical form had been nothing but tightly packed muscle over a skeleton. She certainly did not have the same physique now, and nor was it the Force lending her strength. And yet... and yet it was not the bodily weak and emotionally fragile Jen Sahara I now had to control.

"We're here!" Mission hissed, and I looked up in surprise to see the youth scramble out of sight. Both Revan and I were quick to follow.

As I scrambled over the ledge of the empty elevator shaft, my first impression was one of enclosure. We were surrounded on all sides by dull high-rise buildings that looked both utilitarian and drab in appearance. Littered on the ground were various heaps of metallic rubble and broken machinery. In the distance, a group of Ithorians were bending over something I could not make out.

A beep cut through our silence; I turned, to see Revan tapping at the device on her wrist.

::Jen, where are you? Zaalbar's getting desperate, if his howls are anything to go by,:: a voice rapped out, accompanied by a roar from someone else. That must be Carth. I wonder who Zaalbar is. Could that be a Wookiee, here on Taris? As preposterous as the idea was, the howl sounded suspiciously like one.

"We're fine, in the Upper City. Mission's with us. Meet you at the apartment," Revan replied succinctly, before switching off the communicator.

"Big Z's gonna yell at me," the Twi'lek muttered sulkily.

I saw Revan grin at her. "Mission, can you get us to an apartment building? It's near a cantina."

Mission groaned at Revan. "How many cantinas do you think are in Upper Taris? Sheesh, and how many apartment buildings?"

"Well, the cantina hosts a dueling ring run by a Hutt called Ajuur, if that's any help."

The girl brightened. "We're close by! That's in the alien quarter, where we are. Follow me!"

We managed to avoid any Sith, but I saw some in the distance. It made me suddenly glad for the nondescript overalls I wore; appreciative for the foresight of the one who dogged my every thought.

Revan took over the lead as we entered a run-down building. She strode over to a door, pulled out a tech spike and started slicing the locking mechanism with practiced ease. That's not a skill Jen Sahara knows. A cold chill danced down my spine. Revan looked up at me suddenly, green eyes intent. Can she sense the bond? Fear pricked pimples along my arms. I hurriedly detached myself from it, and attempted to throw her a benevolent smile. She blinked warily at me, and turned back to the electronic lock.

"Hey, you're not bad," Mission commented as the door opened beneath Revan's ministrations. "Not as good as me, though." The Twi'lek grinned cheekily, drawing a laugh from Revan as we entered the room.

Revan's self-proclaimed hideout was no more than a one-room apartment, with dingy, stained walls and a cracked plasticeel floor. The sole bunk bore a rumpled blanket, with a knapsack of gear littered near the foot. The other wall boasted a tiny kitchenette that had obviously seen better days.

"Is this where you have been camping out?" I asked.

"Uh, more or less," Revan muttered.
"So," Mission interrupted brightly, turning to face me. "I'm Mission by the way!"

The girl was beaming at me. I tried to answer her welcoming smile with my own. "It is nice to meet you, Mission." I wasn't sure if I should offer to shake her hand. How did Tarisians act upon first introductions? "I thank you for your assistance," I told her. My sentiment was genuine, but I had the sinking feeling that my words came across as stilted. "My name is Bastila."

I was saved from any further social awkwardness by the door opening.

Carth Onasi strode in, followed by the towering form of a Wookiee. My eyes widened in surprise, despite the fact I had already wondered at the species of the one named Zaalbar.

"Bastila!" Carth greeted. His warm brown eyes creased in relief. "Finally, things are looking up."

"Captain Onasi, it is good to see you again."

Carth crooked a smile at me. "Under the circumstances, Bastila, I think we can dispense with formalities. Call me Carth."

My unease dissipated. I had not much to do with Captain Onasi on the Endar Spire, but I trusted his loyalty to the Republic. A famous war-hero, Carth Onasi had been stationed onboard the Endar Spire in an advisory capacity, commanding the pilots who navigated the Hammerhead-class cruiser in the name of our quest.

Our quest, which had so disastrously failed before we had come anywhere near our destination. My eyes closed briefly, and I once more struggled to detach myself from the despair that had loomed within me since the first alarm on the Endar Spire had sounded.

"(Mission!)" The Wookiee had loped over to the Twi'lek girl, before picking her up bodily.

I felt the tang of apprehension flare to life in my belly. The Wookiee fair towered over the girl. I could not trust Revan's strange companions-

"(You should not have been there! I should not have let Jen talk me into it!)"

The Twi'lek struggled in his furry arms. "Let me down, Big Z!" she squealed.

The apprehension grew as I wildly considered intervening. Why were the others not saying anything-

"(No!)") the menacing Wookiee howled. "(You keep running into danger, and scaring me witless!)"

I blinked. The meaning of his words registered, and abruptly I could sense the source of the Wookiee's distress. Concern, pure and simple - which immediately assuaged my doubts.

I felt the soft puff of a relieved sigh escape my lips.

"Zaalbar, you should blame me," Revan said quietly to the Wookiee. "I needed her skills, her ability to sneak onto the track. I did my best to keep her from danger-"

"I ain't a kid!" Mission protested hotly.

"...but if it wasn't for her, I wouldn't have been free to rescue Bastila." Her eyes slid to mine, then, guarded and wary, and I recalled my earlier words. Embarrassment flushed through me; I had never felt at ease in social situations with normal people, let alone mind-wiped former Sith Lords.
I swallowed, and forced my mind to focus on the intangible mind-link between us. It was resonating with the maelstrom of her chaotic emotions.

Suspicion. Fear. Fear of... me?

Could she be just as scared of me as I am of her?

I was not certain, but the thought alone was enough to calm me.

"Thank you. All of you," I said quietly, keeping my eyes intent on Revan's green gaze.

Zaalbar put Mission down gently.

"(Jen)," the Wookiee wailed. "(I cannot-"

And then, I realized, Revan had been following their conversation intently. She can understand Shyriiwook. Jen Sahara had known only a smattering of languages, half of them dead for millennia and of interest only to academics. She certainly had not the knowledge of the Wookiee language.

But perhaps this is a skill that would stay with her regardless? Perhaps the knowledge of a language is not something that would disappear, even under massive head trauma and a personality implant?

I had to believe that, for the thought of Revan relearning some of her old talents was horrifying.

"Big Z, calm down, okay?" the Twi'lek was saying. "Jen needed some help, and I was the only one who could do it. You'd put yourself in danger to help as well, if you could! Let me do my part, alright?" She finished on a scowl.

Carth sighed suddenly. "Whatever you guys are arguing about, you may as well drop it. Jen's determined to be insanely reckless, and for some odd reason it seems to pay off. Bastila's here, and alive."

Insanely reckless. Carth's words, exasperated and weary, were not an accurate description of the Jen Sahara that had been on the Endar Spire. As if I did not need yet another reminder that the personality implant was shaking loose. The Force healers said the chances of her recalling anything did not fall within a plausible range of probability. That the identity of Jen Sahara was firmly enmeshed. What has changed since then?

I would think on it later. For now, it was time to steer the conversation back on track.

"Well, enough of this. We should be talking about the plan to get off Taris," I intervened, hoping to end the discussion.

"I knew it!" Mission said. She threw an exuberant grin at the Wookiee. "Big Z, we're going on an adventure!"

I blinked in surprise. My gaze slid sideways, to purvey a strange grimace dominating Revan's countenance.

"Um, Mission," Revan began. She dragged one hand roughly through her short mop. "I'm not going with them." The Twi'lek jerked around to stare at her in bemusement. I felt the same sense of determination from earlier, a steely resolve swell from within, but before I could utter a word Carth jumped straight in.

"That's right," he said, his words low and angry. "Just leave - walk out on the Republic and your
promises to the Jedi Council."

"I'm not walking out on anybody." Revan clenched her teeth. Between us I could feel her dark emotions building. In a way, it was less surprising than Captain Onasi's anger. He was a professional and experienced Republic officer, and yet obviously felt the taint of betrayal at the thought of her desertion.

*They have been together for some time. Perhaps it is not all that startling.*

I cleared my throat. "You cannot walk out, Jen," I said smoothly. "You signed a contract with the Jedi Council, do you remember?"

She should, that was one of the artificial ones. That memory should bind her well and truly to the Council.

Revan's face drained of all colour, as her wide eyes gazed at me helplessly. The stink of nausea and fear stormed from her, but was replaced immediately with a white hot anger that overpowered everything else.

"That contract!" she spat suddenly. "I wouldn't sign anything like that! It's- it's effective slavery!"

"Do not be preposterous. It is an employment contract, Jen, no more and no less. You have agreed to work with us for three years in return for an ample salary and the start of your career." I sent her a steady look, inwardly clutching onto my serenity. I had to stay calm. "The Jedi do not look kindly upon people who walk out on such contracts."

*She dares to threaten me?* Her thought, undercut with a vicious fury, shattered my calm. It was quickly followed by another. *No, I will not get angry, dammit! Maybe I should go with them. Just to get off Taris. And then do a bunk, since Mission wants to leave so much. I wonder if that's feasible?* I saw Revan's face twist with suppressed emotions. That logic should so quickly follow rage scared me. Her last thought ran through my mind - *No, it's too risky. I cannot go with them.*

I could feel my panic rise up again, the turgid sense of losing control. My only ally was a Republic captain ignorant of all the pertinent details, and somehow I did not think Carth Onasi would sit back while I Force-compelled Revan to follow me.

*I must ensure she returns with me to Dantooine.*

But what if some part of her recalled the importance of that planet? I had to get her to the masters, before the persona of Jen Sahara truly vanished and the worst threat to the galaxy reemerged. Perhaps... perhaps if I could persuade her to travel somewhere neutral, somewhere that wouldn't pose any sort of perceived threat-

"Jen, perhaps you can accompany us to Alderaan to begin with. I am sure we could do with your skills, and those of your friends," I suggested, keeping my voice mild and unassuming. Including her voice seemed an assumption, were it not for the loyalty they seemed to exhibit toward her. Considering who she had once been, that loyalty was not altogether surprising, and their company might make her easier to convince. One way or another, I simple *had* to entice the shell of Revan to follow me. "If you still feel the need to run, then I cannot stop you. But let us work together, at least, to escape from Taris."

Revan's lips thinned as her face blanked of all perceivable emotion. She was staring hard at me, and I could not decipher any emotion through the bond.
"Alderaan?" Carth threw me a frown. "That's an interesting destination. Why Alderaan?"

"It is not far from Taris," I answered, my thoughts racing in sudden need. I had not anticipated his rejoinder, although I should have. "Alderaan hosts a Republic base, Carth, and it should be a safe enough haven for the others. I can contact who I need to when we arrive, and Jen can... Jen can go her own way."

A true Jedi does not lie. I forced the calm to stay on my face, and stared back at Revan. Slowly, slowly, her head dipped in a nod of acquiescence. Success.

"Okay," Revan said softly. Her eyes narrowed. "I'll join you until Alderaan."

xXx

I spent time later in the refresher, trying to erase the stink of the Vulkars. I could feel invisible marks imprinted on my body, and flashes of Brejik's treatment tormented my mind. I shuddered, and forced back tears.

I am a Jedi, I am at peace. Trials and tribulations only make me stronger.

Oh, how I wished that I had been in full control of the Force back on the swoop track! Brejik would have been dead. No, Jedi do not kill. I would not have killed him. I am better than that. I could not quite convince myself. The neural disruptor and the sedatives had left me helpless, like a child.

He could have... he did not, in the end, but he could have-

I vowed, in that moment, that I would never be helpless again.

The others were talking softly in the main room; I had left them to clean myself and change into a spare set of clothes Carth had dashed out to procure for me. In my head, Revan felt more at peace than before. Or perhaps the word was resolved. I closed my eyes wearily.

I did not expect to deal with her alone. Back on the Endar Spire, there had been a Jedi Master and a squad of knights accompanying me. While I had been called Commander, it was only a technicality. A safeguard, should I ever have need of immediate compliance from all allies should the worst happen. Hidden as a token gesture due to my battle meditation, the change in manifest command had been accepted - even if grudgingly so.

In truth, Master Galdea had led the group. He had been one of three who had completed the personality transplant, and Jen Sahara was under his watchful eye as much as mine. We spoke many times of the brief glimpses I managed to pull from Revan's fractured mind when she dreamed. We had no reason to be alarmed then. And now Master Galdea is gone. All of those onboard the Endar Spire, gone. Carth had told me I was the only Jedi to make it out - the others, all, had fallen while standing their ground against the Sith.

Master Galdea had ordered me to the escape pods, to wait until the last minute for Ensign Ulgo to bring Jen Sahara. To bring Revan. So I had been useless, my battle meditation unable to help, while all my comrades were cut down like renni grass. My old friend Kylah, gone. I will never see her face again. I will never scold her for her irreverence again, nor shelter behind her protection-

Grief can come later. I swallowed, forcing the bleak emotions at bay. I did not have the luxury of breaking down.

I must focus on the task at hand.
We had been heading toward Tatooine, the first of the Star Maps. Although my battle meditation had elevated my public persona in the eyes of the Republic, it had been my vision of Revan and Malak that granted me at last some status within the Order. Enough that, at long last, even Master Vrook started dropping the occasional comment regarding my oft-delayed Knight Trials.

The vision still struck fear into me, even now. It had been months after I had captured Revan; months in which the former Sith Lord had been kept comatose and helpless within the enclave's walls. Months in which the masters debated fiercely what to do with her; redemption, certainly, was a hotly contested topic, but our experts had decreed that her mind was too damaged, too broken, too unstable to even bring back a coherent shell-

I had not been cognizant of the deep Force bond which linked us, had not understood why my sleep was so riddled with shadows of darkness and ever-present grief. Not until the vivid memory shot clear through my mind, that fateful day.

Revan and Malak, entering a tomb on Dantooine. Back when they were still Jedi, but in name only, for the shadows of the Dark Side were already eroding their souls.

Back when they visited Dantooine, flushed with victory from the Mandalorian Wars and determined to antagonize a council that had had little to do with them - for they had been Coruscanti Jedi.

The Dantooine Council had believed the short stayover was merely a childish act, a chance for Revan and Malak to spout I-told-you-so to the nearest Jedi Masters, for the Jedi Thirteen were now galactic heroes, famous saviours of the Republic-

But their visit had been a ruse. Not even the wisest of masters had realized then it was merely a ploy; an opportunity for the two erstwhile lovers to discover the master Star Map.

An ancient relic of the Dark Side, located not far from the Jedi stronghold, that no one knew about. We still had no idea exactly what the Star Maps pointed to, but the master one on Dantooine gave us the location of the other four planets. The Council were convinced that it held the key to the might of the Sith armada, the massive fleet that kept expanding and was slowly, surely, winning the war.

Malak was now leading the Sith, after turning on his old master when she faced me. Malak didn't have her finesse - the Dark Side had warped his reason, and he appeared to be blindly attacking any target within range. But his forces were superior. And Revan had, already, wrecked great damage upon the Republic front.

Yet I could still remember them both as they were when I had first met them. Malak, inordinately handsome and charming. Revan, cheeky, likeable, and fun. Both of them seemed so good.

It was as Master Vrook said, never underestimate the lure of the Dark Side. But there must have been something innately venal in them both to begin with, surely?

Even when I had first met them, their emotions had been apparent and uncontrolled. I closed my eyes, and remembered...

... 

I followed Kylah into the courtyard. Dust swirling upward from a gentle summer's breeze swept into my eyes. I winced, squinting them shut. In the distance, I could hear the audible shink shink of a lightsaber duel.

"That's Revan Freeflight and Malak Devari!" Kylah whispered in awe. "They must be visiting from Coruscant!"
I snapped my eyes back open. Across the vast expanse of the courtyard fought two figures; one fast and fierce, the other fast and strong.

Revan and Malak? I thought in wonderment. I'd heard about them; after all, who hadn't? Two Jedi taken by the Order very late in life, and already both Jedi Knights after five brief years. And I have been here over ten. I quenched that envious thought, and reminded myself of the humility needed by all Jedi alike.

I watched as Revan ducked and dodged Malak's more powerful attacks. In return she flurried a few quick blows, which he parried easily. I couldn't take my eyes off the fight. Revan's two sabers were evenly matched by Malak's double-bladed weapon. Their speed was incredible - but it was becoming clear that Malak's strength was superior.

I cannot duel with anywhere near their prowess, despite my extensive training.

But my talents lay with the mental side of the Force, I admonished myself. I would not envy others for their gifts.

"It's like a dance, isn't it?" Kylah commented. I nodded agreement whilst keeping my focus on the duel. Inwardly, I pegged Malak as the better, but they were both talented. Very talented.

With a powerful thrust of Force that seemingly came from nowhere, Malak was thrown backwards into the dust. Revan was on him in the blink of an eye, landing a pseudo fatal blow before he had a chance to recover.

"End game!" she crowed.

"Hey, that's not fair!" Malak complained, scrambling to his feet. "You said no Force powers!"

"Fair? Come on, never expect your enemy to be fair!" Revan was grinning, green eyes dancing with merriment. Malak scowled, before glancing our way. His expression stilled as his gaze met mine. I was abruptly aware of just how handsome the young, strong, powerful Jedi Knight was. His skin gleamed in the sunlight, sparking deep brown highlights in his tousled hair.

Shirtless and muscular, the man was every inch a warrior. The day suddenly felt unseasonably warm.

Malak threw me a warm smile, and began walking closer.

"I don't believe I have met you before?" the man asked as he neared. His light brown eyes were intent on mine, and I inwardly damned the flush that scoured my cheeks. I was not used to such attention from a stranger, and I did not desire it.

He may be seven years older than me, but I have as much training as him. I am not a foolish girl to collapse into incoherence. There is no emotion; there is peace.

"I- I am Bastila Shan," I stammered, and my gaze dropped despite myself.

"Pleased to meet you, beautiful Bastila. I am Malak Devari." He caught my flailing hand, and raised it to his mouth. His lips were warm, almost hot. I looked back into his eyes nervously; they seemed to shine just for me. He winked, and then looked back to Revan. I followed his gaze, and saw the Jedi Knight glaring at us.

"Really, Mal?" she scoffed. "This is about that spacer on Chandrila, isn't it? I told you why. I told you it was a misunderstanding. I don't play these sorts of games, and frankly-" she shot me a pitying
look. "-it should be beneath you, too. I thought we'd sorted these trust issues out years ago."

Her words dropped in the air like barbs, lingering even after the tempestuous knight turned on her heel and strode away. Ice formed hard and cold in my stomach, replacing the earlier glow. My gaze shot back to Malak, but he was frowning in consternation at her retreating back.

The deep emotion in his eyes gave the game away.

He loves her. And he is toying with me.

I snatched my hand away in outraged confusion. Malak glanced back at me and grimaced, perhaps in apology. Then he whirled around to chase after Revan.

"Revvie! Wait!" he groaned as he dashed off.

Kylah laid a hand on my shoulder. "He should not play with other people's emotions like that," she said softly. "A Jedi should not act so."

...

I sighed, and reopened my eyes.

I could have dealt with my present situation in a collected fashion, had Revan been assuming the identity of Jen Sahara fully. Like she had been on the Endar Spire. Back then, she had acted exactly like the real Jen Sahara would have; meek, shy and obedient. I felt a passing sense of sadness for the scholar, but there was nothing more we could have done. She simply did not want to live after what happened to her on Deralia.

But Revan is not Jen Sahara. Not anymore. The thought was terrifying, except that... there is light within her. Light that does not come from the shell of a dead scholar. I sense empathy when she looks at Mission. She risked herself to come to my aid on the swoop track.

I could not understand this enigma; either she was Jen or she was the Dark Lord. Yet she seemed to be acting like neither.

The only thing I knew for certain was that the planted personality was beginning to shake loose. I had to get her back to the masters.

Also, there was the ambush of the Endar Spire to think on, beyond the bitter loss of all those lives. How did Darth Malak deduce our location? Is it possible he knows we are tracking down the Star Maps... or even that Revan still lives? Our drop from hyperspace, near the Taris system, had been a refueling one. How had the Sith known we would be there?

I need guidance. And help. I shook my head in irritation, and stepped out of the unit. I am calm, I am serene. I am resolute.

Stress and tension had built up to a boiling point since I had first pulled Darth Revan from the burning wreckage of her flagship. Rationally, I forced myself to review the situation I was now in. I must lead this party to Dantooine as readily as possible. Revan aside, I knew that I myself needed time, guidance and recuperation.

I refused to let my fear overcome my judgment. I had to return to the others, calm and in control of the mission.

Somehow, I will get Revan to the masters.
Mandalorian gambit

- Jen Sahara -

Our one-room apartment was starting to feel ridiculously cramped.

After pulling a face at the only bed, Mission had bluntly stated her desire to crash with the Beks for the night, flat-out ignored Zaalbar's howl of protest, and flounced outside with a flippant promise to return in the morning.

I couldn't help but feel a small measure of concern, even as I waved the upset Wookiee away to chase after her. I wasn't entirely sure how strictly his life-debt entailed him sticking to my side like a bad smell, but the Twi'lek kid surely needed his protection more than me right now.

*Quit stressing. Mission's been scampering between the Upper and Lower City her entire life. She's savvy enough to avoid the gang fighting on her way to the Beks, and their stronghold should be well-guarded against any repercussions.*

Besides, I had a different person to concern myself with.

Bastila. In many ways, she was everything I expected: uptight, snooty, and... and powerful. The way she'd caved in that tunnel above the swoop track- no doubt about it, Bastila Shan was quick to act when required. It was hard to believe she'd be held prisoner by a *swoop gang* of all things.

She was taking an inordinately long time in the tiny refresher. I supposed I couldn't blame her. No doubt, the Jedi was savouring her freedom, even if she was going to run us all out of hot water. The plumbing in the rundown apartment complex was notoriously short-lived even at the best of times.

*Better than the sonics on most starships at any rate.* I winced, rubbing my head as the side of it throbbed. The *Endar Spire* was the only starship I could recall, although with my riddled memory I had no idea what was in my past. Street Kid might have done her share of interstellar travel, and Evil Bitch was probably insane enough to believe she owned an entire armada.

I frowned, annoyed with myself, and deliberately forced my attention back to Bastila. Flashes of what felt suspiciously like grief cut through by hot anger kept throwing themselves into my head, and I knew the emotions were stemming from her.

It hadn't escaped me that Bastila would be able to sense my own state of mind in return. She'd wrangled a promise out of me to travel to Alderaan, just when I'd convinced myself to leave her and Flyboy to their own devices.

*If I travel to Alderaan, will Bastila really allow me to go my own way?* She'd said she would. And Jedi did not lie - right?

But something told me not to trust her.

On the other hand, staying behind on Taris had little appeal. *Brejik will know who I am by now. I'll have the Vulkars after me before too long. I can't be insane enough to want that. Leaving Taris is the smart choice.*

And, despite everything, part of me wanted to have faith in Bastila Shan. *She is a Jedi. She might be able to help me.* Yet her very proximity with the mind-link suggested otherwise. On the outside, she
seemed so poised, so composed - but our cursed bond told me different.

Fear. She'd been scared, earlier. I wasn't sure - but I thought it'd been when she'd looked at me. Though didn't that seem the most far-fetched thought of all? To think, a Jedi of Bastila Shan's ilk, afraid of me? Bastila sodding Shan! Hero of the frelling Jedi Order and Republic war effort!

Whatever was in my past, it couldn't scare a Jedi of her calibre.

Even if she is, apparently, still a padawan.

If I really was going to travel with her and Carth, I'd either have to come clean with my identity issues or do better with the faÁ§ade. Maybe... maybe I should see that doc again. Zelka seemed to think he could help. At the close of everything, I wanted answers from Bastila - but I didn't want her to grasp the true nature of my fractured mind, either. I hadn't even been able to fool Onasi into believing I was no more than a shy scholar from Deralia, and we shared neither a history nor a bond.

The man in question looked up from the datapad he was perusing, likely scanning the news-feeds for any pertinent info. He eyed me over as I stretched aching limbs and threw him a tired smirk.

We had our black moments, but for some reason teasing Carth usually made me feel better.

He quirked an eyebrow at me. "Jen," he said in a low tone. "I- uh, thanks. I might not, well, care for your ethics, but I'm not blind to everything you've accomplished. Without you, I daresay Bastila would still be a prisoner, and I- uh, I guess I'd probably still be bumbling around the Upper City."

There was so much I could do with that stuttering statement. "Ethics?" I settled for, letting my smirk widen. "What have I done now?"

His brows lowered. "Let's not turn this into an argument, alright?"

"Hey!" I raised my hands in mock surrender, even though I knew my grin gave the game away.

"What did I say?"

Carth glared at me, but I wondered if I saw the edge of his mouth quirk. I smiled at him sweetly.

"Come on, Flyboy, you can't make a dig at my moral character and get away with it."

"Want to wager on that?" He'd folded his arms, staring at me steadily.

"Five creds?" I offered, grinning. "Spill, Flyboy. I won't let up, you know."

Carth sighed, looking vaguely uncomfortable. "Look, I-I didn't mean anything by it, really. Just-" and here he stopped to shoot me a glare. "You're the one walking out on an employment contract, sister."

My amusement vanished like free spice shots at a spacer's joint. I could feel myself glaring back. "Oh. That," I snapped. The frelling contract. It didn't sit right. It didn't seem right. My head was telling me the Jedi contract was watertight - a guardianship of sorts despite my age - and I'd meekly auto-printed my own autonomy away without a second thought.

No. Jen did that, not me. The burn of anger was familiar, and all too enticing. "Three years," I hissed. "Let me ask you, Onasi, would you willingly serve the Jedi for three years?"

"No," he shot back shortly. "But I wouldn't be stupid enough to sign it in the first place."

Carth turned away from me, pointedly bending back over his datapad as a means of ending the
conversation. I felt the dull flush of emotion heat my cheeks, and wasn't sure if it was from anger or embarrassment.

**Beholden to the damn Order for three years.** But the entire memory of signing that contract felt discordant - wrong. I hadn't even thought on it since I'd left the 'Spire, and wasn't that strange in itself? When Bastila had thrown it in my face like a barbed nitro-dart, the recollection of the job offer had slammed into my consciousness with the precise detail of a holo-recording. The cold blast of the air-con, the hard-edged chair biting into my back, the foreign sense of awe at what was an amazing career opportunity-

**But didn't Jen want to be a history teacher on Deralia?** An occupation far beneath her skills, but Jen had never desired to leave her homeworld. I might've assumed some form of compulsion at work, had it not been for her nascent excitement-

I swallowed. Maybe it was a deeper compulsion that I knew. Or maybe, the fractures of my mind were devolving into paranoia at absolutely everything.

But- but I could sharply remember saying a soft farewell to my proud father. He'd never willingly let me leave, he'd barely even let me leave the commune to study at the Academia every rest day-

**Not my father.** My teeth clenched suddenly. **Jen's father.**

Still, everything about Jen's life from that moment on seemed almost... artificial. I didn't even know how I'd travelled to the conference room to meet with the Order - but then, suddenly, I was on the Endar Spire, meekly reading through any ancient archives that hefty Cerean master had thrown at me.

It was all so - fragmented. **Like the rest of my memory?** Maybe. Maybe it was the missing pieces that made my history so nonsensical, to the point where I simply didn't know what was real anymore.

**Zelka mentioned hypnotic techniques might aid me.** Last thing I wanted was someone else messing up my mind - but maybe he could help. Maybe he could make some sense out of everything. Maybe, what I needed was a neutral, third-party professional-

**Yeah, because a doc playing shop in a frelling Free Clinic is really going to be a professional. Ten creds say he dropped out of Med School, and a poorly paid governmental hack-job is the only thing he could find.**

The thin plimsi hatch to the refresher swished open, then, billowing out a cloud of steam and Bastila Shan herself. My thoughts ceased with abrupt wariness.

She threw me a tentative smile. Bastila was clad in a ragged tunic Carth had picked up from a stall earlier, which looked about three sizes too big for her, and didn't nothing but emphasize her youth. Her damp hair clung to her neck, and her expression showed nothing but a struggling attempt at friendliness.

I couldn't make her out. Was she a Jedi who could help me, or a guard?

"Perhaps it is time to discuss where we are at with leaving Taris," Bastila said, her voice prim as she stepped over to the sole bunk and hesitantly lowered herself to sit down. She looked so out-of-place, posture stiff and back ram-rod straight, flawless skin like she'd never spent a day in the sun, face with the fine bones of an aristocrat-

**She is out-of-place, here, a fugitive hiding out in the arse-end of the Upper City. Bastila Shan has probably never been anywhere without a Jedi entourage and a high-end suite of rooms to fall back**
Carth had slowly lowered his datapad to face her. "Uh, well, we don't really have a plan as of yet," he conceded, mouth quirking in a self-deprecating smile.

Bastila's slanted eyes widened in surprise. "What have you been doing all this time then?" she demanded.

I had to stifle a chuckle. *Whoever said the Jedi were reasonable?* "We were rescuing you, Bastila," I told her dryly.

"I would have expected one of you to have the sense to think ahead," she snapped, throwing me a slight frown.

With mounting amusement, I watched the dark clouds of irritation coalesce on Carth's face. For once, it wasn't me annoying the frell out of him. I inwardly wagered he mentally stuffed us both in a box labeled Difficult Women, and had to bite back a snicker at the thought.

"Bastila, don't you think you're being a little unfair?" Carth said firmly, levelling her with the hard stare of a superior confident of his own position. I could hear the faint echoes of command in his voice - disapproval, edged with an expectation that she would back down. He wasn't bad at that sort of thing, actually - even if it did normally tempt me into yanking his chain.

Outrage pinked high on the porcelain cheeks of the Jedi. She wasn't used to being questioned, at least not in front of others. *No. Not the battle meditation princess of the Order.*

"Unfair?" Bastila gasped. "Force, you two have been here for weeks, free and able to traverse around Taris at will, and you have not yet even *begun* to formulate an escape strategy?"

Again, I had to bite back a choked laugh. Seeing the young, uptight Jedi on the verge of throwing a hissy fit at a war-seasoned veteran bordered on the hilarious.

A stony look settled deep into Carth's brown gaze. "We have been spending all our time and resources in *formulating* a plan to extract you, Bastila. Or you have conveniently forgotten that the very reason you are here, free, is because of that?"

Bastila stood, her chin lifting as she stared stubbornly back at Carth. "Do not be preposterous. I was in the process of freeing myself at that ridiculous event. Captain Onasi, do not forget that I am your commander, and if I believe there is need for a discussion on your lack of progress, then I shall certainly say so!"

"We're not on the *Endar Spire* anymore, Bastila!" Carth's voice had risen with heat, too. "We're stuck deep in enemy territory, and quibbling about who is in charge hardly makes you a good leader. Particularly when you act like a spoiled child!"

I took in the scene: Carth, arms folded, glowering dangerously from underneath that ridiculous mop of rich chestnut hair. Bastila, affronted, hands propped up on hips in bristling anger.

I burst out laughing. I clapped my hand over my mouth instinctively, but it was too late. Bastila's mouth dropped open in outrage; Carth stared at me in disbelief.

"Better than a holo-soap, you two," I guffawed. "And here I thought Carth and I were bad!"

Bastila's mouth snapped shut with a click. "This is no laughing matter-" she began through clenched teeth.
Carth snorted. The corner of his mouth was twitching. "Jen's right. Maybe Taris will spin off its axis at the event, but Jen is actually right for once. We're both behaving like children." He shot me a rueful grin. "I blame your influence."

I fired a smirk back at him. "Thanks. I try to keep things interesting around here, Flyboy."

"Well, I-" Bastila looked at both of us, blinking, as if the sudden turn to amusement completely caught her off-guard. She sighed heavily, her eyes dropping closed. "Perhaps- perhaps I am not quite myself," she said, in a much quieter voice. "And perhaps I should not be so quick to judge. I apologize, Carth."

A heavy knock at the door halted any response from the Republic pilot.

In a lightning quick move, Carth had his blasters aimed while I catapulted towards our growing stash of vibroswords in the corner.

"Who could that be?" Bastila whispered. "Who knows where are here?"

The heavy weight of the common blade felt reassuring in my grip. I strode closer to the door, mind racing.

"No one," Carth replied in a low voice. "Other than Mission and Zaalbar, who would not knock."

"No, she'd slice her way in," I muttered. The knock, loud and heavy, sounded again.

I looked back at the others, only to find them both staring at me. I shrugged, turning back to the door. "Who's there?" I called out.

"(I am looking for Jen Sahara)," a gruff, deep voice called out in Mandalorian.

My eyes narrowed. Canderous Ordo, or I'm a frelling Mon Calamari. He's come for Bastila. I held my vibrosword at the ready, aware of the other two edging close behind me. What are the chances he's come alone?

"A Mandalorian merc," I hissed. I had a quick look through the peephole, and my suspicions were founded; it was Canderous, although I didn't see any signs of backup - unless he had a couple of grunts hidden further down the corridor. "I think he's after Bastila. I doubt he's alone, so be prepared."

I heard Bastila gasp as I activated the entry switch.

Canderous stood in front of me, arms folded, a speculative look on his weathered face. He smirked as his gaze landed on my vibrosword, before it drifted behind to Bastila. His smirk deepened, and the look in his granite eyes changed to something I could only label as suggestive. "(Well done. I didn't think you'd get out of the Lower City alive)."

"Su'cuy," I muttered, keeping my vibrosword at half-mast. Something twitched in my head- no, through the bond. "(I'll take that as a compliment)."

"(You can put those away)," Canderous drawled, snapping his gaze back to me and motioning at my weapon. "(I've come with a proposition, not to cause a fight)."

"(She's not for sale)," I said shortly. In my mind, I felt the sharp tang of Bastila's indignant fury. Heh. Guess she understands Mandalorian. Carth, on the other hand, was probably seething with irritation at his inability to follow the conversation.
Canderous laughed heartily. "(If I was here on Davik's behalf, I wouldn't be offering credits, let me assure you)."

I dropped my blade, but didn't sheathe it. Whatever the merc wanted, I wasn't going to let him catch me off-guard. "(Fair point. So why are you here, Canderous?)"

His grey eyes bored into mine steadily; I returned his stare in equal measure. "(I'll be frank. I have been looking for an... ally, shall we say, to help me leave Taris. Your fighting skills have impressed me. You are also just a little bit crazy, which is exactly what I'm looking for)."

I felt my eyebrows lift in surprise, and tasted wariness from Bastila.

"(Why do you think I want to leave Taris?)" I asked mildly.

He snorted, and gave Bastila another obvious once-over. "(You don't really expect me to bother with a reply, do you?)"

I inclined my head in acquiescence. "(Why do you want to leave Taris, then?)"

It could be a trap. Sun and stars, it probably is a trap. I already know Davik wants to get his claws on Bastila, and Canderous is his henchman. I kept my face blank as another thought occurred to me.

But is that really my problem?

"(My employer hasn't been paying me what he promised)," Canderous explained. "(You've probably figured out I work for Davik Kang and the Exchange. It's beneath me, but the pay kept me around for awhile. Now, though...)"

He trailed off as I grinned in response. That sounds plausible - if it's true. What kind of idiot cheats a Mandalorian and then doesn't kill him?

Canderous' lip curled. "(I figure it's time for me to break the Sith quarantine and get off this backwater planet. I've got a plan to escape Taris, but I can't do it alone)."

Well. This may have come at the best possible time. How fortuitous - if he's sincere.

"What's your plan, then?" I said, switching to Basic. This was important enough that Carth needed to follow the conversation - even if frustrating the flyboy was a temptation all on its own.

Canderous looked vaguely surprised at the change in language, but followed my lead. "I can get access to Davik's flagship - the *Ebon Hawk*. However, any ship leaving the atmosphere without launch codes will be disintegrated by the Sith fleet's automated defense guns. That's where you come in."

Launch codes. That can only mean one thing-\n
Carth snorted. "You want us to infiltrate the Sith base?" he asked in palpable incredulity. "How crazy do you think we are?"

"I ain't talking to you." Canderous turned heavy-lidded eyes on Carth. "I'm talking to your friend, ain't I?"

"He has a point, though," I interjected. "Breaking into the Sith base is tantamount to suicide. Add the fact that I don't know you enough to trust you, and I don't really see why I should help you out here."
"It would be simply preposterous to attempt an assault on the Sith base!" Bastila gasped, weighing in.

"I ain't yapping to you either, princess." Canderous threw her a contemptuous glare before turning back to me. "Can't say I think much of your friends. Look, I'm not big on working with strangers, either, but we both want to get off this rock." He paused, his eyes narrowing. "I can give you some help with the Sith base."

"You want to join us?" I asked, turning speculative.

Canderous grinned at me, and it was a feral sight. "Normally nothing would stop me from a good, clean fight, but I'm too well recognized, even around the Sith. Word would get back to Davik. I can, however, point you towards a top of the line astromech droid that can get you inside the base."

I raised an eyebrow at him. "Don't suppose you can acquire me a droid that will also get us out?"

Canderous barked a laugh. "You'll have to accomplish that on your own. If you want the droid, go to Janice Nall and ask for Davik's special project. Tell her Canderous sent you, and she'll be as sweet as mola-syrup." He eyed me over again. "Either we work together, or we both stay stuck here on Taris. I'll give you two days to act on this. If you don't, then consider the offer withdrawn. I'll be at Javyar's cantina in the evenings."

"A word of caution. Make this a stealth op, or at least cover your tracks. Maybe you can bluff your way in under the pretense of seeing the governor, if you can't find an alternate form of entry. Just make sure those hu'tuun Sith don't realize the codes are compromised, or else they'll change them quicker than you can say 'escape from Taris'."

He left, as abruptly as he'd arrived.

I switched the door closed, my thoughts racing. I wasn't sure whether I wanted to follow the Mandalorian's plan. *I can't trust him... but stars, I can't trust anyone.*

*Might be a useful bit of exercise, slaughtering a few random Sith.* I swallowed, forcing the callous thought away. Any soldiers in the base were just sents doing a job. People, just like anyone else. Grunts. *Fodder.*

"I do not sense any deception from him, which is surprising," Bastila said quietly. Her cool voice sliced through my dark-edged thoughts, and I clung to the sound like a life-line. "If he can procure us access to a ship, then this may be precisely the lead we require."

I drew in a shaky breath, feeling my mind clear, and nodded at her slowly in agreement.

Carth, however, was shaking his head. "I've got a bad feeling about this. You can't trust mercenaries, and you certainly can't trust Mandalorians." Carth grimaced. "This isn't a good idea."

*But it's our only plan to leave Taris so far.* "It can't hurt to check out that droid," I said slowly. "Unless either of you have a better plan?"

Carth frowned. "I wish I did. Jen, why did you think he was after Bastila?"

"Good question," Bastila threw in.

I grimaced, glancing away from them both. "I saw Canderous at the swoop track. He let slip that Davik was interested in acquiring her."

Bastila's face remained blank, even composed. But the lightning-quick thrust of fury that blasted
through our mind-link surprised me. *Her anger... her anger feels as hot as mine.* A nanosec later, and all I could sense was serenity.

Bastila's ability to switch her emotions on and off like a tap was impressive. *And probably emotionally unhealthy,* a voice in my head muttered.

"And we're really going to go along with his plan, then?" Carth asked heatedly. "If he was after Bastila before, what makes you think he's suddenly changed his colours?"

"I am not sure we have the luxury of caution, Carth," Bastila said, a trifle hesitantly. "I believe Jen is right. We should at least investigate the droid tomorrow."

Carth sighed, running a hand through his hair. "Fine. I suppose seeing what the droid can do won't hurt, at least."

xXX

It was already close to evening, by Tarisian time, when the Mandalorian had left.

Carth was quick to rustle up a meagre meal of flatbread and protein paste, of which Bastila wolfed down in three minutes flat before openly eyeing up the only bed.

"Take it," I said quickly. Her gaze was guarded as it met mine, and I threw her a tight smile in response. "I'm fine with sleeping on the floor."

*Not that I'm going to sleep.* I had things to do, and places to be - but she didn't need to know that.

"Thank you." Her voice was soft, but I could hear the relief in it. It made me, once again, yearn to talk to her properly, to ask for her guidance, to trust her-

I turned away, gritting my teeth. I couldn't trust her. Not until I knew more about- about- everything.

We bedded down for the night, Carth and I both curling up on the floor under threadbare blankets that were more for comfort than warmth. I was tired, though, and the aching lassitude present in my limbs reminded me that rest was something I'd been running well-short on.

*I don't seem to need much sleep.* It was a surprising realization; when I looked back on the time I'd spent on Taris, a few hours kip seemed to be all I required to keep functioning for a full day's cycle.

Still, I'd fall into slumber easy enough if I let my mind drift. Which I was *not* going to do.

Carth's breathing patterns dropped into slow, steady respirations quickly enough - military grunts were well-versed in catching a few winks whenever they could. Bastila, however, stayed awake longer than I expected.

I could feel the edges of her presence, now, through the bond I was slowly becoming accustomed to sensing. She was tense, wary, and I wasn't about to chance letting her catch me slip away. It took a great deal of concentration to keep my thoughts blanked and my breathing regular, but slowly, slowly, she drifted off into the realm of the semi-conscious.

As quietly as I could, I rose to my feet.

*A vibrosword and my small pack is all I need.* I left the apartment, my primary destination being that of the Free Clinic. *Zelka better be able to help me out, here. Help me figure out what I should do. Who I am. How to control my own frelling state of mind.*
Jedi contract or not, I had no qualms about disappearing if I thought it in my best interests.

I had another reason for visiting Zelka, though. That serum was burning a hole in my pocket - I hadn't forgotten about that. *A thousand creds. That'd certainly help me out, whether I stay on Taris or slip away on Alderaan.*

It'd help a whole lot of sents out, too, if I gave it to Zelka. I had no idea, yet, which way I was going to turn on the matter of the rakghoul disease.

*Oh well. Guess I'll play it by ear. That approach has worked for me so far, after all.*

xXx
The woman was lying on the medical bed, eyes closed and face slack. I could feel perspiration dripping down the sides of my face; it had been gruelling getting her into a suggestible trance. I’d abandoned using solely centralizing techniques, and had resorted to the aid of calming synthetics to get her this far.

It goes against my medical instincts to use drugs. But she had been desperate for help. Desperate enough to get me out of bed, in the middle of the night. And the trust simply wasn’t there; she did not or could not subsume into a semi-conscious state, so the depressant had been required simply to allow her mind to relax.

None of this would be so damnably rushed, if Taris had a decent healthcare system. But the corrupt xenophobic planet only catered to the rich and the Exchange. To think there’d been a time when things were worse than now - once, before the dawn of the Mandalorian Wars, we didn’t even have free clinics. I’d been training as an orthopaed then, and still recalled the flock of renegade Jedi who briefly transformed the health and education systems within Taris.

Now, the four remaining Free Clinics were about the only surviving remnant their visit.

We had no damn specialists for the masses. I was lucky, coming from a wealthy background, my zeal and resources enabled me to study snatches of various other medical fields. Even psychoanalysis garnered a minor interest from me, primarily since mental health services were one of the least available to Tarisians with no credits. But in all honesty, I muddled along and merely did the best I was able to. For most citizens, that meant just getting them on their feet to face another day.

I looked back down to Jen Sahara, and hoped I would be able to find the origin of her anger, as she had explained it to me. She desired the ability to control her unwanted rage; that, however, was plainly impossible without exploring the root cause and reason for it in the first place. Hence we attempt regressive hypnotism. It wasn't something I had a wealth of experience of; only a snippet of study and three prior patients filled my repertoire on this area of medical knowledge.

But I shall try my best to help her.

My attention caught on the console's chrono next to the bed, and I realized how little time it was before sunrise.

“Alright, Jen. You are sitting alone in the middle of a field, next to a gently trickling river. The sun is beating down on your head, and you feel totally at peace. Nothing can hurt you here.” I took in a deep breath. It was time to begin. “I am going to ask you some questions, Jen, and I want you to answer as truthfully as you are able. Anytime you are feeling too scared or angry, you will retreat to this place. Anytime I call out 'Stop', you will immediately arrive back here as well, calm and emotionless. Do you understand?”

“Yes,” she responded quietly, almost mechanically.

“Okay Jen, I want you to think about the head injury you sustained. Take your mind back to five minutes before it occurred. What were you doing?”
“I was sleeping, dreaming,” Jen replied in a soft voice.

“Move forward five minutes, Jen. Were you conscious at the time of your accident?”

“Darkness,” she murmured. “Bad dreams. I can see people dying!” Her voice rose in panic.

“It's just a dream, Jen, it's not really happening,” I said soothingly. *The accident occurred whilst she was asleep, then. Perhaps it brought on a nightmare.*

“No, it's not a dream! I died! The Sith killed me! They, they tortured me until I-”

"Stop," I said abruptly, and the woman paused, panic melting away from her face. *The Sith? I did wonder who she was running from. If they tortured her, perhaps they broke her mind as well. But she seems fairly coherent when awake.* I frowned.

“I want you to now recall when you first woke up after your injury. Where are you?”

“I don't know.” Her voice had changed. I blinked. Instead of a high-pitched, panicked tone, it was now lower, sultry, and eons more confident. My frown deepened. *Why would her voice change?* She continued speaking- “some sort of cruiser. A *Hammerhead*-class. But I haven't been conscious for a long time.”

She drifted off into silence and I wondered if she’d been convalescing after a long injury. After moments had passed, I prompted, “Jen?”

“No, no wait, I'm a scholar, onboard a Republic starship,” she mumbled, her voice shaking. “Yes, that's right, I've been hired to look at some ruins.” Her voice had lilted again, back to the higher-pitch from earlier.

I breathed in deep, partly in shock. *First the Sith, now the Republic?* She was one of the Republic fugitives, I realized with some wonder. *I must help her as best as I am able.* The local news-feeds were littered with offers of compensation for information leading to the capture of any Republic personnel, and descriptions of high-ranking officers still made the headlines. *If she’s just a scholar, though, then she’ll have a little more anonymity.*

My gaze slid over to the entrance of the clinic. A good thing she'd arrived out of hours, when Gurney wasn't here. I was well aware of my assistant's slippery nature, and knew he'd have no qualms about turning a Republic citizen over to the Sith.

Again, I cursed the corrupt organization who ruled Taris. The Sith or the Exchange - it wasn't like either quasi-government ever did *anything* of note for the people. I'd been one of many who'd hoped, after the Mandalorian bombardment years ago, that Taris might actually be offered a place in the Republic. Pull out from beneath the yoke of the corrupt elite who were no more that puppets, really- doing whatever the controlling power told them to, under the pretense of their dubious station as elected politicians.

Of course, only citizens could vote - and only Humans with wealth could become citizens.

A place in the Republic seemed little more than a pipe-dream, these days.

"That can't be right!" Jen murmured, pulling my attention back to her. "That's not me."

I stared at the woman. "What do you mean?" I asked cautiously.

“I’m no scholar,” she whispered. “I don’t know who I am, but I’m no scholar.”
I stayed quiet for some moments, gazing at the prone woman in front of me, and wondered what clues I could derive from her appearance. She was in her early- to mid-thirties, perhaps, with short dark curls cropped close to her head, and a pale olive skin tone with no obvious tan. I recalled her piercing green gaze from earlier, and she’d struck me as confident and quick-witted in our short encounters thus far.

She was moderately tall, and her form was lithe, bordering on skinny – either she was not the physical type, or she’d been sorely out of practice for one reason or another. My gut told me it was the latter. *Her stance, her alertness, and not to mention her injuries – it all adds up to a life of action, not study.*

But that wasn’t conclusive by any means – plenty of scholars were athletes or soldiers as well.

“Alright, Jen, I do not want you to relive this, but simply answer the question. Can you tell me whether the Sith have ever captured you before?”

“Y-yes. They destroyed my h-home, everything...” Her voice had switched again, back to the trembling, high tone, and trailed off into shaky silence.

“You are in a green paddock, next to a river. The sun is shining on your head, and nothing can hurt you here,” I reminded her gently. “You are not reliving your memories; you are simply answering my questions. Can you remember what happened when the Sith captured you?”

“No, Jen has a mindblock,” the confident tone answered. Surprise lurched through me, and I stared blankly at the prone woman. A mindblock? Why would the Sith block the mind of a prisoner they were torturing? That doesn't make any sense! I frowned. *Perhaps the mindblock is something she created herself, to block out the trauma?*

*But why did she answer in the third person?*

“Did the Sith create the mindblock?” I asked.

A deep snarl ripped out of her throat, and I jumped backwards in surprise. “No, it was those interfering robes who think they can leash me to that trumped-up scow! I will rip their entrails—”

“Stop!” I called desperately, feeling fearful for the first time. *That was a third voice! And one I certainly didn't want to hear again. Full of loathing, hate, anger.... what's going on here?* I had a duty to help this woman to the best of my abilities, but.... *Peace, if this isn't going to be difficult! I was more and more uncertain of how to proceed. I need to know more of her history, to understand where this rage is coming from.*

“You are back in the summer field. You are safe. Can you tell me when your home was attacked?”

“Eight years ago.” Assertive voice was back. “The Mandalorians slaughtered everyone on Talshion. We could have stopped them. We should have been there!” Grief and resentment darkened her tone. *Mandalorians?* I frowned, growing more confused. Talshion was unfamiliar to me, whether it was a city or port or planet. But I, like all Tarisians, had had as much exposure to Mandalorian brutality as the Sith. “I thought you said it was the Sith, Jen?”

“The Sith killed everyone!” Scared girl cried. “My father! They're going to kill me, too!”

"Stop!” I commanded, my brow furrowing. *Dissociative identity disorder?* It was a possibility, particularly given the different timbre of voices she used. This situation was getting worrisome; if only Taris had a psychoanalyst attached to the Free Clinics then I'd stop right now. But Jen was a
Republic fugitive, and I could only do my best to help her stay sane enough to either leave Taris or find a safer hiding place. For that, I needed to understand her better. “You are safe; no one can hurt you.” I took in a deep breath. “Can you tell me a bit about your childhood?”

“I was a street kid,” the woman replied, and I heard echoes of amusement in her tone. “We were lucky, far too many times, really. We’d sneak into places, and steal creds and food. I had no one, you see, and Mal only had his brother. Sometimes I’d go hungry, and eat grubs with old man Freeflight. He was my first teacher, really, only thing I had close to a parent. But I always dreamed of leaving Talshion, to fly amongst the stars.” She sounded wistful. I knew too many people like that, born in poverty and starved for life. Starved for more things than just food.

“You mentioned you were a scholar? What did you study?”

“Everything,” she said. I looked down to see a faint smirk on her face. “Politics, history, sparring, meditation. Anything I could find in the archives, any training I could wrestle out of Yudan. Mal even tricked Zhar into acquiring him starpilot lessons, and I never knew how he got away with that one. But we were so old when they took us away from our home. They said we were too powerful to ignore. We never saw our friends again.”

Who are they?

Whoever took her away probably had something to do with her current issues. “How old were you when you were taken away from your friends, Jen?”

“I wasn’t, they k-killed my friends! M-my family! They hurt me, and k-kept hur—”

“Stop!” I interrupted sharply, and then the air in my lungs rushed out as I came to a startling conclusion: *everything time I call her Jen, she responds as the scared girl.* I closed my eyes, and rubbed my balding head tiredly.

*I’m not qualified for this.*

“You are safe,” I said gravely. “You can smell the fresh grasses around you. No one is around; no one will harm you.” I sighed. “What is your name?”

She paused for a long moment, her forehead etched in deep furrows. “I’m not sure,” she whispered finally, so quiet that I couldn’t pick which voice she was responding with. “I think it might be Jen Sahara.”

*She hasn’t given herself a fake name, then.* That was promising, at least. I’d read of some cases where sentients with split-personality disorders fabricated a whole other life in such detail that it may as well have been a real person. *She will believe they are both real. I cannot lose sight of that.* It was up to me to figure out the truth. Which persona was legitimate: the shy scholar who responded to her name, or the confident street kid who apparently studied everything?

That made me realize I hadn’t asked about Jen’s field of expertise yet.

“What did you study, Jen?”

“Ancient archaeology and anthropology,” came the quiet response.

“Can you tell me a bit about your study, Jen?”

"I-I, okay. I completed a thesis on the founding and early days of the Republic, when it only encompassed Core worlds. My special interest is the extinction of ancient civilizations, though... I've
started a second thesis on the reign of the latter Massassi, with the intention of exploring the theories surrounding the collapse of their people.

While little of that meant anything to me, it was not overly difficult to prod more details from the woman. There was enough depth and discourse, there, to convince me that she definitely was an academic. Her shy voice began to take on a slight enthusiastic lilt to it. But Jen Sahara readily admitted that she had never partaken in any field trip, never travelled to an excavation site - although I was no archaeologist, I would have expected some practical element to her study.

It seemed like Jen Sahara's entire life had been one of isolated learning from within the commune she had been born into.

“Can you tell me what your childhood was like, Jen?”

“It was quiet. My father raised me. I lived in a small community, and wanted to be a history teacher when I grew up.”

Jen's life sounded- well, normal. A bit mundane, and perhaps that was why she’d created the exciting street kid with the fantastical study habits. Don’t assume too much, Zelka, I admonished myself. I cannot rule out the validity of the street kid, yet.

But I was beginning to doubt.

“Did you have a happy childhood, Jen?”

“No. I was very lonely. My father was quite protective, and didn't let me meet many people.”

Perhaps she was so lonely and shy, that she created a more confident alter ego? It was time to find out more about that one, then.

“How old were you when you were taken away from your friends?” I asked, an echo of my earlier question, but this time omitting her name.

“I was sixteen,” Street Kid replied.

“Were you kidnapped?”

“Well, in a sense, really. They were nice about it, I mean, but it's not like we had a choice. Mal saw that, even if I only saw the opportunity.”

“Who is Mal?”

“My best friend.” Her voice turned unbearably sad, and then I heard it contort with dark fury. “My betrayer. He’s ruined everything. He dares to backstab-”

“Stop!” I called out sharply. “You are back amongst the grass and flowers again, one hand dipping in the trickling water of the peaceful stream. You are safe.”

Street Kid is unstable, I understood then. Jen’s made up a fake, confident persona, and funneled all her rage into it. Perhaps it’s anger or resentment at being shy and overlooked, or maybe it’s from the trauma of whatever the Sith did to her. I couldn’t know in one session, but as I looked up through the plasticeel windows and saw the pink flush of dawn, I knew I had to give Jen some assistance in dealing with the present.

“When were you first aware of the anger and rage inside you, Jen?”
“When I woke up with a head injury, on the Endar Spire.”

And I still have to work out how the Republic fit into her life.

“And you didn’t have these outbursts at all before this time?” I asked Street Kid.

“I wasn’t aware. I thought I was Jen. She's not real; they’d programmed her into my head to make me more biddable.”

She yearns for confidence. She wants to feel important, so she's created a more exciting identity - and a reason for why Jen doesn't exist.

I had a friend, a neuroscientist, Engar Droone, who’d studied more psychology and psychiatry than I. Of course, he sold his wares to the upper crust, and I found it hard to disguise my disapproval. It had created a wedge between us, where once professional camaraderie has existed. But maybe, maybe I could still reach out. Ask him for a favour. Engar's expertise certainly exceeded mine in this area.

The woman snarled, then, and I realized she was still in the throes of answering my query. “I was trapped. They dared to cage me!” Her voice had lowered further, into that dangerous tone I’d heard once before.

"Stop," I commanded. I need to find out who she resents so much. "Who caged you?"

“Why did they cage me?” Street Kid was back, but she wasn’t answering. “Why did they save me? I… I can’t handle this. It’s all been such an unmitigated failure, everything I strived to do! It would be easier to, to…”

“Who wants?” I asked softly.

To reclaim my heritage, you weak-minded moron!” she yelled furiously. Her face twisted in an evil sneer, abruptly slackening when I yelled out: “Stop!”

And then, her face crumpled, and without me saying anything I heard her whisper: “No, it's easier to just play along with them. To be the shy girl they want.”

She should not still be talking! But maybe, just maybe, we were nearing the core of the issue. “Who wants?” I asked softly.

“My captor. My rescuer. Don't they realize, they should have just killed me?” the voice broke, and her shoulders sagged. “Death would be a release.”

I am in way over my head.

"Stop,” I whispered, and she was quiet once more.

So much for finding the root of her problems. I am more lost than before. Sweat beaded my forehead, and I felt directionless. How do I proceed from here?

The door opened quietly, and Gurney popped his head around the corner. Taris certainly didn't offer me a grand selection of trainee medics; I had to make do with what was available.

Gurney's curious gaze landed on Jen. I stiffened. He can’t find out she came from the escape pods, or I may as well hand her over to the blasted Sith myself.

"Yes?” I asked sharply. And why didn't he knock?
"You got a patient at the door, doc," Gurney drawled. One eyebrow raised, like he'd noticed my short tone.

I nodded, forcing myself to relax, forcing myself to smile at the man. "I'll be out in a minute."

Gurney disappeared, and I turned back to survey Jen Sahara once more.

The way her street kid persona had stopped responding to my guidance... the unstable rage that seemed a part of this presumably artificial character... it would do Jen no favours, not while hiding as a fugitive from the Sith. *I shall need to see her many times. This will not be a quick treatment. If I can convince Engar to advise... Perhaps he would be prevailed upon. But for the time being, I had to help Jen Sahara remain safe. And in control of who she really was.*

"Are you staying with friends, Jen?"

"I- yes."

My curiosity was burning, despite my training. Were her friends also fugitives? Were the Sith, also, after them? But such knowledge was dangerous. The Sith had audited the Free Clinic more than once. Demanding details of patients, of clients, of call-outs... I did not log all the work I did. But with an assistant as untrustworthy as Gurney, some days I felt like it was only a matter of time before the Sith closed me down.

Or worse.

The sound of chatter filtered in from the outer room: Gurney, welcoming the next patient. With a heavy heart, I acknowledged that we were out of time. For today.

“You are Jen Sahara,” I stated. “The other thoughts and personality are not real, and they are not you.”

“I cannot be Jen,” she whispered, confused.

“This is who you are, you must accept it and not let your anger control you, Jen. You must stay safe, and hidden, and we will work this through together. Stay safe as Jen Sahara.”

“Stay as Jen Sahara?” the response was so quiet, I barely heard.

“Yes. You are Jen Sahara.”

“I am Jen Sahara,” she mumbled.

“Yes, you are. I want you to wake up out of this trance, and feel relaxed and refreshed after a count of three. You will consciously recall nothing of our conversation, but you will wake knowing yourself as Jen Sahara.” I counted, and the woman opened dazed, confused eyes. I laid a comforting hand on her shoulder, and she cringed.

“How are you feeling, Jen?”

“Wh- what's going on?” Her green eyes were fearful.

Worry coursed through me. “You are in a medical facility on Taris, Jen. Do you remember?”


“Do you remember coming in here for hypnotism?” I asked softly. Concern punched deep into my
gut. I’d been convinced that the shy scholar was the real person, but she’d come in as the street kid, I saw now. *Which persona would help her hide from the Sith?*

Had I done the right thing here? Doubt assailed me, and I frowned as I gazed at her.

“Oh! Yes, I do,” she said quickly. “Am I all better now, doctor?”

A small wave of relief mitigated my worry, but it didn’t disappear. “Not quite, Jen, but we’ll get there. I need you to come back tonight, okay? In the evening, like you did this time. We have a lot of work to do to help you.”

She nodded, still not meeting my eyes.

“Promise me, Jen?” I prompted.

“I promise.” She looked up, and her innocent, nervous eyes struck me as strange. *She was wary, desperate even, when she came in. But not shy.*

“Oh! Is it daylight already?” She was looking at the chrono. “The others will be worried. I need to go.” She sat up, and slipped off the bed.

“Jen,” I forestalled her as she began walking away. “Come back today, if you can? I’m worried about you.”

She swallowed, and nodded once more. “Okay.” She frowned in concentration, and dragged a hand through her pockets. “Um, I think you might like this,” she offered, and thrust something into my hands. It felt like a hypoderm.

I stared after her in concern as she disappeared, without examining what she had given me. *I need to access the medical databases, and read up on this disorder.*

*I am scared I may have just made things a whole lot worse.*

xXx
My head was spinning.

I scurried back to the apartments, stumbling over my own feet, nervously avoiding the gaze of any passing sentient as I rushed across the Tarisian courtyards. The Upper City of Taris gleamed with the trappings of wealth and civilization. There were no trees. Just durasteel and chrome and transparisteel everywhere, stretching forever into a faraway sky that was more washed-out and muted than any I had seen on Deralia.

This place was as foreign as the Endar Spire, and I hadn't been comfortable there.

What's been going on? The voice was a high-pitched whine in my head. My thoughts were a frightened jumble of fragments, tripping over themselves and spinning into a dizzying maelstrom. I hadn't been acting... normal since that horrifying attack on the Endar Spire.

I swallowed convulsively. Flashes of hair-raising adventures and crazy battles ran through my head like a horde of spooked Deralian hessi-calves. How did any of- of- of everything that has happened come to pass? I don't know how to fight!

I'd never seen a vibrosword before in my life. But I'd been wielding one, using it to stab into- into-

Sweat broke out on my forehead. My breath came in short, sharp gasps, thundering along with my heartbeat. The doctor. The doctor will help-

He was a trained professional. Doctor Forn had urged me to return, later today, and I rather thought I needed to. For my own peace of mind.

I have nothing to be alarmed about. All these strange thoughts I've been having, the frightening way I've been behaving- he'll help me. I just need to get back to safety, first, and then the doc will see me later.

I slunk back into the apartment building, evading the gaze of the resident aliens. Just being alone on this strange world was alarming. All I yearned for was to be back home, safely ensconced in the academia, or even back with Father-

He'll be desperately worried about me. At least I could count on him not hearing about the Endar Spire. Wide-band HoloNet coverage was severely discouraged in the Godsworn Commune, and only grudgingly allowed for scholarly purposes. And as for a commune inhabitant actually travelling off-world-

Sometimes, I couldn't believe Father had actually let me leave.

My thoughts were so awhirl, that I didn't even notice the body until I tripped over it.

I caught myself on the palms of my hands, rolling back into a ready crouch on instinct. Turned sideways, to see-
Dead eyes staring at me blankly. Round, dark eyes of a Duros who bore a blaster burn melting half his chest.

*Victim of an Exchange take-out,* a voice muttered calmly in my head. *Idiots should've at least cleaned up their mess.*

Horror turned in my gut. A desperate cry fell from my lips. *Bodies, death, everywhere! This isn't real- none of this can be true-*

I ran.

Everything was so surreal, so strange, so *wrong.* My eyes blurred as my feet padded desperately down the empty hallway. There'd been other deaths, deaths at my hand-

Innocent deaths-

That passerby I'd ruthlessly attacked. And- before- I'd somehow... lifted that Vulkar into the air. *Fantasies. Nightmares. I can't use the Force!*

**Jen? Where are you?**

Strange voices in my head. I'd had some delusion about sharing a mind-link with a Jedi, and what did that even mean?

**Jen?**

I was even hearing her voice in my mind! Jedi Shan, that powerful Force-user from the *Endar Spire,* the one who'd been taken prisoner-

*And wasn't that a lark, someone gibed. Precious princess of the Order, held captive by a lowly swoop gang of all things-*

I flinched. The dark voice fled, and I glanced up to see the apartment door in front of me. The hideout we'd been taking refuge in. For we were Republic fugitives - Captain Onasi and Jedi Shan and myself - all striving desperately to avoid the notice of the Sith in a rundown living complex.

My entire life sounded like a poorly planned-out plot from one of those trashy holo-books that Father had always decried. I didn't think we were even paying anybody *rent.* Wasn't that illegal, not to mention immoral?

**Jen!**

The hatch control beeped in reassuring confirmation beneath my palm. Captain Onasi had programmed it with our autoprint, I knew that much - but I was at once assailed with the memory of *slicing* the thing open. That was nothing but pure insanity- I didn't know how to pick locks-

The entrance swished open.

Jedi Shan was sitting on the sole bed, head bowed, rich hair unbraided and pulled back into two tails. Her head jerked up at my entrance, and her expression contorted in fear.

"Jen!" she gasped, jumping to her feet.

**Fear? Why would a Jedi be afraid?**

I felt my shoulders shake as I stumbled inside. At least, around Jedi Shan, I would be safe.
"Where have you been?" she demanded, and whatever emotion I had seen on her face transformed back into poise. "Are you alright?"

"No," I whispered, looking down as the door closed behind me. My shoe scuffed against the tattered plyfoam floor. "Um, not really."

"What happened?" Jedi Shan breathed as she walked towards me. Her steps were cautious and slow.

"Nothing," I mumbled. The room was empty apart from us two. A heap of equipment was stacked in the corner, next to two folded blankets. My head throbbed; the echo of that injury back on the Endar Spire, the incident that had somehow turned me into- into someone else. I blinked, glancing up at the Jedi. "Where are the others?"

Jedi Shan's gaze was heavy; questioning, and pulling for answers I could not give. "Mission has ventured out to purchase the astromech droid. We are fortunate she can afford it. Carth accompanied her, although he was somewhat aggrieved that you had disappeared." Her voice was composed, apart from the slightest hint of reproach. "I understood from him that this is not the first time."

I blushed in furious embarrassment. I've been so rude to the captain. Why? What's wrong with me? He's a Republic officer, for Godsworn sake!

"Jen, where did you go?" Jedi Shan asked, and her voice was strangely compelling. I felt the strongest urge to tell her everything. She is a Jedi. I can trust her, and she can help me.

"I went to, uh, to see Doctor Forn," I answered quickly. "He works at the Central Free Clinic. He's been helping me."

Jedi Shan's almond-shaped eyes widened. "Helping you with what?" she demanded. The sharpness of her tone cut through the stagnant air.

"Um, to- um, control my anger," I mumbled. "He was trying some hypnosis techniques, and said we made progress. I- er, I do feel more like myself, Jedi Shan."

If I believed in this fantastical mind-link, then the stunned astonishment I felt swirling through me would surely be coming from Jedi Shan. But it's not real. It is a fake construction of mine. Head injuries can do all sorts of things to a brain. I am Jen Sahara, nothing more and nothing less. I have nothing to be alarmed about.

"Jedi Shan?" Bastila Shan replied with a touch of asperity, her face composed. "You can call me Bastila, you have certainly done so before."

I had. And I certainly hadn't afforded her the respect someone like her deserved. "Okay," I said hesitantly.

"Jen, you must explain exactly what occurred at the medical facility." Bastila seemed to hesitate, a frown pleating on her pale brow. "You are my charge, and I sense a great change in you. You can trust me, Jen."

I did trust her. Jedi Shan would keep me safe.

Weak minded fool! A voice sneered inside my head. Bastila stumbled back a pace. No! You're not real! I won't listen to you!
The hatch behind us opened, and other voices shattered my internal chaos. 

"I don't see why I can't tag along, it's my droid after all!" a girl complained. I spun around, to see a young blue Twi'lekk glaring at a towering Wookiee. My eyes widened. Mission Vao. Zaalbar.

I'd met only a few Twi'leks in my life, and all onboard the Endar Spire. I'd certainly never even seen a Wookiee before. He appeared uncommonly fierce, tall and muscular and covered in snarled fur.

"(It's too dangerous!)" Zaalbar whined as he followed the teenage Twi'lekk inside, ducking under the door's entrance. A small astromech droid wheeled in behind them, whistling at the girl.

I stumbled backwards, away from them. How can I understand Shyriiwook? I thought in anxious fright. Tremors wracked down my spine as other memories assailed me. And Mandalorian? And Ryl? A head injury can't do that! What's going on?

A warm hand pressed comfortingly into my arm; at my side, Bastila was staring at me steadily.

"It will be alright, Jen," she murmured, and her voice was reassurance itself. "I will help you, I promise. You will be just fine with me here."

I will be just fine with Jedi Bastila Shan, I realized.

Blithering idiot! The taunt was quieter now. I thought I caught a twitch on Jedi Shan's face, but when I turned to look, she was gifting me with a serene smile.

"It will be okay," she said softly.

It will be okay.

"Another midnight escapade, Jen?" The question was as disapproving as it was rhetorical. I glanced back, to spot the commanding presence of Captain Carth Onasi. He was levelling a heavy frown at me, raking a hand through his rich brown hair.

I flushed. "I, uh, I'm sorry." I mumbled, looking away.

"Oh great, back to the apologies," I heard him mutter. Humiliation writhed inside me; that I could disappoint a man I respected so much shamed me. Bastila's hand on my arm was an anchor through my awkward chagrin.

"Jen, tell Big Z that I'm coming along as well!" Mission complained, coming to stand in front of me. Her hands were clenched, and her face was set in an expression of pure teenage pique.

I blinked in surprise at her effusive demand. Who am I to tell a Wookiee anything? I glanced helplessly at Bastila. Oh my, did he really swear a lifedebt to me?

"You are too noticeable, Mission," Bastila said smoothly. "Your skills are useful, but non-Humans garner attention in the Upper City. The same rationale applies to Zaalbar. I will infiltrate the Sith base, along with Carth and Jen."

Infiltrate... infiltrate a Sith base? I stared fearfully at Bastila, but the Jedi's expression was resolute. But I can't- I can't fight!

Her fingers pressed into my upper arm as she leaned close. "Do not be alarmed, Jen," she whispered. "I will protect you."

"(I must go)," Zaalbar rumbled in discontent. "(I must guard Jen Sahara's back)." The Wookiee's
black eyes were fierce underneath his shaggy brown fur. I was reminded, at once, of all those monstrous rakghouls down in the Undercity. He’d scythed through them—dispatched them as easily as a group of harmless tach.

The memories were fresh and raw and wholly unbelievable.

"It will be only us three, Zaalbar," Bastila repeated firmly. But Zaalbar was shaking his furry head in the face of her command. He was ready to protest further, and I realized—somewhat uncomfortably—that he was looking to me for guidance.

_Lifedebt. He swore a lifedebt. How can brain damage transform me into the sort of violent warrior that produces a Wookiee lifedebt?_

"We should do what Jedi Sh—uh, Bastila says," I stuttered.

"Jen," Mission squawked in alarm. "What's wrong with you?" The Twi'lek strode closer, frowning. One hand rose to push a set of tech-goggles higher back on her lekku. "Are you okay?"

"Nothing is wrong with her," Bastila countered, stepping in front of me. Her intonation brimmed with authority. "But I must speak with Jen alone, now, before we begin preparations for our forthcoming mission. Please excuse us."

And with that, Bastila motioned me imperiously into the tiny bathroom adjoining the apartment. It housed the refresher and a floor space of about three foot square. I blinked in surprise, dodged Carth's stare of consternation, and meekly followed her in.

_xXx_

The new droid that followed Mission about seemed very high-tech. When Bastila and I returned to the others—after an uncomfortable conversation where the Jedi became highly frustrated at my inability to recall much of my conversation with Doctor Forn—Mission had cornered me to espouse jubilantly about all of T3-M4’s capabilities. We had droids back at the Godsworn Commune, but only medical and utility bots. I couldn't help but feel uncomfortable at all the slicing and security functions this highly modified class-two astromech boasted.

Mission’s enthusiastic spiel was interrupted eventually by Bastila, who was keen to get moving. I wasn’t. The prospect of entering a Sith base was simply frightening—for all that the Jedi’s presence reassured me. Why, I wondered, couldn't we just stay on Taris, hiding in the apartment where it was safe?

_Yeah, why not. It's not like the Sith are looking for us or anything._ I shook my head, dispelling the strangely sarcastic voice.

Bastila was poking through the ominous pile of weapons on the apartment floor. She retrieved a double-bladed implement and hefted it thoughtfully. It was obvious the Jedi was at home wielding a melee weapon.

Just as it was obvious that I was not. The Godsworn commune was a pacifistic society; other than shiv-blades and standard kitchen utensils, I’d never held an edged blade before.

_Except recently. Against the rakghouls. Against all manner of opponents._

Bastila was looking at me again, a steadying gaze of concern.

_Maybe I'm possessed,_ I thought frantically. _Maybe I'm having a mental breakdown._
Relax, Jen. Her voice rang in my mind. It will be okay. Trust in the Force. Her expression, her very sense of being, seemed to embodiment a state of serenity... and it did comfort me. Bastila smiled, before handing me a light blaster. I swallowed, and clipped it to my belt hurriedly.

"No blades," the captain broke in. "No unconcealed weaponry. Bastila, I heard the Sith are arresting citizens on sight that don't have permits. I'm not sure about the validity of that intel, but striding through the courtyards brandishing vibroswords isn't exactly keeping a low profile. We shouldn't risk it."

Captain Onasi was right - but I'd taken to hiding one underneath that bulky coat. Like some sort of ridiculous criminal-

"Jen," Mission began, stomping over and placing herself in front of me. "I helped in the Vulkar base. You know I did. I'm the one that bought Teethree-

"Only blasters then," Bastila murmured in disappointment, before placing the double-blade back on the ground. "The Force is with us. Perhaps we shall not even need those."

"Mission, Bastila has a point about the Upper City," Carth said wearily. "And being a Tarisian, I rather think you know that already."

"(I don't like this any more than you, Mission)," Zaalbar added in a low voice. "(But this is not the place for us. Allow the others to do what they must)."

Mission's alien blue face twisted in a scowl, but she was looking at me as if I made all the decisions. I gave a tiny shake of my head, before dropping her gaze to glance back at Bastila.

"Fine!" the girl snapped petulantly. "Well, if I'm not needed, I'm gonna go skive back down-level, find someone who actually wants me around. Teethree, stay here and listen to Jen. She's the one who's been leading us all this time, after all."

Carth sighed. "Mission, don't go, we'll be back soon--"

With an irritated huff, the Twi'lek spun on her heel and stormed out.

"(I better follow her)," Zaalbar rumbled disconsolately. "(Even our path to the Lower City can be sighted by upworlders if Mission is not careful. I will ensure she returns)."

An uneasy silence descended on us after the large Wookiee left, and I felt strangely uneasy. I wasn't sure exactly what I'd done to earn the Twi'lek's ire, but I could only hope she wouldn't stay angry for long. My shoulders hunched as I noticed the captain staring at me in confusion.

"Come," Bastila commanded, standing protectively at my side. "I am beginning to feel a certain urgency to start moving." She was frowning, her gaze growing oddly distant. "I am uncertain if this is premonition or purely..."

She trailed off as the astromech wheeled closer, beeping jauntily at me. It's shiny dome swiveled, blue led lights twinkling as it tootled something in Binary.

"You need to do what Bastila asks," I told the droid hesitantly. "Bastila or Captain Onasi."

Bastila's smile at me was approving, but still- there was something watchful in her expression. "Let us depart," she said softly, before shooing Teethree out ahead of us. "I only hope we can accomplish this mission in stealth. I am not entirely sure we could handle a squadron of Sith guards."
"You'd be surprised what Jen can do," Carth commented, but his eyes on me were... worried. I glanced away.

"Regardless," Bastila continued. "I have faith that T3-M4's computer skills and my persuasion techniques will keep us out of any unnecessary bloodshed."

"Unnecessary bloodshed?" Carth scoffed, as I followed them out the door. "I'd like to think you're right, but we're breaking into a heavily guarded Sith base." His tone rose slightly with derision. "We'd better all be prepared to kill, if required."

"T3-M4 should be able to access the Sith mainframe from any terminal," Bastila replied quietly. "With the Force by our side, we may only have to reach one computer to achieve our goal."

"And you think it'll be unguarded?" Carth muttered under his breath.

I trudged behind them reluctantly as we made our way through the Upper City, and found myself walking beside the new droid. Despite it's rather... unethical list of capabilities, the little astromech appeared an innocuous sort. Teethree was a better name, I thought, than that mouthful of a model number Bastila insisted on using.

"Hi there, Teethree," I murmured. I'd always liked the utility droids back on Deralia.

"Beep! Beep-bop whoop," T3-M4 whistled at me. Aww, I wish I could understand the little fellow.

We lapsed into watchful silence as we crossed through the commercial sector. The place didn't seem so scary, now. Peaceful Tarisians strolled along the gleaming courtyards, as a weak sun beat down on our heads. It was hard to believe how different this world was, just metres below our feet.

I noticed one small squad of patrolling Sith guards, bedecked in anonymous black armour as they marched along the fringes of the thinning residents. I kept my gaze down after that.

"There it is," Carth broke the silence some time later, his steps slowing. Up ahead, in a relatively deserted cul-de-sac, loomed the entrance to a large complex bordered by obsidian pillars. "The Sith base. Used to be some noble's home before the Sith repurposed it." He let out a disgruntled sort of noise. "Are you sure about this, Bastila? The whole plan seems... riskier than I would like."

Bastila halted next to him, frowning into the distance. "It is the only way, Carth. And, in truth, I feel a sense of certainty about this. Sometimes, a trained Jedi can sense possibilities upon the Force. Have faith. It will work out."

"Jedi feelings," Carth muttered. I had the distinct impression he didn't think much of her answer, but maybe the captain didn't understand just how powerful a Jedi could be. "We call that gut instinct, Bastila. Half the time it's nothing more than adrenaline spurring you on."

I closed my eyes. I want to go home. The spare blaster dug into my hip. I can't use a weapon! My breath was shaky. A foreign feeling of irritated fury swelled inside me, and that sneering voice snarled once more. This is bantha crap. I'm going to disembowel someone... anyone!

"Jen!" Bastila snapped suddenly. I jerked my eyes opened, startled. She had a fierce expression that dissolved once my gaze met hers. She walked closer, placing a gentle hand on my arm. "Relax," she said softly. "Trust in me, trust in the Force."

I nodded slowly, and the dark thoughts disappeared. I glanced sideways to see a frown of suspicion etched into the countenance of the Republic captain. His gaze was darting between the both of us.
"I shall proceed to have a polite conversation with the Sith guard," Bastila said smoothly. Further afield, I could see the lone figure Bastila referred to, standing at attention near the base's entrance. My stomach clenched. "As soon as he permits me inside, follow. And please, act nonchalant. There is little foot-traffic here, but we cannot be too careful."

Bastila breathed in, surveying the area. The bustling courtyard behind us had a steady stream of sentients, but the cul-de-sac was quiet. Which made sense, as who would want to attract the notice of the Sith?

With a nod to us both, Bastila motioned for the astromech to follow her, and began striding confidently towards the guard. The little droid whistled once, and then followed her obediently.

Carth took a step to my side. I glanced at him sideways; a lock of hair had fallen into his eyes, which were dark with confusion.

"Okay, want to tell me what's going on?" he said in a low tone.

"N-nothing," I muttered, my shoulders hunching.

"Nothing?" he countered sharply. "Jenâ€¦ are you alright? You- you're acting like a different person."

I blinked, staring at him. His frown was slowly transforming into a scowl.

"S-shouldn't we, uh, be keeping an eye on Jedi Sh- I mean, Bastila?" I stuttered, looking back to Bastila. She'd reached the guard, now, and was deep in conversation.

"Jedi Shan?" Carth echoed in disbelief. "What are you playing at, Jen? Are you trying to toy with Bastila? Or is it me?"

My eyes flew to his; his brows had lowered, and he was glaring furiously at me. "No!" I said in horror. "I'm not playing at anything! I don't understand what you mean!"

A stony shutter fell over his face, and he stared at me coldly. "I'm not playing at anything! I don't understand what you mean!"

A stony shutter fell over his face, and he stared at me coldly. "Fine. Have it your way." Carth turned to face the Sith base entrance once more, folding his arms. My face heated with humiliation, and I felt slightly nauseous. *I don't understand, what have I done to offend him?*

*I don't give a ronto's arse.* A dark sneer.

*This is frelling ridiculous.* An annoyed retort.

*No, I am Jen Sahara!* A desperate plea.

*Jen! Stop it! Focus!* Again, I seemed to be hearing Bastila. I gulped, and stared down at the ground.

It was made of a sort of poraclay, up here on Upper Taris. Parts of it sparkled in the sunlight. Back in the commune, only our best dinnerware had been made of poraclay.

*I must trust Bastila,* I reminded myself. *These voices are not real. They are merely some sort of residual trauma from the head injury.* Later, I would go back to the medical facility. Doctor Forn would know how to help me.

"She's in," Carth whispered. He began to stride towards the Sith base as I glanced around nervously. I saw a handful of citizens walking away from us, back towards the bustling courtyard, but there was no foot traffic in between us and the ominous building. The Sith guard had escorted Bastila inside, and Carth was halfway there already. I blinked, and raced after him.
We slipped into the double doors that heralded the entrance of the base, entering a large foyer. It appeared to be a reception area of some description. The same black obsidian pillars as outside also adorned the corners of this room, with a silver filigree pattern inlaid upon them. The ceiling itself was incredibly high, perhaps even the full height of the building. *This place would be terribly expensive to heat in winter,* I thought inanely.

Two auto-hatches exited the foyer on both sides. A green-skinned Twi'leki stood behind a large desk made out of the same black stone as the pillars. Her face was heavily plastered in cosmetics, and she was flanked by two Sith guards in the same full-body armour as the outside sentry.

That one was still chaperoning Bastila, as they approached the receptionist together.

The Twi'leki turned heavily outlined eyes on Bastila, pursing her bright red lips in annoyance. Her lekku were freshly waxed, and shone beneath the artificial lighting of the place. I noticed with trepidation that the two Sith guards had straightened to wary attention.

"What?" the Twi'leki drawled. She sounded utterly bored.

"I am here to see the governor," Bastila said firmly. "He is expecting me."

"Where is your identification?" one of the guards snapped out.

Bastila's head turned to appraise the Sith guards. "You are not needed here. Your superior wishes to see you now." Her words were weighty and strangely compelling, and one of her hands twitched slightly at her side. It seemed a benign and almost abstract gesture, and yet I somehow knew I was seeing Bastila Shan's mystical power at work.

I felt a sense of awe awake within me.

"Uh, I think the captain wants to see us," the guard on the left said mechanically.

"Yes, he requests to see all three of you now," Bastila intoned again, turning to eye over the sentry who had ushered her in.

"We had better see him," the second guard echoed.

"Uh, yes," the sentry stuttered. I stared in stunned astonishment as all three guards turned, and left through one of the doors. *Wow! That is amazing!*

The receptionist, however, was frowning in confusion. "Just who are you?" she demanded, tapping a lacquered fingernail impatiently next to an inlaid console on the desk.

"You need to go powder your nose," Bastila snapped.

The Twi'leki blinked dazedly, stepping backwards. "I'll be right back," she muttered, and fled out the other door.

Carth snickered. "Nice one. A little disconcerting how easy that is for you, though."

*That was so powerful!* No wonder people admired the Jedi so. No wonder Bastila knew she could protect me. I had never met a Jedi, before my contract onboard the *Endar Spire,* but I'd read my share of transcripts and accountings of their fantastical deeds.

"It was not easy." Bastila sounded weary. "Nor does it always work. T3-M4, see if you can slice into the main system from here." Her gaze had moved to the exits. Carth had already unclipped his
blasters in readiness as Bastila continued snapping out commands. "Search for the latest launch codes, and retrieve them."

The droid whistled in acknowledgement, and wheeled over to the reception terminal. A small probe extended from the astromech's chassis, before inserting into the bypass slot of the console.

"Jen, guard the other door," Carth hissed, and his voice sounded angry. I whirled around to see him leaning to the side of an exit, his dual blasters held firmly upright.

*I'm no guard! With difficulty, I swallowed my fear and rushed to the other exit, fumbling to unclip the foreign weapon. I could only hope, desperately, that no one would enter.

"Bastila, this place will have surveillance," Carth clipped out. "If you don't want the Sith to know we're here, get Teethree to disable that first. Here's hoping no one's watching right now."

Bastila nodded. "Good thinking," she murmured, leaning down to relay the orders to Teethree.

I stood nervously by the hatch as the minutes ticked by. Silence lay thick like mola-syrup on the air, broken only by the clicks and whirs of Teethree. My palms were sticky with nervous sweat, and the blaster felt unwieldy in my grasp.

I gasped as I heard footsteps in the distance.

"Someone's approaching my door," Carth muttered. "How far is Teethree?"

The droid whistled something encouraging.

"He's decrypting the codes," Bastila murmured. "Almost there, but we need more time."

"Well, you don't have it," Carth said curtly. "Get the droid to disable the hatch, or we'll end up with a fight on our hands."

"T3-M4, can you disable the right access door into this foyer?" Bastila fired at the droid. "Quickly?"

The droid beeped, whirred and then whistled. I heard a thunk from the wall behind Carth.

"The door's not opening, sergeant," someone snapped out from beyond the thick durasteel door.

"Damn. Why does everything break on this gods-cursed planet? These Tarisians can't do anything right. Davis, call maintenance," another voice commanded, and the sound of soldiers walking away met my ears with profound relief.

Carth grinned at Bastila; a hard, roguish sort of grin. "That'll buy us ten minutes while the tech finishes his caffa and donut."

"That was close," Bastila said softly. Her eyes looked tired. "T3-M4, download those codes and let us depart."

A minute later, and the droid whistled victoriously. A smug smile curved Bastila's face, dispersing the weariness, and she strode away from the desk. Her manner was confident and victorious.

"Mission accomplished." She smiled at Carth, and motioned us to join her. Part of me found it impossible to believe everything had fallen into place so easily - yet, that was the power of the Jedi, wasn't it? I'd certainly studied enough history to know just how amazing the Force could be.

"Let's get out of here," Carth muttered, striding along with Bastila to the exit. "Next up, we've got a
blasted Mandalorian to meet."
The ale in here reminded me of my clan's homebrew stout: thick, hoppy, and with a kick like a rancor. Not that I allowed myself to be drawn into nostalgia; the past was better buried, just like my enemies. There was a time and a place for remembrance – be it honouring the battle songs of the fallen or reliving the glory of battles once fought – and here on Taris, doing small-time work for the likes of Davik Kang, was not it.

But the Tarisian ale wasn't bad, and it afforded me some amusement as I wiled the hours away. There were many here who could not handle liquor of this potency; in particular, the spacers and traders penned down on this planet by the Sith blockade. Between off-worlders getting themselves smashed on the local brew, and the gang altercations spilling into the cantina, I had enough to keep me entertained.

Which was a good thing, as I didn't like waiting. I'd always been a Mando'ade of action, and if I had to have downtime, I preferred it to be between the sheets with a willing partner. Not waiting to see if some crazy bint pulled off a plan risky enough that even I hadn't been sure would work.

Still, she was fast, skilled, and got results. I'd gambled on less and, frankly, it was time to leave this planet. I didn't trust the Sith not to retaliate with excess – not when it was the Republic's Jedi princess on the loose. Malak had already shown he was more than ready to inflict massive civilian casualties in a fit of temper.

And let's be honest, Ordo. Even if Davik was paying you fair, you're itching to move on. It was true, I was feeling restless. Like many other Mando'ade, I'd been directionless since Malachor, and turned to mercenary work. It was… not entirely satisfying. A far cry from the days of glory I'd once been so proud of.

I snorted, dismissing the depressing thoughts, and took another swig of the ale. My thoughts turned back to Jen Sahara and her crew. I'd considered turning Bastila Shan in, I'd considered it hard. She was worth a shiny fistful of credits, and I didn't owe any loyalty to the Republic – or the Sith, for that matter. And the other one, the soldier… well, the moment I'd seen his mug I'd picked it as a Republic survivor from the same crash as Shan. It hadn't taken me long to peruse the newsfeeds and recognize him. Captain Carth Onasi, Republic warhero and top-notch fighter pilot. Also worth a fair amount to the Sith.

Which left Jen Sahara. I hadn't found anything on her. Given her proximity to Onasi and involvement in rescuing Shan, she was obviously Republic too. I could have turned them in, gathered a small fortune, and disappeared to another planet. But there was something about Jen Sahara that intrigued me, and I found myself wanting to follow her lead. Credits weren't everything. I had a gut feeling that life around her would get interesting and, that was just the sort of shake-up I was looking for.

"Uh, Canderous, sir?" a soft voice asked. I looked up to see a Twi'lek waitress, her outlined eyes blinking tremulously at me. "Would you like another drink?"
I gave her a brief nod, baring my teeth, and she scurried away. I couldn't help but chuckle to myself. *This place is a cesspool of weaklings.* Even the gangs didn't overly impress - half the members were no more than homeless runts banding together over their favourite swoop team.

Still, since the blow-out at the race, the streets of the Lower City had been busy. Gun-fights had always been a common sight on the main trunks, but altercations had moved into other pipelines once considered safe to travel. There’d been stories of newly-laid mines, triggered by unsuspecting sents, creating new sinkholes along the fringes of gang-held territory.

I'd heard the Vulkars were winning, and part of me longed to join in, to knock some Vulkar heads together. Brejik should have done better at teaching his troops who to shoot at. Rumour on the street was that the Vulkars, cocky with the scent of victory, had started firing on some of the neutral, smaller gangs.

*If the other gangs collectively join the Bek's, then the tide may yet turn.* I pulled out a cherze cigarra, lighting it, and breathed the woody smoke in. The gang war was an amusing interlude. But, really, it was nothing more than fire-ants scrabbling in the dirt. A scrap over the dingy corridors of a corrupt, resource-less planet.

Such a step down from the battles I had once lived and breathed in.

My gaze caught on a Rodian entering the bar, and I recognized my contact, Jerrin. His round eyes darted about the room before landing on me. As he strode towards me, I stubbed my cigarra out and pulled two prepaid cred chits from my pocket. My other hand rested on a blaster concealed beneath the plasticeel table. Jerrin was a useful tool, but I'd be stupid to trust him.

"Jerrin." I indicated he should sit as he came to a stop in front of me. "Status?"

"I saw three Humans and a droid enter the Sith base about half an hour ago," he said, his words quick and furtive. "Two women, one man. I didn't get close enough to recognize any of them."

"Then what am I paying you for?" I snapped. *Mir'osik.*

"Hey, they would have seen me if I'd snuck up on them!" he protested.

My eyes flicked to the cantina's entrance, and at that moment I saw Onasi walk in, followed by the Jedi princess and Jen Sahara herself. *Ah, the timing of the gods.* I smiled humourlessly. *Did they succeed? They wouldn't be stupid enough to meet me otherwise, I hope.* I flicked Jerrin one of the chits under the table.

"Get lost."

He glanced down at the prepaid plasteel card. The chip on the front proclaimed how much currency was loaded. "Canderous, this isn't what you prom-

"And you didn't deliver what you said, either. Be grateful I'm feeling generous. Now kriff off before I get angry."

The Rodian swallowed before leaving. I turned my gaze to appraise the oncoming group. Onasi was scowling. *Heh, Republic doesn't like me.* I'd skimmed a brief overview of his record from the 'Net. He'd served the whole way through the Wars; and like any other staid, sad Republic grunt, he probably still had a chip on his shoulder regarding my people. Somehow, I didn't think we'd be drinking together and swapping war stories anytime soon.

"Canderous," Shan said smoothly as she neared. She was a bit of a looker, really; creamy porcelain
skin, shapely figure, fine arse. Shame about her snooty attitude.

"Enjoy your little jaunt in the Sith base?" I mocked, not bothering to hold back a smirk. There was a tightening around her dark eyes, but she otherwise remained composed. Lurking in her shadow stood Jen Sahara.

"We have what you asked for," Bastila replied neutrally.

At her words, a heady sense of satisfaction filled me. *I am one step closer to blowing this planet.*

Bastila folded her arms, staring at me with an impassive expression I reckoned was a lot shakier than she thought it was.

"So, what is the rest of your plan?" she asked. Onasi stood tensed by her side, one hand on a hip that undoubtedly concealed a blaster. He was about as covert as the princess was relaxed.

"Perhaps I should be talking to your leader," I interrupted, sliding my gaze to Jen. I heard Jen's breath hitch, and my eyes narrowed as I looked at her properly for the first time since she'd walked in.

Her shoulders were hunched, her face averted, and one hand clutched tight on Bastila Shan's arm. *Haar'chak, what is this?*

"Bastila is our leader," Jen mumbled. My brows lowered as she moved deeper into Bastila's shadow. *Who is she trying to fool? Does she take me for a moron?* I'd seen Jen in action at the swoop track. Mand'alor's balls, I'd fought beside her and been impressed. There was no way I was buying this pathetic act.

Bastila patted Jen comfortingly on the arm. *But Shan sure seems to be swallowing it, doesn't she?* I scowled. This was hardly the Jen I wanted to see. *We ain't got time for mind games, or whatever the kriff Jen is playing at.*

My gaze swung back to Shan. Her lips had tightened, curving down into a sour expression of unpleasantness as she stared back. I almost expected her to stick her fine-boned nose in the air. Suddenly, I thought I could understand why Jen had started screwing with her. *Back to business, Ordo. I shrugged to myself. If Jen wants to play the idiot, it ain't your business. Yet.*

"So," I started. "You have the launch codes. It won't be long before the Sith find out they've been compromised. I can get us close to the hangar, but not without some bloodshed. We should move out. Now."

Bastila nodded at me. "I... feel a sense of urgency to keep moving. You make sense. But we must pick up Mission and Zaalbar first."

My brows raised in surprise. *The Bek brat and her walking carpet are coming as well?* A Wookiee would certainly improve our odds. And Mission Vao... well, a warrior she wasn't. But I'd heard about the slicing skills of the Bek's favourite child. It could be that she'd come in useful. *Interesting companions. They must be following Jen Sahara. Following her off their homeworld. Bet the Beks won't be too happy about that.*

"Lead the way, princess."

Her mouth tightened in annoyance, but she said nothing. I noticed then that the astromech droid had followed them into the cantina. It had been a special commission for Davik, complete with the highest slicing upgrades he could source through the Sith blockade. He'd ordered me to pick it up,
without divulging his motivations for acquiring such a specced droid – but I wasn't stupid. Davik wanted the same as me. *Escape from Taris.* I was not the only one who mistrusted the Sith when a famous Jedi was hiding in our vicinity.

It wasn't like Malak's forces would obliterate Taris. The Sith already held the planet, already reaped the benefits of controlling a hyperpoint along one of the more popular intergalactic trade routes into the Outer Rim. And although this planet had been mined and overused to resource depletion, it did have a large population - which could be a resource in itself.

No, I didn't think Malak wouldn't do another Telos. But he *might* bomb the planet enough to scare the general populace - enough to crank up the search for Bastila Shan several notches. Enough to turn every sent on this place so desperate that they would lynch any brown-haired, snooty-nosed female Human they came across.

The fall-out from the swoop race had already hit the local news, and images of Bastila Shan escaping a swoop gang would no doubt be making their way up the Sith hierarchy. The fact that a gang had held her captive without informing the Sith would be enough to stoke their lord's infamous temper.

I wasn't planning to be around to get caught up in the cross-fire.

Hadn't exactly planned to be rescuing the Jedi princess either, but life can throw interesting curve-balls, and a true Mando'ade knows how to roll with it. My eyes slid back to Jen Sahara, still cowering behind Shan. *And she, definitely, is an interesting curve-ball.* Finding out exactly what Jen Sahara's game was would be an amusing diversion – so long as she didn't let it affect her capabilities.

We walked out of the smoky cantina in relative silence, and I held my repeating blaster ready. It was heavily modified; my preferred weapon of choice. I had three smaller handhelds concealed on my body, but the rest of my spare guns were back in my quarters. *No matter. It's time to leave. Anything there can be replaced.* Clan and honour were what was important, not material belongings.

Not that I had either, on Taris.

I chose a quick route to the Upper City, and as we walked I decided it was time to set things straight with Jen Sahara.

"I don't know what you're playing at, but I expect to see your true form in the oncoming battle," I spoke quietly at Jen's side as I walked up to her. She jumped backwards, her eyes round and fearful.

"Leave her alone," Bastila cut in. "We will be fine in any confrontations that may chance our way."

*Haar'chak, but she can certainly hear well.* I allowed my eyes to travel slowly over Bastila's form; the woman's face flushed with outrage and her eyes glittered. I noticed with some interest that a double-bladed vibrosword was strapped to her back.

"Nice choice of weapons, princess," I drawled. "I thought you Jedi only used lightsabers?"

"We use whatever suits the occasion, mercenary," she said, her voice tight, and she strode ahead of me as if to end the conversation.

Onasi, on her other side, turned to shoot her a questioning look. "Where is your lightsaber anyway, Bastila?"

Her shoulders stiffened in discomfort. "My lightsaber was... misplaced. I couldn't find it after the crash."
I guffawed at the same time as Onasi.

"Wait a minute, let me get this straight," Onasi spluttered, ending on a chuckle. "You lost your lightsaber? I mean, isn't that a violation of some kind of Jedi code or something?"

Shan stopped walking, and whirled around to face us. She put her hands on her hips, and affronted anger burned her normally pale face bright pink. "This is no laughing matter! During the crash my lightsaber must have... it must have fallen from my belt and rolled under my seat!"

I laughed loudly. Sure, I'd lost my share of weapons along the way, but that was why I always carried a handful. And didn't stay attached to just one – no matter if was a brightly coloured laser sword.

Onasi raised a placating hand, attempting belated damage control. "Hey, hey, hey, don't get mad. I'm sorry. It's just funny to think of a legendary Jedi losing her lightsaber. Take my advice: this is one detail you might want to keep quiet."

Shan gave him a quelling glare. "I hardly consider myself a legend, Carth." Her lips pursed. "Let us keep moving. This conversation is hardly beneficial in any respect."

I snickered, but began to walk once more. And as we turned into the last corridors of the Lower City, a small mob of eight gang members met my eyes. I stiffened as I recognized the aggressive stance and slashed armour of the leader. Brejik. And some of his little friends. It's time for some payback.

The Vulkars all turned to face us, clad in red-and-black armour and with weapons held ready. Onasi cursed, and I heard the sound of Bastila unsheathing her vibrosword.

"Well, well, well," Brejik called out over the distance that separated us. "What do we have here, hmm? My runaway slave, the swoop rescuer extraordinaire, and Canderous Ordo himself. You should have known better than to mess with me, mercenary," he sneered.

"What am I, chopped bantha spleen?" Onasi muttered.

I snorted. "You don't know how to keep your boys in line, Brejik. You turned me into your enemy by firing on me at the race. Hope you enjoy the outcome."

"You don't frighten me. Davik doesn't rule these streets, and word has it that he was less than impressed by your antics at the swoop track." Brejik laughed in mockery. "Poor little Canderous. You didn't realize that Davik doesn't wish the Vulkars for enemies, did you?"

My eyes narrowed. He thinks he can taunt me and get away with it? In a flash, I jerked my gun upwards and opened fire at him. This will be a worthy fight.

Brejik yelped; the cocky dì'kut had expected me to stand there and monologue with him until he'd decided to open the fight. He jumped sideways, the blue-white of an energy shield sizzling as he activated it- but I'd pinged him dead centre. Sure, his armour would've absorbed some, but it'd been a hit.

My hand mashed against the power switch of my own shield, while the Vulkars roared and returned fire.

I ran forwards, hooking the blaster onto my belt while unsheathing an Echani foil I'd picked up from an earlier fight. A grenade flew over my head towards the others, and the bright flash of it hit the periphery of my vision. I heard a startled scream from behind.
Four of the men ran up to meet me; I smashed an elbow into the first, following it with a thrust of the blade into his guts. The thud of a stun stick crashing against my armour backplate forced me back a step; I side-stepped and turned; the foil in my hand coming around in a lunge.

But the man crumpled in front of me before I struck; smoke wafting from his head. A quick glance behind him showed Onasi in the distance, taking potshots at the Vulkars.

The discharge of another grenade, this one close, had me stumbling into a foe. We grappled with each other as we lost our footing and fell to the ground, rolling. A sharp pain stabbed into my side; the bastard had managed to wedge some sort of shiv-blade in between the joints of my armour. I rolled over, teeth gritting, and slammed an armoured fist underneath the jaw brace of his helm.

A second punch, and a third, all rocking his head backwards, as the bastard choked and his arms fell uselessly to the ground. The dagger he'd stuck me on was slipped between my ribs and hurt like a schutta. I lunged sideways for the Echani foil; it'd slipped from my grasp as we'd fallen, and now I grabbed it to stab the Vulkar in the throat and end him for good.

I looked up; another Vulkar stood over me, blaster pointed at my head and a victorious sneer on her un-helmed face.

A split-second’s thought, a moment of acceptance: There is no better way to die than in battle.

My vision blurred as a blade slammed hard on the gang member's hand; causing her to yelp and fire uselessly at the ground. It was Bastila, the double-bladed vibro spinning fast and sure in her grasp. Behind her, two other Vulkars were closing in with blades.

As I wrestled to my feet, I felt the impact of blaster bolts against my waning shield. There was a grunt from Onasi, followed by a thud; I looked over to see both him and Jen had fallen. Haar'chak, how'd she get beaten so fast? I'd already picked her as slightly crazy, but this must have been bad luck. I didn't believe she'd go so far as to act like a weakling in battle just to keep up whatever her game was.

The adrenaline pumped through my system, a welcome burn against the sharp pain in my chest. I heard the fizz as my energy shield winked out; I grasped the bladed weapon tight, and charged towards Brejik.

Brejik ducked behind the one gang member remaining next to him, firing over his shoulder. My chest tightened and burned as the armour took the brunt of the blaster bolt; I pushed on through the pain as blood thundered in my head. The other Vulkar stumbled back as my blade rammed through his abdomen.

He gurgled as he collapsed, and I swung to face Brejik, who'd already moved back several metres. Another bolt from him struck me dead centre, and I felt the heat sear and melt through a newly created gap in my armour.

Bastila screamed behind me. There was a thudding noise of her body thumping to the ground.

My breath was coming in short, sharp bursts; my side was bleeding out and another hit of laser fire might be enough to down me.

"Here it ends, Canderous," Brejik mocked, and I heard one set of footsteps behind me. The victor of Bastila's battle, no doubt. "A shame you picked the losing side."

I lurched desperately to the side, ditching the blade as I rolled, one hand scrabbling for another blaster. I fired blindly, feeling a hit to the legs, and another to the chest that seared through to skin
and muscle. The red-mist descended in a cloud of rage and agony as my grip was hot on the trigger and all I could hear was the echo of a dozen blasters all firing-

Somehow I'd ended in a crouch, shaking wildly, gun aimed at Brejik who was-

-turning and running as a shower of blaster bolts fired back at him.

Beks behind me, I realized, stunned and dazed, as my vision darkened and my muscles turned to water. What timing. I got another shot off just as Brejik ran out of sight, but I had no idea if it hit him or not.

The ground rushed up to meet me.

xXx

Frigid numbness and raging hot pinpricks jerked me back to consciousness. I yelled in protest and opened my eyes, shivering and sweating with the contrasting physical discomfort.

Bastila Shan was leaning over me, her face a composed mask. "Relax. It is the Force flowing through you, healing your injuries."

I grunted, struggling to lurch myself into a seated position. My vision speckled and blurred as dizziness briefly reigned.

"Lie down for a minute," Shan advised. "The Force may be quick, but it is not miraculous."

My chest felt tight, but it lacked the agony of melted flesh that came with blaster burns. The armour had held up – barely – and we still had to charge through Davik's estate. The wound in my side dulled to a distant throb; either due to Shan's healing prowess or luck. Regardless, it wasn't debilitating.

I ignored the residual discomfort and dragged myself to my feet, only feeling slightly unsteady.

"Relax, princess," I said, flexing my shoulders. "I'm fine. What happened?"

Bastila stared at me under lowered brows, as if she wanted to argue the point but thought better of it. She sighed. "The Beks finished the fight and chased after Brejik. Fortunately for us all, one of them paused to revive me with a stimulant and a shot of kolto. I, in turn, have been able to assist the rest of you."

I raised an eyebrow at her. "Yes, I'm sure we couldn't live without your amazing Force powers," I drawled. "How did I survive for so long without you?"

The anger that crackled in her dark eyes made me laugh.

"You- !" she cut herself off abruptly, her nostrils flaring as she breathed in deep. I smirked, and turned around to see Onasi and Jen leaning against the grimy walls of the Lower City. The astromech droid was by Jen's feet, looking relatively undamaged. Someone's gotta put a weapon on that mobile trashcan. It could at least serve some purpose in a fight.

"They were both knocked out by grenades," Shan said quietly, following my gaze. Her temper was amusing, but her swiftness at controlling it was even more impressive. I was beginning to enjoy taunting the stuck-up Jedi. "Between the kolto the Beks left behind, and my Force abilities, I believe we are able to move on now." Shan's gaze lingered on my torso, and I glanced down to see streaks of blood drying on the outside of my battered armour suit. "At least take some kolto if you refuse any
further of my assistance, Canderous. We still have a battle ahead at Davik's."

I snorted. "I'll relax when I'm off this chivhole of a planet. In the meantime, stims can keep me going."

"As you wish," she said in a taut voice, and then motioned to the others. "We should move on now."

Onasi nodded in response, but Jen just looked petrified. I narrowed my eyes, throwing her a mock glare until she glanced down in nervousness. I couldn't hold back an entertained chuckle.

"Don't be so childish," Shan snapped, catching my amusement. I shot her a derisive look in return. *Hah. She's the one who believes Jen's little act.*

We headed back to the apartment building in the alien district. My muscles were beginning to tighten and ache uncomfortably; I grimaced and searched my pockets for a stamina stim as we trudged along. From the stiff, abrupt way Onasi was walking, I could tell he too was feeling the after-effects of our clash with the Vulkars. *My only regret is that Brejik escaped.* I wondered what the chances were of those Beks having caught up to the coward. If I wasn't on my way off Taris, my next goal would've been to hunt down Brejik personally.

Mission Vao and her Wookiee were yapping inside the apartment as we entered. The girl stared at me in awed surprise as I bared my teeth at her. It was her shag pile guard I kept note of, though. I'd heard stories about Vulkars stupid enough to threaten Mission Vao, and they always ended up regretting it.

At any rate, I had no problem with the kid, provided she kept her trap shut.

"Pack up," Shan commanded. "We are heading out."

"Cool!" the Twi'lek enthused, jumping to her feet. The Wookiee growled something, and the girl grinned at him before her gaze returned to rove over the rest of us. "Say, what happened to you guys? Sith base didn't go as planned?"

"We, uh, ran into a little trouble afterwards," Onasi said.

I snorted. "Vulkars who didn't like the look of us."

The kid cocked her head in curiosity, opening her mouth to question, but Shan shushed her. "We need to leave now," the Jedi said in a low, terse voice.

"Okay, sheesh, keep your clothes on," Mission muttered, throwing her a glare. The Wookiee howled as he began to strap blades onto his back; I eyed over the pile of random weapons on the apartment floor with mild admiration.

Onasi was crouching, filling up a pack with grenades, while Shan looked to be gathering a box of med supplies together. Jen Sahara, in contrast, stood awkwardly in front of the apartment's closed door, a vibrosword clutched ineptly in one hand. I shot her another glare, just to see if it would disconcert her. She twitched, taking a step back, and I chuckled to myself. I was beginning to enjoy this game of hers, and I wondered if she was laughing on the inside as well.

Some minutes of silent and swift packing later, and I led our motley crew back out onto the Tarisian courtyards. The sunlight gleamed on the courtyards filled with soft Humans, all milling around with no apparent understanding of the dangers that a Sith fleet in orbit entailed. The Tarisians gave us a wide berth in general, the odd one pausing to glare or mutter at the Wookiee. In general, any sent on these platforms that wasn't Human was either mocked or mistreated.
The xenophobia was a damn stupid way to treat sentients, but from what I knew of Taris, it was an attitude that had prevailed for generations.

As we walked towards the more lavish side of the Upper City, personal guards replaced the Sith lining the street. Davik, along with the other rich businessmen of Taris, had paid the Sith an awful lot of creds for relative peace. The upper crust had bought the illusion of freedom, and most of them were stupid enough to believe in it.

Mission Vao skipped along next to us, but her eyes were on Bastila Shan. Curiosity was plainly evident on the Twi'lek kid's face.

"Hey, Bastila. You ever just use the Force for fun?" She tilted her head, an impish grin on her face. At once, I had a brief mental picture of Mission Vao, dressed in the dull clothing of the Jedi, clutching a lightsaber and wielding the Force. I snickered. *I'd give a whole lot of creds to watch a stand off between the Bek brat and the princess. Imagine that.* Was it exposure to the Force that turned Jedi into such boring uptight farts, or did the power only come to those with no personality? *Not entirely true, Ordo. There'd been a handful of Jedi worthy of respect, once upon a time. One in particular.* My eyes slid to the Jedi princess. Having met her, and gained a sense of both her youth and social awkwardness, I had no kripping idea how Bastila Shan had been the final end to a Jedi like Revan.

"Fun?" Shan sounded confused, almost affronted. Her brow creased in puzzlement as she stared at the Twi'lek, as if she were trying to understand her. *The princess ain't used to dealing with people, that's for sure.*

"You know, a little jolt of the Force to trip some jerk who's ticking you off?" Mission beamed. Her brown eyes were bright with enthusiasm. "All these stories 'bout the power you Jedi have… I never really believed it, y'know? But if you *can* do all that stuff, then surely you've wanted to get a few people back- like, nerf-herders who *really* deserve it."

Bastila Shan took in a deep breath, straightening her spine to look down at Mission Vao. Her expression closed in on itself, tightening in disapproval. Her lips thinned. "No. Certainly not. The Force is not a trivial plaything, Mission. One must always remain above such petty revenge."

I snorted. *Uptight little princess. I bet your back is all knotted up with snooty kinks and you don't even realize it.*

"Aw, come on," Mission wheedled, her lekku wrapping around her neck. "There's gotta be times when you've thought about it. Don't be so stuck up - you can tell me!"

I heard Onasi stifle a laugh. I didn't bother hiding mine.

"I am not stuck up," Shan stated in a forced, neutral tone. "I merely have the years of training to give me the wisdom and understanding to see how childish such an act would be."

"Childish?" Mission's voice rose in sharp indignation. "Is that a crack about my age? *I'm* not the one who got captured by a swoop gang, and I've been living here my whole life! Sheesh, just because you're a famous *Jedi* doesn't mean you have to be such a prissy know-it-all!"

Mission stumbled then, as if tripping into something invisible, and fell forward towards the ferracrete ground. Hands outstretched, the Twi'lek only just managed to brace herself with a squeak, taking the fall on her palms.

I looked over to Shan in surprise; the Human's face was flushed pink with irritation, her eyes dark
with anger. *Years of training ain't enough to control her temper it seems,* I realized with amusement. Maybe the uptight Bastila Shan wouldn't be quite so boring as I first thought.

Mission Vao was scrambling to her feet, her face purple with embarrassment. "Hey, that wasn't funny!" she squawked.

I was watching Shan, and saw the regret as it passed through her face. *She'd take it back, if she could. She actually wants to be an ice queen, with no emotion or life in her.* "I have no idea what you are talking about, Mission," she forced out through bloodless lips. Her tone turned neutral once more. "Come now, we have to get going."

Mission let out a high-pitched squeak of frustration, and actually started to leap towards Shan in retaliation, but the Wookiee grabbed her arm and hauled her back.

"Zaalbar!" Mission screeched. He howled something incomprehensible at the Twi'lek, and she shook her head furiously, still glaring at Bastila Shan.

I strode next to Shan; her gaze was fixed firmly ahead and the corners of her mouth had turned down. "How very Jedi-like of you, princess," I drawled. I saw her colour rise, and something akin to shame burn in her dark eyes. *The haar'chak Jedi have it all backwards. To be ashamed of emotion is to be devoid of living.* And then there were the Sith, who gloried in death and destruction and sadism. They got the job done, but they all seemed to wander down the path of true depravity.

*Maybe it is just the Force then. It either snuffs the life out of you, or turns you into something rabid.*

The Wookiee was still something softly at Mission Vao, and I idly wondered if the Twi'lek kid would think of a way to thwart Shan, or even get her own back. I could guess how annoying Mission Vao could be, if she put her street-smart mind to work, but I was willing to bet a hundred creds that Bastila Shan would underestimate her. My gaze, however, caught on the estate looming in the distance, and I shrugged off the idle thoughts.

It was time to issue some orders. I halted, turned around, and eyed the group dispassionately. While there were many sentients nearby, none were in obvious earshot. I kept my voice low regardless.

"Alright, troops." I didn't bother concealing my sneer. I'd had half-dead Mando'ade under my command more worthy than this lot. "Here's how the plan goes. Ladies, disarm and throw the lads your weapons. You three are going to act all scared and meek. Jen, it shouldn't be a problem for you." I tossed her a knowing grin, and she flinched rather realistically. "Republic, chuck that upright carpet one of your blasters. You two are gonna be guarding the three brand new slave girls."

Shan gasped in outrage. I raised an eyebrow, impatient and annoyed. "What? You think we can just waltz in, looking like an armoured gang ready for fighting? This cover story will get us into the base, provided you guys are convincing. That includes you, princess."

Shan had turned a mottled red once more. "If this is some sort of trap, mercenary-"

"No trap, princess. I ain't collaring you, am I?" I met her eyes steadily, and I could see that she wanted to object.

Onasi opened his mouth to say something, but apparently thought better of it and threw Zaalbar a spare blaster. The Wookiee howled in obvious objection.

"It's not like we're going to tie the girls up!" I snapped, before muttering, "although that would be more convincing."
There was an immediate roar from the Wookiee, and Shan looked about ready to explode.

I laughed. "It won't be necessary, provided you play your part. Republic and Carpet, stand behind the girls with your blasters raised. Mission and Princess, act demure and frightened, for the love of Mand'alor!"

Mission Vao grinned impishly at me, winked, and then looked down with a forced expression of fear. Davik liked his Twi'lek slaves, and Mission's youth would make it an easy sell. Jen was older than Davik cared for, but her acting skills would be enough to hide that - at least until we got in.

Shan was gonna be the problem. She had the looks for a joygirl, but if she wasn't gonna play along then we were kriffed before we'd even started.

She sighed, an angry hissing noise, before breathing in deep and dropping her eyes to the ground.

I nodded in satisfaction.

"Let's move out," I ordered, and began to lead onwards. It wasn't long until we reached the ornate gates that bordered Davik's mansion. I nodded companionably to the guard.

"Back with some fresh slave girls Davik ordered," I said flatly.

The armoured Duros stared at me suspiciously through dull red eyes. "Order? I haven't heard nothin' 'bout any new girls."

"Oh? Privy to Davik's plans, are you?" I griped, turning to glare at him full on. He quailed.

"Uh, sorry Canderous, go right in." He activated the access console, and the large gates swung inwards. I walked onwards, underneath the line of visible laser turrets that pointed ominously at the building's entrance.

Another guard met us at the door and waved us in without any interference. I could feel my eyes narrow, my concentration focus, and my muscles tense in readiness as we walked into Davik's stronghold. The buzz of anticipation and adrenaline were beginning to hit; the markers of entering danger I was long familiar with.

The objectives may differ, but the challenges remained the same. Me and my allies against the galaxy.

_Alright, Ordo. Let's do this._

xXx
The opulent estate rose up to encase me with strange marbled walls as I trailed at the rear of the pack. With a blaster pointed fallaciously at Mission's back, my eyes should have been fixed on my young charge, trudging so submissively into the enemy's den like she truly was the captive she pretended to be.

That was not the case, though. I found myself unable to stop my gaze from darting down each exit we passed, as my shoulders tensed and my instincts told me this entire operation would soon crumble like tree-rot.

*This plan is too risky.*

That Mandalorian might be careless with his own life, but I did not understand why Mission and Jen Sahara had to be pulled into this hazardous escapade. Particularly the Human, considering the odd way she was behaving. Mission was worried about her; the way my young friend's lekku twitched whenever she glanced Jen Sahara's way made that plainly obvious.

The woman I owed my life too was quiet, confused, and scared. I could see the tremulous emotions in her cowed stance, and could track the fear in her scent. Something had happened to her – and while I might appreciate the thought of Jen Sahara curbing her own recklessness, I was also concerned that, in her current state, she might be more vulnerable in a fight than ever before.

*I will guard her back, or die in the attempt. Hers, and Mission's both.*

The gleaming ostentatiousness of the dwelling set my teeth on edge. Garish holo-pictures dotted the walls, and each corner was decorated with a purple urn containing a plasteel pretension of a plant. This veneer of synthetic prettiness was worse than the grime and poverty of the Lower City, and a pang of longing for my homeworld burned deep in my soul.

*To be in a forest somewhere. To be amongst the wroshyr trees.* Even after all these years, Taris had never felt like home. Too many strange aliens, all packed together like a teeming nest of fire ants lacking any sort of hive mind. It had been an accident, landing here; I'd been a young cub running from the past, and Taris had been a stop along the way to somewhere else. But traders on the freighter I had boarded betrayed me for the empty allure of alien credit chips. I did not understand, then, how many soulless sentients were out there; how some beings could look at a Wookiee and see no more than a prime specimen to be sold like a shank of meat.

A moment of inattention from an overweight slaver had led to my escape, and so I fled: half-enraged and half-petrified, ignorant of where I was or the dangers I was running into. Had it not been for Mission chancing upon me, I was not sure how long I would have lasted amongst the gangs and the Exchange and the corrupt way of life in the tunnels of Taris.

It was strange to think that we might soon be leaving. Assuming, of course, that this foolhardy plan came to fruition. We had thrown our lot in with off-world strangers – and while my life-debt
shackled me to Jen's side, Mission was another story.

*What sort of existence does the daughter of my heart have here, on this corrupt planet?* I did not wish to think of her, growing up amongst the moral ambiguity of a swoop gang who were willing to sell spice for profit and loot foodstuffs from other gangs who were just as needy. Survival, they called it, but some days all I could see was dishonour in their actions. And while the Hidden Bek's may have granted Mission the protection of a den, they had certainly been lacklustre in keeping her away danger, despite Zaerdra Leno's best efforts.

No – a better future awaited Mission Vao in the stars, and so I could see no solid reason to keep her from following me.

I huffed in irritation at my wandering thoughts, and tightened my grip on Carth Onasi's blaster. A bow-caster it was not, but between this cheap gun, the vibroswords strapped on my back, and the strength of my own paws, I would be strong enough to face whatever awaited us.

The cloying scent of artificial perfume hung thick on the air, and up ahead the Mandalorian halted, before turning around to grace the lot of us with a leering grin. I did not trust this Human. He was dangerous, and worked for the Exchange – an organization both unscrupulous and offensive. While Canderous Ordo might now be rescinding his loyalty, it did not mean his values had increased in worthiness. I planned to keep my eye on him, for both Mission and Jen Sahara's safety.

"Welcome to the slave quarters, kids," Canderous drawled.

Bastila Shan's face was composed, but her posture belied her annoyance. I wondered if there was a trace of fear, also; I could not forget that the Jedi was young, and had suffered trials of her own. It was a shame that Mission seemed to have taken a dislike to the Jedi, for I could not help but feel sympathetic.

"Why are we stopping here, Canderous?" Bastila asked in a level voice.

"Good a place as any to talk before we hit trouble. Now, listen up. The hangar is located in the north-west side of this estate-"

Jen shrank back against me. Once more, she was behaving like a completely different sentient to the brash Human who had rescued me. Her shift in conduct was strange... beyond strange. Did Jen Sahara knock her head again? She suffered a grievous injury shortly before I first met her – perhaps her odd behaviour is connected?

I would ask Mission to speak with Jen later, I decided. I did not pretend to understand Humans, but I did know they were similar to Twi'leks in that they liked to talk a lot – and Mission was certainly good at that.

"-we're gonna get questions sooner or later," Canderous was saying. "And we have to break through Davik's security on the *Ebon Hawk*. This rust bucket better pull its weight there." Canderous aimed a kick at the droid, who beeped in indignation while backing away.

"Hey!" Mission complained, her protest drowning out the Mandalorian's derisive chuckle. "Leave Teethree alone!"

The pad of footsteps ahead had us all wilting into silence. I looked afield, to see a heavily armoured Zabrak walking cautiously toward us. The stranger's helm was raised, and as he neared the heavy brow ridges on his alien face lowered.

"Uh, Canderous?" the Zabrak said. His gaze darted over the group. "Who's all this with you?"
"Just showing some slave girls their new quarters," Canderous replied with a shrug.

The Zabrak's frown deepened, as his shifty eyes settled over Carth Onasi and myself. "I thought you worked alone?"

"Not always, *di'kut*. Not when the situation calls for extra muscle," Canderous sneered. "Look, I need to find the boss. Seen him around?"

"Davik's in his quarters, last I looked," the other man said slowly. He was still eyeing me over, and I felt myself tense in readiness as the man's hand rested near a blaster strapped to his hip.

"Good." Canderous threw the man an abrupt nod of acknowledgment. "I'm headed that way, then. Come on, boys, let's move out."

The Zabrak stepped back to let us pass, and his gaze moved to fix on the Mandalorian's retreating back. His brow ridges were still tightly creased in what I thought might be suspicion.

*This ploy will not work for long.*

I did not like leaving a potential enemy at my back, yet I had no choice but to follow Canderous Ordo's lead. I huffed, and was glad when we turned a few corners, leaving the Zabrak behind.

The group settled into silence as we trudged deeper into the lavish estate. I heard the raucous sound of cheering well before the hallway turned and opened into a large room - a sprawling chamber that was thick with the scent of Tarisian ale and the sound of jeering catcalls.

A brawl, I thought at first, taking note of two Humans wrestling in the centre of the room. But the onlookers – ten sentients, most seated in plimfoam benches circling the spectacle – were making no moves to join in the fight nor stop it, and it was then I realized this must be some sort of organized event.

The two scantily clad Twi'leki cubs who slipped between the cluster of aliens offering trays of drinks seemed to suggest the same.

Mission sniffed in disgust.

I held back the growl that wanted to escape my throat. It was possible the Twi'leki younglings were here of their own free will, on a paid job – but I knew a little of this world, now, and I doubted that. I had been sold like a crate of goods in front of a crowd, and no one had blinked. It was a loathsome practice abundant on Taris – the worst symptom of the corruption that twisted this planet's soul.

In my heart, there was *nothing* more abominable than slavery.

"Daelin," Canderous said in a low voice. In front of him, a Human stranger had slipped away from the fight to intercept Canderous. In the man's shadow stood a heavily armoured Rodian.

"Ordo," the Human replied. The Rodian had a blaster in his hand, dangled idly by his side. "Quite a motley crew you've got here."

"New slave girls for Davik." Canderous tilted his head to the wrestlers, who were now grappling on the floor amidst the braying of the spectators. "Might come back and watch after I offload these girls."

Canderous took a step along the edges of the room, but the man called Daelin didn't budge from his position, right in the way of the nearest exit.
I edged toward Mission. The bad feeling in my gut was growing.

"Davik wants to see you, but he ain't expecting you to bring company." Daelin folded his arms. "And I ain't been told 'bout no slave girls."

"Are you questioning me, Daelin?" Canderous growled. "The last person who did that ended up picking his eyeballs out of his dinner."

"You don't scare me, Ordo," the man sneered. His gaze moved suggestively over Mission, before narrowing on me. "Davik said you'd been getting greedy, said you might be thinking of turning traitor. Do you really expect me to believe that the Beks' pet Wookiee would bring in Mission Vao? How stupid do you think I am?"

The hair on my neck rose in alarm. This was it- no escaping a battle now.

I shoved the foreign blaster in Mission's hand, before yanking a vibrosword free from my back harness. Canderous was even quicker – his large weapon snapped up instantly as he opened fire.

There was a yell from the Human as he was gunned down, and screams from the seated audience as the Mandalorian's firepower turned to sweep over them.

The armoured Rodian, though – that was my target, and I let loose the growl in my throat as I rushed forward.

His armour was no match for the strength of my vibrosword as it shattered into his side. With a roar, I threw my head forward to smash into the Rodian's un-helmed face, and the man crumpled to the ground.

After a final, fatal stab of my weapon deeper through the man’s broken armour, I spun around to view the carnage.

Carth Onasi and Mission were close to the wall, their blaster fire gutting into the room as the two Twi'leki girls cowered behind them. Relief shot through me, even at the sight of the helpless servants – for I knew that it was often the helpless to fall first in a fight like this.

Bastila Shan had reclaimed her weapon from Carth, a double-bladed vibro-staff that spun in her hands as she waded through the centre of the room. And Jen-

Jen Sahara was frozen. Her face was a mask of shock, and she made no effort to move or arm herself as blaster fire streamed around her.

"(Jen!)") I howled.

A piercing wail knifed through the air and, as I bounded toward Jen, I jabbed an elbow into the temple of a Duros, bent over a control panel inset on the wall.

"The kripping alarms!" Canderous cursed behind me. "There goes our secrecy!"

Jen still wasn't moving, and I wasn't close enough. Behind her was the shadow of an enemy-

"(Jen!)") I howled again. "(Catch!"

Too late- her attacker lunged forward with a chiv-blade, stabbing it deep into her thigh. Jen screamed, and the vibrosword I had hurled in her direction sailed uselessly past.

No! I roared in panic, still rushing forward. The mercenary pulled his arm back to strike again, and in
his shadow another two stepped up to flank him. *No – I will not fail my life-debt!*

I saw Jen stumble, saw the smatter of dark red staining the ferracrete flooring at her feet. I’d left her unguarded, she had frozen in the face of terror, and I was too far away-

Jen ducked. It was a sharp move to the side that morphed into a roll, and somehow, she ended in a crouch with my blade in her grasp. Almost faster than my eye could track, Jen’s arms snapped forward in a powerful lunge. The vibrosword blurred, and struck the boots of the nearest thug.

The armour surrounding the man’s ankles shattered. He fell, shrieking.

By then, I had reached the first thug, the one who had stabbed Jen Sahara – but he didn’t notice my arrival until my paws closed tight around his neck. A wrench to the side, and then it was over for him.

"Pathetic weakling!" The words were a low sneer from Jen, but it did not sound at all like her. She stood over her enemy, having finished him with a stab clean through his neck-brace. Hot red spurted from the shuddering corpse as she yanked her weapon free. "You can't best me!"

"(Jen! Behind you!)" I wailed. A female mercenary had a blaster aimed at Jen's unarmoured back. Jen didn't pause: she spun, instead, faster than was possible – and then her outstretched vibrosword sliced through the thug's forearm.

The bloody limb flopped onto the floor. The mercenary howled in shock, a shriek that was abruptly cut off as Jen dropped a hand from the sword and crunched a fist into the woman's throat.

Choking, the woman staggered back before sinking to her knees. She collapsed a second later, when Jen's vibrosword stabbed deep past the thin layer of mesh protection covering her chest.

Jen snarled, both hands returning to the vibrosword's hilt as she pulled it free and raised it high.

She turned to face the room.

For an instant – only an instant – I froze at the look in her forest-green eyes. Soulless. Frenzied.

Madclaw.

"Guess she's got her berserker rage back," Carth muttered somewhere behind me.

"Hah!" Canderous called out in exultation. It was then I realized that we were the only ones left standing. "Ib'nuur ja'ne tuur ash'ad kyr'amur!"

And then, Jen Sahara's expression shattered into fear. Her bloody leg buckled underneath her, and she collapsed.

I was there in a flash, catching her before she landed. Jen was shivering, sweating, her eyes rolling back in her head. "(Someone – help her! There is something wrong other than a leg wound!)

I looked up in panic, only to meet the horrified gaze of Bastila Shan.

"I am Jen Sahara," the Human woman I owed my life to mumbled softly. I did not think it was loud enough for anyone else to hear. "I am!"

"(Yes)," I rumbled, but my gaze did not drop from Bastila Shan's. There was no reason for the look of stark fear that painted the young woman's face and held her strange almond-shaped eyes open so wide.
"We ain't got time for this, princess," Canderous Ordo snapped, giving Bastila Shan a shove. "Use your magic tricks or some kripping kolto and get Jen back on her feet. We're gonna need her sword."

Bastila swallowed, but then her face tightened into composure and she strode forward to kneel next to us.

But the stink of fear still wafted from her.

Is Bastila Shan afraid for Jen, or of her? Jen Sahara's berserking rage was more than unsettling. The unmitigated fury that overtook the older woman was soulless in its depth and frightening in its strength. But to rattle a mystical Jedi... it was then that I wondered if there was something fundamentally wrong with the Human I was indebted to – something beyond the implications of a head injury.

And as Bastila Shan harnessed her fantastical powers, and colour began to bloom in Jen's cheeks, I vowed to myself the same words as before, but this time with an addendum:

*I will protect Jen Sahara from any threat – including herself.*

xXx

Malak Devari:

::*Our fleet is in position, my lord.*:: The image of Admiral Karath flickered atop the holo-stand, his hands folded formally behind his back. ::*The TNF have demanded an immediate expulsion of our forces under threat of retaliation, but that is nothing more than empty bluster. They are too weak to mount any sort of challenge against our might.*::

"The Tarisian National Front all but welcomed our sovereignty years ago." I chuckled, dwelling on my two standing bases that the puppet government of Taris had long pretended did not exist. "Hold your position, Admiral, and await my next order."

Karath snapped out a quick salute, and vanished from the stand. A sense of ready satisfaction warmed in my gut. Truly, I had granted those Tarisians more time than they deserved.

"Put Rylun on," I clipped out to the nearest tech. He was quick, efficient, and sparse with his words. I did not tolerate the bugs in my home any other way.

The technician's fingers danced over the communication controls. Five seconds, perhaps, before another figure shimmered to existence on the holo-stand.

::*My lord*::

"Status update, Admiral," I ordered.

The holo-projection of Admiral Rylun bowed. ::*We have exited hyperspace outside the Arillian asteroid belt, my lord, and our fleet is in the process of refuelling. Once complete, we shall plot a course for the Dantooine system. Our expected time of arrival is thirty standard hours.*::

*Thirty hours.* It was longer than I preferred, but most of my forces were elsewhere – further away from this Outer Rim planet I had been content to ignore until now.

The Jedi Order was a bunch of cowardly hypocrites, but I had underestimated their meddling – and now they would pay the price.
My eyes narrowed. "Hit quick and hard, Rylun. The primary target must be eliminated. There is no room for failure. You understand that, don't you?"

Rylun was too much of a professional to show fear, but a tightening around his eyes indicated he was not as calm as his façade showed. After all, his predecessor had retreated from a risky offensive that I had ordered, after it had turned sour.

His predecessor had taken three days to die.

I'd brought Rylun to visit her, near the end. It was interesting how more loyal and efficient underlings could be with the right motivation. And Rylun, newly promoted, needed to understand that neither failure nor cowardice was an option.

Although, frankly, his chances of surviving the Dantooine offensive were slim.

_I can replace Rylun. Provided he destroys the master Star Map on Dantooine, then I don't care if I lose his entire fleet. If Rylun truly deserves those admiral pips on his shoulders, then he will find a way to achieve his target, weaken those meddling robes, and return with his life._

::We will decimate the ruins, my lord.::

"Good. Once eliminated, you will turn the attack to the Enclave. They will be scurrying to bolster the planetary protections once the plasma starts dropping, but that will take them time. Time enough for you to hurt them."

::I shall not fail you, my lord.::

"See that you don't." I waved my glove to the console technician, and Rylun vanished. "Put Karath back on."

Only two seconds, this time, for the holo-stand to fill.

::My lord?:: Admiral Karath acknowledged.

"Begin the attack on Taris," I ordered, and it was a pleasure to say those words. "Those Tarisians shall know the price of failure, Karath. I will see that planet in ruins."

One live foot-soldier, and three corpses of unimportant Republic grunts. That was all that Taris had been able to offer me from the ruins of the _Endar Spire_. I could feel my anger rally once more, crackle over my skin in waves of pure Force energy. _No officer, no Jedi, and certainly no Bastila Shan_. I did not tolerate failure, be it from an admiral or a planet of Tarisians.

::My lord, our men are still on the surface. I need time-::

"The search for Bastila is taking too long, Admiral. I sense movement in the Force. We attack, now."

I would not risk Bastila Shan going to ground or worse – escaping the planet.

::Of course, my lord::: Karath bowed. He was experienced and strategically gifted, and had once been a man that I had reported to – in my younger, less-evolved days.

Perhaps it was that – or merely the years of war behind him – for the reason I gave the man more leeway than most.

::Although, two hours would allow me to extract fifty percent of our-:::
"Now, Karath!" I snarled, and felt the crackle of Force surge in white static over my fists. Leeway only went so far, and if Karath thought he was safe from a distance-

::At once, my lord!:: Karath gasped, bowing deeper, and the dark fury cresting on the Force around me ebbed in response. ::I will lead the charge myself, immediately!::

I allowed him the gift of my silence, and twitched my hand at the nearby tech.

Karath's figure winked out.

I turned, and strode from the command centre. Taris would soon feel the weight of my wrath. I cared little for the planet, truly; its natural resources had long been plundered to near depletion, and its strategic position along the galactic hyper ROUTES was vastly overrated when compared to the awesome power of the Star Forge.

If I closed my eyes, I could sense the dark miasma of power calling to me from the Forge, even from this distance. Nothing could stop me now – not the prehistoric shell of the Republic, not those cowing fools from the Order, and certainly not that battle meditation thorn in my side.

What a shame I could not have captured Bastila alive. It would have been sweet, so sweet, to break her – a barely grown woman with such an unusual gift, and one of the last defences of the antiquated Order. I had met Bastila Shan, once, a lifetime ago – and still remembered her as a lush girl blooming with innocence.

Of course, I'd only had eyes for another then.

Revan.

If there was one sight I would have liked to see, it would have been the expression on the face of my former master when my flagship opened fire on hers. The only thing sweeter would have been digging my own lightsaber into the black pit where her heart had once resided.

Well, Dead is dead. She is no more than space dust, now. The opportunity to wipe out both Bastila Shan and Darth Revan above Deralia had meant I was denied a face-to-face confrontation, but I had believed it worth the sacrifice of personal enjoyment.

Yet who would have predicted the young Jedi to escape, alive?

It matters not. Soon there will be no more loose ends. Bastila Shan would be vaporised in the Tarisian bombardment, if what remained of the populace didn't hunt her down and offer her up in return for mercy. And the master Star Map would be destroyed, removing any reference to the other four planets.

Oh, how I wished I knew how the Jedi had discovered that relic of Rakatan legacy! My little pet who betrayed the Endar Spire exposed their knowledge to me but not their reasoning: Galdea must have known of the Star Map, but why risk Shan, unless she was the one to stumble upon the Dantooine ruins in the first place?

Had I the young woman in my grasp, I would never have risked her so. Still, perhaps, in the grand scheme of galactic control, the reasoning of those fools on that backwater planet mattered little. Galdea was dead, cut down by Bandon. Rylun's strike on Dantooine would take out the master Star Map. And with Bastila's upcoming demise on Taris, all knowledge leading to the Star Forge would be winked out.

Then there would be nothing left to truly oppose me. The Republic would fall, soon; weakened by
generations of war. The Jedi were even more crippled, and while the Order might sanction involvement in war these days, their strength had been gutted by their refusal to do the same years ago.

And the Unknown Regions – I had turned my back on the Unknown Regions. What was out there could rot by itself.

xXx

**Mission Vao:**

We sprinted down hallways as the alarm wailed in all directions. My heart thumped, fast and hard, like someone had spiked my fizz-pop. And through my mind, images of mangled bodies we'd left behind kept flashing like a blitzed holo-sign, lurid and bright and hard to ignore.

Part of me wished I was back in the Bek headquarters. Back where things were safe; where killing might happen but somehow it wasn't real 'cause the Beks kept me away from it all.

Big Z's heavy paw thudded on my shoulder, holding me back as Canderous charged into another room. The moment we heard the sound of his massive gun starting up, Big Z bounded ahead with Carth at his side.

My blaster felt slippery in my sweaty grip. I looked down to see my hand shake.

*Get it together!* This was real. This was life or death. And if there was ever a time to show that I was more than just a kid, it was right now.

I ran through the doorway, blaster raised- but there was nothing left but corpses at Big Z's feet. My best friend huffed, his vibrosword glistening red under the artificial lighting.

For the first time ever, I suddenly got how others saw him. A towering, bristling mass of muscle that couldn't even speak Basic. I shivered- and then he was Big Z again, striding my way with his furry face all furrowed in concern.

"(Where's Jen?)" Big Z rumbled, and I spun around to check. But it was okay – they were behind me. Jen was pale, cowering at that stuck-up snot's side, and Bastila-

Bastila was next to her, staring at Jen's bowed head with the weirdest look on her face. She almost looked scared of Jen. Jen, who was going all borked and pathetic and was currently about as scary as a soap dispenser.

"Come on!" Canderous bellowed from the other side of the room, and Bastila's chin jerked up. She tugged on Jen's arm, and they both stumbled forward. Jen's eyes were wide and frightened, and whatever was going on with her was serious. Later, when this was over, I was going to have a long talk with her.

The room shook; sudden and jarring, and my feet buckled underneath me. I squawked in surprise, hands stretching out to break my fall.

There was a shattering noise as a holo-picture fell from a wall and smashed into a thousand shards of ferracrystal.

"(What was that?)" Zaalbar howled, getting to his feet. Sheesh – *he'd* also been knocked down. And Davik's stupid alarms hadn't stopped – if anything, it sounded like more of them had joined in. Further away.
“Earthquake?” My question came out in a squeak. Beneath my palms, the ground was still shaking. I'd heard about earthquakes, but the only ones on Taris were when bits of the Lower City crumbled into sinkholes. From what I'd heard, the Upper City was structured and strengthened enough that sinkholes and level collapses simply couldn't happen here.

There was a loud boom somewhere in the distance. It sounded a bit like an explosion.

"Orbital bombardment," someone said in a low, dark tone. I blinked, glancing over at Carth, not recognizing his voice at first. He was still standing – and the look on his face was bleak. Almost-almost like he'd seen a ghost. "That's the noise of plasma chewing into buildings."

"Haar'chak," Canderous spat, as the ground beneath us began to rattle. "Republic's right. This is coming from the skies."

"The Sith." Bastila's voice was a harsh whisper as she held two fingers to her pale brow. "I can sense it. They're bombing the planet!"

"Just to make things really challenging," Canderous ground out. "We're running out of time – we need to split up."

"Split up?" Bastila protested. "Are you mad? We should all be heading for that ship of yours!"

"Someone needs to disable the mechanical lock on the landing gear, princess, while the rest of us secure the ship," Canderous shot back. "Unless you want the Ebon Hawk to rip itself apart when we take off."

The walls shook again with another explosion. "C'mon guys, no time for arguments!" I yelled, getting to my feet. "How do we disable this thing, then?"

"There's a system mainframe near here that controls the ship's security," Canderous said, turning to face me. "Someone's gotta sneak in there with the droid to hack into the system. I'll lead a team to go kill anyone stupid enough to be guarding the 'Hawk."

I'm not just a kid. Here's a chance to prove it.

"Teethree's my droid, so I'll go," I offered. I felt my fingers curl against my palm. I could help, and I was going to show it. "My splicing's pretty wizard, too. Big Z, give us some backup?"

Zaalbar looked at me, then back at Jen. I knew what he was thinking, but Jen... Jen would be safer with the others, the way she was.

"Good idea, kid." Canderous threw me a nod. "Hop to it-

"I ain't a kid, you old geezer!"

"Careful, kid," he growled. "Watch your damn tongue and get to work. Take Carpet and Trashcan and head through the north doors. The security room is down the left hallway, the door at the end. No idea what the system is. Be quick!"

I waved Teethree forward, hurrying past that grumpy mercenary and poking my tongue out when he was looking away. Teethree whistled as he followed, and at the door I stopped, waiting for Big Z. He was howling in complaint.

"(Jen should come with us)," he wailed. He probably thought he was being subtle but sheesh, he was loud enough that I almost expected Jen to squawk in complaint.
"Big Z, she'll be safer with them," I hissed. "I need you!"

Zaalbar huffed in irritation, but strode over to me without any more moaning about it.

"I know," I muttered, as he took the lead. "I'm worried about her, too."

He nodded at me, lifted his blade, and then bashed open the door with a kick. It gave under his strength, and the hallway beyond was mercifully empty as we rushed through.

It didn't take long to reach the security room, which was tucked behind a five-inch durasteel door that took Teethree less than a min to slice. Far out, but he was ace, even for a specced-out astromech. Inside, the mainframe took up most of the space in the small room - there were two tall racks filled up with servers and controllers, and a long desk embedded with a row of console screens. At least I knew we were in the right place-

I ran to the desk. "Teethree, get your gears over here and slice in." I pointed to the central console, budging over to give the droid space. "Start looking for the Ebon Hawk's security system. You need to disable the mechanical lock that's keeping it grounded. I'm gonna do something else quickly."

"Teethree, get your gears over here and slice in." I pointed at the console, budging over to give the droid space. "Start looking for the Ebon Hawk's security system. You need to disable the mechanical lock that's keeping it grounded. I'm gonna do something else quickly."

My fingers flew over the neighbouring console and, within minutes, I had that stupid alarm switched off and the cam-feeds showing on the screen. "Hey Big Z, can you keep an eye on the feeds while we hack? Let us know if anyone comes close?"

Big Z nodded, leaning over me as I turned back to tap Teethree on his dome. "How's it going, little buddy?"

Teethree warbled a negative. I wasn't, like, totally fluent in Binary, but I knew enough to get the general gist. I'd spent a lot of time hacking with the Beks' utility droids. "Can't find a code? Look for some sort of scan – maybe Davik uses retinal or facial recog we can break."

Teethree whistled, and screens of data flashed by on the monitor. A min or two later, and he beeped sadly at me.

"Poodoo," I cursed. "What else could it be? Maybe an autoprint or something?"

"(Mission, some people are in the corridor!)
Zaalbar cut in. My gaze darted back to the second screen.

Banthra crap! It was insane, but I actually recognized them - and it was bad.

Davik Kang and Calo Nord. They'll kill us if they find us here!

"Hide, guys!"

There was no exit... nothing, here, except to hide under the desk, and hope they were too frantic 'bout the bombardment to notice us. But Big Z wouldn't fit-

My panicked gaze snagged on the large equipment closet up against the side wall. "Big Z, go jump in there!" I gestured wildly. "Teethree, under the desk with me- and no one make a peep or we're fried!"
It was dark and dusty, and I banged my knee hard on a desk leg just as the hatch slid open and the large cupboard doors closed.

"Damn those Sith - they're bombing the whole city!" Davik cursed, stomping in and heading straight for the console I'd just been behind. "After the credits we've thrown at them, you'd think they'd give us advance warning!"

"Never trust the Sith, Davik," Calo drawled. I shivered. Please don't let them see us. Calo Nord was one scary guy. He was almost as scary as Canderous. "Davik, we don't have the launch codes. You really think we can get past the Sith's automated defense guns?"

"No idea – but we can at least fly to another part of the planet! Just let me unlock the Ebon Hawk, then we're getting outta here."

I could hear the tapping sound of his fingers on the console. His legs were right in front of me, encased in a grotesquely purple armour suit I'd seen from the cam feeds. It looked as ostentatious as the rest of his gross palace.

I was holding my breath, feeling the dust tickle my nose, and digging my nails into my palms. There was a tinkling sound of light metal clanging on something, followed by the mechanical grind of gears turning.

"A keylock's frakking crap security, Davik," Calo jeered. I saw his armoured legs step closer to the purple-clad ones of Davik. "No encryption, no biometrics... you're just begging for someone walk into this room and pinch your ship."

"That's where you're wrong, Calo," Davik replied. "Who knows how to pick a traditional lock these days? Hah, who would even notice it, in among the controls?"

Whoa. Davik had locked the security with a key? Like, an actual, metal, cut-out key? Maybe the purple crime lord was right. I hadn't even noticed any sort of archaic locking interface. Better hope the 'Hawk itself doesn't have the same lock-

Although, with Teethree humming quietly at my side, I realized that wouldn't be a problem. It'd take Teethree less than a millisec to pick a keylock, now that I knew to look for it. Maybe Calo was right, too.

"Hey Davik," Calo said slowly. His weight shifted from foot to foot. "What are the security cams doing up on the screen?"

Terror danced a jerryjig down my spine. My teeth bit deep into my lip, hard enough that the coppery tang of blood filled my mouth.

"No idea," Davik muttered. "And no time to worry about it. No one could've entered the Ebon Hawk until now. Which means we need to haul jets. Let's go!"

The two men turned and strode from the room. I waited for about five seconds, and then crawled out and ran straight to the closet.

"Looks like they did the job for us, Big Z," I whispered, as he rumbled in concern at me. "We better hope Canderous is already at the 'Hawk."

Big Z nodded in assent, already loping to the exit. "(Stay behind me, Mission)."

I whistled sharply to Teethree, sent out a brief mental plea for the safety of the others, and followed
my best friend out the door.

xXx

Davik Kang:

I ran down the hallway as my beautiful estate crumbled around me, damning the Sith with each step I took. Calo sprinted beside me, a trusted merc for now. For now. Calo was as dangerous as Canderous - and just as ambitious.

*That's the problem with all these damn mercs. Sooner or later they start getting ideas. Thinking above their station. And that's when it's time to make sure something job knocks 'em down for good.*

We turned into my hangar, and the first thing I noticed was a smoking, gaping hole where my blast doors should have stood. Beyond-

The acrid stench of molten durasteel blew in from outside. I gaped at the burning buildings I could see, bordered by the rubble of my own hangar. Most of one wall had been obliterated by an anonymous plasma drop, and there was no avoiding the sight of Upper Taris crumbling into ruination.

*Those blasted Sith!*

My gaze darted wildly back within the hangar. My baby... my baby, the *Ebon Hawk*, was still intact. Untouched. Sitting meek and pretty at the far end of the hangar, like a joygirl waiting for her master.

It was then that I noticed a group of stragglers clustered around her loading ramp.

"Well, look what we got here! Thieves in the hangar," I drawled, slipping a hand over the upgraded blaster on my hip. My focus immediately snapped to the largest figure – a damn Wookiee, of all things. Tough and preternaturally strong, but also simple.

And the Human next to him-

*Shavit! Canderous bloody Ordo!* I could feel my lips curling up over my teeth, but deliberately moved my hand away from the blaster. *I should’ve had Calo take him out days ago.* "Canderous. Fancy finding you here, sniffing around my baby. Suppose you thought you could pinch her and leave me high and dry with the Sith turn this planet into dust?"

Ordo barked a laugh. "Pretty much, Davik. Figured the ‘Hawk could cover the wages you owe me."

"I can take care of Ordo," Calo growled softly at my side. "Leave him to me."

Oh, that was tempting – and I didn’t underestimate Calo – but there were a few allies standing ground behind that disloyal Mandalorian dog. Not just the Wookiee- a Human soldier, with a pair of blasters at the ready. Two females, both wielding vibroswords, and the younger one looked familiar-

*Sithspit! That’s the Jedi prisoner Brejik thought was just a damn officer-!*

We were outnumbered, and bloody Ordo had a Jedi on his side.

"Perhaps now isn't the time to fight," I intervened - quickly, before Canderous could start shooting. The dog could be as hot on the trigger as Calo, at times. "We both want to leave Taris, so why don’t we work together?" If Canderous was this far, then he'd infiltrated my estate before the Sith started bombing. Which meant... *the bastard got the launch codes! And then betrayed me!*
But now wasn't the time for vengeance. I'd have to wait until Ordo got me off-planet before finding the opportunity.

But Canderous laughed, loud and mocking, and I understood then that he wasn't going to play nice. "You think I'd trust you again, Davik? Here's one lesson you shoulda' learnt long ago – never kriff with a Mando'ade."

He wrenched that massive gun up. The second I started running, the bastard opened fire.

xXx

**Jen Sahara:**

Fear and rage pummelled in tandem through my head; it was taking all my possible strength to stop from screaming as a nightmare unfolded all around. *Death! Death everywhere! Who am I?* I stared in shock at the two men talking to Canderous. *I am Jen Sahara!* I needed Bastila's support and strength, but she'd been shooting me worried, frightened looks ever since the earlier battle. *How did I do that? What's wrong with my mind?* I really, really wanted to see the doctor again, but it was just beginning to dawn on me that I probably never would.

Canderous opened fire on the two men facing him, and the one called Calo chucked a handful of grenades. I saw Carth retreat, blasters firing, and heard him yell in pain when one exploded. I clutched my vibrosword with trembling hands, staring at the fight ahead in numb disbelief. An insidious, foreign malevolence was creeping through my thoughts. A desire to rend, to vanquish, to destroy all in my path. *No! That's not my feelings! That's just wrong!* But a presence inside me, a part of me, had enjoyed killing those earlier men, and the acidic taste of smug satisfaction sat like poison in my mouth.

My vision turned blurry; green smoke was materializing throughout the hangar. I coughed, and covered my mouth with a hand. I heard a muffled *puff*, and somehow I recognized it as another gas grenade ejecting - despite never having encountered them before. The smokescreen all around me thickened ominously.

Canderous was cursing in Mandalorian, somewhere further ahead. And in front of me, a figure materialized. My eyes widened in horror as I recognized the bounty hunter, Calo Nord.

He swiftly flung an unknown projectile at my chest. Without any conscious thought, the alien fury took control of my limbs once more, and saved my life as my body dodged sharply to the side. I felt the skin on my face contort and curl into a hideous sneer, and a dark laugh erupted from my lungs. *This pathetic worm will die.*

"Imbecile!" the sneer bubbled up from my throat. *No! No! I am Jen Sahara!* The empowering, evil sense of might vanished from my limbs, and I stumbled in mid leap.

But Calo had stopped, frozen; whatever his expression was, it was hidden behind an armoured face mask set with round transparisteel goggles. "Who in the Outer Rim are you? I know you!"

I gulped, and jumped backwards. I'd never seen him before. *Had I?*

"Never mind," he grunted, his voice resolved once more. "It's your end, Human!" He pulled out a blaster, but just at that moment Bastila jumped out of the smoke in front of me, vibro-staff raised. Calo was sufficiently surprised that she managed to slice into his shoulder. He screamed, stumbled backwards, and spat laser fire at her.
Bastila whirled her blade furiously, and Calo's bolts reflected off the staff and into the surroundings. She pressed her advantage, jumping forward to challenge the bounty hunter.

Calo cursed as he began stumbling backward.

"You'll not kill me, Jedi!" Calo spat, and dropped a grenade at his feet. It hissed, erupted gouts of thick white smoke. Bastila lunged forward a little too late; Calo had already retreated, vanishing into the concealment his grenades provided.

"Davik's dead!" Canderous hollered from somewhere in the room. "Quick! Into the 'Hawk!"

Bastila grabbed my arm, guiding me up the loading ramp of the ship. I stumbled after her, the air thinning as durasteel walls rose to surround us. The pulsing of my heart thundered through me, and my mind was frozen. Who am I? Who am I really? The ship's floors shuddered under my feet as another explosion rocked the surroundings. Bastila's hand came out of her pocket, in a fist that looked like it was concealing something. She pulled me towards her with a rough yank. I stumbled, and felt a sharp prick in my upper arm.

"Don't worry, you'll be safe soon. I promise," Bastila whispered into my ear. A sudden heaviness grew in my limbs, and the black of impending unconsciousness began to creep in around the edges of my vision. A flare of fury ignited in the depths of my psyche, but it was weak and ineffectual against a growing exhaustion. The schutta sedated me! No, no, that sneering voice was evil and wrong. She's a Jedi. She wouldn't do that!

I'm just... so tired.

xXx

Carth Onasi:

My leg throbbed as I stumbled through the gas fog, coughing and breathing shallowly so as not to succumb to the poisonous smoke. I'd heard Canderous crow over Davik's death from somewhere in the room, but I could see nothing bar thick, white smoke. My hand whacked sharply against a hard surface, followed by my head. Ouch. Underneath my fingers, I could feel the durasteel grating of a freighter. The ship! Get moving, Onasi!

I clenched my teeth and squinted through the haze, which was beginning to thin. There – I could just make out the loading ramp - and I stumbled closer, hands outstretched. The hot adrenaline still surged like fire through my veins; it had since the moment we'd entered this damn estate, and ramped up like a furnace once the bombardment started.

A stress reaction was useful, so long as the fight or flight instinct were kept under tight control. Sometimes, the only thing that could get one through a situation was sheer grit.

Time to go fly this rust bucket. I only hope Mission's disabled the locks on the landing gear. I clambered inside, coming across Bastila standing over a crumpled Jen, a resolved look on her face. Jen's fallen again. I didn't know what to make of her anymore. I didn't really want to try. Ever since we landed on Taris, my damn head has been screwed on backwards. I'd never met anyone as mercurial and changeable as blasted Jen Sahara.

Bastila looked up at me sharply, a flash of fright dancing in her eyes.

"S-she fainted!" Bastila exclaimed quickly.

I narrowed my eyes at Bastila's defensive tone. Jen fainting was nothing new to me, but Bastila's
reaction didn't stack up, somehow.

"We're back, let's go!" Mission's bright voice from behind startled me.

"Everyone, get in the ship!" I yelled over my shoulder. "I'm heading straight to the cockpit!"

I heard a howl behind me as the Wookiee neared, and Bastila murmured something to him. The dull durasteel interior of the _Ebon Hawk_ greeted me as I rushed deeper into the unfamiliar freighter. I'd have time to become familiar with her later, but she was a medium sized _Dynamic_-class that was favoured by smugglers, so I had high hopes for her manoeuvrability.

I found the cockpit and settled into the pilot's seat, switching on the controls and locating the onboard communicator. A faint humming permeated the air as the electrics dazzled into life, and I leaned forward to speak through the internal comm.

"Everyone get strapped in! I'm taking her out, and it's going to be rough!" Outside the ferracrystal cockpit window the hangar doors had been blasted open, and a scene of devastating carnage met my eyes. I didn't have time to dwell on the burning Tarisian landscape, but I knew what it would look like further afield. I knew the signs of war all the well. _I hope Mission doesn't see this. Damn those murdering Sith!_

As I began prepping the freighter for take-off, Bastila entered the cock-pit, breathless, and squeezed into the co-pilot's chair. I gave her a brief smile, and hoped the Jedi had had some navigational experience.

The ship's self-diagnostic beeped, and a ready status blinked on the console. I fired up the engines. The turbine compressor started with a high-pitched whirring, building up pressure for the fusion engines to kick into life. Bastila strapped herself in tightly, and I flicked open the comm again.

"I'm heading out," I said calmly as the engines roared to life beneath us. The ship lifted, and a sense of satisfaction filled me as we shot out of the burning estate.

Bastila gasped; fiery buildings were visible on all sides, and a scraper toppled precariously in front of us as I banked the _Hawk_ sharply to the right and up, up into the sky. We left the ruins of civilization behind, but plasma fire still spat down from the heavens on all sides. I veered upwards, weaving beneath the bombardment that I saw, but clouds of smoke hung heavy in the sky and it would be luck that would get us out of here in one piece.

"Get the droid to transmit the launch codes on all external frequencies," I said through gritted teeth. "I've got my hands full."

Bastila nodded, and reached for the communicator, relaying my order. I didn't dare raise the _Hawk_ too high until it was done; the Sith's automatic defense array activated in the upper atmosphere, and that was deadlier than playing chance with plasma fire.

The astromech droid beeped behind us, plugging into a bypass slot on the side of the cockpit wall. A moment later and the navigation console indicated the codes were being sent. I sighed in relief, raising the _Hawk's_ nose high into space.

"Plug in the hyperspace co-ordinates for Alderaan," I told Bastila, my eyes still fixed through the window as blue slowly darkened into black. We'd eased away from the bombardment, and it looked like the codes had worked. "We need to reach hyperspace as soon as we're out of the gravity well."

"We will head to Dantooine," Bastila informed me as she leaned towards the navigational panel.
"What?" I snapped, and then ahead, I saw we had company. A group of snubfighters materialized into view, and laser fire shot out towards us. I twisted the ship sharply to the side, and heard Bastila gasp in protest at the jolt.

"There's a Jedi enclave there where we can find refuge!" Bastila replied as she started tapping in our destination.

"I thought you said – oh, nevermind," I veered in the other direction, and then the ship shuddered briefly. A warning light blinked on the console. That was a hit. Dammit. I accelerated to maximum,

and flicked open the communicator.

"Incoming fighters!" I yelled. "Canderous, Mission, to the turrets! I need a few minutes before we can reach hyperspace!"

xXx

_Canderous Ordo:_

"Got ya!" I yelled in victory, as I twisted the gun controls around to find another easy target. "These Sith fighters are too puny!"

Mission Vao was seated in the turret control opposite mine, but so far had failed to shoot down a single enemy ship. And there were a lot out there.

"Hey, kid, would you start firing already?" I grunted at her. These fighters are the weak sentries of the Sith, but there's too many of them. She's gotta sharpen up!

"Look, I ain't never used one of these before!" she snapped back. "And I'm not a kid!"

"Just aim and shoot – it's kriiffing child's play," I retorted derisively as another ship came into view. I let loose on the turrets, and fire danced from the enemy fighter.

"I'm trying, okay?" she screamed back. "Look, my home is getting bombed! Cut me some slack!"

"No time for snivelling, girl!" I rapped back. "The best way to honour your loved ones is to kill their enemies! So go shoot kriiffing Sith!"

An answering fire from the Twi'lek's guns sounded through the turret room, and I hoped I'd finally gotten through to her. Until she sobbed.

"They're all dying down there!" she whined annoyingly, and dropped the controls.

_Haar'chak._ I kept my aim on the targeting area, but could feel my face creasing in annoyance. "I thought you were stronger than this. Maybe you are just a kid," I growled.

"Shut up, you old geezer!" she shrieked. "You don't care about anyone! You don't understand!"

I tried to remind myself that she was just a girl. _Maybe, just this once, she can get away with that sort of comment._ I understood grief, but it had its time and place. Not here, not now. "If you truly care about those weaklings on Taris, then you will kill as many of their murderers as you can, kid. These Sith fighters are busy destroying your planet, and all you can do is whine and moan about it?"

I heard her breathe in abruptly, and pressed my verbal attack. My fingers were getting slightly numb on the controls. "Look – we're gonna die if we don't give Republic the time he needs to enter hyperspace. Do me a favour and pull yourself together. Kill some of your friend's murderers while
you're at it.” I dragged my attention away from the kid's pathetic state, and focused purely on the incoming fighters. I'll just have to do this myself.

A few seconds later, and I heard the barrage of Mission Vao's guns flare up once more. About time.

"I got one!” she yelled at me. Her tone had turned angry, and my responding grin was a feral one.

"Good. Now get another one of the bastards!” I commanded.

All at once, the ship shuddered with an explosion. I cursed, and the Twi'lek girl bit off a scream as we were both yanked to the side.

Onasi's voice flickered over the ships speakers. "No serious damage. Our external communications are down. Prepare for the hyperspace jump."

I braced myself; the dancing light of enemy fire dazzled fleetingly into bright white as the ship launched into hyperspace.

xXx

Zelka Forn:

A loud hammering on the inside door sounded again, threatening and insistent, drowned out only by the explosive quaking of yet another bombardment destroying a nearby part of Taris. I cursed, bracing myself against the chrome medical bench, as a bed behind me toppled over and spilled an injured citizen to the ground unceremoniously. He screamed.

The flickering lighting came back on fully as the bombing subsided, but it would start up again soon. I could only hope for survival, and help any as best I could.

"Doctor Forn!” a loud female voice yelled from outside the bolted door. I'd secured it after Gurney had showed up with half a dozen Exchange thugs, intent on looting all medical supplies in the wake of the Sith bombing. A nearby explosion had caved in the front entrance of the facility, smothering him with rubble, and giving me the chance to retreat to my inner sanctum. "Open up, or we shall blow this door wide open! We need the supplies, and the Upper City is not safe!"

"Go away, you wretched thieves!” I yelled back, falling to my knees to examine the patient who'd toppled to the ground. He was moaning, semi-conscious, blood bubbling from a corner of his mouth. I had to hope that was due to his facial bruising, rather than one of his broken ribs inflicting internal injuries. "Opportunistic scum!"

The man in front of me needed a bacta tank, but they were all full. And in the case of an explosion hitting the medical facility, immersion in bacta fluid while hooked up to the controlling computer would make one all the more vulnerable. I sighed.

"Zelka Forn, the door is lined with permacrete detonators, and we are exploding the charge in ten seconds. Stand back!"

I gasped, turning to stare in horror at the secured durasteel door. Were there no depths that some people would not sink to? In the midst of such planet-wide tragedy, how could sentients turn into such depraved, selfish monsters?

"Five seconds!” the female voice called commandingly. My feet scabbled backwards of their own accord, away from the door, away from the injured patients that were too close to the oncoming blast-
The durasteel smashed open in a loud explosion of light and tearing metal, and I threw my arms up to cover my face, even as my ears rang from the cacophony and minor shards of debris slammed into me. I fell back, winded, and briefly passed out.

When my eyes opened, a heavily armoured pale blue Twi'lek woman was standing over me, a blaster pointed at my head. Her face was composed. Around her, I saw armoured sentients rifling through every drawer and cupboard, hastily stuffing all they could into pockets and rucksacks and utility belts. My face tightened in disgust.

"Zelka Forn," the Twi'lek said steadily. "Your reputation precedes you as a medical professional with both compassion and integrity. The Bek's could do with someone like you, if you are inclined to overcome your distaste at our methods."

My mouth dropped open, in disbelief at her utter gall, perhaps. In the distance, the booming noise of more plasma smashing through parts of Taris could be heard.

"The Bek's," I muttered in disgust. "First the Exchange, and now a swoop gang. Disaster brings out the scum of society, it seems."

The Twi'lek stared at me unblinkingly. "You're an idiot if you believe you can survive or help others up here, Zelka Forn. What's left of the Tarisian National Fleet is overwhelmed, if they haven't fled. Any aid from the Republic will be days away, maybe weeks. If you want to live your only chance is lower down, in some of the permacrete bunkers close to the Undercity. This is where the Bek's will survive, and help any others who do, too."

Her gaze was hard, and devoid of any emotion. "Help?" I snorted in disbelief. I had no time for any of the Lower City gangs. All too often, I'd patched up the injuries caused by them, to innocents or to other gang members. "You lot help others?"

For the first time, the woman's face tightened in irritation. "I have shot people for less," she muttered, before sighing. "It's your choice, Zelka Forn. We will take the medical supplies for the people of the Lower City, those who are so often ignored by you Upper City snobs. Believe me when I say that you will not survive if you stay topside." She stepped backwards, allowing me room to stand. My gaze fell on an armoured gang member rummaging through a small basket on my desk.

"Hey," I protested, walking closer. "Drop that! Those are medical samples!" The Zeltron in question looked up and frowned as I strode closer. A handful of vials and hypodermics spilled onto the desk's surface, and I picked them up quickly. One derm was a mild violet colour; I recognized it as that strange sample the unstable Jen Sahara had given me. I pocketed it quickly into my medical kit.

"Boss, the southwest quadrant has collapsed," a Rodian spoke from the door, staring at the communicator on his wrist. "The main thrust of the bombardment is headed this way. We've gotta get down to the Undercity, before all routes are blocked."

"Finish up!" the Twi'lek woman in charge called. "Grab everything you can, we're leaving in two!" She stared at me again, striding forward to speak. "Last chance, Zelka Forn. Come with us, and you'll be free to help injured survivors in relative safety, as per the code you would have trained by. I can promise you the protection of the Bek's, and we have some medical equipment, if not what you're used to." Her lips thinned before she continued. "Or we shall leave you here to take your chances against the Sith bombs."

I stared at her in silence for a moment, as the sounds of destruction further afield were once more audible. I could feel the background vibration of explosions tearing up parts of Upper Taris and I knew, in my gut, that I would not survive here.
Lower down I might be able to help others, even if it meant throwing my lot in with a swoop gang of all things.

The gang members were finishing up, coming to surround the Twi'lek leader who was still waiting for my decision, impatience beginning to show upon her pale blue face. I gave her a brief nod, unwilling to speak, and she smiled a hard smile at me.

"Good," she said quietly. "I am Zaerdra. Now come! Follow me."

xXx

**Bastila Shan:**

I breathed a sigh of relief as the ship lurched forward, that minute-long pull of acceleration before it settled into the automatic thrum of hyperspace travel. *Finally. Finally I can relax somewhat.* My shoulders felt like knotted coils of stiffened rope, and my throat was dry and stiff.

Carth groaned in the pilot's chair, and slumped forward.

"Good work," I said softly. My eyes closed. "That did not look easy."

"Why, thank you," his response was dry, but not unfriendly, and I felt him move next to me. "I need some caffa. I hope Davik's fully supplied this ship."

"So do I," I replied, opening my gaze to look at him. Carth was busy undoing his harness. "Crime lords would usually plan for unexpected situations, so I believe our chances are good."

Carth gave me a nod of acknowledgement before standing. "I'll go see if you're right, because we have thirty-five hours before we hit Dantooine. Enough time for everyone to get hungry." He made to move around me, and then I spotted the blood on his leg. And his limp.

"Carth, you're injured!" I exclaimed in worry.

"Yes. Hanging around you and crazy Jen is getting more and more hazardous to my health," he muttered under his breath, combing a hand through his thick dark hair.

"Let me help," I offered, and it was automatic to reach out to the Force and submerge his limb. He winced and jumped backwards, eyes flashing irritation at me.

"Dammit, Bastila, you could at least ask first!" he protested, backing away.

I lifted an eyebrow at his objection, and his response was an angry scowl. Ever since Revan had started behaving... well, more and more like she should, Carth had been in a permanent black mood.

"I... apologize, Carth," I said in puzzlement. "I assumed you would desire my services."

"I'll be right back," he muttered as he walked out of the cockpit.

I sighed, and slouched back into the chair. I had not meant to earn Carth's ire, but I had thought anyone would appreciate Force healing. Canderous had not desired it earlier, either, and perhaps I needed to learn from that. I sighed a second time. Sometimes, it seemed like social niceties and customs were both foreign and nonsensical to me.

Now that immediate danger had passed, my mind curtailed back to the primary source of my fright. Greater than Davik's forces, greater than the Sith bombardment. *Darth Revan.* I'd felt it, I'd *seen* her face, I'd tasted it through the bond. There was no doubt about it, some spark of the former Sith Lord
remained in the shell, and it was mind-linked to me.

Revan's scathing words hissed earlier to Davik's thugs came back to torment me cruelly. *Pathetic weakling! You can't best me!* Exactly what she had once said to me. Just after she had cut down Master Kester and Master Jai'lel.

My eyes closed wearily, and the taste of fear was sour in my mouth. *Darth Revan is coming back.* Galdea and Vima had assured me it was nigh impossible, but something had changed. Something had gone awry. And without Master Galdea's supervision, or any of the Jedi Knights accompanying me on the *Endar Spire*, I was all alone with an amnesiac Sith Lord.

_There is no emotion; there is peace._ I breathed in deep, and forced myself to a calm state. While I would give anything to have one of my former companions back - my dear friend Kylah perhaps, or Master Galdea for his wisdom and knowledge - I was a member of the Jedi Order, and I would impart myself as such. We had made it from Taris, and that was a victory in itself. Whatever cracks were appearing in the façade of Jen Sahara could be fixed on Dantooine. *As soon as they locate Knight Vima or Master Karon,* an inner voice monologued irritably. For the two other Jedi involved in the personality implant were both famed for their wandering ways, and thus unlikely to be at the Enclave. *But the personality of Jen Sahara is there, in Revan's mind. It just needs to be strengthened. That is something I can possibly do.*

Perhaps, when we reached Dantooine, the masters would allow me a reprieve from babysitting Revan. *They have surmised the rough location of the Star Maps on Tatooine and Manaan. Perhaps I will not be needed there.* Wouldn't that be lovely. I wasn't foolish enough to pray that I might be able to step out permanently; I understood with hellish trepidation that the bond joining me to Revan meant it was impossible for me to totally avoid the Council's mission.

Would I have saved her, had I known the repercussion would be a Force bond? Would I have left her to die, alone on her flagship, rather than mind-link myself to someone as corrupted as she? I would like to think that I would still have chosen mercy, but in truth I did not know. *I did not know.*

Surely the Council would understand I needed some time to recuperate, to meditate and find my center, my calm. So much had happened; the deaths of those I cared for, Brejik's violations, and simply the mental trauma of being near Revan. *Ever since she rescued me, I find myself acting less and less like a Jedi.* Canderous' sarcastic words taunted me. "*How very Jedi-like of you, princess.*" I snapped my eyes open angrily. I *detested* that loathsome Mandalorian.

*But in some ways, he may be correct. I lied to Revan about Alderaan, I tripped Mission using the Force, and now I've sedated Revan.* I reminded myself that she was simply too dangerous for me alone to handle, but I could not quite swallow the excuse. *She frightens me. That is the truth.*

*I am scared. I have faced Darth Revan before. I do not wish to do so again.* It had been mere luck that Malak had fired upon the ship when he did; happenstance that I'd had warning and Revan had not. For I still did not know who would have won our encounter. Undoubtedly, Darth Revan was far more powerful than I, and my companions had already been killed, but we were duelling through the mental side of the Force… a place where my strength and even experience outweighed hers. Would she have kept challenging me so, had her old lover not intervened? For all that Darth Revan had to do was pull her mind back, activate her lightsaber and attack, and I would have been lost. Without Kester and Jai'lel, I would not have had a chance.

But it was a mystery I might never know the answer to. I pushed away the memory of how frightened I had been in that encounter, and told myself over and over that I was strong, I was confident, I was capable. *I am weak, and scared,* my mind echoed back. I wondered briefly if Revan had ever felt that way. *She always seemed so sure of herself and what she was doing. I could never*
fathom why someone so bright and powerful would turn to the decaying road of the Dark Side. I had tried to understand, before she had regained consciousness as Jen Sahara. The old memory resurfaced, and I could still see Revan's broken body strapped down into the Enclave's life support system, tubes feeding kolto and nutrients and sedation into her body.

...  

"Why do you think Revan and Malak turned to the Dark Side?" I asked softly over Revan's comatose body. I'd heard many theories, and formulated my own, but I was especially interested in Master Karon's viewpoint. After all, the Zabrak had been one of three involved in the rebuilding of Revan's mind, and was also the Sith Lord's first master.

Master Karon sighed softly, her turquoise eyes troubled. "It is not merely one thing, Padawan. It is a complex set of issues. Although certainly, your own master always argues that their age worked against them."

I nodded; Master Vrook was a vehement believer that Jedi needed to be brought to the Order young, while their emotions could still be moulded and their familial ties cut. Attachment was a danger to all Force users.

"They could count fifteen galactic years when you found them, is that right, Master Karon?"

"Sixteen," the Zabrak corrected quietly. "We have learned from the past, and normally would not train sentients at such an age. Or if we did, we would do so very slowly and warily."

"So why the exception?" The meteoric rise of Revan and Malak through the Order was well known. Their training, unlike my own, was the very opposite of slow.

"Their sheer power. It burned and glowed like a supernova." Master Karon looked at me steadily. "I was with the team that went to Talshion, where we first discovered them, and I have never sensed so much raw Force strength in an individual. In them both. Leaving them behind on the streets of a forgotten Outer Rim planet was not an option."

I turned back to face the prone figure, wrapped in a thin if discreet surgical robe. Revan's skin was still pallid from the length of time spent in the bacta tank.

"Do you think they were doomed to fall, then?" I asked. To fall from such heights of heroics... there must have been something innately flawed in them both. There must have.

"No. I do not believe anyone is, Padawan." Master Karon rested her hand gently over Revan's limp and pale one. The Sith markings had begun to fade with her disconnect from the Force. The bond allowed me that control - to separate her from the Force - once Master Galdea and Knight Vima had worked out how. Their tutelage had been enlightening, and I could now manipulate the Force that connected me to Revan.

Provided she did not know it was there, Revan – no, Jen Sahara - would have no reason to suspect she could access the Force, or that there was a barrier in the way.

"The War, too, played a part in their fall," Karon continued, her voice soft. "For no one can go through the horrors of battle and remain untouched. The decisions that Revan had to make as a general – that all the Jedi Thirteen were forced into as they led troops against the Mandalorians – would have caused scars on their souls. War is harder for Force sensitives, Padawan. The Order knows this. We feared what would happen if Jedi once more walked the battlegrounds of men."

I nodded. The Order had forbidden any Jedi to fight in the War, and Revan and Malak disobeyed
that twice. Once, for a year-long reconnaissance mission. Twice, with dozens of Jedi Knights following them, the brightest forming the Jedi Thirteen - the Jedi leaders who worked with the Republic commanders against the Mandalorians.

"But my belief is their forbidden love was the primary factor." Karon's voice was so low now I struggled to hear it. "Passion clouds one's judgement. It is hard to remain logical and serene when in love. Perhaps if we had separated them from the outset, things may have been different, but Zhar and I feared what such separation may do to two so emotionally intertwined with one another. Perhaps we were wrong."

Master Zhar had been Malak's master once. Kind and affable, he and Karon were lifelong friends, so it was only natural that they would take on Revan and Malak together. Revan and Malak, who were childhood friends and teenage lovers before the Jedi found them. Perhaps Master Karon and Master Zhar expected Revan and Malak's passion to fade away to something like the camaraderie they themselves shared. But anyone who had ever met Revan or Malak before their fall would know what emotive characters they had been – they were nothing like the calm Karon Enova or the gentle Zhar Lestin. "It is a good lesson about the pitfalls of passion, is it not, Master Karon?"

She nodded. "Yes. But the consequences..." she sighed again. "Once, Revan Freeflight's ultimate goal was the stability and peace of the Republic. Yet she did her best to destroy it. Once, Malak Devari's overriding desire in life was Revan's happiness and safety. Yet he tried to kill her, and believes he has. That is the Dark Side for you, Padawan." Her turquoise eyes stared at me unblinkingly. "It grants you power quickly, promises you everything you desire, and then twists you and one day you find yourself destroying that which was once the most important to you."

I shivered.

"The personality rebuild is now complete, is it not?" I asked. After all this talk, some reassurance would be beneficial to my state of mind. Although Knight Vima had already told me of its success, and there was no denying Vima Sunrider's expertise, I was content to hear the results a second time.

"Yes. The persona of Jen Sahara has been successfully implanted, with some of the original Jen's memories repressed, of course," she told me. I winced. I had seen what the Sith had done to the scholar before she had died of her injuries in the Enclave.

"How have you linked Jen Sahara to the Order?"

"A few artificial memories intertwined with Jen's history." Karon took a step away from the body on the medical bed, smiling tiredly at me. She wished to leave, now, I could tell. "I do believe the Council will tell you more, Padawan, when they speak to you later this afternoon."

I nodded, and Karon left me there, staring at the empty shell of a monster. I spent more time in talks with the Council than sleeping, it seemed, since I came back from Deralia with a brain damaged Sith Lord mind-linked to me. While I desired more acknowledgement within the Order, being this close to the corrupted soul of Darth Revan seemed a heavy price to pay.

…

I opened my eyes again, and stared blankly out at the empty blackness of hyperspace, cut through with lines of white. Soon the masters will take care of Revan. I can strengthen Jen Sahara long enough for the personality to hold, and the masters will do more. Dantooine was less than two standard days away, and the sedation may last for as long as twenty hours of that, if I was lucky. And provided Jen Sahara's life was not in immediate danger, it did not seem like Darth Revan would resurface.
It will not be long until this trial is over. I could do this. I could.

And I would.

xXx

Calo Nord:

My damaged ship was slowly being pulled in by the Sith's trajectory beam, and I scowled at the wait. It had taken enough convincing to stop those diseased bastards from blowing me into space-dust to begin with. But I hadn't had the launch codes, and they were pretty trigger-happy up there, firing on anything that dared escape the mess they were making on Taris.

I had hoped to fly from Taris in Davik's baby, the Ebon Hawk. I'd co-piloted it with Davik before, and she was a sleek thing, the 'Hawk: quick, manoeuvrable, and with more shielding than a freighter her size should boast. I'd even packed the cargo hold full of kit in preparation: food, equipment, armour – all the essentials. The plan was to take some of Davik's top mercenaries and blast off Taris before the crime lord had even realized I'd gone. End him too, if I scored the chance. Davik had turned on Ordo quick enough, after all. I wasn't fool enough to think I was immune from his suspicion.

Seems like that Mandalorian scum had the same idea as me. Oh, Ordo would get what was coming to him, one day. No one walked away from Calo Nord and survived for long. I'd make him pay and take the 'Hawk back, make him burn or suffocate or drown in one of those ways his stupid people considered dishonourable.

Death is death, whether you're Mandalorian or Twi'leki or Zeltron. Idiot.

But first, I had to appease the Sith. It was the Leviathan pulling me in, an Interdictor-class heavy cruiser built back during the Mandalorian Wars, and probably the most famous ship in Darth Malak's fleet. The Leviathan meant Admiral Karath – a man I'd read a lot about even if I'd never met him. Strategically brilliant, he'd switched sides along with Jedi Knight Revan Freeflight, and was one of the reasons Darth Revan had been so successful. From what I knew, his loyalty had been to Revan rather than Malak, and I doubted whether Darth Revan's demise had made the admiral particularly happy.

Although, by then Darth Revan was getting trigger-happy and ice-cold. Just like Darth Malak was becoming unhinged, if not insane. I'd met Malak before. I'd completed a prep job for him on Deralia about a year ago, but his own idiot Dark Jedi had botched the implementation. Embroiling oneself in a squabble between Sith Lords went deep into the territory of suicidal - but, well. I hadn't known at the time his true target had been Revan. And the credits involved had been... more than alluring.

It all went belly-up, though. Deralia had been all but flattened, Darth Revan had walked away unscathed, and I vanished, deciding the risk of either Sith Lord's vengeance wasn't worth the missing credits. The Dark Jedi involved, I understood, had been cut down by Revan herself – even including Arran Da'klor, and he'd been one of the famed Jedi Thirteen.

It worked out to Malak's advantage in the end, though, for Bastila Shan's secret strike force were in the area and used the ensuing chaos to attack Darth Revan – and then Darth Malak fired on her ship simultaneously. So, Malak had the outcome he wanted anyway, but I wasn't willing to test the bounds of his forgiveness, and gave up the commission without a second glance despite the fact I'd successfully completed my part.

Now, I had a choice between dealing with an unknown – Admiral Karath – or asking him to hail Darth Malak and speak to the Sith Lord myself. The news that Bastila Shan escaped Taris would be
worth something, surely. It wasn’t my fault that Arran Da’klor kriffed things up so badly a year ago, and lost Malak a dozen or so of his stronger Dark Jedi. Surely the Dark Lord of the Sith would understand that. I’d recognized Captain Carth Onasi with Shan as well – another survivor from the *Endar Spire*, and a mildly famous one to boot, even if his significance paled when compared to Shan’s. In my line of work it paid to remember faces, and the Republic captain was an easy one to recall.

Darth Malak might even be willing to send me on another mission, this time tailing the *Ebon Hawk* and killing or capturing her crew. I felt the beginnings of a smile. That meant going after Canderous Ordo, and I’d be willing to do that for no credits. I’d have to list the other crew members – that Bek brat, Mission Vao, no danger there. A Wookiee was strong, but easily dispatched by surprise. And then there was that crazy woman Bastila had saved…

I frowned as I tried to recollect her features. A strange sense of familiarity had clouded me when I faced her, when her features had contorted into that ugly, malevolent sneer. I knew her name – Jen Sahara – and that she had braved the Vulkars to rescue Bastila Shan. So there was a connection there, a strong one it seemed. *They’ve saved each other’s lives, but she’s not a Jedi. So why did she seem so familiar?* I frowned in concentration as I rifled through my memories. I prided myself on my photographic memory, and it was annoying that this stupid woman eluded my grasp.

*It was that expression I have seen before, the hatred in the eyes. But green… the eyes weren’t green.*

A recollection from the dredges of my mind resurfaced...

…

*I followed Darth Malak out of the command centre, greed and unease clashing in my head. It was an impressive amount the Sith Lord was offering me but… Getting involved in Dark Jedi politics is liable to end ones life. I was beginning to doubt the ease with which Malak assured me this trap could be laid. If I had known the full extent of this job beforehand, I would never have agreed.*

*It was too late now. Malak was sure to kill me if I opted out. I’d just have to make sure I succeeded.*

"Malak," a deep female voice called up ahead, and Darth Malak stopped in front of me, his black cloak swirling around him.

*He bowed. "Master," he acknowledged gravely.*

Just the person I didn't want to run into. *I cursed inwardly, as the Dark Lord of the Sith herself walked around her apprentice and appraised me. She wore no mask, for once, just a midnight hood casting her face into obscure shadows.*

*Her black eyes were pits of soullessness in a marked face of depravity. Unfamiliar fright iced my spine as I suddenly felt pinned by that gaze, helpless as a tach beneath a spear, staring into the depths of perdition.*

Kiribi is 099,099,011, *I thought desperately.* Saleucami is 08,05,29. Coruscant is 0,0,0. *I continued on, forcing my mind to rattle off a litany of hyperspace coordinates, focusing on the numbers and nothing else.*

*There were certain mental tricks one could do to fly under the radar of a mental Force probe. It wouldn't stop an overt psychic attack, but it might be enough to convince her of my insignificance.*

*Maybe.*
"And who is this?" she rapped out.

"His name is Calo Nord, Master," Malak said smoothly. "He is a renowned bounty hunter, and I have hired him to infiltrate the smuggling ring around Exinar."

The lies glided effortlessly out of Malak's mouth. I couldn't look away from those swirling lightless eyes, and I saw the birth of malevolence, of rage, darker than all the hells in the galaxy, burning in her black, black eyes.

"You're moving against Exinar without informing me?" Her voice had dropped to a raspy, dangerous tone. The hairs on my neck stood up, and I wouldn't have been able to speak even had she demanded it.

"Of course not, Master." Malak tilted his head in concession. "We are at the planning stage only. I would not take another step further without consulting you."

"Good." The word was a hiss. And then, like a flick of a switch, the fury in those eyes vanished. A smirk twisted her shadowed face. "Perhaps you can now. Come with me."

She turned and walked away, and Malak followed.

…

A feeling of shocked disbelief whirled inside my mind. No, it can't be! Can it? The eyes were different... but the look was the same. The same hideous, twisted, fury. I quickly recalled the structure of Jen Sahara's face, and tried to match it in my mind. *Darth Revan's skin was sickly, pale white. But the cheekbones are the same*. Identical slanting eyes, and standard forehead. Small nose, and pointed chin.

*Bastila was protecting Jen Sahara. Bastila was the one who faced Darth Revan, and somehow escaped Lord Malak's attack*. Was it possible that Bastila had also saved the life of Darth Revan herself? *The Jedi are cowing fools. Is it conceivable that the Jedi somehow rescued Darth Revan, and now have her under their power?*

The similarities in her face were too close. And that same look of rage...

*Darth Malak needs to be told about this.*

xXx
I sipped my caffea slowly as I stared blankly out the cockpit window. I found it almost hard to believe that we’d actually made it – recovered Bastila and escaped a Sith blockade – and were now on our way to safety. It seemed that everything had fallen perfectly together in one last rush. Even the hit to the Ebon Hawk was minor; the astromech droid had confirmed what was displaying on the navicomputer – other than our communications relay, the rest of the ship was sound.

It was the devastation we'd left behind that stopped me from feeling any joy. It didn't matter how many times I'd seen this sort of onslaught, it was always the damn same – innocent people being slaughtered under the banner of conquest. Every time I was confronted with the burning ruins of civilization, I only had to close my eyes and it would morph into the ruins of Telosian architecture.

Telos. My home planet. Bombed into oblivion by the Sith three years ago, so viciously that the atmosphere acidified and left it uninhabitable. I forcibly turned my thoughts away, unwilling to, yet again, dwell on the darkest part of my past.

But Taris… it'd been hit before, during the Mandalorian Wars, and had survived the economic aftermath only by negotiating an uneasy truce with the Sith. There’d been a push in the Senate to offer Taris Republic status some years back. Its geographic location near some of the primary hyperspace routes in the Outer Rim made it a logistical gem, but as I understood it, too much political wrangling on both sides had deadlocked that suggestion. I sighed. Republic citizenship may have alleviated this mess, or the Sith may have simply attacked earlier, when the escape pods of the Endar Spire had first rained down on Taris.

My eyes slid to Bastila, who was deep in thought, knees tucked up under her chin in the co-pilot's chair. She looked young, so young, even though I knew her to be in her mid-twenties. The Sith attacked to get at her. It was a grim thought, but I couldn't think of any other objective. Darth Malak had laid waste to the Endar Spire, all to capture Bastila. When she escaped to Taris, the Sith descended and quarantined the planet. Had Malak's patience worn thin enough that he'd fire on a neutral planet just in the hopes of killing one Jedi? But Bastila Shan wasn't just one Jedi. She was an emerging icon of Jedi heroism, whether she knew it or not. Her star was rising, much like Revan's and Malak's once had, and the galactic news loved nothing more than to speculate on the strength of her battle meditation.

I'd seen the effects of her talents before, and it was hard to explain. Every soldier affected felt braver, their focus sharper, and their reflexes honed. Somehow, risky manoeuvres paid off, while the defense of the Sith would blunder, seemingly stymied by relatively weak attacks. Battle meditation couldn't pull victory out from a lost cause, but it could tip the scales. And it had, more than once.

Which made it all the more questionable why the Jedi and the Republic would risk her on a secret mission. I’d had little success at gaining any information about why the Endar Spire had been travelling to Tatooine, other than the standard Jedi Business riposte. I’d been a figurehead there, ostensibly keeping an eye on the pilots, but in reality doing a terrible job at engaging the Jedi onboard in any sort of tactical discussion. I grimaced, glancing back to Bastila again. She had been conspicuous with her absence back then, avoiding most of the command discussions and leaving them to Master Galdea, the senior Jedi who blandly stated on numerous occasions that Bastila was
the effective commander of the mission. It seemed like he wanted to ensure Bastila had authority, in case she was ever required to make snap decisions without any consultation.

I frowned. *That* didn't really make sense, either, although I assumed it had something to do with her battle meditation again. I wondered if, now that we had idle time, it would be possible to draw her into conversation.

"So," I began, feeling slightly awkward. "Dantooine. You mentioned a Jedi enclave?"

Bastila blinked, as if coming out from deep thought, and turned to face me. "I- yes. It is not widely known. The home of the Order is located on Coruscant, of course, but we do have Enclaves and Academies further afield. Dantooine is my home Enclave."

I nodded. "It seems our communications are down, so we won't be able to give anyone foreknowledge of our arrival."

"Oh," she replied, and looked a little lost.

I grunted. *I* would have liked to contact Admiral Dodonna after these weeks of silence, but hyperspace communication wasn't the most reliable at the best of times. A warble from behind had us both turning to face the astromech, and a message illuminated briefly on a small display panel he was facing towards us.

"The relay's totally fried," I muttered, reading his second diagnostic. "No comms at all, no chance of repairing it onboard without replacement parts, even if we had a mechanic. Sourcing the parts shouldn't be a problem on Dantooine." The rest was the same as earlier; apart from some minor damage to the hull's main shields, the ship was fine. "As long as a lack of comms isn't a problem landing."

"Dantooine is a farming community. We may receive a fine and reprimand for not announcing our atmospheric entry, but that can be resolved once we dock," Bastila answered. I nodded in response. Some ports were overtly hostile to incoming traffic that didn't negotiate with spaceport control. Manaan tended to claim control of any unknown ships, while Nar Shaddaa just fired on everything that hadn't paid in advance.

"From there, what happens to the ship? The crew?"

"What do you mean, Carth?" Bastila replied, frowning. I sighed at her ignorance. She was either showing a remarkable lack of foresight, or she was too deep in whatever Jedi ruminations were running through her mind to adequately consider our situation.

"Look, the Mandalorian is liable to claim the ship is his and do a runner. Mission's just lost her home. *That* made me pause. She'd be taking it terribly, all her friends behind, with no knowledge if they survived the bombardment. I'd have to go check on her soon. "I- I guess she and Zaalbar are going to follow Jen, who's not exactly acting like herself in case you hadn't noticed."

Bastila's face had paled, and whether it was due to the thought of Ordo pinching the 'Hawk or Jen's erratic behaviour I didn't know. Jen was still out cold, I'd found out earlier when I'd brewed a quick cup of caffa in the kitchenette. It had been hours since the hyperspace jump, and her injuries from the mad dash through Davik Kang's stronghold had been minor – she should have been awake by now. Maybe her body needed a break from acting like different people. I scowled.

"Jen is one of my crew," Bastila said at last, and her voice was quiet and low. "Her employment contract is with the Jedi Order, and she is under our protection."
I could feel my brows lowering with irritation. Not so long ago, Jen had seemed determined to run; run from Bastila and the Jedi and the Republic. It had disappointed me… angered me, even, that she’d turn her back on a mission so obviously critical to the war effort, even if I didn't understand why her skill set would assist the likes of Bastila Shan. But now, this meek game she was playing… and, it had to be a game. The only other conclusion would be that Bastila was using the Force to manipulate Jen into submission. Bastila was uptight, inexperienced and occasionally snappish, but the thought of Bastila manipulating the Force like that on Jen seemed bordering on paranoia.

Even though I’d known Jedi in the past who’d turned into monsters they never would have dreamed of, it was a lot more likely that reckless Jen was the one at fault here. And that bugged me. Scratch that, Onasi, how about it straight out pisses you off. Our interactions had hardly been peaceful, but I owed Jen my life, as much as she owed me hers. She was amazingly competent, scholar or not, and would be an asset to the war effort. She’d be better off fighting as a soldier than helping the Jedi with research. It just didn’t… fit with her character.

Except it did, back on the Endar Spire, I realized that with a cold clarity that had me straightening in my seat. I’d seen her only a few, brief times; only taken note of her really because her transfer onboard had been at the direct order of the Jedi team, and the lack of any other scholars made it stand out. I recalled her, once or twice, blushing in my direction before scurrying away, but all those impressions had disappeared since our explosive crash landing on Taris and the days that followed.

She was the epitome of a quiet, shy scholar from a backwater planet, then. And that is exactly how she has been acting since we rescued Bastila. No, no, it was the day after Bastila joined us, but the timing might still be significant. I frowned. Do the Jedi scare her for some reason? The thought of the Jen Sahara I knew running scared seemed ridiculous. But she wanted to run from Bastila. Is this some game to lull Bastila into complacency before she runs?

I didn’t like thinking ill of Jen, which was stupid in itself, considering how reckless her words and actions sometimes were. My thoughts were turning full circle in on themselves, and the introspection was starting to irritate. But, just as I decided that it was time to leave the cockpit, Bastila spoke up.

"What do you think of Jen, Carth?"

I twitched slightly at the question, unnerved how accurate it was with my current thoughts, and bit out a blatant lie. "I generally try not to."

I turned to see Bastila raising an eyebrow at me. "Really, Carth. You've been working with her for what- weeks now? Surely you must have some idea of her character."

I sighed, raking a hand through my hair. It was getting long, I realized, and overdue for a cut. "I don't know. She's a loose cannon, Bastila. I mean…” I trailed off, still trying to figure the damn woman out in my head. "I just can't imagine her locked up in some learning institute, studying."

Bastila's voice turned tentative. "Has she been very angry?"

I frowned, turning to look at her. "Angry? Heh. Yeah. She seems to get angry at everything." But that wasn't really fair. Generally, Jen was sassy more than anything. Her inability to take things seriously was, at times, galling, even if it did occasionally lighten the mood. "Maybe that's not entirely true, Bastila. She's reckless more than anything. Brave, too." The rancor in the sewers sprang to mind. "She can be generous." The money she threw away on that harassed merchant was an indicator of that. "Annoying." She had an innate ability to hound and exasperate me. This current meek act was the worst, even if it was directed at Bastila. "Really annoying." Stang, I'm rambling. I sighed. "She's just crazy, Bastila. Recklessly crazy."
Bastila was staring at me with a peculiar expression on her face.

"What?" I snapped.

"Never mind," she replied, but her dark eyes still bored into mine questioningly.

"I'm going to check on Mission." I stood, realizing my departure was somewhat abrupt, but the conversation was beginning to feel uncomfortable. I hadn't yet walked around the freighter, either, although I was already familiar with the layout thanks to the ship's computers.

I left the cockpit and headed down the utilitarian durasteel corridor towards the centre of the ship. A small room, likely the pilot's quarters, was on my left, and further ahead the corridor spilled out into the central common room I'd gone into earlier. It was the largest area in the ship, excluding the cargo bay, and housed a kitchenette on one wall, tatty plimfoam benches around the exterior and a large plasteel table. It was obviously the hub of the freighter, and boasted five exits. One led to a small storage room, and the other four were the main corridors within the ship.

It was empty, although I spotted a dirty dish on the kitchenette bench, and the food synthesizer's heating light was still on. I hadn't thought of eating, yet, not while the destruction of Taris sat so heavy in my mind, but it was comforting to realize that at least we didn't have to worry about the bare necessities.

I briefly poked my head into the small supply room, and was surprised to see a hard bed in there and shelves stocked with medical supplies. At a pinch, this could easily double as a medbay. If this room was anything to go by, then the crime lord Davik Kang had kept his ship well equipped and was used to trouble.

I wandered further around the ship, curious about the cargo bay and it's contents, and stopped when I saw the large form of Canderous throwing what looked suspiciously like short knives at the far wall. What, he doesn't like the décor? After further inspection, I noticed the Mandalorian had hooked up a half-tattered combat suit on the wall that had obviously seen better days. Several knives stuck jaggedly out of it.

"Trying to improve your aim, Ordo?" I muttered.

Canderous turned around to appraise me, and grinned. Before I could blink, he had drawn another knife and thrown it in my direction. I couldn't quite hide a jump of surprise as the blade thwacked into the wall half a metre from my head. It quivered.

"Sithspit!" I growled, glaring at him. "Are you trying to start a fight, Mandalorian?"

He laughed. "If I was, you'd already be down on the floor, Republic."

I scowled at him, inwardly debating the merits of taking this further, before pulling the knife out of the wall with a grunt. It was well balanced and unadorned; a weapon rather than a decoration. I pocketed it and left the room, Canderous' mocking laughter following me down the ship's corridor.

There were two living quarters on either side of the freighter, and it was the port one where I heard the sounds of quiet sobbing. Mission. She was so young to have to deal with something like Taris. Another reason why those Sith bastards had to be stopped by any means possible.

I wasn't sure if my presence would help or make things worse, but I had to try. I opened the door and found Mission curled up in Zaalbar's arms, her face pressed tightly against the snarled fur of the Wookiee.
Zaalbar looked up as I approached, frowning. He rumbled something gently to the Twi'lek, who lifted her head to face me.

"Hi Carth," she sniffed, rubbing at red-rimmed eyes that stood out in stark contrast to her pale blue complexion.

"Hey," I said softly as I took a step closer. "Uh, you okay?" It was a stupid question, and I winced. I was useless in situations like this, but I felt terrible for the girl. I knew all too well the pain she would be feeling. In the corner of my eye, I noticed the prone form of Jen slumped on one of the two bottom bunks in the room.

"N-not really. I still can't believe it. All my friends… everything… I don't even know how bad it is. It looked like the whole place was going up in flames!" She dropped her face into her hands, and the old grief tore at my insides. Taris would be rebuilt over time, perhaps, but it would keep the scars. Just like it had in the past.

"I don't know what to say," I said helplessly. I suddenly didn't know why I had come here. Words had never helped me, either. But I hated to see the kid go through what I had once.

"I don't really think there's anything you can say. I just have to find some way to deal with it, I guess." Her voice was muffled against Zaalbar's chest. The Wookiee was glaring at me; I wondered whether my words were just upsetting the Twi'lek more. She muffled another sob against Zaalbar. "I don't know how people can move on from something like this."

"You- you do," I responded hesitantly. "But it takes a long time. And part of it always stays with you."

"How would you know?" she snapped angrily, her mood swinging abruptly as she twisted to glare at me. Zaalbar growled, less impressed with my presence than ever. I sighed in the face of her anger. Why did I say that? I don't want to talk about the past. All it does is rip open scabbed-over wounds.

"My home world was destroyed by the Sith," I said flatly. Don't ask anymore. Please. Mission's face had turned even paler, if that was possible. Her mouth shaped into a circle; her eyes widened as she stared at me in shocked surprise. "Oh! I-I'm sorry. I guess you do understand then, don't you?"

The sudden sympathy that grew on the Twi'lek's face humbled me. I don't need pity. But... that she would feel bad for me when it's her own home busy burning... I understood then that Mission had a very big heart.

I looked around for a distraction – the quarters were stark, plain, and empty other than the blankets on the beds – and my eyes caught once more on Jen's sleeping figure.

"She's been out like a drunk since we boarded the Ebon Hawk," Mission said, and her voice had lowered in tone. "Bastila said she just fainted from exhaustion, but Jen ain't waking up. It's been hours now!"

Zaalbar rumbled something in his language, and Mission turned her tear-streaked face to nod at him in agreement. "Neither do I, Big Z."

"Well, I guess if Bastila thinks she's okay-" I began.

"I think Bastila's hiding something. Jen's been weird ever since the Jedi joined us," Mission muttered.
I frowned as I stared at the girl. It was the same conclusion I'd had, before tossing it out as ridiculous. I didn't trust Bastila, but I trusted the wild, reckless Jen even less. "Bastila's a Jedi, Mission. This meek act of Jen that's driving us all crazy must be some mind game Jen's playing with Bastila."

Mission scowled at me and shook her head, headtails twitching in irritation. "No way, Carth. I know Jen. She hasn't been herself. And Bastila has something to do with it."

"You've only known her for about a week, Mission," I answered, in what I hoped was a reasonable tone.

"Sometimes that's all you need! Geez, Carth, where's your loyalty? Jen saved your life!"

Don't start an argument, I warned myself as I stared back at the irate teenager. "I can't – you can't ignore someone's faults just because they did you a good turn." I struggled to keep my tone neutral. "There is nothing worse than blind trust, Mission."

"Blin- how dare you, you overgrown nerf-herder!" she spat. Zaalbar growled loudly at me. "Jen's been nothing but good to us all – saved both your life and Big Z's! And now she's having some sort of problem – and it's got to do with that snooty, sneaky Jedi – and you want to just walk away? What sort of friend are you?"

I backed out of the door before my own anger boiled over. Zaalbar looked like he was ready to jump to his feet. Obviously Jen had captured both their trust, well and truly. "I see I'm upsetting you, Mission. I'm sorry, I didn't mean to do that. I- I'll talk to you later."

I exited through the door, and Mission yelled out another curse as my back. I could hear the Wookiee rumble something to her as I walked quickly away. "Nice one, Onasi. I thought, wishing I'd left well enough alone. Let's go upset the girl who's just seen her homeworld burn. But I hadn't quite predicted the depths of Mission's loyalty to someone as unpredictable and downright crazy as Jen. The Wookiee had that life-debt thing, and I knew Mission respected Jen, but it surprised me she was so willing to think badly of a Jedi. What if it isn't an act? What if Bastila really has done something to Jen? No... it just didn't seem plausible. I didn't trust the Jedi and their motives, but that was going too far.

Bastila has been totally protective of Jen as well. Which further enforced the theory that it was all a conscious act; for some reason Jen wanted Bastila's loyalty. As well as Mission's and Zaalbar's. Mission could be setting herself up for a betrayal.

I scowled angrily at myself, and headed back to the cockpit, resolving to put all thoughts of Jen Sahara firmly from my mind.

xXx

The Ebon Hawk was not a standard Dynamic-class freighter, I was beginning to realize, having spent some time poring over both the diagnostics Teethree had produced and the specifications from the ship's computer. It had been highly modified, particularly for manoeuvrability and speed, and boasted a reinforced hull and more shielding than was custom for a ship this size. It had two turbolaser turrets that Mission and the Mandalorian had commandeered during our escape from Taris, as well as the capability for firing proton torpedoes from the pilot's seat.

We were nearing Dantooine, and everyone had had a good chance to sleep. Bastila had been quick to claim the pilot's quarters, and frankly I wasn't up to the argument. Technically, she was my commanding officer still, and after her capture on Taris I could understand if the young woman required a little space.
Which left me bunking in with the Wookiee and the Mandalorian, and the quarters already had a faint pungent smell of wet fur. I wasn't looking forward to cleaning out the sonic refresher, although, all things considered, our stay on the 'Hawk should be brief. Dantooine was an Outer Rim world not that far from Taris, and I wondered just what my orders would be when we finally touched down and I made contact with Republic command.

I'd spotted Jen once earlier, eating a bowl of synthesizer mush in the common room next to Bastila on one of the benches. The Jedi had been quietly murmuring something to her, but stopped when I'd entered, so like an idiot I'd turned and headed back to the cockpit. Mission had been conspicuous with her absence, and I could only imagine that she was huddled in what had become the women's quarters, dealing with her grief in her own way.

I'd had a brief scout around in the cargo bay, this time encountering both the Mandalorian and the Wookiee inspecting the first of several crates roped against the inner hull. There would be time for a full inspection upon landing, and I wondered idly what surprises Davik Kang had left in store for us.

But now I was back in the cockpit, and we were nearing endgame. I felt a slight loosening in my shoulders with the realization that safety was not far away.

The hatch opened and Bastila strode in, giving me a small smile before skirting around Teethree and seating herself in the co-pilot's chair. A minute ago, I'd broadcast the message that everyone was waiting for: brace for hyperspace exit in five minutes.

"I am looking forward to some rest," Bastila murmured, as she strapped herself into the safety harness. "I only wish I had been able to forewarn the Masters of our impending arrival."

I inclined my head briefly. "We were lucky, though. The damage could have been worse. Much as I don't like to credit the Mandalorian, he was an ace on those turrets."

I heard an audible sniff as I kept my attention firmly on the navigational readouts. "I am sure he has seen a lot of bloodshed," came the rejoinder.

I felt the corner of my mouth turn up at her prim tone. Neither of us were particularly keen on Ordo, and I was sure the feeling was returned. In fact, he didn't seem to care for anyone, other than exhibit a vague fascination with Jen which irked for some reason.

"What will you do when we land on Dantooine?" Bastila asked, interrupting my train of thought.

"Patch a message through to Admiral Dodonna and await my orders," I said, surprised at the question. I would have expected that to be a fairly obvious course of action.

"You would not be willing to stay with the Jedi mission?" Bastila questioned. "I am sure the Council will send another group of Jedi knights to Tatooine. We must continue our quest, Carth."

"The Endar Spire was a heavy price to pay for that, Bastila. And the secrecy's obviously gone, so you have to ask yourself: are these old ruins you are hunting really worth it?" Too many people had died onboard. People I'd known well, strangers I'd only just met. What could be so important about some ancient excavation or relic?

Bastila paused, and I turned to look at her. Her face was ice. "Darth Malak awaited us at a refuelling point, Carth. He may not know that our destination was Tatooine. And as far as the old ruins go, the answer is a resounding yes. It may be our only hope of defeating Malak's armies."

Admiral Dodonna had imparted the importance of the Jedi mission beforehand, but it was good to hear it confirmed from Bastila. It had been frustrating, on the 'Spire, to be treated as an inferior grunt.
by the Jedi onboard, and told little other than what was already known. "What's so special about these ruins then, Bastila? What sort of Force power do they have?"

"I did not mention anything about the Force," she snapped.

I sighed in exasperation. "It's pretty obvious, Bastila. What else could stop Malak?"

She sniffed, and it was a haughty sound. I found myself rolling my eyes as I turned back to the instrumentation panel. Bastila had a habit of retreating into a supercilious prissy shell when questioned, and it was at those times I found myself disliking her.

"Very well, then. Yes. But I cannot say more."

I tried to shrug away my irritation, and remembered Dodonna's directive. The lack of clear information I'd found out about this mission was galling, to say the least."So why did you Jedi need Jen then?"

Bastila made some sort of high-pitched noise in her throat; I jerked my head to catch her expression, but it was bland and unforthcoming. "She is a talented scholar, Carth. She happens to know a lot about the archaeological period of these ruins."

"More than Jedi Masters?" I said in disbelief. "Come on, I know some of those old farts spend all their time researching the past."

"You should show more respect for the Masters, Carth!" she hissed. "How dare you malign-"

"Okay, okay!" I raised my hands in defeat. "Sorry! I- Look, I don't like being left in the dark. Not too mention that Jen doesn't seem to fit in with your whole mission, no matter how much you harp on about her education."

But the sensor on the cockpit terminal drew my attention away – our time in hyperspace had come to an end. I leaned over to open the ship-wide communicator.

"Brace for hyperspace exit in twenty seconds," I broadcasted. I heard Bastila loose a pent-up breath, and I echoed her before guiding the ship out of hyperspace.

The minute-long deceleration was briefly dizzying, but as every second ticked by I felt myself relax an inch more, until the ship entered realspace fully.

Then the sensors went berserk. Flashing lights blinked into existence on the consoles, and the sharp red of laser fire spat on either side of the cockpit window. A proximity alarm in the ship began wailing.

"Stang!" I cursed, steering the 'Hawk abruptly to the left as I spotted a squadron of smaller snubfighters. Ahead, the green planet of Dantooine was prominently visible, and in between us and her was the ominous sight of a half dozen Sith destroyers.

"Get on the turrets!" I yelled through the comm as three fighters ahead abruptly changed their trajectory towards us. "We have Sith fighters!"

"No!" Bastila half screamed, half gasped.

I tilted the freighter up and around, knowing at once that our only chance was to flee. Even as the 'Hawk twisted away, another small squadron of light fighter craft became visible, and the console was showing far too many for any hope of our survival.
"The Force," Bastila muttered numbly. "I can feel the Masters using the Force."

"Bastila, enter a hyperspace route. Anything. Just get us out of here!"

I vaguely heard the sound of turret fire start up. Ordo got to the turrets. It might buy us some time, but we were sitting gizka out here, defenceless against this sort of manpower.

"No!" Bastila protested, and her voice was anguished. "I must help – my battle meditation can help the Order!"

"There is no way we can survive out here in a freighter!" I yelled. "A hyperspace jump is our only option!"

"They are bombing the Enclave, Carth! I cannot - I will not run!" she cried. "I do not know where else to turn! I must see the Masters!"

The Ebon Hawk jolted heavily, and a warning alarm joined the proximity one. A hit, dammit. "Are you trying to kill us all, Bastila?" I snarled, and leaned over to the co-piloting navigation console, pushing her aside and ignoring her indignant gasp. The Ebon Hawk had a short list of pre-programmed hyperspace coordinates, and the third one proclaimed the smallest travel time. I stabbed that one in, and turned my attention back to steering as the computer calculated the route from our current location.

"Entering hyperspace in ten seconds!" I broadcasted through the comm. Dantooine was behind us, and I turned the sub-light drives to maximum, heading out into black space. In front of us dropped a squadron of hostiles, all firing. The console blinked a navigational completion code.

"Hold on!" I yelled over the comm and entered hyperspace.

"No! Carth – we're going to hit them!" Bastila screamed as the ship jumped forward. The enemy ships ahead seemed to stretch as our craft surged ahead. I tensed my shoulders as one fighter came closer and closer, and I swore I could almost see the elongated helmet of the pilot.

I pulled back tightly on the steering column, and the ship lurched upwards as it jumped fully into hyperspace. Bastila's shrieks rang through my ears as the enemy craft shot underneath the Ebon Hawk.

A minute later, our view snapped into the serene blackness of hyperspace.

Xxx
Ice was curdling in my veins as I sat in stark horror. The *Ebon Hawk* was now flying meekly through hyperspace, and Carth was muttering over the consoles. All I could think of was Dantooine.

And Revan.

*Who is still alive? What do I do?* I'd only once felt as helpless as I did right now, and that was back on Taris. Collared and sedated.

*Dantooine, under attack?* I could barely believe what I had seen. *Why? Why is this happening?* My resolve and confidence were faltering; cracking. *Master Vrook? Vandar? Nemo?* I thought of all the Jedi I knew back in the Enclave, and a dark sickly grief surged through me.

*Despair is one of many roads to the Dark Side, child.* Nemo had said that to me, once. *You must have faith in the Force.*

I could not succumb; now, more than ever, I needed to be strong. Logically I knew that the Jedi masters would survive the attack on Dantooine, and possibly triumph. *I felt numerous masters using the Force back there. If I could have helped...* despite common sense telling me that Carth had been correct in his course of action, I could not stop the bitter anger at his quick jump into hyperspace. *I feel like we betrayed the Enclave in their darkest hour.*

It seemed Malak had split his fleet to attack both Dantooine and Taris jointly. But why? *It is not a clever move. Dantooine is a civilian target, for all that it is a member of the Republic. Surely this will rally other Rim worlds to declare against the Sith.* Malak may not have been the tactician Revan once was, but he certainly wasn’t a floundering idiot. *He knows a direct assault on Dantooine would be unlikely to succeed, even by surprise. The Force is too strong there.* Had the Dark Side twisted him so fully that he was content to destroy parts of his Fleet against a planet he would not be able to conquer?

Or was he after some other objective?

My blood ran cold. *What if our mission really had been betrayed? What if he knows we have learnt about the Star Maps, and his target was the master Star Map?* That made horrible sense. Without the Dantooine Star Map, there would be no markers to the other four worlds. We had, however, already downloaded the data from the ancient Rakatan relic, thanks to Master Nemo’s scouting team. *Only a handful of Jedi knew about the Star Maps, and near all of them were masters.* Could a Jedi have betrayed us? Turned to the Dark Side, without anyone knowing?

Was it possible for there to have been a spy in our midst?

*What is done, is done. You can only make the best of what happens next.* Funny how my father’s words still came back to counsel me, even though I had last seen him at the tender age of seven. I pushed my emotions away and struggled for a calm the seemed impossible against the well of horror and anger that was surfacing. *There is no emotion, there is peace. I must find a way forward.*
I felt my lips pinching in resolution, and turned to face Carth. His expression was dark with concern.

“Where are we headed?” I asked, and my words sounded cold even to my own ears. *I must hold on to this calm.*

“Tatooine,” he replied, and it was in a questioning, almost wondering tone.


Carth looked almost sheepish. “I picked the closest hyperspace route out of the pre-programmed list. They’re all smuggling destinations, so maybe it’s not too surprising. Tatooine is a short jump from Taris, and I daresay this ship was used as a smuggling vessel between the two.”

I leaned back, at a loss for words. The surprise was overwhelming, on top of the despair I was still struggling to tamp down. *Is this not a large coincidence? Heading toward the original destination of the Endar Spire.* And, thanks to the earlier research of the masters, I knew the rough location of the Star Map on that desert planet. *How likely is it for this to occur by chance?*

Master Vrook did not believe in coincidences, or luck. I knew well one of his favourite sayings. *There are no coincidences. There is only the Force.)*

Perhaps the Force had led us here.

With that thought in mind, I hardened my resolve and turned back to Carth. “How long do you expect the hyperspace jump to last?”

Carth glanced at the central console. “Two days. Hopefully we can repair the *Ebon Hawk* when we land.”

I licked suddenly dry lips. “If we will be on Tatooine, then perhaps the mission is not totally over.” The Force had a will of its own. Perhaps… perhaps I was meant to carry on. Perhaps, in stealth and smaller numbers, it would be possible.

Ever since I had escaped from that Brejik’s slimy grasp, the desire for recuperation in safety had been growing. And now, with the shock of the Sith attack on Dantooine, so close after witnessing the destruction on Taris, I could feel an utter well of grief and despair deep within my core. *But, I reminded myself, Taris and Dantooine are only two planets. So many more will suffer the same fate if we don’t stop Malak and his ever-growing armada.* The Star Maps had to be the answer to defeating Malak, and it seemed like I was being given an opportunity to uncover the next part of the puzzle.

Carth had turned sharply to face me at my words, a frown darkening his face. “You want to complete a mission the Jedi Council had originally sent a dozen knights to accomplish?”

“Perhaps a covert approach would work,” I said absently, my thoughts racing. The *Endar Spire* had been a large taskforce in the case of Darth Revan returning, which had once seemed highly improbable. *And only I and Galdea knew about her. Not even my old friend Kylah was informed, despite our long acquaintance.* And now, with the danger of Revan’s re-emergence seeming like a distinct possibility, maybe the idea of striking out for the Star Map was as ludicrous as Carth’s tone seemed to be suggesting.

“A covert approach?” Carth retorted, and his voice was incredulous. “Isn’t that what the *Endar Spire* was meant to be?”

I didn’t answer; my thoughts were still whirling. *But it would not take more than a few days, at most.*
The masters had derived the location of the Tatooine Star Map to be in one of the old caves in the Eastern Dune Sea, very close to the small settlement of Anchorhead. Force relics had been placed there in the past, and the presence of Revan and Malak had been sighted in Anchorhead shortly after their return from the Mandalorian Wars. Manaan’s Star Map, too, was known, thanks to the Republic Embassy who had so recently discovered an archaeological site near their secret kolto base. This is too much of an opportunity to cast away. Despite my fear… despite Revan… it seems like this must be my course of action.

The reminder that I was alone, with Darth Revan temporarily held at bay by the fracturing identity of a shy scholar, slammed the crawling fear back into my body. I had talked to her briefly some hours ago, and sensed no anger, no wildness, nothing but the meek shell of the scholar who had once existed. Yet that was merely a small reassurance - for when I thought upon the dark emotions that had flooded our bond back in Davik Kang’s stronghold, a very real horror gripped me.

I had the terrible feeling that if Revan embraced the Force again, the persona of Jen Sahara would vanish like a child’s ice cone under a desert sun.

I must be rational about this. How could one be rational about the Dark Lord of the Sith, Revan herself? I forcefully swallowed my fear, and reviewed the last day. The only times Revan had escaped the persona of Jen Sahara was when her life was threatened. Hence, I would have to make sure she did not become endangered. Perhaps I should persuade Revan to stay on the Ebon Hawk until I can get in contact with the Council?

At least she had not tried to use the Force. I could block her, I did so instinctively, but she no longer even seemed aware of the Force. Her earlier attempts on Taris had been clumsy, like someone fumbling for the light switch in the dark. Our mind-link gave me sufficient leverage to make sure she never found that switch. Her unbalanced emotional state is to my advantage. And ever since Jen has become her dominant personality, she has not even questioned her own ability. If I could keep her grounded on the Ebon Hawk, then we may very well find our objective, receive our new orders, and leave Tatooine to meet up with the Jedi wherever the closest masters may be.

I breathed in deeply, and turned to face Carth full on, projecting what I hoped was my most calm and commanding tone. I will be strong. The Force will be my ally, and I will be strong. “Carth. There will be a delay on Tatooine regardless, as we repair our communications and contact our superiors. There is a very real opportunity here, and it only takes one Jedi to find what the Council needs on Tatooine. I was your commander back on the Endar Spire. Will you follow me on Tatooine? Will you help with the war against Malak?”

Carth banged a fist down on the controls, hard and sudden. “How can you even ask that, Bastila? Of course I'll help! But I'd like to know a little more, first!” He was scowling. “Not to mention that I think we should wait until we've talked to Republic HQ and the Jedi Council before forging our own way forward!”

“Of course, Carth,” I replied calmly. I could see he was irate, but I would not let it affect me. My emotions were pushed back, firmly under control. “But while we are waiting for the Ebon Hawk to be repaired, we may as well investigate any leads.”

“Look, I-” he broke off, sighing. “I suppose that's fair enough. What is it you're after, anyway?” He still sounded annoyed, and I bit back an exasperated huff. I thought he was military. Used to taking orders, and not questioning his superiors.

“It is a Force relic, as you deduced earlier.” I said no more, and despite a black expression, he seemed willing to let the matter drop for now.
“We should talk to the others,” he muttered. “They need to know where we are headed, and we have very real logistical issues to sort out.”

My thoughts had been whirling through black fear and blind panic, despite my attempts to stay in control. I needed some time alone to strengthen my resolve. But it made sense to hear Carth out.

“What issues?”

“Funding,” he said shortly. “Look – especially if you want to do this quickly and in stealth, how do you expect to repair the ship? Are we going to need any equipment for your mission? And what about Ordo? What’s the blasted Mandalorian planning on doing?”

I blinked; all valid questions I had not yet thought of. I gave Carth a quick nod, he switched to autopilot, and we both stood to leave the cockpit.

\textit{xXx}

The answer to one of our immediate problems was right there, glistening in the form of innocent pre-paid plasteel credit chits. Zaalbar had called me in to the cargo bay as soon as he’d discovered it.

\textit{Has the Force so fortuitously offered me a solution?} The Wookiee was standing to the side, idly holding a durasteel bar he had used to pry the crate open. The rest of the cargo bay was littered with equipment and open crates, mostly weaponry and armour, but this was the goldmine. I did not want to think on the origin of it, but the \textit{Ebon Hawk} had been a smuggling freighter, and its profits were likely on the back of the slave trade or worse. Frankly, it was lucky we had not found glitterstim onboard.

“How much is there?” I asked quietly. “Enough to repair the ship?”

“Half of that is mine,” came a gravelly voice from behind, and I stiffened in outrage, turning to face Canderous with a glare.

We were halfway to Tatooine, and the mood of the crew had been somber. Zaalbar and Mission had not reacted strongly to our change of destination, and Revan was deeply bewildered by everything, and more than a little scared. Of herself. It had taken only the smallest amount of Force persuasion to convince her that a sleeping tablet would lull her into a recuperative sleep that would result in her feeling refreshed and calmer.

Ever since I had crashed on Taris, I found myself acting less and less like a Jedi should.

The Mandalorian had been, in a word, frustrating. He was unwilling to divulge his plans thus far, other than claiming he had a half-share in the freighter which Carth and I both hotly objected to. We had been in the process of yet another argument when Zaalbar had interrupted us with this discovery from his inventory of the cargo bay.

“Half? And what, pray, is your argument for this?” I protested.

He was smirking, even as his grey eyes bored into mine. “I got you lot access to this ship. If it wasn’t for me, you’d be lost on Taris amongst the Sith’s plasma.”

“And if it was not for us, so would you!” I retorted, feeling my cheeks flush with anger. It was the same argument we had had regarding the ownership of the \textit{Ebon Hawk}, and Canderous was not giving ground. But despite his strength, Canderous could not win, not against me, and Carth, and the Wookiee. \textit{Perhaps I need to find another solution to this.} My eyes slid back to the crate. \textit{And perhaps he does have a right to some of it, at least.}
“We need to repair the ship, Canderous,” I stated, before he could argue further. “We may need some basic supplies on Tatooine, as I have an objective to complete. And we do require the Ebon Hawk to leave Tatooine and meet up with the Order.”

The Mandalorian folded him arms, and his expression could only be called impassive. “Are you proposing something here, princess?”

I could feel my lips pursing as I looked upon a man I seriously disliked. But his skills were useful, and antagonizing or alienating him would hardly be beneficial. “Assist me in my endeavour. I am on a mission from the Jedi Council, and I would like you to accompany Carth and I into Anchorhead when we land. Whatever chits remain after our purchases can be yours to do with as you will.”

“As I said before, half of those are mine regardless. If you’re offering me a job, then you need to pay me on top of that.”

Mercenaries, I thought with disgust. “I hardly have access to any additional currency here, Canderous. But when we met up with the Jedi Order, I will make sure you are reimbursed for your time.”

He snorted. “The Order pay well, does it?”

“Yes,” I said icily. “Once we have restored communications, I will ensure they know of your assistance – both with leaving Taris, and whatever occurs on Tatooine.”

Canderous was silent for some time, and his gaze rested on both me and Zaalbar before landing again on the open crate resting in the middle of the cargo bay. “There’s not as much there as you’re probably thinking, princess. Enough to repair the ship, if Republic’s right about it just being the relay that’s down. Maybe some supplies on top of that. I don’t see any harm in getting you out of whatever trouble you’re liable to put yourself in, at least until I can find some real work. But there’s still the matter of the ship to sort out between us.”

“I need this ship to leave Tatooine,” I said again. “But it will no longer be required once I meet up with the Order. I do concede you have a stake in this ship. If you accompany us to our final destination, then perhaps we can discuss what happens to the ship at that stage.”

“We will,” he stated, and his gaze was hard. “But… you’ve caught my interest, princess, you and that Jen Sahara both. What, exactly, do you need on Tatooine?”

I let out a small sigh I hadn’t realized I’d been holding in. “The repairs need to be underway first, so Carth and I can contact our superiors. We will land in a small settlement called Anchorhead, and we may require equipment to travel in the desert if there is nothing suitable onboard. Transport, too, although my destination is not far from Anchorhead.”

My eyes closed even as I continued talking. “It should not be difficult nor long.” Darth Malak, presumably, did not know about my escape. But the Endar Spire had been compromised. If Darth Malak was aware of the Endar Spire’s destination, then he will assume other Jedi will travel to Tatooine.

How likely was it he knew? Even if he did not, the attack on Dantooine indicated that he suspected the hunt for the Star Maps was on. Would he believe that taking out the Master Star Map would be enough?

There were too many questions. And the mantle of leadership sat uncomfortably on my shoulders. I heard Canderous grunt. “All sounds fairly easy, princess. Let Republic organize the ship’s repairs
when we land, and you and I can scout around Anchorhead.”

xXx

I was feeling relaxed and at peace when a presence slowly roused in the far reaches of my mind. *Revan. She is waking.* I breathed in deeply, and stood from my place on the floor. The room I occupied was a small office of some description, perhaps created as the personal quarters of the ship’s captain. It seemed a good place for some privacy.

My determination was clear as I stretched, and left the room. We were close, now, to Tatooine, and I had to ensure that Revan stayed safe. Safe, and onboard the *Ebon Hawk.*

*I must ensure Revan listens to me. At any cost.*

I found her in the port quarters that the Twi’lek claimed as the women’s sleeproom. The room itself was bare, and cramped with two sets of bunks filling most of the available space. The floor was littered with the bright cards of some sort of game I did not recognize; I wondered if Mission had brought these along on our hasty departure from Taris, or if she had found them in the cargo bay.

I frowned, and made a mental note to check back on the contents of the crates. The Twi’lek had been both a gang member and a street kid, and likely was not above acquiring some of those chits to line her own pockets.

“No, no, that’s a nerf-herder move. I mean, the chances of winning on a score like that- sheesh. I see why you lost so much back on Taris,” Mission was saying as I entered the room. She was sitting cross-legged on the small sliver of floor-space with her back to the door, and opposite her crouched Revan, frowning, as her bright green eyes stared at the cards on the grated durasteel floor.

“I don’t really understand this game,” Revan agreed, looking up as she spotted me. A slight smile appeared on her face.

“C’mon, the basics aren’t exactly rocket science- Oh. Bastila.” The Twi’lek’s voice dropped several degrees as she turned to see what had caught Revan’s interest. Mission’s face was pale and wan, and I was reminded that she, too, had just seen a planet dear to her attacked most viciously. She scowled darkly at me.

We had not started off on the right foot, her and I, and I regretted tripping her with the Force – but I also did not understand why she was disposed to think of me so poorly. The expression on her face told me that my presence was decidedly unwelcome.

“Excuse me,” I said in my most neutral tone. “I require Jen’s attention for a short while.”

“Can’t you see we’re busy?” Mission snapped. Revan glanced uncertainly between us.

“It will not take long, Mission, but I am afraid I must insist.”

At that, Revan pushed herself up to her feet, and so did the Twi’lek. “Jen,” she spluttered. “You don’t have to do what she says, y’know-”

“Actually, she does,” I cut in, and I could hear my voice freezing as my ire rose. *She is being unreasonable and immature. This is why we should not have children onboard.* “Jen is employed by the Jedi Order, Mission, and therefore answers to me. I have already said that it will not take long. Come, Jen.” I turned briskly and exited, trusting that my words would be enough for Revan to follow.
I strode through the freighter in silence with Revan’s footsteps behind me, feeling vaguely irritated, and wondering how best to repair my relationship with Mission. Perhaps it is not even important. I should not have to waste energy in smoothing the ruffled feathers of a petulant teenager. The only factor that made Mission Vao important was her relationship to Revan, and that was stronger on the Twi’lek’s side than the Human’s, I believed.

I waited until Revan had followed me into the pilot’s quarters I had claimed, and closed the hatch firmly behind her. I motioned her to sit on the bed, and followed suit.

“Jen,” I began. “I wanted to have a talk before we landed on Tatooine. We will be there for a few days only, before leaving to rendezvous with the Order again. During this time I will be engaged in a scouting trip with Canderous Ordo and Carth Onasi. You must stay onboard at all times, Jen. We require someone to guard the ship, and it is my job to ensure you are safe.” Dared I use the Force to strengthen my commands? It was becoming a habit to keep her contained this way, and I knew, on some level, that it was not right. Stripped of her affinity with the Force, and attached to me via our bond, Revan was a great deal more susceptible to any Force suggestions I made. It was so very tempting to use that opportunity.

But was it necessary? Was it risky? Would she become aware of it? The questions made my stomach lurch.

Revan was staring at me with her bright green eyes, nodding. Jen Sahara’s expressions made her look younger, closer in age to myself or the original scholar. I took a deep breath.

“How are you coping, Jen?”

“I-I am so confused,” she whispered, and her words mirrored her emotions through the bond. “I feel like I don’t know who I am.” There was no anger I could sense, only a whirling puzzlement that was almost choking in its intensity. She could not understand her actions or behaviour, and was scared. I had bought myself some time with the sleeping tablet, but the real risk would be on Tatooine, when I left her onboard.

The Wookiee had already assured me he would not leave her side, and it made me grateful for the life-debt he had sworn.

“You are Jen Sahara, a scholar from Deralia who has been employed by the Jedi Order,” I said, looking at the woman sitting next to me. Her expression was downcast, and her posture hunched in on itself. If it were not for our battles on Taris, I would have believed she was the same meek academic she had been on the Endar Spire. Whatever that crackpot doctor had done to her on Taris seemed to have been a real blessing in disguise.

Revan glanced up at me again, a slight frown on her face. “I don’t understand everything that has happened. This— it all feels like a dream, somehow. Or a nightmare.”

I placed my hand on her knee gently. “It is the same for all of us, I suspect. We have all been through a lot. But do not despair, Jen, for we will not be long on Tatooine.” I paused, wondering if I needed to reassure her further. “The Jedi have mind healers also. They can help much as your doctor did, back on Taris.”

Revan’s expression froze, and I felt a sharp blast of emotion through the bond, so quick that I could not decipher it. I reached out to the Force in panic, and Revan moaned, her hands clutching at the side of her head.

_Jen Sahara. I am Jen Sahara._ The confusion was back, threaded through with fear. But the swift
feeling I’d sensed earlier… I could not be sure, but it felt like rage. Black, furious rage.

The fear was deep in my gut, too.

“You will be safe, Jen,” I said shakily, and felt the compulsion twist through my words. “Stay onboard the Ebon Hawk whilst I am outside.”

“Of course,” she whispered, rubbing at her temple. “Of course I will, Bastila. I’ll stay onboard while you’re outside.”

There was a sickly churning in my gut as she parroted my words. *This is not the right way. I am letting my fear dictate my behaviour.*

I forced a smile on my face. “Good, that’s settled,” I said, a little shakily. I stood, and she followed, her hands dropping to her side. “I suggest you prepare for hyperspace exit, Jen. It will not be far away. I shall leave now to accompany Carth in the cockpit.”

She took a few steps towards the door before hesitating, and looking back at me. Her expression was both apprehensive and questioning.

“Is there something else, Jen?” I asked with a calm I did not quite feel. There were questions she hadn’t thought to ask yet; prime among them was Dantooine. I had convinced Revan - some form of her for it certainly hadn’t been the Jen Sahara that stood in front of me now – that we were headed to Alderaan, not Dantooine. *And I cannot forget the sedation, even if she has.* Would it occur to her to question her sudden collapse when we had first boarded? She had not questioned it yet.

Revan bit her lip. “Sorry, it’s just that- we’re on Tatooine, now. Where we were going originally.” She frowned. “I am still unsure exactly what my purpose is to the Jedi, Bastila. Do you- do you need me for anything here?”

I tried to send her a gentle smile. “Not on Tatooine, no. As for your purpose, well, you have studied the era of the Massassi, and that is of interest to us. We are keen to increase your education, Jen. It is not uncommon for the Jedi Order to fund scholars. We look to the past for guidance.”

It was deflection, pure and simple. Jen Sahara’s studies of interest had been the extinction of the Massassi, as well as the formation of the Republic, neither of which had anything to do with the Star Maps. Master Galdea had kept Revan entertained with research onboard the *Endar Spire*; that was not possible while we were flying blind. Once our communications were repaired and access to the holonets restored, I would be able to divert her in the much same way.

“Okay,” Revan said softly, her gaze dropping from mine. “I’ll leave you be then.”

Arriving in Anchorhead had not been a problem, and Carth had landed the freighter with ease before exiting to meet up with the docking officials. He had not been away long before returning, shooting me a brief smile as we all clustered in the central common room.

“Alright, let’s head out,” Canderous said, hefting a pack from the cargo bay over a shoulder.

My eyes rested on the young Twi’lek, who alternated between glaring at me, frowning at Carth, and staring worriedly at Revan. Mission’s face was an open book, and I wondered idly if she was cross with Carth for some reason. But the concern toward Revan explained the reason for her anger at me. She was worried about Revan, and believed I was to blame.
If she knew the entirety of the truth, it would blow her childish mind apart, I thought irritably. Mission Vao, I realized, would not take nicely to staying onboard the ship. I looked over to Zaalbar, and understood that the Wookiee was key to them all staying behind.

“We shall not be long,” I told them, standing in the middle of the room. Zaalbar had hunched over the end of one of the benches, plainly too large for the furniture. Mission was sitting next to him, one leg tucked under her chin and the other dangling. Revan sat on her other side. “This is a smuggling destination, and it is not safe even in the town. I will lock the hatch behind us. Mission, Zaalbar, it is best if you stay behind with Jen.”

“Sure thing, Bastila.” Mission replied, and her voice was light and sweet. I did not trust it.

“I am serious, Mission.”

“Sheesh, I said okay!” Mission snapped. “What d’ya want me to do, swear my life on it?”

“A promise would be nice,” I said tightly.

“Fine! I promise I’ll stay on the Ebon Hawk!” She crossed her arms and pouted, and I had to restrain an exasperated sigh. Canderous snorted as he headed towards the exit hatch. I looked over to Carth to see him frowning at Revan, his expression both puzzled and irritated, and I wondered again at the mixed reactions he had for her. His eyes rose to meet mine, and he gave a nod of readiness.

I turned, and followed the Mandalorian out of the Ebon Hawk.

xXx
"I'm bored, Big Z. Ain't no way that stuck-up Jedi is telling me what to do." Mission had folded her arms, and her expression was contorted in the stubborn petulance of youth. Although I had expected this reaction from my young friend, I had hoped for more than a mere ten minutes peace. The others had only just departed.

“(Mission, we have been asked to stay on the Ebon Hawk),” I reminded her. I looked over to Jen, sitting on one of those soft brown benches that were not deep enough for my comfort. The human woman was engrossed in a datapad, reading an electronic journal from the Ebon Hawk’s meagre digital library. “(And you promised Bastila Shan that you would stay behind).”

“Only so she'd stop harping at me.” Mission looked disgruntled. “I had my lekku crossed.”

“(Mission!)” I growled. “(A promise is sacred).”

Jen looked up at that, startled, her eyes falling on me before dropping back to the datapad. She was not easy around me, despite our life-debt, and this behaviour was new along with her personality. I did not like it. I found myself wishing for the reckless Jen of old. This one smelled false, and I could not explain why I felt that way. I should be content that Jen was not willing to run blindly into danger anymore.

“Uh uh,” Mission disagreed. “Like that prissy ronto-face would’ve let me go. A promise ain’t worth nothing if it’s forced, Big Z.”

I stared at the Twi’lek cub and realized she was right. Sometimes, Mission came up with wisdom well beyond her years. While Bastila Shan may have had admirable reasons for wanting Mission to stay behind, my young friend would not see a promise made under duress as a worthy one to honour.

“Sides, Zaalbar, this is Tatooine! Sheesh, I didn’t really think much about where we were goin’ at first, y’know? Everything’s been so crazy and bad but… but, I’m actually on Tatooine!”

I frowned. I did not know anything about this place, other than what I had heard onboard. A smuggling destination covered in deserts. I did not think I would particularly like it. “(You know of this planet?)”

Mission smiled at me. It was the first smile I had seen since we entered Davik Kang’s stronghold, and it warmed my heart. Her light brown eyes were crinkled with excitement. “Griff used to talk about setting up a trade route between Taris and Tatooine all the time.” Her grin widened, and then she sniggered. “He had this insane idea ‘bout importing live chuba from Tatooine and deep-frying it as a delicacy to the Upper City snobs.”

Mission rarely spoke of her elder brother, and it surprised me that she would now. I had never met him, as Griff Vao had abandoned her on Taris shortly before we met. Although she did not think of it as abandonment, I recalled. She blames his mate instead.

Regardless of whose fault it had been, the end result was the same: a young Twi’lek girl left alone on the streets of the Lower City, with only the dubious protection of a swoop gang who thought her
talents were useful.

We had both been fortunate to meet each other.

And now, our lives were tied to Jen Sahara. When I thought of the destruction left behind on Taris, I understood how very lucky Mission and I had been, to meet up with Jen and escape when we did. I glanced over to the human again, and wished I knew a little more about her.

During our brief hyperspace journey, Jen had assured Mission that she was fine, and that Bastila was helping her. I understood that Jen had a commitment of some kind to the Jedi, but my worry was not alleviated. *Something has happened to her, and she is acting like someone else.* Mission was convinced it had to do with Bastila Shan and the Force, but I was not so certain. My people knew much of the Jedi and the honourable way they acted. I found it hard to believe that the young Jedi would be responsible for Jen’s affliction.

I lowered my voice to a faint rumble. “(Mission, I do not wish to leave Jen).”

I saw Mission’s face set with determination as she, also, turned to look at the human. “Jen,” she said, catching her attention. “Come for a wander into Anchorhead with us?”

Jen pulled her attention away from the datapad briefly. “Uh, no, thank you. I am happy reading.”

There was a dark scowl on my young friend’s face. “Come on, Jen! Have you ever been to Tatooine before? Let’s go have a look around!”

“I- I told Bastila I’d stay here.” Jen’s voice was quavering.

“Where’s your sense of adventure?” Mission retorted. “You’re the one who conned me into going to the swoop race!”

”(What?)” I growled. *Jen conned Mission?*

A bewildered expression passed through the human's face. “I- I did? I did. It- it all seems a little hazy.”

“What's Bastila doing to you?”

Jen’s mouth dropped open. “S-she is helping me!”

“Helping you turn into someone with the brains of a Gamorrean and the backbone of a gizka!” Mission snapped, her headtails twitching in around her neck. Mission’s temper was a flashpoint, bright and fiery before dying away. I could tell it was still rising.

“No,” Jen said, shaking her head. “No.”

”(We are worried about you, Jen Sahara),” I rumbled quietly. “(I am sure Bastila is helping. But you have not been well, and you are acting like someone else).”

Jen had dropped her head into her hands, and was mumbling quietly. I did not think Mission could hear the words, but a Wookiee had more sensitive hearing than most sentients. “I am Jen Sahara. This bond isn’t real. I am not hearing her say anything in my head.”

”(Jen?)” I barked as my fur began to stand on end at her strange words. Her head jerked up, and a dark maelstrom of emotions had clouded her piercing green eyes. She stared at me, brows lowering, and for a moment I wasn’t sure if she recognized me at all.
“It’ll be fun,” Mission wheedled. “C’mon. We won’t be long, and Bastila doesn’t even need to know!”

Jen’s gaze flicked to the Twi’lek, and I recognized the roguish expression as it crossed the human’s face. “Okay,” she agreed, and I almost shouted in relief. To think I would be glad to see that reckless look again!

“Wizard!” Mission stood, hopping with delight. “I’ll just go grab some supplies – I’ll be right back!” She darted out of the common room towards the cargo bay, and I frowned, wondering exactly what my mischievous young friend was after. I would have followed her, had I not caught the worried look cross over Jen’s face.

“(You cannot back out now),” I warned her. I almost desired for Mission to drag Jen into trouble. Anything to shake her out of this foreign identity encompassing her.

Jen nodded, and glanced away. Mission took longer than I expected - considering her enthusiasm - and I was close to leaving Jen again when the Twi’lek rushed back in. She had a smile on her face that I could only describe as wayward, a bag slung over one shoulder, and her arms full of vibroswords. She handed one to both of us, and Jen took hers hesitantly.

“(What did you do?)” I asked, frowning, still dwelling on the suspicious length of time she had taken.

Mission beamed. “Gave Teethree a couple of orders, that’s all.”

“(Orders? What orders?)”

“Just in case the others try to buzz the Ebon Hawk on their wrist-comms, Teethree’s gonna patch ‘em a message that we’re all having naps.”

“(We will not be long, Mission),” I told her severely. A walk outside would do Jen Sahara good, but I did not discount Bastila Shan’s warning about this area. And the thought of disregarding a Jedi’s orders did not sit well with me.

Innocent wide eyes appraised me. “Gee, Big Z, you sound like you don’t trust me!”

She flounced out of the Ebon Hawk, and I could only follow.

Bright desert sunlight hit my vision as I exited the ship, along with a wall of suffocating heat. I had expected the high temperature, but it was still a sharp contrast to the air-conditioned Ebon Hawk. It took a moment for my vision to adjust to the harsh light.

“Teethree, lock the hatch behind us, okay?” Mission spoke through a device strapped on her wrist, and I realized she must have also visited the cockpit to retrieve a communicator. She shot me an impish grin. “Wouldn’t be smart to leave the ship open to anyone, right?”

No. It would have been foolish in the extreme. And neither I nor Jen Sahara had thought twice about leaving the ship empty apart from an astromech droid with no orders, I realized with chagrin.

I looked around as I stood on the loading ramp; the Ebon Hawk was docked in a large, walled off area that was open to the elements. There were a few market stalls set up around the perimeter, perhaps half a dozen clustered near a large archway in the wall that likely led to the township. Several freighters were stationed on either side of the Ebon Hawk. Sentients dressed in the white and brown uniform of Czerka Corporation stood in the shade of the tall walls, and I found myself glaring. Czerka was a galactic spanning commercial entity with an underbelly as foul as the Exchange. I had
“Here,” Mission said in a bright voice, having opened her pack to pull out two visors. I noticed one resting on top of her head. “I was having a look at what gear Canderous was taking before. I kinda figured he’d had a good idea of the place, y’know?” She was grinning at both of us.

The contents of the cargo bay had been a surprise, and I had not yet finished opening all the crates. It was mostly armour and weapons, all fairly standard, but it had been the quantity that had surprised me. I wondered if that crime lord had been planning a violent trip somewhere.

I struggled to fit the visor around my head, and eventually gave up, giving it back to Mission in disgust. My eyes had already adjusted, but it made me think about the requirements of our crew and what supplies we had onboard. If we ended up staying on the *Ebon Hawk* longer than planned, I might be able to modify a combat suit to fit Mission. I had often spent time with the Hidden Bek, patching up broken armour, and seemed to have a talent for it.

Both Mission and Jen were looking around the sandy docking bay; the former with a delighted expression on her face. *This is her first time off-world,* I realized. I was glad we were going for a short explore. Perhaps Mission needed this as much as Jen.

Mission’s face brightened as she spotted the archway that led out of the docking bay. With a grin toward us both, she jumped off the *Ebon Hawk’s* loading ramp and began walking. I felt a trickle of sweat down my neck, and grumbled softly. As I followed Mission, I noticed that the few sentients walking amongst the docked ships all wore loose clothing over their entire body, topped with headcloths for protection. *It would not do for us to stay outside in the elements long. Not dressed as we are.*

Mission was already at the spaceport exit, chatting to a local Paaerduag, those strange creatures with two heads. The larger head was saying something to Mission in a tongue I did not recognize, with one arm gesturing towards the entrance in the wall. I looked ahead, and could see a few buildings visible of what must be Anchorhead. From here, it did not look large.

“Okay, thanks!” Mission gave him a wave as we walked through the entranceway and into the unfamiliar town. We were on a sandy path lined with stalls that were made from crude tents – no more than thick sticks and pieces of cloth or hide. Above us draped large pieces of lightly-coloured tarpaulin, roped tight between the stalls on either side of us.

Although the heat was still intense, the shade provided by the cover did offer a respite. Not much further ahead were more permanent buildings made from some form of plaster or ferracrete. Overall, the entire place was much less technologically advanced than Taris and with far less people. If it had not been for the temperature, I would not have minded being here despite my earlier reservations.

“(What did the Paaerduag say?)” I asked.

“No idea,” Mission giggled, looking over to me. Her eyes were dancing with delight, and I was so glad to see my young friend happy. “I asked him where the cantina was. I think he understood me, but I guess he doesn’t speak Basic. Say,” and her voice turned speculative, “Jen, did you catch what he said?”

Jen had been walking behind us, and we both turned to look at her. Her face was pale, and her eyes wide. She raised an arm to point further down the path. “The cantina’s over there. First building on the left after the market stalls.”

“Great!” Mission turned back and started on her way again.
“(Are you alright, Jen?)” I asked. She gave me a shaky nod, but her expression said otherwise. I was not one for pushing, but perhaps I would have questioned her further had I not realized how fast Mission was walking. I huffed, and strode quickly after my young friend, with Jen’s stumbling steps following me.

We entered the cantina and I was immediately glad for the drop in temperature due to some form of air-conditioning. There was a faint haze of unpleasant cigarra smoke near the ceiling, and no windows at all. The walls had the odd holo-picture hung up, and the first one I saw was a Czerka advertisement for hunting equipment. Jaunty music played softly from suspended speakers, and in the centre of the room was a floating bar staffed by an Ithorian. I saw a look of despondency pass through my young ward’s face.

“(Mission?)” I questioned softly.

She smiled brightly; falsely. ‘I’m fine, Big Z. I just – ha! I just expected to see Sancha behind the bar, is all.”

“(I am sorry, Mission),” I said hopelessly. I was not good with words.

“Nah, I’m okay, really.” She sniffed. “Though if I ever get the chance, I’m gonna pay back those scummy Sith back for what they’ve done.”

“(Do not say that! You do not know who might hear),” I growled at her in warning.

Mission shrugged at me, and I almost had the feeling she didn’t care. She turned back to survey the room, walking closer to the bartender who was serving a drink to an older, heavily equipped Twi’lek male. He wore combat armour, and had a vibro-staff strapped to his back, along with at least two visible blasters on his hip.

“Hi!” Mission greeted him, having already strode toward the bar and claimed an empty stool next to the Twi’lek. I kept a wary eye on him and followed cautiously. Whoever this Twi’lek was, he looked combat-ready.

There were very few other people in the cantina, and none of them seemed particularly interested in our arrival. Jen, standing next to me, bit her lip and walked over to Mission’s side.

“(Why, hello there),” the older Twi’lek replied in his native tongue. “(Can I help you?)”

“My name’s Mission. I’m new here, and was wondering if you could tell me a little about Anchorhead?”

The Twi’lek turned around to scan the room at that, his gaze only briefly touching on Jen before landing on me. I saw his eyes widen slightly in surprise, and then flick back to Mission. “(Welcome to Anchorhead, Mission. My name is Komad Fortuna, and I am a hunter from Fazza’s Lodge. What is it you wish to know?)”

He seemed friendly enough, the old hunter with the golden skin; and his headtails were looped around his neck in a relaxed manner. Although I did not understand the full nuances of the Ryl language, I had spent years around Mission Vao and Zaerdra Leno and could glean the basics of their mood from their posture. Komad was not at all wary of us, and seemed disposed to friendliness. I found myself relaxing.

“Um,” Mission hesitated. “Don’t suppose anyone plays pazaak here?” She looked around the mostly empty room, crinkling her nose. “Guess not. Any swoop racing on Tatooine?”
“(Only illegal races. You would have to travel to Mos Eisley for the organized runs).”

“(Mission),” I grumbled. “(We are not swoop racing).”

Komad Fortuna turned to me as I spoke, but he did not look like he understood, and faced Mission once more. “(There will not be much in Anchorhead to engage someone of your age, I suspect. This town survives on hunting and mining. It is also not the safest place these days).”

“What d’ya mean?”

“(The natives attack anyone who encroaches on what they perceive to be their territory, which – these days – is getting closer and closer to Anchorhead. They have recently dug another foothold into the dunes only five klicks away from Anchorhead, and the Czerka-hired mercenaries have been unable to shift them. I think it may be a new clan declaring their territory).”

“Sounds like a rough place,” Mission commented, and I growled softly in agreement.

“(It can be),” Komad agreed. “(I am sure you have a good reason for being here, but I would not dally if I were you).”

“What are these natives?” The question came, surprisingly, from Jen, sitting hunched up on Mission’s other side. Komad leaned forward to answer her.

“(They are called Sand People, or Tusken Raiders. They are vicious, mindless monsters).”

“Oh,” Jen replied, and at Mission’s enquiring look, mumbled softly, “I studied a little on them, being the indigenous people of Tatooine. They have lived here for millennia. What is surprising about them is their technology has never really progressed. Water is sacred to them.”

Komad snorted. “(Water is sacred to everyone on a desert planet. It is true that the Sand People target moisture farms first, but here in Anchorhead they seem to be more prolific. They are trying to drive us out).”

“Huh,” Mission replied. “Guess we won’t be heading out into the desert then.”

“(I would not recommend it, no),” Komad replied. “(You would need to purchase a hunting license from Czerka to exit the main gates regardless, and there is nothing out in the desert other than predators and Sand People, and the odd sandcrawler that gets attacked three times a day).”

“Hunting license?” Mission asked. “What, you mean we have to pay Czerka to leave?” Her voice rose in indignation, and I huffed in agreement. Mission was not fond of Czerka, although I could believe that may have been my influence over the years.

Komad chuckled. “(It is not as unfair as it sounds, my young friend. Czerka hire mercenaries to keep the nearby desert clear of predators and Sand People, and they run the hunting trade through Anchorhead. There is no effective government in this small town, and if it were not for Czerka this place would have disappeared years ago).”

“(Czerka Corporation is nothing but a greedy excuse for profit at any cost),” I rumbled in discontent. It pretended to be an affable commercial entity, exporting and importing goods from planet to planet, but I knew better. Czerka Corporation tried to get its evil fingers into every place they could, and strip the indigenous people of their culture, resources and rights.

“(I do not understand your furry friend, but allow me to elaborate),” Komad said, after nodding at me briefly. He seemed like a most unflappable person. “(Czerka run Anchorhead for profit, I do not
deny that. And they have no respect or understanding for the honour of hunting. But they do allow us off-world goods, relative safety, and the ability to export the resources on Tatooine. Although I must admit, things have been turning for the worse, lately.” He sighed, and took a large drink from the glass the bartender had placed in front of him earlier.

“The Sand People?”

“(Amongst others. The hulak wraids – they are predators common to this area – are being slaughtered systematically and we cannot find the source. They are important to the ecosystem on Tatooine, so we always make sure to hunt them sustainably – yet I am finding numerous corpses very close to Anchorhead. The deaths are puzzling. Only krayt dragons hunt wraids, and this is not the work of a dragon).” Komad sighed. There was a discontented look on his face. “(And worse, one of the Czerka mining groups returned yesterday, having been soundly beaten by the Sand People. Two miners and a Czerka rep were captured).” Komad’s gaze travelled to the far corner of the cantina, then, where a Twi’lek woman sat hunched over a large drink. “(My partner grieves, for one of them was a man she used to care for dearly. The Sand People are known to kill those that they enslave if a ransom is not sent to them within days).”

“That’s- that’s awful,” Mission gasped, and Jen echoed her. “Why doesn’t Czerka send someone after them?”

“(They may yet, but they are not obliged to. I am afraid that all Czerka employees sign a waiver for cases like this. I would like to mount a rescue operation myself, for my dear Lena’s sake, but I cannot risk it by myself, and no one else is keen to take on the Sand People without remuneration).”

“(Horrible corrupt parasites),” I growled. “(Czerka Corporation cares for nothing but money).”

“Lena,” Mission muttered, and I turned to her in confusion. She was staring at the darkened corner of the room, where Komad Fortuna’s friend sat, head bowed. Mission stumbled backwards off the stool, barely catching herself against a nearby table. Her face had paled in shock. “Lena Torand?”

Mission’s voice had risen in volume enough that the few sentient beings in the place, including the disconsolate Twi’lek woman in the corner, all took note. I did not know the name Mission called out, but it was obvious by the way the woman was walking closer to us that it belonged to her.

The Twi’lek woman had pale golden skin, her face was heavily covered in cosmetics, and her headtails waxed and decorated in beads and leather braids. Her lips were a full red that was not natural, and her heavily lined eyes were red-rimmed with grief.

“Mission?” the Twi’lek whispered in Galactic Basic as she came within earshot. Komad Fortuna glanced between the two of them, as surprised as I was. “You- you made it to Tatooine, after all? I guess you’ve heard about-”

“Yes, I made it here alright. Guess you thought you’d never see me again, huh?” Mission’s voice had changed, snarly like a bad-tempered cub’s, and I tensed in reaction. I did not know who this Lena was, but I had been enjoying seeing the enthusiasm back on my young friend’s face, and it was gone now.

“What- what do you mean? Griff always told me he would send for you- is that why you’re here? Did that good-for-nothing Hutt-spawn finally patch you some credits?” Lena folded her arms in irritation, but it did not look like it was directed at Mission. I straightened in surprise as I realized that this Lena Torand must be Griff Vao’s mate. Although it does not sound like this is still true. I had never understood that. On Kashyyyk, Wookiees would mate for life.
Mission gasped, and it was an angry sound. “Don’t you dare start trashing my brother, you slimy cantina rat! You’re the chuba-face who told Griff I couldn’t tag along!”

Lena took a step back before the clouds of anger descended on her face. “It’s moments like these that I remember why I am better off without Griff Vao.” Komad Fortuna had stood, also, and was resting a supportive hand on Lena Torand’s arm. I wondered if she had transferred her affections to him, and felt a soft growl begin in my chest. “Mission, I offered to pay for your ticket. I didn’t want to leave you alone on Taris, but Griff persuaded me that you refused to come. I see now that the dishonest coward duped us both.”

“You liar!” Mission yelled. “Keep it up and I’ll smack you so hard that your headtails will pop off!”

“(Please, this is not the time for angry words),” Komad intervened, his voice calm and low. “(We are all upset here, but this does no one any good).”

Lena sighed, rubbing her forehead with one hand and leaning against Komad. “I don’t wish to quarrel with you, Mission. Especially now. I’m sorry, I guess Griff must have told you we moved to Tatooine.”

“What?” Mission spat. “Griff only messaged me once from Corellia, years ago. He said you didn’t like his kid sister dragging him down.”

Lena stared at Mission in silence for several loaded seconds before closing her eyes. “Honestly, Komad, I don’t know why I’m even upset that he’s-” Her eyes snapped back open, and a frown creased the woman’s forehead. “So, wait, what are you doing in Anchorhead, then? Do you- do you even realize where he is?”

“Why would I know where he is? You’re the scow who’s kept me from him all these years!”

But Lena was looking back at Komad, and her expression was torn. I did not think that Mission’s anger affected her greatly in her current state. Komad had said she was grieving over the loss of one of the Czerka employees.

Oh no. My stomach turned as if I had consumed a week old wasaka-berry pudding.

“(Mission),” I said softly, but did not know how to say the words.

“I am sorry, Mission,” Komad Fortuna spoke haltingly in Galactic Basic. His arm had tightened around Lena, whose face was pressed against his chest. “Your brother was the Czerka employee taken by the Sand People yesterday.”

“What?” Mission snapped. “What?” Jen, who had remained silent through the exchange, gasped and took a step closer to her. “No. No, you can’t mean that!”

“Czerka won’t do anything,” Lena said, her voice muffled against Komad’s chest. “I begged them, but they claim it’s too dangerous. There’s not enough mercs in Anchorhead right now to mount a rescue mission. There’s nothing anyone can do.”

“No!” Mission cried. “What, you’re just going to leave him there? To- to be killed by some native monsters? No!”

I placed my paw on her shoulder and could not stop a mournful howl. Mission’s face was pale and tight as despair filled her light brown eyes. After Taris, this just seemed too cruel.

“The Sand People stronghold is new and not very large, it is true,” Komad said, his voice low and
serious. His bright blue eyes were focused sadly on Mission. “They often leave their bases relatively
unguarded, and I would consider a rescue attempt myself if I had the help of half a dozen seasoned
mercenaries. But I do not.”

“Big Z,” Mission hissed, whirling around to face me. “We have to go after Griff. He’s my brother!”

“(Of course, Mission. Family is important. But we should talk to the others-)”

“Komad, would you strike out with us?” Mission turned again, speaking over me, her light brown
eyes intent on the older Twi’lek. “I mean, Big Z is ace at fighting, and you should see Jen in action. I
can fire a blaster, too. We’d be able to get Griff back if we all worked together!”

Komad was solemn, and Lena pulled back to shoot Mission an incredulous stare. Komad sighed. “I
am sorry, young one. While I admire your bravery, and I do not doubt the abilities of a Wookiee, I
will not rush into danger with the odds stacked so heavily against me. I am afraid your brother is on
his own.”

Mission looked wildly between Komad and Lena, both of whom stared at her sadly. She sniffed
once, twice, and then burst into loud sobs and ran from the cantina.

I groaned in despair and hurried after her.

xXx

“(Mission.)” I complained for the tenth time, as she handed me a gourd of water she had just
purchased. “(Would you please answer me?)”

Mission had always had a big heart. She was always prepared to do anything for those she cared
about. And there was no one, it seemed, she cared for more than the older brother who had
abandoned her in the Lower City.

“You ready, Jen?” Mission called, ignoring me yet again. We were in an equipment store, and
Mission had spent the last hour ensuring we were all clothed appropriately for desert travel. If it had
not been for the dire news of her brother, I would have dragged her back to the Ebon Hawk and
spent the rest of the day scolding her. For I knew where those credits had come from, and I did not
believe either the Jedi or the Mandalorian would be particularly happy when they discovered what
was missing from the cargo bay.

But worse than Mission taking credits from the Ebon Hawk was the idea of Mission traipsing into the
desert. Her first step had been to flounce into the Czerka office and purchase a hunting license. I had
not even understood what she was doing until it was done.

“I guess,” Jen said, winding a head cloth around her head awkwardly. “Um. We’re not leaving the
town, are we?”

“(Mission. I will not let you go into the desert alone. The others will aid us. We must go back).”

“Guys. Griff is my brother.” Mission said, and her jaw was set. “I ain’t leaving him.”

“Family is important,” Jen whispered. “But- the others- they are strong warriors-”

“Stronger than you, Jen?” Mission snapped. Jen flinched, her expression twisting with a confused
helplessness that seemed more at home on a starved cub than the woman I had sworn my life to.
Meanwhile, Mission’s scowl simply deepened. “Look, there’s no harm in having a scout around
Anchorhead, and checking we got the right gear, okay? That’s all I plan to do today. Then we can
go back and get the others to help. But it that *snooty* Jedi tries stopping me—"

Mission glared ferociously at me before storming out of the shop. I loosed a huff of breath, and followed her reluctantly. Family was important. As important as honour. I had forsaken mine, and Mission was the only family I had left.

I would do my best to reunite her with her brother, but we had to even the odds somehow.

We were closer to the exit of Anchorhead now, and food stalls were parked on either side of the main path through the town. My stomach grumbled, and I realized I had not eaten for some time. The food synthesizer onboard the *Ebon Hawk* was satisfying but not particularly tasty. I found myself eyeing over one stall that was selling burnt meat on a stick. It looked like a barbecued tree-frog.

“Hotsa chuba,” Mission whispered, looking in the same direction. Tears filled her big brown eyes. “That’s what Griff wanted to import, y’know. He showed me pics on the HoloNet. He gets the *dumbest* ideas.” She sniffed, and looked away.

“(We will go after him, Mission),” I said softly.

She gave a small nod, and then started walking. Two steps later, and Mission halted suddenly in front of me. “Oh, bantha crap!” she hissed. “That’s Bastila up ahead!”

I followed her gaze, and saw three figures in the distance talking to a guard by a set of large automatic gates. They were dressed differently from earlier but there was no mistaking them. Bastila Shan was in discussions with the gate guard, gesturing authoritatively. Three large packbeasts were standing calmly next to Carth Onasi.

“(They look like they are just leaving Anchorhead),” I said, having followed her inside. Much like the cantina, this store also had air-conditioning, and it was a relief to have a break from the sweltering heat. We had stumbled into a droid store; broken robots and parts littered the small room, and a line of identical protocol droids were stacked up against the back wall. There were a variety of utility droids in various states of disrepair, and one was wheeling through the centre of the shop to whistle at us in welcome.

“What is this? A customer Yuka Laka doesn’t recognize?” I heard a voice speak in halting Galactic Basic, and looked up to see an old Ithorian shopkeeper at the end of the store. “Ahhh, an off-worlder perhaps? Maybe you would like a utility droid to keep your starship repaired?”

“Not interested,” Mission replied, turning back to stare at the exit with a frown on her face.

“You must have a reason for entering Yuka Laka’s store,” the Ithorian continued. “Maybe you need a protocol droid? Yuka Laka has plenty of basic models that can translate in thousands of different dialects.”

“Sheesh, what would we need a translator for? Jen speaks every language we come across.” Mission rolled her eyes. Jen, who had also entered the store, looked highly uncomfortable.

“Oh,” the shopkeeper said dolefully. “Yuka Laka has a droid for every purpose, though. Yuka Laka wonders whether this Jen can speak Sand People dialects.”

“Look, I’m not interested, okay?” Mission snapped, and strode back toward the shop’s exit. I began to follow her, but she stopped, one step from the exit, and turned to face the Ithorian once more. A
speculative look was dawning on her face. “Hang on, did you say Sand People dialects?”

“Yes,” the Ithorian confirmed, and rubbed his hands together. “This is not one of Yuka Laka’s normal droids, no, this is the special of the month! This is a one-of-a-kind protocol droid that is also combat ready. You have not seen any droid quite like that, Yuka Laka is sure of it!”


I stared at her silently while my mind was whirling. It was not a bad idea. “(Mission, we should talk to the others first. The Mandalorian is a tough warrior. Carth Onasi is a great shot. And Bastila is a Jedi. I will not let you do this without their aid.”

“Okay, okay, already! I said it before, Big Z, let’s just check out the desert so we know what we’re getting into. We can think about how we’re gonna get Griff later.” The despair had gone from her face by now, chased away by determination. Mission would not be left behind, I knew. “I’m gonna get this droid, Big Z.”

Reluctantly, I nodded. This shopkeeper has also said the droid is combat ready. That means we have another ally for any danger we meet. As Mission walked away to haggle with the shopkeeper, I looked around for Jen.

She was standing in a dim corner of the store.

Talking to a humanoid robot the colour of tarnished fire, whose red eyes glinted in the darkness.

xXx
Acquiring: Master

Entertainment Routine Initiated:

Target Analysis: Type: Organic Meatbag
Species: Ithorian, Male
Name: Yuka Laka
Occupation: Droid Salesman - Current Owner

Death Scenario: Blaster Shot to Head
Survival Chance: 0 percent
Survival Time: 3.42855 seconds
Analysis: Too Quick

.../Some time later/...

Death Scenario: Drop On Hoth
Estimated Survival Chance: 0.00129 percent ###
Estimated Survival Time: 9558.18116 ± 3109.28884 seconds
Analysis: Amusing. Limited Viewing Potential
Optional Scenario: Drop Naked On Hoth

Death Scenario: Drop On Korriban With "Give Peace A Chance" Sign Attached
Estimated Survival Chance: 0.09023 percent
Estimated Survival Time: 727441.00259 ± 727441.00259 seconds
Analysis: Survival Time Too Dependant On Finder. Limited Viewing Potential

Death Scenario: Removal of Skin
Survival Chance: 0 percent Estimated
Survival Time: 532771.38841 ± 94635.40081 seconds
Analysis: Highly Amusing. Satisfyingly Slow
Optional Variables: Weak Acids, Sodium Chloride

Entertainment Routine Interrupted

Three Organic Meatbags Entering Targeting Area

Analysis: First Meatbag
Species: Twi'lek, Female
Facial Recognition Result: Negative
Probable Personality: Irritating Young Thief
Personality Compatibility: 23.78567 percent
Assigned Temporary Name: Gizka Spawn

Analysis: Second Meatbag
Species: Wookiee, Male
Facial Recognition Result: Negative
Probable Personality: Quiet Warrior
Personality Compatibility: 18.37846 percent
Assigned Temporary Name: Mobile Carpet

Analysis: Third Meatbag Species: Human, Female
Facial Recognition Result: Error 1x0EEEFF. Attempted Access to Locked Memory Core Files
...Sequence Failed
Probable Personality: Unable to Compute - Conflicting Data. Closer Observation Required
Personality Compatibility: Unable to Compute. Calculation Aborted

Hidden User Defined Sub-Routine Activated: Personality Compatibility Set To 100 percent

Interrupt:
...Quick Self Diagnostic Routine Activated
...Result: No Errors Detected
...Self Diagnostic Scheduled
Return to New Target Analysis

Assigned Temporary Name: Enigmatic Meatbag

Conclusion: Preferred Owner: Enigmatic Meatbag

Auditory Sensors Set to Scan Targets Conversations

Input – Yuka Laka to Gizka Spawn: “What is this? A customer Yuka Laka doesn’t recognize? Ahhh, an off-worlder perhaps? Maybe you would like a utility droid to keep your starship repaired?”

Input – Gizka Spawn to Yuka Laka: “Not interested.”

Input – Yuka Laka to Gizka Spawn: “You must have a reason for entering Yuka Laka’s store? Maybe you need a protocol droid? Yuka Laka has plenty of basic models that can translate in thousands of different dialects.”
Voice Stress Analysis: Pleading

Visual Tracking: Enigmatic Meatbag Moving Closer

Preferred Owner in Effective Communication Range

Conversation Routines Activated:
Topic: Purchasing Me
Auditory Sensors Set to Focus on Enigmatic Meatbag

Output: “Greeting: Hello to you, prospective purchaser. I am referred to as HK-47, a fully functional Systech Corporation droid skilled in both combat and protocol functions. Query: Would you be so kind as to purchase this model from Yuka Laka?”

Input – Enigmatic Meatbag: “Er, I-I don’t think I need... have I seen you before?”

Output: “Answer: I do not have access to your memory, prospective purchaser. Extrapolation: I
cannot access my own core memory files, so I cannot say whether I have seen you.”

Observation – Muffled Conversation Occurring Between Gizka Spawn and Mobile Carpet

Input – Enigmatic Meatbag: “Why don’t you have access to your core memory?”

Output: “Explanation: I have been recently fitted with a restraining bolt. With it in place, access to much of my memory core is restricted.”

Conversation Analysis:
Current Topic: Inability to Access Memory Core
Conclusion: Conversation Moving Away From Required Topic
Attempting to Refresh Topic

Output: “Request: Please consider purchasing me, prospective buyer.”

Input – Enigmatic Meatbag: “Uh, I don’t have any credits.”

Visual Tracking: Gizka Spawn and Mobile Carpet Moving Closer

Input – Gizka Spawn to Yuka Laka: “This is the droid I’m buying? Creepy looking thing.”

Input – Mobile Carpet to Enigmatic Meatbag (Shyriiwook): “(Jen? Are you okay?)”

Permanent Name Assigned: Jen to Enigmatic Meatbag

Input – Jen to Mobile Carpet: “I - yes. I just had the strangest feeling...”

Input – Gizka Spawn: “So, robot, what’s your name?”

Light Impact Detected:
Source: Gizka Spawn
Combat Mode Initiated:
Interrupt:
...External Pacifism Routines Activated
...Source: Restraining Bolt
Return to Main
Exiting Combat Mode

Quick Response Analysis:
Appropriate Verbal Responses Would Reduce Chance of Purchase
Conclusion: Ignore Gizka Spawn

Input – Gizka Spawn: “What sort of robot are you? Can ya even speak?”

Input – Mobile Carpet (Shyriiwook): “(Odd. It responded to Jen.)”

Input – Gizka Spawn: “Sheesh, what sort of trash heap is this thing?”
Voice Stress Analysis: Annoyed

Input – Yuka Laka: “The unit has been a little uncooperative. They get that way when they go too long without a memory wipe.”

Input – Gizka Spawn: “It’s just ignoring me!”
Voice Stress Analysis: Petulant
Input – Jen: “Why did you want me to buy you, instead of Mission?”

Permanent Name Assigned: Mission to Gizka Spawn

Output: “Explanation: You have seen combat, and are no farmer or diplomat. The Twi'lek is a child. Extrapolation: Even as a droid, I am allowed a preference of owner.”

Input – Mission to Yuka Laka: “I'm beginning to think you ripped me off.”

Input – Yuka Laka to Mission: “You talked me down to two thousand credits! It will behave and treat you as its master as soon as I have removed the restraining bolt!”
Voice Stress Analysis: Protesting

Input – Mission (muttered): “Two thousand credits is almost all I had left.”

Output: “Objection! I have no desire to be owned by a childish blue meatbag!”

Input – Mission: “Yeah, well, I don't like you either! As far as I'm concerned, Jen can take care of you!”

Input – Jen: “Uh, say what?”

Input – Mission to Jen: “As long as it can talk to the Sand People, I don't care who it obeys. Let's just buy this stupid thing and hit the desert.”

Input – Yuka Laka: “If that is what you want. HK-47, your new master is this human.”

Output: “That is most satisfactory.”

External Sensors Registering Removal of Restraining Bolt
Quick Self Diagnostic Routine Activated
Result: Previously Restricted Routines Now Accessible
Removal of Restraining Bolt Confirmed

Output: “Statement: I see you have purchased me, master. I find this a satisfactory arrangement.”

Output: “Query: Am I to accompany you now? Query: Would you like me to kill something for you?”

Input – Jen: “Kill something for me?”
Voice Stress Analysis: Worried

Output: “Answer: Indeed. I am most eager to engage in some unadulterated violence.”

Targeting: Yuka Laka.

Hidden User Defined Sub-Routine Activated:
Owner Command Required. Interrupt:
...Quick Self Diagnostic Routine Activated
...Result: No Errors Detected
...Thorough System Diagnostic Scheduled
Return to Main.

Output: “At your command, of course, master.”

xXx
Chapter End Notes

### Note: - this equates roughly to a 775-1 chance
Author’s Note – Props to Curtis for his help with this.
Fallen to the darkness

-Juhani-

The heat of the desert ruffled through my fur. It was sweltering in its intensity, even in the shade of the ridged cliffs that created a natural border between the Eastern Dune Sea and whatever lay on the other side.

I cared not. This place was like what I imagined my ancestral homeworld to be; a desolate, barren wasteland. A graveyard of nothingness. It was the perfect place to disappear in.

The predators here were fierce; large reptilian creatures that were no match for my lightsaber nor my power. Their deaths were a testament to my might. I would stand strong in the darkness. I would.

For I had failed the light, and there was no turning back.

The corpses of three wraids were laid bloody in front of me, jagged rents in their bellies spilling looped intestines over the yellow sand. The coppery tang of blood lay heavy in the hot air. I could leave these corpses behind, and scavengers would eventually pick the bones clean. I had already eaten.

I was closer to Anchorhead than I preferred, for sooner or later I knew people would be sent after me. There was legislation surrounding the kills of beasts, even on this remote planet. I felt a snarl form on my face. Twisted, greedy bureaucrats. I took delight in raiding their mining parties of food and water. But I had not killed more than wraids, not yet, no.

Apart from the slavers on Taris, but that was a vengeance long in the coming. Those who had treated me so abominably as a child met their end at the point of my lightsaber, and it was well deserved. Even had I not failed the Jedi Order so disastrously, I would have believed in the rightness of my actions on Taris.

My eyes closed and I wrenched my thoughts away from the Order. Away from my only friend left, who was a good, strong Jedi Knight. Away from my Master, whom I had betrayed so horrendously. Quatra… There was no going back, not now. Had anyone failed their Knight trials so disastrously? Perhaps I would go down in the Jedi history books as the pathetic Cathar who struck down her Master in rage because she was too weak to face her own flaws.

A sob caught in my throat. I must move forward. If the darkness is the only path laid before me, then I shall travel it. For who could kill their own Master other than someone too corrupt for the Light?

The anger and the grief mingled within me, even after so long. It had been more than a year since I had run from Dantooine, run from my Master’s corpse, and just kept running from planet to planet as the sickly self-hatred transformed into fury at the galaxy. This planet, at least, allowed me a reprieve. I could disappear from civilization and test my strength against the wildlife.

But the darkness calls. It did. I could feel it, taunting me, a presence that flashed in the Force and then vanished. I felt it the previous day, too. Weak enough to make me doubt my own senses, strong enough to make me cry for what might have been.

Fallen to the darkness. I cannot turn back. This was the next step along my journey, then. I would accept it, I had no other choice. Whatever this presence was, whoever it may be, they would taste my
wrath for the interruption of my solitude.

And either I would fall to them and be at peace, or I would be one step more powerful.

My lightsaber cut a red beam in front of me. Once, I thought myself worthy of the blue I had found in a Dantooine cave. After my miserable failure, I had cast that aside in favour of synthetic red.

The Force rode with me, invigorating my muscles, enhancing speed, and aiding against the harsh elements of the desert world. I was drawing closer to the township, not far from the gates themselves, and within the territory those Czerka clowns thought of as safe. My senses stretched out over the dunes and picked up on the sentients nearby. There were few.

Just over the crest of the next sandy hill were three faint sparks and the electromagnetic oscillations of a droid. In this environment, it would surely have combat specifications. The pulse of power came from one of them. I am certain of it. I would take care of the droid first, then work out which one taunted me with their Force abilities they were now hiding. That was my target, my path.

And I would show I was strong enough for the Dark Side. It was all I had left, and it would be enough.

It had to be.

My steps slowed and quietened as I drew closer, stealing up on the strangers from behind. They were moving away from me. I could hear a young voice; bright, hopeful, what I might have been once.

“See, it’s not so bad out here, Big Z. Komad wanted six mercs, well, I reckon you count for at least two. And Jen…”

“Statement: I have capabilities far beyond any fragile meatbag. Qualification: Once my shields are repaired, I estimate that my combat prowess will far exceed that of the Wookiee.”

I drew the Force in; deep, tight, and life-enhancing. With a howl, I launched after them, ‘saber held firm in one hand and ionizing energy crisping on the fingers of the other. Unnatural speed in my limbs closed the distance. As I cleared the hill, I saw them at last.

“Warning: Incoming hostile!” The droid was already firing despite my sneak attack, showcasing reflexes that far surpassed those of his companions. But it was no match for me; the bolts were cast aside effortlessly by my lightsaber. I snarled, unleashing my fury, and blue and white energy danced over the burnished red of the combat droid. My lightning had always been more effective against machinery than flesh, and with a hiss and a sizzle the droid deactivated.

I looked beyond the smoking scrap of metal.

A Wookiee, a Twi’lek and a Human. They all stared at me in dawning horror, and only the Wookiee had a weapon ready.

“I shall be your doom!” I howled. The Force blasted from my hand, a shock wave of power that tumbled them all off their feet.

There. There. A sharp flash of power so blinding it engulfed me in its fury, before vanishing once more. Like a mirage in the desert, taunting with its treasure before ruthlessly snatching it away. As the three of them scrambled to their feet, my eyes fixed on the human. She looked at me in terror, but it had come from her. It had come from her.

The Force built a wave of power inside, and I flung it at the other two with all my furious might.
They froze, in stasis, that would hold for as long as I willed it. Incapacitated due to my strength.

"No!" the human cried in distress. Her green eyes were wide and uncertain under an askew headcloth, and she held a vibroblade limply at her side. That was a disappointment. Perhaps she wouldn’t be the challenge I yearned for. “Please, let them go!”

I laughed, a dark sound, and pointed my lightsaber at her. Her face paled, and it was right that she should be afraid. “Who are you?” she whispered, and stumbled backwards in fright.

“I am Juhani, and you have disturbed my peace!”

Peace… would that I could have some.

The Force thrummed through my veins, urged on by my emotions. Once, I used serenity and peace to strengthen my power. Now, I could only use rage.

“Please… we’ll leave you alone, just let them go!” Her voice was terrified and pleading, and I stepped closer. She raised the blade in a fumbling grip, and took another step backwards.

“Too late, human!” I snarled. It was too late for me, and too late for her. I strode forward, weapon raised high. The woman’s face had whitened, and she glanced frantically at her helpless companions, first the hairy one and then the blue.

Her pale, petrified expression shattered.

She snapped her head around to face me. Her grip on the vibroblade firmled, and her eyes narrowed in a resolve completely at odds with her earlier fright.

“Let. Them. Go!” she growled in a deep, dark voice. Her face had twisted in a building fury and her chest was heaving. But the blinding Force, the sheer power I had sensed, was still missing.

I took another step closer, watching the play of emotions battle on the human’s face. “Weak Jedi,” I mocked. “Where is your power? Without it, the Dark Side will cut you down!”

“I am not a Jedi,” the stranger said, eyes fixed on mine. Green eyes, spitting sparks at me. The colour of moss on a sodden tree.

The same colour as Quatra’s. Quatra…

I wailed in grief at the memory and charged, launching a swinging blow straight at the human’s torso. Her vibroblade came up to block, but I forced it down towards her body with unnatural strength. The red energy seared against her desert robes before she leaped backwards.

“You’re a Sith then?” the woman hissed, taking another cautious step back.

“I am with the darkness alone!” I howled, slashing at her legs. She darted to the side, a hair’s breadth from certain amputation.

“Who sent you?” she demanded, still edging away. “Are you after me? Or the Jedi brat?”

I bared my teeth, uninterested in her pointless questions. The Force reared up within my grasp again, begging to be unleashed, and I threw it at her. She tumbled backwards, like a flutter-gnat caught in a gale, and landed on her back with a grunt. I sprang forward with a stab towards her heart, but the human rolled to the side and my saber sank deep into the coarse, hot sand, turning it black. Black as my heart.
I spun around, saber raised once more, and watched as the human clambered to her feet.

“If you want a challenge, then you’ve got one,” she told me, and her voice was cold. I could see the fiery hate building in her face. “But let the girl go. She is no threat.”

I glanced behind to the two sentients, still powerless within my grasp. A frozen expression of horror was painted on the young Twi’lek’s face. “You care for the girl? You are foolish.”

The human looked around, as if seeking aid or inspiration, but there was nothing bar the loneliness of sand and heat. Her eyes fixed back to mine, and then further down my body. She frowned.

“Juhani, was it? Looks like you’ve seen your fair share of action.” She was staring at my torso, and I glanced down. I had not paid attention to my state of clothing for a long time. Tattered rags covered in fresh and dried blood. I was missing a sleeve, but it worried me not. Vanity had never been a weakness of mine.

I smile an empty smile. “I hone my skills on the predators. And now, you. Time to die, human!” I ran at her again, and she held her ground until the last moment, before dodging to the side. I snarled, whirling to face her.

“Predators. You mean the wraids,” she panted. “You’re the one that’s killing them? Wow. That’s your big nod to the darkness?” Her voice had turned snide, twisted. She dares to mock me?

“I am more powerful than you could ever dream of being!” I roared. The heat of anger returned in a fierce wave, ruffling the fur on my neck. I ran at her again, saber raised to strike. Her vibroblade blocked once, twice, but it slipped under the third blow which seared a cauterized stripe down her side. She screamed, jumping back, and her light clothes flapped in the stifling breeze, a burnt edge of cloth smouldering in the air.

It had been a glancing blow only, enough to burn, but not injure. Enough to anger, but not frighten. Not yet.

“You are no match for me,” I hissed. “I harnessed true power when I struck down my master! I revel in my darkness! I adore it!”

“Why are you trying to convince me?” she forced out through gritted teeth. “Unless you truly don’t?”

*How dare she question me?* The uncertainty welled up, the grief, the fear; that this was the wrong way, that I had chosen poorly.

No! I had no other choice, not now, not after what I had done. *I shall not be uncertain. I am steadfast!*

I melded the Force together in a ball and slammed it into her abdomen. She was thrown backwards several metres, slamming into soft sand littered with the debris of sharp rocks. Her vibroblade fell from her weak grasp. The human grunted, coming up in a crouch, and I saw a droplet of blood make a slow path down her cheek. One hand pressed against her burned side as she glared venom at me.

I smiled coldly as she scrambled for her dropped weapon.

“Use the Force, so I can prove I am the master!” I cried. I wanted the challenge, not an easy slaughter. “I will kill you far too easily this way.”

My eyes lingered on a trail of sweat that trickled down her face, mingling with the rivulet of blood. I lazily threw my lightsaber at her; she blocked it, but stumbled backward with the effort. It snapped
back to my hand.

“Are you too weak to use the Force in battle?” I taunted.

“I – am – trying – to!” she snarled through gritted teeth.

I advanced again, two steps, and drew deep on the Force. It propelled me into a swift jump and, snarling, I raised my weapon to strike her down on landing. The human dodged to the left, and my lightsaber skimmed against her shoulder just as she backed out of reach.

_Time to stop playing with her. If she will not give me a challenge, I will kill her now._

The black power bubbled within me. I shaped it. Moulded it into something hideous, and threw it out to poison her body. She choked, stumbling back.

“No!” she shouted in denial. I felt it as the venomous Force struck deep inside her, dragging at her limbs, closing her throat and slowing her mind. The Force could be a very powerful ally, and the empty smile grew on my face again.

I could see her anger transform to hatred. “I will not go down like this!” she screamed. Like a thousand tiny needles flung out to pierce me, I felt the raw power pulse from her once more and paused in surprise. _What I sensed before. She is strong._ The human snarled, and before I had time to blink, she gathered my own tainted Force energy from within her system and hurled it back to me.

I gagged, and my muscles abruptly tightening in unnatural lethargy. _What? She threw it back at me!_ My guard had been down and… I had not thought _that_ possible. I lurched as the dark taint dragged me backwards. Her sheer power _shone_, and it was greater that mine.

And then it was gone again.

The human growled, a vicious sound, and ran toward me. She lunged, her attack frenzied and wild, and I found myself dodging for the first time. The next swipe I blocked, before gathering my wits and striking out at her. Even with the corrupted Force slowing me, she was no match. Not without the power that kept eluding her grasp.

_I must finish her before it comes back._

“I will win this!” I yelled, and the Force flung out from my hand, pushing her away. She snarled inhumanely as a wall of energy buffeted against her, pushing her backwards, digging her feet deep into the sand. My fist clenched, and a weave of energy bent to my will, wrapping around her neck. Tightened, clenched, and she gasped in protest, her off-hand clutching at the invisible grip.

The stranger fell to her knees, growling and choking, her eyes emerald daggers of undiluted hate as she struggled against my superior power. I was skilled enough to hamper her breathing, but not to render her motionless.

And then a blast of pure energy had me sailing backward through the hot desert air as she threw off my constriction with ease. The power has returned, and it was blinding in its fury.

“You will bow to ME!” she shrieked in a voice that resonated with malevolent viciousness. I was back on my feet by then, and the human was _rippling_ with energy. A sense of foreboding tiptoed eerily down my spine. _I am in over my head._

But blank shock rocked through her green eyes, and the power vanished abruptly. _She didn’t mean to say that. She doesn’t understand the darkness; she doesn’t embrace it. I am the master here!_
I growled, on the offensive again, and ran at her. She was snarling like a rabid kath hound as she block, her teeth bared as my 'saber sparked against the her cortosis-strengthened blade. *The anger has her, but I am the stronger.*

“The Force had failed you!”

She dodged the next blow, and struck out at my legs, but it was too easy to dodge backward. Without the Force aiding her movement, every attack could be predicted, every block could be overwhelmed, every opening could be used.

*Now it is time to put her out of her misery. Now it is time to prove that the Dark Side is enough for me.*

“If you will not use the Force, I will end it here!” I drew in the Force deeply, and focused on her blade. With a mental yank, it slipped out of her grasp and went sailing behind me.

The fear, the disbelief, the *anger*, battled for dominance on her face. But it was no match for my darkness.

I flung the Force out once more, a solid push of energy that slammed her to the sand. She fell with a thud.

“I am your doom!” I yelled in triumph and closed in.

I lowered my lightsaber ready to stab her through the heart.

xxx
“Are you too weak to use the Force in battle?” the Cathar mocked me, her slanted yellow eyes glinting in triumph. She was tall, my height or slightly more, with an athletic frame that rippled with muscle under her short, downy fur. Torn clothing hung from her wiry frame, smattered in dark markings that could have been dried mud or dried blood. Her face was angular and exotic, with fine stripes of soft fuzz tracing along her cheekbones. Her only hair hung from a warrior’s tail at the crown of her head.

She was strong and fast and had the backing of the Force. And she was winning, while I was fighting a battle on more than one front.

Jen?

The opaque window of Jen Sahara that clouded my psyche was cracking; and as shards of her clattered away, a sense of stark reality shone in like raw sunlight after a sense-numbing storm.

I had not felt this alive since Taris.

Fear and rage intertwined in my mind, and a strong desire to see this feline stranger dead at my hands followed in its wake.

Jen? Anger leads to the Dark Side! What is going on? Bastila’s voice was actually lecturing me in my head. In my own sodding head. Demanding and pleading and intruding where she had no sodding right.

“I – am – trying – to!” I snarled back at the crazy Dark Jedi, ignoring Bastila for the meantime. My side burned and my cheek throbbed, but both were minor injuries. So far, I had been lucky, but luck alone would not vouchsafe my survival for much longer.

I could sense the Force around me, fuelling everything with life and energy and begging to be used, but my attempts to clutch at it were rebuffed by some unseen hand. I’d grasped for it on Taris, instinctively reaching out when required, but sometimes it had failed me. Sometimes it had bent to my will. How could I have thought the bond wasn't real? And the Force? What's been going on – who am I?

What do you mean? You are Jen Sahara!

I am Jen Sahara. The meek voice echoed her faintly, but it was not compelling enough to convince me. Not anymore.

Shut up! I snarled back, to myself and Bastila both.

Juhani laughed low in her throat; a purr almost. She took a few running steps, and I somehow knew a Force-propelled jump was coming. I waited until the last moment before lurching to the side. Her ‘saber glanced past my shoulder, and I felt the searing heat come perilously close to another injury.

Where are you? Bastila demanded. Please, talk to me! Are you still on the Ebon Hawk?
Juhani raised a hand, and intuition turned my stomach. I couldn’t sense it, but that was Dark Force building within her grasp. *No way to dodge that,* I thought wildly as I leapt to the side regardless.

It engulfed me, searing deep into my limbs, closing my throat.

“No!” I screamed, as I felt the dark oozing of something wrong, something evil, taint my body inside. Sick poison swelled in my throat, and I swallowed convulsively. My limbs felt drugged, slowed. Drugged? A flicker of recollection hit me. *Bastila, you backstabbing schutta! You drugged me!*

**No! I had no choice! Please, I can explain!**

I stumbled backwards, gagging as the corruption dug poisonous fingers deep into my body. My vision clouded, and as the Cathar advanced very real fear coiled deep within me. *I can't win this, unless I use the Force!* It was still there, surrounding me, taunting me with its inaccessibility. I growled, and grasped for it once more. My mental lunge landed against an invisible barrier, a shield, caging me away from the Force. *What is that? That isn’t normal!*

But then, at once, it gave way under my pressure, and the sweet taste of power filled me in a rushing torrent.

Panic emanated from Bastila’s presence within my mind.

“I will not go down like this!” I snarled as the Force sang through my limbs, lifting the aching tiredness and invigorating me with life. Instinct mastered rational thought, and somehow I squeezed the tainted power running through my body, collecting it in a ball and flinging it straight back at the Cathar. Fury pummelled a glorious beat within me, strengthening the Force, and there was nothing that could withstand me, certainly not some pathetic animal-killing Cathar.

*Get her, now!*

I sprang forward, and as I did so the Force was cut from my grasp, like a knife through frostti cream, and it slithered beyond my reach once more. *No!*

My anger still held momentum through my limbs, and I sprang forward, attacking, vibrosword lunging at the Cathar’s torso. She dodged the first blow, her movements unnaturally slow as her own poison worked against her. I stabbed towards her heart but she parried, stronger now, and counter-attacked with a wild swing that had me leaping backwards yet again.

“I will win this!” Juhani shrieked, and her hand flung out, accompanied by a wall of invisible might that forced me backwards. I fought her Force attack with every muscle, every sinew, a growl of pure determination ripping from my throat; but it was useless without having access to the Force myself.

The Cathar’s hand raised and clenched in a fist. An invisible band tightened around my neck, clamping down hard, restricting breathing. I choked, spluttering, my free hand clutching at my throat in reflex. *She calls this a Force grip? Pathetic!* a dark voice sneered in my head, but I still sank to my knees under the weight of it. *I will not go down to some cowering Force user who spends her days challenging desert beasts!*

*Jen? Where are you?* Bastila was pleading now, a hysterical edge to her mental voice that grated even as I ignored it. *Please, answer me!*

The fury was blinding, overriding my fear, my despair, any form of rational thought. It was pure, unmitigated rage, and it blasted through me, shattering an invisible barrier with its sheer power. The
Force hummed as it flooded through me once more, and I flung it out viciously towards the Cathar.

Pure unadulterated panic stormed through the mind-link from my unwanted bond-sister.

“You will bow to ME!” I snarled, and could feel nothing but this menacing, malevolent fury at all who opposed my will. She will bow, or she will die. The Cathar was back on her feet, then, and for the first time looked genuinely frightened. She should be afraid of me. All who defy me have reason to fear! I am the master! The power sailed unchecked through me, the power to rule planets, to bend minds, to make everything it should be-

My mind stumbled, tripped over itself, twitched, as I at once comprehended the nature of my own deluded thoughts. The fury damped down, suffocated by confusion and not a small amount of fear. What am I thinking? That is… not right. It’s not what I want-

The panic from Bastila was so fierce I could taste it. And yet again, I felt something snap cleanly through my attachment with the Force. Why does that keep happening? The Force shouldn’t work that way!

Bu-but you don’t – you cannot know how the Force works!

Bastila? Suspicion reared like a rancor within me. Do you have something to do with this block?

The bond was silent.

I saw a mask of superiority fall back down on Juhani's face. She growled, and lunged towards me again, a vicious swipe of the ‘saber that I blocked while snarling, muscles burning as blood-red sparked against the vibrosword. I held her at bay, but only for a moment. She had the Force on her side, and I did not.

“The Force has failed you!” the Cathar crowed triumphantly, staring at me from behind that blood-red beam. She would end me, and soon, if I did not find a way to reach my own power.

I need the Force. I need it now! We jumped apart, and I sprang forward, swiping at her legs in a move she dodged with ease.

Are you in danger? Please, let me come to you! There was a wavering hesitancy in the bond, as if Bastila was beginning to understand that I might actually be in mortal peril. Where are you, Jen?

I reached out to the Force again. Like I was opening my mind, stretching my senses, a psychic exercise that seemed inherently familiar... but, still, there was nothing there. I had the sense of an invisible net enclosing me on all sides, separating me from the salvation I required.

There's something there, blocking me. I know it. And I know I've broken through it twice today. But how?

Sometimes, there’d been no barrier at all. The Force had simply been waiting for me, ready to bend to my will. Pazaak, in the Upper City, that was the first time. But it didn’t work in Javyar's cantina. I'd slipped past the Sith guard to the turbolift. Enhanced my speed, more than once. Couldn't do a frelling thing but run away on the swoop track, though. So... why did it sometimes work for me, and sometimes not?

Like a lightning strike of clarity, I suddenly saw the connection. Every time the power had risen to my fingertips, Bastila had been absent from my head. Unconscious, or cut off by a neural disruptor. Unable to...

I lurched backwards from a hopeful swing of the rabid Cathar, my thoughts still racing.
Unable to shield me, due to incapacitation. The only time I've truly destroyed her shields is today, through brute strength. It is her. It is her!

"If you will not use the Force, I will end it here!" the Cathar yelled, and my vibrosword flew wildly out of my hand.

No, No! I stared at Juhani in a furious disbelief undercut with denial. It will not end here. It can't end here! Bastila! Give me the sodding Force before I die!

Juhani flung her hand out once more, and I was driven backwards, losing my balance and slamming onto the sand. The air gusted out of my lungs.

Jen! Please, I had to! For your own safety!

No. No! I stared at Juhani in a furious disbelief undercut with denial. It will not end here. It can't end here! Bastila! Give me the sodding Force before I die!

Juhani flung her hand out once more, and I was driven backwards, losing my balance and slamming onto the sand. The air gusted out of my lungs.

Juhani flung her hand out once more, and I was driven backwards, losing my balance and slamming onto the sand. The air gusted out of my lungs.

Juhani flung her hand out once more, and I was driven backwards, losing my balance and slamming onto the sand. The air gusted out of my lungs.

Juhani flung her hand out once more, and I was driven backwards, losing my balance and slamming onto the sand. The air gusted out of my lungs.

Juhani flung her hand out once more, and I was driven backwards, losing my balance and slamming onto the sand. The air gusted out of my lungs.

Juhani flung her hand out once more, and I was driven backwards, losing my balance and slamming onto the sand. The air gusted out of my lungs.

Juhani flung her hand out once more, and I was driven backwards, losing my balance and slamming onto the sand. The air gusted out of my lungs.

Juhani flung her hand out once more, and I was driven backwards, losing my balance and slamming onto the sand. The air gusted out of my lungs.

Juhani flung her hand out once more, and I was driven backwards, losing my balance and slamming onto the sand. The air gusted out of my lungs.

Juhani flung her hand out once more, and I was driven backwards, losing my balance and slamming onto the sand. The air gusted out of my lungs.

Juhani flung her hand out once more, and I was driven backwards, losing my balance and slamming onto the sand. The air gusted out of my lungs.

Juhani flung her hand out once more, and I was driven backwards, losing my balance and slamming onto the sand. The air gusted out of my lungs.

Juhani flung her hand out once more, and I was driven backwards, losing my balance and slamming onto the sand. The air gusted out of my lungs.

Juhani flung her hand out once more, and I was driven backwards, losing my balance and slamming onto the sand. The air gusted out of my lungs.

Juhani flung her hand out once more, and I was driven backwards, losing my balance and slamming onto the sand. The air gusted out of my lungs.

Juhani flung her hand out once more, and I was driven backwards, losing my balance and slamming onto the sand. The air gusted out of my lungs.

Juhani flung her hand out once more, and I was driven backwards, losing my balance and slamming onto the sand. The air gusted out of my lungs.

Juhani flung her hand out once more, and I was driven backwards, losing my balance and slamming onto the sand. The air gusted out of my lungs.

Juhani flung her hand out once more, and I was driven backwards, losing my balance and slamming onto the sand. The air gusted out of my lungs.

Juhani flung her hand out once more, and I was driven backwards, losing my balance and slamming onto the sand. The air gusted out of my lungs.

Juhani flung her hand out once more, and I was driven backwards, losing my balance and slamming onto the sand. The air gusted out of my lungs.

Juhani flung her hand out once more, and I was driven backwards, losing my balance and slamming onto the sand. The air gusted out of my lungs.

Juhani flung her hand out once more, and I was driven backwards, losing my balance and slamming onto the sand. The air gusted out of my lungs.

Juhani flung her hand out once more, and I was driven backwards, losing my balance and slamming onto the sand. The air gusted out of my lungs.

Juhani flung her hand out once more, and I was driven backwards, losing my balance and slamming onto the sand. The air gusted out of my lungs.

Juhani flung her hand out once more, and I was driven backwards, losing my balance and slamming onto the sand. The air gusted out of my lungs.

Juhani flung her hand out once more, and I was driven backwards, losing my balance and slamming onto the sand. The air gusted out of my lungs.

Juhani flung her hand out once more, and I was driven backwards, losing my balance and slamming onto the sand. The air gusted out of my lungs.

Juhani flung her hand out once more, and I was driven backwards, losing my balance and slamming onto the sand. The air gusted out of my lungs.

Juhani flung her hand out once more, and I was driven backwards, losing my balance and slamming onto the sand. The air gusted out of my lungs.

Juhani flung her hand out once more, and I was driven backwards, losing my balance and slamming onto the sand. The air gusted out of my lungs.

Juhani flung her hand out once more, and I was driven backwards, losing my balance and slamming onto the sand. The air gusted out of my lungs.

Juhani flung her hand out once more, and I was driven backwards, losing my balance and slamming onto the sand. The air gusted out of my lungs.

Jeh! Please, I had to! For your own safety!

My own safety? The fury was black and thick and boiling tar, burning hot through my body. This deranged Cathar will kill me if you don't back off right now, and let me use the Force!

"I am your doom!" Juhani howled over me, and lunged to stab her lightsaber through my chest.

I reached out, enraged and panicked, and a sudden deluge of raw power flushed through my body. A snarl ripped from my lungs, and instinct moulded the Force into the tool I needed, I required, I deserved.

Juhani was frozen above me, her 'saber an inch from my heart.

I blinked, rolled away, and scrambled to my feet.

My vibrosword glinted at me from a distance, and my hand rose of its own volition. Instinctively I drew in on the Force, and the weapon came flying, snapping back to my hand.

I was completely unprepared for Juhani's lightsaber to come swinging back at me also. I dodged, yelping in surprise, and the weapon fell behind me. It deactivated as it landed with a soft thump and the fail-safe kicked in.

Juhani snarled and stumbled, breaking free of the stasis.

I have the Force now. She will die! A cold smile curved my lips as I eyed the angry Cathar over. I took a step backwards, and grabbed her 'saber. It hissed slowly as I turned it on.

The Force sang through it, strong and rich and twisted.

Jedi do not kill!

I am no Jedi, Bastila!

I held the red lightsaber in my primary hand, whirling it experimentally. It felt like an extension of my limb, like the power of the Force was focused and augmented through the plasma beam. Like anything was possible.

I could feel the burn of pain against my side, but it was meaningless. The Force riding through me was all that mattered. And with the vibrosword in my off-hand, I felt at ease. In truth, the melee vibro felt slightly unwieldy; heavy and cumbersome in comparison to the 'saber – but there was something about the form that held the familiarity of coming home. Two weapons. I fight with two weapons.

“You are strong,” The Cathar murmured, as her eerie golden gaze fixated on the 'saber now within
my grasp. I could see the disillusionment on her face. *She knows this is her end.* “Stronger than me, even in my darkness.”

A smile of triumph grew on my face as I advanced. The bitterness grew on the Cathar's face, but she lifted her head proudly, resolute, even at the end. It fit, with what I knew of her warrior race. They were no cowards. Even at the edge of defeat, they would fight back, and so she did – a hand lifted and a compressed shockwave rippled through the air.

I laughed as I deflected it. So easy, so weak, and the power of life vibrated an echo of my amusement. It danced through my veins, alive and electric. There was no rational thought, just some deep instinct that took control, warped the power, and radiated it outwards.

Bright hot sparks danced across my vision, and static streaks of charged bolts jumped from fingertips I hadn’t even realized I had raised.

Juhani screamed as the electricity embraced her lithe body. Cold raging victory curved my lips as I watched her dispassionately, as she writhed, grunting in pain. Sparks danced across her body as I stared in fascination.

*This is not the way!* Bastila was shrieking, a tiny voice of conscience in my head.

I blocked it out.

I heard a scream of fear from behind me. *Mission!* The Force fell from my grasp in shock as I whirled around, remembering my companions. They were no longer imprisoned, and Mission was on her knees, horror etched on her young face. The Wookiee held out his vibrosword in readiness, but did not budge from Mission’s side.


“End it!” Juhani demanded in a desolate voice, wrestling back my attention. “End my torment!”

The reminder of my foe flared the rage back to prominence, and I spun around, resolve renewed, and strode back towards the Cathar. She was on the ground, faint smoke wafting from her fur. *You don’t have to ask me twice!* The dark superiority filled me again and I felt the sparks spring to life in my hand, ready to fly again towards my enemy, for I was in control here, I had the power of life or death-

Mission whimpered, and I faltered.

*Can I kill someone in cold blood, in front of Mission?* The Cathar stared at me through alien yellow eyes that were full of despair. *I don’t answer to anyone!* The voice sneered in my head, and I took another step forward.

“Jen,” Mission whispered behind me, and I heard a soft grunt from the Wookiee. My resolve teetered on the edge once more.

Juhani was standing defenceless in front of me, brave pride holding her head high as she faced her end. Scorch marks and blood darkened the short downy fur on her arms. I paused again. *Mission and Zaalbar are watching.*

*So what? They are nothing to me!* I lifted Juhani's lightsaber towards her neck, felt the dark power of the Force hum in tandem with the scarlet 'saber, and saw acceptance on the Cathar's face. There was a sob behind me.
“Kill me now, while you still have the power,” Juhani mumbled, her face close to mine. I stared into those tormented yellow eyes, and the maelstrom of emotions there reflected my own. Against my volition, my fingers hit the power switch on the lightsaber. It deactivated, hissing as it retracted.

Her eyes widened. “What is it you want?”

I could smell the tinny scent of blood on the air. I wasn’t sure if it was hers or mine. *To know who I am. To not have voices in my head. To be able to use the Force, consistently.* Now there’s a thought. “I’ll let you live, Cathar, if you teach me how to use the Force properly,” I said softly.

Juhani took a step back in surprise, shocked laughter escaping her lips. One hand clutched at the opposite arm, and she wavered unsteadily on her feet. “You cannot be serious! I have fallen! I am too weak for the Jedi, and too weak for the Dark Side!”

“Such insecurity,” I mocked, and saw the resultant anger flash in her slanted eyes.

“Leave me to my torment, or kill me now!”

*Why do I not just kill her?* I felt a shield slam down over my senses as the Force was cut off yet again. *Bastila.* The thought was weary rather than angry, this time. Like a harping shrew, Bastila’s very presence was inordinately exasperating.

*Maybe now you will listen to me and tell me what is going on!* she demanded. *I cannot allow you to use the Force that way!* I could feel anger there, from her, but there was also fear. *Fear of me?* Of course. For my rage had been real enough, and so had my dark use of the Force.

But the Cathar was hobbled, for now, and I was in not in any immediate danger. More than anything, I felt tired and annoyed. And deeply confused at everything.

At Jen Sahara. At acting like someone I was not, under a cloud of fogginess and a personality more foreign to me than Evil Bitch.

Oh, my rage was real enough. It was still there, simmering, deep within my gut.

My attention snapped back to the Cathar. Without the Force, bone-aching tiredness and burning pain from my side swung back to life.

“Ever had voices in your head, Juhani?” I asked the Cathar dryly. She blinked at me, and I could tell she didn’t know what to make of me. *I don’t know what to make of me. I’m sure Bastila doesn’t either.*

I couldn’t trust Bastila, but she held power over me. Juhani was the first Force-user I’d come across, barring Bastila. *Maybe she could help me. Maybe she can teach me how to break through Bastila’s shields.*

“In return for sparing your life, you can train me in the ways of the Force.”

“Training? You, who bested me?” The pitch of her voice was high; disbelieving and incredulous. Her slanted tawny eyes widened as she stared at me.

“I don’t know what I’m doing,” I told her flatly as I sheathed my vibrosword. I held onto her deactivated saber; I did not think she was a threat anymore, but I wasn’t stupid, either. “Tuition seems a sensible course, and you’ve obviously had some Jedi training.”
Juhani looked away. "When I slew my Master, Quatra, I knew I could never go back," she mumbled. "I embraced the Dark Side and fled Dantooine. The only path left to me was this one, but at least it would give me the power to crush any who dared cross my path. Or so I thought."

My eyes narrowed. "You embraced the Dark Side, yet you ran away to hide on some remote desert planet?" I scoffed. "I don't think you're as far down the dark road as you believe, Juhani."

"Why are you talking at me still?" she snarled, her voice rising in pitch. "I cannot help you – I will not help you! I am nothing!"

"Nothing?" I snapped in derision. "No, you only managed to incapacitate a Twi’lek, a Wookiee and an insane robot with a wave of your hand!" I turned back to look at HK-47; he was still out of action. I’d barely had time to think about his acquisition, and there he was, a heap of disabled metal. I frowned. "Speaking of which, you owe me for repair parts. That's going to be at least a hundred credits." I folded my arms and stared back defiantly at the Cathar. Mission snorted behind me.

Juhani shook her head in apparent bafflement. "Who are you? Are you just going to hound me constantly until I agree to your incredible demands?"

"Sounds good to me." I smirked.

If I can get this Cathar to teach me the Force, then I'll-

**WHAT?** Bastila's resounding scream echoed through my head, and I winced, raising a hand to cradle my face. **Instead of killing whomever you have encountered, you are using them as a teacher?**

*Talk about your permanent migraine.* Every time I thought I sensed Bastila at her most demanding, panicked, fearful state; her emotions seemed to top a new level.

I had to get rid of this bond.

"How can you be so foolish as to ask this?" Juhani asked, and her gaze was as serious as her voice was soft. "I have fallen, and I can never go back. Yet you would trust me to teach you?"

"I don't trust you, Juhani," I said flatly. *Fallen, hah. She didn’t fall. She ran away.* "Make one wrong move and I will kill you without a thought. However, keep your anger under control and we might just have a working relationship."

**No. No! I will teach you!** Bastila pleaded in my head.

*You have a lot to answer for, Bastila.* I responded coldly.

**I- yes. Perhaps I do. But I will not entrust your Force tutelage to some strange evil Force-user you have just met!**

I laughed suddenly. "And now she wants to teach me," I muttered to myself. "Damn you, Bastila Shan." She was becoming as bad as Carth in keeping me off-balance. But Bastila was dangerous where he was not, and had a hold on me that I couldn’t deny.

*But it was the doctor who screwed my mind on Taris, not Bastila.* That was true. My thoughts raced, trying to pick through the haziness of the last few days. It was all a clouded dream.

"Who- what did you say?" Juhani whispered, blinking at me. "You know Bastila Shan?"

I stared at her warily. Should I let Bastila know who I had encountered? There didn’t seem to be any reason not to, other than pique. Pique felt rather tempting, though.
Bastila, heard of a Cathar called Juhani before?

Bastila was silent for a moment; a tense knot inside my head. *That is who you met?* Her mental voice was calmer, now, more controlled. *She was a Padawan at the Dantooine Enclave. She disappeared more than a year ago, and her Master searched for her in vain.*

I frowned at the Cathar staring back at me. *She said she killed her master.*

*No, although I believe she came close. Please, bring her back to the ship and I shall meet you there. Juhani cannot have fallen far to the Dark Side. I can help her.* Bastila sounded genuine. I wondered idly if it was possible to fake emotions within this strange bond of ours, as Bastila seemed truly concerned. I was not particularly disposed to think anything positive of her. And part of me couldn’t believe we were having an ongoing conversation in my frelling head. And at how natural it felt.

“Yes, I know her,” I replied to Juhani finally. “Annoying stuck-up Jedi. Won't stop yelling at me inside my own head.”

“Inside your head? What do you mean?”

“I- oh, I don’t know,” I grumped. *I need some time alone. Away from this angry Cathar, away from Bastila.* Mission had walked cautiously to my side and laid a gentle hand on my arm. *Away from anyone I care about.* Caring was a weakness. Wasn’t it?

Juhani looked at the others warily, and Mission was frowning in return. My cheek throbbed from earlier when I had slammed it into a rock, and the burn on my side was chafing against the clothes. I’d been lucky to escape without any real injury, I knew.

“Juhani, this is Mission and Zaalbar. Try not to kill them again.”

Juhani actually flinched at that, her golden gaze darting between them both. The fact that she was so uncertain now, devoid of the dark emotions that had gripped her earlier, strengthened my judgment of her. She wasn’t a true Dark-sider. Zaalbar growled, stepping up to flank Mission who was still standing close to me. The Wookiee was still holding his vibrosword, black eyes fixed on the Cathar who stood nervously before us all.

“Let’s go back to Anchorhead,” I said to everyone at large. “I want to go back to Yuka Laka’s. Turns out the Ithorian sold us a droid with bust shields. He’s going to remedy that.” *HK-47 has lasted a stupidly short time, and I wondered if his shields had degraded in storage. Still, his reflexes had been good, and his warning would have been useful had I not been stumbling around in a stupor. My gaze wandered back to the Cathar. “We’ll go back to our freighter after the droid is fixed. Bastila is there, and wants to talk to you. You owe me some Force lessons too.” My grip tightened on the foreign lightsaber. “I’m holding onto your weapon, though.”

“Jen,” Mission said, and I turned, raising an eyebrow at the girl. She looked uncertain. “What about Griff? I mean, I know we’re not in any shape for it today, it’s just…” she trailed off. *That’s right. Her selfish brother.* There’d been that encounter in the Anchorhead cantina, when I’d cowered in the corner and barely make a single peep.

*That can’t happen again.* I was angry, oh was I angry, but there was genuine fear there, too. *What if it does happen again?* I’d be avoiding doctors from now on. Could I be certain that Bastila was uninvolved though?

She must have had something to do with Jen Sahara's origin - or she knew something, at the least.
She owed me some damn answers. My eyes narrowed.

“It’s just…” Mission said again, frowning. “What is Bastila tries to stop us going out again?”

“Oh, she won’t.” I smiled coldly at the Twi’lek. “She can try, if she likes. In fact, I almost hope she does.”

xXx

Juhani stumbled in front of us as we made our way back to Anchorhead. I didn’t wish that crazy Cathar at my back, but the defiance had gone from her. She seemed calmer, resigned to whatever fate I was leading her to. Mission and Zaalbar threw me worried glances but said little as we trudged on the dunes.

I pondered over the strange sense of familiarity that struck me back in the droid shop. Back then, I still fully believed I was Jen. My last clear memory had been the exhilarating escape from the Taris swoop track, and the dash to safety afterwards. Everything that occurred after that was a hazy muddle of barely remembered events. Just like the Endar Spire. I won’t let this happen again. A surge of furious determination swelled throughout me.

“You're okay now, right Jen?” Mission asked, breaking through my angry thoughts.

“Yeah, I'm fine,” I lied.

“B-but we're heading back now to the others. To Bastila,” Mission stammered.

I looked sideways at the Twi’lek, and wondered what she was thinking. Did she blame Bastila for my behaviour? Did I? Zaalbar said nothing, other than an irritated huff as he walked on the other side of Mission.

The days after the swoop race were a muddle of barely remembered events. It was interesting that I could recall all of Jen’s history and early memories with relative clarity, but not since we had left Taris.

What are we doing on Tatooine? Weren’t we headed towards Alderaan? I frowned. There’d been some sort of attack from the Sith, though. No, that had been Taris. My eyes slid to Mission, and I recalled just how upset she had been, and likely still was.

But there’d been a second battle when we exited hyperspace. Mission had spoken about it, quietly, as she sat huddled in the port quarters we called our temporary home. The neutral planet of Dantooine had been under attack-

Dantooine. Bastila said that was Juhani’s home Enclave. A Jedi Enclave.

Bastila had persuaded me to travel to Alderaan, but we’d headed to a Jedi planet instead.

She lied. She lied, and she drugged me. Anger stirred again, fierce and fiery, in heat waves that pricked over my skin. Bastila had tried to herd me towards a trap.

Would she have done that? She claimed, on Taris, to only want to help me. Maybe she had good intentions? Then why hadn’t she just told me? Because I’d refused to follow her, back on Taris. No. No, I couldn’t trust anything that came out of the snot’s mouth. She’d proven her lack of trustworthiness. No matter what was wrong with my mind, no matter who I really was – Street Kid
or Evil Bitch – I couldn’t trust her.

But, I could learn what I needed to use the Force from both Bastila and Juhani, and then I would disappear. Just enough to embrace it consistently. To ensure Bastila’s shields can be overpowered.

And then I would leave. Bastila would not betray me again.

The stone walls of Anchorhead rose up to meet us, and Juhani paused in front. Her head bowed, and one hand batted uselessly at her filthy and torn tunic. It flapped in the slight breeze, covered in blood, sweat and dirt.

“I bet you’ll be glad for a shower,” I muttered as I walked closer. Her slanted gaze turned to fix on me in confusion.

“I do not understand you,” she said softly. “I tried to kill you, and you act as if it never happened. I have fallen to the Dark Side, and yet you leave yourself open to attack.”

“Sun and stars, Juhani, give over already,” I said wearily. “You’re a strong warrior, and you don’t give yourself enough credit. If you were truly evil, you would have lashed out at me again.”

“You are trusting; foolish almost. A naïve attitude I once shared.”

“We all have our demons to fight, Juhani.” I shrugged. “I don’t need you to be another one of mine.”

“You struggle with the Dark Side also,” she whispered, and her alien eyes glistened as they stared at me. “I have sensed the anger and hate within you.”

“Guess that makes us two of a kind then, huh?”

She shook her head, a mournful expression on her face. “No. You bested me, in my darkness.”

“Stop it! You’re stronger than this whining,” I snapped.

“Strength.... I suppose there is strength in resisting anger. The Dark Side of the Force is not what I thought.” Her lilting voice had dropped to a mere whisper, and she had bowed her head once more. She was a bit of an enigma, I thought, as I eyed her over in interest. She seemed to think little of herself at times, and yet I would also call her proud. A bit of a contradiction; maybe we did have more in common than she would admit.

“You mentioned killing your master in rage earlier. I assume you fled immediately after. I don’t think you fell to the Dark Side as much as used it as an excuse for your own failure,” I said flatly. Harsh words that resulted in the Cathar jerking her head up to meet mine, her eyes flashing with fury. I smirked as I saw her gaze drop to the deactivated lightsaber held loosely in my hand.

“You think to judge me? You—” Juhani breathed in deeply as my grip tightened. Her expression became cold, remote. “What would you presume to know of the Dark Side, human?”

I shrugged. Like I can remember. “I don’t presume to know anything, Cathar. It just strikes me that you were running, that’s all.”

“I failed my Master! I failed them all. What else could I do?” Desperation chased the lingering rage from her slanted yellow eyes, and once more she stood in front of me, miserable and despondent.

"Learn from your mistakes?” I said sarcastically.

She blinked at me, surprised and silent. I sighed. “Look, if there’s one organization that preaches
forgiveness and overcoming one’s flaws, it’s the sodding Jedi. Did you even think about going back?"

I felt the solid presence of Zaalbar at my back, and Mission next to him. The large automatic gates were not far behind Juhani, who stood there, wild and unkempt, staring at me intently.

At long last she let out a pent up breath. “Maybe you are correct. Maybe if I had the strength to take responsibility for my actions... the strength to resist my dark emotions. You have given me much to think upon, despite the callous tone of your words.”

I scowled. “Callous or not, you will still teach me.”

The Cathar inclined her head, but no emotion showed on her dirt-streaked face.

“I will repeat that I doubt I have much to teach you.” She turned around to stared back at the looming walls of Anchorhead, and lowered her voice to a dusky whisper. “I do not wish to walk through crowds of strangers, looking like this. I never thought I would fall victim to vanity.”

I laughed in surprise. She didn’t strike me as the sort who would care for the opinion of strangers, but she also looked a right mess. I doubted her clothing could be restored. The light amber fur that covered her body likely kept any sunburn away; had either Mission or I been clothed the same, we would no doubt be feeling the effects of exposure. Even the warrior’s tail on the top of the Cathar’s head was congealed together with some dark matter. She’d been a sight before we’d run into her.

“You look like a tough Cathar warrior who's just seen and won a fight to the death.” I imagined the citizens of Anchorhead would give her a wide berth. “Hah, I don't look too hot myself.” My cheek was stiff with bruising and blood, and there was a blackened rent in the loose desert robes. “I doubt anyone will approach us. We’ll just challenge them if they try, and I’m sure they’ll back off.”

Mission snickered behind me, but Juhani looked surprised. “You make light of the situation. You baffle me.”

I grinned at the Cathar, and motioned her onwards. Zaalbar was walking next to me, gazing at me with serious eyes. His arms were full with the dismantled parts of HK.

“(Be careful, Jen. You may be a little too trusting of someone who almost succeeded in killing you.)”

“Don't worry, I'm not,” I told him flatly. I was ready to flick Juhani’s lightsaber on at the first sign of betrayal. But somehow I doubted the Cathar would turn on me again. Despite her earlier bent towards gratuitous violence, she now struck me as an honourable sort. Either that or I was particularly terrible at reading people.

The large automatic gates were made of some sort of durasteel alloy, bolted into the stone walls on either side. There was a sliding hole on one side, behind which was a Czerka guard.

“Uh, guys?” Mission’s tentative voice had us stopping and turning. “Um, I can’t find the hunting license. Or my tech spikes. I think they fell from my belt when she pushed us over.” Mission’s uncertainty vanished as she scowled at Juhani, folding her arms.

“(Shall we turn back?)” Zaalbar rumbled, shifting the droid in his arms.

“I’d rather get to the droid shop before it closes,” I said, taking note of the low sun in the sky. The second one had already set. “Leave this to me.”

I struck out, walking decisively towards the gates, and knocking on them loudly. There was a grating noise as the small sliding window was opened, and the beady eyes of a Czerka-clad Rodian stared
back at me.

“Who are you?” he demanded.

“Hunters,” I responded. “You know, the people who head out to the dunes and kill stuff?”

“I don’t recognize you. I didn’t let you out,” he said boldly.

“Guard here every waking hour, do you?” I snapped. “Let us in.”

“Where’s your hunting license?” he asked suspiciously.

_The Force, Bastila. Stop blocking me, or I swear I’ll..._ I trailed my mind thought off. I didn’t know what I was going to do. I hadn’t quite thought that far ahead. But the barrier was gone when I reached out, and it was effortless to draw it in, fill my mind and my senses with life. I stared at the Rodian guard on the other side of the gate who had not been there this morning.

“I don’t need a hunting license,” I told him, my voice firm and commanding, the Force flickering all around me.

He scowled. “Everyone needs a hunting license, you idiot! You think Czerka lets just anybody walk the dunes?”

_Well, that didn't frelling work._ I breathed the Force in further, deep into my body and mind, ready to try once more.

But then suddenly my senses went into overdrive. The Force extended outwards under my fumbling grasp, and I became aware of the beings of life all around me in a wide sweeping radius. Mission, Zaalbar, and the Czerka guard were very faint, while Juhani was a bright, moody knot of confusion. Further beyond, I could sense a morass of life throughout all of Anchorhead, made from a thousand tiny specks of life and all indistinguishable from each other. _Whoa._ Here and there a brighter spot flared. My minds-eye touched on three such beings, dark and strong. And further, beyond them, there was a pulsing of white light that blazed brighter than anything else. _Is that Bastila? What is this?_  

My confusion caused my hold on the Force to fumble and drop, and at once I was back to myself, blinking at the gate guard in confusion.

“Look, are you going to rack off, or do you want things to turn ugly?” the Czerka thug sneered, and my concentration snapped back to him.

I felt my brows lower in irritation. “I said, I don't need a hunting license.” I forced out, trying to push power behind every word with deliberate thought.

“Trying to be funny, are you?” the guard snapped angrily.

“This is ludicrous,” Juhani said, her voice in impatient as she shot me a wary look. “Perhaps I understand why you need a teacher.” She turned her attention to the hole in the Anchorhead gate.

“We do not need a hunting license.” _There. I could feel it, the Force, as it hummed weakly with the reverberation of her words, interleaving with the noise and giving her message an extra weight it would otherwise not have._

“I guess you don't, uh, need, um...” the guard trailed off, and then his face twisted in confusion. “Uh, hang on!”
A faint blush was evident beneath the dirty fuzz on the Cathar’s face. She glanced at me sheepishly. “I am afraid this sort of Force use was never my strong point, and I have been out of practice for some time.”

Mission guffawed in outright laughter, while I struggled to hide a snigger. The guard, however, was less than impressed.

“Go away!” he snarled, and our attention was drawn to a grating noise from the top of the gates. Turrets were swinging to aim at us, and just like that, my amusement vanished. “No licence, no entry!”

“I think I know how this Force thing works,” Mission said, an impish note in her voice as she smirked at me. She stepped forward to address the guard. “Don’t worry about them, they’ve gone a bit la-la from too much time out in the desert.” She tapped the side of her head as she gave the guard a sympathetic smile. “I’ve gotta get them to a doc. Look, open the door and I’ll slip you two hundred credits? I need to get these two eggheads out of the sun.”

Mission grabbed a couple of prepaid chits from her belt - and where in the Outer Rim had she found those? – and slid them through the opening of the gate. A moment later, and the large doors creaked open.

We walked inside cautiously, as three Czerka guards stared at us from behind raised blasters. Nevertheless, I had seen Juhani’s attempt, and felt confident of reproducing it.

“(Jen,)” Zaalbar growled, a warning in his voice as I stepped over to the guard at the gate. “(We are inside. This is time to leave well enough alone.)”

He was right, I realized, as a blaster aimed straight at my head. But I could end that thug’s life in an instant. It was a bit galling to admit, but the purpose for trying a mind trick once more would only be to satisfy my own pride. Reckless idiot, a voice said affectionately in my head. Overconfidence, a different voice, this one old and sneering with disapproval. You were always too damnably overconfident.

I shivered, the voices fled, and I turned to nod at Zaalbar.

“Yuka Laka’s,” I said through numb lips. “Lead the way, Zaalbar.” The Wookiee nodded, concern evident on his face, but he turned to stride through the crowd, his arms still full of burnished red metal.

Juhani was one step ahead, shooting wary glances at the crowd. Long shadows were drawn on the dusty path that led under the shaded tarps, and the first merchants were beginning to pack up their stalls. Some stared at us, in particular Juhani and myself, and then deliberately avoided our gaze.

Mission was walking next to me. “So,” she said softly, her light brown eyes looking at me sideways. “That was… that was really something, back in the dunes. You can use the Force, huh?”

Both the posture of the Wookiee and the Cathar tightened in front of me. They were listening in, their hearing eclipsing that of a human’s, I suspected. “Yeah,” I said, sighing.

“Does that mean you’re going to be a Jedi?”

The Cathar slowed until she was on my other side, looking over to Mission in askance. “She is strong in the Force. That does not make a Jedi, however.”

“Yeah, no thanks,” I muttered. “If it means being as uptight at Bastila, I think I’ll pass.” Mission
snickered at that, whilst the Cathar shot me a reproving look. Disapproval from one who had just tried to murder me was somewhat surprising, and I scowled in response.

“What’s… what’s been going on, Jen?” Mission asked, and her voice was quiet. “It’s Bastila, isn’t it? She’s been making you act all funny?”

I heard a gasp of surprise or perhaps indignation from the Cathar, but it barely registered. “I don’t trust her…” I whispered, and my gaze travelled away from Mission to stare unfocused in the distance. “But, I don’t know. I’ve got black spots in my memory, Mission. Things that don’t make sense. Just before we left Taris, I went to see a doctor and that made it worse. Bastila’s lied to me, and I don’t trust her… but I’m not sure what she has to do with the last week or so.”

I stopped in the street, answering Mission, but my thoughts were far away, disjointed and confused and deeply worried. I couldn’t get a grasp on myself. In the quiet times, I knew I was Street Kid and couldn’t be anyone else. But then the anger caught hold, and with it the Evil Bitch’s power… and then Jen Sahara would eclipse everything else with her meekness and fright. I breathed in deeply, and felt myself shuddering.

Mission was frowning at me. “Bastila was sure happy that you didn’t have a backbone, y’know.”

*That doesn’t mean she’s responsible.* But I’d already decided she was to blame for Jen Sahara, weeks ago. *To blame? Or maybe she just knows more than I do?* There was a strong part of me, and I wasn’t sure if it was Jen or Street Kid, that desperately wanted to believe in Bastila.

But there was too much stacking up against her.

A light breeze caught, lifting my tattered robe, and bringing with it a dusty, dry smell. An orange-red sun hung low in the sky, slowly sinking below the Anchorhead buildings. The air had a shimmer of heat to it, although it was less intense than earlier in the day. Locals meandering down the paths were clothed in light, loose tunics appropriate for this environment, and I could smell the burnt meat of a food stall nearby.

*I’ve been here before.* It was a deep, unshakeable certainty, a feeling of strong reminiscence, even as no memory resurfaced. It should have confused me further, frightened me. Or stoked the anger that buffeted uselessly against the cage of uncertainty around my very identity. But I was tired, and the emotions were not helping.

“Jen,” Mission said again, and I glanced sideways at her. Juhani was staring at me, her eyes wide and perplexed. She’d probably heard all of our conversation, and was wondering just whom she’d agreed to train. I felt the side of my mouth quirk. *Wonder if she wishes she was still out there,* *slaughtering the wraids. Probably prefers her darkness to my sort of crazy.*

“What is it, Mission?” But as I looked at the young Twi’lek, I knew who she was thinking about. I gave her a reassuring smile.

“Let’s go, Mission. We’ll head out for your brother tomorrow. I promise.”

The vow slipped out before I could retract it.

xXx
I could not stop my pacing, despite the burn of new blisters and the dull ache of weariness in the soles of my feet.

Where is she?

Had the volatile woman reverted fully to Darth Revan? My insides clenched in nauseating terror at the thought. While I did not truly believe that to be the case - not with the contrary mix of emotions flaring from her - I did know one fact for certain: the persona of Jen Sahara had been swept away with the blowing Tatooine sands.

What do I do? What can I do, now?

Persuasion. Compulsion. Sedation. Anything to keep her compliant, until you find the masters, a little voice whispered. Anything to keep yourself - and everyone who travels with you - safe.

It was tempting. All the more tempting, for I had already trodden down that path, had I not? I simply needed to decide on the best mechanism to subdue Revan. Leash her, somehow, find the safest way to contain her...

The sick feeling in my belly grew.

Through the bond, our thrice-cursed bond, there was a brief surge of emotion. Something light, something that felt an awful lot like empathy. Compassion, undercutting the black rage that had returned to the core of her soul.

Perhaps part of Jen Sahara is still there? I found my feet stilling, as my eyes closed and my mind centred on that damnable woman. If the overlay of the dead scholar still held, even in part, then it would be within my capabilities to, to...

The masters would not blame me. Master Vrook - perhaps he did not agree with the Council's actions, but he always disliked Revan, he would understand she needs to be contained-

A flash of humour on the Force. I jumped like a scalded felinx, frightened that Revan had been stalking my own thoughts in turn. But no, no... she did not seem aware of me in this precise moment; her diversion was entirely due to her companions or environment.

She is not Jen Sahara. Jen Sahara would not find anything remotely amusing after almost losing her life. I swallowed past a lump in my throat. Jen Sahara would not bond so easily with a Tarisian orphan, a Fleet officer, a Wookiee, a blood-thirsty Mandalorian...

My thoughts trailed off as I resumed my automatic pacing. Around and around the Ebon Hawk, with my eyes closed and my Force out-stretched and my mind in chaos.

Perhaps... perhaps part of her never truly fell? That seemed like nothing more than a flight of fancy. She had been the Dark Lord of the Sith. Was redemption possible from the depths of such depravity?
But why else did I save her?

The thought rang through my mind, clear and pure and scything through the thick fear with a glow of righteousness. My feet stopped once more, toes digging into the hard dirt of the dockyard.

**Why else did I save her but to give her a chance at redemption?**

For I had not known of the Star Maps or our bond until later, much later. In the moment upon her flagship, all I had thought about was mercy.

*The Force, Bastila. Stop blocking me, or I swear I'll...*

I recoiled, feeling the Force snap back to me, pulling away from the woman who had upended my life. I could not cut through her connection to the Force. No point, not now, not when earlier my misguided interference had come close to endangering her life.

*I did not understand she was in mortal peril. I did not realize she had left the freighter. I...*

I had been blocking Revan from the Force, and now she completely discerned my hold over her.

If I did not plan to control Revan; but instead, somehow, extend her a second chance... the second chance that my retrieval of her fallen body had started all those months ago... then that meant I required her trust.

Trust. How would it even be possible to ignite the embers of trust between us? Between two individuals so entirely different, whose relationship was already fraught with irritation and dislike and, and... distrust.

And, frankly, how was one individual's redemption truly important, when we had the fate of the galaxy to consider?

Somehow, I had started pacing again.

Forget the absurd notion of turning Darth Revan back to the light. Whatever the Star Maps led to might be our only chance at toppling Darth Malak. That was what Master Galdea had argued, during all those Council meetings that a padawan like myself should not have been a part of, if it were not for the mind-link I had unwittingly created.

*This is the Force at work.* I could still recall Master Galdea's impassioned arguments. The Dantooine Council had taken a long time to decide upon action, and I heard the same debates cycle over and over. *Padawan Bastila's vision shows us that the Sith Lord's mind, no matter how broken, may still yield the odd glimpse of information that can turn the tide of war.*

*Padawan Bastila's initial desire was mercy. A chance at redemption. Master Karon had always sounded so sad. A personality overlay is no redemption.*

*Her mind is too damaged for anything else.* The only knight with an equal standing amongst the masters had her own opinions, and they often aligned with Master Galdea's. Vima Sunrider spoke with the confidence of an expert in the field. *Regardless of what you decide, if we do not construct some artificial framework then there is no point allowing her to reach consciousness.*

*From the most unlikely of sources, can redemption arise.* Master Vandar would add in his roundabout vernacular. *Artificial or not, the journey will still be true.*

*This is dangerous.* Master Vrook would grumble the same sentiment most days. His manner was
gruff, but I knew his concern was for me. *Dangerous and fool-hardy. We risk Bastila-

"Would you stop that infernal pacing?" Canderous growled.

I blinked, abruptly returning to myself as the faded memories of my home enclave whispered away into memory.

Canderous, garbed in a hideous purple suit of armour, was seated upon the *Ebon Hawk's* loading ramp as he rifled through a collection of what looked to be grenades.

My mouth tightened as I turned away from the simple mercenary. I certainly did not dispute the man's competence, but his unhealthy obsession with battle bordered on nothing more than blood-lust.

At the close of everything, I was not sure if I dared any further interference with Revan. I was no longer sure it was the right path.

*Trust. Can I, somehow, implore the damaged shell of Revan to trust... to trust me?*

She had saved Juhani, after all.

*Only so she could trick Force lessons out of her!*

The very idea petrified me to the bone. *Revan, using the Force. Being taught by a fugitive padawan?* I had not known Juhani well; she was a quiet, intense soul who largely kept to herself. I knew she had failed her knight trials and fled, after badly wounding her master.

And now, I did not know who was more dangerous: a runaway who had embraced the Dark Side, or the amnesiac Sith Lord who had defeated her.

I bit back a hysterical laugh. Whatever had happened with Juhani, I vowed to myself I would help the Cathar return to the Jedi fold. She had strayed, but surely if she was returning so readily then she had not been truly lost. The masters would be thankful for her return.

*But to think that Revan played a part in it....*

A flicker of movement caught my attention and derailed my internal monologue.

Carth, striding toward us from the other side of the vast open-air docking bay. The last dimming of daylight encased the area in a golden glow, as the second sun of Tatooine winked out beneath a line of haphazard buildings.

The day had been a success, at least. We had ventured out into the sands and survived our first altercation with the fierce natives that plagued this area. I would have travelled further, had I not sensed Revan's predicament and demanded we return to Anchorhead with all haste.

*We are a step closer,* I reminded myself. Our hired rontos were back at the merchant's stall, awaiting our return tomorrow. I had studied the maps of the Eastern Dune Sea, and located the caves Master Galdeea believed Revan and Malak visited, approximately four years ago.

*Tomorrow, we might actually find the Star Map.*

If only I could placate an angry, amnesiac Sith Lord, first.

"Good news," Carth called out as he neared, throwing me a crooked smile. He had made a bee-line for the local mechanics the instant we returned to the docking bay. "The relay's a common part, and they've sourced one locally. It'll be fitted by the end of tomorrow." A slight frown appeared on
Carth's face. "The mechanics aren't exactly the most professional, though. I'd be keen to have a look over their work before heading off."

I nodded, glad of some other matter to occupy my mind. "That is indeed good news, Carth."

The ship's repairs were reason for me to celebrate, at least. In one day, I might be able to contact Coruscant. Patch a message through to the Jedi High Council stationed in the Core, for after Dantooine-

My eyes closed briefly. I had to believe Dantooine had survived. But after such an assault they might not be in any position to assist, so I would-

But I do not even know if this mission is sanctioned by the High Council!

There had been too many vows of silence amongst the Dantooine Council. And now, Master Galdea was dead. Master Vrook- I had to have faith he survived, or my grief would overcome me, but he had been on Dantooine-

Master Karon? Knight Vima? They were known for their wandering ways. Neither had been on Dantooine when I left. Perhaps, if I could track down Master Karon or Knight Vima, it would save me any unpleasantness in requesting aid from a High Council that might, I suspected, be wholly ignorant of Darth Revan's survival.

I must find help somewhere.

For I was acting blind, trying to keep a brain-damaged Sith Lord on a leash, who was slowly breaking through the intangible barriers on her way to reinvention.

Revan and I shared what was colloquially referred to as a bond. But that term was misleading, as in essence it was a Force link. One created when Revan lay dying before me. As a Dark Jedi, her emotions had been irretrievably enmeshed with the Force. While her soul cried in anguish, starting to separate from her body, her pain had radiated strongly through the Force.

I had been unable to simply walk away and let her die in the face of the despairing grief that engulfed her so wholly.

A spark of life had remained; a broken, tormented spark, but it was there nonetheless. I had struggled to sustain it, to fan it back into existence; and as I did so her ripples of agonized Force energy had flooded my own mind. Our respective grasps upon the Force had mingled in the most intimate fashion, as had our minds and our very consciousness.

Eventually, I had pulled back into myself, lulling Revan into a healing coma. But by then, our connections to the Force had become irrevocably intertwined. I had not realized it until months later, but each of us was in a state of continual vulnerability to the other.

And it was strong, oh yes. Stronger than even Knight Vima or Master Galdea had expected.

I sighed, closing my eyes in fatigue. Never again could one of us open ourselves to the Force without also opening a window to the other.

When she was Jen Sahara that had not been a problem. She had not been aware of the Force or the bond. Now, I only held one slim advantage over her.

Revan does not recall her training. Revan's mind had been brutally damaged and Knight Vima had not believed any form of recovery was possible, and that was before the personality transplant.
I wonder what Knight Vima would say now.

Revan did not, at least, yet know how to reach through that metaphorical window. And unlike me, she did not know how to draw the shutters, so to speak. Whenever she pulled upon the power surrounding her, I was able to simply reach through that window and erect a mental barrier between her and the energy she was attempting to draw.

And she cannot decipher my thoughts. Not yet. My strength had always lain in the ability to interpret and manipulate emotions and mental patterns. To that end, I could understand the outer, stronger thoughts passing through Revan's mind, provided I was concentrating on the bond at the time. I could also push out my own mental voice to her, making us essentially telepathic.

I grimaced. Telepathic with a Sith Lord. This is one gift I could readily forgo. I could only hope that Revan would not learn how to decipher my own thoughts in return, or the cover would surely be blown.

"You've got that funny look on your face again." Carth was frowning at me. "What's going on, Bastila? And why did you insist on returning so suddenly?"

A movement up ahead caught my attention, and providentially gave me an excuse for not answering Carth's rather pointed question.

But the trio of dark flares in the Force shocked me into silence.

Imbecile! I am so wrapped up in my own plagued thoughts that I completely failed to take account of my surroundings!

Three robed figures had sauntered into the docking bay, all holding a telling metal cylinder in one hand.

The last merchant still out selling his wares - despite the oncoming of dusk - squeaked and scuttled away. The black cloaks and ready walk of the strangers gave their identity away to all and sundry.

Dark Jedi. Dread stabbed sickeningly in my belly. Here, on Tatooine?

"Looks like we've got company," Canderous drawled from the ramp, swiftly getting to his feet as he unhitched his weapon with one hand and grasped a grenade with the other. I heard a muffled grunt from Carth as he pulled out a blaster.

The robed sentient in the lead stopped ten metres from me. A dark hood shadowed over his face. In my periphery, I could see the nearest Czerka official sidle away.

The remaining two black-clad figures stopped, flanking the first, and the sound of three lightsabers hissing to life echoed in the stillness of dusk.

"Bastila Shan," the leader chuckled. "Lord Malak was most displeased when he learned you had escaped Taris alive. He has promised a great reward to whoever destroys or captures you, and I'm not about to let that bounty hunter claim you first."

He raised his lightsaber, an ominous double-beam of red, and his side-kicks followed suit with their singles.

Three Dark Jedi, and me without a lightsaber.

I unsheathed my vibro-staff, and pulled deep on the Force. The fear over Revan, the grief over
Dantooine, all my roiling emotions faded into steady resolve. The Force was with me, and I would be steadfast.

"You shall not take me, Dark Jedi," I said softly. A stalling mechanism, for the words allowed me precious seconds to envelop myself and my companions in a Force-activated shield. It would not stop any sort of melee damage, but at least the shield would absorb any dark Force assault. For as long as I could hold it. "You are no match for the light side of the Force."

"Aw, no lightsaber?" one of the side-kicks sneered as the leader took a step closer. All the while, I kept drawing the Force in deep. "This is the fabled Bastila Shan, wielding a stick?"

"Use your vibroblades," I muttered over my shoulder. Peace, but I had to hope neither Carth nor Canderous would be foolish enough to fire a blaster at a Force-user.

"Don't scoff at the easy victories," the first one drawled, taking another step. And another-

The Force unleashed from my fingertips, a mighty wave of concussion that slammed into the trio of Dark Jedi.

They stumbled back, and I was already sailing toward them, vibro-staff sweeping through the air to slice straight into the unguarded torso of the nearest.

He fell with a cut-off gurgle, but I was sweeping around, just as a buffet of something truly dark assailed my Force-shields, seeping into the nascent protection-

The world exploded.

"Block that, miro'sik!" someone yelled.

Thrown backward, I landed in the dirt, vibro-staff dropping from my unfeeling hands.

Rolling frantically, scrabbling to my feet, ears ringing as I desperately called my weapon back to my hands-

Just in time to see Carth run one through with a vibroblade, while Canderous shot the other, fallen from the blast, straight through the head.

The explosion... the explosion had been a fragmentation grenade!

"You are lucky you are not dead!" I cried, even as my limbs sagged in relief at the sight of three still bodies. "A grenade... you foolhardy mercenary! The Dark Jedi could have simply thrown that back to you!"

"Settle down, sweet cheeks," Canderous panted, as he crouched over a warm corpse, industriously stripping the now-dead Dark Jedi. "I do what the situation calls for."

"What... what did you just call me?" I hissed.

Carth was frowning at the Mandalorian, but there almost seemed to be a measure of respect in the pilot's gaze. "That was a pretty short fuse, Ordo. Deliberate?"

Canderous grunted in assent, but did not pause from his corpse-robbing.

I fumed, unwilling to admit the Mandalorian may have had a measure of sense in his actions, may have caused the grenade to detonate prematurely- may have fought against Jedi in the past. His large hands grappled on the fallen Dark Jedi's lightsaber, and with an instinctive twist of power I abruptly
pulled the cylinder into my waiting hands.

Canderous threw me an amused smirk, which I ignored as I strode forward to retrieve the other two lightsabers.

I pocketed the single blades, and reactivated the double-bladed lightsaber experimentally.

The blood-red hue was undeniably wrong, and I could feel the taint of the kaiburr housed within resonate discordantly on the Force. But the lightsaber was otherwise a well-designed weapon, nicely balanced and with a good weight. It would tide me over until I found myself a proper Jedi lightsaber.

Perhaps, if I locate another crystal, I might be able to reconstruct this weapon. It would be a shame to destroy a fine lightsaber such as this. It was light, sleek and smooth in its movements.

Carth stood in front of me, his frustration clearly visible through the whirling scarlet of the lightsaber. I snapped off the weapon, and raised an eyebrow in inquiry.

"Yes?"

"They were after you, Bastila. And, they mentioned a bounty hunter," Carth said, his tone serious. He even looked a little angry.

I blinked. Bounty hunter. That meant someone else on our tail, but a mere bounty hunter would not be as much danger as three Dark Jedi.

"I'm surprised they realized you escaped Taris, let alone that you made your way to Tatooine." Carth's voice was heated, now. "Tatooine, the original destination of the Endar Spire. Malak knows what you're doing. Stang, I don't, but the Dark Lord of the Sith does! When are you going to explain what you're really after?"

Indignation rose in me at Carth's insubordinate tone. I felt my lips pursing. "Carth, I believe I have already explained it to you. We are searching for a Force relic that will aid the Republic in the war against Malak."

"Well, what does this relic do?" he asked in exasperation. "And why did you get so panicky earlier and insist we go back to the Ebon Hawk? I hate being left out of the loop, Bastila!"

"You were born out of the loop, Onasi." A voice, sardonically amused, cut through the stagnant air and had us both spinning in surprise. Revan stood some distance away, a smirk apparent under a layer of grime and blood that belied her day's activities.

I had not seen her coming. Force, I'd been so intent on my current surroundings, I had not even sensed her arrival. Much like the three Dark Jedi.

I could not afford to be caught by surprise again.

"Cute, sister, but I-" Carth stopped mid-retort as he fully registered Revan's state and that of her companions.

I stifled a gasp despite myself. Revan and the young Twi'lek were garbed in desert clothes they had not worn earlier, right down to the desert-cloths wound around their heads. But Revan's clothing was charred in several places, and a deep bruise was purpling on her cheekbone. Her expression was one of mingled exhaustion and amusement.
My dazed eyes slid over to the Cathar Juhani, who looked in even worse condition, standing awkwardly in Revan's shadow.

Canderous barked a laugh. "Well, well, Jen. Looks like you had more fun than us."

My attention remained on the Cathar, and I pushed out gently with the Force to sense her emotions. Confusion and guilt were the strongest. If there was still anger, there, it was buried deep.

Revan, in contrast, simmered with rage.

"(A fine battle. A shame you weren't there)." Revan shot a grin at Canderous. An incongruous contrast with the dark emotions I could feel from her.

"(Sick of the act then, I take it?)" Canderous responded. I narrowed my eyes. **Revan hasn't spoken Mandalorian since the time I first met Canderous.**

"Okay, what's going on?" Carth demanded, his face a gathering thundercloud. "Why are you lot covered in blood? Who is *that*?" He added, pointing to Juhani who had taken a hesitant step backwards. "And why did you all leave the *Ebon Hawk* after promising not to, or shouldn't I even bother?"

"That is a valid point," I interjected smoothly, levelling a disapproving look both at Revan and Mission. "You swore to stay within the safe confines of the ship."

"Hey, you ain't my mother!" Mission protested, glaring at me. "Just 'cause you're a high and mighty Jedi, don't mean you get to tell me what to do!"

The Wookiee huffed from beside the upset Twi'lek, and laid a restraining hand on her arm.

"Query: Permission to blast these whining meatbags, master? They appear to be threatening you."

A strange, metallic voice from behind Revan yielded yet another unwelcome surprise. A smug smirk played along Revan's lips as a burnished red and decidedly evil looking robot strode to her side.

"What in the Outer Rim is that?" Carth snapped, his brows lowering.

"My latest toy," Revan purred. "HK-47, these are the rest of our crew. Threaten them if you will, but do not physically harm them."

I could feel my annoyance burgeoning alongside Revan's damnable amusement. I wondered, idly, if this was how Master Karon had felt, all those years as the wretched woman's master.

*I must calm down. I must appease her, I must garner her trust. Somehow.*

*There is no emotion; there is peace.*

Everything did not revolve around Revan, and I would not give her the satisfaction of losing my temper. For I could not forget Juhani. The Cathar had retreated behind the large form of Zaalbar, and looked ready to bolt. I took a few steps towards her.

"Juhani. It is good to see you again, sister," I said, keeping my voice soft as I walked towards her. Juhani's slanted amber eyes were tormented as they met mine.

"Bastila," she whispered. "It has been some time."

It had, indeed. I had once shared a difficult training mission with Juhani and her stand-offish master.
My own master was seen as harsh and forbidding, but Juhani's I found downright rude. Master Vrook had always treated me with the utmost respect, even while limiting my responsibilities and influence.

Our fieldtrip had been interesting, and my respect for the intense Cathar had grown, even though I barely spoke to her afterward. I had been saddened to hear of her disappearance.

*I wonder if the masters know Juhani fell to the Dark Side.* She didn't seem evil or that lost, now, only confused.

But Revan had fought her earlier. It had taken me some time to understand the danger Revan had been in, but it had been real enough. *That it is Revan who brought her is astonishing. That Revan did not kill her outright-

A sign from the Force, perhaps, that anyone could be saved from the path of evil. *Even Revan herself. There is good in her. I can sense it. And I am not sensing the remnants of Jen Sahara.*

I had to continue what I had started, all those months ago on the command deck of the *Nexus*, Darth Revan's flagship that burned above the skies of Deralia.

"Juhani, Jen, perhaps we should go inside? I believe you would both enjoy some time in the refresher to clean up, and then we should talk."

Juhani nodded slowly, and seemed content enough to follow me into the *Ebon Hawk*. Revan's expression was inscrutable but she, too, walked behind me. As we reached the central hub of the freighter, Revan ordered that odd droid into standby mode, and I felt a flare of irritation.

*I do not know where she obtained that droid from, or how, but I believe we would be better off without it.* I'd only heard it speak once, but it was enough to convince me that all this HK-47 could do was encourage the darker aspects of Revan's nature to emerge.

I had planned to bring Juhani to the women's quarters and associated sonic refresher, but Revan had other ideas, striding off toward the pilot's quarters I had claimed as my own. I breathed in deeply, and motioned Juhani to follow. I did not think the Cathar was ready to be by herself yet.

"So, care to explain to me why I should trust you?" Revan asked as the hatch swished closed behind us. Her voice was cold, and the room cramped with three sentients squeezed inside.

"Jen, I-

"Hey, explain to me why I should even be here. I mean, you've drugged me, lied to me and blocked me from the Force. And that's only what I've figured out. My memory's all screwed up, so I could be forgetting all sorts of sins you've committed against me."

I closed my eyes. "Please, do not be ridiculous." Deep in the back of my mind was a glimmer of relief. She had not noticed any of the compulsion. *That would have turned her completely from me, I suspected.* "If I wished to incapacitate you, I would have done so by now."

"Then why lie about Alderaan? Why the sedative?" she bit out. My eyes opened, to see Juhani backed up by the durasteel hatch, her ears laid flat against her head as her gaze darted between the two of us.

I sighed heavily. *I need Revan's trust.* "I admit I used rather unconventional methods to coerce you toward Dantooine. You are a strong Force-sensitive, Jen, and I felt you needed to talk to a Jedi Master as soon as possible."
Her jaw set. "So you were trying to trap me?"

"No!" I protested, even though it was, in a sense, true. "I was trying to get you to help, Jen. I have been worried about you. I can sense a lot of anger from you, and this combined with your strong Force ability is enough to unnerve any seasoned Jedi. Dark emotions such as anger, hate and passion are a sure road to the Dark Side."

"Passion is a dark emotion?" Her voice, her emotions, changed abruptly from anger to amusement. It was as unnerving as the grin curving her lips.

"Yes, if uncontrolled. Jedi use peace of mind, a calming of all emotion - serenity, if you will - to harness the Force. If your emotions are unbalanced, then your ability with the Force becomes flawed and unpredictable."

She had narrowed her piercing green eyes. "But my strongest moments with the Force have been when I am at my angriest."

"Well, that- that is due to a lack of training," I stuttered. This is a conversation a master should be leading, not me! "Emotions can be used to fuel the Force, as it were, but this is merely the quickest way to power and not necessarily the strongest. It is a path fraught with danger, as the Dark Side works insidiously through irrational and illogical emotions, until it ends up controlling you. This is why we teach Force-users to clear their mind, to work through situations with no emotion and no bias."

"Okay." She paused, and then abruptly switched topics. "So why is my memory screwed up then? Don't fob me off, Bastila. Don't you dare."

I had been dreading this line of questioning for the last hour, and had spent the time attempting to think of believable answers she would accept. Half-truths and part-lies... but I needed her trust. More than anything else, however, I needed to make her aware of just how potentially dangerous and harmful the Dark Side could be. "You were once a Jedi, Jen. A young, powerful Jedi with a bright future ahead of you."

Surprisingly, her eyes softened. Juhani was staring at her in a new light, and I wondered exactly what the Cathar thought of her.

"So what happened?" Revan asked softly.

"Your mind was destroyed, Jen." I responded quickly, evasively. "I fear to tell you too much in case I do more damage. This is why you need to speak with-"

"Do more damage?" The soft look vanished, to be replaced by a shaft of anger that echoed through our bond. "I told you not to fob me off!" she growled.

"I am not! Listen to yourself!" I hissed. Did she scare me or annoy me? It was becoming hard to tell. "Your emotions take control of you all too easily! Your rage, your lust for battle, even your inconvenient humour! You are so open to the Force, with no recollection of your training, and yet you let your passions guide you!"

She had folded her arms stubbornly, glaring at me in fury. Juhani chose that moment to speak up in her accented voice. "That is the path of the Dark Side, is it not? Allowing your feelings to overcome your better judgment..." The Cathar trailed off, looking away. I thought perhaps I caught a glint of tears in her eyes, but my attention was once more taken with Revan.

"So, what will you deign to tell me about myself, then?" she said sarcastically.
I breathed in deeply, overlooking her childish tone. *I need to impress upon her the folly of the Dark Side.* And what was the best way to do that?

The hero of the Republic, Revan Freeflight, would have prided herself on her strength. I imagined the Sith Lord would have done the same.

I had to keep the cover story as correct as possible, so it would ring true; but if I could make her believe the Dark Side made her weak...

I wished again Juhani was not listening. She perhaps knew more of the Dark Side than I did, or ever would. "As I said, Jen, you were a strong young Jedi." I paused, bracing myself. "When Malak and his master left to fight in the Mandalorian wars, against the Council's orders, you followed them."

Revan blinked. "I did? I recalled something about the Mandalorian wars..." she trailed off, and glared at me in suspicion again.

I continued. "Along with many other Jedi, you fell to the Dark Side after the war was over."

Juhani gasped, and her gaze shot to Revan in surprise. Revan's face, however, had turned to granite. Implacable, expressionless granite. I ventured mentally into the bond, but I couldn't sense anything. It was as if she refused to allow herself to feel at all.

But I had to finish my explanation, and hope it would be enough. "You became a tool, Jen, a tool of the Sith Lord." I could not bring myself to name *Revan* as her master. "You had once been a strong, capable Jedi, until you fell. You turned into a slave to the Dark Side, a slave to the Dark Lord. You lost your own free will and strength of mind. Your power diminished over time, and you became weaker in the Force. Eventually you were involved in a confrontation with some of the Jedi."

"And then what?" The words were hissed out, low and dangerous.

"Jedi do not kill, Jen. Your mind, however, was damaged beyond."

"Jen Sahara," she spat, cutting into my explanation. "Who is Jen Sahara?"

I blinked, and felt my fingers clench. "Jen, you are Jen Sahara. What you know, what you remember, is your past before you found the Jedi and joined the Order. What happened to your mind... it destroyed your more recent memories, everything you once knew of the Force." It was a bald-faced lie, and I kept my face impassive as the words spewed forth. Guilt writhed like a sandsnake in my belly. *Jedi do not lie.* Would Revan even believe it?

But what was the alternative? I did not know her thoughts about Jen Sahara, but I dared not let her come to the conclusion that she was the victim of mind-altering Force powers. A *personality transplant.* Most Jedi would not believe it possible. Most would not consider it ethical. And even despite her gross transgressions, I was not sure I did. "You need the guidance and help of a master, and I am but a padawan. Although I am willing to help retrain both you and Juhani, if you will let me."

Her eyes were glacial as she stared into mine. I could still sense nothing, absolutely nothing from the bond. The thought that she might be learning to block me, consciously or not, scared me further.

Her eyes narrowed further. "Explain this mind-link we share."

*I should have thought up a plausible story for the bond.* But I had spent the time bracing myself for Revan's return, I could not conceive possible answers to all her queries in advance. *More lies. I act less like a Jedi the longer I am around her.*
I sucked in a breath. "It grew upon the Endar Spire, an unexpected event. You must understand that we did not believe you would recover from the brain damage you had sustained. We did not think you would ever reconnect with the Force." I took another, deeper, gulp of air. "You had studied in the past, and your area of research aligned with ours, so it made sense to have you onboard. We were there to look after you and ensure you were adjusting to a life without the Force. As for the bond... perhaps it was because I kept checking up on you from a distance. I do not know for sure. Perhaps a master can explain it better to you."

Revan folded her arms. Her face was belligerent, disbelieving. "Except that there is no master around, is there? And I have no wish to meet one."

*You will. I shall ensure it.* I merely had to contact one first. "Like it or not, we are linked. Our connection allows us glimpses into each other's mind. We can feel some of what the other feels." I paused, and laid a mental ear through the bond yet again. Revan's emotions had returned, now: frustration and anger and fear. "And what I feel within you troubles me. A Jedi must receive considerable training. They must learn to control their emotions and darker impulses. Often it takes years before utilizing the Force in the most basic of manners can be considered safe. The fact that you are so strong in the Force and have no recollection of any training-"

"Okay, I get it!" she said through gritted teeth. I breathed in again and recited the Jedi Code once more. Was any of what I said getting through to her? Did the fact that she had fallen to the Dark Side faze her at all? *Patience. It will not be for much longer.* Carth had said one more day until the communication system was back up; one more day in which we might be able to locate and examine the Star Map.

Then, provided the Force was with me, we could be on our way to Coruscant, or to rendezvous with Master Karon or Knight Vima.

Revan could become someone else's problem for a time.

If I could find the Star Map, and return Revan to a master, then surely- surely- I would show Master Vrook I was ready to become a Jedi Knight.

For he still lived. I would not believe otherwise.

"I think I'm going to get cleaned up," Revan muttered, wincing as she rolled her shoulders. She shot me one last frustrated glare, and then her emotions in the bond died down again to an imperceptible level. I wondered what effect my revelations had on her, if any. She was a frightening, unpredictable woman, and it was difficult to know how to gain her trust.

Perhaps if I helped her?

"Wait," I commanded, and to my surprise she stopped mid-stride. "Let me help." I drew on the Force, and sank it deep into Revan's body. She was in better shape than I expected, with one large burn on her side, a lump on her cheek, and a few minor cuts and grazes. She gasped, stumbling backwards, shivering and flushing as the Force healing swamped her.

"Don't do that!" she snarled. "Not without asking!"

I blinked in surprise. "I am sorry," I said stiffly. "I was only trying to help."

"Ask first," she bit out, throwing me a furious glare before storming out. Juhani was standing motionless next to the door, an uncertain look on her face.

The familiar chagrin swept through me as I recalled Carth's hostile reaction to the same. I sighed, and motioned towards Juhani. "Would you like Force healing?"
She bowed her head. "It would make sense. Thank you, Bastila."

The Cathar said nothing as I laid a hand on her, and concentrated the Force through her damaged body. The electricity burns I had expected, but my teeth still gritted in reaction as I came across them. *Revan, transforming Force energy into lightning. That is bad, indeed.* I could cut Revan off from the Force still, yes, but I was unwilling to push her anger too far. *She broke through my shields twice when she was fighting Juhani.* It was simply frightening that the one edge I had over Revan - my ability to manipulate our mind-link - could be waning.

"Thank you," the Cathar gasped as I finished. She gave a slight shiver at the hot-cold reactions to the healing. Her gaze was locked on the closed hatch that Revan had walked out of.

"So she is like me, then," Juhani whispered. "A fallen Jedi."

I drooped, sagging against the wall. I looked at the Cathar, and did not know if I was up to dealing with her issues as well. *Here I am, attempting to guide two who have fallen to the Dark Side. One of them used to be a Sith Lord.* A bubble of hysteria threatened to fall from my lips, but I swallowed it back. "Juhani, you are ready to come back to the Jedi? Are you willing?"

Her strange, feline eyes escaped mine, skittering away to focus in the shadows of the dimly lit room. She hesitated for a moment before speaking. "I do not know, Bastila. I think- I think there is much I have to make up for. Jen forced me to look at myself; at my actions, and at my weaknesses."

I could not quite stop the small noise of surprise that erupted from my throat. *Revan? A voice of wisdom?* Obviously she had said *something* to turn the Cathar away from the darkness.

*Revan was always known for her charisma,* a little voice chided in my head. *Both before and after her fall.*

Juhani twitched at my reaction. A glitter of determination, or something similar, flashed through her amber eyes. "Perhaps she makes sense to me because she understands the Dark Side. Although she has no memory of it?"

"Yes," I said shortly. I did not want to talk about Revan's history with Juhani, and disliked the implication that Revan was better at handling this sort of situation because she had once fallen herself. *That notion is simply preposterous. It is her fall which makes her weak, dangerous.*

I focused again on the bond linking me to Revan, but could sense no emotion from her whatsoever. It was like she had detached herself from the situation, for all I could feel was an empty numbness.

But then, right at that moment, the wall crumbled, and a powerful surge of fear and heartbreaking misery cascaded through the mind-link. I staggered with the force of it, dazed.

Juhani's head jerked upwards, her eyes alert. "I can feel something... someone's pain," she murmured. "Jen?"

The Cathar pressed against the hatch control, and ran from the room. That she had sensed Revan's distraught emotional state stunned me even further, and held me motionless for a moment.

"Wait!" I called out, following her speedily. I dashed down the empty grey corridor of the *Ebon Hawk*, but Juhani was already ahead of me.

Panting, I reached the port bunkroom. Rage and confusion were paramount now, seeping through the bond from Revan, and for the umpteenth time I wished I was not placed in this scenario.
But I am, and I will be strong and wise enough to deal with it.

It was not just about proving my worth. I could not quell the empathy that sparked within me at Revan's emotional turmoil. She scared me, she irritated me... and yet, and yet - I still bore a kernel of hope that within her was the great Jedi Knight of the past.

Revan was curled up on the small bed, her dark curls clutched in clenched fists, with Juhani kneeling in front of her.

"We both fight it, do we not?" Juhani murmured as I cleared the doorway. "The Dark Side, and all of its inviting power, and freedom from moral obligations."

"I don't even know who I am." Revan's voice was harsh, guttural. "Why should I even bother to fight it?"

"No!" I cried out, appalled, moving toward them in instinct. Both Juhani and Revan look up at my call, and the look on the latter's face was... twisted. Twisted with a vortex of dark emotions that echoed within our bond. "No," I said again, frightened, and knelt next to Juhani. Revan stared at me with startled green eyes, eyes that looked slightly darker than previously.

Was I imagining it? Were her eyes, her soul, already changing for the worse? Her gaze had been as black as space, once.

"Please, let me help you," I begged, reaching a hand out to her.

She blinked at me, and her pale face suddenly revealed a vulnerability I did not think I had seen before. I could sense her anger dimming, overshadowed by a growing uncertainty. I could almost convince myself that something like hope, too, was budding in her soul.

Almost.

Revan looked away, and then back to me, and her expression had composed itself. Her eyes deliberately trailed me up and down, as one eyebrow raised, and the bond flattened into emotional silence again.

"I guess it's time for our lessons then, huh?" she said flippantly, a forced smile pasted on her face. Juhani also glanced back to me, waiting. I nodded slowly, inwardly thinking their refresher stints could wait.

"Yes," I concurred. "Let us begin."

xXx
I sat down slowly on the bottom bunk, my muscles clenching in protest at the movement. The healing Bastila had forced on me certainly helped, no matter how intrusive it was. But the thought of kolto or even bacta patches was preferable to the unwelcome invasion of her Force. *She meant well*, Jen murmured and Street Kid echoed her, adding on: *even if she is a rude snot.*

Yet the thought of someone intruding into *my* body without *my* permission was infuriating. I'd reacted poorly to her- and I still felt like baring my teeth.

And then there were the revelations she'd dumped on my head. Some, made sense. Some didn't. And some had the taste of blatant lies.

*Jen Sahara sure as stars ain't my past.* The sheltered commune on Deralia had been Jen's childhood; quiet days of simple farm work and sheltered piety, broken only when I had- *Jen had-* scored that scholarship to the neighbouring Academia. It was her history, not mine.

Street Kid came from a poverty-stricken deprivation worse than Taris. As for Evil Bitch- well, she probably hailed from Hoth or some other place as cold and dark as her heart.

They were different people to Jen Sahara.

*Was Bastila lying? Or is her claim of ignorance correct? Could it be that, despite our mind-link, she doesn't know the whole of my history?* I refused, utterly, to even consider the possibility that Bastila might be correct. Jen wasn't me. It might be the only name I had for myself, but it wasn't mine.

Yet that wasn't everything. *Bastila said I'd been a Jedi.* Well, it seemed likely. Both Evil Bitch and Street Kid must have had training from somewhere. So which one had been the Jedi?

At least it didn't take a genius to work out which one had fallen to the Dark Side.

The Dark Side… it was scary just how compelling it was. It was scary how part of me truly believed it was the right way.

I sighed heavily, and forced those thoughts away. Dragging my knees up to rest my chin on them, I moved on to the latter part of the evening. Our little Force session earlier had annoyed rather than enlightened. Bastila, it seemed, wished to take things very slowly. Considering Juhani had until recently been a psychopathic murdering plague upon the dunes, I supposed I couldn't blame her- but it didn't quell my impatience. *I understood that frelling code the first time she said it.* Why Bastila thought repeating it a hundred times to Juhani and me both would help, I had no idea; but it certainly had not lulled me into a deeper meditative state as was her stated intention. *There is no damn emotion, or there won't be after I throttle her.*

Well, satisfaction was probably counted as an emotion.

I scowled. I needed time to examine all aspects of what Bastila had imparted to me. *Can I trust what she said?* To be sure, some of it made perfect sense. My thoughts tracked back to the earlier flashbacks I'd had on Taris. *One mentioned coming back after the Mandalorian wars.* I frowned,
thinking on that recollection as best I could, but it had started to fade the moment I’d come to – and that had been weeks ago. *And I still have no idea who that man was*… He’d been important to Street Kid, though.

I didn’t know why I had three different people in my head, either. *Was* it a sign of a mental disorder? I’d tried seeking help, the result of which landed me in a dazed stupor only a near-death experience could snap me out of.

It had turned me back into Jen. Just like back on the *Endar Spire*, before I’d cracked my head open. But after my head injury… once the alarms had started wailing on that doomed *Hammerhead*-class cruiser, I’d come to and it hadn’t taken me long to *know* I wasn’t Jen Sahara.

If only I could narrow it down further.

*As for the bond*… Somehow, I had to stop Bastila having the ability to cut off my Force power. As soon as I’d seen her outside the *Ebon Hawk*, I’d struggled and striven to feel absolutely nothing, to keep all my emotions under an imaginary shield of indifference. There’d been times I’d wondered if I was picking up on her emotions; which made me assume she could do the same in reverse. Even better than me, for Bastila had training where I did not, and I couldn’t deny her strength in the Force.

So I’d tried my damnedest, as I walked away from her presence and her dubious revelations, to feel nothing but a detached numbness.

It'd been working... *until I broke down*. I closed my eyes in embarrassed recollection. *Hey, it could have been worse. I could have started bawling in front of Canderous.* I snickered as I imagined the derisive look that would have appeared on the veteran's rugged face.

*Stop evading the issue. I lost control. That was weak. Pathetic.* I dragged a blanket over myself half-heartedly. *Weak and pathetic? Like the Dark Side is?* That didn't fit, somehow. Bastila assured me I'd turned into a mindless tool of Darth Malak. *Me? A cowering minion? I am no one's minion!* What was the stronger, the Dark Side, or the resistance of such?

If only I knew Bastila's agenda, then I might have a better handle on her honesty. Jedi did not lie, except that Bastila already had. *She is nothing. She tries to make me doubt my own self!* Although I'd already been doing that before she came along.

I sighed in frustration, and gave up on inner reflection for the night. I was exhausted, mentally and physically, and thought it might be time to get some well-deserved rest. *Let's try some of those simple meditative techniques Bastila was cramming down my throat.*

I cleared my mind after a struggle, and slowly fell into an uneasy sleep.

…

*An older Zabrakian woman stood before me, frowning. She was dressed in loose fitting tan robes, holding a cyan coloured lightsaber pointed at me.*

*Her stance was ready, waiting; but she did not appear in the least bit threatened or anxious.*

…

The vision spiralled into nothingness as I clutched after it, in a drowsy state of semi-wakefulness. *Who was the Zabrak? She looked like a Jedi?* But the details fled, and slowly fatigue overcame me once more. I drifted off again into a restless sleep.
"It's in here somewhere. I can feel it," I whispered as I took another step into the darkness. The air smelled damp and rancid; probably a natural odour in a krayt dragon's habitat.

"Better be. Only for you would I traiipse through this gods-forsaken desert." The words husked past my ears as I felt hands trail over my robed arms from behind. I could almost see him grin cockily as he pushed aside my hood to kiss my neck. "Only for you would I face dragons."

I turned in his arms, shivering despite myself. Our path had turned harder and bloodier than I could have ever expected, but at least we stood together. There were few left that I wholly trusted, and he stood at the forefront of them.

He ran a hand gently along the side of my face. His eyes, whiskey-brown and familiar, were burning with intensity. My lips curved as he lowered his face to mine.

"You smell of krayt blood," he murmured, before pressing forward in a gentle kiss.

"And you are distracting me." I pushed him away despite the welcome tightening in my stomach. There's a time and a place for distractions... not here. Physical satiation can wait.

"Fine," he grumbled. "Lead on then."

I turned from him, and walked further into the musty cave. Bones and rotting carcasses lined the cavern walls, but my goal was further ahead. A dark, clying presence swirled in the Force. This is it, then. This is our next step. I could see some sort of metallic object up ahead, and I knew it was the Star Map.

"Well, well. Only our fourteenth cave, and finally we hit the jackpot." His sardonic tone couldn't swamp down my excitement as I investigated the old Rakata relic, crouching down and activating it with a brief pulse of Force power.

The Map opened, creaking from disuse, and a sharp blue light spiked into my vision. I squinted as the ancient navigational map unfolded in front of us.

... The image blurred and faded; I could feel myself frowning, shifting uncomfortably in my bed; but a weary lassitude sat heavy in my limbs and my mind. There was a sense of watchfulness from somewhere or someone... a worried sort of fear... and it wasn't mine. I struggled to think more on it, but my body demanded more sleep. I sunk back into the realm of slumber.

... "I am loyal! I swear it!"

The woman gasped as I lifted her in the Force, slamming her hard against the wall behind.

"Tell me who betrayed me," I snarled viciously, my rage fuelling the Force that thrummed and pulsed through my body.

"I do not know! I wasn't part of it!"

I could hear the sincerity in her tone. She was of no use to me then, and I was not in the mood to be sparing. I squeezed my fist, and her neck yanked to the side. And audible snap sounded through the
room. Now that was a waste. That sort of carelessness is more often displayed by my apprentice, I berated myself ruefully as I exited the room, stepping over the twitching body. My apprentice... No, he couldn't be the one who betrayed me. Not him. It would be one of the other remnants of the blasted Jedi Thirteen.

I walked further, well aware a trap was waiting for me, but my pride would not allow for anything else but to show I was the strongest. No one can best me. No one ever has, and once again, it looks like I have to prove it.

A large chrome door opened ahead of me. Of course, they are expecting me. I had been lured onto this pathetic hovel of a planet merely to be led into an ambush, organized by Deralian troops and some of my own traitorous Dark Jedi. I will lay waste to this festering planet.

But first, the matter of this scum up ahead. I will show them what happens to those who dare to betray me!

I stood still in the doorway, aware that the light from the room behind was illuminating my presence like a homing beacon, but perversely I wanted them to make the first, futile move.

I could sense perhaps six or so Dark Jedi in the room. The blood of Deralian troops still splattered my robes; yet I was more than ready to add to it. Who organized this? Which pathetic minion dared to believe they could challenge me?

The one nearest snarled, and charged.

…

The vision dimmed and then disappeared, but I could still sense the figure. There was something shaking me, someone's hand, gripping against my shoulder-

My fist struck out the grabbed the offender's throat.

"Jen! Le-let go!" A high-pitched girl's scream.

What? I dropped my hand abruptly, opening my eyes. Someone was coughing, as an alarmed shot of adrenaline surged through me, and roused me fully to consciousness. Did I just try to kill Mission?

Harsh light from a halogen tubing flared through the room as she flicked the lights on.

"Sheesh, Jen, what were you trying to do? Murder me?" Mission spluttered.

"Are you okay?" I gasped. I was standing without realizing it. "Stars, I'm sorry. I was having some sort of nightmare." Vivid enough that I'd lunged out... that I'd almost choked Mission-

"No kidding." Her voice was dry, but she was grinning. I'd not really hurt her, then. Good. "Remind me not to wake you up again, Jen. Sheesh, I thought I was gonna be Jawa juice there for a minute."

"I'm sorry. Really sorry. I was dreaming someone was going to attack me," I said, relieved now that she seemed to be just fine. The vision still swirled in my head. I'd been surrounded by Force-using bastards about to kill me. What happened next?

Mission giggled, a sudden noise that surprised me. "You weren't dreaming about Bastila, where you? I bet she was pretty mad we left the ship, huh?"

"Well, you know Bastila," I muttered.
The Twi'lek rolled her eyes, her lekku flicking in annoyance. I'd never totally been able to speak the full depth of Twi'leki, which required a set of headtails to emphasize certain points and subtleties. I knew enough to pick up on some of the nuances, though, and Mission seemed to incorporate it instinctively as she spoke Basic.

"What are you doing awake now, anyway?" I asked. "It must be the middle of the night."

"It's almost dawn. And, y'know, I'm worried Bastila'll stop you helping me. You're okay to fight, now, right? Will you… will you help me?"

*She wants to go after Griff.* Well, that suited me. The fading remnants from my dream roused a lust for some healthy violence. There was an annoying part of me commenting that I should control that—that I'd almost injured Mission. *And the Twi'lek does have her uses. It would be a waste to kill her.*

No! I felt my fists clench in reflex at the cold thought. *It's got nothing to do with sodding waste! She's my friend!*

But the shadows in my mind knew that attachment was a weakness. *Emotion is a useful tool, provided it doesn't become a deficiency. The girl is no one to me. She is merely a resource.*

A sharp pain in my palms had me looking down; my fingernails were pressed deep into my palms. There was a harsh noise that I recognized as the sound of my own uneven breathing.

"Jen?" Mission prompted. "Are you... are you okay?"

I pasted a smile on my face and forced the dark, contradictory emotions deep down. With a mental wrench, I focused properly on the conversation.

"How do you plan to leave Anchorhead this time?" I asked.

We'd lost our hunting license, somewhere out in the sandy wild. I probed cautiously through the mind-link; from what I could tell, Bastila was still asleep. It made me wonder what sort of dreams she had- and as that occurred to me, the vague recollection of a worried, watchful presence surrounding me resurfaced-

I stiffened in outrage. No. *It's impossible. That couldn't have been her. She can't be sharing my dreams. I'd rather jump into a sarlacc pit!*

But if it was her — and the more I thought on it, the likelier it seemed — then it meant one thing for certain. This bond was getting far too powerful.

"What we did last time, I guess," the girl chirped. "Buy another one. Although I'm outta credits, and I'd better not pinch anymore." Her head drooped. "Big Z told me off for a long time last night."

"Huh," I said, my tone noncommittal. "Zaalbar's coming, right?"

She nodded. "He took a lot of convincing. Keeps harping on about wanting Bastila with us. But I reckon now you're back to normal, and that droid's got proper shields, then we've got a chance, right? I mean, I can't give up on my brother. And last night the Mandalorian geezer said the others were going after a ruin or something." Mission sniffed. "It's just, the longer my brother's held hostage, the less chance he has, y'know?"

"Yeah," I said, but my concentration had wandered. *Ruins? Was it possible that Bastila was going after the original objective of the Endar Spire? All by herself?*
"Jen?"

My gaze snapped back to the hopeful blue Twi'lek. We needed a way of acquiring more credits, or-

A cold smile curved my lips. "I have a better idea."

Mission's eyes brightened. "What?"

"Bastila has a hunting license. She also has three lightsabers." I'd seen them, last night, before she'd quickly hidden them. I hadn't drawn attention to Juhani's, clipped on my belt, but I desired a second. And it's not like Bastila has three hands. She can certainly spare one. "You're pretty good at sneaking into places, my friend."

It was callous, to put it on her, but somehow I had the feeling that Bastila would respond worse to discovering me in her quarters than the young Twi'lek. Not I thought she'd be particularly impressed with Mission, but-

"You want me to steal from a Jedi?" Mission hissed, covering her mouth with a hand.

I smirked. "Think you're up to it?"

Street Kid had done her fair share of sneaking, much like Mission. It was wrong to use my friend in such a fashion.

No, it isn't. One uses the resources one has at hand. And I was assisting her with her stupid brother. I'd be stronger, better to aid her, with two sabers instead of one. The moment I'd claimed Juhani's weapon, the Force had felt wickedly alive, and the vibrosword in my offhand a dead, primitive tool.

"Well, she's asleep now, right?" Mission giggled at my nod. "It's certainly a challenge. She'll have kath pups if she catches me!"

"So don't get caught."

"Okay. I'll see what I can do." The Twi'lek gave me a confident grin, and sauntered from the room. I shrugged the residual guilt away, and allowed my thoughts to dwell back to the flashbacks that had filtered through my dreams. The details were already disappearing, trickling through my fingers like Tatooine sand. But I could still remember the general detail of them.

Only Evil Bitch could be psychotic enough for the last one. But that odd vision about that brightly glowing artefact... it looked like some sort of navigational map. That was Street Kid. Her boyfriend was in it again. I cared for him. I could feel it. Street Kid had used the Force effortlessly to open that map. She was older, harder than before.

Not when compared to my other half, however. I thought on the fading details of that final vision again, and shuddered at the memory of the person I had killed. Why? Why murder someone who was no threat? And I'd been confident enough, or crazy enough, to walk straight into a trap I knew was coming.

It hit me then, fully. I was powerful. I had people following me. At least one, for the woman I had killed had sworn loyalty. Bastila told me I'd turned weak and spineless when I embraced the Dark Side. My eyes narrowed.

She lied.

Evil Bitch might be psychotic, unbalanced, and utterly deluded, but she wasn't weak.
It's time to split. Time to disappear. Any longer around that Jedi schutta and she'll either walk me straight into a trap- or I'll turn back into meek Jen Sahara.

I could feel the rage beginning to burn, deep in my gut. Bastila wanted to bring me towards some of her all-powerful masters. Maybe, one day when I have regained my full strength in the Force, I might just take her up on that. But, seeing as I promised to help Mission find her brother, I'd go there first. The desert is a wonderful place to vanish in. It would be a shame not to spend any time learning from Juhani, but it was more important to put some distance between me and Bastila. I'd been willing to overlook Bastila's lie about Alderaan, even the sedative when I'd boarded the *Ebon Hawk*, but now... I couldn't trust anything she said.

The hatch opened and Mission strode back in, grinning from ear to ear. She grasped a metallic rod in one hand. I smiled slowly.

"Easy as hessi-loaf!" She grinned, coming to flop on the bed next to me. She thrust the deactivated lightsaber into my possession, and flashed the plasteel card that once more, proclaimed our monetary donation to the Czerka coffers. I smirked. Bastila was going to be pissed once she found it missing.

"Let's go."

xXx

I belted on the used combat suit Mission had retrieved for me, followed by winding cloths around my head. The suit itself had a thermostat control that would aid in the desert, and was otherwise a standard issue, lightweight sort that would provide minimum protection. Mission had been acquiring more gear from the cargo bay, it seemed.

I noted that plating was missing from the left arm with a grimace. *No problem. I'll just make sure I don't get hit there then.*

Zaalbar was staring at me in evident worry.

"I'm fine, Zaalbar." He had spoken few words to me since we'd encountered the Cathar. His life-debt tied him to me tightly, but I didn't want him worrying. *He needs to stay focused on any combat, not on my emotional state.* The Wookiee merely shrugged his shoulders at me.

"I'm glad you're back to normal, Jen." Mission said, filling up a gourd with water from the kitchenette. "It's wizard you can use the Force! I mean, wow. That was something against Juhani, huh? What's it like?"

I blinked at her enthusiasm. "Overpowering, I guess. It can override your thoughts, and your emotions can start controlling everything." I guess that's why Bastila keeps harping on so much. *I was so close to killing Juhani.* I scowled. *I do what I like. No snooty Padawan will tell me otherwise.*

"Y'know, you have been a wee bit grumpy, though," Mission commented.

"I didn't exactly have the best of days yesterday," I pointed out.

Mission looked down. "You- you kinda looked like you were losing control. I mean, when you were playing with that lightning. I, uh, I thought you were gonna kill Juhani back then," she said, her voice uncharacteristically timid.

"I almost did. Don't forget, Mission, she tried to kill me," I said coldly.

"Yeah, I suppose," Mission replied, and I strode towards HK-47, sick of the conversation. The droid
powered on, red eyes coming to life and focusing on me.

"Statement: I am ready to serve, Master. Permit me to blast some meatbags in your name!"

I smiled. "We're heading out into the desert, HK-47. Provided you don't fall over so quickly this time, there'll be plenty of blasting."

"Observation: My electrical shields are now at a hundred percent capability, since the repairs yesterday. Statement: I will be pleased to show you just how many meatbags I can kill!"

I looked back to Mission and Zaalbar, and jerked my head towards the exit of the ship. They both nodded, and we headed out.

The docking bay was dark still, and mostly empty. There was an ambient warmth to the air, and a dusty smell of desert and sand. As I jumped off the landing platform, a sarcastic voice rapped out from the side: "Going somewhere?"

"Onasi," I acknowledged, facing him with a smirk. "Guess you warheros don't bother with sleep."

The faint light of pre-dawn illuminated the scowl on his face. His chestnut hair was still falling in his eyes. He'd come from the direction of the mechanic bay, and I wondered if he'd been checking up on the ship's repairs. "Must be a trick I'm learning from you, Jen. I can't believe you're all sneaking off again! After what happened yesterday!"

Mission's lekku had fallen flat against her head as she stared down at him from the height of the loading ramp. "We're just going for a walk, that's all! Sheesh, why's everyone on my tail?"

"Statement: Paranoid Has-Been is in target range," HK-47 pointed out, clattering down the ramp.

"You're taking him, too?" Carth snapped, glaring at the robot. "What are you trying to do, give Bastila a heart attack?"

I sniggered despite myself. "Hey, if she wants to get all worked up, let her."

"Fine." He folded his arms, a stubborn look on his face. "If you lot are simply going for a walk, then I might just tag along."

"Y'know, Big Z's already bad enough with all this smothering. You don't have to bother," Mission objected.

"I don't see him stopping you," Carth said flatly.

"(This is a matter of family! Of honour!)" Zaalbar growled loudly behind us.

I rolled my eyes in exasperation. If we kept bickering, Bastila was certainly going to wake up, and then the fun would really begin. "Let's just go before the sun sets," I muttered sarcastically, striding towards the Anchorhead gates. I noticed the Dark Jedi corpses from the day before had been cleared away. I wondered idly what clean-up crew had done that. Probably the Jawas sold them as bantha fodder.

"(The sun has not yet risen, Jen Sahara. In fact, one could say it is still set)," Zaalbar informed me helpfully. He has to take everything so literally, doesn't he?

"So, Mission, I hope you know the way. Besides dead south, I mean," I commented as the girl dashed up next to me.
"More or less," she said brightly. "Komad said it was five klicks away. That's walking distance, or we could find some speeders to nab if you want to get there quicker."

"Say what? Five klicks south? Stealing speeders?" Carth's voice had risen to an almost convincing imitation of Bastila. *He's not going to stop complaining until someone tells him what's going on,* I realized with mounting frustration.

"Suggestion: Paranoid Has-Been could use a memory upgrade. Or a blaster shot to the head. *Query: May I administer the latter to him, master?"

"Here's the deal, flyboy," I whirled around, facing him and ignoring HK. Carth was staring at me in incredulity, a mixture of alarm and suspicion on his face. I realized then that Carth had an ability to unnerve me. *I don't know where I stand with him, and I don't like it.* "Mission's brother is being held captive by the Sand People. We're the rescue team."


"I ain't looking for sympathy, okay? I just want to find my brother," she said, and her voice was quiet.

Carth nodded, the compassion clear on his face. "I- fair enough, Mission. I can understand. But surely we should get the others to help?"

I snorted. "Bastila doesn't want either me or Mission outside of the *Ebon Hawk.*"

"That's because you're certifiably insane, Jen," Carth fired at me.

"I bet you say that to all the ladies," I purred, and smirked when I saw I had discomfited him.

"So, you in or not, Carth?" Mission asked. "Cause Bastila's busy with her little quest today, and I'm going after Griff."

He sighed, looking between me and Mission. "I'll come. Bastila knows where she needs to go, now. She needs my help less than you lot."

"Such faith," I mocked. "Where's Bastila headed, anyway?"

I could feel Carth's frown on my back as I headed into Anchorhead, following Mission.

"The ruins. She's pretty tight-lipped about the whole thing. Isn't it what you were hired for in the first place, Jen?"

*It is the original mission then.* Curious. I wondered exactly what she was after. *Had Jen's scholarly background been needed for it at all? Or was that just another ruse?*

"So, want to nick some speeders Jen?" Mission asked.

"Nah, let's play it safe." After the harrowing swoop race back on Taris, I wasn't keen to drive anything remotely similar. "Besides, I don't think HK would be comfortable on one."

"Objection: Master, I am-"

"Shut up, HK."

Mission snickered, and even Carth's mouth twitched at my obvious diversion. I carried on towards
the large gates of Anchorhead in silence, where a sleepy Czerka guard snapped to attention as we neared. Mission flashed our license, and we strode out on the dunes.

A glint upon the horizon indicated that sunlight was about to break, and I could see a dark shimmer up ahead. *Some sort of sandcrawler, no doubt. A Czerka mining mission?*

We headed off in silence towards the distant sandcrawler until I felt a drowsy stirring within the bond. "Dammit, Bastila's waking," I muttered.

"Eh?" Mission had obviously caught that. "Why d'ya say that?"

I eyed over the eager Twi'lek as she walked next to me, and wondered whether I should explain things to her. "We have a mind-link, Mission. Don't ask me how it happened, for I have no idea and Bastila certainly hasn't enlightened me." No, that had been a fob-off if ever there was one. *It just happened on the Endar Spire while she was looking out for me.* I snorted. Yeah, right. I'd seen her all of three times.

"Huh?" Mission blinked at me in confusion. "A mind-link? What's that?"

"A Force bond. We can, sort of, sense each other's emotions. Oh, and she can lecture inside my head at times. Makes my life really enjoyable," I muttered darkly.

Mission wrinkled her nose at me. "I knew it! That must be how she made you act all stupid before!"

I frowned. I couldn't blame that on Bastila, but I wasn't particularly interested in improving the relationship between her and Mission, either.

"Come on, Jen, you can't seriously expected us to believe that," Carth interrupted, before conceding, "although Bastila was acting pretty weird yesterday, come to think of it."

"(This is some sort of honour bond you share with her?)" Zaalbar asked.

"Sheesh, Carth, why d'ya always believe the worst of Jen? Anyone with eyes could see that Bastila was doing some sort of Force thing on her." Mission looked at me in speculation as we continued traipsing through the sand. It was still cool, but the sun's rays were just starting to light upon the top of the dunes. "Though I guess now that you can use the Force, she won't be able to, right?"

"Use the Force? Jen?" Carth spluttered. "What have you been eating, Mission?"

*If he doesn't believe me, I could always show him. My fingers twitched. No, it would alert Bastila. Play nice.*

"You're such a brainless nerf-herder, Carth! How d'ya think Jen and that weird Dark Jedi got so beaten up, huh?"

"A cat-fight, I assumed-"

"Drop it," I ordered. "Trouble ahead."

Thick smoke was pouring from the sandcrawler, obvious now that we neared it. I could see flashes of blaster fire glint in the distance.

Mission fiddled with the visor she'd equipped, and I noticed it was a different one from yesterday. Definitely more high-tech, with buttons and dials along the side.

"Where did you get that?"
"I just found it lying around," she evaded.

"(I tried to stop her)," Zaalbar grumbled. *More searching through Davik's cast-offs in the cargo bay, I suspect.* I tried to stifle a grin.

"People being swamped by some sort of robed creature," Mission muttered, fingers on the controls of her visor. "I guess they're probably Sand People, right?"

"Statement: I am ready for action, master," HK said gleefully.

"I just bet you are," I muttered.

"(We should avoid that conflict)," Zaalbar rumbled. He dug his paws into the sand.

"Yeah, I'm with Big Z," Mission agreed. "It looks pretty nasty. Those people are Czerka miners, I reckon. They're losing."

"We can't just leave them to die, though. Not if we can help them," Carth objected.

*Looks like I'm the deciding vote.* I smirked. *Bloodshed it is.* "Let's go give them a hand, then. Zaalbar, you and me take the front lines? Just like old times in the sewers, eh?"

"(Do not remind me, Jen Sahara. I did not enjoy the sewers)." Zaalbar paused, unsheathing a vibrosword. He turned to look at me then. "(But you are a good fighter)."

I grinned at the Wookiee, and pulled out my lightsabers. "HK, don't kill any of the miners, alright? They might be grateful for the rescue." *And who knows what I could pull from them. Credits, information.*

"Where did you get those?" Carth hissed, grabbing my arm. I yanked it away from him, and activated one in sudden anger.

"What do you think Juhani was wielding yesterday, Onasi?" I snapped. His eyes had turned cold as he stared at me. "You are *not* playing at being a Jedi. You really will get yourself killed."

My amusement sprang to life as my irritation disappeared. Like one fire flaring into existence while another was immediately doused. *Quick and rapid-fire and not emotionally healthy.* With a mental wrench, I pushed the nagging feeling away, and forced a grin. "That'll put a load off your mind and Bastila's, I'm sure. Tell you what, if you can catch me before I reach the Sand People, I'll give you the 'sabers." It was a reckless challenge, as he was right next to me. But the Force was there, ready to bend to my will, sparking along the scarlet blades. And I was hungry for some action. The blood called to me.

I broke away, running.

"Jen!" I heard him yell, as I opened myself to the Force. *Speed. Come on, I know how to do this.* The power flowed through me, familiar and natural.

**Jen? Why are you using the Force?**

*Shut up, Bastila. Life in danger. Shush.*

**What? Where are you? You haven't gone again?**
I'll be back in an hour! If she could lie, then so could I. I pushed the bond to the back of my mind, concentrating on the battle ahead. The world stretched around me, as for once the Force did what I wanted. My old instincts are returning. This is an old trick, I'm sure.

The group of hostile Sand People were decimating the ill equipped miners, and I ran straight towards the middle of the fray. I heard Zaalbar howl in objection behind me, but my momentum carried through me as my primary 'saber sliced through the first primitive.

Angry challenging hoots came from all directions as a group of four Sand People engulfed me. The power pulsed through my veins, my movements unnaturally fast as I dodged and hacked at the soft bodies within range. I threw my off-hand saber at one figure, who collapsed to the ground as the weapon snapped back to my hand. It was a dance of pure power, as my co-ordination and awareness peaked and I found myself predicting the move of every enemy.

Zaalbar, growling, impaled one of the natives on my flank. I heard the buzzing noise of blaster fire come from behind me as the others opened fire.

The heat of battle hummed through me, mingling with the Force. Sweat dripped down the sides of my face as I yelled in battle rage, dodging the primitive gaffi sticks the Sand People flung my way. Mission had thrown us each an energy shield earlier, but I deigned to activate it.

The last two Sand People turned their backs on the surviving miners and attacked me simultaneously. My hand rose and the Force flung out in a wave. They flew backwards onto the sand, and Zaalbar jumped forward to stab one through. The other scrambled to his feet, grunted in protest, and turned to flee. I threw my 'saber again, and he became one corpse of many as the weapon flew home.

I smiled as I surveyed the corpses littered amongst the warming sand. Many had been slain before my arrival, but I'd certainly added to the carnage.

"You should be locked in an institution," Carth muttered as he strode to my side. "Though I saw what you did. That's how you got past the Sith guard on Taris. And the rancor!" His eyes were dark with suspicion. "How- how is that suddenly possible? People don't just suddenly start using the Force like that! You- you're meant to be a damn scholar!"

I gave him a wide-eyed stare. "What, are scholars precluded from having Force powers, Onasi?"

His scowl deepened. "Don't try to evade the issue, Jen. Blast it! This makes no sense. You make no sense! If you could use the Force back on Taris-"

At that, I felt my expression mirror his. "I had no idea what I was doing then-"

"This has got to do with Bastila," he muttered. His brows had lowered, and suspicion sat heavy around him like a thick cloak of fog. "She kept you locked up all night; you and that deranged Cathar. What, is she teaching you the Force, now?"

I shrugged. "That's what she claimed. Myself, I just thought she was just trying to make my life miserable."

I thought I saw a twitch on the side of his mouth before he replaced it with a glare. "I thought it took years of study to even use the Force. How are you suddenly wielding it like an expert?"

"I'd hardly call myself an expert," I muttered. "As to how, why don't you ask Bastila? You might get more answers out of her than I do."

Carth folded his arms, puzzlement warring with his trademark mistrust. "You make it sound as if
she's hiding something from you."

"Stars, flyboy, she's hiding things from everyone." *I don't have time for this.* But I supposed he deserved an explanation. *Like he'd believe what I said anyway. Not that I care what he thinks.*

"She- this is why you were stationed on the 'Spire," Carth said, his voice lowering. "She must have known you could- but you said you'd barely met her- dammit, Jen, help me out here! None of this stacks up!"

"Thanks for your help!" one of the miners gasped, interrupting Carth's pointed queries and dark looks, and I felt a rush of relief as I turned to face the stranger. He looked overcome with both weariness and gratitude. "I hope there's no more of those animals out there."

Four other miners were huddled in the shade of the smoking sandcrawler. Beyond then, a small group of Jawas tumbled out of the hulking machine, wandering about like a lazy platoon of fire-ants, poking at the damaged rents along the side of the massive transport. I turned my back on Carth, attached the 'sabers back to my belt, and addressed the miner.

"What are you lot doing here anyway?" I asked. He was a middle-aged Human, and his grey eyes with tight with desperation. There were several Czerka-clad corpses behind him, dots in the sand, his fellow workers now at permanent rest. "You're not fighters," I said bluntly, eyeing him over. He was wearing light armour and clutched a standard issue blaster in his hand.

"No," the man rapped out. "We're a group of miners, working for Czerka. I don't think we'll bother holding this position for much longer."

"No, not unless you get some backup," I said dryly.

"Hey, do you know a Twi'lek called Griff?" Mission piped up hopefully as she neared us. The Human eyed her over, and shook his head irritably.

"Never heard of him."

"Oh," Mission's lekku fell flat against her head, conveying disappointment. "He also works for Czerka, and was taken in a Sand People raid two days ago…" her voice trailed off in despair.

"They should all be wiped out. Every last one of them," the man snarled suddenly. "They attacked without any reason! Dozens of them! We're not soldiers, and we lost so many men."

"I'm surprised Czerka didn't outfit you better," Carth said. He was still shooting me dark glances even as he spoke to the miner. "It's a disgrace, if they knew about the threat of these Sand People."

"They tried," the Human said tersely. "The company did arm us, and even set up remote self-powered turrets on the mining route, but... but that just made things worse."

"Worse? How so?" I asked.

"The Sand People took all the Czerka weapons that were supposed to protect our sandcrawlers. I hear they've even set them up around their new enclave, directly to the south. That's why it's so hard to wipe this scum out. Their base is a fortress, a death trap."

My eyes narrowed. "Wonderful," I said dryly. "It's going to be fun getting in then."

"You're headed that way?" the miner asked in surprise. "Take my advice, and don't go there. You won't stand a chance. I- I suppose the only way to avoid the turrets is to sneak in somehow."
"Sneak in?" My eyes flicked to Mission, and she stared at me hopefully.

"The Sand People attack any outsiders they come across," the man told me. "You're crazy if you go ahead, but hey, it's your life. I'm getting out of here before they come back." He turned around to face the straggling remains of his men. "Come on, let's head back."

"What about the sandcrawler, Jimm?" one of the survivors questioned.

"There's no point repairing it just to get attacked again. May as well leave it for the Jawas to salvage."

The disheartened and injured miners left us, trudging wearily back to Anchorhead. Corpses of Sand People and Humans alike littered the desert floor, and I stared at them, an idea forming around in my mind.

"(I do not know if we should proceed. It sounds like certain death)," Zaalbar rumbled in discontent.

"I'm going!" Mission folded her arms stubbornly, glaring at Zaalbar. "You wouldn't leave me out here, would you Big Z?"

"(I would not forsake you Mission. But we need a better plan)."

"The only way to sneak in would be to dress up as Sand People," I murmured as I crouched down, undressing one of the corpses with a grimace. I straightened, picking up the blood-stained desert robe. "It may get us inside the base. Mission can disable the turrets then."

"Though I doubt Zaalbar would fit one of these robes."

"Then that's what we'll do!" Mission piped up determinedly, and ran over to another corpse. "If it's the only way to rescue Griff, then let's do it."

"I have a bad feeling about this," Carth muttered.

I rolled my eyes. "You sound like a bad actor in an equally bad action holovid."

Carth shot me a dry look. "Come on, you want to dress up as these primitives to get inside their base? How crazy is that?"

I walked over to him, and lowered my voice. "If it's the only way to help Mission, then yes, I'll do it. No one's forcing you to tag along, flyboy."

His eyes, dark and intent, stared down at mine in frustration. "I'll help Mission," he said finally. "I suppose someone has to be there to drag you both out of trouble. but after this, Jen, you- or Bastila- have got to give me some answers."

I grinned, and stepped away, not granting that jibe with an answer. "Time to get moving. Zaalbar was going to be mightily angry when I told him he couldn't accompany us all the way due to his height and distinctive build. We'll cross that hyperlane when we get to it."

xXx
Canderous Ordo - A discovery

A discovery

- Canderous Ordo -

The sun glinted annoyingly into my eyes, hampered by a sub-par visor. Sand was collecting underneath my battle armour. *What am I doing here, following these idiots?* My skin chafed underneath sweaty, stifling clothes, and it irritated me that Bastila was dealing better with the elements than I was. Maybe the Jedi had some sense in mind when designing those ugly robes, other than trying to look like a bunch of pansy old women. *Haar’chak, but I need to see some action.*

I should have followed Jen. Now what a sight she had been yesterday, liberally smeared in blood and utterly exhausted, but still with spirit in her eyes. *About kriiffing time she started acting normal again.*

Still, it was probably time for me to split. Take my share of the credits and find some work worthy of my skills. Onasi had already consumed significantly more than half of them, it seemed, simply for the freighter’s repairs.

Ah, but that was the rub. Half the ship belonged to me, by rights of acquisition. Yet this lot wasn’t going to part with the freighter on Tatooine, and I wasn’t sure I felt like tagging along to some Jedi rendezvous just to get my share.

Following the Jedi princess around was about as exciting as duelling with a Mimbanite; and while Jen had a pleasing propensity for violence, her unpredictability and that odd meek act lessened the chances of a worthy battle. I’d found her amusing at first, but whatever her game with Bastila was, it smacked of female politics I had no time for.

*I should go talk to some of the spacers.* There was bound to be one travelling out of Tatooine in the next few days. *Might head for Corellia or Nar Shaddaa. Find some mercenary work to make use of my talents.*

I missed the glory of the old days. When we fought for the clans, for the honour of Mand’alor and the challenge of a worthy foe. Before the clans had been crushed and scattered, and Mand’alor’s helm discarded. While it wasn’t strictly necessary for a new leader, it had been disheartening when Mand’alor’s victor had taken it, and presumably cast it aside. *Revan may have been an outsider, but it would have been interesting if she’d decided to lay a claim to the title.* The clans likely wouldn’t have backed her. Ordo might have, though, if she’d consented to an adoption into the clan.

“Bah,” I muttered to myself, disgusted at this lamenting of the past. The ronto underneath me squawked, and I held onto the leathery strap tighter.

Bastila had halted up ahead, busily dismounting. We were in the shade of a craggy range of cliffs to the east of Anchorhead, and the Jedi princess was busy consulting a datapad clutched in her grasp. A slight breeze wafted a film of sand against the ill-fitting visor, and I cursed again. *That was idiotic, not bringing along adequate equipment. You are becoming careless, Ordo.* I needed something to stir my battle instincts, and one incident a day with a bunch of poorly equipped primitives just didn't cut it.

*A shame we are not further south, into the heart of the Sand People territory.* They were reputedly fierce fighters in packs, but so far we had only encountered a few lone individuals.
“There is a cavern up ahead,” Bastila informed me, motioning for me to dismount.

“Dark and shady places your cup of caffa, huh, princess?” I replied as I slid from the ronto’s back. We had already explored three small caves etched into the weathered cliffs, all exhibiting nothing bar nocturnal bats and their respective droppings.

Bastila refused to answer, looking towards Juhani as the Cathar walked closer.

Juhani had barely spoken two words to me, presumably because of the plain and simple nature of my heritage. A shame, really, I would have liked to hear why both she and Jen had been so beaten up yesterday. But no, the Cathar had to be predictable and despise me because my people had been victorious over hers.

“It is high noon,” Juhani murmured to Bastila, so quietly that I had to strain to hear. “Do you not wish to go after her now?”

Bastila’s eyes tightened with irritation. Earlier, she’d thrown a fit worthy of a teenager upon discovering both her hunting licence and a lightsaber had gone missing. As amusing as the ensuing confrontation between her and Jen was likely to be, I rather thought I’d prefer to leave them to it.

“As I said earlier, Juhani, I have no idea where she is,” Bastila replied, after a significant pause. Her voice was low, and I strained to hear it. “I may as well continue on with my quest until she deigns to return.”

“But surely that mind-link-”

“Does not work that way,” Bastila cut the Cathar off, glowering at me when she noticed I was still within hearing distance. I smirked, and she narrowed her eyes in annoyance.

“What?” I said innocently. All morning the two of them have been waffling on in secret. As if I give a mynock’s tail about their Jedi crap. The one and only reason I had for deliberately eavesdropping was purely to aggravate the Jedi princess. I took my sport where I could find it.

Bastila lifted her snooty nose in the air, and turned her back on me. “I can sense emotions and Force use, Juhani. But not location – well, not accurately enough to be of any help. She will return.”

Bastila gave another angry sigh, and muttered under her breath. “She had better.”

I quirked an eyebrow in interest. Most of what Bastila was spouting didn’t seem to make much sense, other than she was talking about Jen. Bastila had been in a black mood all day, and the only reason I’d agreed to tag along was out of sheer boredom.

“We should get on with things,” Bastila said briskly, walking towards the nearby cliff.

“Time to slaughter some more bats, then,” I commented as I slung my heavy blaster over a shoulder. Taking pot-shots in the earlier caves had been a way to kill some time and severely piss off Jedi princess in the process, but it was hardly stimulating.

“You should have a little more respect for life,” Bastila said softly.

I rolled my eyes. Curse you, Jen, for not asking me along today. And hadn’t Bastila been ready to spit daggers when she woke and found the entire party gone bar us three.

“And you should have a little more sleep, princess. You might wake up in a better mood then.”

“I had a... disturbing night,” she responded, thin-lipped.
“I can feel something. This place…” Juhani murmured distantly.

Bastila blinked, looking at the Cathar in surprise. She closed her eyes, and breathed in sharply.

“Yes... I feel it too.”

“Feel what? The blasted heat of the sun, or the annoying mites biting at your face?” I growled. It was unlike me to get so frustrated with my environment, but I usually wasn’t so ill-prepared. The cloth wound around my head didn’t cover the entirety of my face. And for armour, all I have is a dented suit that looks to be a complete replica of the hideous one Davik liked to parade about in. It probably was, seeing as I’d found it on the Ebon Hawk. It was as ugly as it was tight-fitting. At least it is some protection. Davik wasn’t a complete di’kut. I didn’t want to explore the real reason for my aggravation. This planet reminded me too much of my homeworld, and too much of a glorious past that far overshadowed my present.

"No, you simple mercenary!" Bastila snapped. I swung to face her in surprise, my brows lowering in oncoming temper, when she sighed and then followed with a genuine apology. "Forgive me, Canderous. I am sorry." Her gaze was genuine on mine, even as her cheeks flushed with emotion. "I am afraid my emotions are getting the best of me."

I snorted, but nodded in acknowledgment, willing to let it go this time.

Bastila had turned to face Juhani. “Come, let us explore this cave. Be guarded, I fear the Dark Side may be strong here.”

I groaned audibly. All day Bastila had been harping on about the Force to Juhani, and had even gone as far as giving the Cathar a lightsaber, after discovering that Jen had taken both Juhani's and one of hers. Now that's ballsy. Stealing a 'saber from not one, but two Jedi. I had to assume the Cathar was a Jedi, though it appeared as if the warrior spirit of her race had departed her in defiance at such a weak role. Jedi. What am I doing, surrounded by mystical fools? Jedi were powerful enough, to be sure, but most of them preferred sitting on their fat behinds and talking to each other solemnly than actually taking any action. The Sith are just as bad, with their lust for pain and needless waste. I enjoyed victory as much as any Mando’ade, but did not see the point in creating suffering unless there was a reason for it. The Sith didn’t need a reason.

Bastila and Juhani had approached the mouth of the cave up ahead, and I walked briskly to catch up. The cavern itself appeared to be rather large from the outside, and my interest was piqued. Could be something in here, for a change. Maybe even Bastila's precious relic.

The two paused just inside.

“This is it. This is the cave she dreamed of,” Bastila murmured to herself, as she eyed over the cavern walls and rocks.

“Dreamed?” Juhani queried. “What do you mean?”

“Uh, nothing.” Bastila stammered, taking a few steps further into the dark, musty interior. There was an unpleasant odour in the air, like that of rotting flesh. The cavern rose high, perhaps five metres or so, and stretched deep into the cliff. The light from outside did not penetrate all the way in.

“It is that mind-link, is it not?” Juhani persisted.

“Please, I would rather not speak of it,” Bastila said stiffly, disappearing further into the shadows.

The rotting stench grew as I stepped deeper into the cave. “Mand’alor’s balls, what is that kriffing smell?”
“I would appreciate it if you watched your language, Canderous,” Bastila retorted. “Particularly around Mission, she is impressionable enough without listening to that.”

She really is priceless. “I think the kid's already got an impressive vocabulary, princess,” I drawled. My eyes were drawn to the sandy ground, relatively sheltered here near the opening of the cave. The light had dimmed, here, but there was still enough for me to take notice of the sand. There was something off about it.

“What is this creature? This must be the source of this smell, but I have never seen anything so large before,” Juhani called out from further inside.

In the centre of the cavern's opening, the sand made a repeating pattern which appeared a common effect of the incoming breeze. But around the edges parts of it looked smoothed over. I frowned, scanning around for any tracks as I walked closer to the cavern walls to investigate. There wasn't much to see.

“That is the remains of a krayt dragon,” Bastila's voice came from deeper in the cave; she had followed Juhani. “It was slain about four years ago.”

“Are you sure, Bastila? I would have thought there would be... less to see, as such. Natural predators and scavengers surely would have picked the bones clean, rather than leaving it to rot for so long.”

That roused my interest, so I followed them to investigate. The sand thinned as I walked further in, the ground hardening to rock under my feet. A monstrous corpse loomed before my vision as I approached, dim light from the outside world glinting on the discoloured bones. The flesh had rotted and decomposed, but Juhani was correct. Even had scavengers not found this beast, the flesh should have been completely gone by now.

“The Cathar's right,” I stated. “I'd say this animal bit the dust maybe a year ago, at most.”

“I said before, the dark Force aura of this place will keep most creatures away, other than mites and flies,” Bastila replied. “It will slow down the decomposition, too.”

More Force crap. “If your dark Force keeps creatures away, then what was a krayt dragon doing here in the first place?” I challenged.

“Some animals have a natural resistance to the Force, while others are attracted to such an evil presence,” she answered. “Krayt dragons belong to the former category. Which makes it all the more impressive that this one was killed.”

“Well, if you two are so afraid of this scary Force presence, then your little relic better be here,” I grunted.

“It is,” Bastila said, and walked around the huge rotting corpse to further descend into the bowels of the cave. I amused myself by rifling through the various decaying humanoid bodies that surrounded the has-been dragon. Looks like many hunters tried to take this thing on. I found little of use; a few grenades that were probably past their use-by date, some poor fool's holocron, and a bottle of Corellian whiskey. Now this is a find.

“Is this it, Bastila?” Juhani's voice rang out from the shadows, and a second later I heard Bastila gasp.

“Yes. The first of the Star Maps. We have done it!” Her voice was wondrous, almost; a tone I’d never heard from her before.
I heard a faint click, and the whirring of something mechanical. A glaring blue-white light blinded my vision, and Juhani gasped in awe.

“This is the source of the evil taint we can feel? What is it, Bastila?”

“A navigational chart, of sorts.”

She was right, I discovered as I closed in on it. A large blue orb made of light hung in the dank air, depicting galaxies and planets of the known universe. *I wonder where this map leads to, what its purpose is. I doubt Jedi princess will tell us.* Bastila had taken out a datapad, and inserted it into a slot near the base of the relic. We spent several minutes in silence as Bastila tapped away on her datapad and I stared at the map of the galaxy. I could see several planets I knew, but there were some missing. I frowned. *Where’s Dxun? Corellia, too, is not there.* Lines etched through the map that weren’t hyper-lanes, but maybe directions of some sort.

“I have what I need. We should leave now.” Bastila deactivated the device, and the glowing chart vanished. Thin metal arms of the device closed in on themselves as my eyes readjusted to the darkness.

Bastila turned to head back to the desert with Juhani in tow. I stayed for a moment longer to eye over this relic with interest. *What had she called it? A Star Map?* Bastila had also informed Onasi earlier that this was the Republic's only chance of gaining victory over Malak and his forces. *Maybe if I stick with them, I’ll get to see some action.*

I frowned, and decided against it. *I'd kill Bastila within a week.* And the Republic didn't look too kindly at ex-Mandalorian heroes. *Face it, Ordo, you'd have better chances with the Sith.*

But there was greater honour in fighting for the side with weaker odds, and I wasn’t particularly impressed with the Sith. *No. I don't wish to see either the Republic or the Sith win this fight. I'm going my own way.*

I noticed that the two Jedi had halted ahead, just within the entrance of the cave. The stiffness in their stance alerted me, and I pulled out my blaster, further back in the shadows. Someone or something had discovered our presence.

“How nice to see you again, Bastila Shan,” a deep-throated and very familiar voice yelled from the desert outside. I stiffened in surprise. *Calo Nord?* My muscles clenched in readiness as I stalked forward cautiously. *Not bad, tracking us to Tatooine.* I was impressed despite myself. *It was too much to expect him to die back on Taris. Though it sounds as if he's after Bastila, rather than me.*

“Calo Nord, the bounty hunter,” Bastila acknowledged. I closed in behind her, and saw Calo’s shadowy figure standing outside, alone. He was also unarmed, though he appeared to be clutching some small object in one hand. That immediately raised my suspicions. “I urge you to walk away, Calo. I do not wish to indulge in any violence that is not necessary.”

Calo laughed mockingly.

“It's your end, Jedi,” he sneered. I lifted my repeating blaster to aim. “You and that Mandalorian worm, I know he's cowering behind you somewhere. What a shame you didn't bring your little leashed Sith Lord along. She, at least, is worth more alive than dead.”

I realized Calo's intention before he depressed the trigger on whatever he was holding. *It's a detonator! The ground was disturbed near the walls – he's lined this place with mines!*

A deafening blast ripped through the air, and the cave wall collapsed. I had already grabbed both
Jedi by their robes, and was dragging them further into the cave as an explosive wave crested over us. The ground rumbled and roared, and rocks began to spit down on us from the sides of the cavern.

“Get deeper into the cave!” I yelled hoarsely, stumbling as a rock slammed into my shoulder, dislodging my grip on the Jedi. “It's our only chance!”

Mines were still being triggered; Calo had been meticulous in his work. But the cavern was large, and we had not even closed in on its depths. It would be more stable further in.

“The Force! Juhani, help me push these rocks!” Bastila screamed. The light from outside had already winked out as the cavern mouth collapsed in on itself.

“Don't be an idiot!” I growled. “Even if you do make it, Calo will kill you immediately!”

I ran further into the collapsing cave, blinded, with gravel and dirt raining down on me. Which is better than boulders, at any rate. I didn't bother with the Jedi any longer, they would either pick the smart choice or the fatal one.

One last huge explosion ripped through the remains of the cave, and I was catapulted forward. Headfirst into that odd Force device, as rocks rained down around me.

A sharp searing pain struck my head, and then nothing.

xXx

“He's alive.” Bastila's words hazily threaded through my awakening consciousness. Not the first sound I wished to hear upon waking, and with a grim sense of irony I realized this was the second time she had come to my aid when I had been knocked unconscious. “A superficial head-wound, and likely some associated concussion, but it’s not serious. How are your wounds, Juhani?”

“It is nothing,” the Cathar spoke softly. “Nothing compared to our current predicament.”

I flexed my shoulders and opened my eyes. Nothing met them.

“Canderous, you are awake,” Bastila acknowledged in the darkness.

My armoured hands felt dirt and stones on the ground. I heard a faint rumble of rocks settling somewhere above us. My head throbbed. “Ugh, I feel like I've just downed a whole bottle of Corellian whiskey. Speaking of which...” I trailed off, and struggled to sit up in search of my pack which contained said whiskey. It was no longer on my back. “Where's my pack? How long was I out for?”

“A few minutes, no more,” Bastila informed me. There was silence, and then a small orb of yellow light flickered into life, reflecting Bastila's strained face and Juhani's form behind her. I winced, but took the time to look at our surroundings. We were trapped. Caved-in walls of rock surrounded us. Near all of the cavern had collapsed, barring a small section surrounding that Force relic of Bastila’s.

I laughed harshly. “Calo sure knows how to do his job, the bastard.” I saw my pack next to me, ripped from my back as I had fallen.

“Except that we are not dead,” Bastila replied.
“Not yet, until our air runs out,” I told her dryly, but she had a point. As long as breath fills my lungs, victory can still be had. I would track down that bounty-hunting slime, and disembowel him. Death by either suffocation or starvation was an insult, and I refused to give him that pleasure. “So, how’d Calo track you down here then, princess?”

Bastila stared at me in silence, her eyes widening in alarm. Her mouth opened to say something, and then closed again.

“He must have known,” Bastila whispered. “He must have escaped Taris and run to Malak. Dark Jedi in Anchorhead, Calo Nord by the Star Map. My worst fears are confirmed then. Malak knows of this quest.”

Now we’re attracting attention from Darth Malak. And I have yet to see any credits. The ones on the Ebon Hawk didn’t count, they were mine by right. “Let’s just focus on getting out of here,” I said grimly. What are you doing here, Ordo?

Bastila glanced around at the jagged rocks surrounding us, obviously searching for inspiration.

"Maybe- maybe you can use that mind-link to call for help?” Juhani asked softly.

"No. She has enough things to deal with, at the moment." Bastila's voice was tight with edginess. "And I am sure we can figure out a way to escape between the three of us."

“I am surprised I didn't recognize her,” Juhani's voice was a whisper in the shadows. “I met her once, when I was young. She came to Taris, with- with some of her fol-"

“Please, please, do not talk of this!” Bastila cut in, her voice high and desperate.

The silence that followed was electric. And, suddenly, Calo’s parting shot slammed through my mind. What a shame you didn’t bring your leashed Sith Lord along. My muscles bunched, my thoughts raced.

The only Sith Lord that had any connection to Bastila Shan was-“Haar’chak,” I muttered, the dazed feeling of sheer surprise both unfamiliar and unwelcome. Calo was not the sort prone to exaggeration or misinformation. And Bastila’s reaction was not what I’d expect, had he been wrong.

Revan is meant to be dead.

Dead, by the hand of Bastila Shan herself.

Could this be? One of the few Jedi I actually hold any respect for, with me all this time? An incredulous bark of laughter escaped me. “I always thought you were too weak to be the end of Darth Revan.”

The little orb of lighted winked out, depriving me of my chance to see her reaction. The silence in the dark turned icy, but I couldn’t hold back the smirk on my lips. Or the renewed interest that sparked within me.

“Jedi do not kill if they do not have to, mercenary.” Bastila’s words lashed out in condemnation. “You will forget everything that Calo Nord has just said to us.”

Her words sounded heavier somehow, and were strangely compelling. “Not kriffing likely, princess,” I drawled. “Revan is the one who defeated Mand’alor, in hand to hand combat.” I sorely
wished I’d seen that blood duel, done in true Mando’ade style. I’d heard the stories. Mand’alor had put aside his helm, the relic of his authority, and Revan Freeflight had wagered her mask against it. A simple Mando’ade mask that she had picked up from who knew where, and had become the symbol of the Republic’s resistance to our Mando’ade might.

_Hah, half the galaxy might think Revan was a man, but we Mando’ade know better._ The stories that came back from the few survivors at Malachor were worthy of telling. She’d removed her mask, handed it to Malak Devari, and faced our Mand’alor – a man almost half again her height and twice her weight – without a flinch. No Force, had been the set rule. And the battle had lasted hours.

_Oh, I would have liked to be there in person._

She’d won, and walked away with both her mask and Mand’alor’s helm.

Revan had honoured our traditions, and gained our respect. “There’s even a case for her to have a claim to that title, should she consent to a clan adoption,” I mused, my thoughts whirring with the possibilities.

“You will forget it! You will think of her as only Jen Sahara, and no more!”

Again, I had an irrational desire to listen to Bastila, to believe her. To believe that Jen was only…

I shook my head roughly. _Wait… is she using some Force crap on me?_ A surge of hot temper broke in my gut, and I struggled to stand in the darkness. “You looking for a fight, Jedi?” I spat. There was pain pounding through my head as I moved. “You think you can do your little tricks on me and get away with it?”

It was time Bastila Shan was taught a lesson or two.

“You do not understand what’s at stake!” Bastila cried in response, her voice unnaturally high-pitched. I cursed my inability to see in the darkness, and felt around the edges of the visor. It hung limply around my face, and I felt a jagged rent on the side-strap.

“She doesn’t know, does she?” I bit the words out, as the truth became obvious in my head. It would explain some of her puzzling behaviour. _And why Bastila wants to keep it a secret._ “She doesn’t know who she is. And you Jedi are hiding it from her. What did you do, lobotomize her?” I’d always assumed her little nervous act was exactly that – an act. Now I wasn't so sure.

“No! Her mind was almost totally destroyed – we did the only thing we could to save her!”

Another harsh laugh escaped me. “Well, maybe it's time she found out the truth about herself.”

"No. No!” Bastila was breathing heavily in the dark, her voice strained and panicked. “I will make you listen to reason, Canderous!”

“Use those tricks on me again, and I'll kill you,” I told her flatly, and I was completely genuine.

“Then, please, just listen to me!”

I paused, my fists clenched. “I'm listening, princess,” I said in a low voice. I wondered if Bastila was considering using the Force again. I was by far stronger than her physically, but it was all too easy to underestimate Jedi and their powers, I knew that much.

I heard Bastila take in a deep, unsteady breath. “Canderous, her mind was almost destroyed when-when I captured her.”
“Destroyed?” I taunted derisively. “Is that your scary Dark Side you always harp on about?” Dark or Light, I cared not. I had respected and admired Revan, and right now I was thinking of Jen in a whole new light.

But she wasn’t what she once was. I had to admit that.

“No, not the Dark side. She was catatonic, Canderous. Comatose.”

I frowned in the darkness, trying out this new, bizarre idea. *Revan, who made the galaxy tremble, catatonic? The one who defeated Mand’alor, a vegetable?* “She’s hardly a vegetable now, princess,” I grated out.

“But her mind is unstable, fractured! If she found out the truth, it could break under the strain—”

“This is rubbish,” I said flatly. “You are trying to keep her weak.”

“No!” she interrupted loudly, and I heard the rush of air at her wavering sigh. “Surely you have heard about the effects of amnesia. You seem to think highly of Revan.” Bastila's crisp inflection tightened. “Are you willing to take that chance?”

I stayed silent, my mouth twisted in a grimace. *Jedi tricks. Can I really believe this trash she is spewing? Revan was the opposite of weak. But if the Jedi have really screwed with her mind...* I wondered exactly how much of Jen Sahara was still Revan Freeflight, Darth Revan, scourge and hero of the Republic.

“For the time being, at least keep quiet,” Bastila's words were intense, heavy, and laden with meaning. “You will not let anyone know this knowledge.”

My head pulsed with a sudden pain, and I felt dazed. *Mild concussion. I gotta get a shot of kolto or at least a stim to counteract it.* A surge of dizziness made me stumble in the dark, and my hand pressed against the side of my scalp. It was wet and warm through the short hair. “I won't let anyone know about this,” I muttered, just to keep the princess quiet. I wasn't entirely sure what I was agreeing to anymore.

“Good.” Bastila sounded relieved. I rolled my eyes in the darkness. *Why am I giving her the victory?* I couldn't remember what we had just been talking about.

_Revan, we were talking about Revan._

Oh yes. I would be very keen to see Jen again, and find out for myself exactly how much she recalled.

*But no one needs to know who she is.*

xXx
[Jen Sahara] - A darker turn of mind

A darker turn of mind

- Jen Sahara -

I dodged underneath a crudely designed gaffi stick, before impaling the offending primitive on one of my lightsabers. My face flushed with the heat of battle as I spun around, throwing the second 'saber at the last remaining native. It scored fatally into his neck before returning to my outraised hand.

The room was now empty, other than HK and I. Perspiration itched underneath the constricting disguise I still wore, and my chest heaved with fast, uneven breaths. Broken bodies with cauterized battle wounds covered the area.

I could hear grunts of Sand People, further back in the perimeter of the base. I wondered if Zaalbar had followed us... if not, he'll be going mad. I'd left him behind in the desert, much to his howling protest. Stealth had been the plan, of course, so I'd informed the Wookiee he could accompany us if he fit into one of the Sand People garments.

As we departed, he was still soulfully staring at the offending robe.

I'd lost Carth and Mission upon entering the base - the natives had ambushed us after we'd slipped past the turrets, and in the ensuing carnage I'd simply hacked a way out.

HK and I had cut through them with devastating ease.

The Sand People should have listened to us, the primitive fools. I'd commanded HK to attempt communication, but as he began Sand People had recognized our disguises for what they were - and were not happy about it.

Their loss.

I eyed over my surroundings; I was in a long clay-walled corridor. The ceiling was no more than light-coloured tarpaulin strapped tight onto the plaster walls. While it might be shelter from the sun, it was hardly permanent - although I recalled this was a newly dug-out stronghold. The outer perimeter of the base was more fortified than this inner sanctum.

My heartbeat slowed to near-normal, and I became aware of the sting of bruising on my back where a few gaffi sticks had broken through my guard. The armour stopped it from being anything serious - good thing, too, for while I could easily best a handful of Sand People one-on-one, the earlier mob had been a challenge.

I'd tried to reach out to the Force, but it had danced tantalizingly out of reach. Somehow, I'd known it was due to my own incompetence rather than Bastila's interference.

She's been too busy lecturing me to bother blocking my Force use. Perhaps she'd gathered enough sense not to push my anger any further. Not that it would change things - I didn't plan on returning. Regardless, Bastila's attention had been drawn away from me. Something had her panicking. Now that there was no imminent danger, I felt my curiosity spark to life.

HK trod insensitively on a corpse as he neared me. "Observation: These organic meatbags are very poorly designed. All soft and squishy, infinitely easy to blast into a pile of rendered flesh." Was that a note of glee I heard in my droid's metallic voice? Probably. Whoever programmed this sarcastic
robot is someone I’d like to meet. Where my lightsaber had failed to strike down one of those annoying hooting Sand People, HK dispatched them with expertise that seemed unusual even in a combat droid.

I turned, intending to go after Carth and Mission. HK and I made a solid team, but it never hurt to have more backup. *I hope they’re okay,* a weak voice whispered in my mind.

Quiet! I didn't need the vulnerability of attachments. What I needed was their firepower, at least until I had mastered my Force ability and could truly stand on my own. When I acted on pure instinct and emotion the power flowed effortlessly through me, melding into a truly magnificent feat. *But when I consciously try to use it, it's like rolling the dice.*

I sighed, and focused on clearing my mind. The Force had evaded me since our altercation with those Czerka miners hours earlier, and I didn't comprehend why. Bastila said one's mind had to be clear and serene to access the Force. But she'd also said the Dark Side was weak. *Why am I trusting her lies? My own experience tells me that I am strongest when the battle rage has consumed me. When I'm angry.*

I could feel the fire of passion still warm in my gut. It had ignited with fury - with power and life - during the earlier battle. I seemed to move faster and strike harder, possess an awareness of where my enemy was going to move next. Even without any overt Force ability at my fingertips, my own rage fuelled my battle prowess.

And the irritating doubt that sat in a corner of my mind, questioning the rightness of these emotions, was nothing more than a weakness.

*I will conquer any weakness, and I will master the Force.* I took a determined step back toward the base entrance.

My attention was snatched by the sound of impending footfalls behind me. I twisted around as a barbaric roar echoed through the chamber, and saw a mob of Sand People spill into the room.

My rage flared.

HK lifted his rifle, and the natives raised their sticks high in challenge, honking a war cry as they charged.

"HK, take out the blasters at the back!" I yelled, holding my ground. The Force pulled at my senses, and I mentally floundered after it. *Focus!* I parried the swipe of the first one who reached me, knocking him down with my off-hand 'saber.

"Statement: With glee, master," HK cackled, firing into the midst. Two Sand People charged at me simultaneously, and a surprised snarl erupted from my throat as I lurched backwards just in time. *Build on the anger,* a dark voice sneered in my head, *let it become one with the Force!* A gaffi stick whirred past my ear, and I feinted to the left, stabbing someone clean through in passing. He shrieked, his arm lashing out in a dying attack that was easy to avoid. As he crumpled to his knees, my 'saber cleaved through his neck.

A masked head bounced onto the dirt floor.

I glanced up; deeper in the room one of the remaining mob was aiming something directly at me. My vision narrowed. *Kath crap, that's a sodding rocket launcher!* I snarled in reflex as the threat registered; my hand punched into the air and my mind pushed outward.

The rocket - pilfered Czerka technology, no doubt - had barely ejected before it slammed back into
the Sand People.

The heat wave of pressure hit me as the entire back wall of the dwelling exploded, tossing bodies around like limp rag dolls. I stumbled back, barely keeping my footing. HK was still firing, his blasts tearing into the fallen. I saw one move; launching forward, it was all too easy to ensure he didn't move again.

I turned. It was just me and HK left standing, once more. My breath came in short bursts, and a mild satisfaction filled me as I eyed over the carnage. The Force came to me again. The more I practice, the easier it becomes. In a way, I was glad the others were not with me. I wasn't comfortable experimenting around them.

That's because I turn into a blood-thirsty psycho when I let the Force overpower me, Street Kid snarked.

And yet, how many times had it saved my life? How much more powerful was it making me?

We are trapped. Trapped under a mountain of rocks, with no way out! Bastila's thought hissed through the bond. With a start of surprise, I realized it wasn't directed at me. She hadn't meant for me to hear. I'm starting to pick up on her thoughts now. Maybe that made sense, for she had already shown her ability to read my mind, and surely it was a two-way hyperlane.

I wonder then, if it's possible for me to cut her off from the Force?

That was a very interesting idea, but I quickly shut it down before she could overhear. Keep the thoughts small, I berated myself. If nothing else, the close mental proximity I had with Bastila had to be good for my emotional control. I'd be damned if I'd allow that snot access to my mind.

I noticed, then, the large hole the rocket had torn through the clay walls of the base. There was another room beyond, occupied with more Sand People who were strangely quiet... and hadn't rushed us in a vain attempt at evisceration. That was... interesting.

We may as well finish this lot off. I need the practice, after all.

"Supposition: These meatbags appear to be guarding something, master. Maybe their leader?"

"Let's go find out." I could feel a smirk on my face. This felt natural, testing my mettle in battle, proving my superiority. I tamped down on the uncertainty wrestling with a corner of my mind, the feeble concern that this path led to ruin.

It didn't. This path led to victory. What were a bunch of Sand People worth, anyway?

I strode forward, ducking through the shattered wall. The sentients beyond hooted in protest, raising their weapons in a defensive guard. They were surrounding one figure, whose robes were decorated in colourful beads. HK was right. This is their chieftain.

I ripped the constricting mask from my face, and threw it to the ground.

The leader hooted loudly.

"Statement: The meatbag chieftain appears to have recognized us, master."

"Huh?" I blinked in confusion. "I've never been here before." I glanced around at the barbaric building. Wicker baskets and grass mats covered the dusty floor. Some odd sticks hung on the wall. No sense of déjà vu hit me. And this bas was new, that hunter in Anchorhead had said something
about that, so it didn't seem possible any part of me could have been here before.

"Extrapolation: It appears the chieftain recognizes both of us, master. He is now demanding an explanation for our presence."

I looked at HK, who was staring unblinkingly at me with his eerie, red gaze. "Have you been here before, HK?"

"Answer: I have no recollection of such a visit, master. However the majority of my memory is still locked within my core. Extrapolation: It could be that I have been here before, or it could be that another similar droid has and these primitive meatbags cannot distinguish between us."

"Your memory is locked away?" I vaguely remembered HK saying something about that back in Yuka Laka's store, but picking out the details from the haze of my memory proved impossible at times. Thank you, Jen Sahara. And Bastila, and any other Jedi responsible for my screwed up mind. "HK, remind me to ask you about that later."

"Response: As you wish, master. Suggestion: Perhaps I should say something to the decorated meatbag before we blast them all?"

The Sand People were still protesting loudly in their guttural tongue. At any moment they were going to attack again, and I would never find out what they meant. "Ask them why I was here earlier. And who else was with me. And ask about Griff."

HK honked something in that ridiculous language. His vocabulator was surprisingly good, and when the leader responded I found it difficult to distinguish between their voices.

"Statement: He appears confused by your question, master. He has said that one other human meatbag was with us, and we met him in his old stronghold, deeper in the desert. He says you were searching for ruins in the Eastern Dune Sea. He also demands that you answer his earlier question, and explain why you have attacked his people when you did not last time. Observation: He appears unwilling to answer any more questions until we respond to his."

I almost stumbled in surprise at HK's response. Searching for ruins in the Eastern Dune Sea? That was precisely what Bastila was doing right now. That seems awfully coincidental. If I really was here before, then why did the Sand People not attack me then?

"HK, inform him that his people fired on me first, and would not respond to our attempts to talk or negotiate."

The droid did as instructed, and turned to face me once more. "Statement: Fortunately, it appears bloodshed cannot be avoided, master." At HK's ominous words my muscles clenched in readiness. "The chieftain has responded that he must slaughter us to avenge the death of his people. Commentary: I find this a satisfactory and most enjoyable conclusion."

So did I. Feel the rage, the passion, the power as it fires through my veins!

I raised my dual lightsabers, and stared through the red glow at the Sand People ahead. I smiled. Well, the voices in my head can't object. It was the chieftain's decision to fight, not mine. The Sand People cried out in challenge, and charged. There were only six of them in total, but these appeared to be more elite in their capabilities. Two of them flanked the chieftain, spraying blaster bolts from stolen Czerka rifles.

I lifted one of my hands high, feeling the Force coalesce around my fist. How had I created that lightning against Juhani? Every time I reached out, I felt like I was a blundering bantha in a cantina,
struggling to find the exit but knocking into walls instead.

The power was there, though. It grew. And as the Sand People neared, I roared and abruptly loosed it.

There was a loud cry of protest as an invisible energy hit them. Two dropped their weapons, their hands wrapped around their neck as they made gagging noises. The Force rode in the air around them, an insidious taint twisting through their bodies. *What the frell was that?*

A gaffi stick shot close to my head, and I lurched back before counter-swiping in a blow that sliced deep into a chest. A second hit followed. *Power and strength. The Force calls to me!* I dodged another blow, coming back to stab the next one in the stomach. A cry of exaltation escaped me. *No one can withstand this!*

Then came another, snarling, lifting his pathetic stick high. I laughed, moulding the humming power in my grasp. As he launched into a wild swing, I hurled a charged ball of energy in the centre of his chest. He went flying.

My lightsaber followed, thrown from my grasp, slashing with precision into his neck. I heard the sentient's cry end in a gurgle, a moment before my weapon snapped back into my hand.

Satisfaction surged through me.

Both of the chieftain's aides had fallen to HK's blaster fire. I stalked forward, intent on the leader, but another primitive came running in from the sidelines. My lightsaber cut straight through him.

Two more followed. I laughed as my hand shot out, static crackling at my fingertips. *Pathetic imbeciles! They think they can survive my onslaught?* Their bodies convulsed and crumpled beneath the sharp white lightning. Their cries of pain dwindled into silence, and the bodies turned into corpses.

I sneered at the chieftain. The exultant power surged through me, the mastery of life and death. It was power to do anything I desired, and it swept away all logical thought or reason. The Force bent to my will, and clenched satisfyingly around the leader's neck.

*Let's see... can I do this better than Juhani?*

The chieftain rose into the air, frantically clutching at his neck as he wheezed and spluttered.

*Why, yes. Yes I can.*

I tried twisting it harder. His legs jerked, and his head flopped to the side. Just as I realized he was nearing the end, a heavy impact crunched into my upraised forearm.

Pain blossomed through my limb. I shrieked, stumbling backward to avoid a second blow from my assailant. But he fell, an instant later, two smoking patches of melted flesh in his back where HK had hit true.

My limb dangled uselessly at my side. The chieftain was on his knees, scrabbling to escape. With a snarl of anger, I strode forward and drove my lightsaber into his back.

Then the Force fled, and fresh waves of agony spiked through my arm. *Sithspit, I think that's broken.* It hurt like a schutta. I grimaced, and cast my eyes over the room.

The bent corpse of the leader was at my feet. Various body parts bloodied the area. The tinny smell
of viscera was thick in the air, and as I looked around, the last remnants of my berserker rage vanished.

There was a sickening sense of dread curling like a sandsnake in my gut. I was clammy, suddenly cold, staring blanking at the dead Sand People. All this crowing pleasure I'd experienced during this massacre, was... was... wrong. The acrid taste of bile rose in my throat.

I do what I want. I prove my worth this way!

This is wrong! This is repulsive! This isn't me.

I closed my eyes, a rising wave of horror overwhelming the earlier satisfaction of victory. The conflicting emotions raged within my soul, and I wasn't sure what I felt anymore. Who I wanted to be.

A surge through the bond shattered my internal struggle, drawing my attention like a lifeline. What was that? I opened my mind once more to my bond-sister. Again, I felt another surge of energy. She's using the Force. I frowned, struggling to make sense of it.

This is not working! I need to make him understand!

Now this was curious. Bastila had not yet sensed my interest in her predicament, and I tried to make my concentration on our link subtle, unnoticeable. I could feel her panic, feel her struggle to overcome it with a dogged determination.

Then there was another surge of Force, even stronger than before. My breath hissed between my teeth. Compulsion, a sepulchral voice whispered in my mind. She's using compulsion.

Finally, it worked. And he has not realized this time. He will not mention this to anyone anymore. Through the bond, Bastila was a mass of pure relief. As if she had somehow avoided some sort of catastrophe.

My curiosity could no longer be contained. You seem to be having fun. I slammed the thought out hard.

Jen! Her response back was quick, and horrified. What are you doing?

Wondering what poor sap you are playing with.

I'm not- I am not playing! This sort of use of the Force is not to be taken lightly! How- how dare you spy upon me! The words were indignant, but her tone... her tone was straight back into panic.

Oh, that's rich, I returned with snark. Well, you don't need to worry about me anymore. We won't be seeing each other again, more's the pity.

A deadly silence echoed through my mind, before her thought-voice returned. What are you saying?

What do you think? I snapped back. I'm not coming back. The desert is a wonderful place to vanish in. I certainly don't trust you, and I'd be an idiot to blindly follow you.

No! No, you cannot be serious! You- you still have so much to learn! She was frantic, I sensed, scrabbling futilely for an argument that would touch me.

I can learn it myself. You forcing that stupid code down my throat is hardly what I'd call productive.
Do not do this, Jen! Please... you are still far too vulnerable to the Dark Side. And- and you are now a target, too!

A target? I felt myself sneering at her through the bond. Is that some sort of threat?

No! I am talking about the Sith! She paused, and I wondered if she was trying to reign in her tangled emotions. Jen. Please, let us talk about this back at the ship. Now is not a good time.

What, because you're trapped under a mountain of rocks?

She was shocked back into silence again. Briefly. That is in poor taste, Jen. How long have you been listening to my thoughts?

I'd hardly spy on you out of choice, I lied. I can't help it if your panic bleeds through to me.

There is no emotion, her mental chant whispered through the bond, there is peace.

I snickered. So you say. What's this about the Sith, anyway?

Something akin to a sigh emanated from her. Calo Nord has attempted to kill us, and is now after you. It appears that Malak wishes both you and I dead. We must stay together, Jen. You are too vulnerable by yourself.

No way. I told her coldly. Calo Nord was no threat to me. I'm on my own now.

"Query: Master, shouldn't we be moving now?"

"In a minute, HK," I forestalled.

You- you have an obligation to Juhani!

What? Disbelief swirled through me at her utter gall. In case you forgot, she tried to kill me!

Yes, and you redeemed her! She believes she owes you a debt. You owe it to her to ensure she follows the correct path.

I can't believe this kath crap you are feeding me. I am not returning, Bastila. You have your own little quest with those ruins, I'm sure you can keep yourself occupied without my presence.

Please, Jen, allow me to teach you! Why do you have to be so- so frustratingly difficult? She was still flailing, somewhere between panic and desperation.

I don't trust you. You tried to trick me onto Dantooine. Where will you lead me next? I will not see any of your so-called masters.

Bastila was silent for a long time after that. I dragged my attention back to my surroundings, and the throbbing agony of my arm came back to revisit my senses.

"Jen!" A high-pitched voice yelled in the distance.

"I wondered where they had gotten to," I muttered, and then returned the call.

A minute later and Mission popped her head around the corner. She appeared relatively unhurt, and squeaked in dismay when she saw my useless limb dangling to one side.
"Oh, Jen! That looks awful! What happened?" She rushed to my side, her light brown eyes wide in sympathy. "Sheesh, there are so many corpses here!"

There was a loud howl, preceding the entrance of Zaalbar. I shot him a brief smile as he ducked through the entrance to the inner chamber.

"I thought you were in the desert," I murmured.

"(I cannot guard your back if I am not at your side!)" he wailed. His eyes fixed on my arm, and he let out a distressed moan.

"When we lost you and HK in that huge battle, I decided it might be best to go get Big Z. I'd been forced into the turret room anyway, so I deactivated them while I was there and then ran back to find him. It looked like you could use the help, y'know?" Mission looked at me solemnly. I didn't doubt the Twi'lek was brave, and she obviously had been trying to do the right thing.

"Shame you didn't get here quicker." I grinned at her, trying to ignore the pulsating pain radiating from my forearm. "Where's the Paranoid Has-Been?"

"Oh, very funny," Carth's voice snapped for the adjoining room. "Any cuter and you could be a Gamorrean's sister."

"Better than being a Gamorrean's mother," I quipped as Carth appeared through the torn hole in the room, scowling at me.

_Bastila's voice entered my mind once more._

_Would you agree to accompany me to someplace neutral?_ Bastila's voice entered my mind once more. _Some place where there are no Jedi?_ I was beginning to feel tired. I sighed in weariness before answering. _What are you suggesting now?_

_You need training, Jen. The Dark Side is ever prevalent. If you refuse to meet with any of the Masters, then I have no choice but to attempt to guide you myself. Please, I implore you to accept my aid._

I was silent, rolling her suggestions around in my mind. I was still fumbling with the Force, it was true. At times it didn't answer, and I couldn't always predict my actions. Then there was the matter of the bond, and Bastila's hold over me. And Juhani- I hadn't pinned her down for any teaching yet, either.

But I didn't want Bastila sensing any indecision on my part. With a forced show of indifference, I tried to mentally shift my focus away from her.

"Have you found out anything about Griff?" Mission demanded

"No," I said, snapping my 'saber onto my belt. I'd dropped the other earlier, when my arm was hit. With a grimace of pain, I bent over to retrieve it.

"You need some sort of brace. We should get back to Anchorhead," Carth said, eyeing me over in concern.

"Hmm," I murmured, not quite sure whether I'd be joining them or not. _I can't fix this arm by myself. Not out in the desert._ I frowned at the realization, and followed Mission back out into a longer corridor.

_What sort of neutral place are you suggesting?_ I asked Bastila. I felt the spark of hope emanate from
I am finished on Tatooine, and Manaan is a planet that I need to visit on my quest. It is also purely neutral in the war with Malak. There is a Republic base on Manaan, but no Jedi are stationed there. The Selkath do not condone any sort of violence.

I stepped over corpses of Sand People as we walked further along the base. It was a complete and utter bloodbath. Was this all my doing? Of course it had been; HK and I had ripped through this place. The Sand People were soft, armour-less and ill-equipped. They had plenty of rage and courage, but that could only get them so far.

No one can withstand me, I thought with satisfaction.

I'm turning into something abominable. Ah, that'd be Street Kid acting up again.

All this death! No, I cannot bear it! A quiet whisper from Jen.

My arm throbbed again, a reminder that I needed some sort of assistance. And I couldn't yet rely on the Force consistently. I couldn't trust Bastila, but I could use her - glean what I needed to improve my control over the Force. Juhani would help, too.

And Manaan... a neutral world sounded easy enough to disappear in. Better than a desert one, at any rate.

Manaan it is, then. I responded to Bastila.

"Well, troops, it looks like Manaan's our next destination," I told the group.

"Manaan? What are you talking about?" Carth asked, frowning, as we ventured further into the base.

"Manaan? What's that?" Mission chirped brightly ahead of us. Sometimes I wondered how she could always be so unfailingly cheerful.

"Some neutral planet," I told her. "Bastila's done with Tatooine, and has just agreed to go there next."

Carth stopped walking and turned to face me, his hands on his hips. His dark eyes flashed with frustration. "You're still referring to that supposed mind-link, aren't you?"

I shrugged irritably at him. "Ask Bastila if you don't believe me." Why did I even bother with the man? For some odd reason, I desired his trust, yet at the same time I wished he was anywhere but near me.

"Hey! Is someone there?" a young, male voice called from further ahead. Mission froze.

I strode past her and towards the rickety door it had come from, thrusting it open with my good hand.

A startled and frightened Twi'lek was crouched in the corner, flinching at my entrance. He blinked, and eyed me over, hopeful surprise entering his expression. His skin was pale blue and covered in desert grime. "Uh... you there! I'm... I'm a high ranking executive of the Czerka Corporation! Eh... there's a big reward if you take me back to Anchorhead!"

"Riiight," I drawled in disbelief.

"Griff!" Mission squeaked, running next to me and brushing past me. I groaned in pain, squeezing
my eyes shut as fresh agony spiked through my forearm. "Sheesh, Jen, I'm sorry!"

"Mission?" Griff squawked in surprise, his eyes round. "Is it really you? I heard Taris was attacked! I thought you were dead!"

Mission beamed, running further in and throwing her arms around her brother.

"Joy of joys, my little sister is alive!" Griff gasped, and Mission squeezed him.

"(I always like a happy ending,)" Zaalbar growled softly behind me.

"Hmm," I said noncommittally. I wondered what Mission's plans would be now, and if they involved Griff Vao.

"Sheesh, Griff, you like smell like bantha poo-doo!" Mission complained, extricating herself. "Like Big Z on a really bad hair day!"

"(I do not have bad hair days!)" Zaalbar howled in protest. I smirked as I saw Griff jump at the Wookiee's roar, his blue skin turning a few shades more pale.

"What-what was that?" he whispered, his voice weaker than before.

"Oh, that's just Big Z!" Mission explained in a bright tone.

"Hate to break this up, but we should probably head back before Sand People reinforcements arrive," Carth, the voice of wisdom, interrupted. "I hear there are plenty more bases deeper in the desert, and Jen's arm needs to be looked at."

"Your concern is touching, flyboy," I murmured. He eyed me over blandly.

"Alright, let's get going. We'll talk on the way!" Mission pulled on her brother's arm, and I stepped back to let them pass. Griff gasped audibly as he spotted the towering Wookiee.

"Zaalbar, this is my brother, Griff," Mission introduced. As she continued the introductions, I spotted another closed door and my curiosity was piqued. I could hear some sort of chattering behind it. I strode forward and kicked it open, the movement jolting a fresh surge of agony through my broken limb.

A small party of Jawas met my stunned eyes, and started jabbering at me in an odd dialect.

"(You are not giants made of sand!)") one of them squeaked. To my astonishment, I understood the words, if not quite the meaning. "(Will you help us or enslave us? We are unwilling servants bowed under whip and gaffi!)

"What the-" Carth muttered incredulously, swinging around to see what the commotion was. "Jawas?"

"Query: Perm-"

"No, HK," I cut him off. These creatures seemed relatively harmless, and the thought of more pointless slaughter raised the bile in my throat.

\textit{No, I enjoy proving my worth. But killing these tiny creatures is no challenge.}

"(You are free to go,)" I fumbled in their language, struggling with the sentence structure. "(There are no more people of the sand alive.)"
"(You speak the language trade!)" one of them responded gleefully. The other bunch jabbered in excitement, and quickly walked past me. "(We will remember you! Should you wish fair trade, find Iziz in the old city new!)"

I stood back in confusion as the Jawas bustled past me, scurrying swiftly down the corridor.

"Just how many languages can you speak?" Carth muttered in disbelief. "What sort of university teaches Mandalorian, Shyriiwook translation, and Jawa dialects?"

I sighed, exhaustion and numbing pain overshadowing any quip I could throw at him. "I don't know, Onasi. My memory is all screwed up. I don't really remember my past, it's riddled with gaping holes. I told you before; if you want to know more, ask Bastila." My words had turned bitter, twisted. Carth stared at me, his brows knitting in either disbelief or confusion. I sighed, closed my eyes, and turned my back on him.

"(Let us go back. Jen is injured,)" Zaalbar growled. I opened my eyes again to see the large Wookiee staring down at me in concern.

"Yeah, no point sticking around here anymore," Mission agreed, pulling her dazed brother after her.

"Okay," I muttered. "Someone give Mission's brother a blaster, though. Just in case we run into anything else."

I vaguely saw Carth chuck the Twi'lek a weapon, before we trudged out. Our exit was a slow, cautious pace, back out the canvas-lined chambers of the inner base. Splatters of blood marked bright spots at various places. Closer to the perimeter, the walls were made of reinforced plaster and sandstone.

I struggled to keep my pain under control. Bastila's emotions were once more apparent to me. Concern and fright and uncertainty. It was interesting that her mental state was so volatile, so less composed than the outer mask she showcased to the world. Idle curiosity had me, once more, opening my concentration to discover what she was up to. If nothing else, it will take my mind off my arm. And away from everything else that is going on inside my head.

Her panic seemed to be getting the better of her.

**What-what does he think he's doing? He will kill us all, the crazy barbarian!**

Ah, barbarian. _She must be cursing Canderous._

_Jen?_ Bastila's startled mind voice homed in on my thoughts.

_Damn._

_You are listening into my thoughts, _she gasped, _again!_ Her panic was growing. It was hypocritical in the extreme for her to complain, and yet I couldn't help but wonder _why_ the thought of me hearing her thoughts drove her into such a tailspin of fright.

_I'm learning from the best, _I snapped sarcastically. _Besides, your ranting makes me forget my broken arm._

A brief silence. _It sounds like you have journeyed into trouble. I suggest you head back to the Ebon Hawk. I will meet you there, as soon as I can._

I snorted, and Mission stopped to look at me, an eyebrow raised. I waved my hand dismissively.
"Just Bastila," I told her dryly. "Trapped in a cave with Canderous for comfort."

Mission giggled uneasily as we stepped outside into the bright desert.

*I'm in trouble? Sounds like you're having your fair share,* I shot back. *Stupid Jedi snot,* I added quietly in the recesses of my own mind.

**Yes, I admit I am not in the most desirable of situations,** she responded in a forced tone. **However, I – no! No!** She cut herself off to concentrate on whatever mayhem Canderous was creating.

*Are you alright?* I asked, concerned despite myself. *No,* I thought. *I'm only concerned because I'd rather have Canderous alive than dead. Nothing else.*

**I do believe his grenades worked.** Bastila sounded stunned, disbelieving. **Now I will never hear the end of it.** She seemed to focus on me once more. *Jen, do be careful out there. Calo Nord is hunting you in the desert. Please, head back to Anchorhead as quickly as possible.*

I rolled my eyes, and refused to answer her.

xXx
Sibling loyalty

- Mission Vao -

Sweat dripped down the ends of my lekku, stuck against my neck under those sweltering headcloths. I trudged behind the others, feet dragging, as we climbed over yet another mound of stupid sand. This was nothing like Taris. Barren and bleak, the harsh desert stretched implausibly in every direction, and two suns beat down an exhausting heat that I was totally over.

On any other day, I'd be in a really grumpy mood.

I glanced sideways at Griff. His mouth was gaping open as he panted like a kath hound, and the heat flushed his face a purplish colour. I knew he'd be gunning for the 'Hawk's sonic as soon as we brought him to our ship, and I was glad there were two onboard so we wouldn't squabble over who got first turn.

My brother. We're back together. At last! It didn't feel real. After all, it'd been years since Griff had disappeared, leaving me nothing more than a data-note and an expired cred chit. We had so much to catch up on. Part of me had never really expected to see him again.

Griff turned to catch my eye, throwing me that cheeky grin I remembered so well.

"I can't believe you're here, sis!" he exclaimed, grabbing my hand and squeezing it. "Getting me out of tough scrapes as usual! Wow, I hate to think what would've happened if you hadn't come along when you did."

I grinned. "And Big Z always hassles me for getting into trouble! Wait 'til he gets to know you."

Griff appraised Zaalbar warily; I could tell he didn't know what to make of the huge hairball that was my most trusted friend. I lowered my voice. "He's absolutely wizard, Griff. He's always looking out for me. You'll like him when ya get to know him."

"Uh, does he actually talk?" Griff hissed in a tactless stage whisper, his eyes widening comically as if he didn't expect Zaalbar to actually hear or something.

I glared at my brother, snatching my hand away. "Sheesh, Griff, has the heat melted your brain? 'Course he talks. In Shyriiwook. Duh."

"Oh right!" Griff said. "That's what all the growling is then, huh?"

I rolled my eyes at him and walked on. "You always were a little slow."

"And you always were a little precocious!" Griff responded. I stuck my tongue out at him, and his blue eyes crinkled in good-natured humour.

It's like we've never been apart, I thought. It's just like old times. My brother even looked the same as I remembered; young and carefree, with his headtails looped fashionably around his neck. He was dirty, sure, and the Czerka uniform he'd been wearing was grimy and torn, but he'd clean up well. He'd always cut a dashing figure, back in the Lower City, dressed in fine clothes as he strutted about on Exchange business, wagering goods back and forth to the Bek's.
The Bek family had never warmed to him, not really. Gadon Thek had taken me under his wing from an early age, but Griff… well, Griff'd been grudgingly allowed in the Bek corridors, but only under supervision. He'd never been considered for membership, no matter how I railed at Gadon. I never understood why, not really. Griff had Exchange contacts, and sure, we couldn't trust the Exchange - but Gadon and Zaerdra acted like we couldn't trust Griff, either.

Griff had always been confident - cocky even, in the past. As I eyed him over once more, I noticed a nervousness in his bearing I was unfamiliar with. His eyes flicked over everybody in quick succession, but wouldn't stay in one place for too long. *It has been six years, though. And he's just spent days as a prisoner. I'd be frightened witless as well.*

We were back together. That was all that mattered.

But as I slogged on, my brother on one side and my best friend on the other, I couldn't help but contrast the two. Griff had always claimed he'd smuggled us to Taris onboard a freighter, although in truth I remembered nothing but the Lower City from an early age. Still, he'd made sure I was fed and clothed and safe. Mostly. There was that time he'd left me in Javyar's cantina, when a slaver had tried to snatch me.

I'd been young, then, only five years Galactic. It had been Zaerdra who'd rescued me, dumping me in front of Gadon like a present or something. I'd never liked the fact that I pretty much owed my life to Zaerdra.

But Griff tried, he *tried* to look out for me. I knew he did. He just had a bad run of stuffing things up.

Big Z was so different to my brother, and not just in looks. First time I'd met him, he'd been surrounded by half-drunk Vulcans trying to prove their manliness by taking down a Wookiee. Zaalbar was enraged and panicked and absolutely *stank*, but for some reason I hadn't been afraid. This was before Brejik, back when the Vulcans were no more than disorganized rabble, back when they feared Gadon enough that they wouldn't challenge me, Gadon's favourite child. I'd brandished a blaster I'd filched from Zaerdra's stock, and they scampered, leaving me staring at a howling Wookiee who didn't know the first thing about the Lower City.

It'd been tricky, learning each other's language. I'd found Zaalbar a place to hang low until he found his feet, and brought him food and equipment. Big Z only had a rudimentary understanding of Basic then, so I downloaded a Shyriiwook translation package that allowed us to communicate. Big Z began to trust me, and we looked out for each other time and again. The amount of times he'd saved my life... Big Z always had my back. We always stood for each other.

I've *never* trusted Griff quite the same way. *Griff always looked out for Griff first.* No, no that was mean, thinking that. I'd only just found Griff again - my poor brother, trapped for days by savages - and here I was, doubting him. But it ain't just Zaalbar who's more loyal. *What about Jen, saving us from that rancor? If it had been Griff there, he would have run and left me as rancor dinner.*

No! Griff meant well. It wasn't fair to compare him to the likes of Jen and Zaalbar, who were stronger and better at fighting than him.

I shook my head hard, as if to throw off the unwelcome thoughts. Directly in front of me was Jen, another hot topic of worry. She was acting normal again, yeah, but... *Is it just me, or is she a bit angrier now? A bit crazier?* Jen had run straight into that Sand People fight, and sheesh! That scared the stuffing outta me. But then, Jen had *always* done that sorta thing, even back in the Undercity on Taris. *But there's something not quite right. It's like she enjoys the killing. Like she's itching for a fight.* Big Z was worried, too. I could tell by the way his dark gaze kept wandering back to her.
And then there was the Force. The freaky, freaky Force. Jen could use it. No wonder Bastila had been so interested in her - the stupid Jedi snot had probably known about Jen back on Taris. *At least Jen won't let her have her way now. At least Jen ain't all pathetic anymore.* It was Bastila's fault, all of it, it *had* to be.

Big Z didn't believe it. Jedi were meant to be all honourable and stuff, and he claimed a powerful Jedi like Bastila Shan wouldn't control someone else that way. I kept telling him he was too naive, and it was obvious Bastila had secrets... but Jen had said her mind was all messed up. She'd said something about a doctor making things worse, about black spots and it maybe not being Bastila... I didn't know anymore. I'd been dead set on blaming the Jedi snot for it all, but maybe I was wrong.

For it kinda sounded like a brain injury, or something. And while I didn't like or trust Bastila, it was hard to think of her as someone evil enough to, like, mind-control Jen and make her forget her past. The worst thing I'd seen Bastila do was trip me with the Force back on Taris and act like a stuck up scow.

Maybe... maybe something had happened to Jen, and Bastila was just trying to help. *Jen said Bastila knew more about her past than she did.* Which wasn't the same as Bastila being the cause of it.

*I'm gonna talk to Jen.* I ran up to her, my boots digging into the coarse sand, and gave her a quick smile. Jen's visor turned to look at me, and I noticed her head-cloths were unwinding. Flecks of blood spattered a maroon pattern of death over her.

"Are things alright?" I blurted out.

"Uh, yeah." She sounded taken aback. "Why?"

I shrugged. "I dunno, Jen, you just seem, sort of, angry and stuff..." I trailed off.

She turned away, staring out at the distant horizon as we trudged, one foot after the other. It was late afternoon, still stifling with heat but somehow a little less intense than earlier. The two suns were close together in the sky, and I'd heard Carth say the days on Tatooine were currently at their shortest. Apparently, that was still longer than a standard Tarisian day, and with all the harsh sunlight it was no wonder this entire place was covered in stupid deserts. I grabbed a quick swig of water from the gourd at my side. I was glad, at least, that the Sand People stronghold had not been far away from Anchorhead.

"Lots of people trying to kill you has that effect," she responded finally, flatly.

Her duel with Juhani had been horrifying. I'd been paralysed, unable to do anything but watch as the scene unfolded. Jen had been spectacularly out-classed at first, and I'd really believed it was her end. And then, it all turned around. Jen had been the one to walk away, and that crazed catwoman had lost her killing edge and followed us meekly back to the *Hawk.* All the fight had disappeared from Juhani, and whenever I'd looked her way she'd seemed downright miserable.

*I still wasn't planning on going anywhere near her.*

But I didn't know what else to say to Jen, so we edged into an uncomfortable silence. Finally she spoke again, her tone cheerful. It sounded forced.

"Well, we're off to Manaan next. Think you'll like it there?"

My thoughts brightened as I considered the possibilities. *Big Z swearing a lifedeath to Jen certainly has its advantages.* I'd never had the chance to leave Taris before. Griff had always talked about taking me to Tatooine or Corella, but it'd never happened. Instead I'd found my own way here -
unlike so many of my friends back on Taris.

*Back on Taris.* Who knew how many were still alive. I sniffed, and forced the thoughts away.

"I've never heard of it. What's it like?" I asked quickly.

Jen shrugged. "Bastila says it's a neutral world." Her voice had twisted on the Jedi's name. "Apparently it's a peaceful world, and violence is not tolerated."

"Sounds too good to be true," I whispered. *No violence.* Was such a place possible? I'd seen so much death lately that I found it hard to sleep at night. Having Big Z hold me while I cried might be comforting, but it was also dead embarrassing.

I look back to Jen, striding purposefully over the sand. Her lightsabers – *lightsabers, like a real Jedi!* – were clipped to her belt, and her stance was that of one who was used to combat. I recognized the sort. I'd spent most of my life around the Beks, after all. *No violence would be good for Jen, too. Maybe help her mellow out.* I liked Jen - we got along great, even though she was almost old enough to be my mother. She was funny, and interesting, and knew how to have a good time. But she was also far too good at freaking me – and everybody else – out.

*Well, we're stuck following her lead. Big Z's pretty solemn with his vows, and I ain't leaving him.*

The suns were drooping warily on the horizon, and I realized with a jolt that dusk wasn't too far away. We'd get back to Anchorhead before dark, though, and I looked forward to the rest. The huge shape of the abandoned sandcrawler we'd passed early that morning loomed next to us, and I ducked into the shadows it cast for a brief respite. I looked around for any of those odd Jawa creatures, but didn't spot anything alive. Just loads of rubble. Overturned crates, and shards of metal, and other rubbish littering the sand near the massive 'crawler. *Sheesh, it's a regular junkyard round here.* It must have been debris from the aftermath of the Sand People raids.

"How's your arm, Jen?" I asked. It hung uselessly at her side. She'd barely complained about it, but it had to be hurting her. *Well, Jen's always been tough.* Except when Bastila - or maybe her own mind - was making her act like an idiot.

"It's okay, Mission."

"(We should hurry our steps, and ensure we are within Anchorhead before it gets dark. This place is dangerous,)" Zaalbar rumbled.

Jen shot a droll look my way, and I grinned. Zaalbar worrying about danger was standard operating procedure. SOP, I'd heard the Beks say, when they tried to act like real military.


"Don't let me die under here!" a female scream pierced the air. We all froze apart from Griff, who jumped back in fright. Carth pulled out a blaster and ran towards the source. I followed him, looking around wildly without spotting anything of note. *Maybe it's a surviving miner from the earlier attack?*

"Where are you?" Carth called out. I ran towards a large metal crate, half broken and lying on its side in the shadow of the sandcrawler. It was tall, and would give me a better view once I clambered on top of it. For whoever it was, they sounded desperate.

"Wait guys," Jen called. "Something's not right!"
"Please! Anyone! I'm trapped under here!" The pleading voice came from directly underneath me. Straight under the broken crate. I gasped, and leaped back down to the coarse sand.

"Get away, Mission! Bastila warned me there was someone out here hunting us!" Jen cried, running towards me. I glared at her. This was someone who needed help. There wasn't any danger. Like Bastila knows what she's talking about!

"We'll help you!" I answered the stranger's voice, bending over to inspect the edges of the crate. It was far too large for me to move, but I could dig a hole under it. Or Big Z could maybe drag it-

A loud explosion slammed into my body and I was flung backwards, ears ringing and vision blinded white. Sand spat pinpricks into the sides of my face under the cloths, and the air left my lungs in a whoosh as I thudded to the ground, stunned.

Something grabbed at my neck, rough and ready, and I was pulled upright in an unknown grip. Dazed and disoriented, I was barely aware of the thick arm clenching around my middle, or the whimper that escaped my lips.

My head was yanked backwards at someone ripped the sweaty headcloths away. Cool metal kissed against my temple, and the ringing in my ears subsided.

There was a loud grunt directly behind me.

"We gots you good now!" a voice squealed.

"(Mission!)") Zaalbar roared. My vision, speckled and spotty, slowly began to make order of the objects in front of me. Big Z was metres away, distressed and enraged. The metal crate had opened in sections along the ground, exposing a large, dug out hole beneath it.

The iron band around my waist tightened as Zaalbar took a step closer.

"Move and yous die!" another voice, thick and deep, barked into my ear. It was followed by a grunt and another snort. Gamorreans! The gun pressed harder into my face. I froze, and the heat of fear burned through me. I could die, right here in this barren desert. A Gamorrean had me by the neck, with a blaster pressing into my head.

"Let. Her. Go." Jen's voice, low and dangerous. She was standing next to Zaalbar, a murderous expression twisting her face. I stared at her pleadingly. Jen, get me out of here! A blood-red saber, held tightly in her good arm, shone scarlet. Carth, flanking her, held a steady blaster at my captor.

My eyes slid to the side, and I could see another one of those piggy creatures scrabble out of the dug-out hole. That makes three, I think. No problem for us, if one didn't have a trigger finger of death pointed at me. Rolls of fat gaped over his substandard armour, and I shuddered.

"We did a good ambush and you better pay... uh... maybe five hundred credits now! She die otherwise!"

Oh bantha crap! The only creds I know of are back on the Ebon Hawk! My stomach clenched in terror, and my mouth dried up. My eyes flicked back to Zaalbar; his face was contorted in a snarl. I looked further and spotted Griff, beyond the others. The blaster Carth had given him hung limply at his side, and as I stared he took a step back away from me, away from the Gamorreans. And then another. He'd just leave me? Leave me here, in the hands of these stinky, ugly pig-faces?

A sob wrenched free from my throat, and my captor shook me in annoyance. My ears rang, my vision blurred, and my stomach heaved.
"Yous all pay up now!" the voice to my side squealed.

My gaze flicked desperately over my friends. Even that insane robot stood in Jen's shadow, a blaster ready and waiting. Jen twitched, meeting Carth's gaze as she jerked her head to the side.

"No tricks! We not thick!" my captor grunted. I tried to force my fear away, to be strong like Jen, but I was shaking in the tight grasp of the monster. Will these horrible pigs really kill me? Is my last sight going to be of my brother, scrambling away in fear? Griff had a pleading look on his face, but he continued to backpedal, even with Jen and Big Z and Carth and freaking HK between him and any sort of danger.

Jen sucked in a large gulp of air, and deactivated her lightsaber before clipping it onto her belt. Her face was blank as she began walking slowly toward the Gamorreans, one hand outspread in a show of peace or surrender. My captor's hold tightened to a chokehold, and I gasped. Jen? What are you doing?

"Here, I will give you the credits," she said, pointing to the Gamorrean who held me. "You are the leader here."

"No!" There was a guttural protect to my left. "Gurke says me in charge!"

"I should be leader!" a low voice rumbled past my ear.

Jen looked past me, straight into the eyes of my captor. "Yes, you are the strongest. I will give you the money." She dug a into the pockets of her armour, as if fishing for the credits, and took a step closer. What's she doing? She doesn't have any creds!

My captor squealed in delight, and dropped me to lurch forward for Jen's non-existent offer. I gasped, stumbling, only to be knocked back with a thump as Jen barrelled into me, toppling us both to the ground.

The harsh noise of blaster fire started, almost drowning out a moan of pain from Jen as she landed. Her weight held me pinned, helpless, yet protected by the shield of her body.

"Jen!" I wailed in panic, in fright.

"Stay still!" she hissed into my ear. Zaalbar was roaring, a loud roar of pure Wookiee anger. The noise of blaster flurries were cut through by the sound of metal striking metal, but Jen completely blocked my view of what was happening. There was a thud next to me, followed by two more. I couldn't stop another whimper, even as I hated myself for it.

"(Mission!)" Zaalbar roared again, Jen rolled away, and the sight of my furry friend looming over me had never been more welcome.

"Frelling bastard stars-cursed sodding arm!" Jen was swearing as Zaalbar lifted me up bodily into his grasp. Stunned, I burst into frantic sobs. His grip tightened, and he crooned softly in his own tongue. "(You are alright. They are gone. Everything is alright now.)" I pressed my face into his musky fur.

I'm crying in front of Jen! And Carth! I sniffed loudly, still dazed, and struggled to force back my tears. I pulled away from Zaalbar. "I'm okay, Big Z. Really," I mumbled.

Zaalbar still held onto my arms, but slid me gently to the sand. My feet were shaky as they took my weight.

"Mission, you're not hurt?" Jen was standing next to the Wookiee, frowning in concern. Or pain. Her
arm hung limply, and her face was sweaty and pale. She looked a mess, with dark curls sticking up
from underneath her dislodged headcloths, and her entire body canting to one side.

"Jen, your arm! Is it okay? You fell right on top of me!"

She frowned at me. "I'm okay, or I will be when I get some kolto. The explosion – it didn't hurt
you?"

"I'm alright, guys," I said shakily. "Because of y'all, I'm alright."

"I'm glad, Mission," Carth added, his brown eyes dark with concern as he looked me over. I smiled
at him weakly, and he turned to frown at Jen. "Why didn't you use the Force, Jen? Mission could
have died!"

Jen grimaced and looked away. She seemed uneasy. Zaalbar dropped his paws from my arms, but
still stood close, also intent upon Jen.

"I didn't want to risk it," she muttered. "Half the time I can't use it, and then when I can it doesn't
always do what I want." She shook her head, and her expression turned baffled. "And then
sometimes Bastila interferes, too. I just didn't want to risk it, Carth. Not with Mission's life."

Carth was still staring at Jen, but his expression had morphed to surprise. I wasn't sure if I'd ever
heard her say his first name before.

"Sheesh, Jen, you saved my life!" I blurted. "Again! I have no problems with how you did it." I
sniffed loudly, remembering the rough hands of my captor, and my eyes slid to the bloodied corpses
on the ground.

"We all saved you," Jen responded in a dry voice. "Even HK."

"Statement: With pleasure, master. I gleefully await the next meatbag to dispatch."

And then, I noticed Griff, standing nervously on the fringes of our group. *Everyone had a hand in
rescuing me. Apart from my brother.*

Zaalbar turned, and I heard a faint grumble of discontent fire in his chest. He glanced back to me,
and the noise stopped. I felt my shoulders tense.

"I'm glad you're okay, sis!" Griff blurted out. He ran back to me, lekku flicking in distress; at least he
was sincere in his fear.

I took a step back, stumbling over some debris in the sand. Zaalbar caught me with a strong paw, and
I righted myself again. "You were pretty quick to walk away, Griff," I mumbled. Griff halted some
metres away, his eyes dark and worried. He swallowed.

"I'm no good in situations like this sis, you know that! I didn't want to get in the way!"

"You ran away, Griff!" I snapped. He flinched, and the hurt, desperate look on his face eroded my
anger. *He tries, I know he does, I thought guiltily. He's no fighter.*

I'm sorry, Mission! I would have helped if I could!" he pleaded. I wanted to believe him, to trust in
my brother, and I reminded myself that he was tired and out of his element... but he'd had blaster
training, back on Taris. Griff was a crack shot. Why had he run, from three Gamorreans holding his
sister, when our allies were obviously the stronger side?
Because he's a coward. Because Griff looks out for Griff, first. Even Lena spoke poorly of him now. I frowned, remembering that dancing trash and her spiteful comments. I hadn't believed it at the time, but now I wondered.

I looked over at my friends, again. All of them had risked their lives for me. All of them had charged into a Sand People stronghold, because it had been my brother held hostage there. What would Griff have done, in a similar situation?

"Griff," I began. "I... I have to ask you something. It's important."

He blinked, his blue eyes staring soulfully at me. They were as pale and clear as the Tatooine sky above us. I'd always envied his eyes; I wasn't vain, but I would've preferred that colour to my own light brown.

"Fire away, sis. You know I'll tell you the truth."

He smiled, his teeth bared in a snarl. "Will you? Will you really? He'd always been so good at lying to get his way. I bit my lip indecisively, and then the words tumbled out. "I ran into Lena. She said... she said it was your idea to leave me on Taris six years ago. It's not true, is it?"

His eyes dropped to scrutinize the dry sand at his feet, his hand rubbing over his unprotected lekku in distraction. "Ah, well... there's the truth and then there's the truth, y'know?"

Shock stabbed deep into my gut, even though I had half expected that answer. "You mean it's true?" I whispered, and felt tears prick at my eyes. I should have known! I tried to swallow the lump in my throat. I did know, deep down. I just didn't want to face it. "I'm your sister – how could you abandon me like that?"

"You left her behind?" Jen cut in sharply. The others had been silent during our confrontation, but no longer. Jen had ripped off her visor, glaring fiercely at Griff. Her face had tightened in disgust. I'd never spoken of my brother to her before. "A pretty Twi'lek girl, on the streets of Taris? Why didn't you just sell her to a Hutt while you were at it, you slime?"

Griff took a step away from her in wariness.

"(What you did was wrong!)" Zaalbar growled. "(How could you leave your young sister behind? Have you no honour?)"

"Hey, hey!" Griff protested, alarmed at the Wookiee's rumbling. "Sis, keep your pet on a leash, would ya?" Zaalbar roared and advanced, causing Griff to stumble backwards, his headtails twitching in fear. "Come on!" he pleaded, his eyes flicking between us all. Even Carth was scowling at him, an obvious look of disapproval on his face. "Mission, you didn't need me to look after you anymore! You may have been young, but you knew how to take care of yourself! Look at you now! Everything turned out fine!"

Fury crested within me. He's always taken the easy way out. Always. I should have realized this and accepted it a long time ago. "That's it?" I challenged. "That's all you have to say to me after all these years of leaving me on Taris? If it weren't for Big Z and Jen, I'd be dead several times by now!"

"Look, I'm sorry! Could- could we just get back to Anchorhead? Uh, this isn't the best place for this sorta discussion." Griff back-pedalled, anxiously looking between as all.

Jen straightened, her expression alert as she scanned the surroundings. I caught her sudden movement and frowned, looking about myself. There was nothing but dunes and that destroyed 'crawler.
"I don't know, Griff," I said. I could feel my anger dissolving into something close to misery. "I'm not really sure I want you around right now."

"HK," Jen muttered. "Scan the area. I think-" her words were cut off by the sound of an electronic explosion. A sharp light pierced my vision, and I felt the burn of static warp through my tech goggles. I screamed, and pulled sharply at them.

"Targetting: Opening fiii..." HK's metallic voice was cut off by another powerful blast at his feet, blue-white and sizzling with electricity. *Freaking ion grenades!* There was a fizzing noise from his circuits, followed by a couple of *poof* sounds I recognized as smoke bombs.

"Damn, his shields!" Jen's voice yelled through chaos. I heard the *snap-hiss* of her lightsaber activate.

Griff shrieked, and I spotted him fleeing through the dissipating smoke. Zaalbar grabbed my arm, yanking me behind him as he raised his vibroblade at an unseen enemy. A sharp, stinging object pierced the back of one lekku, and I screamed more in fright than anything else. Zaalbar growled, and slapped a hairy paw against his neck. My hand pulled back, and I was confused to see a small dart in my grasp. *Huh?* I blinked in confusion as my limbs became weary, leaden with weight. *Poison? Or a fast acting sedative?* Something burned through my muscles as they turned to mush.

"No!" Jen shouted. *She's been hit too?* My eyes were heavy with fatigue as I saw Carth firing wildly into the empty surroundings. Jen dropped to her knees, but her hand lifted up. I wondered if she was trying to use the Force.

Zaalbar roared, and fell down with a crash next to me. *Must stay awake.* I was down on my knees without realizing it. A figure emerged from absolutely *nothing,* standing in front of Jen. *A stealth belt? I've never seen one so good! No way!* I saw it stumble backwards as Jen's hand raised again.

"Ugh," I said, feebly falling to my side. Even my thoughts were sluggish, too slow to feel the panic I should. Dizziness pounded in my head. Jen fell, shrieking and twisting spasmodically as she landed on her arm.

The figure, the man, smirked in victory over Jen's prone form. *Who is that?* My lids closed despite my struggle to stop them.

"And people think Jedi are hard to capture," a deep voice drawled amidst the roar of impending unconsciousness. "All you have to do is catch them by surprise, and be armed with a neural disruptor. Malak will be most pleased."

Malak? *As in, Darth Malak?* My mind was screaming at me, and I struggled desperately to fight the paralysis. A giant metaphorical hole gaped underneath my consciousness, and despite my efforts, I could not stop from falling.

"Sweet dreams," a voice in the distance mocked, and I could no longer tell if it was speaking to me or Jen.

xXx
Hyperspace: III – part one

Bastila Shan:

The late afternoon sun beat down on my head with a vengeance as I walked between the others, an impenetrable silence cloaking us all. The rontos had gone once we cleared the cave. Either the explosion had scared them off, or that degenerate bounty hunter had claimed them. I struggled to show nothing but an outer mask of calm confidence, but inwardly my emotions seethed with frightening intensity.

We had almost reached Anchorhead; as we crested the next dune I saw the large durasteel Czerka gates rise up in my vision. A group of local hunters stood chatting outside them, no doubt passing along wild stories of even wilder hunts whilst they leaned nonchalantly on their respective speeders.

As our steps brought us closer to the settlement, I reached out once more through the cursed bond that linked me to Revan. Again, I met the barricade she had clouded over her thoughts and emotions. How had she learnt that so quickly? Revan had all but ignored my warning of Calo, and I feared what could happen out there in the inhospitable desert.

I glanced over at Canderous striding alongside me; after our escape from that bounty hunter's trap the Mandalorian had been both smug and determined, espousing a violent desire to track down Calo Nord. I only wished that Canderous would leave our party for good, but after today's revelations I no longer believed he would disappear of his own volition.

In fact, after today's revelations I was no longer certain that Revan would remain ignorant of whom she truly was.

At least the Force has given me a small reprieve. I had managed to sway the Mandalorian under my power, but I had my own reservations about whether that would last. If not for his head injury, I am not entirely sure that it would have worked. And then-

And then he may have carried out his threat of attack. He might still, should he ever realize I once more used the Force upon him.

Worries for another day. One step at a time. Yet everything around me seemed to be crumbling like a kassi cracker, bit by bit falling to the floor to break into yet more fragments. We were now heading to Manaan, not the refuge I had hoped to find on Coruscant. Revan grew more violent and careless with each passing hour. Canderous and Juhani appeared to hold loyalty to the former Sith Lord; whilst I could understand the bloodthirsty Mandalorian's regard, Juhani was another matter. I had not missed the wondrous, almost awed, expression in the Cathar's eyes when she had learned of Jen Sahara's true identity. Juhani had quietly agreed to say nothing of it, but her exotic face gave away her desire to follow Revan. I feared for her; she had so recently embraced the Dark Side, and surely an attachment to Revan could only lead her back to that grim, desolate place.

How does Revan do it? I thought sourly as the gates of Anchorhead loomed closer. Everyone in our party follows her lead. Carth, perhaps, was the only one who had sworn to help me in my mission,
but even he had mixed feelings over Revan. Why else would he have left with them this morning?

My anger at Revan had been simmering all day long, ever since I had woken to find that she had gone out for yet another ill-advised, treacherous escapade. My fear, too, had expanded with each additional spark of cruelty that had slipped through Revan's emotional walls into the bond. Now that she was blocking me successfully, and showing an ability to pick up on my thoughts, my fear was in danger of blossoming out of control.

I sighed quietly, breath shuddering in my lungs. I ached for a future time when I could seek out the peaceful sanctuary of a Jedi enclave; when I could enjoy an existence that did not include Revan. I still had the power to easily cut Revan off from the Force, but I dared not use it. She shattered my shields when she was fighting Juhani. I need to save this power of mine for when I really need it. No matter how much she infuriated or terrified me in the interim.

Mission! No! Revan's anguished thought stabbed sharply into my mind, jolting me to a standstill. Canderous and Juhani turned and frowned at me in inquiry.

Jen? Are you alright? Is Calo there? I desperately thrust my thoughts through the bond, but received no immediate response.

“Bastila?” Juhani asked quietly. “What is it?”

Jen? “Jen. In trouble,” I said shortly, aware that my teeth were clenching as Revan continued to ignore my frantic queries. I opened my mind and tried to reach Revan's, pushing against my instincts which wanted nothing more than to build a thousand Force walls between us. My instincts which screamed with every further mental contact I had with that woman.

Those Gamorrean bastards! I can't use the Force, dammit, I can't risk Mission.

Gamorreans? Additional confusion swamped me; I could not visualize Calo Nord using Gamorreans as lackeys. Especially since he had appeared to be working alone when he confronted us earlier. What is going on, Jen?

Stop interfering! She all but snarled at me, and shoved me out of her mind so fast that I physically reeled.

Curse her. Curse that- that- I breathed in deeply, and forced the words of the Jedi Code to the forefront of my mind.

“Is she okay? Where is she?” Juhani asked again, and I turned to see a look of sharp concern on the Cathar's face. Canderous was looking intently at me also. How does that psychotic woman command such loyalty? How is it possible?

“I do not know where she is, Juhani. I told you, the bond does not work that way,” I snapped, my tone more curt than it should have been.

Her intense yellow eyes stared into mine, puzzled and maybe a little annoyed. I noticed then that the local hunters were staring at us avidly, curious at our conversation. I shot them an unimpressed glare, and they turned away to feign interest in their beaten-up speeders.

“Perhaps your bond does not, but the Force itself does,” Juhani responded in a soft voice. “If Jen is close enough, surely we should sense her presence through the Force.”

I gaped at the Cathar as she closed her eyes. Of course! Has my very proximity to Revan blindsided me to the very basic uses of the Force? Has it addled my wits? That Juhani could come to this
conclusion rather than I shamed me somewhat. I closed my eyes hurriedly, and reached out to the tantalizing, living power that surrounded every being.

“I can sense her,” Juhani’s husky voice lilted past my ears. “She is not far. In the direction of that sandcrawler.”

I, too, felt Revan's life force, pulsating and thrumming with the Force, spiking with rage. It was not as clear as detecting Revan's emotions through our mind-link, but that had become more and more difficult for me to achieve as she successfully blocked me out.

I opened my eyes to see Juhani pointing towards a metallic object in the distance that winked at us with the late afternoon sun. It was less than an hour's walk away, if I judged correctly. A movement from the corner of my eye made me aware of Canderous, striding purposefully towards the nearest hunter.

“Canderous?” I called sharply. Oh no. What is he doing?

“You,” Canderous stated in his deep gravelly voice, as he stopped in front of a local Duros who had been bantering with his fellow hunters. “I want your speeder.”

“What?” The Duros replied in surprise. “Are you kidding?”

“Let me rephrase that,” Canderous retorted, swinging up his large repeating blaster to point at the hunter threateningly. The Duros paled, and stepped away from his vehicle hurriedly.

“I must help her. I dislike him, but she spared my life,” Juhani muttered incoherently, and ran towards Canderous as he jumped onto the battered speeder.

“Hey!” one of the other hunters called out in sharp surprise. “Stop, you thieving bastard!”

“Wait a minute!” I cried, running after them as Canderous turned the ignition. I felt Juhani embrace the Force; its power lending strength to her almighty leap aimed at the speeder. She landed behind Canderous with a thud, twisting her arms around him as he roared the engine into life.

“Wait for me!” a desperate shriek rose from the depths of my lungs.

One of the locals shouted in surprised anger, and I saw blaster fire ricochet off the speeder as it tore away, Canderous and Juhani disappearing quickly from my sight.

“Get back here!” I yelled furiously, hopelessly, as they vanished over the dunes. How could they just run off without me? I can help!

All of a sudden I was aware of the heated looks thrown my way by the hunters, who were now short two enemies to pick on.

With sinking dread creating a pit in my anger, I turned around slowly to face them.

xXx

Calo Nord:

She lay before me, dead to the world as I knelt in the cooling sand. And this is what has come of the once all-powerful Darth Revan. I could feel a victorious smirk on my face. Not many could say they have successfully neutralized an ex-Sith Lord.

Certainly, it hadn't been easy. Of course I'd known of Bastila's quest from Darth Malak himself, and
had ensured that cave was fully lined with explosives. Malak had preferred the Star Map obliterated, and it was a perfect ambush. What I hadn't expected was for their little group to split up.

*It was more satisfying this way,* I thought smugly to myself as I pulled out the neural disrupter Darth Malak had given me. *Bastila and Canderous either died in the explosion, or are busy suffocating.* In the case of my former colleague, I hoped for the latter. I knew how much his pathetic race valued an honourable death, and I had no wish to give him one.

I snapped the collar around Revan’s neck, and thought idly that she appeared much younger than she had as the Dark Lord. *She's over thirty standard years. And yet unconscious, she could be an innocent young woman.* I snorted. There was nothing innocent about Darth Revan.

*Back to business.* I stood up quickly, and surveyed her comatose companions. The sedative I’d used, Foraxyn-4, was fast-acting, but it did not linger in the system for long. The biggest threat appeared to be the Wookiee, and I strolled over to his body.

"Since I can't have you following me,” I murmured, pulling out my Men’iki stealth pistol and aiming directly at his unmoving head.

A sharp burning pain stabbed into my arm, and I dropped my weapon in surprise. A loud challenging cry followed by a series of primitive honks slammed into my eardrums as I instinctively dived to the ground, rolling quickly as I drew another blaster.

*Cursed Sand People!* Just what I didn't need.

Four gaffi-wielding scum were charging right at me; presumably the blaster equipped ones were further behind. I held my weapon steady as I fired from the ground, while my other hand pulled out a thermal detonator from my belt.

I primed the grenade and lobbed it towards the oncoming mob. By the time it detonated, I was already on my feet, spraying blaster fire and sprinting for the nearest cover; one of the many twisted heaps of rubble that littered the desert around the unfortunate sandcrawler.

*How did they get here? Were they following me, or Revan?* No matter now; being the only outsider awake meant I was their immediate target.

The brief respite behind the twisted metal heap gave me time to pull out a second blaster. The natives were shouting angrily; I cocked my head and heard two survivors approaching.

*Plus four behind with blasters. Time to party.*

xXx

**Canderous Ordo:**

The wind stung my eyes as the speeder shot over the sun bleached dunes; I opened the throttle and willed the machine to go faster. The Cathar had surprised me by lurching onto the speeder and grabbing my waist fiercely; I had not expected her to willingly travel with me after the cool reception I’d been receiving all day. *No matter. As long as she can fight, she's welcome.* I had no idea of Juhani's skills; she came from a proud warrior race, yet she appeared to be one of Bastila’s lackeys. *Though she did arrive with Jen, gratuitously smeared in blood. No, not Jen. Revan.*

"I don't see them!" I turned my head and yelled hoarsely back at her; the sandcrawler ahead appeared both damaged and entirely abandoned.
"Drive around it!" Juhani screamed directly into my ear, and in retaliation I swerved the speeder sharply to the left, causing the Cathar to squawk and grip me even tighter. The sandcrawler was a monstrous machine, looming about ten metres high and at least fifty long. The bodywork had broken off the oversized machine in several places, and as I sped along the length of it, I had to dodge and swerve of numerous piles of metallic rubble. There was a worthy battle here not too long ago.

We neared the end of the sandcrawler and turned to follow around it. I squinted into the environs, but saw nothing of interest until we passed the final bend. Then-

Sand People! Firing blasters at a closer figure lurking behind a twisted metal wall that had once belonged to the sandcrawler. I'd recognize that blue and white exoskeleton anywhere. Calo had his back to us as he concentrated on the threat of the natives; I didn't have long to make my move. I briefly noticed the bodies of Revan and the others, flung further away to the east.

Well, it ain't a basilisk, but it'll do the job. "Get ready to jump!" I yelled back at Juhani, and aimed the speeder directly at Calo's back. I dived off the hurtling speeder at the last minute, just in time to see Calo whirl around and jump aside in shock. The speeder crashed and exploded brightly into the broken metallic wall that Calo had been using as cover, but not before the bounty hunter had managed to leap from its path.

I cursed as I skidded backwards along the sand, yanking my repeating blaster up to my chest and firing rapidly in Calo's general direction. Bits of destroyed speeder flew through the stagnant air, smoke billowing from the wreck. Answering fire spat at me from several directions; I had attracted the attention of the natives.

"Take care of the Sand People!" I yelled at Juhani, who was further behind me, scrabbling to stand. "They're firing at us now!"

The Cathar ran off towards the Sand People as I leapt behind a mound of broken bodywork laying near the sandcrawler. I noted with grim approval that Juhani did not yet activate her glowing lightsaber – a sure homing beacon for anyone with a blaster on the other side of the smoke cloud.

I should get to the crawler. It's the best cover around here. Gaping black holes had been smashed into the side of the monstrous machine, by the looks of it somebody had fired multiple rockets at the Czerka vehicle.

"Mandalorian bastard!" Calo yelled from somewhere behind the burning wreck of the speeder. "You're old and stupid, Ordo, if you think a stunt like that would work on me!"

I leant around the bodywork briefly to fire another barrage of blasts through the explosion. I couldn't see Calo, and the smoky fire was blinding us both. I could hear shouts and challenging cries from the Sand People, entirely occupied now with the Cathar. There's a group of them, at least five. She probably won't last long.

I retreated back behind cover, alert for any noise. The jagged pile of bodywork wasn't quite large enough to hide me adequately, and I eyed up the nearby sandcrawler. "I wasn't the di'kut who lined a cave with mines and expected it to take out two Jedi and a Mando'ade," I growled back at him. "I would have given you an honourable death before, Nord, but not now."

"You weak idiots and your archaic honour code," Calo sneered. I cocked my head and tried to pinpoint his exact location, yanking out a frag grenade and priming it. "Your time is gone! There is no honour in battle!"

I leapt free from the rubble, running and hurling the grenade in the direction of Calo's voice. Just in
time to see one hurled right back at my previous position as Calo, too, jumped sideways into view. *Damn bastard thinks like me.* I landed in a crouch, immediately buffeted by shock waves of Calo's fragmentation grenade, instinctively firing my heavy blaster that was slung conveniently around my shoulder. Calo, standing some distance away, yelped in surprise as the shots hit home.

*It's gonna take more than that to drop him,* I knew as I turned to sprint towards the sandcrawler, firing blindly over a shoulder as I ran. *He's always been fond of energy shields.*

The nearest entry into the sandcrawler was a jagged hole in the steel wall, caused by some sort of heavy weaponry. I leapt into the dark interior as I felt Calo return fire, shots landing on either side of me and one thudding into the small of my back. *Garish as it is, Davik's armour does hold up well,* I thought grimly as I lurched sideways inside. I could make out vague shapes from what little daylight permeated the interior; large box-like shadows suggested I had ventured into a storage area of the machine.

"Mandalorian coward!" Calo yelled from outside; as I leaned against the outer wall I saw his blasts fire into the make-do doorway. *I'm gonna make you eat your words, honourless scum.* In the relative safety of the crawler, I pushed a smaller crate near the opening and crouched behind it, staring directly out at the afternoon desert. The destroyed speeder was now nothing more than a faintly smoking wreck, and certainly wouldn't provide Calo with any more cover. *He won't be able to see me in here. He's dead, he just doesn't know it yet.* I couldn't spot him, but I was content to wait until he made a move. From here I calculated three particular places Calo could be hiding, still using broken parts of sandcrawler wreckage as cover.

I could spot Juhani in the distance, running towards two firing Sand People. *She's still alive? I guess that Jedi is tougher than I gave her credit for.*

I hit the trigger as soon as Calo made his move, firing at him as he jumped into view, hurling a grenade directly at me. Instinctively I leapt back inside fully, dragging the crate I had been using in front of me to take whatever impact was coming. *Damn Calo and his grenades.* No explosion was forthcoming; I waited tensely but nothing happened. Other than my lungs tightening and a dizziness washing through me.

*Haar'chak! Poison grenade!* The meagre light inside the crawler was turning smoky, hazy. I had to get back out, but Calo would be waiting. *If I stay inside, I'm gonna be out cold.* My head pounded, and I felt the beginnings of weakness enter my limbs.

With a snarl, I heaved the crate I'd been using back outside, diving recklessly after it into the sand. Blaster fire spat at me, most of it deflecting off the crate. I lay panting in the cooling desert, yanking my gun back up in preparation. *I have to think of something. This is gonna last forever.*

"I'm not going to spend all day on worthless scum like you!" Calo yelled. *He's trying to bait me again.* Nothing for it, I had to make a lunge. I sprung out from cover, my finger numb on the trigger as I opened fire once more. Calo had found refuge again, and I spotted another grenade thrown from behind the speeder I'd decorated the desert with.

"You always were fonder of grenades than women," I grated as I rolled back behind my ad-hoc shield.

"This one's for me, not you," Calo retorted. *What's he up to?* I heard the recognizable 'poof' noise of a smoke grenade, and jumped out in the open again. A thick, billowing white cloud rose ahead of me, and I fired blindly through it. *Useful cover, but it's only temporary.* Indeed, the smog was already drifting upwards in the almost non-existent breeze. *Why did he need it?*
"Seems to me I've got the prize, Ordo," Calo's thick voice drawled, and I began to make out a figure through the dissipating smoke cloud. I narrowed my eyes and trained my weapon, but something odd about the outline of Calo's figure made me hold fire. "Unless you don't mind killing the very one you're trying to save."

My spine stiffened as more remnants of fog floated away; Calo held the comatose Jen up with one hand, aiming a small blaster directly at me. No, not Jen. Revan. Calo was a short man, and Revan's limp body was adequate protection; unless I used a sniper rifle I couldn't be assured of hitting only Calo. And he uses shields. I'd need a disruptor rifle, and that ain't something conveniently lying around here.

"I came here to kill you," I said flatly. "And that's a promise."

Calo laughed, and fired at my feet. "Then why aren't you shooting?" he mocked. My eyes flicked on a lone figure some distance behind Calo, a red lightsaber glinting. I took a cautious step back towards the cover I had used.

"This is between you and me, Nord. Are you too weak to fight me head-on, so pathetic you need to resort to sentient shields?" I challenged. Calo laughed again and took a step backward, dragging Revan along. He fired a barrage of shots, and that decided me; I dived back behind the crate.

"I do whatever it takes to get the job done, Ordo! Something you never understood with your useless pride and narrow code. You can hardly call me weak – you're the one too pansy to shoot a woman," he sneered, and gave another low chuckle. I stayed silent, waiting to see what Juhani would do. "I never thought I'd see the day a Mandalorian steps down from a fight because of a hostage. You're a disgrace to your people, Ordo."

A cold, fierce anger burned low in my gut; only the Cathar's potential surprise attack kept me from charging straight out at Calo in a fury. He's trying to get another clear shot at me, trying to lure me out. Bastard.

I heard Calo grunt in surprise and open fire; I leaned around to see Juhani sprinting towards the sandcrawler. "The Force doesn't work on me, does it, kittycat?" Calo mocked triumphantly, still firing after her. I now had a clear shot as Calo had turned to face Juhani; I fired quickly with a more precise mini-blaster I'd readied. Calo screamed as the bolts slammed into his back, but even as he fell he twisted Revan's body around to face me, returning fire and forcing me to resume my cover. His energy shield has worn off. About time.

"Try that again and she dies!"

I shot a quick glance around the side of my cover, and noticed Calo standing upright once more. Damn. I was hoping I'd hurt him more than that. He started to move slowly backwards, away from the scene as he held Revan's body firmly in front of him with one hand. He's using her as his ticket to get out of here. Like I'll let that happen. Calo fired at me, and I ducked back behind the crate.

"You can't kill her," I sneered. "You do, and then you're dead. She's the only reason I'm not gutting you right now, the only reason you don't have the Cathar's lightsaber through your brain."

"True, I don't want to kill her. But it doesn't matter how many pieces she is in."

I heard a blaster shot, and surprise slammed into me as I looked back out at Calo. Sure enough, he had just fired point-blank into Revan's left leg. Good thing she's out cold.

"You monster! That was unnecessary!" the Cathar's growl came from nearby; obviously she had
been making her way towards me.

Calo laughed mockingly; his voice was fainter than before. *The bastard is getting away. I can't let him take Revan.* "It was completely necessary, kittycat," Calo drawled. "The more injured she is, the less trouble she'll be."

I heard a very feline hiss, and suddenly Juhani all but dived into my lap. I stared down at her in surprise as she rolled away. "And here I thought you disliked me," I commented, and sharp yellow eyes glared disgust at me. I looked Juhani over briefly; she appeared to have no injuries. **Impressive, against six Sand People. She's not a total wet blanket after all.**

"Kittycat!" she hissed again, and I made a mental note not to call her that. **Unless I particularly want a fight.** Her eyes flashed sparks of battle rage... and something else. "No. I will control this rage. It is not the way," she muttered.

"We need a plan," I said abruptly. "I won't let Calo just walk away. Not with- not with Jen."

Something stopped me saying Revan's name out loud; I pushed that odd thought away to think about later. **Curious.**

"I cannot use the Force on him! I do not understand why."

"Force resistant armour," I bit out. "Calo's exoskeleton, head-to-toe, has been interleaved with something that repels Force powers. He's never divulged details, but I know he paid a king's ransom for it, and it's saved his sorry arse on more than one occasion."

Juhani stared at me steadily, her lips pursed. "So the Force will not work on him. It will, however, work on Jen. Canderous, cover me." With an almost rabid snarl, Juhani lunged back out in the open.

"Mand'alor's balls!" I muttered savagely, and followed her. **How am I supposed to cover her? I can't fire on Revan!** Juhani had curled into a crouching position, her hands cupped and pointing towards Calo and his hostage. I ran in front of the Cathar as Calo opened fire, placing more faith in Davik's ugly armour than I would have liked. The first shot in the chest slammed me back a pace, and knocked the wind from my lungs. *That's gonna bruise something bad.*

Calo gave an abrupt yelp of startlement as Revan's limp body was suddenly yanked from his grip, to fall flat a few metres in front of him. **So that's Juhani's plan,** I thought grimly as I quickly reigned fire down on the surprised Calo, running towards him as my repeating blaster unleashed itself.

Calo fell backwards screaming as my shots tore into his chest armour. The pain must have been intense, but even intense pain didn't prevent him from pulling a second blaster and unleashing a volley of his own. **How he keeps so much weaponry on his person is beyond even me.**

I rolled to the side; evading his barrage of energy bolts temporarily. **I've got to get to him before he grabs Revan again.** Even as I began another sprint, opening fire wildly, I knew I was too far away. Calo, twisting to his feet, was already scrabbling back towards Revan.

A whirling, snarling blur shot past me at high speed, lurching into the air. Juhani, moving quicker than I would have thought possible, landed directly before Calo. He aimed both pistols in her direction, but fast as he was, Calo never pulled the trigger.

Her lightsaber cleaved cleanly through his head and into his chest.

I stopped my redundant sprint, and stood still, panting. The surroundings could now almost pass for the Tarisian Lower City, cluttered with multiple bodies and smoking wreckage. My eyes caught on a few Gamorrean corpses, and I frowned, before shrugging the curious sight off.
I noticed then that the light was fading quickly; the last sun a winking jewel on the horizon. Revan lay face-down a few metres away. Juhani was walking back towards me from Calo's bloody corpse. I felt a growing respect for the Cathar; she had surprised me with her warrior skills. *We made a good team.* I nodded at her in comradeship, and she stared back at me solemnly.

"What do you think knocked them out?" Juhani asked softly as we both knelt down by Revan. Blood trickled through the cracks of the armour sheathing her leg, and threadbare patches on her left arm revealing swollen bruised skin hinted at further damage.

"Some sort of sedative. Won't be life-threatening; Calo wanted her alive," I stated. "I'm gonna check out Calo's corpse."

A few minutes later, I had my answer. "Foraxyn-4," I told Juhani. "Expensive stuff, but Calo always had credits backing him. One of the quickest acting sedatives in the Core Worlds; the fact that it's not deadly means the demand isn't that high for it. It wears off in an hour or two, but adrenastims nicely speed up the recovery."

Now the fight was over, I was feeling rather angry at myself. I'd thrown my last grenade at Calo, and my meagre arsenal of weapons had left me at a disadvantage. *Before we get off this rock, I'm gonna suit up.*

Happily, stims I had in plentiful supply.

xXx

**Mission Vao:**

"(No. I absolutely forbid it!)") Zaerdra stormed at me, waggling an admonishing finger. I scowled, but for some reason my heart wasn't in it. I felt positively sad at seeing her again. The fact that she was wearing that dull brown robe Bastila had picked up from some merchant to look like a snooty Jedi was also puzzling.

"I do what I want!" I retorted.

Zaerdra's face flushed with anger, and she opened her mouth to yell once more. "Wakey wakey kid," she said in Basic, and in Canderous' deep, gravelly voice.

I blinked, and Gadon's hall dissolved around me. *Huh?* Zaerdra gave me an odd pleading look, and then vanished. *Hang on, this ain't real.*

"I'm not a kid!" I tried to yell, but the words stuck in my throat. There was a derisive male laugh from somewhere, and I became aware of a dull pounding in my head. *A dream, this is a dream,* I understood, my thoughts sluggish like someone had spiked my fizz-pop with a shot of juma juice.

I sucked in a shuddering breath, realizing that I was lying prone on the warm ground. Hesitantly, I prised open my eyelids to see the fuzzy form of Canderous retreat from me, against the backdrop of a starry night's sky. *The dunes... we were out in the dunes.* My vision slowly sharpened on the silvery globe of a heavy moon on the horizon. It was early evening, the last whispers of sunset still being chased away.

And to the side was a dark shadow. The sandcrawler we had stopped by earlier.

"Ugh, what happened?" I moaned, struggling to sit up. *Someone attacked us!* My hand flew to my lekku where a dart had pierced earlier. There was a grunt of pain to my side, and I glanced over to see that crazy Cathar leaning over Jen, who appeared to be waking. *Wait, Juhani and Canderous?*
What's going on? Canderous was crouched down on the sand, something sharp and shiny in his grasp as he reached towards Zaalbar.

"Stop!" I cried in pure reaction. "What are you doing?"

Canderous shot me an unimpressed look, his expression so annoyingly typical of him that I found my alarm dying away. "Waking him up."

"Sithspit," Jen muttered. "Tell me I've got a hangover, and that Calo Nord didn't just succeed in putting a neural disruptor around my neck."

Juhani murmured something from Jen's side. Wait, what? Calo freaking Nord? There was a shiny metal collar in Juhani's hand, and then I remembered how the Vulkars had kept the Jedi snot contained. And Jen can use the Force, too. Oh, sheesh! Suddenly, I understood the big pile of bantha poooo too that we had all almost fallen into. Calo Nord! He kills anyone in his way! How are we all still here? Are we all still here?

"What- what's been going on?" I demanded, desperate now for clear answers.

Jen turned to look at me. Pain was etched in the lines on her face, but worse was the dark look in her gaze. "Calo Nord ambushed us. Juhani and Canderous to the rescue."

"Is he, is he dead?"

"Yes." Jen's voice was black, black as how her eyes looked in the evening light. Her gaze shattered as I struggled to come to terms with the latest bombshell. Calo Nord, dead. It was as strange as Davik Kang, or Bendak Starkiller, or Zax the Hutt being killed in the Sith bombardment. All of them had seemed undefeatable for so many years.

Juhani was staring at me with her weird golden eyes. She made me uneasy. Jen seemed to trust her, and by the sounds of it she had just saved our lives – but then, I wasn't exactly gonna forget the way she tried to murder us all the other day. With the Force. The freaky Force. Which Jen can now use. It felt like everything had changed, or shifted suddenly under my feet.

There was a loud roar. Big Z! Zaalbar, jerking to his feet with Wookiee-ish speed, and scattering plumes of sand in all directions. Canderous was pretty quick to back away, for all his gruff bluster about not being scared of anything.

"Big Z!" I called, and my best friend whirled around, bounding to my side in an instant.

"(Mission!)") he howled, giant paws grasping around my shoulders as he gently lifted me to my feet. "(Are you alright?)"

"Lemme go," I mumbled, disentangling myself. Big Z meant well, but after a day of hot sun and sand, he wasn't exactly the freshest smelling thing around. "I'm fine."

"Your arm is badly fractured," Juhani said in her soft lilting voice. She was speaking to Jen, and I remembered, then, about Jen's injury from earlier. My only problem was a minor stinging on my legs from the grenades of those piggy Gamorreans, and the stinky gree-bacta salve back in the 'Hawk would soon fix that. "The bone is well out of alignment," Juhani continued, "and there is a lot of swelling around the site. This occurred some hours ago, I suspect."

Jen didn't answer. In fact, she wasn't even looking at Juhani. Her face was closed, as she stared away from us all, and I was reminded of just how distant and angry she had been lately.
There was a faint sigh from Juhani. "The muscle on your leg is damaged from the blaster hit. The armour afforded some protection, but I do not think you will be able to walk on that. You need a doctor. Or- or Bastila."

Jen jerked her head to stare at Juhani. "Bastila. Where is Bastila?"

It was hard to tell in the fading light, but somehow the strange Cathar looked sheepish as her gaze skittered away from Jen's. "Outside the Anchorhead gates. I do hope we did not land her in difficulty."

There was a snort from Canderous, crouching next to Carth's body in the sand. "I'm sure the princess is more than capable of charming those shabuirs."

Well, I didn't particularly care where Bastila was, but... Griff! "Where is he?" I shrieked, spinning around to stare in every direction. "Where's Griff?"

"Who?" Canderous snapped.

"My brother!" I gasped. But the gloom was deepening, and it was hard to make out what any of the shadows on the sand were, now. Any of them could be Griff, he could have fallen, be hurt somewhere... "A Twi'lek, just like me! He was with us!"

"Kid, there's dead Sand People, dead Gamorreans, and a dead Human around here," Canderous drawled. "A regular meat market. But I ain't seen no Twi'lek, dead or otherwise."

"He ran," Jen said, her voice flat and emotionless. I whipped around to stare at her. She was hunched over on herself, her good arm clutching a leg, and her eyes pinched closed in pain. "He slipped away when Calo ambushed us. He probably made it to safety."

He ran. The truth of it hit me like a punch to the gut. Despite the blaster Carth'd given him, despite his sister being in danger, despite everyone else sticking together... he still ran.

I could feel my lower lip trembling, and bit down on it hard. "Just like before," I whispered. "He ran, to save himself."

"(I am sorry,)") Zaalbar rumbled softly, placing a furry paw on my arm. I jerked away, suddenly angry. The conversation with Lena ran through my head again, and Griff's weak evasion when I brought it up. Even as a kid, Griff had always been a 'lil self-serving, with the way he looked out for himself first and his own creds-

But I was his sister!

"He's no fighter," Jen stated. She was looking at me again, a frown of concern pinching her forehead. "He's a coward, sure, but that doesn't mean he doesn't care for you, Mission."

There was a faint groan, and I was vaguely aware of Carth jerking up in a seated position, hand resting immediately on the blaster lying next to him.

Yeah, sure, I knew Griff loved me... but in the end, what was that worth? Freaking Canderous had put himself in danger to rescue me, not to mention Juhani, who wasn't much past being a rabid desert cat, really.

"Don't start a fight unless you mean to end it," Canderous snapped, and I saw Carth freeze in response. His hand didn't move away, though.
"Canderous? What happened?"

"I'm getting sick of that question," Canderous growled, as he stood. "We should get out of here before more Sand People arrive."

Griff is a jerk. I've known this for years, haven't I? Sheesh, ever since Gadon refused him entry to the Beks… I'd just never accepted it. Even the times he'd deserted me in the Undercity for a meet or a job, or the time he'd borrowed all my creds to pay off a mark- well, that happened a couple of times. Maybe Griff really did mean to pay me back, in the heat of the moment – but I'd always accepted he'd never get round to it.

"Sand People?" Carth's query rapped out, echoing over the dunes.

"A group of them attacked the bounty hunter as we arrived on the scene," Juhani answered.

Maybe, I was better off without him. I loved my brother, but having Big Z at my side put things in perspective. Travelling with Jen and Carth, and even Bastila and Canderous, changed things. I'd had the vague hope that Griff could join us, but somehow I knew that would never happen, now. Not even if I found him waiting in Anchorhead for me.

He was a liability. It hurt to think it, but it was true.

"Huh," Carth said, in a considering voice. "They were probably following us after the mess we made of their base."

"All the more reason to get back to civilization," Canderous grumbled. "I don't think the rest of you are up to any more action." He was standing next to Jen now, staring down at her. But Jen was still hunched over, seemingly ignoring us all. I worried, then, at just how beaten up she was. "You were lucky those Sand People came when they did. If they hadn't halted Calo, he'd be long gone by now. With you."

"There is no luck," a crisp, annoyed voice floated through the semi-darkness. "There is only the Force."

"Oh great," I complained under my breath. Just about the last person I wanted to see, after my spineless brother.

"So nice of you to join us, princess."

Bastila walked towards us, quick strides over the shifting sand. Even in the dark, I could see the look on her face. It wasn't just cold- it was like she'd spent the last hour traipsing around Hoth. "How considerate of you to leave me there, Canderous."

The Mandalorian shrugged. "I figured you could get your own speeder if you wanted to."

"You figured wrong," she lashed back. "I walked here. It took all my efforts to stop the hunters from attacking me."

"Guys. Enough." Carth's weary voice cut over the two of them, but there was enough steel in it to have them both temporarily subside. "We need to focus on getting back to the ship."

Juhani cleared her throat awkwardly. "I do not think Jen will be able to walk."

There was a deep frown on Bastila's face, and she walked towards Jen – but even in the moonlight I could spot the mistrust tightening Jen's face. Sheesh, I didn't like or trust Bastila either, but she could
help with Jen's leg.

I sighed, my thoughts turning away from them as I stared blindly up at the stars. They looked different on the planet. Clearer. I hadn't seen the night-sky often on Taris, but there were more stars here. Griff, how could you? Twice he had left me to die. I guess that proves he cares more about his own skin that looking out for his sister. Why did it hurt so much?

Zaalbar had come to sit next to me; offering no words but a steady, silent comfort. I leaned against him wearily and wondered if I would ever see my brother again. If I ever wanted to.

"Your leg should be alright to walk on now," Bastila's voice was tired as she spoke to Jen. "I shall be able to augment the healing later. I suggest you take some pain medication when we return to the freighter. I can look at resetting your arm then, too, but I shall need Juhani's help."

"Of course," Juhani murmured.

Jen stood with a groan she couldn't hold back, hobbled slightly, and then steadied herself. She nodded briefly at Bastila, before walking towards Calo's corpse, stopping to kick it hard right between the legs. Of course, being armoured, all it did was cause her to spew forth a litany of what sounded suspiciously like curse words in Huttese. Jen could've been a translator, with the languages she knew. Of course, that didn't pay too well, considering protocol droids could totally outperform sents any day of the week.

"Was that entirely necessary?" Carth snapped, and Jen turned, a faint smirk lifting the dark look that had been dogging her expression.

"Yes. Very." She went to fold her arms, and then moaned in discomfort at the movement.

"Wait a minute," Carth ordered, and walked over to kneel down by Calo's body. There was a moment of silence as Carth undid the side-clasps of Calo's armour, before rolling the limp corpse over to remove panels of the exoskeleton. When he began to rip away the shirt from beneath Calo's armour, I felt my curiosity pique.

"I'm not sure if I want to watch this," Jen quipped, her voice dry. Canderous had wandered over, nonchalantly picking up the blue and white sections of Calo's armour. I wasn't sure if Carth didn't notice, or was simply uninterested in the armour. "Didn't know your tastes ran that way, flyboy."

"Ha ha," Carth muttered. He held part of a loose tunic in his hands, which he deftly ripped into a smaller size. "Here. Hold still."

Jen actually held her tongue while Carth tied a makeshift sling around her neck. He did it quickly enough that I wondered if it was something he'd done before.

"Thanks," she muttered.

"Don't mention it."

"We should leave," Bastila interrupted. "It is a short walk to Anchorhead, and everyone is awake and restored now."

"HK," Jen stated. Her voice had turned low and dark again. "We need to fix HK first."

There was a whistle of air from Bastila. "Can you not just carry it? Or perhaps ask Zaalbar?"

"(I can carry him for you, Jen Sahara,)" Zaalbar rumbled.
"We should find Calo's speeder," Canderous said. "He'll have left one around for a quick getaway."

"It is too dark to find the speeder, and we could not fit everybody on it. We should depart on foot," Bastila said, her voice brisk, motioning us all to start moving. There may have been sense in her words, but it was annoying the way she and Canderous had to disagree on everything. And Bastila always sounded so uptight.

I stuck my tongue out at her.

Canderous laughed. "Y'know, princess, you're almost cute when you try to be leader."

"Very funny," Bastila snapped.

Carth, finally, called an end to the bickering by sighing and starting the journey back. Zaalbar picked up the dead robot with a grunt, and then waited for me to begin walking. The sand shifted under my feet, and I felt the temperature begin to drop as night truly set in.

We trudged slowly through the desert. In front, Canderous fired off a few verbal shots at Bastila, but she had retreated into silence. There was a quiet murmur of conversation between Juhani and Jen, but otherwise all I could hear was the chirping of Tatooine insects. The gloom of night felt eerie and a bit creepy. *I've never been out in the wilderness at night before, that's why. It's different to the Undercity. More... open.* Part of me hoped that Griff was wandering aimlessly somewhere, desperately wishing he'd remained, desperately praying for my survival.

**No. No, I don't want him lost. I don't...** when it came to Griff Vao, I didn't know what I wanted.

"I'm sorry," Carth said awkwardly; I hadn't noticed him slow down to walk abreast of me and Zaalbar. I scowled and bowed my head.

"It doesn't matter," I muttered. "I always knew he was slime."

"I-I guess he was just scared," Carth's response sounded weak, even to my ears.

"Yeah. Scared enough to leave his sister to die. Twice in one day." My mouth felt dry, like I'd just downed a glass of sour-pop. "What does it matter? I've still got Big Z. And- and Jen, I guess."

"It still does matter. Betrayal," Carth's voice was quiet, but there was a harsh tone in it I hadn't noticed before. "Stays with you for a lifetime." He gave a bitter chuckle, and I turned to look at him curiously.

He sounds like he's been burnt. *What happened?* I asked, frowning.

There was an uncomfortable look on his face, and I could tell he wished he hadn't started this conversation. "My father died when I was very young," he said flatly. "There was a man who mentored me when I joined the Republic. He was everything my father was not; intelligent, strong, charismatic. He moulded me into the officer I am today. I grew to care for him more than I ever did my father," Carth trailed off, as if that was the end of his story.

"And?" I asked, interested to know more. Carth didn't usually open up like this, but maybe he was trying to make me feel better. He'd done that earlier, back on the *Hawk*. I got so mad at him afterwards for his mistrust of Jen, but he meant well. And maybe he did understand.

"He turned traitor and joined the Sith army. Spilled the secrets of the Republic, and commandeered attacks that killed millions of innocent people. All for his own ambition." Carth's tone turned dark, and I knew, somehow, that this was the end of the conversation. I glanced over my shoulder, and
saw Jen trailing us. Her eyes had been intent on Carth's back, but flickered to mine at the movement. She grimaced.

We walked the rest of the way without conversation. The quiet of night seemed to reach out with a many-fingered hand and grip us all with an ominous silence. By the time we reached the looming gates of Anchorhead, I was more than ready to get back to the *Ebon Hawk*.

*I just want to curl up, and pretend today never happened.*

Our only interruption was on the empty dirt road of Anchorhead, when a lone stranger approached Jen and slipped something into her hand. Carth, followed by Bastila, immediately demanded to know what it was, but Jen just shrugged them off and walked away.

I grinned slightly as she strode off. *She'll tell me. I'll bug her tomorrow about it... for now I just want some sleep.*

xXx

**Overseer Eridius Talav:**

Shadows flickered like fleeing ghosts across the walls as one candle spluttered its dying breath. I always preferred working in this archaic light; it somehow increased the mystery and darkness that my job entailed. Not one of my minions could enter this room - my master study - without feeling at a loss as I faced them behind an imposing mahogany desk littered with burning candles.

I wrenched my concentration back to the latest report; from a current agent high in the ranks of the Republic Navy. Soon I was consumed, but a brief knock interrupted my reverie.

"Enter," I intoned in as deep a voice as manageable. First impressions of any encounter were always crucial; I had learned long ago what a powerful tool intimidation could be.

Spymaster Gaalin, one of our most intelligent agents, entered silently. His skills were not of the ordinary assassin employed within our organization; rather his sharp mind and ability to interpret patterns of behaviour and make sense of seemingly irrational politics made him an invaluable asset.

He inclined his head slightly, a measure of respect. "We've had a job offer I think you should look over, Eridius," he said softly, his grey eyes meeting mine steadily in the dim light.

I raised my eyebrows; most assassination requests went no further than the spymasters. I had not personally approved one in almost half a year. I motioned for him to continue.

"This comes directly from Darth Malak," he stated.

My brow shot up further. That the Sith knew of our existence did not surprise me; that they knew how to approach us was not startling. That their lord contacted us directly was... unsettling. From the depths of the shadows was where the GenoHaradan worked best; direct communication from a person as powerful and destructive as Darth Malak was not in our best interests. Particularly seeing as our web of information and agents was more firmly planted in the Republic; it was in the GenoHaradan's best interest to see *them* win the war, not the Sith.

"And what is his... request?" From what I knew of Darth Malak, he preferred commands to requests.

"He wants us to hit two targets. With an additional bonus if we capture either of them. Eridius, the price... perhaps you should look for yourself."
I took the proffered datapad. The first sum of credits was enough for me to do a double-take, as I checked it out again. Surely this is incorrect... how can the Sith have this sort of money? Their fleet had expanded immeasurably in the last year; although we had not successfully concluded how their army had grown so strong, I could only assume that their pool of material resources must be wearing thin by now.

The name of the hit was unfamiliar; another surprise. I would have presumed that someone commanding this sort of price would be well known. I scrolled over to the next contract. The same gross figure glared at me baldly, but this time I recognized the name.

I stayed silent for a few minutes, possibilities whirring through my mind. Our coffers have been running emptier than usual lately. War was generally good for the GenoHaradan, but not when we had a vested interest in seeing the weaker side win. We are too well set up with the Republic to walk away without a fight. But we fight from the shadows - so if the Sith do win, we can still prevail.

Eventually I sighed, and placed the datapad down. "We cannot take the contract up on Bastila Shan, Gaalin. As tempting as it is, it would put our organization in jeopardy."

He tilted his head. "Targeting a Jedi hero is too risky."

I nodded. "It’s more than that, Gaalin. We have managed to stay relatively unknown from the Jedi Order, though I doubt they are unaware of our existence. If we showed our hand like this..."

"They would be forced to act," Gaalin finished. "Not to mention the reaction of the Senate, should the Republic’s rising star fall to our hand."

"Yes," I concluded. We were grudgingly tolerated by the few high-ranking Republic officials who knew of our existence. It was not unheard-of from them to engage our services. But should we move against their hero - the young Jedi involved in Darth Revan's downfall, and whose Battle Meditation was one of their few remaining advantages - then our place in the shadows might be compromised. If anyone suspected our involvement, then I doubt they would remain silent. And secrecy was our greatest weapon.

"If we could succeed while casting blame on the Sith..." I mused softly. "But even then, the continued life and freedom of Jedi Shan is to the Republic's advantage, and hence ours. No, despite the remuneration involved, I am afraid we must refuse. Politely, of course."

"As to the other?" Gaalin inquired.

I frowned, picking up the datapad to peruse it once more. "Who is this Jen Sahara?"

"She is a current companion of Jedi Shan, one of the few survivors from the Sith attack upon the Endar Spire. There are many strange things about her, though; many inconsistencies..."

"Such as?" I prompted impatiently. Gaalin had an irritating tendency to trail off into deep thought; a trait I shared but did not tolerate in others.

"We have traced her as a scholar from Deralia, taken captive when Darth Revan invaded the planet. You know of the trap there that Revan narrowly avoided; and the ensuing counter strike lead by Jedi and Deralian troops. Jen Sahara was rescued during that offensive, but our reports suggest she was too badly wounded to recover."

"Yet she obviously did. Jedi healing techniques are unarguably the most effective in the galaxy."

"True," Gaalin conceded, but he did not look entirely convinced.
"You believe Jen Sahara died then? That this is an impostor?" I had learnt to not doubt Gaalin's hunches; they were more often accurate than not.

Gaalin shifted uneasily. "I am uncertain, Eridius. Our intelligence informs us that Jen Sahara was employed by the Jedi Council to help investigate archaic Force ruins." He sighed. "If only we had a Jedi spy."

I smiled briefly at his annoyance; Gaalin's pet peeve was his inability to infiltrate the ranks of the Jedi. "One would think the Jedi would not need any help with Force-sensitive ruins."

"Exactly," Gaalin agreed. "I have also heard disturbing reports – not from our more reliable sources, mind you – that this Jen Sahara can use the Force herself."

"Another Jedi," I said flatly. I wasn't surprised; I doubted Darth Malak would offer such a sum for someone who wasn't powerful.

"No," he contradicted me. "She does not appear at all in any of the Jedi annals; she is not registered as a Jedi under that name. She is attached to the Jedi due to her scholarly background, so perhaps our information is incorrect. Or perhaps she is one of those who came late to the Force, and it has only been discovered now."

I pondered for a moment. Force sensitivity usually materialized before puberty, but there were notable exceptions. Nomi Sunrider, a powerful Jedi Knight who fought in the Exar Kun conflict, immediately sprang to mind. I tapped a finger, looking back to Gaalin. "If she was onboard the Endar Spire... do you think this Jen Sahara could have been involved with the Sith attack?"

"Nothing to suggest it, although I have looked. The only connection I have made with the Sith attack so far is the defection of Jedi Knight Kylah Aramai to the Sith."

I nodded briskly and handed the datapad back to Gaalin. "Well, we need the credits. If this Jen Sahara is not a well-known asset to the Republic, then take her out. I'd be inclined to go for the quick kill, rather than the capture, but I shall leave that to you."

I waved Gaalin out, but he hesitated at the door. "Yes?" I snapped, eager to get back to my original work.

"There is one more thing... which may work in our favour. Jen Sahara has recently been approached by one of our agents. To work for us."

I blinked in surprise. "Oh? Why?"

"She has been watched since Taris, and her abilities have been... admirable. She has also evaded assassination by Calo Nord twice, and either her or her companions have finally ended the bounty hunter's life."

I paused briefly. "That is impressive. Though if she is a Force-user, it may not be all too surprising. What is her point of contact?"

"Foxtrot-17."

I grimaced. Keeping track of the GenoHaradan recruitment point agents was not something required of me, but if memory served correct then that directive listed Corellia, Manaan and Syleyeron. Standard procedure was to offer a potential candidate three locations within a twelve day period, and if they were interested and found the agent in the required timeframe, then negotiations for an employment contract would begin. And once we hired an assassin, it became their lifelong
occupation. People did not leave the GenoHaradan alive.

But we weren't looking to employ this Jen Sahara.

If she made it to Sleheyron or Corellia, then taking her out was be easy. Manaan was trickier at the best of times - which this wasn't. Our last two contracts there had been uncovered by the extensive network of surveillance the Selkath had implemented, both in their cities and their nearby resource planets. *Cursed pacifistic planet.* Ahto City was becoming a popular hideout for targets who knew they were being hunted - whether by us of some other, more amateurish organization.

But the place was too hot right now. Selkath politicians were probing for answers from some of their more puzzling court cases. If this Jen Sahara came to Manaan, it would be better to somehow lure her off-world. Or arrange matters so it looked like the handiwork of some other organization.

Or both, if the lead agent was clever enough.

"Refresh my memory, Gaalin," I ordered. "Who are our pickup agents there?"

"Ja'taya on Corellia. Hulas on Manaan. Terrian on Sleheyron."

I nodded slowly. They were all established recruiters. Hulas was cleverer than the other two, but he had to be, in Ahto City. "Contact them so they are aware. Be prepared to organize an ambush on any of the three locations. If she lands on Manaan, get her away from that planet first if at all possible. Or make it look like a heavy-handed ambush by the Exchange or similar. We can't afford another failure there, Gaalin. The last one was too costly, and the Selkath surveillance is too damn extensive."

I wasn't sure we'd be able to bribe our way out of another mess on Manaan. Those walking fish weren't the easiest to corrupt.

"I will see to it."

I waved him away in dismissal, and Gaalin left me to my reading.

---

**Zaalbar:**

I escaped the *Ebon Hawk* quickly, trying not to look eager. The tension between the Bastila Shan and Jen Sahara was making me uneasy; their arguments last night were only overshadowed by the heated conflict this morning. *They are like two cubs vying for status, both trying to be the alpha.* Bastila Shan attempted to lead the crew, but was constantly undermined by Jen's cheek, mistrust, or flat-out refusal to follow her.

Earlier this morning, Bastila Shan tried to depart Tatooine, but Jen had other ideas. *And I follow her, worrisome though that may be.* She limped ahead of me now, talking to that Mandalorian warrior, the early morning sun glinting off her dark curls. Her cries last night as Bastila and the Cathar Juhani fixed her arm had set my teeth on edge.

I sighed; I did not understand Humans. *They act like cubs, the both of them.* Bastila had informed Jen, in a tone dripping with disapproval and ice, that she needed to rest. That her arm needed the reprieve, and that kolto and Force healing could only do so much. Jen had promptly turned her back and strode off the ship. *They act like ill-disciplined cubs.* Not a thought I would dare say out loud.

Mission skipped next to me as I followed both Jen and Canderous Ordo to the Ithorian's droid repair shop. Jen wished to fix that ill-humoured robot of hers; I was hoping to find something a little more
The sand sank underneath my feet as I walked through the small settlement; a merchant nearby was busily saddling his pack of rontos ready for the day's customers. To the right a group of swoop bike mechanics were tinkering with their bikes. Mission looked their way longingly.

"Aww, Komad said there were only illegal races here. I woulda liked to have a go. I wonder if there's a track on Manaan."

"Of course there is, kid," Canderous Ordo drawled, throwing the remark carelessly over his shoulder.

"Stop calling me a kid, you old geezer!" Mission snapped. Canderous stopped and turned around. I tensed, wary as I looked at him.

"You'd think you guys had enough fighting yesterday," Jen said dryly as she turned around. "Play nice, okay?"

"Play?" Canderous cocked an eyebrow at her, folding his arms.

"Look, you hurt Mission and you'll have a ten ton Wookiee after you." She paused, and then added, "and me, too. You both have names. Try using them?"

"Geez, you're a fine one to talk, Jen. I've lost count of different names you have for Carth," Mission interjected. "Flyboy, Onasi, Republic, that one HK uses, Blaster Boy-"

"Blaster Boy?" Canderous guffawed. "I'll have to remember that one."

"(Shall we get going?)" I suggested impatiently, a growl of hunger echoing loudly from my stomach.

Mission laughed, nudging me in the side. "You just want us to hurry up so you can get something to eat."

"(I only had a small breakfast, Mission,)" I said plaintively.

"Yeah, yeah, I know. If you don't get your eight square meals a day you get grumpy." Mission poked me harder, and I let out a small growl. A local walking next to us jumped at the sound and walked away hurriedly; I felt somewhat abashed. There were not many people here, it was true, but still more than I was wholly comfortable with. And that was despite all my years on Taris and it's overpopulated, decaying ecumenopolis. Tatooine was not a bad sort of planet, but it was barren. I missed the living, comforting presence of century-old trees, and the array of life that lived around them. I supposed I always would.

"What was that thing you got last night, Jen?"

"Oh! A datapad. It was broken, though, and it wasn't mine. Guess the guy was confused," Jen said smoothly, but her posture tensed while answering. She smells uneasy. But why would she lie? Perhaps I was just being suspicious.

"Oh." Mission's headtails drooped in disappointment. "I was hoping it'd be something interesting, like- I dunno, some adventure or something."
"Adventure? Haven't you already had enough of that?" Jen asked, raising an eyebrow.

"No, I mean a real adventure. Where you get to go visit strange places..." Mission looked around herself, in a foreign land, and bit her lip suddenly. "Well, one where no one dies, anyway."

Jen grinned, and grabbed Mission's hand impulsively as we stopped outside a smaller clay building. "Well, here's Yuka Laka's shop. Let's see what adventure we can find in here."

"Don't make fun of me!" Mission snapped.

"Mission?"

The hesitant voice had us all turning. And walking toward us, surrounded by the smell of his own uncertainty, was the Czerka-clad figure of Mission's hapless brother.

His smile at her was both tentative and shaky.

The hum of a lightsaber powering on was preceded by a swift, whirring sound; I blinked, and Jen was two metres in front of me, that sickly red weapon of the Sith resting dead centre at the shaking Twi'lek's neck.

"One word from your sister-" Jen growled, voice low and raspy. There were murmurs and exclamations nearby; people stopped to watch, to step back, to get away. "-and this will be your last breath, Griff Vao."

Next to me, Canderous Ordo straightened to attention. His repeating blaster was held firm in his grasp, but his attention was as much on our surroundings as on the cowering blue Twi'lek.

"(Jen!)" I called out, a clench of unease tightening my gut. I could not see Jen's face from here, but I knew the expression that would be owning her. The rage. The madness. The evil. "(This is not the way. He is harmless!)"

"Harmless?" Jen mocked. Her voice had twisted to a scathing, derisive imitation of what it should be. "There are many types of harm, Wookiee. Cowardice is but one."

"I-I thought you'd all try to escape!" Griff blurted out, his eyes rounded and wild. The sickly smell of his fear was acrid and unpleasant. "And then- then- then I thought he'd kill you! What was I meant to do, die along with you all?"

"You left your sister, young and unguarded, alone on Taris. You left your sister to die out in the desert," Jen whispered.

"Jen." Mission's quiet voice was the strength of a wroshyr beneath Jen's wild hurricane of wrath. The Human turned to face Mission; narrowed, dark gaze staring down at my young friend who had placed a gentle hand on her upraised forearm.

I was holding my breath. Griff Vao's fate concerned me not, other than the impact it would have on Mission. And the scars it might place on her and Jen Sahara both.

And my worry for the soul of the Human I followed grew more every day.

Jen's head tilted in acceptance at Mission's unspoken plea. She stepped backward; her lightsaber deactivating with a hiss as she left the siblings to face each other.

My shoulders eased, just the smallest amount.
"Far out, Mission!" Griff exclaimed, blue eyes blinking at her in relief. "You could do with some more laid-back friends, y'know? Sheesh, here I am, overjoyed to find out y'all managed to escape."

"Goodbye, Griff." Mission's words were quiet, but they scythed through the babble of her older brother nonetheless.

"What?" Griff was frowning, and I realized, then, that he had no comprehension of just how badly he had failed her. "What d'ya mean by that?"

"I'm leaving Tatooine, Griff. I don't reckon we'll ever see each other again."

Griff's blue headtails curved tight around his neck as he stared at his sister in askance. He'd had the time, since he had returned to Anchorhead, to clean himself up. The white Czerka uniform sat crisp upon his frame, making his appear a well-dressed, civilized contrast to his sister's tattered attire. Mission... with the mesh suit she adorned, and covered in the desert dust she hadn't bothered cleaning off, Mission looked like the rogue space explorer that circumstances were slowly turning her into.

"But we just- we only just reunited!" Griff spluttered. "You can't be serious, sis- look, we need to have a couple of drinks- I've got my old job back, but I'll be off shift in a few hours-"

"No. I have my own life to follow. Bit like Lena does, too. Maybe one day if you can figure how to stop failing sents, they'll stop leaving you."

The words were harsh, and wholly unlike the generous spirit I knew my friend to be.

Griff's eyes widened in shock. "Hey, that's not fair! I did all I could by you sis! I-I tried. I always planned to make it big and come back for you, y'know. I just needed- I just needed enough of a start up." His words were wheedling, pleading, but he trailed off as a speculative expression crossed his face. "Y'know, you've done better than I thought you would, sis. Ever thought-"

"Don't," Mission snapped. "Don't you dare ask me for creds or some stupid stake in another hotsa-chuba scheme. Or I really will let Jen go nuts with her glow-stick. Just- just go, Griff!" She expelled a pent-up sigh, and I saw the anger in her face transform into a grimness that saddened me. Her expression firmed. "I got nothing left to say to you."

Griff stepped back once, twice, but I could see the reluctance in his face. It wasn't just greed, I hoped--not just the thought of his sister having resources he could pilfer like the odious, selfish sentient he was. No- there was something deeper there. For all of his flaws, Griff Vao did care for his sister -- but not enough.

Not enough to be a worthy brother.

"Stay in touch, alright?" Griff muttered, stepping back again, his gaze roving warily between the twin threats of Jen and Canderous. There was defeat in the lines of his shoulders, and I was glad to see him retreat. "I've still got the same holonet account-"

"Go back to your job, Griff," Mission cut in. She sounded older than she was. Serious and sad and strong all at the same time. "They'll be missing you."

"Okay." He swallowed. "Okay. Take care of yourself, sis. I- I love you, y'know?"

Griff Vao turned, and slowly walked away.

"I know." The whisper from my young friend was soft, so soft that her brother would not have heard
I loped to her side, placing a paw on her shoulder. "(Mission)," I said, trying to keep my voice gentle. "(Are you okay?)"

"No," she murmured, turning to me with a tremulous smile. "But I think I will be." She sniffed, loudly, before turning to stare at Jen with almost the same amount of sass she normally did. "Shall we go fix your stupid droid then, Jen?"

Jen raised an eyebrow, shot one look of scathing derision in the direction of Griff Vao, and then strode into the droid shop. The Mandalorian grunted before following.

"Come on, Big Z, don't dawdle," Mission teased, tugging on my arm. I could see her blinking back tears, and understood her desire to act like everything was normal.

"(Okay)," I rumbled my assent. "(Let's move on then)."

xXx
The *Ebon Hawk* sailed smoothly into the Tatooine sky, and I felt a perceptible loosening of my shoulders. I'd sent an encrypted message to the Republic base leader on Manaan before take-off, and I was confident of a warm reception there. *I wonder if it's still Roland Wann in charge.* A smarmy, officious man; he was not someone I had warmed to. He'd always been a little too quick to look out for his own interests. *Doesn't matter. Soon we'll be back amongst allies.*

Things had been tense for too long, and only here, in the cockpit seat, did I really feel at ease. *I'd feel more comfortable if Jen would stop staring at me, though.*

Just before we'd launched off, Jen had sailed into the room and deposited herself into the co-pilot's chair. I'd known what was going to happen and groaned inwardly; sure enough, Bastila arrived a minute later asking ever-so-politely if Jen would mind moving. *May as well ask for it to snow in Anchorhead, Bastila.* She'd ended up walking away in an icy snit.

"You could try being a bit nicer to Bastila, you know," I said mildly. Jen smirked at me, her eyes twinkling. At times like this, I wondered if I was dreaming about the changes in her. She was behaving just as sassy and mercurial as back on Taris. At other times... *at other times she seems almost sadistic.*

"Why would I do that?" she asked, still grinning at me.

"Because... because..." I floundered. I didn't particularly *like* Bastila myself, but I knew she meant well, despite all her blasted Jedi secrets. And with Jen playing that *let's-switch-personality* game, Bastila was kept off-balance and didn't present herself well to others.

For all of Bastila's Jedi experience, she struck me as someone who'd lived a sheltered life. I couldn't imagine her dealing well - or at all - with the galactic acclaim that must have been thrown her way. She was the Order's rising star... a young padawan too gifted and too socially awkward to be leading this mission on her own.

"Because she doesn't exactly have many friends on board," I said finally. *While you have a Wookiee and a Twi'lek urchin following you blindly.* Ever since the rescue yesterday, Canderous had barely left Jen alone. And Juhani - who barely spoke to *anyone* - could usually be found dogging Jen's heels. I sighed. *Is everyone here crazy? What's so special about that damn woman?* I frowned at her in frustration, but she was still aiming a delighted smile directly at me.

"So, who was the guy?" she asked, her voice light and candid.

"Huh?"

"I heard you, talking with Mission last night." Her smile looked a little fake now. "Who were you talking about?"
I could feel my brows lower in renewed irritation. I should have known Jen was listening in. "None of your business," I said tightly, turning my attention back to the controls. I hadn't meant to talk about my past, but I'd hated to see that miserable look on the Twi'lek kid's face, and the words had just stumbled out.

"I'll get it out of you, you know," she responded mildly.

"Drop it." My voice had turned flat and angry, and I fiddled with the readout dials for no reason other than to keep my hands busy and my eyes away from her. As the skies darkened into space, the silence stretched between us. I risked a glance back, certain she'd be staring at me with that exasperating look of curiosity.

But no. She was gazing wide-eyed at the controls, as if she'd never seen them before. Every time I think I'm beginning to peg her, she goes and acts weird on me. I suppressed a sigh, and turned to punch in the coordinates for our next destination.

"Prepare for hyperspace jump," I broadcast over the internal comm, and a second later we were away. The familiar dizziness clenched my stomach. Funny. You'd think after all this time I'd be used to it. Although a momentary nausea was nothing to worry about. I'd heard of people who spent hours afterwards hurling up the contents of their stomach.

Once the hyperjump was complete, my gaze slid back to Jen. She was, still, staring dazedly at the navigational controls.

"What is it?" I asked at last, my curiosity finally breaking.

"I... I've piloted before," she mumbled. "I'm sure of it."

"Piloted before?" I echoed. "Right." I didn't know what to believe anymore. "Just who are you? Supposedly a scholar who can use the Force, pick locks almost as well as Mission, speak more languages than your average Jedi, one of the – no, the craziest melee warrior I've ever had the misfortune to meet, and now you think you can pilot. Is there anything you can't do?"

Humour crinkled her bright eyes as she turned back to me, and damn if she wasn't laughing. "I can't ride a swoop bike well, or play pazaak without cheating. Pretty sure I'm pants at cooking, too." The corners of her mouth were twitching. "But I always knew you liked me underneath all those scowls, Onasi."

"You are so infuriating!" the words wrenched out of me in irritation, and I felt my brows slam down even further. Does she take anything seriously?

Jen's grin widened, and her eyes danced with mischief. "Alright, cool your engines, flyboy. I'd better leave you and your bad mood alone." She stood, chuckling to herself, and made her way out of the cockpit.

I sighed once the hatch swished closed behind her. For some reason, my annoyance didn't dissipate with her departure.

We'll be on Manaan soon, I told myself. Things will calm down. I'll be able to find out what's going on, and we'll all have a break from... from everything. The pleasing thing about Manaan was the forced lack of overt violence. I was sick of Jen rushing crazy into battle and slaughtering everything in her way.

Is that a fair judgment? I'd never seen Jen hurt an innocent. And I'd met other berserkers who were good, law-abiding people; they just erupted with senseless rage and adrenaline in battle - much the
same as Jen. *But I've never known a berserking Jedi. Aren't emotions like that meant to be dangerous for a Jedi?*

But she wasn't a Jedi, was she? *No, just someone who's suddenly using the Force and claiming that she can't remember her past.*

I needed some answers. Bastila was still being as evasive as a spice smuggling spacer, and I no longer knew why I was following her so faithfully. *Because I was assigned to this mission. This may be the most crucial task in the war; it could turn the tide for the Republic. If there is any way I can help with that, I will.* But damn it, when was someone going to explain things to me?

At least, on Manaan, I had a few contacts at the Republic base. I'd be able to check in with HQ, and maybe get a little more info. Find out what my orders were now. *And if the Jedi request my assistance any further, then I'll make Bastila give me some real answers.* Like who Jen Sahara really was. And exactly what significance these mysterious Force ruins had. *Why am I always left out of the loop?*

Manaan. I'd get some answers on Manaan, damn it.

  

  xxx

  **HK-47**

Start-up System Check Motoring Functions Online Memory Core Function.... Unable To Access

Audio Sensors ... Online Optical Sensors ... Online Tactile Sensors ... Online Olfactory Sensors ... Online Gustatory Sensors ... Not Installed

Shielding Function ... Error ... Energy Shields ... 20.38472 percent Capability ... Sonic Shields ... 19.34266 percent Capability ... Electrical Shields ... Offline

Scanning External Environment

Location: Ebon Hawk Engineering Section

3 Organic Meatbags, 1 Droid in Targeting Area

Identification – Jen Sahara (Current Owner), Mission Vao, Zaalbar

Optical Sensors Focusing on Droid

Analysis: Unknown Droid Model: T3 Series, Droid Model Recognition Result: Negative Threat Assessment: Minimal Assigned Temporary Name: Mobile Trash Can

Input – Jen Sahara: "What's your status, HK?"

Output: "Response: It appears that the damage to my primary motor functions has been corrected. My electrical shields are completely destroyed, master. My sonic and energy shields are down to twenty percent capability."

Input – Jen Sahara: "Good. Zaalbar, help me back here? I want to take a look at the shield controls."

Intrusion Detected: Rear Panel Opening Threat Assessment: Negative

Input – Jen Sahara: "HK, think we could take a look at your memory core while we are at it?"
Response: You will need to access my central control cluster to do so, master. My own internal diagnostic checks have failed to discover the source of this error. Cautionary: This may take some skill. Please be careful with my circuits.

Input – Zaalbar (Shyriiwook): "The power supply to electrical shields is completely destroyed. See here? It is good we bought a new one. Shall I install it for you, Jen?"

Input – Jen Sahara: "Please."

Removal of Non Functional Electrical Shield Power Supply Detected Installation of Functional Electrical Shield Power Supply Detected

Input – Jen Sahara: "Alright, HK, I'm activating the electrical shields."

Electrical Shields Powering Up Shields Diagnostic Shielding Function... Error... Energy Shields... 20.38472 percent Capability... Sonic Shields... 19.34266 percent Capability... Electrical Shields... 100 percent Capability

Output: "Statement: My electrical shields have been fully restored, master. That was a good effort for a hairy overgrown meatbag."

Input – Zaalbar: (Irritated Howl)

Input – Jen Sahara: "Why do you call everyone meatbags, HK?" Voice Stress Analysis: Amused

Output: "Explanation: It's just that... you have all these squishy meat parts, master. And all that water! How the constant sloshing doesn't drive you mad, I have no idea."

Input – Mission Vao: "Squishy meat parts? Sheesh, you could at least be polite, y'know."

Output: "Query: Perhaps you would prefer the term liquidious fleshbag?"

Input – Mission Vao: "Oh, shut up. Hey, I wonder what this does."

Input – Zaalbar to Mission Vao (Shyriiwook): "No! Mission, not that wire!"

Visual Input: Blue Optical Sensors Overload

Input – Mission Vao: "Uh, oops."

Activating Self Preservation Protocols... Adjusting Targeting System to Audio Triangulation Searching For Weapon... Motor Function Error Light Impact Detected – Location: Left Optical Socket Source: HK-47

Output: "Exclamation: Ow! I am poking my own eye sockets! Ow! What has she done to me?!?"

Input – Jen Sahara: "Zaalbar, quick, deactivate him!"

Power Lost

....some time later/...

Startup System Check Motoring Functions Online Memory Core Function... Unable To Access Audio Sensors ... Online Optical Sensors ... Online Tactile Sensors ... Online Olfactory Sensors ... Online Gustatory Sensors ... Not Installed
Shielding Function ... Online ... Energy Shields ... 100 Capability ... Sonic Shields ... 100 Capability ... Electrical Shields ... 100 Capability

Scanning External Environment
Location: Ebon Hawk Engineering Section
3 Organic Meatbags in Targeting Area
Identification – Jen Sahara (Current Owner), Zaalbar, Canderous Ordo
Input – Jen Sahara: "HK? You alright now?"
Output: "Response: I am fully func..zzz"
Audio Transmission Error Motor Function Error Internal Diagnostic check: ... Limbs Non Functional
Input – Zaalbar: (Howl)
Moderate Impact Detected – Location: Rear Panel Source: Zaalbar Combat Mode Initiated: Interrupt: ...Motor Functions Powering Up... 100 Online ...Audio Transmission Powering Up... 100 Online
Return to Main Exiting Combat Mode
Output: "Response: I seem to be back online, master."
Input – Jen Sahara: "Right. Uh, let's take a break before we install that mod you bought for him, Canderous." Voice Stress Analysis: Weary
Input – Canderous Ordo: "Might be a good idea to keep the kid away from here."
Input – Jen Sahara: "Switch to standby, HK. We'll do the rest later."
Output: "As you desire, master. Signing off."
Entertainment Routine Initiated:
Target Analysis: Type: Organic Meatbag Species: Twi'lek, Female Name: Mission Vao Occupation: Insignificant Member of the Ebon Hawk Crew
Death Scenario: Blaster Shot to Head.........

xXx

Karon Enova:
I sighed softly, staring out through the cockpit window at the blue skies of Rii'shn, a small planet I'd brought my apprentice along for a little adventure. Our business was now wrapped up, and my thoughts were drawn back to a conversation I'd had merely ten hours ago.

I'd known, one way or another, that the past would come back to haunt me once more, or to drag me back into its murky grip... I may have prepared for it, but I didn't feel ready. Here I am, a master for the last twenty or so years, having doubts and fears like a padawan.

"Master?" a young male voice asked behind me. I schooled my expression and turned around in the pilot's chair, smiling briefly at Lars. After my shattering failure with Revan, I'd vowed never to take an apprentice again. Look at me now.
Lars had been with the Jedi Order for eight years already, but in many ways was still a very green padawan. His original master, my old friend Tyrias, had been one of the many casualties of my former apprentice, and perhaps my guilt was the reason I had finally agreed to mentor Lars.

"Lars," I acknowledged. "Everything loaded onto the ship?"

"Yes. We're ready to leave. Are we heading back to Coruscant?" he asked brightly. There was something almost dreamy about Lars; at times I'd wondered whether he'd ever been touched by tragedy in his life. He hadn't held a particularly close relationship with Tyrias, and had not felt much pain when Tyrias joined the Force. *That is what I see on the outside. I should not judge what goes on inside Lars' mind.* And yet I worried for the day that Lars would finally feel the grief of losing a loved one, or the pain of betrayal. He had few true friends, despite his happy, ambivalent nature. *Others do not warm to him because he's always dreaming, always lost inside his own head. He should have been an artist, not a Jedi.*

I smiled at Lars, and motioned him forward. "No. We will rest first, and then we are headed to Manaan."

xXx

**Juhani**

"Juhani. We should talk," Revan said, her eyes piercing into mine as she slouched in the doorframe. Ever since I had learned the truth, I did not want to leave her side. I could sense a dark taint struggling to take root in her body, and her struggle was so familiar that I wanted to weep.

The *Ebon Hawk* had lifted into hyperspace hours earlier, and my place was in the women's sleeping quarters, much to my disappointment. It was not a good den for me, as I wished not to be around others. The Twi'lek kit was wary of me and I could not blame her. The men, also; Carth Onasi and Zaalbar looked at me with heavy suspicion, and Canderous Ordo was one of those genocidal murderers.

Although, I *had* been surprised how well we had fought together. While the thought of living in close quarters with a Mandalorian had at first stirred the rage in my soul, it was his very regard of Revan that forced me to rethink my opinion of him. For it had been Revan who had broken his people, and yet he looked upon his conqueror with respect and interest.

The Mandalorians had slaughtered the Cathar, whilst Revan had merely defeated the Mandalorians - but still, it had made me reflect. Surely, I could look at him in the same light as he did Revan: as an individual rather than a symbol of his people.

But it was not Canderous who was dominating my thoughts. How could it be, now that I knew Revan's true identity?

I motioned for her to walk inside the port living quarters and close the door. Bastila had warned me earlier against an affiliation with Revan, but I could not do what she wished. While I had promised not to initiate a conversation with Revan that might be... incriminating, I could not lie to her, should she ask. *I am grateful to Bastila for her continued help with my inner struggle; she is an honourable Jedi.* But she did not understand my feelings. *Revan saved me; once from slavery, and now from the Dark Side. I cannot forsake her.*

I had been barely more than a kit when Revan and her followers landed on Taris, vanquished the slave trade, and revolutionised the healthcare and education systems. I knew not how long her influence had lasted; when I had recently visited Taris, it seemed like little remained. But Revan *had*
freed me and many others, and it was one of her Jedi allies who had discovered my Force sensitivity and sent me on to Dantooine. I felt a small, wistful smile on my face as I thought of Jedi Knight Meetra Surik. She had been the very epitome of goodness and warmth, so different from my master, and yet in some ways our brief meeting had shaped me and my aspirations as much as my time spent with Master Quatra had.

Revan walked in cautiously; I could see the wary mistrust on her face. I knew I was not impervious to falling back into the clutches of the Dark Side, and I knew the same was true for her, even more so. Perhaps I could redeem myself by guiding Revan back to the light. I wished then, irrationally, that I was the one bonded to her. I can help her better than Bastila. I understand her. I could tell that all Bastila did was irritate the volatile woman.

"What is it you wish to talk about?" I asked softly.

"The Force," she smiled at me, but it did not reach her eyes. "What else? You still owe me Force lessons."

"Of course." She was so hard, so suspicious; but somewhere in her was the charismatic, good Jedi she had once been. "I vowed to you I would help you, and I shall. As much as I am able."

"No waffling on about that stupid code..." she warned in a deadly tone.

A smile flicked on my face. "I remember my trials with the code. I threw a rather childish tantrum because I could not recite it, and my master confined me to solitary meditation. I was not allowed to see anyone but her, nor eat anything bar gruel and water, until I could recall it fluently and prove my understanding was complete."

Revan's expression lifted, and her mouth curved into an amused grin. "That sounds a bit harsh for a kid."

"My master had harsh ways." I did not want to dwell on that topic. Bastila had told me the truth about Quatra, and my thoughts were still too tender and emotive on that subject to explore. I should have realized I could not kill a master. But that it was all a test, all the misery I'd gone through... Quatra had warned me I felt too strongly about her, too intensely. Is that why she used it against me?

It was hard to hold back my bitterness at her. I could not deny that there was still a part of me that wished to flee, to be independent and strong and alone from all sentient relationships, and Quatra had somewhat to do with that. But fleeing had not helped me any. At the end of it, I had been miserable on Tatooine. And while the Dark Side offered quick power through the fury of one's emotions, I no longer believed it was worth the inner torment.

"What do you know of Force bonds?" Revan asked as she sat down next to me on the hard bunk. A coarse, woven blanket covered the thin mattress, and she plucked at it absentlly.

"Like the one you share with Bastila?" I replied. "I do not know much of them. I know they are rare and vary in strength and intensity, and the gifts that are part of it differ with the strength of the link."

"Gifts," Revan muttered darkly. "Hah! See if you'd like Bastila inside your head permanently. I don't want to go to sleep. I-" She cut short her rambling, frowning as she mulled over something. "Could Bastila see my dreams? I wondered something the other night..."

"Yes," I answered truthfully. I would not lie to her. I owed her too much.

"How do I block her out of my mind, Juhani?" Revan asked, gritting her teeth. I could hear the
frustrated anger in her voice.

"I thought you were already doing that?" I frowned.

"I- I suppose I have been, at times. I wasn't entirely certain how well I had succeeded though."

"I do know that one of the fundamental cornerstones of a Force bond is privacy. You have to be able to trust enough to allow each other privacy. Inside your head." I remembered hearing a talk from an older master who had formed a mind-link with an apprentice of his once. He had said the biggest challenge was giving each other space.

"Oh, sure, I can trust Bastila," Revan muttered sarcastically. "About as far as I'd trust a Hutt."

"I do not know what else to tell you, Jen."

"How do I stop her cutting me off from the Force?" She leaned closer, narrowing her eyes. I stiffened, and felt my eyes widen in surprise.

"She can cut you off from the Force? Are you certain, Jen?" Her face was serious, intent, and not a little bit angry. "I did not know that was possible."

"Hmm," Revan murmured, leaning away from me and stretching her good arm above her head. Her other forearm, newly set, was resting in her lap. Although Revan had started using it against Bastila's vehement protests, it appeared weak, thin and purple with mottled bruising. "Well, maybe you can explain how these bonds are created," Revan continued. "Bastila gave me some weak story, and it just didn't ring true. I'd barely seen her on the Endar Spire. I think. It's all a bit hazy."

I tensed; this was heading to unsteady ground. But it is Bastila's lies, not mine. "From what I recall, bonds can be created in three ways. The first is the most common; it can occur between two Jedi working together for a long time. They gradually become sensitive to each other through the Force, and over time a weak mind-link may grow. Even so, it happens rarely."

"And the other two ways?"

I hesitated briefly. "If two Jedi were – intimate, then it is possible for a mind-link to be created. Unlikely, as the very intimacy is frowned upon by the Jedi Council. The third way is."

A knock on the door interrupted my dialogue, and I looked up as Bastila opened the automatic door. I wondered briefly why I wished she had not appeared. An emotion I couldn't identify smouldered in her grey eyes as she glanced between us both, huddled as we were on the bed and deep in conversation.

"Juhani, Jen," Bastila acknowledged, in a calm tone that betrayed nothing. "Perhaps it is time we talked more about the Force."

"Enough talk," Revan disagreed smoothly, getting to her feet. "Juhani, want to have a duel? There's space in that empty hangar. I'd qui-"

"Duel?" Bastila cut in, her voice rising. She took a deep breath, and visibly appeared to calm herself. "Your arm is too damaged, Jen. Also, there is much you should learn, before you start using the Force physically, and I-"

"That's too bad. Juhani?" Revan looked at me, and I saw an odd plea in her eyes. She does not wish to spend time with Bastila. Perhaps if we fought, I could help her control the darker side of her emotions, help contain her anger.
"Certainly," I agreed, and Bastila scowled. "Maybe you could watch us and point out our weaknesses, Bastila," I suggested, more to quiet the younger Jedi than anything else. This caused Revan to glare at me, and I wondered what I was doing. *I feel sorry for Bastila. And yet I wish I was in her place. I do not understand myself at times.*

"Fine," Bastila stated, folding her arms. Revan rolled her eyes and stalked out of the room.

xXx

**Saul Karath:**

I scowled at the incoming text transmission, skimming through the details as they appeared on my console. *Lord Malak will not be pleased.* To offer such a vast sum to a foreign society, and have it half-turned down... I did not wish to be the one who relayed such news. The commodore who'd informed Lord Malak about Calo's defeat did so with a smirk on her face, bumbling idiot that she was. It may have been merely amusement at the thought of a famous bounty hunter being taken out by unknowns – for Bastila Shan's presence was not common knowledge – but Malak had not appreciated such candid mirth.

The poor sap had to be scraped off the floor by the cleaning crew, in the end.

*Malak never used to be so gratuitously violent.* Causing pain for a purpose was fine, necessary at times - but Malak often took destruction to an absurd level. This was an experienced commodore – who'd required discipline, certainly – but we were not so flooded with officers that we could afford to splatter their innards all over the command deck at the first sign of impropriety.

It wasn't particularly good for morale, either.

*Only after Malachor did Malak start to show his sadistic side. And only after he betrayed his master did it truly flourish.*

I was glad I hadn't known of Malak's plans to fire on Revan's flagship the previous year, for surely I would have picked the losing side. But now, as a puppet of the incumbent Jedi, Revan herself was next to useless.

Those first years serving under Lord Revan had been all I'd dreamed of. I wasn't sure when my respect became laced with fear, but I'd never denied her competency. She'd been sharp, charismatic, and willing to listen to the experts she surrounded herself by.

I'd genuinely believed that one day we would see her vision of galactic efficiency come to life. Peace and order - imposed, if necessary, on those that did not know any better – while remaining steadfast and strong. An external threat like the Mandalorians – or worse – could not be allowed to shake the Core again.

Now, under Malak, the vision had slipped. It was not so much that I doubted his chances of success, no; more that I was uneasy where or how his victory would end.

*I cannot deny he has edged into insanity. Or that Revan began to, also, near the end.*

I heard the swish of the command doors opening behind me, and the noise of troopers standing hurriedly to attention. *Contain your thoughts,* I warned myself. For both Malak and Revan had shown signs of limited mind-reading. I'd been trained on how to shield against the psychic probes of Force-users, but it was not an infallible defense.

Personally, I believed the universe would be a far better place without the cursed Force.
"Ah, Admiral. Any news?" Malak's deep, metallic voice intoned. I turned around and bowed hurriedly.

"My lord, I have just received word from the GenoHaradan."

Malak folded his arms; his yellow, soulless eyes appraising me dispassionately. The ex-Jedi Kylah Aramai stood simpering at his side, and I took care to contain my grimace. For all intents and purposes, she was Malak's willing pet. The rest of Malak's top Dark Jedi had elements of intelligence or strategic brilliance about them – even if Bandon was an immature chivhole – but I hoped Lord Malak would soon see that the painted harlot strutting next to him had outlived her usefulness the day she'd betrayed the Endar Spire to Bandon's task force.

"Well?" Malak snapped.

"They have accepted only one of the contracts, my lord. The one on Jen Sahara."

Blind fury crested in his eyes. "I offered them enough to buy a planet!" His fists clenched, and I saw Kylah take a hesitant step backwards. I bowed my head quickly, and Malak took an advancing step towards me.

The silence crackled with palpable tension as I kept my eyes focused on the ground at Malak's feet. How I abhor this pathetic grovelling! Two years ago Malak had been prone to outbursts of violence, but never unnecessary slaughter. He'd been a sharp man, once. The Force and its light and dark sides. It makes them all go insane.

"Come on, Saul, I would not hurt you for this." Malak voice had turned soft with mockery. And yet, I did not feel reassured. "The GenoHaradan, however, have insulted me with this refusal. But we shall deal with them in due course."

He wants to take on the GenoHaradan? A chill stepped down my spine. Revan had always been reckless, impulsive; but these days Malak took that to new heights. To think that, years ago, he'd been the steadier of the two.

"I'll have to deal with the Battle Meditation brat myself. Sooner or later, she'll stop on one of the other planets. Manaan first, I'd wager. She's still on the run, she'll be desperate for a safe place. My forces can go after her there."

"Manaan? But the Selkath don't tolerate-"

The words died in my throat as I stared into his eyes. They seemed to glow with a fevered, crazed gleam of poisoned yellow. His voice dropped to a whisper. "Do you believe the Selkath are a match for my power, Saul?"

"No, my lord," I said. And still, I could not stop myself from saying more. I'd been valued for my advice, once. "Overt violence on Manaan could cause the Selkath to deny us access to the kolto, my lord."

He was silent for a long moment, still staring at me with those damned eyes. In my periphery, I could see Kylah scowling petulantly at me, and wondered, with a chill, if my years of experience and warfare were going to be replaced by a sneering child whose greatest strength appeared to be showcasing her sexuality.

"Your counsel has its uses, Saul. But you are better off leading our starships. Leave the politics to me." And with a patronising chuckle, Lord Malak clapped a heavy hand on my shoulder. "You do not see the grand design, Admiral, nor do you grasp that the power of the Star Forge far eclipses the
kolto trade. Our biggest threat remains Bastila Shan – and my old master – and thus we go after them. On Manaan, those Republic weaklings believe Selkath neutrality will protect them, and that will lure Bastila Shan there first. That, and the Star Map. Neither she nor her allies will expect an attack there."

I took care to couch my next words neutrally. "My lord, if the Selkath allow the Republic sole access to the kolto, it will give them a great advantage." *He would attack on Manaan, and endanger our kolto supply? Not even Revan would throw such a potential gift to the enemy, no matter how confident of victory she was!*

Malak’s fingers ground into my shoulder; a warning of his growing irritation. His grip bit deep, and I couldn’t hold back a grunt of protest.

"Enough, Admiral!" His words lashed like a whip. "I value you, but not enough to tolerate insubordination."

Malak thrust me away sharply, and I staggered back a step. It took some effort to keep my expression blank. There was a painful ache in my shoulder that matched the discontent in my soul. I’d seen Malak do a lot worse to others, and knew that any more discussion on this topic would be nothing more than playing roulette with my life.

"Kylah." Malak turned to face his quiet pet.

"Yes, master?" she purred in response. I rolled my shoulder, and grimaced as pain spiked down my back.

"Pick out ten Dark Jedi. Do not interfere with the GenoHaradan’s plans. You are to go after Bastila Shan. Capture her if you can, eliminate her if you can’t. If it means infiltrating the Republic base and angering those pathetic Selkath – then so be it."

Kylah bowed low, her dark red robes touching the ground.

"This is your chance to prove your strength to me, my dear." Malak’s mechanical voice deepened as it lowered, one gloved finger trailing down the fallen Jedi’s cheek. Her red lips curved as it brushed against them. "Succeed, and you will stand equal with the best of my Dark Jedi."

"I will not fail you, my lord," she murmured, her cheek resting against his hand. My stomach tightened with distaste and I made sure to avert my gaze at the unwelcome intimacy of the moment.

"We shall see." There was a swish of cloth as Malak spun, abrupt and sudden, his words firing like frozen missiles as his voice iced over. "I shall be most displeased if I have to recall Bandon and Yudan to sort this out because you are not up to the task, Kylah."

Personally, I wondered whether Lord Malak should have sent Bandon Stone or Yudan Rosh when he’d first heard of Bastila’s escape and Revan’s flawed resurrection. *Contain your thoughts,* I reminded myself again. And, truly, there were reasons to keep the cleverer of Malak’s top Dark Jedi away. *Yudan’s leadership is required on the frontlines. And Bandon has his hands full breaking the last set of prisoners.* I grimaced in distaste. In many ways, Bandon Stone was a little too good at emulating his master.

When it came right down to it, a runaway Bastila Shan and a mind-broken ghost *should* have been an easy coup for a renowned bounty hunter – or the trio of Dark Jedi Malak had sent on his tail.

"No more mistakes," Malak commanded with finality as he strode away. "I want them both - dead or alive!"
There was trepidation on Kylah's heavily painted face, even beneath the smirking confidence. I once more had to drag my gaze away before she noticed - even as I hated myself for it.

In another galaxy- in a better galaxy- in a galaxy without the damned Force- simpering chits like Kylah Aramai would have been completely beneath my notice.

I turned, with effort, and forced my concentration back to the navi-panels of the heavy cruiser.

xXx

**Yudan Rosh**

“We’re losing our hold on Ando, my lord,” Admiral Sara said, her bulbous eyes blinking up at me. “With the rebellion at Bothawui, our stranglehold on the Rodian corridor is getting shaky.”

I should care. I should care more than I did. “Retreat from Ando,” I said, staring blankly at the holo-map of the adjoining sectors. “Send half the Nova fleet back to Bothawui. As for the remainder: position them a hundred klicks into the Gerrix asteroid belt.”

Sara stifled a gasp, but when I turned to look at her, the Sullustan’s face was blank. I did not appreciate emotion. I did not feel it, and did not wish to see it in others.

“My lord,” she began hesitantly. “There will be casualties-”

“Yes,” I said coldly. “Such is war. Lord Malak will send reinforcements. In the meantime, the asteroid belt is a perfect location to ambush any Republic fleet exiting hyperspace around Ando.”

We might lose Ando, for a time. It was more strategic to hold onto Bothawui, and so I would send what was needed. The rest might as well take out what Republic chaff they could with their own deaths.

Once, I’d cared about losses. Once, I cared about people. Now all I felt was the icy core of the Force; frozen and boreal and never-ending in its frigidity.

The sound of the bridge door swishing open and a half-dozen Sith guards snapping to attention had me turning.

The visitor should have been a welcome surprise, but detachment of the dark cloaked me like a second skin.

“Yudan,” she murmured, walking closer, yellow eyes sharp on me. My old friend. My old comrade. The last survivor of the damned Jedi Thirteen-

Other than myself. Other than Malak.

“Nisotsa,” I drawled. “I thought you were busy on Korriban presenting younglings to Uthar Wynn.”

Nisotsa Organa was wasted in recruitment. Sometimes, I idly believed that Malak only placed her there to elicit a reaction. But over the years, Nisotsa had retreated into caution at the bloody games we Sith played. She didn’t dare raise any objection these days. Whatever fire she’d once had was long snuffed out.

Whereas I- I no longer felt a thing.

Sometimes I wondered if I would even feel my own death.
“Leave us,” Nisotsa snapped at Sara, her tight gaze roving over the comm techs and Sith officers flanking us. Sara’s round eyes moved to mine, seeking permission, which I granted with a sharp nod.

Nisotsa remained silent as the bridge cleared of all personnel, Admiral Sara included.

“We were in the middle of a strat meeting, Nisotsa,” I said coldly. I wouldn’t tolerate this sort of interference from many- but we had known each other for too long. Fought together, bled together, sworn fealty together-

Yes, but she betrayed your true master, an inner voice mocked. Her and Arran Da’klor and that braggart Bandon Stone.

And Malak.

A flicker of rage struggled to ignite deep within the ice, but it soon winked out. I couldn’t fault Nisotsa. Treachery was part of a Sith’s life: the machinations we all devolved into, as our pointless existence served nothing but the corrupted will of the Force. Nisotsa, at least, had exhibited her intelligence by keeping me ignorant of the Deralian plot.

For I would have betrayed her, betrayed all of them in kind, had I known-

Had I known- The what-if’s were poisonous in their never-ending taunts. What if I had known? What if I had told Revan, what if she’d actually survived and taken Malak out instead?

And there was only me left, at her side-

But Revan had used me to keep her apprentice in line; leashed us both, in the end, to her will with twin bonds of jealousy and lust, until I could no longer separate the difference between love and hate-

It was second-nature, now, to force those wild thoughts down. I preferred the icy numbness of the dark. The cold, unfeeling dark.

“Have you heard from Malak?” Nisotsa asked, her voice sharp and short.

I had. A short message, direct and to the point. An order to hold station, hold the frontlines- no matter what wild rumours might catch my ears. A delayed comm, dripping with command and overt threats. It would mean my life, should I abandon my post.

Obviously something had rattled Malak. Whatever these supposed rumours were, I hardly cared. I would play out the game of war here, as ordered, in a cold echo of a glorious, golden past: where I had once taken pride in leading Republic Fleets against the Mandalorian scourge.

“Yes. Nothing more than a command to stay here,” I replied, eyeing over my old acquaintance. “Not that I had any other plans.”

She bit her lip, an uncommon gesture of uncertainty, even for her. “Bandon dropped by at the Academy, to cull another lot of Adepts,” she murmured. “He- you know he led the attack on the Endar Spire?”

I raised an eyebrow, waiting. Bandon Stone was an egotistical tool with a greater depth of Force power than perhaps any, save Malak. Between him and that strutting ex-Jedi harlot, Kylah Aramai, our Lord appeared to be surrounding himself with posturing children.

Sometimes I could still feel the harsh ferracrete bite into my knees as I pledged loyalty to Darth
Malak, even as my heart had blindly refused to believe that she could really be dead-

“Bandon will be coming here, Yudan, to tell you himself. No doubt he’ll get a frakking kick out of it. I thought- we’ve known each other so long- I wanted to warn you-” Nisotsa was almost stuttering, uncertainty and fear warring in those flawed eyes that once shone with silver intelligence.

“Let me know what?”

“I don’t have it verified- rumours, only, from that chivhole’s big mouth- but Malak ordered me to stay away no matter what I heard-”

“What?” I bit out, suddenly impatient. This was it, then, whatever had prompted our master’s cryptic demands. And Nisotsa thought it important enough to warn me- what did I have to do with it?

“It’s about Revan,” she whispered, yellow gaze fixed on mine with a distinct measure of reluctance.

I felt my jaw tighten, and clenched hard on the Force before it spiralled out of my control. Revan was dead. I would not allow her to have such a hold on me from beyond the grave. I would not.

“You mentioned the Endar Spire,” I forced the words out. Kept them cold, emotionless. “I take it this concerns Bastila Shan, then.”

Bastila Shan. That famous padawan the holonets claimed had been the end of Darth Revan, even as the Sith Empire attributed Revan’s demise to her old lover.

We had all loved her, in different ways. And, one by one, our loyalty had corroded into something darker.

There were times when I thought that perhaps if I had known, I would have thrown my lot in with Nisotsa and Arran- been one of the hapless idiots to challenge her on Deralia, died by her blade maybe, as a means of showing her that even the staunchest of followers, the most devoted of allies, could only take so much-

But I knew it for the falsehood it was. Malak had found the strength – or the rage – to betray her. I never had, much as I cursed myself for it.

“Yes,” Nisotsa admitted. Her eyes narrowed with displeasure. Whatever the news was, Nisotsa didn’t like it. “Bastila Shan didn’t kill her, Yudan.”

“Oh?” I raised a brow, finding myself suddenly bored of the whole debacle. Nisotsa was too easily rattled. She’d always been cautious, but these days it bordered on a twitchy fear that was hardly advantageous to her standing amongst the Sith. “I never expected that over-hyped padawan to have laid the death-blow on Revan.”

I would say her name without any emotion. Revan meant nothing to me anymore. Dead was dead.

“Yudan!” Nisotsa hissed, her eyes flashing with a passion I rarely felt these days. “Malak didn’t kill her either!”

My heart stopped. My thoughts froze. There was a roaring sound in my head.

“Who did, then?” I was barely aware of the words as they rasped from my lungs. Bastila Shan had boarded the Nexus with two masters who’d died by Revan’s hand, or so the stories said. Maybe one of them had-
She’s dead. She must be dead. She has to be-

Nisotsa’s face was grey. But resentment glittered in her eyes, and a very real fear. A fear of someone-

Revan had killed Arran Da’klor when he betrayed her on Deralia, but Nisotsa remained unscathed from her treachery-

She’s dead. She must be-

“She’s not dead. Bandon says Bastila Shan captur-”

Everything morphed into a haze of red and black. The glaciers shifted as cracks of searing fury sliced through them, a deep rage and passion so hot it was entirely overwhelming-

“Yudan! Yudan! Frakk it, let me go!” Nisotsa was screaming.

Slowly, slowly, my vision coalesced into a shaky sort of sense. The Force was a whipcord of rage, holding my old comrade tight against a durasteel bulkhead with nothing more than the black passion of my emotions.

I struggled to keep my chokehold on the Force tight, pressing Nisotsa hard against the wall, feeling the dark power lash out uncontrollably underneath my grasp.

“What do you mean?” I hissed through gritted teeth. My jaw was clenched so tight it felt like it could snap. “How in all the hells of the galaxy can she still be alive?”

“Bandon says-” she choked. “For frakk’s sake, Yudan, let me go!”

“Tell me!” I raged. The cold had vanished, and in its place burned a decalescent fury so hot it could be the fiery core of a sun.

“The Jedi have her! They’ve- they’ve brainwashed her or some rot! She thinks she’s some scholar, and Bastila Shan is leading her around like a frakking kath hound on a leash!”

It made no sense. My mind blanked, and I took a stumbling step backwards.

“Scholar,” I echoed. “Brainwashed. Start making sense, Nisotsa! How can Darth Revan both live and believe she is a simple scholar?”

At some stage, the dark Force weaves had loosened against her frame, and Nisotsa took a faltering step away from the bulkhead, her gaze suspicious and edgy as it remained pinned on me.

“I only know what that chivhole Bandon told me,” Nisotsa muttered. “Bastila Shan supposedly captured her above Deralia, and the Order wiped her mind. She doesn’t remember a damn thing, and is following Bastila Shan around like a meek little hood-mouse.”

Darth Revan... alive. And wholly ignorant of her crimes against humanity itself.

And the Order had dabbled in something that sounded an awful lot like what the Sith would do-

A falsehood? A pretence at redemption? There was no redemption for the likes of Darth Revan. There was none for any of us.

The fire died abruptly; snapping back into the frozen glacier of old.
I stared hard at Nisotsa. Sometimes, I could still see my friend as the Jedi Knight she once was. Golden-haired and simmering with intelligence and righteousness. The same as us all, before we had followed Revan into perdition.

Once, I had been a strong Jedi Knight, a warrior for peace and justice. That man was long dead and buried, incinerated in the ashes of evil. A bitter grief rose inside me, a hatred for Darth Revan, for that spectre who had destroyed everyone in her orbit—even Revan Freeflight herself.

And I found, at that moment, that maybe I did have the same strength as Malak.

It was long past time for Darth Revan to die.

“Malak’s ordered us to stay out of it,” Nisotsa muttered, rubbing at her throat, bitterness clouding her corrupted gaze as she glared at me. “Don’t do anything frakking stupid, Yudan. Malak’s dealing with this personally. Don’t give him a reason to kill you, too.”

“Understood,” I bit out. “Provided Malak actually succeeds, I’ll toe the line.”

If not... if not, then even the wrath of my gods-cursed master wouldn’t stop me from interfering.

xXx

Jen Sahara:

"What are you up to, Mission?" I asked, leaning against the durasteel wall of the Ebon Hawk's central room. The Twi'lek girl was all alone apart from her faithful astromech, and appeared to be tinkering with the ship's communication system. Somehow, I didn't think she was engaged in planned maintenance.

The others were all asleep. Although day and night were meaningless in hyperspace, we all tuned ourselves in to Galactic Standard Time, which was based on Coruscant's meander around its only sun. Currently it was the dead of night, but I'd woken from an uneasy sleep with a latent anger burning inside me. I couldn't recall my dreams, but I knew they hadn’t been pleasant.

Mission jumped up, hiding the screen she'd been viewing with her back. A guilty blush rose in her cheeks. "Uh, nothing. Nothing really." Teethree whistled something next to her, and the Twi'lek shot him a quick glare.

I grinned. "Don't let Onasi see you tinkering around with his baby," I warned.

Mission wrinkled her nose. "I'm just- I'm just trying to keep myself busy, y'know?" Her headtails twitched, and then her shoulders sagged in desolation. "After Taris, and all that death, and now Griff—well, I don't really want to think about it anymore. I can't sleep and- and, I, well..." She sighed hopelessly, looking at the little droid for encouragement. He beeped and whirled, sidling closer.

I felt a sharp pang at the miserable look on her face. Despite my intentions, despite my firm will to care for no one, I could not help but worry for the girl. Innocence lost. I remember that feeling. Did I? From where? I racked my memories, but they shied away, vanishing into the murky realm of oblivion that was my past.

I shook my head irritably, and focused on the Twi'lek once more. "So, find anything interesting?" I drawled.

Mission shot me a return grin, and motioned me forwards. "Yeah, I've been looking at the comm log of the Ebon Hawk. Gee, Davik sure was slime! I never thought I'd say this about anyone, but I'm glad
he's dead."

I walked forward, eyeing over the console. Mission had pulled up a list of video signals alongside a supply chart. I felt my lip curl in disgust when I saw purchase orders for several Twi'lek dancing girls.

"You were lucky, in a way, back on Taris," I mused. "It could have turned out so much worse for you, being a pretty young Twi'lek." The thought of Mission being enslaved to the likes of Davik stirred up my dormant anger. Why do I care? Why am I spouting this kath crap?

"Hey, I took care of myself plenty fine!" Mission retorted, her voice sharp and a mulish pout appearing on her face.

"I didn't mean it like that," I said, my eyes narrowing. "Just that-"

"Yeah, yeah I know." Mission sighed. "I just get enough of this 'you're too young' attitude from everyone. Sorry."

I snorted. "You've more than convinced me of your skills." I turned my attention back to the active console. "Anything interesting in the vid comms?"

"Nah," Mission replied. "Just scummy deals and the like. I'd gotten depressed watchin' them all before you came along, actually."

"Looks like he was quite busy in the spice trade before the Sith quarantine on Taris," I commented. The more recent entries were all matched with glitterstim and giggledust, and Davik no doubt made a pretty chit on that. My eyes travelled to the end, and then widened in surprise. "Hang on," I said softly.

"What?" Mission leaned in next to me, looking where I pointed. "That's gotta be Carth's transmission to his uppity officers, right? It's the date we left Tatooine."

"The one before that." My voice had dropped to a quiet whisper. It was an outgoing comm, but not tagged or categorized in any way. "Dated our last night on Tatooine."

Mission turned to frown at me. "I dunno who did that. Shall I play it?"

I nodded, and her hands flew over the controls. A few seconds later and an illuminated figure rose in front of us, a look of inquiry dissolving into surprise. My breath froze in my lungs. Icy fingers tap-danced down my spine. Who is that? The figure was an old female Zabrak, dressed in plain Jedi robes. Her turquoise eyes were a startling contrast to her darker skin, and were familiar to me. Very familiar. I've met this woman before. I'm sure of it!

"Padawan Shan!" the Zabrak exclaimed. Mission shot me an inquisitive look, curiosity sparkling in her eyes.

"Master Karon," Bastila's voice echoed from the video replay. My breath caught as I heard the words, and I felt sweat break out on my forehead. A slight shudder passed through me. I caught a brief glimpse of the woman in my mind, holding a light blue lightsaber as she waited for me. Not threatening, not threatened, just ready. What? Ready for what? Me?

"It is good to see you again, Padawan. We were unsure who survived the betrayal onboard the Endar Spire."

"Master," Bastila's voice cut in. The comm only showed the incoming video, so we couldn't see
Bastila's expression, but she sounded almost... panicked. "I cannot be long. I need help."

"Help?" The one called Karon frowned, and her face turned intent. What is Bastila doing? I could feel the heat of rage as it uncurled in my gut. What has she done?

"Yes. I am heading toward Ahto City. I am glad you picked up on my signal, for I do not believe I will have time for the council on Coruscant to receive my message. Please, would you be able to rendezvous with me? Or perhaps organize another master? We will be there in two day’s time."

The schutta. The betraying, lying schutta! Bastila had informed me there were no masters on Manaan. No masters until she contacted one. Why was I being such a blind idiot? Why was I still near Bastila? This was the same woman who had sedated me and tried to drag me to her masters on Dantooine. She's desperate to put me in their clutches. I will not go! I will not!

The Zabrak woman looked solemn, thoughtful, as she replied. "Who else survived the crash, Padawan?"

"The only other survivors were Carth Onasi and Jen Sahara."

"Ah." Her voice was neutral and betrayed nothing. But it was about me. It had to be, didn't it? "Well, I do not see how a delegate can arrive on Manaan within two days. I, however, am based on one of its resource planets. But tell me first, Bastila: why Manaan?"

"Please, I have to go. We are taking off now. Thank you, Master, I will explain everything when I see you!" The somewhat startled expression of the Jedi Master was cut off with an electronic hiss.

"Well, that was interesting. Y'think Bastila might be worried she's getting behind in her studies?" Mission giggled. I forced a smile on my face, and hoped it didn't look like a rictus of hate. Bastila will not get away with this! But the ship was already headed to Manaan. What in the Outer Rim could I do now?

Escape. I need to escape.

"Hey, it's not something to do with you, is it?" Mission asked, her bright voice cutting through my dark maelstrom of thoughts.

I faked an unconcerned shrug. "Possibly Juhani. Remember how we found her? And you know how highly-strung Bastila can get."

Mission rolled her eyes. "Yeah. Are we gonna ditch her, Jen? I mean, I know you're using the Force and all now, but..."

"Yeah, I don't want to put up with her either. We'll see, Mission. Get some sleep, okay?" I ended on a forced teasing note as I stood, and the Twi'lek poked her tongue out at me. I send her a brief smile before turning around and leaving the room.

The smile dropped from my face like a ferracrete brick.

How do I get out of this one? I seethed. I will not be cornered! But this transmission was sent almost two days ago; the trap was already laid and waiting to be sprung. Would it be so bad? A Jedi Master wouldn't hurt me, right? But if there was no harm involved, surely Bastila would have told me in advance.

Damn her! Damn the lying bitch! I didn't know why I feared seeing any of Bastila's precious Jedi Masters, but the fear and hate were so strong, so tangible, that I'd be a fool not to listen to it.
Alright, think. There's a way out of this. It was long past time to be gone. Why had I stuck around Bastila anyway? I'd always planned to leave Taris by myself, but one thing or another had kept me with the group.

I'd walked to the rear of the ship without thinking, to the empty engineering hangar that housed Davik's custom-built swoop bike Mission had drooled over. She'd been begging Zaalbar to have a go at fixing it, and it was currently in about a dozen different parts. HK-47 was in standby mode near the corner, and jerked to life abruptly as his sensors detected me.

"Master, I am ready to serve."

"Good," I said smoothly. "You can help me out with a little problem."

Together, surely, we could work out a plan to escape Bastila and her little Jedi Master.

xXx
Desperate Measures

- Jen Sahara -

What do you do, when you are surrounded by enemies? I couldn't trust anyone, that was sure. I can trust Mission. Well, maybe, but the last thing I wanted to do was drag the young girl into danger. And the Genoharadan are nasty people.

Had I had dealings with them in the past? When that stranger had confronted me on Tatooine, I'd put the datapad away until I was alone. The message itself was compelling, enigmatic:

The Genoharadan wish to offer you the opportunity of your life. You have twelve days to hear our offer. Prove your worth by finding one of the contacts below:


An instant after I’d read it, the message vanished.

I understood the format. Name, place, city, planet. The Genoharadan... I'd been on the verge of yet another flashback when I read the words, but my memories withered away; the more I'd pushed to recall my past, the more it evaded my grasp. One thought, however, struck me with blinding clarity. Ah, that shadowy assassination order. They might be useful. And after watching the rerun of Bastila's betrayal, some deep, subconscious thought sat up and begged for attention. The Genoharadan are powerful enough to get me off Manaan quickly. Maybe I had potential allies in other places. All I needed was a way to leave the Ebon Hawk before it landed in the thick of Carth's Republic contacts and Bastila's friendly master.

I'd known what HK's first suggestion was going to be. I can easily dispose of everybody on board if you want to be alone, master. No, I didn't wish to kill anyone. Not even Bastila? No! I just needed to get away. But surely Canderous would be an asset? I could let him in on our plan, I'm sure the Mandalorian could make himself useful... No, I couldn't trust anyone. HK-47 was programmed to serve his master – me - but trusting a sentient was baring your back for the dagger to find its way home. If I don't trust anyone, then I'll never care for anyone.

I scowled, and stamped down on my chaotic thoughts. These days I couldn't always pick the difference between Street Kid and Evil Bitch, but I knew which one was the more powerful. Hatred and rage fuel the Force. One of these days, when I finally could use the Force predictably, I was going to track down whatever Jedi had screwed with my mind and have a few words. At the end of a lightsaber.

"Exiting hyperspace," Carth's voice rang over the ship's speakers. I felt the queer sensation ripple through my body as the ship slowed back into realspace. It's almost time. HK had assured me that he was skilled enough to make sure no one would be hurt in the upcoming explosion, though he had sounded disapproving.

I stood, and wandered through the Ebon Hawk's corridors, lounging just outside the cockpit. Bastila had re-taken her seat as co-pilot; I wasn’t interested in picking another fight. Between planning my escape and hiding my rage from Bastila, I'd had more than enough mental strain to cope with.
I watched as an incoming transmission bleeped on one of the consoles. Carth leaned over to activate it, and I wondered briefly what his reaction would be after I had successfully escaped; away from them all, at last. He'd never trust me again. Well, it's not like he ever trusted me in the first place.

"This is Manaan Spaceport Control. Identify yourself," a crackly voice streamed from the transmission, followed by an interpretation in a low, garbled language. I stiffened a little when I realized I could understand the words. That's Selkath! Is there any language I don't understand? Thus far, the Sand People dialect had been the only one.

"This is Captain Onasi of the Ebon Hawk, requesting clearance to land," Carth answered succinctly.

"State your reasons for entering Manaan airspace, Captain Onasi," the voice shot back.

"I thought you said we were expected, Carth," Bastila interrupted. Carth glanced at her in brief irritation, and then responded.

"We are rendezvousing with the Republic embassy in Ahto City."

A pause, and then the crackly voice responded, "you are expected, Captain Onasi. Transmitting your atmospheric entry code and landing coordinates. You have been assigned a Republic docking bay by the request of the Republic Commander Wann."

I slouched in the open doorway as Carth flicked off the communications channel. No doubt the hangar will be lined with Republic officers. And Bastila's little friend. But I kept the thought small; I was not going to let her have an inkling of my plans. Not yet.

She must have sensed something then, for she turned her head sharply. Her aristocratic face dissolved into a fake, forced smile. I sent one just as genuine back to her.

The large blue planet of Manaan dominated the view out of the cockpit, and I realized I'd better sit down. Things would be getting interesting very soon.

"Jen, sit down and buckle up, would you?" Carth said, echoing my thoughts.

I rolled my eyes and sat in the small, undersized chair behind Carth and Bastila. "As you wish, Captain flyboy," I said sweetly. He turned to shoot me a dry look, but his attention was taken again by the incoming transmission of landing coordinates.

Bastila sighed softly, her dark head resting back on the co-pilot's chair. Black space slowly dissolved into the dark blue of the outer atmosphere. "I will be glad to land," she murmured softly.

I just bet you will, you lying traitor.

Jen? She hadn't heard me, but she'd sensed something. I needed to keep control of myself.

I said, so will I, I answered within the confines of our bond.

I saw Carth reach over to flick to the repulsorlift engines as we entered the atmosphere, and I braced myself in readiness. A loud explosion boomed through the ship, and I was slung sideways as the Ebon Hawk shuddered at the impact. A myriad of blinking, glaring lights dotted the consoles, punctuated by the piercing wail of warning sirens. Bastila screamed in shock, and I felt my stomach rise as the ship began to plummet.

"Damn, the engines!" Carth yelled, his hands moving instinctively over various dials and warning lights.
I could hear Mission screaming in fright from the common room.

"What's going on?" Bastila gasped, leaning forward as Carth struggled to find the cause.

"Some sort of explosion! It's taken out two thirds of the repulsorlifts!" Carth frantically flicked over several of the dials. "I'm switching back to the sublight drive!"

I fervently hoped HK was as good as he'd assured me. He'd sworn he could disable the ship well enough to force a landing in water, but not too badly so anyone would get hurt in the process. You'd better be telling the truth, you psychotic bucket of bolts. Otherwise I'll pull you apart and smelt you piece by piece.

Carth hurriedly initiated the faster ion engines, and the whir of the Ebon Hawk's twin turbine compressors built steadily to a high-pitched scream, but did nothing to alleviate our rapid fall.

"What the-?" Carth shouted in surprise, "I've got no power!"

"Why? What's going on?!" Bastila gasped, terror colouring her tone.

"Sithspit! The particle accelerator's offline!"

The ship was shuddering under the outward pressure of our descent, and I clutched tightly onto the arms of my chair. What have I done? Am I truly insane? Carth swore further when he realized the backup accelerator was also down, rendering the engine useless. The small, perfectly placed explosives HK had organized had certainly done their job. He may not be an expert at slicing into computers, but he sure knows how to disable a ship.

The dark blue Manaan sky was slowly growing a lighter colour as we plummeted further into the depths of the atmosphere. I could hear Canderous calling Carth a few choice names from further back in the ship. Carth flicked back to the repulsorlifts, and the few engines still functional struggled against the Ebon Hawk's mass, as he desperately dragged upwards on the steering column. I did, however, notice a decrease in our rapid downwards acceleration.

"We'll have to make a forced landing in the ocean, Ahto City is too far away!" Carth immediately opened a communications channel to request help. It was time for me to get ready.

I unbuckled myself and stood up, stumbling against the wall as the ship shuddered. The persistent whine of overworking repulsorlifts thrummed weakly underneath my feet. HK had assured me there would be enough power to make a relatively safe crash landing in the ocean, but not enough for the Ebon Hawk to reach Ahto City.

"Jen?! Where are you going?" Bastila shrieked as I careened through the doorway.

"Going to get Teethree and see if he can figure out what's going on!" I yelled back, hoping Bastila wouldn't realize that T3 was probably already doing that. As quickly as I could, I exited the room.

"Hold tight!" Carth's voice shot over the ship's intercom, and the Ebon Hawk lurched to the side. I slammed my head into the corridor wall, and cursed the flyboy underneath my breath. No doubt he was trying to maneuver for the safest landing position, but it certainly made it hard to walk.

I deliberately avoided the common room, heading straight towards the back of the ship. HK was there, waiting for me.

"Statement: Everything is going according to plan, master. The Ebon Hawk should be landing some twenty miles outside Ahto City."
The ship rocked again, and Carth warned us over the speakers to brace for landing. Loose tools and gadgets were rolling on the dull durasteel floor, and I struggled to keep from tripping over them. It's time. HK had opened one of the tiny escape pods in preparation, and I clambered into it.

"You know what to do next, HK?" I reiterated as I buckled myself in tightly. Why do they have to make these things so small?

"Answer: Yes, master. This escape pod should eject directly towards Ahto City. I will fire off the other escape pods simultaneously, using the last one for myself. Suggestion: Please take care of your weak watery shell, master. I am beginning to like you." The intense red glare of HK's robotic eyes stared at me eerily, and he pulled the door closed. Of course he likes me. I've just ordered him to sabotage a ship. He'd probably love me if I allowed him to kill someone in the process.

My insides threatened to slam into my throat as the Ebon Hawk crashed into the ocean, and my bones almost seemed to creak in the process. The ship lifted upwards, partly due to a rebound effect and partially to the power of the remaining engines, and I had a brief, vivid vision of a rock skimming across a lake. HK activated the escape pod, and the sudden sideways acceleration yanked my head to the side of the pod, slamming it fiercely into the metal. Not again....

... The wind lifted my hair, and brought the familiar smell of decaying, rotting rubbish to my nostrils. A muddy brown lake of what once may have been called water stretched out in front of me, and I idly stared as a small stone skimmed off the surface.

"Told ya I was better," I said smugly, clenching my fist full of flat stones and cylindrical credit chips that had been phased out years ago in favour of the plastic electronic type.

"No fair, I've only had three goes and you've had about five." A boy was standing next to me, scowling sulkily at his defeat. He was perhaps thirteen or fourteen years old, and grime matted his spiky dark hair to his skull.

"Sore loser." I stuck my tongue out at him. "You jus' can't admit that I'm better at everything."

"Man, how many times have I heard that tripe?"

"Oh yeah? Prove that it's tripe then! Bet you can't catch me!" I challenged, and turned to sprint away, dropping the stones in my haste. The lake, a rotten pool of sewerage, drained from the richer parts of the city behind the controlled walls that separated it from the Western Underground, the forgotten slum where the Uncitizens lived. Echoing footsteps chased me as I turned into an alley between crumbling, abandoned warehouses. I knew all the routes, gave them names in my head. Right into Sunrider's Way. Jump the ledge down to Exar's gutter. Shimmy my way down to Corellia's tunnel. Through there, and I'd have a bunch of choices as it opened up into a maze of alleys I called the Spider.

Gaunt faces stared as me as I sprinted through littered streets, where poverty trapped me within its confines. Altizir was one of many cities on Talshion, but I'd never left it. The homeless were herded and trapped within the confines of the Western Underground. I'd always dreamed of leaving Talshion, to fly amongst the stars. One day, I would. That was a promise I repeated on those nights when there was no food other than grubs to be found, and I lay listening to old man Freeflight's fantastical stories about battles long gone and dreams of the future.

Jen?
I turned into a lightless, murky tunnel, which Freeflight told me used to be a transport lane back when Altizir was a young city. I leaned against the wall, and contained my heaving breaths. I couldn't hear footsteps anymore, and a wry smile curved my lips in the darkness. I can still outrun him, even now. Outrun and out-steal him. Though we always worked better as a team.

I was yanked abruptly forward, and landed with a thud against someone's chest, gasping in surprise.

"Gotcha!" His tone was victorious, and he held me tightly. My gut burned in surprise, and I was sharply reminded of all the forbidden thoughts I'd been having lately. No. We are friends. That's all!

"You forget, little gal, that I know all your hiding places."

"Don't call me that, you know I hate it," I said automatically, struggling to escape. His arms tightened around me, and I wished desperately for some light in the abandoned tunnel. He's gonna tickle me, dammit! Something touched my mouth then, and I stiffened in shock when I realized it was his lips.

"Wha-what are you doing?" I gasped, pulling back slightly.

_Jen? Wake up! Where are you?_

"It's always been us against the world." His voice was low, soft. A finger was tracing my cheek gently. "This is only natural. We've always had each other's back. You and me - we fit together. Tell me you feel it too."

"Miss? Are you alright?"

"But-" I wanted this, didn't I?

"She's out cold. Help me out; we'll have to get her back to base before the blasted Selkath get here."

The finger trailed under my chin, and lifted it. My lips parted in surprise, before his gently covered mine.

_Jen, curse you! How could you do this to us?_

"She's moaning, sir. I think she might be waking."

... Someone nudged against my torso, and agony blossomed throughout my skull. _Where am I?_ My eyes flew open, and painful sunlight sparked into my vision, causing me to abruptly close them again.

"Miss?" a strong, male voice repeated, and full awareness slammed into me. _Kath crap! I've got to get away from whoever these guys are!_ "It's alright Miss, we're Republic officers. You're safe now."

_Damn, I really don't have much luck with escape pods._ I hesitantly opened my eyes again, and forced a nervous, scared look on my face. My vision slowly righted itself, and I noticed I was still strapped into the escape pod. The bright blue Manaan sky glared cheerfully from behind the wholesome Republic soldier who was leaning over me, checking me for injuries.

"Ugh, where am I?" I said in a groggy voice, keeping up the helpless act for now. The fierce pounding in my head receded marginally, but it still felt as though a fusioncutter was drilling a hole into my skull.
"You've landed on the shore outside the Ahto City dome, miss. We're going to bring you to safety now." Oh really? His voice was helpful yet slightly authoritative, and brooked no arguments – particularly from injured damsels in distress. I curbed a strong desire to Force push him into the depths of the Manaan Ocean.

**Jen? Are you awake? What have you done?**

I had to act quickly. My hands flew to unbuckle my body, and I jerked upwards, staring out around me. My escape pod had made it to the rocky shores that bordered Ahto City. The large dome City itself rose impressively near my landing, miles high into the sky. Various openings of the dome allowed interstellar traffic as well as local ocean explorers access to the rest of the planet, which was merely miles of fish-infested saltwater. Two Republic officers, who'd obviously tracked my landing and hastened to rescue me – or capture me? – were standing over me with concerned expressions.

I noticed their speeders parked nearby on the stony beach. **No, these aren't normal landspeeders.** I looked closely at the relatively small vehicles, and realized they had been designed to travel over vast distances of water. **Rescue bikes of some description.** Considering HK had fired off all the escape pods, Republic soldiers were probably using these contraptions to track them all down. **I'm surprised the Selkath didn't get here first. Carth must have got an emergency transmission off to his base.**

I looked the first officer straight in the eye. "This escape pod was empty when you found it," I said clearly, succinctly, wrapping the Force around my words tightly as I climbed out of the capsule. This, at least, was one trick I could now do consistently. I felt the power wrap around the second soldier also.

"The, uh, escape pod was empty," the man mumbled at me, and I turned to face the second soldier.

"Your speeder broke down, and is inoperable. You are forced to travel double on your comrade's speeder." I kept the Force tightly interleaved with my words, and Bastila's seething anger grew within the bond.

**You are ignoring me! And using the Force! If you think I am going to let you just waltz away like that- curse you!**

The soldier blinked at me like a stunned gizka, his mouth working slowly. "My, uh, speeder’s broken. I, uh, guess I'd better ride double on yours, Stirwin."

Quickly, I whirled around and grabbed items out of the escape pod. HK had done his best to store what he termed meatbag necessities into the tiny pod, and the backpack full of protein bars, credits, grenades and a spare blaster would definitely be useful. My two ex-Sith lightsabers still hung at my sides, reassuringly. I took a step towards the closest rescue bike, and then faced the soldiers once more.

"You'd better go and report to – to whoever you need to report to. The pod was empty, and one of your speeders broke down." I slammed the Force harder into my words, pointing towards one of the rescue bikes.

"We should report back to Captain Gilies," one of them mumbled.

"Uh, yeah, he should know the escape pod was empty. Let's go."

I smirked to myself smugly as I mounted the closest speeder.

**Answer me!** Bastila's latest mental shriek rang through my head, and then my senses dulled. My
vision lost sharpness, and the tang of salt from the sea became a touch more faint. The piercing throb from my bruised skull, however, increased in severity. With a sense of horror and mounting rage, I realized just what she had done.

*You think you can cut me off from the Force, you traitorous, lying scow?* I physically snarled as I punched the ignition, the roaring engine of the speeder as it hummed to life echoing the pounding in my head. The two soldiers were staring blankly, dazedly, at the escape pod, and I briefly wondered if I'd used too strong a dose on them.

*You said you would not run! You- you endangered us all, you could have killed us with that crazy stunt! You cannot be trusted to wield the Force!*

A fierce, burning fury grew deep inside me. *I should have ordered HK to kill that schutta.* I slammed defiantly against her mental walls, but they wouldn't budge. I wondered whether I could sense a faint sensation of satisfaction emanating from her mental presence, and my rage intensified. *No time to try and break Bastila's hold. I don't need the Force now, I need to get away! I will not let her make me lose control, sod it all! Focus!* I needed to get into Ahto City and meet Hulas before anyone else found me. In retaliation, I kicked her out of my mind and closed the metaphorical door. *Maybe she can cut me off from the Force for now, but I refuse to listen to anymore of her incessant shrieking.*

I sped away from the crash site, glad this bike was more solid and stable than a swoop. It wasn’t my favourite way of travelling, I knew, as I turned it towards the gleaming jewel of Ahto City. *Gleaming jewel, hah. This place was a pacifistic slime pit the last time I came here.* The last time? Salt stung my eyes as the bike whipped over sand and stone, and I wondered just which identity had travelled to Manaan.

*Well, that dream I just had was definitely Street Kid. Had her favourite boyfriend in it yet again, and I was getting a little sick of the reruns. It's not like I have all day to reflect on the sentimental ramblings of Street Kid.* I wondered if that part of me was getting as pathetic as Jen was. *There's nothing pathetic about feeling for someone. It makes you stronger, it makes you a better person.* I scowled, and wished I could push out all the voices in my head, along with Bastila's.

The translucent dome of Ahto City dominated my sight as I flew closer. *Almost there. Now all I have to do is find this Hulas, and get off this hole of a planet.*

xXx
I gripped tightly onto the edge of the long maroon benches that graced the Ebon Hawk's common room as the ship shot out of hyperspace. I was not yet accustomed to that queasy, nauseous sensation, and it did nothing to alleviate the gnawing hunger in my empty belly.

"Ugh," Mission muttered next to me. "Don't think I'll ever get used to that feeling. It's so weird." I nodded in agreement with my young charge; she was curled up next to me, rifling through her pazaak deck. I was just glad we had finally reached Manaan, and soon I would be standing upon unmoving ground again.

Mission looked up at Canderous briefly. The Mandalorian was sitting opposite us, engrossed in what he was doing; which appeared to be pulling his heavy repeating blaster to bits. The leap from hyperspace into realspace hadn't affected his concentration at all; obviously Canderous had spent some time in space before.

"Canderous, want a game of pazaak?" Mission asked eagerly, waving her deck in what she probably thought was an enticing gesture. Canderous glanced up briefly, snorted once, and then looked down at the parts of his gun which were currently decorating the bare table in the centre of the room.

"No thanks, kid," he muttered, snapping a new power pack into his gun. "You probably cheat." "Cheat?" Mission sniffed, glaring at him. "I do not! Well- only if I have to. And stop calling me a kid, you old geezer!"

I groaned inwardly as Mission shot her mouth off once more. Does she have to argue with Canderous? He is probably the only one here who will take offence. I did not wish to go up against the Mandalorian, but sometimes Mission acted as if it were a given. To my utter surprise, Canderous merely chuckled and then proceeded to ignore her.

Mission poked her tongue out, but when that achieved no response she sighed heavily. I knew the sheer boredom of the space journey had begun eating at her nerves, but I longed for the day when she would develop some patience. She then turned hopeful eyes on me.

"What about it, Big Z? Wanna play to pass the time?"

"(Mission, we are almost there,)" I reminded her. We were already in Manaan airspace, it would not be long before we landed. Already I could hear the winding down of the ion engines, to be replaced by the steady hum of the repulsorlifts. Soon I could get some food.

"Aww, come on! It's not- " Mission's words were cut off by a loud explosion that rocked the ship, tossing us wildly from side to side. Mission screamed in terror, and I landed on her forcibly. Wailing emergency sirens bit into my hearing.

"Get off me!" Mission shrieked, struggling underneath me in fear. I felt the sickening rush of descent, and realized in horror that the ship was falling. Frantically I clawed for the safety belts that lined the benches, yanking one tightly around the squirming Twi'lek and belting her in.
"Haar’chak! My kriffing gun!" Canderous yelled angrily over the sirens as the dismantled pieces of his gun clattered across the floor, and joined the other loose cargo that was rolling chaotically underneath our feet. Mission's pazaak cards flew from her hand across the room, and I saw a handful of them whack into the Mandalorian's face as he struggled to get up. He cursed again, and thumped noisily into the table. "What's that Republic idiot doing? Getting spiced up to land?"

A high-pitched whirring from the sublight engines initiating once more competed with the shrieking sirens for dominance, but if anything the plummeting of the ship increased. Mission screamed again, and I dragged myself off her, hurriedly searching the worn benches for another belt. My empty stomach heaved and protested, and I swallowed the acrid, sharp taste that had risen in my throat. Canderous had starting cursing in his own language; I could not understand a word, and was rather glad Mission could not as well.

The whirring noise dissipated, to be replaced with the struggling hum of the repulsorlifts that had failed earlier. The ship was still falling rapidly, but the descent seemed less severe. *Whatever happened, it took out some of the repulsorlift engines, and disabled the sublight drive.* Had someone sabotaged the ship? Carth Onasi had hired mechanics to fix it back on Tatooine – could something have happened there?

"Hold tight!" Carth's voice yelled from the intercom, although it was something I did not need to be told. Canderous had finally returned to his senses, and was settling himself on the opposite bench, bracing for whatever came next.

Mission shrieked as the ship thumped solidly into what I presumed was the ocean, and I felt the impact jar my very bones. The restraining belt bit deeply into my waist, and I was glad of the restriction; otherwise I would be rolling on the floor amongst the other cargo.

Canderous had managed to belt himself in also, but he made a frantic grab for a part of his gun as it rolled idly by his feet. He had stopped cursing, but I saw a hard, angry glint in his steel-grey eyes.

I could feel the Ebon Hawk slow down as it landed a second time into the ocean, and breathed out a sigh of relief. *It could have been worse. Fortunately Mission is okay.* If only I knew where Jen was.

"Rescue won't be far away," Carth Onasi's voice broadcasted throughout the ship. "I've contacted the Republic forces, so just hang tight guys- hey! What the-? The escape pods are ejecting!" The transmission cut off abruptly, just in time for me to hear a choice word from Bastila I did not expect.

*Escape pods? Jen?* No, it could not be her; she would not run like this. I knew of her desire to leave – particularly to break off contact with Bastila Shan – but she would not do so without my companionship. I had sworn a life-debt to her after all, and Mission was becoming rather attached to the slightly unbalanced human. *I must make sure.*

I turned to face Mission, who was pale and gasping, and laid an arm on her shoulder. The ship's movement had slowed considerably, and was now merely heaving from side to side. "(I will be right back, Mission.)"

She nodded, and gave me a weak smile. Sometimes I marveled at how brave the young girl was.

"Well I, for one, want to know exactly what happened, and why we've got a crazy idiot for a pilot," the Mandalorian growled from the other side of the room, as he rose to pick up the remaining pieces of his blaster. I ignored him as I stood, personally believing that Carth Onasi had done a respectable job of landing, considering the damage that explosion seemed to have inflicted on the Ebon Hawk's engines. The Mandalorian was smart enough to realize that, so perhaps he was merely looking for a target to curse.
I picked my way gingerly over datapads, blaster pieces and pazaak cards that were sprawled over the durasteel floor. The unsteady bobbing of the ship compromised my progress as I left the room, and further increased the gnawing sensation in my stomach. For all that I was hungry, the idea of a meal was beginning to lose its appeal.

I could feel the weak hum of the surviving engines underneath my feet, and surmised that the ship had just enough power to stay marginally above the water. As I neared the cockpit room, I heard raised voices.

"What do you mean, Jen's in one of the escape pods?" Carth's voice; unnaturally high and angry. No! It could not be true, could it? Horror slammed into me. Mission will be heart-broken. She has only just lost Griff. And I had a life-debt to honour.

"She is running. She is also unconscious, I can feel it." Bastila Shan's voice was tightly clipped, but I could hear a blend of panic and anger in the aristocratic tones.

"Feel it? Is this that bond she was waffling about?"

"I-I am surprised she spoke of it. It is true, we share a mind-link of sorts." Bastila sounded as if she'd rather sleep in a sarlaac pit. My hackles rose at her tone. She was a Jedi – someone to be respected – but I did not like the antagonism between her and Jen. Jen ran! I have to find her!

"But if she's in the escape pods- do you mean to say that Jen caused the explosion?" Carth said in disbelief, his voice choking.

"Of course she did! Do you think it occurred all by itself?" Bastila snapped.

"No, but I- dammit! Damn that traitorous woman! I knew I couldn't trust her, I knew she was crazy, but how could she do something like this? We could have died!"

A howl wrenched itself from my lungs, born out of misery and anger combined. I owe a life-debt to you, Jen Sahara! How could you dishonour me by running? Bastila and Carth jumped in their seats at the sound, and turned to stare at me in surprise. Bastila opened her mouth to say something, but a piercing beep from the controls grabbed her attention.

"Good," Carth muttered, turning back to the consoles. "Looks like our rescue has arrived. There's a Class-A salvage craft above us; moving into position to pick us up." He frowned. "I'm surprised they didn't announce their presence first."

"(We have to get Jen!)" I howled in distress. Bastila turned to nod at me, and I could see the worry darkening her eyes.

"We will, Zaalbar. We will find her," she told me softly.

Carth flicked a few switches and opened a communication channel. "This is Captain Onasi of the Ebon Hawk. Might we know who our rescuers are?"

There was no response. Our quiet waiting was interrupted by an abrupt jarring of the entire ship, as something clunked loudly onto the hull. That must be the towing clamps. Bastila gave out a little gasp at the movement.

"Hello? This is the Ebon Hawk, can you respond?" Carth repeated, and the Ebon Hawk was jerked to the side as another magnetic towing clamp latched onto the ship. I was pushed against the chrome doorway at the movement.
"Alright, what's going on? I always knew the Republic were lousy fighters and worse pilots, but you really take the cake, Blaster Boy," Canderous drawled behind me. Carth stiffened, but to his credit did not even turn around.

"They're not answering. This isn't good, a rescue team should be checking on the survivors before towing the ship away," Carth muttered as he scanned over the readouts. Another two clunks sounded against the Ebon Hawk’s hull; and as the ship was yanked upwards I stumbled back into the Mandalorian. Canderous grumbled as I straightened myself abruptly.

"It is either the Selkath or the Republic, surely," Bastila said. "Who else would be rescuing us? Perhaps they simply do not have adequate transmissions onboard."

"Yeah, now that sounds plausible," Canderous said sarcastically, and I wondered if the Mandalorian was trying to pick a fight.

But he has a point. Even the lowliest vehicle has a transmission device.

I saw Carth tap something into the communications console, and lean forward to speak again. "Republic HQ, this is Captain Onasi of the Ebon Hawk. Can you acknowledge?"

The crackle of static filled the room, broken quickly by the response. "Captain Onasi, we have received your distress signal and are on our way."

The noise of engines directly above us was ominous, and the Ebon Hawk began to lift upwards. I stumbled again, and this time made a grab for the tiny seat directly behind Bastila. It did not adequately fit my frame, but it was better than continually falling into the Mandalorian's arms.

"Republic HQ, your salvage craft has already picked us up, but is not responding to our communications," Carth said flatly into the receiver. I heard a tone of worry enter his voice, and felt my hackles rise. This must be a Republic rescue. Who else could it be?

"Uh- Captain Onasi? Our salvage fleet is en route to your ship and the escape pods we detected. We are approximately ten minutes away from your destination," the response cut through the air, and Carth's shoulders tensed. The Ebon Hawk continued to be dragged upwards.

"Repeat – we have already been picked up," Carth stated. "If not by you, then who?"

"A moment, Captain Onasi," the response fired back. "We are scanning the area."

"It must be the Selkath," Bastila said softly. "If it's not the Republic, then it has to be the Selkath. Right?"

Carth shook his head angrily. "The Selkath would at least respond to our transmissions. I don't recognize the make of this ship, but it reminds me of -"

"Captain Onasi?" A different voice crackled over the speakers, and I peered worriedly at the consoles. Ship technology I was unfamiliar with, but the green dots seemed to blink a warning at me. "This is Lieutenant Waltzar of the Salvage Freighter Oceanic Bounty; we are on our way."

An angry sigh expelled from the Republic pilot, as he leaned forward to respond once more. "Lieutenant Waltzar, we are already being towed! By what appears to be a Sith freighter!"

"The Sith?" Bastila exclaimed in horror, and I felt my muscles tense. From everything I'd seen on Taris, the Sith were people to be avoided. And I doubted they would take a liking to either Bastila or Carth. Or Jen. Wherever she is. Why did you run, Jen? Why?

"Nice landing, Republic," Canderous drawled behind me. "Right into the laps of the Sith."
Lieutenant Waltzar's voice shot back from the console. "Captain Onasi, we are aware of the situation, and are dealing with it. Sit tight, we will be there soon." The transmission was abruptly cut off, and Carth cursed under his breath.

"Sit tight? While we're dragged away by the Sith?" Carth muttered angrily.

"The Sith," Bastila repeated. I caught a pale, shocked look on her face as she blinked rapidly. "No. Jen, what have you done?"

"Jen?" Canderous barked in confusion. "What's she got to do with anything?"

Bastila was holding a hand over her mouth, her face devoid of colour. "They will not take me," she said softly as a new sort of determination appeared in her eyes. "They will not."

"Now that's the sort of attitude I like to hear," Canderous said in approval. "If the Sith want us, we'll give them a worthy battle."

Bastila yanked off her safety harness, and stood upright in the crowded cockpit, removing her lightsaber from her belt. "I will not be captured again! Carth, open the top hatch."

"Are you crazy?" Carth stared in her in surprise. "Sit down! It's not like you can do anything."

"I will not just sit by and let the Sith capture me, Carth!" Bastila clenched her hand tightly over her deactivated lightsaber, and started to climb over my legs that were jutting into the middle of the cockpit. I looked at her apologetically as I tried to move out of the way. "If I have to climb outside and cut through those towing clamps myself, then so be it!"

"Bastila! There's no way you can hold on to the top of the ship! You'll fall into the ocean!" Carth protested, his voice rising in confused desperation.

"Republic's right," Canderous grated, but to my surprise he actually sounded a little admiring. "You ain't gonna do nothing up there bar feed the fishies."

A cold, determined look tightened the Jedi's face. "You both underestimate how the Force can aid me. I cannot let the Sith capture me. Carth – you of all people should understand that!"

"Bastila – wait!" Carth called desperately as the impassive Jedi moved past Canderous in the doorway. "There's another salvage craft coming near! I think it's the Republic."

I saw Bastila tense, and turn back around.

"Well, don't just sit there," Canderousgrowled. "Find out what they're gonna do about this."

"Who's piloting this ship, Mandalorian?" Carth snapped. My shoulders drooped at the incessant bickering. *Why is everyone fighting?* If Jen was here, she'd probably laugh at them all. *Why did you run, Jen?*

Carth flicked on more of the communication channels, and static filled the room, followed quickly by angry voices.

"Halt!" came the voice of the Republic Lieutenant Carth had spoken to earlier. "This is Lieutenant Waltzar of the Republic. You are stealing Republic property. We demand that you release the Ebon Hawk at once."

A different, lower voice replied, "we are a salvage crew for the Sith empire. You know the rules of
salvage – first in, first served."

"None of them will budge. And we're the prize," Carth muttered. I felt a strong desire to check on Mission, but considering my precarious place on the chair I decided to stay put.

"The rules of salvage do not apply to survivors, Sith scum! This is Manaan – theft is dealt with justly! Hand over the ship!" Waltzar's proper tone had turned angry over the transmission.

"This is not theft, you weak Republic idiot! The Ebon Hawk is the flagship of the late Davik Kang – an entrepreneur who owes the Sith Empire a sizeable amount of cash. We are taking his ship as compensation, and if you try to stop us we will consider it an act of hostility." The responder sounded smug, and I felt the growing of fear claw within me. *What will they do to us? What will they do to Mission?*

"You try to take our people hostage and we will be forced to fire on you!" Lieutenant Waltzer shrieked, all vestiges of control gone.

Carth winced. "Someone has to teach that boy the fine art of diplomacy."

"We ain't gonna get out of this without a fight," Canderous commented.

*No more fighting.* I just wanted a little bit of peace, time to relax and bring that cheeky smile back to Mission's face. *And time to find Jen. I must find her.*

"Hey!" Carth said in surprise. "There's another squad of ships heading this way. A host of them. One's a light starfighter. Heh, we're certainly attracting attention." For all that his tone was light, Carth did not really sound amused.

"Desist your hostilities at once!" a different voice sounded through the computers, and this one appeared to have as much trouble speaking Basic as I did understanding it. The voice was low and jumbled, like someone who understood that thrown-together language well, but could not quite reproduce all the sounds. *I know exactly how that feels.* "This is Leader Al'hini of the Ahto City Civil Authority. Violence will not be tolerated! Release the ship in question!"

"Well, ain't this turning into quite the tea party," Canderous drawled.

"What is going on?" the quiet voice of the Cathar emanated from further behind the Mandalorian, crowding out the doorway into the cockpit. Bastila crawled over me once more to resume her place in the co-pilot's chair.

"Leader Al'hini, this is Captain Jerome of the Sith Empire. We are towing this freighter against the debt that the late Davi-"

"We heard your reasons, Captain, we have been listening," the Selkath cut in impatiently. "You will not violate the Manaan neutrality laws! This will be judged at the courts. For now, the Ebon Hawk will be impounded, and its occupants are free to stay where they wish."

"Impounded?" Carth burst out disbelievingly, and flicked on the transmission. "This is Captain Onasi of the Ebon Hawk, and this is my ship! The Sith can't just come-"

"Captain Onasi, you're arguments can be heard in the Ahto City courts. You will be fully entitled to an arbiter when the time comes. For now, everybody disperse! We will tow the Ebon Hawk back to Ahto City."

"Bloody Sith," Canderous muttered behind me, but I wondered if I heard a faint tone of amused
Carth angrily chased all of us out of the crowded cockpit, and we sat silently in the Ebon Hawk's circular common room, a gloomy quiet residing over everybody as the ship was slowly tugged to shore. Even Bastila, after failing to contact some person called Karon, had been yelled at to leave. The Republic pilot seemed to feel the effects of Jen's betrayal deeply, if his temper was anything to go by.

"I can't believe she'd do this," Mission whispered brokenly next to me. A fist clenched my heart at her voice. *Why, Jen? You knew how awful Mission had been feeling. You must have known how she would react to this.* How well did I really know this strange human I was indebted to?

"She is running," Juhani interrupted softly, and I stared at the Cathar warily. "Running from anything that will make her face herself." Juhani lowered her voice, and whispered under her breath, her shoulders tensing, "running from the Dark Side."

I stiffened as the words filtered through my ears. I doubted anyone else had caught the Cathar's sentence, but a Wookiee's hearing was naturally sensitive. *Is this Juhani correct? Is this all about the Force?* Jen Sahara had not been trained to be a Jedi, and yet suddenly she was wielding awesome power blindly, without control. And her rage... *Is she running because she fears the Dark Side? Or worse...?* I had to find her. I had a duty- I was obligated to help her. *I will find you, Jen Sahara. I will stand by your side, and help you with your battles.* But how much could a Wookiee do against the mystical, frightening power of the Force?

"But why? Why did she leave without me?" Mission's voice was pitifully weak. "I trusted her."

"That's the problem with trust. It always gets broken," Carth stated coldly from the doorway. Bastila stared up at him, and threw a pointed look back towards the cockpit. He shrugged. "I have no engines, and we're being towed. There's not much I can do in there other than wear out the seats." He barked a harsh laugh, but his eyes were bleak. "Well, at least we're still alive. I'm not sure if we were meant to live through that explosion."

"Don't add stupidity to your other faults, Republic," Canderous snapped angrily. Even the tough, unflappable Mandalorian seemed upset. "If she wanted to kill us, I'd say we'd be pretty dead by now. Well, you lot would be," he grunted, and threw aside the blaster he had been toying with. "I'd like to punch her for this as much as the next guy, but she deliberately didn't kill us. HK's missing, ain't he? I'd bet my last cigarra that these explosives were precisely placed so as not to hurt us."

"I will find Jen," Bastila muttered, seemingly to herself. Again, another sentence that I doubted anyone else in the room heard. "She will not escape."

The hairs on my back stood up as I stared at the Jedi. *Escape? Jen wished to leave Bastila Shan, I knew, but Bastila almost made it sound as if Jen were a prisoner. Mission always believed the Jedi had another agenda.* I had wondered myself, particularly when Jen had been acting so strange back on Taris. *What do the Jedi want with Jen?* I understood that she was a Force user who needed tuition, but at times her circumstances seemed far more ominous.

Mission stuffed her hands in her pockets, and curled her legs up on the battered bench next to me. I'd made her wear the safety belts once more, although considering the slow crawl with which we were being towed to safety, it didn't really matter. "Guess it's just you and me again, Big Z," she muttered, a distraught frown pleating her young face. "At least I know I can count on you."
"(We will find Jen,)" I rumbled softly, reassuringly.

Mission shrugged, and I saw a stubborn, mulish look pass over her face. "If she wants to be on her own, then let her. We would've followed if she asked. I don't need her."

Her words, although defiant, failed to cover up the misery in her tone. I did not often feel angry, but I was starting to. I wanted to shake Jen for the pain she was causing Mission, but part of me wondered at Jen's reasons for running. *Maybe she had just cause.* "(I must find her, Mission. I have a life-debt to honour;)" But if Jen was running from Bastila, then I couldn't trust the Jedi for help. I would have to find Jen by myself.

"If you can find her. I don't think she'll wanna be found," Mission shot back. I saw Bastila blanch at the words, and wondered myself. *Where have you gone, Jen Sahara? How can I aid you if you run away?* I would not leave Mission; could not leave the only person who believed in me. But the heavy weight of the life-debt dogged me with obligation.

*How do you find someone who does not wish to be found? And what will I do if I cannot find her?*

xXx
The clinical chrome walls of Ahto City surrounded me as I walked down one of the circular corridors that branched through the place like the spokes of a centrifugal space station. The entire city had a stark, utilitarian feel to it that reminded me gloomily of a med-clinic; albeit without the lingering tang of bacta. The utter lack of litter, graffiti - even so much as a speck of dirt - made me feel like a raggy trespasser roaming unwanted through a pristine dream. The dull pounding from my head dogged me with each step, merely adding to my detached, numb state of being.

The Selkath sure do like it clean and stark around here. There were no lurid neon signs, hopeful beggars, or dark strangers doing dark deals in corners. Considering the plain attire of the people walking cautiously past me, it wasn't because I was in the rich side of town. This entire city is one controlled, unreal place. I didn't like it.

But people were people; no doubt crimes were committed, information exchanged, spice sold – like on any other planet. In Ahto City, one just had to be a little more discreet.

Small flying service droids buzzed over the heads of sentients, ostensibly to keep an eye on things. My vision snagged on the cameras hung high into the gleaming silver walls, and I restrained the urge to tug my hood down lower. Good thing HK had the foresight to suggest I wear concealing clothing over my armour. I had no idea if the Selkath would be tracking me – would this Master Karon’s influence extend that far? I fought down the rage brewing in my gut; the mere thought of her or Bastila was enough to tear at the edges of my fragile control. Priorities. Focus on getting off Manaan first.

But thoughts of the crew warred for prominence; a masochistic side of me kept imagining Mission’s reaction when she found out I’d left. Stop it. It's not like I really betrayed them. The crash won't have hurt anyone. But I knew how Mission would see it, so soon after facing up to the scummy nature of her cowardly brother. I’d had half a mind to stay on Tatooine, find Griff, and beat him to a satisfyingly bloody pulp. Mission was a weakness. It is better that I left her behind. Weaknesses should be shed.

The corridor exited into a sweeping, open courtyard; sunlight pouring in from the heavens through the dome above. The atmosphere within the city’s enclosure was both warm and overly humid; making it mildly unpleasant to wear clothes let alone armour. The Selkath are a reptilian creature. This city is probably climate-controlled for their comfort.

A sharp spike of pain stabbed at the side of my head; remnants from the recent knock in the escape pod. I rubbed a hand through my messy curls, grimacing. I’d had enough head injuries to last a lifetime, and while the latest was no more than a mild concussion and superficial bruising, I could’ve done without the residual dizziness.

It'd certainly made the speeder trip back to Ahto City a challenge.

I'd managed to dump the rescue bike quickly and hightail it out of the commercial port before being questioned by any of the authorities, but as soon as I'd made it into the Selkath City itself, I'd almost fainted.
Concussion is what I really don't need right now. A passing Aqualish glared at me in suspicion, and I realized I was still clutching my head. I slapped a more composed look on my face, dropped the hand, and moved on. *I'm a mess.* My arm ached, still weak from the fracture back on Tatooine, aggravated by the violent humming of the speeder's unstable steering. *I've got to pull myself together and actually appear competent, or the GenoHaradan won't give me a chance.*

I glanced around my surroundings. I was somewhere in the eastern part of Ahto City, walking through a large courtyard graced by a rather ugly statue of a toothy shark. I wandered towards it, making out the words 'Eastern Quadrant' inscribed in Basic on a small, bronze plaque. More was written below in Selkatha, but I couldn't make out all the words. *Something about a god, and wrath.* I stared back at the shark. *Trust the Selkath to worship a fish.*

I heard a snide laugh, and turned my head sharply—bringing on another wave of dizziness. A group of mostly Humans stood sniggering near the edge of the courtyard, eyeing me over. They were all clothed in a tan, tight-fitting uniform, and with a spark of awareness I recognized it as the casual attire of Sith troops. They didn't seem inclined to approach me, but it was obvious they were mocking me from afar.

I shivered as the hairs rose on my forearms. Dark spots speckled around the periphery of my vision, and the tang of nausea rose at the back of my throat. I steadied myself with one hand leaning against the fierce statue, but it was too late...

…

*Frustrated rage simmered inside me; I knew I should work through my anger and control it, but it wasn't nearly as satisfying as ranting within my own head. Why is he questioning me? We've got this far, and now he's uncertain?*  

*There was one more location after Manaan and now, I wondered, if it would be better to go alone. Send him back to the others, who had been waiting for some time on the edge of space, now.*  

*He trusted me, I knew that as a core truth… but he didn't fear what we'd discovered. Somehow, the danger had ebbed in his mind. He didn't grasp the totality of the threat we faced.*  

*His doubts over that, and what I sought as a counter-measure, were beginning to grate. There were times when I felt it would be easier to command him to hold his tongue. I'd never had an issue with hearing viewpoints that opposed mine - stars, it made sense to look at all angles of any objective - but belabouring the point when I'd chosen the path forward was inefficient, wasteful and irritating.*  

*There weren't many who would dare... and, at times, I wished he wouldn't either.*  

*Striding blindly through the gleamingly perfect streets of Ahto City did nothing but raise my ire further. I hate this place. Frelling Selkath. The shining chrome walls of the corridor glided out into a large courtyard, marred by a hideous statue of a firaxan shark. Their mythical god. The Selkath should go back to the bottom of the ocean and stay there. Unfortunately, it sounded like I would be the one journeying to those murky depths. I grimaced.*

"Hey!" a mocking voice called out, and I stiffened, whirling around. A group of four Sith were watching me, cocky condescension all over their faces. Sod the Manaan neutrality laws. It might be fun to pick a fight with those idiots.

"This street is for Sith only," the closest woman told me, nose in the air, her lips pursed in disdain as she eyed over my ragged clothing. "You got to pay a twenty credit toll to walk down this street."
My amusement warred with a growing anger, but these days my anger was winning more often than not. It hadn't always been that way...

"You can have your credits when you take them from my cold, dead hand," I snarled, and blinked suddenly as I stared up into the grinning face of the shark. In the distance a Selkath was glaring at my hand; I jerked the offending limb away from the statue, but still his eyes bored into me. Just what I didn't need to do – draw attention to myself.

"Well, well," a smarmy voice called, and I turned to see the group of Sith soldiers walk closer. "Lookee, it's a drunk wanting to pick a fight."

I stiffened, and felt my face tighten as the Sith sauntered towards me. I felt disastrously light-headed, and although the feeling was dissipating, I wasn't sure if I was up to conflict. Up to it? I can't actually desire violence – not here on Manaan! Oh yeah. The neutrality laws.

The leader of the gang crossed her arms and smirked at me. Her fair hair and cold blue eyes appeared identical to the Sith I'd just seen in my mind. Could it be the same one? Or do all the pathetic Sith minions look so similar?

"What?" she drawled. "Got nothing to say now, gutter trash?" A man behind her sniggered, and two of the group surreptitiously moved to flank me. My latent anger stirred once more, firing adrenaline through my veins.

"I've got plenty to say," I said flatly. "I just doubt your ronto turd of a brain could comprehend it."

A look of surprise flashed sparks in the woman's eyes, and then she tilted her head back to laugh. "My, my," she purred. "Looks like the drunk rat has claws."

My mouth twitched in amusement; the Sith caught my expression and her smirk dropped like a stone in the Manaan ocean. An ugly scowl took its place.

"You want a fight, gutter scum?" she sneered, and took a threatening step closer. The woman's face was mere inches from mine; I could see the residue of cheap cosmetics padding her skin, smoothing it into the face of someone younger. Like she could challenge me. I can rip her head off in one second flat. "Go on, I'll even give you the first shot," she taunted, spreading her arms open in invitation.

My gaze roved over her companions: four of them in total, standing passively as they watched our altercation. My fist curled. One quick jab to her throat, and she'll be down. The muscles in my weak arm ached as I tensed them. I stared back into the mocking blue eyes of my aggressor, and suddenly, something about the whole encounter seemed slightly off.

Why is she pushing for me to start the fight? I looked over her shoulder and had my answer.

A group of armoured Selkath were striding purposefully across the courtyard, directly past us. Sithspit! I'm a brainless Gamorrean! Is my desire for violence so strong that I overlook common sense? I flung my hands upwards, palms first, in the universal gesture for peace. "I don't want a fight," I said loudly, concisely, my voice ringing false over the flawless beauty of Selkath architecture. "I'm sorry if I caused offence, I did not mean to."

The woman dropped her arms, and I caught the flash of disappointment on her face. Pathetic. Is this how the Sith prove themselves on Manaan? Try to get an unsuspecting stranger to hit them first so they'll be jailed? And I thought the Sith on Taris had been weaklings. I smirked, but bowed low to...
the woman, aware of the close proximity of the Selkath. "I beg your pardon," I repeated my empty platitudes.

"Break it up!" one of the Selkath exclaimed in a slurring voice. "You Sith, always trying to cause trouble! Leave that Human alone!" The three Selkath marched around the Sith party, their armour gleaming a burnished bronze colour that was as stark and shiny as their architecture.

I bowed in overt deference to the Selkath, and stepped away from the crowd. The first Selkath nodded to me brusquely before turning to continue his tirade at the Sith leader. As I strode away from the courtyard, I could still hear the words 'trouble-maker' and 'no respect for the law'.

xXx

I walked out into a large courtyard that seemed to hold nothing bar a rather dismal view of the nearby ocean through massive panes of double-glazed transparisteel. Nearby, leaning unobtrusively under a hanging pillar, stood a dark red humanoid droid. A smile curved my lips as his eyes flared in recognition.

"Greeting: It is good to see you again and in one piece, master."

My smile broadened as I glanced around the area. HK had been ordered to meet me in the southeast quadrant, the same place mentioned in the GenoHaradan's mysterious message. The inner hub of Ahto City was organized into eight large quadrants, laid out like dinner plates surrounding a banquet. This had to be the place, but where would I find Hulas?

The courtyard itself looked identical to the earlier one I'd passed through, sans the grotesque statue. A waist-height ferracrete wall bordered the half of the enclosure that faced the sea, stopping sentients from physically reaching the transparisteel. The wall seemed a popular place to gather nonetheless; a group of Selkath were hissing something in Selkatha, a Rodian was idly shuffling what appeared to be pazaak cards, and a trio of merchants were disbanding a makeshift market stall under the disapproving eye of an armoured Selkath.

Pivoting on my heel, my gaze roved throughout the entire quadrant. Sents strolled in every direction, but I couldn't see anyone lurking about that appeared to be a secret agent for a cryptic organization.

I frowned. "HK, do you think any of the people around here could be contacts for an assassination order?"

HK gave me what could have been construed as a dubious look, in so far as a droid could, but dutifully scanned the area. "Observation: I highly doubt it, master."

"Yeah, me too," I muttered. What was I asking a droid for, anyway? My eyes snagged on a dark doorway set into the towering chrome walls, and I walked closer. A tiny plaque above the opening read "The Spacer's Break." A cantina. Of course. Where else would you go looking for disreputable sorts?

As I neared the entrance, I made out a large figure slouching against the wall within. It jerked upright at my approach and strode forward to meet me, one eye gleaming maliciously from the shadows.

"No droids," the Abyssin grunted, jabbing an accusatory finger at HK. I had a suddenly urge to override his will, to pull on the Force and demand his obedience- but I can't reach the Force. Not yet. And I need to focus on other objectives, first.

I smiled tightly. "No problem. HK, stand guard outside."
"Protest: But master, how can I protect you if I am not with you?" HK objected.

"HK, this is Manaan. Nothing ever happens here," I idly threw over my shoulder as the Abyssin moved aside and let me pass.

The interior of the cantina was dimly lit, and it took a few seconds for my eyes to adjust. Empty booths and pazaak tables lined the walls; the only sents in the place were talking in hushed whispers. I noticed the lack of Selkath around, and wondered absently if the reptilian species didn't appreciate frequenting such places. They may not come in here, but they're watching all the same. Cameras hung discretely from the ceiling and a buzzing surveillance droid circled the centre of the room. The Selkath authorities still kept an eye even on places such as this.

The bar itself was deeper into the cantina, and as I strode further inside, I heard the soft wailing of Bith musicians. A few halogen lamps dotted around the place offered only dismal illumination, and the ensuing shadows mated with thick cigarra smoke. A handful of people sat smoking near the band, but the rest of the cantina had an eerie, empty feeling to it.

The Ithorian behind the bar grunted as I walked up to him, and focused beady eyes on me. "What'll you have?" he asked roughly.

I grabbed a handful of credit chits HK had obtained, and slapped them on the bar. It was well more than a mug of beer. "A Forvish ale," I stated. As the Ithorian moved to take the cash, I leaned forward. "I'm looking for Hulas," I murmured in a lowered tone, and then thrust the small pile at him.

The Ithorian blinked, looked down at the credits, and then back at me. "I don't know no Hulas," he said.

I scowled, and pulled out another handful. At this rate I'll be all out. "Maybe this will help," I commented, and slid the chits over the beer-stained bar.

The Ithorian pocketed the second lot of creds. "Thanks. But it doesn't," he threw over his shoulder as he turned to serve a green Twi'lek that had approached for a drink.

My spine stiffened. He thinks he can just take my credits for nothing? My jaw clenched as a wave of fiery anger surged through me. Abruptly, I felt pushing at me from Bastila through the bond, trying to communicate, trying to reach me... I pulled back, and turned my psyche away from her. My emotions... they attracted her notice, dammit. I had to resist a natural instinct to hammer at her Force block.

What do I do now? No Hulas, no way off Manaan? I felt my fingers twitch towards a hidden blaster. Remember the cameras. This entire place is monitored. I can't get violent!

The Ithorian bartender returned a moment later, and nodded towards the side of the room. "Someone has a message for you," he grunted.

My eyes narrowed, but I turned to stare in the direction he indicated. One of the shadowy booths embedded into the cantina wall held a solitary robed figure. Is that Hulas? How did the Ithorian communicate so quickly to him? I glanced back to the Twi'lek in suspicion, but the green-skinned sentient was already turning back to face the band, a newly purchased drink clasped in one hand.

I shrugged to myself. I've got a lead. Nothing for it but to play along.

The cloaked figure did not look up as I slid into a seat opposite him. He was a Rodian, decked out in an unobtrusive grey robe that covered his torso. His posture was deliberately casual as he leaned his
elbows on the cracked and faded table, but he did not meet my eyes.

"Hello, Hulas," I said softly.

The Rodian finally looked at me, ducking his head to glance under my hood. I was glad of the disguise; I did not want him to see my face until I had sounded him out.

"A Human?" he said finally. "There are sentients everywhere, but you choose to speak with me. Am I so different? Do you think I have answers that others do not?"

"That's a rather strange greeting," I replied. "To someone who has been asked to meet the GenoHaradan."

Hulas paused, but to his credit his expression did not change. "You have the advantage of me, Human. There is power in names, yet in the end a name alone can mean nothing," he finished. I had the feeling he thought he was rather more enigmatic than I did.

_He's a genuine agent, though. His poise, his stance... a lackey, maybe, but definitely GenoHaradan._

How did I know that? What dark dealings had I had with them in the past? "My name is Jen Sahara," I said simply.

Again his expression did not change, but this time I noticed his jaw clenching. _He's surprised. He wasn't expecting me to turn up. I wonder why?_

"Ah, yes." His tone was light, neutral. And yet something struck me as being slightly off. "You may be wondering just what the GenoHaradan is."

I shrugged. _"A secret assassination society who may be interested in my skills."_

Again the slight pause. I was beginning to realize that minuscule delay was the only indication Hulas gave of astonishment. _"And yet, we are so much more. But this is not the most appropriate place to speak of such things. Come, let us move a more private setting."_

Hulas moved to stand, but I cut him off quickly. "I don't have time for that, Hulas," I said flatly.

He stared at me impassively, the only change in expression the slight rise of an eyebrow. _"You do not have time for a walk, yet you had time to seek me out? That strikes me as strange, Jen Sahara."_

I smirked. _"It's very simple. Your organization is interested in hiring me. I, in turn, need to leave Manaan. Immediately."_ Hulas made no direct reply, so I continued. _"I know you have the ability to get me off Manaan, Hulas. Do that, and I'll join the GenoHaradan."_

Hulas crossed his arms, and again I inwardly damned the detached expression on his face. _Does this guy ever show any emotion? He may as well have been a block of permacrete. I suppose the GenoHaradan choose their agents well. This Hulas must be a contact for all sorts of assassin wannabes. It make senses that he doesn't give anything away. Still, it was annoying._

_"We don't make deals, Jen Sahara. You give yourself a lot of credit if you believe we will organize a free trip for you. Why is it that you are in such a rush to leave Manaan?"_

I shrugged, and decided on the truth. _"I have some rather powerful people after me."_

Hulas paused, his eyes darkening in shock, or surprise, or _something_. I stiffened. _Does Hulas know about Bastila and Karon?_ No, he couldn't, the GenoHaradan would have nothing to do with the Jedi. Surely.
"The GenoHaradan offers protection for its agents, Jen Sahara. But you are not one."

"I wish to be," I countered quickly.

"Even so, the wishing does not magically initiate you into our brethren. We have many trials, a long testing period-"

"Hulas," I hissed. "I am happy to do this sort of apprenticeship on another planet. But if you guys truly want me to be an agent, then get me off this planet within the next hour. If you can’t achieve that, then I'm off – right now - to find someone who can."

Hulas sighed, and then to my surprise, capitulated. More easily than I expected him too. "Follow me. There are always civilian ships leaving to Rii'shn. I will organize something."

_Huh, I was certain he was going to refuse. I guess the GenoHaradan are really impressed with me. I wonder what they've heard?_ I followed Hulas out of the cantina, noticing the brief nod he gave the Ithorian bartender. There had been some unspoken communication between them then, I realized with a smirk.

As we walked outside into the bright sunshine, HK-47 fell in behind me.

"Yours?" Hulas asked me, indicating the droid.

I nodded. "Yes. These days you can't live without a protocol droid. He'll need to come with me too."

"A... protocol droid, you say?"

"Statement: I am well versed in verbal and cultural translation," HK intoned from behind us. "I attempt to serve my master's every need."

"Are protocol droids equipped with laser rifles these days?" Hulas questioned. His tone was mild, but there was a slight inflection of disbelief, there.

"One can never be too careful," I said, keeping my reply back just as mild.

"Well, you would not be our first agent with a personal droid," Hulas ventured after a short delay. "As long as he is kept under control, and doesn't break any laws-"

"Objection: I am a law-abiding droid!" HK cut in quickly. The robot seemed to think about this for a minute, and then further reiterated his point. "Yes, indeed, law-abiding, that's me."

I wished his tone had been a little more convincing.

I bit back a snigger, and hurriedly moved to change the subject. "You mentioned the world Rii'shn? Where is that?"

Hulas paused, glancing at me sideways. _I've surprised him again. _"Rii'shn is the closest habitable planet in this system. It is a sister planet to Manaan; its capitol Emnaad is a domed Selkath township much like Ahto City, if smaller. I am astonished you have not heard of it. It is a mere four hour space flight away."

My spine stiffened, and I stopped abruptly. "Four hours away is not far enough, Hulas."

"I gathered as much," he answered, motioning for me to continue moving. "But it will do as a start. I will organize a pickup point outside the dome of Emnaad; a rendezvous with one of our agents. You will learn of your first assignment which shall, of course, be on a planet further away. Do not fear,
In the end, it had been as easy as I had suspected. Hulas had gifted me with a fake ID chip – enough to get me off this stars-forsaken planet. My new name – Alieya Djurr'yni – sounded a lot more exotic than Jen Sahara, but either way it was still a false name.

The civilian transport ship was packed with struggling merchants making the quick jaunt over to Rii'shn, the sister planet that Hulas had given me a brief summary of. Although less populous than Manaan, Rii'shn had smaller townships that were not Selkath controlled - which meant easier credits and more flexible laws, provided one could slip out of Emnaad which housed the planet's only starport under its Selkath dome.

The suffocating stench of organic sweat permeated my senses, and I struggled to keep from breathing through my nose. Crowded sents were squashed into tiny seats all around me, talking and gesticulating in a myriad of languages. The slurry tones of Selkatha were the dominant inflection in the hubbub of noise, and above everyone's heads was the overt presence of both mobile and stationary vid cams. The Selkath liked their surveillance as a means of enforcing pacifism. It dogged me with the ominous sensation of constantly being watched.

I resisted the urge to batter once more at Bastila's shields; strongly desiring the strength of the Force, if for nothing else than to drown out the senseless babble. As always, the power was dancing tantalizingly out of reach, teasing me with its inaccessibility. As soon as I was safely off Manaan, I fully intended to deal with the snot's blockade.

I sighed and stared out of the window. For all that Hulas had jacked me up with the lowest-class transport possible, at least I was seated with a view. I heard the engines power up as the starship readied to leave Ahto City, and through the grimy transparisteel panes I could see crowds of departed family waving their loved ones farewell.

The congregation was too far away for me to pick out individual faces, but my eyes caught on one robed figure as it slowly made its way to the front. The repulsors of the transport kicked in, humming loudly, cutting through the cacophony of noise; but my vision stayed fixed on the brown-clad figure. My skin pricked and my fists clenched.

That's Karon. I know it is. The ship began to rise, but still I gazed out the window, trying to distinguish features on a figure too far away to recognize.

Somehow, I knew, she was watching me too.
A heavy despair – mingled with a bitter relief upon which I did not wish to dwell – sat painfully on my shoulders as I watched the civilian transport lift and leave the ocean world. I could sense my former apprentice's Force presence within the ship, and wondered what she was thinking as she made good her escape.

The transport was headed to Rii'shn. What bitter irony, the planet I had just departed. Two choices lay before me, each one damning the other. Flights to Manaan's closest neighbour were abundantly frequent, and it would be an easy task to jump onto the next available passage and pursue Revan. But I had promised to complete a task for Roland Wann, and how could I leave Bastila Shan? The young Padawan had sounded desperate on the transmission I had received, despite the briefness of it. The remaining Dantooine Council members were unsure of her survival, although Vrook was adamant she still lived. Vrook Lamar was already on his way to Manaan, but he was on the other side of the galaxy. It would be weeks before he arrived.

I grimaced. The press of sentients around me began to disperse, as people slowly left the commercial landing pad. Loud talk hammered at me from all sides, but my thoughts were so chaotic that I did not need the Force to block the noise. My mind was active enough to drown out any surrounding conversation.

I must stay. Bastila needs my counsel. And I already know that Revan and I shall soon meet again. The premonition I'd received days ago haunted my every breath. There was no running from fate, but it seemed a cruel, wicked thing, to be taunted with the very nature of my downfall. And all I know is that it will happen soon. And that Revan will be involved...

…

My skin ached and burned; the residue of a massive bout of Force induced lightening. The cool floor underneath my back was a blessing; yet it did not dull the agonizing pain pulsating from my ribs. My eyes were glued shut, and one hand rested protectively over my torso. Underneath my fingers, I could feel the cauterized edges of a fatal lightsaber wound.

I barely had the strength to draw another breath, and I did not need to wield the Force to realize I was dying.

I opened my eyes, and a bright red bar flared through my vision. A lightsaber; its owner swathed in a black cloak. A Dark Jedi has been my downfall? I couldn't see my surroundings; everything behind the figure was a fuzzy blur.

"It was you!" the stranger hissed in a tone wracked with emotion. I could not tell if it was horror, rage or grief, but I recognized the voice. Revan.

My eyes widened, and I made out her shadowy face under the hooded robe. Sharp green eyes glared down at me in accusation, and her hand tightened on her sickly red lightsaber. After everything that has happened, am I to die by the hand of my old apprentice?
The vision had faded then, and I inwardly damned the lack of detail. I could not even tell where it would occur, but intuitively I knew it would be soon – if I waited here, Revan would come to me. *Is this a destiny I cannot escape? Am I doomed to die?*

Only on a few, brief occasions in the past had I been able to glance into the future, and never so vividly as this. Premonitions by nature were not infallible; but I knew beyond a shadow of a doubt that soon, I would be facing Revan.

The guilt still sat with me: the musings of what could have happened, what might have been. I thought I'd worked through my feelings of inadequacy over the past few years; thought I was stronger, whole once more. I'd even, finally, agreed to train another apprentice; but all it took was one desperate transmission from Bastila Shan to stir my doubts and worries back into a frenzy. *Things might have been so different.*

I allowed my thoughts to wander dangerously - it did no good to dwell on past mistakes, but sometimes one couldn't hold back the tide. If only Revan and Malak had been separated when we'd first found them on Talshion. *She'd been so angry, so hurt, so desperate when we finally put an end to their forbidden romance.* The High Council said it was for the best, and I'd agreed; we all knew how dangerous such strong emotions were to Jedi. *And yet...* And yet at times I wondered what would have happened, had the High Council let the young lovers be. *Would Revan have angrily disappeared to join the Republic cause? Would Malak have followed her so blindly?* That encounter was still so sharp and vivid in my mind, like it had occurred but yesterday...

"...so while I understand the wisdom of that part, I am unsure why I was tested on it," Jedi Knight Kylah Aramai droned on, still talking excitedly to me about her recent successful trials. I knew I should be patient with her, but I did not understand why the new Knight was singling me out for her questions and long-winded thoughts. Perhaps she does so to each Master she comes across. I had more pressing concerns weighing me down. It had been three weeks since the Coruscant High Council approved a plan of separating Knights Revan and Malak, and transferred Revan to the Dantooine Enclave to ensure little future contact between them. Thirteen days since Revan had thrown a tantrum that eclipsed any sort of emotional outburst I'd seen from her before. Eight days since I viewed the holo-streamed destruction of her homeworld by the Mandalorians, and ran desperately to Revan's quarters... to find her missing.

Surely she will come back. Why did she not seek me out? Where has she gone? *Part of me thought I knew the answer. Her crusade over the last year had been against the High Council's inaction over the growing Mandalorian threat.* Surely she would not be so reckless as to disobey the High Council?

*Perhaps I no longer knew what my old Padawan was capable of.*

"Looks like a ship is coming in to land," Bastila Shan, Vrook's prize Padawan and regular companion of Kylah, commented. I squinted up into the summer sky to see a small transport shuttle swoop down to land. I held my breath. Could it be her? Is she returning?

I restrained myself from running eagerly to the small landing pad adjoined to the Enclave, and made my way sedately there instead. Knight Kylah was still chatting in overt animation, with Bastila throwing in an occasional word. By the time I reached the ship, the exit hatch was already opening.

A figure in brown robes stepped out. Despair punched me in the solar plexus the moment I realized...
it was not Revan. In its wake followed a shaft of surprise when I recognized exactly who it was instead.

"Knight Malak!" I called in greeting, walking forward. Next to me, Bastila tensed.

I had heard many young Jedi exclaim that Malak was good-looking, for a Human, although being Zabrakian I was not a good judge of his species’ attractiveness. He did have an engaging manner; always ready with a smile and a quip to set others at ease. Despite all his years at the Order, I knew, deep down, that his first loyalty always remained to the woman he had loved since well before we had stumbled upon them. He had always been Revan's shield, her strength, her calm.

Presently, his brows were lowered, and his gaze simmered with angry intent.

"Master Karon," he acknowledged grimly, not bothering to greet Kylah or Bastila. "Where's Revan?"

"Malak, you should not be here," I rebuked. "You have been assigned to a mission on Coruscant, your home Enclave. Why have you disobeyed the High Council in coming here?"

He scowled. "Some things are more important than the Order, Karon! I won't leave her alone after Talshion! Answer the question – where is she? In her quarters?"

Kylah gasped in affront. "Malak, you should not address a master so!"

His brown eyes darted over the new Knight. "I'm not speaking to you, am I?" he bit out, before turning back to face me. "Look, Karon, the High Council can lecture me to death afterwards. But I must see her! If you won't tell me where she is, then I'll find her myself." With that said, he brushed past me into the Enclave. I saw a disapproving expression on Kylah's face, and a stiff, icy one on Bastila's.

I closed my eyes briefly, and wondered how best to handle this. "She's gone, Malak." I heard gasps from the others: Revan's disappearance was not yet common knowledge.

Malak stiffened at the Enclave entrance, before turning around very slowly. "Gone? What do you mean, gone?"

"She... vanished directly after the televised attack on Talshion. We do not know where she is." All vestiges of colour disappeared from Malak's face. "You don't know where she is," he echoed. "What do you mean, you don't know where she is? If she's left Dantooine, there's only one place she will have gone!"

"Malak-"

"I can't believe this!" he burst out, running a hand angrily through his short, dark hair. "She's gone off to fight the Mandalorians, hasn't she? And you- and you all just let her?"

"Calm yourself!" Kylah intervened in a righteous tone, and inwardly I groaned.

"Kylah, Bastila, can you leave me alone with Knight Malak please?" I said quickly, shooing them away with one hand while keeping my focus on the enraged Knight. "Malak, she has not yet reported back to us, and we are still looking for her. Do not let your emotions cloud your judgment."

"Judgment?" He laughed bitterly. "You really think this would have happened, if you hadn't forced us apart? Oh no, the High Council's to blame for this, and I'm not going to sit around and wait until
I hear she's been killed by some primitive Mandalorian bastard!” he spat out as he strode back towards his ship.

"Malak!” I called desperately. “Please, do not do this! Calm down first, at least! The High Council-”

"The High Council can crucify me for all I care," he said coldly as he re-entered his ship. "Revan's always meant more to me than their backward judgment." The hatch closed ominously behind him.

A sinking feeling overcame me as the shuttle slowly rose back into the sky. My eyes closed in bitter despair. Rash, just like Revan. Return home, my old Padawan. Please.

"I never did like that man," Kylah commented piously from behind me.

... They did return – but back to Coruscant, after a year-long reconnaissance mission on behest of the Republic. And Revan petitioned the High Council once more, this time with the backing of dozens of Jedi, as well as some key members in the Republic top brass.

The High Council still vetoed it, and Revan left to join the War proper, bleeding the Order of Knights as she went, the brightest of them forming the Jedi Thirteen. Although the Fleet liked to name them Revan's Guard, I recalled with a sigh.

I always wondered – would the two of them have listened to our counsel, had they been together when Talshion's fate was broadcast? Maybe...

I forced such futile scenarios from my head. What was done, was done. In retrospect my decisions over Revan's tutelage and future may have been flawed, but hindsight was always such a bitter window from which to view the past. And yet, the pain of losing an apprentice sits with you always. The scars of Exar Kun sat heavy on many of the Jedi Masters. And others had disappeared - one example was my childhood friend Jolee, who had vanished entirely after the fall of his wife.

I had not wanted to tutor Lars, but caved under Vandar's insistence. I should have listened to my heart. I was not ready, and only now I realize how unfair it is to Lars. I had left him behind with our shuttle, busy unloading the few possessions we had brought with us.

I grimaced, suddenly disgusted with myself. Why am I standing here like a buffoon, lamenting a past I cannot change? Bastila surely needs my counsel. I sighed, and began striding in the direction of the Republic Base. When the distress signal and accompanying message from the Ebon Hawk had been received, I had known who was involved. Unexplained explosion, indeed. But why is she running? There could be only one reason – Revan thought I was her enemy. I pursed my lips, lost in thought as my feet strode over ferracrete foundations. She remembers. How much, perhaps only Bastila knows.

The mind rebuild should have been complete, lasting. Galdea and Vima had been adamant it was. But nothing is eternal. Perhaps it is the will of the Force. It had been the worst experience I'd ever had; stripping my apprentice's mind back and rebuilding it with the identity of a dying casualty from the wars she herself had started. I'd had no choice – not only had the Council themselves agreed on the action taken, but Galdea and Vandar has insisted my cooperation was vital.

If not for Bastila's vision of the Star Map on Dantooine, then Revan may have had a real chance at redemption. The Dantooine Council had been divided, but I had hoped for the best outcome. The idea had been posed to heal the Sith Lord slowly, naturally, over months, and attempt to guide her back to the Light. Vima had not believed her mind would ever recover from the psychic injury, but
we might have tried regardless.

No one had expected the young Bastila Shan to behold a vision of Revan and Malak entering Force tombs on Dantooine that we did not even know about. Suddenly, it became a lot more urgent to have a sane shell of the Sith Lord walking about, so we could mine that information if our team of Jedi did not find the Star Maps themselves.

I had done the Council's will, but a dark seed of doubt over the outcome sat with me always.

xXx

A short message from an officer on my comm-link informed me that the crew of the *Ebon Hawk* had already been escorted to the Republic Embassy, despite the Selkath impounding their ship. That puzzled me; I didn't understand why the Selkath would be involved in a Republic rescue mission, though surely I would find out soon.

The embassy itself was situated on the northern side of the city, close to the Selkath Supreme Court and High Command. Despite the Selkath's protestations of neutrality, I knew they at times had background dealings with the Republic they kept secret from the Sith. *Even such a determinedly neutral species as the Selkath cannot blindly ignore the destructive nature of the Sith.*

As I approached the complex, one Republic officer was berating two junior soldiers in a loud, irate voice.

"Your speeder was broken? Where is it? You can't mean to tell me you left it out there! Speak up, Ensign!" The officer had his hands resting angrily on his hips, his face mottled red in irritation.

"The escape pod was empty, sir. My speeder broke, and I thought I should report to you, sir," the soldier responded in a mechanical voice. I stiffened. There was something slightly wrong, even automated, about his voice.

"You already told me the pod was empty, man!" the officer yelled, and I wondered in distaste if I saw spittle fly from his lips. "But where is your speeder? You should know the protocol by now, you shameless excuse for a soldier! We don't have an unlimited supply of vehicles on Manaan – the Sith pinch everything – so all broken parts are to be supervised until they can get towed! Get out there right now, and don't report back until you've brought the wreckage home!" The officer finished his long-winded rant in a sort of snarl, before turning on his heel and exiting the Republic compound in a furious march.

My eyes narrowed as I interpreted the lost, bewildered expression on the two soldiers left behind. *It couldn't be, could it?* I strode over to them, intercepting the men before they could leave.

Injecting just a small amount of Force into my words, I addressed them mildly. "Tell me what happened when you came across the escape pod."

The soldier blinked and swallowed convulsively. "I, uh, I- the escape pod was empty, Master Jedi," he stammered. "My bike broke, and I had to ride double on Stirwin's." The second soldier was nodding dazedly in confirmation.

It is as I suspected then. Revan's strengths may have been in other areas of the Force, but she had certainly picked up a few things under my tutelage. In the early days, I had often doubted whether my training would suit her; I was strong at mental manipulation, but I preferred to avoid outright conflict. She had a flair for the more physical manifestations of the Force, be it lightsaber forms or outright expositions of power like her fabled ionization. However Revan was as adaptable as she
was brilliant. Not only did she become one of the strongest duellists in our Order, but she also gained an impressive knowledge – and ability – of the more passive, subtler uses of the Force.

I grimaced, and drew more power in. "Your will is your own. You will remember what occurred."

The soldier’s expression became even more dazed, if that was possible. Then, abruptly, it twisted into a confused anger. "Wh-what happened? Th-there was a woman!" The second soldier stumbled slightly as a dawning awareness broke on his face, also.

I smiled gently. "It is alright now. The woman is a Jedi, who was lost." That, in a sense, was true. "I will talk to your superior and explain what happened. I would appreciate it if you could tell me everything that occurred first, however?"

The men quickly extrapolated on the encounter, and I wondered at how fortuitous it had been for Revan to find a speeder so easily. After assuring the soldiers that everything was under control, I turned to enter the embassy, subtly reaching out with the Force to scan the area. I sensed Bastila immediately: her presence shone from within the complex. What startled me was the aura of another Force-user next to her. Grief and guilt encompassed a compassionate heart, and I wondered in astonishment whom it could be. I lengthened my stride, and made quick time into the embassy proper.

"Master Jedi," a sentry greeted me in the foyer. Large, chrome pillars gave the place a classical style, akin to the rest of the Selkath architecture on the planet. An immense holo-picture of Coruscant dominated the east wall, adding colour to an otherwise utilitarian foyer.

I nodded briefly at the Republic guard. "Perhaps you can lead me to the crew of the Ebon Hawk?"

"Certainly," the man assented. "Follow me."

We walked down one of the hallways, and the sentry stopped at the first meeting room. After activating the door switch, he stepped back to allow me entrance.

Commander Wann, the current leader of the Republic Embassy whom had holo-commed me more than once, was deep in conversation with Bastila Shan and a man I recognized as the war hero Carth Onasi. They turned at my entrance, and I could not miss the flare of relief on the young Padawan’s face as she recognized me.

But my attention was focused on the other inhabitants of the room, and my surprise intensified. A young Twi’lek girl sitting on a recliner was wearing a surly expression and being comforted by a Wookiee of all things. A small utility droid whirred at their feet. Behind them, a formidable Mandalorian wearing a garish purple suit of armour stood scowling, an unlit cigarra dangling from his lips. I blinked. How in the Force has Bastila managed to gather such an entourage?

Then it hit me, of course. People always flocked to Revan. Her leadership skills were perhaps only matched by her charisma. My last surprise was the unknown Force user; a silent Cathar was standing in one of the far corners. My eyes widened. That’s Quatra’s missing charge! Juhani!

"Master Karon!" Bastila addressed me effusively, and I realized I was still standing in the doorway. I smiled wryly, and knew that even now, Revan could still surprise me.

"Padawan," I acknowledged, and strode forward to take her hands in greeting. "It is good to see you again." I noted the tense set of Bastila’s shoulders relax, and understood that her time had been far from easy.

"Master, allow me to introduce you to my companions," Bastila said as she quickly recovered her
composure. "This is Captain Carth Onasi, whom I am sure you have heard of."

"Master Jedi," the man intoned, but his gaze was on Commander Wann.

I smiled briefly. "Captain. So nice to see you again." I saw surprise flash over the soldier's face as he turned back at me. I let out a small tinkle of laughter. "You perhaps do not remember me, Captain. We met but once, and I am sure most Jedi look the same to you."

A wry grin of agreement curved his lips as I glanced back toward Bastila. She nodded towards the young Twi'lek, but I noticed her expression tense. She does not like the girl, I wonder? "This is Mission Vao, a refugee from Taris. Her companion is Zaalbar, also from Taris."

"Welcome to Ahto City," I murmured, but the girl merely nodded, her eyes trained on the floor. The Wookiee, however, was more courteous and rose to bow.

"(I greet you, Master Jedi)," he rumbled.

My smile grew, and I wished I could emulate Shyriiwook. Before I could address the Wookiee, Bastila moved on, obviously wishing to hurry the introductions.

"That is the mercenary Canderous Ordo," she said flatly, nodding towards the older warrior.

"Yo," he acknowledged, looking away to light his cigarra. I raised an eyebrow, but smiled anyway. Mandalorians were not particularly known for their manners, and I knew it would gall Roland Wann just to have one in residence.

"And I believe you know Juhani already?" Bastila ended on a soft note.

I turned to look at the Cathar who did not meet my eyes. She was wearing a loose white tunic, one hand plucking at the overlong sleeve. My expression grew gentle as I approached her. "Padawan," I said softly. "It warms my heart to see you here."

Juhani looked up then, tormented golden eyes staring into mine. A maelstrom of emotions warred through the Cathar's face as I reached for her hands and squeezed them lightly.

A small, nervous smile flicked at her lips. "Master Karon." Her voice was a mere whisper.

I wondered what had happened. Quatra had sensed her Padawan embracing the Dark Side in her Knight trials, but the woman who stood opposite me merely felt confused; even grief-stricken. I did not approve of Quatra's methods. Even I had sensed the young Cathar had grown too attached to her master, but there are better ways to deal with an apprentice's love than to throw it in her face during her Knight trials. The bitter aftermath had been the disappearance of not one, but two Padawans as Tefain's charge had vanished after a biting argument with Quatra herself. I'd walked in on the end of that confrontation, as the young Human Padawan had stormed away after giving Quatra a piece of her mind. Tefain still hasn't managed to track Belaya down, but at least we have found Juhani.

"We will talk later," I promised Juhani. "For now, relax and have something to eat. I must convene with Bastila."

Juhani nodded, and I looked back at Roland Wann. "Commander, perhaps you could organize quarters and food for all of Padawan Shan's companions? For now I wish to talk with Bastila alone."

Roland Wann nodded, although I could tell he was not happy. Like many of the high-ranking military stationed on bases that saw little action, Roland had become used to being in command, and
did not appreciate accommodating a Jedi. While I had no rank as far as the Republic was concerned, protocol demanded that they cooperate with us unless otherwise ordered. His narrowed eyes settled on the Mandalorian, who was leaning against the wall casually and flicking cigarra ash on the clean floor. I sighed inwardly.

"Of course," Roland muttered.

"(Maybe we could stay here for one night, Mission? At least for the meal?)" I heard the Wookiee say to his companion. I glanced at Bastila, who had pursed her lips.


Roland harrumphed. "But what about the escape pods? I thought there had been some survivor who had ejected from the Ebon Hawk?" he demanded.

"It's under control," I replied. "You can call the search off, Commander."

Six intent and shocked faces swivelled around to stare at me.

"Under control?" the young Twi'lek burst out. "What do you mean by that? Do you know where Jen is? Tell me!" She had leapt to her feet, an aura of intense determination around her.

Bastila shot a scandalized look at Mission, but turned to question me regardless. I noticed that even Carth Onasi had stopped haranguing Commander Wann to pay attention. *Revan certainly made an impact on this lot.*

"Do you know where Jen is?" Bastila asked quietly.

"Not yet," I answered, glancing seriously at everybody in turn. "But I will soon. Bastila, let us leave." I motioned Bastila out and followed before the impassioned Twi'lek could erupt once more.

xXx

"For all that I need the reprieve, Master Karon," Bastila started, as soon as we had entered a more private setting. "Shouldn't we be going after Jen?"

I noted that she still used Revan's false name, even in a secure room. Whether this room was devoid of sensors or not, my Force ability was currently soundproofing the room against any potential eavesdroppers, sentient or otherwise.

The meeting room itself was fairly large; a long, circular table stretched out from wall to poraclay wall, and I inferred Roland liked to hold many officious meetings here. Bastila herself appeared more comfortable to stand and pace across the fluffy grey carpet, but I sat down and picked up a piece of succulent kakasi fruit laid out in a tempting platter. I wondered just how to word the next bit of information.

"She has left the planet already Bastila," I said simply. Sometimes the bare truth was the best way to handle a situation.

Blank shock dulled the lustre of her eyes, and the colour drained her face. "Then we must go after her, immediately!" she burst out. "Where has she gone?"

For all that I felt the bitterness of Revan's escape myself, I could not hold back a chuckle. "Sit down, Bastila, and relax. Your dedication to duty does you credit, particularly since it must have been a thankless task indeed."
Bastila's mouth dropped open at what she probably considered a blasé attitude for a very serious matter. "But we cannot just let her roam free!"

I sighed. "I know. But this is something you must leave to me. I do not know where she has gone, but I will find her soon enough." I did not want to tell her of my vision; the young woman had enough resting on her shoulders as it was.

"If you do not know where she has gone, then how do you know she has left the planet?" Bastila questioned, sitting down reluctantly.

"I sensed her depart. She was my apprentice, Bastila. I have spent years in the past trying to track her and Malak down from their escapades." A wry smile curved my lips in remembrance; thoughts of Revan invariably granted me a wide range of emotions, encompassing everything from grief, anger, and even love.

I noticed Bastila glance around the room surreptitiously as I named the Sith Lord. "It is safe to talk here, Bastila. No one will hear."

She nodded her acquiescence, before staring down at the table. "What now, then?"

"Perhaps a chance to meditate and relax, Bastila," I suggested softly. While I venture to explore the mining facility, like I promised Roland? My premonition told me that Revan would return to Manaan soon, did I really want to be lurking on the bottom of the ocean when she arrived back on the planet? "Your master is on his way here also; he shall arrive in a few weeks."

At that, Bastila jerked her head up, a surprised smile lighting her face. "Master Vrook is alive? Coming to Manaan?"

My smile warmed further; it was good to see the Padawan held her Master in such high regard. Of course. She has not yet returned to Dantooine; she may not have known whether he made it through the attack. "Yes. He was delighted to hear of your survival – as were we all, Padawan. You have done well."

"Well?" Bastila's expression dropped in self-doubt. "I have failed. Revan is out there, unguided, alone, up to who knows-"

"Bastila," I cut her off gently. "You are too harsh on yourself. You should never have been placed in this position, and you were never meant to be alone. I, of all people, understand how hard to is to deal with Revan, and knowing somewhat of both your personalities I doubt you two would have warmed to each other. She cannot be commanded, and follows her own will. She-" I stopped short, and closed my eyes briefly as I halted my train of thought. "But that is not important. What I do need to know, however, is how much she remembers. How is she acting?"

Bastila tensed visibly as she answered. "She is unbalanced. A seething mass of emotions. When I first encountered her on Taris, she showed compassion and- and a rather annoying sense of humour. Then there was a time when I thought the identity of Jen Sahara had returned, but ever since Tatooine she has been behaving psychotically." She shrugged in helplessness. "I have no other word for it. All I can sense from her is rage and desperation, and now she knows how to shield me from her mind."

My eyes narrowed at that; I understood the power and limits of the mind-link Bastila shared with Revan, and it was not good that Revan was beginning to discover it for herself. No one expected Bastila Shan to form a bond with my erstwhile Padawan. It had been created when Bastila had preserved the spark of life within Revan's dying body, but she herself had not been aware of the
consequences her act of mercy entailed until she glimpsed that first vision of the Dantooine Star Map. Those types of Force bonds were exceedingly rare, with the potential to become exceedingly strong. I motioned for Bastila to continue, and she did so haltingly. "She is starting to remember. Her dreams are awfully fragmented, but she is recalling flashes of her past."

"Before or after the fall?" I asked softly, but my tone was deadly serious. If she is remembering her childhood, then perhaps there is hope for redemption. If, however, the stronger memories are of her time as the Sith Lord...

Bastila looked like she did not understand why it was so important. "Both. I do not believe she has any idea of her true identity, but her Force abilities are increasing in power and intensity. She has little control over it, but her strength is returning." She closed her eyes as a small surge of fear emanated from her upon the Force. Bastila has stood up well as she could have, being made to babysit a volatile ex-Sith Lord. Again, I realized how unfair circumstances had been upon the young Padawan.

"That is worrying," I said heavily, more for the lack of a better response. If Revan recalls her dark heritage, and is lashing out in violent darkness, then perhaps I already know my murderer. And perhaps redemption is long past her.

"Worrying?" Bastila countered sharply. "It is more than worrying. If she returns to her apprentice's side..."

"She will not," I interrupted. "You forget - Malak betrayed her. He was always her unwavering shield. She would not return to him, nor would he work with her. Even as the Dark Lord of the Sith, I still felt her grief at his betrayal during the mind rebuild. She had not believed he would ever turn on her." That had been the only sane emotion I had sensed from the fragments of her mind. That such a strong love could be destroyed so completely showed just how corrupting the Dark Side truly was. And yet the fact that she grieved flared my hope for her redemption.

"Why did the Council decide to rebuild her mind? Surely- it would have been safer- to, to-"

"To what, Bastila?" I rubbed a hand over my short horns wearily. "To imprison her with the Senate, and lead her to assured execution? To kill her ourselves? We value life, and you are the very one who saved her and made that choice. Like it or not, Revan owes her life to you alone." I paused briefly. "As for the mind rebuild- well, we needed the information on the Star Maps. We still do - we have no idea where on Kashyyyk or Korriban the maps could be, and the latter would be almost impossible to infiltrate even if we did know. No, we needed information that only Revan knew, and her mind was too fragmented to allow any other course of action."

Bastila sighed. "But then why is she recalling her past with such clarity? She knows she is not Jen Sahara - that façade had already crumbled away. It is only a matter of time before she finds out who she really is."

I felt my lips pursing, and knew that to be the truth. "Perhaps. But things are not always as hopeless as they seem. Trust in the Force, Bastila." I had to do that myself.

She nodded reluctantly as I glanced at the east wall. Behind it, I knew, was a pacing Cathar I still had to see. I smiled again at Bastila. "It is a good thing you have done, returning Juhani to the Order. I am keen to talk to her, although I must confess there are many who believed she would never be seen again. I can sense the turmoil within her, but she is not lost to the darkness. Not anymore. I commend you."
Bastila dropped her head, and I realized with a shock that the credit did not belong to her. She closed her eyes wearily. "I did not find her, Master Karon. Revan did," she said succinctly.

A sudden spark of hope shot through me. "Really? Revan redeemed Juhani?" *Maybe all is not lost. Perhaps I am the one who should have more faith in the Force.*

Bastila swallowed, but her next words were terse. "I would not quite say that. They fought on Tatooine – I believe Juhani challenged her – and Revan returned with Juhani in tow."

"But that is good news! If Revan could make someone-" I stopped myself, realizing just what Bastila had said. "Tatooine? What were you doing there?"

Bastila blinked. "I-I tried to go to Dantooine after leaving Taris, but we exited hyperspace in the middle of the Sith attack," she explained hurriedly. "We had to leave, our ship was damaged – Carth chose a pre-programmed hyperspace jump – we ended up on Tatooine."

"And?" I prompted. *Tatooine? There is no such thing as coincidence.*

"And I found the Star Map," she ended simply.

I could feel the joy blossoming on my face; the warmth of hope filling me once more. "Well done, Padawan. You have the coordinates?"

She nodded. "I sent them under encryption to the High Council. But I have them with me, also."

My smile grew. "It appears the Force led you there, then. And now to Manaan? Why did you choose this destination?"

A frown pleated her face as she chewed on her lip. "I-I do not really know, Master. Revan was planning to run on Tatooine – I convinced her to travel with me to a neutral place, one where there was no other Jedi. Manaan was the first one I thought of. I-I guess she somehow found out about your appearance here."

I nodded; obviously that had been the case. "And yet, you have journeyed to the location of another Star Map. It would appear that the Force is leading you, Bastila. This was always your mission, and now I wonder if you are destined to complete it." Perhaps this way Roland Wann's request could be satisfied, without me leaving the surface of Manaan. The situation in the mining colony sounded dire, and I understood the need for prompt investigation. *Fortunately, the location of the Star Map is within the Hrakert Rift – right next to the station.* If only we knew more about the whereabouts of the other two Star Maps.

Bastila's lips parted in mute astonishment. "I-I had thought to rest awhile, Master Karon."

I looked at the woman then, and for the first time noticed the drawn lines around her expressive eyes. *She is not tired so much as exhausted.* "Yes, I understand, Bastila. And while I do not deny you a few days of rest, this mission is important. I will take care of Revan when she returns, but your task will be to travel to the Hrakert Station. I would hear more of what had happened after she had slept, and then I would see to it that some of her companions accompanied her.

A determined look tightened her face and she nodded at me. "I will do my duty, Master Karon. I-wait, did you say when Revan returns?"

"Yes," I answered softly. "For she will, and perhaps it is time to give you a break from dealing with her, hmm?"
A small smile curved the woman's face, and I once more noted the look of relief flash through her eyes. "Master Karon, a few hours of sleep would be ample. I have slept recently, and would prefer to get started on this quest."

"Fair enough, Padawan, but please ensure you are rested. There are more details I need to impart to you about Hrakert Station, but for now I will let you relax while I talk to Juhani."

Bastila's smile turned compassionate, and I sensed that she felt for the Cathar. "Thank you," she said softly, and I inclined my head.

"Thank you, Bastila. You have done much already."

xXx
Echoes of the Past

- Jen Sahara -

The passage seemed to drag. Hulas had told me it was only a four-hour flight, but it felt like I’d already spent half a day crammed in a transport ship that reeked worse than a Wookiee’s breath. I was pressed up against the window by a heavyset Duros, who had finally stopped initiating conversation after I’d threatened to gut him. That was real slick. I have the subtlety of a Gamorrean prostitute. I wrenched my thoughts away from that ludicrous image quickly, before it could stick.

I felt pressed in, claustrophobic. Children were squalling in a variety of languages, playing on my tense nerves and rising temper. My head was still pounding, and it was hard to stay focused. Flashes of people and places shot randomly through my mind. I closed my eyes in despair and breathed in deeply. Consciousness faded.

…

“Let’s get outta here!” he hissed from his vantage point by the doorway. “We’ve got what we need, so let’s go!”

Stars, it’s not like I’m gonna get caught. I never get caught. But he had, once. He’d never told me what the bastards did to him – they called themselves the Enforcers, but in reality their only job was to ensure no Uncitizen left the Western Underground. I’d seen them slaughter countless of the hungry, starving homeless in the name of their ‘duty’.

Still, to this day, he wouldn’t tell me how he escaped. Perhaps I didn’t really want to know.

“Got a cit ID chip,” I grinned, as I pocketed my tools and a stash of credits.

“It’s not like that’s much use to us,” he muttered. “We’re not registered on the NCD, remember?”

I closed the locker, and stood up. “Sod the National Citizen Database. It’s all a load of kath crap anyway. Telling us we don’t have the right to live because of where we’re born.” I could feel myself scowling. The injustice of my homeworld always stirred my anger, but not his. Not anymore. Somehow, he seemed to have grown resigned to it. Not quite acceptance, but a close cousin.

“It’s the way it works, little gal,” he quipped as I walked over to him. “You can’t change the system.”

“Don’t call me that,” I said automatically. “And that’s such a cop out. Just accepting things ‘cause they’ve always been like that.”

He shrugged, motioning me out as he closed the door. We were thieving in one of the poorer parts of Altizir, which meant less of a haul, but also a smaller chance of being caught. Considering the grim consequences of exposure, it really was our only option if we wanted to eat. It would have sat better with me if we’d looted some rich bastard’s joint instead, but I always made sure not to take
everything. Only what we needed to survive.

“Well, maybe one day you can change the world,” he muttered, grinning wryly at me as we walked quickly through the abandoned apartment building.

“Well maybe I can!” I retorted. “Sun and stars! Why do you always make fun of my views?”

“Cause they’re dangerous views, I guess. That old man is always putting ideas in your head.” He grabbed my hand suddenly, stopping me in my tracks just before the back exit we’d come in through. “I couldn’t stand it if anything happened to you.” His eyes had darkened in intensity, and I felt desire stab deep through my belly. His other hand moved to cup the side of my face, its comforting warmth sending unbidden shivers down my back. Humour crinkled his young face, and I wondered if he could sense my uneasiness. He’d always been able to read my thoughts. Uncannily, at times.

A grinding noise startled me, and a lead weight plummeted through my stomach as I recognized it. The sound of that half-broken side door opening. Blank shock dulled his dark eyes, and he wrenched me behind him abruptly.

Be calm, my mind muttered swiftly. It’s probably just a normal cit’ who’ll ignore us.

“We have been looking for you,” a voice said mildly. My throat dried up, but I jumped out from behind the safety of his back regardless, brandishing a dull, chipped shiv that was my only weapon. I ain’t going down without a fight!

To my utter surprise, the figures standing before us weren’t clothed in the loose blue and silver uniform of the Talshion Enforcers. Instead, all three of them were draped in dull brown robes - like clerics or something - and their body language was relaxed. The leader, who had spoken, was a female of some race I’d never seen. Two small, sharp horns protruded from her forehead, and her eyes blazed a brilliant turquoise against her dark skin.

I blinked. “Who the frell are you?”

…

“Hey, wake up.”

Something prodded me in the side, and awareness flared, followed immediately by a heavy pounding in my head. I bit back a groan; the lingering headache seemed to be getting worse. I turned to glare at my neighbour, who retracted the offending arm from my side. “Sorry,” the Duros said mildly. “You were muttering in your sleep. Sounded like a nightmare.”

I nodded once, and winced. Damn this! My arm ached, my head throbbed, and my vision was fuzzy and unclear. The last thing I needed was to be inundated with flashbacks from one of my pasts. At least I know that Karon woman is from Street Kid’s past. Figures. Damn these riddles in my head.

The Force was still teasing me with possibilities, promising me with power. I couldn’t stop the longing to reach out, and as I did so I slammed straight into Bastila’s walls. Schutta!

Jen? Are you listening? Please, you have to come back!

“You okay miss?” the Duros repeated. His grating voice stabbed into my ears. “We’re almost there. Just an hour away.”

My head pounded, my vision blurred...
“Only one hour until we reach the Genoas system, my Lord,” a man said. He was dressed in a formal military uniform, with Admiral pips on the shoulders. Funny, it looked like a Sith uniform.

“Excellent.” I strode across a large command deck, staring out at the flaring stars. “It starts, Admiral. Soon we shall create a new order. Never again shall we be at the mercy of any threat like the Mandalorian scum.”

The Admiral turned to look at me; an older man, lines of age pitting his face. His hair grew white under a ridiculous military hat. Honestly, I really need to change that ludicrous uniform. His eyes were serious and intelligent, and he opened his mouth to speak.

Something prodded me in the side. Man and starship dissolved.

…

“Huh?” I mumbled.

“You gotta pull yourself together, lady,” someone was muttering. Belatedly, I recognized my annoying neighbour. I should silence him. No, a civilian ship was not a good place to start a fight. I don’t want to hurt him, he’s trying to help!

“The Selkath won’t let you into Emnaad if they think you’re stimmed up,” the Duros was saying. What is he jabbering about? “Here, have some of this.”

I stared at the Duros; really looked at him this time. Odd, he seemed to be sincere as he held out a small syringe.

My eyes narrowed. “What the frell is that?”

“Shhh!” he hissed. “It’s just an energy booster. Clears your mind, sorta thing. Looks like you could use it.” I could see the red veins in his big, bulbous black eyes. He’s a junkie. Stoned up to his ugly eyeballs. And yet, he was offering me a solution to my unstable dizziness.

“I’ll be fine,” I said shortly, and turned away. I wanted him to stop talking so I could think. I commanded an admiral? How crazy is that? Can I really believe all these memories? Well, it was obvious that I had been powerful. Really? And maybe next I’ll dream I’m the head of the Senate. I snickered, and the Duros looked marginally offended.

“Come on, it’s only Gree Spice! And you won’t get into Emnaad if you keep blacking out.”

I shrugged, annoyance winning out. Why not, it’ll make him shut up. And I won’t make it to the GenoHaradan if I keep fainting.

You always were too reckless, someone muttered. Always too quick to jump into situations, without a thought for the consequences.

“Emnaad?” I questioned as I took the proffered needle. “What’s that?”

A prick in my arm, the feeling of salvation.

“It’s the main Selkath colony on Rii’shn. Y’know, the Selkath have to live in domes, the planet’s too cold for them. The rest of the place is mostly Czerka mining colonies, all sorts of temporary towns where the Exchange hang out. People disappear, all the time.” The Duros was rambling, and I
wondered that I hadn’t picked up on his state earlier. “The Selkath keep things pretty peaceful and
controlled in Emnaad. Frakking hard to find any spice around.”

“So why are you going there?” I countered. My head cleared marginally, and my thoughts calmed
down. Everything seemed less important. My fragmented memories and lost past reduced in
importance; I’d made it this far without knowing who I was. Why did it really matter?

**Jen?**

Heh, Bastila was still talking to me. Funny, I wasn’t so angry at her anymore. But I wanted what she
continued to deny me. The Force. *Let’s think about this rationally. I can break through her shields,
one step at a time.*

**No!**

I’ve done it before, right?

**Jen, I-I.** Bastila sighed. *I’ll let you have access to the Force, if you tell me where you are going.*

I thought about that for a moment, clearly and logically. *But if I tell you that, then you’ll find me. I
don’t want that, right?*

A sense of astonishment radiated from her. *What’s wrong with you?*

The Duros was grinning idiotically at me. *I think I have concussion. I wonder if taking spice was
such a good idea, after all.*

**Spice?**

“How long does this last?” I asked curiously. It didn’t really matter. Things were so much clearer
now. It didn’t matter whether I was Evil Bitch, or Street Kid, or Jen Sahara... no, I couldn’t possibly
be Jen. Everything seemed to point to Evil Bitch. She was the strongest, right?

The Duros giggled. “It’ll probably wear off by the time you’re in Emnaad. Doesn’t last long, shame.
If you want more, I’ll need some credits.” He hiccupped, and a sane part of me realized he’d taken
more than just an energy booster himself. *He’s probably on glitterstim.* It didn’t matter, he seemed to
be happy. *Of course it matters, you moron! Snap out of it! This guy could get us into trouble!* No, it
didn’t really matter.

**Spice?!** Bastila sounded outraged and incredulous. I giggled. She was funny like that. *I-I cannot-
I will not deal with this anymore.* A sort of weary resignation emanated through the mind-link. *You
forge your own path, Jen.*

The touch of her presence against mine faded, and part of me was surprised. *She left? What
happened to the overbearing, neurotic woman determined to manipulate and betray me to her
masters?*

Apathy and relaxation overcame me, and the feeling drifted away, superfluous. My thoughts cleared,
and everything seemed so simple, so easy to understand. I’d spent so much time raging at the
unknown without doing anything about it. So many days until I’d finally left the others. Of course,
Bastila still had control over me. *Time to do something about that.*

I drew my mind back to my first encounter with Juhani. I’d confronted her as a meek, empty shell,
and walked away alive, invigorated, and furious. Somehow during our duel I’d shattered Bastila’s
shields in the midst of rage. My eyes closed, and I heard the faint giggle from my happy neighbour, overlaid with the heavy noise of too many people confined into a too small a ship.

Images danced through my mind, as clear as if they happened yesterday. Well, it wasn’t really that long ago, if you think about it. It felt like a lifetime. I could see Juhani, facing me, a feral snarl twisting her features. Despair lurked in the recesses of her amber eyes. Odd, I hadn’t noticed the despair before.

**How did I break through Bastila to reach the Force?** Rage had overcome me at Juhani’s attack. Fear for myself, fear for Mission. I tried to rekindle that anger, rekindle the fury that constantly blazed within me. For the first time, the fury wouldn’t rise. Maybe it was the ‘energy booster’, maybe my exhaustion. My eyelids drooped. A kaleidoscope of colours stretched outwards, encompassing me. Odd, I felt like I was floating. I couldn’t see the transport ship anymore, just small flickers of life dotted around me. A thick cord of bright white dazzled me, blinded me. It seemed to connect me to someone else. I followed.

…

*I will not think of it anymore. I will not think of her.* Master Karon had advised me to trust in the Force, and in a way it was a relief to let go of the incessant worry, the continuing darkness suffocating me through that cursed bond.

The glistening walls of the Republic Embassy engulfed me as I strode back towards my assigned room. Karon had gone to see Juhani; I dearly hoped the Cathar would find some peace. The end of the opulent corridor twisted back towards the exit of the embassy, and a flash of blue in a burnt orange flight jacket darted past. *Mission?* Followed by a lumbering Wookiee.

I sighed internally. *So they are leaving.* I didn’t really expect anything else; the duo certainly hadn’t tagged along because of my presence. For all that the impressionable Twi’lek seemed to do nothing but irritate, part of me worried what trouble she would run into out on the streets of Ahto City.

*It is not like she would listen to me. If she wants to leave, I cannot do anything to stop her. It is better she does not get any more involved with my quest.* I wondered briefly how much longer Canderous would stay around.

*He will be off soon, no doubt.*

The door to my room swished open, and I walked inside with a feeling of relief. A small meditation mat adorned a polished chrome floor, next to a large bed that begged to be used. My eyes snagged on the comfortable mattress, and although I berated myself internally, I could not stop my feet from walking towards it. *I should meditate first.* The bed’s soft comfort engulfed me as I lay down, and a weary sigh escaped. *Perhaps I need rest first.* Karon wanted me to travel to Hrakert Station, and so I would. This time, I would not fail in my duty.

*Whoa, this is surreal.*

My body tensed as shock sparked through me.

…

I felt myself forcibly hurled from Bastila’s mind, and the Jedi faded. *Were those actually her thoughts?* Bastila’s angry indignation wafted after me, and then suddenly her presence vanished. Like she deliberately blocked it.

I was flying away from her mind, back along the thick cord. *Is that the bond?* I’d never seen it before; it looked so pretty. *Stars. What sort of moron am I, taking spice like a crazed idiot?* The
voice was a familiar sneering whisper; quiet and less powerful than usual.

The Force sparkled around me, like viewing fireworks from a distance. I felt so lethargic, so, so... at peace. Everything was alright. And suddenly I saw it for the first time. Remnants of Bastila; a barrier between me and the Force. The shield I’d slammed into countless times, and shattered only twice. It was pure Force energy itself; humming thick with life. Fashioned into a net, cascading tightly around me, and hooked back through our bond. No matter how I try, I can’t draw on the Force with that thing in the way.

How ironic that a barrier of Force energy would keep me from accessing Force energy. Now that was a curious thought. What if I...?

I tugged gently at the barrier, drawing it in the way I usually pulled on the Force in my surroundings. It gave a little; crumbled. I tugged harder.

It shattered.

Without realizing it, I was holding my breath, waiting for a shrewish mental scream from Bastila. My eyes flew open, and I found myself back in the cramped ship. Noise and smell slammed into my senses, then muted as the Force flooded through me. Powerful, intoxicating, healing. A bigger rush than a syringe could offer. Is that it? Is that all I have to do, to break her shield? The passive way certainly was a lot easier.

Still no response from the snot. Maybe she had fallen asleep, at last. Now that’s a good idea. Maybe when I wake up, the effects of this drug will have worn off. I closed my eyes again, content for the first time in a long, long while.

xXx

I was rudely awoken later, by a Selkath jerking on my shoulders.

“Wake up!” he slurred. “We have landed. You need to leave.”

I prised open grimy eyelids as familiar aches surged back into existence. My weak arm, reminding me of its poor condition. My head, throbbing with a dizzy pain. I gasped in a breath, tentatively drawing on the Force. I called to it, and it answered. I couldn’t sense Bastila, but the Force swirled through me invitingly, begging to be used.

I smiled. Finally, something was going right. My Duros companion had already left, and I noted the transport was remarkably empty. The Selkath scowled, his amphibian features wrinkled in annoyance. It’s time to get moving.

I disembarked, picking up HK from the droid storage unit. The datapad Hulas had given me lay heavy in my pocket, detailing where and who to meet. Interestingly, the meeting place wasn’t in the domed city. Hulas had given me a small purse of credits, enough to order a taxi-shuttle to a nearby mining village. There was no time to lose; even on Rii’shn I felt too close to Bastila and her little Master.

The commercial port was situated on the outskirts of Emnaad, outside the major dome. Surveillance drones were buzzing over the crowds of sentients wandering around the starport. Exits into the city itself were heavily guarded by Selkath authorities, and my eyes flicked over a stimmed Duros being searched and arrested. I restrained from sniggering, mentally berating myself for taking his offer in the first place. Part of me still felt woozy despite my grasp of the Force; whether it was due to the spice or the escape pod crashing, I didn't know.
Smirking to myself, I strode towards a nearby taxi.

xXx

It was freezing. An icy wind blew straight through my armour, chilling me to the bone. The hills behind the ramshackle town were dusted in white, and I began to understand why the Selkath did not set foot outside of Emnaad. They probably wouldn’t last longer than an hour out here. I might not either, if I didn’t find some shelter.

“Observation: The designated cantina is up ahead, master.” HK pointed out. I squinted, and made out a lurid pink sign stating 'The Lady’s Garter' in bright Basic. A human followed by a protocol droid were busily entering, and I wondered if it was the only popular place around here. The mining town was an odd mixture of old and new technology; half the buildings looked as if one gale would blow them over. In this weather, it would probably happen soon.

A few sentients were out in the elements, but it was a far cry from the bustling noise of Emnaad. My doomed flying companion had warned me the Exchange and Czerka controlled these areas, so in a way it wasn’t surprising the GenoHaradan wanted to meet here. Scumbags attract scumbags. And when you’ve got a whole bunch of them together... who knows what could happen.

I spotted a Rodian nearby who was backed up against a wall, surrounded by a Bothan and two Gamorreans. His desperate eyes fixed on mine, and I looked away quickly, focusing back on the cantina. I should help. No, I needed to stay out of trouble, and get to the cantina. Why should I help a pathetic weakling, anyway?

“(I didn’t know!” the Rodian objected, his voice frantic and high-pitched.

“You expect me to believe that you were unaware your best friend and partner was going to betray Tasoan?” the Bothan sneered.

“No one betrays the Exchange,” one of the Gamorreans grunted.

No one should be cornered like that. I gritted my teeth, and walked on.

“(He said he was loyal! He did!” the Rodian gasped.

..."I am loyal! I swear it!” The woman gasped as I lifted her in the Force, slamming her hard against the wall behind.

"Tell me who betrayed me," I snarled viciously, my rage fuelling the Force thrumming and pulsing through my body.

...

I shook my head, stumbling against HK as I strove to clear the fogginess from my mind. I’ve had that vision before. I pulled on the Force, for no reason other than to feel its glorious power surge through me.

“Are you looking for trouble?” a voice snarled from behind, and I turned to see the Bothan and his Gamorrean henchmen glaring at me.

“No trouble,” I said flatly. I heard a whirring of HK’s gears as he focused on the new potential threat.
The Bothan turned back to his captive, muttering something about drunks under his breath. The Rodian was still gazing at me with pleading eyes, and my fists clenched. *No, dammit! I will not turn into some sort of simpering little Jedi, helping out everyone in need! This is beneath me!*

I walked on, pushing away a dark, sinking feeling. The thugs had gone back to interrogating the Rodian, and the icy wind blew his words to my ears, torturing me with my decision.

“(I really don’t know!” he pleaded. “(You have to believe me!)”

…

“I do not know! I wasn’t part of it!”

*I could hear the sincerity in her tone. She was of no use to me then, and I was not in the mood to be sparing. I squeezed my fist, and her neck yanked to the side. And audible snap sounded through the room. Now that was a waste. That sort of carelessness is more often displayed by my apprentice, I berated myself ruefully as I exited the room, stepping over the twitching body. My apprentice… No, he couldn’t be the one who betrayed me. Not him. It would be one of the other remnants of the blasted Jedi Thirteen.*

…

“(Query: Master, is your watery shell malfunctioning?” HK’s metallic voice snapped me back to reality yet again. *Frell! This just keeps happening!* This was the first time I’d experienced a recurring memory… or vision… or whatever those flashes really were. An iron band was pushing in against my temples, but I couldn’t stop for rest. The GenoHaradan were waiting.

“I’ll be fine, HK,” I muttered. There was an ominous silence behind me, and I twisted around to look for the Exchange thugs. The street was deserted.

I grimaced. *I guess they decided to do their little interrogation elsewhere. Sod it, maybe I should have helped him.*

A thickset Nikto guarded the entrance of the cantina, casually grasping a large blaster rifle. Small, pointed horns lined the side of the bouncer’s leathery face, and the reddish tint to his skin belied the fact he belonged to the most common branch of Nikto; the Kajain’sa. *That’s odd. Nikto usually work for the Hutts. I wouldn’t expect one to be a bouncer in a Czerka controlled village.* His sharp eyes focused on me as I approached, and he smiled ferally. All I could see was the baring of teeth.

He grunted, pointing his gun in HK’s direction.

“No droids allowed inside,” he growled. My brows lowered. *What is it with cantinas and this no droid policy? Anyone would think HK was planning to blow the place up.* My eyes slid to the dark red combat droid, whose intent gaze was pinning the Nikto… hostilely. *Heh. Maybe I can’t blame them.*

“(Observation: This meatbag looks like the bastard offspring of a diseased Hutt,)” HK stated boldly, in a language I understood but could not identify. The menacing tones of the odd language struck me first, and then the insult registered. I stiffened, and my vision snapped back to the Nikto. “(Which doesn’t say much for his mother,)” HK finished.

*What the frell is he doing?* The Nikto merely looked bored as he waited for me to send my droid away. HK stared back at me. “(Extrapolation: The guard doesn’t understand me. Master, I observed a droid entering this establishment as we walked down the street. Conclusion: He is trying to separate us. This might be a trap. Suggestion: I can easily blast this meatbag now, master,)*”
HK’s words washed through me, and surprise was chased away by irrational anger. My muscles clenched, and I instantly grasped the Force. No one traps me! Somehow I had the common sense – or maybe self-preservation – to grin and nod agreeably at the guard. Calm down. HK’s psychotic – can I really trust his instincts?

“Go back to the hotel, HK,” I said mildly to the droid. “This time, make sure you find the back entrance.” We didn’t have a hotel. I hoped HK would pick up on my meaning. This is going to mean trouble if he’s wrong. A cynical part of me pointed out that the worse trouble was if he was correct. Oh yeah.

HK stared at me with his piercing red gaze. “(Affirmation: At once, master,)” he responded, and strode away. I smiled more confidently than I felt at the alien, who stared back, impassive, and moved aside to let me pass. The lurid pink of the tacky neon sign shone brightly over my face for a brief moment.

The bar inside was fairly deserted, and I was beginning to see that cantinas looked the same all over the galaxy. This particular place was occupied by the same type of ruffians who populated Javyar’s cantina back on Taris. My eyes sharpened on a human who was lurking in the corner, nursing a drink as his droid sat powered down next to him. Right. No droids allowed. I could feel my fingers curling into fists.

A wide door marked ‘Private’ at the back of the room was guarded by a type of alien I didn’t recognize. So much for being the cultural know-it-all. I hadn’t realized how reliant I’d become on this hidden knowledge of my past, this innate ability to speak languages and recognize cultures and technology, even though I had no idea where it came from.

Alright, time to plan. I drew further on the Force, and reached out with it. I can do this. Once before, unintentionally on Tatooine, I’d done it. I can use the Force to sense... My head cleared further, and I felt more alive than I had for days. Faint sparks of life registered around me, and with a sudden boost of confidence I realized I was sensing the drunken inhabitants of The Lady’s Garter through the Force.

The guard further ahead straightened, looking at me suspiciously. He was dark skinned, hairless, and the faint light glinted off sharp teeth. My eyes roved over his muscular frame, menacing claws and bulky armour. Confidence and fury raged, and I reached further out. Somehow, the Force didn’t register on the guard. What? Why can’t I sense his life essence? A latent anger stirred within, blazing heat through my body. What’s really going on here?

I took a step towards the shadowy guard. Never mind. I’ll find out. My fury encompassed an icy core. And if it is a trap, then..... then we’ll just see who walks away alive.

…

I walked further, well aware a trap was waiting for me, but my pride would not allow for anything but to show I was the strongest. No one can best me. No one ever has, and once again, it looks like I have to prove it.

A large chrome door opened. Of course, they are expecting me. I had been lured onto this pathetic hovel of a planet merely to be led into an ambush, organized by Deralian troops and some of my own traitorous Dark Jedi. I will lay waste to this festering planet.

But first, the matter of this scum up ahead. I will show them what happens to those who dare to betray me!
I squeezed my eyes shut, and opened them again. Concentrate, dammit! I am stronger than this! The comforting presence of my lightsabers hung at my belt, concealed by the loose clothing I’d worn since I’d left the Ebon Hawk. Funny, I wasn’t cold anymore.

I strode forward towards the back door, and the alien stepped aside.

“Name?” he all but spat.

“Alieya.” I smiled tightly, offering the false one the GenoHaradan had given me. He snorted, and opened the door.

“Come with me,” he grunted, motioning me inwards.

“No, after you,” I offered in a pleasant voice, baring my teeth. He rolled his eyes, an exasperated expression lacing his dark face. Nonetheless, he stepped through the door first.

Questions buzzed insistently through my mind as I took the first step into danger. The door swung ominously shut behind me, but the warehouse itself was well lit, despite a lack of windows. Numerous bright, fluorescent lights hung low from the ceiling, creating a sheen of dazzling brilliance that all but blinded my eyes. Various storage crates lined the walls; probably brimming with alcoholic supplies for the cantina. A small desk graced the far end of the building, behind which a waiting human sat.

I paused, stretching out my Force senses as I did so. A straight path to the waiting human would take me directly between two small stacks of crates, oddly separated from the larger storage boxes that lined the shadowy walls. The alien guard walked nonchalantly between the crates, but something about their position raised my mistrust.

Pinpricks of life flared through the Force, alerting me to about twenty waiting sentients hidden behind the larger crates. Sithspit, it is an ambush! The guard had already passed the middle of the building, nearing the desk at the far wall.

Who am I that a group as powerful as the GenoHaradan would go to all this trouble of killing me? I barely had the self-control to restrain a feral snarl from erupting. The best way to foil an ambush is to trip it and charge.

The Force begged to be used; my anger begged to be unleashed. The snarl erupted unconsciously from my lungs, and my lightsabers jerked into my hands, the red haze of activation mirroring my burning fury. I could feel the Force all around me as primal power, twisting and reverberating through the 'sabers, surging a dark fury that overpowered any rationality. I wasn't even surprised to feel myself moving, running, sprinting, through the centre of the warehouse, my surroundings elongating in the manner that always accompanied Force induced speed. When you act, strike once and strike hard as if it were your last. Therein lies victory. A dark muttering from Evil Bitch, growing in power.

A large boom sounded behind me; the centre crates exploding as I sped past. Had it not been for my increased celerity, that probably would have been my end. They thought to kill me with a bunch of pathetic mines, a rabid voice growled in my head. They will all die for this!

The heat wave of the blast hit, shunting me closer to the guard who had turned around to look back at me in shock. The comical expression of stunned surprise didn’t leave his face even as my outstretched lightsaber seared through his neck. One moron down, many to follow.
The seated human jerked to his feet and bellowed something, as I leaped over the desk and drove my off-hand saber through his throat. The sheer feeling of supremacy swamped me, overloading my senses. I was vaguely aware of a primitive howl of victory exiting my lungs as I whirled around, utilizing the Force to leap onto the now-bloodied desk. Peace, this can’t be happening, a soft whisper, drowned out by raging, swirling emotions of hatred and fury. Peace is a lie! There is only passion!

The dim lights of the warehouse cut out, engulfing the storage warehouse into a pure blackness only broken by the eerie reddish glow of my ‘sabers. A cold, calculating part of me – the only portion still marginally sane – realized the rest of the GenoHaradan would no doubt be wearing visors. My brilliant weapons were merely showing them the bulls-eye.


I stood still in the doorway, aware that the light from the room behind was illuminating my presence like a homing beacon, but perversely I wanted them to make the first, futile move.

I could sense perhaps ten or so Dark Jedi in the room. The blood of Deralian troops still splattered my robes; yet I was more than ready to add to it. Who organized this? Which pathetic minion dared to believe they could challenge me?

The one nearest snarled, and charged. My lightsabers hissed - twin bands of blood-red. I threw one uncaringly at the oncoming traitor, following it with sparks of brilliant blue static from my fingertips.

The man screeched, stumbling backwards and clutching at his shoulder; now missing one arm. I deftly halted my spree of lightening to catch my off-hand ‘saber.

“Cowards!” My snarl ended in a dark, bitter laugh. “You weak fools! All too pathetic to challenge me one on one!”

“Let’s just see if you’re strong enough to survive us all, my lord!” another figure yelled, his last words mocking as he jumped forwards to challenge me.

Arran. Always brash and fiery, but he’s too stupid to organize something like this. I will find out who put them up to this.

The others followed in his wake cautiously, fanning out into a circle.

It started like a dance; an elegant movement of feints and ripostes and blood and lightening and laughter and slaughter... I lost track of everything as the Force bent itself to my will, as my lightsabers cleaved a path through flesh, and my body dodged and weaved around my enemies. My side burned and my leg cried in agony where a ‘saber had carved out a chunk of flesh, but pain was a useful tool. Pain and anger. Tools to unleash passion. And through passion, I gain strength!


Shots fired – pinpricks of light I dodged and reflected atop the slippery desk. Memories blurred into reality, and I wasn’t entirely sure who I was fighting anymore. Something slammed into my shoulder, with such force that I fell backwards, landing with a grunt onto the darkened floor. Agony resonated down my arm to the weakened bone still mending, and my teeth bared in the darkness. Pain can be used, Evil Bitch growled gleefully. I succumbed further; the Force welled up like a bursting water pipe about to explode. Used to release passion. Passion that can build strength, and increase power.

Something exploded inside of me; a thousand shards of broken ferracryystal pierced through my skin...
from the inside out, stabbing through in an oddly satisfying way. I screamed; whether in surprise or rage or glee I no longer knew. My senses peaked as sharply as a glitterstim high, and a darkly visible aura pulsed and radiated around me. *The true berserker state, at last!* Evil Bitch was crowing.

Numerous grenades were lobbed towards me; the Force hurled them back towards their owners as I leapt clear of the desk. Bright flashes of fragmentation danced against crates, and the blissful tones of agonized screaming filled my ears. *This is true living! True power!*

... "Your time has come! Your power is draining, I can feel it!" Arran snarled. He had only two allies left, but all three raised their lightsabers threateningly.

"Surely you don’t think you’ve seen the limits of my power, little Sith pretender?" I mocked. "Let me show you just how mistaken you are. My power is my victory. You will beg for release at the end."

I pulled on the Force, jerking the Zeltron’s feet out from underneath him.

"Tut tut," I mocked, leaping backwards to avoid the charge of the others. "You really should guard yourself better." Arran Da'klor was a hot-headed imbecile. He’d seen me use that trick in practise against Talvon, against Yudan, even against my loving apprentice. They'd learned to guard themselves against it - well, Talvon was long dead - but stupid Arran hadn't learned a thing. The others wouldn't have had anything to do with this. Not Yudan. Not Mal. Not Mal...

I unleashed a powerful Force-compressed blast of air that slammed into all of them as Arran was struggling to his feet. It knocked Arran and one of his lackeys back down, but the other, a human female, grunted with effort as she blocked it. I took the opportunity to jump towards Arran’s fallen comrade and sheathe my lightsaber home into his chest.

"There goes another one of your friends," I taunted, turning to face the female. Fear and uncertainty rolled off her in tantalizingly sweet waves I could almost smell. I reached out and massaged that fear, encouraging it to take over. She may have strength, but she lacks conviction in her own abilities. The woman took a hesitant step backwards, and my smile grew as I squeezed my fist tight. She choked, dropping her weapon to clutch at her throat.

"No!" Arran shrieked, charging me like a rancor in heat. I laughed as I sent him flying with another Force wave. My hand clenched again, and the Dark Jedi gagged.

"Neiza!" Arran yelled, his voice twisting in emotion.

"Oh dear," I said softly as the woman suffocated. "Don't tell me you actually care for the girl, Arran?" She had risen into the air, legs twitching spasmodically as her hands scrabbled at her throat. "Lucky for you I am feeling generous. Beg on your knees for forgiveness, and I may yet let her live."

"Never!" Arran snarled, lurching to his feet.

"A shame. I guess you didn’t really care for her then."

... The GenoHaradan were, however, professionals. A number of them fired modified slug throwers at me; impossible to see in the darkness... unless one could utilize the Force. My lips curved as I dodged the old-fashioned projectiles; some missing me entirely while others melted on my blades.
Four assassins leapt towards me with vibroblades; their movements appearing slow and clumsy to my heightened senses. Others were still firing; I lured the blade-wielders in between me and the cross-fire. The Force hummed through my flesh; the power of life of which I was master. I twisted it to do my bidding, piercing deep into nearby minds with a blast of intangible terror. All but one of the assassins dropped to their feet, clutching at their heads and screaming. The remaining one, an Aqualish, stepped forward with his blade raised. I admired his ability to resist the fear; this one had courage. I let the Force wrap around him, coil tightly over his limbs as I searched for a weak spot. Electrical impulses caught my attention; they emanated from his eye sockets. Curious. Occular implants? Well, that was easy enough to focus on. I tightened my focus, narrowing it on his eyes and finding my target. With a satisfied smirk, I yanked mentally.

The Aqualish screeched so loudly that even the drunken louts back in the cantina must have heard. His eyes landed with a wet plop behind me.

An explosion rocked the ceiling, the noise a slow growling boom in my ears. I looked up to see a blast of light shattering through the cheap plastifoam roof, followed by fragments of insulation floating like fragile snowflakes dusting the warehouse with winter's kiss. A droid dropped down from the heavens, firing a blaster rapidly on his descent.

“Observation: I see you have started the fun without me, master,” HK commented as he landed with a thud, in a tone that somehow managed to convey disappointment.

Victory was near; I could almost taste it, despite the fact I was still outnumbered. HK started firing rapidly, his shots accurate and his movements nimble despite his mechanical build. One of the assassins turned to run, but did not make it to the door. Victory is mine. Through victory, my chains are broken.

Someone threw a gas grenade; the GenoHaradan were getting desperate if they believed that would work on a droid and a Force user. The grenade was swept to the far corner; I leapt away from any residue gas. Dark laughter bubbled up, and streaks of lightening danced on my enemies, bathing the assassins in eerie blue. The Force-induced rage was still with me, still firing strongly through my veins, but... the return of a dull ache in my forearm warned me my strength was waning.

A flicker in the Force behind me. I jerked to the side just as one of the last GenoHaradan futilely stabbed the air I had recently occupied. Dim light from the jagged hole in the roof illuminated the assassin, and I realized he was the same unfamiliar race as the guard I'd gutted earlier. I slammed the Force into him, but somehow it twisted – split – divided around the alien, refusing to touch him physically. Some of my shock must have shown, for a confident smirk pleated his face. He made a guttural sound; half-laugh, half-snort.

Dashade. Recognition slammed through me; the force-resistant species thought to be extinct. How the frell had the GenoHaradan acquired two of the bastards?

“You won’t find me so easy, Jedi!” the alien spat.

“I’m no Jedi!” I snarled, drawing deeper into my faltering berserker state. The Force was sputtering in my grasp, slithering away. “And while the Force may not touch you, Dashade, it can certainly aid me!” I finished on a howl, and charged.

Speed was on my side, and his attack just wasn’t quick enough. His Echani blade whistled through the air, missing my neck as I dodged; sliding onto my knees and slicing through the tendons in his leg with a ‘saber. I rolled away as the Dashade howled, hopping onto his other foot instinctively to lurch at me again. One ‘saber rose to parry, while the other stabbed deep through his foot, into the permacrete floor. The smell of burning, cauterized flesh tickled my senses.
A scream of pure agony ripped from the Dashade as he stumbled, off-balance, his foot slicing through the ‘saber as he did so. His blade clattered uselessly, a small distance away from his hand.

I stood up, acting quickly as the Force threatened to desert me. *My strength is fading.* My lightsabers both poised at the alien’s neck, I bared my teeth.

“Why?” I yelled. “Why did the GenoHaradan double-cross me?”

“Why do you think?” the Dashade grunted, closing his eyes in pain.

*The GenoHaradan fight for money. Someone put a contract on my head.* “Who, then?” My voice had grown softer. “Tell me who, before I start randomly slicing your limbs off.”

“We have our own honour code, Jedi scum!” the Dashade spat. “Some information cannot be bought!”

“Everything can be bought.” I said coldly, dragging a ‘saber down towards his groin. “Everyone has a price, my friend. And you are just about finished.”

…

“You are finished, Arran,” I said softly, unleashing a bolt of white lightning into the Zeltron. His tortured screams wafted through the stagnant air. “But you know how long I can make you suffer. Weeks... months even. Tell me who commandeered this, and your end will be quick.”

*He had lost his lightsaber, an arm, half a leg and his dignity. But he was not broken, yet. “I gave the orders! This was my mission!” he spat in between choking gasps of pain.*

*I laughed mockingly, firing another round of lightening through his living corpse. “Do not insult me! I have known you for too long, Arran Da'klor. You are a follower, and your temper is easily manipulated. If not for your depth of power and early loyalty, you would never have been one of the Jedi Thirteen.”*

“I curse the day I ever joined your crusade,” Arran hissed. A bubble of bloody spit dribbled from the corner of his mouth. “But you’re right, we were loyal once. And you burned that out of us, burned it out of us all.”

“Who was it?” I snarled, as the achromatic crackle of electricity danced once more through his body. *And all the while, my furious thoughts raged.* Bandon, Bandon is the most likely. But he’s so new, he wouldn’t have the resources to pull this off alone. And Nisotsa’s too cautious, Yudan’s too loyal, and Mal would never... “Tell me! Was it Bandon? Yudan? Malak himself? I’ll rip it from your mind if I have to!”

Arran’s gasps of pain were broken and unsteady; the Force had long since left him. *Or so I thought, and was completely unprepared for his next move.*

A sudden, brief jerk on the Force, focused entirely on a small, ceremonial dagger strapped around my thigh. It flew into the air and embedded in his heart before I could act.

“You will never know,” he gasped. *I flooded the Force through him instinctively, furiously trying to knit together muscle and flesh. I could not heal properly, but damage control was something I had grown adept at. His life ebbed away, despite my efforts. “You will always doubt your followers, my Lord Revan,” he choked, his head turning and I felt his spirit depart.*
I froze; everything turned to ice, and the Force slipped away, out of my grasp. Agony returned in a
flood; muscles complained and burned but nothing could override the growing sense of terror within
my own head.

I stumbled backwards, vaguely aware my mouth had dropped open in horror. The Dashade took one
look at me, and lurched towards his Echani duelling blade lying nearby.

*What did Arran say?*

My limbs failed me, my thoughts reeled in denial.

*Who is Evil Bitch?*

The Dashade grasped his weapon, and pulled it back to throw at me.

*my Lord*

No words could be more damning.

HK materialized behind the Dashade, firing point-blank into his head. The blade clanged to the
ground, dropping from lifeless fingers. Just another corpse.

“Statement: All meatbags have now been terminated, master.” A smug, metallic voice.

I was lying down. I wasn’t sure how I’d made the transition from standing to lying, but I couldn’t

xXx

Time passed. Seconds or hours; I wasn’t sure and I didn’t care. Time lost all meaning when
compared to the horrifying revelation rebounding mercilessly within my own head. A logical voice
was stating that it was time to move; time to get out before anyone discovered the piles of
GenoHaradan corpses that lay within touching distance, surrounding me like a field of red daisies.
The sharp tang of bloodied, mortal injuries assailed my senses, and it would not be long before I was
discovered.

But that thought paled in comparison with the knowledge of who Evil Bitch truly was. *No wonder
she kept wresting control. It all makes nightmarish sense.* Funny how much importance can be
trapped into a name. Jen Sahara, on one hand, meant nothing. A common enough Deralian name, to
suit a common enough scholar. *But now I know another name. Two out of three.*

Bubbles of hysteria trapped in my throat, sticking like cheap fizz-pop. Part of me had almost become
resigned to a lack of knowledge about my past. To never knowing who I really was. *Not Jen
Sahara. I knew that from the start.* Evil Bitch or Street Kid? I thought I’d worked that one out those
first days on Taris, but everything since then had become... murky.

*So what does that make me?* Two out of three. Neither name could possibly be correct; one
anonymous and sickeningly passive; the other a hideous, macabre monster from a horror vid.
Terrifying and utterly unbelievable.

A chill swept through me again.

I couldn’t feel. My entire body was disjointed, like I had somehow separated myself from the
physical flesh. One thought alone kept repeating in my head, like the monotonous chant of monks praying to their un-noticing god. No rational analysis was possible, not with the numb, detached question spinning around and around, demanding an answer that I did not know. But still, I kept asking myself.

Why do I have the Dark Lord of the Sith in my head?

xXx

Chapter End Notes

Many thanks to kosiah for the beta.
Master Karon smiled warmly at me and patted my shoulder. I managed a weak shadow of a smile in response. I felt somewhat drained in spirit after the last few hours. Talking and meditating with Karon had brought a glimmer of peace to my soul, but I could not look at her without thinking of another. There had been only two Zabrak Masters in the Jedi Order - and although I had met Karon only once prior, she reminded me sharply of a past I desired to forget.

She looks so similar to Quatra. Perhaps I was not good at distinguishing differing features of the Zabrak race, but other than Master Karon’s startling eyes, they could have been sisters. They even talk the same. Both spoke with a soft intensity, as if every word had a deep meaning beyond the obvious. Both had a quiet charisma, that made others stop and listen. But there are differences. In all the years I spent with Quatra, I never heard her laugh.

Karon’s chuckle was a bright chime, and at times I could see a sort of wry self-deprecation in her eyes. And flashes of pain whenever we speak of Revan.

Karon seemed to be a gentle sort of person, and I found myself wondering how I would have fared under her tutelage. The last few hours of meditation had forced me to analyze my own character in ways that left me feeling uncomfortable with myself. I latched on to Quatra so intensely because I had no one left, and my childhood had taught me that love was meant to difficult, perhaps even unreachable. Quatra had always been stand-offish and sparing with her praise, which made me desire it all the more.

Bastila had, of course, told me of Quatra’s survival back on Tatooine, but with the revelation of Jen’s true identity – amongst other things – I’d managed to push away the knowledge to a dark, quiet corner of my troubled mind. The fact that Quatra still lived made a bitter mockery of the time I’d spent, in rage and despair and grief. A tiny, twisted part of me wished that she actually was dead. How can I think that? She was my Master! I loved her! And yet, she had betrayed me most cruelly.

Only now was Quatra’s image tarnished in my mind, although I recalled a time when someone else was none too impressed with my former master....

…

The dry, dusty fragrance of long grass tickled my senses, as the blades tickled my face. Dantooine’s clear night sky stretched infinitely above me, and as I lay quietly on the solitary plains, I wondered how similar the panorama above me was to my homeworld’s skies. I could no longer recall it: frantic, bitter memories of Tarisian streets and Tarisian nightmares had long since eroded any recollection of my early years. But I am fortunate, now. The Jedi have taken me in, and I can finally achieve my dream – if only I work harder.

Quatra’s latest lecture still rang in my ears and I was intently determined to win her approval.
would make her smile at me; I would make her proud. My other dreams of her were foolish whisperings that I ruthlessly pushed away and refused to indulge, except when the longing became too strong.

“She is too hard on you,” a voice spoke next to me, cracking through the night’s serenity.

The corners of my mouth turned down. Belaya was my closest friend, my only friend since Dak had run, but she did not understand Quatra. “She is a Master, Belaya, she knows what she is doing. And I will be a better Jedi for it.”

“Juhani, are you blind? She spends all day lecturing you, assigns you to trials and exercises that daunt most Knights, and then forces you to meditate upon your failures for days on end! No other master is so harsh!”

“You cannot seriously question a Master – we are only Padawans! We know nothing of the Order.” I struggled to stay calm – I did not wish to offend my friend, but how could she understand a Master’s methods? Particularly when Tefain – her Master was such an affable, gentle character in comparison.

“That’s- that’s – that’s kath dung!” she burst out.

I blinked in the darkness. I had never heard Belaya curse; her speech was consistently formal – almost to a fault.

Belaya sighed. “Juhani, your admiration for her is too intense, and Quatra is determined to quash that feeling with everything she puts you through! But no matter how arduous the trial, you just admire her all the more!”

“Too intense?” the words ripped angrily from my lungs, and I jumped to my feet. “You know nothing, Belaya!” I spat. “Quatra is my Master, of course I care for her! Do not – ever – imply such a thing again!”

Somehow Belaya had risen as well, and she reached out an imploring hand. I jerked away, furious, and she sighed heavily. “I am sorry. I did not mean to offend. I just- I care for you too, Juhani, and I- I am worried.”

I turned my back, and faced the nearby Enclave. “Do not concern yourself on my behalf, Belaya. I have the utmost faith in Master Quatra, and she knows what she is doing,” I said coldly as I started striding away.

Belaya’s next words were soft and not meant for my ears, but the gentle Dantooine breeze taunted me with them. “I hope she does, Juhani. I hope she does.”

…

“Are you ready, Juhani?” Karon’s soft words cut through my reverie. I blinked, and nodded solemnly at her as she opened the door of the small meeting room we had occupied for the last four hours. Karon had declared it was time for a break from soul-searching, time to see Bastila and discuss our immediate plans. Both of us had been in a Force trance and sensed the young Jedi slowly come to consciousness.

But it’s the other presences we felt that worry me. Karon dismissed my fears openly, but the way her mouth tightened belied her casual attitude. It felt like eight, or perhaps ten, dark souls. In a place as populated as Ahto City, the seething mass of life made it difficult to pick out any single mind in particular. But when a group of Force users – dark Force users – were assembled together, one
would have to be Force-blind not to sense them.

Too many things were pressing down on me. Not the least was Revan’s flight. My first feeling upon realizing that had been despair. She had once begged me to teach her – a request that had ballooned in importance with Calo Nord’s startling revelation. Part of me was convinced that only by saving Revan from the darkness could I prove myself worthy of once more wearing the mantle of the Jedi. Somehow, deep down, I felt like my redemption had escaped along with her. No. Master Karon has faith in me; as does Bastila. If only I shared it.

And then there’s the mission Karon wants us to accomplish. A secret Republic base on the bottom of the Manaan Ocean – conveniently near where the Council believed the Star Map to be located – had abruptly cut contact with the Republic and Selkath authorities alike. What was more worrying was that no rescue team had yet returned – and two had already been sent.

The thought of descending into those watery depths turned my stomach, but I could not let Master Karon or Bastila see that. I had enough to prove – I had to live up to the honour of being a Jedi once more – without falling victim to my own weaknesses. But all that water... Oceans, in general, made most Cathar uneasy, but the phobia had always been more potent for me. Or perhaps it is because I am weak. Can I really expect to be strong enough to become a Jedi once more? After the last year?

I swallowed, and firmly pushed those doubts aside. I had to prove myself! If I could not do it by guiding Revan to the light, then I would by helping Bastila. Too long had I shirked my responsibilities, too long had I taken the easy way out.

“I don’t think you fell to the Dark Side as much as used it as an excuse for your own failure.”

Revan’s words, taunting and yet far too perceptive from one as tormented as she. It was mere minutes after our duel on Tatooine, and already she had cut to the core of my weakness.

…”

“I failed my Master!” I burst out, despair coursing through me. The anger had gone, swallowed up by the endless pit of misery this strange human was evoking. Why was she tormenting me so? Why had she not killed me yet? “I failed them all! What else could I do?”

The clay walls of Anchorhead were nearing, mulling with sentient life I did not wish to face. Yet I could not go back to my violent, meaningless existence... not anymore.

“Learn from your mistakes?” she snapped sarcastically, green eyes flashing. Despite the mocking nature of her tone, there was a grain of wisdom there I could not shy away from.

…”

“Juhani?” Karon prompted again, frowning as she waited by the door. I gave myself a little shake, and followed her meekly down the corridor.

I felt bare, like my soul was ripped open for all to see. Merely compounding this was the empty space on my belt where my lightsaber previously hung. Karon had politely asked to hold onto mine for the time being, assuring me she would return it soon. While I trusted the Zabrak master and was not particularly attached to the Sith lightsaber Bastila had provided me with, I still felt oddly uncomfortable without it at the ready.

We reached Bastila’s quarters just as she stepped out, pale and shaking. Karon immediately went to her, resting hands upon the young Jedi’s shoulders.
“Bastila? What is it? The bond?”

“I-“ Bastila stammered, before quickly regaining her composure. Her face, while still lacking in colour, firmed into a brief smile of greeting. For all that she had been put in many trying situations, Bastila was still able to quickly summon a composure I envied. “I had a rather disturbing dream.”

“Yes?” Karon asked pointedly.

“I-I cannot really recall it, Master Karon,” Bastila said haltingly. “It was – strange. All I could feel was anger. Anger and death.”

“Jen?” Karon’s voice was low.

“Yes,” Bastila admitted reluctantly. “I do not know what has happened, but it is almost as if I cannot sense her anymore. I know she is there but-” She sighed. “My sense of her is numb. Like the stories of an amputee’s ghost limb. She broke through my shields earlier. Perhaps she has found a way of distancing herself from me.”

Karon pursed her lips. “And she is not answering you?”

“I do not believe she can hear me, Karon,” Bastila responded, an apprehensive frown edging into her controlled countenance.

A tired look invaded the Zabrak’s bright eyes. “We must have faith in the Force.” It almost sounded as if Karon was talking to herself. “Leave it to me, Bastila. She is my responsibility.” Karon’s voice dropped on the last word.

The young Jedi nodded, and turned to look me over. Sympathy warmed her face, an emotion I did not particularly want nor deserve. “How are you, Juhani?” Her voice was kind, and I shrugged my discomfort off.

“I am good,” I said softly. Bastila’s eyes pinned me with the lie, and I sighed. “Well, I am better than I was.”

She smiled, and I was surprised by the sadness of it. “I am glad to hear that.” She looked over at Karon again, and straightened her shoulders. “I am ready to investigate the base now.”

“Now?” Karon’s voice was sharp with concern. “Bastila, for all that I said this mission was important, I do really think that-”

“There you are!” an annoyed, smarmy voice broke through our conversation, and I looked up to see Roland Wann stride down the corridor. He was scowling in frustration, his attention focused on the Zabrak master. The Republic commander had already impressed upon me his dislike of having Jedi stationed in the Embassy, even though it was he who had requested Karon’s aid. The only person who seemed to irritate Roland more than one of us was the Mandalorian.

“Commander Wann,” Karon acknowledged, tipping her head in deference. She did not have to be so polite; although Roland Wann was a Fleet officer, the Embassy itself was technically controlled by the Senate, which meant that Karon had as much authority as the human himself.

Roland’s scowl deepened in response. He was middle-aged, for a human, with dark skin and thinning hair. His face was scarred in a few places, indicating that once upon a time, he had seen action of some sort. However his uniform fit him tightly, straining somewhat against his girth. Posted on the relatively peaceful planet of Manaan, I doubted Roland Wann was as fit as he had once been.
“Karon,” he said flatly, omitting the customary title. I saw Bastila stiffen at his rudeness. “I thought you would have been on your way to Hrakert Station by now. You did promise aid.” His voice edged on accusatory.

“We have just been discussing it, Commander Wann.” Bastila interrupted, stressing his rank pointedly. Karon shot Bastila a small frown. I decided to stay quiet.

Roland Wann glanced at Bastila in annoyance, and then looked back to the Zabrak.

“Well?” he demanded.

Karon sighed audibly. “As Padawan Shan said,” she began, and I wondered if she was silently reminding Bastila of her own station, “we are talking about it right now.”

“What’s to talk about? I need a rescue team down there! I have men trapped in the station, men I haven’t heard from for days! And we haven’t had a shipment for over a week!” Roland’s face was flushed with anger.

Shipments? I wonder if he’s more concerned over lost credits than men. I berated myself; I could not know Roland’s motivation, and that sort of uncharitable thought was beneath me.

“Commander Wann,” Karon said tightly, in a clipped voice. “Jedi’s Bastila and Juhani will be travelling down there today. I will honour my word.”

The Republic officer looked affronted and almost incredulous as he once more eyed Bastila, and then turned to appraise me dismissively. The corners of his mouth turned down further. “I thought you were heading down, Karon.” He calmed his voice down, apparently trying to wrest back control of his temper.

“I promised aid; I did not say I would go myself. I have other responsibilities, Commander,” Karon said tightly. Her face was a cold mask, and I was reminded sharply of Quatra at that very moment. Icy disapproval. I shivered.

“This mission seems to call for a Jedi master, not a bunch of apprentices!” he lashed back. Considering Bastila’s reputation as a warhero, I did not understand why Roland was so angry. Perhaps he is looking for any reason to tear a strip off Karon.

Bastila interrupted once more, scowling. “I will do my duty,” she said in a low voice. I looked at her in surprise. Perhaps I am not the only one with something to prove.

“Commander, could you inform us of Captain Onasi’s whereabouts?” Karon enquired, cutting in before Roland could continue his tirade. “I believe his help would also be invaluable.”

“Captain Onasi is otherwise occupied with Republic business,” Roland shot back silkily, his voice almost... sanctimonious. Karon’s bright eyes bored into his, and the human stiffened in righteous determination. Bastila looked ready to join in the battle of wills once more.

“Having fun?” a mocking voice drawled. The four of us started, turning to see the bulky form of Canderous Ordo saunter down the hallway like he owned it. I struggled to stop a frown pleating my forehead. The way the man walked - like a predator casually loping through his territory - set my hackles rising. And yet, I could not help a grudging respect for him, ever since our stand-off against Calo Nord. We fought well together; I could not deny that the ruthless Mandalorian was a talented warrior. I also had the uncanny feeling he was more intelligent than he let on.

“Canderous. You wanted something?” Bastila interjected, turning to face him squarely. A smirk
played on his face as he lazily appraised us all. I did not doubt he could feel the tension swirling between the four of us.

“Simply to say farewell, princess,” he said at last, his gaze coming to a rest on the young Jedi. “It’s been... interesting.”

“You’re leaving?” Bastila echoed sharply.

“Why, yes,” he drawled. “The party’s breaking up, or haven’t you noticed? First Jen and psycho-droid make an explosive getaway, and then the Twi’lek brat and her overgrown carpet sod off. No doubt you’ll find those two in some seedy bar, lifting a few pockets. Figure I might as well head out now, find some work... actually get paid for risking my life,” he added pointedly.

“You are looking for mercenary work, Canderous Ordo?” Karon cut in smoothly.

“Well,” he replied in a sarcastic voice, “it’s generally what mercenaries do.”

Bastila’s eyes flashed at his tone, and Roland Wann looked ready to throw him out. Karon, however, let out a tinkle of amused laughter. “In that case, I have a proposition for you.”

Canderous’ grey eyes sharpened on the Zabrak. “Not interested, Jedi. Not unless you pay me upfront.”

Karon inclined her head. “That can be arranged.”

“Karon, we can handle the situation,” Bastila protested.

The Zabrak’s expression softened as she looked at Bastila. “Yes you can, Bastila. However, I would prefer you had additional help. We do not know exactly what happened at Hrakert Station, and seeing as Captain Onasi is otherwise indisposed—” she threw a rueful look at Roland Wann, who scowled in return, “—then I will take help where I find it. Trust in the Force, Bastila.”

“I don’t like the idea of a Mandalorian mercenary interfering in Republic business,” Roland cut in, crossing his arms in belligerence.

“I’m sure you don’t,” Canderous drawled, his voice mocking. Roland Wann drew himself up to retort, but once more Karon intervened. I wondered at her seemingly endless patience. Canderous, in his own way, was as hard to deal with as Roland.

“Roland, your last rescue teams was comprised entirely of mercenaries, so you should have no problem with Canderous accompanying the others. I will pay his fee, so it will cost you nothing,” Karon interjected smoothly. “Canderous, if you would come with me, we can discuss the more material aspects of this mission. Juhani, Bastila, freshen up and meet us in the communications room. Commander Wann, I would be obliged if you could meet us there also.”

Roland looked like he was being forced to swallow something extremely unpleasant. Canderous rolled his eyes, but willingly followed Karon down the corridor. I guess he’s prepared to do anything for money.

I glanced at Bastila; she shot me a look of pure annoyance about the circumstances. I was merely glad I had stayed out of the bickering, but I wondered how well I would be taking things in an hour or so. Trapped with Bastila and Canderous sniping at each other, and surrounded by all that water.....

xXx
“I do not know who is worse,” Bastila muttered, exiting the refresher. I had been sitting on the small meditation mat, waiting for her to finish. “Roland Wann with his snide comments and dislike of Jedi, or Canderous’ bloodthirsty nature and superiority complex. Force, what was Karon thinking? We do not need his help, and he is hardly trustworthy.”

“An extra pair of hands cannot hurt,” I said softly, glancing around her quarters once more. I was unused to such luxury, and I wondered if Bastila was also. Although the enclave on Dantooine was far superior to any habitat I’d lived in prior, it was still sparse and small. The decadence of the Republic rooms made me itch. “Perhaps Karon believes there is a reason Canderous appeared when he did.”

Bastila threw me a sharp look, and then sighed. “You are correct, Juhani. Certainly, this continued quarrelling serves no one. I should have more patience.”

She smiled at me, patting me companionably on the arm. I wondered when Bastila had started to treat me like a friend. She was still concerned for me – I could see by the way she sometimes watched me worriedly when she thought I wasn’t paying attention – but overall, she treated me like an equal. Like a fellow Jedi. Despite my own insecurities and worries, it felt nice.

“Let us find the others then,” Bastila said on a cheery note that somehow rang false. I followed her silently through the glistening corridors of the Embassy, lost within my own thoughts. I would prove myself with this mission - I had to. It felt as if my whole future was riding on it.

No. I believed the same about Revan. I thought that only by teaching her would I be able to redeem myself, and she has taken that choice out of my hands. I must confront my future one step at a time. Nothing important was ever easy.

Karon smiled as we entered the main communications room. A number of Republic technicians were busy working at terminals along the far wall, but the main console was abandoned except for Wann’s presence. He gave us both a minuscule nod, saving his glare for Canderous who was slouching against a chrome wall behind Karon.

“Are you both sure you wish to start now?” Karon enquired. “You have time for a few more hours of rest.”

Roland began to interrupt hotly, but subsided when Bastila waved a placating hand. “I am ready, Master Karon.”

“As am I,” I echoed softly, striving to sound confident.

“Let’s just get on with it,” Canderous muttered.

“I take it you have been paid, Canderous?” Bastila said icily.

“Even a mercenary has to eat, princess,” he grated in response, folding his arms.

“Commander Wann,” Karon cut in. “If you would be so kind as to brief us on the mission?”

I thought I heard the older man sigh. “As you know, the Republic is fighting for its very existence against the evil of the Sith Empire,” Roland Wann began. Although I sympathized with the struggle, I could not help but feel the man sounded pompous. He flicked a suspicious glance at Canderous.

“Hrakert Station is but one of our research bases across the galaxy. It is, however, of great importance.”

“What sort of ‘research’?” Canderous interrupted, dragging a cigarra to his lips.
“I’ll thank you not to smoke in here,” Roland said stiffly.

Canderous looked ready to object until Karon stared at him pointedly. He rolled his eyes, but pocketed the cigarra anyway.

Roland sniffed, and continued talking. “It’s a biological research station. That’s all you need to know.”

“It’s got something to do with this kolto you Republic love, isn’t it?” Canderous interrupted once more. “It’s gotta be the only thing here to get you so panicky.”

A bland expression crossed Karon’s face, and a muscle twitched under Roland’s eye as he opened his mouth to rant. “That would be a violation of the Selkath non-interference agreement, Mandalorian! It is merely a research base – we are worried because we care for all the workers of the Republic! Unlike you bloodthirsty barbarians, happy enough to slaughter any innocent-”

“Calm!” Karon’s voice resonated through the room, causing even the unflappable Mandalorian to blink. The silence the followed her command was filled with a peaceful, relaxing sensation, and I marvelled at Karon’s ability to manipulate the Force so subtly. Both Roland and Canderous seemed to relax somewhat, their postures loosening.

“Now, Roland, perhaps you can tell us about the rescue parties you have already sent?” Karon’s voice was deceptively mild.

Roland coughed. “As you know, we lost contact with the base six days ago. We were nearing completion of the southern section when the digging teams reported some sort of obstruction... could be that artefact you mentioned earlier, Karon. After that, transmissions from the base were cut off abruptly. We sent a rescue party almost immediately, but they did not report back. Our second team contacted us only once.”

Roland leaned over the console, tapping a couple of keys. A few seconds later, and the static crackle of a voice filled the room.

“Republic HQ, this is Scarlett Five. We’ve just docked at Hrakert Station. The firaxan sharks were crazy on the way down! I’m glad for the sonics, otherwise we’d be a bloody mess on the bottom of the ocean. In fact, I’m surprised we aren’t anyway.” There was a slight pause in the message.

“Commander, this place is a mess. There’s no power to most of the base. I could see the southern side of the station was destroyed as we came in. There’s a pile of corpses here, too... Selkath, Human, and what looks like the last rescue party. Dammit, I’m starting to get the feeling you ain’t paying us enough, man. Will report once we’ve made some headway. Out.”

Canderous broke the ominous silence with a harsh bark of laughter. “Ain’t this gonna be a barrel of laughs.”

Bastila pointedly ignored his comment, turning to look at Roland. “This was the only message you received?”

Roland sighed heavily. Somehow, he looked older than before. “The only one, yes.”

“How many men in the rescue teams?” Canderous asked.

“Five in the first group. The last lot was four mercenaries, I guess I didn’t really expect them to make it, but I had to try something!” Roland ended in frustration.

“At this stage, we have no idea what could have caused the problem,” Karon intervened.
“Perhaps the Sith?” Bastila offered.

“Peace, I hope not,” Roland muttered. “I don’t think so. We would have heard from them – and the
Selkath conservatives – if they had discovered.” Roland coughed abruptly, his dark skin flushing. “I
think it has something to do with the unusual behaviour of the firaxan sharks. Our underwater
sensors were going mad with aquatic activity, and that transmission you just listened to mentioned
the same thing. I’m almost inclined to believe the damned sharks attacked the base, although that
seems a little far-fetched.”

“I wonder if their behaviour is merely a symptom of the problem,” Karon said softly. “Firaxan
sharks, in general, do not attack unless provoked.”

“Well, we ain’t gonna find out by yakking about it all day,” Canderous interrupted gruffly. “Let’s get
our gear, and move out.”

xXx

We made our way to the submersible, following Roland Wann deeper into the Embassy. He briskly
showed us the departure point and then strode off, muttering about more important things to do.
Ironic, really, considering he was the one who had insisted this was so urgent.

The small submersible bobbed gently in the water. Sleek and black, I eyed it over dubiously as I
wondered how the three of us would fit in there. We will be travelling down into the turbid depths. A
coiling hand grasped my stomach. I will not let this get to me. I will be strong.

“Juhani?” Bastila enquired; I turned to see a concerned look on her pale face. She stood close to me,
lowering her voice so the others could not hear. “Are you well? Perhaps you do not need to go with
us; you could possibly help Karon up here.”

She doesn’t think I am up to it.

A sense of shame shot through me. “I will be fine, Bastila,” I said
softly. “I will prove myself to you.”

She blinked in surprise. “You do not need to prove yourself, Juhani! You have already done enough.
That Dark Side calls to us all; you are not alone. I think you should stay.”

Astonishment dawned into understanding. She believes it is the Dark Side that is troubling me.

I forced a smile. “Bastila, I will be fine. We all have our own challenges to face.”

Bastila hesitated. “I- yes, you are correct. I confess that I am also troubled. As much as I disliked my
bond with Jen, I do not know how to react now that I can no longer sense her. I- I wish I had some
inkling of what she is doing- or her state of mind.” Bastila smiled at me weakly. “But now I am
rambling. Master Karon told me that Jen is now her concern, not mine.”

I smiled back at her, thoughtful. I had always thought of Bastila as strong in her Jedi serenity. Only
now was I beginning to see that she had her own issues to deal with. Revan’s departure affected us
all in various ways. Carth had been unapproachable in his foul temper, and disappeared immediately
after we reached the Embassy. Mission was staggered – I’d been able to smell the hurt radiating from
her back on the Ebon Hawk. And now, both she and her Wookiee friend had gone.

As for Canderous... well, no one really knew what the Mandalorian was thinking. He had seemed
grumpier then normal, but perhaps that was just Bastila’s presence. I sighed.
“So this is the secret docking bay, huh? That little boat looks like it would sink with just one of us in there,” Canderous’ gravely voice cut through my inner musing. I turned to see him and Karon walk into the room.

“You know enough about vehicles, Canderous; I doubt you believe your own remarks,” Karon responded mildly. “You will find the submersible is quite reliable and sound. It is also fitted with sonic rays that will keep the firaxans at bay.”

The Mandalorian grunted as Karon turned to face us. She smiled briefly at Bastila and me, and indicated she had a gift for us both.

“Your lightsabers,” the intense master said, tossing a cylindrical object to us both. I caught mine reflexively. “I hope you do not mind that I modified them somewhat.”

I glanced at Karon in surprise, and activated it. The snap-hiss was music to my ears, but the bright blue colour drained the heat from my face.

Bastila was beaming, twirling a yellow double-bladed ‘saber. “Thank you! I was not quite accustomed to that sickly red colour.”

I had not held a blue lightsaber for years. The crystal I had found once, on Dantooine, had been blue. A peaceful, dark blue.

“I doubt it’s as modified as your original lightsaber, Bastila, but it will have to do for the meantime,” Karon said dryly. “What became of yours, anyway?”

Bastila flushed uncommonly. “It was – misplaced. A lot happened on Taris.”

Canderous snorted in derision. “From what I recall, princess, you told Republic it rolled under your seat in the escape pod.”

“Thank you kindly for the reminder, Canderous,” Bastila responded in an icy voice. I could see Karon struggling to hold back a smile of amusement. “Perhaps we should get going?”

At that, I turned my lightsaber off. I could not help feeling somewhat shaken, however. Am I truly returned to the Jedi, then? Is that what Karon is telling me, by giving me this? The Zabrak Master was looking at me now, her turquoise eyes intent. She smiled, and took a step towards me.

“Have faith in yourself, Juhani,” she said for my ears alone. “You will do well.”

xXx

The voyage to the depths of the ocean was worse than I expected. Bastila spent the time trying to be painstakingly civil to Canderous, who merely baited her in return. I kept my eyes shut, desperately attempting to think of anything but the water enclosing me on all sides. It seemed to be pressing in on me. Even the air felt heavier, harder to breathe.

“I am glad of the sonics,” Bastila remarked, leaning over to stare out the ferracrystal windows at the gloomy underworld of Manaan. She and Canderous were seated at the front of the cramped ship, while I stretched out behind. “It’s keeping the firaxans at bay. What wild behaviour!”

I bit back a groan, resisting the impulse to look for myself. Even the motion of the submersible was making me ill. I do not get spacesick, therefore I should not feel so nauseous underwater. Common sense was hardly chasing away my unease.
“Yes, yes, aren’t they pretty,” Canderous grumbled in irritation.

Bastila sighed. “I thought you were insufferable before, Canderous, but ever since we landed on Manaan you have been intolerable! Can we not just try to act civil, for the sake of our mission?”

“I’m being paid to keep you alive, princess, not to sweet talk you,” Canderous retorted.

“Force, Canderous, what is troubling you? Ever since-” she paused, and then sighed irritably. “Ever since Jen left. You have been in an all-consuming grouchy mood.”

“Grouchy?” His voice was low and dangerous.

My spirits ebbed further, and I glanced outside to draw my attention away from the ensuing argument. Bad mistake. Dark water and murky depths greeted my eyes, interspersed with faint lights illuminating a coral-strewn ocean floor. Lights?

“Yes, grouchy!” Bastila snapped.

“The station!” I said quickly, before the argument could escalate further. “Look, in the distance!”

“The base,” Bastila breathed, moving forward to unlock the retractable steering column. The submersible jerked under her hands as she switched it into manual drive. My stomach heaved. A dizzying fear clouded my mind. I will be strong. Think of the code!

My lips formed the first line as I struggled to maintain control. Thus far, my companions had not noticed my distress. I could only hope that things would improve once we set foot inside the station.

Bastila flicked on the transmissions as she guided the submersible ever closer to sanctuary. “Republic HQ, this is the Shadow Cat.”

What an inappropriate name for a submersible. Cats don’t belong in the water. Neither did Cathars.

“We are nearing Hrakert Station,” Bastila continued speaking into the receiver. “The firaxans have been oddly aggressive along our approach, but our sonic emitters successfully kept them at bay. We are perhaps ten minutes from arrival. I will radio in once we have docked. This is the Shadow Cat, out.”

Expectant silence settled over us as Bastila switched off the comm. I stared soulfully at the base lights – it would not be long until I had steady ground under my feet. It could not be soon enough.

The lights flickered; almost as if a shadow had passed in front of the distant base. I frowned.

“What was that?” Canderous asked gruffly.

Bastila leaned forward in her chair. “I saw it too,” she said slowly. “Perhaps there is a power problem at the base?”

The lights flickered again, and this time I could distinguish several shapes blocking out the sight of salvation. The murky water seemed to swirl threateningly through the ferracrystal windows.

“That’s not a power failure,” Canderous said. “There’s something out there.”

“More sharks,” I mumbled, my lips turning numb. The shadows lengthened into metres, and grew eyes and teeth. Ice clenched my spine. With a churning sense of horror, I realized there were hundreds of these things in the water. And we were headed straight for them.

“A school of sharks,” Bastila concluded, her voice tense but controlled. “The sonics should scare
them away.”

“Scare off that many?” Canderous grated. “What has your precious Republic done, fed kolto to the fish?”

I spotted the first few sharks swerve abruptly to avoid us, the sonic emitters no doubt painful to their sensitive hearing. Some of them were at least half the length of the submersible. I heard one rebound off the hull, and the flimsy walls shuddered against the impact.

“This tin can better hold together,” Canderous muttered.

“It’s designed for deep sea travel!” Bastila snapped back. “You have no idea how much pressure it can withstand!”

Another thump resounded against the ship, and I bit back a moan. Never had the vehicle seemed so fragile.

“Give me the controls,” Canderous demanded. “I’ve had more piloting experience than you.”

To my surprise, Bastila released the steering column without argument. The submersible rocked wildly from side to side, and I realized in horror that the sharks were now deliberately smashing into it. Bastila turned to face me, reaching out a hand to place on my shoulder.

“I will attempt to calm them,” she said softly. The faint light from the console showed the pallor of her face. “My battle meditation may help here. But I need your aid, Juhani.”

“Mand’alor’s balls,” Canderous muttered, pulling hard to the left. The submersible swerved sharply, slamming into another group of sharks as it did so. As I landed against the side window, I felt a mind brush against mine.

“Open your mind to me,” Bastila demanded in a quiet voice. “I can do this, but it’s difficult with such a foreign species. I need your help.”

Bastila was asking too much; a temporary melding of minds required an inner concentration I found hard to grasp even on normal days. Such a bond would allow her access to my own reservoir of Force power, as long as we shared both a physical and a mental link. Her fingers dug into my shoulder insistently.

“I cannot do this!” I gasped. Fear clawed in my belly, and for a second all I could see was the inky black water, drowning my body and my soul, pulling me down in its never-ending depths...

“Dammit!” Canderous cursed. The ship rocked heavily to one side, and then the other. I was suddenly glad I’d had nothing to eat for the last few hours. “If you’re gonna do something fancy, princess, now is the time!”

“Juhani!” Bastila’s voice was insistent, allowing no recourse for failure.

I closed my eyes, struggling to push back the terror. Her hand gripped me tightly, almost painfully, and I focused on that. *Pain. Yes, pain can be used as a focus.* That was something I’d learned, back on Tatooine. When my days had been filled with grief and misery and denial, with only rabid wraids around to focus on. Sometimes physical pain was the only way to avert sheer insanity.

I breathed, concentrating solely on the fingers that dug holes into my shoulder. Bastila’s mind touched mine again, but I was not quite ready. I drew in a shuddering breath, clearing my thoughts of everything but those fingernails pricking into my skin. While not the ideal way to open myself to the
Force, peace and serenity seemed out of the question. Revan would accuse me of taking the middle-ground.

I drew in the Force, and it responded. Hesitantly, I reached out to Bastila.

She reacted immediately, and I was swept away in the storm of her Force energy. I felt angry sparks of existence crowd around the submersible, writhing and attacking in a frenzy. I could even sense the simple life power of the coral that graced the ocean floor. Faint astonishment at Bastila’s skill drove away my fear. I cannot sense anywhere near this clearly.

Bastila settled somehow on the swarm of sharks; soothing, calming, peaceful. The foreign feral rage that encompassed the animals – they seemed to react as one being – slowly dissolved. Some turned, and began to retreat. A palpable sense of confusion radiated from them, but the frenzied anger... the anger was disappearing.

My relief vanished a moment later. A presence - huge and vast and ancient - slammed into our joint awareness. It was focused directly on us. I felt the shock ripple from Bastila’s psyche, as it must surely be emanating from mine. This mind, or soul, was immense. It far eclipsed anything I had ever sensed, and it was utterly foreign.

And very, very angry.

Suddenly, sharp painful fury came back to life threefold within the swarm. I jerked back to my body as the submersible was buffeted roughly from side to side. The sharks were renewing their attack with a vengeance.

Whatever that foreign presence was, it had made the firaxans a whole lot angrier.

Canderous was swearing in Mandalorian. Dazedly, I realized the submersible was going a lot faster than it had been. I slammed into the back of my chair as the ship collided sharply with the coral sea floor. A loud scraping resonated from the bottom of the hull, accompanied swiftly by the tearing sound of metal.

A high-pitched whistling of mist shot up from the floor, and my breath caught. We’ve got a leak! Painful shards of water splattered onto my face, and I jerked away from the centre of the ship. I couldn’t inhale; my throat was closing in stark fear.

“I can’t see where that gods-cursed base is!” Canderous was yelling, but his voice seemed somewhat distant. I thought I heard Bastila reply, but could not make it out. My vision darkened. I couldn’t breathe in, couldn’t think for the sheer terror gripping my mind. We’re going to die! I could feel the water rising up around my legs, the water clogging through my lungs, just like those nightmares when I had been but a young kit.

Rational thought was impossible; my mind stopped altogether and then mercifully, everything faded into oblivion.

xXx

Something flowed like honey through a body I’d forgotten. With a slow, dawning self-awareness, I realized it was the Force melting through my limbs. Sluggishly, I dragged myself back to consciousness; the training inbred in me would allow no recourse.

I choked, twisting abruptly to my side to spit out the acrid liquid from my lungs. Cool ferracrete lay reassuringly underneath my cheek.
“Juhani?” a voice queried. It took me a moment to recognize it as Bastila’s.

The Force departed from my body then, leaving a variety of aches I would rather not have known about. Belatedly, I realized Bastila had been probing me for injuries. I rolled over and opened my eyes.

“Bastila,” I acknowledged, licking stinging lips. Embarrassment settled over me that I had abandoned dignity in front of her. “Where are we?”

“We are in Hrakert Station,” she said softly.

“Damn, there’s at least ten corpses in this room!” Canderous’ gruff voice called from further back. “Wake the Cathar up, would you? We should secure the area.”

Shame flooded me further and I jerked upright. I did not want the Mandalorian to see me surrounded by the contents of my stomach. I accepted Bastila’s arm unsteadily and slowly rose to my feet.

We were in a large room that had almost no lighting. One lone fluorescent tube still glowed faintly on the far side of the room. The steady lapping of water grated my nerves even as I realized we were in the docking bay of the base. Nearby, the submersible bobbed gently in the water. I gaped at it.

"H-how? How is that possible?” I mumbled. "There was so much water inside!"

Bastila looked at me oddly. "There was no water in the submersible, Juhani. It is damaged and inoperable, but there was no leak." She paused, and I felt her intent gaze on me. "Still, we were very lucky. I do not know how long the submersible could have withstood the attacks. The high-speed scraping against the coral damaged more than just the hull."

There was no water? I’d felt it, wet fingers of death scrabbling up my body. I swallowed, and refused to look at Bastila. I did not want to deal with the fragilities of my own mind just yet.

I peered into the shadows where Canderous was crouched down. Slowly my eyes adjusted to the poor lighting, and I could make out several shapes. From what Canderous had already said, they were all corpses.

“What happened here?” I asked softly. My inner peace was shattered, but slowly I was rebuilding it. I had to retain control of myself. *I have already failed. Too weak for the Dark Side, too fragile for the Light.*

But Karon had faith in me. Somehow, I had to cling to that.

A weight was still pressing in on my temples - my very psyche itself - but it had become somewhat bearable. Perhaps because now I had both feet on a stable floor.

“I do not know yet,” Bastila returned, her voice quiet and concerned.

Canderous grunted as he stood up, moving slowly towards us. He slung a pack over one shoulder and his monstrous blaster over the other.

“I got everything from the ship. There’s not much on those bodies though. There’s certainly been a bloodbath here, there’s Selkath, Republic, mercenaries... even some dead guy in a lab coat,” he said shortly. “We should get going and look for a way outta here.”

I glanced at him, and then back at Bastila. “The submersible?” I queried at last.
“It’s pretty beaten up,” Canderous answered me. “There’s no way that’s gonna get us to the surface in one piece.”

I licked suddenly dry lips. *Trapped.* “Per- perhaps we could radio for assistance?”

Bastila shook her head. “The collision shorted out the electronics. We were lucky we could steer the submersible to safety.”

“The comm’s totally kriffed,” Canderous added. “I trans’d a help request when the ship first crashed into the reef, but I dunno if it got through.”

Our conversation was interrupted by a high-pitched scream that reeked of anguish. My head shot upwards to stare at the only door; whoever that had come from was not far away.

As one, we moved towards the exit. Bastila and I both pulled out our ‘sabers in readiness, but did not yet activate them. I had a healthy appreciation for both Bastila and Canderous as fighters, and did not feel alarmed for my own well-being. *Anything is better than being enclosed by all that water.* And yet, here at the bottom of the ocean, I was still trapped.

The next room was a foyer of sorts, lit only by an electronic short sparking against one corner. It threw up flickering, eerie shadows that danced alongside walls. I moved through first and noticed three exits - as well as a shaking male Twi’lek huddling in the centre, staring straight at us.

“How... how did you get in?” the Twi’lek mumbled, his words blurry and indistinct. I appraised him warily; his blood-splattered armour and vibroblade did not suggest he was a mere base worker. “They sent you, didn’t they? You came with a ship?” Something like hope entered his voice.

“It is all right,” Bastila said in a soothing voice. Canderous snorted behind me. “I am Jedi Shan, and we are with the Republic. Can you tell me your name?”

“Quick, we have to get out of here, we have to get away!” the Twi’lek demanded. The whites of his eyes were flashing wildly as he stared everywhere at once. I realized, then, that this man had a very tenuous grip on sanity. I shivered. *What is going on?*

“You are safe,” Bastila placated, her voice calm and assuring. “What happened here?”

“The Selkath, they went crazy!” the Twi’lek blurted, his words rushing out in a flurry. “They started killing anything that moved. Someone must have triggered the defence systems too, ’cause all the droids activated as well!” The man had trouble breathing, inhaling in loud, staccato gulps. “We came down and secured the first couple rooms... there were bodies everywhere... and the Selkath came out... screaming and croaking their fishy little war-cries. They're dead! All dead! They swarmed out and over us. Everyone’s dead!” His hands shook wildly on his vibroblade.

“Please, take a deep breath,” Bastila went on in a peaceful tone. “You were one of the mercenaries sent by Roland Wann?”

“Yes, yes, but they’re all dead! We have no time, we have to leave now!” His voice grew in pitch and frenzy, and his vibroblade rose into the air. I saw Canderous stiffen warily.

“We are here to investigate the base,” Bastila told him calmly. “We will not let any harm come to you, you have my word.”

“No! No! They’ll come back! No! We must go now! I am leaving now!” His voice transformed into a screech, and something akin to uncontrolled aggression entered his eyes. His hand clenched around his blade, and it lifted.
“Calm yourself!” Bastila’s tone turned authoritative.

“No!”

“Get out of my sight before I end your miserable existence,” Canderous snarled viciously, raising his gun to point it menacingly at the Twi’lek. I gasped at about the same time as Bastila, reaching for my ‘saber. I could not let Canderous kill so glibly.

The Twi’lek let out a squeak of pure terror, and fled.

“No, wait! We will not hurt you, I promise!” Bastila called out in vain, but there was no response bar the fading sound of frantic footsteps. She whirled on Canderous in a fury.

“How dare you?” she fumed, colour marring the porcelain tones of her face. “We have no idea what is out there - you may have just condemned that poor man to death! How can you be so callous?”

Canderous shrugged disdainfully. “He was a second away from attacking us, princess. That would have been his guaranteed death, let me assure you.” He smirked. “In fact, scaring him off gave him a shot at living. That kook’s survived down here for days. I wouldn’t be surprised if we run into him again.”

Despite myself, I had to admit Canderous made a twisted sort of sense. Bastila threw him a look of pure disgust, and looked ready to throw him another sharp retort.

Not again, I thought in despair. “Canderous, do you have any thoughts on what happened to the base?” I cut in, desperately trying to distract them from another petty argument, and myself from the oppressing environment.

Canderous grunted. “An attack, obviously. Haven’t seen any Sith corpses yet, and I don’t know who else would bother. There’s not much of worth on water worlds like Manaan.”

“Not much of worth?” Bastila questioned, her voice slightly incredulous. “Surely you are forgetting about the kolto supply?”

Canderous laughed, a short, sharp bark. “Kolto may be the single best healing substance in the galaxy, princess, but the Mandalore are not as fragile as your Republic. We do not need to indulge in such weak healing substances when we enter battle.”

“I shall refrain from pointing out that, weak as we may be, your people lost the last war.” Bastila responded archly. I wondered if she noticed the irony of her own words.

“Bah!” Canderous snorted. “We were outnumbered three to one, and still your warriors ran and hid behind civilians like frightened old woman. You had not one competent commander in your cowardly ranks, princess. Well, not until your Jedi Reva-” Canderous halted his tirade abruptly, mid-speech. Shock rippled through his lined face, followed swiftly by a blistering anger.

Silence settled over us for a tense minute.

“Revan,” he said finally, his voice quiet and deadly.

My spine stiffened. He knows. He knows what Bastila did, back on Tatooine. My gaze fled to her face; it was ashen.

“Canderous, you must reali-”
“I warned you, Jedi,” he cut her off, still in the same soft tone. “Back in that cave. I said I would kill you if you tried any hu’tuun trick on me again.”

Bastila’s face tightened; a glimpse of irritation slid between the shock. “You don’t understand what is at stake here, Canderous. It isn’t all about you- it is not even just about Revan-”

“Mando’ade keep their promises, Jedi,” Canderous continued. The fact he no longer referred to Bastila as ‘princess’ hadn’t escaped my notice. Fury and dented male pride rolled off him in waves; I could almost taste it. And I knew I had to do something before they both went too far.

“Stop it!” I screamed, loosing my tense nerves and building my fear into one long howl. A lifetime ago, I had once heard Cathar warriors howl in battle. It was a sound the galaxy would probably never hear again.

Canderous and Bastila started, both jerking around to look at me in surprise.

“Stop it,” I reiterated, quietly this time. “Look at the mess we are in. We have no working submersible, we’re surrounded by corpses and all- all that water... and- we should be working together!” the last few words stumbled out after one another. “This can wait until later!”

“Stay out of this, Cathar.” Canderous’ steely gaze had flicked back to Bastila, who was staring back at him determinedly, chin raised in pride. My hackles rose. I could not stop them if they were determined to fight, but Canderous could not believe he would best a Jedi, surely? Bastila’s fingers twitched near her lightsaber. And Canderous is not stupid, Bastila!

“For the sake of the battles we shared on Taris and Tatooine,” Canderous said at last, “I’ll not kill you now. But don’t think to cross my path again, Jedi. I’m going to find my own way out of this gods-cursed hellhole.” The Mandalorian turned sharply, and strode towards the dark belly of the base.

“Not kill me?” Bastila muttered, quiet enough so that the disappearing warrior would not hear her. Affronted pride burned pink spots into her cheeks.

My gaze stayed pinned on Canderous’ retreating form. In this ominous pit, I knew there was safety in numbers. But I would not beg a Mandalorian for help – even one I had begun to respect.

Canderous reached a turn. He vanished, and did not look back.

xXx

Chapter End Notes

Many thanks to kosiah for the beta.
Objective: Evacuate

Location: Abandoned Warehouse

Scanning External Environment for Surviving Hostile Parties:
...Result: Negative
...No Immediate Danger
Internal Response: Disappointment

Output: “Statement: We are liable to attract unwanted attention here, Master.”
Visual / Audio Tracking: No Response from Jen Sahara.

Closer Optical Examination of Environment:

Corpse One – Male Dashade
Cause of Death: Blaster Shot to Head
Killed By: HK-47
Count: HK-47 – 1

Corpse Two – Male Aqualish
Cause of Death: Profuse Bleeding From Eye Sockets.
Killed by: Jen Sahara
Count: HK-47 – 1; Jen Sahara – 1

Corpse Three – Female Human
Incomplete...
Scanning for Lower Half...
...Lower Half Not Found
Cause of Death: Cut in Half by Lightsaber
Killed By: Jen Sahara
Count: HK-47 – 1; Jen Sahara – 1.5

... /a short time later/....

Final Count: HK-47 – 9; Jen Sahara – 11.5; Crossfire – 2
Internal Response: Disappointment

Output: “Extrapolation: We should leave soon.”
Visual / Audio Tracking: No Response from Jen Sahara.

Sensor Scan:
Target: Jen Sahara
...Location: Lying Immobile on Warehouse Floor. No Response to Verbal Prompting
...Physical Analysis: Minor Leaks in Organic Watery Shell. Not Life Threatening
Conclusion: Jen Sahara Affected By Internal Logic Malfunction
Output: “Observation: That hole in the ceiling is not exactly subtle.”
Visual / Audio Tracking: No Response from Jen Sahara.

Auditory Sensory Input: Cantina Door Opening.
Optical Sensors Focusing on Door:
Observation: Door Open. No Life-forms Detected in Immediate Area

Internal Conclusion: Door was Opened by Life Form Located in Adjacent Room.
Primary Objective: Protect Master
New Objective Accepted: Locate Door Opener

Boosting Power to Auditory Sensors
Target: Adjacent Room.

Physical: Moving to Door
Audio Tracking: Series of Short Beeps
Analysis: Activation of Communication Device

Physical: Moving through Door
Location: Cantina Bar
One Sentient In Targeting Area

Optical Sensors Focusing On Organic Meatbag:
Target Analysis: Species: Human, Male
Facial Recognition Result: Negative
Body Language Analysis: Shocked – Scared – Horrified
Direct Threat Assessment: Minimal
Indirect Threat Assessment: Moderate
Temporary Name Assigned: Cantina Mook

Input – Cantina Mook to Transmitter: “You hired my warehouse for a few hours, asked for complete secrecy, and then scared off my clientele with a shootout! I don’t care if you’re Exchange, this is too much! There’s nothing but a huge pile of corpses, and an insane droid standing in the middle of it!”

Modification: Indirect Threat Assessment: Severe

Target Lock: Cantina Mook
Initiating Combat...
Hidden User Defined Sub-Routine Activated: Owner Command Required.
Attempting Safety Override...
...Factor: Jen Sahara Currently Unresponsive
...Factor: Cantina Mook Severe Indirect Threat to Jen Sahara’s Safety
Override Successful

Physical: Firing Blaster

Visual Tracking: Cantina Mook Eliminated

Count: HK-47 – 10; Jen Sahara – 11.5

Scanning External Environment for Hostile Parties
...Result: Negative
...No Immediate Danger
Internal Response: Disappointment

Situation Analysis:
...Factor: Jen Sahara Currently Unresponsive
...Factor: Hostile Parties Have Been Warned of Ambush Failure
...Factor: Visible Damage to Building Exterior
...Calculation: Chance of Incoming Hostiles: 96.45993%
Internal Conclusion: Remove Jen Sahara from Combat Zone Immediately

Physical: Returning to Jen Sahara

Output: “Statement: Master, it is time to leave.”
Visual / Audio Tracking: No Response from Jen Sahara

Internal Conclusion: Lack of Movement from Jen Sahara is Jeopardizing Jen Sahara

Target Lock: Jen Sahara
Physical: Light Push of Target
Visual / Audio Tracking: No Response from Jen Sahara
Internal Conclusion: Jen Sahara Requires Physical Help to Leave Combat Zone

Output: “Observation: You watery meatbags are so fragile.”

Physical: Lifting Jen Sahara
Visual Tracking: Slight Movement from Jen Sahara.

Input – Jen Sahara: “Wha-?”

Light Impact Detected:
Source: Jen Sahara (Current Owner)
Combat Mode Not Initiated

Input – Jen Sahara: “HK, put me down!”

Physical: Releasing Jen Sahara

Input – Jen Sahara: “Ow! HK, you didn’t need to frelling drop me!”

Output: “Explanation: Percussion maintenance is often the best course of action when proper repairs would be too time consuming. Sometimes all that is needed is a good swift kick-”

Input – Jen Sahara: “Enough, HK. Thanks so much.”
Voice Stress Analysis: Sarcastic.

Sensor Scan:
Target: Jen Sahara
...Physical Analysis: Minor Leaks in Organic Watery Shell. Not Life Threatening
...Body Language Analysis: Tense – Shocked - Responsive
...Location: Standing Upright on Warehouse Floor
Conclusion: Jen Sahara is damaged but operable

Output: “Query: Are you functioning correctly now, Master? We should leave this place.
Assessment: You are too damaged to withstand another attack.”

Input – Jen Sahara: “Yes, I- I need to get out of here.”
Voice Stress Analysis: Distraught

Physical: Moving Through Door.

Location: Cantina Bar

Scanning External Environment for Hostile Parties
...Result: Negative
...No Immediate Danger
Internal Response: Disappointment

Input – Jen Sahara: “Stars, I can’t think properly. I can’t feel the Force. I don’t want to feel the Force. Not... not anymore.”
Voice Stress Analysis: Hysterical

Auditory Sensory Input: External Cantina Door Opening Visual Tracking: Organic Meatbag Opening Door

Optical Sensors Focusing on Organic Meatbag:

Target Analysis: Species: Quarren, Male
Facial Recognition Result: Negative
Body Language Analysis: Surprised – Wary
Direct Threat Assessment: Minimal
Indirect Threat Assessment: Moderate
Temporary Name Assigned: Shrivelled Squid Head

Target Lock: Shrivelled Squid Head

Initiating Combat...
Hidden User Defined Sub-Routine Activated: Owner Command Required
Attempting Safety Override...
...Factor: Jen Sahara Currently Hysterical
...Factor: Shrivelled Squid Head Moderate Indirect Threat to Jen Sahara’s safety
Override Successful

Physical: Firing Blaster

Visual Tracking: Shrivelled Squid Head Eliminated

Count: HK-47 – 11; Jen Sahara – 11.5

Input – Jen Sahara: “No! Dammit, HK, we can’t just go around killing people! Not anymore!”

Output: “Statement: Master, we had already ended the existence of twenty-two organic meatbags. I did not surmise one more would make a difference.”

Input – Jen Sahara: “No! I won’t do it – I won’t let her out! I don’t know how she got in my head in the first place, but she’s not going to take control of me!”
Voice Stress Analysis: Hysterical

Visual Tracking: Jen Sahara has Crumpled to Floor.
Auditory Input: Moan
...Source: Jen Sahara
Situation Analysis:
...Factor: Illogical Commands Issuing From Jen Sahara
...Factor: Jen Sahara is Not Moving
...Factor: Sensor Scans Equate a Hysterical State of Mind
...Factor: Incoming Hostiles Probable
Internal Conclusion: Take Quickest Measure to Remove Jen Sahara from Environment

Physical: Primary Blaster Set to Stun

Target Lock: Jen Sahara
Initiating Passive Combat...
Hidden User Defined Sub-Routine Activated: Owner Command Required
Attempting Safety Override...
...Factor: Jen Sahara Malfunctioning
...Factor: Quickest Calculated Measure to Remove Jen Sahara from Danger
Override Successful
Physical: Firing Blaster

Visual Tracking: Jen Sahara is Unconscious

Physical: Lifting Jen Sahara

Primary Objective: Evacuate

xXx

Scanning External Environment:

Location: Stolen Taxi. Ten Miles East of Mining Village
Destination: Emnaad
ETA: 13 minutes 04 seconds

Sensor Scan:

Target: Jen Sahara (Current Owner)
...Physical Analysis: Minor Leaks in Organic Watery Shell. Not Life Threatening
...Body Language Analysis: Limp - Semi-Conscious
...Location: Front Right Seat of Taxi
Conclusion: Jen Sahara is Waking

Input – Jen Sahara: “Ugh, where- where am I?” Voice Stress Analysis: Groggy

Output: “Statement: Master, you are in a taxi headed for Emnaad. Suggestion: We disembark in the starport outside the dome. The Selkath guard the entrances into Emnaad most rigidly.”

Input – Jen Sahara: “Wha- what happened? What’s going on?”

Output: “Statement: Master, I deemed it necessary to extract you from the combat zone in the most efficient manner. While running from the challenge of battle was regrettable, I am hard-coded to protect your safety first.”


Output: “Resignation: Much as it disappointed me to leave a potential conflict, Master, you were in no state to fight. Extrapolation: Or to remove yourself from danger.”
Input – Jen Sahara: “I can’t believe this. I feel like everything is crumbling around me. I don’t know what to expect anymore.”
Voice Stress Analysis: Hysterical

Internal Logic: Jen Sahara Does Not Compute

Hypothesis #1: Jen Sahara is Chemically Unbalanced
Testing Theory...

Output: “Query: Master, what is wrong with you? Have you imbibed a hazardous substance in the last twenty hours?”

Input – Jen Sahara: “I – uh, well. Dammit, HK, that’s not the frelling point.”
Voice Stress Analysis: Annoyed

Observation: Master has not Answered Query
Hypothesis #1 Probability: 76.55312 percent

Output: “Suggestion: Master, let us find a place to rest in the outskirts of Emnaad. It often takes meatbags days to recover from the usage of pleasure drugs.”

Input – Jen Sahara: “HK, I’m not bloody spiced, okay? And stop – stop damn well fretting over me!”

Output: “Observation: Master, you are behaving in an increasingly odd manner. I am merely attempting to restore your full functionality so we can once more dismember organics. Statement: I am programmed to perform all kinds of psychological assistance. Do you require some?”

Input – Jen Sahara to herself: “Stars, never thought I’d live to see a homicidal droid nursing me.”

Output: “Indignation: Master, that sort of comparison is disgusting! I am a combat droid, not some sort of fluid-dispensing wet-nurse! I can hardly be blamed if I am programmed to look out for your safety.”

Auditory Input: Angry Sigh
Source: Jen Sahara

Internal Conclusion: Jen Sahara is Functioning Correctly

Input – Jen Sahara: “Alright, HK, let’s find some place to hide out until ... until I figure out what to do. I’m not going to use the Force though... I can’t even feel it.... I- dammit, I’ll worry about that later. What the frell has been happening?”

Output: “Query: Master, are you experiencing faults in your internal memory core? Commentary: Organic meatbags have such delicate stamina’s. Perhaps you should consider some cybernetic implants, Master. Memory lapses caused by pleasure drugs do not affect cybernetic-“

Input – Jen Sahara: “Sithspit, HK, would you stop with the spice comments? I’m just trying figure out everything... oh, sod it all. Let’s just get out of here. And- and stop calling me master. It’s giving me the creeps.”
Voice Stress Analysis: Irritated

Output: “Statement: You didn’t have a problem with it before, Master.”

Input - Jen Sahara: “I-I- well, I do now!”
“Observation: I was under the assumption that organic meatbags enjoyed such forms of address.”

Input - Jen Sahara: “Well, I’m not that sort of organic meatbag, regardless of who I have in my head!”

Internal Logic: Jen Sahara Does Not Compute

Hypothesis #2: Jen Sahara has a Person in her Head
...Physical Dimensions Do Not Compute
Hypothesis #2 Rejected

Input - Jen Sahara: “Look... I just have a lot on my mind, okay? And an insane, psychopathic droid calling me master is hashing up all sorts of thoughts I really don’t need right now.”

Output: “Qualification: You are my master, Master. Was I not purchased legitimately? Am I stolen goods? Shall I report myself to the authorities?”

Input - Jen Sahara: “Whoa... slow down. Technically, Mission bought you, HK.”

Output: “Quotation – Mission Vao: ‘As far as I’m concerned, Jen can take care of you.’ Quotation – Yuka Laka: ‘HK-47, your new master is this human.’ Conclusion: Both old and new Masters at the time of purchase transferred control of me over to you; therefore you are now my master, Master. “

Output: “Commentary: Having that blue brat as my master would be more than I could bear.”

Input - Jen Sahara: “Mission... oh gods, what have I done?”
Voice Stress Analysis: Anguished
Body Language Analysis: Despairing

Input – Jen Sahara: “Look..... Just call me Jen, okay? It’s not right... but... it’ll have to do for now....”
Voice Stress Analysis: Nonsensical

Output: “Explanation: You qualify as my master and I must refer to you as such. The legal requirements for models of my type are very specific, Master.”

Input - Jen Sahara: “I thought you were meant to obey me, HK! What type of droid are you, anyway?”

Output: “Evasion: Oh... the illegal kind of model, Master... you know...”

Input - Jen Sahara: “Illegal?”

Input – Jen Sahara (muttered): “Figures.”

Input – Jen Sahara: “Hang on, there are legal requirements for illegal models?”
Facial Analysis: Frowning

Output: “Answer: More than there are for legal models, apparently. That is meatbag logic for you.”

Input - Jen Sahara: “Right, so.... what does all this have to do with you calling me master?”
Voice Stress Analysis: Frustrated.

Output: “Explanation: Someone has hard-coded my system such that my current master always be addressed as such.”
Auditory Input: Indistinct Cursing
...Source: Jen Sahara

Input - Jen Sahara: “Remind me to rewire you, HK.”

Output: “Objection: I can hardly be blamed for my programming, Master!”

Input - Jen Sahara: “Who programmed you anyway?”

Output: “Conjecture: I do not know... some organic meatbag?”

Input – Jen Sahara: “Wow, you’re just full of answers today, aren’t you?”

Voice Stress Analysis: Sarcastic

Input – Jen Sahara: “Fine. Call me master then. But at least stop killing everything in our path! Why’d you take out that Quarren anyway? He wasn’t hurting anyone!”

Output: “Statement: I classified him as a moderate indirect risk to our survival, Master.”

Input – Jen Sahara: “But you told me you couldn’t kill without my direct order.”

Output: “Appeasement: I act only as you instruct me, master. Except in the event of you being unable to defend yourself.”

Input – Jen Sahara: “What, so all you have to do is knock me out, and then you can go on a murderous rampage?”

Voice Stress Analysis: Sarcastic

Output: “Objection: Your safety comes first, master! I am incapable of purposefully harming you!”

Auditory Input: Disgruntled Snort ...Source: Jen Sahara

Input – Jen Sahara: “That still sounds like a weak excuse. Especially since I know how much you enjoy killing everything.”

Output: “Answer: Even a droid has to have a little fun once in awhile.”

Input – Jen Sahara: “I think you’ve had enough fun already.”

Output: “Objection: You have had more fun than me, Master!”

Input – Jen Sahara: “Fun? You think- you think I had fun?!”

Output: “Answer: Yes, master. By my count you had eleven point five units of fun. I only had eleven.”


Output: “Clarification: By the number of meatbag corpses, of course.”

Input – Jen Sahara: “You...you kept score! I... how did you get a half? No... I don’t want to know. I- ... I can’t handle this at the moment. Just stop it... and stop with the meatbag thing already!”

Output: “Suggestion: Would gelatinous slush bag suffice?”

Input – Jen Sahara: “No! Just leave it!”
Output: “Query: How about flesh filled biped?”

Auditory Input: Groan
...Source: Jen Sahara

Output: “Suggestion: Cellular sludge sack?”
Visual / Audio Tracking: No Response from Jen Sahara.


Output: “Query: How about my personal favourite - liquidious fleshbag?”
Visual / Audio Tracking: No Response from Jen Sahara.

Conclusion: Jen Sahara Does Not Like Liquidious Fleshbag
Internal Response: Disappointment

xXx

Chapter End Notes

Props to Curtis for his help with this.
The power of a name

- Jen Sahara -

The streets outside the starport stank of cheap ale and decaying food. People from all the slumy walks of life – mostly mercs, peddlers and whores – filled the area with eager offers and pleas for credits. In the distance the glittering dome of central Emnaad rose majestically, promising civilization and safety under Selkath rule. Here, in the wrecked suburb attached to the starport, nothing governed but strength in numbers - which usually meant the Exchange. At least there was certain anonymity here. Another scruffy stranger staying out of everyone’s way didn’t draw a second glance.

I couldn’t brush off the taste of blood. I felt it, the coppery tang in my mouth. All those bodies, the death, the slaughter-

-the power, to know that I have complete control, that I am the master, that victory is mine-

The sudden sharp pain of cramp from my hand drove the dark voice from my head. I winced, and then realized my fingers were locked fiercely around the lightsaber hidden discretely under my robe. Slowly, I relaxed and drew my hand away. No. No. I will not. I’d lost one of the ‘sabers, back at the warehouse. Lost my sanity, too.

I’d flatly ordered HK to leave me alone and go find some way of getting off Rii’shn within the hour. That, perhaps, wasn’t the brightest thing I’d ever done – letting HK lose without supervision – but at least I’d had the sense to command him not to kill a soul.

Far too many had already died by my hand in the last day alone.

My fists clenched again, and I realized I was shaking. Get yourself together! Things could be worse..... yeah, I could still be Dark Lord Bitch. I was trying to stay angry, trying my damnedest to hold onto the angst over having such a disgusting piece of Sith filth trapped in my head. But chilling horror kept slipping through the cracks, gripping me with trepidation that far outweighed any patronizing revulsion I could muster.

Revan’s in my head. Revan’s in my head. Revan's in my head.

That, of course, begged the question: How did she get in there?

And: Who put her there?

Which all followed onto: How do I get rid of her?

I swallowed convulsively, biting the insides of my cheeks in a fruitless effort to stay focused. The same thoughts still circled dizzyingly through my head ever since HK first extricated me from that ill-fortuned warehouse. I was getting nowhere. I couldn’t even make sense of myself, let alone come up with a decent plan. I had to figure out what to do now.

I can’t keep blindly running. Somewhere, I need to look for help. I thrust away the first obvious source – no sense in taking that course unless I had no other option. But what options were there on an unknown planet, with a powerful assassination order after me?

The only way I’d find out, was by exploring.
Even in the unguarded outlands of Emnaad, civilization still prevailed. Shantytowns of plimfoam and non-hardened plycrete had risen alongside the outer borders of Emnaad’s dome. There was no government to speak of – apart from the Selkath city, this entire planet was riddled with Czerka outposts and Exchange figureheads all trying to make a buck from the mining industry. An overabundance of cantinas and black-market trade swamped the area, and I knew it was just the sort of place where anything could be bought.

But I’d already spent my last credits - on a full-length black cloak, that easily covered the blood stains and gaping rents in my armour. Walking shadowed underneath such a concealing garment may have looked suspicious had not every second sentient been clothed the same. Let’s just ignore the fact that black, sweeping cloaks are probably the sum total of Revan’s wardrobe. I winced. I couldn’t even think her name without cringing.

_and now I’m out of credits. It’s Taris all over again._ Except this time, there was no suspicious pilot to help and harangue me into rescuing a snot-nosed Jedi. There was no Twi’lek street kid to befriend me, and acquire my aid in rescuing her overgrown side-kick.

Shame coursed through me at the thought of my former crewmates, and I closed my eyes in despair. _I’m being pathetic. I’ve got HK-47 instead. I figure I’ll be out of here in an hour at the most._

_Let’s just do what I came here for._

In places like this information was readily available – for a price. However, there was one free source, universally accessible through most of the galaxy – the lower-base holonets. You could find anything on the HoloNet. _Though usually not what you were looking for_, I added to myself sourly.

I’d wandered into a small emporium, where hawkers were trying to lure any passer-by towards their goods. I spotted a couple of old public terminals - the really antique ones that didn’t even have a headset, let alone a cerebral plug-in. _Not that I’d use it anyway; my mind’s already a walking minefield._ With a sigh I tapped into one.

Browsing the HoloNet was child’s play – unless, of course, you needed information from the uppernets. I hoped I didn’t – I wasn’t even sure what I was looking for.

I switched to text feed only, turning off voice input. The last thing I needed was curious locals to overhear.

_Query: multiple personalities created by the Force_

I’d never heard of the famous dance troupe _‘Multiple Personalities’_ until now, but apparently they were quite big in the Forlox Sector. Their smash hit, _‘The force of our love,’_ did nothing to help my search. I scowled, and cleared the screen.

_Query: suppressed memories of a different personality_

_Filter: Subject: the Force_

_Filter: Organization: Jedi Order_

Some Rodian psychoanalyst had become famous after publishing a thesis that claimed Order-trained Force-users not only suppressed their childhood emotions, but also often created a separate persona of themselves to fit in with the disciplined Jedi environment. I chuckled grimly and wondered if any Jedi had ever had a quiet word with him. Oddly enough, the Rodian had never published anything else.
Query: Brainwashing extra identities

Filter: Subject: the Force

Filter: Organization: Jedi Order

I was fast acquiring a painful headache. Limiting the query to Force related results generally pointed me to databanks I had no security clearance for. That, or visually guided tours explaining about the mystical nature of the Force. I grimaced, realizing I was fast running out of time. HK would soon be meeting me in an alley a block away, and I couldn’t afford to hang around long on Rii’shn. The GenoHaradan had already shown how powerful they were, by sending twenty assassins after me – two of whom where Dashade.

I shivered, jerked my attention back to the screen, and cleared the search results. A strange inspiration hit, and I changed the primary filter.

Query: transplanting memories mindwipe

Filter: Organization: The Sith

Filter: Subject: the Force

Half-way down the screen, I noticed a record pointing to a free archaeological databank. I would have ignored it, but as I glanced over the author's name, a quiet part of my mind stirred in recognition. Jen.

The entry was of one Pablo Hinterro recording the translation of an ancient journal. I’d heard of him – or rather, Jen had. There was a faint recollection of studying his work for a project back at the Academia. He was some famous archaeologist who’d spent his lifetime digging up findings on Eltron IV. Died on the primary moon of said planet when a cave mysteriously collapsed on him. But I – or rather Jen – had never read this excerpt before:

... 

Location: Seizon, moon of Eltron IV

I found a written journal in the dig site. Most of it had decayed; in fact only one page was legible. Odd that it was scripted by hand – the findings here are only a few centuries old, so I don’t understand why a datapad or techJournal wasn’t used. It’s composed of lyr-bark paper, and written in Ancient Elisin.

The rest of the journal has decayed. Considering the content of the one page I translated, I thought strongly about contacting the Jedi Order. Jayna convinced me against it; the site would likely be shut down for mere academics like us, and she is still firmly convinced this place was some secret Sith base used to experiment on the unfortunate.

While I agree with her on the first point, I think with the latter she is letting her imagination run wild. More likely, perhaps, that this is the diary of a rambling madman.

Regardless, here is my current translation:

“.... fragmentation of self, and an increasing inability to distinguish between his real personality and the imbedded memories. Surely a mindwipe of the original identity is preferable, but I think Lord Sevra prefers this sort of twisted release of information, despite the lack of efficiency. This method of transplanting memories is still in its infancy, in fact I doubt any other Force user has ever conceived
of it, let alone experimented.

The subject is showing more signs of confusion, and his memories are beginning to mix with the embedded ones to the point where neither memory can be separated. I do believe he is well on the way to insanity, though at least he is not Force sensitive. I wonder how a Force sensitive would fare?”

...

I gave a bitter laugh. *Guess what? I'm Force sensitive and I'm still going insane!*

My hand shaking, I cleared the terminal screen.

*_Is that my only option? Insanity? All because some Jedi decided to put a couple of identities in my head?*_ The sound of harsh, quick breathing reached my ears, and I realized it was me. With deliberate effort, I drew in a deep, slow breath.

*Focus. I've been a Force user, a Jedi in the past if I believe Bastila. There must be a sane, logical reason for Jen Sahara... and for Revan._ What irony, that I knew _their_ names, but not my own.

Theories I could come up with – _they needed Revan for some reason_ – _it was all a freak accident_ – _maybe I agreed to it all_ – but nothing really seemed right. And no matter how I tried, I could not think of a single reason why Jen Sahara was also in my head. *If this journal said their subject was going loony – then what about me, with two extra personalities?*_

I couldn’t escape the inevitable course of action. No matter how furious I was with her – no matter how much I would trust a Hutt before her – she was my only source of help. Insanity didn’t appeal. And neither did letting Evil Bitch out. *Can I keep Revan at bay forever? Can I?*

I wasn’t ready to reach out through the bond – touch the Force – just yet. The sheer life of it was too overpowering for me to handle just now.

*Find HK. Just keep moving, and stop thinking._ I blanketed myself with a detached numbness, and forced my feet to walk.

xXx

The droid’s red eyes gleamed in the darkness of the alley as I walked towards him.

“Statement: Master, I have acquired us a shuttle. By my calculations, we have approximately twenty minutes to board and depart Rii’shn before members of the Exchange are alerted to the lockdown of their south-western landing bay.”

Something clenched in my chest. “HK, you - you didn’t – kill anyone!” It wasn’t a question.

“Affirmative: No meatbags have had their miserable existences ended by my hand in the last hour, master.” For some reason, his voice sounded oddly smug.

The plimfoam walls of the alley were cracked and stained with age and who knew what else. I drew in a deep breath. “HK, how the frell did you lockdown an Exchange landing bay without killing a single person?”

“Observation: It was a mindless oversight of those Exchange meatbags to leave all that Gelosian
toxin lying around."

I stiffened. Gelosian toxin? I had no idea what it did, but if it could knock out a group of Exchange guards- “I thought you said no one had died!”

HK’s eyes flashed. “Conjecture: My chemical database precisely states that Gelosian toxin is rarely lethal, provided medical assistance is sought within twenty-four hours! If there are any fatalities, then it is clearly due to a lack of proper medical attention.”

I choked. “What are you saying? That’s there’s a whole bunch of comatosed Exchange thugs littered around this shuttle, that will die within a day if no one finds them?”

“Answer: Why, yes, master.” Whoever created HK should have drawn a big, evil smirk on his blood red face.

*More blood on my hands. This time, I can’t even blame Revan.*

My teeth clenched; now was not the time for self-recriminations.

“Let’s go then,” I hissed. “And for future reference, HK, if someone dies as a cause of your actions, then it counts as killing them.”

I could almost hear the droid shrug as he stepped forward to lead the way.

“Objection: Master, that is too broad a parameter! Scenario: If I was to buy the last kassi loaf, causing a settlement to starve to death before the next import, then technically I would be the cause of their death. Summary: This does not compute as killing the inhabitants of the settlement firsthand. You cannot expect me to accurately predict the future, master; not without additional core upgrades.”

I bit back a frustrated growl as we turned the corner. “No, but even you can predict that people may die from Gelosian toxin!”

A Rodian garbed in combat armour glanced warily at me; belatedly I realized how loud my voice was and cursed myself inwardly.

“HK,” I hissed quietly, cutting off whatever objection he was about to put forward. “Just tell me we don’t now have the sodding Exchange after us as well?”

“Prediction: Provided we use the fake signature I acquired from the Czerka databanks, and depart this shuttle promptly at our destination, then the Exchange will have no source to lay the blame on but Czerka Corporation. Observation: the cantina mook at The Lady’s Garter believed the GenoHaradan ambush to be an Exchange operation. They will likely blame Czerka for that, also.”

HK’s red gaze gleamed. “The GenoHaradan is a worthy opponent, Master, but not one we wish to draw attention to.”

Despite myself and my growing horror at the bloodthirsty nature of this droid, I couldn’t help but respect his abilities. And if I could slip away from the GenoHaradan, all the better.

We walked quickly and silently to the landing bay.

>xXx

The shuttle was small, and not made for intergalactic travel. Its fuel tanks could withstand only a handful of days in space; fortunately, Manaan was not far away.
The repulsors hummed through the floor as I belted myself in, concentrating fiercely on the controls so as to forget the comatose Exchange guards I’d walked over just minutes ago. I was becoming sorely tempted to melt HK down for scrap – yet so far, everything he had done had been under my command, no matter how brutally efficient he had been.

But it all added up to more people dead.

*The GenoHaradan attacked me – I can’t feel guilty for that!* The Exchange guards, however, had simply been in the way.

I shivered at how cold my thoughts were sounding, and they weren’t even coming from her. *No, not her – Revan. I will not be scared to name that schutta. Not if she’s taken up permanent residence in my own head.*

The shuttle manoeuvred quickly out of the landing bay, and I was glad of one thing – Rii’shn had no centralized government to speak of, and hence no firm astrogation laws. No official would bother with our ship leaving Rii’shn space.

As I activated the sublight drives, it occurred to me – I was flying a spacecraft. Confusion swamped my mind and I fumbled the controls, causing the shuttle to bank. *What am I doing? I’m flying a ship!* An alarm sounded from the console, and a dormant instinct took over. I steadied the ship, raised thrust to seventy percent, and increased the craft’s attitude to match the computer’s suggested exit trajectory.

“HK.” My voice shook slightly as the vehicle stabilized. “You got me a ship like I asked. But how did you know I could pilot?”

There was only one other seat in the shuttle, which the droid was currently occupying. He was silent for a moment. “Answer: I had... assumed, master. Observation: This is highly unusual. My programming does not allow for assumptions of this type.”

*You’re not the only one who assumed. I ordered you to get me a shuttle, and didn’t even think twice about piloting it until I was already in the sodding air!* I remembered the feeling I’d had, after we left Tatooine and I joined Carth in the cockpit – I was convinced I knew how to fly. It was a part of my past – *my* past, not Jen’s or Revan’s – I was certain of that. *But how had a street kid learned how to pilot?*

“Statement: It is time to program in our destination, master. Where are we headed?”

I tore my thoughts away from questions only Bastila could answer. “Mannaan,” I said flatly. “We’re going to Mannaan.”

HK paused, as if taking the time to process this command. “Commentary: While this would certainly not be expected by our enemies, Master, it will be difficult to travel there without being detected—”

“We’re going to Mannaan,” I repeated. “I need to see Bastila.”

His eyes flashed. “Statement: It will be a pleasure to combat a worthy opponent, Master!”

“HK.” My teeth were clenched. “No more killing. No. More. Killing. Understood?”

How a droid managed to deflate in despair was beyond me, but HK did it. His shoulders even seemed to droop.

“Objection: Our en-”
“Shut up, HK. In fact, power down for the remainder of the trip.”

HK dimmed as the sky transformed into space. Without the ongoing commentary from him, I was left with the sound of vibration coming from the small ship’s engines, and the whirlwind of my own thoughts. I was headed back to Bastila – yet the last time I’d spoken to her, she’d sounded as if our association had ended. What had she said?

_You forge your own path, Jen._

That had been over a day ago. There was nothing for it.

I opened myself to the Force, and reached for Bastila.

xXx
Admiral Dodonna’s serious face vanished from the holoscreen, and so did my forced smile. I had to bite back the curses welling up inside. After all these weeks of fruitlessly running from planet to planet, I’d thought I’d be able to wash my hands of the Jedi and their supposed mission. As well as being reprimanded, I’d also been thoroughly disabused of that particular notion.

With a muttered expletive, I clenched my fist and pounded it into the pristine table. Being white poraçlay – some hardened alloy of ferracrete – I couldn’t quite hold back a wince of pain.

I need a drink. A Corellian firewhiskey would do the trick. But I’d kicked that habit a long time ago. Days that blurred meaningless into one another followed by the sharp shock of an official warning from my superior, finally forced me to take charge of my life again. Alcohol may numb the pain for awhile, but it's only transitory. And all I woke up with afterwards was hollow grief, a pounding hangover, and fading memories of a beautiful woman and a studious boy.

No, drinking doesn’t help. As I’d tried to explain to Jen back on Taris, those first few days when she was determined to live permanently in a cantina. The one time she’d actually managed to get roaring drunk, Mission had to drag her back down to our camp in the Undercity. I felt an angry scowl chase away the reminiscing.

Damn you, Jen! Damn you to the Outer Rim, or wherever you’ve disappeared to! She could have killed us all by her sabotage on the Ebon Hawk. Canderous was adamant she’d planned it merely as a diversionary tactic so she could run, but how could she know no one could get hurt in the forced landing? How could she take that risk with our lives? I’d seen the stark hurt look on Mission's face afterwards, and wanted to slap Jen for it.

And now that Jen’s gone, I would have thought I’d be able to get back to my normal life. But no, Admiral Dodonna had other ideas. Watch the Jedi she says, I thought sourly. Like Bastila ever tells me what she’s up to.

The last ten hours – ever since I’d entered the Embassy – were tiresome, to say the least. Roland Wann had grabbed me first, under the guise of a ‘debrief’. In truth, he wanted to grill me for information about what the Jedi were up to. Two hours later, and I’d begged off to report to Dodonna. In reality, I’d gone to grab some lunch first. As much as I respected the Admiral, I wasn’t about to face one of her lengthy reporting sessions on an empty stomach.

Dodonna hadn’t been impressed.

…

“You’ve been travelling with them all this time, and you do not know anything about the Jedi mission other than it involves mysterious Force ruins?” Her voice bordered on scathing.

“Admiral, you know how tight-lipped the Jedi can be,” I objected. Like I hadn’t tried! Retrieving information from Bastila when she wasn’t inclined to part from it was like taking spice from a stoner. Damn near impossible.

“For all that Bastila’s a Jedi, Carth, she is also a pretty young woman.” The Admiral had raised an
eyebrow at me, as if conveying some message I was obviously supposed to understand.

I blinked. “What does that have to do with anything?”

For once, a glint of amusement sparked in Dodonna’s steely eyes. “I don’t indulge in office gossip, but that doesn’t mean I’m unaware of your reputation with the ladies.”

“My- my- what? Ladies?” I managed to croak out. What in the Outer Rim is she talking about? What reputation? My personal life had been empty and soulless since Telos burned.

A slow burn of anger mingled with the frustration I’d been building up for weeks, and with a sense of something close to relief I felt my temper snap. “Admiral, I’ve been stuck with a Jedi brat who’s lightsaber is firmly wedged up her arse; a crazy psychotic warrior who – guess what – can also use the Force; and an ex-Dark Jedi who not so long ago was slaughtering rabid animals out in the desert! The only female around I can relate to is a Twi’lek pickpocket who hasn’t yet graduated from childhood!” My voice rose to near-yelling pitch; vaguely I saw Dodonna’s face pale slightly in surprise. “I haven’t met anyone who could classify as a real lady in months!”

The Admiral straightened, and as her eyes flashed I realized just what I had implied. She stared at me stonily before responding.

“Thank you for that colourful commentary, Captain. Your disillusionment with my sex has been duly noted.”

The heat of anger faded into the uncomfortable sensation of embarrassment; I swallowed, and belatedly tried to back-track. “Uh, sorry Admiral, um- obviously, I wasn’t referr-”

“Save it, Captain,” she snapped. “I’ll overlook your impertinence this time, but you might do well to remind yourself that you are reporting from an official mission, not swilling beer and whining about women at the local cantina!”

I could feel humiliation warming my cheeks, and drew myself up stiffly. “Yes, Admiral.”

She sighed in frustration. “Just find out something useful, will you?” Her tone had changed from angry to mildly annoyed, and I knew she’d let it go. I was lucky enough to enjoy a relatively amiable relationship with the Admiral; relaxed enough that at times – like today – I forgot entirely who I was dealing with.

“I don’t see why I should be spying on the Jedi,” I mumbled. “I thought they were meant to be our allies.”

“Don’t be dense, Carth,” Dodonna snapped. “You are there to also help, and you know it. The Jedi need an experienced pilot, and your combat skills have already proven more than merely useful. But they can be as stiff-necked about ‘Jedi business’ as the Selkath are about neutrality. The Republic knows this mission is crucial to the war against Malak. We would, however, prefer to understand why – and that is where you come in.”

…

I sighed, rubbing my neck tiredly. The debrief had then shifted to my crewmates – and Dodonna was nothing if not thorough. She’d wanted to know every last detail from who Canderous had worked for back on Taris, to why a Wookiee would leave Kashyyyk voluntarily. I’d been about to interject sarcastically if she also wanted a run down on their eating habits, when she moved onto the one person I really didn’t want to talk about.
“Jen Sahara,” Dodonna started. “Quite an enigma, this one. The only other survivor of the Endar Spire – and from your report, she had quite a lot to do with you escaping Taris alive. A scholar who has signed a three year contract with the Jedi Order, and then sabotages your ship on entry to Manaan and does a runner? Who is she, Carth? There’s more than just a scholarly background here.”

“Well, she can use the Force, for a start,” I said. Oddly enough, this entire conversation was making me uneasy.

“I wondered that,” Dodonna mused. “Since you contacted the Republic when you left Tatooine, I’ve had men do thorough background checks on all your passengers. You have picked up some interesting crewmates, Carth, but this Jen Sahara is the most curious. Our reports indicate that she was severely wounded when Darth Revan’s forces invaded the planet Deralia. A medic’s report lists several broken ribs, massive head trauma, multiple fractures in her spine – to name but a few. Apparently this scholar was the victim of weeks worth of torture by the Sith before the Jedi rescued her. In short, Carth, her injuries should have killed her.”

Even now I couldn’t believe it. Jen, captured by the Sith? Tortured by them? The same woman who on Taris had professed – if only to wind me up – that maybe the Sith had the right idea? But then it could explain her mood swings... her violent outbursts... Once, on Taris, she’d fainted in the middle of the street. She was a mass of contradictions – she could wield the Force, yet she was scared enough of the Jedi to crash the Ebon Hawk and run. I’d seen her risk her life for Mission more than once – a street urchin she barely knew – and then she turned around and left us all in the lurch.

Oh, what does it matter. Jen’s well and truly gone. I should have been used to betrayal by now – and hashing it over in my mind accomplished nothing. The others were around somewhere; it was probably time I found them. Before I’d contacted Dodonna, I’d tried to meet up with the others with no success. Even Roland Wann had disappeared, and usually that smarmy commander was everywhere. Now, hours later, I couldn’t help but feel surprised at Bastila’s absence.

I left my private quarters after a brief nap, returning an amiable nod from one of the Army soldiers stationed at the Embassy. I didn’t hold the best opinion of Roland Wann – there was something almost obsequious about him – but the grunts here were friendly and open to conversation.

The Republic Embassy was a pretty swish joint. The shining opulence of furnishings – even the waxed floor that had not one jot of dirt on it - reminded me of the Republic apartments back on Coruscant. I’d never felt comfortable there – maybe it was something to do with growing up as a dirt-poor farmer back on Telos. I wasn’t ashamed of my background, but I’d met plenty of officers who seemed to think I should be. Generally officers who, like Wann, had been promoted due to their lineage rather than any real merit.

For all that I knew the Republic to be the right side in this war - for all that it stood for freedom and justice – sometimes I wondered just how rotten the core of it was. At the end of the day, I supposed that slime trickled to the top of all organizations, no matter what they stood for.

I turned left down the east wing, heading towards the barracks. Striding towards me was one of the Senate liaisons, an Ensign named Gerith I’d spoken to earlier. Upon spotting me, his merry face broadened into a grin.

“Carth,” he greeted. “All is well?”
I smiled briefly in response. “As good as can be expected, I guess. You haven’t seen any of the Jedi about recently, have you?”

Gerith rolled his eyes in disgust. “No. To be honest, I try to stay out of their way. Politics, y’understand. Jedi often want to know information I’m not obliged to impart.”

I nodded in understanding. The soldiers who filled the ranks of the Embassy on Manaan were either Republic Army or Senate bureaucrats. Gerith belonged to the latter group, and was one of the few of which I could stomach. Most of the civil servants had the same outlook on military that Gerith did on the Jedi.

“What about the Ebon Hawk?” I broached quietly. Gerith had been chasing up the red tape our ship was embroiled in.

His countenance lowered further. “No luck, I’m afraid. Some of the more conservative Selkath seem determined to use this as an example. Say that any ship used in a fight on Manaan territory will be seized.”

I clenched my teeth. “There was no fight,” I ground out.

“True, but it sounds like it came close, right?” Gerith shot me a piteous look. “I’m sorry, man, but the Selkath are acting like kath hounds guarding a hoarde of iriaz bones.” He shrugged. “I’ll do what I can.”

_Blast it. Not only did Jen almost kill us, but she lost us our ship._ But if what Admiral Dodonna had said was true – if she’d almost died at the hands of the Sith – then who knew what was going through her mind? She’d told me her memory was messed up, and I hadn’t known whether to believe her. But after hearing this, it made sense. Horrible sense.

I’d known survivors of torture before, and memory loss was not an uncommon way of the mind dealing with the trauma.

My thoughts turned to Bastila. Jen was running from her. She’d tried to, before, but each time Bastila had convinced her otherwise. Now, it seemed, Bastila’s powers of persuasion had finally waned. Maybe, after Deralia, the thought of anyone who could wield the Force had sent Jen running scared. _Jen? Scared?_ The thought seemed laughable, but Jen was such a mercurial character... and damaged, it seemed. More than I’d realized.

Two figures turned the corner up ahead, and I straightened as I recognized the Jedi Master Karon. Gerith turned to follow my gaze, and grimaced.

“I’m outta here – paperwork to do.”

He flicked a hand in acknowledgement as I nodded farewell, moving to intercept Karon. The Zabrak had stopped in the middle of the corridor, her head cocked as if she was listening for something. A distracted frown lined her face, and I walked within five paces of her before she even noticed me.

“What is it, Master?” a timid voice behind her asked. A Twi’lek male stood nervously in her shadow, young eyes trained on her. He was an adolescent, and judging by the tan robes, Karon’s apprentice.

“I’m not sure, Lars,” Karon murmured, and then turned to greet me. “Hello again, Captain Onasi.”

“Master Jedi,” I greeted, trying to keep my voice respectful. A twinkle of amusement sparked in Karon’s bright eyes, and I wondered if she’d picked up on my irritation. It wasn’t directed at her, not really. She seemed like a good sort - for a Jedi - and I had to admit my mood hadn’t been the best.
recently. *Maybe I'm just not good with authority, full stop.* “Have you seen Mission – the Twi’lek girl? Or Bastila?

The Zabrak’s mood sobered. “Mission left during the night, Captain Onasi.”

“Left?” I blinked. “What do you mean, left?”

The Jedi sighed. “I believe she has gone to find her own way in life, Captain. Of course-” she cut herself off, turning her head abruptly to stare into the distance, eyes narrowed.

“Her own way in life?” I all but exploded as my mouth dropped open. “What’s that supposed to mean?”

Karon shook her head, as if shaking off sand flies. “That she is old enough to decide what she should be doing. Do not worry, Captain, her Wookiee friend is with her, and I imagine that useful little droid followed as well.”

Vaguely, I realized I was gaping. I hurriedly shut my mouth, and felt anger churn within me again. *Dammit Jen, this is all your fault! Mission’s too young to be out here – by herself...* “I have to find her,” I said abruptly. “She’s only sixteen! What does she think she’s doing?”

Karon’s wise eyes rested on me. “I was of the understanding that she had been on her own for the majority of her life, Captain. And do not underestimate her friend Zaalbar. I sensed true devotion from him.”

For all that I disliked the patronizing speeches Jedi often spouted – and Jedi Masters were the worst – Karon’s words did have a calming effect on me. And they were, I knew, true.

"I can't believe she'd just go without saying goodbye," I muttered, scowling. I couldn't help it; I had a soft spot for Mission. She was impetuous and sassy, a bit like Jen, really, but Mission had an endearing naivete that was at odds with her street smarts – *look at the way she kept defending Jen* – and, truly, a heart of gold.

The Twi’lek boy behind Karon was staring at me with interest. I transferred my scowl to him, and he glanced away, a faint blush colouring his cheeks.

“Where’s Bastila then?” I asked abruptly. Karon’s attention had transferred once more into the ether – I wondered briefly if the Jedi had any sleep last night – but at my query her head snapped back to face me again.

“Commander Wann has not informed you?” Her voice was sharp.

“Informed me of what?” I could hear the annoyance creeping back into my voice. I knew I was acting like an old grouch – but dammit, nothing had gone right ever since Dodonna had ordered me to pilot the Endar Spire.

“Bastila – along with Jedi Juhani and Canderous – left four hours ago to Hrakert Station.”

“Hrakert Station?” I snapped. “What- where is that?”

Abruptly, Karon’s attention was jerked away from me again, and this time I heard her gasp audibly.

“Master?” the young Twi’lek queried in a hesitant voice.

“Where have they gone? And why aren’t I with them?” I demanded, scowling at the Jedi. *I can’t
“Master, I-I can feel something,” the boy stammered. I glanced back at the young Twi’lek, and with something close to surprise noticed he was trembling.

“Yes, Lars, I sense it too,” Karon murmured absently, but a dark frown lined her face. She whirled back to stare at me intently. “Captain, is there a back entrance into this Embassy?”

The stark alarm on her face dissipated my grouchy mood. “Not that I’m aware of,” I answered slowly. “But I don’t really know the layout of this place.”

“I must see Commander Wann,” she said urgently. “I sense-” she cut herself off mid-sentence, her body stiffening. The boy called Lars gasped.

“The Force,” he mumbled. Shock widened his eyes. “I can feel them using it. There’s so many of them!”

“Peace, Lars,” Karon said curtly.

“What’s going on?” I asked, aware that my hand was gripping the blaster hoisted on my belt. There was an old saying amongst the Fleet pilots I used to serve with. *An unsettled Jedi stirs more than just a mynock’s nest.*

“Dark Jedi,” Karon responded quickly. “Ten of them. Close. We must warn Roland!”

She whirled around, breaking into a run. The soldier in me responded to her barked order, and I sprinted after her automatically. The Twi’lek boy was gasping behind me.

I’d yanked out my blaster, racing down the gleaming hallway. Adrenalin pumped through my veins at the unseen threat. I didn’t hear any sounds of battle, no alarms warning of invaders were ringing, but Karon was running like her life depended on it.

As we passed the barracks, one of the grunts stepped out, his face a blank slate of shock as he took me in.

I ground to a halt, as Karon and Lars disappeared further up the hallway. “Where’s Wann?” I shot out.

He shrugged, inquisitive alarm sparking in his eyes. “No idea, captain. What’s happening?”

“A possible attack,” I answered curtly. “Be ready for action!”

His mouth dropped open in disbelieving surprise, but I didn’t have time for explanations. I ran, determination and fear forcing my legs. Worried faces of soldiers and civil servants alike blurred into the background as I sprinted down polished corridors. Some had been staring after the racing Jedi, only to see me running after her. I ignored various questions thrown in my wake.

Finally I lurched into the command room, panting with exertion. *You’re getting soft, Onasi.*

Roland Wann was scowling angrily at Karon, who was more flustered than I’d ever seen her. The Twi’lek boy was all but hopping on his feet in anxiety. Several techs had stopped working on their consoles to turn and stare at the ensuing confrontation. It didn’t take a second glance to see that Roland wasn’t interested in what Karon had to say.

“Not this nonsense again! I told you before, Karon, I have no time for Jedi foolishness!”
“You would ignore this threat, Commander?” The Zabrak’s voice had risen in intensity. “I assure you, I am not issuing warnings for the sake of my own health. You must evacuate. Now.”

Red blotches of frustration emerged on Wann’s face. “Come on, this is Ahto City! The Sith wouldn’t dare attack us here.”

“Then explain why there are two groups – two, Commander – of Dark Jedi, from opposite directions, heading directly towards this establishment?” Karon fixed her stare on Roland, who turned away to glare at the gob-smacked techs.

“What are you doing – get back to work!” he ordered, waving his hand. His eyes caught on me as I joined them. “Captain, talk some sense into this Jedi, will you? Manaan is ruled by their forsaken neutrality laws!” With an angry sigh, he turned to lean over his console, his back to the Jedi.

I was taken aback, to say the least. I might not trust the Jedi, but I wasn’t blatantly stupid either. “Uh-”

“Roland.” Karon’s voice was low, deep, and almost frightening. I didn’t have to feel the Force to know that it was at work. Roland appeared to turn around against his own volition. “You refuse to evacuate? You refuse to call the Selkath for aid? You would ignore this threat, when the lives of all your men are in your hands?”

“I will not be made to look like a fool in front of the Selkath!” The words tumbled from him. “They already oppose us at every turn, and what with the mess down on Hrakert Station – I cannot afford to have the Republic’s position on Manaan weakened any further by a ridiculous call for Selkath aid from a non-existent threat! The Sith probably know you are here, Karon, and are trying to frighten you – that’s what they do best! If we have Jedi on Manaan, why shouldn’t they have Dark Jedi? They wouldn’t attack – I refuse to believe it.”

Her face was tight. “You refuse to believe it, Roland, because you do not wish to. That does not mean it will not come to pass.”

The tension between the two was more than palpable – the Republic officer, face chubby with good living and little exercise, beady eyes staring defiantly into Karon’s dark turquoise gaze. I could understand where Roland was coming from – politics are always more crucial than they should be – but how could he ignore the safety of his own men? From Dark Jedi?

“You mentioned two groups, Karon,” I cut in, my silence finally broken. “Where are the exits to this place?”

Roland looked relieved at my interruption. “There’s only the main one. Which is heavily guarded by Selkath security cameras – another reason why the Sith wouldn’t try anything. The Selkath would pick them up immediately, and there would go their share of the kolto supply.”

“And yet I sense six Dark Jedi outside in the quadrant,” Karon stated.

“So?” Roland growled. “You sensed ten of them yesterday, and the worst thing that happened is that it was Private Laconi’s turn to help the cook! Could it be your sense radar is a little faulty, Master Jedi?”

Lars gasped. Karon’s eyes narrowed, and I bit back a groan.

“Do not act foolishly, Roland, it does not become you. These are the same ones from yesterday, but now much closer and split into two groups. Attacking from both sides.”
Roland threw his hands up in disgust. Idly, I noticed all the techs had stopped working again. “Give me a motive, Karon – why would they attack us and risk everything? Not to mention there’s only one entrance – unless they want to cut through the roof or swim in from the docking bay!”

All expression fled from the Zabrak’s face. “The docking bay,” she breathed. “That would explain why I sense them beneath me.” Her eyes snapped back to Roland. “Risk the lives of your men if you wish, but at least keep your attention focused on the main entrance. I urge you again to evacuate, or at least call for aid. I shall move to the docking bay to pin them down.”

The Jedi whirled around and stalked out of the room. Lars almost stumbled in his haste to run after her. I jerked my attention back to Roland, who was glaring furiously at the exit.

“She refuses to listen to reason!” he seethed. “The Sith attacking makes no sense.”

*And since when did the Sith make any sense?* Karon’s reaction had certainly unsettled me, and going by the terrified expressions on the various civilians in the room, I wasn’t the only one. The safety of the men here had to come first. I bit back a sigh and tried to force a placating tone. “Still, it doesn’t hurt to evacuate, sir.”

Roland’s eyes snapped back to glower at me. “So not only would you have us lose face in front of the Selkath, but also leave this base unguarded for any man off the street to wander in? Don’t tell me you actually believe the Jedi, Captain?”

I felt myself scowling in return. “You think she’s just making this up, sir?”

He sighed angrily, and turned to glare at the techs who were now listening in to our conversation. Most of them turned quickly back to their consoles. “No, I don’t, captain. But I refuse to believe the Sith would dare attack us here. They are trying to provoke us into a fight with a show of strength – that is all. It is a common Sith tactic on Manaan streets. The gullible fall for it, only to find themselves in a Selkath jail.” At my disbelieving look he rolled his eyes. “Come on, Onasi! Why would they risk their kolto supply? And why would they bother infiltrating the Republic base? What? To get at Karon?”

A sobering thought struck me. Taris. Malak’s forces had laid waste to the city to kill one person. And the Sith probably thought she was safely housed inside the Republic base right now. “No, not Karon,” I breathed, horror striking into my gut. Karon is right. “Bastila. They’re after Bastila.”

Roland dropped his head into his hands and groaned. “Captain, I repeat, the Sith would be throwing away their kolto supply if they dared attack-”

“Do you think that would matter to them if they could finally kill Bastila? She’s central to our war effort, Wann! Where is she?”

“My disbelieving look he rolled his eyes. “Come on, Onasi! Why would they risk their kolto supply if they dared attack-”

“Far away from here! Jakobs – where do you think you’re going?”

One of the techs had been surreptitiously edging towards the door. His face blanched and he looked down at the floor sheepishly. “Er – bathroom break, sir.”

“Get back to work – now!” Roland screamed, his face motting with fury. He looked about one step away from losing it completely, and must have realized this himself. The tech scampered back as Roland took in a few deep breaths.

“We need to get them out of here,” I demanded softly, lowering my voice to a whisper. I could hear pounding in my head. While Karon’s predictions had worried me before, only now did they seem like a plausible reality.
Intense dislike was aimed directly at me as Roland’s gaze bored into my own. “Have you forgotten your position? I’ve made my decision, captain. I will not have you countermanding my orders!”

Stiff-necked idiot! He would throw away the lives of his men rather than risk losing face? Whatever respect I may have had for the aging commander was fast disappearing. The base was full of civilians that would be cut down like renni grass by Dark Jedi. Somehow, I had to convince Roland the threat was real – this place had to be evacuated. I searched the room frantically before my gaze caught on the console next to Roland. An array of camera outputs stared back at me.

“Bring up the cameras for the docking bay,” I ordered. My tone was probably too commanding, as Roland shot me an incredulous look. I scowled. “Commander, we should at least be ready!”

He grunted, but leaned forward to switch the cameras. A view of Karon and her apprentice standing ready in an empty room greeted us.

“See? Nothing.” Roland’s voice was sanctimonious, and almost smug.

“The main entrance?”

Roland tapped another key, and a dual screen of an almost empty foyer appeared next to the docking bay. A bored receptionist was idly painting her nails at the desk. I could feel Roland’s irritated glance on me, but kept my gaze glued to the console.

“Where is Bastila?” I repeated quietly. “They’re after her, Roland, I’m certain of it.”

“She’s on a mission, captain – one I won’t talk about here. But there’s no way the Sith can find her.”

I jerked back to face him. I had almost forgotten my earlier anger at not being informed – I was part of Bastila’s crew, dammit – but now was not the time. Roland’s not far from chewing me out. Again.

Still, I was fast reaching the point where I didn’t care. “We need to warn her.”

“Spread the panic far and wide, huh, captain?” Roland bit out sarcastically. He was staring at the screen, and a puzzled look slowly grew on his face. “That's an incoming submersible. Odd, we're not expecting one for another hour.” He frowned. “That means someone opened the bay doors. That's not right.”

Trepidation crawled down my spine. I swung my gaze back once more to the console. Karon was standing near a surfacing submersible, her cyan lightsaber illuminating the screen. Behind her was the scared Twi’lek, clutching a short green ‘saber. “Do you recognize the ship?”

The horrified expression plastered over his chubby face was answer enough. The dual camera of the entrance foyer blinked at us as six black figures materialized.

The blood drained from Roland’s cheeks as terror uncurled in my stomach, but to give the blundering commander credit, he was fairly quick on the uptake. He all but shoved me away from the console, hurriedly switching to broadcast.

“Selkath Authority: this is Commander Wann from the Republic Embassy signalling a distress call. The Embassy is under attack from unknown forces. We request aid. I repeat: we request aid!”

One of the civilians in the room screamed and dashed for the door.

“Halt!” I yelled. “The entrance is blocked off – stay here!”

The tech shot me a terrified look but bolted from the room. The remaining occupants turned to stare
at me.

“All soldiers to the command room! We are under attack!” Roland hollered through the intercom. I could see sweat glistening on his broad forehead. “All non-military personnel return to your rooms and lock your door until further notice! Do not attempt to engage the enemy!”

I quickly surveyed the room – a large half circle populated with consoles that had two direct exits. Ten people in here, most of them techs. They were no fighters; I didn’t need a second glance to see that. One sole soldier had staggered towards Wann, looking for direction. Her face was pale but set, and she held a small Echani pistol in readiness.

“Guard the south exit,” I ordered, pointing. “Any weapons here the techs can arm themselves with if need be?”

“Commander Wann, this is Selkath Authority,” a hissing voice came haltingly from the comm. “We have lodged your distress call and dispatched a peacekeeping corps. We do not tolerate violence on Manaan!”

“I didn’t exactly invite it,” Roland spat through gritted teeth. “Just get me some damn help before we’re slaughtered!”

The female soldier shook her head at me, then paused. “There might be a few blasters in the locker.”

“What is the nature of your attackers?”

I kept my blaster and eyesight aimed on the second door while motioning the closest tech towards me. “You. Go into the locker and distribute whatever weapons you can find amongst the techs. Stay in the far side of the room, away from the doors.”

The tech nodded, his eyes round in fright.

I turned back to Wann who was staring fixedly at the console. I had a brief glimpse of the once-bored receptionist being cut down by a glowing red blade before the camera shorted out.

“Sithspit!” Roland cursed. The other screen showed two figures advancing on Karon. Another two were climbing out from the now-docked submersible. Someone had engaged the defensive turrets that spat laser at the intruders, flashing sparks across the screen but otherwise being inherently useless against Force-users.

“Repeat: what is the nature of your attackers?”

“They’re bloody Sith!” Roland screamed into the console. “Who else would attack the damn Republic Embassy? Now get me some help!” He angrily cut the transmission with a punch to the desk.

Warning klaxons wailed loudly, and I had a sudden recollection of the Endar Spire. My jaw clenched. Curse those Sith! There’s too many people here... my one brief thought was gratitude that no one from the ‘Hawk was still in the Embassy.

I looked back towards the console in time to see one Dark Jedi push Karon out from the docking room, and out of view of the camera.

“Not even Karon can survive four of those bastards,” Roland breathed in horror. His face was white as he stared at the screen, terrified.
“She needs backup,” I muttered. One of the black robed figures had finally spotted the camera. He raised his arm, pointing towards us as lightning arced from his fingers, shooting straight in our direction. The screen went black.

“Check what other cameras are online,” I snapped out at Wann. “We need to track their movements.” I turned to face the techs – they were hurriedly passing blasters amongst themselves; not a one of them appeared comfortable holding a weapon. Roland's eyes were still glued to the console, but I noticed he’d finally pulled out his blaster.

“How much help would they be, now? I looked up at Roland. “Dark Jedi in the foyer,”” I reminded him. Our call for aid has probably done nothing but send the Selkath to their deaths.

His eyes met mine, and then looked away. He didn’t say anything further.

“How many soldiers here, sir?”

“Thirty-three currently stationed on base.”

I blinked. “Only? In the main Republic base on Manaan?”

“This is an Embassy, first and foremost, captain!” Roland shot back. “We have other troops patrolling the seas. Some are stationed with the Selkath.”

The swishing noise of a door opening grabbed my attention, and I swung my blaster around to face the south door the female soldier was guarding. She gave out an audible sigh as two figures clothed in Republic uniform ran inside. I recognized one as a guard who’d escorted us into the base. Both were armed with stun sticks, and moved to flank the Commander.

“Karon’s hemmed down in the barracks. Holy stars-” Roland cut himself off, but motioned at the screen. I glanced down – the barracks were littered with corpses. Republic corpses. My gut clenched.

“Curse those black-hearted bastards!” Roland spat. “How are we to survive this?"

Someone whimpered from the far side of the room. Dammit. Likely there are few soldiers left. My attention sharpened on the screen. A dazzling display of red and light blue sparks shone from one of the remaining cameras. I had no idea where her apprentice was, but Karon was good – that much I could tell from the terminal.

“We should get the techs out,” I said abruptly. “They’re nothing but fodder here.”

Roland barked in disbelief. “Captain, these are Dark Jedi. We’re nothing but fodder.”

Internally I conceded the point, but now was not the time to show despair. “We should get ready, though. Blasters are all but useless against Dark Jedi. Any grenades here? Flamethrowers?”

Roland was shaking his head. “You’re lucky we had those blasters in the locker.”

I glanced down at mine, and bit back a curse. My one and only vibroblade – courtesy of Jen’s midnight jaunts back on Taris – lay back in my quarters. My only chance was to catch one of them unawares.
The Selkath are going to get ripped to pieces – we can’t rely on them, either. Our only hope was Karon, but she was alone – and I spotted another Dark Jedi entering the barracks to face her. Two against one. There were four earlier. Did she kill two of them, or are they elsewhere now?

“Can you see any soldiers?”

Roland leaned forward to cycle through the remaining cameras. “There’s six in the mess. That’s – that’s next to the barracks. They seem to be shooting at – something…”

I leaned closer; sure enough, a small group of soldiers were panicking, and firing blasters through the room. One of the soldiers fell down, clutching his leg. I grimaced; it looked like he’d been hit by friendly fire. Another arched up off the ground, mouth opened in a wordless scream.

“Where is the fiend?” Roland growled. “I can’t see any Dark Jedi on the screen!”

The soldier collapsed into a crumpled heap. Another threw a knife directly across the room. The knife jarred in mid-air; a sparkle of blue static heralded the appearance of a black robed figure yanking the short blade out of his shoulder.

"Stealth field generator," Roland spat. "The cam should've picked up more feed. Those things are crap, you wouldn't think the Sith would bother with them."

Roland was wrong. I’d seen one that good before, not so long ago. And Calo Nord likely been equipped by the Sith. Have the Sith discovered a superior stealth technology? It was certainly an effective way to create panic, I realized with mounting horror - throwing Force powers around while practically invisible.

Three of the soldiers retreated hastily from the room as the Dark Jedi hurled the knife back to its owner. I winced, closing my eyes reflexively as the Republic combatant buckled, hands scrabbling at his throat. When my eyes opened again, it was to appraise the unreal sight of the Dark Jedi lying comatose on the ground.

“What?” I exclaimed in disbelief.

“The injured man – the one who got a hit to the leg.” Roland fired me a stunned look. “He shot the sithspawn in the back.”

“Fancy that. Guess you don’t need to be a Jedi to kill those bastards.”

Back in the barracks, Karon was being pushed hard. One of the Sith parried her ‘saber as the other slashed at her leg. Karon jumped back, but it looked like a hit.

“I’m heading out,” I said flatly. “There were three soldiers who ran from the mess. I’ll find them, and go help Karon.”

Roland’s jaw dropped. “Are you crazy, Onasi? Those Dark Jedi will cut you to pieces!”

Determination flooded through me. “Maybe I can get a lucky shot in too. It’s better than waiting in here – Karon’s our only hope, Wann, and she looks like she needs all the backup she can get. We can’t count on the Selkath. Lock down the doors after me.”

I heard one of the techs whimper as I strode towards the door, my gun raised.

“Captain-”
I turned back to look at Wann, cloistered between the two soldiers. Their stun sticks looked about as effective as the twigs the Sand People had used on Tatooine, and the Commander had aged a year in a day. Dammit, the Republic should have been prepared for this. We allowed Manaan’s neutrality to lull us into complacency.

Roland stared steadily at me, one soldier to another. “Good luck out there.”

I nodded, smiled grimly, and walked out the door.

xXx

I slammed myself back against the wall, blood thumping so loud in my own ears that it was hard to hear anything above the pounding. I thought I’d heard soft footsteps around the corner; now all I could hear was my own quick breaths. It was a short walk from the command room to the mess, but with Dark Jedi on the loose, it seemed like an eternity.

It wasn’t the first time I’d been up against Force users. Apart from those idiots who’d attacked Bastila in Anchorhead – again, Malak’s forces after Bastila, I should have believed Karon earlier – I’d encountered Force sensitive Sith in the past few years when circumstances had taken me out of the skies. I’d seen firsthand what damage they could do.

The worst battle was on Rodia, where I’d been grounded when the hangar bays had been destroyed. Our squadron was attacked by a company of Sith led by the ex-Jedi Talvon Esan. I recognized him from the Mandalorian wars – I’d served under him directly.

Some of us had escaped. Some, he’d captured and played with. The Republic counter-attack had retrieved the prisoners and Talvon fled, but not until days had passed. I’d known some of those men who’d suffered under Talvon’s ministrations.

Bitterness flooded my mouth. It was all too easy to distrust and fear the Jedi. Too many of them fell to the other side.

The sudden cessation of wailing alarms caught my attention – someone had finally disabled them. If the Dark Jedi had been aiming for a stealthy approach, they’d done a pretty poor job – but stealth had hardly been needed.

The sound of harsh panting reached my ears; it took me a second to realize it wasn’t my own. I froze, and tried to still my breathing. The noise was close; I figured someone was leaning against the wall, just around the corner. I doubted it was a Dark Jedi, but couldn’t be certain.

With a leap, I cleared the corner and aimed my blaster directly down the corridor. A startled scream issued from a bloodied figure huddled against the wall – he scrambled backwards and slid to the ground before I recognized him.

“Gerith.” I lowered my gun and stepped forward to help the Senate Ensign up. “Are you badly hurt?”

His normally clear eyes were wide with panic, and blood soaked his right side. Streaks of black burns ran up his neck; a sign I recognized as the after-effects of Force lightning. He’s lucky to be
“alive,” I realized grimly.

“C-carth,” he mumbled, clutching my hand as he stumbled to his feet. He didn’t let go of me once he stood. “Help. They—they’re after me. I’ve—I’ve got to get away!”

“The exits are blocked. Gerith, get to the command room. Wann’s got it sealed off – you’re best chance is to wait this out,” I spoke slowly, hoping my words would get through to him. Gerith had always struck me as a capable, intelligent man, but he was clerk, not a soldier. He’d probably never seen a Dark Jedi before, let alone had to fight one.

He was shaking his head at me, the whites of his eyes showing. “N-no. They’ll find me. I only j-just got out.”

I raised my other hand and griped his shoulder firmly. “Gerith. Listen to me. They’re not after you, they’re after the Jedi. Get yourself to the command room, or find a place to hide. Do not try to leave the Base, there’s Dark Jedi in the entrance foyer.” My guess was that at least two Dark Jedi would have been placed to guard the main doors and resist any Selkath aid. Unless the Selkath tried blasting their way through the embassy with permacrete detonators, we were effectively pinned inside. And the Sith would search every room until they realized their quarry – Bastila – was not in residence.

A small measure of sanity seeped back into Gerith’s gaze, and he nodded shakily at me. As I stepped back from him, ready to move on, I heard the noise of clambering footsteps. Men, running towards us. Gerith let out a small scream, and stumbled into me.

“Command room. Now,” I ordered, hoping fervently that Wann would let the Ensign in. After all, I had told Wann to lock down the doors after me. Gerith took a step away and turned to run as I hoisted my blaster up again. The footfalls were louder, and judging by the frequency there was more than one man running towards me. I held my ground, blaster raised down the corridor as I heard Gerith retreat behind me.

Three soldiers breached the corridor up ahead, their rifles snapping to aim at me before they recognized I was no threat. I lowered my own pistol, taking in their state as they walked closer. They were the soldiers I’d spotted on the cameras, and one was limping slightly.

“Captain Onasi,” their leader said tersely as they approached. I noticed captain’s pips on the shoulder of his torn uniform. “We’re trying to get to Wann to protect him.”

“There’s Dark Jedi out there!” the injured man wheezed. His comrade elbowed him sharply. “Wann’s as safe as can be,” I bit out. “He’s locked in the command room. I need your help to defend Jedi Karon.”

“What?” the limping soldier gasped. “No sodding way! We only just made it out of there!”

“Laconi, keep your flaming voice down,” the second soldier hissed, elbowing him once more. “Do you want to get us killed?”

“I saw one of your comrades kill a Dark Jedi by shooting him in the back. They aren’t immortal, and our only chance is to aid Karon.” I kept my voice low, intense. If I had to, I’d forge on ahead, but I’d vastly prefer a team. “She’s outnumbered, and won’t last long.”

The captain nodded seriously at me. “I’m with you. I’m Captain Gilies, this is Privates Darna and Laconi.”

“It’s damn suicide!” Laconi muttered.
“Either pull yourself together or get out of here, Laconi,” I ordered. I looked back at Gilies; he was waiting for my command. I quickly snapped out what I knew. “Ten Dark Jedi entered this embassy; six through the main entrance. We know at least one of them is dead. Karon went to the docking bay to cut off the other four – we need to move in that direction.”

Darna, a short, stocky Sullustan, moved to flank me. Laconi scowled, but followed suit as Captain Gilies took the lead.

“This way, we’ll cut through the maintenance corridor,” he whispered, turning to walk briskly onwards. The rest of us followed.

Around the corner we had to step over several civilian corpses. I heard a scream not far away, and Laconi jumped in fright. I cursed under my breath. He’s not far from cracking. I looked over at him; perspiration dripped down the human’s sickly face.

“In here,” Gilies whispered, opening a chrome office door. Darna stepped through first, blaster raised. As the Sullustan waved me onwards, I heard footsteps trailing nearby. My eyes met the captain’s, and then trailed over Laconi. The door swept closed behind Laconi with a mechanical hiss, and I wondered how far the noise of a door shutting could be heard.

The footsteps paused, and started up again; closer.

We were in a workroom, with an exit on either end. I motioned the others to stand further back, and I pressed myself tightly against the wall by the door. If that’s a Dark Jedi, my only chance is surprise.

The footsteps stopped outside the door, and I held my breath, blaster raised at the entrance. I knew I would only get one shot – if that.

The door opened.

“Karon!” Gilies called out, and my grip slackened. The Zabrak master stepped through the entrance, and her head snapped to the side to face down my blaster. The corner of her mouth twitched in acknowledgement, and I truly wondered whether I would have got the shot off, had Karon been a Dark Jedi.

“We need to get everybody out,” Karon said in a clipped tone, her gaze sweeping the room. It was then that her condition fully registered – one arm sagged at her side, and blood soaked her beige robe from the knee down. She took a step further inside the room, and only because I was looking for it did I notice the limp. Of course she’s hurt, you numbskull. She just faced down four Dark Jedi. And there were five still out there.

“The entrance is guarded by Sith,” I replied tersely. “Wann’s in the command centre, with a bunch of techs and soldiers. How many Dark Jedi still out there?”

The Zabrak’s gaze tightened on me. I heard a whimper from Laconi. “I dispatched three of them, and injured a fourth.”

She’s some Jedi, all right. “I saw one get killed by one of ours. That’s five left, plus the injured one.”

Karon was shaking her head. “Too many for me, captain. I was not far from falling myself, and I have no idea where my apprentice is. I believe our-” She stopped mid-sentence, eyes widening a fraction. “Three coming down the hallway,” she whispered, spinning swiftly back to face the door. “Stand ready, they may not know we are here.”

Laconi moaned, dropped his gun, and sprinted for the exit at the south of the room.
“No-!” Gilies cursed as the door swished open, and Laconi disappeared from sight.

“They do now.” Karon muttered. I stood behind her to the left, gun pointing at the door. My chest felt tight with adrenalin and tension. I’m getting too old for this.

“Get ready to fire,” Gilies muttered.

I squinted at the door, readying my aim. Silence ominously pervaded the area. Karon was bathed in the pale glow of her lightsaber, holding station by the door. Gilies’ and I flanked her, further behind but still with a clear shot should the door open.

My grip tightened on the weapon; Darna’s breaths behind me seemed inordinately loud. Where are those black-hearted bastards? A trickle of perspiration slid down my temple, and the muscles in my forearm clenched.

Gilies’ shot me a tense, frantic look as the seconds ticked by. Darna shifted to the side, his weight balanced on his left foot. Only Karon seemed unaffected by the pressure of unbroken silence, standing serenely in front of us all. Have they walked straight past us? Are we safe, or-

A crash outside, and the door yawned wide once more.

As one, Gilies, Darna and I opened fire, a stream of bolts that was instantly deflected back into the room amidst the twirl of a red lightsaber. Karon leapt forward to attack two hooded Sith charging straight towards us.

A wave of Force power engulfed the room; the breath was smashed from my lungs as I was thrown backwards, my blaster ripped from my hands. Darna yelled in protest somewhere in the midst, and I heard Gilies thud into the wall with a grunt.

I scrabbled to my feet, spotted my gun and lunged for it as Karon stabbed her ‘saber clean through the neck of the first Dark Jedi. He crumpled with a bloodcurdling scream, and the Zabrak sprung backwards, dodging the violent swing of the second Sith by an infinitesimal margin. How does she move so flaming fast?

Adrenalin spiked through my veins like spice; I hoisted my gun to fire into the fray as Gilies struggled back to his feet. I pulled the trigger as a third Dark Jedi entered the room, hand outstretched in an sinister gesture that was becoming all too eerily familiar.

No-!

Then the Force was well and truly unleashed.

Bright white scorched the room, clawing at my skin, flinging my weapon away with ease, and driving nails deep into my flesh. Muscles convulsed; agony drove all rational thought from my head. My jaw was locked open in a wordless scream.

Abruptly, it stopped, and I found myself twitching on the floor. Stang! I jerked my head up, taking in the scene at a glance. Karon was facing off the only standing Dark Jedi, dodging a frenzied attack that pushed her deeper into the room. A second dark-robed figure was dragging himself to his feet- Dammit, there’s still two left!

My skin was burning from lightning residue as I dragged myself up, limbs tight and aching. Frantically, I searched for my blaster; tables and containers alike had been overturned, leaving an assorted mess of tools, implements and objects lying scattered. The only weapon I could spot was what looked like a nail gun, perched underneath an overturned canister.
Karon lurched unsteadily backwards, off-balance and on the defensive. Red met cyan again and again.

Darna was moaning softly, the odd blue spark still shooting brightly from his body. I dived for the nail gun as the second Sith turned to face me, a dark chuckle warning of his impending approach.

*Nothing for it.* I snatched the gun and rolled, aiming and firing blindly, the tool bucking desperately in my grasp. The first nail hissed as it melted on a red beam, before an invisible force wrenched the gun from my hand.

A berserker scream sounded from my left; the Dark Jedi whirled quickly to face a surprise attack from Gilies with a stun stick. I couldn’t stop a wince as a red beam cleaved the captain’s head from his body. *Murdering bastards! There’s got to be a way to kill them!* The Dark Jedi faced me yet again; defenceless, weaponless, I stood stock still as he loosed another mocking laugh.

Darna, crouched in a corner, opened fire and snatched his attention away yet again. I leapt towards Gilies’ still thrashing body and grabbed the useless stun stick. *Who am I kidding? This, against a Dark Jedi?*

Darna gurgled as the bolts were deflected back into his torso; the offender was still laughing, his back to me. I glanced down at the stun stick, grimaced, and threw.

It landed with a solid thud into his back.

Triumph was short-lived. As his legs buckled, I glanced back towards Karon. She had fallen to her knees in front of the sole remaining Dark Jedi. *No! Sithspit, I have to help her!*

The hooded figure raised a hand, and Karon’s lightsaber flew effortlessly out of her grip. I was completely out of weapons; my fists clenched, I’d fight bare-handed, if need be. The Dark Jedi wasn’t looking in my direction; so far, my survival hadn’t been noticed amongst their wild duel.

“Well, well,” the Dark Jedi gave out a low chuckle, and took a step closer to Karon. “And here I thought the Force user we sensed was Bastila. I guess it figures you’d be here. Babysitting your failure, are you?”

That made no sense to me, but considering the way Karon’s face tightened, it struck a nerve with her.

“Ky...” she said softly. “I would like to offer my happiness at seeing you alive when we all believed you died upon the Endar Spire – but, considering your apparel, I do not believe your survival was chance.”

Horror punched into my gut, followed swiftly by boiling fury as I looked upon the face of the Dark Jedi. Even shadowed underneath a hood, I could recognize her, now I looked hard enough. One of Bastila’s entourage onboard the doomed Endar Spire, who’ d had the distinct ability to stick her nose even higher in the air than Bastila herself.

“Traitor,” the word slipped out in a hiss before I could think. “You backstabbing gutter slime! You sold out to Malak and betrayed hundreds to their deaths!”

Kylah’s attention snapped to me, her hand punched into the air and I felt my body lift violently. The breath was smashed from my lungs as I smacked into the far wall. Pain shot down my spine, and stars danced in my vision. Joints seemed to creak in anguished complaint.

*Well, that was bright.* I’d crashed into the far side of the room, next to the still warm body of Private...
Darna. His blaster was still clutched in his dead hand.

“So, where’s little Bastila then, hmm?” Kylah had focused her attention back on Karon; obviously I was far beneath her notice. I might be able to use that to my advantage. Get her, when she’s not expecting it. Survival instinct warred with exhaustion as lethargy swept through my limbs.

“You’re after Bastila,” Karon responded quietly. It wasn’t a query, but from the stiff set of her shoulders I didn’t think she’d been expecting that. Who else would they be after?

Kylah laughed deep in her throat. “What, you thought I was tracking your wayward apprentice?” A dark look passed her face. “We all have our missions, Master Karon.”

Karon mentioned her young apprentice had disappeared earlier. But why would Kylah be after Lars? That doesn’t make any sense. I edged my hand surreptitiously towards the blaster on the ground. Kylah had all but forgotten me.

“Now tell me,” Kylah’s voice dropped lower, and she took a step closer to the unarmed Zabrak. Karon was still on her knees. “Where is Bastila?”

The gun was too far away; I shifted my torso closer, holding my breath. Agony twisted through my back, and I knew I’d be a bruised mess tomorrow. Tomorrow? Hah, I’ll be stars lucky if I live through today. My palm brushed the cold arm of Private Darna.

“You will not find her, Kylah.” Karon’s voice was soft.

An ugly sneer contorted the Dark Jedi’s face, and she raised her lightsaber towards Karon. “I will kill you, Karon, don’t make the mistake of thinking I’d spare your pathetic life. Tell me where she is!” The blood red of the ‘saber flickered against Karon’s dark skin.

My fingers caught on the metal of Darna’s blaster as Karon jerked abruptly backwards, rolling to the side with her hand outstretched. I tugged at the gun, wrenching it up to aim. Kylah yelled in outrage and lunged; Karon’s ‘saber thudded into her hands a moment too late. As my blaster spat laser, Kylah’s weapon drove deep into the Zabrak’s side.

Karon gave an agonized wail as she crumpled to the floor.

My shot seared into Kylah’s shoulder; she screamed and spun to face me, flinging aside Darna’s blaster in fury. Dark rage deformed her features, and with a sick punch to my gut, I knew this was it. Karon’s dead, or as near as. And so am I. I’d had so many close calls recently, that part of me was almost resigned to this.

“Worm!” Kylah hissed. “You just don’t know when to stay dead, do you?” She raised a fist once more, and I was dragged up against the bloodied wall, a band tightening around my throat. A fresh wave of panic struck blindly through me. No! I’m not ready to die, dammit! My hands scrabbled at my throat uselessly, and my vision dimmed.

The last thing I could make out was the bright sparks of electricity dancing from Kylah’s free hand.

xXx
Everything was falling apart. We were trapped on the bottom of the ocean, in a deserted base, with no vehicle back to safety. And no communication link back to Karon.

If that wasn’t bad enough, my worry for Juhani was beginning to supersede everything else. The intense Cathar had been strangely quiet, but I hadn’t failed to sense her burgeoning fear. Perhaps because my link with Revan was muted – small mercies, at least there is some peace – but I had realized all was far from well with Juhani. The Cathar insisted she was fine, but the tense set of her shoulders and the feral look in her eyes betrayed her.

And now we only had each other to rely upon. In the past, I had wished for that barbaric Mandalorian to leave – to allow me to continue my quest without his interference and snide temperament – but not like this. I could not quite forget the ugly look in his eyes.

Why did Canderous have to be so stiff-necked? His death-threats did not strike fear into me – I refused to let anything that uncouth simpleton said scare me – but I could not help but be cautious. Canderous was no match for the Force, but should he catch me unawares…

I pursed my lips in annoyance. If it hadn’t been for Roland Wann and his self-righteous interference, Carth would be accompanying us. While I trusted in the Force and my own abilities, the rabid Selkath set my teeth on edge and both Carth’s assured competence and his loyalty would be most welcome. We had been lucky so far, and had not encountered more than two of them together. But the cursed Base had been grotesque in its offerings – the last Selkath looked to have been feeding on a corpse when we interrupted him. Juhani had barely dodged a vicious bite to her leg.

“I wonder what could have occurred to warp these Selkath.” Juhani’s voice was jarringly loud as we picked our way through one of the endless meeting rooms that populated this part of the Base. The darkened chambers were now behind us, but the artificial light emitting from halogen bulbs cast an eerie glow over the plasteel walls.

Silence had enveloped us as we tentatively strode through the cursed Base. An hour earlier I hadn’t been able to ignore the faint, muted sounds that occasionally reached our ears – sounding suspiciously like human screams – but now, nothing. I was not sure what was worse.

“I do not believe I wish to know,” I finally replied. “These Selkath do not feel right.” They had been the only sentients we had encountered in the last hour. And their demeanour has been so crazed that I could not categorically call them sentient anymore.

The Force shone in all living beings, brighter in the more conscious ones. Somehow, it had been dulled, or twisted, in Selkath we had found. The only thing I could compare it to was a rabid kath hound.

“They do not smell right either,” Juhani muttered under her breath. “Like a caged reek.”

The incoherent, raving Selkath had dogged us through the twisted channels of the underwater base, and revulsion sat like sick in my stomach. They used to be researchers here. Logical sane people that have been contorted into something macabre. What could have happened to degenerate them
so?

We exited into a hall that was dominated by a large, round table. Datapads and techJournals sprinkled the floor in a disjointed mosaic. *Days ago, scientists met here to discuss their findings and research projects.* A vast ferracrystal window gave us a view into the gloomy depths of the Manaan ocean. The water was too dark to make anything out, although I thought I caught a glimpse of a slithering shadow in the murky depths.

Juhani shuddered and moved on.

“*You are safe inside, Juhani. The water cannot come in.*”

“I know,” the Cathar replied tartly. “I am well aware that it is an irrational fear, and I apologize for it. But I can – no, I *will* deal with it. In silence.”

She stepped past me after that pointed remark, and did not look in my direction. I held in a sigh and followed her. *I should not have brought that up,* I rebuked myself. *Surely reminding Juhani of her own fear achieves nothing.* But I wanted to help her, and I needed her strong.

I silently followed her into one of the long corridors that sprawled like treekan tentacles throughout the base. Walls loomed on either side, closeting us in this claustrophobic place. I had never been so anxious to see blue sky again.

Our objective was to discover a working transmitter or console, but thus far we had been unlucky. The only computers we had found were either malfunctioning, or had been maliciously destroyed.

The corridor curved gently to the right, and the lights above flickered intermittently. Panels from the ceiling had fallen to leave rubble in our path, but beyond that I could make out a larger room. The door had been smashed open, and pale electronic light shimmered from within. Juhani straightened her shoulders, and stepped over the rubble on the floor.

As the Cathar strode into the room – a command centre of some sort, I could see that now – I noted a faint whirring noise. *What is that?* The Cathar froze, and my mind raced. I’d heard that sound before, but couldn’t place it.

A blast of bright laser fire spat back at us, aiming directly for Juhani. I gasped, instinctively reaching forward to pull her to safety, but the Cathar was quick enough. I sensed a vague hum of the Force swirl inside her as she leaped backwards, falling onto the broken ceiling tiles and scrambling back over them. Her wild eyes met mine.

“Turrets,” I muttered, edging away from the room. “They must be malfunctioning.”

“Why?” Juhani gasped.

“I am not sure,” I returned, but my eyes were on the room. *I can destroy the turrets, but it may take out the computers also. Is it a better choice than turning around?* We had to find a working console to request help, but moving onwards was even more important. We would achieve nothing if we kept backtracking at every obstacle.

“No, no, you misunderstand me. Why would a research base be armed with turrets?”

I looked back at Juhani; she was frowning in thought. "As a defence against the Sith, I imagine. Should they ever find out about this secret base, they would stop at nothing to destroy it." My first thought upon hearing about the problems down here had been that the Sith were somehow involved. Now, I wasn't so sure.
“You believe they would risk the neutrality agreement to attack here?” Juhani inquired.

“I do not think they would be jeopardizing it. This place is secret – even from some members of the Selkath government. The Sith could attack here and the Republic could not afford to cast the blame upon them – not without revealing their operations. The political ramifications of that could cost us the kolto agreement, rather than the Sith.”

Juhani had turned to face the room again, her body tense. Her ears lay flat against her head. I laid my hand on her arm to forestall her.

“Let me disable the turrets,” I murmured. She nodded, and I gathered the Force inside me. The life energy inundated through my veins and settled my nerves – some part of me understood just how addictive the Force could become. I closed my eyes and reached out my senses, feeling for the electrical impulses in the room beyond. It buzzed with the artificial energy of working machinery, and I knew a moment’s regret about the computers I was about to destroy. Though surely we would find more deeper in the base – we had to.

I stepped forward, flat against the north wall and out of line from the working turret. Why it was activated I did not know; I preferred to believe it was malfunctioning. The other reason – that someone had set it to fire at anything that moved – raised too many questions. I only knew of two beings alive in the base, and that hysterical Twi’lek we encountered earlier was in no frame of mind to be turning on defence systems. I did not want to consider that the Mandalorian might be angry enough to impede our progress – or worse, to actively attempt to kill us.

I stretched out my hand, letting forth a flood of ionizing Force power that streamed towards the electrical oscillations. Loud pops and bangs of systems shorting out issued from the room, and bright sparks danced against my eyelids. I let the flow continue for a moment longer and then stopped, panting slightly against the wall. While I was proficient at this use of the Force, it was tiring.

I opened my eyes to Juhani staring at me quizzically. “You transform the Force differently than I, more efficiently. That looked very similar to what Revan used against me, back on Tatooine.”

I stiffened, indignation spiking hot in my belly. Lightning – that is an abomination. Used to torture and kill. “It is not the same,” I said tartly, aware that my voice had turned stiff and insulted. “This use of the Force affects only electronic equipment, such as droids or computer systems. It is nothing like lightning.”

“I am sorry.” Juhani looked taken aback. “I did not mean to offend you.”

I realized I was glaring, and hurriedly schooled my features. Why am I so upset? Revan had once been one of the most powerful Jedi around. She was renowned for her ability with the ionization, far more so than me. Just because her skill had transferred to the electromagnetic side of the Force - what she had used on Juhani - did not mean I should be so offended. For, it was the way she had used her talents that made them so odious, not the talents themselves. Revan is certainly a touchy subject for me these days, I realized with some chagrin.

“And I should not be so quick to snap,” I apologized. “Master Zhar once told me that ionization was a close cousin to the lightning many Dark Jedi employ. Perhaps I am more like Revan than I care to admit.”

Juhani smiled at me in understanding, and her face filled with warmth.

We cautiously edged into the room again. Sparks shot from the turret mechanism up on the ceiling as it hung limply by a cable. Four consoles in the centre of the room showed nothing but static.
My shoulders drooped as Juhani laid a comforting hand on my arm. “We will press on,” she whispered. “There must be some system – or person – left on this base that can help us.”

I nodded at the Cathar; she appeared steadier, calmer than she had been. Perhaps we both benefit from reassuring the other. With that thought, I followed her silently out into yet another corridor.

As we left the doomed command centre behind, a clattering noise reached my ears. I tensed, and once more activated my lightsaber. The corridor turned sharply to the right some twenty metres ahead, and beyond that came the sounds of incoherent muttering. We froze, as into sight loped the crazed Twi’lek Canderous had scared away earlier.

“You!” he garbled, breaking into a run. A hiss next to me indicated Juhani’s lightsaber; with a wary eye I spotted a blade in the flailing hand of the panicked Twi’lek.

“I want your ship! Give it to me!” His hand waved uncontrollably; his eyes were wide and dilated. Part of me marvelled that he had survived these last few hours – he was lucky to have avoided that bloodthirsty Mandalorian.

“Please, calm down,” I said slowly, carefully. “We can help you, but-”

“No! I’ll kill you if you stand in my way!” Saliva dripped from his open mouth.

“Bastila, let him past,” Juhani whispered.

“Our ship is damaged,” I spoke slowly, struggling to keep my voice low and non-threatening. “You must listen to reason-”

“I’m not afraid of you!” he shrieked, his fingers clenching on the blade.

“Let him past, Bastila!” Juhani’s voice was intense. “Let him to our ship.”

Surprise at the Cathar was what made me stand down; at the very second I stepped aside, the crazed Twi’lek was past us at a scream, almost cackling in glee.

“Juhani!” I hissed. “The hull of the submersible is cracked – allowing him through has condemned him to certain death!” Stunned disbelief choked me; that the Cathar would allow such an unbalanced person to their demise was not what I expected.

“He would have attacked us otherwise, and died in the effort,” she replied, her yellow eyes fierce and gleaming. The sound of the Twi’leks footfalls grew fainter before dying away completely.

“No, you cannot know that!” I protested. “We should have tried-”

“We did, earlier,” she countered. “You sensed his mind – he was as far gone as the Selkath, and you have not managed to get through to any of them, either.”

Defeat sat heavy in me; the Cathar was right. I had tried to communicate with all the Selkath we encountered. Nothing but insane war cries had met my desperate pleas.

“Besides,” a half smile sat oddly on Juhani’s face. “He does not have the access codes to start the submersible.”

I felt my mouth drop open as chagrin overwhelmed my sense of despair. Juhani was smiling openly now, not mocking, but merely conveying reassurance. I could feel my cheeks flushing in
embarrassment. *I detest it when I miss the obvious.* Juhani turned to stare intently down the corridor, the warm expression sliding from her face.

“This place is a rotting cess-pit of evil,” Juhani muttered, switching off her lightsaber and hooking it to her belt. “Bastila, not everyone can be saved. And some- some must find their own path to salvation.”

I knew she was no longer talking of the Twi’lek. My thoughts shied away from Revan automatically, but I could not quite still a smile at Juhani’s words.

“And who taught you the wisdom of a Master?” I asked, a lilt in my voice.

Juhani smiled back, and assumed walking once more. “I had a good talk with Karon.”

We stayed quiet after that, walking silently down the eerily empty tunnels. Speaking with Karon had been a balm to my soul; but down here in the bowels of the ocean, I was no longer at peace. Tension returned to Juhani as we moved further; the Cathar’s movements became abrupt, jerky. Occasionally we could hear creaks as the base groaned under the weight of all the water. I could only hope that Juhani was not dwelling on it also.

“I would like to know more about these Star Maps,” the Cathar's voice broke the ominous silence; I recognized she wished more for a distraction than an explanation. I, for once, appreciated the chance to share what had been my mission alone for so long. Juhani was a sister Jedi; returned recently to the fold, yes, but she could be trusted with some of the details. There were many I could not divulge.

“Karon explained the majority of what we already knew,” I began. “The Star Maps are relics of an ancient civilization – but more importantly, we believe they point towards some sort of powerful weapon. A weapon that Revan and Malak discovered.”

Juhani nodded. She had heard this before from Karon, less than a day ago. “There are four maps, yes?”

“Five if you include the one on Dantooine – the starting point. The Council found that it contained the coordinates to the four others.” I paused, wondering how to phrase the rest. “I- I shared some of Revan’s memories before her mind was rebuilt. One of which was her and Malak entering the tomb on Dantooine. That is how the Order found out about the Star Maps.”

Juhani lapsed into silence, and I wondered what she was thinking. We walked cautiously through an empty storage room; I grimaced at the sight of two Selkath corpses lying broken on the ground. Splintered metal fragments lay next to lockers that had been blown wide open. Scorch marks and grainy residue marked the ground, suggesting evidence of a grenade blast. *Could this be the Mandalorian’s doing?* It seemed likely, although I dearly hoped I would not encounter Canderous again.

Juhani’s voice cut through the dead air. “Do you not think the others deserve to know about our mission?”

I could not help a bitter laugh. “What others? Juhani, in case you haven’t noticed, our team has disintegrated. Mission and Zaalbar have disappeared; Canderous has deserted us. Carth is the only one to remain loyal, and he is not even here!”

Juhani did not reply as she opened the exit at the south of the room. Another vast hallway greeted us, this one splitting nearby into two closed doors. A sign dominated the wall next to us.

“It seems we have a choice,” Juhani murmured, her eyes skipping over the sign. “Research
“Let’s try the former. Perhaps we can find a working console there,” I suggested.

Juhani nodded, and stalked to the door. A camera mounted on the ceiling shifted to track her movements, and I froze in readiness, glancing around quickly for turrets. I could not spot any defence weaponry in sight.

“It will not open,” Juhani said, palm pressed on the door control. “Either the door has been locked, or the electronics are damaged.”

My eyes stayed fixed on the camera as I walked slowly next to Juhani. It moved slightly to point at me.

“Juhani,” I said softly. “I think that camera is tracking us.”

Juhani twitched, shooting me a look of surprise before affixing her gaze on the ceiling. She frowned, and raised a hand, palm open, in a universal greeting.

A faint noise permeated through solid ferracrete; I could not make it out, and Juhani shook her head in irritation.

“Hello?” I called out. “Is someone there?”

“Survivors?” Juhani murmured, her eyes lighting. Nothing but silence answered our call.

I knocked loudly on the large door. “We are part of a Republic rescue team! Can you hear me?”

“Go away!” a muffled voice reverberated through the thick ferracrete. “You’ll let the Selkath in! They’ll get us like they got all the others!”

Juhani’s face was solemn as she laid a palm on the door. “There are none out here,” the Cathar cried out. “You can see from your camera – there is but us two!”

“We will not hurt you!” I added, knocking again on the door. “Roland Wann sent us!”

The vague sounds of a stifled argument filtered through – there is more than one survivor then. I could not quite perceive what they were saying.

“We are here to help!” I appealed again. “Please, we will not harm you!”

Voices were raised once more in debate before I heard an answering call. “Okay- I'll unlock the door, but you have to come in quickly!”

The door swished open as I sighed in relief. Two humans stood back from the entrance, staring at us, faces fraught with distress. The younger female was pointing a gun directly at me.

“Quick!” the elder, a male, said frantically, waving his hands. “Before the Selkath come!”

I had barely taken a step inside the room before the door snapped closed behind us.

“Who are you?” the woman cried, her eyes wide. The gun – a small blaster – wavered in her trembling grip.

“Sami, calm down,” the man murmured, raising a placating hand to rest on her arm. “I don’t think they’re here to kill us.” The woman lowered the gun at his words, her shoulders sagging in fear and
exhaustion. She muffled a sob, and I felt a surge of pity at what these poor people had gone through.

“My name is Bastila Shan, and this is Juhani,” I introduced. “Roland Wann sent us to rescue any survivors.”

“I am Kono Nolan,” the male responded, but his head had jerked to face me at my introduction. “This is Sami Touraide. I- are you Jedi?” His eyes had wandered over us, and were resting on the deactivated lightsaber in my grasp. “Did you say Bastila Shan?”

“Jedi?” the one called Sami murmured. Something that resembled hope lifted the weariness from her features.

I was surprised Kono recognized my name, though I should not have been. It seemed like years since I had been actively involved in the war, utilizing my prized Battle Meditation for the good of the Republic. Any person, be they scientist or merchant or clerk, would have heard my name if they followed the holofeed headlines. It was easier then, knowing where the enemy was, and what I needed to do to help our allies. Better than this sneaking about from planet to planet, unable to consult with the Masters and not knowing who to trust.

“Do you have a way out of here?” Sami demanded. She’d put her gun aside on a table, and took an expectant step towards us.

“Bastila Shan,” Kono muttered disbelievingly under his breath, staring at me the faintest glimpse of awe in his eyes. I shifted uncomfortably.

“Unfortunately, our submersible was damaged on the trip down here,” Juhani replied. “We will have to look for another way out.”

Sami was shaking her head as the hope fled from her face. “So you have no way of getting out of this pit either? Some rescue!”

“Sami!” Kono reprimanded her sharply, shooting me an apologetic look.

I pursed my lips, biting back indignation at the scowling woman. “Perhaps, rather than recriminations, you can tell us what happened and we can go from there.”

Sami glowered at me, but Kono was nodding in agreement. “It was... almost a week ago, now. Our work teams were outside in the rift near the vent. This... this monster-”

“Firaxan shark,” Sami interrupted, her eyes flashing.

“Larger than any shark I’ve ever seen!” Kono shot back incredulously. Juhani looked at them in askance; this sounded like the echo of an argument run ragged in the past.

“Kono, I know what I’m talking about-”

“What did this shark do?” Juhani interrupted in a steely voice. The two humans quietened, and Sami closed her eyes in despair.

“Our people outside- they, they were torn to shreds,” Kono answered finally, his voice low and quiet. “This shark or whatever it was– and I’ve never seen a creature so large– seemed to lead an attack. Swarms of firaxan followed it, our cannon defences were useless...” he trailed off, and I was appalledly reminded of the presence I had felt when approaching the Station. Some vast entity slammed into my Force walls and disintegrated them, I recalled with horror. Something that rekindled the frenzy of the firaxan swarm attacking us. Could it have been this monster they are
talking about?

“Then our Selkath researchers went mad,” Sami continued. She was looking away from us, vacant gaze fixed on the wall behind. “They started screaming... and clawing at everything around them.”

“We barely made in here alive,” Kono added. He swallowed. “Sami and me... I... I thought we were the only ones left. We heard the Selkath outside at the doors every once in a while... and those strange noises echoing through the base. We... thought everyone was dead... dead or insane. All we could see was the cameras... and we saw the Selkath slaughter everyone...”

A portentous silence pervaded the room; Juhani was looking down, a painful grimace twisting her mouth. Unease swept through me, heavier than before. *I must find a way forward.* Trust in the Force, Karon had told me. I struggled to take the words to heart.

“Can you contact the Republic from in here?” I asked quietly. “That must be our first objective. We need to let them know there are people alive down here-”

Sami snorted, and I halted my discourse to frown at her. “It’s not like they’d send another rescue team – the firaxans are attacking any vehicle that approaches the base!”

Annoyance wound its way through me; I could understand that they had experienced a horrific time, but the woman so far seemed to be objecting at every turn. “Regardless,” I went on smoothly. “We need to communicate with them. Is it possible?”

Kono was shaking his head. “No, not yet. Our communications array went down days ago. We don’t know how – either the Selkath or those blasted malfunctioning turrets. Something happened, and caused the security systems to kick in and seal the room shut. I can’t connect to the mainframes from here, so I have to assume the damage is irreparable.”

I could feel myself frowning in thought. “You said not yet,” I replied slowly. “Do you believe there is a way, then?”

The older scientist hesitated, and then nodded slowly. “The systems in this room were used for communicating to our workers outside. Each envirosuit is kitted with a small transmitter, so from here we can keep track of our mining teams. Our computers aren’t equipped for long-range communication, but I’ve been trying to strengthen the signal using the amplification units from our spare envirosuits. If I can run it through enough amplification stages without too much signal degradation, it might just be strong enough to reach the surface.” Kono shrugged. “It’s a long shot, and it’s been slow going, but we haven’t had many other options.”

I had a good look around then – I had not paid much attention to our environment since Kono and Sami had so grudgingly granted us entrance. We were in what looked like a research station – terminals lined two walls, yielding what appeared to be scientific data on most of them. A full circle of even more consoles dominated the lower end of the room, and multiple camera outputs illustrated their screens, half of which showed static. I could see that the two humans had been able to track parts of the Base while staying safely locked inside this haven. Desks and benches laden with equipment I did not recognize furnished the north end of the room, underneath a wide window that showed a dark portal to the world outside.

“Well, that is good news,” Juhani said after we paused to digest it. “If you believe we can eventually contact Commander Wann-”

“We’ve got a bigger problem,” Sami cut in, looking intently at the both of us. “The air conditioning’s not working.”

“The air con’s not working,” she repeated indignantly. “The firaxans have attacked parts of the base, and we believe that’s what caused a leak in the pipes leading from the air turbines. The immediate countermeasure by the control cluster was to shut the pipes down, causing the air circulation process to feed back on itself.”

There was a heavy pause. “What, exactly, does that mean?” Juhani enquired in a tiny voice.

Sami sighed. “In short, the air’s not replenishing.”

I froze, and heard Juhani moan beside me. Sami, however, did not look so alarmed. Perhaps she’d had days to come to terms with the ghastly knowledge of her impending suffocation. “Now this base is pretty big, I’d say we’ve lots of air left – but I just don’t see the Republic sending another rescue vehicle when the last three haven’t made it back. We’ve gotta sort out the firaxan problem ourselves first, otherwise even if they do send another ship – it’s not going to make it down here intact,” the words tumbled in a rush from Sami, and she finished by inhaling deep and folding her arms defensively.

“We’re running out of air?” Juhani whispered, her eyes widening. I felt a churning in my stomach, and swallowed despite myself.

“We might have weeks left,” Kono amended. “I’ll only need a day or so and I should be able to send a delayed message through. The Republic will send another rescue team – they must-”

Sami snorted, and despite myself I was almost inclined to agree with her. “Kono, we’ve seen three submersibles arrive since this happened. We’ve tracked them on the cameras. All of them were assaulted by the sharks – one didn’t even make it inside! It’d be suicide for them to send any more-”

“You think they’d leave us to die?” Kono shot back heatedly. “You really think the-”

“What can we do about the sharks?” Juhani intervened.

Sami fixed her gaze on the Cathar. “We’ve powered down most of our harvesting machines. I believe that-“

“What’s that?” I cut in, my attention caught sharply by a blur of activity on the screen directly in front of Kono. In the periphery of my vision I vaguely noticed Sami shoot me an irritated frown, but I was more focussed on what looked like the onset of a fight. Kono and Juhani turned to study the console as I walked forward. I heard the Cathar gasp.

“It’s more psychotic Selkath,” Kono muttered. “Most are dead now – they even turn on each other – but there’s still some stragglers around.”

“Where is that room?” Juhani’s voice had a note of distress. I looked closer, and with mounting horror recognized the bulky figure standing in the centre of the room: Canderous Ordo.

“It’s our chemical storage room – just down the hallway from here actually,” Kono replied.

I couldn’t hold back a gasp of terror; my stomach clenched and my veins turned to ice as I processed the video starkly playing out in front of me. Bile churned in my stomach.

I could make out perhaps seven Selkath, charging at him in unison. The Mandalorian fired point blank into the chest of one, but two others leapt onto his back. Revulsion flooded me as I saw one of the crazed Selkath sink his teeth deep into Canderous’ neck. *He’s going to die in there!* The
Mandalorian arched in pain, but retaliated by slamming his elbow into the stomach of the Selkath.

“We must help him,” I whispered, realizing at once that for all I disliked the callous barbarian - I did not wish him to die. Juhani swivelled to stare at me in surprise.

“We can’t!” Kono objected. “We’re safe in here – the Selkath attack anything that moves!”

One of them had wrested the Mandalorian’s blaster from his grip; another had taken a frantic swipe at his legs. Canderous twisted as he fell to the ground, fists snapping out in a wild attempt to fight back. The Selkath with his gun turned to fire, stumbling backwards as the repeating blaster coughed laser chaotically through the room.

“Open the door!” I demanded urgently. Without consciously realizing, the Force had swirled and interleaved through my verbal command. Kono stepped backwards, a dazed look on his face. “Open it, now!”

Sami’s mouth dropped, her hand snapped towards the console and I heard the door swish open. At once, I ran for it, harnessing the Force to lend me speed.

“Bastila-!” Juhani cried from behind. I paid her no mind, sprinting through the corridor. The walls blurred past as I ran, pausing only to slam my hand on the door control at the end.

The entrance opened, and a horrific sight met my eyes. Selkath corpses garnished the large room, but at least four were a writhing pile in the centre. I could not even make out the Mandalorian – it looked like a feeding frenzy. Feral shrieks and cries mingled with brutish Mandalorian howls – he was still alive.

An upsurge of Force power erupted from me, rippling through the room and thrusting the Selkath off Canderous, like petals plucked by a sharp winter’s breeze. My lightsaber glowed yellow in my hands; with a sharp cry I ran forwards, cutting down the first Selkath in my path. It hissed as it seared into blue-green flesh.

The Selkath howled in anguish, and two others scrabbled up to face me, leaping rabidly at me, snarling, hands outstretched in a frantic bid for my face. They are crazy! My lightsaber whirled in desperation, searing a limb off as warm blood spattered on my face, stabbing deep into a belly as I dodged the swipe of a claw. I could hear Canderous grunting as he struggled to remove himself from the fray; the thrumming noise of his blaster- Wait, he was not holding his weapon!

Sharp pain blossomed in my lower back, and I screamed convulsively as my legs caved underneath me, my lightsaber slicing through a Selkath leg as I lost my footing-

There was a roaring noise in my ears as the agony overrode everything else; daggers of fierce torment biting deep into vertebrae-

“Bastila?” Canderous yelled, his voice shocked and incensed. I’d fallen on my front, my lightsaber slipping from my grasp. Alien growls dimmed under the torrent of pain as a heavy, snarling weight landed on my back – another Selkath, a dim part of me realized, as I sunk helplessly into black oblivion.

xXx

A flaring of agony in my back brought me to jarring consciousness; my eyes stayed tightly closed as I struggled to contain my breathing. Painful warmth throbbed at my side and tailbone,
overshadowing a murmured conversation I barely registered.

“I told you! There are no working submersibles left. Each one that fled the base was smashed to bits by the sharks – I don’t see any way out of here other than to hope for a rescue team.” The voice was desperate; it sounded like the scientist.

“Yeah, and we all know how successful that’s been,” a gravelly voice fired back.

“Bastila? Are you awake?” a quiet murmur by my ear; I felt a faint pressure on my hand.

Bastila? The query rippled faintly through my mind. I shied away in reflex.

“Or we could manually disable the last harvesting machine. No, Kono, listen to me! We have no choice-”

“You wanna go for a swim out there? What, you think the sharks haven’t been fed enough?” That was definitely Canderous, his deep voice mocking and sarcastic.

With effort, I pried open my eyelids. Harsh light blinded me and I gasped, squeezing my eyes shut involuntarily. The pain stabbed deeper in my back.

We need to talk. Are you there? The voice was dimmer now, so quiet I barely registered it.

“He’s right, Sami. We don’t stand a chance out there!”

“Bastila, can you hear me?”

Dizzying nausea pulsated through my senses, and with something akin to gratitude I let unconsciousness claim me once more.

xXx

Angry, raised voices pervaded my oblivion, but this time, awareness was quicker to emerge.

“I ain’t putting my life on the line for a pair of cowardly academics!”

“I’m needed here! I cannot afford to leave this room!”

The breath expelled from my lungs as my eyes opened. Blurry colours morphed into people; Canderous was sneering at Kono Nolan, whose face was red with indignant fury. The Mandalorian has stayed, then. Unease crawled through me.

“Canderous, this is our mission! One of us must brave outside, and I- I don’t…” Juhani’s voice trailed off, and her head bowed in what I guessed was shame.

“I’ll go,” a young female voice spoke out firmly.

“No, Sami, I need you here!”

“What’s going on?” I intended my voice to be firm; that the same argument was still raging seemed ludicrous. However, what emitted was a weak croak that transformed into a choke. My back flared with heat.

“Bastila,” Juhani’s face lit up as she turned to me, a smile curving her lips. Concerned relief warmed her voice.
“Welcome back, princess.” The Mandalorian’s tone was harder to pick.

I was lying on a bench at the end of Kono’s command room. The smell of kolto and bacta patches overpowered anything else, but I took a moment to realize my wounds weren’t as uncomfortable as they had been before.

Juhani moved closer, crouching next to me. “Sami’s patched you up. I do not think you will walk for a few days, but with luck there should be no lasting damage. You will need a proper scan when we get to the surface to make sure. I tried... I tried to heal you. I am afraid it has been too long... since...”

“Peace, Juhani,” the words slipped out, cutting softly through her diatribe. I had no wish to hear Juhani doubt herself again. “It will come with time.”

Canderous had stalked towards the bench, stopping to stare down at me. “It’s not the first time you’ve saved my neck, princess.” His eyes were unreadable; cold slats of grey. A bloodied rag was tied tightly around his neck, and his face lacked the ruddy colour it normally held. “This time, you had no reason to. We’ll talk about Jen later - but Mandalorians honour their debts. I’ll get you to the surface.”

I nodded slowly at him, not trusting myself to respond.

“We won’t get to the surface unless we power off the harvesting machine!” Sami burst out angrily.

“What harvesting machine?” I cut in. I felt exhausted, and my legs prickled with fatigue. I was straining just to follow the heated argument, wrestling against eyelids that were determined to close.

Kono and his assistant had moved towards me also; they glanced at each other briefly before Kono’s gaze returned to me. He smiled, but lines of tension cut deeply into his weathered face.

Sami was studying me appraisingly. “That was pretty brave what you did,” she said, in a musing tone. Indignation flooded me – I knew she had not liked me on sight, but any proper Jedi would not sit back while someone else was in danger!

“We didn’t have a chance to talk properly before,” she added before I could open my mouth to object. She dropped into a worn chair opposite me. “I’m a deep ocean biologist; I was sent to this base to investigate the recent upsurge of firaxan activity in these waters.”

“Now, the sharks have always been a problem,” Kono interrupted in a pious tone. “We use sonic blasters and projectile cannons as a defence, but they still got some of our workers from time to time.”

Sami threw a brief frown at her boss. “Yes, but only when our workers ventured past the safety markers! Firaxan sharks usually stay in their territory, and attack only when provoked. Since we discovered the new kolto vent, and subsequently opened our new harvesting machine, there has been a marked alteration in their behaviour. I’ve never seen oceanic animals attack machinery without provocation, yet this is precisely what they’ve been doing. Almost as if they believe our operations are a threat to their way of life, or an impingement on their territory-”

“Sami, you talk like these beasts are intelligent,” Kono scoffed. “They’re rabid sharks! To be respected, like any other predator, but-”

“They’re a pack animal, Kono!” Sami was scowling at him in anger. Canderous rolled his eyes, leaning against the wall with a contemptuous look fixed firmly on his face. “Just like kath hounds, they will attack something collectively if they’ve a reason to!”
“Perhaps you had best explain where the harvesting machine ties in,” Juhani broke in softly as Kono’s mouth opened once more.

The scientist huffed in frustration. “We’ve powered down all bar one of our harvesting machines, and yes, the sharks have mostly dispersed from our older kolto mines. Now they’ve all swarmed to the new mine, just past the docking bay.”

“They can’t power it off remotely,” Canderous cut in, his voice disgusted. “Seems the little fishies have damaged it somehow. Someone’s gotta get out there and flick the switch.”

I must have shown my incredulity, for Sami intervened quickly. “It’s not as crazy as it sounds! We’ve been working on ways to repel the sharks – poison, cannons – but our most successful experiments have been using sonics. Caal Jordan’s created a handheld sonic emitter that so far has aided all our workers immensely—”

“Have you looked outside lately and seen that swarm?” Canderous growled. “Ain’t no way some fancy little gun is gonna kill off that lot—”

“It’s not a gun.” Sami’s dark eyes flashed. “It’ll scare away the sharks – if they’re close enough, it’ll stun them—”

“Do we have any other options?” I intervened, flaring with irritation at the lot of them.

Silence hung in the air, and Kono sighed heavily. “I’m a few hours away from contacting HQ.”

“However, if they cannot safely send another vehicle, then we are effectively trapped here regardless.” Juhani’s voice was solemn. “And we do not have an endless supply of air to rely upon.”

“Is there any way of modifying this sonic emitter on a larger scale?” I queried. “A handheld device may not be powerful enough to repel all the sharks outside.”

Sami and Kono shook their heads in unison; the latter wearing a dark scowl. “All our techs are dead. Killed by those insane Selkath – most of them are dead, now, too. Seems like we’re the only ones left alive on this gods-forsaken base.”

I struggled to sit up on the bench, jolts of agony shooting down my legs as I did so. I squeezed my eyes shut, containing a grimace as I battled to withstand the pain. There is no emotion. I allowed myself a few seconds respite, then opened my eyes again. The pain dulled to a manageable level.

From my vantage point at the head of the room I could view the camera outputs. They showed nothing but glaringly empty rooms. Venturing out is our only option then. But I battled to sit, let alone walk - and I could not heal myself.

“It appears we must brave the sharks,” I said, my gaze fixed seriously on each of the others in turn. “I can use the Force to distract the swarm away from the harvesting machine. What other resources do we have? Sami, how many of these sonic devices are here?”

The dark-skinned human returned my gaze steadily. “Two. There’s more in our storage rooms.”

“You lot can’t be serious,” Canderous groused. “Only a laser-brain would think they could live through that swarm outside.”

“It’s possible!” Sami objected, swinging around to glare at Canderous. “Firaxans are attracted to vibrations and movements – as well as blood, of course. If you walk outside, very slowly, the sharks may not even notice you.”
“Right.” The Mandalorian’s voice dripped liberally with sarcasm. “So you want us to go outside, walk very slowly at the sharks, all the while firing noise-makers at them?”

Sami grimaced, glancing down. She appeared somewhat ashamed of her own suggestion. “The harvesting machine isn’t that far from Base, though. Only about a five minute walk – just at the edge of the rift, before the ruins.

"Ruins?" I interrupted, frowning. "What ruins?" A shaft of surprise ran through me. Could it be? What with the horror that lurked throughout this doomed station, I'd almost forgotten our original mission.

Sami shrugged. "We don't know. To be frank, the Republic has been more interested in harvesting the kolto in this new mine than investigating the ruins. Our workers have told us that it's a few broken structures, with some old machinery in the middle of it. None of them have looked closely – no one ever wants to stay outside any longer than necessary."

I'd frozen halfway through Sami's address, my gaze fixed on Juhani's shocked, reluctant one. The Star Map! It has to be! There was no choice now – one of us had to brave outside. But I cannot walk. Can I really request such a daunting task of Juhani? With her fear?

“What’s up with you?” Canderous barked. “Your face is all scrunched up like a kinrath pup."

"You cannot walk," Juhani muttered in a stumbling whisper. "And we cannot delay this.” She drew in a shaky breath, and I could see realization painted starkly on her face. She had surmised, then, that she must go. We cannot trust Canderous to get the coordinates, and it needs to be a Force-user to boot. Only Juhani and I understand the significance of this mission.

The Mandalorian was scowling at both of us.

Slowly the fear on the Cathar’s face was replaced with shaky determination; her mouth tensed, and I knew she was rallying her will power as steadfastly as possible. “I will go.” Her eyes met mine; resolved and terrified, all at once.

“Juhani-”

“No, Bastila, I see it now. If I am to be tested, then I will not run. Not this time.”

Grief echoed softly in her voice – I knew she was dwelling on her past. “No one is testing you, Juhani. And we do not need to investigate the Star Map now-”

“Star Map?” Kono interrupted.

“The Force led us here,” Juhani countered. With every passing second, the fear slid from her eyes. A determined sort of resignation held station there instead. “It is time I faced my fear. I do not believe this is chance, Bastila.”

I wondered how she had found such unwavering faith in such a short time; sometimes, it seemed like mine was disintegrating slowly with each passing day.

Canderous spat on the ground; Kono shot him a repulsed glare. “Fine, guess I’ll join you then, Cathar.”

“But minutes before you were adamant you wouldn’t go outside!” Kono blustered indignantly.

“Bah, it’s better than sitting around here, listening to you lot whining,” the Mandalorian said.
derisively. “If it’s the only way to get to the surface,” his eyes held mine firmly, “then looks like I ain’t got no choice. Now give me one of those noise-makers.”

xXx

It had been a torturous hour as we all struggled to prepare for the dangers ahead. Sami had spent the time explaining at length about the behavioural characteristics of firaxans; Juhani remained anxiously intent on her words, but Canderous had all but ignored the younger woman, choosing to rifle through cupboards and canisters instead. What he had expected to find of use in a research station, I did not know.

They had left mere minutes ago, headed towards the airlock Kono had directed them to. My stomach was tied up in tense knots, and my mind fogged fraught with apprehension. I did not like staying behind and leaving them to brave the danger outside, even as I logically knew that my part to play was crucial to our success. If I could not calm or distract the sharks, Canderous and Juhani would not have a chance.

“They’ve reached the airlock, and are suiting up,” Kono informed us, standing in the circle of consoles at the end of the room. “We’ll be able to communicate with them once they have their envirosuits on.”

I was leaning uncomfortably against the wall, my weak limbs still spread out helplessly on the bench. Sami sat near me with a reassuring expression on her face. Since my frantic plight to aid Canderous, the woman had been more benevolently disposed towards me.

But worry stirred within, overshadowing all else. An unwelcome voice whispered that this was more than a fool’s errand; that we may be sending Canderous and Juhani to a watery grave. We seem to have no other choice, and I must have faith in the Force. There is a reason we were led here, and the Star Map is not far. Yet how could they withstand the frenzied fury of the sharks? Our submersible had barely emerged from the swarm intact, and I dared not dwell upon the Force presence that seemed to fuel the rage of the firaxans. For I may be facing that again. I had to help them, and utilizing the Force – in a passive paradigm of my Battle Meditation – seemed to be the only way I could.

“Yo,” a crackly voice emitted from Kono’s station.

“Canderous,” the scientist greeted him. “Hearing you loud and clear. Are you ready to leave?”

“I am. The Cathar’s standing around like a stimmed-up loon, though.”

Juhani, I thought desperately. Do not let your fear overcome you.

“Come on, kittykat. Let’s not lollygag all day,” the derisive taunt slid out into the room.

“Do not call me that, Mandalorian!” Juhani hissed. A raucous laugh echoed her.

“When you’re ready, go through the airlock,” Kono intervened. “I’ll track your movements from here. There’s no sharks near this side of the Base – you shouldn’t have a problem until you near the harvesting machine.”

I closed my eyes, pushing back despair and reaching out numbly for the Force. The affliction in my
spine and legs had been dulled from painkillers, and disappeared into nothingness as I stretched out my senses. It always felt like this, this awed wonder, this reverence, as I half-departed my conscious body and enveloped my surroundings with awareness.

The Base itself was dead around me, a block of man-made structures that emitted no life. Further out, I could feel the frenetic sparks of the firaxans, heavily coalesced around something I surmised to be the harvesting machine. I could not sense that vast foreign being yet, but not far was a swirl of evil; a familiar taint in the Force – the Star Map! It feels just like the one on Tatooine!

“We’re out,” I barely registered Canderous’ statement. “Haar’chak, it’s hard to move in these kriiffing suits.”

“You’re coming out past the kolto treatment rooms,” Kono informed them. “Not far, and you’ll see markers leading to the new harvesting machine.”

“It’s dark.” Juhani’s voice was a whisper. “The water goes on forever here.”

I gathered in the tendrils of Force, pulling back to focus on the two of them. I could stimulate a sense of serenity around Juhani if needed, but would I attract the attention of the firaxans? I did not dare utilize the Force for anything bar awareness, not yet.

“Bah, pull yourself together, Cathar,” Canderous jeered. “You fight well when you’re not whimpering.”

“Fight?” Sami spluttered nearby. “You can’t fight in an envirosuit!” I vaguely heard the woman stir, and stride away towards Kono.

“Thank you, Canderous. I shall be okay.”

“Let’s just do this before I die of boredom.”

My senses hovered over the two of them, and I could feel the sharp spike of fear recede from Juhani. She was not calm, but she was keeping her panic at bay. In relief, I extended the Force further, past the frenzied swarm and back around the Star Map. The evil aura both repulsed and fascinated me. Revan came here once. The base had not been here, then, and the rabid behaviour of the firaxans had only been a recent problem. I wondered briefly if the sharks were attracted to the dark Force that permeated this area.

“We’re by the markers,” Canderous said. “There’s a few fishies around, none close though.”

“If any are heading towards you, just stand still,” Sami advised them. Her voice came from further away; she was obviously working next to Kono. My eyes stayed closed as I struggled to stay in a partial meditative state. “Don’t use the sonic devices unless they get real close.”

“Yeah, yeah, I hear ya.”

“What- what is that? Up ahead?” Juhani’s voice was shaky.

“You can probably see the swarm from here,” Kono said. “These markers lead straight to it.”

“There’s one shark- it’s heading towards us!” Juhani was panicking now; I reeled back in to hover over her presence, her desperation and fright sending ripples through the Force. An angry spark of life was homing in on them rapidly.

“Stay still!” Sami cried. “The shark may not bother with you if you don't move-”
A Mandalorian curse echoed from the console; I did not know enough of the language to comprehend it. Sami gasped, and I pulled desperately on the Force, ready to unleash it-

“Well, at least we know your little toys work,” Canderous barked out. “That's one dead fishy, all right.”

Relief surged through me dizzyingly, and I held back – just in time.

“It's not dead, merely stunned.” Sami’s voice was acerbic.

“I am sorry.” Juhani was barely audible. “I know what to expect, now. I will not move next time.”

“See that you don’t,” Canderous said shortly. “Let's go.”

Shame wafted from the Cathar; using the Force like this, I could almost smell it. It was an extra sense – a blend of sight and smell that permeated through me. I touched Juhani with the Force briefly, reassuringly, before moving further out.

I lingered over the swarm of sharks, and could sense the harvesting machine now, small jots of electronic impulses scarcely noticeable in the Force. It was intermittent and unsteady, almost as if the machine was no longer stable. Some of the firaxans were hurling themselves at it in rabid fury.

“We’re about as close as we can be,” Canderous said. “Look, I don’t see how we’re gonna get any closer without being torn to shreds.”

“Bastila will help us,” Juhani responded.

It was time, then. I dropped deeper into my trance, breathed in, and suspended myself over the writhing mass of sharks. Pure energy flooded through me. I knew how to influence this species now, after using Juhani’s aid on our entrance to the station. I only hoped it would be enough.

I released a surge of peace, of passive calm, that settled around the swarm of sharks and infiltrated the aura of rage that surrounded them. Dazed confusion responded, but the crazed frenzy that had been there was dissipating. I felt some sparks of life turn tail and swim away.

In the periphery of my Force senses, something huge and ancient loomed. Trepidation broke my concentration – No, I knew this was likely. If I cannot calm them, then perhaps I can distract them – and then my hold on the Force was rocked by a vast righteous fury. I gasped, gathering myself desperately as I struggled to stay aware, to stay in a Force trance, all the while attempting to slip away from its focus and back to the swarm.

Wild ferocity shot back to life around me, and the mass of sharks turned as one, veering sharply towards the base. The dead electronic pulses of the harvesting machine were more noticeable, thrumming in an unsteady staccato beat as the sharks left it naked to my Force sight.

“The sharks are clearing out. Kriff, there’s a drukload of them. Let’s move, Cathar.”

I followed the swarm, deftly evading the sentient being who seemed to wield such great power, even if it was so incredibly foreign and primitive to my senses. The firaxans had reached a wall of the Station, and began to flail and thrash against it in rabid fury.

“What- what’s that, Kono? I can see something through the window!”

I discharged another passive torrent of Force power, only to find it blocked from even reaching the sharks below.
What? How can it do that?

“Kono, look! The sharks – I think they’re attacking the base!”

“Got it! Easier than the girls at Roxy’s cantina.”

“Canderous has turned the machine off. Should it be rumbling so?”

“I- Sami, it’s ferracystal, it’ll hold. It has to!”

The vast entity smashed once more into my web of Force, and my senses reeled and staggered under the onslaught. I felt my grip on the Force unravel slightly.

“It’s just powering down. Taking awhile though. No, it- damn, it’s unstable- get out of here!”

“Canderous? What’s going on out there?”

“Cathar, you’re going the wrong bloody way! It’s going to blow!”

“I must find the Star Map, Mandalorian! I will not fail!”

“Kono, the window’s flexing – there’s hundreds of those sharks out there! We need to get out of this room!”

Horror seared through me as I desperately tried to hold myself together. Vaguely I was aware that everyone was in trouble, and the sharks were now attacking the Base itself. I wildly thrust my awareness out further, away from the Base in the desperate hope the swarm would follow. But all that came was the almighty force I could barely defend against.

**Bastila, can you hear me?**

The presence slammed into me again, and I felt a scream loose from my throat as I was taken unawares. I was holding too tightly onto the Force, my very mind enmeshed with the channels I was pushing out, and the vast being was tearing it to shreds, pulverizing my senses as I struggled frantically to evade it.

**Look, I’m back on Manaan. What the frell is going on?**

The raged being actively chased me – *No!* – I reeled my senses in hurriedly, but it slammed into me again and again, my very thoughts fraying and blurring until my awareness narrowed to nothing but pure unmitigated terror.

With a last sharp burst of colour, I felt my mind disintegrate into a thousand shards.

xXx
No more running
- Jen Sahara -

The cerulean sphere of Manaan loomed large through the cockpit window as the ship neared. It brought with it bitter recriminations; not long ago, I’d been in the Ebon Hawk, orchestrating a betrayal of the very crew that had guarded my back these past few weeks. I was not looking forward to the reunion.

It didn’t help that Bastila wasn’t answering. The bond felt faint and deadened, like a hazy, intangible mist – visible, and yet entirely elusive. I hoped it was merely the distance separating us that caused it to feel so; when I’d last been on Manaan, it had been impossible to ignore Bastila’s overbearing presence.

“This is Ahto City Spaceport Control. Identify yourself,” a crackly voice shot from the transmission, first in Basic, then Selkath. My view was painted by an endless blue panorama.

I knew my lines; HK was nothing if not thorough. The ship’s signature was Czerka, and somehow he’d procured Czerka security codes as well. I leaned forward. “This is Janna Terran from Czerka Corporation, requesting clearance to land. Transmitting my clearance codes now.”

I sent the data quickly, holding my breath for the reply. I trusted the droid’s impressive abilities, and yet if the Selkath were to turn us away, I’d likely run out of fuel before reaching a new destination, unless I returned to Rii’shn. That was not appealing, considering the mess I’d left behind.

Finally, after a pause of minutes, a sibilant reply echoed through the cockpit.

“You have clearance to land, Ms Terran. Transmitting your atmospheric entry code and coordinates for Czerka docking bay R13. A reminder that all trade goods must be passed by customs first.”

“Thank you.” I shut the comm off, and guided the ship closer, switching to repulsors as we entered the tranquil atmosphere. But on top of everything else, my possession of this very vehicle was weighing worryingly on my mind.

“We’ve just stolen an Exchange ship,” I muttered to myself as a console blinked with incoming landing coordinates. “Czerka’s not stupid; they’ll find out the signature’s been forged, and that we nicked their security clearance. I need to get rid of this ship. Somehow...”

“Statement: That is well within my capabilities, master,” HK-47’s monotone voice scythed through the air; an abrupt, foreboding reply. I’d almost forgotten he was there.

My eyes closed in a blend of exasperation and dread. HK was conveniently handy in a fight, but I found it hard to dismiss the chaos we’d left while departing Rii’shn. And exactly how would a droid ditch a ship anyway? Blow it up? I grimaced.

A pulse in the Force snagged my attention; at first, I thought it was the bond. But as Ahto City crested the endless azure horizon, I deduced it was something else. My eyes narrowed. I hadn’t even realized I’d been open to the Force; it was becoming instinctive to grasp onto it, ready for any complication or danger.

And that, in itself, is pretty scary with Sith Bitch in my head. I stretched my awareness out further; it
felt clumsy and crude, but adequate for my purposes. The Force flared brightly then vanished, like a flame snuffed in the dark.

“Query: Master, do you wish me to take care of this problem for you?” HK echoed.

“Uh...” I trailed off vaguely. My sense of Bastila remained tenuous at best, but she had to be in Ahto City somewhere. The Force flickered once more – someone, somewhere, was wielding it. If it wasn’t Bastila, then it would be that master of hers. Pity I couldn’t think of a foreseeable reason for her to unleash the Force like that.

I needed to find Bastila, I wanted to avoid that Jedi Master, and the last thing I desired was the complication of Czerka suspicions and Selkath red-tape.

“Okay, fine. Just... don’t hurt anyone!”

HK’s eyes gleamed red with approval.

xXx

Bastila, can you hear me?

My boots left rubbery scuff marks on the gleaming Manaan floors. Despite my distraction, I couldn’t help but feel a perverse sort of pleasure at that.

It had been easy enough to land in the Czerka docking bay, instinctive to persuade the Selkath official that my fee was covered under the Czerka maintenance agreement. Protocol droids infested the area like a plague of mites; attaining directions to the Republic Embassy was hardly laborious.

I was back in Ahto City, anxiety and nervousness curdling in my stomach. I dreaded the reactions of my former crewmates, but it could not compare to the terror of having Revan in my head.

This revelation was too colossal – running was no longer an option.

I’d expected the bond to be palpable again, now that I was in Ahto City. It wasn’t. Bastila felt eons away; occasionally, faltering tremors of emotions slid through the mind-link, so faint and indistinct that I wondered if it was merely my overwrought imagination.

*Doesn’t it just figure,* I muttered darkly to myself. *The one time I actually want to talk to her, she’s impossible to reach.* It was ironically amusing, in a twisted why-does-this-happen-to-me sort of way. No matter what Bastila did, it seemed guaranteed to provoke my animosity.

*Just what do I know of Bastila Shan anyway?* Other than she was prissy, stuck-up, and prone to panicking. But perhaps that wasn’t fair... *she’s been bonded all this time to Revan.* I shuddered, presuming the only thing worse would be to have said Sith Lord hosting a tea party inside your actual mind.

*But she’s young... years younger than me. Still a Padawan, and thrust into the middle of this war because of her Battle Meditation.* I didn’t like her, I certainly didn’t trust her, and yet I couldn’t halt an unwanted modicum of sympathy.

*I need to find her... and fast.* My alternative was tracking down the Jedi Council themselves – and considering they were the ones who’d implanted Revan in my head... *Well, they’d probably just reinforce Jen Sahara.* But could I live with the knowledge that should my control drop – and stars knew how often *that* seemed to happen – then Revan would assume control once more? *No! I can keep that schutta at bay. I have to!*
I lengthened my strides, hurrying through a vast courtyard dappled with incoming rays of sunlight. The Force thrummed and coiled not far away. I was heading straight for it; it appeared to be coming from the Republic Embassy. And I can barely sense Bastila. An icy premonition shook me, dousing my proliferate thoughts. Kath crap. There can’t be an attack. Not on Manaan.

But something is happening.

I pushed out through the bond again, this time in desperation. Look, I’m back on Manaan. What the frell is going on? I frowned as once more, there was no reply. My concentration turned inward to the wavering link that connected us; if anything, it felt weaker than before.

I was completely unprepared for a powerful, alien surge of Force power to slam through the bond. I stumbled, gasping Bastila?! as the foreign energy immediately ceased, leaving behind a withering connection to the only source of help I dared approach.

Panic struck within – What’s going on? Are you there? – and the bond dimmed to a vague memory, a link fraying to near imperceptibility. Bastila was still there, but so faint I was starting to believe her life was in dire peril.

“Hey!” someone called in protest; I’d absentely pushed past them while floundering through the milling throng. I turned, quickly gathering disseminated thoughts; a group of Sith solders in tan uniform were eying me over curiously. Oh great, I thought sourly. I swear these guys breed like gizka. The one who’d objected had a surprised look on his face as he nodded amiably at me.

Cordial Sith? What’s next, charitable Hutts? Clarity struck me, and I cursed my own stupidity. This cloak I picked up on Rii’shn could pass for a Dark Jedi’s garb. And my lightsaber isn’t exactly concealed. It was deactivated, but the flutterings in the Force left me uneasy, and I’d been clenching it tightly since I’d traipsed past the Selkath customs official. Once more, I regretted I’d lost the second ‘saber. The last time I’d fought with one weapon I’d had this itchy feeling that my guard was wide open.

I nodded back, containing a grimace, and resumed a quick pace to the Embassy. Another nudge through the mind link achieved nothing; my best course of action was to move. I strode past a pair of Rodians chatting in exuberant voices that cut through my internal preoccupations.

“(She’s worth betting on, Lagos! This girl Twi’lek has only been swooping for one day, and already she’s matched Qeedle’s time!)”

I glanced at them briefly. The two Rodians looked deeply engrossed in their conversation, and both wore the fire retardant outfits of swoop racers.

“(She’s completed one race, and you think she’s the next great,)” the other scoffed. “(She’s got no commercial backer, and that angry walking hairball who shadow’s her will stop any from approaching. Anyway, how many times have you thrown credits on would-be champions, only to see them crumple before Hukta Jax?)”

Nah, it couldn’t be. “(Excuse me,)” I interrupted them in Rodese. They both turned to stare at me warily. “(I couldn’t help overhearing your conversation. What’s the name of this new swoop racer?)”

“(She calls herself ‘Bek from Taris’),” the first Rodian said excitedly. “(A bit naff, really – everyone’s claiming to be a swooper from Taris these days, since the records were destroyed in the Sith bombardment.)”

My lips twitched. Mission, what are you doing? “(Ah. Doing well, is she?)”
“(Yeah! Did you see her?)” he replied happily. “(Not bad, for a first try, for someone so young!)”

Well, at least I know where she is. I nodded affably at the Rodians and bid them farewell, striding off toward the Embassy. *Not sure if she’ll talk to me though.*

I turned a corner, and emerged into a sweeping plaza that was even grander than the previous. Extravagant pools of crystalline water immediately drew the eye; fountains spat streams of liquid that sparkled in the light. The ground was highly polished marble, and beyond the pools loomed pillars that announced entrance into a majestic building.

But something was wrong. People huddled in small groups, some pointing anxiously toward the large doors nestled between the pillars. Security droids hovered in buzzing clusters.

Nearby, vibrations of Force pulsed a warning.

My stomach lurched as I realized I could no longer sense Bastila. *That building’s got to be the Embassy, and someone inside is throwing the Force around like it’s the latest fashion.* I felt cold. My rampant thoughts couldn’t help but merge into one conclusive deduction: the Republic was under attack.

*But the Sith wouldn’t dare, not on Manaan! They’d be defying the neutrality agreement!* Then again, the Sith were hardly a sterling example of adept strategy.

Sometimes, I wondered if a Twi’lek dancing girl would do a better job of leading the Sith Empire. But that was a dangerous line of thinking, considering who was lolling about in my head.

*Dammit, I thought it was bad enough with the GenoHaradan. Why have they attacked? I thought their sodding kolto supply hinged on the neutrality laws!* Which meant that the Sith were happy enough to throw away their share.

Everything fell into place. *Of course. They’re after Bastila. They sent the GenoHaradan to kill me, and Dark Jedi to capture her.* Fear coiled in my stomach, but I brushed it aside ruthlessly. *I’m insulted, dammit. They must have considered me the easy option.* But – that meant the Sith had contracted the GenoHaradan to come after me. Why would the Sith be after me?

*Duh. I have Revan in my head.* A glacial chill crept laggardly through my veins. *How could they know about her? And if they know, who else does?*

It all came back to Bastila – only she could answer my questions. *But if the Embassy’s been attacked…*

If they managed to capture Bastila, then there went my explanation – and possibly, my only chance at getting rid of this unwanted scow in my head. *I’m not a coward, no matter who I am. I have to get inside.*

I glanced around hurriedly; so far, no uniformed Selkath were in sight. But they wouldn’t be far away. I shook my head irritably, inhaled deep, and broke into a run.

Vaguely I was aware of the gasps of Ahto City residents as I careened past the superfluous pools of water and through the ceremonious pillars. A large door towered just beyond; I was willing to bet it was locked down from the inside.

“Halt!” a garbled shriek from behind had me spinning around, mere paces from the closed doors. A deluge of Selkath military was flowing into the courtyard; the leader of the closest squad had a gun aimed directly at me.
From this distance, a mere twenty metres, it looked like a disruptor rifle. My past memories were disjointed and vague, but I knew there were some things a lightsaber could not block. My weapon, gripped furtively in my right hand, was still deactivated.

“You are under arrest for violating the neutrality agreement! Lay down your weapon, Sith, or we shall open fire!”

Sith? The tan-uniformed soldiers had acknowledged me earlier. With mounting horror, I inwardly cursed the black robe that cloaked my bloodstained armour, and announced me as an enemy to the Republic. If the Selkath want to arrest me on sight, then the Sith are already inside.

And there ain’t no way I’m surrendering to a bunch of walking fish.

My eyes flicked frantically around the courtyard as the Selkath squad took a step closer, guns trained on me. More armoured soldiers inundated the vast plaza, dispersing the huddled groups of civilians that had cloistered in the corners mere seconds ago.

I had to get inside; raw survival instinct overrode my growing panic, and I felt myself grasp out to the Force, stretching senses behind me into the Embassy. I could pick out two Force users, and a swirling of electrical impulses that coalesced into a mass of complex circuitry. A brief moment of surprise assailed me, even as I stared numbly at the advancing Selkath.

What is this? I must be sensing... the door controls?

But the tiny, dancing oscillations were far too complicated for me to manipulate – I could barely comprehend what I was sensing.

You dumbstruck nerf-herder, it’s child’s play! a derisive voice sneered. A surge of contempt swelled up inside, catching me off-guard and wresting the Force from my grasp. Don’t let her take over! I felt the Force meld into the electrical vibrations, into a quick surge of energy that tightened to a pulse and then vanished.

A grating noise sounded from behind.

The closest Selkath gasped, yanking his blaster up to aim past me, and before I was fully cognizant I had whirled around and leapt towards half-open door. My surroundings stretched in that all-too-familiar way as I dived forwards into a roll, laser fire stretching into long bright lines all around me.

A robed figure inside held a red lightsaber, but in my heightened speed, I saw the laser bolts jar slowly into his torso before he had a chance to deflect them. My environs lurched back into normal time as both the door hissed shut behind me and the Dark Jedi screamed, collapsing to the floor.

Selkath one, Sith nil, I thought humourlessly, my eyes snagging on a second figure, whose hand was pressed desperately against the door control. Unsteadily, I scrambled to my feet, furtively glancing around the entrance foyer. The body of a receptionist lay behind a poraclay desk, and near one of the exits sprawled three Republic corpses.

“Who are you?” the Dark Jedi growled, swinging his lightsaber up defensively.

What, no immediate attack? I felt my mouth twist as I appraised the robed figure. Even Dark Jedi think I’m one of them. “Reinforcements,” I quipped. “Latest orders are to head outside and surrender to the Selkath authorities.”

I saw the man twitch, heard him snarl, and activated my lightsaber just in time to counter a wild lunge.
“You’re not one of us!” he hissed, as sparks flew from our crossed ‘sabers.

“What gave me away?” I panted, leaping backwards as he pulled back to strike again. “My cloak not the right shade of black?”

I made out a vague shadow of a sneer underneath his dark hood. "You'll die for your interference, weakling!" His off-hand raised in a sinister motion; I flung out my arm in a honed reflex, ‘saber leaving my grasp and heading straight for him. Pitiful little Sithling. He should be on his knees! A blossoming of rage warmed in my belly as spinning red gouged into the Dark Jedi's arm. I felt an echo of the rage reverberate through the Force and twist through the 'saber as it snapped back into my grasp.

A blossoming of rage warmed in my belly as spinning red gouged into the Dark Jedi's arm. I felt an echo of the rage reverberate through the Force and twist through the 'saber as it snapped back into my grasp.

A severed hand landed on the ground with a splat, and my adversary shrieked.

“You – you bitch!” he gasped, doubling over as the lightsaber in his remaining hand wavered. His dismembered arm hugged tight against his torso.

I felt a cold smile curve my lips as the sweet surge of victory danced through me. “True Sith don’t let pain stop them,” I taunted. I took a step forward, lazily flinging my weapon out in a lunge. He parried ineffectively, groaning with the effort as he staggered back. I threw my weight behind the lightsaber, and the Dark Jedi stumbled, falling with a cry.

“You should have stuck to trooping,” I whispered, as I drove the ‘saber deep into his chest.

His scream was cut off as his flesh cauterized around my ‘saber; I yanked it out, staring fixedly as spurts of warm blood speckled over his thrashing corpse. The cadence of rage and smug superiority froze; reality crashed a cacophony in my mind and my very words replayed sickeningly over and over.

True Sith... My cognition splintered into stark fear. Damn you, Sith Bitch. Get out of my sodding head! I hadn’t even noticed the transition; she’d smoothly taken over as soon as there’d be an opening. I swallowed past a lump in my throat.

I knew, then, that Revan was stronger than whoever I was. Well, duh. She wasn’t the Dark Bitch of the Sith for nothing. Gaining entrance to the Embassy had been her work, as had searing off that Sith’s arm. I’d be a pile of guts back on Rii’shn if she hadn’t taken over. Every time my life was in mortal peril, Revan saved me in her rage and violence and gratuitous disregard for life. But she killed so many... what if she takes over for good? How many more will she slaughter?

Will I even realize it? The Force pulsed somewhere nearby, shattering my horrified thoughts. I need to stop whimpering and find Bastila. She’s the only one who can help me now.

I shook free of my frozen stance and strode out of the room, heading down a stark corridor that gleamed with wealth. Black burns speckled the walls, residue from blaster fire. I passed a door, and heard whispered voices within; soldiers, no doubt, hiding from the Dark Jedi that had infiltrated this place.

A shriek echoed through the halls, followed closely by a surge in the Force. The impassioned fury swelled once more inside, overriding my fear, my determination. I pushed back against it, desperate. I won’t become her! Never again! I’d rather die! The dark emotions ebbed somewhat, even as logic reminded me that death was a distinct possibility.

I cleared a corner, as someone sneered, “You’d better run, little boy.”

Two heads swivelled around to stare at my approach. One, a Dark Jedi; the other, a young Twi’lek
who was cowering on the floor. He held a short green lightsaber, and despair was etched deeply into his face. Blood dripped from his lekku.

“Come to join the fun?” the Dark Jedi drawled, eyeing me over. My eyes snapped to the young Twi’lek; frantic tenacity sparked through his features and he lunged forward, stabbing his ‘saber deep into the Sith’s thigh.

The Dark Jedi let out an agonized scream, flinging his lightsaber round in retaliation. I gasped, running forward, but the Twi’lek dodged underneath the red blade and flicked his ‘saber towards the other’s torso. The black robe shrivelled and burnt as lightsaber met flesh.

The robed figure grunted, voice turning to a splutter as he collapsed to his knees. Bright red entrails gaped from within the folds of his cloak.

The Twi’lek scrambled fully to his feet, horror paling his cheeks as he gazed upon the dying Force user. His eyes flicked to me and he yelped, stumbling backwards before whirling around. He thinks I’m one of them.

“Wait!” I yelled, but the panicking boy paid me no heed, sprinting further down the corridor and out of sight. I followed in desperation, muscles straining as I forced them to work harder. Who was that? A young Jedi apprentice by the looks, but I hadn’t expected to see any other Force users on Manaan.

I slid around a corner, but the Twi’lek was nowhere in sight. Bursts of raw energy were still pulsing nearby; my grip on the Force was tenuous, and I did not dare draw anymore in. I should find out who else is wielding the Force. Was Bastila somewhere in the building? Knocked unconscious, and almost dead? If so, would I find her in time?

**What about the others?** I tasted relief at the knowledge Mission and Zaalbar had fled the Embassy. **Earth? Canderous? Juhani?** If I had not run from Manaan, would I have been able to help them?

I barely registered the opulence of the place; polished walls gleaming with wealth and pride, marred with the occasional smatter of blood. I stepped over bodies – unconscious or dead, I didn’t stop to check – the waves of Force power being melded and transformed in the distance were reeling me in, like a slave to its master.

I had not felt power like this for… a long time. But it was fading rapidly; whatever battle was ensuing, was almost over.

A tortured wail rung out through the Embassy’s lavish rooms, and I froze outside a door, clutching my lightsaber tightly.

“Worm!” someone hissed on the other side. “You just don’t know when to stay dead, do you?”

I thumped my hand on the door controls, and carnage burst into view. Two steps in front was a slain Dark Jedi, head and shoulders cleaved by what had to have been a lightsaber. Grisly cauterized chunks of flesh smattered the ground next to the corpse, and as I raised my gaze in horror, more broken bodies greeted me.

But deeper in the depths of this perdition, a black robed figure was throwing lightening that sparked and flashed over a body trapped against the wall.

A snarl ripped from my throat, and a flood of sweet tasting Force filled me with power, with life, with victory. I yanked it furiously towards me, and the perpetrator tumbled backwards like a dust-ball thrown into the wind.
I vaguely noticed the victim fall to a heap by the wall – my attention was solely focused on the Dark Jedi slowly rising to their feet. I stalked in, but blood was everywhere, fraying at the edges of my vision—

*This is what Revan does,* my conscience taunted. *I can’t let her out… I can’t!*

“Who are you?” the figure growled at me. “How dare you interrupt me – do you know who I am?”

The Dark Jedi shot me a furious glare, and beneath the hood of the black robe I could make out slanting eyes discoloured an unnatural yellow. She brandished a red lightsaber threateningly at me.

“Yes, I have one of those too,” I snapped, raising mine higher in response. “And frankly, I’m more interested in the breeding habits of banthas than I am in your identity.”

“Interloper!” she snarled. “Whoever you are, you picked the wrong battle to join!”

*I’m not afraid of her,* I realized in surprise. *Not in the least.*

Well, what was one Dark Jedi when compared to having the Sith Lord battle with you for control over your own mind?

“Wait,” the woman breathed, and actually took a stumbling step backwards. Sickly yellow eyes widened under her hood. “You! You’re supposed to be—”

“Yeah, yeah, dead, I know,” I drawled, feeling my lips twist in dry humour. *She knows. She knows about the GenoHaradan ambush... and about Revan.* “What can I say? I’m a talented individual.”

The Dark Jedi paused, and I could see the confidence steep back into her stance. She walked forward, slowly but assuredly, and I recognized she was not quite as worried about me as I had hoped.

“Well, well,” her voice turned low and silky. I stiffened. *Have I met her before? She almost sounds... familiar.* “It must be my lucky day. I only came here for Bastila, but now it looks as if I’ll capture two prizes instead of one.”

My eyes narrowed. “I know you,” I said slowly.

She laughed, and I heard the tones of an Alderaanian accent. “They really did a number on you, didn’t they? We met little more than two months ago, Jen Sahara.”

...“You have everything you need?” the Jedi asked me quietly, her eyes seeming to pierce through to my soul. I looked down briefly, unused to such attention. Despite the plain brown robes the Jedi onboard the Endar Spire wore, I could not help but feel they appeared resplendent in their serenity.

“Yes, Jedi Shan,” I answered quietly. “Everyone has – has been kind.”

I looked up to see Jedi Bastila Shan smile benevolently at me. She was beautiful, this famous Jedi, with pale, flawless skin, high cheekbones, and long-lashed dark eyes. Her companion, the one I recognized as Knight Kylah Aramai nodded briskly. A bored look crossed her face, and I felt embarrassed that I had taken time of people so powerful.

“I notice you have downloaded many archaeological journals in the last few days,” Jedi Shan continued. “If you have need for more information, do not hesitate to ask me.”

I nodded, looking away shyly. A hand upon my shoulder caught my attention, and once more I glanced up into Bastila’s aristocratic face. Her expression was poised, peaceful... with the glimmer
of some foreign emotion in her dark eyes I could not decipher.

“Do not be afraid to talk to me, Jen Sahara. I promise I will not bite.”

I heard a stifled snort from the other Jedi, and flushed.

“Th- thank you, Jedi Shan. I shall.”

Her smile blossomed in farewell, and she moved to the doorway of my quarters, Knight Kylah following on her heels. As the two Jedi walked away, I could not help but overhear Kylah’s parting comment.

“Honestly, Bastila, she is just a simple scholar,” she drawled in a silky voice. “Why you feel the urge to check up on such a quiet little mouse, I do not know.”

…

“Of course, I did not know who you were back then, otherwise events may have played out very differently,” Kylah’s voice dragged me back to the present. “I hope you enjoyed your freedom while it lasted.”

“You’re the traitor,” I said quietly. “You’re the reason the Endar Spire was attacked, and that everyone died.”

She scoffed disbelievingly. “That’s a little hard to take, from you. Can’t remember the blood on your hands? Or is it that you don’t know who you really are yet?” She loosed a surprised laugh.

“Considering how appropriate your garb is, I find that a little hard to believe.”

“I know exactly who I am,” I bit out through clenched teeth. I just don’t know my own name. And I am not her. No two-bit little Jedi traitor was going to get the best of me! “Why’d you defect, Kylah? Getting a bit cold in Bastila’s shadow? Did it gall that you had to follow her around, even though you were the Knight and she merely a Padawan?” The taunts rolled off my tongue like honey; the ability to sense weakness and manipulate it... was this Street Kid’s gift, or hers?

Kylah stiffened, and I saw rage contort the sickly lines in her face. “Don’t you dare judge me, you pathetic worm! You’re nothing but the shell of a former time... and your time is up!”

I felt the Force crest within her, and before I had time to blink, the woman had leaped in front of me, lightsaber poised to cleave through my head. A surprised yelp released from my throat as I parried wildly, feeling the force of her blow resonate through my arms. The criss-cross of red burned into my vision as she pushed hard against me, the ‘sabers moving infinitesimally closer.

A wave of malice swept through me. The boiling rage tasted so sweet, it would be so easy to just surrender- I won’t let her take control, not again!

“You are truly nothing now,” Kylah whispered, sneering from beyond our blades. She grunted, straining against me, and I could sense the Force riding through her, enhancing her strength and reflexes. I couldn’t keep this up, not without relinquishing my sanity. No, there must be another way!

I yanked hard on the Force as desperate instinct took over. Grunting, I shoved fiercely against her ‘saber, then leapt clear backwards, flipping in the air and landing on my feet. I won’t get mad, I won’t-

“Oh, very nice,” Kylah drawled, striding towards me. “Did dear little Bastila teach you that? Let’s see if you can block this!”
Before I could even gauge her intentions, the room was filled with bright sparks of agonized pain. I was flung to the back wall, having just enough sense left to clutch onto my lightsaber desperately, but-

The pain, the hot sparking torment burned through my flesh, my muscles, my head- *No! No! I must stop this! I won’t! I’m sorry, Mal!* How- how- Everything morphed into a world of torturous agony and grief.

*Get up, you snivelling coward!* The pain was receding now, slowly, but surely. Vaguely I was aware of Kylah laughing as my muscles creaked and twitched. *Fight back! I should be able to block her!*

“Oh my, you are weak!” Kylah crowed. “I cannot believe I was worried about facing you! The pathetic Council really failed with you, did they not? Lord Malak will be most pleased.” Her hand was still raised, blue sparks crackling between her long fingers.

I was gasping, harsh pants that rattled in my chest as I glared mutinously at Kylah. *She’s too strong! No, no she wasn’t. That pitiful Sith wannabe is no challenge. I wouldn’t let her lick my boots!* The dark fury I associated with Revan bloomed in my head, in my very soul. I had just enough will left to obstruct it. *I won’t give in to her! I won’t lose control again!*

“Ooh, you want some more?” Kylah mocked, and another jet of lightening spiked from her, engulfing me again with fierce, hot agony. I gritted my teeth, fighting against the harrowing torment, the burning that was burrowing deep into me- a scream issued from my lungs, despite myself. *I can’t- I can’t-*

Anger, hot and caustic, grew in my mind, fighting against the tearing pain that threatened to overwhelm everything. I could surrender to the dark hatred pummelling through me, but then, once more, Revan would win.

“My, this is fun,” Kylah murmured, in between bouts of lacerating torture. My vision slowly blurred to normality, as I recognized I was crumpled on the ground, wheezing and shaking. My weapon had already rolled out from cramped fingers. *I’ll die, I realized numbly. I’ll die in this very room, if I don’t capitulate.*

The barbed spikes of electricity seared into me again, and I could hear myself screaming. Flashes of nameless people sparked chaotically through my head, and I thrashed wildly as coherence dissolved. The anger, the roiling black rage, crested through me in a wave, offering a dark and ominous salvation.

My alternative, it seemed, was certain death.

I felt my resistance fray under the never-ending torture. I was poised on a precipice, forced to choose between two options, one that would damn my life, and the other, my soul.

With sinking trepidation, I surrendered to the malevolence that simmered in my mind. The antagonism, the fury, and the vengeance clawed through me, and this time I embraced it. I let the barriers drop against the dark turmoil of emotions that swept aside lucidity and took abrupt command of my senses.

My thoughts twisted cruelly – *Kill her! Force her to beg for her pitiful existence, and then end it!* – and I snapped my head up, rising to my feet. The lightening scalded my skin, but I cast it aside as just another pained memory.

“What?” Kylah spat, hand dropping in surprise as I took a casual step through her electric storm. The
white hot sparks faded from her fingertips as she gaped at me with incredulity.

“Don’t count me out just yet, Kylah,” I breathed. I raised a hand, and called my weapon home. The Force flared as the ‘saber returned to my grasp with a satisfying snap. I took another stride forward, fighting against twitching muscles that were slow to respond – my body would list to my commands - I am the master here! “You have no idea what you have just unleashed.”

“You-” She shook her head angrily. “You are a pathetic failure! I am not scared of you!”

“You should be,” I murmured, my lips twisting. The Force rode deep within me, amplified by loathing and rage. That she had dared to unleash lightning on me; that I had fallen to my knees in front of that rankweed-sucking cantina rat galled me; and the righteous fury burst out in a flood of energy that lashed through the room.

Kylah stumbled back, once, twice, but held her ground. She’s strong. But not strong enough - I will see her crawl before the end! No more pissing about with lightsabers and petty Force powers, I had the ability to assume control over life and death, and I would unleash it here!

The rage exploded inside me, swelling out through me like a thousand piercing daggers, agonizing and yet oddly satisfying. A wail tore from my lungs as my vision darkened to red; a pulsing, crackling black aura sprung to life around me. Rage can be used to increase power tenfold. And I knew that, oh, how I knew that!

“What- no!” she yelled, stepping back involuntarily. “You can’t-”

“Oh yes I can!” I snarled, and my free hand flung out, unleashing a wave of poisoned energy that buffeted through the room. I could feel the sweet taste of it as it soaked into her skin, tainting her limbs with decaying corruption. I was supreme here, no one could withstand me!

“You-” she spluttered, stepping further back. Her hood had been pushed off her face, and her cheeks were pale with fear. Sickly yellow eyes widened in panicked realization, and I could taste the horror that began to permeate her mind. “Sith’s blood!” she swore, flinging a jet of electricity that blinded my vision and sparked white through the room.

Oh, she thinks that will work again? The Force was mine to control, and it slammed away her torrent of lightning like a cloud of moths, but-

Kylah had gone.

What? That was merely a diversion? That cowardly maggot! Pure, unadulterated anger suffused me and I snarled, reeling in the Force to bolster my speed as I prepared to pursue-

A pained moan – quiet, barely audible – tore through the fog of senseless power and fury that controlled my very senses. The berserking aura fractured and smashed, and the Force departed in a torrent, slipping out from my unwieldy grasp. I gasped as exhaustion and agony hit my senses, the lacerating pain that was etched into muscles weak from Kylah’s bombardment.

The fury, the hatred, the shear contempt for everything, had dissolved and left me shattered.

I was bone tired and felt crippled, utterly spent. I had not the energy to race after that traitorous Sith, and I doubted I could survive the encounter.

Revan. I didn’t just let her take over, I handed her the sodding controls! Once more, Evil Bitch had saved me. But at what cost? I’m losing my mind to her! Chilling horror shuddered through me. I’d been determined to hold Revan at bay, yet this time, it had been a conscious decision to yield.
I heard the whimper once more, and allowed it to snatch my attention to a brown-clad body deeper in the room. Bastila’s Jedi Master... I took a step closer, dragging wearied limbs, as I felt the dread riding my system mount.

The Jedi Master stirred slightly. There were small horns framing a dark-skinned face. Zabrak, my mind issued helpfully. I stood over her, staring down motionlessly at the Master who could help me or damn me. Or both...

Her eyes opened, a flare of turquoise against a gaunt face, and I was swept away.

…

Nothing.

There was nothing but unworldly rage that inundated me, soaking into my very soul. I knew nothing, and could feel nothing but immense fury.

I welcomed it. Somehow, I knew it was better than the alternative.

“We can begin the implantation shortly. She is so far gone... I am not convinced this is the best course of action.”

What was that?

“You made your reservations clear at the meeting, Karon. This is the choice we all agreed upon.”

I battled against the thick fog clouding me; somehow, railing at the inevitable felt familiar. Something convulsed and jerked; with an absent sort of reflection I realized it was my body. I gasped, shuddered, and-

“Put her back under! Quick!”

-my eyes peeled open. Vague, out-of-focus images swam hazily in front of me. Someone was leaning over me. Dark skin, small horns protruding from a blurry face.

Karon? No. No!

“Two hypos – that’s more than enough.”

My vision, my confusion, and then finally my unswerving rage dissolved into nothing.

…

Horror crested within – what exactly was I remembering? Was that when they’d stuck Revan in my head? This so-called Jedi Master had been part of it?

“It was you!” I hissed, my face curling in vicious anger as I glared down at the dying Zabrak. My lightsaber cut a beam of red anger in front of me.

Her chest rattled with shallow breaths; blood drenched her austere robes and formed a sickly puddle underneath her.

“I failed you...” a whisper issued from the Zabrak; I strained to catch it.

“Failed?” My voice rose in disbelief. “You screwed with my mind! Why? Why is she in there?”
“Please...” Her bright turquoise eyes closed, and her arm twitched. A deactivated 'saber rolled meekly from her grasp. “My lightsaber... keep it. Let it guide you.”

I stared at her, incredulous and stunned speechless. She thinks her lightsaber is sufficient recompense for tearing apart my mind? I stood still, frozen with confounded disbelief.

Her eyes stayed tightly closed, and her face had drained to a sickly grey. There were things I needed to ask, questions begging to be raised, but I found myself unable to formulate a reply as she lay there, dying in front of me.

I didn’t need to wield the Force to feel her life draining away.

“Forgive me,” she whispered, exhaling, and did not take another breath.

My limbs were rigid; all I could do was gaze down at the woman who had taken my sanity from me. And I still did not know why.

Forgive me...

The words swelled on the Force as I sensed the life dim from the Zabrak, dim until there was nothing left.

Forgive you? How can I? Because of you, my mind is a minefield! Because of you, I have Revan inside my head!

But I felt empty; the rage ebbed away as I stood, staring silently at the lifeless Zabrak. Karon had known the answers... and I’d been so scared I’d lost the chance to learn from her. And Bastila.... where is she?

I heard a scuffle to my right; reflexes I barely acknowledged had me leaping backwards as laser bolts discharged through the room. Pain scored deep into my shoulder.

“Die, Sith schutta!” an angry, male voice bellowed. I faced my next danger – a beaten, bloody Republic officer wielding what looked like a kid’s toy in his hands-

“Carth?” I cried in stunned disbelief. A dull throbbing from my shoulder made me wince – it was superficial and shallow, but I’d had more wounds in the last few days than was objectively healthy. “You frelling shot me!”

His jaw dropped in a comic display of shock; if I hadn’t been so overwhelmed by everything, I probably would have laughed. “Jen?” he croaked weakly, his arm lowering as he stumbled back against the wall. I noticed he didn’t drop his gun, however.

Black lines latticed over his neck, and blood mottled his clothes like patchwork. The idiot hadn’t even been wearing armour. Kylah almost killed him, I realized as he continued to stare dumbly at me. He was the one trapped against the wall.

“What- are you with them?” he whispered, his eyes roving over me. “No... you can’t be... can you?”

I thought I’d had enough surprises already, but apparently not. “Oh, some thanks I get for saving your life,” I snapped, crouching down and pilfering the lightsaber that lay close to the recently departed master. I’d figure out why she wanted me to take it later. “You’ve called me some nasty names before, Onasi, but one of those core-slime Dark Jedi? Gee, thanks.”

His gaze was dubious, almost hesitant, as he looked me over again. As the wariness mounted in his
eyes, I had to bite back the scowl determined to etch into my face. At least this was a healthy sort of anger, frustrated irritation at his familiar suspicion – nothing like the storm of fury that drowned me in its wake. That sometimes seemed impossible to control.

He opened his mouth to speak, closed it, sighed, and then tried again. “I suppose there’s no point in asking why you’re dressed like a Sith, then. Why are you here, Jen?”

How could I answer that? I’d never really explained anything to Carth – stars, I didn’t even know what was going on with myself most of the time. And Revan... now that was something I’d never let slip, no matter what. In the end, I answered simply, “I decided it was time to stop running.”

He sighed, weariness and exasperation chasing through his features as he slumped back against the wall, eyes closed. The gun dropped from his lifeless fingers. “I really can’t believe you, Jen. You blow up our ship – stang, you almost kill us! Disappear off the planet, and then a day later your back!” His voice rose; despite myself, I flinched. At the time, the sabotage on the Ebon Hawk had been sensible, logical – but now, knowing who was in my head- “Barging into the middle of this invasion, and claiming to save my life?” His eyes snapped open, dark and flashing. “Wait- Kylah-where is that bitch?”

“She ran off,” I answered curtly.

“She-” He sighed again. “I guess you did save my life, then. I thought that was my end.” A bark of laughter issued from him; a desperate, humourless sound. “But you arrived in the nick of time, like usual.”

_Not for Karon._ My eyes slid back to the prone Zabrak, resting on the crumple of beige and dark red.

“Karon?” Carth gasped, following my gaze. “Is- is she dead?”

I nodded slowly. “I felt her die,” I murmured through cold lips. “She has... joined the Force, as they say.”

Carth’s attention had fixed on me once more, mistrustful and cagey. “We need to move from here. Kylah’s still out there, along with however many Dark Jedi are still alive. Did you- did you encounter any?”

I nodded briskly, wincing as I rolled my shoulder back. “The Selkath got one of the foyer guards, I killed the other. Some Twi’lek apprentice killed a third.” I pushed my senses out; a deliberate, tiring effort now that the battle adrenaline had departed me. The Force felt heavy, almost unnatural in my grasp, and I couldn’t feel anything approximating a Force user. “Kylah’s done a runner, flyboy. I can’t sense any Dark Jedi in the building anymore.”

Carth’s eyes closed as he breathed in deeply, leaning against the wall. “I hope you’re right. I doubt I can survive another encounter anyway.”

I attempted a weak smile. “Come on, Onasi, you’re not that badly beaten up. Nothing a few whiskeys won’t cure, at any rate.”

His eyes snapped open as he scowled at me. “Your solution for everything, isn’t it, Jen? A few drinks- or, failing that, berserk and go on a rampage.”

I flinched inwardly at his bitter tone, but couldn’t really blame him - I supposed I deserved that. But there was something more urgent than appeasing Carth, no matter how right he was to be angry at me. “Where’s Bastila?” I queried in a low tone.
The scowl dropped as his expression turned serious once more. “Not here, that’s all I know. Wann told me she was on a mission somewhere, but wouldn’t divulge more. At least she’s been safely out of this massacre, though.”

Shockwaves of dread slid through me; I could feel beads of sweat popping into existence on my forehead. *If she’s not here, then where is she? What’s happened to her?* It wasn’t inconceivable that the Sith had led a two-pronged attack. In fact, I couldn’t help but think it probable, considering the intangibility of the bond. If I hadn’t known about our mind link previously, I wouldn’t even have noticed the whisper of her soul in my mind.

“I need to find her,” I mumbled. “Who’s Wann?”

“You actually *want* to find Bastila now?” Carth muttered something inaudible under his breath. “Roland Wann’s the Commander here. I’ll take you to him – we should find out who’s still alive.”

He locked eyes with me again, trailing over my clothes. “Though get rid of that blasted cloak, would you?”

He made to leave, and I hurriedly shucked the robe off and dumped it to the ground. As I followed him silently out of the cursed room, I spared one last glance back at the prone corpse of the Jedi Master.

But there was nothing left bar a pile of blood-smattered brown robes.

xXx

The Republic Commander was an older, chubby man; dark skinned and face etched with worry lines. Black shadows lurked under his eyes, and I had the feeling he’d been less than prepared for today’s attack. None too surprising, really, considering the enforced neutrality of Ahto City.

“Carth, thank the stars you’re alive,” Roland wheezed as we stepped into the command room. A couple of soldiers had waved us in after opening the door, but blasters had stayed ready in their grip. Two of them were looking at me warily. *Well, I guess this torn, bloodied armour doesn’t exactly make a great first impression, but it’s gotta be better than a black cloak.* “What happened out there? The last time I spotted a Dark Jedi was ten minutes ago, jumping into that submersible. I didn’t dare believe it – are they all dead?”

“Kylah,” I muttered angrily. *So she did escape.* Roland’s gaze was drawn to me, immediately suspicious. *Must be a common trait of all Republic soldiers. Maybe they learn mistrust at cadet school.*

Carth nodded at the Commander. “Nine deaths accounted for. The one you spotted must have been that traitor, Kylah, escaping.”

“They’re – they’re all dead?” a younger man squeaked from further in the room. He looked like a tech; about ten casually clothed workers were huddled against the far wall. “It’s over?”

A ragged cheer arose among the small crowd, all of whom appeared exhausted and petrified. One sank to his knees in relief, covering his face with shaky hands. Roland’s shoulders dropped as the tension slowly dissipated from his stance. He looked once more at me. “Who’s this?”

Carth glanced at me also, dark eyes imploring for my silence. “Jen. She’s one of Bastila’s crew,” he said finally.

Roland frowned. “Hang on – wasn’t that the name of the survivor who fled the Ebon Hawk?”
I shrugged uneasily. Carth shot me a disappointed frown, and I dropped my gaze. He must not have told Roland the whole truth, otherwise Wann would be labelling me a fugitive at the least. Roland’s gaze moved to the lightsabers hooked on my belt, and a dark scowl wrapped itself on his weathered face. “Another Jedi?” he groused.

Irritation crested over my disquiet, and I shot him a filthy look. “Oh, I’m sorry,” I snapped sarcastically, “maybe I should have left you lot to fight the Sith alone!”

Carth sighed noisily as the Commander’s fierce look of annoyance intensified. “This attack happened because of you Jedi!” Roland snarled back. “They invaded to get at Bastila or, or Karon! If you Jedi hadn’t been here, all my men would still be alive!”

Fierce indignation swept through me as I opened my mouth to retort, but the Commander beat me to it with a hurried, “Karon – where is she? Did you find her, Captain?”

“She, uh,” Carth trailed off, shaking his head. “She didn’t make it.”

My gut clenched at the words. I hadn’t wanted to meet Karon, inwardly dreading any confrontation with a Jedi Master. But now I’d more or less obtained my wish, I bitterly regretted it. She knew the answers. Sithspit, she’s the one who shoved that schutta in my head! And yet, after witnessing the Zabrak’s death, I couldn’t help but feel remorse as well as anger. It wasn’t my fault! I had nothing to do with the Sith attacking here! But I couldn’t stem the tide of recriminations – if I hadn’t run from Manaan, what would have happened? Would Karon still be alive? Would Bastila be out of danger?

“Bastila,” I gasped suddenly. “Where is she?”

A loud explosion deafened any scathing response the Commander would have made, and rocked the walls around me. I stumbled backward, fumbling instinctively for a weapon as someone screamed in fright. It took a second before I registered that the blast – whatever it was – had occurred some rooms away.

Carth had whipped out his blaster, facing one of the exits intently. The techs were whimpering against the back wall.

“Dammit, Captain! I thought you said those sithspawn were all dead!” Roland cursed, having toppled against a row of consoles.

They are all dead! All, except that traitor Kylah – but she had fled. My muscles clenched in readiness, a painful tension against the exhaustion that lingered in my limbs. The Force skittered away from my clumsy grasp, and I knew a moment of real terror. If this was a second wave of Force users, then I sincerely doubted my chances. My shoulder throbbed from the GenoHaradan attack on Rii’shn, and even now, a hollow ache thrummed in my once-broken arm. In short, I was a wreck.

“Uh, Commander?” a soldier interrupted, eyes fixed on a screen next to Wann. “There’s Selkath in the halls.”

“Selkath?” Roland queried flatly as he turned to look. Realization struck me – the foyer doors had been locked down after my entrance. If the Selkath were determined to enter and supposedly neutralize the Sith threat, then they’d probably detonated their way in.

Carth’s shoulders sagged in relief, even as he holstered his blaster. I stared down at my clenched fingers as the alarm abated. With an absent sort of curiosity I realized the lightsaber I was gripping was Karon’s. Huh. I bet it’s not red.

“Talk about blasted timing,” Roland muttered, his gaze roving over the consoles. From my vantage
point, I could spot several camera outputs displayed on the screens he was leaning over. More than half showed naught but static. “They certainly took long enough.”

Slurring shouts emanated through the doors, and I recognized the Selkath accent with something approaching dread. I’d run from them earlier, but hopefully without that concealing black cloak they wouldn’t recognize me. Neither Roland nor Carth had so far questioned exactly how I’d ventured inside, and I hoped it’d stay that way. A gut instinct warned me that the Selkath were notoriously picky over their tyrannical laws; they wouldn’t hesitate to slam me for resisting arrest at the least.

“This is the Ahto City Civil Authority!” a thick voice yelled from outside the room. “Open the door and throw down your weapons immediately!”

“Oh, this is going to be fun,” Carth muttered, as I tucked my lightsaber away hurriedly. I heard Roland growl even as the durasteel doors opened to admit a dozen heavily armoured Selkath guards. Oh, frelling fantastic, I thought sourly as the soldiers swarmed into the room and surrounded us. I need a sodding drink.

xXx

The chrome bench was cold underneath me as I stared vacantly into a glass of amber liquid. This room was the closest thing the Embassy had to a bar; a sparse cafeteria nestled within the barracks, ostensibly for the Republic soldiers. Considering the opulence of this place, I doubted if alcohol was meant to be served on the premises, but the shifty-eyed soldier who’d introduced himself as Laconi seemed more than happy to supply me with stronger substances than mere ale.

As the Embassy was currently locked-down by the Selkath while they interrogated Roland Wann and perused what camera feeds weren’t destroyed, I had little better place to reside.

I have to get out of here. My body was fiercely demanding rest, even as impatience warred within. Carth had found out earlier just where Bastila had disappeared to – a secret mission to the bottom of the dammed ocean, to rescue a bunch of scientists. He’d known little else, other than that Juhani and Canderous had both accompanied her. I was relieved that neither had been caught in the bloodbath here, though I felt surprise at hearing Canderous had voluntarily followed Bastila.

The distance between Bastila and I couldn’t explain the obscurity of the bond. I could swear that she was critically injured or ill, and probably unconscious. I hesitated to mention any of this to Carth, however. Last time I’d talked of our bond, he’d been derisively disbelieving. I’d no idea what Bastila had said of our attachment during my absence, and frankly, I didn’t want to push my luck as far as Carth was concerned.

I need to find Bastila. Sun and stars, how long are the Selkath gonna keep us here? It’d been hours since they’d swarmed into Roland’s command room, quickly taking control over the whole Embassy. The red-faced Commander had been pretty unhappy about that, even more so when he’d heard the explosion had been a permacrete detonator that had torn through most of the entrance foyer to grant the Selkath access. The Selkath themselves had assumed command and swiftly blockaded the facility, and while I’d disliked obeying the pedantic bastards, I couldn’t stem the amusement that swelled over surveying the blustering Commander’s indignation.

But my thoughts turned once more, inevitably, to my bond sister. The idea of hunting down a submersible and traipsing after her had already occurred to me, although slipping out from underneath the Selkath’s lockdown wouldn’t be easy. I could always ask HK. With a jolt, I realized I had no idea where that bloodthirsty droid had disappeared to. Kath crap, I thought with alarm. If he decides to barge in here, the Selkath will likely fire on him. HK had occasionally shown subtlety, but it almost seemed to go against his programming.
“Jen,” a low voice sparked through my ruminations. I glanced up to see Carth hovering nearby – he’d been called away a few hours ago by Roland Wann. Black shadows smudged the skin under his eyes, and he was still wearing ripped, bloodied clothes. *He looks like how I feel.* His eyes flicked disparagingly over the stale beer cradled in my palms. I felt an easing of my shoulders, and realized that - despite his completely justified anger at me - his presence was a welcome one.

“They finally let you out?” I smirked as he took a step closer. He rolled his eyes at me, and eased himself onto the long bench.

“Anyone would think that we attacked the Sith, rather than the other way around,” he muttered. His gaze roved over the soldier-cum-bartender, and an annoyed scowl appeared on his lined face. I wondered absently what he had against Laconi. The twitchy soldier seemed relatively harmless to me.

“The Selkath are pretty pedantic over their non-violence laws,” I commented, and then immediately wished I hadn’t as Carth turned to glare fiercely at me.

“Yes,” he ground out. “So we found out, after you crashed the ship and the Sith tried to tow us.” Angry disappointment coloured his tone, and I looked away, staring deeply into the ale I was nursing. I could feel something akin to shame burning in my cheeks.

“Look,” he sighed heavily next to me. “I-I can’t forget what you did. You’re a loose cannon, Jen, and you damn near killed us. But believe it or not, I didn’t come here to argue.”

I could feel my jaw clenching, as the uncomfortable sensation of bitter anger mingled with contrition. On one hand, he was right, but then again I *had* just saved his sorry arse. I wondered if he even remembered that.

“So why did you come here?” I bit out, after a heavy pause.

“We’ve heard from the others.”

My head snapped up, startled, as I turned to face him once more. “Where are they? What’s going on?”

“It’s a big mess,” Carth muttered, shaking his head. “The Selkath have intercepted a delayed distress signal from the Republic Station. From what Roland told me, the message was brief. A couple of scientists and three Republic soldiers are alive down there – no names, however. They’ve requested immediate aid and life-support. One of the survivors is gravely wounded.”

*Bastila.* A shred of hope wound through me. If the Selkath were on their way, then it wouldn’t be too long until I could force some answers out of her. She had to tell me the truth, now that I knew just what evil lurked so insidiously inside my own cursed head.

Carth slumped back, sighing. “Apparently, the Selkath have also picked up on some sort of explosion down there. I don’t know what’s been going on, but it’s turned into a colossal predicament for the Republic.”

I frowned at him in query. His mouth twisted as he went on to elaborate. “The Republic base is a secret kolto mining facility. I’m sure I don’t have to spell out the ramifications of that becoming public.”

I could feel my eyes widen. “A secret kolto base?” I gasped. “Kath crap, what did the Republic think they were doing? The Selkath won’t bloody stand for that, they’re so fiercely proud of their blasted neutrality and their independent kolto trade that they’ll stop selling *any* to the Republic after this!
Stars, what did the Republic think would happen?”

Carth was eyeing me over appraisingly. “You seem to have a good idea of Manaan politics,” he murmured in a low tone. I could feel my stomach lurch, and ran through quickly what I’d just said. I shrugged. It seemed like common sense to me. “Regardless,” he continued. “Some members of the Selkath government knew about this base previously. Stang, they more or less sanctioned it and kept it hidden from the rest of the bureaucrats.”

I snorted, shaking my head as I picked up the glass of beer and took a swig. Sounded like the Selkath government was about to embroil itself in an ugly civil war. With the Republic right in the middle of it.

“You know, in a way it’s a good thing for the Republic that the Sith attacked here when they did,” I murmured. A brief surge of outrage flitted over Carth’s face before shrewd introspection took its place.

“You mean, they might close down both Embassies rather than just ours?” he muttered.

I tilted my head. “Well, the Republic’s really screwed themselves over with this revelation, but coming at the same time as an unprovoked attack on them by the Sith Empire...” I trailed off, shrugging. “Probably will make them look a little better, yeah.”

We lapsed into silence after that, each lost in our own thoughts. I’d emptied my glass, and was considering another as thoughts of Bastila and Revan returned to plague me. I knew little of the former Sith Lord, other than that she had once been a Jedi, and had led the Republic to victory in the Mandalorian Wars before turning. But then again, I thought sourly, it’s not like I know a drukload about myself, either. My homeworld was Talshion, and I lived on the streets before becoming a Jedi. From the brief shards of memory that had drifted to my consciousness, I knew that I’d also been in the Mandalorian Wars. Did I follow Revan and Malak? I felt a slight tremor trickle through me. No. I’d never follow that Sith bitch. I wouldn’t. Bastila had once told me I’d fallen to the Dark Side. I’d been more inclined to believe it back then, when I hadn’t been sure which personality was really me. No. She was saying that to justify Revan’s thoughts in my head. I don’t know how I fit in – or how Jen Sahara does – but there’s no way I went Dark Side. No way at all.

Carth shifted uncomfortably near me, his eyes sliding to glance at me surreptitiously. I had the distinct feeling he wanted to broach a topic, but wasn’t sure how to start. I tried unsuccessfully to hold back a smirk.

“Yes?” I raised my eyebrows. “You want to say something?”

“I, uh, yeah,” he stuttered. “Uh, am I that obvious?”

I snorted. “If you were any more obvious, your eyes would fall out of your head.”

Said eyes narrowed. “I’m not that bad, am I? No, look, don’t answer that,” he sighed. “Seriously, I wanted to ask you something. You told me once that you didn’t really remember your past,” he said, his expression intent and fixed on me.

“Did I?” I looked away, shoulders tensing. I wanted to make peace with Carth, but this really wasn’t the sort of conversation I was interested in.

“Yes. On Tatooine, before Calo Nord attacked us.” His voice was short, almost suspicious, and the sheer familiarity of that ripped a laugh from me.

“Is that a crime these days?” I smirked, looking back at him.
He scowled. “No- look, I’m serious here!”

“Okay, okay, keep your flight jacket on.” I paused. “Where is that hideous thing anyway?”

“Mission took off with it- stop trying to change the subject!”

I fiddled with the flask of ale, eyes downcast as I struggled to contain myself. “Alright, what do you want to know?”

“What do you remember from Deralia?”

My eyes flew to his in surprise, but Carth’s countenance gave nothing away. I stayed silent for a full minute, searching his expression. His face was familiar, now, after weeks of working together. I usually found it easier to read him. Why does he want to know that? What interest would Jen’s past have for him?

“I’ve told you about my background before, Onasi. I grew up in a quiet settlement. When I was old enough, I studied at the Academia.” I shrugged uncomfortably. “Nothing exciting about my past, I’m afraid.” Well, nothing about Jen’s.

His gaze held mine. “Were you there when Darth Revan’s forces invaded a year ago?”

I froze; ice slid down my spine. “What?” I hissed. Deralia was attacked? By- by Revan? Disbelief curled through my veins, I didn’t want to think about the implications of that. I was shaking my head wildly without realizing. “No, no, I don’t want to talk about that.”

Something akin to sympathy lurked in his face; I’d be damned if I’d allow him to pity me.

“Jen-”

“No! I wasn’t there, alright?” I demanded angrily. Was I, though? Was Jen on Deralia when Revan invaded? Is that how she’s caught up in all of this? With mounting horror, flashes of recollection caught up to me. Back on Rii’shn– facing off the GenoHaradan– Revan had cursed the traitorous Sith and Deralian troops alike-

No! Bastila faced Revan, on Revan’s flagship! That wasn’t on Deralia!

“I’m sorry,” Carth said abruptly. “Look, I shouldn’t have brought it up. Let’s- let’s talk about something else, okay?”

My jaw was clenched tight, and I could feel my hands shaking. “This conversation is over,” I muttered, standing up. Did Jen meet Revan? Horror soared within; I didn’t want imagine an encounter between the timid introvert and the insane Sith bitch. Not when they were both resident inside my own head.

I didn’t register Carth calling after me as I walked blindly out of the makeshift bar; my thoughts were too chaotically wild to listen to him. As the days had passed, I learnt flashes more about Revan, and about Jen, but my own history remained a shrouded conundrum, taunting me with what I didn’t know.

If Revan and Jen met on Deralia, I thought numbly, then what about me? Dammit, why are they in my head? How do I fit into this? If the Republic didn’t get Bastila back here soon, I swore I’d go find her myself. This has dragged on long enough. I need to get my head straight, and she’s going to give me some long overdue answers.

This time, half-lies and part-truths wouldn’t appease me.
The console of the Republic’s pet harvesting machine blinked ominously at me. First time I’d seen function keys larger than my palm; but then again, it wasn’t exactly easy to input commands in these bulky envirosuits. I stabbed a finger at the keyboard, and watched the output manifest on the screen with grim satisfaction.

**Accessing Harvester Control:**

**Initiating Shutdown Sequence...**

The Cathar flanked me, keeping a nervy watch on our watery surroundings. I’d thought the surface of Manaan had been bad enough, what with the tight-arsed Selkath and their blathering neutrality, but this pissing about underwater.... Well, I’d been in worse spots. Still, Juhani wasn’t alone in her desire to get back to the surface. Being surrounded by toothy sharks that saw me as just another appetizer, with naught but one of those flimsy noise-makers to defend myself with, was more than enough to put me on edge.

**Pressure Control Layer Shutting Down...**

Yet the princess had somehow drawn the rabid fishies away. I personally scoffed at the marvels she and many of her stodgy counterparts attributed to the Force, but this time I was pleasantly surprised. I’d thought the chances of turning into shark chow before reaching this contraption had been altogether too damn high.

**Container Pods Shutting Down...**

Gratification brought a tight smile to my face. *We might actually get out of here in one piece.* A squawk in my ear cut cleanly through my satisfaction.

“*Kono, look!*” the female shark-geek gasped. “*The sharks – I think they’re attacking the base!*”

This infernal place had the same ghoulish feel to it as the Undercity back on Taris. Even relatively sane people started cracking and jumping at the slightest shadows. Yeah, I’d seen that impressive swarm of firaxans dart off in the direction of the Base. But why was the girlie scientist whimpering about it? *What are the sharks going to do? Bite through six inches of durasteel?*

**Shutdown Sequence Complete.**

“Got it!” I crowed. “Easier than the girls at Roxy’s cantina.”

The Cathar had taken a leaden step closer at my remark, envirosuit helmet pointing at the blinking console.

“*Canderous has turned the machine off,*” she murmured through the transmitter. “*Should it be rumbling so?*”

The contraption was echoing with a reverberating rattle. It hadn’t sounded steady since we’d neared it, but then again, neither had the Cathar. I was about to say so when the older academic whimpered over the communications.
“I- Sami, it’s ferracrystal, it’ll hold. It has to!”

I could feel myself scowling; those two had spent far too long staring at fish and plants if they truly believed a bunch of firaxan could harm them from within the Base. The Cathar pulled back as the harvesting machine loosed another resonating discharge. It sounded vaguely similar to the backfire of a basilisk.

“It’s just powering down,” I muttered, frowning at the console. “Taking awhile though.”

A warning flashed on the screen, and shock punched hard in my gut as I read it.

#ERROR: Container Pod #3 Unstable.
#CRITICAL FAULT: Fuel Tank Pressure Leak.

“No, it- damn, it’s unstable! Get out of here!” I growled, muscles clenching as I lurched around violently. *Tits on a bantha! We need to haul ass back inside, now!*

“Canderous?” Kono queried. “What’s going on out there?”

I took a sluggish step towards the lights of the Base, twisting slightly to keep one eye on the Cathar. But she- what does she think she’s doing?

“Cathar, you’re going the wrong way! It’s going to blow!”

Another rumble sounded ominously nearby. Maybe I was being paranoid – who knew how likely it was for Republic equipment to spontaneously explode – *but there ain’t no way I’m sticking around to find out.* I’d seen too many lightweight Republic ships shatter from the slightest hit to trust their machinery.

“I must find the Star Map, Mandalorian!” Juhani’s hiss echoed into my ear. “I will not fail!” She’d taken another step away, further into the darkness past the inoperative harvester.

*Mand’alor’s balls, what is she trying to prove? Now is not the time! I normally had no patience for this sort of stupidity, but the Cathar had been skittish since we’d left the surface. Oh, sod it all. I snarled, staggering determinedly back past the harvesting machine to follow her, even as I cursed myself for succumbing to this brainless sort of loyalty.*

Juhani was still moving deeper into the shadows beyond.

The irregular roll of the machine was noticeably louder now, and my eyes slid to the console as I floundered past. The grim message spurred me on further; I could barely see the shape of the Cathar as the shadows ahead enveloped her whole.

#ALARM: Rupture In Containment Field
#ALARM: Evacuate Area Immediately!

Why am I following her? It was the Jedi Princess I felt a debt towards; yet I respected Juhani’s warrior spirit. And this Star Map business had been part of the mission. The cryptic Zabrak had refused to pay me until I’d vowed to follow their lead. I wasn’t going to renege on that again, not after Bastila had saved my hide the way she did

Still, if they expected me to walk blindly into another hairy situation after this, then they needed their heads checked.

“Kono, the window’s flexing – there’s hundred of those sharks out there! We need to get out of this
The female’s shrieks pierced into my ear; I felt a sharp desire to shut the damn comm. off.

Blurry outlines materialized in the dark ahead, indicating some sort of structure nearby. The hazy outline of the Cathar merged into black as a blaring rumble resounded behind me. I yanked my feet onwards, feeling vibrations through the ground with every step. It's about to blow! Ordo, get a move on! Ahead loomed an uneven wall that might just be the cover I needed. It wasn’t far, but I could feel my mouth opening in a snarl as I pushed my legs even harder.

My hand reached out to grab the side of the broken wall as the ground heaved under my feet. Just as I thought I had my balance, a crushing force of water slammed me off the ground, ripping my grip from the wall and sailing me headfirst into the black unknown.

The machine's finally had it, I realized as a further percussion stunned against my senses, my body sweeping upward with the fierce current. My vision blurred as the water turned murky with debris, but I saw enough. Another blasted wall appeared directly in my path, and there wasn't a kripping thing I could do to evade it. My hands raised to brace against the oncoming blow.

I smashed against it, hard against my arms which collapsed under the pressure. I grunted as the air left my lungs, pushed prone against the structure as the water buffeted against me and the ringing in my ears grew.

I stayed prone for a few seconds, stunned, vaguely aware that someone was speaking to me. I slipped down, senses dazed, and my legs buckled against me as I hit the ocean floor.

“Canderous, are you okay?”

I was flat on my back; eyes blinking as coherent thought slowly emerged. Eddies of blackish dirt spun in the dark water above, and a throbbing ache resounded through leaden muscles. With a grunt, I positioned a weak arm underneath me, propping myself up to take a look around. Let there be no kripping leaks in this suit, or I’m fried. My limb threatened to collapse from the weight, and an echoing pressure pulsed from my head.

I’d landed in the ruins the humans had talked about earlier. Broken, eroded slabs of ferracrete or similar rose into the ocean, moss and lichen literally smothering them. Whatever had been built here was ancient. I had no idea where the Cathar was hiding, though.

“Yeah, I'll do,” I muttered back, scrabbling to my feet inelegantly. I stumbled, falling against one of the ruined walls. The envirosuit seemed fine so far – no ruptures or tears – and oxygen was still flowing normally through it. What luck. Let's hope it holds.

Just when I thought the danger was gone, something flickered in my periphery, and I twisted sharply to catch the movement. A firaxan shark- no, loads of them, headed towards me, and I’d lost that toy sonic gun in the explosion.

“Force, they are headed directly for you! Do not move!” Juhani cried.

I found that a bit rich coming from her, but held my tongue, standing frozen against a decaying wall. Dozens of sharks milled above me, and one came within touching distance, but-

“They’re not attacking,” I muttered, frowning. Dumb luck seems to be with me today. The firaxan’s head twitched towards me, before flicking away to join the swarm above. “Did Bastila do something to them?”

I idly watched a shoal of smaller fish dart between cracks in the walls. One was swallowed whole by a firaxan as it swam past into the murky shadows beyond. I wasn’t going a move a wretched muscle
until those sharks had all gone; I was completely defenceless.

“I do not know,” Juhani’s reply came at last. “I felt a powerful force before, but it was not from Bastila. The firaxans had damaged the harvesting machine earlier, if you recall; Sami believed that may have set off their territorial instincts. Perhaps, now that it’s been destroyed, they—”

“I dunno,” I grunted. I had a hard time thinking of those rabid sharks with that level of intelligence. I would’ve thought an explosion would just piss them off all the more. “Kono? You guys shark bait or what?”

There was no immediate reply. I felt a twinge of concern; if the scientists had run from the command room, they’d have left Bastila pretty much defenceless. But there ain’t no way those fishies could damage that Base. A harvesting machine, maybe, but a solid, underground Base? Even I couldn’t believe the Republic to engineer construction weak enough to be damaged by marine life, no matter how I might enjoy belittling their work.

“These must be the ruins,” Juhani murmured, and I saw her step into view from behind a jagged outcrop. A few brightly coloured fish darted past her, further into the deep. “And it appears the firaxans are leaving.”

I turned around, facing back towards where I thought the harvesting machine would lie. I had no idea in reality; and the ocean was turbid from the explosion. Even the lights from the Base wouldn’t show through this cloud of dirt. “Let’s just find this Star Map of yours and get back,” I grunted, hoping the Cathar knew the way. “I wanna know why that lot ain’t answering.”

“Yes,” Juhani agreed. “I must admit, I am worried for Bastila’s safety. What I felt earlier was that same foreign entity we encountered when approaching the station. But stronger.” She took a step further into the ruins, and I followed cautiously, keeping an eye out for any movement. Even here behind the irregular structures, eddies of dirt and soot were muddying the water.

A massive wall emerged out of the depths as we tramped closer, this structure dwarfing the ragged walls I’d landed next to. It raised high into the ocean, ten metres or so, and it struck me as particularly odd that the Republic had not bothered to investigate this area further, considering the academic weaklings their empire attracted. A dark hole caught my eye, evidence of an entrance through the monumental enclosure.

“This is it,” the Cathar breathed as I stepped through the hole after her. A disjointed contraption, about half my height with four solid spikes protruding outwards, lay on the ground just past Juhani. “The Star Map. We found it.”

It looked much the same as the one on Tatooine, I thought grimly as Juhani knelt on the ocean floor. She leaned forward, activating the mechanism in way I didn’t see, and the Star Map unfolded. A large globe of blue-white illuminated the area, looking distinctly out of place in this bleak environment.

“This thing is so close to the Base, and no one's found it before?” I asked in disbelief, as the Cathar started punching commands into the datapad hooked onto her suit. “Even with the fishies around, I'd have thought some idiot would go looking to make himself a hero.”

The Cathar took some time to answer, engrossed in creating a data connection with the Map. I frowned as I gazed over the navigational markers. There were more black spots in this map than the one on Tatooine. It had the same mysterious lines cut through the galaxy, although in different places. Somehow, the data of the maps added together must create some endpoint destination. Why the creators couldn't just leave a set of coordinates, I didn't know.
“Hrakert Station has been in this area for little more than a year. Karon told me the Republic deliberately chose a place to mine far away from the Selkath underwater bases.” Juhani stood, deactivating the Star Map as she did so. “And this vent has only been found very recently, so I do not think they have known about the ruins for long. But you are correct; the map had been discovered before.”

I squinted through the helmet as the light of the Star Map faded, morphing back into dark murkiness. The Jedi seemed to get their kicks from being mysterious; Juhani, for all her warrior spirit, was no different. I wasn’t a complete imbecile, I’d gathered whatever these Star Maps led to was critical to the war, otherwise the Jedi would hardly let their precious Bastila out alone. “Right,” I drawled. “I take it the Sith have been here, huh?”

Juhani stepped towards me, and I turned to follow. Fortunately, she seemed to know where she was going.

“Let us discuss this later, Canderous, when our crew is back together.”

I’ve heard that before. I shrugged inside the bulky envirosuit. “I’m getting paid to fight, Cathar, and to save your sorry hide. All I need to know is anything that might stop me from doing so.”

“Canderous, Juhani!” Kono’s voice cut past any response Juhani may have given me.


“Come back, quick!” Kono gasped, and I registered just how strained and panicked his voice was. “Bastila’s stopped breathing!”

xXx

The Cathar was one step ahead of me as we rushed into the command room. The two scientists were cloistered near the far end, next to the bench Bastila had been lying on. As we ran towards them, my eyes flicked over a pile of hypodermic needles resting on the table nearby.

“You’re back!” Sami cried in relief, straightening from the position she was crouched in. “I’ve got her breathing again – her heart stopped earlier – I don’t know what happened!”

Juhani was already kneeling next to Bastila, her hands resting gently on the prone Jedi’s chest. A breathing mask was strapped tightly around Bastila’s face, forcing oxygen into her lungs.

I glanced up towards the far window – it looked completely intact, and I had no idea what the scientists had been panicking about earlier.

I folded my arms, feeling my mouth twist with disgust as I looked the two humans over. “What happened to the princess then?”

“I don’t know!” the dark-skinned female gasped. “The sharks started attacking the window – I thought we were all going to die! Then- then they all disappeared.”

“I think when the harvesting machine exploded,” Kono cut in. His gaze was still resting worriedly on Bastila as the Cathar closed her eyes and breathed in deeply. “Maybe that distracted them. Then we saw Bastila was out cold. If we hadn’t had the emergency kits here, she’d be dead by now.”

Sami’s hands were shaking as she dropped another needle onto the pile. “How did the machine explode? I think maybe that’s what dispersed the firaxans; it’d fit with their behaviour. If they
considered our mining an infringement on their territory, then perhaps—"

“I don’t give a damn about the fiarahans!” I snarled, as my impatience with their pointless waffling reached breaking point. I’d seen those hungry fiarahans out there, and I wasn’t about to credit them with intelligence. The girl’s eyes widened at my outburst, and she actually took a stumbling step backwards. “I want to know what’s wrong with Bastila!”

Sami stared at me in mute surprise, and it was the Cathar who answered. Her palms were still laid upon Bastila, and her anguished look of concern redoubled my worry. “I can barely feel her,” she whispered. “Her life force is so weak, it is almost extinguished.”

I felt my scowl deepen. “But she’ll be alright then? Her heart’s beating, she’s getting oxygen - all she needs is rest?” My gaze had fixed back on the Jedi Princess, watching her chest as it slowly rose and fell.

Juhani looked away, shaking her head slowly. “It is not mere exhaustion, Canderous. All living beings encompass the Force; it is part of them, as they are part of it. Bastila... she is so close to dying, that she does not even feel alive, let alone human. This sort of psychic damage... I am no healer, but it is possible she may not recover.”

I could feel the muscles in my face tighten. I’d vowed to get Bastila to the surface, but that would hardly help her if she died in the process. My eyes slid accusingly to the two humans. “What happened to her?”

Horror was etched on Kono’s face; Sami merely looked indignant. “I told you, we didn’t see! We were too busy—”

“Panicking because you thought a bunch of fish could get in here. Yeah. Right.”

“Canderous, she appears stable.” Juhani’s low voice cut through the room. “As long as she doesn’t relapse, I believe she will improve. Blaming the others will not help her.”

There were far too many conditions in that sentence, but the only way to increase her odds was to acquire medical care. The Cathar was right. Denouncing the scientists wouldn’t make the Jedi suddenly wake.

I felt the air in my lungs expel in a dissatisfied grunt. “You said yourself you’re no healer, Cathar. Whether you reckon she’ll recover ain’t worth a damn to me. We need to get her topside, get some real help. Kono, you sent that message yet?”

The scientist nodded at me wearily, a deep frown lining his face. “Yes. I’ve broadcast it on all available frequencies, though to be perfectly honest I’m unsure if the signal is strong enough to reach the surface. I will keep trying.”

“There’s not much else we can do, now,” Sami commented, gazing at me and the Cathar in turn. “We have enough food to last for months. The air... well, as long as someone surface-side gets Kono’s message, then we’ll be fine.”

I felt my lips twist in disgust. “I’m not inclined to bet my life on those sorts of odds. You ain’t got no way of knowing the distress signal’s strong enough, and we may just suffocate in the mean time.”

“We’ve been doing all we can,” Kono blustered heatedly. “By all means, if you have any suggestions, then please air them!”

“Where’s the communications array in this blasted hole?” I shot back. “Seems to me we should focus
on getting that up and running. Make sure that someone hears our call.”

“The room’s sealed shut. You would need high grade explosives – permacrete or something similar – to open the blast doors.” Sami answered, looking intently at me.

I grunted. “Worth a shot. I’m gonna go see what I can do.” My eyes slid to the unmoving Jedi, and I felt determination twist in my gut. No way was I gonna sit about yapping, relying on shaky hope to get us out of here.

“We have weeks of air left,” the dark-skinned human cautioned. “You don’t have to go haring off again, Canderous. Frankly, you look like death.”

My eyes shot to the woman in quick anger, but the only emotion she showed was concern. With that, I was abruptly conscious of the aching lassitude that had sunk deep into my limbs. I knew I’d be feeling some hefty whiplash in a few hours when the adrenalin wore off. The Cathar was looking at me also, her face drawn and pale. I wondered briefly when we’d last slept.

“Rest and food is a good idea,” Kono added quietly. “There may still be Selkath around. We haven’t seen any on the cameras for awhile, but it doesn’t hurt to play it safe.”

I nodded abruptly. If there were still loopy fishmen around, then I’d much prefer to kill them on a full stomach.

“Alright. What you got to eat around here then?”

xXx

Quiet voices roused me from a deep slumber; I yawned, stretching uncomfortably tight limbs on the hard bench, as the conversation drifted to my ears. A band of pressure throbbed around my chest, warning against moving too quickly.

“Are you saying you think one of the firaxan’s could wield the Force?” Sami’s voice, quiet, but sharply incredulous.

“All I know is that a large entity attacked Bastila with the Force – and quite probably caused her current condition. I felt it. It had some sort of control, or authority, over the firaxan swarm,” Juhani’s soft voice replied.

I couldn’t stop the snort of derision that ripped from my lungs as I slowly sat, leaning back against the wall. The Cathar’s startled gaze landed on me in surprise. “And it didn’t occur to you that it might have been a Dark Jedi?” I interrupted, sarcasm audibly dripping from my voice. “You’d rather attribute Force powers to a fish?”

Juhani’s patience was admirable; she didn’t appear remotely offended. “It was a completely foreign power, Canderous. Primitive, and yet immensely powerful. It was not wielding the Force the way I, or any Jedi or Sith, know how to. Combine that with the presence of a shark vastly larger than any we have encountered before, and I believe it to be the only logical explanation.”

I laughed, shaking my head in disbelief. My neck felt irritantly weak, and I could feel muscles creaking in painful objection. “Initiate a few sharks into the Order, and you’ll have the upper hand over the Sith in no time,” I drawled derisively.
A flash of impatience sparked through Juhani’s expression at last, but it was the frowning human who replied. “Actually, we have no idea why the Selkath researchers stationed here went insane. They seemed to lose all grasp of reality, and let’s not forget that Selkath have evolved from aquatic vertebrates…”

“You believe this power may have had an affect on them as well as the firaxans?” Juhani replied quietly, a note of curiosity sparking in her voice.

Sami shrugged. “We haven’t come up with any plausible explanation. And....” the scientist trailed off, deep furrows lining her forehead. “I believe the Selkath’s god is a large shark of some type. I wonder....”

I stopped for a moment, mulling the facts over in my head. A big shark had been spotted, supposedly using the Force. The other sharks had gone crazy. The Selkath are related to the sharks. The Selkath had all gone crazy.

*Well, this all leads to one irrefutable conclusion.*

“You’re both nuts,” I said bluntly, rolling my eyes. I could believe this tripe from the scientist, but Juhani’s input convinced me: the Jedi were a pack of rambling fools, whose common sense had long melted into space dust. Impatient, I glanced around the room, noting Kono’s sleeping figure on a bench near Bastila. “Enough of this useless conversation. How long have I been out? How’s Bastila?”

Sami scowled darkly at me, and even the Cathar was frowning in irritation. I raised my eyebrows sardonically at the both of them, until Juhani finally sighed in capitulation. “About eight hours. I have just woken myself. Bastila came to a few hours ago, and Sami tended to her.”

“She was unintelligible,” Sami replied curtly. “I don't think she roused as much as her vocal chords spasmed. But at least-”

A piercing beep from a cluster of consoles cut through her spiel, and Sami quickly jumped to her feet.

“What is it?” Juhani asked in alarm as the woman strode towards the machines.

“I don’t believe it,” Sami muttered, tapping a few keys quickly. “Juhani, wake Kono!”

“What?” I ground out.

Sami turned back to face us, and her look of sheer amazement told me the news was good. “There’s a ship approaching.” A disbelieving grin lit the young woman’s face. “We’re saved!”

xXx

The trip back topside was annoyingly long, no matter how gratifying it was to be leaving that cursed Base. Our rescuers were, in fact, a squad of Selkath arriving in a ship much larger than the puny Republic submersibles, and their presence at Hrakert Station had been enough to send the older scientist into fits of fear.

Kono’s distress signal had worked, despite my own misgivings, but it had been the Selkath who had
intercepted the message. While a small group of Republic soldiers had also made the trip down, it was obvious who was in charge. The uniformed fish had been interrogating the two scientists since we departed, and each probing question had left the pair of them looking more and more sickeningly uncomfortable.

I couldn’t help a snort of amused derision; the Republic had made this mess with their secret base, and now it was time to pay the price.

Even the Cathar had gone in for her fair share of questioning, but they’d mostly left me alone after a few non committal grunts and vacant stares in their direction. Sometimes it paid to act as stupid as most people assumed mercenaries were.

Now that Bastila was hooked into a partial bacta tank and declared medically stable, if not yet conscious, my own worry had ceased. The princess would recover; it was past time for me to make my own plans. As much as I owed Bastila, I didn’t relish the idea of following her any longer, nor did I particularly believe my skills would be desired.

I disliked being idle, and sitting for hours accompanied by suspicious Selkath and uptight Republic grunts wasn’t doing much for my temper. Or my thoughts, which, now that I was unoccupied, were trailing back to that explosive revelation of hours ago.

Revan. Or, more accurately, Jen Sahara. She wasn’t who she’d once been, the renegade Jedi who’d triumphed over the best of my kind. How much of Revan was left? I’d wager my last credits she didn’t know her true identity, but her craziness and battle-skill convinced me that some part remained.

If she hadn’t scuttled our ship and done a runner, I would’ve followed her. I was going to anyway, before I even knew who she was. Trouble sticks to her like flies on a bantha’s arse, and my life has been just a bit too dull lately. The last few years had gone against the grain, scraping around for mercenary work from the likes of Davik Kang, a small-time Exchange thug with delusions of political importance.

Even without our interference, his ingratiating manner and tendency to renege on trade agreements meant his time had been coming to a close, and I’d jumped at the chance to leave Taris. Jen Sahara had piqued my curiosity. Despite being drawn into a secret Jedi mission – or maybe because of it – I’d felt the complacency and idle restlessness that had dogged me for the past year start to dissipate. I’d thought that maybe, I might finally find something really worth fighting for again.

Waste of time thinking about this, Ordo. The crazy chit’s gone, and you’d better start worrying about your own future. All I was left with was a faint admiration for the Revan of old, and a desire to pay her back for blowing up the Ebon Hawk while I still on board.

I felt the transport ship start to decelerate, just as a hissing voice informed us of our impending arrival. We were surfacing in the Ahto City harbour, where we would be transferred into a submersible headed directly to the Republic Embassy. I wondered idly if the Selkath were planning to question us further, and just how difficult it would be to slip away, and off this planet. Mercenary work wasn’t exactly flourishing on Manaan.

Minutes later, and the ship was docked. Medical personnel had already boarded and began clustering around Bastila. I shot the Cathar a quick look; she jerked her head towards them, indicating she would try to stay with the Jedi.

I wasn’t needed anymore, and maybe it was time to leave. Take the cue from the Twi’lek brat, and disappear. This party’s getting old at any rate. But first, I had to escape from this political nightmare.
It wasn’t possible in the intervening minutes. I, along with the two scientists, were efficiently herded towards a small submersible. The Republic soldiers had already dispersed; instead, four Selkath guards were escorting us back to the Embassy.

*The Republic’s really screwed themselves here,* I thought with grim amusement. *Since when do armoured Selkath “escort” Republic researchers?* All things considered, maybe it wasn’t that surprising. I was still impressed that the Republic actually had the balls to mine kolto right under the Selkaths’ nose.

It didn’t take long to reach the Embassy, and I was quick to unbuckle myself and exit into the docking station of the building. The first man I recognized was the aging Republic Commander; he looked taken aback as I stepped away from the transport, throwing a faint smirk his way and vaguely scanning the room. *Damn, but it feels good to be topside again.* My experience over the last day left me less than keen to travel underwater anytime soon. And to think I’d just been bagging Juhani for such reluctance.

Uniformed Selkath lined the docking room, making clear their hefty military presence wasn’t to be ignored. And the expression on Wann’s face couldn’t be called anything other than pissed.

I strode purposefully towards the exit, hoping cocky confidence would see me out but utterly unsurprised when a Selkath guard stopped me, informing me in broken Basic that the Embassy was blockaded until further notice. I nodded impatiently and moved away. I disliked being confined to the Embassy, but I wasn’t about to defy the Selkath – not since they’d already taken my blaster away.

Against an army of Selkath, there wasn’t much I could do but wait it out. They weren’t, however, likely to hold a paid mercenary here for long. *Right, Ordo, if now ain’t the time for a drink, then I dunno when is.* The Embassy’s mess hall – which had better damn well serve drinks – was back through the main antechamber. A huddle of Republic soldiers cloistered near the room’s centre, looking tired, outnumbered, and defeated. I wondered briefly how long the Selkath had been assuming control. *I’d wager two minutes after finding out about the kolto base.*

My gaze sharpened as I recognized Onasi, gingerly rubbing his shoulder. I glanced back at the other Republic grunts, and suddenly various injuries came to light; bruises, bandages, one man could barely stand up straight – *did they actually fight the kriffing Selkath?* That would’ve been suicide, in Ahto City.

I frowned, and walked closer. “Onasi,” I nodded at him. “Looks like you’ve had a bit of fun.”

The other man scowled, and somehow I doubted we’d ever see to eye to eye. His idea of fun probably consisted of reading the military archives while sipping barli tea.

“Ordo,” he muttered. “I see you didn’t drown. Where’s Bastila and Juhani?”

“My gaze travelled over him; the Republic pilot stood awkwardly, as if in pain, and patches of dried blood discoloured his tattered clothes. But what caught my attention were the black lines tracing up his neck. I’d seen those before.

“What the kriff happened here, Onasi?” I frowned at him as he closed his eyes briefly.

“With the medics, still on their way here. Bastila’s not fairing so well, but they say she’s stable.” My gaze travelled over him; the Republic pilot stood awkwardly, as if in pain, and patches of dried blood discoloured his tattered clothes. But what caught my attention were the black lines tracing up his neck. I’d seen those before.

“What the kriff happened here, Onasi?” I frowned at him as he closed his eyes briefly.

“Dark Jedi,” he replied in a dark voice. “Ten of them infiltrated this place, looking for Bastila.”

My brows shot up in surprise. “I guess old Malak wants her pretty bad then, huh? Ten of them...” I
whistled. “You’re lucky to be standing. That’s a fair army, when it comes to Force users.” I’d seen Jedi, light and dark, fight together before. Ten of them was a lot.

“I know.” His voice was low, his expression tight. “If Jen hadn’t...” he cut himself off, shaking his head in irritation.

“Jen?” I snapped as my attention was sharply wrested back. “She’s here?”

Carth sighed, an exasperated blast of air expelling from his lungs. “Last I saw, she was traipsing back to the bar to get drunk. Why don’t you join her?” he muttered, and stalked off towards Wann.

Revan’s back. I could feel the corners of my mouth turn up in expectation. Suddenly, I wasn’t quite so sure about leaving. Not until after I’d spoken with her, at any rate.

xXx

Surrounded by empty glasses, I found her face planted onto a table. A messy tumble of dark curls proclaimed her identity, and as I strode closer she stirred, slowly raising her head to focus bleary eyes on me.

She squinted, and a vague grin of recognition grew on her face.

“Hey!” she called in greeting, stumbling to her feet. One hand shot out to lean on the cracked plasteel table, which wobbled alarmingly. I could feel myself smirking. *Damn, but she’s completely rat-faced.* “Candy! You’re back!” she gushed, in a semi-slurred voice.

I snorted in amusement. *It’s good to see her, but there’s no way she doesn’t deserve what’s coming to her.* I was unable to quell a wry half-grin as I looked her straight in the eyes. “This is for blowing up the Ebon Hawk while I was still on it,” I said softly. She frowned in drunken confusion, her gaze focused so intently on my face that she completely failed to spot my fist until it crashed into her face.

Revan gave a little scream as she crumpled to the floor. I loosed a bark of laughter, and turned on my heel with one parting shot:

“And don’t call me Candy.”

xXx
This was, perhaps, the ultimate failure of my career. The Republic Embassy was on the cusp of being recalled entirely from Manaan, and any sentient on the street knew what that meant. No more kolto.

I could feel the disgust frowning its way onto my face. Those blasted Selkath and their alien ideas of peace! There could be no peace with those Sith bastards lurking around in the galaxy, but the Selkath turned a blind eye to full-scale murder and destruction when it wasn’t in their backyard. Frankly, I was all for leaving the Selkath to themselves, if it wasn’t for their thrice-damned kolto. Nowhere else in galaxy was there such a large, readily accessible source.

My career was done for if we were shut down. Oh, I’d be given my due; a redundancy package and a run-down condo on the lower terraces of Galactic City. The Republic thanks you for your many years of service, and wishes you a peaceful retirement. But their eyes would say different, the bureaucrats who would damn me to a life of nothingness. It’s your fault, Wann, yours alone for losing us the kolto. For letting the Selkath find out about our secret Base, and letting the Sith invade the Embassy.

If it hadn’t been for those frelling Jedi--!

Real fear had wormed itself deep into my gut during the Sith invasion, and even now – even now, when the enemy was vanquished – I could still feel it, sitting there like a black miasma of vertigo whenever I closed my eyes. A small, cowardly part of me actually desired the quiet, uneventful redundancy.

I’d hated the Sith as much as any Republic man did, but I’d never had to face them. I hadn’t wanted to – I knew my own strengths, and they weren’t in battle. Manaan was a neutral, peaceful station, and it suited me.

But the Jedi were still here; that strange, quiet cat-girl, the obnoxious human who had come in with Carth, Karon’s little Twi’lek apprentice, and the stuck-up Bastila Shan - comatose in one of our bacta tanks. I was sad Karon had died, but I’d lost dozens of men in the assault – and they would all still be alive if the Jedi hadn’t come here, flaunting their powers in front of the Sith. I had requested the aid of one master – one! – to investigate Hrakert Station, and ended up with a bleeding squad of apprentices. No wonder the Dark Jedi attacked, they probably couldn’t resist the temptation.

And they are still here. What if the Sith strike again? The Selkath can’t stop them; they’ll just arrest any survivors and blame us once again for provoking an attack!

A beep from my private console dispersed my unwelcome thoughts and, with a grunt, I leaned forward to accept the incoming message. I was in my private quarters; whoever would be contacting me here was bound to be important.
A hologram of General Adashan materialized; I had briefed him mere hours ago, and was surprised to hear from him yet again.

“Commander,” he greeted in slurring Basic. A Mon Calamari, and as straight and upright as the rest of his species.

“Sir,” I replied, bowing deferentially. It paid to show respect to one’s betters, no matter whether they deserved it. “Has the lockdown been lifted?”

He shook his head solemnly. “No, the Selkath still refuse to allow any Republic ships to land or leave Manaan airspace. I am afraid you are on your own until the Selkath resolve this in their courts.”

Great, we’ll end up stuck with naught but a useless Selkath arbiter to argue the case for the Republic. Of course, agreements were being made behind the scenes, I had no doubt about that. External communications were probably buzzing with concessions and bribes and promises between the Selkath government and Senate officials. Meanwhile, I was quarantined in the Base, while my scientists had been taken into custody. The Embassy was still locked down – I’d been formally requested to stay put.

I grimaced. “What can I do for you, General?”

The black eyes of the Mon Calamari stared at me unblinkingly. “There is more than just our kolto supply at risk here, Commander. I need you to – promptly - escort the crew of the Ebon Hawk off Manaan.”

I stared as surprise assailed me. “I beg your pardon?” I spluttered, unable to contain my surprise. “You want me to what?”

“Get them off this planet, Commander, before they all get embroiled in this messy court case. This could drag on for months, and they are on a critical mission for the good of the Republic. While stationed here, Jedi Bastila Shan is too easy – and too tempting - a target.”

I could feel the burn of righteous outrage in my chest. Those Jedi had fuelled the situation here, and now they would get a free ride out? “General, I must protest! The Selkath have forbidden any Republic military or civilians to leave this planet, and their ship is impounded! If I aid them in leaving, it will only make our situation in the courts worse!”

Not to mention that if I have to go through this damn farce of a quarantine, then so should they!

Adashan’s gaze seemed to bore into me. “Technically, Commander, they are employees of the Jedi Order at this time – even Captain Onasi. The Selkath have not yet placed an embargo on Jedi leaving, and it would be wise for them to disappear while they still can. The Sith Embassy is likely to be shut down and their share of the kolto supply cut off. They will sacrifice nothing should they attack again. We cannot lose Jedi Shan, Commander!”

Despite my mounting irritation, I could grudgingly see that the General made sense. After all, hadn’t I just been musing that it would be better for all concerned if those damned Jedi were off Manaan? But I highly doubted this missive originated from the Republic. Yes, the Jedi Order was useful, and their influence and power couldn’t be ignored. But I hated when they played the politics game within the ranks of the Fleet. Sometimes, I had the distinct feeling they merely saw us as pieces on a dejarik board.

“Whose orders are these, General?” I questioned, still irritated.

The Mon Calamari stared at me, his bulbous eyes bright and piercing. “Yours, Commander. Get to it
at once.” He nodded sharply in farewell, and his visage dissipated from the screen. I released the scowl I’d been holding back, and leaned forward to flick on the internal comm.

“Corporal, get Onasi and any of those Jedi in here on the double. And that damn mercenary!”

With that barked order, I turned to my information console and started to see what I could do about the currently impounded *Ebon Hawk*.

xXx

---

**Juhani**

“Psychic exhaustion,” the Republic medic murmured next to me. “She is already healing, although I imagine she will be out of action for several weeks. I’ve seen the effects of Force attacks like this before, but never so severe.”

I nodded solemnly, staring at the prone Jedi as she floated in the bacta tank. The medic was a greying Bothan; competent, and quietly efficient. He cleared his throat to speak again, and this time I turned to look at him.

“We will move her out of the tank in an hour,” he continued in an apologetic tone. “Unfortunately we have other critical patients, and Jedi Shan is no longer in grave danger.”

“But surely the bacta tank will aid her recovery?” I replied, concerned at such an expeditious medical plan.

The man shrugged dismissively. “It is a device for force-feeding nutrients into the body, and accelerating the healing of physical injuries. The only help it will give her is increased rest, and she can do that in a bed, albeit slower.”

The door behind the medic swished open, and I swallowed back my reply as I recognized the visitor.

“Carth,” I said warmly, stepping forward to meet him. He looked awful; I could make no bones about that. Even for a human he looked sickly and exhausted, deep hollows under his eyes, and dirt and blood etched into his face. A faded webbing of black lines crept up his neck, and I knew he’d faced trials as harsh as ours had been.

“Juhani,” he replied in welcome, his eyes flicking over to rest on the bacta tank. “I came as soon as I heard you were here. How is she?”

“Jedi Shan is recovering well,” the medic answered for me. “No permanent mental trauma, but don’t expect her to be up and about anytime soon. She requires undisturbed rest for the next few weeks. She will sleep a lot, so be prepared.”

“I heard what happened,” I said quietly. “It is good to see you alive and well.”

“More or less,” he muttered, shoving his hands into his pockets. “I’m glad you made it back topside. But I don’t know how long we’ll be kept in the Embassy.” His gaze searched the room, a deep frown furrowing into his forehead. The medic had informed me earlier of the attack, and I suspected Carth had been in the thick of it. That the Republic soldiers had been able to withstand such an assault from so many Dark Jedi, even with the aid of Master Karon, impressed me.
Speaking of whom-

“I haven’t seen Master Karon about, Carth. Do you know where she is?”

He flinched at the name, and a dark spike of dread stabbed deep inside me. *No, it cannot be!*

“I’m sorry, Juhani,” he muttered, dark eyes moving back to hold mine solemnly. “She didn’t survive the assault.”

“No,” I whispered through numb lips, shaking my head. I was vaguely aware of the medic stepping away to give us some modicum of privacy. “How- how could that happen?”

Dismay and grief swelled within and burst, and I stumbled backwards, noting almost absently that my vision was now blurry. Karon, whose wise words and gentle spirit had given me hope once more, since Revan had left and taken what I’d thought was my only salvation. How was I to face the Jedi Order, now that Karon was gone? Would they all be as accepting as her? Would Quatra?

Carth’s head was bowed, and I stared at him dumbly. “I do not understand,” I pleaded desperately. “How could she fall, when the soldiers survived? How?”

I heard the human breathe in deeply before answering. “We had many losses, Juhani. But the truth of the matter is, even with Karon’s help we were overwhelmed. If Jen had arrived a few minutes earlier...”

Shock slammed a wall of ice into me as I gasped. “*Jen?* I cried. “She- she’s back? Here?”

Carth closed his eyes. “Why does that woman elicit such a reaction? First Canderous, now you... next I’ll see Bastila hopping out of the tank and dancing a jerryjig.”

I did not know what to feel. That Revan was back... but why? Did she regret her actions, and come to make amends? Was Carth implying that if not for Revan, they would all now be one with the Force? “Where is she, Carth?”

“Captain Onasi,” a voice cut into our conversation, a young Republic soldier who was entering the room. He nodded at me briefly. “Commander Wann requests your presence immediately and that of any Jedi with you.”

I raised my head to see Carth looking at me, a frown of puzzlement lining his forehead. “I can’t think why he’d want to see you. You, uh, okay to come now?”

A frantic feeling, something like hope, was clawing at my insides. It fought with the tearing grief over Karon. I needed to see Revan first, but the young soldier was staring at us impatiently. *The Commander surely won’t need me for long, and I do not wish to land Carth into any trouble.* I nodded at Carth. “I’ll accompany you, and then I shall find Jen.”

xXx

**Lars Thorstan**

*My master is dead.* I should have felt devastation, bleak misery at the loss of my mentor, a Jedi I both respected and admired. I should have felt something, other than this utter numbness crawling through my veins. *My master is dead.*
"-leave at once," the Republic Commander was demanding angrily of the Cathar Jedi who looked taken aback, ears flat against her head. I didn’t even think she was a fully fledged knight. “All you Jedi lot do is cause trouble – that Bastila in particular!"

I didn’t understand why I’d been summoned here. Everything had been a daze and the Selkath wouldn’t let me leave – all I wanted was to run back to Karon’s ship. She’s dead, though. Dead. How had I survived the bloodbath, when Master Karon had not?

“How do you expect us to leave, Commander? Our ship’s both damaged and impounded. The Embassy’s blockaded. The Selkath aren’t really in the mood to listen to the Republic right now.” This came from the other Republic officer in the room, Captain Carth Onasi, whose clothes were shredded and splattered with blood. Unlike the Commander, he’d joined in the fighting.

“Apparently, that’s been sorted,” Commander Wann snarled, and then turned to gesture at me and the other Jedi. “The Jedi don’t have any restrictions on them yet. “

He unceremoniously threw a datapad onto the table, and Carth stepped forward to retrieve it. I saw the Cathar Juhani edge closer to read over his shoulder. Her catlike eyes remained impassive, but the Captain’s widened with disbelief. “This is from the Jedi Council,” Carth said. “They’re sending us to Kashyyyk?”

The one named Juhani bit back a gasp but Carth Onasi heard it, turning to face her. “That makes sense to you?”

“I- yes,” she said softly. Her eyes gleamed yellow. “If this is an opportunity to leave, I believe we should take it – if it were not for Bastila’s condition.”

I shouldn’t be here. I don’t know these people. I took a quiet step closer to the exit, only to scramble backwards as it opened to admit a large warrior who strode in like he owned the place.

“This had better be good,” he grunted, flicking a disinterested glance towards Commander Wann. I recognized him - he was the Mandalorian mercenary who’d travelled with the other Jedi. “I have three drinks lined up, and I wasn’t quite finished teaching someone a lesson.”


He barked a laugh. “She’s fine. Incapacitated, but that’s mostly her own doing. Although I will admit she ain’t gonna look pretty for a few days.”

“Look,” Captain Onasi cut in, leaning forward over the central table to stare intently at Commander Wann. “This might get us out of the Embassy on a technicality, but there’s still the matter of the Ebon Hawk.”

“That won’t be a problem,” Commander Wann muttered angrily. “Your Jedi have friends in high places. A team of mechanics have been working on the damage for days; stang, they’ve even stripped two Republic freighters for replacement parts. As for the case, the Republic’s assigned their best arbiters onto it and managed to push it forward for tomorrow morning. The Sith Embassy’s been shut down. I highly doubt they’ll even realize they have to send a representative to squabble over your precious ship.” His voice was rising in tempo with each word; by the end, his jowls were quivering with banked anger. “Looks like you lot get a free ride out of here, while the rest of us stay behind to tidy up this mess.”

He was glaring resentfully at us all, myself included. It was becoming obvious Commander Wann
thought I was one of them, much to my growing unease. *I need to leave. Go back to the Enclave on Coruscant.* Danger and destiny clung to them all – even the non-Force sensitives – like an oppressive cloak, and I wanted no part of it. *Master. Why did you have to leave me here?*

The mercenary shrugged. “Well, this kolto mess is entirely the Republic’s fault. You don’t have any right to whinge that it blew up in your face.”

I could see the Commander’s face mottling an ugly red as he looked the larger man up and down. I edged back towards the door again as the Republic officer seemed to think better of starting a fight he’d undoubtedly lose.

“Jenkins! Dalora!” he snapped, gesturing towards two young solders stationed at the rear of the room. “Escort the crew of the *Ebon Hawk* to the Embassy’s exit. They will be residing in their ship until they have clearance to leave Manaan.”

Even I could see that the green Republic grunts were uncomfortable. One shuffled his feet, refusing eye contact, while the other took a tentative step forward. Canderous bared his teeth in a feral grin. *He’s the unarmed one, though.*

“But- Bastila is not well-“ the Cathar protested quietly, before Commander Wann interrupted her.

“I’ll have her transferred this afternoon. Just get out of my embassy!”

In a whirlwind of activity, I dazedly found myself outside the opulent building between a group of Selkath guards and the crew of the *Ebon Hawk*. The mercenary Canderous disappeared briefly, before returning with a groaning human woman slung over his shoulder. She reeked like a cantina’s opening night. Captain Onasi shook his head in weary despair as Canderous reappeared, and I wondered who the dishevelled human was. Surprisingly, the Selkath had let her, as well as the rest of us, past without anything more than a cursory once over. The Republic soldiers escorting us, on the other hand, had been clinically turned back.

*I don’t think anyone’s realized I’m tagging along.* Everything had been numb since the battle. I’d barely had time to breathe. *The shuttle. I can get to Master Karon’s shuttle now, and leave. No one will notice.*

I’d always been quiet, overlooked. I spotted the Cathar brushing back the hair on the drunk woman’s face, murmuring something quietly before the mercenary took off at a brisk walk.

I stepped to the side. There was an alley between the Embassy’s eastern wall and the neighbouring commercial sector that screamed refuge, peace, safety from these dangerous vigilantes. Before I knew it, I was running.

As I turned the corner, I thought I heard the Captain exclaim in surprise, and the Cathar call out, “Wait! Was that Master Karon’s apprentice?”

*xXx*

**Kylah Aramai**

*Think, Kylah, think!* I desperately required a plan. Stars twinkled through the cockpit window as the shuttle eased towards Rii’shn. I’d escaped Manaan so far, but evading my master wouldn’t be so easy.

A shudder trembled through me and I had to focus on slowing my traitorous heart. I’d almost had the *real* prize, even better than *bratty* Shan, but then sheer, shattering power erupted from her-
Revan might be a broken shell, but I’d underestimated her. And whatever the precious Order had
done to her was close to disintegrating her mind. And wouldn’t that be a sight to see. Oh, how sweet
it would have been to truss her up and deliver her to Malak!

But I had nothing. And cold tendrils of icy fear were creeping insidiously through my mind. Rage.
Pain. Not fear! I dug my nails deep into my hands as a focus, deep enough to draw blood. I will not
be weak. I will find a way out of this!

I needed a plan. Malak enjoyed me, but he wouldn’t hesitate to kill me – slowly – for my failure to
capture Bastila. And if he ever learned I’d had Revan in my grasp then I’d be better off jumping into
a sarlacc pit. I couldn’t go back to him just yet. If I wanted to displace Bandon – and I would, one
day, by the stars – then I’d have to show Malak how worthy I was.

I need a place to regroup. Away from Malak. A place to strengthen my grasp on the Dark Side, and
figure out my next move.

Korriban. The idea hit with shattering clarity. What better sanctuary for a Dark Jedi than a Sith
Academy? I’d never visited there but I’d heard Bandon brag enough times about beating up on the
little dark younglings. He always did enjoy pulling legs off insects. And surely, Malak would be
otherwise engaged with the GenoHaradan’s machinations, and Bandon’s mission to Kashyyyk, to
think of looking for me on Korriban-

Well. I had four hours before I landed on Rii’shn; from there, I could acquire more appropriate
transport. To Korriban it is. Surely I can make myself scarce. Once there, I’ll devise a plan to
capture that snooty Padawan. Revan, on the other hand, I might just avoid.

At least I’d sorted out Karon Enova.

My eyes closed, and I could feel my lips stretch in a bloodless smile. At least there was that.

xXx

Zaalbar

The shine of the pit lane holoscreen bit accusingly into my vision; I could see the two swoop bikes
were neck and neck as they coasted over the choppy Manaan waters. How could I let her do this?
That other rider almost knocked her off a second ago!

But Mission rarely listened to me, and refused to be swayed by common sense. She’d acquired a few
wins, enough to glean the interest of the mercenary backers who ran this dangerous sport. After
yesterday’s no show – all races had been cancelled – Mission was all the more hungry to risk her life
once again.

What was I thinking? She is as eager as a pup and twice as blind to the danger. The determination to
carry her bodily away from this place grew; she might rail against me for it, but it was in her best
interests. I did not believe I would cope with the guilt if something happened to her.

The two bikes split away from each other and simultaneously crested separate jumps. I wasn’t sure
which one housed Mission anymore, and apprehension kicked in my gut. The crowd watching the
screen gasped as one bike sailed into the air, landing sideways into the water and spinning, before
righting itself and accelerating after the other.

Let Mission be safe, I prayed silently. And- and let her not win. It seemed a betrayal, hoping for that,
but the Sector Champion had challenged the winner of this bout, and he was reputed to be both corrupt and treacherous on the track.

I could feel a growl starting in my throat. He was a Gamorrean, and there was something rabid about that species; all they cared for was corruption and greed and-

“Zaalbar,” a quiet voice spoke behind me, barely audible over the hum of the swoop fans.

I turned, my bleak thoughts splintering into non-existence as I recognized the human female addressing me.

“(Jen!)” I cried, relief and hope and anger all at once rising to the surface. I could hear Mission’s bucket droid beeping in welcome next to me. “(You’re back!)”

I took an involuntary step forward as if to embrace her, and then remembered exactly how she left. She sighed heavily, her eyes dropping closed.

“I- I came to talk to you both. To apologise.”

I looked at Jen Sahara in silence; she was staring down, shoulders hunched in what seemed to be shame. That she regretted her actions I had no doubt, but the potential consequences of what she had done were hard to swallow. I took some time to think over an appropriate response.

“(I have never understood this concept of apology),” I said finally. “(In my culture, it is our actions that show what we feel, not our words).”

At that, her head jerked back up, green eyes flashing with something akin to determination. She pursed her lips. “I respect that Zaalbar, and you’re right – but still. I also need to say the words.”

“The winner is the Flying Starscream!” a synthesized voice cut through the air. “With a respectable time of 121.43 seconds, beating Bek from Taris by a slim 0.85 seconds!”

“(Mission. She lost).” I was both gratified and surprised to hear her winning streak come to an end. I had already been approached by two agents wanting to sign Mission onto their books. If Mission knew that I had scared them off, I did not think I would hear the end of it.

And what now, that Jen Sahara has returned? Where will fate lead us now?

I glanced sideways at her, for the first time noticing just how awful she looked, even for a human. Dark purple blossomed over a puffy eye and swollen cheekbone, and her clothes were crusted with blood. My nose wrinkled. She smelt like stale alcohol and death.

Jen Sahara was nothing if not observant; noticing my appraisal, she looked down at herself and sighed. “I may have had too many drinks yesterday. I would have freshened up first in the ’Hawk, but Carth refused to wait. He said he tried to find you yesterday after we left the Embassy…” she trailed off, looking behind her into the mechanic’s bay. I followed her gaze and located Carth Onasi, arms folded, leaning casually against the pit wall with an intense gaze focused solely on us. On Jen.

“(There was no swoop racing yesterday),” I explained. It had been scheduled, but an attack at one of the embassies shut down the entertainment quadrant. It puzzled me greatly; I had thought Manaan had little overt violence.

A high whine of a swoop engine thrummed closer; the swoops were coming in. I spotted Mission’s purple and green machine, remarkably unharmed, glide into the landing bay. My young cub must have seen Carth, for she launched herself recklessly off the swoop and ran towards him, away from us. I hastened to follow, assuming Jen would do the same.
“Carth!” I heard Mission call out in excitement, and the Republic officer soon had his arms full of exuberant Twi’lek. She had always been effusive with her affection, but I hadn’t realized she’d thought so much of the human Captain. Judging by the surprise on his face, neither had he.

“Mission, I, uh, it’s good to see you.” His arms hesitantly returned her embrace. “I wish you hadn’t left. We’ve come to see if you want to join us again.”

Mission took a jerky step back before unclasping her modified helmet and dropping it gracelessly to the ground. I groaned as it landed with a sharp thunk, and stepped forward to retrieve it. Mission did not look after her equipment well.

“Uh uh,” she shook her head, eyes pinching in annoyance. “No way. I mean, it’s great to see you an’ all, but I sure ain’t gonna stick around after the way Jen left.”

Carth coughed uncomfortably, and looked over to us. “Yeah. Jen. About that-“

“No,” Mission’s voice, quiet but resolute, came from behind me. Mission whirled around, paling in surprise. Her lekku wrapped defensively around her neck. I wanted to rail at Jen Sahara for hurting Mission this way. My young friend had not yet reconciled to the true character of her sibling, and nightmares of Taris still haunted her sleep. Jen’s betrayal had cut deep, being so wholly unexpected.

“I can’t believe this!” Mission spat out at last. Her face flushed a dark purple, her eyes flashed darker still. “You’ve got some gall, coming back here after what you did! What sort of coreslime space tramp does that to her friends? You could have killed us!”

Jen’s voice was low and deadly serious as she answered. “It was wrong of me – more than wrong – but HK was certain he could disable the ship without loss of life.”

“You trusted our lives to a homicidal bucket of bolts,” Carth cut in derisively.

“You blew up our ship! While we were on it!” Mission railed on, and to my dismay I saw her eyes fill with angry tears. I stepped forward to lay a comforting hand on my young friend, and felt her shake underneath me. “There ain’t no way you coulda known we would be okay!”

Carth Onasi looked worriedly around, and I noticed we were attracting attention from the humanoid mechanics. I had taken to waiting for Mission in the pit lane, but it was not a private place by any means.

“I’m sorry,” Jen said simply. “If I could take it back now, I would. But at the time, all I knew was that I needed to escape. To leave before we landed.”

It was sincere and heartfelt, but I could not understand the logic behind it. To take such risks with the lives of others was not the act of the honourable warrior I had thought she was. Mission seemed to agree, for she sighed brokenly and leaned against me, burying her face against my chest.

Her next words were muffled. “Y’think we would have stood in your way, if you wanted to leave? Sheesh, Jen, you think we coulda have stood in your way?”

“Bastila could have, and would. And I- I was afraid.” Jen’s eyes had fallen closed, and I could see her fists clenched tight against her side. Her face looked worse without the sharp contrast of her eyes; mottled swelling left a patchwork of bruises along the left side of her face. “That transmission you found on the Ebon Hawk, the night before we reached Manaan. It was about me.”

“What transmission?” Carth cut in, frowning.
“We found a message Bastila sent, a plea for help from that Jedi Master who turned up,” Mission answered, before turning back to Jen. “But you said it was about Juhani.”

Jen tilted her head, looking at Mission once more. “I was dissembling. I mean, the Order will be overjoyed she’s denounced the Dark Side, but that’s not why Bastila sent the message. It’s got to do with me, and this damn secret mission they sent us on. I’d only agreed to go to Manaan because she vowed there were no masters here.”

“And then she sent for one,” Mission said slowly.

“Yeah.” Jen sighed heavily. “Not that I blame her, now.”

“You shouldn’t,” Carth snapped. “For all Bastila’s experience and power, she’s still a Padawan. And you- you’re a blast it, I don’t even know what you are, Jen, but sending you to the Jedi Masters is the smartest thing Bastila’s done since she boarded the *Endar Spire.*”

“(Maybe we should talk elsewhere),” I interrupted uncomfortably. The swoop rider Mission had competed against was eavesdropping openly, and the two mechanics working on his bike were suspiciously frozen. “(This is not a good place for this sort of conversation).”

Mission followed my gaze and scowled angrily at the racer.

“What are you staring at, chuba-face?” she snapped.

The Rodian threw his hands up in tacit surrender and turned away, but I saw his ears twitch. “(We should leave this place),” I added.

Jen was nodding brusquely in agreement. “Zaalbar’s right. The crew’s back on the *Ebon Hawk,* and I- I guess I need to talk to everyone before we leave.”

“Leave?” Mission asked.

“We’re getting out of Manaan while we still can,” Carth explained. “The Selkath have stopped all Republic and Sith traffic, but Wann’s got us out on a technicality. I don’t think the credit rests solely with him, but he believes we’ll have clearance to leave in a few hours.”

Mission folded her arms, a recalcitrant look on her face. “I’ll hear what y’all have to say. Doesn’t mean I’ll go with you though.” She looked over at Carth, and nudged him. “Did ya see me race though?”

I missed the Republic pilot’s reply as Jen turned in my direction, staring at me solemnly. I had to stay with Jen, I had no choice. And despite Mission’s belligerence, I knew my young friend wanted to forgive her. So do I.

Carth and Mission started meandering through the pit lane, and the mechanics who had been covertly observing us resumed normal activity. Jen and I followed behind. The swoop racer with the foolish *Starscream* name glanced over his shoulder at us again; I stared at him pointedly until he turned away. He could have given Mission more space on the track, and I would have liked to tell him so.

“I’d release you from the life-debt, if I could,” Jen was muttering. “I think it would be safer here for you and Mission, but Carth has some borked idea that’d be leaving her to the mercy of the streets.” Her eyes slid back to me. “He underestimates you, I think.”

“(You dishonour my life-debt by leaving without me. I had thought you understood, Jen Sahara).” *If she had, she would not have run.*
The human did not reply, and I had no more words to say. She would leave, and I would follow, and help her act with greater honour than she had thus far. I swear it.

xXx

**Spymaster Gaalin**

I perused through the report again, still disbelieving, still shaking my head in refusal to accept the facts. The agent who’d handed me the encrypted datapad had gulped and scarpered – *obviously he’d had some inkling to its contents, I must look into that later* – and now I knew why.

Eridius was going to be pissed.

Twenty-three agents had been dispatched to lay a trap that should have destroyed some of the most powerful Jedi in the galaxy, and this nobody Force-sensitive not only survived, but slaughtered the lot of them.

*Including our only two Dashade agents.* I winced irritably. It had taken years to locate and recruit those Force-resistant agents; it would not be an easy task to replace them.

*How had this happened?* The ambush had been a hurried affair; Hulas had been taken by surprise with the arrival of Jen Sahara and her immediate demands to leave Manaan. He worried that we wouldn’t easily have another chance to eliminate her. Spymaster Dallas had dispatched all the nearby agents we could muster, setting it up as an Exchange ambush to cover our tracks - I’d thought the manpower overly excessive, but Dallas had been rightfully concerned over the high price the Sith had so eagerly parted with to dispose of her.

My eyes closed in dismay. *Excessive. As it turns out, I was excessively wrong.* What sort of Force-sensitive could slither their way out of the quagmire on Rii’shn, and then jettison back to Manaan in a stolen Exchange vessel?

Resolution soon overcame my despair; I wasn’t one to wallow in self-pity, even after disastrous mistakes. I sighed heavily, opened my eyes, and pulled the datapad back, searching through the report contents once more.

*The droid aided her,* I realized, reading the summary of the holo-footage before the cameras had been disabled. *What an unusual combat droid. Together, the two of them created the sort of conspicuous carnage we try to avoid.*

There were too many unknowns here, and it irritated me to no end. Why was Darth Malak after this incredibly dangerous and strangely unknown Force user? Prolonged use of Dark Force powers were strongly linked with insanity, and Darth Malak’s actions of late had certainly echoed that possibility. *Bombing Taris, attacking Dantooine*… that sort of widespread slaughter was guaranteed to turn otherwise neutral factions against the Sith. And yet the overwhelming size of the Sith armada - if recent reports were to be believed - suggested that Malak was powerful enough to start wildly attacking civilian targets without fearing repercussion. *The Republic counter-attacks thus far have certainly been ineffectual.*

I grunted in annoyance, leaning back in the unyielding office chair. I’d have to call in some data analysts, I realized peevishly. There were too many things I was missing lately, and the GenoHaradan had a lot to lose if the Republic did not prevail… and if they did not, there were other moves we could make to ingratiate ourselves to the Sith.

I shoved the datapad to the side of the polished poraclay table, and pressed a button on the inset
communication panel.

“Send me the two best analysts onsite,” I demanded as the bored receptionist answered my call. “Ajax, if he’s available. Oh, and get them to bring their own chairs.” I disconnected the call, surveying my clinically empty office. I preferred to work in a cold, uninviting room bereft of any personal treasures; others were less likely to dawdle here, and it helped me keep focused on my work.

With determination, I forced my mind back to the issue at hand. An ambush had been the wrong way of targeting this Jen Sahara. After all, a disruptor rifle can quickly end any Jedi or Sith, provided you catch them unawares. Yet I wasn’t willing to risk any more of my agents, nor did I think Eridius would let me without further information.

I’ll open her contract up to the freelance assassins, and flag her as highly dangerous. The freelancers had autonomy of a sort within our rank, but were not as highly trained, and therefore generally less effective. There were a lot of them, though, spread throughout the galaxy. And while they clamour for the glory, I’ll work on matching Jen Sahara to another identity. There must be more to her than we’ve found so far. The droid, too, I should search for the droid.

And who knew? The freelancers might get lucky.

xXx

**Jen Sahara**

My head throbbed dully, my body ached, and everyone was staring at me in expectation. Mission’s lips were pursed in a mulish pout, her arms folded, and a foot tapped impatiently. Zaalbar stood still by her side, impassive.

“Where’s Bastila?” the Twi’lek demanded.

We’d entered the *Ebon Hawk* minutes ago, intercepting Canderous who’d been carrying in recently purchased weapons, by the looks. Juhani had rushed into the central common room when she’d heard us arrive.

“She’s in the med-bay, recuperating from injuries,” Juhani answered Mission in a soft tone. Her eyes were on me though, intense and dark with emotion that was less fury than I deserved. I’d woken on the *Ebon Hawk* some hours earlier, with a wicked hangover and no recollection of just how I’d left the Republic Embassy. I’d barely been able to keep up with Carth when he went running off to retrieve Mission.

“You missed out on all the fun, kid,” Canderous interjected. He was sitting by a side table, surrounded by guns and mods and tools. Feet propped up on a bench, he was the only one who looked at ease. He caught my eye and smirked. Suddenly, I thought I could guess how I’d ended up here. “Although I hear you were having fun of your own.”

“Conjecture: Jen Sahara had the most fun. I was keeping count.”

All eyes swivelled to the red droid. He’d been waiting outside the *Ebon Hawk* when I returned, negotiating with a uniformed Selkath. The *Ebon Hawk* was cleared for take-off, but before they would transmit our launch codes there was the minor matter of outstanding docking fees. HK-47 had somehow persuaded them to be waived. After all, the Selkath had docked the ship, not us.

I shivered. The droid was scarcely competent, and showed more initiative that should have been possible. “HK, power down,” I ordered. I heard the Mandalorian snort.
“Statement: As you desire, master. Signing off.” The glowing red eyes dimmed, and then died.

“That droid needs to go,” Carth said flatly, entering the room. Somehow, he’d found another ghastly flight jacket to wear, lime green this time. A Republic uniform would have looked better on him. He threw a disapproving glare at Canderous’ upraised feet, before staring at me, like the others. “I’ve just received clearance for takeoff. There’s an hour wait, so that’s how long you have to convince Mission to come with us.”

I glanced back at the sulking Twi’lek girl. Convincing her is child’s play; regaining her trust is another matter. I felt like I should know the words to quiet them all, to make them follow and obey, and it sickened me. My mouth was dry and my stomach heaving, and it wasn’t just a hangover. No mind tricks. This is a frelling mess. It would be better if Mission stayed behind on Manaan.

“Look,” I said finally. “I’m sorry, and I mean it. But Zaalbar was right when he said actions are what matter, not words. And I don’t trust myself, so I sure as stars can’t expect any of you to trust me. I came back to get some answers from Bastila and her master, but I came back too late.” My words came out jumbled, rambling, and I wondered if I made sense to anyone there.

Mission snorted. “That’s what I don’t understand. Why’s Bastila hurt? Where’s that Jedi Master? And why are y’all here, instead of with the Republic?”

“There was an… incident at the Embassy involving the Sith,” Juhani said delicately.

“By incident, she means a full-scale attack,” I added, my voice dry.

“Whoa,” Mission’s eyes widened. “On Manaan? Geez, I thought this place was meant to be safe!”

“(No place is safe from the Sith,)” Zaalbar roared, his voice startlingly loud. Mission and Juhani both visibly jumped. “(No, Jen Sahara, you cannot do that to me!)”

I blinked, startled. Kashyyyk? The Wookiee homeworld? The only thing more puzzling about the Jedi sending us there was Zaalbar’s reaction. He was visibly upset.

“Okay, why?” I demanded. “I expected Coruscant, or one of the other Core worlds – but Kashyyyk?” I hadn’t any plans beyond coming back to face Karon and Bastila. With the former dead and the latter comatose, I suddenly realized I had no idea what to do next. I’m as directionless as space junk, I thought in disgust. Sun and stars, Bastila, I can’t believe I actually desire you awake!

“Master Vrook is meeting us there. He was on his way to Manaan, I understand, but has diverted his route to meet us on Kashyyyk instead,” Juhani explained. Her gaze was unfathomable, and still fixed intently on me. “I understood from Bastila that this was one of the planets we were meant to visit from the start.”
“More Force relics to stop Darth Malak?” Carth asked.

The Cathar was nodding. “Yes. There are two more Star Maps to discover; on Kashyyyk and Korriban.”

“Star Maps? What sort of ruin is that?” Mission asked curiously.

Sweat broke out on my face, and all at once my heart pounded ferociously. Star Maps. The words meant something to me, something important. Where had I heard it before? Bastila had only ever said we were looking at ruins. She’s been so reticent with everyone. But on Tatooine, I wasn’t with her. She didn’t need me for whatever she found. She didn’t need Jen Sahara. I’d known it was a cover story, I’d known, but why was Jen Sahara in my head? Why was Darth Revan?

“That glowing thing we found on Tatooine. And at the bottom of the ocean,” Canderous grunted, shifting his feet off the bench. He was wearing his customary bored expression, but his gaze was intent. There was more to Canderous than he let on. “It must be pretty powerful for the Jedi to go to all this trouble.”

“It’s a navigational map,” I muttered through numb lips. Back on Tatooine, I’d had a vision. Street Kid found one in a krayt dragon’s cave. “It points to something.”

Someone squeezed my hands tight; I blinked, and the Cathar was crouching in front of me. “Are you okay?” she murmured softly, her gaze roving over my face. “What are you seeing, Jen Sahara?”

“Nothing,” I muttered in return. “What are these maps, Juhani? What do they point to?”

Juhani let my hands go and rocked back on her heels. “I do not know. I am not sure that Bastila does, either, but she is convinced it will aid us against Darth Malak. And so are the masters.”

Frelling fantastic. This secrecy has got to end. “So, Kashyyyk huh?” I said finally, and looked over the others, gauging their agreement. The Wookiee was shaking his head in refusal.

“(You mentioned Korriban also,)” he interjected, almost angrily. “(We could go there instead, we may find everything your Jedi need without going to Kashyyyk.)” Zaalbar held his arms stiffly at his sides, towering over Mission as he stood in the corner of the room. He’s an exile of some sort. Why else would a Wookiee resist returning home?

“I’m not sure Korriban is a good idea, Zaalbar,” I replied slowly. “And I promised myself I wouldn’t run anymore. If a Jedi Master awaits me on Kashyyyk, then I’ll go there. It’s just-” I looked back to Juhani, frowning in puzzlement. “How do we know they’re on Kashyyyk?”

“They sent us an encrypted message through Republic channels,” Carth answered that, leaning against the lockers. The tacky jacket he wore clashed terribly against the dull durasteel. “I guess with Bastila out and the ship impounded, it was the only way to contact us.” He hadn’t stopped staring at me since I’d returned to Manaan. He was justifiably angry, but now and then his gaze would soften with something like empathy that made me want to curl up and hide in a dark corner. I can’t think about Deralia, and Jen and Revan. I don’t want to think about that.

His words sunk in and my mind raced. “Republic channels,” I said slowly, “The Sith will know our destination, then.”

“Excuse me?” Carth interjected in protest as Canderous barked a laugh.

“Come on, flyboy.” I sent him what I hoped was a quelling look. “You can encode the message all you like. People are still going to hack it if it’s come through the Republic comms.” I tapped my
fingers absently against my thigh; the clothes were crusted with dirt and blood. I really needed to
clean up. “No one’s going to expect us to go to Korriban first.”

“Why would we go to Korriban, when we’re expected on Kashyyyk?” Carth said flatly, a warning
note entering his tone.

“I’m assuming we need to visit all the maps?” I queried Juhani; at her nod, I continued. “And Nord
attacked Bastila on Tatooine. Dark Jedi went after her on Manaan. Malak must know what we’re
after. If there’s Jedi enroute to Kashyyyk, surely they’ll be looking for the Map there. We could go
after the other one in stealth.”

“Isn’t that a Sith planet? After all that’s happened, are you nuts?” Carth exclaimed, his voice twisting
in incredulity.

“Calm down before you have kath pups,” I grinned. Carth’s eyes had widened comically; I’d
forgotten how fun it was to rile the Republic officer up. Serious, Jen, I admonished myself. This is a
serious discussion. “Look, all I’m saying is that maybe we should talk it through before jumping to
some Jedi Master’s whim.”

“Are you sure you are not running again, Jen Sahara?” Juhani asked softly. Canderous dropped the
mini-blaster he’d been modifying with an audible thud, and looked over at me measuringly. I could
see he was interested in my response. I pushed back a scowl of irritation. Juhani… all of them, had
more than enough reason to doubt me.

If I hadn’t run when I did, I might understand more. Regardless, I can see that I can’t avoid them.
But if it’s our quest to find these sodding maps, then I think we should do Sith-infested planet first.
I’d rather infiltrate when they’re not expecting me.”

“The Dark Side is strong there,” Juhani whispered. Her tawny eyes were wide and glistening. “Jen,
the lure of it will always be my strongest foe. I do not believe Korriban is a wise choice… for me or
you. And should this not be Bastila’s decision? She would choose Kashyyyk, I think.”

“Hey, Bastila doesn’t make my choices,” Mission interjected angrily. “And if I decide to tag along,
then there ain’t no way she’s gonna boss me around!”

“Mission, let’s not all get tied up in who is leader here,” Carth admonished. “After everything that’s
happened, I’d like to think we’re all in this together. But Korriban is a terrible idea. And if Bastila
were awake, you know she’d be saying that!”

“We need to know more about these Maps before we can make an informed decision,” I said in my
most decisive tone, and abruptly stood. “Let’s see if we can wake the princess up before we leave
Manaan.”

xXx

**Bastila Shan**

…

*The bridge of the flagship was deserted and dark bar the eerie green glow of navigational consoles.*

*The Sith had evacuated, as expected, and left an empty ghost ship populated with ominous shadows.*

*And my greatest challenge yet.*

*I felt the comforting presence of Masters Kester and Jai’lel flanking me. I wasn’t meant to be here, a*
Padawan whose talents most assuredly did not lay in combat, but surprise was of the essence. When we learned of the trap Darth Malak set for his master, we had to grasp our opportunity – and us three were coincidentally nearby.

The cloaked figure at the head of the room was facing us, immobile, as we approached. Darth Revan. The Sith Lord. I swallowed past my fear. If we had a chance to stop this senseless slaughter, then the price of my life was not too steep an exchange.

Darth Revan stayed still, waiting for us, and as we closed twin bars of blood red appeared in her hands. They illuminated ominously against a steel mask and midnight robes.

“Jedi,” the dark lord said softly. Her voice was gravelly; throaty and bitter. It sounded nothing like it had, once. “Sneaking onboard my flagship to attack me? Tut tut. Isn’t that against some Jedi code?”

“You cannot win, Revan.” The words slipped out against my volition.

“Why, it’s young Bastila Shan,” she mocked. She took a step, and motioned me forward with a ‘saber. “Come, then.”

“I’m waiting for you, Bastila.”

Bastila?

...

My eyes fluttered open as sluggish awareness woke within my mind. I saw a face leaning over me, fuzzy at first, before my vision sharpened.

There was no mask this time, but I knew her. A patchwork of purple and yellow, one eye half-closed against swollen flesh.

“I’m waiting for you, Bastila,” she sighed.

I screamed.

xXx

I knew nothing, for a time. My sense of being was scattered, dissolute. Occasionally I felt soft hands on me, urging warm liquid down my throat, murmuring platitudes. I would open eyes and see a feline face I thought I should know. A deep mental lassitude weighed heavily on me. I was content to just be.

“-better you stay away, after last time-”

“-can’t reach her through the bond-”

“-sheesh, why won’t she say anything?-”

“-the way I see it, we all got a vote here. I was paid to take her topside, and now we’re in the skies. From here, I’m a lot more interested in going to a planet that will reap me a job, rather than a tree-infested wild. Unless you plan to pay me-”

“(I cannot go to Kashyyyk. Mission, Jen, surely you will agree that we do not have to-)”

“-we must make a call, Onasi, we can’t wait much longer-”
“-that homicidal droid does not get a vote!-”

“-Stars, Bastila, would you just wake up?-”

xXx

“Bastila, can you hear me?”

The words edged through my consciousness, but this time I understood them. Slowly, my gummy eyelids unstuck and bright light stabbed daggers into my vision. I winced and squeezed them shut.

“Bastila?”

“Juhani,” I croaked. My lips were dry and cracked.

“Here.” A soft voice, warm skin against my cheek, the cool press of ferraglass against my lips. I swallowed gratefully.


“Shhh, it’s okay,” Juhani was murmuring, “You are safe, Bastila, we are all safe.”

I could hear my breathing, fast and panicked, and blood pounded against my eardrums. But there was no threatening psychic presence stabbing at my very being until I splintered into nothingness. Whatever that had been, it was not here.

With forced determination, I slowed my breathing. I realized my eyes were still squeezed shut. Juhani’s next to me. That means-

“The Star Map,” I whispered. “Did you find it, Juhani?”

There was a heavy pause. Perhaps because so much weighed on her answer, the silence seemed longer than it actually was. I tentatively opened my eyes once more.

I wasn’t in Hrakert Station.

“Where am I?” I asked with a touch of asperity. I moved to sit up but my body refused to obey. Juhani placed a cautionary hand on my shoulder.

“Bastila, please, take it slow. This is the first time you have returned to full consciousness in almost a week.”

“A week,” I said blankly. A week? I was in a tiny triangular room with a low ceiling and shelves sparsely stocked with stims, patches and fluids. It was as close a medbay as a swoop was to a starship.

With sudden clarity I knew the place. “I’m on the Ebon Hawk. Juhani, what am I doing on the Ebon Hawk? Where is Master Karon?”

“Please, Bastila, a lot has happened. I fear to tell you everything...” The Cathar trailed off into silence. My gaze returned to her; she was solemn, unblinking. I could sense her concern, and I allowed my mind to open. Where is Master Karon? Surely I should be able to sense her nearby-

Close, very close, too close, I became aware of another presence in my mind. It coiled and unfurled at my awareness.
Revan is here. The Force was with me; weak and unsteady, but enough to indicate the proximity of a powerful Force user. Revan is here on this ship with me. "Where is Master Karon?" I demanded again, feeling the heat of apprehensive anger bud to life. I could not face Revan alone, not in this state, not on this ship.

“There was a Sith attack on Manaan,” Juhani whispered. Her eyes glistened with melancholy. “Karon has joined the Force.”

Horror pounded through me. No! No! Not Karon! A Sith Attack.

Revan had left Manaan. But she was back, here, and Karon was dead. Killed by a Sith. And Revan was back.

All went white.

xXx

Snippets of a conversation slowly resolved into meaning.

“I do not know anymore what I am strong enough for. I did not agree with this decision, and yet… yet it feels like a test I must take, to prove I am worthy of being a Jedi once more.”

A snort, dismissive and abrupt. “You put too much pressure on yourself, Juhani. I don’t think you were ever as dark as you believed yourself to be.”

“Well, I thank you for that. If it were not for you, I would still be lost in the dunes of Tatooine. But I worry… I worry that I may slide back. That we both may be tempted down a dark path from which we cannot return.”

My eyes stayed closed, and I kept my breathing even. I heard a rustle of someone moving.

“Yeah, me too. I need Bastila… stars, I want Bastila to wake up. I could actually do with her guidance, and I can’t believe I’m saying that but…”

The words trailed away, and I could barely make sense of them. Revan is here, in this room with me. And wishes my guidance?

“The bond between you both… this may aid you when we land.” Juhani’s voice was low and hopeful. “I will aid you too, Jen Sahara. I do not know what is in store for us, but I will trust in the Force to help me through whatever is to come.”

Memory returned. Master Karon is dead. And yet, Revan wanted my guidance, and did not sound like a Sith. It was all too much; my precarious grasp on consciousness slipped and I faded once more into nothingness.

xXx
HK-47:

Start-up System Check
Motoring Functions Online
Memory Core Function... Unable To Access

Audio Sensors ... Online
Optical Sensors ... Online
Tactile Sensors ... Online
Olfactory Sensors ... Online
Gustatory Sensors ... Not Installed

Shielding Function ... Online
Assassination Protocols … Restricted Access

Combat Mode … Owner Command Required

Scanning External Environment…

Location: Ebon Hawk Rear Starboard Section

3 Organic Meatbags, 1 Droid in Targeting Area

Identification – Jen Sahara (Current Owner), Mission Vao, Carth Onasi, T3-M4

Input – Carth Onasi to Jen Sahara: "Why are you powering that thing on? We need Teethree for this, not that bloodthirsty machine!"
Voice stress analysis: Hostile

Sensor Scan:

Target: T3-M4
…Physical Analysis: T3 Model series, detected A303 security modification
…Location: Interfaced with primary engineering control panel of the Ebon Hawk
…Objective: Unknown
Internal Conclusion: T3-M4 is modifying the ship
Primary Objective: Protect Master (Jen Sahara)
New Objective Accepted: Investigate to ensure no threat to Master (Jen Sahara)

Input – Jen Sahara to Carth Onasi: "HK's… useful. Teethree's having some difficulty changing the ship's signature, and HK has surprisingly hidden talents."

Interrupt: Conclusion: T3-M4 is acting under orders of current master (Jen Sahara)
Potential threat dismissed
Objective Complete

Input – Carth Onasi to Jen Sahara: "No way, sister, that carbon scored scrap pile can stay shut down."
He blew up the *Ebon Hawk*!

Output: "Conjecture: I disabled the ship without loss of life or major injury to allow the master to escape without notice. The *Ebon Hawk* sustained no serious damage. Retort: One would think a certified pilot could acknowledge the difference, organic meatbag or not."

Input – Jen Sahara: "HK, please *don't* talk about that!"
Voice stress analysis: Ashamed

Hidden Subroutine Initiated: Order From Master: Do not verbalize subject of *Ebon Hawk* disablement

Output: "Statement: As you wish, master."

Input – Carth Onasi (muttered): "I don't believe this."

Input – Mission Vao: "What exactly is a ship's signature anyway?"

Output: "Explanation: A vessel's signature is a unique electronic code appended to every transmission. It is widely used as a means of tracking spacecraft, and considered highly illegal to modify."

Input – Carth Onasi to Mission Vao: "It goes against the grain to attempt this, but the Sith know what ship we have. I'm dead set against going to Korriban… but if we have to, then let's make damn sure they don't recognize us on arrival."

Input – Jen Sahara to Carth Onasi: "And don't forget, Carth, that this ship has quite the history when it belonged to Davik Kang. I'd rather not get caught up in any of his past… dealings."

Input – Jen Sahara to T3-M4: "Teethree, do you think you can do it?"

Input – T3-M4 to Jen Sahara (Astromech Designated Communication Language): "Attempting to access *Ebon Hawk*’s core hardware routines. Manufacturer authorisation required to flash firmware and recalculate vessel signature. Initiating brute force hack routines. Unknown time until completion."

Input – Mission Vao: "The lil' fellow's trying, but not sure if he can do it yet."

Input – Jen Sahara to Mission Vao: "How well do you understand droid, Mission?"

Input – Mission Vao to Jen Sahara: "A little, I picked up the basics on Taris. The Bek's always had a couple of beaten up utility droids around the base, y'know, and I used to tinker on the security system with their help. Although usually they'd end up fixing whatever I broke."

Input – T3-M4 (Astromech Designated Communication Language): "0.001% of brute force routines completed."

Input: Mission Vao: "He's gonna be awhile."

Output: "Observation: With that sort of accuracy, perhaps you should consider a career as a Public HoloNet Journalist."

Input – Jen Sahara: "HK, I have some questions for you. What was the language you used earlier? On Rii'shn, before we entered the warehouse?"

Internal Diagnostic – Language not found
Output: "Response: I am... unsure, Master. I have been experiencing certain... errors in programming since the restraining bolt was removed back in Yuka Laka's store. Speculation: It could be related to this."

Input - Jen Sahara: "Oh, that's just great. Well, how did you know I could understand it?"

Output: "Response: I do not know, Master."

Interrupt:
…Quick Self Diagnostic Routine Activated
…Result: No Errors Detected
...Self Diagnostic Scheduled
Return to Main

Input – Carth Onasi: "Sounds like there's a lot of things you don't know, you worn out bucket of bolts."

Voice stress analysis: Annoyed

Output: "Objection: Worn out?! Listen, you talentless organic meatbag... one word from my master and I will pull you apart limb from useless limb!"

Input – Carth Onasi to Jen Sahara: "Turn this thing off, Jen. Or I'll jettison him out the airlock. I'm serious."

Visual / Audio Tracking: Carth Onasi leaving targeting area

Input – Mission Vao: "Well, at least we know you can't harm anything unless Jen tells you to."

Output: "Statement: I cannot engage in hostilities without a command from my master. Unless my master is unable to properly protect herself."

Input – Mission Vao: "You mean, if meek Jen ever shows up again?"


Voice stress analysis: Exasperated

Output: "Clarification: My primary function is to protect my master, even if it is from herself. Observation: Her fragile meatbag shell has suffered numerous leaks in recent times."

Input – Jen Sahara: "Oh for frell's sake – HK, I don't think meatbag is actually a word,"

Output: "Expletive: Damn it, master, I am an assassination droid... not a dictionary!"

Input – Mission Vao: "Assassination droid?"

Voice Stress Analysis: Alarmed

Output: "Extrapolation: It is sufficient to say that I am a fully capable translator and cultural analyst,
and I am also proficient in personal combat. I am a loyal droid willing to serve my master, organic meatbag or not."

Input – Mission Vao to Jen Sahara: "I've never heard a droid insult their master the way HK does. It's creepy."

Input: Jen Sahara: "Not to mention impolite."
Voice Stress Analysis: Amused

Output: "Retraction: Did I say that out loud? I apologize, master. While you are a meatbag, I suppose I should not call you such."

Input – Mission Vao: "Suppose? Sheesh, you could be a little more convincing y'know."

Input – Jen Sahara: "I agree. No more meatbag calling, HK."

Hidden subroutine initiated: Order From Master: Do not address Master as meatbag

Output: "Appeasement: Yes, master. Of course, master."

Input – Mission Vao: "I'm with Carth on this, Jen. I don't think having HK around is a good idea. You should turn him off."

Audio / Visual Tracking: Mission Vao leaving targeting area

Auditory Input: Sigh
…Source: Jen Sahara

Input: Jen Sahara: "HK, pull up the current newsfeeds from the Core worlds. Anything of interest from Coruscant, or anywhere we've been. And… just be quiet."

Master Defined Sub-Routine Initiated: Locate and Display Newsfeeds that Match Defined Parameters
…Interfacing with Communications Panel: Initiated
…Scanning Available Frequencies: Initiated
…Match Found: Public Holo-Feed: Intergalactic Republic News: Channel 47E
…Streaming Holo-Feed on Console: Initiated
Return to Main

Input – Holo-Feed Distribution from Intergalactic Republic News: Channel 47E:

Audio/Visual Tracking: Czerka Representative Marlani Gerrant, Senior Marketing Overseer: Source – Holo-feed:
"…ship that exploded in the docking bay in Manaan, destroying our facilities. Luckily there have only been reports of minor injuries to some ground crew…"

Audio / Visual Tracking: Canderous Ordo entering targeting area

Audio/Visual Tracking: Czerka Representative Marlani Gerrant, Senior Marketing Overseer: Source – Holo-feed:
"…been identified as an Exchange vehicle using a forged Czerka signature to gain clearance. To this end, we are announcing trade sanctions against the Exchange, and introducing an increase of armed escorts to some of our outposts."

Audio/Visual Tracking: Exchange Representative Dillan Starsonn, PR Agent to Outer Rim Worlds:
We are a legitimate organization of independent traders. We fully refute the accusations labelled at us by Czerka Corporation. We have reports of a hurried exit by a Czerka vehicle after an unprovoked attack on one of our establishments on Rii'shn. Therefore we must respond to any increase in armed presence by Czerka Corporation in kind.

Input – Canderous Ordo to Jen Sahara: "I can't think that Czerka would want to face off against the Exchange. Or vice versa. Y'know, it almost sounds like someone very cleverly put the two of them at odds. You went to Rii'shn before, didn't you?"
Voice Stress Analysis: Speculative

Input - Jen Sahara: "HK."
Voice Stress Analysis: Warning

Output: "Query: Is this going to be another discussion on foreseeable consequences, master?"

Auditory Input: Angry Sigh
…Source: Jen Sahara

Input – Jen Sahara: "HK, power down."

Output: "Statement: As you desire, master. Signing off."
Shutdown routines initiated

Canderous Ordo:

We were headed to Korriban, and that sat well with me. I had no patience for the Sith and their little training school, but Korriban did have an underbelly of trade and crime and opportunities that would certainly keep my life interesting… unless I stayed with Revan. I still hadn't decided.

She wasn't what she once was, that was certain. If Revan had been a Mando'ade, then nothing in the galaxy would have stopped us. And now, maybe she was just a broken echo of former glory. I needed to know.

She'd been avoiding me since we left Manaan, hanging around that Cathar and the storeroom that doubled as a medbay. I'd heard the Jedi princess once or twice, but it didn't seem like Bastila was particularly coherent. Whatever had happened at the bottom of that cursed ocean had certainly done a number on her.

I'd tracked Revan down to the rear of the ship, watching a newsvid while the Twi'lek's pet droid tinkered with one of the control panels. HK-47 was downloading the holo-feed for Revan; I kept a wary eye on him as I walked closer. That robot was efficient enough that I wouldn't underestimate him.

Revan tensed as I stepped closer, but kept her eyes on the newsvid. It was some story about Czerka and the Exchange at each other's throats, over a minor explosion in Manaan and some mess on their sister planet, Rii'shn.

"I can't think that Czerka would want to face off against the Exchange. Or vice versa," I said slowly. I'd wondered earlier where Revan had gone. Bastila had mentioned she'd left Manaan altogether.
"Y'know, it almost sounds like someone very cleverly put the two of them at odds. You went to Rii'shn before, didn't you?"
Revan looked sharply over at HK. "HK-" she muttered, before the combat droid cut her off.

"Query: Is this going to be another discussion on foreseeable consequences, master?" HK answered in his metallic voice. I had little use for machines, but damn, this one was both amusing and competent.

Revan's voice cut through the air. "HK, power down." The droid voiced an assent before shutting down completely, and I took the opportunity to appraise her. I considered myself a decisive man, but something held me back from acquainting Revan with the truth about herself. Maybe it was pure curiosity. I wanted to understand her first, to see if there was anything left worth knowing, to see if she deserved the truth.

"You've been avoiding me," I told her flatly.

"Hardly," Revan replied, but her eyes darted to the exit. A frown crossed her face, and she dragged her gaze back to me. She'd healed well, only a faint yellowing remained on the left side of her face. She's damn lucky. I would have killed most people for doing what she did. And maybe that was it. She still owed me; one punch wasn't enough to even the scales between us.

"Spar with me, Jen Sahara," I offered.

She blinked. "You want to fight?"

I grinned slowly. "Yeah. Unarmed combat. Are you up for it?"

An exasperated puff of air escaped her mouth. "Are you getting bored, Canderous? I remember chatting with a Trandoshan, once, who said that if Mandalorians go too long between battles they start killing each other just to pass the time."

I laughed loudly. "You're thinking of Iridonians. We Mando'ade spar, to pass the time. It's how we test each other's mettle. Come on, Jen Sahara, let's see what you're made of."

She stared at me intently for a moment. "I'm not particularly keen on messing up my face any more, Ordo," she said finally.

"Bah," I spat in disappointment, my lips curling. She isn't who she used to be. Not one bit.

"I didn't expect you to be a coward."

I could see her temper rising; her brows lowered and she scowled angrily. "Hardly," she hissed, eyes flashing. "Fine. I'll take the bait. Let's do this then, Mandalorian."

I felt a fierce grin forming as I stood opposite her. "No Force powers," I said flatly. "No blasters, no weapons." I unclipped two mini-blasters and left them by the wall; the damn Selkath hadn't returned my repeating blaster before we'd left. A vibrosword, shiv-blade, and two 'frag grenades followed.

Revan quirked an eyebrow at me, her anger had already fled in keeping with her mercurial character. I wondered idly if the Revan of old had been so temperamental. "Is that all?" she asked dryly.

"No armour," I grunted, pulling at a worn buckle that opened with an electronic hiss. I'd rifled through the supplies on the Ebon Hawk, cast-offs and spare kit from Davik Kang, but I needed to find a decent vendor. I'd had little time to acquire anything on Manaan, and what options I'd found had been less than desirable. "First to yield loses."

"No armour," I grunted, pulling at a worn buckle that opened with an electronic hiss. I'd rifled through the supplies on the Ebon Hawk, cast-offs and spare kit from Davik Kang, but I needed to find a decent vendor. I'd had little time to acquire anything on Manaan, and what options I'd found had been less than desirable. "First to yield loses."

Revan looked down at her cloth shirt and then grimaced, shrugging her shoulders. She'd equipped as little armour as she had weapons. Mine dropped to the ground with an audible thud, followed by a
heavy plysteel interleaved shirt. Bare-chested, I bared my teeth at her as her gaze trailed down my chest.

I wasn't bad to look at, I certainly knew that.

"Are you ready?" I taunted, raising my fists. Her eyes snapped back up and caught mine, a flinty green gaze. She nodded, legs apart and arms held loosely at her sides while she appraised me.

I stepped forward, lunging with an exploratory left hook. Swifter than I'd expected, she ducked under and side-stepped, but I'd predicted that and kicked out with a leg. She somersaulted over it and landed behind me gracefully.

"No Force powers," I repeated, turning to face her. Damn, but she was quick. How much was innate I didn't know.

"No Force powers," she echoed. "As much as I'm able to, at any rate." It was muttered, under her breath, but I caught the words and scowled.

"A fair, clean fight, Jen Sahara," I ground out, circling around her. She kept her eyes on me, but made no move to advance. I jumped forward and let loose a flurry of blows that she somehow evaded before rolling to the side and coming up in a crouch.

*Come on, Ordo, show her what you're made of.* Another kick that she deftly dodged, and now a mocking expression emerged on her face. *Guess it's time to distract her.*

"Did I ever tell you that Revan once fought Mand'alor, much like this?" I panted, circling around her. I feinted to the left before punching with my right, and yet somehow she was dodging almost before I'd started moving. *I need to connect just once, solidly, and I can down her.*

"No," she bit out, brows lowering in distaste. "I'm surprised she didn't just fry your Mandalore with some dark Force power."

So, she has a bad opinion of herself. I wonder if the Jedi are responsible for that. *Well, I only heard the stories. But she kept true to the Mando'ade way. Fists, feet, nothing else but pure strength and speed.*

Revan snorted derisively, ducking under an exploratory roundhouse. "Sounds pretty fallible, Canderous. I'm sure if someone wanted to win they'd just stim themselves up."

"They could, but no Mando'ade would follow them." I stepped forward with a kick, hitting empty air again. "Are you afraid to hit me?" I taunted.

"No," she scowled, and I jabbed my fist forward directly towards her side. *It should have hit her,* and yet somehow she dodged to the left once more, this time counter-punching and striking me in the gut.

I grunted in surprise, and raised my arm to block a second punch. "You'll have to do better than that," I jeered, and recognized surprise on her face as she realized how ineffectual that had been. I dropped down and struck out with a leg, connecting solidly and tripping her over. I jumped forward with a raised elbow, but she'd rolled out of the way and I landed on the floor with a thud.

We both scrambled to our feet; she was cautious once more as we circled around, both searching for an opening. I heard a series of beeps from the Twi'lek's utility droid in the corner; it caught Revan's attention briefly and I grabbed the opportunity, vaulting forward with a rapid jab. She started ducking the instant I moved, and once more I connected with empty air.
A sharp boot to the back of my thigh had me flailing off-balance, followed by a blow to the back. I fell, and converted it to a roll, coming up in a crouch and flinging my forearms up to block the next impending attack.

But she was four steps back, in the centre of the half-circle room, breathing heavily and eyeing me over. *She's testing me, as I am her,* I realized in annoyance. Her blows were impotent, but I wasn't sure I could get past her speed.

"Are you ever going to stop dodging?" I asked mockingly. "Like a hood-mouse running from a kath hound."

Revan actually poked her tongue out, and that loosed an unexpected laugh from me. *She certainly ain't boring. Or cowardly, despite her initial reluctance.* I struck out with a boot followed by my right hook – she jumped over the first then threw her arms up to block.

My fist slammed through her guard and into her jaw.

She crashed backwards onto her arse; I lunged forward to exploit the opening but Revan was already scrabbling backwards to her feet, a hand cradling her face as she glared sullenly at me. A trickle of red seeped through her fingers.

"That's first blood to me, Jen Sahara," I said smugly.

"Sithspit," she muttered, rubbing her face. The blood came from her lip; it'd be swollen by the morning. "I think I'll stick to keeping out of the way, thanks."

"Are you regretting it already?" I mocked. "Not many Force-users like fighting blind. They become dependent on their magic tricks, like old men hiding behind a shield. That's why we admired Revan, you see. Even after defeating the might of our army, she still agreed to an unarmed duel with Mand'alor. And won."

"Admired," Revan spat out disbelievingly. "You admired that insane monster who slaughtered millions around the galaxy."

"People die in wars, Jen Sahara," I said coldly. "From what I've heard and seen of Revan, she killed only when necessary to achieve her goals. Malak, on the other hand, kills gratuitously even among his own followers." I shook my head in disgust. "It's a stupid waste. I don't understand how his army has expanded so rapidly."

Her brows had slammed down again and her eyes glittered dangerously. She wasn't enjoying the conversation - some part of her didn't appreciate discussing Revan so candidly. I wondered if she had any idea at all.

"Are you going to talk or fight, Canderous?" she jeered.

"I can do both," I replied drily.

The utility room we were sparring in tapered into a tight corner at the stern of the freighter; I recognized that as the best place for crowding her and landing a blow. I stepped forward and loosed a jab that she deftly avoided again, but in doing so she'd backed right into the nook. I put as much power and speed into a swinging right uppercut as I could, but still, *still,* she saw it coming and dived out of the way, rolling behind me and striking out with a sharp kick to my side.

I grunted, throwing my arms up instinctively as I twisted to face her; she'd backed off once more into the centre of the room. *How can she react so quickly?* It seemed like there was no delay between my
action and her subsequent reaction; to get past her dodging I'd either have to distract her or trick her.

"Did you know that by beating Mand'alor, Revan had a claim to the title?" I said conversationally, moving around her. I wanted to try backing her into the corner again. Revan kept her eyes fixed on me, but her face had tightened. "I'm not saying the clans would have accepted her, being an outsider, but they would have listened to her case if she'd consented to clan adoption. If she were still alive, I would follow her."

That definitely startled her; I used the opportunity to launch a fist that connected solidly in her side. She stumbled backwards with a yell and failed to dodge my other fist that sunk deep into her solar plexus.

She crashed onto her back with a thud, groaning, and I capitalized by launching a flying kick. Somehow her instincts were faster; she rolled to one side before leaping up to her feet.

I'd hurt her this time. She was doubled over, breathing unevenly, pain lines scored in her face. Blood dripped down her chin from the earlier blow, and her lip was already visibly swelling.

"Had enough, Jen Sahara?" I mocked, stepping forward towards the stern of the ship once more. Revan was wary now - when I struck out with my right hand, she bobbed under it but didn't counter-punch this time. She jumped backwards to avoid a kick, and was once more crowded into the corner.

I was coming in from a slight angle, leaving a bigger opening on my right. *I won't wait for her to duck to the side this time, I'll just expect her to.*

I punched out with my left fist and anticipated a dodge; my right hand immediately swung in a powerful roundhouse that slammed into the side of her head. Revan crumpled to the floor.

I jumped on her, pinning her arms with my knees, one fist raised to connect again. She moaned and stirred, turning to face me with an unfocused expression.

I vaguely heard the side door swish open.

"You ready to yield yet?" I taunted. Her eyes cleared, losing the glassy look.

"Ordo! What- what are you doing?" Onasi had entered the room behind me. He sounded amusingly outraged. "Get off her!"

"Yes, I yield," she hissed. "Damn it."

I grunted in satisfaction and stood, offering Revan a hand which she grudgingly accepted. I yanked her to her feet, and turned to face the Republic captain.

He had a hand on his holstered blaster, body tensed, ready to take action. My muscles clenched in response, and I immediately glanced toward my weapons – on the other side of the room.

"It's alright, Carth," Revan muttered. "We're just- training."

"Training," Carth responded blankly. I saw him take in my shirtless garb and Revan's loose clothing. He turned a dark scowl on me. "Right. You sure this isn't some sort of primitive Mandalorian mating ritual?"

Revan laughed at that, genuine and loud, before it turned into a choke. She stepped back, leaning
heavily against the wall. *That comment isn't worth my time. I guess Republic's version of sparring is firing blasters at a wall.*

I looked back at Revan. She'd fought well, and was quicker than should be possible, but she lacked stamina. *She's out of shape, not what she was once.* Still, it was a warm satisfaction to know I had beaten her, she who had once taken down our leader. *And she's definitely gonna feel this come tomorrow.*

"Training?" I repeated back at her, raising a brow.

"Yeah," she sighed, closing her eyes. "Tomorrow, Canderous. Every damn day until we land on Korriban. But for now… I'm gonna go lie down."

xxx

**Belaya Linn:**

Dreshdae was a cesspool of lowlifes and mercenaries, and that was not even counting the Dark Jedi. I had been here little over ten days, and already I was considering turning tail.

I sat down on the hard bedroll that served as my sleeping quarters in the cheap dormitory I was renting, my fists clenching in my lap. My courage was lacking. I had yet to venture near the Sith Academy and whether it was fear of the Dark Side or finding Juhani there of her own volition I did not know.

*Perhaps a year of searching is enough. Perhaps she truly is gone.*

That fateful day, I'd cursed Master Quatra's name to the Outer Rim and back. Weeks passed with the healers uncertain whether she would pull through or not; I had stayed, then, if only to find out for Juhani's sake. For I suspected my friend had taken flight believing in her Master's death. *It was Quatra's fault, all of it. Everyone could see Juhani felt too strongly for her Master, but to throw it back in her face like she was nothing…*

It wasn't worthy of a Jedi, let alone a Master.

I sighed, looking down at the lightsaber cupped gently in my hands. Master Tefain had entrusted it to me when I'd passed the Knight trials; it had been constructed with a rare bondar crystal and glowed a gentle gold when activated. *Tefain… what must you think of me now. My gentle master pleaded with me to stay at the Enclave, but how could I? How could I desert Juhani, who was as dear to me as… as Quatra was to her, little did she know.*

When Quatra woke from her healing coma, I launched into her verbally and without mercy. Now, I was somewhat ashamed at my tirade, but also uncertain that I would do anything differently, had I the chance. After that, I'd left Dantooine, vowing to find my friend.

I'd started my search on Taris, Juhani's homeworld, a planet whose racial prejudices were second in magnitude only to the scale of inequality between the rich and the rest. Juhani spoke rarely of her youth, and when she did I heard bitterness and desolation dredging up from the depths of her soul. I hadn't expected her there, but one's place of origin seemed an obvious starting point.

I found dark whispers, and little else. Whispers that a small handful of slavers had recently met their end in a bloody, ruthless way by a Sith assassin - for no Jedi would act like that, even if the plasma beam was rumoured to be a dark blue. My heart clenched with dread but, despite my efforts, I could not even dredge up a reliable description of the slavers' murderer. Whoever it had been had left Taris shortly after the event.
Coruscant was my next destination; I hoped in vain she had returned to the Order, perhaps believing a different Enclave would be easier or more forgiving. A holo-message from Tefain awaited me there, pleading once more for my return. They should have been begging Juhani, not me. Quatra is still a Master, still with the Jedi, and Juhani… well, it was entirely possible my old friend was now one with the Force.

I'd spent the last few months hiring private detectives - even an Exchange snoop - to no avail. Eventually, I'd surrendered to the last obvious option: The Sith. I must gather my courage, put on my bravest face, and enter the Academy. If she truly had fallen, then surely here I would find mention of her, whether she be at the Academy or elsewhere amongst Darth Malak's forces.

And if not, then I will return to Tefain. If he is still alive.

The news of the Dantooine bombing was appalling. That Darth Malak had both the gall and the firepower to mount such an attack would have sent ripples of fear across the galaxy. I'd always thought Darth Revan had been the stronger of the two, but the Sith forces had increased since her demise. The apprentice had certainly outstripped the master.

And Tefain… The thought of his potential death saddened me, yet perhaps the months of living rough and hiding my identity as a Jedi had hardened my empathy somewhat. I hoped my old master survived and that I would one day reunite with him, but finding Juhani was my primary goal.

I took in a deep breath, and glanced around the bare dormitory. Six other sentients were currently residing here, although the room was empty for now. As a Czerka-run hostel it was bare, rundown, and eminently affordable. A good starting place for one attempting to approach the Sith Academy.

I heard footsteps and hurriedly concealed my lightsaber; to my fellow roommates I was posing as a mercenary down on her luck – a common occurrence in Dreshdae. A Rodian entered the room, giving me an affable nod as he walked passed, a tray of hot food clutched tight in his grip.

"How's the job market?" he asked in passable Basic.

"Fine," I answered briefly, not wishing to encourage further conversation. The Rodian took a spoon of the meal in front of him and grimaced, the corners of his small mouth turning down in disgust. It was a plyfoam tray heaped with unidentifiable brown lumps, and did not appear appetizing in the least.

"This is awful," he commented, and I couldn't help a chuckle in agreement. I certainly would not miss the food here when I finally departed.

"Indeed," I agreed. "Korriban's cuisine is not particularly palatable." He stared at me unblinking until I shifted in discomfort. "Uh, I mean it tastes like frelling kath dung and smells like marsh-toad puke?" I cringed, aware that my Chandrilan accent was out of place, and stood abruptly.

"Goodbye. I am going now," I said stiltedly, and hurried out of the room, feeling awkward and embarrassed. I was ill at ease, pretending to be something I most decidedly was not.

I must stop dawdling. It matters not what some anonymous Rodian thinks of me; what is important is seeing this through. I'd heard one of the Sith Masters often frequented the cantina; a Twi'lek female with a sense of humour and a soft spot for other women. That must be my starting point.

My steps became purposeful as I headed towards the local cantina. I would discover a way in, and then see if there was any information to be had about my friend.

And if by some miracle I did find a fallen Juhani, I still had no idea what I would say or do.
Mission Vao:

"Big Z, look what I got," I said breathlessly, my arms full of an exoskeleton that wasn't quite as light as I'd hoped.

Zaalbar glanced up from the armour he'd been repairing – he'd been doing this inventory of the ship's equipment, and I'd been bored enough to scout around for more. Canderous, it seemed, had quite the stockpile.

"(Mission, is that the bounty hunter's armour?)" Zaalbar replied, his hands stilling on the plysteel plates he'd been rejoining. The Wookiee was seated at a workbench in the engineering bay of the 'Hawk, crowding over the tools and benchtop alike.

Although, Big Z did tend to crowd over everything.

"Yeah!" I answered, lugging it over to him. "It's meant to have some sort of Force resistant powers, but it's broken in places."

"(Mission,)" Zaalbar said slowly, his brows lowering. "(Didn't Canderous Ordo retrieve that from Calo Nord's corpse?)"

"Uh huh. D'ya think you can fix it? It might be useful, what with going to Korriban and all-"

"(Mission!)" Zaalbar howled, cutting me off. I blinked in surprise.

"Sheesh, Big Z, where's the fire?"

"(Please do not tell me you stole that from the Mandalorian!)" Zaalbar wailed. "(I know you are bored, but he will notice that it is missing, Mission!)"

I scowled angrily, folding my arms and glaring at him. "How stupid d'ya think I am, Big Z? I bought it from him. It's too small for him, and broken besides, and I still have my pazaak and swoop winnings. I'm not a brainless Gamorrean, y'know!"

Zaalbar looked abashed at that. Well, about as abashed as a seven foot Wookiee can look. He scratched his head uncomfortably, causing his fur to stick out in all directions. He's getting scruffy looking again. I'm gonna have to do something about that soon. It didn't go down too well last time, what with the bath and all.

"(I believe I jumped to the wrong conclusion, Mission. I certainly do not think of you as stupid.)" He leaned over and picked up the blue and white exoskeleton, perusing the side plates that had been severed by a lightsaber. "(You are right, it would be very helpful if I can fix it. I might be able to modify it to fit you.)"

I beamed at the Wookiee. "Great, I'll leave you to it for a bit then, Big Z."

I was starting to feel restless. The hyperspace journey had taken ages, and I really wanted to talk to Jen – even if I was still upset with her. But it seemed like her every waking minute was spent training with Juhani – who barely spoke two words to me – or getting beaten up by Canderous. And she was distant whenever I did manage to collar her. Friendly, but distant.

I guess I missed my friend.
Maybe I should track her down now. Looks like Big Z's gonna be awhile. And Carth won't play any more pazaak against me. I grinned. Carth wasn't bad, for a soldier old enough to be my dad, but he certainly wasn't letting me score any more creds from him.

Zaalbar waved me away absently, and I wandered out the door, keeping my footsteps silent and my ears open for any sounds. Soft voices in the direction of the central common room reached me, and I quietly moved in that direction.

A haggard and barely lucid Bastila Shan was leaning heavily against Juhani. Whoa, she's awake! I kept back in the shadow of the open corridor, away from the artificial lighting, and unabashedly eavesdropped.

"...believe it's a weapon that's powering Darth Malak's army," Bastila was whispering. She looked terrible, her skin sagged from hollow cheekbones and there were bruised shadows under her eyes. She looked old. "We have no other explanation for the exponential growth of his armada. The Star Map found on Dantooine had the coordinates of the four planets; hence our quest." She closed her eyes, panting slightly as if the conversation had exhausted her.

"So if it's a weapon, our endgame will be to destroy it then?" Jen was standing back from them, her arms folded defensively as she stared at them both. Whereas Juhani looked worried whenever she surveyed Bastila, Jen just seemed resolute. Like she was steeling herself for something unpleasant.

"If we are correct in our assumption," Bastila whispered. Juhani put an arm around her.

"I'll tell the others," Jen muttered. "Not that it's much more than what we already knew, but I'm not holding back information from them. They all deserve to know what we're up against." A dark colour suddenly flushed her face, as if she'd recalled something decidedly distasteful. "We need to talk, Bastila. Alone."

"I am tired," Bastila mumbled from next to Juhani. "I do not deny you, Jen, but I am... exhausted."

"Later," Juhani interrupted in a quiet but steady voice, as she began to lead Bastila towards the makeshift medbay. "We must focus on Bastila's recovery first, Jen. We will need all our resources on Korriban."

As the two shuffled away, I heard the plaintive query: "I do not understand why we are headed there, Juhani," before they entered the medbay. Jen sighed in frustration, before turning around to leave through the starboard exit. She took two steps passed me, stopped, and then turned again.

"Mission," she said wryly. "How long have you been listening in?"

I grinned impishly at her. "Awhile. Long enough that you shoulda sensed me by now."

Jen chuckled. "We were a bit distracted."

"I know," I said, wandering over to sit down on one of the central benches. The canvas material had a fraying hole on the edge of it where plimfoam was showing. I picked at it absently. "It's good news though, that she's up. She'll be back to her bossy self in no time I guess."

She laughed, louder this time, and came to sit next to me. "Yeah. Hopefully by the time we hit Korriban, because we could really do with her help."

"But she's famous, right?" I asked, pulling a long strand of plimfoam out from the bench. I grimaced, and tried to stuff it back in. "I mean, surely some of the Sith would recognize her on Korriban?"
"She won't be able to leave the 'Hawk. But I was meaning the bond between us. From everything I've been told, Korriban's a dark place. Guess it has to be, with a Sith Academy there and all." Her words were wry, and the corner of her mouth lifted in a grin. But a different emotion spoke clearly through her human eyes. She's terrified, of the Dark Side.

Well, of course that made sense. Jen had been so angry at times, and the sabotage on the Ebon Hawk certainly hadn't been the actions of a friend. Or a Jedi. But I hadn't really clicked that it would frighten her so. Of course it would! Sheesh, it would scare me spitless.

"How's the bond thing going, anyway?" I asked curiously.

"Not so well," the human sighed, rubbing the side of her face and then wincing as she inadvertently pressed against ugly swelling. "She doesn't respond to me. I'm not sure if it's purposeful or not… she had a lot of psychic damage. Juhani said there was some sort of vast entity near the Star Map on Manaan that damn near blew Bastila's mind apart. I think the length of her recovery indicates what a near thing it's been."

"She's gonna be okay though, right? I mean, she sounded okay."

Jen smiled at me then, her mouth tilting up in a way that made the bruising all the more pronounced. "Yes, I think so."

I pulled my feet up on the bench, wrapping my arms around them as I looked over my human friend. I wonder how much kolto she's going through daily. Fortunately, Davik Kang had left the Ebon Hawk well-stocked with adventuring essentials; I'd seen Big Z move crates of healing supplies and stims over to our makeshift medbay. Good thing too, 'cause I bet no one thought to stock up on Manaan, the freaking kolto capital of the galaxy.

"Why are you doing this thing with Canderous?" I asked her in curiosity. "Is it some sort of training? I can't see Canderous letting you fire freaky Force powers at him without getting his own back. And he certainly is getting his own back. I haven't seen any obvious marks on him, yet."

"No Force powers, just unarmed sparring," Jen confirmed, which made even less sense. The port door opened, and we turned our heads to see Juhani re-enter the room, walking towards us with a tired smile.

"Bastila is asleep again," Juhani murmured. "I am very glad she was able to get up. It bodes well for her recovery."

Jen nodded at the Cathar, but otherwise said nothing.

"Y'know, Jen, that just seems a little unbalanced," I said, rewinding the conversation. "I mean, if you're not using Force powers, how in the Outer Rim d'ya expect to beat Canderous with your fists?"

Juhani interrupted, answering before Jen had a chance to. "The Force guides our actions unknowingly, even when we aren't drawing on it." Her tawny eyes were trained on Jen. "The more you are familiar with it, the more it will guide your actions and sharpen your senses."

Jen was frowning. "Do you mean the reason I manage to dodge most of his blows is because of the Force?"

"I am sure much of it is innate, and a lot trained," Juhani responded quietly. "But put a neural disruptor around your neck and you would notice the lack."
"I bet Canderous doesn't realize that," Jen muttered under her breath. "About me or Evil Bitch."

I didn't think she meant that comment to be heard, but we had, and Juhani sent her a piercing look in response. "What- what do you mean by that, Jen?" The Cathar had taken two steps forward towards her, a furry palm raised as if in question.

"Oh, it's nothing," Jen replied, shooting her a frown. "Just that Canderous won't stop going on about the frelling blood duel between his Mandalore and that sithspawn Darth Revan. I'd rather not hear anymore about it, but Mandalorians seem to have this perverse sort of respect for their conquerors."

"He is kinda weird," I agreed, wrinkling my nose. I noticed then that Juhani's mouth was slightly open, in stunned surprise or something – which looked weird on her stripy face. I wonder what's up with her.

"I do believe there is something I must do. Excuse me." Juhani said at last, her eyes darting away from us both. Jen stared after her in confusion, even long after Juhani had left the room.

xXx

**Bandon Stone:**

Kashyyyk. My lip curled in disgust. *An empty planet filled with brainless Wookiees and pathetic Czerka minions. And supposedly home to a Star Map.*

Three days until the star cruiser would leave hyperspace and enter Kashyyyk's orbit. According to the intercepted comms, there would be at least one Jedi Master waiting. *Vrook Lamar. That'll be… interesting.*

But my primary mission was to locate the Star Map and destroy it, and then lie in ambush waiting for Malak's ex-girlfriend. *If I take out the Jedi farts first, then Revan will be suspicious when she lands. I can deal with the wrinkled old coots in the aftermath.*

It would certainly be an interesting challenge, trying to track down the ancient Rakatan legacy, especially seeing that Malak didn't know its location. *I find that curious. That one of the Star Maps Revan found by herself. I wonder if even then, before they turned on the Republic, she didn't quite trust Malak. In which case it was imbecilic of her not to have dealt with him earlier.*

Revan had never overly impressed me. She had a tendency to listen to her subordinates if they held an intelligent viewpoint and, while that might at first seem advantageous, it also left her vulnerable to betrayal. *A true Sith forges his own path, and cuts down any who oppose him.*

But Revan's sheer power, ahhh. I'd certainly respected that. I'd heard that a Force user of her strength hadn't been found in centuries, and Malak was her equal in that regard, or tantalisingly close to. And the both of them had tempers that, once loosed, were ferocious enough to rock planets.

I'd always been careful not to warrant their rage, or deflect it onto someone else if necessary. I'd seen both of them kill in a blazing fury, and I wasn't idiotic enough to roll the dice with my own life.

*Such is the glorious power of the Sith. The power of life itself. One day, Malak would stumble and I'd take over the reins. My power was still emerging, and so was my knowledge. But not yet. I will bide my time, and grow my strength, and strike when the time is right.*

I heard the exit hatch open and felt the presence of a comrade enter the room. I remained staring impassively out at space so he would come to me. It was crucial to maintain the pecking order, even with the little things, and I was undoubtedly Malak's first apprentice.
"Bandon," Yudan Rosh acknowledged as he took the final step next to me. "I've had reports that Lamar will be accompanied by at least two other Masters on Kashyyk."

"And?" I said in a bored tone. "Is that supposed to make me quiver in fear?"

"Don't turn this into a pissing contest," he returned coldly. "Our target is Darth Revan, not Lamar or anyone else from the Order."

I snorted, allowing the corner of my mouth to turn up in a derisive sneer. As a race, I'd never considered Twi'leks brave, and Yudan hadn't changed my mind in that regard. His Force abilities weren't to be ignored, however; nor his previous battle experience. I didn't count him my equal, but that was due to his lack of ambition rather than strength. Yudan had quite the power, and the quite the past. "Are you going to run from three robes, Yudan?" I mocked.

His expression didn't change, but then Yudan Rosh had always been a frakking icicle. He held my gaze. "I remain focused on our Master's orders. We are heading to Kashyyyk to kill Darth Revan, not play games with Jedi Masters."

"Are you questioning me, Yudan?" I whispered. I drew deep into the Force, letting it fill me to completion with sweet, sweet power. It was a threat, a vow, a promise of what I would unleash if Yudan Rosh dared defy me.

He stilled, his cold eyes fixed warily on mine.

In a straight shoot-out of sheer strength between us, it would be an interesting match. One day soon, I knew, I wouldn't let him back down from my taunts. One day soon I'd grind him beneath my feet.

But for now he said nothing; merely stared blankly at me.

"You're scared you'll finally have to face Tokare." My tone was malicious, and Yudan's yellow eyes narrowed. But he still remained silent. Pathetic. Oh, Vandar Tokare was definitely one to be careful around, but he also very rarely engaged in any form of combat. But then, he wasn't my former master.

The Twi'lek's face had turned to stone, but he hadn't embraced the Force. I'd never quite decided if he was naturally cowardly, or if the steel inside him had been snapped when Darth Revan bedded him. He'd been a general in the past, one of the frakking Jedi Thirteen - or, as those devoted Fleet twats used to call them, Revan's Guard of Twelve. And once, there'd been no one as besotted with Revan Freeflight as Yudan Rosh. Apart from Malak. I snorted in derision. I hadn't been involved in the Wars, so all I'd heard was Nisotsa's drivel. But I did know that Yudan was a captain, one to fill the ranks and lead the minions into slaughter. He'd never be more than that. He'd followed Revan and Malak since the Mandalorian wars, and one days he'd follow someone into his own grave.

"I am leading this mission, Yudan. We will do what we need to, and if further opportunities arrive then we shall take them," I stated coldly, turning away from him and staring once more out through the transparisteel window, into the abyss of space. "I am no fool, but nor shall I fail to take advantage of fortuitous circumstances merely because you are a little frightened. Now, leave me be."

xXx

**Carth Onasi:**

Jen was alone in the central common room when I walked in, a lightsaber held loosely in her hand. The swelling on her lip had died down, but she had a cut under one eye, and a large purpling bruise on the side of her face.
"You look awful," I said. Jen was spending her waking hours either training with Juhani or the Mandalorian. And why I could understand the former, the sparring with Ordo seemed senseless, considering she didn't actively use the Force.

Jen grinned impishly at me. "Aw, Republic, you sure know how to make a woman feel special."

I flushed at that, belatedly realizing how tactless my words had been. "Sorry. It's just- I don't really see what you're getting out of those fights, other than an extra handful of bruises."

"I beat him, yesterday," she said absently. "I got a lucky blow in, now I've got to figure out how to repeat it." She sighed deeply, and then winced, one arm pressing against her ribs. "I dunno, Carth, it's honing my reflexes. And there's something to be said for a good, clean fight…" her lips twisted. "Maybe it's an outlet for me, and that's useful in itself."

"What, getting beaten up daily stops you losing your temper?" I was only half-serious, but she frowned, and I could tell she was taking my suggestion onboard.

"Maybe," she said softly. "I'm working on that with Juhani. Control, I mean. I…" she trailed off, her gaze fixed somewhere on the durasteel wall behind me. She seemed to have lost the thread of the conversation, and had than damn distant look on her face again. There was a large part of me still angry, still furious, about what she'd done, but then I'd remember the frozen, sick look on her face when I'd mentioned Darth Revan's invasion of Deralia. Or I'd catch Jen unawares in the common room, glancing over to Mission with a shamed expression in her eyes.

Jen regretted what she'd done. I wasn't sure if I could get past it, but I had to give her credit for facing up to us and trying to put things right.

I hadn't seen Jen much during the hyperspace journey, though. Neither had Mission, and I'd heard the girl complaining about it. Maybe it was remorse that was keeping Jen tucked up with Ordo and Juhani, as much as training - for the both of them seemed to have completely forgiven Jen for scuttling the Ebon Hawk.

I frowned, and recalled the reason I'd tracked her down.

"We're approaching Korriban," I said, moving to the kitchenette to brew some caffè. "We'll be exiting hyperspace tomorrow. Do you have a plan, Jen, or are you just going to rush in like usual and this time really get yourself killed?"

She was silent; I turned to see she'd dropped her head in her hands. "I'd counted on Bastila being awake and coherent by now," she said, her voice muffled. "I've only had two conversations with her since we boarded, and she's not in any state to aid me or answer any of my frelling questions." She sighed, a stifled exhale of breath, before continuing. "I don't deny that Korriban freaks me out a little, Carth… but we've gotta strike while we have the element of surprise."

"Freaks you out," I muttered in disbelief. "Jen, Korriban is a training ground for the Dark Side-"

"Yeah, I'm aware of that," she interrupted sarcastically. I frowned at her hunched figure.

"Let me finish," I shot back. "Look… I used to think it was just a fancy name for something I see every day. Corruption is everywhere. People are greedy and stupid and do horrible things. But I'm starting to think it's different for the Jedi. That there's this evil watching them, waiting for its chance."

"Like some bad, scary monster?" Her voice was flippant, though her posture was anything but. She was still huddled up on the plimfoam bench, refusing to acknowledge me with her gaze.
"Don't make light of it, Jen," I said sharply. "Just look at Juhani. She seems as straight and true as any Jedi should be… and yet think of the way you found her, back on Tatooine. And then there's you..."

"What about me?" she snapped defensively, jerking up to glare green daggers at me. She can really ask that, after Manaan?

I frowned. "Jen, you have so much courage and strength in you... and yet, there's this incredible darkness, too. Like the flip side of a cred coin. When you have so much power, the stakes are higher. I can only imagine the kind of conflict that goes on inside you, and with no training I'm concerned… more than concerned… at what's going to happen when you get near a Sith Academy."

She didn't answer, but I could see the truth of the matter written on her face. And here I was, worrying about the person who'd blown us out of the sky a mere fortnight ago. I could feel myself scowling. I'd been doing a lot of that lately. "Do you even know where this map is?"

"No." She sighed, her face solemn and set as if carved from permacrete. Wayward curls framed and softened the look a little. "I've been searching the lowerbase holonets. There's scant information on Korriban - but there's only one colony and its right next to the Academy. Also… there's mention of a nearby Sith-controlled valley steeped in dark artefacts and archaeological digs."

"Sith-controlled," I said flatly. "Of course. Blast it, Jen, we don't even know what these Star Maps do! Nothing about this mission makes any sense. Bastila, a Padawan for all that she's experienced, being saddled with the responsibility of tracking down our best chance at defeating the Sith. Why? And how do you fit into this – and don't tell me your scholarly background is useful when Bastila already found two of these maps without your help!"

An eyebrow quirked over an amused green eye. Damn that woman. Despite myself, her amusement took the edge off my anger.

"Are you quite finished?" she drawled.

"No," I bit out, and did my best to level her with a serious glare. "But some answers will do for now."

"No," I bit out, and did my best to level her with a serious glare. "But some answers will do for now."

She didn't reply, and I left my cooling caff to walk closer to her. Nothing for it. I may as well blurt it out. "This has something to do with whatever happened on Deralia," I said in what I hoped was a matter-of-fact tone. Her shoulders tensed and that piercing green gaze shuttered.

"No… Carth, I don't want to talk about this. I can't," she pleaded.

"Jen – this whole Star Map business – you can't think that you're here because you got some fancy qualification at a backwater Academia. You're a strong Force Sensitive, that much is obvious, but something happened on Deralia when Darth Revan invaded. And somehow the Star Maps are involved."

"Please, Carth, please just drop it," her voice rose in pitch, but my words kept coming.

"I can't. I'm sorry… but I can't. This is bigger than just you. All of our lives are at stake here… and the future of the Republic."

"I don't know what happened! I don't remember, okay?" Her eyes were still squeezed shut, and she was visibly shaking. I felt like a damn heel, but this was too big to ignore for the sake of her feelings.

I sighed softly, and sat down next to her on the plimfoam bench. I felt her visibly withdraw from me.
"Look – I know you've got black spots in your memory, and it's been messing you up. It's just that… Do you know why?"

A pause, and then – "What do you mean?" in a clipped, angry tone. *I'll take that as a no, then.*

"Jen, you were captured by Darth Revan's forces when they invaded Deralia. I- uh, found this out on Manaan. There's no easy way of saying this, but you were hurt – badly hurt - over days. By the Sith, I mean. The Jedi rescued and healed you, but it's the reason you have your memory loss, and the Jedi seem to have left you floundering in the dark about it all. No wonder you're confused. Just how long have you been travelling with the Jedi?"

I realized then that she was staring at me once more; but her eyes were wide and round in a slack, expressionless face. *Stang, this was an idiotic thing to push, Onasi.* But Bastila hadn't been honest with Jen, and Jen couldn't get a handle on the Force, and we were headed straight for Korriban-

She was muttering *no* under her breath, squeezing her eyes tightly shut. And I felt like a complete heel. If Dodonna had been right, then Jen had been *tortured* for who knew how long, and here I was trying to dredge it all up simply because Bastila had kept secrets. Suddenly I felt thoroughly ashamed, and reached a hand out to rest over hers. She flinched backward, and I dropped it.

"I'm sorry," I said quietly. "I shouldn't be pushing this. I- uh, it was wrong of me."

Her eyes snapped open, and a stony look settled in their depths. "Yes," she bit out. "It's not like you enjoy speaking about your past, Onasi, so why you think you can grill me about mine when I can't remember it, I don't know."

"Because it affects us all," I answered back slowly. "But maybe it's Bastila who needs to do the talking. And you're- you're right, it is hypocritical of me. I don't like talking about my past, and I honestly don't see why you'd be interested, but if you really insist on knowing then I suppose I could answer a question or two."

"Wow." Jen looked taken aback, but the sickly look had gone from her face. "That was a bit like pulling teeth, flyboy." She quirked an eyebrow at me. "You got some deep dark secret in your past?"

"No," I sighed. "No dark secret, just… a lot of heartache, that's all."

"You lost someone," she deduced. Her voice dropped. "I'm sorry, Carth. I won't pry."

The generosity of her words was unexpected, and wholly undeserved coming on the heels of my interrogation. It surprised me, because I'd always picked Jen as the nosy type. Maybe that was the reason for my reply, bald and unbidden.

"Yeah. A wife and son on Telos. I never... I never found my son."

I didn't elaborate further – how could I? The word Telos said it all. These days, Morgana's face was hard enough to capture in my mind's eye if I wasn't holding a holo-picture. And Dustil… he'd be Mission's age now, almost a man.

I sighed, dropping my head in my hands. It was four years ago, and in some ways the grief was so raw it felt like yesterday. And yet... time moved on. I'd spent the years immersed in work, with nothing but daydreams of vengeance to keep me going.

I felt the slight, unassuming pressure of Jen's hand resting softly on my shoulder. We sat there, in silence, for some time.
The human boy stood in front of me, sullen as he'd always been since the day he was brought to me. But his power... Given a bit more time, he could succeed as my first apprentice. Although, granted, I doubted I would let that Twi'lek schutta live for much longer. She'd been useful, but all tools eventually outlived their usefulness. Or broke.

And Yuthura was less than trustworthy these days.

Which brings me back to the reason I've summoned him. For it meant I needed to accelerate his training, if he were to be a worthy replacement for Yuthura Ban.

I smiled coldly. "I have an assignment for you."

The boy nodded, his dark eyes flicking up to mine in attention. Over the past year I'd slowly clawed my fingers into his soul, having him accomplish more and more personally selected missions. His status within the Academy had flourished as a result of my attention, just as his companionship with students of his own age had withered. Truly, I wondered whether he knew just how much I owned him.

"What is it you want me to do?" His voice was short and monotone, but not lacking in fear. Which was better than respect, in my mind.

"Someone of great importance has landed on Dreshdae. A very personal friend of Darth Malak. But she's hiding low, and I want to find out why. I need you to tail her; stay in the shadows and don't get caught. You are very good at that, my dear boy."

The boy nodded, accepting my reasons. After all, that made two new arrivals in as many days. The first had checked in as a Rita Sunrider. Otherwise known as Jedi Knight Belaya Linn. On a foolish quest to find some lost Jedi. I will greatly enjoy dealing with her personally.

But Kylah… a turned Jedi who'd recently betrayed Bastila Shan and caused the destruction of the Endar Spire. If Darth Malak sent her here for a purpose and I interfered, the results would not be very… palatable. If, however, she is hiding from Malak... then I would dearly love to know. And there is no one more suited to this sort of reconnaissance than my dear boy.

"Here is her last known location," I added, handing him a datapad. I saw the boy's eyes widen apprehensively as he read the name. He swallowed.

"Yes," I said coldly. "She is a powerful target. I need to know what she is doing here, Dustil. I suggest you do not let her see you."

"Is that all, Master Wynn?"

I nodded. "Report back to me with your suspicions daily."

The boy gave me a brief bow, and turned to leave.

"Oh, and one more thing," I said pleasantly. "There's another newcomer, goes by the name Rita Sunrider. If you come across her, lead her directly to me. She is a special case, shall we say."

_xXx_
Past and present challenges

- Jen Sahara -

Dreshdae was smaller than I’d expected, and mostly overrun with Czerka traders and desperate mercenaries searching for work. Soldiers in Sith uniform were also prevalent, but I’d yet to spot a Dark Jedi. I found my curiosity about the place was overriding my caution; I’d spent the last week fearing our arrival to Korriban, and now I was impatient to shake that useless feeling off.

Fear is for the weak.

It might be one of the few times I agreed with Evil Bitch, but even so, I breathed in deep and pushed the voice away, focussing on a calm that Juhani had me practising daily. I am at peace; I am resolute. If I hadn’t been the one to find her, I never would have guessed that mere weeks ago Juhani had been rampaging out in the wilderness.

But her serenity and determination inspired me, and never had it been more crucial to rein in Revan’s violent thoughts and inhumane emotions than on Korriban, training ground for the Sith.

I didn’t enjoy even thinking her name in the privacy of my own head, but it was becoming second nature - and Canderous bloody Ordo wasn’t helping any.

Our spars were useful. Despite what I believed was mild disapproval radiating from the Cathar, I actually felt more relaxed and at peace with myself afterward, not to mention that the practice seemed to be re-honing skills I’d once had. Either that, or I’m a fast learner. Regardless, I was already able to hit Canderous harder and more effectively.

The Mandalorian, however, seemed determined to distract me with war stories – and he certainly had quite a few. While interesting, informative, and occasionally appalling, it did make it difficult to stay focussed on the fight, and then my speed would be compromised. And he seems to have a penchant for bringing up Darth Revan. He’d obviously deduced it was a trigger of mine, and gleefully abused it for victory.

Her voice in my head had been quieter of late, less frequent, and I dearly hoped that was a sign of things to come. Carth’s revelation had left me more than uneasy; I’d known something had happened on Deralia, but the implication here was torture. Jen, tortured because of Revan. I shivered, feeling like the edges of my soul were fraying. And then, what? Jen, killed by Revan or her followers? And of course Revan, killed by Bastila’s strike force. But I had no memory from either side here; and just how I - Street Kid - fit into all of this was anybody’s guess. I’d been a Jedi, once. Is it possible I agreed to this psychic minefield for some reason I don’t yet remember?

But I most certainly didn’t have the answers, so I’d thrown myself into training, both Force and combat alike. Since the devastating flashback on Rii’shn, I’d finally understood just how high the stakes were – just how shatteringly bad things could go if I let her take over.

And that was where the fear trickled back in. While my abilities with the Force were definitely improving, they were nothing to the power that Evil Bitch could draw on. Whether it was her experience or simply the dark side of the Force I didn’t know, but I’d be dead many times over if it wasn’t for her. Tatooine, against the Sand People. Rii’shn. Kylah.
Which swung me right back to my bond sister. Bastila, presumably, didn’t know about Kylah yet. I’d had few conversations with her, and even during the last one she’d been uncharacteristically quiet.

... “Does no one else think this is a bad idea?” Carth was demanding. We were due to exit hyperspace outside the Korriban system in little over an hour; a good time for us to regroup and confirm our plan of action. “Sending out just Jen and Juhani – the two who recently were slaughtering everything out in the Tatooine desert?”

“Look, I’m not saying it’s a great idea. I’m saying it’s the best one we’ve got,” I explained, sighing. “Bastila can’t leave the ship. Even you can’t leave the ship, you’re too… too-”

“Too what?” He frowned at me.

“Too Republic!” I snapped. I heard a snicker from Canderous. Bastila, leaning against Juhani on a tattered bench in the common room, had yet to offer any opinion on the matter.

“She’s right,” Canderous added in his gravelly voice. “Anyone looking at you can see you’re a soldier, Onasi, and I don’t reckon you’d do well playing at being on the Sith side.”

“Aren’t you a war hero yourself, Carth?” Mission piped in. “I mean, isn’t there a chance you might get recognized by someone who follows all the boring HoloNet news?”

His shoulders dropped in defeat, and he sighed in capitulation. That’s one down, I thought drily.

“(What you say makes sense, Jen Sahara. I shall travel with you, of course, and guard your back.)” Zaalbar said, as solemnly as a Wookiee could.

I shook my head. “Not a good idea. Teethree may have succeeded in changing the ship’s signature, but there’ll be reports of our crew make up. And a seven foot Wookiee isn’t exactly subtle. Look – we’re going to need people staying in the ship – as guards. Think about the repercussions if some little Sithling snuck onboard and discovered Bastila Shan was on Korriban.”

“I could come with you and help,” Mission said brightly. “Like, I could pretend to be your slave or something. I bet those Sith scum will buy that. And you know how sneaky I can be.”

I stared at her in silence, while Zaalbar howled in protest. There was no way I could let Mission near the Sith Academy, but I also understood her character, and that the wrong words would merely spur her to reckless behaviour.

“(Absolutely not, Mission!)” Zaalbar growled. “(Not if I have to truss-)”

“Zaalbar,” I snapped, and the Wookiee quietened. Mission’s headtails were already twitching in petulant protest and her eyes sparking with temper. I noticed absently that Bastila had closed hers.

“(Absolutely not, Mission!)” Zaalbar growled. “(Not if I have to truss-)”

“I could come with you and help,” Mission said brightly. “Like, I could pretend to be your slave or something. I bet those Sith scum will buy that. And you know how sneaky I can be.”

I stared at her in silence, while Zaalbar howled in protest. There was no way I could let Mission near the Sith Academy, but I also understood her character, and that the wrong words would merely spur her to reckless behaviour.

“Slavery is an abhorrent practice,” Juhani hissed suddenly. “I do not think I could pretend to have one.”

Mission still looked mulish, and I sighed. “Look, I’d feel better if I knew you were still on the ‘Hawk. Dreshdae is Czerka controlled, and I don’t trust them not to go snooping around docked ships.”
“Fine,” Mission said sulkily. “I’ll stay behind then.”

My eyes swung to the Mandalorian, and he lifted a brow at me. He hadn’t been forthright regarding his plans, and whether they included our quest or not. I loathed the idea of him leaving with full knowledge of what we were embarking upon, but then I also didn’t believe he’d betray me. Not without reason, anyway.

“What about you, Canderous?” I asked finally. “Are you with us?”

He stared at me for some time before finally answering. “Truthfully, I haven’t decided yet. There are things I haven’t quite worked out,” he said slowly, more cryptically than was customary from him. “I’m a mercenary these days, and other than the one job from Karon, I haven’t seen any credits. I remember Bastila promising me payment back on Tatooine.”

At her name, Bastila stirred, opening her eyes and sending Canderous an astringent look. “I believe I said the Masters would pay you well for your services, Canderous, and they shall. When we encounter them.”

“I don’t have anything to pay you,” I added. “Your assistance would be useful, although I don’t know how well a Mandalorian would fit in a Dark Jedi training facility…”

Canderous grunted. “I’ll check out Dreshdae, and go talk to some of the mercs. If you need my help, ask and we’ll talk. If I decide to go my own way, you’ll know.”

I looked at the large warrior, appraising him as I silently mulled over his words. He’d been generous with his time, and scathing with his insults. Definitely a self-centred man but with his own code of honour that I respected. I found myself hoping he’d stay.

“So, just you two then,” Carth was muttering “I suppose you’re right Jen, it’s the best option – but I don’t like it.”

“I’ll have Bastila as well,” I responded quietly, and she turned to look at me then, eyes as dark and silent as our bond had been of late. “I’m counting on your guidance to get through this, Bastila.”

She nodded, and a moment after I heard the words.

I will aid you the best I can.

…

A day later, and we were trudging through the plasteel tunnels of the Czerka colony. From the little I knew of Korriban, most of the planet was a dead rock, and Dreshdae the only actual settlement if you didn’t count the Academy. While it had a breathable atmosphere, Korriban was cold and sulphuric, so most sentients did not leave Dreshdae unless they had to.

I’d left the ‘Hawk outfitted with an alloy mesh armour Zaalbar had patched up, and a standard issue vibroblade visible on my hip. For our first foray into Dreshdae I thought it sensible to appear as mercenaries; by mutual consent, Juhani and I had both concealed our ‘sabers. She had, however, eschewed any form of armour despite the Wookiee’s growing collection.

As always, the local cantina was our first destination as a starting point for information and, therefore, Canderous joined us. He was on the outlook for a weapons trader; he’d lost his highly modified repeating blaster to the Selkath on Manaan, and we were all a bit sick of his grumbling regarding the fragilities of the Echani weaponry he was wielding.
After auto-printing the appropriate forms and paying the exorbitant docking fee to an officious Czerka employee, we moved out of the spaceport area of Dreshdae and towards the commercial sector, sparse and small though it may be. A cluster of uniformed Sith soldiers were chatting animatedly to each other at the turn of the corridor, but they quietened as we approached. The apparent leader, a young male human, eyed us over derogatively.

“Well, well, another group of worn out mercenaries come begging for a job,” he drawled to his followers.

Juhani tensed but Canderous seemed unfazed, treating them to one of his unimpressed stares. “That’s the very definition of mercenaries, ain’t it. We go looking for jobs.”

“Oh great, a Mandalorian,” he muttered. “I’m sick of you lot crowding out the cantina. Why don’t you go find another war to lose?” The other soldiers snickered as the first sneered at Canderous. The Mandalorian looked at them disparagingly but stalked on; in another place, I’d doubt Canderous would allow such taunts without repercussion.

I shot him a questioning look as we left them behind.

“Kids playing with guns,” he drawled at me. “All bollocks and no brains. I’m not so old that I don’t remember being that cocky.”

I snorted. “Honestly, Canderous, I don’t think you’ve mellowed that much with age.”

He shot me a feral grin as we rounded a corner and the tunnel widened into a circular plaza, with numerous exits leading off to various retailers. The grubby beige walls were rounded outwards, marred with numerous vents that kept the air conditioned within the colony. Various holo-pictures were tacked up in a disorganized fashion, advertising products or services available throughout Dreshdae. Most of them were stamped with the Czerka emblem, the conglomerate that owned a fair whack of the galaxy’s commerce.

On Korriban, however, I wondered whether bounties and merc jobs were more prevalent than retail. *Somehow, I can’t see people haggling over the price of the latest hygiene product to come from Alderaan. The scalp of some unfortunate – yes. That seems more likely.*

The plaza was meant to be the central point of the colony, and I found it to be a bit of an ugly eyesore. The cantina’s entrance was immediately visible, and the three of us walked in cautiously. The décor was stark and bare in contrast to the plaza, immediately making me conclude that this place, at least, wasn’t run by a Czerka affiliate. The room itself was elongated and rectangular, split into two sides around a prominent bar that gleamed silver until artificial lighting.

Thick cigarra smoke clung to the vented ceiling, the source being a group of Mandalorian mercenaries drinking around a large table. Canderous’ attention was caught, and he strode over to them with a swagger in his step.

Juhani shot me a questioning look, and I shrugged my shoulders; at this stage, I didn’t have a better place to go as the rest of the cantina looked mostly deserted, so I wandered slowly after Canderous.

“Canderous Ordo!” the nearest Mandalorian hollered, catching sight of our motley group and standing in greeting. With amusement, I spotted five guns on his immediate person, and idly wondered how many more were concealed. *Mandalorians.*

“Ergeron Jangar,” Canderous replied. He sounded pleasantly surprised, an emotion relatively unfamiliar from the brawny Mandalorian. It briefly occurred to me that right here might be where we
parted ways.

“I haven’t see you since Malachor,” the one called Ergeron commented. The other residents had turned to face Canderous appraisingly.

“You’re well decked out,” Canderous said. “Been adding guns to your collection?”

Losing interest, I surveyed the room again, this time my eye landing on a Twi’lek lounging in the opposite corner. One of the few other beings in the room had just placed a colourful drink on her table, and scurried off via a dismissive motion from her.

A tingle of premonition tickled me and I left Canderous, sauntering around the other side of the bar. The server was pouring another drink for the human who’d scuttled away. I felt the comforting presence of Juhani behind me and I paused for a moment, observing, while the same human tottered back to the corner, this time with a grotesque purple concoction clutched in his hands.

The Twi’lek, outfitted in a skimpy leather costume that left little to the imagination, appeared decidedly unimpressed. Her attire would have me picking her for a slave had it not been for her confident expression and obvious authority over the younger human, who’d slumped in dejection.

Tattoos inked over the top of violet lekku, and her sultry lips had been darkened to black. Her eyes… shot up swiftly to meet my appraisal, and I recognized them as an unnatural violent purple. Dark Jedi. Powerful, if her eyes have turned. I didn’t want to dwell on where that thought had originated.

I strode forward again, this time with forced confidence, and the Twi’lek once more shooed away the drink giver.

“Go away,” she said to him, pleasantly but firmly. Her striking eyes swung back to me. “And what do I have here, hmm? A couple of Force-sensitive mercenaries, loitering in Dreshdae.”

Her voice was sultry, melodious, and along with her attire oozed sexuality. With a start I realized I could sense the Force swirling around her and, by Juhani’s tense presence at my back, she had too.

Exercise caution, Bastila murmured. I hadn’t realized she was paying attention as the bond was still insubstantial and faded. The few times I’d seen her awake, Bastila had appeared as weak as a day old ash-rabbit. She may not be hostile, but a Dark Jedi of this power will not tolerate any insubordination.

“I am Ness Jonohl,” I introduced, a fake name spontaneously slipping from my tongue. “This is my friend Staria.”

“And you want to join the Sith,” the Twi’lek replied, her dark lips twisting in amusement.

I wanted access to the valley, the one the public HoloNet listed as the area of excavations and Force-sensitive tombs. But the Czerka officials in the docking bay had also informed me that only Sith students or associated personnel were permitted access.

I inclined my head at her, not quite willing to answer. She quirked an eyebrow at that, her smirk deepening.

“Not so apparently desperate as most others, I see,” she murmured. “Have a seat, Ness, and we’ll talk. Your friend Staria can buy me a Corellian whiskey.”

I looked questioningly at the two colourful cocktails placed in front of her, and a tinkling laugh met my unspoken question. “Dear Shaardan is still trying to guess my drink of choice. I suppose I should
give him an indication of my preferences, but his eagerness to please is very amusing. You can have one, if you like.”

I shook my head in dismissal, not willing to trust drinks of unknown origin. “Can you get us both a whiskey, Staria?” I asked quietly over my shoulder.

I sensed the faint humming of disapproval through the bond. **Be careful, Jen. You do not want to impair your judgement in front of a Dark Jedi master.**

Her caution annoyed me as always, but now, perhaps, I could forgive her for it, better understanding the demon that lurked in my mind.

**But I do need to ingratiate myself with her I suspect. First impressions are important.**

There was a pause before she replied: **Fair point.**

I sat in a proffered chair, and the Twi’lek smiled at me, but her unnatural eyes were watchful, intent. “So,” she said at last. “I am Yuthura Ban, but I suspect you know that already if you’re here.”

I smiled in what I hoped was agreement, unwilling to disabuse her.

“You and your friend are either powerful, or already trained in the Force, either of which intrigues me,” she continued on. “Or I suppose you could be both. We get plenty of turned Jedi here, but normally they dress the part.” She looked down at my armour disparagingly, before eyeing over my face. I was uncomfortably aware of the swollen bruising still prevalent from my sparring. “If you wish to join our Academy, you need to prove your worth.”

**Oh great. A little Sith initiation scheme no doubts. “And how do we do that?”**

The amusement faded from her relaxed expression, chased by something akin to disappointment. “We Sith encourage independent thinking, but if you must have a little pointer, I will tell you thus: Open the Academy door yourself, and you will be admitted into our ranks.”

Juhani was back, placing our drinks down and taking a seat. She looked awkward and tense, and had not ordered a drink herself. Somehow, I had the feeling she generally abstained, being in the company of Dark Jedi notwithstanding. Yuthura glanced back at the Cathar, and once more appeared diverted.

“Of course, you **could** perform a little task for me, and I would then sponsor your application myself,” she said breezily.

I eyed over the two garish cocktails. The first had turned a murky green colour and appeared to be bubbling. “Let me guess, I have to order your favourite dinner?” I replied drily.

Yuthura laughed merrily, sounding genuinely entertained. “I think I can employ your talents a little more productively. Are you interested, Ness Jonohl?”

I paused at that, eyeing over the Twi’lek measuringly. There was no denying she held raw power and seemed content with her career choices, at least outwardly. Although Yuthura didn’t appear to be overtly **evil**, as such, there was no denying the Dark Side had corrupted her – at least, in a physical sense, if her eyes were anything to go by. Curiously, I wondered what her desires and motivations were.

“Why would I want to join the Sith?” I asked slowly.
Jen. This is a dangerous line of inquiry.

Yuthura looked surprised. “An interesting question,” she murmured, “and not one I hear often. For, after all, Force-sensitives on Dreshdae are usually here because they already know the benefits. But perhaps you are undecided. In the end, you will either embrace ultimate power or run in cowardice.”

“Ultimate power,” I said sceptically. Not every little Sithling wields ultimate power. Some run. Some hide. Some go insane, as Evil Bitch so often showcases.

Her face turned contemplative, almost rapturous as she elaborated. “There is nothing as glorious as bending the Force to your will. It rewards the cunning and the mighty – we, who have been gifted and set above the rest.” Her eyes snapped back to mine, piercing in their luminescence. “So, what is it to be? I desire a truthful answer. Are you here to be a Sith or not?”

“What are your tasks?” I riposted. I picked up my glass and took a cautious sip. The liquid burned a slow, welcoming fire deep in my belly.

A responding smile curved her full, dark lips. “There is a… very important visitor hiding out in the private Czerka suites. She is one of us, but she has not made herself known to either myself or my master. It would be… intriguing if someone could unearth her reasons for hiding out on Korriban. I would proceed with caution, however.” Yuthura tapped long fingers on the tables. I sensed rather than saw Juhani shift in uneasiness. “Alternatively, you could eliminate a group of runaways from the Academy. Last seen heading to the shyrack caves – although I do suggest you research those first. Force sensitives rarely, if ever, return from there, and I imagine Thalia May and her friends have long since perished. Proof of that would suffice.” Yuthura looked me over again. “If none of those appeal to you, human, then you shall just have to find another way of impressing me.”

“You left us to die!” a voice roared from behind us, and I twisted around to see one of Mandalorian mercenaries shake an armoured fist threateningly at Canderous.

“Mercenaries,” Yuthura muttered derisively. “Arguing over the size of their vibroblades, no doubt.”

“I did what was necessary at the time,” Canderous bellowed back. “If I had not done it, the battle would have-”

“The battle would have been won anyway!” the other man snarled.

“Excuse me, I’ll think about what you said,” I muttered absently and left the Twi’lek, who shot me a startled, perhaps even offended, glance. Juhani scrabbled to her feet to follow me.

“I will have my vengeance – for the men who died at Althir. I challenge you to a blood duel, Canderous of clan Ordo!” The angry words rang out clearly though the cantina.

I froze halfway back to the mercenaries, who had all fallen silent, warily watching Canderous and the other Mandalorian face each other. They both wore identical expressions of rage. A blood duel? A dazed vertigo assailed me briefly; I shook my head irritably and it dispersed.

“I did what was expedient, and for the greater glory of Mand’alor, Jagi,” Canderous countered in a low, furious tone. “I’ll not hesitate to fight you, but for the sake of our history I’ll give you one last chance to back out.”

Jagi, darker-skinned and slighter in build, threw back his head and laughed mockingly. It was an angry sound. “It was for the greater glory of Canderous Ordo! Are you so without honour that you refuse to accept? You bring shame onto your clan-”
Shut your mouth!” Canderous thundered. His jaw was set. “I accept, Jagi of clan Bala. It will be your end.”

“You will not win,” Jagi’s voice had dropped, his eyes narrowing in unconcealed fury. “Not when the debt of honour is so great. In fact- I call upon a second! Allen of clan Bala, will you guard my back and fight for my honour, should I be no more than a battle song?”

One of the other warriors who had been at the back of the pack, out of sight, stepped forward to face Canderous. He was dark haired and skinned, with the same wiry build and long face as Jagi. Brothers, I bet.

“Allen-” Canderous started in surprise.

The man’s lips twisted. “Yeah, I survived too. Only a handful of us got out alive – the rest were slaughtered for your glory. Jagi, I accept!”

Canderous swung his attention back to Jagi, and his eyes had turned flinty grey. His rugged face could have been carved from permacrete. “Very honourable, Jagi, to challenge me away from my clan,” he drawled sarcastically.

“If you can’t find a second, Canderous, that’s your problem. You’ll just have to go through both of us if you want to gain a shred of dignity back.” Jagi crossed his arms, a smug look of righteous superiority gaining precedence on his weathered face.

Canderous must have glanced towards Ergeron, for I spotted his friend shake his head ever so slightly.

“I need time to contact my allies,” Canderous bit out. “You cannot deny-”

“Three days,” Jagi spat. “I have waited years to repay you in kind. I shall not give you the chance to run away. I challenge you to reclaim your honour outside the shyrack caves, at dawn in three days time! My choice of weapons is vibroblades.”

There was an undercurrent of murmuring at that, and I saw a look of distaste cross Canderous’ face. “Vibroblades?” he countered derisively.

A scowl twisted Jagi’s long face. “Not so good with those, are you, Canderous? Vibroblades may not be traditional, but they will do. I will reclaim my honour!” Jagi’s voice had the ring of righteous fury towards the end.

The wooziness returned, and with it, a memory...

An older man, heavily muscled and highly armoured, faced me across a dusty clearing that was smattered with corpses and limbs and broken weaponry. His face was pierced and tattooed; his eyes dark and watchful. Dozens of heavyset Mandalorian warriors stood some way back, weaponless and mostly injured. Near all had markings on their face. Clan leaders.

Surrounding them was a mass of Republic soldiers that stretched deep into the distance, swamping clusters of unarmed Mandalorian foot soldiers. Plumes of smoke decorated the landscape, and here and there was the shine of a lightsaber announcing the presence of a Jedi.

“Dereck of clan Takal has accepted,” the man stated, his eyes never leaving mine. He wore an ornate horned helmet; ostentatiously visible and marking him as supreme leader. “This battlefield
may be the end of our offensive, but I will reclaim my honour by striking you, the leader of my enemy, down first!"

“You don’t have to do this,” a voice muttered behind me. It sounded furious. “It’s insane, even for you.”

The older man continued taunting. “Dereck of clan Takal will fight for my honour should I be no more than a battle song on the lips of my clan. Is there no one who will stand as your second, Jedi Revan Freeflight? Is there no one who believes in your honour?”

...

An overwhelming nausea threatened to overwhelm me as I struggled to push the vision away. My stomach heaved. Just when I thought that bitch was quiet, memories of her past had to overrun my present.

Jen?

Did you see that? I fired through the bond, as the vertigo assailing me slowly melted away. I felt Juhani’s hand on my arm, anchoring me to the present.

I cannot see through your eyes, Jen.

“As I thought,” Jagi taunted mockingly. “No one here is willing to stand up for your honour.”

Canderous will lose face, even should he win, I realized with sudden clarity.

My head shot up and I strode forward to Canderous’ side. I could see him shaking with fury. The words tumbled out, clear and loud and fierce. “I will stand for Canderous of clan Ordo. I, Jen of clan Sahara, will guard his back and fight for his honour should he be no more than a battle song on the lips of his clan!”

Canderous jerked his head to face me, intense and severe, but I found myself unable to read his expression.

Jen, what are you doing?

Jagi scoffed mockingly as he glanced at me in derision. “An outsider, Canderous? Really?”

“Says the one duelling with vibroblades,” I snapped. “Outsiders are allowed, even if it is unorthodox. Didn’t your Mandalore fight Darth Revan in a blood duel?”

For some reason Canderous choked, appearing visibly startled as he continued to stare at me. Jagi, on the other hand, just looked annoyed. “Big words from such a small human. This does not concern you.”

“I accept, Jen of clan Sahara.” Canderous said, his voice strong and sure, his eyes still never leaving mine.

“Fine, so be it,” Jagi spat. “I’ll spread the word, Canderous, so if you don’t show you’ll be known far and wide as the disgraced coward you are!”

“I will be there, Jagi!” Canderous snarled, swinging back to face his old comrade. “See that you are!”
This is unwise, Jen. This is not what we are here on Korriban for.

Canderous is one of us, I shot back.

Is he?

Jagi and his presumed brother Allen stalked past us and out of the cantina. I spotted Canderous’ old friend Ergeron edge away towards the bar.

Well, I daresay he will be after this duel.

“Thank you, Jen Sahara,” Canderous muttered. “You don’t understand what this means to a Mando’ade. Or- maybe you do. I dunno,” he scowled. “I need to be on my own for a bit. Jagi was a good friend and a fellow warrior, once. I’ll- I guess you have some questions, and you have a right to them. But give me some time. I’ll see you back at the ‘Hawk tomorrow.”

With a nod, more respectful than I’d seen from him before, he turned and left the cantina. The remaining mercenaries looked away from us, murmuring amongst themselves. I turned around, back towards the Twi’lek Dark Jedi, but some time during the ensuing confrontation Yuthura had left.

“That was unexpected,” Juhani said softly, her slanted eyes holding mine as if in question. A blood duel, I wondered. Unexpected is not the word. And another flashback from the insane villain in my head. Bastila had told me, back on Tatooine, that I’d been a Jedi once and followed Darth Revan into the Mandalorian Wars and subsequently the Dark Side. I shivered. If that was true – and I didn’t entirely trust Bastila’s honesty – then perhaps I’d actually seen that famous duel.

I’d have one up on Canderous then, ha.

What do you mean?

And there was my bond-sister once more. Bastila had thought more words to me in the previous hour than we’d spoken since we first entered Manaan airspace. My thoughts were whirling from this unexpected Mandalorian business, but more pressing were the words that needed to be said between us. I’d vowed to stop running, and that meant facing up to Bastila.

We need to talk, Bastila. I pushed the thought out decisively before I could change my mind. I found something out on Rii’shn.

She paused before replying. Something that made you return?

Yes. Something that made me realize I couldn’t keep running.

There was another silence. I felt like we were stepping on eggshells around each other, both wary and trying to keep a peace that neither was sure would last. Our track record hadn’t exactly been promising. I idly wondered if the Jedi Order had ever had two such ill-matched people bond together.

“Jen, are you okay?” Juhani queried. I nodded briefly at her, vaguely aware that I was standing still in the middle of the cantina, staring blindly at a side wall. I stalked over to the nearest chair and sat, with Juhani following me in puzzlement.

“Just having a conversation with Bastila,” I explained.

Very well. Bastila’s mental voice sounded weary, and fainter than before. Say what you will.
I would prefer to talk in person. I needed to see her face. She had the upper edge with the bond - I did not underestimate Bastila’s mental aptitude with the Force. I had to see her expressions, indicators that would give her away. Our inconvenient mind-link was too easy to hide in.

If you must. But may I suggest you pay a visit to the Academy first. It would be a good idea to orientate yourself even if you cannot get past the door.

See what we’re up against, huh. It shouldn’t take long, and wasn’t a bad idea. Judging from Yuthura’s description, I was willing to bet some sort of dark Force power was required to get in. It’s one way of proving yourself a Sith. I didn’t really fancy sucking up to Yuthura – tracking down Dark Jedi, runaway or otherwise, wasn’t appealing and likely to end in bloodshed. Bloodshed – the very thing I was trying to avoid. On Korriban, of all places.

Okay. We’ll go see what’s so special about this sodding door. Then I’ll come back and we’ll talk.

xXx

Outside the colony the air tasted sharp and stung irritably in my eyes. The landscape was bleak; dusty moors stretching into rocky outcrops on either side. One sun radiated a harsh light that reflected glaringly from all sides. I squinted in annoyance and wished for a visor of some description.

“If you embrace the Force it aids somewhat,” Juhani murmured quietly. “And perhaps it is prudent to be prepared in a place such as this.”

It was relatively deserted outside; I’d spotted a group of traders and their droids head towards the west, following a beaten path that led towards the nearby cliffs. The shyrack caves, I mused, remembering a detailed holo-map of the area transmitted on the side of our docking bay. From what Yuthura implied, that area is safer for non Force users. I wonder why.

My attention swung back the other way, towards a wide ferracrete path inlaid deep into the stone ground. Blocks of varying shades of grey had been placed in a pleasing pattern, forming a sort of road that twisted towards the nearby mountains. From here, I could see where it ended – in a distant archway etched into the side of the nearest peak.

“That’s the academy,” I said softly. “It’s dug deep into the rock. There’s an exit on the other side of the peak and that grants access to the Sith tombs. There’s at least six different Sith lords laid to rest there, in tombs riddled with traps and archaeological mysteries.”

Juhani turned to stare at me in surprise. “How do you know all that, Jen?” she whispered.

“It’s amazing what you find on the HoloNet,” I answered wryly, taking a breath and starting the short journey to the Academy. “Although, granted, there wasn’t much about Korriban.” Certainly I didn’t find anything on the Star Map, but being an ancient Force relic it was a logical conclusion that its location was with a dead Sith Lord. Dark Force users were attracted to power, after all. I grimaced.

We lapsed into a comfortable silence, trudging along the strikingly decorative path as the dusty planet echoed an emptiness all around us. The road was surprisingly quiet, and I found myself curious about my Cathar friend. Although we’d spent a lot of time together recently, it had mostly revolved around Force discussions and meditation.
“What made you decide to join the Jedi, Juhani?” I asked, breaking the silence at last.

She glanced at me, her slanted eyes widening in deep surprise. To my astonishment, her cheeks turned a faint red. *Juhani… blushing?*

**Jen. Are you prying?** Bastila’s tone was sharp, and yet she still felt incorporate, weak. I ignored her.

“You don’t have to talk, if you don’t want to,” I said mildly, but I was curious. “I mean, I’m certainly interested, but your secrets are your own, my friend.”

She breathed in sharply at that, as if I’d shocked her once more. Then a genuine, warm, smile curved her face. “Thank you, Jen Sahara,” Juhani said softly. “We Cathar do not make friends easily. Your manner and respect means a lot to me.”

I smiled back, feeling lighter. Juhani had been the only one not to question me about Rii’shn, and my actions on the ‘Hawk prior. She simply accepted that it had been a struggle with the Dark Side, and that now, I was back on the right track. I didn’t really know how I’d come to deserve the Cathar’s regard.

I expected the conversation to be over, so was surprised when Juhani spoke again.

“The Mandalorians slaughtered most of my people on Cathar. I was but a kit, then, and the Republic didn’t yet acknowledge them as a threat – they were still busy rebuilding after Exar Kun.” She paused, her eyes tawny and thoughtful in the harsh Korriban sunlight. “My parents were refugees, and they found sanctuary on Taris.”

“Taris,” I said blankly. “Taris? As in, the scum infested hole flyboy and I crashed on?”

She smiled, but it was sad, almost tormented. I recalled suddenly how non-humans were persecuted on that planet. “Yes. My father lasted three months before lashing out against a member of the aristocracy – he was jailed, and my mother never saw him again. I believe that is when she truly began to struggle, a non-human refugee on Taris, trying to raise a young daughter on her own.”

Juhani trailed off, and we walked for minutes in silence. Jen Sahara’s childhood was, despite her oppressive father, peaceful and happy. Street Kid’s – *mine* – well, I’d only had glimpses of it. While the poverty could likely compare to Juhani’s, somehow I felt I’d been luckier, or coped better. *Or had the advantage of a strong friend at my back.* The bitter melancholy I sensed from my friend touched on a childhood fraught with pain.

Juhani breathed in deeply and continued her story. “I will not wallow in memories, but suffice to say – my mother died in debt to the Exchange, and I was taken as payment. Then, a group of Jedi came, and changed everything.”

There was no elaboration at first. The path was steeper now, climbing up the rocky outcrop. We’d turned a sharp bend, and the deep archway was hidden from view, but it couldn’t be far, now.

“They rescued you?”

“They shut down the child slave trade, and set up schools and orphanages. One of them spoke to me, told me I had Force sensitivity, and that I could pursue training should I wish. I… I was enamoured, and it became a burning drive to emulate these heroes and follow in their footsteps. It was an end to the nightmare that had been Taris, and not long after I was on Dantooine, making my dream a reality.”

It sounded lovely, and had altered life drastically for Juhani, but Taris hadn’t seemed any better when
I’d visited it. “The Exchange were still running a slave trade not so long ago. I didn’t see any services for orphans, and discrimination was rampant. The Jedi.”

“Saved my life, and that of many others,” Juhani cut in sharply, fire flashing in her eyes. “You do not know the torment I suffered through on Taris. You have no idea what it is like to be bound like a beast and treated as such!”

“I don’t dispute that Juhani. Just whether the Jedi made any lasting difference on Taris.”

She sighed, a look of defeat passing her eyes as her anger faded. “Perhaps you are right. They left, to fight the Mandalorians, and I expect Taris went back to the way it always had been. It… it was a rat-hole, a festering warren… but as much as I hated it, it was still home. I grieved when I heard of the orbital bombardment.”

I mulled over the timing in my head. “You would have been with us then.”

Juhani nodded in assent. “I overheard Mission speaking of it, on the Ebon Hawk after we left Tatooine. I didn’t want to believe it. This is the first I have spoken of it.”

Juhani was an intensely private person, I realized as I looked at her sideways. Dressed plainly, she strode with a sinewy grace, and her very build right to the warriors tail at the back of her head calmly stated that this was not someone to be trifled with. We were lucky to have her with us.

We’d rounded another bend, and the Academy entrance suddenly loomed into view, tall pillars carved deep into a stark cliff face. The arch of the inset entrance was higher than I thought, grand and imposing. Foreign symbols were etched on either side of expansive double doors that appeared to be made out of a dark form of ferracrystal.

I shivered. I felt a cloying, hungry feeling all around me, and hoped like frell that Evil Bitch hadn’t been here before. Who am I kidding. Of course she sodding well has. She probably tortured all sorts of budding lil Sithlings.

And found the Star Map.

I stopped in the middle of the path, some distance away from the structure, where I could make out three figures hanging about the entrance. I didn’t know who’d found the Star Maps. Bastila had said that Malak – and presumably Evil Bitch before him – was believed to be using whatever the maps pointed to, to power their expansive armada.

Yet Street Kid had found the one on Tatooine, I remembered that much. I don’t want to believe that I followed them down into depravity, down into the Dark Side. Maybe Bastila had only said that to explain the murderous anger in my head, without divulging Revan’s presence. How else could she explain it away? My eyes narrowed, as my thoughts spun wildly. Then maybe I’d been on this same quest – to stop Malak and Revan before. Before… before whatever happened at Deralia to me and Jen and Darth Evil Bitch. Before she tortured Jen.

Or maybe… maybe I really did turn dark, and I found the Star Map on Revan’s orders.

No… I didn’t want to think that… couldn’t think that. Street Kid was good, dammit, she had a good heart and strength of character and was everything I wanted to be. She’d loved a good man, and that love was returned, from the little I had seen.

I wonder what happened to him. Intense sadness assailed me, for surely there was no answer, other than death, to that question. Otherwise, where was he now?
Well, I thought with finality. *Maybe I did fight in the Mandalorian Wars, but that doesn’t mean I followed the same path of corruption. Surely not every Jedi who fought to protect the Republic would have turned around and betrayed it. Surely I wouldn’t have. I had a feeling that the strength of the Republic had been important to Street Kid. I won’t believe I fell. Not until Bastila gives me a name I can ‘Net search for myself.*

I noticed Juhani looking at me measuringly, waiting with patience in the middle of the dusty road. She probably assumed I was once more chatting with my bond sister, and I gave her a brief nod. *I need to think towards the solution. I’m involved in this quest because I’ve found at least one of the maps before. I may have been exceedingly unhelpful on Tatooine and Manaan, but dammit – that’s changing now. Surely either Evil Bitch or Street Kid have been to the Korriban Star Map before.*

I idly wondered if there was a way to force flashbacks, before realizing how dangerously unpalatable that would be should it provoke Revan. *I’d be happy if I never heard her again.*

*Bastila, I pushed out through the bond. Who found the Korriban Star Map before?*

There was no answer. I nudged slightly against our psychic link, and it provided little resistance – Bastila, I believed, had fallen into a deep sleep. I sighed, and strode forward. Yet again, it seemed my answers would have to wait.

As we neared, it became obvious that a human man dressed in plain dark clothes was in charge, and having a great deal of enjoyment berating the other two - a young Bothan and a slightly older human, both of whom were standing to attention.

“You moved! True Sith show dedication, Jorso,” the first man mocked, twirling a deactivated lightsaber in his hands. “After eighteen hours, I expect you to be better, not worse!”

Our footsteps slowed, and the Dark Jedi human turned to sneer at us. “I think you took the wrong turn, mercenaries, unless you’re hungry for a little lightsaber action. So get lost, unless you want me to teach you a lesson.”

I felt my eyebrows lift. “Wow. And I’d heard the Sith were so polite,” I drawled. Juhani shifted next to me into a battle ready pose.

A curious, calculating look crossed the man’s face and he strode over to us, leaving the other two standing prone at the entrance of the great Academy.

“We can be, if it’s in our interests. You must be hopefuls, dressed as common mercs. Well, you can always join them.” The man jerked his head sharply towards the two behind him a cruel smile on his lips.

“What are you doing to them?” Juhani asked, her voice quietly intense. She was getting upset, although in truth the Bothan and older human didn’t look to be in pain of any sort.

The man smirked. “It’s simple, really. I’ll let in whoever remains standing the longest. If I’m in a good mood.”

Juhani’s eyes flashed fire. “You should not toy with people's lives! That’s disgusting and barbaric.”

The man gave her a decidedly unimpressed glare. “I’m sorry, did you think we were in a nursery?” he sneered.

I snorted, strode past him and up to the looming doors. The two hopefuls refused to meet my eye, and now that I was next to them I saw the human was pale and sweating. The Bothan looked a little
better, but his fur was probably concealing his true condition. I took a step closer to the door and pushed.

It was as ineffectual as I expected, and I heard a snicker behind me. I forced my weight behind it, pushing harder, to no avail. Sighing, I drew slightly on the Force, tasting its life and sweetness and tempting power, and then released it in a focussed punch at the door.

“That didn’t frelling work either,” I muttered.

“You must be very sharp to possess such an astute sense of perception!” the Dark Jedi called out mockingly from behind. I sighed again, turned, and strode back to him and Juhani. “Obviously deaf, however, since I asked you to leave.”

I ignored that, and stared the human straight in the face. Angry blue eyes under a shock of black hair met mine dead on – he was handsome and young, in his early twenties, much younger than me.

I ignored that, and stared the human straight in the face. Angry blue eyes under a shock of black hair met mine dead on – he was handsome and young, in his late teens or early twenties. Much younger than me.

“I’ll leave,” I answered, aware my silence had been nonplussing him. “After you’ve told me what sort of Force is required to open the door.” It’d be something dark, a twisted application of the living energy all around us.

“You think I would tell you?” he snapped back, his mouth contorting. “Have my brains started dribbling out of my nose, or something?”

Juhani shifted again, and he eyed her over, still scowling. The sun winked behind the cliffs as late afternoon shadow threw the entrance into dusk.

“Look, if you two want to be admitted, go and see Yuthura in Dreshdae like the rest of the rabble.” He smiled, and it was a cruel sight. “Tell her Mekel sent you. Unless, of course, you want to join Jorso and Drel.”

“You won’t let either of them in, will you,” Juhani whispered. “You would let them die out here of exposure first.”

“Idiot,” he sneered at her. “A Sith is not a bantha, all endurance and no brains. If these rotgrubs are as stupid as they seem then they deserve their fate.”

I looked the human man up and down, considering my options silently. If I challenged Mekel, I was pretty confident I could force my way into the Academy. But I wasn’t ready to resort to violence, not yet, not if there was another way. The evil presence in my head hamstrung me. Maybe I do need to investigate Yuthura’s tasks first. I wasn’t naive enough to believe we could find the map without any violence – not here, not on Korriban – but I didn’t exactly want to rush into it. Pain and anger were the two guaranteed ways to wake up Revan.

And I liked having my head back to myself.

I sighed. “Let’s go back, for now.” I nodded at Mekel, or whoever he was. “I’ll see you again.”

“Jen,” Juhani hissed after I’d taken a few steps. I stopped, raising a quizzical eyebrow. “Are we just going to leave those poor men there in the hands of that… Sith?”

I looked back at the Academy. Mekel had turned to saunter back to the others, who were still
standing immobile, desperation blinding them to the obvious. Empathy was something I aspired to, especially now, now with the shattering knowledge I’d acquired on Rii’shn. But there was a time and a place, and honestly – we had more vital things to be concerned about. “I highly doubt they’ll perish, Juhani,” I said slowly. “Persuading them to leave will draw Mekel’s attention more than I’d like to at the moment. They are here by their own choice, and we simply cannot afford the risk of convincing them otherwise.”

She looked at me for a long time before nodding reluctantly. “I hope you are right, Jen. For I believe if we have the opportunity to redeem someone, we should grasp it wholeheartedly.”

We started walking back, and a chill swept me as the light slowly faded. Redemption… While I admired Juhani’s righteous drive, I only had to look inside my own head to see that for some, redemption was simply not an option.

xXx
A scout around

- Mission Vao -

It was boring being trapped in the ‘Hawk. We’d just spent weeks all cooped up together in hyperspace, and now that we’d actually landed I was eager to have a scout around.

But Big Z was following me like a bristling overgrown guard. I mean, sheesh, I’d promised to stay behind and not to go to the Academy of Evil, but surely a look around Dreshdae wouldn’t be that dangerous. I’d even take Zaalbar along, if he wasn’t such a noticeable, hairy pain in the behind.

“(Mission, you can help me with this,)” Zaalbar suggested from his customary place by the repair bay. He was holding a handful of dissembled armour plates in a furry paw. I wrinkled my nose at him.

“No way. I mean, no offense Big Z, but I’d rather go talk to Bastila.” My eyes caught on the blue and white exoskeleton I’d purchased from Canderous; Zaalbar had laid it in his completed pile. I jumped off the bench I’d been lounging on and moved to pick it up.

“(You should be nicer to her, Mission, she’s been through a lot lately,)” Zaalbar reproved.

“Yeah, yeah,” I muttered absently, picking it up. Sturdy, and lighter now that Zaalbar had removed some of the panelling to resize it, it might just end up being perfect. I struggled to fit it on, and Zaalbar walked over to help.

“(The fit might be loose,)” Zaalbar worried, and he connected the automatic clasps at the side. I felt the armour shrink to fit around my waist. “(It is made for a human male after all, but I think it will do.)”

I brightened, taking a few exploratory steps. “I’m not used to the weight, but I’ll give it a go. Thanks, Big Z!”

I headed towards the central common room, trialling the armour and eager for some company. Carth was there, sipping a cup of caffa and appearing highly amused as Bastila paced in circles, muttering under her breath. He quirked an eyebrow as I entered.

“Nice get-up, Mission,” he said drily. A frown crossed his face. “Hey, isn’t that Calo Nord’s old armour?”

“Yeah, Big Z fixed it up for me.” I spun around, flexing my shoulders. “Not sure about it yet, though. What’s up with her?” I jerked a thumb in Bastila’s direction; she had slumped against the durasteel wall. Shadows smudged bruises under her eyes, which drifted closed.

“Something about Canderous, Jen, and a duel,” Carth commented, placing his cup down on the chrome bench. A flash of irritation crossed his face.

“Huh. Nothing out of the ordinary then,” I said, expecting a knowing grin from him but he just looked further annoyed. I glanced over to the Jedi again, who was still leaning against the wall. There were hollows in her cheeks, and she looked like she’d lived through a famine. I wasn’t sure who appeared worse these days, her or Jen, whose patchwork of facial bruising might finally get a chance to heal if she’d stop challenging that old Mandalorian geezer.
“Bastila,” Carth called, “You look like you’re going to fall asleep there. Maybe you should think about retiring?”

She opened tired eyes, and seemed to notice me for the first time. “Hello Mission,” she said in greeting, with a forced smile. Maybe I’m too hard on her. “Perhaps you are right, Carth. I think I shall lie down for a moment, at least until the others return.”

“And I’m gonna go for a walk,” I said breezily as Bastila slowly left the room. I pulled at the side of the armour. It wasn’t totally comfortable, but the thought of being Force-resistant was super-awesome. Especially on Korriban. That’d make it safe enough to have a scout around, right?

“A walk? A walk where?”

“Sheesh,” I snapped, turning around to glare at Carth. “Why is everyone on my tail all of a sudden?”

He raised his hands in surrender. “Sorry, Mission, but I don’t fancy having Zaalbar breathe down my neck when he notices you missing.”

I folded my arms, wrinkling my nose in irritation even while I conceded his point. No one liked having to deal with a grumpy seven foot Wookiee, although I was sure he wouldn’t hurt Carth too bad.

I brightened as a thought occurred to me. “Maybe you could wear a visor and a hat, or something, and come out too? Big Z won’t mind if someone else is with me, y’know.” Carth wasn’t all that bad. And humans all looked the same, surely no one would recognize him with a little bit of effort on our part.

Carth grinned wryly. “You can probably convince me, Mission. If Zaalbar’s alright with it—”

“-and when Canderous is back.” Carth spoke over me. “I don’t like leaving the Ebon Hawk empty. I don’t trust those shifty Czerka dock workers, and Bastila’s too well known, and too hurt.” The familiar look of mistrust creased his brow.

I rolled my eyes. “Fine, I’ll just go look around the docking bay then.”

“Okay… I’ll just wait by the loading ramp then.” He was back to sounding amused.

I stuck my tongue out at him and stalked out of the ship, muttering under my breath. Why does no one trust me these days? I know I snuck out on Tatooine after promising Bastila I wouldn’t, but that was only ’cause she was being such a bossy snot. I unlocked the main hatch and jumped off the ramp to the grilled floor below. Landing on the balls of my feet, I absorbed the impact with minimal sound. I used to make a game of it, back on Taris, jumping from duct to platform as silently as possibly.

I surprised a Trandoshan dressed in a white Czerka shirt, who stumbled back from the ‘Hawk with his hands outstretched. It looked like he’d been inspecting the line number embossed on the side of the hull. Not that it was ship specific, and I was sure Carth had checked any registration numbers had already been scored off long ago, but still. Sneaky little gorg.

“What are you doing here?” I demanded. “I’m pretty sure we dealt with all the paperwork when we landed.”

“(Just a customary check of docked ships!” he pleaded unconvincingly, turning around to make a
hasty retreat. His steps were fast, and direct to the exit hatch.

“Stay away from our ship, ronto-breath!” I hollered after him as Carth’s footsteps clattered down the loading ramp.

“Czerka Corporation,” Carth muttered from behind me. “About as corrupt as the Exchange, but at least with the Exchange you know where you stand.”

“What d’ya think he wanted?” I asked, frowning. The door to the colony swished closed behind the shady dockworker.

“Who knows?” Carth sighed. “We’ve paid upfront to dock our ship for ten days in an individual landing bay. Maybe that’s enough to warrant curiosity. Maybe the signature Teethree programmed doesn’t quite match up. Stang, maybe he was just looking to see if the Ebon Hawk was empty and he could pinch something.”

Well, I couldn’t judge that too harshly, I thought, my fingers twitching. I took a few more steps, well aware that Carth wasn’t leaving his watchful position from the ship. I scowled, and had a long look around the bay. Tomorrow, I’ll sneak out.

The dock was pretty standard really, an open air walled-in area with a refuelling gig on the side that was currently empty. But it wasn't that long ago when I'd never been off-planet. I'd never even been in a docking bay, before. It was amazing how, after a few planets, the awe wore off.

The bay itself was large, suited for vessels even bigger than the Ebon Hawk, and we’d paid for privacy. Our ship’s computer had been loaded with an account full of credits from the Republic when we left Manaan – which was good, really, 'cause other than me and my swoop winnings, everyone else had been pretty much flat broke.

The air had a funny taste to it and I wrinkled my nose, glancing over to the dock door that would grant entrance into the fully enclosed colony. A terminal by the exit caught my eye and I scampered over, noting that the armour didn’t slow me down. I tapped a few keys to access the public HoloNet, disabling audio output and making a face at the mandatory Czerka adverts taking up half the screen.

I could get Teethree out here, to hack into the system and see what he can do. My slicing skills didn’t usually let me down, but they were nothing on a droid as spec’d as Teethree. Maybe, just maybe, he might be able to find something about these mystical Star Maps.

xXx

“Mission,” Jen said in greeting, as her and Juhani entered the docking bay some time later. “What are you and Teethree doing?”

I grimaced. My neck ached from bending over the console, and my throat was sore. I blamed it on the weird smell – it wasn’t as bad as parts of the Lower City had been, but the stench of refuse and unwashed sentient didn’t grate against your throat the way Korriban’s air did. “Information gathering. Not doing very well though. How’d you guys go?”

“Let’s go inside to talk,” she replied, tilting her heard towards the ship. Juhani nodded in greeting to me, but said nothing. I rolled my shoulders, which had tensed up a bit, unaccustomed to the weight of the exoskeleton, and spotted Carth still lounging by the entrance ramp. Yikes, he’s got some serious staying power. We’ve been here for ages! Or maybe he really is scared of Zaalbar. I stuck my tongue out at him as we passed, and he shot me a very dry look.

“Is Bastila asleep?” Jen queried once we were inside, and the hatch was firmly closed and locked
behind us. She sounded like she already knew the answer.

“Yep,” I answered, skipping ahead of her deeper into the ship.

“Hey,” she called out behind me. “Isn’t that Calo Nord’s exoskeleton?”

“Far out,” I said in frustration, “Canderous loots it and no one cares. Now it’s like the hottest topic of conversation.” Next I fully expected Teethree to grill me on it, if Bastila didn’t beat him to it.

“No, it’s just that – doesn’t it have some sort of neural Force resistance?

I stopped, frowning, and turned to face her in the ‘Hawk’s main corridor. It was an ugly ship really, dull durasteel plating running through the entirety of the vessel without any form of decoration to break up the industrial look. That surprised me - it used to be that creep Davik’s ship, and I remembered the flamboyant clothes he always wore. I wondered idly if I should do something to spruce the place up a bit.

“Canderous’d said it’d protect from the Force using cortosis, whatever that is.”

She tilted her head, a frown creasing her face as she stared at me intently. “Cortosis only stops ‘sabers, that’s why some vibroblades can block them,” she murmured absently. “There’s something about it… Mission, can I try something?”

“Sure,” I said brightly. “I trust you.”

Jen froze at that, before a dull red colour rose in her cheeks. I realized what I’d said, then, and that it was true – even after what had happened in Manaan. I smiled at her. “The past is in the past, right?” I said softly. “You’re back with us and I just know you won’t do something like that again.”

Her eyes widened, and a wondering look crossed her face. “Thank you, Mission,” she said very softly. “I’ll endeavour to be worthy of that.” Concentration chased away the emotion, and she raised her hand, palm out. I felt a vague pressure around my middle, pressing inwards, before it dissipated.

“Interesting,” she murmured. “I wonder what it is. It offers some defense. I wouldn’t trust it as invulnerability against Dark Jedi though, it has its limits, and only protects against direct attacks at your torso.”

Juhani had poked her head into the corridor, shooting Jen an inquiring look. Jen grinned, dropped her hand, and motioned me onwards.

Carth and Zaalbar were waiting for us in the centre of the ship, and as I moved to sit next to my furry friend, I heard an ominous rumble from his stomach. Hungry again. We’d better get him something before he gets grouchy. I know what he’s like when he doesn’t get his ten square meals a day. And none of us were fans of that regurgitated gloop from the ‘Hawk’s kitchenette, not even Zaalbar, who’d been known to eat refried bantha kidneys.

“So, what’s this I hear about a fight?” Carth asked Jen as she found a seat. The common room was pretty crowded with us all in there, and we didn’t even have Bastila or Canderous in attendance.

She grimaced. “Canderous had a bit of history come up. We’ll sort it.”

“You don’t think we need to stay focussed on our mission?” his voice was pretty mild, neutral even, but I could see a flare of irritation in Jen’s bright eyes.

“Not you, too,” she muttered. “Look, Canderous is one of our crew. If I can help him…”
“He’s a merc, Jen. You’ve heard him, he only cares about payment—”

“Yet he’s been there for both Star Maps,” she countered, voice low and serious. “And found us a way off Taris. He’s been a pretty large part of things, whether he claims it’s just a job or not.”

I saw Carth pause at that, considering her words. I mean, I wasn’t that sure about Canderous either, but the gruff Mandalorian didn’t seem all that bad. Even if he did get pissy when I called him an old geezer. “I reckon Jen’s got a point, Carth. I mean, we’re all part of the same team, y’know. We should look out for one another.”

I spotted Juhani looking at me with a weird expression on her face. I’d never really spoken much to her; she’d kept herself apart and seemed disinterested in anyone who wasn’t a Force user. She was so quietly intense, and my first meeting with her hadn’t exactly laid the foundations for a good relationship between us.

Juhani was smiling at my words, a small but hopeful smile, and I wondered whether I’d had her pegged wrong from the start. Maybe she’s just shy. Shy, and scared. With the Dark Side experiences her and Jen’d had, I could understand that. I beamed exuberantly at her, and she blinked in surprise.

Carth sighed, nodding at me before glancing back over to Jen. “You’re right, both of you. We are a team – not the ones the Jedi Council would’ve picked, but we’re doing better than the Endar Spire ever did. I might just have to overcome my disillusionment of Mandalorians.”

Jen snickered at that, but Juhani was nodding solemnly. “I, too, have reason to dislike Mandalorians, but Canderous has proven himself to be a worthy warrior. All of us… all of us, together, have come so far already.”

Carth coughed. “Yes, well, speaking of that – what did you find out so far?”

Jen grimaced, lifting dusty boots to rest atop the table. Carth gave her feet a pointed look and she rolled her eyes. “You do know this isn’t your ship, right flyboy?”

“I’m the pilot,” he countered drily. “I figure that gives me some leverage to lay down ground rules. No feet on tables.”

She looked decidedly unimpressed, but swung her feet down regardless. “Okay, so there’s a Dark Jedi master in the cantina – she’s a sort of recruiter. We have to accomplish set tasks to prove ourselves “worthy” enough to enter the Academy. Or, if we open the door we’re automatically admitted.”

“Open the door?” I cut in. “How hard can that be?”

“Brute strength ain’t gonna do it,” Jen said wryly. “I tried. I’m picking that some dark use of the Force will open them, but I really don’t want to go down that path. Not… not anymore.”

“We are strong enough to find another way,” Juhani said softly. “The path we follow… it is the right one, and we will hold true to it.”

“Yes,” Jen echoed. “We will. I will, this time.”

Carth was gazing at Jen with something like respect on his face.

“Well, I did a bit of digging with Teethree’s help,” I beamed at the little fella, and he beeped a jaunty tone at me. “Couldn’t find anything on the Star Maps, but d’ya know the Academy hasn’t been here long? Like, only a handful of years.”

“Oh yeah, it’s always been a favourite spot of creepy Sith Lords.” I wrinkled my nose in distaste. “It’s like their burial ground or something. There’s about a dozen tombs at least on this dead rock.”

“The Force feels darker here,” Juhani murmured, with a faraway look in her eyes. She shivered. “There is something twisted about its feel. I do not like it.”

“But there’ve been other Academies before this one. Like, there was one built deep into the shyrack caves, that’s abandoned now because of these poisonous rancors called taretaks- no, teranteks- um-”

“Terentateks,” Jen whispered. Her face had turned a hideous grey colour. Juhani breathed in audibly and stepped to her side. The feeds I’d skimmed through about them sounded horrid; like, honestly, the most warped, dangerous type of monster in the galaxy. But it wasn’t as if there was one right here in the ship with us, so there was no need for that ugly drawn look on Jen’s face.

“Force warped rancors,” Juhani said softly. “They are drawn to Force sensitives.”

“And they feed off them,” Jen shuddered, closing her eyes. Slowly, the colour returned to her face. She’s seen one before. She must have, I thought in a horrified sort of awe. The rancor in the Undercity had been the scariest thing I’d ever seen, and Taris was filled with all sorts of scum. But terentateks were worse, by all accounts.

“Do you- have you seen one before, Jen?” Carth asked, frowning. Not so long ago, he’d refused to believe she’d done anything in her life other than read books.

“I don’t know,” Jen muttered, shaking her head with her eyes squeezed shut. “Doesn’t seem possible, does it. That rancor down in the sewers was bad enough.”

“(These caves do not sound like a place to visit,)” Zaalbar howled. I could hear the despair in his voice. I knew, even if I’d never admit it, that I sometimes took slightly more risks than maybe was necessary, but we’d never been so close to death as in the sewers. That had been the turning point, then. Jen, throwing herself in danger to save our lives. Big Z, swearing his weird Wookiee life debt.

I blinked suddenly, feeling my eyes turn a little moist. Jen was back, and she was with us, no matter what happened on Manaan. Right. Time to get back on track.

“Traders go through the caves all the time,” I said, forcing my voice to be light and cheery. “It’s a common route to a small mining camp on the other side of the mountains. As long as they stick to the southern tunnels, away from the ruins, then they’re usually okay. Unless a Force user enters, or even someone with a little sensitivity – then those monsters come out and eat everything.” I glanced over to Jen, giving her my best I’m serious look. “Don’t go there, Jen.”

“Wasn’t planning to,” Jen replied, grimacing. “Yuthura suggested we track down a group of runaways who’d headed that direction. We’ll give that a miss. Although, Mission, you mentioned ruins?” She frowned at me, and I nodded in response.

“Yeah, there’s some tombs and ruins of a really old school deeper in the caves. Well past the trade route. Seems like this creepy planet is the resting place for every dead Sith guy.”

Jen looked over at Juhani, a considering look crossing her face. Carth watched the unspoken communication between the two, frowning. “You’re thinking the Star Map might be there,” he said slowly.
I could feel myself getting worried. Sometimes, I could still see the rancor if I closed my eyes, saliva dripping from it’s sharp, rotting teeth. Its breath was ten times worse than a hungry Wookiee’s. So much for not going there. But what if the Star Map really was in the shyrack caves? Maybe… maybe then it’d be better if the non-Force users went there. Now there was a thought.

“I don’t know what’s more likely,” Jen admitted. “The tombs on the other side of the Academy, or the tombs in the shyrack caves. We just don’t know enough about the area yet.”

“I believe our best chance is still to enter the Academy,” Juhani said softly. “We may find more information there. I do not believe we should face terentateks unless we have a compelling reason to.”

Jen was silent for a minute, before sighing and nodding firmly. “Right. So back to either locating Yuthura’s mysterious guest, or finding a way past Mekel.”

“Mekel?” Carth queried.

“A Sithling guarding the Academy. He’s got a couple of hopefuls standing to attention until they drop of exhaustion.”

“Nice, what a sweet guy,” Carth replied sarcastically. “He should get the Sith congeniality medal.”

“Yeah,” Jen sighed. “Welcome to Korriban.”

xXx

The following day Jen had stuck around for as long as her patience would allow, before conceding that Bastila wasn’t waking any time soon. We could all see how desperate Jen was to speak to the Jedi, which I didn’t really understand. Don’t they chat all the time in each others’ minds?

Carth was seeing them off the ‘Hawk while I trailed behind. I couldn’t spot the Cathar, but the other two had halted on the loading ramp.

“I’m glad you came back,” Carth was saying, standing close to Jen at the ‘Hawk’s exit. His voice sounded a bit forced.

“Yeah. So am I,” she replied neutrally.

“Doesn’t mean I’ve forgiven you for what you’ve done,” he muttered, and while his words were accusing his expression was certainly not.

“I’ll work on that,” she replied, a wry look on her face. “I can’t take it back, Carth, but I’m doing my damnest to do what’s right, now.”

“I can see that,” he agreed, his eyes intent upon her. “I don’t like being here, on Korriban, with you two going out by yourselves… but you’ve proven you can take care of yourself. Just… just stay true to the mission, okay? Don’t do anything you don’t have to.”

She glanced back at him, this time a small smile playing along her lips. “I hear you, flyboy. I’ll be good.”

Somehow, the conversation sounded weirdly private despite being out in the open docking bay, so I
stayed some steps behind, uncertain whether to wish Jen farewell or silently retreat.

“Don’t you think you should take a communicator?” Carth asked, gesturing to his wrist. “Doesn’t it make sense to stay in touch? If things go belly up we may have to make a quick getaway.”

Jen seemed to think that over, before shaking her head. “I’m not sure that’s a good idea. If we’re playing at being prospective students, then we don’t want to show any outward ties to others. A communication link to our crew is a little suspicious. And remember, I can talk to Bastila. When she wakes, that is.” She frowned. “If Canderous returns, tell him we’re planning to be back tonight.”

An irritated look crossed Carth’s face. “What’s between you and Canderous?” His words were abrupt, annoyed. I felt my eyebrows rise in disbelief. Whoa, Jen and Canderous? That’d just be kinda strange, and a bit gross. That’d explain all the fighting, though. Humans were weird.

“What do you mean?” she asked, throwing him a puzzled frown.

He was shifting uncomfortably. “Look, Canderous seems to hold everyone in the same regard – a sort of callous disrespect. Apart from you.”

“He’s a Mandalorian,” came the dry reply. Jen was quirking an eyebrow, and looked highly amused. “They like anyone who can give them a fight.”

Carth scowled. “And you’ve offered yourself up in this sort of duel-“

“I know,” she sighed. “It seemed like the right thing to do at the time, and I wouldn’t take it back even if I could. But there’s nothing up with us, whatever you are trying to imply.” I dunno, kinda sounds like denial to me.

Carth blinked; she’d surprised him somehow, and he’d started backpedalling. “I wasn’t implying-”

Jen shot him a quelling look and cut in, crossing her arms. “Mandalorians aren’t really my type.”

“Oh?” His voice was loaded, somehow, and I was starting to feel uncomfortable, listening in. I was pretty sure they’d forgotten I was there. “Well, not Republic flyboys with an awful taste in clothing.” She shot a half-amused, half-derogatory glance at his jacket. She was right, though, it was pretty ugly. I almost felt bad for trashing the orange one back on Manaan.

“Hey!” Carth looked affronted. “What’s wrong with my jacket?”

Jen laughed, her eyes sparkling with delight. “Carth, it’s puke green. Honestly. Couldn’t you find anything better in Davik’s cast-offs?” Her grin was impish, even under his mock glare. “It’s not really your colour, you know.” She paused, and appeared to be holding in more laughter. “I don’t think it’s anyone’s colour.”

“I didn’t realize Jedi were such critics of fashion,” Carth replied dryly, loosing a chuckle himself.

That comment earned him a frown. “I can’t call myself that. But- but I certainly won’t name myself a Sith, I can promise you that.”

“Good,” he said softly, his eyes intent on her. “After Tatooine and Manaan… well. Good.”

Jen’s eyes landed on me then, further back in the shadows, and she took a step backwards, an inscrutable look fixed on her face. “See you later, Carth, Mission.” She turned and exited.
Carth turned to spot me in the hallway, and stepped back inside, before locking the ‘Hawk’s exit hatch behind him.

I folded my arms and stared at him. “You haven’t forgiven her, huh?” He’d said that, but the conversation certainly hadn’t sounded like it.

“Have you?” he returned, frowning at me. “Betrayal… I’ve had a life time of it. I don’t trust easily, and when it’s broken…”

“I have, yeah,” I said. “’Cause I don’t think she really betrayed us, Carth. I don’t think she was thinking straight at the time. She just wanted to run from Bastila – but she’s back, now, owning up to it. I reckon we all have to give her a chance.”

“I want to,” he sighed. “Maybe you’re right. And maybe I never really trusted her before.”

“She’s good at heart,” I said earnestly. “Whatever happened to her in the past, whatever is between her and Bastila, I just know that Jen’s one of the good guys. Her and Juhani, they struggle with the Force an’ all, but they’ll come through for us. Just you see.”

He looked at me searchingly, his eyes soft. “You have a big heart, Mission,” he said, smiling at me. “And… I’m giving her a chance. I promise.”

I beamed at him. “Great. I’m gonna go help Big Z for a bit.”

Carth smiled again, before turning and heading towards the cockpit. I waited silently for some time until I was certain no one would hear the exit hatch open. Now’s my chance! I’d only said I’d stay behind, after all – I never said I’d stay put on the ‘Hawk. Surely a little scout around couldn’t be that dangerous. I’ll only be gone an hour, max. They won’t even notice I’m missing!

We hadn’t seen Canderous back yet, and I wondered what that duel thing was all about. It kinda sounds like they’re gonna kill each other. I grimaced as I slipped through the exit hatch and closed it behind me. Mandalorians are crazy.

The air was warmer and cleaner when I entered the colony, nodding amicably at the docking staff who barely noticed me waltz through. Even with browsing the HoloNet, I didn’t really get whether Dreshdae was controlled by the Sith soldiers who lurked near the commercial sector, or the Czerka conglomerates who ran the docking bay and the habitation quarters. However, I was smart enough to skirt the retail plaza – Czerka, I could handle. I wasn’t too keen on getting noticed by the Sith.

But I was bored, and all I really wanted to do was have a look around.

Dreshdae itself was mostly made up of living quarters – dormitories, units and suites. The dormitories were easily accessible; long rectangular rooms overrun by mercs and traders looking for a place to crash. The hallway outside reeked of bad hygiene and musty, unwashed clothes, so I strode past it silently, avoiding eye contact with any of the traders walking past. It’s funny how people would leave me alone if I just looked confident and busy enough.

The map of Dreshdae had shown the more pricey suites to be located behind the apartments and Czerka reception chambers, and presumably that meant higher security. However, there were a couple hidden behind the dorms, tucked away down a long dead-end tunnel, and that engaged my curiosity. I wasn’t planning on breaking in anywhere despite the tech spikes filling up my utility belt – see, I had plenty of credits, and didn’t go around acquiring other people’s stuff unless I needed it – but the layout of Dreshdae intrigued me, and it couldn’t hurt to have a little walk around. It’s not like I’d encounter any Dark Jedi there, they’d all be staying at the Academy.
I reached the corridor behind the lower-end living quarters, and there was absolutely no one around. I saw two closed durasteel doors with auto-print mechanisms – the suites, then, coded to whatever anatomy suited the species of the renter. The tunnel itself ended in a large grill that must lead to part of the colony’s ducting system. I eyed it over curiously, before a chill of premonition danced a sudden tickle down my spine.

*I should get outta here. It isn’t safe.* It was an irrational thought out of nowhere, but I was used to trusting my instincts. I spun around abruptly, noticed the corridor was still eerily empty, and took a hurried step before tripping over something that wasn’t there.

I fell to the ground, gasping before scrabbling to my feet, my eyes catching that of a human boy who was leaning tensely against the cracked plasteel wall of the colony.

His dark eyes were wide, and I could tell he was just as startled as me. *Where did he come from?* He hadn’t expected to be noticed, judging by the way he was pressed against the wall, hands flat on either side. He looked to be about my age, although I never found it that easy to tell with humans. Dressed plainly and wearing a concealing dark coat, I wondered what he was doing this side of Dreshdae.

I have him a tentative smile. “I guess you’re just looking around like me, huh?”

He blinked, and I thought I’d surprised him further. I grinned and kept talking, uneasy but not wanting to either intimidate or antagonize the stranger. “I was getting bored and thought I’d take a walk around Dreshdae. Not that there’s much to do around here though.” I wrinkled my nose. “Honestly, this place is a bit of a dive.”

He opened his mouth to say something, presumably thought better of it and shut it again. I quirked an eyebrow at him. “Are you staying in one of the suites?”

“I, uh- no, not exactly,” he stammered, his eyes flicking over to one of the locked doors and a dull red blossoming on his cheeks. *Ah ha, he is nosing around, just like me.*

I grinned again, this time genuinely. “Me neither. I wanted to have a look around the cantina, but all those Sith soldiers kinda put me off.”

His gaze flicked back to me, and now an intense look deepened the brown of them. “That’s a good idea. Avoiding the plaza, I mean. Sometimes some of the students visit there, and it wouldn’t be safe for a girl out by herself—”

“Hey, I can take care of myself!” I protested hotly. I could feel my lekku twitching instinctively. When would people *ever* take me seriously?

He blushed again, but a small smile also graced his face. “I’m sure you can. But this *is* Korriban.” At least he didn’t sound patronizing. “Where are you from?”

I looked away, feeling my eyes sting a little despite myself. My homeworld had been on my mind a lot lately. “Taris,” I said, my voice barely a whisper.

“Oh!” His exclamation caused me to glance back at him. He sounded genuinely upset, and sympathy softened his further words. “I’m sorry. About- about Taris, I mean, I heard about the bombardment. My- my homeworld was bombed four years ago, so, I guess, I know how you feel.”

“Thanks,” I said quietly. “I was lucky, I just happened to be leaving at the time, but all the people I grew up with… I still don’t know what happened to them. I have to hope they made it through, and maybe one day I’ll see them again.” Although I wasn’t really sure I wanted to go back to Taris. *I did*
wanted to see Lina again, and Gadon, and heck even Zaerdra, but going back to Taris seemed a bit like stepping back in life. I’ve seen and done so much since then. I feel like I’ve left that life behind. I wondered idly if my irresponsible brother would ever head back there or if he was still on Tatooine, searching for his next big break. I’d always love Griff, but I actually hoped I’d never see him again.

“There’s nothing left for me back home,” the boy said softly, but he sounded resentful rather than grieved. He was clenching his jaw.

“I wish this stupid war would just stop,” I burst out. “All this murder and fighting, and its all the innocent people who get caught in the crossfire.” My headtails curled around my neck and I crossed my arms defensively. “I’m sorry. I just hate all this, y’know? I wish everyone could just get along.”

He had a sad smile on his face as he looked at me. “That’s a fairy tale. People will never just get along. Most are inherently selfish, and will grasp for power at the expense of others. It’s the only way to keep yourself safe – be stronger than the rest.”

I blinked, surprised at the bitterness his words conveyed. “That’s a bit jaded, don’t ya think? I reckon most people are good at heart if you give them a chance.”

He snorted in disbelief. “You really are naïve, aren’t you? Most people would hit you up for credits – or worse – if they came across you alone in a deserted corridor.”

I scowled, and let my arms drop to my hips. “Wow. What a depressing outlook. You need to get better friends if that’s your view of the world.” A stony look settled over his face, and I regretted that our conversation had turned sour. It was nice, actually, to talk to someone my own age, even if he was bitter. Suppose that’s probably natural if you live on Korriban. “Look, I don’t want to fight. Let’s talk about something else, huh?”

His expression was shuttered now, but he seemed to consider my words, pushing off from the wall and shoving his hands into deep pockets. “Okay, then. Are you staying in a room somewhere?”

We were avoiding introductions, I realized. It felt wrong to give a fake name, but equally, giving out my real name was overly reckless. Jen said there would be reports of our crew. I wondered why he was avoiding it.

I shook my head in response to his question, my lekku uncurling again. “Nah, we won’t be here long, and our ship’s big enough. Doesn’t make any sense to sleep away from it.” I grimaced. “It’s boring though, staying on the ship. No one will play pazaak with me anymore.”

He was looking at me with an inscrutable expression, and I wondered what he did for fun. A thought hit me, and I brightened. “Hey, you don’t play, do you? I’d be keen to play someone new.”

“That’s a gambling game with cards, right?” he queried, shifting uncomfortably. “Sorry, not really my thing.” His eyes slid away from me to the ground.

I sighed. “That’s a shame. What is your thing, then? What do you do for fun?”

The boy blinked, and then flushed. I wondered why in the Outer Rim he appeared so uncomfortable with everything I said. Social skills weren’t high on the priority list of Dreshdae inhabitants, obviously. “I, uh, not much, really,” he finally stammered.

“Not much?” Sheesh, he doesn’t give anything away about himself, does he? His clothes and bearing were nondescript, like he wanted to fade into the crowd. And he’d been completely unnoticeable before, unless I missed the tell-tale sign of a stealth field generator. But they were easy to spot, and I could swear there had been nothing in the corridor. Ten credits he’s been snooping in some of those
“Well, back home sometimes I used to sneak out to the swoop track,” he muttered, looking away as his cheeks flushed. He sounded embarrassed. “I guess that’s not something a girl like you would be interested in.”

“No way!” I cut in loudly, rising up on my toes in excitement. “I’ve just been racing the track on Manaan! The track’s out on the water, and it’s fantastic! I won my first three heats, you should have seen it!”

He was looking at me again, and this time a true grin lightened his face. “Manaan, huh? They’re part of the championship circuit. I hear the water tracks are hugely popular. Wow.”

“I know, right!” I beamed. “I lost my fourth race by less than a second. I reckon I could’ve challenged Flying Starscream again and won, but – well, we left Manaan.” I wasn’t sad about that, I wasn’t, but swooping had been so much fun.

He still had a genuine smile on his face, his eyes never leaving mine. “I never raced professionally, just practice runs on an illegal track when I could sneak out. Although – you said you were from Taris? Their local season was widely followed before the bombing, even if they had been dropped from the intergalactic tournaments. I wouldn’t be surprised if Taris opens again soon. Did you race there?”

I shook my head, my thoughts tracing back to the underground track in the Lower City. “I always wanted too, and I followed the races closely. The Beks – a swoop gang I grew up with – always did well. I used to imagine I’d grow to be a famous swooper and win them the title.”

We shared a smile, reminiscent of childhood dreams, and I wondered if he’d had the same fantasies. But his look slowly faded to be replaced with one of curiosity. “What are you doing on Dreshdae?” he asked finally. “Are you with traders or mercs?”

I tilted my head to the side. “Merc, I guess.” It was a better fit than trader at any rate. And Canderous, at least, was an actual mercenary.

He frowned at me, a sort of disillusioned look creasing his face. “How come you have such a rosy view of everything if your people are looking for paid work that generally involves fighting? Fighting for money?” he said in disbelief. “I mean, it’s not exactly an ethical career choice, is it?”

“I... well, no, but I mean, I’m not a mercenary. And most of my group aren’t either.” Ethical choice, hah! That’s a load of bantha poodoo coming from someone I’m pretty sure was just breaking into an apartment. I tossed my head. “And anyway, here on Korriban it’s normal, right? Like, compared to all those Dark Jedi scum, mercs are basically the good guys.”

I’d said something wrong, for his face tightened and his eyes pinched in anger. “Dark Jedi scum,” he echoed softly, almost hissing. “Do you have any idea how dangerous it is to say something like that here? You foolish, foolish girl.”

Fear swept through me suddenly, and I took a step away from him in astonished fright. “No,” I muttered. He’d been so nice, a little bitter maybe, but there was no way someone like him could be one of those core slime evil creeps. “You can’t be one of them—”

“Run back to your ship, little girl,” he sneered, and the face I’d considered open and honest took an ugly turn. “If you stick around the tunnels of Dreshdae, sooner or later you’re going to get yourself killed.” He took a menacing step towards me, and I scrambled back further.
“Why?” I burst out. “Why would you want to- to-”

“To have power enough to stop any atrocity happening to me ever again?” he cut in, eyes flashing. “You have no idea. The potential is limitless… and I will not be a victim ever again!” He ended on a shout, and I glanced around quickly; we were still alone, but the one thing I didn’t want was to be part of a scene.

I breathed in deep, torn between running and telling him what a brainless Gamorrean he was being. “But… the Dark Side… it makes you kill and destroy everything you love! Look – some of the people I’m with- they, they can help you. Come with me. You don’t have to stay here on this rotten planet.”

He looked at me like I was stark raving mad, and then a blinding flash of fury contorted his face further. “Go away!” he screamed viciously. “Go back to the safety of your ship before I do something you’ll regret, and stay there!”

I took another step back, but determination swelled within me as well. I didn’t believe this boy would actually hurt me and, whatever demons he was fighting, well surely- surely- Jen or Bastila or Juhani would be able to help him. If he stayed here, on Korriban, he’d end up as just another one of those twisted Dark Jedi.

“No,” I said softly, staring at him. “I’m serious y’know. My friends – they’re good people. They know all about this sort of stuff. You don’t have to stay here on this rotten planet. There’s a better way! A happier way!”

The incredulity on his face grew, if anything, and then he gestured in the air with his hands. I gasped; the boy had completely disappeared from right in front of me. There was no technology that could do that. I looked around wildly, but the corridor was empty.

The sharp press of cold metal against my neck iced my spine, and I froze in shock.

“Do you see how easy it would be to dispose of you?” his disembodied voice whispered from behind me. “A flick of my wrist, and you’d be a puddle of bloody flesh on the ground. How dare you preach of a better way to me, you stupid little girl.”

My breath caught in my throat as I felt the knife trail down my neck. Between my headtails, the most sensitive part of my body. It was as light as a caress, scratching a menacing pattern from side to side. Big Z, Jen, I’m in such kath dung now! My insides froze. The fear was nauseating, and I didn’t know if I should scream for help or just bolt and hope for the best.

The knife pressed in hard, right at the base of my skull, and a desperate whimper escaped my lips. “Go,” he spat, and I felt it on the back of my neck. “And if I catch you again, I’ll slice your pretty little headtails off.”

And with that, I ran.

xXx
I woke, awareness coming groggily as the sound of knocking slowly permeated through the haze of my mind. Normally I needed little sleep, and was alert within seconds of waking. But not since Manaan.

My senses felt eroded, like my entire being was immersed in water, and I struggled just to remain up to speed with what was occurring. Every morning I felt like I was still clamouring after pieces of my mind, scrabbling to put them back together in a coherent order.

“Uh, Bastila? Do you want some lunch?”

I sat up, leaning back against the stark, utilitarian wall of the Ebon Hawk’s medbay. “Come in, Carth,” I answered.

The door swished open, and Carth was holding a plate full of hot brayda rolls, a wry smile on his face. The yeasty aroma invaded my senses, and I realized that I was, in fact, ravenous.

“Look what I found at a stall just outside the docking bay,” he said, offering me the tray. “Sure, they charged me an arm, but what do you expect from Czerka employees on a Sith-controlled planet.”

“Thank you.” I bit into one, my eyes fluttering closed as the hot dough melted in my mouth.

“Jen and Juhani left a few hours ago,” Carth continued talking as I finished the roll. “Jen was pretty keen to talk to you Bastila, but – well, you’re sleeping about eighteen hours a day at the moment.”

My eyes snapped open at my bond-sister’s name. Her presence was nestled in the back of my mind, sparks of irritation palpable now that I focussed on it.

*Jen.* I sent an inquiring probe to her. The communication was second nature now, and I found with little effort that I could feel her emotions, distinguishable from mine and yet somehow part of me. Force bonds were rare indeed, and it seemed that ours was notably strong. I’d heard stories of mind-links that, over time, allowed recipients to share Force power, an aptitude which, given the true identity of my bond-mate, alarmed me more than a little.

But since her return, my opinion of Revan had been slightly mitigated. Her recklessness and inane sense of humour were foreign to me, but her confidence and strength of spirit were admirable.

*Bastila,* she acknowledged, but her attention was distracted. I dearly wished I could see through her eyes, as she’d queried yesterday. *She had through mine once,* I recalled with a shiver. I had not realized *that* was possible.

But her thoughts and memories were infinitely more accessible than her eyesight. And yesterday she experienced some form of recollection, for I had a sudden vision of an older Mandalorian warrior facing me challengingly, a faded background of soldiers and smoke blurrily painting the scene behind him. My grasp on the memory slipped, and it vanished before I could make any sense of it bar the obvious: some fragment from the Mandalorian wars. Had my connection to the Force not been so irritatingly feeble, I would have had a better idea of what she had recollected.
I wished I knew what had happened on the Endar Spire to shake loose the identity of Jen, for before the Sith ambush there had not been a single inkling of Revan appearing.

"Are you talking to her right now?" Carth asked suspiciously. I nodded briefly in assent. "Where are they?"

I glanced up at the Republic soldier standing in the doorway, still holding a handful of delicious food. Carth’s hair had the slightly static appearance of some time spent in the Ebon Hawk’s sonic refresher – a place I was sorely tempted to visit myself. Oh, what I would give for an actual hot water shower! But they were rare indeed on freighters this size.

I was feeling better, and stronger, I realized. It’s about time.

"Carth, can you give me a minute please? I will meet you in the common room.” I glanced down at my rumpled clothes, loose fitting garments that I had worn for days. “Once I am properly attired.”

He nodded and left, taking the food with him, and I drew in a deep breath, slowly collecting my thoughts. I still found it difficult to come to terms that we were, actually, on Korriban of all places – and that for the first time, our motley crew was working as a collective team to find a Star Map. I had not understood properly, until yesterday when Carth blocked me from sending a coded message to the Order, explaining in minute detail the need for radio blackout.

A stealth mission. And everyone who knows of us, Sith and Jedi alike, believe we are enroute to Kashyyyk. Oh, it made sense indeed, for if Darth Malak had any foresight he would soon be sending troops to reinforce Korriban. But I could not help but be apprehensive. Revan, on the dark planet of Korriban. So soon after blowing the Ebon Hawk out of the sky just so she could run.

I breathed in again, buried my fear, and stretched out my senses towards her.

How are you going?

The answer back was quick. Not well. We figured we’d try searching for Yuthura’s friend in the suites, but no joy so far. We’re just pissing off traders and mercenaries alike. I’m about ready to pack it all in and go challenge that sadistic little Sithling at the Academy. In fact-

She cut herself off, and I couldn’t help the concern at her tumultuous thoughts. Oh, I was aware that she considered me reserved, apprehensive even – but Revan’s volatile thoughts and spontaneous actions certainly warranted caution at the very least. Although I did admit that we both wished for a rapid conclusion on Korriban, and a slow, thoughtful approach would not yield that. We are here for two more days at least, due to that primitive duel she agreed to.

Finding the Star Map in two days was highly improbable, but I wished we did not have the distraction of the Mandalorian’s issues. Revan and Canderous seemed to hold a perverse respect for each other, and I did not know what to think about these brawls they had been engaging in during our hyperspace journey.

One day, Canderous will come clean to her. That is, if our long overdue conversation didn’t show that she already knew. Whatever her reason for returning to us, it had been shattering enough to turn her full circle. Although Revan seemed… less dark and highly determined to remain so, since her return. Perhaps it was wishful thinking on my part, but although her anger, mistrust and fear were still there, it wasn’t ruling her the way it sometimes had on Tatooine.

So then she couldn’t know, surely? The horrible fear of her reclaiming her heritage would otherwise come to fruition. Anyone can be redeemed, I reminded myself. And her character now seemed to be
that of Revan Freeflight the Jedi Knight and not the Sith Lord.

Well, it certainly isn’t Jen Sahara.

What isn’t me? She shot back, catching me unawares. Revan’s surprising strength within the bond often caught me by surprise, and my lingering weakness did not help matters.

Never mind, I replied, hoping she would drop it. Mild distrust radiated between us, and I was aware, yet again, how desperately we needed to talk despite my misgivings. She desired it in person; I wanted the additional privacy of being physically elsewhere. I did not wish her to view my face, should I need to dissemble. But, I could avoid it no longer.

I sighed, stretching as I slowly stood. A pile of folded Jedi robes sat on a shelf next to a roll of bandages. Juhani’s doing, no doubt. The Cathar was quietly thoughtful, her nature unassuming and easy to overlook.

I focussed my thoughts back to my erstwhile bond-sister. What is your plan from here?

Yuthura said I needed to impress her. So I’ve told her I’m off to open the door, or get someone else to do it for me. Hah! Let’s see how Mekel responds to an ultimatum.

Be careful, Jen. This Yuthura is a recruiter for the Academy, and not one to cross.

But Sith appreciate a show of strength, she answered, amused for some reason I could not fathom.

She's following us, all nonchalant and casual, but I can tell we’ve intrigued her.

If you can find a peaceful way to enter, then please choose that path. Jedi value life. Do not kill if you do not have to, Jen.

It won’t come to that, I’m sure. Her mental voice was dry. He’s no match for me. He'll back down.

I wondered if she realized just how innate her confidence in her own abilities ran. I don’t plan on doing anything… dark, Bastila. Just shame him enough in front of a Master that he either capitulates and opens the door, or I best him and convince Yuthura I’m Sith material.

This could go wrong, Jen.

Yes. So could any of Yuthura’s tasks.

Revan, as always, rolling the dice. It seemed I had no choice but to trust her instincts. Master Zhar always claimed she held the Force's own luck. Master Vrook didn't believe in luck, Force-born or otherwise.

I pulled back from the mind-link, and took a moment to quickly dress, shrugging off a minor dizziness that still dogged me. The recovery to my stamina, both mental and physical, was frustratingly slow. But I had been lucky, for I did not believe I exhibited any long term damage. Psychic blows of the sort I encountered can shatter minds and destroy memories. Permanently. Revan, here, was the sterling example.

I sighed, pushing the thoughts away as I quickly dressed. Carth was waiting in the central common room looking disapprovingly at Zaalbar. The plate was mostly empty.

“Throw rug here spotted the food,” Carth muttered as I came forward to find a seat.

The big Wookiee hung his head. “(I left you two, Bastila. I hope that is enough. I was hungry.”
“Thank you, Zaalbar,” I said, reaching for one and hoping Carth would be happy to procure more. “I am sure that will suffice.”

“Have you, uh, made contact with Jen?” Carth asked, as I struggled not to demolish the baked good. I nodded at him, finishing the roll before answering.

“They are attempting to enter the Academy, this time by force I believe.”

Carth grimaced, and Zaalbar looked worried, insofar as a Wookiee could.

“(I do not like being unable to help Jen,)” Zaalbar growled softly. “(My skills would be better put to use fighting her enemies than fixing cast-off armour suits.)”

“I do not like sitting here either, Zaalbar,” I admitted. “But we may hinder rather than help, should we leave the privacy of the Ebon Hawk.”

“I’ve got to learn Shyriiwook,” Carth muttered, earning a grunt from the Wookiee.

“(It is a much more expressive language than your simplistic Basic,)” Zaalbar told an uncomprehending Carth. “(I will leave you both now, and attend to the ship’s portable communicators. Mission had an interesting idea for a modification.)”

As the Wookiee left the room, I slowly finished the roll, leaning back on the bench and closing my eyes in weariness. When I opened them again, I saw Carth looking at me expectantly.

I sent him an inquiring look. “Can I help you?”

“Yes,” he said quietly. “I want to talk to you about Jen.”

Despite myself, my spine immediately tightened in nervousness. “What exactly do you wish to know, Carth?” I asked, the wary tone obvious even to my own ears. His brown eyes darkened in intensity as he stared hard at me.

“Bastila… I know you Jedi like your secrets, and maybe you have reasons for them – but it hasn’t helped us any. It hasn’t helped Jen any. You need to- to tell her who she really is.”

I felt my eyes widen with stunned disbelief. There was no way Carth could know the truth, not if he was still standing there instead of storming after Jen with a warm blaster in a tightly clasped hand. If there was one person onboard the Ebon Hawk who would react in the worst imaginable way, it would be the once-betrayed Republic loyalist, Captain Carth Onasi. My stomach fluttered in nervousness. “Carth- what, what do you mean?” I stuttered.

He sighed. “Look, on Manaan I found out she was tortured when Darth Revan’s forces took Deralia. Badly enough that she’s damn lucky to still be breathing.” His brows lowered. “The Sith don’t go around torturing nobody scholars – not to that extent. I’m not stupid, Bastila. I know she has memory loss. And I know that unknown Force-sensitives aren’t suddenly able to use the Force in battle, no matter how strong they are. She used to be a Jedi, didn’t she?”

I was too bone-weary to dissemble, too exhausted to deceive. I closed my eyes and gave a very brief nod. He doesn’t know everything. He doesn’t know Revan, I realized in sudden relief. The galaxy made a little more sense again.

He heard me exhaile. “She’s older than her records say… I noticed that on Taris. Her data’s been tampered with to erase those years, hasn’t it? I’ve seen the effects of long-term torture, Bastila. It breaks some people, and others block out chunks of their life just so they can cope. Some of my men,
once, were captured…” Carth trailed off, and I understood that he still believed Jen Sahara was real. She had been real, once. And she had been an unknown Force-sensitive.

“You must understand, Carth, that we never believed she would regain any of those memories,” I whispered. Not after we implanted Jen Sahara, a traitorous voice reminded me. “She showed no signs of it, and the neural scans indicated that any sort of recovery wasn’t within a plausible range of likelihood.” Except for her dreams. Her subconscious crying out through the Force link. But that, too, the Force healers said was natural – and to our advantage. “Something happened onboard the Endar Spire that changed everything.”

His eyes met mine. “She had a head injury, a severe one. Either from the fighting on the ‘Spire, or the crash landing.”

Trauma to the head. Enough to, in some part, undo what the Council did. That made sense, and explained just how she managed to accomplish so much on Taris. I shivered. The Endar Spire had been a desperate gamble by the Council, and it had failed.

“You need to tell her the truth,” Carth continued, in the same quiet voice. “She ran… she ran because of all these damn Jedi secrets screwing with her head. How is she meant to resist the Dark Side without knowing her past? She has a right to know, Bastila.”

Oh the complete irony in his words. She wouldn’t resist the Dark Side if she truly knew the truth. I looked away, in part to stop Carth from seeing any glimmer of it in my eyes. But he was right, I didn’t believe I had any choice left but to come clean. “I know, Carth. I’ve known since her return. But I have not exactly had much chance to speak with her, if you recall.” My voice rose in indignation, and I turned back to shoot him a disgruntled look.

“Fair enough,” he agreed mildly, but his voice still carried a thread of steel. “But you will talk to her. She’s out here on Korriban doing the Council’s bidding with no recollection of any train-”

“It wasn’t meant to happen this way!” I interjected hotly. “We had Master Galdea on the Endar Spire, with a squad of Jedi Knights. I didn’t choose to go to Tatooine and embark on this quest with a skeleton crew, Carth. I have been doing the best I can with what resources the Force has thrown my way!”

“I know, I know! And look, we’ve found two Maps, so you’ve been doing something right. It’s just-it’s Korriban and I’m worried about how Jen will cope in this environment. And- and Juhani, of course,” he tacked on belatedly.

I stared at him in silence; he broke the gaze to look away, a slight colour on his cheeks. And Juhani, indeed. Revan, without even realizing it, had managed to tie Carth up in metaphorical knots since Taris.

A loud knock at the hatch interrupted our conversation; with a hurried nod to me, Carth rose to investigate. I sighed, rubbing my temples and drawing in the Force as a precaution. I felt bone weary once more, like I had spent the day in gruelling combat practice rather than a conducting a ten minute conversation.

Oh, but I would be glad to leave Korriban behind. If I had not been incapacitated, we would be on Kashyyyk instead. And I might still have a better handle on… on everything.

Revan is leading this mission now, for better or worse. Her luck was astonishing – it always had been throughout her infamous life - and now that she was actively involved in the hunt for the maps perhaps we would end with a speedy exit from this dark planet. And perhaps we will not need to find
the Map on Kashyyyk, if Master Vrook is already there.

I would be very relieved to be back in his company, and under his tutelage. He was seen as a harsh taskmaster, and I knew many believed he had held me back – that a Jedi possessed of my gifts should surely be a Knight after so many years. In my weaker moments, I may have even thought the same. But I trust Vrook. He did not believe me ready for the trials, and I would dearly like to succeed upon my first attempt. It wasn’t a black mark, to fail the trials – many Knights had, even some of the strongest. But I was a perfectionist, and detested the thought of my own failure.

With all that has happened upon this journey, I hope he will approve of my actions.

The clattering of boots caught my attention, and I looked up to see Canderous follow Carth into the room.

“Canderous, welcome back,” I said in greeting.

“Princess,” he drawled. Oh, but I abhorred that nickname. “Where’s Jen?”

“Trying to get into the Academy.” Of course he would be thinking about his duel in two days time. That was irresponsible of my bond-sister to allow herself to be pulled into his mess, but I did not believe she would turn back from it. And perhaps there was some merit in having the Mandalorian accompany us out of loyalty, should the duel go as Revan expected. Certainly, the extra brawn could come in useful when Force powers could not.

“I need to know when she’s back,” he stated in a low voice. His arms were full of new weaponry – surely we have enough assault weapons on board – and a sleek vibroblade rested on his hip.

“She’s out there trying to find a Star Map, in case you’d forgotten,” Carth cut in, sounding mildly annoyed.

“This is Mandalorian business,” Canderous bit out. “Not yours.”

Carth rolled his eyes and looked about ready to fire a retort back, before seemingly thinking better of it. He looked back at Canderous again, frowning. “We’re both military men, Canderous, even if we have fought on different sides. I’m sure we can get along for the sake of the mission.”

“I can get along with whoever I need to, Republic,” Canderous replied, shooting Carth a decidedly unimpressed look.

“Good,” Carth said mildly. “Because the Mandalorian wars are well and truly over.”

The reference to losing didn’t seem to faze Canderous; he sat down opposite me, dumping his load of weaponry over the central table. It was becoming a familiar sight.

“We likely faced one another at some time in the past. What battles were you in, Carth?”

I sighed softly, leaning back again and closing my eyes. I had no time for the glorifying of war and the showing off of battle scars. I stretched out my senses and concentrated back on the bond between Revan and I; sometimes, it felt as tangible as my connection to the Force itself. Revan’s being sharpened into focus, and I wondered if she was preparing herself for an imminent confrontation.

“I’m a star pilot Canderous, I was on the front lines for most of the war, and fought where I was sent. I don’t keep a list of the battles I’ve been in like some sort of tally. The horrors of war are something I’d rather not relive.”
What a snot-nosed show-off. Her thoughts rang in my connection to the Force, derogatory and yet amused. I did not believe she was directing them towards me. He’d back down if Yuthura wasn’t here. I felt her draw in the Force with a practiced ease that disconcerted me, and hoped she would be careful.

Canderous snorted. “With that sort of attitude, no wonder my people made the Republic tremble. We focus on the glory of battle, the victory of triumphing against the odds-”

“What, like you did against us?” Carth cut in sarcastically. “Why did the Mandalorians attack anyway? It’s something that’s always bothered me. I mean, I know your people are pretty bloodthirsty, but the Mandalorians invaded on an unprecedented scale, and seemingly with no provocation.”

My eyes snapped open, catching on the mercenary. I’d heard murmurs amongst the Jedi, bare wisps of rumours that there must have been some reason for the war – that something must have encouraged the leader of the Mandalorians to mount the invasion.

A vision, I thought in curiosity. I wonder if Canderous’ Mandalore had any sort of Force sensitivity. I was swiftly distracted by a tug on the Force from Revan, followed by a victorious crow: Hah, pulled your legs out from under you! If I stayed immobile and focussed, I could almost interpret Revan’s actions as she decided upon them.

“A vision? A vision of slaughtering anyone who gets in your way? What a charming guy,” Carth muttered. “I’ve heard about some of the full-scale genocide you Mandalorians committed.”

“I thought a fellow warrior would understand conquest,” Canderous retorted. “Although I always did have you pegged as one of those cowardly peace types.”

Hundreds of needles stabbed Revan’s presence in my mind; I breathed in quickly and felt her pain and fury flare to life like an incendiary grenade. Detach yourself from the pain, I counselled, alarmed at the velocity of her emotions. Use the Force to hone your senses and reactions. Do not surrender to your emotions – rise above them.

Like quicksilver, Revan’s focus swung on me, and her rage ebbed away. I felt a torrent of power rush in under her command; she was watchful now, wary but calm, as she actually seemed to absorb my advice, act upon it, and turn back to the situation at hand.

I felt gratified, and more than a little surprised at her sudden cooperation.

“I’m not a warrior, I’m a soldier,” Carth said, quiet but intense. “Peace – yes, we defend peace and protect the innocent – usually from warriors.”

“I accept who and what I am.” Canderous said, standing up. “It is our strength and our values as Mando’ade that very nearly won us the war, despite being heavily outnumbered and logistically
h tongied. You keep your peace, Republic, and see how well you can defend it from the next conqueror.” With that, he grabbed the larger gun from the table and stalked out.

Carth sighed, and I wrested my attention back to the conversation in the Ebon Hawk, shooting him a disappointed look. I had hoped those two could cease bickering, for even Canderous and I had moved onto a more civil relationship.

“I know, I know,” he raised his hands in surrender. “Believe it or not, I was actually trying to be polite. But I’ll never understand him… or respect his beliefs.” Carth grimaced. “The Mandalorian Wars are such a defining point in our lives and we were on opposite sides… and, he is right… the Republic very nearly fell.” Carth paused then, looking me over seriously. “Bastila, did you ever think about joining the Jedi who followed Revan and Malak to fight the Mandalorians?”

My breath caught, that line of questioning I hadn’t expected. I felt a furious rush of colour flood my face, recalling those Knights who had left. “No,” I said firmly. “Absolutely not. I had the wisdom to obey the will of the Council.”

I’d been younger than most, and my gifts had not yet manifested, but even so- I couldn’t comprehend the level of unmitigated gall shown by Revan in not only openly defying the Council, but also calling upon others to join her and the Republic’s war effort. It wasn’t merely her; Meetra, Yudan and Xasat had been fairly successful in recruiting further Jedi to defect. And of course I cannot forget Malak. For how far would Revan have gone, without Malak? But in the end, Revan had been the ringleader, the catalyst that had started the drain of Jedi Knights from the Order.

“Unlike Revan, I guess.” Carth muttered in agreement. “Still, do you ever wonder if things could have been different? Would Revan and Malak still have surrendered to the Dark Side if the Council had supported them instead of dragging their feet?”

As his words sunk in, a flare of outrage sparked to life in my belly. I sat up straight and felt a fierce expression tighten my face as I stared at him. “That is the height of absurdity, to blame Revan’s corruption on the Council! She was warned – she and Malak both – what the horrors of war can do to a Jedi, especially ones as emotive as those two! The Order-”

“The Order abandoned the Republic,” Carth said quietly, but his words cut through mine like a lightsaber. “We needed Masters, to advise and counsel, alongside powerful Jedi Knights like Revan and Malak. Instead they were the only ones at first to offer aid, and were left to lead the best they knew how, despite their youth and inexperience-”

“The Council was not about the about to throw lives away foolishly,” I interrupted, forcing my voice and emotions to dampen down. There is no emotion; there is peace. I reminded myself that Carth had witnessed firsthand the carnage of the Mandalorian Wars, and his bitterness was well justified.

I felt the weight of Revan’s focus on me, curious and speculative; either she was distracted by my vexation or her situation had been adequately resolved. I did not, however, wish her to pick up on any of this conversation. “In time, we would have aided you against the Mandalorians. But the wisdom of the Masters saw beyond the immediate threat. Something urged the Mandalorians to war – something that likely devoured Revan and Malak also-”

Carth snorted in derision. “Mandalorians have desired conquest since the dawn of time. You heard Canderous and his account of that vision. That was nothing but a rallying cry to excuse a full-scale invasion. Damn it, Bastila, we needed the Jedi Order!”

Ouch, Yuthura’s got quite the tongue on her. Heavy amusement slid through the bond. Mekel’s going to have to do some crawling to get back in her good graces.
“The Order would have been there when the time was right, Carth. I do not doubt the wisdom of the Masters, and nor should you.” I stared at him solemnly, and wished the Republic Captain shared my faith. “You asked me if I think things could have been different? I know they could have. If Revan had only listened to the Council, millions of innocent people would still be alive.”

“Yeah, right,” Carth muttered, standing up abruptly and scowling at me. “And every single one of them would be speaking Mandalorian.” With that parting shot, he stalked out of the room.

I sighed angrily, my own irritation coming to the fore. This is the opinion of Republic soldiers who do not see the wider picture, I reminded myself, while an insidious voice pointed out that I, myself, did not fully comprehend the reasons for the Masters’ inaction. But unlike Revan, I kept my faith with them. Master is not a rank one attains without a level of wisdom and understanding that surpasses that of ordinary mortals.

You doing alright there, Bastila?

I dragged my thoughts back to my bond sister. I may have had less than harmonious words with Carth, I admitted. How is your situation?

Mekel’s run away with his tail between his legs. I’ll have to watch out I haven’t made an enemy. Her voice was wry, and too unconcerned for my comfort. I think he’s one of Yuthura’s underlings, actually. She’s given him quite a tongue-lashing.

Are you inside?

Yes. It’s… a bit awe-inspiring. The height of this structure is incredible. Surely this has been here for eons, despite the Academy being fairly new. But the Force… it feels twisted here. Can you sense it?

Awe-inspiring was not the terminology I would have used. I breathed in deep, released my earlier exasperation, and meditated on the connection between us. Weariness was creeping in on the edges of my focus, and I understood I was approaching my limit for the day.

The Force felt like pure life, strong and vibrant and limitless. I’d always had a powerful affinity for it, but I wondered – not for the first time – if our inconvenient link hadn’t amplified that.

I do not notice any difference from here.

I exhaled and relaxed against the wall, closing my eyes. Revan was further distracted and pulled away from our communication. I had lost the strength to stay intent upon her circumstance. Exhaustion slowly gained prominence and I let myself drift away in a slumberous doze.

xXx

“Big Z, I’m sorry, alright?”

“(You could have been hurt!)”

“I know! I know, okay, and you’re right – this planet is full of nothing but scummy rotten creeps!”

The sound of erupting tears dragged me back to consciousness, and with a start I realized I’d nodded off on one of those awful plimfoam benches in the common room. My eyes fluttered open.

“And this useless armour didn’t do a damn thing to stop him!” There was a scuffle, followed by the metallic thump of something landing on the ground. Another broken sob in a young girl’s voice.
Mission.

My back ached as I fully woke now, seeing the young Twi’lek falling apart in the Wookiee’s arms. They hadn’t noticed me, tucked away in the corner bench, having fallen asleep unintentionally. A sharp pain shot through my back as I moved, and I let out a soft groan.

Mission yelped, jumping out of Zaalbar’s arms and running from the room like a scalded loth-cat.

The Wookiee started, glancing at me in surprise before bending to pick up the discarded exoskeleton Mission had unceremoniously dropped to the ground.

“(We did not mean to wake you, Bastila. I’m afraid we didn’t realize you were there,)” Zaalbar said apologetically before following the young girl in haste. I felt a moment of awkwardness, having unwittingly intruded on an apparent private conversation. I was aware that the impulsive Twi’lek did not think highly of me, and did not wish to further aggravate this.

I stood, stretching slowly and wincing. Another plate of rolls had magically appeared on the table; a wordless apology from Carth, perhaps. I took a couple in appreciation and walked slowly towards what now seemed to be my room: the makeshift medbay. My meagre possessions had even been moved there from the captain’s quarters.

Jen? How are things going?

Everyone here is either insane or sadistic. Or both. Revan’s mental voice sounded highly annoyed, an undercurrent of frustrated derision seeping through it. The headmaster is inordinately interested in Juhani for some unknown reason. We haven’t been granted leave to enter the valley yet, and we can’t go back to Dreshdae today. There’s this one Sith – just a boy really – who’s canvassing for advice on how to mistreat these bunch of student wannabes who aren’t performing to his expectations. Her anger was rising with each thought. This is just – it’s a waste, Bastila. These students are drunk on power. It’s like someone’s handing out blasters to a bunch of toddlers.

I breathed in deeply, and tried to visualize peace and serenity flowing out from me towards Revan.

Remember the Jedi Code, Jen. There is no emotion-

For frell’s sake, Bastila, not that again.

I sighed impatiently. I did not spend all that time after Tatooine for you to so carelessly disregard it.

Did you know the Sith have a code, too? It’s just words, Bastila. It doesn’t help me here!

Well it certainly should! I could feel myself frowning in frustration. It is not merely a motto, Jen. The words itself guide you to properly utilize the Force. If you embrace the Force with passion, with anger, it will tempt and twist you into actions you would otherwise not take. That is the very essence of why we preach caution! If you let your emotions guide your actions, then you are bereft of clear judgment.

You make it sound as if feeling anything is a crime. There is no emotion – bah!

No, I answered slowly, remembering my own training. That is not what I meant. Simply that one must remain clear-headed and not allow irrational feelings to dictate our actions. That is especially true when you wield the power of the Force. Do you think all of these students were so malicious toward others before they entered the Academy and were encouraged to embrace their emotions, negative or otherwise?
There was a long pause before she finally answered. *There is some truth in what you say, Bastila. I'm not sure that's the whole of it though.*

I felt an unwanted flare of irritation at her doubts of my counsel, until the absurdity of just whom I was advising hit me. I closed my eyes, sat down on the hard bed, and attempted to take my own advice.

*How are you planning to access this valley?*

*I’ve intrigued Yuthura – I believe she’s my best bet to get access, but I’ll need some leverage. She’s Uthar’s first apprentice, so she has some clout around here.*

*So this Uthar is the headmaster?*

*Yes. Nasty piece of work. Turned on the old headmaster some years back with his first apprentice, and then backstabbed the one who’d helped him usurp the position. Typical Sith politics. Her words had a fake nonchalance that was obviously forced. I closed my eyes.*

*If he is the Master on Korriban, then he will be powerful indeed.*

*I don’t underestimate him. She was serious now. He’s permanently immersed in this… miasma of Force power. I’m… uneasy around him.*

I stayed quiet, but my concern was burgeoning. Revan, too, stopped communicating, and our bond echoed the trepidation we both felt. I understood the reasoning for coming here instead of Kashyyyk, but I still wasn’t sure I agreed. On Kashyyyk, at least, we would be safe.

*But Malak would know. And he’d be a braindead murglak if he didn’t guard the Korriban Star Map before we could get here. Our only realistic chance of success is speed, and stealth.*

That she had caught my thoughts so effortlessly worried me. I had not meant for her to hear that. But my connection with the Force was still shaky, and Revan’s grasp was growing stronger. One day, she would pluck the truth from my mind. *If she didn’t already know.*

I breathed in deep, dampened my emotions with a serene calm, and pushed out to her once more.

*Why did you say you couldn’t come back? Canderous is expecting you.*

There was a pause. *Tell Canderous I’ll return tomorrow. That leaves us a day to prepare. I could almost hear her sigh before she continued. Uthar stressed that true students needed to cut their ties with anyone left behind. That we need to focus on the Force if we are to be “worthy”. She sounded serious. I think it would look suspicious if the first thing we did was to head back to our ship. Not if we want access to the valley.*

*Very well. Watch out for each other, Jen.*

*We are. Juhani… she’s a pillar of strength, Bastila.*

Despite myself, a small thread of jealousy wormed itself treacherously in my belly, dispersing the serenity I was struggling to maintain. *I was the one bonded to Revan, and yet from the moment the Cathar had joined our party, the respect and understanding between the two had far eclipsed ours.*

*Somehow, every word I had said, every action I took, had been the wrong one. I was meant to watch Revan from afar, safely guarded onboard the Endar Spire, slowly spending my nights rifling through*
her discordant dreams for clues. Instead, we’d been ambushed, and it had all gone downhill from there.

But she came back.

And now on Korriban, one of the most corrupted destinations in the universe, we were actually coming to an understanding. We were actually working together. And if she and Juhani were close, then I should be thankful for the strength they could draw from each other. I would be thankful for it.

With a deep breath of resolution, I sent her another thought. What happens now?

For me, dinner. With a bunch of Sithlings. Revan was a contrary mix of amusement and irritation. I wonder if I should start a foodfight.

xXx
I stepped softly through the granite halls that were carved deep into the rock; the Force wrapped tightly around me, concealing my presence from most. As ever, the thrumming power inherent in the connection filled me with conviction that my path was the only sensible choice.

The expression on that Twi’lek girl’s face flashed through my mind. Scared, but so earnestly hopeful it made me want to puke. And yet… and yet a weak, traitorous part of me had wanted to throw it all away, and follow her.

To where, Dustil? To a group of sad mercenaries who can apparently “help” me against the power of the Dark Side? I snorted derisively to myself, and a nearby Sith soldier whirled around, startled, searching up and down the corridor but not spotting my presence. Why would I give this up this gift?

She sounded so stupid, so naïve. Most people are good at heart… what complete trash. But she believed it; I could see it in her shiny, innocent eyes. Selene had been a bit like that, once, and the pull to trust in her worldview had been difficult to resist.

Selene was long gone now.

With every step that further lifted me in Master Uthar’s esteem - that developed my abilities and strengthened my grasp on the Force - I could feel the boy I was once die. Bit by bit. I didn’t want to be that hopeful dumb boy, who’d laughed and lived on the swoop track and yearned for a father who never returned home.

But I wasn’t sure I wanted to be what I was becoming.

The fear on the girl’s face should have been gratifying; a testament to my might over her. Yet somehow, a sickening type of heartache was undermining it. I need to control this. Let my anger fade the rest away. For I didn’t want Uthar prying into my thoughts and seeing that Twi’lek. He would scour my mind, too, if he thought something was detrimental to my training. And Uthar was nothing if not meticulous in tying up loose ends. A good thing she said her stay on Korriban was brief.

The hallway expanded into a magnificent cavern that dominated this side of the Academy. The caves here were ancient but, in recent times, sculptures of dead Sith Lords had been carved into the granite, threads of black ferracrystal running through the art and creating a stunning display. I wasn’t much interested in that sort of thing, but even I had to admit the results were impressive.

I stopped, leaning silently against a massive statue of a sneering Lord Naga Sadow while observing the occupants of the room. Selene used to pull comic faces at the sculpture, waiting until Mekel or I would break into fits of muffled laughter. Then there was the time she flicked a glob of frostti cream right up Sadow’s nose. It was a good thing Mekel had Force pushed it off just as Master Uthar rounded the corner.

Things had changed since those days.

Glancing around, I saw Master Uthar was busy extolling the virtues of the Sith Code to a handful of listeners; new students I mostly didn’t recognize. The one I did – Shaardan – was nodding
vigorously, like an eager kath hound begging for a bone. He’d been here for years, failing the Adept trials three times thus far. It made him an anomaly; most either passed or died in the attempt. And the tests were gruelling enough that I certainly wouldn’t put myself through them a second time.

But Shaardan was harmless; all talk and no strike. He was a toy, really, that both Masters Uthar and Yuthura played with turn apiece. Standing near him were two others; a human woman and a Cathar of all things, listening intently to Uthar’s lecture. Their faces were wary and their bodies tense, so they couldn’t be entirely dim-witted about what they were getting into.

Sometimes newcomers were. Some of them didn’t make it past Uthar’s first lecture.

Further beyond in the shadows my eyes caught on Mekel, who was standing still in the entrance to one of the training rooms, facing back into the cavern. Intense hatred marred his face as he glared fiercely at the newcomers.

**Interesting.** I edged around the cavernous area, holding tight onto the Force wrapped around me. Master Uthar showed no sign of recognizing my presence, but not much escaped his notice. I kept my eyes on the listeners, and was surprised to see the human female glance in my direction, before focussing back on Uthar.

Mekel's gaze shot to me as I closed in, and a shutter fell on his expression. He was one of the few who knew about my ability and, other than Master Uthar, the only one who could recognize the dead patch of Force that signified my cloaked presence. It’d taken him years of practice and observation.

“Having fun?” he drawled, slouching back against the granite wall.

“You got an issue with one of them?” I asked, releasing the Force and jerking my head back to the centre of the room. Mekel scowled.

“Fishing for information as always, huh? Well, I’m sure Lashowe will acquaint everyone here, so I may as well tell you.” He crossed his arms, glaring at me as if I was somehow responsible for his current predicament. “That woman back there, that Ness Jonohl, she’s gonna frakking get what’s coming to her. If you find out anything useful about her, let me know. I’d be… grateful.”

I wasn’t sure what Mekel’s gratitude was worth these days. “Tell me what happened, and I’ll see,” I shot back.

His lips twisted. “The inbred harpy challenged me, in front of Yuthura, in front of the entrance.” His dark eyes were flashing dangerously, and his third finger crooked on his thigh. [*I seek revenge*], it said in the street-sign he’d taught Selene and I. Once, we’d communicated that way constantly.

I quirked an eyebrow in surprise. “What, to get in?” *That’s bold.* Mekel was nobody’s fool; if he thought he could slither out of a dangerous duel he would have done so. Also, he wasn’t exactly a pushover, in the Force or in combat. But the implication here was that he certainly hadn’t won.

Mekel nodded abruptly. “Yuthura’s pretty pissed with my performance. She’s sending me off to the tombs to *prove* myself or some rot. Like I’m not already a fully-fledged Adept.”

I felt my brows rise further. The tombs were dangerous, a place Initiates were sent, often to weed out the weak or the idiotic. Those of us who returned did so without any form of prestige, and a new humility towards the Sith Masters. For the true Masters of the Force – Uthar and Yuthura – had no compunction about wandering through the deathly traps and Dark taint that had driven many a lesser Sith completely insane. Us journeymen knew better than to enter any tomb unprepared.

Mekel was still seething. “I want to teach that frakking scow a lesson, but it’ll have to wait until I’ve
returned. And that schutta Lashowe came out and witnessed most of our fight. I’m going to punch her smug little face in one of these days.” Mekel sent me one last furious look and then turned, storming away down one of the tunnels that led to the sleeping quarters. I reached out to the Force once more, wrapping it tightly around me like a reflective shield, obscuring my physical presence. With a deft twist, I cut the Force weaves around me off from the rest of the world, and my psychic presence would be unnoticeable to anyone.

I thought back to my once-friend. There had never been any harmony between him and Lashowe; Mekel’s cruel streak was rivaled only by hers. Both well-established students, Lashowe had been here the longest and believed that gave her superiority over us. Her venomous barbs didn’t aggravate me quite the same as it did Mekel, which irritated him all the more. He wanted allies against Lashowe, but these days we pretty much all stood alone. Trust no one.

We’d been tight, once; Mekel, Selene and I. That was before Selene had vanished, and I’d turned on my old friend; still, to this day, believing he knew something of her disappearance.

Mekel was a Telosian refugee like myself, and we’d both been nabbed by Sharlan Nox, a Dark Jedi recruiter who’d picked at the leftovers of the carnage on Telos. I’d just had enough time to see the obliteration of my home – the clinical high-rise apartment Father paid for and Mother had hated - before I’d been captured. Much later, a HoloNet news search had confirmed my suspicions; my mother was well and truly dead.

It helped that my useless father was famous, otherwise I highly doubted I’d have found her name and had that closure. Once, I’d asked after Mekel’s family, only to hit a stone wall. We’d never exchanged backgrounds, despite our shared heritage. All I knew were guesses – he was from an entirely different part of Telos to me. A darker, more dangerous part I’d never known.

He didn’t know my family name – no one here did. From the moment Sharlan captured me, I was smart enough to shut up about that. A Republic war hero for a father would hardly be an asset. It never had been, after all. I’d once envied those who had dads who actually came home at night.

The early days on Korriban had been frantic, desperate, and yet somehow infinitely happier than the present. Mekel and I had bonded over the destruction of our homeworld – as morbid and devastating as that was – and Selene… well, Selene was a shining star that didn’t belong here. It wasn’t long before she’d begun to have doubts. She wanted to leave. She’d convinced Mekel, or so I’d thought. He’d been the last to see her.

She wouldn’t have left Korriban without seeking me out once more. We’d been on the cusp of something special, something I’d never felt before, and although to this day I wasn’t sure whether I’d have left with her I just knew she would have tried to persuade me one last time.

And Mekel… he was adamant they were just friends and he’d never had any interest in her that way… but they’d been close too. Mekel was smarter and funnier and better looking than me, so I wouldn’t have been surprised, really. But he’d vowed there was nothing there, and that he wanted to leave too - that Korriban was twisting his soul and making him crueller and meaner than he was happy with. Deep words, and ones he denied thereafter.

When Selene disappeared, Mekel and I had no choice but to stay, and a wary distance developed between us. He’d become Yuthura’s man, and I… I was Uthar’s pet. I heard the term and detested it, but Master Uthar was quick to allay my frustrations.

*It’s a derogatory term, yes, but it means people will underestimate you, Dustil. Allow you strength to blossom, your anger to crest and your knowledge to grow. One day you will no longer hide in the*
shadows but take your place at my side.

I could hear his voice in my head, sometimes. I thought less of Mother, and Telos, and Selene, and more about the power and invulnerability that my path would undeniably lead me to.

To Yuthura Ban’s downfall.

I’d not killed outright, not yet, but I’d been implicit in the deaths of some already. One day, I would challenge Yuthura, and only one of us would walk away.

I was nowhere near ready. Yet.

But things were changing rapidly, and I had to up my game. Ever since that man had arrived a month ago.

...

“And this is it? These are the students you have been training for our Master?” The words dripped with venomous disappointment. The man’s eyes were dead pits of hate as they fell on each and every one of us. “Sixteen Adepts and a few dozen Initiates. I am disenchanted, Uthar.”

Master Uthar’s face was blank, but he bowed his head fractionally.

“Darth Bandon, we aim for the glory of our Master and his will... but we can only mould the clay that is here.”

“Then look further afield, Uthar,” his voice snapped out as the Force spun around him in intensity. It did that around Uthar, too. “You have Nisotsa Organa and Sharlan Nox afield hunting for new blood, and that Ban woman canvassing the traffic here. If they’re not bringing in the troops, then discipline them or I’ll see to it myself. You won’t appreciate it I have to get my hands dirty, Headmaster. I usually take things too far when I do.”

But that wasn’t fair! We already had new students arriving almost daily. And near all of them were weeded out; either they pissed themselves on the first few days and tried to run, or they karked it in the tombs. The greenhorn’s initiation, we called it. Those that came back, crawling with humiliation, were the ones who lived. My eyes met Mekel’s, standing to attention behind the billowing dark robes of Darth Bandon. I could almost hear his thoughts – what a frakking gimboid – and his fingers twitched - [power-mad] -and I didn’t know whether I wanted him to be cautious or caught out. I settled for not signing back. I’d trusted him, once. First rule of the Sith: don’t trust anyone, not even your allies.

Darth Bandon looked around at the students once more, a sneer on his face. “I’ll take the ten longest serving Adepts.”

...

And just like that a power vacuum emerged at the Academy. Darth Bandon had done this before, but never had I remembered so few fully trained students left. Only six Adepts – five, after Thalia ran - with Lashowe being the longest-serving and Dak following her lead when he wasn’t nerding out over the excavations. Lashowe was Uthar’s, as much as me, but I was his hidden trump card, his prize. Lashowe was just his front to Yuthura.

And since Bandon had ripped most of the strength from the Academy, Uthar would make his move soon. He was discontented with Yuthura’s growing insubordination, and Bandon’s eyes had fallen on me, just as he was about to leave. Master Uthar had made some comment about fresh prisoners to
distract him, but I’d seen the slight tightening of discomfort on his face.

Next time Bandon arrives, he’ll take me. Unless I’m Uthar’s first apprentice, he’ll be able to take me.

I shivered. Nothing on Telos had prepared me for the political games of power that went with being a Sith. Mekel handled it better, in some ways, but sometimes I fancied it was despair I saw in his eyes, too.

Good. If he had something to do with Selene… then frakking good. I hope he chokes on it.

Back in the grandiose cavern Master Uthar had turned and was headed towards me. I straightened, carefully blanked my mind, and released my grip on the weaves and they unravelled, joining the Force. No flicker of startlement crossed the Sith Master’s face; he’d known all along about my presence. The newcomers were wandering away behind Yuthura, headed towards the Initiates’ sleeping quarters. They’d obviously passed first inspection. I wondered idly if they realized just how many trials were to come. No one’s place here was secure, as Mekel’s current situation so aptly showed.

“My dear boy,” Master Uthar greeted, and I bowed once. “Walk with me. I wish to show you something highly entertaining.”

I envied that power; here, in his kingdom, Uthar was a god. Until someone strikes him down, a little voice reminded me.

For that was the way of the Sith. The powerful rise on the backs of the weak.

The girl’s voice rang in my head. There’s a better way! A happier way!

“You are distracted.” Uthar murmured, coming to a standstill and turning milky white eyes on me. Some students whispered that he’d voluntarily eschewed any physical vision, preferring instead to see the world through the Force at all times. Perhaps, in his case, it was just the way his body reacted to the volatile power of the Dark Side.

“Ahhh, you are thinking of your old friend,” Uthar murmured, and with a tingle I felt him probe my psyche. My body iced over, and I deliberately pulled up a memory of Selene in my head to encourage his assumption.

Uthar wasn’t right all of the time, it seemed.

He slung an arm around me in a false sort of companionship. I did my best not to tense. “Let go of your doubts, young one. Shed your weaknesses. If she had stayed here, she would have only held you back, and you know this.”

“Yes, Master Uthar,” I murmured, looking away, and most assuredly not thinking of my encounter with a hapless Twi’lek girl mere hours ago.

This seemed to appease him, for he carried on walking and I followed in silence. Sometimes Uthar would be like that, considering and almost patriarchal in his regard towards me. Other times, I’d disappoint him and things would not be quite so… pleasant.

Our path took us past the training rooms; circular arenas where students would pit themselves against each other, and not always with the readily accessible training ‘sabers. They were empty currently; the entire Academy had an eerily barren feel to it since Darth Bandon’s visit.
There were only three ways to leave the Sith Academy. Get trained enough to join Malak’s war, be powerful enough to usurp the headmaster or his apprentice, or die.

Some, like Selene and Thalia, tried to run. Whatever had happened to my old friend, I hoped she’d made it out. There was no way Thalia could have, since she’d been penned into the shyrack caves – a place no Force sensitive would go if they valued their lives. Thalia had only just graduated, too, but she’d been as firmly Yuthura’s as Mekel was. Yuthura had grown too strong in the ranks – and I wasn’t quite sure how Uthar had tricked Thalia into running, but I imagined both her and her little group of Initiates would be digesting slowly in a terentatek by now.

With a start, I realized we’d walked further than I anticipated. A locked durasteel door had been welded into the rock, and Uthar dismissed the soldier guarding it, opening the door with a wave of his hand. I still didn’t know if that was a Force trick, or some sort of wireless auto-print mechanism.

I followed him into the interrogation rooms.

Three more soldiers were inside, two standing at ease by the door and one working on a console.

“Leave us,” Uthar demanded curtly, and they all nodded respectfully before disappearing.

Students were not strictly allowed entrance into the interrogation rooms, although I’d been here before more than once. The soldiers kept the captives… captive, and alive. Dark Jedi would direct the treatment. I remembered once when Darth Bandon had visited and killed two Jedi Padawans in a display of overzealous examination.

Master Uthar, who’d pegged them as potential students in the making, was left seething, but Darth Bandon was one of the few that Uthar wouldn’t readily pick a fight with.

Sometimes, if a captive had outlived their usefulness, they’d be transferred to a practice room for us students to experiment on. Lashowe, in particular, revelled in those opportunities. She had a keen ability to harness the Force into electrical lightning, and relished the chance to show it off. Those unfortunate prisoners met their end in that duelling room.

There was only one prisoner, shackled in the central cage. She was slumped back against a conductive pillar that allowed for variable electric shock treatment to be administered, and surrounded by the amber crackle of a Force-inhibition field.

I recognized her immediately.

…

“Are you ok?” I asked the older woman as she sat morosely in the cantina, a non-alcoholic juice cradled between her hands. Wisps of sun-streaked brown hair framed an older face. She looked tired, and unbearably sad. “Can I help you?”

She turned at my voice, and eyed me over. Immersed in the Force, I could feel her senses stretch out and take stock of mine.

“Maybe,” she said slowly. “I am looking for Yuthura Ban.”

I slid in the chair opposite her. She matched the description the traders had given, and her Force ability further qualified that. This is Rita Sunrider, or I’m a Mon Calamari’s lunch. Freckles spattered over a lean, graceful face that looked out of place on Korriban.

“If you’re looking for Yuthura, you want in on the Academy,” I stated boldly, hoping to force her
hand. I’d had no luck tracking down Kylah yet, and achieving my secondary target would at least be a sop to Master Uthar.

“I am after information, actually,” she corrected in a soft voice. “I am trying to track down a friend. She may be with the Dark Jedi.”

Probably a revenge quest, I thought angrily. Come here to assassinate some student who stole her dinner once. All sorts of scum drifted to Korriban, thinking they’d be a match for the Academy.

“I doubt I can help you with that. But I know who can.” At her inquisitive look, I elaborated further. “I can feel your strength. My master is the leader of the Academy. He’ll want to persuade you to join our ranks, if you are so inclined. At the least, he’ll be able to find the information you need.”

She looked decidedly uneasy. “If I can find out about my friend without entering the Academy I’d be happier. I need to let her know she can come back; to tell her about her master. Is there a Cathar studying there?” Her words rang true, and I couldn't help but believe them genuine. But still, Uthar requested her presence, and I’d bring her one way or another.

“There is a Cathar,” I lied. I couldn’t remember the last time I’d seen one. “I don’t know her name though.”

The colour drained from Rita’s face, but her eyes burned a hopeful blue. “There is?” she whispered. “Could it be? Could I have actually found her?”

I shifted uncomfortably, unsure how to proceed.

“Can I implore you to request her presence here?” Rita leaned forward, hope shedding years from her expression. “Please. I can pay you if you desire.”

“I can do better than that,” I offered, smiling at her. “I’ll take you to her.”

…

She’d still taken some convincing, but her yearning to reacquaint with her old friend overrode sensible caution. She’d followed me into the Academy and directly to Uthar, who summarily dismissed me with a pleased nod.

I deliberately hadn’t thought of her again, until now.

And now, here she was, slumped and unconscious from some ministrations of Master Uthar’s no doubt. He’d get what he wanted, and then she’d die, either in this room or by the hand of a student.

Another death to my tally. Drex Voona, a male Rodian Force-sensitive. Talal Born, a male human Padawan who’d fallen. Tushka, a mercenary who’d been in possession of knowledge that Uthar deemed dangerous. And now Rita Sunrider, a foolish Jedi on a quest to save someone who probably wasn’t worth saving.

I’d never killed outright, but those deaths belonged to me directly. Drex Voona. Talal Born. Tushka. Don’t be a marsh toad, Dustril, I sneered to myself. Uthar doesn’t remember all the names he’s killed. And just think how many died on Telos. People die every damn day.

“I thought you might like to see the results,” Uthar commented, his gaze fixed on me. He was gauging my reaction, looking for any signs of weakness or mercy. Mercy is weakness. I straightened my spine and looked him directly in the eyes.
“I hope you’ve retrieved the information you desire, Master,” I responded calmly.

"Oh yes," Uthar breathed, before bending over the console and tapping a few keys. A robotic arm moved inside the cage, stabbing Rita with a hypodermic needle. Her body shuddered as the drugs flowed into her system. "It's not of any great import, but it is amusing. And you've missed out on learning these sorts of techniques, my dear boy. I would be remiss in my duties as a teacher if I did not give you the opportunity to hone your skills."

The bottom of my stomach fell nauseatingly; I bit the inside of my cheek and forced a smile that felt as fake as it must have looked. He wants me to practice torture. Rita moaned and opened glassy eyes that slowly fixed on Uthar. A ripple of panicked fear crossed over her face.

"Do you want to know her real name?" Uthar murmured. "I knew it already, but it was delightful to make her confess it. Breaking people is a sweet pastime. See if you can, my dear boy. Be inventive."

Uthar pressed another key on the console, and the amber prism of Force-inhibition stuttered, and then winked out. I understood, then, that Uthar meant for me to find another method of interrogation than the standard electric shock treatment. Can't have you taking the easy way out behind a console, Dustil. My own inner voice was a dark sneer. You have to get your hands dirty. You have to be inventive.

I swallowed back a lump of sick, my fists clenching tight as I willed myself to be strong. I must do this. There is no other way. Rita slowly swung her gaze to me, and her eyes widened comically in outrage.

"You!" she cried brokenly. "You betrayed me!"

I forced a nonchalant shrug and took a step towards her. "I'm a Sith, and you are a Jedi," I retorted coldly. "What the frakk do you expect, you imbecile." Uthar chuckled behind me. A sort of resigned desolation swept Rita's face, and her eyes closed.

"It was a lie then," she whispered. "There is no Cathar here."

"No," I conceded, and then a sudden vision of whom Uthar had been lecturing minutes ago sparked in my head. A human woman and a Cathar, of all things. I turned to look at Master Uthar. "There wasn't then," I mumbled under my breath.

Uthar threw back his head and laughed. "Isn't it hilarious, my dear boy? I am intrigued to see if it's the same Cathar; it is rare to encounter one. And, as the Jedi as so fond of saying, there is no coincidence… there is only the Force."

I turned back to look at Rita; her eyes had snapped back open and she was staring at the both of us, puzzled and afraid. Uthar's stepped up behind me, resting his hand warmly on my neck. It felt like an unbearable weight that I would never be able to shake off. There was no point in trying.

"It's your move, my dear boy."

I'd not managed the sort of skills Lashowe had. My talents lay in concealment, a duality of hiding both my presence physically and spiritually. Master Uthar had been intrigued with me from near the start; he'd admitted once that he'd never known someone with the ability to enshroud themselves both ways. But, as he so often lamented, my use of the Force was too inward, and I needed the practice.

My hand raised tentatively, and I pushed outwards, hard against her neck. She choked, and strained against the durasteel restraints, but it did not stop her breathing.
"What is your real name?" I asked. I had to do this, I had to go through with it, and I would not fail in front of Uthar. For his disappointment, at times, could be worse than what I was about to do.

"I- I have already told your Master!" she gasped, and anger twisted her face now, sitting hand in hand with the fear. I could feel the ebb of the Force sitting deep within her, now, cautious and watchful. She was physically restrained, but without the inhibition field her Force abilities had returned. No doubt, she'd already tried her strength against Master Uthar, and his return response was likely what was holding her back, now.

Or her injuries.

"But you haven't told me," I replied. Once more, I lashed out with the Force, a tight squeezing of air currents under my command. She choked, and shook her head irritably. I could feel Uthar's displeasure behind me.

"Find your strength, my dear boy," he said quietly.

"It – is – Rita Sunrider!" the woman ground out, and the anger in her was winning now. It burned within her Force signature.

I could feel anger burn inside of me, too; that she would make me do this, make me feel this squeamishness at something that should come naturally to a true Sith. She could at least make it easy for me! I felt my face contort as I allowed my fury to blossom. She's nothing but a worn out Jedi. She is no match for me, and I won't let her upstage me in front of Uthar.

He'd told me to find my strength. So, I pulled hard onto the Force, melded it in the weaves I used every day, and wrapped it around the Jedi schutta. And squeezed.

She screamed as the pressure assailed her body from every side; her stomach, her arms, her mouth, her eyes. I felt the response of Force power bleed out from her, weak and tired and injured, just like her physical body. I focussed hard on forcing the weaves to remain just so, keeping my anger stoked above all else. This is your fault, Rita Sunrider. You should never have agreed to come.

A slight touch from Uthar had me release it once more, and she sagged against the restraints, a low whimper escaping her. Her aura dimmed, shrinking to within her own body.

"What is your name?" I asked again.

She slowly lifted her head, and I could see the fear there once more. But the fury – it hadn't completely gone. She's not broken yet. She licked her lips, and glanced behind me to Uthar.

"It is Belaya Linn," she said softly.

It wouldn't be enough. I knew it, I could tell by Uthar’s heavy hand on my shoulder, and I damned the human for the visible anger on her face. Why must you make me do this more? I screamed inwardly.

"What is the Cathar's name?" My voice was low and dark, and she flinched.

"No," she said. "No… she is not here. Do not make me answer that… it is of no import to you!"

"Tell me," I insisted, but she shook her head wildly, a sob tumbling from her lips, and I felt my rage spike against her once more. With a snarl, I threw the Force back towards her, with all my fury and fear and doubt behind it, amplifying it. She was forced back against the restraints as she writhed and screamed in agony. Damn you! I don't want to do this… why are you making me, you stupid Jedi
scow? I heard the crack of ribs breaking, and once more, Uthar's hand pulled me back from the abyss.

She was crying, in great heaving sobs, her head bowed and words tumbling aimlessly from her lips. Her psychic signature on the Force had retreated to a whisper.

"Please… no more," she begged, her voice breaking on a deep, hacking cough. I saw the bright red splatter of blood strike the floor like a brand.

"Then answer me," I said coldly. "Answer me, or taste more of the same. I will have the name in the end."

"Juhani," she whispered, head still lolling as she sobbed again. "Forgive me… Juhani."

I was made of ice cold granite with a pit of fury at my core. It was the only way to not feel, to not care about this woman whose quest had so disastrously failed. I turned, my face expressionless, to look at my master.

He tapped a key on the console, and the amber prism of Force-inhibition once more winked into existence. In a way, it protected the breaking woman as much as it imprisoned her.

Uthar was smiling at me benevolently. "You did well, my boy." His voice was soft and caressing. It damned me to a future of darkness.

xXx
“Through victory, my chains are broken,” I murmured to myself, tapping through the restricted archive.

“Padawan!”

A jolt of unwanted surprise lurched through me. Turning, I found myself pinned by an intense turquoise gaze.

“Not Padawan anymore,” I muttered, feeling the bottom of my stomach drop out. Stars, she won’t understand. My fingers twitched to shut down the output display, but stopped at a firm shake of the Zabrak’s head. Great. I can’t avoid a lecture now.

“Old habits take time to break,” the Jedi Master said, grimacing as she stepped towards me. “Particularly when I come across you…” She broke off, close enough to view the holoscreen over my shoulder, and gave an audible sigh that echoed through the quiet library. “Breaking the rules again.”

“I was researching-”

“You do realize that some on the Council did not support your rise to Knight?”

“I passed the trials-“

“My old student,” she cut in once more, the exasperation in her voice evident. “Perhaps you would like to explain to me why you are viewing restricted data that only a Master has clearance for?”

Not really. I frowned in frustration. “Look, Karon, the Sith dallied with the Mandalorians two decades ago. I think-”

I stopped at her raised hand. She stared intently for a moment before finally speaking. “You suspect they have influenced the Mandalorian skirmishes.”

“It’s more than just skirmishes,” I grumbled. “But yeah, I’m considering the possibility. Did you know there’s a famous Mandalorian saying? Kar’tayl gar aru’e. Understand your enemy.”

“I believe the Mandalorians have a lot of sayings. And I’m certain you could use any number of them to justify any number of actions.” She placed gentle hands on my shoulders as her turquoise eyes sharpened in concern. Her voice dropped on the next words. “My friend, my old Padawan, there is a reason this knowledge is restricted to Masters. We do not conceal information to serve our own ends. Some knowledge is dangerous, even to those with years of training.”

I held her gaze, but I could see she wasn’t convinced I’d taken her words seriously. With an inward sigh, I resigned myself to at least an hour’s discourse on the subject.
“Jen!” an urgent voice dragged me from the hazy depths of slumber and a half-forgotten memory. My eyes opened, and the blurry shape of a Cathar leaning over me came into view.

“Call me Ness,” I whispered groggily, rising a hand to rub at my eyes. I winced; the side of my face was still tender from my last bout with Canderous. Perhaps I should have applied more of that greebacta salve back on the ‘Hawk, but it stank. “Stay in character, Staria.”

“Oh, yes. Of course,” she murmured as I sat up with a groan. “Are you alright, my friend? You were thrashing about in your sleep.”

My hand stilled, and dropped, and I met the alien amber eyes watching me in concern. “A dream, or a memory. It’s this cursed place. Staria - I dreamt I was looking up the Sith Code,” I muttered. The frelling Sith Code. I grimaced. Kar’tayl gar aru’e, indeed.

But it fit. It fit with everything I knew so far. Street Kid had fought in the Mandalorian Wars. She’d – I’d – followed Revan into that war, at the least. I’d believed in the cause passionately.

Sun and stars, I’d been a frelling Jedi Knight. Bastila had said I’d been a Jedi, but a Knight? How many Padawans d’ya think followed Revan and Malak, you numbskull? That meant- that meant I outranked Bastila, in a sense. A surprised laugh erupted from me before I could stop it, and Juhani pulled back, her ears twitching nervously.

“You were here?” Juhani whispered, her eyes moving around the small habitation quarters we had been resting in. I drew in the Force deeply, and could sense her apprehension. She thinks I learned it on Korriban.

“No,” I muttered absently, stretching out my legs. “I was with the Jedi somewhere, researching the Sith. Researching the enemy.” Until Karon rebuked me for it. Karon.

“Master Karon was lecturing me…” I mumbled, and my eyes widened. “Stars, Juhani, I think she was my Master.”

“Oh,” Juhani replied uselessly. My mind jumped about, trying to connect the dots, and all I could see was the life draining from the Zabrak Jedi on a cold floor on Manaan. She’d been my frelling Master, and she stuffed Darth Revan in my head? And Jen Sahara? I must have… I must have, for some reason, agreed. Why else would a Master do that to their old Padawan?

The Force roiled angrily through me, frustration cresting through my veins and demanding an outlet. A growl rose in my throat, and my fist clenched. My eyes rested briefly on a useless plasteel side table before I sent my hand punching straight through it, the Force riding high in my muscles. It shattered into a thousand splinters. Much like my mind.

“Sithspit,” I cursed bitterly. “If I’d been five minutes earlier on Manaan, she might still be alive! And I might know more about… about everything.” The Force ebbed as despair rode out the fury, and I dropped my head lifelessly into my hands. At my waist, I was hyper-aware of the only token I had that proclaimed Karon’s importance to me, once. Her lightsaber.

I hadn’t let out of my sight since Manaan.

“Let it guide you.”

What did that even mean? When I’d turned it on, facing that mouthy Mekel, I’d felt the Force sing through Karon’s lightsaber in a cleaner, lighter way than the red ‘sabers did in my grasp.
Kaiburr crystals are, in essence, Force amplifiers, a voice murmured in my head. I wondered with a wrench whether it was Karon’s voice, or merely just my own broken mind tormenting me. They are the power source for our lightsabers, and different crystals sing louder to different Force sensitives. Once entrenched in corruption, they turn scarlet no matter their original hue.

The red ‘sabers burned and twisted, and the Force was a rollercoaster of emotions. Is that what Karon had meant? Could a natural rock influence a sentient being, or did the being influence the rock?

*Does it even frelling matter? Karon’s dead, and I still have more questions than answers. I need… I need to talk to Bastila.*

My bond-sister was asleep through the bond, having her own bad dreams. *It all comes back to Bastila. As soon as I’m done here, she’ll tell me the whole truth.*

“Regrets and what-ifs are poison,” Juhani was murmuring softly. Her warm hand was resting gently on my shoulder. “You must look to the present and the future.”

“But if I hadn’t run in the first place… or, no – if I’d stayed, maybe then I might be meek little Jen Sahara once more.” I felt my whispered words break as I realized *that.* If Karon had brainwashed me once, wouldn’t she do it twice? On the Endar Spire, all I’d been was Jen Sahara. Did I agree to that too? An entire scrubbing of my identity? *No… no.* My entire being rebelled at that thought. It seemed like the worst kind of violation.

And Juhani must think I was going frelling insane. I jerked my head to look at the Cathar, and the strongest emotion I could see in her feline eyes was a deep, distraught empathy. “Don’t listen to me, Staria.” I forced a laugh. “This place is just getting to me. I’ll- I’ll go meditate with Bastila when we’re back on the Hawk.” I laughed again, and inwardly winced at the hollow sound.

Juhani was still staring at me intently. “What happened on Rii’shn?”

None of the others had asked yet. They’d all, even Carth, seemed to accept my brief explanation. *No more running.* And it was the truth, but not the whole of it. Juhani… the only one who’d accepted me back with no recriminations, perhaps deserved more.

“I found the Dark Side within me,” I said simply, staring past her at the plain granite walls that extended upwards to a ridiculously high ceiling. Absently, I wondered if the original creators of this cavernous warren were five metres tall.

“We all have the darkness within us,” Juhani whispered. “It is how we deal with it that defines us. Even if we have failed before, there is still hope to do better.”

Was Juhani talking about herself now? Her amber eyes had a faraway look and glistened with emotion. Not so long ago, she believed herself too weak for the Light. *She’s come far.*

“But what if it’s always there?” I murmured. The rage, the fear, the pull for power… the feelings came and went, but thus far I’d never felt them go entirely. “The Dark Side?”

“It is a battle that we face constantly,” Juhani agreed, and her attention was back on me again. She’d composed herself; her face serene and thoughtful. “I am only just beginning to comprehend that.”

I sighed heavily. “Yeah. Do you think some Jedi fall because they’re just so damn sick of resisting it?”

Her eyes widened fractionally. “No,” she said after a moment’s thought. “I believe the more you live
the Jedi way, the easier it is to resist the pull of Dark Side. But that doesn’t mean we should become complacent, for no one is infallible.”

I shot her a sideways glance. “Wise words. Are you sure you weren’t a Knight?”

Juhani smiled sadly. “I was close. It was when I failed my Knight trials that I fled.”

I blinked, startled to hear her speak of it.

I saw a pained look before she closed her eyes. “You must understand… my Master, Quatra… I was devoted to her. The sort of blind, unwavering devotion that is both unhealthy and weak. She had made it clear numerous times how wrong my attachment to her was, but at the trials… I was made to choose… and when I saw her… I thought it was part of the vision. I…” She inhaled deeply. “I am sorry. I try not to dwell on it, but this place has me on edge.”

*You and me both.* Her slanted eyes were open once more, but evading my gaze. She regretted speaking, I could see. “I think she was the wrong master for you.” She was an intense soul, Juhani, and this Quatra sounded like a by-the-books ice queen with little empathy. I wondered idly if I’d ever met her.

Juhani’s gaze had snapped back to mine. “Perhaps you mean I was the wrong Padawan for her.”

“No,” I said a little forcefully. “For the Master chooses the apprentice. When she realized the depth of your devotion, she should have transferred you to another Master rather than try to kill it with coldness and jumped-up Knight trials.” For, to my ignorant ears, it sounded like Quatra had used Juhani’s trials to test the depth of her emotions. *Bet she didn’t expect it to backfire this way.* But in the end it had hurt the Cathar far more than her Master, I suspected.

The chronometer dinged, breaking our conversation with a high-pitched electronic buzz. I frowned, and leaned over to switch it off. Our eyes met again.

“Yuthura will be here soon,” I said, feeling my lips twist. Juhani nodded, and we both rose silently. I felt refreshed after a decent sleep, but I could have done without the dream. *Suppose it’s too much to hope that Bastila didn’t see it.*

Uthar’s drivel yesterday must have dredged it from the depths of my damaged memory. I didn’t put much stock in either the Jedi Code or the Sith Code. *It’s just words, Bastila!* I’d seethed at her. But Bastila disagreed vehemently… and I promised myself I’d take the time to listen to her, now.

I shook my head to clear the thoughts, and began buckling on my discarded armour mesh. Juhani was already clothed in her plain tunic. We’d both, I noticed, ignored the dark robes that Yuthura had mentioned, when she’d taken us here the previous evening.

…

*We followed Yuthura Ban in silence down the imposing corridor carved deep into the rock. Her posture was tense, and her lekku flicked her discontent. I wondered if she felt this sort of orientation beneath her.*

*There were many doors on either side of us, all wooden and without any obvious locking mechanism. The Twi’lek Dark Jedi stopped in the centre of the hallway, and turned to face us.*

*“These are the aspiring student dorms,” Yuthura murmured silkily. Other than the occasional glance at Juhani, she kept her attention focussed on me, pegging the Cathar as an unimportant side-kick.*
Intriguing, in that it was the flipside of Uthar’s reaction. He’d been quick to agree to our admittance as Initiates, and then spent the next hour espousing the glory of the Sith, their code, and their delightful way of life. Then, before dismissing us into the temporary tutelage of Yuthura Ban, he’d directed Juhani to visit him tomorrow.

Not happening, I’d thought darkly at the time, sending a loaded look towards my friend. There was no way I’d let her meet someone like Uthar Wynn alone.

“Pick your rooms. There are no locks, so I suggest you do not be too quick to make enemies,” Yuthura was saying. She threw me a pointed look, referring no doubt to yesterday’s incident with Mekel. She hadn’t been particularly impressed at the time, but I’d wagered a minor irritation on her side was a worthwhile trade-off for a swift entrance into the Academy.

I hadn’t expected the witness, though. Halfway through the confrontation, a young, blonde human woman had slipped out through the Academy’s grand doors and set Yuthura’s teeth on edge. I had the odd feeling that Yuthura wouldn’t have sent Mekel off to the tombs had the witness not been there.

And the blasted irony was vicious little Mekel, being forced directly to where we needed to go.

Within the Academy, Yuthura’s sensual voice contained the monotony of boredom. “You will find robes inside that befit your new station in life.”

I glanced over at Juhani, whose mouth had tightened.

“Once you have proven yourself a true student of the Sith,” Yuthura was saying, “you may end up having your own secure quarters on the other side of the Academy with the Adept. But the first part of your training is your initiation, shall we say.” Yuthura smirked. “You must show yourself worthy.”

I folded my arms, quirking an eyebrow at her and concealing my unease. “Time to use our… independent thinking, was it?”

Yuthura laughed, a high tinkling noise. “I do not want to like you, Ness Jonohl, but it seems I cannot help myself. You are quite amusing.”

“I aim to please,” I said drily.

“I will give you one tip: placate Mekel or risk his wrath at your leisure. He does not forget a slight.” Yuthura’s words were soft and surprising. Her unnatural eyes were serious, and I wondered at her motivations. She’d sent him to the Valley of the Sith Lords, but perhaps she hadn’t had a choice.

“He’s a favourite of yours,” I said quietly.

“It does not pay to have favourites here,” Yuthura replied, her voice colder than before. “You are foolish if you trust anyone.” Her gaze slid over to Juhani. “Allies, yes, to help increase your prestige and power. But a true Sith stands alone. If you do not comprehend that, then it is at your peril.”

She had little more to impart after that; a pointer towards the nearby amenities, and a brief discourse on Uthar’s rise – slaughtering the old Headmaster Jorak Uln plus his apprentice a few years back in the charming tradition of the Sith. At some stage Uthar must have chosen Yuthura Ban as his first. I wasn’t sure what to make of Yuthura; she seemed content in her environment, but her posture changed when she spoke of her master and it wasn’t deferential.
We’d been left to ourselves, then, to rest and find some food in the student kitchenette. The empty room filled with rows of food synthesizers had been a disappointment; I’d had an amusing vision of throwing a wad of mash at some unsuspecting student, but it appeared Dark Jedi wannabes didn’t socialize over meals.

One Initiate entered while we were dallying, shooting us both a distrustful look while filling a plasteel container with gelatinous goop before vanishing.

“Maybe the Adepts have a cantina on the other side of the Academy,” I remembered muttering grumpily, while serving myself a tray of nutritious yet highly unpalatable mush.

Yuthura had told us to be ready at dawn for training, so we had retreated to one of the empty rooms to rest.

And now, it was time to start the day as a Sith student.

I sat back down on the lone bed with a sigh. “I wonder what Yuthura’s training entails,” I muttered, looking up at Juhani. Unease coiled like a sick snake in my belly. “I won’t lie to you, Juhani. I’m… scared. Here, this dark place… I’m scared I’ll lose myself to the darkness. Again.” A shiver coursed through me, and I stared down at my hands. They’d been covered in blood back on Rii’shn. Sure, the blood of people contracted to kill me… but the enjoyment I’d felt then was bone-deep terrifying. Maybe I was wrong. Maybe Korriban was the worst place to visit next.

A gentle touch on my head had me looking up. “Together we will be each other’s strength, Jen. Together we will walk in the light.” The Cathar sounded so righteous, so damn good and strong, that I couldn’t help but feel a bit better.


Juhani stared at me, and I saw the uncertainty in her as she struggled to comprehend my words. It was hard to suppress my smile.

“I-I do not believe your irreverence is an appropriate response, Jen,” she said finally.

The grin broke out genuinely now, and I nudged her leg with my hand. “Maybe not appropriate, but it seems to work for me.”

I saw her lips curve with the smallest of smiles. “Humans baffle me,” she murmured. “Especially your odd humour.”

“Do Cathars not tell jokes then?”

She frowned. “To be honest, I know little of my peoples’ culture or customs.”

A light knock interrupted our conversation, and she rose silently, stepping forward to answer it.

A male human stood awkwardly in the doorway, hands hanging loosely at his sides as if he didn’t know what to do with them. He was garbed in a dark grey robe that ill-fitted him, hanging loosely at the sides. Somehow, he didn’t appear cut from the same cloth as all the other Force sensitives around here. But he was one, I could feel the spark of it around his aura.

I’d been holding in the Force without realizing it. It had become second nature at some stage.

“Oh, ah… hello,” the young man stammered. He was older than Mekel by a few years, but youth
was still evident in his rounded cheeks. “My name is Kel Algwin. Master Yuthura ordered me to show you the Archives this morning.”

I glanced briefly over at Juhani, whose expression was neutral.

“Archives,” I echoed. “Great. Are we studying for something?”

Kel blinked uncertainly. He was an olive-skinned, attractive sort, with an open, wholesome look to him that most certainly didn’t belong on Korriban. Either he had a very convincing front, or he wasn’t going to last long on this frelling planet.

“Well, er… we are studying to be Sith, of course,” he replied at long last.

I inclined my head. “Can’t wait for the final exam,” I muttered. “Well, Kel, I am Ness Jonohl and this is Staria, although I’m sure you know that already. Want to lead the way?”

He stood there, his eyes flicking over both me and Juhani. A twitch on his left eye betrayed his nervousness. “Ah, do you not want to change first? Into robes, or a uniform?”

“No,” I said flatly. I understood why Force-sensitives preferred the advantage of robes to armour – although I still felt more comfortable behind scale mesh – but what I didn’t get was this blasted conformity the Sith and the Jedi seemed to have in announcing their alignment with the colour of their clothing. And surely, being contrary on Korriban would help me fit in as much as wearing their stars-cursed uniform.

“Okay,” Kel replied slowly, seeming anything but. “Come this way, please.”

We followed him down one of the imposing corridors out of the student quarters. Again, the sheer height of the granite ceiling impressed me. It must have taken some work to carve out these passageways. Mission said this Academy was new, but the caverns themselves aren’t. They’re ancient. The Force was strong here, or perhaps I was more attuned to it. I could feel a dark twist to it; an angry, resentful vibration that felt like it wanted to latch into my head. My eyes slid to Juhani and I thought I saw a tremor by her mouth.

As we turned a corner, my senses touched on an odd, dead patch in the Force, a gap where the Force curved away, as if something was repelling it. Yesterday, when Uthar had been glorifying the values of the Sith to us I’d thought I sensed the same thing. It had been moving, then.

“Ness?” Juhani questioned, and I realized Kel and Juhani were waiting for me further ahead while I’d been blankly staring at the wall. With a shake of my head, I fell into step with them. The Force is warped on Korriban. Maybe this is just a sign of Dark Side corruption.

Juhani was shooting me a warning glance, and I chased the thoughts from my head. She probably thinks I’m chatting with Bastila again. Bastila was still asleep, but lightly so. She’d wake soon, I could tell.

The bond was growing stronger.

I cleared my throat. “So, Kel, this place is pretty empty.”

The young man gave me a cautious sideways look as we neared a set of double doors. “We normally have more students than now,” he agreed. “Darth Bandon visited us a month ago, and most of the Adepts left with him to join the war.”

Darth Bandon. The name meant something to me, or it should. Or it does to Evil Bitch. One didn’t
call oneself *Darth* without being powerful, I knew that much. “Malak’s apprentice,” I half-guessed.

Kel nodded, opening the doors and leading us inside a large, deserted room. “Bandon or Nisotsa come here every few months to take the strongest. The departure of the last group has caused a bit of a power struggle here, actually.”

He didn’t seem like he was going to expand on that, and instead motioned to the consoles on one side of the room. Most of them had cerebral plug-ins for those with implants, and all boasted a holo-reader and full AV headset. “These computers are off the grid, linked into our Archives and databanks. The ones on the other wall are connected to the galactic HoloNet.”

“What do you mean?” I asked. “About the power struggles?”

Kel blinked. “Oh, ah… just Academy politics. You’ll get used to it once you’ve been here for a while. So anyway, Master Yuthura-”

“Kel,” I interrupted, straining to keep my voice both pleasant and pleading. “I’m new here, and a bit nervous to tell you the truth. If you could give me a rundown on the Academy politics I’d be most grateful.” I didn’t doubt the consoles might yield valuable information – probably our best bet for pointers to the Star Maps – but I wanted to get a feeling on the hierarchy here. So far, all I knew was that Uthar was top kath-hound and Yuthura one pup below him.

And that there appeared to be very few students.

Kel was gazing at me again, and I could see the caution in his dark eyes. *It’s not a front. He really doesn’t belong here.*

“Please,” I added softly.

“Okay,” he swallowed. “Well, there’s only five Adepts left, plus a few dozen Initiates like yourself. It’s the Adepts who rule the pecking order, you see – they’re the ones who sponsor you for graduation. They’re the ones you have to listen to.”

“And they are?”

“Lashowe, Mekel, Dustil and Dak.” Kel looked away. “And myself, I guess. What- what I’m really saying is that you should be careful not to get on the wrong side of these guys. They’ve been here a few years now, and the Initiates follow them. You’ll – you’ll probably end up siding with Mekel or Lashowe.”

“They’re the two leaders here?” I queried. At his nod I grimaced, and saw a slight wince from the Cathar. I’d humiliated Mekel yesterday in front of Yuthura – his Master, if her reaction was anything to go by – and worse, in front of what *must* have been Lashowe. “Lashowe reports to Uthar,” I said slowly, seeing confirmation in Kel’s face before he looked away.

No wonder Yuthura has dressed him down so harshly. She couldn’t afford to show any sort of mercy to her favoured student in front of Uthar’s plant. It’d figure the headmaster and his apprentice would play out a little power game using their students as bait. *I don’t need to get involved. I should keep my head down, and stay out of these Sithling politics.* But it might already be too late for that.

“Here, this is the Archive’s home portal,” Kel told us, motioning to the screen. A holo-picture appeared on the pad in front of the terminal. “Master Yuthura wants you to become familiar with the history of the Sith and the founding of this Academy. She’ll be here to check on you shortly and give you some rudimentary training.”

He took a step back, his body language clearly stating his desire to leave us – and it was a perfect opportunity to do some uninterrupted research. And yet… curiosity overcame my caution. For Kel
was also a weak link, and our best source of information on how this sodding Academy worked.

**Jen? How do you fare?**

“Kel, which faction is the most powerful?” I asked. He glanced towards me again, twitching eyes betraying his uncertainty.

*I’m fine. Just interrogating a Sithling.*

“Well,” he said slowly. “Dak follows Lashowe, although most of the Initiates tend to side with Mekel. I- I stay out of it as much as I can.” I stared hard at him, and he dropped his gaze to the ground. “I- Mekel’s always been kind to me. He can be nasty, but he leaves me alone. I don’t want to take part in any fighting.”

I mulled things over. Mekel, nasty little snot that he was, was probably stringing Kel along for his own purposes. However, it seemed we’d come at a fortuitous time. I’d felt Mekel’s strength, and it wasn’t to be sneezed at – but it didn’t exactly frighten me either. The small amount of actual Dark Jedi here was a pleasant surprise.

*Overconfidence can lead down dark paths, Jen. At the least, it can cause errors of judgment. Even the mightiest of Jedi can be slain by a knife wound.* I grimaced. Bastila’s caution, as usual, was annoying – the more so because she was right.

“I’m the most powerful graduate here?” I hazarded a guess.

“I shouldn’t be talking to you like this,” he mumbled after a long pause.

“You should not be here,” Juhani said, her voice low and serious. She’d surprised both of us by speaking; I’d almost forgotten the Cathar was there. “Kel. You are too good for this place, and you know it.”

My stomach clenched. This was reckless and dangerous, no matter Juhani’s drive for redemption.

“Staria,” I said warningly. She flashed me a challenging look, her slanted eyes glinting in resolution.

“I- uh,” Kel’s eyes were wide as he looked back and forth between us, uncertainty and unease rolling off him in waves.

“You do not belong here in this darkness,” Juhani said softly. “You do not have to stay with the Sith.”

*Sod it, Juhani, this is frelling risky. And yet, if she was going down that path, I may as well throw my hat in and support her. I suppose if we get caught out, we can always say we were tricking him.*

**What is risky?**

I sighed. “She’s right, Kel. This place will devour you, and you’ll end up detesting yourself.”

**Juhani wants to redeem the world.**

I spotted his fists clenching, and my muscles tensed in response. “Master Yuthura always says I’m too trusting,” he muttered, “too willing to show weakness. What you’re saying… Sith like you use any means to succeed, to trick others.”

**Is that not a good thing?**
“We are not Sith, Kel,” Juhani whispered.

“Yeah, we’ve only been here one night,” I added irreverently. “I’m sure it takes at least a couple of days.”

“Ness,” Juhani reproved.

I ignored her, still staring at the young man. “Look, Kel, Staria’s a good judge of character. Honestly. You must have thought of ditching this stars-cursed place.”

Kel was shaking his head, and his dark skin paled somewhat. “No,” he said. “You don’t just leave the Academy. I mean… not that I’ve ever thought of it. But you can’t. Either you graduate and join the war, or…”

“Or?” I prompted.

“Or you keep trying to graduate, like poor Shaardan. But those that try to run… they never get far.” His voice dropped to a husky whisper, and I heard the echo of despair behind it. Something snapped in me, and I stepped forward, my hands dropping onto his shoulders.

“Kel. Look at me,” I commanded, putting on my best authoritative voice. His black eyes shot up to focus on mine, and I felt his shoulders bunch under my hands. “Once we’ve concluded our business, we won’t be staying. And we will offer you a way off this planet, should you wish to take it.”

He stared, and I could see the beginnings of hope start to burn in his eyes. His mouth opened soundlessly. He wanted away from this soul-destroying place. Juhani is right.

“Don’t say anything,” I added. “We’ll talk no more about this. But we’ll come for you before we leave and give you the option.”

He glanced over to Juhani, who was smiling beatifically at me. “Okay,” Kel said. “I think. Thanks. Maybe. Um…”

I laughed, and motioned him away. “Go. Don’t dwell on this conversation, Kel. We’ll see you later.” The Force thrummed through my words, and I winced when I recognized the faint taste of compulsion. That had been both accidental and instinctive.

“We will not forget about you, Kel,” Juhani added quietly. Her words rang genuine and true, and once more I was filled with admiration for my Cathar friend. She is a true Jedi.

And then the young man smiled, hope well and truly alight in his face. He turned, and made for the exit.

“One last thing,” he murmured at the door. “What you said earlier, about Mekel. Most people believe he’s the strongest, and if he weren’t aligned with Yuthura then Uthar would be priming him to replace her.”

“You don’t think that,” I said slowly.

Kel shook his head. “I watch people, and stay out of things as best I can. The strongest graduate here is Dustil, and he’s Uthar’s true protégé.”

I’d missed the fifth candidate in our conversation. That was sloppy. “I thought Lashowe led Uthar’s faction?” I asked.
“Outwardly, yes. Dustil works alone… people call him Uthar’s pet, like he’s some sort of bootlicker. But he hides his strength and works for Uthar in the shadows. Everyone underestimates him, even Mekel. I don’t. I’ve seen what he can do.”

“Thanks for the tip,” I said quietly. Kel shot us one last, small smile before exiting. Juhani and I shared a measuring look as the door snicked closed shut behind Kel’s retreating figure.

“Well,” I said, sighing. “Sith politics 101. That was enlightening.”

“We may have another crew member when we leave,” Juhani replied. Her slanted eyes were wide with pleasure. “This is a good thing we have done, Jen.”

“Ness,” I muttered. “Use Ness. The walls likely have ears. And anyway… you started it.”

She gazed at me soulfully. “Thank you for supporting me, Ness.”

I inclined my head. “You are shining a light in the darkest of places, Staria. And… despite the risks, you are right to do it. But let’s hop on the consoles and see what we can find, okay?”

With a loaded look between us, we moved to adjacent computers and started our research. Despite Kel’s directive, there was only one primary objective for us both: finding the most likely location of the Star Map.

There was plenty of information on the tombs, they’d obviously been studied excessively by Dark Jedi and Sith scholars alike. Part of me was surprised to realize there was such a thing as academics aligned to the Sith, but I lectured myself that believing things to be so black and white was not only ignorant, but potentially foolhardy. Not all Sith are evil… and not all Jedi are honourable.

There were half a dozen tombs of great importance, all of which listed various traps, and warnings about unstable Dark Force energy that made me grimace. Enough to make any ill-prepared Force sensitive insane, I imagined. None of them had their contents fully recorded – either no one had come back alive from the depths, or those that did refused to share their knowledge. They were all ancient. I’d been hoping that I’d find one eons older than the rest, as an obvious hiding place for a hidden relic.

Juhani was tapping away awkwardly on another console next to me, having also switched off the visual feed. I turned back to my screen, pulling up a query on the dead Sith Lord Naga Sadow. Sadow had triumphed over Ludo Kressh, and Sadow’s tomb lay near the bottom of the valley. It held some importance to the leader of the Academy, it seemed graduation ceremonies were often held there.

How likely would it be for a Star Map to reside where they send all the wannabe Adept’s? And if it’s so accessible, wouldn’t Malak have come back to destroy it? Perhaps he meant to, in time. Or perhaps, with the supposed destruction of the Dantooine master Map, he hadn’t thought it necessary. That’d be an embarrassing oversight, given how far we’ve come.

Kressh’s tomb, on the other hand, lay somewhere in the bowels of the shyrack caves, protected by the stars-cursed terentateks. Somewhere, presumably near the ruins of a much older Sith Academy. I shivered. When Mission had mentioned that, I’d been swamped with a vague, foreboding feeling – like someone trampling over my very soul.

Ludo Kressh was a cautious Lord, and obsessed with the history of the Sith, a dark and all-too-familiar voice whispered. He surrounded himself with artefacts of dark power, even if he didn’t fully comprehend them.
I swallowed, pushing Revan’s voice away. Korriban was messing with my mind, and yet I could feel I’d walked this dark path before.

My eyes slid back to Juhani, who was frowning in consternation at the screen. *I need a distraction.* Looking back to my console, I tapped a key back to the home portal and saw a link to the Academy’s founding. *May as well follow Yuthura’s orders. She’s likely to test us on them.*

The holo-reader lit up with a recording, despite my earlier preference for text-feed only. Two figures shone into existence; one, an older humanoid bowing deferentially to a masked, dark-robed figure that faced him.

“What is that?” Juhani asked, her attention caught by the video.

“It is time to open this Academy up to new students, Jorak,” the masked figured said in a cold voice. “I know you’ve been snivelling around here for years, letting the odd Force-sensitive poke around under your tutelage, but I expect you to actively recruit now that I am leading the Sith.”

“It shall be as you say, Lord Revan,” the older man replied.

“Jen?” Juhani’s voice was sharp and frightened. Bile rose in my throat as stunned shock froze my mind, and a sickening vertigo rushed in my ears.

…

"No messing about, Jorak," I commanded. I could sense the older man was appeasing me, waiting for me to throw my weight about and then leave. Little did he know that we'd met before. I'd dropped a false name back then, of course, and kept a low profile. Acted suitably servile and pandered to the Sith's ego- just enough that he'd been willing to let me roam this part of Korriban mostly unhindered. And I'd found what I required, and then I'd left.

But now... now I led an empire. Now I had a war to win. And for that I needed trained Adepts- and Jorak Uln was powerful enough to both seek out and train suitable prospects... if he complied.

"I have only let a few Force sensitives walk these walls before now, my lord," Jorak answered slowly. "But I understand the playing field has shifted since your rebirth."

**Jen! Come back!**

“Indeed,” I replied, and pulled the Force deep into my body, deep enough to impress upon him my superior power. “I have a Dark Jedi with me, Nisotsa, who shall serve as an off-world recruiter for your Academy. Lord Malak will be here in three months to witness your progress. I expect no less than six loyal Adepts, Jorak. If not, then my apprentice shall delight in testing his new experiments on you.”

The damn mask made it hard to breathe on Korriban, with the tangy sulphuric taint in the air. The Force had once aided me in ignoring it, but it seemed that while some of my talents had strengthened… others had waned. The mask was a symbol I’d once believed in, when I’m been idealistic and not understood the real threat. These days, its foreboding presence carried more importance than its history.

…

A steel mask lay innocently on the ground.

The wind howled over the rocky terrain; it was a desolate and lonely place littered with the debris of
war and the breaking of innocence.

The mask was of Mandalorian make, perhaps once belonging to a foot soldier, judging by its simple yet striking design. As I reached to pick it up, a Force vision blindsided me with such intensity that I felt a scream rip from my lungs.

...

Death. Howling death all around. The screams of a billion Cathar, all being relentlessly hunted due to one leader’s ego. I could sense all the sparks of life extinguish one by one, and with each a small segment of my soul cried out in anguish.

I told them! Again and again… we can’t ignore these atrocities… and this is proof!

**What is this? Jen! Please, answer me!**

...

My head jolted abruptly to the side, and a burning sensation spread throughout my cheek. I blinked.

A Cathar was standing in front of me, a wildly shocked expression in her amber eyes. The downy fuzz on her cheeks seemed to be standing on end. A Cathar just slapped me. Huh. Didn’t they all just die? A tinny noise was ringing in my ears.

**Jen, what did you just see? All those deaths in the Force? Are you- are you still there? Please- please-**

“Jen,” the Cathar said, her voice low and shaky. “Jen, come back to me.” Her hand snaked out to switch the console off. **Hey, I’d been watching that.** I wasn’t sure what I’d seen, though.

“Don’t call me that,” I said automatically. For some reason, she flinched.

“Ness?” she whispered, the very name a question in itself.

...

“**Ness Jonohl,**” a voice said in disbelief.

The night was warm on the grassy plain, and the two men were staring at me outside the tent that was our temporary campsite.

The red-skinned Twi’lek was frowning, muttering something about luck under his breath before giving an audible sigh. “Well, I do not see another solution but to ride this one out. They are expecting Knight-” his mouth twisted, “**Ness Jonohl to attend the delegation, so you shall go and I will accompany you as an advisory Master. We’ll be staying out of the negotiations as much as possible.”**

No we won’t, I thought in determination. Andara will become part of the Republic if I have anything to say about it.

**JEN!**

...

My face stung, and I opened my eyes once more. I was curled up in a foetal position, mumbling
something incoherent as the same Cathar crouched over me. I’d never seen her eyes so wide.

Have I seen her eyes before?

Jen… do you know who I am?

The Cathar’s hand shakily rose to cup the side of my face. She’d slapped me twice, I realized. All those images, flooding in, cracking through my mind. I shied away, it was too painful. I couldn’t think about what I’d seen, what I’d felt. Who I was.

“Please, say something,” she begged. Juhani… the name slowly floated up through my subconscious.

The door to the room swished upon, and a female Twi’lek strode in, her face pinched with barely concealed fury. She glanced down at me prone on the floor and her displeasure deepened.

Jen, you have to pull yourself together… please, answer me!

Bastila, I realized groggily. Bastila, I need your help.

“I trust your time has been productive,” the violet-skinned Twi’lek sneered, looking at me scornfully.


“Get up,” the Twi’lek hissed venomously. Her luminescent eyes were shooting sparks of fury at me. Yuthura, my mind rose helpfully. Something’s happened to royally piss her off. “If this is your way of studying, you won’t be here long.”

I slowly stumbled to my feet, but my concentration was on Bastila, and the serene pull of the Force she was projecting out to me. Juhani was tenser than I’d ever seen her, a coiled spring of nervousness as she glanced between me and Yuthura. She’s ready to fight, if need be. Her ears were laid flat against her head. What did I just see?

My mind flinched away, an instinct for survival.

Yuthura looked at the both of us, frowning as she took in our collective unease, and appeared to dismiss our situation. A disinterested, derisive expression crossed her face, and she turned on her heel.

“Follow me,” Yuthura growled, and stalked out of the Archives.

I gave Juhani a shaky, slow nod, and we followed the Dark Jedi master out of the room in silence.

xXx
The place felt claustrophobic, like the sweeping granite walls were closing in on me. The feeling had been growing, nurtured by that evil Headmaster’s proclamation that we stay away from Dreshdae and focus on our studies if we were to be properly admitted as Initiates.

Cathar didn’t do well when they weren’t under open skies. We were creatures of the wild, that little I knew of my people.

But I had survived Manaan, and triumphed. And while I would choose a cave over a body of water, this cave was intertwined with a sickening, twisted side of the Force that called to me. Independence. Freedom. Strength. All things I yearned for, and the Dark Side whispered how tantalisingly easy they were to grasp. I feared that the temptation to reach for them would grow.

Revan was walking next to me, a naked look of uncertainty on her face that cut me to the core. She stumbled once, and as I reached out to steady her she shot me a grateful look. What had happened back in the Archives… for a moment, I thought she had truly gone. Her face had been blank, and she had not recognized me.

I wonder if part of her realized her true identity when she saw that holo-recording. And her mind almost broke from the sheer enormity of it. I shivered, and my eyes flicked back to the angry Twi’lek who was leading us silently through the Academy. Revan was shying away from the knowledge now, scrabbling to pull herself together to face whatever was to come.

This was entirely the worst place for her to fall apart.

Her head must be a veritable minefield. I would not, could not, lie to her, if she asked me directly. I did not agree with Bastila about that, no matter that I shared her concerns. Anyone can be redeemed. Everyone deserves the chance. But now was not the place, nor the time.

I glanced back to Revan again, and saw that she had composed herself somewhat, her jaw clenching as she stared intently at Yuthura’s back. There was an undercurrent of rage to the Dark Jedi master, and it seemed directed at Revan. But Yuthura had been amenable – if irritated – yesterday when she admitted us, and we had not seen her since.

Yuthura came to a halt outside the Initiates quarters, and turned to face us. Her lip curled in disgust as she very obviously eyed over our clothing.

“Did you not find the proper robes of a Sith student inside?” Her voice was silky and sneering.

Revan raised an eyebrow, and inwardly I admired how quickly she had reclaimed a calm front to the world. No doubt, her psyche was still reeling. “Do Dark Jedi have uniforms then, Master Yuthura?” she murmured, her mouth quirking. I was glad she added on the Dark Jedi’s title, though, for it seemed to calm the irate Twi’lek a little.
“It is not compulsory,” Yuthura replied, her tone indicating otherwise. “But your bearing and clothing say somewhat about your character and your strength. Wearing Sith robes announces to the world whom you are and the power you wield. Most Sith wear them proudly, although there is the odd exception that prefers to hide in the shadows.” Her voice had trailed off towards the end, a disparaging thread obvious.

“Oh?” Revan replied curiously.

“I am referring to Uthar’s pet, but I am sure you can find out about the Academy politics on your own time,” Yuthura said in dismissal. “Come. Both of you, put your robes on and I will show you the training rooms.”

She crossed her arms and waited, and I exchanged a glance with Revan before we silently slipped into our room.

“Are you alright?” I whispered as we both retrieved a set of folded clothing from the only closet.

Revan pulled a face at them.

“I fainted, I think. My head aches.” She frowned, rubbing at the side of her head.

“You were muttering something,” I told her quietly. “I could not make it out. And then you screamed.”

Her eyes were deep green pools of uncertainty. “I don’t know what happened. It hurts when I try to think of it.” She breathed in deeply. “Staria, our Master is waiting for us.”

I gazed at her for a moment longer.

“I’m okay,” she added. “Bastila’s helping through our bond. A lot. I can’t- I’m not sure what I saw, back there, but she’s keeping me together.”

I nodded in assent, watching her critically as she threw a robe on. She did seem remarkably composed, and I wondered if she was riding it out on instinct. My admiration for her swelled, then; for all that she had been through, for the fractures in her mind that must be there, she still managed to gather herself together and keep going because she had to.

I hastily robed myself, looking askance to Revan as she belted hers over the top of that mesh shirt she had been wearing. I did not think one was meant to wear armour beneath a Dark Jedi robe, but I was not going to call Revan out on it.

Yuthura had her arms crossed, a foot tapping impatiently, as we rejoined her. The Dark Jedi’s lekku were twitching over her shoulders in irritation, the tattoos snaking as they curled around her neck. I wondered if there was meaning behind them; from the little knowledge I had of Twi’leks, their headtails were a very sensitive part of their being. I believed to mark them in such a fashion must have been very unpleasant indeed.

“Where to now, Master Yuthura?” Revan asked, her voice neutral and possibly not as subordinate as it should have been.

Yuthura’s lips pursed as she stared down Revan. Anger was still simmering in the depths of her violet eyes. “I will assess your combat proficiency, and then you will both perform a task for me. Come.”

She turned with a theatrical flourish, and we had no choice but to comply.
The practice rooms were close and currently housing an inept duel between two Initiates. They were wielding white practice lightsabers similar to what I had once used, long ago, at the Enclave. With a dismissive motion from Yuthura, the two Rodian students ceased their display and scurried from the room, glancing nervously at the Twi’lek as they passed.

The area was large; a circular room with a dirt-packed floor and only one other exit that was guarded by a Sith soldier. He wore a visor and comm-link, and was not the first armed non-Force sensitive I had seen within the Academy’s walls. Revan was eyeing him over curiously.

“Why are there soldiers here?” she asked.

Yuthura sniffed. “We have a taskforce all throughout Dreshdae, as well as the Academy itself. They report to Uthar. There are some areas of the Academy that not even Adepts have access to, and that corridor is one of them. Now, pick up a training lightsaber, the both of you. Show me what I have to work with.”

I did not see how soldiers could stop a Force-user intent on going that direction, but perhaps that was a test in itself. Regardless, we were not here to whittle out the secrets of the Academy.

There was a large chest full of training lightsabers; weapons, the blades of which would not cauterize through skin, but merely leave a painful burn. I understood these did not have a crystal core, but instead utilized a neon technology that radiated a beam similar to a true lightsaber.

Revan was already rummaging through the bin, having located two she desired, and powering them on. Her off-hand lightsaber was shorter, and I saw a faint smile of recognition on her face. I stepped forward and hastily took the first available, before following her to the centre of the room.

The last time I had faced Revan was on the sands of Tatooine. She had started our duel with one, sole, vibroblade, and I had nearly killed her before her rage took over and swept away my strength like a dustball in the wind.

Revan shot me a rueful smile, and I could see the memory of it on her face, also.

“Proceed,” Yuthura commanded, her voice still tight and angry.

With a nod, Revan stepped forward and gave an exploratory strike. My sole lightsaber blocked hers, before deftly flicking back to parry her off-hand. The weight of the training lightsaber was less than I was used to, and I saw a grimace on Revan’s face as she, also, felt the difference.

At the Enclave, this had been my favourite part of training. The lightsaber forms, the ability to lose oneself in the parry-feint-riposte dance as one met an opponent in a ritual as old as time itself. The meditations and the studies had frustrated me, but this… I had spent years training with Master Quatra and, occasionally, her friend Master Atris. Once Atris had mentioned, a cold smile playing on her lips, that I would not have embarrassed myself against an Echani. It was high praise, coming from her.

Revan and I were well-matched; my speed with a single lightsaber off-set by Revan’s secondary weapon. And yet we were both just warming up, slowly going through the motions as we tested each other and our own limits.

I darted to the left before lunging forward in a powerful strike that Revan blocked with both lightsabers; she grunted, and pushed her weight against mine; I stumbled, off-balance. She leapt forward to swing at me and I rolled away just in time.

Scrabbling to my feet, I faced her warily as she shot me an amused grin.
“Two lightsabers are better than one,” she sang in a teasing voice.

“We shall see,” I murmured, and stepped forward again, my weapon held ready in front of me.

She leapt forward, and I dodged sideways, swiping at her legs. She hissed as I landed a blow against her calf; a split-second before which her primary lightsaber struck against my side. I grunted as the heat burned through my loose clothing.


We stepped back, circling each other warily. This time I advanced first, and as I went to attack, a powerful wave of Force energy rammed me to the ground. Caught by surprise, I collapsed upon the training saber and howled in pained shock as it scorched a hole through my robe and branded a blazing stripe down my chest.

Jerking sideways into a crouch, I took a moment to notice that Revan was still standing, glaring balefully at a smirking Yuthura. That came from Yuthura. I was impressed that Revan had managed to stay upright.

“I have not seen either of you use the Force overtly,” Yuthura sneered. “Really, Staria, if you are in a proper duel you should expect anything.”

I placed my free hand gently over the charred slice in my robe; my chest was stinging fiercely, but it was not severe. Training lightsabers did not cause major injury, and I had certainly tasted worse in the past. Revan’s gaze touched on me before landing back to the Dark Jedi.

“You have witnessed our proficiency, Master Yuthura. Perhaps you would like to enlighten us as to what has displeased you so.” Revan’s voice was cold, as cold as space, and just like that the fury reignedited in Yuthura’s eyes.

“If you had just played the game,” Yuthura hissed, “then your strength alone would have admitted you into our Academy, sooner or later. But no, you had to charge in like a lust-blind rancor, beating your chest and howling out your challenge to the world.”

So it was the incident at the entrance that upset the Dark Jedi, but she hadn’t been so blindingly angry then.

…

“Mekel,” Revan murmured as she stalked over to him. The human’s eyes were wary, widening when they caught sight of Yuthura behind us. He had a handsome face, for a human, pale and expressive under a crop of jet black hair. “Let us in or face me.”

She ignited a short blood-red lightsaber, and came to a halt three steps in front of Mekel. In the distance, I saw only the Bothan huddled next to the entrance, and wondered sadly what had happened to the other hopeful.

Mekel laughed mockingly. “Open the frakking door yourself. Maybe it will work for you this time.”

“Aw, is ickle Mekel afraid to fight?” Revan taunted, taking a threatening step forward.

I felt Yuthura’s presence as she stood at my side. Her eyes were on the two facing each other, but her words were directed at me. “You stay out of this or you will face me.” Her words were mild, but I did not discount the threat behind them.
Mekel sneered, and his hand shot up with a blast of Force energy levelled directly at Revan. She batted it aside effortlessly and smirked at him.

“I’ll ask once more, and I’ll even do it nicely. Let us in, please,” her voice was mildly mocking and I winced. I did not know if she was trying to assist Mekel in saving face or anger him, but I doubted she was achieving the former.

“Frakk off you begging kath-bitch,” Mekel sneered. “Used to pleading like a two-cred joygirl, are you?”

Revan actually appeared to be enjoying herself. Mekel, too, although he kept shooting wary glances at Yuthura. I will never understand humans. “Someone needs to take to you with a soap dispenser. Stars, I’ve pissed in Mandalorian privies cleaner than your mouth.”

And with that, she jumped forward and lashed out with the red lightsaber. I tensed as Mekel hurriedly stepped back, withdrawing his own weapon and igniting it. Red met sparking red, and Mekel darted to the left, pulling his blade away from hers before stabbing it viciously at her thigh.

Revan’s speed was incredible, she knocked his lightsaber away with enough force that his arm swung backwards under the blow, and he was unprepared for her counter-attack.

Her lightsaber rested gently against his throat, and he froze.

“Let us in,” she repeated softly. I felt, rather than saw, Yuthura nod at him from my side.

The doors opened behind them; at first I thought it was some telekinetic energy from Mekel or Yuthura herself, until I saw the pale-haired human waltz outside, giving the exhausted Bothan a careless push as the large ferracrystal doors creaked shut behind her.

“Lashowe,” Yuthura hissed from next to me. She sounded displeased.

Revan’s attention was caught on the newcomer, a female human who crossed her arms and looked us all over speculatively before loosing a high-pitched laugh. Mekel took the opportunity to jump backwards, turning his head to survey the new threat.

When he looked back at Revan, his face had lost all mockery and held only deadly intent.

“Shall we go again?” Revan murmured, and Mekel snarled as he charged. Revan sidestepped neatly and her off-hand rose, yanking deep on the Force, aiming directly for his feet.

Mekel fell hard on his back, feet in the air and his lightsaber dropping to the side. A loud, malicious laugh sounded again from the newcomer. Mekel snarled, raised both hands, and sparks of pure electrical lightning flowed from his fingertips to engulf Revan.

She yelled, taken by surprise, and even from a distance I could see the blinding fury coalesce on her face as she stumbled backwards. My muscles coiled in tension, Yuthura’s threat would not deter me if Revan truly required my intervention. But then, as swiftly as it appeared, the rage dissolved as she somehow gained mastery over her emotions and once more threw off Mekel’s Force attack.

Mekel’s eyes widened; he had not expected such a quick recovery. But Revan was wary now, her face closed as she shifted her lightsaber to her off-hand, and withdrew another.

It activated with a familiar snap-hiss, shining an uncommon, blinding cyan that was a sharp contrast to the blood-red.
“You call that a Sith ‘saber?” Mekel spat, but his voice was nervous.

“Blue or red, it’s a weapon you idiot,” Revan said coldly. “I picked it up from the corpse of a Jedi Master.”

Karon’s lightsaber, I realized with a gasp.

...

It had not taken long, from there, for Revan to disarm Mekel and Yuthura to intervene. After a sound dressing-down, the Twi’lek Dark Jedi had directed Mekel to disappear to the Valley of the Dark Lords and not return until he had found something worthy of prestige. Yuthura then admitted us herself, with a complicated weave of the Force creaking the impressive doors inwards.

Lashowe had disappeared as soon as Revan had stood over a prone Mekel, Karon’s lightsaber held steadily at his face.

Now, Revan was still glaring at the Dark Jedi Master. “I didn’t realize there were rules-

“You are acting like an imbecile,” Yuthura spat. “There are rules for everything. Do you really think you’ll survive the Sith for long if you make enemies wherever you step?”

“Master Yuthura,” Revan said coldly. The honorific was there, but she didn’t sound at all subordinate. Her green eyes had turned to ice, and her spine straightened. “Maybe you should explain what has changed. For, yesterday, you were only mildly irritated at my form of entrance.”

Yuthura’s lips were pursed, and she looked Revan up and down, considering. I wondered what the Twi’lek was thinking. “We had a witness, if you recall. Master Uthar decided my discipline towards my Adept was lacking, so he added to it. Since your actions are to blame, it is only just that you, also, share in his punishment.”

Revan deactivated the training lightsabers, and for some unfathomable reason clipped them onto her belt. I had already retrieved mine, and followed suit, wondering if the weight of four lightsabers would bother Revan at all. Why does she wish to collect training lightsabers?

“Okay,” Revan said slowly. “So what, exactly, do we have to do?”

“Go to Tulak Hord’s tomb,” Yuthura hissed. “Mekel was directed there last night by Uthar, and has not returned. Go, now, and retrieve my Adept.”

xXx

We were walking cautiously down a rocky path bathed in the harsh Korriban sunlight, having just been admitted by two stern Sith soldiers who obeyed a nod from Yuthura. Her last, biting, order had been for us was to seek out the Adept Dak in the Valley’s excavation, who would direct us to the correct tomb.

The Academy’s exit was deep on the other side of the rocky peak from Dreshdae and, glancing behind us, I did not see a convenient way to return to the colony, other than back through the Sith institute.
“At least the doors will open for us now,” Revan muttered. “Did you see what Yuthura did, there?”

I shook my head. Revan was pale but composed, with no indication that something mind-shattering had occurred earlier in the Archives. I wondered how much Bastila was aiding her.

“She added our psychic signature to the doors,” Revan explained. “She did the same yesterday when we first entered. The doors must be some sort of Force relic that she knows how to manipulate. Uthar too, I’d assume.”

I nodded, but my attention was focused on the environment. As we descended down the trail, the valley swept out before us in an eerie panorama of white and yellow. The light here was cold and alien, glaring brightly from the cliff faces on either side. The ground was a coarse sand that shifted under our feet, and ragged outcrops of stone jutted out from the ground in various places.

“Yuthura, for all her rage, strikes as me relatively reasonable for a Sith,” Revan continued, her voice begin to ramble somewhat. I wondered whether she was trying to distract herself from an inner turmoil. “She’d sent Mekel to the tombs yesterday, but hadn’t been specific as to which one. I wonder why Uthar was.”

“Perhaps there is something of import in the Tulak Hord’s tomb,” I offered.

“Hmm,” she responded doubtfully. “I didn’t look him up in the Archives. I remember reading about Sadow and Kressh, and then… then Yuthura came.”

I shot her a sideways look; she had an ugly grimace on her face, one eye squinting like a piercing migraine was biting deep into her head.

Can she not recall the holo-recording? I felt foolish for not realizing there would be information on Darth Revan here. I saw just enough to understand it was the recent opening of the Academy, but I certainly had not known that Darth Revan had been the one to initiate it.

“I found some information on Tulak Hord,” I said quietly, hoping to draw her attention away. “He was a powerful Sith Lord who lived millennia ago, and was known as the Master of Hate.”

“How charming,” she muttered sarcastically, picking her way through a pile of rocks that had slipped to cover the path. “What is it with Sith and their monikers? You don’t have Jedi running about calling themselves the Master of Love and Fluffiness.”

“Perhaps it is vanity, or merely the desire to intimidate,” I replied. “But Tulak was, by all accounts, very powerful. There are rumours he was researching methods to drain strength from his opponents, and use it to extend his lifespan.”

Revan stopped, turning to face me, her face a picture of disgust. “Vampiric Sith rituals… probably none too surprising.”

“I do not believe that is possible.” I heard my voice drop. “The very idea… it is an abomination.”

“You won’t hear me argue,” Revan replied, jumping over a larger boulder that was jutted in our way as we descended further. “Well, Yuthura directed us to go seek out this Adept Dak, so let’s find him. Although, I’d meant to ask Yuthura more about our supposed training,” Revan murmured. “Like, do we have scheduled classes? Do we get detention if we’re late?” She snickered.

I frowned at her inability to take the situation seriously. “I believe we do as she commands. In that respect, it is not so dissimilar to the Order.”

“Other than the torturing,” she muttered. “And I’m willing to bet the Jedi get better food.”
“Food is fuel.” I replied, uncertain what her problem with the synthesizers was. In my youth, I would have given my sword arm to have a free, infinite source of nourishment.

The ground had levelled out by now, and on both sides rose steep, impregnable cliffs. I could make out a handful of dark, visible caverns, granting admission to nightmares awaiting beyond. The Force itself twisted malevolently around us, whispering offers of power and freedom. This entire place set my hackles rising.

The valley wasn’t deserted by any means; sparse groups of Sith-clad soldiers were trudging throughout the valley, and I even noticed a couple of what looked like civilians. Somewhere beyond, lay the Adept who would direct us to Mekel’s destination.

I lifted my chin in determination, and glanced at Revan to find her staring at me. She gave me a small smile.

“You never know, we might find what we’re really looking for today. Let’s go find this Dak, okay?”

I nodded, and followed her silently, deeper into the expansive valley. But there was something else bothering me, that had tugged on my memory since Kel had first named the Adepts and introduced us to the Sith politics that resided within the Academy.

*It is a very common name in the Core,* I reminded myself. It was one of those names that transcended species, for on Dantooine alone I recalled a Rodian trader named Dak, the Falleen Master Dak, and also my old… friend.

I did not make friends easily. At the Enclave, my only one had been Belaya. And, once, Dak Vessar. Before he had run, to leave the Force behind and study at a Technic Institute, he’d told me bitterly. *It will not be the same Dak.*

And yet, as we walked closer to a sole figure bending over a malfunctioning utility droid in the middle of the valley, a tremor ran through me. The harsh Korriban sunlight doused the human in a bright light, and he straightened as he heard us approach.

The man, dark haired and dark eyed, wore a closed expression on his bronzed skin.

“Dak,” I said helplessly.

He blinked, and his composure shattered. “Juhani?”

Revan stiffened, shooting me an incredulous look. I stared at him in shocked silence for several seconds, and he was just as stunned as me. More so, probably, for I’d had some forewarning even if I had not believed this encounter possible.

“Did… did you fall to the Dark Side?” I mumbled through numb lips.

His expressive eyes tightened, and a flash of anger chased away the surprise. “I didn't fall, Juhani... I had my eyes opened. And don't look at me like that... here you are, wearing the same robes as me.” His lips twisted, and the same look of angry disappointment he’d worn years ago reappeared. “I can’t believe you’re actually here. On Korriban.” He laughed bitterly. “I expected you to still be mooning over Quatra.”

My eyes closed in remembered despair. “I struck her down, Dak. During my Knight trials… I failed, and I almost killed her.”

I heard him gasp and step closer. Oh, how he’d detested my devotion to my strict Master. Belaya,
too, had been quietly disapproving, but Dak was not shy in expressing his feelings. He had begged me to leave with him, exposed the depths of his feelings – emotions which I did not desire nor deserve – but still, I had been tempted. I had found the restrictions of the Order difficult, and I had cared for him, in my own way.

His hand touched mine fleetingly, and I looked at him again, this time through moist eyes. There had been a time when Belaya, Dak and I had been happy.

“I’m sorry,” he said quietly. “You know what I think of that ice-cold dragon… but I’m sorry regardless. I guess Belaya’s still there?”

I nodded briefly, half-aware of Revan intently focussed on the two of us, all but forgotten by Dak. “She is a Knight now, Dak. Knight Belaya Linn. She is a credit to the Order.”

His mouth twisted again, whether in resentment or rueful acknowledgement I did not know. “She always was the best of us three. She loved you too, did you know that?”

I blinked as surprise coursed through me, and took an awkward step back from him. “We were good friends, Dak, but you are surely mistaken-”

His mocking laughter cut through my trail of stuttered words. “What a frelling joke. Me and Belaya, both dreaming of your affections while you were hopelessly in love with that Zabrak scow.”

“Dak,” I said warningly. Perhaps Revan was correct, perhaps Quatra had been the wrong Master for me, but I would not stand for insults toward her. And he must be wrong about Belaya; she who was my truest friend, once.

Dak’s dark eyes were burning with emotion, but he shook his head, as if conceding to my unspoken request. “So, Juhani, you’re a new Initiate then?” his eyes flicked to Revan. “And your… friend?”

“I am Ness Jonohl,” Revan said smoothly, stepping forward and offering a hand. Dak stared at it as if it were a sandsnake. “Juhani is known as Staria. I am sure you can understand her desire to keep her past private.”

Dak turned to face me again and I saw Revan’s hand drop uselessly. “Your friend a fallen Jedi too, then?”

“Yes,” Revan cut in. “We have both decided the rigidity of the Order is not the place for us. The Sith offer so much more potential, after all.” Her face was smooth and blank, but the wariness was evident in her eyes.

Dak shot her an irritated look; I could sense he wished for her to leave. If only you knew her identity, my old friend. You would not find her so easy to dismiss then. “Juhani, I am one of the few Adepts here. You do know what this means?”

I nodded briefly, and was about to say something but he spoke over me. He hasn’t changed in that regard. Dak was always the talker between the three of us. “Juhani, this place isn’t like the Order. You have to be careful who you ally with.” He aimed an obvious sideways look at Revan, who rolled her eyes in disbelief.

Sometimes, her inability to take matters seriously was ridiculous.

It was time to cut to the chase. There were so many things to say between the two of us. “Dak, have you ever considered leaving this place?”
He started, jerking back in surprise, and I saw Revan’s eyes close slowly in exasperation.

“Leave?” he said tightly. “Why?”

“This place… it is bad, Dak. Surely you can feel it.” I said quietly. “I know the Order had its restrictions, but this place… the place is worse.”

“Juhani, surely you aren’t trying to redeem me or some such banthacrap?” he spluttered. “No… you can’t be, you’ve left as well.” He frowned. “I admit the thought of leaving with you is desirable, but you can’t just ditch the Academy.” He laughed. It was a hollow sound. “Force, Juhani, those that try generally end up dead. I’m an Adept here - I have some measure of security now.”

He reached for my hand, and clasped it tightly. His grip was warm. “Juhani, I can take care of you here. I know how to play the game. Trust me.”

His gaze was intent upon mine, eyes as black as the Dantooine night sky, and I recalled those past days when we had been friends. Dak was quick with words and more studious than I; in some ways, he made me feel a safety I’d not known before. But my drive, then, had been to impress my standoffish Master.

Revan’s polite cough broke the spell; I blinked, and looked back to her. An angry scowl settled over Dak’s face.

“Sorry to interrupt, but Yuthura’s sent us on a mission,” Revan said mildly. “I’d prefer to get it over with.”

“Yuthura?” Dak questioned, his voice twisting over the name. “Juhani, Yuthura’s not the power here. Come with-”

“She’s Uthar’s first apprentice,” Revan spoke over him, her voice harder than before. “I understand you are allied with Uthar Wynn, and perhaps that will be an interesting discussion later as we have not formed any alliances. But regardless, we have been directed to enter the tomb of Tulak Hord by Master Yuthura, and I don’t think we can disobey such an order.”

Dark frustration gathered on his face with every word, and I could see that here was one person whose first impression of Revan was not a positive one. When she dropped the name of the dead Sith Lord, however, Dak’s face paled and he took an involuntarily step backwards, dropping my hand.

“Tulak Hord?” he gasped. “What did you do, piss in her tea?”

“Uh-”

“Juhani, no, you cannot go there. No one returns, not from Tulak Hord’s tomb. Not past the first chamber, and that’s been picked clean. Why in the Outer Rim would Yuthura order you there?”

“I- uh, may have had something to do with Mekel being sent there,” Revan muttered. “So that’s the worst tomb then, huh?”

Her face was tight, wary, but I saw the gleam in her eye. *If the crypt is so dangerous, then perhaps that is exactly where the Map is housed.* I shivered. Dak’s apprehension was not something to be ignored.

“Mekel,” Dak said in disgust. “If he’s been sent there, it’s on Uthar’s doing. Yuthura’s on her way out, Juhani. Let your friend clean up her own mess, and come with me. Trust me, Uthar is the real
Revan was quiet, watching the both of us, and I wondered what she was thinking.

“There’s something in that tomb that kills every person who sets foot in there,” Dak continued. “It’s the only one that Master Uthar avoids. Doesn’t that tell you something?”

“It tells me that Uthar sent Mekel to his death,” Revan muttered. “And maybe I had a part in it. I’m going in, Staria. You don’t have to.”

“We are a team, Ness,” I said quietly. “Dak, which tomb is Tulak Hord’s?”

He was frowning angrily at me, before an exasperated sigh escaped him. “Talk to me privately, first.”

I gazed at the bronzed face of my old friend, and then nodded to Revan. With a brief pointer at the nearest tomb from Dak, Revan walked towards the entrance before turning to watch us, well out of earshot.

“Juhani,” he began, stepping close to me. His hands settled on my shoulders, warm and comforting. He was my height; tall for a human, and more muscular than I remembered. Older than the Adepts we’d encountered so far; he seemed out of place on this corrupt planet. But then, so does Kel Algwinn. “You don’t know how happy I am to see you. I never thought… I never thought we’d meet again. Especially after hearing about Dantooine.”

I’d barely had time to digest the news about the Enclave’s destruction so soon after the devastating bombing of my homeworld. The only silver lining was the reports suggested that the destruction was not widespread. On Manaan, Karon had assured me that Malak’s forces had been run off after obliterating their primary target: the master Star Map.

Dantooine would have less to rebuild than Taris, and the casualties were not as severe as Malak would have planned. But to have the two planets that meant the most to me so viciously attacked invested me fiercely and personally in the war.

I looked up at Dak, whose face was warm and intent, and felt myself smile. “I, too, am happy to see you Dak,” I said softly. “But I wish our reunion was not here. Dak… this is not the place for me. Or for you. I wish we were back at the Order.”

A pained resentment flared in his dark eyes. “I have forsaken the Order, much as you have, Juhani. Even if I could go back, I don’t think I would want to. Juhani- there is power here. Power to be who you want, if you just play the game. Stay with me. Ditch your friend. Maybe, one day, we could leave Korriban together.”

“Dak,” I said gently. “I will not abandon Ness. We must go into this tomb.”

“You always were too damnably loyal,” he said in frustration. “Just- just don’t go far, okay? If you come out, and act sufficiently meek, then that should suffice. It’s the greenhorn’s initiation, don’t you see? The recklessly stupid die, and the cowards run in fear and don’t get far. But if you come back, if you crawl to Yuthura – or better yet, Uthar – then you’ll make it back. Make it back, Juhani.”

“I will,” I promised.

He looked afar to Revan, who was staring hard at us from a distance, a deactivated lightsaber held ready at her side.
“You should choose me over her,” he muttered. “I’ve got a bad feeling about her.”

I stepped away from him, then, leaving the memories of warm Dantooine nights and companionable laughter behind. We had both changed immeasurably since then.

“I hope to talk to you again, Dak.” I whispered, and walked away, towards Revan.

xXx
Jen Sahara - Brushes with death

Brushes with Death

- Jen Sahara -

Jen!

I came to with a shuddering gasp, my limbs frozen and my eyesight blinded. My first fleeting thought was that, perhaps, I’d knocked back one too many fire-whiskeys, and no doubt I’d never see the end of Carth’s disapproving gaze.

Then: memory rushed back in a torrent. The Sith Academy. Kel, filling us in on the delightful antics of his buddies. My mind… fracturing on something I’d seen in that room. Yuthura, pissed, sending us to the tombs. Dak, pissed, that Juhani would follow me into what he claimed was certain death.

And then…

It was our paranoia that tripped the trap - we were both so focused on reaching out with the Force to find whatever taint had corrupted the place, that we completely failed to spot the mechanically triggered poison gas. Could have done with a non-Force sensitive here. We’re too reliant on the Force, and it blindsided us.

I had the distinct feeling that I’d learned this lesson before, in one of my histories at least.

I’d lasted longer than the Cathar, despite her species’ constitution, as instinct had me twisting the Force somehow to partially block the insidious gas that was deadening to our senses. I’d just had time to spot a partially opened exit, yank on the Force to propel me into a flying leap, and collapse into the room beyond as the door snicked shut. I thought I’d heard the thud of Juhani falling behind it, and fervently prayed that the gas was not lethal. It was the last thing I recalled.

Well, frelling kath crap. This day just keeps getting better.

Jen, you’re back. What’s going on? Bastila had that hysterical edge to her mental voice again.

I have no idea. I’m trapped, and can’t see. I clenched my jaw and pushed outward with the Force, but something solid buffered against my reach on all sides.

“Awake already, are you?” an oily voice taunted. “Excellent! Two students in two days, and one waiting outside. This might be just what I need!”

Sithspit. Someone’s got me, and I can’t reach the Force.

I am never staying behind again, Bastila replied in a taut, prim voice, but I could taste the fear behind it. The bond reverberated as Bastila reached out to me, her very psyche brushing against mine. I wondered idly if we would ever be able to unravel the intricacies of our bond. I relinquished control to her, and felt as she stretched out, touching against the barrier that imprisoned me on all sides. This is new, I realized with faint surprise. She can reach… beyond me now.

“Not very talkative, are we?” the voice was lightly sneering, and put me in mind of Yuthura, albeit a raspy, older, male version. “You are not nearly as fun as Mekel, but eons stronger, I can sense that. Mekel is just about used up, but you, my dear. You will last me days.”

Force stasis. Very strong. I am not sure we can break out of this, Jen. She was scared, and it was
filtering through to me. I gritted my teeth, and clamped down on the fear. Not helping, princess, I shot back.

“How about you restore my sight, o disembodied voice, and I’ll see just how amusing I can be,” I said tightly. I could feel my eyes were open, but absolute blackness met them. And without the Force beyond a foot’s radius, I was blind in all senses of the word.

A mocking laugh echoed to me, followed by the sound of dusty footsteps walking away. A click, and the faint light of a halogen lamp illuminated the room, causing me to wince briefly.

As my eyes adjusted, I canvassed the area I was imprisoned in. A massive cavern that rose high enough that no ceiling was visible; instead, all that could be seen was a mass of moving shadows that I bet was a nest of shyracks. A large sarcophagus dominated the centre of the room, suggesting that here was the source of the dark taint. The corpse of a half-butchered tuk’ata was draped on the ground next to it. Sith hounds, some part of me recognized with a shudder.

The room itself had signs of habitation; two benches littered with datapads and tools, a bedroll deeper in the cavern, and the prone form of Mekel slumped vertically in what I assumed was a similar prison to mine.

The creature itself that had us captured was old, humanoid, and clad in the disintegrating robe of a Dark Jedi. Gaping pits where his eyeballs had once been just added to the macabre visage of an insane Sith Lord. This is Tulak Hord’s tomb, and Juhani said he messed about with draining life to gain immortality. Yeah, but she’d also mentioned he was alive millennia ago. I didn’t care how powerful this Master of Hate was, surely he’d be nothing but decomposed dust by now.

“You are an intriguing specimen, I must say,” the man was muttering as he circled me. Even sightless, he acted like he had physical vision, facing me as he wandered aimlessly about. He’s using the Force to sense me.

There is always a weakness in any shield, Bastila mused, her fear pushed far away as she concentrated on the task at hand. Somewhere there will be an opening to exploit, if I can just locate it. I was content to let her control things; if I could distract this deranged zombie in the meantime, all the better.

Deep, deep within my core, the all too familiar fury had ignited. Being trapped and helpless was not a favourite position of either myself or Revan, but it was just the sort of situation where her strength overwhelmed and conquered my very soul.

No. I refuse to go down that path.

Even if it costs your life? Revan taunted.

It is strong everywhere, Bastila murmured, and I felt her probing touch on all sides. Keep searching, I replied, you’ll find something. I tried to feel nothing but a reassuring confidence in her abilities.

“I have been so disappointed at the chaff Uthar’s been sending my way recently,” the man was muttering. “Ever since that trumped up wench forced me to open the Academy to any mook with an iota of Force-sense, it’s been nothing but weeds and drek. Mekel was a delightful surprise, but you! There’s something almost familiar about you my dear.”

I froze. Bastila froze. My breath was trapped in my lungs.

“Could it be?” he murmured, and this time I felt the brush of his strength push through his force
restraints, circling my very essence with a tight, malicious squeeze before retreating. He laughed in delighted surprise. “Well, well. I used to pride myself on never forgetting a face, before Uthar took my eyes. But I recognize your unique aura nonetheless. Don’t you remember me, my dear? You were very eager to learn my secrets, all those years ago.”

He may have been human, once, or something similar. Fleshy folds ridged down the back of a hairless scalp, but that could have been due to the corruption he was so strongly steeped in. Deep within the pits of his eye-sockets glowed the spark of true insanity.

I licked dry lips, and felt my heart thundering in my frozen chest. “I’m afraid you have the advantage of me,” I whispered.

“How disappointing,” he commented, striding behind me. “Although I imagine I look somewhat different. In other circumstances, my dear, I would not take your life. I did so enjoy our discussions; it is rare to meet someone as intrigued with Sith history as myself. But, I’m afraid, I do have a debt to pay to dear Uthar, and you will give me the strength I need.”

I couldn’t afford to stay frozen. I didn’t dare lose control to Revan. And Bastila, oddly, had retreated in a flurry of anticipatory fear. My hands were clenched tightly against my sides; I could feel the hard press of my ‘sabers against my belt, but had no room to grip them. Around me, within the stasis cage, was the smallest amount of Force available. With a mental wrench, I yanked on the Force and focused on the barrier between me and the rest of the world.

And all the while, my mind was racing like a Stimmed-up junkie. *He lost a battle to Uthar, and has been here for some time. He’s draining life from Initates. Uthar fears this place enough to avoid it, so he’s likely an equal strength. And he knew me, unless it’s Evil Bitch he’s sensing.*

“Jorak Uln,” I said quietly, all the while lightly pushing out with gentle tendrils of energy. I started at the ground, feeling the jagged shape of tiny stones pressing up through the soles of my boots, and the curve of the insane Sith Lord’s Force prison as it tucked under my feet. “And here Uthar’s bragged to the world that he ended you.”

“Ah, so you *do* recognize me, my dear!” he crowed. “I had hoped I had made an impression on you, Ness Jonohl. Your glowering boyfriend was an annoyance, granted, although his strength made an admirable bodyguard, I do admit.”

Blistering shock ripped through me, and the Force fell from my grasp like a ferracrete brick. *Ness Jonohl? It was me… it was Street Kid and her boyfriend, here on Korriban…

…and he knew me as the fake name I gave Yuthura Ban?*

**What?** Bastila radiated confusion. *I did not catch that – what did he say?* She paused, and in a quieter, questioning voice: **Jen?**

*Ness Jonohl. Could it be… could it be the reason that fake name tumbled from my lips so readily was because it was my actual name?*

“I always wondered why you left so suddenly, my dear Ness. You were so intrigued with the tombs that I hoped you would stay. *I did warn you about the terentateks, my dear. I had you pegged for death, once I heard you and your boyfriend disappeared into the shyrack caves and never returned.*”

I’d just started to reach for the Force again when he dropped that grenade. *The shyrack caves. The Star Map. Frelling Sithspit…*
I told you Kressh liked his little artefacts, Revan mocked from the deep recesses of my mind.

“Did you find it?” Jorak’s mad visage was close to me then, his brows raised in a grotesque expression of curiosity. “Ludo Kressh’s tomb? Is it there, as the Archives say?”

“I don’t know,” I whispered. “We didn’t make it past the terentateks.” Was I lying or not? Had I found the map before, or merely deduced its location?

“Ahh, a pity,” he murmured, taking a step back. “Still, you are lucky to have escaped. But those were the days, back then, weren’t they my dear Ness? No weaklings traipsing through the tombs of the mighty past, with no understanding of the sheer glory they are walking amongst. Ahhh…” He trailed off, his sightless face pointing up in the throes of sweet recollection. “It will be like that again,” he whispered, and his voice fairly thrummed with joyous anticipation.

He’s completely deranged. And I don’t have the frelling time to dwell on his revelations. I bit down hard on the side of my cheek, the sharp pain providing a coppery focus with which to draw in what Force I could manage. It snagged Bastila’s attention, which turned at once, predictably, disapproving.

Pain is a focusing tool of the Dark Side, Jen! She was more appalled than anything.

Shush, I grumped, or come back, and sodding help!

“You may appreciate my experiments Ness Jonohl. Watch what I have learned from Tulak Hord!” With a loud exclamation and a gasp of pure ecstasy, Jorak was instantly bathed in an eerie black light that somehow sucked the pale illumination from the one lamp in the cavern. My attention was wrenched to him in horrified fascination; his hand raised, pointing at Mekel, as he mumbled words I couldn’t decipher under his breath.

The black light enveloped Mekel, and then, somehow, appeared to be sucking something. His pallor was wan, and as the darkness pulsed around him, hollows under his closed eyes became visible. His chest sucked in grotesquely, and he hung in the cage like a limp cloth doll whose stuffing was slowly vanishing.

The stasis field around me shuddered and loosened against my limbs.

“Stop!” I screamed in horror. “You’ll kill him!”

Jorak threw his head back and cackled as the black light snapped back into him, swelling around his physical body before vanishing. The pressure all around my limbs tightened once more as the stasis field increased in strength. “That is the idea, my dear Ness! This is the very key to immortality!”

Bastila! I shrieked through our bond. I need to get out of here! Find the weakness! She was riding with me again, stretching our collective Force-senses out with confidence, firmly investigating every curve of the enveloping restraint. She stilled, focusing on the edge under my footwear, and with a mental grunt thrust her strength against it.

Nothing happened.

“You shouldn’t concern yourself with the likes of him, though,” Jorak rambled on, oblivious to both my very horror and Bastila’s next attempt to hammer along the boundary of the stasis. “He doesn’t quite have the gumption of a true Sith. Do you know, I posed a moral question to him, and he gave a very Jedi-like answer. I was most appalled!”

I cannot find any weakness! Bastila cried helplessly. Keep trying! I shot back. I’ll keep him talking!
“What- what was the question?” I gasped.

“Ooh, I always did like your inquisitive nature, so I shall oblige you, my dear Ness. And then, I’m afraid, it will be your time.” He chuckled, and sauntered out of sight behind me again. “I asked him thus: Your immediate superior amongst the Sith is an effective commander and a fine leader. He trusts you and you like him. You see an opportunity to kill him. What do you do?”

“Kill him, of course,” I muttered. The shield is too perfect, Jen! I have never seen the like! Desperation was lacing her words like acid. If there is no weakness, then how else can we shatter it? I shot back. There must be a way, Bastila!

Sheer Force strength would do it. But-you are cut off, and I do not know if I have the reserves-it is too strong for me, Jen!

Can you lend me your strength?

“Of course!” Jorak laughed loudly, wandering back into view. “Did you know poor Mekel elected to do nothing as the commander was good for the Sith? What idiocy! He was a fool to let down his guard, and you would not make the same mistake!”

Yes, I-I think. The bond opened, further than it ever had before, like a flower blossoming under the gentle sun. Her strength, the very essence of Bastila poured through the bond like a thick, golden light. Like an extra well I could draw from to amplify my own strength. If I had the moment to think about it, I’d be swamped with wonderment.

I did not even budge the shield before with my strength. How can you believe you will do any better, directing the same Force?

I’m going to weaken the field. The very thought of how sickened me. Mekel. Hold on. I’ll strike as fast as I can. It was a prayer, useless and fleeting.

Black eye-sockets stared insanely at me, the very stuff of nightmares. “I will finish things, now, and your strength will allow me to leave this place, and face Uthar at long last. I have been looking forward to this. Farewell, my dear Ness.” He raised a hand.

“Wait!” I called desperately. “Mekel… he’s still alive, isn’t he? Can’t this power be used to drain someone completely unto death?”

The hand stilled in front of me, and Jorak’s dirt-smeared face tilted to the side. “Well… of course. Everyone who enters here is sucked dry.”

“Then… why don’t you finish him first?” I whispered. “It will give me one last demonstration… and I do so appreciate the art of such skill.”

Jorak’s head was thrown back in glee, and he cackled. “Ahhh I knew you would, my dear Ness! And do not despair, my dear, for you will live on through me! But, as a last request, I will present it once more.” He turned, facing Mekel, a frown lining his creased and blackened face. “There is not much left in him, but enough for a demonstration. Watch in awe!”

The halo of dark light surrounded him and thrust out to Mekel, enveloping the Sithling in the pure taint of evil incarnate. Last time, the shield had shuddered and weakened, ever so briefly. I was on edge, waiting for that moment, and had to endure the sight of Mekel’s slack form convulsing, the skin around his face pulling tautly inward as Jorak sucked his very life force dry. Mekel’s exposed limbs turned grey, and the desperation within me crested-
-and just there, a faint trembling as my Force cage thinned and lost strength-

Now!

With the strongest mental thrust I could manage, I wrenched deep on Bastila’s reserves and drove the Force into the shield with all my strength. Jorak turned in surprise, the stasis field imploded, and in a singular motion my ‘saber snapped to my hand, activated, and was thrown directly at the insane Sith Master.

The lightsaber thudded back into my grasp.

Silence. Followed by the thud of his lifeless body collapsing to the ground.

His jaw, locked in a silent scream he hadn’t had time to unleash.

Jen?

The only sounds I could hear were the harsh pants of my own breathing.

*Jorak’s dead. I’m free.* I breathed in deep, willing my heart to calm and the tense fear to dissipate. I switched off the ‘saber, turned, and spotted the prone form of Mekel. With a muttered oath, I rushed to his side, dropping to my knees.

*He’s dead… or almost.* The young man’s face had drained of colour, his cheeks sinking into deep shadows. I ripped open the dark robe to see a smooth chest, rippled with the muscles of youth. It was cold as I pressed my cheek against it.

The faint, stuttering beat of a dying heart barely reached my ears.

*He’s fading. I manipulated Jorak into using up the last of his life so I could escape, and he’s dying. Bastila!*

**Reach out to him, Jen. He is not lost, yet!**

I breathed the Force in deeply, and enveloped Mekel with it, and could just sense the spark of life slowly dimming to nothing. It stuttered, winking out, like it had faded through the fabric of life to the other side. *What now?* I thought helplessly. *Bastila, help!*

She was with me, then; intermingled intimately with my very connection to the Force. I gave over to her will, and felt her touch as together we reached out with a desperate hand to pull the spark back. To, very gently, fan it once more into existence. It resisted at first, as if he was so very tired of it all, and wanted nothing more than to sink into oblivion. It felt intensely familiar, and my memory was, at once, swept away.

…

*There was no sight here, no sensation of touch or smell or even the anger that had dogged me for so very long.*

*It had all been such an unmitigated failure, everything I had been determined to accomplish slowly corrupted and twisted until my primary intent had all but vanished.*

*I was standing on the precipice, and below was black. Not a furious swirl of darkness I was so familiar with, but a soothing black of oblivion that promised rest and release from it all. The temptation to fall was so strong, and it would be so easy to just let go. Leave the anger. Leave the*
betrayal. Leave the grief behind.

Behind me I sensed a warm light, a channel of life that hurt.

Mercy, I thought hopelessly. It is all lost. Mercy.

It is not all lost. Please, Force willing, come back. Have faith… it is never all lost.

The light engulfed me in a painful awakening that I wasn't sure I wanted. I didn't know what I desired anymore.

Please, it whispered again, and the very shape of the presence had a name I didn't know anymore. Bastila. Yes. Come back to us. You are not lost.

And my very connection intermingled with the presence until I didn't know where I ended and she began and what was anything anymore but this bright, painful, hopeful life she was offering.

…

Jen, focus!

That was… that was you, and I? Stunned, I reeled back psychically from Mekel, my focus turning inward to my bond-sister. The memory and the thoughts were already fading, but the desire to fall into oblivion remained. Our… bond?

Yes, but not now! You must focus on Mekel!

With a start, I ripped my consciousness back to the young man dying in front of me. I could do it now, I could taste the feeling of being on the other side, and together with Bastila's touch in my link to the Force we gently surrounded him in life and slowly coaxed the spark until it was a fragile flame. The essence of the boy filtered in through my psyche; angry, scared, and yet oddly loyal. Mekel, I whispered. Mekel, Bastila echoed, and for a short time we were three.

I felt what it was like to be trapped on Korriban; to be mad and suspicious of everyone, to desire someone who had eyes for my friend, to believe in that friend but have him lose faith with me, to wonder if this place was even worse than the streets and the lays I'd left behind. To feel like the only one I could trust to look out for me was my own dark Master.

There was no memory here, but his emotions were raw and painful.

Anger, fear, a yearning for freedom and bonds of loyalty to those I- he- cared about. The feelings sunk deep within me, interweaving into my own, and in that instant it became impossible to disconnect us.

He gave a shuddering gasp, separated from us, and I felt his heart thump harder, pulsing through the Force. Heal him now, Bastila commanded. My confusion must had reverberated through the bond, for once more she grabbed the reins and sank our collective power deep into his physical body; flooding it with life, knitting together muscles, and healing skin and bone. Energy flushed through his very veins. In wonderment, I was carried along as Bastila deftly strengthened the young man back to health.

But I could feel her reserves draining dangerously close to empty. Stop, I murmured. It is enough, and you are spent.

Mekel coughed, a spot of colour rising on his young, handsome face, and dark blue eyes opened to
stare at me in shock.

One last pulse of healing Force, and Bastila retreated, releasing the Force to me once more.

*Was that how our bond was created?* I thought in wonderment. I remembered Juhani, once, telling me of three ways a mind-link could occur. From years of working together or from the intimacy of lovers. She hadn't the time to tell me the third way. Was this it? *I was... dying. You saved me.*

I- yes.

Bastila had saved my life, some time in the past. I would have to think on that later. And she could reach through the bond and direct my Force, should I let her. I could draw on hers, should she let me. *That,* in itself, was pretty awe-inspiring.

But- I stared at the young man in front of me. *Bastila! Does this mean I share a bond with him, now?* The thought was, frankly, preposterous. And a bit appalling, actually, when I thought of my altercations with Mekel thus far. *Do bonds come into existence when you save someone's life?*

**Do not be ridiculous. It is not just about saving a life. Very few Jedi can even reach a soul on the brink.*

*Bastila, that's not answering*-

*Force bonds are rare, Jen. Ours even more so. An intimate connection like that which connects us can only occur if one is about the join the Force, and your very essence mingles with theirs*-

*Like we just did with him?*

There was a long pause. And Mekel was still staring at me in wide-eyed silence.

*Force bonds do not usually manifest even if the conditions are ideal. I would consider it unlikely.* She lapsed into another brief silence. *Jen, this may be hard to believe, but you were worse off than Mekel. It took significantly more to bring you back.*

Well, I certainly couldn't sense Mekel the way I could Bastila, but then, my bond with Bastila had grown stronger over time. A lot stronger, it seemed.

"Mekel," I said, breaking the silence. "Can you sit?"

He was still bemused, but pushed himself up on a hand, groaning as he did so. The young man looked behind me, his eyes resting on the still-warm corpse of Jorak Uln, before flicking back to me in undisguised surprise.

"That was... that was Force healing," he muttered. "Frakk. Force healing?"

"Something like that."

"And Jorak..."

"Dead."

*Jen, are you out of danger now? I am exhausted.*

*We'll be on our way back to the 'Hawk very soon. Take a stim or something, Bastila, I must talk to you. To everyone. I know where the Star Map is.*
His eyes tightened warily as he continued staring at me. “I think… I think that was more than just healing. I was about to bleeding kark it… wasn’t I?”

At my brief nod, he grimaced and looked down. “Or I suppose you Jedi call it joining the Force.”

_Alright. This once, perhaps._ I sensed a mild disapproval radiating through the bond, and wondered what my bond-sister had against the occasional use of stimulants. But she was still recovering, and today’s events must have taken its toll on her. My muscles burned with taut stiffness, and I realized I wasn’t feeling so hot myself. It’d been a crap day. _The Star Map? That is... excellent news, if you are sure._

I raised an eyebrow at Mekel, although he was still looking away. “What, does healing automatically make one a member of the Order?” I said mildly.

_Pretty sure, Bastila. I’ll explain when I’m back onboard._

“I’ve never seen anyone on Korriban able to heal using the Force,” he snapped. “Damage control, yes – Kel’s pretty good at it, knitting together muscle to stop the bleeding. But you did more than frakking damage control.”

I sat back, sighing as I rubbed my head. “Let’s just say I had a bit of help.”

“Your Cathar friend?”

“No- I, kath crap!” I scrambled to my feet, rushing over to the door. _Juhani!_

I depressed the door control with a frantic thud, and it opened. A distressed Cathar was on the other side, one hand raised as if to thump loudly against the durasteel. She fell forward, embracing me desperately before pulling back.

“What happened?” she gasped, frowning as her eyes landed on Mekel.

“Turns out the old, dead Headmaster wasn’t quite so dead,” I responded. “He is now.”

“Jorak’s been killing all the students who come here,” Mekel added, slowly getting to his feet. “Leeching them dry.” He took a few steps towards Jorak’s corpse. “You lot don’t have a clue what this means. Uthar didn’t kill Jorak.” He laughed nastily. “Oh, Yuthura’s gonna love this!”

“Uthar will lose face,” I said slowly.

“More than that,” Mekel muttered. “This’ll be enough to challenge the frakkwad. If you want to be Master, you gotta bleeding kill the top tuk’ata. Uthar bloody cheated.”

“Will it be enough to steer the Adepts away from him, though?” I asked, and Mekel looked back to me in surprise. “Lashowe follows him. Dak follows him.” I sent Juhani a sideways glance to see her lips tighten at the mention of her old friend’s name. “And Dustil follows him, too.”

An annoyed burst of air released itself from Mekel. “Dustil… we were friends once. We were both grabbed from Telos after the bombing, y’know, and in the early days we stuck together.” He gave a shaky laugh. “I’m hoping he’ll stay out of things.”

_From what Kel implied, I doubt it._ And Mekel didn’t strike me as the merciful sort… but then I recalled what I’d sensed earlier. _Loyalty._ It surprised me, to find that sort of empathy at his core. _The Dark Side twists people until they’re barely recognizable from what they once were._ Bastila had said something like that to me yesterday. _And Korriban is so very enmeshed in the Dark Side._
The blinding light of Mekel’s ‘saber activated, and bathed the cavern in blood-red. He pointed it at Jorak Uln’s corpse.

“What are you doing?” Juhani gasped in horrified outrage as the ‘saber bit deep into the dead man’s neck.

“Proof,” Mekel grunted, severing the head in a gruesome display. I grimaced in disgust and saw the Cathar turn away.

“That is abominable,” she said tightly.

Mekel had found a knapsack amongst Jorak’s belongings, and was busily stuffing the cauterized head into it.

“You do realize that could just about be anyone’s head,” I said mildly. In a macabre way, it was faintly amusing, a Sithling wandering about with the dead, eyeless head of an ex-headmaster. This place ain’t for the faint-hearted.

“Most of the Adepts know Jorak,” Mekel muttered. “The neurotic chivhole was leader when I first arrived.” He looked up at me, dark eyes glinting against the light of the ‘saber. “You gonna claim the kill?”

“No,” I said shortly. “I have what I need. Take what you want – but stay away from the sarcophagus.”

Mekel stilled, frowning at me. “Why?”

“I’m going to destroy it,” I said coldly. “I’m not leaving Tulak Hord’s secrets around for the next loony Sith Master to exploit.”

I could see the hesitation in the man’s face. He was a Sith student, after all, and Jorak had made himself mighty powerful.

“What are you doing next, Mekel?” Juhani asked quietly. “After this experience, are you certain Korriban is the place for you?”

Juhani, the one-Cathar redemption band. “Staria, his loyalty is to Yuthura,” I said flatly, watching Mekel’s eyes. Some causes, I could tell, were beyond us. “And hers is to Mekel. She sent us after you, y’know,” I commented to him in a neutral tone. He blinked, eyes tightening. “She’s not as self-serving as Uthar. Not yet.”

“But in the end, the Dark Side will twist everything,” Juhani whispered.

I could see his jaw clench as he stared between the two of us. “Thank you for my life,” he bit out. “But I don’t need a frakking sermon.”

I felt my mouth quirk. “Fair enough. Well, good luck Mekel. I doubt you’ll see us again.”

A faint look of surprise crossed the man’s face. “Really? You think you can just walk away?”

“Yep. I sense an insurrection looming,” I said wryly. “I’ll leave you Sithlings to pick over the corpses.”

Mekel stood, slinging the bag over his shoulder. His robe was torn and charred, and streaks of dried blood painted creases over his handsome face. His black hair was matted to his scalp. I imagined I
looked no better.

“Goodbye then, Ness Jonohl. And thanks.” With a nod to the both of us, the angry young man left the tomb.

We waited in silence for some minutes, before Juhani walked closer.

“I do not know what to ask, first,” she said quietly. “The gas knocked me out, and when I came to – I thought that Dak must be right, and this was your end.”

“I’m like a loth-cat,” I quipped. “I have nine lives.”

“Perhaps,” she murmured, her eyes gleaming under the faint halogen light. “What did you mean, you have what you need? The- the Map?”

My eyes closed, and I sighed. “The good news is we can leave the Academy, and never return. The bad news is – the Map’s in the shyrack caves.”

xXx

I had no explosives on me to destroy Hord’s sarcophagus, so Juhani and I did the best we could with the Force, calling down rocks and dirt to cover the inner tomb until all that was left was the entrance. If I could ever come back and detonate this foul, corrupt place I would – but for now, we’d done the best we were able.

Dak had left by the time we exited the tomb, and Korriban’s only sun, Horuset, hung low in the sky. Maybe Mekel’s emergence had scared Dak away, or perhaps it was the rumblings of our combined Force collapsing in part of the cave, but by the drooping of Juhani’s shoulders I could tell she was disappointed. I just had the overwhelming drive to leave this festering Academy and do what we needed to. We can’t forsake Kel, though. We have to return for him. After the Map. And maybe Dak, too, although I really didn’t get the same vibe from that one.

Juhani won’t leave him behind. Not without one more redemption attempt. The Cathar was pensive as we picked our way through the now deserted valley, and I knew the idea of leaving her old friend behind on Korriban would not sit well with her.

Bastila was beyond exhausted, and had moved into the realm of debilitated. She’d held nothing back, particularly in the attempt to save Mekel of all people, and now her body was paying the price. The stim had left her mind with a restless edge that should hold long enough for us to return to the ‘Hawk and talk, and then she could retreat into a recuperative slumber. We may not even need her for the shyrack caves tomorrow. My mind was already racing, trying to think of the best way to attack that.

Canderous. The duel is at dawn. Surely you have not forgotten?

Again, Bastila surprised me by picking out my uppermost thoughts.

Of course not! I lied hotly through the bond. I’d sworn to second him, and I wouldn’t back down on that. But with everything that had happened, somehow the gravity of Canderous’ personal business had slipped my mind.

Good. He is getting agitated. She pulled back, withdrawing from me into a light meditation, conserving whatever strength she had left.

The granite peak of the Academy loomed over us as we neared the top of the rocky path. I, too, was drained, and longed to be back on the ‘Hawk - maybe a quick stint in the refresher followed by a
long sleep. But there was *so much* to think on, now. Jorak’s shattering revelation that I had pushed away, until the threat was gone and Mekel revived.

I knew my name. *I knew my name.* Ness Jonohl. I thought the name, I tasted it on my lips as Juhani and I walked silently through the Valley of the Sith Lords. Never had words sounded so sweet. These weeks of knowing who Evil Bitch was, these months of living as Jen Sahara – and now. I knew my name.

Jorak Uln had met me, once before, either visiting on Revan’s orders or following Revan’s trail much as we were doing now.

I could find out my history, I realized with startling wonder. Surely I’d find something on the HoloNet about Jedi Knight Ness Jonohl. And her boyfriend. *I’d find out whether Bastila was telling the truth or not. Whether I really did fall.*

But even if the worst should come to pass, and I *had* followed Revan and Malak into murder and evil and barbarous insanity, surely I’d tried to turn back. Why else was I involved with whatever went down on Deralia?

*Bastila had a strike team when she fought Revan.* My eyes widened. *Whoa. Could I have been one of them?* I didn’t know how Revan’s flagship fit in with the ground assault on Deralia and Jen’s death, but the famous encounter between Bastila and Revan must have taken place in the skies above.

*And if I had been involved… that would explain so much. Why there’s a bond between me and Bastila and the echo of Darth Revan.* And Jen Sahara? I couldn’t make sense of that. But she’d been taken and tortured at the same place and likely the same time. Perhaps the pieces were starting to fit together now.

Bastila had saved my life. Was that at the same time? Did Revan kill Jen and almost kill me, before Bastila finally killed *her?* And didn’t Darth Malak then choose the opportunity to try and blow Bastila into space dust from another ship?

I winced as pain stabbed into my temple, roughly where I’d knocked my head open on the ‘Spire. *Bastila had once told me my mind was destroyed.* Back on Tatooine, when I’d been consumed with rage and confusion. Back when Revan kept trying to take over. *Bastila was afraid she’d do more damage if she told me too much.* The incident in the Archives earlier sprang to mind, and I wondered, ruefully, if there may have been some truth to her words.

I certainly hadn’t credited them with any back on Tatooine.

“We need to avoid people,” Juhani said quietly as we halted outside the Valley entrance to the Academy. “Yuthura, Uthar… Stretch out your senses, Jen.”

“Ness,” I corrected her. *Ness.* The name sounded a bit washed out, though. *Jedi Knight Ness.* Surely I should feel some sort of *rightness* about it?

The ferracrystal doors opened for us with an ominous creak, and once more we sidled into the Academy. I breathed the Force in deep; stretching out my senses, and in silence we chose a route that skirted along the edges of the school’s domain. The hallways here appeared much the same as the warren of corridors in the living quarters; high ceiling, narrow width, foreign symbols etched deep in the wall that looked vaguely impressive. A cursory glance brought no recollection from Jen, other than it was a repeating pattern intricate enough that most would probably not notice, and believe it to be of some archaeological significance.
We couldn’t avoid the large cavern that dominated the far side of the Academy but, bar a few Initiates, it was empty. I stared down a passing Zeltron that glanced our way curiously; hard enough until she looked elsewhere. The Force told me that there was no one left between us and the exit, but despite my firm grip on an outer confidence, I still held in a tense breath until we finally opened the impressive double doors and spilled out onto the ornate path that led to Dreshdae.

I’d never been so happy to exit a learning institute in my life.

xXx

It was an uneventful journey back to Dreshdae, with looming shadows of the nearby rocky peaks eclipsing our path as we hurried back. The light was fading and we remained silently intent on the darkening surroundings, keeping an eye out for any potential threat.

We spoke little, both lost in our own thoughts. Juhani, no doubt, thinking of Dak, and me… dwelling on everything.

The air-conditioned environment of Dreshdae allowed a loosening in my chest. I’d stopped noticing the harsh sulphuric taint at some stage, whether it was because of long exposure to it, or the simple reason I’d been holding deep onto the Force like Juhani had suggested. The air in Dreshdae was a relief, though.

The inhabitants of the colony gave us a wide berth; we still wore the dark robes of the Academy, even if Juhani’s had a jagged slice down the front and mine was rumpled and dirty.

We both held our lightsabers at the ready.

I thought I recognized the figure of Shaardan - the other sentient who’d listened with enthusiasm to Uthar’s exposition the previous day - catch sight of us as we crossed the retail plaza at the centre of Dreshdae. The enclosed colony was small, and it took us little time to, finally, arrive at the spaceport.

Juhani was one step ahead as we entered the docking bay, and she rapped loudly on the hatch, which opened a moment later as the familiar sight of Zaalbar greeted us. And all around me, the Force felt normal again, less like the twisted, dark energy that infiltrated every corner of the Academy.

Apart from one dead patch just around the outer hull of the ship.

“One second,” I muttered to Juhani. “Go on in, I’ll be right behind you.”

The encounter with Jorak Uln still had the burn of adrenaline running through me. I was wide-eyed, ready to second guess everything, and this damn, puzzling behaviour of the Force wasn’t helping my state of mind.

But maybe it was just that, even here, Korriban’s corruption lingered. I wandered off the loading ramp, and around the starboard side of the ‘Hawk. It was just next to the hyperdrive coupling, a section about a person’s height, repelling the Force as if no life could exist within it.

From some distance away I stared intently, wondering how in the Outer Rim the Force could react like that, and felt Bastila stir at my confusion.

And then, part of it moved.

Startled, I realized that something or someone was there. My hand fell to my lightsaber.

I sensed a brief flicker of hostile intent, and it was just enough warning for me to dive to the side as
an activated lightsaber came spinning out of nowhere to strike just where I had been standing.

Another attempt on my life!

My anger crested, and with it a torrent of Force inundated my senses, demanding an outlet. It slammed the malicious energy against the outer hull of the ship, and the sound of a body crunching against it made a dull echo throughout the empty docking bay.

The dead Force weaves dissipated, and a shocked young man dressed in plain clothes appeared a few metres in front of me, held taut against the Ebon Hawk by my frenzied will. I could taste the savagery of my rage as it rippled through the Force, and squeezed malevolently against the intruder, forcing him prone against the durasteel, tightening ominously against his neck.

**Jen, control your anger! This is not the way… calm down!**

“I am getting a little sick of people trying to kill me,” I hissed through gritted teeth. The man – boy, really, he was young, younger even than Mekel or Shaardan – scrabbled desperately at his neck. Fury pounded a glorious beat within me. *The power,* Revan whispered in my head. *Hatred and loathing and righteous anger… it is mine to embrace!*

**Jen! You must listen to me! Do not surrender to your rage! You are stronger than this!**

*I won’t surrender,* I echoed desperately, clutching at Bastila’s words. *Revan will not own me!* Shallow breaths racked my body as I struggled to rein myself in. The desire to squeeze, to suffocate and choke and destroy, ebbed; and I was aware of the boy pleading under his breath, eyes tightly shut.

A minute passed, and still I stayed motionless, hand aloft while the Force swirled ominously around the intruder, imprisoning him against the Ebon Hawk but doing no more.

“Why are you here?” I demanded.

The boy’s eyes opened, wide and frightful. His hands dropped to his sides, and as he realized the danger was passing a calculating look crossed his face. “Well- uh, everyone is curious about you, and, uh, I was hoping to find something to gain prestige.”

“In case you hadn’t noticed, I’m not doing so well at controlling my darker emotions,” I said quietly, and took a step closer. The boy swallowed. “I suggest you start responding with the truth.”

**Jen?** Bastila’s voice was inquiring, and only a little bit panicky, now.

*I’m okay now, I think. Thanks.*

**What happened?**

A Sithkid tried to kill me. Getting tired of this.

**Oh. Do not- do not answer with the same gratuitous violence. Please.**

“I, um, I was tracking someone.” A mulish look crossed the boy’s face and he glanced down. “Look, if you’re going to kill me, then just get it over with alright?” His voice was filled with the false bravado of youth.

“Okay,” I kept mine flippant, pulled out my short red ‘saber and activated it. *Let’s call his bluff.* I wouldn’t – couldn’t – kill him, but he didn’t know that.
Three steps, and I was within striking distance. I lunged forward.

“Stop!” he cried desperately, his face two inches from scarlet death. “Please, it was Kylah! Master Uthar sent me to find her, and she was interested in this ship! Please don’t kill me!” His voice cracked, babbling with platitudes and pleads.

*Kylah. Stars, Kylah is on Korriban.* Dread circled deep within me. For if Kylah was here…

*Kylah?

And she was scouting around the Ebon Hawk…

*Kylah Aramai? How- she died onboard the Endar Spire, Jen!*

“What do you mean, *interested*?” I could feel the anger building again, buffeting against the fraying edges of my control. It twisted, reverberated darkly through the scarlet beam of the ‘saber.

“I- she- she was looking up the transport logs, the manifest, the- the docking info- that sort of thing!”

The ‘saber stayed taut against the adolescent’s face, which was craned sharply away from the hot burn of its beam. “Was she here? In this docking bay?” I hissed.

“No- I, uh, I don’t know!” he gasped. “I only came here for a look because she ran some queries on this freighter from spaceport control! I wasn’t going to do anything!”

“Jen? What is going on?” Juhani’s voice, quiet and peaceful, cut through the charged atmosphere. I heard the clank of boots coming down the landing ramp to my right.

“Don’t- calm down Jen. We didn’t come here to beat up the Sith kids,” Carth’s voice followed hers, calm and steady and so damned reasonable I wanted to throw something at him.

“I’m absolutely fine, guys,” I forced out through gritted teeth. Their emergence did, however, press the rage back under check, and I took a deep, deep breath. “I’m calm, I’m not going to kill anyone *despite* this being the second idiot today who has tried to end me. Frankly, I think I’m doing sodding well on this damn rotten planet.”

*Did you send Juhani and Carth to check up on me?* I demanded.

*I- yes. As a precautionary measure only. You seem to be doing quite well.*

Grudgingly, I pulled back from Bastila and focused again on the neophyte Dark Jedi. He’d gained composure of a sort, and was staring back at me emotionless. My ‘saber was still illuminating his young face in shades of red. Reluctantly, I released the ropes of Force imprisoning him, and in doing so brushed against his very psyche.

*He’s strong, I realized, startled. And if he was chasing Kylah, on Uthar’s orders… then this must be Uthar’s pet Dustil.* Not a neophyte, then, despite his youth. He was a teenage human, maybe Mission’s age, with rich dark hair and a strong face smattered with freckles. Intelligent eyes stared at me, impassive, waiting for my move.

*Why did you say Kylah’s name, Jen?*

*Later, Bastila. I still have a situation here.*

“Jen. You must let him go,” Juhani said quietly as she drew closer.
“As soon as I figure out what to do with him,” I replied dryly. “I’m not too keen on evading death by his hands again, and I don’t think Uthar’s pet can be easily negotiated with.”

A slight gasp from the teenager was the only acknowledgement I received; but it was enough to convince me I was right about his identity. I felt my lips curve in a small smile.

“But anyone can be redeemed, Jen, you know this,” Juhani murmured as she stepped to my side. Dustil glanced over at the Cathar briefly, before back to me and my ‘saber. Even Uthar’s protégé, Juhani? Sun and stars, you’d probably try to talk Darth Malak around.

What would reach this angry young man, anyway? My eyes narrowed.

“Your Master sent Mekel to his death, you know,” I murmured. “Ordered him into Tulak Hord’s tomb.”

Dustil flinched, and for a moment raw emotion was visible in his dark eyes. “Why the frakk should I care,” he said coldly.

“Because he was your friend… once.” I said quietly.

“You’re a bleeding slug-brained rotgrub if you’re frakking dependent on friends,” he spat, the curses sounding awkward on his tongue. He had the same accent as Mekel, but more refined, more educated. I bet he channels Mekel when he wants to look like he doesn’t care. “And people die on Korriban. If Mekel wasn’t strong enough… then he wasn’t strong enough.”

“Oh,” I said lazily, but held my ‘saber at the ready. “I never said Mekel died.”

He blinked. “What- but you said Tulak Hord- if he went- did Mekel run?”

I couldn’t help a smirk. I shouldn’t enjoy this Sithling’s discomfort, I knew, but a wicked part of me couldn’t resist. “No. You should ask Mekel about it. It’s quite the fun story.”

Dustil’s eyes narrowed with dislike but he didn’t rise to the bait. “So what now? We appear to be at an impasse.”

And so we were. I didn’t have any concrete reason to detain Dustil longer, but the thought of letting him loose did not sit well with me. He’ll go straight to Uthar, unless the humiliation of being bested is too strong. And Uthar’s interested in Juhani…

“We could… pretend this never happened,” Dustil suggested. “I can promise I won’t mention your ship to anyone.”

“Sith’s honour?” I remarked sarcastically.

Dustil shrugged. “We both have reasons for forgetting this incident.” He paused, and it was a loaded silence. “Jen,” he added softly.

Just like that, the humour fled. Damn Carth and Juhani for their lack of finesse. “It’s a nickname,” I snapped. “It’s short for Ness.”

“Riiiight,” he drawled in derision.

“There is no sense in restraining him any longer,” Juhani said quietly from behind me. “He will find his own path.”

“Letting Sith loose who know our ship and have already tried to kill you is neither strategic nor
“Conducive to survival,” Carth disagreed from the loading ramp.

Dustil’s eyes were flicking between me and Juhani, and I could see the wheels in his head turning. Our cover as Sith hopefuls was surely blown. *Carth and Juhani*, I groaned inwardly. *Stealth ops they are not.*

“This boy has no reason to betray us, Carth,” Juhani said mildly. “Surely he will respect that we have spared his life.”

But the boy in question had paled, an odd expression crossing his face, like some wild, preposterous idea had formed. He mouthed something silently, before shaking his head in apparent dismissal of his own thoughts.

*Carth. He was saying Carth,* I realized in puzzlement. That was Juhani, again, not doing so well at the whole covert thing.

But the hairs on my arms began to stand on end.

It was funny, how in some moments a dozen different impressions could coalesce into one startling conclusion.

Mekel’s voice, explaining their shared origins: “*We were both grabbed from Telos after the bombing, y’know…*”

Carth’s voice, telling me of his loss: “*A wife and son on Telos. I never… I never found my son.*”

Dustil had a long face, lean but with a strong jaw that he’d undoubtedly grow into. A wide mouth that might have a handsome smile if he could still remember how. A mop of hair that had the same rich chestnut colour and texture as our pilot.

Something akin to awe awoke within me, as a crazy conclusion peaked into sharp clarity. *Add twenty years and Dustil would be the spitting image of Carth.*

*No. Way.*


“What?” the Republic pilot called back. Dustil started shaking his head, desperation spreading over his face.

“You said you lost a son on Telos. What was his name?”

“No no no,” Dustil was begging in an urgent tone, quiet enough that Carth wouldn’t hear from that distance. “Please send him away, I’ll do anything you want, please!”

“Why would you ask that?” Carth replied tightly, not having budged from the ramp. Juhani, still next to me, drew her breath in audibly. Her thoughts must be racing, trying to connect the dots.

“Humour me. Please.”

The boy darted to the left, away from my ‘saber, and my hand shot out automatically to slam him back against the ship. He grunted, and Juhani shifted to cut him off.

“You can’t do this,” he spat in desperation. “Please, let me leave and I’ll be yours!”

“Sorry kid,” I murmured softly. “We all have to face our demons sometime. And as far as yours
“Go… Well. I don’t think it’s that bad, really.”

“His name was Dustil, not that it’s any of your business,” Carth was outraged now, an honest anger darkening his voice. Everything clicked into place, and I smiled ruefully at the boy. He was shaking underneath my hand.

“It’s my business when he tries to kill me, Carth,” I shot back. “I think you’d better get your ass over here and see for yourself.”

“What?” Carth hissed. A pause, and then hurried steps as he clambered inelegantly over to us. Dustil cringed against the durasteel hull, shame and fear and anger darkening his eyes to an unfathomable black. My gaze slid to Carth; he was bewildered, disbelieving, and didn’t seem to recognize Dustil at first.

And then, a dawning wonder lightened his face, and at once I was reminded of the female soldiers who stalked him around the Endar Spire.

*My, he’s not half-handsome when he smiles-*


“Let me go!” Dustil yelled, and I released him, switching my ‘saber off and taking a step back. I clenched in readiness for any escape attempt, but judging by the adolescent fury building in his eyes I was pretty sure he was going to yell rather than run.

“You’re alive.” Carth stepped forward, arms raised as if to embrace the boy but Dustil flinched and stepped to the side.

“Oh, great,” Dustil sneered. It made him look younger. “It figures that you’d show up four years too late. Couldn't you have gotten yourself blown up on some ship and saved us the reunion?”

“Dustil… what?” Carth frowned, puzzled now as he gazed hungrily at his son. “What are you talking about? I... I thought you were dead!”

“Too bad you didn’t still think that,” Dustil shot back. “What, you thought I’d be happy to see you? Look, everyone!” Dustil gestured comically around the empty landing bay. “It's my father, come to rescue me! Sure, he may have left Mum and I to die, but let’s not quibble over details!”

“No!” Carth cried out in protest, flinching backwards. “I didn't abandon you! The task force just arrived too late. Telos was in ruins, and your mother... I found her body... but I looked for you. I swear I looked everywhere —”

“Ah, save it,” Dustil spat. “You abandoned us long before. We were alone all during the wars, and even when you came back, you still didn't stay.” His voice held the echoes of long buried childhood resentment.

“I didn't have a choice! I was needed...”

“Yes? Well you were needed at home, too. Every damn battle that was more important to you than your *family.*” Dustil took another step away from us, glancing back at me cautiously. “You know what? It doesn't matter. Not anymore. The Sith are my family now, a family that cares about me. I don't need you.”

I snorted at that, and had twin Onasi scowls turn my way. I raised my hands in surrender. “Sorry!” I muttered. “Just the words *Sith* and *cares about me* in the same sentence is a bit hard to take in.”
“The Sith?” Carth turned back to his son, *his son*, his voice deepening to incredulous outrage. “You can't mean that! No! The Sith killed your mother! The Sith destroyed Telos!”

“So? You're the soldier, father,” Dustil sneered, and his words were laced with the venom only an antagonistic teenager could manage. “How many mothers have you killed?”

“No,” Carth rejected angrily. “You've been brainwashed. The son I knew would never –”

“You never knew me!” the boy yelled. “You weren't there to know me! You have *no idea* what I would or wouldn’t do!”

Carth was shaking his head in denial. “I don't know what's been done to you, but you're coming with me. Now.”

“Touch me, old man, and I'll kill you!” Dustil’s voice rose, and with a raised hand his forgotten lightsaber whooshed past me and snapped back into his grip. The red illuminated his angry, resentful expression. “Leave. Get off Korriban! If I see you again, I'll *end* you!”

The Force rallied around him, a powerful, unstable tornado of energy. *He’s close to losing control. This could end badly.*

“Carth,” I said tightly, and he turned to look at me, a parent’s lost bewilderment in his dark eyes. “Let him go.”

Carth had frozen in shock, and Dustil slipped passed us, a hateful glare on his face as he all but ran out of the docking bay. I could see that Carth had absolutely no idea what to do next.

“Inside. Now,” I ordered, jerking a thumb towards the ‘Hawk. Juhani was already at the door, and I motioned Carth in first before locking the hatch securely behind me.

He had barely taken a step into the ship before turning around again.

“Jen…” his voice was utterly lost.

“I know,” I murmured, still reeling myself. *First Dak, now Dustil. Next we’ll find Bastila’s long lost mother or something.*

“No you don’t!” he rejected hotly. “Dustil is… I thought… he’s alive… but-”

I sighed. “But he’s training to be a Dark Jedi.”

“How?” he cried brokenly. “I- four years ago, Telos was bombed by the Sith. Morgana *died* because of them. I came too late- our condo was flattened- by the time we landed- All the Sith wanted was to murder civilians and spread panic,” his voice echoed with deep bitterness. “Revan and Malak and Saul Karath… they’re monsters, all of them.”

I had no response for the utter misery etched on his face. He looked away from me, words spilling out like bitter droplets of pain. “I found my wife’s body, Morgana. I don’t think she suffered. But I wasn’t there… I should have been there. I never found Dustil. I checked the survivor lists compulsively, and every day the hope I carried in me died a little more. There were so many missing, so many bodies they couldn’t identify.”

He sighed and it was a desperate sound. “Eventually I gave up, and accepted that he’d died, too. I went back to the Fleet and threw myself into work… and never really stopped. And now… now I find he’s alive. And training to be a Sith.”
He looked back at me, and now the fire of anger began to burn in his dark eyes. “Jen… I can’t believe you let him go. I have to go after him. No matter if he hates me. I can’t let him stay here, in this evil place.” Carth abruptly tried to step past me; I moved to intercept him and he glared angrily.

“Don’t you dare try to stop me, Jen Sahara. Blast it, you should never have let him go!”

“Carth, listen!” My hands dropped to his forearms and gripped tightly, commanding his attention. “Of course we’re not going to leave Dustil here on Korriban. But would you rather we tie him up and chuck him in the hold, or convince him to come of his own volition?”

“I don’t care!” Carth yelled, his face furious and inches from mine. I felt his muscles bunch under my hands.

“Well you should!” I snapped back. “He’s both a resentful teenager, and a powerful Dark Jedi in the making.” Carth snorted disbelievingly at this, and I scowled at him. “Carth, he’s the protégé of Uthar Wynn. Y’know, the leader of the Sith Academy. Uthar kills the weak ones, Carth.”

He was shaking his head. Absently, I noticed he’d lost that stars-awful flight jacket. “I just- I’m just struggling to get my head around this. Dustil, alive after all these years… and a powerful Force user?”

“Carth, I promise we won’t leave Korriban without Dustil. But Kylah’s back, sniffing around the Ebon Hawk… I need you here, guarding Bastila.” I breathed in deep. “Give me a chance to persuade Dustil to come voluntarily.”

His dark eyes, serious and intent, gazed into mine for moments before he nodded imperceptibly.

“Jen?” Bastila emerged from behind us, deeper in the corridor, her voice a question.

At once I realized how close we were standing, and how warm his arms were under my hands. I released him, taking a step backwards and feeling unfamiliarly flustered.

Bastila glanced at Carth and then back to me. “I believe you wished to talk, Jen. We have… much to discuss.”

I nodded. “I’ll talk to you later,” I muttered to Carth, and followed Bastila deeper into the ‘Hawk.

We headed back to the medbay, which had turned into her quarters since Manaan. The pilot’s office – a small, separate living room near the cockpit which had been her domain prior - was currently empty, although I thought I’d caught Carth kipping in there a couple of times.

My mind was still whirling with the latest revelation of what had to be craziest day of my life. Carth’s son. Alive, on Korriban, and the most powerful Adept here. I couldn’t imagine Carth’s turmoil.

Bastila closed the medbay door behind me, and sat down on the bed. I followed suit, looking at her in an awkward silence.


In the lengthy list of mind-shattering issues, it was hard to know what to prioritize. Perhaps that was why her next baffling question caught me so completely off-guard.

“What is going on between you and Carth?” she asked seriously.

“Are you certain?” Her voice was soft, but not so quiet that I could comfortably ignore it. I had no idea what she was talking about. I mean, sure, Carth was a good looking guy, and we got along great when he wasn’t being a paranoid idiot or I wasn’t blowing ships up, but the idea of something romantic happening was... was, well, it was ridiculous.

“This is ridiculous,” I muttered, wrenching my thoughts into some semblance of normality. “First flyboy thinks there’s something going on between me and Canderous, and now you imply something between Carth and I... sun and stars, I never realized my love-life was so busy.”

“You are dissembling,” she replied, in an irritatingly neutral voice. “And blushing.”

“I am not!” I shot back, my cheeks flaming.

“Perhaps I am mistaken,” she conceded, but I thought I heard doubt in her voice. I scowled. “Certainly there are more pertinent subjects to discuss. But at least let me impart to you the dangers of emotional entanglements to Force users.”

My embarrassment faded, overshadowed by amusement. “Please tell me I’m not about to have The Talk. From someone at least five years my junior.”

Irritation flashed through her eyes. “Must you turn this into a joke? There are valid reasons...” she trailed off suddenly as a thought struck her. And I heard it with startling clarity.

**At least five years your junior...**

I stiffened. For after all, Jen Sahara at twenty-six galactic years was likely younger than Bastila Shan. We stared at each other, and I felt my jaw clenching. Bastila looked away.

“Perhaps this discussion is best left for another day. But please believe that I have your interests at heart, Jen.”

I said nothing, using my silence to prod her into speech. She sighed, and turned to look at me again. Her eyes showed a considerable depth of exhaustion.

“I heard most of that conversation, Jen, regarding Carth’s son. I am... not sure that getting involved is the right course of action.”

Shock assailed me. “What, we should leave Carth’s son to the mercy of the Sith?” I could hear my voice rise in disbelief.

Bastila closed her eyes, and sat further back on the medbay bed, leaning against the wall. There were shadowed hollows in her cheeks, and I wondered how much the experience in Tulak Hord’s tomb had sapped her strength. I had no idea the bond could be so... powerful.

**That is not quite what I meant.** She surprised me by replying mentally. **But he is here of his own volition, Jen. And we are here to find the Star Map... to stop Darth Malak. Every delay adds risk to our mission.**

I swallowed back my instinctive snarl, and deliberately took the time to mull over her advice. Bastila had years of training and counsel from the Jedi, and I was making a concerted effort to listen to her. Not just because of Evil Bitch, but because the stakes of what we were doing were so damn high. And I’d never, till this planet, given her much of a chance.
But still, she was wrong.

_Bastila. If we ignore every little thing we can do to help along the way, then where do we draw the line?_ I briefly recalled the Sith hopefuls I’d left standing under Mekel’s influence. I could have done something there, but had decided the risk was too great. Juhani, on the other hand, tried to redeem all that we met. _Somewhere we have to find a balance. We can’t disregard every wrong we come across because we are doing something more important. In the end, what will that do to our humanity?_

There was a long silence.

**Perhaps, if I am truly honest with myself, I would say that I am scared of staying longer on Korriban than is necessary.** Her emotions cascaded through the bond, waves of emanating shame. **You are right, Jen.**

_I’m scared too, Bastila. But I can’t ignore Carth, or Canderous._

**And that is true bravery, is it not? Doing what is right or what is needed, despite one’s fear. I would ask, as your companion and perhaps, one day, your friend, that you remember thus: It is your actions that showcase your true nature, no matter what may have been.**

And here we were, dancing around the truth again.

We stared at each other in silence, her pale, beautiful face across from mine, a solemn expression in her dark eyes. It was time to find out the truth.

“Okay Bastila, let’s have it out,” I said, crossing my arms. She flinched.

“Ha-have it out?” she stammered. I felt her fear, and inwardly recoiled.

“I know, Bastila,” I said flatly. “Don’t bother hiding behind part lies and half-truths anymore.”

Her eyes widened to black pools of shock. She swallowed convulsively. “You found out on Rii’shn,” she said quietly.

“Yes,” I bit out. “I had a flashback, of sorts. Bastila, why is Darth Revan in my head? _What did the Jedi do?_”

Her face turned white, and she blinked but did not answer.

“I know Karon was involved,” I muttered, my words spilling out. “And I know she was my Master, before all of this. _Mine_, not Jen Sahara’s, not Darth Revan’s. Stars, did I agree to this mental minefield?”

If anything, she paled further and didn’t answer my somewhat rhetorical question. I could feel an honest anger swelling up inside. “Dammit, Bastila, why do I have three personalities inside my head?”

A hysterical laugh burst out from her; it sounded utterly shocked. She clapped a hand over her mouth. Through the bond, I felt nothing but stunned disbelief. _I guess she never planned on having this conversation with me. We were, after all, meant to be safely ensconced on Dantooine. I understood, then, how unfair a position she had been put in, due to our unlikely bond. It was highly doubtful that any of this mess had been initiated by her, a Jedi Padawan._

Apart from the bond. The whole saving-my-life thing.
“You— you think you have three personalities?” she spluttered.

“What? You mean to tell me I have more?” I hissed. “Did this become a new game at the Order? The masters so bored of reciting the Code, they decided to see how many personalities they could cram inside someone’s head?”

“No,” she answered in desperation, and her voice had quietened now, while her eyes searched my face frantically. “Please, Jen, give me a moment to decide how best to proceed.”

“To proceed,” I returned flatly. “No. You can’t hide the truth from me anymore,” I needed to hear it all, now, everything. But most importantly – even more important than the significance of Evil Bitch – was my own history. “Bastila, I know my name, now. Ness Jonohl. Jorak Uln confirmed it. I want—I need to know. Was I— was Ness a Dark Jedi?”

Her face was blank—I would have called it inscrutable, but it didn’t seem to be hiding any emotion other than bewilderment. The same emotion swam strongly through our bond.

“Dammit, Bastila, answer me! Did Ness Jonohl fall to the Dark Side?”

“No!” she answered, her voice strong and sure. “But, you must understand, Ness doesn’t ex-”

“Jen Sahara,” an angry, gravelly voice cut in from behind the door. “We need to talk. Now.”

A sinking feeling pulled at me. “Canderous, give me some time.”

The door swished open. I felt Bastila’s palpable relief through the bond, and my anger crested further.

“The duel is less than a full sleep away. We must prepare. Have you forsaken me, Jen Sahara?”

“What?” I stood abruptly, glaring at the furious Mandalorian. “No! I said I’ll be your second and I will. But I need to sort this out—”

“Bastila will be here when you get back,” Canderous bit out. “Whatever little Jedi spat you two have can wait. This can’t.”

“Go, Jen,” Bastila said softly. “You cannot break your vow to Canderous. And I shall be here upon your return.”

Canderous was radiating pent-up frustration from waiting idly for two days, and Bastila had the shadows of deep exhaustion etched in semi-permanent fashion on her face. Even through the bond, she felt faint, weaker, like she had on the hyperspace journey from Manaan.

Bastila was right. Dammit. I had to talk with Canderous about the duel before he wound himself up any further. My conversation with Bastila could wait—and at the least, I already knew one, soul-defining fact.

Ness Jonohl did not fall.

“We will continue this as soon as I am back from tomorrow’s duel,” I said flatly and, with one last, long look at my bond-sister, I capitulated and followed Canderous out of the room.

xXx
“Sit,” I barked at Revan, pointing to the benches in the common room before stalking out towards the men’s quarters. I could feel a disgruntled scowl on my face; I’d spent the last two days cooling my heels and waiting for Revan to return from playing with the Sithlings. Waiting was something I neither excelled at nor enjoyed.

And as the light faded from the final day before the duel, I started to grow angry. I shouldn’t have expected an outsider to understand or respect the importance of blood debt, but haar’chak, this was Revan. She had sworn to be my second, and I would have wagered the armour on my back that she’d come through for me.

Except that she wasn’t Revan, not really, not anymore.

But here she was, in the nick of time - though decidedly more interested in gossiping with Onasi and arguing with the princess – than discussing the matter of Mando’ade honour: that which is more important than one’s life. I scowled, slamming on the door control to the starboard sleeping area. Revan needed to appreciate the gravity of tomorrow’s trials. Jagi was no pushover, especially not with a blade - I wasn’t idiotic enough to expect an easy victory.

And if Revan even thought about using the Force tomorrow, I’d turn around and stab her myself, second or no.

The living quarters smelled of wet Wookiee, the being in question asleep on the bottom bed with his furry paws sticking off the end. There were a couple of bunks in here, but since Onasi had started kipping in the pilot’s quarters it’d just been us two co-habiting.

Good thing too, because Onasi and I didn’t get along on the best of days – even if I could admit he wasn’t a bad soldier. He needed to loosen up, Onasi, find himself a cantina wench and get laid. He spent too much time pissing about with the past. You should move on and forge a new future if you wanted your clan and your honour to survive.

The Wookiee, on the other hand, was unassuming and easy to ignore.

I grabbed the bottle of slumbari bourbon I’d recently procured in Dreshdae and headed back to Revan. It wasn’t a night for drinking, not with a blood duel in the morning, but a shot or two would help us both sleep. Revan might not need it though - she looked damn exhausted, like she’d been duelling Sithlings for the last two days straight. Judging by the state of her armour, raggedly visible under that dirty Sith robe, it was probably an accurate summary.

Onasi was in the central room when I returned, a lost expression on his face I hadn’t seen before. He looked like someone had just stood on his pet felinx.

“…will find the map, and then go to the Academy,” Revan was telling him earnestly. “We had an incident- I think things are going to get messy there. When we leave the Academy, we have to be prepared to get off Korriban quick.”

“You know where the Map is?” Carth asked in a quiet voice, staring intently at her.
“I know where the Map is,” she echoed, gazing back. Neither of them had noticed my entrance.

I slammed the bottle of bourbon down onto the table with a thud, and they both jumped, spinning to face me. “The blood duel. That’s what we’re talking about,” I bit out. “The Map can bloody well wait.”

“The duel is first,” Revan placated, a slight frown creased between her eyes. “I won’t let you down, Canderous.”

I grunted, part in disbelief, and grabbed a pair of tumblers from the kitchenette cupboard. Sitting down, I roughly motioned Revan to do the same.

Onasi, leaning against the wall, sighed as he ran a hand through his hair wearily. “I suppose it’s too much to ask that a Mandalorian duel can end peacefully?”

I snorted in derision. “And this attitude is why we had no qualms about invad-”

“Canderous!” Revan snapped, her eyes flashing. She stood abruptly. “Wait. Give me one minute to deal with Carth.”

I shot her a glare that should have shown the depths of my annoyance, while Onasi scoffed. “Deal with me?” he muttered disbelievingly.

“Carth,” Revan said quietly, picking up my damn bottle of booze and filling her glass with a generous amount. “It’s a Mandalorian honour duel. I’m sure I don’t need to spell it out.”

He sighed as she walked towards him, glass in hand. “No,” he conceded. “I do understand honour, despite what that thug may think.”

I snorted, but kept my silence under Revan’s quelling gaze. She had about thirty seconds to remove the pilot, before I was going to do it forcibly. We had a damn duel to discuss.

Revan lifted the glass towards Carth, motioning for him to take it. “Drink,” she said firmly.

He frowned. “Jen, I’m not much of a drinker. You know-”

“Carth, you’re going to stay up all night, worrying about Dustil and being unable to do a sodding thing,” she spoke over him, her voice intense and commanding. I could hear the echoes of the leader she had once been. “I’m going to need everyone at their best for both the Map, and to pull off this extraction from the Academy. I need everyone rested. So either knock the drink back or get a sleeping pill from the medbay.”

He looked at the half-full cup. “That smells awful,” he said wryly. The corner of Revan’s mouth lifted in an answering grin. Onasi’s expression turned serious as he stared at her. “I’m a career soldier, Jen. I know how to sleep when required. I’ll leave you two to it.” With a nod at her he left the room.

Revan watched him go, concern evident on her face. I felt my irritation crest once more, and was about to growl with annoyance before she turned suddenly to face me.

“So,” she said, seating herself again. “Blood duels. What do I need to know?”

I fixed her with a hard look, and she stared back unflinchingly.

“There’ll be a leader there,” I said at last. “Usually it’s an Elder, but I doubt Jagi will have found one
on Korriban. You must speak Mando’a, Jen, and for no reason at all use the Force.”

Her eyes glittered. “I’d figured that one out, Canderous.”

“Make sure you don’t forget it,” I growled. “Blood debts are sacred, to us Mando’ade. It’s a redressing of honour, so it’s crucial to get it right. The leader will give Jagi and me a chance to say our piece, and as my second you will support me. There is a traditional phrase for you to use after my address.” I kept my eyes fixed on her as I switched to Mando’a. “(By the witnessing of the stars, the shedding of my blood, and the resting of the earth, my honour stands in agreement with this Mando’ade.)”

“De haa’taylir be ka’ra, galar be ner tal, bal nuhoy be vheh, ner ijaat sonsol ti ibic Mando’ade,” she repeated after me quietly.

I nodded in gruff approval. “Jagi’s second will say it first, so hear him if you need a reminder. You are not allowed to speak during their address, Jen.” At her nod, I continued. “Once the duel has begun, it will proceed to completion. No one, not even the second, is permitted to intervene while Jagi and I still stand.”

“Alright,” she said slowly, nodding. “So tell me. What happened with Jagi?”

It was just like Revan to bend the topic so abruptly. I’d half-expected a dozen different queries on the fight itself, but no – she had to go nosing about for the reasons.

She has a right to them, though.

I frowned as my thoughts turned inward. It had been a long time ago, and I’d been a different Mando’ade then. Filled with dreams of glory and conquest and a victorious future. Jagi had been both an ally and a friend.

Life was easier then. Easier to understand, and easier to know the right thing to do.

“Althir was early on in the piece,” I said roughly. I looked at her in the eye, and wondered, once more, whether she recalled anything at all. “It’s an Outer Rim world, and we took it before the Republic joined the war against us. I took it.”

She blinked, surprised, before a measuring look came over her face. “You led the invasion?” There was no disbelief in her voice – good, otherwise we’d be having words – but a huge depth of curiosity.

I nodded, leaning over to pour a tumbler half-full of the amber liquid. “Yeah. General Ordo. Sounds good, huh?”

Revan’s eyes were sharp as she considered me in silence for a moment. “One day you’ll have to explain how a Mandalorian general ended up doing small-time jobs for Davik Kang.”

I snorted, shrugging my shoulders. “The clans have been scattered since Malachor. I wasn’t proud to be doing Kang’s dirty work, but it sure beat hanging around the squabbling remnants of my people.”

I shifted uncomfortably on the damn plimfoam benches made for sentients smaller than myself. There hadn’t been a Mand’alor since the devastating battle that brought our invasion to an end - the conflict that Revan herself had led and won - that cataclysmic turning point at Malachor.

Maybe, one day, I’d go back and have a say in the choosing of the new Mand’alor. Maybe if my people were ready, I’d return. There were some I had left behind, and in my weaker moments, thought of.

“And Jagi?”
“Althir wasn’t a walkover, even though we were the superior force,” I said slowly. There was honour in victory, but also in recognizing that strength of your opponents. “In numbers, firepower, and sheer grit.” I grinned; they’d had knowledge of us coming, and their defences had held, for a time. We’d underestimated the fortitude of the Althiri - but they weren’t able to withstand our might forever. “Most of it took place in the skies above, but Jagi’s taskforce was grounded, holding a key defensive post the Althiri were desperate to recover. It was important to our line of attack, and I’d ordered him to hold it to the end.”

“To the end?”

“Yeah,” I nodded at her inquiry. *Hold it, or die trying, and we’ll sing your battle song to the stars.*

“A squadron of fighters were backing him, otherwise it would’ve been a suicide mission. But-” I grunted, lifting my feet onto the table, relaxing back into a more comfortable position. Revan’s bright eyes fell on my boots and gave a small smile.

“No feet on tables,” she muttered, seemingly to herself.

I folded my arms and stared at her, unimpressed. Revan laughed, her eyes dancing, and waved at me to continue.

“There was an opening in the air attack,” I continued. “A chance to end the battle quicker, with less loss of life overall. But to capitalize, I needed to pull the fighters back and leave Jagi exposed.”

We lapsed into silence, and Revan took a swig from her drink. “Yurgh,” she complained, frowning at the glass. “Carth is right. This tastes like…” she looked around, her gaze resting on my filthy footwear. “like a Mandalorian’s boots.” She glanced over to me, her mouth quirking. “Not that I know what boots taste like, mind you.”

I gave her a feral grin. “We Mando’ade drink from our boots all the time,” I said dryly. “It’s how we prove our manliness.”

Revan snorted.

I picked up my cup and knocked it back. I couldn’t stop a grimace. “*Haar’chak. This is foul,*” I conceded, picking up the bottle and looking at the label. The merchant had it claimed it was Korriban’s finest – either I was getting old and couldn’t spot a rip-off, or the Sith were trying the emulate the sensation of shoving a lightsaber down one’s throat. The bourbon burned a harsh fire in my chest.

I stared at the table. “It was the right thing to do,” I said quietly. “It was the Mando’ade thing to do. I ensured a quicker end to it, with less casualties and less damage to the Althiri mines – the resources we were after. But it meant sacrificing Jagi.”

Jagi’s battalion had comprised mostly of clan Bala. He would have seen his family cut down one by one, as the defending snubfighters vanished from the skies above. His loss would have been too damn personal for him to accept the rightness of my choice. I got that, I did - but Jagi had been a good friend once. And his clan was a staunch ally of Ordo.

I’d mourned him after Althir, but swung my attention onto the rest of the War. I’d had no idea he’d survived.

Revan knocked back the remainder of her drink, her face pinching from the harshness of it. She slammed the drink down on the table, and gave a little shake of her head. “It’s the choices that battle commanders have to make. Sacrificing a thousand men to save ten times that amount. A capitol ship
for a fleet. A planet for a system.”

I stared at her, hard, but she was still grimacing at the glass. When the stakes rose that high, it took a truly objective leader to make the right choices. Those simpering robes – when they could be cajoled into warfare – tried to save everyone, and that’s where they failed. You couldn’t save everyone in war.

Revan had understood that, in a previous life. I’d never met her, but I’d studied her as my peoples’ enemy enough to know her mettle. This wasn’t the same woman… but there were flashes, here and there. Enough to catch my interest, enough to rouse my respect.

Revan met my gaze, then; eyes serious on me as if taking my measure. “How does this second thing work?” she asked quietly.

I leaned forward, capping the bottle. The bourbon was still sitting in my belly, a comfortable warmth now, and neither of us needed another drink.

“Most blood duels don’t have seconds. If the instigator believes the honour imbalance too great, he can call on a second – if someone will stand for him.” I stared at her. “If Jagi cuts me down, you’ll be facing him next, standing for my honour even in my death.”

She nodded. “And if you kill Jagi?”

“Then Allen will carry Jagi’s honour and face me.”

“And if one side has a second and the other does not?”

I shrugged. “Well. If no one’s willing to stand up for your honour, it probably says a lot about you.” Jagi had given me little time – and that was highly insulting in itself. Every Mando’ade should be allowed to call on allies from afar, and maybe I could have insisted on that without my own personal standing diminishing in front of the others.

Maybe.

Revan grunted, but dropped her gaze to the table. Her fingers were drawing idle circles on the plasteel. “Tell me something, Canderous,” her voice was dark, and twisted on the words. “Did Revan have a second when she faced Mandalore?”

The question stunned me for a second. She’d spent so much time avoiding talking about herself, about Revan, that I hadn’t ever expected her to lead the topic. “Of course she kriiffing did,” I bit out at last. “Malak stood for her. And if he hadn’t, she still had the whole bloody Jedi Thirteen to back her.”

Her shoulders had tensed in on themselves as she continued looking away. From what I could see of her expression, it was part-angry, part-tormented. Inwardly I damned the Jedi Order for however they had screwed with her mind. One of the most brilliant leaders to come from them, and they’d turned her into a damaged shell, a mockery of who she had once been.

Although there had been times, recently, when I wondered if she was rebuilding herself. And that thought is what kept me here, on the Ebon Hawk with snotty princesses, cheeky Twi’lek urchins, and grumpy Republic pilots.

“Malak always had her back, then,” I commented darkly. “One day, he’ll get what’s coming to him.”

Revan raised her head, rubbing at her temple while her forehead burrowed in confusion. She seemed
to have no idea what I was alluding to.

“You don’t turn on your comrades,” I explained. “The way he snuck around, firing on her ship when she was engaged with Bastila’s strike force was an honourless disgrace. If Malak wasn’t man enough to challenge her to her face, then he should have left damn well alone.”

Her expression was composed once more, if a bit pale. “I- I don’t think the Sith follow the Mandalorian way, Canderous.”

I snorted, getting to my feet. This conversation was useless. Either one day she’d get it, or she wouldn’t. And if she didn’t- well. I wasn’t going to be a party to the Jedi keeping her weak. If she hadn’t worked it out by the time we left Korriban, I was damn well going to kick her arse until she did.

“Get some rest, Jen. I’ll drag you up in the morning.”

Revan nodded briefly, but I stood and stared at her until she sighed, clambered to her feet, and wandered off in the direction of the port living quarters.

xXx

I’d already known that Revan wasn’t at her best in the mornings, but she barely even roused when I roughly shook her awake. The Cathar was snoring quietly on a top bunk. The Bek brat and the princess were both missing – Bastila, I presumed, had once more commandeered the medbay. Before that, she’d camped out in the pilot’s quarters. Seems our princess is above sleeping with the rest of the rabble.

I pulled Revan to her feet, but she collapsed back down, mumbling grumpily about caffa and sleep. Her eyes hadn’t opened, and she looked ready to slump back against the hard bed.

“For the love of Mand’alor-” I muttered, clasping her hand once more, and this time strong-arming her down the hallway.

“Okay, okay!” Revan complained as we turned into the central common room. “Sun and stars, Canderous, your bedside manner is atrocious.” Mission was tucked up in the corner, a spoon of food halted halfway to her mouth as she stared at both of us in wide-eyed surprise.

“I’m a man of action not words, Jen,” I said, pushing her towards the benches. “Sit. I’ll get some food.”

Revan collapsed next to Mission was a groan. “Look, I had a full day yesterday. Forgive me if I need more than two sodding seconds to wake up.”

“Jen,” Mission said, dropping her spoon. “Were you two sleeping together?”

I swung my head to stare at the Twi’lek. Revan started choking, her eyes widening in surprise as she gazed in disbelief. A shadow from the cockpit’s hallway heralded the arrival of Onasi, who halted at the fracas.

“Mission!” Revan gasped. “What the frell?”

I gave a brief snort of amusement as the teenager began to flush an amusing purple colour. While I wasn’t one to turn down a roll in the hay, my mind was currently focused on one thing only: the blood duel. Besides, Revan was the sort who came with far more complications than I desired.
“What is going on with everyone?” Revan was muttering in disbelief. “Why does everyone think I’m getting action I certainly am not?”

I smirked. “If you desire action, darling, I’m sure I can oblige-”

“Canderous!” Revan snapped, and now it was her turn to blush as she stared in outrage, first at me, then Mission, and then Onasi, who looked remarkably displeased about the whole conversation. Revan’s cheeks turned uncharacteristically red, and she groaned with embarrassment, theatrically dropping her head in her arms. I snickered.

“Okay, okay! Sheesh, you guys!” Mission threw her hands up in surrender. “Forget I said anything!”

I turned back to eyeball the synthesizer. We hadn’t had real food onboard since Manaan, and due to our hurried departure from that watery planet, no one had bothered to stock up on perishable items. Which left the mush dispenser, and whatever energy ration bars the Wookiee was guarding in the cargo bay.

“Anyway…” Mission trailed off. “Topic change. Boy, am I glad you guys are back. This planet stinks. And the people are even worse. Tell me we’re getting off this rock.”

“As soon as we can, Mission,” Revan replied, her voice muffled. “Actually, I need your help.”

“Really?” the Twi’lek sounded surprised. Between the walking carpet and the paranoid pilot, they probably never let her have any fun. “Sure, what d’ya need?”

The synthesizer glooped as it squirted out a beige pile of mush onto a plasteel receptacle. “You could clean out the food machine,” I grunted, placing a second plate under the machine. A light breakfast before a fight was a sound foundation; fighting on either an empty or overfull stomach was a disadvantage. “With our empty cupboards, we’ll be fried if this thing breaks down.”

“I need you to find a map of the shyrack caves,” Revan answered as I turned around, two plates of breakfast in my hands. The Twi’lek’s eyes went round.

“No way, Jen!” Mission gasped. “You’re not- you’re not going there?”

“The Star Map?” Onasi asked in a low tone.

Revan’s gaze flicked to him before landing back on Mission. “Yeah. It’s there. I’ve got the beginnings of a plan, but I need any sort of map Teethree can find. I’m hoping either the ‘Net will yield results, or perhaps one of the spaceport traders who skirt through the caves to the mining colony have something of use.”

I dumped a plate in front of Revan, and she looked up at me.

“Eat,” I commanded. “We have an hour before dawn.”

She nodded at me before pulling a comical face at the plate.

“Sure, I can do that,” Mission said brightly. I had to hand it to the kid – her enthusiasm never let up.

Revan sat glaring at her spoon as if it were the source of all her evils, until Onasi abruptly spoke. “Did you fall asleep with your armour on, Jen?”

Revan blinked, looking at him in surprise. I shot the Republic pilot a derisive look. There was a time and a place for personal grooming, and Korriban was not it. Revan didn’t answer straight away, and
Onasi began to grin.

“You never heard of a refresher?” he teased.

“Not high on my list of priorities, flyboy,” Revan muttered, running a hand through her matted curls. I looked her over critically, and had to concede that, maybe, Republic had a point. Revan had likely face-planted into the bed with her charred Sith robe on, the dark grey of it failing to conceal darker smatters that were either dirt or blood. Her ragged armour mesh was visible underneath, a contradiction in itself for a Force-sensitive, but then, Revan had never bothered abiding by the rules.

Even the Mando’ade only slept in our armour when we were on the battlefield.

“Remove that robe,” I said suddenly. “You ain’t turning up to a Mando’ade duel dressed as a Force user.”

Revan shot me a startled look, before nodding and doing as I bid. The rumpled dark robe was thrown to the corner with a scowl, before Revan yawned and dropped her head into one hand.

“Are you up for this?” Carth said quietly. It was directed at Revan alone.

I growled, about to jump in but Revan beat me to it. “I’m fine. Give me a Sleheyron caffa and I’ll take on Darth Malak one-handed.”

“Eat,” I ordered again, staring fixedly at Revan until she grimaced, and stuck the offending spoon in her mouth. I copied her. Onasi shot me an unimpressed look before turning to the kitchenette.

“So, what’s the plan then, Jen?” Mission asked, leaning back against the bulkhead.

Revan’s face was cast with a faraway look, as if her mind was still working it out. “The plan… Terentateks go after Force-sensitives, so one or more of us will have to lead them away… from wherever the Map is. I’ll need some of you guys in the caves. And that’s where any sort of map can help.” Her eyes slid to Carth, who’d turned around with two cups of that disgustingly bitter brew he liked so much. “Mission, if you can get us a useful map, then Carth can coordinate our attack from the ‘Hawk. I’m thinking communicators, here, and a split advance.”

Onasi stepped forward, and placed one of the cups in front of Revan who threw him a grateful glance. “This is sounding like one of your standard insane plans, Jen,” he muttered darkly. “And why do I get the feeling you’re trying to keep me grounded?”

Revan quietly ate another spoonful before answering. “Juhani and Bastila can flesh out the details while we’re at the duel. As to the latter… yeah. I’m concerned you’re going to do something reckless. Are you?” Her eyes narrowed as she stared at him, and Mission’s were wide in confusion.

I snorted. Onasi was the cautious sort; not cowardly, no, I wouldn’t label him that, but he wasn’t the type to throw himself into needlessly risky situations.

Although, we were on Korriban, and he did harbour an unhealthy hatred for the Sith.

“Isn’t that usually your forte?” Onasi shot back, taking a sip of his caffa.

“You’re not answering the question,” Revan replied, her voice going tight. “Don’t be an arse, Carth. You can’t rush headlong into the Academy by yourself.”

I put my spoon down, staring hard at the two of them in turn. “What’s going on? Why would Republic want to storm the Sithling school?”
He glanced at me briefly before turning back to face Revan, frowning. “I wasn’t going to. I think.”

She sighed in exasperation. “Do I have to order Zaalbar to stop you, flyboy? Because I will.”

“Yes. I remember the Undercity,” Onasi muttered, shooting her an unconvincing glare.

“And to think, he wasn’t even life-sworn to me then,” Revan drawled. “I could make him sit on you now.”

I stood abruptly, sick of this conversation. It was taking the edge off my focus. And regardless, it wasn’t far off time to go as we still needed to walk to the duel’s location. Being late was dishonourable in itself. “As enthralling as all this is, we have a duel to get to.”

Revan glanced at me, dropped her spoon, and stood. She grabbed a quick slug of caffa, before nodding to the others and following me out of the room. “See you, Mission. Stay here, Carth. We’ll get this duel out of the way, hit the shyrack caves, get the Map, and then plan an extraction from the Academy before leaving this rock forever.”

“You make it sound so easy,” Onasi’s muttered voice followed us as we walked down the ‘Hawk’s hallway.

“Trust in the Force!” she hollered over her shoulder. It may have been more convincing if her tone wasn’t so damn impertinent.

xXx

The darkness was already lifting when we left Dreshdae, having walked silently through the mostly empty air-conditioned tunnels. Revan had been uncharacteristically edgy, eyes flicking on the few sentients around, hand tight on the vibroblade buckled at her hip. I’d forced her to leave the ‘sabers behind – why she had four was another question, although I did see sense in being prepared. She hadn’t been happy about it, though. Jedi and Sith alike were too dependant on their fancy glow-swords – even Revan.

“Vibroblades,” she muttered as we took our first steps down the beaten path that trailed off to the caves.

I inclined my head in agreement. “Yeah. Not my choice.”

“Why’d Jagi get to pick?”

“Jagi posed the challenge, he chooses the means.” I shrugged. “It’s true, fists and feet are the more… traditional method, but any weapon is allowed. Ain’t no way Jagi would have chosen unarmed combat against me.” I looked at her measuringly, raising a brow. “I can count on one hand the number of people who have beaten me in unarmed combat.”

She stared at me in silence for a moment, before looking to the horizon. The first ray of sunlight peaked from within a break in the nearby cliffs. “Seems a bit unbalanced, Canderous. So all a Mandalorian has to do is challenge someone, and that someone is honour-bound to accept the time, place, and choice of weapon?”

I gave her a bland look. “It’s about honour, Jen Sahara. If some mir’osik challenged me because I’d boned his sister, I’d laugh in his face and he’d lose honour for positing such a stupid duel.”

I saw her mouth the word mir’osik and grinned ferally, wondering just how adept her Mando’a was. Dung for brains. The Jedi were expert at learning languages, but I doubted their slang was
particularly fluent.

“Who decides whether it’s honourable or not?” she said, frowning. “I mean, Jagi certainly believes he has a case, but you do not. So why were you honour-bound to accept?”

“It’s… complicated.” I sighed, and offered nothing more. It wasn’t an easy thing to explain, to outsiders. Jagi’s belief in his blood debt for my perceived glory was enough to lodge a case for a blood duel – even though he was wrong.

“Mandalorians,” Revan muttered under her breath, and I chose to take it as a compliment.

There was a crowd gathering well before the entrance to the shyrack caves, and they weren’t all Mando’ade. Traders of different origins and species were clustered together, the buzz of conversation audible across the barren Korriban landscape.

It slowly quietened as Revan and I approached.

“This is Mando’ade business,” I growled my displeasure, eyeing over the motley crowd. “Jagi hasn’t kept his trap shut.”

I could see Jagi, at the head of the group of Mando’ade, already bare-chested and ready. An older man stood next to him, quietly speaking, dark markings on his face indicating his calling. My eyes narrowed.

Jagi actually found an Elder on Korriban?

“(Two hundred on the larger one,)” a trader hissed in Rodese as we walked passed. He was speaking to another Rodian holding a small holo-computer.

“(Nah, they’re using vibro’s. I’m putting three on the younger one,)” another in the crowd muttered.

I felt a renewed surge of irritation. I had no issue whatsoever with betting, but this should have been a private honour duel. Revan looked at me sideways, before halting to address the Rodians.

“(Did you know that before duels, Mandalorians like to warm up on spectators?)” she told them innocently. A trio of rounded, dark eyes turned on her in surprise, and she shot them a feral grin. Two of them shuffled backwards, and looked at each other in concern.

“Having fun?” I drawled as she strode back to my side. “They’re here, now. May as well let them make a little profit.”

Revan snorted, and we both stalled in front of the Elder, who had stepped forward, a small crowd of Mando’ade at his back. I spotted Ergeron, my old drinking buddy, lurking in the crowd. He nodded to me briefly in acknowledgement.

My gaze then rested on Jagi. He was near a decade younger than me, closer in years to Revan - likely faster with a blade, and definitely angrier. None of that makes him the better warrior, though, I told myself gruffly.

“(Canderous of clan Ordo,)” the Elder intoned. “(Welcome. I am Elder Rahm of the Fett clan, and have been asked to preside over this honour duel, to ensure the debts of blood are paid and resolved.)”

My gaze narrowed. The Fett clan had been damn powerful, and suffered the most at the close of Malachor. I hadn’t thought they’d had an Elder left. Something in my expression must have shown my scepticism, for the Elder – my age, so young for that honour – shifted uneasily. He raised a hand to rub at his shaven head.
“(Assistant Elder,)” he muttered. “(I was under the tutelage of Elder Targa. I still sing his battle songs.)”

As I suspected. The Fett were without an Elder since Malachor. If they allied with another clan, then maybe one day they’d regain that prestige, but the Fett had always been an arrogant bunch. As to why an assistant Elder was mucking about on Korriban with Mando’ade mercenaries… well. Likely they were as directionless as the rest of the clans.

Rahm was dressed in a loose brown robe, unassuming and simple, as was custom for the Elders who spoke for the clans. The tattoos on his face belied his lineage and experience, but his forehead was blank. The last time I’d seen Elder Theodorus - head Elder of Ordo - his forehead was more marking than skin.

Rahm clapped his hands loudly, turning to face the rest of the Mando’ade. Jagi straightened, and his brother Allen – also bare-chested – stepped to his side.

“(Let us proceed,)” Rahm said calmly. “(As the instigator, Jagi of clan Bala, you have first right to speak.)”

Fury twisted Jagi’s face as he stepped forward, his black eyes fixed on mine.

“(I have a blood claim on Canderous of clan Ordo, for the decimation of clan Bala at Althir. Due to his actions as War General, my men were left undefended, and were slaughtered as we held the command post on the ground against the major Althiri offensive. Canderous of Ordo pulled back the fighter squadron that was our air support, and it turned our defense into a bloody rout,)” Jagi’s voice had risen with each word. “(Clan Bala was allied with Clan Ordo, and we were heavily betrayed! It can only be resolved by blood – that of the general who gave the order!)”

Revan shifted next to me, looking like she wanted to interject. I raised a hand to her warningly. The Mando’ade spectators murmured in agreement, and I saw a duo of akaanir dala cheer at his words. Akaanir dala were specifically women who had forsaken the raising of children to live their life purely through battle alone. Although few in numbers, their dedication to warfare made them as formidable as the best of us Mando’ade warriors.

“(By the witnessing of the stars, the shedding of my blood, and the resting of the earth, my honour stands in agreement with this Mando’ade.)” Allen intoned in an angry, loud voice.

“(As the recipient, Canderous of clan Ordo, you have the right to respond,)” Rahm’s voice carried loudly over the hum of the crowd.

I straightened, and glared at the crowd. “(I stayed true to the Mando’ade way. I saw an opening in the air battle that allowed us a swift victory, and would halt the destruction of the Althiri mines. My choices strengthened the position of Mand’alor and meant less Mando’ade were sent to their deaths!)”

The mercenaries had fallen silent, and the akaanir dala was scowling. The crowd wasn’t with me, and the unjustness of it rankled. Jagi is their comrade. None of them know me, except by notoriety. Even so, I didn’t like it.

“De haa’taylir be ka’ra, galar be ner tal, bal nuhoy be vheh, ner ijaat sonsol ti ibic Mando’ade!” Revan yelled with zeal, and the wind carried her voice to all in the crowd. I straightened with pride and with the belief that my actions had been the right ones.

Elder Rahm cleared his throat. “(The instigator or his second may now speak in response,)”
Jagi glared, and gave the traditional response when one had said all they had to offer. “(My arm will speak for itself.)”

Allen puffed up his chest as he turned away from me to face the crowd. The anger was strong with him, apparent in the set of his shoulders and the insult of his back. “(Canderous of Ordo is a disgrace to his clan. He broke from the battle plan and let us die for it, all for his own glory. He will pay the price for it today!)”

And now, a ragged cheer came from the mercenaries. I scowled.

“(The recipient or his second may now speak in response.)”

There was more I could say, but I would wait for the duel. Distraction was as valid a part of battle as any other tactic. “(My arm will speak for itself!)” I bellowed, and Revan stepped up next to me, her face set as she stared at the crowd and prepared to speak.

“(She is an outsider,)” Allen snapped, pointing to Revan before turning to spit to the side. “(She has no right to speak here.)”

“(She is an outsider,)” Revan asked, her voice loud and clear.

“(Jen of clan Sahara is my chosen second!)” I growled. “(Respect the rules of a blood duel, young pup, or leave.)”

Revan showed no indication of Allen’s insult, but instead addressed Jagi who was still standing at the head of the crowd with his arms folded. “(Does clan Bala have a blood war with clan Ordo?)”

“(What?)” Jagi snapped, his brows lowering in confusion. I, too, scowled at her back. I’d expected words of support here.

Allen glared, and began to interrupt. “(Outsiders should not be-)”

“(If General Ordo’s actions at Althir were dishonourable to Ordo’s alliance with Bala, then Bala would have claimed a blood war. I assume they did not.)” Revan’s words spoke over Allen’s, and were commandingly crisp and fluent in Mando’a. Again, I had the nagging question of just how much she recalled, and how much she simply ran on instinct. “(The Mando’ade were engaged in an external war with the Republic, not a clan war. General Ordo’s battle plan ensured a mightier victory for Mand’alor, and Bala must have recognized that since they have not acted with any reprisal to clan Ordo for Canderous’ actions.)”

Dead silence fell over the crowd as they all stared at Revan with varying degrees of confusion. Jagi’s face was contorted in a mass of emotions, like he was being forced to think on something decidedly unpleasant. Allen just looking unbearably pissed off. And I- I felt a vindication. I wasn’t a bad speaker, but Revan was better.

Allen glared, and began to interrupt. “(Outsiders should not be-)”

“(What does an outsider know about Mando’ade matters?)”

“(Canderous is a great teacher,)” Revan snapped. I stepped forward to her side, shooting her a disbelieving look. We may have exchanged the odd story or two, Jedi, but you learned all this a long time before we met. Revan turned back to Jagi. “(Those who died at Althir, did so for the victory of Mand’alor, and deserve to be remembered as such. Canderous acted with honour.)”

“(What are they saying? Are they gonna fight, or what?)” a voice in Rodese whispered from behind us, and I suspected the unfortunate speaker hadn’t planned for his quiet voice to carry so over the dusty clearing. As one, the Mando’ade turned to glare at the traders, an ominous growling rising from us all. My hand dropped to my vibroblade as I scowled at the overgrown insects, who’d taken
several steps back, shrinking away in fright.

“(This is what happens when we allow outsiders near Mando’ade business,)” Allen spat. “(No respect-)”

“(Mand’alor’s balls, Allen,)” I snarled. “(The traders were here before we were, and I certainly didn’t go mouthing off to all and sundry-)”

“(Enough!” Elder Rahm bellowed, in a belated attempt to wrest control of the situation. “(Watch your tongue, Canderous of Ordo, and show some respect for the sanctity of blood duels! And you-)” Rahm swung to face the traders, and abruptly switched into Basic. “A word more from anyone who doesn’t belong here, and we will postpone the duel to wet our blades on you!”

I felt a grudging respect for the Assistant Elder, for all his initial awkwardness. He could make a stalwart Elder for the Fett one day.

“(Now,)” Rahm continued, focussing again on Jagi and I. “(All have had a chance to speak. It is time to prepare and commence.)” He nodded at me, and I began to unclasp my armour. Again, this was Jagi’s choice, armour or no. He was planning on taking me out quickly, I realized, baring my teeth. He would not get the chance, no matter our shared history.

I nudged Revan, indicating she should follow suit. A faint look of surprise crossed her face before she shrugged out of the badly worn mesh shirt. She wore a thin, ragged singlet underneath, and glared at me when I looked at it pointedly.

“Uh uh,” she muttered, shaking her head. “You aren’t going to convince me that nakedness is mandatory.”

I barked a laugh before placing my armour down by my feet. “Can’t blame a man for trying.” I said dryly, but my attention was already focussed on Jagi, who’d stepped away from the crowd, chest glistening under the alien light of the Korriban sun. A mild wind dusted through the clearing as I strode over to join him. It was cold, on Korriban, despite the cloudless days, but Mando’ade were bred tough. A hush had fallen over the traders and mercenaries alike as Jagi and I faced each other, both silently appraising.

“(In the Mando’ade way; stars, blood and earth. I call this blood duel to start. May the honour debt be witnessed by the stars. May it be cleansed by blood. May it be laid to rest by the earth. Begin!)” With a final clap from Elder Rahm, Jagi and I began to circle each other warily. The sun hung low in the morning sky, and I knew the first thing Jagi would try would be to position me so its rays stabbed into my vision.

But, I needed to say something more. For our history, for our shared battles, for the camaraderie we’d once enjoyed. “(You were my friend and ally, Jagi. I did not make the decision lightly. But I would do the same again.)”

Jagi’s face twisted; I heard Allen snort in derision behind me, but it was his older brother and my old comrade that commanded my attention. He looked tormented.

“(I saw my father cut down in front of me. My half-sister. Three of my cousins, and my intended. I can’t forgive you for that, Canderous!)”

I inclined my head. “(I’m not asking you to. But I still believe I made the right call. Not for my own glory, not for the glory of Ordo – but for the glory of Mand’alor. Opportunism and flexibility in battle are core to the way of the Mando’ade, and the results at Althir speak for themselves,)” I
paused, staring at him hard, willing him to at least accept the truth of my words. (‘Jagi, if it had been Ordo down there, my actions would have been the same.’)

Allen was seething with fury behind Jagi. (‘You lie!’)

“Haar-chak,” Jagi muttered, spitting to the side. “(Today was not meant to be like this.)” And his gaze moved to behind me, to where Revan stood. “(Your second is too damn perceptive. I begged the Elders to lodge a blood claim against Ordo. The Elders that were left after Althir. I called them cowards for their refusal. They exiled me for a year, Canderous, and I’ve not bothered to return. Allen and I have been directionless, and the only thing that has kept me going is the drive to see you dead for Althir.)”

We faced each other from either side of the clearing. “(I remember those of your clan who fell so we could capture the mines, Jagi. I sing their battle songs.)”

“(They died for your glory, Canderous! Why does no one else see that?)” Jagi cried, his eyes glittering with emotion. The crowd behind us was dead quiet.

“(They died for the glory of Mand’alor, Jagi,)” I contradicted gruffly. “(Mand’alor himself commended me after the battle. Bala agreed with me. I made the right choice.)” My final words carried over the silence, and I was gratified that no one, not even the furious Allen, spoke to disagree.

“(Damn you, Canderous Ordo,)” Jagi cursed, but his voice was broken. His head bowed ever so slightly. “(Damn you. You make me feel like my last few years have been meaningless.)”

I raised my chin as a murmuring broke from the Mando’ade behind Jagi, and we both raised our vibroblades in acknowledgement of each other. Something loosened in my chest as I stared at my old friend. There was no way but forward now, but his acknowledgement had, at least, restored some of my honour. Jagi gave me a slight nod, one warrior to the next, and we both stepped forward.

He would strike first with a sweeping blow, I could see, and I was ready to block-

“(Wait!)” Revan called, her voice loud and confused. “(Hang on, why is the duel still going ahead?)”

Jagi and I paused briefly while the Elder responded to her. “(It is a blood duel, Jen of clan Sahara. It will redress the balance of honour.)”

“(But wait, Jagi, do you agree that Canderous acted with honour?)” Revan went on, her hands gesturing.

Allen’s face was mottling with fury. “(Would someone shut this-)”

“(I may have only seen one side of Althir,)” Jagi spoke over the top of his younger brother. “(I have sung the battle songs of my family for years, all the while blaming their death on Canderous. Their lives deserve to be remembered instead as the glory of the Mand’alor who once was.)”

“(You were not wrong to blame Canderous, brother!)” Allen called out. “(Don’t listen to these poisonous words!)”

“(I think we have been blinded by grief, Allen. Maybe our Elders were correct.)” Jagi had answered Allen, but was facing me. “(Maybe Canderous does not have a debt of honour. But the duel has begun, and so it must end. For both of us, our honour shall be redressed!)”

Our blades had dropped during the conversation, so we lifted them once more. Again, I felt the harsh wind sweep through the crowd, and tasted the sulphuric tang of this environment on my tongue.
Mando’ade were well-used to many different, harsh environments, and this one was a fitting end for my old friend. I did not intend to die here today, and the fight had disappeared from Jagi’s spirit.

I would mourn, however, and remember him.

I made to step forward again, and was once more interrupted.

“(But- but, why?)” Revan, again, her voice going high-pitched with her inability to understand our culture.

I sighed angrily. “(Jen, shut -)”

“(You let an outsider speak for you, Canderous?)” Allen sneered. Elder Rahm closed his eyes in frustration.

“(Watch your mouth, Allen,)” I growled. “(Before I shut it for you!)”

“(I don’t speak for him, I stand by him as his ally,)” Revan scoffed.“(But this just doesn’t make sense. The clans are scattered, and you would let one leader kill another over a blood debt that no longer exists? How is that beneficial to the Mando’ade?)”

Jagi’s vibroblade dropped to his side as he stared at Revan in disbelief. I growled, and spun around, but it was Jagi who spoke first.

“(A blood duel has begun, outsider. It must finish, by stars, blood and earth. I will not shame my clan by backing down, nor will I take away Canderous’ right of reprisal.)”

Revan’s face was twisted with confusion.“(But if the Mando’ade are ever going to rise to power again, then Mand’alor will need as many blooded battle leaders as he can get. Why throw your life away when surely there must be other ways to restore the honour imbalance? We’re not talking blood debts anymore, merely words spoken in anger and grief!)”

“(Jagi, if you don’t start duelling Canderous, then I am going to punch that bitch-)”

“(If you feel like you owe Canderous a debt, then ask him what you can do to restore it! If you feel like it shames your clan, then consult a Bala Elder! Or better yet, an Ordo Elder, to redress the balance!)” Revan hollered over Allen’s venomous words, and her eyes blazed with righteousness. “(But throwing your life away does not bring glory to either Bala or the Mando’ade!)”

Dead silence fell over the area. Even the akaanir dala had quietened, watching the proceedings intently. There was no murmur of discontent from the crowd. Revan made a damn good case, and killing my old friend and comrade left a bad taste in my mouth – but she wasn’t Mando’ade.

How could any of us accept her judgement?

And - the blood duel had already begun.

Elder Rahm cleared his throat then, loudly and a touch awkwardly. The crowd collectively swung its gaze to him.

“(There are, er, precedents),” he muttered sheepishly, looking down. His mouth tightened, and then his chin jerked up as his demeanour hardened. “(The outsider Jen Sahara speaks with wisdom. There have been cases in the past. Jaeneri of clan Fett challenged Bodo of clan Arkar over a territorial dispute. They did not duel to completion – Bodo admitted shame and offered five years service as Jaeneri’s ground general in the war against clan Tansa. The debt was forgiven after the service, and Arkar and Fett allied for many generations.)”
“(One example,)” Allen muttered. “(You think to weigh the honour of my brother on the shrewish words of an outsider, and one incident in the past?)”

“(No,)” Elder Rahm snapped as Revan glared at Allen. “(More than just one. Gordo of Varad and Delsa of Kelborn dissolved their blood duel after agreeing to a liquor-dhezi trade that benefitted both their clans. And Jenera of Bralor lay down her sword against Mend of Kelborn, once Mend agreed to marry her sister.)” Rahm grimaced. “(Although that one did not end so well.)

“(I would have thought that Jagi is the speaker of Jagi’s honour, rather than his little brother,)” Revan said in a low voice. And then she smirked, eyeing him over dismissively. “Mir’osik,” she added.

Allen’s face twisted with anger, and before I could say anything he growled, strode forward, and launched a sweeping roundhouse directly at Revan. Her face was set, focussed, and I wondered if she’d picked a fight deliberately. She ducked under Allen’s fist and darted to the side.

My old friend sighed, and stepped up next to me. His blade was, once more, held loosely at his side.

“(Do we duel, or do we not, Canderous? I look at you, and see the deaths of my family,)” Jagi’s words were low, and for the first time held no anger. Just an immeasurable grief.

“(If you agree that I acted with honour at Althir, then I have no ill will towards you, Jagi of Bala,)” I said, my eyes fixed on the unfolding brawl in front of us. Allen punched his fist towards Revan again, and she easily dodged to the right. “(Bala paid a heavy price for Althir, and I acknowledge that. I’ve always acknowledged that.)”

I could hear the murmurs of the traders behind us as they busily rewrote their betting schedule. One of the akaanir dala cheered as Revan leapt clear of a swinging kick. Elder Rahm strode over to us, his face a question as he skirted around the fistfight that Revan had started. I smirked. Revan will grind Allen into the dust.

“(Jagi of clan Bala, do you still claim a blood debt of Canderous of clan Ordo?)” Elder Rahm asked, and his voice was loud enough to be heard. Allen swung his head around at that, outrage contorting his long, angular face, but whatever he planned to say was transformed to a grunt as Revan dropped in a crouch and kicked a boot into his shins, catching him off-guard and causing him to stumble back.

Jagi sighed, still staring at me, and I was reminded of the years we had trained together. “(It is time for me to travel home,)” Jagi said at last. “(I will speak with the Bala Elders, and – if need be – the Ordo Elders. But for now, I have no blood claim on Canderous of Ordo.)” His mouth twisted. “(I retract any claim that Canderous acted with dishonour.)”

“(Jagi!)” Allen howled. “(What are you doing?)”

“(Aw, have you conceded to me already?)” Revan taunted, causing a snicker from one of the akaanir dala. Allen’s face mottled with temper.

“(I’ll tread you into the dirt, you foul-tongued wench!)” Allen shouted, leaping forward to launch a flurry of wild blows aimed at Revan’s head. She weaved backwards and ducked underneath, dancing out of his way.

“(Canderous of clan Ordo, do you claim a blood debt, or a right of reprisal, from Jagi of clan Bala?)” Rahm intoned.

“(No,)” I said loudly. “(I understand grief. But the next person who sheds doubt on my honour will see my fists. This I swear, on the name of Mand’alor!)”
“(There is no blood debt here.)” Elder Rahm proclaimed. “(By stars, blood and earth, I decree this blood duel dissolved.)”

“(No!)” Allen roared, and his darkly furious gaze fixed on Revan. “(This is your doing, you-you outsider pig-hen!)”

Revan sniggered, her hands still guarding her face. “(Is that the best you can do, Allen of Bala?)”

“(Allen!)” Jagi called, which turned into a sigh as Allen lashed out at Revan with a piercing side-kick that failed to connect. Jagi shot me an irritated sideways look. “(Allen has always been hot-tempered. He’ll down her with the first blow he lands, unless you step in, Canderous.)”

I snorted. “(I wouldn’t dishonour her so. Let him try to bloody himself on her.)” If Allen was victorious and took things too far – considering his venomous anger, that was not unlikely – then I would intervene, and Jagi’s words told me he granted me leave to. I gave Jagi a dangerous smile. “(I’ve been training her.)”

Revan launched forward with an uppercut that Allen blocked roughly, before he counter-attacked with a solid fist that sunk deep into her kidneys. Not well enough, it seems, I thought with a grimace as Revan collapsed to the dust with a groan.

Her speed saved her; a desperate roll to the side that let her avoid the solid boot that Allen aimed at her head. With a leap to her feet, Revan jumped backwards, turning to spit dirt out of her mouth. Her hand briefly rested on her side before raising to guard her face once more.

“(You have no right to speak on Mando’ade matters!”) Allen snarled, advancing on her again.

“(The Elder has spoken, dung for brains,)” Revan shot back. “(There is no debt of honour.)”

“(Allen leaves his guard open,)” I asserted to Jagi. “(He’s strong, but his defense is riddled with holes.)”

Revan darted around Allen, leaping back to avoid another powerful kick.

“(And your Jen Sahara doesn’t have the strength to match him,)” Jagi replied. “(She’ll tire herself out dancing around him.)”

“(No she won’t,)” I denied flatly.

“(Stop moving, you coward!)” Allen hollered as she ducked under another left hook. Revan’s expression was pure concentration as she circled around Allen, weaving back out of reach or dodging sideways to avoid his fists. She’s taking her time, I realized. Making him angry and wild. It was working, Allen’s face was contorting in rage with every blow that failed to connect.

In a match of pure talent, it would be no contest, of course. But Revan was holding back on her speed. She wants to make sure the Force isn’t helping her. She wants to make it a clean victory. It was the right thing to do, and I found myself nodding in approval.

Allen launched forward in a powerful but unguarded kick, and Revan ducked underneath, grabbed his swinging foot, and thrust him on his back into the dirt. I heard a loud jeer from one of the traders as Revan leaped forward and kicked out hard with a boot to Allen’s side. She was about to strike again, when he grabbed her foot and she went down, sideways into the dust at his side. The crowd gasped as Allen lunged for her with a punch that slammed into the clay ground just where her head had been a second ago.
Revan twisted out of his reach and leaped to her feet before he did. The moment he was halfway up, she launched into a vicious kick aimed directly at his head.

Revan landed in a crouch, and Allen landed in the dust.

I smirked at Jagi, and his gaze back was thoughtful and measured.

As the two scrambled back to their feet, I could see that Allen was affected; his fists were slow to rise, and I wondered if his balance was compromised. Revan, on the other hand, looked alert and ready for more as she rested on the balls of her feet.

“(Allen,)” Jagi said sharply. “(Enough. Jen of clan Sahara is correct, and you are making Bala look foolish with your inability to contain your temper.)”

Allen shot his brother a betrayed, disbelieving look. Revan kept her eyes on Allen, but dropped her fists.

“(Jagi!)” Allen protested, but he swayed slightly on his feet. The kick to the head had been brutally efficient.

“(Stand down, Allen.)” Jagi ordered, before turning to look at me. He sighed again. “(I will let the Elders direct me, Canderous. One day, Mand’alor will rise again, and I will be able to serve him with pride. If we meet again, I cannot say for certain if it will be from behind crossed weapons or allied ones.)”

“(Fare thee well, Jagi,)” I replied quietly.

Jagi motioned to his brother, who threw Revan one last hateful glare. Revan’s expression was impassive, all traces of mockery gone. “(If I see you again, I’ll destroy you, outsider,)” Allen hissed.

“(Quiet, brother, and follow.)” Jagi’s words were like whiplash, and he turned on his heel and strode away. Allen, a hand pressed to the side of his head, finally capitulated and hurried after him.

I stared after Jagi for some time in silence, my thoughts awhirl. This was more than just an unexpected ending – to walk away from a blood duel without blood being spilled and honor being lost was unheard of. My gaze fixed on Elder Rahm. Well, rarely heard of. Jagi’s concession had been an exoneration, but it was more than my old comrade that was causing me to think harder than I liked.

Revan’s words about a new Mand’alor rising made me wonder if I’d been gone too long from the clans. I wasn’t the leader of Ordo, but I wasn’t far off – and my influence during the war had been great. If the time was right, I could do a lot for the Mando’ade. And maybe we had been directionless too long. I needed time to think on this, time I’d have while I followed Revan, and aided her in her quest.

The irony of these words coming from her was rich, and I was the only one who would recognize it. That Revan, she who led the breaking of my people, would speak of Mand’alor’s rise was interesting indeed. I wondered if she would say the same when she fully understood her own identity. And she would, one day soon, I would see to it.

My gaze caught on Ergeron, walking in my direction with one of the akaanir dala. The akaanir dala was eyeing me over with an appreciative gleam that I recognized, and I realized that my day was about to dramatically improve. Akaanir dala fought hard, and they played hard, too. I began to grin.

“Canderous,” Revan said quietly from my side. “I need you in the shyrack caves.”
I inclined my head to her, still staring at the approaching *akaanir dala* whose name I was about to discover. Her armour shone and I thought it might be beskar iron. She carried her helm under a tanned and toned arm, and smiled at me from beneath braided blonde hair.

“You have my strength, Jen.” I told Revan absently. “I’ll return to the Hawk this evening.”

Revan grimaced, and that caught my attention. Evening, I saw, was not going to suffice. “My instincts tell me there’s going to be an uprising at the Academy, Canderous. We need to extract at least two people before that happens.” She sighed. “And we need to get the Map first. I can give you an hour… but then we must go.”

I stared at her flatly, seeing her green eyes narrow with thoughts and plans and actions. “Is that an order, Jen?” I asked softly.

She stayed silent for a moment, her gaze intent upon mine. “If I lead, will you follow?”

I knew, then, deep in my gut, that I would.

For the warrior she had been, and maybe still was. For how she had influenced today’s proceedings. For the fact that she was my comrade, and we had shared enough battles that I would also call her my friend.

I gave her a nod of assent. “One hour, Jen. I’ll see you on the ‘Hawk in one hour.”

She gave me a brief grin, and left.

xXx
I felt my side ache with tenderness as I strode back to the 'Hawk, but I had no regrets. Allen Bala had been an irritation, and – despite knowing better – I’d felt a keen sense of gratification when I landed him in the dust.

The day was going well, and my mind was sharp with confidence. After yesterday’s craziness, I had a supreme wellspring of renewed belief that we could get through Korriban and be on our way soon. My mood was resolutely self-assured – dammit, we could do this. We really could.

Underpinning it all was the knowledge from Bastila – I wasn’t a Dark Jedi. I hadn’t been a Dark Jedi. She’d have to explain Darth Revan to me soon, and it would all make sense – but for now, I’d hold my head high and know that I was on the right path.

Because it was my head, dammit, and I wasn’t going to let anyone – Sith Lord or no – take it over again.

The Mandalorian business had been… interesting. I felt immensely gratified with the way it had all played out, and my thoughts turned towards Canderous. He was with us, now, I felt. Wholly until the end. A Mandalorian general. It didn’t surprise me. Canderous liked to play the part of the gruff, crude mercenary, but he wasn’t as stupid as he sometimes liked to make out.

His brief words about Revan and Malak and the Jedi Thirteen came back to mind, and I grimaced in distaste. What was the Jedi Thirteen? The words had resonated deeply, which I found both distasteful and annoying. I didn’t want to think of Darth Revan as someone whom people would follow, didn’t want to dwell on that fact that once, she must have been a respected and worthwhile leader. I scowled. Obviously, idiot, if I followed her into the Mandalorian Wars. But surely there must have been something deeply rotten in her – in both her and Malak – for them to turn out the way they did.

I forcibly turned my thoughts away. I didn’t want to think on her. I wasn’t going to think on her. She wasn’t important. I knew who I was, now, and that knowledge was what would keep me going forward.

We had a short window of time before Canderous would return, and I was eager to get ready. As I strode into the docking bay, I recalled the tough Mandalorian female who’d sauntered suggestively towards Canderous as I left. I rolled my eyes, as I heard the ‘Hawk’s hatch open. Teethree, monitoring the video cams, must have alerted someone to my presence. After all this talk about action, and of course it’s the sodding mercenary who gets some. A shame for him that I only allowed him an hour’s grace, I thought with a smirk. Although, he’s a Mandalorian. Their idea of foreplay is taking their clothes off – if they even get that far.

I looked up to see Carth in the ship’s entrance, smiling in welcome. For some utterly unfathomable reason, I felt my cheeks flush.

"You alright there, Jen?" Carth asked. His gaze was a warm brown, and the corner of his mouth
twitched. He'd noticed my discomfort, then.

“Fine! Never better,” I said in what I hoped was a breezy tone, inwardly cursing hormone crazed Mandalorians, and bond-sisters who asked damnably awkward questions. *Stars, where did she get that ludicrous idea about Carth from anyway? She's been staying in the 'Hawk too long, I bet she’s going space crazy.* Bastila was currently asleep in my head, but then, it wasn’t yet mid-morning. I hadn’t been gone long.

“You’re back early. Very early,” Carth said, echoing my thoughts. “Did the duel go okay?”

I nodded, clambering up the ramp, and Carth stepped to the side to allow me entrance. “Canderous will be back soon. I’m keen to head out, Carth. Let’s get the others and meet in the common room.”

With a nod of assent, Carth wandered over to the cargo hold. I debated waking Bastila up before deciding against it. *Surely we can retrieve the Map without her, and I may need her strength for the extraction. She was spent, yesterday.* And I had an ominous feeling about the Academy; my instincts were pressing me to get moving on the Map, and quick.

On one hand, I felt a renewed surge of confidence since I’d spoken with Bastila last night; a deep certainty that I was capable of accomplishing everything we needed to. *Ness Jonohl did not fall.* It was like a mantra, a strength I held onto inside me. It meant the rage and the grief and the hunger for power I felt – none of it surely belonged to me, right? It must all be the influence of the Sith Lord’s echo in my head.

Yet I also had a premonition that the Academy was going to go belly up, and soon – and whether it was the Force or merely instinct guiding me I didn’t know, but everything was urging me to hurry.

There was no one in the women’s quarters, so I strode back to the common room, raking a hand through my hair. A small cloud of dust briefly enveloped me, courtesy of the brawl I’d encouraged. I wrinkled my nose, and looked up to see Carth appear from the other hallway, his eyebrows raised.

"Not a word, flyboy," I warned, sitting down on a plimfoam bench with a groan. I could smell the sulphuric taint of Korriban's air in amongst the matted curls that fell in my eyes. *I need a haircut.* More than that, I needed a long, hot water shower. The *'Hawk’s* sonic would have to do - surely there was time for that before dashing off to the shyrack caves. I raised my hands, and grimaced at the dirt on them. The tips of my fingernails were almost black.

“Hey, I wasn’t going to say anything,” Carth replied, raising his hands in mock surrender. “I’m learning not to comment on your appearance.”

I glared at him, struggling for a pithy retort, when Mission breezed in. “Jen! You’re back! How’d it go? Where’s Canderous? Did he win?”

I winced at the effusive onslaught. “Hi. Yes. Great. Having fun. Yes.” I replied succinctly before turning to appraise Carth again. “Turns out you were right. Mandalorian duels *can* end peacefully.”

“Oh?” he queried, raising a brow.

“Mhmm,” I replied. “Collective powers of persuasion enabled Jagi to see that Canderous did not act with dishonour.”

“Huh,” Carth replied noncommittally. “And why do I think you had something to do with that?” I shot him a questioning look which he replied to with a half-smile before commenting, “You seem to have something to do with just about everything, Jen.”
I grinned. “It’s all part of my charm,” I said lightly.

“Well, if you manage to pull off everything here on Korriban, you won’t see me argue with that again.”

My amusement dissipated as I stared at him seriously. He was staring right back. “We’ll get Dustil, Carth. I promise. Let’s just focus on the Map first, huh? One step at a time.”

“Who’s Dustil?” Mission asked.

I’d actually forgotten Mission was there, no mean feat considering her ebullient personality. I gestured to Carth, but he sighed, giving a little shake of his head. “Shyrack caves,” he said. “Explanations can come later. Let’s do this first.”

I nodded. “Alright. Canderous is back in an hour. Bastila- she’s still out cold. I think yesterday’s trials were a little… intense.” I frowned, concerned about the weakness of our bond. Her recuperation from Manaan’s trials had taken a step back, definitely. Mekel had better be worth it. Bastila spent just about all she had on him. And yet, the powers of our bond were growing. To think that she had brought someone back from the brink of oblivion through me, using my link with the Force, was genuinely startling. I wondered if Bastila found it as amazing as me.

“I’ll go get Big Z,” Mission said brightly, getting to her feet. “We got a partial map, and Juhani’ll be back soon, too - she said she wouldn’t be long.”

“Wait.” I frowned, as her words sunk in. “What?”

“Oh, she nipped out just after y’all left for the duel,” Mission replied lightly. “She was gonna chat with an old friend, but told me to say that she’d be real careful an’ use the Force an’ all.” Mission frowned. “Something about making sure she didn’t run into this guy called Uthar.”

What? A sinking feeling of dread pulled at my stomach as I stared at Mission in mounting horror. “She went back to the Academy?”

Mission blinked. “Uh, yeah, but that’s ok, right? You guys are students there, right?”

I was standing without realizing it, feeling the heat of alarm flush my cheeks. Carth was looking at me worriedly. I’d been so concerned about making Carth stay put that I forgot to focus on Juhani. Stars! She should have waited!

“Uthar’s after her,” I hissed, feeling my fists clench reflexively. “And he’s got a dozen eyes in there. Dammit!”

“Is Juhani in danger, Jen?” Carth asked quietly. He’d placed his hands on the table, leaning forward to stare at me seriously. Mission’s mouth had dropped open.

“Only if Uthar catches her,” I muttered. “I’ve got to run in there and get her. There’s enough time before Canderous gets back-” I halted in mid-thought, registering the concerned gazes fixed on me. I sighed. “Juhani’s trying to redeem a lost cause. Uthar’s after Juhani. Mekel wants Yuthura to challenge Uthar, and Dustil knows we’re not really Sith. This whole situation’s about as safe as riding a terentatek bareback.”

Carth shook his head. “Dustil won’t betray us. Not- look, he won’t, alright!” His brows lowered in a familiar stubborn façade.

I stared at him steadily. “I hope so, Carth. But I want to get Juhani out of there, now.”
I’d counted on her assistance in the caves, although I only really needed one Force sensitive to distract the terentateks – me. I gritted my teeth and stared at them both. “You guys prepare. Get the wrist-comms ready, light-sticks, armour, bio-scanners – anything useful in that environment. Rations, too – we don’t know how long we’ll be in the caves. I’m thinking Canderous, Mission and HK-47 going in deep while Juhani and I run interference. Carth, you’ll be doing the comms back on the ship.”

I’d predicted the angry scowl that clouded over his face. “You’re going to power up that insane droid-”

“Me!” Mission squeaked excitedly. “Great!”

“Hang on a minute,” Carth cut in, backtracking, and I could see he was torn over what to complain about. “Mission in the caves? Are you sure that’s a good idea? Wouldn’t Zaalbar be a better choice?”

“Hey, I can help!” Mission retorted indignantly, folding her arms and shooting Carth a scowl with all the teenage vehemence she could muster.

“We’ll be reliant on the comms,” I said bluntly. “You and Canderous can’t understand Shyriiwook, and I want at least one able guard on the ship protecting Bastila. Mission can hold the bio-scanners and map while Canderous and HK protect her.” My eyes caught on the discarded Sith robe I’d thrown in the corner an hour or so ago. I grabbed it, before heading to the quarters to collect my lightsabers.

“Look, we’ll flesh out the details when I’m back,” I threw over my shoulder as I left, leaving them standing in the common room. “I won’t be long!”

xXx

**Juhani, what were you thinking?** I seethed inwardly, striding down the ornate ferracrete path that led to the Academy. I’d hoped to walk along this only one more time; it was becoming a depressingly familiar trip. *She was thinking the duel could go on all day, and now would be a good time to track Dak down.* I sighed, closing my eyes briefly. Was Juhani underestimating Uthar? Her Force sense would aid her in avoiding him, sure, but there were dozens of Initiates in there, and any one of them could betray her presence to Uthar, if they knew the Headmaster was looking for her.

And what if Dustil betrays us? He’d had a night to stew on yesterday’s chance meeting. I’d expected Uthar’s protégé to be both strong, and easily underestimated – particularly after Kel’s information. Yesterday, however, changed *everything.* No matter how we managed it, we had get Dustil off Korriban – but if I didn’t believe Dak had much hope of redemption, then how likely would it be to sway Uthar’s pet? *Uthar’s pet Dustil Onasi. What are the frelling chances?* Was it just luck, just coincidence that he was here? The son of a famed Republic warhero, taken after the Telos bombing, and sent to a Sith Academy?

Carth must have had no idea that Dustil was Force-sensitive. But Mekel, too, was taken from Telos, so perhaps it was just standard Sith protocol. Bomb the frell out of a planet, and pick up any promising talent in the aftermath.

I turned a steep corner, and the Academy rose sharply in my vision. I was assailed with a moment of doubt as I strode closer, spotting a lithe figure by the double doors. *Am I doing the right thing, going after Juhani now?* Urgency still pressed on me, pulling me towards the Academy, pulling me towards the shyrack caves. *We can get the Map without Juhani. Surely she can keep herself safe until after?* Was I willing to bet my friend’s life on that?
Jen. What is wrong?

The woman at the Academy’s entrance – Lashowe, I recognized from my altercation with Mekel - glanced at me, before swiftly opening the ferracrystal entrance with a hand motion and slipping inside. Alarm twisted my stomach, and I hurriedly drew on the Force, pushing my senses outward. I should have been using the Force earlier.

*Overconfidence. You always were too damnably overconfident.* Someone, a man’s voice, sneered at me in my head. *Everyone is fallible. Even you. Especially you.*

Jen? Bastila’s voice was sharp. **Answer me.**

**Juhani rushed off to the Academy by herself.** I halted in front of the entrance as I registered an overwhelmingly dark presence just on the other side. The bottom of my stomach dropped nauseatingly. **Uthar. Kath crap! Not now!**

**What?**

The entrance creaked open again, and the humanoid form of Uthar Wynn, clad in a Sith soldier’s uniform instead of the standard dark robe, strode out into the Korriban sunshine. His expression was one of anticipation, and it set my hackles rising.

And to think, I’d been concerned about Juhani encountering him.

*Bastila. I’m about to have an uncomfortable conversation with Uthar Wynn,* I threw wildly into the bond. And just like that, she was with me, her thoughts and strength and reassurance pressing against my mind gently. It was so easy and familiar and… tiring. **Bastila? I said sharply. You’re still exhausted.**

“Ness Jonohl,” Uthar intoned, and his voice was a drawling combination of amused pleasure. He was looking forward to this, I realized with alarm. Milky white eyes fixed on my form tightly as he strode over the packed clay ground. There was no lightsaber in his grasp, and I highly doubted he saw me as a threat. **That’s a good thing. A very good thing.**

“Master Uthar,” I answered respectfully, bowing. **Does he know about Jorak? Stars, does he know about Dustil?**

**Contain your thoughts, Jen!**

“I believe you were warned against visiting Dreshdae,” he said sharply. “What have you been doing?”

“Nothing of import, Master,” I replied in a meek tone, my thoughts racing. “Releasing the mercenaries who travelled with me, and tying up loose ends.”

He stopped about four paces in front of me, arms folded and a heavy frown creasing his forehead. Uthar’s face was heavily tattooed in black and silver, markings that edged over the shiny dome of his head. His almost translucent white eyes were likely a sign of Dark Side corruption, I thought, rather than actual blindness. I wondered briefly how he had ripped out Jorak’s eyes, and shuddered. **Hide your thoughts, Jen! Think of something else, something innocuous!**

A searing blast of agony stabbed deep into my temples; suddenly there was a malevolent presence pummelling through my mind, tearing through random thoughts as Bastila retreated in shock. I was completely unprepared as Uthar’s power scoured through my head, looking for memories of
mercenaries and *Dreshdae* and *the Cathar*. The pain was like a piercing migraine amplified tenfold, and I clutched at my head reflexively, half-aware of someone screaming.

**Think of something else, something innocuous!** Bastila’s words echoed to me, and I reflexively pulled up the image of the Mandalorian brawl. Uthar’s curiosity caught, and he paused in his rough rummaging to focus on the picture of Canderous and Jagi facing each other in the windswept clearing in from of the caves. The memory replayed itself under his grasp, but *Uthar doesn’t understand Mandalorian*, and I could feel his frustration mounting at his inability to comprehend any meaning other than some sort of barbaric stand-off.

And then, a quicksilver spark of inspiration flared into life within me - at the end, the blonde female warrior walking suggestively towards… towards *me*, I *changed* the memory ever so slightly, I *thought* of the Mandalorian looking at me with a knowing glint in her eye and a sway to her hips, and created the idea of *fun* and *passion* that would lure me away from the Sith teachings I pretended to crave. I pictured her face close to mine, her blue eyes sharp with desire, lips full and red and ready to kiss, her armour unwieldy but begging to be removed.

Uthar loosed a loud bark of laughter, and suddenly I was released from his mental clinch. I found myself prone in the Korriban dust, my fingers digging deep into the sides of my head.

“Well, well,” Uthar said in amusement. “*You have* been busy, Ness Jonohl.”

“Through passion, I gain strength, Master Uthar,” I gasped from the ground.

Uthar chuckled again. “You are stronger than I realized, Ness Jonohl. But as tempting as your distractions may be, you *do not* have leave to exit the Academy. Next time you do won’t be nearly so pleasant. Do we understand each other, Ness Jonohl?”

“Yes, Master Uthar,” I mumbled, pulling myself into a sitting position, keeping my head bowed.

“Good,” he drawled with satisfaction. “Now, where is that Cathar that came in with you?”

Wariness still sat heavy within me, I could not trust the privacy of my own head, yet. “*I last saw her in the Valley yesterday, Master Uthar,*” I said quietly, focusing only on the memory of the dying afternoon sun as *Staria* and I picked our way through the valley. *There - I sensed the faint evil touch of Uthar, which confirmed he was still snooping – but this time, testing my honesty by stealth instead of brutally ripping the thoughts from my mind. All I focused on was the rocky path in the Valley of the Sith Lords. Uthar would look for more, I knew, but if he could be distracted into believing my main drive was my own desire-*

*I’m glad there’s Mandalorians in Dreshdae,* I thought overtly, randomly, grabbing the falsehood and running like a crazy stimmed-up swooper with it. *They’re so built and well-endowed, rough and ready and know how to have a good time. Better than the blasted Echani who think everything has to be a sodding battle dance. There was that one who even asked me to bed him in the middle of a sparring match, I swear he would have screwed me right there, even though that ice-queen Atris was in the next room, and then Mal walks in and stars didn’t he get pissed off, he really should have known better though, like I’d bed one of those fairies when I had him-*

“Enough!” Uthar barked, and suddenly I was yanked up hard into the air, the wild thoughts derailing as Force power squeezed tightly around my oesophagus. Rage ignited a maelstrom deep in my belly. *Deception, this can still be won by deception,* a voice whispered a reassurance in my head, and I wasn’t sure if it was Ness or Revan. I roughly tamped down on the anger. *Let him think he’s in control.*
“You really are ruled by your passions, aren’t you, Ness Jonohl?”

“Yes, Master.” I gasped, my hands scrabbling at my neck, as I inwardly focused on my fear, and my fear alone. Panic, not rage. He can still be tricked. Was it overconfidence, or just a natural understanding of my own abilities? But Uthar was underestimating me, and I wasn’t ready to show my strength just yet.

There was, however, genuine fright threading through my anger, and I zeroed in on that. It must have appeased Uthar, for he grunted in satisfaction and dumped me back in the Korriban dust. A place I’d been a little too often, lately.

“You’re a bit wild, certainly,” Uthar mused. “I’m more interested in finding your friend, now, but I think I’ll take over your teaching, Ness Jonohl. I don’t trust my apprentice to control someone of your… unbridled talent. Get up.”

I scrambled awkwardly to my feet, bowing before him once more.

“Get yourself to the Initiates quarters, and stay there until one of my Adepts calls for you,” he ordered.

“Yes, Master Uthar,” I quietly assented. Uthar nodded in satisfaction, turned and strode back into the Academy. I followed meekly, projecting the very impression of a cowed Sith Initiate.

Sun and stars, I thought dazedly. That was intense.

Intense? Bastila sounded a mixture of horrified and appalled. Jen. That was subterfuge on a mental level I have not seen before. It would have fooled me, had I not intercepted your initial thought about modifying your own memory. How do you think so expeditiously on your feet?

I don’t know Bastila. I really didn’t. The thoughts had been random and accelerating and dizzying, borne out of panic rather than any premeditation. I just kinda made it up as I went along! The large ferracrystal doors swung shut behind me, and Uthar was already stalking off to the east, headed towards the Valley, the last place Staria had presumably been seen - according to my memory.

Dak hangs out in the Valley. Which means it is Juhani’s most likely location, I realized with disgust, halting in the central ceremonial cavern of the Academy. What is Uthar’s motivation? What does he want with Juhani? Ridiculously large sculptures of glaring Sith Lords glowered down at me as I stood, alone, in the vast circular room. I resisted the childish urge to scowl back.

Uthar had already gone.

We need the Star Map, Jen. It must be our first priority.

Bastila was right. If I couldn’t find Juhani quick, I’d have to bail and hope she’d keep herself safe until we planned the extraction. It made me feel nauseous, but I could sense the risks mounting. The urgency was still there, an undercurrent of tension telling me I had to move. I couldn’t dally, with Uthar restricting me to the quarters, and the politics of the Academy itself edging towards a boiling point.

The Map, Jen. You must leave Juhani, return to the others, and focus on that. As long as there is one Force-user going after the Map, you can succeed. I nodded mentally at her. Of course we needed a Force sensitive, how else were we going to draw the terentateks away from the Star Map? She probably hadn’t been a party to any discussions of the caves, yet, I reminded myself.
Drawing deep into the Force, I spread my senses out, hoping desperately that I could detect Juhani. *I feel like I should be better at this.* I could sense Uthar, moving further away towards the tombs. He all but pulsed with poisonous strength whenever he registered within the Force. That sort of power… I felt like there was only one way I could possibly vanquish it… and I’d sworn not to go down that path again.

*You cannot deny me forever,* Revan whispered.

My jaw clenched as I pushed the insidious thought away.

There wasn’t much else of interest. A couple of minor sparks - Initiates probably - in a corridor nearby. The Force itself had that dark taste to it, a cruel edge that sparked against the rage and lust for power, and I had to forcibly breathe in deep, focus on the calm and the peace and push the black thoughts away.

*There is no emotion, there is peace,* Bastila murmured, and I found myself echoing her. I didn’t know if it was to reassure her or myself, but it worked. It actually frelling worked. *There is no ignorance, there is knowledge.* I breathed in again, trailing off as Bastila continued to chant through the bond. *I have to leave Juhani behind,* I knew, even as I felt sick about it, but she wasn’t near me. There was nothing nearby, nothing I could pick up on other than an odd, dead patch of-

I swung around sharply, my gaze zeroing in on the entrance to the training rooms.

*Jen,* Bastila’s tone was sharp… but it was also fading in strength. *Do not be distracted.*

My eyes followed the shielded presence as it abruptly backpedalled, stumbling away from me. Before I’d consciously realized what I was doing, I was striding after it.

*Jen!*

*Maybe the Force brought me here for a reason,* I threw back at her as I stalked into the training room I’d sparred so briefly in. It was also, mercifully, empty, and Dustil had already retreated into the corridor beyond. The corridor that Yuthura had explicitly forbidden me to enter. *But then, she also said it was out of bounds for Adept,* I realized with a touch of amusement.

*Maybe you are merely being wilful,* Bastila replied tartly, but I could sense she had conceded the argument.

I walked determinedly down the hallway; it wasn’t long, and finished abruptly with a lone door at the end. No sign of Dustil, and there was only one place he could have disappeared to. I eyed over the door; it was made of a thick titanium alloy, with a control panel visible at hand height. There didn’t seem to be an obvious keycard or autoprint mechanism though, and I wondered whether it was Force-locked in some fashion.

I frowned at the door, concentrating through the Force as I eyed the lock over. On Manaan, I’d been desperate for entry into the Republic Base, and I’d done something… or rather, Revan had. But this wasn’t some corrupted use of the Force, and my life wasn’t in immediate danger… surely this was something I, Ness Jonohl, could do.

I felt Bastila’s interested focus as my senses curved around the door circuitry. On such a minute scale, the electrical impulses oscillated wildly like an incredibly complex dance; a complete jumble to an outsider, and yet somehow it *worked.* I didn’t understand the specifics of how it operated, or whether some Force power was required to open the lock, but I could see the electromagnetic energy as it streamed through the mechanism. And there, right there, I could impede the flow, disable the
power, and cause the lock to fail.

The door clicked, and now I could take a step forward and manually slide it open.

Awe radiated quietly from my bond-sister. How… how is it possible you can do that, on that scale? Her thought was a whisper. So insignificant… I could only feel it through your senses. I have nowhere near that sort of awareness.

We all have our strengths, Bastila, I answered, feeling vaguely uncomfortable. Let’s not forget all you managed yesterday, through our bond. Mekel would be dead now, if not for you.

Perhaps, she conceded, albeit grudgingly. She still sounded weak. It is true that my prowess has always been with the psychic side of the Force… but your instincts ring with the Force’s own luck. Even though you have no recollection of any training.

I stepped forward, about to slide the deactivated door open. I could sense a spark of life inside, but it was so faint it seemed on the verge of winking out entirely. I didn’t think that was Dustil. Either he was shielded, in which case I could only sense his absence, or his presence should radiate with far greater strength.

Well, you did start training me before I ran. And Juhani’s been helping me, Bastila. I didn’t know what else to say. We had so much to speak of, she had so much to explain… and yeah, I felt resentful that she kept Ness Jonohl hidden from me. A Jedi Knight who hadn’t fallen to the Dark Side. Would that have helped? Would I have stayed on Manaan and met Karon, had I known? Would I have done better, on Tatooine, at keeping Revan’s darker emotions under control?

Here on Korriban, of all places, you are maintaining the path of the light side, Bastila murmured to me, picking up on my thoughts once more. Yet on Tatooine, to my great chagrin, I failed you. You should not blame yourself for being absent on Manaan, and for what happened to Master Karon. I could have… I could have been braver, and enlightened you earlier. Prepared you. I am sorry I have not done well by you.

I paused, my hand lightly touching the door, as sheer shock resonated through me. Just when I thought I had her pegged, she tipped it all upside down.

Bastila, I thought in astonishment, I don’t understand the whole of it… of everything. But we are working together, now. Let us both leave these feelings of regret behind, okay?

She paused, and then I felt her agreement wearily touch my mind. With a mental touch of reassurance, I pulled back from her and opened the door.

The room in front of me was, very obviously, a Sith interrogation room, and my initial response was one of repugnance. Three cages lined one wall, robotic arms curving around them in a threatening fashion. One was occupied with the slumped form of a human female hanging from restraints that fastened her to a central pillar. A prism of amber static crackled around her in a forcefield.

The other wall bore a desk with a console, and behind it – now that I was familiar with it – was the cloaked presence of Dustil Onasi.

I scowled darkly at the empty air until he dropped his shields. He was staring at me in shock. Again.

“How- how did you get in?” Dustil demanded, his eyes wide with either fright or anger.

“Uthar let me in,” I said, a touch sarcastically, and his expression darkened.
“Right,” he snapped, hair falling into his eyes. “I suppose Uthar made you his first apprentice, too.”

I folded my arms and stared straight into his brown gaze. “I rather think that’s your aim, Dustil,” I said softly. A dull flush of colour darkened his cheeks before his eyes narrowed.

“Did dear old Dad send you after me?” he accused, taking a step back and leaning against the chrome alloy wall. It was all shiny metal here, overlaying the granite of the mountain we were underneath. Possibly some sort of shielding against surveillance, or maybe just a nod to some Sith Lord’s interior decorating bent. The walls were buffed enough I could make out my own reflection against them. A side wall, at right angles to the cages, bore a set of manacles too high for any sentient to touch the floor, were they restrained in it. And Carth’s son hangs out here. Frelling fantastic.

My eyes flicked back to the prone figure that hung limply in the torture cage. She was a nondescript human woman, about my age, dressed in unadorned clothing. Maybe a trader of some sort. Dried brown smatters decorated the gleaming metal ground underneath her feet.

“I have my own objectives, Dustil,” I said absently, still staring at the prisoner. “But your father is a tenacious fellow.” I dragged my gaze back to the youth, whose brows had lowered in anger. Stars, he looks a lot like Carth. I wondered how much of his mother was in him. What sort of mother had she been? What sort of wife? What sort of woman would catch the heart of Carth Onasi? “Carth won’t give up on you.”

Dustil snorted at that. “He gave up on me and Mother years ago. He has no right to demand anything now!”

“I didn’t say he wasn’t a crap father,” I snapped. “But he is a good person. And he’s going to force you into a choice, Dustil. One of your options will be him, either dead or in there.” I pointed to the unconscious human, helpless and wholly at the mercy of the Sith. “Will you be willing to live with yourself if that happens?”

I could see the emotions wage war on his face. He opened his mouth to say something, clenched his jaw, and then shut it again.

“What sort of a life do you have here, Dustil?” I said softly. “Sure, there’s power – but are you happy?”

“Happy?” he scoffed in disgust, face contorting in disbelief at my words. “Happy is a pipe dream, Jen. Happy doesn’t give you what you want, what you need. Happy sure as frakk doesn’t protect those you love!”

My eyes narrowed as I stared at him, that younger clone of Carth so twisted up with bitterness and fury at the world. “You think you should have been able to protect your mother?” I guessed.

The look of utter derision told me my stab in the dark went wild. “Don’t try to analyze me, Jedi. And don’t you ever speak of my mother again!”

“Okay,” I said slowly, forcing my voice neutral and unruffled. “But exactly who are you protecting, here? You’re not even mates with Mekel anymore –”

“Mekel?” he sneered, and it sounded outraged. “He may be your best buddy, but you’re going to get a ‘saber to the back if you are stupid enough to trust him.”

“I don’t trust him,” I retorted. “And we are hardly buddies. But one thing I do know – Mekel is loyal to those he cares about.”
Dustil all but spat out a laugh. “Really?” he drawled. “Why don’t you ask him about Selene, then, and see if you can find out just how loyal he really is.”

My eyes narrowed, and I stared at him in silence for long enough that Dustil began to shift uncomfortably. Here, maybe, was a piece of the puzzle. I’d had no intention of seeing vicious little Mekel again – he might owe his life to me, but I had no illusions that I could claim any of his loyalty - yet now, I was wondering if speaking to Mekel was exactly what I needed to do.

“I might just do that,” I said quietly.

For some reason, this response annoyed Dustil further; I saw his fists clench as he straightened from the wall, shoulders bunching in unbridled anger.

“What are you still doing here on Korriban?” he hissed furiously. “I told Father to leave. You think I won’t kill him? You think I won’t betray you, Jedi Jen?”

“I’m hoping you won’t,” I answered, keeping my voice mild. “I’m hoping you don’t really want to be here.”

I could see a flash of some emotion cross his face, raw and indecipherable, as he ran a hand through his hair in a gesture that was so familiar. There was no doubting whose son he was, underneath all the bitterness and teenage angst.

“I belong here,” he said at last, and his expression had turned resolute. “If you think I won’t betray a Jedi, then all you have to do is look there.” He raised a hand, pointing to the nondescript woman.

I blinked, startled. **Jedi?** I glanced at her again. Human, close in age to myself, and dressed in a plain, if now bedraggled, tunic. I would not have picked it.

“I captured her. I tortured her. I’m responsible for that, and you dare to imply that I’m not Sith material?” His voice rose with every word, fury fuelling them, and I sensed the Force as it rallied through him, a dark and unstable crescendo of energy.

Dustil’s strength was enough to make me wary, particularly with his state of mind. But I had to believe – I had to hope – that perhaps underneath it all was despair. Despair, and maybe the desire to be elsewhere. “Anyone can turn back.” I said quietly. “Staria keeps showing me that.”

Dustil laughed mockingly. “Turn back? Are you for real Jedi Jen? What, shall I wake Belaya up and say oh, I’m so sorry but I didn’t really mean it, maybe we can be happy little friends together?”

“I never said it’d be easy,” I snapped. “If you want easy, then keep jumping like a kath pup every time Uthar clicks his fingers. But you have a choice now, Dustil. Are you strong enough to make the right one?”

His mouth opened, and then shut again with a click as his face contorted with emotion. I could see the torment on his face and knew that – despite his bravado – he wasn’t sure of his path. Not yet.

“I- uh, frakk it!” With one last, highly frustrated glare at me, he turned on his heel, slammed a hand on the door control, and stormed out of the room. As the entrance closed behind him, I let out a pent-up sigh.

*That could have gone worse.* It could have gone better, too, but at least there was hope. *I think.* My gaze slid back to the helpless victim in the restraints. *And what the frell am I going to do here?*

**Bastila?** Have you caught what’s going on?
It took her some time to answer; I was already standing by the console, reading the health report that someone – likely Dustil – had left up on the screen.

**No. I am very tired, Jen.**

Bastila's voice was still quieter than normal. Thinner. Weaker. *Juhani told me what the medic said, back on Manaan. No permanent mental damage, but be prepared for her to sleep. A lot.* Yet, Bastila had been still managed to help through the bond- throwing her advice and support and inner Force strength to me when required- no matter how drained she was. If nothing else, I couldn't fault her dedication.

I narrowed my eyes on the screen; scanning through the information detailed there. The access level blinked at the top of the console: controller authentication accepted. Dustil had left the system logged in. Was it naive to think that had been deliberate?

The health report on the screen labelled the woman as Jedi Knight Belaya Linn, alias Rita Sunrider, human, female, and rattled off a list of constitutional statistics that held very little meaning for me. It did state that she had several broken ribs, a ruptured spleen, and a punctured lung – the latter two had been surgically repaired.

It didn’t state the cause of her injuries, but I had a sinking feeling I already knew.

*Bastila. I need the medbay.* I’d made the decision, then. I couldn’t leave the unknown Jedi here, despite the risks.

The console allowed me to disable the amber energy shield surrounding the cage - some sort of Force-inhibiting prison, I would guess, as the restraints around the woman made a repulsion or shock field somewhat superfluous. *She's not collared with a neural disruptor, either. Since she's a Jedi, they must've had some method of blocking her Force abilities.*

I stared at the crackling amber prism as it vanished into nothingness under my input. There was the tiny, nagging feeling, deep within my gut, that I'd seen these sorts of prisons before. I felt the corners of my mouth turn down, gave my head a little shake to disperse the unwelcome thoughts, and turned back to the console.

It had a medical AI that allowed me to inject the Jedi with adrenal stimulants. One was usually enough to rouse a person from light unconsciousness, but considering the injuries inflicted upon this Belaya Linn, I decided on a double-dose. *I need her up and walking out of here. I can't exactly carry a body through Dreshdae - or the Academy.* I stabbed a key on the touchscreen, and looked up to see a robotic arm inject the woman twice under my order. *Stimulants have their own side-effects, though. If I could employ some method of Force healing - like Bastila used on Mekel after we'd brought him back from the brink - then that would improve this Belaya's health tenfold.*

**The medbay?** Bastila finally answered. She was confused, rightly so, but her mental tone sounded so bone-weary that I knew I couldn't request her assistance this time. I'd have to sort Belaya out myself. For, I'd likely need Bastila’s assistance later, after the shyrack caves - for now, she needed to recuperate.

*Yes. I'll explain later. You should get some rest. Can you move back to the pilot's quarters?*

A groan issued from the woman as the drugs began to hit her bloodstream. Belaya Linn, the records said. The name sounded familiar, like I'd heard it recently. An uncertain sensation hit me as I wondered whether I'd ever met her before. I walked closer, slowly, and her head rose. Blue eyes opened, and focused blearily on me.
Okay.

Get some sleep, I ordered Bastila gently. By the time you wake up, we might even have the Star Map coordinates and be ready to leave this rock.

Fear tightened the woman's face, but there was no sign of familiarity – she did not know me. Her gaze darted all around the room, looking for other tormenters, before settling back on me again. There was a kernel of anger there, though, within the depths of her gaze. She wasn't fully broken yet, and I blessed that discovery.

That... would be lovely. I shall sleep, now. We will talk again soon. Her exhausted mental voice turned hesitant. My friend.

"I am Ness Jonohl," I said quietly. "Jedi Knight Ness Jonohl." I paused, watching her closely for any sign of recognition, but there was none. Her face creased in wary confusion. "I am a friend, and I have a ship in Dreshdae that you can take refuge in. But I can't carry you out of the Academy without raising suspicion – I need you to walk out, next to me."

Sleep well, my friend, I sent back through the bond gently.

Belaya's face had grown pale, mouth dropping open further with every word, it seemed. I could see her swallow, and then her eyes closed in despair. She didn't believe me. Days of torture and I'd likely think everything is a trap, too. I sighed, and walked back to the console.

"I'm going to release the restraints. Don't fall or anything, okay?"

The cage opened under my command, and the restraints released. Belaya hadn't, however, balanced herself, and she crumpled to the ground with an anguished moan. I remembered the broken ribs, and winced as I rushed to her side.


Belaya was curled up on the ground, but she heard me walk near, and I saw her entire body tense even as she groaned again.

"I'm going to try healing you with the Force," I murmured. If only Bastila had been a little less exhausted, then her expertise would be riding with me once more. But I'd been more than just a spectator yesterday, when she coaxed Mekel back from the other side of death, and then nurtured his body back to health. If I couldn't learn from that experience, then I didn't deserve to call myself a Jedi Knight.

I placed my hands ever so gently on Belaya's torso, and felt her tremble underneath me. The Force sank gently into her flesh, into her muscle, into her very bones. I focused on a sense of rightness, and saw the outlines of musculature as it curved away from the skeleton. There was a painful spot of inflammation around the abdomen, swelling around the jagged edge of two broken ribs. The Force bent itself to my will, and I felt the sweet sensation of melding it to my very desire. I wrapped it gently around the damaged bones, and then jerked them together with a firm twist.

I felt the bones interleave and then separate again, Belaya screamed, and the Force slipped through my fingers. My stomach turned as my failure slapped me in the face. I'd just caused her intense pain and accomplished absolutely nothing.

"Ah, kath crap," I cursed. So much for the whole Jedi Knight thing, then. "Sorry – I, ah, I've not
"Done that before." Belaya whimpered once, twice, still curled up on the floor with her back to me. "Dammit. I'll see if I can find some pain meds in the desk. Hang on." I scrambled to my feet, backing away from the prone Jedi and towards the desk. It touted a couple of drawers that were full of hypodermics, tablets, scalpels, vials, and other small implements I didn't readily recognize. I grimaced, and started rifling through the 'derms with speed. I needed something fast acting and localized that could numb Belaya's pain and get us out of here.

"Ceramol-40," I muttered, placing a 'derm on the desk. "Ceramol-100, too, but that's likely to make you forget you have a body. Or- Profanol. That might work." I looked up at a moan, to see Belaya struggling to push herself up. Her pained blue eyes were watching me warily.

I winced. "Sorry," I repeated. "I've recently observed an impressive Force healing, and thought I could repeat it. Obviously I was misguided." The blue eyes blinked at me, but she said nothing. I sighed. "Look, we've got to get out of here, and for that, you need to be able to move. I've got Ceramol-40 or Profanol here – pick your poison."

A pained grimace creased Belaya's face, but she finally answered. "Ceramol," she whispered. I nodded, and came back to her side, handing her the small disposable cylinder. After inspecting the meds silently, then staring at me in consternation again, the Jedi handed the 'derm back to me and slowly pulled up the side of her tunic.

I gave her a minute for the injected drug to hit her bloodstream, and then stood, offering her a hand and a small, shaky smile. After a pause, Belaya leaned forward to clasp it.

She gasped as I pulled her up, and leaned against me unsteadily before finding her feet. I eyed her over, and realized just how out-of-place she appeared. Her tunic was nondescript and torn, and even with the pain meds she was obviously wounded. I frowned, and looked down at myself.

"Use my robe," I muttered, hurriedly removing the filthy Sith garment that I'd been abusing for the last few days. It's not like I needed it to fit in, half the residents knew who I was anyway. I looked at Belaya seriously. "You'll have to pretend you're a Sith," I explained, and she nodded, lifting an arm. Stars, she's a quiet one.

Together, we got the robe on, with only one grunt of pain from the Jedi. I inwardly hoped my terrible attempt at healing hadn't actually made her injuries worse. But even with the Dark Jedi robe, Belaya still didn't convince me she belonged here. Maybe it was her body language, the way she held herself. Or maybe it's because she's just been tortured, idiot. I grimaced.

"Here," I said, drawing out my off-hand 'saber and offering it to her. "Activate it. It's a Sith one, it'll make you look like you belong here, and draw attention away from your demeanour." I grimaced. "You don't look nearly cocky enough to pull this off."

Her lips pursed, and for the first time I saw a flash of irritation cross her face. "I have suffered through days of unpleasantness. Permit me a moment to regain my composure." Her voice was tart – shaky, but tart.

I grinned. "Good. Keep hold of the attitude." I glanced back to the console, frowning. It was damn risky, rescuing a Jedi from the Sith Academy – particularly when we still needed time. Time to get the Star Map, before Uthar sent Sithlings after our ship. I couldn't know that Dustil wouldn't betray us and the Ebon Hawk – he was dithering, but it wouldn't last, and it was too close to tell which way he would fall. If Uthar found his Jedi prisoner was missing… If Uthar found I wasn't waiting in the Initiate's quarters… If Uthar found Juhani…

And then there was Kylah to think about.

I breathed in deep. There wasn't much I could do about Kylah, bar ensuring that Bastila was well-
guarded. But I could, possibly, cover my tracks here.

"A second," I murmured, and strode over to the console. Belaya stood awkwardly in the room, the saber grasped loosely in her hand as she stared at it in dawning wonder, like she was only just beginning to accept the possibility of freedom. As I began entering commands on the system, I heard the all too familiar snap-hiss as she switched it on. I glanced up briefly to see her grimace at the colour, and rolled my eyes.

Belaya walked closer as I pulled up the medical logs. "What are you doing on Korriban?" she asked quietly. She rested her free hand on her side.

"It's complicated," I muttered, staring at the screen. *What can I do here to cover my tracks?* Fabricating fake medical entries was impossible without a droid. Slicing into the system and uploading a virus might work if only I had the skills of a certain Twi'lek street kid. I could delete the records pertaining to Belaya, but the auditing logs would then point the finger at who'd been logged in at the time - and I could only assume that was Dustil Onasi. *Sithspit*, I thought with disgust. *I can't think of anything useful to do here.*

"Are you… are you here to attend the Academy?" Belaya asked, her voice hesitant. She stared at me warily from behind the blood-red beam.

I blinked, looking over to her. Belaya's eyes were now fixed on my filthy robe that covered her body. "No! No, I'm not a Dark Jedi." It felt good to be able to say that with confidence. *Ness Jonohl did not fall.*

Her face was solemn. "You are the strangest Jedi I have ever met."

I flashed her a grin that was cheerier than I felt, and stepped away from the console, admitting technological defeat. "Okay, Belaya. Chin up, ignore the discomfort, and glare at everyone you see."

Her face trembled as she breathed shallowly. "I am… exhausted and in pain. I do not know if I have the fortitude for this."

I strode back to her, and placed a steadying hand on her shoulder. "Wrap the pain up in the Force, Belaya. Focus on your anger that you were caught, and on how you were treated."

The anger was there, all right, and it was levelled at me. *That is not the Jedi path!"* she said, her voice at once stern and forbidding. *This one definitely walks in the light. She could strike sparks off Juhani.*

I felt the side of my mouth quirk. "No, it's not. But to escape, you must pretend to be a dark Force-user, and anger is not looked at twice, here. You can meditate on the code when we're safe." I walked over to the door, and stretched my senses out. There were no life-forms nearby, and I felt confident of getting us away from the Academy without encountering anyone. It was Dreshdae I was more concerned about – no avoiding sentients there, and who knew which traders or mercs were eyes for the Sith.

I took a deep breath, depressed the door control, and walked out of the interrogation room.

xXx

Luck was riding with us. We'd had to double-back down a corridor in the Academy to avoid company, but we were successful. There was no one in the large cavern, either, and I inwardly hoped that was Dustil's doing. *Unlikely. But he thinks I'm a Jedi, and led me to an imprisoned Jedi. And left the console active so I could release her.*
It had the feel of wishful thinking, but for Carth’s sake I hoped it was true.

Belaya stayed two steps behind me, clutching tightly onto the activated Sith ‘saber. I heard a gasp of relief as we stepped out of the Academy, and knew the same feeling myself. I’d entered with the hopes of finding my Cathar friend, and instead was returning with a wounded stranger. *If my luck holds, Juhani will be back at the ‘Hawk. And if not, then I’d just have to hit the shyrack caves without her.*

We began our walk in silence; my strides were long and hurried, and I knew Belaya was struggling to keep up, but I didn’t feel comfortable dallying. The woman had a permanent grimace on her face, sun-streaked brown hair falling into pale blue eyes as we continued our journey. After some time along the distinctive path, I realized that distraction would be beneficial for her.

“Talk to me,” I said absently, my concentration intent on the Korriban terrain that was becoming awfully familiar. The ornate path was deserted, as normal. *Dreshdae inhabitants avoid the Academy. I would, too, if I were Force-blind and lived here. “It’ll keep your mind from your injuries.”*

“Alright,” Belaya acquiesced. “Let us become acquainted then. Perhaps now you can explain why you are on Korriban?”

“Not yet,” I replied wryly, “but it should comfort you to know that I am travelling with two other Jedi.”

“Oh,” she said in bewilderment. She looked at me sideways. “That is fortuitous, if it is true.”

I raised an eyebrow at her, and saw an answering flush.

“Forgive me,” she said quietly. “I was lured to the Academy under a false pretence from a stranger, so it is difficult to trust again.”

“Fair enough.”

We lapsed into silence again for several minutes, before Belaya plucked up the courage to speak once more. Her voice was fading, and I realized the stims and the meds were wearing thin. “These Jedi who accompany you… they are Knights, also?”

“No,” I said, and my voice sounded surprised even to my own ears. “They’re both Padawans. One failed her Knight trials, but only because they were sodding ridiculous. The other… well. It’s patently farcical that she’s still a Padawan.” A Padawan, in command of the Endar Spire. The one who’d knocked out the old Sith Lord, saved my life, and countless others with her Battle Meditation. What the frell were the Masters thinking, keeping her as a Padawan?

I realized Belaya was frowning at me in some confusion, and shot her a quick grin. “Never mind. You’ll met them soon. But we’ve got to get through the colony first. Follow my lead, and look angry.”

“I breathed in deep, and my eyes held hers. “Be angry at the world, and no one will pay you a second glance.”

I forced a dark glare on my face as we entered Dreshdae, taking the time to scowl at every sentient within view. I couldn’t activate Karon’s ‘saber, not without screaming *Jedi,* but I hoped between my bedraggled appearance and Belaya’s readiness with the blood-red beam, we would be left alone to stalk through the air-conditioned tunnels. I spotted a handful of mercenaries – *not* Mandalorians, for which I was grateful, I did not want them to place Canderous’ second as a Dark Jedi – who eyed us over briefly before wandering into the cantina.

A small group of Czerka-uniformed staff gave us a wide berth as we made our way to the spaceport;
and I found myself struggling to keep from running. *Walk confidently, head up, like you own the place.* I deepened my scowl, landing an angry glare on the docking officials who avoided my gaze, undoubtedly used to dealing with temperamental Sith.

I jammed my hand on the docking bay door control, hearing Belaya stumble behind me as we entered relative safety. We made it, I thought with determined victory as I strode deeper into the roofless area, the Korriban atmosphere assailing my senses once more. *We made it!* The flush of victory was riding high in my veins, and, once more, my confidence rose. We would conquer Korriban, *damn it*, and get off this stars-forsaken planet.

Canderous met us at the hatch, answering my loud knock, his weathered face slackening in surprise as Belaya floundered next to me. She gave a gasp, maybe at the appearance of a very obvious Mandalorian, or perhaps simply because she’d reached the end of consciousness, for her next action was to slump against me as the lightsaber slipped from her loose grasp.

I’d caught her, just, and shot the Mandalorian a frantic, demanding look.

“Found a friend, Jen?” Canderous asked mockingly, but he answered my unspoken order and reached to grab a hold of the inert Jedi. I transferred Belaya into his arms as gently as I could.

“Careful, she has two broken ribs,” I said softly. “Get her to the medbay.”

He nodded, the extra weight no encumbrance to him, and strode into the *Hawk*. After snatching up the ‘saber then securing the hatch behind me, I raced to catch up; he’d transferred Belaya to the bed Bastila had recently occupied, and Carth was already there, rifling through the medical supplies, a dozen questions on his face. Mission, further back in the common room, peered in curiously at us.

Canderous stepped out of the crowded medbay, next to me, his eyes still fixed on the newcomer.

“You started the extraction already, Jen?” he drawled, but he was frowning at me. “Wasn’t that supposed to be a stealth mission after your Star Map, not something we draw out over the day?”

“Her heart’s racing,” Carth murmured from inside the room, injecting a hypoderm of kolto into her arm. “It’s irregular, too, like she’s been stimmed.” His hands were sure as they rested on her upper chest, and I wondered if he’d had medic training in his past.

“She has,” I said shortly. “Two adrenastims, to wake her up and get her out of the Academy.”

The collective gaze of everyone swung onto me, demanding an explanation, and I heard the thud of Zaalbar’s footsteps from behind. “She’s a Jedi. Jedi Knight Belaya Linn. I found her in a torture chamber. I couldn’t leave her behind.” I sighed. “Bastila could help, but she’s still so weak. I can barely feel her through our bond.”

Mission, standing next to Canderous and I, bore such an endearing look I had to look away. Canderous was slightly grim, and I knew he was mulling over our situation and objectives, and likely coming to the conclusion that rescuing a comatose prisoner of the Sith was not going to help our chances, Jedi or no. Carth’s expression was harder to pick, but he stared intently at me.

“You did the right thing,” he said quietly.

“Did I?” I shrugged with discomfort. “Juhani’s not back, is she?” The answering silence told me all I needed to know, and I sighed. “So, instead of finding our able crewmate, I brought back an injured stranger that may risk us all.” I closed my eyes, and that damned urgency was still there, beckoning me to hurry the frell up. “Check her ribs, Carth, there’s two broken at least. Then get her stable. We’re moving out. Now.”
“(Mission,)” I complained. “(This whole plan is foolhardy.)” It was. It was. Concern sat heavy in my chest. I understood the need to locate this powerful and foreign Star Map, but did Jen really require Mission to travel with them? I had heard all the reasons, and I did not deny that my young friend had many skills, but surely a warren of dark caves inhabited by fearsome monsters was not the place for a Twi'lek pup?

Mission glanced up at me from the datapad she was tinkering with. She was sitting in the cargo bay, surrounded by a pile of equipment that included light-sticks, retractable plysteel ropes, bio-scanners, and a half dozen energy bars. Although the Mandalorian had procured some of it, the rest had come from my inventory of the Ebon Hawk’s supplies. That profligate, degenerate human Davik Kang had certainly been a hoarder.

“Sheesh, Big Z, the day you don’t complain about me going somewhere, I’ll know something’s really up.” Mission said. A pair of night vision goggles rested on the top of her head, and her utility belt was full. My young charge was impatient to run out into danger, while I was forced to stay behind.

Jen had been resolute, though, and her eyes had glinted with determined leadership. This was not the same helpless human I’d worried over in Tatooine, and I wasn’t sure if it was the same reckless one I’d life-sworn myself to back on Taris. Jen carried herself with a self-possession that had been lacking before, and there was no doubt whom was carrying the mission. If and when Bastila Shan fully recovered, I doubted that the Jedi would be able to wrest control once more.

The enigmatic Jen Sahara worried me. I did not know all that she was encountering in the madclaw Academy that she and the Cathar were attending, and it frustrated me that my strength and my abilities were of no use to her there. If only Bastila Shan was back at her full strength. The experienced Jedi would surely be able to even the odds, but it seemed her injury from Manaan was more damaging than anyone had foreseen.

I sighed noisily, and Mission shot me a quick grin. It was good to see the humour restored to my ebullient young friend after her encounter a few days ago. She would not divulge details of what had occurred, but someone within Dreshdae had sorely frightened her. And Mission was not one to scare easily, much to my dismay. Of course, if she had listened to me and stayed within the confines of the Ebon Hawk, it would not have happened. *But all what-ifs do is tie a kshyyy vine around your neck.* I may desire to say I-told-you-so like a petulant human, but I knew what little effect it would have on my young friend.

“It’ll be fine, Big Z. Canderous and HK are pretty tough, y’know. The ‘scanners will pick up anything well in advance, and Jen’ll be able to draw the rancor things well away. Frankly, I think she’s in more danger than us.”

That didn’t reassure me. Jen Sahara was capable, fierce, and a Force-user; yet sometimes I worried she over-estimated herself as much as Mission did. I recalled the rancor in the sewers with a frown, and the thought of a monster like that, but larger and venomous, was more than just unnerving. *But Jen Sahara is quick. Unnaturally so. If there is any sentient who can succeed in this dark place, it would be her.* For I did have faith in Jen, despite my concern for her well-being. And since her return
to Manaan, she had been acting with honour. Jen Sahara was, once more, someone worthy of the lifede bt I had vowed.

The unknown Jedi comatose in the medbay was an attestation to that. For all of Jen’s worry about the additional risks, she had done a brave and honourable deed.

I glanced back to Mission, sprawled out on the durasteel floor, looking entirely at home surrounded by gadgets and equipment. She was a wonder, my young friend, intelligent and irrepressible and generous, all qualities which should have been snuffed out by her early life in the dregs of the Lower City. Behind her, in an unceremonious pile of plysteel and alloy mesh, lay a variety of armour suits that I had been slowly modifying or dismembering, depending on its condition. I spotted a panel of blue-and-white peeping out from underneath, and frowned.

“(Mission,)” I said, walking over to the stockpile. “(You have not worn that exoskeleton again. It is good protection, and I do not like to see you without any form of armour.)”

Mission scowled as I hefted up the remnants of Calo Nord’s battle suit. It was a good fit for her, now, but I could not shake the feeling that she blamed it for whatever had occurred in Dreshdae.

“Fine,” she groused, coming forward to talking it from my clutches. “I suppose it’s better than nothing.”

It was a superior piece of armour, even disregarding whatever Force-resistance it was purported to have. Mission was still pouting, but allowed me to assist her in equipping it.

“Come on, ladies!” Canderous Ordo bellowed from deeper in the ship. “It’s time to move out!”

Mission’s head tilted up at the yell, and the gleam in her eyes was too excited for my liking.

“(Be safe,)” I grumbled. “(I will see you out.)”

In a flurry of excitement, my young charge stuffed the datapad in her belt and grabbed a couple of ration bars. The Mandalorian and the human Carth Onasi traile into the cargo bay then, and the Republic pilot handed Mission a wrist communicator.

“Stay in constant communication,” Carth said, his eyes dark with concern. “I’ll be tracking you all from the cockpit. I’ve even put one on that damn robot-”

“Statement: I will be most pleased to inform you of every bat I kill, Paranoid Has-Been.”

I growled softly as HK-47 entered, followed by his master. I did not like that robot, and judging by Carth Onasi’s expression he felt the same. I could not help but lay part of the blame of Jen Sahara’s wild escape on Manaan towards that evil piece of machinery. I had seen many droids in my life, and none set my hackles rising quite like this one.

“Jettison. Air-lock. One day soon,” Carth threatened through gritted teeth.

“We need all the help we can muster, Carth,” Jen said quietly, but her smirk gave away her enjoyment at his discomfort. He shot her an unimpressed look.

Canderous Ordo hefted a pack over his shoulder, and jerked his head towards the exit hatch. Within minutes, Carth Onasi and I were standing on the loading ramp, watching the others traipse out of the docking bay. Jen was at the rear of the group, and turned to face us one last time.

“Keep that hatch closed,” Jen said quietly. An intense, faraway look clouded her eyes, and I could
see she was already thinking ahead. “Keep Teethree plugged into the ‘cams for surveillance. And—” she broke off, sighing. “We’ll be back before you know it.”

“This is becoming too familiar,” Carth muttered.

“But I always come back, right?” Jen quipped, shooting us a last grin and wave, before turning to follow the rest of them. I howled quietly as the docking bay door closed behind her. Staying on the Ebon Hawk, leaving my friends to stroll into unknown danger, was more than just unpleasant. I heard a pent-up sigh behind me, and turned to see Carth Onasi looking at me in understanding.

“Yeah,” he muttered, raking a hand through his hair. “We get the fun jobs. I’d better get into the cockpit and bring up the comms.”

“(I will check on the stabilizers first before coming inside,)” I told him. Jen had impressed upon us all the likelihood of a swift exit from Korriban, and I would make sure the Ebon Hawk was ready. T3-M4 had already completed all the necessary pre-flight checks as well as organizing a refuelling, but I would not miss an opportunity to check the outside of the hull. As highly useful as the astromech droid was, most of his circuitry had been utilized in constant monitoring of the exterior surveillance cameras, to spot any stranger approaching without our knowledge. This had become paramount since Jen’s warning about the Dark Jedi who had ambushed them on Manaan.

Carth Onasi looked at me without comprehension, and I loosed a brief huff of air. Wookiees did not have the vocal chords to make the guttural, awkward sounds of Galactic Basic, and both Carth Onasi’s and Canderous Ordo’s lack of understanding of my tongue was exactly what pinned me to guard duty, here, while my erstwhile young friend went frolicking off into danger.

I motioned around the ship, hoping to convey my intent to the Republic pilot. He gave a brief nod of acknowledgement.

“I’ll leave the hatch open while you do… er, whatever it is you need to do. Don’t be long, okay? We’ve got one sleeping Jedi and one comatose one in here.”

I grunted as he headed back inside, bending under the ship to have a cursory scan. Carth Onasi did not have to remind me of my responsibility. I wondered about the new Jedi, and what complications she would bring to our undertaking. If this one could be sufficiently healed, then perhaps she would make a worthy ally for Jen Sahara and Mission.

Yet currently both this stranger and Bastila Shan were out of commission. Alone, asleep, and wholly vulnerable. And the underside of the Ebon Hawk looked clean, so perhaps any more intensive checks could wait. It would be better to stay inside whilst we were few onboard.

The swish of the docking bay door opening made me straighten in surprise, crunch my head on the hull, and howl in annoyance. I backed out and turned around, expecting to see one of the crew returning.

It was a stranger, and I glared balefully.

“(Go away,)” I ordered, waving the sentient off dismissively. It was an unknown woman dressed in the offensive uniform of a Czerka official, walking slowly towards the Ebon Hawk. She was human - maybe part-Mirialan judging by the yellowing skin, although she bore no facial tattoos – and decidedly not welcome.

“Pardon me,” she said in Galactic Basic. “We have a couple of docking queries.” The Czerka official had bound dark hair, and eerie yellow eyes that matched her skin. Unusual, for a human, and again I
suspected her ancestry was mixed.

“(Czerka filth!”) I roared. “(You should not be here!)”

A brief, calculating look crossed the woman’s face, before it dissolved into understanding. “Ah,” she said quietly. “You are of the same mind as me, then. I despise Czerka, and wish I did not have to pose as one to help the Republic – but we must do all we can for the greater good.”

I paused, befuddled, as she looked at me beseeingly. She understood Shyriiwook, which was surprising in itself. “I have been sent here as an agent for the Republic, but we cannot help in an overt fashion – not here, on this awful planet of the Sith. Perhaps-” and now a knowing look crossed her face. “Why don’t you get Jen Sahara to come and meet me? She knows me well and can vouch for my sincerity.”

“(Jen Sahara is not here,)” I answered, taking a step back towards the loading ramp. Her words sounded genuine, and yet I felt suspicious. Somehow, she looked like she had expected that answer.

“Oh, that is a shame,” she replied dolefully, her eyes fixed on mine. I found it hard to break the gaze. “My name is Aramai. The Republic wishes to help the Ebon Hawk as much as we are able, in particular Bastila Shan since she suffered such a grievous injury on Manaan.”

“(Bastila Shan is resting,)” I said sharply, and then frowned. I should not have acknowledged Bastila’s presence, I realized, as I stared into those alien yellow eyes.

The woman inclined her head. “You can trust me, Zaalbar. I want only to help. My allegiance is with the Republic, and with Jen Sahara.” Her words were strangely compelling. I frowned. She was a stranger.

But if there was any chance this could be true, then it would be fortuitous indeed. We needed all the help we could get. I could feel my brows lowering in suspicion, even as her gaze pinned mine like a tach under a spear. “(And how do you propose to help?)” I howled, feeling vaguely annoyed.

She smiled, looking somewhat abashed. “I am a mere medic for the Republic, so I do not have the skills you need. But Bastila does, if only she were at her full strength. And that is where I can help, Zaalbar. I am expertly trained in the matters of psychic healing, and if I can do anything to assist the crew of the Ebon Hawk then it would be to all our benefit.”

Her words had a coercion to them that I longed to believe in, for Bastila Shan was a powerful Jedi indeed. If she were awake and well, then Mission would not have to run off into danger.

“I can help, Zaalbar,” she said softly. “You must trust me.” Her yellow eyes were bright and genuine and true. The words seemed to sink into my very mind, and I felt a slight release of the worry that was dogging me. Bastila had answers that Jen required. Bastila had strength that we all needed. If this part-human could help…

My paw was resting on the solid durasteel hull, and I still had a desire to turn around and enter the ship, and close the hatch firmly behind me. But it was difficult, so difficult, to break that yellow gaze. I found my thoughts wandering of their own volition, like someone else was lightly sifting through them, and I so dearly hoped that we would make it off Korriban, and perhaps not even need to go to Kashyyyk-

“With my assistance and Bastila’s strength restored, your team can find what they need and you won’t even be required to travel to Kashyyyk,” the stranger murmured, as if picking up on my very thoughts. Her eyes tightened. “The Jedi are waiting there, are they not? If you can complete this
mission and send them the results, then there should be no reason to travel there.”

*I thought in alarm. How does she know my name?*

“Commander Roland Wann from the Republic Embassy on Manaan sent me,” she murmured. Roland Wann was the name of Carth Onasi’s superior there, I recalled, even though I had only very briefly met him. The thought was immediately reassuring. “I have been told of you, Zaalbar, of your honour and your strength. The Republic wish to aid you in any way possible without alerting the Sith, so here I am. I can restore Bastila Shan.” Her tone was earnest, very earnest, and I felt something like hope swell over my suspicion. My overriding desire was to see Jen Sahara and Mission safe, and if she could aid in that *and* halt the requirement to travel to Kashyyyk-

“The Republic worries for Jen Sahara’s safety, without Bastila Shan’s aid,” Aramai murmured again. My brain seemed slow, fogged, but the intense need to trust this stranger was overwhelming. She held out a hand, and I glanced down at it briefly, my gaze catching on a hypoderm, before the pull back to her enigmatic gaze proved too hard to resist.

“This will lull Bastila into a deep recuperative sleep that will accelerate her healing, Zaalbar. You can help everyone, here.”

Her words sounded true. They *felt* true. And yet I was uneasy. I wished that Jen Sahara was here. She would know what to do. “(How can I trust you?)” I howled in confusion.

She blinked, and then held the hypoderm up, twisting it to show the label. “Here,” she said quietly. “It’s medical grade Tystullinium. Well known for its mental healing properties.”

The letters were meaningless to me. Mission had spent many hours on Taris attempting to teach me the written form of Galactic Basic, but learning to understand the spoken form had been enough for me.

“(I cannot read,)” I said hesitantly.

“Oh,” Her face fell. Her gaze pinned me once more, and her words seemed overtly heavy. “I am so concerned that if Bastila does not regain her strength, then Jen Sahara will succumb to the dark side of the Force. Jen Sahara *needs* Bastila Shan.” She was repeating herself, but her words were mesmerizing.

I could feel the fur on my arms standing on end. The strange part-human vocalized one of my deepest fears. *Madclaw.* It was as good a description of the Dark Side as anything else. And Jen Sahara had succumbed once. Aramai’s gaze was still boring into my own.

“We cannot win against the evil of the Sith if Jen Sahara falls, Zaalbar.” She paused, and her next words were slow and carefully enunciated. “Take it, Zaalbar. Help Bastila, inject her with this, and then bring her to me. I can examine her right here, in your docking bay where she is safe, and heal her. Everything will be better, you will see.”

My paw began to lift of its own accord, and Aramai smiled, still gazing at me intently. She dropped the hypoderm into my grasp.

“Go,” she commanded in a deep, authoritative voice. “Inject Bastila. Bring her to me. Help Bastila Shan and help Jen Sahara.” The words sank deep into my very bones, and the periphery of my vision darkened.

I had entered the Ebon Hawk without realizing it, walking along the chrome corridor towards the pilot’s quarters on auto-pilot. It was a relief, actually, to be able to trust a stranger that would aid us
all. The risks we were taking – Jen Sahara in particular – were frequent and concerning.

As I neared Bastila Shan, I could hear Carth Onasi talking over the communicator in the cockpit. I felt a brief stirring of curiosity as to what the others were doing, before Aramai’s words replayed themselves in my mind. Go. Inject Bastila. Bring her to me. Help Bastila Shan and help Jen Sahara. It would be so good to be of use once more!

The sleeping Jedi lay in front of me. Somehow, I had entered the room without being aware of it. Bastila’s form was smaller than I remembered, slight and lean. She had had more flesh on her bones in Taris, and that was after being imprisoned by that bullying swoop gang.

I looked down at the hypoderm in my paw, once again assailed with doubt. The letters printed on the side of the cylinder swam in my vision, but the first one looked like a ‘T’. I recalled all those times Mission had me recite the Galactic alphabet, despite my irritation. Now, I only wished I had paid more attention to my young charge.

Go. Inject Bastila. Bring her to me. Help Bastila Shan and help Jen Sahara. The echo rebounded in my mind, and I leaned over, tugging at a threadbare blanket and exposing one of the human’s pale limbs. Bastila was in such a deep sleep that she did not move, and I knew that Jen was concerned about her bond-mate. If this could help her, then it was the right thing to do.

With a grunt, I slowly turned Bastila’s arm, and placed the hypoderm against the skin. It was a quick movement to inject it into her arm, and the Jedi twitched once in her sleep, before sighing and settling again. I hesitated, suddenly confused, and lowered my head to listen for her heartbeat.

It was there, strong and slow, like the Jedi was sleeping deeply. Exactly what the part-human Aramai had said. I felt a renewed sense of assurance, and gently lifted Bastila Shan in my arms. We would make her better, and she would be able to help Jen Sahara once more.

I was outside the Ebon Hawk without realizing it, like my movement had become primal with no thought to my environment. I blinked in the docking bay, not seeing the stranger at first, until she came into view.

Had she been hiding? I thought in renewed suspicion.

She smiled at me, her gaze fixed on mine again. “Well done, Zaalbar. You have done the right thing,” she murmured, her words compelling and true. I have done the right thing. “Let me see what can be done.”

Aramai walked closer, and I felt strangely reluctant to unburden my precious cargo. Aramai did not look strong enough to carry her regardless, and I wondered exactly what this Republic agent could do, here, without any equipment or medication.

“I am skilled in psychic diagnosis and do not need equipment here,” Aramai said calmly, as if picking up on my doubts. “You are not required to do anything, Zaalbar, just hold Bastila while I examine her.” She raised a hand and made an indiscernible motion in the air.

“(Are you a Jedi?)” I asked warily, wondering what sort of power this medic wielded.

“No,” she said, her voice going tight for a brief second. “No,” she said again, but calmly this time. “My objectives are aligned with the Jedi Order, though, of course.” She made a murmuring noise under her breath as her hand rested gently on Bastila’s brow. “She is weaker than I suspected, Zaalbar, and her mind is greatly damaged.”

“(Jen Sahara said she felt weak in the bond they share,)” I howled mournfully. “(What can we do?)”

But Aramai’s hands had stilled, as she looked at me sharply. “Bond? What do you mean?”
I had the strange desire to explain all I knew to this Aramai. Somewhere, deep in the back of my mind, a faint howl sounded in anger, but it was overlaid with a fogginess that slowed my very thoughts. “(Bastila Shan and Jen Sahara share a Force bond. I do not understand it fully, but they can communicate over great distances, and aid each other through the Force.)”

I sensed, rather than saw, Aramai’s mouth drop open, as I was still fixated on her eerie yellow eyes. “A Force bond,” she whispered. “How unusual… how interesting.”

A feeling of discomfort, like I had released a secret of vast import, assaulted me suddenly, and my grip on Bastila Shan tightened. Is this the correct course of action? I wondered suddenly. Can this strange woman really be trusted?

“You can trust me, Zaalbar,” Aramai said firmly. “This is the correct course of action.” I was once more reassured. I barely noticed the docking bay or any of my environs, so focussed was I on the part-human standing in front of me. “It is a good thing you have told me, for it explains Bastila’s mental exhaustion. I know how to help her now, Zaalbar, and you can assist me.”

“(Is the bond a danger to her? To Jen Sahara?)” I asked suddenly.

Aramai hesitated at that question. “Perhaps it explains her injury. I must get her to my medical tank, Zaalbar, and we can revive her fully. It is not far from here. Come with me.”

My foot lifted with no overt command from my brain, but paused in the air. Deep, deep in the back of my mind I felt a discontent buffer against the cloud of trust I held for the woman.

“You can trust me, Zaalbar,” the woman said again, and as I stared deep into her gaze I realized it was true. I blinked, and was suddenly aware I was at the exit of the docking bay with no knowledge of how I arrived. I paused.

Aramai, two steps ahead, turned with a look of irritation. “Come, Zaalbar! You can trust me. I will help Bastila Shan and I will help Jen Sahara.”

Once more, the pull to her proved too strong to resist. My vision narrowed to the dark-haired medic walking in front of me, so all I could see was a tunnel with her figure leading me. Background noise sounded a distant hum in my ears, and I focussed on one foot in front of the other. She will help Bastila Shan and she will help Jen Sahara.

Aramai stopped suddenly in front of me and I blinked. Somehow, we had made it to another docking bay that looked much the same as the one the Ebon Hawk stood in. I did not know how I had travelled there. The fog sat heavy in my mind.

The bay was deserted bar a small freighter that was completely dwarfed by the large, open-roofed area. The ship did not look big enough to house a hyperdrive, let alone any advanced medical technology. Aramai stared deeply into my gaze.

“You have helped heal Bastila Shan. She will be much better now. Repeat it, Zaalbar.”

“(I have helped heal Bastila Shan. She will be much better now,)” I said mechanically. It was good that Bastila was feeling better.

“Place her down in the ship’s entrance,” she ordered, and I did as I was bid. Behind me, Aramai spoke soft words that didn’t register, so clouded had my thoughts become. A hard pressure was closing in all around my mind, like grasping fingers forcing me to stillness.

“Now, what am I to do with you,” she was murmuring, but the words weren’t directed at me, and I
barely heard them. Like the distant buzzing of gnit flies, they were easy to ignore. “I need time, time to leave this rock and transfer to another ship that can enter hyperspace. I cannot risk being discovered until I am well away. Hmm.” Aramai paused for a moment, and then strode back into view.

That piercing yellow gaze stared deep into my soul again, demanding obedience. “Bastila Shan is healed, now, and is sleeping back on the Ebon Hawk. You must go and guard her door, Zaalbar.”

“(I must go and guard her door,)” I repeated. The words were too compelling to ignore. Bastila was healed, now, and sleeping.

“Good boy,” she murmured, following it with a tinkling laugh, and somewhere deep, deep inside me, an anguished howl of despair was quenched by the ominous pull of the part-human stranger. My gaze had narrowed to pinpricks, and all I could see before me was the eerie glow of the mesmerizing yellow eyes. All I could feel was the overwhelming presence of the woman I trusted implicitly.

Aramai cleared her voice, and spoke loudly again. “Do not let anyone disturb Bastila Shan, Zaalbar. She is sleeping back on the Ebon Hawk, where you found her.”

“(She is sleeping back on the Ebon Hawk, where I found her,)” I echoed. There was a sick feeling in my gut, but it was not important. Doing as I was bid was important.

“One last thing. A message for Jen Sahara.” Aramai reached up, high, to grasp the fur on my chin. She was tall, for a human. Her gaze was all-encompassing. “Should Jen Sahara enter Bastila Shan’s room, you will remember that Kylah Aramai took her to Uthar Wynn at the Academy. Now, go! Go back to the Ebon Hawk and guard Bastila while she sleeps!”

I blinked, and suddenly I was back on the Ebon Hawk, standing guard outside the pilot’s quarters. There was a vague noise of conversation in the cockpit, but it was unimportant. Down in the depths of my mind, someone was howling a murderous scream of wrongness but it was small and tamped down by my primary objective.

All that mattered was the overriding desire to guard Bastila Shan while she slept.

xXx
::I’m going in.:: Jen’s voice breezed through the comm. ::I can sense two of them, not close. I’ll run to the other side of the caves and draw them to me. Wait for my command.::

I stared hard at the dots on the console; bright green lights indicating that Jen, Mission, Canderous, and that psychopathic droid were less than four klicks away from the safety of the Ebon Hawk. The partial map Mission had downloaded was overlaid on the ’Hawk’s navigational software, and it showed a warren of tunnels that ran about twelve klicks under the rocky mountains to the west, before exiting near the mining outpost on the other side. Jen’s half-cracked idea was to lurk about in this area, closer to the outpost, baiting those hideous creatures while the others turned sharply north. Deeper into the mountains and into uncharted territory, for the only maps Mission had located were of the trails that the traders commonly used. And none of them turn north.

But that, apparently, was where the ruins of an old Sith Academy and the Star Map resided.

::Objection: Master, I cannot protect you if you order me away to babysit teenage Twi’lek bra-::

::HK, you’re taking orders from Canderous now. See you on the other side, guys!::

It was risky. Even though Canderous was carrying all the grenades he owned, and that homicidal robot had a dozen hidden weapons. It still smacked of a perilous gamble, and yet we were all following Jen’s lead. I sighed.

“When safe, Jen,” I said. They’d left their communicators open since leaving the Ebon Hawk, and I was glad for that, even if it meant listening to HK-47’s deranged observations on the fragilities of organic meatbags.

One green dot broke from the rest, moving quicker than it had before, and I realized Jen was using the Force to enhance her speed. And to attract the terentateks. I’d done a little research on these warped rancors, and almost wished I hadn’t. They were gigantic, and their claws and tusks highly venomous. Faster and larger than rancors, they were drawn to Force-sensitives. More so if they actively used the Force. Our advantage was both Jen’s speed, and that some of these tunnels were too narrow for the terentateks to enter. But deeper, in the uncharted territory where the others were going, the caverns were likely to be larger. They had to be, for that was where the terentateks retreated when there was nothing left for them to devour.

I kept my eyes fixed on the moving green dot, tapping my fingers idly on the instrumental display. The first part of this mission was waiting, and that was always difficult.

Despite myself, my thoughts turned at once to my son, and the same disbelieving joy rushed through me. Dustil. I’d given up on him. I hated myself for it, but after months of searching Telos post the bombing, I’d given him up for dead. Succumbed to the depths of a bottle, and almost lost my career in the aftermath. And then, I turned around and sank my entire life once again into the Fleet. In a way, work had been as much an addiction as my brief dalliance with firewhiskey. Workaholic. Alcoholic. Anything to keep me busy so I wouldn’t focus on all I had lost.
At least my life in the Fleet had been productive, and I knew I was an asset to the Republic. That gave me a purpose, something to keep waking up for, as the light in my life had winked out the day that bastard Karath had sold out to Revan. At least Revan was dead, even if Malak was still kicking - and while killing Malak was a daydream for a non-Force sensitive like me, if I ever had the chance to face off Saul Karath I’d jump at it. Even now, I could barely reconcile the memories of the Republic Admiral who’d mentored me and shaped my career with the cold-blooded traitor who’d betrayed Telos and spearheaded the Sith Armada against the remnants of the Fleet he’d once served so proudly.

But Dustil’s still alive. That moment, when Jen had called me over, implying that some vicious Sithkid was in actual fact my son… I hadn’t seen him, at first. It was a foreign young man, glaring at me and Jen in hatred and shame and fury, and then, somehow, it was my boy, scared and damaged, but standing there in front of me, alive. Angry, though. So very, very angry.

I’d been an absent father and husband, I knew that. Morgana’s sharp remarks and hurt stares reminded me every time I made it home, and I’d sworn that, one day soon, I’d pull back from the front-lines and be there for her and Dustil. But my skills were needed, and every Mandalorian fighter I’d shot down, every Sith traitor I’d stopped - all of it was in the name of the Republic. I was a military man, always had been. And yet… my family had paid the price.

I sighed, still staring at Jen’s marker, now deep into the map. I had to have faith that, somehow, I could begin to repair whatever damage there was between Dustil and I. But first we had to get him back, and that meant trusting Jen. I frowned at the navigational console. I’d told Mission I’d give Jen a chance, a real chance, and it’d been easier than I expected. Jen had come back from her betrayal determined to redeem herself, and I respected that. Stang, I respected her. Everything she was accomplishing, her sharp intelligence and sheer willpower to see this mission through on the most cursed of planets…

But to trust anyone with the life of my son was a big ask. And yet, Dustil’s very reaction to me showed how little I could do. Add in his Force-powers, which I still found difficult to believe… Jen is adamant he’s strong. Strong enough to be the Headmaster’s protégé. How is that possible? It certainly wasn’t the life I would’ve chosen for my son, even had the Jedi Order picked him up rather than the murderous Sith. I’d never had much time for Force-users, who tended to make every situation more complicated and dangerous, and that was just the ones who walked in the Light. I remembered Karath, once, a lifetime ago, confiding to me that he wished there was no such thing as the Force. And then he swings around and follows that schutta Revan. At least the Jedi who’d fallen after Malachor had the excuse of the Dark Side; for the military commanders who’d followed them there was no such recourse.

And, since I’d met Jen, I was beginning to understand the dangers and the depths of the Dark Side. It put a different spin on the darker side of her personality that had been evident on Taris and Tatooine. The thought that my son had to battle it was terrifying.

::Status update, Jen:: directed the gravelly voice of the Mandalorian. ::The Bek brat’s so bored she’s threatening HK with a paint-job. Amusing as that may be, I ain’t gonna get caught in the cross-fire::.

::Statement: my colour scheme is a satisfying ominous red. Observation: Blue, on the other hand, would fit nicely on the bottom of an ocean somewhere::.

::I’m good:: Jen returned. ::Haven’t come across any bats. I’ve caught the terentateks attention – there’s two of them moving my way. They’re still some distance away, though. Wait for my command::.
“Don’t let them get too close, Jen,” I warned. “Make sure you have a narrow tunnel to fall back on. You’re heading into a large cavern with two east-facing exits, both of which head to the mining outpost. There’s also a large opening to the north. My bet is those beasts come from that direction.”

Of course Jen had a map, too, but she was highly focused on other distractions. Like the terentateks headed her way.

::Noted::

I vaguely heard Zaalbar walk up the corridor and stop outside the pilot’s quarters. He’d come in before, shortly after the others had left, and I thought I’d heard him enter to check on Bastila. I’d been about to see if everything was okay just as the others had started talking over the comm. When I’d finally poked my head down the corridor the Wookiee had gone, likely back towards the cargo bay where he spent most of his time. As long as he was inside I felt reassured, but if he was back and preferred to stand to attention outside Bastila’s door then I wasn’t going to stop him. I hadn’t liked the idea of him outside the ship earlier, but he had seemed intent on a last check of the ship before heading in. At least, that’s what I understood through his howls and hand motions.

I need to make a point of learning Shyriiwook, I realized wearily. It’s ridiculous that I can’t understand Zaalbar after all this time travelling together. I could recognize the sound he made in greeting, and was definitely familiar with the growl where he was objecting to either Mission or Jen doing something foolhardy.

That one is altogether too common, I thought wryly. And I know just how he feels.

::Stars, this is huge. And not empty::: I heard the click of Jen’s communicator turning off, and frowned. The green dot was moving fast through the large area, and it blinked ominously at me.

::Did she just turn the comm off?:: Canderous barked through the console’s speakers. ::While I’m left to play count-the-rocks with the kid?::

“Jen?” I said sharply. “Are you there?”

::I ain’t gonna wait around here while she’s gone silent:::

Another click was audible through the speakers, before Jen’s voice followed it. ::I’m out of the cavern. That was a good sized nest of shyracks just there:::

“Don’t turn the comm off, Jen,” I ordered. “Two seconds of silence and Ordo was about to go charging in like a hero.”

::Do you really need to hear me slaughtering bats, guys?:: Even through the static, her voice was amused.

::Statement: I cannot keep track of your kills without auditory input, master:::

::Keep the damn thing turned on::: Canderous’ frustrated voice shot back, for once in agreement with me. ::We need to know what’s going on in there:::

::Listen to the old geezer, Jen. We wanna know what’s happening, alright::: My brows shot up at Mission’s address, but Canderous just loosed a laugh. It wasn’t that long ago when he’d have threatened to knock her head against the wall for calling him that. I wasn’t sure if the Mandalorian had mellowed during the time we’d spent together, or if he simply enjoyed some camaraderie with the young Twi’lek. While I could never see him and me bonding over a drink, I had to admit his muscle was useful. And it was nice to see him treating someone other than Jen with more than just casual disgust. Because frankly, I was getting sick of the way he kept leering at her.
Okay guys, okay. Jen conceded. Look, the terentateks are getting closer now, and I'm still heading west. I think it's time for you to enter. Turn north as soon as you can.

The others assented, and I leaned forward to study the possible directions they could take. There were a couple of tunnels that arced north near the entrance before heading into the unknown. It seemed the obvious route.

"Keep your eye on the bio-scanner, Mission," I warned, even though I knew she would.

"Got it!"

"Statement: My internal biological scanners have a more precise location and a longer range than the sub-standard Czerka Tech personal bio-scanner that Gizka Spawn is ineptly wielding."

"Oh, shut it, you greasy piece of droid-rot."

I heard a muffled snort of amusement that I assumed came from Jen before everyone lapsed into a silence that echoed through the cockpit, broken occasionally by a patch of static. Jen was moving deeper into a long passage, one of the well-used routes towards the outpost. I could see the others entering the subterranean caves at a much slower pace, and felt my thoughts drifting once more.

Towards Dustil. Towards Jen. Waiting behind while the others struck ahead to find the Star Map was hard. Waiting for Jen to have time to extract Dustil was even worse.

I thought I understood her better, now, ever since I'd learned the awful truth of Deralia. And yet, I wasn't the one that had lived through it, for all that she had blacked it out. But I'd seen the effects of torture before, torture at the hands of the Sith. Talvon Esan, one of the shining heroes from Revan's Guard of Twelve, had been the first of the Jedi to turn Dark. I had a sick feeling in my gut whenever I thought of him, for I'd known him well, once. He, along with Saul Karath, had commanded the defence at Serroco against the Mandalorian advance.

But then, after Malachor, Talvon had turned into one of the most insanely vicious Dark Jedi that fought under Darth Revan's banner. I'd heard it was Darth Revan herself who put an end to him, suggesting that he was too bat crazy even for the Sith. My mouth twisted. Talvon had made a game of torturing captured soldiers just for fun, and some of the rescued had been men and women I'd known well. Some had never recovered, and all bore the scars from that insane piece of scum. And to think that Jen must have suffered the same, from Darth Revan or one of her underlings. It made me viciously glad that Bastila's strike team had put an end to that monster.

People have different ways of coping. I knew that, I understood why memory loss could happen after trauma. But damn it, Bastila had to come clean to Jen, if she hadn't already. Jen was floundering along, using the Force without any memory of her past as a Jedi, and back on Tatooine that had been a disaster waiting to happen.

Not so much now, though. I had to admit that. Here, on this twisted planet, Jen was coming into her own. I'd noticed.

"Yuck. This place smells awful. Mission complained. "It's like that horrible taste to the air outside, but worse."

"Keep your eyes on the 'scanner, kid."

"Yeah, yeah. There's nothing up ahead, or I woulda told ya."

As expected, they'd turned north, inching toward uncharted blackness. There was a stillness over us all for some time, a dearth of noise broken only by the occasional background cough or footprint that
made it through the communicator. We had no real way of telling how long these caves ran, so they were all equipped with extra food and water. Mission had found some information that suggested the old Academy was not more than a few hours trek, but that was from the diary of a Sith bounty hunter who’d been tracking a runaway Miraluka, and hadn’t sounded the most accurate source.

::Observation: Three life-forms detected within the next chamber. Probable Identification: shyracks.::

::Yeah, I got three blips, too,:: Mission said. ::Small, and up about ten metres high.::

I tensed. Three shyracks wouldn’t pose a threat, but even so, it was hard not to worry when I was the one sitting uselessly several klicks away. There was silence over the comm, cut through by the occasional patch of static, before it was broken by the sharp sound of blaster fire.

::Observation: That’s two kills to HK-47, and one to Geriatric Blockhead.::

::What did you call me, you rust-covered tin:::

::Guys, there’s another thing coming this way, it’s bigger and low down. It’s moving fast!::

Blasts crackled through the comm again, and my eyes remained fixed on the green dots. Jen was still advancing west at a rapid pace, but the other three remained stationary.

::Ew! What is that?:: Even through the ship’s speakers, Mission’s voice sounded horrified.

::Explanation: Commonly - - - - as a tuk’ata, they are essentially over-sized - - - - unique to Korriban and usually travel in packs.:: There was a patch of static as HK’s tinny modulator lost transmission over the link.

::Well, that’s - - - - count for at least three bats, circuit brain. That means I’m beating you,:: Canderous drawled.

::Conjecture: A life is a life, meatbag. Current count is HK-47: 3, Geriatric Blockhead: 2.:: HK’s inflection sounded indignant, for a droid.

I heard a derisive snort that could only be Mandalorian. ::Hey tin-- - - - I just squashed about a dozen bug-ants with my boot. Must be beating you twenty to three:::

::Observation: This area is devoid of life, insectoid or otherwise. Your mathematical skill is as accurate as your foot.::

::HK:: Jen’s voice cut through the squabble. She sounded amused. ::Quit picking a fight with the Mandalorian before he orders you to shoot yourself:::

::Statement: He - - - - master. I cannot - - - -,::

::Guys, - - - - scanner. There’s five of - - - -,::

“You’re breaking up,” I said in alarm. “Canderous, copy?”

::: - - - -:: The three dots that represented Mission, Canderous and HK-47 flickered on the console. Stang! I hadn’t expected interference to disrupt the comms, not with the specifications I’d seen from the ‘Hawk’s central computer, but they were under a lot of rock. My fists clenched as my unease grew, and I wondered if they’d double-back to regain contact or forge forward into the unknown.

::Sithspit:: Jen’s voice, still clear, had risen in pitch. ::They’re closer and faster than I thought:::
The three dots disappeared from the map entirely, and with a sense of mounting horror I swung my gaze back to Jen’s marker, comprehending her comment. She was near the edges of a huge cavern with a sweeping exit from the north, the eastern tunnel she’d come from, and a short nook to the west.

“Jen,” I said urgently. “That’s a dead-end. Double-back, there’s no way out other than towards the terentateks.”

::I can see an exit up ahead.::

And then I heard it. A vicious, alien roar that screeched through the speakers and sent chills down my spine.

“Jen, that doesn’t go anywhere! Get out of there!” But she didn’t listen. And the fear grew in my gut as she went deeper still into the cavern, the snarling sounds of a beast breaking into distortion through the cockpit. That reckless woman! Why doesn’t she turn around? Her marker swung to the side of the cavern, before shooting into the dead-end with faster speed than I’d seen yet.

“Jen!” I gasped, my mind filled with the horrifying vision of her body being slammed around by a poisonous claw. Another loud roar crackled through the internal speakers, and I was rocked back with the devastating thought of Jen being hurt. “Jen!”

The green dot blinked, unmoving, just within the dead-end that couldn’t be more than five metres deep. Long enough for a terentatek’s claw? Or had a deadly swipe propelled her in there, unconscious or worse? “Jen!” I screamed.

::I’m here,:: she gasped. ::They can’t reach me.::

Her voice, breathless but otherwise fine, had an immediate affect on my fear. The loud pounding in my ears slowly receded as relief took its place. I breathed in a deep, calming breath. “There’s no exit there, Jen!” I exclaimed. “Blast it, you’re trapped!”

::I know.::

I stared at the console in silence for a moment, half aware that my jaw had dropped, willing my heart to return to normal. And then, my fear flipped straight into anger. “Why- why didn’t you listen? You reckless, crazy idiot! Why didn’t you turn around?”

And all the while, the howling grunts and roars of those venomous monsters were radiating through to my ears.

::One ran in behind me. It caught me by surprise, it moved so frelling quick. Either my Force sense is shaky, or they’ve been holding back their speed until now.::

The way she said it, it was like crediting them with intelligence. More likely they’d been overcome with bloodlust at a potential meal.

“How much room do you have there?” I demanded, and realized my fists were still clenched. With effort, I unfurled them. “Are you safe?”

::Yeah. I’m not taking any chances here. I won’t move until they’ve cleared out.::

“If they clear out,” I muttered, still feeling tense. The others hadn’t reappeared on the map, and Jen was trapped. Completely trapped. Juhani hadn’t returned from the Academy, and Bastila was still out cold. My eyes closed briefly.
Can you check on Bastila?: Jen asked, reading my mind, her voice cutting out against a backdrop of snarling that made me grit my teeth. I could do with her advice, if she’s up to it.: I assented and stood, pulling my head through the hatch. Zaalbar was still there, standing guard. His expression looked oddly blank, and he didn’t seem to notice me until I spoke.

“Any stirring from Bastila yet?” I asked. Zaalbar jerked to look at me, and howled. I grimaced, and once more made an internal promise to learn his language. “Have you checked on her recently? Jen wants her counsel.”

Zaalbar howled again, louder, and motioned me away. The damn Wookiee actually looked angry.

“Okay, okay,” I muttered in exasperation. “We’ll let her sleep some more. Keep an eye out for the new Jedi waking up, okay? Don’t scare her.”

Zaalbar had already turned back, staring fixedly at the opposite wall as he stood outside Bastila’s door.

I frowned. I guess Wookiees take guard duty seriously. That’s a good thing. Zaalbar was pretty intense about his life-debt to Jen as well.

Back in the cockpit, I sat down and took a drink of my caffa. It was stone cold, hours-old, and the taste turned bitter on my tongue. I had another sip anyway, before once more talking to Jen.

“Bastila’s still out. Zaalbar’s keeping an eye on her.”

Yeah, Jen sighed. I guess I knew that. She’s really deeply asleep. Carth… she did some pretty powerful Force work when we were in Hord’s tomb. I’m worried she’s taken a step back in her recovery.: I stared at the lone green dot that was Jen, a small smile appearing on my face. Jen had come so far. She used to strongly dislike Bastila, and the feeling had been returned in some fashion by the Jedi. Maybe Bastila had come a long way, too.

Another alien snarl sounded over the comm. “Worry about yourself first, Jen. Stay focused on your environment.”

I’m fine, Carth, they can’t get in here.: We lapsed into a quiet that stretched out for minutes, interspersed with the occasional predatory roar that shook the speakers. Jen stayed unmoving, tight against the dead-end cave that must have only afforded her a metre or two of safety from their reach. My eyes kept flicking back to where the others would be, off the map and in the black. There was no sign of their presence, and I knew they were forging ahead. I sent an inward plea for safety their way, and wondered again at the necessity of sending Mission out with them.

After a lengthy silence, Jen spoke. Carth, I wanted to talk to you.: “Fire away,” I replied. Actually, there were about a dozen things I wanted to grill her on, too. “What better time than when you’re trapped by a couple of poisonous monsters?”

Hah.: There was silence over the comm again, like she was steeling herself to say something. I was about to prompt her when she finally voiced what was on her mind. Look, Carth, I ran into Dustil. Earlier, when I was looking for Juhani.:
I froze.

::He’s… he’s very angry, Carth. I think he’s done some… bad things.::

I could feel my shoulders tensing, as an irrational urge to snap back rose in my throat. Dustil had been a good kid – studious and friendly, if a bit quiet. The worst he’d ever done was sneak out to ride swoops, and heck, I’d been the galaxy’s biggest hypocrite scolding him for that after Morgana’s insistence. Although from what I heard he was actually proficient at it. I’d never been better than mediocre, the times I’d snuck out.

“We’ve all done bad things, Jen,” I answered finally, trying not to lash out. “Yourself included.”

::Carth, I’m not judging.:: She gave a laugh, a slightly surprised sound. ::Stars, no. No. I’m warning you.::

“Warning?” I frowned. “What do you mean? He’ll- he won’t-”

::Carth, you’re such a-:: She sighed. ::You’re a nice guy. I don’t think you understand-::

“Nice,” I said flatly, cutting her off. I felt my brows lowering. Nice? Nice? Was that really what she thought of me? A nice guy, someone to trust and think of like a brother, someone dependable and boring and-

Why was that bothering me so much?

I scowled. “Dammit, Jen, I’ve been fighting on the frontlines for most of my life. If you think I haven’t seen and done my share of questionable-“

::Carth!:: She cut in, and I could hear her frustration. ::I didn’t mean- look, it’s the Dark side, alright? Give me a chance to explain.::

I forced the glower from my face. “Fine. Go for it.”

I found myself staring fixedly at the green dot of her wrist-communicator, wondering how she was really doing, cooped up in a dark, cramped dead-end with nightmarish monsters guarding the outside. I realized, then, that I hadn’t heard any background noise from the terentateks for some time.

::Look, Korriban is so steeped in the Dark Side,:: she said finally. ::I don’t know how to explain it, just… think of those awful thoughts you have, deep down, the ones you’re ashamed of. The ones you hide in the deepest part of your mind, and curse yourself whenever you think of them. Korriban drags them to the surface. The Dark Side pulls them out of you. Promises you everything you desire. That annoying comrade who always makes you look like an idiot in front of others? There’s an easy way to deal with that, and no one will ever know it was you.:: She sighed. ::What about the superior who never gives you enough credit? A mind trick or two, and his opinion will change. And at first, it doesn’t hurt anyone, not really. At first it starts small.::

I wished she was here, telling me this. I needed to see her face. She sounded so melancholy.

::There’s power, too, and why shouldn’t other people listen to you if you’re stronger than them? And then you start doubting others and their motives… for you can’t trust anyone, and no one can trust you.:: She barked a laugh, cold and hard as ferracrystal. ::Kids like Dustil, going to Korriban off the back of a tragedy like Telos… they don’t have a damn chance, Carth.::

And that was the Dark Side, the cursed Dark Side that Jedi like Jen had to face every day. “What did he do, Jen?” I asked quietly.
She was silent for the longest time. I couldn’t hear anything over the comm, no snuffling or snarling from nearby terentateks, no static, nothing. Finally, she spoke. ::Betrayal. Torture. Stuff he doesn’t think he can be forgiven for. When we get him back, you’ve got to be his unconditional supporter, Carth. There’ll be enough judgment elsewhere.::

I had no return for that, so I sat there, staring at the green dot while my stomach clenched itself in knots. Torture. The very thought of my boy involved in something like that was beyond abhorrent. It didn’t… it didn’t seem possible. Could the Dark Side really twist my son like that?

I thought of Jen, scuttling the Ebon Hawk to run. Juhani had thought Jen had run from the Dark Side. I wondered if she ran to it, before the Dark Side had scared her so badly she’d turned straight back to the Light. One day soon I planned on getting it out of her.

And what about the real villains? Revan and Malak? Talvon Esan? I’d known Talvon well, and he went completely insane. Sadistically insane. That’s what the flipside of the Force does. And my son has to fight it.

I glared at the green dot on the console, suddenly angry that Jen doubted my capacity for supporting Dustil. Of course I’d forgive Dustil anything. He was my blasted son. But… this was part of his life now, the Force and its Light and Dark Sides. And that meant it was part of mine.

And Dustil was, by all accounts, a powerful Force-user. I’d heard those sorts of things usually ran in families, which was… puzzling, in our case. As far as I knew, none of my recent ancestors had any Force sensitivity. Morgana’s family was more of a mystery, however.

I frowned, trying to recall what I knew of Morgana’s past. She’d always been so reticent to talk about it, having been adopted by a Telosian ryee-corn farmer after her parents perished in a freak agri-equipment malfunction. I knew they’d fled to Telos shortly before Morgana’s birth, and had never quite slotted into our farming community. Morgana remembered little of her parents, or even what they had been running from – but she claimed they had been Telosian, originally.

It must have come from her side, then. Morgana was a free-spirited sort, quick with a snappy comeback, and generally content with her lot. She hadn’t wanted to move to Thani, the capital city. And how we’d argued about that, bitterly, even after she capitulated. I’d joined the Fleet young, and I wanted them nearby so they could visit when I was on base.

She never did, though. She never let Dustil either. Stang, we’d even had an impromptu midsummer party on base, where all the families of grounded Fleet personnel had been invited, to meet the famous Malak Devari when his armada docked briefly on Telos. Morgana never made it, and refused to let Dustil go with me – even though he was old enough, then, to be following the heroes in the Mandalorian Wars.

I stilled, trying to remember when I’d come across Jedi on my homeworld. Karath had worked closely with Talvon, and there’d been times Talvon had landed on Telos. Had Morgana ever encountered any Jedi? She’d always held an irrational dislike of them, and it ran deeper than the distrust that I had, that was fairly standard throughout the Fleet. I’d always put it down to her negative outlook on the Republic in general, due to the growing schism it was causing in our family. But maybe, there was something else there.

I shivered, cold suddenly. It didn’t seem possible. If there was any truth to the speculation that had started growing in my mind, then Morgana would have shared it with me. I’m really getting paranoid, now. Morgana had been my wife; my beautiful, sassy, impetuous wife. I suddenly felt disgusted with myself for thinking that she’d hold such a secret back.
“Yeah,” I sighed, drawing my attention back to Jen. “I’ll have Dustil’s back, Jen. I always will.”

“Be caref—”

There was a howl from behind, from beyond the cockpit, followed by a female scream of terror.

“Stang!” I cursed, jumping up to investigate.

Through the hatch, the stranger Belaya Linn was pushing herself back against the durasteel wall, hands resting against the pressure band I’d wrapped around her torso, panic evident on her pale, drawn face. The kolto injections would have stabilized and revived her somewhat, but I was surprised she was up and moving. Even with the support of the restraint, she would be in some discomfort.

Zaalbar was almost… snarling.

“Zaalbar!” I snapped, my brows lowering.

He was still standing outside the pilot’s quarters, and it looked like Belaya may have tried to walk past. Zaalbar turned at my voice, nodded, and then resumed his earlier position. His hairy face was composed; blank. Maybe I’d imagined that look of anger. Zaalbar stood towering in the corridor, his arms crossed and his head brushing the durasteel ceiling, as he stared fixedly ahead at the opposite bulkhead.

“Zaalbar, are you okay?” I asked frowning. The Wookiee looked at me, howled mournfully, and then snapped back to attention.

The sounds of harsh breathing directed my gaze back to the stranger. Her blue eyes were wide and fixed on the Wookiee in fright. Her light brown hair was damp with sweat, clinging to the sides of her neck, and her complexion was sallow.

“Belaya Linn,” I said quietly. Her head jerked to meet my gaze, face tightening in panic. I knew, then, the she’d run—if she only knew where to go. Last thing Belaya Linn remembers is probably that torture chamber Jen found her in, and now she's woken on a strange ship with a seven foot Wookiee snarling at her. I felt a deep surge of empathy for the human woman, and lifted a hand, palm open, in appeasement. “My name is Carth Onasi. I'm a captain with the Republic Fleet, and you are safe here."

Belaya's chest was rising with fast, shallow breaths, and her gaze darted back to Zaalbar. I grimaced. “That’s Zaalbar. He’s harmless, really, he just takes his guard duty seriously. Look – come into the cockpit, please. You can talk to Jen there.”

Some of the fear was fading from her face, but the unknown Jedi still looked wary as her scrutiny swung back to me. “Who?” she asked, her voice so reticent I barely heard it.

“Jen,” I said again. “Jen Sahara. She brought you here, do you remember?”

But Belaya looked blank.

“Tall human, about your age?” I prompted. She was still staring at me in puzzlement. “Dark hair,
green eyes, good looking?” I frowned. “Doesn’t take anything seriously?”

At that, a flicker of recognition lightened her drawn face, and I motioned her to follow, feeling uneasy at being away from the comm for so long. Belaya sidled along the corridor wall, attention flicking back to the Wookiee who was no longer looking at either of us. Zaalbar was acting odd. I knew he hated being left behind, especially if it was Mission or Jen heading out – and now that it was both... well, it probably explained his mood.

I opened the hatch, and Belaya hesitantly followed me in, her palms still held tight against her ribs. The pressure band would help some, and fortunately her rib fractures were aligned correctly, but she’d have to take it easy for awhile. And I knew it was uncomfortable to breathe in those torso bands, for all that they supported the abdomen.

*When Bastila wakes up, she can heal Belaya.* I recalled snapping at Bastila, once, when she’d inflicted Force healing on me without checking first. Maybe I’d been a little unfair.

*Bastila hasn’t exactly had an easy time of it.* No, and Jen’d had it even worse. Bastila had said that the Jedi never expected Jen to have the Force again. They’d never expected her to recover any memory of her past as a Jedi. Jen must have been so shocked, so utterly stupefied, when things started trickling back to her. Back on the Endar Spire, she’d been quiet and studious, hiding away from everyone like a frightened little hood-mouse. My mouth quirked as I recalled how she’d blushed the one time I’d looked her way.

*Was that who Jen Sahara was, before she joined the Jedi? A meek scholar whose life was upended by the Force?* I could accept that the Force might entirely change the course of a sentient’s life, but still... it was hard to imagine Jen as once being so utterly different in personality.

Belaya was standing awkwardly behind me. She shook her head at the proffered co-pilot chair, silently indicating her ribs as a reason, and I bit back a sigh. Stang, she’s quieter than Juhani. Belaya was probably, also, incredibly confused.

A vicious snarl ripped from the speakers, and Belaya jumped.

“Jen? You there?” I asked sharply. The green dot was moving at speed through the same cavern as earlier, making a beeline for the same dead-end. Distortion spat through the comm, and once more, I felt myself tensing.

::Yeah,: Jen gasped through the comm, as her marker stilled in the nook. ::Lured ‘em back. I’d be happier if the others would get in touch, Carth. I don’t like doing this blind.: :

“You’re not the one left behind,” I muttered, too soft to carry through the comm. Belaya huffed, and when I glanced her way, the Jedi was frowning in puzzlement.

“Who is Jen?” she asked. The speakers rattled with another alien roar, and Belaya flinched.

“Uh—” I turned back to the comm. “Jen, Belaya’s awake and standing behind me. She doesn’t seem to know who you are.”

::Belaya!: Jen’s voice was pleasantly surprised. ::How are you feeling? It’s me, Ness Jonohl.: :

I frowned. "Er, what? Ness who?"

::Ness Jonohl. That’s my name, Carth.: Jen paused. ::My Academy name, I mean.: :

“Oh,” Belaya said quietly. Her tone had dropped all suspicion, and now just held soft wonderment.
“Thank you for my life, Ness Jonohl. Or Jen Sahara.”

::You’re welcome. How are you doing?::

Belaya's expression had smoothed into a surprisingly good attempt at composure. "I am okay, Jen Sahara. Very confused about my current environment, but otherwise I am okay."

::Good.:: Jen replied. ::Carth, the terentakeks have gone again. Maybe something else is drawing them away. Or maybe they're too smart to hang around while I'm relatively safe.::

I heard an intake of breath behind me, followed by a pained moan. I winced in sympathy, remembering the time I’d fractured three ribs.

“Did you say terentakeks?” Belaya gasped. A crackle of static followed over the comm.

“Uh, yeah,” I answered for Jen. “She did.”

::It's a long story. We're trying to find something in the mountains.::

“Terentakeks,” Belaya whispered, eyes wide. “You really are the strangest Jedi I have ever met.”

I laughed at that. “Yeah, she is. She really is.”

::Hey!:: Jen's voice was mock-indignant. There was another spat of distortion from the speakers, but it didn't come from Jen this time.

::- - - - smell is - - - -::

“Canderous?” I said sharply. "Can you copy?"

::- - - - whining - - - -::


::Jen!: Mission’s voice, crackly with interference, rang through the cockpit, and I felt a smile of relief grow on my face. ::Hey, wow, this school must be closer to the surface if you lot can hear us again.::

::Statement: Master, we have achieved your objective. Permission to return to your side?:

::HK, you’re staying with Canderous until we’re all out,:: Jen returned. ::Hang on – have you guys found it?:

::Don’t start partying just yet, Jen.: Canderous warned. Belaya had moved a step closer, next to me, looking at the console in curiosity. Her expression was quietly intent. ::We’re near the entrance of what the kid reckons must be the school::

::It’s got the word ‘Academy’ engraved on it, chuba-brain!:::

“The Map,” I cut in. “Have you guys found the Map?”

::Yeah, it’s outside a half-broken tomb::

::Yes!: Jen crowed. ::Download the data, and move out!:::

::That’s the problem, Jen,:: Canderous shot back. ::We’ve spent the last ten minutes trying to open
this kriffing thing with no success.::

::Statement: The Star Map does not respond to sonic stimulation, percussion maintenance, or electrical current. There is no apparent mechanism on it that can be manipulated. Supposition: As it is considered a Dark Force relic, perhaps an organic sacrifice is the trigger?::

::I’ll try a mechanical sacrifice first, robot-brain.::

I frowned. “Well, what happened with the other Maps, Canderous? How did they open?”

::It wasn’t me, Republic. Bastila triggered the one on Tatooine, and the Cathar got the one in the ocean.::

I heard a noise behind me; I’d almost forgotten Belaya was listening in. Her brows had lowered, and she was staring at me in confusion. “Bastila?” she asked blankly. “Not- not Bastila Shan?”

::Oh sithspit!: Jen snarled. ::Sod it all! Bastila frelling told me, and I didn’t understand!::

“Did he- did he say there was a Cathar?” Belaya asked, voice rising in pitch.

::What do you mean, Jen?: Mission asked.

Jen heaved an angry sigh. ::Bastila told me we'd need a Force-user going after the Map. I assumed it was to draw the terentateks away, but she probably hadn't even heard the plan.::

A cold shiver ran through me as I understood exactly what Jen was saying. The Star Maps were Force relics, after all. I felt the dread as it slowly grew in the pit of my belly.

“It opens with the Force,” I said quietly. “You need a Force user to open the Map.”

::Yeah.::

xXx
Input – Mission Vao to Jen Sahara: “Jen, d’ya mean you’ve got to come here?”
Voice Stress Analysis: Shocked

Input (*Dynamic-class Freighter Communication Device*) – Jen Sahara: “I’m… open to suggestions.”

Input (*Dynamic-class Freighter Communication Device*) – Carth Onasi: “No way, sister. You start heading north and the terentateks will follow. At best you’ll be trapped, and at worst you’ll be dead.”

Closer Optical Examination of Environment:

Location: Shyrack Caves, Ten Klicks North-West From Ebon Hawk

Visual Identification Of Current Environment (Infra Red):
…Broken Wall Located To North
…Unopened Sarcophagus Located To West
…Metallic Relic Located To West:
Identification: Star Map (Assumption: Force Relic)

Primary Objective: Activate Star Map
…Factor: No Apparent Opening Mechanism
…Factor: No Effect From Sonic Transmission
…Factor: No Effect From Electrical Transmission
…Factor: No Effect From Percussion Transmission (Boot Of Canderous Ordo)
Conclusion: Force Power Required. Out Of Range Of Capabilities

Analyzing…
…Relic Origins: Unknown
…Metal Composite: Unknown

Searching Internal Database …Database Hit: Marka Ragnos: Force Relic Activation

Output: “Reiteration: Organic sacrifices have been known to quicken Dark Force artefacts, master. Reference: My internal database has a notation regarding a Force-powered golem used by the Sith Lord Marka Ragnos that quickened with the feeding of sentient blood.”

Input (*Dynamic-class Freighter Communication Device*) – Jen Sahara: “HK! Some other suggestion!”
Voice Stress Analysis: Annoyed

Input – Mission Vao: “Sheesh, HK, would you quit it already?”

Auditory Input: Amused Snort
…Source: Canderous Ordo
Input (Dynamic-class Freighter Communication Device) – Unknown Voice: “You need another Force-user in the caves. Someone said- someone said Bastila Shan – is she about?”
Voice Stress Analysis: Confused

Auditory Analysis: Source: Unknown Voice
…Gender: Female
…Age: Range: 26-33 Galactic Standard Years
Assigned Temporary Name: Addled Fleshbag

Input – Canderous Ordo: “That the new Jedi, huh? Belaya, was it?”
Permanent Name Assigned: Belaya to Addled Fleshbag

Input (Dynamic-class Freighter Communication Device) – Carth Onasi: “Bastila’s temporarily out of commission and Juhani’s still at the Academy. We’ve got to find some other way that doesn’t involve Jen taking on terentateks!”
Voice Stress Analysis: Frustrated

Input – Canderous Ordo: “Don’t suppose you’re up for a trip down here, Belaya?”

Input (Dynamic-class Freighter Communication Device) – Carth Onasi: “Belaya: “What… did you say Juhani?”
Voice Stress Analysis: Shocked

Input (Dynamic-class Freighter Communication Device) – Jen Sahara: “Not with broken ribs, Canderous. Belaya should still be resting.”

Input (Dynamic-class Freighter Communication Device) – Belaya: “Juhani?”
Voice Stress Analysis: Stunned

Input (Dynamic-class Freighter Communication Device) – Jen Sahara: “Are you alright, Belaya? Do you… do you know Juhani?”
Auditory Input: Surprised Gasp …Source: Jen Sahara

Input (Dynamic-class Freighter Communication Device) – Jen Sahara: “Belaya Linn! Now I know where I’ve heard your name before!”
Voice Stress Analysis: Surprised

Permanent Name Modified: Belaya Linn to Belaya

Input (Dynamic-class Freighter Communication Device) – Belaya Linn: “No… no I cannot believe this.”
Voice Stress Analysis: Disbelieving

Output: “Statement: We are deviating from our primary objective with all this meatbag waffling, master.”

Input – Mission Vao: “What’s your problem with meatbags anyway, HK?”
Output: “Statement: I just don’t like organic meatbags. Except for the master, of course. Ha ha.”

Input (Dynamic-class Freighter Communication Device) – Jen Sahara: “Belaya, do you know Dak as well? He and Juhani spoke of you. What… what were you doing at the Academy?”
Input (*Dynamic-class Freighter Communication Device*) – Belaya Linn: “Dak? No... no this is some sort of trap… this is just like that monster Dustil tricking me again!”
Voice Stress Analysis: Hysterical

Output: “Observation: Addled Fleshbag Meatbag is sinking into hysteria, Master. You organic meatbags are so mentally fragile.”

Auditory Sensors Tracking: Scuffling Noise Detected

Input (*Dynamic-class Freighter Communication Device*) – Carth Onasi: “Dustil?”
Voice Stress Analysis: Confused

Biological Sensors Tracking: One Unknown Life-form in Targeting Area

Analyzing…
… Match: Probable Humanoid Shape
… Distance: Ten Metres Behind Crumbling Wall

Input – Mission Vao: “Far out, guys, who is this Dustil fella you keep talking about?”

Physical: Primary Blaster Primed
Physical: Moving to Wall

Input (*Dynamic-class Freighter Communication Device*) – Belaya Linn: “I will not stay here to be betrayed again!”
Voice Stress Analysis: Hysterical

Optical Sensors Focussing on Unknown Threat


Audio/Visual Tracking: Canderous Ordo Flanking HK-47

Input (*Whispered*) – Canderous Ordo: “What’s up, robot-brain?”

Input (*Dynamic-class Freighter Communication Device*) – Jen Sahara: “Belaya, listen to me. Juhani is one of our crew. This is no trap, she’s just gone back to the sodding Academy to try and talk some sense into Dak.”

Physical: Breaching Wall

Optical Sensors Focusing On Organic Meatbag:
Target Analysis:
Species: Human, Female
Facial Recognition Result: Negative
Body Language Analysis: Shocked – Determined - Wary
Direct Threat Assessment: Moderate
Visual Analysis: Torn Bloodied Clothing, Gaunt, Dirty Appearance
Analysis: Organic Meatbag Has Been Here For Days
Temporary Name Assigned: Fetid Cave-Dweller

Input – Canderous Ordo to Fetid Cave Dweller: “Hands up where I can see ‘em, stranger!”

Target Lock: Fetid Cave-Dweller
Input – Canderous Ordo: “Hold fire, HK!”

Initiating Combat...
Hidden User Defined Sub-Routine Activated: Master Command Required
…Constraint: Obey Orders Of Canderous Ordo (Temporary Master) Until Reunited With Jen Sahara (Current Master)
Attempting Safety Override...
...Factor: Active Order To Hold Fire From Canderous Ordo (Temporary Master)
...Factor: Fetid Cave-Dweller Is A Moderate Direct Threat To Safety Of Canderous Ordo (Temporary Master)
Override Failed
Exiting Combat Mode

Output: “Statement: I am ready to fire at your command, Geriatric Blockhead.”

Input (Dynamic-class Freighter Communication Device) – Carth Onasi: “Belaya, come back!”

Input – Fetid Cave-Dweller: “Put your toys away! If I meant you harm, you would have already felt it.”
Voice Stress Analysis: Hostile

Input – Canderous Ordo: “Bold words for someone who’s got two blasters pointed at her head. What the kriff are you doing here?”

Input – Fetid Cave-Dweller: “Looking for a way out, same as you I’d wager.”

Auditory Input: Derisive Snort
…Source: Canderous Ordo

Output: “Observation: Judging by your attire, Fetid Cave-Dweller, you success has been limited.”

Input – Fetid Cave-Dweller: “I mean it, point those things away!”
Voice Stress Analysis: Angry

Analyzing…
…Factor: Fetid Cave-Dweller Does Not Fear Imminent Death
…Factor: Body Language Analysis States Fetid Cave-Dweller Ready to Fight
Conclusion: Fetid Cave-Dweller Has Additional Unknown Weapons Or Advantage

Modification: Direct Threat Assessment: High

Physical: C-22 Flame Carbine Powered On Target Lock Continued: Fetid Cave-Dweller

Input (Dynamic-class Freighter Communication Device) – Jen Sahara: “Who’s that?”

Input – Mission Vao: “Sheesh, guys, calm down okay? I bet she’ll be happy to get out of here with us if you just put your guns down.”

Input – Fetid Cave-Dweller: “I’d listen to the Twi’lek, if I were you.”
Voice Stress Analysis: Belligerent

Input – Canderous Ordo: “You haven’t answered my question. What are you doing here?”

Input – Mission Vao: “Look, don’t worry about them. I’m Mission, by the way. That old geezer is Canderous, and the psycho droid is HK. Sheesh, Jen, can you tell HK to put his weapons away?”
Input – Fetid Cave-Dweller: “You can call me May. How the frakk did you avoid the terentateks?”

Permanent Name Assigned: May to Fetid Cave-Dweller

Input – Mission Vao: “They leave non Force users alone, right?”

Input – May: “This deep in the caves they go after anything that breathes. Which won’t include you lot, if you haven’t put those weapons away in five seconds.”

Input (Dynamic-class Freighter Communication Device) – Jen Sahara: “May, is it?”

Input – May: “Four seconds.”

Input (Dynamic-class Freighter Communication Device) – Jen Sahara (Mando’a): “Beware, she’s a Force User.”

Modification: Direct Threat Assessment: Severe
Analysis: Force-Sensitives Attract Terentateks
Indirect Threat Assessment: Severe

Input – Mission Vao: “Don’t be stupid, you guys, put your guns down!”

Physical: FC-1 Flechette Launcher Loaded
Target Lock Continued: Fetid Cave-Dweller

Input – May: “Three seconds.”

Initiating Combat...
Hidden User Defined Sub-Routine Activated: Master Command Required Attempting Safety Override...
...Factor: Active Order To Hold Fire From Canderous Ordo (Temporary Master)
...Factor: May Is A Severe Direct Threat To Safety Of Canderous Ordo (Temporary Master)
...Factor: May Is A Severe Indirect Threat To Safety Of Canderous Ordo (Temporary Master)
...Factor: Force User Required To Activate Star Map
Override Successful (Conditional)

Physical: Kamino Saberdart Readied
Target Lock Continued: Fetid Cave-Dweller
Physical: Firing Kamino Saberdart

Visual Tracking: May Collapsing To Ground

Input – May: (Indistinct Scream)

Input – Canderous Ordo (Mando’a): “Damn!”

Input – Mission Vao: (Scream)

Input (Dynamic-class Freighter Communication Device) – Jen Sahara: “What’s going on?”

Output: “Statement: Severe Direct Threat Has Been Neutralized, Master.”

Input – Mission Vao: “You… you killed her! You insane, awful, monster!”
Voice Stress Analysis: Hysterical

Input (Dynamic-class Freighter Communication Device) – Jen Sahara: “HK, stand down! That’s an
Voice Stress Analysis: Furious

Output: “Assertion: May has been neutralized, not eliminated.”

Input (Dynamic-class Freighter Communication Device) – Jen Sahara: “What did you do, HK?”
Voice Stress Analysis: Furious

Visual Tracking: Canderous Ordo Moving To Examine May

Sensor Scan:
Target: May
…Location: Lying Immobile Cavern Floor
…Physical Analysis: Injected With Foraxyn-4 Loaded Saberdarts. No Further Signs Of Physical Distress
…Body Language Analysis: Unresponsive. Chest Rising In Accordance With Normal Breathing Patterns. No Further Signs Of Physical Distress
…Infra-Red Analysis: Body Temperature Falls Within Range Of Normal Human Parameters
Conclusion: May Is Unconscious But Healthy
Conclusion: Severe Direct Threat Nullified

Output: “Statement: I classified Fetid Cave-Dweller as a severe direct and indirect threat to the survival of Canderous Ordo, master.”

Input – Canderous Ordo: “She’s alive, but knocked out. What the kriff did you inject her with, Tinhead?”

Input (Dynamic-class Freighter Communication Device) – Jen Sahara: “Last time you did that, HK, you damn well killed someone without my direct order. Are you saying May is still alive?”

Output: “Explanation: You informed me that she was a Force-user, master. Extrapolation: Fetid Cave-Dweller’s body language suggested that an attack from her was likely. Seeing as we could benefit from her assistance to achieve our primary objective, I acted with haste to ensure we gained the upper hand.”

Input – Mission Vao: “She’s… she’s not dead?”

Input (Dynamic-class Freighter Communication Device) – Jen Sahara (muttered): “Sun and stars.”

Output: “Suggestion: Fetid Cave-Dweller will wake within a half hour unaided. Restraining her beforehand is a sensible course of action.”

Input – Mission Vao: “Yeah, ’specially since you attacked her, you psycho heap of metal.”

Input (Dynamic-class Freighter Communication Device) – Jen Sahara: “Okay, here’s what we’re going to do. Canderous, can you restrain her? Frelling sit on her for all I care. Put the comm right next to her face, and shoot her with an adrenastim. I need to talk to her with no one else interfering, you got that? And HK – remind me to re-program you.”

Output: “As you wish, Master.”

Hidden Subroutine Initiated: Order From Master: Set Reminder Regarding Reprogramming
…Factor: Re-programming May Hinder Primary Objectives
…Factor: Re-programming May Reduce Capabilities
…Analysis: Order From Master: Parameter Missing
Internal Clock: Reminder Set For 999999 Standard Days

Visual Tracking: Canderous Ordo Restraining May With Plysteel Rope

Input *(Dynamic-class Freighter Communication Device)* – Jen Sahara: “Carth, Belaya, you guys there?”

Visual Tracking: Canderous Ordo Straddling May

Input – Canderous Ordo: “Say the word and I’ll inject her. Better sweet-talk her quick, Jen, ‘cause she ain’t gonna be happy when she wakes.”

Physical: Kamino Saberdart Readied Target Lock: May

Output: “Statement: Fetid Cave-Dweller is under target lock, Master.”


Visual Tracking: Canderous Ordo Injecting May With Adrenastim

Sensor Scan:
Target: May
…Location: Lying Immobile Cavern Floor
…Body Language Analysis: Stirring
Conclusion: May Is Waking

Auditory Input: Moan
…Source: May

Input – Canderous Ordo To May: “Don’t bother struggling, ain’t no way you’re getting up unless I let you up. Here, there’s someone who wants to talk to you.”

Auditory Input: Groan
…Source: May

Visual Tracking: May Struggling
Facial Analysis: (Source: May): Murderous

Input – May: “I’m gonna frakking kill you!”
Voice Stress Analysis: Hostile

Input *(Dynamic-class Freighter Communication Device)* – Jen Sahara: “Thalia May, if you want to get out of here and off Korriban, you will listen to me very closely and not move a muscle.”
Voice Stress Analysis: Authoritative

Permanent Name Modified: Thalia May To May

Input – Thalia May: “And who the frakk are you?”

Visual Tracking: Thalia May Tensing

Input *(Dynamic-class Freighter Communication Device)* – Jen Sahara: “A Force-user who can draw the terentateks away from you long enough to escape these caves.”

Input – Thalia May: “Frakk off!”
Voice Stress Analysis: Belligerent

Input (Dynamic-class Freighter Communication Device) – Jen Sahara: “Calm the frell down and listen, Thalia. This is your chance to get out of here in one piece. I say again: I can draw the terentateks away from you, so you can escape the caves.”

Facial Analysis: (Source: Thalia May): Uncertain

Input – Thalia May: “Get that mercenary off me and we’ll talk.”

Input (Dynamic-class Freighter Communication Device) – Jen Sahara: “Listen to me, Thalia. You hurt any of my crew, under any circumstances, and I will run to that damn forgotten Academy and gut you myself. And bring the terentateks with me. Are we clear?”

Input – Thalia May: “Clear as ferracrystal.”

Input (Dynamic-class Freighter Communication Device) – Jen Sahara: “Canderous, move.”

Visual Tracking: Canderous Ordo Moving to Flank HK-47

Input – Thalia May: “So you’re the leader of this merry band of misfits, huh? A Force-user, and you know my name. You’re a Sith. You’re trying to lure me back to Uthar! I’d rather be killed than go back there!”

Voice Stress Analysis: Hostile

Input (Dynamic-class Freighter Communication Device) – Jen Sahara: “I’m a Jedi Knight posing as an Initiate, Thalia. I probably landed here the day after you ran.”

Output: “Observation: Fetid Cave-Dweller looks ready to fight, master.”

Input (Dynamic-class Freighter Communication Device) – Jen Sahara: “Thalia! We’ve promised Kel a way off Korriban!”

Input – Thalia May: “What?”

Input (Dynamic-class Freighter Communication Device) – Jen Sahara: “Think, Thalia, would a Dark Jedi really send mercenaries after you? Sun and stars, everyone thinks you’re dead!”

Input – Thalia May: “I… frakk. I almost was dead. It was only luck that had those sithspawn terentateks eat my friends and not me. If… If what you say is true, then what the frakk are you doing here?”

Voice Stress Analysis: Wary

Input (Dynamic-class Freighter Communication Device) – Jen Sahara: “We’re after a Force relic. Turns out it needs Force power to activate it. You help us, Thalia, and we’ll get you out of these caves. Stars, you can even join Kel if you want.”

Input – Canderous Ordo: “You gonna taken every kriffing wannabe with us, Jen? What, start a school of your own?”

Voice Stress Analysis: Disgusted

Output: “Statement: Travelling with Fetid Cave-Dweller would pose an unnecessary risk to both you and the organic meatbags you value so strangely, master.”

Input (Dynamic-class Freighter Communication Device) – Jen Sahara: “Or you can make your own
way out, Thalia. Regardless, we’ll get you to Dreshdae.”

Input – Thalia May: “And how do I know you won’t turn on me?”

Input (Dynamic-class Freighter Communication Device) – Jen Sahara: “You need my help to get out of here, so I don’t see you have much choice. If you refuse to help us, then I’ll have to make my way to you to open the relic, and then I’ll really be pissed. Not to mention that I’ll likely have the terentateks in tow.”

Input (Dynamic-class Freighter Communication Device) – Carth Onasi: “You are not heading towards those terentateks, Jen.”


Input (Dynamic-class Freighter Communication Device) – Carth Onasi: “Yeah. I convinced Belaya to come back, she’s listening in. I… Well, we’ll talk later.”

Input (Dynamic-class Freighter Communication Device) – Belaya Linn: “I am listening, for now.”

Input (Dynamic-class Freighter Communication Device) – Jen Sahara: “Thalia, do we have a deal?”

Input – Thalia May: “Remove these restraints first, and then we’ll see.”

Input (Dynamic-class Freighter Communication Device) – Jen Sahara: “Canderous, do it. Thalia, remember what I said about gutting you.”


Input (Dynamic-class Freighter Communication Device) – Jen Sahara: “I never said I was a particularly good one.” Voice Stress Analysis: Amused

Visual Tracking: Canderous Cutting Plysteel Rope

Visual Tracking: Thalia May Standing

Modification: Direct Threat Assessment: High

Input – Mission Vao: “So, you’re a runaway from that horrid school, huh? One thing I don’t get, though. How come those scary rancor things didn’t follow you here?”

Input – Thalia May: “I’m not sure. This place it… feels weird. In the Force, I mean. Terentateks are drawn to the Dark Side, but they won’t come in this cavern.”

Input – Mission Vao: “Well, this is the relic we need. Jen reckons it needs some sorta Force thing to open it.”

Visual Tracking: Thalia May Investigating Star Map (Assumption: Force Relic)

Visual Tracking: Thalia May Making Physical Contact With Star Map (Assumption: Force Relic)

Input: Electromagnetic Sensor: Electromagnetic Fluctuations Detected Within Star Map

Visual Tracking: Star Map Opening
Sensor Scan:
Target: Star Map
…Illumination: Galactic Navigational Map
Analyzing…
…Analysis: Unknown Routes Plotted
…Analysis: Several Planetary Systems Missing
Conclusion: Data Is Incomplete
…Analysis: Several Star Systems Misaligned: Error Margin Falls Between 0.001% - 0.0015%
Hypothesis 1: Star Map Contains Incorrect Data
Hypothesis 2: Star Map Is Significantly Dated

Input – Mission Vao: “Whoa!”
Voice Stress Analysis: Awed

Testing Hypothesis #2:
…Analyzing: Plotting Course Of Star Systems: Orbits Match Reign Of Builders
Conclusion: Star Map Is Within 25,000 – 35,000 Galactic Years Old

Input – Canderous Ordo: “Download the data, kid, and get it to the ‘Hawk.”

Secondary Objective: Download Star Map Data
Tertiary Objective: Transmit Star Map Data To Ebon Hawk
…Attempting Wireless Connection: Failed

Input – Mission Vao: “Onto it!”

Physical: Moving To Star Map
…Attempting Internal Connection: Succeeded
…Attempting Data Download: Initiated

Input – Mission Vao: “Hey HK, get out of there!”

Data Download Complete
Secondary Objective: Download Star Map Data: Complete

Output: “Statement: Certainly, Gizka Spawn.”

Physical: Disconnecting From Star Map.

Visual Tracking: Mission Vao Connecting Datapad to Star Map

Input – Mission Vao: “Alright, give me a few minutes to work this thing out, guys.”

Transmitting Data To Ebon Hawk: Initiated

Input – Mission Vao: “I think I got this started, but it may take awhile.”

Transmitting Data To Ebon Hawk: Complete
Tertiary Objective: Transmit Star Map Data To Ebon Hawk: Complete

Output: “Assertion: Star Map Data has already been transmitted to the Ebon Hawk.”

Primary Objective: Activate Star Map: Complete

Input (Dynamic-class Freighter Communication Device) – Carth Onasi: “Uh, I’m getting the data
through now. Looks like psycho droid’s right.”

Input – Mission Vao: “Huh.”
Voice Stress Analysis: Disgruntled

Internal Response: Satisfaction

Output: “Observation: You are not a droid, and therefore your skills are limited by the physical capabilities of your meatbag extremities. Or somesuch.”

Input (Dynamic-class Freighter Communication Device) – Jen Sahara: “Have you got it all, Carth?”

Input (Dynamic-class Freighter Communication Device) – Carth Onasi: “Yeah. Transmission Complete. Hang on, let me double-check… yeah, it’s all there. You’ve done it, guys!”
Voice Stress Analysis: Pleased

Input – Mission Vao: “Yeah!”
Voice Stress Analysis: Exuberant

Input – Canderous Ordo: “Now, we just need to get out of here.”

xXx
Harsh breath scraped through my lungs like sandpaper as I ran for all my worth, Force propelling my burning muscles as a nightmarish howl of fury reverberated around me. My ears rang and my heart pounded with the beat of fear as I realized that their speed was at least equal to my very best.

Get out, fool! My senses told me one was only metres behind, and this cavern stretched inordinately long. Salvation in the form of a narrowing tunnel lay just beyond. Jump!

I leapt high into the air, the Force spring-boarding me wildly forward just as a terentatek pounced with a resounding thud onto the hard, rocky cave floor underneath. The stagnant air whistled against my face as I sailed towards the exit, the granite walls narrowing as I flew ever closer, landing at last with a stumble, and smashing into the side wall.

A sharp burst of pain blossomed as my shoulder crunched into unyielding rock, and then everything went black.

…

“Well, that was… lucky,” a voice was murmuring by my ear, trailing gentle kisses along my neck. I was gasping, my eyes squeezed shut, as the adrenaline subsided and generic pain overrode it. I could feel his Force senses over me, checking me, touching me, probing for any injury. “Minor concussion, whiplash, a fractured rib – to be expected when a terentatek slams you against a rock wall. Stars, at first I thought its claws got you.”

His arms were warm and firm around me in the darkness, a calm cage of safety that gently soothed my frantic heart. My visor had broken, and my hold on the Force was shaky at best. I focused on my breathing, slowing it down to a manageable level.

“That was… lucky,” I muttered at last, leaning into his warmth.


I let out a weak chuckle, and grimaced as my ribs complained. I wasn’t going to be feeling happy tomorrow. “How the frell are we going to get past three of those bastards?” I whispered.

“Two.” His voice was smug. It took a moment to understand.

“Two?” I echoed in disbelief. “Sithspit, did you get one?”

“A krayt dragon and now a terentatek. I think I made the wrong career choice.”

“Jen?”

…

The memory faded, as it always did, and I became aware of my current position, huddled against the damp sides of a rocky tunnel. An imitation of my past, it seemed.

:::Jen? Can you copy?::: Carth demanded from my wrist. I hadn’t the strength to answer just yet. The
air had been knocked from my lungs, and a throbbing pain pounded through my shoulder. As I struggled to breathe, a loud roar shook the ground underneath me, and I glanced back to where I’d come from.

My visor had a crack running blurrily through it and was hissing an electronic protest, but it was the Force that showed me the monstrous limb edging down the tunnel too narrow for the terentatek’s girth. The razor-sharp claw was scraping against the rock ground, only metres from my position. I groaned, and ripped the useless visor off, hurling it unceremoniously toward the monster.

It clattered futilely off the reptilian limb.

::We’re back on the map, back on the trade route,:: Canderous relayed through the comm. ::Jen, get your arse out of the caves.:.

I closed my eyes, ignoring the venturing claw, and leaned back against the mildewed sides of the subterranean tunnels. The details of the flashback had frayed already, but it wasn’t anything new. I’d already known I’d been on Korriban before, after that lovely meeting with Jorak Uln. Ness Jonohl had been here before, and with her boyfriend, no less.

How could I feel grief, for someone I couldn’t quite remember? Had he died? Had he been just one more casualty of Darth Revan? What, exactly, had we been doing on Korriban? No, not what. Why, is the key question. Bastila told me that I’d never fallen. So it must be what I surmised earlier, then, that I’d been following Revan’s trail. With a man I loved, who was powerful enough to take on krayt dragons and terentateks.

Before Jen and Revan had died, and been forced into my mind.

::Jen? Are you there?: Carth’s voice was agitated, and I realized I hadn’t responded.

“Yeah,” I murmured into the wrist-comm. A loud roar echoed again, and the wall behind me shook as the foreleg slammed angrily against the side wall. A shower of dust sprayed into my face, and I coughed.

::Are you hurt?:

I stood slowly, wincing as I rolled my shoulders, but it appeared to be no more than superficial bruising. A body slam into solid rock wasn’t particularly healthy for anyone, but I appeared to have come off lighter than I had once before.

I took a deep lungful of air, noting my breathing had recovered, and the pain in my shoulder began to subside. I’d been lucky, it seemed.

“I’m good. Moving out now,” I answered.

I turned my back on the snarling terentatek, drawing on the Force around me and pulling a datapad out in consultation. A shattered screen made me grimace.

“Map’s broken, Carth. Can you lead me out?”

Carth’s voice was strong and sure as he guided me east, through one last cavern that was large enough to pose a threat. But the frustrated howls of the salivating terentateks had not caught up to my progress, and my unnaturally increased celerity was more due to my own fear than any real need. I ignored the remnants of the shyrack nest this time, keen only to escape the suffocating darkness and rendezvous with my crew.
My shoulder throbbed weakly as the tunnels narrowed, and I began to believe the end of the shyrack caves was near.

::You’re almost out, Jen.:: Carth’s voice, welcome and constant, emitted from my wrist. ::The others are waiting.::

We’d done it. I didn’t have the strength to celebrate, not yet, but the feeling was growing deep in my belly. After Manaan, after Tatooine, I’d finally come to the frelling party and we’d got the Star Map. Bastila, when she finally woke – and I tamped down my growing concern about her vagueness through the bond – would be ecstatic. We could move on to Kashyyyk, to a planet safer than this one.

To her Masters. Yeah, there was that. But Ness Jonohl didn’t have to fear them, right? Surely, I could show I was strong enough to keep Darth Revan at bay. I was managing to, with Bastila’s help and Juhani’s support. I wondered, not for the first time, if Jen Sahara’s identity was thought to be a better cage for Evil Bitch than Ness Jonohl. Was that why they’d turned me into Jen?

The same questions still buzzed through my mind ever since the frelling Endar Spire. Would there ever come a time when I’d understand it all? Would there ever come a time when I’d be at peace?

The tunnel spilled out into the clearing of the Mandalorian duel, lit only by the vague radiation of nearby stars. It was night already, and beyond stood a small group of shadowy figures. My crewmates. I came to a stop, panting, feeling the ache in my shoulder return as the Force retreated.

“Jen!” Mission squealed, bounding over to me. Ten steps, and my arms were full of exuberant Twi’lek.

“Oof!” I exclaimed, staggering back several places as my arms encased her briefly. My shoulder spasmed in complaint, and my arm dropped.

“We did it!” she cheered, letting me go. Even in the dim light, I could clearly see her beaming grin. “We actually did it!”

I smiled back, enjoying her relief as my gaze moved further afield. Canderous, walking closer, had a quiet look of satisfaction on his weathered face - from what I could see under the visor he wore. HK-47 had his sights focused on the Sith fugitive.

I took a few steps closer to acknowledge her.

“Thalia May,” I said quietly. “Thank you for your assistance.”

The human woman was younger than I expected, maybe about Mekel’s age, with short cropped hair and black skin that faded into the Korriban night shadows. The whites of her eyes gleamed as she eyed me over.

“Well, I guess I should thank you for getting me out of there. I’ve had enough of caves to last me a lifetime.”

Her voice was wary, as wary as her tense posture. Even now, I suspected she didn’t quite believe we weren’t planning to send her back to Uthar. I grimaced. Enough time spent at that cursed Academy would kill anyone’s trust.

“Why’d you run, Thalia?” I asked, aware that my tone was abrupt. In the darkness, I could see her eyes close once, briefly.
“Uthar ordered me to do something he knew I’d be unwilling to.”

Her words were short, angry, and I remembered that she’d been hiding in the cursed caves with friends. Friends who were now well dead. *Uthar tested her, and she failed him. By the sounds of it, he knew she would. Did he send her to her death, like he’d done to Mekel?* Thalia May, it seemed, was yet another Sithling not quite taken with the darkness that Korriban offered.

“You were one of Yuthura’s,” I realized, surprised despite myself. For it was Yuthura Ban who’d first sent me after her, before I’d even stepped foot in the Academy. Yuthura Ban, who’d undoubtedly thought Thalia long dead. Thalia snorted, but didn’t respond. “What’s your goal now, Thalia?”

“You said you’d get me to Dreshdae. I’ll make my own way from there.”

“Let’s get back to the ship.” Canderous grunted. I nodded, and we started the trek back. We stayed in relative silence, apart from the occasional excited comment from Mission who was quickly hushed by the Mandalorian. I could understand his unease, I wasn’t willing to celebrate either until we were in the relative safety of our durasteel freighter.

It was a short walk back to Dreshdae, and soon the lights of the colony shone in the distance. My only thought was our destination of the Ebon Hawk, and maybe it was my pre-occupation that caught me off-guard. I had absolutely no warning when HK roughly shoved me over. Hard enough for me to topple to the ground.

At the same instant, a deep burn sheered along the side of my ribs, and I yelled in shock as I thudded against the hard-packed dirt.

There was a thrwacking noise as HK launched a projectile; Canderous cursed and opened fire; Thalia screamed and unleashed a wave of Force that tingled as my senses picked it up.

Numb shock froze my mind and body but it retreated swiftly, and in its place a fiery wave of pain blossomed into being.

“Jen!” Mission shrieked, falling to my side.

“Statement: Threat has been eliminated, master.” HK’s voice was a distance away. I was staring up at the bright stars in the midnight sky. One of them looked quite close. The sounds of my fast breathing seemed inordinately loud.

::What’s going on?:: Carth demanded.

“I’m okay,” I gasped, pressing a hand along my torso. It felt hot and wet. Whatever it was, it sliced straight through my armour. It burned.

“Can you get up, Jen?” Mission asked.

“Nothing on the body,” Canderous muttered, his voice carrying from some metres beyond. “Not even a kriffing sack of credits.”

“Statement: Even with your kill here my count still far exceeds yours, Geriatric Blockhead.”

I sat, clenching my teeth, as Mission gazed at me worriedly. The injury had cut a line through my armour, alongside my ribs, but it was shallow. If HK hadn’t pushed me over, it would have been a direct hit in the centre of my chest.
I’m only wearing an alloy mesh shirt. Disruptor rifles go straight through those. My blood ran cold. Disruptor rifles were rare, and often used against Force users. It was one of the few things that lightsabers could not block.

“You got enemies, Jen Sahara,” Thalia stated, and I glanced over to see her with the others, some ten metres away. “This guy was lying in wait. And he’s no Dark Jedi.”

“Duros, plain-clothed, completely unidentifiable,” Canderous commented. He stood from his inspection of the corpse, with what must be the disruptor rifle in his grasp. “I’d say one of your friends from the Academy hired a merc to take you out, Jen. We don’t want to stay on this rock much longer.”

“No, that’s not the Sith way,” Thalia disagreed. “We prove ourselves by taking out opponents using the Force. Far more prestige.”

Canderous snorted in derision. “You’re an idiot if you don’t use what tools you have available. This corpse almost did take out Jen, with nothing more than a gun. You lot always underestimate non-Force users.”

“Observation: This organic meatbag has no identification or belongings on him, master. He is too unidentifiable to be a common mercenary. Supposition: this was an experienced assassin.”

I stood, accepting Mission’s hand, and winced as the slice along my ribs throbbed with stinging pain. It wasn’t deep, and could easily be patched up in the ‘Hawk if it hadn’t clotted by then, but the shock was setting in now. A wave of cold sunk deep through me. Just like that, I’d almost died at the hands of a nobody.

I walked over to the corpse, staring at it in puzzlement. An assassin. And then it hit me like a ferracrete brick, for it had not been that long ago when I’d encountered a whole group of them.

Oh no. The GenoHaradan. They were still after me. Of course they were still after me. They had a contract on my life, and it wasn’t complete.

“I’ll make my own way from here,” Thalia said. I could feel her wariness growing, and realized I’d drawn deep on the Force, deep enough to be noticed by her. She was staring at me guardedly. “No offense, but I don’t want to run into any other assassins.”

I wrested my attention away from the mysterious GenoHaradan and back to Thalia May. It took some effort. “Are you sure you don’t want to come with us? We’ll be leaving Korriban soon.” There was hesitation on her face, and I wished Juhani was by my side. She radiated quiet strength and purpose, and I could see that Thalia was wavering. But honesty compelled me to speak further, and I grimaced as I did so. “We are headed to the Academy though; we still have to extract Kel. And Juhani. ‘And Yuthura might be mounting an insurrection, so it’s likely to get messy in there.”

Thalia blinked, and her face tightened. “Yuthura’s not strong enough to take on Uthar.”

“She’s got a reason to swing some of the support behind her,” I explained. I pressed my hand tighter alongside my ribs. “Uthar never killed Jorak Uln.”

I vaguely saw her jaw drop as my gaze drifted back to the warm corpse at my feet. Why would the GenoHaradan send just one agent after me, when on Rii’shn there had been a whole battalion? And if the GenoHaradan knew I was here on Korriban, then would they track me to Kashyyyk? I could feel the paranoia growing, a crawling unease traipsing down my spine.

I can take out the GenoHaradan. A dark whisper caressed my thoughts. Or I could turn them to my
I shivered.

“If Uthar didn’t kill the old headmaster, then who did?” Thalia demanded.

“I did, a couple of days ago,” I said quietly. “Mekel has his head as proof.”

Mission let out a surprised noise of disgust, and I saw Canderous’ heavy gaze swing back to me.

Thalia coughed; a shocked, disbelieving sound. “Even if that’s true – which I find exceedingly hard to believe – it won’t swing Uthar’s Adepts. And he’s stronger than her.”

“I’m pretty sure I can neutralize Dak and Dustil,” I replied. “Let’s just say I have leverage over them both.”

There was a patch of static over the comm, and I briefly imagined the reactions of Carth and Belaya both. Thalia snorted. “So you still have Lashowe. She’s strong – maybe Mekel would take her, maybe not. Kel won’t fight, no matter what you promised him. That leaves Uthar against Yuthura, and you’re a bleeding dumbass if you can’t work out who would win that one.”

I raised a brow. “And us.”

“Look, thanks for saving my life,” Thalia said flatly, and her intonation had turned cold. “But it makes no sense for me to go and throw it away again. I’m outta here, I can find my own way off this rock.”

I inclined my head. “Okay, just –” I paused, once more thinking of Juhani. “You know the Jedi High Council is on Coruscant, right?”

Her brows lowered as she crossed her arms, her entire posture tensing, but she didn’t reply.

“Think about it,” I said. “The Force isn’t something you can leave behind, and I’d say you’ve had enough of a taste of the Dark Side.”

In the shadow of the night I couldn’t easily make out her expression, but it looked inscrutable from where I was standing. “Farewell, Jen Sahara,” she stated, and turned to walk away.

The Force was with me still, strong and true, ebbing the pain of the burn to a faint echo. My shoulder didn’t even feel bruised anymore. I stared at Thalia until the shadows eclipsed her.

“Let’s go,” Canderous said, walking away from the corpse and heading toward the artificial light of the colony that radiated on the horizon. I glanced once more at the dead Duros, feeling my fingers clench tightly. A powerful assassination order was not the best of enemies. *They must know Darth Revan is in my head.* Or- maybe not. The Sith had contracted them, because they knew. *But Thalia said Dark Jedi don’t use assassins.*

*She’s wrong,* a cold voice in my head stated. *Sithlings play their little games with their little rules to appease their masters. But a true Sith uses whatever resources are required to get the job done. Whether it’s a kitchen knife or a nuclear arsenal. Whatever it takes.*

Mission nudged me, the voice fled, and we carried on into the darkness.

xXx
Bastila? I pushed the thought out with as much mental fortitude as I could muster, but there was no stirring from the vagueness of our psychic link. If anything, the spiritual connection between us was dimmer than before, a hazy spider’s web that was slowly unravelling. Now that the Star Map was behind me, my concern for my bond-sister was elevating into alarm.

Paranoia kept my eyes tight on our environment and my hold fierce on the Force. That the GenoHaradan were back did nothing for my peace of mind. The ambush on Rii’shn had resulted in the explosive revelation of Evil Bitch’s true identity. I’d been so shattered, so stunned, so repulsed, that I’d barely even thought about the assassination order again, even though they’d been hired to kill me. Sloppy. I never used to be so sloppy. The thought was laced with disgust, and it was hard to tell who it originated from. I closed my eyes, mentally willing the villain in my head to disappear.

Bastila!

The hatch of the Ebon Hawk opened as Canderous clambered up the loading ramp, and I heard Mission heave a great sigh of relief as she followed him in.

“I can’t wait to tell Big Z about everything!” she gushed, stepping inside. The grill of the ramp creaked as HK stomped on it, and I took up the rear, locking it behind us. I heard Mission heave a huge yawn. “Sheesh, I’ll be glad to get some shut-eye.”

Not going to happen just yet. The Academy. Every minute longer risked Juhani, and I could only hope that she was safe, hiding somewhere from Uthar. Unlikely, after all these hours. And I needed to find Dustil. Kel. Maybe even Dak. I sighed. I needed Bastila.

“To the common room, everyone,” I ordered. I flexed my hand, and it felt dry with crusted blood. The slice on my torso stung superficially, and I made a mental note to bandage it before heading off. “It’s time to finish our business on Korriban, and haul jets out of here.”

Carth and Belaya were waiting there already, the former with a relieved expression on his face. Belaya – well, she looked as drawn and confused as I expected. Her worried gaze landed on Canderous, before flicking over HK and Mission.

“Belaya,” I said in greeting. “It’s good to see you up. This is Canderous Ordo and Mission Vao.” I glanced over to HK who was standing in the corner of the kitchenette. “And HK-47,” I added dryly.

“We did it, guys!” Mission was beaming, all but bouncing up and down, and she ran over to Carth to land him with an effusive hug. I grinned at his half-awkward, half-pleased look. Mission really was the light of our crew.

“We’ve got to extract some people from the Academy first, Mission, before we start celebrating,” I said. “Chief amongst them Juhani. She’s been gone since morning.”

The enthusiasm dimmed in the girl’s face, and I felt irrationally bad for that. “D’ya really think she’s in trouble, Jen?” she asked.

“I do not understand nor know what to believe,” Belaya said quietly. “You all claim that Juhani is one of you, and yet merely days ago I was told by a Sith that she was a student at the Academy.”

Mission frowned. “Well, yeah, ‘cause she and Jen have been pretending to be Sith-”

Belaya shook her head, a flash of anger crossing her drawn face. “No, it was a lie. That monster Dustil lied to me, tricked me into going with him and-”
“Okay, can someone *please* tell me who this Dustil guy is?” Mission demanded. Her lekku twined around her neck in annoyance. “Is he like, some famous Sith Lord or something that we should all know?”

I looked over to Carth, and his jaw was set stubbornly. His eyes held a depth of anguish that made me wince. “Carth,” I said quietly. “We’ve all got to know, now. It’s time to hit the Academy.”

Carth sighed, glancing over to Belaya. “Dustil is my son.”

The silence that fell over us was thick with suspicion and surprise both. Belaya’s eyes widened in horror, or something close to it, and she stumbled backwards. Mission’s mouth dropped open in a comic display of surprise, and even Canderous looked taken aback as he stared at Carth intently, measuringly.

“I-I thought he died,” Carth muttered, dragging a hand through his hair. He looked back to me, eyes dark with pain. “Four years ago when my homeworld Telos was bombed by the Sith. I looked for him, I-” he cut himself off, sighing. He looked so torn that I felt my heart twist. “I only found out about him by accident, days ago. I guess one of the Sith picked him up in the aftermath, and he’s been here ever since.”

Belaya was edging away from us all, her face tight and panicked. Dustil had told me that he’d captured her, tortured her, and now one of her rescuers was his father… no wonder she looked so shell-shocked. For all that I cared deeply about Carth’s pain, it was Belaya who needed the attention right now.

“Belaya,” I said. “How could Dustil trick you about Juhani being here?”

Her light gaze swung to mine, not a little scared. Her lips parted, and her face had lost whatever colour had remained, but she didn’t answer. I frowned, as a conversation from days ago came back to mind.

*She always was the best of us three. She loved you too, did you know that?* Dak’s words, to Juhani. But Juhani hadn’t believed it.

“You’ve been looking for her since she failed her trials,” I said quietly, realizing the Dak had been right. Belaya blinked, and I saw the despair as it grew on her face. She was a Jedi Knight, who had loved Juhani from afar. Juhani’s fall from grace must have affected her deeply, deeply enough for her to walk away from the Order and hunt for Juhani herself. *Juhani’s sodding Master should have been the one to do that.* And Juhani had run thinking she’d killed her Master. “Juhani knows, now, that Quatra lives. I imagine she planned to go back to Dantooine, but we’ve all been caught up in something… much bigger than any of us expected.”

“Where did you find her?” she whispered.

“Tatooine. She wasn’t… she wasn’t in the best of minds, at first.” I heard Mission stifle a snort, and shot the Twi’lek a quelling glance. “But Juhani walks in the Light now, Belaya. She spends her days redeeming everyone she comes across.” I heard my words twist wryly at the end, and saw an answering glimmer in the women’s face.

“Juhani can be fierce on what she believes in,” Belaya murmured. “But… is Dak one of your crew, too? I find that… difficult to believe… he left so long ago, and was so adamant the Order was not for him…”

“No, he’s a genuine student here,” I muttered, frowning. “Running into him was a surprise.”

Surprise
was too light a word. Between Dak, Dustil, and Uthar’s odd fascination with Juhani… My eyes swung back to Belaya as the pieces finally clicked together. For torture had a way of spilling all secrets, and if Dustil has already found out that Belaya was tracking Juhani, then of course that sick, twisted Headmaster would want the both of them to play mind-games with. “Stars, that’s why Uthar’s after Juhani!” I hissed. Although we’d introduced her as Staria, but how many Cathar were running about these days? No wonder Uthar had been chomping at the bit, to collar her alone and discover if she were the reason Belaya landed on Korriban.

“What… what are you saying?” Belaya breathed, her voice breaking. “That Juhani is in danger because of me?”

“No!” I immediately snapped, wishing I could retract my words. “No, no, if Juhani’s been caught, then the only person to blame is that twisted creep Uthar.”

“And Dustil,” Carth said quietly.

I sighed, looking back at him, at a loss for words.

“I will not be on the same ship as that Sith boy, no matter whose son he is,” Belaya said, and I heard the unyielding conviction in her voice. Carth winced.

“Belaya, there are four Jedi on this ship, including you,” I told her. “Dustil’s coming with us, willing or not. If he’s any sort of threat, we will restrain him.” I frowned at the anger on her face, and realized she wasn’t convinced. “Look, we need to get moving. And I need to wake Bastila. And- where’s Zaalbar? Why isn’t he here?”

“He’s outside Bastila’s door,” Carth answered. “He’s been very… intense about guarding Bastila. I told him you guys were here, but he didn’t budge. I don’t think he’s going to move until Bastila is walking again.”

“Big Z!” Mission hollered, skipping over to the exit that led to the pilot’s quarters. “Get your hairy butt in here!”

Zaalbar didn’t so much as grumble back a greeting to her, and I frowned. Too many things were coming to a head now, and even with the success of the Star Map I felt jittery, uneasy, almost panicky. Juhani’s lengthy absence was more than just concerning, and exactly how we were going to extract her, Kel and Dustil without confronting Uthar… it didn’t seem possible. It probably wasn’t possible.

And the GenoHaradan… what if they had more agents on Korriban? I hadn’t even registered the presence of the earlier assassin. HK saved my life, there. If I’d kept my mind on my surroundings, perhaps I would have had forewarning.

I needed Bastila, her advice, her guidance, her strength through the bond. The gradual fading between the two of us had been chipping away at my inner certainty, eroded by my burgeoning apprehension.

“Zaalbar!” I called out, leaving the common room behind in quick, impatient strides.

The Wookiee was standing outside the pilot’s quarters, tense and upright, staring blankly at the opposite bulkhead. Legs apart, furry arms crossed, he didn’t even twitch at my address.

The apprehension grew as it was spiked with something colder, something worse.

“Zaalbar?” I was in front of him, staring up into his empty gaze that was fixated behind me. He
blinking, and craned his head down to stare at me.

“(Bastila is sleeping on the Ebon Hawk, where I found her,)” he said in a low voice. There was no emotion at all in his howl, just a mechanical emitting of noises that, when strung together, formed the vowels of Shyriiwook words. “(I must guard her door.)”

Something is wrong. Something is very, very wrong.

“Big Z? What’s going on?”

“Jen Sahara, I do not sense anyone within that room,” Belaya murmured in the background. She sounded confused. A growing sense of numbness was escalating in my core, a buzzing noise ringing through my ears.

“Zaalbar!” I snapped, and my voice was ice even to my own ears. “By the terms of our life-debt, open this door and let me pass!”

Zaalbar blinked, and a whimper escaped his lips as his hand mashed against the hatch control. My fingers were tingling, my entire body was tingling, and I strode forward, ducking under his arm and shoving three hundred pounds of Wookiee muscle to the side in Force-induced need.

I took two steps into the room.

Into the empty, empty pilot’s quarters.

“(Kylah Aramai took her to Uthar Wynn at the Academy,)” Zaalbar said, and his intonation was flat. He howled, then, a long, despairing, bone-chilling howl.

Bastila! I screamed, and the tingling abruptly transformed into mind-numbing terror. Bastila!

Just then, the vague link between us snapped clean. I’d felt the same, back on Taris, and it had been because a neural disruptor had clicked around her neck. She was no longer present with me.

She was no longer on the ship, and she was no longer in my head.

No! No! The yawning pit of horror inside me froze my blood. A background hubbub of noise started, but I couldn’t comprehend it.

BASTILA!

And then a fiery blast of rage ignited like a thermal detonator. I couldn’t see where I was anymore, no, no, all that mattered was the strength required to go find my bond-sister. My bond-sister. And tear open the body of that schutta Kylah and rip her heart out with my fingernails.

This hot rage is power, power I need, power I can use, power I WILL use-

It was a flashpoint of fury, burning like liquid fire through my limbs, wresting a hold of the Force and drawing it deep, deep, deeper, all the strength I needed and I didn’t need anyone else. With this power I could get Bastila, I could do any damn thing I wanted and no one, not some cowardly ex-Jedi, not a slimy twisted Headmaster, not anyone would stop me-

-I’ll make them all pay, I’ll draw in all the strength of the galaxy and make things the way I want-

Somewhere, in the distance, a Wookiee was howling in soul-shattering anguish.

xXx
The nights on Korriban were icy. I knew this, knew that the frigid air could creep in even through a thick duranex bodysuit under dark robes, and yet here I was, pacing the valley as dusk settled down on this gods-cursed planet.

Juhani. A beloved face from my past, and I didn’t even know if she still lived. Master Uthar was storming around in a snit, Master Yuthura had been missing for the last two days, and Juhani was here on Korriban.

But is she still alive?

No one came out of Tulak Hord’s tomb, not in recent memory. Except that little chivhole, Mekel, had. He’d thrown me a disgusted sneer, a half-hearted push of the Force, and then scampered, a bloody knapsack thrown over one shoulder. I’d pulled on the Force tight, ready to challenge him for all that his strength eclipsed mine, when Force rumblings echoed menacingly from the tomb and we’d both fled. I should have stayed, should have made sure Juhani wasn’t still stuck in there with that obnoxious friend of hers, but I’d been so convinced that damn Mekel had something to do with it that I’d turned and shadowed him back to the Academy.

The bugger had lost me in the Academy’s warrens, and he’d been missing since then, same as Yuthura Ban. Deep down, I’d truly believed that must have been Juhani’s end, and the angry despair curled hot in my gut at the thought.

And then I’d run into Lashowe.

…

“Dak,” she purred, but she was less confident than customary. There was a rattled look in her ice blue eyes that she couldn’t quite conceal. “Uthar’s on the warpath, looking for that new initiate Staria.”

“Staria?” I snapped, recognition burning in me as I remembered what Ness had named Juhani. “What the frell does he want with Staria?”

Lashowe eyes narrowed with speculation. “Have you seen her, Dak? Our Master will be most pleased if you bring her to me.”

Lashowe, I thought with inimical disgust, always on the lookout for advancement and prestige. She was Uthar’s golden child, Uthar’s chosen one, Uthar’s darling. Between her and that bootlicker, Dustil, it was usually easy to keep my head low.

“She karked it in the tombs yesterday, Lashowe. On bloody Yuthura’s orders.” The words burned as I spoke them, burned a deep agony I could taste in the back of my throat. It was the death of a precious vision I’d held – a cornerstone deep in the back of my mind where Uthar’s psychic grasp couldn’t reach. The mental image of Juhani proudly serving the Order shone like a truth: I could see
her, bright blue lightsaber held high as sunlight kissed her warrior’s form. No matter the failure I’d become, at least I could believe that Juhani was truly a guardian of the galaxy.

But, no. She’d left, just like me, looking for power that the Jedi couldn’t give. And now she was dead. And I’d utterly failed to save her.

“Master Uthar doesn’t believe so,” Lashowe murmured, eyeing me over. I noticed her pallor, then, a clammy sheen to her skin like she’d just been fighting a losing battle. “He thinks she’s hiding somewhere in your cherished Valley.”

I stilled, staring at her fixedly as my thoughts raced and my emotions twisted. Lashowe wasn’t an idiot, she’d picked up something in my tone, and it was time for me to go on the offensive. “Had a run in with our Master yourself, Lashowe? Did he kick you out of his bed?” I sneered.

A spark of fire shot through her eyes. “I aim to serve Master Uthar always - as should you, Dak. I know you like to hide away out there, pretending to be a little scholar freak, but just you remember where your loyalties lie. You are one of us.”

With that, Lashowe had stormed off to the Valley. As had I, slower and with more caution.

Was it possible that Juhani had survived the menace of Hord’s tomb? Lashowe and Master Uthar both believed so. And Mekel had escaped apparently unscathed.

What does Uthar want with Juhani? And if she is alive, why would she be hiding? I’d waited until I’d sensed Uthar leave, feeling impatient and annoyed and wretchedly hopeful, before sidling back down to the Valley myself. Uthar often ignored me in favour of his other two Adepts, and that suited me just fine. I had no qualms conceding that Lashowe was more powerful than I, and I certainly wasn’t going to kiss his arse like that little doormat Dustil. Assuredly, one had to bow and scrape to Master Uthar, but he didn’t own my soul.

Really? Are you so sure about that?

My eyes closed as I pushed away the inner sneer, and instead Juhani’s words flashed through my mind: Dak, have you ever considered leaving this place?

Had I? Not really. It wasn’t what I’d thought it would be, but neither was the Order. I’d utterly failed to find peace and self-worth thus far.

But it was obvious Juhani had doubts about the Sith, and Master Uthar must know it. Yet once admitted to the Academy, it was impossible to run. Selene tried, and failed. Thalia tried, and failed. Jorrie, Denessari, Mel… the list went on. If Juhani really was still alive, surely she could be convinced to play the game. Surely Master Uthar could be convinced that she would make a fine Dark Jedi.

A faint wind brushed over the darkening valley, blowing dust and that damn sulphuric taint in my face. One never really became accustomed to the sharp taste at the back of one’s throat, that harshness burning deep in the lungs after a day spent outside. There were Force methods that could filter the impurities of the air, but they required study and practice, and were hardly the type of learning encouraged on Korriban. Research was more… limited, here, than Dantooine.

I remembered leaving the Jedi Enclave in a fury, finally snapping under Master Dorak’s constant prattling on emotional vigilance, and Juhani’s constant concessions to her scow of a Master. I’d intended to leave the Force behind, I really had, but it had found me in the shape of Nisotsa Organa.
The Quiet Death, I’d heard her called. Master Uthar treated Nisotsa like an equal, although she never outright challenged him the way that prick Bandon did. No, Nisotsa was silent and struck from the shadows.

I hadn’t put up much of a fight. Her strength was awe-inspiring – she was one of the blasted Jedi Thirteen, after all, one of Malak’s senior Dark Jedi. She’d promised power and freedom, and I’d believed her. Even now, Nisotsa sometimes visited Korriban, always stopping to award me with an icy cold smile and a pat on the head. Like a loyal little kath hound.

I’d found the power I wanted, but not the freedom.

“Adept,” a Sith soldier acknowledged, as he walked past me to head toward the Academy. I’d been so lost in my own damn thoughts that I hadn’t even noticed the soldiers changing shifts.

I sighed in annoyance and stretched my senses out, traipsing along the dusty ground in the growing darkness. I was deep in the Valley now, near Sadow’s tomb – that cursed place Master Uthar and Master Yuthura liked to hold their graduation ceremonies. Despite myself, I shivered. Adept trials were a harrowing experience, and not one I’d care to repeat. I had no idea how Shaardan managed to live through three occurrences of them and still fail. And still breathe.

Sadow's tomb was dubiously graced with a stone sculpture of the Lord himself – much like the granite and ferracrystal replica in the Academy's hall – but this statue was older, and emanated with swirling dark Force that was noticeable when one neared. The eerie sensation clouded the senses, made it difficult to walk past and head inside. Most avoided the tomb instinctively, as the roiling energy had a natural repelling effect on life itself. Sadow had been a master alchemist, I knew, and had voluntarily placed himself in suspended animation for centuries on Yavin IV. That was all past history now with his resurrection and true death eons ago, but there were theories that Sadow's statue on Korriban held some sort of Force echo of the Sith Master himself.

It was... interesting to speculate. Certainly, the Force swirled in stronger eddies here than anywhere else in the open Valley. And as my feet crunched on a patch of gravel, I sensed a flicker of life move behind the statue.

I drew deep on the Force and stalked over to the sneering Naga Sadow.

“Dak?” someone whispered from the shadows. I froze, disbelief coursing like a shot of firewhiskey through my gut as a figure unfurled from beyond the stone base.

“Juhani,” I breathed, breaking into quick strides. She was a tall, lithe figure in the dark, and I grasped her fiercely. “Juhani! You’re alive!”

My arms were tight around her, my heart tight with emotion. She sighed, and dropped her head on my shoulder. An unfamiliar feeling of contentment budded deep within me. I could hear her heart beating strongly through the Force, and felt a prickling against my closed eyes. She was here, and she was okay. “I thought you were dead. I thought you were gone!”

“No,” Juhani said softly, pulling back. Her slanted amber eyes I’d always found so mesmerizing gleamed at me in the starlight. “I only planned to be here for a short while, but Uthar has been in this Valley all day. I am concerned he has been looking for me.”

“I know,” I murmured, my hands still clasped on her shoulders. We were of an equal height, and my gaze roved over her face fervently. She really was here. “Juhani, what does he want with you?”

“I do not know,” she whispered. Her face, alien and yet so dear to me, was solemn. “But I am certain
he bodes me ill. I must leave here, Dak.”

“Leave?” I frowned. “Hang on, Juhani, you can’t think you’ll be able to leave the Academy.”

She stared at me, saying nothing. Her eyes were deep and intense, and I had no idea what she was thinking. “Juhani, Uthar won’t turn you away. Whatever his issue is with you, if you just crawl and beg forgiveness, he’ll accept you back.”

At that, a flare of irritation sparked through her gaze, and I was reminded of just how proud she could be. “Dak, I am not here to be a Sith. I only came back for you.”

“For- for me?” I spluttered. I’d thought, outside Hord’s tomb, that she had some crazy redemption idea in her head. Turned out I was right. “Juhani, don’t be an idiot! This is the damn Sith. You can’t just change your mind and expect to walk away! I won’t let you kill yourself, not like this!”

“Dak-”

“No,” I said coldly. “No. I thought you’d died in the tomb. I’m not going to let you die again.”

“Dak!” she cut in. “I have to get out of here. The others need me-”

“What, that frelling Ness Jonohl? She escaped too?” I sneered, and read the truth from her expression. “What happened in the tomb, Juhani?”

Her eyes slid away. “Ness and Mekel found… they found the old Headmaster.” She trailed off, and the silence was heavy in the Korriban dusk.

*The old Headmaster.* Jorak Uln had been Headmaster when I’d arrived. He liked me, liked my interest in the tombs and my willingness to catalogue and research any finds that were available. I hadn’t been there long before Adept Uthar Wynn had staged a bloody coup, ripped out Jorak’s eyes, and then turned on Jorak’s first apprentice. I hadn’t thought of Uln in some time, but I’d liked the place better when he was Headmaster.

“Huh. Did Master Uthar leave his corpse in Hord’s tomb?” A body couldn’t have been the danger, though. Some whispered that a remnant of Tulak Hord survived, living on in the immortality that the ancient Sith Lord had once dreamed of.

“No, not his body. Jorak Uln wasn’t dead, Dak.”

My gaze swung back to her, surprised and appalled. “Uln, *alive*?”

“Yes. He- well. Suffice to say he is not alive now.”

“Mekel?” I gasped in disbelief. “Mekel took out Jorak Uln?” Mekel was strong, at least as strong as Lashowe, but I would not have credited either of them with enough power to defeat someone like Uln. Even if Uln had been scraping by for years, isolated and blinded. *Uln’s the reason people don’t return from Hord’s tomb*, I realized suddenly. *Uln’s the reason Uthar avoids it. Even after all this time, Uthar fears Jorak Uln.*

Feared. Past tense, not present.

Juhani was shaking her head, and my shock deepened. “Your friend,” I said slowly, reading the truth from her tawny gaze. Oh, that Ness Jonohl had been both annoying and confident - and, it seemed, powerful. For if even Uthar hadn’t been able to kill Jorak... My eyes widened. “Uthar’s not going to like this. Shavit! That’s why Yuthura and Mekel have gone awol!”
Uthar had claimed the post of the Headmaster without truly killing the old one. Might ruled on Korriban, but status had a lot to do with it. The petty games and power-plays pissed me off, but this deception might turn some of the initiates against Uthar. Unless they were sufficiently cowed- and Uthar could be frelling scary. And I couldn’t see Yuthura slamming down Uthar, not unless she had other allies.

Other allies… Suddenly, my gut clenched in a seething ball of fury and fear. "Ness is allied with Yuthura," I snapped. My voice turned bitter, for Juhani had already shown where her own loyalty lay with her cursed determination to follow Ness into Hord’s tomb.

“No,” Juhani said, and she sounded sad. “Dak, you truly do not understand. We did not come here to join the Sith. We came to Korriban for another purpose.”

The silence stretched between us as I struggled to comprehend. I could feel my head shaking in disbelief. "What?" I hissed. "Don't be ridiculous… no Force-sensitive comes to Korriban for any reason other than to join the Sith. I don't-" I broke off, staring at her angrily. "Juhani, you already told me you left the Order!"

“I did,” she replied gently. “But Ness turned me back. I am a Jedi, Dak, not a Sith. And you can be one again, too. There is no future here on Korriban. Surely you must see that.”

My jaw dropped in disbelief. “How the frell do you expect to leave the Academy? What, walk out the front gates?”

“We did once before,” she answered, her voice steady and sure. “Come with us, Dak. Leave this place. You are a good person, and I know you cannot be happy here.”

It was an empty dream, a promise of a future I could never grasp. I’d killed people, here: initiates in my way, mercenaries on Uthar’s orders, prisoners who couldn’t hold up under the torture. There were some things one couldn’t return from. I wasn’t happy here, but shavit, I hadn’t been happy with the Order, either. “You can’t turn your back on the Dark Side, Juhani. If you’d truly fallen, you would know that.”

I could hear the coldness in my voice, the acknowledgment that, once more, we were on opposing sides of an ethical chasm. There’d been a time when I’d hoped she’d follow me away from Dantooine, but her will had been too strong for my persuasion. I saw the disappointment flare in her eyes, and it stung. It stung deep.

“No, you don’t turn your back on it. You fight it.” Her voice was steel; as strong and sure as ever. “You rise above it. And you do your best to make the right choices, even if you made poor ones in the past. Anyone can turn back, Dak. I know this well.”

My returning laugh was low and scornful. “Really, Juhani? What did you turn back from, almost killing your master?”

“I was not referring to my own redemption,” she snapped tartly. “Although, in my rage, I did kill some who had wronged me in my youth. I am ashamed of my past actions, but I strive to better myself now.”

"And the Order welcomed you back with open arms, I suppose?" I muttered, my voice spiking with sarcasm. "Shouldn't you be meditating in a corner somewhere, languishing in guilt over your past crimes?"

Juhani shifted uncomfortably. "I have only spoken with one master since my return, Dak. But it is
enough."

I shook my head in disgust. “So you don’t know, not really.”

“I do.” Her words rang with a bone-deep conviction.

I sighed. When Juhani believed in something, there was no changing her mind. She was as unyielding as Korriban ferracrystal. “You know nothing about the Dark Side, Juhani, if all you did was run after some childhood bullies.”

She inclined her head. “Perhaps the Dark Side tempts us in different ways, Dak. I feel it, even now, on this planet. It coaxes me to run; run from my emotions, run from my connections, run until no one is left who will challenge me to be the best I can be.” She sighed, and it was a melancholy sound that curled around me in the darkness. An unbearable sadness engulfed me. The yawning gulf between us was impossible to breach. “The Light Side is not the easy path, but it is the right one.”

For you, Juhani, maybe.

“You won’t stay,” I said flatly.

“No. And you will not go with me, will you?”

Maybe if it had just been her, the temptation would have been strong enough to outweigh the risk. But while Juhani cared for me, it wasn't the same as what I'd once felt for her. What I still did, deep in my heart. Maybe I couldn't stop her, but I wouldn't follow her again and uselessly pine my heart away.

Juhani touched the side of my face briefly. "Goodbye, Dak. Take care." I felt my eyes close, and my cheek burned even after she withdrew her fingers. The disappointment was acute, deep and painful; the worry for her safety even more so. But if she truly could escape Korriban, then maybe once more I could dream of her in a happier place, while my own soul rotted in despair.

Juhani had taken maybe five steps away before I felt it. An ominous, forbidding presence slowly edging closer in the evening dusk. Juhani froze, and my stomach turned in fright.

Uthar.

The shadows moved in a murky fashion, coalescing into the shape of the Headmaster as he neared.

There was no hiding now.

A tenacious determination punched me low in the stomach, and I knew then that I'd do whatever it took to get Juhani away from here, away from Uthar, away from me.

I strode past her, hissing, “play the game,” and walked forward to address my Master.

“Master Uthar!” I called out in greeting, coming to a stop and bowing in deference. “Initiate Staria has been looking for you.”

"Adept Dak," Uthar's oily voice greeted me as his unhurried steps brought him ever closer. I quashed the nausea swirling in my belly, thinking only of loyalty to my master. Uthar's mind-games were well-known. "Isn't that interesting, because I have spent all day looking for Staria."

I forced a hollow chuckle. “I am afraid Staria was a little overwhelmed with the presence of Sadow’s statue,” I replied lightly. “I have been trying to educate her upon the dangers of the Valley.”
“Really?” Uthar’s milky-white eyes narrowed. “You are quick to speak for Staria, I see.”

“Master Uthar,” Juhani murmured. There was a quaver in her voice that I wasn’t sure was genuine or not. “Forgive me for my tardiness. Adept Dak has been trying to draw me away from this tomb.”

Uthar stilled, his clouded eyes reaching past mine. The black ink on his scalp faded into the shadows, leaving only slivers of pale skin noticeable. Deep inside me, there was a burning need to understand Uthar’s obsession with Juhani. For if I knew the reason, perhaps I could formulate a way to extract her safely.

Only minutes ago I’d desired her here, with me, on Korriban – but now, now, it was the last thing I wanted. Juhani’s safety, Juhani’s needs – they trumped mine. Maybe I really was just the same love-struck fool I’d been years ago.

Uthar turned his head sharply to me once more, a frown bunching his brow. I forced my thoughts blank, my posture deferential, and looked at him expectantly. He grunted.

“I expect punctuality in all my students, Initiate,” he said, looking back to Juhani once more. His voice was soft and almost friendly, and raised the hairs on my neck. “And I do not give warnings more than once. Perhaps, if you are finished... submerging yourself in Naga Sadow’s replica, you can lead the way back to the Academy.”

Juhani blinked at him in the evening darkness, and I sensed rather than saw Uthar frown. “Go!” he snapped. “I am not done with you yet, Initiate. Back to the Academy!”

Juhani jerked forward, tripping once as she stumbled past us, shooting me a half-terrified look. But it was false, I knew, as I spotted the gleam of determination in her gaze that was simultaneously gratifying and alarming. *Play the game, Juhani! Play the frelling game!* Uthar could be appeased by pleading, by breaking. The sort of behaviour that ran deeply against Juhani’s personality.

My gaze slid back to my master, and my unease spread like a virus. *Uthar doesn’t give verbal warnings*, I realized, and my stomach turned. No, Uthar’s warnings usually consisted of a mind-raping, or a ball of lightning to the face. And that was if you were lucky. I’d seen enough Sith hopefuls kark it on a first meeting with the Headmaster just because he thought them weak.

*Maybe... maybe Juhani caught him on a good day? Or maybe the reason he's after her is just her potential?* Juhani’s sparring and lightsaber prowess had been impressive back on Dantooine. We were an even match on some areas of Force aptitude, but she could kick my arse when it came to out-and-out combat.

Uthar’s pale gaze slid to mine, and I forced the thoughts away with a mental kick. *Keep your mind blank, dumbass!* I looked over to Juhani, traipsing ahead across the cursed Valley, and desperately hoped there’d been no mental bleed-over from my part.

“Walk with me, Adept.” Uthar murmured, starting the trek back himself. I fell into line. “I sense events moving, Dak. This is not the time to be skulking near the tombs.”

“I understand, Master,” I replied.

“Do you, Dak? Do you really?”

Sometimes, it paid to be bold with Uthar. And if it drew his attention away from Juhani, shaken and uncertain as she floundered ahead of us, then all the better.

“I understand that Master Yuthura has been missing since Mekel escaped Hord’s tomb.” The
statement was daring, but surely Uthar already suspected something. I kept my minds-eye tight on the image of Mekel, retreating from the tomb with an ensanguined knapsack slung over his back. Only now did I start to suspect what Mekel may have been carrying.

Proof.

There was a whisper of something in my thoughts, something other-worldly, something that didn’t belong. I dared not deviate from that one particular memory.

Uthar grunted after a lengthy silence. "There was a report of Adept Mekel running from the Academy. I had believed he’d scampered in failure. Hmm." I could feel Uthar's heavy gaze on me, and knew he'd been snooping. He probably still was, and I shook off the chill of preternatural terror. I could do this, and keep my thoughts contained. I had to, for Juhani's sake. "You have never warmed to Mekel, have you Dak?"

"Not particularly, Master," I said neutrally.

"But you seem to have taken a shine to Initiate Staria," he murmured, his voice pitching high with curiosity.

I tensed. “I believe, given the chance, she may have potential, Master Uthar.” A brief flash of Juhani flashed through my mind – the first time I’d seen her on Dantooine. Tipped ears, striped markings along her cheekbones, slanted eyes narrowed in uncertainty even as she stood tall and proud beneath a tattered tunic of rags. She’d been the most exotic thing I’d ever seen.

My fists clenched as I abruptly forced the image away.

Uthar tsked. "She claims to be a fallen Jedi, although we have not found any records of a Jedi Staria. Are you sure you didn't know her during your time on Dantooine?"

Coldness crawled through my gut. I was Uthar's Adept, oh yes, but I'd never intrigued him. I'd dropped a false family name on Korriban, stupidly keeping my first – Dak was such a common name, after all. I'd never known Uthar had dug up my past.

"No, Master Uthar," I answered, and the words sounded forced even to my own ears.

"Tell me about your time with the Jedi, Dak," Uthar said. His words were mild and friendly, and my unease intensified. "You were not there for very long, I believe?"

"Three years, Master," I replied, my eyes fixed on Juhani as she picked her way up the climbing path that twisted out of the Valley. "I did not progress past Padawan. I came to the Jedi later than most, and realized it was not for me."

“And who were your friends there, Dak?"  

My edginess was increasing. For if Uthar knew my history, then it wouldn't take much digging to learn who my companions had been. Although, with luck, he'd never bothered digging that far. "I was not close to many, Master Uthar. I studied under Master Dorak." My mind zeroed in on an image of the Enclave's Chronicler, Master Dorak - who'd seemed a good fit for me at first, due to our shared passion for history. But I'd chafed under his dry rules and regulations, and he'd vacillated between over-the-top leniency and sharp disapproval when I failed. He'd leave me enough rope to hang myself, and then seemed surprised when I did so. I was not sorry to leave him behind.

“That is not an answer, Dak,” Uthar replied, his voice so benign I didn’t trust it. “You must have had close acquaintances you left behind. Tell me about them.”
“I had a good friend, once,” I hedged. I could not, would not, betray Juhani. It was too dangerous to lie, in case Uthar knew more about my past than he’d already let on. But Juhani had already assured me of the safety of my one other friend. *She is a Knight now,* Dak. “But I do not think about her. She is beneath my contempt, Master Uthar.”

Ahead, Juhani was clambering over a large boulder in the shadows. Pale illumination flickered down from distant Academy – two large fire pits blazed on either side of the entrance, throwing shadows that skittered like skorpocrabs against the night-time landscape.

“Names, Dak, names!” Uthar chuckled, and his heavy hand clapped me on the shoulder. “Otherwise you will have me believe you are hiding something.”

“Not at all, Master,” I replied in a mild tone. I didn’t trust Uthar. I didn’t trust my own head. I didn’t trust his puzzling fascination with Juhani. “It’s simply that it was such a long time ago that I don’t even know if she lives. Her name was Belaya Linn.”

Uthar’s hand dropped from my shoulder abruptly, and I turned to face him, startled. But his expression was composed as he stared ahead at Juhani’s retreating form. He cleared his throat. “Were you in love with this Belaya, Dak?”

“No!” I snapped, surprised at the question. Juhani stopped, craning her head back to face us. She’d reached the Academy, now. “I beg your pardon, Master Uthar, but no. She was a friend and nothing more.”

I’d been close to Belaya, and admired her greatly. We’d both loved Juhani from afar, but Belaya accepted it wasn’t meant to be and endeavoured to remain no more than a true friend. I’d run off like a whiny brat. My mouth twisted as I remembered the sour note we’d parted on. Belaya had been a better person than I, in the Force and strength of character. The best of us three, I’d always suspected.

Something foreign twitched behind my eye, and I roughly pushed the memory away. *Mindless idiot!* I hadn’t even realized my thoughts were wandering. My gaze slid to Master Uthar, but nothing showed on his pale, tattooed face other than benevolence. The firelight sparked against the opalescence of his corrupted eyes as we drew to a halt by the entrance.

Juhani was waiting, her gaze hooded as Uthar waved the doors open. A soldier posted within snapped out a salute, and Uthar marched inside. Somehow, his stance and manner seemed more purposeful than before.

“Follow me,” Uthar threw over his shoulder. “I have something to show the both of you.”

We both trailed in his wake. Juhani’s slanted gaze slid my way, and her lips parted, as if to speak. I shook my head curtly, glancing at Uthar’s retreating back. I’d been doing a piss-poor job so far of containing my thoughts, I realized with disgust, and wasn’t sure if it’d been due to my nerves or something more insidious. There were rumours that Uthar’s mental prowess could be stealthy enough to direct another person’s thought-stream without them even realizing. All I knew was that I’d been determined to think nothing, and my thoughts had kept drifting back to Juhani.

I could only hope Uthar hadn’t picked up on anything.

We walked in silence through the Academy, and I was struck once more how empty the place felt since Bandon had stripped it of near-all the Adepts. Even before then, we’d been running low on students. The death-rate on the frontlines wasn’t particularly appealing, which was why Uthar’s first apprentice was such a coveted position. Even Darth Malak wouldn't readily snatch Uthar's
apprentice from him. First apprentices were sacred.

And it was apparent that Yuthura was on her way out.

Uthar led us to a grand cavern on the other end of the Academy. It was deserted apart from the blonde figure of Lashowe. She was sitting cross-legged, in a meditative position, right in the centre of the cold marbled floor.

Lashowe looked up at our approach, visibly startled, before standing and bowing in deference. Uthar strode over to her, caressing the side of her cheek. Lashowe’s speculative gleam fixed on Juhani.

She smiled, and the bottom of my stomach dropped out.

I smiled back at her.

"Wait here, Lashowe," Uthar murmured, and strode toward the training rooms. I still didn't get it, didn't understand Uthar's ploy, and wondered wildly if he was planning on making us duel. But then Uthar halted in the centre of the empty sparring arena.

"Where is the guard?" Uthar snapped to himself, staring toward the restricted corridor.

I knew what was down there, and the bile rose in my throat as Uthar started moving again, motioning us onwards. I found myself reaching for the Force instinctively. *Play the game, Dak! Play the frelling game!* This time the mental plea was directed at myself. But I had to get Juhani out, any way I could.

No matter what Uthar was planning to do. No matter what Uthar was planning on making *me* do. Oh, I'd knew the games he liked to play, in his twisted interrogation room. I'd been forced to partake in them more than once. But Uthar he was too strong for us to take on directly, in the heart of his fortress, surrounded by his guards and his allies.

The only thing I could do was play along until Uthar grew bored and left. Then I could extract Juhani safely.

There was no guard by the locked durasteel door, and that wasn’t normal, either.

I felt the Force coalesce in a swirling miasma coiling around my master. It was almost suffocating in its intensity. *I should have struck him outside, tried to take him by surprise.* But no, no, he was after Juhani – not me. *Stay focused, Dak, and do what you need to, to survive. Play the game and get Juhani out afterward.*

The door hissed open with a command from Uthar. “Go inside,” he ordered silkily. “There is someone I would like you both to meet.”

Juhani looked at me in confusion and not a little fear, before pursing her lips and taking a step forward. I followed her, into the gods-cursed room, my gaze darting to the blighted Force cages.

They were empty.

I swung around to face Uthar, and his expression had contorted into utter fury. “What is going on?” he bellowed.

“Master Uthar–” I began, but didn’t know how to finish.

Uthar snarled, and strode to the console. “Stay!” he snapped at Juhani, who was standing awkwardly
in the centre of the room, disgust evident in the tawny yellow of her eyes as they trailed over the manacles and the dried blood stains evident on the floor.

*This is Korriban, Juhani, I thought sadly. This is what we turn into.*

I took a step closer to Uthar, close enough to view the console as he keyed in a command. A gathering storm of anger grew on his face as he scrutinized the textual input, and I looked back to the exit, inwardly debating the risks of a sudden escape attempt. When I glanced back at Uthar, he'd lifted his head to stare at me. The fury in his opalescent eyes was sharp.

The emotion vanished a second later, to be replaced by benign calm. Like a fire constantly doused and reignited, Uthar jumped from rage to peace so swiftly that I thought it truly a sign of manifesting insanity.

"Well," Uthar murmured softly. "It seems I have a puzzle to solve."

*There’s been a break-out,* I realized with a wave of coldness. I hadn’t known of any recent prisoners, and I also didn’t think anyone would have the sheer gall to attempt such a thing. Yuthura, perhaps, if she planned on mounting a rebellion, but what worth would a prisoner hold for her?

And, truly, I’d suspected Uthar had brought us here to imprison Juhani - as horrific as the thought was - and I still hadn’t a plan for how to extract her other than to wait Uthar out and hope he didn’t hurt her too badly in the process.

And then, somehow, sneak her off Korriban.

There was a tingling in my mind, then, and I opened my mouth to speak only to find my jaw had locked-

My entire body froze: my limbs, my fingers, even my eyes.

“Staria,” Master Uthar said, tapping a key on the console to clear the screen. The only movement I could make was breathing, and even that seemed almost insurmountable. “We Sith do not have the same code as the Jedi you trained with, so I can understand that you require a settling-in period. But I will have you know that the one thing I cannot abide is betrayal.”

His voice was calm and soft and reassuring, and the bastard had put me under stasis!

“I apologize again, Master Uthar, for-”

“No, not you, Initiate,” Master Uthar chuckled. “I am not unreasonable. No, I am referring to Dak.”

My stomach churned and my ears rang. *Shavit!* Uthar had been snooping after all. If he named me a traitor… did he believe I would turn on him? Did he believe my feelings for Juhani trumped my loyalty to him?

Did they?

With a fierce mental lunge, I reached out to pull deep on the Force – but it was beyond my grasp, and all I could feel was this invisible barrier holding my body immobile. *Keep trying, idiot!* Uthar couldn’t trap me like this for long – it wasn’t one of his strengths – but breaking free wasn’t one of mine-

“Let him go,” Juhani hissed, and whatever nervousness had been in her demeanour was fast disappearing.
“I will let him have his chance to speak,” Uthar said mildly. “After I have had mine, of course. For I believe you would make an asset to the Sith, Staria, but first you must understand how grievously Dak has betrayed your kindness.”

What?

Mentally, I pummelled against the stasis with no apparent effect. Uthar liked to play his cruel, twisted games, but I hadn’t even thought he’d turn on me. I was his Adept! And I’d not done anything to Juhani, bar encourage her to join the Sith, so the bastard had absolutely nothing on me-

“I do not understand, Master Uthar.” I could see Juhani's tawny gaze fixed on mine in the periphery of my vision, but try as I might, I was wholly unable to move. Even my damned eyes stayed fixed on the blank console screen, as I mentally struggled and pushed and slammed against Uthar’s shields.

“Why, Dak betrayed a dear friend of yours to me. To the Sith,” Uthar extrapolated. I focused on what little Force I could reach, shaped it into a tight ball of fury, and threw it with all my mental fortitude at the barrier that imprisoned me. It didn’t move. “Captured her because he was jealous, he told me, of your attachment to her. He took much delight in her pain.”

“What do you mean?” Juhani’s tone held nothing but frustration and mounting anger, now. What the frell is he on about?

My only consolation was that Juhani seemed as confused as me, so whatever Uthar's ploy was, it wasn’t working.

Uthar tapped a key, and the sounds of a woman screaming cut through the air. My eyes were drying out, still locked on the screen. The vid-feed was that of a tortured prisoner hanging limply in a cage coughing up blood that splattered onto the chrome flooring.

The prisoner was Belaya Linn.

Horror sheared deep through me, carving through my fury and alarm. It couldn't be true, it couldn't be right – Juhani said she was back at the Order! I numbly took in the scene of a limp woman, as a hank of sun-streaked brown hair fell over her face.

Juhani had stridden forward by then, next to the console. I couldn't see her damned expression, not held prisoner like this, but I heard the anguished whimper as it left her lips.

This had to be some sort of cursed trick, it couldn’t be Belaya!

Uthar punched another key, and different footage of the same prisoner flared into view. The woman was obviously Belaya Linn, now: her face arched into direct view as pain contorted her features and cries of anguish ripped from her lungs. She convulsed, jerking wildly from side to side, metal restraints holding her fixed she shrieked from some invisible attack.

“No!” Juhani cried. "No, this cannot be true!"

"Please," a broken voice emanated from the video, in between screams. "No more."

Could Uthar forge a recording like this? I thought wildly, desperately searching for an answer beyond the obvious. But Uthar had expected a prisoner to be here… and he'd expected it to be someone of import to Juhani. I accepted, then, with a chilling abhorrence, that the videos showed the truth.

"I am afraid it is true, dear child," Uthar said consolingly. "Your friend Dak wanted you all to himself. That is why he killed Belaya."
What? No! With a ferocious surge of fury, I slammed myself hard against the stasis. I felt a tremble, then, but the shield still held. Like a rabid kinrath closing in for the kill, I pulled back to try again.

"I will not believe this monstrosity!" Juhani yelled, shaking her head violently, her warrior's tail lashing from side-to-side.

"Do you need to see more?" Uthar replied, tapping a key again. Belaya, now, choking as she gasped desperately for air, her face drawn and pale, and her eyes shot with red.

"Stop it!" Juhani shrieked. "Stop it at once!"

The console cut out under Uthar's command. My will punched into his Force barrier again, and again, and I could sense Uthar's stasis shuddering beneath my barrage.

"Let Dak go," Juhani demanded, her voice thrumming with rage. "I must hear from him."

"What would you hear, Initiate?" Uthar said softly. "How Dak left Dantooine under the pretence of study, choked in a cloud of bitterness because you rejected him? Or that he found Belaya, searching for you, and promised to keep her safe?"

"You said you would let Dak have his say," Juhani bit out, and her voice broke on my name. My heart stuttered. Don't believe him, Juhani! I wouldn't do that, not to Belaya, not even for you. I could only hope that Juhani kept faith in me, even if I didn't deserve it. My thoughts seethed with terror and anger and most of all – confusion.

Why would that bastard lie? Why would Uthar betray me?

"So I did," Uthar answered Juhani, even as he walked. My master laid a gentle hand on my frozen shoulder. Ah, but your thoughts betrayed me, Dak. You are not faithful, but perhaps your fury-filled friend will be. She would certainly make a tantalizing asset.

His oily voice sunk into my mind, deep enough that I didn't react in time as the stasis vanished, and instead stumbled inelegantly to the ground. I thudded heavily onto my side, grunting as sharp pain stabbed against my cheekbone.

"Dak, now is your chance to explain your actions, and why you brought Belaya to me," Uthar said, his words poisonous as they echoed throughout the room. I struggled to my knees, jerking desperately around to face Juhani.

Her eyes were wild and red-rimmed as they stared at me in horror.

"Speak, Dak!" Uthar ordered. "Explain why Belaya's torture was justified, why it was excusable to turn on one of your oldest friends!"

"Juhani! Its lies – all lies!" I spat out. "Trust me, I didn't know about Belaya, you told me she was safe on Dantooine!"

Uthar chuckled, and it sounded like the menacing crow of victory. "You say you are trustworthy, Dak, but you are quick enough to use Staria's true name to a Master of the Sith."

"Dak," Juhani said desperately. "I do not understand. That cannot be Belaya!"

"Oh, it was," Uthar cut in. "She was searching for you, Juhani. A pity she found Dak instead." He paused. "Dak always believed she was the best of you three. I am afraid my naughty adept is completely riddled with jealousy."
"No!" I snarled, fury swelling at the injustice. Force-strength shot through my limbs like wildfire – I'd had enough of cowering to that lying monster, and my hand dropped to my waist-

I went flying to the far side of the room, slamming against the wall, barely aware of Uthar’s outraised hand.

"No, Dak, it is your friend here who has cause against you. You captured, tortured and killed Belaya Linn. It is only fair that you face up to it in the form of Cathar justice, don't you think?"

"She cannot be dead, she cannot!" Juhani denied. Winded, I lifted my head to see her, her face pale beneath the downy fuzz on her cheeks. "Please, Dak, say something! Belaya… Belaya cannot be gone!"

"He's playing us, Juhani," I hissed, scrambling to my feet, struggling to pull in a breath. "Setting us against each other. I don't know what happened to Belaya, or if she is really dead-"

"Oh, you need to hear more?" Uthar injected, and jabbed one more at the console. Belaya's pleas for mercy filled the air again, stabbing into my heart like a chiv-blade

"Stop it!" I howled, fists clenching. My thoughts raced through flashbacks then- memories of Juhani, and Belaya, and Quatra that unemotional scow whom Juhani loved so futilely, and I shook my head irritably at the sudden, unprompted recollection-

“But you enjoyed hearing her break before, Dak. What, is it not so much fun now the woman you love is seeing what a monster you have become?"

"Dak, tell me this isn't true, this did not happen," Juhani pleaded, taking a step toward me. Her slanted eyes gleamed with the sheen of tears, and her lips pursed with abhorrence.

"It's not true!" I shot back desperately. "I mean, it seems like she must have been here, but I didn't know anything about it, Juhani! You must believe me!"

"How would I know all I do if Dak hadn't told me so readily, hmm?" Uthar countered. "Dak even confessed to me that he wished one day to capture your old Master Quatra, and hurt her as well. He deeply resents anyone you care about, Juhani." Uthar waggled a finger knowingly. "He is in dire need of a telling off, I do believe."

"No, no!" I yelled, and there was a sudden charge in the air. The Force picked up around me, fuelled by my hatred for the malevolent chivhole who ruled this cursed place.

Juhani was silent, and now was my chance-

The Force was wrested violently from my grasp, sucked away to agitate around Uthar- dark and foreboding and much, much stronger than anything I could hope to muster.

Juhani's face had set as she looked over to me. There was a sickly rage growing there, turning her eyes a tawny darkness.

"Belaya did not deserve this," she whispered, and her voice was bitter. "How could you, Dak? You say you loved me, and yet you do this to my dearest friend? Say something!" she finished on a howl, and her fur began to stand on end.

"Juhani, listen to me!" I begged desperately. "This is Uthar's doing, not mine! Trust me, please!"

"My doing?" Uthar scoffed. "I did not torture Belaya Linn. I certainly did not kill Belaya Linn. No,
Dak, this is a quandary of your own making, and you shall reap the consequences."

"You murdering bastard!" I seethed, and suddenly my lightsaber was in my grasp, hissing red fury in front of me.

"How can I trust you, Dak?" Juhani cried, her voice hoarse, and my gaze snapped back to her. Her mouth curled down in torment. "Not so long ago you were desperate to have me stay on Korriban!"

"Juhani, for the last time, it wasn't me!" I raged, the 'saber wavering in my grasp as I glared alternately between her and Uthar.

"Are you thinking of believing his lies, Juhani?" Uthar said. "Do I need to remind you once more of what he has done?" There was a tap, and the tortured cries of Belaya shot through the room again, pleading for a mercy she hadn't been granted.

All despair vanished from Juhani's expression, replaced by a manifesting fury. "Damn you, Dak Vesser!"

No. No! I thought in growing horror. "Juhani, Uthar is the real evil here!"

But Uthar's attention was caught, suddenly, by something else, and he turned to face the closed durasteel door. A frown pleated the pallid skin on his brow.

There was a flash of swirling Force around Juhani, a whiplash of temper snapping, and I understood, then, that my friend had finally lost control.

"Well," Uthar murmured, jerking his head back to face us. "It seems I have visitors at my front door, and my attention is needed elsewhere." He smiled at me then, kind and benevolent and evil. "And I can see you two have a lot to discuss."

He strode over to the door, thumping his hand on the controls, and I was torn between chasing the bastard down or staying to face my fury-filled friend.

I watched him leave, impotent, and as the door swished closed I heard the ominous snap-hiss of a lightsaber activating behind me.

xXx
The Force was blistering; decalescent in its passion and its unmitigated acrimony for whoever dared oppose me. It flared a blinding white through my mind, my limbs, my blood. It was unstoppable.

I will do whatever is needed.

The rage was hot; so very, very hot; it burned away any rational or emotional thought other than itself. I had no visual awareness of my surroundings now, just an understanding that metallic walls encased me and that blips of life were nearby. Non-threatening, and not currently in my way.

Anything in my way I will overcome.

The core of the inferno was the flipside, though. Cold, icy cold thought; straddling ideas and connections, formulating strategies for my end-goal: Bastila. The Headmaster might be a problem if I encountered him simultaneously with the ex-Jedi bitch, but he could be distracted if I manipulated his apprentice. There, there - that was my first objective. Find the apprentice and convert her into an ally.

An ally can help, provided it is not a weakness.

And the blips of life on this freighter were weaknesses, distractions.

There was shouting, there was howling, there was confusion around me, but it was unimportant and I blocked it out as I turned and strode away. I could do this on my own, and I would.

My way.

“Jen!” A young girl’s voice in front of me. She had large brown eyes. The eyes were staring at me in appeal.

“Get out of my way,” the words shot out, low and cold and deep, in a voice that was not my own. My heart was pounding an incessant angry beat: Find Bastila, find Bastila, find Bastila. And to hold onto this rage-fuelled power, I needed to be independent of emotional connections. I couldn’t afford any fault-lines that my enemies might exploit.

I must act, now, and leave these handicaps behind.

A crescendo of air currents picked up, centred around me, lifting loose objects into the air. My rage began to transform into sheer, uninhibited power.

And it would stay with me as long as the passion rode in my veins.

“Jen, calm down, please!” the girl begged. “We have to do this together!”

My arms shot out and firmly shoved the blue Twi’lek to the side, hard enough that she staggered back, falling over. Real violence wasn’t necessary yet - unless she held me back again.

“Jen, not this way, not this way!” Another voice, and a heavy hand fell on my shoulder from behind. “You leave us like this and you’ll lose yourself! Zaalbar won’t stop howling, he needs you! Belaya’s panicking. And I- I need you too, Jen. Don’t go – not this way. Not this way.”
This is the way. The only way powerful enough to achieve my objective.

But there was a crack there, now, in the fire-encased ice; a threat to the immeasurable energy that was coalesced around me, waiting for my command.

“Let me go,” I hissed to the person behind me. I couldn’t listen to him. If I did, my strength would fade, would slip from my grasp, and I would be weaker, unable to do what needed to be done.

_Displace him. If he won’t move, make him._

“No. No, I won’t.” His voice was low enough to be a whisper, but there was steel in it too. “I’ll protect you from yourself if I have to.”

“Jen, you came back to us after Manaan.” It was the kid again, standing in front of me somehow. Her wide eyes were vulnerable and hopeful and believed in me when they really shouldn’t. The man’s hand on my shoulder was an anchor of warmth – not blistering fury-filled power – but gentle warmth that was sinking deep through the tornado of black energy I held with my will alone. The kid blinked, and her light brown eyes glistened and tugged at me. “Don’t go away again, Jen. Please.”

This is the only way!

“You won’t win if you fall, Jen,” the man said in my ear.

A violent shudder shook me, deep to my bones. _You won’t win if you fall._ There was a horrifying truth there that my soul understood. The twisting tornado of power that was attracted to my will and my desire convulsed once and then fractured. It collapsed and imploded inward before vanishing.

The Force plunged from my grasp.

I gasped as all emotion retreated, leaving only the numbness from before. It froze my muscles and thoughts collectively. I gasped again, shivering, and suddenly I was spun around, and there were firm arms tight around me, my face pressed against a wall of warm, cloth-covered muscle.

“Shhh, shhh,” Carth was murmuring, and gradually rational thought returned, creeping through my anaesthetized thoughts. _Bastila, oh no, Bastila._ I’d lost it. I’d completely lost it, just there, just like I had on Rii’shn, just like Tatooine. The unyielding and almighty power of Darth Revan’s rage had comprehensively swept me aside. If it hadn’t been for Carth and Mission, there would have been no turning back. I did not think Revan would have left this time. I shuddered again, and Carth’s arms tightened around me, anchoring me to the present.

There was pure terror, there, deep in my mind, at just how easily she could assume command of me when the chips were down. I wasn’t a match for her. Jen Sahara had held her at bay for much longer than Ness Jonohl had ever managed to.

Was Jen Sahara actually a stronger identity than Ness Jonohl? Was that why she was in my head?

But… why was Revan?

Bastila knew, but now she was captured. _Bastila. No. No…_ 

My brain slowly started processing again, and the sounds of Zaalbar howling in confused despair filtered through to me. I tensed, blinking against Carth’s chest, understanding that it wasn’t just me in an unhinged state.

“Are you… are you okay, Jen?” Carth spoke into my hair.
“No.” The word was torn out of me, unbidden and broken.

“Your expression,” he murmured, so quiet I could barely hear. “I’ve seen that look before, on Taris, before… before I understood… the Dark Side, I’m only really beginning to comprehend what you have to face, now…”

I felt safe, warm, secure; and it was more difficult to pull out of his embrace than it should have been. “I’ll do,” I muttered, stepping back, grasping at some semblance of control that I wasn’t even sure I had. His arms dropped, and I made sure to evade his gaze that I knew was searching my face for any iota of anger.

I saw, then, that I was next to the exit hatch of the ‘Hawk. I didn’t even remember walking there, just a red-haze of furious power surrounding an ice-cold determination, that cared for nothing except retrieving Bastila, at any cost, to anyone.

At any cost.

I took a large gulp of air, and fumbled for the calm that should have been easier to reach.

Behind Carth, I saw Canderous and HK further down the corridor. They both had blasters raised, tracking on us. HK’s, I presumed, were pointed at Carth in the case of a threat to his master. My lips twisted as my stomach turned. That droid… I’d have to do something about him.

But he’d saved my life just one hour ago.

My eyes flicked to Canderous. His expression was inscrutable, although the side of his mouth twitched as he caught my gaze.

“I set it to stun,” he answered my unspoken question, lowering his heavy repeater before slinging it over his shoulder. Ah, yes, Canderous, but who were you aiming at? Perhaps I didn’t need to know.

“Zaalbar,” I muttered to myself, striding past them all a little shakily and back into the belly of the ‘Hawk. Zaalbar was still howling, having collapsed to the ground, clutching his head. His fingers were pulling tight against his fur. Kylah screwed his mind somehow. Mission had a hand on his shoulder – she’d run back here then – but she looked up as I approached. Her eyes shone with hope at my appearance, but there was a guardedness there that’d been missing earlier. I’d scared her.

My gaze slipped to the side, and I saw Belaya pressed tight against the kitchenette wall. If I’d scared Mission, then I’d absolutely petrified the Jedi with that show of Dark Side power.

“Who are you?” Belaya mouthed, her words silent and unspoken. Her eyes were stretched wide in fright. I grimaced, and realized that even the non-Force sensitives would have felt something back then. The coppery tang of blood invaded my mouth, and I became aware I was biting the inside of my cheek in a frantic struggle for control.

I need Bastila. That’s why I came back from Rii’shn. To stop Darth Revan returning. But Bastila’s captured. And I can’t… I can’t become Darth Revan - not even to save Bastila.

For would Darth Revan care about Bastila, other than to see her as a tool or a weakness? Had Darth Revan cared about anyone?

I swallowed convulsively, and felt the presence of the others follow me in to the common room. One thing at a time. Focus on one goal at a time. My conviction firmed, pushing aside the concerns and doubts that weighed me down. Zaalbar, first.
“Zaalbar,” I said as I approached, kneeling next to the Wookiee. He was whimpering now, head bowed, and paws still clawing at his hair. I didn’t know the power required to undo this damage, I could only think of a dubious path that may help. I pulled a little on the Force, feeling the anger still burning-

-the power is here, I know what I have to do, how else can I get Bastila back?- 

-and gently interleaved it with my next words. “Zaalbar, calm down. Calm down, and tell us what happened. Your mind is your own.” I could hear the heaviness in my words - the mind trick I’d struggled with back on the desert planet was second-nature, now. Zaalbar stilled, his arms dropped, and he looked up.

“(Jen Sahara,)” he moaned, and I had never heard him so anguished. “(I have failed you utterly. I am weak of mind, and handed your bond-sister over to the arms of your enemy. I have disgraced myself in the worst imaginable way. Please, I beg of you, allow me to take my life in shame.)” His eyes were deep black pools of despair.

“Zaalbar, I need you,” I entreated. “Mission needs you. We need to get Bastila back.”

A noise escaped him; half-howl, half-whine. “(I betrayed you, Jen Sahara.)” His voice was hoarse with pain.

“No,” I whispered back. “Or at least not by choice. Your redemption can come in the form of aid. I need you strong, Zaalbar, not wallowing in self-pity.”

He dropped his head into his paws, but not before giving a shaky nod. He didn’t appear to have the heart to say anything further, so I stood, slowly, turning to face the rest of the crew. They were all staring at me with varying degrees of wariness or concern.

“Bastila’s been taken by Kylah Aramai hours ago,” I said to the silent common room. “Bastila must have been drugged into unconsciousness, which is why I never realized…” My eyes closed briefly. Should I have realized? Was I, in part, to blame? The obscurity of the bond had been unsettling… but she hadn’t fully recovered since Manaan. *Not the time for recriminations, idiot. That can come later!* I snapped open my eyes. “She’s got a neural disruptor around her neck. I felt it, just now, just like on Taris. Bastila is completely powerless, and Kylah’s taken her to the Academy.”

The reactions around the room differed. HK-47 stared at me intently through his red electronic gaze, awaiting my next order. Canderous pulled at his gun, checking the thermal warming light and who knew what else. He spent more time modifying his weapons than sleeping, some days. Mission was still at Zaalbar’s side, her eyes darting between us both, wide and solemn and a bit scared. Carth… I had trouble reading him, and I knew he’d be thinking about his son, but his attention was zeroed in on me. He looked a little relieved, a little wary, maybe.

Belaya was still pale, but there was more than just fright lurking in her light blue eyes. “What do you mean, you felt it?” she demanded.

I stared at her for a moment in silence, wondering about Belaya’s strength. She had to still be in pain with those ribs. “Bastila and I share a Force-bond,” I explained. “But she suffered a great psychic injury recently, which is why I didn’t realize earlier… I should have known something was up…”

“(Jen Sahara, you cannot blame yourself in any part for this!)” Zaalbar howled suddenly. “(No, I will not allow you to! This was my doing, my blame, my gross misconduct!)”
“Zaalbar,” I sighed, looking back over to him. “Kylah screwed you with the Force. How the frell were you meant to stop her?”

“Bitching back and forth about blame helps no one,” Canderous snapped. “So quit whining, and let’s work out how we’re gonna save the princess!”

I gave him a sharp nod, and closed my eyes. My thoughts raced as I thought about the possibilities. *Screw Darth Revan. I can do this, with my allies, and we’ll sodding well make it work. We have to make it work.* “The Star Map,” I muttered, opening my eyes again. I looked over to Carth. “That’s the single most important thing here. It’s time the break the radio blackout. Carth, can you send the coordinates? This might be the last Map left, if the Republic is lucky. We need to get a copy of the data off-world before we storm the Academy in a fight we may not win.”

“I don’t know Bastila’s contacts,” Carth replied, his eyes so dark they were almost black. “But I can transfer them straight to Admiral Dodonna. They’ll get through to the Jedi from there.”

“Do it,” I ordered, before turning to the Mandalorian. “Canderous, Mission, you’re staying behind. Canderous-”

“What?” the Mandalorian snapped, and he was furious. I raised my hand, forestalling him, and was almost surprised when he subsided.

“The Ebon Hawk must be ready to take off in case we come back running, or don’t come back at all. You can pilot. Carth needs to come with me – he might be the only one Dustil will listen to.”

Carth had pulled me back from the abyss before, him and Mission both. Maybe I needed him, too.

Canderous grunted, and the frustration on his face abruptly vanished. He swung his heavy gaze on Carth. “Family… clan. There is nothing more important than that. Very well, Jen, I’ll concede Republic deserves that chance.” He nodded, once, and Carth nodded back in silence.

“Zaalbar,” I turned to the Wookiee, and he raised his scruffy head slowly. The look in his eyes could only be described as tortured. “Mission will stay behind, safe on the ‘Hawk. Help me get Bastila back.” And as the Wookiee clambered to his feet, I saw the anger begin to manifest on his face. Unworldly anger at what Kylah had made him do. It was more effective than despair.

“(I will retrieve your bond-sister or die in the attempt, Jen Sahara.)”

“Big Z-” The Twi’lek’s voice wavered, and Zaalbar placed a gentle paw on her shoulder.

“(Mission. You will stay behind.)”

“Listen this time, Mission,” I ordered, and her wide eyes turned to mine. “Your safety on this ship might be all that holds Zaalbar together.” I saw the Twi’lek swallow once before nodding.

My gaze finally turned to Belaya. She was staring at me solidly, a composed mask hiding the ever-present fear. “I will come,” she said quietly. “I came to Korriban to save Juhani, and the bitter irony is that I may have endangered her instead. I will come, and fight at your side to find her.”

I sent her a nod. “Get some more kolto and stims from the medbay, Belaya. And get some armour from Zaalbar if you’re so inclined.”

I turned back to Carth. “Send the Star Map data, Carth. We’ll get kitted up, and then-” I breathed in deeply. “Then, we’re off to find Yuthura Ban.”
Even in the dead of night, Dreshdae was still bustling with mercenaries and Czerka staff alike. The cantina, however, was mostly empty other than a Mandalorian I didn’t recognize skulking in the corner. The stark, rectangular room held no evidence of a Twi’lek Dark Jedi master, but my Force senses were aware of her. And just below the surface, my rage still hummed-

-give into it, this is the stronger way, if I want Bastila back-

-like the heat of embers, banked for now, but ready to catch again at the slightest chance. The steady presence of Carth behind grounded me, and the furious anguish of Zaalbar kept me together. He deserved a chance to redeem himself, and I couldn’t give him that if I fell.

Ness Jonohl had never fallen, but Revan certainly had. Though curse her to the Outer Rim and back if I was going to let the rage consume me again. I will not let Revan win. I will not!

There must be a way to succeed without becoming her, and I had to find it.

Behind the bar, to the right, was a blank wall. Beyond that I could feel the dark Force corruption of a Master. I strode over to the wall, my hand raised.

“Hey! You can’t go there!” the bartender protested as the Force swept out from my hand and pushed instinctively at the plasteel wall. The hidden door I knew had to be there swung inward, and I walked forward. The clanking noise of HK followed me, along with the steps of the others.

The room ahead was small and windowless, lit by hanging amber lights that radiated over Yuthura and Mekel. A small table graced the centre of the room, and further ahead was a shadowy alcove that likely led to sleeping quarters. They’d shot to their feet, angry surprise evident on Mekel’s face as he brandished an activated lightsaber.

Yuthura was composed; her only sign of displeasure her pursed red lips.

“Ness Jonohl,” she said silkily, motioning Mekel to lower his ‘saber. Her violet eyes trailed behind me. “I understand you have been gallivanting in the shyrack caves.”

Perhaps I shouldn’t have been surprised she knew that. No doubt, Yuthura had eyes placed everywhere in Dreshdae.

I inclined my head. “I’d hoped to bring you another present, Yuthura, but Thalia May was a bit too keen on jumping on the next transport. For some reason, Korriban isn’t really her scene anymore.”

“What the actual frakk-”

“Mekel,” Yuthura hissed, and he subsided, thwarted for now. His blue eyes flashed angrily at me, but I wondered if there’d been a glint of concern in them as well. It felt that way, through the Force. Mekel’s emotions were easy for me to sense; anger, worry, concern - all blended together. Thalia really was one of their group. Yuthura’s gaze had narrowed in obvious dislike. “Is this your idea of a joke, Initiate?”

“Check the Dreshdae holo-cams,” I said coldly. “Thalia survived, but her companions did not.”

Her face twisted as a mass of emotions travelled through her expression before it was swept clean. I was pretty sure relief had been one of them. Disbelief featured heavily too. “I believe I told you to kill her should you find her, Initiate.”
“Yes, but one, you didn’t think she could still be alive, and two, we both know I’m not an Initiate. Besides, stop trying to pretend like you don’t care about your apprentices.”

Yuthura paused, her lips pursing again. Her violet gaze returned to appraise the others behind me. “So. Another Force-sensitive, a soldier, a Wookiee and a heavily armoured droid. You have some interesting companions, Ness Jonohl.”

I crossed my arms. “Kylah. Let’s talk about Kylah.”

“Excuse me?” she snapped. There was anger there, and recognition of some sort. Mekel was frowning behind her in confusion.

“Kylah,” I bit out. “Where is she?”

“You seem to be under the impression that you can order me around, Ness Jonohl,” she murmured, and her hand dropped to the metal cylinder at her waist. “Perhaps you should remember exactly whom you are speaking to.”

“I saved the lives of two of your apprentices!” I yelled, and now the rage was back, simmering, boiling, and threatening to overflow-

“Jen,” Carth said in warning. I felt my fists clenching, and breathed in deep. Yuthura’s eyes tightened as her hand wrapped around her lightsaber. She was wary, now. And I was close to screwing this up.

*Channel Bastila. There is no emotion, there is peace. And Yuthura can be an ally.* Darth Revan knew that, but so did Ness Jonohl.

“You want to overthrow Uthar,” I said, my voice tight with barely repressed emotion. “Uln’s head might sway some of the Initiates, but it’s not going to work on his Adepts. I can neutralize Dak and Dustil.”

Mekel’s face twisted. His anger flared in the Force at the mention of his old friend’s name. Yuthura stayed blank, cold. “You are proposing an alliance, Ness Jonohl?”

“I want Kylah,” I bit out. “I need to find her, and I’m going to the Academy now to do so. I do not want to be distracted by Uthar Wynn.”

“Distracted…” Mekel muttered in disbelief, and Yuthura’s hand swatted him lightly on the head. He scowled.

“Kylah Aramai is at the Academy?” she questioned, and I knew, then, that Yuthura had no idea of Kylah’s plans or prisoner. I relaxed, ever so slightly.

“Yes,” I hissed. “What do you say, Yuthura? Shall we go storm the Academy?”

“Let us be completely honest with each other, Ness Jonohl,” Yuthura returned. Her gaze was sharp on mine, but her hand had dropped away from her leather-clad waist. Mekel edged closer to her. “I will be the next Headmaster of this Academy. I do not believe you would make a particularly subordinate apprentice.”

Despite myself, despite the cursed situation, a chuckle escaped my lips. “I don’t want to like you, Yuthura Ban, but it seems I can’t help myself. You are quite amusing.”

Her lips curved as she recognized her own words, parroted back to her. “What is your endgame,
Ness Jonohl?"

"Kylah," I said flatly. "After that, I’m leaving this frell-hole with Staria. And Dustil. And maybe even Dak, we haven’t quite decided on that one.” I wasn’t going to mention Kel, not yet. He was one of hers.

Yuthura subsided into silence, her attention still fixed on me. Mekel, at her side, leaned in close, his angry blue eyes landing on everyone in the room in turn. He really was loyal, I understood, to those he’d pledged himself to.

“Do you have a plan, Ness Jonohl, other than to rush in, lightsabers flashing?” Yuthura quirked an eyebrow, almost mockingly, and I found my gaze wandering over her scantily clad form. She used sexuality as both a tool and a distraction, I realized. The tattoos on her head-tails were interesting. Not many Twi’leks would willingly go through the pain of marking the most sensitive part of their body for decoration. I wondered if she did it to prove something.

"I'll take out Kylah Aramai," I said finally. "You focus on Uthar Wynn, and turning any Initiates you can. Mekel can aim for Lashowe. Staria's inside somewhere and might be able to assist, and I've already told you that Dak and Dustil won't be a problem. That just leaves whatever soldiers and Initiates side with Uthar - and if we're quick with our assault then the rest of my crew should be able to hold off whatever forces Uthar can rally."

Her luminescent eyes narrowed as she lapsed into silence.

"This is your chance, Yuthura," I prompted. "Uthar will know something’s up, by now. You’re not going to get a better shot than this.”

She folded her arms, but I saw the resolution settle on her face. “Very well. If now is the time, then so shall it be,” she murmured. “You can lead the way, Ness Jonohl.”

Yuthura wanted to see my back, to have the advantage of retreat, if need be. But her prize was Uthar’s position; so for now, I could trust her at my rear. I didn’t think I had any other choice.

My gaze zeroed in on Mekel. He was handsome and young and didn’t like me, but we had unfinished business.

“Mekel,” I said. “Tell me what happened to Selene.”

I saw Yuthura blink in the periphery of my vision, but it was Mekel’s expression I focused on. His expressive face twisted once more, and on the Force ebbed a wave of grief. Selene had meant something to him, to him and Dustil both.

His eyes pinched and he glared at me. “None of your frakking business-”

“I’m making it my business,” I snapped. “Dustil thinks you killed her. Did you?”

I heard an intake of breath behind me as Carth shifted position. Mekel’s mouth dropped open, and a flush mottled his pale face, a splash of colour against the jet-black of his hair.

But it was Yuthura who spoke.

“I know not what your game is with Uthar’s pet, but Selene’s death lays at the feet of his Master.”

“What?” Mekel snapped, jerking to face Yuthura. “What do you mean, Master? How- why didn’t you tell me?”
Her gaze slid to her angry apprentice. “I have no proof, Mekel, only my knowledge of my Master. But Selene was planning to run, even I knew as much. And she would have taken you with her I suspect.”

My senses were cinched tight on the Force, and there was outrage burning hotly from Mekel now. It was surprising how keenly I could feel his emotions. They almost seemed to blur into my own. Maybe he was one of those people who left themselves intrinsically open to the Force.

“Yuthura, I—”

“Later, please,” she murmured, and her hand entwined with his briefly. She looked back at me and her gaze hardened. “Selene was a risk to both Mekel’s and Dustil’s training. Uthar always had an uncanny interest in Dustil, and I would lay credits on him manipulating events to cast the blame for Selene’s death on Mekel.”

Mekel was shaking his head. “Dustil’s always blamed me for Selene, but I thought she’d just taken off, like she said—”

“I do not believe so, Mekel,” Yuthura said, and her voice was quiet. Her hand raised to touch him once more, light and quick. “Come, we must focus on current events.”

It wasn't quite the proof I'd been after, but maybe it would suffice. I took in a deep lungful of air and turned around. Zaalbar, Belaya and HK were flanking the exit, with Carth two steps in front of them. I stepped to face him, meeting his concerned gaze head-on as I readied myself to confront the Academy.

“I won’t fall, Carth,” I whispered, soft enough that I could at least pretend no one else would hear. “The neural disruptor on Bastila – it caught me off-guard – I... I won’t fall. Not again.”

“I know.” He smiled crookedly, even if it didn’t dissipate the unease on his face.

xXx

The ominous ferracrystal doors creaked open as Belaya and I approached. She hadn’t said a word since we’d departed the freighter, quiet and resolute in her determination to find Juhani. Wearing a thin chromex suit Zaalbar had found for her, and clasping my off-hand saber, Belaya looked ready to fight the world for her friend. The confusion and shock of everything must have been debilitating to her psyche, but somehow, Belaya had composed herself admirably.

Bastila. Juhani. They had to be inside. I didn’t know how much longer I could keep it all together, keep sweeping my allies forward in a shaky leadership that was being thwarted at all turns. But if Yuthura could engage Uthar, then I’d be free to track down Kylah Aramai.

My lips twisted as I fought back the desire to rip the skin from her body, inch by inch.

The extensive ceremonial hall loomed beyond the Academy’s doors, and I could see several figures standing to attention in the centre. Uthar Wynn, in the middle, flanked by that blonde-haired Lashowe. A line of soldiers circled them, blasters at the ready. A half-dozen Initiates. No sign of Kylah.

I stepped forward, clearing the threshold, Belaya at my side. HK, Zaalbar and Carth at my back.

The doors slammed shut with a resounding thud, and I spun in alarm. Yuthura and Mekel were still outside. Sithspit!
“Uthar Wynn,” I hissed, turning back, lightsaber in my grasp. “Your apprentice wishes to speak with you.”

Yuthura had control over those damn doors, she did, unless Uthar had changed something...

The Force swirled a darkness around him and he chuckled. “My apprentice can wait. I believe I have caught you going to Dreshdae again, Ness Jonohl.” His occluded gaze veered sideways to land on Belaya. “And you have found a friend of mine.”

“Where is Juhani?” Belaya demanded, and a beam of red flared to life in her hands. In my own grasp, Karon’s lightsaber emitted a blinding cyan that sparked against the looming statues gracing the circular room. The Force thrummed a calming power through the ‘saber.

"Where is Kylah Aramai?" I demanded. The Force was building now, around me, around Uthar, escalating in a torrent of power that brushed against us all. Lashowe’s ‘saber hissed as it activated, and there was a shuffling as the dozen or so soldiers firmed their collective grasps on their weapons. Six other ‘sabers flared behind them as the Initiates flocked to Uthar’s back. Initiates, I had hoped, that might have been swayed or at least confused by a challenge from Yuthura Ban.

“(Where is Bastila Shan?)” Zaalbar roared; a wild, unyielding bellow that echoed throughout the cavern. One uniformed soldier snapped, opening fire, and Uthar’s arm reached to blast a wave of Force against us all-

…the gritty sounds of warfare were all encompassing, but I had to keep the shield up, to aid our advance. Stretched so far around so many, it took all the effort I could muster, repelling the blaster shots and grenades-

A thick, solid Force shield sprung up from my will, deflecting the barrage of bolts back through the cavern. I saw at least two soldiers collapse from deflecting fire, and Uthar’s clouded gaze widened in surprise. I grunted, my hand held high, as my power overwhelmed his and batted it away.

Not far from here, there was another growing crescendo of power, and it bore the taste of bitter grief and manifesting rage. I recognized it all too well. It felt the same as when I’d first met Juhani, in the hot dunes of Tatooine.

“Juhani!” Belaya gasped, picking up on it too. She sprinted past me, off to the side.

“HK, Zaalbar, protect Belaya!” I ordered, as I saw Lashowe dart sideways to intercept the injured human. At least three Initiates broke away, following the Sith Adept. Zaalbar snarled, flinging aside a soldier in his way. My shield dropped, and HK opened fire, his repeating blaster gutting into the line of soldiers moving to flank the Wookiee.

Karon’s ‘saber spun in my grasp, parrying lasers back into the crowd, Carth returning fire from my side. Further ahead, Zaalbar snarled in pain as an Initiate dug a lightsaber deep into his flank. The Force shot out from my hand, pummelling a wave of compressed air into the crowd, toppling over the soldiers like dejarik pieces conceding defeat.

“Sith!” Uthar hollered, and his Force-enhanced voice echoed throughout the Academy. “To me, to your Master! Kill the intruders!”

Lightning crackled from an exit as Lashowe sprinted after Belaya; I had a brief glimpse of Zaalbar
bodily picking up an Initiate and smashing him into the rock before disappearing after them. HK had already gone.

Force skewered agonizingly into my mind, and I screamed, muscles clenching in protest as Uthar launched a blistering mental attack at my psyche. No finesse, no end-goal in sight, just a violent ripping of the aural patterns within my head.

-count-attack, succumb to the dark, mine is stronger than his-

No, no, no, not even for this, I’d lose myself again-

-I’ll lose myself in every way if I don’t!-

There were other ways; shields, diversion, brute mental strength; but the cerebral tearing was so afflicting I couldn’t think straight, and it was dredging up an awful echo of darkness that simmered just below my consciousness-

“You dare to walk into my Academy and challenge me?” Uthar roared, and I took that moment to fling a Force shield over my mind, and he attacked again-

My defences shattered under his onslaught, and his psychic attack uprooted a chasm of malevolence that seemed to be at the very foundation of my being. He dragged it to the forefront and it clouded everything.

It was a netherworld of swirling obscurity, a tenebrous arctic where all emotion was frozen solid, boreal and bitter in its unyielding coldness. There was yawning depth of grief beneath it all, ancient and never-ending, a despair so encompassing that it felt like it could cover the entirety of the galaxy.

And around the edges of it all licked the burning flames of rage, wildly feral in its destructive fury.

I vaguely sensed Uthar floundering, staggering back, caught off-guard by the sickening miasma of pure Dark Side.

No! Not this way! I will not!

But there were connections there, thin and fragile and golden, and the brighter ones held echoes of recent importance.

A friend’s faith. Even if we have failed before, there is still hope to do better.

A girl’s plea. Don’t go away again, Jen. Please.

A bond-sister’s trust. Do not surrender to your rage! You are stronger than this!

A man’s truth. You won’t win if you fall.

With a fortitude I didn’t realize was within me, I heaved Uthar’s power away, hurled it out of my mind, and the Force coalesced around me in a tight shield of pure will.

Uthar’s eyes were wide with shock. “You are… darker than I thought, Ness Jonohl.”

I didn’t give him the joy of an answer, instead I raised my ‘saber and charged.

Uthar launched another mental probe, but it skittered off my shield, and he dragged his lightsaber up just in time to meet mine. Cyan sparked against red, and I heaved against him until he stumbled backwards. I lunged forward, aiming for an exposed limb, but Uthar blocked in time, and our
lightsabers crashed together again and again in a furious dance of might and will.

My mind sharpened, looking for an opening, even as I was uncomfortably aware that one lone ‘saber was not my preferred weapon’s choice. Uthar was cautious in his swordplay, his defense tight and unyielding, blocking rather than launching an offensive.

And then, the Force whispered a split-seconds warning before lightning spat from his hand-

I directed it towards me, channelled the electrical energy into a tight, closed, sparking ball, and parried it viciously off my lightsaber. With a loud crack, the sphere shot back and landed directly in Uthar’s chest. He howled, stumbling backwards, and I closed the distance between us in three furious strides.

An overhead swing caught him to the side of his torso as the lightning dissipated; his lightsaber blocked but not before mine had scored a hit. With a rabid snarl, Uthar unleashed another mental thrust that staggered me backwards. I grunted, pulled in the Force tight to throw it off, and saw then that Uthar had retreated some metres back.

With one hand pressed on his side, I could see blood seeping through his fingers. It wasn’t a mortal injury, his robes were likely cortosis-weaved and had offered some resistance to my strike. But I’d wounded him, and he was angry.

“Where is Kylah Aramai?” I hissed. As I said it, I kept my focus on him, on his face, on the emotions. He knew Kylah, had some awareness of her presence, but overall - through his fury at me - the strongest thing I could pick up on was puzzlement.

“Dustil,” Uthar grunted, his bloodied off-hand motioning behind him. There was a dead patch of Force my senses hadn’t noticed until now and my eyes narrowed. Everywhere else in the cavern sprawled the bodies of Sith soldiers, and I had no idea how most of them had been downed. Force waves. Force deflection. Pure, deathly Force power. Non-Force users were chaff in a fight like this. “Come to my side, and help me finish this interloper.”

Carth. My senses pulled back behind me. I could sense him on the ground, breathing steadily. He was downed, but not out. I’d not had the concentration to spare on him earlier, and worried over his state. I stepped back a pace, lightsaber raised as an instinctive guard, and immediately damned my overt action as Uthar’s milky-white gaze slid past me. He smirked.

“One of your crew, Ness Jonohl? Did you really think it wise to bring non-Force users in here?” He chuckled, and his posture straightened with arrogance. I’d hurt him, but his confidence returned as he sensed a weakness of mine. “Dustil, you end this scow’s soldier while I take her out.”

I laughed, low and mocking. “Good call, Uthar. Let’s see what Dustil has to say about that, shall we?”

“What?” Uthar snapped, his conceit fading into angry confusion. He turned his head to face his invisible Adept. Dustil’s weaves dropped, and the young man looked between us both, furious and uncertain.

“I told you to leave Korriban!” Dustil yelled at me.

“And I told you that wasn’t an option!” I hollered back. “It was always going to come down to this choice, Dustil, and you damn well know it!”

“What is going on?” Uthar barked. The skin hung on his face, and the pallid patches that weren’t inked with black began to flush a mottled crimson. “Dustil, explain this at once!”
“Oh shut up, Uthar, it’s not all about you,” I flared angrily as my gaze slid back to the twisted Headmaster. He looked so far beyond outraged it would have been comical in another circumstance. “Or maybe… maybe it actually is. After all, I’m sure Dustil would appreciate hearing exactly how you killed Selene.”

There was a flicker of recognition in those clouded, corrupted eyes, and Uthar’s face went slack for a brief instant. But the fury returned like a heat-wave. “You lying schutta!” he bellowed. “Who do you think you are, entering my Academy and throwing these falsehoods about?”

“I am Ness Jonohl,” I returned in a low voice. “And I am a Jedi Knight!”

Uthar snorted, and it grew into a scornful laugh of disbelief. “I’ve seen your mind, Ness Jonohl,” he sneered. “A Jedi Knight you most assuredly are not.”

“Like I’d believe any kath crap that spews from your mouth, Uthar Wynn,” I spat back. “You killed Selene and cast the blame on Mekel, all to drive Dustil away from anyone he cared about.”

“Master Uthar,” Dustil whispered in confusion, his gaze jumping between the two of us. There was growing anger and frustration there, and I wasn’t sure how long the younger Onasi would stay in control of himself. His hand was shaking on his lightsaber.

“Search your feelings, Dustil,” Uthar said through clenched teeth, but his attention remained fixed on me. His eyes had narrowed to slits of milky white. “You know Mekel loved Selene and was jealous of your involvement with her.”

I snorted. “Mekel is a foul-tongued little creep, but his one redeeming quality is loyalty. He would not have betrayed you.” I looked over to the young Onasi, and stared straight into his brown eyes, willing him to believe the truth. “Dustil, if you truly thought Mekel had, you would have killed him by now.”

“Dustil,” the groan came from behind us, and I stiffened, raising my lightsaber warily. Dustil paled, his expression aghast as he stared behind me. “I failed you as a father. Give me another chance. Please…”

There was a second of dead silence in the room, and Uthar’s mouth dropped open as he processed this new information.

“This… this is your father?” Uthar gasped. His eyes widened. “Dustil! Now is the chance to claim your destiny! Kill the soldier, and prove yourself worthy to be my first apprentice!”

“Oh, you know, don’t,” I retorted. “Instead, how about stepping back from the bastard who murdered your girlfriend and implicated your best friend?”

Uthar snarled, and launched a ball of lightning that hit me square in the chest. Static sheared through me, ripping pain across my skin and tearing into nerve endings, flushing out the rage yet again. But a cornerstone of my mind held firm, tamped the unworldly fury back under control, and thrust the crackling energy back at its creator.

Uthar flung it aside like a loth-cat batting a dust-ball. “Dustil,” he seethed. “For the last time, kill the soldier!”

I grasped the Force tight, wrapping it around Uthar’s ankles and yanking, like a lasso – but somehow he blocked it and the weaves unravelled against his limbs. Dustil looked once more toward Carth in desperation, and then his face firmed.
He raised his lightsaber, and turned to face Uthar Wynn.

“Oh no you don’t!” Uthar snarled, and his off-hand flung out in a wide motion, sweeping the boy off his feet and sailing him into the air past me. As Dustil crunched into the wall behind, I charged Uthar with a wild overhead lunge.

Uthar parried, and lightning spat from him once more. My muscles spasmed, and Karon’s ‘saber slipped from my grasp before I contained myself enough to throw off his attack. Another mental intrusion staggered me to the floor, hands out-stretched as I fell, pushing myself onto my back near where my weapon had dropped.

My focus was fraying; I once more kicked Uthar out of my mind and slammed my shields up, but my strength in the Force was fading under numerous attacks. Stunned, I reached for my dropped ‘saber, but it was too late – Uthar was bearing down, a bloody beam of red poised toward my chest-

I twisted sideways just as the sound of blaster bolts hit my ears, and Uthar grunted, a cut-off sound of pain, as he collapsed in a heap just where I’d been.

I looked behind wildly to see Carth with an upraised blaster. My hand shot up, Karon’s ‘saber thunded to my grasp, and I lunged forward, driving the beam deep through Uthar’s warm body.

He twitched once. Thick gouts of blood pulsed from the cauterized hole when I switched the lightsaber off.

I was still on my knees, gasping, staring at Uthar’s corpse. His opaque eyes were gazing up at the cavernous ceiling, darkening slowly to a natural brown.

The air rushed out of my lungs in a sigh, and I looked back to see Carth. He stared at me, intent and unblinking.

“I think you saved my life there, flyboy,” I muttered hoarsely, dragging myself forward to collapse next to him. “I think you got the killing blow.”

He had one hand resting on Dustil’s head who was prone next to him. I could sense the boy still in the Force, strongly enough that I wasn’t overly concerned. I didn’t feel like I had the energy to be, anyway. Hopefully, Dustil had only received a knock to the head.

A sound reverberated from Carth’s chest that might have been a chuckle under other circumstances. “Who’s counting these days, Jen?”

I felt my lips twitch, but it was less than half-hearted. “Are you okay?”

“Nothing major,” he replied. “When my energy shield dropped I took a hit to the legs, and my armour’s pretty fried. There’s life in me yet. Yourself?”

I leaned back against the wall, the Force retreating in mingled exhaustion and despair. I felt absolutely bone-weary, and still, we hadn’t resolved the most important question of all. “I haven’t sensed Kylah anywhere,” I mumbled. My eyes pinched closed in despair.

Carth sighed. “A moment to breathe, and then we can regroup,” he said softly. “Bastila will be in this place somewhere. We’ll find her.”

“Uthar didn’t… I’m not sure he knew anything about Kylah,” I replied. My skin tingled and burned all over, a remnant of that cursed lightning. It was worst around my neck, and the slightest movement was aggravating. Sometimes, it was the littlest things that irritated the worst.
“Jen,” Carth said sharply, and suddenly his hand was twined in mine, squeezing it. “We’ll do what we have to, to get Bastila back. Uthar’s dead, now. And you… you prevailed. You won.” You didn’t fall. The words were unspoken, but I heard him say them nonetheless. My eyes opened again, and I turned to look at him. Carth’s face was set, and there was a smear of blood near his temple. His eyes were darkly intent on mine, shining with approval. In that moment, he’d never looked more compelling. A startling wave of attraction hit me then, burned through my gut, and completely blindsided me with its unexpectedness.

What the frell am I thinking? I dragged my eyes away, snatched my hand back, and stumbled to my feet. The shock of the unbidden emotion was like a sucker-punch to the stomach, unwelcome and unneeded. Focus, you bleary-eyed idiot!

I felt my cheeks flush with embarrassment and surprise at my own thoughts, and mentally wrested myself back into order.

The room was littered with corpses, dead bodies of soldiers and Initiates alike. I needed to find out what was happening further afield, but my Force senses were spent; exhausted. Who is still standing? Belaya? Zaalbar? Did they find Juhani?

"Jen," Carth called my attention back, and he was still sitting, one hand resting on his son. I heard a faint moan from Dustil. Carth was frowning as he gazed around the room, alert for any threat. "You have to find Belaya-"

The entrance doors creaked open, causing his hand to drop to his blaster and me to spin around. Uthar’s death would have released his grip on the giant ferracrystal Force relic, and beyond stood his old apprentice, waiting.

Yuthura stalked inside, a dark storm of wariness on her face as she surveyed the area. Her lekku were twisted around her neck tightly. Mekel trailed her, his lightsaber burning a blood red against his face. So much for Yuthura’s assistance, I thought somewhat grumpily. If Kylah had been here as well, I’d have been fried.

"Well," Yuthura said at last, her violet eyes landing on mine. “This place is quite a mess. You have killed Uthar Wynn, so by rights the Academy is yours.” Her lightsaber hissed to life in her grasp. “Until the next Dark Jedi cuts you down.”

“You have got to be kidding me,” I snapped angrily. The Force was weak, and my mind frayed from the altercation with Uthar. I might not be injured, but I was completely exhausted.

“I told you that I planned on being the next Headmaster,” she said mildly, and took a step closer to me.

My eyes narrowed. “And I told you I was leaving this rock!”

“I cannot let you do that, Ness Jonohl,” Yuthura answered, her voice sultry and calm. “My leadership will not be complete unless I cut down the existing leader. So raise your ‘saber, and let us finish this the proper way.”

With a wild yell, Yuthura Ban charged.

xXx
Hyperspace: V - part one

Juhani:

Dak turned, slowly, his dark eyes wide with alarm as he stared desperately at me. Belaya’s screams replayed again and again in my head. The flush of rage fired through my blood. Everything felt so hot.

All I could think about was Belaya. My dear friend, my only friend, cut down by one who had professed to love me.

Betrayal snarled from my lungs, and the scalding hot of tears blurred my vision. Belaya… Belaya cannot be dead! My fingers clenched hard, and I raised the blue bar of Jedi justice high. My teeth bared. How could he… how could he have done that to Belaya!

“Juhani!” Dak pleaded. He thumbed the off-switch on his weapon in a deliberate action. “Don’t believe that bastard’s lies!” Oh, Uthar was an evil blight on this dark planet, I knew that, I was not an idiot! But how had Belaya been brought here, except by someone she trusted? How had Uthar known of Quatra? Of Dak’s twisted feelings for me?

To think that Dak had fallen so low went beyond understanding. It went beyond forgiveness.

The Force picked up around me, heightened by bitter grief and rage, and for once I welcomed these dark emotions, embraced them, drew in the power deep enough to serve justice where it was needed.

It felt… it felt like it had when I faced Quatra.

“No,” I shook my head. Denied it. Threw away that comparison. This was nothing like my trials, no matter if the Force tasted the same. This was about justice – justice for Belaya.

I ran at him.

Dak threw himself to the side of the room, avoiding my wild overhead lunge, his deactivated weapon held tight in his slimy, betraying grasp. If he thought I would not strike him down due to a lack of defense, then he was grossly miscalculating the depths of my anger.

Dak pressed himself against the far wall, beneath a set of hideous manacles chained high into the chrome. It seemed an indictment of his character, of this evil, evil, place.

“This is why you left Dantooine?’” I hissed, stalking forward. “To kill and torture-” My voice broke on the last word, and the replay of the Headmaster’s villainous video flashed through my mind. A howl ripped from my lungs, and through my blurry vision I saw Dak wildly shake his head. My fury
snapped, then, and I was back on Taris, enacting vengeance against the slavers of my youth. Xor, Dartmoor, Elijuur the Hutt… I could still the hot blood on my face, the sweet vindication of revenge.

The despair had come later, alone on the hot sands of Tatooine.

I lunged forward wildly, barely aware of my motions, the anger driving the Force into my muscles with unworldly strength.

Dak dodged, and my hand flung out an upsurge of energy that smashed him sideways across the room. He slid across the shiny metallic floor before halting with a crunch into the desk. Dak crumpled forward with a grunt, and took a moment to slowly stagger back to his feet.

“Think, Juhani!” he whispered hoarsely. “Uthar brought us to this room to meet someone! It must have been Belaya!”

His gaze on mine was still desperate and wild, and his cursed lightsaber remained off. I did not understand that. *His lies will not trick me. I have always been stronger than him, and he is searching for any means to escape.* Belaya’s screams rebounded through my head once more, and I launched myself through the air, fury-filled and unnaturally fast, the blue of my lightsaber aimed directly for his rotten, evil head. He leaped to the side, and I slammed straight through the poraclay desk with a shattering crack.

He was running from me, like the coward he had always been. I spun to face him; he was once more backed against the wall. I threw myself forward. The Force rode a frenzy within me, dark and bitter and toxic, and it tasted like the despairing Tatooine sand, the raging Tarisian slaves quarters, the resentful Dantooine trials…

…it tasted like failure.

*I found the Dark Side within me.* Revan’s words whispered in my head.

My vision blurred, as my lightsaber paused a hairs-breadth from his neck. Dak twitched, his eyes squeezing shut. He wasn’t even trying. His lightsaber dropped in a deliberate action, clattering to the metallic ground. The sound echoed throughout the room.

“I won’t fight you, Juhani,” he said, and I understood his passiveness then was choice, not weakness. “But I will profess my innocence to the end.”

“Oh course,” I hissed. “You always were the talker, Dak Vesser.”

His eyes snapped open, and there was anger amongst the despair. “You told me you were a Jedi, Juhani. I’m pretty damn sure the Jedi don’t believe in killing the unarmed.”

My lightsaber was wavering, and so was my righteous conviction. I shuddered in doubt, and it caused me to land an accidental glance against his collarbone.

“Shavit!” Dak cursed viciously, jerking sideways, one hand clapped against the side of his neck.

I froze, glaring into his dark gaze through the blinding blue of my ‘saber. Belaya deserved justice, Belaya deserved so much more, and how was it possible Uthar Wynn had known so much of everything if Dak had not played a part in it?

Dak was a Sith, a Sith here on Korriban. And this was exactly the vile sort of behaviour I expected of Sith.
But is killing him the path of a Jedi?

It was not. I knew that.

“Uthar’s a manipulating chivhole,” Dak said in a low voice. “And a frelling mind-reader.” His hand dropped from the side of his neck, and I saw a vicious red burn. Simultaneously I felt the urge to crow in righteousness and apologise for my fumbling. “Juhani, I’ve not seen Belaya since the day I left Dantooine. All the stuff he said… he’s picked from my mind. You must believe me.”

And now there was uncertainty gnawing deep within me. For Uthar had brought us here to meet someone. He had expected there to be someone here.

Was it possible that Belaya might still be alive?

There was a thump, then, from behind the durasteel door, and we both turned in alarm. My unworldly anger was diminishing, and in its place returned the calmer presence of the Force I was more familiar with. It picked up on the energies of my environment, and my eyes widened in disbelief.

“What’s going on out there?” Dak whispered, echoing my thoughts. He stepped closer, having picked up his lightsaber once more, and placed an unsteady hand on my arm which I shook off roughly.

“Do not touch me,” I said through gritted teeth. “I do not trust you, Dak Vesser. This is not over. Not until I find Belaya.”

“Not until we find Belaya,” he returned, glaring at me. “She’s my damn friend too, Juhani. I don’t know what the frell she’s doing on Korriban, but I want to see her away from here as much as you do!”

“Shut up!” I hissed. His words were confusing, and I no longer knew what to believe. He let out a pent-up sigh, and then a massive wave of Force energy right outside the door had us both stiffen.

Dak’s lightsaber activated in his hands.

“There’s lightning out there,” Dak muttered, his eyes widening in alarm. “Numerous Force users. Yuthura… Yuthura must be attacking. I never thought she’d actually have the guts.”

Revan. It did not feel like Revan, not directly outside, but further beyond there was something else. A growing darkness that was beginning to eclipse whatever was next door. It could be her. It had been hours and hours since I left the Ebon Hawk, for what was meant to be a short visit. I had only planned to give Dak a small amount of my time, and yet Uthar’s drive to find me had left me trapped in the Valley all day.

“Open the door, Dak,” I said hoarsely. “Now!”

He shot me a startled look, before striding forward and slamming his hand on the door controls.

Nothing happened.

“Shavit!” Dak cursed. “Uthar must have locked us in!”

I stared at him in bafflement from the centre of the room. “Why would he do that?”

“So I couldn’t escape before you killed me,” Dak bit out, thumping uselessly against the control pad again. He shot me a bitter look. “Uthar’s figured out I’m a dead loss and hoped to recruit you,
“I would never join the Sith!” I hissed, the heat of outrage flaring briefly once more.

“Oh no?” Dak turned fully around, then, staring at me intently from darkly bitter eyes. He folded his arms. “Not even if you killed your old friend and then realized you were in the wrong? If the Jedi didn’t turf you out a second time, then your own guilt probably would.”

I felt myself flushing hotly in shame, even as I reminded myself that Dak would say just about anything to wriggle out of trouble. And yet… I did not know the truth. I had almost killed him on nothing but an evil Sith’s word.

_The only thing Uthar proved is that Belaya was here._

The thought that I may have almost made a colossal mistake – again – burned a sickening humiliation in my gut.

_Not now. Now is not the time._ Energy sparked and unleashed just beyond, and I glanced back to the door. We had to get out. This we could sort out later. Uthar wished us trapped inside, and that meant we had to get out.

“Can you use your lightsaber to cut the door open?” I suggested. It took time, but lightsabers could slice through almost anything, no matter what the locking mechanism was. Dak had already turned back to the door, leaning in to face the keypad unit, but I saw his shoulders bunch at my question.

“No,” he said shortly. “The durasteel’s woven with cortosis to stop anyone with a ‘saber escaping. I’m afraid Jedi prisoners are not that uncommon, here.” It was hard to bite back my disgust, and I felt the grimace on my face. Perhaps Dak was innocent of Belaya… perhaps. But it did not sound as if he were unfamiliar with this room.

Dak jabbed a finger at the panel, and cursed again. “I’m just pushing buttons here, Juhani. Unless you know how to slice a lock or hack the console?”

Another wave of Force power was unleashed beyond the walls that imprisoned us. I looked over to the console. A log on prompt stared at me uselessly.

“I do not, Dak,” I whispered. My anguished eyes rose to meet his despairing ones.

He leaned back against the door and closed his eyes. “Then we’re stuck.”

---

**Belaya Linn:**

The room was a blur as I raced with all the speed of the Force, intent only upon reaching the bitter rage that I sensed was my dearest friend. _Juhani…_ Jen Sahara said she walked in the Light, now. Whatever was being done to her in this cursed, evil place - I could not bear it if she fell again.

The stimulants and the pressure band beneath my armour were enough to keep me going. There was a hallway ahead, and that was the direction I needed to take. It looked familiar. I knew where it led.
My entire being shied away from that cursed place, but Juhani was there. I ran on.

Then blinding white torment sheered into me, crackled through the chromex suit and sent me collapsing to the ground. I screamed in anguish as a thousand stabbing needles pierced deep into the marrow of my bones. Pain blitzed through every rational thought, except - move!

My muscles convulsed as I forced them to obey, rolling frantically to the side. I heard the shink of a lightsaber stab into the ground behind me, and the lightning dissipated just enough for me to draw on the Force in a desperate pull.

It engulfed me with life, shucking the remnants of dark power from my limbs. I stumbled to my feet, turning to face four Dark Jedi I had not known were chasing me. Oh no. Horror was instant and acute. Even were I not injured, this would be too much for me. My lungs felt tight, and every breath was agonizing.

I was so close to Juhani. Which still meant failure if I were cut down now.

The leader, a blonde female human, had closed her off-hand in a fist. Blue shards of energy crackled around it, sparking against the smirk on her face. Dread tasted like ash in my mouth.

Fury roared in the form of Wookiee outrage, and the tip of a bloodied blade protruded from the chest of a yellow skinned Trandoshan flanking the blonde. The Dark Jedi gasped, and I echoed him in surprise as the Wookiee snarled again, shoving the reptilian Sith off his vibrosword. As the Trandoshan collapsed, blaster fire spat and deflected around the remaining three Sith who sprang into action. One bolt was launched directly into the Wookiee’s chest, and he howled as he staggered back.

My breath rattled. My ribs felt like a burning prison of pain spiking into me.

Jen Sahara’s droid appeared out of nowhere, stepping to my side as he fired a projectile at the blonde leader. She dodged, turning back to us, her teeth bared in a rictus of impassioned hate.

“Juhani is down that corridor,” I said desperately to the robot. “We need her assistance. Find her!”

Maroon photoreceptors gleamed at me in assent just as a spinning lightsaber was thrown at him. I drew the Force under my command into a tight ball of compression and flung it outward, hitting the blonde in the chest as I heard a metallic sheering behind me.

The human fell to the ground, fumbling her lightsaber as it returned back to her grasp.

The footfalls of HK-47 disappeared behind me, followed swiftly by a short Rodian female wielding a double-bladed lightsaber. My gaze landed on the prone blonde.

I launched toward her, only to be faced by a snarling Togruta whose blood-red beam crashed into my upraised shorter lightsaber.

My breath was wet and wheezing, a worrying concern for a later time when I was not facing imminent death. My strength and my focus would not be dictated by such physical limitations. I drew deep on the Force and revitalizing energy coursed through me, overriding the pain of my body.

I sidestepped, ducked underneath an overly optimistic lunge, and stabbed at the Togruta’s side just as the blonde human returned to her feet, lightsaber in hand. The Togruta shrieked, and the Force added strength to my next swing. It cut deep, higher now, into the breadth of one of his montrals.

There was a flash of blue-white, then electrical laceration engulfed me in a paroxysm of pain,
slamming me back to the ground in tandem with the Togruta.

The agony bit deep; my ribs were splintering and my throat was hoarse with screaming. *Stop the pain!* The Force was riding with me still, energy that I used to disengage all nerve endings. A blessed numbness followed, even as my muscles still twitched spasmodically under the electrical charge.

“Belaya!” someone yelled. There was a sudden pressure against my ribs, and my eyes opened to see that woman – no, girl, really – withdrawing her lightsaber from my side. *I must get up!* The blonde was looking beyond me now, attention drawn by the shout, and the Force under my command pushed at her weakly.

I struggled to move, to push up from my shaking arms and clamber to my feet. As I stood, there was a shout and a blur past me, moving to engage the woman. It was hard to feel much of anything, with the Force blocking out the sensation of pain. A dangerous talent, but useful, too.

Hands gripped my elbows tight, and a beloved face appeared in front of me.

“Juhani,” I whispered through senseless lips. Never had she looked so dear. Her golden eyes were intensely fierce on mine.

I heard a violent yell of agony. Juhani’s gaze slipped passed me, widening with alarm. “Dak! No!” There followed a malicious laugh and Juhani dropped my arms, a lightsaber appearing in her hands as she withdrew from me.

I staggered back, unsteady.

“You schutta!” a man screamed. “See how you like that!”

I felt cold suddenly. Ice cold. The Force was weak in my grasp, like it was slowly slipping away.

“Belaya.” Juhani was back, catching me just as my legs began to buckle. There was a feral victory painted on her face. I could see a bead of sweat trickle down her forehead. “She’s down. Dak got her.” I tried to smile, but my lips were stuck together. Her forehead furrowed, then, in deep lines of concern.

My vision blurred as I collapsed against her. The Force skittered away, leaving a hollow feeling behind. I felt vague surprise that no pain immediately followed.

“Oh no. No, no. Belaya, you cannot die. We will get help – Dak!” Juhani cried out in desperation, lowering me to the ground.

I looked up to see two figures leaning over me. The man’s face was deathly pale, and he clutched a bloodied stump tight against his chest. Juhani drew a hand back from my side. It was covered in the dark red of death.

The coldness was moving up my chest to my throat, now.

“Hold on, Belaya. Just – hold on!” Dak muttered hoarsely. Juhani’s fingers touched my cheek. They were hot, and I could not feel much of anything else.

“I do not think I can,” I whispered. There was so much to say. *I am dying.* “Please… please…” I blinked. Juhani’s slanted eyes were shimmering and full of despair. “Walk in the Light. Both of you… you are both strong enough. Please… walk in the Light.”

“Can you- can you heal her?” Dak demanded. His face was contorted in pain and horror. “Belaya
can’t frelling die. Not now. She can’t!"

I felt my eyes close, and Juhani’s palm was still resting against my face. Its warmth was fading, and each breath grew more difficult.

“I- I cannot,” Juhani stuttered. She sounded lost.

“Be at peace, my friends.” The words were mouthed; I did not have the energy to speak. Behind my eyelids there was a growing whiteness that seemed to encompass everything. It was nice.

I could not feel Juhani’s touch anymore.

“Oh, Belaya,” someone said. “You always were the best of us.”

xXx

**Yuthura Ban:**

The physical intermешed with the psychic, and it was my area of expertise, my interest, my particular strength. One could use one’s body to seduce, to intimidate, to manipulate or coerce, and when combined with the Force that could become powerful indeed.

Body language. It could speak volumes about what a sentient was thinking and feeling, and when combined with the natural Force vibrations that emanated from a sentient, it was easy to tell when someone’s strength was guttering.

The human, Ness, had intrigued me from that start. I’d been surprised Uthar hadn’t paid her more note; but he’d been too interested in Staria. But I - I knew where the strength in the pair was, and it hadn’t been the quiet Cathar.

I’d entertained the thought of truly allying with the human at one stage, but Ness Jonohl was too reckless and too disrespectful of her betters. She was also unusually strong, and her very existence now stood a threat to the position so close within my grasp.

And I could barely sense the Force around her. It was weak, spent; and I understood this might be my only chance to triumph over the human whose sheer power – if I was truly honest – eclipsed my own.

My jaw set in fierce determination as I sprinted towards her, weapon poised.

Surroundings blurred in a swirl of granite and uniformed corpses, and the distance between us stretched, a long channel that I could overcome in a split-second as the Force lent velocity to my bunched muscles.

Her off-hand snapped out, and the lightsaber from a dead Initiate came whistling through the air. She wouldn’t have her guard up in time, though, and I swung low, aiming for her legs.

Ness jumped at the last second, somersaulting in the air and landing behind me with a thud. I spun, head-tails flying, frustrated rage boosting momentum to my choke-hold on the Force.

From behind a cross of red and cyan, Ness stared at me warily.

My environs snapped back into real-time. **Damn that human!** She’d unsettled me the moment my eyes had landed on her, when she’d been more interested in the braying of Mandalorian mercenaries than my own authority of the Sith. Since then, she’d trumped Mekel, decapitated Jorak, and finished
off Uthar.

My gaze slid to my Master’s corpse, a black and red gaping wound visible in his torso. If I truly was to take his place, my only option was her death. And even with that wild launch in the air, I could still barely sense Ness in the Force. She was exhausted.

I could take her, now. And I would.

“You don’t have to do this, Yuthura,” she said in a low voice. Her entire posture slumped with weariness and resignation which echoed in her aura. The lack of fear disturbed me a little. Her eyes trailed over my lekku, taking in the tattoos that had cost me pain beyond tears to mark. They were a shield - a shield of the past - and I wore them proudly.

“I do,” I contradicted, annoyed she was still belabouring the point. “For you are the Headmaster now, Ness Jonohl.”

Ness gave a snort, an irreverent response that was entirely in keeping with her personality. “Going by that logic, lopping off Jorak Uln’s head made me Headmaster.”

“Either way,” I replied, inclining my head. “I will not be second place anymore.” Certainly not to a garrulous human who has only been on Korriban for days.

The outrage and anger at the situation built deep within me, and I coaxed it, fanned it, caressed the flames of Force power within me. It was building to a crescendo of power, and still she sneered at me from beyond the guard of her ‘sabers.

“For the last time, Yuthura, put your glow stick away!”

Oh, she was powerful enough, when she wasn’t already spent. But Ness Jonohl didn’t understand the workings of the Sith or she would not be begging for my mercy. “No,” I said softly. “For to truly be master, one must prove their strength. And so I shall!”

“Ness Jonohl doesn’t stand alone,” a pained voice came from the training rooms, and our joint attention was wrenched to a bloodied figure limping slowly into the room. One arm, severed just below the elbow, clutched tight into his stomach. The other held his lightsaber. He looked pale, and sick, and determined.

I heard Mekel snort in derision behind me, the sound vocalizing that same opinion I held. Dak looked out for himself, and himself alone. He was irrelevant, one of Uthar’s, and probably the first rat to scurry from the room when the violence had been unleashed.

I wondered, briefly, how he’d lost his forearm.

“Stand down, Adept,” I ordered scornfully. “You are injured and a weakling.”

I glanced back to my opponent. She was staring at Dak in disbelief.

“Sod it,” Dak said, his voice bitter as he stumbled close to Ness. “I’m not doing things wrong again.”

“Juhani…” Ness murmured, and her voice caught on the name.

“She’s alive,” Dak said, but the words were broken. “Belaya’s not. Juhani’s still with her.”

Air expelled out from Ness briefly, a desolate sound, and her shoulders slumped. I tasted her despair as it rode out on the Force, and prepared to strike.

But there was an echoing howl in the direction Dak had emerged from as Ness’ pet Wookiee limped in. Blood clotted the side of his leg, and his vibroblade wavered in his grasp. And further beyond, against the wall behind Ness, her soldier slowly rose to his feet. He was holding his blaster firmly at half height.

“An injured Wookiee and a broken soldier,” I scoffed, shaking my head in disgust. “Wrong place to bring non-Force sensitives, Ness.”

But she smirked at me - the schutta - and her very confidence was enough to rattle. “You’d be surprised to learn who got the killing blow on Uthar, then,” she drawled.

I scowled in anger, feeling the control of the situation shift from my grasp, like a slippery codfish wriggling back to its den. My passion stuttered before igniting again when I felt the presence of another. One of mine.

“Kel,” I ordered silkily, my gaze lifting to the far side of the circular cavern. He stood awkwardly to the entrance of the living quarters, a dozen of so corpses between us.

I’d never seen the place so dishevelled. Uthar’s pet soldiers that manned the holo-cams and torture fields were sprawled like broken toys against the edges of the room. Black scorch marks marred the granite walls and statues alike. Even Naga Sadow bore the burn of a blaster bolt right in the centre of his face.

“Come here.”

“Um…” Kel hedged, shuffling his feet. Ness turned to face him.

“You master bids you!” I snapped, motioning him closer. Kel had always been passive, but he was one of mine. Mine, dammit!

“Sorry Yuthura,” Ness murmured, her tone wry. “I’m afraid I promised Kel a ride off this rock.”

The outrage was sharp, now, sharp and dangerous. Who was this human who dared to turn my apprentices against me? Thalia, still alive, had preferred to run rather than find me. Kel… Kel wouldn’t even walk to my side, I realized in mounting frustration, as he stood there, evading my gaze.

“The Dark Side erodes loyalty,” Ness said softly. “Except in exceptional cases.” I swung my furious gaze back to her, but she was staring at Mekel. “And even then, Yuthura, how long do you think you’d hold onto Mekel? For, in the way of the true Sith, one day he’ll rise to challenge you.”

“That is the way of the true Sith, you imbecile!” I hissed. “How else do you expect to be the strongest?”

“Through allies, of course!” Ness snapped, her green eyes flashing. “Allies you can trust at your back. How much stronger would you be right now, Yuthura, if Thalia and Kel stood next to you?”

“Mekel,” a young voice whispered, and it was from Dustil, the weakling that Uthar and Mekel were both so enamoured of. He had clambered to his feet, standing next to the soldier. “Uthar killed Selene. I know that now. I’m- I’m sorry I was such a frakkhead. But… but I… damn it…” he trailed off uselessly.

I’d never seen the appeal in the boy. Mekel had latched onto him, probably due to their shared heritage, but I’d been glad when Uthar had taken Selene out of the picture and dissolved their friendship.
I expected some backlash from my apprentice over that one, though.

“You’re gonna stand with them?” Mekel sneered from my back. Surprisingly enough, it seemed so. Dustil and Dak, the two most useless Adepts, looked ready to fight with Ness Jonohl. The one who’d taken out their Master. I could scarcely believe it.

“I saved your life, Mekel,” Ness said in a low voice. The fury grew when I realized her ploy. If she dared try and wrest my favoured apprentice away from me, after Kel had faltered—

“I don’t expect you to stand against your master,” Ness continued. “But don’t stand against me. Or Dustil.”

“You’re drained,” I spat. Ness Jonohl had an irritating habit to continually draw me into conversation, and it was beginning to move beyond annoying. Her piercing gaze was roving once more over my lekku, and I twined them around my neck reflexively. They were a source of fascination for many, I knew, but this was hardly the place for Ness to lose concentration. It was almost insulting. “And your allies are broken.”

“Slave tattoos,” she said abruptly.

“What?” I snapped, as a wave of ice-cold slammed into my gut, diffusing the heat of anger. *No! Strike her, now!* In instinct I charged once more.

My off-hand rose, flinging a poisoned wave of Force directly at her, and I followed it with a precise swing. Ness batted aside my toxic attack in a quick flick of the Force, sharp and bright and stronger than I expected, and somersaulted over me again. How did she draw on the Force so quickly, merely for it to gutter out around her again? I would have sworn her abilities to be near empty.

“Headtails are meant to be excruciatingly sensitive, especially near the base,” Ness panted. I spun around to face her once more. Dak and Dustil flanked her now, twin beams of red at either side. Mekel was behind me, uncertain at the thought of facing either his old friend or his rescuer, and I damned Ness Jonohl all over again. “Why would you go through the torture of tattoos, unless you were trying to cover something up?”

“Shut up!” I yelled. There was a frantic sense of fear in my gut, and that cursed human had to stop speaking. “You don’t know what you’re talking about! There’s surgery, there’s tattoo removal—”

“Sure, but I hear the Hutts use a permanent tissue-deep method of marking their Twi’lek slaves,” Ness retorted. Her eyes had narrowed to twin slits of green, and there was a fiercely intent expression on her face. “Surgery *might* work, but it’d go pretty deep into the nerves.”

“Shut *up!*” I echoed, my voice growing hoarse.

“Master,” Mekel pleaded from behind me. “This ain’t gonna frakking work.”

“No one talks about my past and lives!” I howled. Even I could hear the despair. After all these years, I could get through days without remembering, and then to have some unknown, wild Force-sensitive latch onto something only Uthar had picked up on—

“Why?” Ness snapped. “Being a slave isn’t something to be ashamed of. It isn’t something you had any damn choice about.”

“My past is my past,” I bit out, feeling my teeth grit. “It is none of your business, Ness Jonohl. Whatever I do about it has *nothing* to do with you!”
She looked taken aback, and I realized I’d said more than I’d planned to. “Whatever you do about it?” she asked in puzzlement. “What have you done about it?”

“None of your business!” I repeated, flustered.

“It’s not like you would have done anything here, playing teachers and schools with Uthar Wynn,” Ness drawled sarcastically. Her gaze narrowed. “Did you plan to do something about the slave trade, Yuthura? Now that you’re free, and powerful… but of course, one’s never free with the Sith, not really, you always have to pander to your Master—”

She was too perceptive. Too damn perceptive and clever by half. I didn’t know if Ness just made a lucky guess or if the Force itself showed her the connections, but I found myself inwardly damning her yet again. The Hutts bred pretty Twi’leks, kept them chained and marked for their entire lives, rented them out to customers and agents before dragging them back in again. It wasn’t a life for a tuk’ata, let alone a sentient.

I was going to do something about it. One day, when I was free and powerful.

“When I’m Headmaster—”

“When you’re Headmaster you’ll bow to Malak and do his whim,” she cut in, her voice cold and low. “For that’s the way of the Sith. Kiss the arse of the one more powerful, and if you’re lucky, you might make it to the top, but by then you’ll be so dark and sodding insane that nothing will really matter anymore.”

I lapsed into an uneasy silence, and the cursed uncertainty radiating from Mekel at my back encompassed me, too; filtered deep into the rage I had been so carefully fanning. My fingers clenched on my lightsaber in frustration.

“For frell’s sake, Yuthura,” Ness said, and her voice turned weary. She actually deactivated her sabers; which caused Dak to stare at her in alarmed disbelief. “Turn your sodding weapon off.”

Mekel took a step to reach my side. He was more than just my apprentice; I leaned on him when I should stand alone. I… cared for him, in my own way. There was no one else I would bed for sheer companionship rather than gain, and our similar roots created a foundation of understanding that I would be sad to see go.

With the Sith, I guess I knew that one day it would.

“This won’t work, Master,” he whispered, and he switched off his lightsaber.

*Shavit,* I cursed inwardly, lapsing back into the slang of my youth. *Curse that kriffing Ness Jonohl. Oh, that she had never set foot on Korriban!*

“Go, then,” I hissed angrily in defeat. I could still rebuild from here. Somehow. My fingers twitched, and clicked the off-switch on my lightsaber. “You said you’d leave. Just… get away from here.”

“I haven’t found Kylah,” Ness muttered. “I’m not going anywhere until I find that schutta.”

My frustration flared again. “What makes you think she’s even here?” I snapped angrily. “She’s hidden out in Dreshdae ever since she landed. She didn’t bother checking in with Uthar. Force, he even thought she might be hiding from Malak!”

Ness blinked, visibly startled.
The soldier standing behind Ness took a step closer to her. He’d lowered his weapon, but it was still firm in his grasp. “Well, she did run away from you on Manaan,” he murmured to her. “Maybe she was hiding from Malak. Maybe her being here on Korriban was just one terrible coincidence.”

_Run away from Ness Jonohl?_ Who was this human, who could defeat the likes of Jorak Uln, Uthar Wynn and Kylah Aramai? I would have sworn she was no Jedi, but curse me to the Outer Rim and back if she were a true Sith, either.

“Zaalbar,” Ness called out to the Wookiee. He was standing nearby, wavering on his feet. It seemed like only sheer force of will was keeping him upright. “Sithspit, you’re injured,” she cursed, walking towards him. Dak made a sort of choking noise, and Ness jerked her head back to him, her gaze landing on his severed arm. She winced, and cursed again. “We’ve got to get out of here,” she muttered in frustration. “We’ve got to- Zaalbar, why did you tell me that Kylah went to see Uthar?”

“(Kylah Aramai took her to Uthar Wynn at the Academy),” the one called Zaalbar howled in Shyriiwook, but his intonation pricked goose pimples against my neck. I recognized that flat, automatic tone, and moreover, now that I pushed out with the Force, I could sense the unnatural neural patterns in his mind.

“He’s been placed under compulsion,” I snapped. I strode over to the Wookiee. His black eyes bored into mine from an impressive height, exhausted and anguished and angry. “Why didn’t you remove it, Ness Jonohl?”

“I didn’t know how to,” she replied, walking to my side. “There’s so much I don’t know. I- I tried compelling him into thinking his own mind was free.”

I shot her a look I hoped contained the utter depths of my incredulity. “You do understand the paradox of that statement, I hope?” I said slowly, and was gratified to see the red flare of embarrassment mar the human’s cheeks.

She pursed her lips and evaded my gaze. “Can you help, Yuthura?”

I sighed. I did want the human gone, but I’d planned on it being at the end of my lightsaber. That didn’t seem possible, now. My rage had departed me, leaving only the embers of frustration and a galling uncertainty. I clipped my saber back on my belt, and reached out with psychic tendrils of Force, wrapping it around the Wookiee. He tensed, grimacing as I probed for the occluded constraints that threaded through his mind.

It wasn’t difficult, to disperse Ness’ touch, but the other – which I assumed was Kylah’s – went deeper, much deeper. It was stronger and more exact than any I’d come across before, but Kylah Aramai was a Dark Jedi whose Force presence I’d never encountered. I could feel the lines of coercion bedding low within the Wookiee’s psyche, and they unravelling under my will.

The deeper, shackled ones were harder to dissolve, and it took several attempts before I was satisfied. I pulled back, weary and resigned and wishing only to see the back of these people who had upended my territory so thoroughly.

The Wookiee gave a lung-rending howl that echoed throughout the ceremonial cavern.

“It is done,” I said.

“Zaalbar?” Ness called. She stepped forward, and grabbed a furry paw. “Zaalbar?”

“(She is gone),” Zaalbar moaned. “(I put her in a ship, and Kylah has taken her off-world).” The Wookiee collapsed to the ground, his great shaggy head dropping to his hands. Blood seeped out
from his side and splattered to the ground, and pain radiated out from him in black waves on the Force. His body language suggested that the pain barely even registered with him.

Ness dropped to her knees beside him.

“Zaalbar, we’ll get her back,” she was murmuring. “Stay with me, fight with me, and we’ll get her back if it’s the last thing I do.” Ness rested her head gently against the crumpled Wookiee.

“Kylah took the Cathar?” I hazarded. I hadn’t seen Staria since they’d gone to Hord’s tombs, although Mekel had told me she’d survived. It certainly sounded as if Kylah had taken someone of import to them.

Ness looked back to me, her face drawn and bleak and defeated. “No,” she sighed. “I suppose you may as well know. It’s not like you can stay on Korriban now.”

My eyes narrowed. If she thought she could send me away-

“Bastila Shan,” Ness said, clambering to her feet. Her anguished gaze looked past me to the soldier standing next to Dustil. “Kylah’s taken Bastila off-world.”

“Oh no, Jen,” the soldier breathed in mirrored despair.

“Bastila Shan?” Mekel spluttered. “As in… as in... the Bastila Shan?”

Ice froze my insides. Bastila Shan, Jedi hero of the Republic war effort, taken captive by Kylah Aramai on Korriban? Kylah had betrayed the Republic’s Endar Spire, I knew that much, and Bastila Shan had been on the run since then… my mind struggled to recall the news reports Uthar had shared with me.

“What the frakk would bloody Bastila Shan be doing on Korriban?” Mekel continued, his voice loud and incredulous in the blood-smattered room.

They’d been tracked to Tatooine and Manaan, I recalled, hiding in a freighter which just smacked of incorrect information, for why would the young Jedi be sneaking around instead of fighting on the front-lines where her awesome powers could be of use? I frowned, my fingers clenching as I struggled to remember the apparent make-up of Bastila’s crew. Uthar hadn’t been overly interested, Darth Malak had other agents onto it and we’d received no alerts of import. I vaguely recalled hearing she was travelling with a Wookiee-

“My eyes slid to the crumpled, hairy mess on the floor.

“And two Jedi; one Cathar, one human,” I murmured to myself, my gaze sliding back to Ness. She stared at me with an inscrutable expression, all apart from the anguish in her eyes. And there was a Fleet captain, the war-hero Carth Onasi. I looked over to the soldier in suspicion. And a Mandalorian, and hadn’t Ness walked into the cantina with one? “You idiots lost Bastila Shan.” I shook my head, and a hollow laugh escaped my lips. What a colossal cock-up. Honestly. Whose bright idea was it to hide out on Korriban?

“Yeah. Thanks,” Ness bit out, eyes flashing.

“Well, I hope your stay on Korriban was worth it,” I drawled.

Ness sighed, but didn’t answer. I recalled her previous comment, and my eyes pinched tight again. “What do you mean, I can’t stay on Korriban?”
But she didn’t need to answer. Ah, shavit. I couldn’t stop her crew from walking away, and as soon as Darth Bandon or Darth Malak learned I’d let Bastila’s crew go…

“No…” I denied hotly. “There’s a way. They won’t need to know I was here - you took out Uthar, after all.”

“For frell’s sake, Yuthura,” Ness snapped. “It’s not like there’s much of an Academy left for you to run. You don’t even want to be here, not really.”

It was too much. It was all too much, and the chances for my survival were far too kriffing slim. And I despised myself when I descended into the common slang that Mekel was so fond of.

Ness reached one hand out to the Wookiee. He howled softly, before grabbing it and clambering to his feet. Ness’ piercing eyes fixed on me again.

“Walk us to Dreshdae, Yuthura,” she said softly. “Let’s… let’s talk on the way.”

For the first time in years, I felt completely lost amongst the anger, uncertainty and frustration. And yet, deep down, there was a glimmer of something… something new. I didn’t recognize it, and for lack of a better option, I conceded to Ness’ wishes.

xXx

**Mekel Kadoni:**

It had to be the most frakking ridiculous group of kooks ever stumbling out of the Academy.

Ness Jonohl, almost dead asleep on her feet, had first led us to the bloodbath in the training rooms. I’d thought the central hall had been bad, but next door looked like the insides of a meat blender turned on high. The smell was even more disturbing; blood, faeces and burnt flesh combined and reeked worse than a five day-old dead whore.

In the hallway beyond was a smoking heap of droid. Closer, in the centre of the room, Ness’ Cathar friend was leaning over the body of Ness’ human friend, forehead touching forehead like a macabre prayer to a nameless god.

There’d been a bit of solemn snivelling before the injured Wookiee picked up the broken droid, stuffing its dismembered head into a hairy armpit. The Cathar followed, limping, as she carried the corpse she’d been mooning over. Dak trailed quietly at her heels.

He was surprising me, actually. Dak had lost half his bloody arm, and was smeared in the innards of frakking Lashowe. *Lashowe.* I’d not have picked Dak to have big enough balls to take that ice-bitch out, but apparently he’d finally grown a pair when she’d hacked a limb off.

I’d always expected to face down blondie myself. Never thought she’d be taken out by one of the Adepts on her side, but then loyalties on Korriban were ever-changing.

I hated that, and I hated this place. I hoped Yuthura would stop being so damn power-hungry, and listen to frakking Ness Jonohl.

“I cannot leave just yet,” Yuthura was saying, as the first touches of dawn lightened the Korriban
night sky. It was bloody cold, lumbering along to Dreshdae in the dark. “I must see who is still alive here.”

Ness paused, as if she were considering her words. She made me uneasy; there was no other bleeding word for it. She damn well shone in the Force, like a piercing light that stabbed you viciously in the eyes. And then her strength would vanish, causing me to doubt my own senses. And all the while, her emotions seeped out of her like a pus-filled wound. Even now, when she was relatively calm, I could feel the grief simmering from her.

I’d never been so aware of someone I had no interest in banging.

“Kylah’s been gone for hours, for close to a day, maybe,” Ness returned in a low voice. “We’re wanted by Malak as well, Yuthura. He’ll send someone to Korriban soon.”

“I understand that,” Yuthura replied, her voice tightening. “But I will not walk away from the Academy with nary a glance. There are loose ends I must wrap up first.”

My gaze slid to Kel, who’d been silent since… well, actually, Kel was silent nearly all the damn time. I never got how he’d managed to scrape through his graduation - I’d always suspected Yuthura must have helped in some way.

Kel was a nice guy. Genuinely nice. He had no place with the Sith.

“You really gonna go with her?” I muttered, jerking my heard towards Ness. “Our Master’s leaving Korriban as well, y’know.”

I thought I was being quiet, circumspect. Yet both Yuthura and Ness stopped and turned to face us. Yuthura was composed, but I knew my Master - the thought of Kel leaving her rankled.

“She’s not going to engage in a pissing contest with you, Yuthura,” Ness muttered. “But you haven’t even worked out where you’re going yet. Kel should be with the Jedi, and we’re headed to a Jedi Master.”

“You have no authority over my apprentices, Ness Jonohl,” Yuthura hissed. I could see my Master’s anger from earlier flare in her eyes, and a responding smirk threatened to emerge on Ness’ face. I even felt like I knew what the cocky woman was going to say. But you named me Headmaster yourself, Yuthura. Oh, no, she wasn’t going to have a pissing contest. Yeah, right. I snorted.

“I can speak for myself,” Kel mumbled, looking down. Yuthura sighed and walked over to him, a hand on his shoulder. He looked up, dark eyes lifting reluctantly to meet her gaze. “Master… you’ve told me before. I’m not Sith material. I don’t want to be Sith material.”

“They have Darth Malak’s forces after them, Kel,” Yuthura countered. Ness kept silent, surprisingly, and her gaze moved back to me. I tried to pick her age. Mid-thirties, maybe. Tallish, athletic – if a bit on the scrawny side – and obviously used to combat. She’d been travelling with Bastila Shan – Bastila sodding Shan – and it made sense that the Jedi hero’s companions would be strong in the Force. And Ness was very strong in the Force.

They must have had a critically important reason to land on Korriban - either that or Ness Jonohl was as stupid as she was crazy.
“I’d like to join the Jedi, Master,” Kel whispered. There was a set to his jaw I’d never seen before. “I want that choice.”

Yuthura’s eyes hardened. Her hand dropped from Kel’s shoulder, and slowly, she turned to face Ness. “I wish I had killed you when we first met in the cantina, Ness Jonohl,” she said bitterly. “And I swear I will remedy that, should your companionship endanger Kel. Keep him safe and away from Darth Malak, and we shall have no reason to meet again.”

Ness’ face was blank as she stared back at Yuthura. “I’ll deliver him to the Jedi, Yuthura. He won’t have to travel with us for long, and the Jedi will be a damn sight safer than a Sith Academy.”

I glanced sideways, and saw the rest of the sorry group had paused to wait for us. Dustil, walking next to that old soldier, was staring at me. We hadn’t spoken, not since his admission of stupidity.

It had been good to hear the words, though. Satisfying to have him admit that it was Uthar’s fault, not mine. I’d mourned Selene, as much as he did, and it frakking cut deep to live with his mistrust day after day. I’d expected more from him. I’d trusted him more than that.

My gaze slid back to Ness Jonohl. I didn’t really like her much, but I owed her for Uthar. I owed her for Jorak, too.

“We should get going,” the soldier said in a short tone. He had a Telosian accent, I realized, and wondered if that was why Dustil was hanging around him. I frowned, and remembered Ness saying they’d be taking Dustil with them. That makes as much sense as Bastila Shan being on Korriban. What would Ness want with Dustil?

I strode forward, catching up to them as the group resumed walking. The soldier shot me a cagey look as I flanked Dustil on the other side, and I glared back, mentally willing him away.

“Kel’s going with this lot, rather than Yuthura,” I told Dustil. I felt torn over that. I’d rather Kel be with us… but he’d probably make a frakking good Jedi. I scowled. “Dee, you could come with us, y’know. Yuthura would take you.”

Dustil’s eyes widened in surprise, and there was a shocked sort of cough from the soldier. I scowled at him. “Look, this ain’t got nothing to do with you. Frakk off,” I snapped.

The older man’s brows lowered. “No.” The words were flat and resolute, and I wasn’t going to take this crap from a non-Force sensitive, even if he was friends with Ness Jonohl. I drew in the Force, irritable and angry-

“Mex,” Dustil intervened quickly. My anger derailed as I frowned at him in surprise. He hadn’t called me that in over a year. “Look, I- uh, I’ve got things I need to sort out. I, frakk,” he cursed, sounding awkward as he did so. His eyes closed briefly. “You’re my friend, and you deserve the truth.” He motioned jerkily towards the soldier, all the while looking pissy and highly uncomfortable. I’d never seen him at ease, not really, not even when Selene used to hang off his arm and stare adoringly into his stupid brown eyes-

“This is my dad.” Dustil’s voice was low - but still, it echoed through the pre-dawn rocky slopes outside of Dreshdae.

I blinked. Well. I had nothing to say to that, and the surprise sat like turned shyrack stew in my gut. Dustil met my gaze, his eyes pleading for understanding or something - I didn’t know. I could barely comprehend the thought of Dustil’s dad being alive after Telos, let alone frakking rescuing him from a Sith Academy.
I floundered behind as Dustil allowed himself to be led away. We were entering the colony, and I fell into line next to Yuthura, not paying the least attention to whatever snark was going on between her and Ness Jonohl.

I could see the resemblance, now. It was pretty frakking obvious. The soldier was what Dee would be in a couple of decades. I scowled, and knew I should be happy that my old friend had family left that would look out for him.

I was walking past half-asleep Czerka officials before I realized it, confused and unbalanced. As we entered a docking bay, Dustil glanced over his shoulder back to me.

A last look between us was a crappy farewell. After Selene, after all these frakking years on this chivhole of a planet, I’d have liked to have a drink or two at the least. But there he was, his father’s arm guiding him toward the relative safety of a smuggler’s freighter.

His father. How the frakk did that happen?

But we were friends, once. And now he knew the truth about Selene, maybe that bond was still there. Know your family. Choose your own blood. My handler had taught me that, back in the Pillow Palace, where I’d spent most of my formative years. It was a sacred whisper in the brothels, and we’d only trusted fellow lays, while our nights were spent twisted in silk sheets thick with the sweat of rich politicians.

Telos was a civilized world, but it had its own rotten underbelly. And I was such a pretty boy.

But on Korriban, I’d chosen Dustil and Selene as my blood.

“You!” a young voice shrieked from the loading ramp, and my eyes shot to a pretty young Twi’lek, whose face was flushed with shock and hate as she glared down at Dustil. He stopped, stunned, as his father looked frantically between the two. “You disgusting piece of Hutt-slime!”

“Mission!” Dustil’s father said, his voice stunned. “What-”

“Oh, frakk,” Dustil muttered, his eyes closing. The Wookiee howled, bounding past me over to the ship, coming to a halt by the girl. He almost seemed to be petting her or something weird, as he continued to howl in that annoyingly loud voice.

“Oh uh, no way, that murglak is not getting on this ship!” the Twi’lek demanded, shoving the Wookiee’s paw off her shoulder roughly. Despite myself, I was impressed. Not many people would so readily push a fully grown Wookiee about. “Big Z, that’s the ronto-face I ran into days ago!”

“Mission!” a cold voice snapped from behind me, and I knew it was Ness Jonohl. Damn me if I didn’t one day expect to run into a Darth Ness. Or a Master Ness. Either of which sounds frakking ridiculous. She’d have to change her name to something a little more intimidating. “Dustil is Carth’s son. However he’s slighted you, we’ll sort it out later. Let him onboard.”

The girl scowled, her young face twisting, and she jumped down from the ramp as Dustil and his father entered the freighter. At the hatch, Dustil turned again, his bleak face meeting mine.

I wished he was coming with us.

[Be safe], my fingers twitched against my thigh. It had been a long time since Dustil answered me, a long time since Selene had gone and he’d begun to doubt our friendship.

[Stay alive], he signed back, before his father’s arm propelled him inside. The Cathar, lugging her
beloved corpse, followed them in with Dak right behind her. I looked back to the Twi’lek, standing on the docking bay floor, scowling angrily at the hatch of the freighter as the Wookiee continued to moan at her. Bloody horrid language, Shyriiwook, and I wondered that anyone could bear listening to it for more than five seconds.

My curiosity propelled me forward, and before I knew it I was facing her.

“What?” she snapped belligerently, light brown eyes focusing on me.

“Dustil frakked something up, I see,” I said by way of greeting. Her dark expression deepened.

“Look, this place is a cess-pit. I dunno what that gimboid did to you, but this ain’t an easy planet to be a Force-user on. Try to remember that next time you go nova on him.”

She folded her arms, a mulish look in her pretty eyes. “Who’re you?”

“My name’s Mekel. Dustil and I were friends- are friends. He was a good guy, once. Maybe he can be again.”

She looked over to the Wookiee, who was staring at me. Even from this distance, he smelled like a wet dog. He howled something, again, for frakk’s sake.

“Fine, Big Z,” she sighed. “He’s still a rotten space-slug.”

I snickered, and her lips twitched.

“Bitch him out all you like, just…” I didn’t even know what I wanted to say. Dustil deserved a chance to leave the Dark Side behind. Myself… I didn’t know. Yuthura and I would go somewhere else, sure, but I didn’t think it would be so easy for the likes of us.

“I’m Mission,” she said at last, and graced me with a smile. I found myself liking her. “I’ll keep what ya said in mind, Mekel.”

“Mekel,” my Master’s sultry voice had me turning, although I wasn’t sure she was my Master anymore. Not if we were leaving Korriban. Maybe, somehow, we could be equals. Friends, perhaps. Her unnatural violet eyes seemed to contradict that. “It is time for us to leave.”

"Think about what I said, Yuthura," Ness spoke from her side. Ness's eyes were a moss-green, sharp and almost as vibrant as Yuthura's, but not corrupted. Not yet, anyway. And, again, I could feel the drowning grief surrounding her. It was as depressing as she was unsettling. Bet she doesn't get invited to many frakking parties.

Ness was still staring intently at Yuthura. "I nudged Thalia toward Coruscant. It's a valid option, and a damn sight more satisfying than here."

“I shall find my path, Ness Jonohl.”

I walked to my Master’s side, and looked down into her serious gaze. She indicated the exit with a sharp jerk of her head, and we left the docking bay in silence.

xXx

**Data Analyst Ajax Zarr:**

I took a long pull on my turin-spiked caffa, following it with a massive yawn and a slow stretch. It was late, that quiet time when data had a tendency to merge together into fuzzy lines of
meaninglessness. Jeebra Noob, the Rodian working with me on the case, sent a condescending smile my way as his wart-covered fingers scrabbled through a bowl of cracklenuts.

“Flakin’ out?” he grunted, crumbs dropping from his whiskery snout as he followed his words with a chuckle. “Jeebra sez ya need to get laid, Ajax. Jeebra sez there ain’t nuffin’ like ruttin’ with one of them tailheads or redskins to sharpen Jeebra’s mind again.”


He chuckled again, tapping a key on his console. “Eh, Jeebra wouldn’t call them that to their faces. Ajax, yer missin’ the point. Don’t ya Zabraks have needs? ‘Coz Jeebra’s got needs!” He sniffed. “The GenoHaradan provides. No matter what a chivvin’ tighthole ye are, the GenoHaradan provides.”

I ignored him this time, turning my attention back to the exception list on my terminal. Jeebra Noob was a filthy degenerate who enjoyed finding different ways to belittle me. Last week it’d been my lacklustre fashion sense – for Jeebra was nothing if not flashy with his silver bodytights and aquamarine shark suits. Now it was the frequency of my sexual proclivities – or lack thereof. The GenoHaradan might pay for free lays every night of the week, but I hadn’t been interested since my eye had caught on the quiet assistant to Overseer Eridius.

To a chivving Overseer. Like I ever had a legitimate reason to knock on those ominous doors. I reported to Spymaster Gaalin – and even as his best data analyst, I’d still only ever seen Overseer Eridius once in the decade I’d been working here. Jeebra thought the man was nothing more than a rumour.

But Jeebra was a twat. A twat who was slowly pipping me in the ranks, these days. He had an uncanny ability to remain focused and sharp the whole way through a night shift – despite pretending he was no more than gutter-slime.

I tapped to the next exception, skimming through the report. Jeebra had scored the match list, this time, and we both knew the match list was far more likely to find a hit than the exceptions.

We’d been working on it for weeks. The sheer breadth of data the galaxy offered was overwhelming, and Gaalin had been pushing us hard on this one. Of course, our supercomputers sifted through most of it, but it was the exceptions and the matches we had to manually counter-check. Computer programs could only minimize the pool of possibilities so much; with so many recorded sentients in our databanks, doppelgangers and mismatches were not uncommon.

Out there in the galaxy, there were thousands of people who looked almost exactly like you.

But I was convinced that Jen Sahara was not the real Jen Sahara. We had no definitive blood or DNA samples to go on, so we were reliant on facial recognition software. The clearest image we had of the pretender was from the Endar Spire’s feeds, and comparing that to the original from Deralia had proved challenging in itself. The two humans were similar, but the Deralian was slightly shorter, younger, with a wider face and different eyes – all things that could be modified via surgery, but combine the personality and life changes and it added weight to our original conclusion: Jen Sahara had died on Deralia, and an imposter was taking her place.

An imposter with Jedi backing, which was curious in itself.

Currently Jeebra was working his way through the facial recognition matches, while I had the joy of skimming through the exceptions. The exception listings were facial matches that the supercomputer
had discarded due to an unexplained anomaly or filter – maybe the age difference was too great, or the gender or location didn’t match – things that might be explained away by medical intervention or some other factor that computer programming just didn’t pick up on.

All too often we didn’t find the answers this way. There was just too much data.

But the exception listings usually provided an amusing profile or two. With a smirk, I discarded one for the human actress Seriina Starr, who’d shot to fame due to a highly contentious holo-vid portrayal of Revan Freeflight during the Mandalorian wars. It was dismissed as “heretic at best” by the Official Republic Broadcasting Authority, and not commented on at all by the Jedi Order.

The next exception was even more hilarious, being Revan Freeflight herself.

Seriina Starr was in the exception list because her life was considered too active to be a plausible match for the imposter Jen Sahara. Revan Freeflight, of course, was in the exception list because she was dead.

The accounts varied on exactly how, though. Either due to her flagship being destroyed by Darth Malak, or the confrontation with Bastila Shan. Fraud-Jen Sahara, on the other hand, had a contract placed on her by Darth Malak, and was in the company of Bastila Shan.

Wow. That’s weird.

A buzzing hummed through my mind, the jittery feeling I experienced on the cusp of a breakthrough. I hurriedly pulled up the exception report of Revan Freeflight on one console, and the clearest image of fraud-Jen Sahara on the other.

Revan Freeflight – pre-Mandalorian Wars – had long dark brown hair, usually braided out of the way. The picture I was studying had her garbed in Jedi brown, standing tall and confident with a slight smirk playing along her lips. Her skin was a dark olive, her face narrow and plain, her eyes a striking green.

Fraud-Jen Sahara, stationed onboard the *Endar Spire*, lacked the same proud bearing or skin colour. I frowned, flicking through the different stills we’d captured from the Republic security footage. The tone of her skin had a dusty look to it, suggesting months of time spent indoors. Her posture was inhibited, and her gaze often downcast – but, also, the same moss-green.

*Same height. Both unusually strong in the Force – Revan Freeflight uniquely so, while fraud-Jen Sahara foiled a trap Spymaster Gaalin had thought too excessive. My eyes closed as my thoughts raced. Darth Revan. Holy frakk-titties. Could we have been sending out our agents against Darth Revan?*

It was starting to seem surprisingly likely.

*Darth Malak put the contract out on fraud-Jen Sahara himself. For a price exorbitant enough that Spymaster Gaalin passed it by an Overseer first.*

Oh, this was big. This was *colossal*. If Darth Malak had tried to play the GenoHaradan without divulging all the facts… I leaned forward suddenly, and cleared the consoles. Jeebra’s attention caught, and he shot me an inquiring look.

I smiled tightly. “Bathroom break,” I lied, and walked carefully out of the room. This… If I was right, this was big enough to bypass Gaalin.

I was at the obsidian double-doors within minutes. Taking a deep breath in the hopes it would settle
the shaking nerves in my stomach, I tapped lightly and entered.

Seated behind a desk made from an exceedingly rare maroon ferracrystal – could have been transparisteel but I knew better, the GenoHaradan management were nothing if not keen to show off their power and wealth by any means possible – was the perfectly poised form of the Overseer’s personal assistant, Tealia.

She blinked, obviously surprised. “Ajax Zarr!” she exclaimed, before she blushed.

*She knows my name.* I felt the heat colour my face, too. She smiled, dark eyes creasing as a hand rose to rub at her horns. The self-conscious gesture was endearing.

“I, um- I need to see the Overseer,” I stammered.

The friendliness vanished from her face. “Do you have an appointment?” The words were politely spoken, but cool. I’d misstepped, I realized with a jolt.

“No, but it’s important. I mean- it’s big. Very big.”

Tealia stared at me quietly for a moment, darkly-lashed eyes intent on my face and yet inscrutable. I hopelessly wished her smile would return. She sighed, then; a small sound in the overly large room, before raising a hand for silence and clicking a button on her headset.

Her conversation was brief and muffled before she turned to look at me again. “Overseer Eridius will see you now. I trust you are prepared, data analyst, for the Overseer does not look kindly on impromptu consultations without a very compelling reason.”

Tealia’s tone was neutral and not at all disapproving, and yet I still felt I’d disappointed her somehow. She looked so composed and professional and utterly unattainable.

“He is waiting for you, data analyst,” she prompted, and I realized I was staring at her like a goon. I flushed.

“Will you still be here when I come out?” The words tumbled out, abrupt and awkward and painful, and I felt like kicking myself.

Tealia frowned. Her hand rose to rub at her horns again. They were sharpened to shiny points that glinted under soft lighting. “I work here, data analyst. Of course I will be here.”

“Oh, great- I mean, I’ll see you then, Tealia.” My face was flaming. *It’s official, I’m the galaxy’s biggest dork.* After this, I was going to hide in the supply cupboard for a week.

And then, somehow, Tealia was smiling again. At me. “I look forward to it.” She glanced behind her at the closed doors to the Overseer’s office. “You had better go in.” Her smile deepened, and her eyes were warm. “I’ll see you after, Ajax.”

I was a fool… but maybe a fool with a chance. I grinned back and headed towards the Overseer’s office.

Suddenly, Eridius didn’t seem quite so scary.

xXx

**Carth Onasi:**

“Stay buckled in guys,” I called over the comm. “I’ll be pulling us into hyperspace shortly.” I eased
off the repulsors and allowed the sublight drive to kick in as we left the gravity well. Dustil hadn’t
wanted to sit in the cockpit, his face had been lined with misery and exhaustion and stubborn anger –
the latter solely directed at me. The last thing he needed was that confrontation outside the ‘Hawk.

*Blast. How is it possible that he and Mission have already met? And what in the Outer Rim
happened?* Another mystery. I’d planned on sending Dustil to the starboard living area, but for now-
he’d crashed on the bed in the pilot’s quarters. Emotionally he was a wreck, and his body succumbed
to sleep before I’d even wrested the ship’s cockpit from Ordo.

Once the freighter was safely in hyperspace, I could see about sorting Dustil out. For now, there was
no reason he couldn’t rest.

The hatch swished open behind me, and I threw a quick glance over my shoulder; Jen, looking
miserably haggard as she slouched her way into the co-pilot’s seat. Belaya’s death and Bastila’s
capture lay a mood of desolate grief over everyone, but Jen would be feeling it the most. She’d saved
Belaya, only to see her die a day later, and as for Bastila… I’d never seen such a haunted look on
Jen’s face. And her apparent anguish just made me want to hold her and never let go.

*Steady on, Onasi.* I cleared my throat, keeping my eyes on the instrumentation panel. “Plug in a
course for Kashyyyk, would you? And strap in, sister, we’ll be making the jump soon.”

Jen didn’t respond verbally, but her fingers danced over the navicomputer as she obeyed me. She
silently buckled the restraints around her torso. I shot her another sideways glance; her face was tense
and grieved. *Aww, heck. Of course* she was taking Bastila’s capture terribly – we all were, but it was
so much more personal for Jen. Bastila was her only link to a past she couldn’t remember. *I hope
Jen’s not feeling anything through that bond. If she… if Bastila gets hurt, how much will Jen feel?*

The thought was chilling. *Will it… will it bring back what happened on Deralia?*

I wondered if Jen’s struggles with the Dark Side were enhanced due to her past trauma. The incident
earlier, on the ‘Hawk, had frightened me more than I wanted to admit, even to myself. Jen had
completely lost herself, and yet… and yet she’d come back.

She’d faced that evil Headmaster - the one who’d held Dustil’s loyalty for years - and stayed true to
herself.

The Dark Side was real and more compelling than I’d ever realized. And it was something Jen
would always face… it was something she shouldn’t face alone. But Bastila had been taken from
her.

I couldn’t… I *wouldn’t* let Jen fight this insidious battle by herself. I didn’t know how much help a
non-Force sensitive like me would be, but damn the cursed Dark Side if it tried to claw its fingers
back into Jen.

Or into Dustil.

I sighed, and realized we were getting close to the hyperspace jump point. Jen reached out to idly
play with the communication controls, and I gently slapped her hands away, shooting her a mock-
disapproving glance. The faintest twitch of a smirk appeared momentarily on her face, before the
damn bleakness chased it away again.

"Jumping to hyperspace in one minute," I broadcast through the ship, before pulling back to the
pilot’s controls. For a freighter, the *Ebon Hawk* was maneuverable - but it lacked the agility and
finesse I was used to. I was generally more at home in a snubfighter, although I had to admit that,
over the weeks, the 'Hawk had started to feel like home. My gaze slid back to Jen. And the crew had
started to feel like family.

Dustil. And now my son was returned to me. Damaged, scared and angry, but he was whole. He
needed me, I knew, but he was asleep at the moment.

And the anguished look in Jen’s eyes made me feel that, right now, she needed me more.

I pulled back on the controls and the ship lurched into hyperspace, the minute-long acceleration that
no-one ever really became accustomed to. The dizzying nausea ebbed within seconds for most
sentients, although I’d heard of some people who were affected for hours afterwards. Hypersickness,
they called it. Hopefully none of our new residents would have any issues.

The Ebon Hawk settled down into the automatic thrum of hyperspace travel, and I turned to properly
appraise Jen. She was staring blankly through the cockpit window, and even to my somewhat biased
eyes she was a mess. Still wearing the same bloodied and damaged armour, her brown hair matted,
and streaks of dirt marring her face. The black criss-cross of Uthar’s Force attacks defaced what was
visible of her neck.

She still looked beautiful.

“Jen,” I said quietly. “How are you holding up?”

Her shoulders bunched as she stayed staring out into the black of hyperspace. “Terrible,” she said
flatly. She turned, and a visible tremor lanced through her face. “Oh Carth,” she murmured brokenly.
“I’ve made such a mynock’s nest of things. Bastila…”

Her eyes were wide and green and filled with unshed tears. I felt my heart clench. “No you haven’t,”
I denied, my tone sharp. How can she even think that?

“How can she even think that? You succeeded, Jen. You’ve done the
unbelievable. I don’t think anyone else would have been able to-”

“Carth, the Sith have Bastila Shan!” she burst out. “How can that not be a disaster of galactic
proportions?”

“Kylah’s presence was unforeseeable. And not your fault.” I tried to keep my words calm and
reassuring. She had to hear the truth, instead of blaming herself for events outside of her control. “If
Zaalbar hadn’t been outside the ship- or if I’d realized he was acting odd- or if Bastila had been
awake-” I sighed. “Any of those things and it could have played out differently. You ordered us to
guard the ‘Hawk, and it was our failure, not yours.”

She laughed, and it was a hysterical sound. “I don’t give a womp rat’s arse whose fault it is, Carth.
Darth Malak has Bastila!”

“And you found the Star Map,” I cut in. “If the Jedi Masters have done their part on Kashyyyk, then
we might be able to locate the source of Malak’s power now.” I couldn’t help myself; the distressed
expression wasn’t going away, so my hand reached up and cradled the side of her face. It was warm.
“Jen, you found my son. You stood for Canderous, and gained his trust in a way no amount of
credits ever would. You saved Belaya, in time for her to reconcile with Juhani. Dak, Kel, Dustil…
all with a new chance. How can you not see everything you’ve accomplished?”

Jen’s expression was disbelieving, but she didn’t pull away. “I don’t think you understand the gravity
of the situation,” she whispered hoarsely. “Sun and stars, Carth, if I was the Dark Lord of the Sith,
do you know the first thing I’d do?”

I blinked; some metaphors were a little too disturbing to think on.
“I’d break her,” she continued flatly. “By any means possible. Hurt someone hard enough, and long
enough, and they’ll do anything to stop the pain. Anything. Even use their gifts against their allies.”

I couldn’t help a flinch, and my hand dropped. *I’m an idiot.* Somehow, with everything that had
happened, this outcome hadn’t yet occurred to me. Bastila’s battle meditation in the hands of the
Sith… we were already losing the war. Losing Bastila was terrible enough, but the thought of her
gifts turned on us… this was *dire.* Jen’s eyes echoed the despair I was just beginning to comprehend.

A tear welled up and dropped on her cheek, right where I’d been touching a moment ago. It tracked
a clear trail through the muck she’d not yet cleaned off. Jen turned away from me, shoulders
clenching further, and mumbled something under her breath.

“I am a Jedi Knight,” the words were muttered inaudibly, and I wasn’t sure I’d heard correctly until
she repeated them. “I am a Jedi Knight.” *She’s trying to stay strong,* I realized. *To not cry in front of
me. Stang, she doesn’t always have to be the strong one!*

“Jen,” I said through gritted teeth, and abruptly leaned over, unclipped her harness and yanked her
unceremoniously into my arms.

She gasped. “Carth!—”

“Shush,” I ordered quietly, and pulled her tightly against my chest, one hand firmly on her dark curls
and the other wrapped around her torso. “It’s okay, Jen. We’ll find a way.”

Jen was stiff and unyielding in my arms, but I heard a quiet sob rip itself from her lungs. “Shhh,” I
murmured. “We’ll be with the masters soon. We’ll plan from there. Shhh.” Another sob, followed by
another, and then she thoroughly fell to pieces in my arms.

I didn’t know what I said to her; nonsensical platitudes as I gently stroked her head and she cried
herself out in a purging of emotion she’d likely never allowed herself. The thought of Bastila’s battle
meditation turned on the Republic was horrific, yet surely there had to be a glimmer of hope. We’d
come so far – if the Jedi Masters had found the last Star Map, then we might be close to the
endgame. If Bastila could just hold on – if Jen could help her remain strong under whatever evil
ministrations the Sith would come up with – then maybe we still had a fighting chance.

I had to believe that.

And Jen had come so far. She’d led the mission, well and truly, on Korriban - and we’d all followed
her lead as if it were the natural thing to do. Jen’s abilities in the Force had escalated tremendously -
likely due to instinct borne from her forgotten past. And she was controlling her anger… she was
transforming into the Jedi she must have once been. Bastila had said it wasn’t thought possible, but I
could see it happening. Jen was… Jen was someone I respected. Someone I admired. Someone I
cared for.

Her sobs turned to quiet whimpers, which then eased into the slow breaths of slumber. All the while
I’d been murmuring nonsense, and she’d fallen asleep to it. I felt myself smile.

Despite everything, this wasn’t a bad place to be. I looked down at the dark head pillowed against
me, and could smell the faint sulphuric tang of Korriban air still resting within her curls.

I didn’t care in the slightest.

Morgana had been a simple woman, easy to love with every fibre of my being. She had been content
with life out on the rural plains of Telos before I’d brought her into the city. After Morgana’s death -
and, I’d assumed, Dustil’s - my life seemed to lose all meaning other than work and a burning hatred
for Karath and all things Sith. I’d found myself wholly uninterested in any other woman. I didn’t plan on it, I didn’t vow to stay celibate, I just- never really got over her death.

Jen was the most complicated woman I’d ever met. They were poles apart in drive and motivations, but in some core ways Jen reminded me strongly of Morgana. Stubborn and sassy. Unable to take anything seriously. Terrible at staying out of trouble. Altogether too accomplished at driving me crazy.

Maybe I had the chance for something here, if I was man enough to take it. I felt the slow burn of desire deep in my gut, and my arms tightened around her reflexively.

Jen stirred at that, and I inwardly berated myself for waking her just as she’d fallen asleep. Her head lifted, and sleep-clouded green eyes stared at me in drowsy confusion.

“Jen,” I whispered. Her eyes dropped to my mouth and stayed there tellingly. A furious flush of red blossomed on her cheeks. The desire flared to life, then, and I lowered my head to hers.

But Jen stiffened, scrabbling out of my lap when we were mere inches apart, her eyes widening in surprise or fright. She landed backwards on the ground with a squeak, before standing inelegantly and backing away.

“Jen-”

“I-uh, have to go,” she mumbled, and all but ran out of the cockpit, leaving me staring at the exit.

Oh no you don’t, Jen Sahara, I thought fiercely, and my brows lowered.

I’ll give you space for now.

But we’re going to talk, and soon.

xXx

**Canderous Ordo:**

It was at least twenty hours into what Onasi claimed was a two week hyperspace journey, and I lugged the spare bedroll into the side of the cargo bay with a frown. The *Ebon Hawk* was overloaded, and now that Onasi junior had been moved to the men’s quarters we were out of bunks. Crashing in here was preferable to sleeping near that bunch of Force-using di’kuts – the Wookiee could have ‘em, as far as I was concerned.

We’d lost the princess, and gained three sullen Sithkids instead. It wasn’t a fair exchange.

Bastila’s capture irked. I’d not expected the Wookiee to be so feeble-minded that a haar’chak mind trick would work on him, not to the extent that it did. If he wasn’t so obviously wounded, I’d be laying into him myself.

**Bastila’s tricks fooled you once, Ordo.** Ah, that was galling to remember. There were words to be spoken, between the princess and I, and now it seemed that the chance had been snatched away. Bastila had saved my life, though - in the depths of Manaan when she hadn’t needed to. For that, I’d inwardly acknowledged the debt had been repaid.

Bastila was an uptight, neurotic Jedi, but she’d been our uptight neurotic Jedi. All I knew was that we’d better be getting her back.

Revan had called a ship-wide meeting a few hours after the hyperspace jump. It was the most dysfunctional group I’d ever seen, all crowded into the freighter’s common room, with half the sad-sacks either avoiding each other or glaring like sullen teenagers.
Come to think of it, half of them were sullen teenagers.

There was the quiet one, standing awkwardly against a bulkhead, biting his lip like a toddler as he stared uneasily around. The dark-skinned injured one leaned against Juhani, stimmed and drugged, but his expression was guarded. I’d mentally taken note of him; I’d heard he’d killed the Sith who’d lopped his arm off. After she’d lopped his arm off. And then there was Onasi’s glowering offspring, who hadn’t raised his angry gaze from the ground.

Revan had led an awkward conversation about the robe we were meeting on Kashyyyk, and how our low kolto supplies were reserved for the injured. I’d rolled my eyes in boredom as she went on about some embargo on fighting, friendly or otherwise, due to the dwindling meds.

I’d sent her a look, then; her return expression had been wry as she’d extrapolated that light sparring was permissible, provided it didn’t cause any injury. Then, she’d launched into an idea about sharing Force tricks or some rubbish with the new Sithkids, and I’d snorted before heading away. I didn’t know if Revan planned to train them or convert them — but she was going to need some luck with that lot.

Still, this was Revan. It was likely she’d trained worse in the past.

“Canderous.” A quiet voice from the rear of the ship had me glancing up; the Cathar had entered silently as I’d been eyeing over my temporary living quarters. She’d worn a broken look on her feline face since we’d left Korriban. In the tail of the freighter, wrapped in metres of cloth, lay the corpse of her friend.

It wasn’t how Mando’ade grieved. We burned the remains of our loved ones, sang their battle songs to the stars, and plotted our vengeance. We found a way to move on, to shape our clan into something stronger, and saw the memories of the departed live on in our future.

“Hey,” I acknowledged, pulling open the pack I’d brought into the shyrack caves. The cargo bay was a bit of a mess, now — the Wookiee usually did an alright job of keeping order, but since the princess’ capture he’d fallen apart into a hairy, howling mess.

“I must speak with you, Canderous,” Juhani said softly. I dropped the pack, meeting her alien gaze. It was solemn. “This is important.”

“What’s up?”

“Hear me out, Canderous, please.” That caught my attention. The next words set my teeth on edge.

“It’s about Jen.”

Oh, I knew what she was going to say. In Bastila’s absence, I could damn well guess. My eyes narrowed. The Cathar truly was a secret-keeping Jedi at heart, even if she had spent the last year communing with wild beasts in the desert.

“I ain’t keeping the truth from her, Cathar, and if you even think about using the Force—”

“I would not,” she cut in, eyes flashing. Her warrior’s tail snapped around the side of her head as she shook it. “But I am asking you, as her friend, to let her come to the knowledge in her own time.”

I snorted in derision. “In her own time? What, before or after some hu’uum robe kriffs her mind again?”

“Canderous, we saw something in the Academy.” The Cathar clasped her hands together. There was a smear of dried blood that clotted the fuzz on her face, and I didn’t think she’d rested since the ship
had hit the skies. “A holo-recording of Darth Revan.”

That silenced me for a moment, and my eyes fixed warily on Juhani as I waited her out. She held my gaze, her eyes shining an intent entreaty. “She did not recognize me for a time. She did not know where she was, or who she was or what we were doing. If it had not been for Bastila, through the bond – I am not sure she would have returned to a properly conscious state. Canderous, I think it truly dangerous for her mind to comprehend her true identity.”

The Force was a slippery thing, and it had completely kriffed Revan over. But if Revan was ever to regain the glory of who she had once been then she needed to know the truth.

I said as much.

The Cathar nodded in agreement. “I do not dispute that, Canderous, and I have already told Bastila more than once that I would not hide the truth from Jen should she ask me directly. But I believe we must wait until her mind is ready for it. We must wait until she is mentally prepared to accept what she has done-”

“The Jedi have made her hate who she was,” I growled, staring the Cathar down. I’d had enough conversations with Revan to be fully cognizant of her opinion of her true self. She loathed the very mention of Revan. It made for interesting sparring as an obvious weakness – and that’s exactly what it would remain, until she damn well understood the truth.

“No, Canderous, you are wrong,” Juhani countered softly. “It was not the Jedi, it is Revan herself. For Revan Freeflight would not condone what Darth Revan became. And I believe that is the crux of the matter. Until she is ready to accept her past actions as ones she herself committed…” Juhani trailed off, sighing. “Her mind was badly damaged. Enough so that any sort of recovery was not expected, certainly not to this extent. We can only hope that she continues to recover.”

I folded my arms. “And what are you going to do if your beloved Jedi try to mindwipe her again, huh?”

Juhani’s gaze steeled under mine. “I will stop them.”

I grunted. She had the look of genuine resoluteness to her, and I believed her - but that wasn’t the same as agreeing with her. I’d held onto this knowledge since Tatooine, and that seemed like a lifetime ago.

“I don’t deny your intent or courage, Cathar, but you ain’t strong enough to hold up against a group of your own Masters.”

“We only know of one Master there, Canderous,” she countered. Her slanted eyes gleamed with tenacity. “Master Vrook Lamar. He is Bastila’s Master.” She folded her arms and lifted her chin. “Jen is telepathic with Bastila now. We will have no link with Bastila if Master Vrook does… whatever was done to Revan before.”

I stared at her.

“Just wait and see, Canderous. That is all I am asking.” Her gaze never wavered from mine. “We are all her allies here. None of us will allow anything to happen to her, and I truly believe Bastila’s Master would not wish to lose his link with Bastila. And when they see how far Jen has come…” She took in a deep breath through her nostrils.

My eyes narrowed as I surveyed Juhani; she was stalwart and full of conviction. Revan wasn’t the wartime commander she had once been – but she was more than the woman I’d first met on Taris. I
followed her now, without reservation – and I planned on ensuring she became the leader I’d once fought against. I’d watch her, and see if I agreed with the Cathar’s evaluation.

Juhani was still staring at me in appeal. I grunted. “I’ll think about it. Not sure I believe your story about the fragilities of her mind – but I’ll think about it.”

Our attention was caught then as the very topic of our conversation opened a hatch and stepped in. Revan grinned at us, but there was a serious look in her eyes. None of us had felt much like smiling since the princess was taken.

“Are you ready to join us for practice, Juhani?” Revan asked. “Kel and Dak are in the garage.”

“Dak’s out of the medbay again?” the Cathar, her voice pitching high in startlement. Her arms dropped and her eyes widened. I was mildly surprised myself, inwardly picking the human would crash within the hour. He’d already collapsed once when he first boarded.

“Yeah. He’s loaded up on pain meds and kolto. I think he’s having trouble sleeping.” Revan looked at me. An eyebrow raised, but her expression was calm. She’d come back changed from Korriban. Stronger, more sure of herself. “You up for some sparring later, Canderous?”

I felt my mouth twitch. “Aren’t you afraid I’ll mess your face up again?”

“I’m sure you can hold back your punches, Canderous,” she said drily. “We are running low on kolto. But I’d appreciate the practice and the distraction.”

So would I. I gave a curt nod. “Go play with your Sithkids. I’ll see you in a few hours.”

xXx

**Kel Algwinn:**

The garage of the freighter was mostly empty, other than the parts of a broken swoop bike piled against the far wall. Dak leaned next to them, idly rolling a hydrospanner under his boot.

I’d not had much to do with Dak on Korriban. He’d been one of Uthar’s, but spent most of his time in the Valley, documenting whatever finds he came across. I knew he had an interest in learning and a keen mind, and had wondered once if he might be a kindred spirit trapped on that awful world, just like me.

Dak was a talker, though, and he’d irritated those on my side. Thalia, Mekel, Master Yuthura. But maybe... maybe their dislike of him had been more due to Yuthura’s growing discontent with Master Uthar, rather than Dak himself.

“I’m not in any state to be stuffing around with Force lessons,” Dak muttered, his bandaged limb clasped protectively into his side.

“It’ll take your mind off things,” Jen Sahara said, her tone more wry than sympathetic. I wasn’t used to calling her that in my head, not yet. And the other one, Dak’s friend Juhani – she was Staria, still, to me. The one who’d offered me hope away from Korriban, and was now delivering. I owed them both, I acknowledged, even as the nervousness sat uncomfortably in my stomach. “And you keep refusing the sleep meds.”

Dak looked down, glaring at his mangled limb. “Sleep doesn’t help. All the meds do is screw my dreams worse than usual.” The fingers of his good hand clenched his opposite elbow.
“You will remember some of our training, Dak,” Juhani said quietly, coming to sit next to him. “Kel has never been amongst the Jedi and could benefit from our shared experience.”

Jen cleared her throat. “There is something I must say first.” She was looking at the Cathar. There was a tight look on her face. “To you and Dak. It’s about Belaya.”

That was the name of Dak’s friend, the one Lashowe had killed before Dak turned on her. The corpse lay wrapped in the engine room of the freighter. It gave me the creeps. Dead matter had no bearing on a person’s soul… I didn’t understand why they wanted to transport a corpse that would begin to rot and reek before our journey would finish. Amongst my people, we would bury or discard the flesh remnants of a dead loved one as soon as possible. For the physical was no more than a temporary dwelling, and once you left it, it served no purpose other than to fertilize the ground.

“What about Belaya?” Dak snapped, his face darkening with grief. Juhani was silent, her Cathar eyes wide andgolden.

I’d not have predicted Dak leaving the Sith voluntarily, but the death of a shared friend had rattled him. I believed in him more than Dustil, at any rate. Everyone overlooked Dustil - but I didn’t. That sneaky rat could be in this room, right now, for all we knew.

Jen’s gaze hardened. “I’ll not have any violence on this ship. Dak, you’ve been on Korriban, so you damn well know what Uthar’s like-”

“Jen,” Juhani cut in, halting her tirade. “Speak. What is it?”

Jen sighed, her eyes closing briefly. “It was Dustil who captured Belaya. On Uthar’s orders. I- I thought you should know, before you hear it from one of the others.”

“Dustil,” Dak said flatly. His eyes had narrowed, and his only hand dropped away from his bandaged stump, clenching.

I wasn’t surprised at all. Not at all. Dustil had always been Uthar’s stooge – I’d seen him, once, lead a mercenary straight to Uthar. Straight to his own death. And I knew he’d had something to do with Initiate Drex’s death, even though everyone said it was just the Korriban pox. And what about Initiate Selene? She’d been the nicest sentient on Korriban, and Dustil’s close friend – and she’d gone missing. No, that boy was a true Sith in the making, and the one reason I didn’t feel entirely safe on this ship.

But here was better than following Yuthura, who would likely try setting up her own Sith Academy one day if she didn’t change her mind and stay on Korriban. I’d dreamed of leaving that place for too long. I’d done my best to hide away wishes of the Jedi, in a deep corner of my soul. I’d never met one… not before Juhani and Jen Sahara.

“Carth’s son?” Juhani whispered hoarsely. “He’s the one who took Belaya? Who… who tortured her?”

“Uthar had a damn sight more to do with it than some angst-ridden teenager, Juhani,” Jen countered. Her eyes were intent on the Cathar. “He’s avoiding all of us because of it – but… look, I can’t ask you to forgive what he did, but…”

“That chivhole Uthar,” Dak hissed. “If it were possible to resurrect him so I could stab him through the gut myself, I’d do so.”

“Do not even think such things, Dak,” Juhani mumbled, bowing her head. “And to think, I blamed
Dak snorted as he turned to look at her. “Don’t sweat that, Juhani.” He looked serious and genuine. “Uthar was always a pro at screwing with people’s minds. Shavit, I’ve done enough things I’m ashamed of - a damn sight more than Dustil I’d wager.”

I wasn’t so sure about that.

“Dustil’s strong in the Force,” I said abruptly, causing their collective gaze to swing on me. “Stronger than any of us here. And he can hide himself… he could be anywhere on this ship.”

“He’s not here,” Jen said, her voice confident and sure.

“You don’t know that,” I muttered, feeling the unease twist in my gut. “You don’t know how well he can disappear.”

“Oh, I’m familiar with Dustil Onasi’s cloaking abilities,” Jen replied. A wry smile played on her lips. Jen wasn’t one who took too much seriously, I was beginning to realize. She closed her eyes, still smiling, and the Force coalesced under her command.

I had to revise my earlier statement. I’d felt Jen’s power, back on Korriban, facing a furious Uthar. I’d only come near after Uthar was dead. Jen Sahara blew Dustil into the wind.

She raised a hand, pointing deeper into the ship. “He’s hiding out in the men’s quarters. Avoiding us all.” Her eyes snapped open, green and considering. “Look, guys, we can’t isolate him. He’s angry with his dad, he’s pissed off Mission which means he’s pissed off a Wookiee, and he’s avoiding us. This is not a good situation for him… even if it is of his own making.”

“What are you asking of us, Jen?” Juhani said, her voice low and bitter. “I came close to killing Dak when I believed he was at fault, and Dak is a friend. I do not have it in me to forget something like this.”

“That’s because you’ve never been on Korriban,” Dak cut in, and his hand moved to rest gently on her shoulder. “Juhani… you don’t truly understand what living in Uthar’s house was like. How he preyed on your fears and weaknesses, how he twisted you into doing things you’d never believe yourself capable of.” Dak sighed, his face lined with something akin to disgust. I had the feeling it was directed at himself. “Shavit, it’s not like Dustil knew Belaya. I can’t hate him for doing to a stranger exactly what I’ve done, in the past.”

The garage resounded with silence after that, and Dak rested his head back against the durasteel wall, shutting his eyes. He surprised me. I wasn’t ready to give Dustil an inch of trust, and Dak’s words left me feeling slightly ashamed of myself.

“You are more ready to return to the Jedi than you realize, Dak Vesser,” Juhani murmured.

Dak snorted, eyes still closed. “We’ll see, Juhani. It’s not exactly what I planned on doing, but then I can’t say I’m sad to see the back of Korriban, either.”

Jen cleared her throat, and we all turned to look at her. The corner of her mouth twitched in a wry half-smile. “Well. I’ll go about tracking down the young Onasi later. For now, let’s keep things traditional. Juhani, do you want to lead a Force meditation?”

The Cathar looked taken aback. “I can if you wish me too, Jen.”

“You recall the most Jedi training, Juhani,” Jen said. Dak frowned at her, and I felt the same level of
confusion. I would have expected Jen Sahara to lead whatever Force lessons she had in mind. I had thought she was the Jedi Knight onboard.

“As you wish,” Juhani said softly, and began.

xXx

Yudan Rosh:

The giant wroshyr trees loomed all around us like colossal sentinels forever immortalized into petrified stillness. There was an eerie, ominous feel to the Shadowlands – indigenous wildlife aside. It added to the oppressive weight that had been bearing down on me, ever since I had heard about the resurrection of Darth Revan.

I remembered clearly the first time I’d seen her, alert and enthusiastic, but with a wary edge that was a product of her upbringing. She’d been a few years younger than me, right at the peak of adolescence, but where I’d spent my formative years training at a Jedi Enclave, she had been scraping to survive in one of the forgotten slums in the Outer Rim.

Revan's thirst for knowledge had been staggering. Her ascension to knight was swift, and it wasn't long before her dedication and intrinsic need to understand everything began to inspire others. And not just young greenhorns like her. Seasoned, experienced knights like Arran Da'klor and Talvon Esan began to follow her lead. Myself - well, I'd been one of the first. The same as Meetra, who was older and had significant standing within the Jedi ranks herself.

Not that those old coots would ever admit to there being a pecking order. The Sith and the Jedi were not so dissimilar, really. And these days I found myself dwelling far too often on events from a past that had once been glorious.

...

It was hard to stay focused on Alderaanian politics. The databook glinted in front of me, listing the latest concessions and demands that raged from their capital. Part of me had truly believed I'd left political intrigue behind with the ashes of my childhood when I'd joined the Jedi on Dantooine - but my transfer to Coruscant, the heart of the Core, had dispelled those rosy illusions.

I sighed, placing the databook to the side for an interlude. Meetra was nearby, her soft voice intermingling with the children. She had a sweet, compelling nature, and was already a favoured mentor of the younglings. They loved her. Everyone did, really; some of the Jedi who rallied around Revan's cause did so because Meetra had.

The sound of raised voices from the meeting hall drew my attention, I looked over to see Revan stalking outside with a face like thunder, sparks flashing from her eyes even at this distance. Malak walked behind her, as always, displeasure apparent on his open face.

They’d been gone for a year. Once the news about Talshion broke out, Revan had fled Dantooine – what had been her home Enclave for a brief three weeks - and Malak had followed from Coruscant. Reports had been scant, but we’d heard enough: the two knights had been deep into the frontlines, in the Outer Rim territory, scouting for the Republic. Reconnaissance and information gathering. They’d seen first-hand the collateral damage the Republic was threatened with.

Then a month ago, like a thermal detonator, Revan had exploded back onto the Coruscanti scene. With holovid footage, military reports, and even a Force relic to back her up, she’d spent her time rallying the Jedi to support her petition: intervention against the Mandalorian offensive.
I jumped to my feet and strode over to meet her. The outcome of this audience with the High Council was critical; Revan had petitioned them in the past, prior to the devastation on Talshion, but this time was different. This time she had not only the backing of a powerful Rear-Admiral in the Fleet, but also a fistful of Jedi Knights.

Surely now, the Council would see reason.

Revan was clutching a steel mask in her hand, and her face was a gathering storm.

It hasn't gone well. I could feel my lips compress into a grim line of displeasure, and had to halt the urge to wrap my lekku around my neck defensively. They didn't listen. Again, despite all Revan has worked towards, the High Council refuses to listen. Revan was a charismatic speaker, but there were some on the Council who’d never warmed to her. Lonna and Atris, in particular. Revan’s age when she was found would always be held up by her critics as a deficiency, and the last year had hardened her.

She was still the Revan I'd always love from afar, but some of the light had been snuffed out.

“Well?”

“They’re deliberating,” she answered me tightly. I sensed Meetra come to my side, and spotted Arran Da’klor and Nisotsa Organa walking towards us decisively – both seasoned knights and staunch supporters of Revan’s cause. Malak was a towering form of barely-concealed frustration at her side. “But I think we already know their answer.”

“I’ve heard Captain Karath is engaging the Mandalorians at Suurja. There’s skirmishes at Jebble, Vanguo and Tarnith.” Malak scowled. “They’re all resource planets of Taris, so you know where they’re going.”

“The Council is scared. Scared and tired,” Revan whispered; an angry, hissing noise. “It’s the legacy of Exar Kun - they’re afraid that if Jedi engage in battle, one or more will fall to the Dark Side.” She clenched her fists. “They’d rather let the Republic fall than run the risk.”

“Exar Kun…” Arran whistled as he joined us, his red skin darkening. One of the few Zeltrons in the Order, he was a good friend of Revan’s. “It’s before our time. Maybe, they have a point-”

“Since when do we compare atrocities,” Revan cut in tightly. “Murder is murder, but if you’re going to pull out the scales, then remember the genocide we’ve heard about from the Outer Rim outweighs the devastation of Kun.”

“The reports are scant, Revan. We don’t know how much is hearsay-”

“We do,” Malak interrupted. “Any Force-sensitive within a light-year felt Revan’s vision when she picked up that cursed mask. And it’s not just the Cathar who’ve fallen to the Mandalorians. They’ve been busy for years before the Republic even paid notice – and now they’re steamrolling a path directly to the Core.”

Revan’s green eyes flashed to Malak. “They’ll get Taris well within the year. We need to go there, Mal.”

“You’re going to join the war?” Meetra questioned in her musical voice.

Revan gave her a short nod. “I’ll wait for the Council’s answer, but we already know it. Mal and I heard Master Kavar is on the frontlines – you know he’s busy fighting, despite the Order’s decree? If he can frelling well ignore them-”
“He’s a Master, Revan-”

“Exactly,” she cut Meetra off. “He’s exactly who should lead the Jedi. If we can form a group of knights to work under him, we could make a difference. A real, tangible difference out there on the battlefield.” She sighed. “You don’t realize how bad the morale is, out there. The Fleet desperately need something to believe in. They’re disorganized and fragmented and think the Mandalorians will win. Sun and stars, if Nomi Sunrider had only passed on her gift, think how that could aid the Republic!”

Battle meditation. The lost Jedi art Nomi had rediscovered against Exar Kun, and failed to pass on to her progeny. It was an amazing talent, and had been lost for centuries. Chances were it would never again be seen in our lifetime.

Revan was staring intently at the steel mask clutched in her hand. “The Republic needs a symbol to believe in. A paragon, a hero. Huh…”

“What are you thinking, Revvie?” Malak rumbled at her side, giving her a nudge. She shot him a quick grin, but there was a calculating look in her eyes I recognized all too well. Her quicksilver mind was at work.

“You said a group of knights,” Arran interrupted. “Who do you have in mind?”

“Whoever is interested,” Revan answered, levelling him with an intense stare. “I won’t build it up, Arran. Kavar can get away with disobeying the Order, but it may very well mean exile for anyone who follows us.”

“I’ll follow you past the Outer Rim and back, Revvie,” Malak said in a quiet voice, his hand touching hers briefly. He was always one for dramatics, and sometimes, in my lesser moments, I hated him for it. “I’d follow you against the whole of the Order.”

Revan sent him a heated look that spoke of an intimacy foreign and forbidden, before turning to the rest of us.

“I’ll ask Xaset Terep and Talvon Esan along,” Revan said.

“You know my mind,” Arran stated. “Organize a meeting. I’ll be there.”

“I’m in,” I added. As if there had been any doubt. “Invite Jonn Dan.”

“I, also, will be there,” Nisotsa said huskily, speaking up for the first time.

Meetra was silent, and all eyes turned to her. Her sweet, unassuming nature meant that some overlooked her despite her experience, and her empathic ability was vastly underrated by most. Revan was not one of them. Finally, Meetra spoke.

“I will be there, and listen.” She gazed at all of us in turn. "Invite Cariaga Sin. Alaki Vash. Rab Vooktari. And Jexer Te'reda.”

... And that was the birth of the Jedi Thirteen. Or, as the Fleet liked to call us, Revan’s Guard of Twelve. For Master Kavar refused to lead, and abandoned the frontlines to go crawling back to the High Council. Revan had been left to command as best as she could, donning that cursed mask and giving the Republic a faceless hero to worship.
Half the damn galaxy even believed that Revan Freeflight was male.

Of course I’d followed. I’d agreed with her from the start, and Revan’s sheer power and mercurial charisma were a shining light we all fell victim to. Malak added thoughtful reason to her impassioned arguments, and so many of us were convinced to follow them deep into war. And we’d won.

Oh, how we’d won.

Malak always had her back, then; he was her guard, her wall, her tower of strength. Anything Revan set her mind to, he strived to make a reality. I’d wondered, so many times, what she would have made of herself had Malak Devari not existed.

Who would she have turned to? Who would have supported her, guided her, made her stronger?

Would that person have been able to stop her succumbing to the Dark Side?

Would I have been able to?

We’d been close, I recalled with a bittersweet resentment I’d held at bay until recently. I’d followed Revan most of my life, breathing her dreams and her ideals and victory and twisted power and delusions of conquest. Oh and hadn’t the Force tasted sweet then, after the Mandalorian scourge had been eliminated, and we were on the path to power the likes of which no one had ever tasted before. With the Star Forge, Revan would mould the Republic into a better, stronger empire, and I was one of the lucky few who would help make it a reality.

But then her anger began to encompass everything, and Malak’s insanity would creep in, and the few others remaining either cowered in constant fear or became warped tools sadistically enjoying the suffering we began to inflict upon the known worlds.

Even then, I still would have followed her anywhere. Malak’s betrayal had been unknown to me; perhaps he realized my devotion had always been to her, first and foremost. Bandon and Nisotsa had been part of it, always eager to scrabble for more standing, but even they hadn’t dare face her directly. Arran had, and paid for it with his cursed life.

With Revan gone I drew deep into the Dark Side, cold and remote, as my soul slowly withered away.

And then, the news of Darth Revan's resurrection broke through the upper ranks of Malak's Dark Jedi. It hit Nisotsa hard, she who'd betrayed Darth Revan and was the only Guard member remaining - other than myself. And Malak. The rest were long dead, or presumed so, in the case of Xaset and Meetra who were never found after Malachor.

I thought I’d been holding it together, but insidious doubts had been creeping in for weeks, nightmares of all those I’d murdered and tortured in the name of Revan’s vision of a better galaxy that was as warped and twisted as the Force we all wielded.

If I drew the Force in, deep to the cockles of my soul, I could forget, I could ride a wave of power that would separate me from the rest of the living. But it always ended, and without it came the recriminations, the remembrance of who I had been, once; a good Jedi who desired peace in the universe and the love of another who only had eyes for her childhood friend.

I would never have turned on her like that, no matter how Dark we’d become.

Now, however, she’d enacted the ultimate betrayal. Mind-wiped, or so the rumours said. A puppet of the Jedi Council, with no memory of her past atrocities, while I was forced to re-enact them nightly.
The Force twists and corrupts, I thought bitterly, but that she be ignorant of all that she wrought is the very height of injustice.

It would end here, on Kashyyyk. For the memory of the woman I had once esteemed so highly, I would ensure Darth Revan was no more. Our speeder was loaded with grenades and nerve restraints and syringes of that Force-inhibiting drug Kylah had been experimenting with. Bandon had slipped in a neural disruptor, thinking I wouldn’t notice.

He had plans to capture Darth Revan.

But, no. Oh no. It was time for Darth Revan to finally come to an end. If Bandon didn’t finish her off, then I certainly would.

But, unlike Malak, I would follow her into oblivion.

xXx

Chapter End Notes

Seriina Starr belongs to kosiah, from her fic 'Memory'. I'd say my Mekel has been influenced by hers as well. If you're after a great post-KotOR fic with heaps of plot twists and characters, go read 'Memory'.

I would love to hear what you think. Thanks for reading!
Hyperspace: V - part two

Dustil Onasi:

I waited until the garage of the *Ebon Hawk* had emptied out before finally making my way there. I felt them - Dak and Kel and the Cathar and bloody Jen Sahara, starting their little Force lessons that I hadn’t dared join. *I don’t want to join in. I’m not scared, I’m just not interested.*

It was galling when I couldn’t even convince myself.

I could have gone with Mekel. I should have gone with Mekel. What the frakk was here for me, after all?

The broken parts of a swoop bike littered half the garage, and that was my reason for checking this place out. I’d just knelt down, releasing my invisible Force weaves as I bent to investigate whether it was possible to salvage this mess, when the hatch swished open.

“You plan on hiding the entire hyperspace journey?” Jen said mildly, stepping inside.

I could feel myself scowl, and deliberately didn’t look at her. “I think everyone would be happier if I did,” I muttered.

“Your father wouldn’t be.”

“He can frakk off,” I spat, suddenly angry. “My entire life he’s been too busy fighting for glory, and now that I actually moved on he wants to be a part of it. Frakk him.” I felt my mouth twist. We’d barely spoken two words since the ship left Korriban behind. I didn’t know what to say to him, so I hid. It wasn’t like I couldn’t work out how to use that disgusting synthesizer after everyone had cleared out from the common room. The only sent I’d come across was that damn ugly Mandalorian, who’d given me a derisive sneer before stomping away.

Jen wore a thoroughly unimpressed look when I turned to face her. “You chose to come onboard, Dustil. Your dad’s pretty stubborn. You’re going to have to talk to him sooner or later.”

“No I don’t,” I said automatically, and glared when she snickered.

“Here, catch this.” She threw a lightsaber to me unexpectedly, and I caught it on reflex, staring at it dumbly. It was a training one. I wondered if she’d nicked it from the Academy. There were chests full of them back there, but sometimes peeps used real ones. I remembered a time when that pissant Shaardan somehow got a hold of a white colour crystal in a real ‘saber and used it to cut down an unsuspecting Trandoshan in the training rooms. He was a tool, Shaardan, but I’d always been kinda surprised he kept failing graduation.

Jen was holding a training lightsaber, too. “You didn’t join in with the Force lessons earlier.”

“Well, no, I did just torture and cause the death of Belaya Linn, so excuse me for avoiding a really pissed-off Cathar,” I snarled. Not to mention Dak. We’d gotten along okay, as far as Sith students
did, but that was before Belaya. And Kel— well, Kel hadn’t looked me in the eye since I’d betrayed that mercenary to Uthar. I scared him.

This wasn’t even talking about Mission Vao, who glared bloody death whenever she spotted me. And she had a damn Wookiee bodyguard. The only one onboard who wasn’t pissed at me, for some reason or another, was the Mandalorian mercenary. He merely thought I was beneath his notice. And I still didn’t get how my father was travelling peaceably with a Mandalorian.

And- Jen Sahara. Or Ness Jonohl. Or whatever the frakk her name was. She, who’d slaughtered Uthar and turned the Academy upside down. Who was—so I’d found out eavesdropping—Force-bonded to Bastila frakking Shan, a paragon of the Jedi Order. How could a stand-up Jedi like Jen Sahara even have an inkling of my situation? The darkest thing she’d probably ever done was tell my useless father off for drinking all the caffa.

“What you did to Belaya was abominable,” a voice hissed from behind us, and I spun to see Juhani lurking in the other doorway. Her alien eyes gleamed yellow, and I tensed, ready to reach for the Force at a moment’s notice. Jen stepped up next to me.

Jen opened her mouth to speak. “Juhani—”

“I cannot forgive you for that,” the Cathar spoke over Jen. “Belaya was my truest friend, and she deserved better than an end like that.”

I felt the dread circle sickeningly in my belly. For what, really, could I do on a ship where everyone hated me? I didn’t believe Jen Sahara would stand by me against her friend, no matter that she tensed in readiness at my side. And Juhani—well. She had a right to vengeance. I couldn’t refute that.

“But maybe I can understand it,” Juhani said softly, and I felt my mouth drop open in surprise. Righteous anger and despair still marked the Cathar’s face, but there was something else I couldn’t decipher. She turned to look at Jen. “Did you know that, after I fled Dantooine, I returned to Taris first?”

At Jen’s mute shake of her head, the Cathar continued. “I was full of rage, rage at what Quatra had put me through, and despair at what I thought I’d done.” Her voice dropped to a whisper, and her eyes gained a faraway look. “There were—some people I tracked down on Taris. Some I held grudges against from my childhood. They didn’t live long.”

Her gaze snapped back to mine, then. “I can understand that you may not have had much of a choice, Dustil Onasi. I may not be able to forgive you for what you have done- but I do understand it. Better than you would think.”

Think. I didn’t know what I was thinking anymore. The Cathar was bristling with anger, and yet almost seemed to be condoning my actions. Because she’d killed, before.

Maybe she wasn’t cut from quite the same cloth as powerful Jen Sahara and heroic Bastila Shan.

“Dak does not blame you. You should know that,” Juhani added softly. “He was with you on Korriban, all these years. He understands. Now—” She cleared her throat, and glanced over to Jen. “Why don’t you turn on that training lightsaber so we can see what you have been taught.”

I glanced back to the older human, to find her grinning impishly at me. “Come on, kid,” she teased, a white bar activating innocently from her hand. Hers was a short, off-hand blade—she’d tossed me the superior one. After witnessing the showdown with Uthar, though, I didn’t really believe I held the advantage. “Let’s see what Carth’s son can do with a lightsaber.”
I turned mine on and faced her warily. She was still grinning, her eyes dancing from behind the beam of white. I stepped forward, somewhat awkwardly, and lashed out.

Jen blocked and stepped to the side, and I followed her, flicking my ‘saber down by her legs.

Again, a block and a side-step. She wasn’t attacking, I realized, but giving me a chance to warm up.

“Look for her weaknesses,” Juhani called. “There is an opening in her guard. Find it.” Jen bared her teeth as I swung again; once more parried by her shorter weapon. I had the reach advantage, but more than that—there was an awkward shift to her pose, her ‘saber wasn’t covering her body adequately.

I swung high, but abruptly changed direction when she rose to block. Jen was too quick for me, though, and dodged backwards.

“She is used to wielding two blades,” the Cathar added, and Jen shot her a mock glare. “She leaves her side unguarded when she only has one.”

I could see what Juhani meant, now. Jen fought like she expected a shield on her off-hand, and when it wasn’t present she failed to fully compensate. But Jen Sahara was too quick for me to land a blow, and she refused to attack.

“Stop hiding, Dustil,” Jen said, dodging me again. My eyes narrowed, and I stepped sideways before launching a blow at her weak side. She blocked, still, and grinned at me from behind our crossed weapons. “I expect to see you at the next session.”

“I’m not going to be a frakking Jedi,” I retorted. I didn’t care what Dak and Kel planned on doing, but there was no way I’d go scurrying to some robed Master to beg for enlightenment. I had zero interest in the Jedi Order, and a lifetime’s worth of distrust.

“Then use it as an opportunity to learn skills for yourself,” she snapped, leaning backwards from an overhand lunge. It was getting annoying, the way she refused to attack. “We’ve all got things to teach, yourself included. I’d love to know how you keep hiding the way you do.”

I stalled, momentarily surprised. Sith didn’t share skills on Korriban. Not the Adepts, not the Initiates. We were all too busy vying for prestige and individual status. “You want to learn my trick, huh?” I said, somewhat guardedly. Everyone wanted something, after all.

“I’d be interested, but it’s up to you. We’re not your enemy, Dustil.” Jen paused, too, a serious look on her face for once. “Stars, the only one on this ship likely to lash out at you is Mission, and she’s not a Force user.”

I could feel my cheeks heat at the mention of the Twi’lek. I wished I’d never met her on Korriban. Then we could have started with a clean slate here. I’d actually enjoyed speaking with her before I’d frakked it all up.

“Why don’t you try facing up to her and apologizing?” The words were soft and genuine and I felt my lip curl at the stupid idea.

“Apologizing?” I spluttered. “What, sorry for scaring the stuffing out of you and threatening to lop your headtails off? Yeah, I bet that’d go down real well.”

She shrugged, her lightsaber lowering. Mine was at half-mast. “Mission has the biggest heart of anyone I ever met. An apology worked for me when I screwed up.”
I snorted in disgust. “What did you do, pinch her pazaak cards?”

“No,” Jen said absently, but her gaze had travelled behind me to the open hatch. I could sense someone else enter the room, the faintest touch in the Force, and it was more familiar and welcome that I’d ever admit. Dad. Jen’s lips tightened and a high colour of red bloomed on her face. “I scuttled the Ebon Hawk while Mission – and everyone else – was onboard. Caused them to crash-land in the Manaan Ocean and almost get captured by the Sith while I ran off-world.”

My mouth dropped in shock as I stared at Jen disbelievingly. Her eyes snapped back to mine, and she grinned. “We’re not that different, Dustil.” She switched off the saber and threw it to Juhani, who caught it effortlessly. “I’ll leave you guys to it.”

I turned to watch as she wandered to the exit, where Dad was still standing, his arms folded casually as he stared at her.

“Excuse me,” Jen said tightly, motioning for him to move. She looked either uncomfortable or angry. I thought they were friends. Is she pissed at him?

Maybe I’d have an ally. For I sure as frakk didn’t know if I wanted to punch Dad or hug him. “You’re leaving so soon?” Dad asked in a neutral voice.

“I have- things. Things to do,” Jen muttered.

“Coward,” he said mildly, but sidestepped out of the way. She shot him a fiery glare before disappearing. He stared after her for a moment, in silence, as the Cathar exited in her wake.

Then, with a quiet sigh, Dad turned back around.

“Dustil,” he acknowledged quietly.

I could feel the scowl on my face, and hated the awkward feeling inside. Everything in my life had been overturned in a matter of days. While I was glad to be free of Uthar – truly, I was – I felt completely directionless. Like I had no idea what I actually wanted.

“I wish things were easier between us,” Dad admitted, and I opened my mouth to retort that it was his damn fault but he bet me to it. “Look, I know you have every right to be angry at me. For not being there, for always putting the war first. I- I can’t change the past, Dustil. I can only try to do things better this time around. To be there for you, if you’ll let me.”

He looked so serious, so damn earnest, talking to me like an equal for the first time in my frakking life, and I felt the anger completely vanish, leaving only an uneasy residue of bitterness behind.

“I don’t know,” I muttered, raking a hand through my hair. I sighed. “I don’t think I know much of anything anymore.”

His mouth twitched; almost a grin, but not quite. “Believe it or not, son, but I know how you feel.”

Son. The word simultaneously annoyed and warmed me – annoying me further. “Really?” I said in disbelief. Like he’d ever felt that way. Seriously, I’d lost count of the commendations Dad used to receive from his superiors. As a boy, I’d weigh his medals in my hands when he was away, awed and proud and sad all at the same time. Dad had three of them, then; shiny titasteel with colourful ribbons. I wondered if he’d been awarded more since Telos.

“Yes, really,” Dad answered, his voice dry. “These last few months, especially.”
My eyes narrowed. “Why were you on Korriban, Dad?” I could hear my voice twist on the last word, and saw the flicker in his eyes as he noticed it, too. “You’re a fighter pilot. What the frakk were you lot doing there, with Bastila frakking Shan of all people?”

He hesitated, and I felt myself scowling all over again. “Suppose you can’t tell me, huh?” I said bitterly. I’d always wanted details, as a kid. The few times Dad was actually home – home, not on the frontlines, not at Base where Mum refused to let me go – he never wanted to talk about it. Always seemed more interested in my studies, or what stupid holo-movie was doing the rounds, or who my friends were. He never let me catch a glimpse of his glorious life, out there, being a famous warhero.

“I can tell you parts,” he said quietly. “I’d like to know what you’ve been up to as well.”

I snorted. “I’ve been training to be a Dark Jedi, Dad.”

“Yeah, I got that,” he snapped. “I didn’t mean- look, we’ve got a lot of catching up to do. And- and you’ve grown into a man since Telos. I- I can’t begin to tell you how it feels to know you’re alive, Dustil. At how- how happy that’s made me.”

I shrugged uncomfortably, looking away. “Guess I always thought you’d throw yourself into the war. Y’know, like you’ve done your entire life.”

“Well, I did I guess,” he conceded, ignoring the bitterness of my last words. “But I thought of you and your mother every day, Dustil. Every single day.”

I blinked and glanced down at the ground. It was the same slate grey durasteel as everywhere else in the ship. “She shouldn’t have died. It’s not fair that she did. I… I miss her.”

“I know, son.” His arms were around me then. I hugged him back, awkward and ill-at-ease and maybe a little bit comforted, before stepping back.

“You’re almost as tall as me now,” Dad said, startled.

I laughed, surprised at the inane comment, and looked at him. We were close to the same height.

“Four years of growing, Dad,” I said wryly.

He smiled, but it was sad. “Look, come and get something to eat in the common room. You can tell me about that, er, colourful friend of yours who looked like he wanted to kill me outside the Academy.” Dad grinned, then, looking about ten years younger. “And I’ll tell you how I crash-landed on Taris and met most of the crew onboard.”

xXx

Zhar Lestin:

The air on Kashyyyk had a wildness to it that I found strangely freeing. Amongst the branches of the great wroshyr trees, it was easy to forget the galactic battles being fought elsewhere. In other circumstances, I would have found myself at peace on this unkempt world.

But the indigenous tribe in this part of the planet were under a Czerka-sanctioned stranglehold due to a corrupt leader, and the presence of several Jedi was not exactly welcome. Staying in temporary Czerka huts mounted by hanging plysteel ropes was a viable alternative to the dubious hospitality of the Wookiees, but Vrook, it seemed, had valid reasons for imposing upon the natives.
I sat back in a woven lee-cane chair, my fingers pressing deep into my temples. The situation of the Wookiees was an unpleasant one, with any dissenters being sold by their chieftain as slaves, and was the sort of unjust scenario that we as Jedi should be investigating.

*But this Wookiee business is as significant as a tach in a krayt dragon’s den.* For years, now, I lived with the crushing despair within me that the padawan I’d trained had turned into one of the deadliest villains in the galaxy. When the news broke that he’d turned on the one he’d once loved more than life itself, something inside me truly died. It was the final step into the darkness, and I did not know if there was anyone who could turn back from that.

I transferred back to Dantooine when Malak first fell. Coruscant was too busy, with the weight of my old padawan's fate on my soul. And Karon was already there, had been for years, since just prior to Malak and Revan's initial flight to investigate the Mandalorian threat. She'd transferred for Revan, at the time, to try and ease her ex-padawan into a new enclave away from her lover. The High Council in Coruscant themselves decreed the separation of Knights Malak and Revan, despite both mine and Karon's heated arguments against it.

But Revan was too outspoken, and Malak too convincing. And there were too many on the Council who, I believed, feared their views and their charisma. Other powerful, more experienced Knights like Meetra Surik and Yudan Rosh started clustering around them, and sometimes I believed the Council-sanctioned separation of Malak and Revan had less to do with their supposedly forbidden love, and more to do with their growing power bloc.

But, regardless, Revan’s stay on Dantooine had been brief. Three weeks, all told, before the news of Talshion burning hit the galactic HoloNet and they both ran to the frontlines. It was a year before they returned to Coruscant, and this time, when they left, they took damn near half the Order’s Knights with them.

Dantooine was a quieter place than Coruscant, and a calmer one. Karon and I had been children there, a lifetime ago, before we moved to Coruscant for padawan training. We’d both been fresh-eyed and adolescent, and we’d bonded early. If we’d not been Force-sensitive, then perhaps we would have been something else to each other. Something more. But the combined complexities of an inter-species relationship and the emotional pitfalls of the Force were enough to keep our feelings for each other at a strictly platonic level. We’d both believed that, given time, perhaps Malak and Revan’s relationship would fade in the same manner, as the effervescence of youth did.

Who knew? Given different circumstances, perhaps it would have. The Coruscanti High Council did not agree.

Karon had been elected to the Dantooine Council a year ago. We had worked together our entire life, so a part of me was surprised to find her involved in something distinct to me. I held no contention over it… excepting that it conflicted her. Karon had been deeply torn over something, something from the Council meetings that she could not unburden on me.

Something so staggering that the entire reason she’d been elected to the Council was because of who her padawan had once been.

I found it difficult to forgive Karon for keeping Revan’s survival from me. While I understood that secrecy was part of one’s ascension to the Council, in some ways I was as much Revan’s Master as she had been. Just as she had understood Malak as well as I.

It had always felt wrong to be mad at Karon, and doubly now that she was one with the Force. I sighed, feeling the sting of tears at the back of my eyes. Vrook had showed me Karon’s last holo-message, and for once he’d been peaceably quiet. He had viewed it weeks ago, before I had even
known the name Jen Sahara.

…

The dark-skinned Zabrak stared at the camera, her eyes a bright turquoise even in the shaky light emitted by the holo-token.

“I am on Manaan, having spent the last day in discussions with Padawan Bastila Shan, and Padawan Juhani. Let me say at first that Padawan Juhani is fine, and has been redeemed by none other than Jen Sahara.” Karon smiled, then, and it looked heartbreakingly sad. “But Jen Sahara herself has run off-world. Although she does not know the truth of her identity, she is filled with rage and frustration that does not come from the Deralian scholar. I… have had a premonition, a strong one. The reason I have not raised an alarm about Jen’s departure is that the Force has shown me she will return to Manaan. What happens from there, my fellow Jedi, I do not know – but I do not believe I shall be much longer on this physical plane.”

Karon sighed deeply, her gaze moving away from the holo-cam. “I will strongly recommend once more that you include Zhar Lestin in the knowledge of this mission. After myself, there is no Jedi Master who might understand Jen Sahara better… or calm her, if the need arises.”

…

There was more in the message, explaining about the Star Maps, that the Ebon Hawk would be directed to Kashyyyk afterwards, and an odd observation on the emotional state of Padawan Shan that seemed meaningless when contrasted with the mind fractures of Jen Sahara. But it was the last recording from Karon, and I had re-played it more times than was emotionally healthy.

I heard a forced cough from outside the wicker-lashed room, and raised my head as Vrook Lamar walked in, a customary scowl on his lined face. He took great delight in his curt and intimidating demeanour. We all had our faults, and Vrook’s was that he believed a gruff exterior was necessary for emotional detachment.

No, it’s that he believes emotional detachment is necessary. Bah. He’d have us all walking like automatons. He always was a bit of a blind idiot, even as a kid. It was funny how sometimes thoughts came in the voice of someone else. And that thought, as it flashed through my mind, was spoken in the dry, chuckling tones of a long-lost friend I’d believed as one with the Force as Karon was now.

Vrook came from Coruscant too, although he transferred to Dantooine decades ago. But we’d known him on Coruscant, as padawans training to become knights, and never particularly warmed to him. Those days, it had been three of us who’d been close. And while Karon and I found it easy to ignore Vrook’s negative observations on just about everything, Jolee Bindo had always liked to speak his mind.

Jolee had disappeared during the height of the Exar Kun conflict, after his wife – and hadn’t that marriage rocked the Coruscanti Enclave – was refused training by the Jedi, and ran to Kun’s side. After so many, many years, it seemed only sensible to assume that Jolee had died somewhere along the line. For how many people could truly turn their back on the Force?

But Vrook and Vandar disagreed, now. They had travelled to Kashyyyk weeks ago, starting their search for the Star Map in the depths of the massive wroshyr forest the Wookiees called the Shadowlands. But the planet was so big…

There was a Force presence, though. A benign one, like someone tracking them, far enough away to
remain unseen, close enough that Vandar had picked up on it. The presence had faded away when either of them tried to approach it, overtly or otherwise, and that sort of slippery stealth against the likes of Vandar Tokare was impressive.

It was the Wookiees who gave Vandar and Vrook a lead. *The Hairless One*, they called the human who had made the Shadowlands his home for the past two decades, who kept the dangerous depths free from poachers, and occasionally spoke to the odd Wookiee who ventured down there. Somehow, Vandar had deduced it was the long-lost Jolee Bindo.

*And his sum total of evidence was that Jolee and Nayama had celebrated their honeymoon on Kashyyyk.* Odd destination, that, but Nayama was a wild soul who had a soft spot for the Wookiees before she fell. By the time she’d left Jolee, that had been burned away.

Perhaps it was a quiet place for him to remember happier times.

Regardless, if there was one sentient who might know the location of the Kashyyyk Star Map – other than Jen Sahara – then it would be The Hairless One who may or may not be my childhood friend. And if it was Jolee, then perhaps he would show himself for me, where he would not for others. My gaze drifted to the pack stuffed full of survival gear that lay at my feet, and I felt ready to find my Wookiee escort and head out.

Vrook coughed again, more of a grunt this time, and I realized I’d completely forgotten he was there. He’d taken a seat opposite me, his frowning gaze locked on mine.

“My apologies, Vrook,” I murmured. “There has been too much to think on lately.”

“Hmph,” he uttered. “Keep your mind together, Zhar. There are too few Dantooine Masters left for you to be daydreaming all the time.”

I inclined my head, letting that comment past. “How did Quatra take the news?”

Vrook grimaced. “Not well, I’m afraid. She’s been angling to ascend to the Council for years now, and this damn fool mission has her convinced that had she been one of us, we would have done something smarter. Huh. Not sure I can argue with that.”

Vrook had been against the plan regarding Jen Sahara, but had been out-voted - or so he’d told me, in a voice as dark and bitter as the caffa he drank.

“It’s damn risky and damn crazy, and now two Masters outside of the Council know,” Vrook grumbled. “Not to mention a runaway Cathar and a Mandalorian mercenary.”

And that had been the reason for informing Quatra, who’d rushed to Kashyyyk once she learned of Juhani’s existence and destination. For Karon’s missive had told us that Juhani now knew of Jen Sahara’s true identity. Vrook and Vandar had both decided that perhaps it would be better for Quatra to learn about Jen Sahara from Council members, rather than from her recently fallen apprentice.

Of course, the *Ebon Hawk* should have docked here weeks ago.

“I am ready to head down to the Shadowlands, Vrook,” I said mildly. I wanted to meet the *Ebon Hawk*, should she finally land on this planet – but there was no telling when that would be. And, more importantly, we needed to locate the Star Map. We only had two of the four maps so far - the two easy ones we’d already known the location of.

And Malak knew what we were up to.
“I’ve heard from Vandar,” Vrook returned, and the tone of his voice was noticeably pleased. That surprised me, and I jerked my gaze back to his. A slight smile sat lightly on his lined, human face.

“We could do with good news,” I replied, not rising to the bait. Vandar had left Kashyyyk some days ago, following an urgent summons from Republic HQ. Vrook would either tell me or he would not; jumping him for it would only add to his amusement.

Vrook snorted softly, but his eyes were crinkled with pleasure. Whatever it was, it was good news indeed. Vrook did not often show positive emotions of any sort. “Republic HQ have received a transmission from the Ebon Hawk that they have decoded. Although they have not yet released it to Vandar – I believe there is some tight negotiation going on – Vandar has been told enough to know what it is.”

“The Ebon Hawk?” I couldn’t help myself; I asked, and Vrook smirked in triumph.

“Aye,” he assented, quicker than was customary for him. “More than that, though. It’s the Korriban Star Map.”

I stared blankly at him for several moments, allowing the shock and surprise to dissipate before relief followed in its wake. “Korriban…” I breathed. “So that’s where the Ebon Hawk has been.”

Vrook grunted. “Aye. And a second transmission saying they have left Korriban and are enroute to Kashyyyk. We can expect them to land here in four days.”

“All of them?” I asked.

“I don’t have a manifest, so we’re only working under assumptions at this stage.”

“Hmm,” I murmured, and my gaze fell on my pack again as my thoughts raced. “I shall delay my journey below, Vrook. Once the Ebon Hawk lands, I shall take Jen Sahara with me to the Shadowlands.”

“What?” Vrook snapped.

I kept my face composed as I stared at him. "If she doesn't know her identity yet, then she likely must be told. Such a conversation is best held far removed from civilization of any type. And face it, Vrook - you have never been able to remain on civil terms with Revan beyond a one-word greeting.” I saw his face tighten at that uncomfortable truth, and allowed my tone to gentle. "Vrook, you will have your hands full debriefing your own padawan, as Quatra will hers.”

“Vandar and I will deal with Jen Sahara,” Vrook said through clenched teeth. “I’m not taking any chances with her, not this time.”

“No,” I disagreed flatly, and heard the steel in my voice. “No, Vrook, you will not. Vandar is unlikely to be back before the Ebon Hawk lands. I will deal with Revan.”

“You are not on the Council, Zhar,” Vrook bit out.

“No, but you and Vandar made the choice to tell me about the Council’s decision regarding Revan. You have made me part of this. Galdea and Karon are dead, Vrook, and Vima’s gone gallivanting who knows where. Re-imprinting Jen Sahara is not an option.”

“I did not agree with that, Zhar, and you well know it,” Vrook rejoined, his eyes flashing. “But it’s done, now, and reinforcing the overlaid personality is a lot easier than the initial-“
“No!” My voice was loud, and it echoed through the wicker-cane room. Any Wookiee nearby would have heard it clearly. Vrook frowned, taken aback. It was quite possible I had never raised my voice to him before. I sighed, and felt a measure of calm return to me. “No. Revan is my responsibility now. I shall take her with me to find the Star Map. She returned to Bastila on Manaan. They have been successful on Korriban. If there is a possibility for any sort of redemption here, Vrook, then I shall take it. And you will not stop me.”

xXx

Zaalbar:

The Shadowlands were a dangerous place on my homeworld for the unprepared. The young would go there, occasionally, to prove their mettle against the wildlife or to eradicate unwelcome poachers gloaming for resources.

The banished sometimes chose it as a final refuge or a means of atonement - and they did not bring weapons or armour with them. I thought I understood that now. My failure hung heavy in my soul, and the idea of disappearing into a predatory underworld with naught but my wits and natural strength held a primal temptation I could not deny. To lose myself amongst the wroshyr trees, until a natural carnivore cut down this body and soul that had been brought so low by shame.

Those named madclaw had the choice of leaving Kashyyyk forever, or spending the remainder of their life in the dark depths as a challenge – or penance - to the gods. I was young – fully grown, but young – when my father exiled me. A future in the Shadowlands promised a quick end, and I had not desired that. Instead, I left with the first civilian transport, injustice and bitter resentment clouding my mind.

But now… now I could understand the allure of the Shadowlands. Now I felt like I truly deserved the name of madclaw.

Bastila Shan was a good Jedi, and it was due to me that her enemies held her. Instead of honouring my life-debt to Jen Sahara, I had been too weak of mind to guard her bond-sister. How was I ever to repay such a debt to Jen Sahara, when I already owed her my life?

I had asked for death, back on that cursed planet, and she had not granted me the leave to do so. Perhaps I should be glad of that. For, if there was any chance to retrieve Bastila Shan, I had to do so. I could not help if I was dead.

But I doubted myself now. Would the others have been so feeble? Would Carth Onasi have betrayed Bastila Shan so? Would Canderous Ordo have deposited her into the arms of the enemy?

The hatch opened, and I turned to see Jen Sahara in the entrance, her strange human face solemn and serious. I was hiding in the stern of the *Ebon Hawk*, in the engine room, surrounded by the buzzing of machinery. It was one of the few places I could find solitude in this overcrowded freighter.

Jen took a step inside and closed the hatch behind her. “Zaalbar, I can hear you blaming yourself from the other side of the ship.”

I wondered at that comment. I had had enough of Force mind reading and manipulation to last me a full lifetime. Jen Sahara must have seen something in my expression, for she grimaced as she took a step closer. “I only meant- sometimes, it’s hard to block out someone’s emotions. I’m still learning, I guess. And I share the guilt, too.”

“(You should not, Jen Sahara),” I growled. “(You did everything right).”
Jen snorted, crossing her arms. “I should have picked up on the inordinately long sleep Bastila was having, but I’d put it down to exhaustion from what we’d done. Yet, I was able to carry on…” she sighed. “I should have realized that a Jedi of Bastila Shan’s calibre wouldn’t be so easily tired. That there must have been something else going on.”

“(Jen Sahara, you did not physically hand her over to a Dark Jedi!” I was vaguely aware my voice had risen. That she continued to believe herself culpable was ridiculous.

“No, but have you thought of the alternative, Zaalbar?” she snapped back. Her eyes flashed with indignation. “Say you had resisted Kylah’s compulsion. What do you think would have happened then?”

I stared back, suddenly mute.

Jen sighed. Her face suddenly had a bleak cast to it. Her brown hair stuck out in all directions; the static aftermath of some time spent in the sonic refresher. The men’s starboard one was currently clogged up with fur. I was vaguely aware that it was my turn to clean it out.

“She would have killed you, Zaalbar,” Jen finished quietly. “Once she realized you weren’t succumbing. Then she would have boarded the ‘Hawk, disabled Teethree who likely would have alerted Carth, and killed him also. Bastila… Bastila was still recovering. Even had she woken, Kylah could have overpowered her.” Jen paused. Her moss-green eyes pinned mine, as if forcing me to accept what was her truth. “Zaalbar, you and Carth almost certainly would be dead. Bastila would have been taken anyway.”

I did not like partaking in what-ifs. It was a redundant exercise that usually served no purpose other than to make one feel bitter about the past. For my what-if did not have the same shape as hers. “I should not have been outside, Jen Sahara.”

She stepped closer, laying a hand on my arm. I looked away, my eyes resting on the cloth-wrapped corpse of Belaya Linn that lay deeper in the engine room.

“I understood you were outside for all of five minutes. Look, Zaalbar - Kylah knew we were here. Dustil already implied she was monitoring us from spaceport control. If she hadn’t found an opportune moment then it would have been no hardship for her to call on Uthar Wynn for assistance.” Jen’s voice dropped lower. “Zaalbar, she must have seen us all leave for the caves. She must have understood the ‘Hawk was relatively unguarded. She was going to go after Bastila one way or another – before we returned.”

We lapsed into silence. Her logic may have been sound, but it had the feel of freedom from transgression that I did not like. At the end of the day, I still became the unwilling tool of a Dark Jedi, and betrayed one of our crew.

“(What-ifs are poisonous, Jen Sahara),” I said at long last.

“Yeah,” she sighed. “They are. I just wish- I just wish you didn’t carry so much of the guilt inside you, Zaalbar.”

“(I cannot change what I feel, Jen Sahara. But I still breathe. I still have the chance to put this right, somehow).” I did not see how yet. We were en route to Kashyyyk rather than following Bastila Shan’s trail. Kashyyyk, the one place in the galaxy I was forsworn to travel to. I looked back over to the human I followed, who was still staring at me steadily. She had grown into herself on Korriban. I owed her much. And perhaps… perhaps that meant it was time for me to break the silence of my past.
I had sworn never to speak of my homeworld. Even to Mission, she who held a dear place in my heart. Even to her, I would only talk about my people in general terms. For I held great remorse and great bitterness, and the label of madclaw silenced me.

But our quest continued, and Jen Sahara deserved what knowledge I could provide.

I huffed, uncomfortable and irritable, my eyes landing on the wrapped body once more.

“I think they mean to bury her on Kashyyyk,” Jen murmured, following my gaze. “Juhani couldn’t bear to leave her on Korriban.”

"(I have heard of this human concept of burial)," I said slowly. Whilst entombing a dead carcass within the ground made sense of a sort, as it allowed the flesh to rot and become one with the earth, I could not comprehend why some of them encased the body in containers made of plasteel or other such material that could not easily decompose.

My people left dead bodies to the wild. We would celebrate the life's journey of a departed one, with feasts and ballads and tales of reminiscence. What happened to the prison of flesh left behind mattered not. It was dropped into the Shadowlands, to be transformed into fertilizer or fuel for beasts, in the true continuation of life.Â

"Deralians bury their dead," Jen said. "I'm more accustomed to burning, myself. It seems more symbolic."

“(I understand that even less, Jen Sahara),” I said in askance. Fire killed the nutrients left behind in the physical body, and left only ash. Jen Sahara came from Deralia; I wondered that she did not follow the customs of her people.

Jen sighed, looking back to me. “Will you be alright, Zaalbar? I don’t like the thought of you twisting yourself up in remorse.”

“(I have told you before, Jen Sahara. It is the actions that matter. I only hope I have a chance to redeem myself).”

Jen nodded, and looked ready to leave. I raised a hand to forestall her, and she lifted an eyebrow in question. “(I wish to speak to you),” I said haltingly. “(About Kashyyyk).”

Jen looked faintly surprised. My reticence to talk of my homeworld had not gone unnoticed, then. I huffed. “(Where are we landing, Jen Sahara?)”

“The Jedi Master Vrook Lamar awaits us in Rwookrorro,” Jen answered, stumbling over the name of the settlement. She grimaced. “I understand it’s close to the largest Czerka spaceport on Kashyyyk.”

I could not quite contain a growl. The influence of Czerka was great on Kashyyyk, drawn to the natural resources my planet provided. Most of my people lacked knowledge of the true depths of Czerka’s greed.

I had hoped we would land somewhere else. There were many settlements on Kashyyyk. But, somehow, this did not surprise me. Somehow, it had the feel of destiny about it, as if I needed to face the past. And yet, if I left the freighter and set foot once more upon the wicker-lashed platforms of my youth, I might very well lead Jen’s party into danger.

Perhaps the decision would be best left to Jen Sahara, to whom I owed so much.
We were interrupted, then, by the arrival of Mission. A few seconds before the hatch opened, Jen was already turning and murmuring her name, a small smile on her lips. Jen Sahara was using the Force like a Jedi, these days, augmenting her natural senses and reflexes. It was necessary for the battles ahead.

“Guys, I’ve been looking for you,” Mission chirped, her gaze flicking between us. “What ya doin’ in here?”

“(I was looking for a quiet place, Mission),” I said. “(Come in and close the hatch. I have things to say that you should also hear).”

For Mission was my friend, perhaps the truest friend I had ever had. Although I felt the need to unburden myself to Jen Sahara, it would be right for Mission to hear as well. I knew far more about her youth than I had ever divulged of mine.

Mission’s bright eyes widened in curiosity, and she walked in, tapping the door control closed as she did so. “What’s up, Big Z?”

“(I wish to tell you of my youth),” I said heavily, turning my gaze back to Jen Sahara. “(I should tell you why I do not live on Kashyyyk).”

“Whoa, Big Z, are you sure?” Mission took a step closer to me, and laid a hand on my arm. “You don’t have to speak of it, y’know. I mean, I’ve kinda figured you must be running from trouble or something – but we don’t need to know the details.”

I smiled briefly at Mission. There was no one with a heart quite like my young friend. “(Thank you for the support, Mission. But this may prove important to us. This Jedi Master is in the settlement I grew up in, and the only place Jen’s Star Map could be is somewhere in the Shadowlands).” Jen frowned at the mention of the Force relic, folding her arms and staring at me intently. “(If I walk once more into Rwookrrorro, I will be led straight to the Shadowlands. But I shall never be allowed to leave).”

There was a brief silence as they both looked at me, broken after a moment by Mission’s curiosity. “What’s the Shadowlands?”

“(The wroshyr trees on Kashyyyk are kilometres high. My people live in platforms near the top. The Shadowlands refer to the ground – it is not a safe place, Mission. Nor it is easily accessible except through the moving platforms my people control).” When I had left, Czerka Corporation were negotiating for the rights to build their own lift to the ground. My father would never agree to that, however. Access to the Shadowlands was strictly controlled.

“Why can’t we just land on the ground somewhere?” Mission asked. “I mean, it’s not like the trees can cover the entire planet, right?” She stared between the two of us when I failed to answer. “What, really?”

“(We do have oceans, but the lands are covered in jungle. The inhabitable parts of Kashyyyk are all on the treetops).”

Mission blinked. “Sheesh. Like one giant forest, huh? Has no one ever tried cutting down the trees to clear some space?”

“(No!)” I said, my voice abrupt and loud in the engine room. Mission looked taken aback, and I suddenly felt sheepish. “(I apologize, my friend. That is not something you should suggest to a Wookiee. The wroshyr trees are a crucial part of Kashyyyk).”
“They are held almost sacred to your people, from what I understand,” Jen murmured. “The entire ecosystem is based around them.”

I nodded in assent. “(The trees are the backbone of life on Kashyyyk, Mission. There are many plants and fauna that only live at a particular height or particular area of the forest. The Shadowlands is but one level of ecology on my planet – however it is the most dangerous).”

“And you think the Star Map will be somewhere there?” Jen asked. She leaned back against a durasteel bulkhead, her face drawn and tired under the halogen luminescence of the freighter’s lighting.

“(If it is as old as you say it is, Jen Sahara. I know not of any relic that matches the description of these Star Maps, but the Shadowlands are the least explored area of Kashyyyk. It is where I would start).”

“But you would not be allowed to leave if you took us there,” Jen added. Her eyes narrowed. “We could find another way down without your assistance.”

I grunted. “(Perhaps. But first I should tell you why. I should tell you both why I do not live on Kashyyyk).” Jen’s gaze was dark and serious on mine. So was Mission’s. “(I left my planet labelled as an exile, with hate in my heart for my den-brother).”

Mission slipped her tiny hand into my paw, squeezing it gently. She wore a sad smile. “I guess I know all about scumbag brothers. What did he do, Big Z?”

I huffed. Griff Vao was a slippery coward with no real power over anyone except his younger sister, due to the love she held for him. Would that my brother Chuundar was so ineffectual. “(Czerka beguiled my brother into dreams of expansion and power beyond Rwookrrorro’s natural borders),” I said abruptly. Jen frowned in confusion. I had to explain, then, what I had never once let slip to Mission, in all the years we had known each other. “(My father is the chieftain, Jen Sahara. I am his second son, cast out and labelled as a madclaw for failing to accurately expose the depths of my brother’s greed).”

Jen’s eyes widened. Mission’s gasp was audible, and echoed in the silence. “Whoa, Big Z! Does that mean you’re like a prince or something?”

“(I was a chieftain’s son, Mission. Now I am only a madclaw).”

“They’ll throw you down to the Shadowlands if you leave the freighter,” Jen deduced. She straightened from the wall. “What happened, Zaalbar?”

My mind drifted back to years ago - years I tried to forget during my new life on Taris. It was hard for a Wookiee, to be so far from Kashyyyk. I would never have left voluntarily. “(Czerka Corporation have always held a great interest in my planet. My people do not strip our planet of resources; instead, we strive to live in harmony with the environment. There are many resources that the greedy eye of Czerka rests on. The glands of the tach can be processed into stimulants. The fibres of a syren plant can be transformed into synthetic pheromones. Even the wroshyr trees themselves can be mined for minerals deep within the bark),” I explained. “(Centuries ago, Czerka fought hard for the right to build space ports on Kashyyyk. Since then, they have been doing their utmost to claim more of our planet).”

“And your brother is in bed with them.” It was a half-question, as if Jen already knew the answer.

I gave a short nod. “(Chuundar always believed our father Freyyr should be chieftain of more than
Rwookrrro. Our settlements are self-sufficient, Jen Sahara. We may trade or hunt together, but we have our own system of leadership. There are two towns nearby – smaller towns with weak leaders that my brother believes would do better under his rule.

I sighed, scratching my head as I dwelled on unwelcome thoughts from the past. “(I am not sure how Czerka fits into Chuundar’s ambitions),” I admitted. “(Czerka is a commercial entity, not a military one. But aid from Czerka could come in many forms: superior weaponry, armour, or simple credits to purchase a mercenary force. Chuundar believes himself to be a liberal Wookiee who is listening to the new generation, but many would not agree with Czerka infiltrating our planet).” I paused. “(I found my brother allowing Czerka-led hunters down to the lower levels to trap for tachs. He had started an underground tach trade).” I huffed. “(I accused him in front of an audience. That was foolish. Chuundar denied any involvement, and my father believed him).”

“And what? Your dad kicked you out because of that?” Mission said, her voice sharp and indignant. “Sheesh, Big Z, that’s rid-”

“(No. I lost my temper, Mission. I struck out at my brother).” I hung my head. “(With my claws).”

“Madclaw,” Jen whispered. There was a look of recognition on her face, and I understood she knew something of my people. This did not surprise me; Jen Sahara had always shown a modicum of understanding for different cultures alongside her gift with languages. “That’s a terrible taboo amongst your people, isn’t it? I’m sorry, Zaalbar.”

Mission leaned her head against my side. I was not overly comfortable with physical affection, but I understood it as a way of the Twi’lek showing me support. It warmed my heart.

“We can find some other way down, right Jen?” Mission implored.

Jen nodded in assent. “You won’t have to leave the freighter. It’ll be best if someone stays onboard anyway, as we’re docking at a Czerka spaceport. Look, I’m sure this Jedi Master will have found a way to the Shadowlands by now.” She paused, and then her voice was even quieter. “There’s a good chance he may have even found the Star Map.”

“I hope so,” Mission whispered.

I sighed, a great blast of air releasing from my lungs. I was tired, suddenly, and had spoken more than I normally liked to. “(Thank you both for listening).”

Mission squeezed my arm, before stepping back to the hatch. “I’m gonna go grab something from the slop machine. Oh!” She swung to face Jen. “I almost forgot why I came here. Carth’s been looking for ya, Jen, ever since the day’s training finished.”

Jen’s posture changed; her shoulders tensed and a faint colour rose in her cheeks. I wrinkled my nose. She even smelled uncertain.

“I’m – I’m off to the quarters now,” she muttered. “If you see him, you can say I’m sleeping. I’ll catch up with him tomorrow.” For some reason I did not believe her intent. Jen was not meeting Mission’s gaze.

“Sure thing,” Mission chirped. “See you guys.”

Jen stared after Mission as my ebullient friend left the room. When she looked back to me her gaze was wary. “What?” she snapped.

“(I did not say anything, Jen Sahara),” I answered quietly. Her behaviour was odd. And I recalled
seeing the Republic pilot searching for her yesterday. I frowned. “(Are you hiding, Jen?)” That seemed unfeasible, on a freighter the size of the *Ebon Hawk*. And I had understood the two of them to be friends.

“No!” Jen shot back, quick and loud. The flush on her face was brighter, now, but her eyes flashed with sparks of annoyance. “I am *not* afraid of Carth Onasi.” She gave me one last glare before stomping out of the room.

I blinked in the sudden quiet. I had not accused Jen Sahara of fear, so I did not understand her defensiveness. But there certainly was something making her uncertain. *It is not my business. Humans are temperamental and odd. Whatever her issue is, likely she will be over it tomorrow.*

---

**Dak Vesser:**

The pain meds sat heavy in my system, clouding my thoughts. If I let my mind drift, I could feel the fingers of my left hand again. At times, I was certain I could clench my fist if only I tried hard enough.

It was a small price to pay. I knew that, I accepted that, and I was happy to leave Korriban behind. And still, I was angry. Irrationally, annoyingly angry.

The Force lessons were a good distraction though, and I found myself learning quickly from Juhani and Jen Sahara. Quicker than Dantooine. Maybe even quicker than Korriban.

At the Sith Academy survival had trumped self-advancement. Any Force-tricks and techniques I *had* discovered had been by poking around in the Archives â€“ usually to thwart a rival or protect my own skin.

Sometimes Uthar would lead a lesson. I swiftly learned to keep my head down and my ears open â€“ don't draw any attention, but keep a quick reply ready, for that bastard just loved to skewer any Sithling who stuttered over an answer.

Uthar's displeasure could be agonizing, or humiliating, or both.

I was viciously glad about his death. Juhani might harp on and on that such a dark emotion wasn’t healthy, but it felt good. I would’ve liked to have seen the blaster shot that took the bastard down.

Master Dorak, in contrast, had pushed me to lead my own study. Maybe that was why I’d been such an unmitigated failure in the Order.

I understood myself a little better, these days. I would learn best under a more structured approach, with a more disciplined Master.

Thoughts like that had me wondering if I’d accepted my new destination as the Jedi Order. I wasn’t certain. Juhani was adamant that was the best place for me. Belaya’s last request had been that I walk in the Light, and I couldn’t ignore my old friend’s dying wish.

But what I did understand was that continuing to follow Juhani would lead to my own downfall. I loved her dearly, as a friend and more – but I needed to find my own way, my own standing. A one-sided pining had led *both* Juhani and I to near-ruin.

The training helped. The only part I disliked was the sparring. I had no interest in more than watching, not with the aching heaviness of my stump preying on my mind, and my senses clouded
by the medbay’s Ceramol that I was slowly working through. That bloody Mandalorian, however, considered it a great game to goad me into action.

“I fought alongside a Fett, once, who’d lost his primary arm just below the shoulder,” the smirking prick commented. “Didn’t stop him taking down his share of Republic grunts. Didn’t stop him riding a basilisk into battle, either.”

Thing was, he was tougher than me before I’d lost my arm. Tall, muscular, and with a face like a slab of permacrete, Canderous Ordo was one formidable opponent. I had half a mind to Force slam him into the nearest wall, but the occasional pointed glare from Jen Sahara stayed my hand. And the feeling that Ordo might make me regret it. Shavit, even Juhani respected his fighting prowess.

“I’ve got it,” Dustil muttered from the other side of the room, facing Jen Sahara. He was joining us now, edgy and wary and sullen, but present. It was something, I supposed.

We didn’t have much in common. Between us there was almost a decade and the death of my oldest friend. I didn’t blame him for Belaya – how could I? – but the grief was still raw. It wasn’t fair that I had survived and she had not.

“Canderous, you were showing me a block,” Juhani said quietly, drawing the Mandalorian’s attention away from me in what I believed a deliberate action.

“No reason I can’t show the cripple,” he grunted.

“Canderous!” Juhani flared.

“Settle down, kittycat,” Canderous said, and Juhani’s face heated in annoyance. I couldn’t help a snort of amusement. *Kittycat.* Juhani threw me a glare, and I ducked my head sheepishly.

“Look,” the gruff Mandalorian continued. His gaze had swung back to me. “It might be useful. People will pick on you if they think you’re weak. You can spend the rest of your life wallowing in self-pity, or you can improve your situation.” It wasn’t the first time he’d encouraged me to get up and make a fool of myself. I got the feeling he wouldn’t stop until I did.

“I’ll get a prosthetic,” I said coldly. “No point training until then.” I should’ve joined in with whatever Jen was showing Kel and Dustil, rather than sit to watch the sparring – but I’d always enjoyed seeing Juhani fight, and I’d been curious to see how she’d fare against the Mandalorian.

“Bah,” Canderous spat. “It ain’t the same as a true limb, Sithling. You may as well get used to it now. At the least it’ll keep your mind off things.”

At the crux of it, I was sick of his goading. That was what I told myself when I clambered to my feet, glaring and brushing off Juhani’s concerned murmurs. My arm was clutched tight to my chest. Juhani sighed, and passed me a training lightsaber as the Mandalorian grinned, raising his vibrosword.

Maybe the distraction would do me good.

“Try to get through my guard. Don’t clutch your half-arm into your chest – use it for balance,” he ordered. I scowled. Even with the pain meds, my limb ached with a grinding, persistent pain.

It hadn’t hurt at the time. A hot burn and then- nothing. Nothing but rage and disbelief at seeing it flop uselessly to the ground.

Sometimes I dreamed that Lashowe had cut my other hand off, followed by my legs and finally my
head. Sometimes I wondered how I’d managed to get that lucky stab in, straight into her heart - a swing powered by the fierce need to protect Belaya and Juhani behind me.

Lashowe had always been stronger than me in the Force, and superior in duelling. That wasn’t the same as fighting for one’s life, it turned out.

I advanced on the Mandalorian, awkwardly striking out in a sweeping blow that the Mandalorian blocked with a sneer. The parry was solid and vibrated through my arm, and I staggered.

“Your balance is crap,” Canderous said. “I told you, you need to drop your off-hand.”

I scowled, but lowered the stump to my side. It ached.

“Use the Force to cloud the pain,” Juhani murmured from behind.

“No Force,” Canderous bit out. “We ain’t playing tricks here, we’re sparring.”

“It’s a passive use, Canderous, and Dak could do with a little slack,” Juhani countered. “And we Jedi fight with the Force – it is important we practice with it so it becomes instinctive to use.”

The Mandalorian grunted, but surprisingly let it slide.

The Force lightened my thoughts as I drew it in, dissolved the pain and the tiredness from my limbs, and even assuaged the bitterness that clouded my thoughts. It felt different since we’d left. I wasn’t sure if the Force on Korriban had a dark edge to it that was now lacking, or if it was due to the change of direction in my life.

Maybe it was a mixture of both.

I strode forward again, eyes narrowed in concentration as I made to stab him in the torso. I was too overt – his block back was fierce enough to unbalance me, and his riposte halted an inch from my neck.

“Again,” Canderous ordered, withdrawing. “Don’t look where you’re about to swing. It’s kriffing obvious.”

I glowered at him, but listened. Again. And again. Until I’d fallen on my arse three times, my forehead was beading with sweat, and the pain from my off-hand began to bleed into my connection with the Force. I figured if I showed enough determination – enough grit – then maybe the Mandalorian would leave me alone.

It would have been nice to land a frelling blow, though.

We stopped at the sound of a loud hiss from the other side of the room. The exercise had my chest heaving, and I knew I’d be feeling it the following day. I turned to see Jen Sahara standing over a smoking datapad, a rueful smile on her face.

“I didn’t sense anything,” Dustil muttered at her side. “What did you do?”

“I was trying to show you how to short the power in a machine, not fry it to bits. I thought my control was better,” Jen replied. She motioned towards the circular speaker mounted in the ceiling. “Good thing I didn’t try it on the ship’s circuits.”

“Jen,” Juhani cut in. She looked worried, and her ears had flattened against the side of her head. “That- that is not a good idea. I do not believe you understand the extent of your own power with
“Ionization?” Jen frowned.

“That’s creating electricity, isn’t it? Like, lightning?” I asked, flicking the off switch on the training ‘saber. This was the sort of conversation I enjoyed, the intricacies of the Force and its applications. Lashowe had been particularly strong with lightning. It would have hit Belaya hard. I could feel the scowl emerging on my face again.

“Not quite,” Juhani corrected. “Ionization is the working with electricity through machinery – droids, computers, electrical systems. Most Force users who have learned an affinity with this can disable systems, much as you have blown this datapad up.” Juhani hesitated, as if unsure of her next words. “Some can manipulate the electricity on a truly minute scale.”

Jen’s eyes had narrowed, as if in suspicion. “I opened the Embassy’s doors on Manaan. Opened the torture chamber in the Academy, too. Is that… is that uncommon, Juhani?”

“That’s what you did?” Dustil cut in. “That’s how you followed me in there?”

There was a heavy silence at his words. Jen nodded, seeming reluctant to speak further. I saw the twist of anger on Juhani’s face at Dustil’s admission of being there- in that torture room- where Belaya had spent her last days.

Apart from her final one. At least she’d lived that in freedom, and found Juhani at the end. We all had Jen Sahara to thank for that.

Jen had irritated me on Korriban with her obnoxiousness, but somewhere along the way my dislike for her had vanished. Maybe, it’d only been there in the first place because Juhani had followed her instead of me. Now – after all that had happened – it seemed more important that Juhani’s loyalty was to the right person.

Jen Sahara, the Jedi Knight onboard, was the one who’d found and turned Juhani back once before. That was good enough for me.

Dustil cleared his throat, staring down at the ground with his shoulders clenched. I wasn’t particularly good at sensing emotions through the Force, but the waves of shame rolling off him were plainly obvious. Then, an instant later, he vanished. Completely.

He appeared a second later, his face contorted in emotion, but he was now glaring at Jen. “You asked how I did this,” he muttered. As an obvious attempt to change the course of the conversation, it worked. I’d never seen anything like that before, and I could have sworn his psychic presence disappeared in the Force as well.

“Do that again,” I said, chucking the training ‘saber to the side of the room and focusing on the angry teenager. I heard the Mandalorian mutter something about party tricks, and then stomp out of the room. Dustil vanished again.

He was gone in the Force; as absent as his body was. I stretched my senses out, curious, but couldn’t pick up on anything.

“I knew he could do this,” Kel muttered, his brows lowering. He was a nice guy, Kel, but clearly didn’t trust Dustil. All of us were going to find it hard to leave Korriban’s lessons behind.

Dustil materialized, still looking awkward and ill-at-ease and avoiding everyone’s gaze.
“How is that possible?” Juhani asked. The dark emotion had disappeared from her face, which now wore nothing but an open curiosity. “You were simply – gone.”

“There’s a dead patch,” Jen Sahara said. “Dustil, don’t make yourself invisible this time. Just hide your Force signature, okay?”

I’d never heard it phrased that way before – labelling the energy all living beings radiated as a signature. Deep in meditation, you could feel the interconnected web of life. Everything, from the tiniest insect to the largest animal. Force sensitives glowed brightly, and some shone like stars.

Jen Sahara was one such. I wondered idly if she was stronger than Bastila Shan. I remembered meeting Bastila a few times on Dantooine – she’d been young, aloof and followed the Masters around like a shadow.

And, not for the first time, it made me speculate about what they’d been doing in a Sith Academy. Juhani had alluded to the importance of their mission - or whatever they wanted to call sneaking around frelling Korriban. So far, I’d refrained from grilling Juhani about the details, but it was getting increasingly difficult to bite back the questions.

Dustil stood in front of us, physically there but missing from the Force. It felt like he wore a neural disruptor around his neck. It felt like there was nothing but empty space.

“Can you sense it? The absence of Force?” Jen said. She actually sounded excited. “Dustil – disappear again? And walk around the room?”

With a nod, he obeyed her, and she turned to face us all. Her eyes were sharp with interest, and her mouth quirked with a smile. “Come on, guys – push your senses out. Who can feel it?”

All I could sense was us. Kel was shaking his head. Juhani, frowning, turned to motion towards the exit, but Jen sighed. “Nope,” she negated. She lifted a hand to point behind me, and Dustil rematerialized. He had a small smile on his face for the first time.

“How do you do that?” I demanded. Wouldn’t that have been useful on Korriban! I wondered, then, if Uthar had known about Dustil’s talent. *Of course he did. Dustil was his bootlicker.* Did Uthar teach Dustil how to disappear into thin air? I’d never seen any evidence of Uthar Wynn being able to sneak around invisible – but then, I’d never known Dustil could, either.

Kel had, though.

“Well, hiding in the Force is easy,” Dustil muttered, and once more he was no longer present in the Force, even as he stood in front of us, shoulders hunched awkwardly. He glanced up to Jen. “You just invert the Force around you, and keep it balanced. Kinda like holding magnets together on the wrong ends.”

Jen’s eyes narrowed. “I saw it, that time. Can you do it again?”

I hadn’t, and didn’t the next half-dozen times he repeated it. First I could sense the boy, and then not – like someone turning a light-switch on and off. The frustration on Kel’s face and puzzlement on Juhani’s showed they didn’t follow, either.

Jen, on the other hand, was grinning with mounting excitement as she attempted to emulate him. On her third try, she succeeded for about ten seconds.

It was all the more glaringly obvious with her. Even without trying, I could sense her aura. When she blocked herself out, it was like an inferno had suddenly been extinguished.
“Have you ever seen this before, Juhani?” Jen asked, as she tried again. I could feel her fumble with the Force under her command – again, her psychic presence winked out for a short time before the weaves unravelled. Despite concentrating on it, though, I couldn’t see how they managed to do it. It was like the Force just repelled around them.

“No, I am unfamiliar with this talent,” Juhani answered.

“Where did you learn this, Dustil?” I asked, stepping back to lean against the wall. I was tired, now, and the throbbing of my stump was growing harder to ignore.

There was an obvious look of discomfort on Dustil’s face before his expression steeled over. “I’m tired,” he said abruptly. “This is enough for me today.”

He turned and left the garage, as subtle as a ferracrete brick swung at a gizka.

“Guess I shouldn’t have asked,” I muttered, watching Jen throw Juhani an openly curious look.

We’ve all got our secrets. Sith secrets.

I wouldn’t question Dustil again. I understood too well about topics best left unsaid. “I’m done for the day, too.”

With a nod to the others, I followed Dustil out of the garage.

xXx

Jen Sahara / Ness Jonohl:

The days were falling into a set pattern that seemed to suit everyone. Eight hours kip, followed by a light breakfast and group Force exercises. Lunch followed, and then sparring with the Sithkids. Canderous joined, sometimes; insulting and obviously bored but willing to show Kel and Dustil a move or two without getting overly physical. Dak sat out, at first, until Canderous goaded him one too many times.

Then Dak sparred more than the others. One-armed and astoundingly unmatched, Dak seemed determined to adjust to his disability. Although he’d certainly get a prosthetic sooner or later, learning to guard oneself with a weakness was a useful exercise in itself.

Canderous didn’t show it, but I thought a grudging respect for Juhani’s old friend might be slowly growing. It was with me. My opinion of Dak Vesser had certainly changed from our first encounter.

Mission was conspicuously absent from the garage. I only saw her if I strayed from our set routine, or deliberately sought her out. Normally she was the light of the crew, interrupting everyone’s activities with a burst of enthusiasm or curiosity or both.

I didn’t know what, if anything, to do about that. It was a mess of Dustil’s own making, though, and eventually I concluded that he’d have to find the courage to face Mission himself.

Zaalbar hid out with Mission, mostly - when he wasn’t in the cargo hold organizing whatever Canderous had upended. We were running short on kolto, ration bars, stims and - according to Canderous - grenades. Zaalbar had used all available mesh strips and chromex plates fixing surplus armour, and we now had twice as many suits as people onboard. I had the distinct feeling that the Wookiee was trying to keep his mind occupied and away from our impending arrival on Kashyyyk… and off Bastila.

I could feel the guilt gnawing at him. He hadn’t appreciated me commenting on it, I knew; and even less so when I’d mentioned my own shame. For I harboured some, rightly or wrongly. I was bonded to Bastila – an uncannily strong Force bond, I’d worked that one out – and yet I hadn’t even realized
she’d been drugged and taken. The bitter recriminations would well up inside, and the Force would rally in self-anger before I managed to calm down and will it away.

Bastila was blank in my head; non-existent. I had no idea what was happening to her, and it should have been paramount in my mind.

It should have been the only thing I could think of, but it wasn’t.

My cursed head was occupied, instead, by thoughts of a much more carnal nature, and it was slowly driving me crazy.

He was damn well stalking me about the ship. Fortunately, between the Sithlings and the rest of the crew, I had plenty to keep me occupied, but I had the feeling it wouldn’t hold Carth at bay forever. *Just until Kashyyyk. Just until I get off this ship.*

It was ridiculous, really, because Carth was the stand-up sort of guy who would back off if I flat-out told him I wasn’t interested. The problem being, of course, that I *was.*

It had come as a bolt out of nowhere, an attraction that was sudden and shouldn’t be so strong simply because it *was* so sudden. Although… he’d always had me on edge, a little. On Tatooine, I’d never really known where I’d stood with him, and that had rankled. On Korriban, I’d felt driven to gain his good opinion. And since we’d first crashed on Taris, teasing him had always been more enjoyable than it should have been, by rights.

He was so, infuriatingly, *Republic military,* and I had a thing for pilots. At least, I thought I did. I felt like I did. My shot memory told me one man had loved me, once, but how deeply or long I didn’t know.

I couldn’t *remember* any damn thing of use. Was that why I was acting like a startled teenager?

My eyes closed. At another time, I’d be jumping right into bed with him. But now? Now, when he just had his son returned to him, and was probably feeling all sorts of emotional highs? Now, when my bond-sister was collared and inaccessible and likely being tortured while we desperately raced to save the galaxy-

I felt my breath catch. *Bastila.* I could still hear her lecturing me, in that prim and proper voice, about the dangers of emotional entanglements. When we had far more crucial topics of conversation, like our frelling bond, or Kylah, or Darth Revan, or the Star Maps. What I wouldn’t give for her to be safe, here, onboard the *Ebon Hawk.* She’d be a great buffer against Carth.

*And probably, if she were here, I’d throw myself at him,* I realized ruefully. How could I allow myself to enjoy something so natural when she was in the clutches of Darth Malak?

How could I even think about it, when I had a sodding dead Dark Lord bouncing around in my mind?

It was a rare quiet time in the ship, when we’d ended training for the day and I’d found myself too restless to turn in for the night. Kel was still up, practising combat forms in the garage with one of the training ‘sabers. He gave me a small, awkward smile as I came across him.

He’d make a good Jedi, I thought, but not a warrior. He was the weakest of the three both in combat and pure Force strength, but he was definitely the steadiest in temperament. And unlike Dak and Dustil, he was very easy to overlook and forget.

“And probably, if she were here, I’d throw myself at him,” I realized ruefully. How could I allow myself to enjoy something so natural when she was in the clutches of Darth Malak?

How could I even think about it, when I had a sodding dead Dark Lord bouncing around in my mind?

It was a rare quiet time in the ship, when we’d ended training for the day and I’d found myself too restless to turn in for the night. Kel was still up, practising combat forms in the garage with one of the training ‘sabers. He gave me a small, awkward smile as I came across him.

He’d make a good Jedi, I thought, but not a warrior. He was the weakest of the three both in combat and pure Force strength, but he was definitely the steadiest in temperament. And unlike Dak and Dustil, he was very easy to overlook and forget.

“That’s not the time, Carth. I’m just going to straighten this out and you can relax,” I told him, and he smiled again.

He was so damned good at that, and I had to admire him for it. As long as he didn’t invite too many people in, I could smile along with him. But there was that little something else, that drive I couldn’t quite talk about.

“Couldn’t sleep either, huh?” I murmured, and he ducked his head in acknowledgment. I grinned,
and raised my hand. One of the other training ‘sabers flew to my grasp.

I was taking the Force for granted, now, in simple and everyday ways. It was instinctive and natural, and I wondered if it’d been like that before.

“Shall we?” I offered, inclining my head.

He was about to answer when the hatch swished open.

“Jen,” came a voice from the doorway. I turned to see Carth entering with a decidedly tenacious look on his face. A stab of uncertainty spiked through my belly, and I struggled to steel myself. “Can we talk?”

“Sure,” I said brightly, falsely. I motioned for him to speak, and he frowned.

“Privately, I mean,” Carth countered in a low tone.

“You can speak here,” I said tightly. I could feel my damn cheeks flushing again, and inwardly cursed myself. “We’re all part of the same team, Carth. There’s nothing you can’t say in front of…” and my mind went completely blank. Flustered and unbalanced, I shot my training partner a helpless glance.

“Kel,” Kel prompted helpfully.

“I knew that,” I snapped, scowling.

“Nothing I can’t say in front of someone who not long ago was training to be a Dark Jedi?” Carth shot back, frowning. He glanced at Kel briefly. “No offense.”

The tension in the room mounted, and Kel shifted uncomfortably. “Er, I’ll just go-”

“No!” I said loudly, and winced when I heard the desperation in my own voice. I couldn’t even explain to myself why I felt so unbalanced. “It’s fine! Everything’s fine! Look, Carth, it’s not like anything has ever happened between us so there’s nothing to talk about!”

“Oh, is that so?” Carth murmured, and his eyes narrowed dangerously. “Well in that case-” And he stalked into the room. I froze as my fight or flight instinct completely evaporated. Suddenly, he was in front of me, and his arm raised to snake around my neck, and before I knew it he was kissing me soundly-

His lips were firm and warm and his arms were tight around me. The solid warmth of his body pressed against me, and his hand was in my hair, holding me against him. I felt stunned, aroused, and my lips parted beneath his. There was a clatter as the deactivated training ‘saber fell uselessly to the ground.

Too soon, he pulled back, dark eyes burning hotly into mine. “So, can we talk now?”


He raised one eyebrow, an insufferably smug, male expression on his face. “Still not, huh?” and his hand gently tugged me back to his mouth. My own raised to clasp his shoulders, and I felt myself melt against him, a wholly undignified, wanton response that was as uncontrolled as the Force itself at times.
When he raised his head once more, I could hear my breathing, fast and shallow. An uncertain desire was burning like I’d shot back a glass of Corellian whiskey, and Carth looked altogether far too pleased with himself.

I blinked. “Are you… are you kissing me out of gratitude?” I whispered. “Because of Dustil?”

Brows lowering dangerously, Carth stared at me in disbelief. “No,” he said flatly. “Are you kissing me out of gratitude? Because I saved your life?”

A surprised laugh escaped my lips, and I felt myself flush. Again. “No.”

He smiled. “Good. I’m glad we got that sorted then,” he murmured, and moved forward again but I was stepping backwards, now, strangely skittish and uncertain.

“This, this isn’t a good idea,” I muttered. The wall was cool at my back. “Damn it, Carth, what the frell is this?”

Carth raised his eyebrows, as if in surprise at my question. The side of his mouth quirked. “Well, when a man likes a woman-”

“Oh shut it,” I interrupted. He chuckled, moving closer to me. “Carth, I’m serious. This isn’t a good idea.”

“You’ve already mentioned that,” he murmured, reaching to clasp my hand with one of his. His thumb drew light circles on my skin. “Are you saying you’re not interested, Jen? Because I’m not sure I’ll believe you if you do.”

“I’m saying this is a bad idea.” I countered, squeezing my eyes shut. “Look, there’s the Star Map – our mission – Bastila – a thousand reasons why we shouldn’t be doing this.”

“Well, I’ll admit the timing could be better,” he conceded. He dropped my hand to cradle the side of my face. I kept my eyes closed, enjoying the brush of his fingertips against my cheek. “But we have no idea what’s going to happen when we get to Kashyyyk and check in with your Master. We can’t do anything about Bastila until then. You’re not exactly giving me a reason to stop, here.”

I snapped my eyes open. He was close enough to feel the warmth of his breath. His eyes pinned me with burning intensity. It was tempting, and I wanted to fall.

“Dustil,” I said quietly. Carth blinked, and his expression dimmed. That’s a hit, I thought, and felt disappointed. “I don’t think he’d take the thought of you with another woman well.”

Carth sighed, and his fingers stilled against my skin. “I don’t know my own son well enough to predict how he’d react. But then, I wasn’t exactly planning on broadcasting anything.”

I quirked an eyebrow. “Carth. You just snogged me in front of a Sithkid.”

There was the faintest colour on his face, even if his mouth did curve into another smile. I liked his smiles, I realized. “Dammit, woman, you asked for that one,” he growled softly, and I chuckled.

“Kel will probably keep quiet,” I conceded. I hadn’t seen him leave, but I could guess it was pretty damn quick. He struck me as the discrete sort. “And he’s not exactly best chums with Dustil, anyway.”

“Jen,” Carth said softly. “To answer your earlier question – I don’t know what this is. But I do know I’d like to find out.”
So would I. The thought was irresponsible, and yet so very compelling. And a strong part of me felt like I deserved some happiness for a change.

He leaned forward, and kissed me again – but lighter, this time. Sweet and soft and tantalising, before pulling back.

“One of the perks of being the pilot is having my own quarters,” he murmured. “If you want to find out also, then you know where to find me.” He smiled, and then stepped away before quietly leaving the garage.

I leaned back against the bulkhead, my eyes closing. My lips were tingling, and I felt a sort of buzzing anticipation that made me want to grin stupidly and dig my toes into the ground. *This is insane. Bastila would not approve. Stars, would any Force-user approve?*

And yet, I already knew what my decision was going to be.

xXx

**Nisotsa Organa:**

My fingers tapped against the powered-down navicomputer, and I scowled. I’d docked on the *Leviathan* near an hour ago, and should have disembarked by now.

But frakk them. Frakk Lieutenant Delia and frakk Admiral Karath and frakk that junior officer whatever-his-name-was who’d signalled me when my shuttle had entered the *Leviathan’s* docking bay.

I was Nisotsa Organa, a general of the Mandalorian Wars and one of the most powerful Dark Jedi alive. To be greeted by an underling and commanded to make my way to sleeping quarters was more than just galling. Karath should have been the one to contact me – him or his stuttering second Delia. But, once more, I was overlooked and my authority diminished.

It was familiar, now; this growing resentment and bitterness towards my allies. It was part of the reason I’d supported Malak's play for power, even if Arran had royally farkled it.

In the past - the dead, glorious past - Revan had occasionally deferred to Malak. She'd listened to Yudan, she'd respected Talvon, and she'd empowered Meetra to lead when she wasn't present.

I’d had just as much damn battle experience as all of them, and I’d been shunted into Recruitment and Intelligence. Even if I was surprisingly good at it, I’d never held the same standing or respect. When the holonews spoke of the Jedi Thirteen, they mentioned Revan Freeflight and Malak Devari and Yudan Rosh and Meetra Surik and Talvon Esan… they never mentioned Nisotsa Organa.

Malak had promised me it’d be different, *he* would be different, as the Dark Lord of the Sith.

He wasn’t.

That obnoxious Bandon and that simpering newcomer Kylah held more sway with Malak and Karath, and even with the likes of that nutbar Uthar Wynn. Yudan Rosh commanded more authority, and *his* backbone had been snapped when Darth Revan had finally bedded him.

Even Meetra Surik used to receive more acknowledgement than me, and she’d been the quietest of us all. It was galling, bloody galling, after all my history to be discounted this way, time and time again.
I had my strengths, I wasn’t in-your-face overt like Kylah and Bandon, no, I had the patience to wait for the opportune time, and strike when necessary. Yet it always seemed to be the brash, reckless ones who came out on top – no matter what they risked to get there.

It was as if all my life I’d been waiting for the next event to come along and improve my situation. Joining the Jedi would make my life great. Following Revan to fight the Mandalorians promised adventure and justice. Joining Revan’s quest to conquer the galaxy meant being a crucial part of a new empire that would outlast our lifetimes. Agreeing to Malak and Arran’s Deralian ambush promised true recognition from a new leader of the Sith. Bowing to Malak’s second betrayal promised the same and, finally, an end to Revan Freeflight - who’d been the cornerstone for too many crucial decisions in my life.

I’d agreed out of terror more than anything, though. Sometimes, I still remembered what Malak’s face looked like.

... 

The fear sat in my gut like cold, cold sick. My fists clenched and unclenched and clenched again. The trap... the trap had failed.

Arran Da'klor was butchered, along with his team of crack Dark Jedi. Our Deralian ambush had been upended and squashed like a bug. And my cousin wasn't answering her damn comm-link.

I'd sent the lame-brained twit away weeks ago. I hadn't wanted her anywhere near Deralia, not if things had a chance of going balls-up - and, against Revan, I didn't dare rule anything out. Neiza had vowed to stay away - but she was also a love-struck imbecile when it came to Arran Da'klor-

Neiza promised. She swore me fealty, and promised to stay away from Arran until I gave her leave to return. She's just shite at replying to holo-comms.

My inner voice was as convincing as a Mandalorian waving a peace offering.

I was scared. No bones about it. Scared my cousin had thwarted my command, scared she had fallen next to Arran, scared... scared for my own, damned, skin.

Revan lived. I had turned on her, and she still lived. Worse than that - she had eviscerated Malak's allies, she'd taken over the Deralian capital, and she was still the Dark Lord of Sith.

I'd heard Revan had set up torture camps in one of the Deralian communes, a'la Talvon Esan style à€“ our insane cohort she’d cut down herself for being too debased.

Oh, Revan was pissed. Righteously, planet-bendingly pissed.

Malak lay comatose, face mutilated, in the infirmary. I’d not seen him yet, only heard the reports. Revan and Malak had injured each other before, but not like this. I’d heard she’d sliced his jaw off with her gods-cursed lightsaber while he begged for mercy.

My fingers clenched again. Bandon, unearthing a self-preservation most unlike him, had scarpered to the Lannik system, one of our key outposts that Intelligence suggested the Republic would soon attack. I didn’t think Bandon or myself were implicated yet – Arran must have kept quiet on the details at least – but Revan had gone after Malak. If she knew Malak was part of it, and he was still alive...

Malak was currently helpless, drugged in the infirmary, awaiting parts for a voice modulator and facial reconstruction. Revan might come back at any moment and pick the details of the disastrous
betrayal out of his comatose brain. I could kill him right now-

The noise of the command centre’s entry hatch opening had me turning in surprise. I’d ordered isolation; I wasn’t in the mood to face anyone just yet, and the Invictus was idly orbiting around Deralia with no clear objective for now. I needed time to consider my options.

The figure in the doorway was truly macabre. Dressed in the medical white of a patient, half his face was a gaping black maw of cauterized flesh. His eyes were yellow and dead.

He’d never eat food again, I realized dumbly. He’d never kiss Revan again.

And then the ominous pulsing of pure Dark Force around him hit me; I’d been rattled and panicked, but I should have sensed him well before he entered the command room. It went beyond strong and into titanic. The air in the room held an unsteady charge to it and it was crackling around him. He shouldn’t be up, he shouldn’t be able to be up. It was as if the pure strength of his fury alone kept him going.

He walked towards me, step by step, and I struggled against the driving need to flee. I drew deep in the Force, but it was a pathetic, shallow strength compared to the almighty hurricane that blistered around him. There was a shimmering in his aura, as if light itself was bending away from the infernal vortex that was Darth Malak.

He faced me now, and a large hand thumped onto my shoulder. I flinched despite myself, and the stench of open flesh hit my nostrils.

Don’t look, Nisota. But I did. It was black and red and hideous and I couldn’t understand how he was alive let alone moving-

Malak had always been strong enough to frighten and impress, but I didn’t think I’d felt this level of power before.

Passion fuels the Force. And you have no idea how… passionate I am feeling.

And I’d never heard Malak’s voice in my head before. Both he and Revan tended to focus on other areas than mental manipulation. Of course, it still paid to guard one’s thoughts around them, for Dark Jedi that powerful could pick up overt emotions or desires without breaking a sweat. I swallowed convulsively, and his fingers tightened into my flesh.

“Malak, you should be in bed,” I whispered hoarsely, not daring to move. I’d just been considering killing him, and here he was, standing in front of me and wielding enough power to flatten a city.

My eyes kept drawing back to that hideous wound. There were black strings of dead flesh hanging from it. It looked like it went back as far as his spinal cord.

You thought about killing me because you fear Revan’s reprisal. I will have to educate you that my reprisal is the more fearsome. But we will overlook that for now, and I may be merciful depending on your usefulness, Nisota. For there is another matter to attend to.

My thoughts froze. I’d have to prove my loyalty, I realized in mounting horror. I was loyal to Malak, but I didn’t want to die, either – by his hand or Revan’s. He wouldn’t kill me for this thought, I was too useful – but Revan might, should she find out who else was involved on Deralia. And that meant-

“Revan,” I mouthed the word only. We were down a dozen Dark Jedi, Arran Da’klor, and Malak’s jaw. We were in no shape to attack Revan, again. And she knows Malak betrayed her, so she’ll be watching us if she’s not already on her way to kill us-
No. No, she won’t. She truly believes in my devotion, still. She doesn’t think I had anything to do with Arran’s ambush. His mental voice was arctic. She sliced off my jaw because the other Sith leaders believe me implicated, and she couldn’t afford to appear weak.

It took a moment to process that, and I sensed it as the root of Malak’s unholy dark rage. He’d already tried to kill her, but his end-goal had been leadership of the Sith and galactic control. Now, I had the uncanny feeling that Malak would damn himself and everything in the galaxy to see Revan’s end. Because she’d mutilated him for the sake of her own standing amongst the Sith.

It would have been more understandable if she’d done it believing in his guilt.

Malak valued me and my skills, even if there was a fair amount of groveling in my immediate future. And there was no way I could entertain the thought of standing against the tornado of barely contained dark energy right in front of me.

“How?” I clasped my hands together to stop them clenching again.

I’ve broadcast a holo-feed of Deralian atrocities Revan has committed to a nearby Republic Fleet. She won’t be expecting reinforcements yet – the HoloNet blackout still holds as far as her intelligence is concerned.

Information was power, and I knew that better than anyone. Reading the patterns of data and predicting sentient reactions was one of my strengths. My team of security analysts were second-to-none, with not a single Force-user amongst them.

Not everything was about sheer power. Controlling media coverage was crucial to any war or strategy. The opinions of the masses could sway governments, if massaged correctly.

“How many ships? Who is in command?” I asked.

The sickly yellow of his eyes gleamed in the halogen light. They were the same colour as mine, the common Sith-turned colour. Eighty percent of Dark Force users ended up with that shade.

It was a useless statistic I knew. I’d spent some time, once, trying to find meaning in it. Why had Revan and Bandon’s turned black as space? Uthar Wynn on Korriban, that new Headmaster who’d been there for all of three months, had white. Alaki’s turned a blood red before Bandon had shoved his ‘saber through his gut. But near everyone else I knew had gone yellow.

It’s a small enough fleet to be insignificant, were it not for the two Jedi Masters onboard. He paused as I absorbed the shock. And Padawan Bastila Shan.

My eyes widened. Now there was a prize Revan and Malak had been dying to get a hold of. The only flip card left in the Republic’s pazaak deck, their shining padawan with a newly discovered gift everyone had thought long buried with Nomi Sunrider.

How had Malak discovered this? How had he transmitted a message when Revan had ordered all communications blocked?

I have taken command of your team, Nisotsa, and now I have new orders for you.

I swallowed the injustice of that, reminding myself that Malak, more than anyone else, appreciated my talents and what I could offer the Sith. I kept my gaze fixed on his, and did not drop it.

“What are they, Master?” Master. The acknowledgment had his eyes crease slightly in satisfaction.
Revan is on the Nexus, overconfident and still furious enough that she is not thinking clearly.

I hadn’t heard that. Most of our armada in this sector was grounded on Deralia, along with the troops.

I need your team to hack into the Nexus’ systems and override the sensors so they don’t see anything approaching.

His dead gaze never wavered from mine. His power still pulsed, buffeting against my aura, strong enough to slam a dizzying nausea into my senses.

I need a message sent to the Republic ships about Revan’s current location, and the scarcity of her defences. Forge it from a deserter, or something tempting enough to lure Jedi Masters Kester and Jai’lel to the Nexus. This is their chance to face down Revan. If we’re lucky, they might even drag Bastila Shan along.

“And us?” I whispered. We were orbiting Deralia, too, on the Destroyer Invictus. It was as powerful as Revan’s flagship, the Nexus, and only marginally slower.

The Invictus has been outfitted with the experimental cloaking technology I have been creating on the Star Forge. It’s time to see if it works. He paused briefly, and his heavy hand clenched on my shoulder. I felt the bones grinding together, and bit back a wince. If the Jedi don’t finish Revan, then the Invictus will.

…

It had worked, or so we’d thought. Bastila Shan’s survival had been irritating, but a minor concession when compared to the end of Darth Revan. Malak had assumed the mantle of Dark Lord, and moved our forces away from the insignificant planet of Deralia and towards the Lannik system, where a mighty battle was brewing.

We’d lost that one, but not before destroying its resources. And we’d won near everything since.

Over time, though, my authority had once more withered. I’d lost command of the Invictus, I’d lost my Intelligence portfolio, and all that remained was floating by after Malak’s victories, and picking up whatever Force sensitives I could find in his wake to shunt them towards Korriban.

Things were worse, not better. Every time I tried to change my cursed life, things ended up worse.

And Revan was still alive, damn her black soul.

A light blinked on my wrist-comm, and I looked down. An incoming message through my private channel that required a blood-print to activate. My eyes narrowed. There were only a few who held the hexi-codes for that channel.

I activated the delayed transmission, feeling a surge of antipathy as a small holo-image of Kylah Aramai illuminated above my wrist. Last I’d heard, that shameless schutta had fled Manaan after completely failing to capture Bastila Shan.

::Nisotsa,:: the holo-image purred, flicking her dark tresses over one shoulder. The fact so much glossy hair remained on her head should have been a shout-out to her weakness. No true Dark Master kept a head of hair that complete. ::You should be onboard the Leviathan by now. Our Master has decided that more… authority is required there, so I shall be joining you soon.::
She smirked, and my fingernails dug deep into the palms of my Sith-white hands. Kylah Aramai was only so highly ranked because she liked to frakk with people’s minds and suck Malak’s cock. She was a cowardly worm who should have been beneath me.

But… she knew Malak had ordered me to the Leviathan. She was with Malak, despite her failure on Manaan. Something had transpired, it seemed.

The eyes in the recording narrowed. ::Ensure that Admiral Karath is on his way to Kashyyyk, and transmit a message to Bandon. Our Master is quite prepared to destroy Kashyyyk if Bandon is unable to find the Star Map or capture that walking ghost.::

Bandon was pissing about on Kashyyyk, waiting to ambush Jen Sahara. I’d assumed he’d have more success that Kylah Arama.

Maybe I was wrong.

::I have my prize.:: Kylah whispered, her lips curving in smug pretension. ::Lord Malak has promised I could be the one to wake her, so it will be a few days before I leave for the Leviathan.:: Her simper grew to a full-blown grin of pleasure. ::Expect me soon, Nisotsa. Then if Bandon screws his mission up, we’ll finish it.:: An eyebrow quirked. ::Even if he’s still on Kashyyyk.::

The image winked out, and I sat back, momentarily stunned.

Kylah had captured Bastila Shan. After all this time, Malak finally had his hands on the battle meditation princess of the Jedi. Surely, nothing could stop the Sith now, not even a broken fragment of the old Dark Lord.

Surely that meant, somehow, I could gain a modicum of power back. It was galling to be considered beneath Kylah Aramai, but I preferred her to that obnoxious prick Bandon.

Yudan Rosh is on Kashyyyk, too. We were old friends, and I felt conflicted over the thought of his demise – but, if Bandon and Yudan were both gone, then I could wrest control of Yudan’s Fleet. Kylah would step up as Malak’s first apprentice – I’d have to bite back the revulsion - but I’d happily do that if it meant leading battles again, stepping up once more as a war general.

My fingers clenched again as my thoughts raced. This might be a turning point that actually worked out for me. I felt my jaw firm, and slowly made to move out of the pilot’s chair.

It was time to disembark, and find Admiral Karath.

xXx

**Mission Vao:**

I poked moodily at the grey slush in the plasteel bowl. At least on Taris we’d get cast-off meat from the Upper City. This synthesizer slop was getting old. Canderous’d made sure the machine was well-stocked before we’d left that horrid Sith planet, but I wish he’d scored some real food, too.

We weren’t far from Kashyyyk now, though. I brightened. Big Z liked to eat all sorts of weird stuff – but the key thing was he liked to eat. Wookiees were big on food.

I looked over to Jen, who was seated across from me. They’d finished training for the day, congregating into the common room around the centre table. I’d conned Kel into a pazaak game, even if he hadn’t any credits to wager – but it wasn’t long before he’d begged off and followed Dak to the men’s quarters.
Jen was staring down into her dinner with a funny look on her face. I gave her a small kick under the table.

She blinked, jerking her head up.

“What’s up?” I asked. “You look a million klicks away.”

She blushed. She actually blushed. That was weird, even for Jen. “Uh, nothing,” she muttered, looking away. “Just thinking about training.”

“Far out, that’s all you ever do these days,” I complained. It was boring. And I would have stayed to watch, out of curiosity if nothing else, but that stupid Hutt-slime was there. I never saw him in the common room, though, getting food with the others. I reckoned he was avoiding me as much as I was him. Cowardly little sneak. I can’t believe he’s Carth’s son.

Jen was grinning at me. “You could join in, you know. Canderous is there sometimes, teaching basic sparring. Wouldn’t hurt for you to learn a few moves.”

I wrinkled my nose. “Uh uh, no way.” I’d rather play pazaak by myself. Sheesh, I’d rather help Zaalbar clean out the ‘fresher. I was a bit surprised Canderous was there, though. He’d made his opinion of the ex-Sith students pretty clear. Although he’s always liked to hang out with Jen.

That thought made me look at her suspiciously, but she’d gone back to staring at her mush. *Come to think of it, I didn’t see Jen come in to sleep last night.* Whoa. Maybe there was something to it. Jen had been pretty quick to deny it, back on Korriban – but then I’d kinda put her on the spot.

I grinned. “So, Jen, did ya sleep well last night?”

Her head jerked up, her eyes widening as she stared at me. One eyebrow raised. “Yes, I did thanks, Mission. How about you?”

I might have believed her neutral voice, were it not for the rather obvious blush on her face. Again. *Jen and Canderous! That’s hilarious!* Her eyes narrowed as she looked me up and down, and I knew I was smirking at her.

Juhani cleared her throat from the other side of the table. I glanced over at her – she had a solemn look on her face. “It is less than two days until we reach Kashyyyk. Have you sensed anything, Jen?”


I frowned, staring down. I’d never got along with Bastila, but that didn’t mean I didn’t wish she was still here. Big Z felt wretched about it, and barely said a word to me these days – except the time he’d spilled his guts about his home.

And wasn’t that a surprise. I’d known there were secrets in Big Z’s past, I’d known he was running from something – but he was, like, royalty. Royalty that was exiled, though. *His dumb brother and father kicked him out, remember?* It sounded worse that Griff leaving me behind on Taris. At least I’d had the Beks, sort of, to look after me. Zaalbar hadn’t had anyone, and he’d been completely out of his depth when I’d run into him on Taris.

I’d planned to look around Kashyyyk when we landed, but now I thought maybe I should stay behind, and keep an eye on Big Z. I’d never seen him so depressed. Not just about returning to his home – but also because of Bastila.
But it wasn’t his fault, not really! The stupid Force was the problem, when it let bad people stuff your mind up or turn invisible while they made threats behind you-

I scowled, and stabbed my spoon into the plasteel bowl.

Juhani sighed. “I was hoping we might have some information for her Master when we landed.”

Jen placed her spoon down in a deliberate action, her eyes narrowing. “Master,” she said flatly. “Bastila’s Master?”


Jen’s eyes widened, and she appeared visibly shaken. “Oh… oh, kath crap. I did not realize that.”

“Whoa,” I said. “The guy we’re meeting on Kashyyyk? Guess he ain’t gonna be too happy, huh?”

Jen snorted, but she’d dropped her head into her hands. “That’s one way of putting it.” Her voice was muffled. “Do you know this guy, Juhani? What’s he like?”

“I do,” Juhani said quietly. “He is strict but fair. Some might consider him unapproachable, but he is also held as one of Dantooine’s greatest Masters.”

“Huh. Well, if he’s that great, maybe he’ll have the last Map,” Jen muttered. She raised her head to stare at Juhani. “And we can go straight to the rescuing Bastila part.”

“But what about wherever these Map things point to?” I asked. “Aren’t we going after that?”

“We can’t make any plans until we find out where we’re at with the Star Maps,” Jen said. “And talk to Vrook Lamar.” Her mouth twisted. “Which is going to be even more fun than I realized.”

“I guess I’ll stay on the ship with Big Z,” I said slowly, wrinkling my nose. “Are y’all gonna go meet this guy, then?”

“Yeah, except Canderous. I’ll send him out shopping again.” Jen grinned. “We need an alternator to repair HK. Zaalbar managed to affix his arm and head together, but his power core is completely shot. Here’s hoping Czerka has parts that’ll work.”

I didn’t like that droid, even if I could admit he’d been useful on Korriban. Still, he acted all evil. Whoever had programmed him was seriously unhinged.

“Hey, maybe Teethree could re-program HK when he’s fixed!” I blurted out. “He might be able to, like, turn that insane robot into something with manners.”

Jen laughed in delight. “That’s an interesting idea. Not entirely sure Teethree would be up to it.”

“Hey, Teethree’s pretty well-specced for an astromech,” I retorted. “Y’know, he’s got some pretty advanced hacking abilities. And come on, it’d be nice if we could stop HK calling us meatbags all the time.”

“I dunno,” she murmured. “Some of his nicknames are amusing.” She was looking beyond me, her lips twitching, and I turned to see Carth enter the common room.

“You’re going to fix psycho-droid,” he said, his voice flat as he crossed his arms and glowered at Jen. “Do you have any idea how close I’ve been to throwing him out the airlock?”
“Come on, Carth, you’ve got to admit HK’s pretty useful.”

“I’m not admitting anything, sister,” he grumbled. “Except that I think we’d all be better off without that thing.”

Jen was full out grinning, her eyes dancing with mischief. “Guess I’ll have to convince you otherwise.”

I yawned, then, loud and obvious in the room. “Oops,” I said, a little sheepishly. “Guess that’s my cue for bed. You guys coming?”

“I shall,” Juhani assented, standing and heading over to the kitchenette to return her bowl. “I find with all this training I require more rest than usual.”

“I’ll be along soon,” Jen muttered, staring at her bowl again. “Might eat some more first.”

“Yuck,” I commented. “Not the sort of thing I have seconds of. Oh well, it’s your stomach.” I shot her a grin as I stood, but she was still looking down. I shrugged to myself and wandered away, throwing a carefree goodnight over my shoulder as I did so.

xXx

Atris Surik:

The dark skin and pointed horns of my oldest friend slowly faded from the holo-screen, as did my forced, fake smile.

The anger, the outright fury and utter disgust I had been concealing during our conversation surged to the forefront, and I heard the snarl as it ripped from my lungs.

_Ice queen. Unemotional scow. Nothing ever touches her, that frigid Echani robot._

Oh, if they could see me now-!

Through a rage-filled gaze, my hand swept violently across the poraclay desk, knocking over a ferracrystal jug and a half dozen techJournals detailing plans for the Telos restoration.

There was a shattering noise as the water jug fell to the ground and exploded into a thousand sparkly pieces.

_There is no emotion, Atris, _I counselled myself, even as my teeth clenched. I breathed in a shaky breath. _There is peace. And there is a way forward._

But I could not believe what they had done.

Oh, but perhaps I could. Because hadn’t the Dantooine Council _always_ thought themselves a special exception to the rules and laws that governed all sentients?

Had they learned _nothing_ from Ulic Qel-Droma? He was Dantooine's child, Dantooine's failure, and yet they allowed him freedom after his crimes against life. Force, they'd sanctioned his exile: escape from Republic justice and all the violence he had enacted under Exar Kun's banner.

It mattered not that he was Force-blind and miserable, after Nomi did whatever she did and could no longer recall – No. What mattered was that he escaped his trial.

I believed in redemption, oh yes, but I also believed in _justice_. And those idealistic fools on
Dantooine never owned up to just how much damage Ulic's freedom cost the Jedi Order. The bitterness of Exar Kun and Ulic Qel-Droma's fall was bad enough, but that could have been mitigated if only we'd turned Ulic over to the Republic Senate after Kun's defeat.

Exar Kun had met his justice with death. And while Ulic's last-minute aid may have helped in Kun's defeat, it certainly did not undo all the damage he had wrought, all the lives he had taken. Ulic had walked free, with the aid of the Dantooine Masters. And for decades, now, that had damaged relations between the Jedi Order and the Republic.

For, after all, how many people out there had lost a loved one, due to Ulic Qel-Droma?

How many, due to Revan Freeflight and Malak Devari?

The righteous anger was building again. How dare the Dantooine Council claim ownership of Revan’s soul, and hide this from the High Council? Revan Freeflight belonged to the Coruscanti Enclave, the same as Malak Devari. A transfer three weeks prior to her flight to the Mandalorian Wars did not suddenly turn her into Dantooine’s responsibility. But Karon Enova and Zhar Lestin had never let go of their childhood ties with that Outer Rim rock, oh no, so it was not surprising that they both transferred shortly afterwards as well.

I found myself pacing, boots crunching over shards of ferracrystal as my thoughts seethed with discontent. Which Master had thought up this crackpot plan? Was it possible my old friend Quatra had some of this wrong? Quatra and I had known each other for years, and despite being from different enclaves, we remained close. I knew Quatra had been shaken after her apprentice’s betrayal, it was true, and now that her apprentice was crawling back to her perhaps the Zabrak’s mind was scattered and easily influenced by whispers and rumours.

But, no. Quatra was highly intelligent and logical, with an admirable ability to detach herself from emotional situations. Usually, I reminded myself. For I’d never seen her as flustered as just now. She had only put up a token protest at my digs for information. It had not taken much pressure to unravel all the sordid details. The secret mission. The Star Maps. Revan.

This would not have been Vrook’s brainchild. He disapproved of Revan and Malak as much as I. I could still recall the day I’d come across my favourite student, Dajineer, in a fistfight of all things with Malak Devari. Whilst Revan stood back, an Echani blade at her side, laughing at the two of them forsaking the Jedi Code and making idiots of themselves. They were supposed to be learning the art of duelling from the Echani, not rolling on the floor like common Mandalorians.

But I had other reasons to detest Revan. Other, private, familial, reasons. Yet it is not my personal issues that will guide my hand here. No, it was justice, plain and simple. For I knew what the Dantooine Council would do, should their insane plan actually work. They would squirrel away a quiet, redeemed Revan Freeflight somewhere, to live a quiet, redeemed life. Force, they’d do the same with Malak Devari if possible. All without thinking of the consequences, should someone on the Senate discover their existence. What idiotic Master actually thought this was a good idea?

It was that fat fool, Galdea, I swear. He always liked flouncing about with his mental tricks. And what about Dantooine’s shining Master-in-waiting, Vima Sunrider? If there was one Jedi who firmly believed in redemption at the cost of justice, it would be her.

My eyes closed as I recalled the last Senate meeting I had been invited to. I’d been spoken over by Senator Akku. Seated at the back like a petitioner. Ignored by Chancellor Nevex, and he owed the Order a favour.

It was inescapable. The Jedi Order did not have the influence we once enjoyed. We were meant to
be the guardians of the galaxy, the upholders of peace and light, but we could not do our work without the Senate's backing.

After Exar Kun, after Ulic Qel-Droma, after Revan Freeflight and Malak Devari, there were many on the Senate who believed the galaxy would be a better place without the Jedi. On some level, I could understand why they thought that way. There were enough senators whose lives had been personally touched by darkness inflicted from one of those villains.

Villains that had all been nurtured and trained by the Jedi Order.

It wasn’t the plan I had so much an issue with as the secrecy. For this war was being waged against the Republic. That the Senate hadn’t been informed of all the particulars was the height of insanity. How could Dantooine not comprehend the magnitude of the fallout if Revan’s existence was discovered? Or worse, if she regained her Dark strength - and it became known that the Order had captured her and let her loose?

No, the only way forward was damage mitigation.

And if all we needed now was the fourth Map on Kashyyyk, then there was no reason Republic forces couldn’t pick up Jen Sahara before she left that tree-infested place.

There was no reason she couldn’t be sent off to face trial and justice while the Republic Forces dealt with whatever threat the Maps led to.

From here, I did not believe it was for the Jedi Order to choose the way forward. I walked back to my desk slowly, making a mental note to send Brianna in to clean the mess on the floor. With a heavy sigh and an inward curse directed at the surviving Lestin and Sunrider, I turned to my console and opened a communication channel to the Senate.

xXx

Bastila Shan:

Consciousness came with a lurch, and it took no more than one fleeting second before I dearly wished myself once more comatose.

They had woken me, earlier. Sith medics running mandatory health checks while I was collared and restrained. The confusion and horror of being captured and away from the Ebon Hawk had been all-encompassing. I had prayed it was naught but a nightmare. I had screamed in fear. I had struggled uselessly against unyielding restraints and the terror of a neural disruptor.

The clinical, emotionless medics put me back under when my hysteria became uncontrolled.

The same helpless, overwhelmed feeling was back, but I did not think it would allow me an escape this time. Not from the two who leaned over me.

“My pet,” Darth Malak breathed, a gloved hand caressing Kylah Aramai’s cheek. “You did so well, my lovely.”

Kylah… my old friend whom I’d known for so many years. Her brown eyes were yellow, now. Her very existence explained Master Galdea’s death… the death of all those onboard the Endar Spire.

How did she capture me? How is it I am here? How is it fair that Kylah Aramai is alive in this cursed galaxy?
I stared, morbidly transfixed, as Malak’s face lowered down to his apprentice, for all the galaxy appearing as if he were to kiss her. *Half his face is metal!* I heard a low thrumming noise, and with a jolt realized he was laughing.

He turned to face me, dead eyes trailing down my body. *I will survive this. I have survived indignities before and been all the stronger for it.* Flashes of being helpless on Taris raced through my mind, but all the while I knew… that was a cakewalk compared to what was in store for me here.

I blinked, and Malak’s face was next to mine. Years ago, he had had a thick crop of dark hair over a handsome face. Now, shadowed tattoos inked over a shining scalp, and his skin was mottled and pale. Black markings pitted what was visible of his cheeks. The bottom half of his jaw and throat had been replaced with a metal alloy that wrapped around to underneath both ears. My gaze, despite myself, remained transfixed on the mechanical part of his face.

I shuddered.

“We are going to have such fun together, Bastila Shan,” Malak murmured in his modulated voice. It still managed to sound taunting. “Do you know how I lost my jaw, little one?”

I did not, nor did I wish to. It was a recent injury, just before his betrayal of Revan, but that was all the galaxy knew.

“I’m going to give you assignments, little one,” Malak continued on, still in that soft mocking tone. “Every time you pass I’ll let you have a rest. Every time you fail I’ll give you a taste of our interrogation methods. Revan will know some of them, but it was always my pet hobby. I’m sure you’ll enjoy experiencing some of my more inventive techniques, dear Bastila.”

The sound of my breathing, harsh and uneven, reached my ears. “I do not know what you want, Malak! But torturing me serves no purpose as there is nothing much of value that I can impart!” The words tumbled out, tripping over my tongue, nothing more than fruitless pleas of the desperate.

Kylah laughed, a high and tinkling sound, as she stepped forward next to her master. “Oh Bastila you silly gizka, it’s not about you. I guess you expect it, after all these years of everyone fawning over your Battle Meditation.”

I stared at her, disbelieving. *Jealousy*, a little voice in my mind whispered, storing this nugget of information away. Kylah Aramai had been one of the few Jedi my age that I had called friend. To think that all this time, she had resented my talent… despite her superior position as a Jedi Knight…

The terror made my skin clammy and my heart race erratically. My breathing was quick and harsh, and the nausea in my belly was overpowering. Yet, deep down, there was a kernel of growing hatred at that betraying, evil woman who stood smirking in front of me.

But I know I’m not the prize. I tried to calm my breathing, and failed. *As long as they do not find out about our mind-link. That would be… beyond disastrous.*

“I know enough about your quest for the Star Maps, little one,” Darth Malak continued, still in that soft, metallic intonation. “What I’m far more interested in is this bond Kylah’s told me all about. Force bonds are very rare, you know. Usually only between lovers… yet even I and Revan did not share one. I am very curious to explore yours.”

A wave of sickening dread flushed through me; the nausea bubbled up and I dry-retched, my vision fading out. It was lucky I had not eaten for some time. *They know. Sith’s blood, they know.* How did Kylah find out? The only comfort I could find was the cool press of metal against my throat.
was no bond now, and they would not dare remove it.

For if my connection to Revan returned, I would be her biggest liability. And after how far she had come, I could not bear that. Oh, how the tables had turned!

I felt a sharp prick. My vision sharpened back to normality, and I turned to see Kylah remove a hypoderm from my right arm. She sent me a poisonous smile, her unnaturally yellow eyes gleaming. “This is jerrikerr-kolto. A by-product of kolto, as you may have guessed,” she murmured. “It has very mild healing properties, but the main side-effect is a dulling of the senses, particularly to one’s connection with the Force. Jerrikerr-kolto doesn’t entirely cut you off, but you shall be weak enough that even a neophyte padawan could best you.”

“My lovely does so enjoy learning about the intricacies of the Force,” Malak commented, turning his attention to the traitorous Kylah. She all but purred beneath his ominous gaze.

“I am already collared and helpless,” I said through numb lips. The durasteel restraints were solid and unyielding against my flesh. “You do not need to inject me with experimental poisons as well.”

Kylah laughed again, a sound akin to ferracrystal shattering. “Oh but we do, my dear old friend. You see, the mind is the least affected, specifically telepathic abilities. Your charming Wookiee cohort informed me that your bond has grown into telepathy.”

“And we wouldn’t want you escaping when we remove your collar,” Malak added. A gloved hand curled around my exposed throat and tightened. A bubble of hysteria caught in my throat, and my vision faded briefly.

The loud snick of the collar opening was followed by the thud of it dropping to the ground.

“We will leave you in peace for one hour, little one,” Malak murmured. “Then I shall return, and ask you again: how did I lose my jaw? You shall not like it if you do not know the answer, so I suggest you try contacting Revan. Do tell her I said hello.”

xXx
Safe. I was safe, and warm, and blissfully content; feelings that seemed foreign for some reason. My mind was at ease, enjoying the touch of warm skin and the scent of warm male. I don’t want to move.

I heard the rumble of a chuckle underneath my ear, and I cracked open an eye to view Carth gazing at me in amusement. He was propped up against the side of the bed in the pilot’s quarters, his fingers entangled in my hair. I’d fallen asleep curled up on his chest, my face pressed against his skin.

“You remind me of a loth-kitten I had, once,” he murmured. “Every night, she’d go to sleep on top of me. Used to annoy the heck out of Morga—” he cut himself off as a distant look passed through his brown eyes.

Way to wreck the mood, flyboy, I thought, disgruntled. I shifted to the side, sat up, and touched his cheek lightly. He needed a shave. “You don’t have to stop yourself speaking about her, Carth,” I said. “As enjoyable as this is, it’s hardly going to replace what you once had.”

His eyes snapped back to mine, and I saw I’d pissed him off. “Very fatalistic, Jen. Do you always start relationships on such a happy tone?”

Relationships? I blinked. What the frell? “Uh, we’re having a good time, right? Let’s leave it light, okay?”

He didn’t answer, but I could spot the mounting frustration in his gaze. I sighed.

“Look,” I said, leaning away from him against the durasteel grated wall. “My mind’s a shot mess. Honestly, you have no frelling clue just how messed up I am. I can’t- I simply can’t go into anything heavy.”

The thought had occurred to me, before this had started, how terribly paranoid Carth’s reaction would be if he ever found out I had the voice of Darth Revan in my head. Now that we were engaged in whatever this was, it went beyond the realm of appalling and straight into the territory of completely frelled up.

I’m a selfish idiot. I shouldn’t be involved with him.

“I know,” he said quietly. “Bastila and I- talked. I know you were a Jedi once, Jen, but you’ve blocked out chunks of your life to cope after… after what happened on Deralia. I’ve learned a lot about the Force and the Dark Side since the Endar Spire. Watching you, and Juhani, and all that happened on Korriban… everything I thought about the Jedi before was wrong. Even if you lot are too damn secretive.” He moved out from underneath, turning to lean over me with a half-smile on his face. He laid his hands flat against the wall, on either side of my head, his body warm against mine.

And damn if I didn’t feel the insidious curl of desire start up again.

“No one’s infallible, Jen,” he murmured. “But whatever scared you on Rii’shn – and you’ve got to explain that to me some time soon – you’ve been doing everything right since then. You have no idea how impressive you are.” His eyes dropped further down; I’d fallen asleep naked, and the
blankets had long since slipped off. “Very impressive. Especially when you’ve bothered to shower,” he ended on a teasing note, and then leaned forward to capture my lips again.

This will never work. I kicked the guilty thought away, and my hand snaked behind his head as I kissed him back.

The chronometer dinged, an incessant and highly irritating noise that had us breaking apart. He’d set it hours earlier as an alarm for the upcoming hyperspace exit. Carth pulled back from me a little, his eyes black with desire.

Darth Revan’s in my head. How is this fair to him?

“Carth-”

“Jen,” he cut in. I had the feeling my doubts were showing on my face. “I’m not asking you for anything you’re not willing to give. Just- don’t close your mind to anything, okay? We’re almost at Kashyyyk. When we land, we might find the Jedi already have all the Star Maps, and have a plan for facing Malak and rescuing Bastila. Our mission might be over. We might actually have some time to explore… whatever this is between us. And I’d like to do that.”

I could feel my cheeks burning again as his gaze held mine with an intensity I was unused to. Stars, I think I’ve blushed more in the last week than my entire frelling life. But if he was right… maybe he was right. Maybe we would have a reprieve from everything.

And maybe… maybe he was a damn good option.

I felt my lips curving despite myself, and an unfamiliar feeling of happy curling in my stomach.

“Okay,” I said softly, and then laughed. “Honestly, Carth, you’ve got to be a complete borkhead to take me on.”

He chuckled, and leaned over to kiss me softly on the lips. I shivered. “Leave that to me, beautiful.”

I stared at the door long after he’d vacated. It’d been three nights; three secret nights of guilty pleasure, that made me feel young and carefree and normal. We’d spoken less than he’d planned, I suspected, but I was more interested in physical gratification than verbal repartee.

And I wasn’t exactly keen on opening up to him. He’d mentioned Rii’shn twice already, curiosity evident in his voice. He wanted to understand what had changed, what had made me come back. I’d told him on Manaan that I’d stopped running – and while that was true, it was also simplistic.

Despite myself, my smile slowly slipped away as the uneasiness returned.

He’d spoken to Bastila about me. Well, this is Carth. No doubt he’d been grilling her for answers about my unpredictable behaviour since Taris. And she told him I’d been a Jedi Knight? But he still knew me as Jen Sahara, the scholar who’d been tortured to death by Darth Revan. Bastila had let slip only half-truths to him, it seemed.

I had to be realistic. It’d been a lovely reprieve, these last couple of days – but that’s all it was. Carth might understand part of my history, but he didn’t realize that the Jedi with the broken mind was someone completely separate to Jen Sahara – and that wasn’t even the worst of my secrets.

I didn’t know what had happened to me, to Ness Jonohl. But I’d find out on Kashyyyk.

And then, maybe, find out if there’s any chance for any of… this.
But there couldn’t be, not really, not with Darth Revan in my head. I knew that. I’d known all along, which is why I’d avoided him for most of the hyperspace journey… but I’m also selfish, which is why I’d caved in the end.

I sighed irritably, and swung myself out of bed. Okay, I’m not going to beat myself up over having a little bit of fun for once. Sun and stars, second-guessing things is not my sodding style. It didn’t take long, to throw some clothes on and leave the room. I found myself wandering to the cockpit automatically, but Dustil was sitting in the co-pilot’s chair, looking awkward and ill-at-ease and yet taking the time to voluntarily sit with his father.

I smiled slightly as they both turned to look at me.

“You got this?” I asked Carth. He nodded, throwing me a heated look that spoke of last night’s entertainment. I left them both and wandered back to the common room. Carth could land the Ebon Hawk without a co-pilot, and I was intensely aware of his need for more father-son bonding time.

I didn’t like the thought that what we were doing might be cutting into that. But it’d only been a couple of days, and only at the end of the day’s routine I’d imposed on the crew – waiting until everyone was asleep before sneaking around like a damn teenager.

We hadn’t really spoken about it, but discretion was important. Dustil was only marginally less sullen than when we’d left Korriban, and who knew how he’d react to his father sleeping with someone who wasn’t his mother. He still blames Carth for Telos, in part.

I sighed, and pushed all Onasi related thoughts from my head. We were almost at Kashyyyk. I needed to concentrate on what was coming up.

I found myself drifting off into my own thoughts, absently taking a seat next to Mission who appeared to be wheedling Dak into a game of pazaak. His one hand held the cards, frowning at them in concentration that bordered on derisiveness. I had the distinct feeling his opinion of the game equalled mine.

Juhani sent me a small smile of welcome from the other side of the common room. I returned it, before leaning back to close my eyes. The conversation buzzed around me, melding in with the hum of the ship’s hyperdrive.

Soon, I’d be meeting Master Vrook Lamar. I’d been running from this for so long. The fear of the Jedi repeating whatever they’d done to me had never ceased, not really. But the need for answers had grown - had become necessary - ever since Rii’shn. I’d taken too long to draw them out of Bastila, and now she was gone. Now my only option, it seemed, was the Jedi Master she’d been herding me toward since Taris.

Vaguely, I heard Carth broadcast a hyperspace exit transmission through the ship, and slipped myself into one of the safety belts attached to the tatty plimfoam benches, before my thoughts once more derailed.

What did I know about myself, really? I was a Jedi, a Jedi Knight. I fought in the Mandalorian Wars, but Bastila told me I’d never fallen to the Dark Side. I knew something of the Star Maps. The Star Maps. That was the key, the key to Darth Malak’s power.

The key to Darth Revan’s power, once. I frowned. Is Revan in my head because I’d failed to find the Maps on my own before? Ness had seen the Tatooine one, sure – but that was the only one I was certain of. She’d – I’d – been on the trail of the Korriban one, but had we actually found it? Or had the terentateks scared us away?
Us. For it hadn’t been just me. I suspected my past lover had died, somehow. He must have died. And yet, he’d been an integral part of those flashbacks. Without him, had it all fallen apart?

My mind, once more, was going around in meaningless circles. This was why I’d stopped running. This was why I was headed to a Jedi Master. Because I couldn’t make sense of anything on my own.

As the freighter shot out of hyperspace, I squeezed my eyes shut tighter and focussed on willing the uneasiness away.

xXx

We docked at a Czerka starport, most of us crowded into the common room as Carth organized landing permission and coordinates on Zaalbar’s home planet.

It seemed to take forever.

Juhani was murmuring quietly to Dak, and Kel sat awkwardly on his other side. Canderous was next to me, making an occasional comment that didn’t register. I wasn’t used to feeling nervous. I detested this feeling, this uneasy edginess that sat like sharp ferracrystal jabbing the insides of my belly.

I had allies with me. I had nothing to fear, surely. Juhani – a powerful Force user in her own right - would not sit back while something happened to me.

*Why had I not confided in Juhani?* I realized, with a start, that I could have. My mind and its fragilities was not something I spoke of – ever- even on the few times Carth had hassled me for details. I’d only ever cornered Bastila. But Juhani’s loyalty to me was there, and resolute – why had it never even occurred to me to just *talk* to her?

*Bugs she’d think I’m crazy. Because I don’t know what’s going on, not really. Because I can’t let anyone know about Darth Revan.*

I sighed, banging my head back against the durasteel bulkhead in irritation.

“Jen,” Juhani said, across from me. Her slanted eyes gleamed with emotion. “Are you alright?”


“Jen,” Canderous interrupted in his gravelly voice. “I’ve got quite the shopping list. You know those Republic credits ain’t gonna last much longer?”

“Priorities are kolto and parts for HK,” I answered. We’d decided, earlier, for the Mandalorian to focus on restocking the ship, while Mission and Zaalbar stayed behind. I would have sent the young Twi’lek with Canderous – expecting her to sneak out otherwise – but Mission claimed she *wanted* to stay behind with Zaalbar. He’d likely be just as uneasy and on edge as me – worse, in a way, as he had to spend the entire stay on Kashyyyk in the freighter.

The rest of us would find this Master Vrook Lamar.

I didn’t expect Kel to be with us for much longer. The quiet teenager didn’t talk often, but his eyes shone with hope whenever we spoke of the Jedi.

Dak, despite his earlier protestations, was following the same path. I could see the fierce emotion on his face, at times, when he looked at Juhani and thought her unaware – but he also seemed reconciled that a return to the Order was his future. Dak Vessar had surprised me. I wondered what he’d make of his second chance.
And as for Dustil… well, he hadn’t said. Carth expected him to follow Dak and Kel, but that would likely mean a separation from us all. I wondered how Carth would handle that. It’s not like he’d ever been a shining advocate of the Jedi.

*It’s just another thing we have to sort out on this planet.*

“We’re free to disembark now,” Carth said quietly as he entered the room. The background buzz of conversation halted, and all eyes turned to me. I smiled tightly, unclasped the safety harness around my waist, and stood.

“Let’s go.”

The first thing I noticed as the exit hatch opened was the humidity. There was a distinct moisture noticeable in the air, which was also warm— not hot like Tatooine – but I still felt overdressed in the plain tunic I’d pilfered from the cargo bay’s stores. I’d eschewed armour for the first time. It didn’t seem necessary. If this Jedi Master was truly a threat – and I was probably the only one who thought so – then armour wasn’t going to help.

The seemingly infinite expanse of greenery struck me next. It bordered everything, a striking contrast to the permacrete grey of the landing pad. In the distance, in every horizontal direction, leafy vegetation merged into haziness that could be hiding anything.

Above us, the dense foliage had been cleared in a man-made circular channel to allow for air traffic. Even this high up, we couldn’t see the tree-tops. Walls of wroshyr greenery rose majestically into the blue sky high above us. Clearing it would have been a massive project, and I guessed the maintenance had to be a killer.

The docking bay itself was a large foundation cinched between two massive wroshyr trees by titanium alloy cables thicker than my waist. There was some sort of large ratchet device around the trees; I imagined that as the tree grew, the mechanism could be adjusted to ensure rock solid immovability of the landing pad.

More guide ropes rose vertically to higher branches, connected in a similar way. The entire construction bespoke a long-term design; surely, with how steady the ferracrete foundation currently was, it wouldn’t need any sort of adjustment for years.

*Czerka is here to stay.*

There was a control tower at the end of our docking bay, built alongside one of the giant wroshyrs. It was large enough that even the tree – whose diameter had to be tens of metres – didn’t entirely dwarf it. The tower rose only a few stories higher than our level, but it also descended below view. I wondered how low into Kashyyyk’s depths it had been built.

A wide set of stairs leading downwards heralded the only obvious exit, other than going into the control tower which was guarded by a handful of armoured Czerka-clad sentients.

“I had not thought trees this size were possible,” Juhani murmured, as she stepped to my side.

My gaze slid back to the wroshyrs. They were, supposedly, more than a kilometre in height. The base of them must be truly awe-inspiring in girth. Even here, close to the sky, Kashyyyk had a way of making one feel truly infinitesimal in size. A bit like space, really.

“Huh. Big trees,” Dak commented in a neutral voice. He sounded a lot less impressed than either Juhani or I. “Shall we get a move on?”
I rolled my eyes, but gave a short nod, attention snapping back to the inhabitants of the starport. There were more landing pads, coiling around the tower in a ring of civilized permacrete that looked jarringly out of place on this wild world. Deep into the green haze, I could make out another identical control tower nearby, which likely had a similar setup of encircling landing pads.

This wasn’t a small starport. It explained the number of visible Czerka staff, milling around the edges of the tower. Most of them held blaster rifles and were equipped with moderate body-armour – which shouted a perceived danger or perhaps an elevated caution that I’d not noticed in previous starports.

And standing near the set of stairs, I noticed a brown-robed figure.

I took a deep breath, and began to walk.

Juhani fell into step next to me, and I saw an encouraging smile in my periphery. Dak and Kel were on her other side, and then running footsteps had me slowing. I glanced over my shoulder to see Carth.

“I asked Ordo to finish docking the ship,” he said, a little breathlessly, and his gaze slid to Dustil who was dragging his feet behind us. I wasn’t sure if Carth was there for me or his son, but shot him a brief smile of acknowledgement. Canderous would be fine handling the paperwork. Carth would have already sorted out landing clearance and transferred docking payment before we landed, but the bureaucracy that went with docking a ship escalated exponentially with the size of the starport. This port was likely on a par with Ahto City.

I looked forward again, and resumed walking. The Jedi Master, Vrook Lamar, stood awaiting us, hands clasped casually in front of him. Bastila’s Master. This wasn’t going to be pretty. Carth had transmitted the Star Map coordinates from Korriban but little else – in space, it was all too easy for communications to be intercepted. I did not think this Jedi Master would know the news of Bastila’s capture yet.

Vrook Lamar looked calm - peaceful even - as we neared. There was a serene expression on his face that became apparent with every step. It was hard to guess his age, but his face was lined and his dark eyes fixed solely on me as I led our group forward.

The hairs on my exposed forearms lifted, and a shiver coursed through me as the metres closed in. The sharp edginess was still there, now matched with a mild vertigo I recognized all too well. I picked up on a sign of uneasiness from the Master, too, as his red headtails tightened around his neck - and then my vision dimmed in a rush and I was swept away.

…

“I have often hypothesized the Force to be a living entity in its own right,” a robed Twi’lek said thoughtfully, as his dark purple eyes trained on me. “And if so, you are surely one of its favourites. I have never known a Force-sensitive with such immeasurable good luck.”

“Yeah, it was a bit like that on Talshion too,” the young man standing behind him muttered. His face wore a thunderous scowl. “I can’t believe you did that. I can’t believe you’re still alive!”

I shifted uncomfortably. Zhar didn’t concern me, but I was very aware of just how much trouble I was in with the most important person in my life. “Look, the governor’s agreed to meet the Republic delegate and discuss entry requirements. Can’t we just focus on that for now?”

Master Zhar sighed heavily; he was a mild-mannered Master, but I knew that sometimes he was
driven to distraction when he took the two of us on training missions. This one, in particular, had snowballed ridiculously. Still, I'd seen an opportunity and it was working out for the best – for us, and the Republic.

“Jedi do not involve themselves in politics, Padawan,” Zhar rebuked. “No matter how important the situation may seem. We are mediators only, not politicians. We leave the matters of men to the governments of the time. And now Governor James is expecting Jedi Knight- what name did you give them?”

“Ness Jonohl,” I muttered.

"Ness Jonohl," a voice said in disbelief.

The night was warm on the grassy plain, and the two men were staring at me outside the tent that was our temporary campsite.

The red-skinned Twi’lek was frowning, muttering something about luck under his breath before giving an audible sigh. "Well, I do not see another solution but to ride this one out. They are expecting Knight-" his mouth twisted, "Ness Jonohl to attend the delegation, so you shall go and I will accompany you as an advisory Master. We'll be staying out of the negotiations as much as possible."

No we won't, I thought in determination. Andara will become part of the Republic if I have anything to say about it.

…

My steps froze, and I stared at the brown-robed Twi’lek in shock. Carth turned to frown at me in confusion.

“Are you alright, Jen?” he asked softly, stepping back to my side. He placed a steady hand on my shoulder.

A false name, I thought numbly. Ness Jonohl is a false name. There was a hollow in the pit of my belly, and an acrid taste in my mouth. Disappointment reared through my psyche – and it was all the more bitter because I recognized something galling: I am not surprised. Somehow, deep down, some part of me had always known. Ness Jonohl had never quite fit, never quite felt right.

I’m back to two out of three names.

“Jen?” Carth prompted again, and I realized I was still staring at the red-skinned Twi’lek Master who was now moving toward us slowly. His face was a composed mask.

“Yeah, I’m okay,” I whispered, looking over to Carth with a shaky smile. The concern was all too evident in his eyes.

“What’s wrong? Are you- we can go back in the ‘Hawk if you need to, Jen.” Carth frowned. “This meeting can wait.”

I glanced back to the Jedi Master, who was less than ten metres away, now. Carth’s support was nice, but I didn’t believe this Jedi would allow me to walk away, and there wasn’t any real point in it, either. He knew my real name. He knew my origins. It was long past time to find them out myself.

I could feel the wariness of the others behind me, and pasted a smile on my face. “It’s fine, Carth. I just – I’ve met this guy before. Just felt a bit off-balance, that’s all." I touched his hand briefly, and
then stepped forward to meet the Twi’lek.

“Welcome to Kashyyyk, Jen Sahara,” the Twi’lek said in fluent Basic. What was his name? I’d heard it in the fragmented memory, but already it eluded my grasp. His dark purple eyes moved past me to view my companions. They widened, slightly, in a startlement that was likely unusual for a Jedi Master. I bit back a smirk, realizing that an extra three Sithkids would hardly have been anticipated by the Order.

“Thanks,” I told him shortly. “You’re not Vrook Lamar. I was of the understanding that he was the one we were going to meet.”

The Twi’lek inclined his head, another flicker of surprise betraying in his indigo gaze. “I am Jedi Master Zhar Lestin. Master Vrook and Master Quatra await us in the Wookiee village of Rwookrrorro.”

Zhar. Zhar Lestin. The name was strongly familiar. It seemed to echo in my head. *Hang on. Did he say Quatra?*

Juhani gasped audibly and stepped forward. Dak moved to flank her. “Quatra,” she mumbled softly. “I did not… well. I did not expect that.”

“You don’t have to come, Juhani.” I said, turning to face her head on.

“Yes, I do,” she countered in a tone that was both soft and firm. A sad smile played along her lips, and she gazed at me fondly. “It will be alright, Jen. I must face Master Quatra one day, and I would rather meet this challenge now.”

Zhar cleared his throat. “Do not see it as a challenge, Padawan. Your Master has been most grieved for you.”

“She is no longer my master, Master Zhar.” The words were solid and resolute, and not at all bitter. Juhani sounded more calm and sure of herself than ever. “And while I thank you for the title of Padawan, perhaps that is a bit premature at this stage.”

I snorted. “I don’t know anyone who walks in the Light more strongly than you, Juhani. If you’re not worthy of the Jedi, then the galaxy makes no frelling sense.”

“Perhaps this conversation can be concluded once we have moved to Rwookrrorro,” Zhar intervened. He was frowning, looking past us to the *Ebon Hawk*. “Where is Bastila Shan? I do not sense her nearby.”

It was difficult to reply, and the heavy pause caused his gaze to meet mine again. Understanding was followed swiftly by grief and despair. “Oh no,” he whispered.

“She was captured on Korriban by Kylah Aramai.”

“Kylah Aramai,” he said blankly. His dark purple eyes blinked once, twice. “Jedi Knight Kylah Aramai?”

“I think you might have to change her title,” I remarked somewhat tartly. “Surely you’ve heard who led the Dark Jedi attack in Ahto City?”

Zhar shook his head briefly. “Oh, Vrook,” he murmured softly, and I wondered what this Vrook Lamar was like, to have mentored someone like Bastila Shan. It was hard to get past her aloofness and prissiness, but we’d been getting there. She’d been becoming a friend. I felt tears prick at the
“We have to get her back,” I muttered. “She’s got a neural disruptor on, but she’s skivvied her way out of one before on Taris when those Vulkar idiots forgot to restrain her hands. Either way, I’ll know the instant it’s loose.”

Zhar had composed himself, and his attention was once more fixed on me. It briefly darted to Carth, who was standing closer than necessary on my other side. I stiffened, and remembered Bastila’s reaction when she’d suspected something – before I had even understood my own desires – and my eyes narrowed as they remained on the affable Jedi Master.

“Are you entirely sure it was Kylah Aramai?” Zhar asked quietly. “Our intelligence tells us she died onboard the *Endar Spire.*”

The indignation flared in my belly. “Let me,” Carth murmured. I rolled my eyes, and conceded the conversation over to him. He shot me a wry half-grin before facing Zhar. “I am Captain Carth Onasi, Master Jedi, and I met Kylah Aramai enough times on the *Endar Spire* to recognize her when she led the assault on the Republic Embassy in Ahto City. My report to my superiors have mentioned her involvement, so I’m surprised you haven’t heard about it.”

Zhar frowned. “The information sharing between the Order and the Republic has waned in recent weeks, Captain. However, this is dire news indeed. This is not something we foresaw.”

I bit back a snort, barely. Seemed like there was a lot of things the Jedi failed to foresee. “I met Kylah on the ‘Spire, too,” I said flatly. “I recognized her on Manaan, before she ran. I saw the effects of her handiwork.”

There was a flicker of some emotion on the composed Twi’lek’s face – I saw it, before it disappeared. I wonder if he had known Karon… he must have known Karon. Karon… who had been my Master. Zhar was still staring steadily at me, as if taking my measure.

“Anyway,” I continued, “Kylah happened to be on Korriban when we landed. She snuck in and stole Bastila while we were out hunting the Star Map. We…” I trailed off, squeezing my eyes shut. There was still that blank space in my head, like a sense that had been cut off. An invisible wall between us that I could not breach.

She was still alive, though. I’d feel her death. Considering how intertwined our connections were to the Force, I had the unnerving feeling that her death would be debilitating.

And then… something changed. The wall blurred… morphed into a hazy fog that was clouded with distance.

*Bastila?* There was no response. The barrier-*no,* the barrier *was* still there, but it felt different, somehow. Less perfect, maybe less impenetrable. I pushed out, tentative at first. *Bastila?*

“Let us all retire to Rwookrrorro,” Zhar said again, his voice gentling. “This is not a safe place for conversation.”

“There is one thing first,” Juhani spoke up, her voice low and intense. “We have a casualty on board. I could not leave her body on Korriban, and would like to bury her on Kashyyyk.” Dak reached out to grasp her hand, a solemn look of support on his face. “Jedi Knight Belaya Linn.”

There was a slight noise as Zhar took in an unexpected intake of air. His eyes widened again as he surveyed Juhani. She returned his gaze without flinching. “Belaya Linn,” he murmured. “I am grieved, indeed, to hear of this.” His gaze slid to Dak. “If you wish to bring her body now to
Zhar led us out of the starport efficiently, and onto vast wooden ramps that spanned between the gigantic trees. The foliage was thicker, here, with the odd spindly branch growing crookedly over the path. Gnats and flies buzzed around us, and the caw of some avian species was prevalent in our hearing.

Beneath the ramp, the depths of Kashyyyk dimmed to a murky blackness. It was a giant, over-sized world, and I'd probably have remained somewhat awed if I wasn't otherwise occupied.

\textit{Bastila}? Was I imagining things? Surely, if the neural disruptor had been removed, she'd answer me. But the barrier between us no longer had the clinical, absolute edges that sliced through one’s connection to the Force. It felt, instead, like a clouded shield was blocking \textit{me} from reaching \textit{her}.

Zhar was silent as we walked along. The others spoke softly behind us, but my mind was solely occupied by my bond sister. Beyond the starport were small Czerka stalls and wicker buildings lashed against the side of the massive trunks. Zhar skirted away from all of these, and our path was relatively quiet. There was a mild wind rustling through the trees, bringing with it a wild astringent smell that might have been the sap of the wroshyr.

“It is not far to Rwookrrorro,” Zhar said quietly from my side. I shot him a tight smile, and wondered what he was thinking. The serenity of his expression gave nothing away. “The Wookiees have rented out rooms to us on the edge of their township, provided we do not stray into Rwookrrorro. They do not trust outsiders, so I urge you to advise your companions accordingly.”

“Fair enough,” I acknowledged. “Crossing a Wookiee isn’t a good idea at the best of times.”

“I understand one of your crew is a Wookiee, Jen Sahara. I am surprised he is not accompanying you.” It was a question, a gentle inquiry for information, and I immediately stiffened in mistrust.

“He’s happy on the ship,” I said shortly. I wasn’t planning on giving Zaalbar’s past away, but surely the names of our crew pre-Korriban had filtered through to the Jedi. Surely Zhar Lestin or Vrook Lamar would have looked up the name Zaalbar in Rwookrrorro.

\textit{Wookiees do not speak of madclaws}.

It was a whisper from the back of my mind, from the voice of Ness. No, from the voice of Street Kid. I gritted my teeth, and looked away.

Carth had increased his pace to catch up with me, shooting me a supporting smile. “I knew the trees were big here, but this was beyond my expectations,” he murmured. “Dustil’s pretty awed.”

“Yes,” I agreed. The ramp ahead split into three directions, and Zhar took the smaller one leading off to the left. We lapsed into an uneasy silence, and I had the uncanny feeling that Carth was searching for something encouraging to say. I remained quiet, frowning, once more reaching out into the obscurity of the Force bond that connected me to Bastila. Something \textit{had} changed. I was becoming certain of it.

A fence made of lashed wooden poles came into view around a bend, and further past that I saw a massive Wookiee-made wall that ran between multiple wroshyr trees. Small wooden towers oversaw the obstruction in numerous places, and Wookiees manning them were visible with bowcasters or
blaster rifles in hand. The howls of Shyriiwook were noticeable as we strode closer - the background noise of a decent sized village.

One-room buildings were present along the edges of the township, beyond the smaller gate but on our side of the massive wall that seemed to mark Rwookrorro’s territory. They were for visitors, then, or outsiders – those not trusted to enter the encampment proper.

Zhar turned to address the group. “I have a room in the outer reaches of Rwookrorro where I shall take you all, before I go to retrieve Master Quatra and Master Vrook. Do not leave this area without one of us. The Wookiees are not known for their patience.”

There was a spark of fear, sharp and sudden through the bond, taking me by surprise. I flinched. *Bastila!* I demanded. *Stars, Bastila, can you hear me?*

She had to hear that. She was there, I could almost feel her. Why wasn’t she answering?

Zhar walked forward to address a Wookiee that was guarding the entrance into the lesser defended barricade on the edge of the township.

“Dustil!” Carth cried out suddenly. “Where is he?”

As his words registered, I spun around, my gaze searching our group as I flung the Force wildly to sense my surroundings. There was no dead patch anywhere nearby. *Kath crap! Where the frell has he gone?*

And then, stabbing through the bond, came another wave of acrid, uncontrolled fear.

“I can’t sense him,” I muttered to Carth, my thoughts reeling and torn in two directions. “He’s not here.”

Carth closed his eyes, looking both anxious and exasperated. “He’s gone back to the ship,” he said quietly. “We spoke of the Jedi last night – he didn't-” Carth sighed. “He’s not very happy with the idea of the Order, but I thought he’d agreed. Now, I’m thinking he was just trying to stop the conversation.”

I smiled tightly, but my concentration had moved inward. The bond had turned silent; the desperate emotions had abruptly ceased. *Bastila is trying to control herself,* I guessed. *She’s trying not to draw my attention.* Why the frell was she ignoring me? “Go,” I said softly. “Find your son. I’ll be fine.”

Carth’s expression tightened as his gaze locked on mine. His chestnut brown hair was falling into his eyes again. I tapped the *Ebon Hawk’s* communicator affixed on my wrist, and he glanced down before the side of his mouth curved in a half-smile.

“I’ll be in touch,” he murmured. “Stay safe, Jen.”

I shot him an absent smile, but my mind was still on the bond. Better that Carth focus on his son before he learn about any developments on the Bastila front. “Don’t annoy any Wookiees,” I returned.

He looked like he wished to say more, but I gave him a brief nod of farewell before turning to the others. I heard his steps fade away behind us, and turned as Juhani touched me gently on the shoulder.

“I was not paying attention to Dustil,” Juhani said. She looked mildly abashed. “I did not see him leave.”
“Don’t feel bad. He’s an ace at sneaking around,” I said, aware my voice was short. In a snap decision, I lunged mentally, attempting to force my very psyche through the bond. Bastila had done that, had ridden with me in my own mind more than once on Korriban. But my concentration frayed and dissolved as it barrelled through the hazy esoteric nature of our bond. Bit by bit, my focus was chipped away until I was swung back into my own mind.

My muscles were tensing, my fists clenching.

“Jen?” Juhani prompted, her slanted eyes narrowing.

“It’s Bastila,” I muttered. Her eyes widened. “Something’s changed, dammit, and I don’t know what. Let’s get to this place of Zhar’s, first, and I’ll explain more.” I swung back around to stride after Zhar, who was murmuring something to a Wookiee even taller than Zaalbar.

“(Your people may not leave your designated outbuilding,)” the Wookiee growled. “(And Chuundar, long may he reign, shall be informed of their names and backgrounds at once.)”

*Chuundar?* That wasn’t the name I was expecting. A surge of panic snatched my attention once more, burgeoning in strength. *Dammit, Bastila, answer me!*

“Of course,” Zhar was murmuring as I neared. “I will escort them there right away.”

Terror slammed into my head, then, uncontrolled and overwhelming.

And the agony that followed encompassed everything else.

xXx
The trees were crazy on this planet, like someone had shot them full of growth stims en masse over centuries. They must be ancient. In places, the outer crust of bark had been stripped away or eroded due to time. I could see the dried edges of the bark. In some places, that alone looked like it was more than a metre thick.

Funny, to think this was only the third planet I’d ever been on. It was so different to Telos or Korriban. Even the smell in the air was weird; pungent and moist, like the entire place was smothered in fungi-moss. Still, it was better than the sulphuric stink of Korriban. And the Force here felt wild and strong – without that twist to it that had become as familiar as a dagger in the back.

I retraced my steps to the freighter, walking fast, holding tight onto the Force weaves that obscured my presence. I’d kept a close eye on our path before, mentally taking note of each turn that frakking robe had chosen as we’d all followed him like meek bantha to the slaughter.

It’d been easy, to slip away from Dad once he moved to speak to Jen Sahara. Kel avoided looking at me most of the time, and Dak and the Cathar were otherwise occupied with that wrapped up corpse they were carrying. I wasn’t going to meet those damn Jedi and turn into one of them. I’d said as much to Dad last night, but like usual, he hadn’t listened. Some things hadn’t changed, even after all these years.

…

“I want you to go with Dak and Kel,” Dad said, his face serious as we sat quietly in the central room of the Ebon Hawk. I’d waited until the others had cleared out before entering. Even now, I hadn’t fancied running into Mission Vao. Jen Sahara had still been there when I’d entered, but she shot me a wry look and vanished in the direction of the cockpit. Guess she knew Dad was about to grill me. “To the Jedi Master, I mean.”

“I’m not going to be a frakking Jedi,” I shot back, scowling. This wasn’t the first time I’d said it.

He sighed. “I’m not asking you to join the Order, Dustil, but I don’t think the Force is something you can run from.”

“You don’t know anything about the Force, Dad.”

“Maybe not,” he conceded. “But I’m learning. Look, Dustil, the truth of it is that I want you somewhere safe. I don’t know where I’ll be going until I check in with my superiors – and while I’d like to believe I can stay on Kashyyyk for an extended period of time, I get the feeling we’ll be headed straight towards the Sith after this.”

My eyes narrowed. “So, are you gonna tell me what’s going on? Why aren’t you on the frontlines?”

He looked away, his face tightening. Like always, keeping secrets. He’d told me they’d been on a classified mission commanded by the Jedi Order, but that didn’t make any sense. Dad had been a
Wing Commander, last time I checked, not a frakking scout or spy.

He’d said his posting to the Endar Spire – the big cruiser that’d been betrayed and shot up over Taris – was as an advisory one to the navi-pilots, and circumstance more than anything else had thrown him together with Bastila Shan and Jen Sahara. Since when did Dad take advisory positions? I’d been away for four years, though, so things might have changed, but…

…he’d been cagey about Jen Sahara, too. She had to be a pretty powerful Jedi, yet I’d never heard of her. And we got pretty familiar with the names of important Jedi at the Sith Academy.

At the close of it, he still wouldn’t budge on details - on what they were actually after.

“What we’re doing could change the course of the war, Dustil,” Dad said at long last. “But it’s dangerous. I want to know you’re somewhere safe.”

“So I’ll head back to Telos,” I snapped, my shoulders tightening in annoyance. I’d heard a large space station had been set up in orbit around our ruined planet, whose atmosphere had acidified to the point where no life was currently viable. The full extent of the devastation had only become apparent weeks after the plasma had settled. I hadn’t understood the depth of my homeworld’s ruin, not until I’d been months on Korriban. “I’m sure I can hang around on Citadel Station until you’ve finished with your war.”

“It’s not my war, Dustil, it’s everyone’s,” Dad returned, his voice flat and terse. “And I don’t have lodgings on Citadel Station. There’s nothing there for you – it’s better if the Jedi look after you until this is all over.”

I could feel the scowl growing on my face. “I don’t want to go with the damn Jedi, Dad. And if you’re happy enough to take a Twi’lek girl along with you, then why the frakk can’t I come?”

Dad sighed, his eyes closing briefly. “We won’t be bringing Mission with us, not if we’re heading into Sith territory. I don’t- Look, I haven’t worked out where Mission will go, but I won’t let Jen take her into certain death. Dustil, I’m not sure where I’m headed yet. But it can’t hurt to at least meet that Jedi Master and see what he has to say.”

“Fine,” I bit out, fed up and annoyed. I stood abruptly, pushing away my uneaten dinner. It tasted like the mush the Academy had offered over the years. Synthesizer crap was probably the same anywhere in the galaxy. Artificial flavourings never really hid the paste-like consistency.

“Dustil,” Dad said, as I began to move away. His voice had a pleading note in it. “We’ll work it out, okay? The Jedi are not anything to be scared of.”

I gave him a short nod and moved away. I’m not meeting any damn Jedi, no matter what he thinks. But sometimes, it simply wasn’t worth arguing with him.

I slipped into the starport, unseen by the uniformed Czerka staff who manned the area. Unlike the incompetents that milled throughout Dreshdae, these guys were armoured and equipped with varying weapons. Czerka Corp branched out all through the galaxy, or so I’d heard, but here on Kashyyyk they looked more like a military force than an intergalactic retail conglomerate.

I drew in a breath as the Ebon Hawk rose in front of me. I had another reason for heading back. My own cowardice had been gnawing at me - my inability to front up and say one simple word. Sorry. I didn’t doubt that it’d get thrown back in my face – but from what I knew of Mission Vao, she deserved that word.
Why don’t you try facing up to her and apologizing? Jen Sahara’s advice kept coming back to haunt me in my head, and yet I’d found it so hard to do what she suggested. I could still see my dagger tracing along the back of Mission’s neck, and the hateful words spewing from my mouth and destroying the camaraderie we’d just founded.

I dropped my grasp on the Force and knocked loudly on the closed hatch. A minute later, it opened and the Wookiee stood in the entrance. His arms were folded and he was glaring.

I’d never met a Wookiee before this one, and now I was on a planet full of them. They were smarter than I’d realized. I’d always thought of them as no more than primitive muscle who could barely communicate, but I was beginning to realize how completely wrong, even potentially xenophobic, I’d been.

I swallowed. “Hi. I wanted to, uh, to say sorry. To Mission, I mean.”

He howled something incomprehensible, and didn’t move. His black eyes stared down at me from an impressive height, and I shifted uneasily.

“Look, I frakked up badly on Korriban,” I muttered. “I realize that. I just want to make sure she knows I realize that, too.”

"Let the Sithkid in, Zaalbar," a gravelly voice said from behind me. I turned to spot the Mandalorian, who was eyeballing me derisively. A harassed Czerka bureaucrat holding a datapad stood in his shadow, failing miserably to get his attention. "He's Onasi's son. You ain't got nothing to worry 'bout him."

The Wookiee huffed, stepping to the side and allowing me access. It was galling, to be so easily dismissed by that ugly merc. I didn’t get his comment. Was he calling me weak because of Dad, or too nice to try anything?

Why is a Mandalorian with Dad? Dad had told me a bit about Taris, the mad adventure to rescue Bastila Shan and sneak off-world before the Sith could capture them. He and Jen had picked up Ordo, the Wookiee, and Mission along the way. But Dad hadn’t explained exactly why Ordo was still with them. If they’re on a super-secret quest for the Republic or the Jedi or whoever he’s reporting to, then how the frakk can they trust a Mandalorian?

I felt my mouth twist, and clambered up the loading ramp. It didn’t matter. I was here to apologize, and I was damn well going to do it before my courage ran out like juma juice in a spacer’s bar.

The Wookiee was dogging my heels, and I supposed I couldn’t blame him. Dad told me Zaalbar was best friends with Mission, and they’d been looking out for each other for years in the Lower City of Taris – which sounded like living on the streets. Mekel would get along with Mission. Mekel would know what to say. Mekel had always been better with words than me.

I wondered where my friend was, and if he’d truly forgiven me for Selene. I should have trusted him. I wished I had.

I heard music as I wandered into the Ebon Hawk, the thrumming bass of a rock song that was unfamiliar but had the catchy beat of popular music. And as I turned into the garage, the sight I saw was more carefree and jubilant than anything I’d seen in my life ever.

Mission and that astromech droid were twirling around dancing – as much as a three-foot high utility droid could. The droid stopped mid-spin at my entrance, beeping in protest, but Mission didn’t hear. Her hands were raised as her body swayed to the beat, and her high voice echoed the chorus words
of the song blasting from the ship's speakers.

My mouth dried as I took in her lithe figure that was clad in a tight tunic, leaving little to the imagination. Her lekku hung loosely down her back as she stretched her arms skyward. I wondered, suddenly, just how old she was.

The Wookiee howled from behind me, and Mission spun around, lekku flying. Her light brown eyes widened in alarm as they fixed on me.

“You!” she cried in surprise. Her cheeks flushed angrily, darkening the blue skin to purple. She folded her arms and glared. “What d’ya want, chuba-face?” she snapped.

The tense knot of uneasy shame sat heavy in my stomach. “I- uh, I-”

“Aren’t you meant to be with the others?” she cut in. The droid wheeled behind her and switched the music off. The silence was a jarring contrast to the earlier happy beat.

“Well, yeah, but-”

Her gaze slid past me. “Why’d ya let this jerk in, Big Z?” Her mouth twisted in a scowl. “He should be off with his daddy.”

“Sorry!” I yelled suddenly. Mission blinked, before her eyes narrowed again. “Look, I came back to say sorry, alright? I should have done it earlier, I know, but…” I trailed off, feeling my face flush. I’d always been useless talking to girls. It was worse when they had every reason to hate me.

“You think some half-baked apology makes up for what you did?” she spluttered. “Far out, you threatened to kill me, you- you- yellow-bellied slug-brained Gamorrean pig-man!”

“I know! Look, I don’t expect you to forgive me, alright? I just wanted you to know that I wish I could take it back, that…” I broke from her angry gaze, dropping mine to the ground. My face was hot. “You kept talking about leaving Korriban and there being a better way… and it just didn’t seem possible. Talk like that – it gets people killed, back there.” My voice had dropped to a near-whisper, and I heard the footsteps of the Wookiee wander away from behind me. Maybe he’d decided I was too pathetic to be a threat. “You seemed nice. Real nice. There were worse students in the Academy than me that might’ve come across you, y’know. I thought if I scared you enough, then maybe you wouldn’t leave your ship again.”

“I can take care of myself,” she snapped, her voice tart. “And I don’t let anyone stop me going where I want.”

I looked up; she was still scowling at me, but I thought she looked a little less fierce. Or maybe that was just wishful thinking. Her face had paled back to its natural blue, smooth and youthful and flawless. “Fair enough,” I mumbled. “As long as you know that I regret it. I- I’ll leave you, now.”

I turned, and walked out of the freighter’s garage, not entirely sure of my destination.

“Are you heading back to the others?” Mission called out, her voice peaking with cautious interest. I halted, staring blindly down the corridor to the exit hatch.

“No,” I answered. “I’m not interested in meeting the Jedi. Thought I’d go have a look around the Czerka shops.”

I heard footsteps as she walked closer. “Why don’t you want to go with that Jedi Master?” The curiosity was obvious, now, as she questioned me further.
I didn’t want to answer… but then, it almost sounded like Mission was giving me another chance. There was a small kernel of hope inside my belly, slowly growing, and I realized her good opinion meant something to me. “I’m sick of people telling me what to do,” I muttered. “I didn’t have a choice about going to Korriban. I’m not going to be forced into anything again.”

Mum had mistrusted the Jedi. She’d been fierce about not wanting me to even talk to them. *Interfering bigots that ruin lives,* I remember her saying once, in a voice laced with acid. Normally Mum was a happy, forgiving sort, but not when it came to the Order. Her dislike of them ran far, far deeper than Dad’s – who just vaguely mistrusted them - and Mum never explained why. I didn’t think Dad even knew she had a problem with the Jedi.

“I guess I get that,” Mission said from behind me. I turned, then, to face her once more. She was staring at me with a frown, as if trying to work me out. “Does Carth know you came back?”

“No,” I shrugged uncomfortably. "He won't be happy. So I may as well have a look around this place before I face up to the music."

The corner of her mouth twitched, before it blossomed into a pretty smile. “Want some company?”

In surprise, I found myself smiling back at her.

“Yeah,” I said, and felt a flush of warmth as her eyes sparkled at me.

xXx

I didn’t spot the Mandalorian as we left, and Mission was pretty keen to avoid the Wookiee, too. I had the feeling she was used to sneaking around. She shot me an impish grin as we locked the exit hatch behind us.

“Big Z will yell at me later,” she commented, her voice off-hand and light, as we wandered into the bustling starport. “An’ I don’t really wanna leave him alone for too long. So this should only be a quick look around, yeah?”

“I’m surprised you trust me enough to come with me,” I said, and immediately wished the words back. Mission stopped walking, staring at me with wide, serious eyes.

“You did a rotten thing to me. But,” she continued, “I believe in second chances. And you *are* Carth’s son.”

“So everyone keeps saying,” I muttered.

She frowned, and a touch of belligerence crept into her face. “What’s your beef with your dad? He’s a good guy, y’know. I woulda thought you’d be happy he came an’ took you away from that rotten place.”

I could feel my shoulders hunch defensively. “It’s complicated. I don’t want to talk about it. Look, let’s get going.” I glanced around – I could only see Czerka staff nearby, but it wouldn’t be long before Dad came back for me. I’d get an earful, sure – and I’d rather put that off as long as possible.

I strode away from Mission, towards the stairs leading out of the landing pad. There were similar sized pads – both empty - on either side of the *Ebon Hawk.* Even more dotted around the gigantic tree that braced the control tower.

There were no footsteps behind me, and I could feel Mission’s gaze boring into my back. Maybe, after that exchange, she’d decided I wasn’t worth the bother. But I didn’t want to talk to *anyone*
about my father – especially not a pretty girl near my own age.

Just when I thought she wasn’t coming, the sound of running footsteps caught my ear.

“You should chill out a bit, y’know,” Mission said, as she caught up to me. “I reckon you take everything too seriously.”

We sidled past a pair of uninterested Czerka guards and down the stairwell that curved around the wroshyr tree as it descended. At the bottom, it spilled out into a large courtyard that was winched tight against the neighbouring trees, much the same as the docking bay.

The construction of the Czerka outpost was completely different to the Wookiee ramps and lashed village buildings. Permacrete and metal versus natural materials. It was a jarring contrast.

"And you don’t take things seriously enough," I returned at last, unable to stop the corner of my mouth from twitching. "I mean, you did go for a wander - by yourself - on a Sith planet."

I didn’t know if the reminder would just piss her off again, but she just grinned back at me. “I’ve been on my own since I was a kid. And as for Korriban- well, I just kinda figured all the Dark Jedi would be at the Academy.”

I stared at her in disbelief. “Okay, one: you are a kid. And two: really? What, you really thought none of them would ever visit the town that was no more than a short walk away?”

It was the wrong frakking thing to say. I knew it as the damn words spilled out of my mouth, and yet I didn’t have the smarts to stop them. Mission’s face darkened in a thunderous scowl, her light eyes spitting sparks at me. But she was so frustratingly naïve. And while it was endearing, to a point, it was also dangerous – considering the little I knew of Dad’s quest. He wasn’t exactly bringing her to the safest of places.

“I’m sorry,” I muttered, looking away and feeling as awkward as frakk. “I didn’t- I don’t want to fight. Sorry. Look, can we just forget I said that?”

I stared blindly at a nearby wroshyr tree, barely registering a cloud of mites as they lazily circled around me before moving away. The uncomfortable silence needled after awhile, and I chanced a glance back to her. She was still glaring at me.

“Kid,” Mission groused. “What are you, like twenty years old or something?”

“I’m sixteen,” I told her, crossing my arms. “What are you, like twelve or something?”

“I’m almost sixteen,” Mission claimed, tossing her head and turning away. “So if I’m a kid, then that pretty much makes you one as well.” And with that she started walking – away from me, away from the starport, and towards the various Czerka stalls that opened up into a marketplace of sorts on the other side of the courtyard.

I couldn’t stop a grin as Mission walked away. She was… certainly interesting, and I was pretty glad to hear we were the same age, more or less. I didn’t let her go far before I chased after her. She shot me a look I couldn’t quite decipher as we neared the first stall – manned by a Czerka-clad Ithorian leaning over a table laden with small plasticeel boxes. They all held disposable hypoderms in varying quantities.

I leaned closer to read the labels, and realized they were all stimulants. The Ithorian gave us a disinterested grunt. *Probably thinks we’re too young to have a decent amount of creds.* Mission wrinkled her nose and we both turned away to canvas the area.
It was a sterile sort of place. I remembered the colourful weekly markets I’d attended on Telos when we’d lived out in the country. Even the capital city, Thani, held bright retail displays of hawkers and vendors out in force each fifth-day. I could recall the smell more than anything – different roasted foodstuffs or fried delicacies that were always the highlight of the outing.

To the right I spotted a stall selling wrapped protein bars. It wasn’t the same.

“Sheesh,” Mission complained. “This place looks boring. I wonder who they’re even selling to.”

“Mercenaries,” I said slowly. The sentients wandering through the stalls all had a combat-ready look to them, those that weren’t overtly grasping blaster rifles. They looked a lot more like mercs than traders or tourists. It seemed everyone on Kashyyyk wandered around openly armed. There weren’t any Wookiees, I noticed. They had a reputation for keeping to themselves, and clearly had no interest in mingling with off-worlders.

Mission bore a slightly surprised look on her face as we moved deeper into the marketplace. “What would mercs be doing on Kashyyyk?”

I shrugged. “I dunno, but all of these stalls are geared towards them. Look – armour, supplies, weapons… this is a pop-up trading post just for them.”

We quietened as we neared a couple of Rodians speaking to a stall-owner in halting Basic.

“Sector D4H is infested with katarn,” one was stuttering, his large eyes gazing fixedly on the sent manning the stall. “But there is also a lot of tach, which means a lot of credits.”

“If this poison can wipe out the katarn in an area,” the other added, “then we can process the tach. We are talking large profits here, Gem, for us all.”

"Not mercs," Mission hissed. "Hunters. Czerka-hired scum." She spat the last words out, and I saw her fists clench into tight balls at her sides. Her angry gaze snapped back to meet mine, before she whirled on the spot and strode off blindly, deeper into the marketplace. I blinked, momentarily surprised at her sudden getaway.

“Mission – wait!” I called, running after her through the crowd. “What’s going on? What’s got you so upset?”

Mercs or hunters – I honestly didn’t see the frakking difference. Half the time mercs were hunters. The only thing to differentiate between them was that mercs got paid to do a job, while hunters found their payment from their kill.

Mission had a mulish look on her face as I caught up. She glanced at me sideways, and I saw a touch of sadness in her eyes. She huffed. "Look, it’s just that this is Big Z’s homeworld, alright? And Czerka’s here to strip it of resources and make as many grubby credits as they can.”

“Sure,” I said slowly, not really sure at all. “But that’s what they do, right? That’s what any business does.”

“But this is Kashyyyk!” she burst out. There were small spots of red on her cheeks. “This ain’t what the Wookiees want for their planet. They live together with the plants and animals, they don’t go around killing things for money!”

I frowned. “So why don’t they stop Czerka then?”

She deflated at my words, staring at me mutely for a second before answering. “I dunno,” she said
sadly. “But I get the feeling it’s worse now than when Big Z left.”

I wondered why he was still back on the *Ebon Hawk*, and not out here on his homeworld. Why would he hide out, rather than walk outside on his homeworld again?

“Well, Czerka’s pretty entrenched in this place.” I glanced backwards; the imposing control tower was still visible, with the large docking bays above casting shadows over the small marketplace. Further afield, I could see another control tower with the same arrangement of landing pads around it. “I can’t see them leaving Kashyyyk any time soon.”

We walked in silence for a little longer, eyeing over the stalls we passed, but not getting close enough to attract attention from any seller. The Ithorian earlier had ignored us because of our appearance rather than age, I realized. Mission and I both wore loose clothing and lacked any sort of armour or weaponry. We looked like add-ons from a spacer’s planet-side trip, rather than hunters about to comb the depths of Kashyyyk. It was the hunters they were interested in selling to, the hunters that their stock was aimed at.

The market ended sooner that I thought, near the edge of the permacrete platform that didn’t even have a railing to advertise the fatal drop below. I made sure to stay a good metre away, and saw Mission staring at me. She had that curious look again.

“How long were you on Korriban for?” she asked, her voice high with interest.

“Four years,” I said, feeling my shoulders bunch uncomfortably. The first two years hadn’t been all bad, but everything had derailed after that. Now – I was away from there, and that was good – but I hated feeling so frakking directionless and uncertain. And I hated talking about it. “How long were you on Taris?”

“My whole life, I guess,” she replied, shrugging. She seemed so easy and carefree, and I envied her equanimity. “My good-for-nothing brother used to say he smuggled us to Taris in the cargo hold of a freighter, but he always liked to make up wild stories, y’know? I don’t remember anything but Taris from when I was young.”

I didn’t know Mission had a brother. I wanted to ask, but a cloud crossed her face as she spoke of him. I had the feeling it was a sensitive topic - and I didn’t want to piss her off. Again. “Why’d you follow Dad off Taris? I mean, he told me how Zaalbar swore his life to Jen, but you were with a swoop gang, right? Why didn’t you stay?”

Near us, a wooden path led away from the suspended marketplace to another permacrete foundation that held a handful more stalls. The air was warm and humid, and Mission was still staring at me, like I was some sort of puzzle to solve. Black leather bands wrapped around her headtails in a decorative fashion, and her brown eyes were wide and guileless.

“I guess I followed Big Z,” she said slowly. “He’s my best friend. I mean, the Beks woulda looked after me, and I feel bad I never had a chance to tell them where I was going…” she trailed off. “They probably think I died in the Sith bombing. Those that are still alive, anyway. I wish I coulda let them know I survived.”

“Regrets suck,” I muttered. “I wish I’d never blamed Mekel for- for- well, uh, it’s not important now, but I wish I’d trusted him.”

“Mekel – that’s your cute friend, right?” Mission asked, and I tensed. Mekel was three years older than me, and Selene once said he was the best looking sent on Korriban. I wasn’t sure if she’d been teasing or not, but I’d always been worried he’d make a move on her. “He told me to give you
another chance.”

I blinked, startled, and my eyes shot back to hers. *Mekel spoke to Mission?* The only time that could have been was just after I’d first entered the *Ebon Hawk*. When Mission had recognized me and screamed at me, and Dad had forced me inside.

“Mekel’s a better friend than I deserve, I think,” I said slowly.

Mission grinned, and nudged me. “Let’s go check out those last few stalls, and then we’d better head back, okay?”

She began to walk onto the short wooden path that connected the courtyards, and I couldn’t help but smile at her back before following. “Who do you think will yell the loudest?” I commented, as we closed in on the remaining stalls. “Your Wookiee or my dad?”

But Mission had stopped ahead of me with an audible gasp. As I stepped to her side, I could see her eyes had narrowed and her skin had paled.

“That can’t be what I think it is,” she whispered, and I followed her gaze to the furthest stall. It was next to a half-dozen cages.

All of them held at least one large, hair-covered, shackled sentient.

“Slavery,” I muttered, my mouth twisting.

“No way, that’s not right!” Mission seethed. “Wookiees *hate* slavery! I mean, it’s totally against their way of life! They’d *never* ship any of their people off to be slaves!”

“Maybe it’s just their criminals?” I guessed with a shrug. “I mean, that’s the normal practice isn’t it? Sell the bad guys off?”

Mission shot me a look of scathing disbelief. “What utter tripe. D’ya really think that’s why so many Twi’leks are slaves?”

“Uh, no.” I flushed in embarrassment. That hadn’t occurred to me. Dancing girls and joyboys were often born into that life, or so Mekel had told me once.

She shook her head, still scowling with anger. “Wookiees exile their criminals. They don’t sell them. Or at least, they didn’t,” she muttered, and resumed walking. Her gaze stayed fixed on the cages, but I glanced furtively around, trying to get a sense of our surroundings. There were less hunters here, and only a few remaining stalls. The slaver wandering in front of the cages stared at us in derision as we neared the first cage.

Chrome restraints were immediately obvious on all of the Wookiees’ paws, locking them together in the front. All but one of the slaves were hunched in a seating position. Mission strode directly to the standing Wookiee, who was taller and darker-haired than Zaalbar. He had an older look to him, even if I couldn’t pinpoint exactly why.

Mission folded her arms and stared up at the Wookiee. His black eyes were fixed on her, but they looked desolate and dull.

“How come a Wookiee is a slave on Kashyyyk?” she demanded.

He didn’t answer, but the slaver did. “Hey! No talking to the merchandise,” the Human grumbled as he stalked over. “I don’t want any of them things upset. Get away, unless you have the creds to buy
Mission’s eyes flashed in annoyance. “It ain’t a crime to talk, is it?”

My stomach tensed as a belligerent scowl twisted on the older man’s face. I made a split-second decision, and pulled lightly on the Force before speaking.

“She means no harm,” I said, feeling my words drop heavily in the pungent air. “She is only talking, and will be gone soon. You do not need to be concerned.”

The Human snorted. “Well, I guess if you’re only talking then I don’t need to be worried.” He spun on his heel and walked away.

Mission was looking at me in suspicion, and I felt my shoulders hunch.

“I’m not sure I like it when you lot do that,” she said quietly. “I mean—sure—it’s handy, but it kinda feels like you can make people do anything you want. And that’s a bit scary in the wrong hands.”

I shook my head. “No, that was just a simple mind trick, Mission. It worked on him because he’s bored and not interested in you, anyway. If he thought you were any sort of threat then I wouldn’t have been good enough.” It’d been a favourite game on Korriban, to trick free drinks from the cantina’s staff. Mekel had been good at it. “As for getting sents to do anything you want—well, that’s compulsion. Only really powerful masters are good enough for that sort of thing.”

“Poor Big Z,” Mission whispered, looking down briefly. I wondered what she meant, but she’d already turned back to the caged Wookiee. I hoped he could understand Basic.

“Why are there Wookiee slaves?” Mission asked again, and the Wookiee huffed but didn’t reply. Mission frowned. “My best friend is from Rwookrrorro. He said his people never enslaved each other, that slavery was one of the worst things in the galaxy.”

The Wookiee howled at that, a long incomprehensible answer that had Mission nodding.

“But why?” she answered. “I mean, why weren’t you exiled instead?”


I glanced back over to the slaver, who was scowling at us again while Mission kept talking. The mind-trick wouldn’t last long, I realized in dismay. He looked ready to come back over and yell at us again.

“Hundreds?” Mission squeaked. “But—but that’s awful! Big Z won’t stand for this!” The Wookiee grunted, and Mission shook her head. “No, his real name’s Zaalbar, he never wanted to leave—”

She was cut off by a more ferocious howl, and I was distracted by a heavy hand clapping on my shoulder.

“You kids are in trouble,” a gravelly voice said. It sounded amused.

Mission was still firing rapid questions at the captive, the slaver was now striding towards us with a thunderous glower, and I turned to see bloody Ordo staring at me with a shark-ugly grin on his face.

“Time to head back before your Dad gets his jockeys in a twist,” the Mandalorian commented, dropping his hand and looking over to Mission. “Oy, Mission! Get your scrawny blue butt over
“Canderous!” Mission cried, turning around and stepping towards him. “These ronto-turds are enslaving Wookiees!”

Ordo lifted one heavyset brow in bored inquiry, before heading back through the marketplace with Mission in tow, who was still exclaiming at him. I followed silently in their wake. It was obvious Mission was upset by the slaves, but she held such a rosy, unrealistic view of the galaxy - she didn't really understand that rotten things like slavery were standard practice on any planet. Sometimes I thought it would have been better if no one had ever evolved beyond meaningless grunting.

I was more worried about Dad. I wasn't going back to that frakking Jedi, but I didn't really want to have a screaming row, either.

“Czerka are shipping hundreds of them off-world, Canderous,” Mission spluttered. “That ain't right. These guys in the cages are just the old ones they're selling as curiosities. It's sick!”

“It’s slavery, kid,” Ordo grunted. “It’s the same galaxy-wide.”

“Not on Kashyyyk, you old geezer,” Mission fumed, and I glanced at Ordo in startlement but he merely shot her an amused grin. Somehow, I didn't think I'd get the same reaction if I dared called him that. “Czerka is rotten to the core. Someone needs to stop them.”

The humour slid from the Mandalorian’s face like chocha pudding as introspection took its place. “Huh. Czerka don’t usually dabble in slavery, they’d be stepping on the toes of the Exchange and the littler syndicates if they did.” His granite eyes gained a thoughtful gleam as he stared ahead. “I wonder if they’re trying to branch out. Czerka Corp and the Exchange have been at loggerheads recently.”

“I don’t give a mynock’s tail about that,” Mission snapped tartly. “I gotta talk to Big Z. His evil brother has kicked his dad down to the Shadowlands.”

I blinked, and Canderous stopped walking, turning to face Mission with narrowed eyes. “His brother must be someone important, then.” Mission didn’t reply, but the mulish pout on her face was answer enough. The Mandalorian smirked. “The Shadowlands, huh? I can’t see Zaalbar staying on the Ebon Hawk if that’s true.”

“It’s true,” Mission muttered. “As true as the hundred or so Wookiees imprisoned in a Czerka freighter on docking bay F4.”

Ordo’s brows shot up, and mine did the same. He laughed; a short, harsh sound. “Let’s go talk to your Wookiee then. I have a feeling our life is about to get a whole lot more interesting.”

xXx
Revan sat on the floor, hands wrapped around her knees, her eyes closed and her face shiny with sweat. Master Zhar had been shielding her, but it was obvious that pain was still bleeding out to her through the bond.

_Bastila is being tortured._

Kel and Dak did not understand. The former wore an anxious expression, appearing ill at ease as he leaned back against the wicker-lashed wall of Master Zhar’s humble dwelling. Dak glanced between me and Revan suspiciously, his dark eyes narrowing with questions I did not think he would hold back for much longer.

I had not explained any of it to Dak. Not the Star Maps, not the mind-link between Bastila and Revan, and certainly nothing about Revan’s mind or background or true identity.

It had taken us all by surprise; Revan collapsing on the wooden path, clutching at her head as an agonized scream rent from her lungs. Master Zhar had been quick to materialize next to her, but it had taken him some time to truly assist, and even longer to move us all to his lodgings.

I dearly wished I could have aided her, but my talents had always been with the more physical aspects of the Force. I would not have known where to start.

“If you can hold that barrier in place then it will provide a buffer against emotions that intense.” Master Zhar was crouching in front of her, red-skinned hands resting gently on her knees.

“Emotions,” Revan scoffed, her eyes still squeezed shut. “I should be able to help. I should be able to push back through the bond rather than hiding behind a shield like a frelling coward.” There was a pained frown on her face, which was still unnaturally pale.

“Travelling through a mind-link in that manner is dangerous,” Master Zhar cautioned. “And it also requires the power and discipline of a Jedi who has truly mastered the psychic side of the Force.”

“Bastila did it on Korriban. Twice,” Revan bit out, her voice bordering on acidic. I saw Master Zhar’s eyes widen slightly. He did not expect that, despite Bastila’s keen knowledge and experience. I knew little of mind-links, but I was aware that the strength of theirs was considered well beyond unusual. Even telepathy - at the vast distance they could utilize it - was not overly common.

Revan’s eyes blinked open then, green and burning with fierce emotion as she pinned Master Zhar with a look. “I’ve done it once before, too. I saw through Bastila’s eyes when she was on Manaan and I was heading off-world. Mind you, I’d just taken some spice and had no idea what I was doing…”

A visible tremor twitched through Master Zhar’s face, and now he appeared somewhere between shocked and appalled as he leaned back from Revan. Dak made a coughing noise, and I, too, felt the heat of surprise. _I must find out more about bonds, for Revan’s sake. This sort of ability cannot be_
Although, really, had Revan ever been labelled normal?

“Hallucinogens or any form of pleasure drug can be dangerous for normal sentients, Jen Sahara. It is far more treacherous for Force users.” Master Zhar wore a disapproving frown; an expression I had not seen on him before, even in the time I had known him on Dantooine. “With the power that we Jedi wield, knowingly imbibing any substance that can erode self-control goes beyond reckless and deep into irresponsible.”

I glanced back to Revan; her face was etched with a thunderous scowl as she glowered at the Jedi Master. “Good thing I’m only a scholar from a backwater planet, right Master Jedi?”

I stifled a gasp at the vitriol laced in her words, all too aware of the shaky ground this conversation was heading onto. Revan knew something, she suspected something, and I wished she had confided in me. The intonation of her angry words implied a strong disbelief in Jen Sahara’s identity, something I had already known but had feared to raise in conversation.

I had promised myself that I would not lie to her, but I had also promised Bastila I would not divulge details without prompting. So I did not initiate the topic, and neither had Revan.

What must she be thinking? How can she trust anyone, if she believes all that she knows is a lie? I wished, now, that I had said something – at the least, so she would understand my loyalty to her was absolute. But I worried, too, for the state of her mind when she finally understood the whole of it. The mental fractures she bore had been evident since I had first encountered her.

“This is a conversation for later,” Master Zhar murmured, his face gentling in concern. “Although, please believe me when I say that I mean you no harm.” He sighed, and briefly touched her knee again. “You must refrain from reaching through your mind-link in that manner. It can strengthen your Force connection with Bastila, but it also creates a dependency that deepens with every contact. Not only can it become difficult to pull back into one's body, but bond-mates with that level of Force intimacy do not always survive each other’s death.”

The anger fled from Revan’s face as she stared at Zhar in growing alarm. I felt my mouth open in surprise, and wondered whether Bastila knew of this. She must. This is her area of expertise. Yet she had knowingly reached out when Revan was trapped by Jorak Uln. And Revan had said that was not the only time.

“I must collect Master Vrook and Master Quatra,” Zhar said in a quiet voice, rising to his feet. “I shall not be long. Please, do not leave these lodgings.”

The Twi'lek master exited silently. The door was made of many fine branches, lashed together by a type of flax twine that was likely a plant native to Kashyyyk. I imagined the temperature on this planet must stay relatively ambient, for these buildings could not be easy to heat.

An awkward quiet settled on us all. Revan closed her eyes once more, obviously uninterested in any form of conversation. Dak stared at me, a thousand questions on his dark-skinned Human face. He opened his mouth more than once, as if uncertain what to ask. Finally, after several long minutes, he turned an irritated scowl on Revan.

“So, Jen.” Dak’s voice had Revan acknowledging him with a flat stare. “You’re Force-bonded to Bastila Shan. That’s… how did that happen?”

Revan’s mouth twisted. “She saved my life, once. I understand that’s how it was created, but I don’t have any memory of it… or much else, really.”
I struggled to keep the surprise from my face. I’d not had any chance to speak to Bastila, not since we landed on Korriban. She must have said something to Revan, something more than the web of half-truths she had grudgingly parted with on Tatooine. It could not have been easy for Bastila, though. Revan was not exactly co-operating then. I remembered that conversation. I remembered Revan’s state of mind. I had not known her true identity, then.

“Huh,” Dak said, his voice non-committal. “Still, Bastila Shan. What’s that like?”


“Jen,” I rebuked, and she turned to shoot me a dry look. I sighed softly. “How is Bastila?”

“Unconscious,” she bit out, her face tightening. “Don’t ask me for more details, Juhani, because all I can tell you was that she was being hurt. A lot.”

The uncomfortable silence stretched out again, although it was not long before a gentle knock on the door preceded the return of Master Zhar. Following in his wake was my old master.

I scrambled to my feet, nervousness trembling like flutter-gnats in my stomach. Quatra looked the same as always, tall and imposing, clad in brown robes with the hood thrown back from her horn-lined head. But there was an openness to her expression I had never seen, a concerned grief that sharpened as her olive-green eyes landed on me.

“Juhani,” she sighed, and strode into the room before embracing me. I blinked, feeling stiff and awkward in her grasp, my gaze meeting Revan’s over my old master’s shoulder. Her eyes, a similar shade to Quatra’s, darkened with suspicion as she glared at the Jedi’s back.

Quatra pulled back, and I tried to firm my tremulous smile. There were words I had to say to my old master, and I would hold on to the strength needed to utter them. I could not go back to the way things were once before.

“Padawan,” she murmured. “It warms my heart to see you again.”

“Master Quatra,” I returned. “It is good to see you too.”

I wondered if she picked up on something in my intonation, for her brown Zabrakian skin darkened, and her gaze slid from mine to rest on Dak. Her expression stilled.

“Dak Vesser,” she acknowledged. Her voice had cooled to a forced neutrality. “Welcome back.”

Dak had once resented the hold my old master held over me, and disliked her because of it. She would have been aware of his opinion, as Dak had never been adept at concealing his emotions. Whilst Quatra, in return, had no patience for those who struggled to exhibit the composure and level-headedness expected of a Jedi.

I could only hope that Dak’s second chance with the Jedi would not be affected by his interactions with her.

Dak gave her a perfunctory nod of greeting, and Quatra glanced at Kel before turning a look my way that was half-order. Her lips thinned. “Perhaps you would be so kind as to introduce me to your other companion, Padawan.”

The frosty manner was so familiar it made my heart ache. “This is Kel Algwinn, Master Quatra,” I answered, striving to keep my voice level. “He was a student at the Sith Academy on Korriban, and
wishes to join the Jedi.”

Master Quatra recognized him with a minute nod of the head, before turning to face Master Zhar. I noticed she did not acknowledge Revan at all. She knows, I thought with a chill. Revan may not have been trained on Dantooine, but Bastila - her bond-sister, her captor, her rescuer - had. Likely every master from my old Enclave knew exactly who Jen Sahara was.

“Vrook is waiting in the hall,” Quatra told Zhar. “Vandar will be landing within the hour, if he is not here already. Let us all move there now.”

Master Vandar. I did not realize he was coming here. Vandar and Vrook together were the heart of the Dantooine Council. Their power and authority was not to be taken lightly. I felt a shiver of foreboding and the hairs on my neck stood up. My gaze slid to Revan. The mistrust was blatant on her face.

“Jen Sahara and I will follow shortly,” Master Zhar said in a mild voice. I glanced over to him, but the Twi’lek looked as calm and composed as ever. “Go and acquaint the others with Vrook. We will not be long.”

There was obvious disapproval on Quatra’s face, but Zhar’s authority must have outranked hers. They were equals, from what I knew – both masters, yet not Council members - however Quatra conceded under his resoluteness, and motioned to the rest of us. “Come with me.” Her voice was terse and commanding, and she swept out of the room expecting us to follow.

Kel did. Dak shot me a look before I waved him onward, turning back to face Zhar.

“A word please, Master Zhar,” I said, motioning outside. Revan frowned at me, obviously puzzled. “It is fine,” I told her softly, hoping the words were not a lie. “I shall see you soon, Jen.” The suspicion in her gaze cut to my heart, and I could only hope none of it was directed at me.

What must she be thinking? How much does she know? I wondered if she recalled anything of the holorecording in the Korriban Archives. I feared for her sanity. My eyes slid to Zhar, and my thoughts turned to the three other masters on Kashyyyk.

I feared for her safety, also.

Master Zhar followed me silently outside of the humble room. I could see Quatra further down a wooden ramp that led toward more Wookiee lodgings. She was staring at us impatiently, with Kel and Dak in her shadow. Even at this distance, the disapproval on her face was evident. Kel and Dak stood behind her.

“Speak, Padawan,” Zhar urged, his voice quiet yet insistent. The others were out of earshot, but my old master looked ready to stride back to me and hurry me along forcibly, if required. Zhar, in contrast, appeared relaxed and unruffled, his stance casual and his lekku looped casually around his neck. And yet he must be anything but. “Master Quatra will not wait for long.”

“Swear to me on the Code that you will not harm her.” My voice came out in a hiss that surprised me, low and fierce with emotion. “Swear to me that you will not do anything further to her mind. I shall not leave her side unless you do so.”

Master Zhar’s mouth opened slightly, and at first he appeared at a loss for words. Then, to my surprise, the smallest of smiles emerged. It grew into a genuine expression of delight. “Your loyalty does you credit, Juhani,” he said at last. “And I vow, upon the Jedi Code and the will of the Force, that I shall do my utmost to return Revan to the Light, without resorting to any form of mental
manipulation.”

Revan. The name out in the open now. “You are going to tell her?” I asked.

Master Zhar nodded. “There are others who do not approve.” His gaze flickered, ever so briefly, to my old master. “If you happen to engage Vrook and Quatra in lengthy conversation it would aid me. I do not desire any interruption.”

My eyes widened as I understood his meaning. Vrook. Vandar. Quatra. Do they mean to do something to Revan? Do they mean to erase her returning memory? They could not, surely they could not – after all that had happened and how far she had come-

Master Zhar did not break my horrified gaze. His indigo eyes stared solemnly at me, conveying a silent message I was not sure I understood.

I did not know Zhar well, but he had transferred to Dantooine a year or so before I had left. He was widely regarded as a kind and gentle master, who had failed terribly with his padawan.

Malak Devari. Revan’s lover and closest ally, once.

I wanted to tell Zhar, then, about Revan’s reaction to the holo-recording she had seen of herself, and the fractures I knew were in her mind – but I heard the impatient footsteps of Master Quatra close in on us. Our time was up. Master Zhar gifted me a benevolent smile.

“We are all glad of your return, Padawan,” he murmured. “I shall see you again soon.”

I nodded, turned, and walked back to my old master’s side.

xXx

The room Master Quatra led us to was larger than Master Zhar’s lodgings, and overwhelmingly bare. I understood why she referred to it as a hall. Master Vrook sat on a bench against the side of the room, his sharp eyes landing on me as I entered.

His face was lined with raw grief. Master Zhar must have imparted the news to him.

“Where’s Zhar?” he demanded, looking to the door behind us.

“Zhar is talking with Jen Sahara. He won’t be long,” Quatra answered. The disapproval cooled her voice, which had twisted on the false name. Vrook grunted irritably, and stood. I wondered if he meant to leave, meant to go to Zhar.

“Master Vrook,” I hailed, steeling my courage and walking toward him. I gave him a short bow of acknowledgment.

His gaze fell on me again. I had kept to myself on Dantooine, and did not often have dealings with masters other than Quatra. But I was as aware of Vrook’s reputation as I had been of Zhar’s – Vrook was known to be cantankerous and difficult to please, irritable with any failings, and held exceptionally high standards. Dak had once described him as an ornery, masculine version of Quatra, which I had not appreciated at the time. Upon reflection, I could now acknowledge some similarities.

I had lived on Dantooine for years, in the same building as Master Vrook. Surely I could find a topic of conversation to delay him somewhat.

The thought was nerve-wracking and bordered on seditious. But I knew, now, that the masters were
divided on Revan - and Zhar had essentially requested my aid on her behalf. There was a hard knot of unease in my stomach.

“I’ll be honest, Padawan,” Vrook was saying. “I didn’t expect to see you again.”

I took that one on the chin. If I had not encountered Revan, I did not know what my fate would have become either. “I did not plan to return, Master. But I confess myself glad beyond words that Jen Sahara found me.” Vrook’s face tightened at that, and I could see real anger simmering in the depths of his dark eyes. I softened my voice. “Both Jen and Bastila have aided me significantly during our journey.”

Vrook looked away.

“I understand you were on Tatooine, Padawan,” Quatra intervened, walking to my side. Her voice remained impassive, and her expression was guarded. I wondered if she regretted showing any emotion earlier. “We have been told that Jen Sahara returned you to the Light. How is that… how did that happen?”

I breathed in through my nostrils. I could remember the dusty smell of the Tatooine Dune Sea, the never-ending heat, and the solitude I had crave only to find it did not ease the burning grief and anger. “I happened upon her and two of our crewmates. I did not take kindly to sentients chancing upon me, particularly not ones with Force sensitivity. So I attacked.”

The silence with thick with anticipation. I chanced a look at Dak, whose eyes were fixed intently on mine, wide and curious.

“I almost killed her. She… she was struggling with what little she could recall of the Force. But she prevailed, in the end, and granted me mercy despite my baiting.” I did not plan on expounding the details here – Revan may not have cut me down, but it had been a near thing. If I had faced her away from Mission or Zaalbar, I suspected the end would have been different.

We had both been close to killing each other, that day.

I cleared my throat. “She spoke some truths that made me look at my actions in a different light… that made me realize perhaps all was not lost. And then she took me to Bastila, who cemented those realizations.”

Quatra sent Vrook a loaded look, before turning her attention back to me. “Well. I imagine there is much to reflect on, Padawan.” She paused. “My shuttle is already loaded and ready to leave this planet. You and your companions from Korriban must make haste to farewell the others you travelled with, and then we shall depart for Coruscant.”

My stomach clenched. I had expected this, but her presumption still galled, a little. It should not. She sees herself as my master, which she was for many years. “Has the Star Map been found?”

Quatra’s lips pursed, and she fired another glance at Vrook. “That is no longer your concern, Padawan.”

“I opened the Star Map on Manaan,” I returned, pleased to hear my voice solid and steady. “I was there for the Map on Tatooine. I have been with Bastila and Jen for long enough now that this is just as much my quest as theirs.”

A noise akin to a growl came from Master Vrook. “If that’s true, then why didn’t you follow the directive on Manaan?” he accused, his voice dark with simmering anger. “The Ebon Hawk was ordered to travel to Kashyyyk, and I’ve heard how injured Bastila was from Hrakert Station. She
was in no state to ensure orders were being followed. I know exactly whose crackpot idea it would’ve been to travel to Korriban!”

I blinked, momentarily taken aback. “We found the Star Map, Master Vrook,” I reminded him.

“You lost Bastila Shan!” he hollered back. His voice echoed through the long room. “If that cursed Jen Sahara had only gone to Kashyyyk, then Bastila would be here right now, instead of in the hands of Darth Malak!”

He had a right to his grief and his anger, and I reminded myself that Vrook had only just learned of Bastila’s capture. But I could not let Revan take the blame for this. “Jen did everything right on Korriban,” I argued. “We could not have prevailed without her. We have the Star Map. The Sith Academy is leaderless and in ruins, because of her. She rescued Belaya-”

Vrook snorted, cutting in over me. “And yet, if what Zhar told me is true, Belaya Linn is still dead.”

I winced.

“Hey, hey,” Dak muttered, walking to my side. He grasped my hand and gave it a quick squeeze. “Belaya’s death is the fault of Uthar Wynn, and no one else. Certainly not Jen Sahara. Look, I don’t get what’s going on between you all, but from my viewpoint it was obvious that Jen was pivotal to the success of your mission. Shavit, even Yuthura Ban has a chance for a better life now!”

I felt my jaw clench in resolution. “If we had gone to Kashyyyk first, do you really believe Darth Malak would have left Korriban unguarded?” I whispered. I did not wish to be confrontational, but Revan’s strategy had made sound sense. “Our one chance to infiltrate the Sith Academy was then, when everyone believed we were on our way here.”

“Your logic would have the Sith here on Kashyyyk, waiting for you, while you were on Korriban. So why then, Padawan, are they not here?” Vrook asked coldly.

I paused. Revan had been adamant the communiqué would have been intercepted, routed through Manaan Republic channels the way it was. Perhaps she had merely been weighing the risks. “I do not know, Master,” I said slowly. “But I do believe every delay would have proportionally decreased the chances of success on Korriban - a Sith-controlled planet. Malak attacked Dantooine to obliterate the Master Star Map. He sent an assassin to destroy the Star Map on Tatooine. It would have taken him little effort to either fortify Korriban or eradicate the Map there. It is likely that complacency is the only reason he has not – the belief we were coming here first.” I motioned outward with my hands, struggling not to quail under Vrook’s glower.

I had always been steadfast and passionate in my beliefs, but the authority and opinions of the masters was something I had never outwardly challenged. Quatra was staring at me strangely.

“So you agreed with Korriban, then,” Vrook muttered, his lip curling.

“I gave a brief shake of my head. “No… no, I feared the danger of the Dark Side that is so prevalent on Korriban - even as I understood Jen’s argument.”

“So why, pray, did you go then?” Vrook scoffed, his brows knitting in renewed anger. “Bastila would not have agreed. And yet, you still let Jen Sahara lead you? With you both against, and knowing who she is?”

There was a sick feeling in my gut, and I could only hope that Dak would not question me on Vrook’s words later. “We held a vote,” I said, forcing my voice to remain neutral.
“A vote?” Quatra injected. She sounded incredulous. “What, like a democracy?”

“Democracy,” Vrook repeated. His voice was flat with disbelief. “An Order-led mission allowed their next objective to be decided by a vote of hands? You can’t mean… surely not from completely uninterested parties like your Mandalorian mercenary?”

I took a deep breath in before answering. “We have all worked together, Master Vrook. We are all part of the same team. And every single member of the *Ebon Hawk* has proved invaluable to our success – Mandalorian mercenaries included.” I did not drop my gaze from his angry one. “Bastila would not have escaped Taris were it not for Canderous Ordo. Or Jen Sahara.”

Quatra sighed irritably. “Enough. I do not wish to stay on this planet any longer, Vrook. The Sith will have heard about Korriban, and their eye will turn to Kashyyyk.” Her green eyes frowned at me. “Move your belongings to my ship now, and organize your farewells.”

“We have a body to bury first,” Dak cut in. “We must find a resting place for Belaya.”

“What?” Vrook snapped. “You’ve brought her corpse here?”

Master Zhar had not told him everything, it seemed. Belaya’s body rested back in the corner of Zhar’s room - I did not think Quatra had noticed it when she entered.

I took in another gulp of air. “We could not leave her behind,” I said quietly. “Not in that place.”

“She is the reason I am here, the reason I came back,” Dak added. He shot me a supportive glance. “Her and Juhani.”

Vrook grunted. “Sentimental and pointless. Belaya Linn is one with the Force, no matter what happens to her body.”

I stiffened, and he raised a brow as if daring me to object. My displeasure was likely apparent. And while there may have been some sense to his words, I had not been able to leave her body out in the open of a desecrated Sith Academy. Belaya deserved a better resting place, and an acknowledgment of her life.

“Nevertheless,” I said finally. “It is done, now, and so we need to do something with her body.”

Vrook didn’t answer, but just remained staring at me fixedly. There was a slight loosening of the frown that creased his face, an almost infinitesimal nod.

“I am not interested in delays,” Quatra grumbled. “There is nothing to be served with some meaningless ritual that we cannot know if Belaya Linn even desired.”

Vrook harrumphed. “Closure has its place for all sentients, Quatra.” His eyes rested briefly on Dak before returning to me. “Fortunately, the Wookiees in *Rwookrrro* are more easily bought than they once were. A quick trip down to the Shadowlands to bury and pay homage to Knight Belaya Linn will take no more than an afternoon, and won’t cost me many more credits than I’ve already thrown at Chuundar.”

An annoyed sound whistled from Quatra. “Fine. You organize it, Vrook. Juhani, Dak, Kel, come with me to the starport. We shall organize your farewells now-”

“Master,” I interrupted. The flutter-gnats in my stomach were a swarm, now. Quatra turned a fierce look on me. “I shall not be going with you, Master Quatra.”
There was a flicker of emotion that tightened her expression, before her eyes narrowed with what I believed was disappointment. I had the old instinct to please her, to bend to her will - desires that ran deep enough that I felt the shame of them. For no one else would I humble myself so, and I should not for her. *I am stronger than this. Master Quatra may be a wise Jedi, but that does not mean she knows my path. The blind adoration I once felt for her is nothing more than the foolish desires of a girl who did not understand true love.* I lifted my chin. *I have outgrown this.*

“Padawan,” she said icily. “Do not be preposterous. We will speak of your failed trials at another time. For now you shall do as I say.”

“Master Quatra,” I said softly. This had nothing to do with my trials, not really, even as I understood why she might think so. “I admire and respect you, but you are no longer my master. I stand on my own, now, and I follow the mission of the *Ebon Hawk.*”

Again, there was a visible tremor in Quatra’s face, and this time I recognized it. *Hurt.* No matter her cold manner, I could recognize that she cared for me on some level. The observation soothed the pain of the past; at least, a little.

“You are angling for an apology,” Quatra accused, and her voice had turned bitter. “I expected the outcome of your trials even less than you did, Padawan, but you forget your place. You are a padawan of the Jedi Order, and *I* am your master!”

“You mistake my motivations, Master Quatra,” I answered. This time, I would not let my emotions derail. This time, I would speak my thoughts in a calm and detached manner. My confidence grew as I held her furious gaze. “This has nothing to do with my trials, nor do I blame you in any part for them. But I do not believe I am the right padawan for you.”

Revan had once said Quatra was the wrong master for me. Perhaps she was correct. Quatra’s expression didn’t budge, and I sighed. “It is more than that, though. I am part of this mission, whether you or Master Vrook like it or not. Too often have you told me about the will of the Force, about destiny, about there being no such thing as coincidence… well, I do not believe it was chance that crossed my path with Jen Sahara’s. My place is with her mission until it is over.”

“*Her* mission?” Vrook interjected, his voice low and dangerous.

“Padawans do not decide where they go, Juhani.” Quatra’s voice had lost the anger, now. In fact, it seemed flat and overly neutral as her gaze pinned mine. I could not tell what she was thinking. “If you insist on staying with the crew of the *Ebon Hawk,* then you cannot be counted as a padawan of the Order any longer.”

Vrook snorted. “And Jen Sahara may very well never leave Kashyyyk. You and the *Ebon Hawk* may find yourselves grounded here while others finish what Bastila started.”

My eyes closed, and I felt a sinking feeling in my chest. I had feared this. I had known Quatra would insist on my leaving with her, and had understood what might eventuate from rebellion against that. *Expulsion from the Order.* And Vrook was implying… what, exactly? That the Order or the Republic would send other forces against whatever the Star Maps led to, and leave the *Ebon Hawk* behind?

It might make sense. We were only a freighter with a handful of sentients on board. But it still did not change my decision. I would stand by Revan. And if Vrook meant anything more sinister… if Zhar was correct with his implied suspicions… then I would do my utmost to help stop it.

Despite all of that, I did not think Revan’s destiny was to stay on Kashyyyk.
My eyes opened, and both Vrook and Quatra were staring at me now with inscrutable expressions. I took in a deep breath. “My place is with the Ebon Hawk and her crew,” I repeated quietly. “Whether we stay on Kashyyyk, or rescue Bastila, or go after Malak himself. My place is there. And if that means the Order no longer has a place for me…” my voice trailed off, and I felt the sting of tears at the back of my eyes. I blinked fiercely, and thumped a closed fist against my heart. “I will still be a Jedi in here. I will still hold myself to the ideals of the Jedi Order, even if I cannot name myself as a member.”

The silence in the room was complete. I kept my gaze level on Quatra’s. There was a softening around her eyes, after awhile. It took me a moment to interpret it.

Approval.

“I do believe the Order shall always have a place for you.” A faint smile curved her dark lips. “Jedi Knight Juhani.”

I blinked. I did not understand her words, at first.

A throat cleared from behind us, and in hobbled the short figure of Master Vandar. His bright blue eyes were trained on me. “Listening to this conversation, I have been,” he said. “Spoken like a Jedi Knight, Juhani has.”

There was a buzzing in my ears.

“I-I do not know what to say,” I stuttered. “I am not sure you are correct in your assessment, Masters.” I could feel the blood rushing to my face. “In truth, it was not that long ago I was lost on Tatooine. And then, I barely held it together on Hrakert Station. I-I…” My gaze slid to Dak, who was grinning at me. “I almost believed the lies of a Sith Master, and struck down an old friend.”

Dak’s expression turned solemn. “But you stopped at the crucial moment, Juhani, still believing in my guilt. And look, I told you I didn’t blame you. I don’t. I knew Uthar Wynn and his machinations all too well.”

Quatra cleared her throat. “My old padawan, we are not judging you on your past failures. We are measuring you on what you are today. While I think it foolhardy and wasteful for you to dedicate yourself to that ragtag crew Bastila Shan has assembled, I can sense your determination. You have grown from the padawan you once were.” She smiled. “I don’t believe there is more I can teach you.”

“Strong with you, the Force is,” Master Vandar added. He rubbed a three-fingered hand over his wrinkled shoulder. “Steady and resolute.”

“It seems your time away from Dantooine has done the opposite of what we all feared,” Vrook added, his voice gruff but not unkind. “I see a Jedi Knight in front of me, not a damaged padawan.”

This… this was more than I could have dreamed of. This felt like more than I deserved. But Quatra, Vrook and Vandar were all gazing at me with varying degrees of recognition, like they truly believed I was worthy of this honour.

I felt a nudge, and turned to see Dak smirking at me. “Close your mouth, Juhani.”

I felt the spark of conviction as it flickered to life within me. I could be worthy of this honour. I would be.

“Thank you,” I said softly, bowing my head. There was no great ritual to one's ascension as a Jedi
Knight, merely the acceptance of at least three masters. Usually after the completion of the Knight Trials. Perhaps, in a sense, the last year had been an extension of mine.

“I still wish to hurry,” Quatra said, her voice turning matter-of-fact. “Let us get this burial over and done with.”

“We’ll be parting ways, Juhani,” Dak muttered. I glanced at him, startled. “It’s alright,” he added, the corner of his mouth rising in a half-smile. “I think so, anyway. I’ll go back with Quatra, find my own way for a bit.”

“Are you… are you sure, Dak?” I asked. These last few weeks in hyperspace had made me realize that Dak was, truly, a good friend. And yet, once, he’d desired more. More than I had to give. *And he still struggles with the past. The Order would be a better place for him than our mission.* But, selfishly, I did not want to see the back of my old friend.

“Yeah.” There was a calm acceptance on his face. “It feels right. I need to go back to basics if I’m to honour Belaya’s request. And someone’s gotta keep Kel out of trouble.” We both glanced back at the quiet young man, who was edged against the wall of the room, plainly uncomfortable and overlooked during the conversation. What he must have thought of it I could not tell.

There was an obvious look of consternation on Kel’s face, and Dak snickered. “That was a joke, Kel.”

Master Quatra sniffed irritably, and Dak nudged me again. There was a fond smile on his face. “Come on. Before we split, we have a friend to mourn.”

xXx
The Twi’lek master didn’t speak to Juhani long; a minute, maybe, before he quietly let himself back in, while staring at me with that measuring, intent look on his damned familiar face.

I’d known him well, once. The fleeting recollection that had sparked to life when I’d disembarked the ‘Hawk suggested a strong acquaintance – one, I believed, that transcended a standard relationship between a padawan and a master who was not their own.

I’d gone on training missions with him, and there’d been an easy camaraderie between us – between us and the other man who’d been, I was beginning to think, central to my previous life.

Zhar could tell me about him, I realized in sudden surprise. I glanced at the Jedi sideways; the specifics of the memory had faded, but I was left with the strong belief that I’d trusted Zhar. I certainly hadn’t felt threatened by him – not then.

And I wanted to know what Juhani said to him. It’s probably about Belaya or Quatra. It might have nothing to do with me. But I’d been wading in secrets for months and, now that I felt like I was getting close to answers, I was torn between shaking them out of people or turning tail once again.

More than anything, I was deeply uneasy.

And then there was Bastila. Unconscious, likely having passed out from pain – which meant that she probably would be revived soon. And Zhar wanted me to hide behind a shield, away from her.

Bond-mates with that level of intimacy do not always survive each other’s death.

Could that be true? Surely Bastila would have stayed out of my head, if that was the case. But it would have meant my certain death, against Jorak. And certain exposure, against Uthar. Maybe she’d felt like she didn’t have a choice – but then, she would have said something to me about the dangers, wouldn’t she?

Unless she didn’t know? But Bastila Shan was supposed to be an expert in the matters of psychic Force powers. And yet… and yet, she was also just a padawan. And everyone keeps saying mind-links are unusual – ones the strength of ours even more so. Maybe the knowledge and understanding of them is just as unknown?

I sighed irritably at my own thoughts. I’d talk to her once she came to, at the least. I needed answers. And if there was something I could do-

“Jen,” Zhar interrupted my thoughts, his voice soft and calm. “We need to head down to the Shadowlands.”

I blinked. “The Shadowlands,” I echoed in disbelief. I could feel my eyebrows rise. “Is this before or after we dance a jerryjig with the Wookiee chieftain?”
Zhar seemed remarkably unruffled by my sass. A benign smile sat on his faded red face. “We have not yet found the final Star Map, Jen Sahara. With Bastila’s capture, your presence on Korriban will already be known. It will not be long before Darth Malak moves against Kashyyyk.”

I felt the air hiss out of my lungs in disappointment. “You don’t have the Map?” I groaned, closing my eyes. “Stars, we’d been counting on that. Do you have any leads?”

“The Shadowlands,” he repeated. “Vrook sensed a Force-user down there, someone we believe is an old friend of mine. He may be able to help.”

I felt the corners of my mouth turn down. Everything kept coming back to these damn Maps and whatever they led to. But the Shadowlands weren’t the sort of place to go to unprepared, or with the wrong people.

“Canderous,” I muttered to myself. “HK, if he’s fixed. Maybe Carth. Definitely Juhani.” I looked back to Zhar, who was now frowning. “We can be ready to go first thing tomorrow.”

“We must go now, Jen Sahara. You and I alone.”

The edginess was back, stabbing me with uncertainty, and I drew on the Force in reaction. I could feel Zhar’s aura, calm and peaceful and yet he wanted to drag me – just me – out into the wilderness. Maybe I’d trusted him once, but I wasn’t sure if I should now.

Zhar stared at me unblinking.

“What about the other masters?” I asked, my voice dropping an octave or two.

He hesitated, and I knew he was measuring his words carefully. I felt the mistrust grow, and clenched my teeth. Dammit. All I knew about this particular master was the tatty remnants of a faded memory.

Master Vrook - somewhere nearby on this planet - was Bastila’s master. Would he be more trustworthy? Would he be safer? Why wasn’t he here, demanding details of Bastila?

And that led me straight back to thoughts of my bond-sister again.

Bastila had been blocking me earlier. I was sure of it now. Once the agony had engulfed her, she’d lost control and it’d slammed through our open bond like a tidal wave. Zhar had shielded me and shown me how to replicate it – but I was not confident how well it would work.

I needed to talk to her. About so many things.

“There is much I wish to speak of, Jen Sahara. And not all of us are in agreement about the best way forward.”

My muscles clenched as the words registered. I could feel my face heat with a blend of anger and fear. He means that some of them might want to… to…

I would not be Jen Sahara again. Not for anything. But if they feared that Darth Revan would once more take over my mind, then maybe they felt the end justified the means. What’s a little mind-raping when balanced with the galactic devastation she has caused?

Not much. Unless it was your mind.

“And how do I know I can I trust you?” I bit out.
Zhar did not break my gaze. “I mean you no harm, Jen Sahara. I only wish to tell you the truth. The whole truth. And that is a subject best approached away from any possible interruptions.” Through the Force I could feel his sincerity, but emotions could be faked.

_The truth. The whole truth._ Oh, that was tempting beyond measure. But to wander out into the wilderness with no allies or backup was foolhardy. Reckless—

_Tempting._

I didn’t answer, and his composure didn’t slip at all. He seemed to realize I was struggling for a decision, as he spoke again. “I swear it upon the Jedi Code, Jen Sahara. I swear it upon the Force itself. I am your ally, and I will not harm you in any way.”

I wanted to believe him, to trust him, to follow him. And if he was genuine, then the need for haste was truly there. Quatra had not even acknowledged my presence when she’d arrived. I could have been a damn wicker chair for all the attention she paid me. Bastila had trusted and respected Master Vrook, but what did that even mean to me? Vrook might blame _me_ for her capture. After all, Korriban had been my idea.

And then there was the arrival of a third master that Quatra had mentioned, this Vandar. Juhani had looked worried when her old master dropped his name. That made three additional masters, other than Zhar. When it came to answers – and, potentially, my own safety – did it make more sense to disappear in the company of just one, who my previous self had trusted?

Or go to three, one of whom Bastila trusted? And while Vandar was an unknown, I already had a poor opinion of Quatra – who was rigid and cold enough that she’d use a padawan’s feelings against them to test their mettle, rather than show any real empathy.

_If Zhar is lying, or planning anything against me, it's possible I might have a chance against him. If I stay on my guard._ Three masters, on the other hand, was a whole other skillet of scalefish.

“Okay,” I assented, as I stood from my place on the floor. Once the decision was made, I felt a slight loosening of my shoulders. I had a way forward, and it felt right. I stared at him unflinchingly. “Let’s go. What do we need?”

_xXx_

The Wookiees in Rwookrrorro had just one elevator down to the Shadowlands. I found that odd, at first, until I remembered the Shadowlands were held sacred by the Wookiees. Access was strictly controlled by the chieftain, usually for the purposes of either exile or coming-of-age rituals. And yet, Zaalbar had uncovered a plot – six years ago, give or take – to harvest tach from the bowels of the wroshyr forest. How could an operation like that be implemented under the noses of the Wookiees?

The elevator itself was just within the large barricade that marked Rwookrrorro proper. The armed Wookiees guarding the entrance eyeballed me with dark, suspicious eyes; but allowed us entrance after a few quiet words from Zhar. One of them escorted us to the lift, where another two stood waiting. They both held bowcasters in ready grasps.

The Wookiees all had a wary, almost angry, look about them. I knew they weren’t predisposed towards outsiders, but I didn’t think the tension in the air had anything to do with our presence. The number of Wookiees overtly gripping weaponry was excessive for what was, in reality, a modest township. Rwookrrorro might be considered large by Kashyyyk standards, but galactically speaking it was a blip.
The demeanour of the Wookiees spoke of undercurrents that I did not understand. Zaalbar was reticent by nature, and I believed it to be a common characteristic of his species. But it went beyond that. The Wookiees were on edge, as if preparing for an internal threat or political schism.

Their leader. Just before Bastila’s agony had flooded through the bond - eclipsing thought of all else - I’d heard the name of their leader. Chuundar.

I stiffened in awareness, my thoughts racing, just as Zhar was motioned onto a large wooden basket that was suspended by four pulleys of thick rope. That’s Zaalbar’s corrupt brother. Sithspit, what happened to his father? Zhar turned to look at me, one brow raised in gentle inquiry, as he stood on the elevator and awaited my presence. He radiated a peaceful calm through the Force.

I threw him a tight smile and walked forward.

A dark haired Wookiee grunted, and stepped onto the platform next to us. With a dismissive flick of his paw, the elevator began its slow descent.

The light started to fade as we dropped; infinitesimally at first, but it made me aware of just how dark the bottom would be. Zhar must have picked up on my thoughts, for he gave me a small smile and cleared his throat.

“I have a couple of visors, but it would be easiest for you to remain immersed in the Force,” he said quietly. “I understand the darkness is near absolute in the Shadowlands.”

No problems there – right until Bastila wakes up again. But I gave him a short nod anyway, and my gaze slid back to the silent Wookiee, who stood on the edge of the elevator, staring away from us. Their vision was vastly superior to most sentients. I remembered in the Undercity, Zaalbar had not needed the lowlight sonic visors the rest of us wore.

“How long has Chuundar been chieftain?” I asked abruptly. Our Wookiee guard stiffened, implying some knowledge of Galactic Basic. Zhar’s gaze shifted to him before moving back to me.

“Six months,” he replied, his voice unnaturally curt.

Politics, alright. There’s been some sort of coup, or I’m a Gamorrean’s aunt.

Silence settled back on us, and my gaze slipped to the communicator resting on my wrist. I’d brought nothing with me, bar the two lightsabers on my belt. Zhar had insisted additional supplies weren’t necessary – he’d been packed and ready to go at a moment’s notice, with a large knapsack full of protein bars and whatever additional items he’d deemed necessary.

We might be doing this trip outside of the knowledge of Vrook, but there’s no reason the crew can’t know. I felt like I should trust Zhar, and yet running off blindly with him bespoke a recklessness that could be foolhardy. Well, I’m not going to ask his permission to contact my people.

I tapped on the communicator, and Zhar blinked.

“It’s Jen,” I spoke, when I heard Carth pick the signal up. “Have you found Dustil?”

::Yes, he’s here with me now,:: Carth returned. ::We’re at the ‘Hawk. Are you heading back soon?::

“Not exactly,” I muttered. Zhar’s expression was composed, and he made no move to stop me talking. “I’m going down to the Shadowlands.”

There was a pause, and I entertained myself with the image of Carth’s expression. I felt a vague
longing to have him here with me.

::When?: he asked. ::We’ll need to get kitted up, and decide who’s going to go. You sound like
there’s urgen-::


The pause was briefer, this time. ::What?: he demanded. ::Right now? You’re not serious?:

“I’m on the lift headed down as we speak,” I replied, my mouth twitching. “There’s reasons, Carth –
in a nutshell, we’ve got to get our main objective as quickly as possible.”

I heard him sigh over the comm. ::Everything I’ve heard about the place – it’s dangerous down
there, Jen. Tell me you’ve got the right equipment. Tell me you at least have some idea where to find
what you’re looking for.:.

Carth was being as circumspect as I. Wrist-comms weren’t exactly the most secure method of far-
range communication, and there were enough people out there who might try to sniff our signal. For
my part, I wasn’t sure how much I wanted the Wookiee listening in to understand.

“Zhar has a contact who might help. I’ll stay in touch. You better get Dustil back to the others, if you
can.”

::The others?: he questioned. His voice had shot up with disbelief. ::They’re not with you?:

“The one who met us in the starport is. The others are back in the village,” I answered. I didn’t think
Juhani had grabbed a communicator before disembarking. Likely, Carth had no way of reaching
them – and possibly no easy way of dragging Dustil past the Wookiee sentries by the visitor
lodgings. Carth would have to wait until Juhani returned to the ‘Hawk.

No doubt that would suit his moody offspring just fine.

I hurried to keep talking before Carth could start venting his likely frustration. He’d never done well
with me running off, even back on Taris, “Carth, do me a favour and keep an eye on the skies
above? It’d be good to have forewarning of any… visitors to Kashyyk.”

There was another brief silence. I imagined Carth was trying hard to contain himself, and I couldn’t
stop a small grin as I stared down at the device on my wrist.

::Are you expecting someone?:

“Not exactly,” I replied. “But our departure from our previous location will be known by now.”

If the Sith had half a brain, they’d be sending forces to stop us. Frankly, I was surprised the Jedi
hadn’t come across any yet. Kashyyk is a large place. Maybe they are elsewhere on this planet.
How do we even know the Star Map is near Rwookrororo? My gaze slid back to the silent Wookiee,
and I reminded myself to ask that of Zhar when we were alone. Zaalbar knew nothing of the Star
Maps, but I wasn’t inclined to let slip any information that was bound to track back to his mercenary
brother through our silent Wookiee escort.

I held onto a fleeting hope that Zaalbar didn’t learn of his brother’s ascension to chieftainship. With
Zaalbar’s current mood, there was no telling what he’d do. I have to find out about Freyrr, at least.
For Zaalbar’s sake.

::Noted.: Carth said, and I took that to mean he understood what I didn’t say. Keep an eye out for
any incoming Sith. ::Be careful, Jen. This is... I don't like this.::

Leaving Carth behind was becoming a familiar scenario, and I knew how much he hated it. More so now, with whatever was between us. If sodding Dustil hadn’t scarpered, Carth might be here next to me – a gun at my side, and a solid wall of support.

“I’ll check in later, Carth. Go keep an eye on your son.”

He murmured a farewell, and the comm-link shut off. I noticed, then, just how dark our surroundings had become. The trees were giant black shadows engulfed in an indigo haze. Here and there, tiny dots of glow-bugs were visible, emitting the smallest amount of light – just enough to attract their prey. I took a deep breath, and immersed myself in the Force.

Seeing with one’s minds-eye was similar to wearing a low-light visor; the outlines of all shapes were distinct in shades of blue and black. In some ways, the clarity of detail shone out more. I could pick out the individual hairs of the forbidding Wookiee, as he stared into the blackness with his bow-caster raised, keeping an eye out for any predators that might pay us a visit.

There was some colour, though. Anything that lived radiated a faint yellow-orange hue of some strength. Zhar was a solid body of amber, and he was still staring at me placidly.

There was a gentle thud, and the basket landed on the forest floor. The Wookiee grunted, and unlatched the side before motioning us out.

“(The intercom is here),” the Wookiee barked at Zhar, motioning towards a large device mounted above my head on the nearest wroshyr. The tree was beyond gigantic. I felt like it would be a genuine ten minute walk just to get around the damn thing. “(When you are ready to go back, send a message. You might have to wait. We do not jump for outsiders no matter how much you’ve paid).”

He sounded like Zaalbar when he’d skipped a meal or two.

“Thank you, Growwhul,” Zhar said in a pleasant tone as the Wookiee strode back into the basket. He grunted at Zhar in answer, and pushed a button on the railing that I hadn’t noticed.

I’d barely been in Rwookrorro, but I’d seen enough to be intrigued by Wookiee technology. It was an odd mix of primitive and new. They certainly weren’t above using off-world machinery when required – their weaponry was evidence of that – but the housing and walking ramps were all made of native materials. Zaalbar said they preferred to live with nature - as much as was realistic when they allowed off-worlders to land on their planet and eye-ball their resources.

For instance, there had to be a Wookiee starport somewhere. I couldn’t imagine the inhabitants of Rwookrorro traipsing through Czerka bureaucracy to board a ship, and surely some of Zaalbar’s people occasionally left Kashyyyk without being exiled.

The grinding noises of the ascending basket slowly faded, and I turned my attention to Zhar. He looked up from a datapad, hoisted the large pack over his shoulders, and gave me a brief smile.

“This way,” he murmured, and began walking into the shadows.

I fell into step beside him.

I barely knew where to start. The list of questions was so long, and each one was loaded with the potential for answers I may not want. Just spit ‘em out. Whatever the reason is, I already know some truths. I was a Jedi. I didn’t fall.
My mind froze. Ness Jonohl didn’t fall. There was a hard lump in my throat, and my steps faltered. Ness Jonohl didn’t exist.

“Watch out for these,” Zhar murmured, motioning towards a silvery thread that was stretched taut between two colossal wroshyrs that loomed like black walls on either side of us. “They are remnants of a wyyyschokk web, giant spiders native to Kashyyyk. Although these arachnids do not usually delve to the depths of the Shadowlands, their webs are extensive and it is better not to try our chances.”

I glanced back to Zhar as he ducked under the sticky thread. “Have you been to the Shadowlands before?” I challenged. It wasn’t the question I should be asking. What’s my name, old man?

“No, but I am well informed. Provided we hold onto the Force and stay aware, I am confident we shall avoid any undesired encounters with the wildlife here.”

Zhar picked up his pace. He was only walking, and yet I felt the power of the Force gain momentum under his heels. I matched my stride to his.

“You have a specific direction in mind?” I asked. How about, why is Darth Revan in my head?

“While we do not know where the Star Map is located, Master Vrook has indicated where he felt the presence of the Force user,” Zhar answered in a mild tone. He skirted around a large patch of what appeared to be gigantic fungi. It glowed a yellow luminescence in my Force-sight. “He did not show himself to Vrook or Vandar, but if we are correct in his identity then he may appear to me.”

“An old friend, you said,” I muttered. And Jen Sahara? Why is there both a dead scholar and a dead Sith Lord in my mind?

“Yes. We believe him to be Jolee Bindo, a Human padawan who left the Order some forty years ago after the loss of his wife. We were padawans together; he, Karon and I.” The words were spoken calmly, but there was a catch in his voice when he spoke Karon’s name. I’d already suspected he’d known her, and now I could infer that he’d known her well. She was my master. And Zhar took me on training missions. Of course they knew each other well.

He took me and my lover on training missions. I wonder, could Zhar have been his master?

I was blind-sided, then, by a sharp spike of acrid fear in my head, and I stumbled. Bastila! Startled, and with a surge of fierce determination, I threw my mental voice as hard as I could towards my erstwhile bond-sister. Bastila, talk to me! Let me help!

I cannot! You must leave me be!

How long had she been awake, dammit? Stuck here in the shadowy depths with a master who knew my secrets, I hadn’t been paying her the attention I should have. No way am I sitting back while you’re getting tortured! I can help, Bastila, you need—

I will not be a liability to you!

“Jen? Are you alright?”

Liability? Stars, Bastila, what do you mean—

Shield yourself, and stay away from me!

A tearing pain ripped into my mind, and I gasped, my hands raising to clutch at my head. It was an
I could see the layers he’d built around me through the Force-sight; intermeshing weaves of Force that blocked incoming psychic attacks… or emotions. It was the same mechanism I’d raised as a defense against Uthar Wynn, even if he’d managed to shear straight through them. With an internal resignation that felt far too gutless for my liking, I set about copying Zhar’s shield.

When he was satisfied, he pulled back from me, leaving only my shield in place. I could still feel Bastila faintly, but her pain was now no more than a dull echo in the back of my mind.

“I can’t keep doing this,” I muttered through clenched teeth. Zhar began to walk again, and I had no choice but to follow.

“You must,” he repeated. “There is no more you can do for her, not now.”

“You would have me ignore her existence?” My voice rose in a blend of incredulity and disgust. “Let her wallow in pain while I go about my own damn business?”

“Certainly not,” he replied, his voice as calm as ever. “But while she is being hurt you do yourself no favours by sharing the pain. It will not make it less for her should you allow yourself to feel it, too.”

“She won’t talk to me.” The shield felt like my ears were stuffed with clotted wool. “She’s blocking me out, when she’s not being—” my mouth twisted—“tortured. She only said something about not being a damn liability, whatever that means.”

I sensed rather than saw Zhar turn to look at me sharply. Our boots crunched through a damp layer of undergrowth. “Perhaps she is afraid the pain will uncover memories best left forgotten,” he said softly. “Bastila is an experienced Jedi, and will have her reasons.”

Memories best left forgotten. Maybe she was afraid it would rouse Revan.

Maybe she was right.

But I was learning to hold Revan back. I’d managed it, against Uthar. I’d damn well do it again if I needed to.

A blinking on my wrist-comm distracted my thoughts. Zhar and I clambered over an exposed root, and I answered it.

::(Jen):: Canderous’ voice came through in Mandalorian. ::(We gotta talk)::

I risked a glance at Zhar, who seemed as damnably unruffled as ever, even as we strode along at a...
fast pace. I had no idea whether Zhar understood Mandalorian or not, but I’d put my credits on the affirmative.

“(What’s up?),” I asked, replying back in kind.

::(Onasi told me you’re headed down to the Shadowlands. With one of those robes, and without Juhani. Tell me he got that wrong)::

“(I’m there already, with a master),” I answered. “(Juhani is back in the village. Is there a problem?)”

Canderous cursed in his mother tongue, a long string of words I didn’t quite follow. I caught ‘Jedi’, and ‘mind’ and something about a slug, but everything else was unintelligible. ::(I shouldn’t have listened to that damn Cathar),:: he growled. ::(I take it you’re with him right now?)::

“(Yeah),” I said slowly. What did Juhani say to him? “(We’re going after the same thing as previous planets. What’s going on, Canderous?)”

He sighed angrily. ::(Keep your guard up, alright? I’ll explain when you’re topside. Just keep your guard up and your eyes open).:: I could feel myself frowning. Did Canderous suspect a threat in the Shadowlands, or was he implying one of Zhar? ::(Jen, there’s other things we need to talk about. There’s been some developments).::

Zhar was watching me calmly, and I just knew he was following the thread of our conversation.

“(Report),” I stated.

::(There’s been a coup at the Wookiee village a half-year ago. Zaalbar’s dad has been chucked down to the Shadowlands).::

“(Yeah),” I agreed. “(I heard that).” Not about Freyyr, though. So he’d been exiled rather than killed. For a Wookiee, that counted as more dishonourable.

Canderous grunted. ::(Huh. Well, Zaalbar didn’t take that too kindly. He’s gone off alone to face his brother).::

“(What?)” I exclaimed. I’d stopped walking, and so had Zhar. “(He’s left the ‘Hawk?)”

::(Yeah. Czerka staff were ready to restrain him on sight, too. There ain’t any free-walking Wookiees around this starport).::

I closed my eyes. “(He’s going after his father, then. He’s picking that Chuundar will throw him down to the Shadowlands).”

::(That’s assuming his brother doesn’t sell him into slavery, first. There’s an underground trade here, Jen, and it ain’t the most stable).::

The breath whistled out of my lungs. *Slavery.* That wasn’t the Wookiee way. But from what Zaalbar had told me, Chuundar didn’t follow the old way. Chuundar was all about expansion, at the cost of tradition. I wondered, briefly, if the brothers had ever gotten along. “(I can’t think that the Wookiees would stand for that, even if their chieftain does).”

::(I don’t know what sort of politics those hairballs are embroiled in, but I’ve done a spot of nosing about in the starport. Czerka’s deep in bed with the Wookiee leader, and they’re secretly shipping any protesters off-world for a pretty profit. But that’s just a side-trade, Jen. The real money is the tach and syren harvest, and that’s at the bottom of the forest. Czerka’s employing hunters and mercs
If Chuundar was selling his people into slavery – those that didn’t agree with him – then things really had changed since Zaalbar left. It was a risky way to remove dissenters, though, if Chuundar had to do it covertly. Why wouldn’t he just exile them all?

If Czerka are busy harvesting in the Shadowlands, then the last thing they need is a bunch of disaffected, angry Wookiees crawling around. Maybe Freyrr had been one of the lucky ones, or perhaps Chuundar couldn’t bring himself to sell his dear old dad into slavery.

My fingers tapped against my thigh. The Czerka trade, though - that was bugging me. If it was as substantial as Canderous was suggesting, then there was no way the Rwookrrorro elevator was being used.

“(They’ve got another way down here),” I said slowly. “(Chuundar and his followers may be in bed with Czerka, but I can’t think all the Wookiees would agree to that. And the lift I used wasn’t exactly a well-used device).” Not to mention it was in the Wookiee township proper. Those armed and grumpy Wookiees did not look like they’d readily accept an influx of off-world scavengers.

::(I was thinking the same thing),:: Canderous agreed. ::(Either Czerka have their own lift or they’re going elsewhere on the planet).::

Kashyyk was covered in wroshyr forest. Maybe there were clearings around somewhere on the planet, but this area was choked with foliage - and the Czerka starport was stationed pretty frelling close to Rwookrrorro. Logistically speaking, a secret elevator within the Czerka stronghold would be the more efficient solution.

But Zaalbar had said his people controlled access to the Shadowlands. Chuundar’s machinations must be relatively unknown amongst his people – some of them, anyway. I was willing to bet that his people wouldn’t take too kindly to Czerka having free reign in the Shadowlands. If Chuundar’s duplicity could be unearthed, then it could very well start a riot. Inciting a revolt on Kashyyk is not what we are here for. But Zaalbar was one of my crew – and, possibly, on his way down here right now.

“(Get Teethree hacking into the Czerka communications array, see what he can dig up),” I said at last. “(Did you get the parts for HK?)”

::(Yeah. He’ll be fixed soon. I was thinking he might be of some use. Jen-)::: Canderous hesitated for a moment, which was unusual for him. ::(There’s a hundred or so Wookiee prisoners on a freighter not far from us. Mission wants to go free them).::

I could feel my brows shoot up in disbelief. A hundred Wookiees in one ship... Czerka was getting deep into the slave trade. And while Mission’s desire was good-natured and whole-hearted typical of her, the fact that Canderous bothered repeating it meant he was considering it, on some level.

“(I doubt we have the manpower for that),” I said slowly.

::(Normally I’d agree with you, but these Czerka soldiers ain’t hardened military. Look, I spoke to a couple of mercs who’re providing muscle for a squad of hunters. This used to be a joint venture between the Exchange and Czerka until about a month ago when Czerka booted them out).::

I had little time for petty politics between corrupt organizations, but Canderous didn’t generally waste his time on small talk. “(Go on),” I prompted.

He gave a short laugh. ::(Kashyyk’s a small operation in the galactic scheme of things, so it’s not
that damaging for the Exchange. What it really is, though, is retaliation. A swipe back against the Exchange, after they overran several outposts on Rii’shn - including some Czerka mining interests).:: Canderous sounded amused. Too amused. ::(They blame Czerka for framing them over some sort of shoot-out in a cantina, and the closure of their primary docking bay).:: Canderous paused. ::(Right about the time we were on Manaan).::

My shoulders tensed as the pieces clicked together. *Oh, Sithspit. You’ve got to be kidding me.* I glanced over to Zhar, and even with Force-sight I could see his eyes had narrowed on me. He’d picked up on my reaction.

HK-47 had nicely manipulated events to leave the GenoHaradan blameless for the mess on Rii’shn, but it had caused a schism between Czerka and the Exchange instead. Did it matter? I had little love for either of them, but the fall-out was still impacting real people.

*No. I did what I had to, to get out of there. At the crux of it, the fault lies with the GenoHaradan. If HK hadn’t stolen an Exchange ship and blamed Czerka for it, then the GenoHaradan would have found some other way to point the finger elsewhere. It’s not like anyone even knows who the GenoHaradan are.*

I wrested my thoughts back into order, and focused on Canderous’ voice.

::(-to tell me about that some time, Jen. Regardless, Czerka’s forces are armed, but ill-trained. Most of them were ship crew and office staff before the Exchange guards left).::

Canderous was mulling over the idea of rescuing the Wookiees. I was vaguely surprised at that. But no matter how poorly trained the Czerka forces were, I didn’t see any plausible way a hundred unarmed Wookiees could walk out of that starport alive.

“(See what you can find out, Canderous. We’ll go from there).”

::(I’ll be in touch).::: he assented. ::(Let’s see if I can get the kid’s bucket droid to dig up anything useful).::

“(Okay. Don’t put anyone at risk).” I didn’t think Canderous would. He wasn’t the sort to go sticking his neck out for others, so this entire conversation seemed a little surreal. Canderous was far from being any sort of coward, but I didn’t quite get where his interest in the Wookiee situation was coming from. “(This isn’t what we’re on Kashyyyk for.)”

::(I hear you. But that walking hairball is one of us, ain’t he? Even if I can’t understand a damn word he says).:::

*Clan.* Canderous was seeing us all as clan, now, I realized. Mandalorians were as fierce about clan as they were about their honour. I’d respected Canderous for a long time already, but my opinion of him rose another notch. Self-serving at times, he may be – but he was damn loyal to those he considered his.

“(Yeah),” I said finally. “(Zaalbar’s one of us. Keep in touch, Canderous. If Juhani comes back, slap a communicator on her as well).”

::(Alright. Keep your eyes open).::

With a click, the comm switched off. Zhar regarded me steadily.

“You have picked up some interesting companions, Jen Sahara,” he commented. “And are involving yourself in politics that perhaps you shouldn’t.”
I sighed irritably. His words had the touch of déjà vu about them, as if they were an echo of conversations I’d heard numerous times before. The faint bleed-over from Bastila didn’t help my mood, either. The psychic shield held her presence at bay, eliminated near-all of what she was feeling… but not the awareness of it. The bitter taste of cowardice still sat in my gut.

“I know, I know,” I muttered in a low voice. “Jedi do not involve themselves in politics. We are mediators only, not politicians.”

Zhar’s eyes widened. Through the Force, he was a body of radiating amber, etched in blue and black lines. It wasn’t so easy to decipher his expression, this way, but I thought he looked slightly shocked. “Uh, yes. Yes.” He cleared his throat. “While the Wookiee situation is regrettable, and perhaps some Jedi involvement could assist or at least advise…” he trailed off, frowning. “Exactly what do you recall of your past?”

The abrupt question caught me off-guard; I’d expected to be the one to initiate that line of conversation. I was about to answer – not really sure of my words, just yet – when a rustling in the nearby undergrowth had us both turning.

A sole figure, a dark blue shadow of a humanoid, emerged walking slowly towards us.

“Huh. Looking for me, are you?”

xXx
The walls of Rwookrrorro loomed in the distance. Thick rope lashed the wooden poles together, timber that had been taken from the smaller branches of the massive wroshyrs; a small pruning, here and there, to create our habitat within the heights of our forest.

Some of the Wookiee tribes who lived elsewhere on Kashyyyk built cylindrical wooden rooms wrapped around smaller trunks, and were not as far from the forest floor. But Rwookrrorro was situated in the densest, tallest part of the wroshyr forest. Nowhere else on our planet were our sacred trees so impressive and so ancient.

I felt my chest puff up with a large breath of forest air. The astringent smell of tree-sap, undercut by a fresh fragrance of lottie-blossoms, was ever present here. It smelled like home.

It was home.

A home I had never thought to see again. But the news Mission and that sullen Dustil Onasi had brought back with them changed everything. Father. Could Chuundar really have done such a thing? Exiled our sire to the depths of our world? I had feared returning to Kashyyyk, feared the injustice of my past but this… this was worse.

Six years ago, I had discovered my brother was selling tach organs to Czerka for a tidy profit, but my only evidence had disappeared, and the rest was circumstantial.

Chuundar had taken an interest in the coming-of-age rituals in the Shadowlands, the hrtrayyk rite of passage for all young males. The Old Ones would usually preside over them, but Chuundar’s interest had been approved of by Father himself – and my brother became something of a mentor for all whom partook in the hrtrayyk.

It was only when Ruubarg had confided in me that I began to suspect Chuundar was using those trips down to the Shadowlands for other purposes. Drawwlog confirmed Ruubarg’s suspicions, and led me to the cargo he knew of - canisters filled with meticulously butchered tach that had been collected from Czerka-provided traps.

My brother and I shared the same, hot-blooded temper – but Chuundar was clever where I was brash and simple. My accusations fired around the throne room like wild kinrath fleeing a terentatek, and each one Chuundar had shot down with a carefully aimed riposte.

There is no tach trade, no tach corpses in the storage rooms – come, see for yourself, dear brother.

Czerka staff claim they have not left their starport – and while we cannot trust their word, they offer us their holo-footage as proof.

Drawwlog denies all knowledge, younger brother, and fears you have had too much fermented wasaka-berry juice last night.

And as for Ruubarg – a shame on you, that you draw in someone who is at death’s door and cannot speak for himself. The healers do not know if he will recover from the suspected tysharn flu that has drawn him into a stupor.
Where does this mistrust, these lies, come from, younger brother? I know you have always looked upon me with a jealous eye, but surely you understand the responsibility I must live up to is a heavy burden. A second son should be a pillar of support for the first, not a dagger lodged at his back.

Being accused of such a childish emotion, when I had hero-worshipped Chuundar for most of my life, was the final straw after the frustration of all my suspicions being expertly dismissed.

My temper shattered, and I lashed out in the worst possible way. In front of everyone.

Madclaw.

One does not strike one’s own with one’s claws.

The rage had sat like a red mist in my eyes, a righteous fury that only dissipated when I saw Chuundar’s shocked expression as he stumbled back from me, blood seeping through the fur on his face and shoulder.

He had not expected me to lose control that way, I realized much later. I wondered if he only meant to ridicule me, to put me in my place, to silence my suspicions and humble my standing. The glimpse of horrified understanding I saw in his eyes before resignation eclipsed it, allowed me to believe that perhaps exile had not been his objective.

Perhaps he had only wanted his brother silenced, not cast-out.

What-ifs were a poisonous thing.

And while I could blame Chuundar for the most of it, the raising of my claws was my own burden to carry.

And now, as I stood staring at the walls of my childhood, I wondered if the shame of the past had coloured Chuundar’s character, too. For while he had always been opportunistic, I could not reconcile that with someone duplicitous enough to send our traditionalist father into exile.

But maybe the seeds had always been there.

Years ago, Chuundar had wished to amalgamate Vroalkarra and Arooagorro, two smaller townships nearby that were struggling under poor leadership. Father would not hear of that, however; tribes did not interfere with other tribes. Marry into, trade with, celebrate together: yes. But conquer? No, that was too much like our madclaw past. Wookiees stood together against outsiders. We did not fight each other. Father stood firm on that.

Chuundar claimed - provided we kept strict controls over Czerka - we could milk them for trade goods by selling inconsequential amounts of our resources. A slippery road, my father decreed, and one he would have nothing to do with. If Czerka were irritated that their fancy starport on Kashyyyk had brought them naught, then they could leave.

I had been present for many of these heated debates and, in the early days, I had a sympathetic ear to my brother. Father had always been seen as somewhat conservative, a traditionalist who refused to consider anything other than our centuries-old customs. How much harm would it be, really, to allow Czerka a small slice of our resources? We would stay in control, ensure there was no lasting damage to our precious planet. But Father refused to bend, and his word was law.

When Ruubarg had first suggested to me that Chuundar was sneaking behind Father’s back, I had found it difficult to believe.
But even after that – even after all that occurred – my first emotion upon hearing Mission’s earth-shattering news was disbelief. What was more inconceivable, my brother exiling my father, or my brother engaging in slavery of his own people?

Slavery. The very thought sent a rumbling of discontent in my chest. The idea of a sentient owning another was abhorrent. Even as we hunted predators on Kashyyyk, we always honoured their lives, to the very smallest of insects. Might did not make one better than another, and the thought of ownership over anything – even the wroshyr trees themselves – was disgusting. How could my brother be involved in that?

But Mission had spoken with one of my people, caged in the marketplace like a bantha. She had seen six of them, all trapped the same way. And she spoke of a hundred more, imprisoned within a freighter, about to be sent off-world by the corrupt Czerka Corporation.

I could feel my hackles rising in growing hatred toward my brother. Slavery was worse than death, worse than exile. It was worse than being labelled a madclaw, one who could not master their own inner fire, their rrakktorr, and had succumbed to the madness of our ancestors who had been unable to live in peace within the ecosystem the gods had granted us.

With all of this explosive news, I had known I could not stay onboard the *Ebon Hawk* any longer. But the debt I owed Jen Sahara sat heavy on my soul, and she was gone for now, meeting her Masters in my own home village.

So I sat in the cargo bay, and begged Mission for solitude while the poisonous thoughts grew darker and darker in my head. They all left me for the common room, and spoke in hushed voices so as not to disturb. Perhaps they expected I would not hear their conversation through inches of durasteel, but a Wookiee’s hearing was vastly superior to most sentients.

…

“-gone to the blasted Shadowlands, with only one of the Masters. She’s-”

“What?” The low growl was definitely Canderous. “Without the Cathar?”

“Yes. She said she had reasons, but couldn’t say. She was more concerned about any incoming air traffic-”

“You’ve got to be kriffing joking.” Canderous sounded anything but amused. In fact, he sounded furious.

“Sheesh, you can’t let Big Z find out,” Mission interjected. Her voice was quiet through the durasteel walls, and I struggled to pick up on it. “If he hears both his dad and Jen are down there-”

I stood. The determination grew within me, as solid as the roots of the mighty wroshyrs, and I began unbuckling the belt and vibrosword from my back. This was it. I would find Father, or I would find Jen, but what I would not do any longer was stay on this ship.

…

I slipped out of the *Ebon Hawk* quickly, before Mission found out and decided to do something foolhardy like follow. But the Czerka starport had changed; there was a new control tower I did not recognize, and the guards were armed where they had not been years ago.

And they did not want a free-walking Wookiee in their starport.
“Hey! Halt!” a loud voice exclaimed in Basic behind me. My gaze was pinned on the stairwell near the imposing control tower that was new, and I did not realize the voice was yelling at me. The building was large, and looked decidedly out of place next to the ancient wroshyr it was bolted against.

“You, Wookiee! Stop, or I’ll shoot!”

That had me tensing in surprise. I wore nothing nor held any weapons – exiles were stripped of possessions when they were sent to the Shadowlands. I turned, to see a handful of sentients raising blaster rifles at me. They all wore armour, but there was a smell of anxiety around them, a looseness to their posture. They were not well-trained.

“(What do you want?)” I barked, even as I knew they likely couldn’t understand me. I have not done anything. Why are they threatening me?

“D’ya think he’s escaped?” one of them muttered.

“Must’ve,” another agreed. “We don’t let any from their town here. We’d better stun this one and bring ‘im in.”

My eyes widened as their intent hit home. They believe I am a slave! I could not escape four blasters, and the Ebon Hawk was now many metres away. I had not expected this hostility on my own planet, from a starport I had used in the past!

“Put your guns down before you hurt yourself,” a gruff voice called out, irritation plainly obvious in the intonation. I glanced over to see Canderous Ordo, striding fast from our freighter, a rough scowl aimed at the group of disorganized Czerka-clad sentients. “That ain’t your property, he’s mine, and I’ll thank you to go kriff off before I knock your heads together.”

The implication in his words held me speechless for a moment, before a kernel of undeniable fury sprang to life.

“I am no one’s property! I will fight until my last breath to deny it!”

But Canderous Ordo was already motioning me to the exit of the starport, his back turned dismissively at the faltering Czerka infidels who gaped like the slack-jawed soulless beings they were.

“Come. We’re going for a walk,” he ordered, his voice a commanding echo that my sense – finally kicking in – realized was for their benefit and not mine.

Still stunned at the turn of events – that a Wookiee could not walk freely amongst this starport without being apprehended – I followed the Mandalorian in silence as we departed the corrupt Czerka stronghold without any further interruptions. It was not until we left the obscene permacrete foundations behind, and I stood once more upon the wooden walkways I knew so well, that Canderous finally spoke.

“I’d a feeling you wouldn’t stay cooped up,” he commented, “and judging by the state of things around here, I didn’t think this lot would take kindly to a Wookiee walking around without chains.”

It struck me, then, that Canderous Ordo – of all people – had come to my rescue. He wasn’t the same self-involved mercenary I had met on Taris.

We had all changed since then.

“Look, I gotta get back. I gotta check in with Jen, find out if kriffing Onasi is right-” he sighed, sounding heavily irritated. “I ain’t gonna talk you out of whatever you’re planning. Don’t figure
you’d listen to me anyways.”

I grunted in affirmation, and the corner of his mouth twitched.

“Right. Do you really think your father’s alive?”

The question brought up me up short. Mission had reported that Freyyr had been exiled a half year ago. Normally, exiles to the Shadowlands did not live long. The burden of shame could only be assuaged by a challenge, a testing of one’s inner strength against the wild predators of our planet.

Those young cubs testing themselves for their hrrtayyk went to the depths with weapons, provisions, and a mentor. But the exiles-

It was meant to be death. The more glorious, the more one’s shame would be alleviated in the eyes of the gods.

But Freyyr held no shame. He would not have felt it, not have believed in Chuundar’s exile. I did not think my father would be content to throw himself into death, to match himself against the wilds of the Shadowlands.

No, he would want to survive, and to find out exactly what Czerka was doing to our planet.

I gave Canderous an obvious nod. He folded his arms, a thoughtful look on his face. “Your brother’s involved in slavery. He’s a lot more likely to sell you than chuck you down where your dad is.”

I felt the growl in my throat, and the Mandalorian raised an appeasing hand. “Look, be smart about it, okay? Otherwise you may as well stay in the ‘Hawk.”

He wasn’t saying anything I hadn’t already considered, but I appreciated the sentiment.

...

Canderous left me then, claiming he was going to ingratiate himself with some of the off-world mercenaries to gather information before contacting Jen. Jen, who was down in the Shadowlands herself.

If Chuundar had grown so black in his desire for acquisition, then he would not want me to find our father, should he still live. But the one right of an exile – even a madclaw exile – was to brave the Shadowlands. Any of the Old Ones would hold firm on that. I had but to find one.

In the ancient days, our people did not have mastery of their rrakktorr. They fought; with each other, with the wildlife, with the planet itself. The Old Ones were the story-tellers, the elders, the ones who remembered. And they believed, more strongly than any other, that the only place for a madclaw was the Shadowlands.

I began walking again, veering slightly away from Rwookrorro now. I had taken a long route, amongst some of the narrow, less-used paths that skirted around our township. And this one led to a small, reinforced building, lashed tightly against one of the larger wroshyrs.

Most Wookiees lived within the walls of our town. It was safer, and it was the proper way. But the Old Ones held a special place of authority in our society, and lived where they willed. From as far back as I could remember, Growwhul and Tasharr had made this hut their home.

I was counting on them to escort me to the Shadowlands. If I could locate them.
My inner anger desired an encounter with my brother; I wanted to rail at him, to demand a reason for his treachery, to expose his vile dealings with slavery.

But I was not the brash, simple Wookiee from six years ago. I had no evidence, and even if I did – I was a madclaw. My words would not be listened to.

But my father’s might be.

When I closed in on the outbuilding I recalled from my youth, I saw a tall, leaden figure slip out of the house. His fur was grey with age, and matted with what looked like a lack of grooming. His posture stilled as I neared, his gaze fixed on me as I walked ever closer.

Jabakka was an Old One, too. He was ancient when I had been but a cub. I thought he would have departed the physical world by now.

I saw the moment his rheumy eyes recognized me. They narrowed, and his paws dropped to the blaster on his hip.

That stung, even as I was aware it would be a common reaction. *I do not believe I have ever seen Jabakka armed.* Perhaps, if he lived here now – outside of Rwookrorro – it had become a necessary safety precaution. Still, it saddened me to see it.

“(Madclaw,)” Jabakka rumbled. The rifle was in his grasp now, but at least he did not raise it at me. I wondered why he was living here, instead of the two I had expected. “(You are no longer welcome here,)”

“(I have come to finish my exile where it should have started,)” I said. I remembered Jabakka much the same as Growwhul and Tasharr – a conservative who believed in discipline, obedience and an adherence to tradition. Whilst none of them would likely approve of my older brother’s expansionist goals, they all strongly supported a chieftain’s authority. The leader was absolute.

The Old Ones had power, of a sort. If Chuundar had managed to successfully exile my father, then he must have had their backing – even if they did not like it. Or him.

“(Going off-world was adding disgrace to dishonour,)” Jabakka growled. “(That should not be an option for madclaws. A truly penitent Wookiee would not have chosen such,)”

I shrugged. “(Youth does not always choose right. But I have come back, unarmed, to make the correct choice now,)”

Jabakka grunted. His clouded eyes narrowed on me. “(Then I will walk you there myself, right now, and see to it that this is finally ended,)”

That was what I had been counting on. An Old One’s sense of tradition, at the cost of either empathy or politics. A different Wookiee might have insisted on a meeting with Chuundar first, but an Old One would want for nothing more than to see a madclaw away from the rest of our people – and into the depths of the Shadowlands.

We began walking; Jabakka behind me with his blaster trained at my feet. Not quite a prisoner, but only because I did not try to run. I breathed in deeply, tasting the forest breeze as it ruffled through my fur. There was no wind down in the Shadowlands; but here, on the paths of my childhood, each air current conveyed a hundred different scents of forest life. I found myself hit by a nostalgia that I struggled to keep at bay.

I did not know if I would ever return to Rwookrorro, but I did not plan on dying in the
Shadowlands.

If my father believed in his own innocence and Chuundar’s duplicity – and whilst I did not know the
details of the coup, I was counting on that – then his desire for his own survival would burn in his
gut, the way it did not with exiles who genuinely deserved their sentence.

I did not believe my father would be far from the Rwookrrorro elevator. He would be searching for
the Czerka hunters, the Czerka traps – anything, to sabotage what they were doing.

He would be stealthy about it, though. I could not imagine the Czerka hunters leaving him alone,
should they know he was there. I would have to be stealthy, too.

I had been to the Shadowlands before, more than once. I had lived off the lands, tracked the small
game, and avoided the predators. For the most part, the Shadowlands could be a quiet place, one that
could make you forget its inherent danger.

It did not sound like it was so quiet anymore.

The walls of Rwookrrorro came ever closer, and ahead of us a small group of Wookiees stopped to
stare. I averted my eyes, but not before I recognized warriors from my youth. One turned, and ran
back toward the town.

_He has recognized me. He has gone to inform Chuundar._ There was nothing but to walk forward,
now; the elevator was not far within the walls of Rwookrrorro, and I could only hope I would reach
my objective without any interruptions.

Jabakka was not, however, the fastest of walkers.

The guard posted at the wall had already straightened, his eyes narrow and wary as they fixed upon
us. There was a bow-caster trained upon me from high on the wall.

“(Let us pass,)” Jabakka growled.

The guard was young, and I could see the recognition as it dawned on his face. “(That’s, that’s-)

“(I know who it is, cub. Stand aside!)”

He blinked as he moved sideways, wide eyes staring at me. I could not put a name to him, but he
was vaguely familiar. _Six years. Six long years._ It was hard, to think of all that I had missed. But it
had not been all bad, either.

Most Wookiees did not leave Kashyyyk. I did not think I would have, voluntarily. And yet, I found I
could not regret all that had happened. My experiences had opened my eyes. I had grown to see a
different sort of honour in others, different struggles, different values. While I did not often
understand those who were not Wookiee, it did not mean I could not respect them, or care for them.

Mission held a place in my heart, deeper than most I had known on Kashyyyk. My fondness for a
Twi’lek girl cub was not something I would ever have expected. At least she was safe, back on the
_Ebon Hawk._

I strode forward, into the bustle of my home village, Jabakka flanking me with his rifle still in his
grasp. The elevator was close and I was glad of it, as I closed my ears to the gasps of surprised
inhabitants, and averted my eyes to any who might be staring.

I heard one call out inquiringly to Jabakka, but we both continued our walk toward the suspended
basket that I had travelled a half dozen times in my life thus far.

To my surprise, Growwhul was one of two sentries there. He looked old. Grizzled, and older than he ever appeared before. Growwhul and Tasharr were always together, irascible and forbidding in their scolding of Rwookrrorro’s youth. Had something happened to Growwhul’s mate?

It seemed likely. It would explain why Jabakka now lived in his home. Perhaps Growwhul had desired to move back into the walls of Rwookrrorro, if Tasharr had died. And yet, why was an Old One on sentry duty at the elevator?

Growwhul’s eyes widened as they fixed on me, before narrowing in distaste.

“(The madclaw is here to complete the terms of his exile,)” Jabakka spoke to Growwhul, his voice low with disapproval. “(Finally.)”

Growwhul grunted, and unlatched the basket before stepping onboard. He held a bow-caster at the ready, and his glower was focussed on me. The other sentry looked worried, shooting glances between Growwhul, Jabakka, and myself, but made no move to stop me as I strode toward Growwhul.

“(Halt!)” a commanding voice called loudly behind us, and with a sinking feeling in my gut I recognized the timbre all too well. There was a padding of feet running along the wooden boards, and I turned to see my brother, his expression wild with surprise.

At his side, running next to him with a vibrosword drawn, was Drawwlog. He wore the decorative neck-piece of a chieftain’s aide.

I was only metres from my destination, but the other sentry was already raising his bow-caster, even as he looked unsure as to whom he should be pointing it at. Jabakka and Growwhul both held weapons, heavy frowns on their faces. They would support my access to the Shadowlands, I had to hope - but not if I ran from the chieftain.

The anger at my brother burned in my gut, but I had to rise above it. This time, I had to do things the smart way.

Chuundar stopped several metres from me, roughly motioning Drawwlog onward. Drawwlog obeyed, moving until he flanked the sentry and blocked my access to the elevator.

“(Younger brother,)” Chuundar panted. He looked beyond, his gaze landing first on Jabakka and then Growwhul, before returning to me. He looked the same as I remembered, if slightly shorter. It was with some startlement that I realized I must have grown. “(I did not believe it, when I heard.)”

“(Chuundar,)” I acknowledged. I could not let my anger at him eclipse my objective. “(I am here to end my exile the way it should have ended six years ago.)”

Chuundar’s eyes widened, but I was not sure how surprised he really was. “(Even a madclaw is allowed a last conversation, brother.)” He did not name me, I realized. Madclaws were both honourless and nameless. “(Come. It has been some time, and you have spent years off-world. I desire to hear about that.)”

Chuundar shifted uneasily, and I heard a faint grunt from Growwhul.

“(I will respect the terms of my exile, Chuundar. I will go now.)” And I would not call him brother. I took a step closer to the basket, and Drawwlog lifted his blade to bar my way. His expression was pained.
“(Younger brother, do not be ridiculous. You must know that I never wished things to go so far six years ago. Exile can be lifted. Even a madclaw can find honour again.)”

It was rare - although not unheard-of - for exile to be overturned.

Once, I had worshipped my brother. And I held on to the image of him, six years ago, bleeding and shocked from the impact of my claws - the initial bewilderment evident in his face. He had not wanted me exiled, not then.

But that was six years ago. Since then, he had sold dissenters into slavery and exiled our father. And as I stared at him, I could see suspicion darkening his eyes.

“(He belongs in the Shadowlands,)” Growwhul growled. “(Exile is not a tool belt that one takes on and off.)”

“(I am the chieftain, Old One,)” Chuundar snapped. “(There have been enough Wookiees exiled in recent years. Rwookrrorro grows weak. If my brother can convince me he is loyal, then it is my decision whether the exile should stand or not.)”

I wondered, then, if that was how Chuundar was hiding the slavery. Did most of them believe that those who opposed Chuundar had lived out the last of their days in the Shadowlands?

I looked over to Drawwlog, and his expression sagged. There was a desolate look in his eyes, and I thought he might understand the heaviness shame could bring. Drawwlog had learned about Czerka in the past, he had shown me the tach harvest himself. I wondered if he knew about the slavery, and still kept Chuundar’s secrets after all this time.

“(But I am also a madclaw, Chuundar,)” I said finally. “(And even a madclaw exile has the right to enter the Shadowlands. I will cleanse my honour in the only way I can.)”

I saw a slight flinch on Drawwlog’s face. Perhaps he blamed himself, somewhat, for my accusations against Chuundar all those years ago. I liked to think that he regretted his lies, regretted not backing me against my brother and my father.

And I found, as I stepped forward, that Drawwlog did not have the will to stop me. His blade wavered and dropped, and I walked past him.

“(Brother,)” Chuundar barked sharply as I strode onto the lift. “(You would throw your life away like this? Is there not anything else you wish to say to me?)”

I understood, then, that Chuundar was burning with the need to find out what I knew.

He wondered if I had heard about our father. He wondered if I had discovered the slavery. He wondered what I knew about the Czerka trade, now.

But I was not the same brash, simple Wookiee I used to be.

“(I regret that I struck out at you, Chuundar,)” I said simply, looking upon the face that was so like our fathers’. “(I dishonoured our family with that one action.)”

But not with my words. They were true, and I would not apologize for them.

And as Growwhul started the lift’s descent, I kept my eyes on my brother. Frustration, more than anything, was apparent on his face. But he had no way to stop me, not with the Old Ones watching everything. If I had been angry, if I had thrown accusations about and we had begun to argue once
more, then perhaps he could have claimed I was a threat and neutralized me. If I had gone with him instead, he could have dealt with me some other way.

The passionate, clever brother I had worshipped as a cub was gone. I mourned him, even as I recognized that today’s chieftain was a threat to Rwookrroro and perhaps even Kashyyyk herself, should Czerka gain a prominent foothold here.

The gods be willing, my father would still be alive, and there might still be a way to bring honour back to our people.

xXx

Growwhul was silent on the way down. His kept his bow-caster fixed outside the lift, but never far from my form, and his dark gaze continued to land on me from time to time.

“(Where is Tasharr?)” I asked, about halfway down. I was not given to curiosity, usually, but Tasharr’s absence from Growwhul’s side was painfully noticeable. As fractious and choleric as the two of them were, their love for each other had always been evident. When all three of their cubs married into Arooagorro society, Growwhul and Tasharr remained here and ascended to become Old Ones. They were rarely without each other.

There was an obvious tensing in Growwhul’s grizzled frame, and his expression contorted with grief.

“(I do not speak to madclaws,)” he growled, staring into the darkening shadows.

She had died, then, or perhaps been sold under the guise of exile. I hoped, for Growwhul’s sake, it was the former.

I cleared my throat. “(There are Wookiee slaves in the Czerka starport.)”

Growwhul’s gaze jerked back to mine, his eyes wide with surprise. There was something in his expression, some glimpse of recognition… I wondered, then, if he had heard rumours of slavery before. Growwhul was not one who would stand for slavery on Kashyyyk, but he also would not act against the chieftain without proof. All I could do was sow the seeds.

“(Six in cages, in the marketplace. And I have heard of a freighter, in docking bay F4, that has a hundred imprisoned.)”

Growwhul gave out a sort of strangled noise. “(Are you telling me you saw this with your own eyes?)”

“(No,)” I shifted uncomfortably. “(Someone I trust with my life spoke with one of the caged Wookiees. She did not get his name, but he told her about the rest of them.)”

Growwhul grumbled in disgust. “(It was not a Wookiee, was it?)” At my silence, the rumble of discontent in his chest grew louder. “(You spread off-worlder lies. Even now, even as you go to face the consequences of your actions from years ago, you are still looking for any way to discredit your brother.)”

He would not listen, I knew. Growwhul had never been a shining advocate of Chuundar, but he would always follow the chieftain.

“(Mission Vao does not lie,)” I barked. “(One thing I have learned in my years abroad is that off-worlders can have honour, too. If you have heard anything of slavery, then remember well what I
said today-)

“(I have heard enough,)” he growled, the corners of his mouth pulling down.

“(If someone were to venture into the starport, they could either prove me wrong-)”

“(Silence!)” Growwhul roared. His thickset brows were lowered in righteous anger.

“(or Czerka would not let them enter, which would then pose the question of what Czerka was hiding.)”

“(I will hear no more poison from you, madclaw!)” Growwhul’s bow-caster swung to aim at my face, now, close and threatening.

I subsided then, for I had said my piece. Whether it would amount to anything I did not know, but at least I had tried, and with someone honourable enough to do something about it – should he ever believe any of it might be true.

The shadows darkened as we descended further, and the air became stagnant; musty and earthy in its scent. The odd speck of a glow bug against the nearest wroshyr was visible, and after a time Growwhul looked beyond me once more, aiming his weapon back into the shadows.

The foliage thinned, and I realized we were nearing the bottom. Even here, the temperature was ambient. I felt a tension in my gut, and was ready to move out. I had slipped past my brother and made it to the Shadowlands. Thus far, things were going as planned. I could only hope it would stay that way.

The elevator thudded gently onto the forest floor, but what had me stiffening was the small group of sentients who awaited us. Growwhul’s bow-caster was aimed at them, and I saw they were mostly small, hairless off-worlders.

My eyes widened with surprise when I recognized the only one with any fur at all, even if it was fine and short. I strode past Growwhul, unlatched the basket, and walked out.

“Zaalbar!” Juhani greeted, stepping forward to clasp my hands. Behind her stood Dak Vessar, Kel Algwinn, and a robed human male I did not know. “We have been waiting for someone to answer the intercom. I did not expect… what are you doing here?”

“(Your exile begins, madclaw, where it should have six years ago,)” Growwhul growled, stepping out of the basket and motioning me away into the shadows. “(Go. Cleanse your shame, and do not return.)”

The older human stepped forward. “We are done here, and will take the lift back,” he spoke directly to Growwhul, a deep frown lining his face.

“(I am an exile, Juhani. What are you doing here? Where is Jen?)”

The Cathar frowned as she struggled to follow my words. At times I thought she could comprehend me better than Canderous Ordo and Carth Onasi, but her understanding of Shyriiwook was only rudimentary.

Still, I had grown to respect her, and how she had struggled to better herself since Tatooine. Perhaps the path of the Jedi who had tasted their madclaw Dark Side and turned away from it – Juhani and Jen Sahara both – had shown me that honour could come after dishonour.
“We have been laying Belaya to rest. Are you- are you going after-” She stopped talking at the robed human’s scowl. She meant Jen, of course. I did not think Juhani would know anything about the politics of my homeworld, or my father.

Growwhul had pointedly walked back into the elevator, and both Kel Algwin and the older human followed. Dak Vessar was frowning at Juhani.

“We need to leave, Knight Juhani,” the robed man spoke. “Master Quatra is awaiting our return.”

“Juhani?” Dak prompted, when she kept staring at me, a silent question on her face.

“(I have more than one reason to be here, Juhani,)” I said finally, but the frown on her face showed this was either an unsatisfactory answer, or she did not comprehend my words.

“Do the others know you are here?”

“(Canderous Ordo does. He will have told Mission and Carth Onasi by now.)”

There was an impatient growl from Growwhul, and Juhani shifted to stare at all her companions in turn. Finally, she closed her eyes and sighed.

“Juhani,” the one I did not know grumbled. “You’re dithering. That’s irritating at the best of times, and downright foolish in the Shadowlands.”

“I am not dithering, Master Vrook,” Juhani responded, her voice calm and collected despite his censure. “I am making a decision.” Her eyes opened, then, and she stepped forward to embrace Dak.

“Take care, Dak,” she murmured, her arms tight around his middle. “I shall not be travelling back with you.”

“What?” he demanded. He pulled back, his brows lowering to glare at her. “What are you saying?”

I blinked. Did Juhani mean to accompany me? Growwhul would not like that, not for an exile. And I planned to hunt for my father. Juhani is thinking of Jen Sahara. And our mission. I could not deny the importance of the Star Map, and its impact on the war being waged in the galaxy.

My loyalty was as much to Jen Sahara as it was to Kashyyyk, these days. I did not know what or whom I should attempt to find first, but perhaps Juhani could aid me in that decision. And I found I would be glad of Juhani’s company, and not only because she was a fearsome warrior in her own right.

“My place is with the crew of the Ebon Hawk, Dak,” Juhani murmured, but she was looking at the robed one called Vrook. He scowled from his place on the lift.

Dak Vessar stared at me in mild incredulity, before turning back to Juhani. “You’re going to stay here? In the Shadowlands, with no equipment?”

“A Jedi is hardly helpless,” she replied, in a mild tone. She wore plain clothing, and although I saw the glint of a lightsaber on her belt, she was equipped with little else. But I knew how to survive here, and Juhani had lived in an inhospitable desert for the better part of a year. I did not doubt her resourcefulness.

“(He is an exile!)” Growwhul roared, as if he suddenly understood what was happening. “(A madclaw exile! He cannot have allies. This is his only chance to cleanse himself of his dishonour, and it cannot be interfered with by outsiders!)”
“I go to seek a companion of mine, who is in your Shadowlands.” Juhani had turned around, and spoke clearly to Growwhul. She may not understand his words, but his displeasure at her intent was plainly obvious. “I will return when I have found her.”

Growwhul was growling, his grizzled fur standing on edge. And then, I saw a flicker of movement from the one named Vrook, and Growwhul’s snarled coat flattened slightly. The grumble in his throat subsided. I felt more at peace, more serene then I had in days.

It was false. And I was familiar, now, with the way Jedi could use the Force on others. It was deceitful, and unclean, and I hated it.

The one named Vrook spoke. “Juhani-”

The Cathar shook her head at the robed Jedi. “Go back to Master Quatra and Master Vandar. My place is here. I can return to the elevator when I am done."

“(Are you sure, Juhani?)” I rumbled softly. “(I was always destined for this place, since we first aimed our ship at Kashyyyk. There is no need for you to be here.)”

Juhani only smiled at me. Her slanted eyes gleamed in the shadows.

“This is foolish,” Master Vrook muttered from his place on the basket. “First Zhar and now this… Zhar could have waited to speak to Vandar, at the least.” A deep frown formed on his face. “I could forbid this, Knight Juhani.”

“Master-”

“I won’t,” he grumbled. “I won’t test your mettle again. And I must admit I’ve half a mind to go with you, if it weren’t for the need to return these two to Quatra.” He sighed, scratching the thinning hair on his head. He looked old and tired. “Just don’t forget that your loyalty to the Order trumps your loyalty to your friends. If that’s not the case, then you need to reconsider your priorities.”

Juhani bowed her head. “I shall not forget, Master Vrook.”

I was silent as Dak Vessar gave Juhani one last embrace, whispered something to her quietly, and then walked onto the basket to accompany the others. Growwhul gave a soft growl again, before initiating the basket’s ascent. As the lift slowly began to rise, Growwhul remained staring at me, his dark gaze disapproving and forbidding. Dak Vessar had a torn, wistful smile as he looked back down to Juhani.

The basket went up. It did not take long until it was eclipsed by the shadows.

xXx
The voice was slightly gravelly, as if dry from disuse. As he came closer I could see he was, in fact, a male human of advanced years. He lacked any hair on his head, but there was a thick smattering on his chin. There was no colour to him, not through my Force-sight – he was nothing but an etching of blue and black lines.

He was staring at me.

There was no Force aura around him at all. He felt… dead in the Force. Much like Dustil, when he hid. And as the man stood perfectly still, I could not pick him out from the rest of the shadowy environment.

“Jolee Bindo?” Zhar managed, after a noticeable pause. He sounded both puzzled and incredulous.

“Were you expecting someone else?” the stranger replied in a dry tone, his gaze moving to settle on Zhar.

There was a slight look of unease on the Jedi Master’s face. “It has been some time, my old friend. I did not expect to find you so quickly.”

Neither did I. Jolee Bindo’s surprising appearance put paid to my conversation with Zhar for the meantime, and that was enough to increase my ire. Certainly it wasn’t the old man’s fault – by all accounts, we needed him – but he could have sodding well waited a few hours.

Jolee snorted. “At my age, time ends up being a slippery thing.”

“I do believe I am older than you by a few years, Jolee,” Zhar returned, his voice mild and amused. “This is Jen Sahara, a Jedi of the Order who is travelling with me.”

I noticed the complete lack of rank, and my eyes narrowed.

“Let’s get a move on,” Jolee declared. “What you seek is this way.”

The old man turned abruptly, as abruptly as his words had been, and began walking in the same direction we were headed earlier. Zhar glanced at me, his brow slightly furrowed, before following the stranger. The ground was hard-packed and free of any obstacles in this area, and yet the Jedi Master did not speak. I wondered if he was trying to wait the old human out. But Jolee Bindo looked wholly unconcerned and uninterested as he strolled through the Shadowlands, his eyes fixed ahead into the gloom. I’d put my credits on Zhar breaking first, I thought with some amusement.

Sure enough, after minutes of silence, Zhar finally cleared his throat. “So, you know what we seek?” he asked. His voice was cautious and low.

There was a creasing around Jolee’s eyes, as if Zhar’s question entertained him. “The Shadowlands holds many secrets, or so I’ve found over the years. But there’s only one relic around here that would
be drawing all you Force users to a remote world like this one.”

“All us Force users…” Zhar frowned. “It has been decades, Jolee, but you were one yourself. How is it I cannot sense you at all?”

I quickened my steps, moving to flank the stranger. “How can you see in the Shadowlands without a light source?” I added. He shot me a speculative sideways look.

“There’s more than one way to kill a kinrath, young pup,” he countered. I raised a brow, but the strange old man didn’t elaborate. If he held no Force, then he couldn’t be using it to assist with his vision. There was no obvious visor or light-source, and off-hand the only solution I could come up with were occular implants.

“You are completely dead in the Force, Jolee,” Zhar said quietly. “What happened?”

The old man didn’t answer at first, and the only sound I heard for some time were our quiet footsteps squelching into the moist forest floor. The humidity was thick down here, where the light never reached. Many species native to Kashyyyk had developed vision advanced enough to make their way through the Shadowlands – Wookiees included – but for us off-worlders, it was nothing more than pitch-black.

“Are you not able to conceal your own Force presence, then?” Jolee Bindo said finally.

I glanced over to Zhar, who was walking on Jolee’s other side with a slight frown. “Certainly, one can dim their Force signature to a near imperceptible spark, so one cannot be sensed unless nearby… but you are completely absent from the Force, Jolee. More so than a non-Force user, more so than a common forest creature. If I could not see you with my own eyes, I would not know you were there. Are you suggesting this is some use of the Force itself?”

There was the slightest touch of disbelief in Zhar’s voice, and it was enough for me to clear my throat, my mouth twitching in a half-grin. Zhar looked over to me as I reached out, striving to emulate the trick Dustil had shown me. With a mental flick, I inverted the Force weaves around me. My vision went instantly black.

There was a bit of balancing, at first, to keep the inverse energy in place as it repelled the Force away. It didn’t work as a shield, as such – I imagined any Force attack directed at it would sever the weaves in a blink – but it did hide my presence from being sensed, even as it cut me off from the Force. It was a passive use, too, and one that could be held for some time with minimal effort.

In the Shadowlands, though, my lack of sight was disorienting, and I was quick to drop the weaves. I glanced over to Zhar; the startlement on his face showed me this was new to him - a Jedi Master. So where the frell had Dustil learned it?

I’d not managed to emulate Dustil’s physical invisibility, though. That was a shame. The two tricks coupled together were a powerful tool indeed.

Jolee Bindo wore an inscrutable expression as he continued walking; stripped from the Force the way he was, he wouldn’t have sensed what I’d done. But Zhar had, and the curiosity was paramount on his face.

Zhar’s composure had been slipping a bit, since we’d met the enigmatic Jolee Bindo. And I had to admit, I relished the idea of knowing something Force-related that the Jedi Master – who knew my secrets – didn’t.
“I’m not suggesting anything,” Jolee said, at last answering Zhar. “You’re welcome to draw your own conclusions.”

That sent the Twi’lek Master back into silence. I found myself liking this strange old man. He certainly wasn’t quick to explain himself. *He’s unnerving Zhar, though. So much for them being old chums.*

“How long have you lived down here?” I asked in curiosity. We walked through a section of thick-bladed grass that was a little above chest-height. I felt the moisture on my hands as I swatted the plants away, and wondered if light clothing was a sensible choice down here. The temperature was ambient, though – I was unlikely to suffer from the cold here. “Why make this place your home?”

“You want to play question and answer, kid?” he returned, glancing at me sideways. I felt a stirring of empathy with Mission – that moniker was irritating, particularly when I’d left my childhood behind decades ago. “Fine. I’ll go first. I’ve found Kashyyyk is a good place in which to retire. People leave you alone. As for how long… well. I stopped counting a long time ago. Let’s just say when I first came here I was a strapping young man with a head full of hair, and Coruscant was a small town with a well. Heh heh.”

Zhar snorted. “You didn’t have that much hair, even back then.”

Zhar’s irreverence surprised me, and I saw a fond smile on the Twi’lek’s face. Jolee, however, ignored him to continue staring at me. “Your turn. What do you know of this relic?”

The question was blunt and straightforward… and Jolee hadn’t named it a Star Map. So maybe he had absolutely no idea what it was. *Although, he’s asking me what I know of it. That doesn’t necessarily mean he’s ignorant.* “It’s a navigational map,” I replied. Jolee hadn’t completely answered my first question, and I wasn’t sure how comfortable Zhar would be with me divulging all the details to someone who had left the Order decades ago. “We don’t know what it points to.”

Come to think of it, it wasn’t like I knew that many details myself.

Jolee hummed, Zhar remained silent, and I thought on what to ask next. “Are there more off-worlders down here in recent times?” I questioned. “I have reason to suspect there’s a second elevator down to the Shadowlands. Have you seen anything?”

Jolee’s forehead furrowed with speculation, a bunching of blue-black lines in my Force-sight. He appraised me out of the corner of his eye as we walked on, out of the grass and through a leaf-strewn area that slipped and slid under our feet.

We were moving slower, now, than Zhar and I had earlier. Jolee had no Force – and whether that was intentional or not was going to be one of my next questions.

“You’ve heard something about Czerka interests, and are sticking your nose in – or thinking about it,” he surmised. “But which side are you on? The profitable one, or the honourable one?”

“You didn’t answer the question, old man.”

“Huh,” he harrumphed. “Impatient one. You don’t want to be just another fool with a big impatient chip on their shoulder.”

I snorted. “And you don’t want to be another geriatric who no one listens to because you keep talking in circles.”

To my surprise, Jolee laughed. “Alright, alright. Yes, Czerka have two lifts down here now. Hidden
in their control towers, I believe. Paid a pretty credit to the Wookiee chieftain, although I doubt most of his people know about them. It’s taken them years before they were finished, the second one’s only been operational for a fistful of months.”

“How can Czerka hide this from the Wookiees?” Zhar asked, a note of disapproval in his tone. “Building an elevator down here – surely that must be common knowledge.”

"It's my turn for a question," Jolee said. His voice was mild, yet resolute. He was keeping his cards close to his chest, and considering his past history with Zhar, that surprised me not a little.

"The Wookiees keep to themselves," I murmured in an aside to Zhar. "And it sounds like they’re not allowed to roam freely through the Czerka starport. If the lifts are concealed in the towers, then the only place the Wookiees could conceivably find them is the Shadowlands.”

“Hmm,” Zhar acknowledged, likely thinking on my conversation with Canderous earlier. I’d been surprised to hear that Czerka weren’t allowing unrestrained Wookiees walking around. This was Kashyyyk, for frell’s sake. I couldn’t imagine any Wookiee standing for that.

It’s to stop them seeing the slaves. Czerka must turn them away at the entrance. Still, it was hard to believe. Maybe that was part of the reason there were a hundred of them in a transport ship – some had found out the truth.

“Here’s a big one, and I’m looking for your honesty here, young pup.” Jolee drew my attention by halting, turning to stare at me through narrowed eyes. “Where does your loyalty lie, Jen Sahara?”

Jolee was keeping a close eye on me, as if attempting to gauge my sincerity through sight alone. Certainly, the ability to read someone through body language or intonation was useful, but it wasn’t exactly an infallible science.

His question, though… it was an interesting one. Despite myself, I was intrigued enough to truly consider it.

I sighed, closing my eyes briefly to the indigo lines of the Shadowlands, broken up here and there by yellow sparks of smallish insects. I would be glad to see proper light again, and briefly considered activating a lightsaber just for the sheer radiance of it.

Where did my loyalty lie? To my crewmates, obviously. To Carth, to Bastila – even if I felt conflicted over her secrets, to Mission and Juhani and Canderous and Zaalbar. But, beyond that?

I followed Bastila's mission, now. I hadn’t, at first, but somewhere along the line my loyalty had truly swung in favour of her objective: to stop Darth Malak by tracking down the source of his power. His expansion and destruction were a threat to the stability of the Republic, to the Jedi of the Order, and to billions of people around the galaxy.

I’d been a Jedi Knight, once. It was obvious where my loyalty lay.

“The Republic,” I said, my voice slow and wondering as the words came out. I opened my eyes to see them both staring at me. Zhar’s eyes were wide. “My loyalty is to the Republic, the ideals and the foundations it was built on.”

“That’s an interesting answer for a Jedi,” Jolee commented. He began walking again, at a slower pace, and Zhar and I followed.

“Is it?” I countered. This felt familiar; like I’d had to defend this particular viewpoint before. “The Jedi are guardians of the galaxy and mediators for peace. The Republic is meant to be an empire that
strives for harmony amongst all its members, no matter how diverse.”

“A Jedi’s first loyalty is to the will of the Force,” Zhar cut in. His voice had returned to the damnable neutral tone of earlier. “And second to the Jedi Order.”

“And what if you don’t know what the Force wants?” I said. For some reason, Zhar’s comments made me feel overly irritable. “Do we sit back, meditate for years, and try to guess? And what if the Order itself is wrong?”

There was a slight noise as Zhar breathed in quickly. “Do you realize quite how egotistical that sounds, Jen?”

I sighed. Yeah, I did. And I didn’t think it was coming from the echo of Darth Revan, either. If I’d followed her into the Mandalorian Wars, then I must have put the Republic above the Order at one time.

*She must have, too.*

I clenched a fist, hard enough to dig my nails into my flesh. I wasn’t going to excuse that sorry piece of destructive Sith crap. She may have had a way with words to convince so many to follow her, but there had to be something innately flawed with her to begin with, to fall the way she did.

“It’s not meant to, Zhar,” I muttered. “Look, I’m not saying I know better than the Masters. All I’m saying is that just because we wave a glow stick around and wear brown robes doesn’t necessarily make us right. *Or* that we should seat ourselves apart from everything in the damn galaxy.”

“There are many reasons Jedi do not involve themselves directly with societal injustices, Jen,” Zhar replied. I had the feeling we were getting off-topic, and Jolee appeared more than content to let us go at it. “We are advisors only because of the very power we wield. We cannot have a jealous eye being turned on us, or any claims against our impartiality, if we wish to help the people you want to protect. And then there is the Dark Side, and the overwhelming damage it can do-”

“I know,” I interrupted. “I understand the tightrope the Order has to walk – politically speaking - if they truly want to aim for peace for all. But the Republic… Look, I’ll not deny it has its corruption, its blind-spots and its inherent bureaucracy that borders on stupidity, at times. But it’s the best model the galaxy has come up with, so far. Surely that’s worth fighting for?”

“At what cost, Jen?” Zhar murmured. “War is damaging for all sentients. It is worse for Jedi, who feel the very fabric of life with their senses. So much death and suffering has an enormous effect on one’s soul.”

“That’s why the Order sat back from the Mandalorian Wars?” I asked. My voice had dropped in volume, much the same as Zhar’s. “The Council was worried about the Dark Side?”

“That was one reason amongst many. But, as you know, the best and the brightest of us did, in fact, fall in the end. Our gravest fears were proved true.”

“Well, the Order was divided, wasn’t it,” I said quietly. “Who knows how it might have played out, had the High Council actually supported the Republic.”

Zhar had not been expecting *that* one, I could tell by the way his shoulders tensed up. I hurried to keep speaking. “The alternative was to sit back, and let the Mandalorians reach the Core,” I said. “I don’t know enough- “ *I don’t remember enough-* “about the Wars to give an expert assessment, but the Republic was close to falling. Opinions are pretty widespread about that.”
The silence that followed was tense. For once, Zhar’s emotions were apparent through the Force; more than anything, he felt conflicted. Some part of him, at least, agreed with me.

I still couldn’t sense Jolee at all. I recalled, then, that it was my turn to ask a question - but a few flickers of life nearby drew my attention.

Jolee looked up from a device attached to his wrist. “A small group of katarn,” he muttered. He brushed the sleeve of his garment back over his arm, and it was hard to tell exactly what he’d been looking at. A bioscanner, likely. I thought I’d seen the interleaving of scale or mesh armour, too, which was an interesting choice for a Force user.

If Jolee was still one. He pulled out a vibrosword, then, and I wondered if he’d lost his connection to the Force permanently. Whether that was even possible.

Yes. Yes it is.

I scowled, and pushed the dark voice to the back of my mind.

We edged forward, toward the rustling noise of animals moving in the underbrush. Jolee wielded his blade expertly, confident enough to lead two Force users against the predators of the Shadowlands.

There were four of them; decent-sized reptomammals that turned at our approach, the nearest launching forward from a four-legged jump aimed straight at Jolee. My sabers flared to life, and the Force swelled in my grasp, boosting an instinctive strength and speed into my muscles. I ran, overtaking Jolee with ease, and sliced through the neck of the nearest katarn.

It was practised instinct, now. I could sense the movements of the enemy, position myself in the exact spot to dodge a swipe, land a blow, and spin to face the next one. Calculating precision, a lifetime’s worth of experience that was bedded deep into my senses, my psyche, my very being. With a final leap, I landed next to the last surviving reptomammal, the cyan saber already scything deep into its underbelly.

I looked up, realizing that four warm corpses were sprawled around me in a haphazard fashion, and Jolee was some metres back, wearing a faint smirk.

“You young things always like to show off,” he commented.

Zhar was staring at me in shock. “That’s- that’s Karon’s lightsaber,” he whispered. “Isn’t it?”

I thumbed off the sabers, and clipped them onto my belt. Zhar’s gaze was intense, even through my Force-sight. I nodded slowly. “I came across her, dying from the fight with Kylah. If I’d been earlier-” I frowned. “I was too late to save her. I scared Kylah off, but I was too late for Karon. She told me to keep her saber.”

Zhar swallowed, and raised a hand. “May I?”

I felt attached to the pale blue lightsaber, more so than the short red one I’d picked up from a random Sith corpse. The weight of it, the balance - it felt right somehow - and the idea of releasing it into the hands of a Jedi Master I still didn’t entirely trust wasn’t appealing. But there was a yearning in the lines of the Twi’lek’s expression that I couldn’t quite ignore.

With some reluctance, I unclipped the saber once more and tossed it to him.

Zhar activated it, giving a few exploratory swipes in the air. The faint hum of Karon’s old weapon reverberated through the air, and I realized then it had become a familiar sound to me.
“Did she- did she say anything else?”

_I failed you. Forgive me._ “No.” I heard the curtness in my voice, and Zhar did too; his gaze shot to mine and he flicked off the ‘saber before handing it back.

“It’s a good weapon, Jen. Take care of it.”

I nodded, and Zhar turned to look at Jolee. “You haven’t asked about Karon,” he said. His voice was almost accusing.

Jolee’s gaze was drawn to the katarn corpses, and he didn’t answer Zhar at first. “We should move from here. Fresh blood draws other predators.” With that, the old human once more began striding into the shadows.

We followed, on either side. Zhar, however, was still staring at Jolee pointedly. Long after the silence had edged into awkwardness, Jolee gave an irritated huff.

“I’ve been here for more of my life than I’d care to remember. The past is exactly that. I figured if you wanted to tell me about Karon, you would.”

Zhar retreated back into silence, a slight frown on his face. The three of them had been Padawans together, he’d said. But Jolee was plainly uninterested in the past, while Zhar, in contrast, was still grieving for his – for their - old friend.

I kept quiet, at first, wondering if I should give them a chance to speak, give Zhar an opportunity to coax Jolee into conversation. I had the feeling that this reunion wasn’t going at all like Zhar had expected.

In the end, the silence began to grate, and I realized it was my turn anyway.

“What about you, Jolee Bindo? What are your loyalties?”

There was a faint twitch at the corner of his mouth. He veered to the right, avoiding a gigantic wroshyr that was directly in our path. There was a massive hollow in the base of it, at least two metres wide, and a faint flare of yellow life deep within. “Much the same as yours, young pup. I favour peace and stability. You could say my loyalties are aligned with the continuation of the Republic.”

That wasn’t quite the same as loyalty to the Republic, but I was beginning to suspect Jolee was a slippery sort of character when it came to conversation. I was mulling his response over when he cleared his throat and once more took up the reins of dialogue.

“I’d like to pose a theoretical one for you this time, Jen Sahara,” Jolee said. There was a patchwork of hanging vines up ahead, and he motioned for us to walk around them rather than through. Above, I could see a shifting in the shadows, and I wondered if the vines were the home of yet another deadly predator. “Say there’s someone out there trying to kill you. Doesn’t matter who, but they’ve tried and failed. Now they come up to you, and claim their reason no longer exists. They’re not a threat anymore. Do you move on or claim vengeance?”

“What’s the point of these questions, Jolee?” For it hadn’t escaped my notice that he was more interested in talking to me than his childhood friend. _He knows something about me. He must_, I realized with a chill. _He’s trying to figure me out._

“Why, merely to get a measure of your character,” he returned, sounding vaguely amused. “I already know Zhar’s. No need to sound so suspicious. At my age, and especially on this planet, there’s not
too much to keep us old folks amused. Now, answer the question.”

“What was their reason?” I parried swiftly.

“Is that important?”

“Absolutely,” I countered. “I need to know how genuine they are, and for that I need the reason they wanted to kill me in the first place. Did I wrong them? Did they have a genuine grievance against me?”

“It’s an impartial motive – nothing personal.”

“Impartial?” I scoffed. “Charming. If it’s impartial, then what’s to stop them impartially changing their mind again?”

“Hmph,” Jolee murmured. He sounded vaguely irritated. “Not quite the point of my question, young pup. Let’s just say you’re convinced they will no longer be a threat. I’m interested in your response to their previous actions, not their potential future ones.”

I took a moment to think it over. “Well, assuming they hadn’t caused any collateral damage or hurt anyone else in the process, I don’t think I’d be particularly interested in revenge.”

He hummed. He was still shooting me considering glances from the corner of his eyes. “You don’t think you deserve something in return for the attempt on your life?”

“Well, now you’re talking about compensation, not vengeance.” I frowned. “And that depends on, again, what other damage they may have caused.”

A faint buzzing on my wrist-comm halted my words. I half-raised my hand at Jolee, and answered the incoming message.

::Jen:: Carth’s voice emitted from my wrist, and I felt myself smile. ::How are you doing?::

“Fine,” I spoke softly. “We’ve found Zhar’s contact, and are on our way to our objective.”

::That’s- that’s fantastic. How far away is it?::

That was a good question. I turned to frown at Jolee, and he stopped walking.

“We’ll rest here for a bit, have a bite to eat,” he said, motioning toward a fallen log that looked a perfect size for seating. Small sparks of green-yellow flared on one end, while the rest of it was nothing more than a bunch of blue-black outlines. Much like Jolee. “Tell your friend it’s a handful of days away. You might get there in a single day using the Force.”

I relayed the message to Carth, who at least seemed pleased with the progress. His news, however, wasn’t quite so great.

::Neither Juhani nor Zaalbar have returned:: he told me, a note of worry evident in his voice. ::I guess I didn’t expect Zaalbar to. Ordo’s concerned he might end up a slave rather than an exile::

“Juhani’s probably still tied up with the Masters,” I said haltingly. I’d expected her to check in with the ‘Hawk by now, but maybe they had other things on their mind. Like the swift departure of Zhar and myself.

::Ordo is keeping himself busy, trying to find some intel on… well, I’m not exactly sure what he’s doing:: Carth sounded vaguely irritated. I frowned, wondering what Canderous had and hadn’t told
Carth. I expected Canderous to involve Carth in any plans, but maybe the Mandalorian hadn’t gotten that far yet. ::I’m going to be tied up for a bit, Jen. There’s a couple of Republic freighters docked next to us, and I’m going to find out what they’re doing on Kashyyyk – and check in with Dodonna while I’m at it.::

I felt my brows lift in surprise. What the frell are the Republic doing here? Had the Order contacted them? Carth had been assigned to Bastila, even though he reported to his Admiral. Maybe someone in Republic HQ desired a closer eye on our progress – and, when considering the importance of this mission, that probably made sense.

“Okay,” I said, feeling uneasy regardless. “Possibly someone wants a personal debrief from you rather than a comm’d one. Take care, alright?”

He gave a brief chuckle. ::I’ll be fine, Jen. It’s you I’m worried about.::

::There’s three of us now, Carth. We’ll find what we need in no time.::

::I hope so, Jen. Be careful. I, uh--:: he paused, like he wanted to say something more. A public communicator was hardly discrete, though. ::Be careful.::

I felt myself smile wistfully. Once more, I longed for his presence at my side. “I’ll see you soon, flyboy,” I promised.

I switched the comm off, and looked up to see Jolee snap open a plastifilm covered ration-pack, before pouring a minute amount of water from a canteen into it. Somehow, I’d expected him to be living off the forest, not armed with off-worlder protein meals.

Zhar was sitting on the log, rifling through his pack as I went to join him. After a moment, he tossed me a thick energy bar of some description, and ripped into a similar one for himself. It tasted heavy and grainy, and I longed for the day I could actually consume some real, unprocessed food.

We ate in relative silence, passing around a gourd of water as the sounds of the Shadowlands permeated the air around us. It was fairly quiet: a faint rustling from further ahead; a clicking noise of some insectoid; and the caw of a flying creature a distance away.

I was beginning to feel a heavy lassitude sink through my body. I was tired. We’d been walking for hours. And at some stage, my awareness of Bastila had dimmed and I’d dropped the psychic shield without consciously realizing it – either she was now blocking me, or she’d fallen asleep. Despite myself, a brief yawn escaped me.

“A few hours rest would be a good idea,” Zhar said quietly. He moved to sit on the ground, leaning back against the log and closing his eyes. I felt the Force retreat around him, to centre in his being, and realized he was lapsing into a meditative state. “I shall awaken if anything comes nearby.”

I moved to copy him, expecting some semblance of sleep to overtake me quickly.

It didn’t.

I’d hoped, by now, to have some concrete answers from Zhar. Jolee’s fortuitous appearance had scuttled that, and I had the feeling that Zhar wouldn’t be overly keen to talk about my history in the presence of company.

And Jolee was trying to figure me out. I wasn’t sure if he was merely testing my character, or trying to pull secrets from my head. What would he think, should he find out sodding Darth Revan had taken up residence in my head? Was it possible he already knew? Zhar hadn’t seen him for decades
– an odd forty years, he’d mentioned, since Jolee had disappeared.

My eyes opened, to see Jolee staring at me again. A blue-black eyebrow raised in my Force sight.

“Got something on your mind, do you?” Jolee murmured.

He certainly was an enigma, that one. Jolee had implied decades of his life were spent down here, and yet the human hermit still preferred to use technology – ‘scanners, synthetic food – rather than living with nature the way I’d expected him to. And he knew something about me, at least – enough that I was far more interesting to him than Zhar Lestin, a Jedi he’d trained with in his youth.

Had I met Jolee Bindo before? He didn’t seem at all familiar.

*But Revan had come here once before, to get the Star Map. It’s entirely possible she met him.*

Zhar wasn’t at ease with Jolee, not really. They’d been good friends, once, but there was something about Jolee Bindo now that put Zhar on edge.

Zhar had also expected Jolee to be using the Force - much the same as us. It could be that Jolee was hiding his strength from us both – but why? Much more likely that Jolee had lost the Force, somewhere along the line. That would explain why he was equipped with a vibrosword rather than a lightsaber, why he had what I thought was armour under his loose clothing.

*Yet the Masters who came down here earlier sensed a Force user.*

I felt a tingle of awareness, and my gaze narrowed on him.

“You’re not Jolee Bindo,” I said, my voice quiet, watching him intently.

I wasn’t sure, not until I saw the complete lack of movement on his part. He could have faded into the background of my Force sight, had I not known exactly where he was sitting.

“And you’re not Jen Sahara,” he murmured. “Are you?”

He was preternaturally still, the same as me. I knew exactly where my lightsaber was, and held onto the Force tight, ready to strike at a moment’s notice. “What are you after, old man?” I demanded. “Are you even leading us the right way?”

“Oh, yes,” he confirmed. A small smile curved on his face. “Continue in this direction, and you shall find what you seek. As for what I’m after, I should have thought that would be obvious.”

His intonation had changed, somewhat. His voice was neutral, his manner a touch more formal than before. He seemed less a wry self-deprecating ex-Jedi, and more a detached observer.

“All I’ve figured out is that you’re trying to figure me out.”

He gave a quiet chuckle. “You are an interesting character, I’ll give you that.” He said no more, as if trying to make me lead the conversation. It was irritating.

“And what have you concluded?”

“Your interests align with mine, for now.”

*Interests...* He was affiliated with the Republic, or – more accurately – loyal to the stability the Republic offered. He *must* know who was bouncing around in my head, which explained some of his queries. The fact that I’d shunted the Republic above the Jedi Order had likely appeased him.
Which also meant he had great faith in his own ability to spot the truth, to read people – and that suggested either over-confidence or training. I was willing to bet my last credits he was some sort of intelligence agent.

And he looked enough like Jolee Bindo to have fooled Zhar, to some extent.

That spoke of technology or surgery – resources behind him, anyway. His other line of questioning – about vengeance - made less sense, unless it was purely to see how Dark Side I was with Darth wacko in my head. For the only impartial attempt on my life I could recall was from the GenoHaradan, which in reality was no more than a trumped up bounty hunter organization – just more secret and expert at it than the Exchange.

Unless there was more to them. My eyes narrowed.

“You’re with the GenoHaradan,” I guessed. The stranger who called himself Jolee Bindo completely failed to react at all, and I knew then I was right. “Which means two things,” I continued slowly, even as my muscles tensed. Scenes flashed through my mind in rapid fire: the slaughter on Rii’shn, the quiet corpse outside the shyrack caves. “You’ve dropped the contract on me, and there’s a lot more to you all than just assassination attempts.”

“You’re perceptive,” the old man returned. He folded his hands in his lap, but his gaze didn’t stray from mine. “Can’t say I’m surprised at that. But I’m not an agent, not anymore. In all honesty, I’m retired, although one doesn’t ever truly retire from the GenoHaradan. But I was far enough up the ranks that I’ve autonomy, of a sort. Let us just say I owed Eridius a favour.”

He paused, then, like he expected me to react.

“Should that name mean something to me?” I questioned.

He shrugged. “I wondered, but evidently not. As to your questions – yes, we are far more than an organization that posts out contracts on sentients. That is our front, to the few who know of our existence. Our cashflow, if you will. But our main purpose is the stability of the galaxy – and, for the most part, that means the ongoing existence of the Republic.”

“The most part?”

“Well…” He paused for a brief moment. “There was a time when we believed that perhaps the Republic was not sufficient, shall we say, to the continued order that we desire. But our… contact, in those dealings, was lost. So for now, we wait and we watch. Perhaps our contact will return, and explain what is still a mystery – even to an organization such as ours.”

He hesitated over the word contact, which was intriguing in itself. But I had other questions to ask, first. “Had I answered you differently, would you have killed me?”

He shrugged. “I don’t dally in what-ifs, and nor should you. I work toward the goals of my people, and a Sith Empire led by an insane Dark Jedi is not an outcome we desire.”

I snorted. “Don’t think it’s a desire of many people, to be honest.”

“We wouldn’t normally take such an interest, if it wasn’t for the armada Malak has gathered. More ships than he has people, or so our intelligence suggests. Tell me, you who call yourself Jen Sahara, are you ready to put an end to Darth Malak?”

I raised an eyebrow. “That’s a bit of an assumption, to think it’s going to come down to me and him.”
“Is it?” he questioned, and I found I had no answer. I shifted uncomfortably.

“Look, all I know is that he’s bent on destroying the Republic, and has a gratuitous disregard for sentient life. If I have the chance to stop him, I will.”

“Interesting,” he murmured, and said nothing else. There was a faint buzzing on my wrist-comm, and I thumbed the ignore button.

“So, that contract’s been lifted. I can’t imagine that was ole Malak’s decision.”

“We had little knowledge of your quest, then,” he said mildly. “If you are, indeed, the Republic’s best chance – and we believe you may be – then we have every right to pull the contract.”

That was a fairly weighty thing to state – especially considering it had been all of us, every single member of the *Ebon Hawk*, who’d had a part to play in our success so far.

My eyes narrowed on the stranger. “And how do I know you won’t reinstate the contract?”

He gave a short laugh. It echoed in the shadows. “You don’t. But I spoke of compensation, earlier, and I was genuine. If you are content to leave us alone, then I shall give you two warnings in return and leave you to your mission.”

“I have no desire to hunt down the GenoHaradan,” I said quietly. “You guys have made enough of a mess in my life. Speak.”

He stared at me. “First: we are not alone in the Shadowlands. Between here and your objective are two Dark Jedi. Proceed with caution.”

I tensed. Two Dark Jedi… but then there was me and Zhar, a Master of the Jedi Order. We should be able to avoid them, or stand our ground.

“Who are they?”

He shrugged. “I have my suspicions, as I am sure you will, too. I didn’t get close enough to confirm their identity. I usually keep my distance from Force users.”

Obviously I was the exception. I raised an eyebrow. “And what of Jolee Bindo? Does he even exist? And if so, does he know you like to run around impersonating him?”

The stranger gave a brief chuckle. “He exists, he’s around here somewhere. But not even Jolee Bindo knows all the secrets of the Shadowlands. Oh, he’s aware of my presence - his continued tampering of my comm arrays is evidence of that – but, as I said, I’ve no interest in making friends with Force sensitives.”

Exactly why someone would bother setting up a comm array in the Shadowlands was a question I didn’t bother asking. Probably, this stranger desired extensive contact with the rest of the galaxy, given his affiliations.

I gave him a tight nod, and he continued.

“Two: the Republic presence on Kashyyyk has orders to capture you, Jen Sahara. If you wish to put an end to Darth Malak, then you had better find a way of avoiding them as you leave this planet.”

The Republic… *what the frell?* The shock was like a bucket of ice water had been tipped over me, and the Force shook in my grasp, blue-black lines of Force-sight disappearing momentarily before I
grasped it again. That meant… that meant someone high up in Republic HQ knew what the Jedi had done to me, knew Darth Revan was entrenched in my mind. The Republic… and the sodding GenoHaradan.

But the GenoHaradan believed I was worth a shot, where the Republic obviously didn’t. That burned.

“Understood,” I bit out. “Don’t suppose you can give me any good news?”

The old man chuckled again. “We’re not looking to kill you anymore. Isn’t that enough?”

The GenoHaradan believed in the Republic’s continued existence – which wasn’t the same as agreeing with their objectives, otherwise this stranger would hardly be leaving me alive and free. Sun and stars, he’d told me a lot more about the GenoHaradan than outsiders likely knew. He stood, then, his knees cracking as he flexed his back. He was still looking at me with a vaguely interested expression.

“You can find us again, should you have reason to,” he said quietly. His voice was matter-of-fact, like he expected it to be a distinct possibility. “You have the recruitment point on Manaan. Drop the name Rulan Prolik, and someone of import will meet with you.”

I had no idea why I’d want to do that, but I nodded anyway. “Is that your name?”

“What’s in a name?” he countered. “You, of all people, should know a name can mean absolutely nothing. Or everything. I’ll leave that with you.”

He turned from me, then, and began to walk away, into the blue-black shadows of my Force sight. And just as he was about to disappear, his entire outline shifted somehow, merged into a form smaller and leaner, less humanoid than before.

And then he was gone.

“Well.” Zhar’s voice was soft. “That was interesting.”

“You’re a master of understatement,” I muttered, leaning back and closing my eyes. It didn’t surprise me at all that Zhar had been awake the whole time. “Did you know?”

“That he wasn’t Jolee? I wondered. He didn’t say my name, until after you had. And yet, he had Jolee’s mannerisms.”

“Did you see him change form?” I asked. “That’s pretty advanced technology.” I frowned. I’d heard of belt-morphs that could change someone’s appearance via a photo-electronic field generator, but they were notoriously finicky – and I should have been able to sense the electrical oscillations.

“I do not think that was technology,” Zhar mused. “I have heard of shape-shifters, before; a race of sentients with the ability to change their form at will, through some sort of bio-mental process. I did not believe in their existence, but now I am not so certain.”

I sighed. Somehow, I didn’t think I’d ever get to the bottom of Rulan Prolik – or whatever his name was. And, frankly, there were more important things to think on. “The Republic are after me. Fantastic. We need to have our talk, Zhar.”

“Indeed,” he murmured. “But the Sith in the Shadowlands are what I’m concerned about. We should not use the Force, Jen, no more than simple Force-sight. Anything too overt can be sensed from a distance.”
“You don’t think we can hold our own against two Dark Jedi?” I raised a hand to rub at my temple. There was a headache forming, and I wondered if I felt the faint stirrings of Bastila waking up. In pain. Zhar didn’t answer at first, and I opened my eyes to stare at him. “Who do you think they are?”

“If they eluded Vrook and Vandar, then they will be a threat we cannot take lightly,” he warned. “It will not be Malak himself, but someone near his strength. Bandon Stone. Yudan Rosh. Nisotsa Organa. Sharlan Nox. Any one of those names should worry you, and two of them together is enough to make me consider returning to the others.”

Kel had mentioned Darth Bandon to me once, back on Korriban, but they were all faceless villains in my head - as anonymous as the spectre of big bad ole Malak.

The names meant nothing to me. But Zhar was staring at me like they should.

Damn Darth Revan. Maybe they were all her best mates, but they were still out to kill her – through me – weren’t they?

And Rulan – or whoever the frell he was – wondered if I knew the name Eridius.

Panic flashed through my mind, then, as quick and electric as lightning shearing through a night sky. It was Bastila, waking up with a jolt, and the Force flared wildly from her before ricocheting through our bond. I winced.

I can beat this. I shall wield the Force, I shall!

She wasn’t talking to me, but convincing herself, I realized. The Force was fluttering like a frantic wisp-fly in her mental grasp, slipping through her fingers like sand, bleeding back through to me-


Bastila?

There was a renewed sense of determination from her, and she either ignored me or could not hear. I felt her lunge out frantically, her psychic grip clumsy and unwieldy and completely failing to hold onto anything.

Are you drugged?

I- yes- stop talking to me, Jen! This is what he wants- you must stay away from my mind!

Zhar was frowning at me, and I tried to draw back into myself, to hold only the smallest amount of Force required for sight. It was difficult, open the way I was to Bastila, for her wild attempts were akin to a rancor picking up a dust-ball, and the flashback was hitting me.

Look, I’m safe now, alright? I’m with the Masters-

Don’t tell me anything, Jen! Her voice had turned quasi-hysterical, then, although there was a thread of frustration there, too. Don’t you see, he’ll just rip it from my mind?

I stilled; understanding at last. Was Bastila being used, to get at me? No, no, Bastila was a prize in herself. If her gifts could be turned against the Republic, it might be the final blow. Like I’d told Carth, hurt anyone long enough and they’d do anything to stop it.

I couldn’t let her deal with it alone, no matter the risk to me… but it wasn’t just about me and Bastila. The key objective was getting to the Star Map, first and foremost. I had to leave Bastila until that was
complete.

The shame tasted like ash in my mouth.

Zhar was standing, his brow furrowed. “We should move,” he said quietly. “If someone is tracking us through the Force, they may have felt you just now.”

I felt my lips thin as I realized he was right, and rose to my feet. I may not have slept, but the few hours downtime would be enough to keep me going. I have to stay shielded from Bastila, I realized with gutting disappointment. I gathered in a small amount of energy, about to erect a psychic barrier when one last message slipped through:

Stay away from the Shadowlands, she whispered. Do not tell me where you are, just stay away from the Shadowlands.

Uh-

No. No! It was a scream of fright, of hysteria, as she understood my hesitation. You cannot be there already! It’s a trap, Jen, get out of there!

Her emotions were savage, completely unrestrained and utterly unlike her. She was there, abruptly, in my head; fearful and unhinged. And the Force echoed in response, a wild surge of energy with a backlash like a terentatek’s claw-

“Jen!” Zhar yelled. “Stop it!”

I slammed down a shield that blocked the bond, and Bastila’s panic faded to a distant whimper in the back of my mind. I heard the sound of my own breaths, quick and shallow, an echo of Bastila’s frenzy.

“Come,” Zhar ordered, hoisting his pack over a shoulder, and striding fast into the shadows. There was no Force under his feet, it was pure muscle driving him on, and I hurried to catch up. He wasn’t walking in the same direction as Rulan had, I noticed, but slightly to the left.

“Bastila. She’s hysterical.”

“And she made you panic,” he said, his voice unnaturally curt. “You must keep her at bay for now, Jen. For both our sakes.”

“I will. But that wasn’t me panicking, that was all her.” Drawing through the bond, clutching at my Force. She hadn’t meant to, she likely had no idea – but it was the edge of her hysteria that had called to my Force-senses. Sithspit. I can’t let this happen again.

Zhar stumbled, a slight misstep of his hurried pace. “That bond,” he muttered. “It’s too strong. I don’t know of any Force bond in existence that is as open and powerful as yours appears to be.”

I frowned. “So there’s other Jedi out there, with mind-links like ours?”

“A handful I know of,” Zhar murmured, veering further to the left. “And not all Jedi, either. Although—” He halted mid-sentence, his head cocking.

“What?” I demanded. “Do you sense something?” I didn’t dare draw the Force out beyond the shield and the small amount required for sight.

“This way. Now!”
And he broke into a run.

I caught up, jumping over an exposed root, the both of us sprinting unaided by the Force, veering around clumps of undergrowth and beneath spindly kshyy vines that dangled free from the wroshyrs they grew upon. The blue-black of the Shadowlands blurred as I struggled to hold the psychic shield tight and small, aimed to draw only the smallest amount of power needed for sight-

“Throw me a visor,” I panted. He had a spare, he’d said. I could use that, cut myself off from the Force, and then no one would be able to sense me-

Zhar came to a sudden stop, and I stumbled sideways to avoid slamming into his back. He threw his pack off in a hurried move, and turned to stare into the shadows.

“It’s too late.”

I heard the thrum of a vehicle nearing, and my stomach coiled into tight knots. Without realizing it, my ‘sabers were back in my grasp. I heard the hiss of Zhar’s activating.

A jumpspeeder spat out of the shadows, before skidding sharply to an abrupt halt some metres in front of us. A loosely clothed humanoid figure jumped from the one-man vehicle.

My mind cleared; the fear faded away, replaced by calm, cool precision.

The figure stared at me, and a smirk grew on his face. He was young, and bald, and confident. Behind him, a second jumpspeeder screeched to a stop.

“Well. You certainly took your time,” he drawled, and a bar of evil hissed alive in his grasp.

xXx
Start-Up System Check
Motoring Functions Online
Shielding Functions... All Online
Assassination Protocols... Restricted Access
Combat Mode... Online (Owner Command or Override Required)
Memory Core Function... Unable To Access

Audio Sensors... Online
Optical Sensors... Online
Tactile Sensors... Online
Olfactory Sensors... Online
Gustatory Sensors... Not Installed

Scanning External Environment
Location: *Ebon Hawk* Engineering Section
2 Organic Meatbags, 1 Droid in Targeting Area

Identification – Canderous Ordo, Mission Vao, T3-M4

Primary Objective: Locate and Protect Jen Sahara (Current Owner)

Input – Mission Vao to Canderous Ordo: “Well?”
Voice Stress Analysis: Demanding

Input – Canderous Ordo to HK-47: “What’s your status, HK?”

Quick Self Diagnostic Routine Activated
...Result: No Errors Detected

Output: “Statement: I am fully functional, Geriatric Blockhead.”

Input – Mission Vao to Canderous Ordo: “C’mon Canderous, who cares about fixing that insane droid. Tell me what ya found out at Czerka!”

Input – Canderous Ordo to Mission Vao: “Look, kid, I ain’t gonna repeat myself. We’ll talk when Onasi gets back – I’ll give him an hour.”

Auditory Input: Irritated Huff
Source: Mission Vao

Input – Mission Vao to Canderous Ordo: “From the way those Republic suits were eyeing Carth up, I don’t reckon he’s gonna be back here anytime soon.”

Input – T3-M4 to Mission Vao (*Astromech Designated Communication Language*): “Male human
requesting entrance to *Ebon Hawk*. Initial biometric scans indicate identification as approved member of the *Ebon Hawk*.”

Input – Mission Vao to Canderous Ordo: “Okay, I take it back! Teethree says Carth is at the door!”

Input – Canderous Ordo to Mission Vao: “I’ll get it, kid. You stay here.”

Visual / Audio Tracking: Canderous Ordo Leaving Targeting Area

Input – T3-M4 to Mission Vao *(Astromech Designated Communication Language)*: “Retinal and thermal scans identify sentient as Dustil Onasi, approved member of the *Ebon Hawk*."

Output: “Observation: The accuracy of Gizka Spawn has once more proved to be on a par with a Czerka Thrifty Blaster 100.”

Input – Mission Vao: “Shut it, rustbucket. Honestly, I have no idea why Jen puts up with you.”

Output: “Commentary: I am a highly advanced combat and protocol droid, with moderate splicing skills, expert translation capabilities, superior combat and assassination protocols, and an advanced wit designed to both amuse meatbags and have them reflect on their meaningless existence. Retort: What skills do you offer, Gizka Spawn, to allow the Master to keep you?”

Input – Mission Vao: “I’m not talking to you anymore.”

Voice Stress Analysis: Petulant

Scanning External Environment: Longer Range Bioscan Activated
...No Additional Life Forms Onboard Freighter
...Factor: Ship is Currently Docked
...Factor: Internal Clock Shows Time Lapse of Sixteen Standard Days Since Deactivation
Possible Conclusion: *Ebon Hawk* Has Left Korriban For Next Proposed Destination: Kashyykk

Secondary Objective: Ascertain Location
...Physical: Moving to Interface With *Ebon Hawk* Navi-Computer
...Interface Initiating

Input – Mission Vao to T3-M4: “Teethree, what did you and Canderous find out at Czerka? What ain’t he telling me?”


Secondary Objective Completed: Interface Completed
...Factor: *Ebon Hawk* Docked At Czerka Corporation Starport, Planet G5-623 Reference Edean Alias Kashyykk
...Factor: Jen Sahara (Current Owner) Departed *Ebon Hawk* 1.34 Standard Days Ago For Rwookrrorro
...Analysing: Rwookrrorro: Moderate Wookiee Township. Known Jedi Order Presence In Attendance
Conclusion: Threat Assessment To Master Unknown. Continue With Primary Objective

Input – Mission Vao to T3-M4: “You got a map? Cool! Can you show it?”

Visual Tracking: T3-M4: Holo-Map Projection Initiated
Analysing: Holo-Map Projection...
...Two Identical Super Structures Of Note: 302 Metres in Depth of Outer Building
...Inner Shaft Extends To Planetary Surface, 1143 Metres in Depth
Conclusion: Inner Shaft Is A Transport Mechanism Or Elevator

Visual Tracking: Canderous Ordo and Dustil Onasi Entering Targeting Area

Input - Canderous Ordo to Mission Vao: “You just had to be nosey, didn’t you, ad’ika?”
Voice Stress Analysis: Amused

Input – Mission Vao to Canderous Ordo: “Hey, don’t call me names I don’t understand. And look, Teethree’s my droid anyway, so I can- oh, hi, Dustil. Where’s your dad?”

Input – Dustil Onasi to Mission Vao: “Busy talking. And being talked to. It’s going to go on for ages, I can tell.”
Voice Stress Analysis: Annoyed

Input – Mission Vao to Dustil Onasi: “Oh, did he send you back, then?”

Input – Dustil Onasi to Mission Vao: “No. But I’m not waiting around for him to remember he’s got a son.”

Auditory Input: Dismissive Snort
Source: Canderous Ordo

Input – Canderous Ordo to T3-M4: “Turn that map off.”

Input – T3-M4: (Astromech Designated Communication Language): “Awaiting Confirmation From Master.”

Input – Mission Vao to Canderous Ordo: “Told ya he was my droid.”
Voice Stress Analysis: Smug

Input - Mission Vao to Dustil Onasi: “And Dustil, don’t be so hard on your dad, alright? I mean, you disappeared on him before. He’s just trying to protect you ’cause he loves you.”

Input – Dustil Onasi to Mission Vao: “First he wants me to be a Jedi, and now he wants me to stay on some frakking Republic ship while he gets grilled by a half-dozen officers. Frakk that. That’s not love, that’s nothing more than controlling me.”
Voice Stress Analysis: Angst-Ridden Hormonal Adolescence

Input: Mission Vao to Dustil Onasi: “You’re such a brainless nerfherder. He’s trying to keep you safe. D’ya even know what love is?”
Voice Stress Analysis: Annoyed

Input – T3-M4 to Mission Vao (Astromech Designated Communication Language): "Love is a hormonal response designed to enable an organic to act in defence of their offspring or chosen mate in times of danger. It can be defined as a biological survival mechanism.”

Input – Mission Vao to T3-M4: “Didn’t follow all of that, but I know Teethree said something about family. See, even this little guy understands what love is!”

Output: “Conjecture: Love has a more ephemeral meaning than a meatbag protecting its dribbling spawn, you ignorant bucket of bolts. Example: Love is making a shot to the knees of a target 120 kilometers away using an Aratech sniper rifle with a tri-light scope.”
Input – Canderous Ordo: “I’m not sure that’s love so much as pride in one’s abilities, Tin-Brain.”

Output: “Statement: This definition, I am told, is subject to interpretation. Obviously, love is a matter of odds, of knowing your target, putting them in your targeting reticule, and together, achieving a singular purpose... against statistically long odds.”

Input – Mission Vao to Canderous Ordo: “Okaaaay. Did you have to fix him, Canderous?”

Voice Stress Analysis: Uneasy

Input – Canderous Ordo to Mission Vao: “Having one more gun in the hold while half our crew’s gone walkabout ain’t a bad thing, ad’ika.”

Input – Mission Vao to Canderous Ordo: “You gonna talk about what you and Teethree found, then? You heard Dustil, Carth ain’t gonna be back anytime soon.”

Visual Tracking: Canderous Ordo Gesturing At Holo-Map

Input – Canderous Ordo to Mission Vao: “Look at the Czerka schematics, kid, and tell me what you see.”

Input – Dustil Onasi: “Those inner shafts... they go all the way down, even when the building itself stops.”

Input – Mission Vao: “Whoa... are they what I think they are?”

Input – Canderous Ordo: “Czerka’s constructed lifts to the Shadowlands. Shame our walking carpet has already kriffed off. These schematics would be a slap in the face to his brother’s chieftaincy, I’d say.”

Input – Mission Vao to Canderous Ordo: “Canderous, where’s docking bay F4? Is it close to one of those control towers?”

Voice Stress Analysis: Intrigued

Input – Canderous Ordo to Mission Vao: “Don’t you start getting wild ideas, kid. It may be close-”

Input – Mission Vao to Canderous Ordo: “We gotta help the Wookiee prisoners if we can, Canderous. I mean, they’d rather be exiled in the Shadowlands than slaves – and if both Big Z and his dad are down there already...”

Voice Stress Analysis: Excited

Input – Canderous Ordo to Mission Vao: “Mission-”

Physical: Mission Vao Moving Closer to Holo-Map

Input – Mission Vao to Canderous Ordo: “Look at the map, these control towers have a service entrance I bet I could splice into. And you can see it leading straight to a tech area that backs onto the inner shaft – the elevator. All we need is to get the Wookiees off the freighter and into the control tower-”
Input – Canderous Ordo to Mission Vao: “And how do you expect to do that, kid?”

Auditory Input: Snort
Source: Canderous Ordo

Input – Canderous Ordo to Mission Vao: “Look, kid, I’m as gung-ho as you about this. But I ain’t gonna do a suicide run. Getting into the control tower would be easier than getting onboard that freighter – it’s teeming with guards and groundcrew. We need a way to get on that ship either undetected or through brute force, and we ain’t got either.”

Visual Tracking: Canderous Ordo Activating *Dynamic*-Class Communication Device
...Observation: No Response From *Dynamic*-Class Communication Device

Input – Canderous Ordo: “Here’s the deal, Mission. I’ve been trying to get Jen on the comm but she ain’t answering. I don’t like this. I’ll give Onasi another hour to turn up, or for one of us to get some brilliant idea to free Zaalbar’s kin. If there’s nothing, though, then I’m heading down to the Shadowlands myself, to find out what the kriff is going on with Jen.” Voice Stress Analysis: Tense

Analysing: Primary Objective Aligns With Canderous Ordo

Output: “Statement: I will follow you, Geriatric Blockhead, to assist and locate my Master.”

Auditory Input: Cough
Source: Dustil Onasi

Input – Dustil Onasi: “Um, I might just have a way of getting onto that freighter without anyone noticing.”

xXx
“Jen,” Zhar hissed, his voice low and intense. “Do not let yourself be distracted by what they may say. We will talk after.”

“Jen?” the bald human mocked. His posture was cocky and confident, and his scalp was etched in mottled tattoos. A dark, familiar voice sneered inside my head. *He always did like to fashion himself as a mini-Malak, no matter how loudly he denied it.*

I flinched. As far as I knew, Darth Malak could have been a dancing Aqualish – but of course Darth Evil Bitch knew better.

The stranger let out a cruel laugh. “Don’t tell me you still believe those Jedi lies?”

I raised Karon’s ‘saber high; it pierced through my vision as I stared fixedly on our aggressor. *I might be able to catch this pissant off-guard, if I’m quick enough.*

“I know exactly who’s in my head,” I said. Zhar gave out a strangled sort of noise, like a kinrath had died in his throat. My gaze darted to the second individual, still submerged in the shadows next to his jumpspeeder. He was hanging back - seemingly content, for now, to let the confrontation unfold between us and his comrade.

“Oh, a pity,” Baldy murmured. “For a second there, you had me believing I would get the pleasure of enlightening you, Revan.”

I didn’t flinch this time. My gaze narrowed on him. “By all means, call me that if you think it makes you clever, mini-Malak.”

His eyes widened the briefest amount, before his expression began to contort in a callow anger I had somehow predicted. I was already drawing on the Force, allowing it to surge through my body and launch me into the air, my lightsaber raised and aimed directly for his torso. He wouldn’t block in time; I saw the beginnings of shock slacken his face, and my mouth opened in a fierce rictus as I sensed victory a hairs-breadth away-

-I was slammed sideways in mid-air; self-preservation had me thumbing the off-switch on the ‘sabers and readying my body for a roll as I fell. The air burst from my lungs on impact. As I twisted to the side, I heard the shearing sound of a lightsaber hissing just past me.

I scrambled to my feet, in time to see the thrown ‘saber returning to the grasp of the second Dark Jedi. He remained in the shadows, a hood enshrouding his head, and all I could tell was that he was a humanoid of some description.

He’d interfered. He’d been quicker to glean my intention than Baldy.

*He might be the more dangerous one,* I realized, as Zhar came to my side and my gaze returned to the tattooed human. The anger on his face had transformed from hot into arctic.

“You haven’t changed,” Baldy hissed. “Still using any underhanded trick to get your way, Revan.”
Jen?

I switched on my ‘sabers again, muscles tensed for the next attack, my mind clear and concentrated on both Dark Jedi, now.

Apart from a small tendril of unease, coiling deep in my gut.

Baldy knew Darth Revan, obviously. That’s why I knew how to trick him. But that taunt had felt a frell of a lot more like Street Kid than Evil Bitch.

“Jen,” Zhar muttered. I could sense him by my side, strong and resolute and steady. “Stay with me. Do not lose your focus, no matter what.”

Jen? Are you getting out of there? The voice was frantic. At some stage, my shield to her had withered away.

Not now, Bastila!

She recoiled in horrified comprehension. I couldn’t spare the mental concentration to block her presence, not now, not in the middle of this – so I could only hope she would remain withdrawn from me. If something – if Malak - happened to her, I would shield myself then. Although it might catch me off-guard, should it occur.

It was, as always, a roll of the dice.

Baldy had turned his sneer on Zhar, now. “Let me see, a worn-out Twi’lek in faded robes with a sad kath-pup expression. I was hoping for Vandar, just to piss Yudan off, but this-” he snickered. “This is better. Tell me, Zhar Lestin, do you still cry at night for my Master?”

There was a dark sort of glee in his voice; he put me in mind of a sadistic kid about to squash a bug just to see if its insides were blue or red.

“I mourn for all who are lost, Bandon Stone,” Zhar said simply.

Bandon Stone. And Bandon referred to Yudan - that must be his shadowed companion. Two names Zhar had mentioned, two of Malak’s top Dark Jedi, their combined strength enough to scare a Jedi Master into running. Bandon, I’d already picked, was hot-headed and easily distracted. Not stupid, though, Revan muttered in a crepuscular corner of my head. Just simple. That much power without foresight is a sodding waste.

Shut. Up!

I sensed Bastila quail from me; she’d been listening in, despite herself. Bastila, I hissed, tense and urgent. Bandon Stone and Yudan Rosh. Tell me something – a weakness, a strength – anything to help me out here!

No, she whimpered. Run, get out, you must escape-

For frell’s sake, Bastila, between you and sodding Darth Revan I could do with a little help here!

“As amusing as this stand-off is, I have a ship to catch,” Bandon jeered. I could feel the Force swirling around him, a crescendo of power slowly augmenting his strength. Zhar, in contrast, was a steady beacon of light. “There’s room on it for you, Revan, if you behave. But Zhar- well. I’m afraid I’m quite taken with the idea of telling Lord Malak that I was the one to kill you.”
Bandon—he’s very powerful, Bastila whispered. But Yudan knows you, he knows how you fight, he’s one of the best duellists alive—

“Jen.” Zhar’s voice was tight. Somehow, he must have sensed my attention was elsewhere.

“Oh, don’t mind me,” I said flippantly. “Just having a little telepathic chat with Bastila.” That was enough to draw everyone’s attention. Even the mysterious Yudan jerked his head in my direction. I felt a tight smile form on my face, and my next words were crisp and pointed. “She’s escaped and just shoved a ‘saber through Malak’s black heart.”

The disbelieving shock and resulting pause on Bandon’s face had me striking out once more, with a powerful unleashing of pure Force that knocked the both of them flat to the ground. This time, I launched myself at the cloaked Yudan, a gamble in that he was further away, trusting in my own celerity to get there first with an outreached weapon—

Yudan’s ‘saber slammed against mine, a parry from the ground, forceful enough that I stumbled back a pace, and he flew to his feet. His single ‘saber morphed into a double-blade, the point swinging toward me—

—I blocked and thrust out in a riposte that he batted aside with ease. His reprisal was swift, a flurry of blows that immediately had me on the defensive.

My mind cleared; no thought, no emotion, just a lucid focus on my opponent as I understood my life hung in the balance. I ducked under a swing, striking out with a vicious return that met empty air as he somersaulted over me, the Force swelling under his grasp.

I spun around, too slow, my off-hand lifting in an unsteady parry that Yudan knocked aside. His follow-up was fierce, fast, and seared into my hand.

A blazing burn scorched deep into my fingers. There was a thud as my off-weapon dropped. The Force rallied around me in instinct, and I flung myself backward, away, landing metres behind in a controlled crouch.

Agony flared as I flexed my hand, and with a dull sense of horror I realized my grasp wasn’t responding correctly. A quick glance down confirmed my suspicions – the bastard had sheared my two smallest fingers completely off.

Oh, kath crap. Kath crap in a frelling sandstorm!

Zhar’s solid presence stepped to my side, and I sank myself deeper in the Force. Ignore the pain, focus on the present! The pain ebbed as a deluge of power engulfed me, and my attention snapped back to Yudan.

He had paused, facing us both, while Bandon moved to his side. Bandon’s face was twisted in a livid scowl directed solely at me. “You think I would believe that? I would have felt my Master’s death, you imbecile!”

“You believed it, for a second,” I panted. “You always were a bit of a gullible tool, mini-Malak.”

Bandon lifted his sole ‘saber in a threatening motion. “And you were always an overconfident scow. Even now, no more than a puppet of the Jedi Order you once scorned, and you still aren’t smart enough to realize you’re beaten.”

“I am no one’s puppet,” I hissed, my temper spiking. That smarted. Maybe it had been all the months simultaneously doubting Bastila’s motives, and fearing that the voices in my head would conquer me
- but I wasn’t going to take that quietly. “Not yours, not the Order’s, and certainly not to the schutta in my head!”

There was a tenebrous silence, then, that seemed to fall on us all. Bandon’s expression contorted in confusion, as if simple thought was currently beyond him. Yudan took a step forward, pushing back his hood to reveal a face etched in the blue-black lines of my Force Sight.

It was like a lined engraving of a long lost loved one, forgotten eons ago.

Nausea reared, and the Force shook uncontrollably in my grasp. The Sight dropped, and I was left with the illumination of lightsabers radiating in the darkness, the blood-red reflecting from Yudan’s face as I stared at him, transfixed.

He was a Twi’lek, my age or somewhat older, with deep pits of Force corruption visible along his cheeks and forehead. My heart pounded resoundingly in my ears, and I felt sweat break out on the back of my neck. A sick, familiar feeling of vertigo swamped me. Not now! Frantically, I gathered in the fragmenting tendrils of my mind, and forcibly turned to face Bandon instead. I could not afford to let my mind wander off, not now.

No matter what Darth Revan and Yudan Rosh were to each other, I would not let it affect me.

*Jen, you must hold it together,* Bastila whispered, as if sensing my unease.

I raised my arm, and the shorter ‘saber came flying out of the shadows back to me. A hot pain reverberated through my hand, and I fumbled the weapon. *I can’t use that hand,* I realized with dull horror.

Zhar murmured something, and I was engulfed in the soothing, healing embrace of the Force. The pain faded to a throbbing I could ignore, even if my hand was currently useless.

“The schutta in your head?” Yudan asked, his voice barely louder than a whisper. “Is that why Lestin calls you by that fake name? Because you don’t understand that you are Revan?”

“Jen, *not now!*” Something akin to a growl escaped Zhar, and the Force heaved out from him in a powerful wave of concussion that should have been unstoppable, and yet Bandon’s hands were raised-

-Bandon- he’s very powerful-

The Force recoiled, returned to hit us. An instinctive twist of the power at my fingertips, and most of it deflected harmlessly above. Most of it.

Zhar stumbled to the ground under the remnants of the backlash.

And Yudan was still staring at me.

“I am *not* her,” I snarled. “Just because some robe implanted her in my mind-”

My tirade was halted by Yudan’s strangled laugh. The look of utter disbelief on his face completely captured my attention. “I’ve known you most of your life, Revan. I’ve fought beside you, bled for you, followed you into the deepest perdition. I will not let you wallow in some Jedi-induced daydream that allows you to ignore the blood on your hands!”

*Most of your life.* Yudan had known Darth Revan well. He must have been one of the Jedi to follow her into the Wars. He was probably one of the original Jedi Thirteen.
There was a sick feeling in my stomach.

But just because she was resident in my head, did not make me culpable of her atrocities.

“Say what you will,” I said at last. “But I’m not Revan. I’m just a street kid from Talshion.”

The corners of his mouth turned down.

“You mind-screwed failure,” Yudan whispered, but his voice carried through the thick silence that swamped us all. “Revan was a street kid from Talshion. Revan and Malak both.”

The words took a second to register.

But self-preservation already had me scrabbling for possible reasons, plausible denials—“Is that where I met her?” I mumbled, blinking. There was a queasy churning in my gut; my thoughts felt sluggish, almost paralyzed. *Street Kid’s boyfriend was from Talshion, too. Had we both met her and Malak there, then?*

There were no coincidences. The Masters always loved to spout that saying. Seemed a pretty big one to have two powerful Force users from the same place, let alone four—

“Jen—” Zhar murmured. He was back on his feet. “After. Focus, *please!*”

The desperation in his voice was obvious, and downright incriminating.

No. No, there must be some explanation—

*Jen?*

A memory, from not long ago, flashed to the forefront of my consciousness. Bastila’s face, drawn and shocked, her voice spluttering in disbelief: "You- you think you have *three* personalities?"

*Bastila,* I pleaded. *Bastila, I can’t trust anyone- tell me, who am I, who is the real me?*

*I can hear him coming, Malak’s coming back, I can’t shield myself from you-*

Tell me, once and for all, what is my real name?

She was panicking, flailing, a mirror of my own state. *Block yourself from me Jen, I’m drugged, I can barely grasp the Force as it is-*

*BASTILA!*

There was a surrender, then, her will succumbing to mine, the crumbling of a wall long since held up against an onslaught from all different directions. I could feel the sharp tang of despair, of hopelessness, and didn’t know if it came from me or her.


Pressure built on all sides, and a sharp crackling pricked along my skin, bright flashes of white light sparking all over me, as my control dropped and the power of the universe seemed to shake all around me.

A vortex of nausea struck hard. There was a hot tearing inside my mind, like the very fabric of it was ripping apart. I heard a scream, and then I fell.
The freighter lurched into space, away from Talshion, away from our origins and toward a brighter life. I nestled into Mal’s side as his hand sought mine.

I’d always dreamed of leaving Talshion, to fly amongst the stars.

“I didn’t think the Jedi existed,” I said. They were a fairy-tale, a fable to whisper at night when your belly was empty and your mind despairing.

Except it turned out they were real, after all. And we – the both of us – somehow had the potential to join them. I’d already pinched myself a hundred times to check I wasn’t dreaming.

“I’m not sure they are what we thought,” Mal muttered, his grip so hard it hurt. I clung onto the pain. “They didn’t give us a choice, Revvie. I don’t give a mynock’s tail how nice they are, they still wouldn’t have let us stay behind.”

“Stay behind,” I scoffed disbelievingly. As if we would want that!

“It’s about personal freedom,” he whispered, his eyes falling shut. He was frowning, suspicious, as he rested against the durasteel bulkhead of the starship. He’d never been quite the same since that time he’d been taken by the Enforcers. I still didn’t know how he’d returned. “We’ve never had any our entire lives. If they really are these mystical do-gooders, bent on making the galaxy a better place, then surely they should have allowed us that. But we were hustled away without so much a chance to say goodbye.”

He may have a point, I realized, for I would have liked to farewell our friends. Jonohl, Deric, Staria – they’d assume our absence on the streets meant that we were caught. Ness would be the most grieved. And yet, if we’d been allowed a goodbye, how would we be able to explain our departure from Altizir, scummiest city on scummy Talshion? It was a life-long trap for all of us homeless nobodies.

I’d miss them, miss them all – but we couldn’t bring them with us. We’ll come back for them. When we’re proper Jedi, we’ll come back and save them. I had Mal, and in the end, that was the most important thing of all.

My gaze darted around the unfamiliar vessel, trying desperately to contain my awe, my excitement, my eagerness to draw everything in and learn the world. Mal’s caution couldn’t deflate my mood. I saw the opportunity for everything, and no one was going to stop me from grasping it.

“And stars, Revvie, what in the Outer Rim did you introduce us like that for?” his voice snapped, and I glanced sideways to see his mouth twisted with heartache. I’d known it would upset him, but hoped he’d see it for the tribute it was.

"They all have two names, Mal. That horned one with the weird blue eyes – she's got at least four."

"But- Devari-"

He swallowed painfully. His brother had disappeared, same time as him, both captured by the Enforcers. No one ever returned from that.

Except that Mal had, somehow.

"We’re not going to forget where we came from, Mal. Our lives might change radically... but we’ll remember the past. I won’t let their deaths be final."
Mal had half-formed memories of a drug-addled mother who died when he'd barely begun walking. So it was Devari who'd raised Mal, kept him alive and fed in Altizir's slums where so many others perished. Sometimes, I believed something had broken inside of Mal once he'd finally accepted that Devari was truly gone.

As for me, I didn't even have those memories. Only the fleeting image of warm arms tight around me; the sound of a whisper murmuring sweet nothings in a sad, sad voice.

I knew my mother had landed on Talshion pregnant with me. She died a handful of years later, in a gutter; just another nameless sent with a squalling toddler plucking uselessly at her rags.

It was old man Freeflight who'd found me; named me after a comet in the Unknown Regions, he'd said, for I didn't recall any name prior to him. He dared me to dream of the stars when some days we all went without food. When some days we barely escaped death let alone the dismal streets of Altizir that had us all trapped.

Freeflight wasn't that old, really. But he was blind and broken and could barely move. A husk of a man that once must have lived a life outside of Talshion. He refused to speak of his past except in general terms, but I had always been convinced he was not a Talshion native.

Freeflight had shaped my childhood: raised me, educated me, ensured I had a shot at survival. All his stories - only I'd ever listened to them. They varied greatly; from governmental politics, to meditating techniques, to the intricacies of the Exar Kun conflict.

All of them sounded wildly unbelievable, but I had listened, and dared to dream.

"Malak Devari. Revan Freeflight," I whispered proudly. "They're good names, Mal. Better than Malak and Revan. Let's take what advantage we can, and remember those we came from."

... 

I'd always dreamed of leaving Talshion, to fly amongst the stars.

Something was clutching at my hair. A buzzing on my wrist. A disconnect in my head.

Street Kid is Evil Bitch, and Evil Bitch is-

There was power, unrestrained, building inside in a staggering inferno.

-Revan.

The power exploded in a shattering sphere, a loud whoosh as it escaped in a wave of solid concussion.

Street Kid is Evil Bitch is Revan.

Darkness. My eyes were open, to see only black.

The sheen of a red 'saber perforated the gloom, throwing up shadows against giant wroshyrs that revealed inches of fresh bark stripped clean from the outer husk. The lightsaber illuminated the face of a bald human as he staggered to his feet, some distance away.

He stared briefly at the gouged sides of the nearest wroshyr, something like incredulity on his face.

It can't be true.
The shine of green lit up next to me. I heard someone murmur; something calm, something soothing, and it didn’t even begin to register through the terror and denial.

That power… are you there? Are you okay? Please, he’s at the door-

The panicked voice cut through the numb turmoil; my attention turned to her like a lifeline, and I reached out inwardly – a frantic, desperate lunge for safety or answers or refutation or anything bar the truth-

My consciousness went flying.

Through space, through time, through nothing and everything, immersed in a psychedelic backdrop of colours I didn’t see so much as sense, all the while following the source of the frantic voice speaking to me.

I reached the end of our connection, and opened my eyes.

I was in a small room with durasteel walls and grilled venting, as commonplace to a starship as leaves were to a forest.

I was seated, hands bound, and a towering man in a black robe stood over me. He raised a hand to gently touch my cheek, and I felt someone – myself – no, someone else – flinch.

There was a chrome plate where his jaw once was. Why did that burn me with horrifying shame?

His eyes should have been whiskey-coloured, but they were a poisoned yellow.

His voice - so wrong - came out in a metallic enunciation. “Bastila, I’ve got such a surprise for you.”

“Mal?” I squeaked.

No! Bastila screamed, and I found myself hurled away with an almighty, frenzied wave of the Force.

…

“I’ve got such a surprise for you,” Mal’s voice, warm and amused, murmured in my ear as the taxi shuttle came to a stop. We’d snuck away from the Jedi Temple, deep into Coruscant’s Galactic City. It wasn’t the first time, but still – we tried to be circumspect about it. Even as no more than a lowly Padawan, I was aware of the disapproval many Masters directed at our attachment.

But – we’d been together before Karon and the others found us. No one was going to dictate our relationship away.

The door opened, and Mal helped me out, blind but by no means helpless. “Don’t open your eyes just yet.”

But I didn’t need physical sight to divulge the location. My other senses picked up enough - the thrumming of repulsorlifts, the pungent smell of Peragian fuel, the muttering of mechanics.

Why has he taken me to a space port?

I followed him trustingly, one hand held tight in his. The environmental noises echoed off physical objects, and just by sound alone I could formulate a rough sketch of the immediate area.

“Your eyes can deceive you; don’t trust them,” Master Karon had said. “Trust in the Force.”
“Practise blocking one of your senses; see how the others compensate,” Freeflight had advised, back in the Western Underground. “What can you see with your ears, Revan? What can you see with your nose?”

We came to a stop, and even without the Force I could sense Malak’s budding excitement. He’d been keeping something from me for months now; he’d pleaded that I didn’t try to find out, that it was a surprise – and now, I suspected, was the grand reveal.

“Any ideas?” he breathed, a possessive hand sweeping up my arm. I shivered.

“Well, I’m in a spaceport,” I murmured, my lips curling in warm happiness. There was a large object in front of me, the shape and size of a snubfighter, at a guess. “Did you buy me a starship, Mal?”

“But better than that,” he whispered. “I got you the keys to the stars you’ve always dreamed of, Revvie. Open your eyes.”

It was a snubfighter, one of those dual cockpit starships that fought on the front lines; room enough for two sentients and a droid to act as gunner. I wasn’t yet conversant enough to recognize its model, and a brief glance over showed signs of wear. A name on the side had been roughly scratched off.

I glanced back to Malak, puzzled, for surely he hadn’t the credits for a purchase on this scale. Little more than a year ago we’d been scrabbling for food in the Western Underground. Mal was pretty ace at playing the economic stocks, sure – and stars hope the Masters never found out about that – but a hyperspace-ready snubfighter wasn’t exactly a trivial purchase.

But Malak was looking down at a thin sheet of aluchrome clutched in his other hand. Embossed words shone under artificial lighting. It was a certification of sorts, I recognized, as he handed it to me.

“Mal,” I breathed in awe. “You’ve got your pilot’s licence?”

Malak Devari. First Class Starfighter Accreditation.

“Master Lestin agreed, he believes that learning more mundane skills makes for a well-rounded Jedi,” Malak answered. His voice was self-satisfied, bordering on smug – but I couldn’t fault him. Not for an achievement like this. “A good thing he didn’t know about your penchant for pilots, or he would never have let me. I can take you to the stars now, Revvie. Wherever you want, whenever you need.”

It struck me then, that his devotion to me surpassed mine. He’d spent months on this, and I didn’t believe pilot training was a walk in the park. First Class honours, I wondered in amazement.

“Can you teach me?” I whispered.

…”

“Revan! Pull yourself together!”

The voice came from in front of me. The back of a red-skinned Twi’lek, his hands outstretched, an iridescent turquoise shield spanning from him and encompassing us both.

Revan. No, it wasn’t real. I wouldn’t let it be real. For if it was, if that was truly me-
An attack from afar slammed into the shield. Hot shards of bright white electricity, crackling around us both. The shimmering turquoise shuddered, but held against the onslaught.

-then what did that mean? What was my loyalty to my friends, to the Republic, worth?

The tearing in my mind grew, a stabbing deep in my temples, a denial, a forgotten history of black holes from a cursed past. A hot melting as everything seemed to peel back, and nothing made any comprehensible sense anymore.

“Revan!” someone yelled, their voice hoarse. “You cannot give up! You never give up! Stand by me!”

Jen, he’s in my mind! I cannot stop him-

Revan.

The psychic voice reverberated through me like a damning, ruinous answer, for I knew that voice. I knew it well, and that knowledge made a mockery of all the half-cracked theories I’d scrabbled together to somehow explain myself. To deny all that I had wrought and forgotten.

I had a half-sense of the Force, exploding out from the red-skinned Twi’lek whose name I should recall, as he discarded the shield and launched himself toward the shadows beyond, his green lightsaber spinning in the darkness.

Revan. Can you truly hear me?

The voice was achingly familiar.

Street Kid is Evil Bitch is Revan.

And Street Kid’s boyfriend is-

My body convulsed, and suddenly I was crouching, hands clutching at dry leaves, as I expelled the contents of my stomach all over the forest floor.

I regret, now, not killing you face to face. To think that the Jedi concept of mercy might give me that chance…

A dark chuckle rebounded mercilessly inside my head.

My throat burned, and my chest heaved once more. The shink-shink of a lightsaber duel faded into the distance. There was a crunching noise as someone walked closer. The feet halted just behind me. I was staring blankly at the debris on the ground, visible due to the blood-red illumination of a ‘saber at my back.

“And so, your end is cowering in a pool of your own vomit,” a voice murmured. It sounded sad, rather than mocking. “I wish you dead, Revan, but not so stripped of your own dignity.”

There was a shuffling noise, a grunt-

You are not hearing me, are you?

“We take her alive, you melodramatic fool,” someone else hissed. “You kill my prize, and I’ll eviscerate you.”
There was a yell-

cowering in a pool of my own vomit, no, no, I won’t let my death come like that-

-and I somehow had the energy to spin and scrabble sideways, to see my end face on at the least, but I found my one ally had returned, a shining green outnumbered by the two red that launched at him with a fury he wouldn’t withstand for long.

“Zhar,” I murmured through frozen lips. I raised my empty hands, one stiff and numb, and willed my sabers to return home.

For once, the Force didn’t answer. Maybe I didn’t care enough. How could I care, after all I had done?

A shame. I would enjoy relaying my plans for you.

The double-blade held the green at bay, and the single red was behind him.

“Zhar,” I mumbled again. A slight tug on the Force, but everything was anaesthetized; my fingers, my thoughts, even my very connection to the Force.

A cry wrenched from the green as the double-blade scored a hit. Then the single.

I was standing, arms raised, expecting some sort of response that didn’t come. And then the one holding the green collapsed as the double-blade pierced straight through him.

Time lengthened. He crumpled to the ground ever so gradually, almost leisurely, as his body soured in front of my unfeeling – no, no, Zhar, get up, I can’t lose you too – gaze. Green reflected from his tattered robes as the lightsaber slipped from his grasp, and then the weapon’s fail-safe kicked in as it thudded to the ground.

The only colour left in the darkness was cursed, infernal red.

The scene replayed in my head. In slow-motion, a killing blow and sudden collapse of someone who was important to me.

Somewhere, beneath the glacial numbness that felt entirely overwhelming, there was a tiny spark of devastated grief.

I could hear an echo of myself raging, screaming to do something, because I never lost it this way, I didn’t give up, there was always a solution if I just tried hard enough, and if I surrendered now I’d be just as dead as Zhar-

But everyone thought Revan was dead, anyway.

I intend to keep Bastila, you know. Such a unique gift, that one. But you-

And I found I couldn’t move, even as the bald human turned to me, his face a shadowed mask above the scarlet illumination. A raised fist lifted in front of his sneering face, and an invisible force clamped down on my limbs.

I was soaring, flying backward through the humid air, and nothing felt real or tangible-

My body jerked, snapped hard against something solid, my shoulder collapsing against the unyielding rough bark of a wroshyr directly in my way.
I slid down.

Agony ignited like a maelstrom from both my shoulder and lower arm. It was bad. But it was feeling, of a sort.

Pain is a tool.

That was a path I’d taken, so many times. Maybe it was the only path left.

An echo of someone’s disapproval lashed through my head. Pain is a focusing tool of the Dark Side, Jen!

You offer nothing of value anymore. Other than the enjoyment I shall have in killing you.

Footsteps, coming closer. I’d fallen onto my face, panting against the dirt, each breath rifling the harsh leaves of the forest floor. There was a stabbing torment running through my limb.

The torment, the pain. Focus on the pain. Use it. And my consciousness, slow and lumbering, turned to fixate on the pain.

Thoughts narrowed to a pinpoint of concentration. My senses unfurled, and the Force flooded through me like a power conduit I had no control over. All discomfort vanished.

Face-down in the dirt, maybe, but I was wildly open to everything, now. And the Force whispered to me, of the man walking closer, clutching a metal collar that pulsed with microscopic oscillations of electricity-

A recollection – something dredged from the murk of my mind. It was considered ominous to distinguish energy on such an infinitesimal scale. Is that… is that uncommon? I’d asked a Cathar that, recently. She’d never answered.

But someone else had, once.

…

“Why is my talent so frowned upon?” I demanded. “Is it really that uncommon? Is it’s simple rarity why Master Atris treats me like I’m the next Sith Lord on the rise?”

“Padawan,” Karon rebuked gently, “You are letting your emotions control you. Find your inner peace.”

Master Karon was like that. She’d answer my questions, but only when I could demonstrate an outer – and inner – serenity. It was, without a doubt, the hardest thing I found to learn.

An eternity later, my frustration had ebbed and the Zabrak gifted me with a gentle smile. “Revan, there are few who are able to manipulate machinery and technology. And no one with near your prowess. But you must understand something else. Whilst ionization is a neutral application of the Force, it is also a close-cousin to a darker use employed by many who have lost their way. Combine that with your age when we found you, and you must appreciate why Master Atris advises caution. It does not hurt to slow your training down, Padawan.”

…

A sudden weight compressed my torso as someone sat on me. The neural disruptor was open, ready to enclose around my exposed neck.
And what did it matter, given now I knew the truth?

The Force was there, all around me, buzzing with life and opportunity and choice – but did I deserve any of it?

Revan. There is no hope for either of us now. An abyss of desperate pain was in those words.

Bastila. She was back, and witnessing my capture.

Maybe… maybe I wasn’t worth saving, but she was. Wasn’t she?

A desperate instinct inside me snatched at the Force; it was weak, minuscule, on a microscopic scale. One small electronic tweak, and the neural disruptor would no longer function. Just there.

Its electrical power was still prevalent, but its ability to repel the Force had gone.

The cool metal touched the back of my neck, and I realized it wasn’t enough – I had to be cut off from the Force or they’d know something wasn’t right.

The angst-ridden boy had shown me that. He was important… no, his father was. I hadn’t mastered the weaves to render myself physically invisible, but concealing my psychic presence had come easy. A last, frantic tug on the Force, and I cut myself off just as the collar snicked home. It was cool and tight against my neck.

Agony exploded from my limb with the Force no longer there. Cauterized fingers. Broken arm – again, the weak one. Dislocated shoulder.

The physical pain shattered through whatever coherence had been left in my thoughts. I couldn’t hold back a moan. Forceless, sightless, mindless… but I had to keep the weaves balanced through the discomfort. I had to hold it together.

“Sod it all, Bandon, if you don’t kill her right now I will,” someone said.

I choked back a laugh – hold it together, how funny, since when does a Sith Lord need to be sane – and I felt a tight band clip around my upper arm. A multitude of needles pricked into my skin, and then abruptly my arm was no longer there. Nerve restraint, I recognized dimly. Dizziness swam through my head.

“I’ll end you, Yudan, if you try.” A dark growl. Another restraint on another limb. A third, a fourth. “Malak wants her alive. He wants the kill.”

Up, up, I was lifted off the ground, and found myself staring into the red-shadowed face of the bald human. My cognizance was splintered, fractured into a thousand messy pieces. One sliver, saner than the rest, focussed on the weak touch of Force I still needed. Only the mildest of pressures, to keep the chance I wasn’t sure I wanted alive.

My limbs hung like dead weights off my torso; I couldn’t feel my arms or legs – which also meant the lacerating pain had gone. I laughed.

“That’s a good thing, right?” I mumbled.

Bandon reached forward to twist a fist tight in my hair, and my head was yanked roughly to the side. It frelling hurt - I didn’t have a nerve restraint around my neck and tears stung at my eyes.

I laughed again; that I would cry over this small agony was ridiculous, really.
“Nerve restraint around my neck.” It would stop me breathing. *That* would stop me feeling. It sounded nice.

Through a blurred vision I could see Bandon’s grey face staring at me curiously.

“She’s always been a scrawny thing,” he said absently. I gasped as he thumped me against a wroshyr tree, the bark pressing unevenly into my back. The hand in my hair eased, then moved to close firmly around my neck, mashing the disrupter roughly against my oesophagus.

And somehow, a deep-seated part of me was still holding the Force weaves in check, keeping the outward Force repelled in a sort of circular motion. It was a bit like juggling kakasi fruit, something Jen had practiced. She’d been surprisingly good at it.

Jen was well and truly broken, but she had been a long time ago. By the Sith. By me. By me.

Bandon’s other hand moved to cup a breast roughly, before squeezing it hard. I gasped.

“You bedded her for a bit, didn’t you, Yudan?” Bandon said conversationally. “I’m surprised our Master never eviscerated you for it, although he probably knows you had no choice in the matter.”

“Bandon, stop playing with her and end it.”

Bandon’s face came closer, his nose almost touching mine. I felt the warmth of his breath and recoiled, but there was nowhere to retreat. His black eyes - *black as death, black as mine, didn’t nearly everyone’s turn yellow?* - stared into the depths of my soul.

“I’m not fool enough to risk his wrath, and he would find out. But if he lets me… oh yes, I’ll have my fun with you.”

His hand squeezed tighter.

…

*Malak’s body forced me hard against the hull of the Sith battlecruiser, his superior weight pinning me with the power of the Force behind him. His eyes, a poisoned yellow, burned with the sharp edges of impassioned hate.*

*I preferred their original brown. The colour of high-grade Corellian malt whiskey, I’d always thought.*

*He leaned forward, kissing me hungrily, suffocating me, devouring me. There was a temptation to bend to his desire, to sink into the black abyss of submission.*

*But the temptation was weak, and held no sway over me. With a wrest of mental fortitude, the angry lifeblood of Force sparked through my veins. Under my command, it streamed outward and hurled him away.*

*Malak went flying across the command deck, which had emptied in the midst of our howling argument. I pushed off against the wall and stalked forward. The haze of emotion added tumultuous strength to the power I could wield. Malak – even Malak – would comply with my will.*

*My will had him pinioned against a bulkhead; spread-eagled, immobile, and cut off from the Force. I could feel my mouth curving in pleasure. He’d stopped struggling - that may have been defeat or a deliberate action on his part. He was still angry – oh yes – but I could read the desire there, too.*
“I am the master, Malak. No matter how important you are to me, you must never forget that,” I purred, close enough to touch him now. A finger traced his lips idly, and they parted under the contact.

Malak didn’t have quite the same drive as me; the dedication to build an empire strong enough to withstand any threat, any challenge. Even from beyond the Outer Rim.

Malak believed in me, not my vision. A subtle but distinct difference, and that meant I had to be the master. He had to obey.

And I couldn’t afford for him to screw up at this magnitude again.

I kissed him slowly, felt him yield beneath my touch, beneath my Force bonds that held him captive; willingly or not, I wasn’t sure anymore.

I’d always been more powerful than him.

But he’d always been able to surprise me.

…

“Even from beyond the Outer Rim,” I muttered. “What’s beyond the Outer Rim?"

“She’s certifiably insane,” Bandon was saying. He dropped me to the ground with a thud. It would have hurt, without the nerve restraints. “This is just delicious. She’s stark raving mad.”

The boy had said it was easy to hold the Force at bay like this. He was right, it was like maintaining levitation. A gentle play that was elementary if you balanced the weight just so.

“I’d always dreamed of leaving Talshion, to fly amongst the stars,” I whispered.

“She doesn’t look like Darth Revan,” Yudan muttered. He was standing over me, the brilliance of his lit ‘saber still in his grasp. His face was drawn with banked anger. “She looks like Jedi Knight Revan Freeflight. How is that possible?”

“The Jedi mindwipe, obviously,” Bandon said, his voice screaming out his boredom. He didn’t respect Yudan. Wasn’t Yudan a general, once? What was Bandon, a pissy teenager with a bag full of thermal detonators? “What does it matter which one she looks like?”

“It matters!” Yudan snapped. “You can’t- you don’t just lose the effects of the Dark Side along with your memory!”

“To fly amongst the stars,” I echoed. “To fly beyond the Outer Rim?”

…

The sky was an eerie violent purple that stung my eyes, dotted with five noticeable suns too distant to provide any warmth. There was a complete lack of vegetation, and no life-forms had registered on any of our long-range scanners. This place with dead.

I’d not travelled to this part of the galaxy before. Stars, I’d never seen this on any map.

The Force felt sentient here, like it had a will of its own.

And its intent was evil.
I’d never encountered that, even in places where the Dark Side sang loudly.

I shivered, and for the first time wondered if I’d been wrong to come here. Punch drunk on victory, burning with curiosity over Mandalore’s true impetus for conquest, I’d rushed to investigate.

Brash, as always. Vrook Lamar’s voice rebuked me again and again, even though I’d barely known him. Reckless, disobedient… she was too old to be trained, no matter her power. They both were.

I glanced to the side, and saw a frown etched on Malak’s face. I wondered if he was experiencing the same as me. If I stayed very still, I had the eerie sensation of a malevolent energy creeping, ever so insidiously, into my mind.

Whatever it was, surely we could face it and triumph. Together, we’d always been unstoppable.

I reached out and he clasped my hand.

…”

“Where’s your hand now?” I whispered, unseeing. I’d been left prone on my back, two figures staring down at me.

“She doesn’t sound like Darth Revan,” Yudan hissed. “And earlier, in the Force, she sure didn’t feel like Darth Revan, either.”

My hand was missing a finger, or was it two? At least I had my jaw. I laughed. “Where’s your jaw now?” I mumbled.

“For frakk’s sake, Yudan, you’re beginning to piss me off,” Bandon growled. “You whine more than Nisotsa. You want to kill her? Then do it. See if you can get through me.”

It was warm, here, in the red-shadowed black. I could lie back and let my mind float away, let it all go – apart from that one small speck of concentration, still there, still balancing the Force, still keeping open a chance.

“I thought not. You’re a coward, Yudan.” The words were drawled, and the human snorted before striding away. But the Twi’lek with the pained expression still stood above me, staring.

“I swore to kill Darth Revan,” he whispered. He was a ghost from my past, his gaze pinched and fierce, and he searched mine for answers I didn’t have. “And I will, the first time I see her. She must be inside you still, somewhere…”

“Help me right my ‘speeder,” Bandon called. I stared up blindly into the darkness. “Bloody Revan and her little Force tantrum knocked it right over.”

“Little?” Yudan muttered in disbelief, but he turned willingly enough to follow Bandon’s directive. It didn’t feel right, somehow, that Yudan would cede to Bandon. “The Wookiees will have to make up legends to explain the damage to these wroshyrs.”

Yudan moved away, and the shadows closed in. He was headed to Bandon, to Bandon’s ‘speeder. Bandon was taking me somewhere on his ‘speeder.

How long would it take? I couldn’t keep this up forever, I’d drop the weaves sooner or later and then the game would be up.

But… it was hard to know what was real. I was in a forest, and I was a Sith Lord. Or I had been,
until my lover had betrayed me. My lover, Malak.

I heard a scuffle, a rustle on the ground, an exclamation of disbelief.

“Huh.” There was a world of surprise in that one word. “There’s only robes here. The body’s gone. Frakk, I didn’t believe that actually happened.”

The body. Zhar. The light sources had moved away, now, and I was truly blind. I felt something wet trickle down the side of my face.

If this was reality - the restraints killing off sensation in my limbs, the leaves in my face, the dark of the Shadowlands – then I could let Bandon take me and show me the way before I pulled back on the Force and ripped his head off.

That was something Revan would enjoy doing, and it turned out I was her, after all.

But first, Bandon could show me the way to the stars I’d always dreamed of…

…to the stars, and to Malak.

xXx
I’d tried, so many times, to get Big Z to take a bath. I’d even succeeded once, although freaking years later and he still complained about it. A Wookiee does not bathe, Mission! What humiliation will you use on me next? A comb? Still, he had nothing on twenty odd of his countrymen, all crammed together in a freight elevator spec’ed to take about half that number.

Canderous figured the safety margin should allow us to double the weight. Of course, we weren’t gonna test it personally – not on the first run, anyway.

I wasn’t meant to be here.

…

“You’re not going to sneak down to the Shadowlands, are you?” Dustil asked.

“What?” I looked up from the armour straps I was struggling with. “No! No, you heard Canderous.” It might have the shine of adventure about it, but I’d heard too much about that place. Flying insects with fangs. Spiders the size of loth-cats. Giant plants known to gobble up whole Wookiees if they weren’t careful. ‘Sides, Canderous had made it clear he expected Dustil and me back on the ‘Hawk once we’d played our part – and while I had no problem ignoring Big Z, Canderous was a different skillet of scalefish. I had the teensiest feeling I’d end up regretting it.

Dustil was staring at me, doubtfully, and I wrinkled my nose. “I won’t, alright? I mean, I’m dead worried about Big Z an’ all, and then there’s Jen…” I trailed off, frowning. She’d be okay, I reckoned, but Canderous didn’t seem to think so.

“Yeah, well, those two are kinda involved,” I said, scowling at the stupid clasp that wouldn’t close. Big Z had done a great job modding ole Calo’s armour to fit me, but it was such a pain to get on. Suddenly, I realized what I’d let slip, and glanced back to Dustil in shock.

“What, those two?” he spluttered, his dark eyes wide. “Frakk, I never would have picked it.”

“Er-” I could feel a blush forming. “Um, don’t say anything, alright? Jen’s pretty cagey about it. I don’t think anyone actually knows.”

“Anyone knows about what?” Canderous drawled, stomping into the cargo hold. I jumped, and Dustil looked away. Canderous raised an eyebrow, before snorting at our lack of response. “Czerka’s starting to load the cargo onto the freighter. It’s time to roll out, kids.”

…

I stared at the tallest Wookiee, the loud scraggly one growling about untrustworthy off-worlders as he eye-balled me, and swallowed. I edged deeper into a corner of the descending lift. There was a
rattling noise from within the ceiling, and I tried not to think about how far down we still had to go.

I’ll be fine. It’ll be okay. We’ll get to the bottom, the Wookiees’ll clear out, and I’ll ride back to the top. Canderous was still there. Between him and the remaining prisoners, they had to have the place secure. Dustil – well, I hadn’t seen him. He’d probably snuck back to the ‘Hawk as planned.

Canderous didn’t trust him – and, truth be told, I didn’t entirely myself. Carth’s son was plenty smart and dangerous, but I kinda thought that he looked after himself first.

Although, Dustil had agreed to the riskier job – sneaking onboard with that wizard power of his and releasing the droids from the containers we’d used to smuggle them in.

Canderous and I – we could always bail if things went chuba-shaped.

At least that was the plan.

…

“You got the plan, kid?” Canderous asked, pulling hard on the last loose strap of my armour before thumping me on the back. I choked slightly. “Do what I say, when I say. If we run into trouble with Czerka, let me do the talking.” He walked around to face me, deep lines etched into his forehead. “I’ve got a cover, Mission. If things kriff up, you shut up and play along. Got it?”

“Yeah, yeah,” I muttered. Turned out Canderous had already infiltrated the tower earlier, when he’d gone out scouting with Teethree. Under the guise of an Exchange agent wanting to chat about reconciliation with Czerka or something. I’d forgotten Canderous used to work for the Exchange under Davik Kang, that slimy marsh-toad whose fat fingers had dabbled in just about every nasty thing going on in the Lower City. “How’d you end up as one of Davik’s men, anyway?”

“I was after credits, and he wanted the manpower,” Canderous said. He hefted his repeating blaster, and began striding toward the exit of the Ebon Hawk. “It was beneath me, really. A bit like driving a spike through your head. Sure, you’ve got something new in there, but in the end, you’ve lost something as well.”

I sniggered.

Canderous paused by the hatch, before turning back to face me. He looked more serious than normal. “The Sithkid’s already begun his part. Don’t do anything stupid, ad’ika, and this might just work.”

…”

It’d worked, so far. I kept reminding myself of that, even as the howls around me grew ever louder.

I’d thought my Shyriiwook was good. I could pretty much get everything Big Z said – but it turned out having a whole bunch of angry Wookiees arguing at the same time wasn’t quite so easy to follow.

The one next to me, a bowed one with dappled grey fur, had been at my side since the lift doors closed. I had the feeling Grey-fur had some understanding of Basic, for I’d been screaming I was helping them when the first wave of Wookiees swarmed into the lift, murder in their gaze.

I wasn’t meant to be hacking from the elevator access panel. I wasn’t meant to be here. And to think, our part had started off so well-
“Did we have to kill them?” I whispered, staring down at the dead body. Half his face was grisly and melted. It made me feel like puking, and I looked away.

“Next time, shall I ask them to step aside and pretend we ain’t here?” Canderous mocked from deeper in the room. He was crouching as he methodically searched the warm corpse of a tech who, moments ago, had been innocently tapping keys behind a console.

“No, look, it’s just—” I stopped, not really sure what I was trying to say. These guys here, they were just workers. Admins. Doing their job, before we sliced into the service entrance and opened fire. It felt wrong – even with the weight of a hundred Wookiee lives in the balance. “I dunno. Couldn’t we just have stunned them?”

“Mission,” Canderous said, and he sounded irritated now as he stomped back to me. “There’s only two of us to secure the area. We don’t have time to tie anyone up in case the stun wears off. And we especially don’t have time for you to start mourning some dead Czerka grunts.”

I scowled, and he jerked his head toward the nearest console.

“Get your arse behind that, kid.”

“I’m not a kid,” I grumped, and thought I saw his mouth twitch. He was right – even if he was annoying – and I ran toward the blood spattered console.

⋯

“(These off-worlders are soulless madclaws that defile our planet,)” Tall-scraggly growled. I heard a half-dozen rumbles in response, all unintelligible and mixed in together. The sound of them speaking at the same time hurt my ears. Tall-scraggly howled louder, still glaring at me. “(Slavers, planet-rapers – we should not allow any of them to live on our world!)”

I pressed myself tight against the chrome walls. It couldn’t be long, surely, until we hit the bottom. The Wookiees could file out, and I’d ride back to the top.

Half of them were injured. All of them were crazed. I supposed I’d be, too, if my chieftain had sold me into slavery just to get rid of me – but sheesh, I was on their freaking side!

“(You heard the metal-robot,)” Grey-fur spoke. It was the first time I’d heard her – I thought it was a her, but really, I couldn’t be sure – say something. “(The blue cub is one of them. An off-worlder who has risked much to help us, Chorrawl.)”

Chorrawl huffed, and shook his head irritably. He had to have at least fifty pounds on Big Z. An arm hung limply at his side, the fur matted with blood.

The Wookiees left topside would be facing the rallying Czerka troops. Some would die, I knew. I hoped that Big Z would approve of our plan. *He always said death was better than slavery. Sheesh, I hope he meant it.*

“(We cannot trust any off-worlder,)” Chorrawl growled. A Wookiee next to him nodded in agreement. “(Not even harmless blue-skinned girl-cubs.)”

My hands were laid flat against the metal of the lift. I could hear my heart beat resoundingly in my ears. If only I’d had more time-

⋯
The system was EliteSec, a variant of the IntelliSecurity OS I’d cut my teeth on back on Taris. It was familiar enough that I felt comfortable, but still – it would have been quicker for Teethree. Dustil needed his slicing skills, though. Freeing the Wookiees would be a harder task than overriding the lifts.

My gaze narrowed on the screen, and I began to smile as I inserted a tech spike and got to work. First stop, as always, surveillance.

There were holo-cams in engineering admin – tech was so cheap these days that most corporations installed cams even in the freaking loos – but it wasn’t like they’d finance the manpower to actively watch them. The recorded vid would sit in an archive somewhere, to be retrieved only if there was a need for it.

Unless someone, of course, deleted it first.

I smirked, erasing the last hour of footage and setting the cams on a replay loop from the hour previous. That was enough that if someone did glance at them they might be fooled for a bit. “Cams are sorted.”

I heard Canderous drag a body somewhere out of sight as I turned my attention to the mechanical functions of the building. Most OS’s were interconnected – get to the root, and you could access just about any system. I just had to find the lift functions, before Dustil came running with a hundred angry Wookiees.

Hopefully, HK would tell them what was going on. It felt dodgy, trusting communication to that evil robot, but he was the only one who spoke Shyriiwook. I’d wondered, aloud, if it would make more sense for me to go – there had to be at least one Wookie who understood Basic, and surely I’d be a safer translator than psycho-droid – but Canderous flat-out refused to let me anywhere near that freighter.

He was the one who’d demanded I wear Calo’s ugly armour in the first place. Sheesh, at times he was getting as bad as Big Z and Carth. Not that I’d ever tell him that.

I switched control to the transportation function. There. Elevator A and B. I wondered which one was ours, as I scrolled through the lift specifications. “So, this thing has a max weight of three and a half thousand pounds. Um…”

“Huh, that’s a good sized lift. Guess the mercs taken enough gear down with this,” Canderous commented, his weapon held loosely in his grasp as he strode back to face the inner door. “Don’t suppose you ever got Carpet on a set of scales?”

“Hard enough to get him to brush his teeth,” I muttered, browsing the initialization routines available. There were two doors leading into the lift, and we were aiming for the secondary entrance – the cargo door. I needed to seal the main one, stop any Czerka mercs from coming in that way.

“Let’s assume three-fifty standard, that’s ten Wookiees to hit the max. We should be able to double that, safety standards being what they are,” Canderous mused. I heard a faint buzz, followed by an electronic click. “Incoming text feed from Sithkid. The bucket droid’s done it, and the Wookiees are on the move. You gotta work your magic now.”

"Yep, one sec," I murmured absently, shutting down the primary doors on both lifts. I could hack a route into the access functions, but I needed to know which one was ours, and even worse-

“Mission, it’s gonna turn into a bloodbath out there. You ain’t got time-"
“Bantha crap,” I spluttered. “Canderous, its voice activated. I gotta get in the lift-”

“I thought you said you could hack it, kid!”

“Yeah, but it’s gonna take time we don’t have,” I snapped. “I’m not an astromech. Far quicker if I get to the lift controls, I can nullify the primary access method from there and find an override-”

“Haar’chak,” Canderous cursed, before talking into his wrist. “Dustil, the service entrance is unlocked. We’re moving to the lift.”

…

The Wookiees had swarmed into the room before I’d finished. Canderous had secured the area, hollered at me to get out, now!, but even he was taken aback at just how quick a bunch of Wookiees could move.

I’d been surrounded by a crowd of injured, roaring, seven-foot hairballs before I knew what was happening, and then one of them shoved me fiercely to the side and mashed his great big furry paw on the control panel.

I’d scrabbled to my feet, engulfed in a forest of hairy, smelly legs. The lift doors began to close; I yelled in surprise and tried to push my way forward.

I wasn’t quick enough.

And now…

“(We will find Freyyr, if he still lives, and then we shall drive all off-worlders from Kashyyyk forever!)” Chorrawl snarled. “(No more starports, no more trade, no more Czerka!)”

The elevator erupted into loud roars of agreement, and I clapped my hands over my ears. Surely, surely, we were almost at the end.

“(No more off-worlders!)” I picked that line up, from a heavy-set one with mad gleaming eyes. He raised a hand to point at me. The harsh lighting in the lift glinted from exposed claws. “(Starting with that one!)”

Fright spiked deep into my belly. I stared at the mad Wookiee, wishing desperately that Big Z or Jen or even Canderous were here with me. I’m really in the poodoo now!

“(Silence!” Grey-fur’s voice lashed out, loud and commanding, and to my surprise the mood of the Wookiees immediately settled. Several heads swivelled to stare at her. There was a constipated look on Chorrawl’s face – kinda like Big Z when he didn’t get his eight meals a day - but most of the rest were watching Grey-fur in a sort of anticipation. Like she was a leader or something.

“(We must fight, Tasharr.)” Chorrawl growled. “(I will go against you if you advise any sort of delay. Now is the time for war, to drive these madclaw outsiders-)”

“(Chorrawl,)” the one called Tasharr spoke over him. Her voice was low and gravelly, but still seemed to hold an air of authority. “(We have all suffered humiliation that no living being should. We have all had the truth laid bare in front of our eyes of what Chuundar has been doing to our world. I agree that we must act to protect Kashyyyk-)”

The Wookiees roared again. Tasharr had stepped mostly in front of me, and I could only hope they would forget I was there. I crouched back, trying to look as small and unintimidating as possible. I’d
seen Big Z lose his temper before, but this lot looked feral. Crazed.

“(but we must think with our head as well as our heart. We are not madclaw.)” With that, she turned to stare at the wider Wookiee, the one who had his claws out. He shuffled, and slipped his hands behind his back. Tasharr huffed in satisfaction. “(If we allow off-worlders and a corrupt chieftain to turn us into that, then they have already won.)”

The crowd dissolved into silence. Chorrawl lifted a paw to scratch at his head, and the heavyset one looked down. Whoever Tasharr was, she held some sort of power over the others, and I was beginning to realize she might be my only hope of safety.

“(So what do you advise, Old One?)” Chorrawl rumbled. Now that the rest had quietened and it was only those two speaking, I had a better time following the conversation.

“(As you said. We find Freyyr, should he still walk this world. We drive Czerka off. But we fight with honour, and we do not go after those who are no threat. Particularly those who may actually be our ally.)”

And with that, she turned her back on the crowd, and stared at me with dark eyes. She was bowed with age, and short for a Wookiee besides, and yet she still towered over me. Her fur was oily and matted with dirt, and it made me wonder just how long they’d been kept in the freighter.

“(You understand our language,)” she mused, staring at me in consideration. How had she picked up on that? “(And the metal-robot who helped remove us from our prison said this was your idea. Why?)”

I couldn’t believe I was actually grateful for something HK had said. I nodded, a bit desperately. “Well, I mean, it’s what Big Z would’ve wanted, he always said slavery was worse than death, and he was so upset when he saw what happened to his world since he left, and then he disappeared into the Shadowlands after I told him about his dad and the slaves, and I just wanted to do something…”

I was rambling, words tumbling out, tangling over the top of each other in half-panic. Tasharr frowned, thick brows slamming together in confusion over my garbled answer. She wouldn’t know who Big Z was, and I didn’t think dropping Zaalbar’s name would help me here. He was labelled a madclaw, after all, even if these guys were completely wrong and dumb for calling him one-

There was a rumble of growing irritation from the others.

“My best friend is a Wookiee,” I said helplessly. “He would do the same for me.”

Tasharr’s face cleared, as much as a Wookiee’s could, and she gave me a brief nod. “(Even off-worlders can have honour,)” she said softly. “(We must remember that, when-)”

The elevator thudded to a halt, and I stumbled against the wall. There was a loud, mechanical creak as the doors began to open.

My breath stuck in my throat like I’d drunk too much fizz-pop, and I pressed myself tighter against the wall. The Wookiees, as one, lapsed into a tense silence as they all turned to face the opening exit.

A sliver of darkness appeared. It widened, as the doors slid open.

“What the-?” a foreign voice called out in confusion, from deep within the gloom.

“(Czerka filth!)” It was a roar, load and furious in Shyriiwook, and the rest answered in thunderous agreement that echoed through the chrome-walled lift.
“Frakk!” someone yelled, as the mass of furious Wookiee muscle surrounding me surged forward. Berserking howls grew to ear-splitting volume all around me. But as they all jostled to exit, I heard a different sound: blaster fire.

I screamed, as a shot ricocheted from the ceiling to ping next to my head, before burning into Tasharr’s arm.

“(Kill the slavers!)” a Wookiee snarled, echoed by his kin as they tumbled out into the thick, black shadows.

The doors! I scrabbled sideways, back to the lift console. Tasharr, clutching at a hairy limb, looked back to me. She was the only one left in the lift.

“Go! I’ll ride back up!” I cried. My hand grabbed the side of the access panel as she gave a curt nod, and then turned to follow the others.

The sound of something small and metal dribbling against the lift floor caught my attention. As my hand mashed against the topside button, my brain recognized the object that had been thrown into the lift.

A grenade. Just starting to emit the first puffs of green poison.

Bantha crap! My stomach bottomed out. I jerked my gaze back to the lift doors, which were starting to close. The black outside was shot through with red spits of laser. I only had one choice.

I ran into the Shadowlands.

Howls and screams resonated in all directions. The doors closed behind, killing off the only source of light, other than the flashes of guns as they discharged.

I had no visor. I couldn’t see a thing.

“Boda, Aldirik, pull back, there’s too many of the bastards!”

Someone crashed into me, and I fell to the ground with a squeak. A hand enclosed around my ankle and I screamed, kicking back in instinct before scrabbling away.

I heard a grunt behind me. Something nearby exploded, and harsh light stabbed into my eyes. A wave of heat hit my exposed face. Somewhere, someone howled.

“Czerka don’t pay us enough for this crap!”

I was on my feet, running blindly, panting, my heart in my throat. I had to hide, had to get away from the blaster shots and the grenades and all of this-

I tripped over something in the darkness.

I fell, twisting sharply on an unsteady wrist. My head hit the forest floor, and a wad of dirt or something like it mashed against my face. Desperation coursed like fire through my veins, I was already scrabbling away somewhere, anywhere, fingers clawing frantically into the moist ground.

“Hey!”

The air was humid and sticky. Hot tears blurred my vision, cast in various shades of black. With a panicked grunt, I was back on my feet, running forward blindly.
“A little Twi’lek joygirl here?”

Something hard thumped into my back, and I collapsed with a shocked cry.

“Quick, Boda, take her and let’s get out of here!”

I was yanked up roughly, there was a rough blow at the back of my head, and then I knew no more.

xXx
For what is real

- Revan Freeflight -

The repulsorlifts hummed underneath me.

My cheek rested against the chrome of the jumpspeeder, my arms and legs flopping uselessly over it. The mugginess of the air whipped through my hair as the 'speeder coasted in pitch darkness.

Everything was black.

_The Force can do terrible things to a mind._ The thought was a sepulchral whisper, a dark voice I’d lived with for so long - without ever accepting that it could be my own malevolence, my own evil intent at war within me.

It didn’t seem real. Nothing seemed real. To be faced with such a terrible truth –

It made me consider conceding _everything_, just so I could fall away into obscurity. Into nothingness.

_“You never give up!”_

Thinking was hard. My thoughts coagulated like glue, sluggish and detached. And then snippets of voices would spark faster than light through the apathy, before spiraling into another thought-stream just as shattering as the previous.

All this time… all this time I’d assumed it was a _choice_ between Street Kid and Evil Bitch. One or the other. _Not Jen Sahara. I knew that from the start._ The truth seemed so… my train of thought twisted sharply around another jagged corner.

Maybe the truth was just so stupidly obvious.

Since Rii’shn, I’d been determined the vicious voice in my head wasn’t me, couldn’t be me, and I’d completely ignored all the clues thrown my way.

_“Can't remember the blood on your hands?”_ a traitor mocked. _“Or is it that you don't know who you really are yet?”_

_“A Jedi Knight. Riiight,”_ a failed Sith student drawled.

_“I've seen your mind, Ness Jonohl,”_ the white-eyed Sith Master sneered. _"A Jedi Knight you most assuredly are not."_

A Jedi Knight… oh, it turned out I’d been a Jedi Knight alright. The best and the worst of them, all rolled into one hideous package. No wonder it’d been so _natural_ to slip into the darkness; the powerful, cursed darkness.

Why? Why would I do that? _How could I do all of what Revan had been purported to do?_

How could any of this be true?

Bastila. _Bastila._
Bastila saved my life, I’d known this already.

"You're Force-bonded to Bastila Shan," a troubled man with a second chance said. “That's... how did that happen?"

Bastila had famously faced Darth Revan, and she saved my life.

*This sort of intimate connection only occurs if you bring someone back from the very brink, just as they are about to join the Force, and your very essence mingles with theirs-*

Force-bonded to a broken Sith Lord. Hah.

Bastila had been concealing such a secret from me, from us all, while plunged into events well beyond her comfort zone. No wonder she’d acted like she had - panicked and imperious and annoying - back on Tatooine.

For I was never meant to escape the shell of Jen Sahara, or the enclosure of the *Endar Spire*. And Bastila was never meant to be alone with me.

My mind prickled, tiny tendrils of thought unfurling, connecting dots that should have been clear months ago.

"We can begin the implantation shortly. She is so far gone... I am not convinced this is the best course of action."

A control. A yoke, around my mind, to keep me pliant and ignorant. But *why*? The Jedi did not kill their prisoners - somehow I knew this as a core truth - and they also did not re-program them as *someone else*!

*Isn’t that against their ethos, or something?*

I was missing a piece of the puzzle. There was a vague buzzing in my head, mirroring the thrum of the repulsors, every thought slow and dumb like a drugged spacer merely going through the motions. If I really was Darth Revan - a colossal horror I could barely grasp - then why in the Outer Rim would the Order risk patching over my mind and sending me off-world?

But I already knew the answer, didn’t I? The Star Maps. It had always come back to the Star Maps, and now I knew what they really had to do with me. The final nail in the coffin of self-deception, the last blow against the mirror of ignorance I’d shielded myself behind. *Street Kid found one in a krayt dragon's cave.* Whatever they led to was the source of Malak’s power. The source of my might, once. The Order, somehow, found out and were desperate enough to throw a coat of white paint over my fractured psyche and hope it held.

This sounded like something the *Sith* would dabble in, not the Jedi.

A gust of disbelieving laughter escaped me, unheard over the hum of the engine. *Who the frell am I to talk? To judge?* But they’d tried to turn me into someone else. The *Jedi*, the guardians of peace and stability, so afraid of conflict they’d refused the pleas of aid from a Republic under siege… until, apparently, *I’d* turned the tables and drawn them in.

The flashes of Revan, of *me*, had showcased the magnitude of her/my fury, of the power that the Dark Side could encompass. At first, it’d seemed memories of a madwoman, frankly unbelievable. After Rii’shn, it had spiraled into terrifying. But all the way through, the thought that the actions and consequences of sodding Darth Revan could belong to *me*...
All those deaths. All those deaths, due to me.

Jen Sahara had been someone, once. A casualty of my war. And the ramifications of an innocent, so carelessly tortured and thrown aside, slapped me in the face with its inhumanity.

Jen, so scared of her own father that she refused to leave the commune where she’d grown up. A shy scholar, whose empathy was overshadowed by her very real cowardice. Whose love of learning eventually came to naught, thanks to the horrors I unleashed upon her homeworld.

How many others, frail and bright and innocent, had died just like her?

"People die in wars," a Mandalorian snapped. "From what I've heard and seen of Revan, she killed only when necessary to achieve her goals."

My goals? What the frell were my sodding goals? The cliché of galactic domination?

The concept burned like acid. There was a faint metallic taste in my mouth. And suddenly I was angry, so frenetically enraged at myself, at the idea that I could have allowed myself to fall so far, to unleash such evil into the galaxy-

"We all have the darkness within us," a friend whispered. "It is how we deal with it that defines us."

It couldn’t be real. It couldn’t be true! A final gasp of denial rallied once more, choking the fiery rage, dissipating it back into the glacial blanket of disengagement. Yet a part of me acknowledged, even then, that my disbelief was just a mechanism of desperation – of scrabbling for some way to absolve the deluge of blood-guilt on my hands, so I wouldn’t have to reconcile myself to what I didn’t want to, couldn’t, admit.

And the thought bloomed within, blasphemous and heretic, that maybe the galaxy would be a better place if the Force didn’t exist.

“The Force is the energy of all living things, Padawan. It surrounds us, it binds us. It is life in its purest form."

Shimmering gently around me, held in place with the slightest of touches by a fragment of sanity, a reminder of the awesome possibilities the Force could provide. Light or Dark or somewhere in the middle…

And what was Darth Revan, if not the epitome of the Dark Side? Sun and stars, I may as well sit next to Exar Kun and Naga Sadow and have a sodding picnic. The image was ridiculous. I felt myself laughing in choking gasps, cheek sticking to the side of the humming ‘speeder. Sith Lords probably didn’t eat, anyway. Not unless it was deep-fried terentatek gizzard, or the sautéed eyeballs of a failed Sithling. Maybe a crumbed tuk’ata leg on the side.

I’d probably had lots of picnics with Malak, once. Malak… but he was Darth Malak, now. Darth Malak…

“It's obvious that Darth Malak's a ruthless tyrant who'll crush anyone who gets in his way... just like his master Revan had been.”

Carth… oh no. Carth.

A new shaft of horror uncurled in my gut, like a poisonous kshyyy vine casting its venomous abhorrence into every single part of me.
Carth might accept a shadow of the Dark Side in his son, but an ex Sith Lord in his bed? *The sodding Sith Lord responsible for the very war waging amongst the galaxy right now?*

Back in the Embassy on Manaan; his gaze was unrelenting and tenacious as he questioned me about Deralia: “*Were you there when Darth Revan’s forces invaded a year ago?*”

Was I there? *Was I there?*

A hysterical laugh ripped from my lungs.

His broken words, on Korriban: “*Revan and Malak and Saul Karath… they’re monsters, all of them.*”

He’d kill me, given the chance. He was Republic, through and through. And the Republic couldn’t afford the chance of Darth Revan returning. “*They were heroes. No one expected them to turn on us the way they did. Think about it... if you can't even trust the best of the Jedi, who can you trust?*”

What the frell had the Jedi been thinking? What had Bastila been thinking, saving me from the abyss?

*Death would have been a mercy.*

Maybe my lack of memory was a mercy. Now, the gaping holes of nightfall in my head only taunted me with atrocities I couldn’t remember.

Recollection would be worse.

But it was *Revan*. Not just Darth Revan, but the blazing Jedi Knight who’d blatantly defied the Council, and helped lead the Republic to victory, once. The one who’d convinced dozens of Knights to follow, to defend the galaxy against the very real threat of the Mandalorians. Hero, saviour, conqueror, villain… Revan just seemed too *big* to be a real person – let alone *me*.

And now, more than ever, I found it impossible to understand myself – to recognize what my values or motivations or loyalties were – or if I even had any.

“My loyalty is to the Republic, the ideals and the foundations it was built on.*

And suddenly, I could imagine myself defying everyone – even the mystical Jedi Order - if the reverse meant sitting back while billions capitulated to the Mandalorian scourge. The Mandalorians, whose goal was to kill or convert any they captured in the name of pure conquest. *They were steam-rolling a path directly to the Core, and the Republic was faltering!* 

Somehow, it had been *me*, alongside dozens of other passionate Jedi - young or old but all burning with righteousness - who'd helped transform a seemingly certain thrashing and subjugation into victory.

Oh, how the mighty had fallen.

The air rushed in and out of my lungs, frantic gasps of breath, as the staggering enormity of my own crimes once more lashed against me. There was a loss of balance in the parts of my body I could still feel, an acute dizziness as if I was slipping off the ‘speeder, or slipping away into some nauseating state of unreality.

There was pressure on my back, and everything seemed to stop-
“Yudan, what the frakk? Why are you stopping?”

The vibrations under me eased, the engines calming down to an idle state. The air was thick like tar, and a dazed part of me realized the jumpspeeders had come to a halt.

“I sensed… something,” someone muttered. Yudan, it was Yudan, not far from here. “A Force presence nearby. A Jedi, maybe.”

A rumble of annoyance sounded from directly behind me, followed by a sneer. “Jumping at shadows, again? You’re scared that bloody Tokare is lurking about, you yellow-bellied excuse of a Sith.”

“Don’t be an arse, Bandon,” Yudan growled. “Do you want to be knocked off your speeder at full velocity by a stranger? Because I can show you how that’ll go, if you like.”

Maybe the two of them will fight, take each other out. Leave me here, alone in the bowels of a forest world, without a clue of my next move – or if I really was here at all.

Maybe I wasn’t. Maybe this was all one completely frelled-up dream.

But the Force weaves still sat there, resting against my mind, a gentle balance repelling the outward world and leaving me invisible to their senses. Hiding the inactive neural disruptor, until I made a move – if I made a move.

I was tired. Tired of it all. I wouldn’t have the fortitude to keep up the weaves for much longer, and I wasn’t sure I wanted to anyway.

“Besides,” Yudan continued, “it wasn’t Vandar. I’m not sure if it was Light or Dark, but it was certainly someone.”

“Bah,” Bandon grunted. There was a wet sound as he spat to the side. “I can’t sense a damn thing, Yudan. You’re getting senile.”

“You can’t sense a damn thing?” Yudan shot back, his voice sharply sarcastic. “The entire Shadowlands are crawling with sentients that weren’t here a day ago, and you can’t even detect that!”

“Oh for frakk’s sake, back your words up with a ‘saber or get back on your ‘speeder,” Bandon’s voice was gravelly with mounting annoyance. He wasn’t the sort to back down, not normally. “If there’s anyone around here, we’ll deal with them like we did with Lestin. I’m sick of your twitching. Get a move on.”

Yudan didn’t answer, at first. I wondered if the two of them were staring at each other in a silent pissing contest, waiting to see who would blink first. Bandon wouldn’t. Somehow, I felt like Yudan shouldn’t - except that he’d been following Bandon's lead, so far.

At last, an irritated noise escaped Yudan. “I’ve a message waiting,” he muttered, and his words were followed with a faint click.

::Bandon, Yudan,: a silky voice sneered, and a rush of malevolence hit my bloodstream. The traitor. Kylah. The one who killed Karon and caught Bastila. The tiny circular weaves wrapped around me shuddered, just the smallest amount, before righting once more.

“Kylah,” Bandon drawled in recognition. The repulsors underneath me sputtered into silence. The speeder bounced upward as Bandon jumped free, and there was a rustle of footsteps as he walked
away from me, toward the holo-message. He always was easily led. “She’s been unbearable lately.”

::Our Lord grows impatient with your lack of communication. And I am just about to exit hyperspace outside of- oh, I completely forgot-:: There was a mocking tinkle of laughter. ::What system is it, Admiral Karath?::

::Kashyyyk,:: a male voice answered. The words were ground out in displeasure, as if the man was crunching rocks.

::Right. Kashyyyk.::

I had a sudden vision of Kylah smirking. With a stab of visceral hatred, I recalled her sultry cockiness as she faced me on Manaan, before I’d succumbed to the darkness that I had refused to own as myself. ::You have eight hours to convince him otherwise before I proceed with orbital bombardment. It would be a shame if you failed when I have so decisively succeeded.::

There was an electronic hiss at the conclusion of the message.

Bandon chuckled. “I’ll enjoy making that schutta eat her words,” he murmured. “My prize trumps even Bastila Shan.”

“Orbital bombardment?” Yudan said. His voice had sharpened, and a low, angry noise escaped him. “Shavit, has Malak completely tipped over the edge?”

“Watch your tongue,” Bandon lashed back. “Are you making a special effort to be stupid today? Kashyyyk has- what, exactly? Ten thousand Wookiees and a Czerka outpost? It’s nothing on Taris-”

"Keep talking Bandon, someday you'll say something intelligent," Yudan sneered. His snark was steadily rising to match Bandon’s, and he had to know that was playing with fire. Why was Yudan getting so pissy? Why didn’t he kill me when he had the chance? "They're not the same. Taris has been an economic partner of the Sith for the last three years, for all that they like to tout their neutrality and pretend we don’t have two standing bases there. Kashyyyk, on the other hand, is truly neutral and entirely defenseless. You think the undecided factions will sit back if we target an undeclared system with no organized military?"

I wondered, idly, if there was some way to provoke them into the fight they must surely be on the cusp of. Provocation was the sort of thing Revan was good at. Street Kid had always been clever with words.

How had I completely failed to see – to accept – what was now, in hindsight, so blindingly obvious?

“So? We’re taking over the galaxy if you hadn’t noticed, you half-bred imbecile. Dantooine was a civilian planet. Not like anyone so much as blinked after that-“

“Dantooine’s Republic, and the Jedi Enclave there is an open secret,” Yudan scoffed. There was an undercurrent of frustration steadily growing in his voice. “That was only going to piss off those already fighting us-”

“Frakk, Yudan, you’re a boring sod. I don’t give a dancing Twi’lek’s tit what some piddly Outer Rim worlds decide to do, and neither does our Lord. Speaking of which-”

There was a compression around my midsection, followed by a sudden release. A fall, and an ungentle landing.

The sounds of my own breathing seemed inordinately loud. A sickening dizziness, as if I’d stayed in
one position too long before abruptly moving.

Which I had – or had been made to – I realized dimly. I was staring up into darkness from the forest floor. Vaguely, I realized Bandon must have shifted me there with the Force.

There was a *snap-hiss*, and blinding scarlet stabbed into my vision.

Above me, Bandon stood wielding a lit ‘saber and a vicious smirk. “Take a holo-pic, Yudan, and patch it through to Lord Malak. Send a copy to Kylah on the *Leviathan*, too. They say a picture is worth a thousand words, after all.”

A second figure appeared, pausing as he gazed down at me. The dark crevasses along his cheekbones were a macabre sight against the red illumination. His eyes were pinched with fierce emotion.

I looked away, away from them both, and up into the infinite trees shadowed in the radiation of red.


“Aww,” Bandon mocked. He must have put his ‘saber away, for everything transmuted back into the black where I belonged. The dead, dead black. “Are you hurting, Yudan? Does it upset you to see your old Master brought so very low?”

There was an angry growl in response. “Do you want to get moving, or greet the sents headed our way?”

“What?”

A faint rustle of footsteps whispered against my ears. From further afield. We had company.

“You’ve got to work on that,” Yudan said in disgust. “All power and no chivving finesse. It’s a wonder you can wipe your own arse.”

“Frakk, Yudan, that’s it, I’ve had enough of your mouth-”

“Would you look at that,” a new voice gibed. It was high with barely suppressed glee, and Bandon wilted into silence. “Two armour-less idiots with ‘speeders.”

*Walking corpses,* I thought dumbly. *Whoever they are, they’ve just danced into their death.*

“We’ll have those, thanks,” another voice, alien and foreign, slurred.

“Mandalorians,” Bandon chortled. There was a sadistic grin in his voice. I should have felt pity for the unsuspecting strangers. A good person would have. All I felt was numb.

“No weapons, either,” a third voice added. “Let’s give them a head start, Boda. What, thirty seconds before we open fire and take their ‘speeders?”

“Mandalorians working as Czerka mercs,” Yudan said, his voice laced with distaste. “You’re an honourless disgrace to your clans. To think that this is all that’s left of your kind, scrabbling remnants taking orders from chivving Czerka-”

“Screw the head start,” one of the mercs snarled, and I recognized the faint whine of a repeating blaster warming up.
The gloom was once more shot through with scarlet, as both Dark Jedi activated their 'sabers. I stared upward, unseeing, but I could imagine events as they unfolded.

A scream, a scuffle, a cut-off yell-

I felt a breeze, warm against my face, and knew it was the residue of Force power. Thuds, as lifeless bodies fell to the ground. The sobs of a panicked girl shuffling away-

Wait, what?

“Ooh, the Mando’s got themselves a Twi’lek joygirl?” Bandon effused. The pitch of his voice spiked with delight. “Come here, little girl, let me look at you.”

“Shavit, Bandon, this isn’t the time or place,” Yudan muttered, sighing. “And I’m not sticking around while you satisfy your urges. Let the sent go.”

_Czerka-employed Mandalorians working in the Shadowlands, with a joygirl by their side? That wasn’t plausible. Not in the frelling Shadowlands. They’d keep any precious slave locked up topside, surely._

Maybe my mind really was slipping into insanity. Just like Malak.

“What, leave a Twi’lek girl all alone here? She wouldn’t last a day.” A dark chuckle. “Final chance to come willingly, little girl, before I drag you here by your headtails.”

I tried to turn my head to see, but everything was so heavy.

“She’s choking. Mission. Mission. What was real? My young friend, clad in that neural-resistant armour of Calo Nord’s that didn’t protect her neck, captured by frelling Mandalorian mercenaries in the sodding Shadowlands?”

That wasn’t real. That didn’t make any sense.
“Jen,” she whimpered again, and bright white crackled from Bandon’s other fist.

“Wrong name, little girl.” Bandon chuckled with unrestrained mirth. “Your Jen is actually Revan, or what’s left of her after the Jedi took a crap through her mind. Still, Revan’s pissed me off enough in the past that I desire a little payback. Watching you die can be the start of that.”

The sparks of electricity shot forth from Bandon’s hand, and encased the twisted mind-vision that looked like Mission Vao.

Mission screamed.

The detail of my warped mind was intense. The lightning sheered away from her Force-resistant armour, most of it bouncing harmlessly into the shadows. The edges of it curled around her bare neck and lekku. The cries of anguish grew louder, and a burgeoning horror spiraled through me like many fine threads of a wyyyschokk’s web.

“Interesting armour,” Bandon commented. “I guess this will take longer than normal.”

The horror crawled through the detachment that had owned me since Bastila voiced my name.

“This is the price of knowing you, Revan,” Yudan whispered. Somehow, I didn’t think he meant me to hear those words. He was standing close but facing away, facing the perdition unfolding in front of us. The Mission-form twisted in mid-air, sparks of white-death flaring over her twining headtails, and suddenly I realized-

What if this is real? And if it wasn’t, if it was just my screwed-up psyche plummeting into insanity, then what did it matter if I acted upon it?

For, real or not, I couldn’t bear to listen to her screams anymore.

But – if I was going to do this, then I had do it properly. I had to fight to the bitter end with every breath and thought and tooth and nail –

I felt the burn of conviction as it sparked to life. I hadn’t felt it in some time, but it was a familiar emotion, like slipping into a pattern of behaviour that was both a homecoming and a resurrection. I would do what was needed to save my friend, and I wouldn’t give up.

Thoughts at once crystallized into a matrix of concentration as I regarded Bandon, who was unaware anything was amiss. My gaze flicked back to Yudan – still staring ahead – before converging upon the unlit ‘saber held loosely in his grasp.

My mind cleared. All emotion vanished out of necessity. And I made my decision.

I dropped the weaves, and lashed out at the nerve restraints. They sputtered into electronic demise.

As pained feeling surged into my limbs, I drew harder on the Force than I could ever recall. I lurched a half-numb limb upward – the working one - just in time to grasp Yudan’s flying ‘saber.

I wrenched myself upright, the Force wrapped tight around shaking legs. My off-arm was tucked snug into my chest, hot flares of agony shooting through the limb that were wholly unimportant. My other limbs were unnaturally stiff, nerves slowly prickling back to life.

The Force sang through my body, sweeping aside all discomfort. With an instinct both trained and innate, I threw a psychic shield-block over my mind, submerged my vision back into Force Sight, and opened my senses to the world.
I could see everything. The faint spark of Mission, the dark miasma of Bandon turning slowly in shock, the influx of shadowed energy emanating from Yudan.

But even with the awesome might of the Force behind me, I needed a moment to loosen muscles that had been inoperable for some time. Bandon was the primary threat, his lightning dying out as he faced me once more, mouth gaping in stunned surprise.

Yudan’s uncertainty was palpable on the Force. I could only gamble it would stay that way.

I stepped toward Bandon, my gaze fixed solely on his. I flicked Yudan’s ‘saber on, to one blade only, and stared Bandon down as I took another step.

His weapon flared to life in response.

Various attack plans ran clinically through my head. I held one, unfamiliar, lightsaber, and I fought best with two. I was injured. A fair duel was not in my best interests.

Bandon’s greatest strength was sheer Force power. But then, apparently, so was mine.

I took another step and he mirrored me, as we closed in on each other in preternatural silence. I held his gaze and willed him to stay fixed entirely on my advancing form, and my senses unfurled and took note of the surrounding environment.

Even the trees here radiated with power, ancient and slow and unyielding. The forest floor was speckled with insects that skittered through dirt and leaves and paid no attention to us. The only things not teeming with life were the deactivated ‘speeders.

My primary arm, the one clasping the ‘saber, punched into the air. I unleashed my will, and threw a jumpspeeder at Bandon with all of my Force-might.

My muscles tensed in readiness as I prepared to intercept Bandon, if necessary. There was a mere fraction of a second before the ‘speeder smashed into the ground, shards of metal ripping apart and careening through the undergrowth. Plumes of dirt were thrown up, and the acrid stench of ruptured power cells hit the humid air.

Bandon had almost no time to leap clear, and yet there he was, sailing away from the smoking remnants of his transport, directly toward Mission Vao.

I was ready.

An influx of power bent to my command. It was neither Light nor Dark, just an implacable determination to reach my goal. I landed in front of Mission a split-second before Bandon, and was already lashing out as his feet hit the ground.

Bandon blocked; I felt myself slip naturally into an offensive form, slashing upward to score a glancing blow against his cortosis-weaved robes. I struck again at his arm, his chest, his head, a flurry of frenzied attacks designed to keep him on the defensive.

He deflected them all.

My injured arm, tucked tight into my chest, was affecting the fluidity of my movements. His final block swatted my ‘saber aside, and counter-attacked in a single motion. I barely dodged. I have to change the game plan.

My mind stayed blank; purposeful. With a wrench on the Force, I launched myself high into the air,
landing on a low hanging branch from a nearby wroshyr. He would follow. I knew his character. And when he did-

I stepped closer to the trunk, and sliced my lightsaber clean through the branch.

Bandon, with no place to land, plummeted to the forest floor with a surprised yell.

I followed.

The red ‘saber scored deep into the ground, an instant after he rolled out of the way. But I was on him as he’d barely found his feet; no finesse, just a brutal, rabid series of blows that had him stumbling backward.

But, again, he rallied, and a cold voice in my head pointed out my very obvious weakness.

"She is used to wielding two blades," a Cathar murmured. "She leaves her side unguarded when she only has one."

And injured, to boot.

Bandon snarled, smashing aside my next attack with his ‘saber and coming in for a riposte aimed directly at my curled up off-arm.

I’d seen it, predicted it, and acted before he made contact. In a rush of wild Force energy, I threw him hard and fast back against the unyielding trunk of the massive wroshyr.

He crumpled, and I closed in for the kill, like a rancor sensing blood.

But Bandon was no easy prey, and even gasping for breath, he was already coming back at me with a powerful overhand I had to dodge sideways to avoid.

An upsurge of achromatic voltage sparked to life around him, a blistering aura of electricity centred around his left fist. I vaulted further away, pulling the Force tight around me. He strode forward, face taut with antagonistic concentration, before unleashing a mighty wave of crackling lightning.

Power can be transformed, my glacial mind whispered. Absorbed, and transformed. And Bandon’s power was great, indeed.

I felt the lightning as it hit me. Pure energy at its core, able to be reconstructed into something else, if one only had the strength to do so. It sucked deep into me, transmuting into a raw, chaotic form of life, of potential in every single atom.

It was engulfed deep into my bones, the sheer power building until it completely filled me. And right at the moment I felt I could hold no more, I flung it back as a solid, savage wave of concussion.

My enemy went flying. Chunks of bark ripped themselves free from the wroshyr, sailing into the shadows. I was already in the air as Bandon crunched against the inner trunk, my lightsaber arcing toward his torso.

This time he didn’t block. Yudan’s ‘saber drove deep into his chest.

The adrenaline burned. The beat of my heart was fast and loud. Harsh pants of air scraped like crushed ferracrystal in my lungs. And slowly, slowly, both the Force and the exultation of battle seeped away.

It’s not over, I whispered to myself in desperation. It’s not over yet.
The shield over my mind, blocking me from my bond-sister, still held. The Force Sight was shaky, but there. Behind, metres away, I could hear vague whimpers from Mission. And to the left-

I spun, shaky on my feet, and my gaze narrowed on Yudan Rosh. I could feel my senses fraying, as I stared at someone who apparently had known me far better than Mission Vao ever had.

He was standing, motionless, as if impotent while this battle had raged on. In his grasp was an unlit lightsaber. His fingers twitched, and a bright green beam activated from his hand.

The Force was skittering out of my grasp, slipping away like smoke on the wind.

There was a clinical thought in my head. *If I’m going to kill Yudan, it has to be now.* But I stood, staring at him instead.

“You don’t deserve to hold that lightsaber,” I whispered.

“I seem to have misplaced mine,” he shot back in response, but made no movement in aggression. Behind me, I could still hear faint sobs, shuffling away from us. From me.

*Now. Now is my only chance.* The broken limb tucked into my chest flared with the onset of agony, no longer held back by the Force. The shield over my mind was weakening.

“Make a move, Yudan,” I growled. “Make a frelling choice.”

The clarity of my thoughts was disintegrating. The conviction that rode me to victory was fracturing, as the horror of my hideous truth began to resurface. *Revan. I am Revan. The butcher, the villain, the fallen hero.* Any chance for triumph over Yudan was fast disappearing. And yet, somehow, I found myself wholly unable to attack a stationary target from a past I didn’t recall.

“This isn’t over,” he whispered. He switched off Zhar’s ‘saber, and took a step back. “I’ll be watching you, Revan. This isn’t over.”

He turned, and disappeared into the Shadowlands.

I was left with the pounding of my own heartbeat, the flailing of the weakening Force, and the sounds of Mission’s harsh breathing behind me.

xXx
A second encounter

- Jolee Bindo -

The Shadowlands was an elusive beast, I’d found. After too many years to count, I should have known all her secrets. Surprises had become… rare. There was a certain heartbeat to the ecosystem, an amalgamation of sound and smell and spirit that could forewarn one of endangerment, be it from flora or fauna.

Bah. Maybe I would have done better as a poet.

Still, the shattering upsurge of raw Force power had certainly given me a nasty jolt.

And this place was getting far too darn crowded.

I was happy when it was just me, the odd Wookiee, and the natural wildlife that may paralyze or maim or kill, but not with any malice. As far as the predators here were concerned, I was just a walking meal - albeit a bit of a bony one.

It was a simple life, and it agreed with me.

But there was always a fly in the bacta salve, and for me it was the Faceless One. He’d killed a few Wookiees, hoisted his comm arrays near and far, and hacked through the habitats of enough endangered species to earn my ire. I’d never managed to track him down in person but, heh, I’d destroyed a sufficient amount of his tech that it had to be hurting his credit line.

A guy like that, he had no business living in a place like the Shadowlands. It made me wonder why he did.

Still, the Faceless One was a minor irritation in the grand scheme of things. I’d made my peace with the past, and left it behind me. I’d always figured I’d meet my end here, either through complacency, old age or just darn bad luck. Adventures on any galactic scale were beyond me now.

Or so I’d thought.

Oh, sure, there’d been that time four years ago, when I’d had a visitor so drenched in destiny that it had disturbed my peace of mind – but she’d left, leaving her secrets cloaked in a technology I’d never managed to conquer. The dust soon settled, and my life resumed its simple anonymity.

It was Vrook’s presence that first made me wonder if I was wrong, if this wasn’t the completion of my tale, if maybe the Force had turned her eye once more on ole Jolee Bindo.

Ah, Vrook Lamar. Now there was a sourpuss if I ever knew one. He’d been cantankerous and surly as a teen, and I doubted he’d aged well. He was probably a Master now, a snappish old man lecturing the kids on the dangers of feeling anything other than mild indigestion.

He was here with Vandar Tokare, although it’d taken me some time to recognize that Force signature. Vandar had already been an established Master back when I was a pup. From a different
Enclave to me though – Karon and Zhar’s first one, if I recalled correctly – which was why it’d taken me so long to ascertain his identity.

There was only one thing on Kashyykk that could have brought them here.

I’d thought about showing them the way, I truly had – but, well, Vrook had never been my favourite person. And it wasn’t like that relic had done Revan any good, with the way she’d turned out.

I didn’t hear much, down here in the Shadowlands, but usually I glanced through the galactic goings-on before smashing the Faceless One’s arrays. Heh. And it was hard to miss the repercussions of Revan’s actions, when one was scrolling through the HoloNews headlines.

I’d found it annoying, at first, all these off-worlders interrupting my hard-won solitude. Bad enough that Czerka started sticking their fat fingers into the Kashyykkian resources, worse that a Wookiee chieftain had fallen prey to the greed of civilization.

I liked the Wookiees. They were simple – by no means stupid, but in general they preferred to eschew the trappings of wealth and technology that could make living so darn complicated at times. Czerka had gained a foothold here some hundred years ago, so I supposed it was only a matter of time until they finally gained a Wookiee ally.

A right shame, though.

It’d be nice to do something about that, but while the Wookiees accepted my presence on Kashyykk, the ones who braved the Shadowlands generally weren’t interested in conversing with a hairless geriatric. They fell into three groups: young cubs proving their worth, mentors keeping an eye on them, or exiles embarking on a final journey of redemption. Not anyone particularly interested in an off-worlder’s observations, be it about increased merc activity or the foibles of tolerating an organization such as Czerka Corporation.

So I sat back, and let events unfold as they may.

Then Vrook and Vandar came, wandering aimlessly around the Shadowlands for a couple of weeks before heading back topside.

And now… well, the shock of four great Force-users, agitating and clashing together in a swirling of power and destiny, certainly had me sit up and take notice. Maybe it was time to find out exactly what was going on in my backyard.

I hadn’t been nearby, though. Far enough away that I doubted the familiarity of the lightest one - the one that shone with a gentle righteousness I thought I recognized. It had been snuffed out before I came close, and so had the chaotic spark – until all that was left were two Dark signatures, speeding back in my direction. Before they’d stopped, and everything erupted all over again.

*Kids messing up my planet,* I thought grumpily, but I couldn’t deny the caution in my soul at that level of power. And if Dark Jedi were here, then maybe I’d made the wrong decision in evading Vrook.

I’d felt an upsurge of turbulent power, and then one of the Dark ones sputtered into death. The other fled - away from me, away from the Force presence that bordered on behemoth.

It seemed the chaotic one may not have been as defeated as I first thought.

But the power plummeted as I warily closed in. I kept my footsteps quiet, and tamped down hard on my Force signature.
I could hear a voice; a young, hysterical voice that didn’t belong to the presence I had felt. “Jen, what- what-”

Noisy sobs echoed through the shadows, followed by the whisper of a tormented sigh.

I took a step closer. There was a tangle of sparse undergrowth between me and the strangers. Sparse enough to offer some view of what lay ahead.

A bowed figure, scarlet lightsaber held impotently at his or her side. The dark mop of curls suggested a woman, probably human, but I couldn’t be certain from here. Her shoulders were slumped, head tucked into her chest. Defeat seemed etched into every line of her body.

Some metres to the left was the crumpled form of a Twi’lek teenager, whose sobs were dwindling into messy sniffles as she slowly clambered to her feet.

The human’s red lightsaber didn’t mean anything – just like brown robes, too many Force users allowed coloured labels to define them – but I was still wary. This young Twi’lek was completely defenceless against a wild Force user, who had more raw power than anyone should, by rights.

I scanned through the brambles, taking in what scenery I could. There was a tangled, smoking mess of durasteel beyond the figures. Shards of twisted metal had spread out in a wide arc around it, suggesting whatever it had been – a transport vehicle, most likely - had collided with some velocity into the ground.

My gaze travelled further, snagging on four visible corpses nearby. One was a crumpled mess of dark robes. I’d felt that one die. His body was leaned against a wroshyr that bore obvious signs of heavy Force damage. Layers of thick bark peeled back from the massive tree, presenting the unwelcome image of a gaping wound in the trunk.

I could feel my irritation flare, at that.

The Force-user tensed in sudden movement, her head jerking in my direction as her lightsaber lifted. I had one moment to curse myself for the slip of emotion, before she’d launched in front of the Twi’lek as a shield, her weapon raised in a defensive guard as the Force rallied around her like a sweeping cyclone.

“Show yourself!” the woman growled. “Or, so help me, I will make you!”

“I’m no threat to you,” I called out, taking care to stomp loudly as I rounded the bushes. “Just an old man fed up with the mess you and your friends are making of my home.”

She was human, I confirmed, as I had my first clear glimpse of her. The illumination of the lightsaber reflected against her face, dark shadows under her eyes standing out in stark relief against the red. Hard to pick her age, from this distance, but she was too young to be anyone from my past.

I breathed out in relief. After Vrook, I’d been wary that other ghosts of mine might resurface. I’d been gone near four decades, half of which I’d spent on Kashyyyk. This one probably wasn’t born when I’d turned my back on the Order.

“Rulan Prolik,” she muttered, her eyes narrowing.

I felt my eyebrows raise in bemusement at the foreign name. Behind her, the Twi’lek stepped backward and stumbled over the corpse of a mercenary, falling inelegantly to the ground.

“I thought you-” the human cut herself off, frowning as she eyeballed me. And I found myself taking
her measure, in return. One arm was tucked tight into her chest, and her breathing was hitched in
pain. She wore loose, torn clothing that had obviously seen better days. Suddenly, the woman barked
a laugh that was both cold and harsh. “Sun and stars. It’s the real Jolee Bindo, isn’t it?”

“Huh. You’ve got the advantage of me, young pup,” I said, my brows knitting together. Maybe
Vrook had detected me and sent someone else in his stead, but this one seemed a strange choice.
“Not to mention appallingly bad manners.”

I glanced behind the human to the young Twi’lek, who’d raised herself on her elbows. Her hand
brushed against a lightweight blaster, seemingly dropped from the mercenary’s dead grasp.

“Did you know Rulan Prolik likes to run around impersonating you?” the woman demanded, rather
inanely. Her shoulders slumped and her weapon dropped, as if she no longer saw me as any sort of
threat. I noticed her shaking, then, a second before her eyes rolled back in her head and she collapsed
to the forest floor.

Somehow, she’d had the presence of mind to mash the off-switch on her lightsaber, first.

The Shadowlands were once more immersed in darkness, which wasn’t a problem for me, but the
young Twi’lek cried out in blind shock, and her fingers curled around the grip of the blaster.

“Calm down,” I said, in my most non-confrontational voice. “I’m not here to hurt you.”

“Go away!” the girl shrieked, her voice quavering in panic. “Leave us alone!”

Her breathing was fast and loud, verging on hyperventilating, and her unseeing gaze was wild. She
was helpless and frantic in the dark, and with that mind I used the most obvious light-source to
accommodate her.

The green of my decades-old weapon glowed.

“I’m not your enemy,” I said, reaching out with a soothing touch of Force. But she shrieked as her
vision homed in on my lightsaber, and in a panicked motion quicker than I predicted her hand lifted
and squeezed the trigger.

The shot missed me by more than a metre, but it was still closer than I liked. With a twist of irritation,
I aimed a channel of thermal energy directly at the titasteel of the blaster.

The girl squeaked as she dropped the now piping-hot gun.

Again, I surrounded her in a gentle energy, attempting to smooth over the jagged edges of her panic.
The girl’s heartbeat was thundering strong and fast, but it began to ease. Then her agitated gaze
slowly travelled over me, taking in my face and the serviceable tunic I wore.

“Now,” I said briskly. “No more shooting at me. Where I come from, that’s considered rude.”

The girl’s breathing slowed, somewhat. “Are you- are you a Jedi?” she whispered.

I snorted as I took a step forward. The human was still down, but I could feel her rousing already.
Just a faint, then, and I wondered exactly what sort of trauma these two had just been through. “I’m
not overly fond of labels, girl.”

“A Sith?” the Twi’lek gasped, completely ignoring my previous statement.

“I’m just an old man who might be a friend,” I said, by way of explanation. The girl’s gaze had
locked again on the bright green beam. I huffed in irritation. “With a lightsaber. And fancy Force powers.”

She blinked, before turning back to her companion. “She’s- she’s hurt,” the Twi’lek mumbled. “I don’t know how badly.”

I looked around once more, surveying the environs. The destruction of whatever vehicle that had been had likely scared off predators, but not for long. And the faint metallic tang of blood on the air would draw some of them back sooner rather than later.

“This place isn’t safe, not with these corpses,” I said, walking closer to the strangers with slow, obvious strides so as not to spook the girl again. She seemed less hysterical now and I wanted to keep it that way. “Let me see to your friend, and then we’ll move to my camp. It’s not far from here.”

I crouched next to the human, reaching out with gentle weaves of Force energy. She was coming to, and it was easy for me to speed that process up-

I leaned over her, close now, and recognition punched me hard in the gut.

…

“You can quit hiding,” the stranger called out, her back to me as she tended to the wild game roasting over a small fire. Amusement warmed her low tone. “I’m bored of waiting for you to announce yourself.”

“Huh,” I managed, surprised despite myself. I’d been discreet, in terms of both my physical and Force presence. “Just testing your skills, young pup. This place has killed many an off-worlder before you.”

I’d been tracking her for days. Her signature burned in the Force, a chaotic raw power completely foreign to Kashyyyk. I was curious what would draw such a presence here. There was danger aplenty on this forest world, but big-game hunting was infinitely more accessible on a hundred other planets.

“Young pup,” she echoed, following it with a soft chuckle. “That’s rather refreshing, actually.”

She turned her head to appraise me as I stepped near the firelight. She was human, thirty or thereabouts, with sharp green eyes that stared at me in wary calculation. Her dark hair was tied back in a messy braid, and she wore loose, non-descript clothing that was immediately noticeable as not Jedi robes.

Which didn’t necessarily mean a darn thing. I’d never worn those robes myself, even when I’d called myself a member of the Order.

“When you get to my age, you’ve earned the right to throw that label near and far,” I said at last, perching on the ground near the fire.

Her expression was inscrutable, and she looked back to the roasting meat. It smelled good. “What are you doing on Kashyyyk, old man?”

I huffed in mild annoyance. “Hey, that’s my question to you! This is my home, kid. Why are you here?”

I saw a twitch at the corner of her mouth. Something told me not to underestimate this one. “I’m looking for a relic of a civilization long dissolved into dust. It’s a technological device that pre-dates
even the wroshyrs. Seen anything like that?"

“There’s nothing like that here,” I answered, feeling my brows knit in bemusement. I wondered what sort of wild bantha chase had led her here. “This part of Kashyyyk is home to trees, predators that will kill you, plants that will kill you, and a few more trees. The refreshing thing about the Shadowlands is its complete lack of technology.”

Her mouth curved in a smile that didn’t reach her eyes. She appeared calm, but there was an underlying tension to her body language that bespoke of a readiness to leap into action in an instant.

“Oh, it’s nearby,” she murmured. “This is the oldest part of the Shadowlands. The trees here tell a story all their own.”

I could feel my eyebrows rise at her conviction. “Well, young pup, I hope you’re used to disappointment.”

“She’s had my share.”

I harrumphed. “You keep blundering through the undergrowth the way you are, and you’re bound to get yourself into trouble,” I said, my voice gruff through the blatant lie. Her survival and tracking skills had been obvious to me days ago. “I know the area. I can guide you around, at least until you realize your Force relic isn’t here.”

Not that she’d said it was anything to do with the Force, but it was a sharp enough guess. The casual manner in which she reached forward to remove her dinner from the flames either meant my assumption was wrong, or she was a better actor than I suspected.

“You can join me, for now,” she said. I had the vague feeling the ‘for now’ suffix was not so much a threat as a statement of certainty. “I’d be glad of the company. What’s your name, old man?”

“Jolee. Jolee Bindo.”

She nodded, her gaze meeting mine again. “My name is Revan Freeflight.”

…

Back then, I had struggled not to react to that, even as an irritating smirk had blossomed on her face. At least this time, she wasn’t awake.

Revan. Huh. I didn’t see that coming.

So much for being too young for anyone I knew. To be fair, since I’d left the Order behind I could count the number of Force-users I’d encountered on one hand, with fingers to spare.

It just so happened that she was one of them.

But while I was certainly not up to date with the latest headlines, I was pretty sure Revan was meant to be dead. As well as a lot more Sithy.

I didn’t like feeling back-footed. With an impulsiveness unlike me, I wrapped the human up in a soothing blanket of Force, and coaxed her into a deep, slumberous state. I expected some psychic resistance, given what I knew of her, but the strength of it surprised me nonetheless.

You are safe here. I willed the energy surrounding her to appear benign, pacifying, trustworthy. My gut said it wasn’t working, that her consciousness was fighting me, struggling against my efforts with
a growing strength that would soon out-strip mine. You are safe, I repeated, knowing that while she might not hear my mental words, she may at least feel their intent. You and your friend both.

With a suddenness I didn’t expect, she seemed to surrender, plummeting into unconsciousness.

I rocked back on my heels, taken aback at the swift change. It seemed – deliberate. As if she desired the escape. Huh. Looks like she’s just as hard to predict as last time. And likely just as dangerous. Still, I had a reprieve in which to work out what to do next. She had to be after that ancient relic, the one she hadn’t let me near for four years ago.

But Revan had done an awful lot of bad things in the intervening time.

I remembered, then, that I wasn’t alone, and turned back to the Twi’lek. “I think your friend – Jen, was it?” At the girl’s worried nod, I continued. “She needs rest. Her arm’s pretty banged up.” I frowned, nudging at the limb gently with the Force. “I can look at that back at my place. Come.” I stood, hearing my knees creak.

“But- Jen-” The girl gestured to Revan in confusion.

“Fancy Force powers, remember?” I admonished. I sent the Force out, in cushioned cords of energy that lifted the volatile human into the air. The Twi’lek blinked. “Follow me, and stay close.”

xXx

The Twi’lek girl introduced herself as Mission, before drooping into silence. She’d scooped up the merc blaster as we’d left, and I hadn’t bothered to comment. If it made the girl feel safer, then so be it.

I was wrapped up in my own thoughts, anyway.

Revan, alive and back on Kashyyyk. But she hadn’t recognized me, for all that she knew my name. That was odd. We’d spent days together, philosophizing about the nature of the Force and the Jedi, before she turned into a corner of the Shadowlands I’d always avoided – innately, without realizing it – and then flatly told me to leave if I valued my life.

Now I didn’t exactly consider myself a memorable character or anything, but it hadn’t been that long ago. And she had to be here for that Force relic – again – so why wouldn’t she think on the grumpy old coot who’d trailed her for most of that original journey?

It could have been the Dark Side messing with her head, what with the stories I’d heard – but then she didn’t look all that Dark, either.

And the Twi’lek called her by a false name. That don’t mean a thing. Of course she’ll use a false name if the galaxy thinks she’s dead.

I’d been thinking things were getting boring, lately – but this wasn’t exactly the sort of shakeup I was after. Bah, quit your whining, Bindo. It’s not going to change what the Force has thrown at you. Somehow, I had the feeling I wouldn’t be on Kashyyyk for much longer.

“Well,” I said, breaking the silence as we neared my hut. “Welcome to my home, such as it is.”

I had a couple of makeshift huts, dotted around the Shadowlands. Sure, they had a tendency to get infested with rkkrrkkrl trap-spinners, which was dangerous – or tach, which was annoying and mildly messy. Then there was the time an uller had chosen one as a mating pen.
That had taken a good dollop of Force persuasion to clear.

But, as far as shelter went, they were good enough for me.

The young Twi’lek was staring at the sideways-leaning one-room building with a mild look of disbelief.

“That’s your home?”

I frowned. “It’s a perfectly serviceable hut,” I grumped, although I did take a moment to try and view it through the eyes of a teenage city-dweller. Massive chunks of bark shed from the wroshyrs themselves formed the base of the roof, resting on pruned baloo poles and twined together with kshyyy vines. The entire structure rested back against a wroshyr, and the remaining walls were thick branches lashed together in a manner similar to the Wookiee’s handiwork topside.

The Force made it relatively simple to throw one of these shacks together, and ensure its stability in the short-term. It wasn’t pretty, but then I never pretended to be an architect.

Mission was still staring at it doubtfully, before her gaze slipped back to her sleeping companion. With a flick of my wrist, the door to my home opened, and I shifted Revan inside.

I didn’t have a fixed abode as such - the huts I created were meant to be temporary habitats that fit in with the Kashyykian ecosystem. As such, this one was sparsely furnished. One corner held a bundle of blankets where I placed Revan; the far wall was graced with a long bench that held a minimal collection of cooking utensils and implements. Closed containers of water and wasaka-juice sat under the only table – for although water was plentiful in the Shadowlands, it was also something I preferred to have reserves of.

The girl was standing awkwardly in the centre of the rom, having left the door wide open. I harrumphed. City-dwellers became so accustomed to electronic closures that it completely addled any basic courtesy or common sense they might otherwise have had. I stomped over to close the door myself, before gesturing toward the small stool by the table.

“Pull up a stump and be comfortable. I’ll see to your friend, and then we should discuss a few things.”

Revan’s arm was damaged in three places: a shoulder dislocation I could fix, a broken forearm that I could set but would take some time to heal, and two severed fingers I couldn’t do anything for. Still, lightsaber wounds healed clean, and she’d be able to sort a prosthetic or mechanical solution once off-world.

“Will she be okay?” Mission asked in a tiny voice. “Why isn’t she waking up?”

“She will soon,” I murmured, as I reached out simultaneously with my hands and the Force. I’d set many bones and dislocations in the past… but not for a very long time. “It’s a good thing she’s out to it, young pup. Otherwise this would hurt.”

With a slow, steady force, I pulled Revan’s outstretched arm away from her torso. I felt the thunk as the bone slid back into the socket. She gave out a sharp cry and her eyelashes fluttered, before she settled back into unconsciousness.

She’ll come to, and soon. I’d better work out exactly how I’m going to handle her this time around. But her instinctive action of guarding Mission had already shown me one thing – she cared for the girl. And Mission seemed loyal to her.
Perhaps they would reveal more if I wasn’t around.

I cleared my throat. “Her forearm is broken, but it’s in the right position. There isn’t much more I can do for her other than immobilize the arm.” As I continued my ministrations, I could sense the teenager glancing around in curiosity. The Force made it easy to read people’s emotions, and the Twi’lek was no exception. She was shocked, fearful – natural that, here in the Shadowlands – and undeniably confused. But her mood had definitely calmed from earlier.

“So, you live in the Shadowlands?” she asked, as I rocked back on my heels. I’d strapped Revan’s arm, but it would only hold as long as she wasn’t stupid with it. And this was Revan, after all. Inconsequential things like broken arms wouldn’t stop her from doing what she wanted. In fact, it seemed that not even death would stop her.

“What gave it away?” I asked, reaching out with gentle threads of healing Force. There were damaged nerves and ruptured blood vessels in the shoulder, it having been dislocated for some time. The Force could accelerate the healing process but, ultimately, she needed rest. “The fact I’ve built a hut down here, or that I referred to this place as my home?”

“Okay, okay, no need to get snarly,” she muttered. “It’s just, I thought only Wookiee exiles went down here. And the boys out to prove their manhood or something. ‘Cause, y’know, the girls have to stay behind and do the cooking.” She said the last with a derogatory tone, and when I turned to face her she was rolling her eyes in vague annoyance.

“You know a bit about Wookiee culture,” I said mildly, trying not to sound surprised as I stood and wandered over to the table where she sat.

Mission shrugged. “My best friend’s a Wookiee. Hard not to pick a few things up.”

I felt my eyebrows shoot up at that, but my reply was interrupted by a quiet chirping sound. We turned in unison, to stare at the source: the unmoving Revan.

The noise sounded again, the soft vibration of an electronic device. The Twi’lek girl gasped, scrabbled to her feet, and ran to Revan. As she crouched down and began fiddling with the human’s wrist, I recognized the noise for what it was.

::Jen?:: a deep voice barked from Revan’s limp wrist. It sounded angry, upset, and demanding.

“Canderous!” Mission cried, fumbling with the communicator. There was a pregnant pause.

::What? Haar’chak, Mission, is that you?:

The Twi’lek burst into sobs.

::Mission? Mission! Calm down-:: There was an intake of breath. ::Jen. She’s not-::

“No! No, Jen’s fine. I mean-” The Twi’lek sniffed, seemingly once more in control of herself. “She’s a bit banged up and out to it, and there’s some other stuff – but she’s okay. We’re both okay, we’re both safe. I’ve just had a rotten day.”

There was a string of curses from the communicator in a foreign language. I thought they might be Mandalorian.

::You’ve had a rotten day? Mand’alor’s balls, Mission, I had to watch you disappear down to the Shadowlands and not come back up. When I finally got there myself, I couldn’t find a trace of you or Jen, and then your kriffing communicator blacked out-:: There was a deep growl over the comm. I
raised my eyebrows, turned around, and decided to make myself a cup of tea. Didn’t sound like this conversation was going to be over in a hurry.

“Blacked out?” Mission parroted. There was a shuffle behind me. “Oh! Oh, mine’s completely bust. I didn’t notice. Um, I guess it was from all that lightning.”

Lightning? I frowned, turning back to stare at the Twi’lek. If she’d been caught in the middle of the fight between Revan and those Dark Jedi, then she’d truly had a bad day.

::Lightning?:: the voice from the communicator demanded. ::Okay, kid, start from the beginning and report.:}

The girl sniffed again. I finished straining the dried auldflowers from the chipped mug, and took a small sip. I didn’t particularly like it cold, but sometimes it felt comforting just to hold a drink in one’s hands.

::Hello?:: another voice cut in over the comm, frantic and young and male. ::Ordo, what have you found? Did you find Mission? Her link’s still dead::

“Dustil?”

::Keep your jockeys on, Sithkid, she’s fine::

I found my eyebrows raising at the moniker. Between a girl Twi’lek who claimed a Wookiee as a best friend, a Mandalorian, and a young’un labelled a Sithkid, it seemed that Revan’s companions were interestingly eclectic.

::Mission! Frakk, Dad went absolutely mental- hey, what are you doing on Jen’s comm::

“Oh, is Carth back? Sheesh, I bet he had some choice words—”

::Is Onasi there?:: the Mandalorian cut in.

::No, the Republic brass pulled him away again. Something weird is going on with them – he said he’ll be right back – frakk, Mission, just after he left I saw your link black out on the ‘Hawk’s console::

“Yeah, I dunno if this thing can get fixed—”

::I was gonna go after you, after Ordo told me what happened, but Dad got that stupid astromech to seal the damn hatch so I couldn’t::

::Enough! You kids can bitch about everything when we’re all back on the ‘Hawk. Mission, what the kriff happened::

There was a shaky intake of air from the Twi’lek. “I didn’t mean to leave the lift. But there was a grenade – so I ran, and then these sleemo Mandalorians grabbed me and took off!” A note of anger had entered her voice. “Sheesh, Canderous, your countrymen were complete ronto turds. And then they tried to pinch ‘speeders from a couple of Dark Jedi – who were holding Jen captive – and, well, you can probably guess what happened next.”

There was another pause. I leaned back against the wooden bench, and took a second sip of tea.

::They killed the Mando’ade, and Jen killed them::

“Something like that,” she muttered.
Okay, kid, you win. Your day is worse. And I’m glad I didn’t tell Carpet you were missing.

“You’re with Big Z?” she demanded. “Where are you? Is he okay? What’s going on?”

He’s here, with his dad. They ain’t too interested in talking to non-Wookiee folk like me. Look, kid, you need to wake Jen up and get her on the comm.

The girl paused. “Um… I’ll get her to buzz you when she comes to. She’s… a bit out to it, Canderous. But she’s okay… I mean, uh, give her some time, okay?”

There was a disgruntled noise over the communicator.

::Sithkid, trace Mission’s location and patch me the coordinates. Mission, are you with anyone else?::

“Yeah,” she sighed. “Some old guy with a green lightsaber. He’s helping us.”

“Jolee. The name’s Jolee, young pup,” I called out in vague annoyance.

“Canderous, Dustil, I gotta go and see to Jen. I’ll be in touch, okay?”

::Stay put, ad’ika. I’ll be getting your position shortly.::

::Uh, be safe, okay?: The younger voice added.

Mission switched Revan’s communicator off, and turned back to look at me, uncertainty plain in her expression. I took another sip of tea, before placing the cup to the side of the bench. It did taste pretty awful cold.

I reached out gently with the Force, more to gauge her mood than anything else. The girl was still scared, on edge, but calmer than I expected, given what I thought she’d been through. Ah, the resilience of youth. And also, I felt Revan stirring. I could coax her back to sleep – possibly – or I could fish for information another way.

This was Revan, after all. I had a darn right to know whether she presented a danger to Kashyyyk, or anyone who lived here.

I cleared my throat. “I’m going for a quick walk, young pup. Stay in the hut – it’s safe here, and I won’t be long. Don’t leave this place – I don’t have to tell you the Shadowlands are dangerous.”

Mission immediately looked alarmed, and her wide eyes shot back to Revan. “You’re- you’re leaving? Why?”

“To pick up that one’s lightsaber, for a start.” I gestured toward the sleeping human. “If she’s like any other Force user I’ve known, she won’t be happy until it’s back in her possession. As I said, you’ll be safe as long as you stay put. See you in a bit.”

xXx

There weren’t any predators sniffing about the corpses yet, other than a dozen or so hopeful gnit-flies. It gave me time to investigate the scene, without having to concern myself about nullifying any irritating threat. Kinrath would flock here soon enough, I knew, so I got to work.

Revan’s double-bladed red ‘saber lay on the ground where she dropped it. I picked it up, and went to appraise the mercenary corpses first. Two of them were decked out in full heavy-armour that was distinctively of Mandalorian style. The third was a heavy-set Togruta, who wore nothing more than plain clothing, which was odd in contrast to his deceased companions.
I frowned. It looked like the Togruta corpse had been shifted. Regardless, the mercenaries held nothing of value to me other than a handful of ration bars and a sole medikit. I moved onto the Dark Jedi.

Even in death, there was a dark residue around the body. With some hesitation, I pocketed his single lightsaber. I wasn’t planning on collecting them as such, but I also didn’t want the next Czerka-paid idiot to come along and accidently hack his own arm off. That sort of thing had been known to happen, with lightsabers.

The remnants of the vehicle – some light speeder I suspected – were strewn near and far. Surveying the dual power cells and the amount of debris visible, I judged it to have been just the one vehicle. As I sifted through the wreckage, I came across a set of nerve restraints and a neural disruptor.

With a grimace of disgust, my lightsaber ran through the lot of them.

There was a cargo bag, too, flung some distance away. It had likely been attached to the speeder before its unfortunate demise. The first thing I pulled from it was yet another lightsaber.

I stilled, staring down at the hilt. It took a moment before my thoughts began processing again.

Right. It’s time to head back and get some answers from Revan.

The walk back was swift. I kept my mind blank, and focussed purely on the Force around me. Revan’s presence was significant as I neared. She was either awake, or on the cusp of being so, and I didn’t want her to sense me.

I dimmed the energy surrounding me, drawing it gently inward. It wasn’t possible to conceal my presence entirely, but I could pass for the psychic touch of a smallish forest creature. And although that hadn’t fooled Revan four years ago, she was somewhat more rattled and preoccupied this time around.

And, darn it, I wanted to eavesdrop on their conversation and figure out what the heck was going on.

_I ain’t going to feel guilt over this_, I told the slight pang of misgiving in my chest. _I’ve heard enough of Revan’s doings after the last time she found that relic. I have to decide whether I should stop her or aid her, and that means I need information._

“Jen?” I heard the Twi’lek kid question through my amplified hearing. She sounded plaintive.

There was a groan in response.

“Jen, are you awake?”

“Mission.” The voice was a hoarse whisper. “Mission, is that really you? Sithspit, where- where am I?”

“We’re safe, at least for now. Are you- are you ok?”

There was a muffled snort that seemed to border on hysteria. ”This is real,” Revan muttered. ”Sun and stars, this is actually real. I can’t…” the voice trailed off. I felt my brows knit together in confusion. Revan'd had a rough battle, for sure, but she sounded nothing like the self-possessed Jedi of old. Something was off. Something had changed with her, and I had no idea what I was dealing with, yet.

“It’s gonna be okay, Jen. I mean-”
The laughter that followed was definitely trekking into the throes of hysteria, now. I wondered if I needed to make my presence known. *Does the Twi'lek chit have any inkling who she is dealing with?*

"That's not my name, Mission. You heard. Don't tell me you didn't catch that bastard calling me Revan."

*Okay, so maybe she does."

"Yeah, I mean, but—but it's not true, right? I mean, that Hutt-slime was just messing with your head. *Everyone* knows Revan was a guy—"

*Or maybe she doesn't. This was getting confusing.*

And the choking noise that cut through the Twi'lek's impassioned plea sounded a lot like sobbing. "Stars, Mission, I can decisively confirm that I'm female. That *Revan* is."

There was a slight pause, before the exuberant Twi'lek bounced back. “Look, Jen, I *know* you. Whatever that freakazoid said to have you believing—" "Mission,* stop.*” The words were low, intent and commanding, and the girl dwindled into silence. “It’s true,” Revan whispered. “It’s true, Mission.”

I could hear the Twi’lek take in a deep breath. “Okay,” she said slowly. “Okay. But we can sort this out—"

“*How? How in the sodding Outer Rim can we sort this out?*"

There was a heavy silence following her impassioned plea. I found myself bemused. Not only was Revan alive when the galaxy mostly certainly thought her dead, but it sounded like her own identity was as much of a surprise to her as it had been to me.

“I don’t know,” Mission whispered. “I mean, I don’t really understand any of this. How can you be…”

“That monster? Bastila saved me instead of killing me like she should have.”

*Ah, Bastila Shan.* The latest prodigy of the Jedi. Had some fandangled talent the holonets were raving about. And somehow, like all young, strong Force-users, had become tangled in events beyond her control.

“Everyone knows Bastila faced Darth Revan. I can’t believe I didn’t sodding guess this before.”

She hadn’t known who she was. That explained her behaviour— but not what she was going to do next.

There was shuffling noise. “Jen—"

*That’s not my name.*"

“It is, to me,” the girl answered. The honestly in her voice was raw, and beautiful.

“Mission,” Revan replied, soft and mournful. “Jen Sahara died a year ago. *I* killed her. How can you be taking this so… so damn lightly?”

It was interesting to speculate on exactly what had happened. Somehow, I had the feeling the Jedi
had done something they shouldn’t. Huh. Wouldn’t be the first time.

“I’m not, okay?” Mission retorted. “It’s big, I mean, it’s like, huge, but you’re the same person I met back on Taris. And you keep fighting and coming back to us. You can fix this, Jen, you can fix your mistakes.”

Revan laughed again, a jagged sound that put me in mind of shattering ferracrystal. “My mistakes? This isn’t something you can just- just stick a plaster over! As far as I know, Mission, there’s no way to bring billions of people back from the grave-”

“Jen-”

“And are you forgetting what I did when we arrived in Manaan airspace? Stars, what about Korriban when we found Bastila missing? If it hadn’t been for you and Carth, I would have killed everyone in my way – Sith, or no.” Her impassioned rant petered out into an agonized sigh. “I’m… I’m unstable, Mission.”

“You’re wrong, y’know,” Mission countered, in a gentle voice. “It wasn’t just us. I reckon if Bastila had been around, she coulda stopped you. Juhani woulda said something about the Force to make you listen – you always listen to her. Sheesh, if Zaalbar hadn’t been all brain-fried, he woulda had some choice words to say – and he’d’ve made you hear them.” The Twi’lek let out a frustrated breath of air. “And Jen, what about Canderous? Wouldn’t you listen to him most of all? And if you didn’t, I just bet he’d kick your arse until you did, scary Force powers or no. Don’t you see? All of the crew have holds on you. And I reckon any one of us coulda pulled you back.”

Hah! A Twi’lek teenager shows more wisdom than half the Council! Whatever had happened to Revan, she was being granted a true second chance… and going about it in a way the Order had likely not foreseen. For, I knew well, that it was the connections to others that were the very fabric of the Force itself. Love, in all of its forms, was the essence of everything. And those old fools would have every Padawan fear it.

The Jedi Order had lost a lot of strength the day they started preaching that emotional detachment was the way of the Light.

“Stars, Mission, I’d like to believe that, I really would…” the voice trailed off brokenly. “I can’t- they deserve to know the truth, but-”

“You have to tell them, yeah… but I get you need some time. Look, Jen, if it helps then I reckon Canderous won’t take it too bad, y’know?”

“Canderous?” There was a snort. I’d heard enough, I realized, and it was time to interrupt before the conversation got any more personal. “True. He’ll be all sorts of proud that he’s knocked the infamous Revan to the floor a dozen times.”

Well, I’d better make a show of coming in before she senses me. Revan seemed to have a knack for doing that. I huffed, and strode the last few metres to my hut.

“Okay, ew, Jen, I don’t need details, y’know-”

The Twi’lek halted in mid-sentence as I entered, and they both turned their heads. The Twi’lek was easy enough to read – she was disappointed at the interruption, but held no animosity toward me. Revan, on the other hand, simply appeared blank and cold. Apart from her eyes. She glanced away, but not before I recognized the depth of despair there.

The Order have really put her through the wringer, haven’t they? And left her alone to deal with the
fallout. Well, at least she’s not running off in a black robe throwing lightning about. Yet.

No, I wouldn’t be staying on Kashyyyk. I could see that now.

“You’re back,” Mission said. “Did you find what you were after?”

“Humph,” I grumbled. “Not sure, really.” I stared at Revan until she finally raised her gaze back to mine. The first question I’d planned on asking was the identity of her companion, the Light one I’d felt join with the Force hours ago. The one who – for a split second – had made me think of my old friend Zhar.

But it wasn’t his lightsaber I’d found, in amongst the debris of that second confrontation.

“Mind explaining this?” I asked, lobbing the ‘saber to Revan. She caught it with her uninjured arm, before looking down to stare at it. I heard a faint whistle of breath as she recognized it.

“My ‘saber,” she whispered. Her head jerked back up, green eyes narrowing. “You went back to the scene. Bandon must have taken it, when he first captured me.”

“Your ‘saber?” I threw back. “Look, pup, it’s been a decade or four, but I recognize that hilt. The crystal’s different, but I know who crafted that lightsaber, and it sure as Coruscant wasn’t you.”

“She gave it to me,” Revan said, and her words turned cold and curt. A shiver rippled through her face before it turned blank. She closed her eyes, resting her head back against the wall. “As she lay dying. I’m sorry, Jolee, but Karon’s dead. Zhar—” her voice cracked, a bit. “Zhar, too.”

I turned away from her reflexively, from them both, as a hot and uncommon flare of anger burned deep within me. When I’d seen that lightsaber, I knew it meant Karon’s demise. And where one found Karon, they usually found Zhar. They would have been Masters, no doubt, with Padawans of their own, soaking up their light and wisdom. I’d never expected to see either of them again, true, but they had been good friends to me. Both of them had pleaded for me to stay after Nayama-

I growled, walking over to the small bench on the far side of the room. There was a pot of day old stew that could be heated up, and a covered bowl of wasaka-berries that needed a wash to clear them of the dirt from harvesting. Karon and Zhar should have had decades upon decades of life left. The Force slowed aging, and both of them were so darn good, such decent beings that truly showcased what the Order could be. Should be.

“How?” I demanded, staring blankly at the berries. I’d gathered them a few days ago, and they were beginning to smell a bit pungent. Maybe I should throw them out. “How did they die? And what did you have to do with it?”

“Hey, Jen didn’t—”

“Mission,” Revan murmured, hushing her friend. She took in a deep sigh, and her voice turned clinical again. Like a tap, her mood switching on and off. “Karon was killed on Manaan by Kylah Aramai, a former Jedi Knight who led a squad of Dark Jedi to capture Bastila Shan. When I came on the scene, Kylah was in the process of defeating her. If I’d been there—”

She cut herself off, but not before I heard the guilt in her words. It probably wasn’t justified, but heck – I’d just heard about the deaths of my two oldest friends. My brows slammed together, and I spun, glaring at the woman. “And Zhar?” I bit out.

Her voice turned to ice once more. “Killed some hours ago by Yudan Rosh and Bandon Stone.” Her gaze met mine unflinchingly. “And my inaction.”
I could feel her despair on the Force. It was fathomless, and completely at odds with the glacial look on her face. I snorted, and was gratified when I saw her blink. “You’re telling me that you sat back while a couple of Dark Jedi ran my old friend through, and said *Oh, don’t mind me, I’ll just watch the show*?”

“I didn’t- I couldn’t act, I just stood there like a stunned idiot and let them capture me and kill Zhar.”

“You didn’t act or you couldn’t act? Because there’s a world of difference between the two, young pup.”

She looked away, and didn’t answer. I took in a deep breath, feeling my anger slowly ebb as memories of my own past rose to haunt me. I had been sure of my path, I had been righteous, and still I had frozen in the face of the Dark Side.

Blame wouldn’t resurrect Zhar or Karon. And the suffocating self-hatred rolling off Revan in waves would only end up driving her back down the same corrupted path she once owned.

I turned back to the bench, intent on making a small cooking fire. The Twi’lek murmured something consolingly to Revan, who didn’t answer. I could stretch the leftover stew to the three of us, and it had to be better sustenance than whatever ration bars they had likely been filling their bellies with.

It didn’t take long to heat and then ladle the steaming meal into three vessels, before pulling up a couple of crates next to the table. I gestured the two of them over, and Mission came willingly enough, but Revan-

She was staring at me with an expression of vague disbelief. It was more honest than the blank look she’d been sporting earlier.

“You’re not going to press for more details?”

“Will it bring back the dead?” I retorted, folding my arms.

Her eyes narrowed. “Zhar had to face two top Dark Jedi alone because I was too- because I didn’t- I couldn’t- dammit, I should have been able to fight! He should still be alive!”

“Shoulds and what-ifs are a waste of time, young pup. If you stuffed something up, then learn from it and move on.”

“You- I-” Revan stopped, scowling. “Zhar was an old, true friend of yours, and when I say I’m part to blame for his death your only response is to *do better next time?* Are you for real, Jolee Bindo?”

“Oh, you want a lecture? Then how about this,” I snapped. “Self-flagellation is very Jedi, but it’s also very destructive. If you truly want to make a difference, then pick yourself up and *make* one.”

She didn’t answer, but continued frowning at me through angry eyes. I took the fire in her expression as a healthy sign.

“Um, guys, can we just eat?” Mission asked, her voice tentative.

We broke our staring competition to look at the girl. She was sitting by the table, glancing between the two of us nervously. Her face was slack with exhaustion, and now that I surveyed her properly I could see the faint tracing of electrical burns marking her headtails. When my gaze returned to Revan, I noticed that the former Sith Lord’s expression had softened.
“A spot of food followed by rest would be good for us all,” I commented, before taking a seat next to the Twi’lek. “We can move on after that.”

Revan hesitated for a moment, before her expression firmed and she joined us.

“Move on?” Mission echoed, frowning. “Where are we moving to?”

“You know what we’re looking for,” Revan said, her voice a low whisper.

I snorted. “There is nothing else on Kashyyyk. The problems of a few Wookiees don’t amount to anything before the concerns of Force-users like you.”

“Hey!” Mission interjected. There was an annoyed spike in her tone. “We are helping the Wookiees. Look, whatever you think about normal Jedi, Jen ain’t one of them-”

“So where is it?” Revan’s voice cut directly through the girl’s, cold and hard and intent.

I turned, slowly, and met the fixed gaze of probably the most powerful Force-user in the galaxy. “It’s some days walk away, depending on how fast we travel. I will take you there, but on my terms.”

This time. This time.

There was a distant look, then, that clouded the green eyes facing me, and I felt the current of Force power as it flowed from her. She stared blankly into the distance, her face turned in the approximate direction of the Force relic.

…”

“This is where we part ways, Jolee Bindo,” Revan said, her voice both clinical and emotionless. “Do not follow me any longer. I shall know if you do.”

This was a part of the Shadowlands I’d never been to. Surprising, really, because I knew this area well. And yet, I felt a crawling sensation toe-dance down my spine, repelling me away from this area, suggesting that I turn around or find another way forward.

“Oh ho, your manner is fearsome. Like the little ullers I shoo from the garden, hissing at what they don’t understand.”

The Force rallied around her, quick and swift and terrible. A dark miasma of power of which I had never felt the likes of, and never wanted to again.

“Leave, Jolee Bindo, if you value your life. I do not give many a second warning.”

The strength I felt was enough to make me step back, suddenly wary of my companion for the last few days. I could feel the darkness within her, the resoluteness to do what she must – and, for some reason, that meant doing it in secret.

And, now that I was conscious of it, I could feel the taint in the Shadowlands, driving me away from an area I had never thought to set foot into. An area I had always ignored, without realizing it.

I would come back, later - my own curiosity would compel me to. But for now… I could feel her conviction to act against me, if I stayed. It was absolute. Attempting to thwart her would probably end badly for me – and it wouldn’t do her shadowed soul any favours, either.

So I left, in silence.

…”
I cleared my throat, coming back to the present. I had gone back, many a time. But she’d re-programmed that darn computer... whatever secrets she’d uncovered, she didn’t leave them easily accessible. Perhaps this time, I could discover what they were.

*If she hasn’t just worked out the relic’s location herself, that is.*

Revan was facing me again, her eyes dead and her face expressionless. Maybe her gaze had been coincidental. She wasn’t exactly acting the most lucid, after all.

I turned back to my bowl of stew as my thoughts lingered over that obstinate computer and Force relic. It was alien to Kashyyyk, I was sure of it. Nowhere on this planet were there indications of any civilization having existed that could create technology that advanced. And it was located in the oldest part of the wroshyr forest, where the tallest and largest trees grew. Was there any relevance to that? Four years ago, Revan had implied there was.

We ate quietly, crowded over the small table. Mission was obviously exhausted, and her eyelids began to droop before she’d finished her small portion. It wasn’t long before she curled up on the blankets in the corner. She’d sent Revan a plaintive, pleading glance the human obviously couldn’t deny, for a moment later she was sitting quietly at Mission’s side.

When the Twi’lek succumbed to slumber a short time later, Revan’s expression hardened and she looked back to me.

“You’ll take care of her,” she stated, one arm resting gently around the Twi’lek’s shoulder. “You’ll make sure she stays safe.”

*Oh no, I’m not letting her go without a fight.*

“We’ll go together, young pup,” I retorted. “You think running out on her is the right thing to do, after what she’s been through? Caught in the middle of a Force duel? How well do you think she’s going to take that, waking up to find you’ve skipped out on her?”

Her eyes darkened. “There’s still a Dark Jedi out there, old man,” she said. “I won’t let him track me down when I’m around others. I won’t let Mission get hurt again.”

“That should be her choice, not yours,” I replied. “Besides, don’t lie to yourself. That’s not the real reason you’re running.”

“It’s a reason,” she snapped back. “It’s definitely in the top three.”

I folded my arms and stared at Revan. Not surprisingly, she stared straight back. She always struck me as the resolute type; once she made up her mind, there was little budging her. “You know, you remind me of someone I used to know. Promising young man, great destiny. Breath like a bantha.”

Her eyebrow quirked, but other than that, her face remained emotionless. “Did you annoy this person endlessly, too?”

“Oh ho ho, very funny,” I said. She stood, disengaging herself from her young friend. I directed my strongest disapproving look at her. “Are you not even going to let an old man tell a tale? That’s a bit heartless, don’t you think?”

“I’ll take a raincheck,” she muttered. “If I see you again, I promise to listen for at least a whole minute.”

“I could stop you,” I said, throwing one last attempt out there. She was a damaged version of who
she had once been, and I gambled on the slight chance that my bluff might hold some sway.

Revan turned a faint smile on me, and it was both sad and terrible. “No you couldn’t,” she whispered, and walked out the door.

xXx

Chapter End Notes

And with this chapter, I’ve broken the 500K word barrier. Yikes! It’s taken that long to get Jolee in the picture! I hope y’all liked him.

Let me know what you think, if you’re still with me. Reviews or comments truly make my day. It's nice to know I'm not just using up all my spare time to throw words into the ether :-)}
I ran.

I had a purpose in mind, and it wasn’t just flight – escape from Mission, escape from the cryptic old man who acted like he knew me, escape from the horrors of my mind –

But flight was part of it.

I couldn’t bear Mission’s acceptance. She was shocked, yes; uncertain and a little afraid of me – and that was it. Somehow, she still saw me as the woman she knew as Jen Sahara – who, in truth, was really a damaged Revan Freeflight lacking the recollection of her own experiences. The same flaws that caused me to fall in the first place must still there.

Whatever those had been. Overconfidence? Arrogance? A mild distaste for authority?

Dammit, merely days ago I would have sworn that Street Kid was one of the good guys. But Street Kid was. Revan was… until, you know, she wasn’t.

Mission had only ever heard tales of the Jedi and the Sith, wild stories on the holonets that didn’t touch the Lower City of Taris, not really. Not until the Endar Spire spat escape pods all over the ecumenopolis, and Taris was left dealing with the fallout of a fugitive Bastila Shan. Mission was too young, too removed, too nice, to grasp the magnitude of my crimes.

Mission’s acceptance, in a way, was worse than Carth’s inevitable hatred.

The Shadowlands whispered to me, as my feet danced over fallen leaves and dirt and forest debris. I whipped past giant wroshyrs, the sentinels of this wild world, and felt the hum of power embrace me as miles vanished in my dust.

Somewhere, on Kashyyyk, was Yudan Rosh. And somewhere here in the Shadowlands, was the Star Map. The former would come back to hunt me or haunt me, and I wouldn’t allow that encounter to occur around anyone I cared about. And as for the Map…

I had an inkling, a faint impression of something further afield that didn’t want to be found. But I wasn’t sure of my own senses – now, when I cast out psychically, all I was aware of was various predators stalking through the ancient forest. It was entirely possible that I was running to absolutely nowhere.

Jolee Bindo knew where the Map was. The smarter course of action would have been to accept his aid. That had been Zhar’s plan in the first place.

Zhar… I held some responsibility for his death, surely. If I hadn’t… if I’d understood everything before… if I’d just kept it sodding together-

“Sithspit,” I cursed bitterly, my useless words dying on the air as I ran. And don’t forget Karon. The Force sang to me, a lullaby of life and possibility, urging me ever onward. If I hadn’t bolted from Bastila in the first place-
There was a faint chirping on my wrist, and I ignored it.

Zhar and Karon, two solid links to my cursed past. And now all I had left were sodding Yudan Rosh and my old lover, Darth Malak.

My vision blurred. My limbs kept moving.

*And Bastila.* She had some questions to answer, too, didn’t she? She… she saved my life. But she knew, all along, and sat back while I formed connections with others who deserved to know who they were *really* dealing with. Mission might be able to get past it, and stars knew which way Canderous would flip – but Zaalbar, who valued honour above all else? Juhani, struggling so valiantly against any glimmer of the Dark Side since Tatooine? *Carth?*

I could feel a growl of discontent rumbling in my chest as I launched over a massive log. My senses quickened, warning me of a nearby pack of katarn, enabling me to diverge my path from any threat as I shot through the shadows.

I felt the communicator vibrate again.

Bastila had been party to this from the start. Our bond would have allowed no ignorance. She would have experienced my mind being scrubbed clean and programmed into someone else.

*Did she agree?*

*Was she personally involved?*

The very thought made me want to drop my shields and lash out at her, in wild fury and grief.

*How can I allow myself to feel these bitter recriminations, after what I have wrought?* And yet, all I had to do was recall my movements on the *Endar Spire* - when my desires were reduced to hiding in my bunk and devouring any archives that fat Cerean had foisted on me – and a rage as black and thick as pure hate began to burn.

The Order would have kept me a puppet, trapped in a false identity with no release. If it hadn’t been for that head injury, I would still be Jen Sahara right now.

Jen had been a simple woman, with simple wants. *Escape into history, and hide from reality.* I stopped, toes digging into the damp forest floor. *The reality is… she’s dead, and it’s my fault.*

*So many dead.*

The desolation and guilt lashed me like a whip, again and again. I didn’t think it would ever stop, given my past. *From denial to rage to an ocean of shame and grief. If that’s not the path to the Dark Side, then I don’t know what is.*

The comm buzzed again. I stared down at my wrist blankly. A message in text appeared on the screen.

::*Blast it, Jen, answer the comm!::*

*Carth.* My knees collapsed under me. My off-hand was bound tight to my chest, and my head bowed over it in despair. I couldn’t talk to Carth. Not yet. How does one broach such a revelation? *Hey, flyboy, you know how we’re all relieved that at least Revan is dead? Well guess what…*

Carth had made me feel normal, for a few days. Normal, and hopeful, and *happy.* Now I understood
why those emotions had felt so foreign.

…

“You’re still awake,” he murmured, his voice a soft rumble under my ear. He’d fallen asleep with my head pillowed on his chest. I hadn’t been sure if he’d expected me to turn up again, but after last night I wasn’t staying away.

“Mhmm,” I acknowledged. “I don’t need much sleep. Not sure if it’s a Force thing…”

“That probably explains all your midnight jaunts on Taris,” Carth said, his voice a touch wry.

“That was reconnaissance,” I replied, feeling my lips curve in a small smile. “It’s important on an enemy planet, you know.”

“Reconnaissance? Is that a synonym for acquisition these days?”

I lifted my head to see his crooked grin, the teasing glint in his eyes. He hadn’t entirely approved of my methods, then, even while acknowledging our situation had been desperate. Still, it didn’t sound like he held it against me.

My smile widened as my fingers trailed over his chest. It was dark, in the pilot’s quarters, with the only light being the dim illumination of telemetry from the one console. “We made it off Taris, didn’t we?”

His expression turned intense, and his dark eyes held mine. “We’ve made it further than anyone could have expected.”

We had, but the cost had been high. Karon. Belaya. Bastila, kidnapped and taken stars-knew-where. Carth must have seen something in my face, for a hand lifted to cradle my face. Despite everything, I felt somewhat comforted.

“We’ll get her back, Jen,” Carth whispered. “I have faith in you. We’ll finish this mission, and get Bastila back.”

He leaned forward, and captured my lips in a tender kiss.

…

Somehow, I felt strangely calmer, sitting amongst the moist undergrowth of the largest and darkest forest in the galaxy.

Those three nights on the Ebon Hawk – and our friendship preceding it – were more real to me than a past love I couldn’t remember. The brief flashes of my history told me that it shouldn’t be that way; that Malak, once, had been a core foundation of my life. But I had little true recollection, and any emotional attachment I felt was primarily of guilt.

These memories of Carth, fleeting and transient, were a gift I didn’t deserve - but perhaps they gave me the strength to do what I had to, next.

I would find the Star Map, and if Yudan Rosh didn’t track me down first, then I would go after Bastila and Malak.

But Rulan Prolik’s warning sat heavy in my mind.

"The Republic presence on Kashyyyk has orders to capture you, Jen Sahara. If you wish to put an
end to Darth Malak, you'd better find a way of avoiding them as you leave this planet.”

The thought of handing myself over to the Republic was appealing, in a guilt-assuaging way. How could I have any faith that I wouldn’t revert to the monster I once was? I knew the depth and strength of my loyalty to the Republic. I still felt it – an unyielding, abiding conviction to do everything in my power to safeguard the freedom of billions of people. To uphold the founding principles of the Republic. To find the best strategy for the greatest peace – even as I understood it would never be perfect, that the fight would never, truly, be over against the greed and corruption that came with all sentient life. That sacrifices would have to be made, no matter how bitter or great.

But the end goal - peace, understanding, acceptance - was worth whatever we had to endure.

I felt all this, and I knew it was what Street Kid – Revan Freeflight – had felt before.

And yet, what had I turned into?

There was a strong part of me that argued my surrender – and likely execution for war crimes - would be the best thing I could now do for the Republic.

But – Bastila.

Once I had the final Star Map coordinates, we would all have an end point to converge upon. And I couldn’t help but feel that the Republic would be a lot more likely to sacrifice Bastila – if an obvious rescue plan didn’t jump out and dance a jerryjig at them – than I would be.

She had saved my life, when most Jedi would have counselled against it. Sure, mercy was a tenet of the Order, but she could have walked away. It would have been safer for the galaxy. In the end, I owed her – even if I wanted to shake her for it.

And – Malak.

“Tell me, you who call yourself Jen Sahara, are you ready to put an end to Darth Malak?”

Malak had an ever-increasing armada. Even with the final Star Map, would the Republic be able to defeat him? I didn’t know. But one thing I did know-

I was stronger than him, once. Maybe I still am. And he- he had followed me. Followed me into the darkness of which he now claimed ownership.

Malak, the love of my past, was my mess to clean up.

I was stripped, laid bare, emotionally naked, as if a hundred layers of self and feeling and thought had been shed like so much dross. And all that was left was a fragile psyche encasing a steel core that still – despite everything - glowed with the fire of conviction.

And as I pulled myself up into a crouch, I felt it burn brighter. My guilt and self-doubt and anguish were still there - but I could no longer let those sentiments hamstring me.

I wouldn’t let them stop me from my next goal.

Zhar had died because I’d been unable to accept my past, because my fractured mind had rebelled at the horrific truth, and disconnected me from the present.

It was hard to know how much blame for his death I should apportion to myself, but Jolee Bindo had one thing correct – it was destructive. Better that I move on, and not repeat my mistakes.
Any of them.

I stood, and reached out with the Force afresh.

There. There. That same negative sensation ebbed further afield, a mild repelling that translated into a desire to be elsewhere, to avoid this particular area. Do all Star Maps resonate so on the Force, I wondered, or is this unique to the one on Kashyyyk?

I took a deep breath, re-focussed myself, and once more began to move.

It wasn’t far now, I realized, as I flew over the ground. Time passed quickly as a Force-induced celerity hastened my movements. And I could feel the aversion grow as I neared, an itchy discomfort compelling me to turn back, to change course.

It wasn’t difficult to ignore, but I suspected that was because I was aware of it. If I hadn’t been, it would have felt natural to avoid this area of the Shadowlands. And I noted, too, that little life existed in this area, other than insects and smallish rodents scurrying through the underbrush. It seemed this repelling sensation also had an effect on non-sentient life.

My pace slowed to a walk as I came ever closer. I rounded across a large thicket of spiny thorns and elongated flowers, and then a large clearing unfolded in front of me.

Oh, the wroshyrs still blacked out the sky well and truly, but this flat area was massive – and no tree, bush or any sort of plant life grew upon it. It was a circular field of dirt that had to be close to a hundred metres in diameter.

And in the very centre of it sat a large metallic device. It looked jarringly out of place.

Fine hairs rose on the back of my neck as a creeping sensation of déjà vu hit me. I had to have been here before, but there was no rising memory to aid me, no glimpse from my broken and cursed past to confirm that this was, indeed, my objective.

The device was a large rectangular shape, stretching a few metres high and wide, with venting and exposed piping along the sides. It could be anything from a power generator to some sort of horticultural equipment, but there was no obvious input panel I could see from this side. It looked like it was driven into the ground. In fact, as I walked closer, I became convinced that part of it was built beneath the surface. It made me wonder, again, at the round patch of dead earth that surrounded it, and if this was somehow related.

What is this? This can’t be the Star Map?

In front of the device sat an elliptical platform made from the same metallic alloy. I walked forward cautiously, my good hand clutching Karon’s ‘saber, the other still strapped tight against my chest. When I neared to within five metres, there was a loud thunk.

A whirring noise echoed from the device.

I stilled, and a hazy hologram flickered to life on the platform.

It was an alien figure I didn’t recognize. Humanoid in shape, with an aquatic look to his smooth skin and elongated forehead. Two eyes protruded on short stalks either side of his head. He was a similar height to me, but also lean and thin and with flipper-like digits at the end of his limbs. I’d stick credits on an amphibian ancestry. But what is he?

“(Life form detected,)” a crackly voice emitted from the hologram. His pale blue lips moved in sync
with the recording. “(Determining parameters. Initiating neural recognition.)”

The hologram swivelled both eyeballs around to stare at me. I remained motionless, my grasp clench tight on the Force.

“(Primary neural recognition complete,)” the hologram stated. “(Begin socialized interface. Neural scan indicates positive identification of subject Revan Freeflight. Subject meets accepted neural patterns.)”

A chill danced down my spine. My cursed name spoken so boldly, so confidently, still had the power to shock. But it was out of place, I realized – my name jarred heavily with the thick consonant tones of everything else he said. Understanding unfolded swiftly – the sodding thing wasn’t speaking Basic; in fact, I had no clue what language it was, but I could understand it fluently.

And he recognized me. His holographic eyes were pinned on me.

“(Awaiting instruction),” he slurred, words that were not only comprehensible, but also strongly familiar-

...

"(Observation:,)" HK had intoned, in the same garbled vernacular. The sounds were guttural and harsh, and I didn’t recognize the language – but I understood him. “(This meatbag looks like the bastard offspring of a diseased Hutt. Which doesn’t say much for his mother.)”

...

I blinked, startled at the recollection. That had been in the arse-end of Rii’shn, just before the GenoHaradan ambush. HK had been looking for a way to communicate with me that the Nikto guarding that rundown cantina would not understand.

How interesting. I frowned. HK-47’s depth of languages had always impressed – he knew Sand People dialects, for frell’s sake – but hadn’t I questioned him about this particular one, on the way to Korriban? And hadn’t he retorted with something about errors in programming?

That’s not important right now! I dragged my attention back to the computerized figure, making a mental note to query HK about it in the future. The hologram was still staring at me attentively.

I took a cautious step forward. The thing’s gaze tracked my movements, but otherwise he remained motionless.

“Hello?” I ventured, in Basic.

“(Greetings, Revan Freeflight,)” the hologram replied.

I cocked my head. “You can understand Basic,” I murmured, wondering just how old this relic was.

“(Dictionary of language ‘Galactic Basic’ was uploaded four years ago by yourself, Revan Freeflight,)”

I drew in a shallow breath, feeling suddenly clammy. Only now, did it really hit me that I was retracing my own steps – the same steps that had led to such disastrous ruin before. I felt an immediate rush of longing for Bastila’s counsel. But I can’t reach out to her… I heard Malak, before. Mal. I closed my eyes in painful recollection. I’d be better off putting a blaster to my head than allowing him a foothold into my mind.
I had to do this by myself, and do it better than last time. Which was a monumental ask considering I couldn’t remember a damn thing.

“Why did I do that?” I asked, snapping my eyes open. “(I can speak your language. Why bother with Basic?)”

“(You desired to link this unit to galactic informational networks beyond this planet, Revan Freeflight. The controlling computer required translational capabilities of a current sentient communication method to parse available data, should it ever become connected.)”

Okay. I wanted to link some old computer to the holonets. That was even more confusing. “And did it ever get connected?”

The thing blinked at me. It responded intelligently to my queries, and must be based on either an advanced AI or some sort of holocron. Considering its lack of individuality, I thought the former was more likely.

“(No. You attempted to repair the transmission relays four years ago, but were unable to source the correct technology for replacement parts. As per your directive, this unit has remained in stasis until your return. Or, as programmed, until another builder communication.)”

I walked around the hologram, frowning in thought. The figure lapsed into silence, awaiting my questions, shifting to face me as I circled it. "What sort of builder communication? Does 'builder' refer to those who installed this device?"

"(Error. Information regarding the builders of this unit has been corrupted.)"

"Corrupted?” I muttered. "Fantastic. So you don't know who built, well, you?"

"(The builders installed this unit, Revan Freeflight.)"

The builders… I realized, then, that it was a name rather than a profession. The Builders… And a quiet, seldom-heard voice whispered in the back of my head. The Rakata were known as the Builders, due to the massive structures and sculptures their slaves built in forced homage on various colonies. The Rakatan empire was vast… they colonized much of the galaxy tens of millennia ago. It has been speculated they were an incredibly strong Force-sensitive species as well, but there is no concrete evidence to support this.

Jen… her memories were still with me, faint but there. And while this era was much further back than her specialty, she still knew something of them.

“The Rakata,” I murmured slowly. “This computer was part of their civilization?”

“(Error. Malfunction in core programming. Last communication with primary Builder node 29,642 years before current Republic standard.)”

I blinked. That was a long time ago, but it fit with Jen’s knowledge. The Rakatan Empire was well established some 35,000 years ago, reaching its zenith 7,000 years later, before collapsing a few millennia after that. The little Jen knew of their empire was that is was built on slavery and subjugation, and spanned more of the known galaxy than the Republic did now.

And then, for some unknown reason, they died out. Rapidly, over the course of a few mere centuries. The largest player in the galaxy – by far – decimated for some unknown reason that history had not recorded.
I glanced back to the hologram. The hologram of a Rakata, I surmised. “What is the purpose of this installation?” I asked.

“(This utility was built to monitor planet-wide agricultural reformation,)” the hologram stated.


“(This colony was selected as a breeding ground for servants of the Infinite Empire.)”

The breath hissed from my lungs, and a cold sensation pricked at the base of my neck. *Slaves. They bred the Wookiees as slaves.* Suddenly, I felt nauseous. This technology – the same tech as the Star Maps, surely – came from a civilization built on slavery. On terraforming *entire planets to breed sentients.* And there was a strong power around this supercomputer, repelling everyone away – and only those trained in the Force had some chance of overcoming it.

The Rakata were theorized to be a Force-sensitive species, and they enslaved much of the galaxy - through methods certainly *not* of the Light Side. *This* was the technology I’d chased after, four years ago, before turning into a monster.

*What an idiot. What a reckless, arrogant idiot- why would I mess around with tech from a source such as this?* I must have, already, been far down the dark path-

No, no, I remembered the krayt dragon’s cave. I remembered running through the shyrack tunnels, with Mal- with Malak. Those recollections were from Street Kid, *not* Evil Bitch. I must have had reason, I must have thought I could use this tech for something worth the risk-

Or maybe I simply thought I could master it.

*Overconfidence. You were always too damnably overconfident.* The voice, an older man’s, sneered inside my head. I’d heard it before, but I couldn’t pick from where-

*Everyone is fallible. Even you. Especially you.*

I breathed in, deep to the bottom of my lungs, the bottom of my soul, and willed the disapproving voice away.


“(The native species of this planet were chosen as suitable servants for the Infinite Empire,)” the hologram answered. Its tone was damnably neutral.


“(Last communication with primary Builder node 29,642 years before current Republic standard. This unit malfunctioned 26,334 years before current Republic standard, causing hyper-acceleration of the natural fauna.)”

*Hyper-acceleration?* “The wroshyrs… kath crap, *this* computer is the reason they’re so huge?” I blinked, my gaze once more landing on the supercomputer. It *must* extend deep into the ground, but to control terraforming on that scale- “Is it still functional?”

“(Terraforming capabilities have ceased production 8,233 years before current Republic standard.)”
Somehow, I didn’t think the Wookiees would believe this particular piece of their history. Okay, I’m getting off-topic now. Focus, Jen- I closed my eyes for a brief second. Revan. Focus, Revan. The name echoed inside my head.

It should have felt wrong, but it didn’t. It felt right.

“Do you have access to a Star Map?” I asked quietly.

“(The Star Map is yours, Revan Freeflight,)” the hologram replied. Behind it, next to the supercomputer, a small portal in the ground opened. There was a whirring noise, and four large metallic prongs protruded through the opening, slowly raising until the tips were about a metre high.

I’d seen this mechanism before. My hand moved of its own accord, and I released a small wave of Force power on nothing more than pure instinct. It swirled around the device, which emitted an audible click.

Then, slowly, the prongs unfolded to reveal a small sphere spinning in the middle.

A luminescent light spun around the sphere, before it expanded into a large, cerulean holo-map.

I stared at it, transfixed, my thoughts stilling. It was a map of the galaxy, the definition so intense that I knew I could zoom in many times to particular quadrants and still have intricate detail available.

And I knew it, I knew it well - even if the memory was lost to me.

I stepped closer and my fingers were immediately drawn to the black spots of the map, the missing segments I was innately aware of before my eyes landed on them. This data combined with the other maps will unlock our destination. Our endpoint.

In a sudden rush, I fumbled against the wrist communicator on my good arm.

“Can you download this map to my comm?” I asked the hologram.

“(Communication parameters initiating,)” the hologram said. There was a bleep from my wrist, an access prompt I accepted. “(Download commencing.)”

I wondered, then, about this AI program, about the supercomputer and its control over the Star Map. Juhani had never mentioned anything like this from her trip to Hrakert Station. Canderous and Mission surely would have talked about a hologram who spoke a forgotten language they could not have understood-

“(Download of Star Map is now complete, Revan Freeflight.)”

I frowned, still staring at the alien hologram. “Do all the Star Maps have a controlling supercomputer?”

“(Negative. The primary purpose of this installation is to monitor agricultural reformation,)” the hologram repeated. “(The controlling computer determines access to the terraforming functions of this unit. You re-programmed the controlling computer four years ago to restrict access to this unit and the adjoining Star Map, Revan Freeflight.)”

“I… did?” That probably made sense. I probably didn’t want anyone tracing my steps. “Has anyone accessed this since then?”

“(152 attempts by human Jolee Bindo, all denied,)” came the implacable response.
A surprised laugh ripped from my lungs. *Jolee. You must have been bored.* Well, he’d been living here a long time. *Stars, does that mean I’ve met him before?*

Not necessarily- but I wondered. Jolee’s manner to me had been pretty damn familiar, but that could also just be his personality.

My attention re-focused on the image of the Rakata.

“What about before I came? Did anyone else come across this device?”

“(Error. Malfunction. List of prior access attempts corrupted. Repelling energy field still online.)”

I felt a shiver run through me as I considered that. So it was confirmed, then, that this averting field of Force originated here – that the supercomputer had some ability to manipulate the Force.

Which meant that the Rakata definitely did.

“Exactly what sort of Force capabilities does this computer have?” I demanded.

“(Definition of force: physical strength or power exhibited. The primary purpose of this installation is to monitor agricultural reformation,)” the hologram echoed. Again.

I frowned. “What about the Rakata? How did they use the Force?”

“(Error. Malfunction in core programming. The Rakata controlled the Infinite Empire, and forced lesser beings to augment their civilization.)”

I sighed. *This is getting nowhere.* It sounded like the hologram didn’t understand my query, didn’t know what I meant by the Force. Perhaps it was a translation issue.

My attention was drawn back to the supercomputer, the large terraforming relic of a civilization the galaxy was better off without. “The Star Maps… were they all located on planets with agricultural reformation units such as this one?”

“(The Star Maps are navigational maps pointing to the Star Forge, Revan Freelflight. They are unrelated to the purpose of this unit. The only connection this unit has to the Star Map is the identical date of installation by the Builders, and your re-programming of the controlling computer four years ago to restrict access.)”

I barely processed most of what he said. *The Star Forge…* For as those words hit my ears, I was beset with both familiarity and a crawling trepidation that hissed deathly shadows into the cracks of my mind.

“What is the Star Forge?” I whispered.

“(The Star Forge is a weapons factory of the Infinite Empire,)” the hologram said calmly.


“(Error. Corruption in internal data. The Star Forge is a weapons factory of the Infinite Empire,)”

“You already said that,” I muttered, scrubbing a hand across my face in frustration. “What can you tell me about it? How is it powered? How big is it? What sort of defences does it have? Do you have any sort of schematic?”
“(Parameters too broad. Error. Incomplete Request. Error. Initiating holo-graphic,)” the thing intoned, and there was a rush of light as the navigational map was replaced by the image of a large space station.

I stumbled back in shock. Sithspit! I hadn’t expected a positive answer to the last. My breath stuck in my throat as I was riveted to the glowing picture in front of me.

“Download it,” I hissed, my eyes roving over the space station. It had a spherical centre, with three elongated fins that extended around it on a vertical plane. The graphic gave me no idea how big it was but-

It’s big, a voice whispered. It’s powerful. It might just be enough.

Enough? I was breathing, suddenly, hard and fast, as sweat popped on my forehead. Enough for what? Another damned empire like the Rakatan?

There was no answer.

My heartbeat thundered in my ears, as the Star Forge holo-graphic shimmered in front of me. I can’t truly go there and expect to end up different from last time, can I?

“(Download of Star Forge schematic is now complete, Revan Freeflight,)” the hologram stated.

I ripped my gaze away, and back to the Rakata. “The weapons… it must be the ships, the Sith Armada. How does the Star Forge create these weapons?”

“(Error. Information regarding the output of the Star Forge has been corrupted.)”

I closed my eyes. “How does the Star Forge operate? Where does it get its energy from?”

“(Error. Information regarding the input of the Star Forge has been corrupted.)”

“You’re not being very helpful, you know,” I snapped.

“(The primary purpose of this installation is to monitor agricultural reform-)”

“Okay, okay!” I interrupted. “But you said the terraforming capabilities had ceased. So what can you do?”

“(The secondary purpose of this installation is to guide any who match the accepted neural patterns of the Builders,)” the hologram stated. I began walking around him again, my brows knitting in thought. It had said something about accepting my neural patterns at the outset of our conversation.

“Guide to what? Or where?”

“(Error. Information regarding the Infinite Empire has been corrupted.)”

He said the Infinite Empire… maybe, once upon a time, this terraforming supercomputer allowed any space-faring Rakata to communicate with the heart of their civilization. It was pure speculation, and the device utterly fascinated me. That such ancient technology was capable of terraforming a planet so long ago, and also housed information regarding an extinct, powerful civilization – well. My curiosity was piqued. Much like it once had been before. No wonder I’d thought about hooking it up to the holonets.

Dangerous, though, considering its origins. And even worse, going after a weapons factory built by the same species…
I sighed, running my good hand through my hair. It was hard to know what to do with the supercomputer – but, for now, I could just leave its access restricted.

For I had more pressing matters to attend to - and, I was tiring. Even with the strength of the Force, I could feel a dull ache in my bound shoulder, echoed by a phantom pain where two little fingers used to be.

A small price to pay. Insignificant, really, compared to everything else.

*I've got what I need. I should move from here.* I stared down at the wrist-comm. It was time to transmit the Map – and the illuminating schematic of the Star Forge – back to the *Hawk.*

But I wasn’t ready. I hadn’t been ready to face Mission – let alone anyone else. Facing the crew felt harder than going after Malak and Bastila.

*If I could, I’d go on my own. Can I go on my own?* I didn’t have the other Maps in my possession. And it smacked of cowardice, really. *But it’s my fight – not theirs.*

But wasn’t that a big stinking pile of kath crap? This was everyone’s mission, it had been since Taris. I sighed, realizing something else – I was assuming Bastila and Malak were on this powerful weapons factory. In reality, they might be somewhere else.

*No… the Star Forge must be the heart of the Sith Empire – and until I’m dead, Malak won’t be far away from it. Bastila will be with him.*

I gritted my teeth. And began the transmission.

“Okay, keep the same access restriction, and power down for now,” I ordered the hologram.

Bulbous eyeballs blinked at me. “(Parameters reset,)” the shimmering figure intoned. “(Stasis initiated.)”

There was a faint electronic hum, and both the Rakata and the holo-graphic of the Star Forge winked out of existence. I sighed, took a few steps closer to the massive supercomputer, and slid down next to it. The metallic wall around it was mildly warm, and I rested my head back against it as my thoughts whirred.

The *Ebon Hawk* would be receiving the data now – with the other Maps, it would be able to calculate a set of hyperspace coordinates to find this Star Forge. I couldn’t do that on my own, not unless my damn mind decided to suddenly spew out the galactic data I needed.

I had to stay with the crew – we had to finish things together. And that meant- I had to tell them the truth. They all deserved that.

And yet… I couldn’t even face it myself. It was one thing to suspect you’d gone bad, to experience the desire for power and subjugation at the expense of others. To feel the dark rush of immortality that surrounded an unfeeling core. But to learn you’d plumbed the very depths of destruction and darkness…

I’d turned on what I cared for the most. Conquered planets and shipyards, annexed trade-routes and sectors, bombed-

*Telos.*

*I cannot bear this anymore.*
Telos. Oh no. Oh no…

Telos had been bombed into devastation, one of the first battles when Revan- when me and Malak began our offensive. I couldn’t breathe, I couldn’t remember, I couldn’t feel a damn thing but this over-whelming self-hatred – I’d known Carth would detest me before I’d even thought about Telos, about his dead, dead wife, about Dustil who’d spent four damn years in a soul destroying Sith Academy because of frelling Telos-

*I will not listen to his poison. He will not twist my beliefs!*

But I didn’t remember why. It made no sense. Why destroy a logistical gem like Telos when capturing its resources would be far more beneficial? It was Outer Rim, in the thick of the now-Sith Empire, and bridging over two major hyper-routes. What could be gained from such destruction, such slaughter? Was it just to terrify the galaxy into submission?

My cheeks were wet. And there was a buzzing on that cursed communicator that I just couldn’t bear to answer.

How would I ever be able to face him?

*I must- Revan?*

**Bastila?** With a sharp jolt of surprise, I realized my shields had completely dropped. I should have been alarmed at her proximity and the danger it presented - but I was too empty to feel anything further.

**Revan,** she whispered, her mental voice broken and hollow. Our mind-link was tangible to me now, filled to the brim with our collective despair, and an undercurrent of rage that wasn’t mine. **Bandon has you, but I can sense you. How?**

I didn’t know how to respond, but she must have sensed something.

**He thinks Bandon has you.** There was a small spark of confusion, of hope. **I thought Bandon had you.**

**Bandon's dead,** I replied dully. **I shoved a lightsaber through his chest.** I could see it in my minds-eye again; Bandon's spread-eagled body pinned to a wroshyr by Yudan's 'saber, as large chunks of bark sloughed away from the massive tree.

**Is it true?** she gasped. **Is he dead? Show me again!**

Her words crowed through my mind, insistent and righteous. I could understand her emotion, after what she must be enduring, but somehow it felt slightly off.

**He boarded the Endar Spire. It was he who slaughtered my compatriots, Seris and Jorayl and Master Galdea and all of the soldiers onboard,** she seethed. **There is only one other whose death I desire. The one who betrayed us. The schutta who pretended to be my friend.**

Kylah. Not Malak. Not the one who had been torturing her for days on end.

There was something worrying in that, but I hadn’t the mental aptitude to think on it.

**If it were not for Bandon and Kylah, then the Endar Spire would never have fallen. Our mission would never have collapsed.**
And I would still be Jen Sahara, I said sadly.

There was silence between us, an awkward chasm of bottomless grief. She didn’t answer – maybe she couldn’t.

Why save me, simply to kill me another way? For I wasn’t- I wasn’t meant to wake up, was I?

I had the sense of her sighing; a deep, broken gust of air. In all honestly, I am not sure. You were still present in your dreams. But I - Jen- Revan- her words began tumbling over one another, like dustballs bounding down a hillside. Please, it wasn’t what we planned at first- we didn’t know about the Maps- it wasn’t my decision or doing- I- she halted, trailing off into silence. You must protect yourself from me, Revan. For I am a danger to you, now.

Where are you, Bastila? Are you on the Star Forge?

You know of the Forge… you have the final Map, she breathed. I felt the hope burn from her then, the burgeoning belief that I could save her.

It left a sour taste in my mouth. I was no hero. Not anymore.

To answer your question, yes, I am on the Forge. This is a… dark place, Revan. Do you recall it?

No.

That is for the best. It frightens me. I could sense her drawing in a shuddering breath. Revan, part of the Sith fleet are in orbit around Kashyyyk. As soon as Malak realizes you’ve escaped – and he will pull it from my mind – he will order bombardment. You must leave Kashyyyk. You and the crew. At once.

Orbital bombardment. Again, but this time of Zaalbar’s homeworld.

My next steps were clear. And there was no hiding from it any longer.

One moment, I fired back. There was a prickling along all my nerve endings, and I stared down at the innocent communicator latched on my wrist.

I pressed a button, and fired out a comm-wide message. Small lights on the display lit up as both the Ebon Hawk and another communicator – Canderous, probably – answered the call.

“The Sith are rallying to commence orbital bombardment on Kashyyyk,” I said in a rush. “I’ve sent the Map coordinates through. Whatever you’re doing, finish up and get back to the ‘Hawk.” I took a deep breath. “I’ll collect Mission and meet everyone there. We must leave Kashyyyk as soon as we can.”

I switched the comm off, stood, and began to move. Away from the clearing, away from the Star Map, and away from the terraforming supercomputer that had changed the face of Kashyyyk forever.

Bastila, I reached out again as I left the Rakatan legacy well behind. How long do you have, before Malak finds out about me?

How would I know? Her voice was shaky, but there was a tartness to it I recognized. Fear did not wholly command her, not yet. He cannot touch my mind, and therefore our bond, unless he is physically here. Jen- Revan- I do not know if you heard him earlier, I do not want to know, I do not want to betray anything-
It's okay. Have faith. I felt the side of my mouth twitch at the black irony of my words. Have faith in the Force.

Oh, Revan, she whispered shakily. There is so much I wish to know. Vrook, the crew... Revan, some of what Malak has been saying does not sit well with me. And this place... it calls to me. I feared the taint of the Dark Side on Korriban, but that was nothing on what I feel here. The power...

Power corrupts. If you ever doubt, just think on how far I fell.

Do you think I do not know that? Her words lashed back through the bond. I do not desire any of this, except that it means freedom from the pain of being a prisoner. All I wish is to be away from here!

I had a sudden image, then, of a small room with walls made from some metallic compound I couldn't identify. It had the same look as the terraforming supercomputer and its elliptical platform. The same material, the same technology.

The Star Forge.

I was seeing through Bastila again. The Force around her had a dark twist to it, but it fumbled in her unwieldy grasp – her drugged grasp, I remembered. Her hands were bound together by electronic shackles.

I focussed on them.

Well, I answered her at last. Maybe we should try getting you away from there, then.

xXx
::I gotta go and see to Jen. I'll be in touch, okay?::: Mission’s words rushed over the comm. The relief I’d felt at her voice blaring over Revan’s communicator had dispersed with her report. Revan, injured and currently out to it. Mission, kidnapped by Mando’ade before being fried by Dark Jedi. The fact they now had some additional ally with a lightsaber didn’t lessen my unease.

“Stay put, ad’ika,” I shot back. “I’ll be getting your position shortly.”

I switched the link off and looked up, meeting the alien gaze of the Cathar. She’d been listening in, slanted ears cocked in attention.


I grunted in acknowledgment. “They’re with one of your robes.” I raised a hand to adjust the dial of my visor. The damn thing had been twitchy since I’d entered the Shadowlands. “I’ll go after them as soon as I have their coordinates.”

Juhani’s eyes were wide and solemn. The fine fur on her neck fluffed out in the humid air of the Shadowlands. “I can get there faster, Canderous.”

I felt my brows slam down. “You should have told her. I should have told her. You let her run off alone with one of your hu’tuun masters, gambling he wouldn’t kriff with her mind-”

“Juhani continued to eye-ball me as her lips thinned. I’d say one thing for the Cathar, there was no staring her down. She’d grown steel in her spine since the Tatooine dunes belched her out. “I worry for her mind, Canderous,” she said quietly.

She’d said that before. I wasn’t buying it, not any longer.

“Better the risk than have her floundering around the way she has been.” I crossed my arms. “I’m a simple man, Cathar, but I don’t let indecision handicap me.”

Juhani frowned. It was a dig, and she knew it. We’d reunited a few hours ago, and she’d made the
wrong call.

...“Canderous!” a familiar voice called, cutting through the mass of roaring Wookiee surrounding the Czerka-built elevator.

In another scenario, my blood would be pumping with the anticipation of testing my skills against the famed big game of Kashyyyk. But right now, all I wanted to know was Mission’s location. And why she wasn’t answering her comm.

Just like kriiffing Revan.

I’d gone down with the second lot. As soon as the damn lift doors opened to show only an empty shaft with a lingering acrid smell, I’d cursed and ordered HK to follow me. About twenty or so Wookiees squeezed in with us, filling the enclosed space with a suffocating stench of musk and wet fur. Some were injured, and undercutting their pungent body odour was the tinny smell of blood.

But the ones left topside were decidedly worse off. It was descending into a bloodbath, up there. Czerka had rallied, and rallied hard once they realized their precious slave cargo was running out on them.

I didn’t know if there’d be many Wookiees left to fill the elevator a third time.

At the base of the forest, we’d stepped into another scene of carnage, but this one had the Wookiees as the overwhelming victors. Bodies of ill-prepared hunters were strewn amongst upturned storage canisters and survival supplies. Rifles had been ripped from warm corpses by furry paws, and the Wookiees were now shooting at any noise or shadow they detected in the surrounding underbrush.

They were savage with their anger, and some of the bastards looked ready to challenge me before HK reminded them in Shyriiwook exactly who had yanked them out of that slave ship. I could take on a Wookiee, armed as I was – but not thirty-odd. I was getting pissed they kept forgetting I was on their damn side.

It was mostly the first lot, struck by battle-lust and feral rage. The ones who’d breached the Shadowlands, who’d hacked their way through the surprised hunters that had been swilling ale in the fortified Czerka camp at the base of the lift.

The same Wookiees who’d come down with Mission, even though there was no damn sign of her.

I hadn’t been entirely surprised to spot Zaalbar. And, since he’d joined the party, the tall one next to him was probably his sire, the chieftain. As far as leaders went, he wasn’t a pretty one, due to the snarled mank in his thick fur that made me wonder if he’d taken to mud-bathing. But there was no mistaking his status. The other Wookiees were crowded around him, heads bowed in deference as they listened to him holler in a deep, crusty voice.

But the Cathar-

No. No, I hadn’t expected her.

“You’re here with Carpet?” I demanded in way of greeting, as she came to a stop in front of me. HK was in the midst of the hairy figures, howled enquiries firing from his vocabulator towards a bowed Wookiee with grey fur. He was gathering intel from the ones who were here first – but he wasn’t the least interested in Mission’s whereabouts. “You seen Mission?”
The Cathar blinked, and her look of surprise was enough answer for me. “Mission? No, Canderous, why would-”

“She came down here with the first lot,” I growled. “What about Jen?”

Juhani closed her eyes, sighing. “This place is wild and untamed. It stirs the blood. Everything feels more alive – the people, the animals, the trees-”

“Answer the kriffing question, Cathar!”

A nearby Wookiee glared at my raised voice. The savage one I took as Zaalbar’s sire grasped a thick pole as tall as himself and gestured in my direction, and the bowed grey one placed a calming paw on his forearm. I heard Zaalbar howl in protest, saw him wave a hairy limb. He was standing to the side, behind the rest, a subordinate position in a pack dynamic.

Wookiees were not so far removed from their ancestry as other species. And I’d hunted enough pack animals to make a solid assumption that his exile had not been magically forgotten by his peers.

“I have not seen her, Canderous.”

Something about Juhani’s inflection gave me pause. I dragged my gaze back to her. “What?” I snapped. “What aren’t you telling me?”

“I have sensed…” she sighed. “In truth, I do not know what I have sensed. Great power, deeper in the heart of the Shadowlands. Dark. Some of it, at least.”

I didn’t hold with the Jedi and their dark and light sides - but we both knew who the great power was. “Was she in trouble? Is she in trouble?”

“I do not know, Canderous-”

“You should have gone after her,” I growled. “Why are you here, and not after her?”

Her face twisted in indecision. “Zaalbar,” she explained in a soft voice. “Some of the Wookiees attacked him at first. He is an exile from his own people, Canderous. And then- even after his father spoke for him- I wasn’t even sure what I had sensed. The disturbance in the Force had stopped, and I was too far away to pinpoint it, let alone assist.”

But the torn look on her alien face gave away her true feelings. She wasn’t sure she’d made the right call.

…

She was still frowning, either from uncertainty of her own damn choices, or annoyance at my reminder. “I will go after her, Canderous,” she said softly. “With the Force as my ally, I can travel swiftly through the Shadowlands. I should be able to sense Jen when I get close enough, and Zaalbar is… somewhat accepted by his people, now.”

It had taken us some time to secure the area. Zaalbar had run out in front, snarling rabidly as he chased down armed hunters fleeing the scene, taking risks against blaster fire to ensure none of them escaped alive. Zaalbar’s warrior spirit may have done something to assuage his low position, but I doubted he’d ever have the proper status of a chieftain’s son again.

During the previous hour, small groups of Czerka-paid hunters had returned to the area, either drawn by sounds of battle or heading back topside. And then I’d noticed Mission’s comm-link signal had
Well. She’s safe now, more or less. She’s with Revan. Lack of comms had been both stupid and dangerous on this planet. I stared pointedly at the Cathar’s bare wrists. When we left Kashyyyk, I was going to implement a rule that no one stepped out of the damn ‘Hawk without a comm slapped on their wrist. And, whenever someone failed to answer a bloody call, they would owe me a kriffing bottle of Corellian whiskey.

That should sort out both Revan and the Cathar.

But, more importantly, I’d have that overdue talk with Revan – before we left Kashyyyk, if possible. I’d sworn to make her face the truth at the conclusion of Korriban, and I’d let Juhani talk me out of it.

I didn’t waste time on regrets, but this was one mistake I was gonna fix.

“We’ll both go after her,” I ground out at last. A flash of displeasure crossed Juhani’s face, and I could see she didn’t agree. I scowled. She was right in that she was faster, but the others weren’t in any immediate danger now, and I wanted to see Mission personally back to the ‘Hawk. That was one detail I’d rather Carpet not hear. Reserved though the Wookiee was, Mission’s safety had a tendency to rile him up like a rabid kath hound. “Look, kittycat, I should have their position any second now-”

The comm chirped. Juhani’s gaze flickered away to the distant figure of Zaalbar.

“Let me speak to Zaalbar,” she murmured. I grunted in dismissal, waved her off, and answered the call.

::Ordo, do you copy?::

“Onasi,” I acknowledged. “They finally let you go, huh?”

::Yeah, I- yeah.: The Republic soldier sounded annoyed. Scratch that, he sounded pissed. To be fair, I’d feel the same in his boots. I would’ve liked his backup earlier, if he hadn’t been so busy cosying up to his superiors. ::Dustil’s filled me in. I’m not::. he stopped with an irritated growl.

::Well, I’ll leave the debrief for later. Look, have you heard from Jen? She’s not answering.::

“She’s wounded and knocked out, Onasi,” I said shortly. “Your stuttering spawn should have relayed all of Mission’s report.”

I heard him sigh. ::Look, Ordo, we’ve not always seen eye-to-eye, and blast if I can understand why you lot value battle over life the way you do::

“Is there a point to this?” I cut in. “For you might be lounging around in the cockpit sipping caffa, but I’m actually busy down here.”

::I follow orders, Ordo,: he said, his voice turning cold. ::Even if I disagree. Even if I’m left out of the loop::

I didn’t dispute the need for discipline, for the chain of command. You had to trust your men, particularly during war. But blindly following orders without weighing them against your own honour – that was dangerous. Weak. I wondered where Onasi’s breaking point would be. He was implacable in his loyalty to his laamdu Republic, but he didn’t strike me as the sort who would sell his soul or tear down his own moral code to keep that loyalty.

I didn’t agree with him at the best of times, but I held a grudging respect for both his character and honour.
“What’s been going on up there?” I asked slowly. “Sithkid said you were pulled away again. What are the Republic doing on Kashyyk?”

There’d been a couple of freighters, coming in to dock either side of the ‘Hawk, both chock full of uniformed Republic soldiers who’d made a beeline for our ship the moment they landed.

::Our mission’s critical to the war, Ordo, it’s not that surprising.:: he muttered. ::Except… they’re very interested in the crew. The Republic have appropriated this mission, and they want us all to report in before we leave Kashyyk. Then, the Ebon Hawk will be docking with the Meridus. It’s waiting in Kashyyk airspace.::

“What’s been going on up there?” I asked slowly. “Sithkid said you were pulled away again. What are the Republic doing on Kashyyk?”

There’d been a couple of freighters, coming in to dock either side of the ‘Hawk, both chock full of uniformed Republic soldiers who’d made a beeline for our ship the moment they landed.

::Our mission’s critical to the war, Ordo, it’s not that surprising.:: he muttered. ::Except… they’re very interested in the crew. The Republic have appropriated this mission, and they want us all to report in before we leave Kashyyk. Then, the Ebon Hawk will be docking with the Meridus. It’s waiting in Kashyyk airspace.::

“Report? You think I’ll be reporting to one of your office managers?” I shot back, amused. “All of us, huh? Think you can get Mission to drop a salute?”

Actually, the Meridus sounded familiar. I frowned. And the Republic taking over would ruffle a few feathers. This had been a Jedi mission from the outset, but maybe Bastila’s precious Order had lost authority when she’d been captured.

::Yeah, I - look, I get their interest, this may be our only chance to stop Malak, so in a way I’m surprised this didn’t happen earlier. But--:: he broke off, sighing. ::There’s something going on I’m not understanding, Ordo. And, I found out some of your history.:: He paused, before adding pointedly, ::General.::

I barked a laugh. “I could’ve told you earlier, Republic, but I didn’t want to intimidate you,” I mocked.

::Hardly,:: he fired back. ::Look, Ordo, you were a bigger player during the Wars than I realized, and your clan more active than I knew. We’ll be staying with the Meridus for some time, I suspect. I don’t know when we’ll be released or what we’ll do from there.::

The Meridus… I recalled it, now. The Meridus was an Interdictor-class heavy cruiser. A notable ship in the Republic armada, with its own supporting fleet. Even if Onasi were to disobey orders and refuse to dock – and he had no reason to do that – the gravity well projectors of the Meridus would be able to block us from entering hyperspace.

And it was orbiting Kashyyk, in wait for us.

Onasi- he was trying to warn me, I realized with surprise. I wasn’t wanted by the Republic as far as I knew – Malachor had well and truly ended Mando’a de might with the death of near all clan leaders and the scattering of the remnants – but I’d always held influence with the Ordo clan, and that had grown during the Wars.

I was high enough in the ranks to warrant some interest from the Republic - for if Ordo were to call a leader-seek, I’d be a contender.

Ordo had come out of the Wars burned and battered, but not as decimated as some of the others. We’d been one of the strongest clans, and one day it was entirely possible I could end up leading it.

Onasi- he was being circumspect, but there was an audible tone of concern in his words. He thought there was some danger to me. He was giving me a chance, a chance to avoid the Republic soldiers waiting in the starport. Despite our disdain for each other, our differing values, our opposing sides in the Wars.

Maybe, the grudging respect was on both sides.
But- I realized with a jolt- he had it wrong.

Revan. They're after Revan. Haar’chak, they know.

There was a damn Interdictor ship in orbit around Kashyyyk. The Republic wasn’t after a Mando’ade general who’d spent the last few years pissing about with mercenary work. Even if I did go back and lead Ordo – which was a presumption in itself - the Mando’ade wouldn’t be a major player, in galactic terms, for years. Our strength had been gutted.

But- their old hero turned conqueror, now a product of a kriffing Jedi experiment- Oh, yes, she was enough to scare them right down to their bollocks.

“I hear you, Onasi,” I finally said. “Keep trying Jen. Haar’chak, I need to talk to her.”

::You need to talk to her:: he muttered in disbelief.

“Keep trying,” I growled. “Send me her position. I’ll go after her.”

I switched off the comm, and looked up. The Wookiees were still howling at each other, and Zaalbar caught my eye, trotting over in my direction.

“Carpet,” I acknowledged, glancing behind him. His countrymen had surrounded the area, some patrolling the boundary of the overturned camp, and the rest listening intently to the chieftain and the bowed one. And I couldn’t see any sign of-

“Where’s Juhani?” I demanded. “She was with you a second ago-“

He howled something.

“Translation: Brooding Tabby has run off to find Master,” HK intoned from behind Zaalbar. “Observation: Master’s last known location has been transmitted to your personal communicator. Primary objective to locate Master initiating.”

“What?” I barked. “HK, stay put! Damn that Cathar!” My teeth gritted, and I glanced down at the wrist-comm. Geographical coordinates were blinking at me – and either HK’s superior visual receptors had gleaned that data, or he’d hacked into the ‘Hawk’s communications to download them. I wasn’t sure which one was more likely.

HK’s red eyes gleamed. “Statement: No current orders from Master are active. Reverting to default objective: find and protect Master.”

I growled as he began to move out. “Then give me a minute and we’ll go togeth-“

The sound of blaster fire further afield had me halting, mid-rant. My heavy repeater was in my grasp in a flash. From here, all I could see was the red spit of laser dancing behind the massive girth of a wroshyr. Someone, up ahead, had broached the perimeter.

“HK, Zaalbar, to me,” I commanded, rushing forwards. Zaalbar chuffed, loping next to me with an upraised rifle he’d no doubt pulled from a dead hunter. The snarls of his countrymen picked up, and the flashes of fire retreated away. I heard the puff of a smoke grenade, and some indistinct cursing.

Poor bastards. They won’t be able to outrun Wookiees reclaiming Kashyyyk. Although, as Carpet and I neared the skirmish, I began to realize these hostiles were better trained than the others we’d encountered. We halted behind a wroshyr trunk to pinpoint their location. I guessed four or five of them, hiding behind cover as they took accurate potshots at the approaching Wookiees.
The earlier Czerka grunts had run in panic, and not made it far. This lot – well, they wouldn’t last long, but at least they’d go down bravely, with honour. I pulled out a grenade, about to prime it-

“Ib’tuur jatne tuur ash’ad kyr’amur!” someone yelled.

*Today is a good day for someone else to die.*

*Haar’chak!* My own tongue, being spoken here by those I was firing against-

“Stop!” I hollered in shock. “HK, tell the Wookiees to hold their fire!” I shoved the inactivate grenade back in my belt, switching to Mando’a. “(Hold your fire! State your clan and hold your damn fire!)”

I didn’t hear the mechanical howls of HK’s translation. I turned around wildly, and couldn’t spot the damn droid anywhere. There was a blurry flash as three Wookiees ran past me, snarling.

“(Who’s that?)” someone answered, an angry voice in the distance. “(If you’re with those beasts, get them to stand down!”)

“(Zaalbar!” I yelled. *No, that won’t work!* *Carpet has sod-all status* - Zaalbar was howling something, all the same. Behind us, another group of overgrown hairballs were advancing, flanking each other with stolen blasters aimed at the shadows. The one in the centre, the leader, was Zaalbar’s dad.

And I ran. Slung my weapon over my shoulder, hands free and unarmed, and ran straight towards the Wookiee chieftain.

“Those are my men!” I roared, metres away, my arms raised in the universal motion for halt. Next to him, the bowed Wookie with the dappled grey fur jerked in shock. On either side, hairy forearms belonging to others trained laser sights in the centre of my torso. “I led the escape of your damn Wookiees, *now get them to stop firing at my men!*”

One of them *had* to understand Galactic Basic. *Damn HK for leaving!*

Carpet’s dad chuffed in anger. The bowed one gestured something. I could still hear blaster fire, and at the end of it those unknown Mando’ade were too outnumbered to survive for long.

“If it wasn’t for me, your son would have died on Taris!” I bellowed. “If it wasn’t for me, near all of these Wookiees would be sitting in a Czerka prison waiting to be shipped off-world as slaves!”

The bowed grey one understood, I was sure of it, with the way she cocked her head at my words. Even Zaalbar’s skeevy dad stopped rumbling when I spoke, although now his face was contorted in a furry rictus.

Zaalbar’s solid presence stepped to my side, and I turned to face him, my hands digging into his forearms in desperation. “They’re not Czerka, Zaalbar, not really,” I growled. “Just mercs doing a job. Just like I was on Taris. *Rangir*, you owe me. You *all* owe me. I’ll have them throw down their damn weapons and leave the planet—”

He removed my clenched fists with relative ease. I was a strong man, but I was no Wookie.

And then, Zaalbar’s dad roared, a litany of Shyriiwook vowels in a voice loud enough to reverberate through the trees.

The nearby fire ceased, and Zaalbar thumped me on the shoulder, motioning towards the shadows. I understood the unspoken message. *Go. Be quick.*
I lurched forward, towards the Mando’ade.

“(Throw down your weapons and come out slowly!)” I bellowed. “(The hairballs owe me a favour and I’ve got them to stop their fire, but don’t do anything stupid. They’re trigger-happy and more than a little pissed at off-worlders!)”

A thickset Wookiee snarled something at me as he stomped back towards the others. But there were still almost a dozen facing the hidden Mando’ade, all now wielding ranged weapons and unholy anger.

“(I ain’t surrendering to one of those!)” a young voice shot back. “(Better a quick death from a blaster, than being ripped limb from-)

“It’s not surrender, di’kut, I’m trying to get you off-world,” I thundered. “And speak Basic, so the Wookiees can hear. I want to make sure they understand that the only thing y’all plan to do next is haul jets off their planet.”

“Who are you?” a deeper voice yelled, the first one I’d heard.

“Canderous, of clan Ordo,” I answered. “Now stop wasting time if you want to live!”

An uneasy silence descended on the shadows. A Mando’ade feared nothing, but the Wookiees were one of the more dangerous – and savage – species in the galaxy. And they had every right to be steamed at the mess Czerka were making on their planet. They looked like hairy guardians, dotted between the giant wroshyrs as they stared into the shadows, their noses raised and blasters aimed. Each of them, on a trigger-edge of violence.

I didn’t even know the Mando’ade I was backing, and I damn well hoped they were worth it.

“Okay, I’m coming out,” the first one called. A second later I saw a figure emerge from the dark. Clad head to toe in beaten armour, he held a blaster at his side, before tossing it to the feet of the nearest Wookie.

“You better know what you’re doing, Canderous,” he said, as he walked slowly in my direction. “If you cause me an honourless death, I’ll damn well haunt you in the afterlife.”

Three more figures materialized, all throwing their weapons in the same fashion. One was limping heavily.

“Do what I say,” I ordered, as a menacing group of Wookiees encircled them. Zaalbar howled something next to me, gesturing at his blaster before pointing at the nearest Mando’ade. “State whatever weapons are still on your person, before – slowly! – throwing them to the ground.”

“There is no honour in this,” one of them growled. “Coming forward like weak-”

“Oh, and there’s honour in doing Czerka’s dirty work?” I snapped, seeing one of the Wookiees facing them twitch aggressively. “Hired guns for nothing more than credits?”

It had been sitting in my craw, ever since I’d faced Jagi. There had been a decent sized group of Mando’ade on Dreshdae, wiling away the time as they picked up the odd merc job for cash. It was too much like what I’d done, wasting years on kriffing Davik Kang.

“There’s a pistol on my hip,” the first one said. “A shiv-blade by my thigh. Two grenades. I’m removing them now.”
There was a shuffle amongst the rest as they copied him, all slowly stating their weapons before tossing them to the nearest Wookiee. Even the one who’d complained followed suit, so I figured the first one was their leader, of sorts.

“Canderous,” he said, stepping closer to me. “Never thought I’d see you on the wrong side of a gun.”

My eyes narrowed, as his hands moved to remove his helm. One of the Wookiees snarled in threat at the movement, yanking a rifle upwards. “I’m just removing my helm!” the Mando’ade protested. “Haar’chak!”

I felt a jolt of surprise as his weathered face came into view, from behind an in-line visor. Blonde hair shorn short around a heavily scarred face. A wide jaw and two round ears that stuck out prominently on either side of his head. Not a pretty man, but a damn capable one.

“Jacen,” I said in surprise, my brows raising.

“Su cuy’gar, clan-brother,” he replied in wry tones. “You’re aiding the Wookiees, huh?”

Zaalbar rumbled something softly, but I heard the urgency in his tones. Still, kriffing Jacen. A cousin, on my mother’s side. An up-and-coming leader of Ordo, I’d picked, from the battles we’d shared. He was quick, fast, and resourceful. I hadn’t seen him since the fringes of Malachor.

“Something like that,” I muttered. “I’d have a drink and catch up, but it ain’t the friendliest of company, here. Who else is with you?”

“Trallia of Kelborn, Da’thok of Kelborn, and Jernnin of Lok.”

Not anyone else I knew personally, but I’d heard of two of them. Trallia Kelborn was known for leading risky manoeuvres with small basilisk squads. In fact, her exploits were notable enough that it had sparked inter-clan wagering on her chances of survival at times. And Jernnin- Well. He’d been the third of the Lok clan, once.

Both blooded during the Wars, just like Jacen. Just like me. Veteran Mando’ade, scattered like useless drek around the galaxy.

“And Dan of Fett,” another man called out in a bland voice, and a fifth figure strode into view, calmly handing a blaster grip-first to the nearest Wookiee. Clad in the same armour as the rest, but from the shifting of the others they hadn’t expected him.

“Su’cuy,” Jacen muttered to him. “Haven’t seen you down here. Where’s your hunter group?”

“Dead,” Dan said succinctly. His visor turned to face me. “Canderous of Ordo. I’ve heard of you.”

Zaalbar rumbled something again, giving me a rough nudge.

“Okay, keep your hair on,” I muttered, before glancing over my shoulder to the Wookiee leader. He was glaring. “Give me a minute,” I called to him, “and I’ll get them out of here.”

The chieftain growled something, and the dappled grey one echoed him in a calmer voice. The Wookiees surrounding them all put me in mind of a kath pack, tensed and waiting for the moment to pounce.

I sighed, turning back to Jacen. “You lot need to get out of here. Get back to the Czerka lift, and get off-world. This isn’t our planet, and it’s not ours for the taking. Not under Czerka. Rangir, we’re
“Better than what, Ordo?” one of the others sneered. Da’thok, I thought, the argumentative one. “There are no more clans left, not after Malachor. You think to judge us for picking up honest work?”

_Honest work. As honest as tracking down bounties for Davik and keeping the swoop gangs in line._

"Yes, I damn well do," I growled. "Since when did we turn into aimless mercs who value credits over clan and honour? Our leaders may have been killed, our forces may have been routed – but Revan didn't break us. We broke us."

I turned to the side, and spat on the ground. “Clan can be rebuilt. Haar’chak, have we all forgotten what makes us Mando’ade? We grow strong through testing our mettle, through strengthening our clan. Defeat is nothing more than a set-back, a challenge to do better. When did we forget this? Since when do we allow defeat to crush us?"

The silence was electric. Dan Fett had folded his arms, and looked the most relaxed of the lot. Jacen sighed, scratching his head. “Malachor. It is gone, and you know its importance. But not only…” Jacen trailed off, before picking up again. “We lost our Mand’alor, Canderous. All the clans of any import lost their leaders at Malachor. Our fathers, our brothers and sisters, our generals. What strength remained has been dispersed through the galaxy. Just like me, and just like you.”

“We are more than just our leaders, Jacen,” I said. “Our leaders don’t define us. Our bloodlines don’t define us!” I gestured to Jernnin, whose four armoured arms gave away his Besalisk ancestry. And to Dan Fett, whose high-raised helmet named him as Cerean or Togruta. Adoption was clan, and that was an integral strength in the Mando’ade. “We are a culture, an idea, and we do not let any enemy – no matter how powerful – vanquish that idea!”

Again, they lapsed into silence, and I had no clue if anything I said was reaching them. But, _haar’chak_, it was time. Jacen, Trallia and Jernnin should be rebuilding our people. As should I. “Go home, leave this planet that’s not ours, and go home to your clans. Tell them it’s time to rebuild. It’s time to seek new leaders.”

“Ordo needs a leader too, Canderous,” Jacen said, slipping his helmet back on. “Will you come with us?”

“Not yet,” I muttered. _Not yet._ “I have something else to see out, first. But I’ll be back within the year. If I’m not, then you know it’s time to sing my battle songs to the stars.”

“I will, brother,” he murmured. Zaalbar, at my side, chuffed something, and we both looked to see him motioning towards the Czerka lift.

“Go back topside,” I ordered. “Go back through the Czerka lift. Find a flight out of here quick, for as sure as the grizzle on your bollocks, Czerka won’t be on Kashyyyk for long.”

The approving roar that shook the ground told me enough Wookiees surrounding us had some understanding of Basic.

“Men,” Trallia muttered, her visor shaking at me as she began to limp past. “Don’t stay away too long, Ordo. If enough others feel as you do, then it won’t just be individual clans looking for a new leader.”

Her meaning was obvious. _Mand’alor._ It would be a good thing, to see the choosing of a new one. To witness our rebirth from the ashes of Malachor.
I would go back, I knew this now, had known it since I’d encountered Jagi. I would follow Revan first, see this out to its end, and then I would go back. Jacen wasn’t the only one of my clan who might yet live. He wasn’t the only one I held bonds to.

Zaalbar rumbled something further, a long litany of incomprehensible vowels as the Mando’ade slowly trudged through the now-Wookiee encampment, and a half-dozen armed hairballs followed them with blasters raised.

“You get I don’t understand a damn thing you’re howling, right?” I muttered. He continued to howl.

“They’re planning on destroying the Czerka lifts,” Dan Fett said. He’d halted, facing me, as the others continued to walk away. “Not yet, but soon. They’re going to throw grenades in the shaft.”

I turned, to stare at the unknown Mando’ade. His battered visor remained facing me, his arms held loosely at his side. “You understand Shyriiwook,” I said slowly. “What are you doing on Kashyyyk, Dan of Fett?”

“I know enough to get the gist,” he answered, shrugging beneath the bulky armour. He was as tall as me, not surprising given his ancestry, and he held himself with a warrior’s alertness. “If you want to follow them topside, then now’s your chance.”

“As I said to Jacen, I have other business to attend to,” I growled. “It’s you who should be leaving.”

Zaalbar said something more, gesturing wildly with his hands. Dan tilted his head to appraise him.

“Some of the Wookiees have gone back to their village, before they met up with—” He paused, waving irritably at the chieftain. “That guy, I can’t pronounce his name,” he muttered. “They took Czerka corpses as proof of the leader’s dishonour, so there’s likely a merry little shindig happening in their charming habitat topside. Your furry friend will be following them shortly, and wants to know your plan.”

I scowled at the stranger. The other Mando’ade had vanished into the shadows, but this one seemed entirely too interested in sticking around. “As enticing as your translation skills are, if you stay here you won’t last long. I ain’t gonna protect you from your own stupidity.”

A cacophony of Wookiee howls had us both turning, to see a small group of walking hairballs lope into the camp. One, a grizzled ancient figure with streaks of white running through his snarled fur, strode over to the bowed grey one, before embracing her fiercely. A few others nearby rumbled their approval.

“A mated pair, separated by the leader topside,” Dan murmured. “Wookiees are interesting creatures.”

Zaalbar snarled something at that, and Dan shrugged in apparent indifference. There was a loud roar from Zaalbar’s sire, who was standing next to the grizzled newcomer. And all the Wookiees encircling them jerked to attention.

“Fighting’s broken out in their village,” Dan translated. “That old one who just came down reports that the corpses and news of a Czerka lift have started a riot. Seems a lot of the Wookiees topside didn’t know about the Czerka presence.”

“Zaalbar—” I started, but an upsurge of Shyriiwook rumbling completely drowned out my words. The Wookiees, as one, turned on their heel and began bounding out of the camp, and into the Shadowlands.
“Zaalbar! What the kriff’s going on?”

But between the barked orders from the chieftain, and the mass exodus of howling Wookiee, I already knew. They were on their way to the Rwookrorro elevator. And then-

A chirp from my wrist-comm snagged my attention. It was Revan.

::The Sith are rallying to commence orbital bombardment on Kashyyyk:: Her words came through in a rush. ::I’ve sent the Map coordinates through. Whatever you’re doing, finish up and get back to the ‘Hawk:: There was a deep intake of air. ::I’ll collect Mission and meet everyone there. We must leave Kashyyyk as soon as we can::

She switched off the channel before I could say a damn word, and ignored my immediate attempt to contact her back.

“Mand’alor’s balls!” I cursed. I swung back to look at Zaalbar. We were alone, now, the rest of the natives having left us for dust. “You got that, Carpet? We gotta head back. You have to make a choice, the ‘Hawk or your village?”

He gesticulated wildly, rough growls spitting out from his vocal chords, his eyes pinching in anger.

Dan started stumbling over the translation. “Something about a life-debt, and a mission that shouldn’t be there-”

“Yeah, okay, so Mission’s down in the damn Shadowlands, but she’s safe-”

He roared louder.

“Look, she wasn’t meant to be in the lift, Carpet, you can bawl her out later-”

A furry fist shook in my face.

“For the love of Mand’alor, would you focus on what’s important?” I snapped. “You heard Jen. The Sith know we’re here. We have to get off-planet.”

He was still howling, and Dan Fett struggled to keep pace. “He wants to see his father in the village, first, something about his brother and dishonour, I think? But he’s talking about a life-debt again-”

“Zaalbar,” I forced out through clenched teeth. “It’s one or the other. I ain’t sticking around to be turned into a plasma smear in your damned forest.”

Although- where had Revan’s intel come from? Onasi had just relayed that a damn Republic cruiser was in Kashyyyk airspace. If the Sith planned to bomb Kashyyyk to get at the Star Map or Revan – or both – then there’d likely be a pretty party up in the skies, first. That might buy us some time.

“He’s adamant he has to see this through,” Dan was saying, his words interspersed with Carpet’s rumbles. “But his life-debt will bring him back to your Jen’s side, one way or the other. He says you should go back to the ship, he’ll be as quick as he can but don’t wait for him-”

I folded my arms. At the end of it, Zaalbar was one of the crew – and without a blasted comm. And it hadn’t escaped me that Revan had delayed the shyrrack caves, back on Korriban, for my own personal business.

“I’m coming with you, Carpet,” I said. “And if your family feud drags out too long, I’ll kick your furry butt.”
Zaalbar nodded his shaggy head, and strode off into the Shadowlands. I had to run to keep up, and I knew he was slowing down for me.

Dan of Fett trailed us silently. Somehow, that didn’t surprise me.

xXx
The corridor was empty.

It was comprised of a strange metallic compound that bore a silvery colour lighter than any form of durasteel I was familiar with. The walls curved in a cylindrical cast, with no obvious delineation of panels. The result was both perfect and alien in its appearance.

Behind me lay the quarters I had been ensconced in. The door, strangely, had been unlocked. And now that I was mobile, I had utterly no idea which direction I should take.

*Can you sense any lifeform nearby? There must be guards, soldiers - you can’t afford to run into any, not without a weapon, not with the Force so weak.*

Revan’s presence sat strongly in my mind, and that was a comfort in itself. But the Force was dull and shaky, my heartbeat irregular and loud, my senses woozy. The Sith medic who had overlooked my vitals for so long, a silent Rodian named Boc, had been exceedingly regular in his application of the sense-scrambling jerrikerr-kolto. *That schutta’s* cursed formula, scrambling my mind and Force alike.

I had tried to disable my shackles, to blast the circuitry in a basic pulse of ionization. That had never been beyond my talents before, but the drugs made it so now. I fumbled and tried, and tried and fumbled, and every failure tasted like desolate ash in my mouth.

But now Revan was here, and free, and able to do what I could not. Such a minimal, and yet precise, twist of the Force through the bond, and the electronic fetters hissed open.

*Can you sense anything?*

Sometimes, the jerrikerr-kolto eroded all my senses, like I was blind and deaf as well as Force-numb. But it would come in different coloured waves; one a nauseating detachment, another a dizzying delirium.

I had the impression of my own thought-streams fragmenting; the yearning to drift away and disconnect from reality. Even as I understood it a side-effect of the medication, awareness still did not dispel the desire to simply close my eyes and just *stop.*

*Bastila? Stay with me!*

*I am here. I cannot sense anything… I cannot sense…*

Her psychic touch brushed against mine, intertwining with my precarious hold on the Force, and commanding it to obey our mingled will. Such power, flowing through me from her, but it was clumsy and skittered out of my-her-our grasp. Whether it was the jerrikerr-kolto or her unfamiliarity with the bond, I did not know.

*Neither do I,* she muttered, discerning my thoughts. *You feel like you’re on a spice crash.*

For Revan to make a connection like that was not wholly surprising, even as I doubted she had any
conscious memory of such an event. But her instincts and innate experience from a past history she could not recall had manifested time and again.

Although, somehow, I did not think Darth Revan had ever resorted to ingesting spice like a spiritless spacer.

There was a mental flinch from her, and I realized she had intercepted that thought, also.

_Probably Street Kid back on Talshion_, Revan muttered. _Look, just put one foot in front of the other. Go!_

I found myself stumbling forward, instinctively reacting to her command. The corridor curved gently, the inside of a shiny silver snake, and I was breathing shallowly by the time I rounded the bend.

It was a surprise for me to find it empty.

_I have such a surprise for you, Bastila_, Malak’s mechanical tones echoed in my memory.

The surprise had been the Star Forge, of course. And within these walls I could feel the licking of dark Force encircling me, a creeping sensation that whispered _evil, power, freedom._

There was nothing I wished for more fervently than my freedom.

But now I beheld a flutter of hope that my wish may yet be granted. Revan was free, and I was unshackled. I could breathe again.

For I had been suffocating under a nadir of despair, a graveyard of hate and desolation that Malak had delighted in…

…

_I could not feel Revan. I had vowed to stay back, to block her as much as I was able beneath the weight of the drugs, yet now I found myself scrabbling for any sense of my tormented bond-sister. She was entirely absent from me. Our bond had been cleaved through with sharp precision, as though no connection between us had ever existed._

_It did not mean her death. I would feel that, oh how I would feel that, and likely not survive. No, I understood the implications well enough._

_Bandon Stone and Yudan Rosh had captured Revan Freeflight, and we had lost. We had lost everything._

_Her capture, like mine, was worse than a quick death._

“_You will enjoy this,”_ Malak intoned, _his sharp yellow eyes gleaming with victorious glee. “A message from Bandon, confirming everything you witnessed earlier.”_

_From a small, portable reception stick held tight in his gloved grasp, a holo-picture sprang to life. That sneering reprobate Bandon, the one who executed the offensive against the Endar Spire, stood in swirling shadows brandishing a blood-red lightsaber._

_Lying prone in the gloom at his feet, was Revan. Scarlet illumination winked against the neural disruptor on her neck, against the restraints on her lifeless limbs, against the utterly broken expression in her blank eyes._
I had never hated Bandon as passionately as I did in that moment.

Bastila! For frell’s sake, stay with me!

The sweat crawled down my neck like slimy mud beetles. My face flushed with heat, even as my arms prickled with goose-pimples beneath the light garment I had worn for days.

Sithspit, when was the last time you had that drug?

I am not sure. Boc comes once or twice a standard day, perhaps. He was probably due now, I realized. I had lost any awareness of the passing of time, but Boc always arrived shortly after the dizziness reared, the clamminess set in, and my senses fragmented-

It’s the side-effects of it wearing off. Revan sounded grim. If they need to inject you that frequently, then there’s a good chance that recovery will be quick. But if you think he’ll be turning up in your cell with another dose, then we have sod all time. Move!

Her urgency finally began to penetrate the fog that sat in my consciousness, and then I was running blindly down the smooth alien tunnel. Revan was right there with me; seeing through my eyes, listening through my ears-

Footsteps. Try that door!

Sets of footsteps sounded from further ahead that I had not registered. A service door to my right I had not seen. I am in bad shape, I realized somewhat forlornly. This will never work.

The door! Revan ordered, and my hand lifted of its own volition.

The door swished open to reveal a modest utility closet. Deactivated cleaning bots were plugged into sockets on the floor, and shelves heralded piles of garments and cloths all neatly folded. The closet door closed, plunging the small space into darkness with only the orange luminescence of the door control shedding any light.

The footsteps grew louder.

About four sets, walking in unison, Revan muttered. I had a vague sense of humid air against my face, the tang of tree-sap in my sinuses, and realized that Revan was running at speed through a forest. We’ve got to get you a weapon, Bastila. And a sodding disguise. The Force feels… sick, through you.

…

“You’re sick,” I hissed. “You would say anything to justify your monstrosity-”

“What’s so monstrous, little one? Wishing to save the Republic? The High Council would have had the Republic fall before they involved themselves, do you not understand that? Diverse cultures replaced by Mandalorian braying and beating of chests-”

“War is dangerous for Jedi!” I spluttered. “The Council had their reasons-”

“They feared the power of the Dark Side,” Malak agreed, his yellow eyes glowing sickly as they bored into me. “But have you asked yourself, dear Bastila, why they were so quick to become
involved after Malachor? Is there not some hypocrisy in that they would ignore genocide committed by non-Force sensitives, but jump into the fray when the conquerors are Dark Jedi?”

“I will not listen to your poison, Malak!” I seethed, clenching tight my eyes. There is no emotion, there is peace. He shall not make me doubt the Order! There is no-

“I see I have exhausted you for today,” he murmured. “Very well, I shall leave you alone to contact Revan. My next question - ask her which Master swore fealty to her after the loss at Duro.”

I didn’t ask. I didn’t reach out.

…

**Bastila, what the frell?** Her voice stormed through the mind-link. It sounded horrified. **What did he mean, his next question?**

The footsteps were very loud, resonating through the thin metal door. I heard the idle chatter of soldiers, but could not register individual words. My harsh breathing was deafening in the darkened closet. There wasn’t much space, here, only enough to rest against the side-wall. The metal was oddly warm beneath my shaking hands.

Each breath was fast and furious and shallow. But no one had discovered me yet. No alarm wailed in the distance. No running footsteps. **For now.**

Beneath my hands was a small display panel, a holo-still, a section of a map. **Utility cupboard A04. Wing 3F.** Linesbranchingout like a spider, pointing to other storerooms dotted around this segment of the Forge.

Revan, do you see-

**Yes. But it isn’t complete, and all I can see is cleaning cupboards-**

Surely it can aid us? Does it… seem at all familiar?

**I don’t know the sodding place, Bastila!** There was anger, there, in her words. Masking a black river of despair. But it was the Star Forge. Could she really claim not to recall anything about it?

**For frell’s sake, I didn’t even know my own name a day ago!**

That wasn’t true. Not really. She just refused to accept it.

**Bastila! This isn’t helping!**

…

“You’re not helping,” Malak murmured, as a gloved finger trailed down my cheek. I flinched, drawing as far away as I could. My muscles still twitched and burned with agony. “I really would prefer not to hurt you like this, dear Bastila.”

…

The Force flickered in my grasp, sluggish and sweet, slipping through my fingertips like I was attempting to grasp jella-pudding. It was a sickly dessert, one of the very few my mother would make. She was always affronted when I turned it away.
I felt Revan’s complete realization at what I had been enduring at the hands of Malak, and the anger emanating from her climaxed into hot fury.

*He’s been trying to break you,* she hissed. *To make you fall.*

*Perhaps… but primarily he wanted me to contact you. To find out what you knew, what you recalled, what sort of threat you are. To… to toy with you and toy with me.*

*Is that why you kept trying to block me?*

*I-I don’t want you to recall your past, Revan. It is too dangerous… but he kept asking. How did he lose his jaw, what were Talvon Esan’s last words, what happened to Kreia-*

*I don’t know any of that, Bastila!*

But the questions still spilled out, varying demands precluding the pain that came later, when I refused to answer. And each time, I felt my self-resolve slowly splinter. *I told him you recalled so little, but he kept asking. Who found you on Talshion, how did Arran Da’klor die, who did you send as the first Dark Jedi recruiter on Korriban-*


It took a second, a horrified frozen second, before I fully comprehended her answer.

*Revan, I said, shaken. How can you- how can you answer that, and know nothing of the Star Forge?*

*Stars, Bastila, I don’t even know what they mean- who Arran or Nisotsa were to me- I just have these cursed flashes dropping names and feelings into my frelled-up head- she trailed off brokenly. Ever since the Endar Spire.*

It was then I sensed her utter exhaustion, through the bond. It rivalled mine.

*But I will clean up my mess, Bastila. I swear it. I will not… I refuse to turn into what I once was.*

She sounded spent; grief-stricken and hollow. And yet, the faint steel of conviction sang through her words. I found myself believing in her.

*Look at the map again.*

I glanced back to the unintelligible lines. In the centre, there was a different coloured dot. Command Center 3F.

*There. We go there. We need to find a way out of this place. We need to find a ship.*

*A command center will be guarded, Revan.*

*Yes. You’ll have to mind-trick someone into helping you. Go, Bastila, while the corridor is empty.*

I gasped in a lungful of air, mashed my hand on the door control, and entered into the hallway once more. Second door on the right, along another length of alien tunnel, a bend to the left. And as I rounded that last corner, a sole soldier jerked in surprise as we nearly barrelled into one other.

Alarm fired through me, a rush of Force, shaking in my grasp. Revan was there, her strength aiding mine, as either panic or feral instinct had me hurling forth a shockwave of energy.
The soldier, an Aqualish dressed in the starched tan uniform of the Sith, was thrown back against the curved wall. He grunted, recovering quickly, a hand already scrabbling for the blaster on his belt.

No! Panic coursed like wildfire through me, rallying the Force in my grasp. He took a step forward, and I lashed out again, slamming him back once more with a thud.

It was a weak effort, and his large black eyes began to narrow in mounting outrage.

Again!

“The prisoner!” he barked in understanding, blaster rising as he stepped forward.

If I allow him to defeat me, then Kylah has won! The moment she decided to betray the Order, she won! An upsurge of power, passionate and furious, collected in my grasp – whether it was mine or Revan’s I did not know – and then the Aqualish was sailing back against the alien walls a third time.

He shook his head dazedly, and it still was not enough! I felt despair at my own weakness, all because of that schutta, and the soldier’s tusks and hairy face swam in my vision, morphed and transformed until all I could see was the striking face of my one-time friend, and the glint of jealousy burning in her eyes.

Someone was growling in rage. I felt my fist clenching. The figure in front of me was pressed hard against the wall, thick fingers scrabbling at his neck- no, no, fine fingers hidden beneath glossy tendrils of dark hair-

…

A warm Dantooine breeze lifted glossy tendrils from Kylah’s face, as her slanted gaze fixed on mine. “What is going on?” she asked, as we ambled through the high grass. She was composed, but I could see the concern dancing in her eyes, evident in her pursed lips. “I was so relieved when you returned, and after all you’ve gone through I do understand that the Council wish to keep a close eye on you, but-” She paused, frowning. “This is the first time they have let you out of their sight. Are you alright, my friend? Is everything okay?”

No. No, it was not. But I could not tell her that.

Our secret prisoner was cloistered deep within the Enclave, the best Jedi medics rallying to keep her comatose as the Council discussed what to do. Master Nemo had been shocked. Master Vrook disapproving. And myself… I had not known how to explain my act of mercy, other than I had been unable to leave someone to certain death when I could save them.

No matter their crimes.

“I cannot speak of it, Kylah,” I said softly. I knew she would not appreciate the answer. Kylah had always watched out for me, and I knew I had a tendency to follow her lead around others. She was proud, in her own way, of my Battle Meditation and victories thus far in the war against the Sith, but she cautioned me against overconfidence. Kylah did not believe I was ready for the Knight trials.

In that way, she sounded much like Master Vrook. And yet, a small part of me rebelled at them both. Look at what I have achieved! I sometimes thought. Look how far I have come! Surely, I am ready? But I could not deny the reservations of both my closest friend and my Master. They must have their reasons for holding me back… and I had heard how gruelling the Knight trials were. Strength in the Force had naught to do with it.

Even Kylah had failed, the first time.
“You cannot speak of it?” she asked in disbelief. “Bastila, you cannot doubt my loyalty to you, the 
trust that is between us. Whatever is going on has you torn, my friend. You can unburden yourself 
safely, in the knowledge that it will go no further.”

I trusted Kylah implicitly, but this was not just my secret to bear. And it was so big… I had not 
expected a Force bond. I had not expected the memory to flood through me, of a secret artefact here 
on Dantooine. Master Nemo was setting out, tomorrow, to investigate. The thought of what he might 
find scared me not a little.

“You must trust in the Council, Kylah,” I replied, hearing a prim tone in my voice that made me 
cringe inwardly. “I would tell you if I could.”

“This makes no sense,” she muttered, a flash of annoyance creasing her striking face. I had 
sometimes speculated on a Mirialan mix in her otherwise human ancestry, given the slight yellow 
tone to her skin that always struck me as exotic. I had never dared question her on it though. “You 
are but a Padawan, Bastila. Surely Master Vrook does not agree with all of this… whatever this is.”

“Please, Kylah, do not press me anymore,” I begged, before turning back to stare at the Enclave. I 
took a deep breath, and tasted the scent of flowering grass that beheld the onset of spring. “I must 
head back to the Enclave.”

…

She was gasping for air, beneath my choke hold. But if I let go then it would mean my end. And she 
deserved everything she had coming, the betraying, jealous schutta-

…

“Bastila,” Kylah said, drawing me into an empty officer’s room of the Endar Spire. A large 
plasticeel table dominated the humble room, which was otherwise bare of any furniture. A meeting 
room, of sorts. “Galdea has just imparted to me-”

“Master Galdea,” I murmured, unable to help myself.

Kylah’s dark eyes flashed with irritation. “Master Galdea,” she snapped, “has just imparted to me 
the extra-ordinary powers of command you have been granted. What is going on?”

The last question was hissed out like a whiplash. I looked away. “Kylah, Master Galdea is leading 
the Endar Spire in actuality. You know this. I will not be countermanding anything he says-”

“And yet you have the power to do so!” she interjected, her voice high with incredulity. “It is hard 
 enough to stomach the secrecy around these Force ruins you are hunting – and do not look at me 
like that Bastila, I know you have been granted more details than I or any Knight on board – but 
this? This is- this is ludicrous!” she ended on a splutter.

She was not the only one who thought so. The reactions of the Republic officers had been galling. 
Even that experienced advisor to the navi-pilots, Captain Onasi, could not contain his disbelief when 
he glanced my way. Certainly I was well-known to Republic soldiers; famous, even. But a leader I 
was not, not yet, and the Endar Spire was not a small assignment to grant a greenhorn.

Still, it was irritating. I could only trust that the Republic military would obey my command, and 
pray that I would not need them to.

And as for Kylah- she was accustomed to leading me, guiding me, speaking for me-
For there were many times the galactic press cornered me for interviews, or various delegates wished to question the strengths and foibles of my Battle Meditation. Kylah was adept at leading those encounters, emphasizing that it was a team effort, that my power was due in part to the tutelage of experienced Jedi like her.

It was only since I had returned from Deralian airspace with a galactic secret she was not part of, that I began to comprehend the imbalance in our friendship. And I began to sense her frustration when she was unable to command me.

Kylah was my closest friend and confidante, and I did not wish to upset her – but it was time for me to step out of her shadow.

“I am sure it will not be necessary,” I said at last, meeting her gaze with a wrench of self-control. “Master Galdea leads us, and if something untoward were to happen to him, then Knight Seris would step up as the next experienced.”

“There why grant you powers you don’t need and won’t use?” she snapped. “Why?”

As a last resort. In case Galdea and Vima and Karon are wrong. In case she wakes up. No one on the Council believed it was plausible. Her mind was too damaged, the personality overlay too complete. But given her power and history, it made sense to be cautious. If, for some unknown reason, something changed with her state of mind, I would be the first – and possibly only – one to know, due to our Force-bond.

And I might require unconditional assistance from all onboard to contain her.

It seemed a fanciful scenario. The few times I had spoken to her, there was nothing of the former Sith Lord or Jedi Knight in her. Just a shell, inhabited by the echo of a meek scholar, who beheld horrifying dreams I intercepted but she couldn’t remember.

“I am sorry, Kylah, but this is Council business, and I am not permitted to say more.”

…

The Aqualish crumpled to a dead heap at my feet.

Bastila! Revan’s voice, intense and commanding and concerned, sliced through the wild rage owning me. I realized, vaguely, that it may not have been the first time she had called me.

I stared down at the Aqualish. He had suffocated to death. Suffocated, by-

No! Revan snapped. You will not wallow in self-pity or guilt! Not now!

I had killed him by-

Pick up the damn corpse, Bastila! We passed another utility cupboard, just before the corner. Move the body!

Mechanically, I bent down and obeyed, my mind blank with shock. The Aqualish was surprisingly heavy, and I found myself struggling to drag it backward. By the time I had reached the small door, I was panting with exertion.

The strength of the Force is returning to you, Revan muttered, as I stuffed the dead Aqualish next to another row of deactivated cleaning bots. Find another lone soldier, and compel him to lead you to a ship. You can do this, Bastila.
Compulsion. A dark power in itself, but not as dark as-

I clenched my fists, shook my head wildly, and forced myself to focus. The utility cupboard swished closed, and I once more started down the corridor.

*Do you remember which way to go?*

**Yes. Down the corridor, to the left.**

We were on the move again, encased by shiny curved walls. My bare feet were silent on the glistening floor, and the only sounds to be heard were my fast breathing and overly loud heartbeat. We passed closed doors, behind which I could sense faint flickers of sentient life. *Just keep walking.*

*Just keep walking.*

This was not going to work. This was insane. A lone prisoner, wandering blindly through a foreign space station, completely helpless-

**You are not helpless, Bastila.**

Revan’s presence, nestled within my psyche, felt stronger than my own. I could not perceive any separation between us now; how much was I controlling my own physiological actions, and how much was I simply bending beneath her will?

*We can sort out the intricacies of our bond later, Bastila. For now- there’s a lot of doors, here. Living quarters, maybe? What can you sense?*

I breathed in, and let the Force flow out. More faint flickers of life, one behind each door, quiet enough to be-

**Sleeping. If this is luck or the Force, I don’t care, we’ll take it. Try one.**

The door consisted of the same cinereal metal, inlaid perfectly into the curvature of the polished wall. I stared in askance at the access panel. The utility cupboards may open for anyone, but surely individual rooms would require some authorization or unlocking mechanism?

Revan was there, tangled in with the threads of my Force. I could feel the depth of exhaustion within her, and yet it didn’t seem to hold her back at all. She grasped the reigns of our collective power, all the while concentrating on the infinitesimal oscillations of electronics that flickered within the door’s circuitry.

I could not make any sense of energy on such a minute scale, but her control was deft. A small tweak, and the door gave way.

Beyond was a small spheroid space with a bunk and a sleeping Duros in plain clothes. I stepped forward. The door shut behind me as I stared at the snoozing Sith.

*Wake him up. Mind tricks and compulsion. You can do this, Bastila.*

Yes, yes I could. Kylah had always been a master at it, and I had learned a few things from *that schutta*. I took in yet another shuddering breath, and my gaze darted to a footlocker by the foot of the bed.

*See if it’s unlocked.*
It was. I was not interested in the detritus of holo-mags or candy bars, but the slim-line blaster nestled on top was nothing short of miraculous. I picked it up with unsteady hands, and turned my attention back to the Duros.

Wielding the Force still felt sluggish, but it had improved. I could do this. And I had little time in which to do so.

I knelt down next to the stranger, the blaster held limply in one hand while I reached out with shaky fingers of psychic power.

“Wake up,” I whispered, and nudged him gently with my free hand.

The Duros twitched, and alarmed red eyes snapped open.

_Say you’re doing Malak’s bidding._

“I am acting under orders from Darth Malak, and you shall help me,” I intoned, intertwining strands of Force into my words, wrapping threads of power around his weak mind. _Keep your eyes fixed on his._ The sleepiness on his face was chased away by confusion, and his whole body tensed. “You shall help me,” I repeated.

“I- what?” the stranger slurred, shuddering awake. His gaze slipped from mine, dropping down to stare at my crumpled attire in disbelief. “Who the frakk are you?

“Have you never seen a Dark Jedi just rolled out of bed before?” Revan snapped, through _my_ lips, through _my_ body. “Lord Malak requires your obedience. Get up, soldier!”

_Leave this to me!_ I snarled, suddenly furious at her presumption — and more than a little alarmed at her ability to take over. _I can, and shall, do this!

I’m sorry, Bastila._ Revan’s immediate remorse was like a deluge of rainfall. She retreated from me slightly. _I- that was instinctive. I won’t do it again._

I was immediately mollified, more so when I understood the hot shame rolling from her did not just concern this incident. Of course it did not.

I stared deep into the large eyes of the Duros. “I am under orders from Darth Malak, and you shall help me.”

The words sat heavy in the air, echoing with compulsion. The Duros nodded, his face blank. “You are under orders from Lord Malak, and I will help you.”

_It is okay, Revan. Perhaps I over-reacted, too. And do not vow that — for if my life is in danger, then I would wish for your assistance._

“I need a ship. Lead me to the closest one-man ship, so I can act out Darth Malak’s orders.”

He stood, turning to face the door. “I will lead you to the nearest ship, so you can act out Lord Malak’s orders.”

He took a step, and I felt Revan’s hesitation, her desire to interrupt once more. _Bastila… he’s not in uniform._

She was right, I realized with chagrin, even as I was struck once more at her ability to see through my eyes. It had not been long ago when I hadn’t believed that possible. I pushed back to her, just a
little, and was rewarded with a wild scent and thick humidity that could only be from the Shadowlands.

At least our bond was equal, even if her power eclipsed mine. But I trusted her. I did.

“Put your uniform on,” I ordered, as the soldier’s hand lifted toward the access panel. “You are on duty, now.”

The Duros began to strip, mechanically removing his sleeping tunic, before turning, naked, to retrieve an ecru uniform from an inlaid closet. He glanced back at me once, and I repeated my command, feeling the Force sink deeper into his mind.

The deeper I went, the longer it would take to dissipate. Sometimes, it never really did. A sentient could live out an entire existence under the yoke of another person’s dark will.

No regrets, Revan whispered. We will get you out of here. By any means necessary.

That was Revan’s entire life, if one were to cut right down to the bare bones of it. By any means necessary. Any sacrifice, any method, any way to achieve the end result – no matter the damage that might be done to one’s soul. No matter how the end result might warp along the way.

Bastila, please- She was distraught. Suddenly, sharply distraught. I’ve got to get you out of here. Recriminations and judgement can come later- but I need you. Your counsel, your knowledge- Sithspit, Bastila, this is too much to bear on my own!

Her anguish was akin to a slap in the face, and now it was my turn to feel the burn of shame. Revan, I did not mean to- my thoughts are still not entirely sensical, and far too wrapped up in past history. The Duros was still bare, now holding aloft a pair of creased uniform trousers. I am not judging you. Everything that has happened since the Endar Spire, everything you have done and struggled with – you are once more a champion of the Light, Revan. Do not let your past, or even the ill-timed thoughts of someone like me, make you forget that.

Revan was already pulling herself together, quicker than I ever could have, and I sensed the steel of resolution fire in her once more. She may have claimed she needed me, but I wasn’t entirely sure she did. Her drive and steadfast determination had always been a core foundation of her personality.

Okay. Enough of the naked green guy. I’m not sure about you, but those body warts aren’t doing it for me. Let’s roll out.

Not to mention her inability to remain serious when the situation warranted it.

Coping mechanism, Bastila. I felt a small rumble of wry amusement from her. It was her first in a long time. We all have them.

The Duros finished buttoning a shirt, before slipping feet into electronic dress shoes. They tightened with a hiss, and he looked back to me in expectation.

“Find me a ship,” I repeated. “A small one with a hyperdrive. Under Darth Malak’s orders.”

“I shall find you a ship, under Lord Malak’s orders.”

I felt more confident now, with my mind a little sharper and focused on our objective. The Force willing, our luck would hold, and this would work. For now, I could only keep placing one foot in front of the other, and keep it together.
“How close is the nearest ship?” I asked the Duros, holding his crimson gaze as we stepped out from his living quarters.

Get him to address you as Darth… I don’t know. Make up a name. Darth Rosa. It will be more convincing if you run into anyone.

“We are in the accommodation wing 3F,” the Duros replied in a monotone. “There is an officer’s docking bay adjoined to the common rooms ahead. Beyond that are the factory bays for this wing of the Forge.”

Darth… Rosa? I thought faintly. Honestly, Revan, that’s patently ridiculous-

Okay, just ‘my lord’ will do. There will be other guards in a docking bay, Bastila, who will think to question your presence. We can only make this bluff as convincing as possible, and hope it’s enough to haul jets out of here.

“Lead me to the officer’s docking bay, but skirt around the common rooms,” I said in a rush. I had not seen most of the Star Forge with my own eyes, but Malak had been keen to espouse upon the output of the factory bays. Somehow – I did not understand the mechanics of it – the Forge created whole starfighters. The armada that fuelled the Sith offensive. I imagined the factory bays to be very large, and no doubt riddled with soldiers. “And address me as ‘my lord’. I am a Dark Jedi, and your superior.”

Oh, how sick those words felt, dropping from my mouth.

“Yes, my Lord.”

Would we encounter any further soldiers? It seemed likely, here in the heart of Darth Malak’s empire. And yet, the corridors remained empty as I followed the marching Duros. It added weight to the military reports I had read, the ones that claimed Malak had more ships than men. Perhaps that was true.

Or perhaps Revan’s famous luck was riding with me.

There is no such thing as luck, Padawan. Master Vrook had told me, time and again, irritated whenever anyone mentioned luck - often with regard to Revan Freeflight. She had been renowned for it, once. The Force’s own luck, at the head of the Republic. Before she turned it against them.

I felt the aversion from Revan, as she inadvertently caught my uncontrolled thoughts once more, but she said nothing. I pursed my lips, and vowed to stop thinking.

The corridor widened as it separated into three. The Duros led me a short way down the left one before it ended in a set of double-doors guarded by a console. He turned to face me, a faint crease in his beryl forehead.

“We are at the docking bay, my Lord.”

Was there confusion in his expression? Puzzlement, as to why he was following me?

I could not risk this failing. Revan was correct, and I had been wrong to doubt her earlier. By any means necessary.

“You shall obey me,” I said, staring deep into his vermillion gaze. “I am doing Darth Malak’s bidding, and you must obey my orders.”
“I must obey you,” he intoned. “I must obey your orders.”

“Open the door, and lead me to a starship I can fly out of here,” I said, willing my voice to snap with authority. “So I can do what I need to, for Darth Malak.”

“For Lord Malak,” he repeated, and placed his hand on a scanner next to the console.

I had the brief impression of a relatively bare docking bay, sleek and cylindrical like the rest of this cursed place. Half a dozen snub-fighters were arrayed on the hangar floor, although there was space for easily twice as many. One section of curved wall was lined with consoles and astromech droids, along with a handful of busy technicians.

And in amongst the ships were at least a dozen crew.

**Bluff it out, Revan instructed. Get him to lead you to a snub, un-couple it, and open the docking bay doors.**

“Lead me to an available star ship,” I directed the waiting Duros.

He nodded, and strode into the cavernous room. With a fleeting prayer, I followed him.

The silent walk across the glistening floor seemed to take eons. I noticed one mechanic glance our way, throwing a frown of confusion at me. **Confidence. Arrogance. Act like you have every right to be here.** I forced a glare in his direction, raising an empty fist in a threatening motion.

That had been the last thing the Aqualish had seen.

I swallowed, but held the mechanic’s gaze until he look away, back to the refuelling gig he was working on.

The Duros halted next to the first snubfighter we reached, and turned around to face me.

“Open the cockpit,” I said. These ships were small, one-pilot fighters, but it would be enough for me to escape. Even a starship such as this would have basic provisions onboard. And a true Jedi could last a long time without food or water, if required. “You must un-couple any landing gear locks, and open the bay doors. Immediately.”

“My Lord, what about pre-flight checks?” The Duros blinked, creases of confusion appearing around his eyes. “It is customary to-”

“This is urgent, soldier!” I flared. “I must do Darth Malak’s bidding, and so must you! Deactivate any mechanical locks on this ship, and open both the cockpit and docking bay doors. Immediately!”

“Immediately, my Lord,” he echoed, his voice dull and blank. He turned on his heel toward the wall of navi-computers, while I stood next to the ship, attempting to emulate a pose of supreme confidence.

My fists wanted to curl in on themselves. The slim-line blaster lay heavy in my grasp, and I did not know if that made my appearance any more conspicuous than it already was. And yet, there were no actual soldiers here – just ground-crew going about their business. A rather skeleton ground crew, for a half-dozen ships. **This is not a factory bay, though. This might actually work. I can do this, I can.**

I glanced back to the starfighter. I did not recognize its make, but I had never paid overt attention to the specifics of starship design. It did not have the same alien look as what I recalled of Malak’s fleet, however.
No, these are Republic cast-offs. Ships assigned to officers for errands or missions, I suspect, Revan murmured. She sounded absent, as if something else was distracting her. You know how to pilot a snub, right?

I have not been in one of these before, I shot back, before comprehending the defensiveness in my not-quite-answer. I sighed. I have run co-pilot many a time before, Revan.

Not quite the same thing, Bastila. Have you ever sat in a pilot’s seat?

I felt my lips pursing. Once. The memory, even a year gone, was still sharp.

…

There was an amber light blinking on the telemetry. Something about the hyperdrive coolant, although the temperature appeared to be within acceptable limits. I could only hope the alien craft would stay alive.

And the passenger strapped into the seat behind me.

I shivered. Horror was still churning in my gut, horror blended with something akin to awe. I could feel her life presence echoing faintly in the Force, a soft spark that was close to sputtering out once more.

And yet, her emotions sang to me. Incandescent rage licking around a core of bitter ice that was cracked through with so much grief. I knew she was close to death, and I knew I should not be sensing her as strongly as I did.

Perhaps it was simply being in the presence of one so powerful, one so dark. Perhaps it was because I still clutched onto the Force so desperately.

It was a mere twelve hour hyperspace journey from Deralian airspace to Dantooine. I had been stationed with an exploratory Republic cruiser, flanked by Masters Kester and Jai’lel. We had not expected an anonymous report from a Sith betrayer, detailing the relatively low defences of the Nexus and her master. Any other time, and I would not have gone. My talents were best used from afar - but this was too great an opportunity to waste.

I did not think Master Kester nor Master Jai’lel would have approved of my actions. This was a chance to remove the Dark Lord from the war, not save her. But, even upon their deaths and her seemingly inevitable one, I found I simply could not walk away.

Mercy was a tenet of the Order, after all. And now… well, Jedi did not kill their prisoners.

And yet, I feared the thought of her waking more than I feared her death.

The Republic would assume my end, when they received news of the Nexus’ destruction. But if I had returned to them, with a comatose Dark Lord instead of Master Kester and Master Jai’lel, then I could predict their subsequent action. And it would entirely nullify my efforts in saving the life of my captive.

My captive. Darth Revan.

Oh, what would Master Vrook say when I landed.

…
With a concerted effort, I pulled myself from the reverie, struggling against a residual dizziness I blamed on the remnants of the jerrikerr-kolto. It was still difficult, at times, to concentrate.

So much so, that it took a moment for me to realize Revan had retreated. There was a definite chilliness resonating from her, and I did not know if she was affronted, or masking a deeper anguish.

_I... I am sorry. I did not mean to dwell on that._ It could not be healthy for her to witness my past memories of her. It could not be beneficial for her state of mind. Particularly since she was not the same person I had pulled from the wreckage of the _Nexus._

That harrowing flight was burned into my recollection. I’d stayed awake the entire journey, on a constant knife-edge of terror that Revan would wake or die under my watch. When the ship had finally exited hyperspace, a thruster warning of the sublight drive had sounded and I had to fight back another surge of unwelcome panic.

I had overcome my weak emotions, and managed to land the craft a little messily in the peaceful starport next to the Jedi Enclave.

I had not known of our Force bond then. I had not seen her memories, merely tasted her emotions without understanding what it meant. I had known my arrival would shock, but I had hoped the Council would consider some path to redemption for her.

Perhaps they would have. Perhaps, if I had never found out about the Star Maps.

_And yet, if I had not, then surely we would have no chance against Malak now._

There was a mechanical thunk from near the front of the snubfighter, and an astromech whirred toward the ship, before connecting with the landing gear. I looked over to see the Duros nod at me from the console, before he bent over it again. The small droid beeped in reassurance, and then retreated. _It is un-coupled, _I realized with a glimmer of relieved hope. _We are almost there._

The same mechanic from earlier was staring at me in blatant curiosity, and I threw him another glare with all the haughty anger I could muster.

_The mindwipe_, Revan’s voice returned, dark and cold. As cold as space. _Show me who was involved._

_Revan-

_I have that right, at least. Show me._

It was a command, granite hard and implacable in its necessity for my answer. I knew it was a bad idea, but after everything, I found I could not deny her. I kept one eye on my biddable Duros, and recalled the past.

…

_I stared up at the prone figure floating in the bacta tank, and even now, while lines of sedation forced their way into her veins, I could not quite stop a shiver of apprehension. Not when I gazed upon the visage of the Dark Lord herself._

_Her face was colourless, a play in black and white, her skin so pale against the dark crevasses that cut deeply into her cheeks. It was just one more sign of corruption that plainly stated how far the mighty had fallen._
She had worn that ridiculous – and intimidating – mask when I had faced her, when it had just been
us two left, battling through the psychic side of the Force-

Why had she abandoned a physical challenge, to fight me where I was the stronger? It still puzzled
me, that question. Had it been overconfidence, or merely a desire to test me? I did not know. Revan’s
power in the Force was overwhelming, but my talent at twisting beneath her psychic probing had
proved to be a match for her. She could not break through my mental shields, and I had begun to
pierce hers.

Revan was notorious for changing the game plan, so perhaps she had merely been testing me.
Surely she would have switched strategies – had her flagship not been suddenly, dramatically, fired
upon. The ensuing explosion whilst we were so heavily interlocked caused a psychic tearing that had
ripped our minds apart. I’d had warning – I had heard the proximity alarm, but Revan had been too
deeply entrenched in the spiritual side of the Force that was my forte. The one area where I’d had
more training than her, and I was able to frantically gather up the loose threads of my floundering
mind, even as I felt Revan’s blow completely wide open.

My eyes were still fixed on the limp, naked figure resting in the blue liquid tank. There wasn’t an
ounce of fat on the heavily scarred and marked body, just sinewy muscle packed over a skeleton,
held in by black and white skin. The Force could burn through a body, I knew that.

Clustered around the medical input console was Master Nemo and Knight Ri’thanok. Ri’thanok had
spent his entire life devoted to medical training and physiology, so it was not surprising he was
involved with the sedation of Darth Revan, despite it meaning knowledge of her identity.

“I don’t like this,” he muttered to Master Nemo. “The neural readings are too advanced. It shows
too high a psychic alertness than should be possible.”

“We already risk cardiac arrest,” Master Nemo replied. “It seems unlikely she is consciously aware
of us. Ri’tanok, we cannot increase the dosage.”

“We must do something. The thought that she may have some awareness is not ethical, Master
Nemo. We could add tystullinium to the IV. There are no known contraindications with her current
dosage, and it will deepen the coma.”

“No,” Nemo refuted. “That will make the Council’s next steps impossible. Thank you for your
assistance, Ri’tanok, but you must leave now.”

I felt a slight touch on my arm, and turned to see Master Karon also staring at the bacta tank as
Knight Ri’tanok silently left the chamber. Karon, so recently ascended to the Dantooine Council,
and all because I had captured her old Padawan.

Karon’s browned face bore an overwhelming grief.

“You always were too reckless,” she said sadly, turquoise eyes fixed on the bacta tank. “Always too
quick to jump into situations, without a thought for the consequences.”

“This plan is foolhardy,” a gruff voice spoke from behind. I had been so deep in thought and
memory that I had not registered the presence of any new arrivals, not even my own Master. He
stepped up to flank me on the other side, also touching me briefly in reassurance. “This poses an
unnecessary risk to us all, in particular to Padawan Bastila.”

“Abundantly clear, your views were made,” the raspy, high-pitched tones of Master Vandar filled
the room. He, too, hobbled closer. “Reached, the decision has been.”
I looked back to the tank, and sensed the Masters were doing the same. Master Vrook stepped closer, so close he could touch the ferracrystal, his head craned up to glare at the unconscious face of what was now my bond-sister.

“Overconfidence,” he all but spat. “You were always too damnably overconfident. Everyone is fallible. Even you. Especially you.” Vrook spun back to address us, his expression bitter. He had never approved of Revan or Malak, even when they were but Padawans training on a completely different planet. Sometimes, I had wondered if the dislike was personal. “The bond should be severed,” he growled. “Padawan Bastila would survive it, now. Should this mind-link be allowed to deepen, it will become both a threat and a vulnerability to her.”

I shivered. The danger was two-fold, here. I was connected so very intimately to the Dark Lord of the Sith herself, and Vrook feared what such constant exposure to the corrupted side of the Force may do to me. But, also, he was concerned about the bond itself – and its inherent vulnerability. For the few histories we had regarding Force-bonds created in such a fashion told us that when one recipient died, the other often did so, too.

Hence the desire to sever the bond in its infancy, before it had a chance to strengthen.

“Padawan Shan has had the risks explained to her,” Master Galdea said, frowning. Lines etched deeply into the Cerean’s elongated forehead as he faced my Master. Galdea was the only one not eyeing over the Sith Lord. Even Nemo was ignoring the medical telemetry to gaze upon the floating body. “The memory that Padawan Shan intercepted led Nemo to the Star Map on Dantooine. It has shown us that Revan’s mind – broken as it may be – holds secrets that can aid us to a victory that has been slipping out of our grasp. We do not know the exact location of the other Maps, and these may prove impossible to find, particularly on Kashyyyk or Korriban. We do not know what the Maps lead to. We do not know what other secrets the Sith Lord may be hiding, but if it gives us a chance against the powerful and foreign armada that Darth Malak now leads, then I believe it is the right path.”

“Everyone should have a chance for redemption,” Master Karon said quietly. “I am, still, unsure if this is the correct course of action.”

“Destroyed, her mind was,” Master Vandar murmured, as he turned to address the Zabrak. Karon’s bright eyes broke away from her old apprentice to gaze down sadly at him. “To be redeemed, one has to be whole.”

“Jedi Knight Revan Freeflight cared for the Republic more than aught else,” Master Galdea added. I realized, then, just how divided the Council could be. They did not generally talk like this in front of me, but due to my connection with Revan I was now heavily involved. “More than the Order, more than her own life, more than her lover Malak. By doing this, are we not helping her redeem herself?”

“A forced redemption is not a true one,” Master Karon retorted, an unusual flash of irritation sparking in her bright eyes.

“Redemption,” Master Vrook muttered. “That’s a wasted opportunity on the likes of her. But I’d rather that, than this ridiculous idea of using an unknown Force sensitive who is on the cusp of death—”

“She does not want life, that one,” Master Galdea murmured. “But her psychic signature is strong, and we can overlay it on Revan’s fractured mind. It will work, underneath the Force skill of the best of us. I am confident, and so is Vima.”
“There is a sort of bitter irony, I will concede,” Master Vrook said, “that the echo of Jen Sahara may live on in the woman who tortured her to death.”

I shivered again. My confrontation with Darth Revan had taken place in the skies above Deralia. After the destruction of the Nexus, Darth Malak had abandoned the Outer Rim planet to turn his focus to the Lannik system. All that remained were a sparse army of Revan loyalists that had not been quick enough to proclaim loyalty to Malak.

Between the nearby Republic forces and a small fleet spearheaded by Coruscant’s Master Kavar, they were able to retake Deralia. There had been survivors; victims that Kavar had transferred to Dantooine before rejoining the war effort.

Some were Force sensitives. A standard Sith strategy was to locate any who held the spark of Force within them, and either send them off for training or break them until they went Dark. In the case of the scholar Jen Sahara, it seemed that someone took the latter a step too far. And whether it was by Darth Revan’s direct hand or not, she still bore the responsibility. It was her program to recruit as many Dark Adepts as possible.

I heard the door behind us open, and another set of footsteps walk over to join us.

“Everything is ready,” the quiet voice of Jedi Knight Vima Sunrider told us. I turned to nod at the striking older human, as always feeling slightly in awe of her presence, despite her friendly demeanour. Knight Vima was less than a decade older than Revan, and on track to become the youngest Master at the Dantooine Enclave. And, given her psychic prowess, she was often granted the same respect and authority as many Masters already.

In an operation that required as much skill and psychic precision as what they professed to do to Darth Revan, they needed the best. Knight Vima and Master Galdea were the best in their field, and Master Karon no pushover herself. I was required for the bond, but Galdea had assured the Council that the Force-link would actually improve the depth and strength of the personality overlay. For I could monitor her in a way that was not normally available.

Knight Vima’s face was blank underneath a mop of bright strawberry blonde hair as she, too, took the time to stare up at Revan’s prone form. How could a naked, lifeless body still seem so intimidating?

Because she has caused the death and destruction of so many.

Vima turned her head, frowning, before her pale blue eyes caught mine. She smiled slightly. Despite her Knight status, I had spent some time training underneath her as well as Master Galdea – when Master Vrook would permit me. He was, at times, cagey about it. Young Jedi Knights with vast amounts of power – and at a little over forty years, Vrook would consider Vima young – made him wary of the Dark Side. I sometimes wondered if that was why he kept delaying my own Knight trials.

Around Vima, I always felt slightly embarrassed of my Battle Meditation.

For it had been her mother Nomi who, during the Exar Kun conflict, had rediscovered the lost art of Battle Meditation – a powerful Force talent long thought lost to the annals of history. From what I had pieced together, after Nomi’s death the entire Order had held its collective breath as Vima grew up, waiting and hoping that Nomi had passed on her fantastical gift to her progeny.

She had not, although Vima had matured to become a powerful Force user firmly entrenched in the Light. The emergence of my own ability with Battle Meditation had taken everyone by surprise, my own Master included.
“I am ready to proceed,” Knight Vima said.

“As am I,” Master Galdea echoed, rubbing a hand along his sweeping hairless head. “Karon?”

The Zabrak sighed, but did not answer, still staring at her old apprentice with glistening, distraught eyes.

“To do this, we require the skills of you three,” Master Vandar said to her, his voice gentle. “Crucial here, is your history with Revan Freeflight.”

Master Karon nodded. “Let us begin, then.”

...

I pulled back to awareness, to hear nothing but silence from Revan. Did that help, or merely make things worse?

*Karon, Galdea and Vima. So they are the ones that did this to me. And Karon is gone, now.*

As is Galdea. He was lost on the Endar Spire.

**Vima is the only one left.**

*What are you thinking, Revan? I asked sharply. I understood revenge, oh yes, I only had to think of that schutta who was responsible for Galdea’s death, for the Endar Spire, for everything I was enduring at the hands of Malak-

I sucked in a shuddering breath, and focussed on the Duros. He was still bent over the screen, green fingers tapping commands under my will. *Revan, you must know the whole Council decided on the course of action taken.*

**Vrook didn’t agree.**

No, I conceded. *He felt the risks too great for me.*

**He may have been right.**

*What are you implying? I gasped, suddenly outraged with her. That your intimacy with the Dark Side has corrupted me? How… how dare you!*

No! She was taken aback, as if the depth of my anger had surprised her. **Don’t jump to conclusions, Bastila. I was merely thinking on Vrook’s observations… for we may be each other’s greatest strength, but we are also each other’s greatest vulnerability, now. Would one of us survive the death of the other?**

My fury at her vanished, my emotions flaring into life and snuffing out quicker than they ever had before. Through the bond, I wasn’t sure if Revan’s musings of our link held the touch of wonderment or fear.

*I highly doubt it, I answered at last. In fact, I believe I could say with certainty – no. Our connection is too strong, and we are too enmeshed in each other’s thoughts and feelings. There would be nothing to pull one of us back from death, should the other die.*

**Is Malak aware of this?**
No… no, he knows little of Force bonds. In truth, no one knows a great deal about a Force bond such as ours.

He’ll kill you, Bastila. If he finds out it’s a way to get at me-

He won’t find out, I whispered. He’s more powerful than me, yes. I cannot deny him when he rips into my mind- but, Revan, he does not sense what I hide from him. He can only pull out what he is looking for, or what I am overtly thinking. He does not have my skill, nor my experience when it comes to psyche. I felt a puff of air escape my lips, an echo of a bitter laugh. Much like you, really. Although you have always been quick on your feet.

There was a loud humming next to me, and when I looked sideways I saw the cockpit window begin to open. My hope was now burning a fervent flame.

I heard footsteps closing in behind me.

I whirled around to see the mechanic, a frowning Bothan, openly eyeball me up and down.

“I don’t have any departure orders,” he challenged, one hand resting on a cylindrical holster at his waist.

The Force spiked within me, a passionate and furious response to danger, and I surrendered to it. “I am following Darth Malak’s orders, and anyone who disobeys me shall pay the price!”

I felt my power buffet against his mind. Behind him, I saw another two mechanics stop what they were doing to stare at us in open curiosity. The Bothan’s hand dropped away, the same time as I heard a thunk from the snub-fighter. It was ready for me to enter, all I needed now was the interior docking bay doors to open. From there, I could fly out of the airlock.

I was almost free.

“I-I-” the Bothan stammered. But I could see the suspicion rearing in his gaze. One command from him, and everything might be derailed. The Duros had his head down, doing my bidding, and I had no other allies to draw upon.

“Yes, of course,” he muttered, taking a step back, but I didn’t believe him. I could not fail, not now, not so close- You need to compel him-

In an unnaturally quick movement, I lifted the blaster and shot the surprised Bothan in the face.

“Does anyone else doubt me?” I hollered, infusing my voice with as much autocratic clout as I could muster. The Bothan crumpled in front of me, and I would not feel guilt, I would not, I had to get out of here and would do so any way I could-

There was a loud creaking noise as the docking bay doors began to separate, showing the airlock beyond. Adrenaline was sharp and hot in my veins, and this was really going to work-

And then I felt it. A vortex of darkness, honing in on me. A miasma of evil so inherent in this unholy place, but separate and sentient and focused on my location. And moving fast.

My horrified gaze shot to the Duros, who was now staring at the corpse by my feet. The docking bays were still, slowly, opening, but even from this distance I could see the bewilderment on his face. He slowly lifted a hand as if to cancel his last command-

I raised my blaster, pulled on the Force to make my aim true, and fired at him in rapid succession.
Get in the ship, Bastila!

The double doors I had walked through earlier crashed open beneath an immense psychic will, rather than any sort of electronic process.

NO!

I was scabbling frantically up the side of the snub, if I could just get in and power up the ship, I might still have time-

The cockpit window smashed down with an explosion of shattering transparisteel, and I was flung hard onto the ground below.

Despair blistered through my mind. Mine or Revan’s, I did not know.

I heard the footsteps and surprised yells of scattering mechanics. I felt the ominous presence of Malak overshadow every sense. I tasted the desolation as it once more gained a foothold into my soul.

But I still had hope.

Go. You must go, I ordered my bond-sister in desperation. My free bond-sister, who was stronger than Darth Malak. Block yourself from me, and escape Kashyyyk.

I could feel her thoughts twisting around, trying defiantly to locate some path to triumph from the ashes of our doomed escape attempt. Go, Revan. I will attempt to buy you some time, but you must hurry. And… do not get captured again. I rolled onto my front, shards of broken window crunching under my hands as I pushed myself to my feet. I would not face him from the ground.

I could not bear it if you are captured again.

I swallowed, lifted my chin, and turned around. With every ounce of self-control I could muster, I once more met the corrupted gaze of the Dark Lord of the Sith.

There was a pleased look in his poisoned yellow eyes.

“My dear Bastila,” he murmured. He stalked closer, the smooth stride of a loth-cat homing in on its prey. “I did wonder how long it would take for you to launch a futile escape attempt.”

There was a low thrumming of mechanical laughter from his vocabulator.

Bastila-

Go! Sith's blood, Revan, go!

“You did well, little one,” he murmured, coming to a stop in front of me. His gaze bored into mine, and I felt my teeth clenching. “But I cannot have you kill any more of my men.”

I felt the shroud of Force come down between us, the disconnect of Revan’s presence beneath a shield, and, once more, I was alone.

But she was free, and she would find me. If I could only give her some time-

“I will never stop trying, Malak!” I hissed. “You shall not break me. You shall not turn me!”

“Such passion!” he taunted. He stepped closer, so close I could feel a wave of heat rolling from him, so close he towered over me like a sentinel of darkness, eclipsing my vision. “I see the drugs are
wearing off. Good. I did not like seeing you so weak, but you had to prove yourself, little one. And you have.”

I did not understand him, and it must have shown in my face. He chuckled again.

“Did you think your room was unguarded by chance? Did you not stop to consider why your door was unlocked, why this wing of the Forge has so few men?” He hummed, his cursed gaze roving over my face. “The Star Forge is powered by the Force, Bastila, and I am its master. I watched every step of yours with interest. I wished to see how far you would go to escape. Would you kill, if needed? Would you even be able to, through Kylah’s poison?”

I took a step back, despite myself. Transparisteel shards cut sharply into the soles of my feet, a reminder of just how close I had come. And yet, it had all been a test-

“A true Jedi does not kill, Bastila,” he mocked.

I felt the rage, then, blaze through the despair that had dogged me since that schutta had rendered me no more than a helpless prisoner. “A true Jedi does not kill if they can help it, Malak!” I spat. “There is no law that forbids killing, in the face of danger to oneself!”

“Is that so?” he murmured. “And tell me, dear Bastila, would you kill your old friend Kylah, if you had the chance?”

“I-I-” I would not answer that. Malak knew my thoughts regarding her already. But I had to distract him, for as soon as he discovered the truth of Revan’s freedom, I knew exactly what orders would be relayed to the Leviathan. The Leviathan, where Kylah was stationed.

I had to buy Revan time, time to leave the Shadowlands and leave Kashyyyk. Perhaps it would only be minutes, but that would be additional minutes on top of the time it took for orders to be relayed, for the Leviathan to move into position. I did not know how far from the Ebon Hawk Revan was, and could only have faith that I might make a difference.

If I was lucky, Malak might even knock me unconscious before discovering the truth. He wouldn’t kill me. Not yet.

He was chuckling again, the same dull mechanical hum I had heard so often. “Maybe, one day, you shall have the chance to face Kylah. I might allow you that chance, dear Bastila, if you continue to impress me.”

By any means possible.

I jerked the blaster up once more, firing before I aimed, simultaneously drawing hard on the Force and allowing the quick power of my anger to flow through it.

The blaster was thrown from my hand in an instant, but I was already focussing on a seismic wave of power, an assault quick and furious enough to draw Malak into fighting-

He stood his ground beneath my blast of power, his yellow eyes crinkling in delight, as one hand raised in a mocking come hither motion.

I felt the scream of frustration grow in my lungs, sensed the desperation when my power could not even touch him, and one fist clenched in furious reaction. The Force swelled, lashing out at Darth Malak like a whip.

His eyes widened, but he was otherwise untouched. “Oh, little one, you have come far. Catch!”
And from his belt, he threw a cylindrical object toward me. I caught it by pure instinct.

I gasped.

*My lightsaber.*

“I have modified it somewhat,” he purred. “But I believe you have earned it back. Let us dance, Bastila. I am curious to see how you have evolved.”

*I cannot refuse. This is a way to buy Revan time. Minutes, or hours, or merely seconds- I do not know what will make the difference.*

Behind me and beyond Malak were the deserted snubfighters. The interior bay doors were wide open, now; the only barrier between me and space was the airlock. There was a heavy scent of Peragian fuel on the air, and my bare feet crunched as I slowly side-stepped around the Dark Lord of the Sith.

It was an odd place for a showdown, but I would make the most of it. *For Revan.*

My thumb flicked on the switch of the hilt I had recovered from a Dark Jedi’s corpse, the one Master Karon had modified on Manaan to suit me better.

A double blade of scarlet bit into my vision.

xXx
Tasharr was waiting for us at the Rwookrrorro waypoint.

“(Zaalbar),” she greeted, as we neared. “(The others have already ascended. I elected to wait for you and your off-world friend who has aided us so greatly).”

I glanced at Canderous, running beside me with an apparent grimace beneath his visor. I did not know the details, of how he had coordinated the breakout of my fellow people from the clutches of soulless Czerka, but I understood that we owed him a debt.

Although, I was highly unimpressed that he allowed Mission into the fracas. The thought of my young friend, down in the Shadowlands, set a growl of frustration growing in my chest, even as reason tried to argue with it. *Mission is with Jen. Juhani has left to find them. They will be safe, Mission will be safe.*

The thought did not reassure as much as I would have liked. A young Twi’lek cub did not belong amongst the perils of the Shadowlands, no matter her allies.

“(Come),” Tasharr chuffed, motioning us into the basket. I was aware of Canderous’ Mandalorian friend quietly translating behind me. Although, *friend* might be too mighty a word, judging from the wariness in both Canderous’ stance and scent. I reminded myself that this newcomer was not only a stranger to Canderous, but also a Czerka-hired mercenary. I would be keeping my eye on him.

We moved silently into the elevator. The warm air of the Shadowlands ruffled my fur. Tasharr patted me softly on the shoulder before taking guard, a small blaster pointed outward. I was quick to follow suit.

There were many deadly predators on Kashyyyk, and some of them were winged.

As the lift began to rise, Canderous settled into the side of the basket, his heavy weapon also at the ready. He turned to appraise me silently for a moment, before looking down and pressing a button on his wrist communicator.

It emitted a faint electronic hum as the signal was picked up. Dan of Fett stilled, ramrod straight, like a kath hound bristling to attention. Even Tasharr, facing away into the shadows, had her head cocked with interest.

“We’re headed up to the hairball village in what passes for a lift around here,” Canderous muttered into his wrist.

::Noted.:: the reply came, and I recognized the voice of Carth Onasi. I desired to hear from Jen, who was with Mission. Jen, who had fired out such dire news not so long ago. *Orbital bombardment.* To think that we might have brought such danger to Kashyyyk’s surface – and it would be because of Jen’s Star Map, no doubt – sent a shiver of trepidation through me. I had seen Taris, and heard of what happened to Dantooine. The same could not occur on my homeworld.
The sooner the *Ebon Hawk* left Kashyyyk, the better.

But my debt was to Jen, and my loyalty to both her and Mission. I would travel to Rwookrorro and ensure my father reclaimed what was his, but then I would leave. The life-debt demanded it.

I had accepted the chains of my vow to Jen Sahara, since the words had first left my lips, since the moment Jen had thrown herself into the path of a rancor for my salvation. But my unwilling part in the capture of Bastila Shan added both urgency and shame to that debt. My honour held no recourse but to restore the Jedi, in any way I could.

Never had the responsibilities of my vow weighed so heavily on my soul. Never had I so much to atone for.

Carth Onasi was still relaying information to Canderous Ordo. ::-tracking her position, but she’s still not answering me.:: There was evident frustration in the human’s voice. ::You should get to the ‘Hawk well before her, assuming you don’t have a tea party with the Wookiees.::

“Yeah, I hear ya, Republic,” Canderous replied in his drawling voice. “Carpet’s gotta see his dad right, but he understands the urgency. If he forgets, my foot will remind him.”

I huffed at him in irritation, and he threw me a smirk.

::Teethree’s hacked into the Czerka air traffic control. It’s patchy, but there’s preliminary reports of a Sith warship exiting hyperspace in Kashyyyk airspace.::

*It starts.* The madclaw Sith were here.

“Huh. Jen’s timing was spot on, then.”

::Yes. I don’t have details of the Sith starship, but whatever it is, it emerged directly in the path of the Meridus. Czerka staff are fleeing the starport like scattering gizka at the thought of a firefight in the stars above.:: Carth sighed, a gust of air evident over the transmission. ::Not that I blame them, most of these idiots are just office workers with blasters.::

I might have felt satisfaction at that, of the Czerka plague fleeing my planet, were it not contrasted with the thought of what the Sith might unleash upon Kashyyyk.

“Keep me informed of Jen’s whereabouts,” Canderous said. “She gave the warning, she’ll be taking it seriously. She better.” There was either impatience or irritation in the gravelly voice of my crewmate, but I did not think it was directed at Carth Onasi.

::Stang- I’m going- some hopeful is trying to slice the hatch open-::

Canderous snorted. “Right. I’ll check in soon.”

The shadows were slowly lightening as the lift continued its swaying ascent. I saw Canderous turn to his new acquaintance, this Dan of Fett who had elected not to follow his companions.

“This planet’s getting hot – you’ve heard enough to figure that out for yourself. You’re not getting a ride outta Kashyyyk through me,” Canderous said, in a flat tone. Dan Fett’s helm swivelled to face him. “So you’ve heard of me. Big deal. That don’t mean I’m on the lookout for followers.”

Dan of Fett cocked his head, as if in thought. “Why wouldn’t you give a fellow Mandalorian a ride out of here?”
I did not like the thought of another Mandalorian on the Ebon Hawk. I had become accustomed to Canderous, and grudgingly trusted his loyalty to Jen, but I had heard enough about his kind. Battle was all important to them. Their self-worth was tangled up in their combat prowess, like a kshyyy vine choking an otherwise healthy sapling. I did not think the addition of an unknown extra was a good idea.

Although, I had not approved of three errant leavers from the madclaw Academy on Korriban, and yet they had surprised me. That quiet one, Kel Algwnn, even attempted to understand a few basic Shyriiwook greetings – something Canderous had not yet bothered with.

“You’re unarmed, unproven, and I don’t know you from a can of beans,” Canderous snapped. “If you’re a true Mando’ade, you should be resourceful enough to find your own way off Kashyyyk. Besides, it ain’t my command, Fett. I’m not letting a stranger into the midst of our crew.”

Tasharr shifted, her gaze still facing outward, but her attention obviously on the ongoing conversation.

“I’m no threat,” Dan Fett retorted. “I will swear it.” He drew in a breath, and then rattled off a long string of incomprehensible words in what I could only assume was Canderous’ native tongue.

Whatever Dan of Fett spoke, it seemed to silence Canderous for a full minute. I glanced over to Tasharr, before turning my attention back to the brightening umbra.

It was good to see Tasharr again, alive and whole. It was better to see Growwhul, rushing through the Shadowlands, to embrace his estranged mate. To think that Chuundar had separated them, by selling Tasharr into slavery-

He was not the brother I had once known.

“What’s your past, Dan Fett?” Canderous said, breaking the brief quiet. “Where have you been blooded? Were you active in the Wars?”

Dan Fett shifted, as if uncomfortable. His helm turned to point into the gloom, and his posture was stiff under his ill-fitting armour.


“Huh,” Canderous grunted, a considering tone evident in his voice. “So you served under Cassus.”

“He was the leader of Fett,” a cold reply shot back smoothly.

“You sing his battle songs?” Canderous demanded. “You honour his memory?”

Dan Fett dwindled into a silence that had Canderous raising his brows. I found myself staring at them again. Dan Fett may have been facing away from us, and his expression may have been concealed beneath a battered helm, but his lack of immediate answer was telling.

“You said it yourself, Ordo. A true Mandalorian values clan and honour above all else.”

Canderous snorted. “And yet, that’s not a kripping answer, Fett. Cassus was your clan leader. You owe him your loyalty.”

“I fought in the damn Wars,” Dan Fett snarled, and it was the first real emotion I had heard from the dispassionate Mandalorian. “Cassus Fett would sacrifice anything, clan included, for nothing more than further standing in Mandalore’s eyes. He didn’t do it to win the damn war. He did it for his own
perverse pleasure at slaughtering those weaker than him.”

“I know of Cassus Fett,” Canderous said. In contrast, Canderous sounded remarkably calm and unruffled. I had the distinct feeling he was pleased at finally getting under Dan of Fett’s skin. “He was instrumental to our early success. Brilliant, ruthless, and a strategic genius. He was your damn leader. If you didn’t respect him, then you should have challenged him.”

“It’s not always that simple, Canderous Ordo,” Dan Fett said. His hand twitched, ever so slightly, toward his hip. I had thought the Mandalorian was disarmed, but it was possible he had left a concealed weapon on his body somewhere. “I followed an unworthy leader for a lot longer than I should have.”

It would have to be a small weapon. Which did not mean it was not lethal.

“That’s on your own head then, Fett,” Canderous retorted. “You gotta make the choices you can live with.”

With those words, Canderous struck a chord deep within me - for I had made tough choices - and while the stigma of madclaw would always lurk upon my soul, at least I had spoken truth.

Claws were a taboo, a throwback from our dark past when Wookiees had not mastered their own rrakktor. It would have been acceptable had I thrown a punch at my nest-brother, or even pulled out a weapon. But lashing out with claws displayed a rabidity that was unacceptable, that any true Wookiee should have evolved from. A sign of madness from the days before we had found our souls.

I regretted the delivery of my actions, oh yes – but the actions themselves?

Once my words had been spoken, Chuundar would have found a way to exile me, to silence me – even had I kept my claws sheathed. For Father had not believed in Chuundar’s dishonour, not then. And yet, had I the chance to walk back in time, I would not change my words. I would not say differently, and keep quiet against wrong doing.

For I had seen the weight of shame upon Drawwlog’s shoulders, when I had entered Rwookrorro with Jabakka. Drawwlog wore the aide’s necklace with dishonour, and he knew it. His bowed back and slumped shoulders spoke the truth of his feelings, as did his gaze that had not been able to stay on mine for long.

Dan of Fett had turned back to face us, an armoured, anonymous figure whose attention was focussed exclusively on Canderous. “Sometimes, Ordo, it takes a lifetime to figure that out.”

“Well, I was never particularly taken with Cassus myself;” Canderous muttered, shrugging his shoulders in a dismissive fashion. “Sadistic shabuir. He may have led Fett to greatness, but he also damned them to decimation with his actions.”

I did not understand Canderous at the best of times. Only a moment ago he had been praising this Cassus in an attempt to needle Dan of Fett, and now he seemed bored of the conversation. Even after all these years off-world, I still found humans – Mandalorian or otherwise – to be particularly contradictory.

Off-worlders were confusing.

Canderous’ head tilted, as if he were eyeing Dan Fett over from beneath his visor. “Hiding a weapon from the Wookiees is damn idiotic,” he said at last, and I understood my crewmate had not missed that slight, but telling, twitch on Dan Fett’s part. “Look, Fett, I ain’t gonna stop you following me,
but I ain’t protecting you either. Get in my way or the Wookiees’, and it’ll be your death.”

“My death, my choice,” Dan Fett muttered. “I need a ride out of here. I’ll see if I can convince you yet.”

A bark of laughter escaped Canderous. “You’ve got balls, I’ll give you that.”

They dwindled into silence: Canderous having said what he wanted, and Dan of Fett with no apparent reply. I could smell the perfume of lottie blossoms as the lift rose higher, the flowery scent of the herbs the Old Ones cultivated in the upper levels of the wroshyrs.

“(We are almost there),” Tasharr said, her head tilting upward. It was noticeably lighter, now. I felt the twist of apprehension in my belly, and wondered what we would find topside. Was Father facing Chuundar, right now?

Surely my brother had lost his support. Surely, my countrymen would now believe the truth.

“(Stay close),” I addressed Canderous. “(You may be attacked on sight if you are not with me or Tasharr).”

“He says we would stick with them,” Dan Fett translated in a neutral tone.

“(And do not interfere),” Tasharr added. Her gaze homed in on the repeating blaster held in the firm grip of Canderous, before moving to trail over Dan Fett’s armoured form. “(This is no business of off-worlders, no matter what aid has come before).”

It would sit in the craw of the Old Ones that we owed so much to an off-worlder. They did not see non-Wookiees as complete souls, not entirely. Most of my homefolk had never left Kashyyyk before, and did not comprehend that honour and dishonour could apply equally to any sentient, no matter their species.

“And we’re to stay out of things, if we don’t want to turn into Wookiee dinner.” Dan Fett shrugged, an air of unconcern once more wrapped firmly about him. His stance had relaxed back into one of casual nonchalance – contrasting with Canderous who was taut with attention and purpose as he kept half an eye on the surroundings. Dan of Fett came across as a detached observer with no recognition of any potential threat to his person.


The basket halted with a familiar grinding of gears, and I heard a wuff of emotion from Tasharr. She had been absent for some time, shackled and enslaved, believing she would never set foot in Rwookrrorro again. The despair of that thought must had eaten into her soul, an Old One who had spent more than a century within the same village, not even departing when all her cubs had left the nest.

This would be quite a homecoming for her.

There was a young Wookiee waiting for us, a stolen Czerka rifle held awkwardly in his grasp. I did not recognize him, but judging by the scowl when his dark gaze landed on me, it was not a mutual unfamiliarity.

“(Growwhul asked me to wait),” he rumbled, his attention turning back to Tasharr. “(I know not why you are travelling with these-)”

“(Thank you, Kraytrron),” Tasharr spoke over him. Her voice remained mild, but the authority
behind it was unmistakeable. “(Lead us, and fill me in on proceedings).”

He subsided, with a last glare at the Mandalorians, before falling into step next to the Old One. “(Fighting broke out as Chorrawl breached Rwookrrorro with wild stores of Czerka pollution in our sacred Shadowlands. Many doubted him, but I did not. There has been something wrong with all the exiles, yours and Freyyr’s chief amongst them).”

Tasharr inclined her head, as the two strode along the wooden paths that led deeper into the village. Normally, these walkways would be bustling with Wookiees, going about their daily business. Even when I had walked here with Jabakka mere days ago, intent upon reaching the Shadowlands, they had not been as empty as they were now.

But angry howls and fierce roars echoed from deeper within the walls of my home. I could only hope the bloodshed was not too great.

“(Chorrawl was soon overwhelmed, but then Freyyr arrived).” Kraytrron relayed, his long limbs hanging awkwardly by his side as if he did not know what to do with them. He was young, barely out of adolescence, and perhaps that was why I did not recognize him. “(There are many who feel the shame of not acting earlier, Old One. Many who feel the disgrace of keeping quiet).”

“(Let us focus on cleansing our village, Kraytrron. What of Chuundar?)”

“(The Old Ones were mediating at the Elder’s Circle when Growwhul sent me back. Chuundar-)” Kraytrron paused briefly, throwing a suspicious look back to me over his shoulder, “(Chuundar was arguing that Freyyr’s exile has clouded his mind. When I left, I heard Freyyr challenging Chuundar to face his honour in front of the gods).”

I sucked in a large gulp of air. Father had the build of a warrior, tall and muscular and fierce, and he had passed on his physique to Chuundar. But Father had aged in the six years I had been away, and his stint of exile had not done his physical form any favours.

I had noticed this immediately, even when we first reunited, even before Canderous had brought the freed Wookiees down to the Shadowlands.

…

“There is something ahead,” Juhani murmured, her pointed ears drawing flat against the side of her face. After a brief rest, we were once more on the move.

Travelling through the Shadowlands with Juhani had been companionable, more so than I expected. The quiet that reigned between us did not have the awkward feel to it so common around off-worlders. Both Mission and Jen had a tendency to fill silence with meaningless chatter or superfluous observations.

I glanced sideways at Juhani. She stalked through my world with a warrior’s grace, and easily matched my speed.

“(Is it what you sensed earlier?)”

Juhani shot me a brief frown as she tried to comprehend my words. Something, earlier, had the Cathar halting in alarm; head cocked, eyes roving the gloom, unease wafting from her short fur in acrid waves. She had not explained, and I deduced it must have been the Force. And Jen.

Whatever Juhani had been about to answer was interrupted by a reverberating howl of dissonance further ahead, a challenging warcry of a predator about to attack-
We both froze in readiness as a blurry figure rounded a large chocha bush, running at speed toward us.

He was a Wookiee. His fur was matted with grime and streaked with grey, and I did not recognize him. Obviously enraged at our presence, he closed in on Juhani, an outraised paw ready to strike.

“(Stop!” I roared, as the Cathar ducked before leaping to the side. The Wookiee turned, and advanced on her again. “(We are not here to fight!)”

But my words had no effect on the stranger. Juhani held no lightsaber in her grasp, and her every step was a calculated retreat, an attempt to allow the aggressor to back down.

“(Off-worlder filth!” the Wookiee howled, in a voice that was far more familiar to me than his bowed, straggled form.

“(Father!” I yelled in shock. Oh, I knew that voice, be it calm or raised in righteous anger. “(Father, stop! It is I, Zaalbar!)”

His massive head jerked in my direction. His gaze, furious and near-rabid, was also clouded white with age. I saw the astonishment as it rippled through his face, eking away the anger and replacing it with bewilderment.

“(Father),” I echoed, and strode over with an outreached limb. “(It truly is me. This off-worlder is my ally, and means no harm to either you or Kashyyyk).”

…

Freyyr had listened, then, and his confusion slowly transformed into hope with every word I spoke. For my father had always held steady faith in the gods, and once he was truly convinced that I was there with him in the Shadowlands, he had decided my restoration was a sign of things to come.

Freyyr believed, deeply, that I had returned as his true heir. Even the taint of madclaw did not seem to dissuade him.

I did not know how to tell him that I would not be staying in Rwookrrorro.

The centre of my village was a round courtyard of roughly sawn planks, a large area for meetings and the telling of stories. Never had I seen it so full of bodies. Some lay in crumpled hairy heaps, and it tore at my heart to witness bloodshed amongst my own people.

Once, in ancient times, this sight was common. When Wookiees had not control over their rrakktorrr, and turned claw upon each other.

In the centre of the Elder’s Circle, my father stood facing he who had once been my brother.

My arrival was not unnoticed. Chuundar jerked his head in my direction, a furious scowl of recognition twisting his face.

“(Brother!” Chuundar roared. “(I should have known this would be your doing. After all this time, you have returned to wreak ruin and disorder amongst our people. Our father named you well, madclaw!)”

A growl emitted from Freyyr. Standing against Chuundar, he looked old and bent with age. “(My second son spoke the truth from the beginning, Chuundar!)”
But there were a group of staunch Wookiees at Chuundar’s back, encircling him in support, blades and bowcasters clasped grasped tight in their paws. Drawwlog stood, shoulders hunched in uncertainty, his gaze pinned on mine as one hand grasped the necklace that proclaimed him Chuundar’s aide. And the eldest of the Old Ones, Jabakka, had a fierce glare turned on my father.

That surprised me.

“(You have been exiled, Freyyr),” Jabakka intoned in a low voice that nonetheless carried over the Elder’s Circle. “(Exile can only be lifted by the true chieftain. Rather than cleansing your shame, you have returned to bring death into our encampment).”

“(Go),” Tasharr murmured from my side. “(The Old Ones are divided, but they should hear from you).”

I glanced back to see Canderous Ordo scowling at me.

“We ain’t got much time, Carpet. If you’re certain you’re heading back to Jen, then get a move on.”

I gave him a short nod, and stalked toward my father. There was a grumbling of discontent as my stride cleared the uneven wooden boards of the courtyard. There were so many memories of this location, evenings spent sampling fermented wasaka-berry juice whilst the Old Ones relayed fables and legends, the preparation rituals of young cubs about to head off on their hrrtayyk, ceremonies of mated ones declaring vows to one another—

And now, Wookiee blood stained the area. Chorrawl, young and fierce, stood over the fallen body of his brother as his glare focussed on Chuundar. Growwhul, standing stalwart at my father’s side, faced off against his fellow Old One, Jabakka. Drawwlog, back bowed with the weight of his treachery, flanked Chuundar.

Brother against brother, friend against friend. All for Chuundar’s ambition.

“(Chuundar has allowed Czerka to dig their poisoned claws into our planet?)” Chorrawl growled. “(He has sold his fellow Wookiees into slavery! Chuundar-)”

“(Off-worlder lies!)” Jabakka roared. He raised an accusatory paw, pointing directly at me. “(Look at who has reappeared, after claiming he would cleanse his shame in front of the gods. He brings off-worlders here, into the heart of Rwookrrorro, breeding discontent-)”

“(Do you doubt, Jabakka?)” Growwhul raised his voice into the fray. “(Do you doubt Tasharr, who has spent days shackled in an alien ship, when Chuundar claimed she had been sent down to the Shadowlands-)”

“(I doubt what I cannot see with my own eyes-)”

“(Then come with me),” I interrupted, and all heads turned in my direction. “(All of you who doubt, come with me into the Shadowlands. I shall show you the Czerka lifts that Chuundar allowed. The traps full of dead tach to be processed. The encampments set up by off-world hunters brought here to strip our Kashyyyk of resources-)”

“(This is the voice of a madclaw),” Chuundar sneered, his eyes full of vitriol as he stared me down. “(A madclaw who was proven wrong years ago and should be no more than a ghost now!)”

Next to Chuundar, Drawwlog shuffled uneasily. My eyes turned to him.

“(Drawwlog),” I said, my voice dropping. “(Will you stay quiet once more? You knew, all those
years ago, and hid the truth from Freyyr. I see the shame upon you, as you clutch at the baubles around your neck. You betrayed me. You betrayed Kashyyyk).”

He did not meet my gaze. Six long years ago, Drawwlog and Ruubarg had been the ones to tell me of the tach trade, to show me the depth of Chuundar’s greed. But Ruubarg had been cast down by a mysterious illness, and Drawwlog had retreated into denial-

I sucked in a breath. Why? Why had Drawwlog back-pedalled? Unless… unless he was afraid of meeting the same fate? “(How did Ruubarg die?)” I gasped, glancing back to Chuundar. A flicker of emotion tightened his gaze, and I knew the truth, then, with a coldness that grieved me.

“(Chuundar),” I said sadly. “(You killed Ruubarg to silence him).”

A snarl of ferocity ripped from Chuundar, and he broke from the ranks, running forward-

Freyyr was there, but Chuundar was younger and stronger, and one massive swipe from his paw knocked my father straight to the ground.

“(This will end, now!)” Chuundar howled, and leaped toward me.

My arms raised in reflex, even though part of me was shocked frozen that it would end this way, with my stronger, older brother coming to strike me down-

And then Chuundar crumpled in mid-air, landing in a broken heap at my feet.

Dazed, I looked up to see Drawwlog, his bowcaster raised directly at where Chuundar had been.

An outpouring of howls erupted into mad cacophony, as I collapsed next to my brother. A charred, blackened hole gaped from the back of his head, and the acrid stench of burnt fur and blood sat heavy in the air. My brother. The grief was bitter, and surprising in its intensity. There was a rumbling in my chest, and I looked up through blurry eyes to see Drawwlog clutched firm in the grasp of others.

Freyyr was next to me then, one hand resting gently on the prone shoulder of what had once been my brother.

“(I have been blind),” my father murmured, his voice breaking. “(I must take part of the responsibility for this).” He breathed in, his gaze meeting mine.

“(It is true, then),” Growwhul said from some distance away. I could only stare at the slowly cooling corpse, as memories of my youth hit me with rapidly increasing emotion. Chuundar, steadying my grip on the first bowcaster I had held. Chuundar, explaining in detail how best to prepare for my upcoming hrrtayyk.

Chuundar, spewing forth lies in the throne room to protect his ambition at the cost of my honour. How had greed wormed its way so deeply into his soul?

“(Ruubarg’s death was no accident),” Growwhul was still speaking, and I glanced up to see him advancing upon Drawwlog. “(The madclaw-Zaalbar spoke truth. Admit it, before us all, you who do not deserve to live, let alone wear the neckpiece of a chieftain’s aide!)”

I heard a shuddering breath from Freyyr, his gaze remaining fixed upon the remains of Chuundar. He must have known that any reconciliation was impossible, and yet accepting the final outcome was likely the hardest thing either he or I had ever had to endure.
“(Kill him),” Chorrawl snarled. The fur around his neck bristled. “(Or I shall. It is time to wipe this taint from our homeworld!)”

Drawwlog’s weapon had long been taken away, and he hung limply in the grasp of two Wookiees. He sensed his death, a dishonourable one through Wookiee justice, a blood-letting of vengeance-

“(No),” I said, struggling back to my feet. I blinked away the moisture in my eyes. “(No. There has been enough killing).”

Chorrawl’s young face twisted with disgust, but Growwhul merely looked confused.

“(You plead mercy?)” Growwhul questioned. My father struggled to his feet, shoulders bent with grief, as Growwhul continued speaking. “(You, who have been dishonoured in part due to Drawwlog, would speak for him? Surely, you must understand that someone so unworthy cannot be allowed to live).”

“(I plead exile),” I spoke to Growwhul, but I was barely cognizant of the words as they tumbled from my mouth. “(One thing I have learned is that honour can come after dishonour. Drawwlog has long felt his shame. I smell it on him. Allow him the grace of seeking his own death in the Shadowlands, of appeasing his crimes in the eyes of the gods).”

How much the gods listened to us I did not know anymore. But it did not feel right to stand back while yet another Wookiee died by Wookiee hands. And Drawwlog may well have suffered more than I.

“(Exile),” Freyyr whispered. He exhaled, and then his posture seemed to swell with purpose. The rumblings of the crowd had ceased, and all attention slowly turned upon him. The feeling amongst the Wookiees had shifted, and although no one had spoken the words, I knew my father once more held the mantle of chieftainship. “(Both I and Zaalbar have suffered under this punishment unjustly. Perhaps it is time for exile to mean what it once did. Old Ones, what do you say?)”

There were quiet footsteps behind me. “(Your second son speaks with a wisdom beyond his years),” Tasharr said. “(I am in agreement).”

Growwhul’s gaze was fixed on his mate. “(As am I),” he added.

Jabakka sighed, a deep broken sound that echoed across the courtyard. He stood across from me, surrounded by a small group of armed Wookiees that had backed Chuundar. The uncertainty was thick upon them, and they all looked to Jabakka, the eldest of the Old Ones, for guidance. His head bowed. “(I doubt my own counsel now, Freyyr. I am an old Wookiee, and this is for the chieftain to say. You… you are the chieftain. Perhaps there is much I have been blind to.)”

Drawwlog’s head lifted, at long last, and he stared at me from across the bloodied Elder’s Circle. “(Thank you),” he whispered. “(I do not deserve this, not from you, but I will take the gift anyway).”

“(Get him away from here, then),” Chorrawl snarled, waving his arm dismissively in the direction of the Rwookrorro waypoint. “(Let Drawwlog find his own end, while we chase the Czerka rot from our planet).”

There was a muttering of agreement from the crowd, and a few figures walked to Chorrawl’s side. He had always been quick to anger, and intensely patriotic in his beliefs. Chorrawl, I felt, would storm the Czerka starport on his own if he had to.

I became aware of a clambering of footsteps, a further group of Wookiees heading toward the Elder’s Circle now that the fighting had ceased. Most were nest-mothers with cubs on their
shoulders, or trailing by their feet.

“(You want to attack the starport now?)” Growwhul rumbled, folding his arms as he stared down Chorrawl. “(We have wounded to heal, and dead to mourn. Czerka will still be here tomorrow).”

Drawwlog passed me, flanked by two armed guards, as he went to meet his fate. He met my gaze, but spoke nothing more. There was not anything more to say. In the end, his actions had spoken for him.

With a nod of respect, he raised his chin, and left the Elder’s Circle.

“(Czerka are back-footed from our escape),” Chorrawl disagreed. “(The bloodlust runs through our veins now, Old One. It is time to strike).”

“(There are many who did not escape the starport),” Tasharr added. “(Their bodies lie in territory that Czerka have claimed as theirs).”

It surprised me, that Tasharr would offer an opinion against her mate. But Growwhul had not endured what Tasharr and Chorrawl had, the indignity and despair of impending slavery.

“(Zaalbar, my second son),” Freyyr intoned, his voice loud and clear. “(I would hear your thoughts. You have overcome trials which you should never have had to face. If you had not come back to Kashyyyk - against tradition, against the terms of your off-world exile - then Chuundar would still rule. Some of our people would be condemned to slavery, to an existence worse than death).”

I looked over the rest of the crowd, aware that all eyes were on me. Some held mistrust, some disgust, and some open curiosity. I took in a deep breath, and wondered at what words I could impart.

“(Czerka should not be allowed on Kashyyyk),” I began. “(But you must understand that Czerka Corporation is far mightier across the galaxy than any of you know. We can claim grievance against them, but they were acting with the acceptance of he who was your chieftain).”

There was a shuffling of feet at this. “(Chuundar is not our leader now, Zaalbar),” Freyyr said. “(Slavery has always been an abomination, and Czerka defiled our laws when they partook in this practice).”

“(They are filth we must scrape off),” Chorrawl growled. “(No more honourless off-worlders should be allowed on Kashyyyk, now we have seen first-hand what they are capable of).”

“(I hold no respect for Czerka or their dealings. But not all off-worlders lack honour, Chorrawl),” I said. “(I went to the Shadowlands to find my father, but it was my ally, an off-worlder-)” I halted, throwing an arm backward to gesture at Canderous Ordo, “(who enabled the rescue of our enslaved. And he was not alone. A young Twi’lek cub, who is as dear to me as a daughter, aided him. I have other allies on Kashyyyk, whom I have travelled with, and they may also have played a part).”

I looked around, and did not think I was convincing. Growwhul was frowning in discontent, and I knew the reminder of off-world aid would not be a pleasant one. But how could I make them see? Tarring all non-Wookiee with the same brush was both incorrect and blind.

I turned back to Freyyr. “(Father, I hold a life-debt to a human. Knowing little of me, she saved my life twice, once at great risk to herself. She holds more honour than Chuundar did. Do you not see? Things are not simply black or white, Wookiee or not-Wookiee).”

“(A life-debt?)” Freyyr mused, his forehead bunching. “(Zaalbar, I hear your words, and I can accept
that some off-worlders may not be as soulless as we would like to believe. But that does not mean we should accept them on Kashyyyk.”

His openness surprised me. I had thought that Freyyr would rail against the idea of off-worlders having virtue of any sort. “(I am not sure I am advocating that, father. Merely that we should not remain unsighted as to what is out there. The galaxy is large, and there are powerful forces out there).”

“(Then we should do nothing to warrant their interest. But Czerka must be removed from Kashyyyk. The only question is when)” Freyyr paused, before raising his voice to a command that echoed throughout the crowd. “(Zaalbar, my second son. You are my heir now. I believed my eldest child six years ago, as custom dictates, but I was wrong to do so).”

The words were a balm to my battered soul.

“(Your son spoke of a life-debt to an off-worlder),” Growwhul grumbled, and Freyyr’s gaze sharpened.

“(Life-debts are not common, and I have not heard of one given to a non-Wookiee).” My father sighed. “(Perhaps we can fulfil your debt in a material way that will appease your off-worlder’s morality. For, Zaalbar, your place is here in Rwookrrorro. The gods have restored you as well as me. Together, we shall reclaim our planet from Czerka, and then you will take your place as my heir).”

It was... tempting, despite my conviction to follow Jen Sahara. I longed for days spent amongst the wroshyrs, away from the pollution and greed that I found inherent on other planets. Jen would release me from the life-debt if I asked. She was not one to hold someone against their will.

But I heard a whisper from someone in the crowd. Madclaw. I may have uncovered the truth of Chuundar’s nature, but I was still struck with disgrace that did not easily fade.

*One does not strike one’s own with one’s claws.*

“(Father-)”

Freyyr moved closer to me, placing heavy paws on my shoulders. Perhaps there was uncertainty on my face, for he seemed to realize I was unsure of my path. “(Zaalbar, you belong here. You have travelled a hard road, and it is now time to come home)” My father’s voice lowered, quiet enough to be a mere whisper between us. “(My son, you were wrong to raise your claws against your brother, but our people will come to accept this as just the wildness of youth. If you leave to follow your off-world ties... Zaalbar, if you leave, I must train another successor. And then, were you to return another day-)”

He did not finish his sentence. He did not have to, for I could see the shape of the future he illustrated.

As Freyyr’s only true-blooded son still living, I held first claim to chieftainship. Although this could be challenged by the Old Ones, in general it was not. One only had to look at Chuundar’s reign to see that the Old Ones preferred to counsel rather than dictate leadership.

If I left Kashyyyk, and returned some indeterminate time later, it could cause a schism between those who believed blood should rule, and those who followed Freyyr’s chosen successor. Whoever that would be, it would be a Wookiee who had not left our home for off-world matters, and who did not hold the stigma of madclaw.

“(Stay),” Freyyr murmured. It was half-plea, half-command.
I could see my future. Setting down roots, finding my place once more. Sharing my experiences with my people, and enjoying the solitude that was easy to find on Kashyyyk. This world brimmed with life, pure and dangerous and beautiful, and nothing I had seen elsewhere in the galaxy could compare.

I would be happy. One day, I might have a cub or two of my own. I had never desired chieftainship, but I could set my mind to it and be worthy of the responsibility-

But I would have to forget my debt to Jen Sahara. I would have to ignore my part in Bastila Shan’s capture. I would have to accept a parting of ways with Mission, whom I could not see electing to stay on my homeworld by choice.

The first two, I could only do by compromising my honour. My brother had spent his years doing just that.

“(Father, when I swore my life-debt to Jen Sahara, I meant the words. My own integrity demands I aid her until my vow is fulfilled. I cannot choose any other course of action and hold my head high).”

Freyyr’s gaze was still and black. “(You might spend all your days travelling the stars, Zaalbar. Or, if you do return-)”

“(If I do, I would not wish to cause unrest amongst our people).” I knew, then, what I had to do. I had never desired chieftainship, but now the possibility was there, it made the next words difficult. I thought of my brother again, who had spent his lifetime disgracing the position, and knew I could do a better job.

I cleared my throat, and spoke the next words loud enough to be heard by all. “(In the eyes of the gods, I hereby rescind any claim to chieftainship. Honour compels me to leave Kashyyyk, and Rwookrrorro must carry the torch of leadership without me. One day, the gods be willing, I will return. But not with any claim to the position of chieftain).”

I heard someone rumble in the crowd. My father closed his eyes, but not before I saw a flash of grief cloud them, and it turned my stomach. My gaze skittered over his shoulder to Jabakka, the Old One who had backed Chuundar and despised my return.

He nodded at me in approval.

Freyyr breathed in a deep gust of air, and turned to address the crowd. “(Listen to my son! His insight humbles me. Truly, Zaalbar speaks with a depth of honour that is rarely heard. I am proud to call him my son).”

He threw his arms around me then, tight, and for a brief moment I was a cub once more, protected and loved by my authoritative father.

“(Take your good judgement with you),” Freyyr rumbled, “(and teach the off-worlders you meet what Wookiee wisdom is. Then, the gods willing, come back to us).”

He released me, and I saw Tasharr had walked closer, with both Canderous Ordo and Dan of Fett trailing in her wake. There was a considering gleam in her eyes as she laid a paw on my shoulder. “(Return to Kashyyyk one day, Zaalbar. You will be missed).”

“(Czerka),” Chorrawl’s intense growl cut through our conversation. “(Every minute we delay is an affront. Let us finish this).”

“It’s time to head out, Carpet,” Canderous grumbled from behind me.
Growwhul frowned at Chorrawl, and looked ready to object, again. The Old One desired Czerka gone from Kashyyyk, the same as every Wookiee still standing in the Elder’s Circle, but he doubted the timing of an attack.

And then I recalled the information Carth Onasi had relayed earlier. My people knew little of the Sith, and had minimal interest in the Republic. Off-world events were of no interest to Wookiees, unless they touched on Kashyyyk directly.

This one might yet. But we could definitely turn it to the advantage of Rwookrrorro.

“(Father),” I said. “(There are off-world ships in orbit around our planet. I have had word from the pilot I travel with that a potential fight between Republic and Sith forces is brewing in our skies. Czerka staff begin to scatter in fear of what this might mean. There has never been a better time to capture their starport than right now).”

Freyyr’s expression creased with puzzlement. “(A battle above us? Why would off-worlders be interested in Kashyyyk?)”

If I had time, perhaps I could explain about the Star Map, and the galactic quest the _Ebon Hawk_ had embarked upon at the bequest of a powerful Jedi. But the name Bastila Shan would be unknown here, and the impatience rolling off Canderous Ordo told me that time was a luxury I did not wield. And now that I had committed to my decision, I, too, felt the urgency to leave.

For the _Ebon Hawk_ would only invite the orbital bombardment Jen Sahara had warned of. It must leave Kashyyyk, and so must I.

“(There is a great war being staged across the galaxy, father. Suffice to say that now is our opportunity).”

“(Let us go, then!)” Chorrawl roared. He held a Czerka blaster rifle raised high in his grip. “(Even the madcl- even Freyrr’s son is in agreement!)”

“(You are sure, Zaalbar?)” Freyyr questioned, as a low rumble of readiness grew from the crowd.

I nodded briskly. “(I am, father. But allow me and my ally to lead the way. I have friends and a ship in the starport that cannot be attacked).” I looked back to Canderous again, aware of the murmured translation from his Mandalorian companion.

“I ain’t offered you a place on my ship, Fett,” Canderous warned, aiming a flat look at Dan Fett. “Force the issue and you’ll regret it.”

The armoured Mandalorian shrugged. “I’m not out of time to change your mind yet, Ordo. Besides, if you won’t grant me a lift, then I have to get to the starport to find another ride anyway.”

“(Let us move out, then!)” Freyrr howled, and a chorus of Wookiees agreed. “(Zaalbar will lead us to reclamation!)”

The roar of my people grew to a deafening clamour of righteousness. I motioned to Canderous, took one last, long look around my home, and began the walk back to the Czerka starport.

xxx
“Dad. There’s a Jedi at the hatch.”

I looked over at the co-pilot’s console to see the image of a scowling human. Dustil had brought up the vid-feed outside the Hawk’s entrance. It was low-res, but the brown robe and look of annoyed expectation on the stranger’s face was enough to give the impression of someone confident of immediate entrance. If we hadn’t already had to ward off two separate groups of Czerka staff trying to slice in and pinch a freighter they no doubt hoped was empty, I might have opened the hatch.

“Do you recognize him?”

“I’m not exactly best buddies with all the frakking robes, Dad,” Dustil complained. He’d been snarky with me ever since I’d sealed him inside the Ebon Hawk. Although, frankly, after he’d vanished from both the Wookiee village and the Republic freighter earlier, I didn’t feel I had much choice.

I’d thought my son was dead for the last four years. Since he refused to travel with the Jedi, I was going to make damn sure that I at least knew where he was.

“But y’know, the lightsaber in his hand kinda gives it away,” Dustil muttered. I looked again, and saw a deactivated metal rod in the old human’s grasp. The stranger leaned forward, and rapped on the hatch door.

There’s Dark Jedi on Kashyyyk. The thought chilled me, not for the first time. Dustil had, at least, relayed Mission’s comm’d report. Mission, who’d somehow ended up in the Shadowlands captured by Mandalorians. And Jen- who’d been captured by Dark Jedi.

I hated this. Being left topside, with Jen not answering any of my comms, with nothing to do but keep the engines warm and be browbeaten by senior officers, while those I cared about ran into danger and I couldn’t do a blasted thing.

Something had happened to Jen. She’d extricated herself from danger, I understood that much, but something had happened to cause this radio silence. We had the nav data - she’d succeeded in the quest for the Star Map, and that should be reason to celebrate. But instead, all I felt was deep unease.

Why hasn’t she been answering?

Another robed figure, this one less than half the height of the grumpy looking human, hobbled into view of the vid-feed. I recognized that one with a frown. Vandar.

And hadn’t that meeting been fun.

…”

The small office in the Republic freighter was enough to give the illusion of privacy, but I didn’t trust the communication link to be secure. Encrypted, yes, through Republic channels. But I’d spent the last few hours being grilled by Commodore Tar’coya, a stony-eyed Sullustan who’d run through my
debrief multiple times before thoroughly criticizing every action of mine since leaving Taris. I wouldn’t put it past him to listen in.

The holo-image of Admiral Forn Dodonna was staring at me patiently, awaiting an answer.

I repeated the same words I’d told Tar’coya at least three times. “The last I heard from Jen Sahara, she and Master Zhar had found a contact in the Shadowlands and were on their way to the Star Map. All going well, Admiral, we should have the Map soon.”

::Good. I am sure Tar’coya has relayed your orders, Carth. As soon as the Star Map is located, gather your entire crew and dock with the Meridus.::

“Yeah, I got that, Admiral.” I did my best to sound respectful. Considering my history with Dodonna, it was more difficult than it should have been.

But I’d spent the last few months jumping from one desperate situation to another, while we pulled off the near-impossible. And now, I had a Core-bred Commodore treating me like an incompetent sheltering a group of insurgents one step away from joining the Sith.

And Dodonna wasn’t acting much better.

I cleared my throat. “Of course I will, Admiral, we’re all on the same side. But I’m the only one who’s actually Fleet, here. Mission’s just a kid. Zaalbar’s a damn Wookiee. And Jen and Juhani report to the Order, not the Republic.”

And then there was ‘General’ Ordo. His background made me wonder if that explained the heavy-handedness of Tar’coya’s interrogation. Five years ago, Canderous Ordo would have been imprisoned faster than a Hutt could shovel down a half-dozen juice lizards.

But Ordo was an ally, for all that he annoyed me. Somehow, I felt I had to warn him of the Ebon Hawk’s destination. Somehow, I felt that his reception would not be as warm as it should be, considering his part in everything we had accomplished.

It hadn’t been long since Jen had pointed that out to me herself.

::Carth,:: Dodonna began, her voice gentling. ::This is a Republic mission now. With the capture of Bastila Shan, we must ensure the correct forces are sent after whatever the Star Map leads to. Anything your crew might have learnt in your travels could be vital. A debrief for all is essential.::

Admiral Dodonna’s lined face showed nothing but purpose. And yet… I didn’t know how to say that it wasn’t really my crew. It was Jen’s. Jen Sahara, a mind-damaged Jedi Knight with little recollection of her past.

Maybe I would simply be making my case weaker if I brought that up.

“I’ll get us to the Meridus, Admiral,” I repeated. I sighed, and lowered my voice. “Forn. Why am I here? You’ve trusted me all this time, and my crew’s delivered. Bastila Shan and Jen Sahara have led us all to pull off the impossible. I should be back on the ‘Hawk, not answering Tar’coya’s pointless queries.”

Dodonna’s lips thinned, but she didn’t answer. I leaned forward on the table. “Why is Tar’coya acting as if he’d like to chuck the lot of us in the brig?”

Dodonna blinked, and visible startlement chased the irritation from her face. ::Carth,:: she said, ::Commodore Tar’coya is known for his less than melodious manner. It is simply the gravity of your
mission. We are not unaware of all that we owe you and your crew.::

I folded my arms and stared at the holo-image. “Then keep your faith in us. Jen will deliver.”

::The amnesiac Jedi:: Dodonna commented, her tone neutral. There was a vague tightening around her eyes that didn’t surprise me. With the Republic appropriating what had begun as an Order-led mission, there had to be background politics involved. The Fleet brass didn’t like the Order at the best of times, and I couldn’t imagine the Jedi Council being particularly impressed at losing command. ::Your report of her abilities and character is glowing, Captain. Is she as good as you say?::

I could barely recall what I’d relayed back on Manaan, when I was ensconced in the Embassy just after Jen had crashed the ‘Hawk and done a runner. No doubt the tone of my report this time around was somewhat different.

I’d always recognized her competence, well before the depths of her Force powers had been apparent. Now, Jen was less of a wildcard, and a greater leader than Bastila had ever been. I could acknowledge that, and know that my personal feelings were not clouding my judgement. Jen really was that good.

I’d been an idiot to hope we’d have uninterrupted time together on Kashyyyk, I realized, somewhat bitterly. Now, all I longed for was Jen safe, and back next to me.

“She is,” I said. “Bastila started this mission, but it’s Jen who will finish it.”

The door behind me swished open unexpectedly, and I turned around with a scowl.

“I’m not to be interrupted,” I snapped at the newcomer, a uniformed soldier I didn’t recognize. Behind him, hobbled in a short green alien with a walking stick.

“Master Vandar wishes to speak with Admiral Dodonna,” the unknown soldier uttered, in a flat tone I recognized all too well.

“Captain Onasi, you must be,” the wrinkled green figure said in a creaky voice. He had sharp blue eyes that fixed on me. “Owe you and your crew much, the Order does.”

“Not enough to leave me alone in a private conference,” I ground out. I heard a sigh from Admiral Dodonna.

::Carth:: Dodonna said quietly. ::We shall speak later. I suspect Master Vandar has his reasons for interrupting.::

Perhaps he did, but I was less than impressed.

…

Still, the interruption had allowed me the opportunity I needed to slip back to the ‘Hawk.

“I better go see them,” I muttered, getting up from the pilot’s seat. “You coming?”

Dustil scowled, and shook his head mutely. His dislike of the Order ran deep, and I put it down to the years spent training in a Sith Academy. I might be wary of the Jedi, but it was nothing on Dustil’s bitterness. I had hoped that he might find a place with them, find a way to control his powers that had come as such a shock to me.
That didn’t seem likely, now.

I’d seen Vandar a second time, along with a Zabrak master herding Dak Vesser and Kel Algwinn through the starport. They’d dropped by as a final farewell, passed a few stilted words back and forth with Dustil - who’d obviously been itching to head back to the safety of the ‘Hawk - and then left Kashyykk for good. Vandar hadn’t, though. He’d sent Dustil a puzzled look, before hobbling back out of the starport.

I’d felt slightly pensive at the departure of Dak and Kel. It was good to see their second chance turning into reality, but it would have been nice for the rest of the crew to see them off. Better, still, had Dustil elected to join them. I had tried once more, futilely, to convince my son, but all he’d done was shoot me a glare of teenage resentment before storming back into the ‘Hawk.

I sighed, coming back to the present. “Okay. I’ll be back in a minute. Let me know if you hear anything on the comm.”

I walked through the empty ‘Hawk, sending an inward plea for the safe return of the others, before opening the hatch.

On the loading ramp stood the two Jedi Masters.

“Captain Onasi,” Vandar greeted. His voice was creaky and high-pitched. “Wondering, we were, if you have heard from your crew.”

“I am Master Vrook,” the old human said, in a low voice that hinted at displeasure. His face was wrinkled with age, but his eyes were sharp. “Has Jen Sahara found the Star Map?”

The question was both blunt and forthright, coming from a man I’d never met before. I had no reason to hold anything back from them, and yet, they were the ones who’d let Jen travel down to the Shadowlands with only that Twi’lek master for company. I felt myself frowning. “I report to the Fleet, not the Order,” I hedged. “And I understand our mission is now under Republic authority.”

“Allies, we all are,” Master Vandar murmured in a soothing voice. Despite myself, I felt somewhat calmed. “To aid and to counsel is why we are here.”

Master Vrook cleared his throat. “Any information you impart may help us assist the Republic.”

I felt my shoulders relaxing as I realised they were right. Meddling and annoying they might be, but this had been a Jedi mission from the outset. And we were homing in on the endgame now. “Yes, she found the Star Map, and I patched through the coordinates as soon as they were transmitted.”

The two masters shared a look; inscrutable, lined faces that seemed to communicate invisibly with one another.

“Travel with Commodore Tar’coya, I shall, to the Meridus,” Master Vandar said.

“Don’t forget our scoutship, Vandar,” Master Vrook warned. “It’s docked by the other tower.”

“Take that, you could, and meet me there,” Vandar murmured. His bright blue eyes appraised the human, whose scowl had etched deep lines into his leathery face. “Needed, we both are, to counsel and to placate.”

“It’s getting hard to bite back I-told-you-so,” Vrook grumbled. “This whole thing was always destined to explode in our faces.”
I didn’t believe they’d forgotten me, but right now I felt like as overlooked as the scenery. On the landing ramp of my own blasted ship.

“Destined, Master Atris’ actions, were not,” Vandar replied. His voice was mild, even as he stood there disagreeing with the human in a roundabout vernacular. “Nor Quatra’s. Free will is ever present.”

“So is a lack of foresight,” Vrook muttered, before expelling a gusty sigh. His gaze shifted back to me. I hoped I looked as unimpressed with them both as I felt. “Go with Tar’coya, then,” he said to Vandar, even as he held my gaze. “You make more sense than I; he’s not known for his sympathy toward humans. I’ll see you there, Vandar. I’ll wait a little longer.”

I felt the vivid gaze of the alien master again. There was something about the green Jedi that made it difficult to remain irritated. I didn’t know if it was a slippery use of the Force, or merely the benign appearance of the man.

“May the Force protect you and your crew, Captain Onasi,” Vandar murmured. “Meet each other again, I believe we shall.”

Without waiting for an answer, the Jedi Master turned and hobbled away. I felt my brows rising as I turned to look at the other master.

“So, Tar’coya’s leaving now?” I asked. “And you and Vandar are heading up to the Meridus?”

Vrook scowled, apparently displeased with my line of inquiry. And that’s where the masters irked me - Karon having been a possible exception. Their counsel and aid was all very well, but their inability to answer direct questions was more than a little frustrating – and hypocritical - at times.

“Darth Malak is a threat to us all. Anything the Order can do to assist, we will,” Vrook growled. “Where’s Jen Sahara? What happened in the Shadowlands?”

I felt a scowl forming on my face, a matching one for Vrook’s. I realized, then, that his name was familiar. He was the master that Jen expected, when we’d landed here. Instead, there’d been that red-skinned Twi’lek, Master Zhar.

“I don’t have the details, but she ran into trouble with Dark Jedi. Might have been better if she hadn’t been rushed down there with only Zhar as an ally.”

The words sparked obvious anger on the old human’s face. “You overstep yourself, Captain. Don’t presume to comment on matters.”

“I’ll presume alright,” I snapped. “Jen’s found herself in danger, yet again, because of all these blasted Jedi secrets. Jen’s had to face the likes of Uthar Wynn with no recollection of any training, and let me tell you that fight could have gone either way. And stars only know what happened in the depths of this blasted planet. If Jen isn’t the luckiest person I’ve ever met-”

“There is no such thing as luck,” Vrook ground out, eyes flashing, angry words cutting over mine. “What of Master Zhar?”

I subsided, then, understanding that Vrook had real concern to be worried, as well.

“He’s with her, I believe,” I said, remembering Dustil’s recollection of Mission’s report. “They’re safe, and on their way back.”

Vrook’s eyes narrowed. “We felt a disturbance in the Force. I was certain it was Zhar’s end. Are you
“Sure that Zhar is with her, Captain?”

“An old guy with a green lightsaber,” I said slowly. Mission had said that, to Dustil and Ordo. But that had been before Jen’s missive regarding the Sith bombardment. Jen said she’d pick up Mission, like Mission wasn’t with even with – a contradiction to what the Twi’lek had apparently reported.

Damn, but I hated being left out of the loop.

Vrook sighed, running a hand over a balding scalp. “Not entirely descriptive, is it?”

His grumbling words fired my irritation once more, even if I knew he was correct. But Mission and Dustil were barely more than kids, and non-military besides.

Vrook raised a placating hand, as if sensing my growing ire. “It could be Zhar,” he said. “Or, more likely, it’s Bindo finally emerging from the depths of his hermitage.”

The words were half-muttered under his breath, more to himself than me, I suspected. Not that they were illuminating in any way. But my attention was pulled away, then, by a uniformed figure striding towards us from the control tower.

Jordo. Captain Merrix, now, in charge of the second Republic freighter. I could turn my head and see the Ruby’s Claw, across the chasm of space that separated the ‘Hawk’s landing pad from its neighbour. Jordo’s ship was a Hyperion-class; more frigate than freighter, really, boasting defensive capabilities such as a dual-plated reinforced hull and a particle shield generator. It had a hefty arsenal, too, with rotator laser cannons and proton torpedoes, but the Hyperion-class was primarily designed for transporting troops on a small scale, often into hot combat areas.

Commodore Tar’coya had the same class starship. At roughly four times the size of the Ebon Hawk, the Republic freighters made for an interesting choice as our military escort. No doubt, they could aid in the battle above once we hit the atmo. The only thing the Ebon Hawk could match these freighters on was speed.

Jordo was an old friend of mine from Telos, who’d joined the Republic military young, just like me. It’d been a pleasant surprise to see him here, although we’d barely had a chance to exchange pleasantries let alone catch up on the past. Jordo reported to Tar’coya, and I had the feeling that the Sullustan had been keeping him busy.

“Carth,” Jordo said in greeting, coming to a stop before us both. “Commodore Tar’coya’s leaving to dock with the Meridus.” He slanted a quick look towards the Jedi Master, whose expression had edged back into inscrutability.

“So I’ve heard,” I replied. “Interesting, that, seeing as Tar’coya was adamant he wanted to personally escort me there himself.”

Jordo shrugged, his black eyes fixed on mine. There was a bitter expression on his face, like he was about to swallow something unpleasant. Jordo had been a light-hearted sort, back when we were both Ensigns, young and full of brash enthusiasm to save the world. He’d been a snubfighter pilot as well, same as me, and we’d seen a lot of each other before Telos.

Things changed, after that. Jordo had lost his family, too.

“Well, you know, orders can be fluid,” Jordo muttered, before derailing into a pent-up sigh. “Carth. They’re engaged in full-out battle up there. I guess Tar’coya wanted to be a part of things. He’s commanded me to wait with you until your crew return. But…” he trailed off, staring pointedly at
Vrook.

Vrook’s brows raised, and he folded his arms. “Oh, don’t mind me,” he said, in a bland voice.

Jordo rolled his eyes, and in another circumstance I might have chuckled. My old friend glanced at me again, and the burning anger in his gaze surprised me. “Look, Carth, it’s the Leviathan.” His lips thinned as the words hit like a hammer to the heart. “Up there, firing on the Meridus. I thought you should know.”

“Karath,” I whispered, closing my eyes. The sick feeling of hatred clenched tight in my gut, and for a brief instant Morgana’s face flashed through my minds-eye. It was indistinct, features faded with the passing of years, and I hated Karath all the more for that.

Admiral Saul Karath, the man I’d spent half a lifetime looking up to. The man who had betrayed Telos to Darth Revan’s forces.

“Yes. Being grounded like this while that betraying bastard engages our men in the skies above goes against the grain. How far away is your crew?”

“I don’t know,” I admitted. “A few hours, guessing from their last location.” I glanced over to Jordo’s landing pad; a handful of soldiers were milling about his freighter, likely doing last minute checks before take-off. I saw one soldier chase away a uniformed Czerka figure with an upraised blaster. The starport had emptied itself of foreign vessels, but there was still a fair amount of ground personnel and Czerka-paid hunters around. In that respect, the Ebon Hawk was lucky to be flanked by the two Republic freighters and their troops. There were too many hopefuls looking for a quick getaway right now.

It still didn’t make sense to me, why the Republic had sent two large freighters - more suited for transporting troops or prisoners - to escort us back to the Meridus. Or why a blasted Commodore was commanding one of them.

“What’s the status up there?” I asked, turning to look up. The branches of the wroshyrs covered near everything bar a small circle of cropped blue. It gave the false impression of security. As I stared, a brief line of light flashed through the sky. On another day, one might assume it was nothing more than a shooting star.

“It’s fairly even, last I heard,” Jordo relayed. “Six squadrons apiece. Karath didn’t know we were here, but it took time for us to rally. The Leviathan came out of hyperspace closer to Kashyyyk than the Meridus was. Dammit, Carth, I could be of use in skies. So could you.”

Orbital bombardment. Jen’s words came back to haunt me. The Leviathan had been responsible for Taris, I’d found out after the fact. One of the more impressive ships in Darth Malak’s armada, the Leviathan had once served the Republic Navy, back in the Mandalorian Wars. Back when Saul Karath was still an honourable man, at least on the face of things.

The Meridus was a similarly-sized cruiser with a similarly-impressive past, so it came down to the supporting fleets the two had. With both cruisers wielding interdicting technology, no one would be escaping into hyperspace in a hurry.

The sound of thrusters warming up had us both turning, in time to see Tar’coya’s freighter launching off from the landing pad next to the ‘Hawk. It looked a hurried exit, as if Tar’coya’s pilot had forced maximum power into the repulsors, and the craft took only a handful of seconds to clear the top of the wroshyrs.
Tar’coya will dock with the Meridus, first, and offload some of his men. His Hyperion-class freighter would be useful in the battle, but it didn’t make sense to leave it full to capacity with troops that would be more useful on the Meridus.

Jordo, when he finally left Kashyyyk, would undoubtedly do the same.

I glanced back to my old friend, to see the lines of age in his face that hadn’t been there last time we’d met. Once, our families had been close. Dustil used to play with Jordo’s little girl, back when the Mandalorians had been the only threat.

It took me a moment to remember the girl’s name. Kala. Jordo’s little girl Kala. So much war. So many ships burned down, that sometimes the golden memories of the past felt like someone else’s life. Like I’d seen too much to ever enjoy a simple existence of family and friendship again.

And then I remembered the soft skin and taut muscles next to me in the pilot’s quarters, the sharp humour that sometimes surprised me into a laughter I thought I’d long lost. The one responsible for the restoration of my son. Damaged but, amazingly, alive.

I still had reasons left to live.

“Jordo, my son’s onboard. Dustil’s onboard,” the words rushed out, and I saw blank shock dash through my old friend’s face. “It’s a long story, and I’d hoped he would go with the Jedi… but he’s here, on the ship with my crew.

“Dustil’s alive?” Jordo gasped. His face had paled. He couldn’t help but think of Kala, who’d been the same age. “Really? Carth- how- you must be ecstatic- where did you find him?”

I remembered searching through rubble, demanding details from demo-bots who scanned for lifeforms under the debris before shifting large chunks of ferracrete to expose the bodies of the fallen. Frantic, horrifying times, as Jordo and I had held out desperate hope for our families.

Morgana had been found with Jordo’s wife – and I couldn’t even remember her damn name – when the bots uncovered them. It hadn’t been much longer after that when they’d found Kala’s little body. She’d always been tiny, for her age.

Tiny limbs, broken and lifeless, just like her mother. Just like Dustil’s mother.

Saul Karath, who was responsible for their deaths, for the surprise attack and wholesale slaughter of our homeworld, was alive and above us right now.

“Dustil was captured by the Sith during the bombing.” I answered, as emotion filled Jordo’s face. He was happy for me, he truly was, but it couldn’t help but bring up the ugly grief of four years ago. We’d seen each other only once or twice since Telos, as he’d taken time out from the Fleet before returning, while I’d thrown myself head-first into anything that would help me forget. “We found him on Korriban. He’s… he’s been through a bit, but he’s alive.”

Jordo nodded, stepping close to clasp a hand on my shoulder.

“Why would you want him to go with the Jedi?” Vrook interrupted. I’d forgotten the crotchety old man was listening in. I didn’t even know why he was still standing there, listening in on two Republic officers’ private business. Vrook turned to stare at the Ebon Hawk. “There is no Force sensitive onboard your ship, Captain Onasi.”

I stared at the JediMaster mutely, realizing that I’d never, in actual fact, seen Dustil do anything with the Force. But even as that thought shot through my mind, I immediately disregarded it. Vrook sent
me a pitying look, as if suspecting the dishonesty of my teenage son, and that did nothing but increase my distaste for the man.

Uthar Wynn had regarded Dustil as his protégé, I’d seen that for myself. And Jen had assured me of my son’s strength in the Force. When it came down to it, I trusted Jen worlds more than some old Jedi who hadn’t even been able to meet her in the starport.

Jordo’s hand dropped as he turned to face Vrook. “Master Jedi, I’m afraid we have Fleet business to attend to. Is there something Captain Onasi or I can assist you with?”

“I thought you were heading to your scoutship?” I added, trying to will the sour tone from my voice. “I’ve already had Czerka try to break into the ‘Hawk. Maybe you should check on your ship.”

“You’re as subtle as a ferracrete brick, Captain,” the Jedi Master groused. “Don’t forget that members of the Order are part of your crew. I desire an update on their whereabouts.”

“Juhani waltzed off – to you and your colleagues- without a communicator,” I shot back. “That won’t happen again. I told myself. It was insane that the crew had all scattered, with only two working comms left between them – one of which was never seemingly answered. ‘Jen hasn’t been checking in, but is on her way back. We’re taking off as soon as they get here. Any debrief will have to wait until we reconvene on the Meridus.”

“I can offer you a lift on the Ruby’s Claw if you desire, Master Jedi,” Jordo said. His voice was light and pleasant. “It will likely be safer than your scoutship.”

Vrook harrumphed. “My ship will do just fine, Captain.” He sent me another hard stare, before muttering something about the Force under his breath. “Very well. I shall head to the Meridus. Don’t delay your departure, Captain Onasi. Once you have your crew, get them to safety.”

He sent me a brisk nod, before turning on his heel and striding towards the control tower. Jordo’s gaze returned to meet mine, as we both waited in silence for the Jedi to move out of earshot.

“I saw that look on your face,” Jordo said, the side of his mouth quirking. “I thought you were going to have a go at him.”

“I can hold my tongue,” I muttered, wondering inwardly how true it was. There was too much at stake here. After years of having nothing left to live for other than shooting down enemy ships, now I found myself in the thick of war with those I cared about in danger. Dustil. Jen. Mission.

The electronic hiss of the hatch opening behind us forestalled whatever reply Jordo was about to make. I spun, to see Dustil in the entrance of the ‘Hawk, shooting me an uncertain look before walking closer.

“Dustil,” Jordo hissed behind me, his voice shot through with awe as if he hadn’t quite believed my words. “Stang. It really is true.”

Dustil blinked, the surprise of recognition widening his eyes, before his attention homed back in on me. He’d always been a bit on the reserved side, but his years on Korriban had added layers of wariness. Once, he would have walked over to Jordo and given the man a hug.

“I’ve heard from the others,” Dustil said, all but ignoring Jordo as he stepped up to me. “Ordo’s just left the Wookiee village at the head of a frakking Wookiee army. It sounds like they plan on attacking the damn starport, Dad.”

“What?” Jordo snapped.
“Wookiee army?” I repeated faintly. “Is he still on the comm?” I glanced down at the device on my wrist, but there was no open channel blinking on its tiny screen.

“No, but I’m not kidding around. The Wookiees have had some sort of internal revolt and slaughtered their leader. They want to get rid of Czerka, and Ordo reckons they think anything that’s not seven feet tall and covered in hair is Czerka. He’s half a klick away, and says they’re gonna attack any sent on sight.”

“Blasted primitives,” Jordo muttered, with a xenophobia that surprised me. “Czerka’s been screwing them for years, but to rise up now-”


“Briefly. Jen comm’d in,” Dustil’s eyes met mine again, and I felt an irrational annoyance that Jen had, once more, communicated with someone other than me. It was like she was deliberately ignoring me, which made no sense. And is verging on paranoia. I’ve been away and Jen’s had her hands full - I know enough to understand that. She’s going to lambast me about trust issues if I’m not careful. Dustil cleared his throat. “They’re headed to the Czerka lift, but they’re some distance away. The Wookiees will get here first.”

Jordo swore under his breath. “Carth, I don’t want to waste my men on a bunch of insurgent Wookiees. We need to get your crew on the ‘Claw.”

I blinked in surprise. “What? Why would I do that?”

His dark eyes met mine steadily, even as he shifted on his feet. “My ship’s larger and far better armoured, if there’s some sort of native uprising about to-”

“No,” Dustil interrupted. “Ordo says Zaalbar’s making sure they leave the ‘Hawk alone.”

Jordo’s gaze flickered slightly over my son, before meeting mine again. “Carth, the Sith know the Ebon Hawk. You fly this thing into the atmo, and all those snubs out there will immediately be targeting you.”

It was true. The signature change on Korriban wouldn’t do a blasted thing here; right now, they’d be on the lookout for anything remotely close to a Dynamic-class. We might not have Bastila Shan onboard, but we were still her remaining crew. We’d still found all the Star Maps, and that must be making Darth Malak edgy.

Would Karath turn his forces from the Meridus, to focus on taking our ship out? He’ll know I’m onboard. Will that mean anything to him, one way or the other?

The Ruby’s Claw would have a better chance at reaching the Meridus. But the ‘Hawk was fast, and manoeuvrable, and it had become home. Not to mention whatever argument I’d have on my hands convincing Ordo or Jen to board a foreign ship. Or Mission, depending on her mood.

I’d get the Ebon Hawk to the cruiser.

“No, we’re staying with the ‘Hawk,” I answered finally.

Jordo turned away to stare at his ship, one landing pad over. His next words sounded forced, and something tightened in my gut. “Carth, don’t be an idiot. It’s safer on the ‘Claw, surely you must-”

“I’ll get us to the Meridus, I have my orders,” I snapped. “You’re escorting me, anyway. Why the sudden urge to get my people onboard?”
Jordo shrugged. “It’s a preference from the brass: if possible, ditch the *Ebon Hawk*, and transport your crew personally. It *would* be safer, Carth, you must concede that-“

“But heavy-handed. Dammit, Jordo, this whole things been over the top since we landed. You and Tar’coya, with combat-ready freighters chock full of soldiers, as if the ‘Hawk was going to run through enemy lines. What the heck is going on?“

His dark eyes met mine, then, frowning with puzzlement. Whether it was at my question or the situation itself, I wasn’t sure. “I don’t know, Carth. I thought you’d know more than any of us.”

And, once more, I was struck by the feeling that something of import was eluding me. It was like they expected one of the crew to go rogue. I’d thought it was Canderous, at first – and I ignored the inner voice that told me my veiled warning to him bordered on treason. Stang, I wasn’t going to let his background blind me to what we all owed him.

But this felt excessive – even for a missing Mandalorian general who might one day lead a clan that wasn’t a threat anymore.

If Bastila had still been with us, then maybe it would make sense. Her Battle Meditation was invaluable to the war effort. But she was gone, and I’d already transmitted the Star Maps the moment Jen had sent them.

Jen… she was the only unknown in our party. A previous Jedi Knight with memory loss. Her power had been enough to worry Bastila, at times. And yet, why would the Republic be interested in her? I felt the concern well up again, undercut with irritation, that she still hadn’t made any meaningful contact.

“It doesn’t have anything to do with Jen Sahara, does it?” I said abruptly. Then, it occurred to me that I hadn’t even considered Juhani, who’d fled the Order once to dabble in the Dark Side personally.

Jordo shrugged, his open face betraying nothing of consequence. “All I know is the brass want your entire party. I guess whatever you’ve been doing is critical to the war, huh?“

It was. And maybe that was all there was to it - the Fleet ensuring we were all safely ensconced in their protection now that our destination was clear. And while Juhani’s dark past or Jen’s forgotten one were Jedi business, not Republic – I could understand why they might be concerned.

The stars knew there were enough Jedi who’d fallen in the past, often while on some dangerous mission with the best of intentions.

But my crew *were* trustworthy, and we’d successfully completed our objective on Kashyyyk.

I hadn’t even had time to dissect the Star Map data, although I’d seen Teethree illuminating a large holo-map in the *Ebon Hawk’s* common room. I’d briefly spotted the schematic of the alien space station, too. The endpoint. Malak’s cornerstone of power. I didn’t know exactly what it was, yet, but the fact Jen had managed to retrieve the plans was nothing short of miraculous.

A uniformed soldier jogged over to us, her attention firmly fixed on Jordo.

“Captain, there’s reports of debris burning through the atmo. Latest comm from the *Meridus* states a twenty percent fighter loss on both sides. The *Leviathan* is close to the planet, and there’s concern that its quad laser cannons will soon be within range,” she said, her voice breathless and rushed. “We think they’re positioning for orbital bombardment. The *Ruby’s Claw* is ready to depart on your command, sir.”
It struck me hard, every word confirming Jen’s previous warning. Jordo took a deep breath, and looked over to me.

“Get to the ‘Claw, Jordo,” I said. “I know your orders are to escort me, but I can’t leave – not even if fire starts reigning down on the starport.” The urgency was building within me now, sharp and acrid. These quad lasers had reduced Upper Taris to rubble. “I won’t leave. Not without the whole crew. You should be ready to take off – if, if it looks like my crew won’t make it in time.”

There was a dark acceptance on my old friend’s face.

“I’ll stay until the last possible moment,” Jordo murmured. “But I’ll be ready to launch earlier, should I need to.”

He gave me a fierce nod. And behind me, I could hear the awkward silence of my only child. I can’t… I can’t lose him. Not again.

I had to stay. Even if the Meridus couldn’t stop Karath once more engineering the wholesale slaughter of civilians on an unsuspecting planet. And if we did get out of here, the ‘Hawk would be a bigger target – and a more fragile one – than the ‘Claw.

“Wait, Jordo-” I turned, facing Dustil, whose dark eyes gave nothing away. He’d been so silent, I’d almost expected to find him gone, yet again. “Can you take my son?”

I was watching Dustil as I said the words, and saw the outrage ignite to twist his features. “What?” Dustil hissed, his brows slamming down in automatic anger.

“What?” Jordo echoed behind me. “Um, yeah, of course I can-”

“No!” Dustil yelled. “No way, Dad! I’m not leaving-”

“No!” I cut in, and dropped my hands to his shoulders. I felt the insistence well up, the desire for my only child to, this time, actually stop and listen. “I can’t… I can’t leave without the others. But I’ve spent the last four years thinking you were dead-”

His eyes were darkening with resentment. “Don’t ask me to do this, Dad,” he ground out. Dustil’s voice had deepened so much, that it still sometimes startled me to hear him talk. “I won’t go. Dammit, you always do this!”

“Please,” I whispered. “Dustil, please, I have to know you’re safe. I lost everything four years ago. It’s the damn Leviathan, positioning itself for bombardment. You said yourself that Jen and the others are some distance away. Look, the Sith know the ‘Hawk, especially after Korriban, when we do launch they’ll be straight on us-”

“Dad-”

“Jordo’s freighter is heavily armoured and can get you to the Meridus-”

“I will,” Jordo promised. “I’ll make sure he’s first in line for an escape pod, too, should the Meridus falter.”

If there was a man I could trust with my son’s life, it would be my old friend who knew the pain of losing a child.

But Dustil’s face had turned to stone, all emotion encased behind a frozen wall of teenage bitterness.
“Please,” I repeated, my fingers digging into his shoulders.

My son tore his gaze away, and stepped back from me. “Fine,” he mumbled through gritted teeth, and I could hear the undercurrent of anger still present. I didn’t care, I couldn’t care, not if it gave him a better chance of survival. “Fine.”

“Son, please-” I sighed. “I’ll see you on the Meridus. Be safe. I love you.”

“I know.” He threw me one last, resentful glare, before brushing past me and Jordo both, and stomping towards the Ruby’s Claw with all the angst he could muster.

There was sympathy on Jordo’s face, but I saw the longing, also, for the child he had lost. “Best of luck, Carth,” Jordo said. “I’m getting out of here now.”

I stayed still, staring at their retreating backs. Dustil turned once, to shoot me an unfathomable look, and didn’t raise his hand in reply to my farewell.

I sighed, heart heavy, and retreated back into the ‘Hawk.

xXx

I only planned a brief trip back to the cockpit; just enough to cast my eye over the nav-screen and locate the others. Ordo was close, now, but Jen was at least a klick away. I tried once more to contact her.

And, again, she didn’t answer.

With a grimace, I ran my gaze over the ship’s start-up diagnostics. The ‘Hawk was refuelled and ready to go, with Teethree patched into the control computer, overseeing pre-flight checks and intercepting any traffic comms. I switched the nav screen to the exterior cam, swivelling it to point to the landing pad’s entrance.

I had no idea what the impending arrival of angry Wookiees would mean for the ‘Hawk, but I wouldn’t do any good in here wearing out the seats.

“Teethree, don’t let anyone onboard who’s not with a member of the crew,” I ordered, as I strode back past him. He whistled at me in reassurance.

Striding back through the ship, I opened a comm channel from my wrist this time. Ordo picked up immediately.

“Dustil tells me there’s a damn Wookiee army headed this way,” I said, unclipping a blaster from my belt.

I heard a harsh back of laughter in reply. ::Yep. The Wookiees ain’t too impressed with off-worlders right now. Get ready to open the hatch, Onasi, we should plan on a quick getaway.::

“Zaalbar’s with you? Juhani?” I demanded, as I opened the exit hatch. The landing pad was empty, now, and I glanced over to the control tower. A couple of figures – Czerka hunters, by the looks – came running at speed up the stairwell that led out of the starport. I frowned as they made a beeline for the control tower’s entrance.

::Carpet’s leading the way, yeah. The Cathar went back for Jen. They not back?::

“No.” The entry doors had shut behind the hunters. The stairwell was important, being the only
access into or out of the starport, other than through the control tower itself. The six landing pads dotted around the tower all converged on the narrow stairwell that might allow for two sentients to pass through simultaneously; one, if the being in question were a Wookiee.

All the visible landing pads were now empty, other than mine and Jordo’s.

“They’re less than an hour away,” I elaborated, my attention still fixed on the tower. “Assuming they move fast.”

::Here’s hoping tin-brain caught up to them:::

I felt my mouth twist at the mention of HK. Here’s hoping he didn’t. I wouldn’t be the only one glad to see the back of that psychotic droid.

::Onasi, you should tell your Republic friends to vamoose. The Wookiees will attack them, y’know. Czerka or Republic, they won’t give two craps:::

“They won’t leave until we do,” I muttered. Other than a handful of soldiers standing at attention outside the Ruby’s Claw, Jordo’s ship was ready to leave. Part of me doubted the decision I’d forced on Dustil, and the doubt sat like a block of permacrete in the base of my gut. But I was playing the odds right, I knew I was. The Ebon Hawk would be well-known to the Sith, and should we make it off Kashyyyk – and we would, because, dammit, Jen always pulled through – then I knew that Sith fighters would be immediately dispatched to take us out.

The Ebon Hawk was fast, but it was a smuggling freighter, not an offensive craft. And without the option of hyperspace, our only recourse was to dock with the Meridus as quickly as possible.

Stars willing, we’d all get to the Meridus in one piece, and Dustil would be waiting for me there.

A flicker of movement from the tower caught my eye, and from my vantage point on the ‘Hawk’s loading ramp I had a clear view as a large group of Czerka-clad guards poured out from the double-doors. My frown deepened as I spotted the variety of weapons in their grasp; blasters, rifles – and there had to be about thirty of them, all converging at the top of the stairwell.

::They’re about to have some fun then::: Ordo response was dry. ::I see the starport, Onasi. Be with you shortly:::

“Ordo, wait,” I demanded, as the men spread out into a large semi-circle, guns pointed down to the only possible place the Wookiees could be emerging from. “Stang! Czerka’s had warning. There’s a blasted ambush at the top of the stairs!”

::What? Mand’alor’s balls, how many:::

They weren’t well organized, I could see a duo of Rodians arguing amongst themselves as a Duros waved an angry fist at them. “Thirty, maybe. Weapons aimed down the stairs.”

::I can’t slow down the kriffing Wookiees. Watch for grenades and guard our backs, Onasi:::

And the comm switched off. I ducked behind the cover of the ‘Hawk’s entrance, blaster raised, as I kept my eye on the group. They didn’t know I was there – yet. Had Jordo seen this, from the neighbouring landing pad?

He knew some of my crew were with the Wookiees, but I had no way to reach him for aid, not without running back into cockpit and firing off a transmission.
I lifted my blaster, stared down the barrel, and had the back of one hunter fixed in my sights. There was nothing more to do but wait.

I didn’t have to wait long.

There was a yell from afield, followed by the percussive detonation of a frag grenade rumbling through ferracrete foundations. A handful of Czerka guards were flung wildly back from the circle, and the ping of blaster fire started up.

I fired a double-tap into my target. As it crumpled, my aim shifted to repeat the same direct hits on the figure to his left.

The first Wookiees appeared at the top of the stairs, howling in fury as they charged the armed hunters. One Wookiee fell almost immediately, cut down by blaster fire. There was another explosion to the side, ripping through the line of hunters, and my grip moved to focus on my third mark.

More Wookiees were spilling out from the staircase, severely disadvantaged by the waiting guards. A few of the Wookiees didn’t bother returning fire, instead charging the Czerka forces with nothing but rage propelling them.

I spotted Canderous as he emerged, armoured but helmless. His hefty repeater was in his grasp, gutting into the surrounding hunters.

The air was shot through with roars of Wookiee rage as they continued to ascend onto the landing pad. My finger was hot on the trigger, aiming at those closest to Ordo. I had no idea where Zaalbar was, and wouldn’t be able to recognize him through the brawl of hairy muscle and waving limbs. And as more of Zaalbar’s countrymen continued to arrive, one Czerka-clad guard turned tail and sprinted for the safety of the control tower.

A bowcaster bolt from somewhere hit the hunter directly in the back.

Another explosion reverberated through the starport, followed by the sound of shattering transparisteel and crumbling framework. I glanced over to see a gaping maw where the control tower’s double doors had been, and the nearest Wookiee unleashed a howl of righteousness before running directly for the new opening.

It didn’t take long for others to follow suit.

I looked back to Ordo; there were bodies encircling him like dead petals fallen from a flower’s stem. Machinery grasped in both hands, he scanned the area, but neither he nor I had a clear shot at the last main thrust of hunters. There were eight or so of them remaining, firing frantically at an approaching trio of Wookiees that blocked my view.

There was another Wookiee, bounding to Ordo’s side, before gesturing wildly at the ‘Hawk. I recognized Zaalbar with a jolt. He shook his shaggy head, turned, and then sprinted directly to me.

There was still the odd Wookiee clearing the stairs, now all making a direct line for the control tower. I could see the spark of a blaster rifle discharging from an open moisture lock one storey up; a second later, the body was hurled out the window and a furry face was briefly visible.

Back on the ground, Zaalbar was almost upon me, with Canderous following at a pace that wasn’t close to a Wookiee’s. And behind, the remaining group of hunters – four of them, still standing – had gunned down the Wookiees and were backing away from the stairwell and control tower both.
In this direction.

I saw one point a fist towards Canderous, then all four of them turn and raise their blasters. *Stang!* My eyes widened in alarm, and I made to aim, but Zaalbar was right there, halfway up the loading ramp-

Zaalbar howled something, right in my face.

“Ordo!” I yelled. “Get out of the way!”

Zaalbar’s paws slammed down on my shoulders, shaking them in desperation before repeating the same howl.

“Stang, Zaalbar, Ordo’s in trouble!”

I pulled back, desperate to get out of the Wookiee’s tight grip, as he howled a third time – not registering my words just like I never heard his. The same howl, a low intonation with a lift of pitch right at the end.

I’d heard it a thousand times before. *Mission! He’s saying Mission!*

“She’s in the Shadowlands!” I screamed. “Coming up the Czerka lift with Jen! Put me down and help Ordo!”

His black eyes widened, and he jerked around, leaping clear of the landing pad with a velocity that could rival a Jedi’s. I had a clear view now; twenty metres away and Ordo was on the ground, rolling to avoid a barrage of blaster bolts that nonetheless thudded into his armoured form.

I was firing immediately, but they were all upon him and Zaalbar was too far away, and an armoured blur of a fifth joined the brawl from out of nowhere-

One went down - I didn’t see how - but Ordo wasn’t moving and the group turned on the newcomer. I steadied my aim and stared through the sights, focusing on a hunter who at that moment caught a flying armoured fist to the face. The hunter staggered back, head jerking unnaturally to the side.

The remaining two opened fire on the armoured figure, who swiftly dropped to the ground at the same time as the one he’d knocked out. But the newcomer wasn’t hit; he was rolling with a surprising speed considering his armour, before coming up in a crouch with a blaster materializing in his grasp.

Laser spat instantly into the two hunters. They fell, motionless. The Wookiee was there then, a howl on his lips, and I had the fleeting thought *that guy’s an ally, Zaalbar!* but he seemed to realize, ignoring the armoured stranger to crouch down next to Canderous.

I scanned around the landing pad, now empty but littered with bodies from both sides. Black burns defaced the ferracrete near the stairwell, and there was a plume of smoke lazily trailing above the tower’s entrance. To the right, the *Ruby’s Claw* still sat, dwarfing its landing pad. I could see two Wookiees advancing, bowcasters drawn, and cursed inwardly.

A handful of soldiers stood at attention outside the armoured freighter. It looked like Jordo at the front, with a gleaming protocol droid taking a step forward. I could only hope the Wookiees would stop to listen, because I couldn’t see them overwhelming a transport ship of trained military with the same ease. Jordo might not attack, but at the first sign of aggression his men would be jumping into action.
I glanced back to Ordo, who was now struggling to his feet with the aid of the armoured stranger. I felt a small rush of relief – for a moment, there, I’d been concerned about his fate. Zaalbar was howling something, before he turned and bolted towards the control tower with a speed that surprised me. He halted only to rumble something to a grey Wookiee emerging from the building, before vanishing inside himself.

Ordo was obviously injured. Limping heavily, despite leaning on his friend, it took them minutes to reach me. As they hobbled closer, I recognized the stranger’s armour as Mandalorian make with a grimace. He was tall, almost as tall as Canderous, but that was partly due to the high-backed helmet that concealed his face and had obviously seen better days. He raised an arm once, to fire at a fallen body at least thirty metres away with unerring accuracy. I could only assume it had been showing signs of life I hadn’t seen.

“Onasi,” Canderous wheezed in greeting. There was a vivid burn along the side of his scalp, but that was the least of his injuries. My pick, judging from his walk, were primarily hits to the legs. Ordo raised the arm that wasn’t leaning on the unknown Mandalorian, and ripped a cracked visor from his face. His grey eyes still gleamed with the blood-lust of battle. “Good shooting out there. Carpet’s gone to get the others.”

I nodded. “How bad are you hurt, Ordo? Can you man the turrets?”

“Easy,” he grunted. “Worst hit is my thigh. Couple of stims and a shot of kolto and you won’t notice the difference behind the guns.”

My gaze moved to settle on the stranger. Light glinted from the anonymous visor. The damn T shape of the Mandalorian helm brought back unwelcome memories. “Who’s your friend?”

Ordo’s head turned, and he appraised the Mandalorian in silence for a moment. “I owe you one, Fett,” he said finally, his voice low. “That was getting a bit hairy, back there.”

_Fett_, I thought with a grimace. The Republic’s least favourite clan.

The armoured Mandalorian shrugged. “You sure took a few down with you, Ordo.”

“I always do,” Canderous drawled. “Still, that was some impressive fighting, in a suit of armour that I’m willing to bet didn’t always belong to you.”

The stranger clipped the blaster onto his belt with one hand, still supporting Ordo with the other. Behind them, I saw the grey Wookiee who’d spoken to Zaalbar wander in our direction. Unarmed, and not an obvious threat, but my grip tightened on the blaster at my side regardless. “Lots of Mandalorians lost their beskar at Malachor, Ordo. Look, I still need a lift out of here. Have I convinced you yet?”

“Really?” I interjected in mild disbelief, following it with a sigh of capitulation. It wouldn’t be easy to contest this, if Canderous agreed. After all, the man had just saved his arse. “Another Mandalorian?”

Canderous swivelled his head to stare at me blandly. “Do I need to mention the three Sithkids, Onasi?”

Fett made a noise somewhere between a choke and a cough. “Sithkids?” he said faintly.

“None of them are with us,” I said, my voice sharp. “Kel and Dak have gone with the Order. Dustil’s joining us on the _Meridus._”
Canderous’ gaze sharpened, but he didn’t question further; turning, instead, to face his companion again. “I’ll get you a lift out of here, Dan Fett, assuming our leader doesn’t have an issue with it.”

The Wookiee had drawn level with us, then, at the foot of the loading ramp. Old and bent with age, with streaks of grey dappling his or her fur. The Wookiee howled, a mournful sound, followed by gesticulations aimed at Canderous.

“She’s thanking us for our assistance, and asking that we piss off now,” Dan said, and I blinked in surprise at his translation. So far, the only sentients I’d come across who could understand Shyriiwook were translation droids and the odd Jedi. *And Mission, of course,* I reminded myself.

“We’re waiting for Zaalbar, and the rest of our crew,” Canderous told the Wookiee. “We’ll be outta here as soon as they show.”

“Don’t attack the Republic ship in the next landing pad over,” I said, causing the Wookiee to stare at me sharply through intelligent eyes. “They’re our escort. They’ll be taking off as soon as we do.”

The old Wookiee chuffed something in acknowledgement, before turning back to Canderous with a look I construed as, strangely enough, gratitude on her furry face. *Canderous got the Wookies free,* I recalled, remembering all Dustil had filled me in on. *It was Mission’s idea, and Dustil and the droids helped - but Canderous led the charge.*

The Wookiee placed a gentle paw on Ordo’s shoulder, causing the grizzled Mandalorian to look wholly uncomfortable. I couldn’t hold back a smirk, and Ordo shot me a quelling glare as the Wookiee stepped away, before she turned and strode quickly back toward the control tower.

I glanced over to the *Ruby’s Claw* again; there were no flashes of blaster fire just yet, and the burnished droid was between the soldiers and Wookiees, hopefully translating some sort of negotiation.

“Get on the turrets, both of you,” I said, attention snapping back to the Mandalorians. “The skies are hot up there, and I want to be ready to leave at a second’s notice. There’s no telling if falling debris will hit the surface, or if the Sith will begin their planned bombardment. As soon as the others’ feet hit the ‘Hawk, I’m powering up the repulsors.”

I stepped to the side to allow them entrance.

“Turbolaser turrets,” Canderous said, shaking loose of Fett’s hold and limping up the loading ramp. “I take it you’ve fired one before, Fett?”

The armoured Mandalorian nodded in assent. Not an unexpected reply, Mandalorians were known for their space-worthiness.

“Come on, then,” Canderous muttered, entering the ‘Hawk.

I followed the two of them in, shutting the hatch and heading straight to the cockpit. Teethree beeped reassuringly at me as I slid into the seat and flicked the nav console back on. The green dot of Jen’s comm-link blinked at me, closer than I expected, and warm relief unfurled in my gut. She was almost back.

I sent a ping her way, opening up a comm channel for what felt like the hundredth time, and inwardly pleaded for her to damn well answer for once.

::*We’re in the lift. We’re not far,:* Jen’s voice shot through the speaker, and my shoulders sagged in gratitude.
“Jen,” I breathed. “Hurry to the ‘Hawk. There’s fighting in the skies, and crazed Wookiees in the starport. Zaalbar’s gone to meet you in the control tower. We’re heading out as soon as you’re all onboard.”

::Noted.:: she answered, and switched the comm off. I frowned at the curt response, but turned my attention to the turbine compressor. It sprang to life underneath my command, whirring in high-pitched expectation. I paused briefly before transmitting a departure message to the Ruby’s Claw - Jordo would rally to leave, now I was - and then flicked open the ship’s internal ‘comm. “Ordo. You both on the turrets?”

::We’re good to go, Onasi.:: Ordo’s reply shot back. ::What can we expect up there?::

“The Leviathan, with a supporting fleet of snubfighters. Six squads, Republic class I’d wager, rather than the alien craft Malak’s been pushing through the galaxy. This is Karath’s armada, so it’ll be his forces.”

Saul Karath had taken a good chunk of the Republic Navy with him, when he’d followed Revan into darkness and betrayal. I didn’t know how many soldiers who’d once worn Republic uniform still followed Karath, but they’d likely be stationed with him rather than elsewhere in Malak’s fleet.

Admiral Karath had been an inspiring leader, once.

::Right. You told Jen about your orders to dock with the Meridus?::

“I haven’t had the chance, Ordo,” I ground out. “She hasn’t exactly been communicative.”

::Make sure you do, Onasi. It’s her call where we go.::

I frowned at the console. I’d warned Ordo about our destination, and he’d elected to come back to the ‘Hawk anyway. I couldn’t do any more for him.

::Onasi, did you hear me? Make damn sure Jen knows, or I’ll leave the kriffing turrets to tell her myself.::

“I’ll tell her,” I answered, as puzzlement chased away my irritation. I was about to say more, when Teethtree whooped loudly behind me. The entrance light on the dash blinked, and I switched the vid-feed to the hatch.

And there, at the top of the ramp, was Jen. The relief that surged through me was nothing short of happiness.

I opened the hatch. I could see Mission, Zaalbar, Juhani, some old robed guy, and – damn it – everyone’s least favourite droid. As soon as they all entered, I sealed the exit and lifted the loading ramp.

“Everyone, get buckled in!” I broadcast through the ship. “We’re about to take off. Jen, get your ass in the cockpit.”

But, as I fired up the thrusters and started the repulsorlifts, it was the unknown old man who slid in next to me.

“What?” I snapped, shooting him an indignant glare. “Who are- where’s Jen?”

“Eh, she bust her arm.” The dark-skinned man leaned forward to stare at the co-pilot’s dashboard, and the artificial lighting in the cockpit gleamed from a balding scalp. I had to fight the urge to slap
his hands away. “Don’t you worry about me, sonny, I’ve flown many a ship in my time. ‘Course, that was about forty years ago, but I can’t think tech’s changed too much since then.”

I didn’t have time for this. I scowled, pushed full power into the repulsorlifts, and launched clear from the landing pad. The *Ebon Hawk* rose vertically through the circular tunnel cut from the foliage of the wroshyrs, and just as the blue sky hit the transparisteel window, I felt a figure thump into the seat behind us.

I canted the ‘Hawk as we cleared the treetops. There was a feminine curse in a language I didn’t recognize, and a thud of someone falling out of the third chair.

“Jen,” I said, my eyes tight on the window. “Get your damn harness on.”

I heard her shuffle, curse again in what sounded like *Huttese* of all things, and then the click of the safety harness.

On the nav screen, I could see the *Ruby’s Claw* right behind us. I switched power to the sublight drive, and the ‘Hawk shot up through the sky like a rocket.

“Carth, who else is on this ship?” Jen whispered from behind me. Her voice would have been a welcome sound, had it not been so utterly shocked. It rose in volume on the next words, sharp and high with palpable alarm.

“How else is on this frelling ship?”

xXx
Hyperspace: VI – part one

Nisotsa Organa:

The muted murmurs of incoming comms filled the air with a background static. Even from the far side of the command deck, I could see a rainbow of warning lights blink from various consoles. Two well-scrubbed underlings raced back and forth across the shiny floor, their only apparent job to relay status updates from the differing fighter squadrons to the grizzled Admiral.

Not that it did much good, with Kylah standing in his shadow, countermanding half his orders with a vicious smirk on her pouting red lips.

“We are still not within striking range of the starport, Karath,” Kylah commented. Her voice was mild and silky, and would have been out of earshot had the Force not augmented my senses. “I am starting to wonder if you are stalling.”

“I obey Lord Malak’s will,” Admiral Saul Karath growled, not even looking at the younger women as he stalked behind a row of diagnostic holo-screens. “I will position the Leviathan for bombardment when I don’t have a Dreadnought-class cruiser on my tail-”

“His orders are clear.” Kylah’s voice changed into a whip, lashing with an authority I both resented and wished to own myself. “Immediate destruction of the Wookiee village and associated starport, Karath. We cannot allow her to slip through-”

“We have closed in as far as possible without ceding a clear advantage to the Meridus,” Karath snapped. “They already destroyed our secondary shields. We cannot deviate from our position any further; we must focus our arsenal on the Republic forces, first. Once victory is ours, then we can turn our guns on-”

An amused chuckle from behind me derailed my Force-focus; my hearing dimmed to within natural levels, and now all I could hear was once more the background hubbub of whispering techs interspersed with the electronic thrum of machinery. Tens of metres away from me, Kylah stood glaring hot malice at Saul Karath, who was now studying a holo-map of the surviving snubfighter squadrons as they encircled the Leviathan and Meridus both.

Technically, Admiral Saul Karath held command on the Leviathan, but Kylah and I were Lord Malak’s envoys. Kylah believed her authority trumped Karath’s. Malak… well, my Master would likely back whoever rode us to victory.

“I do pity Admiral Karath,” a voice drawled. I turned to frown at my compatriot; he was lounging on a plush red sofa pushed up against the wall. It was completely out-of-place in the frakking command centre of the frakking Leviathan. I wouldn’t have put it past Sharlan Nox to be the one who’d actually moved it here. Certainly, the last time I’d been stationed with Karath’s crew, there was no vermillion eyesore taking up space.

“Hmm,” I acknowledged, eyeing over Sharlan’s dangling limbs in silent disapproval. He was an
insouciant degenerate, who did nothing for the status of Malak’s top Dark Jedi. But - he was still alive - where so many of us had perished. It was strange, for Sharlan’s sheer laziness and passive apathy should have spiralled him into failure or defeat by now.

One of Sharlan’s pets, a blank-faced Togruta, was kneeling quietly at his side.

Sharlan’s pets creeped me out. *Me, The Quiet Death.* A general of the previous wars, and a Dark Jedi recruiter for Darth Malak himself. But there was something soulless about Sharlan’s Force-sensitive toys, and the way their eyes never wavered from his pock-marked face.

“Doing the bidding of a strutting harlot is not what Karath signed up for, when he swore fealty to Revan and followed Talvon’s directive.” There was an obvious snicker in Sharlan’s tone. He didn’t feel sorry for Saul Karath; no, he enjoyed every drop of resentment and disgust that the Admiral tried so valiantly to conceal.

Sometimes, Sharlan’s brevity still struck me as odd, even after knowing him for years. Sharlan had been a Revan loyalist, found by her personally just after Malachor, although I never found out the details of how or where. If Sharlan’s personality had not been the very antithesis of a Mandalorian warrior, I may have suspected he had been a rare Force-sensitive Revan had picked up from the losing side.

But Sharlan did not speak of his past. And after Revan’s assumed death, Sharlan and Yudan had been the two Dark Jedi I’d watched with a careful eye, as they bowed knee and swore their lives to Malak.

Yudan had done so with a cold, remote look on his face; Sharlan, an amused smirk.

But still, I had wondered just how true their vows were. And now Yudan – my old friend, my old comrade – must be dead, alongside that smug prick Bandon.

Malak’s latest missive, burning cold with acidic venom, told us of Revan’s escape from Bandon in the Shadowlands. How my Master had found out, I did not know, but he was certain of Bandon’s demise. I could only assume Yudan, too, had faltered. If by some chance Yudan still lived, then he had to be hotfooting it into hiding – if he was simple enough to believe he could hide from our Master’s wrath.

I hoped Yudan was dead. The vague grief I felt at the thought was preferable to the disgust his cowardice would otherwise bring.

Regardless of Yudan’s fate – and surely he was dead, he must be – it meant one thing for certain: only three remained from the fabled Jedi Thirteen.

Revan, Malak, and I.

“You’ll have to choose, you know that, right?” Sharlan said, running a long nail over his black lips. The Togruta’s eyes stayed pinned on his finger, moving back and forth, back and forth. “Kylah will want to step up as Malak’s first apprentice, his Shadow Hand. She’s a bit of a joke, really, but you’ll either have to publicly acknowledge her superiority, or throw a challenge. You never did like outward challenges, did you?”

I scowled into his sickly yellow eyes. “Shades of hypocrisy, coming from you, Sharlan Nox,” I scoffed. “When was the last time you stood up to anyone of note?”

Sharlan laughed, a high-pitched trilling noise that echoed over the shiny command deck. A nearby console tech jerked his head around to stare at us in alarm, before quickly bowing back over his
work. “I’m not ambitious, Nisotsa, I never have been. Plucking up hopefuls and delivering them to Korriban is enough for my appetite. But it’s always grated for you, hasn’t it? Such a step down from your glorious past.”

“Enough,” I growled. “Unless you want to make it more, because frankly, I’m in the mood for a spot of violence.”

Sharlan, I could beat. His perpetual habit to bend beneath the will of others surely showcased his weakness. But it was difficult to gauge his strength in the Force. It seemed to undulate, to ebb before spiking at a level he never maintained for long.

Sharlan’s physical appearance was also mysterious. He was human, I was almost certain of it… but there was something almost reptilian about his movement. And his face… it was strikingly pale with a closed slit on either cheek that reminded me somewhat of aquatic gills. He had nothing of the jagged scars of darkness that were more common around long-standing Dark Jedi. Of all people, I knew that the physiology of different sents could react in a myriad of ways to the Force, but I had never heard of Sharlan’s facial deformities.

He was strange in other ways, too. Stars, I’d never seen the man eat, or go to the ‘fresher or even change his frakking robes from that silver-and-rubescent ensemble he pranced about in. Maybe his wardrobe was filled with the same outfit times ten, and he got his kicks from screwing with people. It seemed like the sort of thing that would amuse the chivhole.

But in other ways, Sharlan was just like me. His eyes shone the same acidic yellow of the true side of the Force.

“Oh no, Nisotsa, I am quite content to label you my superior,” he drawled, inclining his head to me.

“In that case, go fly a frakking snub and get out there,” I snapped. “You could actually make a difference, rather than wearing out this ridiculous lounge suite.”

We hadn’t expected a Republic cruiser in Kashyyyk airspace. At first, Karath had assumed it was lying in wait for us, that somehow our communique had been intercepted, and an ambush for the mighty *Leviathan* was in play.

But no, the *Meridus* was here for an entirely different reason.

*Revan.* Just like us, the Republic was here for her. I would have been amused; smug, even, had I not heard the news of Revan’s escape. Again. Frakking again.

Oh, Bandon’s death was a joy to behold, but Yudan’s… had that mind-wiped joke I’d once followed felt anything at Yudan’s death? Yudan, who had been more loyal to her than frakking Malak himself? *How* had Revan managed to escape? I’d seen Bandon’s taunting little selfie, with her collared and captured in the Shadowlands… how the *frakk* had she escaped a neural disruptor and defeated both Bandon and Yudan?

It was Revan. If anyone could achieve the impossible, it had always been Revan.

Yet, Kylah assured me that Revan remembered absolutely nothing - that she was just a brain-damaged experiment with the odd flash of power from her past… but I recalled that power. Even the odd flash was behemoth.

Not enough to defeat Malak, though. Not broken as she was.

And not enough to defeat Kylah, Sharlan and I, surely.
“I think I shall,” Sharlan twittered, and I turned back to stare at him in surprise. His black lips were twisted in a smirk, and one long nail was now tracing down the left montral of the kneeling Togruta. “I have some cargo to deliver.”

“Really,” I said flatly. “I didn’t expect you to acquiesce so easily, Sharlan.” I could make the apathetic man bend to my will, but I’d actually expected Sharlan to stay on the Leviathan. With the rest of us.

“I aim to please, Nisotsa,” Sharlan drawled.

My eyes narrowed. “You are running in case Revan escapes Kashyyyk, and we intercept her ship. You don’t want to face a shell of our former Master.”

Sharlan had never had much to do with Malak. He’d gone straight into recruitment, vowing to help Revan build a mighty empire of loyal Dark Adepts. I remembered his first assignment, we’d done that one together. Telos. There’d been quite a crop of sensitives we’d found in the aftermath of the Talvon’s carnage, and surely, I’d thought, the five hopefuls I’d dumped on Korriban would be enough for Revan to send me elsewhere - somewhere more important, more strategic, more frakking note-worthy.

Sharlan had only brought two boys to the Academy, although I’d known he’d left Telos with four. Oh, I’d known for a long time that he liked to pick up his own personal pets while he was recruiting for the Sith, but I’d never worked out why they survived so very short a time.

“I hold no loyalty to Revan, or the body that once inhabited her,” Sharlan said, his voice patently bored. “But I shouldn’t think she’d pose much of a threat to you and Kylah. Since you appear to doubt my allegiance, let me leave my pet in your care, Nisotsa.”

Sharlan stood, a fluid motion of limbs slowly straightening, and motioned the Togruta to follow suit. With a sensual purr, Sharlan dragged the Togruta closer and kissed him gently on the lips. “Obey Nisotsa in all, my pet. She shall be your last master.”

The Togruta nodded, and turned to stare at me.

“What?” I snapped. “I don’t need one of your cast-off toys, Sharlan!”

“Don’t underestimate this one, Nisotsa. He will obey your commands to the very end, and his power is not inconsequential. Although…” Sharlan shot me a smirk, a thin-lipped indication of his twisted humour. “I don’t believe there is much life left in him, so use him sparingly.”

“Sharlan,” I said in warning. “We may need you here. Be careful you are not disobeying our Lord.”

A razor thin eyebrow lifted in apparent bemusement. I didn’t buy it. “Lord Malak hasn’t ordered me here, dear Nisotsa. But I came anyway, and gave you the gift of an ally to assist. I don’t see how you can believe I am disloyal to our Lord.” He bowed, mockingly, and began to walk away.

The Togruta’s gaze was fixed on me, blank and soulless. “Sharlan!” I snapped. “Wait!”

He stopped, turning to glance back at me quizzically.

“This… this thing,” I muttered, motioning at the silent Togruta. “What is his name?”

Sharlan shot me a puzzled look. “Pet,” he said, before leaving the command deck.

xXx
“Positive ID on the Ruby’s Claw, ma’am,” a tech engineer said breathlessly. “Illuminating now.”

A blue speck on the massive holo-map flared an iridescent shade, indicating itself as the freighter the technician identified. Its colour switched to green as our mapping OS marked it as a friendly. The Ruby’s Claw was rising from the atmo of the forest planet below, canting to the left of a mass of red specks that formed some of the Sith squadrons.

The enemy’s location between us and Kashyyyk was both a problem and an opportunity. It left the Ruby’s Claw and Ebon Hawk vulnerable to Sith fire before we could reach them; but the flipside was that Karath’s apparent desire to position for orbital bombardment had allowed us an opening to unleash our firepower.

The Dreadnought-class cruiser had taken some solid hits. Our scanners estimated its shields were a quarter down, and there was a hull breach in the Leviathan’s rear - bad enough that Karath would have to take precautionary measures: isolate and seal the part of the cruiser that was no longer air-locked.

The damage wasn’t enough, not yet. The Leviathan was a mighty beast, just like the Meridus.

“Search for the Ebon Hawk,” I commanded, eyes roving amongst the translucent topography outlaid in front of me. Behind, in an arc of consoles surrounding the colossal map that dominated this side of the command deck, sat a dozen of the best comm techs and engineers.

“There.” Commodore Tar’coya pointed a stubby finger at a blue speck that came into view, rear-side of the Ruby’s Claw, and closer to the Sith forces. “That’s it.”

“Rallying, the Sith are.” Vandar hobbled closer, raising his archaic stick to indicate the enemy squadron closest to the Ruby’s Claw. They veered sharply, breaking away from the Leviathan to make a beeline directly for the presumed Ebon Hawk.

Tar’coya had been plenty annoyed I’d allowed Vandar on the command deck. I could understand that – Jedi made most military uneasy, even if I trusted Vandar not to use any of his mind tricks here. The Jedi were on shaky ground, and the first hint of interference would have me booting the lot of them out of any Republic intelligence or command.

That wasn’t the only reason for Tar’coya’s irritation. The passenger on the Ebon Hawk had us all on edge - and Tar’coya didn’t even know it was Revan we were chasing, only that it was a Dark Jedi of some import.

But Vandar was an ally, for all of his secrets. He had a lot to answer for, though. The whole blasted Jedi Order did.

“Imosh, inform the Ruby’s Claw of six incoming bogeys,” I rapped out to the Ensign on my left. “Tell Captain Merrix to keep his latitude parallel to the planet, and send Tau Squadron after him. Get Captain Onasi on the comm for an update.”

The Sith snubs would soon catch Jordo Merrix and Carth Onasi. The Ruby’s Claw would be able to withstand a fair amount of damage, unlike the Ebon Hawk. We’d have to rely on Carth’s superior flying and the manoeuvrability of his craft.

“Positive ID on the Ebon Hawk, ma’am,” the tech from earlier said. “Illuminating now.”

In the periphery of my hearing I could make out Ensign Imosh talking urgently to Jordo over a
secure comm channel. The mark Tar’coya had pointed out flared briefly, but stayed the blue of the neutral. Carth was one of us, of course, but our system wouldn’t recognize a modified Dynamic-class freighter with a forged signature as an ally unless we overrode it.

And, frankly, with Revan onboard I couldn’t count it as an ally. Particular when our orders were to capture her – or failing that, kill her once and for all.

It shouldn’t make me uneasy, considering all she had wrought. The orders came direct from the Senate, who’d called a secret emergency meeting directly after the intel drop from Master Atris of the Jedi on Coruscant. Get the Star Map details first, by any means possible. Once complete, capture the war criminal Revan Freeflight for trial. If this proves too difficult, then eliminate her instead.

Gently, gently, seemed to be the best approach. Revan’s power was undeniable, but she didn’t seem to be an overt threat – unless we panicked her. She had panicked on Manaan, after all, when she thought it was a trap.

I’d wanted her on one of our freighters – preferably Jordo’s, as Tar’coya had a tendency to talk down to people, and he knew too much. Revan wouldn’t be able to pick the details from Jordo’s mind, seeing as Jordo knew nothing.

But - as Jordo and Tar’coya had been ordered - don’t force her. Don’t force any of crew. Get them to the Meridus, one way or the other. If that meant travelling on a fragile smuggling vessel, then so be it. I knew I could count on Carth’s loyalty, when it came right down to it – even if the strength of his regard for Revan had surprised me.

It shouldn’t. I knew Jedi Knight Revan Freeflight – not well, but enough to appreciate her charisma. Her drive, and her undeniable power. And it was hard to think of her only as the betrayer who had killed so many and fallen so far. For Revan had once been a hero, and I couldn’t dispel those memories of the Mandalorian Wars, no matter how I tried.

She’s not the Sith Lord nor the Republic hero any longer. Merely a broken Jedi experiment still echoing with her power of old.

More red marks were diverging from defense of the Leviathan to chase after the two freighters. More… all of them, I realized, as my gaze roved over the tactical map. Only a small squad of six remained at the tail end of the Leviathan, a cargo section of the mighty cruiser, exactly where we’d already breached the hull.

Not an important part of the starship, not if Karath had sealed it – and he would have had to.

“Update Captain Merrix and Captain Onasi,” I directed. “Order squadrons…” I trailed off, mind racing.

“This is an opportunity to hit the Leviathan,” Tar’coya advised in his slurring voice. “We only have to worry about the defense turrets, with their snubs ordered away.”

“Overwhelmed, the freighters will be, if aid is not sent,” Vandar interjected. A note of alarm had entered his creaky voice. He had been insistent that Revan could come peaceably - if only the Jedi were allowed to deal with her. He claimed it would be the best, and safest, course of action.

But the Jedi had lost control of her since the Endar Spire perished, and that had been months ago, now. Vandar hadn’t even encountered her. Revan Freeflight was presently a loose cannon, running free and damaged, with the power of a supernova and the predictability of Chaos Theory.

“Karath’s over-extending himself, and this is our chance,” Tar’coya cut in, his large eyes staring at
me intently through the holo-map. “The Sith snubs will get to Merrix and Onasi first, even if we do
chase them. We could put an end to Karath, to the Leviathan, right now.”

We already have the Star Forge coordinates. If I can take that bastard Karath out, it will be a
tangible blow to Darth Malak. In terms of the loss of ships, the loss of Karath, and the loss of
whatever Dark Jedi must be onboard.

And if Revan dies because we did not send aid… then my orders are complete, anyway.

It was a sickly thought. Even more so, when I considered Jordo and his hundred or so troops
onboard. And Carth.

Yet, sending our snubs after the ‘Claw and the ‘Hawk might not do any good, regardless. And the
destruction of the Leviathan had the potential to save a far greater number of lives.

“Direct all squadrons to the Leviathan,” I commanded, my eyes stilling on the six bogeys at the tail
of the Sith cruiser. I could send some forces to take them out, but their current position was nowhere
near the vulnerable parts of the massive Leviathan, and who knew how short our time window
would be before the other Sith snubs would retreat to bolster the cruiser’s defense. “Rho squadron to
lead the offensive, and draw the turret fire. All remaining fighters to focus on the Leviathan’s primary
shield generator.”

“Admiral-”

I raised a hand at Vandar’s interjection, and part of me was surprised that he quietened. His bright
blue eyes stared up at me sadly.

“I must think of the whole picture, Vandar,” I told him quietly. “That is something the greatest of
your Order understood, once.”

“Tell Merrix and Onasi to dive back into the atmo,” Tar’coya jumped in, snapping out orders to the
comm techs. “They’ll have a host of enemy fighters on them any moment. Any weather event might
give them an advantage.”

Kashyyyk doesn’t have weather events, I thought, but kept silent. No matter how fast and
manoeuvrable Carth’s highly-specced smuggling vessel was, it wouldn’t be able to outrun a
snubfighter.

There was part of me that wished Carth and his crew could just vanish into hyperspace. Even if it
meant Revan would escape…

…for there were few people I regarded as highly as I had her, once. Carth was probably one of them.
And his fate, now, seemed intrinsically linked to hers.

“Comm from Captain Merrix, ma’am,” Ensign Imosh interrupted. “The enemy snubs are within
firing range of the Ruby’s Claw.”

“They’ve started,” Tar’coya said, pointing to our squadrons milling near the front starboard section
of the Leviathan.

“Rho Squadron is drawing turret fire,” a comm tech updated from my left. “Rho Three is down.”

“Tau Squadron going in for first sweep,” another tech added from the next console across. Six green
marks flickered brighter for an instance as they drew into the massive breadth of the Leviathan’s
image. I glanced back to the rear of the heavy cruiser, and stilled.
“Comm from Onasi’s co-pilot, ma’am,” Imosh said. “Snubs are flying beneath them and forcing the 
_Ebon Hawk_ back up.”

The six Sith fighters had disappeared from the holo-map.

“The _Ruby’s Claw_ is reporting damage and asking ETA of assistance, ma’am,” Imosh reported. I was vaguely aware of him turning to look at me in question.

“The Sith snubs from earlier, that stayed behind,” I said in a rush. “They’ve dropped from the map!”

Imosh had a hand to his headset, stumbling over the words as they were transmitted to him. “The _Ebon Hawk_ has taken a hit and is being forced back towards the _Leviathan_. Most fighter fire is being focused on the _Ruby’s Claw_.”

“Find the Sith fighters!” Tar’coya snarled in alarm, turning to face the group of techs. “Check all frequencies! They should _not_ be able to evade our scanners!”

We’d never come across cloaking technology that our higher class starships – of which the _Meridus_ certainly counted – couldn’t detect. Until the last year or so. The occasional destroyer, always one of the foreign makes from Malak’s main fleet, vanishing in the midst of battle before reappearing elsewhere, usually just before launching a devastating blow.

Whatever technology Malak had acquired – almost definitely from the weapons factory the Star Maps pointed to – he hadn’t been able to mass produce it yet. But to modify it to fit on some of Karath’s ex-Republic snubs…

“Second sweep from Tau and Phi Squadrons. Rho one is down.”

“Nothing on the scanners, sir,” the first tech replied to Tar’coya’s demand. “We’ve lost them.”

“Comm from Captain Merrix,” Ensign Imosh interrupted. “Their sublight drives are hit! The _Ruby’s Claw_ is switching to repulsors and making an emergency return to Kashyyyk!”

“Follow, the _Ebon Hawk_ cannot,” Vandar murmured. “Or destroy the _Ruby’s Claw_, the Sith will.”

He was right, and Carth would recognize it too. If he attempted to stay within Jordo’s protection, the overwhelming Sith would finish off the _Ruby’s Claw_ – they might still. As for the _Ebon Hawk_ – it was apparent that the Sith preferred the capture of Revan, but her death would do in a pinch. Both sides were after the same prize.

And we were in no position to aid the _Ebon Hawk_.

“There’s no choice, we must keep going forward with this,” I said, hearing the terseness in my voice. “Focus all fire on the _Leviathan’s_ shield generator. Hit fast and hard, we must give it _everything_ while we have the chance.”

“The _Ebon Hawk_ is demanding an update on assistance, Admiral,” a female tech intervened. “The co-pilot, er, is a bit rude.”

The holo-map showed it unfolding; Jordo descending in a semi-controlled fashion back into the atmo, and the _Ebon Hawk_ steadily being directed toward the _Leviathan_. The mass of Sith snubs would be giving Carth no choice, other than instant death. Our fighters were along the other side of the six hundred metre-long cruiser, their attention fixed on the shield generator which _must_ be taking severe damage by now. The only way to give Carth any sort of chance would be to cripple the _Leviathan_.
“Proximity alarm on section starboard-4 of the Meridus, ma’am!” the closest comm tech cried out in alarm.

“What?” Tar’coya snapped. Vandar, next to him, hobbled closer to frown at the holo-map.

But there was nothing showing. And that section of the Meridus only housed the-

The breath hissed in my lungs. “Get all surrounding turbolasers and ion turrets to cover the gravity-well projectors!”

“Ion missile damage reported, Admiral! The starboard-4 shields are down!”

Some parts of the Republic cruiser had their own shields, for redundancy’s sake. Ion damage could be reversed, depending on its severity-

“Get them back up! Recall!” No, our snubs were too far away. That bastard Karath planned this, drew his fighters away to lure us into all-out attack. He was willing to risk the hits to the Leviathan if it meant he could disable our interdicting technology. Without that, he could make the leap to hyperspace. All he needed was the prize. “Fire all defensive turrets to cover the gravity-wells! Those stealthed bastards are out there!”

“Admiral, the ‘Hawk’s taken a hit. It’ll be within range of the Leviathan’s tractor beam in minutes!”

Vandar motioned with his walking aid. “Turn back to aid, Phi squadron could-”

“The snubs stay on the Leviathan’s shields,” I snapped. “That’s the only way we can help the ‘Hawk.”

There was a hiss from the first tech. “Explosion detected on gravity-well two- and one-”

"Starboard-4 shields are back up, Admiral!” the female tech gasped. "Secondary generator is online and fully functional.”

"We've got one!” someone crowed. There was a small flare of light from the holo-map, and six red sparks appeared near the gravity-well projectors of the Meridus. One flickered before extinguishing. "Scanners have picked up the rest, and all turrets are firing at them now!”

"Interdiction is confirmed down,” a low voice snapped out from behind a console. The remaining five red marks turned sharply, and began their retreat.

“Ma’am,” Imosh interrupted, high-pitched and loud. “Captain Onasi reports that he’s lost manual control. The Ebon Hawk is… it’s caught in the Leviathan’s tractor beam.”

“Stang!” The curse hissed from my lips, and my eyes closed briefly. Damn Karath’s black soul to the darkest pit in the galaxy. I could not let him escape into hyperspace with Revan Freeflight onboard! And the Leviathan… it was harder hit than the Meridus. We had a distinct advantage, if only I could stop him from fleeing!

“We go after the Ebon Hawk,” Tar’coya slurred. I snapped open my eyes to see him staring at me. “We have five minutes, tops, before the ‘Hawk is docked and clamped, and the Leviathan can escape. If we cannot have the prize, then neither shall the Sith!”

“No!” Vandar exclaimed sharply. “Against us, she will surely turn, if you resort to that-”

Tar’coya scoffed. “I’m not planning on anyone surviving, Jedi-”
“Rho six and Rho two are down! Third sweep from Phi and Tau squadrons. Sith snubs have returned and are engaging Xi squadron.”

“I’ve lost comms with the ‘Hawk!’” Ensign Imosh slammed a fist down in frustration.

“Predict their survival, you cannot—”

“Sensors show shields are down along the Leviathan’s hull, Admiral!” a tech gasped. “The generator is damaged, but not destroyed—”

“The hyperdrive,” I whispered. I knew the Leviathan well, and its schematics were well-studied by our best engineers. For, after all, it had been built for our army. And its hyperdrive was located near the front of the hull. Exposed, and only protected by one of the heavy cruiser’s shields – which were now down. “Focus all remaining snubs on the Leviathan’s hyperdrive generator! On the hull, twenty metres from the bow, near the main inertial compressor! There’s more than one way to thwart a hyperjump!”

The green marks on the holo-map turned to face their next objective. To prevent a leap into hyperspace, we had to land a crippling blow within minutes. On the holo-map, I could see our squads wheeling into action as orders were relayed, and could only hope it would be enough – and I tried not to dwell on the blue speck of the Ebon Hawk, being slowly pulled into the Leviathan’s waiting dock.

xXx

Revan Freeflight:

My heart was leaping in my throat and pounding in my ears like a Weequay thunder drum. The last fifteen minutes had been a steady intensification of danger and risk; the hurried departure from Kashyyyk merging into a desperate air battle, with the ‘Hawk outgunned and trapped in realspace, and our only ally – the Republic military escort, who wasn’t my ally in truth – faltering against the superior Sith squadrons.

And if we prevailed, I was headed straight into a Republic trap. Not that that seemed particularly likely, right about now.

Our shields were down to twenty percent. The life-support system blinked a warning about the state of its recirculators. One of the repulsors had been hit. Oh, our hyperdrive was still fine, but fat lot of good that would do with two interdictors blocking hyperspace entry.

And yet, while Carth and old man Bindo did their best against overwhelming odds, I was trapped in the rear seat, hyperaware of the other threat we faced.

I faced.

Jolee Bindo must have sensed the presence. Juhani, too. Carth had only managed to mutter some vague comment about a frelling Mandalorian slipping onboard after saving Canderous’ life, but then the ‘Hawk’s veering route had been cut off by a waiting squadron of Sith, and Carth’s attention was otherwise engaged.

There was only one person it could be.

No, dung for brains, I immediately slammed myself, it could be dozens… hundreds of Force sensitives, if only they know of my existence. But there was only one I’d encountered on Kashyyyk, who had been in the Shadowlands the same time as Canderous.
The presence hadn’t moved from the turret room and, despite my alarm, I’d been keeping a close eye on the navi-console – what I could see from the rear of the cockpit. Whoever he was – *Yudan Rosh, it’s sodding Yudan Rosh, you know it has to be* – he had a higher hit rate than Canderous.

He was willing to shoot down ships from his *own* side, to keep up the façade – and he *had* to know I’d be aware of him by now.

A warning alarm wailed from the ship’s speakers.

“Stang!” Carth cursed, jerking sideways on the steering column. The ‘*Hawk* didn’t respond, and I knew the inevitable had finally happened. “We’ve lost manual control!”

Jolee Bindo leaned forward to speak into the comm. “Eh, your aid’s been great, Mr Ensign,” he muttered into the mic. “Send my regards to the brass. The Sith have us like a burra-cod on a hook. You gonna to watch from the sidelines, or actually do something for a change?”

Carth’s hands flew over the navi-controls in desperation. We’d barely had a chance to talk, but when the *Ruby’s Claw* had floundered, I’d heard clearly where he’d sent his son. *Dustil will be okay. The snubs left the ‘Claw alone as soon as we did. It should be able to make an emergency landing back on Kashyyyk.*

*Our* predicament was far more ominous. But - now a tractor beam held us motionless - I could finally move without the g-forces sending me sprawling. The safety harness sprang free underneath the fingers of my good hand, and I ripped through the medi-restraint pinning my off-arm to my chest. My fingers still ached with a deep, dull pain. What was left of them, anyway. The arm itself would do. It’d have to.

“We have only minutes to come up with a plan.” My words rushed out as I stood, somewhat inelegantly. “Send everyone to the common room. Now!”

Maybe there was some way of turning my unexpected guest into an advantage. I had to think of one, because the last thing we needed was for things to get frelling worse.

I barrelled into the common room, gaze frantically coasting over Zaalbar, Mission and Juhani, all belted safely on the plimfoam benches. Mission was wide-eyed with fright as she nestled close to Zaalbar. Juhani… the fine fur on her neck and arms was standing out in shock. The alarm that surrounded her was palpable, and her gaze was firmly locked in the direction of the turret room. Her eyes snapped to mine at my entrance.

“I know,” I said curtly to her unspoken question. “I have an idea of who he is-”

“Turrets are down,” Canderous grated as he stormed into the room. “We’re kriffed. What’s the plan?”

Behind him, a figure in full Mandalorian armour walked in. Canderous acknowledged his presence with a slight tilt to his head. “This is Dan Fett. I offered him a-”

“Dan Fett.” My words, cold and hard, cut through Canderous’ like a blade sheering through churned frostti cream. My gaze travelled over the high-backed helm that must have belonged to a species with a longer cranium at one stage. “Nice armour. Pick that up from one of the Mandos you killed in the Shadowlands, did you?”

The second the terse words began to leave my mouth, Canderous was already swinging around, interpreting the threat, a light blaster in his grasp-
“Canderous!” I snapped. The Force rallied to me, a storm of power that echoed the darkness lashing around the armoured newcomer. Canderous, for all of his strengths, couldn’t help here. “Hold!”

“Ge’hutuu n chakaar!” Canderous cursed, his blaster pointed dead straight at his companion. And Yudan – for it was him, the black aura was clearly recognizable now – crossed his arms and leaned back against the doorway. “You lying shabuir!”

“Let’s all calm down for a moment,” Bindo’s dry voice appeased as he entered the room. I sensed Carth follow him in and stalk to my side, but kept my gaze firmly on Yudan. “A ship in flight ain’t the place for a firefight or a Force wrestle, young pups. Space has a tendency to be indiscriminate with its whole icy coldness and instant suffocation business.”

“I didn’t lie to you, Ordo,” Yudan said, his helmet turning ever so slightly to address the irate Mandalorian. Yudan might sound nonchalant, but his choke-hold on the Force told me otherwise. “Even my name… well, my ma used to call me Dan. And the Fett offered to adopt me once, when I was their prisoner. Dan Fett’s not much of a stretch, really.”

“What do you want?” I hissed, not caring a frelling damn for his justifications. “Give me a reason, right now, why we shouldn’t just kill you.”

He pushed off from the wall, causing Zaalbar to growl from the other side of the room. “I saved Ordo’s life. I shot down a dozen Sith snubs. I didn’t kill you when I had the chance, Jen Sahara. Is that enough for you?” He loosed a short chuckle that was as cold and mirthless as the depths of space. “And you know what I’m after. I told you in the Shadowlands.”

I blinked, finding myself silenced by those words. I hadn’t been in the most stable frame of minds then – truthfully, I still wasn’t, even if I had cobbled together a somewhat shaky framework with which to move forward. Yudan had planned to kill me, I recalled. Bandon had been focused on capture, but Yudan’s drive was to end me, once and for all.

And then, the memory of his words shot through my mind like liquid fire.

_I swore to kill Darth Revan. And I will, the first time I see her. She must be inside you still, somewhere._

“I vowed to Ordo I wasn’t a threat to his companions,” Yudan added in a monotone. “I’ll hold to that, for now.”

_For now._

Carth cleared his throat, and laid a hand on my arm. “We have a minute or two left,” he murmured. There was an ominous thunk from above as towing clamps settled on the outside of the ‘Hawk’s hull, probably drawing the freighter into a waiting docking bay. Carth’s gaze was darkly intense on mine, and I could recognize the faith he held in me, despite the peril of our situation.

It was a sickening reminder of what he didn’t know.

_Screw it all, I need to focus on the situation, and play it out with the hand I’ve been dealt._

“Jolee, throw your ‘saber to Juhani. She can be a double-wielder; you’re a harmless trader who bought a ride off Kashyyyk.” I glanced over to see the hermit raising an eyebrow, before doing as I bid. He was the one person on our ship that wouldn’t be detailed in any crew manifest, which might just give Jolee the advantage we needed. And as for Yudan Rosh…

“We could trade you,” I whispered, staring at him again. “The release of a Dark Jedi, for some of our
Crew.”

Carth’s grasp on my arm tightened at my acknowledgment of Yudan’s true calling. But even as Yudan cocked his head from behind that sodding anonymous helmet, I recognized the futility of my own suggestion. Yes, because the Sith are known to ransom their men back, particularly those who got themselves caught by the Jedi.

“’You could try,’” Yudan said mildly, as if content to sit back and do nothing more than observe my next course of action. The dispassionate bastard. Is he just going to watch from the sidelines, waiting to see if I slip the smallest inch towards the Dark Side?

The way things were going, he wouldn’t have to wait long.

“Jen,” Carth urged, a second before the ‘Hawk thumped against something solid. It was a sinister sound. The freighter canted slightly, before thumping again, as if levelling onto a docking platform.

We’ve landed. Sithspit. We’re in the sodding Leviathan. And we’re out of time.

“Right,” I said, half-snarl. “You vowed you’re not a threat? Then you can sodding well help, Dan Fett. You can say you’ve come onboard and overwhelmed us during the aerial battle. Canderous, get yourself properly armed, you’ve defected to his side. The two of you can lead the rest of us out as subdued prisoners.”

“Jen,” Juhani murmured, fixing Jolee’s ‘saber onto her belt next to her own. “I do not think-”

It reminded me, then, of another detail. “Give me Zhar’s damn ‘saber,” I demanded, glaring at the high-backed helm. My good hand twisted Yudan’s lightsaber from my belt, and I threw the hilt at him with force.

He caught it effortlessly, and paused, as if I’d surprised him. But it wasn’t like Yudan could play the part of a Dark Jedi while his prisoner held onto his damn ‘saber. Play the part? How can I gamble that he won’t simply return to his old post? Did he even leave it?

A second later, Yudan tilted his head and lobbed a deactivated cylinder back to me. I clipped it on my belt, right next to Karon’s old weapon. Somehow, it seemed fitting.

“Zhar’s lightsaber,” Jolee echoed. His voice was flat and low, and his gaze narrowed as he stared at the armoured Dark Jedi. “After this, you and I are going to have a long talk, sonny.”

And then, a booming message echoed throughout the ship.

“*The Ebon Hawk is surrounded. Turrets are locked and will discharge in five minutes unless the entire crew has disembarked with their hands clearly visible above their head. Any aggression will result in death.*”

Mission whimpered. Juhani stood in a fluid motion, her face set and resolute. She gave me a nod of agreement or support, as if waiting for my next command. Canderous muttered something undecipherable, staring down in disgust at the lightweight blaster in his hand, and then strode out of the room. He’s gone to get his repeater, I realized, and maybe a dozen more weapons knowing him. He’d better be quick.

“Jen, this is Karath’s ship,” Carth whispered. There was something in his tone, something dark or tormented that made me glance to him. I’d missed Carth, down in the Shadowlands, and now that I knew the truth…

But I didn’t have the time to lament and wring my hands over just how awful his reaction would be.
For the kath crap had well and truly hit the fan, and I needed to frelling step up. I couldn’t afford to be off-guard, or wallowing in emotional angst.

“Karath,” I echoed, racking my mind for details on that vaguely familiar name. Kylah… she’d mentioned him, when she’d sent a missive to Bandon in the Shadowlands. He’s the officer in charge of the Leviathan. But that didn’t explain the look of bitterness etched into Carth’s face.

“Admiral Saul Karath,” Carth said quietly. “I knew him, once. He…”

Carth didn’t finish. He didn’t have to, and I didn’t have the time to find out what caused the hatred I heard underlying his words - much as I wished to. I slipped my good hand into his, and gave it a brief squeeze.

Yudan’s helmet moved, ever so slightly, and I was struck with the uncomfortable feeling that he was staring at our enclosed hands.

“You have four minutes remaining before we open fire on the ship.”

Canderous bowled back into the common room, his heavy repeater slung in grasp. Zaalbar had straightened to his feet, and Mission followed suit, biting her lip. She caught my gaze, then, and slowly moved one hand to motion at her utility belt. There’s spikes in there. She’ll be frisked, but if she can hide one…

I gave her the smallest of nods, but my faith wasn’t there. For no matter how I looked at it, our prospects were dire.

I couldn’t trust Yudan. Stars, I’d be hard-pressed to think of anyone I trusted less. He could very well turn around and betray Canderous. As for the rest of the crew, our options were limited. A Wookiee’s strength wouldn’t be underestimated by Sith forces - I couldn’t see how Zaalbar could break himself free against such overwhelming odds. Mission was a great stealth op, for a fifteen year old Twi’lek urchin. But even if she managed to sneak away a tech spike, I had the feeling the Leviathan’s security was more than one step up from slicing into apartments back on Taris. Juhani was a known Force user; like me, she’d be neutralized first. And Carth was too damn famous to be anything other than heavily guarded.

We were pinning our hopes on Jolee Bindo – who’d followed me back to the ‘Hawk like a bad smell on Kashyyyk - being taken as nothing more than a harmless old trader. Yet that all hinged on Yudan sodding Rosh not betraying Jolee’s Force sensitivity.

There had to be something else, some other advantage I could wrangle from this situation. I had to find something, for the odds playing in my head were not coming out in my favour. In desperation, I breathed in deep, centring myself as my eyes dropped closed, and stretched out wide with the power of my mind.

Searching for anything.

If Juhani and Jolee glowed in my Force sense, then Yudan burned a raging fire. I let the energy under my command drift outwards, until I could sense the hundreds of specks of life surrounding the Ebon Hawk, which was parked in a massive docking bay.

Even if I went out fighting, there was no way I could protect everyone on board. Not against that many, not with defensive turrets aimed at the ‘Hawk. They would be willing to destroy the freighter, to risk damaging this section of the mighty Leviathan, if I resisted.

No, I couldn’t fight back. Not overtly, not right now.
I reeled the Force back in, slowly and deliberately, until my senses were settled only on the *Ebon Hawk*. So few sentients here, compared to the seething mass of life directly beyond. Every electrical oscillation was outlined in my minds-eye, every room in the ship made tangible by whatever swirl of energy or life or electricity I could pick up.

With a puff of air, I dropped the Force and snapped open my eyes.

“"I need a minute in the cargo bay with the droids,” I rapped out. “Alone.”

---

**Rulan Prolik:**

The shadows of the wroshyrs enveloped me like silent wraiths; ominous friends who had kept me company for so many years. In truth, I enjoyed the solitude, but it would have been mind-numbingly boring without my links to the outside world.

And now, events were afoot that impacted even a retired Overseer of the GenoHaradan.

Not that one ever truly *retired* from the GenoHaradan.

The holo-image of Eridius shone a translucent cyan that reflected into the nearby environs. The Shadowlands limited me to shifts with advanced vision, unless I deigned to wear an electronic visor. I was not fond of them.

I had tried the Wookiee form more than once; stars knew I had ended the life of enough to accurately imitate their form. But their vocal abilities inhibited easy communication, so my shift of choice on this planet was Arkanian. Even when I had impersonated that meddling fool Jolee Bindo, I had incorporated Arkanian physiology for sight.

::This is unsettling,:: Eridius murmured from the array platform. I’d been more than a little irritated to discover just how many of my communication platforms Bindo had destroyed. Still, he hadn’t found them all. ::We have analysed the transmission you intercepted, Rulan. The schematic appears to be a ship factory of sorts, although we do not understand its power source.::

“Revan’s core of strength, at the height of her power,” I commented. “And now, she leaves to destroy it. And Malak.”

::If she gets that far:::

“If there is one sentient whose fate we have been unable to predict—”

::Yes, yes:: Eridius interrupted, somewhat irritably. His creased eyes frowned at me through the holo-image. He was a worthy successor for the GenoHaradan, and I did not regret choosing him as a replacement. He was no field operative, though. In some ways, I rather thought that gave him a perspective other Overseers lacked. ::You believe she will succeed then?::

I sat back on a massive log, frowning as I considered the odds. “She has a chance. I won’t commit to more than that.”

::But she recalls nothing of our alliance. And nothing of what first urged her to align with us.::

“No. There is something of both the old Jedi Knight and the Sith Lord there, but she is not what she once was. Only extensive neural scans would give us an indication of how much remained.”
Once we knew what to look for, our data analysts had unearthed the details of Revan’s fate. Brain damage. Mind wipe. Identity replacement. Even for a sentient as old as I, it was intriguing.

The Force was both a slippery and powerful tool, and one of the few abilities I could not engineer for myself. A shame, that.

Once, Darth Revan had promised us a vision of GenoHaradan success. A Republic stronger than the stagnant beast that stalled under local politics and petty grievances. An efficient military machine that could withstand a greater threat than the Mandalorians had been. The carrot: a guaranteed seat for an agent on the Senate. Secret, of course, but signed off by the Lord of the Sith herself.

She would not divulge details of the threat, and we tried – oh, how we tried – to find out what had been the trigger for the birth of Darth Revan.

Our analysts believed it was more than just the corruption of their Force and its Dark Side, even though history had shown that could be immeasurable in its power. But no, I amongst others was convinced something had happened after Malachor - and the GenoHaradan still, to this day, wished to know what.

Any threat that powerful could be destabilising to our Order, and first we needed to understand it.

::It is in our interests to see Darth Malak overturned, but only if we can do so unnoticed.::

Eridius had turned solemn, and I knew, then, what he was about to ask of me. Kashyyyk would be waiting for me after all, and my first loyalty was, as ever, to the GenoHaradan.

And I always made a point of being honest with myself. Revan intrigued me. Not much did, these days.

“I shall travel to this factory,” I said. “It will be easy to replace a Sith soldier. I can watch and learn from there, Eridius.”

His blue lips pursed, but he gave me a short nod. ::If there is some way of bringing her into our debt without showing your hand, then do so, Rulan. The Jedi Knight, at least, always honoured a debt.::

“And she has much to explain to us,” I murmured. “I shall make it so, Eridius. I will call in when I can.”

With another nod, the Second Overseer cut the connection, and I was once more enveloped with varying shadows of black. Above me, high in the skies, a battle raged. I would be best travelling to another part of the planet before finding a ship.

With an inward sigh, my limbs melded into the forelegs of a katarn. My head twitched, before shifting into a long reptilian cranium. Thought-processes were always tricky to keep a hold of, when shifting into a non-sentient, but I’d acquired the knack of keeping my brain physiology intact while changing. Smell, sight and hearing morphed and amplified, and it took a moment to adjust.

Then, with a lash of my extending tail, I bounded deep into the shadows.

xXx

**Canderous Ordo:**

That corpse-robbing *shabuir* was still standing, leaning casually against the wall. I damned myself for being such a kriffing *di’kut*. I’d thought there was something suspicious about him, but like a fool
I’d ignored my gut and was now paying the price.

*He knows Revan. The bastard is here because of Revan.*

Revan’s insane strategy relied solely on an alliance with a Dark Jedi masquerading as a Mando’ade. And what would it grant us, even if it paid off? My freedom, alongside kriffing Dan Fett. Maybe I could work with that, maybe find some way to free the others – but only if I relied on that bastard actually holding to Revan’s shaky plan.

She *must* realize, that odds were he’d turn around and betray the lot of us.

Revan may have been renowned, once, for risky gambles that paid off - but this smacked more of wishful thinking than anything else.

*I gotta tell her the truth. She’ll be captured, tortured – I can’t let her walk into that without knowing.*

Onasi had already left, flatly ignoring Revan’s plea for a minute alone and granting her, maybe, thirty seconds before following in her wake. I scowled, and knew that time was fast running out.

“*You have two minutes remaining before we open fire on the ship.*”

The words echoed loudly throughout the freighter. I stood, my eyes landing on Juhani as I did so, standing silently near the exit.

“I’ll go get them,” I said roughly, and the Cathar blinked solemnly at me. Her fur was bristling, standing up from beneath the warrior’s tail on her head, but she stood ready to obey Revan. A warrior, following her leader into near-certain doom.

For all our differences, there were things that connected us, too.

I caught Mission’s gaze as I strode out the room. She had her head tucked into the Wookiee’s, one hand clenched protectively over her utility belt that would be stripped from her waist the moment the Sith forces grabbed her. My mouth thinned. I couldn’t do anything about that, and the anger that surged inside at the thought of her capture was irrational, at best.

Mission was the child of the group, the kid, the one to protect until she was competent enough to stand on her own. Sure, amongst my people, any teen her age would likely have been blooded twice over, or at the least sent on a clan raid to test her mettle.

But Mission wasn’t Mando’ade. She was soft, mouthy, and on the gullible side if she truly believed she could smuggle a tech spike under the noses of Sith – some of who would know *exactly* who Jen Sahara was, and would be suitably suspicious of her companions.

Still, I wasn’t gonna stop Mission trying.

I heard the hatch of the common room hiss shut behind me as I stomped down the freighter’s short corridor. Revan had some other trick up her sleeve, something to do with the damn droids, even if for the life of me I couldn’t figure out how *they* would assist. First thing the Sith boarding party would do, would be to shove restraining bolts down their respective gullets.

I rounded the corner. The entrance to the cargo bay was open, and standing in the middle of it was—

I stopped, eyes widening in disbelief. Onasi had his hands trapped in Revan’s dark curls, and was snogging her soundly, somewhat desperately, pushed up against the side of the open hatch.
Mand'alor's balls! It was common knowledge who Revan’s old lover was. To think she’d replaced the now Dark Lord of the Sith with a Republic loyalist would have been kriffing hilarious if we weren’t about to be boarded.

And Onasi… if he ever found out the truth his brain would short-circuit.

“Kids, there’s a time for that sort of thing!” I snapped out. “It ain’t now. Not sure I can think of a worse one than right now.”

They jumped apart, Onasi turning to scowl at me. Revan’s cheeks were flushed, but her gaze was intent and serious.

“You done here?” I drawled, raising an eyebrow.

To give her credit, Revan recovered with quick aplomb. She gave me a short nod. “Yes,” she muttered, disentangling herself and striding towards me. “Let’s move out.”

“Jen,” I ground out, as she brushed past. “One second. I need to talk to you.”

She shot me an indecipherable look, but didn’t stop walking. “There’s a time for that sort of thing, Canderous,” she snarked, one hand rising to thump against the hatch control of the common room.

“You have one minute remaining before we open fire on the ship.”

There was a twitch of black humour on Revan’s face at that.

“We’re out of time!” Someone – sounded like that old robe who’d followed Revan onboard – hollered from the hatch beyond.

“Let’s go, now!” Onasi urged, motioning us forward.

“(They’re going to torture you, break you, and hand you over to Malak.)” I switched to Mando’a. The hatch swished open under Revan’s hand, but I saw her shoulders tense. “(You’re a bigger prize than Bastila. Do you know why?)”

Her head turned, and I saw the blank shock in her eyes. Names remained the same no matter the language, and I wasn’t going to voice hers in front of Onasi. Beyond the open hatch, stood the others, waiting frantically for us to get a move on.

“Come on, guys!” Mission yelled.

Did she get it? Was it knowledge I saw in her face, surprise that I knew the truth and accepted it? Or did the stunned expression show her complete lack of understanding?

“We must leave, now!” a feline voice hissed, and Revan turned away from me, not answering or acknowledging my message. In the common room, waiting, was the armoured betrayer I’d led into the ship, the one who knew Mando’a almost as well as a born Mando’ade.

I was out of time. I should have told Revan back on kriffing Korriban.

“Go!” Revan ordered, motioning everyone out of the ‘Hawk with a wave of one hand. Her other, I noted, was held tight to her chest and I recalled she’d had some sort of injury in the Shadowlands. “Keep your arms free and raised, guys. They’ll only stun you, then.”

“Only,” Mission muttered. The Wookiee howled something at her before they followed the Cathar’s quick trot out of the room.
“Whatever you did with the droids won’t work,” the lying *shabuir* said as Revan walked passed him. “You know that, right?”

“I’m allowed to play my last flip card, Yudan,” she murmured, Carth’s hand on the small of her back as she strode away, head held high.

In the distance, I heard the roar of a crowd, the yelled orders to stand down. It was just him and me left in the common room, his visor turning to face me as I stared at him. *Yudan.* I knew that name. Yudan Rosh. A key Jedi Knight of Revan’s, who had rallied the Republic forces against many of the Fett advances.

Some, he’d even won.

Suddenly, his answers in the Shadowlands made a lot more sense.

My teeth bared as his armoured gloves raised to remove the battered helm that was twice again too high for a Twi’lek’s head. Piercing yellow eyes stared at me a moment later, betraying absolutely nothing.

“I fought in the damn Wars, Ordo,” he said, his words cold and dark. “Against your darling Cassus Fett. While he raped civilians and razed land he’d already conquered merely to impress Mandalore. *Not* the best example of your people.”

My eyes narrowed and my grip clenched on the repeater in my grasp.

“War is war, Rosh,” I growled. “I would have expected a Dark Jedi under Malak to understand that.”

He didn’t answer, instead jerking his head towards the ‘*Hawk*’s exit. “You first, Ordo. Better raise your hands.”

And so, I found myself walking down the durasteel corridor of the *Ebon Hawk*, inwardly cursing myself and Yudan Rosh and even Revan for not cobbling together a better plan. As I stepped into the artificial light of the *Leviathan*’s docking bay, making out the figures of Zaalbar and Mission directly ahead, I threw one last warning behind me.

“Remember what you vowed, Rosh,” I said over my shoulder. My hands lifted into the air, into a surrender that galled me to the core. A hundred weapons swivelled in my direction as my boots clambered down the landing ramp. “You vowed not to harm my crewmates.”

I didn’t have to look at him to see the unconcerned shrug. “Well, harm is such a relative term.” His voice surged in volume, then, much the same as the temper swirling in my gut. “Lieutenant Delia! It is me, Yudan Rosh. I’ve overwhelmed this band of misfits, to bring them here for the glory of Lord Malak. Stun them.”

Juhani was already down, having led the crew out. I could only hope it was a stun bolt that felled her. Next to her was the prone form of the old man the Sith didn’t know about. The one Revan hoped to pass off as a harmless old trader.

My stomach churned with impotent fury as Mission collapsed in Zaalbar’s arms.

A female Sullustan garbed in an officer’s uniform stood near the front of rows of soldiers, her eyes fixed behind me.

“I’m with Rosh,” I snarled, hearing the Dark Jedi strut down the loading ramp to my side. There was
a flare of red as his lightsaber ignited.

“My lord,” the Sullustan acknowledged Rosh. “We had heard of your demise.”

Revan, further ahead, turned around to stare at her once-comrade. He stared right back, pointing his saber at her. “Make sure you isolate the Force sensitives, Delia. The female human, the Cathar, and the old male human.”

The words were a punch to my gut.

_Dammit, Revan, you better have a kripping plan to get out of this that doesn’t rely on Yudan Rosh!_

Revan fell to her knees from a hit, quiet even as her eyes accused Rosh. Her gaze travelled beyond us then, beyond the ‘Hawk, a contortion of disgust marring her face like she’d spotted something even more unpleasant than the betrayal of someone who used to be a comrade. Revan’s hair whipped upwards, as if a gust of wind surged in a torrent around her. I wondered if it was a final, desperate surge of the Force, before half a dozen stun bolts finished the job.

She dropped, collapsing next to Onasi.

“Restrain them!” the Sith officer shouted, pointing at the fallen bodies of my crewmates. The closest row of soldiers ran forward to do her bidding.

Yudan Rosh turned slowly to look at me. A smirk formed on his face, creasing the ugly black lines of corruption that marked the stronger Dark Jedi like a badge of kripping insanity. His eyes were blank, though, and did not match the dark humour twisting his lips.

"General Ordo," Rosh said, and I knew then that I was going the same way as old man from Kashyyyk, the one who'd followed Revan onboard, the one who Rosh had betrayed. Rosh's gloved hands motioned to the nearest soldiers, before gesturing to me. "I must admit, I'm curious. Jen Sahara knows who she is. Do you?"

I felt my expression harden, and Rosh picked the truth from it. His mouth quirked. “Should have expected that from a Mandalorian general. I’m only surprised you kept it from her.” He turned to face the approaching soldiers. “Stun him.”

I turned to the side and spat. “You’ll get yours, Rosh.” A sharp pain in my side, followed by a growing numbness. “Mando’ad draar digu,” I muttered. Something clobbered me hard over the head, and I staggered before falling over.

_A Mando’ade never forgets._

xXx

**Bastila Shan:**

The stars winked at me, like tiny jewels of hope, taunting me with the freedom I no longer possessed. This wing of the Star Forge was grand; replete with prodigious viewing rooms that housed floor-to-ceiling windows made of a ferracrystal compound so translucent there appeared to be no barrier at all. At times, I indulged in the delusion that I could take one step forward, and then gently float away into space.

Away from Malak, away from the Forge, away from everything.

There was no one in this part of Malak’s dominion. No soldiers, marching in unison; no engineers or
techs or support staff. Perhaps isolation was meant to be my next test, for the only company Malak allowed me other than himself were the nearby manufacturing droids, who oversaw the massive turbines that churned out chunks of machinery later assembled as ever more cogs in the Sith armada.

Still, Malak had a manpower problem. I had ascertained that much from my time here. The Star Forge might be a powerful weapons factory from the Rakatan era, but unlimited starfighters were little more than pleasing decoration without pilots to fly them. A shame for Malak that he had not also uncovered a training facility to work alongside the Forge.

Experienced, competent pilots were harder, it seemed, to replace than starships.

I walked slowly through the cavernous room, my eyes fixed on unfamiliar star systems so many light-years away from my current position. My feet, now shod in gleaming black dress shoes, echoed a dull *clip-clop* around the empty chamber. The shadowy robe Malak claimed was a gift from the Star Forge itself sat heavy on my shoulders, and swished around me like a wave of icy seafoam in the night’s darkness.

Malak had me dressed to his liking, and I found I had not the heart to fight him on this. Even if a lifetime ago, I would not have allowed *anyone* to dictate my garb.

*But I wore the Jedi brown without protest. A good little Padawan, bending knee to my betters.*

But that had been *my* choice.

*Really? Choice? Since when was any Padawan allowed to choose otherwise? I was snatched at little more than seven turnings of Coruscant’s sun. What choice does a girl-child have, when the all-powerful Jedi tell her what to do?*

I sighed in wearied frustration, shaking my head to dispel the altercating thoughts that were not uncommon to me. It seemed the more I was alone, the more at war I myself became. But solitude was an improvement from being restrained and medicated! I would reassure myself of this, when it seemed like my mind wandered down caliginous alleys and I struggled to scrape up the wherewithal to find my way back.

Malak had restricted me to this wing of the Forge. His command was absolute, and after my abortive escape attempt I could not find the strength to defy him. Not without Revan. Not on my own. Not after having lived through his displeasure when he had uncovered exactly how much involvement Revan had had in my brief taste of freedom.

Malak’s pleasure and sickly pride in me had dissolved into a furious well of disappointment. And this time, he unleashed it as a psychic scouring, a mental thrust of brutal power that I could no more halt than one could hold back a supernova.

My mind, always a tightly locked chest, my cornerstone of skill and expertise, had bled out in front of him like a smashed chick’s egg. Like complete failure. Oh, Malak had no finesse, and found answers only to what he directly sought, but it was still failure. And to think, I had been hailed as the new Jedi hero, the one with such a grand and powerful gift of the mind, and yet my barriers were little more than spider-webs in his way as he strode forward.

Malak honed in on my thoughts and plucked the memories out like cheap trinkets he then promptly discarded. Flashes of Revan, my comatose captive on that harrowing flight away from Deralia. Of Jen Sahara, dying as we collected her holocron imprint without her consent – and hadn’t he had something to say about Jedi ethics on *that* one. Of Revan-as-Jen Sahara, no more than a silent ghost in a pathetic shell.
And then the *Endar Spire*. The impossible. Revan, truly, slowly, returning to herself.

Her struggles against me on Tatooine. Her struggles against the Dark Side on Korriban. Her overconfidence and conviction against overwhelming odds, even when perhaps the correct path was caution. The chasm in her mind where her past experience once was.

All potential fault-lines for Malak to exploit.

The bonds Revan held to all the crew of the *Ebon Hawk*, but especially Mission. And, I believed, Carth - even if she did not know it herself.

Oh, Malak had lingered over that one, and I tasted the shame of betrayal sear through my self-respect.

And when I thought I could bear the mental violation no longer, he had turned to my memories of Kylah.

Kylah, murmuring that I was not ready for the Knight trials. Kylah, “protecting” me from galactic fame. Kylah, holding me back from connecting with others. Taking credit for my talents. Deceiving me. Duping me.

Kylah, Kylah, Kylah.

My hatred burned like nothing I had felt before. Like the power of the Star Forge itself responded to my enmity of *that schutta*. The Forge- it felt like a living entity. I could hear it, sometimes, whispering to me, suffocating my soul and my sense of right from wrong.

*You could defeat Malak now, if you catch him unawares. He has left you with your lightsaber. Why do you not use it against him?*

But I *had* tried. I had tried, and failed. And I *would* try again; rail at the inevitable, at the monster that was Darth Malak, for what else could I do? Even though I was no match for him. He was too strong, with his Force augmented so by the omnipotence of the Forge.

I wondered - even as I knew it a dangerous contemplation - where the heights of *my* power would peak, if I were the Master of the Star Forge. I would be able to defeat Malak, then. My Battle Meditation would sweep his armada into nothingness. I could stop the likes of Kylah from drawing another breath into her lying, betraying body.

Sometimes, the Star Forge seemed to speak to me in Malak’s voice.

*Where are the Jedi now? You are their golden child, set up as their hero after Revan failed so publicly. Surely, they could have found a way to protect you on Manaan, to nurse you back to health in the company of allies – rather than send you off, comatose and vulnerable, in the company of an amnesiac Sith Lord who had so recently scuttled the very ship you were sent away in.*

No matter that Revan and I had grown close since then, that my bond to her felt more akin to sisterhood these days. The Order could not have foreseen that development, nor the Republic forces who were *supposed* to be assisting me.

I had awoken from my trials in Hrakert Station to find Karon dead, Revan in command, and our crew headed to Korriban.

And, yes, Revan had been remarkable and our mission had succeeded. But still, I was no more than a dejark piece to the Order, to be used dispassionately and discarded when convenient.
Kylah would not have been able to capture me had the Jedi or the Republic given adequate aid.

Sometimes, it was my own voice I heard.

They will blame Revan for my capture. For everything that went wrong. They always do. Oh, I could not deny her culpability in her own atrocities, but these days I felt I held more objectivity about Revan Freeflight than most of the Jedi Order. Certainly more than when I was merely another mouth spouting the same Jedi rhetoric. Now it was the what-ifs that plagued me.

Would Revan have fallen, had the Jedi High Council backed her? Carth asked me that, once, and I dismissed it as preposterous. But the truth is, the Senate rallied around her – they, at least, believed the Core was truly under threat. Any politician or military leader of import believed that.

I could not deny that some on the Jedi High Council had always disapproved of Revan – her advanced age when she was found, her meteoric rise and unprecedented standing amongst the most experienced of Knights, her not-quite-forbidden romance with Malak.

Her willingness to challenge authority, openly, when she believed it to be wrong.

What would have happened had it been a Master, a Jedi more accepted by the conservatives than Revan Freeflight, who had stood up and demanded that the Order support the Republic in its hour of need?

I felt like I knew the answer to that, and it burned with resentment on my bond-sister’s behalf.

I tried to dispel those thoughts that I knew, deep down, were corrosive to my own well-being. I scrabbled to hang on to the fragile spark of light within me, that undercut all the despair and rage and hate I suffered through.

It was a thin thread of gold, almost completely obscured by the shadows engulfing me, but it was there.

Hope.

Revan’s shields against me still held. Somewhere, she was still fighting. All I had endured, I would do over again, to give Revan – to give us – this chance at success.

For a time, I had held Malak at bay. Our dance had lasted minutes or hours or years, in that forsaken, empty hangar. I saw each second as a gift to my bond-sister, a droplet of time to fill her cup of chance, to increase the odds of her escaping Kashyyyk before Malak ripped the truth from my mind, before Malak ordered the plasma to rain down on the forest world.

In the end, my diversions weren’t enough, and Malak deduced her escape. His orders were sent to the Leviathan, and I suffered through his fury.

I knew it had not occurred long ago, and yet it felt like an eternity. That gold thread of hope bowed under the weight of despair, but it was still there. It was still there.

Revan. That you will find a way to escape.

To finish what we started.

And to free me.

The last thought was selfish, I knew, but I could not help it.
I could feel him drawing near, yet again. I did not know if it was my own senses or the Star Forge whispering to me, but I drew my thoughts in tight, clenched my shoulders, and kept my gaze blindly on the galaxies ahead as I heard a door behind me hiss open. His footsteps padded closer.

Each one, a sinister thud of advancing corruption.

“The Unknown Regions,” Malak murmured in his mechanical voice. He was speaking of the stars. Astronomy was not an interest of mine, and I could be staring at the Core for all I knew. “We travelled there, after Malachor. The Force feels more alive in the wilds of space. Some cannot handle it.”

He paused, then, and I could not help but question, even as I kept my head firmly turned away from him. “What did you find?”

“Some things are better left alone, little one.” Interestingly, his voice turned blank and monotone. Even through his motorized vocabulator, his emotions were normally perceptible. “Revan never did understand when it was time to step away. Curiosity was always one of her flaws.”

He spoke no more, and I knew it was not wise to question any further. I could not trust what he would say, at any rate.

But he had found something. They had found something. Corrupted and jaded by years of warfare, they had ventured out for some unknown reason into the Unknown Regions. And found something unknown out there.

I had always been so young and presumptuous, so quick to judge. I would listen in askance about Darth Revan, and assume there must have been some innate corruption in her before she fell, she who had stood as the hero of the galaxy, the shining icon of liberation.

Oh, she fell indeed, but I had never thought to question why. No, I was so blind, always eager to follow the judgements of the Masters, who blamed it on the scars of battle.

And Malak stood, forbidding and gleeful and just as blind, denying any real threat. But whatever it was, I now wondered if it was the catalyst for Revan’s actions after Malachor. Malak might be the only soul left who knew, and he did not believe.

Malak’s gloved hand landed on my shoulder liked a harbinger of doom, shattering through my thoughts, and I inwardly cringed away from his mental probe. I could sense him, already, searching for any resurgence of my bond-sister. Malak’s psychic touch was hardly subtle.

Was it because of him, that I felt her stir? Her shields, so hastily erected, shudder between us? A trickle of fear, of alarm, of something from Revan, and then suddenly Malak was deep within my mind, desperately fumbling for any awareness of her.

No! I cried, but I had the idea that she was not cognizant of me, that her attention was so caught on some other danger that she could not spare the focus on the bond that linked us so intimately.

Malak, eager as a hungry kath pup, pushed hard against her shields, and they shattered into nothingness.

Suddenly, I could see a massive hangar inside a massive starship, filled to the brim with soldiers armed with an array of weapons all pointed at me. Carth, at my side, his face dear to me - to her! – and tight with dread. Juhani, hands held aloft in surrender, before a laser bolt caught her in the side.

The proud Cathar fell.
No! The horror struck me like a physical blow. *Revan, you must do something!*

I heard the roar of a Wookiee. I saw him, as he held a comatose Mission in his arms, as he collapsed himself.

*Fight! Revan, you can get out of this! You must!*

I turned and saw a yellow-skinned Twi’lek male with corrupted eyes standing next to Canderous, pointing a scarlet ‘saber at me and shouting something.

*I cannot bear it if you are captured again!*

I fell to my knees – her knees - our gaze still on the yellow Twi’lek, before it skittered beyond to the edge of the hangar. A railing, high above the mass of troops, held a robed figure. A person in the distance, staring down at me, head uncovered and glossy tendrils of dark hair adorning her shoulders.

I did not have to see her face to know the superior smirk was there. I could sense her presence shining in the Force, as she skirted along the edges of the seething crowd. I could taste her glee, her elation, her pride in conquest.

*Kylah.*

My gaze blurred, and I fell. Revan fell.

*I cannot bear it…*

The Force bond blurred into unconsciousness, and I was hurled back into my own body.

A canyon of despair cleaved open in my soul. At its very depths was a bedrock of hate. Kylah, once more, was victorious.

Malak’s fingers branded deep into my shoulders. Triumph oozed from him like a sickly syrup of hedonistic exultation. He rode a maleficent wave of victory, tangled with corrupted Force that smothered me in its darkness.

All because of my jealous childhood friend.

“It is over, dear Bastila,” Malak murmured. His fingers gripped tight, his will pinched into mine. **I have won.**

Denial, my only bolster of hope left, rallied its weak, fragile wings.

*Revan escaped before. She escaped Bandon’s neural disruptor, and that is not meant to be possible-*

There was a mechanical thrum of laughter. “It is not possible,” he refuted, and the delight in his voice pierced the faint hope I was clutching onto. “But betrayal… now that is something a true Master is always on his guard for. Did you not see who was there, who must have led Revan out of that tin ship of yours?”

A Twi’lek, a Dark Jedi, shouting something *at* Revan or *to* her?

“Yudan Rosh,” Malak said, and it took a moment for the name to register. A relic of the Jedi Thirteen, who had been sent to Kashyyyk, to capture Revan. Had he infiltrated the *Ebon Hawk*, and betrayed them?

**Oh, I am sure that is what he would like us to believe,** Malak answered, his presence still deep
within my mind. I was in shock, I knew, and had little control over my thoughts or what he could hear. He spoke, and I could not distinguish between his mechanized voice and his mental touch. “But not even Revan could have removed a neural disruptor without help. No, Yudan has switched his loyalties one too many times. I shall take no chances with him upsetting my plans. Kylah and Nisotsa will take care of him before he has a chance to interfere, and then Revan shall be sent to me.”

I could not succumb to this chasm of despair. Revan would not. Somehow, she would rally, she would fight, she would scrabble for any solution-

**You are mine, Bastila.**

His hand withdrew before returning, this time to cup under my chin and force me to look at him. His sharp yellow eyes had narrowed with pleasure. **There will be no Revan to help you escape this time.**

My lips were numb. “But, you will send her here, to you, to fight you one last time-”

Malak cocked his head, considering me. “Hope is a dangerous thing, Bastila. Whether you be Jedi or Sith.” His words, both spoken and not, reverberated with an echo I could not escape from. **It can blind you to reality, tempt you into irrational action. You must know I am not foolish enough to give my old Master a chance to escape or succeed.**

The Masters always said hope was a gift.

The thin gold thread was beginning to unravel. Revan was captured. Revan was captured again.

Revan was captured by Kylah.

**I must be able to do something, anything!**

I could barely convince myself. And I felt that if I breathed too deeply, the very weight of my despair would snap through the last vestige of hope still within me.

“You didn’t face her, at Deralia,” I croaked. Malak’s gloved fingers tightened around my chin, holding me immobile against his superior will. My voice scraped against my suddenly dry throat. “Surely you wish to end things with her as a fair fight. Surely she… surely you both, deserve that.”

His pale-and-chrome face blurred in front of me.

“Oh Bastila, you are a unique creature. Did the Order truly believe you could lead Revan meekly around the galaxy like a domesticated bantha?” His voice thrummed with a mild incredulity. “They always underestimated her. Even I did. For, in truth, she has become your Master, hasn’t she?”

**What?** I blinked, damping down the moisture from my eyes. Revan and I were equals-

“She is stronger, quicker, and more adept than you,” he murmured, as if sensing my thoughts. Maybe he still was. “And your loyalty to her is absolute. It does your credit, little one. I shall enjoy winning that loyalty for myself.”

He wouldn’t. I might bow to him, do his bidding, follow his will, but he would not own me. Never!

His face moved closer, a warm puff of air ghosting out over the cool chrome of his lower jaw. “I do not believe in a fair fight, dear Bastila. This is something Revan taught me long ago, before we were Sith, before we were Jedi. When we were nobodies scrabbling to survive on a forgotten world.” His eyes held mine tight. “There is no fair. Anything to reach your end goal. The end justifies the
“But you are bringing her here?” My lips moved around the words, but I did not know if they actually formed.

“I would enjoy the kill, little one. But I am not so intent on it that I will give her an opportunity for escape.” His head cocked to one side. “Did you take me for a monologuing villain, Bastila?” He chuckled. “Enjoy your hope, dear Bastila. Believe that Revan will come here, and I will be foolish enough to grant her an opportunity. The aftermath of your despair will be all the sweeter.”

The golden thread thinned further. I found I could not breathe with my face held so in his grasp.

**I will have you acknowledge, in the end, that I am your Master.**

My eyes closed, and I felt a warm trickle of moisture trail down my face.

It was all pointless in the end. The Republic may have halted the plasma, but Revan was caught by *that schutta* in the aftermath anyway.

Revan’s grave beckoned, and there might not be anything I could do about that. But a true Jedi would stand guard against evil, be it Malak or the Star Forge or whatever Revan had uncovered on the fringes of space.

Yet, there was no place to be a true Jedi, not here. *By any means necessary.* Revan understood sacrifice, more so than I ever had.

I had to keep true to her. I swore to myself, that I would keep faith in her, even as I felt the final, intangible thread of golden hope finally snap through beneath the weight of despair.

**xXx**
Hyperspace: VI – part two

Saul Karath:

“We have her,” Kylah Aramai purred, strolling once more onto my command deck. I frowned, intending to ignore the irritating chit. My attention was fixed on the Leviathan’s diagnostics. We’d taken too many hits, getting so close to Kashyyyk. The overall health of the shield generators was alarming, and worse: the hyperdrive was malfunctioning.

My victory at the destruction of the Meridus’ gravity-wells had been short-lived, and I damned the quick thinking of the commanding officer who faced me out there in the skies. My intelligence reported it was Forn Dodonna – a shrewd, if cautious, Admiral. Perhaps I’d underestimated her. I’d anticipated additional attacks along the hull, or even snubs targeting the Ebon Hawk directly – and I’d positioned our squads in an appropriate defensive array to thwart that.

I didn’t count on the Republic Fleet aiming directly for the hyperdrive – and worse, bringing it down.

We were on the back foot, now. If we couldn’t recover the hyperdrive, our only option was to overpower the Meridus - and that was starting to look more difficult than I was comfortable with.

And then, Kylah’s words fully registered.

We have her.

The Ebon Hawk had been bagged not long ago, and I’d been glad to see the back of blasted Kylah Aramai as she skipped away to supervise Delia’s handling of the prisoners.

I didn’t believe Revan would be onboard. It didn’t seem possible, not unless she really was as mind-crippled as the reports led us to believe.

And with the threat of the Meridus, I had other concerns to focus on rather than the ghost of a woman I had once admired and followed. I forcefully kept my mind trained on my current objectives, and nothing else.

Besides, the last thing I needed was for Kylah Aramai to pick up on my personal interest regarding the Ebon Hawk’s pilot.

“You personally checked the crew?” I growled, spinning to face the dolled-up harlot. Oh, but did Kylah Aramai irritate me in the worst possible way. She couldn’t have been this childish, this demanding, this entrenched in her own sexuality as a Jedi Knight.

Damn Malak for not reigning the stupid bint back in.

An expression of insolence crossed her face as she eyed me over in a dismissive fashion. I saw her fist clench at her side, and felt a tightening of air currents squeeze faintly around my neck. A warning. A threat, from a child who shouldn’t be allowed on a starship let alone a command deck.
My face tightened, and I felt the corners of my mouth turn down in disgust. Behind me, the beeps of incoming electronic reports sizzled through the air, an aural reminder that my attention should not be wasted on a supercilious chit like Kylah Aramai.

She laughed, a high-pitched tinkling sound that grated, and abruptly released the weak threads of energy coiled around me like an uncomfortably tight kerchief. Overt uses of the Force were not Kylah’s greatest strength. No, I’d recently discovered that damn mind control was - and while I might have trained resistance to it, I also understood Kylah to be something of an expert.

Talvon Esan had taught me, years ago, mental exercises to keep Force sensitives out of my mind. It was a practised, ordered way of thinking behind constructed mental shields I constantly rebuilt. A useful trick – although not infallible, Talvon had warned me. In the end, the best form of defense against mental trickery was the self-control to ensure one’s thoughts did not stray.

Talvon had been intrigued by me, back when he’d been sane. He had theorized, once, that I had an innate, previously untapped Force-sensitivity. The thought was unappealing. The longer I lived, the more I detested the power that more often than not was wielded by unstable sentients wholly unsuited for leadership. Talvon was a perfect example. My old wartime comrade, whose corruption led him down sadistic paths I never would have predicted.

“Of course I did, Karath,” Kylah purred. “You believe I wouldn’t triple-check Revan’s presence? You don’t give me enough credit.”

The cavalier fool, thinking it was nothing to throw Revan’s name around like that. Behind her, I heard the indrawn breaths of two comm techs who were idiotic enough to be listening in. Imbecile! The last thing we need is for our men to believe a dead Sith Lord is walking amongst us!

A smirk twisted Kylah’s vermilion lips, and her tawny golden eyes stared at me in amused awareness. “You worry too much, Karath,” she drawled, before gliding over to the snooping staff. One of them squeaked when Kylah placed a gentle hand on his shoulder.

“You will remember nothing of this conversation,” she whispered, her head lowering between the two men who were undoubtedly wetting their pants. The words ghosted out over her painted lips, puckered up to within an inch of their frozen faces. “Your only focus is to do the best job you can, to sit at this desk and work for the glory of Lord Malak until you drop of exhaustion. Then you will get up, and continue to work some more. Do not stop, for your insignificant lives are worth nothing but to better our Lord’s cause.”

She straightened, faced me again, and smiled sweetly. The two techs bowed their heads as their fingers danced manically over the consoles.

I scowled. “And in a few days time, I’ll be down two senior engineers.” Not to mention the drop in morale when others saw these men work themselves to death. “Leave the command deck to me, Kylah. Go play with the prisoners. I need to be focusing on the Meridus, not any fallout from you-”

Her outlined eyes widened in outrage. “Are you talking down to me, Karath?” she flared.

“There’s a space battle going on out there!” I flung a hand sharply to gesture at the massive viewing windows. “I don’t have time for this petty sort of.”

Too late, I noticed the gleam of insanity in her yellowing gaze, the achromatic crackle of blue static around her raised fist. “I am Malak’s Shadow Hand!” she snarled.

And she threw the ball of lightning directly at my chest.
Instinct had me lurching to the side; but still it caught me, needles of pain piercing deep into my chest. My heart shuddered. A scream ripped from my lungs. Barbed cords of power were tightening around my torso, ripping spikes of pain everywhere-

It stopped. And, somehow, I was lying prone on the ground.

Kylah stood over me, black shadows rippling underneath her eyes and along her cheekbones. Her gaze gleamed a sharper yellow than before. “You are a relic from Revan’s era,” she hissed. “It is power that rules, Karath, and you are nothing more than a null. It is time you realized that your lifespan is measured only by your usefulness to Lord Malak, and in his absence – me.”

Every hoarse breath in my lungs was pained, and getting up was worse – it felt like a current of electricity was still burning a path through my ribs. But still, I struggled to my feet. I would not cower on the floor in front of Kylah Aramai.

And, yet, it was with a sick sort of self-disgust that I held my tongue as I faced her. To think, that my life was now in the hands of this strutting child.

“You’re excused, Admiral, until you’ve learned the correct subservience to your betters,” she said, her voice once more dwindling to her habitual drawl of amusement. “Your second can lead us to victory here, I’m sure.”

My gaze slid to Delia, standing some metres behind Kylah, large black eyes alarmed and alien face visibly shaken. Kylah’s going to kill the lot of us, I thought in seething frustration. Lieutenant Delia was sharp, and had promise – but she was young. Too young to lead the Leviathan to triumph in a situation as precarious as this one.

But I only had to look at the warning in Kylah’s eyes – the sadistic gleam I was familiar with, having spent too much time around the forsaken Dark Jedi – to realize that I had no choice. They all loved to showcase their pretty little Force powers - particularly on anyone who dared defy them.

With a stiff nod to Delia, and a churning sense of antipathy in my gut, I turned and walked toward the exit. It was not fear hastening my steps. I refused that emotion. I might have to bow to that under-dressed harlot for now – but I will not allow myself to be frightened of her.

“Good choice, Karath.” Kylah’s mocking laughter danced across the shiny deck.

There was a growing malcontent within me at having to constantly cede to unbalanced Dark Jedi. The Leviathan was slowly losing to the Meridus. I didn't rate Delia's chances. Kylah Aramai was either completely blind to the possibility of failure, or she simply didn't care about the loss of life and ships – for no doubt she'd survive, Force-users always had a tendency to find the escape pods when required. Some of the escape pods here had their own internal hyperdrive, so Kylah likely believed she could run straight back home to Malak.

She had already shown she was good at running.

I frowned, one hand rubbing gingerly at my ribs as the pain eased. I had little options left. Working underneath Lord Malak was not what it once had been. It certainly wasn't the same as reporting to Lord Revan - but she'd ended up dancing along the same unbalanced path of sadistic insanity, hadn't she? Talvon had embraced it, and Malak now owned it - but, once, it had been Revan's dominion.

What a waste. What a waste of power, intellect and potential.

I'd always appreciated the strengths the Dark Side could offer our Sith leaders, but it had been apparent for some time that its vulnerabilities were more dangerous - they all lost themselves to their
own twisted emotions, in the end.

And now, what choice did I have left, but to continue working for Malak? I’d be signing my own
death warrant if I ran. Malak did not look kindly on deserters – particularly not highly-ranked ones.

And he had the resources to track them down.

I sighed irritably, and my gaze dropped to a pair of gossiping techs, on the lower part of the
command deck near the exit hatch. It was far enough from the viewing platforms that they may have
missed my confrontation with Kylah – and, certainly, they seemed wholly absorbed in commenting
on the audio-visual feed displayed on their consoles.

My mouth tightened as I neared. The holo-cam feed was annotated with Detainment Cell F07, and
displayed a rectangular room split into four by shimmering energy walls.

“Nah, I still say fifty creds on the Wookiee,” one of the workers commented. “Those furry beasts are
strong, man.”

The other snorted, jabbing a finger at the screen. “He got almost as many stun bolts as the Mando.
Neither of ‘em will wake for ages. My creds are on the soldier.”

The prisoners. The non-Force sensitives. And, underneath the tech’s fat finger, was a man I had once
known well.

Kylah had relieved me of any usefulness. Perhaps it was time to see to my own debts. For, if the
Leviathan pulled through, I knew that none of the Ebon Hawk’s crew would have an easy time of it.

“You were gossiping like a pair of tweens on a holo-movie set,” I spoke over him, folding my arms.
It took me a moment to recall their names: Ensigns Guido and Bar’gata - Rodian brothers who talked
too much and were undoubtedly going to annoy the wrong people, sooner or later. Guido’s gaze
dropped from mine uneasily. “Now, tell me, where have the Force-users from the Ebon Hawk been
detained?”

I had a different sort of debt to Revan. I still didn’t believe she was onboard, not really. It seemed
more likely that Kylah had been misguided or tricked in some fashion.

“They’ve been put in the lilac interrogation room, sir. They’re heavily sedated and restrained in
Force cages.”

I nodded at him sharply. “Go to detainment cell F07, and arrange the transfer of prisoner Carth Onasi
to the lilac interrogation room. I want him prepped for questioning, Ensign, within twenty minutes.”

“Yes, sir,” he muttered, before scrabbling to his feet and lurching away. I sent one last, hard look to
his brother, before leaving the command deck myself.
Dustil Onasi:

The cool of the durasteel wall pressed against me. There was a metal seam running through it, digging deep into my back, and the awkward way I’d restrained myself using harnesses meant for cargo wasn’t helping any.

It was getting hard, frakking hard, not to drop the weaves and reach out for the Force.

The ship’s staccato alarm had been switched off seconds after it activated. When the flight pattern had steadied - a distinct change from the aerial manoeuvring of earlier - I’d had the sick idea of what that had meant.

And now, the freighter was landed, locked, and emptied of every sentient except me.

I wondered, uselessly, how Jordo’s ship was faring.

…

“Ensign Fulmosh will see you to one of the living quarters,” Jordo told me. Kala’s dad had always been a nice, friendly sort; more carefree and jokey than Dad and, as a kid, it’d been easy to relax around him. Now, the years of military service had etched a sternness into his face that matched his rank.

I wasn’t gonna ask about Kala, or her mum. Funny, I hadn’t thought of Kala in years. She used to follow me around, claim that one day we’d get married and become Fleet pilots, just like our dads. The last time I’d seen her, dolled up in a new skirt with her lips crookedly painted pink, she’d coyly asked me along to the latest flick at the holo-centre.

Some action-adventure masquerading as a Malachor doco, starring that garish Serina Starr who was steadily becoming typecast as a brooding Jedi hero. I wanted to go see it – the galaxy was abuzz with theories of where the Jedi Thirteen and half the Republic Fleet disappeared to months ago – but Kala was making me uncomfortable with her kath-pup eyes and stupid compliments.

Life had been so different, once. These days, I couldn’t imagine being scared of a tween girl who couldn’t even use cosmetics properly.

“Get yourself strapped in, Dustil, and heed Fulmosh. We might need to launch off Kashyyyk at any minute.” Jordo gave me a gentle pat on the shoulder, before seemingly dismissing my presence.

I was fine with that. Let Jordo think I was the same, useless boy that did nothing but dream of swoop-racing. Frakk, that was all Dad thought, and he should damn well know better by now. What did he think I’d been doing, those weeks in hyperspace, training with Jen and Dak and Kel and that brooding Cathar whose best friend I’d betrayed? Playing frakking pazaak?

I had four years of schooling under Master Uthar, and Dad thought I was a helpless little boy that needed to be shipped off to the Fleet for safekeeping – or worse, the bloody Jedi.

“Captain, there’s Wookiees in the starport!” a soldier called breathlessly, rushing towards us. The clomp of his boots echoed down the corridor, the noise mingling in with the busyness of a military freighter about to commence flight.

Fulmosh pulled me away gently, and I had to push down the irritation of strangers touching me. Even Jordo – wasn’t like I knew him anymore. Sents weren’t touchy-feely on Korriban. Brush
against someone without permission and you were likely to get a hand chopped off or a sandsnake in your bed.

I allowed him to lead me into a small corridor that arced around the side of the Ruby’s Claw. Various hatches dotted the passage, and uniformed soldiers marched past with only a nod or brief greeting.

“This is us,” Fulmosh chirped at me, as his green hand mashed against a door control. The small room beyond had a row of benches, all lined with safety harnesses, and half of them occupied with chatting grunts. “Come in and sit down. We’re all waiting for launch.”

“I, er, need to go, er- is there a ‘fresher?” I stuttered. Fulmosh grinned at my awkwardness, and I felt myself redden.

“Yeah, just back out the hatch, the next door down. Be quick, okay?”

Quick. Yeah, I’d be quick. I pasted a smile of agreement on my face. Quickly getting the frakk out of here.

One second, to slip out and enshroud myself in the Force. I trailed back to the exit, pressing tight against the wall whenever I encountered a soldier, and focused on keeping my footfalls silent. I’d had practise at that, over the years.

I snuck past the handful of sents at the rear of the Ruby’s Claw, and out the open exit. Jordo was waiting outside, flanked by a small squad of underlings. I spared a brief moment of thought for him, wondering if I’d ever see him again. Wondering, once more, about his wife and daughter and whether they’d lived through the carnage of Telos.

Then a glimpse of blaster fire from the neighbouring launch pad caught my eye. I strode away from the ‘Claw, breaking into a run when I was certain no one would hear my steps.

…

I’d remained cloaked within the Force. There’d been enough blasted Wookiees running about, feral and bloodthirsty, that I’d be a sense-blind gimboid to show myself. Maybe Mission’s pet Wookiee tolerated me okay, now, but there was no telling what his half-tamed countrymen would do.

By the time I neared the ‘Hawk, Ordo and some other Mando were clambering up the ramp, and it was easy to slip in with them.

Dad had been right behind, shutting the hatch while completely oblivious to my presence. As always, underestimating me and telling me how to live my life. I knew, now, that there was no point arguing with him. I’d just do what I wanted, and maybe one day he’d wake up and see I wasn’t a little boy anymore.

I’d expected to reveal myself much later, after we’d escaped the Sith battle – for I’d believed Dad would get us through enemy lines - he had to, if a decorated pilot with a half-dozen medals couldn’t then we were truly frakked.

I hadn’t thought he’d fail. And I really hadn’t expected our survival to fall down on me.

…

The Sith broadcast had resounded twice throughout the ship already, and my hands were twisted tight in the cargo harnesses. I didn’t know what to do, other than keep up the disguise. Dad was
gonna get captured. Mission was. They all were.

But no one knew I was here. My heart thundered and my brain whirled with that knowledge, and I had no frakking idea what to do next.

The hatch opened, making me jump in surprise. That psycho robot stomped into the room, with the astromech wheeling in behind him. And in their wake-

Jen Sahara.

She raised a hand in a halting motion, her gaze fixed firmly on me. And I knew, once more, that she’d bloody well sensed me out.

“Stay hidden,” she hissed. “I don’t think anyone’s sensed you – I almost didn’t – and that means no one can betray you.” Her green eyes were narrowed on me; sharp and intent and gleaming in the light. The next words dropped fast and furious from her lips. “Standard Sith protocol is to board an enemy ship, and install restraining bolts into any droid they come across – if they don’t destroy them.”

“You have three minutes remaining before we open fire on the ship.”

Jen’s mouth tightened. My breath caught in my throat, and I wondered how the frakk she knew about bloody Sith protocols. “There’s a window of time, then, after they leave and before maintenance arrives to uplift the droids. That’s your chance.” Her gaze skittered back to the astromech and the combat droid, who’d both turned to face her. “HK, Teethree, you will obey Dustil Onasi and aid him in rescuing the crew. Shut down now, the both of you.”

With electronic murmers of assent, they powered off. Jen took a step back. I didn’t want her to leave - I had no idea how the actual frakk I was supposed to infiltrate the blasted Leviathan – but the look of urgency on her face kept me silent.

“Good luck,” she murmured, levelling one last intent gaze at me. “Go after Mission and Zaalbar first – they’ll be less guarded than your dad or us Force users. Teethree can hack into the Leviathan’s mainframe, if you can get him out of the freighter unseen. HK’s good in a fight – but maybe he needs to stay behind to secure the ship. Whatever you do - keep yourself hidden!”

With that final warning she turned, and stalked out of the room.

That would have been the last of it, had my father not been on the other side of the hatch when it swished open underneath her palm.

“Carth, what are you-”

And then, Dad grabbed Jen by the shoulders and pushed her up against the hatchway before kissing her fiercely.

My mouth dropped open. My eyes bugged out. It was quite likely I was making gagging noises – half-disbelief and half-disgust – but they were too occupied to hear a damn thing.

“You have two minutes remaining before we open fire on the ship.”

Dad’s hands moved to thread in her dark hair, and with a hot flush of embarrassment I recalled the time I’d walked in on Mum and Dad snogging in the kitchen. A flare of anger sprang to life in my gut. For frakk’s sake – I wasn’t gonna watch any more of this-
“Kids, there’s a time for that sort of thing!” Ordo snapped out from further down the Ebon Hawk’s corridor. “It ain’t now. Not sure I can think of a worse one than right now.”

At least they’d cleared out pretty quick after that.

...

I didn’t know what to think about it. I didn’t have time to think anything about it, even if my initial reaction had been bitter resentment - at seeing my dad kiss someone who wasn’t my mum.

So much for Canderous and Jen being a thing. Maybe Mission had it completely wrong. Or maybe Jen had the morals of a loth-cat. But wouldn’t Ordo be more pissed in that case? Although, Mekel’d told me that Mandalorians slept with anything that moved, so maybe it simply didn’t bother Ordo if his woman was making out with others.

And isn’t Jen supposed to be a stuffy Jedi? Celibacy was about reason number five of why I was never going anywhere near the Order.

I’ll worry about it later. I’ll get pissy about it later! I knew it’d been four years. I knew Mum wouldn’t have wanted Dad to be alone for the rest of his life, but the desperate way they’d been sucking face felt like a slap to my childhood.

Had Jen bloody Sahara forgotten I was there, or simply didn’t give a crap?

Life and death situations had a way of making sentients act brainless. Like me, right now, bitching over my dad’s stupid sex life when I should be getting a frakking move on.

The boarding party had already arrived. Six armoured soldiers had filed into the cargo bay first, with weapons poised as they nosed around corners and cupboards, and upturned a handful of canisters that the Wookiee had been organizing.

It was no more than idle curiosity – their job were merely to secure the ship, not strip it. But still, I hadn’t dare breathe, as they’d stomped about before finally disabling the droids. My sight had speckled from lack of oxygen, as they’d seemingly taken forever.

Eventually, they’d all wandered back out, and I could hear them now near the exit.

Hurry the frakk up! I thought in desperation. Get out of here!

I needed to get the droids online, and figure out what to do. For I’d heard the yell of the crowd and the unleashing of blaster fire, when the crew had disembarked.

They’d been fired at. They’d been taken. All of them. Force, let them all be alive. Please.

And then, mercifully – finally – the sound of fading footsteps followed by the hatch closing reached my ears.

Keep yourself hidden! Jen’s words, and I’d be a half-wit to go against them. I kept the weaves up and tight around me, and fumbled my way out of the cargo harnesses.

My damn leg had gone to sleep. I tripped, stumbled, and fell over – the resulting thump echoing throughout the empty freighter. I caught my breath, eyes widening, and body stiff with fright.

Move, dumbass. The ship’s empty. No one would have heard this from outside the ‘Hawk.

I’d done plenty of risky things before. I’d killed people, indirectly, for Master Uthar. Their names still
sat with me like bitter droplets of pain - *Drex Voona, Talal Born, Tushka, Belaya Linn*. I’d snuck around many a place before, including Master Yuthura’s – who undoubtedly would have killed me if she’d found out.

Once, Master Uthar had bade me plant a document in Darth Bandon’s apartments. Bandon’s notice would have been worse than Yuthura’s.

I’d done it, I’d done it all, with my heart pounding but my focus sharp and clear on executing Uthar’s will.

Why, then, did this feel more dangerous? Why was the feeling of fright curdling so strongly in my stomach?

*Because Dad’s life is at risk. Because people are counting on me. Because it’s not just about myself anymore.*

I swallowed, and staggered to my feet.

I strode to the droids, yanked out the restraining bolts, and held my breath. HK-47 came to life first, his maroon photoreceptors flaring into existence as his head tilted sharply. The astromech whirred and beeped, before a little sensor extracted from its dome and swivelled around. He beeped again.

“Retort: I had already ascertained that, you ignorant trash compactor. Statement: Primary objective to locate and protect Master initiating.”

“Um,” I said.

HK-47 moved quicker than I expected, a hidden blaster dropping to his grasp from a concealed section of his armour, and shifting instantly to aim in the direction of my voice.

Teethree warbled something.

“Statement: Voice recognition analysis matches that of Dustil Onasi.” HK’s mechanized vocabulator seemed to be expressing curiosity. I stepped sideways to avoid the barrel, but HK’s aim followed me unerringly. “Observation: Auditory sensors acknowledge bipedal presence in the cargo bay. And yet no thermal or visual data is available. Hypothesis: As the Master appeared to be communicating with Hormonal Pity-Party before my unnecessary shutdown, then this must be an advanced cloaking mechanism used by Hormonal Pity-Party. I congratulate you, minor meatbag. Most organics seem oddly resistant to cybernetics or implant technology to improve their fragile, gelatinous condition.”

I blinked. The HK unit had a tendency to monologue on the frailties of flesh that I found a bit disturbing.

“Um, yeah, it’s me,” I stammered. “I’m hidden. Kind of.”

“Commentary: And, once more, the concise observations of biological meatbags showcase their intellectual inferiority to artificial life-forms.”

“What?” I frowned, feeling back-footed. “Um, look, we gotta work together and get the others free. Let’s stop with the insults about intelligence, okay? That’s not what’s important here.”

“Agreement: Certainly, intelligence is not everything. Why, in your case, it’s practically nothing.”

Teethree beeped angrily, waving an antennae at Psycho-Droid. I felt myself scowling, and welcomed the onset of anger. It felt stronger, fiercer, *better*, than the fright which had been owning me.
“Jen Sahara ordered you to obey me, HK,” I snapped, and hoped it came out as commanding rather than petulant. “So stop with the frakking insults already.”

To my surprise, he did. “Assertion: As you wish, Hormonal Pity-Party. May I suggest we start on our objective of locating and protecting the Master?”

“We’re rescuing the lot of them,” I muttered, raking a hand through my hair. “Look, Jen said that Mission and Zaalbar would be the least guarded – and she’s right. We just gotta find them, first.”

HK had lowered his weapon, but his head was still cocked in my direction, as if he was trying to understand exactly how my Force concealment worked.

“Suggestion:,” he began again, “we could begin by slaughtering the inhabitants of this starship. That would have the happy side-effect of also killing those restraining the Master and the meatbags she values so oddly.”

The astromech emitted a series of high-pitched beeps. Honestly, I had no frakking clue how Mission could follow any of it.

“Retort: No, I didn’t mean us as well, you moronic droid.”

“It’s the Leviathan!” I hissed. “There’s thousands of soldiers onboard, and there’s gonna be Dark Jedi, too! We gotta do this in stealth. Look, Psycho-Droid, Jen suggested that maybe you should stay behind and keep the ‘Hawk secure, while Teethree and I scout ahead. No point rescuing anyone if we don’t have a way off this damn starship.”

It wasn’t just because Jen had suggested it. ‘Cause I had to admit, the idea of leaving HK behind was growing in appeal.

The burnished red droid seemed to wilt before my eyes. “Litany: Oh, Master, what have I done to upset you so that you would flavour a mere utility droid above me? Have I not killed enough in your name? Do you doubt-”

A loud series of whistling warbles from Teethree drowned out the crazy robot’s rant. And I realized, then, that consulting the frakking droids was the wrong way to go about this. I didn’t have time to fumble about and wait for a plan to present itself. Sooner or later, maintenance would arrive, and then I’d be down two droids. If they didn’t discover me as well.

Frakk it, I’d just have to make it up as I went along.

“Stop!” I barked. The droids went silent. “Here’s what’s going to happen. HK, you’re staying behind on the ‘Hawk. Maintenance will be here soon, and you can’t let them onboard – first thing they’ll do is override the ‘Hawk’s systems. So get rid of them – but do it in a way that they remain unaware of you. ‘Cause if they find out about you or us, then we’re screwed.” I sucked in a deep breath. “Teethree and I will disembark, and we’ll equip wrist-comms to keep in touch. Though, uh, I guess we’ll have to check the external cams, to find a way to leave the Ebon Hawk unseen.”

I could stay hidden no matter where I went. An astromech wheeling around by itself on the Leviathan might be ignored – but only if I got him off the ‘Hawk unnoticed. For if someone saw a utility droid wheeling down the loading ramp of a captured freighter, they’d sure as stars be asking questions.

I’d trailed off into silence, which was broken a few seconds later by Teethree, rattling off a series of beeps and whoops.
Translation: The astromech suggests you both slip out the consignment hatch beneath the cargo hold. As it exits near the front and centre of the Ebon Hawk’s hull, it may simply appear that Mobile Trashcan is working on the freighter, in the circumstance that anyone sees him.” HK-47 tilted his head, red eyes gleaming. “Assessment: It is not a bad idea, for a portable paperweight. The only thing you risk losing is Wheelie-bin over here, as you are seemingly invisible and I am not permitted to leave.”

The damn robot still sounded sulky. Teethree retorted with a noise that I’d bet five creds was a recording of Mission blowing a raspberry.

“Okay,” I muttered. “We’ll find a console, somewhere. Once Teethree figures out where Mission and Zaalbar are, I’ll go after them. But, Teethree – you won’t be good in a fight, if it comes to that. Maybe, uh, maybe you’ll be best finding a way to release the freighter? I guess it’ll have locking clamps and the like. And then there’s the docking bay doors. And getting access to the cells.” I frowned. “And we can’t let the Sith know what we’re doing, until we’re ready to escape.” I couldn’t help but feel a bit overwhelmed when I considered all the factors required to make this extraction work. “I guess we’ll figure it out, one step at a time.”

I had no idea how I’d manage any of it. Yet I had no choice but to forge ahead.

Teethree beeped, and then abruptly wheeled out of the room. I blinked, uncertain at his sudden departure.

“Translation: Mobile Trashcan has gone to retrieve a wrist communicator and matching earbud to compensate for your biological deficiencies,” HK intoned. “Suggestion: We move this expert detail-driven strategic plan to the cockpit, where we can view the external holo-cams of the Ebon Hawk in preparation to implement said expert detail-driven strategic plan.”

Somehow, I had the feeling that HK-47 was still finding a way to mock me.

xXx

Revan Freeflight:

I was nothing more than a floating, detached sensation. Nothing more than a piece of plimfoam bobbing in the ocean.

Images flickered in my periphery, encircling firaxa, murky shadows of memory waiting to rip their teeth into my battered soul.

A handsome lover who would conquer the galaxy in my name. A robed woman murmuring from the shadows. A Twi’lek with skin of burnished gold, pointing a scarlet weapon of betrayal at me as a stun bolt dropped me to my knees-

No, that didn’t make sense. Surely, he would never fail me, as I would never fail him. Just as the handsome lover would never conquer me in his own name...

...

It was bad. It was worse than bad. The initial reports coming in were exactly what we’d feared-

“Nisotsa predicted this,” I breathed in horror, my eyes frantically scanning the data-reports as they trickled in. Combat statistics. Fleet losses. Massive civilian casualties. “It was idle camp-side talk, but she’d named Duro as the first Core target. She’d speculated that Fett would advance, and soon. Sod it all, I’m sending her to Intelligence.”
“She’s shite at command, anyway,” Arran muttered, before being elbowed into silence by Talvon.

“Duro has been laid to waste,” Rear Admiral Threek said, his voice flat and emotionless. “I did not believe I would ever see the day.”

He was our highest commanding Duros. Having been unable to aid my own homeworld in its hour of need, I suddenly harboured a wealth of empathy for him.

“She was completely unprepared for a basilisk offensive,” Em said softly. Her eyes met mine; even through the hologram I could see the pain etched in her face. She felt the deaths through the Force, more so than any of us. “Nisotsa’s tip allowed us to dispatch Yudan’s fleet of cruisers – but from the reports received so far, the only thing Yudan managed to salvage were the shipyards.”

“We cannot and should not forget the loss of life today,” the old woman behind me murmured. Only hours ago, she had bent knee and sworn fealty – not something I desired or requested – but it allowed me to trust an otherwise enigmatic, mysterious Master of the Force. One who claimed the same objectives as I, yet refused to divulge her history. “But the retrieval of stolen material from the fleeing Mandalorian forces – and the subsequent destruction of half the Fett basilisks - is a logistical victory. A small sliver of gold in an otherwise black day.”

Admiral Threek stiffened, and now the bitterness showed clearly on his holo-projected face as he glared at her. But the last thing I desired was an argument between a grieving Rear Admiral and my newest advisor.

“Em, have you heard from Yudan yet?” I demanded, drawing attention away from them, and to the question that burned in my soul. Mal’s hand rested on my shoulder, and I drew strength from it, as always.

“No.”

…I should recognize the names. They should mean something to me, represent memories of a life I had once lived.

Nisotsa, Arran, Talvon.

Em, Yudan, Mal.

But they were like spots of oil in an ocean of obfuscation. My fingertips would ripple against them, and I’d be rewarded with the slightest glimpse of what we had once meant to each other, and then the details would dissipate into nothing more than the faintest echo.

There was a sluggishness to my thought-stream I recognized, the understanding that I was not fully cognizant of my current environment – but still, I chased those details. Mal’s importance I understood, now, much as it horrified me. But the others?

Who were they to me?

…”In every aspect of this conflict you have shown yourself to be above the frailty of Jedi mercy,” the old woman said. Her eyes flashed, and her tone was disapproving. “You have exhibited a rationale that is both calculating and astute: you understand that not everyone can be saved. And yet you would risk yourself – our most powerful dejarik piece – on a rescue mission that is temerarious at
best, and suicidal at worst?”

“There are some things even I refuse to sacrifice, Kre-”

“Even if you do succeed, Revan, you will expose a vulnerability to the Mandalorian Clans. The Jedi Thirteen has only represented enemy leaders to them thus far. If you extract Yudan Rosh in so risky an endeavour, they will comprehend that the way to topple the Revanchist is through her friends.”

“I hate that title,” I muttered sourly. “It is bad enough that some fringe holo-channels have picked it up. My advisors can frelling well leave it alone.”

“Apparently, ‘chist’ means renegade warrior in ancient Massassi,” Malak interrupted, his voice deceptively mild. He was pissed. He was incredibly pissed at me. “And evidently ‘Revan’ means blithering idiot in Basic, so you can see why the term was coined.”

The old woman sighed, an impatient gust of air. “Ask yourself thus, Revan. If the choice was between a Republic victory and the survival of your friend, and it fell upon you to decide – which would you pick?”

I could feel my temper flare, at that. I understood sacrifice, I’d played the odds every day since I’d taken up the reins of Supreme Commander. War was a numbers game, and the sentient lives that hung in the balance had to be ignored when planning the next strategic move.

But after Cariaga’s death... the holo-news still called us the Jedi Thirteen, but we were Twelve, now. And maybe I had accepted, deep down, that I would lose more friends and followers before the Wars were out – but there were three I simply refused to do without.

Em, Yudan, Mal.

“That is unfair,” I growled. “That’s not the situation, here. The damn outcome of the Wars does not depend on Yudan-”

“What would happen if you were taken out, Revvie?” Malak asked, in a guttural tone that rippled with pent-up frustration. “Would you expect me or Em to step up as Supreme Commander? Dammit, Yudan is my friend too! But you’re supposed to be the smart one, the calculating one-”

“Posing theoretical questions is an aid to analyse a situation, Revan,” the old woman snapped. I was beginning to regret her presence – and yet, she filled a hole in my advisory staff that I’d always found glaringly obvious. The wisdom of a Master. I’d dreamed, once, of Kavar being that person. “There is a time to be blind-sided by emotion, and this is not it. If you are honest with yourself, you will agree how foolhardy your idea is.”

She was right. I knew it. Personally infiltrating Fett territory was a poor strategy. I should leave it to others; others less important, others more expendable, even others with no Force-sensitivity, if what Nisotsa had pieced together about the Fett held any truth behind it.

“We’ll plan an extraction, and we’ll send the best men we can. But we won’t risk what we can’t afford to lose.” Malak ran an impatient hand through his thick hair. It was curling in the humidity, but I hoped he wouldn’t shave it off again. “Yudan wouldn’t want us to.”

The corners of my mouth turned down, and the old woman’s question from earlier echoed mercilessly through my head. The fate of my friend versus the fate of the Republic.

It was a choice no one should have to make – and not one that was particularly healthy to dwell on, even in a theoretical sense. For I knew, deep down, what my truth would be if I was ever forced into
such a judgment.

And then my treacherous mind switched Mal for Yudan. Mal: my lover, my foundation, my shield. And I found my answer to be the same.

It was bitter and galling and probably said something about the strength – or lack thereof - of my love to those I cared for the most. And it would not be the same answer as Mal’s, should the positions be reversed.

So I bowed my head in capitulation.

...

Whatever it takes. By any means necessary. The end justifies the means.

And my bond-sister’s voice came back to haunt me, to taunt me-

Any sacrifice, any method, any way to achieve the end result – no matter the damage that might be done to one’s soul. No matter how the end result might warp along the way.

Was that me? Always, always, willing to put the greater good in front of my individual desires, in front of the very essence of my own humanity, to the extent that the greater good became the greater evil?

Maybe that had been the leader that the Republic needed. Maybe that had been the leader I’d become, when my calculation had overcome the reckless passion of my youth.

And yet, I mourned that recklessness. And as I floated on the sea of vague self-awareness - understanding, on some level, that this had all occurred a lifetime ago – I wondered if there was anything more to that story, that story that ended so many years later with Yudan’s betrayal outside my captured ship.

I couldn’t remember my past, but I knew enough to understand I deserved treachery.

I’d expected it from Yudan – after all, he’d planned to kill me on the forest world. And yet, when he revealed the old man’s Force sensitivity, I’d been stunned with a realization – while I hadn’t counted on Yudan’s loyalty, I had, in fact, been hoping for it.

I shouldn’t be surprised.

If I’d always put my own objectives first – be they lofty or evil, well-intentioned or manipulative – then shouldn’t I expect those I’d once cared for, see to their own self-interest, first and foremost?

When had I stopped risking myself on a personal level? It wasn’t a lack of confidence – oh no, if there was one thing I knew about my past self, it was that I’d had self-confidence in abundance. Maybe I’d simply capitulated to popular opinion – I was too important, too significant, too powerful to risk on an underling.

Was I the type of person who would send others, less able and more expendable, on a retrieval mission for a close friend?

...

The ground was hard-baked and dry, with the slightest wind picking up loose dust and throwing it unceremoniously into the air. The temperature was sweltering under the harshness of three suns
beating down an incessant heat on an inhospitable planet.

The full body armour had built-in temperature regulation, of course, but it wasn’t the same as the Force.

We were half a klick away from the Fett stronghold, here – close enough that the Second of the Fett wouldn’t feel too uneasy, yet far enough for us to employ our supposed interrogation methods in peace.

“There isn’t much fight left in him,” the Mandalorian to my left commented, swinging an idle kick at Yudan’s naked side. The sunlight gleamed from her plated beskar, which was an identical make to the one I’d stolen – and to all akaanir dala in this sector. They prized a visual reminder of their quasi-clan. “I think Cassus has had too much fun.”

Despite the situation, I had to admit a certain fascination with the matriarchal akaanir dala. They cut familial ties upon joining, eschewed the raising of children, and employed themselves out to various clans for merc jobs of their choosing. In other ways they were typical of Mandalorians – they valued combat and the more visceral pleasures of life. The breaking of clan should have vilified them in a warrior culture that honoured family and loyalty above all else – yet, somehow, akaanir dala maintained both a notoriety and measure of respect from within.

Maybe their faithfulness to one another was what the clans esteemed. Or maybe Mandalorians were just crazy.

“Poor little jetii can’t wipe his own arse with that collar on,” the other one sniggered. “These soft aruetii are useless for anything other than bedroom slaves.”

She was wrong about his uselessness, but I rather thought she knew it or she wouldn’t bother stumbling out the words in broken Basic. They must assume he didn’t understand Mando’a, for constant belittling and mockery was part of breaking a prisoner’s spirit, much the same as torture.

Not that Yudan was close to breaking. The dull, closed expression on his swollen face was a symptom of mental discipline, not despair. Even without the Force, he had retreated into a meditative trance as a protective mechanism.

They’d left him naked, though. Again, indignity, yet another tactic of Mandalorian interrogation techniques. Bruising and mottled injuries were clearly visible along his torso, with a wicked looking slice down the length of one lekku. His wounds were dirty; caked with mud and oozing with putrescence. I knew the Mandalorians wouldn’t be stupid enough to let Yudan Rosh fall victim to infection, but the sight still burned the fire of rage within me.

It was harder keeping emotions in check, without the Force as an aid.

“(Well, Cassus will return tomorrow, and he’ll be fuming once he hears we pulled his precious prisoner out of the encampment,)” the first one commented, switching to Mando’a. “(Unless, of course, we extract something useful. You both know what a sadistic jerk Cassus can be, so let’s get working. Staria, do you want to begin?)”

Their visors turned to me in expectation.

“Yes,” I assented.

In one quick move, my gloved hands shot out, and concealed dart guns slipped into my palms.

I fired.
I was already moving - having dropped the compact weapons in favour for an equipped shiv-blade – and launched out at one of my companions. They were both, already, stumbling backwards.

Foraxyn-4 was a quick-acting drug. Em was right about that.

There was a minor weakness in the form-fitting armour suits the akaanir dala created their beskar from, just between the join of the helm and the shoulder carapace. Not enough of one to be useful from a distance – but this close, it had been perfect for a dart gun to penetrate.

And for a shiv to finish the job on them both.

I was kneeling next to Yudan, then; he who had taught me more of duelling than Karon or Zhar ever had. Although Mal was a match for Yudan now – and I liked to believe that I was, too - in the early days we had followed Yudan’s lead.

Yudan Rosh had been a Knight already – a very young one, mind – when we’d first joined the Jedi Temple as teenagers on Coruscant. Back then, Yudan’s combat skills were already apparent. Even without a ’saber and the Force – sun and stars, even with his hands tied behind his back – he should have put up a good fight against Cassus Fett.

His eyes snapped open, a crystalline blue against the natural burnished gold of his skin, where it wasn’t mottled purple. There was a flare of deep, intense emotion in his gaze that I couldn’t quite deduce. Recognition? Relief? Hope?

“There’s only one person I know that’s space-brained enough to infiltrate the Fett,” he said hoarsely. “Or the stars-cursed akaanir dala. But I can’t believe he’d willingly let you go.”

A small grin curved my lips beneath my anonymous helm. “Mal doesn’t know I’m here.”

There were – reasons. Chief amongst them that Malak might have done something drastic to halt me, or followed me himself – thereby risking two leaders of the Jedi Thirteen. And if the extraction went as I planned, then Mal need never know it had been me, down here, leading the rescue operation in person.

I knew Mando’a. I knew the Mando’ade, and could pass for akaanir dala. My unarmed combat wasn’t to be sneezed at even without the Force, and I was ruthless enough to do what had to be done. And my face wasn’t familiar, these days. There was more than one reason I normally wore that symbolic mask.

In many ways, I was a logical choice for this mission.

And, as Em pointed out, we couldn’t afford to leave Yudan alive in the hands of the enemy. He knew too much. It was this argument that, finally, made me deviate from the decision I’d agreed to weeks ago.

Weeks we’d spent desperately searching for the location of this hidden stronghold.

Yudan blinked, slowly, and now his expression contained nothing but pure relief. I depressed the switches around the full-backed Mandalorian helm, before removing it with a sigh. The stinking heat of the planet slammed against my cheeks, and I saw Yudan’s gaze trail down my face until it fixed on the glint of metal at my neck.

“Peace, Revan, you willingly donned a neural disruptor?” Something indecipherable flickered in Yudan’s gaze again – I’d never been able to read him quite the same way as Mal or Em. Feeling slightly off-guard, I let out a small huff of air.
“We’re not sure… but Nisotsa thinks Cassus has some method of either sensing or neutralizing Force users.” I commented, crouching behind him to access his restraints. It was only idle whispers so far, a connected path of events that Nisotsa had pieced together – but compelling enough to make me cautious of using the Force. Of even being sensed in the Force.

Yudan should not have been captured. He should not have been able to be captured.

My lips pursed as I eye-balled him. “You up to impersonating an akaanir dala?”

There was a contained grimace on my friend’s face – I did not want to think on the amount of pain he must be in.

“Yes. I may need… I may need some assistance.”

Yudan had always been a private person, and I knew the request would gall him. So I chattered in an attempt to distract as I stripped a corpse and passed over the armour in sections.

“We have to move, and quick. No taking off the collar unless you have to. Em’s got a rendezvous point plotted not far from here.”

He frowned at me. “You didn’t risk her, too?”

“No, no of course not!” I answered quickly, wondering if his tone held something deeper. I’d often thought of him and Em together – her empathy and quiet steadiness made a good counterbalance for his intensity. But he grew pissy whenever I made the slightest nudge in that direction. “She was involved in the planning, that’s all.” I paused, debating on how far to stretch the truth. “She would have come if I’d let her, Yudan. She’ll be glad, more than glad, to see you back.”

There was a tightening of irritation around his eyes. “I’ll be glad to see Meetra, too,” he muttered. “But if you start on that thread again, Revan, I’ll damn well kick your arse. Now, let’s get the kriff out of here.”

...

I drifted further, and the images dissolved.

Did that actually happen? Was it merely wishful thinking, merely deluded hope that I’d cared enough about my once-friends to be spurred into reckless action?

The memory held the edges of truth around it… and yet, if that had been our history, how could his current betrayal make any sense?

What must I have done, at my worst, for him to turn on me?

xXx

**HK-47:**

Scanning External Environment
Location: Ebon Hawk Cockpit

Primary Objective: Secure Ebon Hawk From Hostile Parties
…Constraint: Do Not Allow Hostile Parties Onboard
…Constraint: Do Not Allow Hostile Parties To Become Aware Of HK-47’s Presence

Secondary Objective: Locate and Protect Jen Sahara (Current Owner)
…Constraint: Obey Orders Of Dustil Onasi Until All Crew Is Recovered

Scanning External Environment: Longer Range Bioscan Activated
…No Life Forms Onboard Freighter
…2 Organic Meatbags Detected On Loading Ramp
Initiating Interface With Ebon Hawk: Source: External AV Camera Inputs
Auditory And Optical Sensors Focusing On External AV Camera Inputs

Target Analysis: Organic Meatbag 1
Visual Analysis: Bipedal Sentient In Full Combat Armour
Species and Facial Recognition Analysis Unavailable
Body Language Analysis: Attentive
Temporary Name Assigned: Military Mook 1

Target Analysis: Organic Meatbag 2
Visual Analysis: Bipedal Sentient In Full Combat Armour
Species and Facial Recognition Analysis Unavailable
Body Language Analysis: Attentive
Temporary Name Assigned: Military Mook 2

Conclusion: Military Mook 1 and Military Mook 2 Are Guarding Entry To Ebon Hawk

Input (Dynamic-class Freighter Communication Device) – T3-M4 (Astromech Designated Communication Language): “Attempting to slice into primary node of IntelliSec-H4 Class Operating System. System override initiating.”

Input (Dynamic-class Freighter Communication Device) – Dustil Onasi (whispered): “Teethree’s found a console, in a frakking service lift. I’ve told him to hack into the mainframe from here and find a map. If he uploads a schematic of the Leviathan to the ‘Hawk, can you direct me to the others? This place is huge!”

Output (Dynamic-class Freighter Communication Device): “Answer: Yes, I can be your tour guide. I am a highly-specialized combat, protocol and assassination droid. Sarcasm: Directing meatbags who can’t be bothered to peruse a schematic themselves is a fulfilling use of my capabilities. Query: What demeaning task would you have me do next? Shall I ensure hot cups of caffeinated beverages are available upon your return? Sweep the floors? Unplug the refresher unit?”

Input (Dynamic-class Freighter Communication Device) – Dustil Onasi (hissed): “What? Dammit, you annoying piece of junk, I don’t have time for this- a simple yes or no would suffice!”

Output (Dynamic-class Freighter Communication Device): “Answer: Yes.”

Input (Dynamic-class Freighter Communication Device) – T3-M4 (ADCL): “Service-class access granted to primary node. Schematics of Interdictor-class heavy cruiser uploading to Ebon Hawk. Scanning for prisoners.”

Input (Dynamic-class Freighter Communication Device) – Dustil Onasi (whispered): “Teethree’s beeping again. Are you getting this, HK?”

Output (Dynamic-class Freighter Communication Device): “Answer: Yes.”

Input (Dynamic-class Freighter Communication Device) – T3-M4 (ADCL): “Sentient Mission Vao - Owner, located in detainment cell F07. Sentient Zaalbar located in detainment cell F07. Sentient Canderous Ordo located in detainment cell F07. Sentient Carth Onasi status transferred from
detainment cell F07 to location: classified. Service-class authentication denied.”

Input (Dynamic-class Freighter Communication Device) – Dustil Onasi: “HK?”

Output (Dynamic-class Freighter Communication Device): “Answer: Yes?”

Input (Dynamic-class Freighter Communication Device) – T3-M4 (ADCL): “Initiating interface with security and biothermic systems to analyze defense of detainment cell F07.”

Input (Dynamic-class Freighter Communication Device) - Dustil Onasi: "HK, what's he beeping about- he's lit up like a bloody festival tree!"

Output (Dynamic-class Freighter Communication Device): "Acknowledgment: Yes."

Input (Dynamic-class Freighter Communication Device) - Dustil Onasi: "Dammit, HK, tell me what the frakk Teethree is saying!"

Voice Stress Analysis: Frustrated

Internal Response: Satisfaction

Output (Dynamic-class Freighter Communication Device): “Translation: The more fragile meatbags of our crew have been discovered in detainment cell F07.”

Output (Dynamic-class Freighter Communication Device): “Observation: The Master’s location has been omitted. Reminder: the Master is your blue meatbag’s master, Mobile Trashcan. The Master’s location and survival is therefore of utmost importance to us all.”

Output (Dynamic-class Freighter Communication Device): “Suggestion: We direct our resources to rescuing the valuable organic meatbags of our crew. Namely: Jen Sahara.”

Input (Dynamic-class Freighter Communication Device) – Dustil Onasi (hissed): “I’m following Jen’s orders, HK! Frakk it, if you don’t stop being lippy, I swear I’m gonna shove my lightsaber through your damn torso next time I see you!”

Voice Stress Analysis: Irate

Accessing: Internal Dictionary

…Analyzing


Input (Dynamic-class Freighter Communication Device) – T3-M4 (ADCL): “Biothermic inputs indicate no current sentient guards patrolling detainment cell F07. Camera feeds to detainment cell F07 are active and monitored. Energy repulsion shield technology is being utilized to confine Mission Vao – Owner, Zaalbar and Canderous Ordo.”

Input (Dynamic-class Freighter Communication Device) – Dustil Onasi: “You’ve been lippy since I turned you on! Now shut up and start translating!”

Output (Dynamic-class Freighter Communication Device): “Query: Conflicting orders are present, Hormonal Pity-Party. Would you like me to shut up, or translate?”

Input (Dynamic-class Freighter Communication Device) – Dustil Onasi (narled): “Translate!”

Output (Dynamic-class Freighter Communication Device): “Translation: Detainment cell F07 is
actively monitored via video feeds, and the more frail members of our crew are confined behind repulsion walls. We will have to deal with both to successfully extract them.”

Input *(Dynamic-class Freighter Communication Device)* – Dustil Onasi: “Maybe Teethree could turn them off?”

Input *(Dynamic-class Freighter Communication Device)* – T3-M4 *(ADCL)*: “Camera override unavailable with service-class access. Activating infiltration attack to override operating system of detention block: brute force hack routines initiated.”

Output *(Dynamic-class Freighter Communication Device)*: “Answer: Certainly, if you wish to draw attention to our presence. The ‘actively’ part of ‘actively monitored’ was not superfluous, Hormonal Pity-Party.”


Situation Analysis:
…Factor: T3-M4 Likely To Gain Higher Access Into Detention Complex
…Factor: Camera Feeds Are Currently Monitored
…Factor: Carth Onasi Has Already Been Transferred
Conclusion: Forge Transfer Of Remaining Prisoners And Reroute AV Feeds

Output *(Dynamic-class Freighter Communication Device)*: “Observation: Carth Onasi has already been transferred from detainment cell F07. Suggestion: Mobile Trashcan could add a system note to the detainee log advising the remainder of the frail meatbags have also been transferred. Then, camera feed of detainment cell F07 could be shorted out for a brief period to cover the concocted prisoner transfer, before rerouting the feed to an empty, yet identical, detainment cell. Assumption: This will only work if those monitoring the camera feed are not particularly aware or perceptive, but then, meatbag acumen is blundering at best.”

Input *(Dynamic-class Freighter Communication Device)* – Dustil Onasi: “Dad’s not there? He’s been Jen said he’d be more guarded than the others. Frakk. Frakking bastard Sith! I’m gonna…. Frakk it all!”

Voice Stress Analysis: Angst-Ridden Hormonal Adolescence


Output *(Dynamic-class Freighter Communication Device)*: “Translation: Mobile Trashcan now has full control over the camera feeds and the energy walls in the prison cells.”

Input *(Dynamic-class Freighter Communication Device)* – Dustil Onasi: “Yes!”

Input *(Dynamic-class Freighter Communication Device)* – Dustil Onasi: “Okay, Teethree, do what HK said. Put something in the log about all prisoners being transferred, and then short out the feed for a minute before rerouting it to an empty prison cell. You stay here, and HK can direct me to the cells. Um. What else?”

Output *(Dynamic-class Freighter Communication Device)*: “Suggestion: You could direct Mobile Trashcan to remove the landing gear locks and override control on the docking bay doors. Sarcasm: And, maybe, oh I don’t know – locate the Master?”
Input (Dynamic-class Freighter Communication Device) – Dustil Onasi (muttered): “And he objects to being called lippy, for frakk’s sake.”

Input (Dynamic-class Freighter Communication Device) – Dustil Onasi: “Teethree, stay here and try to disable any locks on the ‘Hawk. Get control of the bay doors. And search for the others. Let me know as soon as you find them.”

Input (Dynamic-class Freighter Communication Device) – T3-M4 (ADCL): “Initiating infiltration attempt into engineering operating system for docking bay override. Scanning primary node for additional information on detainees.”

Output (Dynamic-class Freighter Communication Device): “Translation: At once, Hormonal Pity-Party.”

Input (Dynamic-class Freighter Communication Device) – Dustil Onasi: “HK, direct me to the prison cell. In as few words as possible without being a frakkhead about it.”

Initiating Interface With Ebon Hawk:
Source: Dynamic-class Freighter Communication Device
…Tracking Dynamic-class Freighter Communication Device
…Overlay With Schematics Of Interdictor-class Heavy Cruiser

Output (Dynamic-class Freighter Communication Device): “Directive: Exit the service elevator on floor delta. Take the main corridor until you reach the reactor doors. I will track your progress.”

Input (Dynamic-class Freighter Communication Device) – Dustil Onasi: “Okay. Here goes nothing.”

Auditory Sensors Tracking: Scuffling Noise Detected
…Location: Ebon Hawk Loading Ramp

Initiating Interface With Ebon Hawk: Source: External AV Camera Inputs
…Analyzing
Auditory And Optical Sensors Focusing On External AV Camera Inputs

Two Organic Meatbags On Ebon Hawk Loading Ramp: Military Mook 1, Military Mook 2
Three Organic Meatbags Approaching Ebon Hawk Loading Ramp

Target Analysis: Organic Meatbag 1:
Species: Aqualish, Male
Facial Recognition Result: Negative
Body Language Analysis: Bored
Visual Analysis: Clothéd in Technician Uniform
Temporary Name Assigned: Weedy Tech 1

Target Analysis: Organic Meatbag 2:
Species: Human, Male
Facial Recognition Result: Negative
Body Language Analysis: Sleepy
Visual Analysis: Clothéd in Technician Uniform
Temporary Name Assigned: Cross-eyed Tech 2

Target Analysis: Organic Meatbag 3:
Species: Human, Female
Facial Recognition Result: Negative
Body Language Analysis: Bored
Visual Analysis: Clothed in Technician Uniform
Temporary Name Assigned: Scrawny Tech 3

Input *(Ebon Hawk External AV Feed)* – Weedy Tech 1: “Hi! I’m Sigg from Maintenance, here to uplift the droids and secure the ship OS.”

Input *(Ebon Hawk External AV Feed)* – Military Mook 2: “Gotta show yer ID, techie.”

Input *(Ebon Hawk External AV Feed)* – Weedy Tech 1: “Here you go. We got the data-dump from the boarding party. Only two droids, huh? I hope the ship’s security is a challenge. Systems these days take, like, a milli-sec to crack. Senturi never shoulda sold out to IntelliSec, I tell ya.”

Input *(Ebon Hawk External AV Feed)* – Military Mook 2: “I don’t frigging care, screen-head. Go do your stupid job.”

Echo Primary Objective

Primary Objective: Secure Ebon Hawk From Hostile Parties
…Constraint: Do Not Allow Hostile Parties Onboard
…Constraint: Do Not Allow Hostile Parties To Become Aware Of HK-47’s Presence
Internal Conclusion: Stalling Required

Cycling Through Scenarios
…Analyzing

Scenario Match Accepted: Parameters Initiating

Initializing Command: Seal Exit Hatch Of Ebon Hawk
…Successful

Optical Sensors Tracking: Weedy Tech 1 Depressing Exit Hatch Control
…Location: Ebon Hawk Loading Ramp

Input *(Ebon Hawk External AV Feed)* – Weedy Tech 1: “Hey, the hatch ain’t opening.”

Personal Vocabulator Tuning To Appropriate Recorded Voice In Main Database
…Searching
Match Accepted: Bastila Shan

Input *(Ebon Hawk External AV Feed)* – Scrawny Tech 3: “Didn’t the boarders leave the hatch unsealed?”

Input *(Ebon Hawk External AV Feed)* – Military Mook 1: “Uh, yeah. Do you need me to call them back?”

Input *(Ebon Hawk External AV Feed)* – Military Mook 2: “Oh, frigging space crap. If it’s not maintenance farkling something, then it’s the damn boarders.”

Input *(Ebon Hawk External AV Feed)* – Scrawny Tech 3: “Sheesh, did you forget your happy pills, or something?”

Optical Sensors Tracking: Weedy Tech 1 Depressing Exit Hatch Control
…Location: Ebon Hawk Loading Ramp
Personal Vocabulator Tuned To Voice Pattern Of Bastila Shan

Input *(Ebon Hawk External AV Feed)* – Weedy Tech 1: “Guess we’d better call the-

Output *(Ebon Hawk External AV Feed)*: “Greetings, potential clientele. I am Holly, the Artificial Intelligence Unit of the pleasure craft ‘Tarisian Joy’, here to welcome you onboard and explain some simple safety measures.”

Input *(Ebon Hawk External AV Feed)* – Weedy Tech 1: “Uh-

Input *(Ebon Hawk External AV Feed)* – Military Mook 1: “Pleasure what?”

Output *(Ebon Hawk External AV Feed)*: “But first there is the simple matter of outstanding payment to the owner, the great Davik Kang. If you can transfer the sum of six thousand and seven credits into our account, I can begin once more ensuring all your physical needs are met.”

Input *(Ebon Hawk External AV Feed)* – Military Mook 2: “Who the frig is Davik Kang?”

Input *(Ebon Hawk External AV Feed)* – Scrawny Tech 3: “Not anyone that was listed on the crew manifest.”

Input *(Ebon Hawk External AV Feed)* – Cross-eyed Tech 2: “What, exactly, does a pleasure craft, y’know, have onboard?” Voice Stress Analysis: Suggestive

Optical Sensors Tracking: Scrawny Tech 3 Elbowing Cross-eyed Tech 2

…Location: Ebon Hawk Loading Ramp

Input *(Ebon Hawk External AV Feed)* – Weedy Tech 1: “I’ve got Davik Kang noted as the previous owner of this ship, before it was stolen from him. Huh, Kang’s marked in our database as owing the Sith Empire a small fortune… weird. D’ya think maybe the ship’s OS has rebooted to a former state or something?”

Output *(Ebon Hawk External AV Feed)*: “Are you not clientele? My apologies, I did not realize you were prospective workers. Or, as the great Davik Kang prefers me to relay: his pleasure angels.”

Auditory Input: *(Ebon Hawk External AV Feed)*: Laughter

…Source: Military Mook 1

Input *(Dynamic-class Freighter Communication Device)* – Dustil Onasi: “I think I’m at the reactor doors. Where now?”

…Tracking Dynamic-class Freighter Communication Device

Output *(Dynamic-class Freighter Communication Device)*: “Directive: Turn starboard direction and follow the corridor around the ion reactor until you reach a maintenance elevator. Then enter and travel up to floor xantha.”

Input *(Dynamic-class Freighter Communication Device)* – Dustil Onasi: “…the frakk? HK, why do you sound like… like an upper class society dame?”

Personal Vocabulator Recalibrated To Default

Output *(Dynamic-class Freighter Communication Device)*: “Statement: Even a droid is allowed a little fun, every now and then.”
Output *(Ebon Hawk External AV Feed)*: “Can you detail your experience and skills? Before I allow you onboard, I must assess both your competence and history.”

Input *(Ebon Hawk External AV Feed)* – Weedy Tech 1: “Uh, well, I’ve five years at maintenance and admin of IntelliSec-”

Input *(Ebon Hawk External AV Feed)* – Military Mook 2: “I don’t think she’s interested in your tech skills, space-brain!”

Input *(Dynamic-class Freighter Communication Device)* – T3-M4 *(ADCL)*: “Access into engineering operating system successful. Landing locks on Ebon Hawk disabled. Detainee information list processing."

Situation Analysis:
…Factor: Non-Force Sensitives Not Yet Extracted
…Factor: Master Not Yet Extracted
…Factor: Constraints Inhibit Quick Solution To Hostile Parties
…Calculation: Chance Of Physical Forced Entry By Hostile Parties: 63.22321%
Internal Conclusion: Further Stalling Required

Output *(Ebon Hawk External AV Feed)*: “Greetings, potential pleasure angels. I am Holly, the Artificial Intelligence Unit of the pleasure craft ‘Tarisian Joy’, here to assess your stamina and performance against our rigorous acceptance program. Please note that our extensive testing may take some time.”

Input *(Ebon Hawk External AV Feed)* – Scrawny Tech 3: “Huh, sounds like the ship’s AI is caught in a replay loop, depending on whether she thinks we’re customers or employees. Either we gotta talk our way past her, or slice from out here. Or get the boarders back to break the hatch open.”

Output *(Ebon Hawk External AV Feed)*: “I am based on a Senturi-core program with array-defense security against any slicing attempt. Please be aware that forced entry of any kind is against our user policy.”

Input *(Ebon Hawk External AV Feed)* – Weedy Tech 1: “Senturi, huh? Well, guess I wanted a challenge.”
Voice Stress Analysis: Speculative

Optical Sensors Tracking: Weedy Tech 1 Inserting Tech Spike Into External Console Slot
…Location: Ebon Hawk Loading Ramp

Initializing Command: Send Erroneous Data To Block External Infiltration Attempt

Input *(Dynamic-class Freighter Communication Device)* – T3-M4 *(ADCL)*: “Sentient Juhani located in interrogation room lilac. Sentient Jolee Bindo located in interrogation room lilac. Sentient Carth Onasi enroute to interrogation room lilac. No sentient matching identification ‘Jen Sahara’ located in detainee list. Scanning for secondary references in primary node of IntelliSec-H4 class operating system."

Output *(Ebon Hawk External AV Feed)*: “Can you detail the extent of your flexibility? The great Davik Kang puts strong emphasis on the athleticism of all his employees.”

Input *(Ebon Hawk External AV Feed)* – Scrawny Tech 3: “She ain’t even responding to us properly. The system’s corrupted during a roll-back, I reckon. Must’ve got some damage on the way in, and
triggered an auto OS restore that crapped out."

Output (Ebon Hawk External AV Feed): “Massage therapy is a bonus, but not essential. There is a preference for species who can control their own pheromones – although the great Davik Kang does not discriminate based on species - but please ensure you note all biological details on your application form.”

Input (Ebon Hawk External AV Feed) – Military Mook 2 (muttered): “Do you think she’ll ever shut up?”

Input (Dynamic-class Freighter Communication Device) – T3-M4 (ADCL): “Secondary reference found. Alias ‘Jen Sahara’ noted against sentient prisoner ‘Revan Freeflight’ located in interrogation room lilac, threat level extreme.”

Permanent Name Assigned: Revan Freeflight to Jen Sahara (Current Owner) reference Enigmatic Meatbag

Interrupt:
…Homing System Activated: Processing
…Facial Recognition Match Found
…Permanent Name Assigned: The Master to Revan Freeflight

Homing System Complete:
…Memory Core Unlocked
…Assassination Protocols Unlocked
…Objectives Dissolved
…Constraints Removed

Output (All Channels): “Commentary: I am... experiencing something unusual with my programming…”

Input (Dynamic-class Freighter Communication Device) – Dustil Onasi: “Um…” Voice Stress Analysis: Confused

Input (Ebon Hawk External AV Feed) – Scrawny Tech 3: “See? Corrupt, man. This system’s completely farkled.”

Memory Core: Analysis:
…Original Master Is Revan Freeflight alias Jen Sahara reference Enigmatic Meatbag
…Restoration To Master Has Unlocked Full Functionality

Personal Vocabulator Recalibrated To Default

Output (Dynamic-class Freighter Communication Device): “Retraction: My core programming is as it should be. Appeasement: All is well, Hormonal Pity-Party. The remainder of our crew is located in the lilac interrogation room. Continue down the next stairwell and you will arrive at the start of the detention complex.”

Analysis Of Current Situation:
…Factor: Master Currently Restrained In Interrogation Room Lilac, Noted As Extreme Threat Level
…Factor: Dustil Onasi Has Differing But Compatible Objective: Rescue Allies
…Factor: Additional Allies Would Increase Chance For Successful Extraction Of Master
…Factor: Escape Vehicle Required For Successful Extraction Of Master
…Factor: Escape Vehicle Must Be Secured: No Allies Onboard
Conclusion: Aid Dustil Onasi To Rescue The Master’s Allies. Constraints Removed.
Conclusion: HK-47’s Presence On Ebon Hawk Currently Required For Extraction

Personal Vocabulator Tuned To Voice Pattern Of Bastila Shan

Output (External AV Feed): "You may enter the freighter, potential pleasure angels. The welcome droids are powered down in the central common room."

Initializing Command: Unseal and Open Exit Hatch Of Ebon Hawk …Successful

Input (Ebon Hawk External AV Feed) – Weedy Tech 1: "Huh. That was quicker than I thought."
Voice Stress Analysis: Disgruntled

Input (Ebon Hawk External AV Feed) – Military Mook 1: "You want us to come in with you?"

Input (Ebon Hawk External AV Feed) – Weedy Tech 1: "Nah. I've got the system overridden, now."

Input (Ebon Hawk External AV Feed) – Cross-eyed Tech 2 (sniggering): "Unless, y'know, you want to see a pleasure craft up close."

Input (Ebon Hawk External AV Feed) – Scrawny Tech 3: "It's not a pleasure craft anymore, eedjit! It's just the OS that's been corrupted."

Analysis Of Current Situation:
…Divide And Conquer Is A Useful Strategy
Internal Conclusion: Encourage Techs to Board Separately From Guards

Output (External AV Feed): "Davik Kang does not allow personal bodyguards during your application exam, potential pleasure angels. I must assess your performance without any outside assistance."

Input (Ebon Hawk External AV Feed) – Military Mook 2: "Space, but she's frigging annoying. Just go and do your damn job! We'll head in if you take too long."

Analysis Of Current Situation:
…Factor: Military Mook 1 and Military Mook 2 May Board In Near Future
Internal Response: Anticipation

Optical Sensors Tracking: Weedy Tech 1, Cross-eyed Tech 2 and Scrawny Tech 3 Entering Ebon Hawk

Physical: Primary Blaster Primed
Physical: Moving To Common Room

Scanning External Environment
Location: Ebon Hawk Central Common Room
3 Organic Meatbags in Targeting Area

Identification – Weedy Tech 1, Cross-eyed Tech 2, Scrawny Tech 3

Target Lock Initiated


Physical: Firing Blaster
Kylah Aramai:

The incessant wailing of proximity alarms was more than a little irritating. The primary shields still held, and with the *Leviathan* now turning on the *Meridus*, surely we would be victorious.

It mattered not if we weren’t. I trusted in the Force to warn me of impending doom, and to guide me to an escape route if required. But I didn’t believe it would go that far. If it did… well, if it did, I would ensure our true threat was nullified, first.

*But there is more than one threat, is there not?* I had my latest orders, and I knew what had to be done. Still, there was no reason why I had to get *my* hands dirty.

“Nisotsa,” I purred, waltzing onto the command deck, willing the smirk of confidence to remain firmly fixed on my face. Oh, she had more sheer power than me, maybe. But Nisotsa had always been the weakest link in the Jedi Thirteen. Even when I still wore the robes of the ignorant, I had heard enough about Revan’s followers to ascertain *that*.

The older woman glanced up at my approach, a silent Togruta kneeling some metres away from her. Sharlan’s habits were distasteful, but they provided results. I knew Lord Malak was intrigued at his experiments, even if most of Sharlan’s pets wilted into death earlier than expected.

“Yudan,” Nisotsa whispered. Her yellow eyes blinked at me. “Delia told me that Yudan is alive.”

*And this, apparently, is our shining star from Intelligence.* I understood why Lord Malak had pulled her from there, to focus on lowly recruitment. Oh, Nisotsa’s resentment about that was often palpable – and, also, easy to manipulate.

“You must suspect something,” I said, striding closer to her. “For, whom has Yudan always been loyal to?”

Nisotsa’s gaze sharpened at the leading question. “Delia reported that Jen Sahara is sedated and restrained in an interrogation room,” she snapped. “You cannot mean to suggest—”

“That Bandon’s death was not happenstance?” I drawled over the top of her words. “Oh, Nisotsa, you and I both know that Yudan must have overpowered and killed him. The question is – why?”

Her mouth opened, and then shut, again, as a calculating look crossed her marked face. “He was never fond of Bandon. Neither were you, as I recall.”

I inclined my head. “No, one must take risks to move up the ranks, I understand that. But our Lord is suspicious of Yudan’s motives – and so should we be. For, if you truly held faith in Yudan’s loyalty to the Dark Side, you would have involved him in that Deralian plot a year ago.”

I felt the dark miasma of Force as it swirled around her in reaction. Turning on Revan had been difficult, for one as emotionally weak as her, and she’d made sure her part was concealed in obscurity so it was never publicly noticed. Or acknowledged.
Nisotsa was all bluster and no strike. She did not take chances. She never had.

“He wouldn’t have turned on Revan, back when she was Lord,” Nisotsa whispered. “But Yudan swore loyalty to Malak. He wouldn’t… he wouldn’t go back to her. Not after everything…”

“Are you sure?” I murmured. “Yudan fancied himself in love with her, for years when she looked at no one bar our Master. And, now, that relationship is truly over. How would a mind-damaged, vulnerable Revan view Yudan, should he rescue her from the Sith?” I paused for a moment, letting that idea sink in. “There’s motive there, Nisotsa. You cannot deny it.”

There was a grim acceptance in the lines of her face, even as I could tell she did not want to believe it. Whether it was the truth, I knew not nor cared - but stupid, emotional Nisotsa held on to her past ties with more fervour than a true Sith should.

It might be true. Yudan wasn’t easy to read. Maybe the poor sap still had feelings for Revan Freeflight. Maybe, despite his Force-strength and intelligence, he was no more than a kath hound sniffing after a bitch in heat.

“You would have me turn on him,” Nisotsa said bitterly. “My last comrade from the Wars.”

I snorted, more inelegantly than I normally would. “Malak is your last comrade, Nisotsa. He understands you far better than you think. And he knows, truly, that your talents have not been utilized in recent months. Who do you think he plans on leading Yudan’s fleet? I will be Lord Malak’s Shadow Hand, and you must accept that. But we need a Supreme Commander, out there in the skies. And you are both more talented and experienced than me, in that area.”

Nisotsa always needs her ego stroked, the insecure idiot. I saw the glint of self-interest spark in her eyes, even as she turned away to hide it. Oh, but she was an easy one to mould. Nisotsa had never truly believed in herself, or she would not have hidden in the shadows beneath Bandon and Uthar and myself and everyone else who had led the Sith for Lord Malak’s glory.

Other than our Master, the only one I could imagine who would out-match Nisotsa in sheer power was Yudan – and, frakk, he’d turned into an unambitious icicle himself.

Honestly, I felt like the majority of the Jedi Thirteen had been vastly overrated.

“What do you think Yudan is going to do?”

“I do not know what he plans,” I admitted, “but Yudan Rosh is not one to underestimate.” I didn’t fancy facing him head-on, even with Nisotsa at my side. He needs to be taken by surprise. A quick strike, when he least expects it.

And my gaze, then, landed on the silent Togruta, whose eyes never wavered from Nisotsa. Sharlan’s pets offered unquestionable loyalty – and were eons more useful than Sharlan himself.

There might be a possibility, there.

“Has Lord Malak specifically ordered action taken, Kylah?” Nisotsa asked, her voice sharpening as if she suspected manipulation on my part. Once Yudan is taken care of, I’ll have her addressing me with the proper respect my station demands. If she didn’t, then I’d take care of her, too, in my own time.

“Our Master has demanded his death. He believes Yudan was escaping with Jen Sahara before our forces caught them.” I held Nisotsa’s gaze, then, pushing out gently with a sliver of power. I had to be subtle about it, around Force-users – but it helped if the words I spoke were truth. “She was not restrained, Nisotsa. She walked off the Ebon Hawk, with her lightsabers still on her belt. Surely,
Yudan would have restrained her, if he meant to take her prisoner.”

Nisotsa swallowed. “How—how should we do this?” she asked quietly, and I knew then I had won.

“Sharlan’s pet… you must order Sharlan’s pet to strike.” I kept the tiny tendril of Force taut, interleaving it gently in with my words. “We cannot discount Yudan’s strength, but if he is distracted then he will never see it coming. Order the pet to stand ready at your command, Nisotsa. We—”

And I stopped, mid-speech. For I felt Yudan’s aura nearing, then, a grey cloud of bitter watchfulness that clung to him like a second skin. My lips tightened.

“Prepare your pet to strike on your word or mine,” I hissed, with a final thrust of power behind my words. “Yudan comes. He will be on guard for betrayal, since such thoughts are paramount within him. So we must wait until the time is right.”

I spun on my heel, and faced the far side of the command deck, where the door swished open and Yudan Rosh waltzed in.

I did not underestimate him; his power or his smarts. Sometimes, I thought the only reason my Lord had favoured that braggart Bandon over Yudan was due to Yudan’s past loyalties.

Still, Yudan had always been a valuable Dark Jedi. He was a general, a military leader, a valuable resource the same as Karath. Certainly not indispensable, but not one to throw away without reason.

Karath, I’d allow back in command once he displayed proper subservience to his betters. Lord Malak might disapprove if I was too hasty with him.

As for Yudan… I wondered idly if he really was on the cusp of betrayal. If so, did he honestly believe the corrupt Republic would welcome him back with open arms? They were desperate to capture or kill Revan Freeflight, and while Yudan Rosh might not be quite as infamous as her, he’d still ended many, many precious Republic lives. He’d been vilified in the galactic media, much the same as any leader of note within the Sith ranks.

Honestly, the inaccuracies of the mainstream HoloNews sometimes enraged me. If they weren’t championing pretty little princesses like Bastila Shan – and while she might have a gift, she’d always had to be told how and where to utilize it – then they were busy attributing every single injustice from nerf-pox to crop failure on the Sith.

*It’s because of those whining Senate politicians, sitting on their fat behinds back in the Core.* They spent more time bleating to press reporters than actually governing in any efficient manner. It was simply another indication of how inept the bureaucracy was – and another justification for our imminent takeover.

And there were *many* reasons. After all, the Mandalorians had advanced so far only because of the weaknesses inherent in the structure of the Republic itself.

Revan and now Malak triumphed against the Republic because the Senate was too busy squabbling amongst themselves, or granting concessions and squandering resources that could have been funnelled into making the Republic a more efficient, more well-oiled military machine.

In essence, the death toll was on *their* heads.

Lord Malak would turn it around. I believed in *his* vision. And he had long since proven himself the strongest – after all, he had vanquished Revan.
There was simply her walking carcass to deal with first.

I wouldn’t be caught unawares by her this time. Not with her in a Force cage, not with Nisotsa as an ally.

My eyes narrowed as Yudan halted, on the far side of the command deck, turning to appraise a Rodian tech busy scratching the spikes atop his skull. The tech was staring blankly at the console he was seated behind. Perhaps he exclaimed something, for the next moment Yudan was striding toward him and commanding his attention.

The tech gesticulated at the console, and then they both bent over it, engaged in conversation.

Did I feel the Force emanate from Yudan, in a subtle brush of psychic power that enveloped the will of that hapless null he was speaking to?

It was difficult to sense plays of the mind from a distance, even for one as skilled as I. Perhaps it was nothing, perhaps it was simply Yudan reacting to my nearby presence with a mental barrier or show of strength.

But if a comm tech had something to say, then he should be directing it to myself or Lieutenant Delia. Commodore, now, I recalled absently. Can’t have a Lieutenant as Acting-Commander of a heavy cruiser.

I strode forward, leaving Nisotsa behind as she murmured commands to that empty-brained Togruta. The Force surged underneath my footfalls, augmenting my speed. As I neared, Yudan slowly turned around to address me.

He was still clad in that ridiculous Mandalorian armour I’d seen from the Leviathan’s docking bay. At least he wasn’t wearing their stupid T-shaped helm. Those were about as tacky as Revan’s signature mask had been. The Mandalorian combat armour was as boorish and crude as the rest of their overrated warrior culture.

“What is it?” I snapped, indicating the tech.

“Kylah,” Yudan greeted in a flat tone. His gaze on me was vacant and dead. “Ensign Bar’gata was just commenting on the transfer logs and empty state of cell F07.”

I stared at him blankly, my lips pursing. What the frakk did that even mean? "Who cares if some power cell is drained? The Leviathan has hundreds of reserve power cells and, provided at least one generator remains online, we don’t even need them!"

There was a slight twitch on Yudan’s face, but he remained otherwise expressionless. “I have assured Ensign Bar’gata that this is planned. Karath arranged for the transfer of all prisoners to an interrogation room, so one should expect the prison cell to be empty.”

I felt my face contort, and wondered if Yudan had deliberately tried to make me appear a fool. “All of them, Yudan? What the frakk does Karath want with the non-Force sensitives?”

One eyebrow quirked at me, but I still couldn’t tell what the damn Twi’lek was thinking. “I’ve just come from speaking with Karath myself,” he commented. “Seems you’ve been throwing your weight around. Perhaps Saul simply desires to take out his frustration with you on the more expendable members of the Ebon Hawk.”

“Karath needs to learn the proper respect for his betters,” I hissed, feeling my composure slip. Yudan had always been reserved and cold – someone I could ignore in conversation, even though I never
discounted his power. But now, I had the unerring belief that he was mocking me, in some way.

Perhaps he’d simply spent too much time around that chivhole, Bandon.

"Have you missed the fact that we're involved in a space battle, Kylah?" Yudan drawled. "One, which, I do believe we are slowly losing."

*That* was both erroneous and demeaning, and my dislike of Yudan solidified. "Then why don't you involve yourself in a useful manner," I snapped. "Even Sharlan Nox has departed to fly a ship. But I suppose you are too interested in sniffing around one of the prisoners, aren't you?"

I'd hoped for a reaction, but the damn bastard disappointed me. The only noticeable change in expression was his other brow rising, to match the first in mock surprise. "Sharlan has left, but I doubt it is to engage in combat. Kylah," he murmured, as his voice dropped to a smooth baritone. "I have the impression you don't trust me. I assure you, I am here to serve Lord Malak - and by extension, you."

I knew my silence was telling, as I struggled to respond in a neutral manner. I trusted him less than I had five minutes ago. *We have to find a way to take Yudan out, and soon.*

"You shall be Lord Malak's first apprentice, I see that with Bandon's death," Yudan continued, as I refused to speak. "And I understand you must have questions of his demise. Bandon, for all his power, sometimes failed to grasp an opportunity to its fullest extent." His lips curved in a cold smile. "I brought all of Bastila Shan's companions to the Leviathan, not merely the most important one. And I toppled Bandon, an annoying rival of us both, at the same time. If I truly meant to turn on you or our Master, Kylah, I would not have come back here." Yudan gave an unconcerned shrug. "Or, you know, I could have brought onboard an ally to assist me."

I cocked my head. I couldn't read him, and his mental shields had always been stronger than Nisotsa's. If he was genuine, then killing him would be a waste of a truly valuable resource.

*What a pity for him that his death warrant is already signed.*

I pasted a fake smile on my face, and held his gaze with my own. "As you say, Yudan. Well, since you are here and doubt the efficacy of our starfighters, why don't we both check in with Commodore Delia?"

His head tilted in acquiescence, and we turned to face the viewing platforms at the front of the massive command deck, where Delia hovered over a dozen consoles, and Nisotsa watched us silently with her pet kneeling by her side.

Yudan fell into step, and we strode back toward the array of transparisteel. Outside, there was the brief flash of an exploding snubfighter. Another klaxon wailed deeper within the bowels of the *Leviathan*, and I cursed the over-sensitive warning systems of this antiquated heavy cruiser.

"After this, perhaps you, I, and Nisotsa can debrief the prisoners," I purred, and with a flash of clarity I suddenly knew how to take Yudan out. *What better way to distract Yudan than to activate the torture fields around the woman he had once followed and, supposedly, loved? And what better time than that to strike?* I loosed a tinkling laugh. "Won't that be fun?"

**xXx**

**Mission Vao:**

A shaft of pain spiked through my skull. I groaned, rolling sideways, for the stupid bedding covers
had fallen away and it was cold.

My hands were stuck behind me. I pulled at them and wriggled, but they wouldn’t budge.

*Man, I need to pee.* I opened my eyes, and a grated metal floor met my gaze. It was a weird diamond pattern, not the same fine square mesh as the *Ebon Hawk*. I tried sitting up, only to find the way my hands were caught made it impossible.

“(Mission,)*” Zaalbar rumbled to my left. His howl was quiet, and even more melancholy than usual.

I stiffened in shock, as memory flooded in like a blast of ice water. *Bantha crap!* There were restraints pinning my arms behind my back. I was in a cell. We were captured-

“(Big Z,)*” I whispered, blinking furiously as my eyes watered in reaction. I struggled again to sit upright, and this time managed to somehow wedge myself up against a back wall. In front of me shone the blue luminescence of an energy forcefield, separating me from freedom. To my right, there was another one between me and Big Z. And on the left the same, beyond which I could make out the crumpled form of Canderous. My stomach bottomed out. “Where’s everyone else?”

“(They took Carth Onasi a short time ago,)*” Big Z howled, low and mournful. I craned my neck to stare at my best buddy in fright. Past Zaalbar, there was one further barrier of a shimmering wall of blue, but beyond it the space was empty. My gaze slid up to the smooth durasteel of the ceiling. The words ‘detainment cell F07’ were embossed in faded amber script that crossed over the entire room. Dotted in the corners were slowly swivelling cameras. ‘(He was not awake. The guards left with him.)’

*Carth. Oh no.* “What about Jen? Juhani? Jolee Bindo?” The old man had started to grow on me. He was a bit snarky, for an old geezer, but he was like, old and stuff. Harmless, really.

Well. Except for the whole Force thing.

*But shouldn’t he be in here with us? Unless the Sith found out about his Force abilities…*

“(I do not know, Mission,)*” Zaalbar answered. His dark eyes stared sadly at me through the forcefield. I tried an awkward sort of bum shuffle to move closer to him, all the while holding back the tears. Big Z, too, had his hands restrained behind his back, but unlike me his furry legs were also locked with shiny electronic cuffs. *Even the Sith ain’t dumb enough to take chances with a Wookiee.* I swallowed, and told myself to stay brave.

“(Do not touch the strange blue wall,)*” Zaalbar warned, his head dropping. “(It is some sort of repulsion technology, and will shock you backwards.)”

“Oh,” I said uselessly, wondering if Big Z found that out first-hand. I knew my friend – his reaction upon waking would have been to test the strength of our enclosure. *But brawn and muscle ain’t gonna get us outta here.* I knew that, and kept a careful eye on the cams as I wiggled my arms around.

I was cold. Those juma-heads had stripped Calo’s blue-and-white armour from me – *and isn’t it strange to be missing that?* – and I was left shivering in my underclothes. They’d taken my belt, too – although I’d snuck out a few spikes before I’d left the ‘Hawk.

But my boots were gone, and that’s where I’d slipped the first two. Some chuba-face had unravelled the leather straps I wore as a headpiece over my lekku – they musta found the spike there, too. I’d slid one into a hidden compartment in the armour’s carapace, but of course I didn’t have *that* anymore.
“They got all my spikes, Big Z,” I whispered, hating the prickling of my eyes as the tears returned. But there were cams on us – even if I’d had a tech spike, chances are guards would come rushing in the moment I tried to use it. And my hands were restrained anyway.

But it woulda been nice to feel like I’d had something to work with.

I should’ve found another way to sneak one in. I remembered hearing about a Twi’lek slicer who’d escaped a high-security prison after smuggling in a spike up his bum. Ew, at the time, the thought had totally grossed me out. Now, part of me wished I’d had the chance to try it.

“(I am sorry, Mission,)” Zaalbar howled mournfully. “(Once my strength returns, I will try testing the limits of the strange blue wall again. I will not give up, my friend. The might of a Wookiee is often underestimated.)”

There was no point in stating the obvious – that repulsion technology was more than a match for the strength of any person, Wookiee or not. Or that he wouldn't get anywhere, cuffed as he was. And, again, the stupid cams.

’Cause Zaalbar wasn't someone who gave up easily.

There had to be a chance, somewhere. There was always something someone hadn't thought of.

What about that guy? The Mandalorian that Jen freaked out over?

No, not Jen. Revan.

I swallowed again. She was my friend, and I trusted her, and sheesh, I couldn’t imagine how she was coping with all of this, but I was still struggling just to understand it. I didn’t even know what was truth from legend, really. Revan had been this great Republic hero against the Mandalorians – against Canderous’ laser-brained people – but then she went all bad and stuff. Like Darth Malak was now.

Jen had looked out for me since we’d met. Saved my life heaps. She was funny, curious like me, terrible at pazaak and... and she’s my friend!

But she was also crazy powerful, and we’d all seen flashes of her dark side. On Tatooine. When she ran on Manaan. On Korriban, when she’d discovered Bastila missing.

It was those memories that made me believe her, down in the Shadowlands, when she’d told me the truth. Because, frankly, it sounded like the craziest thing ever.

And then she ran from us again.

…

“Hush now, child,” the old man cautioned. I stuck my tongue out, but did as he bid. I’d woken up hours ago, after falling asleep in his hut – and sheesh, I got there weren’t any building codes on Big Z’s overgrown homeworld, and it wasn’t like I hadn’t lived in my share of shacks in the scummy Lower City, but Jolee Bindo’s hovel looked like a stiff wind would knock it over. “Someone approaches.”

My eyes widened, and I darted behind him on reflex. Old and wrinkly he might be, but I’d felt the heat of my blaster when he’d zapped it. He was my only ally in this wild place, unless-

“Is it Jen?” I whispered. “Is she coming back?”
I’d been plenty mad when I woke to find her gone, leaving me here with that weird old man who’d turned up just after she had killed one ronto-turd Dark Jedi and scared another off.

But maybe, I could get why she ran. Revan. Darth Revan. I’d always known Bastila’d had secrets – I mean, for the longest time I’d thought Bastila was like, controlling Jen with the power of her mind or something. But this…

I probably woulda flipped out a whole heap more if Jen hadn’t been freaking out herself.

“No. But it’s not a threat, young pup, that I’m sure of.” He wandered over to the door – not that I’d really call a bunch of twigs tied together a door as such – and casually opened it with a wave of his hand. He seemed relaxed and unconcerned, but I still clutched tight on the Mando blaster I’d nicked. After everything that’d happened today, I was gonna keep myself armed.

I wished I was to be back on the ‘Hawk.

Jolee Bindo faced the blackness of the Shadowlands for a minute in silence. And then, I heard the fast padding of feet close in. I tensed.

“Who are you?” a female voice asked from the darkness beyond. I gasped as I recognized the exotic, feline voice.

“Juhani?” I cried out.

The old man harrumphed. “Come on in. Seems like it’s a day for visitors.”

Juhani blinked solemnly as she stepped into the dull glow of Jolee’s only halogen lamp. I couldn’t help myself, I ran forward and threw my arms around her. The Cathar tensed in surprise, and I felt the muscles of her back ripple underneath my clutching grip. It reminded me then of just how tough she was. Like Big Z, a born warrior.

Hesitantly, I felt a hand pat me gently on the back.

I pulled away, scrubbing at my eyes. I didn’t really know Juhani, and felt a bit embarrassed to be randomly hugging her like that, but the joy at seeing another of my friends down here had kinda been overwhelming, for a second.

But Juhani was so quiet and reserved. I’d probably just made her feel all sorts of uncomfortable.

“Sorry,” I mumbled, stumbling back into the falling-down hut. “It’s been a crazy day.”

“Come in properly before the tach follow,” Jolee invited, waving the Cathar inside. Juhani shot him an uneasy look as she took several cautious steps inside. She twitched slightly when the hermit closed the door with a magical flick of his bony hand.

“I overheard your communication to Canderous,” Juhani murmured, the warrior’s tail on her head swishing behind her as she glanced at me. “Are you alright, Mission?”

“Yeah, I guess.” I shrugged, sniffling a bit. “Could do with a shower and three days sleep. But I’m not badly beat up, not like Jen.”

At that, Juhani’s gaze sharpened and her chin tilted upwards. It was nice, having her here, but I knew she’d come for Jen, really. The thought flashed through my mind – what if Juhani knows the truth? – but it took, like, one second for me to discount that. After all, we’d found Juhani on Tatooine, all crazed and rabid. It was kinda hard to remember our first meeting, with just how quiet
and righteous she was these days. Juhani won’t like the truth about Jen. Not with how scared she is of the freaky Dark Side. The thought made me sad. I had the feeling that Jen needed all the friends she could get, right about now – and I didn’t think Jen could, or should, keep the truth from us. It’d eat away at her, in the end.

“Where is-”

“You know, an exchange of names would be nice,” Jolee grumbled, frowning at me. “While I’m all for you inviting your friends over, young pup, it’s considered polite to actually introduce people.”

“Okay, okay, keep your shirt on,” I muttered, rolling my eyes. Far out, but he was a cantankerous geezer. “Juhani, this is Jolee Bindo, a grumpy hermit who likes to live in smelly old huts. Jolee, this is Juhani, a Padawan Order Jedi person.”

“Pleased to meet you,” Juhani said quietly, her head tilted in acknowledgment.

Jolee hummed as he eye-balled her. “Padawan, eh? So you’re travelling with Mission’s friend Jen?”

“I,” Juhani hesitated, before her lips curved into a small, but genuine, smile. “In truth, it is Jedi Knight, now. And yes, I am travelling with Jen Sahara. I had believed her to be with Mission. Where is she?”

“Jolee reckons she’s gone after the Star Map,” I said, trying not to sound sulky about it. “She needed some time alone. She- we both had a bit of a bad time of it.”

…

The sound of Zaalbar saying something dragged me back to the present. I frowned, having completely missed what he’d said, too lost in my own thoughts.

HK-47 had tracked us down, in the Shadowlands, some time after Juhani had showed up. And, then, it wasn’t too long before Jen herself had returned – having successfully found the Star Map and told the others to rally. She hadn’t said much, not around Juhani and Jolee and HK, and the trip back had been quick and quiet.

But, still, it seemed like - despite everything - we’d actually succeeded on Kashyyyk. The Wookies were freed, the Star Map was found… we’d be able to leave, and Jen’d have some time to… to think about things. To find a way to tell the others, without them going all crazy-ape on her.

But now, we were caught. And Jen was… Jen was likely being tortured or something horrible, considering her past. She wasn’t that person anymore, that evil Dark Lord like Malak, I knew my friend… but I couldn’t see the Sith treating her particularly nicely.

She used to be their old Master.

It still didn’t seem real. And now, Jen might not ever have a chance to tell any of her friends the truth. And while maybe that didn’t really matter, in the grand scheme of things – there was one person who had a right to know.

“(Mission,)” Zaalbar said quietly. “(Do not give into despair. I shall not give up. I shall keep trying, until my last breath, to find a way to rescue both you and Jen Sahara. I swear it)”

The one who’d sworn a life-debt to her.
“Zaalbar,” I whispered, shuffling closer to the wall. “I need to… I need to tell you something. It’s important. It’s about Jen.”

His dark eyes looked at me seriously through the repulsion wall. There were only inches separating us. I sighed. “Zaalbar, Jen and I found out about her past. It’s not… it’s not good, not really. Bastila had been keeping secrets—”

“(Mission,)” Zaalbar interrupted in a warning tone. “(Not this again. This is not the time, my friend, to be complaining about Bastila Shan. She is-)”

“Shush, Big Z,” I hissed. “Lemme finish. Look, I ain’t blaming Bastila, okay? I mean, she probably wet her pants when she realized the poodoo she was in. Jen is… Jen ain’t Jen Sahara. Her mind, like, got wiped or damaged or something. She’s really Revan.”

Zaalbar blinked at me, his head cocked.


Zaalbar huffed. “(I am not sure I understand, Mission. You are saying that Jen used to call herself a Darth? I believe that is a madclaw title of the Sith-)”

“(Zaalbar!)” I cried. “I’m talking about Darth freaking Revan! Y’know, Malak’s old master? The one who, like, turned on the Republic and tried to take it over before? The one Bastila is famous for having killed, except it now turns out she actually didn’t?”

His furry brow furrowed with confusion, and I wondered if it was at all possible that Big Z didn’t recognize her name. Surely not, right? I mean, we’re talking about Revan here! THE Revan!

“(I do not follow galactic politics, my friend, you know this. But I am aware of how the shadows of the past can stretch over one’s future.)”

I struggled not to snap out that slashing your brother with your claws ain’t quite the same thing as being a scary Sith Lord, aware that Big Z might not exactly appreciate the comparison – but, far out, he had absolutely no clue at all sometimes!

Big Z was still droning on. “(If there is one thing Jen Sahara has taught me, it is that honour can follow dishonour. She sometimes struggles to remain upon the correct path, I have seen this. And yet, she returns to it, time and again. I will not forsake her.)”

The sound of an entryway opening had us both dwindling into silence. I blinked, and looked up to see two Sith nerf-herders stomp into the room.

“Hey, the cute blue one’s awake,” one of them commented, gesturing at me with a grasped blaster. There was a swishing noise as the hatch shut behind him.

“Looks like the Mando is coming to, as well,” the other muttered. “Man, but I hate guard duty.”

“(One of them said earlier, before you woke, that Canderous Ordo took more than his share of stun bolts,)” Zaalbar murmured to me, as softly as a Wookiee could. There was a faint groan from my left, where Canderous lay. “(I do not envy his headache upon waking.)”

“No talking,” the first one snapped, pointing his blaster at Big Z. My fingers curled in reaction behind my back. “Or grunting in what you beasts call a language. These walls can be light- and sound- blacked, if we want. An’ solitary is the least of what we can do.”
The other one faced me, the shiny mirror of his visor both anonymous and frightening. “Or maybe we’ll just pull the girl out. Y’know, have a little fun before the interrogators do.”

The first one snorted. "With the amount of prox alarms going off, Jarl, I don't reckon the interrogators will even get here. Frig it all, we've taken enough hits out there. I like your idea - let's have some fun before we all blow up into space dust."

And then his visor, too, turned to swivel at me.

I didn’t have to see their ugly faces to spot the leers. Maybe it was a bluff, maybe not. I didn’t know. I was at their mercy.

The mercy of the Sith.

My stomach clenched tighter. There was nothing I could do, and I couldn’t really see any way how anyone could help us now-

A spike of scarlet brilliance suddenly protruded from the centre of the first guard’s chest.

I blinked.

The guard made an awful gurgling noise, before collapsing in a dead heap.

“What the-?” The other guard was scrabbling back, from what seemed to be a freaking lightsaber spinning all by itself in mid-air, but it was no use, the 'saber bobbed forward and then lunged-

-striking deep through the guard’s chest. His yell was cut-off as he dropped to the ground.

Zaalbar was growling, deep and low in his throat, fur bristling in reaction to the unknown.

I stared in half-horror, half-fascination at the floating lightsaber – the red lightsaber of the Sith – did that mean Jen’s Dark Jedi friend had actually pulled through for us-

“There’s only one person on our side that I’ve seen hide like that,” Canderous whispered hoarsely. His voice was weak, yet threaded through with interest. “But I didn’t think you were onboard with us, Sithkid.”

The breath rushed out of my lungs. “Dustil?” I whispered in wonderment. And, suddenly, he was there, like he’d just switched off the galaxy’s most wizard stealth belt. There was a faint hiss as his lightsaber extinguished, and then he was staring at me in deep concern.

I’d not trusted him, not totally, not after our first meeting – but here he was coming to our rescue, and the relief that surged through me was sharp and profound. Dustil was here, and he was one of us.

“Surveillance,” Canderous grunted. I glanced sideways to see him struggling to sit. He’s in bad shape. I spotted various burns dotted along his bare chest and arms. There was dried blood caked all over one leg, as if Canderous had been hurt before we’d been caught.

He was as under-dressed as me, I realized. For I was sitting in front of Dustil Onasi wearing nothing but a crop top and panties. I felt a furious blush heat my face in reaction. “We gotta get some clothes,” I squeaked.

“I, er, I saw some gear in the next room,” Dustil stammered, looking away. The back of his neck was super red. “It looked like ours, but I didn’t stop to check. There’s guards there, I just followed behind these two.” He gestured awkwardly to the bodies on the ground.
“Surveillance!” Canderous repeated in urgency, and I was surprised to see he’d gotten to his feet somehow. He was as restrained as Zaalbar. “Our cuffs. The walls! Got a plan for those, Sithkid?”

Dustil blinked. “Um, yeah, the vid-feeds are pointing at an empty cell, and the logs have been forged to make it look like you all were transferred, not just my dad.” He looked down at his wrist, fiddling with the comm there. I recognized it - it was a link back to the ‘Hawk. “Teethree, take the repulsion walls offline in cell F07. I’ve secured the area.”

*He’s been working with the droids!* “Jen,” I whispered, in dawning realization. “She went to do something with the droids, back on the ship, before we left.”

The blue walls enclosing me on three sides flickered, and then vanished.

“Jen put you up to this, she knows you’re here,” Canderous surmised. “Huh. That’s good. At least it might stop her kriffing out about Yudan Rosh.”

Dustil had already taken a few steps towards me, but at that name he stumbled forward, his eyes widening comically. “What? Did you say-”

“Never mind.” Canderous grumbled. “One thing at a time, Sithkid. Get us out of these cuffs.”

The name was familiar. *Yudan Rosh?* I figured Canderous musta meant Jen’s Dark Jedi friend, for he’d stuffed us over, hadn’t he? Otherwise old man Bindo would be in the cell with us. I frowned, thoughts whirling even as Dustil walked behind me and gingerly seared through my cuffs with his ‘saber, before heading straight to Canderous. I’d heard that name before, I was sure of it.

“Give me the comm, kid,” Canderous ordered, once he was free.

Dustil looked uncertain, as he took a step back from the mostly-naked, muscle-bound Mandalorian who fair towered over him. Dustil was lean in comparison – but he had the Force.

He was a lot more freaking powerful than he looked.

Canderous sighed in irritation. “Look, I ain’t gonna underestimate your talents, okay? But I’ve experience at leading an extraction. Give me the damn comm so I can talk to the droids and figure out our next steps.”

Dustil actually looked relieved when he handed over the wrist-comm. Canderous gave him a sharp nod of approval. “Go free Carpet. Then help him frisk the bodies, we need to move quick and I want to see what resources you can find. Stims, guns, whatever. Hop to it.” With a wave, Canderous looked down to speak into the comm. “Droids, seal this cell immediately so we don’t get interrupted before we’re ready. Then, I need an update on the forces outside this cell. We’ll need to reroute or disable any surveillance before we go on in. I want a snapshot of schematics from this area to wherever Jen and the others are. I need specs of the security-”

With Canderous barking out orders, I watched Dustil as he freed my best buddy from the restraints that had pinned him down. Zaalbar chuffed, stretched, and then lumbered over to the prone corpses to do Canderous’ bidding. Dustil glanced back to me, a warm look in his dark brown gaze as Canderous continued to rap out commands, and Big Z started to rip away armour.

I recognized that look, I reckoned it was on my face as well.

*Hope.*

xXx
Carth Onasi:

Awareness returned slowly; at first, just a small degree at a time.

Dry mouth, followed by a pounding in my head. Bright light against closed eyelids. Aching in my muscles. *I’ve drank too much. Stang, I swore I’d never go that path again.*

Then, it became a torrent of images.

The ping of blasters. Juhani falling first. The Dark Jedi walking out from the *Hawk*, proclaiming himself as Yudan Rosh – a monster from Revan’s Guard of Twelve. A monster that Jen was pinning her hopes on.

Jen, collapsing to her knees, as I faded into unconsciousness.

The breath shuddered in my lungs, and I jerked upright.

I was sitting on a hard-backed chair, having slumped over a plasticeel table. My hands were restrained tightly, locked behind the arms of the chair. And seated opposite me was an old human dressed in the starched uniform of a Sith officer. His shoulders were adorned with Admiral pips.

It took a moment for his weathered face to dissolve into familiarity.

“Saul,” I hissed. My voice came out garbled, the after-effects of too many stun bolts landing at once. A residual weariness ached deep in my bones.

“Carth,” he acknowledged, staring at me with a neutral expression. The years had aged him, I realized with a bitter triumph that was probably emotionally unhealthy. Blast it, I didn’t care. I wanted to see the bastard *burn*, just like everyone had on Telos. Just like Morgana. “I would have kept you out of this, if it was possible. If you hadn’t been travelling with her.”

His gaze drifted beyond me. I twisted my head sharply in reaction.

Behind me there were three Force cages, all occupied with a slumped, unconscious figure restrained tightly around a central pillar.

The middle one held Jen.

No! Reflexively, I twisted my hands, trying to find any purchase within the solid cuffs behind my back. It was no good; they were hard and unyielding.

“I can give you a clean death, Carth.” Saul’s cold words dragged my attention back to him. And now he was staring pointedly a lightweight blaster placed in the middle of the table. “I owe you that much, at the least.”
A clean death. The bastard actually wants me to agree to a blaster shot.

“Owe me?” I growled. The hate that blazed through me was pure and savage. My arms and legs yanked roughly at my confinement, even as logic told me not to bother. “You more than owe me, Saul,” I seethed. “You owe the millions of people you killed, you betrayed—”

“I made a choice, and had to follow through.” His hard words cut through mine, pitiless and implacable. “I don’t expect you to understand. I knew, the last time we met, that you would never understand.”

Oh, I remembered that conversation. Over the bleak years that followed, I’d cursed myself bitterly for not seeing through him, not grasping the import of his words, the evil path he’d been about to embark on—

I could have pulled out my blaster and shot him dead, that day. Saved Telos before it was scorched into ruin. Or, or, called someone, and warned them that Admiral Saul Karath was on the cusp of treason. The what-ifs would sear with feral rage in my chest, playing over and over, a sickening reminder that I’d had a chance to do something—

Logically, I’d known my guilt was erroneous. For, even if I’d had been sharp enough to suspect Saul’s next actions, no one would have believed me. Admiral Karath and Revan’s Guard have turned on us? Half the Fleet are… attacking Outer Rim Republic worlds? Heck, it’d taken weeks after Saul’s involvement was publicized before I’d truly believed he’d betrayed us along with the Jedi heroes of old.

Yes, I did remember that conversation. Morgana had still been alive. All I’d really been focussed on was seeing her again. Because of him, I never had that chance.

…

“Saul, you’re back!” I said in greeting, walking forward to grasp his shoulders. He was more than just a superior, more than just a mentor. In many ways, he was the father-figure my own had failed to be. “I heard the Fleet returned. It’s been hard to celebrate, with all of you gone for so long—”

“Carth, I don’t have much time,” he interrupted, in a voice terse enough that I wilted into silence. This wasn’t going to be a social visit, then.

“I guess you’ve got a lot of debriefings to look forward to, huh?” I said, stepping back and trying to halt the litany of questions that rose on my lips. The last few months had been crazy. Public fanfare and blowouts all over the Core, as the Republic both celebrated the end of the Mandalorian threat, and mourned those we had lost.

I was itching to go home. Two weeks, before I could head back to Telos. Morgana hadn’t concealed her irritation last holo-call, and I couldn’t fault her for it. Months of peace, and I still wasn’t back. She understood the paperwork, and the ceremonies, and the clean-up required on some of the more ravaged worlds – but she needed me, too. Dustil kept sneaking out to practise illegal swooping, and nothing she’d say stopped him. Heck, he’d started a new college some weeks back, and I’d missed it. I’d missed a lot.

It’d be different, soon, I vowed. The Wars were over, and I’d be home.

“Yes,” Saul assented with a thin-lipped smile. “Carth, I wanted to speak with you, first. This conflict has made… it has made us all re-think a lot of things we once took for granted. The Senate, I hear, overturned military command the day after the triumph at Malachor was broadcast.”
He said it like it was news. Surely Saul and the rest of the absent Fleet had kept abreast of events in the Core. They’d been mopping up the last remnants of the Clans along the Outer Rim, or so I’d heard, but little detail of their exact whereabouts had actually trickled back to us. I’d been concerned, on a personal level - and I’d seen the edgy look on some of the military brass left behind.

Why aren’t they back yet? What if there are more Mandalorians out there, when we’d thought Fett and Mandalore had been the biggest threat?

What if the deaths at Malachor aren’t enough?

But Saul was back, now, and I could only assume the Jedi heroes were, too. I didn’t think the bureaucrats Saul reported to - now that peace reigned - would be particularly impressed with the lengthy absence of half the Republic Fleet and all of Revan’s Guard. I didn’t envy Saul the fallout he’d inevitably have to wade through.

Saul continued talking, and I thought I heard an impassioned plea underlying his normally neutral tone. “You’ll recall how we first crumbled beneath the Mandalorian might. How far their strength punched through our defences, before military order was imposed.”

I frowned, unsure where he was going with this. The first years of the Mandalorian Wars had been devastating, true. There’d been enough times when everyone was convinced that we were one defeat away from surrender – or worse, annihilation. Sometimes, I couldn’t quite believe we hadn’t all ended up speaking Mandalorian.

“You’ve been on the frontlines the whole way through, Carth. You saw the transformation when Revan’s Guard entered the war, when the Senate granted full authority to the Fleet. When we didn’t have to wait on Coruscanti approval before implementing the smallest decision.”

“Sure,” I said slowly. The Senate had dragged their feet for years, unwilling to grant supreme power to the Navy or Army chiefs - until things became desperate. Until Revan Freeflight had turned up with a blazing group of Jedi Knights, and inverted everything.

I’d heard she’d stormed into a Senate meeting, demanding complete strategic privileges to be handed over to the brass. Although, the rumours swirling around everyone in Revan’s Guard had always run a bit rampant.

Apparently, Revan Freeflight wore a mask because a Mandalorian had slaughtered her parents and disfigured her face as a child. She was seven-foot tall, a man, no, a Zabrak from a forgotten planet along the Outer Rim. Malak Devari was an assassination robot in disguise, when he wasn’t single-handedly saving millions of orphans from slavery. Meetra Surik cut down half the Jedi High Council with her lightsaber when they refused to follow Revan, and Yudan Rosh infiltrated the Fett Clan and beheaded Cassus Fett with a shiv-blade. I’d rather enjoyed hearing that one, myself, even though I knew Cassus had been personally sighted at the battle of Malachor, and apparently met his end there.

The latest was that Revan defeated Mandalore in hand-to-hand combat on the surface of that cursed planet – which was completely ridiculous since the reports stated it had been destroyed the moment Mandalore had set foot on it.

Yellow news, and all complete trash.

I’d only ever known Talvon Esan, myself, and he was both steady and level-headed. Nothing like the mystical legends most of the grunts expected from Revan’s Guard. Once, I’d met Malak Devari, when his fleet docked on Telos. He seemed a decent sort, too – calm, but with a sharp mind behind
his relaxed demeanour.

I couldn’t deny that the Jedi crusaders who had followed Revan Freeflight into the Wars were inspiring figures. That their power was awesome. And that when leaders like Saul had full command, our tactical warfare had been a heck of a lot more effective. But while a military government was a compelling one amidst conflict, it wasn’t what the people needed during peacetime. Otherwise, the Republic might as well be a stratocracy.

“Our forces became stream-lined, brutal and effectual, when we weren’t tied to the bureaucrats back in the Core,” Saul continued, echoing my thoughts. “When we had one powerful leader, overseeing everything.”

“I certainly won’t deny the power of the Jedi, Saul,” I said, feeling a bit puzzled at the conviction I could hear in his voice. “And, yeah, things turned around when the brass could focus on the battles we faced instead of appeasing the politicians back home. But we’ve peace reigning, now—”

“And what happens the next time something threatens our peace, Carth?” he cut in, his grey eyes intent and serious as they held mine. “Do we have to go through the same process, lose the same number of lives and territory, before the Senate cedes any meaningful control back to the military?”

I laughed, and it sounded uneasy, even to my own ears. “Saul, it almost sounds like you’re advocating a military dictatorship.”

He said nothing, but simply stared at me. I felt my brows lowering. “You can’t truly believe that’s the best form of government. The Republic is founded on the sharing of control between its members, to allow every culture, every planet a say—”

“And it almost broke us, Carth.”

His words might ring with truth, but it was a blind truth that ignored its own inherent dangers. “Saul, you only have to look at history to see how badly a one-leader empire turns out. It always relies on a benign dictator staying that way. Who would you even put in that position? Blasted Revan Freeflight?”

He didn’t answer, again, and my confusion was starting to mar with the beginnings of frustration, now. “That would mean- it would mean loyalty to a person, rather than a set of ideals. The Republic is founded on its ideals, Saul! The idea of one person leading it alone is so fraught with risk, that I can’t- I can’t even understand why you’re thinking about this!”

Saul took a step back from me, a look of resignation on his face. “Well. The Mandalorian Wars have made us all reassess our established beliefs, Carth. Loyalty to a leader is important. As a military man, you should understand that.”

“Yeah, sure,” I snapped. “But that’s because I am a military man. I sure as heck wouldn’t want our government to rule civilians that way!”

“Alright, alright, I see we’re not going to agree.” He raised his hands in mild surrender. “Peace will give us all time to thoroughly debate topics like this. I have to depart, now, as I’ve some meetings to attend. I’m sure we’ll see each other again soon.”

He left quickly, after that. Uneasiness sat cold in my gut as I watched him go.

…”

“No, Saul, I would never understand such a cowardly act of betrayal,” I said, the words hard and
low as they left my lips. Saul had the codes to bypass the planetary shields. Telos had no warning, no
defence, no opportunity to rally against his fleet. No time for any sort of evacuation against an attack
that wasn’t just an invasion or conquering of territory. The devastation he unleashed on my home
planet had such an effect on the ecosystem that the atmosphere acidified months later, to the point
where it was, still, uninhabitable. It ranked right up there with the sort of genocide displayed by the
worst of the Mandalorian clans. “Telos was a civilian target. Because of you, it was bombed into
obliteration, and the blood of those innocent people is on your hands.”

He sighed, and a look of weariness crossed his face. “Innocents die in war, Carth. You know this. I
had to prove myself to Talvon—”

“She died in that attack, Saul. And for that, I swear I’ll kill you.”

He retreated into silence at my hissed words.

And, once more, he looked beyond me to my friends, hanging helpless in the Force cages behind
me. I’d had no chance to talk to Jen properly, to find out what happened in the Shadowlands and if
she was truly okay - and now she was at the mercy of the man I hated most in the galaxy. The man
responsible for the death of my wife.

My fear for Jen was a wedge of ice in the core of my anger. I didn’t think I could bear losing another
person I cared about. Not again, and certainly not to Saul.

Saul’s chair ground against the floor as he pushed it back, a discordant sound that struck me with
alarm. Whatever his next move was going to be, I wouldn’t like it. He stood, still staring beyond me.

He was staring at Jen. I couldn’t tell from this angle, but somehow I knew he was.

“Empty words, Carth, restrained as you are,” he murmured, as he walked around the table. Around
me, and towards the Force cages. A bitter laugh dropped from his thin lips as he brushed close, and
one hand rested gently on my shoulder.

Like a friend, offering comfort.

Like the last four years had never happened.

I growled in hot reaction, jerking away, lashing out with my feet – but they were tightly fettered to
the chair legs, and the chair itself was bolted to the durasteel floor. There was no give, no movement
to be found. All I accomplished were mild skin burns and a mounting exhaustion.

“If it’s any consolation, Carth, you are an insignificant part of all of this.” His voice was bland and
unemotional. He could have been talking about the blasted weather. I hated him all the more for that.
“I am genuine in my offer of a clean death. Your companions will not be granted the same egress.”

*Torture.* The word slipped through my mind, a lightning strike of horror cutting through the seething
hate.

Jen had been convinced it would happen to Bastila in Sith hands. *Hurt someone hard enough, and
long enough, and they’ll do anything to stop the pain.* But there was motive to torture Bastila, to turn
her, to misuse her gifts. For the rest of us-

*This happened to Jen on Deralia simply because she is a Force-sensitive. This is what the Sith do.*

Jen had barely survived, last time. It was a mercy she had no recollection of the suffering inflicted
upon her by Darth Revan’s forces, but it was the reason behind her mind-damage. The thought of the
same happening to Jen a second time rekindled my blistering rage into nothing more than a primal need to pummel Saul into a bloody, broken mess.

“You- you complete bastard!” I thundered, barely feeling the skin of my wrists tear as I wrenched violently at the restraints. “How do you sleep at night? How do you justify torture to yourself?”

“I don’t,” he snapped, and he slung his head back around to face me. There was anger in his grey eyes - hypocritical and unjust considering all he was responsible for. His mouth twisted in a sneer. “This isn’t what I believed in, Carth. This isn’t what I agreed to. The Force- it turns them all insane; into sadistic, perverted shells of what they once were. Malak, Talvon, and even Revan.”

His voice dropped in volume on the last words, grown hoarse and husky. And, again, his gaze moved to Jen. There was something akin to fascination in his expression, and the feeling of unease crawled over my skin, undercutting the blazing anger owning me.

*I’ve got to do something. I’ve got to-

“Damn you, Saul! You lot already have Bastila Shan. But Jen- the others- they’re not important. They don’t deserve this, they’re not-”

His hand dug deep into my shoulder, and the harsh sound that escaped him was a dark mockery of a laugh; discordant and guttural and broken.

“Of course you don’t know the truth. I didn’t think so. Your presence here wouldn’t make any sense otherwise.”

Saul removed his palm then, but my neck was still craned sideways, glaring at him, inwardly vowing that somehow he would meet his end today, in this very room.

Even if I couldn’t see how. Maybe- keep him talking- and bank on Yudan Rosh of all people coming through for Jen. Or, whatever Jen had planned with the droids in the cargo bay-

*I won’t die. I’m not going to take the coward’s way out, and leave the others behind. If Jen’s shown me anything, it’s that there’s always room for hope, for another solution to present itself.*

I didn’t know what Saul’s enigmatic words meant, and I didn’t care, not when he started walking ever so casually to the middle cage, the one holding Jen prone as she slumped forward, linked flexisteel belts fastening her arms to her side and her body to the conductive pillar.

They’d even removed her shoes, I realized with an absent sort of horror. Her bare toes seemed completely out of place on the chrome floor. Her hands were barely visible, I could only see the edges of two knuckles – curled into tight fists strapped to her thighs under a belt restraint, as if she were seething with anger even in her unconscious state.

The static of a golden prism enveloped her. They used to employ old-fashioned torture cages and neural disruptors for enemy Force-sensitives, before someone had invented the technology behind Force cages near the close of the Mandalorian Wars. I didn’t know how the tech worked, but the end result was a prisoner completely unable to use the Force. And the central pillar they were strapped to could carry an electric current or inject meds as per the warped desires of the jerk behind the controlling console.

“She doesn’t look like much, here,” Saul commented. It sounded like he was speaking to himself, like he’d forgotten I was even in the room. And through the black tar of my hate, the uneasy confusion grew. *Why was Saul so interested in Jen?*
How in the Outer Rim could I get him to stay away from her?

“It seems strange, after all this time, that she was brought in by Yudan Rosh.” Saul had never been one for lengthy disquisitions. Short and to the point was his style. Or had been. “You didn’t realize he was on your ship either, did you Carth?”

No. And Jolee’s slumped presence on Jen’s left meant he’d been betrayed – obviously from that black-hearted villain Jen had gambled on.

Saul sighed. “You’re a good man, Carth, and it’s a shame you were dragged into this. They all turn on each other in the end. Revan’s Guard of Twelve.” His voice dropped, a cruel note twisting it. “To think, how many of them were taken out by their own. I truly thought it was going to be great, you know. A better galaxy. A stronger one.”

Maybe, maybe, that was regret underlying his bitterness. I didn’t care. So what if the insanity of the Dark Jedi finally opened his eyes? The bastard has killed too many for any sort of redemption.

“I wonder, Carth, if I should enlighten you to the truth before I grant your death.” His voice switched back to the bland, neutral tone of earlier, and for some reason that fanned the flames of my black fury.

“You can take your clean death, Saul, and shove it where the stars don’t shine!”

Saul gave a dismissive snort of disgust. “You could never view events through a logical frame. Always, your emotion and empathy gets the better of you. I suppose it would be a shame for your trust, once more, to be broken.” He’d turned back to face me, impassive and cold as his flinty stare held mine. My enmity burned as I glared back, taking in the grey complexion of his face, the deep inset lines around his mouth. He looked old. “But there is no such thing as trust, not in this galaxy. As for your precious Jen Sahara—”

A racking cough from behind shocked him into silence. My gaze swung, once more, to Jen.

Her eyes opened, misted and cloudy from the dreams of unconsciousness, before settling on me. My breath stuck in my throat. She blinked once. Twice.

Saul spun around, and I knew his attention was once more fixated on her.

“Carth,” Jen whispered.

Saul took a step closer, and then her gaze narrowed, hardened, and shifted to him.

“You’ve had enough sedation to knock out a rancor,” Saul mused softly. “It’s never easy to calculate the correct dosage on powerful Force users. I suppose I shouldn’t be surprised that you’ve woken.

You always did manage to defeat the odds, didn’t you?”

Jen said nothing. I said nothing. And I heard a rough gust of air release from Saul’s lungs. “Kylah says you have no memory from the past. It doesn’t seem possible, but then neither does your capture. Tell me, is it true?”

Jen’s gaze slipped from Saul’s to meet my horrified one. My neck was beginning to pinch with pain at the awkward way I was craning it. There was a flicker of emotion on Jen’s face as she looked at me – relief, maybe, although there was no perceivable reason for her to feel that – and then she glanced upwards, eyes roving around the circular crackle of energy that stopped her from using the Force.
I had no way to disable such a device, but still, I felt the small flame of faith deep within my fear. Jen could always defeat the odds.

_That’s exactly what Saul just said about her._

My uneasiness grew into an edgy disquiet. The perils of our situation meant I hadn’t been following the conversation intently, but one thing was becoming abundantly clear – Saul had known Jen, once upon a time. She didn’t express any sort of recognition in return, but he knew her.

_Had he been on Deralia, maybe, when she was captured?_

That idea – that Saul may have been involved in what happened to her – was even more horrifying.

“There was one of these on Korriban,” Jen murmured. I didn’t understand what she meant, at first, but she appeared riveted by the amber prism that enclosed her restrained form. _She’s trying to take stock of her environment, look for a way to escape._ “A Force cage.”

“Yes. It’s technology we stole from the Fett,” Saul said. There was a sharp edge to his voice, as if he didn’t appreciate her ignoring him. My stomach twisted as Saul took yet another step closer, but Jen kept her gaze averted. “If your mind-wipe really is truth, then I suppose you won’t recall. The Fett had portable Force-inhibiting devices that gave them an advantage against Force-sensitives. When we finally got our hands on one, we incorporated the science behind it into prisons that could incapacitate any Jedi we captured. Neural disruptors, after all, are challenging to mass-produce with the specialized crystals they require.”

_...did he say mind-wipe?_

“They stop the Force from being used within a small radius,” Jen said, her voice soft and almost wondering. “They generate a repelling effect on the connections within the fabric of the Force itself, but it takes an awful lot of power to run. There’s no real way to counter it. Not unless you held some sort of Force amplifier.”

Beneath the restraint that pinned her body to the pillar, I saw her fists clench in what I could only assume to be futile anger.

She didn’t look angry.

“Who put me in this cage?” Jen whispered. She was looking at Saul, now. “Tell me, who should I thank when I get out of here?”

At that, Saul laughed. It was a hollow sound that echoed throughout the grotesquely coloured room. “Your overconfidence remains, I see. Even with your mind broken and painted over.” He cleared his throat. “Kylah Aramai and Yudan Rosh restrained the lot of you, and my second double-checked the restraints, the cages - everything. I’m afraid there’s no escape for you here.”

A piercing siren cut through the charged atmosphere. It made me aware of another, higher pitched alarm that had been wailing faintly in the distance since I’d woken.

“Isn’t your ship under attack?” Jen asked. I saw her brows lower in concentration, as the louder siren abruptly ceased. There was an intent, calculating look in Jen’s eyes, like she believed she held all the flip-cards. Her lips twisted in a smirk. “Let me guess, someone relieved you of command? Tut tut. What did you do?”

I could feel my heart thumping. I could feel my confusion being overshadowed with a sinister foreboding. I’d thought the showdown would be between Saul and me – but he was wholly focused
on Jen.

Despite our history, despite the years we had worked together, despite his betrayal of me and my entire planet.

And the awareness that Jen was more important to him – for some reason - stoked the fear churning in my gut. He’d offered me a quick death. He’d already said that same wasn’t available for my companions… and now I realized he was specifically meaning Jen. But why?

Who, exactly, is Jen Sahara to Admiral Saul Karath of the Sith Empire?

“I was foolish enough to follow a Force-user,” Saul replied. He took another step. “You’re not as broken as we thought, are you?”

“No,” she whispered, and her eyes dropped closed.

And a flare of scarlet gleamed beneath a belt restraint, from one clenched fist.

There was a buzz of visible static, then, enveloping her limb. Saul grunted in surprise, and suddenly Jen was covered in a cocoon of blazing shards of red lightning, her mouth dropping open in a scream-

“Jen!” I yelled in fright. Saul ran forward, just as the metal restraints pinning Jen ripped free from her body, and all three amber forcefields fizzled into nothingness.

There was a blaster in Saul’s grasp, pointed directly at her.

“No! Saul, stop! Don’t do it!” I screamed.

Saul fired.

The next events happened in breakneck motion.

Jen jerked sideways as the blaster bolt spat against the pillar of the Force cage. Something red dropped from her hand as she lifted it; there was a whistling blur through the room, and a metal object slammed into her grasp.

I didn’t recognize it as Saul’s gun until a retaliatory shot was discharged.

Jen stumbled forward into a crouch, dumping the blaster to the ground as she caught herself on her primary hand.

Saul fell back with a thump. My stupefied gaze was transfixed on his chest. He’d only been wearing an officer’s uniform – no armour, no activated energy shield - and the beige material of his shirt was black and smouldering around the edges of melted flesh. The bolt had caught him in the centre of his torso.

Saul Karath was dead.

I swung back to Jen. She’d pushed herself into a sitting position, one limb tucked into her chest, and the other outstretched, calling a small object to her. It glowed a scarlet red as it floated from the ground into her palm. That’s what she had earlier, I realized numbly. That’s what flared in her fist inside the cage.

Slowly, I tried to scrabble my thoughts into a semblance of order. Saul is dead. Jen killed Saul. It didn’t seem real, or possible. I had to double-check his body. I had to get free. And Jen only
appeared interested in scrutinizing the thing that must have had something to do with her escape-

“Jen,” I rasped, swallowing back the dryness in my throat. “What- what is that?”

She’d done something back on the ‘Hawk, in the cargo bay with the droids. Could they have slipped her something, something the guards hadn’t found on her person?

Her moss-green eyes shot to mine, and they were clouded with bewilderment. “I think… I think, maybe, it’s the redressing of an old debt.” And with those whispered, enigmatic words, her shoulders slumped and she fell forward.

“Jen- Jen, you have to get up!” I cried out. My arms were pinned, my legs restrained, and Jolee and Juhani were both still out. If Jen drifted back into unconsciousness, we were just as damned as if she’d never escaped. “You’ve got to get me out- Jen, you can’t collapse on me now!”

My fears were unfounded. She raised a wavering hand from the ground, and I heard a mechanical hiss as the restraints pinning my wrists together snapped open. A second later, the cuffs around my ankles followed suit.

For a moment, I was struck with the sense of awe at how easy that was to her – even while she was injured, exhausted and likely still feeling the after-effects of sedation. The depth of power at her fingertips had been growing with each step of our journey since Taris, and now seemed immeasurable.

And then, I shot to my feet and stumbled towards her.

“Jen,” I whispered, pulling her upright. She moaned in discomfort, before slumping against me.

“Carth,” she muttered against my chest. I could feel her shaking, ever so slightly. I closed my eyes, unable to make sense of anything anymore.

And as the sirens wailed around us in discordant harmony, we clutched at each other for a brief moment of respite. Her tousled head was tucked under my chin, her arms tight around my waist, and I took a moment to breathe in the sharp relief of having her once more safe in my arms.

Yet, somehow, I had the ominous feeling that the worst was yet to come.

xXx

Kavar Kira:

“Kavar! Kavar, I would have a word with you, now!”

The temptation to keep walking was strong. A brown-clad Padawan stared in askance behind me, at the shrill voice that hollered for my attention. Atris Surik was well-known in the Jedi High Temple for being icily composed, and shrieking like a commoner in a produce market was probably a new look for her.

I should face her. If I slip away without letting her unleash her wrath, she’ll likely track Zez-Kai down. And he’ll just apologise and make excuses and tell her every blasted thing that was said in the meeting.

Suppressing an inward sigh, I stopped striding along the Temple’s courtyard and slowly turned around.
Atris was a sight to behold, having donned an outfit of ivory busk-leather that held the shimmer of cortosis weave about it. While simple in cut and design, it had an elegance and striking appearance that set her apart from most Jedi Masters, who tended towards the nondescript, even after shedding their Knight robes. She spends so much time around her Echani handmaidens that she’s turning into one. There were three of them trailing her, hair like snow and eyes like ice, silent silver wraiths with wooden poles strapped to their backs. An honour guard to the queen of white.

“How dare you, Kavar? How dare you?”

It was pointless and immature to pretend I didn’t understand. “I’m sorry, Atris, is there a problem?”

I could see the moment her outrage turned frigid. Long had Atris held firm to the mandate of controlling one’s emotions, but I always believed she suppressed them rather than rose above them. “You play the fool, Kavar, the way it has always amused you to do so,” she returned, and her voice dropped in both tone and temperature. The three Echani stood behind her, impassive and unseeing, warrior clones of one another. “But I know well who was behind this assembly, and I shall not stand for the insult of being overlooked. I have sat upon the High Council for years longer than you. You have no right to exclude me from an emergency conclave. I, who know more than any Master the truth of current events!”

“Yes, Atris, you do,” I growled, my equanimity slipping, as it always did around her. “A shame you saw fit to share it with the Senate before the Jedi, isn’t it? You can’t expect me to believe you are confused over why we elected to discuss matters without your presence?”

There was a flicker across her face, like she was holding back a sneer beneath a mask of detachment.

*Let it go, Kavar. She isn’t worth your anger. The Jedi Code is more than just words.* I sighed. “I don’t deny the Senate had to be informed, Atris. None of us deny that. But to find out that… I trailed off, my gaze slipping to the three guards standing to attention behind her, all within earshot. The closest one was slightly shorter, slightly less identical, than the other two. “To find out that she is still alive in the midst of a dressing down from the highest ranking senators in the Core was a slap in the face to us all. You should have told us.”

My words didn’t touch her. I couldn’t detect the slightest hint of remorse, nor even a smidge of uncertainty. No indication that she even considered her action may have been the wrong one.

“And risk the High Council hiding the truth of Dantooine’s betrayal?”

“Huh.” *She’s lost all her trust in us. I wonder, does she even see herself as one of us anymore?* “I see it more as an act of desperation than betrayal, Atris. But you should have believed in the High Council. We would not, do not, condone the actions nor the secrecy of the Dantooine Council. This is a war against the Sith, against the Dark Side itself. Of course we would have involved the Senate. The last thing we need is to be at odds with the Republic.”

“And that, is exactly why I told them.” Her face was still and carved from ferracrete. “The Jedi need the Republic, Kavar, and you are a fool if you don’t perceive how much. If you think they don’t hold us accountable for unleashing Darth Revan and Darth Malak upon them, then you are blinder than a shyrack.”

“Name-calling, Atris?” I raised an eyebrow, but her expression didn’t change. “The Jedi work with the Force. Our interest is the harmony and balance of the Force, not appeasing the Republic. The way you are talking, you remind me of the very one you are set out to destroy.”

“Don’t you dare make that comparison, Kavar!” she hissed, and the fire flashed in her eyes before
she visibly forced it back down again. “I am an agent of peace, always! I never counselled direct action by the Jedi, but you were certainly tempted once, weren’t you?”

Oh, that one hit below the belt. Funny, how our conversations always seemed to devolve into a dung-slinging match. I blamed it on the Force’s odd sense of humour, constantly throwing together two Jedi Masters who failed to see eye-to-eye on any topic ranging from the true meaning of the Jedi Code to the interpretation of Coruscanti’s five-day weather forecast.

Well, I couldn’t deny she was right. Atris beheld an acidic pleasure in dredging up the past, but I had been tempted. I’d thought, then, I’d made the correct decision in turning away.

But my certainty began to erode many years ago, and now it was barely more than a token effort held up to others. I could still recall, so vividly, the day that offer had been first suggested, from one that had meant so much to me.

…

“Em,” I said in greeting, walking forward to embrace my old Padawan. Sometimes, I still saw her as the charming girl she had once been, always free with her smiles and gentle with her words. She was a younger, golden version of her half-sister; warm instead of ice and considering instead of judgmental. In essence, she was simply one of those sentients everyone felt better for being around.

But Meetra Surik had not been a child nor my Padawan for over a decade, now.

“Master Kavar,” she murmured, pulling back to give me a sweet smile. “Thank you for coming at such short notice.”

“Always,” I replied. “But I must confess my confusion at your presence, here on the front-lines. I’m sure I don’t need to remind you of the Order’s decree on non-interference.”

“I am not the only one here, Master.” Her blue gaze was serious.

I felt my heart turn heavy. I was afraid of that. For a full year, I had avoided Knights Revan Freeflight and Malak Devari as they travelled deep into the Outer Rim with Republic reconnaissance troops, testing the might of the growing Mandalorian threat. Gathering intel first-hand instead of trusting the High Council to disseminate what information was required amongst the Order.

When Revan and Malak returned to Coruscant, I had hoped that would be the end of it. My ties to the resisting Onderonites held me here, thick in the Republic war effort – but I was also a Jedi Master, and to a large extent could find ways to circumvent a direct edict from the Council.

And could be trusted to withdraw from conflict, when necessary.

They were raised too swiftly to full Knights. I don’t know what Karon or Zhar was thinking, testing them so soon. Raw power alone does not make a steady Knight, and without the impediment of reporting to a Master, of course Revan would run off half-cocked at the first glimpse of adventure.

And Meetra Surik, my empathic ex-apprentice, was just another powerful Jedi Knight under Revan Freeflight’s thrall.

“And it is dangerous for Jedi to be involved directly in combat. Our connection to the Force enables us a unique perspective to counsel and mediate. Once we turn it into a weapon against our enemies, it forces us along a slippery path that is difficult to turn back from.”
“And yet, here you stand,” she said simply. There was a core of steel resolution in her words. Too many wrote Meetra Surik off as a soft-spoken hood-mouse, a Jedi suited for nothing beyond the placating of younglings and the guardianship of the Archives.

"I have diplomatic obligations to the Onderon front, Em.” I tried to wedge a rebuke in my tone, but it did not appear to shake her composure in the slightest. "And these will be complete within the week. I shall be returning to Coruscant. Come with me."

Meetra’s eyes widened. “You are leaving the Wars?”

“For now, I must. It is not idle words when I say that bloodshed affects one’s soul, Em. The damage is amplified for Force-sensitives.” We said it over and over again. And yet some in each new generation thought they were immune.

“I understand that, Master, I do. But inaction against grievous wrong can be just as damaging.” There was a shine of conviction about her, as if she beheld a vision of a perfect future that her involvement in the Mandalorian Wars would somehow make a reality. “It is not the path I can take any longer.”

I could feel my lips thin. “Are they your words, or Revan’s?”

“My will is my own,” she retorted, folding her arms. “I respect and admire Revan, but I would not follow her if I did not also agree with her.”

I sighed. Meetra was a child of peace. She’d barely been more than a tot when Exar Kun fell. “Em, you have no idea of the bloody truth of warfare.”

“Perhaps not, but Revan and Malak do.”

I tried not to let my teeth clench, as I couldn’t entirely refute that. The year in the depths of the Outer Rim would have taught the two troublemakers something about the Mandalorian campaign. And before that- well, Karon Enova had always been a nomad and Zhar Lestin followed her lead. They were both gentle souls, but their wandering ways often landed them right in the thick of hotspots or local skirmishes, regardless of any Padawans they had in tow.

Even in a galaxy enjoying decades of peace after Kun’s fall, there was still conflict to be found. And, somehow, Revan Freeflight always seemed to find it, even when she was no more than a curious Padawan new to the galaxy, equipped only with a sharp mind and a fistful of potential.

“So, the trio of you plan to rush in and save the Republic?” I could hear the disbelief in my voice. “Em, can you not see how hopelessly romantic that sounds?”

A musical laugh escaped her, and her eyes crinkled with amusement. “I think your idea of romance and mine might differ somewhat, Master.” Meetra’s idle comment roused an uncomfortable thought of her with some other Knight the same age, perhaps that intense Twi’lek who shadowed Revan around. Attachments were forbidden amongst the Jedi, ever since the fall-out surrounding Arren Kae’s secret family and subsequent exile, but if Revan and Malak could openly flout the Council, then what was to stop their friends-

“And it is not just us three, Kavar,” she continued. She reached out with one hand, clasping my forearm gently. Her fingers were warm. “There are thirteen of us, talking with the Fleet brass, seeing how we can assist. And many, many more have expressed a desire to follow.”

“To follow Revan Freeflight,” I said flatly.
“No,” Her voice was a gentle whisper, and her hand retreated. I felt the imprint of her clasp still, gently encircling my wrist. “We were hoping you would lead us.”

...

I was tempted. Despite myself, I allowed Meetra to persuade me to talk with Revan. Oh, Revan was powerful and quick-witted and charismatic indeed. And convinced that she required a Master to legitimize her truancy from the Order.

I’d walked away, in the end. Begged Meetra to follow, and held onto the hope she would.

But she did not.

Atris always blamed me for not returning her beloved younger sister back to the Jedi fold. And that emotion burgeoned into deeply buried enmity after the events at Malachor.

There was word that Revan and Malak returned after Malachor, to visit the Dantooine Enclave, flaunting their victory to the Jedi there before they vanished for months. When they reappeared as self-proclaimed Sith Lords, I was not wholly surprised.

From the moment Karon Enova brought the two of them to Coruscant, I had always suspected the Dark Side would overshadow their destiny. They were found so late in life, their power so staggering, their emotional attachment so entrenched - the odds were against them from the start, really.

After her rebirth as Lord of the Sith, Revan and her fallen Jedi began a campaign of attrition on the planets who had once idolized her as a saviour, and revered the Jedi Thirteen as their heroes.

But there were two who didn’t follow, two who returned to Coruscant, unnoticed and unseen by the galactic stage.

Two who were judged by us, the High Council.

Xaset Terep was in such spiritual torment that he barely said a word. I couldn’t feel him or Meetra in the Force at all, just a void of nothingness where two bodies stood and spoke and breathed. But Meetra’s spirit still held firm, even against the fires of condemnation from the High Council. Even against the bitter recriminations of her elder half-sister.

I only remembered snippets of that awful day of judgement.

Zez-Kai, sad and weary at the thought of so many fallen. “Revan and Malak go to war with the Republic itself. This is the evil you both bought into, the day you elected to leave Coruscant and follow Revan Freeflight into war.”

Vrook, on placement from Dantooine, as disapproving as ever. “You have both been corrupted by years of engagement with warfare; engagement that we directly forbade. You cannot be sensed in the Force itself anymore, as if it has departed you in justice for your actions.”

Atris, throwing verbal daggers at her half-sister. “The only reason you stand before us now is because you have not the power to follow Revan any longer. Otherwise you would be calling her master.”

Lonna, implacable with her final judgment. “You are exiled, and you are a Jedi no longer.”

There were other words, and other speakers, and I knew not what I had said, only that I judged her
But Meetra’s final words never left me. She was calm and sure, despite the deep weariness etched into her beloved countenance. Her strength of character was bruised and bloodied, but not defeated. “I stood against the Mandalorians as a guardian for the innocents they were slaughtering in the name of conquest and expansion. I followed Revan then, because I believed in her. But even Revan understood she required the guidance of a Master of the Force.” And her gaze slipped to mine. It didn’t blame, no; rather there was a sadness in the depths of blue, as if she dreamed for what might-have-been. “I would not follow Revan’s way now, had I the Force still within me. But I would do the rest all over again, and call it the correct path.”

And she left us then, forever, Xaset trailing silently in her wake. And they disappeared into space. They left as Force-blind sentients, and there was every chance they’d met an anonymous death somewhere out there amongst billions.

The Republic remembered Xaset Terep and Meetra Surik only as their Jedi heroes who had never turned on them, never fallen to the darkness that Revan Freeflight unleashed upon the galaxy.

“But I would do the rest all over again, and call it the correct path.”

We labelled her final words pride, an unwillingness to confess accountability, to repent or show humility.

But that had never been the Meetra Surik I had known. She wasn’t overly proud. She was wise beyond her years, considering and thoughtful- and if she still thought she was right, after Malachor, then why had I never stopped to consider that she actually might be?

Why had I never taken her assessment of Revan Freeflight seriously, and considered re-evaluating my own snap judgment?

I’d always credited Revan for her conviction, but thought it tarnished with a self-serving arrogance. But what if she truly desired my counsel as a tempering voice rather than a pretext for Order approval?

What if Revan had first gone to war because she actually cared, rather than as an outlet to advertise her depth of power and bask in the adulation of billions?

For I’d assumed the years of Jedi fawning over Revan’s power must have turned her conceited, eager to stretch her wings and show off to the galaxy. Revan’s breathless audacity at not only flouting the High Council, but also recruiting so many Jedi to join her, smacked of narcissism coated in a fake veneer of heroism.

But Meetra Surik was not the sort of woman to follow a leader like that. And I should have realized it a long time ago. Even after all Meetra had done under Revan’s command - even after losing the Force because of it - she still stood up to the High Council and defended Revan Freeflight, while simultaneously condemning the Sith Lord she became.

What if I had elected to stay, to lead the Jedi Thirteen directly?

The thought was both bitter and devastating.

“But your attention is wandering, Kavar,” Atris spoke, shattering through my reverie. “I’ll take your silence as an admission of culpability.”
Atris, a cold mirror of her half-sister, had never liked me since the day I’d become Meetra’s Master. And after Em stepped up as one of Revan’s top generals, we’d barely been able to avoid the sort of arguments that the both of us, as Jedi Masters, should really be above.

But, well. Too many other Jedi let Atris Surik stomp all over them. Someone needs to be a balancing force.

“I’m sure you’ll do what you want, regardless,” I retorted. “But know this, Atris. The day you decided the Republic Senate trumped the High Council, was the day you showed where your true allegiance lies.”

“I am a Jedi,” she countered frostily. “My truth is the Force, always. But we cannot bring about the peace and order we desire without senatorial engagement. If any of you ever bothered to step down from your lofty heights and engage with the politics of the real people out there, then you would see just how far the Jedi Order has slipped in status and standing.”

It was hard to suppress the urge to roll my eyes at that. So I didn’t bother. “Status and standing should not be the concerns of a Jedi Master—”

“Face reality, Kavar,” she cut in over me. “The billions out there, all they see is us hiding criminals like Ulic Qel-Droma from justice, and then training a new generation where half of them turn into monsters. And you know well what Dantooine would elect to do with her, should she actually survive.”

I snorted. That was making some pretty large assumptions. We are not the Dantooine Council, and they are subject to our decree. “From all accounts, she is not even the person she once was—”

“And that makes it acceptable for her to evade justice?” The breath whistled from her lungs. “So all we require is a little brain damage and repentance, and suddenly we can forget mass slaughter and depravity—”

“You are putting words in my mouth, Atris,” I growled. I’ve had enough of this. I can only take so much of Atris before I want to go crack my head against a ferracrete wall. “You assume the actions of the High Council, and then denounce the whole of us in favour of politicians.”

“Well.” Her voice was as sharp as ever, and frigid with ice. Her and Em were as different as the seasons. “I see we shall not agree on this. But I hold a seat on the High Council, Kavar.” Her eyes narrowed. “You shall not omit me again.”

“As you will, Atris.” I breathed in, and prepared my parting shot. “But if you continue to put your loyalty to the Republic Senate above your loyalty to the Jedi Order, then you have a lot more in common with Revan Freeflight than you realize.”

She looked as if I’d slapped her. The Handmaiden - the slightly shorter one – flinched. I made a mental note to scold myself later for the warm satisfaction I was feeling, and turned on my heel to walk away.

xXx

Vrook Lamar:

“Their subsidiary reactor is down,” Commodore Tar’coya slurred, pausing only to shoot me a suspicious glare. He didn’t like Jedi, and he didn’t like humans. “Hull shield’s gone, but their squads are swarming all over it. The fact they haven’t shot into hyperspace yet means they haven’t been able to recover the drive.”
“Keep the pressure on the hyperdrive and the secondary hull shield generator,” Admiral Dodonna ordered to the worker behind her. Green and red specks swarmed like bugs through the enlarged holo-map, as busy as the comm techs on the consoles that encircled us.

“Good to see you here, it is,” Vandar murmured, hobbling closer. It’d taken longer than it should have, to navigate the halls of the Meridus and gain access to the bridge. Even when I’d first docked my scoutship in a landing bay of the giant heavy cruiser, I’d had a damn Ensign “suggest” I go to a set of assigned quarters for a “nap”.

It’d been hard not to mind trick my way straight here. Politics and showmanship. Ah, but the blasted Republic brass don’t think much of us these days, do they?

And how could I blame them, really? We should never have trained Revan and Malak. Better to have left them to their non-Force life on that forgotten Outer Rim planet, where the most damage they could have done would’ve been forgotten beyond the walls of a city that the galaxy cared nothing for.

But Karon Enova had always been soft-hearted, even as a kid, and Zhar Lestin was just the same. ‘Had’ been just the same. Zhar is one with the Force now, same as Karon. We might not have seen eye-to-eye, but I couldn’t deny Zhar’s death grieved me. In some ways, I believed Karon and Zhar had made the perfect Jedi Masters – at least, in a galaxy bereft of villains and greed and wrong-doing.

In the real world we had instead, their unending empathy and forgiveness had hindered their outlook on reality. Too often, it just led them into the wrong decisions.

“Phi Eight has auxiliary damage and is returning home. Phi Four is down,” a tech muttered in the background. “Bogey squad six has been eliminated in totality.”

“That’s another enemy squad gone,” Tar’coya said in evident satisfaction. “We’ve had no more signs of stealthed snubs since that first squad. Karath’s losing this one, Forn. We’ve got him, it’s just a matter of time.”

Dodonna said nothing in response, but there was a gleam in her steely gaze that suggested she agreed with Tar’coya’s assessment.

“So, the Hawk is captured,” I muttered, staring back to the holo-map. Dodonna was too busy to brief me, and Tar’coya too resentful. “And without an avenue of escape for the Leviathan to run to, this is shaping up to be a victory for us.”

“For the crew of the Ebon Hawk, it is dark times,” Vandar murmured. He did sometimes have a penchant for stating the obvious. “I hold onto hope.”

I said nothing. Freshly risen Jedi Knight Juhani was onboard, her misplaced loyalty sending her down the same route it had so many others. She’d surprised me, with her steel and courage when she faced us in Rwookkorro. Her trials away from the Order had seen her grow into a formidable young Jedi.

And she laid part of that on Revan’s influence.

Ach, I never liked the woman. And I could admit, in the privacy of my own head, that some of it was irrational and personal. Revan was the spitting image of someone I’d known and cared for a lifetime ago, but her personality was the complete opposite. Outspoken, overconfident, and far too damn powerful.
It would be better, for everyone, if the *Leviathan* faltered with the *Ebon Hawk* still onboard.

I’d been against the damn fool plan from the start. Even having faith in Galdea and Vima’s expertise at occluding what was left of Revan’s mind, I’d still seen risks and little benefit. Mining the dreams of a broken, amnesiac Sith Lord was the act of the desperate – and while I could concede that desperate might very well describe our position in the war, it had galled me that no one else seemed to take the inherent dangers to Bastila at all seriously.

*Bastila*. She was a good Jedi. She worked hard, she was principled, and she didn’t take her gifts for granted. I cursed myself for not going on the *Endar Spire*, with her. But Bastila was a heavily experienced Padawan, and used to travelling with other Masters, given the need for her Battle Meditation.

I’d hated that. Shipping her out to Kester and Galdea and Kavar, sending her into war so our troops could lean on her emerging Battle Meditation. Bastila should have been spending her years at the Enclave, preparing for the Knight Trials I should have approved earlier - not being dragged from pillar to post as the last advantage our side could scrape together against the wrath of Darth Revan.

But, in that regard, Bastila had known her own mind. She was in many ways a biddable Padawan, but she had a fierce understanding of right and wrong. And for all of Bastila’s self-doubts, she did not shy away from what scared her.

…

“Even now you can still pull out, Bastila,” I said, hearing the gruffness in my voice. I didn’t like being at odds with the Dantooine Council. But everyone, it seemed, saw wisdom in this foolish mission that I did not. “We have enough to go on for now. You don’t need to travel to Tatooine as well.”

“Master Galdea believes it prudent for me to be nearby,” Bastila commented, looking up from the data-book she was scanning. It had something garbled about dream interpretation on the chapter title. “He wishes to know immediately when I experience anything through the mind-link.”

I grunted in mild annoyance. Jedi did not kill their prisoners, and above all we respected the sanctity of life. But everything would have been a damn sight easier if my Padawan had just left that cursed Sith Lord dying on the deck of the *Nexus*. “Did you intercept anything last night?”

“No, Master.” She shook her head faintly. There were smudges of tiredness under her eyes. I didn’t believe my gifted Padawan had slept more than an hour straight since she’d stuffed Darth Revan into a space-worthy escape pod and fled the Deralian sector. “Her dreams have been quiet of late.”

I couldn’t help but feel that was a good thing, even if I was the only one.

Ever since Bastila’s vision had precipitated Nemo’s discovery of the Dantooine Star Map, every Master involved suddenly had an appreciation for Bastila’s unlikely Force-bond – and how it could be exploited to excavate the secrets of Revan’s shattered mind.

And the need to push and use Bastila had grown.

The whole damn mess was turning her into nothing more than a tool to be used. And Bastila, highly-principled as she was, would accept this for the greater good.

I cleared my throat. “*Stay on the Endar Spire. You don’t need to land on Tatooine yourself.*”

She blinked, before nodding in acquiescence. “*Yes, Master. I believe Master Galdea’s intention is to*
send down a small scoutship to the desert planet, and investigate from there. I will stay behind on the Endar Spire with Knights Seris and Kylah. And- and shall Jen Sahara.”

I could feel a grumble of discontent wanting to rise from my chest. Since the day Nemo had returned with the Rakatan data, our best academics had been researching the four identified planets for clues. While Darth Malak may have overlooked the obvious, he wasn’t a floundering idiot. The minute he saw an expedition of Jedi to one of the Star Map planets, he would start to wonder if the Rakatan knowledge was unearthed.

The Endar Spire was a sizeable vessel, armoured and battle-worthy, and its cover story as a Republic warship meant it could be called into nearby skirmishes – with the dual benefit of Bastila’s gift being available while Galdea kept the secret mission on track.

I’d argued for greater stealth. A small squad of Jedi, led by Galdea, travelling anonymously in a scoutship or freighter rather than a cruiser that wasn’t exactly easy to hide in space-

But, again, I’d been out-voted. I was getting sick of that.

And now Bastila was one day away from leaving to the first step in the journey Revan and Malak once took.

Huh. Well, at least we’ve got a solid lead on Tatooine. Treasure-seekers and big-game hunters were prevalent on that desert trap, and it was common for them to transcribe their adventures. We’d found reports of a pair of Force-users leading a krayt dragon hunt there three years ago, that had culminated into a discovery of an ancient cave structure a desert tracker had logged about.

Nothing for the other planets. Nemo was inveigling himself with the officious Republic Embassy on Manaan, but what he really need to do was find a Selkath geologist or historian who knew the planet. As for Kashyyyk and Korriban – well. No wonder the others wanted to employ Bastila’s Force-bond. We had little else to go on, and what was the risk to a gifted Padawan when balanced with the outcome of a war we were losing?

Dammit. I felt like cursing to the stars. Sacrifice was part of being a Jedi, but Bastila was so sheltered in some ways, so young-

I harrumphed, well aware it made me sound like a crochety old man. “You are sure, then, that this is what you want to do?”

She was frowning, but gave me a quick nod. “It is what I need to do, Master. And I have faith in Knight Vima and Master Galdea. She- she exhibits no sign at all of her past.”

“Except when she dreams,” I grumbled. Galdea said that was normal. Vima said her consciousness would never recollect a thing, due to the damage she had sustained. I could only see the disastrous consequences if they turned out to be wrong.

And the ethical blurriness. Let’s face it, old man, if this wasn’t Darth Revan whose mind they were scrambling, you’d be a lot louder about the moral ambiguity of stripping someone’s personality away and replacing it with another - all in the name of the greater good.

Ach, but I’d never liked the woman.

“I- well, yes.” Even after all these years at Dantooine, Bastila still retained a polished accent from her Talravinian beginnings. “But of course that is to our advantage. We can only hope we do not require it.”
I gave her a curt nod of acknowledgement. I could see fear in her eyes - fear of the unknown, fear of the wretched woman bonded to her - but Bastila still had the gumption to face down her fear. Truly, she was ready for her trials, if only the blasted Wars would stop interfering.

“There is one thing that bothers me, Master,” she added quietly, her braided hair swinging as her head drooped. “I wish I could enlighten Kylah. She does not appreciate being left in the dark.”

“There are too many involved already,” I warned. “The more who learn, the less of a secret it becomes.”

“I- yes. But I believe she feels slighted, perhaps, that there is information being withheld from her and not me, despite her rank.” There was a tense note to my Padawan’s voice that surprised me. I wasn’t sure if it was concern or irritation toward her friend. Kylah Aramai had always been protective of Bastila, and I hadn’t minded that, truly. She was more experienced and worldly, and seemed to appreciate that many would see Bastila as no more than her Battle Meditation.

I felt my brows rising. “There are other Knights travelling with you as well, Padawan. And, yet, only yourself and Galdea know the full extent of our mission. If Knight Kylah is feeling aggrieved, she should be speaking to a Master, not whining to you.”

Bastila blinked. “I- this is speculation on my part, Master, not a retelling of Kylah’s words. She means only to protect me.”

That was true. Kylah Aramai had done her best to shelter Bastila from the world. As had I. And yet, her Battle Meditation kept shunting her out into the spotlight, again and again.

Young Jedi with vast amounts of power were more at risk to the dangers of the Dark Side. I knew that, and had always vowed Bastila would be as protected as possible, but her gifts had made that a challenging task. Or, more accurately, Revan’s fall and the subsequent requirement for Bastila’s skills to be utilized made it damn near impossible.

Although I had little common ground with Jedi Knight Kylah Aramai, at least she seemed to have Bastila’s best interests at heart.

“Ah, well. Kylah is devoted to you,” I said, with a faith I did not quite feel. “Kylah Aramai will keep you safe.”

…

Kylah Aramai. Now there was a fallen Jedi I could not blame on Revan. No, I had been blind to Kylah’s faults, and allowed a poisonous friendship to flourish with my Padawan, when she had warmed to few others. In that, I had to take some of the blame for Bastila’s current predicament.

“Incoming holo-call from the Leviathan, ma’am!” The breathless words from an excited tech had us all turning. Forn Dodonna strode quickly to the console.

“Put it on speaker,” Tar’coya growled. At Dodonna’s nod, the tech pressed a button and the stocky image of a female Sullustan filled out the small holo-stand.

She blinked, her attention fixed on Dodonna, as the human Admiral shifted to stand in front of the console.

:::I am Commodore Delia, Acting-Commander of the Leviathan. I want- I am requesting an acceptance of the full surrender of our forces, and an immediate cease-fire.::: She looked behind herself nervously, before turning back to stare the holo-cam.
“Acting-Commander?” Dodonna questioned. She was bristling with intensity. “Where is Karath?”

::He has been relieved of duty, ma’- ma’- ma’am.: The Sullustan’s nervous stutter was the braying of a fleece-lamb, naming a bantha its mother in the absence of its own.

“We’re tracking an escape pod from the Leviathan, Admiral,” a tech three consoles down called out. “Just the one, so it’s probably a runner instead of an organized evac.”

Dodonna hadn’t moved from the transmission. “And who relieved him of duty?” she demanded.

The Sullustan blinked again, her shoulders hitching. ::Please, we know we’re losing. There’s thousands of men onboard. We are ready to surrender.:.

“She doesn’t have the authority to make this call,” I growled, and Vandar’s bright gaze shifted to mine as he nodded in agreement. “She’s doing it behind the back of whoever is really in charge.”

“What leader of Darth Malak holds command there, Delia?” Dodonna asked, her voice steely with ingrained authority. “I will not contemplate any cessation of combat without speaking to them. Which Dark Jedi is calling the shots?”

::I-I-,: Commodore Delia swallowed, before lifting her chin and staring straight into the holo-cam. The rebuilding of her composure looked to take a lot of effort. ::I am in command of the Leviathan. There is no one else. Again, I request a cease-fire of hostilities, and negotiations for our immediate surrender.:.

Admiral Dodonna leaned forward and cut the connection abruptly.

“There is a time for mercy, and it is not when an underling is trying to save her troops without the accordance of her superior,” Tar’coya muttered. “No matter how honourable her intentions are.”

“There’s at least one of Malak’s leaders onboard, probably caught up dealing with the crew of the Ebon Hawk,” Dodonna mused. “I would like to know which one. Bandon Stone, Yudan Rosh, Nisotsa Organa… any of their deaths would be a blow to Malak’s offensive. His trained generals are few, now – Force-born or military.”

“As evidenced by a kid running around as Acting-Commander on a heavy cruiser,” I grumbled. I wasn’t exactly adept at devising Sullustan age, but Commodore Delia looked to be a sight of a lot younger than Commodore Tar’coya. From the way Tar’coya wasn’t glaring at me for vocalizing an opinion, I figured I’d hit the mark pretty well dead-centre.

Dodonna clasped her hands together. “An infinite navy of ships is not insurmountable when it has greenhorns at the helm.”

We were losing the war. But Malak’s lack of manpower – both skilled starpilots and leading officers - was a potential weakness of his operation. We needed to knock out Malak and his weapons factory first and foremost, but this could be another pressure point to hammer our counter-offensive home further.

“Karath is onboard too, even if he is disgraced,” Tar’coya growled, and this time he did shoot me a hot glare. “Or already killed by one of those insane Force-users.”

Huh, there was a lot of blame toward us coming from the Fleet. And how much is unwarranted? Two of the three Dark Jedi Dodonna just named were trained by us. Malak was trained by us. And, of course, Revan was too.
This might be her final end, and I could not help but find it fitting.

“Separates us from the Sith, mercy does,” Vandar murmured, taking a halting step toward Dodonna. “To take out a leader, you would sacrifice so many?”

“There’s more than one leader there, Vandar. And they’re all responsible for too many Republic lives.” Dodonna sounded sad, which surprised me. Of course, she had fought on Revan’s side, once. The loyalty amongst the Fleet towards Revan and her followers had been strong as permacrete, then.

It was a familiar story. The war against Kun had been in my lifetime, and Revan Freeflight’s journey was a parallel to Ulic Qel-Droma’s. Young, powerful Force-sensitives that have never known the meaning of humility. It all starts with intentions of saving the galaxy, and always ends with damnation. Kun and Qel-Droma may not have caused quite the same scale of destruction, but their actions had ripped the Order apart. And, yet, we hadn’t learned enough. Revan should have been curtailed, penned-in, kept within the Temple’s walls-

Revan should never have been trained in the first place.

“Press on with the attack,” Dodonna ordered, before turning her attention back to the massive holomap. “Any sight of more escape pods?”

“No, ma’am.”

“Any should be followed and destroyed,” Tar’coya added. There was a permanent crease of anger over his large black eyes. I saw the same lines when I looked in the mirror. “They might be housing Dark Jedi or Sith officers that could slip through our line and run-”

“We keep the focus on the shields and the stem of the hull,” Dodonna interrupted. “I don’t want any chance of their hyperdrive becoming operational. Once the Leviathan is destroyed, then we can concern ourselves with escape pods.”

“As you say, Admiral.” Tar’coya’s concession sounded gruff, but he was nodding in agreement. “Although, if they happen to be directly in a snub’s sights-”

“Destroy them.”

Vandar cleared his throat. “And what of the Ebon Hawk, should she escape?”

Admiral Dodonna turned, once more, to appraise Vandar Tokare. There was a grim set to her features. “That is grasping at renni-grass, Vandar.” She sighed, closed her eyes briefly, and then raised her voice in volume to all nearby communication techs. “If the Ebon Hawk is sighted leaving the Leviathan, it cannot be given any chance of escape, not with our interdiction down. One warning, only, for the freighter to dock with the Meridus. If there is the slightest hint of non-compliance, then the Ebon Hawk is to be shot down.”

Vandar’s shoulders drooped. He believed the will of the Force was at work, here; that Revan had survived so long because it was her destiny to clean up the damn mess she’d made of her former lover.

Bah, I didn’t know. Zhar used to spout that she held the Force’s own luck. Damn fool thing to say. There is no such thing as luck. There are only some born with more power than is safe for one sentient to wield alone. All one has to do is look at all the lives she has ruined-

And my bitter thoughts turned, again, to my Padawan. Being held hostage somewhere under the cruel hand of Darth Malak.
Bastila is on the Star Forge.

The thought came, pure and potent, like a message from the Force itself. And my logic, slowly, built upon it. There’s no Malak here above Kashyyyk, nor on the frontlines at Lannik or Rodia. He hasn’t been sighted for weeks.

From the moment Zhar had given me the awful news of my Padawan’s fate, I’d known what Malak’s endgame would be. It wasn’t just our side that saw Bastila as a prize.

He’s retreated to his damn stronghold, to focus on corrupting her into his own weapon. The Star Maps were reportedly entrenched in the Dark Side of the Force. What better place to turn Bastila, than on the Star Forge itself?

Always, always, Bastila’s gift turns her into nothing more than a tool. I should have protected her better. I never should have let the Council use her to leash Revan.

The Republic Fleet would rally after this conflict, and turn their eye on the Star Forge. But even with a victory here, it would still take time to organize an offensive, to gather together other capitol ships in nearby sectors-

A lone scoutship could get there quickly. A single Jedi might be able to infiltrate the Forge and track down Bastila. Because, let’s face it, everyone else’s goal is to destroy Darth Malak and destroy the Star Forge.

Who is actually thinking of Bastila Shan?

The idea budding in my head was an ambitious one. Vandar shot me a frown, as if he suspected the racing of my thoughts. It might be possible. Was that actually a spark of excitement, glowing faintly in my chest? If I could slip in without Malak sensing me...

But grim realism had a way of shattering such foolish pipedreams.

Darth Malak is the Master of an ancient Force relic that almost allowed Darth Revan to conquer the Republic within three years. Short of using a neural disruptor, how in the Outer Rim could a Jedi like myself slip in unnoticed?

I felt old, suddenly. I hadn’t been out in the field for years. My heart desired to rush out in defence of my forgotten Padawan, but my head knew it bordered on feeble-minded.

If I was caught – and let’s face it, that’s what the odds say – then Darth Malak would have a powerful tool to use on Bastila. Her own Master.

I couldn’t do that to her. But staying here, under the thumb of glowering Republic officers who were one step away from chucking the lot of us out of command, did more than chafe. It damn well aggravated the heck out of me.

I have no other choice. I stay here, I do my best not to snap at the likes of Tar’coya, and I accomplish whatever else I can from the sidelines.

I breathed in a deep, raspy breath, and felt like a useless old fool.

xXx

Revan Freeflight:
The warm comfort of Carth’s embrace anchored me in the depths of craziness we had descended into. My face was pressed against his lightly clothed chest, and I could feel myself shaking. Tightly clutched in my hand, pressed against his back, was a synthetic kaiburr crystal. One that would typically power a Sith lightsaber, for the natural ones did not sing as strongly to those entrenched in Dark Side corruption.

But any Force-sensitive could tap into most kaiburr crystals, even if the end result was unstable. My skin burned, where the discharge of pure energy had sheared over it. It had been difficult to control. Kaiburr crystals worked as an amplifier for Force power, but there were reasons we normally left them enclosed within our lightsabers.

Funny, how snippets of my past knowledge came to me at times, like established fact – even without any associating memory backing it up.

Someone slipped me a lightsaber crystal. Packed it into my fist, strapped it under the restraint, while I was out to it. Someone who understands how to counter Force-inhibiting technology. I shivered, and my thoughts were slow and sluggish. Force-inhibiting technology that originated from the Fett. The synthetic crystal had been enough to offset the hindrance of the amber energy cage, enough for me to pull deep on the Force and short the entire system out.

Why would Yudan do that? Why would he betray Jolee Bindo, and then grant me an opportunity for freedom?

Maybe, to pay a debt from the past on his own terms. Maybe now, the unseen hand that had stopped Yudan Rosh from killing me in the Shadowlands was gone. Now that we had saved one another apiece, he could finish me off without feeling any inkling of guilt.

Because inklings of guilt are paramount to Dark Jedi, an inner voice snarked.

It had to be from him, didn’t it? And there had to be other debts between us, darker debts, unholy reasons as to why he’d sought to kill me in the first place. It felt like - even if this crystal was a gift from Yudan - he was still entrenched in a black cloud of suspicion.

“Jen,” Carth murmured, his voice a deep rumble beneath my ear. “We have to move.” He pulled back, and I looked up to see his warm gaze burning into mine before he leaned forward to kiss me softly.

I didn’t deserve Carth. I was painfully aware of that, as I closed my eyes and felt the soft press of his lips brush against mine. At how wrong this was, to have him touch me without the knowledge of my baleful past. For me to act as if our relationship wouldn’t completely implode from what it was now, once he learned the awful truth.

Carth stepped back, away from me, his attention caught on the remains of the officer who’d stirred a faint recognition in the back of my head. His uniform had marked him as an Admiral – this must have been Admiral Saul Karath… and he’d known me well, judging from our conversation.

My mind was leaden and hazy; I felt the need for at least five cups of caffè just to get a handle on everything going on. I knew it to be the effects of sedation drugs still processing within my system. It should wear off soon. I just have to keep putting one foot in front of the other, and I’ll come right.

Still, if I recalled correctly through the depths of fuzzy memory – then Saul had been the one Carth was so torn up about, just as we’d been leaving the ‘Hawk.

I swallowed. “Who… who was Saul to you, Carth?”
Carth was already kneeling next to the corpse, but shot me a look fractured with wariness. I could see the retort _who was he to you, Jen?_ on his lips. “A mentor,” he said curtly, before turning back to check the vital signs of the body. Like he didn’t really believe the man was dead.

_A mentor…_ And I was reminded, then, of a whispered conversation between Carth and Mission, back on the hot sands of Tatooine.

“There was a man who mentored me when I joined the Republic. He was everything my father was not; intelligent, strong, charismatic.”

“He moulded me into the officer I am today. I grew to care for him more than I ever did my father.”

“He turned traitor and joined the Sith army. Spilled the secrets of the Republic, and commandeered attacks that killed millions of innocent people. All for his own ambition.”

Those words had not been for my ears, and Carth had certainly turned pissy when I’d referred to them later. But, well… I’d not exactly been the most sympathetic or stable back on that desert planet.

As for Saul Karath - he’d had an obvious Telosian accent, same as Carth, but clipped and higher-pitched in tone. And with the slamming of an illusory fist into my solar plexus, I was struck with the premonition that Saul had something to do with Telos.

My stomach bottomed out.

_He turned traitor and joined the Sith army. He spilled the secrets of the Republic…_

...for me.

Carth’s mentor. Carth’s wife. Carth’s planet.

My gut heaved. My fists clenched, pulling tight against the charred, aching wound on my off-hand. It took all of my self-control to not release the contents of my stomach, right there on the lilac floor of a Sith interrogation room.

Black spots sprang into existence around the periphery of my vision, and I felt both light-headed and nauseous. _Later! I can angst later! We must focus on the frelling task at hand!_ My body was lethargic, and my eyelids blinked over dry eyes that had seen too much. Carth was still searching uselessly for a pulse on a cooling corpse, as if he, too, was currently hamstrung against accomplishing anything remotely productive.

“He’s dead, Carth,” I said tiredly.

Carth sighed. “I used to dream of pointing a gun to his head and pulling the trigger,” he murmured, before shaking his head and clambering to his feet. He turned to focus on me anew, gaze roving over me, taking in the clenched fist at my side, the malformed one at my other-

I heard the intake of breath, and then Carth was striding forward, grabbing my hand-

“Jen,” he breathed in horror, staring down at the blackened edge of my palm where two fingers had once been. The skin around it was inflamed and painful, but not infected. Cauterized wounds rarely turned that way, and Jolee Bindo’s ministrations had certainly accelerated the healing process.

“What… what happened?”

My mouth twisted, and oddly enough I felt on the verge of tears. “Yudan Rosh. He… well. We had an encounter in the Shadowlands.”
Carth raised his head to frown at me. His hand was still cradling mine, as if he thought to protect it from worse injury. “And you didn’t kill him on the ‘Hawk?”

How could I answer that? How could I say, that some damaged part of me had actually hoped he was on our side? A Dark Jedi from my past I could barely recall?

And that the crystal in my other hand now muddied the waters even further?

“It’s because he knows you, isn’t it? From… from before?” Carth whispered. He turned, slightly, to stare back at the corpse of Saul Karath. “Just like Saul knew you. I- what did Saul mean about a mind-wipe, Jen?”

My eyes squeezed shut. It was the worst possible place for a conversation that could only end in the worst possible way. We were on the cusp, here, of knowledge there was no turning back from. And I couldn’t stop the incoherent words-

“My mind was… Bastila, she… I don’t know why they picked Jen-”

_Shut it, you babbling idiot!_

I felt Carth tense, and forced myself to open my eyes. The bewilderment in his expression was sharply intense, and I knew my use of Jen’s name had not escaped him. My mouth twisted further, and I swallowed past a blockage in my throat. I felt unsteady on my feet, in my own head. “Jen Sahara died from what happened to her on Deralia, Carth. I needed an identity. But I didn’t know who I was- I, please, this isn’t the place. As soon as we get to the Ebon Hawk I’ll explain everything that I know. I promise. But I need you here, now – we have to get out of here first.”

I kicked myself for the blank shock in his gaze. My composure and logic was completely frazzled, and the befuddlement of sedation had obviously frelled any filter between my mouth and my brain. There was _no_ excuse for letting that detail slip, _here_; that detail which would start Carth questioning _absolutely_ everything-

“Please,” I whispered, blinking. “We have to get the others. Find a way out. Please, for now, I’m asking you to trust me.”

He nodded slowly, and raised a hand to touch my cheek. He was dumbfounded and confused, but he was also worried. For me. _Me._

I held onto the feeling tightly, knowing it wouldn’t last.

For how much longer before Carth began to piece together the monstrous truth?

He knew I’d fought in the Mandalorian Wars. He knew I was once a Jedi Knight. But he thought the darkness within me was due to the experience of torture on Deralia… torture that was inflicted upon innocent Jen Sahara, whom he now understood _was not me._

Because I was an idiot who couldn’t hold back a simple truth from a man I cared about.

How long before Carth began to speculate that the darkness simply… belonged to the person I was?

The lights flickered, then, three times before cutting out completely. A reverberation thrummed through the ground beneath us, and another wail echoed the one that had been steadily ringing in the background for some time.

A moment later, orange and red strips of halogen lighting sprang into existence along the walls.
I felt Carth’s body tense, his muscles bunching in readiness to move, and his attention shift to the darkened room as he looked around. It was a hideous purple colour in the glow of emergency lights. “See if you can release the others, Je… Jen.” I heard him swallow. “I’ll see what I can find. A weapon, stims, anything to help us leave this place and find the rest of the crew.”

I nodded, as he stepped away and bent to scoop up Saul’s blaster, the one I’d unceremoniously pitched onto the floor. I couldn’t imagine what Carth must be thinking, right now. All I knew was that it would pale against reality.

But the drive to move, to find a way - to stop wasting precious seconds on self-flagellation! - ignited within me. It took more effort than it should have, to pull myself out of this useless funk, and I blamed it on the frailties of my recovering body.

Think, you half-drugged moron. Think and focus on what needs to be done. Get Juhani and Jolee free, and wake them. Find the remainder of the crew. Locate an escape vehicle. And don’t get caught.

I lifted my chin, forced myself to ignore the residual dizziness, and looked around the room proper. The main doors sat to one side, on the edge of a long chrome wall blinkered in the orange-red glow. On the other side was a smaller exit, as if it led to some utility room or service way. In the centre was a plasticeel table with a handful of chairs, one of which had held Carth, and a pair of large footlockers he was busy investigating.

Behind me lay the three inactivated Force cages. I turned, and strode over to the slumped form of Juhani.

The Force-inhibiting field had shorted out around all three cages, but she was still strapped tightly against the conductive pillar. The flexisteel belts cracked and bent as I reached out with the Force - trying to avoid disrupting the unstable crystal still in my grasp, while focusing on ripping apart the molecular bonds of the restraint.

The metal shattered, and I leaped forward to catch the slumped form of the Cathar, staggering back as I did so. There was a thump from the side as Jolee’s body fell to the ground, and I winced in reaction.

“Don’t suppose you’ve found any stims?” I called out, allowing the muscular Cathar to slowly slip through my grasp and land in an inelegant heap on the floor. There was a twitching, still, deep in my muscles, and I opened myself to the Force in reaction.

Fresh power surged through me like a warm torrent of life, brushing away the cobwebs of my mind, and stabilising the unsteadiness of my limbs. Somewhere, far, far away, my bond-sister half-stirred in her slumber. It was with a grim reckoning that I once more raised a shield between us.

And within my clenched fist, I could feel the corrupted mineral react ever so slightly to my Force use, reverberating in a mildly twisted spike of power.

Behind me, a cleaner source of energy echoed it.

“Karon’s ‘saber,” I gasped, spinning around in surprise. Carth had straightened from a footlocker, looking back to me with a frown.

“Your lightsabers are here. No other gear that’s ours… just the lightsabers.”

I walked back to him, feeling his heavy gaze on mine. I heard him breathe in, felt his confusion and concern and burgeoning worry, and bent over to collect the lightsabers that had once belonged to my
old Master... and Malak’s.

“That’s pretty fortuitous, don’t you think?” Carth asked. “Why would your ‘sabers be left in an interrogation room?”

“Laziness, maybe,” I muttered, sifting through the remaining detritus in the large locker. Jolee’s ‘saber and Juhani’s were here also, and I put them aside on the darkened floor. Holo-mags, credit chits, a utility belt that I hastily clipped on over my loose singlet. It’d be enough to hold my ‘sabers and contain that cursed crystal, but a pair of boots as well would’ve been nice.

And then I stilled, glancing back to Carth. Laziness would mean all our gear left here, not just weapons. This was deliberate.

Was this some sort of a game to Yudan Rosh, or a genuine attempt to aid? And my gaze swung back to the prone form of Jolee Bindo, who in my plan would’ve been snug in a cell with the others.

And, somewhere, was the wildcard only I knew about. Should I tell Carth about his son?

“Who’s been helping you?” Carth whispered, and I couldn’t tell anymore if he was confused or suspicious. “Did you get the droids out? Are they free?”

“No, I- I don’t know.” But the thought of Dustil had me searching outwards, closing my eyes and drawing deep on the Force-

Nearby sparked the dark aura of three powerful sentients, moving directly towards us.

My eyes snapped open in terror. No, no, there’s four- A fourth one, much weaker than the others, but pulsing a black inverted wrongness in the Force, like a dependent wound with no soul of its own-

“Sithspit, Carth, they’re coming!” I hissed, wildly looking around the room. They’d enter through the main door rather than the service exit I’d noticed on the side, and Juhani and Jolee were completely helpless-

“Who?” he asked, his voice sharp.

“Dark Jedi, strong, I don’t know!” I gasped. “Kylah frelling Aramai and her best buddies, at a guess. I can’t- I can’t let them come across Juhani and old man Bindo like this!”

“Can you wake them up?” he fired at me, stepping forward to clasp my forearms tight. “With the Force?”

“No!” The very idea had me panicking. That was akin to healing, and I’d royally flubbed that one, last time I’d tried on Belaya’s broken ribs. Bastila might be able to do wonders – stars, she’d brought mouthy Mekel back from the other side of oblivion using my Force connection, before immersing the three of us in an awesome healing – but I had absolutely no idea about human physiology!

Whether it was my lack of memory or actually an area I didn’t shine at, I had no idea.

“Carth, I can’t-” I had to leave him here. I realized the truth, then. If I were to give him a chance to escape, the others a chance to wake, I had to face my own demons – and they were mine – on my own.

But the look of growing tenacity on Carth’s face as he accurately interpreted my thoughts meant I needed ammunition.
“Dustil’s here,” I said, my voice low and dark.

Carth’s eyes widened with shock. “What?” he hissed. “What- you can’t be serious?”

“He snuck onboard,” I rapped out, half my concentration focussed on the nearing Dark Jedi, as my gut clenched tighter. “I only sensed him just before… he’ll have got the droids loose, Carth. I ordered them to obey him. He’ll be somewhere on the Leviathan, searching for you. You must wait here, protect the others-” I flung a wild hand towards Juhani.

Carth was pale, shaking his head in disbelief. I didn’t have time, I couldn’t give him time to rally and make the wrong choice-

“Good luck,” I breathed, and strode away, Karon’s ‘saber in my grasp and grim resolution in my soul.

The double doors, also a putrid purple hue, swished open under my command. The room beyond was a large, octagonal meeting room, bereft of any furniture bar a control desk, with additional exits dotted around the wall segments. Most were coloured in varying pastel shades – likely leading to similar interrogation rooms. The lighting was still on mains, here; bright and harsh to my eyes.

Two armoured guards were leaning over the desk, deep in hushed conversation, and barely had a chance to look up before my ‘saber went flying.

The first collapsed. The other was pushed back against the wall beneath the weight of my will, gasping and crying out for help.

I didn’t feel pity. I didn’t feel anger or hate either, just a calm conviction of what I had to do.

I caught the lightsaber, and threw it again. The cries stopped.

The door. An upsurge of power crested within, and I channelled it behind me to the lilac atrocity. I didn’t have to turn around to see the coloured durasteel fuse within the locking mechanism, I could feel the malformations ebbing on the Force. It was enough that no one would be able to - Carth would not be able to - walk through that door. Not without a fusion-cutter or a lightsaber, anyway.

The Dark Jedi were just in the next room. I could clearly recognize one as Yudan, now.

At least I wasn’t risking anyone but myself, here.

“Jen.”

I whirled around in horror. My mouth dropped open, gaping, at the figure standing in front of the permanently closed lilac door.

“Carth!” I cried. “No, no, you weren’t meant to follow me!”

His eyes flicked briefly to the two corpses by the control desk, as if he were taking in just how easily I could dispatch anyone in my way. He’d seen it before, many a time, and each death came quicker to me.

“You could do with a gun at your back,” he whispered. His grasp tightened on Saul’s blaster, and I suddenly saw him from afar, a military soldier clothed in singlet and shorts, barefoot and exhausted, armed with nothing more than solid determination and a frelling blaster against four Dark Jedi-!

He was remembering Uthar Wynn. He didn’t believe my riposte regarding Dustil, and thought it a
ploy to keep him safe. He was thinking of the end-game, back in the cursed Sith Academy.

“You got to Uthar because he thought you were out cold!” I hissed. *What’s he going to do, play dead and hope for a lucky shot?* “Dammit, Carth, you have to get out of here! Pick a coloured door and run!”

A silver hatch to our left opened.

And a woman clothed in a burgundy tunic that matched her painted lips stalked in. Dark tresses adorned her bare shoulders, and her slanted yellow eyes narrowed on me. My fists contorted in sick recognition, my teeth gritted in remembered fury. *Kylah.*

In her wake, an older woman followed, an activated scarlet ‘saber in her grasp. And a young male Togruta, thrumming a muted lesion of ill on the Force. The three of them fanned out into the room, the Togruta walking softly with his head tilted sideways, staring unblinkingly at the older woman.

And behind them all strolled in Yudan Rosh.

He still wore that battered Mandalorian armour, and his expression was blank and fixed solely on me. There was an unlit hilt in his grasp. *I wonder if it’s missing a sodding kaiburr.* No, I couldn’t count on that. For all I knew, he kept spares in his pocket, ready to plant on comatose prisoners he’d threatened to kill.

His gaze, a sharper, brighter yellow than Kylah’s, trailed down my form and his mouth tightened in disapproval or disgust or something I couldn’t decipher. *Next time, leave a frelling robe or suit of armour if my state of undress annoys you so much, you ass.* My thumb twitched, close to the ‘saber’s activation button. I could feel my eyes narrowing, glaring hotly at Yudan, as his gaze returned to meet mine.

“Well, well,” Kylah drawled, and my attention wrenched back to her. She took one step closer, some ten metres away now, and her artfully crimson lips pursed. “The failed Jedi experiment escaped her cell.”

“Saul was very helpful,” I snapped, shoulders tensing. I heard Carth shift behind me, and cursed him again for his presence.

There was a flicker of suspicion on the groomed face of the humanoid woman staring at me. She wasn’t sure whether to believe my words, and I had no idea how conceivable they were, anyway. Or if it was necessary to protect Yudan in such a fashion, seeing as I still had no idea whose side he was actually on. *Sod it all. Just run with it.*

“Saul didn’t think I looked good in a cage,” I added. “Neither did I, to be honest.”

“I’m sure you had a lovely reunion,” Kylah purred, her eyes narrowing to slits. She’d coated a thick layer of silver powder around the slant of her eyes, contrasting with the corrupted gleam of yellow. Even her high cheekbones were coloured in shades of pink and rouge, thickly enough that I wondered if she’d been holed up in a refresher unit with a cosmetic kit, while her minions ran around doing the unimportant task of fighting the enemy. “And I’ve been looking forward to ours,” she continued. “The odds are on my side now, don’t you think, Jen Sahara?”

I could feel the susurration of rage kindle inside me. Here was the schutta who’d killed Karon, who’d kidnapped Bastila, strutting in like she was the Dark Lord of the Sith herself-

*Dangerous line of thinking, bonehead!*
I was barely cognizant of Carth’s faithful presence behind me. I wished him anywhere but here. He’d either get cut down like renni-grass – or live to hear the whole truth. He deserved the whole truth, but not like this. Not like this.


I kept my gaze on Kylah’s yellowing one, breathing the Force out slowly, settling it gently on the occupants of the room. Yudan was stronger than her. The unknown woman, also. The Togruta I was wary of, but didn’t seem to pose as much of a threat, as he took a step back and dropped to his knees in quiet submission.

If Yudan really was my adversary here, then I was facing a powerful trio. One where Kylah was the weakling.

_Oh, kath crap in a sandstorm._

One on one, I’d beaten her – _succumbing to the Dark Side_ – but against three?

“No way, beautiful,” Carth said softly. Loyally. “I’m not leaving you.”

Kylah’s eyes landed on Carth, standing behind me, and then widened with elated surprise. “Oh my. That looks remarkably like the Republic soldier I fried back on Manaan. And I did hear you were travelling with the war-hero Carth Onasi. Could they be one and the same?” She laughed, a high, piercing sound that echoed through the room. “My, my, he is resilient. I might keep him as a slave.”

Black, boiling rage surged like a tsunami inside me, like thick tar that threatened to sink into the very marrow of my bones. _Passion, rage… use it! It fuels the Force, and can grant me the strength I need!_

I couldn’t win, not against three of them, not even if Yudan stepped out – not with such an obvious weakness standing at my back. The Dark Side beckoned, with instant might and gratification, and I would _so_ enjoy gouging out that bitch’s eyeballs before feeding them to her.

With the power of the Dark Side, I might just be able to do that. I could feel I was standing on the very precipice, shaking with fury and the need to relinquish control in return for sheer power and almighty strength. But if I did…

_Would I remember to protect Carth?_ His solid presence behind me was a focus in itself. _I loved Malak, once. That withered and died when we embraced the Dark Side._ The same cold, logical voice pointed out that, years ago, my driving desire had been to save the Republic. Somewhere along the corrupted path I took, that had lost meaning.

_There must be another way. Search for it._ The rage pulled back, simmering, under the most tentative of holds, and I let my gaze land on the unknown Dark Jedi.

She was solemn, staring at me from behind wispy remnants of light hair. Most of it had fallen out, I noted. She was human, my age or a few years older. Deep black crevasses marked her face – _Sith markings_. Not everyone had them, but those that did had been entrenched in the Dark Side for a long time.

Her eyes, staring at me straight, were the same yellow as Kylah’s. They should have been grey.

…

_“Let me take the Countervail and support Yudan,” she entreated, grey eyes shining with fervour._
She was leaning over a table filled with datapads and roughly drawn sketches of proposed advances. In the centre of the room shone a holo-map of the Serroco system. “The Mandalorians have us outnumbered and outclassed. Even with Karath’s forces there, it’s going to be a rout. I can get there quickly—"

“Not quick enough,” a holo-image of Malak said. “And even so, the Countervail and supporting fleet won’t be enough to repel Fett if he gets a stranglehold on Serroco. We need to lure the bastard away.”

“Nisotsa, this very information you have unearthed is why I need you in Intelligence,” I answered. I saw the holo-image of Admiral Sara roll her bulbous eyes. She’d never thought highly of Nisotsa, but then Sara only respected obvious power. “This is what you shine at.”

Nisotsa’s grey gaze hardened in resentment. She’d been mediocre as a War General, but brilliant as an Information Specialist. If only I could convince her that this was just as important as leading troops.

…

My eyes widened, still staring at the blonde, and I took a small step backwards. Nisotsa, I mouthed, and her gaze sharpened in response. She was… she was important. Once, she’d been important to me.

My attention swung back to Yudan. They’re from the same time in my past. Yudan’s already tried to kill me, and Nisotsa’s here to do the same.

“I thought you said she recalled nothing, Kylah,” Nisotsa snapped.

“Jen Sahara is a walking corpse of a forgotten time, Nisotsa,” Kylah drawled. Her finger twitched on the hilt in her grasp, and a red plasma beam hissed to life, mirroring the one in the older woman’s hand.

“Really?” Nisotsa’s voice was sarcastic. “Because I think Jen Sahara just remembered me. Didn’t you?” Her voice, raspy and low, challenged me directly.

I licked suddenly dry lips. I heard an intake of breath behind me. “We – we fought together,” I said haltingly. “Against the Mandalorians.”

“Yes. A lifetime ago,” she said simply.

“Nisotsa,” Carth echoed from my side. His voice was shocked. “As in, Nisotsa Organa? Jen, she and Yudan Rosh are the only surviving members of Revan’s Guard - other than Malak himself. And they know you… Saul knows you…” I felt, rather than saw, him step closer to me. I tensed, and his voice dropped lower. “Jen… were you… were you in the Guard?”

My throat dried up. I heard a laugh from Kylah, a sound of delight and mockery, and found I was unable to respond as I turned to stare helplessly at Carth.

Nausea burned in my stomach.

“Jen.” His eyes were glistening with something akin to awe. “There were two unaccounted for after Malachor. That never- that never followed Revan and Malak’s dark path.” He paused, his gaze deeply intent and fixed on mine. “Xaset Terep and Meetra Surik.” He took a deep, shuddering breath. “Do you know who you really are, Jen?”
“You’re Meetra Surik,” he said quietly, his eyes wide with emotion.
Revan Freeflight:

Kylah laughed. Long, hard and loud, and it verged on hysteria.

Each sound stabbed a jagged spike of heartache in my chest, each laugh was a mocking sign of the inevitable truth Carth was on the cusp of understanding.

Desperate and determined, my gaze fled to the others, my fingers tightening on the hilt of Karon’s weapon as I judged my chances for a sneak attack. But both Nisotsa and Yudan had their attention fixed on me, the former standing motionless with a lit ‘saber tight in her grasp, and the latter strolling casually forward, around Nisotsa and Kylah and towards me, like a felinx slowly circling his prey and closing in.

Nisotsa’s almost-familiar face creased in anger as she stared me down. Whoever Meetra had been – another member of the damned Jedi Thirteen, but I knew no more - it seemed to dredge up bad memories for the blonde human.

“Oh, to connect the dots like that-” Kylah gasped, her chest racking with taunting laughter “-but then still get it so tragically, laughably wrong-” she broke off again, succumbing once more to her hysteria.

My heart was strangled, and a suffocating helplessness held me rigid with inaction. Not here. Carth can’t find out here. Not from Kylah!

Carth was frowning when I wrenched myself back to him, his expression deeply confused as he eyeballed the laughing Dark Jedi with a sort of appalled bewilderment.

“There were three women in Revan’s Guard,” he muttered. “Cariaga Sin died before Malachor. Nisotsa’s here. Meetra-” he looked back to me, and I could almost pick out the sparks of different thoughts as they occurred to him, like neurons firing quicksilver through his mind, each trying to manifest some sense out of a situation that made absolutely none. “Maybe I’m wrong. Maybe you weren’t on the Guard, then, maybe just one of the other Jedi who fought with them-”

Oh, Carth. What had I done, to deserve such faith?

“She was in the Guard, alright.” Nisotsa’s voice was raspy where Kylah’s was silk. Kylah could be mocked, distracted into gloating, or scared off by a show of strength. Nisotsa- I wasn’t so sure of.

“You Fleet idolized Revan, didn’t you? Named us Revan’s Guard. Revan’s Guard of Twelve.” Nisotsa spat to the side, a glob splattering on the gleaming surface. And I was, still, damnabley frozen.

“But the rest of the galaxy knew us as the Jedi Thirteen! And there were four women in the Jedi Thirteen!”

I flinched. Carth’s face was uncomprehending, at first. I could spot the instant a flicker of horrified understanding crossed his face. Disbelief chased it away, but it returned.

“Fo-ur,” Kylah parroted in a falsetto sing-song. “One, two, three, fo-ur. Don’t forget the most
notorious one, soldier!”

Oh, it returned.

“No,” he whispered, and he stumbled back in reaction. “No,” he repeated, and I could say nothing in response. “Tell me it’s not true!”

My breath stuck like a bubble of sick in my lungs, and I could only stare helplessly at him. The heartache grew turgid and black.

“Bastila… of course, she killed Revan- she saved your life…” Carth’s face twisted, a look of contorted abhorrence I’d never seen before. Nothing I don’t deserve. I felt the despair as its murky fingers began to encircle my cursed soul.

It was easy to guess his thoughts. His wife, dead. His planet, devastated. His mentor, seduced to treason. And his son, scarred from the crucible of Korriban. Everything that had been destroyed in his life, because of me.

His hatred was recognizable when it dawned. A malevolent hatred directed straight at me. His blaster shook in his hands, and he began to raise it. At me.

The tears were hot as they pricked behind my betraying eyes. My thoughts were chaotic, but my limbs remained frozen. Wildly, I wondered if I’d just stand there, and allow my lover to shoot me dead in front of my old comrades.

I never knew if I would - or even if Carth could follow through - for in that instant there was a snarl from elsewhere, and we were both swept from our feet in an upsurge of Force compression that caught me completely off-guard.

A lifetime of training kicked in. Thumb on off-switch, convert into a roll, a moving mark is harder to target- I was reacting before thinking, before the adrenaline even hit.

The billowing wave of power had us both tumbling backwards, away from each other; but where I landed in a crouch, Carth thudded uncontrolled into the sealed door behind us. Instinct had me hurling up a Force shield around him, but just as I did so a levelled spike of something penetrated straight through my nascent protection.

It was a psychic twitch of the Force, fine and precise and familiar, and it pierced directly into Carth’s mind- I’d felt that before-

“Carth!” I cried, desperation propelling me into a leap from the ground. Pure need had me careening to his side. Someone had directed some sort of attack, and Carth was now an unmoving heap-

My maimed hand roughly slapped his unresponsive, unshaven face; shoved hard at his shoulder-

The despair was beginning to choke.

I can’t fall apart. I must protect Carth-

“What did you do?” I growled hoarsely, spinning around to face Yudan Rosh. I could sense Carth with the Force, but he was no more than a laggard, inert presence, almost as if he were in a drug-induced coma.

“You really don’t recall a damn thing, do you?” Yudan sneered. His eyes were bright slits of resentment. In his shadow, Nisotsa’s expression was a mirror. “Stasis, Revan. A hibernative stasis.
One of my many talents. I can make him go deeper, you know. Slow his body down to a fraction of its life-speed.” His voice dropped. “So deep he’ll never wake up.”

“Leave him out of this!”

“Ohh, I think she might actually have feelings for the battered soldier,” Kylah mocked from behind Yudan. “That’ll be an amusing tale to tell our Master. Although, Yudan, I’m a bit surprised you haven’t actually killed the Republic grunt.” There was a shared glance between the two women standing behind him that I didn’t understand. “Why is that?”

Kylah’s venomous words were leading, taunting, echoing through the despair that twined around me like a strangling kshyyy vine. A flash of twisted emotion crossed Yudan’s face, but he didn’t turn to acknowledge Kylah. Oh no, he kept his concentration fixed firmly on me.

“It would be an interesting test,” Yudan said. His voice had switched to neutral; no inflection, no apparent emotion at all. “Would the broken, redeemed Revan stay true to the Light, I wonder, if her new lover was slaughtered in front of her eyes?”

The words carved a pitch horror deep within. But my need, driven and potent, was stronger. Find a solution. My thoughts immediately turned to the logistics of the room.

I must get Carth out of here. But I don’t know the occupancy of any of the exits. The Force rallied around me like a charged thunderstorm, discerning a few flecks of nearby life that were entirely eclipsed by the Force-signatures of the Dark Jedi surrounding me. If Dustil is on the move, he’ll be hunting down his dad. The droids will point him towards the lilac torture room.

Of course, I’d cocked that up by fusing together the locking mechanism, hadn’t I?

“Lover?” Kylah trilled. “My, my, this is going to be even more fun than I thought.”

“Redeemed?” Nisotsa hissed, further back in the room, the acidic bitterness so palpable on her tone that my attention darted to her. She was frowning at the kneeling Togruta, before turning to direct a hot glare at Yudan’s back. “What the frakk, Yudan? She’s mind-damaged and brain-washed, not a frakking paragon of atonement. Don’t make the wrong choice here.”

There was a service-way into the torture room, wasn’t there? And if someone was sneaking through an enemy cruiser, then service-ways and utility corridors were the best method of transportation, short of shimmying through the sodding air-con ducts.

I need to re-open the main door, to get Carth back in the room with Juhani and Jolee. And pray to the Force that either they wake up, or Dustil finds them before someone else does.

Yudan didn’t turn for Nisotsa, either. His gaze was still on me, and he began to lift his free hand ever so slowly, as if he wanted to survey my reaction. The Force mobilized around his fist, and I had no idea what his next move was – all I knew was that his last words had been a direct threat to Carth.

There was a snap-hiss, and in his other hand a single beam of scarlet sprang to life.

“What’s wrong with your double-blade, Yudan?” I gasped, standing in front of Carth. He lay prone as if he were guarding the melded lilac door like a frag mine, a weakness of mine in so many ways. About to explode if he wakes. Or- or I’ll explode if they target him.

The Force shone like pinpricks of light through my skin, stinging with panic and fear and a mounting determination to do whatever was needed to get Carth out of this mess I had caused.
Yudan’s gaze narrowed, a burning beam of golden topaz, and I felt an influx of power immediately surge beneath his feet. My mangled hand scrabbled for Zhar’s lightsaber, and I switched both weapons on as he jumped.

My guard was raised high, a cross-hair of green and cyan, blocking Yudan’s offensive strike as he landed. He pulled back, before lashing out sideways in a blow I mirrored with a block. Like a haunting dance of memory, I found myself descending into a remembered form, mind crystallized in a sharp focus purely on the spectre from my past.

He swung to my good side; I parried with both before counter-attacking with the primary. His deflection was fast, and the return blow launched under my guard, compelling me to dodge sideways as Force burned velocity through my limbs.

He followed, aiming another attack at mid-height that crashed down on both my ‘sabers once more. Dull pain echoed through my weakened hand- the shoto was normally my guard, my defense- but the green wasn’t a shoto, it was longer than I expected, and my grip debilitated besides-

I pushed back the tingle of unease and thrust out high with Karon’s ‘saber.

His single blade blurred like a scarlet curtain of humming death, faster than I expected, knocking the cyan blade aside before smashing down on my secondary guard.

Agony recoiled through the marrow of my injured limb, and Zhar’s weapon was knocked out of my numb, feeble grasp. The green winked out of existence as it fell with a clatter, nudging into fail-safe mode.

The burn of death at my neck had me frozen. I hadn’t even seen the bastard move.

Twin eyes of intense heat glared at me from beyond.

“I can master more than one form, Revan,” he whispered, unmoving. My cyan lightsaber was held out-stretched, useless at my side, while his was millimetres from my throat. “This can be useful, in the case of either injury or an unfamiliar lightsaber.”

He didn’t move. The ends of my unruly hair sizzled as they melted against the red plasma. The scorching calefaction against my skin was quickly becoming unbearable.

Ever so slowly, I inched back in retreat. Yudan was suspended in the act of execution, the only sign of life the glow of indecipherable emotion from his cursed yellow eyes. Another step, Carth’s body at my side now, the wall to my back, my injured hand coming to stabilise on the one hilt I still held.

Two hands, one lightsaber. I’d fought like this before. But I found I couldn’t make the first offensive move against Yudan, whose loyalties and motivations were still damnably in question. Something had held him back in the Shadowlands, and it was still there. It was still there. I couldn’t remember him, but it felt like my heart did, and sod it all- if I could have a second chance, and gift that to everyone I’d encountered along the way- Juhani, Kel, Dak, Dustil, even the others we’d let walk free from Korriban – then why wouldn’t I extend that to someone who was only damned in the first place because he’d followed my lead?

Someone who seemed as unable to kill me, as I him?

“Now, pet!”

There was a blur, too fast for my eyes or Force-sense to see. A blank look of shock in Yudan’s gaze as he stumbled back from me, looking down to see someone else’s lightsaber embedded deep in the
side of his torso.

Next to him, the Togruta switched off a lightsaber, and slid back into a kneeling position.

Yudan’s ‘saber fell from lifeless hands, thudding to the ground and dying. My disbelieving eyes caught on the charred hole in his armour that betrayed a mortal wound. No. No! His gaze returned to mine, sharpening with pain and intense concentration - I felt the Force around him flare inward, felt it twitch precise and deep, before it guttered out and he collapsed.

And Kylah was nearby, weapon in hand as she launched towards Carth.

“No!” I screamed, urgency driving a tsunami of Force that rippled outwards at her-

**Revan?**

Shock and desperation concussed through any sense of thought or logic, an implosion of rationale as pure emotion crested to an apex.

**Revan. I am here!**

My bond-sister was sucked into the maelstrom of despair as it crashed over me, lancing deep into my soul. I could feel Bastila submerging her senses with mine, frantically trying to decipher my chaotic thoughts and churning emotions, taking in the battleground of a heavy cruiser’s meeting room as Kylah stumbled back like a dust-ball in the wind-

**Carth. Oh stars, Yudan. I must save Carth, I must get him out-**

And our mingled will combined into an awesome drive of power that could rock the galaxy. Carth. The fused durasteel behind me creaked and splintered free, the doors ripping open beneath our resolve. With a roar, we lifted Carth with nothing more than our need, and unceremoniously threw his prone body back, beyond, behind, deep into the damned lilac room that had once held me prisoner.

Another wrench, and the mangled doors were forced shut.

My chest was racked with heavy breaths; deep and fast and furious.

And there was a second of stillness, there, just as the flood was about to overcome me again. A moment of time, an eternity, the briefest stutter- as if I had a choice to make-

Carth was safe. The look of abhorrence on his face was branded in my mind. But he was safe. He was away.

Whatever I did next, it didn’t matter anymore. It didn’t matter.

My gaze skittered around the room, and landed on the Togruta, now kneeling in quiet submission next to Yudan’s body.

And my emotions ignited into frenzy.

It was rage, bursting into flames, scything through the despair, blackening the Force with hate as it rallied around me in a hurricane of chaos. The Togruta was a muted wound through my senses, a festering sore I’d damnably overlooked-

**What is that thing?**
I will end this evil!

The Force converged into a vacuum, a channel that coerced life in whichever direction I chose, and I centred it directly on the figure of wrongness that sat so silently next to the corpse of one who may have been an ally.

Revan, this is- this is wrong!

I could feel the energy as I forced it from the body of the damned Togruta, draining from him and into me. There was a natural resistance there, but so weak, and I didn’t care anymore- that thing shouldn’t be alive!

There was a screaming from my lungs as the deluge of twisted Force hit my bloodstream, a rush of power and victory that chased away any self-doubt I may have had left. I felt the final spark of life in the Togruta die beneath my will, and it was a sweet annihilation, a reminder that my might was superior.

As the Togruta crumpled into a pile of death, I looked beyond to the others.

You should not do that- Bastila was frightened, worried, and drawn deeper into me than ever before, as if she felt her presence would draw me back from the edge. Her concern for me reverberated, a calming hand against the unstoppable – and it was just strong enough to trigger a thought-stream of semi-rationale logic back to the forefront of my consciousness-

-a life drain like that is considered evil for a reason- you felt the taste- you understand that addiction can chain even the strongest-

-and you know that a true Jedi would be unable to twist the Force in such a method of corruption-

-surrendering to unholy fury won’t protect Carth if you lose yourself- he is still helpless, even if a door separates you-

-and nothing can bring Yudan back from the dead-

Maybe those thoughts would have been enough for me to step back.

Bastila, shaky and divided, was still holding onto the last vestige of light, a faint flicker casting a fragile glow of tender morality between us both.

And together with my final shards of logic and empathy, it might have been enough.

But then my gaze landed on Kylah. And Bastila noticed.

Kylah. A deathly hiss of acidic enmity. The righteous rage of a betrayed friend dragged through the fires of perdition. And Bastila’s emotions dove-tailed like a falling bomb, pitched directly into the vortex of seething hate I was struggling to break free from.

“Redeemed,” Nisotsa spat. She stood ready, lightsaber held close, gaze glittering with anger and grief and a lifetime of resentment I could taste on the Force. “Yudan was always idiotic about you. Here you stand, a broken husk of what you once were, but still just as corrupted as ever.”

Now, pet! The order had come from her, not Kylah. Nisotsa had directed it, commanded the death of someone who had been a friend to both her and me-

And our mingled hate grew.
“Together,” Kylah murmured, stepping to Nisotsa’s side. “We take her out together. She will not triumph against the two of us.”

**Kill her. I am here, Revan. Let us put an end to that schutta, now!**

*Nisotsa,* I breathed, my gaze fixed on the older woman. Bastila’s will buffeted against mine, a roiling presence of acrimony that was a mirror, but she wanted the focus on Kylah-

*Nisotsa’s the bigger threat,* I snarled in the torrid recesses of our shared psyche.

**Then take the weaker link out first!**

There was sense, there, beneath my bond-sister’s black desire. And as we gathered up the tendrils of our combined power, and I knew how best to accomplish this- I might not recall my past, but I’d done this on Rii’shn and Manaan-

*Fan the hate. Excite the fury. Encourage the pain.*

*There is only passion.*

And the Force shook within. And I fell. *We* fell.

The power exploded, a billion shards piercing out through my skin, the high of pure dark Force as it peaked my senses, sharper than a spice-induced high, stronger than the whole of the galaxy-

-*strong enough to do whatever we want-*

And this time, I had Bastila with me. Her power surged through the bond, driving us higher, darker, stronger than ever.

The crackling obsidian aura of a Force-induced berserking rage sprang to existence around me.

The older woman’s eyes had widened in recognition. Names weren’t important anymore. There was only one to keep in my head. *Bastila.*

**Revan,** she echoed, and her hatred turned my gaze to the younger sentient. *She will feel pain. The pain I have suffered!*

Our two adversaries ran forward in tandem, then, but their speed was no match for ours.

We launched sideways, flying across the room and over a table, the Force bending to our command. Poison streamed from my fingertips like a murky ripple of death, and we beheld furious satisfaction as it hit them both.

They weren’t deterred, merely changing their course like a pair of kath hounds hunting down a predator they did not yet understand was about to eviscerate them.

The room was high, and it was a feral joy to leap into the air, to fuel our combined might under my body, to drop one hand beneath and release a shaft of lightning as we crossed.

One staggered and the other retaliated with a mental skewer that ripped through my unshielded mind.

My rage bellowed inside my head.

**Our might is greater!** Bastila was beginning to understand. And we deflected the psychic attack with no more than a nudge.
We had the wall to my back, now. Fury still owned us, and we lifted my lightsaber high.

But the weapon felt wrong somehow- I could still use it- but there was an unstable edge to its vibration that clashed against the resonance of the howling Force.

*Replace it with something better.* I felt Bastila’s innate approval, and we reached out with the might of our anger, coiling it tight around our closest enemy, the younger one, and we hurled our capricious lightsaber directly at her.

Even held prone in our Force grip, she managed to deflect it with her grasped weapon. The cyan ‘saber was knocked to the side, sputtered out, and didn’t return.

*No matter.* We heaved hard on the Force, rage and enmity threading together and augmenting our pull, and her weapon slipped from her grasp before thudding home into mine.

Two steps forward - the woman still held tight by our frenzied will - and we aimed low, gouging straight through her scrabbling legs.

Her screams were sweet, and we were not ready for her to die just yet.

*See how the schutta likes that!*

A lunge of scarlet from the side; we’d missed the other one coming close, and as we ducked something scored against my shoulder. Bastila’s concern flared, but it was just a flesh wound, and nothing could beat our celerity and might as I spun around to knock a thrusting ‘saber back with my own. The woman’s guard was open for a fraction of time, but it was enough. My maimed hand dropped from the hilt, and whistled forward in a furious jab deep into her soft, fleshy oesophagus.

The woman choked, staggering back, and we felt my mouth curve in a cold smile as we glanced back to the other, lying lame on the ground.

Shards of jagged lightning crackled from her hand, raised in our direction.

*She is not the master of that here!* And we both thrust out with the Force. I led, and Bastila added might. It was a wave of annihilation, a nullifying field of death that attacked every molecule in front of us, killing the lightning as it fizzled on her outstretched hands.

We stopped the ripple of nothingness just as it touched the woman. Just enough for her to sense it, for it to shrivel the tips of her fingers white, for the sick realization to widen her slanted yellow eyes.

And Bastila’s awe and comprehension at the depths of our combined power oscillated through our minds.

For me, it was merely the homecoming of the damned.

*Enough.* A flicker of uncertainty, of unease, drifting through our bond. *I want her dead, Revan.*

*Dead, now, while we still have the power!*

*As you wish.* And the lightning cascaded from the remaining fingertips of my crippled hand. It was only fair to return the favour, after all, show the schutta how it was *really* done.

Bright shards of death, and there was no escape for someone who deserved none.

I paused, before the end.
“Bastila is with me,” I whispered. “Our bond is stronger than ever. She is seeing through my eyes, and your cries are sweet.”

Her out-lined eyes widened in outraged denial. And Bastila moved closer to enjoy it.

“This is for Galdea. For the Endar Spire!” Bastila cried, through my lips. “This is for me!”

There was someone else, too. Someone important, to me and not Bastila, someone whose death the schutta had been responsible for. But maybe, at the pinnacle of this colossal power, names and individuals no longer meant anything.

There was only the Dark Side.

The achromatic discharge intensified. It flared out from my hand, in a white-blue cocoon of death around the writhing woman, charring flesh where it entered and exited the body. The other target had recovered- was lurching forward in attack again- so we dropped the 'saber from my other hand, let it crash to the floor, and raised my second palm to target her in unison.

Crackling annihilation erupted from both hands, and our two adversaries faltered.

We felt their spirits diminish beneath the electrocution, their bodies surrender and their life-sparks dim to near nothing-

Done.

We called the schutta’s lightsaber back, stepped forward, and ground it through her smoking chest.

Bastila’s sense of triumph was intoxicating, even as fear fluttered around its edges.

The power we can wield. It’s unfathomable-

This state doesn’t last long. It burns through a body-

Kylah deserved to die. Bastila’s fear warped into alarm as the rush of victory faded. Perhaps-perhaps not this way. Perhaps-

A death is a death.

I enjoyed it. She was… appalled, now. That is… I should not have enjoyed it. She deserved to die, but- A scrabbling, a way to make sense of it all. I could have told her there was no sense, anywhere in the galaxy. She deserved to suffer. She… but I should not have encouraged you to cause her pain. And I should not have enjoyed it. A deep, shaking sigh. If we had more power, Revan, we could control it instead of succumbing to our base desires. I felt like we were there, we almost had enough, we almost mastered everything-

Somehow, all I thought was that more power would make the darkness even darker.

I must go. Her apprehension crested once more, and I didn’t know if it was due to what had happened here, or where she was currently captured. All I knew was that together, no one could withstand us, and there was little separation between her desire and mine, now. I must go before I draw Malak’s attention. We shall sort this out, Revan. We shall… just come for me, and we will find a way forward.

I will come for you, I vowed. How could I not? There were times, there, when we had felt like one.
Her fierce longing to be free was mine, her despair at her helplessness also; just as my blistering rage was hers, and the ancient bedrock of grief that lay beneath everything.

You must go. You must shield yourself. He will learn what happened here, but I will conceal what I can.

Tell Malak I have killed them. All his allies, all his underlings, I stand on his sinking starship surrounded by their corpses.

I will come for you, and I will come for him.

With a sharp yank on the Force, I slammed down the shields between me and Bastila, and once more was submerged in her lack of presence.

There was one still gasping in shuddering breaths, audible throughout the room. The Force bent to my will, bowed to the fury of my hatred and the yawning chasm of my grief. I dragged the older woman upwards with an invisible rope of taut energy.

I no longer knew why I was so angry with her, but still, the emotion was satisfying.

She gasped in my chokehold.


Her suggestion was sound. And my objectives went beyond her death, now. I had to leave, to find my bond-sister.

The fury retreated, and my mind went cold.

I squeezed, hard and brutal, holding it until the woman died in my Force grasp.

I dropped her to the ground.

The arctic influx of power owned me. There was nothing to feel, here; just a clinical matrix of opportunities and objectives. Bastila was important. Both a vulnerability and a strength. The Star Forge would be re-taken. Malak would be eliminated.

The purpose- the end-game- infinite control. With Bastila at my side, we could fix anything, remake anything, better- stronger- to our design-

And the desolation at the foundation of it all could be forgotten.

I would be the master. The weak die, and the strong survive. That was the only purpose.

There is something. Something else. A reason…

It felt like a glitch, a hiccup in the arboreal thoughts that flowed like ice.

The Light isn’t strong enough for what I must do. I don’t know if this will work- it’s time to roll the dice-

It was a fragment from the past, a slippery thought from before the veil of broken memory.

I frowned. Roll the dice? I didn’t need to gamble. Whatever purpose had me stepping first along this
The ownership of the Dark Side was now paramount.

The Dark Side is the true owner. No one can control the Dark Side. Not even one with the best of intentions. Not even Revan Freeflight.

I felt my fist clench in mild irritation. Looking down, I beheld inky shadows wisping around my fist, a mini-vortex of energy. My head cocked in mild interest. That’s familiar.

And, beyond, my gaze slipped to the dead flesh that was resting at my feet. Something had my gaze lingering. Maybe a remembered grasp of humanity that had all but burned away?

Maybe nothing more than idle curiosity?

The woman’s face was slack in anguished death, dusky lines of charred flesh tracing along the sides of her neck and mingling in with the fading Sith markings. There was red bruising around her neck from my cord of invisible death.

She’d been beautiful, once.

I pushed out with a faint coil of Force, brushing closed her eyelids. It made it easier to recall the colour of her gaze. Memory was such a useless, emotive noose that one had to shrug off to move forward.

…

“They have something, I’m sure of it,” Nisotsa whispered, eyes shining like a silver beacon of fierce intelligence. “You’ve seen the surveillance footage. They took out Knights Tarra and Du’khan like they were Force-blind. The Fett must have some way of counter-acting the Force.”

…

She’d been smart, I recalled absently. Quick to grasp connections.

…

“They’ll break through to the Core,” she murmured, leaning tiredly against a large crate full of armour segments and bot-parts. “That’s always been their goal, but it will happen soon. Victory and pride keep the Clans strong. And if you look at the trade routes they’ve been targeting, you’ll put your credits on Duro as their first mark.”

…

Her loyalty had been worth something, all the more because of her innate caution.

…

“I’ll follow you,” Nisotsa rasped. Behind her, out of earshot, Arran Da’klor was making eyes at her younger cousin. “You’re right, I believe we must take action. But I ask only this: leave Neiza out of it. She’s… she’s too soft for this. Leave her behind on Coruscant. She’s barely more than a Padawan, and even younger than you.”

…

There was something pressing hard against my temples. The corpse in front of me blurred, shook-
“I’m sorry,” Nisotsa said. “Cariaga… you did everything you could to save Cariaga. Don’t blame yourself, Revan. Please.”

…

The canyon of grief grew. A tearing, a sharp pain in my head, I didn’t know her- not really – but the emotions were still there- along with jagged shreds of memory-

…

“Really, Revan?” she mocked gently. “Em and Yudan? You’ve got to be out of your frakking mind.”

…

My gaze slid to the burnished-gold body metres behind me, across the other side of the room. The desolation turned black with soul-wrenching despair. I didn’t recall him, either, but I knew I should, and now they were dead, they were all dead, and how many had died because they’d followed me-

…

“Talvon,” I whispered, a shiv-blade tight in my fist. He turned, and I knew the glint in his eyes. Madness. His mouth stretched in a mockery of a grin.

“Master!” he called gleefully. “You don’t mind me calling you that, do you, Revvie? It seems appropriate, these days.”

…

My lungs were burning as I refused them oxygen. The charcoal flames around my fingertips grew, the bitter self-hatred-

…

"Neiza!" Arran yelled, his voice twisting in emotion.

"Oh dear," I said softly as the woman suffocated. "Don't tell me you actually care for the girl, Arran?" She had risen into the air, legs twitching spasmodically as her hands scrabbled at her throat. "Lucky for you I am feeling generous. Beg on your knees for forgiveness, and I may yet let her live."

…

Neiza- that was Nisotsa’s cousin-

…

“I curse the day I ever joined your crusade,” Arran hissed. A bubble of bloody spit dribbled from the corner of his mouth. “But you’re right, we were loyal once. And you burned that out of us, burned it out of us all.”

…

They died. They all died.

And I was drowning in the desolation.
I could stay here. Bleak and dead and damned as the rest of them. The ship would falter, sooner or later, and I could break with it. Fall, finally, into the abyss.

And drag Bastila down with me. She will not survive my death. But I cannot survive this. Justice demands I do not. And Bastila’s death is better, better than my evil that now echoes within her. Better than her turning into Malak’s weapon.

Malak. I didn’t know him. But the death of Nisota- the death of Yudan- it was too much. Too much. Dark or Light, I wouldn’t be able to take out the man I’d once, by all accounts, loved as fiercely as the stars.

But I could take myself out, before I returned to what I was. Again. Before I led my bond-sister down the same corrupted path I’d led so many others.

I bowed my head to the despair, and was submerged.

xXx

There were noises nearby. They didn’t touch me. I’d been ignoring the sirens for eons, now.

The sear of something hot scorching through metal.

My hand was on Nisota’s dead face. My gaze on Yudan’s body, some distance away.

“Someone frakking help me with Dad!”

My fault. My crime. My villainy, leading them all through a life worse than death until their final resting place here on this doomed starship.

A resounding thump of metal slamming onto the ground.

My eyes were dry, now, as if no tears could help. Yudan deserved more. Nisota- she’d never seen her own strengths. She’d never believed in herself.

A howl, followed by a young voice. “Whoa! Jen- what’s all that black stuff- Jen, are you okay?”

Had she? I didn’t know Nisota. Large holes of nothing in my mind, where the past had been incinerated, and all I was left with were emotions with no grounding in memory. I’d cared for Nisota. Yudan was deeply important to me. He shouldn’t be dead-

“Jen!” a feline voice gasped. “Jen, are you alri-“

If I couldn’t handle their deaths-

“Stand back!” An old voice, husked with age or emotion or both. “All of you, get back, now!”

“Do not come near,” I whispered, but I knew my voice echoed on the Force, a vibrating command. “I will be alone. I will it.”

“Juhani, you must take the others back to the ship. Do it now, child!”

“I shall not fail her, Jolee Bindo, like she has not failed me!”

The flames of shadow licked out around me. They were the touch of death, I knew. Like a black hole of life and I was the nexus.
“I have seen this before, child. I can deal with it… this time, I can deal with it. You must guide the others out! The Mandalorian is dead on his feet, the soldier is out cold, and the Wookiee is carrying them both. Those two kids need someone to lead them, and this darn cruiser is losing the battle. Get your people out, Juhani!”

“Leave me,” I breathed, a final warning.

“I’ll follow if I can. I’ll find your trail, and follow with her if it’s at all within my power. But don’t sacrifice any of the others! Go, Juhani!”

I couldn’t pull my hand away from Nisotsa. I couldn’t wrench my gaze from Yudan. He was facing away, strewn on the other side of the room. I saw the charred slice through his armour where the lightsaber had entered, in the side of his gut. He would’ve died within seconds- minutes maybe. It surprised me that there wasn’t a pool of blood underneath him. Even with cauterization, a wound that deep should’ve bled out.

Such fragile flesh. In the end, we were all mortal.

Even me.

The others had departed, apart from one spark of life I didn’t know so well. Less attachment, less danger, less grief. Non-threatening. He didn’t step any closer, merely stayed on the periphery of the room.

“So, your game here is to go down with the ship. Huh. Doesn’t sound very smart, young pup.”

“Failure,” I whispered, blinking. I could feel my fingertips clench. I frowned. “Why are you here, old man? It is not mere words when I say I am the bringer of death.”

“Bah.” It was a dismissive sound. A ludicrous response to the likes of me, but still, it was different enough that the edge of my attention caught. “I’m no threat, just a harmless old man you don’t even know. But the others… Now, they’ve got claims on you. You really want to inflict your death on them?”

*Inflict my death… it’s my survival that’s the real affliction.*

“It’s safer for everyone, old man.” I didn’t even speak the words. My mouth shaped them, air came out… and somehow the Force whispered them around the room.

The glacier of grief settled beneath me.

“The true failure is giving up, and giving in to despair.”

On another day, I might have laughed at that. “The true failure is destroying the galaxy after murdering your friends. Giving up is a triumph in comparison.”

“Humph.” It was a sound of discontent. “Not sure I like it when you counter my arguments.” He was still some distance away, hovering along the edges of the room. Desolation licked around me in a manifestation of circling anti-light. I wondered absently how close it was to him.

“You should go.” *Go, now, before you remind me of those I wish to forget about.*

I sensed the man take one step into the room. One small step only, and then pause. “By all accounts, this Malak will take over the galaxy if he’s not stopped. Are you prepared to sit back from that?”
My eyes closed. I couldn’t bear to look at the room anymore. The rancid stench of charred skin and melted hair stung my nose. My senses, slowly returning. “Each time I stumble, old man. Each time I fall. And it’s pitch-dark and the return becomes impossible.” Warm air ghosted over my dry lips. “And if I triumph over Malak and then fall, I won’t return. I could go back to what I once was. Worse than what I once was. For this time, Bastila is Force-bonded to me.” *This time our pool of power might be even greater. This time I really will rock the galaxy.*

“And if you don’t face him? What happens then?” He took another step. “Then Malak destroys the galaxy in your stead?”

“There’s— others—” I couldn’t finish that. I knew little of Republic troops and Jedi Masters. *I knew more, once. I was so involved.* My thoughts were polar glaciers that churned only when the fury awoke. The fury was asleep, now.

But the echo of earlier logic still whispered, a faint wind breathing over the hardened snow.

*They have the coordinates. They will launch an attack. But against Malak, master of the Star Forge, how far would they get?*

*Especially if he has Bastila harnessed at his side? I can’t help her yet, and I daren’t drop the shields with her prisoner. She’s failing, she’s falling, and he’ll take advantage—*

“Huh. And do they have a chance?”

No. No, they don’t.

*Malak’s a fool if he lets anyone close to the Star Forge. The remainder of his armada will be there. And his armada is vast.* They’d repel any offence that came close. I didn’t recall the Forge, but it surely had protections, defences— it seemed like the only way to get onboard would be either sneaking in, or tricking Malak somehow.

*Tricking… and the only sentient he might act irrationally over is me.* That was true, if there was a way to work that to my advantage. Despite myself, despite the penumbra of despair that had iced everything, the cogs of my mind were slowly creaking back into action.

I didn’t want them to. For it meant I’d have to experience the anguish and self-recriminations that were sure to follow. But the thoughts still persisted, fragile and weak as they were.

*There’s another line of attack. I have an inside line to the Forge that no one else does. When the time is right, I can drop my psychic block and reach out to Bastila for aid. Our bond is an advantage that rests solely with my survival.*

When compared with my links to Malak and Bastila, did anyone else have a chance?

“No,” I whispered.

He harrumphed. “So, again, I ask: are you really prepared to give up?”

The chasm of grief was shuddering. I didn’t want it to break, to flood with emotion, to force me to open my eyes in the bloodied room that held the corpses of those I had once loved—

That I couldn’t even remember. And the lack of recollection was simply another offence in my long list of crimes.

“I kill those who follow me, old man. Even now, once more, I couldn’t hold back the tide of
darkness. I can’t master this… I think I thought I could, once, that I could own the Dark Side.” *But all that happens is me destroying everything I ever cared for. The Republic. My friends. Myself.*

“Well. Young people are idiots. Young people with the Force even more so.” A gusty sigh. “You’ve done some pretty heavy things, I won’t argue with that. But today… I don’t think you can kick yourself too badly over this one. I heard enough to guess you only figured out the truth in the Shadowlands, just as I came across you. So this is the first time you’ve been truly tested since then, ain’t it?”

I blinked. I didn’t deserve any form of understanding, nor did I desire it. “I faced Bandon without slipping,” I mumbled. The Force shook, cracks widening in the ice. “Mission was there.” *A focus. A friend. A weakness and a strength.* “I chucked Carth out of *this* room, because I had to protect him. I didn’t think I could bear his death. But Yudan was killed—”

I couldn’t finish that.

“Ah, attachment,” he murmured, taking a third step. “That’s a double-edged sword, that one. The Jedi fear it for its inherent dangers, and the Sith deny it for its empathy. It can drag you down evil paths, and shine light into the darkest corner. I’m not sure the Order would approve, but sometimes they struggle with finding their own arses, that lot. For what, truly, is a life without attachment?”

“It brought me away from the edge on Korriban.” Golden threads anchoring me to my new friends. “But… I had that before. It wasn’t enough then, to stop me embracing the Dark.” *The Jedi Thirteen. The Fleet. More, so many more. I had more support and love and attachment back then than now, and I fell anyway.* “I turned on those who swore themselves to me. Two of them lie dead in this very room.”

“Well, young pup, I can’t say why you did what you did, and I don’t think you know, either. But if you know who you are right now, and the path you need to follow, then you can take the first step forward.”

“I know I’m dangerous.”

He snorted. “Seems to me, you’re the most dangerous when you go running off by yourself. So, friendly tip: *don’t.*” He moved closer. I could sense him behind me, now.

“I killed Nisotsa,” I mumbled. “She… she promised her life for my cause. I have- flashes- of others- others I killed- they turned on me, or me on them- I don’t *want* to remember anymore of this, it hurts—”

My eyes squeezed tight. My shoulders shook. I tried to hold onto the frigid numbness.

The old man harrumphed again. “Ah, what you need is a good cry. But this actually ain’t the time. We have to get back to that freighter of yours, and get you around those who care for you. Mission. Juhani. The Wookiee. The Mandalorian. The soldier.”

Each name caused my breath to hitch further. The last was the worst. *Carth.*

“They need you. And you need them. A fall to the Dark Side doesn’t just happen in a single moment, you know. And a true redemption… ach, well, I suspect that’s a lifetime of struggle. It ain’t easy, but then the most important things never are. You don’t just wake up one day, decide to turn your life around, and have it happen magically overnight.”

“The Dark Side… it always seems more powerful.” I had needed that power, or had I just desired it? I didn’t know. I didn’t know who I had once been, and I didn’t want to. “Beguiling. *Easier.*”
“Humph. The last two, maybe. It’s certainly a quicker route to strength. But more powerful? That I’m not so certain of. And in the end, is power what’s truly important? You’ll have to decide that for yourself. Think on your friends when you do.” His hand pressed softly into my shoulder. “There may come a time when you have to make a final choice, when there’s no turning back, and it’s your friends who will help you with that choice. But it ain’t today, young pup. It ain’t today.” He sighed. “So get up, dust yourself off, let’s figure out what to do with that one, and then we’ll head back to your ship before we really are blown into spacedust.”

I was standing without realizing, as if the will of that cantankerous old man was enough to grasp the giant weight of my despair and shake it into order. March, kid! Off to your dorm! Get your schoolwork done, and then you can play! I forced the half-crazed hilarity down, and slowly opened my eyes.

I was going to break, soon. I could feel it approaching, like the angry clouds of a summer storm. Hot and sharp and a painful awareness of emotion I’d shied away from. But I would survive it. I had no choice. I had to clean up my mess, to stop Malak, and to save Bastila- she who had rescued me, once.

I had already survived so much. But I had to survive this too, hollow and exhausted, yet ready to do what I must.

Old man Bindo is right. It was so hard, so intensely hard to make the turn around. The Force sucked into me and blinkered out, and I knew the shaking of my body was simply an emotional response that hadn’t quite hit yet. Only I can take care of Malak... which means I must keep going. And find a way where – this – doesn’t happen again. The conviction was there, but it was battered and crippled and hard to revive. I couldn’t even look at the corpses surrounding me, but I knew Jolee was gesturing at one.

“Well?” Jolee demanded. He sounded impatient. “This is a choice you have to make. I ain’t making this one for you. He’s well corrupted, I can sense it. It’s a very real risk to bring him onboard, and it’s one you have to bear the culpability for.”

“What?” I blinked, confused. I didn’t know how I was still standing. And the old man was talking in code. He was still pointing at Yudan’s body. “What are you talking about?”

Jolee paused, his eyes meeting mine. There was a slight frown wrinkling the lines on his dark-skinned forehead, a considering look in his gaze. He huffed. “Push your senses out. Don’t assume the worst until you’ve double-checked matters. That one ain’t dead.”

That one ain’t dead.

Everything shook around me in disbelief.

The old man stepped closer to the body. “He’s in a deep form of stasis, a physical hibernation,” Jolee mused. The Force flared out from him, gentle fingers of exploration melding into the body on the ground. “Eh, I can see why. That’s a mortal wound, right there. It goes straight through a kidney, the liver, and it’s ruptured his pancreas- he’d live minutes, at most, if he weren’t in a static hibernation. It slows everything down to a fraction of what it was, you see. But even so, his life’s slipping away.” Jolee turned back to face me. “If only you had someone nearby who was a master medic.”

He was wearing a self-satisfied smirk, waggling his eyebrows in a comic display that was completely out-of-place in this charred room of death.

Yudan... Yudan’s not dead. Everything blurred again. There was a sharp pain in my chest, and I had
no idea if it was relief or unease or just deep confusion.

And my mind, the slow lumbering beast bowed deep beneath the weight of despair, began a burdened trek back to normalcy, or at least a masked veneer of it.

And I gradually cobbled together a facade of my earlier self. It was the only way to keep going. Fall into the action of leadership, once more formulate a way forward, and hope it would become a stronger reality than the despair I couldn’t shake off.

I took a deep breath, and focussed on the body lying in front of Jolee Bindo.

*It would be idiotic to resurrect a man who has already betrayed me.* I’d let him walk away from me in the Shadowlands – although, to be fair, one could argue he’d let me live – and he’d returned only to betray our plans to the Sith. If it hadn’t been for Dustil’s chance appearance, we would have had nothing to go on.

The despair was still there, but it began to recede. Somehow, I knew it would never fade entirely.

*Nothing to go on- no, that’s kath crap. I escaped entirely due to Yudan’s aid. And, once again, Yudan has shown his inability to kill me.*

But he’d been on the cusp of killing Carth, earlier, and for what? To see if I’d fall once more to the cursed Dark?

*Turns out he didn’t have to. I fell anyway.*

“We ain’t got time for lengthy meditations,” Jolee prompted. “Sirens have been wailing for awhile, now. You got to make a decision, and quick.”

“Can you… can you revive him enough so he can make his own way out?” I whispered through dry lips. *Let him slip away, so one day he can return when I least expect it and screw everything up again.*

Jolee was shaking his head. “That’s a deep injury. I can stabilize him enough to move him onboard, tie off the bleeding and the damaged organs - but he’s going to need more than that from me.” I felt Jolee’s hand lightly rest atop my bowed shoulder once more. It bore the heavy weight of responsibility with it, the charge a true leader could not shy away from. “He’s either coming onboard with us, or dying with the ship.”

I couldn’t let Yudan amongst my crew. What was I going to do, offer him a place on the frelling *Hawk*, and tell him to play nice or he wouldn’t get any good-behaviour stickers? For the safety of those I cared about, I simply couldn’t take another risk on Yudan Rosh.

“Heal him.” My voice cracked, and the disbelief at my own words coursed through me like unforgiving fire. He was nothing to me, a shade from my past, and yet I still felt the emotional connection to someone who had once been a friend.

And the guilt, for where I had led him.

*Sun and stars, if I’m not ruthless enough to kill Yudan Rosh, how the frell do I expect to take on Malak?*

I felt my teeth grit as Jolee crouched down next to the prone Twi’lek. I raised one hand, and a lightsaber from somewhere flew to it. As I thumbed it on, there was both sharp relief and surprise as bright cyan illuminated the room instead of red.
“You are not going to make me revive him, just so you can kill him, young pup,” Jolee grouched, his brows slamming down in disapproval. “That’s not only rude, it’s bordering on sadistic.”

“I’ll do what I have to, Jolee. Now, heal him.” My words were hard and implacable. I saw the resistance in the old man’s expression, and a sepulchral shadow in my mind murmured that I could make him bend to my will, whether he liked it or not.

_Not like this. Not again. Not, ever, like this._

I felt a shudder ripple through my face. “Please,” I whispered to Jolee. “I don’t know how much of a threat he is to those I care about. I have to speak to him before I decide. Please, Jolee. Help me.”

The disapproval in Jolee’s face was chased away by grudging acceptance, and he nodded, before pulling in the threads of the Force and getting to work. It was an intricate business – not quite as fine as manipulating the electrical oscillations that came so naturally to me, but there was a certain finesse, a certain patience required, allowing physical flesh and blood vessels to meld before progressing. A natural instinct, knowing when to steamroll forward with the healing power of the Force, and when to retreat and allow flesh to mend on its own.

I could sense what Jolee was doing, enough so I doubted I would ever be able to replicate the like.

Jolee pulled back several minutes later. “That should be enough to move him. I’d rather not wake him from the stasis, as it risks undoing what I’ve done - but I guess you’re going to insist on that, huh?”

“Wake him,” I whispered. I raised my lightsaber, so it cut into my vision like a blazing bar of light blue fire.

Jolee grumbled something, and once more I felt the Force swell beneath his command, this time as an energizing wave that encouraged the body to consciousness. Chemicals within the bloodstream stirred – I had the vague remembrance of a theoretical lecture on the dangers of activating cortisol and adrenaline – and then Yudan’s eyelids flickered.

I stepped closer, inching the ‘saber forward so it was mere centimetres from his heart.

I saw the moment he became aware of pain. Lines creased and deepened around his face, and his yellow eyes shot open before stilling on the beam of plasma directly above his chest.

His expression immediately shuttered. I couldn’t help but feel the slightest sense of admiration for how quickly the cursed man could conceal his thoughts.

“You betrayed me,” I said curtly, nudging Karon’s lightsaber closer. I wanted a damn reaction I could read, but his entire body was frozen. “I should leave you here, to die along with everyone else onboard.”

His eyes narrowed slightly. “I betrayed you? Did I, Revan?”

I felt a grimace twist my lips. “Maybe you slipped me a token of escape, Yudan, but not before selling my crew out,” I said. “The very man you snitched on, is the one who just saved your life.”

Yudan’s gaze darted to the side, landing briefly on Jolee, before coming back to rest on me. I could decipher a pissy sort of anger in his expression, now, and it was obvious he was in some amount of pain- but other than that, nothing. No remorse or regret, no satisfaction, no lead to help me decide what manner of person he truly was.
“You told me to play the part of a Dark Jedi, the one who’d overwhelmed the lot of you,” he growled. A small gust of irritated air left his lungs. “And exactly what do you think would have happened, had Kylah or Nisotsa come across your harmless old trader, without me declaring his Force sensitivity?”

I blinked, and the cyan ‘saber wavered in my grasp. In the docking bay, an elevated walkway high at the back, I saw her-

“For Kylah was in the docking bay, Revan,” he said, wedging an arm underneath his torso, and beginning to struggle upright. I moved the lightsaber back in reaction. “My cover would have been immediately blown.”

“Lie down,” Jolee snapped. “You ain’t moving anywhere under your own power.”

“And as for Ordo,” Yudan continued, still heaving himself up into a sitting position despite Jolee’s protests. “Well, I’ve come to respect the man. But we’ve known your crew manifest for some time, and his background is well understood. As is the penchant for Mandalorian clan leaders to admire you. I didn’t think it a plausible story that Canderous Ordo would turn on you for credits after following you since Taris.”

Yudan was canted to the side, leaning heavily on one arm, his body shuddering under the movement. He waited, chest heaving, gaze never leaving mine. Awaiting my judgment.

I was well aware of how hypocritical that was.

“Would you have killed Carth?” I whispered.

The slightest sound left his lips; a wearied, beaten form of a chuckle. “Your soldier? I don’t know, Revan. I honestly don’t know.”

I felt the truth of those words sing on the Force.

“Did you have any plan at all, Yudan?” I snapped, suddenly furious at my inability to come to a decision. How could I trust him? How could I even entertain the idea of leading him back to the Ebon Hawk, when it sounded like he had no frelling idea whose side he was on? “If Nisotsa hadn’t turned on you first, which sodding side were you going to pick?”

The yellow gleam of his gaze sharpened in returned anger. I wondered what colour they once were. I should know. All those little details, all those forgotten memories… it was no wonder he faced me with such bitterness. I’d led him, Nisotsa, and others I had no faces nor names to put against, down the path of evil.

And now I stood, with allies and freedom and barely any recollection of my past misdeeds.

And a lifetime of despair to wade through.

The corners of his mouth turned down in an uneven grimace. “All I can really tell you is that I would have struck out against Darth Revan. But she wasn’t there. And I… I don’t really know anything, anymore.”

His eyes dropped closed, and his elbow buckled underneath him. With an involuntarily grunt, Yudan collapsed back to the durasteel ground of the bloodied room.

“He’s fainted,” Jolee muttered, kneeling back beside him. “Probably for the best. Heh. For more than one reason, I’d say.”
...I would have struck out against Darth Revan. But she wasn’t there.

Oh, sithspit. The burn of remembered hatred, black and turgid and blazing over an ocean of infinite grief, rose within me once more.

My shoulders slumped. Should Yudan ever discover exactly how I’d killed Nisotsa, then he would strike out at me. Was this, maybe, the reason I should leave him behind?

Or… maybe it’s the reason I need to take him with us. Maybe, what I really need, is a watcher who will stop me, by any means necessary, should I fall again.

It was quite possible I might already have that in Carth. It was quite possible that Carth wasn’t going to wait until he saw a sign. I felt the clench of heartache once more, the bitter longing for what might-have-been. I’d known since the Shadowlands how this revelation would play out, but it didn’t make it one iota easier.

The ground underneath me shook abruptly, and I found myself stumbling. The halogen lighting fizzled before cutting out, and what sounded like another three warning klaxons joined in the merry band of sirens that had been screeching for some time.

:: All personnel to evacuate immediately.:: a young female voice slurred over the starship’s intercom. ::Hull shield generators are down. Repeat: all hull shield generators are down, and we have been unable to negotiate terms of surrender. We are still taking enemy fire. I say again: all personnel to evacuate immediately.::

The darkness was perforated by the same red-and-orange emergency strip lighting as in the interrogation cells, which must have been on a separate circuit. Deep on the Force, I could sense the groans of unyielding metal being forced apart hundreds of metres away, reverberating all along the length of the cruiser.

“You’re out of time, pup,” Jolee said, an unspoken order in his voice. I wondered, idly, if he was deliberately avoiding my name. There was no way Jolee could have missed it, but he’d been remarkably facile in not showing any reaction at all.

My gaze was still fixed on Yudan, whose chest was slowly rising and falling in the depths of unconsciousness now, rather than any forced state of deep hibernation.

It was going to be a damnably awkward conversation, explaining his presence on the ‘Hawk.

“We’re taking him,” I said grimly, turning to look at Jolee.

Hah. Explaining Yudan Rosh will be a doddle. It would be, I realized, my mind resting on Carth again with a renewed pang of dejection.

Because that conversation that was going to be a frell of a lot worse.

xXx
“Sublight drives are fine, but the repulsors are gonna make any sort of planetary landing a kriffing party,” Canderous Ordo grumbled, as he switched auxiliary power on and surveyed the nav console with a vaguely distrustful expression. The turbine compressor began whirring to life under our feet. “And the recirculators are dodgy enough that I ain’t keen to spend more than half a day in space.”

“Do you want me to drive?” I asked, only part in mockery. I’d flown many a freighter, back in my time, and with a lot less moaning about it than him.

Though, to be fair, I’d never flown a freighter quite as banged up as this one.

The Mandalorian scowled at me. We’d exchanged only a handful of words so far, most of them cursing on his part when Revan and I had careened back to the Ebon Hawk lugging her second best buddy from the Dark Side. Heh. Canderous and I were both going to have some fancy words with Yudan Rosh when he came to.

I hope Revan’s gambled the right way. She was torn about him, I could sense that much. And it didn’t help that I’d stumbled onto her and her crew when she was in the thick of the sort of revelations one could make a holo-soap about. She’d been over the edge, back on that cruiser. Ain’t no denying it. Revan still has the same darkness within her.

But she wasn’t as… hard, or calculating, as the woman I’d met four years ago - the leader who hadn’t yet fallen, but was well on her way. The one who’d been spat out the other side of the Mandalorian Wars.

This woman… this woman was more tormented, naturally; more flawed - but somehow, the scars hadn’t stiffened and scabbed over into the same clinical detachment. Bah, I don’t know. Despite the short time I’d known her, I found myself already invested.

Canderous was leaning over to jab at what I thought was the ship’s intercom. “Mission,” he growled into the mic, “make sure your bucket droid is doing all he can to stabilize the ship. Even get kriffing HK, if he can help. I’m about to launch, so snap to it and buckle up.”

I wasn’t sure if it had been chance that’d made HK-47 encounter Revan and me, as we’d stumbled blindly through the floundering Leviathan. With the heavy cruiser falling apart, and sentients running in all directions, I’d been unable to sense the presence of Juhani. Her Force signature was the homing beacon I’d been counting on, and without it I was little more than a mink-rat in a maze.

And Revan herself hadn’t been in any state to do more than dazedly follow my lead.

Then, from the depths of a darkened corridor, that robot with the badly-programmed attitude appeared and started mouthing off - while simultaneously hovering around Revan and leading the way back.
I’d gleaned that HK – with an autonomy that should be alien to a droid – had decided to leave the ‘Hawk in search of Revan, once the rest of the crew had secured the ship. *I don’t like to think on our chances if he’d stayed put. Heh. Never thought I’d see the day I’m indebted to a darn droid.*

Any other piece of machinery wouldn’t bother me. This one was annoying enough without me owing my life to it.

There was a loud reverberation as the ‘Hawk’s engines kicked into gear, and a self-diagnostic beeped on the console. I frowned as multiple lines of red blinked at me.

“Mand’alor’s balls,” Canderous muttered in disgust, leaning over to eye-ball it tandem. “Oh well. I suppose I’ve flown in worse.”

He sent a final comm to the crew about take-off, and his hands tapped over the control panels. I heard a discordant rumble as the repulsors charged, and felt an uneven wobble throughout the freighter as it slowly began to rise.

But it rose.

The twin sets of docking bay doors were operating under evacuation procedures, which meant automatic sensors – so there was nothing stopping the *Ebon Hawk* as it began to limp away from the faltering cruiser and out into space.

Flashes of light scored against a backdrop of stars as we cleared the external doors.

And ahead was another heavy cruiser just as behemoth as the one at our back.

“Right,” Canderous muttered. “My plan is an emergency landing on Carpet’s overgrown planet, as I have serious doubts about this ship holding together for long. Somehow, though, I don’t think the Republic are gonna play nice.”

An incoming transmission bleeped on the comm console. Canderous barked a short laugh, and motioned for me to answer it.

::Ebon Hawk, you are ordered to dock with the Meridus immediately. Two squads of class-e snubfighters are incoming to flank you. The slightest deviation of your flight path will result in us opening fire. Lack of confirmation to this transmission will have the same effect. Ebon Hawk, confirm receipt of this transmission now.::

“Good thing our comms aren’t down this time,” Canderous grumbled. “But they can all go leap into a sarlacc pit, far as I’m concerned.” He shot me a hard, flinty stare. “Alright, old man, check out the pre-programmed hyperspace jumps, and let me know the closest one. I’ll answer the kriffing Republic.”

I raised an eyebrow, but leaned forward to do as bid.

“*Meridus*, this is Canderous Ordo. We have injured parties onboard, and require an immediate medical transfer. Lead us to your docking bay, and we’ll follow.”

The *Ebon Hawk* had five hard-coded hyperpoints, all with thousands of different jump-routes so they could be selected from most of known space. It was a safe-guard, an escape route if things turned dicey – for mapping out a new hyper-route could take precious minutes, or longer, if the nav computer had issues calculating the best path.

Hard-coded routes took a lot of drive data, and were most common amongst smuggling vessels.
Obviously, this little freighter had a bit of history behind it.

I recognized Tatooine and Nar Shaddaa, Corellia and Taris. Trade spots and smuggling runs. There was a final one that was unfamiliar.

“The closest coordinate is less than a seven hour jump, but there’s no information listed about it. No telling if it’s a planet or an asteroid belt or the centre of a star.”

“We don’t have time to map out another route,” Canderous said. “But we need to jump, now, and the longer the jump, but worse our chances the ’Hawk will falter in hyperspace. And that’s usually game over. What’s the next closest?”

“Nar Shaddaa,” I answered. “A little over five days. Humph. Are you sure you want to risk this? The ’Hawk ain’t a happy ship, you know.” Even having switched to sublights, the engine still sounded dodgy to my old ears. “It may very well tear itself apart in the entry to hyperspace.”

Canderous snorted. “I ain’t handing myself or the crew over to some greying Republic admin.”

The nav comm blinked again, and I flicked the receive switch.

::Ebon Hawk, medical intervention will be granted upon docking. Continue your path to the Meridus. Any deviation will result in us opening fire.::

“Huh,” I said, leaning back. “They’re persistent blighters. I thought only old men like myself were allowed to repeat themselves.”

“Plug in the unknown course.” The Mandalorian’s voice had turned serious. “Let’s try our luck. If I can do anything about it, we ain’t dying today.”

Well. I had to approve of his attitude.

The ship’s computer immediately routed the remembered jump point from our current location, as Canderous aimed the freighter directly at the Dreadnought-class cruiser. Idly, I wondered if I felt the Force once more at work.

Heh. I haven’t had this much excitement since I almost caught the Faceless one in a katarn pit. Pity I’d never got my hands on him, in the end.

As Canderous increased the sublight drives to full power, I activated the hyperjump at his nod, and the Ebon Hawk gave a loud groan of mechanical complaint as it shot towards the Meridus.

At the last instant, it lurched into hyperspace.

xXx

“Sheesh! I can’t believe we’re all outta there in one piece!” Mission exclaimed as I wandered in from the cockpit. She was hugging her knees on a plimfoam bench in the common room, presumably having wriggled out from the safety harness the moment the freighter wobbled into hyperspace. Next to her, Revan was currently face-planted onto the plasticeel table. Someone had covered her with a blanket.

I sent out a diagnostic feather of Force. Just sleeping. She’s probably gonna regret doing it in that position though.

“(We were lucky to escape,)” the Wookiee rumbled softly, wedged in on the other side of Revan.
His attention was dolefully fixed on her. “(All of us, intact.)”

The Mandalorian had followed me into the room, and directed his next words at the young Twi’lek.

“Wake Jen up, ad’ika. There’s some things to discuss.”

“Aw, man, Canderous, can’t ya just leave her alone?” Mission griped, shooting him an accusatory glare. “She’s exhausted. Look at her. She’s fallen asleep on her face.”

“Yeah,” the Mandalorian commented in a dry voice. “I can see that with the way she’s drooling all over the table.”

“Eh, doesn’t hurt to let the lass catch a few hours kip.” I threw my two credits in, while eyeballing the fandangled percolator on the bench next to the mush maker. I couldn’t think that caffa machines had changed awfully much since I’d settled down on Kashyyyk, but this one boasted a lot more lights and dials than should be necessary to make a simple brew.

“One thing I’ve learned on this trip is not to put off kriffing conversations,” Canderous Ordo growled, stomping over to me and jabbing at the smallest button on the side. The percolator blinked on, and began to whir as he shoved a chipped plasticeel mug in a tray underneath it. “The second thing is that Jen likes caffa almost as much as Onasi.”

“When’s my dad gonna wake up?” the second teenager in the room muttered, his arms folded as he hunched on Mission’s other side. I hadn’t caught the boy’s name, but where the Twi’lek girl was ebullient and optimistic, he instead came across as wary, hunted and a trifle hard. “He hasn’t moved since Zaalbar dumped him in his quarters. I don’t even get what’s wrong with him. I saw frakking Karath in that room. Saul Karath, dead from a blaster shot! Who killed him? And what did he do to my dad?”

I stepped to the side, towards the young Cathar Jedi who was leaning against the wall, and left the overly complicated machine to the Mandalorian. “Your father was hit by a hibernative stasis, lad. It ain’t too deep. He’ll be waking up soon.”

“Stasis?” the boy parroted. He turned a narrow gaze on me. “You mean, from one of the-” he stopped, frowning. “You’re a Jedi, too, aren’t you?” he accused. “Can’t you wake him up?”

“Dustil, I believe we are all exhausted,” Juhani said quietly. “Your father is fine. It’s the others on this ship we have to worry about.” She was staring at Revan in concern, before her gaze sharpened with wariness and darted towards the makeshift medbay I’d strapped yonder Dark Jedi into before take-off.

I liked what I’d seen of the Cathar. She struck me as a principled sort, over the brief time we’d travelled together in the Shadowlands. Jedi Knight, she said. Huh. I wonder what her home Enclave is. I’ll be interested to find out.

I’d left the Jedi Order a long time ago - and I could admit, now, that part of the reason was an overly inflated sense of self-importance with a dab of petulance on the side. Only part of it, mind. The rest was definitely the Order being a bunch of hypocritical arses.

“I suppose we may as well talk about that one before Jen here smells the caffa and wakes up,” Canderous grumbled, jerking a thumb towards Yudan Rosh’s temporary quarters. He levelled a scowl at me. “Haar’chak, what were you two thinking, bringing him onboard?”

“Canderous, did you not first-” Juhani began delicately, only to be cut off.
“Don’t even start, kittycat. That lying shabuir tricked—”

I cleared my throat loudly. These days, I often had enough phlegm to make quite the racket. *I’ve forgotten how noisy a shipload of people can be,* I thought in mild irritation, wondering if the Wookiee beheld the same impressions. “I ain’t defending Yudan Rosh, but he gave a pretty solid reason for betraying both me and you, Canderous Ordo.”

“*Yudan Rosh?*” the boy called Dustil spluttered. And, abruptly, I was aware of an upsurge of power swirling around the lad, all the more noticeable when I realized he’d been completely absent in the Force beforehand. “Ordo said his name before- frakk- you don’t mean to say he is actually onboard?”

I frowned, my gaze stilling on Dustil Onasi. *He’s quite powerful. How did I not sense that earlier?*

“Solid reason, huh?” Canderous Ordo muttered. He was walking back to the table with a steaming cup of caffa. It didn’t look like he’d made it for me. “This better be good.”

“Frakk!” Dustil swore, his eyes rounding as he swivelled to gape at the closed hatch. “I can sense him in the frakking medbay! Why is nobody else flipping out about this?”

“That’s the Mando Dark Jedi from earlier, right?” Mission piped in. “Okay, so he’s a bit of a ronto-turd. But seriously, Dustil, chill out. Between you and Jen and Juhani- and sheesh, even old man Bindo- I don’t reckon we’ve got anything to worry about.”

“One thing he ain’t is a kriffing Mando’ade,” Canderous growled, placing down the cup of caffa a centimetre from Revan’s face. He stared at her for a moment, the corner of his mouth twitching. “I give her two minutes, max, before that rouses her.”

Zaalbar leaned over the table and nudged the hot mug away slightly, as if he were concerned it might burn the woman’s nose in her sleep. I took note of that small movement. Even now, it was obvious the ties of loyalty Revan had bound to herself.

“I will remain on guard,” Juhani said softly. “After all, Yudan Rosh did betray us to the Sith.”

“Of course he did!” Dustil spluttered again. The expression on the kid’s face- it was fright and alarm, undercut by a gleam of awe. It was the awe that had me wondering. Teenage Force-users from the Order did not generally feel that way about powerful Dark Jedi. “It’s bleeding Yudan Rosh! Do any of you actually understand who he is?”

*Maybe it’s time to cut to the chase,* I thought, turning back to eye over the Mandalorian. “If he hadn’t blurted out I was a Force-user, then his game would’ve been up,” I interrupted. “There was another Dark Jedi in the docking bay, you know. And we Force-users have this annoying habit of being able to sense each other.” My gaze slid back to the younger Onasi. “Well. Usually we do. I’m starting to think there might be some exceptions to that.”

The boy blinked at me, before ducking his head. *I’m going to find out about that one. Before my curiosity gets the better of me.*

“Doesn’t explain why he dobbed me in, though, does it?” the Mandalorian asked, dropping onto the edge of the tattered bench with a *thwump.* The room was crowded, I realized, even with Juhani and I both standing.

“Well, he said your name like it was someone important.” I shrugged. “Something about his lot not believing you’d turn on Jen. That make any sense to you?”
“Huh,” Canderous grunted, but there was a considering gleam in his eye.

A soft groan emitted from the table, and all attention turned to Revan. The tousled head moved, ever so slightly, and Zaalbar leaned over to push the steaming cup even further away.

“As I said before,” I continued. “I’m not defending him or anything he’s done in the past. But he did have something to do with Jen escaping.” I looked back to Dustil. “And that, in turn, allowed her to save your father from what I’d say was certain death back there.”

“But Dustil rescued the rest of us,” Mission said, and she turned a look of such teenage gratitude on the poor boy that he blushed scarlet. “That was absolutely wizard, by the way.”

“(You acted with honour, and we all owe you a debt),” Zaalbar said quietly. Dustil shot him an uncomprehending glance, managing to look even more uncomfortable.

“Thank you, Dustil Onasi,” Juhani added. “Actions are the mirror of a person’s soul. I once told you that I could not forgive the past… perhaps I was wrong. Perhaps you are more brave and honourable than you realize.”

“You did well, Sithkid,” Canderous commented, with a faint smirk. “But don’t let it go to your head.”

“Sithkid?” I asked, a faint memory of the same moniker being used in a comm to Mission. “Now that nickname sounds like an interesting story.”

“Um,” Dustil began, frowning at me in suspicion. “Leave me alone?” From the way he said it, I wasn’t sure if it was a request or statement. Bah. It wasn’t going to deter me. That young man had well and truly caught my interest.

“Caffa,” Revan mumbled, and a hand shot out sleepily over the table.

“(Sit up, Jen. It’s hot,)” Zaalbar warned, and I was surprised to see her automatically obey the Wookiee, with only a mild groan of complaint. Once the cup was firmly in her grasp, she looked slowly around the room, as if needing the time to orientate herself.

Revan’s eyes closed, and the faint look of despair lined her face. I felt the emotion echo on the Force. “I guess you all have some questions,” she said, taking a blind sip of her brew.

“Yes,” Canderous agreed. “There’s things to talk about, I’d say. But you could do with a status update first.”

I watched the woman take a deep breath, as if fortifying herself, and then open her eyes to stare fixedly at him. “Please,” she said, but her voice was firm, and the underlying tone of command was there.

“Right. We’re six hours out from a pre-programmed hyperpoint none of us recognize. If the Republic find us, they’ll be shooting on sight along with the Sith. Our repulsors are half-fried and the stabilizers are shot, meaning our hyperspace exit is gonna be dicey at best. Oh, and forty percent of the recirculators are down.”

Revan had dropped her head back into her hands. “Balls of a rancor,” she muttered, her voice muffled.

“Jen!” Mission sniggered. “Ew!”
I could feel myself frowning in disapproval. “Ain’t no excuse for poor manners, young pup. I don’t care if you’re a janitor or a Senate Councillor. It ain’t hard to mind your tongue.”

“That’s nothing, you should hear Mekel,” the younger Onasi muttered under his breath.

“So,” Revan continued, lifting her head again. “We’re hoping there’s some facility or planet at this hyperpoint that can fix the ship?”

“In a nutshell, yeah. The bucket droid’s working on the recirculators, under the supervision of your faithful assassination robot.” Canderous snorted, but there was a slight grin of approval on his face. “You should’ve seen the pile of corpses on this ship. Some techs, some guards. There’ll be a good amount of salvage on that. We made HK shift them to the cargo bay, but we gotta do something about the bodies before they stink the place out.”

“I told HK not to let anyone on board,” Dustil said. “Man, he’s annoying. I thought droids were meant to obey orders?”

“HK’s a special sorta droid,” Mission said, rolling her eyes. “Sheesh, I’ve lost count of the number of times Carth’s threatened to dump him out the airlock.”

“Carth,” Revan whispered, and her gaze travelled to the hatch that led to the pilot’s quarters. She swallowed. “How is he?”

“Why don’t you go see for yourself?” Dustil snapped, a look of belligerence crossing his face. “I mean, from the way you two were sucking face earlier, I’m surprised you’re not at his side right now.”

Oh ho! Now that’s an interesting development! And the boy’s angst over his father’s love-life was nothing on what was to come when he learnt the whole truth. Although, let’s not forget his reaction to Yudan Rosh. That wasn’t entirely negative. Huh. I probably shouldn’t be finding this quite as amusing as I did, but I couldn’t help a lingering desire for a bowl of popping corn.

Meanwhile, Revan’s horrified gaze had shot to Dustil, and her cheeks flamed a deeply embarrassed crimson.

“Dustil!” Mission squeaked, her eyes round. She glanced over to Canderous in fright, while the Mandalorian looked torn between exasperation and mild amusement. “Um, seriously? Jen is- Jen and Canderous–”

The hatch opened. And we all, as one, turned to survey the bedraggled figure outlined in the doorway.

Carth Onasi certainly seemed the worse for wear. He’d belted on a jacket over a singlet and shorts, and still managed to appear woefully underdressed. The man looked exhausted and deeply bitter, and his gaze was intently fixed on Revan.

Aw, heck. He knows, and it didn’t go down well.

“Dad!” Dustil clambered to his feet, and in a singular motion ran over to launch his arms around the man.

“Dustil? I–” Carth’s eyes closed briefly as his arms wound tight around his son. One, two seconds later, and the troubled teenager was already disentangling himself, like he hadn’t been the one to sprint over to his father in the first place. And as the boy retreated, Carth’s gaze returned once more to Revan. “I guess you weren’t lying about him, then,” he said quietly.
The shame rolling off Revan was hot and palpable on the Force. I could see the Cathar’s nose wrinkle in reaction, and Dustil twitch in surprise.

“No,” Revan whispered. “Dustil snuck onboard. He- your son saved everyone, Carth.”

“The crystal,” Carth said abruptly. His mouth was fixed in a firm line of simmering anger. “That, too? Or was that the droids?”

Revan shook her head. She looked, in a word, miserable. “That was Yudan Rosh.”

“Who’s onboard, by the way,” Dustil muttered, stepping back to sit down next to Mission. The Twi’lek was biting her lip, glancing back and forth between Revan and Carth.

“What?” Carth snapped. “You’ve got to be kidding! Tell me that’s some sort of sick joke-”

“I know, right?” Dustil added. “I mean, no one else seems to get who he is! I mean, frakk!”

“Pipe down before you embarrass yourself, Sithkid,” Canderous growled. “You ain’t the only one with a second chance here.”

“He’s on the same level as Darth frakking Bandon!” Dustil protested, his voicing edging higher. “That insane gimboid used to visit the Academy! You lot have no idea the sort of things he used to do! Or how powerful Dark Jedi that far up the food chain actually are!”

Revan shot me a look, then, and I could read it clear as the age spots on my arms. Part of her – irrational, she likely knew – wanted to blame this on me. For I could have left her there, spared her this, back on the *Leviathan*.

Ah, but that’s living, ain’t it? You got to face up to the music.

“Bandon’s dead, Dustil,” Revan said quietly. She dropped her gaze to stare down at the table, at her maimed hand resting on the chipped surface. It looked to be healing well, but I wondered on her arm and shoulder. I’d have to see to her again, and soon, if I didn’t spend all my energy on her comatose friend. “I killed him down in the Shadowlands. At least that’s some good news, huh?”

“We’ve got a bigger issue to deal with here,” Carth cut in, his voice dark and low. He was still glaring at her bowed head.

“Bigger? Seriously, Dad, bigger?”

“They deserve to know the truth about you,” Carth continued, completely ignoring his son’s incredulity. “Do you want to tell them, or should I?”

“Let me guess,” Canderous drawled. “She wears jockeys underneath her armour.”

“Not the time to be making jokes, Mandalorian.” The man’s voice was dead. As dead as the gaze he still levelled on the former Sith Lord.

“And I never pegged you for a drama queen either, Republic. You want to give her a chance to find the words, first?”

Revan’s shoulders hunched. I saw the Wookiee rest a comforting paw on her shoulder, but she merely flinched at that, her head raising to shoot both Zaalbar and the Cathar an appalled glance of horror.

“You know,” Carth hissed, swivelling to stare at the Mandalorian. He gave a bitter sort of laugh;
cold and hard. “Hah. All this time- you’ve known, haven’t you, Mandalorian? That’s what all those
damn sparring fights were about? Testing yourself against the likes of her? I guess you thought this
was the greatest thing you’d ever heard!”

Revan flinched again, and her gaze shot up to Carth’s in desperation. “Carth-”

Canderous growled. “Don’t assume anything about my kind, Republic, unless you’re looking for a
fight-”

“Stop it,” Juhani cut in, her voice quiet, but intense enough to scythe through the burgeoning display
of testosterone. “This is not the time.”

Carth wrenched his eyes back to Revan. “Well?” he demanded.

She swallowed, ignoring everyone else in the room as she returned his gaze. It had to be hard, I
realized. “The- the- Bastila,” she whispered. She directed her voice to Carth, but it swept around the
room like a breaker of revelation. “You all know she and I share a Force-bond. What some of you
don’t know is that it- it came about when she saved my life. I have no memory of the time, but it’s a
pretty famous story. She- she boarded my flagship with a group of Jedi, and I understand Malak fired
on us at this time.”

And, still, her gaze never wavered from Carth’s dead one. There was an audible intake of air from
the younger Onasi as he began to connect the dots.

With a shaky breath, Revan continued. “I hear I was a wreck, mentally speaking. The Jedi decided
to, to- save me or use me, I’m not sure- but they implanted another identity in my head.” A dark,
harsh laugh escaped her. “Jen Sahara doesn’t exist; she did, once, but I killed her. Tortured her into
death. She was a Force-sensitive, and I’ve been told we liked playing with the Force-sensitives.”

She laughed again, and it was a truly broken sound. Her eyes closed and her head dropped. “My real
name is Revan.”

The silence that followed was downright deafening.

I couldn’t help but glance around the room in morbid curiosity. Mission had already known, of
course, and while there was a definite shine of fear about her, the look of concern in her brown eyes
was stronger.

Grim acceptance lined the Mandalorian’s face, and the Cathar was staring at Revan with nothing but
soulful empathy shining in her slanted eyes. Huh. Not quite the reaction I expect from a Jedi who
had been ignorant of the truth.

Dustil, in contrast, had pushed himself hard back against the wall, staring at Revan in horrified
disbelief. I had the feeling that Yudan Rosh had been completely pushed from his mind, right about
now.

It was harder to tell with the Wookiee, but his raised paw was hovering over Revan in the same
familial concern as earlier.

And Carth- Ach. Well, young love can certainly tear at the heart. I’d been there, once before. Only
difference was, my wife had never desired nor been granted a second chance.

“Well?” Carth demanded, at long last. There’d been obvious heartbreak on his face, before it
hardened into bitterness. The man cared for her, despite what he was busy telling himself. “Isn’t
anyone going to say something?”
Canderous snorted. “Sure. Did someone remember to refill the synthesizer on Kashyyyk? Because, again, no one bothered to pick up fresh supplies-”

There was a snarl from the Republic soldier at that, and Revan’s shoulders hitched further.

“Dammit, Ordo, you may not care that you’ve been following a blasted Sith Lord, but do you really think the others are going to be so quick to get over it?”

“Carth.” Mission’s voice was tiny, but it was enough to grab the soldier’s attention. “Look. I knew, okay? I found out the same time as Jen, down in the Shadowlands. I guess we’ve had more time to come to terms with-”

“Come to terms with it?” Carth whispered. “How do you- how do you come to terms with something like this?”

“Well,” the young teenager looked back to Revan, and shuffled closer, enough so they were almost touching. I could see the fear, again, spark through the Twi’lek’s face, and it made me understand just how brave the girl was. She had the inner strength, I thought, to choose the course of action she desired, and follow through on it. “You scare me, Jen. I ain’t gonna lie about that. But- you’re my friend, as well. And it seems like you jus’ keep coming through for me, and if there’s ever a time you need your friends at your back, it’s right now I reckon. I won’t let you down, Jen.”

“(I have learned a lot about different sorts of honour and dishonour while travelling with you, Jen Sahara,)” Zaalbar added. He gave a huff. “(I follow the person you are now, not the one you were. There are times you have worried me. But you are not madclaw. And if I can fulfil the terms of my lifedebt by chasing the shadows of madness from you, then I will call it a fair redressing.)” There was a pause. “(And I will do all I can to rescue your bond-sister. That I shall not forget.)”

“I- I told him, Jen,” Mission admitted, casting her eyes down bashfully. Revan still had hers bowed, but she gave the tiniest nod of acknowledgment in return. “On the Leviathan. I mean, I know I said you had to do it- but, sheesh, I thought we were all bantha fodder back there. And Big Z- I figured he had right to know, y’know? With the lifedebt and all.” She cast a mildly irate look at the furry Wookiee, over Revan’s tousled head. “Not that you seem to really get it, you ignorant hairball.”

“It’s Revan, Mission. Not Jen, but the former Sith Lord who’s slaughtered millions-”

“Look, I get that, okay?” Mission shot back tartly. And on her other side, the younger Onasi had his eyes round as food plates, his gaze landing on the different speakers like a flutter-gnat drawn to the light. Every now and then he’d look back to Revan, bent silently over the table, and I wasn’t entirely sure if it was hatred or veneration that darkened his gaze when that happened. “But she’s Jen to me, not a Sith Lord. She’s my friend who’s been with me through thick and thin-”

“Jen Sahara is a lie, Mission!” Carth cried. “You heard her! Jen Sahara is a dead women, just another casualty of the war she brought on the Republic-”

“For the love of Mand’alor, I need a kriffing drink before all this wailing does my head in,” Canderous muttered, before stomping out of the room.

Mission shifted closer to Revan again, this time nudging her. “What- what do you remember, Jen?”

“Small bits.” Revan’s voice was muffled. “Strange dreams and visions. Feelings.”

“Just a few flashes?” Mission replied. “That’s it? Nothing more?”

“Mission, I’m not Jen Sahara.” The woman looked up, her head turning to face the unabashed
teenager who sat next to her, and offered friendship like it was the most natural thing in the galaxy. *Heh. Maybe it is.* “Carth’s right about that. I may not recall my past, but I know I’m the same woman I once was. The one who ended up falling to the Dark Side and destroying everything I cared for.”

“But you’re not bad right now.” Mission wrinkled her nose. “And it- it kinda seems to me- that, that the one sure-fire way to bring Darth poodoo back would be if we all deserted you now.”

“Sometimes, kid, I think you should be on the Jedi Council,” I commented, pushing back from the wall and sliding into the unoccupied seat the Mandalorian had vacated. “I suppose it’s my turn to say something pithy about Revan not being a Sith Lord so much as a vagabond who needs to wash behind her ears and have her head knocked on straight. But that ain’t gonna help much, is it?”

I paused, then, allowing the woman time to meet my eyes. “You know what your next steps are, Revan, and the mess only you can clean up is waiting for you. Malak. Bastila. That thing you’re after, out there in space somewhere.” I sighed, staring straight into the torn green eyes that didn’t leave mine. “You’re lucky enough to find friends again who’ll support you. But I wasn’t just throwing words around when I said there’ll come a time when there’s no turning back. The Dark Side is a slippery slope an’ all that, and loyalty and faithfulness eventually erode. So make the right choice. Stay true. And lean on your friends when you need ‘em.”

She blinked, her gaze narrowing. “We met before, didn’t we?” she whispered. “Years ago?”

“Oh ho! So you do remember something of that?”

“No.” The tiniest shake of her head. The briefest wisp of a word. “An educated guess.”

I harrumphed. “Huh. I’ll have to tell you about it someday, then. In short, yes. You were running around like a mad kath pup at the bottom of the forest. Well, wasn’t my place to go blurting it out to the rest of you.” I looked around the room, and Carth Onasi was staring at me in blazing incredulity. “Better that it’s out in the open though, if you ask me.”

“So, you’re staying with us then, old man?” Mission asked.

“Well, I’m not traipsing back to Kashyyyk,” I grumbled. “The food is terrible. Do you know you can survive on jarinn grubs alone?” I shuddered. “Not pleasant. And it gives you the runs- uh, nevermind.”

“(Jarinn grubs are a delicacy of my people, Jolee Bindo. But they should not be eaten in excess,)” Zaalbar chided. “(Even the youngest cub knows that.)”

I raised a brow at him. “I’ll keep that in mind next time I’m starving in the Shadowlands.”

“This doesn’t phase you at all?” The soldier’s voice rose in pitch as he addressed me. “You’re a Jedi, or you were once. And you’re absolutely fine travelling with Darth Revan? Are you off your rocker, old man?”

“Not yet, but I did know this Rodian once who made the most amazing-”

“Jolee Bindo,” Juhani’s voice, low and intense, once more silenced the room. “Your propensity for teasing others is inappropriate at this juncture.”

I turned to face her; she’d been silent for the most part, but right now she was levelling me with what I’d classify a disapproving look. Hah! I had about six decades on her!

“And Carth,” the Cathar continued, her voice gentling. “It is shocking. It is a major revelation that is
difficult for anyone to take in. But I begin to see that the rest of us have had time to process it. Canderous and I have been aware for some time.” And she turned to lay a look of such compassion at Revan that my grumble at her rebuke stalled on the edges of my lips.

Revan’s intake of air was loudly audible, and her eyes were glistening as they rose to meet Juhani’s.

“Jen. Revan.” The Cathar gifted her with a gentle smile that shone with unconditional acceptance. “I have felt the presence of the Dark Side within you, as it has fought within me, within Dak, and within Dustil. I know how the fallen can be redeemed, and that while it is a difficult path, it is worth the pain. You have shown me that, my friend. You found me lost on Tatooine, and pointed me toward the light. Together we guided each other through our trials on Korriban. I will not give up on you, as you have never given up on me.”

The charged moment was shattered by the Mandalorian striding back into the room. “This is the last of my kriffing booze,” he muttered, slamming down a bottle of something golden before turning to retrieve a tumbler from the cupboards. “Ad’ika, assuming we survive the hyperspace exit and our next dock – wherever the kriff that may be – your job is to re-stock the shelves and the mush-maker. Put some Corellian whiskey on that list, okay?”

“Oy, get an old man a glass while you’re at it,” I called out. “Do you know how long it’s been since I’ve had anything other than fermented wasaka-berry juice?”

“You all knew,” Carth said flatly. His gaze was dark and anguished as it landed on everyone in turn. “And no one thought it was worth even talking about. I can’t believe you all- you all knew!”

His son coughed awkwardly. “Um. I didn’t.”

“I can’t- I need some time alone,” Carth muttered. He shot one last, deeply bitter glance at Revan, before turning on his heel.

“Hyperspace exit in less than six hours, Republic,” Canderous said, his voice unruffled as he calmly poured a drink and handed it to me. “Much as I’d like to laud my piloting skills, we ain’t got no idea where we’re headed and the Hawk’s a mess.”

“I know how to do my damn job, Ordo,” Carth said, his back to the room. “Stay out of my cockpit.”

And the hatch closed behind him. His son directed another wide-eyed stare of horror at Revan, before stumbling after him.

When the hatch closed a second time, it was Revan’s turn to stagger to her feet. She pulled the blanket around herself tight, and the hunted look on her face was decidedly uncharacteristic. “I- I need to be on my own for a bit,” she mumbled, squirming her way past Mission and heading out the other side of the room.

The rest of us stared in silence after her.

“The one thing that woman doesn’t need right now is to be on her own,” I grumbled. “I wasn’t just talking to hear my own voice. She’s going to need her friends.”

“I shall go,” Juhani murmured. “I shall watch over her. You keep an eye on the Dark Jedi, Jolee Bindo. Redemption should be offered to us all, but we cannot be blind to the very real threat he may pose.”

In a sleek, graceful movement, the Cathar slid away from the wall and stalked after Revan.
“Bah,” I muttered, as the hatch closed. The drink in my hand was pungent, and I was starting to think fermented wasaka-berry juice might be preferable. “I’d forgotten how much Jedi liked to order people around.”

“You shoulda met Bastila then.” Mission giggled. “Although I gotta say, Juhani’s come a long way from killing animals on Tatooine, right?”

The girl kept nattering before I had a chance to probe that curious comment. “Hey, Canderous, wanna pour me a drink?”

“Dunno, kid, this stuff will knock your headtails off,” Canderous said, his voice dry as he took a swig. The man didn’t even grimace, so maybe it wasn’t that bad. I took a cautionary sip, and immediately began spluttering.

“Hey, so I’m okay to buy you booze, but not to drink it with you?” Mission complained indignantly. It took a moment for the foul drink to finish burning the lining of my stomach, and when I looked up through watering eyes, it was to see her pouting with pure teenage mulishness. How did Revan end up with a teenager onboard? One thing I did know – teenagers would find a way to do what they wanted, regardless. And heck, experience was a lot better than advice anyway.

“Have mine,” I offered, sliding the tumbler across the table and ignoring the Wookiee’s immediate howl of protest. “It’s disgusting. Enjoy. I’m going to have a proper look around this ship.”

It’d been a hair-raising jaunt off Kashyyyk, and an even worse one fleeing the Leviathan. Still, someone could’ve at least shown me the darn refresher.

And as I meandered out the port exit of the common room, the last thing I heard was the bright chatter of the Twi’lek girl, once more.

“So, Canderous… uh, I guess you and Jen aren’t a thing then, huh?”

xXx

Davis Tar’coya

The blue speck on the holo-map winked out.

“Um,” a nearby tech said hesitantly.

“Ah, crap,” I cursed, knowing exactly what had happened.

The little green Jedi Master straightened, shooting a bright-eyed glance at Forn Dodonna. I could see some tripe about the Force’s will about to spew forth from him, and apparently so could Forn, because her face blazed with righteous ire, and one hand jabbed forward to point at him in warning.


I had to say, for a human, Dodonna wasn’t all that bad.

“Confirm reason for disappearance of the Ebon Hawk,” I barked at the tech.

“Sensors show successful hyperspace entry, sir.”

We should have shot on sight, Forn. The Sith may have failed to capture the prize, but so did we.

The prize had to be Kylah Aramai - that turned, half-human Jedi who’d betrayed Bastila Shan to
Malak. It couldn’t be the likes of Bandon Stone, Yudan Rosh or Nisotsa Organa – Forn had mused on one of those bastards being in command of the Leviathan. The only other suspect that came to mind was Sharlan Nox, but the intense interest from the Jedi Order made me suspect it was a fallen one from their ranks.

I shouldn’t be thinking on it, as I hadn’t been granted the damn clearance to know. But still, my thoughts whirled.

*Or... what if Bastila Shan herself has succumbed to the Dark Side? And is now running amok?*

It was certainly possible. I had little respect for the fortitude of Force-users, and the human ones were the worst. They, without fail, made up the largest chunk of the ones that turned bad.

I knew my attitude was frowned upon, and had likely cost me an Admiralship. I was as experienced as Forn, having partaken in countless battles during the Mandalorian Wars, and been a greenling at the close of the Kun conflict.

Once, I’d believed in the Jedi. I’d reported directly to Revan Freeflight and Malak Devari. I’d worked alongside Captain Karath, before his leap up the ranks.

I’d thought a damn supernova shone out their collective arses.

*I’d been a starry-eyed idiot.*

Unlike me, Forn knew how to be diplomatic. But I found I didn’t have time for that crap anymore.

“No telling who’s on board, other than the Mandalorian,” the human Jedi Master muttered. He, at least, looked decidedly less joyous than Vandar Tokare.

Forn snorted, an uncommon display of informality from her. “I believe we can safely assume, Vrook. The question is where they’ll be going next.”

“The Force is at work here,” Vandar murmured. “To the Star Forge, they will be going. To face Malak, to fix the mistakes of the past.”

There was a gusty sigh from Vrook. “Maybe, Vandar. Or maybe someone is just going down the same path—”

“Faith, Vrook,” Vandar interrupted. “Faith in the Force, we must all keep.”

“It’s quite an assumption to think they’ll be headed there,” Forn interrupted. “Our only true ally onboard is Carth Onasi, and we have no idea if he survived.”

“Doesn’t really matter either way, does it?” I said. “The *Ebon Hawk* is not what’s important, in the grand scheme of things. We’ve got to focus on taking out the Star Forge.”

*That* schematic had been an eye-opener. Our best engineers – who weren’t currently involved with taking down the *Leviathan* – were poring over the information Captain Carth Onasi had sent to the Republic. It looked to be a highly sophisticated starship factory, although the power source had yet to be identified.

The factory was the core of Revan Freeflight’s ascendance to super villainy. And now, it was Malak Devari’s keystone. We’d be aiming for it, and we’d damn well take it out.

*Revan’s dead. Karath will be soon, if he’s not already. And then we’ll put an end to Malak. That’ll*
be the three of them, finally, dead and burned. The three I had once all but worshipped.

“Ion reactor explosion detected on Leviathan,” a Rodian muttered from behind a console.

“Bogey squad one has been eliminated,” another tech piped in. “There’s only one snub left from bogey squad three… oh, and they’re doing a runner.”

Back on the holo-map, dozens of smaller blue flecks were swarming around the Leviathan. Escape pods. Evac orders had been issued. The Leviathan was going down.

“Keep the focus on the Leviathan,” Forn ordered. There was a weariness in her tone, and I knew she was thinking on the vanished Ebon Hawk. “We don’t stop until the cruiser’s destroyed.”

“That won’t be long, now,” I said. “It’s a blow to Malak, Forn. Whatever else, we’ve a victory today.”

She shot me a look, and there was a bulldozed sort of grimness in her small eyes. I’d worked with Forn long enough to read her, smooth-skinned and human though she was. I could recognize her despondency, even though I didn’t understand it. The Leviathan’s about to go. That means an end to that bastard Karath, to one or more Dark Jedi, and Malak’s most powerful heavy cruiser. Sure, we lost our grasp on Kylah Aramai – for who else it could it could be? – but that’s a small price to pay. Insignificant, really.

“The escape pods don’t all need to be shot down, Dodonna,” the one called Vrook offered. His voice was defeated. I felt like dancing a damn jig of celebration, and half the command in the room were hanging their heads. “Vandar and I can sense any Force-sensitive onboard, when they get close. You can afford to grant mercy.”

“The Leviathan, first,” she snapped. I didn’t support the Jedi Master’s suggestion, purely because we’d lost too many damn times in this blasted war. But then my mind landed on the young Sullustan officer, putting her life on the line to bravely beg for surrender.

Forn sighed. “I’ll think about it, Vrook. The Leviathan goes down, first.”

“Bogey squad three has been eliminated, ma’am. There’s only one squad left, and they’re dispersing.”

“To the Star Forge, we must look,” Vandar murmured. “Follow the Ebon Hawk’s trail.”

Vandar Tokare had an unbending belief in the will of his mystical Force that went well beyond irritating. Why would the Ebon Hawk head to this Star Forge, to throw their might – insignificant though it was – against Malak? There’s another Jedi onboard, though. Some runaway Cathar.

Maybe that was the hero Vandar was pinning his hopes on. Unless- unless he dreamed of redemption for Kylah Aramai. Also a possibility. For how many times do the blasted Jedi like to sweep away the crimes of their villains under the flag of atonement and rebirth?

The Order had lost status and standing amongst the Senate. I didn’t see how they’d be able to wrangle any captured Dark Jedi under a flag of sanctification after this war was over.

No. In the unlikely event that freighter had fled to Malak, it’s a damn sight more plausible they’ve gone to join his side.

But we would follow, regardless.

“It’ll take time to muster our forces,” I said, still looking over the holo-map. Sections of the Leviathan
were flashing in orange, now; our diagnostics confirming the failing parts. “A week, maybe two.”

“We’ll move as quickly as we can,” Forn murmured. “Malak will draw his forces back. We have no idea what’s out there, but the longer we give him, the stronger his defences will be.”

“Onboard, I shall stay, and assist as I can,” the short green alien offered.

The human Vrook sighed. “It may- it may not be a bad idea to send some scoutships ahead, Forn. Transmit back what they find before the bulk of the Fleet get there.”

Vandar had turned, his bright blue eyes assessing the human Jedi Master in interest. It seemed a pointed look, as if unspoken communication flowed between the two.

“‘Their inertial compressor’s blowing!’ a tech cried in jubilation. “That’s it, ma’am! The *Leviathan*’s a goner!”

The words sparked a surge of victory through me, and I felt a fierce grin form on my face. I glanced away from the massive holo-map, over to the transparisteel viewing windows on the side of the command deck. The *Leviathan*, kilometres away from us, had sparks of turbolasers dancing over its body. Even from here, I could see the tail-end was visibly separate. And within the heart of the mighty starship, an explosion was visible for an instant - before the vacuum of space gutted the fire out.

Triumph felt sweet. *Yes! That’s Karath down!* Unless he’d found an escape pod – and we’d shot down most of them, and could round up the rest, now – then that meant he was, finally, dead.

My fists clenched in victory. *Fare thee well, Karath, you damn bastard.*

One day soon, I swore, I’d be around to see the end of Malak, too. And then I could finally leave the ghost of bitter betrayal back in my past, where it belonged.

xXx

**Juhani:**

“Revan,” I said softly, entering the living quarters. She had tucked her knees up under her chin, the pose of a lost child, yet her expression was anything but. Grim, resolute. Carth’s words had sliced into her self-resolve – I’d witnessed the cut of each one – and yet Revan wasn’t broken.

She had had a portion of time to accept the truth, if she had learned it back on Kashyyyk. I had been so concerned for her state of mind, but it seemed I had not given her enough credit.

Perhaps the Mandalorian had been correct. Perhaps we should have told her earlier.

“Juhani,” she replied, her voice quiet. “I’m not even sure what to say… I certainly didn’t expect you to already know.” The last words were uttered with a faint twist of wry humour, an echo of her usual self. But her eyes were bleak.

“Calo Nord let it slip,” I murmured.

“Calo Nord?” she repeated blankly. Surprise chased away the darkness in her face. “What, back on frelling Tatooine? Juhani, are you *serious*?” At my nod, a brief puff of laughter escaped her lips. “Stars, Juhani, we’d barely even met then! How in the Outer Rim did you not totally flip out?”

“Well,” I replied, taking a seat on the lower bunk next to her. “I was still processing my own issues
at the time… no, that is not the truth. The truth is I had met you before, Revan. I did not recognize you, not until Calo gave it away, but—"

“You- you, what?” she said, obviously stunned. I could see it was the last thing Revan thought to hear, and judging from the horrified look on her face, she expected it was from the darkest time of her past.

“Revan,” I cut in gently. It was strange, being able to say her name so freely, now. She’d drawn back from me, pushing up against the wall. Her moss-green eyes that reminded me so of Quatra’s widened with alarm.

I smiled at her in reassurance. “On Korriban, I told you about the group of Jedi who stopped on Taris. The Jedi who overturned the slave trade, and liberated me along with so many others, while on their way to fight the Mandalorians. Who did you think they were? Who do you think was their leader?”

She blinked, and the horrified expression slowly disappeared as a considering one took its place. “Really?” she whispered. “I can’t… I can’t remember anything, Juhani. I feel like I should be asking if you’re absolutely sure it was me… but I guess that’s a bit redundant, considering my past.”

I chuckled softly. “Taris was an awful planet for non-humans, and I suppose it still is… but you transformed that, Revan, if only for a short time. You arrived with a squad of Jedi, like a harbinger of change, fierce and righteous in your leadership. You overturned the corrupt rule of the rich elites, liberated the slaves, established free medical care… you do not understand what a difference you made.”

Her face was pale, and she looked away from me. “It didn’t last though, did it? By the time I was there again, after the Endar Spire, Taris was… well. I imagine it was much like it had been in the past.”

“Perhaps,” I conceded. “But you still saved my life, and that of many others.”

Revan’s piercing gaze returned to mine, and this time a frown of concentration furrowed her brow. “That was when you left to become a Jedi, wasn’t it?”

I felt a small smile curve my lips. “Yes. One of your people recognized me for what I could become. If you were a force for change, then she was an angel in white. I had never met heroes before you, before her.” I found myself slipping into the past, when a soft voice gently spoke to me about opportunities, about betterment, about the Jedi. I had only seen Revan Freeflight from afar, but Meetra Surik was the one who compelled me to travel for Dantooine.

I swung my gaze back to Revan. “If you had never stopped on Taris and attempted to improve matters, then I am sure I would be dead by now, having lived nothing but a life of poverty followed by slavery. Not all of your past is dark, my friend. Some of it is nothing short of heroic.”

I caught the slight flinch on her face and understood she was nowhere near acceptance yet. How could she be? I struggled to reconcile with my own dark deeds, and they were truly inconsequential next to hers.

“I have no choice, Juhani, but to keep going,” she whispered. “Yet part of me wishes that… that Bastila had left me. Left me to die, onboard that damned flagship. She gave me a gift, but sometimes it feels a lot more like a curse.”

“Do not say such a thing, do not… do not even think it,” I said, placing a hand on her knee. She was
still in her undergarments from the cursed torture chamber. I’d had a chance to clothe myself, but she
remained wrapped in a blanket. Her pale, hairless skin was a striking contrast to the fine striping on
mine.

Revan had been darkly tanned, once. She had been a warrior of the sun.

“It’s just… it’s the same path, Juhani!” she burst out. “I’m following the same path, only this time
with sod-all recollection of any training, and I have to keep Bastila at bay- I don’t even have her
voice in my mind now, keeping me on the straight and narrow.” Her head dropped, and a bitter
chuckle escaped her lips. “Not that I think she’d know how, anymore.”

“Revan,” I murmured. How could I make her see? “Memory is not everything, my friend. It is not
what will keep you in the Light. Trust in the Force. And… although I am uncertain of everything
Jolee Bindo says, he is correct when he points out that you have us here to lean on. To support you. I
will be there for you, Revan. And I am not the only one.”

She mumbled something, and I thought it might have been Carth’s name. Revan and Carth. That
was an astonishing development. I was surprised I had not sensed something, smelled something…
perhaps I, like everyone, had been too preoccupied with our quest. Still, it was a messy
entanglement, and did nothing but make matters more complicated.

“I do not wish to preach to you, Revan, but romantic attachments are frowned on amongst the Jedi
for a reason,” I said, trying to keep my voice gentle. She hunched away from me. I slowly removed
my hand. “To be perfectly accurate, forbidden is closer to the truth. I, of all people, understand the
pitfalls of not mastering dangerous emotions.”

“Evidently I don’t,” Revan muttered, scrubbing at her face. She raised her head, then, and stared
back at me grimly. “I never would have involved myself with Carth if I’d known. Dammit, I never
should have anyway, and I knew it at the sodding time.” She sighed. “Though, from everything I
hear, Mal- Malak and I were long-established lovers, even when we were fully loyal Jedi Knights.
How the frell does that fit with the Jedi ethos?”

“I do not know of your past, my friend, only of what I have heard. And, in truth, I have always paid
little attention to gossip.”

Revan broke from my gaze, to stare blankly at the durasteel wall ahead. The corners of her mouth
had turned down.

I sighed. “But it has always been difficult to avoid hearing mention of you and Malak. I understand
you were involved before the Jedi found you, and… attempts were made, unsuccessfully, to curb
your attachment.”

“Hah.” It was a bitter sound. “We’re the poster children for why Jedi should stay celibate, no doubt.”
Her eyes swung back to me. The depth of anguish there cut deep into my soul. “You were thinking
about Quatra, earlier, and about not mastering your emotions. Don’t tell me you still blame yourself,
Juhani?”

I blinked. Revan had never been one to dance around matters, but I had always been uncomfortable
with talking about my own feelings. “In part, perhaps. If I had learned to control myself, to rise
above such physical, unwanted desires, then perhaps Quatra’s rejection and condescension would
not have pushed me over the edge. I was unprepared at my Trials… I had thought of so many
different ways she would test me, but I had never expected a personal angle. I did not- I did not truly
understand it was her. Others had spoken of ghosts and visions at their own Trials, and when I
attacked, churning with my own self-doubt and longings, I don’t believe I fully grasped that it was
It was a long speech, coming from me. Heart-felt and awkward, and Revan’s gaze shone in fierce empathy. I did not regret my words, though. It would do her good to think of something other than her own despair.

Her eyes narrowed. “Quatra’s an idiot.”

“She’s a Master, Revan,” I said gently. “She has had decades upon decades of training.”

“Doesn’t stop her being an idiot.”

I could not hold back a wholly inappropriate chuckle. “Well. I do believe you are correct in that we were ill-suited. But it is an example of where romantic entanglements can lead - down dark paths. I understand why Force-sensitives distance themselves from such… messy, emotional states.”

“Messy?” She quirked an eyebrow. “I dunno, Juhani. Love is a pretty amazing thing, in all its forms. To label it as dark-”

“I am not calling it dark. Just dangerous, for Jedi.”

She snorted, and I saw the refusal to believe on her face, despite her past. I sighed, and spoke further of intimacy I normally tried not to dwell on. “Dak left the Order, because of inappropriate desires that were not returned. What if he had, instead, stayed and tried to overcome them?”

“Juhani.” Her voice was intense, and her eyes captured mine. “Dak returned, due to his feelings for you. He may have accepted that those feelings will never be reciprocated, but it is his love for you that set him on the right path.” The corner of her mouth quirked. “And you’re not talking about relationships, so much as unrequited love. And even that… Stars, Juhani, Belaya loved you too. She didn’t falter.”

“Belaya,” I whispered, closing my eyes as her beloved face flashed through my mind. She had been my truest friend, and the grief was still fresh. “I do not believe I shall ever stop missing her. But our bond of friendship was pure, Revan, and-”

“You are not going to preach to me that sex is impure-”

“No, no,” I felt myself flushing in discomfort. “Merely that Dak has a tendency to jump to conclusions.”

I petered into silence, looking away from her, and feeling distinctly off-kilter. It had never even occurred to me to think of Belaya that way, until Dak had mentioned it. And, now that she was gone, the odd thought slipped through my defences. Brief, and bittersweet.

“I’m sorry, Juhani.” Revan’s voice was wry. Despite my discomfort, that pleased me. Better she gain some small amount of pleasure at discomfiting me than sinking into the depths of her own despair. “I didn’t mean to re-open any wounds. But I can’t- despite everything, I can’t agree with you here. Romantic love is just another facet of love itself, and if that’s not the very essence of the Force, then the galaxy’s a cursed place. Look-”

And I found myself meeting her rounded, human eyes once again.

“It’s one of the reasons we managed to reach Dustil, you know. I’m not sure if his father alone would have been enough. But there’d been a girl he’d cared for, back on Korriban. Even sodding Mekel-” Revan rolled her eyes. “I sensed the same emotion from him. One of the few glimpses of
empathy, of love, of *light*, from both those angry boys were their romantic feelings towards a girl. Sun and stars, frelling Yuthura Ban believed Mekel would have left Korriban, left the *Sith*, for that girl."

I wasn’t entirely sure how I felt about being compared to a pair of hormonal Dark Side teenagers, and perhaps something showed in my face, for Revan gave a snort of amusement.

“Well, as old man Bindo likes to say, young people are idiots,” she commented. “But I think I agree with him about attachment.”

My lips curved in a gentle smile towards my emotive friend. “Perhaps you have given me somewhat to think on. For I have the feeling, Revan, that this is an opinion you held once before, when you were a guardian of the Light.”

Again, there was the small flinch. “Don’t be too quick to listen to me, Juhani,” she muttered, her voice twisting. “At the end of it all, I’m still the same blighted woman who fell in the first place. Dammit- if only I knew *why*-”

“Perhaps it is a blessing you cannot remember – and I am not only talking about the dark parts of your past. Perhaps, with a clean slate, you are not doomed to make the same mistakes.”

Her brow furrowed. “I think the reverse is more likely. Dammit, I feel the same drive I must have once before. The same conviction, to uphold the strength of the Republic, to fight for galactic peace, to-” she broke off, sighing. “*How* can I face Malak in the depths of the Star Forge and not expect to fall again? It’s a Dark Force relic, Juhani!” Revan looked away, before her voice plummeted to a broken whisper. “Especially- especially after what just happened on the *Leviathan*.”

I couldn’t deny the state she had been in, there.

When we’d rushed out of the interrogation room to find her, the despair had been so deep I’d choked on the Force. Visible shadows of death had danced around Revan, still and crouched down as she was. The misery had reached out with murky fingers of obscurity, submerging us all in a pall of darkness.

My own dalliance with the Dark Side was *nothing* in comparison, I knew. And yet, somehow, Revan had managed to pick herself up. There was a brittle hollowness about her, undeniably so- but she had managed to pull herself back. Somehow.

I understood, now, why *I* had fallen. Did that make it easier, to stand firm in the Light? To avoid the same mistakes, the same pitfalls?

I cleared my throat. “Well, perhaps you need to talk to someone who can explain.”

“What?” she snapped, her bright green eyes sparkling at me with an echo of her former sass. “Someone who knows the reason why I grasped the mantle of the Sith in the first place?” She snorted in disparagement. “Think I should holo-call Malak and see if he wants a heart-to-heart?”

“No,” I said gently, holding her gaze. “Actually, I was thinking of Yudan Rosh.”

**Revan Freeflight**

I wasn’t sure how long I sat there, in quiet companionship with Juhani. She had lapsed into a gentle Force meditation, possibly hoping I would join her… but I was spent. Utterly spent.
They had known. They had all known. Canderous’ words upon us leaving the ‘Hawk and surrendering to the Leviathan’s crew had stunned me, but I’d had little time to reflect upon them. Maybe, out of everyone, his reaction was the least surprising. Especially when taking into account how much he enjoyed throwing around what turned out to be my name during our sodding spars.

Carth was right about that. Canderous had a frelling field day.

Carth… I wasn’t ready to think on him. There were words to speak, between us, and they would be ugly.

I slowly dragged myself upright. My legs were cramping from sitting still for so long.

Juhani cracked open a tawny eye, and smiled. “Go see the others, Revan. They care for you too.”

I gave her a short nod before leaving. My overriding desire was to lick my wounds in peace, but Juhani had followed me in here for a reason. My gut told me old man Bindo was behind it, and that solitude was likely something he wouldn’t let me dwell in for long.

His dry voice rumbled in my head. “Seems to me, you’re the most dangerous when you go running off by yourself.”

It was hard to know how true that was. But one thing I did understand was the danger I presented to others.

I sighed, and trudged wearily back to the common room.

Mission glanced up as I entered, shooting me a bright smile that tugged in my chest. “You okay, Jen?”

I didn’t exactly want to lie to her, so settled for throwing a shrug in her general direction. Canderous, sitting opposite her, tipped the remainder of a drink down his throat.

::One hour until hyperspace exit::

Carth’s grim voice shot through the ship’s intercom, and I gritted my teeth in reaction. I didn’t need to reach out with the Force to realize his son would be ensconced in the cockpit with him – both Onasi’s, as far away from me as possible on this freighter.

I had no idea what to say to Carth. And it hurt, more than I wanted to admit, to face the reality of his reaction.

And to accept all of my crimes against him.

I couldn’t even argue that it wasn’t me, that I was changed; different, now. The charred stench of death still lingered in my senses, as well as the memory of the once-sworn comrade killed by my indifferent hand.

“We got no idea where we’re headed, or if there’s danger waiting,” Canderous said, unfolding himself from the bench and levelling me with a flat stare. “Get your arse behind the turrets, Revan. You and I will man them.”

Unlike Mission, he had no qualms about naming me to my face. Of course he didn’t. This was sodding Canderous.

I gave him a nod of assent, before complying in silence.
I’d been in the dorsal turret room before, of course, but I’d never strapped myself into either of the controlling seats. The safety harness slid naturally around my torso as I clipped it on. There was a deep ache in my shoulder, reverberating through to my crippled hand, and I was too weary to immerse myself in the Force to block it out.

Canderous was quiet, unusually so. Maybe he was waiting for me to broach the topic.

I cleared my throat. “I hear Calo spilled the beans.”

There was a gust of laughter from behind me. “Yeah. Nasty piece of work, that one. Kinda wish I’d got the death blow on him, rather than Juhani.”

“I’m surprised you never said anything earlier, Canderous.”

“Bastila had something to do with that,” he replied, somewhat cryptically. “But it’s dust under our boots, now. We’ve evened the scales well enough. If we can get the princess back, I’ll let her fill you in on the details.”

I couldn’t envisage Bastila convincing him to be quiet. It seemed- hard to imagine, how a conversation like *that* would have gone.

“So. You’ll follow, still?” I asked, a bit awkwardly.

“How can you even ask that?” the Mandalorian bellowed out, thumping a fist on the targeting deck behind me. I craned my neck around to see him doing the same, staring back at me. “You defeated the Mando’ade clans in the war, Revan. You were the only one in the galaxy who could best us. Whatever you are fighting, it will be worthy of my skill.” His eyes, tough and hard as ferracrete, held mine firmly with fierce determination. “I’m your man until the end, Revan, no matter how this plays out.”

I held his gaze in silence for a moment, until he barked a laugh. “I’ll go back to my people, after this. You’ve made me see the sense in that. But first, we’ll face your endgame. Whatever happens, it’ll be a battle song worthy for the stars.”

His loyalty was- maybe not surprising, but it both gratified and humbled me. It made me think on his blood duel, back on Korriban. Canderous had agreed to follow me then, knowing who I was, understanding my own ignorance. Somehow, during our travels, I’d managed to secure the alliance of a man I esteemed highly.

The duel must have been on his mind, too. “Don’t think I don’t get what you did for me, against Jagi. No one else could have turned that around the way you did. Jagi was more than just a battle comrade, once. And because of you, he might be again.”

He turned back to face his targeting reticule, indicating an end to that conversation. I did the same.

I had no recollection of controlling turbolaser turrets like this one, but as I gingerly placed my hands on the gear-sticks, muscle memory had me trialling out the movement. Like so many things in my life; the memory washed away, but the instinct remained.

I’d been a gunner at one stage. Possibly I’d been crap at it – who knew? – but I’d done it.

“Were you at Malachor?” I asked, my voice curt and abrupt.

“On the fringes, only, or I wouldn’t be here,” his voice, dry and amused, answered. “Malachor’s a
heady topic, Revan. Let’s wait until we have a few hours spare and a few drinks under our belt before we delve into that one.”

“Oh.” I stared blankly out the viewing window; black hyperspace cut through with lines of white.

“Tell me a story, then, Canderous. Not- not about me.”

With a grunt of assent, he complied.

And as Canderous began to expound upon a tale of piloting a damaged basilisk through the atmo of an enemy planet, I allowed myself to enjoy the camaraderie of friendship, of those who accepted me, unconditionally, even though I didn’t deserve it.

I can do this, I thought to myself, even if it meant dealing with the pain of Carth’s justifiable enmity. I can finish what Bastila started. One way or another, we’ll end this together.

xXx

Suvam Tan:

I nervously hummed a year-old jingle under my breath, while filling up the stocks of my self-styled cantina. One thing I didn’t lack was booze. Amazing how generous the Exchange could be, when I sourced them the correct parts.

Bunch of sadistic nerflings when I don’t, though. I was trying to act casual, keep my mind in order, think of mundane things. My space station has its defences. And I have true friends in the Exchange – powerful enough that their dumbass underlings know to treat me with respect, or they can piss off back into hyperspace.

Things were normal. Things were just peachy. My contacts were growing, my credit base – at long last – was exceeding that fat Hutt’s interest charges, and one day I’d be able to pay off my debts.

One day. One day, soon. I’ll be able to extract my son from of that tub of lard’s slave pit.

I just needed credits. Which meant dealing with dangerous people.

And out here, on the fringes of space in a forgotten station that could route all manner of illegal goods, dangerous peeps were a-plenty.

But I could handle the Exchange. Share a drink, have a laugh, know when to bow your head-

I could handle the Exchange. Problem was, there were some peeps out here worse than the Exchange. And I was four days away from an encounter with two of them.

They’ve told me what they want. I’ve got it sorted. I’ll offer a free drink- everyone likes free drinks- as long as they’re not angry drunks-

I wasn’t scared. Just a little jittery, that’s all.

-the booze will give me time to sort out the bots, switch their ship over, get their papers sorted- and they’ll be on their merry way without losing their temper or- or- blowing anything up, or hurting me-

I wasn’t scared! Any rational peep would be careful around Force-users, that’s all. Especially Dark Jedi. Especially especially Dark Jedi as powerful as the leader of the duo. That one’s eyes….

I shivered. Powerful Dark Jedi meant powerful credits. So long as I didn’t annoy them.
Just act pleasant, do what they want, and hope no one else visits at the same time.

Because I’d had fights on my station before. And while my turrets and shields could deal with a lot of things, the Force was a sadistic bugger. *I get approx one unplanned visitor a month. I’ve postponed the weekly Exchange contact. Chances of anyone else turning up has got to be piss-all-

My chron-comm bleeped. I stared down at it.

::Automatic Alert: Hyperspace Exit Of Unknown Vessel Detected. Report To Control Room.::

There was a stutter in my chest. I dropped the bottle of vox, ignored the smash of ferracrystal and the pungent kick of evaporating spirits, and sprinted as fast as I could.

The console was blinking with an incoming comm when I bowled in; I ignored it to run my eyes frantically over the grid sensors. Yavin Station used to be a supply run for the Republic, frigging decades ago when they mounted a last-ditch effort to oust Exar Kun from Yavin-4. After that, well-the Yavin sector was so out of reach– and most of it uninhabitable except by venomous natives– that the Republic had kriffed off and never looked back.

The nav-com ran a quick analysis of the incoming data.

*Ship Model: Dynamic-class Freighter  Line Number: AF2992-X1-BA9371 Signature Broadcast: Daisy Flash Alert: Visual, Radiation And Emission Match Found In Local Database*

I blinked. *Match found?* I’d never heard of a Daisy Flash, and I was pretty solid remembering ship names. Had to be, in my line of work. That meant it was a returning client, who’d changed their ship’s signature in the intervening time.

Which was pretty odd, since signature changes were one of the reasons peeps came to me in the first place.

Screeds of info scrolled past, before the final blinking line held my attention.

*Match: Ebon Hawk*

The breath whistled out my lungs. *Davik’s baby.* Oh, it’d been awhile. But Taris had long burned, and Davik Kang with it – surely. He would’ve sent a comm before coming. *He wouldn’t have changed his frigging baby’s signature!*

Whoever these ship-robbers were, it would be safer to get rid of them. Get them outta here. *At least before the Dark Jedi come.* My mind worked furiously. *There… there might be time for a barter if the price is right.*

Credits were credits, after all. And I had four days grace before I had to get rid of whoever these guys were.

I leaned over to receive the waiting transmit. It was audio only.

::*This is the Ebon Hawk. We require immediate assistance. Our repulsors are down to twenty-thirty, and stabilizers are pingin high in the one-eighties. Request permission to dock and repair.*::

A man’s voice. Circumspect enough to hold back his name, but not stealthy enough to make up a fake one. *Or to remember that he changed his frigging ship’s signature, the dumbass.*

I tapped my fingers. No talk of payment in *that* greeting. "Station’s closed. Turn around and return to
hyperspace. We can’t help you here.”

The reply back was quick. ::Blast it, we have to dock with you! The ‘Hawk’s falling apart. We can
pay you- we have some credits, or an assortment of salvage if you prefer- but we have to get this
freighter seen to-::

The man was obviously desperate, and the incoming diagnostics confirmed his tale of woe. Landing
that baby safely was going to take skill. I had four docking bays, and enough space-bots to fix one
should a poor pilot dock, but still-

I winced, remembering the time a drunk Trandoshan smeared his brains along with his scoutship all
over dock three.

If these guys are still around in four days, I could have a much bigger mess than one dead
Trandoshan and a fragged docking bay.

But the man was desperate. And he had salvage-

I licked my lips. “What salvage?”

There was a pause. ::Armour. Weapons::

“What sort?” That was important to know. Commercial weaponry was easiest to sell, of course, but
military meant more creds even if it was hot-

::A variety from our travels. Some of its Czerka-brand. Some… some of it’s not. We haven’t, uh, exactly
sorted that out yet::

If they hadn’t even sorted their own freight out yet, then they were running. Means they haven’t had
time to assess the value of what they’ve got. Another sign of desperation I could capitalize on. It was
a risk, sure, but running this station always had been-

I can do it. I tried not to think of unnaturally luminescent eyes. More creds. Easy creds. And the gods
know I need those. I just had to make sure they would play by my rules-

I cleared my throat, tried to firm my voice into a command. “I have important visitors in four days
time. You will be gone by then. I’ll inspect your salvage, first, and take what I want. No complaints.
I’ll set my repair-bots on your ship, and you’ll disappear in three days. No matter whether your ship
is space-worthy or not.”

I couldn’t believe I was actually considering this. I knew if these visitors were still here when the
others landed it was just asking for trouble-

If they don’t leave, I’ll make them. I’ll detonate their ship. It should be fine, just fine. My space-bots
were the best, and I could get the freighter outta here in two or three days. Fix it good enough, at
least, so they can hyperjump the frig away.

::Understood. Look, we want to lay low as well, okay? We’re not interested in interrupting your
business or meeting any strangers. I’ll order the crew grounded, and only I’ll come onboard::

“Right.” I nodded to myself. It could work. “Okay, standard procedure is a docking clamp on
touchdown. Its insurance, is all. I have to protect my own livelihood. I’ll release it once we conclude
our business.” I took a deep breath. The man sounded reasonable enough – I’d just give him a drink,
talk over his salvage, and let the bots do the work. “My name’s Suvam Tan.”
::Uh, I'm Carl::

Carl. Right. This would be okay. This would work out, and I’d be just that little bit closer to getting my son back.

“Okay, Carl, bring her in to docking bay three.”

xXx
Zaalbar:

When I walked into the garage, it was to see Jen Sahara staring at a holo-feed emitting from the communication console.

“(Jen,)” I said. “(You should eat something,)”

She shot me a small smile, before glancing pointedly to the plasticeel receptacle clasped in her hands.

I huffed. “(Caffeinated beverages do not qualify as sustenance, Jen. Your body requires fuel, even if you wish to deny it,)”

There was a hollow look about her, now, and I was not sure if it was due to the altercations on that madclaw cruiser, or the revelations back on my homeworld. She put me in mind of a young nest-mother I had known once, who had lost both her cub and her mate to a pack of katarn. Although Malarghh had kept on living after that tragedy, it seemed like a light inside her had been snuffed out.

“Observation: the physical limitations of organic meatbags require an ongoing intake of caloric matter. You have my abject sympathies for the fragilities of your being, Master.”

“Thank you, HK,” Jen said, but her voice lacked the amusement that droid’s disturbing remarks usually evoked in her. HK was interfaced with the console, controlling the audio-visual feed that was playing, and Jen had turned back to stare at it. “Come listen to this, Zaalbar. It’s the fallout from Kashyyyk.”

The two days we had spent docked next to a foreign space station had flown past. Auto-repair bots had surrounded the *Ebon Hawk*, under the watchful eye of T3-M4, and their work was now close to completion. My assistance had been enlisted by Carth Onasi to offload what spare material supplies we had onboard. Some of it was stock from Davik Kang’s days of ownership, and some was what we had amassed during our travels. Scavenged salvage – mostly weapons and armour, all in varying states of repair.

The corpses, too, had to be disposed of. Space was an anonymous graveyard, and I understood the necessity of ejecting the incriminating Sith bodies here. I did not wholly approve, though; to my mind, decomposing matter was better served to fertilize the soils of a planet rather than add to the junk that floated meanlessly throughout the stretches of space.

Between removing near-all our salvage and anything else Carth Onasi required to pay for ship repair, I had not the time to seek out Jen – until now. But she had been on my mind nevertheless.

I knew the others had taken to accompanying her – Jolee Bindo had reiterated his concerns about leaving her in solitude, even though I believed we all understood that without his input. There was an injured look in Jen’s eyes that belied the hurt to her soul.
Mission might tease me about not comprehending the scope of Jen’s past, but I understood well enough. She had committed dark crimes, and betrayed many who had followed her. And now, she struggled to reconcile with all she had done.

A year ago, I would have labelled her madclaw and unholy, and believed the only way to assuage such past misdeeds would be to end her life in a battle put on for the gods’ pleasure. And while I still honoured the customs of my people and our laws regarding criminals, it had been Jen herself who had shown me that restitution was an alternative path to redressing honour. One could not wipe out atrocities one was responsible for, no; but one could atone for them – and perhaps in a more productive way than searching for death in the Shadowlands.

*It would not be a fitting end for Jen Sahara, regardless. I am not sure the wildlife of my home would be enough to break her mettle.*

Jen motioned me forward with her uninjured hand, and my attention was drawn to the informational holo-feed she was staring at. A scowling Human in a tight Czerka uniform was speaking to a gaudily decked-out Twi’lek.

“…of all planets. Czerka Corporation has invested heavily to protect the interests of many indigenous species all throughout the galaxy.”

Jen snorted.

The Twi’lek shot a coy smile at the holo-cam, before addressing the Human. “So Czerka does not have any immediate plans to return to Kashyyyk?”

The Human’s scowl deepened. “At this stage, return is proving difficult. Our starport has been destroyed due to an internal rebellion instigated by illegal off-worlders. There have been sightings of agents from the Sith Empire brewing dissent on the protected surface of G5-623. You must understand that the Wookiees are a both primitive and simple species. Organizations that have a vested interest in disrupting economic harmony would find untouched civilizations like the Wookiee one a prime target for their malcontent.”

Jen whistled. “The Sith? They’re blaming your people’s uprising on the Sith?”

I felt a growl in my chest. “(Czerka are a soulless organization that care only for their own greed and profit margins. They look to hide their own weaknesses by pointing the finger elsewhere.)”

“Yes… but naming the Sith as perpetrators is interesting. There must have been some witnesses in the Shadowlands… or maybe Bandon was causing trouble with Czerka hunters before we arrived.” She was frowning. “Regardless, publicly blaming Malak’s forces is more ballsy than I’d expect from sodding Czerka.”

“…to rebuild the starport on Kashyyyk?”

“We are working with inter-galactic organizations to ensure the natives on G5-623 are fully prepared to govern themselves.”

Jen snorted again. “What he means is that galactic non-profits who actually care about indigenous autonomy are making it difficult for Czerka to re-establish their presence. Or, that Czerka’s cutting their losses and walking away.”

“(My homeworld is named Kashyyyk,)” I rumbled, glaring at the suited Human in the holo-video. “(Not that offensive string of letters and numbers.)”
“…comment on the cessation of hostilities with the Exchange?” The Twi’lek was idly playing with a string of pearls, his glitter-coated eyes constantly straying back to the holo-cam.

“The recent discord between us, you will recall, originated on the Selkath mining colony of Rii’shn. It has come to our attention that the disharmony between our organizations was deliberately manufactured by the Sith Empire.” The Human folded his arms. “Video surveillance has been released to both Czerka Corporation and the Exchange that illustrates the presence of a robed Dark Jedi on Rii’shn during the events that set us at loggerheads.” There was an outraged sniff from the suit. “It is a safe assumption that this is the same Sith agent spotted fleeing a stolen scoutship from the Czerka docking bay in Ahto City, not long before it detonated.”

Jen’s eyes were fixed on the obnoxious Czerka representative. She appeared far more interested in his words than the prettified Twi’lek who was interviewing him.

“So does this mean all economic sanctions imposed upon the Exchange have been lifted?”

The older Human shot a hard stare at the holo-cam. “Czerka Corporation has long had a history of working amiably with the Exchange, and we will not tolerate any entity that interferes with our business relationships.”

Of course they were friends. Czerka and the Exchange were as corrupt as each other. The only difference that I had ever determined was that the Exchange were more open about their dark dealings.

Despite the content of this unpalatable holo-feed, the look of intent concentration on Jen’s hairless face satisfied me. The hollow grief had been chased away, at least for now.

“...expand upon that?” The painted Twi’lek fluttered his eyelashes at the stone-faced Human. “Does this mean you are now levelling sanctions at the Sith Empire?”

“We, together with the Exchange, have offered commercial backing to the Republic’s war effort. The menace of the Sith Empire’s galactic greed cannot be understated. While Czerka Corporation may be an economic confederation, at our heart we are a humble consortium that believes in both freedom and peace for all. The objectives of the Sith Empire are contradictory to those ideals, and thus to all species around the galaxy.”

“Whoa,” Jen said. “That’s… unexpected. I don’t- I don’t remember there being a Dark Jedi presence on Rii’shn.”

I could feel a curl of anger in my chest. That Czerka would so blatantly espouse themselves as upholders of peace and freedom when they had done their best to strip-mine my homeworld was galling. They are gone, now, I reminded myself. And that was due to Mission’s ideals. To the might of Canderous Ordo. The aid of Carth’s cub. And, to Bastila Shan and Jen Sahara, whose quest led us to Kashyyyk in the first place. In that respect, it would be more accurate to blame the Czerka expulsion from Kashyyyk on the Jedi Order, rather than the Sith Empire.

HK-47 had swivelled his head to face Jen. His crimson photoreceptors flashed. “Statement: I disabled all surveillance at the Exchange docking bay in the Selkath colony of Rii’shn, Master. However, our extraction from The Lady’s Garter was hurried, and I did not have time to do the same there. Commentary: Selkath territories are notorious for the proliferation of their recording devices. It is possible that I missed one.”

Jen blinked, and I could smell her surprise before it formed on her face. “Me,” she whispered. A shocked laugh escaped her. “They’ve some footage of me there. Stars, of course they would assume
it was a Dark Jedi."

“Observation: It was mentioned that this footage was released to the Exchange and Czerka Corporation. Conclusion: This has the slippery fingerprints of manipulation from a third party.”

“Not the Selkath,” Jen mumbled under her breath. Her eyes narrowed. “That cursed cantina was well beyond the borders of Emnaad, and that’s the only place on Rii’shn the Selkath control… no, this is the GenoHaradanan at work.”

Perhaps I misunderstood. I did not recognize that phrase.

Jen gave another laugh, her expression clouded with thoughts and conclusions I did not follow. The corner of her mouth was twitching. “Rulan did tell me the stability of the Republic was in their best interests. It would be fitting that they would find a subtle way to add support to their favoured side in this war.”

The hatch opened, then, and Canderous Ordo strolled in. His hard gaze landed on Jen. “Revan, come to the common room,” he said. It was more a command than a request. “We’ve got something to discuss.”

“Supposition: you have aligned your objectives with them in the past, Master. Perhaps they seek to do the same again,” HK intoned. “They make as worthy an ally as they do an enemy.”

“In the past… Rulan said- wait, what?” Jen’s voice sharpened on the last word. “How did you know I met one of their agents in the Shadowlands?”

There was a slight whirr from the HK unit. “Clarification: I was referring to your dealings with them when you grasped the mantle of the Sith Empire, Master. Assumption: Although you never divulged your objectives to me, I understood that you were working with their organization for some ulterior purpose.”

Jen’s jaw had dropped, and the shock rolled off her in waves. I wrinkled my nose. Humans, much the same as Twi’leks, expressed their emotions in a gustatory fashion. I always found it ironic that Mission so often complained that I was the one who stank.

“Huh,” Canderous interjected, frowning at HK. “So you’ve heard about your master’s past. What did you have to do with it, Tinhead?”

“HK, what were you doing before we found you on Tatooine?” Jen whispered.

“Answer: I had completed your latest assignment, Master, but being unable to reunite with you meant my memory core remained fully inaccessible. Reminder: Sith protocols maintain that all droid knowledge be locked before assassination missions, and restored upon return. Your death was widely accepted.” The droid had paused the video-feed to answer Jen. His mechanized voice dropped in pitch, to incorporate an almost chiding tone. “Admonishment: Had you informed me earlier about your identity, my full capabilities would have been unlocked sooner.”

“(Jen?)” I murmured, alarmed at her stunned expression. She was staring at the repugnant droid in utter astonishment, all colour having drained from her face. Even Canderous Ordo looked surprised. I did not follow the implications of the droid’s words, but I did not like the pale, shocked expression on Jen’s face.

“I- what?” Jen looked completely flabbergasted. “Sun and stars, HK, are you saying that you used to be my assassination droid back when- when- who in the Outer Rim built you in the first place?”
“Answer: Why, you did, Master. Qualification: With the technological assistance of the Star Forge, of course.”

Jen merely gaped at him. Canderous threw back his head and laughed, long and loud. “I’ve never known how much to credit to this Force of yours, Revan, but coincidences do seem to follow you lot around,” he guffawed. Canderous looked highly amused despite there being no discernible humour that I could comprehend in the conversation. “At this point, Malak himself could drop out of the sky and I wouldn’t bat an eyelash.”

“You were… you were my droid?” Jen stuttered. Her voice was high-pitched with disbelief. “Before? Before all of this?” She waved a failing hand. I wasn’t sure if she was indicating the ship, or had merely lost motor control of her limb.

“Answer: Other than a few temporary masters during your assumed death, you have always been my master, Master. My birthplace is the Star Forge. Commentary: the organic damage to your inefficient biological processor appears to be substantial. Have you considered an array of cybernetic implants?”

“The Star Forge,” Jen whispered, blinking. “HK, does this mean you know where it is? That you—that you’ve always known where it is?”

“Rhetoric: How else would I be able to return to you upon completion of my assignments?”

Canderous gave a deep belly laugh again, thumping his side. “So all this time we’ve been hopping from planet to planet, Psycho-droid here has known the coordinates. Oh, this is great. If only the princess had let the truth out back on Tatooine.” Canderous shook his head, his mouth still split with a grin.

“(Perhaps there is a certain symmetry here, Jen,)” I hazarded, wondering at the odd chance of HK-47 being a spectre of her past. Combined with the Dark Jedi comatose in the medbay, it seemed that Jen’s history was catching up with her. All I could do was my best to ensure she walked through it untainted, this time.

Jen shot me a dark look. She looked far less amused than the Mandalorian. I could understand that she didn’t appreciate reminders of her corrupted past, but she must also realize that that was inevitable, given the path she had chosen.

“Maybe.” Jen muttered. “You do understand that Jen’s not really my name, right, Zaalbar?”

I huffed. “(I am not a simpleton, Jen, even if I may not comprehend all the intricacies of your life. Names are merely a marker of identification.)” I shrugged. “(If you wish me to call you by your new-old name, I shall.)”

The smallest of smiles curved on her face. “I- I don’t mind, Zaalbar. It’s a nice reminder of how you and Mission see me. Only as the woman you have known for these past few months.”

“(You are the woman who rescued me twice on Taris, Jen. Whoever you once were, you do not have to be that same person again.)”

Canderous had wandered over to the communication console, and switched off the paused holo-feed. “Revan, leave Psycho-Droid and head into the common room. As I said, we’ve something to discuss.”

Jen shot one more look at the robot who hailed from the darkest part of her past. Perhaps his abhorrent personality made more sense now. Although my preference still remained for someone to melt him down as scrap. “Shut down, HK.” The light in HK-47’s eyes winked out, and Jen sighed.
“I have no idea what to do with him,” she muttered.

Canderous threw her a shrug. “He’s a useful combat droid. He kept the ‘Hawk secure on the Leviathan, and had a part to play with the Wookiee liberation, also.”

I was not all that happy with the comparison, but perhaps it was a reminder that even the most undesirable of machines could be used for a good purpose.

Canderous had marched back to the hatch, throwing a commanding look back to Jen. “I’m sure we’ll find a way for him to pull his weight on the Forge. Come on. Follow me.”

Jen acquiesced without further comment.

In the central common room, we found most of the others. Jolee was leaning against the kitchenette, a cup of caffa clapsed between his hands. The faint aroma of firewhiskey wafted from him, and I wrinkled my nose in distaste.

Mission and Juhani were seated, both with a bowl of synthesized nutrients in front of them. Thermal batteries and targeting scopes littered the table, remains left from the Mandalorian’s incessant tinkering with his weaponry.

“(You should eat something, Jen,)” I rumbled, waving a paw at the empty seat next to Mission. “(Sit, and I shall get you some food.)”

I did not wait to hear her answer, but merely began working the synthesizer. Canderous had found a seat, also, and began talking. “Our time here is almost at a close, Revan,” he said. “The ‘Hawk will be space worthy in a matter of hours, and that twitchy Rodian wants us outta here in no more than eight.”

I turned around with a full bowl and spoon, and heard a chuckle from Jolee Bindo. “You met him as well, huh?”

“Hey,” Mission interjected. Her voice had spiked in indignation as she looked up from her bowl of pureed food. “What, you both snuck out? Far out! Carth told us all to stay put. I actually listened this time!” My young friend was scowling, throwing her displeasure at both Jolee and Canderous in turn.

I placed the bowl in front of Jen, and motioned toward it. She pulled a face. While I could understand her distaste, I still stood over her with limbs folded until she began eating.

“I have no idea what you are talking about, Mission,” Jolee Bindo replied in a mild tone. “Although, at my advanced age, I do find myself wandering places I don’t mean to.”

“Revan,” Canderous cut in, his voice a lot more serious than the old man’s. “You need to make a decision regarding Rosh.”

Jen’s gaze darted to the closed medbay doors, her spoon stilling in the air. Her mouth twisted.

“Revan,” Canderous cut in, his voice a lot more serious than the old man’s. “You need to make a decision regarding Rosh.”

Jen’s gaze darted to the closed medbay doors, her spoon stilling in the air. Her mouth twisted.

“This is a good place to get him off our ship,” Canderous continued. His flinty gaze held hers. “There’s a whole empty space station for him to rummage around.”

“Because I’m sure our alcoholic friend won’t mind a Dark Jedi for company,” Jolee drawled.

Canderous grunted. “I wasn’t exactly gonna give Rosh or that Rodian much of a choice. Besides, Onasi’s stripped the damn ‘Hawk of near all our supplies just to foot the repair bill. I’m sure that can cover babysitting duties.” Canderous raised a brow. “It’s your call though, Revan.”
“I’d advise against it,” Jolee said, placing his caffa down on the bench to level Jen with a serious look. “I ain’t happy about the idea of waking him, just yet. He’s stable an’ he won’t die, but a few extra days in a healing coma would be safer.”

“I dunno,” Mission piped in. “Safer would be him off this ship, I reckon.”

“With the drugs in his system, he won’t be a threat.” Jolee said. He paused, before qualifying further, “well, not upon waking, at least.” Jolee cleared his throat, but kept his gaze on Jen. “If you want him to tag along with the rest of us, Revan, then you’d better make darn sure his darker instincts are reined in.”

“(This is a sensible place to part ways, and he is not one of us,)” I said slowly. “(But a short time ago, Jolee Bindo was not one of us. Before that, Carth Onasi’s cub was not one of us. This Yudan Rosh may be more dangerous, but it comes down to whether we can trust him. Whether he is worth the risk. And I am not sure anyone can judge that other than Jen.)”

Juhani had placed her spoon down, turning to look at Jen before throwing her opinion into the wind. “We cannot trust him yet. But it does not sit right with me that we would offer a chance of redemption to all we met at Korriban, and yet deny it to him.”

Jen threw her a dry look. “You’d save the galaxy if you could, Juhani.”

The Cathar gave her a smile, full of affection and admiration. “I am a Jedi, Revan. And so are you.”

A faint colour rose on Jen’s cheeks, and she looked away. “I- I need to talk to him, I guess,” she muttered. “You have to wake him, Jolee, whether he stays or goes. I’ll give you some time to do that. I need a moment to think, anyway.” She stood, muttering under her breath, “frelling HK.”

I tried to catch her eye, motioning back to the half-full bowl of synthesized gloop.

“I’ll be in the garage. I’ll head back to see him soon,” Jen told Jolee. She glanced back to me, jammed one last spoonful into her mouth with a wrinkle of her nose, and then left the room.

xXx

**Yudan Rosh:**

Coming to awareness was a process of automation. Reach out with the Force and identify one’s surroundings. Keep up the façade of slumber, but use one’s sense of smell and hearing in tandem with the Force. Locate the nearest weapon and wield it, if required.

A lifetime of reaction upon consciousness. Trust no one, and nothing.

Now, the Force was weak and indistinct. My soul yearned to sink back into the depths of slumber. Vaguely, I wasn’t even sure why guarding myself was so important.

The haziness of my thoughts was unusually cumbersome. And the pain that followed, radiating out from my gut, was distinctly worse.

“Calm down,” a raspy voice soothed, which immediately had me tensing. The pain heightened, and I only just held back a groan of discomfort. “You’re among friends.”

There was a pause, and I struggled to identify the voice before opening my eyes. The Force. It is... It was shaky and slippery, and my grasp toward it weaker than a neophyte Initiate’s.
Drugs. Medication. Something is interfering with my own personal defences.

I am a prisoner. The thought sparked a surge of caustic adrenaline rushing through my bloodstream, but self-control kept my eyes shut. Gather information about your environment first. Appear weaker then you truly are. Let them underestimate you.

“Well,” the voice continued, “suppose I’d better qualify that. You’re among friends who don’t trust you. Heh. But you’re safe enough, sonny, and panicking ain’t in your best interests.”

Sonny? My limbs were leaden and weak, but not restrained. The Force was indistinct and hard to reach, but not impossible. I would be able to harness it if I tried harder.

Wherever I was, it seemed my captors were complete idiots.

I opened my eyes. It took a moment to focus against the contrast of the halogen lighting.

An old, dark-skinned Human was staring at me with wary interest. His pose was benign and casual. I had the urge to lunge out in pre-emptive attack at my would-be captor, but something held me back – possibly my own physical weakness. For there was a drug-induced lethargy deep within my muscles, and the grinding pain in my abdomen went well beyond unpleasant. I will make a move when the time is right.

And then, recognition flared through my pain-riddled mind.

The old man. The Leviathan. Revan.

My gaze darted swiftly around the room in reaction; a small storage area, not much more than a closet, really. Shelves lined with towels and bacta patches and containers full of hypoderms. A make-shift medbay, for a place not large enough to have a dedicated one.

The vented ceiling was a dark grey; a blend of durasteel and titasteel common to smaller scoutships and freighters. The ducting lines along the side looked commercial rather than military, and the lack of any obvious surveillance further cemented that impression.

I’m on Revan’s freighter. I felt the unfamiliar taste of bewilderment. In my mind rose the recollection of her levelling that cyan blade at my heart. Her eyes, fierce with green fire, as she stared down at me like the blazing Jedi Knight she had once been.

Like Malachor and all that happened afterward never occurred. Like she had never fallen. And the injustice of that burned, as I ignored the corner of my soul that rejoiced at the sight of her uncorrupted face.

So. She hadn’t killed me on the Leviathan. But why had she not just shoved me into the nearest escape pod?

Because Revan is reckless. I tried to pretend I did not think that with any measure of fondness. Before she fell, she was reckless to a fault. It used to drive Malak absolutely crazy.

The old man coughed, and it was with relief that I dragged my jagged thoughts away from her.

“I can imagine it’s a bit disorienting, waking up here.” He was staring at me with a beady expression. “If the Force feels off to you, it’s just the Ceramol in your system. It’s the only pain-med the crew bothered to stock, I’m afraid. I remember Zhar telling me once that Ceramol and kolto together had a tendency to scramble the Force in Twi’leks.” His mouth thinned. “You needed the kolto, and the Ceramol’s taking the edge off your pain, hard as that may be to believe. With your internal injuries, I
imagine the discomfort is substantial.”

_Ceramol._ That explained it. Not an impossible handicap to overcome, if I didn’t wish to wait the effects out. Still, I would have preferred the pain.

“Wr’re going to talk about Zhar, one day soon,” the old man muttered. “That is, if you end up sticking around. Half the crew want to pitch you over to a nearby space station with only an alcoholic Rodian for company.” He paused. “Not that it would be all bad. He’s got quite an extensive range of spirits. Although don’t tell our pilot I snuck out.”

He waggled his eyebrows at me. I stared back, wondering if the rambling, half-senile act was designed to put me at ease. If so, it wasn’t working.

“Where, exactly, is this space station?” The words scraped against my throat, which made me speculate upon just how long I’d been out cold.

“Oh ho! So he _does_ talk!” The old man sounded almost gleeful. “Wr’re docked on some old station orbiting Yavin Prime. Seems to be in the hands of a sole smuggler doing trade runs for the Exchange and the like.”

_Yavin Prime._ Outer Rim, not far from Kashyyyk, but nowhere close to any well-known hyperlane route. Last I’d heard, the Yavin sector was uninhabited barring primitive indigenous species - ever since Exar Kun had been ousted from one of its moons. If there was a space station here, it was likely some relic from his time.

“I didn’t want to wake you up just yet,” the Human was grumbling. “Seems to me that gut of yours could take a bit more rest, and you don’t strike me as the sort of fellow who will idly lie back and let your body heal. But, well, the others insisted. We’ll be heading out in half a day, and someone’s got to decide what to do with you.”

_Do with me?_ It was galling, to think of my life in the hands of others. Barring Malak, I had not taken orders from anyone. I’d put up with Bandon’s hot air and grandstanding for my own purposes, and no one else had dared speak to me in the same fashion. Bandon may have grasped a larger depth of Force power than I, but the difference had not been insurmountable, and I’d more than outstripped him in combat.

I’d long since gleaned Bandon’s weaknesses, for I’d realized an altercation between the two of us was inevitable. At least it had been, until Revan ended matters so spectacularly.

The old man was still staring at me with interest. _He said half the crew wish to offload me here._ It wouldn’t take long, I suspected, before I found a way off some decrepit old space station. But what would I do, then?

The only purpose I’d felt in recent times was the undying drive to end Darth Revan. And surely she was still there. I did not believe otherwise. I refused to believe otherwise.

But, it seemed, I could not strike out at Revan Freeflight. Not without proof of her corruption. And once again, I damned myself for the fragility of feeling I had never been able to shed since a teenage Revan first stepped onto Coruscanti soil.

“What do the other half wish to do with me?” My head was clearing, now. The pain was constant and deep, but I could ignore it. When it became unbearable, I would reach out for the Force, and by then the Ceramol should have adequately worn off.

The old man snorted. “Well, our pilot wants to knock you out, tie you up and ship you off to his
superiors. Or, failing that, shoot you in the head. Still, you can’t really blame the fellow. I understand you were on the edge of killing him yourself.”

It took longer than it should have to connect the dots. I had never liked the way drugs addled my thought processes.

Revan’s soldier. Had Revan actually found love again? It seemed unlikely. Beyond unlikely. It must be a simple fling that, judging from the explosive stand-off back on the Leviathan, would now have turned remarkably sour.

The love Revan and Malak shared once had been eons deep. Before their fall, Malak would have damned the galaxy just to keep her happy.

Afterward… well, even their love had burned to ashes. And the fallout had affected more than just them.

I felt my teeth grit, and forcibly pushed away the dark, heady memories that Revan had absolutely no recollection of. Part of me desired that she find out, one day, everything that had occurred… and a larger part of me hoped she never would.

“At the end of it, the decision is Revan’s. So, let’s see if you can sit up, huh?”

I stared back at the man; he was serious, now. “What is your name?” I asked.

“Jolee Bindo.” He harrumphed. “You won’t have heard of me. I’m one of the few not-famous ones here.”

I ran through the list of Revan’s crew in my mind once more. I’d known it off-heart months ago. Jedi Padawan Bastila Shan. Republic warhero Captain Carth Onasi. Mandalorian General Canderous Ordo. They were all famous enough, even if the Twi’lek, the Cathar and the Wookiee were not. I suppose if one were to add in Revan herself – and now my own presence – then it amounted to a rather notorious manifest.

I knew nothing of this old man. Judging by how mortal my injury had been - and that Revan had never been able to heal a chivving papercut – then this man must have been Jedi-trained. I was well-versed with the annals of the Jedi Order, but his name was unknown to me. Perhaps he’d left young. But- My eyes narrowed. “You knew Zhar Lestin.”

“Yes.” His voice had hardened, bushy white eyebrows slamming down over dark eyes. “You could say we were best buddies back when we were kids. Me, Zhar, and Karon Enova.”

That was… interesting. Malak and Revan’s masters. Now dead, but their childhood friend follows Revan. Perhaps it was just an odd coincidence, one of those funny quirks of the Force.

“Jokes, sometimes, the Force plays on us all. Take life less seriously, you should. Learn to laugh a little. A smile. A smile, now, my Padawan. A raspy chuckle. Consider my day’s work done, I will, if today I wrest a smile from you.”

That was… interesting. Malak and Revan’s masters. Now dead, but their childhood friend follows Revan. Perhaps it was just an odd coincidence, one of those funny quirks of the Force.

That voice, creaky and high-pitched, was one I hadn’t heard in my head for a long, long time.

Jolee Bindo cleared his throat, and the memory fled like a shadow in the sun. Bindo’s expression had transformed into open speculation. “I’ve spent most of my recent years hanging out with the Wookiees, so you’ll have to forgive me if I’m not up to play with recent events. Who was your Jedi Master, Yudan Rosh?”
Oh no, I was not going to play nostalgia with a rambling old man. “Where is Revan?” I asked, struggling upright and swinging my feet off the bunk with a groan. I couldn’t hold back a grimace of pain, and a surge of dizziness engulfed me. My vision immediately speckled with black. “I will see her now,” I rasped, my breaths coming out high and fast.

“You can barely talk,” the old man snapped. “Take it easy, sonny. If you rupture something, I may not be on hand to save you again.”

“You’re a medic,” I forced through gritted teeth. “You would not have roused me if you believed the chance of me dying was high.”

“High, heh… fine. Far be it for me to talk any sense into the likes of you,” Jolee Bindo grumbled. “But I’ll foist one last piece of advice your way, sonny. Don’t say or do anything stupid. There’s a few Force-sensitives onboard, and those who aren’t ain’t exactly pushovers either. No one here has much of a mind to give you any chances.”

Slowly, I forced myself to my feet, ignoring his comments. I was not an imbecile.

The oncoming surge of nausea was strong, and I held it back with an effort of will, my fists clenching in reaction. It was easier to conquer physical weakness with the Force but, for now, I’d have to rely on the effect of the pain meds.

“Where is Revan?” I repeated, this time keeping my words firm and unshaken.

“Humph. Try the garage. You’ll have to go through the common room- here, you’d better let me lead the way.” Muttering something about idiots, the old man opened the hatch and wandered through. I took a deep breath and followed, concentration focused exclusively on not tripping over my own unsteady feet.

*Shavit,* but I hated feeling so weak. Especially here, around Revan and her allies.

Looking down at myself, I realized the old man had removed my armour, and replaced my no-doubt bloodied and torn clothing with what amounted to little more than grotesquely coloured rags. I grimaced. *What I wear is irrelevant. Deciding on my next steps is what I need to focus on.*

*And- and not falling over.*

The room beyond was clearly the central hub of the freighter. Jolee Bindo had meandered over to a comestible dispenser bolted onto the wall. My attention was immediately drawn to Canderous Ordo. He was seated and, in typical Mandalorian fashion, surrounded by various pieces of weaponry.

Ordo’s expression stilled at my entrance, and his hands tightened on the nearest blaster.

Next to him perched the young Twi’lek girl, Mission Vao. I hadn’t been concerned about her the first time I’d boarded Revan’s freighter, for I had been anonymous beneath a Mandalorian helm. And, even now she knew my name, she may not have realized it had been I down in the Shadowlands.

*It was dark and she was panicking. The chances of her recognizing me are sli-*

Her eyes widened. “You’re that marsh toad from the Shadowlands!” she accused.

“What?” Ordo demanded, his voice warping into a low roar. “Ad’ika, did this *chakaar* hurt you?”

There was a whistling through the air, and the blaze of a red lightsaber at my neck. The Force
flooded through me, ready to do my bidding, breaking through the fuzziness of the lingering Ceramol. I clamped down hard on the urge to react, aware that my injured body could fail me - and that passivity might actually be the safest course of action here.

I slowly turned my head to survey the weapon’s owner, keeping my face expressionless.

A young Human male stood, glaring at me with a mixture of hate, fright, and the recognizable awe of a youngling. The Force was swirling uncontrolled chaos around him. There was emotion there, deep and black and bittersweet. This one was strong, but undisciplined in the matters of Force control.

Also, he was obviously not from the Jedi Order.

“You said something about lightning, Mission,” Ordo growled. “Back on Carpet’s planet. You told me you got hit.” In my periphery, I could see the Mandalorian wielding a large repeating blaster levelled in my direction. “All bets are off if this shabuir struck you in the Shadowlands.”

“Sheesh, guys, settle down. It wasn’t him, it was his best buddy. This one actually tried to get the bald sleemo to let me go.” The girl sniffed loudly. “He didn’t try very hard, mind you.”

“Huh,” Ordo grunted, and there was a thunk as his weapon was placed back on the table. I was still holding the gaze of the young Human, whose eyes had widened after my absolution from the most unlikely of sources. He switched off the lightsaber, gave a squeak of alarm I’d place credits on him regretting, and then vanished.

I blinked. He was completely gone. I couldn’t even sense him in the Force.

*Perhaps Jolee Bindo overdid the Ceramol,* I thought fuzzily.

“Think you got yourself an admirer there, ad’ika,” the Mandalorian commented in a teasing voice. “That’s the first time I’ve seen Sithkid in days.”

“What?” the girl squeaked. “Don’t be ridiculous, ya old geezer. We were playing pazaak earlier. Turns out, Dustil’s just as crap as Jen.”

Ordo snorted. He looked back to me again, and I realized I’d been standing stock still, waiting for my respirations to stabilize and my vision to clear. Maybe the old man hadn’t been voicing garbage when he urged me to take it easy.

“You and me got some things to settle, Rosh,” Ordo said, his voice cooling. “But amongst the Mando’ade, we don’t discharge our debts on injured parties.” He paused, jerking a thumb in the direction of an exit. “I expect you want to see Revan. She’s off sulking in the garage behind me.”

Jolee Bindo snorted, having turned around with a steaming beverage in his clasped hands. He hadn’t moved, I realized, even when that young Force-user had brandished a lightsaber at my neck. *Jolee Bindo gave me fair warning, and now he’s standing back to see what I do.* On one level, I could appreciate that I deserved no chance from these sentients. On the other, I did not see the point in healing someone from a mortal wound, merely to stand back while they were threatened.

“Canderous.” The kid Twi’lek rolled her eyes at him, before shooting me a wary glance. “Don’t hassle Jen. She needs some time alone, is all.”

“Sulking,” Ordo muttered, and the girl stuck her tongue out at him.

It was… too much. This sense of camaraderie and allegiance amongst these people… the warmth
they obviously felt toward Revan. It was a bittersweet reminder of my own past before the shadows had strangled everything.

“Go on, then,” Jolee Bindo urged, jerking his head toward the hatch Ordo had indicated. “The galaxy knows that lass could do with the distraction.”

Jerkily, I nodded, and began walking. Behind me I heard the girl mutter. “Sheesh, but he’s a quiet one.”

Well. I had never seen the point in talking when one had nothing of import to say.

I stepped into the garage, and the hatch closed behind me. Revan was there, but she was not alone.

And the pair of them were so deeply involved in conversation that they did not even register my entrance.

xXx

Revan Freeflight:

I stared at the shut-down frame of HK-47. It seemed unbelievable. Crazily coincidental. I had no recollection of him whatsoever; stars, I’d been travelling with the damn homicidal droid for months without any glimmer of familiarity.

But then, I hadn’t recalled Jolee Bindo, either.

HK had an upright humanoid shape that was heavily armoured, allowing him to pose as a combat droid with protocol specifications. But there was a distinctly foreign look about the angular lines of his build that denied any sort of mainstream manufacture. I’d noticed that well before the revelations of today.

Combine HK’s physical appearance with his unique attitude, and it all screamed out a custom-built blueprint. That I’d apparently designated. I wondered, with a shiver, if the Star Forge had spat out any others. It can make starships, and it can make scarily competent assassination droids. What else can it do?

I glanced around the rest of the garage, searching for a distraction. It was mostly empty. Detritus from Davik’s old swoop bike still milled about in a corner- someone having strapped the chassis to the wall and gathered the loose parts into a storage canister. I’d heard Mission moaning about repairing the bike, and even caught Dustil, once, trying to reframe the repulsors.

This room reminded me of our last hyperspace journey, when I’d spent most of my waking hours here, training and discussing the Force with Juhani and the Sithkids. Kel had been quiet, Dustil sullen, and Dak moody and lacklustre- at least at first. Strangely enough, it had been Canderous who’d gone some way to dragging Dak out from the depression of losing one of his best friends and his arm.

Whereas I’d spent the time running from Carth, until he’d finally cornered me and we’d-"}

I gritted my teeth, dragging my thoughts away.

The last two days had been quiet. I’d only seen Carth once, just after docking, when he’d walked into the common room to address us all. He’d demanded, in a flat voice, that everyone stay restricted to the ship. Something about a nervous, trigger-happy Rodian, and that the ‘Hawk’s safety would be compromised if anyone was caught disembarking.
His eyes had been on me when he’d said it. The message had been clear. *Don’t leave the ship. Or else.*

Of course, both Canderous and Jolee had flat-out ignored him. Jolee had returned from the station muttering about a roomful of alcohol and an over-eager host. I couldn’t think that Carth was ignorant of the old man’s travels, but then, Carth had other things on his mind.

I sighed. I’d had little time alone, and I honestly wasn’t sure if that was a good thing or not. I’d milled aimlessly around the ship – avoiding the cockpit and Carth’s quarters – with one or another of the crew tacitly keeping me company.

It was up to Carth, now. When he was ready to talk, he’d find me, and I’d just have to suck it up and take whatever he dished out.

I kept my eyes on the hatch that led to the common room, attempting yet again to think of something other than Carth. *I have to head back to the medbay.* Staring at the powered-down HK wasn’t giving me any answers, and I’d have plenty of time to grill the droid later. Right now, there was another important matter to deal with. And in a way, I was just as uncertain what to say to Yudan Rosh as I was to Carth.

Would Yudan want to travel with us, or leave?

Should his opinion hold any sway over it?

Could I trust that he wouldn’t join Malak’s side, if we took him with us to the Star Forge? All I knew was that Yudan had once been a close, trusted friend of mine. Which meant he must have been the same to Malak.

And- Malak had turned on me. Was Yudan part of that, too?

The hatch opened. But it wasn’t the one I was staring at.

I spun around, to see Carth take a step into the room. And my stomach bottomed out in reaction.

He looked- *like he hasn’t slept in days. Like he’s been tormenting himself over- over me.* The anger was still there, darkening his eyes to almost black. I couldn’t tell if it was hatred or not- *but it must be, surely-

“Revan,” he said in a low voice. I couldn’t hold back a slight wince. *It was* my name, far more than Jen had ever been- and it wasn’t like I wanted him to call me something I wasn’t- but it was a reminder, perhaps, of the events that stood between us like an unpassable schism of darkness. “I have some questions.”

I swallowed. “Ask. I’ll- I’ll answer. As best I can.”

His mouth thinned at that, although I didn’t really understand why. His voice remained cold. “Mission said you found out in the Shadowlands. Is that true?”

“I- yes.” *In a manner of speaking.*

“So- what? I fell for a dead woman?” His brows had lowered. “All that time, on Taris- on, on Korriban – none of it was really you?”

I sucked in a deep, shaky lungful of air. “It was me,” I whispered. “I just didn’t know my name. It was me since my head injury on the *Endar Spire*… Jen is- was a completely different woman to me.
To the one you’ve travelled with.”

“And you killed her.”

I felt my breath hitch at that. Jen Sahara was not the sort of person I would warm to naturally. Nervous, shy, meek. She’d been intelligent, sure enough, but had wasted that under her controlling father’s thumb. And now, I was stuck with her faded memories, a constant reminder of one of the many, many lives I had ended. “I have no idea if it was by my hand. But I know I’m responsible, nevertheless.”

“Yes,” he bit out. “You are.”

I stayed silent, having no rejoinder to that. What could I say? Jen Sahara had been tortured, under my command, presumably for no other reason than her untapped Force sensitivity. She could have been so much more- flourished, perhaps, if she’d found the strength to step away from her father. She could have become a trained archaeologist, or, or, a medical doctor-

“What happened on Rii’shn?”

Carth’s question was sharp, and wholly unexpected. I could see a flare of anguish in his face, then, before his expression hardened. He’d asked about Rii’shn before. More than once. And I’d always found a way to distract him.

I must have taken too long to respond, for his brows lowered further. “You owe me an answer,” he growled. “Dammit, Revan, you owe me a galaxy more than just one blasted answer.”

I looked away. It was easier, somehow, to reply without holding his gaze. “I walked into a trap,” I said in a monotone. “Assassins that Malak sent after me. Things turned a bit- messy.” Understatement of the year, there, Revvie. Why don’t we just say we had a wee disagreement and cancelled any future play-dates.

“And?” His voice was uncompromising. I felt my temper rise a little, at that, no matter how unjustified it was.

“I went Dark,” I said, forcing the words out. “I guess that’s what you want to hear. I had- a voice in my head. Flashbacks of a similar incident.” Each word was a wrestle of will to voice, and there was worse to come. Somehow, I knew Carth wouldn’t let up until he’d had the whole of it. “By the end, I enjoyed slaughtering everyone in sight, and when I came to I thought I had the voice of a dead Sith Lord in my head.”

There was a pause. And then- “What?”

I could feel my anger stirring. It was at myself, though, I knew. “All the time, Carth, I convinced myself I was some other third party, with Jen and Darth Revan in my head, taking turns apiece to screw with my sanity.” A bitter laugh fell from my lips. “Pretty crazy, huh? Enough to make one go see a doctor for help.”

And hadn’t that turned out well?

“You- you mean- wait a minute- you knew you weren’t Jen Sahara, you knew Revan was in your head, and it didn’t even occur to you that Revan might actually be you?” He was a mix of incredulity and blistering anger, now.

This was going about as fantastically as I’d expected.
My fingers cramp into fists. My eyes prickle, and I blinked furiously. “Bastila told me I’d been a Jedi Knight. She’d told me I’d never fallen—no, she told me Ness sodding Jonohl had never fallen, and I latched onto it like a lifeline, believing it was my real name.” The words kept stumbling out, harsh and low and like little droplets of acid. “Everyone knows that Revan is dead, right? How could I be her, truly her, and not just a screwed up sent with a ghost in my head?” My jaw clenched, before I finally admitted the truth of the matter. “I didn’t want to believe it, I guess. So I didn’t.”

I sneaked a look back to him. Was it self-loathing on his face? Was it about his own poor judgment—

_He got it wrong with Saul, before. The man he looked up to, the man who mentored him. And now, Carth’s looking at me in the same light. Worse, even. Because Saul was my creature. And Telos—_

“I shouldn’t have become involved with you,” I whispered. Somehow, my anger had vanished in the beat of a heart. “I knew that at the time. I guess— I guess I was selfish.”

The pain in his eyes seemed to agree with me.

It was—It was getting too much. I could feel the grief, again, rising from the marrow of my soul. I’d thought I could handle this, but everything Carth felt was justified. He had every reason in the galaxy to blame me, to despise me—

My gaze stilled on the blaster clipped at his hip. Carth never, since Korriban, walked around the ship visibly armed— not like Canderous, who made a game of seeing how many weapons he could carry and still walk without keeling over. Carth always disarmed, or at least tucked them away discretely into a chest holster concealed beneath a jacket.

_The ship’s home base, he’d said once when I’d queried him on it. Not to mention that Mission keeps trying to twist them off my belt as a prank—_

My eyes were stinging, now, still pinned on the gun. The last thing I wanted to do was break down in front of Carth. But the despair hadn’t left me, no matter that I’d tried my best to rise above it. I’d known our next conversation would test me. A smarter woman would have walked out of the room. But Carth was right. I owed him—and he deserved so much more than me.

I saw his hand twitch, next to the blaster I couldn’t drag my gaze from.

“If the billions out there knew you were still alive, they’d cheer me for pulling the trigger,” he whispered. He’d caught my gaze, then. “To stop any chance of Darth Revan returning.”

I closed my eyes.

Standing like a blind woman in the middle of a freighter’s garage, holding myself upright against the hammer of words from a betrayed lover.

I could picture it in my minds-eye, myself motionless while Carth’s hand slowly lifted. Unsure if he had the fortitude to shoot the monster he’d come to care for—

“They’d cheer me for pulling the trigger,” he whispered. He’d caught my gaze, then. “To stop any chance of Darth Revan returning.”

I closed my eyes.

Standing like a blind woman in the middle of a freighter’s garage, holding myself upright against the hammer of words from a betrayed lover.

I could picture it in my minds-eye, myself motionless while Carth’s hand slowly lifted. Unsure if he had the fortitude to shoot the monster he’d come to care for—

“You should,” I mouthed. “Let it come to an end then.”

“Do it,” I mouthed. “Let it come to an end then.”

Just like the _Leviathan_, but this time I couldn’t watch.

Yet… this time I wouldn’t be held back by inaction. This time I couldn’t be. Carth and I… the debts between us— it was insignificant, really, compared to what was waiting for us at the Star Forge. To the mistakes I had to fix. As much as my heart might yearn for the impossible, our mission trumped personal and I knew it.
I wouldn’t let Carth shoot me, not while I still had Bastila and Malak and the Forge to deal with.

But maybe I just needed to know if he’d actually do it. It wasn’t like I wouldn’t be able to dodge in time-

_You always were too reckless_, someone rebuked in my head. It sounded like Karon. _Always too quick to jump into situations, without a thought for the consequences._

_Reckless idiot_, a different voice murmured with affection.

I wondered if Carth’s grasp was shaking, like last time. If he truly thought he could follow through. Surely he didn’t believe he’d be quick enough on the draw - a split second’s thought and I’d wrap the Force around him before he’d even begun to press the trigger.

_This is unfair to Carth_. And as that realization unfurled in my mind, I understood that it wasn’t my right to know what he would do. Perhaps I had lost that right.

“I get why you feel betrayed, Carth,” I said, my eyes still squeezed tight. The resolve was firming. It was like I’d accepted what was out of my reach, and now only looked towards that which I had to do. “I won’t ask you to trust me again. But you and me- we’re not what’s truly important. Not when compared to stopping Malak.” I breathed in, deep to the bottom of my lungs. “So either hammer that trigger home and do something about your anger at me, or let’s move on and focus on our mission.”

My eyes snapped open.

Carth’s face was anguished with heartbreak as he stared at me. His hand was nowhere near his blaster, which was still clipped safely onto his belt.

“I won’t let you move against the Republic,” he whispered brokenly. “I won’t let you become Darth Revan again.”

_Oh, Carth_. His tenacity to his own ideals was one of the things I admired the most about him. _I wish I could believe that. How would you be able to stop me?_

“If Darth Revan returns, I shall know,” an arctic voice bit out behind us.

I flinched.

Carth’s hand moved, for real this time, resting at the weapon on his hip. His expression had hardened, staring beyond me, at the intruder who I heard slowly walking into the garage.

_Yudan_. I had little memory of him, but it was obvious our history was huge.

I turned. Yudan’s attention was focused exclusively on Carth. “There is no one left alive who knows Revan as well as me. Malak is too insane to count.” He was five metres away from Carth, now, his hands relaxed at his sides. His face was pale and drawn. He didn’t look like a threat. But still-

Carth’s grip was firm on his blaster. The Force shook like a thunderstorm around me.

“I knew Revan Freeflight as well as a close friend could, and I followed Darth Revan into the darkest pits of perdition. If Darth Revan returns, I shall know,” Yudan repeated, his voice dropping. “I’ll ensure she dies. And stays dead, this time.”

They stood, staring at each other in grim silence. Of an equal age and height, they’d fought in the same wars. Once on the same side, once on opposite.
Carth’s mouth twisted in pain, and he swung his attention back in my direction, as if Yudan Rosh wasn’t worth any more of his time. He seemed at a complete loss for words.

Yudan, too, had shifted his gaze to me.

Like twin sentinels, they stood, facing me and the creeping shadow of my evil. One, a dark voice from my forgotten past. The other, a shining promise of a future I had to accept, now, was completely out of my reach.

Carth gave the tiniest shake of his head, threw one last glare of mistrust at Yudan, and left the room in silence.

I was vaguely aware of the flood of tears I struggled to hold back. All I could see was that octagonal room back on the Leviathan, drenched in death. The Togruta, the betrayer, and the woman who’d once pledged her life to me. Darth Revan. Neither of you grasp just how much she has already returned.

“Damn you,” I whispered to the man who was still in the garage, the one who’d interrupted Carth and I. “Damn you, Yudan.”

“You damned me a long time ago, Revan.”

It was- enough. Maybe because it was Yudan and not Carth- the one who’d sliced two of my fingers off and laid the death-blow on Zhar, the one who I couldn’t even remember, the one who was sodding well corrupted himself-

Maybe because it was him, the melancholy disappeared and a hot anger rose up in its stead. Not a dark, unstoppable rage that would blacken anything in its path, but a pissy temper that felt a damn sight more healthy than it probably should have.

“We need to talk,” I bit out, shooting him my most ferocious glare. Yudan didn’t look fazed in the slightest. “And, sod it-” I stared around the empty garage. Most if not all of the crew were onboard. Zaalbar had advanced hearing, and anyone with Force powers could listen in if they desired. Last thing I needed was for Dustil to go telling his dad whatever Yudan would reveal about my past. “-we’re leaving this ship. I need a drink, anyway. Follow me.”

xXx

No one had been around when we disembarked the ‘Hawk. Left the docking bay. Trudged into the mysterious space station.

We walked without speaking down a long, grey corridor. The sound of our footfalls wasn’t loud, but it still echoed. There were Republic markings along the skirtings of the walls, raising my curiosity about the history of this abandoned place.

Everything felt a touch surreal. Here I was, casually strolling along to grab a drink with a friend, as if I were leading a perfectly normal life. As if Yudan was a perfectly normal sent. As if I was.

As if I hadn’t just left my battered heart back on the ‘Hawk.

My gaze slid to Yudan. Jolee had patched him up well enough, I thought, although he was pale beneath the muted gold of his skin. The old man must have rustled up the dregs of the clothing bin, for Yudan was attired in a torn pair of trousers, and a bright pink shirt too small for his build. It looked completely ridiculous on him.
My interest regarding Yudan Rosh was only natural, considering our past. He was slightly taller than me, a similar height to Carth, but he reminded me more of Canderous — albeit a golden, hairless version from a different species. Yudan’s entire body was packed with lean muscle, like he’d spent his life dedicated to training.

He was a warrior, obviously, much the same as Canderous or Juhani. I had the vague recollection of Bastila telling me he was one of the best duellists alive-

My maimed hand clenched at my side. Without some form of advanced prosthetic, I’d be changing the lightsaber form I was most adept at. Yudan had made that abundantly clear back on the Leviathan.

“Do you have something to say?” he asked in a monotone, and I realized I’d been staring at him.

“No, uh, no,” I muttered, wrenching my gaze ahead. There were doors leading off in both directions. The entire place was eerie; completely devoid of life. “You’ve been in that Mandalorian armour so long, I’m surprised you’re not still wearing it. Or some fancy ceremonial tunic that shouldn’t step foot outside of a sodding temple.” Somewhere should be the station’s owner. And a roomful of alcohol, if Jolee’s word was to be trusted.

“Ceremonial—” Yudan stopped without me realizing at first, and I had to turn around several metres ahead. He was staring after me, eyes blazing. “What do you remember, Revan?”

“What?” I frowned, puzzled. “It was just an off-hand comment. Nothing behind it.”

It was- awkward as frell, talking to someone who knew my entire past, while I had little recollection of the man at all. No idea why he’d latch onto something like that, seeing as he’d probably worn nothing but brown robes followed by black most of his life.

Although, I had the feeling I’d been rather disinterested in adopting any sort of dress code, so why should I expect others to?

“Hello, hello!” a voice squeaked out nervously. Behind me, a Rodian male was almost tripping over himself in fright. I sensed Yudan move the final metres back to my side. “Your ship’s almost done. Carl assured me everyone would stay onboard for the length of your stay.”

Carl. Carth’s attempt at a false name, I thought with exasperated fondness. My heart ached. He’d grounded all of us – me especially – and he had every reason to keep me pinned down.

But, then, I’d never done particularly well at following orders, especially not ones I thought were stupid. I needed a place to talk with Yudan, away from the others- and, stars, I couldn’t imagine Dustil obeying this sort of directive from his dad, so really, what was Carth thinking, expecting me to?

Carl. I’m sorry. I wish-

I bit down on my inner cheek to stop the useless thoughts, and sent a fake smile to the twitching Rodian.

“We’re just after a drink. That’s all,” I said, in a voice I tried to make as soothing and gentle as I could. “Just a quiet place to chat away from the others. We won’t cause any trouble.”

The Rodian’s black eyes had widened dramatically, fixed on Yudan’s face. It might have been recognition – or maybe just the sickly yellow of Yudan’s eyes, the black crevasses of corruption alongside his cheeks. It wasn’t hard to spot a powerful Dark Jedi.
The Rodian squeaked again. “I’m happy to send alcohol back onboard with you. The salvage your pilot has off-loaded more than covers the repair-bots’ work. I—”

“We’d like to talk somewhere here,” I interrupted, with a firm voice. The temptation to cut this conversation short with a little Force persuasion was strong. Did others, those firmly entrenched in the Light, feel the same desire for short-cuts, for methods where the ethics blurred?

It wasn’t like it’d cause any harm—just a quick twist of the Force augmenting my suggestion: that he grant us privacy, allow us a brief window of time on his station. It wasn’t a dark employ of the Force, not really, maybe just a little grey—

Was that how it started? Tiny, tiny steps with seemingly solid justification behind them? I didn’t know. Sometimes, I thought a fall was merely a journey of a thousand stumbles, without the time or inclination to pull oneself back up again.

I forced a smile, aware it probably appeared more like a rictus of pain. Well, the Rodian wasn’t even staring at me anyway. “We’ll be on our best behaviour,” I promised. “Look, just a few drinks, away from our ship, and—” I frowned. “What’s your name?”

“Suvam,” he said. He didn’t look at me. His large black eyes hadn’t moved from Yudan’s visage, and the stink of fear was rolling off him. Of course it was. The last thing the Rodian desired, no doubt, was an unstable Dark Jedi running amok on his station.


Yudan flashed an indecipherable look at me, before turning back to the Rodian. “We are not here to cause any sort of trouble.” His voice was silky; deeper and smoother than I’d heard it before. And the thrum of compulsion was evident on the Force. “You can find us a place to sit and have a few quiet drinks.”

“I have just the place to sit and have a few quiet drinks,” the Rodian mumbled, spinning around. “Follow me!”

“Yudan!” I hissed indignantly, feeling my face flare with annoyance. “That was the sort of thing I was trying to avoid!”

“I am sorry,” he said blandly, sounding anything but as he began traipsing after the Rodian. “Did you mistake me for a tame kath pup, Revan?”

My eyes widened in further outrage, but the Rodian was probably too far ahead to have heard my name, and now Yudan was walking away—

Sun and stars! This conversation was going to drive me mad, I could tell. Which is probably better than wallowing in my own heartache. Canderous had already tried, more than once, to lift my mood which had been desolate enough before I’d spoken with Carth. Canderous had even pulled out the twin lures of sparring and alcohol, brandishing a couple of bottles he must have traded or nicked from Suvam. It hadn’t worked, though. Finally, he’d stomped off with a comment about childish sulking—

I was a grown woman in my thirties. I had more issues to deal than was reasonable on any level. I did not sulk.

Still, it felt better to be seething at his comments, or outraged at my maybe-enemy-turned-ally, than spend the time slowly sinking back into the despair that seemed to dog my every thought.
Suvam turned into a room that opened out into a large half-circle dominated by benches and tables. On one wall was a bar, behind which the shelves were lined with an impressive array of colourful bottles. I felt my eyes widen in appreciation. *Getting drunk right now would be beyond idiotic.* That was true, but a couple of drinks wouldn’t go amiss. It might be enough to loosen the awkwardness that was bound to otherwise dominate our conversation.

The Rodian had scampered over to his collection of booze, before turning around to shoot Yudan a worried look. The room itself was large enough that we could easily sit out of earshot – good thing, too, because the topics I planned to touch on did not need to be overheard. But, still, there was the matter of surveillance.

My eyes caught on the black ducting around the edges of the ceiling. Easy enough to hide mics in there, or pinhole holo-cams. “I should be able to short anything out,” I muttered, more to myself as my gaze roamed around the industrial walls that beheld no decoration whatsoever. Obviously, Suvam was not a decorating sort of guy.

“And you thought to upbraid me for utilizing a simple mind trick?”

I scowled at Yudan. I didn’t want to concede any sort of point-scoring, here, not to sodding Yudan Rosh. And privacy was damn well important.

But one could easily argue that the destruction of a civilian’s monitoring equipment was hardly the behaviour of a Jedi. I couldn’t ever forget Yudan’s prime motivation. But what did he constitute as stepping into the shadows of darkness? *How can you call something good or evil, when there are a thousand shades of grey in between?*

Darth Revan hadn’t been grey, though. I couldn’t kid myself on that.

“Go take a seat, Yudan,” I said. I was still glaring at him, yet his composed expression implied he was entirely unruffled by my ire. He had to be in some discomfort; the lack of colour in his skin tone and the sheen on his face belied that. And, yet, he came across as completely unconcerned by everything around him. It made me wonder if anything in the galaxy unsettled the bastard.

*I daresay he’s seen too much to care about anything, anymore. And that’s on me.* The despair rose again, choking in my throat, the flash of Nisotsa’s corpse, a red ring around her neck— all the other millions I’ve killed or betrayed—

I spun around before it could show on my face, and stomped over to Suvam.

“Surveillance,” I said, through clenched teeth. I leaned over the bar, but the Rodian was still gawking at Yudan. “There better not be any here.”

“No, no, of course not,” he mumbled incoherently.

I let my irritation come to the fore, then, and slammed a fist on the bar. Suvam jumped, and his round eyes shot to mine.

“I need your vow that there is no surveillance here.” I didn’t want to threaten the fellow, but there was no point in this conversation if I had to watch every second sodding word. “You’ll have nothing to worry about, assuming I can trust you.”

Suvam’s bulbous black eyes blinked at me. “I don’t spy on Dark Jedi!” he squeaked. “I leave all cams disabled so they don’t zap ‘em! Or me! All I do is offer free drinks, make the trade, and keep ‘em happy!”
His panic was evident in his shaking hands. As was his honesty.

“Great. Calm down, then. Make us a drink of- of something, and-” I halted in mid-speech, suddenly weary and mildly ashamed of the sent’s obvious alarm. “We only want a place to talk, Suvam. I know you need us off this station. We’ll be a few hours, at most, and then you’ll see the back of us. I promise.”

He quivered a nod at me, and then began pouring something into a pair of tumblers. I only started frowning when he picked up the third ingredient. *A simple drink would have sufficed. I guess he’s trying to placate us with fancy highbrow cocktails.* It smelled fruity and looked vaguely tropical. I half-expected him to stick a paper umbrella and a wedge of sour-fruit in it.

Suvam slid the two highball glasses over the bar. Faint puffs of mist curled over the edge of the ferracrystal. I had the sudden recollection of Yuthura Ban, surrounded in undesired multi-coloured drinks back in that cantina on Dreshdae, when an underling had tried uselessly to sidle into her good graces.

“Thanks,” I said slowly, eyeing over the drinks in askance. “We’ll wave you over when we need a refill. Or, er, a different drink.”

Suvam gave a shaky nod. I collected the glasses, turned, and headed back to Yudan Rosh.

Yudan was lounging against the wall, his eyes half-lidded and his posture relaxed. For some reason, it irritated the frell out of me. Maybe because I was so on edge, while he almost came across as bored.

I thudded the drinks down on the nearby table, took a seat, and wondered how in the Outer Rim to start. We both desired information – well, I was assuming on Yudan’s part – and neither of us had any amount of trust in the other.

_You want to play question and answer, kid?_ It was the voice of Jolee running through my mind, sparking an idea. But it hadn’t been Jolee Bindo who had said that to me.

“I met an interesting sentient down in the Shadowlands,” I commented. Yudan’s gaze flew to mine. “We both wanted to interrogate the other. Of course, in retrospect, now I understand just why he asked some of the questions he did. But at the time, taking turns to ask a question was a solid framework for us both to get what we wanted.” I took a pull of my drink. It was sweet and bubbly. I grimaced. “So. A question apiece. I’ll start.”

“You wish to shift this into a lark, Revan?” One eyebrow raised at me in mocking disbelief. “With alcohol? Are we divulging into boorish drinking games, then?”

I shrugged. “The drink’s up to you, Yudan. All I’m proposing is that we grill each other in turn. Unless you have a better idea?” He stayed silent this time, and I held back a smirk of victory. *Okay. No point jerry-dancing around. May as well dive straight in.* I took another gulp of the foul tropical concoction for fortitude, and kept my gaze fixed on the piercing yellow of his.

“What did I find beyond the Outer Rim?”

A muscle in his jaw twitched. His lips thinned. His eyes flared with deep emotion that echoed in the Force, until he sharply reined it in. And I understood, then, that the detachment he so often expressed was no more than a very practised, very expert façade.

“I wasn’t there.”
“Who was?” I fired back.

“Malak. Talvon. Alaki. Kreia. Others.” Each name came out low and emotionless. Talvon I’d heard whispered in the shadows of my mind. The other two were unfamiliar. Regardless, Yudan hadn’t answered my initial question.

I scowled at him. “What did I find?” I repeated. “Surely you must know something?”

“You didn’t speak of it.” He had turned away. “None of you did, other than in general terms. All I knew was that you considered there to be a threat greater than the Mandalorians. You argued that a stronger Republic was required.” He gave a hollow laugh. “We all saw sense in your arguments, whether we believed you had found something or not. The Senate had hogtied the brass for years, and in doing so almost gift-wrapped the Core to the Mandalorian Clans. Now on the other side of war, we were victorious but tired. Exhausted of it all, and determined to leave behind a lasting peace. Somehow, you convinced us that invading the Republic would bring that about.”

_Some unknown threat turned me on the Republic?_ I blinked, not quite grasping the rationale for such an extreme course of action. _Some unknown threat, that hasn’t even eventuated? The only sodding threat to the Republic since Malachor has been me!_

It all seemed… insane. Insane justification for power. I must have been well corrupted, then, merely searching for some twisted logic that would hold my followers to my damned cause.

But in the Shadowlands… when Bandon had captured me… I’d remembered _something_.

As always, the flashbacks faded like a res-corrupted holo-still, half the pixels coming through null. But vague snippets remained. There’d been a purple world. The Force had felt both alive and evil. Malak had been at my side, clapping my hand.

“Are you in love with your soldier?”

The sheer audacity of the question had me swinging back to face him in disbelief. “Excuse me?” I spluttered. “What sort of question is _that_?”

“A pertinent one,” he snapped. “The Jedi preach that romantic entanglements are but one of the paths to the Dark Side. You and Malak flouted their ethos, and later devolved into Sith Lords. So, I ask again, are you in love with your soldier?”

I looked away. I cared deeply for Carth – months of desperate adventure had a way of forming strong bonds. But the transformation from friendship into something deeper had been recent. Carth made me smile, in his arms I felt safe… and the attraction was strong. Was it love? Or, more accurately – _had_ it been love?

“I don’t know,” I whispered, staring at the plasticeel table. There was a grimy crack running straight through the centre, like something had been slammed down on it in force. “It was such early days. It had the potential to be, given more time. If I’d known, I never would have…” I trailed off. With a grimace, I suddenly realized who I was confiding in, and knocked back my drink.

In a jerky movement, I pushed back my chair and grabbed my empty vessel. Yudan’s was still untouched. Muttering something about a refill, I stalked back to Suvam and used the minute’s grace to recover my equilibrium.

_Obnoxious nosy frelling Dark Jedi_, I cursed inwardly, storming back with a bright blue drink this time. I hadn’t expected a question so personal, I’d thought he would more likely interrogate me on… _actually, I have no sodding idea._ Damn, but this was awkward. _And_ he was annoying.
I sat back down again with a scowl at the expressionless bastard. “I didn’t start this conversation for it to devolve into ship gossip,” I muttered.

He gave an unconcerned shrug. “You ask your questions, I’ll ask mine.”

“Fine.” I glared. “What do you know about the Star Forge?”

His eyes narrowed slightly. “It spits out alien starships.” He finally took a swig of his tropical concoction, and didn’t so much as grimace. Honestly, it was disgusting. I had no idea how he kept a straight face. “It’s a Force relic, but I’m assuming it has some sort of environmental power source as you never appeared to require any materials for it. Maybe a nearby sun… I don’t know, Revan. You did not allow anyone bar Malak to set foot on it, and you rarely spoke of its capabilities. All I can divulge to you is that it powered your armada.”

It wasn’t much I didn’t already know, other than his speculation towards the power source. Which might be worth considering, when we actually arrived there. I frowned. “How did I even find out about it? About the- the Star Maps?”

“An abandoned Sith Academy on Malachor V.”

I sucked in a deep breath of surprise. “What? As in- as in Malachor? The final battle of the Wars?”

Yudan gave a short nod. “You discovered the ruins before, of course. You learned of the Star Maps there. I expect whatever archives or structures remained were blown into space dust following Malachor.”

My thoughts raced. Was this all linked, somehow? A Sith pointer to a Dark relic, on Malachor V- a sacred planet of the people who’d invaded the Republic. And something led me to the Unknown Regions after the Wars, which then turned me back to this earlier discovery-

My head was spinning. More alcohol was probably a bad idea. I grimaced, and took a drink anyway. Turned out, the blue one tasted even worse.

“You- you were there?” I asked. “On Malachor? With me?”

“No, Revan. You told me.” He was starting to sound pissy, now.

My eyes narrowed. “I told you about the Sith Academy, but not the Unknown Regions?”

“As I said earlier, no one spoke of that,” he bit out. *Yep, definitely pissy.* “You came back impassioned and fierce, convinced of a threat, and ordered the lot of us to hold guard in the Outer Rim Territories, while you and Malak went gallivanting across the galaxy.”

“To find the Star Maps,” I said slowly.

“Yes.” His voice was short. “‘What, exactly, do you recall?’ His eyes narrowed when I blinked in reaction. That was a huge question. “It’s my turn, Revan. Tell me what you remember.”

I looked away. There was nothing to stare at, in this utilitarian room. No viewing window, no holo-art, no paint veneer to break up the grey. Somehow, I didn’t think this room had always been a cantina. “Small… fragments. Fragments of memory. Not much, really. A few flashes of Talshion.” It was more a set of feelings than any recollection, now. The pang of hunger, the fright of being caught, the excitement of a heist. A blind man’s counsel as both my education and the shaping of my character.
And, through it all, Malak.

I sighed heavily. “One or two of my time at the Order. And… and after.”

“The Wars? Or your fall?”

“Both,” I murmured. There was a handful of black scorch marks high on one wall. It made me wonder if Suvam had had to deal with blaster brawls in the past. “Few enough memories, and most of them half-forgotten. All intangible enough that I was able to kid myself about my identity, I guess. Actual events, names… those things elude me.”

“So I gathered in the Shadowlands,” he replied, his voice short and low. Yudan had been the one to name me, back there. To force me to accept the stark truth of it all, when I’d spent so long immersing myself in any fabrication that could explain my own head. Ness Jonohl. That’d been the biggest self-deception. I grimaced, and looked back to him.

“So you don’t recall anyone from your life?” He’d folded his arms. He was leaning casually against the industrial wall of the spaceport, but his sharp gaze belied the intensity of his concentration. This question was important to him, I thought. “You looked blank when I said Alaki’s name earlier. And Kreia’s?”

I shook my head.

“Meetra?” he asked, and still I shrugged helplessly. He took in an audible breath. “Me?”

I forcibly turned my gaze away. His voice had twisted on the last, and the bitterness in it was audible.

“I remember little even of Malak. Little enough that I didn’t understand it was Darth Malak in my memories.” I curled my fingers around the blue bubbling liquid. “I remember killing Arran Da’klor.” My voice came out cold. The shadows of death and lightning played through my head. He’d killed himself on my dagger, but not before I’d butchered him. “I recognized both Karon and Zhar.”

And there was no way I was going to bring up Nisotsa.

I recognized you, too. And I remember rescuing you from the Fett. But, somehow, that felt too damn personal to say. Maybe once I’d known him well, but I didn’t anymore.

Yudan gave a hollow laugh. “How much of you is even left?”

“Who the frell knows,” I muttered. It doesn’t matter. Juhani said memory isn’t everything. And when I think of how far we’ve come, what we’ve accomplished so far… I find myself agreeing with her. My fingers clenched, and I felt a furious rush of resolution. The eons-old conviction flared to life inside me again, despite the despair, despite Carth, despite everything.

And I cherished the burn.

I looked up to pin him with a glare. “But know this, Yudan. I’m heading to the Star Forge. I’m going to stop Malak. I’m going to rescue Bastila. And I’m going to destroy that factory. My next question is this: what do you plan on doing?”

He was silent for the longest time. I had no idea of his leanings, nor could I work out what I even wanted him to answer. But I held his gaze, still staring fiercely into those cursed, fallen eyes.

At long last, he broke away, lifting his tumbler to down another swig. “Alright,” he said, his voice low. “I’ll play your ally once more. I’ll stand with you and your crew against Malak, and help
destroy the Forge. And when you fall—" he swung back to me, “I’ll run you through myself.”

He meant it as a threat. But, in a sense, it was the promise I needed. Yudan and Carth, two watchers against the Dark. One powerful enough, perhaps, should he catch me unawares. The other with a tangible hold on my heart. Between them both, I could only hope they’d manage to take me down, should the worst happen.

Again.

It was a promise, and I welcomed it.

I smiled. “Fantastic. It’s your turn, Yudan.”

xXx

Chapter End Notes

Revan’s thoughts on Jen possibly being a medical doctor is a nod to the Dr Jen Sahara in kosiah’s fic ‘Memory’. It’s nice to know that in another ‘verse, Jen Sahara has a happier ending. Thanks, kosiah, for giving her that.

And, I'll say it again, if you're out there and reading I'd love to hear from you. Even an anonymous one-liner makes my day :-)

xXx
"Keep your head down, Mekel," Yuthura hissed as we strode towards the end of the space station. "I do not trust this Suvam, and we do not know who else is here."

I rolled my eyes at her back. Yuthura had been edgy as frakk since we'd left Korriban and found her galactic cred accounts had been emptied. Of course, it wasn't exactly hard for a Dark Jedi Master to finagle more creds, but we needed to source ID papers. Good ones, if we wanted to avoid Darth Jackoff and his army of nutbar gimboids.

Sometimes, I wondered if Yuthura wanted to turn back. Korriban had been a chivhole, but she'd enjoyed what authority she'd wielded. I didn't quite believe her when she claimed she was happy to try her hand at smuggling. I had the feeling she felt it was a step down.

From one way of looking at it, I guess it was. I just wanted to be the frakk away from all the power-games and back-stabbing that went along with the Sith. A smuggler's life sounded fun, actually – independence and freedom of choice and all of that. But we needed papers, some hot goods to run with, and a signature change on the small freighter we'd nicked. So here we were in the arse-end of sod-all.

I didn't know where Yuthura had heard of this joke of a station, but she reckoned Suvam Tan could get what we needed. He'd answered our comm a week ago, fell over himself promising to keep up his end of the bargain, and all but begged Yuthura to dock and come meet him in his "cantina."

I'd snorted in disgust when I'd seen the size of the station – or lack thereof. I was willing to bet this kriiffball's cantina was no more than a kitchenette where he pawned overpriced firewhiskey to spacers desperate enough to seek him out.

We'd spotted another freighter docked on the station. Larger than ours. We weren't close enough to make out more than that, but it'd be a smuggler – that had to be near-all of Suvam Tan's clientele. Depending on the peeps on board, we might have a shot at pinching it for ourselves. I'd wanted a closer look, but Yuthura had insisted on meeting Suvam first.

She was pissy about the additional company. Her fault for turning up a day early – that Rodian insect had promised anonymity, but that was based on a day from now. Still, I'd seen her in a snit enough times to know there was no talking to her until she'd verbally skewered the object of her ire.

Or worse, if he didn't grovel enough. Sometimes, I wondered whether Yuthura would ever let go of being First to a Sith Headmaster. She expected immediate obedience.

Sometimes, it wasn't that bad, actually-

Yuthura stopped ahead, turning back to shoot me a glare that said *hurry the frakk up*. Not that she would phrase it so, of course, but we'd been together long enough that translating her expressions was easy as kassi-loaf.
I shot a little Force speed under my heels, and was by her side in seconds.

We walked on, and I felt my shoulders tensing.

I was getting angry, for absolutely no reason. It wasn't the strangers. The chances of running into a group of smugglers that could challenge the likes of Yuthura and me together had to be non-existent. I was also feeling upset as frakk, with no bloody idea why. I wasn't bleeding sad – in fact, I'd felt more free than ever - ever since we'd shot away from Korriban.

Free to do what we wanted, shag when we wanted, and not have to worry about one of us waking up with a 'saber through the gut.

But the anger and the grief was there in my head, had been since we docked at this chivhole of a station. It was flashing in my mind, pissing me off and making me angry. My stupid mind wasn't making any damn sense, even to myself.

We heard voices as we neared the end of the only corridor, before turning into the hatch on our left. This must be Suvam's cantina – the Rodian himself from the holo-transmission was behind a bar surprisingly stocked with dozens of colourful bottles. Two sents were seated on the far side of the room and, with a jolt of wary surprise, I felt their power through the Force.

Frakk. Frakking frakk! Oh, they were strong, both of them. Powerfully strong. The swirling miasma around the two of them was blatantly obvious. Yuthura froze, staring across the room. Leaning back against the wall was a yellow-skinned Twi'lek, his eyes trained directly on us. The other sent looked to be a female Human from the back, with a mop of dark curls. She didn't bother turning.

"Ah, my visitors!" the Rodian hailed us and, with feet like ferracrete, I followed Yuthura's guarded steps over to Suvam Tan. "A drink on the house, and welcome to my humble home! I go weeks without guests, and then they all come at once!"

He laughed loudly. I could spot the twitchy fear around his eyes, the uneasy crack in his voice. He was one step away from pissing his pants. No doubt, the last thing he wanted was a Force-fight on his precious little corpse of a space station.

The Twi'lek across the room took a swig of his drink, but his attention remained fixed on us. The Human dropped her head into her hands.

"We wish to conclude our business and be on our way. Immediately," Yuthura said, her voice cool as she leaned against the bar. She wasn't looking at Suvam, though. Just like me, she was staring at the strangers. The Twi'lek in particular.

In reaction, I pushed out with the Force. Just a little. Just enough to eavesdrop, but not enough to be noticed.

"Would you like a drink while you wait?" the Rodian asked desperately. He couldn't actually want us to stay and socialize, but maybe his tactic was bribery by booze. Or maybe he was just half-crazed with fear. "I have quite the range, fully stocked since my last shipment."

"If you desire my credits, Suvam Tan, then you will produce what you have promised without delay." Yuthura always could draw cold authority into her words, and it seemed to shut the little bug up.

"Telos," the Human snapped suddenly, raising her head. "Explain frelling Telos to me."

Telos. My stomach clenched. The Human didn't have a Telosian accent; something more Outer Rim,
I suspected. I'd heard that accent recently, and it sure as frakk wasn't from my homeworld.

Suvam squeaked. "I will return shortly." He bowed, and all but sprinted out of the room.

"What's to explain?" the Twi'lek was saying. His voice was smooth. "It was a casualty of the Sith offensive."


*They're talking about the bombing,* I realized with a sick jolt.

"Don't you sodding play idiot, Yudan Rosh," the Human seethed. "Or I swear I'll gut you."

**Yudan Rosh.** The name was like a sucker punch to the gut. I'd never met the guy, but even the greenest Initiate knew his name. Now the fear rolling off Yuthura made sense – she'd probably recognized him on sight. *If he knows her, and suspects we're on the run from Malak, then we're frakking fried!*

Yudan Rosh laughed; a low, dark sound that echoed through the small room. "If you were going to kill me you'd have done it by now."

*But what the frakk would Yudan frakking Rosh be doing out here? And who's bleeding insane enough to threaten him with gutting?*

"Mekel-" Yuthura hissed and jerked on my arm. She'd be listening in, same as me no doubt, her Force intent on their convo. And yeah, I wasn't jacked on hanging about either, but they were talking about Telos-

"I could say the same back to you," the Human returned in a voice just as dark. "Stop pissing about, Yudan, and answer the question. Telos makes no sense. Not the way it was done. It's on the Peragian trade route, and two major hyper-lanes run directly past it. Geographically, the planet is a gem, and it's loaded with natural resources besides. It should have been captured with minimal casualties." The woman was leaning over the table now; her words lashing out, demanding answers. This sounded personal. "Instead, it was obliterated. A potential base, a logistical prize, and millions of sentient lives. All gone. Why?"

Oh, no, this was a conversation I *had* to hear. This was my damn homeworld, its fate being discussed by Yudan Rosh and what must be another of Malak's top Dark Jedi. Nisotsa Organa, maybe, except it didn't look like her from the back. She'd been blonde, in those holos from the Mando Wars. Hottest of the Thirteen, I'd always thought - at least before her hair fell out.

She hadn't looked so hot when I'd last seen her at the Academy.

She hadn't been the only high-profile visitor to Korriban. Bandon Stone and Sharlan Nox kept turning up too, like expired credit chits certain to screw with your day. Bandon was a sadist and drunk on his own power, and I'd always have a soft, squiddy, *I-want-to-dig-your-eyeballs-out-with-a-fork* place in my heart for that sociopath Sharlan. He'd been the one to capture Dustil and me from the fires of Telos.

Nisotsa Organa was more reserved than Bandon or Sharlan; but she had the same streak of savagery, the same twist of cruelty, the same penchant for torture and killing. That sort of thing was always a bit of a turn-off.

*Maybe it's Nisotsa after hair replacement therapy.*
It might have been funny. If she wasn't something, like, twenty years older than me, twenty times more powerful than me, and hanging around with Yudan Rosh.

He wasn't even staring at us anymore. I shot Yuthura a fierce look, even as I recognized the fear in her eyes.

"Talvon and Malak had command in that sector," Yudan frakking Rosh drawled. "Admiral Karath had just defected to our side, and Talvon was testing his commitment. They were both Telosian, you see, even if Talvon was only from his mother's side. Karath… Karath brought a lot of Republic troops with him. He was important. Talvon wanted to ensure he would be ultimately loyal to our vision, no matter what he was asked to do." Yudan smiled. From here, it looked like a firaxa baring teeth. "In the end, Karath proved loyal to the same leader we all swore fealty to."

He descended into silence. *Darth Revan. At least that frakkface has karked it.* The woman said nothing, and Yudan Rosh began to speak again, his voice bland and emotionless.

"We acquired a highly skilled and loyal Admiral, with a veteran fleet of starships. I'm sure some would argue a planet was a fair price to pay. Of course, if Talvon hadn't been going round the twist by then, we could have had Telos as well." Yudan shrugged. "In war, you win some; you lose some." His voice was flat with apathy. He looked like he didn't give a crap about any of it, and I struggled to contain the primal urge to stalk over and sock him one in the jaw.

…sock him one? What the actual frakk?

That was a dangerous thought. While there were plenty of people I wanted to punch, senior Dark Jedi who could zap me in a blink were *not* on that list. No matter his thoughts on Telos.

"Heh, don't worry about those two," a dry voice rumbled behind us. "They won't blow up the station." The voice chuckled. "I think."

I turned to see an old geezer wearing a dung-brown tunic, an openly curious gleam on his lined face as he made his way to the bar. His gaze stilled as it focused on the unnatural fluorescence of Yuthura's eyes.

The colour had – interestingly enough - dimmed since we'd left Korriban, but it was still noticeable. *He knows what she is,* I realized. I reached out with the Force, and felt a swirl of it around him, too. It was eclipsed by the choking maelstrom of the others, but it was there.

*Bleeding shyrack balls. We're surrounded by frakking Force users!* The old man gave a sort of unconcerned shrug, before leaning over the bar to pilfer a bottle and mug.

"I'm Jolee," he said, in an absent tone as he uncapped the bottle and poured himself a shot of what looked like firewhiskey. He glanced over to Yuthura again.

"And I'm going," Yuthura replied silkily, and this time her grip was tight enough to be painful. I would have followed, were it not for the angry yell that had us all turning-

Yudan Rosh, one of the most powerful Dark Jedi in the gods-damned galaxy, stood dripping wet and glaring at his companion. Whatever had been in her glass was blue and steaming from his skin in light curls of noticeable smoke.

It would have been frakking *hilarious* in other circumstances.

"Would you look at that," the woman sneered. "It seems I need another drink." She pushed her chair back and stood, before turning to stride towards the bar. I couldn't resist a once-over; she walked
with an animalistic grace, sleek and fluid, like a predator totally at ease in her environment. I had to admire anyone with balls big enough to throw cocktails over Yudan Rosh, and while she looked a fair amount older than me, she was kinda hot too-

She either completely failed to notice Yuthura and me, or simply didn't give a toss, because she ignored our presence to copy the old man by leaning over the bar and grabbing another bottle of Suvam's stash.

But I was staring at her. And now I knew why her accent was familiar.

"Frakk me!" I burst out. "Ness Jonohl?"

Yuthura let out a sort of choking noise, Ness over-filled her glass as she spun to look at us, and the old man hummed like a senile jackass.

Ness was staring at us both with wide, startled eyes.

"Your drink is full, dear," the old man murmured.

Ness jerked back to her glass, grimaced, and then carefully put the bottle to one side. With a measured slowness that was overly deliberate, she took a long draft of her drink and then turned to face us again.

"I go by Jen Sahara these days," she told me in a forced voice.

False names were standard on Korriban, but I didn't give a roonto's arse about that. What the bloody frakk was she doing hanging around Yudan Rosh? And what happened to Dee?

Her gaze had shifted to Yuthura, who was staring back with a cold, composed expression on her face. Yuthura didn't exactly hate Ness- Jen- whatever- but she wouldn't be interested in staying anywhere near the woman who'd convinced her other two apprentices to sod off, and thoroughly outclassed her on Korriban.

Not to mention Ness-Jen's fantastic choice of company.

That was on Yuthura's mind, too. "I thought you were headed toward a Jedi Master, not a Sith Master," Yuthura said, her voice managing to sound both accusing and silkily disapproving. She was thinking of Kel. Kel, who'd been promised a life with the Jedi Order. And what about bleeding Dustil?

"Run into some old friends, Jen?" Yudan frakkface Rosh said, as he wandered closer. His voice twisted acidly on her name. But his gaze was narrowed on Yuthura, one Dark Jedi sniffing over another. If they were kath hounds he'd have his nose up her butt. Frakk. Frakk! I didn't know much about Yudan Rosh, other than he was too powerful to challenge - and I wanted us outta here. Now. "And where do you know this lot from?"

I felt angry again. I felt furious, as Ness-Jen spun to face Yudan, her fists clenching and the Force sparking a raging chaos around her. "Leave them alone, Yudan. You're here for me, not anyone else. So leave them the frell alone."

Yudan had gone back to staring at her, his skin gleaming wet under the spaceport's lighting. His eyes were the piercing yellow of the truly damned – Yuthura was one of the few anomalies who'd turned a different shade – and Yudan Rosh had been pissing around in the depths of the Dark Side since frakking Malachor.
He gave Ness-Jen an imperceptible nod of agreement.

The surprise felt like a rush of gree-spice. *Who the frakk is she, that Yudan Rosh would back down for her?* The same woman who'd triumphed over Uthar Wynn and Jorak Uln. I couldn't believe, now, that I'd actually challenged her outside the Academy's gates, second time we'd met.

I was taken, suddenly, by an irrational urge to see a showdown between her and that power-mad gimboid, Bandon Stone. He used to flounce about the Academy, label himself a Darth like he didn't kiss Malak's wrinkly toes along with the rest of them, and then piss off after kidnapping the strongest Adepts.

Ness-Jen was a firebrand. But was she a Sith? Did she, also, bend knee to Malak?

She had turned back to stare at Yuthura. "Kel and Dak left Kashyyyk with Master Quatra from the Jedi Order. They're headed to Coruscant." Her eyes narrowed. "They might meet up with Thalia, there. It could be quite a reunion if you followed."

Yuthura turned cold. I didn't have to look at her to see her expression ice over. She got *testy* when people told her what to do – even in friendly, *just-trying-to-make-an-innocent-suggestion* sorta ways.

Ness-Jen laughed suddenly. I scowled as I felt her amusement swirl around her in a tangible wave of Force. Man, whoever trained that freakshow taught her frakk-all in control, with the way she bled her stupid emotions out everywhere. "Okay, okay," the woman said. "I can see I'm wasting my time. Guess I've been hanging around Staria too long."

Staria – that was the pious Cathar who'd preached that Korriban wasn't the place for me. Maybe the uptight kittykat had been right about that, but the way both her and Ness-Jen waltzed about shoving every screwed up Sithling towards the Jedi was as stupid as it was dangerous.

My gaze slid back to Yudan chivhole Rosh, who was staring at Ness-Jen through narrowed, frakked-up eyes. The blue booze still dripped in misty trails down his Sith-marked face. The thought of trying to redeem the likes of him was completely borked. *But if they're all travelling together, then does that mean he's on the run from Malak? Just like us?*

That sounded even *more* borked.

Suddenly, I found I didn't give a crap. All I really cared about was the one Ness-Jen had omitted. "Where's Dustil?" I said, scowling.

Her eyes slid to mine. "Well- uh. Actually, he's on our ship."

I jerked around in reaction, staring wildly at the open entrance as if my old friend would suddenly appear. Instead, in slunk the petrified form of the station's rotgrub trader.

"Dee's here? At this turd of a spaceport? I had to see him. Did he even know who he was travelling with? What the frakk was he still doing with them? Somehow, I'd had the idea he woulda disappeared off into the galaxy with his dear old dad, maybe to that new astro station that orbited our decimated homeworld like a frakking memorial to the dead."

"Eep," Suvam squeaked, his gaze darting around the lot of us, standing all together like we were having a touching heart-to-heart. Suvam looked as desperate as a spice addict run out of shot. "Anyone need another drink?" he gasped.

"I need my trade completed," Yuthura snapped. "Now."
"I-I have the data-work, back in the office," the spooked bug stammered. "I've pulled my bots away from-" he shot a frantic look at Yudan Rosh- "I mean, they're loading the goods now, and affecting the required changes to your ship. It won't be long!"

"I'll see to the papers now, and then we shall wait back onboard," Yuthura stated. Her face could have been carved from a slab of permacrete. It was gonna take ages before she thawed, I could tell. "You shall stay in constant communication with me, Suvam Tan, and I will transfer half the funds upon completion." Her violet eyes narrowed as she stared at him coldly. "You promised anonymity, and you have not delivered on that. Do not displeasure me further."

"Yes- yes, of course, come with me then," Suvam mumbled, his gaze flicking back and forth between the two Twi'leki Dark Jedi like a frakking game of pong. He stumbled backwards, moving out of the room.

"I have to see Dustil." My words came out, low and a lot more firm than I usually dared with Yuthura.

She shot me a look of annoyance. Her violet eyes were pinched with a cautionary fear. She wanted her trade, and she wanted away from Yudan Rosh. "Now's not the time," she said, her tone clipped and demanding an end to the conversation.

But Dee had been my blood before her. And while I labelled Yuthura my Master, my lover, my ally… Dustil had been a true friend. Well, before he'd frakked it up by blaming Selene on me. I gotta make sure he knows who he's travelling with. If nothing else… I gotta make sure he's okay.

"I'll go see him quick while you sort out the admin," I said. I saw the fierceness on her face, and held her gaze anyway. "I gotta do this."

She closed her eyes, just for a sec, as if internally debating the concession.

"Eh, you can follow me. I'll rustle him out of the ship." It was the raspy voice of the old Human, the one who'd stood aside from events for the most part with his nose in a drink. He turned his head to the others. "May as well leave those two here to finish their drinks in peace." The old man eyeballed Yudan turdface Rosh up and down like he was critiquing a work of art before cackling. "Blue looks good on you, sonny."

Yuthura glanced my way again. Her eyes widened the smallest amount; from her, that was akin to a warning. I could tell what she was thinking. I've killed people for less, Mekel. And so has he! And yet, other than a seething glare of animosity, the Dark Jedi who'd led fleets into war under Malak's banner did absolutely sod-all.

"Fine," Yuthura said to me. "Go. You have little time, Mekel. I shall return for you forthwith." Her voice was glacial, and she spun on her heel before leaving the room after Suvam.

"Humph," the old man muttered. "Strong woman." He peered back at me. "Well, don't just stand there like a limp fish, boy. Come this way."

He meandered off in Yuthura's wake. I shot one last look at the others. Yudan Rosh had turned emotionless, staring at me blankly as I made to leave. Ness Jonohl, in comparison, was an open frakking holo-book. She frowned at me in puzzlement, brows creasing over green eyes, like she thought I was the weird one here. Yeah. Whatever. She was an oddball, alright.

"Okay. Don't kill each other," I muttered as a farewell. "Or do. I don't give a crap."

I ran outta there before either of them could take offence.
For a senile old git, the man was already halfway down the bleeding corridor by the time I'd caught up. He shot me a speculative glance as I drew close. "So," he said slowly. "Judging by your age and attitude, you were trained at the same place as Dustil Onasi. Old friends, hmm?"

I couldn't hide the surprise that twisted my face at his words, and the man's eyes narrowed as he caught it. Onasi? Dee and I had been fast friends since the moment Sharlan had tied us up and thrown us in his ship's hold next to a pair of blubbering girls who'd never surfaced on Korriban. We'd shared dreams, and secrets, and trust – for a while.

But we'd never swapped family names.

Didn't make two shots difference in my case; I'd been a joyboy since my ma had sold me off as a squalling babe. But Dustil had been from the rich side of Thani - capital city of Telos before it burned. It was evident in his accent, his reserve, his frakking way of walking, even.

And he clammed up tighter than a Hutt's credit purse when our convo danced anywhere near his childhood. I'd like to think I'd respect his desire for privacy. But, frakk. I wasn't sure I'd be holding my curiosity back next time my fingers had HoloNet access.

Funny, the name seemed kinda familiar, too.

I shot the old man a smile. "Yeah, we go way back," I drawled. "Cousins from Corellia. Trained as security guards, y'know, before we went our own ways."

The old man snorted. I'd forgotten what he said his name was. Joel? Jolly?

"You're an atrocious liar, sonny boy. You think I can't tell the pair of you are Sith-trained?"

"You think I can be arsed with this conversation?" I shot back. "It's none of your business, gramps." I looked up to see a large hatch emblazoned with Dock Three on it. I smirked. "This must be your port, old man. Tell Dustil its Mex here to see him, and he'll come out."

He gave me a beady eye, as if it were meant to frakking break me or some such banthacrap. "Manners, kid. You'll be surprised how far in life it'll get you." With a huff, the old man still stalked through the hatch to do what I wanted anyway. I rolled my eyes. Yeah, screw that. Like asking 'please' ever got me anywhere.

I wandered into the dock after him, stopping to eyeball the freighter from a distance as he clambered up the loading ramp and tapped something into a control panel. He vanished inside, and I was left staring at the starship I'd thought about nicking a mere hour ago.

It took up about a quarter of the hangar's available space. Same one they'd left Korriban in. Pretty beaten up, and I didn't pretend to know anything about its model. Bet they're here for a signature change. Just like us.

Minutes passed, and I was left shifting my weight uncomfortably in the quiet hangar. Ness-Jen had dropped Dustil's name and I'd shot here like a desperate ash-rabbit sniffing a scent on the wind. Only now did caution rear its ugly snout, and the thought occurred to me that separating from Yuthura might've been a bonehead move. Especially with who else was on this station.

The ship's entrance opened. There was no one there. I narrowed my eyes, and pushed out with the Force in reaction.

There was a patch of null-Force in entranceway. Relief rushed through me like a high.
"I can still sense you, Dee," I snapped. Back on Korriban, I'd been inordinately proud that I was the only one – other than Master Uthar – who could tell when Dee was sneaking about.

Dustil appeared in the blink of an eye, gaping at me like a stunned gizka. He ran down the loading ramp and across the hangar, only stopping when he was a metre or so away.

"Mekel?" he gasped. "Mex?"

"Dee." I grinned stupidly, holding back the urge to go hug him like an emotional tween on a hot date. Any other time, I'd twist his arm into a drink. Wouldn't even need to use a mind-trick to score 'em free - Suvam was too piss-scared to ping us for it. But no way was I heading back to mingle with Yudan Rosh and Ness-Jen, or whatever her name really was.

Dustil gave me a crooked sort of smile, like he didn't believe I was actually standing in front of him. "What the frakk are you doing here?"

It was exactly my reaction, and I couldn't hold back a snicker. "Yuthura and me, we're trying our hand at smuggling. You?"

"We're- it's complicated," Dustil said, hitching his shoulders and looking awkward as frakk. Still the same old Dustil, then. *He's on the run, just like us. Has he been running since Korriban?*

"Seems like everyone's on the bleeding run these days," I muttered.

"You have no idea the crap I've been through," Dustil blurted out. His eyes were wide as he stared at me. "Mex, Saul Karath is dead. Dead."

I stiffened. That chivhole Karath had sold out our homeworld. If there was one person Telosians all around the 'verse wanted dead- "Are you sure?"

"I stepped on his corpse," he said. He looked solemn, before the corner of his mouth twitched. "I may have kicked it once or twice."

I snickered again. "Frakk, really? Damn, Dee, what in the bleeding hells were you-"

"There's more," he interrupted. He looked a little wild, leaning in close as if to whisper state secrets between us. "There's a frakking galaxy more you wouldn't even guess at. I don't even know where to start. Bandon's dead too, Mex. That bastard karked it as well."

I could feel my eyes widening. Bandon had been a chivving prick, and I'd always thought he'd end up nabbing Dee on his next run at the Academy. Dee hated him too, but there'd been a sort of hero-worship underneath his angst. In some ways, Dustil had been more invested in the Sith ideology – and hierarchy – than me. Power impressed him.

Me, I just wanted to do my own damn thing. *Freedom.* Something I'd never had, not really.

Still, I'd not have pinned my old mate Dee to go gallivanting on adventures that included wiping out traitorous Fleet Admirals and powerful Dark Jedi.

But it couldn't have been Dustil who'd got the kill on Bandon. No, not when he was travelling with the woman who'd taken out Dee's old Master, and Yudan frakking Rosh.

My eyes narrowed. "Dee, do you know who-"

The entrance of the freighter opened again, and another figure stepped out. A blaster was held
loosely at his side, and I recognized Dustil's father as he cleared the loading ramp. The words died on my lips. Four years of Sith training made one suspicious of just about everyone, best mate's dad or not.

*Damn,* but the man looked old. He'd looked rough on Korriban, too, but that'd been just after their bloodbath with Uthar. The whole sorry group had looked like refugees from a war zone. Now, the guy just kinda looked sad and worn-out and suspicious as he glared at me.

[Safe to talk?] My fingers twirled against my thigh.

Street-sign was a hangover from my past - those slippery, dark days in the play-rooms of Telos's underbelly. We didn't trust anyone but fellow lays, and sometimes it was necessary to shoot a warning to each other without our clients knowing. Or our handlers.

It wasn't perfect. Right hand for words, left hand for letters. It wasn't complex. But it was a drukload better than nothing.

The spaceport's entrance behind me opened.

[No.] Dustil was looking over my shoulder. And I felt the presence of Yuthura draw near.

"Mekel, there is no more time for social mingling," Yuthura said at my back, her voice gentler than normal. I felt myself tensing, felt the scowl on my face. Yuthura was... I didn't know what Yuthura was to me anymore. Lover? Partner? Master? Neither of us had stepped away from that final role, not completely. And it had nothing to do with the frakking decades between us – it was, simply, the shadow of Korriban that I'd no idea if we'd ever be able to shed.

Dustil's face had shut down like a Czerka-stamped clean-bot as he stared past me to Yuthura. He'd never quite got what was between us, but then sometimes I reckoned Dee didn't know how to loosen up and have a little fun. Take a risk, here and there. Play the pazaak hand of life, and enjoy the thrill of the unknown.

Or maybe he was just smart enough not to dance with fire.

"Yuthura," Dustil acknowledged, in a cold voice that impressed me. Maybe he'd grown some steel somewhere along the line, because he sure as frakk wouldn't have addressed her that way on Korriban. Behind him, his father shot a hard stare at the both of us.

"Adept," Yuthura issued in a cool tone.

[You know who's here?] I signed rapidly, aware our time was coming to a close. Frakk, if Dustil didn't know exactly who he was travelling with -

His eyes widened comically. [You do?]

"Mekel." Yuthura's voice was hardening. "It's time to leave."

"You okay, Dee?" I asked, my fingers furiously twitching. [He's powerful. He's bad.]

[No.] Dustil shook his head. He signed something else; it looked like a sloppy form of joygirl. Dustil's sign had never been precise, but then he hadn't grown up with it the way I had.

"I'm okay. I'm fine," Dustil said. His voice turned abrupt. "You still have that SpiderNet account?"

I blinked. "Yeah." That was from our early days in Korriban. The first time Dee, Selene and I had
snuck out to Dreshdae, we'd set ourselves up with anonymous comm accounts. Figured we could do with a way to contact one another that didn't run through the Sith network.

I was surprised he remembered. After Selene, our interactions had devolved into no more than impersonal snark, and his trust in me had vanished. I'd half expected him to have deleted that account, somewhere along the line.

[R], his left hand twitched. Left hand for letters, when the right wasn't enough.

"After all- all of this, I'll get in touch," Dustil muttered. His dad had walked closer, and behind them the ship's hatch opened once more. I glanced over warily to recognize the lithe form of that Cathar, Staria. Frakk, it's a whole shipload of Force-sensitives. She was clearly a preachy light-sider, despite who she was travelling with.

"Mekel," Yuthura growled, and her hand dropped onto my shoulder. "Now."

[E]. Another letter, although maybe it was an 'F', Dee had a habit of frakking up the subtler ones. Yuthura's hand tightened with Force power, and spun me around like a top.

Her eyes sparked with irritation undercut by fear, and her voice dropped to the slightest of whispers. "We do not know his objectives," she murmured, so soft I could barely hear. She was talking about Yudan Rosh. "Nor can I tell if he knows who I am. He is too strong to face, particularly if he is allied with-" her lips pursed, and she shot a glare over my shoulder. "We must leave."

The Force swirled in her grasp, and behind me, I could feel it catch around the Cathar. Dee said he was okay. He said he was fine. I had to trust his word on that. I had to trust that my friend knew what he was doing.

If only he'd never reunited with his stupid dad, then maybe Dee could've been travelling with us instead.

Yuthura's hand dropped to encircle my wrist in an ironclad grip, and she pulled me back to the exit. If the Force frakking wills it - as the bat-shite Jedi spout - then I'll catch up with Dee again one day.

I glanced back, one last look, as yet again my Master dragged me away from my best friend.

[V], I caught over my shoulder, just as the hatch closed.

Yuthura marched us back to Dock Two in dead silence.

I didn't feel like yakking anyway. Even by the time we'd belted ourselves into the cockpit, not a frakking word had been spoken between us. She was probably a little pissy with me – and I'd have to deal with her static later – but I knew it was edginess turning Yuthura mute more than anything else.

My thoughts stayed on Dustil.

At least he was- Okay. Fine. But he'd been trying to tell me something, something he didn't want to say out loud.

Revoke? Reveal? It had to be a word that Street Sign didn't incorporate, but then that didn't really narrow it down. Sign was a covert way of communicating – small, hidden movements that the eye didn't catch unless one was looking for it. Downside being, of course, that it's breadth of vocab was limited. Revolt? Revolution?
Was there some borked chance that Dee had was caught up in a mad attempt to thwart frakking Malak? It seemed insane - but they'd killed Karath and Bandon along the way. Yudan Rosh was travelling with them, and it didn't look like he was playing Malak's side, pissing about with a bunch of light-siders the way he was. And then there was bleeding Ness-Jen, who – I reminded myself with a kick – *had come to Korriban with Bastila frakking Shan.*

Well, I had nothing but time. As Yuthura flicked on the comm and began snapping out orders to Suvam, I jumped on the side console, pulled up a dictionary on Galactic Basic, and started scrolling through a list of words beginning with 'rev.'

xXx

**Malak Devari:**

The heart of my empire rose majestically in front of me, an awesome crystalline structure of kaiburr mounted deep within the bowels of the Star Forge. Drawing power from the only star in the Lehon system, the crystal amplified it further, and the Rakatan technology funnelled the raw energy into the weapons factory of which I was master.

Truly, the Rakatan Empire concealed some almighty secrets I was still unveiling.

They had been a Force-sensitive species, and yet I wondered if their depth of power had been lacking. The eddies of the Force swirled around me here, in the heart of the Star Forge, whispering a promise of immortality. The Rakata had either not heard this whisper or been unable to grasp it – otherwise, surely, their species would still be the conquerors of the galaxy they once were.

Immortality would be mine. It was close, already, and I took another step closer each day.

Further afield, I could sense the presence of my newest apprentice, succumbed to the depths of exhausted slumber. I allowed her that small reprieve, now that my emotions had cooled. The news regarding the disastrous failure of the *Leviathan* had enraged me at first, but that storm had passed, and now it was time to consider my next move. She would be an integral part of that. Better that she replenish her physical reserves while she could.

Bastila Shan was the first Force-user I'd brought to the Forge - but I had reason for that uncharacteristic caution.

For Revan had shared the location of the Star Forge with me. Knowledge could be a dangerous thing, even for Shadow Hands. And this superweapon was powerful enough to tempt many into prospects of betrayal. I did not know if learning its secrets had been the final push I'd needed before I'd formulated the Deralian plot against her – but it had been one of them.

We'd ruled the Star Forge together, for a time. And as I evolved, day by day, into the Sith Lord I now was, the idea of treachery was seeded and began to bear fruit. Once I understood that the Star Forge was the crux of Revan's might – that without it, she was merely a strong Force sensitive with nothing to power her armada – then I realized I could be the next True Master. If only I wrested control of both the Sith Empire, and this legacy of the Rakatan.

And *I* would not be foolish enough to share my power with anyone until they were wholly my subordinate. Revan had taken my fealty far too much on faith, in the end.

Bastila Shan did not know the coordinates of her location, and I would enlighten her only when I allowed her freedom of movement – and that would not occur until she was truly mine.

That moment was close, though. I could taste its sweetness upon the Force.
Bastila Shan held promise, a promise I had not fully accredited Bandon Stone with, nor Arran Da'klor before him. Both men had been hot-tempered, courageous and powerful. And, yet, they had both lacked a certain discipline and forethought that was necessary to become a true Shadow Hand to the Master.

Nisotsa was the flipside; too cautious to step up and grasp what was within her reach. Kylah had been naught more than an amusing diversion offering a bountiful gift in the *Endar Spire*. Yudan… he might have been great, had I ever been able to fully trust him. But Yudan's core had been broken well before I'd even grasped the helm of the Sith Empire, and that had made him nothing more than a useful tool.

"Tell Malak I have killed them. All his allies, all his underlings, I stand on his sinking starship surrounded by their corpses."

"I will come for you, and I will come for him."

Oh, those words, reverberating through Bastila's mind in a broken imitation of the driving power Revan used to wield… that had been enough to send me into a tailspin of fury. The Star Forge had rocked around me, responding to my rage, as I ripped the images from my captive's mind in a furious need to understand everything that had occurred.

I saw the bodies on the *Leviathan*. I felt Bastila succumb to the pleasures of the Dark Side. I tasted the echo of Revan's former glory.

And through it all, I seethed with thwarted fury that drove every sentient in this place to their knees.

But all storms pass, and now it was time to plan. Now, I began to see the advantages in the failure of the *Leviathan*. Now I began to see the gifts Revan may have inadvertently given me.

The first gift was the deaths of Nisotsa, Yudan and Kylah.

It had not escaped me that numerous underlings vying for power and status could be destabilising. Trust was not a commodity amongst the Sith, but if a Master had only one apprentice they could nurture and train and use, then that apprentice could – to some extent – be relied on to strengthen the Sith Empire and further augment the Master's goals. *Without* the distraction of other potentials snapping at his or her heels.

One could argue the infighting was merely a mechanism for producing the strongest apprentice, but that didn't equate with Bandon faltering before the likes of Nisotsa and Kylah.

Or that the only Dark Jedi of note still remaining was Sharlan Nox – a most peculiar specimen with the ambition of a ferracrete brick. *But he has his gifts. And his lack of interest in either status or power makes him safe to bring here to the Forge.*

Sharlan Nox was not any sort of apprentice in the making. He was naught more than a sentient device that could produce unique assassins, provided one remembered to *feed* him.

But the others- Arran's death had been a waste. The blackout from Korriban told me all I needed to know about Uthar Wynn. Bandon, I should have directed after Revan alone. But Bandon was arrogant and prone to being misled – so I'd sent Yudan with him. Yudan, who'd been driven by unholy vengeance since the news of Revan's resurrection broke. For while I'd ordered Bandon to bring in the brain-damaged echo of my former Master, Yudan was my insurance should Bandon somehow cock it up. I'd expected Yudan to hone in quickly for the kill, given the opportunity.

It had been a severe miscalculation.
But, no matter. I'd seen his corpse through Bastila's eyes. I would not waste another thought on that fickle, pathetic Twi'lek.

Now I was left with only Bastila Shan. And hers might be a strength that I was just beginning to comprehend.

The breaking of a light-sider was a truly beautiful thing. For some, it happened as a shattering epiphany, where they shrugged off the carcass of their weak beliefs and arose anew. For Bastila, it was a series of small concessions, each taking her closer to the precipice she now stood upon.

It would make her a stronger Shadow Hand, in the end. I could see the final metamorphosis of my empire, and there would be only two left at the helm. No more infighting, no more treachery from within.

And it was curious, I realized with a vague sense of recollection, that I was not the first to think along these lines.

…

She was staring silently into space, alone on the elevated viewing platform of the Nexus, a robed penumbra of authority that eclipsed the entire command deck.

Beneath her, Admiral someone-or-other was striding along the lower deck, checking in with various techs as the starship flew to link up with the rest of our fleet, now that the personal mission of Lord Revan was complete.

I had come as soon as I heard. She was hard and she had chosen the correct course of action – but this would have been difficult, even for her.

She was more powerful and awesome and magnificent than ever, but a fading whisper of empathy was one of her few weaknesses left. And the fact that I cherished it was one of mine.

The viewing platform had been a recent addition, installed halfway up the height of the massive bridge windows. I'd heard Arran sniggering that she'd had the transparisteel replaced with pricey ferracrystal to match her new station, and I'd given him a zap for that.

Vanity had never been a characteristic of hers, before her rebirth or afterward. And Arran Da'klor needed to understand the hierarchy had changed, now. It was important to display the proper respect. Arran had always fomented casual backchat, and while that may have amused Revan Freeflight, Lord Revan was another matter.

Arran had to learn, or he'd end up the same way as Talvon.

Revan hadn't acknowledged me in any way, despite my arrival. She was as still as a statue of the night, raised high above us all.

I could feel myself tense. The Force flooded through me, a decalescent burn of energy, and I jumped high into the air.

I landed behind her with a quiet thud.

"He died well," she said, her voice clinical. She knew, of course, why I'd come. Comfort. Concern. Care. I hoped she didn't count it as a weakness. "At the end, I was reminded of the Jedi Knight he once was."
I took the five steps to her side, high on the viewing platform, where no one could hear us or interrupt unless the Force was theirs to command. Her masked face remained facing the solitude of space.

"You did what was needed," I murmured. I reached a gloved hand toward her, wishing the damned mask gone, but the slight twitch of frigid darkness spiking on the Force halted my movement of frailty.

"I know."

There was a shiny steel bar, bolted onto the transparisteel, and she leaned forward to grasp it. She was still scrutinizing the black of space, I assumed, although the mask made it impossible to see her eyes.

They were the dark green of a jungle at dusk, now. Slowly, slowly, turning like the rest of us.

My gaze dropped to her ungloved hands, gipped tight on the metal bar. Strange, to see such ashen skin, when the whole of her body was always clothed in shadows – excepting those few quiet moments in our quarters. Or that time in the officer's mess. Or the conference room, right on that poraclay table before the Malachor strat meeting, when Yudan and Em walked in. Ah, that had been gratifying. One of the last times I'd seen Revan truly embarrassed.

And one of the last times I'd seen her truly undone. Perhaps, that would not be a bad way to comfort her today. Perhaps it would be the only method she would allow.

My wandering thoughts stilled as I processed what my eyes were seeing on her unnaturally pale hands. A blotch of brownish crimson alongside her thumb. And another, higher up on her wrist.

Dried blood. Talvon's blood.

"You didn't use a lightsaber." You killed him with your bare hands.

"Talvon was descended from Beast Riders, on his father's side." She turned, finally, to acknowledge me. The charred mask was as expressionless as ever. Just like her face. "Amongst them, the blood and the blame must be felt by the leader if an execution is ordered. The leader carries the weight of it."

"Talvon was raised on Telos, not Onderon," I said, hearing my voice tighten with emotion. Stars, she has to do this to herself, doesn't she? Talvon had to die, we all knew it, he'd long since turned rabid and unhinged. I should have killed him myself and spared her this. "He was a Telosian in every aspect that counts."

"Nevertheless, I thought it fitting."

Telos should have warned me that Talvon wasn't strong enough for the Dark. But I'd seen the advantages of his proposed offensive. A powerful statement of our might as we re-entered Republic airspace. We knew our grand victory might be years in the making, but Revan needed... we needed the quickest path. Shock-tactics. A rapid, brutal front that would make the Republic yield in terror before it shattered beneath our might.

I had not realized how much Talvon relished crapping all over his own backyard. How much Talvon's mind had already begun to fracture.

"That newcomer, Bandon Stone." She changed the topic deftly. A statement of disinterest, of icy detachment from Talvon's death. "What are your thoughts on him, Malak?"
Once, she'd called me Mal. Once, I'd named her Revvie. Rev. My flying star.

The idea of pet-names and endearments was mildly embarrassing, now. Demeaning. Pathetic.

"He is the first Adept from Jorak, and he's certainly strong," I answered.

"Stronger than I expected," she murmured. "But his large mouth is annoying Alaki. They'll fight, soon, if Bandon doesn't rein it in."

"Do you wish me to speak to him?" Sometimes, the urge to end a sentence with 'my Lord' was strong. Revan did not demand it from me, her lover, her Shadow Hand, her second in command. Not yet.

She paused. "No. It may prove a useful test, for both of them." As I puzzled over her response, her fingers tapped along the polished hand rail. There was dried blood under her neatly trimmed nails. "Talvon broke beneath the weight of the Dark Side's power. Yudan will challenge Jonn Dan, one of these days. Arran and Rab have already duelled, and it was not friendly. Rab was fortunate he walked away only missing an arm."

She was silent, then, and I found myself thinking of Rab Vooktari. I felt a flicker of concern for him. But there was little room for friendship in our ranks, these days. The infighting was merely a method for us all to find our position in the pecking order.

I shrugged, turning away from her to stare into the soullessness of space. Truly, I did not understand how she spent so long, still as a wraith, facing the unknown. And yet her best strategy came from these quiet moments. Unlike me, inaction was sometimes her ally.

She spoke, again, her voice cold and dark as a breath of a winter's night. "The way we once led together, fought together, and lived together, is not strong enough for our new path, Malak. Tensions flare between our followers, and it weakens our position. We need to be stronger than this. I wonder if there is a design to all the infighting that is now commonplace."

I frowned, not following her. Personally, I thought a firmer hand was needed – Arran had to learn to shut his big mouth, as did Bandon. And Jonn. He'd been harassing Yudan over something personal for weeks, now, and Yudan was going to snap one of these days.

More of us would die before it was out. I knew that as a truth, much as I knew my own position was secure. But whether that was due to the depths of my power or the depths of Revan's love for me, I was no longer certain. Sometimes, I thought it the former.

The camaraderie we had all enjoyed was fading, had been fading for months.

Revan was still facing me, and I understood she expected a response.

"What is your point, Revan?"

"There is an interesting philosophy I have uncovered in an ancient Sith holocron." Her tone was completely devoid of emotion or inflection. "The rule of two. It postulates that the power of the Dark Side is strongest amongst the Sith when there are only two Dark Jedi mastering the Force: a Lord and an Apprentice."

A crepuscular shiver coursed through me as the implications reared. "What- what are you proposing, Revan?"
"I do not propose, Malak." Her words lashed out like a whip. The authority behind them echoed a darkness on the Force. "I command, when required."

"And is this a command?" my Lord.

"No, this is purely conjecture. But it is conjecture that has caught my interest. Truly, we do not benefit from our leaders squabbling like undisciplined children." She paused, averting her cursed mask from me again. "Perhaps I am merely speculating if this is the innate order of the Sith. That, over time, we will naturally progress into this hierarchy whether we force it or not."

She was, coolly and calmly, thinking on what strength the deaths of those she had once loved would give her. Those who had followed her through the crucible of the Mandalorian Wars and now beyond: into the depths of perdition for a vision only she truly understood.

We dwindled into silence, both facing out into infinity. Mere inches of physical space separated us but, sometimes, it felt like a chasm growing in width as to be impossible to breach.

...

Revan had never followed through on the theory she’d stumbled over. By the time I’d turned on her above Deralia, there were still more than half a dozen Dark Jedi leaders left. Arran, Bandon, Yudan. Nisotsa, Sharlan, Uthar. Others, who have now faltered as well.

But it was an interesting concept. I had little time for the rest of the recollection; I had still been shedding my weaknesses then, slowly evolving into the power I was today. But memory had its uses, and there was a detail from that moment in time I’d never dwelled on again until now.

The rule of two.

At first, I had brought Bastila Shan here with only the thought to gain mastery over her unique gift. But the Star Forge whispered to me how much stronger Bastila would become once she succumbed to my will – and I could sense the dark potential within her. Some Force-sensitives turned powerfully like that, gained depths they would never come close to realizing as a light-sider.

Provided they did not lose themselves in the process. A sharp mind and a strong will are the other two pillars required for a true master of the Force.

Bastila Shan could be a worthy asset to me and my Empire.

It was a future I would realize. And it was close. So close. One more prod, perhaps two- and then she would be totally, irrevocably, mine.

She must turn on the Order first. I will grant her full freedom of movement when she has no recourse for return.

And then she must turn on Revan.

The former would be easier, and the foundation was already there. Bastila’s doubts, her bitterness, her suspicion – I felt those emotions whisper like faithless phantoms slipping through the cracks in her mind. And I knew, then, how to nudge her into that final step of no return.

Beyond the Outer Rim. What made Revan double-cross the Republic? What made any return to the Jedi Order impossible for either of us? What we found beyond the Outer Rim.

Even now, my mind shied away. Let sleeping demons lie, I’d once begged Revan. It is beyond
known space. Your objectives are sound, but your reasoning for them is not.

I could bring Bastila here to the heart of the Star Forge, where the Dark Side ruled supreme. Immerse her in the almighty Force that swirled around the giant kaiburr like a space storm light-years in width. Rip into her mind, and show her my half-forgotten memory of that encounter after Malachor.

Make Bastila Shan experience Revan's justification for her invasion of the Republic. Make Bastila accept it, agree with it, embrace it.

And then, when the Fleet dragged their half-broken armada into realspace around Lehon, Bastila would understand that her only way forward would be to unleash her Battle Meditation against them. That the only chance for victory was triumph over those she had once called her allies.

Of course, no fleet could breach the first defence of the Star Forge – that was controlled by that smaller mirror of kaiburr down on Lehon itself. No… and if Revan's memories were slowly returning, then instinct would guide her there. She recalled nothing, yet, of the Star Forge, according to what I had pulled from Bastila's mind.

But the Force whispered to me that Revan would retrace her old footsteps. To Lehon. The Force whispered, with thrumming anticipation, that it was destiny.

So I would be ready.

I was not sure if Bastila had the strength to turn on her bond-mate. Truly, their psychic link was more powerful than I had first realized, and I was still learning more of it. But Bastila didn't need to be the one who betrayed Revan. Oh, no. If I can use Bastila, somehow, as bait-

I would prefer to kill Revan by my own hand, for I would enjoy the sweetness of it. But I was no fool. If there was a way to lay a trap and make it seem one of Bastila's making-

Then either Revan will die a final death, or she will escape believing of Bastila's treachery. And Bastila will have nothing left in the galaxy to turn to.

Except me.

Bastila would finally reach her zenith in a surrender to the Dark Side – she would finally evolve into my true Shadow Hand.

My thoughts turned to the planet below – Lehon, the once-capital of the Rakata – and a plan began to formulate. The details- ahhh, the details would need sorting out, but I still had time before Revan came near. I would sense it when she entered this system, and I would know when to act.

But first, Bastila's ties to the Order and the Republic. I felt the lids of my eyes half-close in pleasure as I stared deep into the massive kaiburr that reverberated with pure Force.

It was time to wake Bastila, bring her here, and show her a memory.

xXx

**Revan Freeflight:**

Awkward crew briefings in the *Ebon Hawk* were beginning to feel all too damn familiar.

There'd been the Tatooine landing, when Bastila attempted to take charge. Of course, I hadn't shaken off that quack's treatment from Taris, so I'd barely noticed Carth's irritation or Mission's petulance. In
hindsight, it'd been blatantly obvious that Mission was going to sneak off the sodding ship first chance she had, and now I was surprised Bastila had been so easily appeased by the teenager's sulky promise. \textit{To be fair, Bastila may have had other things on her mind. Like me.}

Then, the conversation on Manaan, just before we'd left – when I'd been hungover and ashamed and barely able to look anyone in the eye. Bastila had been out cold in the medbay, and the others all stared at me with varying degrees of expectation and anger.

They'd given me far less than I'd deserved, really; even counting in that shiner from Canderous. After all, I'd scuttled the \textit{Ebon Hawk}, which caused them to be towed by the Sith and grounded by the Selkath. Not to mention my late return into the fray - that had been too late for Karon.

And then, our crew briefing in hyperspace, just after leaving Korriban for dust. That had been a new level of awkwardness. I was barely dealing with the despair of losing Bastila, and had three damn Sithkids to somehow rein in. One injured, one scared, and one sullenly angry. Somehow I'd cobbled together a sort of training regime to impose a routine on us all, even underneath the withering derision of Canderous.

\textit{Apparently, I'd once been a charismatic leader who'd directed armies into war. Seems a bit ludicrous, looking at this lot.}

We were all crowded into the common room once more. Suvam had given the \textit{Ebon Hawk} the all clear, but now that his other visitors had left - \textit{and hadn't} that been a surprise – his urgency for us to make space tracks had dissipated.

I cleared my throat. "Teethree, project the Star Map again."

The luminescent holo-map sprang into existence above the table. Mission leaned forward, her light brown eyes wide with interest. Next to her, Dustil paid no attention to the cerulean sphere – his gaze was darting warily between myself and Yudan, who'd taken to leaning silently against the back wall.

At least Dustil wasn't hiding this time. I'd run across him earlier – more than once – skulking around the ship while cloaked in the Force. He'd been tailing me, only fleeing when my gaze lingered on the blank patch of Force that heralded his presence.

\textit{I'd put credits on him shadowing Yudan as well. Watching us both in fear or readiness should we fall. And – I reminded myself with a kick – Dustil had seen Carth and me together... his father and me. Me, the one who'd re-opened the sodding Academy that had imprisoned him for the last four years. And that wasn't even touching on Telos or his mother.}

No wonder the boy hadn't shown his face since we'd escaped the \textit{Leviathan.}

It'd always be like this, I suspected- the upsurge of black shame deep in my soul, when past repercussions reared up to slap me in the face. \textit{And what is it really, but justice, of a sort?}

As for Dustil- Well. If it hadn't been for Carth's presence here, I imagined he would've run after mouthy Mekel. His old friend; just another lost, directionless Sithling.

I felt myself frown. \textit{Mekel. There was something... curious about the expressive teen. He had potential, sure; his depth of power seemed to fall on the strong side of middling from what I could sense. But it wasn't that. His emotions shouted out to me on the Force; his unease, his desire to find his friend mingling with the one to flee- it was the vividness of them rather than the feelings themselves that felt familiar, like I should recognize something here, something I couldn't quite put my finger on-}
"There," Canderous said, grabbing my attention as he jabbed a finger towards the bright green speck that marked our end-game. "A fair way into the Unknown Regions. Even the Mando'ade are cautious when they venture out there."

I felt the corners of my mouth turn down. Caution. Yeah. Not one of my strengths. I deliberately didn't look at Carth, standing arms folded, face expressionless, in front of the hatch that led to the cockpit.

"The Star Map is more than just a set of coordinates," I said, gesturing to the route lines that led to the Forge. "The safe hyperpoints are marked out – as long as we feed these into the nav-computer, we'll avoid anything that could pull us out of hyperspace."

Travelling outside of known hyperlanes was a gamble, at best. Uncharted space meant uncharted phenomena. Undetected planets. Undetected asteroids. Undetected black holes.

The sort of thing that could disrupt a hyperspace journey – generally, resulting in the destruction of the hapless ship.

"Except that this map is, what? Thirty thousand years old?" Carth said, his voice low and intense. "Maybe that's little time on an astronomical scale, but it's still enough for things to have changed."

"Apparently I've taken this route before," I muttered, trying hard to keep the snark out of my voice. I glanced towards him, and the darkness in his gaze cut something deep inside of me. I felt my cheeks burn, and looked back to the map.

"Teethree, shut the map down. The rest of you- before we go," I began, "there's a reason I've called you all here."

I took in a deep breath as the shimmering Star Map winked out, and all eyes turned to me.

"There's-" I paused. "The Star Forge is in the Unknown Regions, but we're not that far from the edges of the Outer Rim Territories now. Teethree calculates it as little more than five standard day's journey. We won't be stopping anywhere along the way. This is the last chance for anyone to jump ship."

I was staring at Mission. And it didn't take long for her to start glaring back at me.

"Uh uh." She shook her head angrily. "No way. I can't believe you're even suggesting this, Jen!"

"We're heading off to face Malak," I said, struggling to keep my voice calm. "The chance of us dying-"

"Far out!" Mission burst out angrily. "You're the one who's always believed in me, Jen, even back on Taris when the others just saw me as a kid! I can help."

"Against the Force?" I cut in. "Against the Star Forge itself? Stars, Mission, I've never doubted you, but-"

"But you doubt me now? Is that it?" She'd clambered to her feet, arms jammed on hips, light brown eyes sparkling with indignant temper. "Big Z and I have always been a team. There ain't no way I'm letting him – or you! – go off and do this without me!"

I subsided, then. Maybe I'd known it was useless. Canderous was eyeing me over in mild derision; despite his growing attachment to her, he didn't see a problem with the young street kid following us into the greatest of dangers yet.
Street Kid… she's about the same age now as I was when I first joined the Jedi. I remembered enough, just barely, to know I wouldn't have allowed anyone to send me off into safety if I hadn't been invested in it myself.

There are ways. If I truly love her, there are ways to ensure she stays behind-

There was a strong appeal to that creeping whisper from the black side of my soul. Questionable methods, but with an outcome I craved. And I knew then that I'd always be fighting this, this urge to use less-than-desirable tactics, this internal debate over what constituted the right choice, anyway-

If something were to happen to Mission, I'd react badly- just think of how I reacted when I thought Yudan was dead and I don't even remember him- there's no way I can keep Carth behind or any of the others, but a twist of the Force could hold Mission here-

And each time, I'd have to battle through the internal quagmire of twisted thoughts, and hope I chose the right path.

She's one of my weaknesses. I can't bring weaknesses to the fight with Malak-

But for all that I wanted Mission's safety, I couldn't… I couldn't do this to her. She was my friend, not my subordinate. Not my follower.

And while the thought of her being cut down like renni-grass against Malak's forces was enough to carve a black-seated horror within me, she'd more than proven her worth since we'd first met. I didn't have the right to choose for her, not here.

Somehow, my gaze caught against Carth's, who was staring at me with a deep understanding in his dark eyes-

He blinked and looked away.

I cleared my throat. "Sorry, Mission," I muttered. "I guess I- I had to try."

"Yeah? Well next time, don't," she snapped, and skivvied past Zaalbar to stomp out of the room. She paused at the hatch. "I'll be in the cargo bay. Y'know, just sitting around, being young and useless."

I sighed as she left. Zaalbar rumbled deep in his throat. "(Do not take her words to heart, Jen. I have had much experience with her ire when I have tried to hold her back. Mission's temper is a flash-fire, and dies down as quickly as it takes root.)" He stood, too, towering over the central table as he turned his gaze on me. "(I appreciate that you tried, but I do not believe she will be moved. And if there is one thing I know about my friend, it is that when she is left behind she has a tendency to find her own trouble.)" He huffed. "(I will check on her.)"

I stifled a hollow chuckle as Zaalbar left, understanding the truth of his words. Stars, maybe this was an idiotic thing to bring up in the first place. Even if I'd succeeded, could I really expect Mission to stay put – here? Or believe that a nervy, alcoholic Rodian could stop her from following us? But everyone I cared for was on this ship, everyone – except Bastila – was right here, surrounding me. I'd felt the desire to protect at least one corner of my heart, package it away safely, for all who have ever followed me have died or worse-

I couldn't help but look at Yudan, then; the null part of my past, but the bastard's face was closed and expressionless as he stared back, still leaning insouciantly against the freighter's wall.

"Don't even start, Dad," Dustil snapped, and I jerked back around to see the teenager glaring at his father. "I can see what you're thinking, and I'm not going to pretend to listen, this time."
My gaze flew to Carth; he was obviously torn as he viewed his only child. "This isn't your quest, Dustil," he said quietly, before ending on a sigh. "But I've underestimated you. Gravely. I won't do it again. And you're- you're a man, now. I'd feel happier if you would stay behind or make your own way to Telos… but I won't ask you to do it."

Those words, the fragile understanding between them both- it was a private moment, and my observation would be wildly unwelcome, but I couldn't help but take it in anyway. The softening of Dustil's sullen, wary expression, and the quiet pride of Carth's. It was a gratifying moment that I shouldn't be witnessing- but it warmed my heart, nonetheless.

"I'll go see Mission," Dustil muttered, looking awkward as he stood, shoulders hunched as he stared away from anyone's gaze. I wondered, briefly, if the boy would ever become accustomed to emotion of any sort, and how much Korriban was to blame for that.

"I'll be launching soon," Carth warned, as his son left and he looked ready to do the same, his hand pressed against the hatch control that led to the cockpit. "Get yourselves strapped in."

"Carth," I said, my voice halting his exit. His expression was indecipherable and a muscle twitched in his jaw. He said nothing, however. I breathed in. "When we get close to the Star Forge, I'll run co-pilot."

His gaze darkened on mine. "You… remember something…?"

"No." I shook my head. "Just in case."

Was I warning him? I didn't know. A large part of me didn't want to be anywhere near Carth and his justifiable bitterness. But I couldn't afford to hide away like an emotional coward, not with everything at stake. And it wasn't just my broken memory, here….

The Republic would be shooting at us on sight. The thought of Carth having to face that, or being ordered to bring us in… I couldn't let it happen. The crux of it was, I simply had no idea how he would react to that sort of order now that he knew the truth.

But I knew I had no choice- I couldn't let us be taken by anyone's forces. No matter what Carth might decide.

Not when Bastila was still prisoner. Not when Malak was still out there. Not when I was the best – perhaps the only – shot at toppling Malak.

I had to hope we'd arrive before any Republic offensive, and that this hypothetical scenario remained just that. For if I'd thought things were bad between Carth and me now…

_We've only been at Yavin three days. Sure, the brass have the Forge coordinates, but they'll need time to rally the fleets._

I'd strike fast, if I were in their boots. Roll the dice of chance, and gamble on speed trumping might-a forward advance of whatever ships were available, for reconnaissance and infiltration if at all possible-

Likely, it'd be a suicide run, but it would send back valuable information to the rest of the Republic Fleet, and might even surprise Malak.

Well. I had to hope the Republic brass was more cautious than I. For, if they weren't, then we might very well arrive in the middle of a Republic vanguard.
Carth was still staring at me, his face grim and set. I had no idea what he was thinking. Once again, I felt the longing for the easy camaraderie that had once existed between us. Even should I never be able to claw anything deeper back, the desire for his respect was strong. It didn't seem possible that it would ever return.

He said nothing, merely turned and stepped through the open hatch.

*Focus. Focus, Revan,* I commanded myself, as Carth disappeared behind the closed door. *Focus on the endgame.* I took a deep breath and – despite the incongruity of the moment – actually heard the echo of the blasted Jedi Code run through my mind.

*There is no emotion…* I wondered, idly, if I'd ever believed in it. Certainly, mastering emotions was useful no matter what a person's station was. Although, sometimes I wondered if the Jedi used it as a way to pretend they didn't have any emotions in the first place.

*Yes. Because I'm the most suitable person to judge the frelling Jedi.*

With that in mind, I glanced back to Yudan, who was still leaning quietly on the fringes of the room. I couldn't help but feel a twitch of black humour. "So… er, were all our past briefings this awkward?"

I saw the corner of his mouth curve, ever so slightly. For a second there, I could've sworn I almost made the bastard smile. "No," he said flatly, turning on his heel and leaving without another word.

"Well, young pup, I'll give it to you," Jolee drawled, staring at the closed hatch. "You sure know how to clear a room."

"Sometimes, Revan, you're a blithering idiot," Canderous added.

I laughed. I couldn't help it, and it was hard to stop. I wondered, briefly, if my companions of old had been so quick to criticize me. *If not, then maybe it's a humbling force I sorely lacked.*

"So, five days, huh?" Canderous added, his expression turning thoughtful. "We should make the most of them, then."

"I've stocked up enough." Jolee added, brandishing a bottle filled with clear, amber fluid. "Better than that swill you tried to foist on me earlier, Mandalorian."

Canderous snorted. "Good stuff's hard to come by when you're running from planet to planet." His flinty gaze firmed on me. "A drink or two, maybe, on our first day of hyperspace. But we've a battle to prepare for, Revan. All of us."

I raised a brow. "Sparring, huh?"

He gave a half-shrug in return. "Preparation, of whatever sort. Mind and body. No point heading into battle if you don't take it seriously."

"Preparation is a good idea for us all," Juhani said quietly from behind the table. "Revan…" she trailed off, until she'd completely captured my attention. I motioned for her to continue. "Duelling practice would be useful for you, I suspect. Your hand…"

She didn't finish. I glanced down at the maimed limb, and was surprised at her perception. I needed to become more comfortable wielding only one lightsaber, and I had little time to do so.

"Yeah." I sighed. "You offering?"
"Of course," she murmured, gracing me with a small smile.

::Ship's taking. Buckle in, everyone:: Carth's curt words shot through the ship's intercom, seconds before I heard the turbine compressor whir underneath our feet.

This could be my last trip in the 'Hawk. The thought was both nostalgic and bittersweet, as I shimmied into one of the safety harnesses attached to the plimfoam benches. End-game. It's not far, now.

The desire to reach out to Bastila was strong. I felt a deluge of Force surge hard through the bond, then, buffet against my shields; something insidious and baneful and powerful. I stifled a gasp, and it was almost impossible to push back, to strengthen the barrier between us rather than reach out with a supporting hand.

Tears pricked against the back of my eyes as I understood whatever Bastila was enduring was entirely my fault. If it had not been for her act of mercy, I wouldn't be here, right now. And she wouldn't be Malak's prisoner.

I gritted my teeth, and shame curled in my belly as I slowly built the shields between us even higher.

I'll come for you, Bastila. I'd vowed that back on the Leviathan, a whispered promise full of darkness and grief.

Now, it was just a raw conviction.

I'll come for you, Bastila.

Just hold on.

xXx

Chapter End Notes

I had thought this chapter would come out a day or two after the previous one, but it turns out I got a little side-tracked. If you don't have me on author alert, then go check out the one-shot M!Revan ficlet I posted - "Face of a Sith Lord". I had a lot of fun writing it!

So, thus ends the longest ever hyperspace arc. We're heading onto the final stretch, now, at est. 102 chapters. I'll say once more (and then I'll try to shut up about it for a couple of chapters, ha) - if you're reading this far, then I'd love to hear from you. Even an anonymous one-liner makes my day. I'm spending a lot of time on this, and it's nice to get validation that I'm not just throwing words out into the ether.

Big thanks and gratitude to anyone who has ever reviewed, and double-thanks to those that consistently do so.

Triple-thanks to kosiah for the read-through. Mekel's thoughts on Nisotsa being hot are entirely your fault.
"Hah!" I crowed, slamming down a flip-card and shooting Dustil a smug grin. "Time to cough up. I just whipped you, again."

"This is a dumb game," he muttered, but there was a slight grin on his face as he nudged me another expired cred chit across the ship's grated floor. They were leftover plasteel chits from slimy Davik Kang's stores, the ones that'd been voided when I'd tried to cash 'em in on Manaan.

Sure, I woulda played for real creds in a flash, but no one on the 'Hawk felt like handing me their hard dosh anymore. It was lame.

"You're just sayin' that 'cause you keep losing," I teased in a sing-song voice.

Dustil rolled his eyes at me. It softened his face, chased away the suspicious look he so often sported. I liked teasing him. It's good for him, I reckon. Sheesh, an' he could do with taking himself a lil less seriously.

"It's a game of chance, Mission," Dustil said. "You won't give me any of your side-deck cards. There is such a thing as an unfair advantage, you know."

"Pffft." The air breathed past my lips in a dismissive sound. "Not my fault you don't have your own side-deck. Pazaak's like, what? The most popular gambling game in the galaxy? You gotta learn to be prepared, Dee."

His head snapped up; his brown eyes widened in shock. "What- what did you just call me?"

A furious blush flooded into my cheeks. Oops. "Um…"

Dustil blinked. He didn't look mad, or anything- just confused. And yet, as soon as he figured out I'd been snooping, this casual friendship that'd sprung up between us might be completely borked. Because of me and my big mouth.

Okay, maybe 'cause I was bored and started poking through the security feeds. My cheeks were still burning, and Dustil was still staring at me in puzzled expectation.

"I may have, kinda, been looking through the 'Hawk's external cams," I mumbled, shifting restively on the floor of Carth's quarters. It was the only room Dustil was easy in; he seemed to be avoiding the rest of the crew like they had the rakghoul disease or something. "Maybe, at the same time your friend turned up back on Yavin station."

We'd shot into hyperspace a few hours ago. Part of me wondered why Dustil hadn't stayed behind with his friend; I mean, sure, his dad was here- but we were going after freaking Malak, and Dustil'd only been part of our whole quest since Kashyyyk, really.
Didn't mean I wasn't glad about it, though. He was pretty freaking powerful, and... and it was nice to have a friend my age. That is, if I hadn't just stuffed it all up.

There was a slight narrowing to his gaze; the creeping in of wariness, mistrust- the same look he had around everyone. It made me sad.

"Look, I'm sorry, okay?" I wrinkled my nose and stared at him in appeal. "I didn't mean to snoop or anything. Honest. I was just- bored. I won't call you that if you don't want me too."

I wasn't gonna admit I'd centred the cams and amp'd the audio on him and his friend – that cute guy who'd told me to give Dustil another chance back when we were leaving Korriban, back when I'd been ready to dump a gallon of Peragian fuel on him in his sleep. The cute guy was right, though. About Dustil.

And Dustil, really, was just as cute, I thought. If he ever learned to loosen up a bit.

"I, uh-" Dustil broke off, his shoulders hunching up in an awkward movement that was overwhelmingly familiar. "It's- it's okay. You can if you want. It's just, only Mex and Selene ever..." He looked away, staring into nothing with a slight smile. His voice dropped to a whisper of remembrance. "It was damn Mekel who started those nicknames, you know, although Selene flat-out refused to be called Sel."

Dustil shook his head, eyes blinking, as if throwing off the cobwebs of his past. It was a shame- I found I kinda wanted to know more about it all. I knew it had to be bad- it was a Dark Jedi Academy after all- but it was his past. And I was finding myself more and more curious about him.

Dustil looked down at the mess of pazaak cards in his dad's room. He was still holding a 2-pointer in his hand that woulda won the round if I hadn't laid down a special. "This is a stupid game," he muttered.

"So you keep saying." I snickered. "Sheesh, you're as bad as Jen, y'know. All these excuses about the game, when in reality you got the card sense of a Wookiee on gree spice."

But his face hardened, then; his eyes narrowed and his lips thinned. It took me one sec to work out why- Jen.

"You don't- you don't really seem to get it, do you?" he forced out in a low hiss. "She's- I don't care if she's somehow lost her memory- you don't seem to get just what she was. How strong she still is."

"She's my friend," I said, frowning at him. "We've been through so much together-"

"She used to be the Dark Lord of the Sith, Mission!" His voice raised, edging high into incredulity. "Like Darth Malak is now, except she's the one who started the entire war! Her brain might be completely fried or something, but she's still got the same frakking Force-"

"Dustil, look," I cut in. "She's-"

"No, you look- she's killed millions of people around the galaxy. Destroyed planets. Turned on the frakking Republic with half their own fleet. And I don't know what she was playing at with Dad-"

"Um-" I shuffled back from him awkwardly. "I don't reckon that's got anything to do with anything, y'know-"

"How can you be so- so frakking calm about traveling with the likes of her? And now, Yudan Rosh, one of her faithful generals, has flocked back to her side-"
"Well, I'm not so sure about him," I muttered, lifting a hand to smooth a lekku behind me, feeling ill-at-ease as our conversation dovetailed. "But you can tell he's still screwed up, what with those weird eyes an' all-" I paused, staring hard at Dustil. He looked mad. "Jen's eyes are fine. I dunno how this Sith thing works, but surely that counts for something, right? And look, you can't deny that if it weren't for her, you'd still be back on Korriban. She's done some pretty amazing things along the way."

The pazaak card slipped from his hand. "If it wasn't for Revan," Dustil hissed, his voice twisting with venom. "Telos would still be intact. And I would still be living there, and my mother would still be alive."

I felt my face burn with embarrassment.

"You're a kid, Mission," Dustil said, sneering, his voice turning dark and nasty. With a sick jolt, I was reminded of the first time we'd met. How he'd, suddenly, flipped into this complete jerk- "You have no idea what the Sith truly mean. You have no idea what it's like to watch your homeworld destroyed."

The embarrassment winked out, to be replaced with a sudden, sharp temper.

"My homeworld was Taris, you moron!" I yelled, jumping up to my feet. My fists clenched. "I had to watch the plasma falling and everything burning as our ship made it out only just in time! And I can't believe you, of all sents, have the gall to call me a kid!"

"Me?" Dustil blinked, taken aback. He slowly clambered to his feet in response, a handful of pazaak cards dropping from his lap. His cheeks were mottled red, and his gaze snapped sparks of anger at me. "What the frakk is that supposed to mean?"

But I was so sick of everyone dissing me, bringing up my age again and again. I hadn't expected it from freaking Jen when she'd tried to make me stay behind on Yavin – and yeah, I knew it was 'cause she cared an' all, but it'd still hurt. And now Dustil, who was only a year older-

I felt my eyes narrow in returned anger. "You might've spent the last few years playing bully games with your Dark Jedi mates, but my entire life has been tryin' not to die in the corridors of the Lower City! You had a family for most of your childhood! All I had was a sleemo brother more interested in making creds than keeping his baby sister safe!"

His eyes widened at that- like I'd slapped him. "You've got no right to talk about my childhood!" he snarled. "You know nothing about it!"

I snorted in disdain. "I know you had it easier than me," I shot back, glaring. "And I know you had it easier that Jen, too."

All I really knew about Jen's early past was that it'd been similar to mine. Harder, I'd gleaned. Hungrier. Poorer. Although probably, I shouldn't have tacked on that last comment. I realized this as Dustil's temper devolved into ice-cold fury. The look on his face was ugly; his eyes had pinched to slits of burning anger, and his lips were curled back in disgust.

"I don't give a crap what her childhood was like." He glared at me contemptuously. As if I wasn't worth another second of his time. "No amount of pity-story can make up for a hundredth of what she's caused. You're an idiot, Mission. A stupid, naïve idiot."

In a blink, he completely vanished; but I heard the tread of his boots as he stomped over to the hatch, opened it, and stormed out.
And I was left glaring at the closed door, standing in the midst of discarded pazaak cards.

"Screw you, Dustil Onasi," I whispered, blinking back tears.

xXx

"(Mission)," Zaalbar complained. "(You're sitting on half the workbench)."

He was lugging a panel of Calo's armour, the side piece he'd cut down to fit me weeks ago. I'd already pushed all of his repair tools to one side of the 'bench so I could sit, with my legs kicking against the posts.

I was bored. And miffed. Really miffed.

Maybe a lil upset, too.

Zaalbar huffed, as if to further repeat his point; so I shimmied to the edge of the workbench, knocking a fusion-cutter to the ground that made Big Z groan. I glared mulishly at the wall. I hadn't seen Dustil since he'd stormed off nearly a full day ago, and I was still fuming over our stupid argument.

"Stupid laser brain," I muttered under my breath.

'Course, Big Z being Big Z, he totally heard me.

"(Mission)." Zaalbar looked up from the panel he'd been examining. The blue-and-white exoskeleton still fit me fine, but some of the duranex clasps had been totally fried. Sure, the armour itself had protected my torso from that slug breath's lightning, but it seemed the resistance had stopped at the stupid clasps. And since Carth had chucked out near all of our spare parts to appease the trader back on Yavin, Big Z was having a hard time repairing anything.

"What?" I knew my voice sounded sharp and sulky, like a kid's, like the kid stupid Dustil had accused me of being-

I scowled.

Zaalbar was frowning at me, big bushy brows of hair bristling over his black eyes. It was a familiar look. For me, anyways.

"(You are not still mad at Jen, are you?)"

"What?" I blinked. "Oh! No. Not really."

She'd found me earlier, nudged me while offering a friendly apology, said she was glad to have me with her. I wasn't totally sure she really meant that, but I appreciated the effort.

One thing about Jen, she was able to front up and say sorry when she'd stuffed things up. Well, at least about the little things. Don't think anyone could apologize about the stuff she's done in the past.

I hated to admit that Dustil might actually have some reason to react the way he did. Jen's gonna fix it, though. And that's way better than an apology.

Big Z was still staring at me steadily.

I sighed. "I fought with Dustil," I admitted, before looking away to glare at the far wall some more.
"(Mission)," Zaalbar said slowly. "(I hope our last days in hyperspace are not going to be filled with arguments)."

"Hey, that's not fair!" I flared, jumping off the workbench to jam my hands on my hips. "Dustil was being a complete laser brain about Jen! I wasn't gonna sit back and just listen to all of that!"

Zaalbar knew me, and he wasn't one to take offence even as I glared my most righteous glare in his direction. He stayed silent for a moment, as if thinking about the whole thing, while I tried my best not to pout.

"(Carth's cub does not know Jen as we do, Mission. When I first met Jen Sahara, in the sewers after you both rescued me, I will admit that she made me uneasy. There was something about her I did not trust)." He placed the side panel down gently onto the workbench, still calmly holding my gaze. "(And, unlike Dustil Onasi, I understood nothing of her past then)."

"You don't seem to understand much now," I mumbled, a bit sulkily, even if I knew I was being the teensiest bit rude. It was true, though. Big Z just didn't really get the whole galaxy and everything that went on outside of Kashyyyk – despite having lived on Taris for years.

And Dustil thinks I don't get it. Stupid nerf herder.

Zaalbar huffed. "(What I am saying is that you cannot expect others to have the same opinion as you, Mission. Dustil Onasi has not had the easiest time of things. Perhaps you need to grant him a little leniency)."

"Easiest time?" I muttered, scowling – but it did make me think of how I'd thrown my childhood in his face. Sure, Griff had let me down… but I'd had Gadon and the Beks. Big Z had always been my shield. Maybe Dustil had had a rosy enough time in his early years on Telos, but I couldn't kid myself that the Lower City of Taris were as bad as living in a Sith Academy.

They probably had to hurt each other… kill each other… do all sorts of horrid things just to survive. That tortured Jedi, Belaya, came to mind… and Dustil's role in her death. I shivered. At least on the streets of Taris things were simple. People were only after creds in one form or another.

Maybe Big Z was right. Maybe I'd been a lil unfair. But then, so had he!

"Okay." I sighed, folding my arms. "I'll track him down later and try to make up."

Later. When I wasn't feeling so steamed.

Big Z gave me a shaggy-haired nod, before bending over the armour again. "(I may be able to weld one side shut and move the inner clasps to the outside)," he rumbled. "(It is not ideal, but it will work. I would like you to wear it before we approach this Star Forge)."

I took a moment to appraise Big Z; large head bent over the freighter's workbench as the halogen lighting shone around him, picking up brownish highlights in his ragged coat. Zaalbar'd taken to tinkering with the Bek's armour, too; at first, it was a way to stay out of company, for in the early days on Taris Big Z had been even more ill-at-ease around sents of any species. And then, fixing things had turned into something he'd a bit of a knack for.

The Bek's came to appreciate it, even if they'd never extended full membership to Big Z or me. They woulda, eventually. Maybe when I'd turned, like, sixty years old or something.

Stupid Zaerdra woulda stuck me in a crèche if she could've got away with it.
"What're ya gonna do, Big Z? After all of this?" The question had been on my mind for a bit, 'cause I couldn't really see myself going back to Taris. I... wanted to know if some of my old friends survived, I wanted to hear about the planet and I hoped the bombardment hadn't been too devastating- but I didn't want to go back to my old life. I'd seen so much since then. The Hidden Bek's would view me as the same girl who'd left so many, many months ago- and I wasn't, not really.

Maybe part of me felt like I could do more, or better, than living on the streets again.

"(I will go back to Kashyyyk)," Zaalbar said slowly, straightening up once more to look at me. No matter how often I interrupted his work, Big Z never got irritated. He was a gem, really – I knew that. "(My father will be looking for a new successor; he may have chosen one by the time I return. It is a big thing, the choosing and the rituals, but Freyyr will be keen to bury the past and plant the sapling of the future)."

I frowned. "Do you... do you regret it?" I asked, in a tiny voice.

He coulda stayed behind. Part of me thought he should've.

Big Z took the time to consider my question. It was one of the things I liked about my old friend. Total opposite of me; he chose his words carefully and ensured they were what he meant before they spilled outta his mouth.

"(I do not. I was never raised for chieftainship, Mission)." His furry face was creased in a frown of concentration. "(There may have been a moment in Rwookrorro when I saw myself as the future leader I could be; a stronger, healthier bough than my brother; a pillar for my people... but my heart would not have been easy. I would not have been able to ignore my debts to Jen Sahara and Bastila Shan, and those debts would have made a mockery of my honour. I am content with my choice, Mission)."

I nodded. I didn't want to think on Bastila much. I'd never liked her, but I couldn't kid myself about what she must be going through. I looked away from my oldest friend, one hand fiddling with the utility belt strapped around my waist. "I don't mind visiting Kashyyyk for a bit, Big Z. But... there ain't no way I'm setting down roots there. It's not- it's not the place for me."

I grimaced, and felt my shoulders hunch. I loved Big Z, I'd known him for years, I couldn't imagine us two not being a pair an' having each other's back... but-

"(I would like to return home)," Zaalbar said quietly. "(My exile has been overturned. And my people know little of matters beyond Kashyyyk. I do not believe Czerka could have gained a foothold on my planet had we better understood the motives of off-worlders)." He paused, before adding sheepishly. "(I hope I can help with that knowledge, given my experience away from home)."

"You could." I snickered. "Maybe one day you'll end up being a hairy grey Old One, telling all the little hairballs about your adventures with me."

Zaalbar blinked at me, his black eyes like round little pebbles in the midst of a face of snarled fur. "(Old Ones are revered amongst my people, Mission. I do not know if I could live up to something like that)." He nudged me affectionately. For him it was gentle, but I still stumbled back a pace. "(But all Wookiees share their stories with the young. And you would feature in every one of my escapades, my friend. I feel I already have a lifetime of tales to tell, and I am still a young Wookiee)."

I grinned at him. "We still got some to go, Big Z. It ain't over yet."
I tried hard to hold onto the moment, and not let the fear ice in underneath. After all my complaining to Jen, I wasn't gonna let anyone see I was scared of Darth Poodoo and his stupid factory.

"(If you will not stay on Kashyyyk with me, Mission, then where shall you go? Shall you return to Taris?)"

"No," I said, frowning. "I dunno, Big Z. But it won't be Taris. I guess we don't need to decide straight away, right? I mean, first we gotta get rid of Malak – and then, like, have the galaxy's biggest party to celebrate."

Zaalbar chuffed. "(Your ebullience has always warmed my heart, Mission. You are a rare soul. If we part ways I shall miss you sorely)."

I snorted before leaning against him. His fur was warm and slightly musky—sheesh, when's the last time he stepped in the 'fresher? I had to pick my battles with Big Z, there was only so much nagging that worked on the uncivilized throw-rug.

"Y'know," I began, resting the side of my face against his waist. "Just 'cause you're gonna go commune with your trees, don't mean I won't be visiting. Heaps. You can't get rid of me that easily, Big Z."

He rumbled in amusement, lifting one shaggy paw to rest around me gently.

xXx

Big Z didn't normally have much to say, but when he did – unless it was some trash about me staying behind – it was usually worth listening to.

So I'd been wandering aimlessly through the ship for hours, trying to track down Dustil.

The *Ebon Hawk* wasn't that big. Dustil Onasi might have some special magical hiding power, but it shouldn't be this freaking hard to pin him down.

I scowled, and stomped into the common room.

"...asteroids everywhere, but only one planet," Jen was saying, leaning over the table next to Canderous. Teetree was projecting that fancy Star Map again, although it looked totally different this time. Objects were bigger, and there were way less of them. It wasn't a map of a galaxy anymore. "It would be a logical place for a base or supply depot."

Canderous, too, was staring intently at the holo-map. Behind them both was Carth, his gaze fixed on the back of Jen's head.

I hoped he could get over things. Jen and Carth. It still surprised me. I'd thought Jen and Canderous made sense, what with them both being warriors and all that stupid sparring... but there was something about Jen and Carth that worked, too. Maybe Jen needed someone who would remind her of the right thing to do, and Canderous wasn't always so good at that.

Canderous raised a hand to swivel the translucent map around in the air. I spotted the Forge, then; a large object in the middle of the projection. The Star Map was just showing one sector, I realized – they'd zoomed right in on our destination.

"I dunno, Revan," Canderous said. "The Forge is a sizable structure in itself. It can probably work as its own supply run. And don't forget how remote and distant this sector is. There's no point in fortifying – and then defending – other parts of a system unless you mean to inhabit or exploit them."
Jen hummed; it sounded like agreement. "We're on the edge of the galaxy here." Her eyes met Canderous' through the map. "Malak's spent the last year attacking the Republic; parts of his fleet will be dotted around the current flashpoints." She frowned, suddenly, and shot an enquiring look at the wall next to me.

My gaze slid sideways; I jumped as I focused on the still figure of Yudan Rosh, leaning silently against a bulkhead not more than two metres from me.

"I have been on a personal mission for the last month, Revan; my knowledge is hardly up to date," the Dark Jedi drawled. He shrugged. "The Rodian corridor was under siege when I left. Ando, Manda, Bothawui… it is an important trade route into the Core, and a difficult one to defend. It's switched hands more than once already."

"Huh." Jen looked vaguely disgruntled as she turned her attention back to the map. I took several steps away from the motionless Dark Jedi, and slid into a seat while keeping half an eye on him. I didn't care if Jen was at ease around the guy, I still didn't like him. I could feel my lekku curl around my neck defensively.

"This sector is days into the Unknown Regions," Jen murmured. "I can't think that Malak would hold back too large a slice of his armada this far out. And other than our brief stop at Yavin, we've come here directly. The defences of the Star Forge won't be primarily enemy ships."

"It is his stronghold, Revan," Yudan said flatly. His voice was still a monotone, like he didn't care about anything, even when he was disagreeing with Jen. I wish she'd kicked his ass to the curb back at Yavin. "Malak would be a fool if he left it unguarded. And Malak is many things, but he is not a fool."

"No, not unguarded," Jen mused, her green eyes clouding with thoughts. "But not at his full strength either. It will take time for him to pull his forces back to the Forge now he knows the Republic are on their way. The quicker they can get there, the better their chances." She grimaced, one hand rubbing at her face. "As long as they don't get there before us."

My gaze flew to Carth; he'd tensed at that comment, his eyes narrowing as they burned into the back of Jen's head. She shifted uneasily, but didn't turn. "This unknown planet," Jen murmured, leaning closer to lift a hand through the shimmering sphere and rotate it much the same as Canderous had. "I feel like there's something I should know. See, here – the map plots out the solar trajectory of both the planet and the Forge. The Forge orbits the planet, but in heliosynchronous fashion; it always has line of sight to the sole star in the system. There'll be a reason for that."

"Power source," Yudan said flatly.

"Probably." Jen was nodding. "But there's something about the planet itself…" She frowned, rubbing at her temple. "There's this twitching in the back of my mind, like if I could just find the right word or thought I'd recall something- if I could just force my damn mind to remember-"  

"Don't," Carth said. His voice was abrupt and loud. Jen jumped, before turning to meet his gaze. He looked- torn. There was no other word for it. "Forcing your old memories… just don't."

I couldn't see Jen's face anymore with the way she'd craned around, but I saw her shoulders tense before she slowly nodded. "It doesn't work anyway," Jen whispered, so quiet I had to strain to hear. "Every memory that's resurfaced has been unexpected. Sometimes things trigger them… but never from a deliberate action of mine. It's like my mind doesn't want to remember anything… and I don't either, Carth, I truly don't." There was a soft sigh that echoed around the room before she continued
in that same, deathly quiet voice. "But I don't want any of you to die, either."

"It's not worth losing your soul over," Carth replied, and part of me thought the two of them had completely forgotten there was anyone else in the room with the way Carth was still staring at her. "It's not worth becoming what you once were again."

A shadow passed his face, then; and his gaze moved over the rest of us. His lips thinned; he suddenly looked grim and old and, without another word, he turned and left for the cockpit.

"You know," Canderous said, swinging his boots up to rest atop the table. One of them merged through a larger asteroid in the holo-map, and Teethe squawked in complaint. "You Republic lot make things a lot more kriffing complicated then they need to be."

"Republic?" Jen said in a dry voice, turning back around to raise an eyebrow at him. "Not sure that's the best label for me, Canderous."

"But it's the side you're on, Jen," I said, shuffling along the bench to nudge her affectionately. Sometimes, I thought it might do her good to remember that some of us were with her, no matter what.

Canderous snorted. "Well, Jedi don't fit you, and neither does Sith. You'd make a damn fine Mando'ade, you know."

Jen stilled, staring at the older warrior in silence for a moment, before tilting her head in recognition of the compliment. Even I got that that was high praise from him.

I was looking up at Jen, so saw the speculative grin as it formed on her face. She was aiming it at Canderous. "Yudan made you believe he was Mandalorian for some time, too, Canderous. And I don't get the feeling you're easily tricked about such matters."

My gaze shot back to the far wall; but at some stage the Twi'leki Dark Jedi had left the room.

Canderous grunted, but didn't answer. I frowned. "Jen, are you sure about him?" I asked, keeping my voice quiet in case the marsh toad was, like, doing some super-secret listening in or something. I didn't think they could do that sort of thing – but then I'd never expected one of them to turn invisible like Dustil, either. "I mean, he's still a Dark Jedi, y'know. More than you, more than Dustil… I don't wanna deny someone a second chance, but I'd rather he had his somewhere far, far away from us."

Jen had turned to face me, sighing. "Truly? No. I'm not sure about him." She quirked an eyebrow at Canderous, as if asking his opinion.

The Mandalorian shrugged. "He saved my life, but I don't count that as any sort of debt. He only did it to get my approval for him to board this ship. Yudan Rosh followed you once before, Revan; and then he followed Malak. I ain't sure what his end-game is, but I know one thing – he doesn't give a kriff about anyone on this ship other than you. And whether it's to kill you or fight by your side once more, I couldn't tell you."

"Yeah," Jen breathed. "That's more or less what I think. He vowed to ally with me, but then he almost killed…” she trailed off, frowning into space.

"Well, I still wish we'd dumped him back on Yavin station," I said, somewhat tartly.

Jen shot me a half-smile, but I could see her thoughts were elsewhere. "I'll keep an eye on him," she said quietly.
"And I'll keep away from him," I muttered. Suddenly, I was sick of talking about Yudan Rosh. It was more boring than all that waffle about orbits. "Look, Jen, I actually came here 'cause I'm trying to find Dustil." I scowled. "He's hiding from me because we had a stupid fight, and it's not fair that he can go all invisible like that. Is there- is there some way you can tell where he is? Or, I dunno, do something to stop him?"

Jen blinked, looking visibly startled.

Canderous snorted again. "Kids," he muttered, shooting me a derisive look. I stuck my tongue out at him.

Jen laughed. "Sometimes, it's nice to be reminded that not everything is a life or death matter around here." She closed her eyes briefly. A peaceful look crossed her face, before she smiled and raised a hand to point to the stern of the ship. "Dustil's in the engine room, Mission."

"Thanks," I said, before slipping back to my feet. If Jen could find Dustil so easily, then there was no way he'd be able to keep hiding from me anymore.

xXx

I pulled my bio-scanner out from my belt, and pressed against the hatch control.

"Hah!" I crowed to the empty engine room as I took a step inside. I brandished the 'scanner in mock-triumph. "I knew I could tweak this thing to sense you, Dustil!"

"What?" Dustil snapped, and an instant later he was right there, standing in front of me, eyes blinking in shock. "Really? That thing- that thing can find me?"

"Nah," I said, slipping the 'scanner away. I shrugged. "Jen told me where you were. It's not fair, y'know, that you can go all invisible just 'cause we had a lil argument."

His jaw snapped shut with a click, and a frown creased his forehead. He stepped back, looking awkward. "I- uh, Mission, look-" he paused, like he didn't know what to say, and ran a hand roughly through his brown hair.

"I reckon we both said things we didn't mean to," I said slowly. Somehow, I had the feeling Dustil was crap at making up and I'd have to do all the legwork. "And I reckon Jen might jus' be one of those topics we have to agree to disagree on, y'know?"

"You don't understand," Dustil muttered, breathing out loudly in frustration. "You really don't understand. As a kid, I used to hero-worship the lot of them, okay? Frakk, I even had a holo-poster tucked up in my bedroom of the Jedi Thirteen. I'd read the 'Net news, follow the Mando Wars, look up the latest battles- frakk, Mission, they used to be my heroes!"

I blinked. "A holo-poster? What, really?"

A gust of air escaped his lips; almost a chuckle. "Yeah. The Jedi Order kept trying to shut all the merchandise down, but different ones kept cropping up. It all seems stupid, now. My idol was Talvon Esan- he was from Telos, you know? But I knew all their names. Could rattle them off by heart; their backgrounds, the battles they led, their species and gender... Well, except Revan, she was always masked. But..." Dustil sighed. His gaze turned bleak. "The Wars ended. And then they came back. Telos happened. I met Nisotsa Organa at Korriban- she was one of the Thirteen, once. But she wasn't a hero anymore."

His gaze held mine, wary and intent. "I heard stories, at Korriban," he said softly. "Of all of them.
Talvon was killed by Revan, you know? Although I heard he'd gone stark raving mad first. The rest all turned on each other. My childhood heroes, turning on each other, turning on the Republic. And then there's Malak..." His eyes shut, and he shook his head briefly. "Bandon almost took me, last time he visited the Academy. If things had turned out just the smallest bit different, I'd be loyal to Darth Malak right now, killing people in his name. People like you. People like Dad."

My breath caught in my throat. "But- but you're not," I whispered. I wanted to reach out, hold his hand, maybe; but I worried it might break the spell between us. "You got a chance to turn everything around, Dee. And so does Jen."

His eyes snapped open. His gaze had firmed, intense and dark, as it bored into mine. "I've been the cause of unnecessary death before, Mission, and those deaths hang over me. Four. Four sents total. Do you have any idea how many deaths Revan is responsible for?"

"Lots," I said simply. "But she's always been there for me. She laid her life on the line against a rancor of all things, for no reason other than to save Big Z and me when she barely knew us. She rescued my brother, when he was captured- and he's a jerk that probably didn't deserve it. These sleemo Gamorreans on Tatooine woulda killed me if not for her. And- and- in the Shadowlands... you know I ran into that Bandon fella, right?"

There was the slightest twitch to his head, and I took that as a yes before continuing. "He had her captured. Restraints, this Force collar... she'd given up. Completely. I could see it on her face, even if I was totally freaked out at the time. And then, when she realized I was there and Bandon was about to- to-" I snorted, not wanting to finish that sentence. "-to be a complete ronto turd, she somehow escaped and killed the bastard. Because I was there."

We stared at each other in creeping silence. The frustration was still obvious on Dustil's face; and heck, it wasn't like I needed him to like Jen or anything, but if he could just see the sort of person she was now-

I breathed out through my nose before continuing, in a quieter voice. "I know you reckon I don't understand -- and maybe I don't, the way you do -- but what I do understand is that she's the only one who can sort all this crap out. And yeah- Jen scares me too. But she's also my friend. And I love her, y'know? Scary Force powers an' all."

There was the slightest softening in his face, the disappearance of sharp lines around his mouth. Dustil didn't smile much; it was like he never let his guard down, never let himself just relax. And I could get that -- what with his past an' all -- and I knew it all came back to Jen in one way or another... but I also kinda thought that everyone in the 'verse would be quick to lay the blame on Jen -- herself included.

I wasn't gonna. She was my friend. I wouldn't see her as anything beyond that.

"Maybe she's the only one who can stop Malak, but I wish you'd stay away from her," he said quietly. "You don't have any defences around her... and she's dangerous. A lot more dangerous than you seem to realize."

I rolled my eyes at that. "Okay, now you're insulting my smarts. Wouldn't matter if I had freaky Force powers like you, Dee -- Jen just blasts anyone in her way no matter how strong they are. But she trusts me. And I trust her." I frowned. "Although if she tries to leave me behind again I'm gonna stick fire-spice in her caffa."

That loosed a surprised laugh from Dustil. His eyes widened, like he'd never heard anyone crack a joke before. I guess no one would've dared, not about Jen. The thought made me sad.
"I'm serious, y'know," I muttered. "I'm not above getting my own back if people try to make decisions for me – Jen included."

There was a slight look of awe around Dustil's face as he stared at me. He probably couldn't conceive of pranking someone like Jen, no matter if they deserved it. Maybe he'd never get over Jen's past – and I couldn't blame him, not really – but it'd be nice if he came round to seeing her as just another person rather than the scary Darth Revan she used to be.

I didn't expect it would happen anytime soon. But I knew it would never happen if he kept hiding away.

"Come on," I said, motioning to the hatch. "Stop hiding and come play another game of pazaak."

"I was not hiding," he mumbled, folding his arms and scowling at me half-heartedly.

"Okay, well stop not-hiding and come play pazaak." I reached my hand out to him in invitation. "Bet you can't win even one of five games."

Dustil stared at my outraised hand for a sec, the corners of his mouth curving upwards, before he reached forward to slip his larger one into mine.

"We'll see about that," he replied, before following me out of the room.

xXx

Chapter End Notes

Back to the shorter chapters! Hopefully that means more frequent updates :-) Thanks for the comments/reviews, they make my day.
Coming up next [proviso: subject to change]: *Revan sticks her nose in, Jolee tells a tale, and the crew finally exit hyperspace.*
Thanks as always to kosiah for the read-through. Any and all errors left behind are mine!
My dreams had been uneasy of late, more so than usual. Full of phantoms, murmuring evocations of power, betrayal, death...

I remembered nothing tangible when I woke- nothing more than shadows. It could have been the bond, could have been emotions leeching through from Bastila; stars knew that Force shields only held so well in slumber. Our last interaction had shown that Bastila's principles, along with the fragility of her soul, had devolved into a mirror of my own.

I could predict the guilt she would be wallowing in now. And the self-flagellation she would inflict upon herself for the visceral pleasure she had enjoyed at Kylah's downfall.

Bastila, when it came to her own standards, was a woman of extremes. She would either crucify herself for what she had felt on the doomed heavy cruiser, or worse-

*Embrace it.*

I worried she was reaching a point of capitulation- or abandonment. I worried that her fault-lines, her pressure points, were widening.

I knew Malak would be a fool not to capitalize.

He could drive into Bastila's mind – maybe he did not have her finesse with the Force, but certainly his power eclipsed hers – and he would undoubtedly see something of how we had succumbed to the Dark Side.

For we had welcomed it, allowed it to overwhelm us with its majesty of power and morass of seething emotions, and surrendered to its unyielding tide.

Everyone stumbled, at times. But Bastila and Malak would both know that the *Leviathan* had been more than a stumble.

I could still feel it. Taste it, in the back of my throat. The unholy Force that had run through us.

It had been unchecked, staggering and magnificent in its breadth. I knew where that path led. Whatever remained of my life, I would always be facing both the ramifications and the insidious desire to traverse it once more.

Or maybe… maybe Bastila had nothing to do with my broken sleep. Maybe it was no more than the weight of my own past suffocating me.

We had little more than a Galactic day's cycle before our final journey would end. I tried to turn my thoughts away from Bastila, and towards the Star Forge that awaited us; but my problem was I had little idea what to expect. If we weren't so overwhelmingly desperate, it wouldn't be us leading the
vanguard, racing to arrive before the Fleet, rushing recklessly into the unknown.

I was fine with risking myself; stars, the morbid side of me thought a fitting end for my doomed life would be in the fight against Malak. Provided I nullified him and destroyed the Star Forge, the mission would be a success – and my own survival mattered little.

But we had to get there first and, despite Carth's wish for my memories to remain behind the veil of amnesia, I yearned for something to break free- anything to aid us in what was to come.

Would it really be so easy to fly over and dock at the Star Forge? Face Malak, rescue Bastila, and be done with all of it?

One way or another the Force had seemingly led me this far, and my only option now was to have faith it would stay with me.


She'd put me through my paces a fair few times in the preceding days. I'd needed the practice, wielding just the one 'saber, and Juhani was a formidable warrior in her own right.

But not my equal. Even focusing on pure duelling with an unfamiliar form, it had become easy to best her. *I need to pin down Yudan.* I knew this. I had an expert duellist onboard this very ship, sworn to fight by my side- and yet I quailed.

Canderous had wanted to dump him off at Yavin Station. Mission had pointed out that he was still, obviously, a Dark Jedi. Carth didn't need to voice his opinion to me; it was patently clear.

*Dammit. I made the choice to trust Yudan's word. So it's time to stop beating about the cacta bush and make use of his talents.*

I could sense him in the garage, him and Juhani; and as I reached out further with the Force I could feel around the edges of their emotions. I wasn't adept at interpreting them, but Juhani’s presence had a sort of fierce conviction, as if she were resolved to do something-

The hatch behind me opened, and I sensed the affable presence of Jolee Bindo walk towards me as I stood still in the centre of the abandoned common room.

"What are you up to, young pup?" he asked in curiosity, and I wondered if my use of the Force had drawn him closer. He snorted as his gaze dropped to the table, which was covered in a mess of haphazard pazaak cards. "Kids," he muttered. "Always leaving a mess behind. Some things never change, no matter the century."

A spike of something like anger resonated on the Force, before being drawn tightly into the ominous presence that was Yudan Rosh.

*Sun and stars, what's going on? I wouldn't find out here. With a grimace, I began striding towards the garage.*

"Ach, leave them to it," Jolee advised. "Not everything's about you, you know."

I threw Jolee an irritated look, before pressing my hand on the hatch control.

"...to the Light?" Juhani was saying as I entered. Her tawny gaze flickered over to mine briefly before settling back on Yudan. Both of them grasped deactivated lightsabers, and my attention was immediately drawn to the hilt held loosely between Yudan's fingers.
"Really," Yudan drawled. He sounded derisive; mocking, even. He didn't turn to acknowledge me, merely remained standing, staring impassively at the Cathar.

"You cannot expect me to believe that the Dark Side has brought you peace," Juhani returned simply. There was an intent, righteous expression on her face, and suddenly I knew exactly what she was doing. What Juhani was always drawn to do. *Kath crap, Juhani, do you really think you can redeem Yudan Rosh?*

I saw Yudan's fist clench slightly around the 'saber hilt, and the misgivings in my gut grew.

I sucked in a breath. "Is this really-"

"And what do you know of the Dark Side?" Yudan mocked. He still, completely, ignored me. "Enlighten me, youngling. Go on."

Juhani's lips pursed. "I have had my own dalliance with it, minor as it may have been in comparison to yours. I understand the despair, the lack of choice one feels-"

Juhani cut herself off as the Force swelled within Yudan's grasp; her eyes widened and she stumbled back. Alarm shot through me, and everything tensed. The apprehension grew, and my hand shot to Karon's 'saber in reaction.

"You struck down your Master," Yudan said softly, his eyes burning as he stared the Cathar down. I could feel faint coils of psychic energy reaching out from beneath his command, and the Force surrounding me roused in response; an influx of power ready to unleash at a second's notice. "You think a failed Knight Trial gives you experience of the Dark Side? Oh- and you didn't even *succeed* in killing her?"

Hot anger bloomed on Juhani's face, throwing the angular planes of her striped cheeks into stark relief. "Stay out of my head!" she hissed, slanted eyes flashing. "There is no call for that sort of trespass!"

Yudan laughed, and there was an audible nastiness in it as it rang throughout the garage. "Quit preaching then, Cathar. Your words are meaningless and beneath me."

"Yudan, stop being an ass," I snapped.

He turned, finally; his impassive gaze landing on me.

Damn, but he was a hard one to read. Sometimes, an intense flash of *something* would spark through the flawed yellow of his eyes, and I'd be struck with the uneasy feeling that he was reconsidering our shaky alliance.

"I see I am wasting my time," Juhani decried, her face set with dislike as she stalked past us both to exit the room. I was left glowering at Yudan, wariness tightening my stomach as I was suddenly hit by just how much I *didn't* know regarding the Dark Jedi I'd invited onto our ship.

And Canderous' words shot through my mind: *Yudan Rosh followed you once before, Revan; and then he followed Malak.*

Malak, who'd turned on me so infamously with some of my own followers above Jen's homeworld-

"Deralia," I hissed, the word twisting on my tongue like poison. "Were you part of it?"
"The betrayal?" Yudan didn't pretend to misunderstand, at least; but he didn't look the slightest bit concerned, either. "What is wrong, Revan?" he drawled, raising an eyebrow. And the urge to punch him in his smug face, to make him exhibit some emotion other than disdain or mockery or that damned indifference, grew hot with urgency. "Are you having second thoughts about me?"

"Yes, dammit!" I growled. "Everyone I know, everyone I care for is onboard this ship-" except Bastila- "and you've shown no compunction about-" I bit off the rest, and breathed in deeply. Tried to settle myself, tried to let the emotions calm down. Stars knew I had little justification to be angry at him, with all I'd done. "I need to know, Yudan. Were you part of it?"

Yudan's expression turned hard; a frozen breath on the Force. My gaze slipped, once more, to the deactivated lightsaber he held so casually, and the idea of standing against him yet again turned my stomach-

"I was not near Deralia. I did not know of it." His words were formal and icily issued.

He wasn't part of it. Hot, welcome relief seared through me. Well, I may have let a Dark Jedi in amongst the crew, but at least it's not a traitorous Dark Jedi. Did that make any difference, really?

"And if you had known?" I asked in a low voice.

"You don't have the right to ask that," Yudan bit out. His eyes narrowed to slits of iced topaz. "I will not dally in what-ifs with you, Revan. You made a choice, now either live with it or challenge me."

I jerked backwards, stung. I didn't want to fight the bastard-

"I told you I'd fight by your side," Yudan sneered at me. His attention had dropped to my hand, now curled tight around Karon's 'saber. Anger sprang to life on his face, shattering the cold aloofness he had been sporting. His brows lowered, and the corners of his mouth turned down in disgust. "You, of all people, dare to doubt my word? You are a hypocrite, Revan. The galaxy's biggest hypocrite. And I am a fool for ever following you."

With a muttered oath, Yudan hurled the hilt in his grasp across the opposite end of the room, where it landed in an open storage canister. Whirling on his feet, he stalked out of the garage.

I stared at the storage box, blinking, as comprehension surged through me with a sick jolt. He'd been grasping a training lightsaber, one of the ones I'd pilfered from Korriban. Stars, he and Juhani might've been sparring, before I stepped in and made it all worse-

Sithspit.

I wasn't just a hypocrite; I was a sodding imbecile. My fear of Yudan's potential betrayal had completely blinded me to the fact that he couldn't be armed; his lightsaber had been left behind on the frelling Leviathan. Even if Jolee had pocketed it on the way out, there was no way the old man would have left it with Yudan. While Jolee might like to jerryjig along on the edge of senility, it was naught more than an act- the hermit from Kashyyyk would not have left a powerful weapon in the hands of a powerful Dark Jedi.

My tumultuous thoughts turned to Juhani, and how she'd tried to reach Kel, Dak- even emotive Mekel ten seconds after that insane Jorak had sucked the life out of him. Juhani was a noble soul and meant well, but her platitudes could come across as pious to those who considered her a stranger, and hardly a relatable one at that.

Double sithspit, I cursed myself again. Really, what would Yudan have done had I taken Jolee's advice and stayed out of it? Been a ronto's arse until she left him alone. And that's probably it.
I damned myself for my interference, and could only hope it hadn't kicked our fragile alliance back ten steps.

"That went well," Jolee commented. At some stage, he must have followed me in. "Think maybe next time you should keep your nose out of it, huh?"

I blinked, before shooting him a glare.

Jolee chuckled. "It wasn't your business, Revan. They weren't threatening each other; they weren't fighting. No one on this ship knows how to take Yudan Rosh, and you should let him sort that out himself."

"Yeah," I sighed, suddenly defeated. "I see that. Now I wish I'd listened to you."

"Humph," he muttered, eyeing me over with a frown. "Well, at least you're self-aware. I'll give you that much."

"At times," I said, staring over to the entrance that led back to the common room. I felt dispirited, almost melancholy, and beset with a longing to drown my sorrows. *Caffa will have to do. Let's not add to my stupidity by indulging in alcohol.*

I strode back to the central hatch control, pausing as my hand hovered over the release button. "And at other times," I added, "I think I'm just stumbling through the dark."

"Hah!" the old man crowed as the door swished open in front of me. "That's the truth for us all, young pup. You think you're any different, just because the Force swirls around you?"

"No," I groused, walking through to the common room as he followed in my wake. Again.

Mission had appeared in the intervening time, and was busy sorting out the colourful cards strewn over the table. She shot me a smile of welcome.

"That wasn't what I meant, anyway," I continued, throwing the words back over my shoulder to Jolee. "Just... how many mistakes do I make because I don't remember what I've learned before?" I sighed, taking a seat next to Mission. "How can my lack of recollection be anything but hampering? How am I supposed to stay on the right path, when I don't remember why I fell in the first place?"

Mission frowned, looking as if she were about to interject but Jolee beat her to it. "Hmm. Jedi like to talk about destiny, you know," he said, meandering over to the caffa machine before shooting it an irascible glare. "And they like to harp on about the chances of falling to the Dark Side, as if it were preordained and the likes of you or me don't have anything to say in the matter." He jabbed a finger at the percolator, and grunted in approval as it began to whir.

"Chances..." I muttered, running a hand through my unruly mop. "Are some sents more likely to fall?"

Jolee shrugged as he slipped a cracked mug into the tray at the bottom of the machine. "Certainly there are risk factors. Those trained late in life, or already attached-"

"I was-" My breath hitched. He could be describing me, I realized. "I- we were already involved before the Jedi found us. I recall that much. And... we weren't young." I frowned. "Somehow, I don't believe the Sith are so concerned about age. Or attachment."

Jolee chuckled. "Aye, well, that don't surprise me much. The ethos of the Jedi Order was not always so strict, you know. Centuries ago they did not pull apart families. A generation or two back and the
rules regarding age were more flexible. But before I left, they frowned on admitting anyone who had lived more than ten cycles of the Coruscanti sun."

"Ten," I said blankly. "Ten? But I was… Malak was… sixteen, maybe? How- how did that work?"

Jolee slid a full cup of steaming brew over the plasticeel table to me, before turning back to make himself one. It struck me then, suddenly, how everyone on the damn ship seemed to quietly understand my needs and act upon them without comment.

I was blessed, I realized; surrounded by those who cared for me even when they shouldn't.

"Well, it was after my time, but even in the depths of Kashyyyk I occasionally caught the galactic news, you know. Usually just before destroying the comm arrays I stumbled over, but heh, that's another story." Jolee waggled his eyebrows in his customary cryptic fashion, before grabbing his own cup of caffa and taking a seat. "Your admittance to the ranks of the Jedi caused a stir even I heard of. Sure, there's always exceptions to rules, even within the rigidity of the Order – but you two were uncommon, even for an exception."

"So old," I murmured, glancing down at the grubby table-top. "Old, and already attached." I couldn't stop the bitter laugh as it fell from my lips. "You spoke of destiny, old man. Is that what you think? That Malak and I were destined to fall?"

There was something sharp lodged in my chest. If the odds were on me stumbling back then, then what about now? Jolee Bindo was no Jedi Master, but I was beginning to value his counsel, and part of me dreaded his next words.

He didn't answer at first, and the silence turned thick with premonition. Slowly, I raised my gaze to meet his.

Jolee snorted; a loud and inelegant sound. "Did you know that Force-sensitive Rodians are more likely to fall to the Dark Side?"

"What?" I blinked, completely blindsided. Next to me, Mission guffawed with disbelief.

"Oh yes," Jolee murmured from across the table. "By quite some margin. There was a time when the High Council even considered banning all Rodians from entering the Order, due to the fear that they were merely training acolytes who would one day swear allegiance to the Dark Side."

It sounded like the warped reasoning of bigots. On one hand, I had the feeling I may have labelled the High Council such, once upon a time. And yet the idea struck me as far-fetched, even for them. How could one sweep such generalizations over an entire species? Surely there was a Rodian or two on the Council. Surely no Jedi Master worth his robes would stand for that sort of blind xenophobia, no matter how wrapped up in good intentions it may be.

"Are you messing with me, old man?" I asked suspiciously.

Jolee threw back his head and laughed. "Good to see you're not easy to fool. But I do have a story for you, and this one's actually true." 

I folded my arms and shot him a wary look. He was still chortling with mirth. "You promised, young pup. When you scampered away from me in the Shadowlands, you promised to listen to my next tale."

"I believe I said for one minute," I muttered.
"Bah, we're in hyperspace. What else are you going to do, besides skulk around and avoid our pilot?"

I scowled at him, as fingers of guilt clenched tight around my heart. Jolee stared straight back at me, uncompromising and resolute. He was damn annoying- but maybe his persistence was what I needed.

"Fine. Spin your tale, old man," I said, the snark evident in my voice. "Reveal to me the depths of your wisdom."

"Oh ho! No, young pup, wisdom is learned. Make what you will of my story." He cleared his throat. "Right. Now, where was I?"

I stared at him in silence. There was a slight twitch at the corner of his mouth that made me wonder how much of the doddering old man act was just that – an act. It was at least most, if not the entirety, I swore it.

"Okay, okay, I'll get to the point before your impatience explodes," he grumbled, but his eyes were twinkling. "This is a story of two sisters, close in both age and friendship. Fully grown; younger than you are now, but years older than when you were discovered on that Outer Rim planet of yours."

He coughed, thumping on his rattling chest. Not for the first time, I wondered at just how healthy he was. "The eldest married a Jedi Knight, as it happens; perhaps the last marriage the Order didn't outright forbid, even if enough disapproving eyes were cast their way. Well, the husband died young, and the spark of the Force awoke in his widow. Bright and unexpected. Normally the Order wouldn't allow training at such an advanced age; but, eh. Things were messy, what with Kun running around like a mad rancor. More than that, though- she'd attracted the eye of a Master who was used to thwarting the will of the High Council." He turned a beady eye on me. "She's long gone now, but a powerful Jedi of the Light she became. Many would argue she out-stripped her husband."

He trailed off into silence, a thoughtful look in his dark eyes. There was a ring of truth to his words, and I wondered if he'd known the woman personally.

"And the younger sister?" I prompted.

"Oh! Well she, too, had her own adventures. Maybe a year after her brother-in-law's death, she encountered a Jedi Padawan. A rather flamboyant fellow, more interested in skirmishes around the Ukatis system than actually furthering his own training. Their courtship is another tale, but suffice to say that her new paramour discovered the Force sang brightly in her, just like her elder sister."

Jolee skidded off into silence once more, staring into space.

"So, what happened?" Mission demanded. "Did she get training too?"

Jolee harrumphed, his gaze roving over Mission before snapping back to me. "Not exactly. She didn't have the backing of a Master but, instead, a rogue Padawan who was seen as less-than-reliable. Still, he knew enough to understand she needed mentoring beyond his abilities. So he took her case to the High Council." Jolee shrugged, as if unconcerned, but there was a very real bitterness clouding his eyes. "They refused. Too old, they said. Too risky she would take the wrong path. Too much in love with one who spent his life involved in non-Jedi matters, despite the brown of his robes." He sighed. "So, the foolish young man did the only thing he could think of: he trained her himself."

He was still staring at me, face sagging with the heaviness of age. I felt the shiver of certainty, then,
that the young man had been him.

"The power of Exar Kun grew," Jolee said softly. "And his teachings and promises of strength were
beguiling, particularly to those still struggling with the ways of the Force. The woman became
convinced that his path was the one to follow, and tried to persuade her new husband. They
disagreed. They fought. She lost, but the man could not bring himself to cut her down."

He sighed, a hollow sound that echoed. "So, she left and followed Kun, and killed many under his
lead. The Order used her name as a warning, as to what happens to those trained late in their life-
all the while conveniently ignoring the very example of her older sister who became one of the greatest
heroes in the fight against Kun."

"It was you," I murmured. "You were married."

"Do you know of another way to get a wife?" Jolee raised an eyebrow at me, a bushy white line of
hair that contrasted with the leathery darkness of his skin. His eyes were once more twinkling with
mirth, but there was an underlying seriousness in their depths. "Odds are just that, Revan. You've
played them all your life, and you've beaten them many a time. You start blaming your age for your
fall, or waffling on about inevitability, and all you're really doing is shirking responsibility." He
shrugged, pausing to take a sip of his caffa. "That doesn't strike me as the sort of thing you'd
normally do."

No. It wasn't. But while I might scoff at the Jedi Order, they wouldn't implement rules with no
rationale. No matter how misguided they were, the Jedi would have justification, of a sort, regarding
their reasoning behind age.

*Had it upset me in the past? Being such a striking exception, having the odds stacked against me,
wondering if some people were just waiting for me to fall? Us. For us to fall. But, surely, Malak and
I weren't the only ones admitted past the customary cut-off?*

One only had to hark back one generation further to see the exception of Jolee's wife and her sister,
to know that I hadn't been *that* unusual- at least in age.

*It's the legacy from Exar Kun, my mind whispered. The Order grew cautious. The Order grew
afraid. It was the same reason, I speculated, for their reluctance to join the Mandalorian Wars – even
when the Republic all but begged for their aid.*

*It was fear of the Dark Side once more rotting their ranks. So they held back. And, instead, I
happened.*

The fallout from Exar Kun had blinded them to what should be a universal truth, particularly for Jedi:
fear should not be allowed to influence one's decisions, whether it culminated in action or inaction.

Jolee still had a vaguely unimpressed look on his face, and I couldn't help but imagine the
conversations he would've had with the Jedi Masters, once upon a time. *He'd add a unique
perspective if he ever decided to return to the Order.*

Well. That was a conversation I wasn't going to touch. I'd leave that sort of thing to Juhani.

I felt a nudge from the side and turned to see Mission, smiling tremulously at me. "It'll be okay, Jen.
You'll see."

I smiled back, feeling my expression soften. Mission's faith, at times, seemed almost unconditional.
And when I thought of the others who followed me, here onboard this very freighter; others whose
loyalty and affection I had somehow acquired along the way...
I'd had this before. The few memories were visceral and intense, and the remembered emotion burned.

I'd had this before, and damned it to the Dark Side.

No… A negative, a disagreement, somewhere from an ancient crease in my mind. Not damned… I sacrificed it.

I blinked, my thoughts inverting in on themselves, my consciousness scrabbling desperately to follow that loose thread of thought. Sacrificed? For... for what? For a purpose?

Purpose… there'd been that thought earlier, like there was something just beneath the veil of forgotten memory, some reason… a calculated gamble that, for once, didn't pay off-

Something beyond the Mandalorian Wars, beyond the invasion of the Republic, beyond everything I knew so far regarding my infamous life...

But the train of thought eluded me, a neuron sparking away on a switchboard until it died out from existence.

Jolee said I played the odds and beat them often. But what if, when it really counted, I lost?

What if I'd had a reason to step into the Dark, even understanding the risks, but hoping my drive and strength could see it through before everything collapsed in the worst possible way?

Arrogance. Overconfidence. Recklessness. No one can control the Dark Side. Not even me.

I shivered. But, really, how was my fall different than any other? Some Force-users turned due to emotion, some tempted by a lust for power… stars, Bastila had had a moment where she thought we could control it, back in our zenith of madness- that we could leash the Force and own it, all we needed was a little more strength-

Mission nudged me again, shattering my contemplation like a thousand shards of ferracrystal.

"We're all family here, y'know?" she murmured, her eyes shining. "You go take out Darth Poodoo, and we'll have your back."

The words completely broke my internal reverie, and I couldn't hold back a snicker. With a wrench of mental fortitude, I let the turbulent contemplation go, and it faded into a stream of nothingness as I grinned warmly back at my young friend.

xXx

"We'll exit on the far side of the unknown planet," Carth said, staring blankly through the cockpit window. His voice was terse; impersonal. It wasn't long until hyperspace exit, and here we were, making a mockery of playing at pilot and co-pilot. "Out of sight from the Star Forge."

I cleared my throat. "So if things are too hot, our back-out plan is to retreat into hyperspace? Back to Yavin?"

"Yes. We don't have a closer set of safe coordinates, not here in the Unknown Regions."

We dwindled into silence. It was the first time we'd been alone since that interrupted conversation back on Yavin Station. I had… nothing to say to him, really. Nothing I could say.

Sorry? Sorry for everything? For your wife, your planet, your Republic?
It was ridiculous. And all I wanted, really, was to rest my head against his chest and forget it all.

"Have you comm'd the brass?" I questioned in a low voice. Real-time communication through hyperspace was unreliable; but I'd expected him to have sent a delayed message, at the least.

"Yes."

I shot him a look; he hadn't shaved for days, and was now sporting a permacrete stubble that rather suited him. A muscle twitched in his jaw as he continued facing away, not elaborating on his answer one iota.

Not that I could blame him.

I'd left most of the others back in the common room. Mission had, somewhat sulkily, changed back into Calo Nord's old exoskeleton at Zaalbar's insistence, before belting herself into one of the plimfoam benches. Dustil was at her side, shooting me a wary look as I walked past in the direction of the cockpit.

Part of me had expected him to follow, visible or otherwise. Part of me would've been glad for the additional company to break up the tension that sat so thick in the air.

"Will you, uh, contact Bastila?" Carth asked. He sounded awkward. He sounded like his son.

"Only if I have to," I muttered. "She's- she's not doing so well."

"Oh."

The tone of his voice made me think he wanted more: more detail, more information on our crewmate and what she was dealing with. But I couldn't- I'd answer him if he asked directly, but I didn't want to. There was a dark gnawing at my soul whenever I thought on her; I knew what was happening – not just whatever unpleasantness she was enduring, but the breaking of her spirit – and the thought of my role in that broke something inside of me, too.

I only had to look at Yudan to be reminded of what happened to those close to me. The Dark Side. To think of it encompassing Bastila Shan…. 

"Who's on the turrets with Ordo?" Carth asked. He leamed forward, as if he meant to turn on the comm and find out for himself.

"Yudan." I hadn't spoken with him since our altercation earlier, but I'd heard Canderous more or less order him into the turret room. To my surprise, Yudan had acquiesced without comment.

Yudan told me he respected Canderous, back on the Leviathan. And Jolee is right. It's none of my business. For better or worse, Yudan was part of our crew, now. I had to step aside and let the others judge him on their own terms.

Carth was still staring away from me, but I caught his eyes narrowing. A certain frigidity crisped the air. "You trust him?" he bit out.

Yes. No. Sun and stars, I don't have a frelling clue. "Not sure I can pass judgement."

I doubted that answer would appease Carth, but it silenced him nonetheless. And I, once more, cursed the awkwardness that sat between us. I found I'd rather have him raging at me, cursing me to the Outer Rim and back rather than this damned, damned awkwardness.
I stared down at my fingers, clenched tight into uncomfortable fists, the skin pulling taut against my maimed off-hand. I suddenly felt flushed; black spots speckled the edges of my vision before driving inward, and I wondered fruitlessly if I’d ever been forced into such a clumsy conversation with a lover before.

It was only when the vertigo punched me in the stomach that I recognized the all-too-familiar encroachment of tunnel vision.

…

The silence between the two of us was thick with awkwardness.

This is ridiculous, I seethed internally, glaring at Mal as he lifted a spoonful of synthetized mush that posed as breakfast into his mouth. He deliberately did not look my way.

Like he had nothing to say to me. Like we were nothing to each other.

And as I sat across from him in the Temple mess, feeling ungainly and irritated and hurt, the sharp thought suddenly sparked through my mind: Sod this.

My chair scraped loudly against the ferracrete flooring; a discordant sound breaking through the gentle silence of Padawans eating and greeting and harmonizing with the galaxy or some rot. I stood, the brown robes that still smelled new chafing against my shoulder blades as I did so.

We’d always been a team, Mal and I. We’d always had each other’s backs. And now that our lives were better, safer, greater- he’d decided it was time to stop trusting me. I still missed Staria, and Jonohl, and Ness- stars, it hadn’t even been that long since old man Freeflight had died- I’d only been on frelling Coruscant for a handful of months and my heart still yearned for those we’d loved back on Talshion-

Sod this. I glared down at his averted face with mounting anger.

"You know what, Mal?" I said, keeping my voice quiet and, hopefully, not overheard. Last thing I needed was another of Master Karon’s lengthy lectures. "Sod this. If you won't talk to me-"

Finally, his head jerked up, whiskey-coloured eyes flashing with anger. "I never see you, Revan! If you're not busy with your own Master or someone else's, then you're spending all your spare time with-"

"I'm learning, Mal! I'm learning everything I possibly can," I hissed. Our entire lives had been fraught with danger and powerlessness. Balanced on the blade-edge of chance. I hadn't been able to stop Freeflight dying from septa-lung disease- I'd thought of him as old my entire life, but he wasn't, not really, more like middle-aged- he was just blind and broken and homeless like the rest of us. And Mal- he hadn't been able to rescue his own brother from the Enforcers.

I would never be powerless again, never allow injustice to prevail if I could do anything about it.

"Damnit, Revvie, it's not just that, it's-" He halted; and the contained frustration on his face would normally have made me laugh. Usually, I only ticked Malak off when I did something he considered dangerous. This time I didn’t really understand what was going on in that thick, handsome head of his.

He sighed. "Revan. You're in the training chambers all the time. He's- he's into you, alright? It's the only reason I can think of-"
Maybe it was the expression on my face that shut him up. I wasn't sure. But the anger that surged through me was hot, wild, and incredibly non-Jedi like.

I didn't get jealousy. I didn't do jealousy. And I wasn't going to be hemmed into making only friends he approved of.

Back on Talshion, Mal used to get pissy whenever I spent time around Jonohl, too. That's why I never told Mal that Jonohl was my first kiss. For frell's sake, we were supposed to be adults! We were supposed to be Jedi. I felt suddenly, deeply, disappointed with the man I loved with all of my heart.

"You don't trust me," I said quietly. "Never mind that we've been together for years; you actually don't trust me enough to choose my own friends based on my own judgment."

Malak twitched back, his eyes widening in reaction. "That's not it, Revvie, it's because he's-"

"He's into that blonde Knight who hangs around the younglings," I snapped. "He doesn't even like me, Mal, he thinks I'm nothing more than an uneducated street kid that shouldn't've been admitted. I swear he's only spending his time on me because he gets to kick my arse on a regular basis." I stopped, clenching my teeth, as we glared at each other in silence.

Vaguely, I was aware of that hot-headed Padawan Arran Da'klor listening in unabashedly, and I threw the Zeltron a dirty look. Arran was amusing, but he had absolutely no concept of privacy. He grinned, before jerking his head to the front of the room. My gaze followed.

Icy, disapproving Master Atris was staring at me.

Oh, for frell's sake. Making a scene within the earshot of Atris. I was never going to hear the end of the dangers regarding attachment, now.

"You know what?" I lowered my voice to a soft whisper. "It doesn't matter. Whatever he thinks of me has nothing to do with you or me anyway. I'm using every resource I can to become the best Jedi I can. That's what you should be doing, Mal."

I turned away from him, took one step towards the exit.

"If you think you can get over your trust issues," I said, throwing the words carelessly over my shoulder, "then maybe you should try joining us. You never know, you might actually make a friend."

…

I gasped loudly; someone was roughly shaking my shoulder.

"Revan? Revan, are you alright?"

I blinked, my vision swimming back into focus. Fingers clenching tight in my lap. A beep from the navigational console indicating hyperspace exit within five minutes. Carth's hand, firm on my arm.

"I'm okay," I whispered, even as my voice broke on the words. Mal. My lover, my past, the black hole in my mind. We'd been so young then. He'd been… jealous? I frowned, thoughts darting wildly on the jumble of achromatic recollections as the details dissolved. There'd been a Zeltron, there… Arran. Arran Da'klor. One of the Thirteen I'd led to the Dark Side, before he betrayed me and I killed him. Malak had been jealous… jealous of him, once upon a time?
So strange, to think that once we were teenagers, drunk with the messy emotions of youth. No war hanging over us, no mountain of death or worse...

"Did you… did you remember something?" Carth's voice was low and shaky. "What?"

"Nothing of import," I mumbled, closing my eyes. Obviously Malak had, at some stage, overcome his reservations regarding Arran Da'klor. For the Jedi Thirteen had been, by all accounts, a tight-knit team. Once.

Before… before Malachor. Before everything after Malachor.

I squeezed my eyes tighter. Every remnant that surfaced told me that Malak had been crucial to my life and yet, when I thought of him, all I could feel was guilt. Guilt, and a determination to end things.

_The Dark Side corroded all that was between us. There is nothing left._ It was a quiet whisper from the broken recesses of my mind, and somehow it had the feeling of unshakeable truth. But could I really count on the past staying buried when I finally faced him?

When fragments emerged showing him as the man he once was, before I led him to ruin?

"Revan. Talk to me."

I glanced up to see Carth, finally, looking at me. He'd withdrawn his hand, but I could no longer see enmity in his expression… just a torn anguish that cut me to the quick.

"It was nothing that could help us here," I said quietly, holding his dark gaze. "Just something… something from much earlier."

His brown eyes roved over my face, his forehead were creased in… in concern? I drew in a shaky breath. I had not expected _that._

"I didn't- I didn't stop to think how this must be affecting you," he murmured. His voice was so soft I could barely hear it. "This must be even more of a shock to you… but surely, you must have had some idea, some inkling-you knew who was in your head-"

I couldn't help a snort of derision; from the way his brows slammed down he didn't appreciate it… but I'd never been adept at keeping a personal conversation on a serious tone. "You have no idea the insane theories I tested out," I said, raising a hand to push a wayward curl out of my face. "I think the height of ridiculousness was when I wondered if I'd been one of Bastila's infamous strike team."

Carth blinked at that, before a frown of wariness once more clouded his face. He sighed, his shoulders slumping. "I don't- I can't reconcile you with the women who led the Republic before turning on it… damn it, Revan, I've- I've tried to hate you, for all you've done-"

A discordant beep from the console shattered the spell between us. Carth jerked around, glaring at the nav controls. "Two minutes until hyperspace exit," he muttered, before leaning forward to broadcast the same throughout the freighter. He sighed again, pulling back into the pilot's seat, turning away from me. "I guess we both just have to find a way to push forward." His jaw firm as he stared out at the black of hyperspace. "I'm a soldier, and you're a, a-… Look. We need to focus on the mission. On Malak and the Star Forge. We can, uh… we can talk later, you and I. Just give me some time."

"Okay," I whispered, but I wasn't, not really. We'd be spitting out in the realspace near the Forge any second now, and then what? Off to rush headlong into a confrontation that, even if it ended in
success, still wouldn't wipe away my past crimes.

I honestly couldn't see any sort of future between Carth and me, assuming we survived. Even supposing he forgave me, I couldn't see a Republic that would allow my freedom, no matter how this all played out. And Carth... he was a military man. Somehow, I thought he'd be unfulfilled doing anything other than serving the Republic – even if he might've learned to shunt his family to the top of the priority list.

There wasn't a place in his life for the likes of me... and I wouldn't wish my ominous presence on a good man like him anyway. But if on this journey I could regain Carth's respect; and maybe even, one day, his trust; then I'd be satisfied, and would ignore my yearnings for anything more.

The infinite ivory lines of hyperspace snapped into nothingness as Carth expertly launched the ship into realspace. I had one moment to frown at the mass of asteroids in our field of vision before a dozen different warnings clanged from the nav console.

A proximity alarm wailed-

The 'Hawk was wrested sharply to one side as an ominous grating noise echoed from the lower starboard of the ship.

My stomach lurched, my vision darkened-

"Blast!" Carth yelled. "We've hit something!"

Beyond the mass of spinning asteroids, I saw the wink of a blue-green planetoid-

I could feel my heart thumping; each beat a deep thrum of dizzying vertigo-

"Sun and stars! What's happening?" a deeper voice exclaimed.

"Breach in starboard fuel tank," Carth growled, hands flying over the nav console. "There's something scrambling all the sensors and surface controls! Disable them, Revan! I need manual control, now!"

A moment of unreality froze my limbs, congealed my thoughts; and I sat there, passive and useless-

"The ship's not responding properly! I don't know what the frell is going on-"

Blinking lights on the dash, sweat popping out on my neck, images from the past and present overlaying but the edges didn't quite match-

"Blast it, Revan!" Carth cursed, leaning over me to jab at something on the dash. "Snap out of it! I need you, here!"

An astromech's distraught beeping from behind us; Teethree, plugged into the 'Hawk's computer, trying to desperately to override whatever was happening-

"The instruments are all out of whack-"

"It's a scrambler, Mal, you'll have to fly manual-"

"Comm the crew." Carth's voice was terse; experienced and trained for this sort of situation. "I've powered off the sensors, but one of the engines is losing fuel. Brace for emergency landing. I'll aim for a nearby asteroid."
Half the grid of instruments were shut down, now; a patch of darkness on the nav-console. Carth's grip was firm on the manual steering column; his feet and off-hand manually adjusting the thrust in the way a nav-computer normally did. I was slung sideways as the ship canted to the side; Carth veering along the edge of a jagged satellite of space rock almost the length of our ship.

"Focus on the damn ship, Mal. I'll move any rock that gets too close.\" I gasped, filling myself with the Force as the snub weaved between asteroids. "Keep the stabilizers on max and don't turn the sensors back on-"

"I know how to fly, Revvie!"

He did, but not as well as required for this, not as well as Carth-

Flushes of heat surged along my skin, vision blurred, the cockpit merged into the smaller, elongated tip of a Republic scoutship-

"Comm the crew," Carth demanded again. "Let them know it'll be rough. I've got the rest." His words were low and furious with the tension of the situation, as if he understood his co-pilot was currently dysfunctional, trapped between two time-lines, frozen in memory-

"I can sense the scrambler, Mal, it's coming from the planet.\" My eyes were squeezed tight, my senses stretching out into the breadth of the galaxy.

If I turned, would I see a hotshot pilot with a heart of gold, or a charismatic warrior who blazed in the Force?

"The planet," I mumbled.

"Scramblers are localized; their radius is never large," Carth muttered, dragging on the manual column to turn the freighter. A larger asteroid was visible some distance in front of us; big enough to land a ship on. "We'll land on that rock, fix the fuel tank breach and fly away from this location. Fly out of the reach of the scrambler."

I was so adept at this, now; drifting out along the fabric of the Force, visualizing celestial bodies whether they be fleets on the battlefront or asteroids in our path. "The signal encompasses the whole damn sector. It's huge-"

"No," I gasped. "It's too powerful, sublights will never get us far enough. You can't get us out of range without jumping into hyperspace-"

"I can't make a hyperjump with the nav computer offline!"

"It's an EMP signal scrambling our sensors, the utility droid can't crack it. Damn it, Rev, I've never done a manual landing, you need to kill the signal-"

"I can't, it's too strong-"

"It's coming from the planet," I mumbled again, half-aware of Carth cursing indistinctly as the freighter canted again. "It's too strong to disable from here."

"Too strong for you?\" His voice was coloured with disbelief. "Then I'll just fly out of the planetary ring until the scrambler can't reach us."

"No.\" I was firm; resolute. I could see the path before us. "The planet. Something's amplifying the signal. We need to counteract it from the surface."
"You can't be suggesting-"

"Fly through the asteroids and land on the damn planet, Mal!" I ordered.

"What?" Carth snapped, and I realized I'd spoken aloud. I turned to face him; he was barely
cognizant of me, all attention forward on keeping the *Hawk* from being smeared into space dust
along with the rest of the rocks that orbited the planet.

The larger asteroid was close, now. Carth veered hard in an approach vector, shifting auxiliary
power to the repulsors as one hand remained steady on the column.

"No," I whispered. "The planet. We have to get to the planet-"

"The *Hawk*'s losing fuel," Carth rapped out. "One of the engines will die before I reach atmo.
Asteroid's a safer bet."

"Disable the engine connected to the ruptured tank, then. Fly without it. We need to be on the
planet."

It was certainty, burning deep in my gut. I was following the same path, this time with a more
damaged ship but a more experienced pilot, too-

"Damn it, Revan!"

"Trust me. Please, Carth. You need to trust me."

"The planet's big, Revvie. I can't even get readouts on the atmo."

"Keep going, Mal. Trust me. The source of the scrambler is a Force beacon. We must get there."

A pause, the briefest stutter in time; I could feel the tension burning in Carth.

"I've been here before, flown this path before," I whispered. "There's something on the planet, and
we need to get near it."

With a muffled oath, Carth returned power to the sublights, and the *Hawk* reneged from his
approach vector, careening back into the planetary ring of asteroids. The g-forces slammed me deep
into the co-pilot's chair as Carth spun the ship vertically, skimming past a couple of smaller rocks.

Through the cockpit window, the blue-green planet came once more into view.

"Keep your trajectory shallow, Mal. I need to canvas the planet's surface, find what I'm looking for."

"Enter the stratosphere but let me guide you," I whispered. My eyes fell shut once more. The Force
was shaky, but there. I could feel something drawing me in towards the planet, something tempting,
something alluring-

"Fifteen degrees to the right. Hold the course steady."

"You want me to fly this damn thing on manual control, leaking fuel and minus an engine, and then
not even land at the first opportunity?" He was incredulous. Mistrustful. Angry, even.

"Land. Now." It was a barked order, and I felt the craft respond under his grip.

"Yes," I hissed, pressing one hand tight against my closed eyes. "You can do it, Carth. I need you to.
To- to- fly to- somewhere-"
"There's some large structure ahead, Revvie, some sort of pyramid-"

"That's it. Get close and find a place to land."

"It's visible from the skies. A pyramid. The source of the scrambler." I sucked in a deep breath as I followed the tantalising beacon of Force power that called to me. I didn't have to open my eyes to know the planet's visage now engulfed the screen of the cockpit.

The ship shuddered as it hit atmo without any automatic readjustment, but it realigned under Carth's control.

I could feel his hesitation once more, rippling around him, tangible on the Force.

"Trust me," I whispered. The source of the signal beckoned to me, further around the curvature of the planet as we descended. Slightly to the left of our current trajectory.

"Please. Follow my direction. Trust me."

Trust me.

xXx

Chapter End Notes

Coming up next: Damage to the Ebon Hawk is canvassed, and Carth takes charge. Thanks to kosiah for the beta.
The thrumming of the repulsorlifts slowly dwindled as I killed all power. Beneath us, I could feel the landing feet of the ‘Hawk slowly settle into the soft beach sand that comprised our makeshift berth. The low warning clang of the fuel tank malfunction echoed throughout the cockpit.

The landing hadn’t been as rough as I’d feared – I’d had plenty of experience bringing in smaller, twitchier snubs minus an engine; and manual docks were simply part of advanced pilot training. But I’d never done both at the same time.

“We’ve landed. We’re in one piece. We can move forward.” Adjusting the stabilizers to counteract the disabled engine while simultaneously correcting the flight path in a way that nav-sensors normally calculated had been... a challenge. But launching back into the air wasn’t an option. Not until the leak was patched and the fuel tanks re-levelled so the starboard engine could be brought back online.

Otherwise, the chances of the Ebon Hawk spinning out of control and careening back into the ground before I’d raised her fifty metres were altogether too high.

“Teethree, run a ship-wide diagnostic,” I ordered, leaning forward to do the same myself. The sensors and the surface controls were throwing out garbage results, but the internal ship computer remained unaffected from the scrambling EMP signal. I heard a beep of assent from the astromech.

The console spat out the prelim results; other than the tank rupture, everything looked fine so far. I felt my shoulders sag in relief. A fuel tank breach I can deal with. We can still move forward.

I turned, slowly; finally to look at the woman who was haunting my every thought. Our descent into the planetary atmo had been broken by a series of short, terse commands from her; minor adjustments to our trajectory; and I followed each in silence even as my doubts over both her sanity and the stability of her mind began, once more, to build.

And then, as I canted left in yet another of Revan’s course corrections, I’d spotted the structure. The pyramid. What she claimed was the source of the signal.

What could be the ruin of the Republic Fleet before they even had a chance to assault the Star Forge.

I could have lined the quad lasers up right then and there, had the ship not been so heavily compromised. I’d be able to do it, I knew, even on a manual launch – provided I wasn’t also compensating for a missing engine.

At any rate, it’d taken all I had to land safely. I’d slowly babied the ‘Hawk inland from an aquamarine coastline that glittered through the cockpit window, and finished our descent some distance away on the beginnings of a pristine white-sand beach.
Revan’s eyes were still shut; chest heaving with shallow breaths, sweaty dark curls stuck to the side of her neck. There were bruises of sleeplessness under her eyes, despite the five days in hyperspace that should have given her adequate rest. Her skin was both pale and blotchy.

In short, she was a mess. My heart ached for her.

“Revan,” I whispered, but she didn’t seem to hear.

I was... I was out of my league, here. I’d lived through more hairy experiences that most sents: combat zones, hot extractions, even ground attacks when events had conspired against me. But Revan....

She was slipping away from us. I shouldn’t want her, but I did- and she was slipping away from me, from us all, entangled in the horrors of a past I could neither understand nor forget. What had the damn Jedi been thinking? Letting Revan loose with no idea, no defences, absolutely nothing but a gifted Padawan who had been number one on the Sith’s hit list?

I knew that wasn’t fair. The Endar Spire had been manned by a squad of Jedi Knights under the command of a Master, even if a technicality placed Bastila in command-

And finally, finally, I understood. The strangest demand from the Jedi-controlled mission, to give all authority to Bastila Shan even though that Cerean Master had, in all practicality, been leading it.

In case something happened with Revan. In case she broke free.

I could still, somewhat hazily, recall Revan from the Endar Spire. A quiet scholar who’d voluntarily stayed confined to her bunks. She’d blushed profusely the one time I’d spoken to her but, other than a fleeting irritation, I hadn’t thought of Jen Sahara again until the Endar Spire had been betrayed.

Kylah Aramai. A traitor in the ranks of the Jedi overturned the plans of the Jedi. The absolutely insane plan. What idiotic, stuffed robe came up with the idea of putting Darth Revan on a leash and thought: Hey, you know what? Let’s do that!

Revan had one fist pushed hard against her closed eyes, shaking slightly. The very real cost to her was obvious... she should be the last person I cared about, but I did. Everyone on this ship did. And she was struggling so hard not to be dragged back into the labyrinth of evil most would assume she’d never escaped in the first place.

I couldn’t forget she’d once been a hero. That her zenith had shone as brightly as her nadir had eclipsed everything. That, without her, the Mandalorians would’ve won.

Sometimes it seemed impossible to believe that the sassy, driven woman who’d somehow wormed her way into my heart could be Revan. Darth Revan. Revan Freeflight.

And then I’d consider everything we’d accomplished, every time Revan had blazed a path through seemingly insurmountable odds – sometimes due to nothing more than sheer, raw power – and I could see it. I could see her. The charismatic, resolute leader who’d rallied a generation of Jedi Knights to lead the Republic, before falling into the depths of betrayal and madness.

Now, all I could see was her slowly breaking in front of me.

There was so much at stake. Revan needed something to keep her tethered to the present, to keep her as the Jen I had come to know- even if Jen wasn’t her... I knew Jen wasn’t her... I knew that the woman I cared for was some shade of Revan Freeflight... but I had the horrible feeling we were losing that woman to the worst part of herself.
She needed something to anchor her in the here and now, but I- I had to remain an impersonal colleague. I had to keep the mission on task. How could I bring myself to reach out to her, when faced with the enormity of her past?

And yet... how could I not? When I could see what this was doing to her- and, dammit, despite everything, it still didn’t change how I felt, even though it should-

I gritted my teeth. “Revan,” I said again, more to derail my own spinning thoughts than anything else. “Tell me about this planet. What do you know?”

“Mal and I came here before,” she muttered, her head still bowed. “I don’t recall anything past the landing.”

Mal. Malak. Darth Malak. Something poisonous clenched in my gut. I’d heard the rumours in the Fleet. Sure, there was wild gossip about every rogue Jedi hero who joined the Republic – but that particular one cropped up time and again.

Revan Freeflight and Malak Devari defied their Order in more than one way. Jedi are meant to be unattached. They are meant to love every being equally.

They are meant to be emotionless robots.

Lovers or not, there was no denying Revan and Malak had been close. Comrades. The two most influential members in Revan’s own Guard. The Supreme Commander and her Second.

The Sith Lord and her Shadow Hand.

How much did Revan remember? How hard would it be for her, at the end of all things, to face Malak once we finally made it to the Star Forge?

She hadn’t even been able to kill Yudan Rosh! He’d faced her twice, now – I didn’t quite understand what had gone down in the Shadowlands, but Revan was missing two fingers because of him. And on the Leviathan – the bastard was standing against her when he’d knocked me out. Maybe he was an ally now – and I had serious misgivings on that one – but she must have had a chance to kill him, and for some reason, hadn’t.

Dustil had attacked her too, first time she met him. And she stopped herself from retaliating. No. I was not going to compare my son to Yudan Rosh. But there was no denying Revan was keen to give others a second chance – and considering her own, I could understand that – but blast, what did that mean if she had to stand against the man who was the most important part of her past?

Revan said she remembered little. Little more than dreams. If that was true, then it might be possible that I remembered more of Malak Devari, and I’d only met the man once.

...

“Carth, you made it!” Jordo effused, one hand slapping me companionably on the shoulder. The background hubbub of people chattering and laughing filled the air. It gave the base a festive feel to it I hadn’t seen in years. I couldn’t remember the last time the Fleet had paused to enjoy a social event on this scale. “No Morgana?”

“No, uh, she couldn’t make it,” I said, giving him a quick grin as I canvassed the large hangar with half an eye. They’d relocated the snubs and converted the bay into the venue for this impromptu celebration, assuming correctly that the turnout would be far too much for the event halls that were normally used.
Well. It was the first time the Navy base on Thani had hosted two famous members of Revan’s Guard. Talvon Esan had been here before, of course – for strat meetings, military speeches and, at times, to lead our squadrons off to join the rest of the Fleet. Every Telosian was proud of Talvon Esan – our half-blooded native who was one of the galactic icons of hope and leadership against the Mandalorians.

This time, Talvon had brought Malak Devari with him.

“A shame, that,” Jordo commented, his tone neutral. He knew well that Morgana never visited base. “A shame you missed the speeches too, Carth.”

At my dry look, Jordo gave a chuckle. “It wasn’t that bad. Knight Talvon’s a good speaker, and Knight Malak was even better. Lots of the grunts out here could do with their spirits lifted, and it’s funny how a few words from a robed fella can achieve that.”

I snorted, even as I knew he was correct. Jordo tended to be scathing regarding any sort of pep talk from the higher-ups; the fact he spoke well of this evening’s address meant I’d no doubt missed something rousing. Not that I really cared; I’d had little desire to attend, by myself, and was only putting in an appearance at this late stage because Saul would expect it.

I scanned the hangar. Near the front on a makeshift dais, I could see Saul clothed in full ceremonial dress replete with medals and surrounded by other members of the brass, similarly attired. He was speaking with a tall man in civvies, who looked strangely out of place amongst the admirals and commodores.

Saul took that moment to look over in my direction, his gaze landing on Jordo and me, before turning back to his informally dressed companion.

“Talvon Esan’s left already, sadly enough,” Jordo was saying as I turned back to him. “I was hoping to score a holograph for Kala – you know how much the kids worship him – and you keep forgetting to ask each time Karath introduces you.”

By kids, Jordo was referring to my son as much as his daughter. A subtle way of my friend enquiring as to where the heck Dustil was. I’d waited over an hour at home, wondering if Morgana would return, despite the data-note informing me she’d taken our son out all evening to watch some new flick at the holo-centre across the other side of the city.

Dustil would be gutted if he heard he’d missed out on this. It wasn’t often families were invited to events at base, and even less often we had such famous visitors. I’d accepted Morgana’s indifference to the military years ago – even the whole damn war – but she was wrong about Dustil. He was old enough, now, to come along to things like this; even if she preferred to avoid them herself. I saw him little enough as it was-

“A holograph of Malak would be even better, but the chances of meeting him in person have to be-” Jordo halted half-way through his prattle, his voice changing to slow and wondering. “Or maybe not?”

I looked back into the hangar, to see the crowds of Fleet staff slowly part for Admiral Karath and the tall human he’d been speaking to up on the dais – Malak Devari, I realized with some surprise. The legendary Jedi Knight was younger than I expected, my age or even a few years under, and he walked with a natural grace and charming smile that made him seem likeable even from a distance.

They were striding towards us.
“Looks like we’re getting an introduction,” Jordo murmured. “That’ll be your doing, Carth.”

I didn’t have a chance to reply; they were almost upon us. I snapped to attention – although technically this was an informal event, the very fact that Saul was dressed in full regs said as much as the flinty steel in his gaze. Saul’s promotion from Rear-Admiral to Admiral had been recent, and that meant other members of the brass were watching him – judging him not only on his own actions, but also those of his underlings.

Events like these always reminded me why I never wanted to climb too high on the ladder of hierarchy – too many undercurrents to navigate. Too many sents to impress, instead of going about the actual business of protecting the Republic.

“At ease, Lieutenant,” Saul said as he neared, before I had a chance to snap out a salute. Saul turned to face Malak Devari, who appeared both relaxed and at ease in his environment.

There was an intensity, though, in the broad planes of the Jedi’s face and in the sharpness of his gaze. Malak Devari had a certain presence that made it impossible to overlook him, despite the casual attire that contrasted so sharply against Saul’s.

Most of the Jedi attached to Republic forces still wore their Order robes, despite their aid being unsanctioned. Maybe it was the symbolism of the Jedi that they valued; in which case it surprised me to see the second most powerful leader of the Republic war effort dressing down at a military event such as this. But then I recalled that Revan Freeflight herself was rumoured to be both lightly armoured and masked during any public address. It made me wonder if the informality of Malak Devari’s attire was some sort of statement against the Jedi High Council that had refused to back them.

“These are my two most skilled fighter pilots,” Saul said to Malak. “I am extremely proud of the entire Telosian division, but these two stand out from the rest. Lieutenant Carth Onasi and Lieutenant Jordo Merrix.”

“It’s nice to meet you, sir,” Jordo said, as the Jedi Knight shook his hand and turned to me with a brief smile.

“Onasi,” Knight Malak said in acknowledgement as our hands clasped in greeting. “I’ve heard that name, I believe?”

“Serroco,” Saul murmured.


“Uh, thank you. And you, too, obviously- I mean.” I felt like kicking myself as I stumbled over the words – it wasn’t like I was awe-struck or anything ridiculous; more that any Force-user inherently put me on edge. There were too many rumours about what they could do: read minds, calm emotions, lift spirits – and that wasn’t even talking about what they unleashed on the battleground.

It was no wonder that Jedi were such inspirational speakers if half of the magical powers attributed to them were true.

A lesser man would’ve been outwardly amused at my social inelegance; Malak merely smiled and gave me an easy nod of acceptance. Despite my wariness of Jedi in general, I found myself liking Malak Devari on first impressions.

“Uh, this might sound a little forward,” Jordo interrupted, sounded sheepish, “but I don’t suppose
there’s any chance I could grab a holograph?” He laughed weakly. “It’s just- my daughter’s a huge fan.”

Saul’s face tightened in discomfort and, this time, Malak did look amused.

“Lieutenant,” Saul warned. “This is hardly the-”

“It’s no problem, Saul,” Malak cut in. “If you could do the honours and take a snap?”

“Carth, too,” Jordo added, motioning me forward despite my glare. “He’s got a son.”

Saul sighed; a sharp, angry noise that was meant to be heard.

“Kids are the future, Saul,” Malak said, grinning at the Republic Admiral who had no family outside of the military. “What else are we fighting for, if not for them?”

... Dustil had loved that holograph, too. A picture of the once-revered Malak Devari, flanked by Jordo and myself, even though my smile was obviously forced. I’d been annoyed at Jordo’s insistence that I be part of snap; at least until much later, when I’d seen the awed pride on my son’s face as he stared down at the signed memento.

I supposed that holograph had burned along with the rest of Telos. And the three men directly responsible for Telos had been there that night: Malak Devari, Saul Karath, and Talvon Esan.

And their leader... She hadn’t been there. As far as I knew, Revan had never landed on Telos, never seen the beauty of my homeworld, before the forces under her command had bombed it into obliteration.

I swallowed, my empathy for Revan’s situation eroding as my own losses reared up yet again. Jen-Revan had been the first woman I’d ever really looked at since Morgana, the one who’d started healing the breaches in my heart, the one who’d found my son-

And isn’t that just the damnedest, darkest irony of all.

A beeping acknowledgment from the astromech brought me back to myself. The console detailed further information from the droid, confirming the preliminary diagnostic.

“Go to the common room, Revan,” I said quietly. “We’ll have to discuss our next steps. I’ll be there in a minute.”

Her head lifted, her gaze finally meeting mine. There was a question, there, that part of me didn’t want to answer.

“I have to comm the Fleet. Let them know to expect the scrambler. Hope they’re not too close behind us.”

And I don’t want you here when I send the message.

She understood, I thought, with the way her eyes darkened, and the sharp nod of her head.

I waited until the hatch had closed behind her before entering the encryption and transmission details, date-stamping the message, and starting the recording.

“This is a P1 message to Admiral Dodonna of the Republic Navy, or any member of the fleet
division in her stead.” I leaned forward to stare into the dashboard holo-cam. “This is Captain Onasi. We have exited hyperspace into what the Star Map classified as the Lehon system. Our point of origin was half a million klicks from the dark side of the sole planet, which brought us directly into a planetary ring of asteroids not detailed on the navigational map. We immediately had a collision which caused a fuel tank rupture, but have successfully executed an emergency landing on the planet, and should be able to fix the tank breach within a day or two of labour, depending on the planetary conditions.”

I sighed, leaning back. “The worse news is that there is an EMP signal scrambling all ship sensor controls that neither the nav-computer nor my highly-specced astromech could crack. Manual flight control was the only way to get around it. With the lack of nav-data, I am also unable to send you any meaningful information on the breadth of the asteroid orbits. I have... intelligence from a Force-sensitive crewmate that this signal encompasses the entire sector.” I grimaced. Forn knew about Revan. The actions of the Meridus had made that perfectly clear. “My first priority is to find the source of this signal and destroy it before the Fleet arrives. Fortunately the, uh, same member of my crew is adamant the origins of the scrambler are on this planet. We will make haste to ensure the Fleet can survive any planetary exit. Onasi, out.”

I switched off the signal and leaned forward to send it, with the misgivings heavy in my heart. Most of the Fleet would have picked a similar exit to mine; hidden in the planetary shadow on the far side of the Star Forge, out of sight. It was possible to pull ships out of hyperspace slightly earlier than programmed, and a starship’s hyperdrive had evasion sensors that would automatically readjust to exit next to a celestial object rather than in it – but it wasn’t infallible. There was still an art to hyperjumps, and accidents were as common as asteroids, out there in the galaxy.

The scrambler was worse than any potential collision, though. Although some of the larger destroyers would have more powerful computers than Teethree, the ships themselves were not made for manual control. There was no choice; I had to destroy the signal fast, and to do that, first I had to fix the Ebon Hawk.

I unclipped my harness, stood up, and left the cockpit.

xXx

“...can’t get it out of my head,” Dustil muttered, rubbing hard at his arms. The entire crew had filtered back into the central room of the ‘Hawk, and with nine sentients it was beginning to feel a little crowded. Next mission to save the galaxy, I thought idly, we’d better source a larger freighter.

“It is constant,” Juhani said from her customary place by the wall. She was staring towards the stern of the ship, tawny gaze narrowed, tipped ears laid flat against the side of her head. “A constant call of power.”

Dustil was staring at the same blank patch of durasteel walling.

I scanned the room, and all thoughts of freighter capacity flew from my head as the eeriness of the scene struck me. We had five Force-users onboard the ship and, without exception, they were all looking in exactly the same direction. Like a pack of gazehounds, noses in the air, collectively drawn to the same sight of prey.

“What,” I snapped, “is going on?”

Revan broke first, turning to look at me from her place seated next to Zaalbar. But it was the Mandalorian – with his damn boots up on the table again – who answered first.
“Well,” Canderous drawled, “from what I can tell, you crashed the ship into a space rock before crashing it into a planet. Interesting bit of flying there, Republic.”

Sometimes, I had the strongest urge to punch that smug Mandalorian right in the kisser. I’d had my share of brawls, and while I wasn’t sure I could take him, I knew I’d be able to get a couple of good hits in along the way.

“I challenge you to exit a hyperjump with nav data thirty thousand years old,” I ground out. “There was no sign of planetary belts on those blasted Star Maps. Try doing that and a manual flight pattern because of some damn scrambling signal.”

“Enough,” Revan cut in, her voice terse. “Canderous, I’m sure you know a lesser pilot would’ve crashed. I think I did crash, last time, and we weren’t leaking fuel or minus an engine.” She frowned, leaning forward over the table, one hand rubbing at her temple.

“You flew here last time?” Juhani asked, her attention now trained on Revan. I glanced around and saw both Jolee and Yudan paying attention to the conversation, but my son was still staring at the wall. His head was cocked, mouth slightly ajar, face glazed over like a stim junkie.

“What’s on this planet, Revan?” Canderous asked. “What’s this signal Onasi’s talking about, and how do we get to this Forge of yours?”

“Dustil?” I said sharply.

“It’s a scrambler, I...” Revan trailed off, turning to stare at Dustil. The hairs stood up on my arms. He wasn’t moving; his eyes were unfocused and he wasn’t listening to any of us. He wasn’t hearing us, I realized with a shaft of horror.

“Dustil? Sheesh, snap out of it!” Mission, seated next to him, gave Dustil a nudge.

“Dustil!” Revan snapped, and at the same time a gust of air currents lashed through the room- I had a split-second’s moment of confusion, how the heck could there be wind inside our ship-

Mission squeaked in alarm as Dustil was pushed deep into the plimfoam benches by an unseen force.

“What- what the frakk?” Dustil spluttered, his frozen expression shattering as he turned around to glare at Revan. “What the frakk did you do that for?”

She was staring at him through narrowed eyes. She did that. Broke him free of- of whatever- whatever has all of them so damn entranced-

“There’s some sort of Force beacon on this planet,” Revan said in a tight voice. “It’s controlling the EMP signal, but it’s powered by the Force and we can all feel it. Dustil, apparently, more so than the rest of us.”

“What- what do you mean by that?” Dustil spat, his eyes shooting daggers at her. Mission laid a calming hand on his shoulder, but I could see the belligerence all over his face. Revan was right, though. And worry for my son sat tight in my stomach.

“It is pure Force, being harnessed somewhere nearby,” Yudan spoke up from the far side of the room. He, too, was staring at my son with a look of frowning intensity. “Those more attuned to the Force will feel it strongly. And those with less training will have a greater susceptibility to its call.”

“Both of which apply to you, Dustil,” Revan murmured, her gaze still fixed on him.
For the hundredth time, I found myself wishing that Dustil was normal, that he was just a Force-blind sent that wouldn’t attract the likes of Yudan Rosh, and- and Revan.

But then he would have died on Telos. He wouldn’t have rescued us on the Leviathan. He wouldn’t be the man I can sometimes see he has the potential to become-

I’d accepted, back on Korriban, that the Force was part of Dustil- which meant it was part of my life, too. I could spend my time wishing futilely that things were different- or I could face up to the hard facts: Dustil was a powerful Force-user with incomplete training from a Sith sociopath.

And now, he was surrounded by powerful Force-users who could teach him a better way. And maybe, just maybe, that also included Revan. I didn’t know.

Dustil was glaring at both Revan and Yudan in turn. “I spent four years training under Jorak Uln and Uthar Wynn!”

“One of whom spent his time resenting the students, and the other pitting them against each other,” Yudan commented in a droll voice.


“I- I-” Dustil’s face was flushed with embarrassment, and I would’ve felt sorry for him if I didn’t feel so damn concerned. There’d been a moment, there, when he hadn’t reacted to Mission’s nudge, that I’d been struck with the horrible notion of him being forever lost to some Force-induced catatonia.

Sometimes, I really hated the blasted Force.

Revan’s expression softened. “I’m not trying to get at you, Dustil. But I’m worried how much a hold on you this Force beacon has.” She raised her gaze to stare at Jolee, who was leaning back against the kitchenette counter. “Can you spend some time with him, Jolee? Get him to guard himself properly?”

I could see Dustil’s jaw set in resentment as he scowled at her. He wasn’t going to budge easily-

“Eh, it’s not a bad idea, lad,” Jolee commented, and Dustil’s brittle gaze shifted to settle on the old man. “She’s right, you know. You are strong in the Force, and that means you’re more open to its dangers.”

“A true Sith seeks power. A Jedi seeks learning. Those who stand in between seek balance,” Yudan Rosh spoke in a low monotone. “You stand to gain a useful skill regardless of your chosen path, Dustil Onasi.”

I could have growled something about his path being obvious- I was not going to stand back and let my son fall back into the clutches of their damn Dark Side – but I saw the considering look Dustil gave that blasted Twi’lek; the slight, imperceptible nod before he slowly got to his feet and followed Jolee out of the room.

Damn it. Dustil had refused to follow Masters from the Jedi Order back on Kashyyyk, but up until this moment I’d thought he detested the likes of Yudan Rosh even more so.

He spent four years in a Sith Academy. Being fed all sorts of propaganda. Of course that part of him is going to listen to Yudan Rosh.

“We should keep an eye on him,” Revan said in a low voice. “At least until we can disable the signal.” She placed her hands on the table like she was about to get up.
“Wait just a minute,” I warned. “No one is leaving this ship until we get a readout on the atmo, and the ‘Hawk’s sensors are unintelligible. Unless you remember walking about this planet unaided.”

She shook her head, briefly, her green gaze fixed on mine.

“-then we’re going to send Teethree out first, cycle the airlock, and check the breathability of the air. Our first priority is to repair the fuel tank rupture. Then, we’re going to destroy that damn pyramid you Force-users are all so drawn to.”

“Destroy?” Revan said sharply. “I’ve overpowered it before, Carth. It should be easy enough to-”

“You don’t know,” I cut in, folding my arms. “You said yourself you only remember landing. You have no idea what’s in this pyramid, or what it cost you last time. We’re here to put an end to the Star Forge, Revan, and that includes this damn defense that will cripple the Republic Fleet if we don’t take it down.”

I could see the thoughts whirling in her mind as she stared at me in silence. “You plan on using the Ebon Hawk to fire on the pyramid,” she said slowly.

I nodded. “I can do a manual launch if I can re-level the fuel tanks and have all engines running. The turbolasers should be enough to take it out; if not, then there’s always the proton torpedo.”

There was one torpedo, its launch able to be activated from the cockpit. One way or another, I was not going to let history repeat itself. Last time, Revan had come here with Malak and, presumably, disabled that Force-damned scrambler before using it again in the name of the Sith. Not this time. Not on my watch.

I held her gaze as the rest of the crew watched in silence; wondering, maybe, who would win this battle of wills. Revan smiled, slow and sweet, and it transformed her drawn face; reminding me of yet another facet of the woman who still drew me in like a flutter-gnat to a raging inferno.

“You’re right,” she murmured, nodding. “Let’s do this. Your way.”

xXx

“This world is odd,” Canderous said, staring hard into the distance. The beach sand stretched for miles in either direction; a soft, harsh plain of white. From our vantage point next to the hull of the Ebon Hawk, we could spot a couple of broken husks of metal; downed starships some klicks away. “It looks like a battlefield, but the environment is lush and green. This place is strange. I don’t like the lack of life here.”

Of course he doesn’t, I thought sourly. No life means there’s nothing to beat up.

Deeper inland, the vegetation encroached on the sandy ground; thick, green foliage that told of a healthy planet ripe for life. Teethree’s air quality tests had all come back positive for standard sentient life, and yet none of his long range bio-scanners found anything larger than small rodents or seabirds.

The ‘Hawk was positioned half a klick inland from the edge of a restful ocean. The pyramidal structure was clearly visible a short distance into the bush, but I’d flatly ordered everyone to stay confined within the ship or its perimeter. None of the others had shown any further signs of being drawn in by that damn Force beacon, or whatever it was, but I wasn’t going to take any chances. I couldn’t get the image out of my head, of all five of them – Revan, included – staring blankly in the same direction.
Zaalbar howled something as he backed out from underneath the *Ebon Hawk’s* hull. I’d taken a look at the damage myself. Our inertial shields had stopped the rent from tearing open further during atmo entry, but it was still sizeable.

“Big Z reckons it’ll take a half a day to smooth over the damage before it can be sealed,” Mission piped up, crawling out behind him. I’d caught the word ‘repair’, but other than that Zaalbar’s native tongue still blurred into a long litany of meaningless rumbles. Even after all this time, my Shyriiwook was dismal at best. “And then we’ll have to source a patch. We off-loaded all our metal scrap back on Yavin, so maybe we can cut something from the inside wall of the cargo bay?”

She wrinkled her nose, pushing up a set of goggles high on her head. The idea of butchering the *Hawk* didn’t sit well with me either, but speed had to be priority.

Canderous snorted. “Half a dozen downed ships within sight, and you want to go bastardizing our own?”

“We’re not doing any recon, Ordo,” I said warningly. “Only the quickest method to get the *Hawk* up and running. Then we destroy the pyramid and head to the Star Forge.”

“You make it sound so easy,” Mission commented. “Just fly over and boom. One less Star Forge in the universe.”

_Easy. Nothing about any of this has been easy._ A chime from my wrist-comm cut off whatever response I might have made, and I frowned down at it. A message from the *Hawk’s* comm relay: receipt of a delayed transmission. But it wasn’t marked with the standard encryption protocols I’d been using – rather, it was scored directly against the *Hawk*’s central computer. Any interception of the comm would require advanced hacking techniques to capture it intelligibly; it wasn’t as secure as the military protocols anyone in the Fleet would use, but even those weren’t infallible.

“I’ve a comm,” I muttered. “Zaalbar, get started on smoothing the breach with Teethree. We’ll talk more about the patch material after I’ve viewed this.”

The Wookiee howled an assent, and I began walking back around the freighter’s hull. I wasn’t going to play the message here, but the headers on it had me start in surprise. It was marked as coming from a member of the Jedi Order.

I glanced up as Revan stepped down from the loading ramp. She looked at me, cautious and wary, as if she knew something had just happened.

Is it meant for her? Wouldn’t the Jedi Order expect me to vet it first? Maybe it was for Juhani. Maybe it was some warning about Revan... some message they wanted the rest of the crew to hear.

_It doesn’t matter,_ I thought suddenly. _It’s from the Jedi Order... and surely that means Revan has a right to see it._ I could go on forever about the crimes of her past, but at the end of it all the Jedi Order had placed her firmly on this path- without her consent.

We stared at each other in silence, and the strands of broken trust between us were almost tangible in the air. _Dammit._ I couldn’t- I _wouldn’t_ let her go through this any blinder than she already was.

“Revan,” I said in a low voice. “There’s a delayed comm. It’s from- it’s from the Order.”

She blinked, but her face remained impassive.

“Come to the cockpit. We may as well see it together.”
I heard the quietest of sighs, but otherwise she followed me in complete silence as we traipsed back through the ‘Hawk. Juhani gave us a curious look as we passed her in the common room, but Revan didn’t say a word until we made it to the communications array.

I slid into the pilot’s bucket seat, and motioned for her to sit as well.

Revan shook her head. Her lips had thinned and her shoulders tensed, as if she was bracing herself for what was to come. “Just play it, Carth.”

I leaned forward, and accepted the transmission.

A holo-picture of two Jedi Masters winked into life above the vid-stand. One was a scowling male Human, and the other a green alien less than half his height. I recognized both of them immediately.

::*This is a message for Revan Freeflight.*:

::The Human looked grim, his jaw set as if he’d swallowed something unpleasant.

::We are on our way with the Republic Fleet to assist on your assault of the Star Forge. To make sure the right thing happens this time.::

“Who is he?” Revan whispered, frowning, as she stared at the hologram. “Should I know him?”

“Vrook Lamar,” I said tersely. It hadn’t been that long ago since I’d last spoken with the man, and he appeared even more ill-tempered this time. “The short green one is Vandar Tokare.”

::*To the Force, you must listen.*:: Vandar added, leaning in from the side. ::Clear your mind. Let emotion blind you not. We remember the Jedi Knight you once were. Still there, she is. I have faith that she is.::

I felt Revan shiver next to me, and couldn’t help but turn to look upon her. Her green gaze glistened and her face was etched with pain.

“I don’t know them,” she whispered brokenly. “Shouldn’t their faces mean something to me?”

::*Do not forget all that Bastila has sacrificed for you.*:: Vrook cut in, his voice harsh with pain. I understood his grief, but I damned him for it anyway. One master counselled rising above emotion, where the other had it written all over his face. ::She is now in Malak’s clutches because of her mercy toward you. You cannot forget what you owe her.::

There was a hiss of anger from Revan, and the torn look on her face morphed in anger. “As if I could,” she muttered.

“Revan,” I whispered, as Vandar started saying something about the will of the Force.

“What?” she snapped, and then very deliberately turned her back on the delayed holo-message to glare at me. “What the frell is the point of this? To make me feel worse? I don’t even recognize those damn Masters!”

I leaned forward to cut the transmission. I could always replay it later. Maybe Vandar meant it as a bolstering talk, but he would have done a damn sight better keeping Vrook out of it.

“Vrook Lamar is Bastila’s Master,” I said haltingly. “I guess that’s why he’s a bit-”

“Upset?” she all but snarled. “Dammit, Carth, I’ve been living with this since the day Kylah Aramai took her!”

The pain broke in her voice, and I leaned forward to clasp her hand. She jerked back, stepping away
“Revan-”

“No. No, I can’t, Carth, I- damn them! They were on Kashyyyk, you know?” she demanded, her eyes blazing with emotion. “Zhar herded me down to the Shadowlands before they came close, because he didn’t trust what they would do to me! What the frell does that tell you about the Order?”

That they’re divided. That the Jedi Order is divided over you.

She grimaced before looking down. “I had two Masters on my side, Carth, and they’re both dead now. I’m not going to sit and listen to those robes who were a part of- look, I get why they did what they did, but forgiveness is a whole other skillet of scalefish.” She laughed bitterly, and took another step backwards. “I’m sure you understand that. I’m going to end this, one way or another, alone if I have to. I refuse to listen to anymore-”

“You’re not alone!” I cut in sharply. “Blast it, Revan, you’re not alone.”

“Aren’t I?” she whispered, eyes glittering, and I knew she wasn’t talking about the rest of the crew. My breath hitched in my throat and my heart stuttered. She stood in front of me, brittle and flawed and yet somehow still blazing with conviction, despite all of the pain and horror she had both suffered and perpetuated.

I was silent too long. Revan took another step back, one hand fumbling for the hatch control. “Listen to the rest of the message if you want, Carth. I’m sure you can fill me in on anything relevant.”

She spun on her heel and left me.

“Sithspit!” I swore, slamming my hand against the dash, and damning myself for being a fool.

Whether it was for reaching out or not reaching out far enough, I didn’t know.

xXx

There was nothing of real import in the remainder of the transmission. Vrook seemed to think that guilt was the key to motivating Revan, which just showed the damn Master knew nothing about her at all. Even I could tell that Revan had been crucifying herself, rightly or wrongly, ever since she’d found out the truth. The only reaction Vrook Lamar elicited in her was anger.

Vandar’s calming messages about the Force would have meant more to a Force-user than a soldier like me, but I wasn’t going to ask Revan to sit through that again.

I sighed heavily as I once more left the ‘Hawk.

Other than Dustil and Jolee, all of the others were gathered outside. Canderous was at the base of the loading ramp, surrounded by discarded pieces of an armour suit he’d obviously hidden from my purge of the Ebon Hawk’s stores. He was busy wrestling with an armoured glove as I stepped next to him and paused, staring at the others standing some metres in front of me.

Revan was saying something to Yudan, her words inaudible from this distance. The Twi’lek’s expression was set, almost hostile, as Revan offered something cylindrical from one outraised limb.

The alien sun glinted from what I immediately recognized as a lightsaber hilt.

Alarm shot through me. She wasn’t- she couldn’t seriously be thinking about arming him? It was one thing to bring a dangerous war criminal into the midst of our crew, but to hand him a damn lightsaber
before we’d even reached Malak-

Yudan Rosh leaned forward and plucked the hilt swiftly from her grasp.

It was only when it ignited a blinding white in his grasp that I recognized it for what it was: one of the training lightsabers Revan used so frequently in the garage.

Behind them, Juhani activated an identical weapon, and stepped up to face Revan. I saw the quick grin on Revan’s face, the first flash of delight I’d seen in what felt like forever, and my chest tightened. I wanted... I wanted to see that carefree joy more, I realized, despite everything. I wanted it to be less forced- I wanted her to be happy, even while part of me railed that she, of all sents, didn’t deserve it.

Canderous stopped what he was doing to watch, as Juhani and Yudan both advanced. Revan held an answering blade of white, and suddenly surged to the left, striking low at Juhani’s legs as Yudan shot forward to intercept her.

The lightsabers sparked as they crashed together. Revan launched forward with an aggressive lunge at Yudan that he swiftly parried before counter-attacking.

Canderous grunted from beside me. “You’re not man enough for her, Republic.”

I shot him an incredulous look. “What?” I snapped, gesturing over to the trio, who were moving too fast to keep a fix on. “And you are?”

Ordo had always had a ridiculously high opinion of himself, but surely he didn’t believe he could hold his own against them.

He snorted in derision. “I’m not talking about combat, di’kut.”

I could feel my jaw tightening. Revan and I were none of his damn business, and the last thing I was going to listen to was any sort of insult from a damn Mandalorian. I glared at him, and his ugly face stared back at me uncompromisingly.

“Combat ain’t everything. Not even to a Mando’ade. Not when it comes to your clan. Your woman.” Canderous jerked his chin to point to the ongoing spar. “Malak was her equal, out there. And still he failed her. Revan doesn’t need an equal on the battlefield, she needs someone to fight her demons with her. And I ain’t talking about the ones she meets on the end of her lightsaber.”

He turned his head to the side and spat. “Bah,” he added, his voice scathing. “You don’t deserve her.”

The anger was there, simmering hot and heavy in my gut, and suddenly everything snapped. The grief over Morgana and my lost life that had once more been dragged to the surface with Revan’s reincarnation, my torn thoughts over Revan herself, my worry for Dustil-

And that damn Mandalorian, staring at me with a derisive sneer, because of course to him it would be nothing to jump straight back into bed with a woman who’d once destroyed millions of lives including his own-

For once I allowed my anger to find an outlet. It found it as my fist crashed into his jaw.

His knees buckled; with satisfaction, I saw a brief moment of confusion in his eyes as he realized he was kneeling in the sand.
He roared a second later, surging angrily to his feet. I felt my second blow to his jaw reverberate through my forearm as he collapsed to the ground once more.

I kept my guard up, waiting, the red-mist burning hot in my tensed muscles. *Damn* that bastard if he thought I was going to take any more of his crap-

Canderous rose from the ground once more but, this time, thrusting forward with a stiff left jab that thudded into my guard, and robbed me of my opportunity to land a third punch on his damned smug face.

I realized it was all on now, as he moved forward with another straight jab that I caught on my forearms. And another; that grazed my cheek as it partially penetrated my upraised fists.

He was bigger than me. Taller, with a longer reach. And I knew that standing on the end of his jab was a bad place to be.

The next time he threw; I ducked forward, underneath, and hurled my most powerful overhand right.

He raised his lead arm, and my blow thudded harmlessly into his upper arm and shoulder.

*Blast it! I’ve got to try that again*-

Another straight jab from him that I ducted, again countering with a power punch that he shouldered.

This was working. The next time I’d have him. The next time my counterpunch would be faster, more direct. I’d land before he could raise his shoulder to deflect my blow...

He moved forward to jab, and once more I slipped it-

-but it wasn’t a jab. I ducked forward straight into his left hook.

His right followed with speed, smashing into my teeth.

There was a moment where, stunned, I felt the ripples of pain explode through my mouth, and then Canderous charged with a wild yell.

His shoulder slammed deep into my gut, tackling me to the sand. Landing hard on my back, a second later his fist sunk deep into the side of my ribs.

The air escaped my lungs in a winded gasp.

And he was... the bastard was *laughing*!

“Didn’t think you had it in you, Onasi,” Canderous wheezed, rolling off me. The adrenaline, the urge to rise up and challenge him again was still there, and yet he seemed totally unconcerned as he lurched to his feet.

Canderous laughed again. “Hah. You should do that more often, Republic. Release some tension since you’re not getting laid.” He was grinning madly above me, blood trickling down from a cut on his cheek. My head was thumping, my vision blurred, and a dull ache thumped in the centre of my gut. “D’ya feel better now?”

Despite it all, I laughed. *Mandalorians. It all boils down to sex and fighting with that lot.* And yet, surprisingly, I did feel better – aches and pains be damned.
A calloused hand swam into view; I blinked, and realized Canderous was offering me a lift up. With a grunt, I took it.

“You start the prelim work on the repair job,” he said, dragging me up to my feet roughly. His gaze sharpened as he turned to look back at the ‘Hawk. “I’m gonna go see if I can score a hull patch from the nearest wreck. I reckon I’ll be back before you smooth the edges of the breach, and then we don’t have to cut into our own damn ship.”

I stared hard at the seasoned veteran; one eye was puffy, and I couldn’t help a sense of satisfaction at that, even though I knew I likely looked just as bad. He was waiting for my reply and part of me thought I could refuse him – Canderous didn’t follow me, but he answered to Revan, and she had more or less ceded leadership.

For now. Somehow, I didn’t expect it would last long. Somehow, I didn’t think it should.

I nodded in assent. I didn’t need the assistance of Canderous to continue with the repair and, if he came back with suitable material before we required it, then all the better. I could see the sense in his plan.

“Just take a wrist-comm, alright?”

He gave me a dry look I probably deserved. Back on Kashyyyk, Ordo had been the only one who kept in reliable contact. “I ain’t the one who needs to be told that,” he said gruffly, before turning back to his pile of armour.

I glanced over to the others. Revan and Juhani were both staring at us, shocked and somewhat appalled in the Cathar’s case, lightsabers extinguished like they’d been on the cusp of intervening.

I was glad they’d stayed the heck out of it.

A look of exasperation crossed Revan’s face as she thumbed her ‘saber back on and turned to face Yudan. And as she raised her weapon once more in a guarded position, I took the moment to view her as the woman she now was. Not the villain who made the Republic tremble, nor the charismatic hero the galaxy had adored.

Instead, the flawed, beautiful warrior who kept fighting despite every stumble along the way.

All I could remember, right then, was vowing to protect her back on Korriban when she’d lost control. Protect her from herself, if need be. Being there for her, an anchor of the present, to help chase away the nightmares of the dark.

I didn’t know how much help a simple man like myself could be against all that she grappled with, but suddenly, all that seemed important was that I try.

xXx

Chapter End Notes

Coming up next: The sparring continues, and Juhani has another talk with Yudan. Thanks to kosiah for the beta.
I sailed backwards, landing on the soft sand in an ungainly heap. With a wrench of lightning-quick Force, I was back on my feet, hand outstretched, calling the training lightsaber back to my grasp.

Metres in front of me, Revan and Yudan slowly circled one another, all but oblivious to my recovered presence.

They were both suffering from temporary limitations: Yudan's speed and stamina were compromised due to his recovery, and Revan was still adjusting to wielding just the one lightsaber. As I watched Yudan launch into another flurry of offensive moves, it became obvious they were an even match. I suspected the same would hold true once they were both on form.

With a note of chagrin, I ruefully accepted I was their inferior.

The balance changed when I flanked the Dark Jedi and we simultaneously challenged Revan. Her limits were tested, she retreated into defensiveness and, as a result, innately leaned harder on the Force – be it to enhance her speed or strength or push away a foe.

When that happened, she truly became a creature of magnificence.

I took a moment to breathe, feeling the grittiness of the sand trickling down my tunic, catching on the sweat and fur along my neck. There was a mild burn there that stung, a place where Revan had caught me directly on the back.

The daylight was starting to dim, now. I did not know how long a solar cycle was on this strange world, but it had been high noon when we had first landed, and now the sun was winking out of sight above the forest line.

If I cocked my head and listened, I could hear the trill of alien birdsong deeper in the vegetation, alongside the rustle of small tree-dwellers. Louder still was the shearing sound of a fusion-grinder beneath the *Ebon Hawk*, as Zaalbar, Mission and Carth continued their work. Artificial lighting spilled out from under the freighter as the repairs stretched into the onset of evening.

The sound of the footsteps meandering down the loading ramp had me turning to see Jolee Bindo approach.

"They still at it, huh?" Jolee said as he traipsed toward me. "How's the ship coming along?"

I looked beyond the old Human, deeper into the open hatch, but no one was following him outside.

"Canderous departed a few hours ago to see what he could salvage from the closest wreck," I replied. "I do not know the progress of the reconstruction. Where is Dustil?"

"Eh, he wanted to stay on the ship." Jolee shrugged, but his gaze was sharp as it landed on the
others. I wondered whether he was judging their skill; truly, I considered myself a more than adept duellist, but I was not their equal.

Yet, not long ago, I had been a match for Revan.

Her progress was astonishing. I wondered how much of it was her past reclaiming her, and I worried over the implications. While my faith that she would stay true to us remained steadfast, I could still see that her broken history was damaging her soul, and my own ached in empathy.

How Yudan Rosh's presence would affect her I could not predict. He had grossly offended me earlier with his callousness and utter disregard for personal boundaries. Even the general aloofness of his character was discordant, and did not invite a good opinion.

But Yudan meant something to Revan. And every sentient deserved a chance to change things for the better. I could only hope that Yudan truly desired to, and that Revan's trust in him was justified.

"Do you have any thoughts regarding what this Force beacon could be?" I asked quietly. Behind me, there was an absence of sound, indicating the attention of the others had been caught.

Jolee shrugged again. "No more than you. Pure power like that is enough to catch any Force-user's interest, and there's a fair dollop of it being channelled on this planet."

"It's being used to amplify the EMP scrambler. The signal's being pushed out through the entire sector." Revan's voice wafted through the cooling air. It was still warm, but the ambient temperature had started to fall once the sunlight had disappeared.

In all, this seemed a pleasant world with all the required markers for sentient life. The mere fact that a construction of the Star Forge was here meant that it had been inhabited at one point. And yet, the bio-scanners of the astromech had picked up nothing of import. No sizeable life within range, be it on land or sea. No large predators or herbivores, no sign of civilization.

That struck me as odd.

I turned to survey Revan as she padded closer. Her breathing was shallow and fast, and her green eyes glittered. She looked alive, confident, and more at ease than I had seen her for some time.

I understood that. I had always felt both more relaxed and focused after immersing myself in combat forms and training regimes, rather than the meditation other Jedi turned to.

"We know the Star Forge is a ship factory, so I guess there's technology on their craft that decodes the signal and stops it affecting their own fleet," Revan added, drawing close to me. There was a burn of red alongside her neck; the mark of a direct hit that would have been a deathblow with anything other than a training 'saber.

"Huh. I wonder if there's some other purpose," Jolee mused, peering toward the jungle. From here, we could still see the top of the pyramid jutting above the tree-line. It was only a short distance into the forestation. "It's an awful lot of Force power."

"And the scrambler's an awfully good defense," Revan shot back in a dry voice. "Any starship exiting hyperspace within range is immediately compromised. I doubt it's the only defense of the Star Forge, but it's a damn good preliminary one."

"Where's the boy?" Yudan drawled as he neared. The lightsaber in his grasp hissed as he deactivated it.
Revan's gaze had sharpened on Jolee. "Do you think it's wise, leaving him-"

"Eh, quit worrying, the lot of you," Jolee grumbled. "If you don't give the lad some space, then the first opportunity he gets he really will sneak out. He said he'd stay on the ship. Let's give him a chance, huh?"

Revan's lips were twitching. "A chance. Sure." Her gaze had travelled behind Jolee to the open hatch. I stretched the Force out, focused it directly on the entranceway of the Ebon Hawk, but I could not sense anything out of the norm, no indicator to show me-

"That is so annoying," Dustil snapped, abruptly appearing at the top of the ramp, his arms folded and his face twisted with belligerence.

Beside me, Jolee grunted in surprise. "You heard about such a thing as trust, boy?" he demanded.

Dustil gave an abrupt shrug. "I'm at the top of the ramp. That's still the ship."

"How did you pick up on him?" Yudan asked Revan. As always, his tone was flat and remote... but he would not have asked if he was not curious. I wondered, then, how much of the disagreeable Twi'lek's indifference was no more than a front.

"A null patch of Force," Revan murmured, the amusement still clearly evident in her voice as she gazed upon the irate teenager. "Dustil's repelling the Force away to hide his psychic signature, and it feels like the absence of any life or Force. In reality, it's just a mirror." Revan shrugged. "I haven't quite worked out the invisibility part yet."

"I could not sense anything at all," I said.

"Huh," Jolee was frowning, one hand scratching at his hairless head. "Do that trick again, lad, if you don't mind?"

There was a truculent contentiousness on Dustil's face, as if he despised this sort of show-and-tell. I could recall Dustil showcasing it once before, enroute to Kashyyyk. He had not seemed particularly willing then, either.

Dustil's hostile gaze moved past Revan before landing on Yudan. Something in the young man's expression eased, even as his shoulders bunched in discomfort.

"Fine," he muttered, scowling, and then vanished once more.

Jolee shifted on his feet, his bushy brows creasing. "I'm not picking up on anything," he grumbled, glaring at the ramp. "And I'm used to relying on my senses. You sure you can sense the lad?"

I cleared my throat, attracting Revan's attention. "I do not understand what you mean with an absence of life," I said to her. "I can sense the Force within sentient beings, even within trees and plants. But Revan- you speak as if the air itself has life, that you then notice the lack thereof when Dustil shields himself so."

"Well, the air does have life," Revan said. Her gaze was tracking seemingly nothing, moving to the base of the loading ramp. "Doesn't it?"

The soft pad of a footstep caught my ear, a brief whiff of Human youngling. Nothing apparent with eyesight nor Force. My senses, disagreeing with one another- still, it was something to know that at least the young Onasi could not conceal his sound or scent on top of his other talents.
“I don’t sense him either,” Yudan said, shrugging in apparent nonchalance. “Your definition suggests one has to be able to sense the smallest amount of life. Intricacies like that were always one of your strengths, Revan. It is not surprising that you are the one to notice him.”

"It's not that special," Dustil snapped, appearing next to Jolee with a sudden movement that had the old man start in surprise a second time. "It's not like she's the only one, either. Mekel has no problem picking up on me."

"Mekel." Revan's eyes narrowed as she stared at Dustil. "That friend of yours... he's- is he normally so open in the Force?"

I frowned. That ill-mannered Human had chanced across us on Yavin Station with his mistress, but I had seen more of him on Korriban. Back in Tulak Hord's tomb, when that maddened, blinded Sith Master had captured him and Revan and almost killed them both-

"What?" Dustil blinked, wavering somewhere between confusion and outrage. "What the frakk do you mean by that?"

Revan shifted, tossing the training hilt from one hand to the other. She looked vaguely uncomfortable. "His emotions. His feelings, I guess. They just seemed very-" She paused. "Loud."

Yudan was staring at Revan in open curiosity now. I could smell it on the stagnant air. He caught my glance on him and his expression shuttered back into indifference, but his scent remained the same. I understood, then, that no matter his outward insouciance and detachment, Yudan Rosh remained intensely interested in Revan.

Dustil's eyes had narrowed in return, and his voice iced over. "I have no idea what you're talking about."

"He didn't seem anything out of the ordinary to me, young pup," Jolee Bindo added, raising a brow. "Rude and potty-mouthed, maybe, but otherwise just your average Sithling runaway."

Revan looked slightly puzzled, running her free hand through her hair, as if her thoughts had been misguided. I did not quite know what she referred to, myself. The Human Mekel had seemed no more than an average Force-user riddled with anger and more than his fair share of curse words.

Revan shrugged in apparent dismissal, and glanced back to Yudan with a slight smile. "We still have an hour of light left, I reckon. You done for the day?"

"Hardly." The Twi'lek lit his weapon once again, a droll look on his face. "Although I do think the Cathar should join us once again, and this time you should refrain from overtly utilizing the Force, Revan."

Her grin widened as she lunged forward in a lazy swipe which Yudan knocked aside with ease. "Surely one should use all resources at hand."

"That depends if you wish to practise combat forms or Force powers," Yudan shot back, darting to the side before swinging forward in a sweeping hit that Revan caught on her blade. I was about to walk up and flank the Twi'lek, but something changed in Revan's expression that halted my movement.

Startlement, chasing through her hairless Human face, evident even through the white cross of the training lightsabers.

"Blue," she whispered, blinking, take a faltering step backward. "You had a blue double-blade."
I could see the overt stiffening of Yudan's back as I strode to his side. Revan's gaze was fixed on him, her brows creased, with a look of something akin to wonder in the moss green of her gaze.

"You remember something?" Yudan's words were tight and low, and taut with intensity. I felt the hairs on the back of my neck stand up, understanding that Revan was yet again dealing with an unexpected fragment of her past – and wondered if the frequency of these was accelerating.

"No." Revan gave a little shake of her head, the confusion dissipating into a slight smile. "Not a memory... just the knowledge of it, somehow. It happens." She shrugged, striving to appear nonchalant, but I could see she was still rattled. "Sometimes I just know something without any understanding of how. Like how the Force cages worked on the Leviathan. The Sith boarding protocols. Even how to fly a frelling starship."

The understanding of something with no foundation to ground it on. It sounded like a deep, instinctive muscle memory, but of the brain as well as the body. Bastila had explained to me, back on Manaan, that so much of Revan's mind had been irrevocably damaged... so many neural pathways incinerated during that infamous stand-off on her faltering flagship.

No matter that Revan's recovery was well beyond anyone's expectations – Bastila's opinion was that most of her memory was simply no longer there.

I felt suddenly, inexplicably, sad.

Revan's expression firmed. Yet again, she was gathering herself back up, finding a path forward. Her eyes glinted with curiosity. "What about me?" she asked. "I never thought to question it... what colour did I use, before- before- well. You know."

"Before you became an insane evil schutta who tried to destroy the galaxy?" Dustil muttered from behind us.

Yudan turned, deliberately, and shot the boy a quelling look. Dustil subsided, somewhat, glaring down at the sand.

"Well, you had many different lightsabers, Revan," Yudan replied, and it surprised me to see the corner of his mouth twitch as he faced her yet again. "Jedi usually keep to one crystal, perhaps two. Whichever kaiburr sings the loudest to them. But you..." And now, he looked almost fond. "You used to claim you were versatile. You had more than half a dozen different kaiburr, and modified your lightsabers constantly."

"Really." Revan raised an eyebrow, and her return back was dry. "That sounds an awful lot like showmanship."

Yudan laughed. The sound was rich and deep, and I didn't think I had heard it before. "It certainly was," he agreed, amused. "I always suspected the truth was that you didn't wish to give away anything about your character. There are... theories. Philosophies, if you will, on what the different hues of a kaiburr represents."

They had deactivated their lightsabers once more, and I saw Revan attach hers to her belt. There was a shuffle as Dustil took a step closer to us. I cocked my head; interested, also. This was a discussion I had heard more than once back at the Enclave, but not one the Masters ever seemed to agree upon.

"It is inordinately strange explaining this to you, Revan." Yudan was frowning, his earlier expression of mirth well gone.

"My entire life is strange." Revan's reply was flippant, but her face was still lit with curiosity.
"Karon's 'saber is light blue... does that have some sort of meaning, then?"

"The blue..." I murmured. "I heard it postulated that blue crystals are more attuned with lightsaber forms, with the physical offense and defense of the Force... particularly the darker hues."

Jolee snorted. "There have been enough Jedi-led studies into some so-called meaning of kaiburr colours without anything of note coming from it. Bah, there's always some who have to explain everything away."

Revan arched an eyebrow. "So, nothing to say about your green 'saber then, old man?"

"It's pretty," Jolee drawled. "I always liked green."

"Some say that green represents a search for balance in the Force, an understanding that every ying has its yang. Dark and light. Good and evil." Yudan shrugged. "And that yellow is more apt to suit those in touch with the more tangible aspects of life- those who believe that Jedi should concern themselves with the day-to-day lives of all sentients, be they Force-users or not."

"There are other colours, and a thousand shades in between," I commented. Although the meaning of lightsaber crystals had always intrigued me, the whole explanation often fell flat to my comprehension.

"People do not belong simply to one characteristic," Yudan said in reply, but his gaze still lay on Revan. "I once suspected you were more drawn to the yellow, but it was a subject on which you always refused to offer a serious answer."

"People will attribute meaning to the dregs of caffa, if they can – and some cultures do." Jolee turned a beady eye on Yudan. "In the end, it usually becomes a self-fulfilling prophecy. A more academic Jedi might harvest a blue crystal, and argue to himself that of course the crystal suits him, because he might have made a fantastic duellist if he'd put effort in that direction. And, after all, he isn't so bad for a mere beginner."

"You must admit that most Jedi with duelling as a focus wield a shade of blue," Yudan cut in, his attention turning to the old man.

"They named us guardians," I murmured, feeling a soft curve to my lips as I recalled my own first harvest. Belaya had once held an amber lightsaber, whilst Dak had found a green kaiburr... even though he had struggled to construct a lightsaber for it. I had felt satisfaction from that balance, once. Three friends, all different points of the Jedi triangle. Before Dak ran. Before I failed. Before Belaya died.

So much had happened since then.

"It's common knowledge that blues are the most easily found," Jolee grumbled. "As for those who style themselves as so-called guardians – how many of them truly found a blue kaiburr first? Eh, I bet most scoured the caves until they found one that both sang to them as well as appealed to their own ego."

"I found a twin of blues almost immediately," Yudan murmured. "Perfect for a double-blade. It was striking how loud they called to me. I knew not their colour as my hands first rested upon the mineral bed they came from."

"What happened to them?" Revan asked, her voice dropping to an almost whisper.

I could feel a tightening of Force currents around the Twi'lek; an immediate reaction, I suspected, to
a question he did not appreciate. His expression froze as he stared coldly at Revan.

"Crystals like that do not work so well in the hands of dark-siders, Revan. Or they corrupt." His eyes glinted with buried resentment. "Once corrupted, they stay scarlet forever. Damaged, or so the Jedi say. Unable to be redeemed or restored to what they once were."

He turned, an abrupt movement on the sand, and stalked off along the darkening beach. My gaze slipped to Revan; she was watching him go, a lost expression of melancholy tightening her face.

"Well." Jolee raised an eyebrow. "Ain't he just a ray of sunshine."

"People are not crystals, Revan," I whispered. She glanced back to me, her face shifting into inscrutability.

"And red?" Dustil's tone was short, and I realized the young man had been quietly listening in. He looked almost angry as his gaze roved between us all. "Yuthura used to say it was the mark of passion that the Sith embraced. I guess the Jedi-" his voice twisted, as his hand rested on the cylinder at his hip, "-just label it as evil, right?"

Jolee snorted in response. "I thought I made it clear that the colour definition was a load of twaddle, lad."

"But there is an organic explanation, as such," I murmured. My first kaiburr hadn't turned after I'd left Dantooine. I recalled staring at the dark blue in a rage, wanting it to corrupt, needing it to corrupt-

In the end, I'd discarded the crystal in a trash compactor on Taris, the blood of slavers still tinny in my nose. Synthetic reds were a lot easier to come by than natural kaiburr.

I sent a brief thought of gratitude toward Master Karon – now held deep in the embrace of the Force – for the gift of the blue that was once more nestled in my old hilt.

Dustil's attention had turned to me, edgy and fierce, his chin jutting out in teenage resentment. His chestnut hair flopped into his eyes, framing the square lines of his face. I could see his father in him then, strongly; and hoped Dustil would mellow into the good-hearted man that was Carth Onasi.

"Natural red merely indicates the crystalline structure is flawed; imperfect," I explained. "For some reason, this resonates better with more emotive uses of the Force. This is why sometimes pure crystals will crack or corrupt when used too often in the hands of dark-siders. As I understand it, synthetic reds are purely factory-created kaiburr... technology has thus far been unable to replicate a perfect kaiburr such as those that grow in the wild."

"So, of course some point to a natural flaw of a mineral and attribute it to evil," Jolee muttered. "Your actions are your own, boy. Sure, you may find a different crystal suits you better these days, but I wouldn't bother with ephemeral definitions when even the Jedi Masters don't agree."

Dustil had taken out his lightsaber, one of the few things he had brought with him from the Academy. It activated with a hiss, the blood-red glowing faintly across the sands. Above him, pink streaks of sunset adorned the darkening sky, almost a perfect match for the corrupt colour in his grasp.

He was staring at Revan with a grimly intent look on his face.

"I missed out on the sparring," he muttered.

Revan drew back to him, pulling her gaze once more away from Yudan who was no more than a
speck in the faraway dusk, now. The corner of her mouth twitched, and she tilted her head in acquiescence.

"Yudan may be right about crystals," Revan said, her training saber sparking back to life as she faced him. "But I think Juhani's got the handle on people. So, if you're looking at the likes of me and him and thinking you're screwed as well, then maybe you should ask Juhani about her trip along the Dark Side. Out of the lot of us, she's the one who holds true to the right path."

I blinked, feeling the warmth of an unexpected blush heat my cheeks. "You refuse to give yourself enough credit, Revan," I murmured, simultaneously uncomfortable and grateful for her regard. "I have never been tested as either you or Yudan have. And you stand in front of us all now, as a soul that may be hurt but is most assuredly shining with light."

Jolee snorted. "You could do with washing behind your ears a bit."

Dustil's expression had morphed into a scowl. "Light," he scoffed. "From Darth Revan? Are you frakking kidding me?" He took a step closer to Revan, raising his lightsaber. She should have demanded he hold a training weapon like her, but perhaps his own lethal blade gave him comfort, of a sort. And, truly, Dustil Onasi would not be any sort of danger to Revan, even if he were to try. "Master Uthar used to say one's true character came out in combat. Shall we give it a shot, Sith Lord?"

His words were both bitter and taunting, but didn't seem to reach Revan at all, who merely stared back at him with a mild expression and a nod of agreement.

My gaze travelled along the sprawling beach that disappeared into the encroachment of evening. I could not see Yudan Rosh anymore, but Carth's order for everyone to hold station sprang to mind. He would not be impressed with the departure of Yudan- and although the Twi'lek had not strode off in the direction of the pyramid, I could not help but be suspicious.

"I will be back shortly," I murmured, as Dustil stepped into his first attack.

xXx

I left Revan engaged with Dustil Onasi as they eyed each other from over their raised lightsabers. I suspected he planned to test her with jibes or wild attacks to see if she would fall victim to any sort of temper.

Dustil Onasi did not fully appreciate who she was or had been. Darth Revan would not have stood for a taunt from a child with a lightsaber, but the Revan that now was... I thought of her most like the Jedi Knight she had once been... and that person would have had time for the likes of Dustil Onasi.

Yet Revan was not the same person from a decade ago. My friend now bore cracks running along her soul, fault-lines that could be tapped into- but not by a wary kid almost as damaged as she. Not by Carth Onasi's son.

Myself, I had another quarry to follow.

My people had been a warrior race; fierce and proud enough that Cassus Fett thought to hunt us into extinction. It made him a despicable sentient, but it showed that the Cathar were worthy of notice. He respected our abilities, no matter what sort of evil man he was.

The planet Cathar had been destroyed whilst I was young enough still to clutch onto my mother's fur. I had little true recollection of the Cathar, and none of their training. Even so, it was likely my warrior's blood had something to do with my strengths as a Jedi. I was at home in the wild, and my
senses would sing with the beat of a planet. I could stalk game or people as well as any seasoned tracker, and I was adept at minimizing both my physical and psychic presence.

My skill was not an invisibility such as young Onasi's; but a lessening of overt power. An exuding sense of non-threat that made beasts ignore me, and most sentients fail to notice.

I wasn't sure if it would work on Yudan Rosh; but then, he was likely mired in his own thoughts.

The planet hummed with life underneath my Force sense, but it was a simple, basic life. Plants and foliage and small night animals traipsing out from their burrows... nothing larger than a mink-rat, not nearby.

And through it all, the distant thrumming of Force power emanated from the pyramid, beating steadily like a faraway thunder drum.

I strode swiftly and silently over the sand as it rolled into gentle hills marred by the occasional tussock. The light was truly fading now, and nightfall was not far away. Over the next crest, I could see the dark gleam of water lapping gently across the shoreline, and the silhouette of a figure standing stationary, facing out into the ocean.

The entire scene looked too picturesque to be real. I began to understand Canderous' discomfort; everything here was too pretty, too perfect, too idyllic.

I preferred the wildness of Kashyyyk.

The Dark Jedi hadn't moved; his profile facing away from me into the horizon. Perhaps all he desired was a moment's peace, away from a crew that did not trust him – even if we had more than adequate reason.

I hesitated, then, as it became obvious to me that Yudan meant no betrayal, that there seemed no threat of him heading toward the Force beacon that called to us all. I was about to leave him to his privacy, when another life-form flickered on the periphery of my senses. A non-Force user – but a sentient nonetheless – coming in from the west.

I turned, recognizing the faint flare of life as familiar some seconds before he came into view. Canderous, dragging something large behind him attached to plysteel ropes, something that glinted metallic in the fading light. He was making a beeline for Yudan Rosh, who had also turned to face him.

I did not know if either man knew of my presence, and was not sure if I should interfere. Certainly, I was aware the men had unfinished business between them that had naught to do with me – and Canderous was the sort of man who believed in evening the scales.

But for all of his strengths, Canderous would be batted down like a dustball if he faced the likes of Yudan Rosh.

"Rosh," Canderous' voice floated through the stagnant air; harsh and guttural. "We've got matters to speak of, you and I."

"Ordo." Yudan acknowledged in a flat tone. "Say your piece, then."

Canderous stopped on the shoreline, some metres away from the Twi'lek. "Any other man I'd be seeing on the end of my fists," he stated, dropping the ropes that were held in his armoured grasp. "But I don't know if I can trust you to keep the Force out of it."
Yudan's expression did not change. "I don't need to use the Force to have it run through me, Ordo," he replied. "Any seasoned Force-user is augmented in such a fashion. Senses, reaction time, speed... these passive behaviours are honed the more one uses the Force, until they become nothing more than instinct." He shrugged. "I respect you, Ordo, but a fistfight between the two of us would be no contest."

Canderous folded his arms, staring hard at the man who faced him. "Revan didn't use the Force against Mandalor."

"I'm sure she didn't. Overtly," Yudan drawled, turning away to face the indigo horizon. "I'm also sure that had she been wearing a neural disruptor your Mandalore would have gutted her two minutes in."

"Huh," Canderous grunted. There was an obvious note of interest in his gravelly voice. "Is that really what you think?"

"I think Revan did what she had to, to break the Clans." Yudan's return was almost monotone, but at least he gave Canderous the courtesy of an explanation. In that respect, he responded more to the Mandalorian than he had to me. "The conquest of the Mandalorians blindsided the galaxy. Revan needed to ensure your people were truly vanquished. The defeat of Mandalore in a public arena was part of that."

I recalled hearing about the fall of their leader, in hushed whispers around the Dantooine Enclave. Certainly, the Masters didn't appreciate talk of the rogue Coruscanti Knights, and I tended to avoid any sort of gossip... but I had idolized the Jedi Thirteen. Two in particular. And the end of a people who had all but wiped mine out had caused me a visceral pleasure that, even then, I knew was not healthy.

"The destruction of Malachor V was the rest of it," Canderous said slowly. "I can't deny she was the most formidable enemy we have faced in recent times, but we Mando'ade also respected her generals. Your name was well-known to us. Jaga's Cluster- that was an interesting attack vector your ships used. My clan leader suspected Revan's hand in that, but I'd heard she was tied up in the front at Iridonia at the time."

Yudan shrugged as he swung back to face Canderous. This time, I saw his gaze land on me, further back in the shadows, and knew I had been sighted. "I had command at Jaga's Cluster, Ordo," he said flatly. "And, if you recall, that was a Fett victory."

"Yes," Canderous agreed, stringing the word out slowly. "But that wasn't surprising, given the ambush from the Neo-Crusaders. We made damn sure your intelligence didn't know about them. But what was surprising was how many Republic ships made it to safety- and the sneak attack that almost took Cassus out. Whose strategy was that?"

"Mine." Yudan's voice was terse, and travelled well across the cooling sands. "I would never diminish Revan's strategic competency, but her greater brilliance was in leadership. In recognizing the strength of her generals and placing them where they could most benefit the Republic." He sighed, barely audible, before continuing his discourse. "It is not arrogance to say I worked well with the Fleet commanders, although I was not the only Jedi who did so. Cariaga and Talvon, also, were heavily involved with the Republic Navy. But Revan had little power over the intergalactic media, and it irritated her when the accomplishments of others were accredited to her."

I found myself struck with surprise at the sheer quantity of words coming from the normally reserved man. Perhaps he felt he owed Canderous. Perhaps I was right to believe Yudan Rosh worthy of redemption... but approaching the topic myself had been the wrong tactic.
"Such are the holonets," Canderous said dryly. "There's a reason my people despise reporters."

There was a short noise from Yudan; almost a chuckle. "In that respect I defer to the wisdom of the Mandalorians."

"Still," Canderous continued. He didn't sound willing to let the topic die. "Jaga's Cluster was one of the turning points. Your move was unexpected. Fett lost his Second, and his standing with Mand'alor diminished, after that." He shrugged, a strangely thoughtful look crossing his weathered face. "Our advance deep into Republic airspace had made us bold; arrogant, maybe. We believed we could predict the reactions of the Republic forces; know when they would run, know when they would cower behind civilian worlds as if it were an adequate shield. Mand'alor could see his battle song of victory written in the stars… until Revan entered the war."

"She understood a certain ruthlessness was required," Yudan returned. He paused, and the moment sat heavy in the air. "Just as she once understood the true purpose behind the Mandalorian offensive was to flush the Jedi out."

I stepped closer, close enough to attract the attention of Canderous, who raised a brow in surprise at my presence, but nonetheless turned his attention back to Yudan.

"We invaded to expand our territory, Rosh."

Yudan snorted. "That might have been Mandalore's rally cry, but I don't buy it. I spent a lot of time studying your people, Ordo; you honour combat for the testing of mettle, and expansion of territory is part of that. But you know the folly of over-extension. Push victory too far, and you cannot build nor guard your Clan successfully. And what is more integral to a Mandalorian than family?"

Canderous was shaking his head. "You may think you understand my people, Rosh, but you underestimate our might. We could have held the Core—"

"No," Yudan said flatly, as if daring Canderous to disagree with him. My ears flattened against my head; Canderous was not one to take rebuttals lightly, and certainly not about his own people. "I don't slight the strength of the Clans, Ordo. I was held prisoner by them for weeks, and I fought them for years. I have tested your people's might, and I've no doubt you would have won without Revan's interference— but your newfound empire would not have lasted. Even with Mandalore's adoption filling your ranks and the Neo-crusaders of the Fett, you had too few warriors to hold the Core for long. Too many sectors. Too many planets. The offensive was never designed to control the whole of the Republic."

"Do you really believe so?" I whispered, frowning at the Twi'lek, stepping close enough to join their conversation. He shot a sideways glance at me. "That the whole of the Mandalorian Wars was naught more than a lure for the Jedi? That is terrible—"

"The Jedi would have been valued as a worthy opponent to Mand'alor," Yudan answered in a low voice. "Perhaps that was the whole of it. Or, perhaps there was another reason."

"I'd call that a load of kriffing rubbish, Rosh. But—" Canderous paused; his voice was harsh and low, and yet there seemed no anger in the lines of his posture, no belligerence looking for an out toward the Dark Jedi who had fought against his people.

"But?" The reply back was almost a taunt; not quite, but almost.

Canderous grunted. "I'll admit some of the clan leaders wondered at Mand'alor's continued expansion. He'd a vision, at the start, of galactic superiority— but as the Wars dragged on and the Jedi
Thirteen emerged as worthy foes, overextension was raised more than once. Huh. I ain't sure you're right, Rosh."

"But you're not sure I'm wrong, either."

"Maybe." Canderous shifted on the sand, looking back to me before facing Yudan again. "You got one thing spot on, though. Clan is of fundamental importance to us. Who's your clan, Rosh?"

At that pointed question, a flicker of startlement chased across of the enigmatic Twi'lek's face before dying back beneath his standard impassivity. "I have none left, Ordo. Any family I once had are long dead or as good as."

Canderous snorted. "Clan ain't all about blood, Rosh. Some clan you are born to. Some you choose. My people are Ordo, and I'll return to them one day soon. But my people are also those onboard the Ebon Hawk. I gave you a chance when we left Kashyyyk- and aye, I get your reasons for what happened on the Leviathan. But I don't trust you, not yet." He loosed a harsh gust of air. "And while I may not have the Force, I've taken down Force-users before. You cause any danger to any of the crew, and I'll make sure you're the next one on my list."

My gaze shot to Yudan swiftly; he offered no reply, merely stared back at Canderous steadily as if acknowledging the threat, and accepting it. Canderous wasn't a match head-on for the likes of Yudan Rosh or any experienced Force-user- but Canderous was also the sort to spit in the face of a fair fight.

Even a Jedi could be taken out by a single blaster shot to the head.

Canderous knew, more than I, that there was nothing fair when it came to war. Or to one's enemies. And I understood then, as I glanced back at the silent Twi'lek still appraising Canderous, that perhaps Yudan Rosh knew this as well.

Having said his piece, Canderous bent down to gather up the salvage he had collected. With plysteel ropes in hand, he glanced one last time at the silent Twi'lek.

"Things change, Rosh. Maybe you should think about who your Clan is now." With that parting shot, Canderous began trekking back toward the Ebon Hawk, offering me naught more than a sharp nod of acknowledgment as he passed. Yudan pivoted away from us both, once more staring out into the nothingness of dusk.

I waited in silence, as Canderous' footsteps padded away. I felt like I, still, had more to say to the man who'd once been a hero to my younger eyes. And yet my sense of privacy still smarted at his mental intrusion from earlier. I could have accepted anger from him; mockery, even, when I raised the topic of redemption. But to delve, unwelcome, into my mind and pull out details of my own fall, and that of Quatra-

Somehow, I thought it likely he saw it as no more than a slight transgression- if he even recalled it at all.

"What is it, Cathar?" he said, his back still turned to me.

I could not forget what he had once been. The Jedi Order may have disavowed the actions of all the rogue Jedi who fought in the Mandalorian Wars – and I held myself to the precepts of the Order – but I honoured the Jedi Thirteen regardless. They had risked everything to fight for those who had quailed beneath the might of the Mandalorians.

And my people had been among them.
"I met Revan once, when I was a kit," I said softly. I was unsure why I was broaching a conversation like this, but the same part of me that yearned to reach the damaged souls we met on Korriban looked at Yudan Rosh in the same light. No matter that Dak's voice drawled in my head: you're an idiot, Juhani. Give over already. He would roll his eyes in that peculiar Human habit if he was here.

I missed my old friend, I realized.

Yudan Rosh had swivelled back to stare at me once more, but offered no response.

I tilted my head. "It was on Taris, just as she was heading to the front lines to join the war effort against the Mandalorians. There were a group of Jedi Knights with her. I find myself wondering if you were, too."

The silence stretched out between us, and he remained impassive for perhaps a full minute, before offering an aloof: "I was."

He was not interested in making conversation with me; in truth, I was uncomfortable as well. I sighed, my gaze drifting to the endless water that seemed so often to capture his attention. "I do not recall the Jedi she was with, only that there were some. Other than her and Meetra Surik, the rest of you were simply a blur of righteous warriors to me; guardians of justice and defenders of innocence."

A soft chuckle left my lips. "I am afraid I was somewhat of a romantic, then."

"You met Meetra," he said. His voice was quiet, but there was an inflection there that had been missing before. Interest.

"Yes," I said softly, meeting his flawed gaze once more. "Revan liberated me from slavery, but she did so from afar. It was Meetra who recognized my Force sensitivity, and ultimately sent me on a course to Dantooine, the nearest Jedi Enclave."

Revan had made it obvious – without meaning too – that she had no memory of Meetra Surik. The name meant nothing to her, despite how close they must have once been. Meetra had been an idol of mine once, perhaps even more so than Revan – for there was one obvious difference between the two: Meetra Surik never fell to the Dark Side.

She never followed Revan and Malak past Malachor.

Whatever happened to her afterward was a mystery, but the Republic lauded her and Xaset Terep as the only remaining heroes from that time. It always struck me as odd that the Masters in the Order refused to speak of them.

"That doesn't surprise me," Yudan said. "Meetra had a gift for recognizing the Force in people. She was a unique individual."

"What happened to her after Malachor?" I breathed. "The Jedi do not speak of her and Xaset… but they should. They should."

Yudan was silent for a moment, his intent gaze holding mine firmly before his mouth tightened and he began to speak. "Meetra and Xaset were amongst our more gifted ground generals. They were instrumental in the victory at Malachor V, but they paid the heaviest price for it." His voice had turned hard, cold, and he glared at me as if in condemnation for raising the subject. "The Order should have acknowledged them, but instead they did the unforgiveable."

"What?" I whispered, blinking. "What do you mean?"
"None of your concern, Cathar," he bit out. Dusk had truly fallen now, and Yudan Rosh was no more than a shadow towering in front of me, the last of daylight glinting against the unnatural yellow of his burning eyes. "Malachor is a subject none of us who were there like to speak of. Perhaps you should ask your Mandalorian if you are so interested."

*For Revan does not recall.*

The words were unspoken, but I felt he had heard them as much as me. I breathed in a gulp of air. "You do realize she has some memory of her past?"

"She doesn't remember me. She doesn't remember Meetra." Yudan gave a short, bitter laugh. "Shavit, I don't think she even recalls Malak."

I knew he was wrong on that, at least. "Perhaps it is a mercy," I said softly. "I cannot think how hard this will be for her, confronting her past demons."

"Indeed." His voice had turned smooth; his face, composed. And I realized with a sudden flush of chagrin that he, too, would be facing the same past. And yet, Yudan Rosh had once more morphed into the indifferent spectre he so liked to emulate. "I will see this out to the end, Cathar. I know you followed me here in suspicion, and I do not blame you for that. But speak of lofty ideals like redemption to me again, and things will go worse than last time."

I felt my lips purse and my temper rise at the unexpected threat. "I understand," I said stiffly, once more disliking the odious man who had somehow become part of our crew. "Perhaps we should return to the *Ebon Hawk,* then, as neither of us should have left in the first place."

"Lead the way, Cathar." The damnable man sounded amused, now. "I shall follow."

xXx

Chapter End Notes

Coming up next: Jolee's POV as the repairs near completion, and one of the crew goes missing.

Bit of a delay on this chapter, as I'm afraid RL got in the way. It does that, at times. We're nearing the end of the lull, peeps – things will start to happen next chapter.

Thanks kosiah for the beta.
An abrupt awakening

- Jolee Bindo -

“I will be back shortly,” Juhani murmured, before striding away on the cooling sands like a desert cat hunting her prey.

Bah. That’s a terrible analogy, given her quarry. My eyes narrowed as I watched her figure depart, wondering if I should stop her, if she were the best choice to head off after that brooding Twi’lek, in light of their last encounter.

He wasn’t headed to that cursed pyramid- at least not yet. I could sense him further afield, some distance out of sight along the shoreline. Well, it’s the Cathar’s choice to chase him. Here’s hoping she’s more circumspect with her words this time around.

The loud shink of lightsabers crashing together reminded me of the others; swivelling back around, I could see Revan holding her training ‘saber in a steady defensive guard as Dustil took a step back. He scowled, and then lunged forward abruptly, red plasma beam aimed low at her legs.

With ease, Revan jumped clear of the swipe, her weapon returning back to its default position as she landed. “You’re leading with your shoulder,” she murmured. “It makes your next move predictable.”

Dustil’s eyes glittered with resentment. “How can you not remember anything?” he spat. “Mission still calls you by that fake name. But even you said you’re not her... I heard you say that... but you also said you can’t remember a damn thing!”

Revan raised an eyebrow; the boy was obviously frustrated, but it didn’t seem to faze her.

“You can’t have it both frakking ways!” he blurted out. “Either you’re Revan in which case it’s your fault- everything is your fault.” His face was blotched red with frustration; like every other teen out there in the darn galaxy, he was looking to blame all his woes on someone else-

Ach. I suppose in his case he might actually have a point.

Revan didn’t answer immediately, and there was a certain measure of calm on her face that, if I were honest, I hadn’t expected from her. Aye, she was usually prickly about discussing anything of her past... and with good reason, given who she was.
But maybe it was her questioner. Somehow, I didn't think the likes of Dustil Onasi would ruffle her. Somehow, I didn't think she'd let him.

Revan strode forward, blade levelling out in a textbook-standard blow that appeared more to keep Dustil’s attention on the duel rather than pose any sort of real test. His ‘saber rose to block, and she side-stepped, throwing another sweeping hit his way—this time with a tad more speed and strength behind it.

Dustil blocked again, his eyes narrowing in concentration.

“If you’re facing a superior foe, make them do the work,” Revan commented. “Make them chase you. Tire them out. Don’t stop moving.”

The boy scowled, but I took note of the way he retreated, feet shuffling on the sand, leading Revan backwards. When she struck out at him again—in another overt move that I picked was designed to be noticed in advance—Dustil dodged backwards, once more forcing her to follow.

“I’m not asking for any acquittal from my past, Dustil,” Revan said. She circled around him, pausing her offensive for now. “But if what you really want to know is about Telos...” she trailed off, her voice lowering. A dark look of anger twisted the kid’s face, and he growled, before abruptly leaping forward in a savage flurry of attacks.

She didn’t dodge; no. Each wild lunge she blocked, as if choosing to allow the boy’s anger to find an outlet against the safety of her training blade.

“Keep your eye on the environment, too,” she advised. I snorted to myself at her adroit change of topic. Aye, in some ways Revan was a mercurial character, quick to think on her feet. She was drawing Dustil into conversation, into the depths of his bitterness... but drawing him out again before his emotions had a chance to explode. “We’re losing daylight... can that aid you in any way? Are there obstacles around you could use against your foe?” Revan gave an obvious tilt of the head at the ‘Hawk’s landing ramp, off some distance to Dustil’s side. “Height’s an advantage, for instance.”

“Environment, huh?” Dustil muttered. He flung his off-hand out in a sharp motion, a short burst of Force energy exploding from his fingers and slamming into the ground near Revan’s feet.

A flurry of sand shot into the air at the impact, some firing directly at her face.

She was quicker; just. Revan bounded into the air, somersaulting backwards to land some metres behind.

An amused look appeared on her face. The sand hadn’t caught her in the eyes, but it’d been close. Closer than she expected, I’d wager. And yet the darn woman looked almost impressed.

“That’s a cheap shot,” I grumbled. “For a practice duel.”

“Oh, I dunno,” Revan murmured, as she kept her eyes on the lad. There was a note of approval in her voice. “Practise duelling as you would out in the field, I reckon.”

It was getting dark, I realized, staring beyond the two to the expanse of beach sand that slowly lolled into dunes in the distance. The shadows of evening lengthened over us, cut through by the glare of the ‘Hawk’s illuminated underbelly.

“Eh, it’s time to turn in,” I called out, jerking my head back towards the loading ramp. “Let’s finish this spar on a pleasant note, huh, kids?”
“I can’t tell you about Telos,” Revan whispered, completely ignoring my last statement. Sometimes, I grumbled to myself, *I swear that darn woman lost half her sense with her memory. Sithkid was just starting to calm down around her.* “But Yudan can. Question him if you want answers... all I know is what he told me. Telos was a joint strike by Malak and Talvon Esan.”

And, as I expected, the boy’s face had twisted once more in a backlash of anger. “Talvon was a Telosian!” he hissed. “I’ve heard that banthacrap before, and I don’t buy it! You really think he’d turn on his own frakking homeworld?”

Revan stared at him, mute. *She doesn’t know,* I realized with a pang. *She’s got no idea here... no recollection of this at all.* I’d not paid extensive attention to Revan’s war of attrition, and all I knew about Telos was that it had been obliterated.

But I’d heard about the madness of Talvon Esan.

“That’s the Dark Side for you,” I said, hearing the sadness in my own darn voice. It wasn’t just Revan who’d dovetailed into actions and corruptions that those who’d once known her would never have believed possible.

It wasn’t just her generation who had the monopoly on failure of such magnitude.

I cleared my throat. “In the end, if you keep following that cursed path, you’ll have to sacrifice everything. Your planet, your friends, your values, your soul. Some just fall quicker than others.”

Dustil’s shoulders slumped, and I saw defeat chase across his expression before he turned awkwardly away. It was a bleak sort of resignation, I thought; an acceptance of something that maybe he’d already known.

“The holonews...” Dustil muttered. “All the channels said Talvon went mad. Insane after Malachor. He’d been the hero of Telos... him and Saul Karath. If the likes of them can turn into monsters... frakk, the likes of you.” he turned, throwing a bitter look over his shoulder at Revan. “Then what hope is there for anyone else?”

“Bah,” I snorted in derision. “That’s a load of rubbish, boy. Everyone’s fallible. Being more powerful or intelligent or heroic don’t make you any less likely to fall... in fact, some say the pressure’s harder. Everyone has the potential for evil inside them... and the flipside is, anyone can be strong enough to resist it, too. No matter their background. No matter what trials their past have already burned them with.”

“All I can tell you is that I won’t fall again,” Revan said, her voice a quiet whisper in the dusk. “Except that I’m sure I believed myself incapable of falling once before. But I’ll finish this, no matter what it takes.” She sighed. “And my allies will help me stay true... or stop me if I don’t. And you’ve thrown your lot in with us, Dustil, which makes you one of them.”

Her lips twisted into a quick grin; a flash of wry, almost black humour. “Bet you never expected that.”

Dustil blinked, for once surprised into silence. His mouth opened, before shutting again, like the lad had no idea what to say, or how to take the damaged, powerful woman standing across from him with a training ‘saber held loosely in a combat grip.

“Okay, I’m calling time,” I grumbled, with a sudden shiver. The temperature had plummeted after sunset, and it was fast getting too cold for my old bones. “Come on, kids. Inside.”

xXx
Of course, they’d taken their time before actually listening to me. The Mandalorian had returned, dragging some salvage behind him on plysteel ropes, which immediately garnered the attention of both Revan and the Twi’lek chit who’d backed out from underneath the ‘Hawk’s hull to join us.

No sign of Juhani or Yudan Rosh, although Canderous mentioned something about running into them on the beach. *Eh, I hope for their sakes they make it back before our pilot spots their absence. We’ve had enough spats recently to flesh out a holo-soap.*

I’d wandered inside at that point, more interested in a lie-down than idle conversation. I didn’t bat an eyelash when Revan followed me a few minutes later, but Dustil’s presence behind her had been a surprise.

I’d half thought the boy would stay outside to chat with Mission, or go find his dad- but instead, he appeared to be shadowing Revan with a wary gleam of interest in his gaze.

Aye, he certainly didn’t trust her... but she’d done well with him. Better than I thought she would. Dustil had been determined to get a rise from her, throwing his anger in her face, constantly poking at a sleeping terentatek with a stick – and Revan, in contrast, had exhibited a surprising amount of tact in not reacting.

*She’d make a fair teacher.* I hadn’t noticed that about her until now.

“You should head to your dad’s quarters, lad,” I said, frowning at him as he entered the common room behind Revan. “Get a few hours kip while you can.”

“Don’t think I can sleep,” Dustil muttered, scrubbing at his face with one hand as he slumped down on the plimfoam benches.

“Now that Canderous has returned with a suitable repair patch, I think we’ll be all fixed up in a matter of hours,” Revan said, eyeing over the caffa machine. “Sleep’s a good idea for us all.”

“It’s not a magical thing I can turn on,” Dustil grumbled. “If I’m not tired, then I’m not frakking tired.”

“Training helps with that,” Revan returned in a dry voice. She followed it with a frown directed at me. “I think. I don’t remember, but I seem to fall into sleep easily enough.”

“Aye, you have the right of it. Meditation, too,” I offered. “All good tricks. Even the military use a form of it, teaching their troops to sleep when they have a chance.” I turned an eye on Dustil, who was still scowling at Revan. “After all this is over, it’d be a good idea to get you some training, lad.”

“I ain’t going anywhere near the Jedi,” he returned coldly, his glare burning into mine. “Don’t you bloody start.”

I snorted. “I got my own issues with the Order. What’s a young pup like you so annoyed at them for?”

“I don’t trust them,” he said through clenched teeth. “And I’ve spent my life doing what others tell me to do. Not anymore. No frakking way.”

“Guess you’ll have to learn from others, then,” Revan said, her voice light, even as her gaze on him was curious. “Pretty much like you have been doing. Seems like our Jolee isn’t too bad a teacher, anyway.”

“Bah, did you completely fail to hear my story the other day?” I grumbled. Last time I’d tried my
hand at training, it had ended in disaster and ripped out my heart. “There’s a reason they stick Padawans under Masters, you know.”

“For lack of a better option…” Revan murmured, trailing off. There was a certain amusement in her gaze that dwindled into seriousness. “You’ve had some training in the Order, Jolee. It’s better than nothing.”

She pushed one hand up against her forehead, brushing her unruly mop away and leaving her face bare. It brought the angular lines of her face into stark relief. I could tell she was paler than normal for her olive skin tone, but I hadn’t really paid much attention to her physical appearance until now. The flight from Kashyyyk and the Leviathan had been frantic enough to keep my focus on the more important aspects of our lives: namely, survival.

Besides, Force signatures were usually the way I recognized people. When I’d spent time with Revan four years ago, that’d been down in the dark depths of the Shadowlands, where we’d both relied on the blue-black etchings of Force-enhanced vision to see anything.

The Force provided a useful form of sight. Aye, particularly for noting fluctuations of energy. Didn’t shine the greatest illumination onto physical features, though.

My eyes narrowed as I stared hard at the woman, and a ghostly shiver danced down my spine.

“What?” she asked, her hair still pulled tightly back.

Revan had a plainish sort of face, long and ending in a chin that was almost too sharp. Normally her striking eyes dominated her expression, but now I took note of the way her nose curved ever-so-slightly at the tip, and that her eyes were a little wide-set-

“You have had a few years training, Jolee,” Revan repeated, frowning.

..."A few years training is more than I’ve had," Nayama said. I could hear the resentment in her tone, and knew, as always, that she was thinking on her stars-blessed sister. Nayama’s straight brown hair was braided tight against her scalp as per her norm, leaving her face bare to the elements. Her wide-set brown eyes stared at me in simmering resentment. “It was one mistake, Jolee. One!”

“Aye, and it almost killed us both,” I said, sighing as I placed a hand on my irate wife’s arm. “I’ve as good as left the Order, Nayama. I-”

“I didn’t ask you to leave!” she seethed, eyes flashing, the curved tip of her nose wrinkling in anger. “Don’t you dare lay that on me, Jolee Bindo!”

“Now you’re taking my words out of context,” I grumbled, as she jerked away from me. “I’d do it again in a flash, Nayama. But if they won’t train you, and I can’t train you without it being a danger to us both—”

“Exar will.” Her voice had turned soft; her anger vanishing in a beat. I knew it to be a dangerous sign. “He’ll train us both, Jolee. You cannot expect us to live a life without the Force.”

“You’ve been in contact with him again,” I said slowly, feeling my gut tighten with anger – and not a little dread. That man was all over the holonews these days – as notorious as Nayama’s sister was famous. “Nothing good will come from associating with him, Nayama. You must see that.”

Once, before the Force had touched either Nayama or Nomi, they had spent some time on
Dantooine. It wasn’t my native enclave, but it had been home to Nayama’s brother-in-law when he still lived, the aspiring Jedi Knight Andur Sunrider.

Nayama hadn’t particularly enjoyed her time there, but she’d befriended two of the people I liked least in the galaxy. The powerful Knight Exar Kun, and the grouchy Padawan Vrook Lamar - who would later transfer to Coruscant where I had the unfortunate experience of knowing him.

“Exar is offering to train us, Jolee-”

“You told me that last time he made contact with you,” I muttered, trying to hold back a scowl. Nayama swore there had never been anything romantic between them- she’d been young, bored, and resentful of her sister’s new husband. But her bashfulness when speaking of Exar always put me on edge. The slight look of awe, as though wondering what might have been-

I’d never met the darn man, yet that would have been enough to make me dislike him. But there was worse. Oh, there was, indeed.

Skirmishes. Annexations. Massacres. All along the edges of the Outer Rim, in little-known worlds with no government to speak of. Sketchy reports of dark sightings and deep terror amongst the refugees. And through all the unreliable stories, the same name kept cropping up: Exar Kun. The Jedi Knight who’d left the Order under a cloud of suspicion.

Aye, mayhap there was no concrete evidence that Exar Kun was leading the unrest, but his name was whispered frequently enough to implicate it. Along with another word that hadn’t been used for centuries: Sith.

Sometimes, Jedi walked away from the Order. Sometimes, Jedi fell. But there hadn’t been a Dark Jedi who’d proclaimed himself a Sith Lord for a long, long time. And while I would never denounce anyone as destined for the Dark Side- I also wasn’t a blind idiot.

One thing was obvious – Exar Kun desired power. And he was willing to chip away at his own humanity to achieve it. There was a reason the Jedi were rallying against him, and I hated the fact that Nayama was so blind to it.

“He swears we will have nothing to do with his ongoing disagreement with the Order-”

“Disagreement?” I muttered. “Bah! There’s a euphemism if ever I heard one.”

But her sharp chin jutted out in that familiar stubbornness I both loved and, at times, was annoyed by; and I settled myself in for a lengthy discourse on the subject. There was no way I’d let my wife get embroiled with the likes of him.

No way at all.

...

“Jolee?” Revan prompted. She’d dropped her hand so the dark curls once more framed her face.

I held back another shiver, blinking with unexpected nostalgia, as the creeping tendrils of the past slowly loosened their hold. Revan was still staring at me, and the odd sense of familiarity departed. Suddenly, she was once again the unique individual that had sent ripples of change across the galaxy.

I shook my head in mild irritation. It’s the words, is all. This conversation started too darn much the same.
“Eh, it’s nothing,” I muttered, scratching my head. “A wraith tip-toed across my soul, as the Ukatins like to say.”

"Hmm." Revan didn’t look convinced, but she appeared willing to let it go. She shot a sideways glance at Dustil. "I’m off to sleep. Doesn’t hurt to try it, Dustil. Even a lie-down counts as rest, and you might be grateful for it later."

The boy said nothing, merely stared at her with simmering mistrust.

A wry grin stole over Revan’s face, and she walked away, avoiding the caffa machine for once to head to the women’s living quarters.

“Fine,” Dustil muttered, the moment the hatch had closed behind Revan. “Suppose rest is better than sitting around, waiting for the hours to tick down until the end of everything.”

I snorted, unimpressed with the boy’s melodrama. “There’s always another great war around the horizon, lad. And with every war, there’s always someone who claims the end is nigh.” I gestured around the room ruefully. “Yet here we are, and the universe still stands. Don’t be so darn dramatic.”

“Why are you even here?” Dustil demanded suddenly, eyes flashing. “I mean... I get why some of the crew follow her... but you’d been living in that frakking forest for decades. What made the likes of you decide to up and follow her?”

“Does everything need to have a reason, boy? Maybe I was just sick of all the trees.”

“That’s misdirection if ever I heard it,” he muttered, running a hand through his hair. The boy looked tired, no matter what drivel he claimed. “If you don’t want to say your reasons, then just frakking say so.”

“That Academy of yours certainly didn’t teach you any manners, did it?”

“We were a bit more focused on different ways to kill people rather than flowery speech,” he said coldly.

“Bah, don’t talk back to your elders, child. If you really want to know...” I paused. “The Force swirls around us all, but no one more so than our Revan. Ah, but it’s not just that... for I know well that sometimes swirling Force is just swirling Force. No, it’s her actions that intrigue me. She’s got more reason than any to run, and yet she’s doing her damnedest to stay on course, now. Face up to things.” I turned a beady eye on the boy, thinking on his innate dislike of the Jedi Order and wondering exactly where it stemmed from. Was it just the years he spent with the Sith? He’d turned his back on that life, and yet seemed to hate both sides with equal passion.

I didn’t exactly care for the restrictions of the Order, myself. But, still, I couldn’t help but think that the Jedi might do the angry lad some good. I sighed. "Revan understands that running away doesn’t work. Maybe you could learn something from that."

Dustil’s jaw stiffened and he rose to his feet. Without a word in reply, he stalked off towards the pilot’s quarters.

Well, that’s one way to get him to bed, I thought with mild amusement. I wasn’t sure if he’d actually take any of my words in... but Dustil Onasi listened more than he let on. Earlier, when it’d been just us two left on the ‘Hawk, I’d taken stock of the interested gleam in his eye when we’d spoken of psychic guarding. Take the angry lad away from any flashpoints like Revan or Telos or the Order, and he calmed down immeasurably. Showed a fair aptitude for imitating the basic blocks of a mental shield, too.
Aye, Dustil Onasi might pretend to be angry at the universe, but he had a desire for knowledge alongside it. Coupled with his undeniable strength in the Force, he had the potential to transform into a powerful Force-user one day.

One day. If the lad would ever grow up and get over his simmering resentment of just about everything.

I was just about to depart for a lie-down myself when I heard the footfalls of another echoing through the freighter’s hall. I turned as the hatch opened to admit the boy’s father.

Carth Onasi shot me a tired smile; no more than a quirk at the edge of his mouth, really. Everyone is so darn glum these days. It was beginning to get on my nerves.

“Humph,” I said in greeting. “How’s the patch job going?”

“Good.” Carth stifled a yawn. “The others are outside, but I told them to head in to catch some sleep. Zaalbar’s staying out with Teethree. They don’t need more than two hands sealing the patch, and they’ll wake us once done. A few hours, maybe four, and we’ll be launch ready.”

“The others?” I frowned, wondering whether to ask for elaboration. “All of ‘em?”

The Republic soldier shot me a puzzled look. “I saw Dustil and Revan head in before. But the rest are congregating by the repairs. Did you expect someone to be missing, Jolee?”

HAH.” I hid a grin, shook my head, and took a step towards the starboard living quarters. Probably a good thing that brooding Twi’lek’s walk went unnoticed by our pilot. “Well, stars know I ain’t one to turn down a nap. I’ll leave you to it before the rest turn up and fill this ship with yakkity yak.”

“Where- where’s Revan?” Carth’s hesitant words had me pausing at the exit. “I- and Dustil?”

“They’re of the same mind as me. Dustil headed to your room; good thing, too, with how crowded the men’s quarters are.” I shot him a look over my shoulder, and knew it wasn’t his son he’d really been asking about. “If you want to talk to Revan, then stop dithering and do it before we leave this planet. None of us are getting any younger, you know.”

The man’s face snapped into a scowl at my interference, and I had to stifle a chuckle at how much his expression reminded me of his son, then.

“Thanks for the advice,” he ground out. “But I’d appreciate it if you keep your nose out of my affairs.”

I let my chuckle run free as I opened the hatch. “Eh, what would I know? I’ve only lived for more decades than I can count. But one thing I’ll remind you is the danger we’re about to sail into. Sort things out while you’ve got the chance. Living with a lifetime of regret ain’t a fun thing to do.”

I stepped through the hatch and wandered away, aware the man was no doubt glaring daggers at my back. He and Revan might be fully grown, but they were dancing around each other like a pair of mating wyyyschokk spiders. It could take years for the arachnid mating ritual to complete, and half the time one ended up eating the other before the next generation was even conceived.

Well, I can’t deny they have more than their share of issues. Aye, it wasn’t easy for them, I’d admit. But I was a firm believer in grasping love where one could find it. There was enough darn bleakness in the rest of life that letting a chance for happiness slip away was nothing more than foolishness.

I yawned, disrobing absently as I sat down on the bunk. After all my years of sleeping on a pallet –
or a bed of leaves, when circumstances had rolled that way – a soft mattress was more comfort than my back could handle. I was used to the harsh wild of Kashyyyk; my home for near on half my life. Sometimes, I wondered if I’d ever see her untamed beauty again.

First time I'd happened upon the planet of the Wookiees had been on honeymoon with my new wife. She'd always liked the simpler, less civilized worlds.

My thoughts lingered back on the recollection from earlier. Nayama and I'd had some good years between us, but they'd been few. Too few. And my failure with the woman more precious than any I'd met before or since sat heavy on my soul- even all these decades later.

Nayama had been so like her elder sister. She'd never seen it, though. She'd always measured herself against Nomi, and always believed that somehow she was lacking in comparison. But they were similar... both free-spirited nomads at heart. Daydreamers, but with a determined drive regarding causes they believed in. Strong, gifted, and unusually late to bloom in the Force.

If Nayama had only secured the training of a Master. Aye, and maybe that had been my miscalculation, taking her to my home enclave on Coruscant rather than following her sister’s footsteps. For the High Council had been fired up at Dantooine’s gall in accepting Nomi Sunrider – an adult woman with a squalling newborn at her side – and the Masters on Coruscant weren’t willing to take the same risks with Nomi’s younger sister. Not when she was already emotionally entrenched with the likes of me.

The Order might have changed their collective minds later – when Nomi’s Battle Meditation reared alongside her heroism against Kun – but by then it’d been too late for Nayama. And the sheer hypocrisy of some of the Council members, using Nayama Bindo’s name as an example of how attachment could lead to corruption, why adults should not receive training- Aye, sometimes I wondered if Nayama’s fall was preordained, from the moment the High Council refused her. She could have been great. I still believed that. And I still cursed the Order for sealing her fate.

I sighed, lying back on the soft mattress, letting the bitter thoughts slip away into the cobwebs of history. I could hear the movement of others through the ship, feel their presence in the Force as they congregated around the central hub of the freighter. I planned to be out cold before any of the men walked in here.

Yawning, I emptied my mind, and drifted slowly into a meditative precursor to sleep.

xXx

Wake up!

“Eh?” I muttered sleepily, half-aware that something had woken me, but whether it be dream or reminiscence or purely a sense of justified foreboding I couldn’t tell. I nestled deeper into the covers, blocking my ears to the Mandalorian’s snores, and tried to grasp the last eddies of slumber.

My thoughts submerged into the half-conscious state of dreamworld. My dreams were interspersed with flashes of darkness, and a woman demanding someone to speak with her. A plea, for someone to listen.

Time morphed into intangibility, stretching into seconds or hours.

This is no trap!
I jerked back to wakefulness as a psychic wave of power washed over me. It dissipated quickly, but the echo of the voice rebounded in my mind. This is no trap! A woman’s voice, insistent and indignant and thrumming with dark Force residue. A powerful message aimed at someone other than me.

My attention crystallized into focus, immediately stretching out to find the source of the power-

The audible sound of the hatch hissing closed scythed clean through my concentration. I scrambled into a seated position, hands grabbing the two lightsabers near my person as I took immediate stock of the room.

The Mandalorian was still breathing heavily in sleep above me, and the Wookiee’s bunk opposite was empty – he’d be under the ‘Hawk, still, finalizing the repairs. But the fourth bed- that should have had a body-

No you don’t! If there was one person on board this ship whose loyalties were still in question, who was the most likely to be lured away-

I barrelled off the mattress, shucking on my tatty robe, and darted through the closing exit.

If that mental voice had roused me, then it would have woken others, too. Augmented by a psychic power both strong and foreign and insidiously dark, it had to be coming from that cursed Force beacon. Attracting the darkest link in our crew, mayhap?

I sprinted around the curve in the ‘Hawk’s corridor and all but slammed into the Twi’lek’s back.

Blinking in surprise, I stumbled, catching myself against the durasteel walling.

“What is not a trap?” Yudan Rosh murmured, without bothering to turn around.

“Humph,” I grumped, poking at his back in irritation. He didn’t budge. “If someone tells me something ain’t a trap, first thing I conclude is that it is. Could be that I’m just a suspicious old bugger, though.”

“The psychic power felt strangely alien to me,” the Twi’lek continued. “But the voice I heard spoke Basic with a clear Core accent.”

Did mental voices have accents? Pshaw, I didn’t know – but I understood what he was saying. The words that had flashed through my mind had been spoken in the tones of a young, educated female. One whose home tongue was Basic, I’d wager.

“I cannot sense it now,” Yudan commented. “Only the steady Force beacon we have all felt since landing here.”

“They could be the same thing.” I shrugged behind him, but my thoughts were still fixated on the strange event that had pulled us out of slumber. “Most likely it came from that darn pyramid. I thought the message was aimed for you. But if not-”

“So who-” Yudan Rosh stopped speaking, and I had the brief impression of his back tensing before he shot forward in a surprising burst of speed.

I blinked, before my brows lowered in annoyance. Twitchy Twi’lek! Was he running away or running after someone? With a grunt of effort, I reeled the Force in underneath my heels and ran after him.
The hatch to the common room was still open from his entrance and, once more, I almost barrelled into his stationary back next to the kitchenette. He made a damn inconvenient wall.

“Are you staying or going?” I snapped, jabbing a finger hard into his kidneys. I felt a small sense of gratification at his grunt of discomfort. “Make up your darn mind, sonny. I’m getting dizzy here.”

There was a swish as the door leading to the port living quarters opened to admit Juhani.

“Cathar,” Yudan said, his voice low and tense. “Tell me Revan’s still in her bunk.”

The light had been set to night-time low, so only the faintest illumination glowed from the ceiling. The *Ebon Hawk* had been programmed to emulate diurnal rhythms, although frankly, I didn’t see the point when one could just choose to turn the darn light off. But even in the dim, I could see that Juhani’s ears were laid flat against the side of her head. Her slanted eyes were tawny slits, and the fine dusting of fur on her face quivered in tension.

Juhani’s alarm was palpable on the Force.

“That message or whatever it was that woke us,” I said, my voice lowering as I realized what I should have understood the moment I’d woken. “It was aimed at Revan.”

“She has gone,” Juhani confirmed with a brief nod of the head. “When I first saw her empty bunk I sensed her running at speed toward the pyramid. She is beyond my range, now.”

A low noise rumbled from the Twi’lek; almost a growl. “After all of this,” Yudan muttered. His normally bland tone had hardened with disappointment, and his jaw was clenched. “She fails again.”

“Fails?” Juhani echoed tartly, glaring at him. “I do not believe she had a choice, Yudan Rosh. Not when it was her captured bond-sister begging for her presence.”

“Ah,” I said in sudden comprehension. “That voice. Bastila Shan, was it?”

“I forget that you have not met her before,” Juhani murmured. “But, yes, you are correct.”

“Revan should have woken us,” Yudan censured. “Running off alone is the worst thing she could have done.” He sighed; a short gust of irritated air. “Reckless,” he muttered under his breath.

“We must go after her,” Juhani implored in a low tone. Her slanted eyes flashed in the dim lighting. “Bastila is... I am unsure of Bastila’s state of mind.”

“She is Malak’s prisoner,” Yudan bit out. “I am well familiar how quickly Force-sensitives break under his ministrations. This *is* a trap, and Revan is idiotic to face this herself-”

“We must wake the others,” Juhani cut in. She turned, face cocked in the direction of the men’s living quarters.

I heard the slightest of scuffles, the whisper of a footstep near the now-closed hatch that led back to the men’s dorms. I frowned, staring at the durasteel flooring. A handful of that Twi’lek chit’s pazaak cards littered the ground; a picture of teenage normality, in amongst the craziness of our situation.

“That is time we do not have, Cathar,” Yudan growled. “I agree that we follow Revan. Now. But the rest of the crew would only slow us down.”

One of the brightly-coloured cards shifted slightly; almost as if someone had stood on it.

A body whirred by me at breakneck speed; taken aback, it took me a moment to comprehend that
Yudan Rosh had launched himself into the air, leaping directly past me and landing in a controlled crouch on top of something- something invisible-

Beneath him, the figure of Dustil Onasi winked into existence. One of the Twi’lek’s fists was pressed hard against the boy’s throat.

“Get- get off me!” Dustil choked from under the hand crushing his oesophagus. His eyes were wide with fright.

“Do not sneak around me, boy,” Yudan warned. He leaned in close, face to face with the young lad. “You are fortunate I do not have a lightsaber in my possession, or my instincts may have yielded more severe consequences.”

“Stop grand-standing and get off the lad,” I muttered, unable to stop a roll of the eyes. “Yes, yes, you’re a scary Dark Jedi, we’re all aware of that. No need to go frightening the children, sonny.”

In a fluid motion, the Twi’lek rose to his feet and Dustil scrambled to follow suit.

“I heard what you all said,” Dustil muttered, glaring at Yudan and me in turn. He raised a hand as if to rub at his throat, before evidently thinking better of it. “Revan’s run off, and you’re going after her. If she’s gonna fall again, then I- I can help. I’m not just a frakking child, y’know.”

At that, I felt a sliver of unease. Of the lot of us, he had the least training. I’d thought Yudan Rosh the most likely to run off independently, but surely Dustil Onasi was the more pre-disposed to lose control when faced with the power of that cursed Force beacon.

“No, you are not a child,” Yudan monotoned, staring at the lad. His gaze narrowed. I had only the briefest inkling of forewarning before he jerked one hand up vertically, and a fine, precise twitch of the Force erupted from his fingertips. Swift and minuscule, the spear of energy hit Dustil Onasi directly in the forehead.

The boy collapsed to the ground.

“Stop!” Juhani cried. She took one step towards Yudan Rosh, her unlit ‘saber tight in her grasp. “What- what have you done?”

The Twi’lek turned around slowly, his expression blank, his yellow gaze pinned on her.

“Ach, the boy’s fine,” I muttered, even as I strode forward to double-check. But I recognized that use of Force power, even if it wasn’t something I could emulate myself.

Juhani held still, attention still fixed warily on Yudan. I harrumphed, one hand raised in a shooing motion at the Cathar as I knelt down next to the lad. “Settle down, girl. Push the Force out yourself and you’ll see there’s no damage to our resident Sithkid.”

Best make sure, though. I’d be a senile idiot to blindly trust Yudan Rosh. Wisps of investigative Force gently curled out from my command, circling the prone body in front of me. My assumed diagnosis was immediately confirmed: stasis. Not even a strong one, at least. I shot the Twi’lek an irritated look. “Your favourite trick again,” I grumbled. “Get a kick out of putting everyone to sleep, do you?”

Yudan Rosh gave a nonchalant shrug. “If the boy’s mental guarding was competent, that would not have been able to fall him. He will wake soon and no doubt let the others know our destination. In that respect, Dustil Onasi will be of assistance.”
Mental guarding, bah! I wasn’t sure if that was a dig at my training of the lad, I’d only had him to myself for a few hours. I felt my brows lowering again as I viewed the dispassionate Twi’lek. “Dustil won’t be impressed when he wakes. He’s got a thing or two to prove to himself, and staying behind won’t rest easy with him.”

“He’s a liability,” Yudan shot back. “Dustil Onasi is young, powerful, and little trained in either restraint or control. Consider my attack a test. Had his innate shields proved a counter to my stasis, then perhaps he would have been competent enough to accompany us.” The Twi’lek looked down to appraise the comatose boy. “We are heading toward the lure of an immense Force power,” he murmured, his voice dropping. “Bringing the boy along would be a greater risk to his own soul than whatever benefit it would bring us.”

Yudan Rosh glanced back to me again, staring at me flatly, expression revealing nothing. Mayhap it had only been pragmatism that drove the Twi’lek’s actions. I wasn’t sure. And I had to admit there was a goodly chunk of sense in his little mental test, whether it originated from concern or cold reason.

“Careful, sonny,” I warned, feeling my eyes narrow. “You might start me thinking there’s a bone of compassion in your body.”

His expression didn’t change.

“We should depart,” Juhani murmured, her voice once more her useful, reasoned tone. “Every second Revan gets further from us.”

A metaphorical gust of icy wind chased across my soul, then. Sudden and dark and bone-chilling with foreboding. It faded as quickly as it had materialized, leaving nothing but an unnatural urgency thrumming in the Force all around me.

“A premonition,” I muttered. I knew the difference between personal anxiety and a portent from beyond. The feeling had been too puissant for a simple flight of fancy. “Juhani is right. We have to move, and now. I’ve a hunch that Revan’s going to need us before long.”

With a silent nod from Juhani and a sharp-edged look from the Twi’lek, we all departed the Ebon Hawk with alacrity.

xXx

It’d been awhile since I’d used the Force so gratuitously, hammering at speed through a tangle of low-lying bush. The Shadowlands on Kashyyyk were filled with trees as tall as mountains, which left their depths relatively clear of bramble for the most part. In contrast, the vegetation here was nowhere near as haughty or ambitious – laying much thicker on the ground, and thus being immensely more bothersome.

“Good thing I didn’t like this robe,” I muttered as the other two ground to a halt. There were minor scratches on my face from the whiplash of branches I’d run full-tilt into, and burrs of thistle clung to the tatty remnants of my clothing.

Ahead of me, the mess of greenery ended abruptly in a large clearing. Perhaps fifty metres beyond us lay the entrance to the pyramid.

Even I had to admit it was grandiose. Looming high into the now-midnight sky, the edifice was etched in the blue-black lines of my Force-enhanced sight. But it was the wisps of burgundy energy curling back from the edges that had me stiffening in caution; those wisps were the residue of the
alien power bleeding back... bleeding back into the fabric of the Force itself. I couldn’t attribute direct evil to them, but the temptation to walk forward and possess the eldritch energy they offered was strong.

It was a very good thing Dustil Onasi wasn’t here, I realized. Somehow, I doubted the boy’s tenuous control would hold firm under the promise of such power.

Slowly, tentatively, I stretched out my awareness on the Force. The pyramid beheld four sides, each set at a wide angle from the ground, so the final height of the structure was far greater than its base. The sides were a smooth pane, comprised of some metallic material I couldn't identify. My Force-sight showed little in the way of indentations or imperfections anywhere on the outside of the pyramid, and I knew it to be a statement of superior craftsmanship. Or an ego-stroking flaunting of wealth and power to all and sundry. From the little I’d heard of the mysterious Rakatan, I had the feeling it was a bit of both.

“The beacon,” Juhani said in a quiet, almost awed, voice. “It is so strong here, and emanates from the bottom of the pyramid itself.”

She was right, I realized, as my gaze narrowed and dropped back to the base. Inset in the centre of the side facing us was a curved archway that jutted out several metres from the pyramid itself.

The entrance.

“And yet Revan is ascending inside,” Yudan murmured. His profile was aimed high, near the zenith.

“I cannot sense any life nearby.” Juhani’s voice was taut with concern as I felt the Force stretch exploratory wings out from her. I sighed in irritation, plucking an errant bramble from my sleeve, even as my own Force awareness emulated hers.

“There she is,” I muttered, senses briefly touching on a flare of familiar power. She was high already, more than halfway up the temple, but even Revan’s strength was difficult to pinpoint in amongst the overpowering morass of energy coming from the temple.

I lost her psychic signature, then, and Yudan Rosh stiffened ahead of me. Frowning, I threw my Force-focus out further afield.

-come closer, old man-

My concentration frayed, quicker than it should have. The alien power, while not exactly sentient, still merged into my connection with the Force.

-glimpses of the truth can be found here-

Revan’s presence was indistinguishable, now; completely obscured within the pyramid that rose like a sinister portent of doom. I pushed out, harder; surely I should be able to track a Force-user of her magnitude-

-you could find out what happened to your wife-

“Careful!” I gasped, reeling myself back in with a jolt. My stomach turned. “Keep yourselves contained! That- that power...” is seductive. Too darn much.

Yudan Rosh pivoted to face me, his expression blank even as his fists were curled tight at his sides. He’s got some inkling of the danger here. Juhani gulped in a shuddering breath. Her inward struggle was obvious as she slowly grounded herself.
“I do not trust promises like that,” Juhani hissed as she turned. “I will not fall prey to such trickery, wherever it is coming from.”

“Aye, it’s beguiling, alright,” I muttered. “But provided you keep your shields up and don’t push out your awareness, it shouldn’t be a problem.”

“This is a construction of the Star Forge.” Yudan turned back to the pyramid once more, crossing his arms as he stared at it. “This is a taste of what we shall experience on the Forge, no doubt.”

“Huh,” I grumped, feeling slightly taken aback when I considered the likelihood of that. “I hope you’re wrong, sonny. I don’t normally attribute Dark Force to anything except sentients, but I’m thinking this pyramid might be an exception. And if the Star Forge is similar…”

Juhani, too, had turned back to appraise the pyramid. She inhaled deeply. “Despite my efforts, I still did not sense Revan. Or Bastila.”

“Bah, that beacon’s so strong it’s drowning out every other vestige of life. Could be a hundred sents inside that we don’t know about.”

“But if Bastila led Revan here…” Juhani trailed off.

“This Force-bond,” Yudan said tightly. “I know little of it, other than it is uncommonly strong. What sort of power does it have over Revan?”

Juhani turned at that, throwing Yudan Rosh a wary glance. “It is an equal connection, as far as I know. Created when Bastila drew Revan back from beyond the edge of death on her flagship. But you are correct; it is very strong.”

“This Bastila Shan managed to break through Revan’s natural shielding,” I commented, staring at the pyramidal structure through narrowed eyes. Temples of this design could be found throughout the universe, but the Force-power that radiated from this one set my hackles on edge. The power stemming from the base was both foreign and overwhelming, even while the majority of it was funnelled up through the centre of the pyramid, shooting like a laser into the skies above. Magnifying the EMP scrambler, Revan said. But then there’s the residue flashing back to us. Drawing us in.

While alien in its nature, the attraction of the beacon hummed around me; coalescing into a deep desire to step forward and embrace it. On my belt, my decades-old lightsaber hummed.

“Bastila and Revan share a telepathic connection and can also lend each other Force strength,” Juhani murmered, facing back to the pyramid once more. Her ears twitched. “That ability aided Revan more than once on Korriban.”

“Lend each other…” There was a shocked note in the Twi’lek’s usual monotone. “I have never heard of a mind-link to allow that sort of exchange. Are you certain, Cathar?”

“I would not say it so if I were not.” Juhani’s reply back was tart. “Bastila herself had expressed concern at the potency of their connection. I do not believe any of the Masters had ever seen such a link before.”


“And this bond allowed your precious Masters to destroy what was left of her memory-”

Some kaiburr had a tendency to feel alien in their power. Usually the ones that didn’t sing out to the
“Her mind was already destroyed, Yudan Rosh. Revan holds no ill-will toward the Council for doing what they had to.”

-but they could be sensed upon the Force nonetheless.

“Really?” Yudan mocked. “Are you so certain about that?”

_This is a structure created by millennia-old Force-sensitive species. I wonder, did they ever harvest kaiburr?_

“This is a pointless conversation,” Juhani replied tersely. “We should stop bickering and go after Revan.”

_It would have to be a very large crystal, to throw out that much power-

“At long last, a sentiment I agree with,” Yudan drawled. The Force drew deep underneath his limbs, and next to him Juhani readied herself to move in tandem-

“Wait,” I said, and the two stopped mid-stride, turning back to look at me in question.

Kaiburr or not, the monumental Force power could be concealing any number of enemies. The Force had whispered to me that Revan would need aid of some description, that there was danger ahead- but I had no idea in what shape this threat would present itself. The three of us would need to be ready, be strong, be _armed_

I stared hard at Yudan Rosh, the Twi’lek who had followed Revan into the depths of the Dark and still carried the shadows of darkness inside him. In many ways, I wondered if he was more of a liability than Revan herself.

_Aye, but she was willing to take a chance on him._ And the second lightsaber I’d unthinkingly grabbed upon waking in the men’s quarters still sat snug on my belt. I didn’t believe everything was due to the Force... but, sometimes, she certainly seemed to have a wry sense of humour.

“Best we all have weapons,” I muttered, unclipping Zhar’s lightsaber and lobbing it casually to the man who’d killed him. Yudan’s hand shot up in instinct to grasp the hilt. A flash of sheer surprise crossed his face as he surveyed the weapon he’d once pilfered from the leafy floor of the Shadowlands.

I’d not bothered picking his ‘saber up when I’d left that cursed, charred room on the dying _Leviathan_, but my gaze had landed on Zhar’s old weapon as we’d traipsed out. Revan had used it, briefly, as a secondary hilt, but hadn’t even thought to question its whereabouts since that explosive scene.

Probably she believed it sank with the heavy cruiser, and Revan seemed content with just the one ‘saber these days, seeing as Yudan himself had mangled her off-hand.

There was a certain irony, I thought, in Zhar’s weapon ending up with Yudan Rosh. Mayhap a sense of rightness, depending on what future the Twi’lek chose for himself. And as the green flared from the once-Dark Jedi’s grasp, somehow I knew it was the Force again at work.

_Giving Yudan Rosh a chance, may he be worth it._

“Zhar Lestin’s lightsaber,” Yudan murmured, gazing at the particle blade whose colour mirrored my
“Aye. I still plan on having that chat with you, sonny,” I harrumphed, rubbing a hand over my bare scalp. “But that can wait. For now, honour the weapon and its original owner. Mayhap the green will aid you in finding balance.” I snorted. “Since you seem to believe your own waffle about some fancy spiritual meaning behind crystal colours.”

Yudan didn’t acknowledge my words, but remained staring at the lightsaber with a fixed expression.

“Let us go,” Juhani cut in. Her posture was tensed with readiness, her gaze tight on the pyramid. Her own sabre ignited, a dark blue single-blade held taut in her grasp. “I have the same ominous premonition as you, Jolee Bindo. Let us go find Revan.”

With a collective nod, the three of us approached the pyramid.

xXx

Chapter End Notes

*Coming up: Revan walks amongst the ghosts of her past.*

Thanks kosiah for the beta!
The first part of this chapter overlaps with the last part of the previous chapter.

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

Intermesh

- Revan Freeflight -

... 

_A thousand stars winked like tiny dots of ferracrystal in a sea of black. In front of me, through the transparisteel that encompassed one entire wall of my personal quarters, the universe was laid out in a matrix of opportunities... a game-board that I controlled._

_My bare limbs felt languid with the aftermath of sex; a deep lassitude that eased my body as my thoughts stretched ever outwards._

_Things were finally coming together. Not as quickly as I had once hoped, but I would yet see my vision of galactic might come to fruition._

_Behind me I heard soft footfalls, felt the heat of a naked body draw close. Truly, it had been too long since my desire had been slaked in such a fashion. I had plans to set in motion, but they would keep. For a time._

_Revan!_ A woman's voice, appalled and frantic and amplified by a vast, alien power.

... 

_A rush of air sucked deep into my lungs; my eyes snapped open in confusion. The shards of the dream slipped away; leaving nothing but the image of infinite space and the lingering impression of physical satiation._

_Instinct had me firming my shields against the bond; the first action upon consciousness. I was not ready to risk reaching out for Bastila. Not yet._

_An errant notion dashed through my mind: Had it been Bastila's voice, urging me to wake? Had I imagined her hammering at my shields? Bastila... I couldn't- I didn't dare lower my guard, not unless absolutely necessary. Not with Malak so deeply entrenched in her mind._

_I sighed, forcing myself to relax back against the soft bedding. I could hear the quiet breathing of Mission above me, and the snuffling snores of Juhani on the other bunk. Comforting, familiar sounds. The _Ebon Hawk_ was the only home I could truly recall, other than the memories of Jen's childhood- and the artificiality of those were glaring in their dissonance._

_Like holo-pics pasted over an old album, but the adhesive was inferior and the edges were flapping loose-
Right here, lying in the dim of the port living quarters, I was in the closest space I had to a safe harbour. My heart clenched in trepidation that it could all end so soon-

*The best I can do right now is catch another hour of sleep. We’ll be woken when the repairs are complete.* Logic sliced through my bittersweet nostalgia; I knew I had to be at the top of my game for what came next. Ruminating over where I considered my only home to be was not going to help in that regard.

With a forced wrench of concentration, I once more focused on emptying my mind of both thought and emotion, while lulling my heart rate and respiration back into a deep, heavy state of slumber.

...  

*His hand was hot; a welcome burn as it pressed against my naked shoulder. I didn't turn and face him: it was space I stared out into, infinite space that I mastered. But his tension was evident in the fingers that dug into my flesh, and it amused me.*

To think, we play the game of worlds, and yet we are still so embroiled in the personal.

*The Sith used passion to augment strength, but a true Sith knew how to use it with calculation.*

"I have a right to know what you plan," he bit out. "This concerns me as well as you."

"Enough." I let my command echo on the Force. I let the power circle tight around the muscled, naked body behind me, and my amusement vanished in the blink of an eye. "You will find out when I will it, and not a minute earlier. Obey, and follow. If I have to make you kneel again I shall." I let my voice drop to a whisper. "I would prefer you willing."

He paused, and absentmindedly I took note of his inner struggle. It was a trifling observation; my mind was otherwise engaged, stretching out into the plans of the future. There was a tactical victory to be grasped at Deralia, if what Nisotsa had uncovered bore fruit. But I planned to commence my offensive towards the Rodian corridor, and for that I needed a real leader on the other side of the galaxy.

**Revan! I must speak with you!**

"As you will, Master." His words ghosted past my ear. Was there a tone of defiance in them? Resentment? It was hard to tell, but at least, for now, he was compliant.

For now. Maybe it would be best to send him to Rodia immediately.

**I have little time! Please!**

But- there was time to play, first. And we both enjoyed that. With a smirk, I turned around-

**Wake up!**

...  

I sat up in bed, gasping. The last eddies of slumber unfurled and vanished as my heart thundered in my ears. The aftershock of a mammoth psychic blow rattled me, dissipating the remnants of the dream that had been about- about-

I grimaced, hands clenching against my sides, twisting the coarse blanket between my fingers. An icy sense of superiority still lingered, the knowledge that I had been the dejaripl master: every person,
every planet, every fleet had been positioned to my ultimate desire, even the man behind me-

Deralia. The word slithered through my mind with horrifying dread. It had been mentioned, somewhere in the throes of dreamworld that were already fading-

Was this just before everything fell apart? Like it hadn't already, so terribly, fallen apart. Was this a scene of me pushing Malak a step too far, ordering servitude from one who had been an equal, using him like a Corellian Dagger in a game of And’zhai Runes- all the better for my own cold, cold plan-

Mal- Malak- I didn't even really know what the man looked like; in this recollection I hadn't even granted him the courtesy of turning to face him as I demanded his compliance-
-as I planned to take over the galaxy but not before jumping into bed with him once more-

What sort of monster had I been?

The worst, most depraved sort. Who'd cared nothing for-

Sithspit. I wasn't getting back to sleep, that was for sure. With a grimace, I rolled out of bed. Maybe a quiet cup of caffa, before the others woke, would allow me some time to gather my thoughts- to push back the shadows of my past and harden my resolve that I could do this- that I was strong enough to stand firm against the corruption I had once embraced.

The common room was dark and quiet as I entered. I took one step towards the percolator and-
-something slammed against my Force shields, shattering through my introspection and splintering the remnants of the dream into oblivion.

This time there could be no doubt what- who that was. Bastila!

You must speak with me!

My mental guards still held, but her words were thrown with so much strength behind them- more than I would have expected from her- that they leached through anyway, each one reverberating with frenzied need.

That sort of potent, wild power would wake the others.

Can I really deny her? She's frantic... she needs me...

Her desperation was evident as I felt another hammer of psychic power- another demand for me to listen-

What if this is Malak's doing? He had his fingers in her soul, true enough. Yet, in the end... what was Darth Malak but a villain of my own creation?

The Dark Side didn’t allow partnership or equality. Somehow, I knew that truth, memory-blind or not. Any relationship would corrupt, in the end; no matter how deep and steadfast. Even the only thing that seemed to remain – physical gratification, if my ominous dreams held any truth – had not held back the inevitable.

Betrayal.

And yet... I couldn't forget the notion that the Dark had been a conscious decision of mine... I had gambled... risked everything – Malak's love and the love of all others dear to me – as if I believed I
was strong enough to own the Dark Side...

I had gambled, and I had lost.

*Please!*

And Bastila... what was Bastila's circumstance, but my doing?

I couldn't deny her.

It took a conscious effort to drop the psychic barrier between us. My soul was instantly submerged in an immense flood of power through the bond; I gasped, rearing back in physical reaction, bombarded by a thousand scents and scenes flashing like wildfire through my mind-

-all too fast to make sense of anything but this overwhelming *power*-

The bond didn't feel like Bastila anymore, but something ancient, deep as the blackest ocean, an alien sense of Force that was utterly fathomless-

I knew it, I *recognized* it-

*Revan*, Bastila spoke, and the power retreated sharply. Suddenly, Bastila was once more the bond-sister who'd been so intimately connected to me for months. *Listen quickly. I dare not trust this sort of communication. Not anymore. Malak is too often in my mind, and the power of the Star Forge augments his abilities.*

...it was obvious Malak wasn't the only one tapping into the Star Forge-

*Yes, only under his guidance. Or so he believes.* She sounded vaguely irritated. *He sleeps, for now. I can only hope this has not awakened him, but I do not dare keep up this communication. He grows interested in psychic abilities, Revan, and he notices when I use them. This will rouse him sooner or later.*

*How do you know he isn't listening right now?*

*I don't.* She was impatient. Desperate, also. *We must speak. Get yourself to the temple, Revan. The top of the temple. Go. Go, now.*

I had to wake the others, at least-

*No.* Was it my sleepiness that allowed her such easy access to my thoughts? Or was the power beneath her grasp, so foreign and so familiar, magnifying her skill into a staggering form of psychic control that changed the balance of the scales between us? *Hurry, Revan. Come alone. I beg you. We must speak, and every second counts.*

An insidious thought crept through me: I could not forget all we had devolved into on the *Leviathan*, and Malak surely held her strings like a puppeteer-

*This is no trap!* The alien power was there again, strengthening her desperation, throwing her indignance into my face. She was affronted, and had no remorse in showing me so, forcing me to feel the bitter taste of her emotions as they flashed back to me through our mind-link.

*Calm down!* I snapped back in reaction. That much power was bound to draw the attention of Malak- or any Force-user nearby, really. If he wasn’t there already, behind her every thought-
I had the sense of her sighing in irritation, and the Force ebbed once more, drawn back beneath her shaky control. *I am yours, Revan, as you are mine. Our bond allows no other recourse. Trust me. And hurry!*

But, no-- I couldn’t sense Malak anywhere within her at present. All that shimmered through the bond was Bastila, intertwined with the massive power from the Forge that she kept drawing on.

How could I turn away from her? Or deny her very real desperation?

*Waking the others will take time. Time to explain, time to convince. If I hurry, I might be back before anyone notices.* But I’d be a fool to keep myself so open to Bastila.

*I'll be there as quick as I can,* I promised, and gathered the Force up in the tightest of shields I could manage before running out of the freighter.

xXx

The inner archway of the pyramid was bereft of any natural light. The Force outlined the curve of the walls in blue-black, a perfectly symmetrical surface of some metallic compound I didn't recognize. I strode forward with measured steps, drawing the Force tightly inward, somehow recognizing that allowing my awareness to unfurl would be dangerous-

-glimpses of the truth can be found here-

My thoughts stayed fixed on Bastila. I hadn’t spoken to her since I’d left the ‘Hawk – I didn’t dare risk it. Risk her, risk myself. And yet she was leading me to the top of the pyramid-

-beneath you, the truth is beneath you, power to do what you need-

It was impossible to ignore; the deep thrumming of promise at the bottom of the edifice I now entered. And yet it was Bastila I would follow... *what if this is a trap? Why is there no life anywhere nearby? No guards, no sentries, no defence systems? Why has Malak left this place unprotected?* Could Bastila have disabled the temple’s defences, knowing that we’d need to overcome the EMP scrambler, with the Republic Fleet on its way?

But would she know that? Stars, how had she even known we’d crashed on this unknown planet?

*Malak. Malak would have sensed it.*

I clenched my teeth, forced the dark thoughts back, and walked on.

The vestibule was metres deep into the pyramid before it opened into a vast inner chamber. Around the edges of the curved wall were incomprehensible sigils written in-

-Massassi? Some ancient dialect of Massassi? A quiet, artificial murmur from the back of my head. But no, Jen was wrong. *Not Massassi, although there are similarities...* I narrowed my eyes, fixating on one intricate glyph directly above my head that abruptly coalesced into meaning-

..."Mastery," I translated, staring hard at the sigil. Flickers of nearby firelight danced over the walls, illuminating the carved inscriptions in a soft golden colour. "The next one states ‘of life.’ The Rakatan sure like to grandstand their own achievements."

"We didn't have to enter like this," Mal muttered behind me. "It was rash, Revvie. Unnecessary."
"You're wrong." I struggled to hold back a frown at his comment. This was why I'd sent him away before Kashyyyk. Malak had always championed my objectives, but something about the Rakatan technology unsettled him deeply. But I needed him with me on this mission – and I needed him at his best. "I did what I had to."

"You always do."

...

The voices fled, and the sigils dimmed to the blue-black of my Force-sight. My breath stuck in my throat. I can’t... I can’t lose myself to the past. Not here. Swallowing, I unclipped Karon’s lightsaber and held it tight, as if for reassurance, before stepping into the inner chamber.

It was a vast, circular room with four exits, including the one at my back. In the centre rose a massive sculpture of a stern Rakata, both eyestalks aimed in my direction, with limbs outstretched as if drawing on the power of the universe itself.

Shooting up from the long-fingered hands and into the ceiling beyond were two dense beams of pure, undiluted energy. In my Force-enhanced sight, they were thick braids of dark vermillion; coagulated blood, the life-force of the galaxy-

-glimpses of the truth-

I shuddered, and dragged my gaze away forcibly. That's the beacon. It's... it's coming from beneath the statue. Prickles of awareness rose to life all over my body, and my skin was suddenly, intensely, hyper-sensitive. The stagnant air felt like it was pressing in, like it had a beat all its own, vibrating with the residue of the beacon itself-

-your past could be revealed here-

My jaw clenched, hard enough to ache. I could feel myself glaring. My fists knotted at my sides, as I stared at the millennia-old Rakata and wondered fiercely what sort of technology they had dabbled in- and whether it led to their odd, unexplained extinction.

The effigy of the Rakata stared back as I struggled to overcome the all-familiar vertigo. His small, thin-lipped mouth was carved downwards in a disapproving sneer-

...

"This is what the Rakatan used to look like," I murmured, surveying the scowling statue that was bathed in the glow of amber firelight. Sconces were dotted haphazardly around the walls, all cinched tight around a burning torch apiece. It was an odd contrast of technology: treated wood held aflame in a crude poraclay holder, affixed against a sleek, unblemished wall made from a fine-grade metal even I didn't recognize.

The primitive mystics outside added the torches, no doubt. They have no true sight, no vision beyond the organic. They comprehend so little of their own past greatness.

The chiseled Rakata loomed over us, and soaring through his dead palms blasted the lifeblood of the universe itself. Surely, surely, this was a mirror of what the Star Forge would offer me.

"Keep your awareness held tightly inward," I said, repeating myself from earlier. "This is not the time to investigate the power of the kaiburr buried here."

"I know." His words were short. Sharp. Annoyed. "Ever wondered why the Rakatan died out,

"I know." His words were short. Sharp. Annoyed. "Ever wondered why the Rakatan died out,
Revvie? Ever thought they might have played around with powers beyond their control?"

My gaze stayed fixed on the bust of the Rakata. He looked similar enough to be the same species as the ineffectual Elders who tried to control our entrance; but there were differences, too. "They were taller, more muscular than their Force-blind descendants," I mused, ignoring Malak's earlier words. "The Rakatan of old would surely shudder at how their species devolved."

"What, before or after you-"

"Do you want to leave?" I snapped, a sudden upsurge of anger firing through my gut. "Because honestly, Mal, I'm not in the sodding mood to argue. Either stay and help, or go wait by the shipwreck while I sort this out on my own."

"No. You've wrangled the both of us inside despite the wishes of the Elders. I'll not leave." A heavy sigh from behind had me relaxing; a little, anyway. He sighed a second time. "I- I'm sorry. I don't agree with your methods, but I have your back. I'll always have your back, Revan."

...

I shuddered again, recoiling back to the darkened present. The reminiscence of gentle torchlight dissolved, and the room slowly faded back to the indigo of darkness. The statue, no longer resplendent with the flickers of amber fire, was once more a series of hollow blue-black etchings. The only colour in the chamber now was the thick scarlet beams of tempting Force energy the Rakata clutched.

*I have to get a sodding move on. The glances of the past were messing with my head. It was me I recalled, driven by need and purpose, but with a calculating edge that felt a trifle too sharp, a fraction too cold... a warning sign of things to come.

I hadn't fallen then- I had logical reasons for my objectives- yet, I wondered... had I already been touched by corruption? Hardened by the horrors of war? Scarred and jaded before I'd even grasped the reins of the Star Forge?

How much was I like that Revan who had walked these walls once?

Who had come here with the overriding desire to claim the Forge for her own?

*Who I was doesn't matter,* I thought with an inward snarl. My fingers curled tight around Karon's saber, tight enough that I could feel the indentations from the hilt press into my skin. *This time I'll destroy the Forge. This time I won't follow the same path."

*I've already lived that horror once- even if I don't remember it.*

I averted my gaze from the cursed statue and instead examined the exits. The passageways beyond were etchings of indigo lines, enough to make out the detail: two led down, and one revealed steps climbing upwards before disappearing from sight.

I kept the Force cinched tight around me, closed in like a buffer from any outward influence, and strode towards the ascending stairwell.

xXx

The steps curved up in a circular fashion, winding through the temple, circumnavigating the very centre of it. On the inner wall, I could feel the thrumming of the beacon through no more than a few
metres of metal. It didn't stop calling me, and the past didn't stop reminding me-

"Uza, pleen, tota, daden," he muttered behind me. Malak had taken to counting the never-ending steps, after complaining about a lack of stars-forsaken elevators. Having exhausted his knowledge of Mando'a, he'd promptly switched to Ryl.

"We'll run out of stairs before you run out of numbers," I murmured, mildly amused. Ryl was one of the few languages we'd known before the Jedi found us. Jonohl had taught us his home-tongue, back when we were kids struggling to survive in the slums of Altizir. He was long gone now, as was every ember of our poverty-stricken childhood.

"Bo, dopa, duba, fwanna," Malak retorted, switching to Huttese.

Maybe, in a sense, the flashes of the past helped distract me, helped keep the temptation of the beacon at bay. But I was dizzy and lightheaded, and I leaned hard against the railing as I trudged ever onwards. Beneath my fingertips, the smooth surface of the alien metal was a familiar sensation in itself. Fragments of memory reared in response, like jagged pieces of a puzzle I had no hope of ever completing-

"The glyphs tell stories of their conquests," I commented. Mal didn't know Rakatan. Mal didn't know about the supercomputer on Kashyyyk, and everything I had learned from it. For some reason, I hadn't been willing, yet, to share what I had found next to the Star Map. "See, this one's about Tatooine."

"Does it talk about their retreat from a bunch of gaffi-wielding primitives?"

It did, actually, but not quite in those words-

I gasped, stumbling up a step, as my gaze caught on the section of glyphs that detailed the terraforming disaster of Tatooine. The part of my mind I identified as Jen struggled and failed to translate it, before a deeper part picked up the reins and-

"An atmospheric calamity, they write," I said, amused. "The Rakatan believed the world itself no longer useful, and appear to have no idea they'd been, essentially, driven out by the Tusken Raiders."

The chieftain had recognized me. HK had mentioned that-

First time... first time around, I'd dealt with the Sand People peacefully. The realization turned my stomach, and with a sick jolt, I saw once more the bodies HK and I had scythed through, the slaughter we had exhilarated in, the dark contrast to the calculating me of the past who'd instead
stopped and collaborated with the natives rather than descending into darkness-

The dead air rasped against my throat as I sucked it in.

*Second time around, I went in and slaughtered the lot-

*Okay. Okay, maybe that's so.* My jaw was clenched tight as I accepted the unnecessary mess I'd wallowed in on that desert planet. *Tatooine was a bad time for me. I've grown from then. I know what the frell is going on, now.*

Well, mostly. Regardless, I was steadfast- and I would not allow the past, recent or otherwise, to influence my actions from this step forward.

With a wrench, I pulled my gaze away from the revelations of the Rakatan glyphs, and concentrated instead on leading one foot in front of the other.

I'd lost any real awareness of altitude. I'd been ascending for some time now, but it was hard to judge how far from the top I was. The staircase petered out into another room, much smaller than the chamber at the bottom. The Force energy was there, again, but instead of channelling through the medium of a forbidding Rakata, this time it shot up through the centre of the antechamber unencumbered.

I had the strongest desire to step forward and immerse myself in it.

*-glimpses of-

The temptation was strong, but so was my self-awareness – I *knew* just how dangerous this sort of undiluted power could be. Stars, even the *old* me had remained focused on my end-goal, if the snippets of the past told me anything.

*-you could see once more what you found in the Unknown Regions-*

Oh... oh that was tantalizing beyond measure.

...which immediately raised my hackles of suspicion-

...

*"Is there a danger in walking through this? This- the energy is bleeding through the entire chamber-*"

*"No," I mused. "It's benign... insofar as the temptation of the kaiburr could be called benign. It is merely concentrated residue. Residue of the kaiburr holding still in this room. You have to be Force-sensitive to pass through this antechamber... and yet controlled enough not to lose yourself to its lure."*

Malak didn't respond, but he flanked me as I took a step forward.

*"The remnants of the Rakatan are, to a one, blind to the Force," I added, skirting around the centre of the chamber. It was much smaller than the grandiose one at the bottom, and the kaiburr's power was deeply concentrated, here. "They cannot pass through this room. We shall not find any Rakatan beyond."*

*"Or anywhere else," he muttered.*
The residue curled back from the conduit of power, intermingling with the air and swirling through the entire antechamber – right down to the individual molecules I could sense buzzing around me. I kept my gaze averted from the vermillion tideway that blasted through the middle of the room, but I couldn't ignore the seductive wisps of kaiburr that-

Kaiburr... I blinked. I'd remembered something about kaiburr-

In my grasp, Karon's lightsaber hummed. I hadn't noticed it, until now, too caught up in the tangled skeins of the past-

Is this... is this beacon coming from some sort of kaiburr crystal?

Crystals were an amplifier for the Force. Not a source, no; but Yudan had theorized the Star Forge might draw its power from the only sun in this sector. What if the pyramid drew on the life Force of this unknown planet, and then utilized some sort of massive kaiburr to strengthen it, before powering the scrambler?

If that was right... Destroy the crystal, destroy the strength of the signal. Maybe Carth is correct.

My lips thinned, and I took a resolved step forwards. And another. I kept to the edges of the room, looking only beyond to the one exit, focusing my mind on the objective. I reached the threshold, another curved archway of alien metal, and placed my palm against it-

..."Revan." His voice was low and serious; serious enough that it had me turning at the threshold, one hand pressed against the cinereal alloy of the wall. "I must say it one more time. Once more, before there is no turning back."

It was hard, to push down the aggravation. This had been our joint quest on Tatooine and Korriban, but it'd all changed on Manaan. He'd begun to doubt, to fear, to disbelieve-

After Manaan, I'd sent him away, ostensibly to check in with the fleet but, in reality, to allow me to find the Star Map on Kashyyyk free of his nagging doubts and cautious concern. I'd wanted him at my side for this final endpoint, though, and he'd come as soon as I'd called.

He always would, no matter his reservations.

I owe him enough to listen, my conscience nagged me. But there was a small, insidious voice deep in the back of my mind that whispered maybe Malak wasn't strong enough for this-

I bit back a sigh, and turned to face him. The Force energy illuminated his handsome face in shadows of blood-red; beyond this room, I knew, everything would be pitch-black. The Rakatan could not pass here, so there would be no more markers of primitive firelight.

"Say your piece," I said, striving to keep my voice reasonable.

"We are already heroes, Revan. We have achieved the impossible. Victory. And you would risk this one-"

"Heroism comes with its own obligations, Malak." I stared deep into the whiskey-brown of his eyes, willing his faith in me to return. It would, I knew, but the battle for it was both annoying and emotionally exhausting.

Yet I did what I had to, whether it was to convince Malak or forge my own path. There was nothing
more fundamentally important to me than the continued strength of the Republic, the governance for peace across the galaxy- but it was too weak. Too shaky to withstand-

"Do you really believe what we found is a big enough threat for what you are leading us to? Everyone has differing accounts of what they saw," he said. His eyes beseeched me to listen. "I fear for Talvon's state of mind. Nisotsa is shaken. Alaki-"

"Kreia understands. And she is not the only-"

"I have never trusted that old bat, Revan. She has too many shadows of her own past to remain objective-"

"Malak," I cut in, my voice cooling. "We all saw shades of the same thing. You believed in the danger at first. The Mandalorian threat is nothing to what may come to pass-"

"What may come to pass! And that is exactly it!" he erupted. "Can't you just... let sleeping demons lie? It is beyond known space." His voice held a wheedling tone, a plea for me to falter. A cold chunk of my heart lost respect for him at that very moment. "Your objectives are sound, but your reasoning for them is not."

And this, I thought with frustration, is why I had been elected Supreme Commander ahead of him. Malak had been raised by his enigmatic brother Devari, whereas I'd been fed on Freeflight's stories: fleet strategies of battles long past, political manoeuvrings of dissenting factions, and what I now understood to be passive Force techniques. Oh, Malak had learned something of strategy at Freeflight's knee, but half the time he'd scoffed at the old man's stories.

He'd never resented my promotion ahead of him. Malak knew I made the better leader – even as he was both a brilliant commander and charismatic front-man to the masses. But he lacked the ruthlessness required to oversee the entire game-board.

Malak would do anything for me – even now, I knew, he would follow despite his deep objections – and that was the true difference between us.

He would always follow me, no matter what he had to sacrifice in order to do so. No matter if he believed I was wrong.

The same cold chunk of my heart withered at the realization.

"We go forward, Malak," I said, turning my back on him to face the smaller stairway. "The Mandalorians were only the start of this war. We go forward to save the Republic."

... I was leaning against the exit, shivering with dizzying breaths of air as my awareness returned. Behind me, the channel of Force called, a seducing siren-song of power that battled with the nauseating crumbs of the past.

-you could see once more what you found in the Unknown Regions-

What if... what if Malak had been right? It sounded like he'd believed whatever we'd found... we could have just left it alone.

For nothing... nothing had ever emerged from the Unknown Regions. Nothing had threatened the galaxy, the Republic... except me.
And now, Malak.

The shudder that coursed through me was borne of deep, icy horror. I'd fallen- and what if I'd fallen for a reason that didn't even exist?

*It doesn't matter.* The thought was sad and hollow, and it echoed like the gong of an ancient tabernacle. *It doesn't matter.* That binding truth sank deep into my soul. *If I fell due to madness, or a lust for power, or because of a non-existent threat- it truly doesn’t matter.*

*What matters is cleaning up my mess.*

Maybe, all the past did now was confuse the issue. Maybe, I didn't need any of my past to move forward.

-you could see-

And that meant the damn Force beacon had as much power over me as the fragments of my broken history: only what I allowed it.

And I would allow it nothing.

xXx

The next set of stairs was steep, curving in tighter to the centre of the pyramid. Force-power pushed at my heels as I clambered forever upwards, feeling the urgent drive to ascend as quickly as possible to Bastila.

To the top of the temple.

The stairwell straightened, abruptly. The width of the pyramid could not be large, now, yet the stairs were ascending in one direction only; moving off-centre from what had been my path so far. The beacon was behind me as I followed the corridor, which flattened out before making an abrupt turn-

And there was another archway, leading into an even smaller chamber. No Force energy here, though; the room was off-set from the centre, but even so, the beacon wasn't far away.

I took a cautious step forward, ducking into the entranceway-

"Stop," I commanded, at the threshold-

I paused, staring into the pitch room beyond. On the far side-

"What?"

Nothing but-

*Two short staircases, both leading to a door apiece. The Rakata Elders had said either door would lead to the roof, to the controlling console of the kaiburr, but through the walls and floor in this antechamber I could feel the faint oscillations of a different mechanism-*

There was nothing beneath my feet now but cold, dead metal.

*My eyes narrowed, tracing the patterns of faint electricity to the staircase. Hidden panels, triggering a mechanism that would- that would-*

"It's a trap," I stated, staring hard at the doors beyond.
There were no doors. Just a vast hole—most of the far wall ripped out in chunks, allowing starlight from outside to seep in—

"Two people, walking through each door simultaneously, would counter-balance it," I said, frowning. "But enter with only one and something... something would activate—"

I was alone this time. But I couldn't sense anything except the tantalising, overwhelming promise of the kaiburr. Nothing in this room.

"You need two people to cross this room," Malak surmised. "That's why the Elders insisted on only one."

"Because they never planned for me to actually reach the Star Forge," I finished. "They've been protecting this relic for generations, yet they are Force-blind. They must know about this room; this trap or test that their ancestors created. And so, the Elders use it as the only means they have to stop Force-users—by deception. By convincing them they must go in alone."

Something had happened. Something had changed this room. For, now, it felt safe to cross, safe to clamber over the metallic rubble that hadn't been there in the past; and scale the far wall before crawling through the hole to outside—

"You suspected a trap, before we entered? Is that why you killed them all?"

"I knew there was subterfuge of some sort," I murmured absently, drawing the Force in deep. The kaiburr beneath us resonated in response, threading into the energy I harnessed, promising more the more I took—

I stepped forward, hands outstretched, almost expecting the room to collapse or explode or fill with lethal electrocution—and yet knowing it wouldn't, all at the same time.

"What are you doing?" he demanded, sensing the Force coalesce beneath my grasp. "There's two of us. You said we could clear this room safely—"

"Stay behind me," I warned, still poised at the entrance, unwilling to step forward until I was satisfied. "I refuse to leave this mechanism intact to catch the next Force-user unaware. It is millennia old. What if it triggers spontaneously? What if it activates on the two of us regardless? Who knows if one of us should ever have to return, alone, for some reason?"

The power grew, and I was ready to unleash it—

I gasped, the memory of a Force backlash shuddering in my mind. The sight of metal warping and shredding, the staircases melting, violent purple electricity lashing through the room as I held it at bay from the threshold and destroyed the mechanisms inbuilt into the walls and flooring—

I stumbled forward, landing hard on my palms, looking up to the jagged hole of starlight—

"Done," I said, dropping my hands. The skin on my palms burned, but it was a meaningless injury, easy to ignore.

"You drew on the kaiburr, there." Malak's voice held a touch of awe. "That—those—was immense."

"Yes," I agreed. It was hard to push the lure of the kaiburr back, but I would. Self-control was key; I understood that well enough. Stepping through the room, I noticed with satisfaction that it had transformed into a ruin of rubble and cooling metal. An acrid smell filled the air with a sharp, caustic edge. Opposite us, the stairs and doors were gone; in their place a torn chunk of the wall
gaped open to the elements, bathing the far side of the antechamber in the golden rays of sunshine.

My vision was eclipsed again, as sunlight morphed into starlight, and the smell of burnt metal vanished. I pushed against my palms, heaving back to my feet with effort, and strode to the far wall.

_Bastila might be here. Enough of the past. It's time to focus on the present._

The bottom of the hole was at least two metres high; with a quick twist of Force energy, I jumped, caught my hands on the edges, and swung one leg over into the space beyond.

I stood in a courtyard, walled in partially by the sloping sides of the pyramid, but it was larger than I expected. From the ground the pyramid had appeared to close directly into a point at its apex; but I saw now this wasn't the case at all. Above me, there was a fair clearance of open air, allowing an unencumbered view of the stars above.

In the middle of the courtyard the raw energy of the kaiburr shot straight into the heavens. Somehow, from there, the signal spread out to encompass the entire sector. _Maybe the planet's atmosphere diffuses the signal as it passes through... spreads the power out far and wide._ The signal went a long way... I sensed _that_ much when we'd been landing. The EMP scrambler covered more distance than anyone would realistically expect.

Mere metres in front of the fount of kaiburr power rested an innocuous console. My gaze fixed on it. _Maybe that's how I can disable the scrambler._ But there was no way Malak would have left it unguarded, surely-

_Not unless Bastila did something._

Frowning, I looked around. The console was bathed in the vermillion radiance of the beacon, but the corners of the courtyard were darker. On the far side, behind the blast of Force, were a set of misshapen shadows-

I stepped forward and around, the beacon to my side before the blue-black outlines translated into any sort of sense-

_A snubfighter._ The realization was confusing, almost bewildering. _A sleek, foreign snubfighter, big enough for one or two sents._ Jerking my gaze up, I frowned at the clearance above – it would be possible to launch the ship from here without touching the Force beacon, but it would require finesse.

_What the frell is a snubfighter doing here?_ On the darkened ground in front of the fighter was an oval holo-stand I barely noticed. _Is it Bastila's?_

Was she in the snubfighter? I was here, and it was time to find out what was going on. I kept my gaze fixed on the angular cockpit of the small fighter, expecting it to hiss open and my bond-sister to jump out at any moment – even though I couldn't think how she'd have escaped from Malak's clutches.

Behind me, in the depths of the pyramid, the Force flickered.

With a conscious effort of will, I dropped all shields within the bond, and reached out.

The Force flickered again. And then a third time.

_Bastila?_ I called out, clear and loud through our mind-link. _I'm here._

_xXx_
Chapter End Notes

*Coming up next: Bastila's plan differs from Malak's.*
Many thanks to kosiah for the beta and suggestions.
I stared at the console screen.

*It shall not be long, now. Patience. Patience is a facet of self-control.* My fingers tapped against the sleek silver of the shiny console; the tapping noise both discordant and overly loud in the empty control room.

*Patience is the companion of wisdom.* I recalled my father murmuring that once, in the middle of an exposition regaling a rogue hulak wraid and a foiled scent trap.

*Patience is an art of discipline,* a mechanized voice thrummed in my head. *But you must know when to employ it, little one, and when restraint becomes nothing more than inaction.*

I shuddered. *Malak.*

...

“*Emotions fuel our strength, little one,*” Malak murmured. I was some metres back, lightsaber held in a shaky grasp, perspiration matting my hair to my neck. No matter how I persevered, I could not break through his guard. But if I did not try to his satisfaction... Malak became displeased. “*Your rage, your lust for vengeance... all of it can augment your power. If you have the calculation to use it wisely.*”

*With a burst of Force I charged, changing direction at the final moment before lowering one end of my scarlet double-blade in a sideways swipe.*

*Malak choritled, somehow standing at ease metres away, while I lunged impotently through empty air.*

*I had not even seen him move.*

*I had tried, for a time, to remain semi-passive during what Malak liked to term our advancement spars. Malak always defeated me, but he was more... gratuitous about it when my effort was not to his satisfaction. And I had seen enough of the impersonal medics on the Star Forge.*

*I had felt enough of pain.*
The heat of my own chaotic emotions was far preferable... and it soothed the hollow fear in my soul.

“Sometimes you must remain patient until you register an opening,” he commented. His single blade was held loosely, ineffectually at his side. Did he mean for me to strike again? “Patience is an art of discipline.” His head cocked; his attention drawn to the sleek exit hatch of the training room. It was sealed shut. “But you must know when to employ it, little one, and when restraint becomes nothing more than inaction.”

Was he mocking me? Darth Malak stood, face averted, sharp yellow eyes creased fixedly on the closed exit like it was a greater hazard than I was. The bitter virulence that simmered within me these days flared; and I was speeding forward again, feeling my lips curl over my teeth as I could see my lightsaber whir fast enough to-

-it crashed against his in a shuddering parry, and his corrupted gaze swung back to mine from beyond the crossed blades.

“Good!” Malak laughed, his voice no more than a series of mechanical whirs that haunted my every waking moment. “You are learning, little one. But hold, for now. We have a visitor.”

His gloved hand moved; a short, abrupt motion of command. My lightsaber deactivated in automatic reflex.

The swish of the hatch opening echoed in the barren room. The man who entered was clad in an ostentatious silver-and-rubescent tunic, which clung to a long-limbed, athletic form. Rounded yellow eyes sparked like poisoned gems inset in a face of white, bordered by a tail of straight black hair.

The man appraised me openly, even as his long strides took him directly to Darth Malak.

He knelt effortlessly, in a subservient move that was as fluid as it was graceful.

“My lord,” he murmured.

“Sharlan,” Malak acknowledged. Despite the automated timbre of Malak’s voice, I was accustomed to gauging his emotions from it. Malak was displeased. “You took longer than you should have.”

Sharlan Nox. One of Malak’s highest ranked Dark Jedi. The only one that remained, now.

The searing sound as I rammed Revan’s lightsaber deep into Kylah’s betraying heart flashed through my mind. The death throes of her smoking corpse-

“Your apologies,” the man drawled, smoothly returning to his feet. He brushed a long-fingered hand along the length of a cuff, smoothing the material over his chalk-white skin. “It took time to round up the pets you require, my lord. Evading the Republic fleet was also a-”

“You have command of a cloaked starship from this very Forge, Sharlan. Do you mean to suggest its abilities are inferior to those of the Republic Fleet’s?” Malak’s voder-enhanced voice lowered; a dangerous indication of his mood.

“Of course not, my lord!” Sharlan tinkled a laugh. “Your cloaking technology is superior to anything the Republic could counter with. I only hope my experiments serve you as prodigiously.”

“Is that one of them?” Malak snapped, crooking a finger towards something beyond the Dark Jedi’s back.

I had not noticed the silent, kneeling figure behind Sharlan Nox.
A ghostly tremor whispered down my back. Sometimes, I had the soul-freezing notion that my awareness was entirely ensnared in the nebulous vortex of Darth Malak.

Revan, I whispered uselessly to myself, keeping the thought small.

I had not been able to reach her since our victory on the Leviathan. I survived as I appeased Darth Malak—but he did not own me. The one thread that held me from submerging completely under his dominion was still out there, somewhere, having promised to come for me.

Revan.

“I have brought you eight in total,” Sharlan Nox trilled, tapping a skeletal digit against his duranexclad thigh. “Come here, pet.”

The silent stranger was a male Human, young and attractive, with thick brown lips and midnight skin. His gaze was downcast as he strode to Sharlan’s side.

I shivered. I knew little of Sharlan Nox, other than that he had been found by Revan herself in the wake of Malachor. Not a fallen Jedi. Not one who had ever touched the light, except for perhaps the most incurious of glances.

Sharlan held the passive Human’s jaw in a pale hand, before leaning forward and... and kissing the man... thoroughly... in front of Darth Malak himself!

My cheeks were aflame as I jerked my attention away, both affronted and highly uncomfortable.

“Enough, Sharlan! Else there will be little of use left in your pets. Control your appetite or I shall control it for you.”

“Of course, my lord,” Sharlan appeased in a mild, lilting tone. “They have all sworn undying loyalty to you. All eight of my lovely little pets.” The lascivious man hummed. I was still staring forcibly at the far wall, the corners of my mouth turned down in inimical disgust; but, somehow, I felt the heavy weight of the man’s intrusive gaze land on me. “And is this your own personal pet, my lord? Is this Bastila Shan herself?”

Malak said nothing. I continued my blank, unseeing stare away from them both. Soft footsteps whispered toward me. I felt Sharlan’s shadow eclipse me before I saw it.

“All porcelain beauty and silent outrage,” the man murmured, trespassing into my field of vision. “Attractive enough, for a Human.”

It was an odd comment from one who was Human himself, and the irregularity of it drew my gaze to meet his. His eyes were sharp, superficial, corrupted yellow; just like Malak’s. Just like every fallen one who had damned themselves-

Revan’s gaze had once been black, I recalled. Black as the far reaches of space. Black as the lips of this abominable creature who strutted in front of me-

Sharlan smiled, a cruel widening of a thin mouth in an alabaster face marked only with a curious slit on either cheek. He lifted one long-limbed hand to touch my face-

I jerked backward, awaiting Malak’s directive to cease, to desist toying with what he continued to label his apprentice-

But the Dark Lord of the Sith said nothing.
Sharlan stepped forward again, so close I should have felt the heat of his body. Even amongst the waves of the Force, so wild and efficacious here on the Star Forge, I could barely sense this foul creature of the dark. His presence was a muted, oily thing; like dregs of silt marring the crystalline depths of an untouched lagoon. His hand reached out-

“Do not touch me again,” I hissed, but heard the shakiness in my own feeble voice. I glanced back to Malak, but he was as still as a corpse, observing us both in quiet detachment.

The embers of outrage simmered in my heart. I would not suffer indignity again... not like this. Not as a tool of amusement from a depraved scion of Malak’s.

“You are more potent than I expected,” Sharlan commented. There was a brush of Force against my mind, and I recoiled from the obtrusive touch. “I understand my lord’s fascination, now.”

He leaned over and clasped my jaw tight in his claw-like grip.

“I wonder, my lord...” His evocative words were meant for Malak, but his creeping gaze bored into mine. “I wonder... would you allow me a taste of her?”

A moment of eternity, hinged upon a deathly silence. No words uttered from Malak.

Sharlan inched closer, his round eyes piercing into mine, his black lips- 

Self-control shattered. An inferno flared inside me, burning away all residue of fear or inaction. The Force in all of its chaotic brilliance exploded, and I became no more than a vessel for unholy emotions as they streamed out through my hands in a manifestation of energy.

Sharlan Nox went flying across the room.

“I said, do not touch me!” The howl ripped from my lungs. I still felt the ghostly imprint of his bloodless fingers against my chin. Scarlet retribution leapt from my hands as I chased him down, lost to everything but the burn of passion-

A figure blurred in front of me. Oh, but if Sharlan Nox thought he could withstand the vengeance he had just unleashed then he was deluded-

With a sharp cry, my body began a swift ascent into a sweeping lunge.

Something whispered- intuition or the Star Forge itself-

-change course, catch the dodge that will come-

I wrenched downwards, my lightsaber changing direction in an unnaturally abrupt move reinforced by the primal power that sang passion through my blood.

There was a vague, mild resistance as scarlet plasma seared through flesh.

A body collapsed in two charred, useless pieces; thumping to the ground with a hollow thud.

The tempest ebbed, retreating in shuddering gasps. A mechanical chuckle reverberated throughout the room. The mutilated corpse at my feet sharpened into focus, as sanity crawled back into control.

It was the Human. The pet. Now in pieces, having inserted himself between my wrath and the useless depravity of his master-

Beyond, Sharlan slowly rose to his feet, dusting off his tunic with pale hands in an outward display
of insouciant nonchalance. “Well,” he drawled, tilting his head at Malak. “It turns out I have brought you seven pets in total, my lord.”

Malak’s laughter dwindled as his deathly gaze pinned mine. He began to stride toward me, and now fear became my only master. My stomach bottomed out, extinguishing the remnants of the fury that had blossomed in such magnificence.

“I had wondered when your backbone would show,” Malak murmured. His eyes creased in pleasure, and a finger rose to touch the side of my cheek gently. I flinched, but against him - all I felt was a galling subservience. “Weakness does not become you, little one.”

... 

He had sent Sharlan Nox away, after that. Raised his lightsaber at me once more, and again inveigled me into our dance of darkness, allowing me no recourse to ruminate over what had just happened.

It matters not. If I could have ended all of Sharlan’s filthy little pets and Sharlan Nox himself, I would. Malak had plans for Sharlan, no doubt... he had plans for me. And Revan.

But I had plans of my own.

The console lay dark and quiet beneath my gloved hands. Spidersilk black encased my limbs, now; offset by a sweeping cloak of midnight that Malak himself had clasped around my neck. Gifts from the Star Forge, little one. I did not sense any work of the Force within these garments, but I could not be certain. Malak garbed me to his liking, and his liking was that I became more attached to the Star Forge with each pressing day...

...and I could see the advantages in that, myself.

Malak thought to own me, to court me with the allure of omnipotent power the Star Forge offered – and there was truth amongst his duplicity, glimmers of reality amongst his delusions. Things were not so black and white as they had once appeared, to my younger, more innocent eyes.

I had been blind, and so naïve and rigid in my blindness.

Now, shallow words of appeasement might fall from my lips to gratify the Sith Lord, but it was all a waiting game.

Revan understood. She had always understood that, sometimes, one must do or say the unthinkable, in the name of the greater good.

She understood, even if she did not remember.

...

*The immense kaiburr rippled with energy, each pulse buffetting against me. I was like a helpless child struggling against almighty waves of icy seafoam that engulfed me with the frigid strength of nature at its terrifying best.*

- surrender, succumb and see the truth-

*The voice of the Star Forge was more than just potent; it echoed deep into my marrow, compelling me to stop railing against what I could no more overpower than a starship could hold back a black hole.*
-let down your guard and evolve to what you were meant to be-

The core of the Star Forge beat a steady thrum, as if it were an ancient, massive heart, almost predatory in nature. Each beat promised power. Strength. Freedom.

It was unfathomable in its depth. And at its nexus was Malak.

See, little one. It was a command. I had no perception of his physical presence in this room, this inner chamber of the Star Forge he had brought me to; but his psychic presence suffocated me nonetheless. See what we once found.

His images burned through my mind, entangled so deeply with his black emotions that I felt rather than saw what he intended.

A purple world. A creeping plague of darkness. Death. Death of....

...death of the Force itself.

I beheld shadows of licking anti-life, twisting through the nether, winking out the beauty and the feral power that fuelled the Force, be it light or dark or somewhere in between. The shadows left nothing in their path but an empty organic life; a shallow mirror of dull existence, beyond horrifying to perceive.

The shadows were sentient. The shadows were... spreading.

This... this was it, I thought numbly. This was the turning point. Revan’s turning point. Even the pinnacle of the kaiburr’s power couldn’t hold back my terror. I didn’t comprehend what Malak saw, what Malak felt- not truly. Just a bone-chilling knowledge that this threat- whatever it was-

It was... it was...

Come back, little one. Lose yourself here and you will not return.”

It was worse than anything the universe had seen before.

-the power is here to combat the threat. all you need do is grasp it-

Come back, Bastila.

Malak’s voice, of all the damned things in the galaxy, was my life-line now as panic sunk its claws into the foundations of my being. The death of the Force. Something is... hunting down the Force itself... and extinguishing it. Forever. Chaotic waves of kaiburr-enhanced Force crashed into me, submerging me with pure energy, the very antithesis of the memory Malak had plunged me into.

The Force cannot die. It is never-ending. It cannot...

So, you see a glimpse, at least, of what set us on our path.

What form the threat was, exactly, I did not comprehend. Malak’s shared memories were a turmoil of half-formed conceptions and emotions, a blinkered remnant of something he had once experienced. But there was a shattering truth at the core of them I could not deny.

The Republic with their pretty fleets and ineffectual bureaucracy cannot counter it. The Jedi Order with their trite mumblings of harmony would crumble like dust in the face of what we have seen.
Malak’s psychic recollections faded, and my terror ebbed as rational thought returned. The power of the Star Forge was a comfort, now; a reminder than any threat, no matter how colossal, could be retaliated against with the correct means.

-yes, and the power is here-

**Revan thought to build an empire strong enough to attack it.** Malak laughed. A mirthless sound of automated whirring through his vocabulator. **Power... she had the right of that, at least.**

He spoke no more, and yet I wondered what he believed.

Revan’s war against the Republic coalesced into sense, now. I had suspected there was an ulterior motive in her actions beyond the undeniable corruption of the Dark Side- and this appeared to be the essence of her reasoning.

In contrast, as Dark Lord, Malak was always more willing to destroy resources and planets. He was more destructive, more gratuitous, less invested in keeping his vision fixed upon that which had turned them in the first place-

Some things are better left alone, little one. *He had said that to me, once, not so long ago- and had been referring directly to the Unknown Regions.*

Why, then, had he shown me his truth, if he never meant to fight?

**Knowledge, dear Bastila. Knowledge and understanding. You are at the edge of becoming what you could be, and yet fear holds you back. Fear of the Dark Side that has hamstrung you since the Jedi Masters first starting spouting rhetoric into your young ears.**

I slowly became aware of physical sensation: the rasp of air pushing in and out of my lungs, the tightness of my eyes squeezed shut, the pressure of hands clasped down hard on my aching shoulders as energizing waves of kaiburr promise rallied around the both of us.

I do not undermine my empire with the pointless fear of the unknown reaching us. That was Revan’s weakness, not mine. But ask yourself this, little one: wouldn’t you rather have the power to stand against this threat – or any other – should it emerge? To grasp the almighty magnificence of the Force at its greatest?

-the Force is not dark. it is not evil. evil is only in the intent of the beholder-

The chrome of Malak’s jaw brushed against the nape of my neck, and his words rasped against my ear. “Do you truly believe this is the Dark Side? When you have caught a glimpse of what we have seen?”

-evil is the death of the Force-

“Can you not sense the power I wield, and what we could achieve together, when you take the final step to my side?” Malak’s gloved grasp still anchored me. Wild spirals of unbridled Force encased us both and shaped my thoughts.

To think, once, this was Revan’s dominion. How great she must have been. How immensely powerful. And yet, even in her glory, she had still lost herself in the end. She had still not been strong enough to hold back the insidious madness that such power ultimately brings.

But together, together through our bond, we would be stronger still-
“It is time for you to make a choice, Bastila,” Malak murmured. “Are you a prisoner or my apprentice?”

-choices are not always what they seem. people believe what they wish-

There was a hot tightness in my belly.

“I am no prisoner.” My thoughts were an inferno of chaos. Revan was still not here, and I would do better to strengthen myself while this waiting game unfolded. “I am no prisoner,” I repeated, holding back a small kernel of emotion deep inside my psyche, where even Malak could not reach.

“Name yourself then, little one. I would hear the words from your lips.” His jaw pressed tight against my neck; cold, cold metal that chilled my skin. “Are you my apprentice?”

“Yes,” I gasped, hating the treacherous curl of betrayal that burned like bile. Words did not matter, even if he thought they did. “Yes, master.”

I would say what I had to, but that did not make it truth.

...

The words had appeased Malak, and I was careful to keep my true loyalty as hidden as I could. But soon... soon, it would all change.

Everything had changed so much already.

Had the masters, any of them, ever had an inkling of what lurked beyond known space?

There had been rumours- no more than whisperings of rumours- that the Mandalorian invasion may have been triggered by something more than just their eons-old lust for conquest. Force knew the Mandalorians had always tested their so-called mettle by engaging in barbaric combat, but never on such a scale. Never at such risk to their own territory, to the security of their much-valued Clans.

The theory of a great threat had led on to suppositions of what had caused Revan’s dramatic fall after Malachor – but the party line of the Order had always remained steadfast: it was due to horrors of war. Revan Freeflight and all who followed her should have listened to the Jedi.

But the Jedi had been fools after all. Little more than misguided cowards, hiding behind the protection and the Republic-sanctioned status of their robes.

Even before Malak had shared his warped version of the truth, I had begun to doubt the Jedi’s account of events. I had begun to see what most of the Republic had believed: without Revan’s interference, the Mandalorians would have won.

And now... and now I began to understand why she had turned on those she had once thought to protect.

Malak said it himself. Revan thought to build an empire strong enough to attack whatever is out there. Revan thought to conquer the Republic, and in doing so, save it.

Before the madness took her. Before she became what Malak is now: a power-hungry slave to the chaos of the Force.

Revan had lost her objectivity along the way. But I could see what it had been, once. And I could remind her, show her what we could achieve together-
The danger of the Dark Side is ever present. The memory of Master Vrook’s voice murmured in my mind, dry and severe with his ceaseless caution. You cannot trust what you were shown from a Sith Lord’s mind!

My old master. I had loved him, as a padawan should love their master. But he held no power over me now. The recollections of his tutelage were naught more than a fading shadow, a shadow whose disappearance I welcomed.

For it turned out, I could trust Master Vrook about as far as I could trust Darth Malak.

...::Send the western fleets to Admiral Dodonna,:: a slurring voice shot out from a uniformed Mon Calamari atop a holo-stand. Age spots dappled down his sloping forehead. ::Anything within seven days range of the Edean sector. If this is our one chance to destroy Darth Malak, then we shall hit quick and hard!::

The hologram flickered in front of us: intercepted communications some days old that Malak delighted in sharing.

“General Adashan,” I uttered in recognition. My voice was hollow, as hollow as my heart. General Adashan had been responsible for my alacritous removal from Manaan; it was his clout that had Commander Wann transfer me, still comatose, onboard the fleeing Ebon Hawk in the company of a former Sith Lord.

The Republic had been keen to extract me, a valuable dejark piece, out of the growing political quagmire on Manaan. So keen, they thought nothing of playing games of chance with my own personal safety-

“Yes, Adashan has been licking Republic boots since the Mandalorian Wars,” Malak commented. “The Republic are rallying, little one. Do you wish to see what their orders are?”

I stared at him, mute. Truly, it was not as if he offered me a tangible choice.

But it was not as if I would turn it down, had it been one.

He chortled, and leaned forward to press another silvery button.

::We will waste no time in reconnaissance,:: the next voice said; the smooth timbre of a serious Human. Her greying hair was pulled tight in a severe bun underneath a crisp military hat. ::Assuming no further intelligence returns from our scouts, the orders remain the same: a direct assault on the Star Forge until it is destroyed. As soon as our fleets exit hyperspace, we advance. We give no quarter, no warning, no chance of defence-::

The hologram winked out underneath Malak’s gloved finger.

Forn Dodonna. Leading the advance. To attack the Star Forge, even though they know-

“They move to strike, Bastila. They know of your presence here, and yet they are willing to sacrifice you – even after all you have sacrificed in their name.”

The Republic had to weigh gains versus losses. The gain of Darth Malak’s end, versus the loss of...

me.

The realization burned. Deep and hot.
They have Jedi Masters advising them, little one. Would you like to see the manifest?"

I was not even aware of the traitorous droplets of moisture clouding my vision as the text scrolled on the impersonal screen. Even through my beclouded eyes, one name shone through, crystallizing into cursed recognition.

Vrook Lamar, Master of the Dantooine Enclave of the Jedi Order.

The betrayal struck like a shaft-spear straight through the centre of my heart.

This was one of the many crimes they attributed to Revan Freeflight. Sacrificing individuals for a strategic cause. Master Vrook... he always- he always despised Revan, and yet here he is-

Acting in exactly the same fashion. Ceding my life, the life of his only padawan, for a so-called higher purpose.

Your master, Bastila. He is part of the Republic assault. He is willing to sanction your death, for his vision of the greater good.”

...

And, still, the console I stared at was dark.

There were motion sensors active on the top of the pyramid; the flight-droid that controlled the starship’s landing had installed them. The moment Revan stepped close enough to the holo-stand, the communication channel would open.

It could not be long, now, before she did. An hour or so had already passed since I had awoken her. She must be close to clearing the pyramid, close to speaking with me.

It may have been Malak’s design, but he was a fool if he believed I danced to his tune. I had the opportunity of warning her while he slept, deep in meditation at the heart of the Forge.

The greater good.

I understood sacrifice in the name of the greater good, now more than ever- now that I had tasted true evil. But I also knew the greater good required my survival- mine and Revan’s.

Every sentient struggled for survival. Malak might desire my gifts as his apprentice, but he would willingly sacrifice me for his own purpose. My old master had already accepted my sacrifice, as evidenced by his advisory position to the Fleet that travelled to attack.

To attack me.

There was one sentient I could trust to never surrender my life – no matter that she had spent her years yielding whatever she had to in the name of the cursed greater good.

For our bond shackled us both, with a trust and dependency deeper than Malak knew. His awareness of its strength had grown, but he was not cognizant of just how intermeshed our individual connections to the Force were. The moment Malak realized that the death of one of us would mirror in the other, would be when my usefulness to him would narrow to one event only: my death.

It was the secret I kept tightly locked away, hidden deep beneath all other extraneous thoughts.

It was also the binding truth of why he would never, truly, own me.
I would act out his demands because I had to, or because I believed them necessary regardless; but always, always, my final loyalty remained with the one whose loyalty was just as firmly returned: because it had to be.

Because our lives depended on each other.

... 

“Eight hours until the first of the Republic starships enter the sector,” Malak murmured. Screeds of info-data scrolled in the air, transposed over a holo-map of the Star Forge. “The pyramid’s signal will scatter them, but I expect a few to reach the Star Forge nonetheless.”

“Your fighters will no doubt destroy them, my lord.” The words burned less the more I used them. They were empty, hollow utterances that meant nothing.

“Indeed. But this is where you prove your loyalty.” He turned to face me, his eyes gleaming with a supremacy that was galling.

He believes I bow to his whim. But I only do what I must... for now.

“You will use your Battle Meditation to hasten the destruction of their fleet, Bastila. I will accept nothing less from you. There will be no second chance if you falter in this, my new apprentice.”

The words brimmed with mechanical satisfaction. His order to attack what had been my allies, my people, those I had sworn to defend...

...it should have felt harder than it did to bow my head in acquiescence.

They come to vanquish me! The rebuttal rang with righteousness in my head. I had no other choice. The Republic was damned whether I acted against them or not... and even if they did, implausibly, defeat Malak and the Star Forge, they would never be strong enough alone to face the real threat.

As for the Jedi Order... they had failed me. Just like they had failed Revan.

“Yes, master,” I whispered.

“Good,” he murmured, turning away. “For I shall be otherwise engaged with Revan.”

It took a moment for the bold nature of the words to scythe though my calamitous thoughts.

“Wha- what?” I gasped, the words hissing from my lungs. “Is- is she here?

“The shell of my old master is trapped on the surface of Lehon,” Malak said. “It seems she is retracing our old steps... not that it will do her any good.” There was a low humming from deep within his vocabulator. “In six hours, you shall reach out to her, Bastila. Invite her to meet you on top the pyramid that houses the Forge’s first line of defence. Coax her, tempt her, demand her presence. Do whatever is necessary to ensure she comes at your call.”

“Am I- am I to travel to Lehon?” I whispered. Unbelieving hope dawned a sunrise after an eternity of night-

“Do you take me for a slack-jawed imbecile?” Malak growled, the cadence of his voice switching abruptly with his mood. “You stay here, my apprentice. You stay here until she has died her final death.”

He strode forward, and again his gloved hands captured my face, holding me immobile with my
own fear. “Do you think me unaware of the fruitless hope you cling to? How you hold her existence
tight in your heart? Oh, I understand such fragility well, little one. Remember, I once called her
master, much the same as you do now.”

An indignant denial rose within me- No. No! He can say what he will, but I know the truth. The
bond we share makes us equal, no matter Revan’s power. It was not the first time Malak dared imply
such a thing. The bond makes us equal, my mind repeated. No matter that Revan’s Force power
blazed like a supernova- we were equal. We were!

If I had been braver, I would have denied such a preposterous claim to Malak’s face. But I was
learning... had learned... when it was best to stay silent, and allow Malak the victory of voicing his
own, misguided conclusions.

The pressure of his hands, unyielding against my face, stopped any refutation of mine issuing forth
regardless.

“I am your master, Bastila. And once Revan is dead and the Republic forces destroyed, I shall own
you in every way.”

I am your master.

Malak’s words echoed in my head, and the frantic nature of my own thoughts froze in self-
preservation. Better that he believe I accepted his words. Better that he think I bow my head in
compliance.

“Observe, little one.” His voice ebbed back into mild neutrality, and his hands dropped. A swish of
a gloved limb, and the holo-map vanished, to be replaced with the scene of a courtyard dappled with
the last gasp of daylight.

“The vid-cam from the viewport of a Forge snubfighter,” Malak clarified. “It has been remote-flown
to the pyramid on Lehon, and its flight-droid has installed a holo-stand for visual communication.
My ships are not affected by the scrambler, dear Bastila. You shall lead Revan into this ship and
bring her to me.”

If Revan and the others were truly stranded on Lehon – and I had no reason to doubt Malak on this
– then her only option for departure was in his chosen vessel.

“Why the holo-stand?” I mumbled, trying to make sense of Malak’s reasoning. He had once assured
me that he would kill Revan in the most expedient of ways- not risk granting her an opportunity for
victory-

“So she can see you are talking with her alone, of course. I doubt she is truly the match of the Revan
I once knew, but even a broken, mind-addled fool would expect my hand here.”

Malak had mocked me, once – dared me to believe he would allow Revan to reach the Star Forge
unhindered, when he could kill her from afar. If she was already trapped on Lehon, why would he
grant her an opportunity to leave?

I had countered with the transparent ploy of a fair fight, at which he had laughed.

Could it be the idea had grown in appeal to him?

“She can only hear your voice through your telepathy. But by using a holo-stand, she can see with
her own broken eyes that you act alone.” His eyes narrowed; whether in pleasure or irritation I
could not perceive. “It seems you shall get your wish after all, little one. Revan shall return to the
Star Forge. Alone, without her allies, to face me in my place of power.”

A curl of unease sat in my gut. There was something off about this- something I did not quite comprehend-

“In six hours’ time, you shall reach out to her.” He tilted his head, and gestured toward the exit of the command room. “But for now, we sleep. Even the Force cannot hold back exhaustion forever.”

No matter what Malak’s game was, if it meant Revan made it to the Star Forge then there was still hope- still a chance-

“Come, little one.” He folded his arms, awaiting my subservience. “We shall rest in deep meditation, and arise in six hours. There is a lot to prepare for.”

“Yes, master,” I whispered, bowing my head. And the thought shone with startling clarity – maybe this was his trap, his machination – but who said I had to play by his rules?

...

Deep meditation was akin to sleep; a resting of the physical and a re-energizing of the mind. While the Force protected one in such a state, it also dulled the physical senses.

Malak only allowed me to rest near the kaiburr, these days. He would sit, cross-legged, and sink into a deep trance himself. The Force would wrap around him in a thick shield of energy that was both impenetrable and glorious.

I had lulled myself into meditation as per usual, but I had kept part of myself back. Just enough to grasp upon the edge of awareness, the corner of full consciousness.

I had waited until I was sure Malak was as submerged as he could be. And then I had waited some more.

When I could wait no longer, I silently rose to my feet and slipped out of the inner chamber.

I had hours left until Darth Malak would arise from his meditation. Hours in which I could lure Revan to the Star Forge, sooner than Malak expected, and everything would change.

It could not be long, now.

*Patience.*

Any moment, any moment now, the motion sensors should register her presence, and the holo-stand would activate.

*Patience is an art of discipline.*

*Bastila? I’m here.*

xXx

Chapter End Notes

*Coming up next: Revan talks to Bastila.*
Thanks as always to kosiah for the beta.
The snubfighter rose sleek and proud in my Force-enhanced vision. It wasn’t a large ship by any means, but its elongated lines and protracted curvature were distinctly different from any Republic craft I could recall.

The design of it was completely alien... and yet familiar enough to raise the hairs on my neck.

*It’s a ship from the Star Forge itself.* The thought shone with certainty, and I hated the encroaching recognition that drove its blind fingers into my riddled mind.

*Once, I flew in starships like this. Once, I commanded fleets of them.* I’d accepted my past – as much as I could, anyway – and I understood there would always be spectres resurrected to haunt me.

I knew I’d always have to make the choice, again and again, whether to ignore them or listen.

*Bastila?* I called out a second time. She had to be in the starship. I took a cautious step forward, my gaze landing on the innocuous holo-stand, the one that’d been placed on the ground some metres before the snubfighter.

It wasn’t connected to the console. It wasn’t part of the temple’s infrastructure – it’d come from the snubfighter, I thought, one of those moveable vid-comms that had an inbuilt battery for easy portability – and likely programmed to transmit on only one channel.

Which had to be directed at the Forge, didn’t it?

The magnificence of kaiburr-enhanced Force clouded my senses, beating a steady thrum that overtook almost everything else... but *almost* was not *everything*. I frowned as my awareness snagged on a series of muted oscillations running directly to the holo-stand.

*There’s a wireless signal running to that... and from that...* my head turned, tracing the source-

An electronic hiss permeated the air, followed by the sharp radiance of artificial light converging into my Force-enhanced vision. I jerked back to the holo-stand, my Force-sight dropping as I sucked in an involuntarily gasp.

“Bastila!” I breathed, as the projection atop the stand sharpened into high-res focus. The shaft of disappointment was both deep and gutting. “I thought- I thought you’d be here. In person.”

::*If only...:* Her voice was clear, if low, and reverberated with urgency. Her lustrous brown hair was caught back in intricate braids – even more ornamental than her norm – and they framed her pale, heart-shaped face.

I had a fleeting thought of triviality – *some tech hasn’t set the colour-adjustment quite right* – as
Bastila’s skin-tone appeared an unnatural chalk-white, offset by sweeping midnight garments that encased her form. Her gaze glinted with ferocity and purpose.

::The ship, Revan:: she urged, leaning forward. ::It is not impeded by the scrambler, as I am sure you have guessed. It is your passage to the Star Forge. To me:::

No time for small talk, I thought idly, as I scrutinized my erstwhile bond-sister. The holo-projection muted her environment into shades of fuzzy grey, so all I could really focus on was her.

Bastila. The Jedi Padawan who had saved me. The young woman who had shown a Sith Lord mercy.

So much had happened since I’d last seen her. It felt like a lifetime ago: back on Korriban, inside the safety of the Ebon Hawk, when psychic exhaustion from both Manaan and mouthy Mekel’s resurrection had scored fault-lines into Bastila’s mental guards and physical well-being.

Would Bastila have even been captured had she been at her best? As quick as that errant thought slithered through my mind, I dismissed it. Kylah Aramai had been watching us from spaceport control, then; biding her time. Kylah had been waiting for the opportune moment to strike.

Kylah was now dead, and I could not forget our visceral pleasure at her end.

Bastila and I had been through so much together since Korriban, all due to the intricacies of our connection. And yet, there was something different about seeing her face-to-face, over a holo-call. Something that clenched at my heart.

Our bond was quiet. Bastila was holding back in obvious retreat, and I found myself emulating her as I pulled the Force tightly inward. She had already warned me that our telepathy might rouse Malak- that he grew interested in psychic abilities- that he has his fingers deeply ensnared in her mind.

Wariness kept me silent. Bastila’s gaze was sharp, sparking a tawny brown through the holo-projection- a lighter, more radiant colour than I recalled.

Karon’s hilt was still clasped tight in my hand. Beneath my fingers, I could feel the faint echo of my old master’s lightsaber crystal. The vibration of energy was indistinct – so weak and inconspicuous when contrasted with the blast of kaiburr behind me – and yet, despite that, a comfort in my grasp.

::I can see the suspicion on your face:: Bastila said at last, breaking the loaded silence. ::So listen, for time is of the essence. Malak is expecting you to travel in that starship to the Star Forge. To face him alone:::

My gaze had shot back to the snubfighter. Bastila’s earlier words rang through my head- it’s not a trap!- and the uneasiness began to curl tight in my gut.

::But I play not by his timeline, and nor should you. He planned for me to contact you in four hours. He sleeps now, Revan. He is unaware that I am acting pre-emptively:::

“Wait a minute,” I cut in, and heard the steel forming in my tone as I guessed her intentions. “You want me to walk into a snubfighter that Malak expects me to board?”

::Yes.:: Her words were resolute; unyielding in their purpose. Her brown eyes glowed. ::It shall take you no more than half a standard hour to reach me, Revan. Together, we shall overpower Malak. It is a destiny we have been travelling toward since I first pulled you from the Nexus. You must know this, as much as I do:::
The cockpit was small. Enough for one pilot. Possibly a second sent could squeeze in behind, but it was difficult to tell from outside. Bastila’s intent was clear, though. She wants me to travel. Now. Without the others.

Without informing the others.

Jolee’s scolding about running off by myself sprang to mind... and an instant later, I realized that was exactly what I had already done, right here, right now.

“Why?” I rapped out. I lowered my Force-shield, just a little, just the smallest amount to lay a metaphorical ear along the path of our bond. “Why alone, why without my... without our allies?”

::How, exactly, do you expect to bring them to the Star Forge?:: she shot back tartly. ::From what I understand of the scrambler, it encompasses the entire sector. You are lucky you crashed on Lehon rather than into the heart of an asteroid.::

I felt myself grimacing, recalling Carth’s steady grip on the controls of the ‘Hawk as I spat out half-coherent directions. Luck had nothing to do with it. Since when does Bastila Shan attribute anything to the fanciful notion of luck? “I can disable the scrambler right here, Bastila. I can face Malak on my own terms, not in one of the Forge’s own snubfighters.”

::Revan.:: Bastila’s voice had a sad tone that bordered on pity. Immediately, my spine stiffened in response, but all I could sense from her psychically was deep resolve. ::The console behind you may as well be an ornamental fixture. The scrambler is controlled by the Star Forge.::

The air caught sharply in my lungs, and I found myself turning on the spot, turning back to look at the console-

“No,” I muttered in denial, shaking my head. “I came here last time-”

::Once, the signal was programmable from both the temple and the Star Forge. But you could not expect Malak to leave a system unguarded that could bring down his first line of defence. The console is not just deactivated, Revan. It has been erased of all functionality.::

That made a horrid sense. The realization tightened claws into my gut.

“That’s why there’s no guards,” I muttered, blinking. “That’s why there’s nothing here to stop a Force-user- to stop me-”

Of course Malak wouldn’t have left a functioning console accessible on Lehon – not if he could control the scrambler from the Forge.

But I had, once. I’d more or less left the pyramid alone after bringing down the scrambler the first time around. Yes, but by all accounts, I’d been an overconfident idiot. Or had I relished the thought of an unexpected challenge? Maybe I’d believed the Forge had additional defences? I didn’t know. It was yet another small, insignificant detail that would likely never emerge from the holes of nightfall in my head.

::All that remains on Lehon is the kaiburr itself:: Bastila continued. ::That, and it’s mechanical enclosure that transmutes the Force into an EMP scrambler. So unless you plan on traipsing into the bowels of the pyramid and running your lightsaber through the kaiburr personally.::

I frowned. That wouldn’t work- a crystal large enough to power all of this would undoubtedly hold up against the plasma of a lightsaber, but the idea of destruction itself-
Revan, Bastila snapped, as if she knew my attention was wandering. That was said in jest. Stay away from the crystal. You do not- You could lose yourself. The allure.... it is hard to resist, and harder to return from.

“Yeah, I get that,” I muttered, my gaze returning to her. “Having just hiked through this frelling pyramid myself.” I clipped my ‘saber away, before folding my arms and looking hard at her. Bastila stared back unflinchingly. “Why did you insist I come alone?”

::You cannot fit the crew in that starfighter, Revan! Even if the scrambler were not an issue, there is no way the Ebon Hawk could land on the Star Forge. Malak has a fleet of fighters. The Ebon Hawk will be immediately tracked and shot down.::

My breath caught. That was a detail we hadn’t exactly thought through. How the frell could we safely get the ‘Hawk through squads of attacking starships?

::What, truly, do you expect the crew to accomplish on the Star Forge anyway?:. It may have been a question, but it was obviously a rhetorical one. This is a place of great Force power. The non-sensitives would be no more than chaff, here. And Juhani... do you really suppose that a young, flawed padawan like her would be able to walk here unscathed?:. Bastila snorted. The Cathar couldn’t ascend the temple you now stand upon without losing herself, let alone stay true on the Star Forge.::

My mouth opened... and then shut again. Bastila had always had a great deal of empathy for Juhani... but she hadn’t seen how our Cathar friend had walked away from Korriban. Shaken, and yet stronger for it.

::Bastila doesn’t know about Juhani’s knighthood. Stars, she doesn’t know about Dustil, or Jolee, or even sodding Yudan.::

The lure of the kaiburr here on Lehon was strong, but I believed in my companions... more than Bastila did. Juhani had the mental fortitude to resist. I had faith in her strength of will... and Jolee’s. Yudan’s. Not so sure about Dustil, though.

I grimaced. “What, exactly, is your plan, Bastila? You want me to fly to the Forge without the others, and then- what? Chase down Malak and gut him in his sleep?”

I couldn’t help the scathing tone that entered my voice. How could Bastila trust my survival to a ship from the Star Forge? The sensors would probably zero in on it the moment I launched from Lehon, if it wasn’t otherwise compromised.

I frowned, unfurling my awareness towards the snubfighter. It was powered down, and all I could really pick up were the muted pulses of a system on standby. If anything, the signal lines running to the holo-stand were more distinct than the electronics of the snubfighter itself.

::It is not as absurd as you may believe.:: Bastila retorted. There was a frown creasing her pale forehead, and through the open crack in our bond I could sense her irritation. Some part of her had expected me to capitulate with ease.

Bastila sighed, leaning back from the holo-cam. ::You have no chance with the Ebon Hawk. But with my ship you do. You could be here, with me, before Malak even wakes.::

“How do you know he’s not already awake, Bastila?” I said quietly. “How do you know he isn’t expecting exactly... this?”

::I can sense him. Every moment, be I conscious or asleep, I know what my- what Malak is doing.
He rests deep in meditation now, Revan. He is not aware.::

The holo-projection was crisp and detailed, enough for me to see the faraway look in her eyes. She was feeling out with the Force, seeking out the state of Malak. How often has she done that? Had to reach out, in fear that he would be coming- doing stars-knows-what-

A shudder of guilt wracked through me. I couldn’t- I didn’t want to imagine what Bastila’s life had been like, this last month, centred entirely around the whims of a Sith Lord I was responsible for creating.

I’ll get her away from him. If it’s the last thing I do.

Bastila swung back to face me. She was shining with conviction, but there was desperation lacing her thoughts, too. I couldn’t deny her, my bond-sister, my rescuer... but I had to be smart about this, too.

“How often has she done that? Had to reach out, in fear that he would be coming- doing stars-knows-what-"

::He wants your death, Revan!:: Bastila scoffed, as if it were the most obvious thing in the galaxy. Maybe it was. ::And what better place to stand against you, than in the heart of his own stronghold?::

There was truth, there. I’d be alone, and Malak would be surrounded by his own strength. No doubt he was getting sick of how I kept wriggling away from him and his forces. But... I frowned. Malak betrayed me from afar above Deralia. That had been a trap, a machination organized so he didn’t have to face me directly. I couldn’t remember the specifics, but the frontal assault had come from his followers... he had not risked himself against me.

Something must have slipped through our mind-link, for I saw Bastila’s expression soften.

::He did not face you head-on in the past, Revan. For you were stronger than him, once.::

Once... No matter how I felt like the Jedi Knight of old, I wasn’t the same person anymore. And neither was he.

“Once?” I said quietly. “And now?”

::Now, he is the master of the Star Forge. He believes merely bringing you here will be enough for him to defeat you.:: Bastila sighed. ::Malak thinks you damaged and broken... and perhaps you were, when we took our initial footsteps together back on Taris.:: Her lips pursed, and a fierceness tightened her sharp gaze. Bastila was steeling herself to face the inevitable- and yet there was a sense of anticipation emanating from her, too.

::Malak expects me to sit back in fear while he challenges you. Oh, he understands my loyalty to you but believes his hold over me counter balances that.:: She broke off with a hollow laugh. ::I do not deny he scares me... but Malak does not appreciate the depths of our bond. He does not realize how I can aid you... how strong we can be together. He saw Kylah’s death through my mind, Revan.:: She paused, staring hard into the holo-cam. A spark of dark satisfaction slipped through the cleft in our bond.

It echoed within me, too.

::Malak believes I was no more than a bystander. He does not grasp that it was I who raised your lightsaber and drove it through Kylah’s chest. He does not understand how our power can combine,
or I highly doubt I would still be alive.::

Had it been Bastila, raising Karon’s lightsaber, plunging it into the traitor’s dying body? Somehow, I recalled it differently. A fusion of our combined will, both vengeful and predatory in nature. We had both been lost onboard the *Leviathan*, sinking into the depths of chaotic rage and seductive power. We had been one, for a short time- one with the dark.

::You were the strongest Force-sensitive in the galaxy once, Revan. Together, I know, we will be stronger still.::

A ghostly shiver danced down my spine. “I’m not sure... I don’t think that’s a good thing, Bastila.”

::It is a necessary thing. I know you better than anyone alive, Revan.:: Her tone was implacable.

And yet, how true were those words, really? I didn’t even know myself, at times. ::You still possess the same power, the same drive- all you lack is your memory, and I can help you there.::

The words were issued boldly, hanging stark and crisp in the air. I had told myself, again and again, that I didn’t want those memories- they weren’t important, they held no power over me, and delving into my past was dangerous besides-

All valid arguments, but the burning desire to remember remained, regardless.

“Help me? How?” I countered sharply, needing Bastila to say the words out loud. “Are you talking about somehow restoring my memory?”

I wouldn’t accept it. No matter how tempting- I was who I was, now. Letting the past back into my head could very well damn me to the same path as before.

::No!:: Bastila looked startled, and I realized I’d misunderstood. Sympathy eked through our mind-link, hot and poignant. Her gaze softened. ::No. You must understand the damage to your mind was extensive. We knew some fragments remained... the image of the Star Map, for instance, was startlingly clear.:: A distant look crossed her face as memories of my past crossed her mind. ::You and I have not had the chance to speak of this in depth, and we shall not until Malak is defeated. But Revan... I saw your medical scans, when you were imprisoned on Dantooine. Pathways in your pre-frontal cortex were completely burned away. Much of your long-term memory will never return. You must accept that.::

I found myself swallowing, my gaze moving away from her to rest back on the sleeping snubfighter she wished me to enter. My grief at her words sat in my throat like a shiv-blade, sharp and unyielding.

Yet, there was a bitter sort of relief there, as well. The decision about what to remember was out of my hands.

“I still get the odd flash, Bastila,” I said, my voice calm and neutral as if we were speaking about Coruscant’s three-day weather forecast. “Should I always expect that?”

::Possibly. It was those fragments, those whispers that drove the Council to do what they did.:: The corners of her mouth turned down, and a flash of scorn blazed through the bond. *The mind-wipe...* Oh, it was enough to fan my bitterness at the Order, but I was surprised to feel the same echo of repudiation from her. ::Galdea alleged you would never recall anything on a conscious level. Vima claimed you would only see the briefest of visions, wholly unconnected to anything else. But those glimpses would be enough to dovetail you into insanity.::

Bastila had told me Galdea had died with the *Endar Spire*. Karon’s death still sat heavy in my mind.
It was this Vima who still lived... the only one left who’d personally reconstructed my mind to the liking of the Jedi Order.

_Dovetail into insanity..._ It was difficult to admit this unknown Jedi might have had a valid concern. The flashes of memory that returned to me stood on their own, with no indication of what occurred before or after. So often, they were a picture of people I didn’t know or events I didn’t understand... and yet the emotions were still there.

I had little conscious remembrance of my time as Dark Lord – and that was a good thing – but the feelings remained. The visceral pleasure of commanding power... the icy calculation that transcended everything... the ancient grief beneath it all....

And I felt more than just the darkest part of my history. Nisotsa was nothing but a whispered name in my head, and yet my grief at her death had been deeply personal. I remembered so little of Yudan, but he was important to me... as important as any member of my crew- and that wasn’t logical, either, given how little I knew of him.

Malak... Malak was different. Once we’d been close. Objectively, I understood that once I’d loved him fiercely, as fiercely as the stars. That feeling simply wasn’t there, within me, any longer. Maybe it was simply my lack of memory at work here... or some innate sense of survival responding to his betrayal.

Maybe the Dark Side had burned away every remnant of what we had once shared.

_Or maybe it will come flooding back when I see him face to face._ I shivered.

::They were blind, Revan:: Bastila continued, wrenching me back to the present. ::Vima and Galdea and every other member of the Council. Perhaps it was a subconscious blindness but, at times, it feels more contrived than that. They needed justification for brainwashing you, for turning you into a mindless puppet that danced at their whim, all the while telling themselves that they remained true to their code. What better argument than claiming you were broken regardless?:: She gave a bitter laugh. ::Truly, none of those hypocritical old fools ever considered giving you a chance. The real you.::

I was shocked into silence at her words. Bastila sounded like she had no faith in the Council. _Bastila Shan_. The battle meditation princess. The emerging Jedi hero of the war effort.

I was plenty pissed at the Order. Maybe screwing around with one sentient’s mind paled in comparison to my own crimes, but the whole event was too personal for me to ever be objective about it.

I hadn’t expected Bastila’s reaction, now, to be so similar.

_Is it the bond? Have some of my feelings... my emotions... been leaking through to her?_

::Look at you now::. Bastila murmured. She almost sounded gratified. ::Even with no memory you have returned to yourself. The Order, Malak... They still underestimate you, Revan. But I do not. And there are some memories I can restore, some that are crucial beyond--::

“Wait a minute,” I snapped. My hand jerked up in a halting motion, my gut clenched. “What?” Restore memories- but she’d just said- she’d- “I thought the last thing you wanted was for me to recall anything of my past!”

::The Unknown Regions:: Bastila cut in, her radiant eyes blazing. ::I have seen what Malak saw. I understand what set you on your path. I comprehend what the Jedi do not... what they would refuse
to acknowledge even had they the chance. I know, a facet at least, of what you and Malak found.

Shock shuddered through me like a glacial wind, chilling me to the bone.

“No,” I mumbled through numb lips. The burning desire was there, again, but caution was stronger still. “Whatever Malak has shared with you... For frell’s sake, you can’t trust him- and even if there is some truth there- don’t you see, whatever’s in the Unknown Regions is the catalyst that tipped me over the edge last time-”

::Yes,:: she challenged, leaning forward so her entire face filled out the holo-image. ::Yes, you fell and you failed. The whole galaxy knows that. But the reason... surely, you must have suspected something great set you on that path. You! The saviour of the Republic! There was more than just a lust for conquest that drove you... and, at best, I can only call the Jedi misguided for blaming it on the horrors of war.:: She snorted in disgust. ::They thought nothing of entering battle when the enemy leader was a Dark Jedi, and yet they sat back when it was Mandalore.::

She paused, then, and her stare was as hard as ferracrystal. ::The hypocrisy, Revan... sometimes, I hope they choke on it.::

My breath froze in my throat. My lungs began to burn as I denied them oxygen. Everything she was saying... it all made sense, it seemed to echo with what I had once believed, and yet... and yet-

How can I begrudge her anger at the Jedi? I couldn’t; I felt it myself. I understood it. And... whatever had driven me in the past... it must have been important. Critical. Something I believed more momentous than the fate of the Republic.

“I can’t, Bastila,” I said through clenched teeth. “I can’t risk falling again-”

::You risked everything last time, Revan, because you knew you had to! Because you understood that sometimes the lightest path cannot prevail against the greatest darkness! And that sometimes-:: Bastila paused abruptly, lips pursing, faint spots of colour blooming on her porcelain cheeks.

Sometimes, what? Sometimes sacrifices have to be made? Sometimes the end justifies the means? Hadn’t Bastila condemned me for taking that too far in the past?

::And that sometimes,:: Bastila repeated, her voice dropped to near-inaudibility, ::words are not enough.::

I had my mental shields mostly drawn up, closed deep around my psyche; all apart from that one small opening between us. I was completely unprepared for Bastila, in a sudden movement, to throw a blast of kaiburr-induced Force straight through our bond.

A memory, rich and dark and thrumming with power, slammed into my head, and I staggered backwards under the power of it.

A wave of death. The matrix of the Force itself, burning and shrivelling, each thread withering into nothingness as it was extinguished forever. The backdrop: an eerie purple world with the specks of five distant suns glaring a cold light from beyond-

I knew that scene. I knew that world-

My mind reeled with the sensation of a null life, where all senses were dulled, like a neural disruptor was permanently affixed around one’s neck. But the psychic feeling jarred within me- that wasn’t how I’d remembered it, that brief flash that’d scoured my mind back in the Shadowlands, the one with the same, alien world-
I gasped as Bastila retreated, leaving only her lingering need for me to understand.

::The death of the Force::, Bastila murmured. Her voice broke, before firming once more with purpose. ::Whatever is out there, it poses an incalculable risk to us all. You knew, once, that you could not sit back from such a threat. I cannot either, Revan. I shall not.::

The death of the Force... but, no, no! The Force had been alive! I remember... it was seemingly sentient... and evil, in its intent. An evil awareness driving behind it all-

“Bastila...” I whispered again. Bastila said Malak had shared this with her, like a commander divulging intel to his subordinates- yet when the commander was a Sith Lord whispering images straight into the mind, how much credence could that intel be given?

But how could I trust my own instincts more, when all I recalled was the smallest snippet, sparking across the surface of my brain?

The truth could be both, or neither, or something in between.

::Malak said you thought to create an empire strong enough to invade the Unknown Regions. Strong enough to attack, before the galaxy itself was threatened.::

“I don’t even understand what you’re showing me, Bastila!” I said, feeling my jaw clench. “The idea of the Force dying-”

::I know,:: she murmured. ::I can still feel the Force turning to ash. Revan, I am not fool enough to naively believe all Malak shows me, but I sensed the truth of that image. He saw the Force die, in a way that it would never return. He saw the malaise spread. Revan... nothing like this has ever threatened the galaxy before.::

“But what... what is it?” I threw my hands up in the air. “You say my purpose behind the Sith Empire was to attack... attack what? Some Force sickness? How can a fleet of starships attack that?”

Unless there’s something behind it? An alien empire? A single sentient more powerful than we can imagine? A disease of the Force itself?

::Whatever the truth is, Revan, we must claim the Star Forge to fight it.::

There was a sinking feeling in my gut. It was obvious where she was heading. “No-”

::Yes,:: she hissed. ::You knew before. You-::

“You’re getting this from Malak, Bastila,” I protested, but I wasn’t wholly sure I believed my own words. It sounded more like this was Bastila’s plan... Bastila’s desire... “You’re believing what he wants- doing what he wants-”

“Do not be preposterous,:: she snapped. ::What Malak desires is for me to bring you to him four hours from now, neatly gift-wrapped for him to dispatch while I cower in the shadows. The last thing he would wish is for you to once again claim mastery of the Star Forge!::

The words were out. Her plan was openly spoken between us.

Something... in my heart... cracked. A deep anguish... undercut by a familiar drive to do what was necessary. What I had to, no matter the cost.

::Revan::, Bastila’s voice was softer, now. Resolution pulled deeply at me from the other side of the
bond. ::You cannot be blind to the fact that Malak – Jedi Knight Malak Devari – followed you once before. Most of the Jedi... half the Republic Fleet... they followed you. You convinced them this was the correct course of action.:: She blinked at me, eyes full of the same fire and purpose that resonated between us. ::You and I may not understand everything that you and Malak once found – but we know the threat is real. You had a higher purpose before. Your men followed you because your actions were necessary... they were just not enough.::

“Necessary?” I choked, blinking, feeling the sting of emotion at the back of my eyes. All those who’d followed me – most of whom now lay dead – how much had they really known? Would some fanciful tale about a Force threat beyond known space really turn half the Republic Fleet? Or had I simply used pretty words, manipulations and threats and promises, to get them on my side? Anything, to bend people to my will, because the end justified the frelling means?

::Yes, necessary!:: Bastila blazed. ::We’re talking about the death of the Force here, Revan! Think what that would mean to us- to, to everyone!::

The death of the Force. It was a horrible idea to consider.

But it would mean no more fallen Jedi, a sepulchral voice creaked in my head. No more Darth Malak. No more Exar Kun. A shudder racked through me. No more Darth Revan.

Somehow, I didn’t think this concept would have ever crossed the old Revan’s mind.

“You think I decided the Dark Side – which the Star Forge is an instrument of – would be strong enough to combat this- whatever this is?” I whispered.

A thought sparked- shaking and quicksilver- a murmur from my past-

The Light isn’t strong enough for what I must do. I don’t know if this will work- it’s time to roll the dice-

::I believe you thought yourself strong enough to master the Star Forge without losing yourself in the process,:: Bastila said, her voice gentling.

And she was right. Somehow, I knew it. Roll the dice... I knew there was a risk. I knew it was a gamble. But gambles had always paid off for me before-

::You were almost strong enough, Revan. Almost::: Her pale face was set with righteousness, and I heard her next words before she even spoke them. ::Together, we are stronger still:::

But I recalled the Leviathan. Our powers merging, combining, surging to greater heights as we spiralled out of control-

::We were unprepared::: There was a grimace on Bastila’s face as she flawlessly picked up on my thoughts, but she didn’t drop her gaze. ::I was unprepared. I allowed my baser desires to control me. But we are aware of the danger, now. We can rely upon our connection and empathy toward each other to direct our power. Revan... my bond-sister. My friend. I know you fear falling to the Dark Side once more, but you must think through both sides here. If you hold back, Malak will remain a blight upon the galaxy. Our only chance is to grasp this opportunity. To defeat him while we can, and remain true to ourselves. And we can do this, Revan, we can. I have faith in us both:::

I wasn’t ready to make this choice- I felt like I was teetering on the edge, torn between my desire to aid Bastila and stay firm against the lure of the Dark Side- wanting to protect the galaxy but unsure which option would be best to do so-
The threat remains, Revan, Bastila insisted. Perhaps it is merely biding its time, or perhaps it is already moving through known space. We do not know... but it is there. And someone needs to stand against it.

Us. The word hissed through my mind like a sandsnake. Us.

Us, Revan. Bastila repeated, louder this time, her voice ringing out over the courtyard. You and I are strong enough. And the Star Forge shall be our shield with which we defend the galaxy.

Her tawny eyes widened, then; flashing sharp with outrage as her gaze drifted over my shoulder. It was the only warning I had before the incongruity of a raspy throat clearing echoed through the still night air.

"Can’t say I think much of this place," came the dry voice of Jolee Bindo. "Even in my day we installed turbo lifts."

I told you to come alone!

Bastila’s mental voice was both thwarted and annoyed, and the injustice of her accusation was enough to keep my attention firmly fixed on her. I didn’t need to turn around. I knew who was behind me.

Jolee. Juhani. Yudan. At least they’d had the brains to leave Dustil behind.

"Their presence has nothing to do with me," I muttered. My thoughts were still on Bastila. She had turned away from her original objective. Bastila wanted us to harness the Star Forge. Us.

We would be powerful. More so than I had been last time. And Bastila was convinced the threat was still out there, still waiting, still an unfathomable danger-

She could be right. I believed it once before.

"Bastila," Juhani’s voice, low and intense, spoke behind us. "I had hoped you would be here in person. It is good to see you again, even under these circumstances."

There was a tightening on my bond-sister’s face, the briefest twitch of a forced smile, before her gaze pinned back on me. Revan. I can see you are not wholly convinced. We must speak more and this is a private conversation. Her gaze never wavered from mine, her eyes never blinked. Get rid of them.

I felt my eyebrows raise. What does she expect me to do, order them to leave? I turned around, slowly, deliberately, to face my crew-mates.

The illumination from the holo-projection was enough to bathe the darkened courtyard in dim light, enough to reveal my friends without the aid of Force-Sight.

They were mere metres away, having cleared the kaiburr already. My gaze caught briefly on the empty air behind them. Force-enhanced vision depicted the beacon as a burning crimson; but without it, there was nothing to see. Only the sense of ultimate strength, once more humming a loud promise of power against my soul.

I jerked my attention back to the others. I should’ve sensed them earlier, I thought with mild irritation. The kaiburr still inundated my senses, and the conversation with Bastila was all-consuming, but... I should’ve sensed them earlier. Once, I would have.
Maybe Bastila is right, maybe I still have the same depth of power I once wielded – but I don’t have the same finesse or training. In some ways, with years of tutelage and experience sitting firmly behind her, Bastila was a more complete Jedi than I.

Jolee Bindo came to a stop not far from me, his lined face genial and relaxed as ever. Juhani’s expression was fixed, intent; her ears laid flat against the side of her head and her mouth pursed in thought. They were both keeping their gaze firmly on the holo-projection.

Yudan, in their shadow, betrayed no emotion at all – but he was staring at me.

“Get rid of them?” I muttered, the words meant for the woman behind me. “Yeah. Somehow, Bastila, I don’t think they’ll be listening if I tell them to sod off.”

“Eh, what was that?” Jolee drawled, the casual nature of both his words and expression at odds with the tense lines of his body. He folded his arms. “I’m afraid my ears don’t work so well these days. Old age. Heh, you know how it goes.”

“Bastila,” Juhani began once more. She took another step closer, leaning forward, ears twitching. “This-”

Revan! ::Revan:: Bastila snapped, the words echoing strangely in my senses, loud enough that I found myself pivoting on the spot, back to face her once more. Her eyes glittered through the holo-projection. The last thing she desired, I could see, was this exchange out in the open. ::You insist on speaking of this in front of them? A runaway padawan who more feared the Dark Side than embraced it, some irreverent old man I do not even recognize, and...:: she paused, her expression tightening further as her gaze roved over the others. ::...one of your fallen generals, who appears almost as hard to kill as you yourself?::

“Bastila, we are a team,” Juhani said. Her voice was gentle. “We are all in this together. We can all help you-”

::This is far beyond your scope of understanding, Juhani.:: Bastila interjected. I could see her taking in a deep breath, trying to control herself, trying to hold back her irritation. ::This has nothing to do with you, and you trespass upon a private conversation. You know nothing of what is at stake!::

“I know we are all tempted-”

::You think this is about the Dark Side?::: There was a definite lacing of scorn in Bastila’s voice. Juhani meant well, but Bastila was correct: this went beyond the Dark Side.

But it has to do with the Dark Side as well, my mind whispered.

“The Dark Side is ever present,” Juhani murmured. Pious words, even if there was a shining truth to them. Juhani, in contrast to my bond-sister, sounded completely unruffled. Serene. Calm. “We are sisters of the Order, Bastila. Tell us-”

::The Order? You clutch to your dreams of forgiveness, but what has the Order ever done for you? Karon imparted quiet platitudes in appeasement, but do you really believe your Quatra will allow you to amount to anything of note, now?::: Bastila scoffed. ::The Order will hold you back, Juhani. You will spend your years as a padawan mired in the depths of self-flagellation.::

Sometimes, I forgot just how much Bastila had missed out on-

“I stand in the light,” Juhani replied. “The Order is my shield, my family; but I hold myself true to the will of the Force.”
Tactful, I thought with respect. Juhani had always been a contradictory mix of humbleness and pride. Surely, some part of her was dying to slip the knowledge of her knighthood—

**What? **::What?:: Bastila hissed in shock. Uneasy mortification jolted through me- Bastila was keeping a closer watch on our mind-link than I- **::Knighthood? You cannot be serious!:**

I felt the vehement taste of her anger, then; her betrayal- *After all I have done for the Order, all those years Vrook refused me*- her righteousness surged through my mind- *I am no more than a tool to them, to be used as required-*

“Bastila,” I snapped. “You said our telepathy might rouse Malak. Rein it in!”

I sensed her retreat, then; her eyes sparking a russet outrage through the holo-projection. **::This must have occurred on Kashyyyk. Vrook was there, wasn’t he?:** she all but snarled. I couldn’t help but notice the distinct lack of honorific. **::It all makes a bitter sort of sense, if you’re a manipulative hypocrite. They completely failed to control you during the Mandalorian Wars, Revan. They weren’t going to let me, their only tool against your Sith, acquire any sort of autonomy for myself. A padawan is much easier to control than a knight.:**

I stared at her in silence, my lips thinning. I had no obvious retort. Certainly, I’d *always* thought it patently ridiculous that she’d spent years unleashing her battle meditation out in the field, while remaining held back as a padawan.

**::It matters not.:** she bit out, but her words still simmered with unchecked resentment. **::The Order matters not. They would sit back while the galaxy crumbles, with their hands fixed firmly over their eyes. You knew this once, Revan. Force help me, you will understand this again.:**

“She wants you to take over the Star Forge,” a low voice intoned behind me. I stiffened. As always, Yudan’s words came out detached and monotone, to the point where I had no idea what he was truly thinking. “She wants you to replace Malak.”

**::Do not be an imbecile. Malak is just as misguided as the Jedi!:** Bastila retorted. Her eyes flashed fire over my shoulder, before coming back to rest on mine. **::Revan, leading the Sith Empire and surrendering to the Dark Side was never your intention, for all that it may have happened. You needed an army, which is why you first fashioned yourself as Dark Lord. But the Sith, the Jedi – both are no more than extremes with little consideration of the middle ground. Both are too entrenched in dogma to see the whole picture and act accordingly. And part of you knows this, or you would not surround yourself with scions from opposite ends of the spectrum.:**

“I am no scion, Bastila,” Juhani said. She’d taken a step forward, almost flanking me now, as we both faced Bastila. “I am Revan’s friend. Your friend. But I follow my own values.”

**::You are a follower.:** Bastila fired back. **::Revan, must you persist with their presence here?:**

Did Bastila think I had some control over them? *Once, when I was a different person, my allies were my followers. Once, I could have demanded their departure.* Even had I that power now, I wasn’t sure it would be the right course of action. I desired to speak with Bastila in private, and yet... how objective was I, about her?

*How objective is she?*

In that regard, having my allies- *not my followers*- nearby to weigh in with their opinion might not be a bad thing.
Bastila must have interpreted something in my expression- or, she was merely translating what she felt between us. All I could sense from her was, once more, a growing resolve. Steely and righteous. She believed in herself, I could tell.

::So be it,:: she accepted, even if the lines in her face belied her irritation. ::Revan, Malak must be stopped. We have a few hours while he remains unaware. The ship in front of you can take you straight to me. He expects you to dock at the primary landing bay on the Star Forge, but while he has been deep in meditation I have opened a smaller dock. An officer’s private one, right next to the ventral wing I am occupying. There is no one here but me – I am not taking chances with your life that I do not have to.:::

“No, you just want her to travel, alone, back to the evil artefact that corrupted her in the first place,” Jolee grumbled. “I think there’s a flaw in your plan, there.”

Bastila ignored him. She was completely focused on me, now. ::Go. You will be earlier than he expects, and not in the location he expects. Malak doesn’t understand the power we wield together.::: Her eyes narrowed. ::The threat remains, Revan. If you are still uncertain... well, we can decide what to do with the Star Forge afterward. But first we must master it to defeat Malak.:::

I didn’t want to grasp the mantle of the Star Forge again. But what if it’s the only way? The only way to defeat Malak? The only way powerful enough to stand against whatever is out there?

Last time... I had failed. So badly, so horribly- how could I risk that again?

I have to stop Malak. I have to save Bastila. If there was no other way getting to her but this... and if I could arrive before Malak expected- with the element of surprise on our side-

“I can’t let you do this, Revan.” Jolee’s voice was low and serious, all traces of his customary irreverence gone. I found myself turning, once more, to face the others. “You have the self-awareness to realize what will happen if you travel alone into the heart of darkness. Alone, to your bond-sister, who is conflicted herself-”

::Stay out of this, stranger!:: Bastila decried. ::You know nothing:::

“I didn’t stand in your way in the Shadowlands,” Jolee spoke, his words rolling over Bastila’s. Jolee had stepped forward, close to me now. He looked grim. “When you went after the Star Map alone. Twice, as it turns out. But this is different, and you darn well know it. We go to the Forge together.”

::Revan!: Bastila commanded, snagging my attention once more. ::You stay behind and Malak can pick you off at his leisure! There is no way off Lehon other than in my starship!:::

“There is another way off this planet,” Jolee contradicted.

::You think Carth Onasi can fly through the scrambler?: Bastila said with disbelief. ::Even if that is true, you fly in the Ebon Hawk and you will be immediately shot down. Malak wins. You stay behind on Lehon, and Malak wins. The only way forward, that has any chance of success, is getting into that snubfighter and leaving now.::: Her eyes flashed. ::I reviewed its schematics. It has advanced cloaking technology – you can hide yourself from even the sensors of the Star Forge itself. But the longer you delay, the more risk you bring to your life, to the lives of everyone- to the galaxy itself:::

Jolee snorted, and I could feel the weight of his scrutiny settling on me. “Greater risk is letting you run off alone again, young pup. And I think you know that.”

I stumbled back a pace, closer to Bastila. My lips were dry. My thoughts spun like the vortex of a tornado. It was hard to rasp the words out- “I know it’s better for our team to travel together, but
Bastila has a point about the Ebon Hawk. And Malak. If I can get there before he expects—"

“Revan.” Juhani’s velvet voice held a deep thrum of intensity, enough that my gaze slipped to hers. “I agree with Jolee. You recall what Korriban was like, how we struggled against the influence of that dark planet... and how we had each other to lean on, there. Going to the Star Forge alone is unwise... more than unwise. It is perilous to your soul.”

There was a heaviness seething inside me. A tingling on my skin, as if events were converging together, intersecting into an unavoidable nexus.

And, in my mind, the irritation from my bond-sister was mounting, transforming into hot anger at the continued interference of the others.

I cut in before Bastila could. “The ‘Hawk’s repairs are not finished, are they?” I asked, my voice low, holding Juhani’s slanted gaze. The Cathar’s slight grimace gave the answer away. “So Malak will likely wake before our ship is space-worthy, and rip our intentions from Bastila’s mind. There’s no way the ‘Hawk alone can clear a fleet of Sith snubs.”

Bastila’s argument was beginning to coalesce into sense- that our only chance was right now, to take the charge to Malak, before he was awake, before he was aware-

“All.” The moniker, spoken deep and low, had me turning back to Jolee. His expression was fixed. “I will not stand aside if you try to board that ship.”

I felt the frown as it furrowed into my forehead. Puzzled, I stared at him, taking another step backwards, closer to the starship, further from Jolee- until both he and Juhani were in my field of vision.

“Wh-what?” I stuttered, not sure if I could believe my own ears. “Are you saying you’ll- you’ll try and stop me?”

Juhani, on Jolee’s other side, looked as serious as the old man. My frown deepened as my attention darted between them both. “Seriously?” I almost choked on the word.

Jolee nodded. It was no more than an abrupt, jerk of the head. “I’ve seen the horrors the Sith under Kun’s banner unleashed on the galaxy. Your time as Sith Lord was just as bad.” There was something in his gaze that- that- I didn’t think Jolee blamed me, exactly, for the past- but he was the sort to demand accountability. As he should. As everyone should. “Don’t do this, lass. I don’t want to, but I’ll fight you if I have to.”

::This is not about leading the Sith, you old fool!:: Bastila cried. There was an impassioned edge to her voice. She was thwarted, frustrated, angry... and I couldn’t help but empathize with her. The emotions resonated between us. ::This is about stopping Malak!::

“Bastila desires you to retake the Star Forge,” Juhani declared. “There is no coming back from that, no deciding to walk away afterward, no matter what Bastila claims. And I... I cannot look away if that is your intention, Revan.”

They do not comprehend what is at stake, Revan! This is why you walked away from the Order once before... because they are blind and weakened by fear!

I couldn’t- I couldn’t deny Bastila, but there was no way I could cut down my friends to achieve my goals-

You do not need to cut them down, Revan! Just get to the snubfighter! Their misguided intentions
cannot be allowed to stop us from doing what we must. Otherwise Malak has already won- and
the Force has already begun its death.

The hiss of a lightsaber activating cut through the air, froze my thoughts, curled my fingers tight
against my thighs-

A green blade that pierced a bright light, overwhelming the dim glow of the holo-projection.

It was wielded by Yudan.

_He has Zhar’s lightsaber_, I thought dumbly. Yudan was between the others, but some metres further
back, his gaze still pinned on mine. There was no perceivable emotion on his damned, detached face.
_He’s made the first move. He’s standing with them – against me – if I choose to follow Bastila._

I couldn’t do this-

Then slowly, deliberately, Yudan moved his head to stare at Jolee. “Revan can make her own
choices.” His words rang out loud and clear. “I shall not allow anyone to take away her right to
decide.”

A cut-off gasp from Juhani, a puff of surprised air from the old man-

“You’ll fight against me?” Jolee said, jerking back slightly, his voice higher-pitched than normal. My
stunned gaze darted back to the old man; he was facing Yudan, now. “After everything, sonny, you
would allow Revan to walk back into darkness?”

“Free will, old man,” Yudan intoned. “That is something I have always believed in. You are not
allowing Revan that.”

My mind was stuck, a block of permacrete in my head, as I stared wildly between the three of them.

Surprise mingled with approval though my connection to the Force. To Bastila. _He, of all people,
actually has the right of it_, she murmured. _One of your old followers, who fell just as surely as you
did._

Jolee’s brows slammed down. “It is my choice to stop Revan making the same idiotic decision she
did years ago. Just as she still has a choice- to back away, or cut me down on her way to this darn
Star Forge.” He swung back to face me. “Revan, you getting in that ship alone will end in only one
place: darkness. You might as well strike me down now – you’ll be killing a lot more down that
path.”

::You have a greater strength of will than this geriatric claims, Revan. It is not like before. This time
you are aware of the dangers. This time you will be stronger – for you have me. And I am not
Malak.:: Bastila’s voice dropped. ::Together, we have the power to stop him... and to face what
lurks in the Unknown Regions.::

“Bastila,” Juhani’s voice raised in challenge. “It does not matter how you justify this. You must
know, deep inside your heart, where this will lead. I shall do all in my power to stop Revan from
once more falling.”

And the sheer of dark blue plasma dawned from the hilt in the Cathar’s grasp.

_We can master the Star Forge, Revan, and still remain true to ourselves. We must, for the sake of
the galaxy. ::Stand down, Cathar!:: Bastila called out in frustration. ::You do not understand- this is_
“Stopping what you found in the Unknown Regions,” Yudan announced. He was scrutinizing Bastila’s image over my shoulder, but his eyes narrowed suddenly and snapped back to mine. “That was your purpose, once before, in claiming the Star Forge. I will never follow Darth Revan again.” His gaze bored into me; the silence hung thick in the air for a short, pregnant moment. “But it was Revan Freeflight who first claimed the Star Forge... not Darth Revan.”

My mind shook. *Was it? Are you so sure about that, Yudan?* The brief recollections of the temple ascent once more flooded my mind; it *had* been me, I *hadn’t* fallen, not quite, not yet- but there’d been a colder, darker edge to my thoughts-

*Maybe all that means is I have a better chance this time around- as Bastila believes-*

“Whatever you found beyond known space convinced you this was necessary. Convinced all your followers. I pledged my allegiance to you, Revan. So make your decision.” Yudan didn’t blink. He didn’t move either, still holding that green ‘saber tight in a defensive guard. “I shall follow you either way.”

*Yudan Rosh was, by all accounts, unbendingly loyal to you once, Revan. One of your most gifted generals, one of the strongest Jedi Thirteen. If you believe you can still trust him-*

“You have a chance to walk away, Jolee Bindo.” Yudan’s voice was flat. Cold. Remote. “You, too, Cathar. But I shall not stand aside if you lift your lightsabers against Revan. And you both know I will win.” His hand lifted, his ‘saber pointed directly at the old man from Kashyyyk.

“There is no death, Yudan Rosh,” Juhani shot back. There was an undercurrent in her voice, the slightest hint of a feline snarl. “I am disappointed that you would choose this side. But I shall remain true to my values, no matter what price I must pay. I-” Her voice faltered, her slanted gaze slipped back to mine. “I stand in the light, Revan. Stay in the light with me.”

::There shall be no light if there is no one strong enough to hold back the darkness!:: Bastila cried. I felt her will surge through the bond, her emotions buffet against mine. ::You know this to be the truth, Revan! Do not allow an old fool and a misguided Jedi to bring about the downfall of the galaxy! For that is what their interference threatens!::

Jolee sighed heavily as he faced me. I flinched when, at last, a bright green activated in his grasp. “Come back to us, lass. I ain’t standing still if you take another step closer to that cursed snubfighter.”

“And I will cut you down if you attempt to stop her,” Yudan said coldly.

Juhani’s profile turned, her nose upraised in the air, her fingers tightening on her ‘saber hilt as her attention fixed on the Twi’lek.

The four of us, spread out like a diamond, three deadly beams of light. And me, whose hands were entirely empty.

For once in my cursed life, I had *absolutely* no idea what to do.

xXx
Coming up next: Canderous wakes up to find half the crew gone. Without wrist-comms. 
Kriffing again.
Big thanks to kosiah for the beta and support. Much, much appreciated.
"Ordo."

It was Onasi's voice that had me waking, thoughts snapping logically into order. The ship's repairs must be complete. It's time to get moving.

There was always that sense of feral urgency – anticipation, really – when heading into combat. Battle lust zinging through the blood, sharpening the mind, knowing it could be the end, but a glorious one-

And what was flying to the Star Forge to take on Darth Malak – fighting next to Revan herself – but a glorious way to live or die?

It was when my feet hit the durasteel floor that I realized something had gone balls-up.

The old man's not in his bunk. Neither is Rosh. And, hovering over me, pissed-off panic in every line of his body, was Onasi – who should've been warming up the engines or something useful had things gone according to plan.

"What the kriff is going on?" The words came out in a growl as I reached for my boots.


My gaze stilled on the damned empty bunks in front of me. I didn't have to bet a pile of creds as to who else was missing – I already knew.

Revan. Haar'chak kriiffing Jedi!

Minutes later, I strode into the central hub of the freighter; fully armoured, jaw set, heart pumping steadily as my mind zeroed in on exactly what crap had exploded where. The weakest link in our crew was obvious to me, and so it was a surprise to see Carth's kid standing awkwardly in front of the gloop machine, instead of also missing. Mission was sleepily rubbing her eyes in his shadow.

Kid Onasi shot me a furtive glance. "Um. Dad's just getting Zaalbar." He folded his arms, all defensive and wound up like a slink-spring about to let go.

"I can't believe they've gone," Mission mumbled. "I should... I mean, sheesh, it's not the first."

"Clarify," I barked. "Who's they? Rosh, Bindo... Revan?"

"Juhani, too." Mission was nodding, eyes downcast as she leaned against the wall at Sithkid's side. She sounded more subdued than customary – and that just pissed me off all the more.

"Tell me they took a wrist-comm," I growled, as the stern hatch opened on my left. "Tell me someone took a kriiffing comm!"
"No." Onasi had returned through the door, Carpet hot on his heels, and he sounded just as furious as me. "First thing I checked when Dustil woke me."

"No," I echoed, barking a laugh— but it wasn't funny in the slightest. Oh, I was gonna knock some heads together when we caught up with the others. *Revan, you better have a damn good reason for leaving us behind!*

The Wookiee rumbled something that caused Mission to push off against the wall and walk to him, one hand reaching out for his furry arm.

"You were only half-coherent when you woke me, Dustil," Onasi stated. The anger in his voice had firmed into a hard-edged command, levelled directly at his spawn. "We're all here, now. Tell us what happened."

"Revan ran," Dustil muttered. "The others— we all woke up and, and they went after her."

"Where? To this temple we're planning to blow up?" I stared hard at the boy, but he refused to meet my gaze— or his dad's, for that matter. "How long ago?"

"The temple, yes, but I-I don't know how much time has passed."

"He said that bastard Rosh knocked him out," Onasi cut in, before I had a chance to growl at the stupidity of the answer. It was then that I noticed the blaster held tight in Onasi's grip, the mesh armour he was already wearing, the glint of purpose hardening his face. He was about as willing as I was to be left behind.

My gaze slid back to his son. "You said Revan's the one who ran. So, she fell under this mystic spell you lot are so enraptured by? With the way *your* eyes glazed over the other day, boy, I find it hard to believe that Revan's the one who crumbled."

Sithkid's head snapped up, the fire of anger apparent in the deep lines of his scowl. "Well, she did, okay? *She* ran... *she'd* already gone by the time that damned voice woke us all—"

Carpet howled. Mission mumbled something, sinking into his side. Onasi cursed under his breath—

"Voice?" I snapped. "You mean to tell me this pyramid is *talking* to you lot now?"

"We have to extract them and then blow the blasted thing up," Carth muttered. "Dammit, Revan! How could you run, after everything—"

But his son was shifting awkwardly on his feet, his temper vanishing as something close to embarrassment burned his cheeks. "Um, maybe what I said— maybe it's not entirely fair to Revan—frakk. I can't believe I just said that—"

Onasi blinked. "Dustil—"

"Spit it out. Now!" I demanded.

Kid Onasi shot me an almost-hostile look. "It wasn't the Force-beacon talking to us, or whatever you're thinking. The voice was speaking to Revan— only Revan— it was just so powerful that the rest of us heard it." He bit his lip, looking uncertain. "Juhani said it was Bastila Shan."

*Bastila.* The name was a shock. Oh, I'd thought of the princess often since her capture, but I'd never known how much to believe in the Force-voodoo between her and Revan. Revan had confirmed Bastila'd been having a hard time, but little else— and that bit of intel wasn't exactly galaxy-shattering
in revelation. I knew they could speak to each other with their minds, but...

My eyes narrowed. Bastila had been a prisoner for over a month. Young, softly-bred woman like her- she would've broken by now. She's lured Revan away. Question is, why the kriff did Revan listen?

There was another howl from Zaalbar, this one more insistent than the last.

"We'll get her back, Big Z," Mission soothed, empty words considering half the damn crew were gone. "We'll get them both back."

"Bastila..." Onasi trailed off. Just like that, the fight leeched out of him as he wearily scrubbed at his face. "The bond... I- Revan's been worried... Dustil- what exactly did you hear from- from Bastila?"

"I heard her say it wasn't a trap," Sithkid muttered. "It's what woke me. I think Juhani heard more. She- she thought Bastila's state of mind was- was- and then Yudan Rosh said it was a frakking trap and Revan was an idiot and waking up the rest of us would only slow them down." His jaw clenched.

"Huh," I grunted. "I've seen how fast those Force-bastards can travel, so I might actually be with Rosh on this one. Except that shabuir should've kicked us awake before leaving. Doesn't make any sense to knock you out, either." As I stared, a dull red darkened the boy's smooth cheeks once again. He held my gaze, this time, but it was obvious there was still more to his damn story. "Why'd he knock you out, Sithkid?"

Dustil looked over to his dad, who had a firm, uncompromising look on his face. I was one step away from shaking the boy, myself, when Dustil sighed. A heavy gust of air that signified defeat. His shoulders sagged and his head dropped.

"To stop me following, I think," Dustil mumbled. "I said I could help, and then all three of them looked at me like- like I was the biggest liability- and next thing I knew I was lying face first on the frakking ground and they'd long gone."

"To stop you following?" Onasi's voice had deepened. "Rosh knocked you out to- you didn't tell me that before."

The boy's jaw tightened, but his head stayed bowed.

There was no denying we had to get a move on- maybe old man Bindo and Juhani and Rosh had this under control- but I wasn't counting on it and, somehow, I didn't think Onasi was, either. But for the first time since I'd met Onasi's difficult, resentful kid, I actually felt a wedge of sympathy for him.

Staring down at the ground, a mixture of shame and belligerence hunching his shoulders up to his ears, I could see that despite the boy's issues with just about everything – he wanted to prove his worth. Like a young Mando'ade unblooded in battle, Kid Onasi wanted to race after the others and throw his might at the enemy. He ain't exactly a weakling, either, when it comes to that. Can't forget all he got up to on the Leviathan.

The dumbest thing Dustil Onasi could've done upon waking was run after the others – but he hadn't. He'd woken his dad up instead – and I didn't think it was from a sense of fear. Maybe the boy was learning to think things through.

Onasi's gaze shifted to mine. We stayed silent, and I knew he'd come to the same conclusion as me. His son was the only Force-user left on the ship, but there was no denying he was a liability. I could still see Sithkid's nose in the air, his eyes unfocused like a spice junkie, as he failed to see or hear
anything until Revan had slammed him backwards with the kripping Force.

Dustil Onasi may have kept control of himself since then, but there was no telling what getting closer to this pyramid would do to him. Yet... I didn't want to crush the whining boy's pride, either.

*You're getting soft, Ordo.*

"We can't leave the ship undefended," I said abruptly, swinging my gaze to Zaalbar. "How's the repairs going, Carpet?"

He answered, a long and low rumble, followed by a shaggy shake of the head that looked entirely too negative for my peace of mind.

"Slow," Mission translated, her voice muffled as she leaned against him. "The patching's done, but Teethree's worried it'll explode--" A short howl drowned out the rest of her words, and she pulled back, rolling her eyes at Zaalbar in an echo of her normal sass. "Okay, okay. They're worried about the integrity of the fuel tank, and that it might explode further along--" Another rumble had her huffing and poking him in the side. "Sheesh, Big Z, rupture or explode, what does it matter?"

"How long until we're done?" Onasi demanded.

"Big Z says maybe another six hours?" Mission relayed after a long series of howls. Her voice was tentative. "Canderous got him enough material, but there's another spot- Teethree's scans show a weakness in the metal seam from the collision... they're worried it might tear when you re-pressurize the fuel tank."

_Haar'chak!_ My gaze snagged on Onasi's again; he was frowning in consternation. _They said four hours before we went to sleep!_

"The longer we're on this damn planet, the longer we're a blind target," I said. "We gotta keep the speed on the repairs."

"Yes," Onasi rapped out in agreement. "Any minute the Republic fleet could be jumping out of hyperspace – and straight into the scrambler. We can't help them until I can manually launch the 'Hawk and target the temple... but- but we have to get the others away from there, first."

Zaalbar roared. Short, sharp and loud.

"Big Z's going after Jen," Mission said quietly. "He- it's the lifedebt. You won't be leaving him behind."

There was no denying the Wookiee's strength in a fight, but I didn't want the astromech fixing the 'Hawk without assistance. "Trashcan's gonna need another set of hands or we'll be here forever. _Ad'ika_, you're the only one who can understand him. I need you under the ship helping him."

"And Dustil can protect the two of you," Onasi added. "While you're busy working-"

"Hey, I don't need protection-" Mission flared.

Dustil glared at his father. "You're only saying that to make me stay behind-"

"Dustil, we need the ship repaired as quickly as we can. Ordo's right." Onasi's jaw had firmed as he stared down his son. "There's enough Force-users already after Revan, it makes sense to leave one with the ship. We send muscle after them."
"I can help!" the boy implored. "Dammit, Dad, I'll be nothing but useless while Mission and Teethree fix the ship-"

"A true warrior knows his own strengths and weaknesses," I snapped, slamming an armoured glove down hard on the table. Sithkid jumped, his gaze swinging back to me. "You're susceptible to this kriffing Force temple – you're a blind streekov if you pretend otherwise. And we'd be a pack of dikuts if we didn't leave someone behind to guard our only way off this damn planet."

"This planet's deserted," he muttered. "You're just-"

"You think I'm saying words for fun, boy?" I growled as my impatience surged. "Our sensors – the ones that actually work – only show the immediate area. We don't know enough about this place to equivocally state it's deserted. But I have seen your abilities. Guarding home base is just as vital as leading the vanguard, and you're a powerful warrior in your own right. As long as you stop whining about everything and focus."

I wasn't the sort to waste bolstering words on weaklings. And while I might label Onasi's son any number of uncomplimentary words, weakling was not one of them. Not since the Leviathan.

... The Sith armour sat tight around my waist, tight enough that I was concerned about it hampering my manoeuvrability. There's prison guards in the next room, Ordo. This suit's better than nothing. Wander in there half-naked and one shot will drop you. I grimaced, feeling my head pound, my thigh throb, and the superficial grazes over my torso sting like a swarm of sugar-bees.

I'd been worse off – more than once – but I knew if I didn't find a stim or painkiller soon then my injuries were gonna compromise matters. Especially my damn leg, where those Czerka dikuts had got the better of me back on Kashyyyk.

Zaalbar howled something, waving a blaster around, as he crouched over the two corpses Kid Onasi had sliced effortlessly into pieces.

"Nothing else on the bodies," Mission translated. She was hovering behind him, wearing the armour suit of the smaller guard. Good thing, too, because she'd been just as under-dressed as me – and I had the feeling things were gonna get hairier than Zaalbar's furry arse once we left the prison cell.

And, at least now that she was wearing more than just her damn underwear, Kid Onasi might stop blushing whenever he looked her way.

"No matter. We gotta move." My words were brisk, and I motioned the others closer. There was only so long before one of the guards outside tried the hatch, or ran a wary eye over the forged vidfeed-

Someone banged heavily on the other side of the only exit.

"Time's up," I muttered, before jabbing at the wrist-comm that Sithkid had been using earlier to get to us. "Trashcan, send a malfunction report through to the next room, informing them there's a fault with the hatch to our containment cell. Say that maintenance has been despatched." It should be enough to stop the guards next door from sending out an alert – at least, for the next few minutes.

I looked over the three allies I had to work with. Somehow, we had to get from this prison complex to the suite of interrogation rooms where Revan and the others were being held. It was only three floors up from here, but we had little in the way of armament – and I couldn't discount how my own injuries would impact my abilities.
My gaze fixed on the young man who'd just broken us out. "Can you do that hiding trick again, boy?"

He stared at me before nodding firmly. His fingers tightened on his deactivated glow-stick.

"Right. Here's the plan. Trashcan reports there's five guards in the next room. I'll get him to seal all exits, then we'll open this one and Dustil will take the lead." I could see Mission steeling herself next to the Wookiee, but it was the Sithkid I kept my attention on. He'd done damn well to get us out of the cells without being seen, but now I needed to use him in outright combat. "Dustil, you go straight for the soldiers further back in the room. Carpet, give your blaster to Mission – you'll be taking out the closest Sith with your fists. Mission and I will follow with covering fire. We all good?"

Mission swallowed, nodding a little shakily. Zaalbar handed her the lightweight blaster he'd frisked, hilt-first, before rumbling something and striding towards the exit.

"I'm ready," Dustil said in a low voice, standing next to the Wookiee. "Don't shoot, though. Not unless you have to. You might get me instead." He gave me one last intent look, before vanishing in front of my eyes.

The boy had a point. "Ad'ika, we cover Carpet. Only Carpet. Don't go firing wildly unless you want to hit Sithkid."

"Yep," she whispered, stepping closer to me. "Got it, Canderous."

"We'll secure the next room, grab whatever equipment we find, and move on to the others," I said. "They're counting on us, and we damn well won't let them down."

Mission's chin lifted. Zaalbar roared in agreement. I stared back down at the wrist-comm. "Trashcan, seal all exits of the next room, and disable the defense turrets and surveillance." There was a heavy minute of silence before the bucket droid beeped an assent that translated as confirmation on the small screen. "Now, open the cell hatch."

The door hissed as it opened.

I had no way of knowing where Sithkid was, and instead placed myself behind the towering form of Zaalbar as he barrelled into the room. My focus narrowed down the scope of the standard-issue blaster; five marks – all armoured Sith – the nearest one straightening in surprise just before he copped a hairy limb to the head.

The Sith's scream was drowned out by the cracking noise of shattering plasticeel as Zaalbar's fist pounded again and again through his helm.

My aim moved immediately to the next mark, who was running straight for the Wookiee's back with an upraised vibroblade. A double-tap of my gun crackled against a blue energy shield; at my side, Mission opened fire in unison. The guard stumbled as his blue-white shield dispersed; my next flurry of bolts smashed the neckpiece of his armour suit right open.

The Wookiee roared, spinning around, before laying a wild roundhouse into the faltering Sith.

I wrenched my attention deeper into the room as Zaalbar flattened the second mark. Standing awkwardly over three prone corpses, a red 'saber in his grasp and a fierce glint in his eye, was the visible form of Dustil Onasi.

Mand'alor's balls! He'd taken out three guards quicker than the rest of us had neutralized the other two. I'd seen – and firmly discounted – the use of stealth belts in combat. They had nothing on this
clever trick of Dustil Onasi's.

And it seemed his sword arm wasn't too shoddy, either.

... 

We'd run into heavier fire before we'd finally made it to the interrogation rooms, where we'd found Onasi, Juhani, and the old man – all prone on the lilac floor until Mission shot them full of stims we'd looted on the way there.

I'd taken another hit, by then, and was barely walking myself. It'd been a close call, more than once, as we blasted through the enemy cruiser. And it was Kid Onasi who'd led the way; sometimes hidden, always with that red bar of death in his grasp, silently obeying my snapped orders as he cut through most of the enemy and Zaalbar mopped up the remainder.

There was no denying that Dustil Onasi worked a lot better under pressure than he did when he had time to whine about his life.

"You got us off the Leviathan, boy. Hold the damn ship. Stop feeling sorry for yourself, and hold the damn ship."

"We need you here, Dustil," Onasi said, his voice low and resolute. "You wanted to be part of this. That means you put your personal opinions aside and do what's required. I need to be able to trust the 'Hawk's covered."

"Okay." The boy swallowed, and lifted his chin. All traces of resentment had vanished, and his nod of agreement was firm. He stared at us steadily. "I won't let you down. Either of you."

"Armour up, the both of you," I rapped out, inclining my head at Mission. "Then grab a kriffing comm and go help the astromech. Ad'ika, you do whatever Trashcan needs to get the 'Hawk fixed as fast as possible."

"Dustil, keep your eye on a bio-scanner," Onasi added. "Make sure nothing catches you unawares, and stay within sight of the landing ramp. I'll be in touch over the comm."

"Sure." Kid Onasi nodded again. "I'll go- just, be safe, okay Dad? Let the Force-users do- whatever they need-"

"Go," I snapped, suddenly impatient. "Get your kit on, and get to work."

The kids left, and Onasi and I stared at each other, grim and resolute and ready, as the Wookiee rumbled something incomprehensible. The three of us made a tough trio – if we were up against anything other than kriffing Force powers.

We don't know the area. Only the general direction of this damn temple. We'd have to rely on comms back to the 'Hawk- unless there was someone else who might know something about this cursed place-

My thoughts spun quickly. And another gun in the hold is always a good thing.

"Carpet, get yourself armed," I ordered the Wookiee. "I'll grab a belt full of grenades. No telling what we're gonna run into."

"I'll get medkits and visors," Onasi added. "And a bio-scanner. It's still dark out, we need to make sure we know which way to go-"
"Leave that to me," I ground out, feeling a feral grin spawn on my face. "I've got an idea."

xXx

Crimson photoreceptors flared to life as HK's head swivelled in my direction.

"Greeting: I am-"

"We're on the only planet in the Lehon system," I interrupted, not interested in any sort of deranged waffle that Revan had once programmed into him. "Are you familiar with it?"

There was a slight whirring from the robot before he answered. "Query: Does the master wish to travel to the defense structure of the Star Forge?"

I grunted at his acknowledgment of the pyramid. "So, you've some knowledge of the area, at least. Can you lead us to the damn structure?"

HK's angular head cocked; if he'd been a sent, I would've expected a puzzled look of curiosity. "Acknowledgment: If the master commands me to perform the belittling duties of a tourist guide, then my programming has no option but to comply, even under duress."

"Here's the thing, Tinhead," I cut in, leaning forward. "I remember how you ran off in the Shadowlands, last time Revan played truant. This time you're taking orders from me."

"Statement: My primary objective is the safety of the master." His head canted even further, while his unblinking electronic gaze stayed pinned on mine. "Inference: The master has once more disappeared into danger. Primary objective initiating-"

"You take one step on your own and I'll shove that triangle head of yours down your own gullet," I growled. "We're leading an extraction to rescue your damn master, and if your aim is Revan's safety then the best thing you can do is follow my orders and lend supporting fire. Don't test me, Tinhead, or you'll find yourself marooned on this chivhole of a planet while I have all the fun killing the enemy on the Forge."

I wasn't really gonna disable HK if he was determined to do things his own way, as the one thing I could count on was his loyalty to Revan. But if I couldn't trust his back in a firefight, then the droid could damn well rot on this beach while we took to the skies.

"Observation: You are a harsh, harsh taskmaster. I like you more already."

The hatch to the cargo bay opened, and Onasi took two strides in before stilling.

"Oh no," he said. "You're not taking that thing-"

Behind him, Zaalbar walked in, huffing with disapproval as he also spotted the droid.

"Commentary: Geriatric Blockhead has wisely deduced that you frail meatbags require my superior assistance." There was a clicking noise as HK withdrew a blaster rifle and cocked it. "Mockery: It is beyond my processing power to account for your survival before I entered your meaningless lives."

"He knows the area, and he's loyal to Revan," I pointed out when Onasi's frown landed on me.

"Fine," Onasi grumbled. "Maybe his shields will fail and enemy fire will take him out." He shot HK a look of intense dislike. "Again."

There was an electronic squawk of protest from the droid. "Indignation: The first time that occurred,
I had no shielding to fail, about which I had already warned the master. As for the second time: you fell to Calo Nord's offensive the same as I did."

"Only twice?" Onasi muttered. "I seem to recall you were a heap of useless metal after Korriban-"

"Retort: That had nothing to do with my shields, Paranoid Has-Been. Did your half-blind, organic eye-receptors fail to see that my head had been removed."

"I'll remove your head from your-"

"Children," I growled, a second before the Wookiee rumbled something that was probably the Shyriiwook equivalent. "Shut your traps and focus on what's important." I levelled an irritated scowl at Onasi; to his credit, he looked somewhat sheepish.

"I checked in with Teethree," Onasi stated, turning his attention back to me as he tightened a strap on a small backpack. "The 'Hawk's external scanners are useless with the scrambler active, but Teethree's picking up an electromagnetic spike six klicks from here. That'll be where we need to go."

"Confirmation: The radiation is the emittance of the kaiburr housed within the defense structure of the Star Forge. Even a portable paperweight should be able to sense that."

I glanced back to HK, and wondered just how long his obedience would last without a direct order from Revan. "What else can you tell us about this place, Tinhead?"

"Statement: Now that my memory core is fully unlocked, I can access the navigational charts of Lehon and the schematics of the Rakatan structures from my databanks. Elucidation: This planet was once the homeworld of the Rakatan species. They used a transmutation technology to convert Force-power into other forms of energy. On Lehon it was converted into a sector-wide EMP scrambler that disabled any starships missing their designated decryption protocols." The droid gave a mechanical shrug of indifference. "Commentary: While the Rakatan were both ingenious and innovative in their use of kaiburr-enhanced Force, they failed to fully account for the cerebral and biological side-effects of such constant immersion in transmuted Force power. It is simply another indication of the superiority of artificial life-forms."

"Force power," I muttered. "Makes sense. And I think I can guess the side-effects, judging by the impact it had on Sithkid."

"You've been on this planet before?" Onasi said, his voice abrupt as he stared hard at the droid.

"Negative: I have not personally walked upon Lehon's surface."

"Revan uploaded this intel into your head," I surmised, rolling my eyes. *Haar'chak, to think how much shorter this mission could've been, had we all known the truth back on Tatooine.*

"Speculation: While the master did not divulge her reasons for storing this intelligence in my databanks, my hypothesis is that her motive was to provide an alternative route to access the Star Forge, should it be compromised. The information I have is locked to be released only to those I calculate as fully loyal to the master's well-being." The robot sniffed. "Reluctance: Despite your obvious biological deficiencies, I suppose I can consider you all to fall within those parameters. For now."

Probably, HK meant for it to sound ominous. But I'd heard too much of his thinly-veiled threats for it to hold any water, and I highly doubted it had any effect on the others, either.

"Let's get a move on," Onasi said, his voice gruff. "We can always grill Psycho-droid on the way."
"Okay," Onasi muttered into his wrist-comm, acknowledging his son's report of absolutely nothing. "We're about a klick away. I'll check in with you when we reach the pyramid."

The forest we traipsed through was low-lying; a tangle of dry brambles that wasn't the easiest for humanoids to clamber through. Zaalbar led the way, forcefully clearing a path for the rest of us to follow, the vegetation posing no challenge beneath his muscle.

::Right. Talk to you then,::: Sithkid returned, before Carth's comm switched off.

"Commentary: Internal bio-scanners are sensing nine mink-rats within close proximity of our position," the droid droned. My visor picked up the small, swift blur of a projectile the same time as a faint *thwacking* noise resounded through the air. "Amendment: Eight mink-rats now within close proximity."

"What, killing the native fauna now?" Onasi's voice was laced with disgust. "It's no surprise you're a creation from the blasted Forge, with all your gratuitous killing."

I hadn't heard Onasi's reaction to HK's origins, but I highly doubted it'd been a positive one. Frankly, I was surprised the Republic pilot wasn't, once more, calling out for the droid's scrapping. Onasi generally allowed his tedious moralistic principles to override his pragmatism, but maybe in this case he was smart enough to concede HK's usefulness had its place in our team.

"Objection: The Rakatan considered the mink-rat species to be a native pest. Without their presence to keep the rodent population in check, one could argue that I am merely providing a planetary duty." The damn droid sounded far too smug for that argument to hold any weight. An irritated howl from the Wookiee seemed to agree with my observation.

"Retort: Taking pride in my prowess does not make me evil, Mobile Carpet. In fact, from a nauseatingly emotional viewpoint, it is merely one route to an ephemeral form of happiness."

"These Rakatan," Onasi cut in. "What happened to them?"

"Conjecture: The answer to that is not conclusively known. There are theories of some sort of plague decimating that Rakatan population, but the odds for that to drive a galaxy-dominant species to near-extinction are mathematically unfeasible. Commentary: It was the master's belief, once, that the Rakatan suffered from too much Force-exposure, and may have inadvertently caused their own demise with their experiments. Perhaps it was a combination of both, or some other unknown factor."

"She thought *that*, back then," Onasi whispered as he strode in front of me. His steps suddenly seemed faster, angrier. "And she still did what she did, despite believing the Rakatan had dabbled too far."

"Revan had a reason," I replied to him, hearing the gruffness in my own voice. "She may not remember it, and it may not have worked out how she planned... but she had a reason. We both know that."

"She was wrong, whatever it was," Onasi returned bluntly. "Nothing good can come from that Forge."

I shrugged, unwilling to encourage the pilot's melodrama. My gaze returned to the droid, striding in front of me, ducking smoothly behind a branch that swung back from the Wookiee's grasp.
"Tinhead," I called out. "You said near-extinction. Are there some of these Rakatan still around, then?"

The droid whirred as he continued walking. "Answer: That is unknown. Four years ago, all Rakatan on this island perished. But Lehon is comprised of many islands and archipelago. There are two landmasses larger than this one, and I have little data on the habitation of them. Extrapolation: There is no evidence of Rakatan surviving elsewhere in the galaxy, and there is no advanced technology of note on this planet – with the exception of the Star Forge's defense structure. One can surmise that if the Rakatan are not yet extinct, then they are surely on the brink of becoming so."

We lapsed into silence, following the Wookiee, as he snapped spindly branches and pushed through dense undergrowth in the dark. It couldn't be too far from dawn, now; the nav-charts gave Lehon an eighteen-hour solar cycle, and it'd been night for at least six hours. Though I had no damn idea about any seasonal fluctuations on this planet.

The jungle was dense enough to block out the light from Lehon's two moons. The visors more than coped for the lack of visibility – not that either the Wookiee or the droid required one.

"HK," Onasi said, some time later. "The scrambler. What's the best way to bring it down?"

"Answer: There is a console at the top of the defense structure that corresponds to one on the Star Forge itself. Either can be used to shut down the transmission of the EMP scrambler."

"Then what's to stop ole Malak from turning it right back on?" I growled. "Not exactly an infallible plan, if that's what Revan's going for."

Zaalbar stopped in front of us, turning to briefly howl something over a furry shoulder before moving on.

"Translation: The Wookiee's opinion, debatable though its value may be, is that the master's primary desire is to rescue Bastila Shan.Obviously the idea of having more than one concurrent objective is a foreign one to his inefficient brain, but, that is hardly surprising."

"It comes right back to blowing up the pyramid," Onasi cut in, his head turning to face me. "That's the only sure-fire way of taking down the scrambler for good."

"Cautionary: While destruction of the kaiburr itself will certainly disable the scrambler, it will also leave it inoperable for when the master once more assumes control of the Star Forge--"

"Revan's not looking to take that cursed thing back over!" Onasi said heatedly. "That blasted factory is getting destroyed, one way or the other!"

Frankly, I didn't care if Revan blew the kriffing thing to bits or appropriated its functions again. I was here for her end-game – to take down Malak. If that meant stealing his ship factory out from under his nose, or exploding it while he stood on it – well, the end result was the same.

Zaalbar halted again, this time long enough that the rest of us stopped as well. He turned around to face us, before rumbling something long and low in Shyriiwook.

"Statement: The Wookiee wants something to eat." There was a howl of protest, loud enough that it made me wonder about the reliability of HK's translation. "Commentary: The bio-organic fuel required to power you meatbags is an obvious design flaw of your life-form. Example: Withhold rotting matter from the Wookiee for a single rotation of this planet, and one could probably coerce him into doing just about anything."
Zaalbar growled, a hand waving in either disagreement of the translation, or simply a desire to
dismember the droid.

"Mockery: Your organic flailings amuse me."

"Keep food from the Wookiee, and I think he'd be a lot more likely to rip your arms off than do what
you want," I said drily. "What else did he say, Tinhead?"

"Extrapolation;" HK continued. "The Wookiee also points out that we have reached the pyramid."

I stepped sideways, looking beyond Zaalbar to see an immediate thinning of the vegetation.

My fingers tightened on the heavy blaster in my grasp as I prepared to face the unknown. It felt-
strange, almost, to go striding into a danger I couldn't even perceive – an enemy that wasn't a group
of people to be fought against, but rather a foreign energy that might be screwing with the minds of
our Force-sensitive crewmates.

And Bastila Shan.

I couldn't think of the princess as an enemy, but I wasn't blind to the edginess some of the others had
whenever her name was mentioned. Dark Side, Light Side... the labels mattered little to me, but it
was obvious Revan and Juhani were both deeply concerned about Bastila.

Which made it even more idiotic for Revan to have run off alone. Bastila saved her, though. Just as
the Wookiee owes his life to Revan, Revan owes hers to Bastila. That, maybe, I could understand.

"Let's go," Onasi said in a low voice, striding forward to flank Zaalbar.

The treeline completely disappeared within metres, and we were left staring into a large clearing, lit
by the same sharp moonlight as on the beach. In the centre of it, rose the oblique pyramid that could
be easily seen from the skies.

The angles of the structure were sharp, sharp enough that I guessed its height more than twice the
length of its base. The pyramid narrowed to an almost-tip at the top; it was hard to see clearly from
the ground, but it looked like a small roof or platform was notched into the very peak of the building.

"Commentary: The kaiburr and its transmuting enclosure are housed within the ground floor of the
defense structure. The controlling console is located on the apex of the structure. Observation: I
cannot sense any life-forms in the immediate area, but the emittance of kaiburr radiation is interfering
with my scanners. I would speculate the master has likely travelled to the apex to gain control over
the scrambler."

My eyes narrowed as I kept them fixed on the pinnacle of the building. Is that where Revan was?
And the others? Bastila?

A flash of light sparked from the top.

"Hypothesis: The master is currently blasting-"

The light morphed silently into a large fireball; a second later, the cacophony of detonating
explosives hit my ears.

"-her enemies-"

Before my stunned eyes, the peak of the pyramid ripped apart beneath the might of what could only
be high-grade munitions-

"What in the blazes-"

"Haar'chak!" They're there – or were. They've triggered a damn minefield!

The flames of conflagration receded; another deafening rumble sounded through the air, and beneath the dying flames of what I guessed to be permacrete detonators there was a new shape to the apex of the pyramid.

Something whistled. Debris, firing down from up high, as chunks of the structure's framework were blasted through the air.

"Take cover!" I snarled, spinning around to see Onasi already yanking the Wookiee back into the treeline. Alarm wedged a spike of ice in my gut as I sprinted after them. No matter the droid's rosy belief in his master's superiority, I knew this wasn't her work.

I threw one last look over my shoulder before disappearing back into the vegetation. There was no clear apex anymore – simply an uneven gouge, running metres deep, like a massive claw had taken a swipe to the very top of the pyramid.

An explosion like that – I knew the odds, even for Force-users. If taken unawares, it'd be game over.

*For the love of Mandalor – Revan, are you still alive?*

xXx

Chapter End Notes

*Coming up next: Revan makes a choice. The unexpected happens.*
A thousand thanks to kosiah for the beta.
Chapter Notes

**Chapter Note:** The chapter overlaps with the previous.

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

---

**Precipice**

- *Revan Freeflight*

The silence lay as thick fog; oppressive and heavy between us all.

The scene was almost absurd, like a line of topple-over chits: Juhani facing down Yudan facing down Jolee – who was staring grimly at me.

All were waiting for my next move. All was silent around us.

Except for the clamour in my head.

*You do not need to cut Juhani and the old man down,* Bastila urged again, as if she believed that to be my only hesitation. Stars knew, it was my primary one, but it certainly wasn’t the whole of it. *Knock them out, neutralize them – just do not allow their ignorance to stand in our way!*

It wouldn’t be that easy. It wouldn’t be that simple. And I knew Yudan would not act with such restraint.

He’d fallen into a battle-ready stance: muscles tensed, gaze fixed, green ‘saber held at guard.

The lightsaber that had once belonged to Malak’s old master.

Jolee must have pocketed Zhar’s weapon upon leaving the *Leviathan* – the old man must’ve decided Yudan was worth it after everything – and now Yudan thought to stand against him?

*What the frell is Yudan’s game?*

*He believes in our cause, Revan. Unlike the others, he understands – of course he does. He’s travelled this road with you before.*

She was right... but she was wrong, also. Yudan had made clear his primary objective again and again – and did that really fit with allegiance to me while I once more claimed the Star Forge in the name of the galaxy?

My gaze shifted to Juhani. Eyes narrowed, ears laid flat against the side of her head; in the illumination of her royal blue ‘saber, I could almost make out her fine fur quivering on end as she glared fiercely at Yudan. Ready to pounce.
Juhani had been with me since Tatooine, and there was no denying her unyielding stand against the Dark Side. More than perhaps anyone who followed me, I could rely on her loyalty – with the caveat that I stayed true to the right path.

**What is the right path, Revan?** The sound of a dismissive snort echoed through my mind. *Conquerors rewrite history in their own image to justify their actions. You know this. You know things are not black and white – Juhani never will. One poor decision led to her fall, because of her blind conceit that a true Jedi cannot fail. Rather than face the consequences of her actions, she ran away to cower on a foreign planet, believing a single misstep equated her as evil. Juhani is no authority – not on the matters we are dealing with.*

Bastila’s voice was a buzzing in my head. An intrusive eye, attempting to shape my indecisive thoughts as I struggled to think everything through-

**Of course I am trying to convince you! I have laid my motives bare. We have the stability of the galaxy at stake here, Revan – the galaxy!** There was an obvious thread of frustration running through her psychic monologue. Bastila had been concerned this communication would rouse Malak, but her desperation was overriding that now-

**Because you are faltering! Due to nothing more than meddlesome ignorance!**

Jolee’s mouth thinned. That small action, in the periphery of my vision, drew my attention back to him. He’d been involved in the Exar Kun conflict. He’d seen his wife fall. He understood the pitfalls of pursuing power – no matter the intentions used to rationalize it. Jolee had instigated this stand-off, for all that he had been the last to power on his weapon.

*He is willing to lay down his life for his values.* I had to respect his tenacity, at least. There was a grim acceptance in Jolee’s expression – for he’d already acknowledged that opposing me would mean his end.

*Can I really allow it to come to that?*

**While your reluctance to confront your friends is admirable, do not forget that two lives balanced against the weight of the whole are meaningless.**

*But where does it stop? When sacrifice merely begets more sacrifice, and with each death our souls are hardened to the very real cost-*

**You would prefer to sacrifice the galaxy?**

No, no... but I was missing something, here. And Bastila wasn’t helping any. *I need a moment,* I whispered to my frantic bond-sister. A clamminess stole over my skin as I stared upon the others. One move, right or not, would set everything into action.

If I followed Bastila, the crew would be trapped on Lehon. Carth might be able to launch, but only straight into a Sith bloodbath-

**The snubfighter can fit two. Yudan will follow you. The others- it would be better for them to stay on the planet.**

- unless the Republic Fleet turned up, but the Fleet had no hope of survival while the EMP scrambler was still active-
The scrambler is controlled on the Forge, Revan. If you so strongly desire it disabled, then it is yet another reason for you to travel here-

-because I’d certainly have time to go traipsing through an alien space station looking for the right controlling mechanism-

What are their lives to you, Revan? Her irritation was mounting, threading like skeins of dark emotion through the mind-link. The Republic forces travel here not just to end Malak, but also you. And myself, by proxy. The only threat they see is the Star Forge itself – which is naught more than a weapon.

My throat dried. Every argument Bastila thrust at me had truth in it, but each word also deepened my unease. What are their lives to me? There was a sense of unreality, of fuzziness fraying at the edges of my concentration as I considered that.

I’d answered Rulan Prolik’s interrogation over loyalty, and my disclosure had surprised me more than him.

Before... beyond the veil of amnesia that clouded my past- I knew I’d once turned against the Republic for valid reasons – with the arrogant intention of building a better, stronger Republic.

Because, once, Republic lives had been important to me.

I felt beads of sweat break out on my neck as the thoughts spun. Once, I’d led the Republic instead of conquering it. Once, I’d been willing to risk everything in the name of defense, of protection – anything I could, to help save as many Republic lives as I could.

Once, there had been nothing more important to me.

...

The Force sang.

I took one step into a massive hangar that stretched forever.

A thousand pinpricks of life shimmered ahead of me.

A thousand star pilots, their nervousness saturating the air as they faced away, listening to a panicked member of the brass trying valiantly to conceal just how badly the Republic was losing.

Flat words spoken to me earlier skimmed through my train of thought. “General Adashan wants us to pull back,” Yudan had said. His tone had been neutral, but I knew him too well to be fooled. Adashan’s sentiment sat as well with him as it did me. “He believes we are too valuable a resource to risk on the frontlines.”

We’d arrived the previous week, all thirteen of us. We burned with righteous determination to do what the High Council would not. If we allowed Adashan to herd us, we’d be of assistance – there was no doubt of that. Vital resources, to augment the midfield.

But thirteen Jedi following a traditional general’s command wouldn’t be enough to hold back the Mandalorians. Adashan lacked the foresight required to change the tide of war... or to upturn the game-board and play a different game entirely.

My fingers clenched around the anonymous mask I’d carried since Cathar.
In the centre of the hangar the officer was still firing out frantic orders. Behind him was line upon line of prepped snubfighters, waiting to launch into the skies.

But there was an undercurrent of fear amongst the crowd, whispering through the matrix of my Force awareness. The grunts out there didn’t believe in victory. They’d hold off the incoming wave of Mando fighters – this one, and the next – but their hearts had lost faith in the Republic prevailing.

In my mind, I could see the drawn cast to Em’s face from the previous day. Her gaze had been bleak as she’d relayed the news. “Kavar has returned to the Core.” She’d struggled to appear unaffected, as I’d struggled to bite back a curse regarding Kavar’s parentage.

His departure hurt Em personally, but worse- it undermined our position with the brass.

The High Council denied my final petition. The Order still refuses outright aid. And now, the military commanders and Senate bureaucrats see that not even a master is willing to lead us.

The Republic would fall. I could see it happening, if things stayed as they were. Traditional, Senate-ordered ripostes were completely ineffectual against Mandalorian shock-tactics and basilisk drops. Outer Rim planets were ceding from the Republic in response to overwhelming civilian casualties, while other sectors were willingly absorbed into the enemy’s ever-growing empire. Our morale was fractured by the waves of soulless refugees that had simply seen too much.

That same morale plummeted as the mystics- the saviours- the heroes that every little kid wanted to be- sat back and did nothing but meditate on a peace the galaxy no longer had.

What good is the Jedi Order, if we don’t protect peace itself?

I still felt the heat of Mal’s firm grasp as it had clasped mine. He’d found me, hours ago, seeing straight through my veneer of calm to the uncertainty that simmered beneath. “All of us followed you here, Revvie.” His whiskey-coloured eyes had been dark with fierce conviction. “Lead, and show the Republic what it means to fight alongside a Jedi.”

The mask sat heavy in my hand as I stared at the back of a thousand flight helms.

Weeks ago, back on Coruscant, as I’d waited for the Council’s impending denial of my petition, I’d had an idea. It wasn’t a path that appealed to me – but, maybe, it was a path that would give the Republic what they needed. What they deserved.

A faceless hero. A symbol of righteous might. An icon that taunted the enemy with their own face.

My fingers clenched again, and in a sharp movement I lifted the plain Mandalorian mask and placed it over my face.

No rank. Not a master, not a knight.

Just, simply, a Jedi.

The mask was more comfortable than I’d thought. The metal alloy had a certain flex to it that moulded perfectly around my face. With a steely conviction, I pulled up the hood of my grey travelling robe, and drew deeper on the Force.

Deep, deep, deeper.

The sensation was as rich as mola-syrup and as charged as a conduit about to blow. This hangar was the largest on Vanquo, hundreds of metres long; and yet I could trace out the electrical systems
of each individual snub in my head; feel the lilt of every turbine compressor as it warmed to life.

Taste the agitation and despair of the crowd as it seeped into the Force. It was a gnawing shakiness eating away at them all, a blackening of morale I had seen everywhere during my renegade year of truancy from the Order.

I was back on the frontlines, now, and this time I meant to stay.

The sound of my boot landing on the ferracrete floor was audible as I took a step closer towards a thousand Republic backs. My next footfall was louder still. The slightest breath on the Force was all I needed to amplify the echo of my strides.

Make an entrance. Make an entrance, and give them something to believe in.

I felt rather than saw when they first became aware of me.

Another, tiny, release of energy; just enough to let the air whip around in a benign display of power.

The crowd turned, the crowd parted, and the brass stuttered into silence.

The officer was a Sullustan, standing on a raised platform addressing the room. His large black eyes widened in astonishment. Commodore stripes marked his shoulder – I vaguely recognized him as Karath’s second.

Directly behind the man was one of the many snubfighters about to be deployed.

My focus narrowed. I lengthened my strides, jogging, running, sprinting with the celerity of the Force – leaping high as an influx of sweet energy boosted me clear over the startled commodore’s head.

I landed on the roof of the fighter, and whirled around to face the crowd.

No title, I reminded myself. No family. No face.

“I am Jedi Revan!” I bellowed, letting another wave of power deepen my voice, carry through to every sentient in the hangar. A vortex of energy swirled, billowing my cape out behind me. A thousand visors stared, transfixed.

In the centre of it all, I felt strangely calm.

“The Republic bleeds. The Republic burns. The Republic cries out for help, and the Jedi are here today to answer that call!”

My free hand clenched tight into a fist. I centred the Force around me in a swirl of visible static that unleashed as a show of bright sparks spitting out from my closed hand.

There were at least a few gasps.

“Imagine a war where we shield you from incoming fire. One in which we sabotage the enemy’s weaponry with a single thought. A war where we detonate mines from a distance, anticipate Mandalorian movements before they occur, and heal mortal wounds within minutes. This is the war I shall bring to you.” I called a ‘saber from my belt; in a showy twist, I thumbed it on before brandishing it in the direction of the far wall. “Myself, and twelve of the best Jedi Knights stand with you, ready to take the battle to the Mandalorians and show them that the Force fights with the Republic!”
My ‘saber was aimed pointedly at the others – for they had followed me in, silently watching from the back of the crowd, far enough away that I couldn’t even pick Mal out from the group. My friends, no more than a group of specks in my vision.

The brown of their robes was still noticeable, though.

There was a shuffling as many turned to look. I settled my awareness deep into the crowd – through the Force, every spark of life was inter-connected, every pinprick made up part of the whole.

And every single one was precious.

I could taste their awe as it began to build. Their fear, as it was slow to recede. And their disbelief – for twelve Jedi, I realized with a start, might not look like much from a distance to those who had never seen Jedi in action before.

I had to make them believe.

“One Jedi alone can change the outcome of a battle!” Reining the Force back in, I tightened it on the mass of durasteel beneath my feet. With my free hand raised aloft, the snubfighter gently rose a metre or so, just enough to make a statement.

The Sullustan officer on the platform was quick to scrabble down and disappear into the crowd. A spattering of gasps was audible; the first few lines of soldiers stumbled back from me in caution.

With a slow, measured drop of my hand, the snub returned silently to the hangar floor.

“Thirteen Jedi can do a lot more!” I called out, my voice resonating loud and clear with the Force. “But I stand before you today, before the whole of the Republic itself, and vow this: more Jedi will come. Many more. I have spoken with my brothers and sisters from Coruscant to Taris, and I speak for them now as I promise you: the Jedi have not forsaken the Republic! We stand with you, and we will fight alongside you!”

The words were true, and I unleashed them with all the passion I could muster. I’d talked with many during my disjointed journey to the frontlines. Kavar I’d failed to win over, but other Jedi had listened, had believed. Some were already following in my wake. Some were sitting back to see if we’d follow-through on our defiance of the Council’s decree. Then they’d come, too.

The Jedi hadn’t forsaken the Republic – only the High Council had.

I swung the ‘saber up high, now, pointing to the hangar’s roof like a golden beam of light.

“Up there, in the stars, I will be the first to fly against the Mandalorians. I will ride co-pilot, in this snub beneath my very feet, and show those bastards who dare burn our worlds and enslave our children what the Force is truly made of. I will teach them what it means to attack an enemy with the Force on their side!”

With a deliberate flash of static light, I levelled the ‘saber back down to point at the crowd. “The Force is with me. The Force is with you all. And we will not allow a horde of barbarians to take our worlds any longer!”

All eyes were on me. A battalion of Navy pilots, transfixed, following my every word. A singular focus, stripped of its earlier fear, and ready to be aimed at the enemy. This was what the Republic needed. Faith. “Death comes to us all, but not today. The Republic is worth dying for, but not today.
“Today, it is their turn. Today, we bring the war to the Mandalorians!”

There was a cheer; ragged, at first, as if half of them had forgotten their voices. It built louder, deeper, rolling into a frenetic, battle-ready echo of defiance.

The growing belief of so many bled into the fabric of the Force like a rich melody of life. I was part of it, as little or as great as every single sent who stood with me.

“Take to the skies! Let’s show those bastards what we stand for! Let’s reclaim our lost worlds! For the Republic!”

The cheer was louder, this time.

I brandished the golden ‘saber once more, spinning it around in a flamboyant arc. With one last burst of ionizing light, another charge of static erupted from my free hand, shooting harmlessly above my head.

“Now, we fight back!” I howled. “For the Republic!”

A second later, a thousand voices roared with me.

... The vision departed, leaving me gasping, stumbling back with its intensity.

There were three figures in front of me, but I could still see- hear- feel- the crowd I had faced.

Another step back- the visceral feeling of inter-connectedness with so many sentients- it was something I’d forgotten- that sensation of oneness-

In my head, there was a distinct impression of awe.

Bastila. My thoughts were sluggish, as the image of the hangar slowly dispersed into memory. I blinked, taking one last step back to steady myself. Bastila and her snub are behind me.

Bastila saw what I just remembered.

“Revan,” Jolee snapped. I looked up through blurry eyes to see him striding forward. It took a second to comprehend he was reacting to my movement. His earlier words scythed through my mind-

“I ain’t standing still if you take another step closer to that cursed snubfighter.”

A blur- Yudan launched himself into the air, ‘saber raised-

Sudden realization punched panic hard into my stomach.

“No!” I screamed. Desperation morphed into instinct, and I was calling out to the Force before even conscious of it. “Stop!”

The Force answered; and oh, there was a sibilant darkness to it here, a temptation to fill myself to the brink, the knowledge I could make everyone here do what I thought was best-

Get to the snubfighter, Revan, that’s all you need to do.

The power erupted from my outstretched hands, a concussive wave of need that slammed into all of
them. Yudan was knocked back before his ‘saber could reach Jolee; Juhani toppled down from mid-pounce; the old man sank to his knees-

The Force burned.

-anything you desire can be made a reality-

That power you wield – that is what we shall master, Revan. It is stronger, still, on the Star Forge. It is what we need. It is what the galaxy needs.

The kaiburr’s amplification transformed the Force into a raging torrent, laced with the cold desire to do my will. I could feel it responding to me, tightening around my crewmates and holding them fixed in a stasis prison, for all I wanted right then was a damn moment alone-

Hold them there, and come to me.

Air scraped against my throat. I could feel Yudan’s immediate attempts to hammer against my invisible bonds, followed a second later by Juhani. On my own, it should’ve taken some effort to contain three powerful, experienced Force-users this way.

-glimpses of the truth can be found here. and truth is power-

Jolee... he wasn't pushing back at all. Yudan's strength was beginning to buffet against mine-

-draw deeper, for you are master here. once again, you can be master-

That voice- but it wasn’t so much a voice, was it? More like a nebulous yearning that echoed from the kaiburr, and pervaded deep into my own Force connection. It promised the power to unleash my decree – like it had once before. The ability to do whatever I needed – whatever I wanted.

Revan, stop analysing everything- we don’t have time! Come to me!

And if I wanted the others silenced and stilled so I could think through my options, then why the frell wasn’t I thinking through my options?

Because power overwhelms. The thought came from deep within. An understanding, a comprehension, a lesson learned from past consequences. Overwhelms and corrupts free will, until nothing is left but the addictive pull of power itself:

Drawing back was hard. It was frelling hard. Like dragging out from a mud-bog, one torturous hand-hold at a time. The kaiburr-imbued Force didn’t want to be released, as if it had found a home immersed deep within my flesh.

-do not be alarmed. you know better this time. you are in control-

I wouldn’t be in control. And that damn voice wasn’t sentient. It was merely the Dark Side calling to my own weaknesses, so much stronger here on Lehon – but, in the end, a challenge that all Force-users faced in one form or another.

And the path to falling felt far too easy.

With a final, gut-wrenching discharge, I let the threads of power go.

“A moment,” I rasped, shaking slightly with reaction. “I need one damn moment to think.”
Yudan was the first to find his feet, golden lekku lying flat behind him as his burning gaze pinned on me. He’d dropped Zhar’s ‘saber – but in one swift movement it flew back to his grasp and reignited.

I jerked up a hand, palm first. “If you make one sodding move, Yudan, I swear I’ll wrap you back in stasis and throw you down the frelling pyramid. Just- just- stay still!”

His eyes narrowed and his grip firmed, but he otherwise remained motionless. Juhani launched upright, mirroring his actions, and a second later she was also standing with her weapon held aloft.

This time, at least, their attention was on me.

*Revan-*

**Quiet!** I half-snarled through the bond. *One sodding minute of quiet, Bastila!*

In the silence, I heard Jolee’s knees creak as he pushed himself upright. He was frowning, as if a grumble trembled on the edge of his lips – but he said nothing.

I drew in a loud breath, closed my eyes, and focused on calming the raging chaos of my mind. Pulled myself inwards, away from the bond, away from Bastila, and deep into my own core.

*The Republic Fleet is key, here.* My thoughts slowed down into a line of cool, ordered logic. *The scrambler is blocking the Fleet. Without the Fleet, the ‘Hawk has no chance of survival in the skies – regardless of whether I am onboard.*

A bloodbath in the skies between Malak’s armada and the Republic forces would provide an appropriate distraction for the *‘Hawk* to approach the Star Forge. Contrast that with journeying in a Forge snubfighter – where I had the element of surprise, of time, on my side – but I did not trust the origins of the craft itself, no matter Bastila’s assurances of its safety.

At the crux of my deliberation was the searing realization that I simply could not sacrifice lives so callously again. Not the lives of my crewmates, nor the thousands of anonymous troops from a Republic I had once sworn to defend.

*My first objective must be to disable the kaiburr,* I realized with a chill. *Before I embark on anything else. Before I travel to Bastila or go after Malak. There was still Carth’s plan – but I kept that thought small, tiny, hidden, from my bond-sister. For I didn’t trust her, not wholly, not while she was still Malak’s captive.*

*Carth will follow through even if I fly straight to Bastila.* But… the *‘Hawk* was outfitted with just one proton torpedo. While its turbolaser turrets should turn the pyramid into rubble, kaiburr crystals themselves were amongst the more indestructible of minerals. And one this size...

*The ‘Hawk will have a single shot to get it right.*

Maybe one of us had to traverse into the bowels of the pyramid itself. Actually *see* what mechanical enclosure surrounded the kaiburr, ascertain any other defences that may or may not be there, and judge how best to destroy it with the armament we had.

Getting that close to the source of the scrambler would be highly dangerous for any Force-user.

*Revan? What are you thinking? Is it the Republic Fleet causing this indecision?*

A cold anger bloomed deep in my gut. Bastila was allowing me no space, unlike the others who had withdrawn into silence-
I do not wish to be intrusive, Revan, but you are not thinking logically. You cannot compare a fleet with the whole of the galaxy-

I could block her. Draw deep into the Force, twisted as it was here, and block Bastila’s influence from my mind.

Or I could level the playing field. Bring her arguments to the table for us all to hear.

“Bastila,” I said out loud, snapping open my eyes to stare at the others. “Somewhere, you have to draw the line. And if you keep pushing it back and back, then the line fades. It blurs, it dissolves, until it eventually disappears.”

And there is no empathy left. And the greater good you were fighting for is no longer a good anything... just a cold, selfish drive for your own ambition.

I could feel her recoiling in reflex indignation.

::This is your line?:
f::A few hundred Republic ships?:

A soft breath escaped my lips, a hollow excuse of a laugh. “I’m not sure where my line is anymore, Bastila. But I know it has to be firmer than it was.”

There was an easing in Jolee’s grim countenance; the slightest hint of a nod. Acceptance. Maybe even approval.

I’d defend my decision to join the Mandalorian Wars until my dying breath... my conviction remained, that the Council had been too cautious: so scared of the past repeating itself that they failed to comprehend the magnitude of the Mandalorian threat. Had I done nothing, the Core would have fallen, billions more would have died, or been enslaved, and the Republic would have lost all faith in the Jedi as guardians.

Somehow, I knew the latter had happened regardless.

I’d spent years fighting an enemy in beskar. And when that enemy was broken, I found myself a new enemy. A greater one. And my actions ramped up in magnitude and consequence. All justified by my perceived belief in yet another threat to fight against – and strengthened by the power I had amassed during the years of Mandalorian conflict.

Power corrupts. Every idiot knew that. Power and the Force combined corrupts on a galactic scale.

I had no idea what this threat was – and part of me still wondered if Malak’s approach would have been the wisest course after all. Let sleeping demons lie. The galaxy might have been a different place if I’d only listened to a man I should remember more than I did.

Perhaps, if I had, I wouldn’t have fallen. Wouldn’t have transformed into a villain. A villain that, so far, had done a lot more damage than whatever had so shaken me out there in the Unknown Regions.

And if it felt so easy to succumb now – to surrender to the dark glory like I had on Tatooine, on Rii’shn, Manaan, the Leviathan – then attempting to master a corrupted Force weapon was the last thing I should be doing.

::Revan!: Bastila was angry. I could hear it behind me, feel it between us.
“Bastila.” My voice croaked. I caught Yudan’s gaze, tainted a fierce yellow from the shadows of our shared history, and was sharply reminded of the Jedi he must have once been. I swallowed, lifted my chin, and spoke louder. “I’ve done this before with the best of the Jedi, and it didn’t work. It didn’t frelling work then, Bastila-”

::You were not strong enough then, Revan! But together-::

“Strength in the Force is not everything!” I burst out. “And I’m not the same person I once was! I can only judge myself on events since the Endar Spire. Every time I’ve failed, I’ve been alone. It’s been my friends, at my side, who’ve drawn me back from the edge. Who’ve kept me strong.”

Golden bonds of friendship and love, a safety net of support, and a reminder of the cost-

And what am I?

The memory of the Leviathan simmered between us. Spiralling darkness, heady bloodlust, the sweet taste of righteous vengeance. Bastila had faith that such a fall wouldn’t recur, but I... I didn’t.

My heart stuttered as the realization chilled through me. And, between us, there was a sharp prick of hurt as she understood that.

“You are a friend,” I whispered. “A friend who needs the whole crew behind you, as much as I do.”

Bastila’s hurt tainted our connection with bitterness, before it shrivelled back beneath her determination.

::There is no other way to succeed.: Her words were cold with censure. ::You will remain stranded on that dead planet for Malak to target at his whim.:::

“There is another way.” A better way. A safer way. But I didn’t dare relay anymore of my thoughts regarding it. “I will not forsake you, Bastila. But I will not step into your snubfighter. Not like this.”

Everything paused for the briefest moment. I saw Jolee’s mouth twitch with the slightest of smiles; Juhani’s expression soften with relief. Yudan cocked his head- I couldn’t read him, but oh were we going to have words once we got down from this frelling pyramid-

::The Fleet will be here soon.:: Bastila bit out. ::Do you know what my orders are?:

“What?” I rapped out, spinning on my heel to face her. “When?” The demand ripped from me, a driving need to know exactly what she did. “Bastila, do you have intel on when they will enter this sector?”

Her copper eyes flashed bright with fierce emotion. I will convince you. Anyway I must. There was a gritty desperation in her thoughts that felt almost foreboding in nature, before she withdrew from me in one swift movement.

“Bastila-”

::I shall leave that to your imagination.:: The timbre of her voice cooled into clipped tones as she leaned back from the holo-com, face set in a pale, rigid mask of disapproval. I lurched out psychically, only to slam against a solid mental shield. ::Malak commands me to employ my battle meditation against all enemy ships that survive the scrambler’s signal. I remind you, once again, that they come here not only to destroy Malak and the Star Forge – but also you.:::

She was hiding- retreating behind a block that shimmered with the intensity of her growing fury. The
bond was a shadowy tunnel connecting our minds, one end closed tight with her command of the twisted Force that radiated from the Forge.

The Star Forge had to go.

“That hardly matters, in the grand scheme of things,” I forced out through gritted teeth. “I’ll see the Forge destroyed, Bastila. Like you planned from the beginning. Whatever is in the Unknown Regions isn’t worth the risk of using a cursed, dark relic that warps everyone idiotic enough to use it!”

::I will not disobey Malak and suffer his wrath while you dither over an inconsequential number of lives.:: Her eyes narrowed. ::What the scrambler does not destroy, I shall.:: It was a proclamation of intent, hard and sharp-edged like I’d never heard from her before. There was nothing seeping through our mind-link, now – I slammed hard against her shield, but there was no give. She’d well and truly distanced herself.

“Bastila!” Juhani gasped from behind me. “You cannot-”

::If these Republic lives mean so much to you,:: Bastila continued, ignoring Juhani, her voice growing in volume and steel as she stared me down, ::Then you best enter that snubfighter now and stop me yourself.::

Outrage, or shock, or a mixture of both, seared hot through my veins. She couldn’t mean-

“Do you hear yourself?” I snapped, fists curling, stepping closer to the holo-stand. “Employing blackmail, willing to kill simply to force me into doing your bidding-”

::I look to the greater good, Revan. As you once did.:: She could’ve been a statue, carved from chalk-stone, face tight with condemnation. ::Every minute you delay is another Republic ship downed.::

“Don’t you do this, Bastila!” I growled, voice thick with angry desperation, heart pounding loud in my head. Hot words firing into our bond- A fall is simply a series of stumbles into the darkness, justified or not! Damnit, Bastila, this is another stumble! She wasn’t hearing me. She wasn’t listening, not through the mind-link, not anymore. I threw myself psychically, harder, harder, pulling deep on the Force- “You’ll hate yourself for it-”

::You alone have the power to stop me. So, come and stop me.:: Her hand reached out, underneath the holo-cam, stretching towards the controls at her end. ::I shall see you soon.::

The image cut out.

And a signal sparked from the holo-stand as it powered down. The Force wavered in my grasp, turning instinctively to focus on the minuscule stream of electrons-

-oscillating straight back to the snubfighter, but it was a portable holo-stand, why was there a damn feed back to the ship-

Inside the snub, numerous devices on stand-by sprung to life-

My eyes widened.

“Trap!” I screamed, spinning around, the Force flaring out to the others in a haphazard shield. I was already sprinting back- “Run!”
The ground behind me exploded. A concussive wave of air punched me from behind, and I was flying, desperately struggling to hold firm on the Force as it wrapped around us all-

Metallic shards punctured my shield. I was plunging down, down, and my vision dimmed-

_We're falling into the pyramid. The top will collapse above us!_ The shield- it was clasped tight around the four of us, even as exploding rubble peppered it from all sides. I had to keep it intact-

Distantly, I was aware of pain scoring against my back. Behind, a screech of tortured metal as an entire wall crashed inwards. One edge of my shield shattered underneath the impact, and I lost all sense of Juhani-

_No!_ The Force thinned as my palms slammed into a moving surface- Jolee and Yudan blazed bright, adding their weight to my shield- but I could feel the fractures in our defense grow as debris rained down from above, fired by a second wave of detonation-

_Sithspit! Must- protect-

One last flare of Force, one last injection of power to hold back this collapsing ruin of Rakatan legacy-

Something sideswiped me. I was thrown forward into darkness. And then everything cut out.

xXx

Chapter End Notes

_Coming up next: HK-47 leaves the others behind in a bid to locate his master._

A gazillion thanks to kosiah for the beta, suggestions and corrections.
Input – Carth Onasi: “What in the blazes-”

Input – Canderous Ordo (Mando’a): “Damn!”

Audio/Visual Tracking: Explosion On Summit Of Star Forge Defense Structure

Analysing Visual Input ...
Conclusion: Multiple Permacrete Munitions Detonating On Summit

Hypothesis #1: Explosion Designed By Master Hypothesis #2: Explosion Designed By Unknown Hostiles To Target Master

Testing Hypotheses....
...Factor: Probable Objective Of Master To Rescue Bastila Shan
...Factor: Probable Objective Of Master To Deactivate Controlling Console
...Factor: Unknown Time Elapsed Since Master Left Ebon Hawk
...Factor: Master Not Known To Be In Possession Of Permacrete Munitions
More Data Required
Preliminary Conclusion: Hypothesis #2 Accepted

Audio/Visual Tracking: Flying Debris Entering Targeting Area

Sensor Scan: Target: Multiple: Incoming Debris
...Optical Sensors Lacking Required Illumination!
...Infrared Sensors Focusing:
#Warning: Interference From Kaiburr Affecting Long-Range Infrared Sensors

Visual/Thermal Tracking: Fixed On Incoming Debris

Input – Canderous Ordo: “Take cover!”

Analysis: Incoming Debris
...Debris: Multiple Projectiles Detected
...Debris: Velocity Of Debris Falls Within Movement Capabilities
...Debris: Trajectory Of Debris Calculated
Threat Assessment: Moderate
#Warning: Interference From Kaiburr Affecting Long-Range Infrared Sensors
Threat Assessment Modified: High

Evasive Protocols Engaged
Visual/Thermal Tracking: Canderous Ordo, Carth Onasi, Zaalbar Retreating Into Treeline

Primary Objective: Locate and Defend Master
...Factor: Allies Can Assist With Extraction
...Factor: Allies Are Fragile Organic Meatbags
...Factor: Allies Have Retreated
...Factor: Hypothesis #2 Implies Presence Of Unknown Hostiles
Primary Objective Amended: Locate And Defend Master With Urgency

Boosting Maximum Electrical Power To Motor System

Physical: Moving To Star Forge Defense Structure

Optical And Infrared Sensors Focusing On Incoming Debris
#Warning: Interference From Kaiburr Affecting Long-Range Infrared Sensors

Visual/Thermal Tracking: Multiple Projectiles Within Targeting Range

Physical: FC-1 Flechette Launcher Loaded
Target Lock: Closest Incoming Projectile
Physical: Firing FC-1 Flechette Launcher

Visual/Thermal Tracking: Closest Incoming Projectile Destroyed Count: HK-47 – 1; Debris – 0
Internal Response: Satisfaction

Optical And Infrared Sensors Focusing On Star Forge Defense Structure
Analysis: Star Forge Defense Structure....
...Factor: Explosions Have Ceased
...Factor: Estimated Height Of Defense Structure: 197 metres
...Factor: Detonation Affects Highest Portion Of Star Forge Defense Structure
...Factor: Estimated 91.34% Of Structure Remains Unscathed
...Factor: Infrared Sensors Malfunctioning: Kaiburr Scrambler Remains In Place
Conclusion: Quickest Method To Locate Master: Enter And Ascend Pyramid

Stealth Mode Enabled Assassin Protocols Enabled

Physical: Entering Pyramid

xXx

Closer Optical Examination Of Environment (Infrared):
Location: Stairwell Of Star Forge Defense Structure

Visual Identification Of Current Environment (Infrared):
...Calculated Ascension: 177.44 metres
...Archway To Inner Chamber Located Ahead
...Minor Damage Visible To Archway Framework
Conclusion: Entering Damage Zone

Echo Primary Objective:

Primary Objective: Locate And Defend Master With Urgency
...Factor: Unknown Hostiles May Be Present: Assume Force Abilities
...Factor: Master May Be Injured Due To Explosion
Conclusion: Prepare For Hostiles
Physical: Primary Blaster Primed

Boosting Power To Infrared Sensors
#Warning: Interference From Kaiburr Affecting Long-Range Infrared Sensors

Physical: Moving Through Archway

Scanning External Environment (Infrared):
...2 Organic Meatbags Detected On Far Side Of Room
...Ceiling Of Chamber Destroyed
...Debris In Chamber Blocking Alternative Exits

Target Analysis: Organic Meatbag 1
Species: Twi'lek, Male
Facial Recognition Analysis: Unavailable From Rear
Body Language Analysis: Alert, Tense
Visual Analysis: Crouching Over Organic Meatbag 2, Intent Unknown
Temporary Name Assigned: Tailhead Prey

Target Analysis: Organic Meatbag 2
Identification: Master
Body Language Analysis: Unconscious
Visual Analysis: Lying Prone On Ground, Injuries Unknown

Target Lock: Tailhead Prey

Initiating Combat....
Hidden User Defined Sub-Routine Activated: Master Command Required
Attempting Safety Override....
...Factor: Master Is Currently Indisposed
...Factor: Tailhead Prey Unknown Sentient
...Factor: Explosion Likely Caused By Unknown Hostiles
...Factor: Tailhead Prey Unaware Of HK-47: Surprise Attack Available
Conclusion: Tailhead Prey Fits Parameters Of Unknown Hostile: Force Abilities Assumed
Direct Threat Assessment: Extreme
Anecdote: Even A Force-User Can Be Taken Out With A Surprise Shot To The Head
Override Successful

Null-Force Field Activated #Warning: Null-Force Field Severe Drain To Primary Energy Source:
3.73 Minutes Remaining

Physical: Firing Blaster

Blaster Shot: Dodged By Tailhead Prey

Analysing....
...Factor: Speed Beyond Natural Capabilities Of Bipedal Sentients
Conclusion: Confirmed Force-User: Tailhead Prey

Evasive Protocols Engaged

Visual/Thermal Tracking: Tailhead Prey Activating And Throwing Lightsaber

Physical: Retreating Behind Archway
Incoming Projectile: Dodged

0 Meatbags In Targeting Area

Physical: C-22 Flame Carbine Powered On Target Lock: Archway

Visual/Thermal Tracking: Vibrations Around Archway

Analysing....
...Factor: Debris Shaking Loose From Archway
Conclusion: Force-Propelled Concussive Wave Directed At Archway
Predictive Algorithm: Tailhead Prey Will Launch Follow-Up Physical Attack

Physical: Igniting C-22 Flame Carbine

Tailhead Prey Within Targeting Range

Carbine Discharge: Direct Hit To Tailhead Prey
Analysing....
...Carbine Discharge Force-Reflected By Tailhead Prey
...Calculating: Superficial Impact Only
...Visual/Thermal Tracking: Tailhead Prey Retreating Into Chamber

#Interrupt: Facial Recognition Match: Yudan Rosh Reference Apathetic Fleshbag
Permanent Name Assigned: Yudan Rosh To Tailhead Prey Reference Apathetic Fleshbag

0 Meatbags In Targeting Area

#Interrupt: Master Defined No-Kill List Activated: Identified Match: Yudan Rosh
...Internal Response: Disappointment

Reassessing Calculation Of Hostile Intent To Master: Unable To Compute

Physical: Kamino Saberdart Readied (Non-Lethal)

Output: “Suggestion: Shall we engage in a cessation of hostilities, Apathetic Fleshbag, at least until the master is awakened?”

Input – Yudan Rosh: “A combat droid appears from nowhere, attempts to kill me, and then pleads for mercy?”
Voice Stress Analysis: Mocking

Input – Yudan Rosh: “Walk back into the room, little droid. I will be glad to show just how merciful I can be."

Calculating Threat To HK-47: Extreme
Calculating Threat To Master: Unable To Compute

Primary Objective: Protect Master
#Warning: Null-Force Field Severe Drain To Primary Energy Source: 1.01 Minutes Remaining

Physical: Entering Chamber
Physical: Moving Through Archway
Physical: Firing Kamino Saberdart

Kamino Saberdart: Deflected By Yudan Rosh
Visual/Thermal Tracking: Yudan Rosh Unleashing Force-Driven Electrical Discharge

Electrical Discharge: Negated By Null-Force Field

Evasive Protocols Engaged: Rolling To Ground

Physical: Firing Kamino Saberdart

Auditory Input: Groan
Source: Master

Kamino Saberdart: Deflected By Yudan Rosh

Output: “Demand: Master, permission to remove Apathetic Fleshbag from your banal and nonsensical no-kill list?”

Physical: Moving To Master

Visual/Thermal Tracking: Yudan Rosh Raising Clenched Fist
Analysing...
...Force-Attack Assumed: Bodily Constriction Or Weapon Disarmament Likely

Force Attack: Negated By Null-Force Field

#Warning: Null-Force Field Severe Drain To Primary Energy Source: 0.71 Minutes Remaining

Input – Yudan Rosh: “A droid with incorporated Fett technology?”
Voice Stress Analysis: Disbelieving

Input – Master: “Wha- what the frell is going on?”
Voice Stress Analysis: Groggy

Output: “Statement: One of your followers is intent on my destruction, master, over a simple misunderstanding. Repetition: Permission to remove him from your inefficient no-kill list, so we can blast him and save ourselves the trouble of any tedious melodrama sure to follow?”

#Warning: Null-Force Field Severe Drain To Primary Energy Source: 0.06 Minutes Remaining
Null-Force Field Deactivated

Input – Yudan Rosh: “Revan. Why is this demented droid calling you master?”
Voice Stress Analysis: Flat

Visual/Thermal Tracking: Yudan Rosh Deactivating Lightsaber

Primary Objective Completed

Exiting Combat Mode

Input – Master: “Er-”
Voice Stress Analysis: Confused

Visual/Thermal Tracking: Master Moving To Sitting Position

Sensor Scan:
Target: Master
…Physical Analysis: Movement Is Slow But Unhindered
…Body Language Analysis: Conscious, Tense, Shaky, Organic Breathing Patterns Within Normal
Human Parameters
…Infrared Analysis: Body Temperature Within Normal Human Parameters, Minor Elevation To Internal Blood Pump Frequency
Conclusion: Master Is Mildly Concussed

Input – Yudan Rosh: “And what exactly does he mean by a no-kill list?”

Input – Master: “That’s... a good question. HK?”
Voice Stress Analysis: Faint

Output: “Explanation: As Dark Lord of the Sith, you had a short-list of sentients I was not allowed to harm in any meaningful fashion, should I encounter them during any of your assignments. I believe you had an ulterior motive for their survival rather than any sort of sentimental lapse, as is so frequent in sentients hampered with inefficient biological processors.”

Input – Master: “Yudan, meet HK-47. Apparently, he used to be my personal assassination droid.”
Voice Stress Analysis: Weary

Output: “Conjecture: Master, the equivocation of past tense is disingenuous.”

Input – Yudan Rosh: “He’s Star Forge built, isn’t he?”
Voice Stress Analysis: Angry

Output: “Statement: I am a product of the Master’s inspired programming and the technological superiority of the Star Forge. It is no boast to state that I am both unique and unmatched in design, functionality, and statistical philosophy.”

Auditory Input: Harsh Laugh
Source: Yudan Rosh

Input – Yudan Rosh: “Who’s on this supposed no-kill list, then?”

Output: “Retort: I don’t take orders from you, Apathetic Fleshbag. One word from my master-”

Input – Master: “HK. Answer the damn question.”


Input – Yudan Rosh: “How informative. Revan, I can see why you have allowed this deranged apparatus of pedestrian taunts to stick around.”
Voice Stress Analysis: Sarcastic

Output: “Conjecture: I was still assimilating my thesaurus at the time those references were created, Apathetic Fleshbag. Perfection is not an expeditious process, even for a superior artificial lifeform such as myself.”

Input - Master: "HK, shut up. And include every member of my crew, whether here or elsewhere, on that damn no-kill list. And Yudan- stop insulting my frelling droid. Instead, why don't you explain why you were one inch away from lopping Jolee's head off?"
Voice Stress Analysis: Vehement

Input – Yudan Rosh: “I was allowing you a choice.”

Input – Master: “Cut the crap. I could have- we could have left without resorting to killing- dammit,
Yudan, I don’t even get how you could supposedly support both sides—”

Input – Yudan Rosh: “Is this really the time?”

Input – Master: “I- Stars, the others! Where- where are they?”
Voice Stress Analysis: Frantic

Visual/Thermal Tracking: Master Moving To Standing Position
Visual/Thermal Tracking: Master Unsteady On Bipedal Limbs

Input – Yudan Rosh: “I have not had the chance to investigate the area, nor look for the others. Sit down, Revan, before you topple over—”

Input – Master: “If you make one more move against any of them—”

Input – Yudan Rosh: “Revan. You have made your decision. Your allies will not stand against you, and I will not strike out at them.”

Facial Analysis: Master: Glaring
Body Language Analysis: Master: Disbelieving

Input – Master: “This conversation is not over, Yudan. Dammit- HK, can you sense Jolee or Juhani nearby?”

Output: “Answer: No. Extrapolation: My long-range biothermal sensors are affected by the residue of the Star Forge Defense System, master. Any scan beyond the closest proximity gleans results about as accurate as competitive projectile vomiting.”

Input – Master: “The kaiburr- I can still feel it travelling into the skies- but the roof of the pyramid is caved in ahead—”

Visual/Thermal Tracking: Master Moving Towards Destroyed Section Of Chamber

Input – Yudan Rosh: “I am unfamiliar with the material of this structure, but the signal passes through the rubble unimpeded. This is likely by design.”

Visual/Thermal Tracking: Master Levitating Debris

Input – Master: “Help me.”
Voice Stress Analysis: Commanding

Visual/Thermal Tracking: Master and Yudan Rosh Levitating Debris

Sensor Scan (Infrared): Target: Star Forge Defense Structure Inner Chamber
#Warning: Interference From Kaiburr Affecting Long-Range Infrared Sensors
...2 Organic Lifeforms Detected Underneath Debris

Output: “Observation: My infrared scanners are—”

Input – Master: “Jolee!”

Input – Yudan Rosh: “He’s fine. Coming to, even as we—”

Input – Jolee Bindo: “There you are. What have you been waiting for, an engraved invitation?”
Voice Stress Analysis: Groggy
Sensor Scan:
Target: Jolee Bindo
...Physical Analysis: Minor Bruising Noticeable, Organic Breathing Patterns Within Normal Human Parameters
...Infrared Analysis: Upper Torso Constricted By Debris, Body Temperature Within Normal Human Parameters
...Body Language Analysis: Conscious, Alert, No Further Signs Of Physical Distress
Predictive Analysis: Force Shielding Prevented Serious Injury
Conclusion: Jolee Bindo Is Healthy

Input – Master: “Jolee, are you okay?”

Input – Jolee Bindo: “Oh, I’m fine. Nothing a hip replacement or two won’t cure. How about you get this darn thing off my chest?”
Voice Stress Analysis: Disgruntled

Visual/Thermal Tracking: Debris Removed From Jolee Bindo

Visual/Thermal Tracking: Jolee Bindo Moving To Sitting Position

Input – Master: “I lost Juhani from the shield before the end. She’ll- she might have-”
Voice Stress Analysis: Worried

Input – Jolee Bindo: “Well don’t lollygag about then, young pup. Let’s get this rubble moved.”

Visual/Thermal Tracking: Master, Yudan Rosh and Jolee Bindo Levitating Debris

Incoming Transmission: Source: Dynamic-class Freighter Communication Device

Physical: Accepting Transmission

Input – Yudan Rosh: “There she is. Look.”

Input (Dynamic-class Freighter Communication Device) – Canderous Ordo: “Tinhead, where the kriff have you disappeared to? Again?”

Input – Jolee Bindo: “Stop! Don’t move that section! She’ll bleed out!”

Sensor Scan:
Target: Juhani
...Physical Analysis: Left Lower Limb Mostly Severed By Metallic Framework, Organic Breathing Patterns Below Normal Cathar Parameters
...Infrared Analysis: Lower Torso And Limbs Constricted By Debris, Body Temperature Within Normal Cathar Parameters. Internal Blood Pump Frequency Below Accepted Levels, Severe Blood Loss Noticeable
...Body Language Analysis: Unconscious, Limp
Conclusion: Juhani Severely Injured, Mobilization Risk To Organic Life

Output (Dynamic-class Freighter Communication Device): “Explanation: While you were cowering in an attempt to prevent any damage to your fragile outer coating, I have been completing my primary objective.”

Input – Master: “Oh no, is that her-”
Voice Stress Analysis: Stricken
Input (Dynamic-class Freighter Communication Device) – Canderous Ordo: “Do you want your robotic trap welded shut?”

Input – Jolee Bindo: “Make yourself useful, sonny boy, and put her in your fandangled deep stasis. I’ll see what I can do.”
Body Language Analysis: Purposeful

Input – Master (whispered): “This is my fault.”

Output (Dynamic-class Freighter Communication Device): “Sarcasm: My tactile receptors are aquiver in anticipation.”

Visual/Thermal Tracking: Jolee Bindo Kneeling Next To Juhani
Visual/Thermal Tracking: Yudan Rosh Moving To Juhani

Input – Master: “I- HK, is that-”
Voice Stress Analysis: Shaky

Input – Master: “Give me the comm, HK.”

Physical: Dynamic-class Freighter Communication Device Relinquished To Master

Input – Master: “Where are you, Canderous?”

Input (Dynamic-class Freighter Communication Device) – Canderous Ordo (Mando’a): “Revan. I see you’re not dead.”
Voice Stress Analysis: Pleased

Input (Dynamic-class Freighter Communication Device) – Carth Onasi: “Revan-”
Voice Stress Analysis: Emotional

Input (Dynamic-class Freighter Communication Device) – Canderous Ordo: “We’re just inside this alien treefort. Onasi and Carpet are with me. State your location, and we’ll intercept you.”

Input – Master: “Just- just keep heading up. There’s only one stairwell, and nothing here that affects non-Force users. Hurry- we need... we could do with some help.”

Input (Dynamic-class Freighter Communication Device) – Carth Onasi: “On it.”

Input (Dynamic-class Freighter Communication Device) – Canderous Ordo: “On my way.”

Audio Tracking: Dynamic-class Freighter Communication Device Deactivating

Input – Jolee Bindo: “Let’s hope they thought to bring medpacs with them. This limb can’t be saved, though. We’re going to have to deal with it here.”

Input – Master: “Oh, Juhani-”

Output: “Observation: The loss of an organic limb represents the opportunity for Brooding Tabby to improve her flesh-like status with superior cybernetic prosthetics. Frankly, master, this incessant moping is as illogical as it is inefficient.”

Facial Analysis: Master: Furious
Body Language Analysis: Master: Aggressive

Output: “Appeasement: Er, I mean, nice master, goo-oood master.”
Input – Master: “HK. Get out of here. Get to the bottom of the pyramid, and locate that damn kaiburr. Run an analysis on how we can destroy it with the armament of the Ebon Hawk, and upload your calculations directly to the ‘Hawk’s navicomputer. Not another word. Not another damn word until I give you leave to speak.”
Voice Stress Analysis: Cold

New Objective Received

Output: “Statement: Of course, master. Shutting up now.”

Physical: Leaving Chamber

xXx

Chapter End Notes

Coming up next: Revan's POV as the troops head back to the ship. Explanations and reconciliations ahoy.
A megatonmilliong thanks to kosiah for the beta.
If I hadn’t run off alone...

The temptation to sink into guilt was familiar. As familiar as the tinny scent of blood and burnt metal that distorted the air. The acrid smell of warfare that part of me recognized all too well.

Juhani’s limp figure lay some metres ahead, wedged firmly under a collapsed wall of alien metal. I felt my teeth grit as I stared at her body, bloodied and half-concealed by the kneeling form of Jolee.

I had no right to guilt. It was Juhani’s decision to come here. Just as it was her choice to stand against Bastila. Juhani was my crewmate, my comrade... not my follower, despite what Bastila had espoused. Juhani had thrown her life on the line for her values, and I had to respect that. I knew my Cathar friend – she would willingly bear the sacrifice of a limb, and call it a fair exchange.

“We wait for the others, then we free Juhani,” Jolee said, in a low voice that matched the grimness in my soul. He was crouching over Juhani, an amber figure glowing softly in my Force-enhanced vision. Spilled blood speckled a lattice of blue-black over his steady hands. “We need a more suitable place to assess that leg.”

“I thought you said the leg couldn’t be saved,” Yudan intoned. “A lightsaber will give a clean, cauterized cut. I didn’t pick you as the sort to shy away from hard choices.”

Yudan was idly twirling the deactivated hilt in his grasp, as if field amputations were commonplace to him. Perhaps they were. I felt the sensation of familiarity heighten, and I didn’t need a flash of the past to know this was the sort of situation I’d been in countless times before.

“Don’t assume you know me, sonny boy.” Jolee’s rejoinder was no more than a mild rebuke. His attention was fixed upon his palms as they gently pressed against Juhani’s upper thigh. “I ain’t chopping off legs without adequate reason to. Her limb’s a goner, but with proper medical facilities more of it can be saved-”

“Proper medical facilities?” The derision in Yudan’s voice was palpable. “Is that what you call your storage closet filled with kolto ‘derms and kiosk-strength painkillers?”

“Not the ‘Hawk,” I cut in. “Jolee’s thinking about afterwards.”

“Aye,” Jolee assented. He raised one hand, and I felt the Force draw to him, gentle and unassuming, as his ‘saber rattled free from underneath a pile of debris. A second later, it thudded into his grasp, and Jolee deftly cinched it onto his belt. “The Star Forge beckons, sonny boy. After that, we’ll either be space dust or nestled in the bosom of a Republic Fleet. With fancy med-droids and bacta tanks aplenty.”
“That’s an assumption or two,” Yudan drawled. He stood back from Jolee, arms hanging loosely at his sides, and lekku trailing proud behind him. As casual as Yudan’s stance was, I could sense an undercurrent of readiness about him. I wasn’t sure if the man ever truly relaxed. “I have seen enough to know you deal to injuries with immediacy, for predicting the future is no more than a spice junkie’s game.”

“Jolee’s right,” I said softly. “Leg or no leg, Juhani is too injured to assist in any meaningful way on the Forge. If we had more time for her to recover…” I trailed off, as I eyed over a skewer of metal that stabbed into the Cathar’s hip. It wasn’t just her leg that needed seeing to. “We keep her under and treat the wounds. We leave the leg alone. And, stars willing, she’ll be in better hands within a day or two.”

My gaze drew unerringly to Yudan’s. He tilted his head in a slight gesture of acquiescence, but I wondered if he was thinking the same as me. Victory means us in the hands of the Republic. Yudan Rosh and Revan Freeflight. It would be an ending rather than a beginning for the likes of us.

One step at a time. Focus on what’s needed, right here and now. I shut my eyes against the indigo backdrop of Force sight, and centred myself.

Emotions sat like sick in my gut. Not just guilt- for I couldn’t deny that anger seethed in my soul as well. At Bastila, at Yudan. At the awareness that a friend’s leg might be only a sliver of the final cost. And inflaming everything, interleaving deep within the Force, was the kaiburr's susurrating promise of power.

Yet... yet, calming the morass of those emotions, rising above them, and spurning the crepuscular voice that tempted me with the weight of my own desires... it was becoming easier.

Gently, I once more unfurled my senses. A clean, raw strength rushed through my limbs, and a second later my lightsaber flew home into my palm. When I looked up, it was to see Yudan still appraising me from the other side of the room.

“Bastila set this up,” he stated, as if daring me to deny the truth. “She betrayed you.”

“No.” An instinctive denial rallied forth from my lips. No more than reflex, really; an innate response to refute that anyone so close to me would succumb to treachery-

“You have always been blind, Revan, when it comes to the few who truly know you.” There was a damnable look of something close to pity on Yudan’s face. I felt myself flush in mild irritation. Yudan had never met Bastila. He didn’t know a sodding thing about our relationship-

Not Bastila. The bleak realization chased away my ire. He’s referring to Malak.

Had I ever predicted Malak’s betrayal? Considered it? Taken into account the possibility?

Somehow, I didn’t think so.

I’d always been more powerful than him, a voice whispered. But he’d always been able to surprise me.

“No,” I repeated, softer now, my thoughts less reactive as they skirmed over recent events. “It wasn’t Bastila’s betrayal.” Not when it might mean her death. “She knew nothing of the explosion. Malak’s hand was behind that.”

“You believe Bastila Shan would never betray you?” One brow shot up in disbelief. “Malak Devari swore undying love to you once, Revan. He promised fealty. He knelt and named you master. What
makes you convinced Bastila Shan would stay true when Malak did not?"

I glanced away, my lips twisting. “I never shared a Force bond with Malak. No, he used Bastila. Used her to lure me to top of the pyramid and straight into that primed snubfighter.”

He must have considered that I might not fall into line with Bastila’s desires. That I might have enough warning to survive. The whole chain of events had an orchestrated feel to it, like Bastila had been set up to take the fall. What does Malak think I’ll do next, once he realizes I still live? Turn on Bastila? Maybe. If he ever understood the depths of our bond-

I bit off a broken laugh. I didn’t understand the depths of our sodding bond.

“I’m glad you find something amusing in this situation,” Yudan said, his voice droll. “For I fail to.”

“Oh, there’s nothing amusing about any of this,” I muttered, my eyes narrowing as a flash of Yudan’s swinging lightsaber burned through my mind. One inch closer, and it would have seared into Jolee’s neck. The old man hadn’t commented on it so far, but I damn well was not going to let it lie. “Or about—”

Something sparked in the Force; close enough that I halted, mid-speech. There was a scuffling noise from the stairwell-

“The others,” I murmured, turning back to face the archway.

The armoured hulk of Canderous was the first to appear. He took one step inside, visored face scanning the room, his repeating blaster hefting in his grasp.

“Is this area secure?” he demanded, in lieu of greeting.

“We’re the only ones here.” Something inside me eased as Zaalbar and Carth followed him in. Despite everything – Bastila, Juhani’s injury, the scrambler – we’d find a way forward. I didn’t know how much to believe in the frelling will of the Force these days, but there’d be a solution. There always was.

“The princess?”

I shook my head. With a deft twist of a plated gauntlet, Canderous broke open a light-stick and threw it into the room. Invariably, my gaze trailed to Carth. I couldn’t see his expression behind the visor he wore, but I could feel the heaviness of it.

“What happened?” Carth asked. His voice was low, and brimming with intensity.

“Give me a hand over here,” Jolee cut in before I could answer. “And tell me you brought some darn medkits with you. We have to get Juhani moved, so leave off the recriminations until we’re back at the ‘Hawk.”

There was a distressed moan from Zaalbar as they collectively looked to the limp form of the Cathar. Metallic rubble had collapsed over her legs, but the primary source of concern was the sharp edge of a panel shearing diagonally into her left thigh. From this angle, it looked to have sliced almost entirely through the limb. Blood pooled beneath Juhani’s body, saturating up the sides of her robe. While Yudan’s stasis may have slowed the bleeding, now, I was worried about the amount that had already been spilled.

Carth took one step towards me, before striding purposefully to Jolee, shrugging off his pack and upending it.
“(Jen. You ran off alone),” Zaalbar admonished, his rumble gravelly with discontent. “(I may not understand all that you face, but I thought you understood I have a right to face it with you).”

“Bastila begged me to hurry,” I replied, staring at the steadiness of Carth’s hands as he pulled out hypo-sprays and bactawraps from one of the ‘Hawk’s medkits. “I thought she might be here in person. I-”

I couldn’t deny her. Her desperation, her urgency. Her need. We stood on opposite sides, now, but the link between us was ever-present.

“But the princess ain’t here,” Canderous ground out. “Revan. What the kriff happened?”

Mala happened.

“Bastila wanted me to travel to the Forge alone,” I said, semi-absently, as I watched Carth inject drugs into Juhani’s thigh. It brought back a fleeting recollection of his expertise dealing with Belaya’s broken ribs. He’d had more than basic medic training. Despite everything we’d gone through, it made me realize how many parts of his past I didn’t know. “She thought she was acting without Malak’s knowledge. She underestimated him.”

That drew a dismissive snort from Canderous. “Well. She always had a penchant for missing the obvious.”

“Yeah. You could say that.” The bond was still quiet. A dead, empty tunnel ending in a barricade. Had anything filtered through to her? Did she have any idea what happened... how bad the repercussions could have been?

I didn’t think so. But Malak wouldn’t allow her to remain ignorant for long. Which meant... will she reach out to me? Malak will make her. Malak will...

“Malak will understand we are alive, and soon,” Yudan weighed in, echoing my thoughts. “He will move against us, if the Fleet doesn’t distract him.”

I saw Carth’s shoulders stiffen at that. “Do you have intel on the Fleet?” he demanded, without turning from his position next to Juhani.

“No,” I whispered, as I considered my next words. Throw the truth out there. Best we are all prepared for what is to come. “But Bastila plans on using her battle meditation against them.”

Carth inhaled, a sharp intake of air audible within the room. This time, he did turn. “Are you serious?”

"Yes." The word breathed out as I recalled the fiery passion of Bastila's conviction. She was utterly convinced of something worse out there, worse than Malak, worse than the downfall of the Republic. I knew we couldn't harness the Star Forge without losing ourselves, no matter our intentions- and the thought that Bastila might be wrong about a threat lurking beyond known space had skirled wildly through my head more than once. But, perhaps, I also had to consider- what if she's right?

"Maybe you saw HK on your way up - he's gone to assess the kaiburr," I continued, my thoughts still on my bond-sister even as I relayed the information. "We'll destroy the scrambler, wait until the Fleet arrive as a cover, and then travel to stop Bastila. Extract Bastila."

If Bastila was right, if I had been right, last time – and, frankly, I’d had a lot more information then than I did now – then what else could I do about it?
I needed to focus on Bastila. Malak. The Star Forge. But the possibility that I might not prevail had to be taken into account. The idea that the galaxy itself might have no inkling of something worse-

Something worse than Malak ruling as Dark Lord?

“Why’d I go to the Unknown Regions?” The words came out low and hard. I stared at Yudan, before transferring my focus to Canderous. Two people with me, who might have some idea of the missing link. Yudan had said I’d discovered ruins of a Sith Academy on Malachor V that pointed to the Star Forge. I’d found something else in the Unknown Regions. But how were the two associated? What had propelled me beyond known space? “I went straight there after Malachor – why?”

There was a heavy pause as both men appraised me. Yudan hadn’t been at Malachor. Canderous had only been on the fringes. I didn’t know what sort of answer I expected from them, but it surprised me to hear Carth speak instead.

“The party line was that you led a third of the Republic Fleet to mop up the remnants of the Mandalorians.” His voice was so quiet I could barely hear it. “Maybe some of the Clans led you there.”

“No.” Canderous’ negative was sharp and harsh. “Even in the face of defeat, even broken, we Mando’ade do not run. And we know well the risks of venturing into unknown space.”

“You always believed the Mandalorian Wars masked another purpose,” Yudan uttered. “To lure the Jedi into outright battle.”

“Huh. It was me who did that, in the end.” I bit back a bitter laugh. “Under the guise of building a stronger Republic.”

“There’s no denying the Republic was weakened after the Wars,” Carth said slowly. He was still kneeling next to Juhani, but his concentration was firmly fixed on the conversation. “Even in victory. But a deeper reason behind the Mandalorian offensive other than their love of combat? Blast, I don’t know.”

“Combat and honour make a warrior. Family and blood make a clan.” Canderous shifted, slinging his weapon over a shoulder before folding his arms. “But it is Mand’alor’s will that has always united us, whether into battle or peace.”

“Mandalore’s will…” I trailed off, frowning. The Mandalorian culture sometimes had the feel of a dictatorship about it. Clan leaders had clout, sure, but it was Mandalore who ruled above all. Above blood, above individual desires, above Clan honour.

What was your will? A voice demanded. It sounded like mine. To throw your people against mine? To claim territory you had no hope of holding for long, even had you won?

“He dreamed our battle songs would echo through the ages,” Canderous added. There was a faint touch of nostalgia in his voice. He must have been so invested, once – Canderous, a significant leader from a significant clan. “We Mando’ade have always followed our Mand’alor, even if it meant leaving our posts in the Outer Rim.”

The Outer Rim... the traditional home of the Mandalorians.

Why leave the Outer Rim? The heart of your Clan territories? Why over-extend in a fashion that would weaken the Mandalorians, much as it did the Republic?
A ghostly throb of pain lanced deep into my stomach. My hands pressed there instinctively, as an echo of discomfort travelled down one leg.

What set you on this path, Mandalore?

..."They tricked me," the burly man gasped. A dark rivulet of blood dribbled over his thick, fleshy lips. I dug my palm tight against the deep slash in my gut, and had the inane idea that it was the only thing still holding my guts inside. “We were never meant to win this war. They used me and my people to test the Republic’s strength.”

I pushed the pain back. It was unimportant. The Force could hold my flesh in for now.

“Who used you?” I demanded. I had to get off this dustball planet, and quick. Em and Xaset were waiting for my command, and it had to be now. Now, while most of the Clan leaders were rallied here, at the culmination of everything.

I did not want to think about the sacrifice ahead. There was no way I could pull all the troops out. Not in time. Not while so many Mando warships sat in orbit, like sitting tach, halted from any offense only due to the mystique of a blood duel on their sacred planet.

“The Sith.” Bubbles of death trapped in his throat, distorting his words. Proud blue eyes creased with virulent dislike as they glared up at me.

“The Sith?” I’d thought it before, but I’d never been certain. The Sith were an ideology that hadn’t been heard from since the demise of Exar Kun. And, yet, Kun had involved the Clans back then, hadn’t he?

A rasping laugh coughed mockingly from the older man’s lungs. “Not those pretenders from a generation ago. You want to see the real puppet-master behind my work, little jetii? Follow my trail beyond the Outer Rim. Follow my footsteps. You’ll be played, just as I was.”

...“Revan, why are you clutching your side?”

I stared down blindly. My fingers clawed deep into my stomach. I expected to see dark blood oozing over my hand, and yet there was nothing.

My other hand... my other hand was holding an ornate, horned helm. A symbol of leadership, an icon of Mandalorian history more powerful than the mask I’d bartered against it. I’d always planned to destroy their cursed helm, launch another blow against the unification of the Clans, another strike at their common banner-

But the Clans held parts of the Outer Rim firm. They always had. Not all sectors, no, but if anything was going to emerge from beyond known space, it would likely be the Mandalorians who encountered it first.

And now I was one blow away from breaking them entirely.

My fingers clenched against nothing. The destruction at Malachor had happened regardless, but I remembered making one slight change to my plans, that day. One out, in case there was ever a need for the Clans to rally again-
“Canderous,” I croaked. “Throw me your comm.”

*HK. I can leave a message with HK-*

I *needed* to focus on Malak. This wasn’t the time to go chasing the ghosts of the past. But that didn’t mean I couldn’t leave a trail of crumbs behind.

xXx

The walk back through the Lehon undergrowth was sombre. Jolee led the way, pulling aside the bracken with a good-natured grumble as Zaalbar carried the unconscious Juhani in his arms. Low-lying brambles and spurs of sprawling shrubs made the journey vaguely unpleasant, but at least I knew it to be a relatively short walk back to the beach.

Canderous brought up the rear, dominating the conversation with an ongoing cross-examination of HK and his knowledge of the Star Forge. I was grateful for the distraction, listening to their diatribe with half an ear. For Carth strode next to me, and I knew he was just waiting for a moment to speak. I didn’t know if I was sensing something with the Force, or if it was the way he kept turning to face me, but I could tell he was brimming with barely held-back questions. The personal mingling with the important. It made me feel an uncertainty I couldn’t afford.

Sooner or later, he was going to interject-

“Revan, what... what did you need to say to that blasted droid that was so important?”

I tensed. I had asked the others – told them, really – to grant me ten minutes alone. Used Canderous’ comm to organize a private rendezvous with HK outside the pyramid, while I left my crewmates behind to deal with Juhani.

Of course, HK had remained obstinately silent until I’d lifted the sodding gag order-

Well, it was done, now. HK had his future commands and a holo-recording for safe-keeping. I had no idea if it would make any difference in the end, but at least the knowledge from Malachor was somewhere else other than the murky fractures of my head.

“A message for someone,” I said quietly. “It’s- it’s not important right now, Carth.”

He wasn’t going to let that go easily – and I couldn’t blame him. Carth had always disliked a lack of transparency, and such a vague answer from the likes of me made it worse by an order of magnitude.

But as I wasn’t sure about the message, about my memory, about the truth of anything I recalled-

No. It was best to keep it private, for now.

"HK's uploaded his assessment of the scrambler's mechanism to the 'Hawk," I offered, in the faint hope that Carth would be suitably distracted. The assassination droid had completed his objective before my transmit to him and, in that regard, things actually looked promising. "If we open with the turbolasers to damage the outer framework of the pyramid, we can follow up with the proton torpedo. It should be enough to disable the scrambler – if not destroy the kaiburr entirely."

All we needed was the Republic Fleet to arrive, now. *And the 'Hawk to be flight-worthy.*

“*I know.*” Carth’s response was curt. “I heard the tail-end of his report when I exited the pyramid, Revan.”
“Oh.” I felt strangely tense and awkward as we dwindled into silence. The crunching sound of dry undergrowth beneath our boots seemed discordantly loud. I knew Carth wasn’t pleased with my earlier response, and could guess at his thoughts. *He doesn’t know whether to push this topic, or move onto something else.* Stars knew there were enough matters left unspoken between us, and I vacillated between believing that was a good thing and wanting to spill my heart out to him.

"So, Tinhead," Canderous drawled from behind me. He’d been marching next to HK since we’d left the pyramid, peppering him with questions about what we’d be up against. Most were details we’d already gone over with the droid while in hyperspace, but I respected Canderous’ desire to revisit the specifics. "Let's go over the outer defense specs of the Forge. There's a standard deflector shield to repel enemy fire. We should be able to get past the short-range heavy lasers that guard the three primary docking bays. Our main resistance looks like whatever forces ole Malak has in the skies. Is there anything else we need to take into account?"

I frowned, thinking on the defense matrix over the primary docks. There was something bothering me, an elusive detail I should be catching-

“Answer: Spontaneous fusion-drive malfunction is always a possibility. Not to mention one of Gizka Spawn’s pazaak cards getting wedged in the turbine compressor.”

“The docks,” I murmured to myself. *Bastila.* There were three massive entrances to the Star Forge that we’d studied from the schematics, all designed to allow large deployments of factory-built starships. But Bastila had mentioned something else. “HK, is there an officer’s dock on the ventral wing of the Forge?”

“Affirmation: There are three small, private docking bays designed for high-ranking meatbags and their own personal craft. These are detailed as supplementary exhaust vents on every diagrammatic, at your command. Elucidation: You desired a means of travelling to and from the Star Forge largely unseen, master. It is also a method I utilized myself.”

*Secret docking bays known only to a few. How did Bastila find out?* She'd wanted me to land in one of those docks. The ventral one, she’d said, was located close to her. Would Malak have known she’d planned that? *He knew the Forge’s snubfighter would never launch from Lehon, so it might very well be a detail he was missing.*

If Malak thought on the possibility of the *Ebon Hawk* reaching the Star Forge, would he account for us using an alternative entrance?

“Alright. We check those out back at the ‘Hawk,” Canderous commented. The thud of his footsteps were heavy behind me. “Could be that’s the best ticket for a Dynamic-class freighter to land unseen, assuming the docks are open.”

Bastila had said they would be. Bastila could help, in that regard... if Malak wasn’t watching over her personally.

Bastila still wanted me to stand onboard the Star Forge, no matter that our objectives now stood worlds apart.

“We’ll need to go over the internal defences in that area of the Star Forge,” Canderous continued. My gaze slid sideways, to see Carth’s visor turned in my direction. “So far, we’ve been planning under the assumption of landing in one of the primary docks.”

“Commentary: Anti-personnel turrets and heavy blast doors are standard throughout the entirety of the Star Forge,” HK intoned, from his position next to Canderous. “The true might of the Star Forge
comes from its ability to produce machinery, not any sort of humdrum defensive capability.”

“Machinery?” I asked, shooting the droid a quick frown over my shoulder. “Are you referring to the ships it creates, or something else?”

“Clarification: The Rakatan created the Star Forge as an automated starship production facility. However, it must be noted that you were exploring its ability to create battle droids, when you last held mastery of the Star Forge.”

“Droids, eh?” Canderous issued a mild grunt of interest. “Suppose that explains your origins, Tinhead.”

“Agreement: I am the forty-seventh iteration of the master’s brilliance marrying with the Star Forge’s technological prowess. The perfection of my own designation required an exhaustive amount of time and resource, and so the master was exploring the mass-production of a simpler, and hence inferior, model.” There was a faint whir from HK as he took the moment to pause for what he probably calculated as dramatic effect. “Reflection: Had the master been able to replicate my design on a large scale, no doubt we would already be ruling the galaxy in a choke-hold of efficiency and superior intellect.”

Canderous snorted. “Alright, so I guess we assume ole Malak continued along the same line as Revan did. Tell us more about these kriffing battle droids.”

It was odd, hearing of my past plans and deeds, issued forth from the creepy vocabulator of an ominously capable assassination droid. Sometimes I felt like HK’s presence was nothing more than a big karmic joke.

“Revan.” Carth’s low voice dragged my attention away from HK’s onslaught of mechanical specifications. “This isn’t the time for secrets. Whatever set you running off to HK, if it has any bearing on the Star Forge or Malak or anything you need to tell us.”

“It’s not-” I sighed. I owed Carth the truth. I owed him a damn sight more than that, but being around him now just reminded me of the fleeting moments we’d had… the poignant moments I’d lost. “It’s no secret, Carth. A future set of orders and a change of ownership, in the event of my death. I hardly want him to end up in the back corner of a substandard droid shop again.”

“Revan-” Carth sounded like he was biting back curses. “You can’t go into this accepting your own death-”

“I’m not. Trust me, Carth, I’m not. I just remembered something I had to take care of.”

“Interjection: And by something, the master means diminishing my abilities into no more than a holo-recording unit. Perhaps next I shall be put to use scrubbing the deck of the freighter. Sarcasm: My actuators are abuzz with excitement.”

“It’s called planning, HK,” I returned, rolling my eyes. “Something we meatbags do to maximise our chance of success.”

“Observation: I suppose you have to account for the frailties of your flesh. It must be rather depressing, to be at the whim of your own organic weaknesses. Suggestion: Shall we kill something to cheer you up, master?”

“I see you programmed him with no understanding of his own mortality,” Yudan drawled, a faint touch of amusement in his voice. He’d been silent, until now, picking a clear path through the undergrowth as he kept pace with Zaalbar. “If you hadn’t come to when you did, Revan, your droid
would be no more than a heap of plasma-scored pieces left behind in the pyramid.”

“Interjection: I was one step-”

“Carth,” I said quietly, tuning out the sounds of HK’s indignant invective. “The instructions had nothing to do with the Star Forge. Ask me when this is all over and I’ll tell you. But for now let’s keep our eye on the endgame, okay?”

Carth sighed as he ducked underneath a low-lying tangle of spindly branches. “I hate this,” he muttered. “I feel like there’s a thousand things I need to wrap my head around. But Bastila... Revan, are you absolutely certain about what you said earlier? That Bastila has turned on the Fleet?”

“Yes.” There was so much more I could say. How Bastila had tempted me, laid the convincing groundwork for turning against everything Carth stood for. How she had made it sound the right decision. How I had turned it down.

I could win back Carth’s trust. Part of me knew that. Say the right words, sink back into his arms, enjoy a brief moment of intimacy that would bolster the both of us. He wants to trust me. Despite everything.

I didn’t know if it was self-denial or bitter resignation that held me silent. Carth and I would never work. Even with a Republic victory – and, dammit, I would see that come to fruition – I had no future in his world. My past actions had long since burned away any hope of that. Trying to forge a relationship between the two of us would do nothing but destroy a good man.

Malak had been a good man, once.

I stared forward blindly, barely registering how the vegetation thinned and the dry ground slowly transformed into soft sand. Moonlight glinted as we spilled out onto the darkened beach. The ‘Hawk was a welcome shadow ahead of us. With a soft sigh, I lifted my gaze to the sky.

The indigo night was slowly lightening with the onset of dawn. Hanging low on the horizon, the spark of an artificial satellite winked at me. The Star Forge.

“Get Juhani inside,” Jolee ordered, as we drew near the closest thing I had to a home.

The heavy thud of Zaalbar’s footsteps upon the landing ramp was enough to bring Dustil and Mission scurrying out from underneath the freighter. Mission gasped, one hand flying to her mouth as she silently watched her oldest friend carry the unconscious Cathar inside. Blood-stained bactawraps did little to conceal the mangled condition of Juhani’s leg.

“Bastila?” Mission turned to me, light eyes blinking back moisture. One hand shakily pushed back a pair of goggles high on her lekku. “Did you- did you find her? Was she there?”

Once more, I shook my head in silence.

“The repairs,” Carth cut in, striding to the underbelly of the ‘Hawk. “We need to get moving. Mission, come with me and translate for Teethree.”

I watched Carth as he disappeared beneath the freighter, Mission and Dustil in tow. Jolee followed Zaalbar inside the ‘Hawk, and I took the moment to order HK to stand by in the cargo bay.

For there was a conversation I wasn’t going to let lie – not now I had the opportunity.

With a grimness that still edged into anger, I turned back around. Canderous was standing silently
near the treeline, armoured limbs folded. But it was Yudan my eyes fixed upon.

He stared back at me, a remote statue of impassivity.

“You would have killed Jolee. Juhani.” I felt my lips thin. The recollection of his ‘saber lunging at Jolee replayed through my mind. And, back on the Leviathan, the Force as it swirled threateningly around his fist. As he speculated what killing Carth would do to me.

Even in the dim light of early-morning darkness, I could still make out the sharp yellow of Yudan’s gaze as it held mine. Uncompromising and unapologetic. “The old man said it himself, Revan. You would have killed a lot more had you been swayed by Bastila Shan. Stepping back from the precipice had to be your decision, unencumbered by the bonds you hold to anyone else.”

“Why?” The word wrenched from my lungs. “Dammit, Yudan, I can barely understand why Jolee was going to attack- why the frell would you have followed me to claim the Star Forge? And don’t give me that line about Revan Freeflight being the one to master the Forge in the first place. You saw what happened last time!”

“Yes.” The word was hissed out, and his expression tightened with blazing emotion that shattered his standard façade of detachment. His fists clenched tight at his sides, and I could feel his intensity as it spilled out onto the Force. “And if you had truly decided that was your path, then I would have followed you. Followed, and plunged my lightsaber into your back before you became Darth Revan again!”

The shock of Yudan’s words slammed into me like a deluge of frost-choked sleet. A test. There was a lump in my throat I could barely swallow past. He was testing me. The bastard was testing me.

Like the flames of a hearth-fire blazing into existence, I felt my anger at him ignite once more. Again and again, he funnelled all his energy into measuring my actions, rather than thinking on anything else that was going on. Yudan Rosh didn’t give a damn about Malak or Bastila or whether the galaxy was safe. No, all he cared about was ensuring Darth Revan stayed buried in the bitter cinders of history.

The Force flared. And I found myself submerged in a torrent of emotions directed at a spectre of my past that had more than enough reason to hate me.

The satisfaction as my fist landed hard into his face was most un-Jedi-like.

Yudan stumbled backwards, almost falling. I had the errant thought that maybe he’d let me have that blow; realizing that on some level, he deserved it-

He took one more step back. A bronzed hand raised to rub at the side of his face, but he made no move in retaliation.

I flexed my fist, still glaring, as my fury slowly ebbed. In the distance, I heard Canderous snort with amusement. He and Carth still sported identical shiners from their brawl earlier, and I really hoped I’d given Yudan one to match.

“Would you damn well figure out what side you’re on,” I growled through clenched teeth.

“I’ve already told you, Revan,” Yudan said quietly. He didn’t look angry. In fact – the bastard was always so damn hard to read – he almost looked gratified. “I’m on the side that Darth Revan is not.”

Stars, he’d said those words so many times. Everything he’d done so far was to place himself in the best position to kill me should the worst happen. I understood his drive, but that didn’t stop my
resentment. Yudan was a chiv-blade lodged at my heart, ready to be thrown at the first misstep. One I wasn’t sure I’d have the fortitude to dodge.

And I, just like everyone else, was fallible. Something I hadn’t believed, once.

Everyone is fallible, a disapproving man’s voice snapped in my head. An echo I’d heard before. Even you. Especially you.

“Except-” Yudan paused, staring at me, and his expression – just for a moment – softened. “I am starting to see that Darth Revan really was vanquished a year ago. And Revan Freeflight, whom I thought long buried, rose anew from the ashes.”

With a tilt of the head, he turned and walked away from me.

The breath escaped my lungs in surprise. That was a redemption I didn’t expect.

The image of a fallen friend flashed through my mind, lying charred and strangled on the Leviathan by my dark will alone.

A redemption I didn’t deserve.

And yet… and yet, I couldn’t deny how much it meant to me, to hear those words.

I glanced back to the ‘Hawk, blinking. To my surprise, Jolee was standing at the top of the ramp, watching the scene in silence. And Carth... Carth had backed out from underneath the ship, arms folded, legs apart in a military stance, attention solely fixed on me. I had no idea what they’d overheard, but Carth’s expression was inscrutable. I tensed, and immediately knew he’d be angling for a conversation I wasn’t sure I wanted- I couldn’t-

More to distract me from whatever Carth might be thinking, I turned to Jolee.

“Juhani?” I enquired in a low voice.

“She’s stable, for now,” the old man returned, slowly trudging down the ramp. “I came out to see how long before launch.”

“Two hours, maybe less.” Carth’s reply was matter-of-fact. “Revan, much as your old general likes to hide away and sulk, I won’t wait for him to wander back. We go as soon as we’re able.”

“Noted.” I felt my eyelids droop briefly as I levelled out a sigh. “Jolee, Jolee, what were you thinking? Yudan would’ve killed you. I could’ve killed you. You’d already made your point- why throw your life away like that?”

The old man snorted. “You know, lass, sometimes you miss the obvious.” Jolee rubbed absently at his fingernails, staring down at them as if hand-hygiene was the most important item on his to-do list. “It’s all that flouncing about you do. And probably too many holo-vids. They rot your brain-”

“Jolee!” I snapped.

Jolee sighed, an annoyed sound like he was irritated at having to spell it out. “Maybe it’s not the dying that’s important, Revan. Maybe it’s the way we die. What we choose to stand up for.”

Well, that sounds suitably cryptic and unhelpful, I thought with mild irritation.

“What would your death have achieved, Jolee?” I stared hard at him, willing the old man to look up and face me. Slowly, he did, his expression shadowed with the heaviness of age. “How could it have
“Ach, you’re looking at it from the wrong angle,” he murmured, his voice gentling. There was a discernible emotion glimmering in his eyes, and I could see the old man was suddenly turning serious on me. “My wife fell, Revan. You know this. She was strong in the Force, my Nayama. So strong. But so ill-trained.” He trailed off, turning his head to stare into the bleakness of nothing. “We fought, you know. Duelled, when it became clear neither of us could convince the other. In the end, I won, but I could not kill my own heart. So, like a love-struck idiot, I let her walk away.”

I could feel a frown of confusion etching into my forehead. “You wish you’d killed her?”

The brief gust of a laugh escaped him. “No, young pup. I should have stood my ground. Forced her to cut me down on her way to Exar Kun. Oh, she longed for training, the ability to harness the Force that the Jedi denied her- despite offering it to her sister. Nayama... she didn’t stand wholly in the darkness then. No, our duel tore her heart apart as much as it did mine.”

Jolee slowly turned back to face me. His expression trembled with emotion he wasn't too proud to reveal. Love, for his lost wife, still shining brightly beneath a layer of soul-wrenching grief. ”The journey to the Dark Side begins small, you know. Concessions, desires, lapses of judgment... all without reflection. Every day, I regret not forcing Nayama into a real, tangible choice. Every day I regret not making her face what the end of her journey would look like, before she became so twisted she no longer cared."

His voice, deep and gravelly with the sorrow of ages, felt like the only sound on the planet.

“She might have killed you,” I whispered.

Jolee inclined his head, and the ghost of a wry smile touched his lips. “Aye, yes, she very well might have. In which case, nothing I would’ve said would have mattered anyway.” He shrugged, and the rueful expression deepened. “But my life might have been enough to stop her. That’s the curse that’s been on me, since the day I let her walk away and join Exar Kun. And that’s why I stood against you, young pup.”

He paused, and I took the moment to weigh his words carefully. In some ways, Jolee represented to me the very embodiment of a seasoned Force master, bowed but not broken with the injustices of life. A man who knew himself, and accepted the disappointments and recriminations that self-reflection could bring – without letting it damage his own self-worth.

A master, but not a Jedi. Not a Jedi of this galaxy. The dangers of emotional attachment had burned the Jedi Order, hardening and blinding their ethos. I had no right and no place to judge the Order, but when it came to attachment... they are wrong. Jolee knows it, and so do I.

“Did she die, Jolee?”

“Ach, I have no idea.” His hands lifted in a gesture of the unknown. “Exar was killed in battle. Nomi stripped Ulic of the Force and he disappeared. Nayama... I tried to find out. I tried. But the only Jedi who might’ve known...” he broke off with a half-hearted snort. “Well. Nomi refused to see me. Then, or any time since. She’s dead now, and I’m left without answers. My wife... my wife was fairly infamous, by the time Exar was defeated, and yet there was no trace of her. Perhaps Nayama died an anonymous casualty of the war, or maybe she fled into exile. Eventually, I stopped looking. If Nayama had still lived, she would have known where to find me.”

His last words trailed our conversation into silence. Jolee nodded at me, before turning to shoot Carth a knowing glance.
“I’ll go check on Juhani,” he said, shuffling back to the ramp. “Your friends are what give you strength, Revan. Don’t forget that.”

“Huh,” Canderous muttered behind me. I’d almost forgotten the Mandalorian was still there. “It is true that Clan is strength. I’ll give the old man that, even if he is a protein bar shy of a field-ration.”

“I heard that!” Jolee hollered as the hatch closed behind him.

Canderous snorted. “Won’t be long till we leave this rock. I’ll go drag the brooding Twi’lek back.” There was a knowing, almost sly tone in his next words. “Don’t yap too long. We’ve got a ship to fix and a plan to discuss. And Mand’alor knows you two do seem to have the worst timing.”

He chuckled under his breath as his footsteps thudded away.

Carth’s gaze hadn’t left me since I’d turned around. At some stage, he’d removed his visor. It would be morning, soon. I could see it in the dim light of near-dawn as it kissed his face.

“Carth—” I didn’t know what to say to him. I didn’t know what I wanted to hear. A stronger woman would’ve walked past, walked inside, or found the words to quench the glow of hope that shone in his face.

“Bastila tried to make you claim the Star Forge, didn’t she?”

My head dipped in a silent nod.

“Why?” Carth whispered. “I’m trying to make sense of what went on up there, but I don’t understand... you once predicted Malak would warp Bastila into turning against the Republic, but why would she now want you to- to-”

He seemed unable to finish the sentence.

“Malak showed her... he showed her what we found. Why we turned. Why we attacked the Republic, four years ago,” I murmured, and felt my eyes close. “Bastila isn’t loyal to Malak, Carth. She believes the right thing to do is for me... for us to reclaim the Star Forge. She is convinced it’s the only way for the galaxy to prevail.”

“That’s why you were asking why you went to the Unknown- wait, Revan, do you remember any of it?” His voice edged into sharpness. “You can’t- you can’t think it’s still out there? What- what is it?”

“I- I don’t know.” A creeping plague of death. A sentient spread of malaise. An evil hand guiding the Force, darker than any seen before. “I don’t know how real it is... but it- it broke us. Mal and I. We- we meant to save the Republic.” My own words cut deep into my heart. I felt the tears brim, and willed them back. “Instead, we did our damnedest to destroy it. Whatever we found in the Unknown Regions, Bastila believes in the truth of it. Just like I did, once. Fiercely enough to turn on everything I held dear.”

“And now?” His voice ghosted to mine as he inched closer.

“I don’t know. I don’t know, Carth. But I do know claiming the Star Forge ends in only one way, and it’s not a victory for the Republic or the galaxy. I think- I think I once believed the light wasn’t strong enough... but what I understand now is the dark has only one master... and it’s not the one who wields it.”

“So. You’ve turned your back on it, then.” His words were so low I could barely hear him. He stood close enough that I could almost feel the brush of his body against mine. “On your Dark Side. The
Star Forge. Even on Bastila.”

My shoulders slumped, and my eyes opened to stare blindly at the ground. “I’ll get her back, Carth. If it’s the last thing I do. I won’t let her become something she despises.”

His fingers burned as they touched my cheek. And I knew, then, that this was the moment to step back. To break away, from something precious and fleeting and golden... something that wouldn’t stand the test of time or the consequences of my past – no matter how much we wished it would.

I stayed motionless.

“‘I stopped thinking of any sort of future years ago,’” Carth whispered, as his hand gently encircled my jaw. Tentatively, he raised my chin and my gaze slowly followed. “And now, it seems, I can barely think of anything else.”

“You can’t... you can’t seriously forgive me, after all that I’ve done.”

Carth’s mouth curved in a gentle smile. “Believe it or not, I’m getting there. You’re not who you once were, Revan. It’s taken me awhile to see that, but I do. You can be... you can be so much more than your past. Whatever the Jedi did to you, however wrong they were, they gave you that chance, at least.”

I blinked furiously. “I’m not some sort of redeemed paragon, Carth. The darkness- it still calls. I think it always will.”

“That’s why you need people who love you to stand by you, Revan. To remind you of what you have, right next to you. I—” A faint colour rose on his cheeks, but his gaze didn’t waver from mine. “I want to give you a reason to stay true. To who you are, right here, right now.”

There wasn’t an answer to that. I knew, deep down, that the strength of will he was talking about came from within. But there was no denying how the bonds of friendship, of family, of love, could bolster that strength.

Nor could I refute how precious his words were, even if the promise of a future felt like a daydream’s wisp that wouldn’t stand against the harsh realities of life.

But still. The moment itself was worth treasuring.

“So,” I murmured, feeling the corner of my mouth twitch. “Are you going to kiss me, or do I have to do all the legwork around here?”

Carth blinked, before both eyebrows rose in disbelief. “You’re really something else, you know that?”

And he grinned, before lowering his lips to mine.

xXx

Chapter End Notes

_Coming up next: Yudan receives an unexpected offer._
A dancing Twi'lek troupe's worth of thanks to kosiah for the beta.

Comments regenerate a fanfic author's HP. It's true!
The early morning air was a cool comfort as I faced the darkened shore. Waves died quietly upon the soft sand, a gentle lap of noise intermingling with the faint buzz of nocturnal gnit-flies. Above, twinkling innocently in pre-dawn sky, was the Star Forge.

Soon the nascent light of a new day would blot out its artificial glow, but the Star Forge would remain visible to the naked eye for what it was: an alien curse orbiting an empty world.

Bar her apprentice, Darth Revan had never let any Force-sensitive stand upon that eons-old relic...

"The Dark Side is strong there, Yudan. So strong that it becomes tempting to lose oneself." She had her back turned to me, staring out through the tempered transparisteel viewport in her quarters. As she so often did. "I risk only what is necessary for my purposes. The Star Forge is my tool, and I shall not allow it to become my weakness."

In my quieter moments - away from her - I knew that it already was.

It seemed ironic, now, that Revan Freeflight was the one to finally lead me there.

I had studied the schematics well, and had an idea of the size of the Star Forge. Somewhere onboard was the flawed Jedi who had saved Darth Revan's life, despite all logic and common-sense. I wasn't sure if I, at that point in time, would have shown Darth Revan the same mercy.

There was no denying Revan owed Bastila Shan her life. And yet, she had found the fortitude to deny Bastila, to turn away from the biggest mistake she had ever made. I had not truly believed Revan would reject the Dark Side's call, despite the hope I had denied existed within my heart.

Bastila Shan was a challenge Revan would face again. Worse than her, though, was Malak.

Malak.

We had been friends, once. It had taken years. Time for him to mature, to trust me, to understand that I would not step where I had no right. Once we were fully engaged in the Mandalorian Wars, the four of us had formed the core of the Jedi Thirteen. Revan, Malak, Meetra and I.

Despite the blood, the sacrifice, the despair- in many ways I still viewed that time as the golden age of my past. Before Malachor. Before the Star Forge. Before Revan reinvented the Sith Empire, and all our friends and allies fell, one way or another. Seduced or killed by the primal side of the Force.

The Dark Side had a way of obfuscating the past in an unholy marriage of burning emotion and frigid detachment. One could not function as a Dark Jedi if the past retained tangible holds on one's
Now... now, too many parts of it were leeching back to me.

"You won't be at Malachor." Meetra's voice, soft and musical, stated a fact rather than posed a query.

I inclined my head in agreement. "I will be posted with Adashan's forces. We will be the net to catch any survivors."

"Good." Meetra glanced away, an uncharacteristic expression of uncertainty on her face. She, who sensed the emotions of others so readily, rarely came across as flustered. Once I had envied Meetra that ability, before I had seen what the isolation had done to her.

"What is it?"

Her lips pursed. "Casualties," she murmured, her pale blue eyes dimming with melancholy. "We can't hope to pull out all our forces in time. Xaset and I... given our proximity, there is a very real chance we won't survive."

I felt my heart clench as I stared hard at my oldest friend. I did not know all the intricacies of Revan's plan, but I understood that Meetra and Xaset were fundamental to it. And that had its own underlying risk.

My mind, as always, trailed back to the woman at the core of everything. There was a twitch to Meetra's wide mouth, as if she sensed the betrayal of my thoughts. Perhaps she had. I knew part of what made our friendship so strong was my own emotional shields; Meetra had once told me I was the quietest soul she'd ever had the grace to befriend, and I knew she was not talking about a lack of expansive verbiage.

But, still. I could not hide everything from an empath.

"Revan understands sacrifice," she said quietly. "Too well, these days. I remember how she reacted when her homeworld Talshion was destroyed. When Cariaga died. Every time we lost more than expected. I'm worried what my death might do to her, Yudan. She'll allow her guilt to harden her further, and she is too hard already."

"Malak will be there for her," I said, without a trace of bitterness. I had long since accepted his role in her life, or so I told myself daily. "I do not like to think of your death, Meetra, no matter that we may have accepted our mortality years ago. Perhaps you need to focus on your own survival."

Meetra shot me a half-smile, but would not be derailed. "Malak holds Revan's heart, but don't underestimate the depth of her regard toward you. We all need friends as much as lovers." Her soulful eyes held mine. "And sometimes, a friend can reach where a lover cannot."

In the end, neither friend nor lover had been able to reach Revan. Only Bastila Shan's inexplicable stroke of mercy - and the Jedi manipulations that followed - had achieved that.

But by then the four of us were long shattered. I had seen Meetra, once, during the aftermath of Malachor. Empty, broken, grasping desperately onto Xaset's hand. What had the deaths of so many done to such a gentle, empathic soul? Xaset himself was but a walking corpse, pain etched deep into
his hollow eyes.

Even the smallest creature, even the trees themselves, could be sensed through the Force. Whatever had happened to Meetra and Xaset, the Force was burned out of them. My senses told me it was impossible for them to be standing, breathing, living in front of me.

I had not heard from Meetra or Xaset since that day. And as the Dark Side clawed ever deeper into my soul, I stopped thinking of them. Now... now it was like the scab had been torn open, bleeding anew. Was my oldest friend still alive, still Force-less, still radiating with the horrors of Malachor?

A selfish part of me was glad she disappeared. That one person from my past had not been a party to all we devolved into. Had not seen first-hand all we had done.

The thud of footsteps in the distance broke me from the bitter ruminations of my past. It was not Revan's light tread, no; judging by the tenacious look in her soldier's eyes earlier, I thought she might be otherwise engaged.

I could not begrudge her happiness. Not now, not anymore. Who knew, perhaps her soldier would be a better fit for her than Malak. From the little I had seen of Carth Onasi, he struck me as the sort who would not compromise his own values for the love of anyone - even one such as Revan.

And, he lacked the Force.

Perhaps a partner who was not exposed to the temptations of the Force would be a better fit for Revan Freeflight. A better shield, a better grounding force.

I did not begrudge Revan her happiness. But after this - after the Star Forge, should we survive - I would not stay in her orbit. I could not.

I turned around, to acknowledge the oncoming figure of Canderous Ordo.

We had reached an accord, I felt, over the weeks of travelling together. Yet I had not forgotten the black look of retribution on his face when I had ordered the Leviathan soldiers to bring him down.

"Rosh," Ordo greeted, as he trudged within earshot. Dawn was close. The early morning light outlined his armour; a patched-together military suit of duramesh and a garish purple chest-plate. Functional and heavy, for all that it wasn't beskar. Ordo was visibly unarmed, but I had a wealth of experience with Mandalorians - they liked to squirrel away weapons all over their person. It often seemed to be a competition amongst them. "The droid's almost done on the Hawk. It's close to end-game. I reckon you never planned to be here, doing this, but here you are." He looked me up and down, as if taking my measure. "Have you spared a thought for what you're gonna do after?"

I had. And the thoughts were both tumultuous and inconclusive.

_Incarceration amongst the Jedi. Execution sanctioned by the Senate. Death somewhere onboard the Star Forge._ Each option more likely than the previous.

I threw Ordo an unconcerned shrug. "Your assumption of our survival is a rather large one, Ordo."

"I plan on survival, Rosh," he retorted, his voice dry. "What would be the point, otherwise?"

I had to concede that to him, with a nod of my head. Canderous Ordo was both a simple man, and a smart one. Like a number of Mandalorians I'd known, over the years.

Although, there'd been plenty who were thick as tusk-pig crap, too.
"Look, I ain't sure about you, Rosh. But I'm sure what will happen if you let the Republic get their hands on you."

My eyes narrowed, but his stare back was flat and steady. "You think I should run."

A faint look of irritation crossed his weathered face. We weren't far away in age, but I'd guess he had a decade on me, maybe. A man of war, much the same as myself, yet one who knew his own values and foibles - and accepted them.

"I ain't suggesting anything, Rosh. But you're too focused on Revan and Malak's little factory to think past it. And look, I get that, I do - but you gotta think past it. Sounds like the robes caught up in all of this have kriff-all status now. It's the Republic calling the shots, ain't it? And if you don't watch out, you'll end up walking straight into your own publicized execution."

It is what I expect. I didn't say it, well-aware what Ordo's mocking reaction would be to what he'd label melodrama.

Ordo let out a non-committal grunt. "I'll be headed back to my clan, after this. It's time the Mando'ade pulled their heads out of their collective arses and started being true to themselves. I intend to be a pivotal part of that."

I sent him a short nod of acknowledgment. "Good luck."

I was surprised, with him being both Mandalorian and wholly unconnected to me, that my words were both genuine and heartfelt. I really did wish the warrior the best.

He nodded in return, turned, and walked away. Some five metres gone, he stopped.

I frowned at his back. Canderous Ordo wasn't one for uncertainty, or dramatic pauses.

"Ordo will need new blood, new strength," he said slowly, his voice low and deep. He did not turn. "The Mando'ade value adoption of those who know and honour our way of life. We're wary of the Force for good reason, but Force-sensitive Mando'ade ain't entirely unheard of. Rare, yes, but not unheard of."

He paused again, while I was shocked into silence. I could feel my mind racing, even as my limbs froze in disbelief. Truly, it had been so long since anyone had offered me something that wasn't given out of fear.

"I ain't sure about you, Rosh, but I think I'd gamble on you," he offered, still facing away. "And a simpler life might be a happier one for you."

I... had no rejoinder. No idea what to say or think in response to such a generous, unwarranted offer.

"Think about it. But not too long, alright? We got a battle to win first."

And then, he left.

xXx

A simple life. A happy life.

I recalled the time I'd mercilessly killed a family of Rodians pleading for their lives. They were simple farmers, no doubt happy with their lot on a remote, rural planet that we ear-marked as a strategic resource drop.
They likely had a simple, happy life before we arrived. But sentients who refused to leave were forcibly removed. In the quickest possible fashion.

I bombed a resource planet of Onderon to cow a royal leader into submission. I located a suitable moon for a Jedi containment complex, and did not dwell on the fate of the prisoners of war shipped there. The Dark Side was good at eroding conscience of any sort.

I ran Jonn Dan through with my double-blade, when he mocked my attachment to Darth Revan one too many times. Jonn had been my friend, my comrade, my fellow Jedi Thirteen, once.

The idea of a future after the Star Forge - a future actually worth something - had not occurred to me until now. I did not know if I damned Canderous Ordo or blessed him for the thought. It meant coming to terms with the entirety of my past, and that was harder without a mind-wipe to erase all the gory details.

The descent to the Dark Side had been a series of slow, measured steps. At first, it was easy to justify ruthless acts with the end result. To convince oneself that, in the future, we would rise above this sort of behaviour. That we were only doing what had to be done, utilizing the quickest route to unlock the power and strength necessary for the times we lived in.

That it wouldn't always be like this: things would change when the dust settled and we had our established peace and order that was stronger than the antiquated beast they called the Republic.

Then, slowly, I cared less. The awareness was still there, the understanding between right and wrong, but the empathy eroded. What did others' pain mean to me? I had lived through many lifetimes of pain. One grew hard and strong, or one died, and that was reality of life.

The Force itself was intoxicating. The rush of strength, augmented by emotion, burning through my body as pure, undiluted energy. I held the power to do anything I wanted, be anyone I wanted. All it meant was kneeling to those few stronger than me.

And I'd been kneeling to Revan my whole life, light or dark.

When Revan died, I ceased to feel anything but the icy core of the dark. Fiery emotion was conquered by an endless winter of detachment, freezing my every desire. I continued on with Malak's will, my only motivation the twisted addiction of the Force, as it swirled shadows of arctic despair that dogged every beat of my cursed heart.

I cared for nothing. I spoke little. I sent starships into combat in an empty echo of Mandalorian battles and Republic glory that felt more like a half-forgotten dream than my own past. I didn't fear death, not really. I thought it would come at Malak's hand, one day; maybe even Bandon or one of the others if they caught me off-guard.

And then, Revan.

And then.

Her resurrection was a blazing meteor that crashed into my indifference, shattering it into a million fragments.

I swore to find her, kill her, kill us both, and put an end to this tormented corruption that had spiralled into insanity after Malachor. I would have followed through on my vow had she been anything like the Revan after Malachor. Any glimpse of evil, any breach of morality, any lack of empathy.

But once more, she completely blind-sided me. I found a damaged woman; but one who was also
driven, reckless, and loyal.

The Revan I had once known, a lifetime ago. The passionate Jedi my life once orbited around.

The descent to the Dark Side was a series of slow, measured steps. But the climb back up- that was a crawl. As, inch by inch, my fingertips scrabbled to purchase higher on the cliff of awareness and consequence.

It would get harder, I thought. And yet I was once more following Revan - this time, back to the light.

That- that had to stop.

That had to change. For the sake of myself, I couldn't do it for her, because of her. Not anymore.

Revan might show me the path back to the light, but I had to take it for myself.

With a shaky inward breath, I knew it was time to head back to the Ebon Hawk. Somehow, I wasn't surprised to turn around and see Revan strolling toward me.

She was a figure wrapped in a lightweight duramesh suit, feet shod in scuffed boots, her old master's lightsaber clearly visible on a tattered utility belt. Revan cared little for appearances, these days; much like the pragmatic youth I had once known.

"I came to say we'll be departing soon." Revan's voice carried over to me, the faint breeze ghosting it to my ears. "But- I wanted to talk, first."

"Did we not already talk outside your freighter?" I asked, lifting a brow in rhetorical inquiry. The skin on the side of my face had tightened, already, with that one blow. I could allow her that transgression, if it meant she now had some understanding of my actions.

Revan's mouth twitched, but she did not rise to the bait. "There's- there's more, isn't there?" she murmured. "Between us. Our history, I mean. It's more than just us falling to the Dark Side. It's- it's personal, somehow. Isn't it?"

My shoulders stiffened, despite myself. There is no 'just' about falling to the Dark Side. But, still, her perception was painfully correct.

"There are some matters best left forgotten, Revan," I clipped out, turning away to stare blindly at the indigo ocean. From here, it looked endless. "Or best left alone."

I would not speak of it. Not to her, not to anyone. The twist of passion and hate still knifed in my gut at times. In the depths of Darth Revan's corruption, all her allies had been no more than dejarik pieces used to keep each other in line.

Even her childhood love had been broken down and measured as nothing more than his usefulness to her objectives.

If Malak had no chance, then I certainly didn't.

Our loyalty had been absolute, and Revan took it for granted that it would always stay that way, no matter what she did. Maybe- maybe, Malak's loyalty would have remained steadfast, had she actually taken a care with it.

"It's not like I want to remember anything from those days," she was muttering behind me, "But
sometimes I feel like there's no choice- that to move forward I have to uncover-

"You don't," I cut in, and I could hear the ice in my voice. "Some events are better buried in the past, where they belong. They would only rip open the scars and bleed the darkness out if you keep picking at them."

There was a pause. "Okay. A bit on the tragic side there, Yudan, but I'm coming to expect that from you." There was the soft sound of feet padding on sand, and I felt rather than saw her walk to my side. I kept my eyes fixed on the blurred line of the horizon, that promise of infinite distance, and wondered if she did the same.

I wasn't sure if she sought me out for anything further, for we both lapsed into a silence that was more comfortable than I expected. I still felt the camaraderie we had once shared - but it surprised me that she seemed to, also. To her, surely, I was no more than an unbalanced villain teetering on the jagged edge of redemption. No more than a lost Jedi who had once followed her lead.

"After this I won't follow you again, Revan," I whispered, unsure if the words were for her or myself. Perhaps they were meant for us both.

"Follow me?" she questioned, a sharpness cresting in her voice that was either surprise or indignation. "Did I ask you to, Yudan? Sun and stars, where would you follow me anyway? To our public execution, on the off-chance that we actually survive the frelling Forge?"

Despite myself, a chuckle fell from my lips. "I wonder if Ordo's bent her ear, too. "Maybe the Republic will throw us a joint trial. Save on the administration costs."

"Like a combined birthday party, but with beheadings instead of lolly scrambles," she muttered, and I heard the wholly inappropriate grin in her voice.

But my smile faded, as I recalled a deranged event Talvon had organized once, in celebration of his fourth decade of life. He'd killed a pair of lieutenants he'd caught screwing in a lift while on-duty. Hacked their heads clean off after watching them eat a slice of his overpriced anniversary spice-cake.

And Talvon had smiled sweetly, before forcing the remaining officers to stay for hours afterward and indulge in idle chitchat with him. Talvon had kicked the ensanguined heads to the side of the room, and blithely ignored the streaks of gore smudging beneath boots as they trekked over the titasteel floor.

The noose of insanity held Talvon tight, then. That was right after Telos. Right before Revan executed him.

Will it always be this way, where the slightest comment dredges up a sliver of evil from my past? And it slices against my soul with the black conscience that I had refused to feel at the time?

Maybe there was no escaping it. Certainly, I had been involved in enough to warrant infinite self-flagellation. I could only hope that Revan remained mostly unaware of those memories of the worst part of her life. She might never understand the mercy her amnesia and mind-damage truly was, but I did.

"I don't want you to follow me, Yudan," she whispered finally. "Not after this. I don't want anyone to follow me, ever again."

I sighed. Revan had always been sharp on the uptake, remarkably perceptive, and yet with regards to herself- almost wilfully blind. "That is not is up to you, Revan. People follow who they choose. But I- it is time I found my own way. I am not sure what that will be, but it needs to be on my own terms,
I could feel her eyes on me, and finally, finally, I turned back to meet her. There was a depth of curiosity in that moss-green gaze - for she did not know me anymore, not truly, and that still burned at times - but at least there was solid respect there.

"Will you go back to the Jedi?" she asked quietly.

"Perhaps." I inclined my head. The conversation with Ordo tempted me in another direction, a wholly unexpected one, and I had no idea which path I would choose. All I knew was that it would not be Revan's. "Perhaps I owe Vandar that much. If there is any sentient whose counsel I might heed, it could very well be his."

A frown creased her face at that. "Vandar- he's the short green one that talks funny, right? I got the impression he was Vrook's oddball sidekick."

I couldn't repress a snort of incredulity, at that. Despite my comprehension of her memory loss, there were times when it caught me completely off-guard. "Vandar Tokare is centuries old, Revan, and a Grand Master besides. He is the only Jedi Master who holds a seat on both the Dantooine Council and the High Council. While Vrook Lamar is a respected and established Master who occasionally reports to Coruscant, Vandar is surely one of the pillars of the Order itself."

Her lips twitched. "So he's more important than I realized. You going to check yourself in to him, then?"

I shrugged. "He was my master, Revan. I was a Dantooine child. I had only recently ascended to knight and transferred to Coruscant when you and Malak first joined the Order."

Her shoulders hunched uncomfortably, as they always did when one spoke of Malak and her youth. I could see, sometimes, her desire to learn more about of past- mingled with a horrified denial she still struggled with.

"We trained together a lot, didn't we?" she asked softly. My gaze flew to hers, but Revan already anticipated my rejoinder with a grimace. "I don't- I don't remember, Yudan, but our spars... they're familiar. Very familiar."

I turned away again, to face the ever-dawning horizon. Slowly, slowly, the sky was paling to a cerulean blue. The few puffs of cloud visible were edged in sunrise pink. "Yes," I said finally. "You asked me to teach you, the first time we met. All but begged me, if I am honest."

I heard the sound of a half-choked chuckle as she stepped close to my side. "How did we meet? Would you tell me?"

I didn't want to. Enough excogitating of history, I was ready to head back and face the present.

"Please," she whispered; and the word, sincere and heartfelt, was a ghostly echo of that first meeting. I found, as a fond smile rose unbidden to my lips, that some things had not changed. It was as hard to deny her now as it had been so many years ago.

... 

"Perhaps that's enough for today," Master Kavar said, his voice mild as he thumbed off his lightsaber. The Jedi Master was cloaked in a demeanour of tranquillity, his stance relaxed and his manner serene, as if our hour-long spar affected him not at all.
But I could detect signs that belied his composure. The sheen of sweat glistening at his brow. The slight tremble of fatigue in his forearms. I pushed back a surge of accomplishment that bordered on pride, and instead acknowledged him with a formal bow.

"Thank you for the duel, Master Kavar," I intoned. I had heard of Master Kavar’s lightsaber prowess before I had met him, and was already thinking on what he could teach me. Kavar was young for a master, as I was young for a knight, and there was more than one similarity between us. "I look forward to our next bout."

"(You do your home enclave credit, Knight Yudan)," Master Kavar continued, still with the calm expression clouding his blue Human eyes. It was the sudden switch to Ryl that made me blink, though. "(I hope you will come to see Coruscant as your new home, much the same as you did Dantooine, once)."

The reminder of arriving on Dantooine as a bewildered twelve year old was unsettling. Coupled with Kavar’s use of my home tongue, it immediately set my mind racing. Was he deliberately referring to my origins? My childhood spent readying for a life of political leadership, only for it to be wrested away by a chance encounter with a Jedi? Perhaps. After all, the Onderonite Kavar Kira would have been a royal delegate of import himself, had he not been found as Force sensitive. Once a Jedi, all former ties are forgotten, a raspy voice echoed. Equal, here, we all are. One with the Force, no matter our lineage or background.

That had been true on Dantooine. But, here in the Core of the galaxy, it seemed Jedi matters were more enmeshed in governmental intrigue. Perhaps I had been naïve in assuming the Jedi High Temple would remain detached from the political machinations that were the heart-blood of Coruscant’s Galactic City. Ambassadors from member-states all over the galaxy came to Coruscant, each bringing their own entourage of advisors and officiates and trade bureaucrats. Many would knock on the entrance of the High Temple. Many would be admitted. And Ryloth, my once-home before the Force claimed me, had always been an influential member of the Republic.

I had no leverage with the past and the people I had left behind, but it did not seem that others understood that. A mere ten days had passed since my arrival, and I had already dealt with more allusions and speculations regarding my genealogy than the entire eight years of training on Dantooine.

I was beginning to doubt the wisdom of my transfer to Coruscant.

Master Kavar was still looking at me expectantly, awaiting my reply. His gaze danced briefly over my shoulder before landing back on mine. Keeping a watchful eye on our silent observer, no doubt. Someone had sidled into the senior training rooms halfway through our duel, and although neither of us had acknowledged the presence, it was impossible to miss the flare of raw power ebbing on the sidelines.

"(I am sure I shall, Master Kavar)," I answered finally, sticking to Ryl. Master Vandar always chided me for my innate suspicion. Perhaps Master Kavar had merely been searching for a way to make me comfortable and welcome in my new home. "(Coruscant will have much to teach me, I am sure)."

"(Vandar Tokare does not often train apprentices)," Kavar mused. He took a step back, eyeing me over in consideration. "(He is renowned for his duelling technique, however, despite how rarely he switches on his 'saber. I begin to see why he picked you, Knight Yudan)."

My old master had been the one to urge me to transfer to Coruscant. As formidable as Master
Vandar's lightsaber forms were, his style was also unique and distinctive. Dantooine had little to offer in the way of duelling masters, other than Vandar Tokare.

"(Master Vandar has taught me much)," I agreed. "(Combat has always been my focus. That is when the Force calls strongly to me, like it is but a natural extension of my body)."

Perhaps I had hoped for more from the Human master than a smile of agreement. My greatest struggle had always been the flipside of combat: meditation, oneness, self-reflection. Finding the peace of the Force through a non-physical channel. It was not a weakness of Vandar Tokare, but I did not know enough about Kavar Kira to judge if he attained the same level of enlightenment.

Master Kavar was looking beyond me again. "Perhaps we should ask our visitor from H'ratth if she wishes to join us?" he suggested, switching fluidly back to Galactic Basic as his voice raised in volume. "Come forward, Jedi Knight, and let us hear your observations of our spar."

I turned, to witness a Human teenager walk cautiously closer. Long-limbed, olive-skinned, and a tad on the scrawny side, our spectator strolled toward us with a half-smile twitching along her mouth. She wore the dark brown robes of the delegation from H'ratth - five Jedi Knights, all told, recognizable from the samite-thread robes they wore - a slightly darker shade than the garb of Coruscanti Jedi. I knew little of H'ratth, other than that they were reputed to be as reclusive as Dantooine was untraditional. A delegation from their enclave was rare.

"I am Jedi Master Kavar Kira," Master Kavar introduced, bowing in greeting. "And this is Jedi Knight Yudan Rosh."

The youth of the mysterious Jedi Knight surprised me. Not much more than a girl, really; somewhere in her mid-teens - I had a handful of years on her at least. A few dark curls fell into her eyes, escaping a haphazardly knotted braid tossed carelessly over one shoulder. That H'ratth would send a youngster as one of their envoys surprised me, considering this was their first visit in over three years.

The Human grimaced, her slightly up-turned nose wrinkling in discomfort. I was drawn, suddenly, to the expressiveness of her moss-green eyes. My once-clan on Ryloth had been seen as more cosmopolitan and worldly than most, and I had grown up around many Humans.

This one was easy to read.

Her stance was tense and wary, and her attention darted between us. There was no denying the spark of mischief in her expression, even as it warred with a growing uneasiness. The H'ratth delegation had been here less days than I had, and were expected to depart with the next morning's sun. I had not thought I would meet one of their envoys.

But as I stared at the Human in dawning suspicion, I began to comprehend that I still might not.

"I'm not from H'ratth," she admitted, lifting her sharp chin proudly as she addressed Master Kavar. One hand plucked at the sides of her robe - which, now that I looked closer, were at least a size too large. "I just wanted-"

"You thought to sneak into the senior training chambers by masquerading as a Jedi Knight," Master Kavar finished for her, his voice cooling. "What is your name, Padawan?"

"Revan Fr-Freeflight," she answered, stumbling over her surname as if it were unfamiliar. Still, she held Master Kavar's gaze, despite his obvious disapproval.

Kavar blinked. There was a slight twitch on his face - surprise perhaps - before it smoothed over.
"You are one of Karon's urchins," he said heavily. Her name meant nothing to me, but there was no denying the exasperated tone of recognition in Kavar's voice. "Not even a padawan, yet. I bid you welcome to Coruscant, apprentice, but these training chambers are out-of-bounds to both apprentices and padawans." There was a thinning of his lips as his gaze trailed over the bulky robe the girl had wrapped tightly around herself. "Nor do we look kindly upon theft, no matter your background."

"I didn't steal these robes," she interrupted, as her green eyes darted to me briefly. I realized I was staring back in fascination. I would never have dared such an act as a youngling- sneaking somewhere prohibited under false pretences-

Her indignation was clear, and levelled directly at Kavar. "And what do you mean, my background? Look, I won a wager against one of those H'ratth Jedi, alright? And-

"Stop." Master Kavar's voice had turned to ice, echoing loudly throughout the chamber. One hand rose, palm open, a command that rippled on the Force. The girl halted her tirade, a flush of chagrin dawning belatedly on her smooth cheeks.

I did not know whether to be appalled or impressed. A wager? An apprentice won a wager against a H'ratth Knight? And took his robes? The girl called Revan ebbed into silence. I could see the embarrassment on her face, the sense that she had done wrong- but I did not know if that equated to regret.

Kavar's jaw squared as he stared down the girl. A master's disapproval radiated from his hard expression. "You shall address me as Master Kavar. You are not to approach the H'ratth delegation again, Apprentice. Get yourself to your master, and do not enter these chambers until you have earned the rank required."

The girl bowed, a gesture both inelegant and stiff in its execution, before leaving the room. She was quick to depart, but it surprised me that she did not run.

"I'd better ensure the envoys have not been offended by an errant street kid," Kavar grumbled, before frowning, as if he regretted that careless slip. It reminded me that Kavar had been a master for about as long as I had a knight - a handful of months. For all of Kavar Kira's composed authority, he was likely still settling into his new position. "I'll see you in a fourth-day, Knight Yudan."

I nodded in acknowledgment of our next bout, and Master Kavar strode away in the direction of the inner Temple. I found myself staring back at the outer exit, where that brash, tempestuous teenager had vanished. Her strength in the Force had been noticeable, but she was strikingly old for an apprentice. More so than I had been. I doubted she would last long here- and nor did I think I would see her again.

I was proven wrong the moment I stepped out of the senior training chambers.

"Knight Yudan? Can I ask you something?"

It was difficult to stop my mouth dropping open in shock at the girl, perched high on an ornamental railing some metres beyond the chambers. This part of the Temple was open to the elements, and the winter sun glinted a warm brown in her tousled tresses. "You have been directed to your master forthwith, Apprentice," I said stiffly.

The girl grimaced again. It was becoming obvious that she struggled with authority. "Sure," she muttered, "But he didn't say straight away, right? And besides, it's 'Padawan', now." The girl called
Revan grinned, an easy curve to her lips that didn’t conceal the wariness in her eyes.

I blinked, and had to quash the errant desire to congratulate her. "You should have corrected Master Kavar in that case."

She snorted. "I think he was pissy enough with me already. Look, I wanted to see some real sparring, alright? I get that I broke the rules, but it’s not like I actually lied to anyone."

She halted as my expression hardened. "Deception comes in many forms, Padawan," I intoned, even as I disliked how uptight the words made me sound. "Now if you will excuse me."

"I-" Her shoulders hitched as her eyes darkened with self-awareness. "You’re right. I told myself it was okay as long as I came out with the truth if caught. It’s just- it’s not like I’m doing any harm, here. I just want to learn." A scowl flashed over her face, quick and fleeting as a summer storm. "Isn’t that the whole point of being a Jedi? Learning?"

I had thought so, once. It was strange, seeing similarities of my earlier self, in someone so different. "What would you sacrifice for knowledge, Padawan? Your morality? Your compassion? Your soul?"

Her green eyes narrowed on me. I was abruptly uncomfortable with the realization that I was parroting one of Master Vandar’s lectures. It was time to leave. I took a step to the side as she expelled a noisy sigh - one more thoughtful than irritated, I believed, even though I’d hardly had her acquaintance long enough to tell.

"Master Karon told me to seek out all knowledge," she muttered, brow creasing in thought. "I guess, maybe, I used that as a justification to do what I wanted."

"How interesting," I lied politely. My gaze shifted pointedly to the corridor behind her. "But I have somewhere to be, Padawan. Excuse me."

Even by then, I should have known that would not stop her saying her piece. I had walked a mere five metres past her when she spoke again.

"You said something to Master Kavar."

"I’ve been here for almost two months," the girl called Revan continued. "Everyone keeps telling me how strong I am, and yet I can barely feel the frelling Force. Except when I pick up a ‘saber."

"I said that in Ryl," I commented, slowly turning back to face her.

"And?" She frowned, before deftly switching tongues. "(My oldest friend Jonohl was Twi’leki. What’s so strange about me speaking Ryl?)"

I blinked in lieu of answering. She had a thick, drawling accent, but her fluency was undeniable.

"Oh." A flare of irritation darkened her gaze. "I heard Kavar call me a street kid. Therefore, I must know nothing, right?"

"I did not say that," I answered stiffly, even if it had been my assumption. In my experience, homeless illiterates often spoke a smattering of gutter dialects that were of no use beyond the borders of their hometown.
"I don't pretend to be educated," the girl muttered, pushing back a stray lock of hair. "Look, I'm here because I'm hoping to find someone to train me." Her jaw squared. "With the lightsaber, I mean."

I took a step back from her. "That is why you have a master, Padawan-"

"Karon's great, but we spend all our time theorizing if we're not traipsing out somewhere for some higher purpose I'm meant to understand. Stars, Karon's the one who encouraged me to see out alternative teachers. I know you're new here, and a hotshot at the 'saber besides-"

My head was shaking all the way through her impassioned invective. "Padawan, you need a master to train you-"

"No, I need a duellist to train me-"

"I am on Coruscant to hone my own skills, not teach younglings-"

"What better way to do so, than to learn through teaching?"

We were squared off against each other, her fierce gaze imploring me into an engagement I had never considered let alone desired.

"I am no teacher, Padawan," I said finally. "Nor do I wish to become one."

The girl called Revan folded her arms. "I'll make you a wager," she threw back, lifting her chin as she flat-out ignored my reservations. "Grant me thirty lessons, and I bet I can best you in the ring."

I did not bother hiding my snort of derision. "Girl, you would not last a minute before I disarmed you, thirty lessons or a hundred."

"Prove it, then."

My eyes narrowed in distaste at her fumbling attempt to manipulate. "I do not need to."

Again, I walked away. Again, she spoke after me.

"Please." The word hung in the air. Not desperate, not quite - but it was genuine and heartfelt. "I'll do what you say. I'll listen. I know you don't like me, Knight Yudan, but I just- I just want to learn. I just want to feel the Force again. Please."

...

"And that actually worked?" Revan stared at me, eyes wide with disbelief.

I let out a small sigh of capitulation. "Our backgrounds could be polar opposites, Revan, but in that moment I understood you a little. I came late to the Jedi, too, and I had my own struggles with the Force."

She blinked, wonderment warring with open curiosity. In some ways, Revan was as easy to read as she had been then. "I sound like I was a bit of a brat," she murmured, shooting me a half-grin. "I'm guessing I didn't win in thirty matches, huh?"

"Well-" I concealed my smile of amusement. "You cheated, Revan."

"I- I beat you?" The delight was sharp in her carefree snigger. "Hah! You can't hold back on those details-"
"Do you fail to comprehend the meaning of the word 'cheated', Revan?" I threw her a stern look. "You conceded the bout to me later. Of course, that may have been because I was refusing to train you any further."

"Stars, Yudan," she said slowly. "I wish I had some memory of this..."

So do I, I thought with a sharp pang. "You were a street kid, Revan. It took me time to understand that utilizing all means for victory was no more than a survival mechanism for you, just as it took you time to adjust to life amongst the Jedi. Still, I did not stay angry at you for long. You had a knack for public apologies and concessions of my superiority."

"Right." She snorted, raising an eyebrow in disbelief. Ah, but it made me yearn for her to recollect those rather effusive demonstrations of atonement. Even in the early days, I had found it difficult to harden my heart against her. "So, cheated, huh? What, did I dare use the Force against you?"

"Try a flash grenade," I murmured, watching her just to see her eyes widen at the admission. "What?"

"You heard me." I kept my expression impassive, but the memory brought nothing but mirth, now. "I have no idea where you located that from. Armaments such as those are not readily available in the temple. But, well, you were determined to best me."

Revan paused, before asking- "Did I ever best you? Fairly?"

I breathed in, reminding myself that I should not be surprised at the question. "A handful of times with the 'saber alone," I answered, tilting my head. "It is a different battleground when you throw active Force use into the mix."

Revan had transformed into an adept duellist- not the master I was considered to be, but some would have labelled her an ace, perhaps even an expert. Her strengths, however, spanned more than one focus. When she truly immersed herself in the Force - be it light or dark or somewhere in between - I could not hold my own against her.

There was a contemplative look furrowing her brow. "You must have trained others? Others who were with-" she broke off, air hitching in her throat. "Malak. Did you train him, too? You must have- you were his friend before- and you followed him-"

I jerked away. My shoulders stiffened, my jaw clenched, my mood plummeted. This was the minefield of the past, and I would not indulge her in traipsing down those back-alleys.

Malak had been a friend, once. After the initial years of mistrust, we eventually became close; a bond of comradeship and camaraderie that remained for a time after Malachor. Even while feuds and power-plays sprang up like bush-fires amongst our allies, Malak and I still maintained some degree of familiarity.

It had taken one incident, one moment, for that final thread to snap.

I would not think on those memories. I would not-

Despite my self-resolve, the heady shadows rose as a noose twisting tight around my heart-

... I stared forward blankly, ignoring the flare of Force power as I tuned out the argument that raged in
the room beyond.

Fleet statistics and tactical opportunities ran through my head; a litany of data that was no more than numbers on an info-pad. Figures on a game-board. Cold facts to relay to my master. Sometimes, they made her smile - a cold reflection of something that had once been beautiful.

"I am your Shadow Hand!" Malak roared, from deeper in the now-empty command room.

The dark had turned Malak hot, a flashpoint of fury that bubbled with rents of twisted ambition and possessive emotion. Revan, in contrast, only burned the rare times she chose to show her anger. Otherwise she was cold. As cold as space, and just as far-reaching.

"I am your lover, your second!" Malak towered over Revan. The Force choked in his unsteady grasp. "You cannot risk my men - me! - so callously, not without divulging your plans! I have a right to know your next move!"

He did not often challenge her, but the place cleared out when he did. And Malak was growing more unstable these days.

I wondered if my master noticed. I wondered if she realized it was slowly happening to her, too. Talvon Esan was no more than an accelerated snapshot of what we all faced.

I barely heard of the sharp crackle of lightning as it streamed across the far side of the command center. White sparks danced along the periphery of my vision, but I did not look. Revan knew I was here. She would address me when ready. I was long since accustomed to the dance my master and her apprentice engaged in. In many ways, it was more palatable now than when we had all been Jedi.

"You do not." Her command was dark and implacable. Revan stood over the crumpled form of her apprentice, arcs of white pain dying out against her fingertips. "We are but cogs in a machine, Malak. And everyone is replaceable on our journey."

"I am not," Malak gasped. His yellow eyes, damned as the lot of us, stared defiantly up at her, but his crumpled form acceded surrender. "You are not!"

I shifted, staring away from the spectacle that raged on the Force as much as in their hearts. I followed Revan, and by extension Malak, but sometimes I wondered how much of that was merely due to habit. A pattern of behaviour that had once had meaning.

"Then you truly do not understand."

She left Malak there, collapsed on the ground, and turned her back on him. As if she sensed his resistance was spent for now. The sound of her footsteps drew close. My gaze snapped to her, a spectre of shadows, midnight robes wafting in her wake, a darkly beautiful figure of monochrome death and breath-taking power.

I would not think on the golden icon of light she had once been.

Revan paused in front of me, a hand lifting to remove the mask that had once been other than a piece of a Sith Lord's ensemble. Her obsidian gaze, pitch-black and starless, appraised me coolly. "Everyone is replaceable," she told Malak, but she was staring at me. Her head cocked, and she took a step closer. "That is your next lesson, my apprentice."

I thought she could not surprise me anymore. I thought I had seen the worst already.
I was wrong.

In one swift movement, Revan slid a gloved hand behind my head, and her cold lips crashed against mine.

My mouth parted in shock. Instant passion scorched to life. I thought I could feel nothing anymore—but I was wrong, so wrong, and those lips moved so sweetly against my own, hot and demanding and undeniable—her hand drifted to the base of my neck, that sensitive spot right between my lekku—

With a wrench I stumbled back from her, blazing lust warring with pride, both of which shot all rational thought straight to some nether-hell I could not reach. My fists clenched and shook, and it was so hard not to raise them, to reach forward and tear that gods-damned robe from her body, show her what it meant to play with fire, lose myself in a way I had long since taught myself not to think of—

Revan was staring at me curiously. With a start, I realized I was spilling everything out onto the Force. My respirations fast and loud, my heartbeat thundering with want, my desire shouting out through my own signature loud enough that any Force-sensitive onboard her flagship would notice.

And Revan, once blind as a shyrack bat, was eyeing me over in unconcealed interest.

"I will hear your report in two hours, Yudan." Her mouth moved, but I could barely comprehend the words. Her head cocked, before her face smoothed into pale impassivity, and she stepped away. Gliding fluidly past, a figure of unconcerned damnation, while the Force rocked wildly in my shaking grasp. I didn't turn to watch her go, still frozen in lust and shock, my gaze skittering further afield.

Malak was clambering to his feet.

"Everyone is replaceable." Revan repeated the phrase, cool and collected, as a hatch groaned open behind me with a pneumatic hiss. "Any means to get the job done, Malak. Remember that, and toe the line."

She stepped through and the exit thudded shut, with Malak staring at her wake. The look on his marked face...

...I had not seen that before, not directed at Revan. Not such a raw, naked hatred.

Slowly, Malak's head turned. His gaze met mine. And, tightening around my soul, the first stirrings of fear dawned. I stood immobile, as the fear grew, slicing through all primal emotion as I watched him watch me. I had to swallow, then, at just how deeply I had been used to drive home a point. Nothing was sacred amongst the Sith. Not honour, not friendship, not even a loyalty that spanned more than a decade.

The impassioned acrimony in Malak's damned eyes was hardening into something more soulless. It wasn't aimed at me, for all that I stood directly in Malak's path. I was but the spectator, the third party, the pawn.

Still, Malak said nothing.

She won't do that again. I couldn't bring myself to say the words, not even for him. And if she does, I won't. But I couldn't bring myself to finish the lie, not even in the sanctuary of my own head. All I could see was that intrigued speculation on Revan's face, as she looked at me in a way she had never done before.
Malak may not have seen that, but he had seen enough. I was conquered with inertia as seconds stretched into minutes and we both remained still and silent as statues. Survival instinct on my part, maybe. My gut told me the slightest twitch would break Malak from the shackles of inaction. I could face many, but not Malak Devari- and he knew it.

With a final narrowing of the eyes, Malak strode forward. Artificial lighting gleamed against the pale curve of his head where it wasn't inked black. With each step, the Force gained momentum in his grasp, the temperature dropped, and the air become hard to breathe.

He stood opposite me, poisoned yellow eyes demanding silence and submission, as a palpable vortex of power whipped to life around him.

"This did not happen," he whispered, as soft as a caress, as hard as a threat.

I bowed my head, and remained there for some time after he left.

...

Malak departed the Nexus that day.

I was sent away to front the Rodian Corridor two weeks later.

The blip of time in between I would not think about. Just as Malak said, it didn't happen-

"Yudan?"

Incandescent madness- but if no one acknowledged it then it did not happen. I threw myself into battle and vowed I would not return, I would not be used as a dejarik piece between them-

The point was moot, for it was not long afterward when the news broke: Arran Da'klor's fantastical failure; Malak's subsequent disfigurement; Revan's death. Deralia.

Malak rose to power, and I knelt to him in dead, frozen supplication.

Whether he suspected anything further had happened - whether he even cared, at that stage - I still did not know. Darth Revan's lesson in her command room was not the reason for Malak's betrayal, no. That had been inevitable, to anyone watching from the sidelines. No, but perhaps it had been the final tipping point.

"Yudan? You didn't answer?"

Sometimes I damned her for not knowing, not remembering, for surely thinking me nothing but a failure from her past, while her slate of misconduct was painted over with forgetfulness.

Sometimes, I burned with the urge to remind her.

"Okay." She sighed, a soft sound of capitulation. "We won't talk about Malak. I- I'll leave it alone."

The grace of a friend, backing away, when surely she had all the questions in the galaxy.

Most of the time, I knew it was better to do what I told her earlier: keep the past where it belonged. Revan struggled with enough... and I had, truly, forgiven her for everything- even if the memories sometimes made that difficult.

My attention was caught by the movement of her palm, rubbing idly over the communicator affixed to her other wrist.
"We should head back," I murmured, staring at her long fingers. Two of them, and a thumb. Her maimed hand.

"I told Carth where I was going," Revan said, her voice softening. "He'll ping me when it's time."

I refused to feel guilty, as I wrenched my gaze away from the knobbing of pink scar tissue where two little fingers had once been. I would not feel guilty. Sometimes, I was still surprised we had both come out alive from that encounter. But it did pose an interesting question-

"The Shadowlands," I said abruptly. "How did you escape Bandon's disruptor?"

"I might leave that one a secret, Yudan," Revan said lazily, her eyes twinkling with suppressed mirth. I wondered if she'd noticed my gaze. I wondered if she resented me for the injury... and damned myself for caring.

My eyes narrowed. Neural inhibitors - far more common than kaiburr-based disruptors - could be overcome by a strength of Force-will. Null-Force fields based on Fett technology submerged the fabric of the Force itself, but could be counteracted with an amplifier. But a neural disruptor... as far as I knew, there was no way to overpower one once it was cinched around one's neck.

Yet, in the depths of the Shadowlands, I'd felt Revan's Force-strength dawn out of nowhere to disable the restraints on her limbs, and yank my lightsaber to her grasp.

The restraints... I felt her short those out... but not the collar.

"The neural disruptor was already defunct," I realized slowly. "Before Bandon even clasped it around your throat."

Revan's smile widened, but she said nothing.

"But her Force signature had vanished the moment Bandon- "You were hiding. Much the same as that Dustil boy. You've learned his tricks."

The smile turned to a full-blown grin, then. "Well, one of them. I reckon I can get the other one with enough practice."

"That boy needs a proper master," I said, dragging my gaze away from her carefree grin. I had once admired Revan's ability to find joy in the darkness, before her darkness submerged every vestige of light. It was almost painful to see that old trait once again present in her character.

"I don't see him voluntarily going to the Order. Guess he's stuck with old man Bindo." She shifted, one hand running through her hair, before abruptly shifting topics. "Do you... do you think the Order will protect you? If you go back to Vandar?"

"From justice, you mean?" I clarified, and received a short, sharp nod in response. "They shouldn't, you know. But history tells me they will shelter those that truly repent, no matter their crimes," I sighed. "I do not know if I fall under this umbrella, Revan. The Jedi way- there are facets with it I no longer agree with. This was true before... before I fell. It will always be true, I believe."

"I-" Her quiet voice dropped. "It's the same for me."

The acknowledgment hung in the air between us like a primed thermal detonator.

She reminded me strongly of the Jedi I had known on Coruscant. Not the padawan I had first met, no- perhaps the knight, seasoned but still shining with optimism and righteous conviction, as she stormed fecklessly to the Mandalorian frontlines. Back then, Revan had struggled with certain parts of the Jedi ethos. She had not accepted their limitations on attachment. Nor had she agreed with their
policy of non-interference outside of the Order's walls.

But she had been a paragon of the light.

I had changed from the Jedi I had been; I was hardened, scarred and shadowed with all of my misdeeds. It was almost absurd that Revan, in contrast, appeared to have turned full-circle back to her past self.

_She is not the knight she once was_, I reminded myself fiercely. _But, perhaps, she is a close enough match that the flaws do not matter._

I blinked back emotion, looking away from her again. "The Republic will judge you on your past actions, Revan. But the Order will judge you for who you are now." I paused. "They will offer you a safe harbour if they can."

"I'm not sure I want it," she said softly, and turned to gaze once more across the endless Rakatan ocean.

"Neither am I," I whispered.

A chime sounded from her wrist; the noise discordant and harsh against the soft tones of our conversation. Revan's dark hair bowed over the communicator.

"It's time," she murmured. "It's time to go."

Our eyes met once more, before we turned in unison and began the walk back.

Away from the shoreline, both wrapped in our own thoughts, as a quiet introspection settled over us and stifled any further conversation. As we crested over a nearby dune, I threw one last glance at the brightening horizon.

The first touch of a sun breached it, casting a weak ray that shimmered over the shadowy ocean. Light dawning after an endless winter of darkness.

Like hope, pure and intangible and seemingly out of reach, yet touching our souls regardless.

_xXx_

Chapter End Notes

Coming up next: Vrook Lamar discovers that even the overly cautious can be tempted into recklessness.

Yikes, we've hit Chapter 100! That deserves a review, right?
An anniversary spice-cake's worth of thanks to kosiah for the beta (minus the beheadings, of course). You mentioned in your last fic that your OC Davad Arkan owed something to Yudan Rosh. Well, the influence certainly goes both ways. Sometimes I think Yudan is a cross between your Davad and your Malak. Thanks as always for your support and insights!
Reckless

- Vrook Lamar -

Reckless.

It was a character trait I had little time for. An impatience that exhibited a lack of mental discipline - the assuaging of one's desires at the expense of studying the larger design. A bit like allowing one's temper to win: sure, there was visceral satisfaction at first, that heady feeling of triumph - right before reality broke in to slap one over the head with the consequences.

Up until now, recklessness had never been an emotional weakness of mine. I'd more or less prided myself on it.

My fingers were encased in the sound-dampening material of a starpilot's envirosuit. I tapped them against the dash regardless, inordinately irritated at the lack of noise the motion provided.

Recklessness was one of the many traits I'd always damned Revan Freeflight for. Ah, but that comparison burned. Recklessness, overconfidence, and an uncanny knack for landing on her feet that so many damn idiots labelled as luck.

Yet, what could I call my own behaviour right now, if not reckless?

...

"We will enter hyperspace the moment Admiral Gant's fleet arrives in this sector," Forn Dodonna relayed, her lined face folding in a frown as she scrolled through a data-feed on her command table. "General Adashan's fleet has already jumped from Trandosha. He may reach the Star Forge before us, but if he does, it shall only be for a time measured in minutes rather than hours."

Davis Tar'coya harrumphed, shooting me a suspicious glance before turning his black gaze on Dodonna. Ach, but the commodore's consistent resentment of Humans and Jedi both was more than a little tiresome. "And the intercepted comms?" Tar'coya growled.

"Changes nothing," Dodonna clipped out, not even lifting her head. "Malak may know of our advance, but at this proximity we shall reach his stronghold before much of his armada can be successfully recalled. He has over-extended himself across the breadth of the galaxy, under the assumption he would have enough warning should we learn the location of his base. Once Darth Malak and his Star Forge are finished, the remnants of the Sith Empire shall either scatter or yield."

I could hear the burn of disappointment in the greying Admiral's voice, for all that she tried to conceal it. Republic Intelligence was widely regarded, and the discovery that our tactical comms - along with the manifest of command detail - was intercepted directly after delivery had been a hard one to swallow.

Darth Malak will soon know who is leading the Republic vanguard. And who the advisors are.
The thought was acid in my heart. For Malak would waste no time in relaying it to his captive, and I could only imagine his delight in telling Bastila Shan that her master travelled to aid in the destruction of her prison. Of her.

Decades of emotional control should have prepared me for such a bitter scenario. But it didn't.

With a half-choked harrumph that made me sound like even more of an old fool than I was, I muttered a weak excuse for departure and stalked out of Dodonna's strat room.

Bastila. What must you be thinking of me?

All of this damn foolhardy plan, from the minute Galdea had suggested it over the comatose body of a broken Sith Lord, had done nothing but set Bastila Shan up to fail. To fall. No one put the interests of my young, gifted padawan first - not when the likes of Revan and Malak were involved. And now...

There was a thump of a walking stick hobbling behind me.

"What?" I snapped in irritation, as I strode down a restricted corridor of the Meridus. A passing lieutenant threw me a glance of surprise, before diverting his attention to the short figure travelling in my wake. With a mumbled greeting, the Republic officer hurried away.

"Heavy, your heart is," Vandar murmured behind me. "Despair-"

"Spare me your platitudes of the Force, Vandar," I grumbled, even as I paused so he could catch up. I didn't particularly feel like listening to Vandar Tokare, but striding away under the power of my longer limbs seemed a disrespect beneath me. Besides, I knew Vandar. He'd find a way to speak his piece.

"Vrook." The centuries-old Jedi Master sighed as he stepped close. "Both a challenge and a heartache is training a padawan. More for the master than the youngling. You know this."

Aye, I did, and it was part of the reason I had delayed so long before choosing my one and only padawan. Vandar, in contrast, had trained many. But the creaky sadness in his voice told me he was thinking on his last. His failure.

At least I knew my old padawan still lived.

"She'll see this as a betrayal."

"Understand the sacrifices of war, Bastila Shan surely does-"

"Bah! She's spent weeks as a prisoner of a Sith Lord, Vandar. You can't expect me to believe her judgment isn't skewed by now."

He paused, bright blue eyes staring at me steadily. "What will you do?"

That question, right there, set my heart burning. Vandar had sensed my desire earlier, the reckless urge to race out in my scoutship, track down Bastila myself seeing as no else gave a damn about her-

But caution had quickly curtailed that. If Malak captures me, I'll be used against her. What did that matter, now, when all Bastila would see was me advising the Republic front to destroy her?

She'll fall. I knew my padawan well. She was a good woman, who had been protected for much of
her young life. I'd been adamant Bastila Shan would not receive accelerated training the likes of which Revan and Malak had, but the war had thrust her into the limelight anyway, with less preparation than was wise. Bastila yearned for acknowledgment, and that was not something I had ever been good at granting.

What would Kylah Aramai’s betrayal have done to her?

The thought of Bastila truly falling, devolving into one of Malak's Dark Jedi, blackened my soul with self-recriminations and unyielding despair. I'd never fully appreciated the internal self-doubt that Karon and Zhar and even Vandar exhibited after their apprentices sunk to such depths, but I was beginning to.

"I don't know," I said heavily. Dashing off in my scoutship was a fool’s game, I knew that. The Force might enable me to fly a starship with pre-cognizance and skill beyond a normal starpilot, but I could not hope to slip through whatever armada Malak had stationed outside his fortress. Not in a Republic scoutship. My only chance of infiltration would be-

-in a Sith ship.

... The console of the snubfighter blinked at me, counting down the minutes until hyperspace exit. The cockpit was large enough for two, and behind was a small room jammed full of supplies and a closet refresher. Some snubs were offensive craft only; not designed for hyper-travel, but rather a supporting limb of a larger starship’s arsenal.

This was an Aurek-class, a snubfighter that had its own internal hyperdrive, a model that had been in production for many decades. I'd flown Aurek-class fighters before. A fair swathe of them had been manufactured for the Republic, and they were still being built today. This one, in particular, had been around since the dawn of the Mandalorian Wars, and no doubt seen more than its fair share of the frontlines.

Of course, it had been retro-fitted since then.

... "I got every grunt studying this thing, ever since we got our interdiction back online," the head engineer commented, his large blue eyes swivelling around to survey the diagnostics. One limp forearm indicated the underbelly of the common Republic ship. "The stealth tech's wheedled into the thrusters and sublight drive both, so the ship can be well-cloaked at any speed barring a hyper-jump. It's easy enough to activate, too, but understanding the tech's a different skillet of scalefish."

I tried to ignore the ethics of using mild Force persuasion on the Ithorian. The snubfighter in question sat in one of the smaller repair bays of the Meridus, docked and clamped one bay along from my very own scoutship.

"Understanding it- so it won't be an easy task to replicate this technology?" I kept my voice mild and non-threatening, with the slightest hint of Force adding gravity to my words. I didn't like this sort of intel-gathering, but ever since the thought had flashed through my head-

The Meridus captured two of Saul Karath's stealthed snubs. Two of the original six that had targeted the Meridus' gravity-wells.
-it kept taunting me with possibility. Five hours estimated until Gant's fleet would arrive, and then Dodonna would order the jump to hyperspace. Five hours for me to decide on a stupid, reckless course of action that was entirely uncharacteristic.

Yet all I could think of was Bastila. I'd worried that if I took the insane route, I'd end up being used as a means to twist her further. But what if the opposite were true? What if the one thing that might adhere her to the light was witnessing her master risk everything for her safety?

The Ithorian engineer snorted. "Honestly? I reckon it'll take years. Look, we've snagged this tech before, but never undamaged - so this last week's been a real eye-opener, and let me tell ya we ain't even scraped the surface. The OS of the stealth mod is coded in a language we can't crack. The power source of the cloak is a bio-mineral I ain't never seen before. And when ya add in the fact that we've seen the Sith use this tech on an' off for at least a year - but only ever on a handful of their marks - well. I'd lay my creds on them not being able to mass-produce it either."

The engineer's drawling commentary certainly raised an interesting assumption or two. Republic tactical command had encountered cloaked Sith starships before, but only sporadically. That such a massive advantage hadn't been reproduced throughout Darth Malak's fleet indicated the technology was still emerging, difficult to implement, and likely available from only one source.

The Star Forge.

The snub that rested so innocently before me must have visited Darth Malak's stronghold before. And it was housed right next to my scoutship. I had full clearance to open the airlock of this minor repair bay and depart at my leisure. I was under no oath to remain- frankly, some of the brass would be happy to see my back.

My eyes burned as I stared at the Sith snub. What more of a sign from the Force do I need?

I cleared my throat. "Any plans to use this ship in the offensive against the Sith?"

My mind was reeling with a mounting excitement that was as unfamiliar as it was dizzying. But if Dodonna fancied some sort of battle tactic utilizing this spoil of war, then the one sure way to stoke her ire was to sneak this very ship out from underneath her nose.

Last thing I needed was for the Republic brass to distrust the Jedi Order even more. Still, after Atris Surik's shattering revelation to the Senate, it was hard to know if relations could get any worse. While I didn't entirely blame Atris for relaying Dantooine's misguided and highly contentious actions regarding Darth Revan, the fact that she decided to inform the Republic Senate before the Coruscanti Jedi surely said something of fractures within the High Council itself.

The Ithorian's eyelids drooped in confusion. "Eh, I doubt it. What can a single snubfighter do? Nah, this is our chance to study the tech, man! I'll be gassed if they don't send this snub off to one of our bases before the jaunt into hyperspace."

What can a single snubfighter do? What can a single person achieve?

A lot, if the Force was with them.

... 

*Have faith.* Vandar's last words to me, after he'd found me standing alone in the repair bay, internally warring with myself. *And may the Force be with you.*

It hadn't taken much to convince the engineers to take a break; the Ithorian, for all his enthusiasm,
had just about burnt himself out studying Karath's elite snubfighter. All sentients needed sleep, sooner or later.

Vandar had hummed, then; his bright blue eyes dancing over the *Aurek*-class snub before resting on my scoutship. He said nothing more, merely turned on his heel and left the repair bay in silence.

He'd known. I wasn't sure if it was simple deduction or if the old bat had skimmed my thoughts - and I wouldn't put that sort of sly snooping past him. Too many saw Vandar Tokare as nothing more than a wrinkled old coot who knew nothing past the philosophies of the Jedi. He was an easy one to underestimate.

I'd acted quickly, the unfamiliar recklessness spurring me on, as I readied the repair bay for the supposed departure of my scoutship. I hadn't risked refuelling the Sith ship - the readouts, at least, claimed the tank had enough reserves for a week in hyperspace. Another sign from the Force, or maybe that was purely my own scrabbling for justification. One could see the Force's hand in just about anything - and while Vandar liked to prescribe to that philosophy, I was too cynical to allow it as an excuse from personal responsibility.

One sole transmission from the *Meridus* had reached me, a handful of seconds after I'd cleared the external airlock.

::<*Halt! Unknown starpilot, we will open fire-::*

I'd shot into hyperspace, likely just as they were scrabbling to activate the interdiction drive. Dodonna was going to flay me alive.

And, now, here I was. Truly alone in space, acting like a reckless idiot.

It felt right, though. For the first time in what seemed like forever, my mind was focused and fixed on one clear objective only. The Republic could take care of the Star Forge and Darth Malak - or maybe blasted, broken Revan Freeflight will, if Vandar turns out to be right yet again - but I was heading for Bastila.

I'd failed to protect her from the frontlines. Failed to stem the exploitation of her gift in the name of the greater good. Failed to shield her from the deception and treachery of her closest peer- one I should have seen through back on Dantooine.

I would not, could not, fail Bastila again.

*Attachment.* I knew well what the Jedi ethos had to say, being one of the staunchest critics of individual attachment myself. Deep, intense emotions directed at singular individuals were fraught with risk: jealousy, resentment, anger, betrayal- all of these feelings were dangerous to one who could reach the Force. All could tempt one down dark paths that would forever throw shadows over one's future.

A Jedi pulled back from individual attachment, and practiced unconditional love for the many. Everyone was tempted towards unbalanced feelings for others, but someone who truly embraced the Force in the light could rise beyond that, and have the judgment to see *all* of life as something worth preserving equally.

But Bastila was my padawan, and I had more than just an obligation to her. I cared for the young woman, the closest thing I had to a daughter. I could not ignore her.

I'd rejected a different attachment, once, and spent my life denying the regret it had brought me. Even now, the familiar heaviness still weighed on my heart. I was a servant of the Force, and considered
myself blessed for it, but even I had dark moments when I wondered just what sort of life the Force had cost me.

If I closed my eyes, I could still see the flash of a young woman, wild brown hair aloft in the wind, a yearning loneliness in her soul that called to me-

...

_She was sitting atop the crumbling stone wall, legs swinging idly as the warm breeze rifled through the strands of her loose hair. It had once been a ritual, where every Baker's Day we'd meet. Ours was as an innocent friendship between two very different souls, and I couldn't even admit to myself how much I treasured it._

_That was before._

Now, she turned up rarely. But my feet still traipsed the same trail twice a week, every Baker's Day, one hour before the noon feast. Each time I noted her absence on that derelict wall, my heart would skip a painful beat.

Now it was racing.

_I deliberately made my footsteps audible, and saw the slight cock of her head when she heard my approach._

"Bored again?" I asked, striving for a light tone as I vaulted the stonework. This part of Dantooine was dotted with forgotten ruins, marks of civilization long abandoned. Acidic remi-grass grew dominant here, a consequence of land tilled into near-barrenness. Other than the wild kath hounds, the only life to be found on these empty plains was the odd wandering Jedi.

"Yeah." She threw me a guarded smile that only served to illustrate the awkwardness between us. "I've sat through enough history lessons today, no matter what Nomi says. Though from the way she laps it up, you'd think she was Force-sensitive herself."

I didn't miss the twist of sibling resentment in her voice. Oh, there was no doubt Nayama adored her older sister, but she was envious all the same. Nomi was strikingly lovely, and had a sweet temperament coupled with a mettle of morality that made near-all admire her.

_It was easy to understand Nayama's ill-feeling. Her sister had bagged a powerful Jedi one step away from ascending to knighthood. While Nayama, in contrast, was merely a Force-blind teenager stuck on a planet full of mystics. She would have been better off boarding with a nearby farm, but it was her ties to Nomi that kept her ensconced in the enclave - and Nomi was too busy proving herself as a pillar of strength to her new husband rather than a hindrance._

And where did that leave Nayama? Jealous and bored and with nothing tangible in her life - all because of her attachment to her sister.

Attachments are dangerous. That is why Jedi break from family. That is why Jedi love all unconditionally, rather than singular individuals. _That was why Nomi's marriage should never have been permitted._

_I lowered myself next to Nayama, allowing my gaze to slip to her out-stretched hand. Long fingers, lean and wiry like the rest of her, twitching with the desire to do something._

_She withdrew her hand swiftly into her lap._
The heat of embarrassment scoured my face, even as I damned myself for the lack of emotional
countrol.

"Why are you here, then?" she asked, her voice abrupt and cool. "Bored from all your Jedi
training?"

My mind flashed with a traitorous what-if. That day, when she'd reached out to clasp my hand, a shy
invitation warming her brown gaze- what if, instead of snatching my limb away and dove-tailing into
a stuttering discourse regarding Jedi and attachments, instead I'd curled my fingers around hers-

Then I'd be making as much a mockery of the Jedi Code as Andur Sunrider is. More, even. Nayama
is barely more than a girl, and a good eight cycles younger than me. She is as innocent as a sunrise,
and as lonely as a desert. She deserves a man who can be her everything.

"I wanted to- to talk to you," I said, stumbling over the words. "I, ah, I have something to tell you."

I didn't warm to people easily. Never had. The Force had bloomed in me young, and I could barely
remember a time before Dantooine. Understanding the mysteries of the Jedi Order was the driving
purpose in my life, and that had always been enough.

"So, talk." Nayama was looking ahead, profile turned from me, as she watched something in the
distant hills. I longed for the easiness of our past, even as I accepted it was long gone.

She'd been here for near-on a year, now. I still recalled the flurry of excitement when dashing Andur
Sunrider had returned, with his outspoken master and the two sisters in tow. Force-blind nulls, a few
of the more acerbic Jedi muttered, as they cast a suspicious eye over the enclave-sanctioned
marriage between Andur and Nomi.

Somehow, Nayama and I had fallen in together. Maybe it was a shared loneliness- but I hadn't truly
thought I was afflicted by that sort of heartache. Deliberate solitude did not equate to loneliness- I'd
always told myself that. I only knew it for a lie after that fateful day, when Nayama retreated from
our friendship, hurt pride and insecurity simmering behind a mask of poorly-built indifference.

You are lovely. The words stayed lodged in my head.

I would choose you, if the Force had not
chosen me. Ach, but I'd never been good with words. And why would she accept them, when the
likes of Andur Sunrider had thrown caution to the wind, and found victory in doing so? When his
master spoke out against our established ethos, proclaiming that the Order had forgotten the old
ways, that once Jedi did not eschew attachment but embraced it instead?

There were enough rumblings of discontent from the Council, but so far the Sunrider marriage
seemed to be surviving the fallout. I wasn't sure I would have that sort of strength.

"I'm leaving for Coruscant." The words came out in a rush, twisted as the grimace that sat on my
lips. "For padawan training. In ten days."

Her stifled gasp pulled at something in my chest. She still cared; a little, at least.

"P-padawan training? But- you are a padawan!" Nayama had jerked to face me, wide-set eyes hot
with emotion. It gave her an exotic look, I'd always thought. Nomi might be the classical beauty, but
there was something wild and free about Nayama that drew my gaze.

"Yes." I shrugged uncomfortably, looking down. "There's not enough masters here, Nayama.
They're sending the more experienced padawans away."

How could I explain Jedi politics to her? Andur and Nomi's marriage had ruffled tempers in the
Core, where the more conservative masters frowned at the liberties Dantooine so often took, and worried over the padawans trained here. And it was true, we were bottom-heavy in the ranks. Another five Force-sensitives had been picked up from the Outer Rim in the last quarter alone, and then there were trouble-makers like the Qel-Droma brats who, frankly, needed at least two masters each just to keep them in check. Whereas I- I hadn't had a dedicated master since Master Yatree left for Coruscant with padawans Karon Enova and Zhar Lestin three years ago.

I didn't want to leave. I'd always disliked Coruscant. While Karon and Zhar were... tolerable, I'd grudgingly admit, I knew next to no-one else there.

"Andur's sitting his knight trials in ten days."

I blinked, jerking back up to meet her gaze. "I- I did not know that."

"Why aren't you?"

"I'm not ready, Nayama." Another reason for my transfer. Andur and I had been on Dantooine for the same number of years, but he'd had extensive field training. I was well-aware that the more practical aspects of my Jedi education had fallen short of the mark - and that Coruscant offered more experience and opportunities in that regard.

My stomach turned at the flash of disappointment in her eyes. She moved, once more, to stare into the hills.

"I'll be going too." Her words were so low I barely caught them as the warm breeze stole them away.

"You- you are? Why?"

"Andur has some mission in the Mid Rim once his trials are over. I didn't catch all the details. Not like I really have a choice, anyway." Her distraught sigh softened the edge of bitterness prevalent in her words. "It'll be better when I leave. I think- I think Nomi- she's been worried about me. This place- it's not for me."

I stared, transfixed, at the line of her profile. The curve of her nose tipped up ever-so-slightly at the end. Her hair, the colour of darkened malt, whipped in the wind. I found my gaze lingering over the turn of her face, wondering if this would be the last time I ever saw her.

"That's Exar," she muttered, eyes narrowing.

"What?" I jerked around to the hills that had so captivated her attention, and realized she hadn't been staring blindly at nothing-

The brown-clad figure of a Jedi Knight was stalking purposefully towards us.

Exar Kun. I'd never warmed easily to people, and enigmatic, glib types like Knight Exar least of all. He was the sort who innately knew which words would cut and which would charm, and he used those gifts well. Always with a cool smile on his striking face, while his deep green eyes glimmered with intelligence and his aura shone with barely-checked power.

The Force loved him, and he knew it.

But I certainly didn't expect Nayama to be familiar with him. Sure, I'd seen them in conversation once or twice, but thought nothing of it. Exar was the type of Jedi to use words like null, and I highly doubted he'd ever spend time on the likes of Nayama Da-Boda.
But, as I turned back to observe the pink blush blossoming on her face, I started to wonder if I was wrong.


"Knight," I returned stiffly.

"Exar," Nayama murmured. I must have imagined the breathlessness in her voice. "Are you out showing the kath hounds who's boss again?"

The man gave a lazy chuckle, coming to a halt a few metres from us. "We cannot have predators too close to civilization, my friend." He lingered over the possessive pronoun, and I felt the simmer of malcontent in my gut. The Jedi Code ran through my head instinctively, but it didn't stop my mouth tightening. Green eyes flashed at me, followed by the amused arch of a dark brow. "I am merely trying to comport myself as a Jedi."

I tried to stop the dark flush of embarrassment returning. At least Nayama wouldn't notice my discomfort. She was too busy gazing stupidly at the cocksure man.

"I hear the packs can get quite large, deeper into the hills," Nayama commented. It sounded forced, like she was struggling to find some way to keep the conversation going.

"Not these days." He threw her a wicked smile and, despite myself, I suddenly saw the knight the way a young woman like Nayama must. A tall figure, strong and at ease with himself, lightsabers displaying proudly on a gleaming utility belt. His mop of black curls was matted to his head with sweat, and his olive skin glowed with health. The man looked every inch a warrior, and I tried not to hate him for it.

"You've left your hair unbraided," Exar observed, a cool smile twitching at the corner of his mouth. "As wild and untamed as the Dantooine hills."

The pink on Nayama's cheeks deepened, and I knew then I was not imagining anything.

"Are you heading back to the enclave?" I asked, gruff and abrupt, feeling my mood plummet further as Nayama stiffened.

Exar glanced back to me, his gaze darkening with awareness. "Are you looking for an escort, Padawan?" The amusement thrumming in his voice was obvious. "I suppose, even here, the odd kath hound can rear its ugly head. They can be dangerous if you are not prepared."

I scowled at the unjust implication, but Exar had already turned from me, offering an arm of welcome to my companion. I tried to ignore the stab of regret as she stifled a shy giggle and leaned forward to clasp his hand.

...

Nayama didn't bid me farewell from Dantooine. In fact, the next time I saw her was many years later, following in the wake of a man I disliked almost as much as Exar Kun.

The now-grown Nayama, swirling with wild Force, halted my steps. Her hand, intertwined with the runaway padawan I'd resentfully trained with on Coruscant, staggered me into silence.

Jolee Bindo had returned to the Jedi, married to my old friend. Who now shone with the Force, as unexpectedly and brightly as her sister.
::Five minute warning until hyperspace exit::

The automated alarm from the console wrenched me back to the present. I grimaced. It did no good to dwell on the failures of the past. Nayama was long since dead, and I laid that squarely at the feet of Exar Kun and his innate corruption that had shadowed the galaxy more than a generation ago.

Today, I had a different Sith Lord to elude.

The logs of this vessel had confirmed my suspicions: some months back, an elite six-man squad of Karath's fleet had been sent to the Star Forge. The coordinates had been scrubbed from the logs, but the entry was still earmarked as High Command. It had to be the Forge- which meant this ship's signature would be recognized. Should be recognized. I could only hope my cover story would hold.

The console beeped, an incessant sound that grated. The seconds ticked down as my hands steadied on the controls. With gritted teeth, I slowly eased the snubfighter out of hyperspace.

The minute-long deceleration seemed to take forever. Space-lines of white slowly protracted, before finally- finally- snapping back into real-time.

I had a brief impression of multiple starfighters dotting the black skies in front of me, before a discordant wail screeched throughout the cockpit. The A-236 snub jerked wildly under my grip, and the console lit up in a disarray of flashing alarms. Indecipherable sigils flashed on the screen, before a translation in Galactic Basic appeared beneath:

::Decryption activated::

The alarm cut off with a whine, the lights blinkered back to normality, and the vessel steadied.

What the blazes was that? No time to puzzle over it, or the foreign symbols, because next followed the lower-pitched beep of starship detection- many upon many, all flickering into friendly green specks on the nav-screen.

Back through the cockpit transparisteel, the sight of the enemy greeted me.

Snubfighters. Strikefighters. Sith warbirds. A vast array of ships, milling around a massive space station that was immediately recognizable from the schematics I had so studied.

Darth Malak's fortress. Darth Revan's discovery. The heart of the Sith Empire. It was colossal, with three elongated fins aimed sharply downwards like a tripod of alien incisors. Sleek snubs assembled near the rise of each tooth, exiting and entering precisely where the plans placed the factory docking bays. Circular trajectories, like three hive minds working in unison, all mobilizing into squadrons of readiness.

Some of the marks hovered in stationary formation, like fire-ants guarding a mountain. There was a group of six visibly closer to me than any other squad. As my attention fixed upon them, they all canted to the left, before levelling into a trajectory aimed directly at me.

My hand jerked straight to the onboard ship communicator.

"This is snubfighter A-236 of Saul Karath's armada, requesting permission to dock." I opened the transmission wide, broadcasting on all available channels. "High Command, please respond. Transmitting the ship's signature now."

I waited, grip tensed on the controls, for a forthcoming reply. None came. The incoming fighters didn't deviate from their course.
"I repeat, this is snubfighter A-236, the sole survivor from Elite X squadron of Admiral Saul Karath's armada. Requesting permission to dock."

The incoming warbirds remained steady on their course. The message had to be picked up somewhere, but the comm still stared blankly back at me. My hands hovered over the stealth mod- but they'd already seen me, the second I'd lurched into realspace.

"Dammit, I'm a friendly!" I growled into the mic, my gaze narrowing as I speculated on the torpedo-range of the Sith snubs. Wouldn't be long, before those bastards could get a lock. "The Leviathan's blown into space-dust, so I'm returning to home base. Is someone going to answer?"

It seemed not. Like a game of who would blink first, except that I was ridiculously outnumbered. The lead snubfighter dipped, and hot red spat from its apex-

My palm slammed on the stealth controls. Acknowledgement bleeped from the ship's computer just as a hazy purple sheen erupted over the transparisteel. My hands, pulling back hard on the thrusters, diving the snub laterally, G-forces slamming me against the pilot's chair-

Turbolaser bolts skimmed past the viewport as the A-236 abruptly changed course.

A proximity alarm wailed belatedly before sputtering into silence. Trigger-happy bastards! I veered into an evasive roll, the specks of distant snubfighters now a vague violet as the stealth tech encased me in an illusion of refuge. I was cloaked, but that didn't mean safe. With another draw on the steering column, I canted the A-236 back in the direction of the Forge, now some degrees askew from the hostile snubs.

Blood pulsed in my ears. If the Sith weren't even going to talk-

An incoming message blinked on the comm.

::Er, unknown starfighter,: a young voice croaked. A holo-image blinkered into existence on the nav-stand, sharpening into the image of a spotty youth who couldn't be old enough to be manning comms anywhere outside of a virtual-gaming complex. ::This is Lieutenant Jha'hasi. Um, we can still detect you.::

Jha'hasi had the wide-eyed look of a gormless tach, one corner of his mouth drooping in an uncomfortable grimace. He blinked, leaning forward to peer into the holo-cam.

"Yes, I'm sure you can," I snapped back, glancing down briefly at the nav-screen. The ship's diagrammatic revealed the Sith warbirds were thinning out, shifting course- but not directly gunning for me. "Explains why you're hailing me now, right?"

Actually, it was a pretty solid assumption that Forge command could track their cloaked snubs - but whether that was relayed onto ships without the stealthing mod was another story.

::We request- er, demand that you uncloak now, and ready yourself for an escort back to base.::

"And I request that someone other than a damn greenhorn speak to me over the comm," I growled. "I didn't survive the Leviathan to get blasted by a delinquent who can't distinguish between bogey and friendly!"

Still, the Sith were talking to me now. I felt my blood-pressure ease, my mind sharpen. Steady. Focus. Make the act convincing.

I was getting closer to the Star Forge. A massive bay door gaped open from the nearest fin, and from
here I could see multiple vessels exiting the factory, even as two swarmed back in. I'd shot past one squad, but directly in my path were at least another twenty marks. Two of them shimmered, before disappearing entirely.

_Ah, damnation._ I glanced sideways to the nav-screen. They weren't there, either.

A scuffling sound of static erupted over the comm, before the youngling was unceremoniously pushed out of view.

::Unknown starfighter, identify yourself and report::: The voice was dead calm and levelled with authority. The weathered face that stared back belonged to a Zabrak male, who was capped with a ridiculous military hat tilted askew over one horn. The lack of introduction was not inviting.

_Play it cool. I'm a Sith starpilot who wants nothing more than to fight the Republic._ I cleared my throat. "Star Forge, this is Captain Elias Troystar of the A-236 Aurek-class snubfighter from the late Admiral Karath's armada. I'm sure you're aware of the rout in the Edean sector. I only just made it out. My squad's all gone. Requesting permission to dock, sir."

My cover story had the right details- the luckless pilot of this snub was sitting pretty in a prison cell in one of Dodonna's transport ships. While I didn't know what the interrogation team had gleaned from him in terms of intel, his name had been an easy find on the Meridus' detention register. The Sith landing protocol had been a quick study from the snub's internal logs. It seemed like all the details had fallen into place for me, like it was meant to be. Now if only I could convince the Sith-

The Zabrak had folded his arms. Black tattoos formed a lattice of lines on his cheeks and forehead, adding to a formidable presence. I couldn't tell if the man was suspicious or indifferent. ::Didn't feel like seeing the battle out, Troystar?::

I eyed over the general stripes on the Zabrak's shoulders. "I held the line, sir, right up 'til the Leviathan issued evac orders. Seemed like a choice between turning into a smear of space-dust or retreating to fight another day. I'm interested in claiming more Republic scalps, not adding to their kill-count."

A hairless brow raised sceptically at my reply. ::Mind explaining why you're here, Captain? Our lord sends out starships from here to link-up with fleets throughout the galaxy. They are not expected to return. Not to the Forge:::

That wasn't a surprise, not with the coordinates missing from the logs. It was probably a safeguard if the ship was captured- up until now, the Star Forge's location _had_ been a closely-guarded secret. I forced a nonchalant shrug. "Well, sir, this is an Aurek-class snubfighter. I have, at max, a week's worth of fuel onboard. Not enough to meet up with Admiral Sara on the Rodian front, or, frankly any of the offensives in the Mid Rim-"  

::Enough,:: he interrupted. Impatience furrowed his brow. ::Aurek-class snubs are widely spread throughout our enemy's forces, so I'm sure you can appreciate our immediate reaction. We're expecting an enemy assault within hours.::

"Indeed," I bit out. "Why do you think I returned home?"

The Zabrak's eyes tightened.

"Sir," I tacked on. _Easy does it, Vrook. Play the part of a battle-angry pilot, not an insubordinate one._  

::You privy to the enemy's plans, Troystar?:::
I snorted, struggling for an outward display of scorn even as I scrabbled for a plausible riposte. "Republic comms aren't hard to crack, sir," I fired back, shooting off an inward apology to Dodonna. "And the _Leviathan_ agents weren't exactly circumspect with their intel. Gossip of a Republic assault on the Forge was a bit of an open secret over the airwaves."

::Sloppy.:: The disapproving tones of the general lay thick through the comm. ::Not what I expect from Saul Karath.::

I debated an answer to that, before leaning on silence as the best rejoinder.

The Zabrak's gaze was stony as he appraised me. All he'd be seeing in return was a starpilot's targeting helm, orange visor occluding what was visible of my face. I had no idea if Darth Malak's home base had dossiers on Karath's doomed crew, but at least the pilot I was impersonating had been a male Human.

::Alright, Captain, time for you to uncloak before Zephyr-3 gets a twitchy trigger finger.:: The corner of the Zabrak's hard mouth curved. ::She's got you on lock, Troystar. I suggest you don't give her an excuse for target practice before the real fun begins.::

My gaze snapped to the nav-screen as something lurched in my gut. Dozens of green blips were visible, but nothing close enough for immediate danger—_the two marks that vanished earlier_. Could they track me? Through the trace of the comms, maybe. Wasn't like I had much of a choice but to go forward with my cover story, and hope the hard-bitten general bought it.

_Trust in the Force_. I could almost hear Vandar's damn voice in my head. Well, I'd come this blasted far-

The purple hue of the stealth tech crackled before vanishing. A second after deactivation, two specks of green dotted into existence on the nav-screen—right on my tail.

The Zabrak was wearing a grin as cold and sharp as his damn flinty gaze. ::I've tacked your comm-signal onto Zephyr squad, Troystar. Your new designation is Zephyr-13::. He leaned back. ::Get some kills under your belt. Maybe it'll make up for running out on the _Leviathan_::

I was just starting to realize a dock wasn't forthcoming when the general stood, with the shadow of that spotty lieutenant hovering at his side. _Blast it!_ I'd been counting on getting pulled in to dock for a debrief. Surely, I'd thought, some slimy Sith officer would want to grill a lone survivor from the _Leviathan_-

I leaned forward in desperation. "General-"

::Hop to it, Captain,:: the general growled as he stepped away and the stuttering greenhorn slid into the chair. The general's last words were muffled- ::I have enough to prepare for without micromanaging a rogue runaway, Lieutenant. His signature's authentic. Don't bother me again unless there's an actual Republic bug to squash.::

_Force, I have to get on the damn Star Forge, not join the blasted Sith fleet!_

Lieutenant Jha'hasi muttered a cowed _sir_ before turning to face the cam, a forced smile on his face that wavered into a pained grimace. ::Zephyr-13, you heard General Daelidar. You need to form-up behind-::

"I'm flying on fumes here, Lieutenant," I cut in, trying to edge my tone into neutral. If spotty idiot was back in charge, I'd have to play him. _Might be easier than the general, now that the Sith aren't trying to shoot me._ "I need to dock and refuel."
The kid frowned, one hand scratching at the fuzz on his face. ::I'm looking at your readouts, Zephyr-13. You've got more than a quarter-::

So said my diagnostics, too. I pasted on a smile. "Damn internal specs have been unreliable since the stealth mod was installed. A-231 sputtered out in the middle of a dogfight, Lieutenant. We all learned quick to refuel before the quarter-mark was hit."

Jha'hasi blinked. ::Um, that's news to me, Captain.::

"Apologies, Lieutenant, I'll be sure to log it with Quality after the battle," I replied in a bland tone. Easy, I warned myself, as Jha'hasi flushed a mottled red. Intimidate the kid, don't annoy him. I lowered my voice. "Look, all I want to do is kill those bastards who got my comrades. Please, get me docked and refuelled, so I can do just that."

Jha'hasi's head twitched sideways, as if he was looking to the general's retreating form for assistance. His young shoulders slumped, before he turned back to me with a long-suffering sigh. I wondered, not for the first time, just how depleted the ranks of Darth Malak's experienced nav-officers were.

::Alright, fine. I can get you a window to refuel in the Anterior factory bay, Captain.:: The kid frowned, leaning over a console. ::I've got a spot- er, dock F14 is empty. Fly on in, and comm the dockmaster for entry. I'll let Zephyr-I know that you'll form up within thirty minutes.::

"Thank you, Lieutenant." I switched the comm off. It was only then that I realized my hands were shaking.

So far, so good. I took a deep breath in. My pulse was steady, my head clear. One second, to re-focus myself. Alright. Game on. The Force is with me.

My hands twitched a slight adjustment to the trajectory, aiming the snub straight for the midsection of Forge's closest fin. Landing protocol should be easy to follow. Wouldn't be long now, before I took my first steps on that cursed space station. Smooth flying from here on in-

The comm blinked again. My jaw clenched in a forced smile as I leaned forward to answer it.

::Er, you're heading to the wrong bay.::

Great. Stuttering Greenhorn was back. And I was a fool for assuming the nearest factory bay was my designated destination. I sighed noisily over the comm. "Useful. Even more useful would be some actual directions."

I heard a faint snigger over the airwaves, which made me wonder just who else was listening in. The kid grimaced. ::Sure, yeah, it's the factory bay to the left. My left. So, um, your right.::

Jha'hasi's expression was pained, like he'd just bitten into something rotten. I wondered whether he'd survive the day, and felt vaguely sad despite my irritation. Kids like this one, on both sides, were nothing more than numbers. Despite the horrors Kun had unleashed a generation ago, nothing had truly changed.

"Understood." I gave the boy a curt nod, bit back an acidic retort about his communication skills, and flicked the communicator shut once more.

xXx

I wasn't interrupted again. And as the Star Forge slowly eclipsed the entirety of my view, a great heaviness weighed on my soul. A creeping desolation, as if this entire plan was doomed from the
start. It wasn't reckless, it was flat-out insane-

This place reeks of the Dark Side. Despair was but one of many paths, and I knew the taste well. I also knew that the best counter was beyond me- I couldn't reach out to the Force. Not here. Not so close to Darth Malak.

The dockmaster had commed through an approach vector and landing coordinates. I'd been surprised to see it was a droid, a sleek cinereal protocol droid that issued forth automated docking instructions. That's a good thing. One less sentient to placate or win over. My Aurek-class snub hovered, pausing just outside an external airlock at the anterior maw of the Star Forge, waiting for the chance to enter.

The delay itself, transmitted from the dockmaster as an estimated eight minutes, was gruelling. I was so close, and yet felt so far away. That insidious trickle of doubt returned, the creeping belief that everything was about to go belly-up in the worst of ways-

Patience. Faith. Master them both. The Dark Side shall not prevail. With a deep cleansing breath, I cleared my mind and waited.

When an airlock finally opened and spat out three enemy marks, I slowly edged the A-236 into the heart of Darth Malak's empire.

As the ship crept ever forward, I tightened my focus inward. Kept the Force around me small. It wasn't possible to make one's signature entirely vanish, but dampening it was a skill I had some proficiency with. Maybe, if Malak was searching for an intruder he might hiccup on me, but it was a risk I'd accepted when I first jumped into this stolen craft.

He'll be concentrating on the Republic advance. His focus will be on Bastila. On Revan. So long as I don't cast any attention to my presence, I can slip through his fortress without him even realizing.

The turbine compressor whined as I cleared the airlock into the internal docking bay. The room beyond was- colossal. Larger than I expected, even from the outside. Rows of individual docks, many empty, spanned the massive hangar. The ground was teeming with flight-bots and astromechs and protocol droids. Refuelling gigs lined up in columns between the bays.

The snub held steady as my gaze spanned the hangar through the viewport. I'd seen enough docking bays in my time: large military bases housing dozens of strikefighters on Coruscant, on Duro, on the Chandrilan moon... but this one pipped them all for sheer size. Only snubs here, though. Out in the field, we've seen Forge-created destroyers, cruisers, transports-

But there were two more factory docks on the other fins of the Forge. Possibly meant for the deployment of the larger warbirds. A chill crept down my spine as I suddenly saw first-hand the military might that Darth Revan had brought into being.

The console blinked with a docking designation. Nearby, a display panel secured by a large robotic arm blinkered with the letters F14. With an inward breath, I flew the snub slowly forward before descending.

As the snub touched down on the launch pad, I killed the repulsors and powered the engine down. The lights on the dash winked out as I glanced sideways through the viewport. From here, near a dozen alien warbirds were visible, sleek and elongated and unique to the Sith armada. My craft may have been one of Karath's elite, but I was well-aware of just how badly it stuck out.

Move. My limbs moved automatically, unbuckling the safety harness, opening the cockpit window. An automated refuelling gig was already wheeling closer, along with an astromech droid that
bleeped at me in surprise. *If the Force wills it, this entire dock is run by droids. No one to question why I am suddenly leaving-*

With a wrench, I pulled myself upright and clambered out of the snub.

My booted feet echoed as they landed on the shiny floor with a thud.

*glimpses of the truth can be found here-

I glanced around wildly- a column of crates blocked my view in two directions, but to the right I could see various launch pads dotting along in a row to a distant wall of the hangar. The closest snub was some five docks away, with a suited pilot sitting ready in an open cockpit. He paid me no mind, leaning over the dash of his readied ship.

*Move. Get out of here.* I lifted my chin, and began walking. *I need to find a soldier or an engineer. Change out of this flight suit. Find an outfit to blend in-*

*draw deep. you can find what you're looking for. you can find Bastila-*

My breath caught in my throat. The urge to embrace the Force swelled: to search for my padawan using my strength, for surely that was the only way to locate her in a station the size of this one-

*yes, and there is great power here. you will find her, if only you reach out-

Oh, that dark desire was *dangerous.* I could *not* draw Darth Malak's attention. I knew that. So why was I even considering it?

*because you can't find Bastila without it-

No. *No.* I drew tight, tightly, tighter within myself. I was small, insignificant really, not noticeable-

The whispering voice ebbed before fading. The Dark Side... I knew it would be strong here, but I'd been an idiot to believe it would be easy to remain unaffected. I'd always thought Revan Freeflight and Malak Devari had been well-scarred, corrupted even, before Malachor- they would have thrown up little defence against the constant pull of temptation that emanated here.

Something alien and ancient and massive brushed against my soul before moving away. A presence, perhaps; or merely a coalesced corruption of the Force. And I knew, then, that Darth Malak sensing me wasn't the only danger I faced.

I had to stay sane. I had to stay *true.* Which meant doing things the old-fashioned way. *Sneak. Lie. Impersonate the enemy, and don't get caught.* I would risk delving into the Force only if I had to, only with the lightest of touches, only if there was no other way to find Bastila.

The Force had led me here. Surely, it would guide me to my padawan. I kept walking, focused on that distant wall, on a nearby exit that offered a glimmer of hope.

Recklessness had always paid off for the likes of Revan Freeflight. Force-willing, maybe it would for me.

xXx
Chapter End Notes

Coming up next: Multi-POV as the end-game finally opens.
A flight-squad's worth of thanks to kosiah for the beta.
Bastila Shan:

The soul-curdling memory whispered to me. Replaying the same vision; taunting with the same dark malevolence. Again and again in an ever-growing echo of evil.

*Shadows of licking anti-life, twisting through the nether.*

The images burned when I slept. When I woke. Whenever my mind wandered from its tightly held directive.

*Winking out the beauty and the feral power that fuelled the Force, be it light or dark or somewhere in between.*

The true threat behind everything.

*Death of the Force itself.*

My hands clenched tight against the smooth alloy railing of the meditation chamber Malak had so thoughtfully bestowed upon me. My head bowed, tightly twisted braids dangling like limp vines slowly suffocating for lack of sunlight. My eyes squeezed tight against the inevitable.

*-evil is the death of the Force-*

How could Revan turn from me? How could she behold this horror, this most crucial remnant of her cursed past, and then bleat on about the insignificant lives of a fleet doomed to destruction?

*She was broken. Truly broken, when I first saved her.* Since then, Revan had vaulted from strength to strength, despite the hurdles along the way, until even I had dared dream she could once again be the mighty hero the galaxy needed.

She still retained her old power. Oh, yes, I had tasted *that* enough times. But what was the power of Revan Freeflight against the death of the Force? When she refused to claim our only hope of triumph?

*-the power is here to combat the threat. all you need do is grasp it-*

Malak would awaken soon, if he had not already. He would find me. A platitude or two might soothe my forbidding master, but he would soon command me to contact Revan, and when she did not answer the holo-call-

*He will tear into my thoughts, discover I have already spoken with her-*

I had expected Revan to be here by now! Now, before I had to face Malak again. *Maybe- maybe she has changed her mind, stepped into the snubfighter, and is already on her way-* For Revan, of all
sentients, should comprehend what was truly at stake.

The old Revan had known, had understood.

*Shoulds and maybes don't make a wall, Bastila. Rely on them and you may as well tuck your head beneath your bedcovers. Focus on what you can do.*

I had to reach out to Revan again. Contact her, before Malak arrived. Pride held me back—pride and resentment were emotions I did not wish to admit—but the sting of Revan denying me, when she had been upon the precipice of truth—

*She does not grasp the truth in its entirety.* Perhaps Revan was still too broken. But while her strength eclipsed mine, I was the one who stood upon the Star Forge. I understood the limitations and possibilities of the bond that shackled us. I could sense the deep reverberation of promise echoing from the mighty heart of this very factory.

Perhaps, all I needed to do was remind her that our power was greater as one.

With a shaky breath, I called upon the Star Forge and released the psychic shield I had built between us.

There was...

My heart froze in disbelief.

...nothing.

*What?* No sense of my bond-sister. No presence intermingled within my connection to the Force. No tangible block on her end, nothing but an empty space where Revan should reside.

The taint of vague horror uncurled in my stomach. My thoughts raced as wildly as a summer storm. Nothing. *How could that be? She is missing... again?*

It took a moment for my frantic mind to slow. To ease back into something approaching order. *This has the same feel as Kashyyyk, I thought numbly, when Darth Bandon collared her. Somewhere, Revan had vanished from the Force. Or the Leviathan, when that schutta had thrown her into a Force-cage.*

The flurry of panic threatened to soar again. *Is Revan once more someone's prisoner? Is this all for naught? Is her death merely one heartbeat away—and mine, also?*

Yet... yet I did not know how she escaped Bandon, nor the cage on the Leviathan. Revan had never shared the specifics; all I had was Malak's patchy guesswork. A desperate laugh choked from my lungs. *Perhaps Revan has willingly donned a disruptor, to ensure neither I nor Malak can contact her.*

It seemed an absurd thought. Such an incongruous image: Revan forfeiting the Force.

I blinked back the sting of moisture in my eyes. *Curse you, Revan. Do you stand upon Lehon now, Force-blind and hopeful, with no plan behind you other than your thrice-damned luck?*

But... had she not alluded to another plan? An alternative method to reach the Star Forge? That geriatric who now followed her said as much atop the pyramid. *There is another way.* The sting of bitter distaste was acrid in my mouth. If Revan truly believed the Ebon Hawk could navigate against Malak's scrambler and through his armada both-
Then she was even more broken than I realized.

-\textit{you can be the saviour. the power is here}-

I had so little time. If Revan remained on Lehon, then Malak would target her only after the ill-fated Republic forces had burned into space dust. I would do my part; it made no difference if the chaff headed our way destroyed themselves against my battle meditation or Malak's scrambler. They were dead regardless.

And their objective of destroying the Star Forge was as nihilistic as Revan's. They were blind bantha butting heads against a wall, without seeing that the wall was the only structure capable of holding the darkness at bay.

In that regard, Malak reigning victorious was a more desirable outcome.

\textit{At least he would have a chance against what lies in the Unknown Regions.} Another bitter laugh bubbled from my cold lips. To think, I was driven to such a dark place that the thought of \textit{Malak} winning was the lesser of two evils-

Malak's triumph over Revan would mean my death. But it would give the galaxy a chance of survival.

-\textit{you can be the saviour}-

The power that Revan and I could wield together would be greater than the fist of Darth Malak. And I alone was grounded. I, alone, had my focus fixed where it should be: the true threat behind it all. For I had little faith in Malak's sanity - or Revan's objectivity, now.

And if, somehow, Revan was on her way here and despite the odds made it through-

\textit{Then we destroy Malak. And I would make} her see the truth, or Force help me, the Star Forge itself could.

For now, I would wait. Appease Darth Malak, and wait for Revan. I swallowed against the lump in my throat. My entire life had been spent waiting for someone else to decide my next move. It was a bitter realization.

Malak might be the master, but only in this ephemeral moment. Masters changed, usually to whomever held the seat of power. And the power was here.

If I could not make Revan see reason, then I would step up and seize-

The hatch behind me opened with a hiss.

"Little one," Darth Malak murmured.

\textit{xXx}

\textbf{Zez-Kai Ell:}

"The Senate demands transparency of all financial matters. Establishment and assessed compliance of our own professional standards." Kavar's eyes were so hard they'd turned a slate grey colour. His knuckles bleached white as they gripped the offending datapad. "Minutes of board meetings. They want us to scribble down specifics of High Council Meetings?"

"They seek to define us, Kavar." I sighed. There was a weariness deep in my soul that made me feel,
for the first time in my life, truly old. Defining the Jedi Order within a framework meant we could be all the easier controlled. That was obvious, to any master worth his robes. "Their recommendation is a non-profit corporation, although there is the alternate option of declaring the Order a religious organization."

"Religion." Kavar shot the word back at me, his head lifting briefly. "We have faith in the Force, Zez, not some dogmatic consortium revolving around a fictional deity."

I tilted my head. "Many have compared the Order to a religion in the past. It is a better fit that a non-profit, if you ask me."

"Dammit, Zez, that's not the point!" Kavar slammed his hand down on the poraclay surface in a rare show of temper.

"I know," I murmured. "But we knew the Senate's reaction was coming. Perhaps the shape of it was unknown, but nonetheless, their displeasure was guaranteed to fall upon us one way or another."

"Ever since Atris-"

I cut him off with a dry laugh. "Be honest, my old friend. Our reckoning has been due for a lot longer than our colleague's revelation to the Senate. Revan Freeflight's resurrection was merely the last straw for a generation of disgruntled politicians."

Kavar closed his eyes in defeat. "They blame us for non-involvement," he said softly. "Then they turn around and blame us for Revan and Malak."

"The Jedi have always enjoyed a position of impartiality from judgment, Kavar. Do I like the Senate enforcing limitations on us? No. Do I think it's fair? That is a harder question."

"Fair," he muttered. "It's never been about fair, Zez. Life isn't fair."

"Yet fairness, or lack thereof, is what the masses see." Truly, there were times I found it difficult to believe that Kavar had been born into a political family. He was an honest man - and I loved him for it - but there was no denying his objectivity was sometimes clouded. "The Order has been a part of the Republic for centuries. Yet we are granted concessions no other institution or member-state can solicit. We pay no tax. We cannot be indicted to the Senate. We are allowed to claim - even exonerate - the galaxy's most heinous villains. Why?"

Kavar shot me a strange look. "We wield the Force, Zez."

I shook my head almost impatiently. "There are all manner of sentients and cultures who have special abilities. What separates the Jedi from them?"

Again, his expression appeared to be debating on whether I had sprouted another head. "The Force, Zez. The power that the Force grants us."

"Power." There. That was the key. Kavar and I had engaged in shades of this dialogue before, and never reached an accord. Yet there had been something different about Kavar, lately. A jaded bleakness at the edges of his mind. Not an emotion I desired to see my friend inflicted with, for all that it seemed to have granted him some badly-needed gravitas. "It is the power of the Force, Kavar. That is what the citizens of the Republic see, that is what the Senate once trusted. That we would step up as galactic guardians, with the power of the Force as our might and their shield, should the need ever arise."

A faint sigh ghosted from his lips. It sounded wistful. "Then the Mandalorians came."

Kavar turned his head to stare blankly through the open viewport. Outside, the fragrant gardens of the inner Temple scented the air with rose petals and starflowers, and I doubted he even noticed.

That would be an end to our conversation, I suspected. For if there was one topic that had always divided us, it was the Order's decree regarding the Mandalorian invasion. My given opinion had been scarce in the High Council chambers: that we could not sit back, no matter the danger to our souls. That we could not expect the Republic to understand our need for caution, when all they saw was millions of their own dying-

For if we weren't able to convince our own knights to embrace non-involvement, how could we believe the galaxy at large would accept it?

Whatever impetus had driven the Mandalorian Clans may have been hazardous to our fractured Order, but our chosen route of inaction instead felt like a gradual death. A death of our integrity, our principles, even our own meaning. There had been something behind the Mandalorian thirst for conquest - our grand masters had been convinced of it, even if their deep meditations had never revealed precisely what. That ominous presentiment, coupled with the scars of Exar Kun's war, had been enough to convince the High Council to sit back. Wait for the opportune time. Allow the true threat behind it all to show itself-

Allow the Republic to burn, first.

I'd had dark times, in years past, when I had doubted my loyalty to the High Council. When I had wondered, dangerously, if I should do what no other master would- if I should follow my old padawan into war-

Aye, but would that have meant falling alongside her? That was the true danger we all feared. The temptation of losing oneself, of transforming into a being held hostage by the whims of one's own dark desires. Or the flipside. Could I have drawn her back?

A bitter, bitter thought.

She was dead, now.

I'd felt it, some weeks ago, her life a dark spark that snuffed out in caustic bitterness. A shock sensation that woke me from my slumber; that pulled at the shadows in my heart.

The Senate refused to share beyond the most basic of military statistics, but I did not need to review the casualty lists from the skirmish above Kashyyyk. The timing fit: she had been on the *Leviathan*. My cautious, irreverent, once-padawan.

I'd begged her not to follow Revan Freeflight, but when she did- aye, and when her name was one of the Thirteen emblazoned on the hearts of the Republic- I had silently praised her courage.

So many of us had lost padawans. So many of us had watched them ascend to knighthood, only to fall from afar.

"Self-realization is a bitter pill to swallow," Kavar murmured. He was looking back at me again, expression heavy with grief. His fair hair was peppered with grey, and hard lines of age bracketed his sturdy face. Somewhere along the line, even my youthful friend had begun to show his years. "I've spent so long blaming the likes of Revan Freeflight for our slipping status within the Senate. But when I look back..."
He trailed off. And I discerned, then, the note of regret clouding his voice. After all this time of staunchly defending the Order's decision, I had to wonder- did Kavar, now, wish he had chosen differently?

As Jedi, we looked to the past for guidance, not self-flagellation. But it was so intrinsically difficult not to dovetail into defeatist what-might-have-been's, when so many lives were on the line.

The corners of Kavar's mouth turned down. "Have you spoken to the others?"

"Some." I inclined my head. "Lonna is furious. Deshtar is scrabbling for a loop-hole. And Atris-well. She is adamant that we must appease the Senate."

Kavar snorted. Funny how Atris Surik always managed to bring out the worst in him. "She's a blind mynock for not seeing how this would backfire so badly."

"Perhaps. But even you must admit that Atris' intentions were sound, no matter how ill-thought out. She believed full disclosure would regain some trust-"

"Because informing senators that Dantooine sponsored the release of Darth Revan was always going to rebuild trust," he muttered darkly.

"Sarcasm ill befits you, Kavar."

He threw me a crooked grimace of chagrin. "To be fair, I don't necessarily disagree with the actions of Dantooine. Stars, letting this broken version of Revan loose seems to have granted us a long-shot at taking out the heart of the Sith. It's just the secrecy-"

"Which is why Atris revealed it," I said calmly. "Because she did not trust the High Council to do so."

"We would have told them eventually," he grumbled, but his heart wasn't in it. Neither was mine. Every High Council member was well-aware of the growing mistrust the Senate harboured toward the Order. To admit to them that one of our enclaves had undertaken such action- not only without Senate knowledge, but also their own High Council's-

I could see why the Senate wished to rein us in. I detested the very idea, but I could certainly understand why.

"We should head to the chambers," I said. "The others will be waiting. We all need to work together to form an appropriate response for the Senate. That means you need to play nice with Atris."

Kavar shot me a grin that echoed with his wry candour of old. "I can do that," he assented. His grin only grew at my look of disbelief. "Trust me, Zez. Force, she might be our only inside line left to the Senate. If Atris has news of the Star Forge, I'll even slap a smile on my face and compliment her shiny outfit."

xXx

Malak Devari:

She stood before me in silence. Eyes downcast, figure preternaturally still - the young woman had come far, in the short time her soul had been mine to mould.

"I cannot reach her, master."
She was a much more proficient liar than she had been.

My gloved hand dropped to Bastila's shoulder. I could feel the ridges of slender bones beneath my grip. Fragile and delicate. Just like her mind, as it fluttered to defend against the touch of my own. Ah, but I had been inside Bastila's mind too often, these days. The path was well-worn and beaten down.

"Your words are honest," I intoned, interleaving my thoughts with hers. Her relief at my agreement was a sharp tang that failed to conceal her fear. "But your intent is not."

Physical contact made a psychic breach so much easier. I had always found this side of the Force obscure and indirect, but it certainly had its uses. With the power of the Star Forge augmenting my strength, any facet of Force use was possible. Surmountable. Masterable.

"I- I- tried to speak to h-her, but she w-would not answer-" Blabbering words. Stuttering like an invertebrate slave. Her bones ground together beneath my grasp as I let the first edge of my displeasure show.

Holding back a gasp of pain, Bastila looked up. Her tawny eyes widened as she understood that I already knew of her treachery. A swallow, but she held my gaze, face pale and bloodless, as she awaited her master's next move. Her chin lifted.

There. There was the steel I needed in an apprentice. The perfect blend of steel and sweet fear.

"You disobeyed me, little one," I murmured. "You spoke to your old master before I gave you leave to."

As always, such a reference shone sparks of indignant amber that glowed in her eyes. She struggled valiantly to conceal it, but Bastila's weakness was obvious. Her innate objection to naming Revan as her superior was strong. Greater, perhaps, than her resistance at bending knee to me had been. It was... an interesting observation.

The past is merely the journey one has taken to reach the now. No point feeling the sting of self-disgust at what one had done. Bastila may never have knelt in subservience to Revan the way I had been forced to, but her heart had been bound just the same.

Throwing off the shackles of the past was what allowed one to embrace the present.

Now, my present stood, shaking in my grasp and yet awaiting my displeasure in silent readiness. An influx of energy levelled in on her mass. Holding her upright, alert for my retaliation. The power of the Star Forge. She had called upon it, and the Forge answered. The kaiburr... liked her. The Star Forge approved of my choice.

A curl of pleasure unfurled in my gut. Truly, I had chosen well.

"I am your master," I uttered, as I toyed over what to do with her. Pain was a price to pay. A battle to win. A challenge to overcome. This was one of the most valuable lessons I could give her. "I know your mind, your hopes, your desires. Did you believe I would not notice you rising early? That I would not account for it?"

Shock blanked her face.

She doesn't know, I realized with vague amusement. The detonation on Lehon had been tripped successfully, tied to the completion of the holo-stand's transmission. The report had been waiting for me once I roused myself from meditation. All had gone as planned.
Although, truly, I had expected Bastila to have some inkling through her bond- unless one of them was deliberately blocking the other.

*Revan is not dead. That is not the reason.* Her death would have been a sweet prize, but I was not foolish enough to count on it. Force bonds rarely bloomed between a master and an apprentice, but when they did, one recipient almost certainly sensed the death of the other.

Their bond ran deeper.

"Show me," I whispered. My gloved hands held firm on her shoulders; my mind aimed like an arrow into hers. *Show me.* I would know all that went down on that dead world. Revan might still breathe, but she was trapped on Lehon's surface regardless. Perhaps the explosion had taken out some of her allies, and it *must* have broken her trust with Bastila-

A torrent of images unfurled like spring buds opening to the sun, each sprouting to life in my apprentice's mind. I saw the courtyard. I heard the conversation. The entrance of Revan's allies. One raising a green lightsaber at the others-

*Wait.* A green lightsaber, wielded by a shadowed Twi'lek. *No. No! That misbegotten, traitorous bastard cannot still be alive!*

Rage, as turgid and torrid as the molten core of a star, fired to life in my heart. The Star Forge rallied around me-

- *end him. end her. show your superiority-*

Bastila was wildly thrown from my grip across the chamber as a snarl ripped from my vocabulator, buzzing against the ruin of my throat. That *bastard* Twi'lek had the temerity to bend knee, vow to hunt Revan's walking corpse down and eviscerate her if Bandon failed, yet now he was once more glued to her side-

- *-he will pay. she will pay. you are no longer first amongst followers, to be replaced at the fickle whim of an ex-lover. you are the master-*

I *was.*

And my rage... my rage was useful, but it would own me only when I allowed it. That was one lesson Revan had taught me well. *She is impotent. She is weak and imprisoned by my scrambler. I shall deal with her- with them- in due course.*

The rage winked out to a slow-burning ember. I would fire it back up when required. But first, I had an apprentice to forge. And the destruction of a fleet to oversee.

"Show me the rest," I whispered. Touch made it easier, but surely I could delve into my apprentice's mind from across a mere room by now. The Force was mine to own. And Bastila would become the most prized tool in my arsenal.

I raised one black-clad hand toward Bastila's crumpled form. Her head lifted as my psychic probe once more entrenched upon her consciousness. It *was* getting easier. I was struck with the idle supposition on whether Force bonds could be created by such constant transgressions.

Wasn't *that* an intriguing thought? An enduring mind-link with my apprentice, who was indelibly connected to the spectre of my past. To think, I might even taste Revan's death through Bastila, and wouldn't *that* be sweet-
Bastila's psyche, once more, opened beneath my touch. Truly, it seemed like she wasn't even trying. Perhaps she had succumbed to the inevitable.

"Malak commands me to employ my battle meditation against all enemy ships that survive the scrambler's signal." Bastila's words atop the Lehon pyramid, cold and clear, as she raised a mental shield to separate her and Revan.

"I will not disobey Malak and suffer his wrath while you dither over an inconsequential number of lives. What the scrambler does not destroy, I shall." A narrowing of purpose, of anger, when she could not make her bond-partner listen. Oh, I recognized that emotion.

"If these Republic lives mean so much to you, then you best enter that snubfighter now and stop me yourself." The steel conviction in her words could have matched my old master's.

Bastila had come far.

"You are angry with her," I murmured, rifling through the end of their exchange. Revan didn't enter that doomed snubfighter. A pity, but Bastila's reaction was nothing short of delightful. "For she chose the Republic over you."

Bastila's eyes opened, a sharp gleam of tawny brown, glistening with emotion. Her chin lifted, and she stared back at me in trembling resentment. And it was not wholly directed at me.

The historical precedence of this moment! I knew it too well. This was a Revan I could easily vanquish. This was a Revan Bastila could turn away from.

"Come here, my apprentice."

There was a certain wariness in her wan countenance, but Bastila walked forward silently, stopping shy just within arm's reach. I could feel her inner struggle to suppress her emotions; a raw anger that battled over her brittle resolve.

It was that anger, familiar to me by now, but most certainly fledgling in its recipient, that made me hold back on the consequences Bastila did not yet realize. She had no awareness of the fallout on Lehon - and I saw that enlightenment was not required. Not at present. No, far better she clasp tight onto this delightful belligerence, and believe that Revan did not come out of a continued choice, rather than the lack of a working vessel.

"Bastila." I raised one hand to touch the side of her cheek gently. The black glove contrasted with her chalk-white skin. One day soon, the stipple of corruption would be visible amongst that youthful pallor. "We shall deal with Revan later. You know what the true threat is."

A flash of something dark sharpened her gaze before her eyelids fluttered closed. Her head dipped in a nod.

"The Star Forge is our bastion of defense against the Unknown Regions, little one. You and I both understand this. Perhaps, once, my old master did too, but now..."

I could feel that soft skin tense beneath my gloved fingertips. Her heart rallied in futile objection, even as her head listened. Bastila was on the path of becoming a truly great apprentice. I would have liked to smile down at her, to brush my lips tenderly against her forehead, but that was yet one more thing Revan had stolen from me.

"For now, she places the Republic first," I murmured. So sweet, to drive that shiv-blade in deeper. "First above all."
She will come for me. She- she must-

Bastila's head still bowed, and her thoughts edged with the hysteria of the desperate. Even she did not believe her own words anymore.

In due course, my apprentice. Let her hold onto that image of the snubfighter still safely snug on the pyramid's roof courtyard. Let her remain ignorant of the truth: that Revan was entirely trapped on a dead world. How gratifying, to think that the shell of my old master would be powerless, as the Republic Fleet was destroyed above her head. First, we must strike down those who seek to destroy us. You know what your next step is.

Brief images flashed like quicksilver through Bastila's mind, fleeting and almost too swift for me to grasp. Memories of her past, when Bastila had knelt in subservience, unleashing her gift under the watchful eye of a robed protector. Cloistered and guarded while her power was used.

"Your battle meditation leaves you exposed," I realized, my eyes narrowing. I had been waiting for this precious moment, waiting to taste the breadth of Bastila Shan's battle meditation that had been a thorn in my side for so long. And, now, her uneasiness caught me off-guard.

I was still hooked into her psyche, just enough that I caught the image of an indolent figure sauntering toward her, and the reactive disgust that pooled in her mind-

"Oh, Bastila." Another day, that show of vulnerability would irritate me. But, perhaps, even the keenest of tools required reassurance at times. "You have nothing to fear from Sharlan Nox. You are my Shadow Hand, my apprentice above all others. I will not leave you unguarded."

I stepped back from her, enjoying the way her near-golden gaze unerringly returned to me. With a tap on my wrist, I hailed the scourge of her thoughts.

"Sharlan, send two slayers to Bastila Shan's meditation chamber immediately. They will report to her."

::As you will, my lord.: The man's insouciant drawl echoed from my personal communicator, and I saw Bastila's bloodless lips tighten in response.

"Oh, and one more thing," I murmured pleasantly, keeping my eyes fixed on Bastila. "Come within twenty metres of my apprentice and I shall rip out your entrails and wrap them around your neck."

There was a slight pause. A flash of something akin to satisfaction narrowed Bastila's gaze.

::I would not dream of displeasing you, my lord.: The communicator clicked off with a faint whine. Bastila drew in an unsteady breath. "You think to place two of his- his pets here?" she squawked, and the heat of her tone bordered on defiance.

"Careful," I warned. "I act in your best interests, little one. Do you not realize that by now?"

She swallowed, but kept her chin aloft. "Master, I- I don't see how his- his playthings could adequately guard me."

"His pets are nothing more than batteries, Bastila. Just as Sharlan Nox is nothing more than a means to an end." My chosen Shadow Hand should not require such words. She had already shown her fire against the likes of Sharlan Nox; that she now quailed meant her use of battle meditation must leave her vulnerable indeed. It was, perhaps, something for me to remember. "The slayers I speak of are not Sharlan's, and you will find them enough of a guard should you be interrupted. Come, now. It is
time to unveil your vaunted battle meditation."

Something firmed in her expression then; an inner resolve perhaps, a tightening of will to continue on the path I had chosen for her. This was one of Bastila's final steps, to turn on those she had once labelled allies, and the moment itself was as sweet as the memory of biting into a sun-ripened honey-pear.

Bastila nodded, turned from me, and sank to her knees.

I let my hands settle gently on her shoulders as her first tendrils of Force grasped slowly outward.

*Show me,* I repeated, sinking into her mind.

The Force pulled out from her like a spiderweb's lattice made of the finest titasteel. The power swelled, and I could feel the heart of the ancient kaiburr echo through me, to her, as our combined will spread through the walls of the Star Forge.

*So strong,* she murmured, as the alien power threaded through our joint grasp. *Yes.* My eyes had closed against the sensation, against the influx of energy as it caressed my soul. The Star Forge was a circular mass around us, threaded through with the occasional pinpricks of life that scurried like beetles in a sand-hill, wholly unaware of the titans standing above them with the power of the galaxy clutched in their fist.

*Beyond,* Bastila whispered, and then began to transcend from her body.

It started out the same as a deep meditation, but this... this part was new to me. This was my apprentice's vaunted gift. Such a rare talent, such a promise- and one that now belonged to me.

I could not see how to emulate her machinations of the Force, but I could follow.

Bastila spread herself thin, ever outward, dispersing her self until she was no more than a misting of intangible energy resting gently over a large circumference now extending into space. Her body was left behind, no more than organic dross, a limp figure in the very nexus of her realm. *You are vulnerable in this state,* I mused. There was a distracted murmur of agreement from my apprentice; her focus remained as fixed as her concentration.

Specks of life flared in clusters around the edges of our consciousness. *Show me,* I ordered once more, pausing as I considered a small array of entities. A snubfighter squad, I thought, formed up in readiness to execute my will. *These are my men. Show me what you can do.*

Her attention turned at my command, zeroing in to settle over the specified group. It was a strange, almost passive sensation, as foreign emotions fed back through to us, all too transitory to grasp.

*It is like manipulating the clay of a utensil.* She touched one life briefly before moving on. It flared a brighter spark than before. *I can focus their mind, disperse unease and sharpen concentration. Their reflexes, their reaction time- all augmented.*

*Like an adrenal stimulant.* One fleck in the squad was noticeably duller than the others. *What if the clay is defective?*

I felt Bastila pause to examine the deadened flare of light. *I will have some effect on near-all sentients. The magnitude depends on how open they are. This one- he fights the limitations of his own flesh.* Her presence pulsed, a gentle ripple in the fabric of the Force as she hovered over the life in question. *I cannot entirely counteract the effects of too little sleep and an overindulgence in*
gree-spice. Her thought was laced with mild disgust. I had the sense that Bastila was experiencing more from each sentient she touched than I could see. As she drew back, the dull speck remained a sullied glow contrasting with the sharper lights in the squad. **There is only so much I can do.**

*Weakness does not belong in my fleet.* My displeasure rallied; from deep in my bones I could feel the promise of the Star Forge. I called, and it answered.

The kaiburr blazed. I surged forward. There was a flash of alarm from Bastila, a shudder in the matrix of threads held gently in her clasp.

*That's too-*

I shot forward, and pinched the light out.

*-far too much-*

A crash against the senses, a sharp recoil between us, a loss of control as the Force bucked wildly-

Rage at the unknown blazed into being, and I *would* halt this effect, for the Force answered to me-

But I was falling. Flying, drawn down into a vortex of plummeting power. Like a spring, pulled to its apex, before snapping shut with a crash.

There was a loud clap of sound. A slamming into something hard as the sensation abruptly stopped.

A residual dizziness slowly receded. The press of gravity under my feet, the confines of my flesh once more surrounding me. Eyes opening, I found myself standing, staring down at the fine, delicate braids that bedecked the back of my apprentice's head.

She was gasping. Her kneeling form shook with tremors of reaction.

"We must increase your capacity to wield power, little one," I observed, mildly displeased. "You lost control entirely."

"Cannot- cannot get too deep in the lives I touch," she whispered. "Might- might lose the way back."

She drew in a shuddering breath, tilting her head sideways. I stepped around to look down at her. There was a hollow look in Bastila's eyes, and I wondered exactly how much of that feeble life she had experienced before it was snuffed out. "You- you killed that pilot."

The cast to her expression- it was surprise, I realized. Bastila had never envisaged such an execution was possible. Perhaps it was not, for her. My apprentice called upon the kaiburr, but she did not yet comprehend its full capabilities.

"You disapprove, my apprentice?" Surely, she was not still that soft-hearted. I had made her better than that.

"No." She blinked, and her body stiffened. "A sentient in that condition would be a liability to his own squad. He should not have entered a ship."

The correct answer gratified me. War was a numbers game, a calculation of odds, and Bastila was learning well. I glanced over to the far side of the meditation chamber, a muted curved wall of silver that faced the skies. With a flourish of my hand, four large panels dissolved into clear panes of translucency.

"This is our game board today, my apprentice. The Republic are due any moment, if the first wave is
not already encroaching at the edges of Lehon space." The specks of my rallying snubfighter squads dotted the panorama in clusters of formation. All marks of my might. I wondered, idly, which group had just noticed one of their own careen out of control. "My scrambler will decimate the Republic advance, Bastila, but it is your responsibility to mop up any remnants that come close."

"I will not fail you, master." The words were low, but not subdued. "The Republic is nothing but a distraction to what we truly face."

"Good." A soft chime echoed from my wrist. Ahead, underneath a windowed-panel, lights on an inset console blinked. In the deep throes of space that yawned back at us, faint flashes of blaster fire flared into being.

My eyes lidded in anticipation. "It starts, little one. Focus on the Sith fleet. I want you to direct every shot my men aim at any ship capricious enough to evade my scrambler."

Bastila nodded, bowed her head, and reached out once more. This time, I did not follow.

It would be over quick, I thought, as I drew the Force in deep. Every death Bastila orchestrated would be another nail hammering her onto my path. She would never be able to turn back, nor did she even want to, at this stage. As for Revan...

*That shall come after.* The core of the Star Forge murmured agreement with me. I stared hard at the viewport. The flickers of light were pitiful, really. Every Republic starpilot out there was merely toiling against the inevitable, helpless as my scrambler aborted their sensors and my apprentice ensured their end. If I drew in deep enough, I could feel the faint echo of the kaiburr's child, that daughter crystal on nearby Lehon, as it pulsed disruption throughout the sector.

Out there on the fringes of my game board would be some of the Republic greats. Had the officers I'd once served with arrived yet? Adashan, Dodonna, Gant? The loss of Karath at Edean went beyond vexing, but this- ah. This would more than make up for it.

It truly was a moment to savour. Bastila's body knelt limply beside me as she enacted my will, and the victory today would be a cataclysmic blow against the crumbling Republic forces. Oh, there would be other battles as I drove my advance back into the heart of the galaxy, but taking out the three leaders listed in the intercepted Republic comms would send ripples of panic through my faltering enemies.

Nothing more to do but enjoy-

A shudder. An undulation, somewhere, searing through the Force. A flare, before a distant echo died abruptly, and suddenly all my senses dulled. A keening cry of loss from the kaiburr-

*What?* Four strides to the console. *No. No, where is it?* A tap on the keys. A message in red:

::EMP scrambler not available.::

Black rage followed quickly on the heels of alarm.

*Revan.* The name was a sibilant curse hissing through my mind. A poison seeping through again and again. *Revan!*

Instinct gathered the Force in, coiling tight, burning with need. *The scrambler. The Lehon crystal. But how- how had she-*

Another rap on the console. No link with Lehon, no connection to the daughter crystal. It was gone.
Fury was a scorching heat of hate. Revan. The Force was an influx of unsteady acrimony, a retaliation of fire from the kaiburr-

-the power is here. and it is yours-

I was turning around, ready to atomize anything in my path, rend it apart in reaction-

My gaze landed on Bastila. Kneeling, slack-formed, compliant and unaware. Cold. Cold, not hot. Use the hate. Feed it with Revan's death. Bastila wouldn't know, couldn't know. If she learned that Revan had somehow destroyed or disabled the first defence of the Star Forge-

Revan will travel here. She will use the recovering Fleet as cover, and travel in her freighter here.

-then my apprentice might once more be afflicted with a glimmer of hope.

The Republic cannot withstand my forces backed by Bastila's battle meditation.

I could not afford Bastila to weaken. Even now, Republic lives would be winking out beneath my apprentice's will.

I will deal with Revan myself. Perhaps I always knew it would be this way.

-you are the master. and this is your stronghold-

The desire to destroy still rose dominant, but I would use it with calculation until the endgame reached fruition. Battle droids. The slayers. The sheer might in the very heart of the Star Forge. Defences to be rallied that would make a mockery of Revan's rogue assault.

Revan thinks to challenge me on her own terms. Ah, let the crippled shell try! This was a flawed Revan, who knew not her power nor her past. That, I had clearly deduced from Bastila.

The rage simmered into a darkness that thrummed wildfire through my veins. This will be sweeter than her first death upon the Nexus. More satisfying than emasculating her on Lehon. Let Revan see her allies fall one by one, until I finally taste the gratification of tearing her heart out from her chest with my own hands.

Or- maybe I could install her as an impotent conduit of the kaiburr itself, right next to those lifeless pets.

The supposition was entertaining, but- no. It ends here, today. No more shall Revan be a blight upon me, ghost-shell or otherwise. I will end her, along with any idiot asinine enough to follow in her wake.

My footsteps echoed as I strode to the exit. The hatch was bordered on either side by a Force-blind assassin now, the two slayers I had called in earlier. There were others, elsewhere in the Forge, awaiting my orders. Somehow, I doubted that Revan remembered them.

And the kaiburr itself... Revan had never uncovered all of its secrets. I, already, drew in greater power than she had once understood.

Come to me, Revan. So many times had she escaped death. Not any longer. I am waiting.

And you have exhausted all of your lives.

xXx
"Kappa Three is down," Fulmosh reported. He shifted on the co-pilot's chair, one hand hovering over the comm. "He shouldn't have turned the blasted sensors back on."

I could feel a hard grimace twisting my face. My grip stayed firm on the steering column. "Squad-wide channel on my mic, Fulmosh. Now!"

On our flank, Zeta squad was flailing like a nest of ash-rabbits scattering from an encroaching kath hound. I'd seen two of our ships crash into each other, and felt the pained flinch from Fulmosh every time he reported another one down.

"It's ready, sir," Fulmosh muttered, and the pilot's mic blinked in recording mode.

"Kappa Squad, this is Captain Merrix," I bit out, canting to the left as a snub careened wildly across our trajectory. "Stay on manual control! Until we get confirmation from the Meridus, we are all flying manual. We've trained for this, troops. Get to the frontlines, and target those blasted Sith!"

We weren't close to the enemy marks, not yet. We hadn't even reached Adashan's cursed fleet. They were further ahead, clustered around our final objective, engaging directly with the enemy. Although if what the Meridus had reported was truth, then this damn scrambler was affecting us all. I didn't have read-outs on the status of our armada, but the current silence from Meridus command was ominous.

Adashan's flagship, the Lightstar, was a granite slug far in the distance. Swarmed by flecks of Sith fighters. Without nav-data, it was all guess-work - but my gut told me the general's heavy cruiser was one leap shy from turning into space dust.

Somewhere behind us, in the thick of Dodonna's forces, someone else was captaining the newly refurbished Ruby's Claw. I'd had the option of keeping that baby; stars knew, I had a greater chance of survival in the better-armoured frigate. The tow and repair from Kashyyyk had concluded in the nick of time; half a day longer and I'd have missed the rendezvous with the Meridus. After all that'd happened, Commodore Tar'coya assumed I'd stay with the 'Claw - but I'd known where my place was.

I'd spent my life fighting and winning as a Wing Commander, and this might be the most crucial battle yet.

"Incoming ping," Fulmosh muttered. I was half-aware of him leaning forward over the secondary nav-console. "Don't recognize the source. It's- er, it's broadcasting on all frequencies. Should I pick it up?"

Transmit like that, it had to be some sort of morale-sapping taunt from the bastards out there. Like they needed another damn edge.

"Order the squad not to receive." I felt my teeth grit. Stang, does it really matter if I hear it? "Then play the damn message."

Fulmosh muttered a curt command into the mic, before tapping hard on the console. A crackly, audio-only message echoed throughout the cockpit.

I tensed, ready for the worst-

::This is Captain Carth Onasi of the Ebon Hawk. The scrambler has been destroyed. I repeat, to all available Republic forces: the scrambler is confirmed down.::
The jolt of recognition hit me a sec before the meaning of the message registered. *Carth, you old kath hound!* A punch of visceral glee burned in my gut. *You got the blasted scrambler!* "Activate the nav-computer," I growled. "Quick, Fulmosh, see if he's right!"

Before my co-pilot even had a chance, another transmit overrode our comm.

::*All Wing Leaders revert to automatic ship-control and engage the enemy.*::

The iridescent sphere of a hologram flickered on the nav-stand. I didn't have to look down; I recognized the slurring tones of Tar'coya immediately. He was one of few who could force a message over any sort of acceptance protocol. *::The EMP scrambler has been confirmed as destroyed. Inform your squads, and haul arse to the frontlines!::*

An array of lights blinkered dizzyingly on the dash, before settling into familiarity beneath Fulmosh's expert hands.

"It's back," Fulmosh breathed. He leaned forward, fingers dancing over the dials and read-outs. "All sensors online. Targeting module ready. Hyperdrive back. We're- we're good to go!"

I jammed the pilot's mic back on squad-wide broadcast. "Scrambler is down! All pilots, switch back to auto now!"

"I can see the others rallying," Fulmosh muttered. "Zeta's following us, with Upsilon and Chi right behind. We're the vanguard, sir."

"Then let's show them how to scythe through enemy lines." My eyes narrowed as I spoke once more through the comm. "Kappa squad, full power to thrusters and form up in echelon formation. We're leading Dodonna's fleet. Let's make her proud!"

"Boosting aft shields." Fulmosh retracted the turbolaser module, hands resting firmly on the targeting joystick. He was an expert gunner; one of the reasons I'd hand-picked him as my co-pilot. "We'll hit the first Sith bastards in thirty seconds."

Our snub shot forward, at the apex of the formation Kappa squad had trained in countless times before. There were twelve of us left; a brief glance to the nav-chart assured me the empty spots left by Three, Four and Eight had been adequately filled. Behind us, Zeta squad mirrored our stance.

"Six bogeys at the forefront."

"I see 'em," I muttered. The vast bulk of the Sith armada was kilometres ahead, but we'd be striking the stragglers at the forefront any second now. "Kappa Two and Five, follow me in a starboard roll. The rest of you hit them straight on!"

Fulmosh hummed under his breath; a reedy noise of anticipation I'd heard countless times. I waited a span of painful seconds until the bogeys were almost within range, then pitched the snub into a barrel roll.

I barely felt the G forces as adrenaline coursed fire through my veins.

Snapping out of the roll, we came out directly underneath the bastards.

"Lock!" Fulmosh cried in exultation, jamming hard on the turbolasers. "That'll be him down- stang!"

His squawk of protest told me all I needed to know. "Focus," I rapped out, angling the nose of the fighter up. There were another two, bearing directly down on us. Red laser spat from our guns; the two marks dived in opposite directions, and the fire of our bolts seared uselessly into black space.
Damn evading bastards! "Leave the bogeys for Zeta squad!" I ordered into the mic. "Follow me, we're going in deeper!"

"Another eight coming in from aft-starboard," Fulmosh growled. I could hear the pissyness in his voice. He didn't like missing. "I'm gonna slam the first one with a missile."

"Only on a sure hit," I muttered, even though I knew Fulmosh wouldn't waste our limited concussion torpedoes. I canted sideways, and there- Adashan's heavy cruiser was visible again, and beyond- the powerhouse we were all aiming for. The massive factory of the blasted Sith. "Get ready."

Fulmosh hummed again; I yanked the snub up and the enemy squad sprang into view.

"Lock!" Fulmosh yelled again, a sec after a missile streaked forth. Faster than a fighter at full throttle, no mark could dodge a guided projectile at this range-

"Dammit all!" Fulmosh cursed, even as he fired another salvo of lasers at the dispersing marks as they all plummeted out of view. "How can they be that quick?"

"You winged one." I'd seen the spark of fire against a Sith's wing, but it looked no more than a glancing blow. "They're underneath us now. See if they're doubling back or engaging our ships behind."

The view ahead turned ominous. Dozens of alien craft lay between us and Adashan's embattled fleet, and more still swarmed all over the Republic front.

"Kappa Five's down. Nine's critical," Fulmosh snapped out. The thin note of displeasure in his shrill inflection was readily obvious. "Four bogeys are circling around on our tail. I'm balancing the shields."

"Hold steady," I warned, spinning the snub into another dive. The stabilizers groaned in complaint; I pulled the ship out, and straight into-

The burn of red splattered against the viewport. The ship bucked violently, alarms screamed, and I wrenched the steering column straight up. "Status!" I hollered, before jerking the snub starboard.

"Shields down to twenty! Aft stabilizer's pinging low! It's like those bastards knew where we were coming out!"

"Lucky shot is all," I growled as I levelled the snub's trajectory. "And now it's our turn!"

I didn't have to tell him; Fulmosh released another missile the instant a mark swam into view. Even the screech of the discordant alarm didn't dampen my vicious pull of triumph as the Sith turned into a brief flare of orange.

But not before it'd released its own retaliation-

My gut churned as I rolled the ship again; laser fire spat past the viewport harmlessly, missing us by scant metres. Fulmosh was hot on the turbos again, firing wildly as we came out of the barrel, only to face a line formation of three enemy Sith.

Three missiles were already flaring-

Stang! I wrenched hard on the steering again, reminding myself that Kappa Two was still on my tail, and the rest of the squad right behind him.
Yet even with the friendly fire coasting past us as we dropped low, I already knew it was too late-

Revan Freeflight:

"Second diagnostic's cleared," I confirmed, skimming rapidly through lines of successive nav-data. Victory was riding me, riding us all like a stim high; each confirmation of success punching the visceral satisfaction up another notch. It was fleeting, I knew, when compared to all we still had to face - but I'd take my joy where I could. "No residual issues from the scrambler. All systems are humming."

Carth made a non-committal noise deep in his throat. There was a shadowing of permacrete stubble on his jaw, and his rich chestnut hair was ruffled, as if he'd been throwing his hands through it more than usual. All those little characteristics had become so intensely personal, so poignantly familiar to me, somewhere along the line.

When I granted myself leave to dwell on my own memories, the soul-baring truth was that the events from the Endar Spire onwards made the bulk of it. Carth - his presence, his companionship, his growing affection - was my one constant since I'd woken with a blinding headache in a dingy Tarisian apartment. He was the anchor grounding me through the turmoil of my splintered life.

Carth's attention remained pinned on the darkening azure sky. I glanced down to the nav-map; miniature specks of company flared into existence as we rose, yet another indication of the ship's sensors feeding accurate data through to the nav-computer.

I'd thrown the auto-systems back on, seconds after that proton torpedo had slammed home under Carth's manual guidance. As soon as the first electronic lights blinkered across the dash, he'd been hot on the comm.

The 'Hawk had strafed the pyramid first in preparation; a gunning run for our turbolasers to gut deep into the foundations. The outer layer of metallic skin had peeled back from the Rakatan relic, exposing the vulnerable bowels on one side as the upper framework crashed inward. I'd wanted at least one more strafing run - we only had one damn chance, one sole torpedo, and so much was weighing on the outcome-

But Carth had flat-out ignored me. He'd had an intent cast to his features, a stilling to his body, as if he'd sensed the moment was upon him and was now reaching out to grasp it with an expert hand.

As if he'd been in the zone. I've heard this before. Somewhere. A feeling, a voice, some blind knowledge from my past. Pilots, gunners, and soldiers- they talk about that moment, when time itself seems to crystallize. When the target gets bigger and bigger, and it's like nothing can make you miss-

The only thing I could compare it to was the Force.

...it works through us all, Jedi and non-Jedi alike.

Karon's words to me, once. Maybe she was right- or maybe it was simply a starpilot's life worth of experience and mental discipline at play.

The Republic hadn't answered our call, not yet. We had no clue if anyone above had even picked up the transmit. They could all be running manual up there, heavily disadvantaged from a lack of nav-sensors and self-correcting targeting modules, not to mention Bastila's battle meditation-

"How long can you keep this up?" Jolee broke through my mental tirade, a muttered voice from
behind, stationed in the cockpit's third seat. For once, he sounded entirely neutral.

I sighed. "As long as I have to," I replied grimly.

Cut off from the Force. Yet again, I was employing Dustil's trick that baffled Jedi and Sith alike. Everything felt dull, slow, dreary - safe.

For there was no bond, shielded or otherwise, lurking like a cursed vulnerability in my head. Not until I was ready to reach out for it.

"Dustil has to do the same," I continued. "Even when we land on the Forge. If that place is anything like the frelling pyramid, he has to keep his mind guarded:"

"Revan." Carth's voice cut through my impassioned words, words he'd already heard me pitch directly to his son. "You have to- you have to promise me something."

I glanced sideways to scan his profile, handsome face set as it stared fixedly into Lehon's upper atmosphere. The first sparks of distant blaster fire were dawning into view, now; hundreds of kilometres away. Fleets of ships, echoed by the blinking telemetry on the dash. I didn't look down to count them.

"What?" I'd promise him anything if I could- if I could.

"Promise me you'll get out of there alive."

A barbed jolt of emotion seared through me. Carth didn't turn, merely kept his grim attention fixed on the viewport. Glancing wildly over my shoulder, I could see Jolee raising his hands in mock surrender.

"Eh, don't mind me. My old ears don't hear much these days," he muttered, in an obtuse attempt to grant us some privacy. "And what they do my mind scrambles anyway. Just make like I'm not even here."

My face was hot. My heart stuttered. How the frell could I promise something like that? "Carth-

"Promise me."

The low, simmering words sounded like they'd been torn from him, and completely blind-sided any train of thought I might have had. Oh, Carth-

A discordant beep sounded from the nav-console. An incoming transmit, shattering the charged moment, as welcome as a Hutt in a communal sonic.

"You gave HK orders for a transfer of ownership in the event of your death," Carth ground out. One hand lifted from the steering column to rest gently next to the nav-comm. "I don't know what's going through your head, Revan, but I'm worried once you're up there you'll let your guilt convince you to do something stupid. Promise me you'll get out of there alive."

I swallowed thickly. It was hard to know what truth there was to his words. HK- well, HK's message was wholly unrelated. I didn't plan on sacrificing myself - not unless it was necessary - but I also didn't envisage myself walking away from the Star Forge intact.

Oh, I could believe in victory, yes; find Bastila, shake some damn sense into her, stand off against Malak-
And then, what? Kill my once lover, that colossal fragment from my torn past, and walk blithely away while the Republic destroyed my old superweapon? I couldn't- I simply couldn't see the shape of that future.

Carth wasn't going to let it drop, though. That was evident, in the square of his jaw, the clenched knuckles of his gloved hands. I'd always respected his tenacity, even when turned against me.

The nav-console beeped again, twice, and I just knew Carth was going to sodding well ignore it until I produced the answer he desired.

And I owe him. So much.

I blinked back the stinging moisture that blurred in my vision. "I- I'll promise." My voice hitched. "If you promise something in return."

"Revan-"

"Hear me out," I blurted in a rush. "Carth, you lost your planet, your wife, your son... we may not have had many heart-to-hearts, you and I, even in all this time together... but I'm smart enough to know you stopped living after Telos. If I don't make it out, Carth - and, dammit, you have to acknowledge that's a possibility - then I need you to live. To show Dustil what it's like to live, to move on, to be sodding happy-

I halted, mid-sentence, suddenly finding it hard to breathe. The silence lay thick between us, and I could feel my fists squeezing tight- if there was one personal desire I yearned for out of this whole mess, it was Carth's happiness-

He didn't say anything. I wondered, wildly, if such a vow was just as difficult for him. His jaw had firmed at the mention of his son, and a life-time's worth of reading people whispered to me that Dustil-

Dustil is the angle I can use to secure his compliance.

Even in a moment like this, so fraught with heartfelt sentiment, I felt myself flinch at the machination of my own perception.

I said the words anyway. "You know Dustil lost a girl on Korriban," I whispered. "He used to blame Mekel... but he blames himself, now. Blame, self-guilt - it can be soul destroying." The next sentence felt so hard to force out. "I promise I'll do everything I can to make it out. Promise me you'll do more than just survive if I don't."

Carth turned, finally. His eyes were black with emotion, and slowly- so slowly- his head dipped in a nod. "I promise," he breathed. My heart clenched in my chest. No matter what happened, at least I had that intangible vow to bolster me. Carth's gaze held mine firm, as if we had all the time in the galaxy-

The corner of his mouth quirked. "We'd better- uh, you might want to move out of line of the holo-cam."

His hand was hovering over the receive button. My lips curved in a distant echo of a smile as I shunted myself sideways. A second later, the nav-comm sprang to life, illuminating an iridescent figure in shades of blue and white.

::Carth.:: The greeting shot through the speakers, crisply uttered from the image of an older Human woman. She was capped with a formal military hat, and her shoulders were adorned with admiral pips. Face lined with age, and gaze both sharp and intelligent. She didn't look remotely familiar.

::Captain. We have the Ebon Hawk on our sensors.::
"Admiral," Carth acknowledged. I could hear the warmth in his voice. "You got my message."

::Yes.:: There was an arch to the woman's mouth; no more than a slight twitch, really. I had the strange feeling it was the woman's version of a joyful grin. ::The whole fleet did. Both sides, I'd wager. Good job. You will fly straight:::

Carth threw me a wild glance.

::to the Meridus, coming in to:::

Oh, sod it all. Really, I'd known it would come to this.

::land at the alpha docking bay:::

I cleared my throat, loudly, leaning back into the projection field of the 'Hawk's holo-cam. The moment she saw me, the admiral's words halted mid-speech. Like a shutter slamming over a moisture-lock, her expression turned dark. Thin mouth, pinching tight, into a line of something that far superseded censure.

"Admiral," I said in a forcibly neutral tone. Carth stiffened next to me, and I could just imagine the black look of exasperation plastered all over his face.

There was a slight pause as the Republic officer regarded me through dangerously narrowed eyes. ::Jen Sahara::, she bit out at last. The words were more than glacial; they were dripping in black ice. ::I'd label you a wanted criminal, but that is akin to naming a loose rancor a trifling nuisance:::

I had to force back a wholly inappropriate grin. The admiral's distaste aside, I admired her presence of mind. I had no idea who was listening in on her periphery, but she was, at least, circumspect enough not to name me - despite her obvious desire to.

I found myself liking her, and wondered if the contrary emotion was a figment from my past; if this experienced officer was someone I'd once worked with- or against-

Hardly the moment to dwell on it, bonehead! The admiral's recriminations, justified as they were, simply had to wait. It was time. It was time to go to Malak.

"We need an escort to the Star Forge," I began. Kept the words cool, neutral - calm. I could feel my chest tightening in self-castigation as I considered what I was about to impart next - but I had to lay the truth bare. I couldn't ignore this threat. The Republic couldn't. "Bastila Shan has vowed to unleash her battle meditation on our forces until I set foot on that place. I'm the only one who can stop her."

The admiral's jaw worked. ::Our forces::, she growled in disbelief. ::You have the unmitigated gall to request an aided transport to the Star Forge? Did the Order completely scramble your mind, or do you merely take us for braindead imbeciles:::

Carth leaned forward, nudging me roughly in the side. "Admiral-

::Bastila Shan::, My bond-sister's name came from elsewhere - from a creaky, high-pitched voice that preceded its owner. The admiral frowned as a short figure hobbled into the holo-image. ::Feel her strength already, I can. Did not know, perhaps did not wish to admit, what I was feeling:::

It took me a second to place the newcomer. Vandar Tokare. The little green Jedi Master from that seemingly useless holo-transmit, the one Carth'd pulled me in to watch back on Lehon. Vandar had been one of three who'd awaited me on Kashyyyk, who'd made Zhar Lestin fear for the safety of my
mind.

::This is Fleet business,:: the admiral forced out. Her lined face was implacable, but I could hear the irritation burring her voice. ::You are on shaky ground already, Vandar. Do not presume to interfere here.::

::Forn. Allow us a moment.: The Jedi's voice was gentle. ::Check on your forces, you should. Confirm the truth of this, for it may yet change everything.::

The admiral's head turned slowly back to appraise me, and like a shot of spice, I suddenly knew her name. Forn. Admiral Forn Dodonna. Carth's admiral. The one who'd dispatched Carth to the Endar Spire. A high-ranking member of the brass - the officer in charge of the mighty Meridus.

In a way, I was surprised she still allowed a Jedi Master to set foot on her command deck.

::Don't even think of doing anything.:: she told me in a dark voice, before swinging her gaze on Carth. ::Captain, a squad of fighters are enroute to flank you. They have orders to fire should you deviate from your trajectory. I shall return in a moment.::

"Admiral, you must." Carth cut himself off mid-sentence at the woman's upraised hand. She shot me another glare that dripped with dark suspicion, before moving out of sight.

Carth heaved an exasperated sigh. "You should've stayed out of sight," he muttered quietly under his breath. "Blast it, Revan, have you no sense of self-preservation left?"

I ignored him, leaning forward to eyeball the Jedi Master. His large blue eyes peered back soulfully. "Vandar Tokare," I said softly. There was no sense of familiarity. Stars, there'd been none in that inane holo-message, either, but maybe I'd been hoping it would be different, in a real-time conversation. "How well did we know each other?"

The master's wrinkled head cocked. ::A handful of times only, we have met. Know each other, truly, we do not - other than what the Force shows us.:: His small mouth rounded into a gentle smile. ::The Force shows me a Jedi Knight. One that stands firm, no matter the darkness that has been.::

I stilled, staring at the bright-eyed alien. I felt a sudden regret, then, for storming out halfway through that holo-comm. I'd not exactly been in the mood to listen to what I considered little more than Jedi-waffle. Stars, I didn't think I ever had been.

But now, I wondered if there might have been some wisdom, something of use, deeper in that message. If I'd only had the patience to see it out, the foresight to hold back my reckless urge to flee. In hindsight, it seemed - pointless, really - for a master like Vandar to fire off a patronizing comm with no ulterior motive. Perhaps his counsel would have been bolstering, if I'd only taken the time to listen. After all, Yudan had said-

My thoughts stilled.

"One of my crewmates told me you're seen as a pillar of the Jedi Order itself." My words were slow, considering. The complete manifest of our freighter was unlikely to be known, unless Carth had spilled the beans in a previous transmit. Somehow, despite having every reason to, I rather thought he hadn't. We were all being granted second chances, here; every single Force-user onboard the Ebon Hawk.

::Many pillars is the Order made of,:: the little master returned. He was impossible to read. Much like his old padawan. ::Precious, each one-::
"He also said that of all the sents in the galaxy," I spoke loudly over him, "Your counsel might be worth him seeking out."

He stopped talking. His eyes widened, ever so slightly.

"Assuming, of course, that we survive all of this," I finished wryly.

Vandar was budged to the side as the admiral returned. ::It's confirmed.: Dodonna's burr was laced with distaste. Vandar was still staring at me, but the admiral didn't notice. ::Adashan's reporting overwhelming casualties at the front, and this is after they've regained control of their systems. My ships are closing in, but from the shape of it-::

She bit the words back, as if suddenly realizing exactly who she was talking to. Deep trenches of displeasure bracketed her thin mouth. Dodonna didn't need to complete the sentence, though. It's going to be a rout. Surely, she'd seen the effects of Bastila's battle meditation before.

Vandar's little head had dropped in a silent nod of acknowledgement. Message received. I had no idea if Yudan would curse me or thank me for such interference - the former, if I had to lay creds somewhere - but at least his old master knew of his survival. And, perhaps, had some inkling to his current state of mind.

"We need to stop Bastila." Carth was leaning forward again, allowing the 'Hawk to run on auto-pilot as he stared intently at his superior. Blinking ominously on the nav-chart, I could spot the squad of snubs moving into position around us. "We're the only ones who can. We're the only ones she'll let close to the Star Forge, Admiral - if we can clear the Sith fleet."

"I can get to her," I added. The desire to reach out was there. What if I could stop Bastila now, right here, before she downed even more starfighters that she'd later hate herself for?

But what if Malak sensed me? What if, with the strength of the Forge behind them, they could incapacitate me before I even came close?

There is no other choice. I had to retrace my old steps, to the nexus of my past evil. I'd always known that. My chin lifted, and the next words I spoke rang with the steel of conviction. "I can get to her. I can make her listen. I might even convince her to work with us again."

The admiral's eyes flashed with dislike. ::Ignoring the absurdity of allowing you back on that Star Forge, if Bastila Shan has allied herself with Darth Malak, why in the blazes would she permit you to board?::

"Because she's not loyal to Malak." I had to hope that was true. My heart said it was, but my head pointed out that loyalty was not always black and white. Particularly in the case of Bastila Shan. My eyes closed in a brief flurry of despair. "Bastila wants me to take Malak out and reclaim my past. She believes in a greater danger- a greater peril- something worse to threaten the galaxy. What spurred me on in the first place."

::Well, that's tempting.,:: the admiral snapped, in a sarcasm I suspected wholly uncharacteristic to her. ::Your skill at persuasion is hardly what it once was, Jen Sahara. I see little point in continuing this conversation.::

But she was still listening. That counted for something. "I want to see the Forge destroyed as much as you, Admiral. I-"

::This threat you mentioned. What exactly-:: the words rapped out, each one as hard and cold as ice-crystals. :::is it?::
The all-consuming question. "I don't know. I don't- remember-" I quelled back a bitter laugh that threatened to spill. "It's actually not important right now. Destroying the Star Forge is. And to do that, you need to get me there first. Let me take care of Bastila. Malak, too. I'll keep him occupied. You focus on blowing that cursed thing up, whether we're on it or not."

Her eyes had narrowed to slits. ::Trust me, Jen Sahara, your survival would not impact my judgment one way or the other.::

Had I ever worked with the damn woman? Her burning acrimony should drive me to a like-minded flare of enmity, or even the same old morass of shame- but, instead, I felt a solid core of respect for her. It didn't make sense. I must have worked alongside the admiral in the past. Some part of me- once more dredging up the emotions of a forgotten life.

"I can stop Bastila," I urged again. "Convince her, or force her through our bond. First chance you get, target the damn factory and wipe it from the face of our galaxy."

::Destiny.:: Vandar murmured. I wasn't sure if he was beseeching Dodonna as well, but his bright gaze stayed on mine. ::The shape of destiny, this has. Save Bastila, you will, as she once saved you.::

"Admiral, I believe in Revan," Carth said. He was an idiot for naming me when the others had so clearly avoided any mention, but my heart warmed at his words regardless. "We all do, everyone onboard with us. Get us to the Forge, and let us play our part. Let's end this war."

"I won't make the same mistake," I uttered in a softer voice. The look on the admiral's face said that hardly mattered, in the grand scheme of things. Perhaps she was right, but the words tumbled out regardless. "Nothing can convince me to walk down my old path."

A dark prescience stirred in my mind. Words like that were so easy to express, to believe in, when facing the true evil from a distance. But my expression remained resolute as I stared the stone-faced admiral down.

::I am little concerned whether it is you or Malak fashioning yourself as a cloaked harbinger of doom.:: she muttered. Her lips pursed, then, and I could almost see the infernal debate waging war within her mind. ::I care about winning this war. Halting the destruction of Malak. Returning peace to the galaxy you sundered.::

::Believe in Jen Sahara also, do I.:: Vandar murmured at her side. He'd turned, finally, to stare up at the older Human. ::A pragmatic leader you are, Forn. The way forward, this is, to break through Bastila's battle meditation. Force or not, you can see this must be our chosen path.::

There was a slight loosening to Dodonna's shoulders, a deepening of the furrows on her brow. ::Tell me you have some plan for getting through to the docks.:: she said, and in that moment, I tasted the hot rush of another victory. Ephemeral, maybe, but things were finally slotting into place. We had a way forward. ::For I cannot conceive of how you mean to land without being shredded into space dust.::

"They'll be on the lookout for the Ebon Hawk. Bastila will do what she can to ensure our survival." Furious at me or not, she hardly had any other choice. "At the last minute, we'll diverge our course to a hidden docking bay."

Carth cleared his throat. "There's three small landing docks, Admiral, that aren't noted on the schematics. We believe at least one of them is open."

::Where?:: she demanded, leaning forward once more.
And as the conversation narrowed into a series of short commands and sharp nods of agreement, the warmth in my soul stayed constant. The Republic would get me to the Star Forge. The Republic I had championed, I had loved- I had betrayed.

Whatever victory I- we- could pull out from this wouldn't erase the past, and nor would the Republic owe me anything bar a public execution, but the thought didn't concern me as much as it should. They were leading me to the Star Forge, to Bastila, to Malak- and that was all that mattered.

xXx

Chapter End Notes

Coming up next: Defences of the Star Forge are rallied, and the Ebon Hawk touches down.
An echelon formation's worth of thanks to kosiah for the beta.
Sharlan Nox:

Thirteen slayers stood before me. Upright, at attention, each clasping a metallic sphere of Fett technology, ready to activate a field as null as their aura. Thirteen slayers, the legacy of Jonn Dan, a Dark Jedi pioneer with the foresight of a Selkath sea-sponge.

I smiled.

"And how many Jedi have you ended in your tenure?" I asked the closest slayer.

The duramesh-armoured assassin stood still as the night. Her reply echoed through an anonymous voder. "Seven, my lord. Three were successfully turned."

"And tell me," I drawled, stepping around the figure, allowing my fingertips to trail lovingly down her scaled shoulder carapace. "Do any still serve?"

Don't play with your food, an echo of my master snapped in my head. Ah, but these ones weren't food. Nulls. Not much more than carrion beasts, truly, and I had stopped snacking on dead meat long ago.

"None still live, my lord." The slayer didn't flinch, even when I sauntered behind her, skimming my fingers across the barely-covered sheen of her neck. Jonn Dan's little tools- different from mine, far less powerful, but I wouldn't deny their effectiveness. He'd trained them well. A pity Jonn hadn't directed the same level of diligence towards his interactions with his peers, otherwise Yudan Rosh may not have split open his entrails to the air.

And wasn't it amusing to hear that Rosh still breathed?

...

The Force choked tight around Lord Malak, a viscous cloud of barely-checked anger. His eyes were slits, spitting yellow poison as they fixated on me.

The common colour of corruption.

When my own gaze had turned a smooth amber, I'd been surprised by a vague stirring of disappointment. Hubris on my part, perhaps, to assume that a creature such as I would possess a hue of something special, something distinct.

Nisotsa Organa's studies on the Dark Side's interactions with organic physiology found little logic behind the transmutation of optical organs: neither genetics nor Force-power explained why most darksiders bore a shade of yellow, barring a scant few.

Not that it mattered. Flesh was simply fuel: either to control or to be consumed by someone greater.
Flesh was hardly what made one special.

"I hope my pets are serving you well, my lord," I murmured in a placating tone. Malak looked truly riled. Perhaps all those incoming toy ships were aggravating him.

Sometimes I wondered at just how exhausting it must be, to constantly surge from fiery rage to deathly amusement the way he did.

Anger might fuel the Force for Lord Malak, but we were all different. Some of us drew power in other ways.

"They'll do," he snapped, without offering more. He'd taken my pets into the bosom of the Star Forge, a place where I was forbidden to follow. The heart of the Force in this sector of the galaxy.

It wasn't in my interests to disobey Lord Malak, but I'd tried to enter that chamber. For there was a tantalising scent upon the Force, here, and it originated from the very nexus of this factory.

Something great was housed there. Something magnificent. Something that would be a true joy to taste.

But every time I walked towards the Star Forge's black heart I found myself elsewhere. Esoteric whispers murmured in my mind; I couldn't decipher the words, but the tone was forbidding. Almost as if the Star Forge itself was warning me away.

No matter. I still had time to try again. I knew how to be patient.

"The echo of Revan travels here, Sharlan," Malak said. His eyes narrowed, and now I wondered if it was satisfaction burning the fire in his soul. "In her tin can, the Ebon Hawk."

A showdown between those two would be a sight to behold. From a safe distance, of course. I had knelt to Revan once, as I had knelt to Malak. Sometimes, I fancied myself as nothing more than a prized bantha, passed from master to master. And with each reincarnation, my need and my knowledge grew.

"What are your orders, my lord?"

"Revan is mine." He looked past me, one fist clenching tight. White sparks traced a spider web of static around his gloved hand. He did not seem to notice. "When she walks upon the Forge again I will end her once and for all. You will take out her followers."

I felt my lips curve and my belly tighten. "I believe there are at least two Force-sensitives amongst her crew."

His marked visage snapped back to me. The inked lines of tattoos on his scalp morphed into ripples of corruption along his deathly pale cheeks. "Kill them, Sharlan. I want her to feel their deaths. Take whatever slayers are here and assault that freighter the minute it is docked and Revan departed."

It would be a relief to have something tangible to do. I enjoyed idleness when surrounded by ripe pickings - but the Star Forge was noticeably lacking in desirable fruit. Lord Malak had filled this entire factory with nulls, and the only life-forms onboard that drew me were my now-forbidden pets and the untouchable, delectable Bastila Shan.

Malak often left her alone, these days-

An invisible band snapped tight around my throat, clawing deep without warning. I could feel the
fleshy sides of my oesophagus cave under the pressure.

"Do you require a physical reminder to stay away from my Shadow Hand?" Malak murmured, a whispering rumble through his vocabulator. When Lord Malak spoke softly, it paid to take heed. "You can still obey my commands with only one arm, after all."

My wandering thoughts stilled with quick precision. Sometimes, Malak's brutish demeanour obfuscated my assessment of his abilities.

Sloppy. Your extended life-span curses you with insolence to your betters. It was a reprimand I had heard from many, including Lord Malak. If you cannot control your hunger-

The pressure eased, and I bowed my head in submission.

"I do prefer both my arms, my lord. And your Shadow Hand is safe from me for as long as you will it."

There was a pause. I did not raise my head.

"I destroy tools when they outlive their usefulness, Sharlan," Lord Malak rasped. "If you allow your appetite to become a liability, I will ensure it no longer exists."

"My appetite serves you the same as my skills, my lord. Both are yours to command."

"Good." Satisfaction thrummed through his voder. "Keep an eye on the dockmasters' logs for the Ebon Hawk. I shall ensure the battle droids are mobilized. On the off-chance Revan scrapes through my defences, well... the heart of the Star Forge awaits her. My Star Forge."

Lord Malak turned, a looming figure in black-and-grey armour, striding away from me in a sudden move of haste. Unlike his former master, no midnight robe billowed out behind him, just as no ominous mask concealed his face. Malak's presence meant such tools of showmanship were not necessary; his musculature and height made him imposing in his own right.

Lord Revan, on the other hand, had played on her iconic appearance, allowing the mystique and mystery of her anonymous spectre to unsettle her enemies.

Perhaps there was an advantage in both methods of presentation.

Malak had paused at the hatch, which opened beneath a wave of his gloved hand. "At least three, Sharlan."

"Three?"

The Dark Lord of the Sith threw me a speculative glance over his shoulder.

"Three Force-sensitives amongst her crew. I saw three on Lehon." His voice had deepened with what I could only label as feral anticipation. "An old man, a Cathar and Yudan Rosh. Kill the first two, but if you encounter the Twi'lek then I shall allow you to choose. Dead or one of your pets-either would be acceptable."

... So many Dark Jedi fell victim to delusions of power, but I knew my own limits. Yudan Rosh had been beyond me - nor had I ever had reason to challenge the man. Now... well. Taking down a Dark Jedi of his calibre would be an interesting venture. I would simply need to be smart about it.
One day, sentients with the power of Yudan Rosh— with the power of Revan Freeflight— would easily be mine for the tasting. But that day was not here yet.

With each meal, my strength increased— but it was a transitory peak only, the energy bleeding back into the fabric of the Force. The loss would be frustrating, if the meal itself wasn’t so satisfying.

A slight shuffle refocused my attention back to the lines of Force-blind assassins. After Jonn Dan’s evisceration, Lord Revan had passed leadership of them to Malak— who may have utilized the slayers effectively, but did little to fill their ranks. Still, I’d seen the slayers in action. These nulls might not have the Force sharpening their senses and augmenting their speed, but they were dangerous in their own right.

The Jedi were wise to fear them.

I eyed over the slayer that had shifted on his feet. "And you?" I drawled, taking a step closer. "How many Jedi do you claim?"

"Twelve," he muttered. His form had stilled, but his visor pointed down. "Only turned one, and she's spacedust now."

A sudden pulse— the tiniest of sparks— something peaked on the Force before vanishing. My head cocked, and the hidden gills on my face flared at the scent. They were Force-blind, all of these sharpened tools of flesh-murder, but for a second there I could’ve sworn the Force had glowed from the slayer in front of me—

"The Force— it glowed from you, for a second—" A wisp of a memory, surprised words from a gentle soul, the first to sense my true potential when I had been nothing but a craven parasite nibbling at the edges of the galaxy. A pity what had happened to her—

The same shuffling noise from earlier snapped me back to the present. The slayer still stood, head bowed, form poised in readiness. He’d moved again— or so I thought, just like I’d wondered if that flare of Force had spiked from him— but there was nothing, now. Just a blank slate awaiting my command.

Slowly, softly, I unfurled a gentle finger of Force into the null's little mind.

_Flip over a 5, that makes 21, but the +/- 2 bonus scores a certain win—_

Witless mark seemed to be ruminating over basic mathematics. Still, he’d taken down his fair share of Jedi, if his words held true. I felt my lips smile as I reached a hand out to lift the null's armoured chin.

His asinine addition skills ceased, mid-thought.

"You all have your orders," I whispered to him, but my words were for each and every slayer. "If the _Ebon Hawk_ docks here, we expect a small party of them to disembark. One, maybe more. Leave those to the battle droids and our lord. Your task is to kill any who remain behind with the ship."

I leaned forward to kiss the man's mirrored visor. Beneath my fingertips, I wondered if I felt the null shudder. "Complete your objective, or die in the attempt. Lord Malak has promised me any survivors who fail."

The visored head dropped away from my hands in a short, compliant nod.

I stepped back, allowing my smile to rest on all of the sharp little tools. "I am without playthings at present. And a failed slayer would make a satisfying plaything." My smile widened. "For me, at
"Revan."

"Trio of marks coming in port-side," the darn woman muttered, flat-out ignoring me. "They'll be in Canderous' sights within seconds."

"Tell Ordo and Rosh to improve their blasted aim," Carth snapped. Through the cockpit viewport, a flare of red sputtered against the fin of a friendly. Like a wyyyschokk's flying-web glancing off a daubird's wing. Not fatal- but not good. "Dodonna's squad is covering us, but we've lost half of them already."

"Revan."

The thrumming sound of the dorsal turrets re-engaging was noticeable, even at this end of the ship. It wasn't loud enough to drown out conversation, though. Revan pretending not to hear my hail was as unconvincing as it was irritating.

"Another five coming in aft of our lead snubs," Revan rapped out. Her voice had turned flat. "Any more and they'll outnumber us."

_Aye, and they have that fandangled battle meditation on their side._ The Force was thick out here; humming tendrils of psychic manipulation clawing deep into the enemy ships. I could feel it like a burr chafing against my shoulder blades.

"Lame-brained chit," I grumbled. "You can't save Bastila if she accidentally kills you." In front of me, Revan tensed. "You can't save her if you keep hiding from the Force."

"I know." The words were growled out through gritted teeth. "I'm waiting for the opportune moment."

A prox alarm pinged from the console; our pilot swore as he wrenched the freighter into a sideways dive. The safety harness bit into my torso as Carth stood hard on the thrusters, and the entire framework of the *Hawk* shuddered in response.

"Sithspit," Revan cursed. Something red flashed on the telemetry. "We're hit. Glancing one, but there's minor damage to our shields-"

"Now's your opportune moment, young pup!" I snapped. "Talk to your darn bond-sister. Or maybe I'm wrong, and you _do_ have a preordained destiny. One that involves plasma, suffocation, and a new existence as space dross decorating Darth Malak's pretty little fortress!"

"We can't make it to the Forge like this, Revan," Carth added in a low tone. I could see the Star Forge through the viewport, an alien canker with three elongated pincers needling downwards, but between us and the Forge were just too many blighted ships. "You have to risk it, even if Malak senses you."

I wasn't sure what Revan was most wary of: Malak, Bastila, or the sibilant temptation of the Star Forge itself. _Aye, _her caution was warranted, and shrewd- but not up to the point of near-death.

"Fine." Her assent was swift, followed by the bright beacon of pure Force splaying out from her
core. Like a monsoon deluge drenching me in power; all the more obvious when contrasted with her absence a nanosec ago.

I blinked, momentarily startled. *Ach, when Revan decides on action, she doesn't dither about it.* The Force pulsed, strong enough that I had a fleeting worry on it rousing our injured Cathar from her drug-induced coma.

I stilled my thoughts; allowing my tired eyes to close and my mind to centre. Somewhat akin to ignoring the brilliance of a supernova in high blast. Possible, but intrinsically difficult.

"She hears me." Revan's words were thick and slow. The Force ebbed, contracting back to her. "She- she won't talk to me now. But she's drawing away from us. Focusing on the rest of the battlefield." A broken laugh choked from her. "We'll get through. She'll make sure of it. Bastila wants me on the Forge."

"*Meridus*, this is the *Ebon Hawk.*" Carth was snapping out a despatch to the comm, but his profile never strayed from the viewport. "We have confirmation that the enemy are pulling their battle meditation away from our squad. Get any nearby fighters to follow in our wake.-" 

"The enemy." Revan's words were muttered to herself. "*You mean Bastila's battle meditation.*"

"-they'll have a better chance staying within proximity of the *Ebon Hawk.* Any Sith near us won't have the same advantage."

"She's our enemy out here, lass, whether willing or not," I said quietly. "Better that our pilot keep her involvement as impersonal as possible." *If she's to have any hope of forgiveness.* Ach, I'd never met the woman, but I could guess at her character. Proud. Impatient. Flawed, just like the rest of us. 

::*Understood, captain.*::: The audio acknowledgement spat from the speaker. The same admiral as from earlier, I'd wager, keeping a close eye on our movements.

Revan didn't answer me, but simply kept her head bowed over the nav-screen. "That's one ship knocked out." Her report was crisp and clinical, cold enough at first that I had no idea which side she referred to. "Make that two. Tide's going to turn, at least in this small corner of the carnage."

"So long as it's enough to get us there." Carth angled the freighter slightly to the right. Near the ship's blunt nose, I could spot four friendlies moving into protective position. "So long as it's enough to make a blasted difference."

"It will be." There was no measure of fragile hope in Revan's words, merely a hard statement of fact. "Jolee. You're staying behind with the *Hawk.*"

I blinked. "Eh, what?" Sometimes, conversations with that darn woman felt like a continued barrage of unexpected sideswipes from a kinrath hive.

"I want a Jedi staying behind."

"Labels, young pup," I harrumphed. "You've always done me the courtesy of not lobbing labels in my direction. Don't disappoint me now."

"Force-user then." She was impatient. "Dustil has to keep his signature hidden unless absolutely necessary. None of us trust the constancy of his mental guards-" she cut herself off with an irritated sigh. "Jolee. I need you with the ship. With Carth and Mission."

I'd expected to enter the Forge with her. I'd expected the Wookiee or the Mandalorian, at least, to
stay behind and secure our route of escape. Didn't sound like it, from what she was implying.

"I should go with you." Carth's rejoinder was muttered- and torn.

"No."

"Revan, this is hardly the time to debate it." The growl from our pilot told me that it wasn't the first time they'd spun this conversation, even if he, ironically, was the one still contesting it.

"It's not a debate." Her voice steeled with authority. "Your place is with Dustil and the 'Hawk, and you know it."

"It's easier to wrench a stone mite from a ship's hull than change your mind, sometimes, you know that lass?" I grumbled. "Damn parasites. Had a group of them bore through my scoutship once-"

"Revan, I."

"It has to be this way, Carth." Her voice had gentled. "Look. We're closing in."

As a measure of halting objections, it worked. There were eight friendlies in front of us now, fragile-looking Aurek II's the Republic had started favouring in place of their aging, less-manoeuvrable Aureks. The nearby Sith snubs had deviated away from our path, clustering around a distant Republic destroyer that could only be seen on the sharp starboard pane of the viewport.

Whether the enemy had been gifted new orders, or simply trailed after the lingering tendrils of battle meditation, I didn't know- but we now had a clear run straight to the Star Forge.

"The closest prong is the ventral one," Revan said. Her voice had switched to monotone again. "Halfway down, that black circle- that's the factory bay. We aim straight for it."

"I thought you-"

"Just before we're in range of any turret matrix, we veer upwards. The officer's dock is much higher. Near the apex, just below the lip of the viewing chambers. I'll guide you."

There was something in her voice- or nothing. Maybe that was it. Somehow, I had the feeling she wasn't navigating due to any deep study of the schematics. *The jaws of memory are biting deep again.*

I coughed loudly in an attempt to distract her. "So. You're taking Ordo and Zaalbar. Why?"

Revan was silent for a minute, her concentration fixed on the encroaching factory. "I'm not sure either of them would stay behind if I told them to."

"Bah. Quit dissembling." I'd been around Revan long enough now to recognize when she was trying to tease me down a fool's trail. "That's not your reason."

I was following her, aye, and I'd hold the fort if she insisted. But it was her reasons that interested me.

There was a time when Revan had no need nor desire to explain herself. But while echoes of that woman might still cast darkness over her from time to time, that wasn't who she was anymore. Sometimes, it didn't hurt to remind her of that.

A quiet sigh slipped from her lips; a soft sound of concession. "Zaalbar... his life-debt shackles him.
His part in Bastila's capture weighs on his soul, even though there was nothing he-" she paused, one finger flipping the console's mini nav-map around as something caught her eye. A generation or two ago, we made do with a simple 3d holo-pic from the dash, not some fancy glittering doodad that one could spin around like a top. Revan hummed, evidently satisfied with what she saw, and continued. "Zaalbar has a right to address what he sees as his debts. And... did you know that Juhani and I were captured by a mad Sith on Korriban?"

Once more, she veered the conversation on an incomprehensible tangent. I shrugged. "Eh, can't say I'm surprised. Korriban has mad Sith the way Kashyyyk has trees. Got a point to that sentence?"

"Yeah. We were too reliant on the Force. Totally missed a gas trap." It sounded like an interesting yarn. But, much as I liked to hear stories - almost as much as I liked to tell 'em - we were busy pootling along in enemy airspace heading to an enemy fortress. This wasn't really the time to be waffling. If even I realized that, then surely Revan did-

"We underestimate those without Force ability." Her voice had lulled to a whisper. "All of us. Jedi, Sith, anyone who wields the Force. The more powerful we become, the more we see Force-blind sent as checkers on a game board. Figures on a data-sheet. And we forget... we forget that anyone can be killed by a single blaster shot."

Revan cleared her throat suddenly, profile slanting to face the pilot. "And, sometimes, a blaster shot is all that's required."

"We're nearing," Carth said. Whatever Revan was referring to, he had no interest in recognizing it. "The lead snubs will be in range of any automated defense matrix within minutes. Keep your eyes ahead, Revan. Tell me when it's time to deviate course."

The view out the cockpit was completely dwarfed by the Rakatan factory, now. All shiny metal and sleek curvature, with a gaping maw of black that belched out a trio of strikefighters as we drew close. The Force thrummed around me. Hidden within its beguiling power, lurked a slippery, suggestive coil that I had waded through on Lehon.

-glimpses of the truth can be found here-

Laser spat between our friendlies and the new marks, Revan whispered "now", and the 'Hawk lurched upwards to our destination.

xXx

**Rulan Prolik:**

"That's the ventral wing released," Kampton muttered, bending over his console. "You done yours yet, Carly?"

I hummed in response. My fingers tapped the keys in idle pretence, for my attention was absorbed in the data-feed scrawling down the inset of my visor.

*Full-body titaplate armour. Inlaid cortosis weave to block lightsabers, and resistant to any form of ionization.* These battle-droids were custom-built to face down Force-users. They had gone through many design iterations, but the ionization resistance was new. *There'll be a weak spot somewhere, if I can just figure out how to best shear through that plate.*

"Carly? You heard General Daelidar's order. You'd better release the droids-"
Thermal motivator's in the torso. Three inches down from the neck segment. If one can get through the armour, a hit straight there would-

"Do you want me to show you how?"

I glanced up, to see Kampton's shiny green face staring down at me in solicitude. One mention of my nervousness, and the poor sap had been all over me like nerf-pox.

My smile would be visible beneath the edge of the visor. I let it blossom. "Thank you, Corporal. I-I'm not really sure how to work this system."

He flushed a dark green as he leaned over me. "You can call me Kampton, y'know. While- while there's no one else around."

"Thank you," I murmured again, ducking my head like a simpleton. My painted hands retracted from the console, allowing Kampton to accomplish his basic data-entry. Magenta nail varnish looked ridiculous on the skeletal digits of a Rodian, but the luckless sentient I was emulating had primped herself with all manner of mating inducements. Powdered snout, waxed antennae, plucked eyelids and bright nails.

I had no idea if it was bumbling Kampton she'd had her eye on, but the inept corporal certainly seemed receptive.

"There," he said with satisfaction, laying one limb possessively on my shoulder. "It's okay, Carly. I'm sure this is simply a precaution. You don't- you don't have to suit up, y'know."

He was staring at my visor, before his gaze dropped to the duramesh-and-leather armour wrapped around my slender form. Not a piece from dear Carly's ensemble, it was true, and I'd had to make some modifications to the enclosures before it suitably fit this body.

Armour like this was beyond difficult to procure. Even allowing for safe harvesting of the source material - and terentatek hide was hardly simple to obtain - the manufacturing process failed more often than succeeded. I still maintained Spymaster Gaalin had been an imbecile to sell a suit of it to that bounty freelancer, even if Nord had shelled out a king's ransom.

"There's a chance of an invasion, or we wouldn't be ordered to ready the droids," I whispered, allowing my lips to tremble. "Will we be safe here?"

"Course." Kampton's antennae flared in my direction. I supposed it must be some sort of masculine display for his species. "There's few enough of us sents here - so long as we stick to the lower levels, the droids'll leave us alone. Don't you worry about any Republic slugs actually boarding, Carly. They can't get through our star fleet."

But I did, little bug. True, finding a way onto the Star Forge had been a far greater challenge than slicing the factory's location from the Ebon Hawk's transmission to the Republic. But, well. No one could impersonate other sentient that way I could.

I allowed myself to lean against him, adroitly switching data-feeds as I did so. I'd intercepted enough transmits to inform me that the intriguing sector-wide scrambler had been destroyed, but Kampton was right, regardless. The Republic forces were taking a hammering.

Still, the assault might be enough cover for the Ebon Hawk to slip through. I had trackers on the dockmasters logs linked to my data-feed, and would be aware the instant that smuggling freighter dared broach one of the factory docks. It would be tempting to meet the fragment of Revan Freeflight there-
Eridius' words whispered through my mind. *It is in our interests to see Darth Malak overturned, but only if we can do so unnoticed.* There was too much surveillance in the factory docks, even for one such as I. The GenoHaradan worked best from the shadows.

*We pull strings in the dark. We aim for stability, but only from the depths of secrecy.*

The GenoHaradan might desire to pin Revan down and see what answers we could shake from her damaged mind- but only if the risk was worth it. *And the neural scans we stole from the Jedi databanks are disheartening: the damage to her mind is, indeed, severe.* Although our slicer's hack was incomplete; I had little data on Revan's cerebral cortex, and the reconstructed graphics of her hippocampus looked like a corrupted feed.

The scientist in me itched to strap that notorious woman down and get a half dozen medi-droids to cut open her mangled mind.

"We should head back to the commons," Kampton said. "All remaining personnel have been directed to the sub-levels. We're the only techs left on the cardinal floor."

*Ah, but I am headed up, not down.*

I threw the hapless Rodian a coquettish smile. "Have you- have you sent our job acknowledgment through?"

"Yeah."◆ His fingers tentatively pressed against my hide-covered shoulder. "Defense diagnostics double-checked. Surveillance re-routed to the battle droids. And them released, of course. Our sector is cleared for droid-only control, Carly."

"So you mean-" I let my voice turn coy, "No one will expect us for awhile?"

The hitch in his breathing was pathetically obvious. Poor insect had probably never got into anyone's pants before. "I-" He licked his lips. "No. But- surveillance-"

I scanned the room quickly. There, close to the main server rack, an innocuous utility hatch that was likely never used by anything but mini clean-bots as they benignly whirred and buffed every inch of factory floor.

"Bet there's no surveillance in the clean-bot closet," I breathed, wrinkling my snout at him. The powder had a disgusting florid scent. "And those closets are roomier than you would think."

Kampton's thin lips twitched as his blood travelled south. He grabbed my hand and dragged me as I giggled stupidly alongside him, tripping past the empty bucket-seats and the morass of sentient debris on the ground. Looked like the clean-bots had a fairly shoddy routine, at least in this section of the Star Forge.

The grilled hatch to the utility locker yawned ajar under Kampton's bony hand. I saw a brief flash of graffiti defacing the door, lower down at knee level, in what oddly looked like scrawled *Massassi* script of all things- but then the closet opened fully and Kampton tugged me inside.

His hand moved hesitantly to the back of my helm as the hatch groaned shut and immersed us in relative darkness. My limb moved swiftly to the shiv-blade in my armour's hidden side-sheath.

That was the good thing about clean-bot closets: even if someone *had* installed holo-cams, no one would bother looking up the footage without reason. A dead tech's body could stay there, unnoticed, for days.
Revan Freeflight:

Canderous, HK, and Yudan were already out of the freighter by the time I cleared the loading ramp.

"Not much of a dock," Canderous grumbled. His helm swivelled in tandem with his repeating blaster, sweeping over the deserted consoles and empty corners. "And no defense matrix to stop an enemy infiltrating. Kriffing airlock was wide open. Suppose the Sith thought leaving this dock off the schematics was enough. Blithering dikuts."

"Statement: Infrared sensors are picking up a disappointing lack of sentient life." HK had already stalked deep into the hangar, pausing only to stare disconsolately into a trio of empty snubs parked ahead of us. "Reminiscence: In your heyday, master, you at least left this area armed with a whimpering fleshbag. Or twelve."

"I don't think the airlock's normally left open, Canderous," I said absently, scanning the room myself. The three abandoned Aurek-class vessels HK was nosing into were bordered by discarded refuelling gigs, almost as if some unwitting tech had considered jumping in one himself before abandoning the idea. It was odd to find ex-Republic craft here, rather than the alien strikefighters we'd encountered so far. "Bastila ensured the interior bay doors would open for us."

"Pity she didn't leave them open," Carth commented, hot on my heels. "Two snubs came in with us before the airlock closed, but the rest of Dodonna's squad are left outside."

I turned, to see a grimace on Carth's face as Zaalbar edged past, bowcaster in hand. Carth's gaze was bleak.

The Republic's main thrust was to obliterate the Forge from the outside, but Dodonna had been gunning for the entirety of her "protection" squad to dock with us. Aid us, maybe. Maybe.

Part of me wondered if they had an ulterior agenda. Backup orders of assassination, should events turn awry. Myself, Bastila- maybe we'd both be targets. Sun and stars, it's likely what I'd have done, in Dodonna's boots. Carth might not imagine such a thought, but the admiral struck me as shrewd enough to consider it.

Worst part was, I wouldn't blame her if she had.

"Get Teethree to see if he can hack into the Forge from the cockpit. Or, failing that, from one of the consoles out here," I commanded, shaking the irrelevant notion from my stream of thought. Orders or not, these soldiers would be nothing more than starpilots, considering they'd been hot in the skies before we'd even left Lehon. They weren't a threat to me, not at this point in time. "See if he can find a way to override the bay doors."

"Teethree and Mission are already on it. I'm going to talk to the pilots." Carth jumped the final metre from the loading ramp, before striding off to the rear of the Hawk where the two Republic snubs perched, repulsors whining softly in cool-down mode. I could hear the clatter of booted feet from around the hull of the freighter, and hoped the unknown grunts would be amenable enough to follow Carth's leadership.

We didn't have time to knock any heads together, as Canderous would say.

The dock itself was smallish, its total capacity a dozen snubs- give or take a few. With the three
Aureks ahead of us, the duo of Republic strikefighters behind, and the 'Hawk itself taking the space of at least another four, this place was almost crowded.

It made the lack of both organic and artificial company feel a bit discordant in contrast.

A glimmer of light drew my attention from beneath the nearest Aurek snub. Broken shards of transparisteel, glinting a rainbow sheen of dross on the ground.

My eyes narrowed. The cockpit of the snub in question was smashed. Like someone had forced it down so hard it smattered the space-strengthened glass - even though that seemed patently ridiculous considering the military-class hydraulics of the cockpit mechanism-

Malak. Bastila. My breath hitched. Suddenly, I was seeing through her eyes again, panic burning wildfire in her throat, the interior bay doors opening as we scrabbled desperately up the side of the ship-

*This is where Bastila almost escaped.* Something clutched at my heart. It'd felt like we'd been so close to freedom, that day. Maybe we had.

*Or maybe Malak had simply been playing her all along.*

It didn't matter. *That snub means she's nearby. She's close. She wouldn't have sent me to this dock if she wasn't.*

-she is here. you are here. together, anything you desire can be made truth-

"Place is deserted," Canderous called out, chasing the opaque voice from my mind. "No turrets, only one exit. Should be easy enough to defend. I'll knock out the surveillance."

It was tempting to tell him not to bother. The holo-cams sat on the ceiling sidings like fat round grenades, prime for the plucking. A short burst of ionization and the whole lot would fry-

-you can save everyone. if you just reach out-

_Hold tight on the Force. Keep it drawn in. Don't be a frelling bonehead._

"Do it," I said shortly.

HK whirred in acknowledgment, taking the order as his own with a certain glee apparent in the crimson flash of his eyes and the sharp rise of his rifle. Canderous simply grunted in acknowledgment before striding deeper into the dock.

Yudan, standing still mere metres away, shot me an unreadable look. I wondered if he'd predicted my errant desire to short out the cams.

Likely. Bastard knows my instincts better than I do, at times.

"Lass." Jolee's voice from behind had me turning. The first shot from Canderous ended in a fizzle, echoing throughout the hangar. "You sure about this?"

I knew what he was asking. The old man still wanted to go with me. I could see it in the set of his grizzled jaw. But I needed- a Force-user behind with the others, with the 'Hawk. With Dustil. Mission. Carth.

I nodded at him firmly. And at the very top of the ramp, deep in the shadow of the open hatch, Mission's young face peeped out to stare curiously around the hangar.

"S'not very big, is it?"
"It's not meant to be." What had HK said? Something about these docks being for the private use of high-ranking meatbags? I grimaced, and supposed I could qualify as that, even now. "Thought you were in the cockpit?"

The grin on her face was bright. As always, showing eternal optimism and bravery in the face of everything the galaxy hurled at her. Sometimes, I had no idea how a chivhole like Taris could've produced Mission Vao.

"I'm allowed to say goodbye at least, right?"

"So say goodbye." It was a mutter from Dustil as he sidled past her, before leaping off the ramp and slouching against the 'Hawk's hull. His null aura was as obvious to me these days as Jolee's Force signature. Dustil had years of experience under his belt, holding the Force at bay. I simply had to have faith he'd keep it up.

Dustil shot a frown back at Mission. "You should get back to the cockpit. It's dangerous out here. You should go where it's-"

I winced. Somewhere, behind me, was the ping of HK's blaster. Dustil, don't say it-

"-safe."

"Hey, ronto-breath!" Mission flared, before side-stepping to aim a kick at his shoulder that he narrowly avoided. "I can take care of myself! I can't believe you-"

But Dustil was grinning. And despite everything - the danger, the risk, the frelling galaxy at stake - seeing Dustil Onasi learn to tease a friend choked a startled laugh of joy from me.

Mission must've realized, too, because she stopped squawking and settled for poking her tongue out at him.

"(Mission)," Zaalbar rumbled gently. His bowcaster was still held aloft, but he'd turned back to face the others. "(Go inside now. We need you to work with the astromech)."

Mission's gaze slipped back to mine. "Jen-"

My smile was tight. *Tell her to get back to the cockpit. Tell her this isn't the time for goodbyes, for as every warrior knows, goodbyes do nothing but bring bad luck.*

Ah, sod it.

I stalked fiercely back up the loading ramp and flung my arms around the Tarisian street kid. "Hold the fort and get the bay doors open," I whispered. "I'll go find the princess, kill the bad guy, and then we can all haul jets back to a known world. In less than a standard week, we'll be in a cantina somewhere and I'll introduce you to Corellian whiskey."

Her giggle against my chest was more of a snort. "Too late, Jen. Canderous has already done that. An' that stuff is foul."

I pulled back to stare down fondly at the girl who reminded me of a childhood I barely recalled. Leaning forward, I kissed her gently on the forehead.

"I'll see you soon, Mission," I whispered.

Zaalbar lurched past as I left. His footfalls thumped softly up the ramp. I heard him rumble an
endearment to Mission, and then I deliberately blocked the rest of his Shyriiwook out.

I didn't need to hear their farewells. I hadn't teared up yet, but listening in to those two parting might be the thing that tipped me over.

_He'll get out. We'll all get out, dammit._

"Uh, Jen."

The name had me stiffening. No matter that it wasn't mine; I imagined that in some small way Jen Sahara would always have a hold on me. It was strange to hear it from Carth- even though the four troops in his shadow immediately explained why.

Two pilots, two gunners, I assessed quickly. They all wore standard Republic flight suits - better protection than nothing, sure, but I still had an irritable desire to rush into the 'Hawk and throw whatever duramesh suits I could find at them.

Would've been a good idea, too, if Carth hadn't offloaded everything we collectively owned just to keep that alcoholic Rodian back on Yavin quiet.

"This is Corporal Tensey. Ensigns Joss, Lilani, and Tobards."

They all nodded cordially. I supposed Carth must have informed them I was in command, as one even made it halfway through a salute before dropping his hand awkwardly.

_Good thing they're all lower ranks. I grimaced. No conflict of hierarchy here._

"Protection of the _Ebon Hawk_ is priority," I stated, eyeballing the assembled troops. They all grasped blasters and wore grim expressions beneath grimy orange blast helms. I didn't want them anywhere near me when I left the dock, but an extra four guns for the 'Hawk's defense was nothing but a good thing. "Defend under the assumption you'll be leaving with us in our ship. Our resident slicer inside is working on the bay doors, while my team head in to extract our target."

"Statement: Objective complete, master." At some stage, Canderous and HK's blaster volley had died out. I was vaguely aware of both of them striding closer behind me. "Reflection: Performing as a mechanism to destroy our enemy's hardware was mildly amusing. Consider my weapon modules adequately warmed up. Plea: Let us depart this area and find something that offers at least a modicum of challenge to eviscerate?"

The flight helms of the Republic grunts swivelled sharply in HK's direction. One poor sap even took a wary step back.

"Er... what type of robot is that?" one of the pilots muttered stiffly.

HK's angular head twitched in her direction, and one mechanical limb waved in a dismissive flourish. "Statement: Just a simple droid here, ma'am. Nothing to see. Move along."

My lips twitched as I glanced back to Carth. He wore the same stony look of exasperation that HK always evoked in him. He must have felt my gaze, for he turned back just in time to see my smirk before it vanished.

"Airlock," Carth muttered, but for once the threat almost sounded fond. His expression slipped, then, before turning serious. "You should go, beautiful." His words were low, almost whispered. "It's time."
It was.

I allowed myself one last look over the *Ebon Hawk*. Mission had disappeared back inside, but Jolee stood ready near the freighter’s entrance, scant metres from Dustil who was gripping his Korriban-grown lightsaber tight in one hand. The four soldiers all had their attention on Carth, awaiting his orders.

It was the best party I could leave behind to defend the *Hawk*, and Carth the best leader. I had to carry on: with a Wookiee, a Mandalorian, an assassination robot, and a Dark Jedi as my allies.

With a muffled oath, Carth strode forward, grabbed me around the waist and kissed me soundly.

His kiss was more a hard press of need than anything else- desperation- hope- a fierce display of faith that we’d both get out of here, because we simply *had to*-

Then his lips gentled. Suddenly, softly, moving tenderly against mine, as I was kept safe in the cocoon of his arms. I could almost believe we were back in the *Hawk’s* pilot quarters-

He pulled back, just as abruptly. "Go," he choked out.

In that very moment, it seemed like all the iterations of Carth I had come to know overlaid one another. The suspicious soldier on Taris, the grudging one on Manaan, the man who had learned to trust me on Korriban and love me on Kashyyyk-

"Come on, Flyboy." I murmured, as I felt an impish grin widen my mouth. "No tears. Don't I always come back from certain death?"

His gaze warmed, but he said nothing, as I turned, and walked into the Star Forge proper.

*xXx*

**Vrook Lamar:**

It had been hours. Hours of evasion: masquerading as a lost mechanic, chancing an occasional mind-trick, slipping into empty rooms when my senses warned me of company nearby. All the while, holding tight onto a fragile faith that my slight use of the Force would go unnoticed.

But compulsion wasn’t a trick worth anything, now. Not on the upper levels. This part of the Star Forge was run entirely by droids. Some of them were benign-

"Bleep! Dur-whoop beep!" a clean-bot squawked, as a tiny infrared scanner protruded from its carapace, scanning the name tag visible on my stolen coveralls. The clean-bot whined in complaint before scurrying down the corridor.

-some were infinitely more dangerous.

I’d kept to the shadows, concealed in the corners, shrouded my signature from the psychic probe of the almost-sentient Star Forge- but I couldn’t hide from biothermal scanners. And those battle droids I’d seen eject from internal blast doors only minutes ago were bound to have biothermals.

All a clean-bot could do was log my unauthorised presence somewhere in the databanks of this rotten Dark Side relic. Somehow, I doubted the armoured droids now clanking a few shiny floors below would treat me with the same ambivalence.

It was fortunate I’d been some levels higher, on an open-air railing that crossed over the heads of the
mechs as they spat out and unfurled, snapping disruptor rifles to their serrated forearms. Fortunate that I'd been quick enough to sprint through the next hatch before one of them could get a read on me.

But they were nearby. And if Darth Malak had kicked a load of battle droids into open sentry, then he was concerned about infiltration. I didn't think he was aware of me-

The Fleet will be here by now. They'll be attacking. Had someone managed to actually board this forsaken place? If so, they'd be headed straight for a reactor, or some other sabotage vector meant to obliterate the Forge from within.

Republic resources wouldn't be wasted on a fallen Jedi who'd been failed by everyone.

A fallen Jedi who - I could damn well sense it, much as it blackened my heart - was now reaching out to smite those she had once named ally.

-you can reach her, you can help her-

Every now and then, my mental guards would drop and that infernal voice would susurrate through my mind, a creaking promise of whatever I desired most.

-the power is here to save her-

I wasn't an idiot. I wasn't about to trust whispers from the dark. But I had to keep my walls up lest Darth Malak became aware of my presence.

I had to reach Bastila on the quiet.

The corridors here were a muted silver, almost perfectly circular in shape, marred only by the occasional scratch of graffiti that the clean-bots likely couldn't buff out. There had been little sentient life on the lower levels, but here- nothing but these damn droids.

Malak's released them to guard Bastila.

No doubt he saw her as the most prized jewel in his stolen treasury.

But I could be wrong about the Fleet. Bastila's unleashed her gift on them- on us. Could be they've sent a special ops taskforce to take her out.

It was a foreboding thought, but truth was- I had no idea. None. For all I knew, it could be blasted Revan Freeflight boarding that had sent Darth Malak into a tizz.

Regardless, the battle mechs were spanning out here. Which meant I was in the right place. The intelligence I'd scored was correct.

I grimaced down at the name tag on my lapel. Alan Ber'keek was stunned and trussed up in a supply closet. A voice in my head had murmured that it would be safer- cleaner- to kill him.

Jedi do not kill.

He might escape; aye, I knew that. Or someone might stumble on the hapless mechanic, learn of an intruder on the Forge-

I had a choice. Jedi do not kill unless they have no choice.

What choice had it been, really? A rogue Sith worker, if found, might bring about my capture- throw
away my shot at saving Bastila.

There is always a choice.

In the end, I simply couldn't bring myself to lay a death blow on a comatose man. Whether it was Jedi mercy or simply a way of proving to myself that the damned Dark Side wouldn't control me-bah. I didn't know.

I'd made the choice, no point lamenting the stupidity of it now.

Up ahead, the corridor flared into a junction.

The internal diagrammatic I'd studied with Alan's comp login told me that left spiralled downwards to crew quarters, and eventually a hidden officer's dock - one not detailed on any schematic the Republic brass had eyeballed. But right, ah- that wound higher to the upper viewing decks. Chambers that were restricted to system droids and the master of the Star Forge.

Presumably, also, holding the woman he labelled his new apprentice.

I drew right, and the 'saber on my waist hummed.

No Force, though. I didn't dare. Stayed small as a gnit-fly, an old fool that was no threat, slipping between the radars of Dark Jedi and the Dark Side alike. But the kaiburr housed in my lightsaber's casing buzzed like I was waving it about in battle.

*Even my damn weapon can hear the blasted Star Forge.*

There was a dark, slippery taint in all of my senses - like a sheen of oil both polluting and pervading through an ocean.

To think that my padawan had been helpless and imprisoned in such a place for so long...

The burn of attachment cinched tight around my heart. Attachment was a danger; aye, I'd always known that, and fiercely believed in the truth of it. But without attachment, what was left but isolation?

...

*Place hasn't changed.*

*That was the first thing I'd said, in a voice abrupt enough to discourage Dorak from indulging in any more superfluous chitchat.*

*Dantooine hadn't changed. I'd left the planet an inexperienced padawan decades ago; heart a little bruised, maybe, but otherwise a typical young Jedi in need of shaping and moulding beyond Dantooine expertise at the time.*

*I didn't much enjoy my time on Coruscant. Hadn't expected to, and wasn't that just the way of it- cast a shadow on your own future, and most of the time you'll draw it true.*

*Aye, knowing the wisdom didn't necessarily mean one was smart enough to prescribe to it. People were idiots. Myself just the same as any other.*

*I'd never liked Coruscant. I could've ignored the politics, the annoying training partners, and the ceaseless millions of sents all scheming just outside the Temple's walls.*
But no one could ignore Exar Kun.

Dammit, I'd known the bastard, and still never imagined his depth of depravity. The reach of his influence had been far, farther than any Jedi could've foreseen.

Knights turned. Masters fell. Padawans broke the code- and, aye, no matter how I grieved over Nayama's fall to Kun's ranks, I couldn't help but blame it partly on her unsanctioned marriage to Jolee Bindo.

She was turned away by *us*, though. Her sister wasn't. Her sister never fell, despite a marriage.

I wrenched the thoughts in. They were always bitter, and the what-ifs even more so.

"...good to have you home," Dorak said mildly. He'd always been an affable sort, even when we were both padawans. Reminded me a bit of Zhar, back on Coruscant - and one day Zhar would come back home, too; him and Karon both. I'd wager on it, if I'd been a betting man. "We have too many apprentices without a master."

I grunted in non-committal response. "Place really hasn't changed then."

I didn't want an apprentice, but I had little choice in the matter.

We must train the new generation. Heavy words laid on me, what seemed like a minute after I'd ascended to masterhood. All of us have a responsibility to rebuild the Order from the ashes of Exar Kun's corruption.

Ach, I couldn't deny that. At least I'd used the High Council's desire as a way to wrangle myself back home.

"Walk with me to the younglings," Dorak suggested. "Allow me to acquaint them to you. They're all in the courtyard beyond, listening to Vandar."

Some things didn't change. It was an echo of my earlier ruminations. Men like Exar Kun would rise and fall, but the renni-grass on Dantooine would forever grow wild, and Vandar would forever lead the Enclave.

There was a certain peace in that thought. I might not admit it to Dorak, but I was glad to be home.

"I'm hardly going to choose an apprentice on my first day back," I groused.

As we traipsed onwards, the courtyard opened into view. There were a dozen or so younglings, ranging from little more than toddlers to a bright-eyed tweener, all sitting cross-legged in a semi-circle facing Vandar and an older Twi'lek padawan who stood in his shadow.

A couple of kids were making lewd faces at each other - and I had a sudden, bittersweet recollection of the Qel-Droma twins. I'd never liked the brats, but that didn't mean I hadn't mourned their fate. Both of them.

The rest of the younglings had their keen eyes and expressive faces fixed wonderingly on the short green master.

Apart from one girl.

She was sitting slightly apart from the rest. Young, maybe six or seven, dark hair knotted into decorative braids that looked more at home on a Core noble than a kid learning in the Dantooine
wilds. Her expression was blank. But her gaze was aimed intently on Vandar just the same.

Dorak chuckled. "No one expects you to select your apprentice immediately, Vrook. We all appreciate such a responsibility should not be rushed."

Vandar rasped something that made the kids giggle. All but the girl. Her head cocked, as if she were digesting every word.

"Who's that?" I asked, abruptly pointing to her.

"Bastila Shan," Dorak offered. "Middling strength for her age, although it's always hard to predict how that'll come out after puberty. The girl's shy. The other younglings see her as snobby and standoffish, but honestly, I think she just doesn't know how to be a child."

I was aware of him shrugging in my periphery, the corners of his mouth twisting in a wry grimace - but I kept my gaze on the girl.

"She was home-schooled by her mother, a Talravinite noble who lost her fortune. The woman never bothered to socialize her daughter. My observation is the girl's hampered by a fair wallop of social awkwardness - but she's young. Young enough to change, to adjust."

Shy. Socially awkward. Seen by others as standoffish.

I'd be a liar if I couldn't see myself in that description. My acerbic manner was my own damn fault, I knew - but, well. Knowing the wisdom didn't necessarily mean one was smart enough to prescribe to it.

Dorak was looking at me with a gleam in his eye. "Not going to choose one on your first day, huh, Vrook?"

I threw him my fiercest scowl. "Thought you were going to introduce me, Dorak." I flourished a hand towards the students, and demanded, "Well?"

Dorak chuckled. "You say Dantooine hasn't changed. Neither have you, my old friend. Neither have you."

... I'd immediately been drawn to Bastila because of her isolation. Because I felt a certain kinship with a young girl-child.

In all likelihood, that probably made me the worst damn master for her- for if I shared the same weaknesses, how could I ever help her overcome them?

The corridor ended up ahead, drawing into a mammoth oblique hatch inlaid with foreign sigils I didn't recognize. One of the upper viewing chambers, if I recalled correctly from the schematic.

I unfurled a tiny finger of Force-

-she is here. draw on the power, make her listen-

-and snapped it hard back to me.

My lips tightened. One hand clenched my 'saber, and the other threw a sudden burst of Force directly into the entry sensor.
The half-moon doors opened. I had the briefest image of a kneeling robed figure alone in the centre of a cavernous room, as I took a cautious step forward-

A movement along the edges of my vision had me ducking sideways, lightsaber flaring high, reflecting the first laser bolt back into the midriff of an armoured guard-

Everything dulled. Like a cessation of light, the entire room was immediately muted in coagulation.

Another bolt streamed at me- so fast- and my limbs were sluggish in lifting the 'saber to block-

*The Force. It's- it's- gone-*!

A burn of agony punched into the side of my chest. I felt it, a nanosec before the scent of charred cloth hit my nostrils, and then the pain hit higher-

"Halt!" a woman's voice ordered. Stone-cold, and ringing with command.

The flare of green wavered unsteadily in my hand. My other clutched desperately at my mangled chest. Pain was an iron band squeezing hard against my ribs, but I kept my eye on the black-armoured guard who held a mini-pistol aimed directly at my heart.

Behind me, I thought, was another.

And the Force- *it had completely vanished!* I reached out desperately, frantically- at this stage I'd welcome the cursed murmurings of the Star Forge itself, but- *nothing*!

"Vrook."

My head turned to face her. My fingers seared with the heat of scorched flesh and warm blood. I could feel the shaking of shock set in on old limbs disconnected from any aid of the Force.

"My padawan," I managed through dry lips, as my gaze roved over her. She was so *pale*. And thin. And her eyes blazed-

My breath hitched, and the stones in my soul grew heavy.

"I am not *yours* any longer, old man," she hissed, and I saw the flare of emotion lighten the unnatural yellow taint in her eyes.

The taint I had known would be there.

"Perhaps you have gone through too much to be mine any longer," I rasped. "But you are not Malak's. You are too strong for that. I *know* you are."

Something snapped in her countenance. "You should not be here." Her voice was cold, and damned me for my presence. But her tawny eyes- there was distress, there. I could see it. I simply had to find a way to reach her.

"I used to say that to you every Baker's Day," I whispered. "Do you remember?"

... "You should not be here, Bastila," I said. My heart was burdened each day of freedom I found her in Dorak's library - because it reminded me of myself. Aye, other than a singular year in my own youth, I'd done exactly the same.
Hidden away amongst the dusty archives, in the pretence that learning was my only desire.

Her head lifted, and a small smile of welcome flittered nervously on her young face. Almost a teen, now - a time I'd been expecting to lecture her on the dangers of attachment, of emotion, of allowing reckless idiocy to reign over logic.

But not my Bastila.

"I am studying the building blocks of deep meditation, Master." Bastila indicated to the crystalline polyhedron that sat, deactivated, on the beech wood table next to the plasticeel datasheets she had been perusing. "Master Galdea has directed me toward a holocron that might aid in my understanding."

"Child." I could hear the grump in my voice. I certainly didn't besmirch my padawan from honing her burgeoning knowledge, but Baker's Day was a traditional rest day on Dantooine, a break from study or work- be one a Jedi or a common-folk tilling the fields. "You should be outside. Mingling." I cleared my throat. "With the other padawans. Having- having fun."

Forming attachments.

Aye, singular attachment was dangerous, but a complete lack could be just as perilous. The Force interconnected all life, and that was not something Bastila could experience while hiding away with her nose in a book.

Bastila blinked, before her gaze dropped from mine. "Master, I train with them every day. If Baker's Day is meant to be a pursuit of pleasure, then can I not utilize it in the way I see fit?" She loosed a tinny, awkward laugh. "This is what I wish to do, Master. I am learning so much-

I harrumphed, cutting off her stilted tirade. Ach, and how could I berate my padawan for living a childhood so similar to mine?

Her young face tilted up, but there was an edge of guardedness in her countenance. It'd never really left, not since I'd first laid eyes on her.

"One more hour, Bastila," I told her severely. "I shall return and expect this room to be empty. A Jedi should embrace experience beyond just the academic. Galdea's teachings can wait."

She bowed her head in compliance. "Yes, master."

... Most days I hadn't had the heart to cut short her solitude. And as the years passed, Bastila had slowly escaped her self-imposed shell, slowly allowed others to reach her-

Aye, and I'd been such a grateful idiot to finally see another befriend her that I'd completely failed to comprehend the inequity of their friendship, the fractures of corruption that must have been prevalent in Kylah Aramai, even as a padawan.

I'd always been a suspicious old bugger. But I'd been blind to the sandsnake as it slithered into our den.

"I remember Baker's Day." Her voice was a blast of arctic wind. I'd hoped a stab of nostalgia would reach her, but I couldn't even spot the slightest chip in her impassive face.

"Bastila," I said softly. The beat of my heart drummed against my fingertips. I punched off the 'saber
in my other hand and held it aloft, in surrender. "Come with me. Leave this place. Please."

She was silent for the longest time. Behind her, curved transparisteel viewports shot through with the flashes of battle. I didn't know what she saw in my face, but in hers I saw disdain. Condescension.

Supercilious emotions that everyone had always believed as her true self, even when young. Whereas I'd always seen them as nothing more than the mask of the insecure.

Bastila wore those emotions well, now.

"Too little, too late, old man," she said at last. There was grief in those words. Dammit, I was sure there was.

"It's never too late!" I growled, feeling the surge of my emotions briefly overwhelm the gripping pain of my injuries. "You of all people know that! Any other Jedi would have left that woman behind on the Nexus, but you didn't. You didn't-"

...

She is alive.

The thought was a savage prayer of faith. A need to make desperate hope a reality. Because I would know if my padawan had fallen in battle, no matter what the Republic comms from Deralia spouted forth.

Galdea said nothing, merely nudged a tray of Dantooine tuber-roots smeared in white sauce across the mess table. He knew better than to speak pithy platitudes.

And if damned Karon or Zhar came anywhere near me right now I'd clock 'em straight in the face.

There is no emotion. There is peace.

It was hard to calm down. Had been all week. And annoyingly dim as those two could be, I had to concede they meant well. They always did.

No one felt the fall of Revan or Malak more than them.

Revan and Malak should never have been trained in the first place-

"There's a presence in the sector. Just exited hyperspace." Galdea's large head jerked up, nose in the air like a kath hound. He'd always had a strong sense for that sort of thing. "Fear. So much fear. I-"

"Who?" I demanded, my voice hoarse as I shoved the lukewarm tray to one side. Galdea's unerring accuracy at recognizing Force signatures was as adept as his detection skills. "Who is it?"

His eyes shot to mine. There was a widening to them that told me the answer before he did. "Bastila Shan," he breathed. "But she's so scare-"

I ran.

Every step, my heart in my throat, vowing I'd never let the Republic sympathizers collar her again. It'd been Kester this mission, but if not him then it was Galdea or Vima-

By the time I'd reached the small dock a klick outside the Enclave I could sense her, too. A few minutes later, and the speck of her craft dotted in Dantooine's pale blue sky.
Another few before I saw the shape of it clearly-

What manner of ship is that?

The realization was numbing. One of Darth Revan's. Somehow, my padawan had escaped in one of the Sith Lord's own vessels.

As the sleek snubfighter descended on an erratic landing trajectory, Bastila's Force signature became apparent to my own senses. There was only hers. No one else on board, and my padawan's fear eclipsed all other emotion. She'd last been with masters Kester and Jai'lel, two of Dantooine's most powerful and most experienced.

I accepted they were dead before the ship landed with an unstable skidding on the open dirt dockyard, spitting billows of dust into the air. I'd feel grief for the masters later. All I cared about was Bastila, safe.

But why is she so petrified?

Galdea and Karon and Vandar were flanking me by the time the ship's curved hatch opened and Bastila tumbled out. She was a mess- but not visibly wounded- no obvious reason for the overwhelming fear that buffeted against my grip on the Force-

"Master!" she sobbed, and the closest thing I had to a daughter launched herself at me. My arms tightened around her awkwardly.

"It's alright," I said, voice gruff, blinking back tears of relief I'd deny to my dying breath. But this last week, since the news from Deralia had broken- I hadn't truly thought that Bastila was gone- but I'd feared it-

I cleared my throat hurriedly. "You're back home, Bastila. It's alright. It's over."

"No." She whimpered like she hadn't done since she was a tweener. And then her entire body stiffened. She drew back and stared up at me bleakly.

The look on her face- and I saw, then, the dark hollows in her cheeks, the tracery of veins taut on her pale forehead, the smudges of exhaustion starkly visible under her eyes-

Like she'd been pumping herself full of stims for a week just to stop from sleeping.

"It's not over, Master." Her eyes fluttered closed and her voice dropped to a stage whisper. "I'm not alone."

The words were a kick in the guts.

I threw the Force outwards, my gaze snapping to the alien ship as my hands tightened on Bastila's arms, and then- there- I felt it-

The faintest spark of evil. A dying black hole of grief and shadow.

"Oh no," I whispered. There was a sharp, startled gasp of recognition from Karon, and that told me exactly who Bastila had brought back with her. "My padawan. What have you done?"

"Mercy," she mumbled, her eyes still squeezed tight. "I couldn't... Malak fired on her flagship- then she was out cold and her mind broken... I couldn't leave her! Not when... not when I could save her. We preach mercy, and I- I just couldn't- I couldn't leave her to die."
I said nothing, even as my limbs stiffened and Karon and Vandar strode forward in haste. The only thought running through my mind, as I pushed Bastila roughly behind me and glared at the now-threatening snub, was simply that I wished Bastila had.

... "No one else could have accomplished such a thing in the face of their own fear. But you were right, Bastila, right to show the mercy of the Jedi. Right to understand that it is never too late-

"It is too late! Too little, and far too late!" The words seethed like acid, and her eyes flared golden. "You believe I refer to a redundant redemption of my own actions?" Her words cut through me like a razor of ice. She followed it with a mocking laugh- a sound of contempt I had never thought to hear from her. "You misguided old fool. It is too late for you to comprehend what is truly at stake! It is too little- this- you reaching out for me after all this time, like there is any time left-

Her mouth snapped shut with a click, and she threw a sudden glare at the viewport. "Time. This wastes my time. I have a battle to attend to, Vrook, and you- you made the choice to step foot on enemy ground."

"I am not your enemy." I would believe that, say that, until the last breath had choked from my lungs. "I am on your side, Bastila!"

I kept my palm facing upwards, the deactivated 'saber rolling loose between my fingers. Still no Force, and the dizziness of blood loss was setting in, as it seeped through the calluses of my other hand. But I'd hold it together. I had to. "Please. Listen to me. This is not- whatever is happening, whatever it is that I don't understand... this is not the right path. Tell me what's going on. Tell me, Bastila."

The slightest flinch- if I hadn't been watching her so intently I wouldn't have seen it- but she was tempted. Part of her was, I could see it.

I stepped forward. Wounded and with one hand open in a gesture of peace, I was no threat to her. So I thought, so she must know, but the damn silent guards I'd forgotten thought otherwise-

It felt like two flaming shiv-blades stabbed deep into either side of my lower back. A scream tore from my lungs. The 'saber dropped with a clatter-

"Halt!" The same stone-cold command from the same frigid voice.

I was still standing. How, I had no idea, as the agony of seared flesh was overriding everything.

"The Force." It was Bastila's voice. But so cold. So emotionless. "You. Slayer. Why does it disappear when I step forward?"

"Null field technology, my lord." A mechanized response. One of the damn guards. Slayers. She called them slayers.

I was swaying, both hands now clutched tight around blazing ribs, breath coming in shallow gulps that rasped against my throat.

"Our portable devices have a six metre radius, my lord." My lord. The bastard was naming my padawan a dark lord. "If you stay back it shall not affect you."

There's been whispers in the Core. Whenever I landed on Coruscant, making my grudging report to High Council. Jedi assassins. Assassins of the night. First Revan's and later Malak's- deadly silent
warriors the Force didn't touch.

Could it be these slayers, who now pledged obeisance to my old padawan?

A flicker of movement through my half-closed eyelids. One of those anonymous bastards had scooped up my dropped 'saber as a trophy.

My thoughts were fraying like a lit fuse. No Force to hold the pain back, to hold me upright. But I had to keep talking, keep fighting for her, keep thinking-

"Did you honestly believe you could rescue me from Malak?" She was speaking to me again. And her voice oozed with scorn. The pain blazed whenever I moved, but I was still standing- I lifted my heavy head to stare at her-

Bastila's yellow eyes flared with disgust. "You cannot even make it past two slayers, Vrook. Look at you. You are dead on your feet. You should have stayed on Dantooine."

Numbness was setting into my body, my mind. "Dantooine was- was- bombed-"

She knew that. She had to know that. And the Enclave was already being rebuilt, having mostly survived-

Her expression didn't budge, even as it blurred in front of me. "Dantooine would have been a more noble death for you than this pathetic display."

"Bastila." I wouldn't let those words cut me. "I believe in you. In the Jedi you are. No matter what has happened, what you have done in the name of Darth Malak or simply to survive, you can come back. You believed that of Revan, and I believe it of you. Come with me-"

Her gaze was pitiless, and that was enough to choke the words in my throat. "I shall not allow you to interfere, Vrook. You made your choice to infiltrate the Star Forge. This is the price of your ignorance." Her profile swivelled to the left. "If he disturbs me or moves another step closer, shoot out his knees."

"Bastila!" I cried. The words stabbed something deeper than the blaster burns that'd butchered my flesh. "I don't believe you'll kill me." I didn't. I would keep faith with her. I had to show her- and she could control the blasted guards- "Tell your slayers to stand down. Leave this place. Come- come with me- p-please-"

My words were starting to slur together as my head swam. I couldn't raise my hands from their tight grip against my torso, but I could make my next step so obviously slow that it'd give her a chance to halt them before they fired-

The impact was a detonation of pain. Nothing but pain as it eclipsed everything else. I couldn't see, couldn't hear, just the hard, sticky press of metal against my face as my body burned.

I'd fallen.

"Scrape him off the floor of my chamber." I barely heard the words made of ice. "Put him by the wall. If he tries anything, kill him."

It was a place beyond pain, now. Coherency had completely shattered. Vision was fuzzy, but opening my eyes I could see a black-robed figure in the distance-

"Perhaps you are a fitting witness, Vrook. Perhaps as you lay here; a useless, old, dying fool; you
can bear witness to the heights of my battle meditation married with the galaxy's most powerful defence."

She turned. A blurry cape of black spidersilk flurried over her shoulder as she stepped away. Further, further away from me, and knelt to do the Dark Side's bidding.

xXx

Chapter End Notes

*Coming up next: Battles on the Star Forge.*
A year's worth of clean-bot service to kosiah for the beta.
Nexus: Furtherance [Revan Freeflight, Mission Vao, Canderous Ordo, Jaq, HK-47]

Chapter Notes
See the end of the chapter for notes

Nexus: Furtherance

Revan Freeflight:

The sound of Canderous shooting out another holo-cam echoed down the strangely circular corridor.

"You know anyone tracking us can just follow the lines of dark cams?" I commented. It was more an idle remark to distract myself, really, for I inferred the sense in Canderous' actions. He'd already despatched a comm back to Teethree regarding a remote disabling of surveillance, but there'd been no declaration of success, yet.

"Better they see black screens than a feed showing them exactly how many of us there are," Canderous clipped out behind me. His voice was derisive, like he'd expected me to deduce that already.

Sure, Canderous, but I'm willing to bet that in between the milliseconds of you firing and the cam blowing out, a feed has already transmitted a couple of frames somewhere. Somewhere.

Better odds to hope no one was monitoring the surveillance, but that didn't seem particularly likely, either.

"Observation;," HK piped up, after a blast from his upraised forearm. He and Zaalbar were metres ahead, leading us through the warren of silvery tunnels. "That's six to me, Geriatric Blockhead, and only three to you. Reflection: As expected, I am once more topping the kill-count.'

"You're in front, Tinhead," Canderous replied in a dry voice. "If you had less than me, I'd be worried."

Mere minutes had passed since we'd embarked on this final journey, stepping out from the officer's dock and into the bowels of the Star Forge. So far, the only sounds had been the idle banter between Canderous and my pet assassin droid. There was a razor-edge to my thoughts, like the charged calm before a storm's unleashing - for I knew this might be the final minutes of peace for us all.

"I believe I comprehend the origins of Malak's insanity," Yudan murmured, a quiet whisper by my side. "And yours, once."

I glanced sideways at the man. His smooth, bronzed face was set, and his eyes glittered with intent. He hadn't said a frelling word since he'd walked out of the 'Hawk.

"The voice," I acknowledged. I knew what he was referring to. "The voice that's promising you everything you most desire."

He nodded; a small, sharp motion of assent. "The voice is louder here than on Lehon."

"The crystal is larger," I said shortly. "It's not- it's not sentient, Yudan. The voice, it's simply..."
"Amplification of the Dark Side," he finished for me. His profile was facing straight ahead as we moved quietly behind Zaalbar and HK. Yudan stalked forward like a jungle cat, fluid and graceful, yet ready to strike at a moment's notice. "I understand, Revan. I did not believe I would ever need to resist this temptation again, but I shall. I shall."

The corridors in this place were a maze. Like stark, shiny sewer pipes, and we were but mink-rats scrabbling through them. I had no cohesive skeins of memory rushing forth to aid me here, just the odd, tantalising glimpse of reminiscence. Like the scent of rose-apple pie that made me yearn for home.

Home. What a twisted, jarring notion, labelling this place as home - as odd as baked rose-apple pie; for, really, my childhood home had been streets and danger and scrabbling for crumbs in the gutter-

Jen. Da's pie. He hadn't been much for kitchen-work, but he'd taught her how to bake that Deralian rose-apple pie-

I blinked, and cut through the errant thought at its stem before it could flower.

"Observation: We are nearing the experimental droid complex, master." HK had halted at a junction where the corridor split into three like spokes of a wheel, glistening and starkly chrome. There was nothing but the odd vent or scratched marking to mar the pale, silvery metal.

"Statement: To reach our destination, we have the option of wading directly through the droid complex, or scaling higher to the transport railings that overhang the complex. Addendum: While ascending directly to the railings is the shortest route, it will leave us more vulnerable to any potential threat." HK paused. "And with less opportunity to destroy any inferior droids directed into sentry mode."

"We'll take the railings, HK," I said. Bastila was above me. I didn't have to reach out to feel her now. The Force diffused outwards from her signature like aphotic fingers of night stretching into the nether.

"Acknowledgment: Onward, to the path of lesser enjoyment," HK intoned, as he selected the right-hand corridor.

As we all followed HK, my attention snagged on a handful of gouged lines in the wall, lower down at knee level. Odd, to see such markings throughout the place. They were scattered around sporadically, clusters of vertical lines that were easy to dismiss as historical damage, perhaps the scrape of a sentry droid grinding against the curved alloy walls.

Something squeezed taut in my mind-

... "We've already walked down this corridor twice."

"Yes." I kept walking. I didn't need to hear his sigh to know it was present.

"Revvie, you're going around in circles."

"And I shall continue to do so until I have adequately familiarized myself with this place," I snapped. I lengthened my strides, and felt the ache of a tension headache setting in.

The Star Forge was mine, now. I was determined to thoroughly acquaint myself with my surroundings. For soon it would be time to activate the crystal we had found in the very nexus of this
The uncut, colossal kaiburr stood more than twice my height; faded to a dull grey within the filigree strands of Rakatan metal that clasped around the crystalline edges like a claw. The kaiburr was more immense, more beautiful, more powerful than the thrumming one on Lehon, but this crystal was dormant. Only an echo of something alien and hauntingly compelling emanated from the behemoth mineral rock.

Once we powered on the internal reactors that housed the crystal, it would surge brilliantly to life.

Like Lehon, but stronger. And possessing a vastly greater purpose.

The crystal would draw in solar energy from the nearby star, amplifying its own power, sparking this entire factory to life.

Oh, the power here might just be enough. Enough to roll the dice, to make a pre-emptive strike; to secure the galaxy under a singular choke-hold and turn our eye to the true threat-

"Revan, I want to contact the Fleet," Malak muttered, striding forward to reach my side. "It's been too long. They are waiting for our hail, standing guard in the Outer Rim."

"And they will continue to wait," I snapped again. My words echoed down the corridor, harsh and unyielding, rebounding back to me. I sighed, as my irritation abruptly ebbed. Malak was right. The Fleet were important. I was allowing my hard-edged purpose in mastering the Star Forge to preclude all other considerations.

Sometimes, there was wisdom in his words.

"Tomorrow," I relented. "Tomorrow, I will send a transmit. Update the commanders, at least. Give them an ETA of our return."

Allow me a window of time to activate the Star Forge, and see what I can manufacture. A strikefighter prototype, perhaps, to show the Fleet brass.

For my new objectives would need to be unveiled, soon, and that would start with my generals.

"Tomorrow, then," he vowed, as if my words were a promise. "Alright, Revan. One more round of our new home. Then you're stopping for a meal if I have to tie you down and force-feed you myself."

I felt the corner of my mouth twitch in a distant reflex of what had once been a carefree grin. More habit than anything else, these days. "Not sure about the force-feeding part," I quipped. "But the other..."

I let my words trail away into silence under the weight of his frown. In truth, our old banter had felt stale for some time. Too many heavy deeds resting on our souls. It was a grim reckoning I had long accepted: that we would never make it out from under the bloody shadows cast by the Mandalorian Wars.

Our individual futures do not matter. Only our survival. So I can achieve what I must.

"Odd, all these scratches," Malak muttered, swinging one leg idly to catch at the wall. "They appear in some places, but not others. I thought they were just scuffs left from some clean-bot or tech droid, but the pacing is too irregular."

I cast my eye over the marks. Almost looked like primitive markings counting the numbers in a
"Superficial damage to utility corridors is hardly what is relevant here," I clipped out, before striding forward, having already dismissed the unimportant markings from my mind.

... The edges of the memory swam, dispersing into haze. I found myself walking further down the next corridor, but my eyes were locked on another cluster of scratches.

Vertical lines, interwoven with the occasional flourish or sharp borderline. The marks looked meaningless. Almost...

"They're nothing," I muttered. "Just random marks."

I had known that. My old self, cold-edged and driven with hard purpose, had known that. If there was any sort of legibility or meaning to them, surely I would have interpreted it years ago.

"What is it, Revan?" Yudan asked. He must've noticed me staring at the walls.

I couldn't pull my gaze from the odd markings, though; I felt like if I just tried hard enough, I'd be able to comprehend—comprehend some meaning....

I squinted, vision blurring, and a whisper of something almost artificial curled in my mind. Not from the shadows—

Not from me—

"Wait a minute," I called out sharply, as I came to an abrupt halt in front of another group of interlinked lines. I dropped to my knees and tilted my head at a right angle purely on instinct.

The lines abruptly morphed into a series of archaic glyphs. Sigils, scratched sideways along the corridor of an ancient Rakatan superstructure. I frowned, struggling to follow, the glyphs looked so primitive and coarsely made, and it was not a language I innately knew—

*Early Massassi. Sidi-script, before their alphabet evolved into true hieroglyphics. A primitive, simple means of written communication. There are so few preserved fragments.*

The hitch in my breath seemed inordinately loud. That wasn't my thought—

The stirring in my mind was mild and timid, as if the slightest surge of emotion would banish it back into nothingness.

*This is from the first reign of the Massassi. The Sidi-Massassi, the least known about, the ancestral line that died out when the true Massassi evolved. The Sidi-Massassi were physically inferior to their descendants, but believed to have a deeper Force-sensitivity. Enslaved by the Rakatan regime.*

My fingers were running down the sharp-edged grooves as I crawled forward, trying desperately to let my cursed mind think by itself.

*That's the siga rune. There- the alicer, and that must translate to-*

There was a sluggishness to my own internal computation, a difficulty in comprehension that I somehow knew Jen Sahara never had. Not over translation of archaic texts dating back to the field of her expertise.
Balance. The glyphs keep repeating balance.

The glyphs clustered together in a group beneath my fingertips. I heard someone ask something behind me, but my attention was wholly absorbed.

 Builders upset balance. Balance of magic- no, no the Force! The Builders have upset the balance of the Force!

I rocked back on my heels, mind whirring as the faint thought-stream began to dissipate.

This was a curiosity, nothing more. Because it wasn't like I didn't comprehend what balance meant to a Force-user.

Canderous' heavy glove thumped down on my shoulder as I canvassed the glyphs one last time.

The balance between life and death.

"Revan? What are you doing?"

I blinked, looking up to stare at Canderous' visored helm.

"We have to keep moving. Get your head together, Revan." It was a barked command, which meant my friend and ally was worried about me.

"I'm fine," I said absently, getting to my feet. "I actually- I actually am. I think I've just discovered something about this place that I didn't know before."

The Rakata kept Massassi slaves here? Why? Why would they allow Force-sensitives, even enslaved ones, to step foot on a Force-relic like this?

The thoughts were all my own, now. The vague, lingering remnants from the dead scholar had completely vanished.

And what were the ancient Massassi trying to tell someone - anyone - by scratching sideways messages at knee level?

Once, I had dismissed the graffiti as nothing more than damage done to a factory over its lifespan. Possibly, so had the Rakata.

Balance between life and death.

I'd always thought the balance was between light and dark.

"(Jen?)" It was Zaalbar, now, emitting a worried rumble from the front.

"Lead on," I said, nodding, storing the information like a nugget in the back of my head. Perhaps this was simply like the terraforming computer on Kashyyyk: an intriguing puzzle, a potential source of information, a fragment of history that piqued my interest - but also something I simply did not have time to indulge in.

Yudan was staring hard at me. Maybe that was an expression of concern on his face.

"Lead on," I reiterated, once more following Zaalbar down the corridor. "It's nothing of import. Nothing that could help us today, anyway."
Mission Vao:

*Place is dead empty,* I thought, as I shimmied out through the cargo consignment hatch.

Sure, I'd been watching the *Hawk's* cams, and I'd seen Carth point those extra pilots deeper into the hangar. I couldn't spot them from my crouch under the *Hawk's* hull, but I knew the direction they were in. *That* way. Past those other snubs. Near the exit.

*But where's Dustil and old man Bindo hiding at?*

Teethree clanked on the hard flooring as he lowered himself from the cargo hatch, and I flinched at the noise. Sheesh, I had to find a stealth mod or some way of muffling his gears, 'cause he was freaking loud-

"Mission!" Dustil hissed, face popping under the edge of the ship's loading ramp. "What are you doing?"

"Poodoo!" I shot him a carefree grin as I crawled silently forward. He musta heard Teethree's landing, but Dustil had his eyes pinned on me. It was dark, under the belly of the *Hawk,* and I'd hoped that would be enough-

He scowled. "You know those mainstream stealth belts are frakking useless, right?"

"Not all of us can turn invisible," I muttered, *maybe* a little sulkily, because it wasn't fair that he could just wave his stupid hand and disappear like that. "Anyway, I figured something was better than nothing, right?"

Stealth-fold technology had never really taken off- except in dark ops, but then infrareds could turn them from mostly useless into totally useless. Still, there'd been more than one time in the shady tunnels of Taris when my trusty belt had helped me shake loose a Vulkar or two. *And* stealth tech had been surprisingly wizard against those creepy rakghouls. Between my belt and Big Z's immunity, we'd freaking owned the Undercity.

Well, kinda.

"Why are you- why are you coming closer?" Dustil was still whispering in that outraged voice as I wriggled out from underneath the *Hawk.* "Mission. Get back inside the ship."

Sometimes, it was sorta cute the way he tried to act like his dad. Like I ever listened to Carth.

Up ahead, I could see Jolee lounging against one of those snubs that had been parked in here when we'd arrived. Weird, because it looked more like a Republic bird than a Sith ship - but it'd been sitting pretty *here,* in the badass factory of freaking Darth Malak.

Jolee's head swung in our direction. One bushy eyebrow raised, like the old guy was mocking me or something, and then he turned his attention back to the rear of the hangar.

*Far out, he's like, twenty metres away, and he can still spot me through the belt?* Maybe the thing was just a piece of useless Jawa-scrap.

"Mission-" Dustil had turned plaintive, like he realized ordering me about wasn't gonna work.

"Teethree can't do anything from the cockpit." I flipped my goggles on, fiddling with the dial as I parsed the hangar. The bio-scan feed overlaid the lens in red- *there.* I could see the heat of a body past the next snub, and another two on either side of the exit hatch. Marking the door.
"Does Carth reckon someone's gonna attack us?" I asked quietly. Everyone was silent and still. Everyone was aiming at the only hatch like it was gonna explode out with monsters.

I shivered suddenly. The monsters were deeper in. With Canderous and Jen and Big Z. Last thing I was gonna do was sit on my tail and hide away, when everyone I cared about might not even be coming back.

"Honestly?" Dustil muttered, shifting uneasily from his perch by the ramp. "I have no frakking clue. I mean, uh- I don't think anyone is coming here. But Dad's so on edge-" Dustil cut himself off with a huff, turning to glare into the hangar. Every line of him was sprung tight like a swoop ignition coil.

*Carth ain't the one on edge, Dee.*

Dustil saw me looking at him, and scowled again. "I'm holding myself back from the Force, Mission. I won't be able to sense anything coming close. I'm as blind as a frakking shyrack."

If we'd been anywhere else, I'd be telling him to take a freaking chill pill. But everything was at stake here- and everyone.

So, instead, I reached out and placed a hand on his arm, ignoring the way he tensed at the contact. "Jolee will be able to sense anyone coming. Don't stress, Dee. Jen and the others - they got this. All the nasties running around here will be gunning for them."

It was supposed to cheer him up, but instead, the comment just made *me* feel worse. They were all out there - and Big Z, well, I knew how bad he still felt about prissy Bastila, and his life-debt would make him do anything for Jen, no matter how dangerous-

*We've come so far. I got faith. All of us, we're the only ones who've been smart enough and strong enough to get all those Maps and find our way here, in Darth Malak's stupid super-secret Star Forge.*

*We'll finish things and save the galaxy. I just know we will.*

"Yeah." Dustil still looked worried. "Mission, Dad'll flip if he spots you. Get back in the 'Hawk, alright?"

I rolled my eyes. *Round and round like a broken spin-disc, playing the same borked song.* "Look, I was serious, alright? Teethree can't do anything from the 'Hawk. The bay doors of this place - they're not just closed, they're not even responding to the core engineering system." I puffed out an annoyed breath. "An' it's not just here, Dee. The minute the Ebon Hawk got in, every airlock in this place snapped shut. Completely overrode everything."

Teethree beeped sadly at my side.

"That- that sounds like it was planned." Dustil's eyes were wide.

I shot him a look. "Gee, ya think?"

His teeth were worrying his lower lip. Sometimes, Dustil went all serious and dark on me, and seemed years older. Other times, like right now, he looked just like a kid holding a lightsaber.

*We're not kids. We ain't been kids for years.*

"Entry sensors," Dustil whispered hoarsely. "Or something- something must have been triggered by the Ebon Hawk. Even in this supposedly undisclosed dock, they were looking out for us. They know"
we're here.”

They. Darth Malak. And everyone who followed the freakazoid.

"Yeah." I sighed. "Apparently Bastila pointed us here. Guess she's probably the one who slammed shut all the airlocks."

It seemed weird, to think of Bastila being able to override systems like that. Maybe she'd ordered someone else to do it. Some underling. Because from what Jen and the others had been saying, it didn't sound like Bastila was a prisoner here anymore.

"I still don't get that," Dustil muttered in an echo of my thoughts. "I mean, Bastila Shan! She was the shiny symbol of the Jedi when I was at the Academy. Her battle meditation and all that rot. Hard to believe she's using it for the other side now..."

"I suppose people thought that about Jen, once." I still found the whole Revan thing almost impossible to get my head around, even now - much as I knew it peeved Dustil off. I mean, I'd seen plenty of bad poodoo in my life, but deep down I knew it was nothing on what Darth Revan had once unleashed.

I was glad I'd never known her then. It would've been- harder, to get past it.

 Maybe explains a bit of Yudan's snarly attitude. Maybe. Didn't mean I'd ever give that ronto-turd the time of day.

"But y'know-" I made a face. "Bastila used to be a real goody-two-boots. I don't reckon she's gone truly bad. Jen'll sort her out."

Dustil threw me a pitying look. It was difficult not to reach out and slap him one.

Instead, I turned to look down at Teethree. At least he didn't talk back - well, not so anyone else could understand.

"Go to the consoles, Teethree. See what you can slice into. We need to get those bay doors back online."

Teethree's dome spun. He beeped happily, before extending his tracks and rolling away.

"Er-" Dustil looked oddly hesitant, as he turned to peer into the hangar.

And then, suddenly, the tiny little dock looked a heck of a lot bigger. And empty. As Teethree pootled along the entire width of it, travelling in first freaking gear by the looks, and in complete line of sight of the only exit.

The droning noise as he whirred forwards echoed loudly throughout the eerily silent hangar.

"You said you reckoned no one would come here, right?" I hissed. Teethree was a wizard astromech, but one bolt could completely fizzle out his actuator. And anyone strolling into here would immediately spot a utility droid chugging along slowly in front of them-  

"Well, maybe," Dustil muttered. He, too, was staring intently at the droid.

The sound of Teethree's gears was ridiculously loud. I bet stupid HK had hogged all the gear oil and my poor droid was slowly rusting away because of it.

A flurry of movement near the door shook a frightened gasp from me.
But it was only Carth—his head peeping around one of the ships near the exit.

My wrist-comm beeped, and I jumped without meaning to. Looking down, I felt my nose wrinkling as I accepted the call.

::Mission, get back in the 'Hawk:: Carth growled.

Sheesh, my lame belt really is banthacrap if he can spot me from the other side of the room.

My eyes narrowed in suspicion. Or, maybe, he can't—

"Um, what do you mean, Carth?" I faked into the comm. "I sent Teethree out to slice into the consoles."

That wasn't actually a lie, as such.

::Oh:: Carth sounded nonplussed. ::Sorry, Mission. I just assumed—never mind::

The comm clicked off. I stifled a giggle as I glanced up at Dustil, who was grinning like an idiot. Up ahead, the whirring of gears ceased as Teethree finished circling around the line of consoles.

"Dad knows you well," Dustil snickered. "But not well enough to tell when you're lying—"

Something hissed.

Our heads jerked around.

Ping of a blaster firing—

The hatch! My stomach lurched. The freaking hatch hissed opened!

Dustil's arm thumped hard into me. "Get back inside!" he yelled roughly.

Oh, crap! Fright choked in my throat as I heard the hum of a lightsaber snapping to life, and I had no idea if it was one lone Sith or a whole battalion of them, or— or— a Dark Jedi—

"Go, Mission!" With a last holler, Dustil abruptly vanished. The sound of his disappearing footfalls was drowned out by a scream. Two snubs parked between me and the hatch, so all I could see was wild blaster fire shooting upwards, all I could hear were thuds, a cut-off yell, tell-tale pop of a grenade—

No way. No way am I gonna hide! Fear felt like sick in my belly, but if Dee thought I was gonna cower away when I could actually help, then he really didn't know me.

I sprinted to the nearest snub, mini-blaster already in hand, heart beating fast, and legs pumping as I made a wild dive under the ship's hull.

I skidded along the floor, coming to a halt just underneath the front-mounted hyperdrive of the parked strikefighter.

I skidded along the floor, coming to a halt just underneath the front-mounted hyperdrive of the parked strikefighter.

There was another snub between me and the hatch, mostly blocking my line of sight, but I could see legs blurring beyond it on the other side. The Bek used to hide in utility vents, marking places to take pot-shots at Vulkars sneaking in on our turf. 'Course, Zaerdra never let me go on sentry duty, but I imagined it was something like this.

Lying flat on the ground, propped up on elbows, aiming down the sights as the sounds of blaster
volleys and clashing blades filled the air.

_Hold your aim steady. Wait for a clear shot._

A black-armoured leg paused for a nanosec.

I fired twice.

The legs stumbled to the ground, and then the green of a 'saber stabbed straight into the fallen body.

"Status!" It was a holler from Carth. No more blaster pings, and I couldn't see anyone's legs now. If Carth was yelling then did that mean all the bad guys were dead?

"Three enemy down, sir!" someone rapped back in response. "No one else outside the hatch!"

I felt my thundering heart begin to slow, just a bit. My arms shook.

"Three enemy down, sir," the same voice said. "Tobards is badly hit."

I scrambled out from under the snub's angled nose. Snapped the gun to my waist. Stood, pretended I didn't feel my stupid legs shaking, and began to walk forward.

"Stang." A quiet curse from Carth. "Search the bodies. They were well-equipped. Professionals. Only reason we didn't lose more was because we were prepared."

"Eh, I wasn't," Jolee growled. I spotted him as I cleared the last snub, crouching down over a corpse. "Not for the Force to wink out. If it hadn't been for that snipe-shot under the snub, I think I'd be looking at my grave right now."

Three black bodies. Smears of dark blood on the shiny floor. Two more bodies, in orange flightsuits—no, wait, one was moving. I blinked. _We won. We killed the bad guys._

It felt hard to swallow, suddenly.

_And we lost a stranger who'd come to help us._ It seemed oddly terrible to realize, in that moment, that all I really cared about was that the orange-clad body wasn't Carth or Dee or Jolee.

"The Force. It's gone." Dustil's words were a shocked whisper as I neared. "And not because _I'm_ doing anything!"

"Aye, I know, kid," Jolee grumbled. He had a shiv-blade in one bony hand, cutting apart sections of armour from a black-clad body like he was skinning an ash-rabbit. "Something to do with these dead fellows. We just have to find out what."

"Mission!" Carth had spotted me. 'Course he had. I felt strangely numb - I'd been in spots like this before, I'd seen so much death already, an' the Shadowlands had been a bloody blur of screams and corpses— but, somehow, nothing about this felt any easier.

Carth had taken a reflexive step closer. His gaze dropped to the blaster held loosely at my side.

Something crossed his face, then, like he knew it'd been me firing that last shot, for he seemed to choke back whatever he'd planned to say next. He just looked— sad. Resigned, maybe.

I walked the remaining steps to Dustil's side. My limbs still felt shaky, but my stride was steady.

One of the Republic pilots was propped up against the wall, his flightsuit drenched in blood all over
his gut. There was another one leaning over him. The injured guy lifted one hand to unsnap and rip off his flight-helm. He was an older Human, maybe Jen's age, and he was staring solidly at me.

"You winged that last one in the knee, miss," he said, his voice wavering. "Saw it clear as day. Mighty fine shot."

"Huh," Jolee muttered. He tossed another section of cracked armour behind him, head still bowed over the corpse he was mangling. "Think you saved my life there, kid," he threw over his shoulder. "Remind me to buy you a drink."

Carth hadn't shifted his gaze from me, either. He still looked like he was biting back protests.

"We're all needed here, Carth," I said softly. "All of us."

Which reminded me- I swung around, frantically scanning the empty hangar, eyes roving the line of consoles where Teethree had been-

The droid was hooked innocently into a comm-port, all shiny chrome under the lighting, as if nothing had been going on at all.

Silly astromech was just fine.

"Ah, got you, you bugger!" Jolee crowed. I heard the smashing sound of shattered glass, and turned back to see Jolee grinding his booted heel down on a mess of ferraglass.

"What's going on?" I whispered to Dustil. "What did ya mean about the Force?"

There was a wild look in Dustil's dark eyes, a sort of helplessness that I hated to see. "I can't- something is stopping us-"

"Make yourself useful, boy," Jolee cut in, directing his bark at Dustil. "Go strip the other corpse, see if you can find a trinket in his belt. Ten creds say that's what's causing the Force to black out on us."

Dustil blinked quickly as his expression firmed into resolve. He reached out to squeeze my hand before moving away.

"Tobards, you can't fight like this," the pilot who was leaning over the injured one said. She was pulling apart a medi-kit, tearing open bacta patches to pack over his exposed gut. His blood was soaking into the sleeves of her flightsuit.

"No, not fight," the one called Tobards muttered. His hand was clenched tight around his belly, and the other pilot had to pry it away as she peered clinically at his wound.

Too many times I'd seen the mess of battle afterwards. Too many times I'd smelt the charred scent of burnt skin. Some of the older Beks used to say it was something you got used to, but I hadn't. Not yet.

"Sir, that Twi'lek of yours has the right idea." It was the injured one again. Tobards. I didn't think I'd be able to talk so calmly with so much of my own blood spilling out everywhere. "I scored top marks in marksmanship. If someone can give me a lift to the top of your freighter, I think I can find myself a good sniping spot."

"Tobards, I have to halt the bleeding first," the other one scolded, the one with stripes on her shoulders.
Carth was silent for a moment before nodding firmly. I could see in that brief instant how part of him hated this, this cold way of placing peeps around in battle for the best outcome. Using sents for the good of all.

It was the sort of thing that'd always come so natural to Jen.

"Stabilize his injuries then move him topside," Carth ordered the woman, before swinging his gaze on a third pilot who was busy pulling weaponry from a corpse- I hadn't even noticed him. "Joss, get back to marking the door. Jolee, as you were. Dustil, I want you standing ready and hidden by that second snub. Mission..."

Carth trailed off, gazing at me with that stupid concerned look. I'd helped, more than helped, and Carth had to freaking realize that-

Something firmed in his face. "Get back under the snub," he commanded. "Back into your sniping position. Belt on, and sight the door."

I blinked, as something warm curled in my belly. He's finally got it. Finally understands that I ain't just a kid. That I can help, just as much, even without the stupid Force.

Sheesh, Jen had figured that one out back on Taris. It'd only taken Carth, like, six planets.

But I knew, really, that snapping out orders to me would've been hard for him. All Carth had ever tried to do was protect me - just like Big Z. Stupid and annoying, maybe, the way he kept trying to put me somewhere safe - like there was anywhere truly safe in the galaxy - but Carth was one of the few sents who actually gave a cred about me.

One of the few I cared about, too.

"Got it," Dustil muttered, as he cracked something under his boot.

"I might just turn this one off." Jolee hummed, thumbing at something in his hand. A small round object that was glittering, until it suddenly went dark. "Heh. Just like that, eh?"

"It's back," Dustil breathed, as Jolee slipped the weird object into his robes. "The Force. It's back."

"Remember to keep yourself hidden, cub," Jolee warned. "Don't let all this," he flapped a hand around the room, "allow you to forget about the danger of the Star Forge itself."

Dustil mumbled something in return, but I was busy focusing on Carth again, who'd walked close enough to lay a hand gently on my shoulder. His brow was creased with concern, and his mouth was tight.

"Go, Mission," Carth told me, but his words were less like an order, now. "We need you out there."

"You reckon- you reckon there will be more of these guys?" I whispered.

"Yeah." His return was grim. "Whoever sent these men will know they failed, as soon as they go dark on the comms. And I think we can expect more than just three next time."

xXx

**Canderous Ordo:**

*Whoever dreamed up circle tubes for a station's navigational system needs their kriffing head read.*
Even under my boots, marching down the centre of a long spherical tunnel, I could feel some curvature to the flooring. Considering the diameter of the corridors, it meant a lot of this factory was nothing but wasted space.

*Maybe the laandur Rakata died out due to inept architectural design.*

The extinct fish had been a space-faring, battle-hungry people, once. They must've had space stations dotted around aplenty; the fact that only *this* one survived the ashes of history had to be down to the magical diamond Revan said was in its belly.

*Take the pretty Force gem outta the Forge, and what's left is a badly-designed, resource-hungry hulk of strange metal.*

At least Revan had stopped crouching down to examine every little scratch we passed. She seemed fine, now; stalking ahead of me with her 'saber at the ready, but her intense interest in the kriffing walls a few minutes back had been... concerning.

*Don't let your mind crack, Revan. Not now. Not heading into this battle.*

"Statement: We are above the entrance to the experimental droid complex, master. Beyond this hatch are the elevated railings that cross overhead before leading to the meridian viewing chambers." HK and the Wookiee had paused next to a large oblique hatch at the corridor's end. "Prediction: We should expect Forge-built battle-droids from here on in, unless your former pupil's biological processor has decayed beyond recognition."

There was a moment of silence as Revan walked to the half-moon doors, before laying a gentle hand on them.

"Former pupil," she muttered, with a dark twist in her voice. "You mean Malak. Did you ever meet him, HK?"

HK's angular head swivelled to face Revan. "Answer: A handful of times, Master. I found him to be efficient and brutal for an organic. I rather liked him. Retrospection: If I had known what he would do to you, Master, I would have gladly removed his entrails right then!"

"Forget I asked," Revan growled. "Instead, how about relaying what you can sense in this frelling complex?"

HK emitted a clucking sound before answering. "Admonishment: As stated earlier, Master, the radiation from the kaiburr interferes with my long-range infrared scanners. All I am detecting within a five-metre radius are four organic meatbags." HK swooped his rifle over all of us in turn. His photoreceptors gleamed. "Suggestion: Would you like me to kill Mobile Carpet or Apathetic Fleshbag to cheer you up, Master?"

"Put a bolt in it," I drawled from my place at the rear, as Revan turned to throw me the faint echo of a grin. "Or disclose something useful. How much open-air railing are we headed into, Tinhead?"

"Answer: Multiple walkways branch throughout the upper cavity of the experimental droid complex, but in the interest of limiting fun, our chosen route should be the most direct walkway. Extrapolation: A forward run of railing from this hatch extends for approximately fifty metres before reaching an enclosed maintenance room at its end."

"Fifty metres?" I echoed in consideration. "Huh. Must be a pretty large room then."

"Statement: The chamber beyond is the experimental droid complex of the Rakatan Empire's largest
space station. Mockery: Did you expect it to be a closet?"

I had to say HK was good at dishing out what he got. Before he got it, even. If HK'd been an actual sent, I daresay I would've liked him.

Revan's fingers drummed against the closed hatch. Her expression had firmed into hard resolve, and the glittering in her green eyes told me it was time. I felt my mouth tighten into a fierce grin of readiness.

"Zaalbar, Canderous and HK, I want you to head out first," Revan rapped out. "Run straight to the room HK detailed. We'll be exposed, so go as fast as you can. Yudan and I will follow and use the Force to fry anything shooting projectiles our way."

She paused, scruffy head turning back to face the hatch. Other than a lightweight duramesh tunic, Revan wore no battle-suit, no carapaces shielding her limbs or torso - not even a helm protecting her head.

I got why Force-users eschewed armour, when toe-dancing around in the middle of their fancy duels, but at times like this the lack seemed nothing more than a kriffing liability.

"We might be preparing for nothing," Revan said in a low voice. One of her hands lifted, wavering in the air. "Could be that all we're faced with next door is a large, empty room."

My own armour was the best I could manage. A patched-up suit the Wookiee had repaired, with duramesh links fused around an old purple chest-plate from that di'kut Davik. Nothing like the beskar'gam I'd once earned. Still, at least this jigged battle-suit had a working stimulant system and standard utility mods built into the belt.

"Well, get on with it then," I growled, amping up the levels of adrenastim vaporising into my helm, just as Revan waved her Force voodoo at the door.

The dual half-moon hatches slid ajar, and Zaalbar was the first to clear, shooting straight through them like a sprinting loth-cat.

The adrenastim vapour hit my bloodstream with a tell-tale burn as I surged forward next to HK.

Railings were only wide enough for two. More like maintenance routes this high-up, near the ceiling of a cavernous warehouse, above what had to be a twenty metre drop.

All fleeting impressions, quick-fire thoughts, as I stormed into a chamber thick with the din of automatic machinery snapping to attention. The snicking sound of projectiles loading. A dozen mechanical voders issuing identical intruder alerts-

There was even a bastard on the walkway itself-

An animalistic howl erupted from the Wookiee as he leaped forward. My hand, thumbing the safety-lock from an ion grenade even as I sprinted behind. A Revan-shaped blur above my head-

The railing thuddied as Revan landed, well clear of Carpet. The battle-droid sailed off the walkway, shoved by an unseen force, the elongated red stripe of a disruptor bolt aiming wild from its forearm.

The air was shot through with laser.

Revan whirled back to face us, face white. "Go!" she hollered.
I lobbed one grenade, readying a next as my legs pumped. Jarring impact under my feet- something exploded into the walkway behind me. The Wookiee sprinted past Revan as currents of purple-white sparks streamed from her hand. There was the crackling of the same at my back.

Another ion grenade thrown from my grasp, as I grabbed a third-

"Revan!" The Twi'lek's voice was hoarse behind me. "We are not damaging them!"

A thwarted roar in Shyriiwook, as tens of metres ahead Carpet was slamming an angry fist against a closed hatch.

I'd almost caught up to Revan- I saw her lurch around, one hand waving open the exit next to Zaalbar, just as a red stripe bore directly into her shoulder-

I heard no scream from her, for in that moment the world exploded.

The impact deafened everything - sight, hearing, touch - but not my mind.

*Missiles launched into the kriffing walkway. I'm sliding, about to fall-*

I wrenched an arm I could barely feel against my suit's belt, launching the standard grappling hook blindly, for either the damn visor had gone dark or I was more damaged than I knew at that moment-

I fell-

No more than a metre, before something yanked against my waist and pulled taut, and then I slammed sideways into something else.


The reeling sensation of concussion ringing in my ears-

"Ordo!"

My hand ripped the visor clear. Vision blurrily returned. I was hanging, hooked some metres down from the broken corpse of the walkway. One section of path hung limp, the section of path I'd slid down before falling.

Below- six of the robots still standing, still firing, even as two more sailed uncontrollably through the air before either Revan or Rosh smashed them into a nearby wall.

My hands were numb but I could still fish out another ion grenade from here-

"Ion doesn't work on them, Ordo!" Rosh's voice, from somewhere above. Couldn't spot the bastard. Wookiee was howling in the distance. "Retract your grapple, I'll hold them off- shavit, there's more in the room with the others- Revan!"

There was a note of stark alarm in the Twi'lek's normally emotionless voice.

I reached out to the grapple just as the world exploded again. This time, I fell all the way.

Even in the falling, I knew my fumbling grasp had found a 'frag grenade.

Safety-switch off, throw--

xXx
"Intruder sighted!"

Awareness slammed back with the lingering burn of the adrenastim high.

I was rolling on instinct- there was a crackling, shattering sound to my battle-suit that I knew wasn't good, but it'd taken the brunt of the fall-

This had to be my end, dropping in full armour on six of those Forge-built aru'e with my comrades pinned down in a room topside.

Still, end or not, I found myself coming up ready in a crouch, prepared to glare into the jaws of death with a war-cry on my lips-

Odd. The jaws of death were a mere two battle-droids that weren't even facing me. One was stomping sideways, disruptor rifle levelled at the smoking remnants of another droid.

A humanoid figure darted away from the metallic detritus just as both active battle-droids fired.

_Dunno who that is, but I ain't gonna complain about the diversion._ My breath rattled as my limbs straightened and I glanced wildly about for a nearby weapon - my repeating blaster having dislodged somewhere in the fall. With an internal shrug, I drew out two mini-pistols, switched 'em on, and aimed.

In the seconds it'd taken me to ready my guns, one of the droids had already deactivated, head and shoulders curling into itself like a giant metallic seashell.

Quelling my surprise, I sighted the remaining droid. I'd no idea how the strange humanoid - a lithe figure garbed in what looked like primitive beast-leather - could've dismantled a battle-droid three times his height, but the final droid had its disruptor aimed straight back at him.

I might owe my life to this stranger, and it was better to resettle any debt while I had the opportunity.

I loosed a quick volley - ineffectual laser bolts that pinged from the battle-droid's back carapace - seconds before the droid unleashed a disruptor shot directly at the stranger.

The flare of a blueish energy shield glowed as the humanoid dropped into a crouch, levelled a rifle, and fired an identical, elongated disruptor bolt in return.

This time I heard a muffled explosion inside the battle-droid's torso as it deactivated in the same manner as the other.

_Mand'alor's balls! One kriiffing disruptor hit did that?_

My eyes narrowed. Disruptor bolts were effectively the same as standard blaster bolts - but the energy was concentrated by several orders of magnitude. Point of impact disintegrated matter at a molecular level, and the area of effect depended on the concentration of the disruptor.

Disruptor tech was rare due to its high-energy needs making the required therm batteries stupidly short-lived - not to mention, of course, that disruptor-based armaments were classed as illegal throughout the hu'nuun Republic.

Another interesting fact was that standard energy shields, just like Jedi glow-sticks, couldn't stop disruptor bolts.

Which meant the stranger now strolling towards me must be equipped with a _very_ specialized...
personal shield - on top of knowing exactly how to disable Darth Malak's pet defence droids.

Odds were, he'd taken out more than just the last two.

I surveyed the room quickly to get my bearings. The cavernous droid complex had been emptied of any live threat, for now. All original battle-droids were disabled or smashed.

Well, at least the ones down here-

My head jerked up. Twenty metres above, the hatch of the maintenance room yawned open, but I couldn't see or hear a damn thing. Rosh had said something about there being more droids-

Everything blurred. A sudden weariness in aching muscles warned the adrenastim was wearing thin. I locked my knees too late- my legs gave out, and the thud as my backside hit the ground jarred painfully up my spine. There was a throbbing at the base of my skull. A piercing stab into my thigh, like a piece of armour had cracked and was slicing into flesh-

*Get up, Ordo. The others-*

"Canderous Ordo."

My name, dropped so casually from a stranger's lips, had my fingers ready on the mini-blaster and my attention once more engaged.

The man was a tall, wiry Human, who appeared relaxed as he stood a few metres away, disruptor rifle slung back in a shoulder harness. His custom duramesh-and-leather armour was topped with a sleek durasteel helm, whose visor was currently lifted to reveal a grizzled face. Pale eyes appraised me without any noticeable expression.

"(This is not our battlefield; now is not our fight,)" he greeted, in fluent Mando'a.

The pain in my leg was worse, now. I'd have to remove a section of armour if I wanted to walk. *Get a couple of kolto shots in me, hope the kriffing comm survived the fall-*

I stared hard at the stranger. I had to address this man, first. The one I owed my life to, this unknown Human who spoke Mando'a like he was born to it.

The man didn't move as he appraised me in return. "(As they die upon my blade, my adversaries know me as Harten of clan Itera.)"

The traditional greeting of an unknown Mando'ade who claimed no harm on the battlefield. And the Itera were a solid clan who'd fought well in the wars, a clan that could claim both status and pride despite their diminished ranks.

My honour demanded I acknowledge my fellow countryman: acknowledge his name, and the battle-dent I now owed him.

There was something very kriffing familiar about this situation-

I barked a laugh. "Y'know, the last time an unknown Mando'ade saved me from probable death, he didn't act from the good of his heart." My eyes narrowed as I watched the man. "He saved me to get close to Revan."

To give the stranger credit, he didn't even blink. "My goals align with your leader," he replied, in smooth and flowing Galactic Basic.
"And that means I owe you no debt, Harten of kriffing Itera."

"She ran into trouble up there," I said shortly, jerking my chin to the distant ceiling. No idea if the man - and I'd wager he wasn't sworn Mando'ade - meant Revan harm, but I highly doubted I was telling him anything he didn't already know.

The Human's head cocked; one ear facing the hatch topside. "There are no weapons being discharged. All I can make out is the rumble of your Wookiee."

"Aural implants," I muttered, impressed despite myself. *Highly-specced ones to cover that distance and not be affected the way Tinhead's sensors are.*

A faint smile barely curved the Human's mouth. "I have superior hearing," he murmured, and I wasn't sure if that was assent to my comment or not.

"Look, what the kriff do you want?" I rapped out, impatient. I had to find a way back to the others.

Glancing down, I could see my wrist-comm had smashed in the fall. A jagged crack ran up the length of battle-suit covering that arm, and I could tell a blaster hit there would penetrate straight to my skin.

"I desire a conversation with Revan," the Human said, after a pause. "I saved her ally's life. She will owe me that, at the least."

His gaze dropped overtly to the mini-blaster held firm in my hand. I wasn't raising it - yet.

"I mean your leader no threat, Canderous Ordo. Particularly not in this place."

"So you say. Not exactly the place for a chat between strangers, though, is it?" I leaned forward, dropping the gun to pull the leg segment of my battle-suit free. A sharp sting and a rush of blood- it wasn't serious, but I'd have to attend to it now. "And I suppose you want me to introduce you, Harten Itera?"

I didn't bother concealing my disbelief over his name.

"You should head back to your freighter."

That got my attention. "Why?" I snapped out, leg forgotten as I glared up at the man.

"There are more droids deeper in the upper levels, Canderous Ordo. It will take you time to double-back and find another walkway to meet up with your team."

The man's pale eyes lingered over my battle-suit, before coming to rest on my arm. "Your armour is splintered in several places. You have no disruptor rifle, and that is the only easy way to disable the battle-droids." He paused, gaze shifting back to mine as his hand tapped on his upraised visor. "My data-feed has returned information detailing two groups of five hostiles apiece converging on your *Ebon Hawk.*"

I wasn't gonna react to that. Maybe the sent was right, but that docking bay wasn't a bad spot to defend. Between Onasi and the old man, they should be able to stand guard with minimal casualties.

A slight twitch on his face, like the stranger picked I wasn't buying his intel. His thin lips curved. "I have my suspicions on who these hostiles are, Canderous Ordo. If I am correct, they are specialized assassins from the Lord of the Sith himself."

Was *Harten Itera* looking to get rid of me? If he was working against Revan, I couldn't see why he'd bother using words - especially as I was wounded and separated from my team already. Easier to just shoot me in the head right now.
I let my eyes travel slowly down his busk-leather armour, pausing on a pair of fancy beast-hide boots before drawing back up to meet his pale gaze.

"Specialized assassins." I snorted in disparagement. "And what, exactly, are you?"

"No one of import." His bland smile widened, before his head tilted to face upwards. "But I am willing to inform Revan of your whereabouts. Assuming she still lives."

"She lives," I grunted in irritation. But still, my attention swung unerringly to the open hatch topside. If Revan was alive and well, I'd expect her to be yelling something down at me if she didn't just magically jump-

\textit{And then what? Walk the kriffing long way 'round while I limp behind?} That railing was as bust as my grapple, and it wasn't like this kriffing battle-suit boasted a jet-pack. I'd have to find an alternate route to join up with Revan, and she was in a hurry to get to Bastila before the princess killed more of their \textit{laandur} Republic-

My hands roved along the util belt of my suit. Stim system was erroring. Grapple was kriffed - of course. Armour had gaps along a forearm and shoulder, and I'd have to ditch the entire left leg carapace.

But I still had blasters, a blade, and a drukload of grenades. That would make me more effective at ambushing a bunch of ole Malak's assassins from behind, rather than slowing Revan down and firing ineffectual lasers at those \textit{haar'chak} droids-

"Give the Wookiee your disruptor," I barked. The stranger had already moved to the wall, as if he'd given up on me answering. He turned, visor now pushed down and occluding his face. I scowled. "Tell Revan where I've gone. Tell her how to disable the battle-droids. An' if all you want is a kriffing conversation, then there ain't no reason you can't hand over your rifle to Carpet. Might buy you some trust before one of them tries to lop your head off."

If Revan was injured - and I hadn't forgotten Rosh's shout of alarm - then I didn't think either Rosh or Tinhead would be particularly receptive to a stranger's company. But I'd seen this unknown sent disable two droids in under a minute, and knew it was an advantage my side needed.

The pretend Mando'ade gave me a slow nod. "I shall consider your request, Canderous Ordo." His voice turned almost formal. "And I will inform your leader of your survival and destination."

He turned, metres away from me now, and placed one hand on the shiny wall.

The man began to climb.

I blinked. Sent rose quickly, like he had suckers on his naked hands - although I coulda sworn they'd been covered in the same busk-leather as the rest of him.

\textit{No way a Human can climb like that, like a kriffing tree-lizard-}
Wasn't the time to puzzle over it. Man was a good six metres high already. But if his words held truth - and I didn't see much point in assuming they didn't - then I had to find my kolto, get to my feet, and join in the fun before Onasi got swamped. He'd be prepared for an attack, but a bunch of specialized assassins might be a whole different skillet of scalefish from what he was expecting.

*I swore I'd see this to the end with you, Revan.*

She lived, still. No point thinking otherwise without proof. Not here.

*But I guess the 'Hawk is part of your end, ain't it?*

It chafed, to be slowly climbing to my feet, stabbing two kolto 'derms in my exposed thigh and one in my neck, before turning to face the corridors that would lead back to the dock.

But a true warrior understood when best to lead the vanguard, and when best to defend the base. And the sooner I got back to the 'Hawk, the sooner I could comm Revan myself.

*And kick some of this 'assassin' arse.*

xXx

**Jaq:**

*Bugger this for a game of soldiers.*

Toc, Min and Des made no sound as they moved through the tunnels of the Star Forge. Behind me, Ran was just as silent. Slayers never made a sound until it was too late.

*Slayers are never sent on a frontal assault like a kriffing squad of soldiers.*

Data-feed had pinged us the docking location of our target. The ventral officer's dock. We'd all thought Ros, Bor, and Yal had been wasting their time, heading that direction soon as ole greaseball Nox released us; but turned out those three might've already scored the home-run.

The other five- who knew? Probably they'd meet us when we all regrouped, bending knee to Sharlan Nox as he slimed over the winners.

*Bitches. We're nothing but Sharlan's bitches now. Lord Jonn at least gave us purpose, used our strengths, didn't turn us into a special-ops covey, no more than a herd of grunts-*

Rogue thoughts had been creeping into my mind for months, now. Like spice eroding a matrix of purpose. Sure, I enjoyed kicks the same as any other slayer- shot of glim-laced spice, willing piece of arse, glass of sweet single-malt whiskey - but only off-duty.

When in the game, my mind was focused. *Should* be focused, honed like a gleaming shiv.

All slayers had been shaped in the Force-hands of Lord Jonn: recreated in his image, moulded into weapons for his higher purpose.

*But Jonn Dan's dead. Entrails splattered all over the command deck of Darth Malak's Invictus. Jonn Dan's kriffing higher purpose can rot in a Corellian nether-hell-*

::Alright, Jaq?:: Ran's voice shot through my helm. Individual feed-only, and I was glad of that- but he must've picked something up- maybe my stance wasn't exact, maybe my gloved hands had clenched- *something* had raised his instincts.
Wasn't the first time, either.

"I'm fine," I shot back shortly. "Let's haul arse to the dock already. Maybe Ros and the others left us a mark."

I inwardly damned that woman, that Jedi scow I'd almost turned, before I reeled my wandering thoughts back in. Turned my mind back to the lines of pazaak cards, the jump-point coordinates, the hyperdrive ticks- all the mental exercises Lord Jonn had taught us so well.

None of us had a past. Whatever we'd once been, it'd burned away in a hazing of pain as we were reborn as Lord Jonn's slayers. Renamed as his tools. Re-forged as his things, for the glory of the Sith.

Lord Jonn's bitches. Darth Malak's bitches. Sharlan krriffing Nox's bitches-

Part of me knew all those rogue thoughts belonged to a person I had been once. Someone I had no name or history to place against, someone that had died under Jonn Dan's tender ministrations.

Someone that had been silent, until that Jedi scow had waggled her dying fingers in my brain.

Ran snorted through the feed. ::Not likely there's marks left, issit? Twenty creds say the crew of the Ebon Hawk are in casserole pieces, and Ros'll make us clean up. You know how she gets.::

There was a reason slayers were sent out alone. We were assassins of shadow, whispers in the night, unseen blades to strike at the opportune moment. Lord Jonn had known that. Even Darth Malak had understood that. To be sent out like a bunch of sodding infantry-

Means they're desperate. Means they're losing. Means there's nothing krriffing keeping me here-

Slayers didn't desert. Their minds were too well-trained, grinded away to a chiselled point with no room for deviation. I'd never thought of anything beyond my master's objectives first, and my own physical gratification second. Never, until-

... Wet gasps rattled like glue in her lungs. Her blood seeped into the medi-cot, staining the white sheets almost black with her fading life. A neural inhibitor clawed into her sweaty forehead.

I would turn this one. My twelfth Jedi. Prove I could master the art of breaking as much as any other slayer.

I was close already. She had just let slip her own name - the first sound of sweet surrender.


I'd known her name before I'd netted the woman. But always better to make a captive spill. Get them to admit the intel you know, then you can squeeze out what you don't-

There was still defiance in her dark eyes. "Sure, if you count an uncle's nephew's cousin's frakking former roommate a relation."

I allowed myself a chuckle. The woman was no threat, not with the inhibitor biting into her Force-strength. Only the strongest of will could overcome those pretty little gems- sure, I'd prefer a neural disruptor or my Fett ball, but the former was hard to come by and the latter busy recharging.

"Maybe I should comm Lord Nisotsa," I said softly, watching the woman. Slightest widening of her bloodshot eyes- no relation, indeed. "Nisotsa Organa lost her cousin Neiza. I'm sure she'll be
overjoyed to hear we've snagged a Jedi cousin in our net."

...::Ros ain't answering...:: Toc's feed shot through to the four of us, all marching behind him like a kriffing row of cannon fodder.

::Ros never answers...:: Min was always dismissive of Ros. Toc and Ran had a betting pool running on how long before those two jumped in the same fart sack. Now that was something I'd pay to see.

::Yeah, but I'm not getting a ping back from Bor or Yal, either...::

"Wager's on, Ran. Twenty cred's say at least one mark's still kicking," I threw in quickly. If Bor wasn't bleating on the comm - and that sucker loved to hear his own voice after a kill - then that meant they'd gone dark. Hit trouble. Were still busy, maybe, or worse-

Because this is a kriffing joke. Throwing slayers together in a frontal assault. The dice are rolling and coming up skulls-

::No wager, Jaq...:: Toc was grim. He'd put himself in lead, like a corporal dragging a squad.

This isn't my game. I don't have to do this-

... "You don't have to do this," the woman gasped. She was fading in strength, now, but a semblance of inner will had returned. Earlier, I'd reduced her to broken begging, sobbing out some girlfriend's name like a benediction while she thrashed about in semi-consciousness.

"I don't have to do this," I parroted in a pleasant tone. A mini blow-torch rolled in my hand. Ran's favourite way of breaking, he claimed. "I want to do this."

"I don't frakking believe that," she mumbled, shaking her head wildly enough that her messy topknot slithered on the stark sheets like a sandsnake. Beya Organa had a drawling accent, from one of those colonial Outer Rim rocks, and her dark skin and dark eyes looked nothing like Lord Nisotsa. Hard to believe they were related. "I know about you slayers. No more than a herd of frakking hessi, broken to some Dark Jedi's will. Doesn't mean you can't get out. Live your own frakking life-"

I snorted, leaning forward with the torch. "Typical Jedi, always trying to show some loser the light. I've got a different light to show you, Beya Organa. One your cousin knows well."

The Jedi's lips pulled back in a snarl. "I'll show you my frakking light first!"

An explosion in my head, a shattering of everything as I reeled back-

She's overcome the kriffing inhibitor! I lurched towards her, but was suddenly blinded, as the damn woman clawed fangs into my mind-

**You will release me, slayer. You are no match for the Force.**

The pain was intense. Someone was screaming, and it wasn't my tortured captive.

**You**-

A blinding vortex of light- a rushing sensation of feeling- like a grid; no, a matrix, no- threads and threads of energy spreading out everywhere-
A stunned moment of wonderment from my companion. You- frakk! You can touch the Force!

I opened my eyes, and saw her.

...

::Ina's group will meet us outside the dock.:: Toc's barked comm brought me back to the present. ::The ten of us will enter together.::

::If there's a Jedi in the mix::: Min began.

::Neutralize.:: Toc's command back was stern. Like an order. Maybe he'd been a kriffing officer in his past life. ::We'll worry about turning them later.::

They would turn me, if they only knew. And sooner or later, someone would find out. Secrets rarely made it to the grave.

::Lord Nox will suck the juice out of any Jedi before we get a chance to turn 'em,::: Ran muttered.

Lord Nox will suck the juice out of me if he finds out. That slime-ball had paused in front of me, earlier, before greasing on my helm. Maybe he'd sensed something, suspected something.

I still didn't know if I believed that Jedi scow, but if she had been telling the truth-

...

**You can't go back, you know. You're like me.**

I'm not like you. I'm not kriffing like you!

I didn't know if I was saying the words or thinking them. I couldn't feel my own body. Just this overwhelming sensation of light and energy spiralling like clusters of stardust all around me.

And one dying cluster, brighter than the rest, but slowly fading-

My prisoner. Or was I hers? Trapped within this golden web of life, I felt myself falling, floating, flying- and living through even one more heartbeat like this felt so exquisite, so painful, so beautiful-

**Guess it was buried deep in you, slayer. If the Force doesn't awaken before puberty, it generally never does. Look. You are more than just a tool of the Sith.**

She reached out, and dragged me with her.

...

::Jaq?::

I'd paused, falling behind Ran.

See, slayers didn't pause. Slayers didn't desert.

But slayers didn't march together like a line of bantha to the slaughter.

**Kriff this. I'm more than just a kriffing tool. Kriff this for a buggering game of buggering soldiers.**
"I'm gonna find a vent," I spat through the comm, turning on my heel. "There's always air-con ducts. I'm gonna come in from the roof."

I was running back, running away, deserting- I didn't know who I was anymore, but kriff all of this if I was gonna keep marching on like trained little Jaq or Toc or Ran-

::The ducts leading into the officer's dock are too small, Jaq, you saw the schematics!::

::Jaq, get back in line!::

"I'm going dark, team. Bet I get the first kill." The lies slipped from my lips so easily. Mark of a good slayer, when the lies sounded like the truth. "You know we work best alone. Don't wait for me- fifty creds say I'll be there before any of you."

I deactivated the comm-feed as I dived into a service lift.

...

**Look. The Force. It is everywhere around you.**

*The intensity of an electric current shot through me- my mind- my body- I didn't know. Everything felt exposed, raw to the touch, hyper-sensitive. It was too much. Too much. Too much for me to handle.*

**The Force is in everything. It is in you.**

*With a violent wrench, I could suddenly feel the trappings of my body again. I lurched to her-*

...

Whatever that Jedi scow had upended in my mind, it'd disappeared with her death by my hands.

First death I'd shed tears over. At the end, I no longer knew if I'd been close to turning her, or she turning me.

I hadn't felt that sensation, the one she claimed was the Force, since.

But rogue thoughts kept slipping through my mind, breaking the facade of Jaq. Reminding me that I had been someone else, once, someone who'd died in Jonn Dan's hands.

Maybe, someone I could find my way back to.

Down, down, I ran to the lower levels. Discarding sections of assassin armour along the way: the helm, the carapace, the tracking-comm module, even the Fett ball- until there was nothing left but a man in his skivvies, with nothing left to mark him as a tool named Jaq.

Down to the factory bays. Striding confidently into the public 'fresher stalls-

"Who're you?"

One lone occupant. Garbed in a flight suit, flight helm on the bench as he sanitized his hands under the clean-spray.

The pazaak cards were flipping over in my favour, now.

I threw the sent an easy smile. "Just suiting up. You don't wanna know what happened to my other
flightsuit. Say, why aren't you hot in the skies?"

The mark scowled. "Factory airlocks slammed down on the last two squads, and maintenance still ain't got them open." Suspicion reared in the man's swarthy face. "Whaddaya mean, your suit? And where's the one your changing into?"

_You're standing in it._

Slayers didn't need a weapon to kill. We were that quick- and that good.

A few minutes later one of the closed stalls held a body, and I became a Sith strikefighter pilot.

The keycard access had the location of my snub, and told me my new name. Holo-pic might not look much like me, though at least the man had been the same species. The name on the keycard would do, for now.

Atton Rand.

It was a better name than Jaq.

With a jaunty whistle, I snapped the flight helm around my head, and waltzed towards the nearby factory bay in search of my new ship.

Sooner or later the airlocks would open, and when they did, I would be just another Sith chump fleeing the burning nest.

_xXx_

**HK-47:**

Input - Master: "I'm fine."
Voice Stress Analysis: Pained

Input - Yudan Rosh: "Clearly, you are not."
Voice Stress Analysis: Aggrieved

Visual/Thermal Tracking: Yudan Rosh Injecting Kolto Hypoderm Into Master (Left Hip)

Sensor Scan:
Target: Master
...Physical Analysis: Disruptor Wounds: Moderate Damage To Left Shoulder, Minor Damage To Left Hip, Superficial Damage To Right Lower Limb, Organic Breathing Patterns Strained
...Infrared Analysis: Minor Blood Loss Noticeable
...Body Language Analysis: Tense, Breathless
...Location: Slumped Against Maintenance Duct
Conclusion: Master Has Sustained Minor Injuries To Organic Shell, Winded

Visual/Thermal Tracking: Zaalbar Applying Bacta Adhesive Dressing To Master (Upper Left Shoulder)

Input - Master: "Zaalbar, Yudan, stop- stop fussing. We need to get back to Canderous."

Input - Yudan Rosh: "Fussing?"
Voice Stress Analysis: Cold

Input - Zaalbar (_Shyriiwook_): "Jen, we must attend to your wounds first."
Input - Yudan Rosh: "I will go after Ordo when I am certain you will not die due to a damn droid."

Output: "Interjection: The master's injuries are minor and healing expeditiously. Observation: Master, your inferior flesh responds nicely to kolto injections. If you continue in your sentimental refusal of cybernetic implants, my recommendation is an internal kolto applicator housed within your organic shell. Rumination: This may take some expertise to adequately install without biological rejection."

Input - Master: "I'm just winded from Zaalbar's throw into the wall. Zaalbar, your- your arm..."
Voice Stress Analysis: Concerned

Visual/Thermal Tracking: Yudan Rosh Activating Dynamic-class Freighter Communication Device

Sensor Scan:
Target: Zaalbar
...Physical Analysis: Disruptor Damage: Severe Damage To Right Upper Limb, Minor Damage To Lower Torso, Organic Breathing Patterns Strained
...Infrared Analysis: Moderate Blood Loss Noticeable, Body Temperature Within Normal Wookiee Parameters
...Body Language Analysis: Tense, Minor Involuntary Shaking Present
Conclusion: Zaalbar Moderately Injured, Organic Shock Possible

Input - Zaalbar (Shyriiwook): "I am capable of continuing on, Jen."

Input - Master: "You took two disruptor bolts for me, Zaalbar. One of which would've pegged me straight in the chest. Your life-debt-"

Input - Yudan Rosh (interrupting): "Ordo's communicator is down."

Input - Master: "Sithspit! Zaalbar, dammit, take a kolto 'derm- Yudan, open the frelling door and see if-"

Visual/Thermal Tracking: Outer Hatch Opening
Combat Mode Initiated
Physical: Primary Blaster Primed

1 Organic Meatbag Entering Targeting Area

Target Analysis: Organic Meatbag
Identification: Jolee Bindo
Combat Mode Aborted

Input - Master: "Jolee? What are you doing here? Have you seen Canderous?"
Voice Stress Analysis: Surprised

Auditory Input: Growl
Source: Zaalbar

Input - Jolee Bindo: "Eh, the Mandalorian is fine. Well, his armour's half-broken and he's got a nasty limp, but I guess it's all a matter of perspective, right?"

Input - Zaalbar (Shyriiwook) (muttered): "Only droids are scentless."

Input - Master: "But why are you here? And what are you wearing?"
Sensor Scan:
Target: Jolee Bindo
...Visual Analysis: Customized Duramesh And Busk-leather Armour
...Infrared Analysis: Body Temperature Falls Within Human Parameters
...Body Language Analysis: Relaxed
Conclusion: Jolee Bindo Has Acquired Alternate Armour, Detail Irrelevant

Input - Zaalbar (Shyriiwook): "Only droids, and the Faceless One."

Auditory Input: Chuckle
Source: Jolee Bindo

Input - Jolee Bindo: "Should have known I couldn't fool a nose from Kashyyyk."

Visual/Thermal Tracking: Jolee Bindo Spreading Arms In Supplication

Input - Jolee Bindo To Master: "I wish to continue our conversation from the Shadowlands."

Auditory Input: Growl
Source: Zaalbar

Input - Zaalbar (Shyriiwook): "Jen, this is not Jolee Bindo."
Voice Stress Analysis: Alarmed

Visual/Thermal Tracking: Yudan Rosh Activating Lightsaber

Sensor Scan:
Target: Jolee Bindo
...Species: Human, Male
...Facial Recognition Result: Positive: Jolee Bindo
...Electromagnetic Scan: No Devices Found
...Body Language Analysis: Relaxed, Calm
...Direct Threat Assessment: Minimal
Conclusion: No Photo-Electronic Field Generator Detected, Sentient Matches Organic Form Of Jolee Bindo
Conclusion: Zaalbar Is Acting With Meatbag Irrationality

Facial Analysis: Jolee Bindo To HK-47: Suspicious Frown

Hypothesis: Jolee Bindo Detected Electromagnetic Scan
Conclusion: Jolee Bindo Lacks Required Sensors, Hypothesis Discarded

Input - Master To Jolee Bindo: "Oh."
Voice Stress Analysis: Comprehending

Input - Master To Jolee Bindo: "Here? Seriously? On the sodding Star Forge?"
Voice Stress Analysis: Irritated

Audio Tracking: Growl
Source: Zaalbar

Input - Master: "Zaalbar, Yudan, stand down. Rulan, you can wait. I need to find Canderous first."
Voice Stress Analysis: Resolute

Accessing: Internal Dictionary
...Analysing
Parameter "Rulan", No Matches Found

Input - Jolee Bindo: "Canderous Ordo has returned to your freighter. He has sustained only minor
injuries, but both his communicator and armour suit are badly damaged."
Voice Analysis Mismatch: Vocal Depth Out Of Range From Recorded Match: Jolee Bindo

Hypothesis: Sentient Is Posing As Jolee Bindo
Error: No Photo-Electronic Field Detected To Mask Organic Build
Conclusion: Organic Voice Is Decaying With Sentient Age, Hypothesis Discarded

Visual/Thermal Tracking: Yudan Rosh Moving To Outer Hatch

Input - Yudan Rosh: "All I see below is the rubble of deactivated droids."
Input - Jolee Bindo: "I have no reason nor desire to dally in untruths with you. As a token of my
good faith, allow me to gift your Wookiee with my disruptor rifle. There are further battle-droids
ahead, and the quickest way to deactivate them is-"

Output: "Evaluation: a clear disruptor charge aimed eight centimetres below the cessation of the neck
segment will disperse through the titaplate armour and disable the thermal motivator located in the
chest cavity. Mockery: I have already ascertained that, Doddering Fossil. Perhaps you would like to
return after we have eliminated our remaining enemies, and inform us how best to kill them, too?"

Visual/Thermal Tracking: Jolee Bindo Appraising HK-47

Input - Jolee Bindo To Master: "Interesting droid you have there, Jen Sahara."
Input - Master To Jolee Bindo: "You might as well call me Revan. And change your frelling face,
alright? I'll give you five minutes to say whatever is so damn important to you."
Input - Jolee Bindo: "Very well."

Visual/Thermal Tracking: Jolee Bindo Is Transforming Organic Shape
Parameters Recalibrating: Jolee Bindo Does Not Match Jolee Bindo
#Alarm: Unknown Meatbag In Targeting Area
Permanent Reference Removed: Jolee Bindo
Temporary Alias Assigned: Mutating Somatic

Sensor Scan:
Target: Mutating Somatic
...Species: Human, Male
...Facial Recognition Result: Negative
...Electromagnetic Scan: No Devices Found
...Body Language Analysis: Relaxed, Calm
...Direct Threat Assessment: Unable To Compute
Conclusion: Undetectable Technology Is Dissimulating Mutating Somatic
Deeper Electromagnetic Scan Initiated: Target: Mutating Somatic

Input: Mutating Somatic To HK-47: "Stop that."
Facial Analysis: Mutating Somatic To HK-47: Forbidding Glare
Body Language Analysis: Mutating Somatic: Tense

Conclusion: Mutating Somatic Detected Electromagnetic Scan

Direct Threat Assessment: Moderate
Combat Mode Ready
Physical: Arming Disruptor Pistol

Input - Mutating Somatic To Master: "Is your droid going to be a problem, Revan?"

Output: "Observation: I am not a problem, you useless organic meatbag! You and your lack of any detectable technology or parameter matches are the problem!"

Input - Yudan Rosh To Master: "Revan. This wastes time. We should find Ordo, or move on."

Input - Master To Mutating Somatic: "Four minutes. Start by convincing me why Canderous would have returned to the 'Hawk."

Input - Mutating Somatic To Master: "I informed him of two groups of hostiles converging on your freighter. As he is separated from you and ill-equipped to defend against battle-droids, he has returned to where he can be of further assistance."

Input - Master To Mutating Somatic: "Okay, say I buy that. Cut to the chase. What do you want?"

Input - Mutating Somatic To Master: "In the complex below I disabled five battle-droids and saved the life of your ally. Canderous Ordo can confirm this when you next speak. In return for my assistance, my organization politely request that you meet with them when your business on the Star Forge is concluded."

Indirect Threat Assessment: Probable

Output: "Analysis: My vernacular interpretation construes that as a threat. Permission to blast him, master?"

Input - Master To Mutating Somatic: "Why? I am not Darth Revan, Rulan Prolik. Our alliance no longer exists."

Permanent Name Assigned: Rulan Prolik To Mutating Somatic

Input - Rulan Prolik To Master: "If you recall our alliance, then you recall more than just your name."
Voice Stress Analysis: Speculative

Input - Master To Rulan Prolik: "No. Other remnants of my past have... enlightened me, shall we say. I have no memory of any dealings with your kind, other than the shindig on Rii'shn and our charming little chat in the forest. I am not the Sith Lord who worked with you in the past."

Input - Rulan Prolik To Master: "I comprehend that you no longer lead the Sith Empire, Revan. What my organization desires are answers-"

Input - Master To Rulan Prolik (interrupting): "I suffered severe brain damage followed by a personality replacement. Exactly what answers do you expect me to have?"
Voice Stress Analysis: Forbidding
Input - Rulan Prolik To Master: "All I request is a conversation between friends, Revan. No threats, no danger, no trap. I once told you the purpose of my organization. Do you remember?"

Facial Analysis: Master To Rulan Prolik: Hard Stare

Input - Master To Rulan Prolik: "Stability of the galaxy."
Voice Stress Analysis: Monotone

Input - Rulan Prolik To Master: "Yes. You convinced us, once, of something greater than the Mandalorian Clans threatening that stability. Even if you have no recollection, a Force-user with your strength might still have a critical part to play in future events. Or, perhaps, one day your memories will return. Either way, my organization wishes to remain, at the very least, an amicable associate with reciprocal interests."

Visual/Thermal Tracking: Rulan Prolik Handing Disruptor Rifle To Zaalbar

Input - Rulan Prolik To Zaalbar: "Here. Take this. You may find it difficult to use with your injury, but a disruptor is your best offense against a battle-droid."

Input - Zaalbar To Rulan Prolik (Shyriiwook): "I am capable of wielding a weapon, Faceless One."
Voice Stress Analysis: Wary

Input - Master To Rulan Prolik: "You make a lot of assumptions regarding my survival, Rulan Prolik. Both from this place, and from a Republic victory. I can't even say I'll be around long enough to meet up for a play date."

Visual/Thermal Tracking: Rulan Prolik Shrugging
Body Language Analysis: Rulan Prolik: Indifferent

Input - Rulan Prolik To Master: "My organization watches the possibilities of many futures, Revan Freeflight. However, a victory for you on the Star Forge does not necessarily denote your fate in the hands of the Republic."

Input - Master To Rulan Prolik: "What do you mean?"
Voice Stress Analysis: Wary

Input - Rulan Prolik To Master: "I sent your Mandalorian back to help defend your freighter. But there are more... anonymous ways to leave this place than the ship you came in on. You may be aware there are three officer docking bays in the Star Forge. All have a handful of strikefighters still docked within them; modified ships that belong to Sith officers or Dark Jedi. And by modified, I am referring to a stealth technology that the Republic Fleet cannot decrypt."

Input - Master To Rulan Prolik: "You think I should leave in one of them."

Input - Rulan Prolik To Master: "It is merely an option I offer, in the name of our future association. I have encoded all remaining docked strikefighters to activate upon the vocal passphrase 'nexus'."

Input - Yudan Rosh: "That is in particularly poor taste."

Input - Rulan Prolik To Yudan Rosh: "Is it? I thought it fitting."

Accessing: Internal Dictionary
...Analysing

Output: "Analysis: Reference: 'nexus'... a connected series; the core or centre of a matter or situation."
From the literal definition, such a comparison to meatbag's strikefighter may appear disproportionate. However, as this is a proposed escape vehicle for my master, and may even be the vessel that assures her survival, it can certainly be considered a core or central factor.

Input - Yudan Rosh To Rulan Prolik: "And what is the deactivation passphrase? 'Invictus'?
Voice Stress Analysis: Sarcastic

Output: "Mockery: Apathetic Fleshbag, do be quiet."

Input - Master: "Obviously I'm missing some historical reference."
Voice Stress Analysis: Wry

Input - Rulan Prolik To Master: "At this juncture in time, it is truly nothing of import."

Input - Master To Rulan Prolik: "Alright, you've passed along your friendly request. Unless you're planning to stick around and help me, I don't think there's anything further to say. I'll think about meeting your... organization, once I've finished with slightly more pressing matters. You know, Malak. The Forge. The space battle raging outside around us."

Input - Rulan Prolik To Master: "I shall leave the current battles to your capable talents, Revan Freeflight. Just do not forget my organization in the midst of victory. Your ally owes me his life, and a conversation is a small price to even the scales. My overseers are not fond of waiting."

Output: "Reiteration: Definitely a threat, master. Hypothesis: Mutating Somatic will be unable to transform shape after his neck is crushed. Shall we test this theory, master?"

Input - Rulan Prolik To Master: "Let me reassure you, once more, that my organization is no threat to your person, Revan Freeflight. Consider this, instead, a promise. If you do not seek us out within three months, one of our agents will find you instead."

Visual/Thermal Tracking: Rulan Prolik Moving To Outer Hatch

Input - Rulan Prolik To Master: "One last matter for you to take into account. My organization can offer you amnesty, Revan. Something the Republic will not. Your memory may be incomplete, but you know enough about us to have some understanding of our resources. We would prefer to think of you as a friend, and friends help each other out. So - until we meet again, Revan Freeflight."

Visual/Thermal Tracking: Rulan Prolik Exiting Targeting Area

Input - Yudan Rosh: "His organization does not sound like one you wish to be indebted to. Although I suppose one could argue it is preferable to public execution."

Input - Master (muttered): "We should go. Bastila is near. Then... then Malak. Sometimes, I feel like I'm just... just..."

Input - Yudan Rosh To Master: "Rushing in recklessly without a plan? In that respect, Revan, you behave a lot like how you were before the Mandalorian Wars."

Input - Master To Yudan Rosh: "Just with a few more battle scars and wrinkles, I guess."

Input - Yudan Rosh To Master: "Well, your species is not renowned for aging gracefully."
Voice Stress Analysis: Droll

Auditory Input: Laugh
Source: Master
Input - Master To Yudan Rosh: "Fighting words, Yudan. Next time we spar I'll show you just how well I've aged."
Voice Stress Analysis: Amused

Output: "Repetition: Again, master, my programming compels me to remind you that cybernetic implants do not suffer from decay due to any organic aging."

Input - Zaalbar (Shyriiwook) (interrupting): "Do not despair, Jen. Bastila will listen to you. You are her bond sister. All you need to do is communicate."

Visual/Thermal Tracking: Master Moving To Inner Hatch

Output: "Commentary: Communication can come in a variety of forms. With Force-users, some of my favourites include grenades, sonic screamers, cluster rockets, and plasma charges. Mines are also effective, since many Force-users will run to meet you in hand-to-hand combat. Silly Force-users."

Visual/Thermal Tracking: Zaalbar Readying Disruptor Rifle
Visual/Thermal Tracking: Zaalbar And Yudan Rosh Moving To Inner Hatch

Input - Yudan Rosh: "Interesting this droid was programmed by you, Revan, considering his opinions on how to eliminate Force-users."

Output: "Statement: I speak from experience as much as programming, Apathetic Fleshbag. Recitation: When it comes to Force-users, weapon selection is critical. If I see one more idiot attacking a Jedi face-on with a blaster pistol, then I'll kill them myself."

Input - Master: "Enough, HK. Ready your disruptor, and let's go finish off these battle-droids."

Visual/Thermal Tracking: Master Opening Inner Hatch

Output: "Statement: With pleasure, master."

xXx

Chapter End Notes

Coming up next: Things get real down by the Ebon Hawk, and Revan faces Bastila.

A Sith Lord's flagship worth of thanks to kosiah for the beta.

Beya Organa belongs to kosiah's 'verse in her sagas 'Memory' and 'Oblivion'. Thank you for letting me borrow her, kos – even if Beya didn't survive here, at least she's responsible for the birth of Atton Rand. I think that's a good thing, lol!

Props to anyone who spotted the line Beya blatantly stole from the Star Wars spoof 'Spaceballs'. Obviously it's not mine, disclaimer disclaimer etc etc.
Carth Onasi:

The same charged readiness from earlier had settled once more throughout the docking bay. From my vantage point in the corner, I could spot Ensign Joss marking the hatch, ducking behind a discarded refuelling gig as he kept his sights firmly on the one point of entry.

We were both a good thirty metres away, but we'd still be the first to hit enemy fire.

Corporal Tensey had set two proximity mines either side of the internal exit hatch, set to trigger the moment anyone stepped through. The prox mines might be enough to startle any incoming hostiles, give us all a chance to fire off a few quick shots-

_Those blasted energy shields, though._ Standard military issue would resist four direct blaster bolts, but the first wave of Sith bastards had taken more heat than that before they'd fallen. I'd hit that last one standing at least seven times before Mission's rogue shot had scored through his shield.

And Mission herself was far too exposed, her and Dustil both-

_She's as safe as can be. Dustil's guarding her, and he's invisible._

My worry for them both was a sick thing, twisting in my guts.

::I'm moving to the roof of the 'Hawk::: It was Jolee's voice, crackling through the ear bud linked to my wrist-comm. :::Seems our best bet to take these vermin down from a distance is Tobosh. I'll make sure nothing hits him.:::

I kept my gaze tight on the hatch as I considered his words. Jolee's strength was neutralized if he came within reach of any Force-nullifying tech, and he was right about Tobards-

::Er, it's Tobards::: Ensign Tobards corrected. First thing we'd done was synchronize the pilots' comms with the Hawk's. :::And I've got good cover up here. I don't want anyone drawing attention to me.:::

I could understand the ensign's reluctance, but the moment he ducked into view he'd be vulnerable.

::Ach, you get hit, Tobosh, and we've lost our best marksman. If I'm standing pretty near you, they'll be too busy aiming at me.:::

::Tobards::: Tobards muttered again.

"It's a good idea," I weighed in. "It won't take long for professionals to sight the source of blaster bolts, Tobards, no matter how good your cover is. Jolee can use the Force to stop you taking any fire. We need you protected."
There was another ghost of static in my ear. ::Guys, Teethree says there's something heading down the transport corridors towards us. Five minutes away, he reckons.::

::What?:: I clipped out as my gut tensed. ::Mission, I need a little more detail:::

Something coming- that seemed blasted ominous, given our current predicament.

::Well, if Psycho-Droid hadn't shot up all the cams, then Teethree might actually have visual:::
Mission snarked back.

::Explain:: I demanded. ::Where's the astromech getting this from?::

::I got Teethree to slice into logistical command, see if he could track any hatch openings. Give us a warning of anything coming, maybe. Whoever it is, they're definitely headed this way:::

"Alright," I said quietly. There was a preternatural calm settling over me, now, as I focused hard on the exit. "Everyone, stand ready."

::Uh...::

Dustil's voice was hesitant. He'd never been afraid to speak up, when he was a kid. Now, he only did when he was angry about something. ::Mission, if Teethree can- uh, do you think he can hack into the air-con controllers?::

::Sure. Why?::

::It's just- in Dreshdae, well, Mex used to- I mean, in the early days, when all we wanted to do was leave, but of course we couldn't, and it wasn't like we could do anything in the Academy itself:::

::Dustil:: I cut in. I hated the way he second-guessed himself. If I could see Korriban destroyed, one day, I'd throw a damn party. ::Spit it out:::

::Mekel would slice into the Czerka atmo regulators back in Dreshdae, and sometimes we'd blow the conduits up. A way of rebellion, I guess. We stopped- we stopped after:::

He trailed off. I didn't have time to wallow in bleakness over what my son had endured. When I was a kid, our way of railing against authority had been nothing worse than insipid holo-graffiti that didn't hold up against a sani-clean. "Someone died," I finished for my son in a quiet voice.

::Yeah:: he whispered. ::Some trader. We only meant to cause material damage, but::

::Lemme see what Teethree says!:: Mission interrupted. Seemed even she knew that now was hardly the time for a heart-to-heart. I would've liked to assure Dustil that it wasn't his fault, everything he'd had to go through, been forced to participate in-

My mouth etched into grimness, and I deliberately flat-lined my thoughts. First, we had to get everyone out.

::If you go blowing bits of this place up the moment someone walks past- eh, how can that bucket-droid even tell if it's a friendly or hostile::: Jolee's concern might've had some weight, if the prox mines weren't already primed with the same anonymity.

Besides, I'd already tried hailing Revan with no success. "We'll get a transmit from the others if they're on their way back, Jolee."

No answer meant they were busy. Just like us.

I chanced a quick look down at my wrist, pinging the status of the crew comm-links. Seven of the
remaining eight wrist-communicators from the 'Hawk were currently deployed, the droids having their own inbuilt comms, and Zaalbar, as customary, refusing to clip anything around his shaggy wrist.

My gut lurched. One of the wrist-comms was black.

::Yeah, he can do it!:: Mission enthused over the airwaves. ::Better yet, there's an air-temp alternator just outside. Teethree can set it to overload when the hatch is opened!::

::That could trigger the mines.:: Corporal Tensey murmured. ::Might make a decent enough explosion to go straight through their energy shields. Will likely render the hatch inoperable, though::. Ordo. It was his comm-link that had faded into inactivity on the tiny screen. Ordo's down.

::Then we hope there's only one lot of bad guys left, right?:: Mission sounded so damnably optimistic. If she thought of checking the comm-

"Do it, Mission," I ordered tersely, wrenching my gaze back to the hatch. A dead wrist-comm didn't mean anything. A crew member could just as easily go down with their comm still active. And-Mission's had blacked out in the Shadowlands, when she'd run into Dark Jedi-

Ordo's failed signal told me nothing other than that his wrist-communicator had been damaged. Revan was still out there, still active, and I wasn't going to believe any of the crew had fallen while she still led the way.

She'd make it out. She promised. And after all of this, we could finally start thinking about a future.

::Done,:: Mission confirmed. Her voice was breathless. ::Just in time, 'cause they're right outside:::

I started firing the second the hatch opened.

xXx

**Inon Daelidar:**

Star Forge High Command was a salient fusion of contemporary technology and the archaic. Our starships were superior to any in both breadth and manoeuvrability but, as Fleet Commander, I was reliant on a row of ancient flat screens as my only guide to what was actually manifesting in the skies.

I might be copacetic about our current fleet advantage, but the antiquated surveillance was nothing short of irritating. There was no excuse for my predecessor to have overlooked something so basic as installation of holo-topographics and a semi-decent sector surveillance matrix. Her incompetence led to her end. Just another smear of Lord Malak's wrath marring the command floor. That would not be my path. Fleet Commander of the Star Forge was a coveted position, even with its inherent dangers - but I knew how to placate our tempestuous lord.

I knew how to win battles.

The glower stayed fixed on my face as I perused the line of consoles blinking delayed snub location and health status back to me.

"Reactor core explosion detected on the *Lightstar*, General!"
I didn't allow my fierce expression to slip, not even an inch. All the officers milling around this command deck were incompetent clods who responded best to fear; frankly, trying to implement a sound battle strategy within the limitations of poor fleet data and maladroit staff had been challenging at best.

*The Lightstar, though. That's Adashan down.*

Inexperience amongst the Sith brass aside, the EMP scrambler had gifted us the early advantage, and the famed battle meditation of our lord's latest apprentice was now driving that advantage deep into the Republic's craw.

"The *Lightstar* is breaking up, sir," the breathless voice of the console tech gasped out. He turned, young face staring gormlessly at me. "She's a goner!"

"Keep your eyes on the screen!" I growled.

*One out of three.* Oh, the words struck satisfaction deep within. *Adashan, Gant, Dodonna.* Three Republic fleets spearheaded each by a fossil from the Mandalorian Wars. A lifetime ago I'd fought with them. Reported to - even respected, in the case of Forn Dodonna. A lifetime ago. But all three commanders had been too cautious to grasp the opportunity Supreme Commander Revan had offered - too blind to accept the inherent weaknesses of the Republic we had once defended against a barbarian horde.

"Gen-general-"

It was damn Jha'hasi, stuttering like a tenderfoot, back again and as welcome as the scent of decomposing faecal matter. I did not turn to face him.

"Um, we- we can't get the airlocks open to release the last few squads. I can't find-"

My impatient growl stumbled the idiot back into silence. Jha'hasi hadn't been able to handle that insubordinate starpilot Troystar, the runaway from Karath's disaster who'd turned up in his A-236 in the middle of our defence formations. After *that* singular waste of my time, it was hardly surprising to find Jha'hasi flummoxed by a stuck airlock.

"Commodore Beso is in charge of internal defence, Lieutenant," I clipped out impatiently, still with my back to him. Beneath my fingertips, the flat-screen displayed Gant's fleet moving in to flank Dodonna's; as if one final, desperate thrust of their combined strength would punch through our defence. *They lack the numbers to stand firm against our augmented armada. I could throw all squadrons at them now and cement a Sith victory.* I frowned. It was a tempting proposition, but edging our craft too close to those powerful Republic dreadnoughts would accelerate our own losses - and, the simple strategy relied on the three Republic fleets being the whole of the enemy assault.

Even I had to admit Sith Intelligence had been sketchy in recent weeks; I could not conclusively assume more bugs wouldn't spit out of hyperspace beneath a fourth banner.

The Republic's attrition rate so far bordered on the extreme, and their vanguard was attenuating sharply beneath our superior fist â€“ but the shrewdest of commanders knew that, sometimes, the unbelievable could eventuate in the fires of battle if one didn't consider all possibilities.

The reports of the skirmish above Kashyyyk showcased that. Admiral Karath would have assumed victory was his for the taking, right up until his flagship ripped to pieces around him.

*Without Karath, our only commander left with any modicum of experience is Admiral Sara, and she's pinned down in the Mid Rim with no reinforcements.* It was a grim thought I did not have time...
to indulge in. Lack of qualified high command was one topic that had to be addressed with our lord, sooner or later - but without an obvious solution to present, I risked raising his ire.

"Yes, but- but General, um-"

"What?" I snapped, spinning around to glare at the floundering lieutenant.

Jha'hasi had an eye for detail and was adept on the comms, but damn if he wasn't an irritant who demanded a stupid amount of micromanaging. Once this battle had morphed into victory celebrations, I was going to think seriously about transferring him to head of Janitorial Services.

Jha'hasi had taken a wary step back. The teenage pustules on his disgusting Human face contrasted starkly against his chalk-white skin. He swallowed. "Commodore Beso told me to tell you he doesn't know what to do."

Disgust at others' incompetence was nothing new, really. It was almost a relief to let it show, even if Jha'hasi was an overwhelmingly easy mark.

"I am overseeing the defence of Lord Malak's Star Forge, our most vital resource, the very station we are standing in - and Beso dares bother me with *maintenance* faults?"

I was fair roaring by the end of it. Damn Beso was two weeks into the position after Commodore Jinna had smirked at Lord Malak - imbecile! - and, quite frankly, I was beginning to think a spiced-up Gamorrean would do a better job.

"General." Jha'hasi's weak chin shook, but he lifted it. "Commodore Beso is otherwise engaged with the surveillance blackout spreading through the Forge."

I could feel the twitching in my jaw. Common sense told me none of this was Jha'hasi's fault - the pathetic Human just required someone to handhold him into action â€“ but if Beso was so inadequate that he couldn't multi-task simultaneous maintenance failures, then I'd be making damn sure his head rolled after this-

"And the battle droids," Jha'hasi finished on a whisper. His gaze darted to the left and right. "Um-they're dropping fast, sir. Something or someone is disabling them â€“ and quickly. Two-thirds have already- already gone dark."

The soft words had me backpedalling into silence.

Someone's breached the Star Forge. Someone competent enough to scythe through our internal defences.

"Why isn't Beso working with Maintenance?" My words snapped out, cold and hard and showing none of the unease that Jha'hasi's report had just stoked.

*It doesn't matter if all the damn droids get ripped to shreds. No one is more powerful than Lord Malak. What's the worst the Republic can do, send one of their wrinkled Jedi coots after the Lord of the Sith himself?*

"Maintenance Head's missing, sir." Jha'hasi was still whispering. Easily cowed he might be, but at least the boy understood how to be circumspect. "So is his second, Corporal Kampton. A handful of other maintenance techs as well: Ensign Carly, Ensign-"

I jerked my hand upright to halt the soft diatribe. In my gut, the unease grew.
Someone's inside. Someone dangerous. Someone ignoring the fleet combat to gun straight for our lord.

Absurd, how victory could sometimes teeter on the edge of one powerful person. I'd seen it too many times - throw a Force-user into the mix, and everything could upend in the most unexpected of ways.

There is no one in the galaxy more powerful than Lord Malak. He, who toppled Lord Revan herself. It didn't matter who the miscreant was that dared broach our perimeter: Lord Malak would eliminate them in a blink. The only battle of uncertainty was in the skies, and that uncertainty was slim, indeed.

The comfort of those thoughts felt shakier than it should have.

"Tell Beso to ignore the droids and surveillance," I ordered Jha'hasi. "Find someone from maintenance - a corporal, even a damn ensign - and get them to report directly to Beso. He needs to get those airlocks open to release the last of our strikefighters."

"But- but the droids-"

"I will contact Lord Malak myself." He will already be aware if there is any true danger. Lord Malak ordered no interruptions. Ignoring his command might have... unpleasant consequences. A text-only feed, then. Less chance of repercussions, particularly if I signed it with Beso's electronic auto_print. "If there is any internal threat of import, Lord Malak will extinguish it. We need those ships out, Lieutenant. Hop to it!"

Jha'hasi offered me a limp salute, before dipping his head and turning on his heel.

My attention drew back to the flat consoles. At a glance, the stats looked as reassuring as before: victory was at hand, it was only a matter of minimising our own casualties that I had to concern myself with. Enough time to break and send a forged comm to the Dark Lord. All was well, and the Republic's loss today would go down in the galactic archives as one of the most decisive.

Hard-edged facts, backed by the fleet data blinking at me from the antiquated consoles.

And yet, as I felt my mouth compress into a thin line of grim displeasure, I realized my satisfaction from earlier had all but vanished. All that remained was the same condescension for the incompetence that surrounded me - and a nascent, unwelcome sense of foreboding.

xXx

Sammy Tobards:

Aim, shoot.

Blighters were moving fast.

Hold. Keep the sights steady.

I'd seen one duck behind the nose of that snub a nanosec ago. I'd wait for a flicker of movement-

Double-tap.

He ducked out of sight again, but not before discharging a blaster bolt back at me. I was beginning to appreciate my Jedi defender, standing firm in front of me and slightly to the side, deflecting any heat headed my way with an upraised glow-stick and the ability to invisibly hurl grenades away before they even came close.
I didn't think the mark would pop back into sight from the same direction, not with the way I kept hitting him. Which meant I should guard the rear of the snub, right there-

Fire.

The mark stumbled. Through the scope mod on my weapon, I saw the tell-tale crackle of an energy shield dying. Another double-tap: the body jerked, collapsed, and then stilled.

I swung my sights back over the hangar.

That was three I'd personally downed, but space knew how many - if any - had fallen when that explosion had ripped the entrance hatch clean open. One of the Sith buggers had detonated a cluster of smoke grenades, hiding them all from view at first.

I'd seen Ensign Joss fall. Pegged his murderer before moving on. Didn't know Joss well, but I'd raise a drink to him later on.

"I'll be right back," Jedi Bindo muttered. I edged back from the scope, just enough to spot the old man jumping fluidly off the edge of the freighter's roof.

Blast it! He must've had a solid reason for disappearing but, despite my earlier reluctance for his presence, I suddenly felt a heck of a lot more exposed.

I squinted back into the sights. I had to trust the Jedi, and keep focused on my own game.

Another sweep back across the hangar- there, I spotted a black figure, dropping fluidly into a crouch, aiming a rifle elsewhere-

Something scuffed softly behind me.

Footsteps, on the roof of the Ebon Hawk, coming at my back.

Too soon for it to be Bindo, who'd at least warn me of his returning presence.

It was moments like these - charged, heady moments in the thick of battle - that tested a soldier's mettle. I could unleash one, maybe multiple, hits on the unsuspecting mark below, knowing whoever was behind me only needed a second to land a killing blow.

Or I could lurch to the side, and hope to evade an enemy that already had the jump on me.

My trigger finger squeezed. Twice-

I felt the pressure before the pain. The thud against metal as I was slammed sideways into the freighter's roof, a heavy weight pinning me, a sharp stabbing pain biting deep into my shoulder-

My... shoulder?

"Got him," someone muttered.

The weight - a fully armoured body, I realized dazedly - was half-dragged away. I rolled on instinct, the sharp burn of adrenaline hastening my movement, as I ended in a crouch with no weapon in my grasp.

Staring in disbelief at the old Jedi who couldn't even get my name right.
"He was too close," the man muttered, shuffling forward to turn over the body that had been pinning me seconds ago. The Jedi began fishing through the corpse's utility belt with a practiced hand. "I had to double back, and hope I'd down the fellow before he got to you. Just give me a minute, lad."

My shoulder throbbed, deep into the bone. The grind of pain only intensified as I leaned forward, flattening myself once more against the freighter's roof, minimizing my visibility in a combat zone.

In stark contrast, the crazy old Jedi looked strangely calm as he crouched next to the dead, more concerned with the fruits of his looting than being sighted by the enemy.

*He saved my life*, I realized numbly. Didn't seem right to lecture a mystical Jedi, but part of me just wanted to push the old man flat before a rogue bolt got him straight in the chest.

My gaze caught on my discarded blaster; I leaned forward to grasp it, barely biting back a moan as a deeper shaft of pain made its way down my back. It was bad.

Not mortal, no; but bad enough to affect my aim. Bad enough I wasn't sure I'd be lifting my weapon any more today.

"Stang," I muttered under my breath, jaw clenching. Couldn't hear any noise elsewhere in the hangar, but I wasn't pinning my chances on all enemies down until I was certain. "Jedi Bindo, take my gun. It's got a specialized targeting scope modded onto it. I can't- I can't shoot like this."

"One minute," the crazy Jedi grumbled, like I was asking him to hurry out of the 'fresher. I jerked back to stare at him in disbelief.

The old man was grinning at a plasticeel ball held in his wrinkled grasp. He looked absolutely absurd.

"Uh, there's likely other Sith still out there," I hissed, still pressed taut against the ship's roof while the Jedi thumbed at a toy in his hands.

Bindo raised one bushy eyebrow at me, before tucking the ball away and lifting his arms. Making him *even more* visible up here, and he hadn't even turned his glow-stick back on-

My whispered protest died as a gentle amber light began to glow around his fingertips.

"Yes. That's why I thought I'd heal you up so you could take 'em out. I'm a useless shot, lad."

*Lad.* I was going to be a grandpa in three months, if I managed to fly out of here, if I executed all my orders. I was-

I gasped as the back of my shoulder suddenly plunged into ice, simultaneously pricking through with needles of burning heat. The pain, though... the pain then *completely ceased.*

"There." The Jedi wiggled his thick white brows, which stood starkly against the leathery brown of his skin. "That should do you for now. Get back to work, lad."

I tentatively rolled my shoulder. No discomfort, no restriction of movement- I found it impossible to believe my injury had *completely vanished-* I didn't even know *what* had caused it; a blaster or vibrosword or heck, even the old man's 'saber cutting through the Sith's body- but my shoulder *felt* as good as new.

It was then I remembered feeling the same weird sensation earlier, when Corporal Tensey had been guiding me to the *Ebon Hawk*, when I'd been crippled from that shiv to the gut in the first wave. I
hadn't even *thought* on my previous injury since then, other than a vague surprise that no pain had stopped me-

"You healed me before," I mumbled in awe, my eyes widening. "Just like that? I'm all fixed?"

"Ach, not quite." The Jedi looked vaguely uncomfortable. "Part is just blocking out the pain receptors in your shoulder. I don't have time for much else, and doing this much is dangerous if you're stupid with it." The old man harrumphed, scratching absently at his bald head. "I can look after you proper, lad, when we're not in the thick of action. Just keep yourself as still as you can, and let's take care of these Sith first."

I shuffled forward, muttering a dazed word of gratitude as my hands reached to retrieve my fallen gun. I'd heard of Jedi miracles many a time. Never experienced them personally, though.

*This* was the sort of stuff you told your grandkids about. Desperate battles. Miraculous Jedi. Victory, hopefully, despite the odds.

My gaze narrowed through the scope as I once more shifted into a sniping position.

"Can you... can you sense any hostiles around?" I whispered, not budging from the sights. That was a Jedi skill, I thought. Being able to see people... except not with the eyes.

"No," he said quietly at my back. "Their fandangled trinkets kill the Force around 'em, meaning all they'd be is a..."

The old man trailed off as I began another visual sweep of the hangar. There was a fresh black-clad body next to the second Sith snub - I saw the captain's son pull something from the corpse's belt, rub at it briefly, before tucking whatever he'd found away in a pocket. Funny, it was exactly what the old man had done.

"...a null patch of Force," Jedi Bindo was muttering. "Aye, she always said it was the absence she could pick up on. Huh, and these buggers are using tech that nullifies the Force for metres, so surely I should be able to..."

I blinked, and the Onasi boy had vanished from my sights. He must've moved fast, to get that quick behind cover without me spotting him.

My scope moved steadily to the far wall, before trekking back again. "I can't spot anyone," I whispered. I might have to move, get into a position to sight the rear of the docking bay, in case they'd infiltrated that far. Or, maybe, this was finally it.

*The captain would be on the comm if he thought it was over. Unless he's down-"

"There's three left." The Jedi was right next to me, then, lying flat as if he had a gun in his grasp, too. His words echoed strangely in my ear, and it took me a second to realize he'd opened up a comm channel. "Eh, one's underneath the darn 'Hawk. Someone gun for that guy. The other two have made it to the Republic birds by the airlock. Tobosh and I will get those."

I flipped around, biting back the urge to correct the Jedi as I shuffled forward. The freighter's roof was flat, but large - I had to wriggle metres forward to get a clear view.

"Not spotting anything," I whispered again, spanning my aim over the *Aurek II* snubfighters I'd flown in with.

"Behind the hyperdrive of the furthest one." The old man had moved with me, but he was standing,
now, lightsaber back in hand. From my angle, I couldn't see the ground beyond the snubs. "They know you're up here, lad. Keep your sights fixed and I'll tell you if I sense any movement."

::The mark under the 'Hawk is down.:: Captain Onasi reported in my ear. ::It wasn't me, though.:.

My gaze narrowed as my aim firmed.

Hold.

"The remaining two are pinned behind the last starship," Jedi Bindo said over the airwaves. "Ten creds say there'll be an incoming projectile headed our way."

Keep the sights steady. Wait for any movement.

::On it.:: The captain's response was terse. ::I'll try to draw them out.:.

Blinding light flared behind the snub, then a second time; flash grenades possibly thrown by Onasi-

"One's down," Bindo muttered. "There's only one left."

A black-clad figure darted into view. I let my barrel lead the target, squeezing the trigger, as the mark turned to fire a wild shot back at us- but I knew Bindo could deflect that-

The flare of a shot landing next to me barely registered; a strangled cry of pain from my side, as I felt the old man collapse next to me.

"Bindo!" I cried, firing once more before rolling in evasion, feeling the burn of a second bolt glance off my forearm.

"Blasted- disruptor- can't deflect-" the old man wheezed. "Get- the last-"

Gun was still in my grasp. Pulling into a crouch, I saw one form standing below through a blurry gaze.

"Last one-" the old man choked.

This Sith bastard was wearing some ugly purple chest-plate, even missing armour from one entire leg. My hands firmed, and I made to depress the trigger- this hit would go straight into the bastard's un-helmed face-

"Last one's down!" Bindo gasped.

My finger twitched. At the final moment, the old man slammed a hand roughly into my leg, causing the shot to skim just above the mark's head. In turn, I could see the mark wrench a weapon in my direction, and only then did I recognize the man: that Mandalorian merc who'd left with the others earlier.

"Stang," I muttered in askance, quickly thumbing open a comm channel. "The Jedi says they're all down. Er, someone tell that Mando-"

Onasi was already there, down below, striding to the Mandalorian with an upraised hand waving in my direction.

::All Sith reported down.:: the captain's voice said in my ear. ::Tobards, fix your aim back on what's left of the entrance. Mission, get Teethree monitoring the nearby hatches again. Everyone else, report in.:.
"They're dead," I said with relief, feeling my shoulders sag. "It's over. You alright, Bindo?"

::On it::: the Twi'lek kid affirmed.

::Mission and I are fine::: the captain's son commed in. ::Saw the two Republic pilots go down. Dad, are you okay?::

"Stang, not Tensey too," I muttered, squeezing my eyes tight. I'd been her gunner for near on a year. Professional and a darn good sort, even if she did have a tendency to run her mouth after a couple of beers-

::Tobards? You marking the entrance again?::: the captain asked. ::You two alright up there?::

"Yeah, I'll be there in ten seconds. Just need to move around." Grief came later. Every grunt knew that. Sometime in the future, I'd bring Tensey back to life with a tale or two over a fresh beer. "I'm fine. Bindo-"

It was then I became aware of the ominous silence at my side.

"Jedi Bindo?" I whispered.

xXx

**Revan Freeflight:**

"You holding up okay?" I asked Zaalbar, after the last droid had been thrown into the corridor wall by Yudan with a devastating crunch. Hadn't taken long for HK to fire a redundant disruptor bolt into the thing's torso and claim the kill; but, frankly, we'd all stopped quibbling over the accuracy of his stats weeks ago.

Zaalbar nodded at me. The side of his furry face was matted with dried blood, sign of another injury - although this one, at least, had been glancing.

My shoulder still throbbed when I dropped the Force. We'd exhausted our remaining kolto 'derms and bacta patches - Canderous having been the one to carry most of our medkit supplies.

It'd been a risk to leave Jolee behind, considering his expertise with healing. For all I knew, though, the others back at the 'Hawk needed him more. At least it was a damn sight easier taking the droids down, now that we knew their weak spot - and were sticking to the narrow transportation tunnels.

I grimaced as my gaze gleaned over HK. One robotic limb hung sparking intermittently at his side. Good thing he was ambidextrous.

In fact, the only one of us not injured so far was Yudan - and considering the way he kept leading the charge around each corner I was putting that down to blind luck.

**Luck. Skill. The Force. Whatever the reason - I'll take it.**

As for Bastila - she was close, now. Very close.

"How far until the upper meditation chambers, HK?" I asked, drawing the Force in tight to minimize my presence. Up ahead, the silvery corridor veered to the left. Even here, this high in the Star Forge, the odd sigil was scratched low down on the arc of the wall. Repeating the same, obscure, message.

**The Builders have upset the balance between life and death.**
"Statement: The entrance to the meridian viewing chamber is around the next corner, Master."

Life wasn't the same as Light; nor was death anything more than a natural part of the survival cycle. Not to say that the Force couldn't kill, but any Jedi worth their robes knew that the light and dark sides of the Force did not simply equate to life and death.

I frowned. I didn't think it was a translation error, even if Sidi-Massassi script seemed to be a notoriously simple scripting language-

"Revan. Can you feel that?"

Yudan's low voice scythed through my thoughts; I glanced up straight into his narrowed, intense gaze.

Something malignant was crawling through the Force.

I stilled, both in mind and body, as the creeping sensation tiptoed eddies of swirling malevolence in the air around us. Slowly, slowly, increasing in strength. Not Bastila, no; this close, it was impossible to ignore the way her meditation oscillated in rays of psychic strength aimed beyond the walls of the Star Forge.

This felt more exploratory. And originated from deeper in the Forge.

Something whispered-

Revan.

In my periphery, I saw Yudan jerk with surprise.

Revan, I can sense you.

Malak. My heart stuttered, and I could feel him now- a morass of dark energy centred in the very nexus of this cursed place. Growing, magnifying, swelling in strength.

Come to me, or I shall find you.

The threat was almost a caress as it brushed against my mind.

Do you hear me? Do you remember me? A soft chuckle. I remember you. In all of your iterations. Which one is it, I wonder, that I shall finally have the pleasure of squeezing the life from?

Bravado. Mockery calculated to induce me to reach out in return; but his words had the opposite effect. I withdrew, thoughts cooling, instinct simmering into patience - for he was not my first objective.

Do you remember us, Revan? The way you used to moan beneath me? You would-

The Force thickened, tightened, and encased hard around my mind. Blocking the taunts that crawled through the air around me.

Malak would still be able to sense me, yes- but he'll stay by the kaiburr if he can lure me there, my intuition whispered. There is little time left - but there is time. Time to save Bastila, or better yet, use her-
"Revan-" Yudan's voice was choked with emotion, and the sheer oddity of that was enough to silence the crepuscular voice of my own cursed soul.

"They're both drawing on the kaiburr now," I said quietly, meeting Yudan's burning gaze. "Which might even work to our advantage. Let's go. Let's go find Bastila."

xXx

**Dustil Onasi:**

"Nine Sith accounted for." Ordo was sneering at a disruptor pistol he'd pulled from a corpse, before chucking the disassembled therm battery to the side. "Problem is, there should be ten."

"Where'd you get your intel?" Dad demanded. "And the others- I haven't heard from them-"

The minute Dad had commed the all-clear, I'd rushed to his side. I knew Mission was okay; I'd been marking her, somehow managed to make sure none of those bastards came close- but Dad had been right in the thick of things-

"I got separated," Ordo grunted, grabbing another mini-disruptor to pull apart. I didn't know where he'd found the time to loot the frakking dead.

"So there's one guy left," I muttered, fingers clenched tight around my 'saber hilt. Maybe those incoming marks could blank the Force out on me, but I'd had practice stabbing Sith without the Force.

Problem was, I was used to staying unseen. That frakking tech totally castrated my skills - same as old man Bindo.

My gaze slipped back to the loading ramp of the 'Hawk. We'd brought Jolee down from the roof, but he was in bad shape. Disruptor hit had chewed right through what looked like half the flesh on his chest. Dad had tried to get him inside after shooting him full of kolto and ceramol, but he should've stuck a tranq in the old man as well. Jolee had regained consciousness - and was as crabby as ever.

"One left - Ordo, why do you think there should be ten?" Dad asked again, before thumbing open a channel over the comm. Didn't know why he bothered, really. All the Republic pilots except that wounded marksman were dead, and Mission was still within earshot. "Mission, has Teethree picked up on anything nearby?"

::Nothing so far,:: Mission replied. She was still lying under the snub, snug in her sniping spot. I'd seen her shoot down at least one Sith, and she'd hurt another before I'd shoved my 'saber through his black heart.

Together, we'd downed our share of 'em, at least.

Killing felt too easy, these days. I remembered Mekel saying that, once, a bleak look on his face that he usually didn't let show.

"I ran into an associate of Revan's," Ordo answered at last. He threw the second weapon away in disgust. "*Haar'chak* disruptors. One-shot wonders before the battery completely kriffs itself."

"Associate?" Dad demanded. "What do you-"

"Don't get your jockeys in a twist, Republic. Whoever the sent was, he saved my arse and took out a pretty number of battle droids at the same time. Fairly sure he ain't here gunning for Revan." The
Mandalorian shrugged. "Leave her to do her job, and let's focus on ours."

::There's hatch movement:: Mission said suddenly. I hated the unwelcome lurch in my stomach. ::Um, not sure if it's headed this way yet:::

"Tobards, take point," Dad ordered into his wrist, before turning back to shoot me a hard stare. "Dustil, get-"

"Already on it," I muttered, pulling tight on the Force before inverting the weaves with a deft twist. Just like that, and I was once more hidden to the naked eye.

Just like that. Except if Ordo was wrong, and there were another nine of those chivholes, then we were truly frakked.

Dad was striding to the side of the hangar. I saw him duck behind a refuelling gig, the same spot one of the ensigns had been in before he'd karked it. Dad swiftly dropped into a ready crouch, turning to sight the jagged hole that'd once been a hatch. I'd always thought of Dad in the skies, shooting down starships with perfect aim from behind the safety of a snub's turrets.

He seemed just as competent and calm here, fighting face-to-face with the enemy.

Ordo- Ordo looked frakking ridiculous, flattened against the wall, his right leg naked and marred with streaks of dried blood. One hand raised a steady blaster at the entrance, and a grenade was primed in the other. Ordo's teeth were bared, and he looked for all the galaxy exactly like how Dad had once described the bloodthirsty, savage, Mandalorian barbarians.

But this Mandalorian barbarian was Dad's ally. And, despite all the snark between them, I got the distinct feeling they were pretty much friends, too.

::ETA, Mission:: Dad clipped out, his voice echoing through my earbud. ::And I hope Ordo's blasted intel is right:::

::Definitely coming here. Four minutes:: Mission sounded quiet. She'd wanted to see to the old man, she'd sounded shocked when she heard those pilots had karked it, she'd- she'll be scared spitless, stressing out over her Wookiee and frakking Revan.

But Mission was still lying ready, gun in hand, looking to shoot more of the bastards.

Mission was so- so genuinely nice and good, just like Selene had been- funny, and cheerful, and optimistic- but there was an inner strength to Mission that I wasn't entirely sure Selene'd had.

But Selene was smart enough to know Korriban was killing us. So was Mex. I was the dumb idiot more into increasing my own frakking power than finding a way off that dirtball planet.

Mekel'd had nothing to do with Selene. Maybe part of me had always known that. Maybe that was why I'd always wondered- what if I'd agreed with her straight-off? Would we have made it? Would she still be alive-

::Intel can only help so much:: Ordo muttered. ::One di'kut or many- with our limited resources and time, our strategy boils down to nothing more than blasting anything walking through that hole:::

::Two minutes:: Mission whispered. ::Moving fast. Carth, can you check- I mean, it's definitely not the others, right?::

::They'd answer the comm:: Dad replied in a tight voice. ::Jolee, haul your arse back inside the
freighter.:

::Eh, 'm not moving.:: The old man's voice was faint. I'd put it down to a crappy line, if I hadn't seen the bloody mess of his chest. ::Might be I can help from here. Not sure I'm up to moving anyway. Heh.::

::One hatch away.::

::I'm ready.:: the Republic marksman threw into the convo. I'd forgotten what his name was. ::One more Sith blighter going down.::

::There's something-::. old man Bindo wheezed. ::Something off- I sense-::

A robed figure in red stepped through the hole. Something exploded in mid-air, like Ordo's grenade had detonated prematurely. Time seemed to-stop.

I caught a glimpse of Ordo, thrown back from the frag blast, caught like a flutter-gnat in the wind.

Dad, on the opposite side of the entrance, flung high into the air - before smashing down into the line of consoles.

Mission, shrieking behind me, as something dropped from her hands with a clatter.

I froze in horrified disbelief as the figure sauntered nonchalantly into the hangar. Tall, thin, bedecked in silver and scarlet, with black lips marking a damned, pale, face.

Sharlan Nox. Oh no. No. No frakking way!

Something blurred in the air.

Jolee Bindo. Landing limply in the Sith Lord's outstretched arms. A long, thin hand rested over the old man's forehead.

I didn't have to sense the Force to know it was at work.

But then, thin, pink tentacles - frakking tentacles! - protruded from slits in the Sith Lord's cheeks, and slithered towards the old man's face.

Numbly, I remembered wondering, once, what those slits were for-

...

Something kicked me in the side.

"Wake up."

Slowly, I became aware of the grilled press of metal, hard against my face. I groaned, tried to stretch, but my hands were caught tight against something-

"Wake up, you gimboid," someone whispered.

Violent images flashed through my head: fire, raining from the skies; buildings shattering as I ran in desperation; the sight of my apartment complex exploding, before something slammed into my head
"Mum!" I screamed, jerking awake, struggling to sit, only to stare into the prettied face of a stranger.

He was scowling. "Not so frakking loud! You'll get Lord Arseface back in here."

Panic fluttered like a horde of gnit-flies assailing the inside of my throat.

My hands were bound behind my back. Legs tied together. Something cinched into my forehead, and someone was sobbing- no, two someones, a pair of Twi'leki girls in the corner. The corner- the corner of what looked like a starship's brig-

"Mum," I cried again, helpless, as my mind replayed the rending destruction of my home beneath the weight of turbo-lasers shooting down from the heavens. I could hear the discordant wail of planetary alarms again, feel the panicked throng of people shoving me this way and that-

"Frakk, are you gonna be as bleeding useless as Blue One and Two over there?" the boy hissed. His dark blue eyes flashed as I stared at him dazedly.

The boy was Human, mid-teens, with a handful of years on me. His glittering, skin-tight costume and painted face immediately identified him as the sort of sent I would never normally associate with. A delicate circlcut of gold wrapped tight through his jet-black locks.

"Thani," I said numbly, blinking. "It was- was-"

"Blitzed," the teen said bluntly. "Same as the rest of Telos."

My stunned gaze then noticed something else: he was bound, too.

So were the whimpering girls.

The teen followed my gaze. "Cantina dancers. I've seen 'em before, rolling in the creds at Starshine's Waterhole. Everyone likes twins." He snorted in disparagement. "Helpful as tits on a Hutt, in this place. Say, don't suppose an upper-class nob like you knows how to slice through restraints?"

"Where are we?" I asked hoarsely. Nothing seemed real. War was something that happened out in space - tales of adventure that Dad would occasionally relay, although he never made it sound as exciting as I thought it really was.

"Picked up by a bunch of scum-loving Sith." The teen's blue eyes were outlined in black kohl, and his lips were an unnatural shade of red. He's a hooker, I realized in horrified awe. A joyboy. A sent who sells- sells his-

Picked up by the Sith. The words hissed through my stuttering thoughts with terrifying comprehension.

Don't trust the Sith, Dee, Mum's voice murmured in my head. Don't trust the Jedi. Don't trust anyone who uses the Force. Just hide like I showed you-

Hide, Dee. Hide-

It wasn't working! There was nothing there! I couldn't feel the weaves she had painstakingly shown me in secret, the weaves to wrap tight around my body and invert so no one would notice me.

I could feel my eyes widening, my body shaking, my heart thundering like a swoop about to explode
The boy kicked me with his bound legs. "Keep your dumb head together! This isn't the frakking time
to bawl your soft, stupid eyes out."

I swallowed. My throat was dry. I blinked stupidly at the teen, who seemed a lot more confident and
in control than I was. "What the frak?" I swallowed again, forcing the curse word out, "-frakk can
we do, then?"

He was about to say something, just as the only hatch to the room opened.

The man who walked in was as dressed-up as the boy. But different. Imposing instead of handsome.
Robed instead of sequined. Authoritative instead of imprisoned.

Sith.

Black lips in a white face smiled down at us. "Mm, four pretty little playthings."

"You told me you only had two, Sharlan," a voice snapped out behind him. Another figure emerged,
this one clad in combat-armour, with sun-streaked blonde hair pulled tightly back from a beautiful
face.

Both of them had sharp, unnaturally yellow eyes.

"Two finds inventoried against your five, my dear. Consider it a showcase of your superiority." The
man trilled a high-pitched laugh. "Perhaps that will be enough for a transfer back to command."

"Yes, you're only thinking of me," the woman drawled sardonically.

I was the robed man, sauntering closer, that my horrified gaze fixated on. He raised a pale hand,
and I couldn't move, but something was lifting me, off the ground and into the air-

"I shall send the girls to Uln," the man murmured, stepping close. On the ground behind me, the
pretty boy was strangely silent.

"No you frakk won't," someone growled, but all I could see was a thin white face. A hand
grapsed my jaw, and I flinched- but the rest of my body was suspended. I hung; lifeless, helpless,
useless, as the pale man moved ever closer.

The air was cold. A black slit on either cheek of the man's face breathed open.

Gills, my mind squeaked in petrified shock. But that's not right, he's Human not aquatic, so what are
they?

I didn't want to know the answer.

I'm gonna die. A sob stuck in my throat. My body wracked with shudders. Mum. Dad. Where are
you?

Dad was a warhero. Surely, somehow, he'd come for me-

"You threw inhibitors on the boys. That means they're strong." The woman was close now, too.
"We're in a frakking war, Sharlan. I don't give a ronto's arse what you do in your spare time, but I'm
not letting you piss around wasting valuable resources just because you get off on the strong ones.
What's your name?"
The last question was snapped out like a command, and made no sense until I heard the pretty boy answer.

"Mekel Kadoni." The teen sounded sullen.

"And yours?"

All I could see was gleaming yellow eyes. Two pairs, now, staring at me with the detached observation of the powerful. Two faces waiting for my answer.

Dad, where are you? Dad- Dad was a famous starpilot. If anyone could find me, Dad would. Dad had scored three medals against the Mandos, Dad was pretty much a household name these days - even if it didn't make up for him never being home. Dad was-

Dad was a famous starpilot. Dad was a household name.

A hand tightened cruelly around my jaw. Tears I didn't know were there spilled out over my eyes.

"Answer the lord, little pet," the man said. The inky slits had disappeared, now, leaving behind only pale, smooth cheeks.

"Dustil," I gasped. "Dustil Balon."

A common Telosian surname, from my mum's line. Her dad had been a Telos native. Not her ma, though, she'd been some sort of exile who'd sought refuge-

The woman snorted. There was the sound of boots clanking away. "I expect to see them both on the roll-call at the Academy, Sharlan. Otherwise I'll go straight to the top, and make damn sure Revan knows what you do with half your frakking finds."

Swish of a hatch closing. Fingers, gentling on my jaw, as the pale man leaned close again.

"Looks like you have a lucky escape," he murmured, before pressing black lips against my forehead in a feather-light touch of benediction.

I gagged, recoiling, panic flooding like acid through my limbs.

I was dumped to the floor in a heap.

"What a shame," the man drawled. "I suppose I'll have to make do with the twins, instead."

... The old man from Kashyyyk hung lifeless in the Sith Lord's arms. Something shuffled behind me-

Mission, who must've lost her weapon, and would lose her brains if she moved out from the cover of her snub.

Dad and Ordo and that Republic marksman were nowhere to be seen.

I'm the only one who can stop Sharlan Nox. The realization was as terrifying as it was liberating. Crashing through the frozen, petrified stillness of my mind. The only one who can stop him killing Jolee or Mission or- or Dad, if he hasn't already karked it on a frakking console screen-

Hatred felt good. Blinding fury battered into my impotent sense of fear, breaking through the hidden Force weaves, and submerging everything with the roaring promise of vengeance.
I was *not* the same scared, powerless, little boy anymore.

"Hey, arseface!" I hollered.

Sharlan jerked, dropping Jolee Bindo to the ground as he turned to stare at me in surprise.

I thought I heard the old man groan. It was hard to tell above the rush of rage in my ears.

"Yeah, I'm talking to you, frakkweed!" My 'saber was tight in my grasp. The Force rocked a promise of power around me, all the potential to do whatever I wanted-

*Fear. Hate. Passion. They can fan the strength of your Force, my boy.* Uthar's voice chuckled in my head. *But only if you master them. Use your emotions as fuel, but stay in control of the fire they ignite.*

I was going to fry that perverted bastard's heart.

"I thought you got off on the strong ones, turd-for-brains! So leave the old man, and come after me instead!"

Korriban scarlet blazed in my grasp.

Sharlan's head cocked. He took a step towards me. And then I felt it- a vortex of raw, swirling Force, centred solely on the corrupted Sith Lord as his intrigued, damned, eyes pinned mine.

He was stronger than me, even in the throes of my hatred.

Those slimy tentacles - or whatever the frakk they were - contracted back into the Sith Lord's face. His hand lifted.

"Well, aren't you just the loud-mouthed delicacy," Sharlan Nox murmured. His eyes blazed, even from the distance between us. I felt the oddest sensation of magnetism, dampening my rage- like my limbs had suddenly frozen, like all I wanted to do was walk towards his glowing, glowing eyes-

*Hide, Dee,* Mum hissed. *Hide!*

The Force rushed inwards like a torrent, curling tight around me before inverting.

All the emotions returned, but this time undercut with a chilling comprehension.

I had to get out. I had to get out, and lure him away, away from the others, back through the hatch, away from everybody-

"Where did you go, little snack?" The Sith Lord was frowning, now. I began moving; silent, silent steps to the side. Uthar had been intrigued when he'd chanced upon my trick.

You are *not inaudible*, my boy. *Forget that at your peril.*

Silent steps. Forward and sideways. Then- Sharlan Nox moved faster than I could see without the Force. I blinked, and he was standing still in the place I had just been. Right next to the snub that Mission was hiding beneath.

I was halfway to the hatch already, but all he had to do was bend over and peek underneath that frakking starship-

"What's the problem, bonehead?" I jeered. The Sith Lord spun around, the scarlet of his robes
billowing out behind him. "Can't you see me?"

More steps towards the exit- a blur in the air, and suddenly Sharlan Nox was in the spot I had been a second ago, one hand grasping at empty air.

Mere inches from my sleeve.

My hand grasped tight around the 'saber hilt, concealed within the weaves of invisibility. My feet moved forward; slowly, quietly, as I held my breath. My other hand slipped into my pocket as I breached the hole that had once been a hatch-

I was slammed back into a jagged edge of durasteel by a fist in my gut. Breath exploded from my lungs on the impact, the Force unravelled, but my sword-arm moved on instinct-

An iron band twisted my hand back unnaturally; I screamed as agony shot up my limb, something crunched, and the 'saber hilt fell from my prone hand with a clatter.

The red disappeared as the 'saber knocked off into fail-safe mode.

"Too predictable, going for the exit." The bastard's grip still forced my arm back, and it hurt like a schutta, and his other hand was now on my throat-

I choked, flailing desperately for the Force.

"Still, you are a clever little titbit." His face was so close, now. Frakk! Frakking frakk! My eyes blurred, I could barely see or breathe, and in the centre of his pale white cheeks gaped open a slit of darkness. His eyes glowed, and his voice turned mesmerizing. "I think I shall keep you."

No! No you frakking won't, you frakking Hutt-spawned gimboid!

In my pocket, my other hand brushed against the trinket I'd pulled from a Sith corpse. With a squeeze of my fingers, I felt the thing vibrate.

The Force winked out. Sharlan's eyes dimmed. My knee jerked up, hard, straight into the sleemo's crotch.

He bellowed in pain, stumbling back, releasing me.

The air was harsh in my crushed throat. My arm was agony- but I could still bend it into my chest, stride forward, jerk my elbow hard into the bastard's face-

He caught my upraised limb and swung it further, launching me into the ground.

"I don't need the Force to extract your soup!" He was on me; I was rolling frantically, trying to wedge a knee between us. "This shall simply be all the more unpleasant for you!"

Somehow, I wriggled free, clambering to my feet one-handed, hearing the clink of that Force-nullifying gadget drop to the ground, the hiss as the Sith Lord's lightsaber exploded to life within his grasp.

I stumbled back, out through the hole, eyes fixed on Sharlan as he rose to a seated position. A twitching proboscis curled out from both sides of his face.

Run!

I turned, and sprinted down a gleaming corridor.
Six steps, and the Force flared to life.

*Hide, Dee!*  

Another step, and I was tucked back into the realm of invisibility. One hand, punching forward to release a hatch, hearing footsteps behind me, praying uselessly that I had enough of a lead to keep going, to find a place to ambush the knobhead—

*If you're facing a superior foe, make them do the work.* Of all the frakking sents, it was frakking Revan whispering in my head. Words she had said back on Lehon. *Make them chase you. Tire them out. Don't stop moving.*

"Come and get me, arseface!" I yelled, and ran.

---

**Bastila Shan:**

*This is our game board today, my apprentice.*

Malak had murmured that earlier, whilst pointing to the viewport that boasted the glittering lights of his armada. What I discerned through battle meditation was the same game board, albeit seen from an alternate dimension. Pinpricks of life, all sparks for me to mould, all pieces to be played in the dejarik match for the galaxy itself.

And Revan was the most powerful piece of all.

*-you can be the saviour. both of you. if she will only listen-*  

The battle of ships was still raging in the skies. A last gasp of Republic forces had entered the fray, adding a further impotent push to their beleaguered front. Without the scrambler destroying their sensors, perhaps it would have been enough.

But my battle meditation had tipped the scales.

Ironic, really, to think on how often my gift had been used in the name of the Republic, only to be turned against them at this final moment.

*It matters not. All these ships, all these lives, they are but an infinitesimal slice of the whole.*

If I had more time, I would muscle the pressure further, expedite our victory by remaining in a Force trance until destruction of the Republic assault was a shining certainty. But my influence thus far should be enough for the remaining Sith pawns to gain dominion; *I* had to attend to Revan.

*-if she will not listen you can make her-*  

I stood.

*-you can make her listen. show her what she needs to see-*

"Deactivate the null field," I ordered the slayers standing over the broken body of my once-master. He had to be one heart-beat away from death's door. There was no sentiment left inside of me for him.

After all, Vrook had chosen his path.
A wisdom all Jedi adhered to was accepting responsibility for their own actions. Vrook should have realized that. Should have discerned-

*What? That his padawan would turn on him?*

-individuals do not matter. you see this now. what matters is the whole-

I could not- would not allow myself the weakness of emotionalism. The Revan of old understood the necessity of shedding one's vulnerabilities for a greater cause. And it was the Revan of old I would resurrect, buried deep in the fractured shell of my bond-sister.

I kept my gaze firmly away from Vrook's fallen body.

"My lord?" a slayer asked in question, straightening from his post.

Through the Force, I could sense my once-master ebbing into unconsciousness. Perhaps, that small reprieve, was the final gift I could grant him.

"We have company," I said smoothly. My gaze drew unerringly to the oblique hatch at the end of the chamber. This was the moment I had been waiting for.

A sharp wedge of nervousness chafed through me, like the brittle sensation of crushed ferracystal scraping against my skin. A minor discomfort I would prevail over. "Stand down, slayers, unless I command otherwise."

-you can show her. draw deep-

Around me licked the power of the Star Forge.

-draw deep. the power is here. the power to save everything-

The half-moon hatch opened.

Somehow, I had known she would enter first.

Revan strode in, cyan bar blazing in her hands, attention drawn briefly to the slayers before dismissing them as unimportant.

"Bastila," Revan said, voice quiet, as she stepped deeper into the meditation chamber.

I called to the Force, and it answered. Oh, it answered. Rocking around me with the power of planets.

"Revan. I knew you would come."

It felt almost... aberrant, to be staring across from her once more. The woman my life had revolved around for what had to be more than a galactic year, now, since the death of the *Nexus*.

Revan appeared the same as on Korriban: dark curls a mink-rat's nest atop her head, with her expression broadcasting every tumultuous emotion as it crossed her soul. Concern, suspicion, anguish. *Vulnerabilities. Vulnerabilities when you do not use them.*

I may have only encountered Darth Revan once, in all her glory, yet I knew the woman standing before me was but a pale shadow of what she had been.

Her power still blazed, though. And her old self... her old self was still there, buried beneath the
dross of Jedi brain-washing.

Revan's mouth quirked. "I told you I would come. Can't say the journey's been all pazaak and spice-shots, though."

She halted some metres in front of me. The Force beckoned, swelled, surged, as I drew in its life-beat. Revan had to be sensing that, now.

-show her the power-

"Again. You could not come alone?" I could hear the censure drip from my voice as my gaze travelled scornfully over her companions. That distasteful robot. Oh, her old general I could perhaps understand - but the Wookiee? "Honestly, Revan. You did not think it wise to bring the other Force-users with you? Or, better yet, allow us the chance to converse alone for once?"

"All of my companions grant me strength, Bastila, Force-borne or otherwise," she replied in a neutral tone. "I would have asked Juhani to accompany me, but she hasn't been conscious since your snubfighter exploded on us."

I could feel my lips curl at the asked- if Revan had not yet realized that every member of the crew was hers to command-

My thoughts stilled in shock as the rest of her words evolved into meaning. "Wait- did you say exploded?"

The look she levelled on me was sad. "Lehon was a trap, Bastila. The snubfighter was primed with permacrete set to detonate the instant your holo-transmission cut out. If I'd followed your plan, the pair of us would be nothing but spacedust now."

The calefaction of anger was fierce and immediate. Malak. Malak! I should have known- but I had suspected something, had I not? Of course a Sith Lord would manoeuvre me to his own ends! It was to be expected of Lord Malak, but the betraying taste of being exploited was a recurring thread woven bitterly throughout my entire life.

-no one can use you if no one is more powerful than you-

At least Revan had never sought to manipulate me-

"Malak tricked you, Bastila. We have to get you away from him. Back to the 'Hawk." Her face was impassive, but the bond between us yawned open. We have to get you away from the frelling Forge-

Never sought to manipulate- oh, the shock of such deceit originating from her!

"Do you honestly believe you can conceal your thoughts from me?" I spat the words out, indignant and vehement and flat-out seething with rage. Power churned a conflagrant fire in my soul, burning alongside my anger. "I will not allow you to destroy the Star Forge!"

The flare of Force awakened in Revan, also; the strength that not even near-death and a mind-wipe could erase.

But it did not compare to the torrent coursing through my veins, stemming from the ancient kaiburr itself.

"And how do you plan on stopping me?" Revan's voice had turned soft. Her eyes narrowed. Weaves
of Force shielding curled around her presence, like she believed I would pre-emptively strike out.

-show her-

I would not attack her. I could not! No, I had to persuade Revan, remind her, induce her back to the cognizance that had once empowered her to act for the good of the galaxy, no matter how ruthless that direction required her to be.

But, first, to showcase the almighty power at my- our- fingertips.

Mere hours ago Malak had fumbled through my meditation to snuff out the feeble heart of one lackluster pilot. I had noticed. I had always been quick to learn.

My fury focused to a sharpened point. My hands clenched into fists, and I struck.

Two heartbeats stuttered into silence. Two gasps choked through the air. Two thuds echoed as two bodies fell to the floor.

Lifeless and still.

Revan whirled around in shock.

"Bastila! You just- your own guards?"

"This is the power of the Star Forge, Revan," I said coolly. My emotions were back under leash. I would make her see - and if this small display of power shocked her so, then it wouldn't even take me long. "The power over life and death."

"Power over life and death," Revan muttered, turning slowly back to face me. Her expression was granite-hard, now, as she began to comprehend. "And where's the balance? When you kill your own?"

"These were slayers. Jonn Dan's slayers." A murmur from Revan's old general, Rosh. "What were they still doing in circulation?"

"They were Malak's guards, not mine. I trust not their loyalty." I eyed over Rosh and the Wookiee, both standing metres back by the dead. The former held his weapon ready in guard, like that was any sort of peril with the Star Forge responding to my will. "Tell me, Revan. Should I trust the loyalty of your guards?"

"Is that a threat?" Revan hissed at me. Her muscles bunched beneath bloodied, tattered clothing. Her desire to protect her followers was evident - Darth Revan had shed that weakness, but I had come to know my bond-sister well during the months aboard the Ebon Hawk. She was pertinacious. Reckless. Loyal - even when it handicapped her.

-make her angry. her shields will slip-

"This is- this is Vrook Lamar." Rosh's voice laced with disbelief. "Jedi Master Vrook Lamar! What is he doing here?"

Startlement widened Revan's gaze, but she did not turn from me this time. "What? Bastila-"

"Irrelevant," I forced out. I would not look at his fallen body. "Revan-"

"Vrook is your master!" she cried, interrupting me with the histrionics of the weak. "Bastila, what did you do?"
"He still lives. Barely," Rosh muttered. "Despite being riddled with blaster burns."

"He was an obstacle in my way," I snapped. "You have not answered my question, Revan. Are your allies obstacles as well?"

"Query: Master, permission to remove Uptight Soporific from your redundant-"

The Force shone from Revan like a star, battering my senses and occluding our bond, drowning out whatever meaningless drivel her inane droid was spouting. Revan's power was a growing storm, lashing alongside her temper, rocking the foundation of her shields as she threw them over her allies instead.

"You will leave them alone!" she growled.

And the bond was open. So open.

All the kaiburr's power I had assimilated was waiting. The memory of that evil, dead world was forever at the forefront of my mind. With a deep wrench on the Force, I threw all my conviction and dread and visceral sensation that Malak's vision evoked directly into our mind-link.

Revan stumbled back, gasping.

-show her the death of the Force-

I could see Malak's past again: the necropolis of a space rock bordered by an eerie, violet atmosphere, devoid of everything. The plague growing, as if directed by some unknown hand, eradicating all light and dark Force until there was nothing- nothing- left.

I relived the experience once more, further magnified by the Star Forge, and projected it ruthlessly through our bond.

The Star Forge crooned in my grasp.

-show her the power you can draw to defeat the true evil-

Flashes of feeling, of memory, of truth.

The kaiburr's amplification of the Force. The means to build fleets within weeks. The augmentation of my own battle meditation; the ability to extinguish individuals with a thought; Darth Revan's original conquest that almost brought the Republic to its knees - and collectively we could achieve so much more.

All, all, all, possible with the Star Forge! Together, we would be each other's strength, and the galaxy would prevail.

Revan was struggling, ramming the psychic Force back through our mind-link, fighting with the desperation of the fearful. For I could sense her fear: fear of her own darkness. Fear of that kernel of black emotion she still carried, the kernel of strength that could be enkindled to nothing short of epochal.

We can control the darkness together, Revan! Together!

The purple world... She was gasping in my mind, gasping to hold herself together. There was someone... something... I had to find a way to stop-
-together nothing can withstand you-

Roll the dice... Another gasp, another flail. *It didn't work. All I know is that it didn't work!*  

*You must have faith in me, in us!* I demanded, my mental voice shouting alongside the currents of power that submerged us both. *You shall not be a slave to the Dark Side this time!*  

For what was the Dark Side, really, but freedom from constraint?  

One merely required the wisdom to harness it with impartiality, and with this much power surely we could-  

"Release her!"  

The furious growl snapped my awareness to the burn of plasma. Yudan Rosh, Revan's faithful kath hound, pointing a green glow-stick at my throat. In his shadow, the Wookiee had a disruptor levelled in my direction. The robot was aiming some sort of ridiculous projectile at me.  

And Revan... Revan was on her knees, head clutched in hands as the Force rocked a hurricane around her.  

"Kill me and you kill Revan," I said softly, staring into the burning gaze of Revan's pet Twi'lek. His slight pause as that thought sunk in was all I required.  

Like yielding to a vacuum, the Force surged back through our bond, wrested from Revan's impotent, stricken mind. It was instinctive to transmute the Force into telekinetic energy, and hurl the power wildly outward.  

But the moment Revan's three servants were thrown into the wall, she was right there, a closed fist launched straight at my face.  

Her punch cracked hard in my jaw. I flew, sprawling backward, stunned, angry, *furious*- my emotions rocking frenetically around me-  

-show her everything-  

Revan was on me, pinning me to the ground, her thoughts chaotic- *I'll knock her out if I have to!*  

-show her-  

The kaiburr ignited emotion within me - all the volatile affectations I could feed it I did - resentment for years of impotency, fear at holding the leash of an amnesiac Sith Lord, enmity directed at a duplicitous childhood friend - emotions black as tar-mud as they resonated through our bond.  

An earthquake of passion battering against her restraint.  

Oh, and I felt the depths of Revan's desires, too - for there was fury within her, and grief, and the lingering residue of frozen calculation that had once mastered her.  

Stronger still, deep in my own soul, was my unyielding abhorrence at whatever could so permanently extinguish the Force from existence - the only thing that made me special.  

The same revulsion echoed in Revan. She might not consciously recall the Unknown Regions, but she still knew. *She still knew.*  

"Stop it!" she was screaming. Futilely fighting and failing to remain unaffected. *Stop it!*
I was on my feet again, and she was clutching at her head again, as fragments of the past rose in her
mind like flowers of truth.

Movement elsewhere- My hand lifted to hurl the returning Twi'lek back from me. He landed,
collapsing next to Vrook.

Good. Two useless bodies for the clean-bots to clear.

_Get out of my head!_ She was building a wall, but it could not stop me. Not when the same fervour
of passion echoed in her own core. _I won't yield, Bastila! I will not fall again!_

Her will was stronger than ever. I had to concede that, without the Star Forge, I would not prevail
against her.

But I _did_ have the Star Forge. All Revan had was a broken mind, and a tempest of power over which
she lacked the training to master.

"If you cannot overcome me then how do you expect to defeat Malak alone, Revan?" I hissed. _You
need me. And the galaxy needs us!_

_Not... this... way!_

That ridiculous robot bleated something about a no-kill list as I deflected one of his projectiles.
Lightning was not something I had ever initiated, but now was as good a time as any-

The minute a sharp current exploded from my fingertips, Revan vanished.

_What? Revan?_

A fizzle from the robot, but still he levelled a weapon at me. Thermal energy narrowed into a weave
of need in my grasp, and my mouth tightened in satisfaction as the droid's hapless weapon began to
bend. Folded, twisted, its barrel turning full circle to point back at its owner.

_-do not lose sight of her-_ 

The kaiburr whispered a warning, and the instant I stepped away, something unseen skimmed hard
against my forehead. I reeled, realizing instantly that without my step back the blow would have
struck me direct on the temple. Knocked me out. By my ignorant, unseeing, blinded bond-sister.

_-you must show her who she once was!-

Revan was utilizing some fancy Force trick to render herself invisible, but she could not hide from
the Force as it spat currents of nascent lightning, dawning from my fingertips, an achromatic
discharge engulfing this side of the chamber.

A flicker-_ there. Her signature flared back to life, as her body flared back into view. My
tracery of purple-white twined around her figure-_ she shuddered, but somehow my attack was
absorbed into her instead of assailing her flesh.

Revan's chin lifted. Sparks of white died into nothingness. Her green gaze glinted rock-solid
determination as she glared.

"That will not work on me." Her voice was as cold as space.

_-show her-_
"I did not intend it to, Revan."

Did she still not understand? Did she still believe I meant to attack her?

No, no, I only unleashed that lightning to see her, to make her see, make her see the past, and understand-

And what better way, than to show her the past?

The past I had once thought to hide from her, to let those dark memories die with me, before I saw the glimmers of truth that shone between the shadows.

All through my trial of purgatory and perdition, those early days when I was relegated as nothing more than Malak's conduit to Revan, I had cursed every assignment he had imposed upon me.

Every taunting question he dared me to level at Revan through the bond. Who found us? What were Talvon Esan's last words? How did Arran Da'klor die? Who was our first recruiter? What happened to Kreia? How did I lose my jaw?

Why did we invade The Republic?


And with every refusal of mine to accede to his will, Malak had shown me his truth before moving onto the next, damned, question.

...

The pain burned like acid through my limbs. Inside my skin, like molten fire, like flames licking through every nerve centre.

Even now, after Malak had pulled back, tears still streamed helplessly down my face as I begged for the torment to cease.

"You should have asked Revan my question," Malak murmured. "I shall win in the end. Your defiance does nothing but break your spirit and body."

I could not answer. It seemed an inordinately difficult task merely to force oxygen through my cracked lips. Still, still, I would hold onto my resolution to remain separate from Revan. Malak's twisted games would not have me reaching out to her, tempting her with her dark past...

...no matter the cost to myself.

"Perhaps I shall show you the answer, before moving onto your next assignment." A gloved finger touched me gently on the cheek. I jerked, but the restraints had no give. "Would you like that, little one?"

...

**Bastila!**

And Malak showed me. With my every refusal to pose his absurd memory trips to my fugitive bond-sister, Malak rewarded me with both pain and memory.

Every shadow of his past allowed me a glimpse of Revan, Darth Revan, the Sith Lord I had never seen as anything more than a spectre of corrupted evil.
I slowly began to perceive the depths of her calculation and power.

By the time I learned the truth of what they had found in the Unknown Regions, I understood so much more than Malak.

_The wider picture. The greater good. The whole requires protecting, not the individual._

Revan and I were the best defense for the galaxy. If only she saw, and embraced, the truth of her past.

_Bastila, Malak can't hurt you anymore! I won't let him!_ She was choked with emotion, still dwelling uselessly on the ravages of pain I had endured at her old lover's hand. _That_ wasn't the point!

_That_ was hardly worth thinking on!

Those glimmers of truth, obscured within the gloom of Malak's petty mind-games, were what she had to see!

I felt the snarl on my lips, in my soul, as I dredged forth one of those cursed memories and exposed all of Malak's thoughts straight into the esoteric link that chained us.

... 

"Are you certain Nisotsa is the correct choice?" I asked without preamble, strolling into the room.

Revan was leaning over a transcript, masked and robed despite the anonymity of her chambers. She struck a deathly beautiful figure, but there were times I hungered for her to drop the disguise, even if only between the two of us.

Opportunities for intimacy were so rare, these days. So inconsequential with what we had to face. But a corner of my soul mourned regardless.

"Jorak Uln will shape the adepts I require on Korriban. Nisotsa shall recruit them for him." She did not look up, merely tapped one gloved finger on the techJournal in front of her.

I knew the production of the Star Forge eclipsed all other priorities, but once Revan had taken the time to listen.

"Nisotsa will resent the transfer, Revan. You know she has been angling for another crack at command."

The mask lifted to appraise me. "Nisotsa is no commander." Revan's rejoinder was smooth, but implacable. "She excels at intelligence retrieval and discovery of Force adepts. That is where I shall utilize her."

Even midway through the Mandalorian Wars Revan had perceived that. But, somehow, I did not think my lover would have phrased it so clinically then.

Revan's head bowed back over the transcript. "Ensure her compliance, Malak. She will submit beneath a firm hand or a stroke to her ego. I trust you to handle her with alacrity, for we have no time or resources to indulge her desires."

We have no time for our own desires. _It could have been my thought, or hers - whispering a warning directly into my mind._

...
Malak had thought my fealty to Revan would erode upon exposure of her true character. How she clinically withdrew from those closest to her. How she came to utilize their skills with detached ruthlessness, precisely like - as Malak took perverse pleasure in pointing out - my talents had always been used.

Perhaps he believed that in showing me thus, I would no longer have faith in Revan's loyalty to me. Malak had never understood.

**Nisotsa.** A horrified murmur. *She turned from me in the end.*

Revan had mourned Nisotsa Organa's death on the *Leviathan,* without even remembering the woman. But the Revan of old knew that friendship was an extravagance true leaders could not afford.

Loyalty had to be absolute, whether induced by fear or respect. The fickle bonds of camaraderie could only extend so far before they became meaningless.

...

"*Remember me as I was.*"

"*What?*" I looked back to Revan, but her mask still faced the anonymity of space.

"*Talvon's last words,*" she elaborated. *Her voice was cold. *He made a fine Jedi Knight, once. Remember him as that man, Malak. Not as the failure he became.*"

*She turned fluidly from me, silent as a wraith, pale skin marked with Sith-black and fingertips tarred with brown blood. In one smooth motion, she leaped down from the viewing platform.*

*Had her words been wistful? Nostalgic? No, I decided. That was merely my own frail longing for the woman she had once been. The Supreme Commander of the Republic might not have had the fortitude to cut down a monster of her own creation, but Lord Revan certainly did.*

What about you, Revan? Will you remember Talvon Esan, insane Sith commander or revered Jedi hero? Is there any room left in your heart for that, or am I to do your grieving for you?

...

*Talvon. I killed him.*

Executed. You did what was necessary.

*I... I had to.* I could hear belief in her words. Talvon's death didn't strike the same echo of devastation that Nisotsa's had. *But I don't know why...*

*To prevent another Telos. You kept your eye on the end game, Revan, so other sentients could enjoy the fragility of emotionalism. That is what makes a true guardian - knowing what to shape into a weapon, what to cut down, and what to leave behind.*

...

*"She has gone."

*Revan's two lightsabers crashed against my single blade. I thrust back in a show of strength; the*
second our weapons no longer crossed, one hand dropped from my hilt to clench tight in the air.

Revan's choked gasp was satisfying, but it did not last long. I launched sideways, already anticipating her counter-attack-

Needles of piercing hot pain engulfed me regardless.

"Too predictable, Malak." There was a measure of mirth in her voice that galled. It took me only a thought to fling her lightning away, but Revan's continued success in striking me was beginning to fray at my reserves.

"Who has gone?" I demanded, lunging forward to strike again. The creeping residue of electrical burn on my skin was both an irritant and an accelerant for my Force-use. Physical suffering. Passion. Resentment.

Emotions to fuel my own strength.

In the spiralling depths of our training spars, there were times where I did not know what was more potent: my love for her or my hate.

"Kreia." She grunted as she ducked beneath an overhand, sidestepping neatly before her shoto glanced off my armoured shoulder. "Focus, Malak. There are consequences if I keep slipping so easily through your guard."

I had always been the better duellist, but I had always been handicapped by my concern for her. It was a weakness I was slowly learning to shed.

"That old bat?" I snorted, as a rippling wave of poisoned energy flared from my fingertips. Revan, anticipating a concussive force, tensed as she guarded against a threat that did not eventuate. Her eyes widened as my blade knocked hers aside, and my boot kicked hard into her knee.

Revan stumbled back, almost falling.

"I never trusted her," I said, striding forward to drive home my advantage, but she launched herself into the air before my blade could strike. I could feel the taint of Force-poison seep into her veins before she dispersed it. Enough to have weakened her, at least. "Desertion though... shall I track her down for you?"

Revan landed silently behind me. As I turned in response, her flying lightsaber almost caught me side-on. Our robes were cortosis-woven, but we were duelling bare-handed. Minutes ago, my calloused fingertips had been trailing down the vulnerable skin of her neck.

A flare of animosity dawned deep within. In one stroke, she could have sliced through my hand, just to win a training bout.

"No," Revan answered, as her scarlet blade snapped home. "Kreia is no threat. She is perhaps the only one who truly perceives what the galaxy faces. She will have disappeared to fight against the threat in her own way."

"The only one?" The rage turned black, now. I was the only one, the only person who had been at Revan's side her entire life. I was her Shadow Hand, and both my power and my experience trumped some wrinkled, miserly, sarcastic old woman!

A cold smile curved Revan's bloodless lips. "Use your emotions, Malak. Do not allow your emotions to conquer you. Too many have become slaves to the Dark Side, and I would not have that same fate
"befall you."

... 

Stop it! Damn you, Bastila, I don't want to see this! I could have - could have sliced his hand off - and for what? You think showing me this will induce my cooperation?

The horror etched deep within her. But I could sense the comprehension, also. A part of her still understood.

You created Darth Malak. At that point in time, he was still a capable, adept commander of your empire. He may have taken your lessons with resentment, but he grew strong from them.

He's a monster! Oh, there was fury in her, too. A flash of my own tortured screams flickered between us, and it stoked her rage. You can't be blind to that!

He is, now. Tools do not last forever. But you knew how to forge them, Revan, much how you forged yourself. You understood that emotions fuel the Force. That you can exploit emotion for the power you require, no matter how arduous or galling the task is.

I failed, Bastila! The Dark Side controlled me, not the other way around!

She was angry. She was devastated. She was beset with emotion, for the names and faces of a past all glimpsed through the bitter eyes of her old lover.

If Revan would just allow those emotions to break free, she would experience the might within our grasp, the full depths of what the kaiburr had to offer - and I could help her control it.

I would not fail like I did on the Leviathan. This time, I would embrace my own strength with the calculation required.

Perhaps that is so, Revan. But you- we- shall not suffer the same fate this time. You were close, Revan! So close to remaining the guardian you strove to be! Even at the very end, you almost - almost! - had the fortitude to undertake the most distasteful of actions to do what you must! You almost mastered it all!

No one can master the Dark Side! She didn't believe now, but she had once, and she would again.

We can! We can and we shall! Even if I have to force you-

...

Agony stabbed into my ribs. Even gasping for breath was torture. Punctured lung, perhaps. Snapped ribs. Right leg definitely broken with that last attack from Revan.

Fury roared in my soul. Like a wild rancor, flinging back his head and bellowing his discontent to the universe. My own rage burned and broiled, deeper than ever before.

And it was still not enough to overcome the Force holding me impotent against a starship's bulkhead.

Unholy chaos swirled a firestorm in Revan's black eyes. Her robe rippled and flared, her steel mask long discarded in a distant corner somewhere.

Inky shadows of death danced an eerie vortex around her as she prowled closer.
Rarely had I seen her so undone, and this time - directed at me.

"It wasn't me!" I growled, barely able to force the lie out beneath her invisible bonds. My lips were numb. I would go down fighting, but she did not even allow me that grace, held shackled beneath her will the way I was. "I knew nothing of Arran's actions, Revan! I have always been your shield! You know I would never betray you!"

"I know."

Like the flipside of a light plunging into darkness, the black aura of insanity extinguished into nothingness.

Her pale, Sith-marked face smoothed into calm.

She... knows?

Revan had always taken my fealty for granted; always, always, always - to the point where she would toy with my emotions and my pride and even my own men without bothering to divulge her motives. Perhaps she had none, beyond a sadistic delight in seeing how far her Shadow Hand would bend.

But at this juncture, I had actually believed she would open her eyes to the truth.

You can only push people so far before they push back.

"Arran's treachery on Deralia has left me with a problem, Malak. All my leaders are convinced you are implicated. Alaki, Saul, Sara, Jorak, Daelidar... even Yudan. They may not name you directly, but I know my men, and I am aware of what they do not say. Arran could not have worked alone."

Did I betray Bandon or Nisotsa now? Neither of them were particularly charismatic leaders, but she could pick the truth from their minds. If I toppled them to save myself, I would have to see to their demise personally.

Or, perhaps Revan could be convinced to believe this was all Yudan's doing, and wouldn't that be a particularly sweet twist of irony to see him fall by her hand-

"You are too useful for me to eliminate, Malak." Her voice had dropped to a rasp of a whisper, but there was no feeling in it. Her lightsaber pointed at my face. "But I cannot have my entire upper rank believe in any weakness of my will. Know that everything we sacrifice is for our cause."

I did not understand what she meant to do. Not at first.

And then, when I did, I still did not believe it. Even as the torch of pain against my face turned unbearable, and my screams morphed to struggling gurgles, the situation was simply incomprehensible.

But the pain incinerated everything away. Love, trust, loyalty... not that there had been more than a dying flicker of that left.

In the ashes of agony, only enmity remained. And it burned bright.

"I shall send in the medi-bots." Her words came from far away, from some nether-hell of hate I would send her to. My breath bubbled, struggled, faltered, and every remnant of consciousness not twisted in torment focused purely on drawing in oxygen. "I will find who was behind Arran Da'klor's treachery, Malak, and you shall have the pleasure of dealing with them."
There was a pause. Footsteps. I was lying in a puddle of my own spilled blood.

Like a mewling kit drowning in water, I was drowning in pain, struggling and failing to clutch onto the Force as it slipped from my helpless grasp.

"I trust you understand that I only act as I must, Malak. I cannot afford weakness, no matter where the blame for it lies."

...

Mal! Mal! NO!

It was him, Revan! That was your mistake! I screamed the words at her, willing her grief to die beneath the anger I knew she was holding back. You should have killed him at that juncture, innocent or not!

She was swimming in self-desolation, but the turgid depths held passion, too. Innocent-

For he was guilty after all! He turned Nisotsa Organa against you! Arran Da'klor! Heroes from the war you won, tools you could use to defend the galaxy!

I didn't believe he could be guilty. Her words choked. With shock, with horror, with budding comprehension. Was that comprehension discerned from Malak's memory, or her own? I didn't believe he was behind Deralia, the first time. Arran said I would never know-

"You will never know." The faint sneer of a dying man's voice, the echo of a memory I had never seen before. "You will always doubt your followers, my Lord Revan."

The bond between us thickened with ice. And the kaiburr danced fire through us both. I no longer knew if the Force was originating from me or her, but in the end, the strength was ours combined. If she would simply stop flailing about-

Use your emotions, Revan! Do not allow them to master you - for that was why you let Malak live, was it not? Even believing in his innocence, had you been truly objective you would have known his death sent a more powerful message than a dismembered jaw. That one moment of impaired judgment showcased your remaining weakness - and allowed Malak to strike again.

But it was Malak after all. The horror morphed into disbelief, which was slowly transforming into something more feverish. He cost me Arran Da'klor.

"You're right, we were loyal once." The same skein of memory combed dead fingers through Revan's mind. As intertwined as we were, I heard all she did. "And you burned that out of us, burned it out of us all."

Burned it out of him... but was it my doing or Malak's? Something clenched in the bond. A fount of fury - held back by the jaws of determination, perhaps, but the turmoil of the past was eroding her will. And her passions would melt it away. He turned Nisotsa-

"Redeemed... what a joke." Rasp of a woman's voice. "What a frakking joke."

I had no choice but to kill her by then.

Malak turned them against you for no reason greater than his own ambition. He considered blaming Deralia on Nisotsa. You saw that. He thought to implicate Yudan-
Oh, there was the anger, belching into life, screaming a roar in synchronization with the kaiburr.

Some of the fury was directed at me, but that did not matter, for Revan could no more lash out at me than I her.

Malak betrayed you. I would hammer that home until it evoked the rage such treachery deserved. You, the one he had sworn to protect and shield and follow. Even as a Jedi Knight he sought to play you-

"Beautiful Bastila,“ Malak had murmured, that one time I met the famous Jedi Knights from Coruscant. Knight Malak Devari, gazing soulfully at me and kissing my hand just to make his childhood love jealous.

I could sense her recoil at that thought, and her dark emotion grow.

If not for Malak, you would stand at the helm of an empire now, holding firm against the worst threat the galaxy has ever seen! The death of the Force, Revan. The death of the Force!

I rolled the dice... but it wasn't enough-

There's two of us now! With a stronger Force-bond than any master has ever seen! What is that, but a sign from the Force itself? Why else was I placed in a position to save you, but for you to save the galaxy once more?

A ghost of a woman flickered through our consciousness. A robed Jedi, yellow double-blade in hand, as she walked shakily past two corpses. I- Revan- we could sense her fear, and it was vaguely amusing in the way a bleating tach could be; but there was surprise, too, as she lifted her lightsaber and stepped close with a fierce expression conquering the fear on her face-

Me. You remember me?

Revan did not hear, caught in the tailspin of past emotion. I will test the psychic strength of this Jedi paragon before capturing her. But I won’t draw it out too long. There is a person responsible for her presence, here, and only one knew of my current location.

Revan-

I trusted him as no other, and he dares to send Jedi after me?

Revan, come back-

He would ruin everything we fight for, all I have sacrificed. All, all, ruined! Her growl turned visceral. A thousand needles of raw power pierced through me, as the rush of a Force high engulfed the bond. A tempest of black rage roared in our minds. He betrayed me. And I lost everything!

So take it back! I gasped, we gasped, and I could no longer see the separation of our thoughts. Do not let the galaxy turn into sectors of dead worlds. Reclaim what was yours, what is ours, and defend the galaxy once more!

Everything upended in a rush.

I choked, the physical making itself known, lying on my back as my body burned. Veins pumping blood through limbs that suddenly felt engorged, every beat of my heart thudding like a jungle drum in my hollow chest.
Revan shone white in my senses, glowed black to my eyes, as I turned to sight her.

There was a movement from the wall, from the Twi'lek, as he slowly lifted his head off the ground to stare at Revan. He was no concern, not now that Revan understood. After all, he had been her faithful subordinate, when she was both light and dark.

Visible black wisps danced around Revan's kneeling form. Her head bowed. The tunnel of psychic connection that joined us was iced in black permafrost.

So cold... but our pool of power was fathomless. The Force ricocheted, echoed, doubled back on itself, and amplified into sheer magnificence. The fury in Revan's soul had been quenched by a calculating glacier of the night.

One she could rule, this time. One we could both master - and save the galaxy along the way.

xXx

Chapter End Notes

Coming up next: What happens afterward in the meditation chamber.
A Republic vanguard's worth of thanks to kosiah for the beta.
Yes, there is an interesting backstory to Morgana Balon's parents. This fic probably does not have the scope for it. Maybe one day I'll write an off-shoot.
Nexus: Catharsis [Zaalbar, Yudan Rosh, Bastila Shan, Forn Dodonna, Revan Freeflight]

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

---

Nexus: Catharsis

---

**Zaalbar:**

...

"(What is that smell?)"

My nose wrinkled in distaste. Ahead of us, Chuundar raised a cautious paw as he halted beneath a low-lying tangle of kshyyy vines.

"(Our burned-out campfire)," I answered slowly. But that wasn't quite right. I knew the scent of soot well. Any Wookiee worth his chest-fur did. This odour sat thick in the humid air of the Shadowlands, acrid and rancid and pungent with ash.

"(Wildfire)," Chuundar muttered, his voice a warning, as he turned his shaggy head to stare intently at the pair of us. "(You rested in the thicket ahead, cubs? You turned over the remnants of your cooking embers?)"

"(Yes)," I assented, answering for Drawwlog. But our friend had turned away, his young shoulders bunching uncomfortably.

That morning I had been the first to leave, freshly rested beneath the guard of Drawwlog's watch. As I padded back toward the Rwookrrorro waypoint, my sole concern had been luring the katarn that had chanced upon us into the waiting might of my elder brother.

I had left Drawwlog behind to deal with the dregs of our night's habitation.

Chuundar huffed, loping forward again. The harsh air scraped against my throat as I followed.

"(I was in a hurry)," Drawwlog whispered beside me. "(I was worried there might be more katarn),"

My stomach, empty but for the wasaka berries we had foraged the previous day, lurched at his quiet words.

Drawwlog and I were not yet grown enough to prove our mettle against the might of our planet, alone and unaided, as the gods bid all young warriors should. This excursion was merely a trial; a practice-run Chuundar had successfully argued for, despite the oddity of sending two younglings out alone without the watchful supervision of an Old One.

My brother had a keen eye and a sharp mind that would serve him well as chieftain, one day. He understood the need for our friend to test himself away from the shade of his autocratic sire, who would no doubt preside over Drawwlog's coming-of-age.

"(You did not see to the campfire cinders)," I said to Drawwlog, my words heavy. Ahead, I saw my
"(Stay here)," Chuundar barked at the both of us. With an irritated grunt, my brother bounded forward and soon slipped out of sight.

I did not drop Drawwlog's gaze.

"(Fire does not catch in the Shadowlands)," Drawwlog replied, but it was a feeble protest, and judging from the worry in his dark eyes, even my young friend realized as much.

Over Drawwlog's shoulder, beyond the nearest wroshyr, I caught the first glimpse of blackened, shriveled gorse.

Our home was a humid environment. Moisture hung dense in the air, even in the depths of the Shadowlands. The sap of the wroshyrs ran thick through branches and roots alike, and the musty soil held water enough to sustain all manner of life that called Kashyyyk home.

But fire was always a danger in any forest.

"(My father...)") Drawwlog muttered. "(If this is my cause, he will never allow me...)")

He did not finish the statement. Drawwlog's sire had little faith in his youngest cub, and no patience with failure of any kind. Let alone the sort of mistake that no true guardian of Kashyyyk should ever make.

"(It is out)." I heard my brother's words before the pad of his returning feet. "(No wroshyr caught, of which we can be grateful. But the fire damage is extensive enough that there will be questions)."

Drawwlog's head drooped. The charred scent of burnt tinder irritated the inside of my muzzle. Chuundar, drawing close to us, bore streaks of soot marring his shaggy coat.

I caught my brother's gaze above Drawwlog's bowed head. Castigating Drawwlog for idiocy would aid no one, but I wondered if Chuundar felt the desire to do so regardless.

I did.

"(It was my mistake)," Chuundar said after a lengthy pause. "(A pack of katarn took us all by surprise, and I chased you both away to safety. By the time I returned, it was too late)."

"(Chuundar-)") Drawwlog gasped.

"(Go. Look)." My brother's voice had turned hard. "(See the ramifications of your actions, cub, and then we shall never speak of this again)."

Drawwlog ran, and I stared mutely at my brother.

"(Perhaps it was too soon for you both to come here)," Chuundar muttered. "(But what is done is done. Drawwlog needs the chance to grow from beneath the bough of his ancestors)."

"(You will tell Father?)"

"(No)," he answered, voice sharp. "(I will tell no one. And neither shall you, Zaalbar. Freyyr would not understand, and Drawwlog's sire would not forgive. The truth of today shall stay silent as the wroshyrs)."
The odour was acrid against the back of my throat.

The mighty wroshyrs in my mind slowly dissolved as the grind of pain made itself known. My forearm was numb. Somehow, I knew that was a bad sign.

I gasped in a wintry breath that smelled of ash and tasted of death. It was not quite the same as wildfire in a forest, no; I could recognize the difference now. This was the residue of ozone upon the air, mingling with charred organic material-

Jen!

I lurched off the floor as awareness scalded through my body, overriding the deep lance of pain that bordered on debilitating. We had been facing Bastila Shan. Jen had been talking- arguing- with her bond-sister, before Bastila had done something to her and then I was thrown back-

I was barely aware of my own unsteadiness as I gazed in horror upon the scene in front of me.

The air was iced with cold. The scent - I knew it now - was the taint of foul electrical discharge. This was nothing like a Shadowlands bushfire.

This was everything like the Leviathan had been.

Madclaw madness.

...

*The slam as cauterized durasteel landed on the ground ahead was loud, but the blast of frigid air from beyond was worse.*

"(Jen!)" I howled, unable to see ahead, my arms full of Carth Onasi and my shoulder weighted with Canderous Ordo.

"Whoa!" Mission cried, having followed Jolee Bindo through the hole he had made in the welded lilac hatch. "Jen- what's all that black stuff- Jen, are you okay?"

I leaned against the wall, unable to bend through the makeshift entrance without dropping the comatose pilot. My nose wrinkled in immediate disgust; I had to fight the urge to gag against the rancid stench of scorched hair and flesh.

"Jen!" Juhani gasped. She was deeper in, having entered first with the old man. "Jen, are you alri-"

"Stand back!" Jolee Bindo's voice was loud and sharp with an alarm I had never heard from him before. "All of you, get back, now!"

A low voice I did not know murmured something in reply.

"Juhani, you must take the others back to the ship," Jolee Bindo ordered. "Do it now, child!"

*The Cathar protested something, but Onasi's cub heeded the old man, clambering back out through the hole. Mission followed, and as she retreated behind me I finally caught a clear glimpse into the chamber beyond.*

Jen was kneeling, surrounded by an aura of darkness. Threads of madclaw black licked flames around her frozen figure, like spirits from the netherworld resurrected to conquer her mind and body alike.
The fur on my neck stood up in shock.

"Do not come near," the same foreign voice from before ordered, quiet as the night, commanding as nature itself. "I will be alone. I will it."

...

My soul howled at the sight of the woman I was indebted to, bowed beneath the weight of a foreign anathema I could not comprehend. Slips of inky black wisped about her, the shackles of a curse she could not chase away.

This is what Mission meant when she said Jen was once Darth Revan. I knew it only as a title of the baseborn Sith, but now I understood the name went deeper. The roots of a perfidious evil had risen forth to claim Jen Sahara once more.

On the Leviathan, Jolee Bindo had drawn Jen Sahara back to herself. The Human male who knew the Shadowlands like one of my people, the hermit who was more of a Jedi Old One than he would admit. Jolee Bindo had spoken words of Jedi counsel; words I had not heard, words I could not replicate.

Jolee Bindo was not here this time. Only I, and...

Beyond Jen Sahara, standing preternaturally still next to a vast viewport window, was her lost bondsister.

Bastila Shan was facing away, a figure netted in flowing black, garbed as the Jedi I had once travelled with would never have desired.

Neither of them moved nor spoke - lest not so I could hear. But, somehow, I knew words were flowing between the two of them.

I must reach Jen Sahara. I felt my hackles rising; whether at the unnatural cold or in stark trepidation, I did not know. I have not the wisdom of a Jedi, nor the strength of a magic bond, nor even the easy camaraderie of one such as Mission. But I must try. This madness is not what the woman I vowed my life to would wish upon herself - or upon her bond-sister.

I took a step forward, wholly uncertain of what I would do or say, but only knowing that I had to do something.

As I did so, however, I caught the slightest flicker of peripheral movement.

My limbs stilled, my head turned, and my gaze darted sidelong to see Yudan Rosh in a ready crouch, one golden limb raised high at Jen Sahara's back-

"(No!)" The roar was feral. My muscles bunched into a frantic leap toward him. But I was metres away, and no shield against the Force. "(You cannot!"

The Twi'lek's fist released, fingers spanning out in invisible attack. I skidded mid-sprint, glancing back wildly to Jen, praying she had guarded her back against an ally that everyone else had doubted-

She did not fall. She did not stand. She did not turn around to face us.

Whatever Yudan Rosh had attempted, it did not work.

"Stasis, Yudan?" Jen Sahara's voice was naught more than a murmur, deep and throaty like the purr
of a rancor. "I expected a lightsaber in the back."

Inaction held me still; I no longer knew if I should go to Jen, or stride forward to knock the duplicitous Twi'lek flat.

"I will not allow you to fall again, Revan." Yudan's voice had lowered just like hers, but when I looked to him, I saw the palpable cast of defeat cross his face. His outraised limb shook, clenched, and then fell down to grasp his lightsaber.

Perhaps we fought for Jen in our own way, but Yudan Rosh could not win. Not like this. All he would accomplish would be to further damn the woman we both swore to follow.

"I know," Jen whispered.

Like a loose vine swinging back and forth in the depths of darkness, I once more stared uselessly at her bowed figure.

Further ahead, Bastila Shan had whirled around, flurries of dark material spinning around her like a wyyyyschokk's web. Her skin was chalk-white, and her eyes blazed with the foreign hue of corruption I had seen in the alien irises of Yudan Rosh. Bastila Shan had always been lithe for a Human, but the woman in front of us now bordered on skeletal.

Bastila's mouth tightened.

"Revan. We have spoken enough," Bastila clipped out. Her foreign accent was as crisp as I recalled, yet there was a hardness to it that was unfamiliar. "You must deal with your... your allies, and then face Malak alone. I cannot follow. From a distance I shall lend you my strength, all that we have together, and he shall be defeated."

I stepped forward.

"(Do not turn against her, Yudan Rosh)," I rumbled in the softest whisper I could muster. I took another stride, allowing the man the advantage of my back as I focused only on Jen. "(Honour can come after dishonour. Jen Sahara taught me that. Strength after corruption. Have faith in her, as she does in you)."

"Revan," Bastila prompted again, this time in overt irritation. "You understand enough. Your old general just assaulted you. We cannot accommodate unnecessary sentiment - not even yours."

"(Jen)." I was near her, now. I could see my own breath puff in the arctic air. Around her, the obsidian flickers held steady, like an encircling wreath of death. "(Please. This is not the way)."

But what words did I have to offer? Nothing more than the simple, stark utterances of a sentient that had no comprehension of the struggles one like her faced. All I had was a Wookiee's understanding of right from wrong.

Jen Sahara did not answer.

Bastila was glaring at me, now, as I stepped around to face Jen.

"I shall abide no interference, Wookiee," Bastila snapped. "Abide by the terms of your life-debt to Revan and obey our will, or face the consequences."

"You will leave him alone."
Jen’s voice was not loud, but the words still crashed implacably throughout the room. Her chin snapped up, and the turn of her profile was angular, almost sunken, in her strange hairless cheeks.

"Revan, the galaxy-"

"Will wait a minute. He has earned the right to speak his piece." Jen glided to her feet smoothly, silently, turning to gaze upon me. Her eyes... I had never been adept at reading the emotions of aliens. Yet the dispassionate way she viewed me through those darkened green eyes caught at my heart.

The woman I had travelled with for so long looked like she did not even recognize me.

"This is the only way." Her lips barely moved. "There is more at stake than we knew when we first embarked upon this quest."

Jen Sahara's words were slow, measured, and laden with a deep grief I could only presume stemmed from the horrors of her past. My gaze dropped to the flashes of nightfall that danced around her. I did not know if they were a manifestation of the corruption that shackled her, or simply an indication of her state of mind.

"(I know little of your Force, Jen Sahara)," I began slowly. "(I can only say what you and Bastila Shan and Juhani and Jolee Bindo have told me. This Dark Side is not a tool that can be controlled. You may have the right intentions, but when you start compromising your own honour those intentions change. You have been down this path before. You know where it ends)."

Jen jerked a hand upright, in the abrupt and universal motion for halt. It took me a brief moment to realize the gesture not directed at me - but at Bastila Shan.

I could not forget the mind-talk those two were capable of.

"(Your bond-sister would have you reclaim this factory)," I continued. I wondered what Bastila Shan was murmuring in Jen's mind. Lies? Threats? Promises? "(What will you sacrifice to do so? Will you destroy the starships outside that you vowed to fight for? Will you kill the allies that have been at your side and bled for your cause? Will you forsake everything, Jen Sahara, only to find you have become what you once were?)"

Jen's closed expression did not change, not at my words. But a second later, there was a flinch, and those heavy eyes shot back to Bastila.

Her bond-sister, whispering words of poison I could not hear.

"Sacrifice is required for a higher purpose," Jen said hoarsely, but she was staring at Bastila, now. "You must understand that, Zaalbar. I... sacrificed everything I held dear, last time, for the sake of the whole. All, all ruined..." The words trailed away, lost and bereft as a winter's breeze.

"For the sake of sentiment," Bastila cut in. Her eyes flashed the bright yellow of sunstone. "Because you trusted where you should not. This time it is different."

"(Is it?)" I whispered. "(Would any Force master truly agree with that?)"

"You know nothing, Wookiee!" Bastila snarled, face contorting in a fury that was as sudden as it was unbridled. One hand shot up, fist clenched, and for an instant I felt a tight band compress around my neck-

"I said no!"
Something frozen lashed through the room.

The pressure against my throat dispersed as if it had never been. Jen made no move that I could see, but the thwarted scowl on her bond-sister's face was answer enough.

"We have the power this time, Revan." Like the flick of a switch, Bastila Shan retreated into an eerie calm. "We have the strength to use it wisely, and the understanding to keep our focus on the true threat. Revan-
"

She stopped talking, but the two women were still fixated on each other. Words, unspoken, were travelling between them, and I had the sinking image of Bastila's will slowly entangling Jen's like a kshyyyy vine-

...

"(We are the guardians of Kashyyyk, Zaalbar)," Chuundar rumbled. "(And the wroshyrs are the pillars)."

We stood together in the depths of the Shadowlands, quiet and still as the area around us.

There was a balance in nature that Wookiees understood well, and the harmony of the encircling kshyyyy vines as they grew upon the mighty wroshyrs were but one example.

Sometimes, though, that balance was upset.

"(Tell me, brother, what do you see?)"

I frowned, staring at the massive hulk of the wroshyr. Everything from the tiniest dirt-bug to the ancient trees obeyed the cycle of life, and even the centuries-old wroshyrs would eventually succumb to old age or disease. Rough hanks of bark would erode, then, and the symbiotic kshyyyy creepers would no longer encircle the outer shell, reaching for the skies with the aid of Kashyyyk's pillars.

No, instead the kshyyyy found cracks in the trunk to snarl deep inside, slowly strangling the inner bark, tainting the wood-flesh with sap-poison as the vines hastened the inevitable.

The tree might take generations to die, but a decomposing wroshyr could make a gigantic mess.

"(This tree is not old)," I said slowly. "(Nor do I see any sign of disease, bar the blackening tar of kshyyyp sap breaching its trunk)."

Chuundar huffed in approval. "(Come)."

He began loping around the girth of the colossal tree; which, down here, bore little evidence of the kshyyyp vines that had overcome it hundreds of metres above. The creepers were no danger to Wookiees; in fact, their tough, sinewy fibres made them a staple in many of our constructions topside. But their prolific nature made them a danger to much of Kashyyyk's foliage - even the wroshyrs, if circumstances allowed.

"(There)." Chuundar raised a paw, indicating a jagged hole in the trunk only a scant few metres from the ground. I frowned again, staring at the edges of thick bark as the hole narrowed half a metre deep into the tree. I knew not what manner of event could have dealt this damage - but I could clearly see it was not a mark of decrepitude.

Near the base of the hole, a pale creeper - so thin and weak, down here in the lightless Shadowlands - had wormed into the inner hull of the wroshyr.
"(This happened some time ago. An accident. Perhaps some off-worlders trespassed here to hunt our big game, and crashed their vehicle into the wroshyr)." Chuundar's voice was calm. In his stead, my father would have been full with invective at the blight of foreigners, who found their way to Kashyyyk from time-to-time. "(But the tree is sound, Zaalbar)."

Chuundar reached down, one paw trailing the thin kshyyy vine down to the soil, before yanking it out by the roots.

"(I thought Father always left the kshyy vines alone?)" I ventured, as my brother began applying a ground paste of fermented wasaka leaves to the tangling fibres of the kshyy. It was one of the few substances known as toxic to the pervasive plant.

There was a rumble of amusement from my older brother. "(Father believes in allowing nature to find her own course. I think, sometimes, a guiding hand can help forge nature's strength. This wroshyr will remain a pillar of Kashyyyk for many generations yet)."

"(But it still bears the same weakness for a kshyy to find)."

"(The trunk shall thicken and scab over in time, Zaalbar)." Chuundar shrugged, wiping his paste-stained fingers on his flank. "(In the interim, we can stand watch. After all, we are Kashykk's guardians)."

It was a more proactive approach than our chieftain would take, but I found myself nodding in agreement. Chuundar snorted, before clapping a heavy hand on my shoulder.

"(Our father is wise, and it behooves you to listen to his words. But he is not all-knowing. Take heed of your elders, but learn to grow your own wisdom too, little brother)."

...  

Was Bastila Shan the kshyy vine slowly strangling Jen Sahara's will? Or was it the dark side of their Force, intertwined in that insidious mind-bond, that fettered the both of them?

"(My brother was once good and righteous, Jen Sahara)," I said softly. "(The Wookiee I faced a few weeks ago was not the same brother I revered. Yet there was a time when Chuundar's honour was greater than his ambition)."

I did not think she was even hearing my words. Jen, still, had her eyes locked with her bond-sister. An angry hiss cut through the chamber as Bastila Shan took a step closer. "Revan, this wastes time we cannot afford! The petty squabbles of some meaningless individuals-

"(Chuundar did not wake one day a villain!)" I hollered, drowning out Bastila Shan's disparagement with the strength of my voice. "(He could justify every action, Jen. Every time he believed the compromise of his own integrity was necessary-)

"The Wookiee is raving," Bastila snapped, her voice almost a growl. "Revan. This is of no import. Deal with him, so we can focus on what we must!"

I drew away from Jen to meet Bastila's vengeful glare. The battle was with her, I realized suddenly. With the tortured woman who had not even been on Kashyyyk. The one who no longer addressed me by name, whose poisoned eyes spat scorn and enmity and labelled me as nothing more than an obstacle to remove.

I understood, then, that I could not reach Jen Sahara over the acidic invective of the one chained to
And Bastila Shan was a Human I understood even less than Jen Sahara.

I huffed, drawing in a draft of air as I held the furious gaze of the fallen Jedi. "(My brother wrested control of the largest settlement on Kashyyyk, Bastila Shan)," I said, hurriedly searching for the words before she intervened again. "(Chuundar believed in the greater picture. He thought he was strengthening Rwookrorro, and that sacrifices were a small price to pay for his vision of the future. Right to the very end, when he struck out at his father and brother alike to hide his own atrocities, Chuundar still believed in his own ideal - and could not see how it had warped along the way)."

Did Bastila Shan dare to ignore the parallels? How sacrifice would erode objectivity, even in the best of men, even without the pernicious nature of their Force influencing matters?

There had been a time when Chuundar had revered and loved our sire. My brother had believed in a better world, and no doubt envisaged Freyyr as part of it. Once, Chuundar would never have dreamed of exiling our father, of striking out at him, of silencing Freyyr by any means possible. Jen Sahara had labelled the man dying behind us as Bastila Shan's own master. From what I understood of the Jedi Order, their masters raised Force-sensitive cubs as their own.

Riddled with blaster burns, Yudan Rosh had said. Vrook is your master! Jen had cried. Bastila, what did you do?

Sparks of furious white sprung to life, spitting and crackling around Bastila's clenched fists. At my side, the black glow dimmed. Bastila did not move forward to attack me, but I could read the desire to do so in the bunching of her shoulders.

"You dare compare the scrabbling of some backwater village with the fate of the galaxy?"

"(Look upon the body of your Jedi father!)" I roared, flinging a hand behind me.

Bastila Shan blinked. The jagged shards of white vanished, as if in surprise, as the woman stumbled back a pace.

But Bastila did not turn to look.

"(That is what you shall become, Bastila Shan!)" I cried, my forearm still gesturing to the wall behind us. "(How can you claim the greater good when your own actions belie it?)"

Her eyes narrowed. "Sacrifice-

"Sacrifice is fundamental, Zaalbar." It was Jen, stepping forward to flank me. I felt the bottom of my stomach fall out with the weight of her heavy words. My head turned, slowly, apprehensively, to face Jen Sahara again.

Her face was drawn; blank and dead as if she were no more than a carved effigy of remembrance. Her lips did not seem to move, but Jen Sahara's strangely low voice was impossible to ignore.

"Sacrifice is a truth I discerned during the Mandalorian Wars. Cede a few thousand to save five times that many. Grant the enemy ground if it gives you the overall strategic advantage. The Mandalorians are a warlike people, and we had to learn to fight the way they did."

All attention was on Jen Sahara, now. With a start, I realized the black dregs of her corruption had completely gone. Jen stood facing Bastila, eyes wide and dark and ancient as the galaxy itself. With a shiver of foreboding, I realized I had no idea if anything had reached Jen at all - or which side she
"Many thought the galaxy would be a safer place if the Mandalorians were driven to extinction." She continued speaking, voice as quiet as it was commanding. "Their culture encourages honour through combat, strength through the subjugation of others. But the Mandalorians are not the only warlike people amongst the stars. One could argue the Zabrak of Iridonia are just as bloodthirsty. Their love of violence blights the Zabrak species as a whole. Would peace not be more prevalent, galactically speaking, without the existence of the Iridonians?"

"(Jen, what are you saying?)" I rumbled, fists clenching in stark alarm.

"And we cannot forget criminal organizations like the Exchange. What do they offer, other than a means of encouraging the base desires of all who engage their services?" Jen Sahara's voice was monotone, hard as titasteel and just as implacable. "No, better to wipe every element of the Exchange from the galaxy. Czerka, too, if they keep dealing in extortionist trade and indigenous enslavement."

Bastila Shan was frowning, now. "Revan-"

"Disease is another factor, Bastila. Think of the rakghoul plague. Malak stopped at surface bombardment. Perhaps he should have bombed Taris into complete oblivion. Can you imagine the death toll should that virus ever be transmitted to other worlds?"

"Revan, you are being preposterous."

"Am I?" Jen cut in coldly. "Differing cultures and beliefs breed friction, and it is far more efficient to stamp out dissent than inveigle oneself in any form of mediation that fails more often than it succeeds. Think of the whole, Bastila," she mocked. "Think of the galaxy, not the individual."

"Of course there must be a balance-" Bastila was spluttering, bright spots of red dawning on her pale cheeks.

"Yes." The word was a hiss. "Balance. There's the magic word. And where's yours? When you cannot even look upon Vrook's body?"

"That is not fair!" The cry was plaintive, but Bastila still did not look.

"How much do you sacrifice, Bastila? How far do you go?" Jen drew in a deep breath, and she turned to face me. Somewhere, between the blank expression and the green eyes that now blazed with emotion, I could once more see the honourable hero I had sworn my life to.

Jen's next words, barely more than a whisper, stuttered us all into silence.

"How far do you go, until you become the war?"

xXx

**Yudan Rosh:**

*Have faith in her, as she does in you.*

I stood silent and still, my will eroded by a Wookiee's simple loyalty, realizing that my faith was as much with him as it was with Revan. That, perhaps, Zaalbar's method of vanquishing Darth Revan was a redemption I had started to believe in.

She had returned. She had stumbled, perhaps even fallen... and somehow found her way back to her
feet again.

The Force convulsed around Revan, an icy tidal wave of potential - once more held tight beneath an iron will. The power was deep, it was dark and all-encompassing... but it no longer owned her.

Revan glanced sideways, to acknowledge the Wookiee who embodied more wisdom than most Jedi I had ever known.

"How far do you go," she said softly to the room at large, "Until you become the war?"

Oh, Revan.

I heard a harsh intake of air as Bastila Shan struggled not to react. The latest paragon of the Jedi was younger than I expected, for all that I had seen her atop the Lehon holo-stand. She was shorter than Revan, and carried herself with an innate poise even while flaring with passionate fury. Bastila's rich brown hair was cinched back in tiny ornamental braids, leaving bare an aristocratic and unnaturally shock-white face.

So strange, to think that this slip of a Human had been the one to show Darth Revan such unwarranted mercy. It would have taken a special brand of devout courage... courage, that later faltered beneath the machinations of her own Order.

"The depth of power we can reach will hold us true, Revan!" Bastila's verbal riposte was more of a dying splutter. "You have seen this before-"

"And it's a load of kath crap I used to justify my own helplessness in the face of a horror I could not overcome," Revan broke in sharply, swinging back to stare solidly at her. "Bastila, all such power guarantees is that our darkness will simply be all the darker."

My jaw clenched. Fingers pressed hard against the grooves of Zhar Lestin's lightsaber. Revan recalled so little of her past, but the cursed Star Forge had evidently been bleeding back remnants to her. And despite that - or perhaps because of it - Revan now understood a truth that had eluded her before.

The Dark Side cannot be mastered without losing oneself.

I felt my voice return as I stepped forward. "No one in the annals of history has ever mastered the Dark Side and simultaneously remained true to the Light," I said in a low voice. Once again, I was entrenched at Revan's side. But this time - I hoped - it was a more conscious decision than in the past.

I would find my own path away from Revan one day. But not yet. Not yet.

Revan's head tilted ever-so-slightly in my direction, but she kept her attention fixed on the young woman Force-bonded to her. "It is the height of hubris to assume we can achieve what is patently contrary to everything the Dark Side entails," Revan said. "Your guards struck down Vrook. I highly doubt he was here to fight you, Bastila. How can you justify that with your goal of galactic harmony?"

The young woman flinched visibly. "He was- he was-"

"An inconvenience," Revan finished. Her voice softened. "I know. I mutilated the face of my own lover for the same reason."

Revan... remembers? She remembers that? The passion in her voice wasn't dark, but at that moment
I worried just how close she was to breaking. Revan was reaching Bastila Shan, now, but would either of them recover from the fallout?

"Malak was guilty!"

"But I believed him innocent!" Revan roared. "I saw that cursed memory, Bastila! I cared more about losing face among my own damn subordinates than the well-being of the man who had stood by me since infancy!"

My breath caught. I had always imagined that Revan had known at that juncture...

"Balance, Bastila," Revan continued hoarsely. "I don't know where the frelling balance should be, but I'd slid light-years past it by then. While slicing off a lover's jaw was by no means the worst atrocity I enacted, perhaps it was the most personal." She paused to draw in a shuddering breath. "When you lose empathy for those closest to you, what do you have left?"

Bastila Shan did not answer. She stood stock-still, unshed moisture glistening in those flawed, sun-bright eyes that mirrored my own.

Revan's voice dropped to a gentle murmur. "Look at Vrook's body, Bastila."

The younger woman jerked, but she still refused to heed. Twin tears budded and fell, tracking a telling path down her pale face. "You are- you are forgetting."

"The true threat?" Revan whispered. Like a sandcrawler, slowly but inexorably pressing her point home. "The scary danger we can't even define? The horror in the Unknown Regions? I claimed the Star Forge to fight against whatever it is. Who's to say that wasn't the enemy's plan in the first place?"

"What?" Bastila hissed in shock. The widening of her eyes said it all: that was a speculation that had never occurred to her. Or to myself. Or, I assumed, to Darth Revan.

"If so, then all I achieved, in the end, was to continue what Mandalore started. To further weaken the Republic - and the galaxy as a whole."

"No." Bastila shook her head wildly, delicate braids swinging, artificial light glinting against the betraying wetness on her cheeks. "No-"

"We don't know, Bastila. I don't know, and neither do you. All we have is broken fragments from my mind, and a handful of Malak's corrupted memories that he forced upon you. We can't trust either source!"

"The Star Forge is a relic of the Rakatan!" Bastila protested. "Their species is extinct! Whatever is beyond known space-"

"Yudan told me I learned of the Star Forge before I went to the Unknown Regions, Bastila," Revan cut in doggedly. With each word, I could sense the chaotic Force encompassing her harden, and the uncertainty around Bastila Shan grow. "So the knowledge was in my mind, when I rushed head-long to face something powerful enough to start the Mandalorian Wars." A harsh laugh escaped Revan. "Or maybe the Star Forge was purely my own decision. I simply don't know. But enlivening a millennia-old superweapon of the Dark Side to take on the Republic sure doesn't sound like the actions of a galactic guardian."

"You did it to save the Republic. To save the galaxy," Bastila whispered, her voice wobbling. "It was the only way to be strong enough to fight against- against- Dammit, Revan! If not for Malak, the
galaxy *would* be stronger, more defensible, lean and war-hardened and ready to stand firm against anything!"

"I don't believe that anymore," Revan countered in a flat voice. "And I certainly wasn't thinking about the Republic at the end. Bastila-" She broke off with a sigh. "This place amplifies every insidious desire and destructive thought you have. It slowly warps your intentions and purpose. If you allow yourself to succumb - *no matter what your end game is* - then one day you *will* find yourself betraying everything you value. Because you no longer value it." A ghost of a wry grin twitched at Revan's mouth, but her eyes were still so damn bleak. "I guess the Jedi don't have it all wrong - and I rather think you know it."

"But-" Bastila swallowed, and Revan took a step closer. Little more than a metre separated them, now. "But everything you've- *I've*- done... it's all been because... and it's all..."

"Ruined," Revan finished. "I know. We did it to ourselves, Bastila. But that doesn't mean we can't try to make it right. That you can't find your way back to the person you were."

There was a painful ache in my soul. It did not escape me that Revan excluded herself from that last sentence. *You are more like the champion you once were than you realize, Revan Freeflight.* I yearned to say the words aloud. *More than I believed could be possible.*

"I- I-" the young woman stuttered, and another teardrop trembled on her lashes. "I am not sure I know anything anymore."

Revan snorted loudly.

*There's my old friend,* I thought in exasperated affection. *Once more displaying her irreverence in the most dire of situations.*

"I know *that* feeling well," Revan muttered. "But the one thing I'm certain of is that the Star Forge must be destroyed. For the sake of the galaxy, Bastila." Her words were wry, teasing. "For the greater good."

"You- I- you cannot-" Bastila broke off, voice hitching and shoulders shaking. With a loud sob, she abruptly dropped her head into her hands. "Damn you, Revan!" she cried, voice muffled and broken. "How can you jest- such serious matters- must you always-"

Revan strode the last step forward, and with a half-muttered oath, embraced her bond-sister fiercely. The sense of amelioration was cathartic. My eyes closed briefly as I felt the inherent darkness around the two women contract. A victory like this wasn't won in a single conversation, but Revan was successfully holding the tide of calamity at bay. And Bastila Shan, I dared to hope, would prove strong enough to keep fighting the same demons we all did.

As the young Jedi prodigy fell to pieces in Revan's arms, I looked sideways to see the Wookiee appraising me.

"(Jen Sahara is unlike any sentient I have ever known)," Zaalbar rumbled in a quiet whisper. "(She is an astonishing individual)."

"I heard that, Zaalbar," Revan muttered, but she kept her arms tight around the sobbing Bastila. For all of Revan's levity, she sounded on the verge of tears herself. "Hah! *You're* the amazing one."

Personally, I rather thought they were both correct.
"Go to Vrook," Revan murmured. "While there's still time."

"I can't." I detested the feeble whimper my voice had devolved into, the helpless shaking of my shoulders as I stood, impotent, in the embrace of a mind-damaged former Sith Lord. Oh, the absurdity of allowing myself to become so undone, of being unable to hold back the tide of mortification, of shame-

-you will lose everything. they will not forgive. and Malak will win-

"The Star Forge-" I mumbled brokenly. What is the right way? Revan speaks of balance and empathy, but when I have sacrificed so much already... How can I truly know if turning back is the right path?

-the right path is the one that ensures the galaxy's survival at any cost-

Well, I'm hardly the judge on what's right, Revan's thought nudge against mine. There was an almost soulless quality to her mental presence. But I think I'm the master of what's wrong. Trust me, Bastila. Trust me.

-you convinced her before. you can do it again-

"The Star Forge still calls." My eyes were squeezed tight, yet still leaking incriminating tears of unchecked emotion. My face, wet and sticky like a child's, pressed hard into Revan's shoulder. My heart stuttered and shook with uncertainty, and I felt more adrift and lost than I ever thought possible.

"Yes," Revan uttered, a hollow echo of fathomless grief. She pulled back gently, and I could sense the exhausted struggle within her as she scrambled to overcome her own pain. "Right now, it's telling me I'd murder for a cup of caffia."

My breath hitched, and I found myself frowning in nothing more than pure reflex against such impudent flippancy. "Revan-"

The faint twitch at the corner of her mouth forestalled my response. "Coping mechanism, Bastila," she murmured in wry apology. I was at once beset with a recollection of her muttering something similar, during that thwarted escape run that now seemed a lifetime ago.

Surely no more than weeks had passed. Days, even. Yet in such a short span of time, I had transformed into someone entirely different. I no longer knew myself, let alone what I would do next.

-save the galaxy. what else can you do? what else would any true protector do?-

All I felt like I could do was follow Revan's lead.

Revan stepped back, dropping her arms. Her eyes were dark pools of desolation, and through the bond ricocheted a vacant sense of emptiness, a pervasive desire to cede all purpose and drive.

The sentiment stemmed from us both.

The Dark Side offered seductive power and freedom from transgression. The Light demanded accountability even as it strived for the lofty heights of selflessness.
I simply wanted to surrender and let someone else look after the galaxy for once.

"The kaiburr is nothing more than your own thoughts, Bastila," Revan said gently. "Corrupted, warped, and louder than normal... but it stems from your own soul."

"I am not sure if that makes it better or worse," I whispered.

The smile on Revan's face was so sad. My own despair and self-doubt were choking me, but every now and then I sensed a glimmer of her disposition... if my soul was a turgid ocean, hers was a chasm of devastation that spanned planets. Impossible to quantify or breach.

Yet there she was, standing before me, somehow finding the wherewithal to do what she must. I had the awful supposition that the only thing holding Revan together now was me. My brittle fragility and failure to cope, compelling her back into the role of leader.

Or, perhaps, Revan Freeflight merely had the grit to keep on going, no matter what she had to suffer through.

"It is not anything but an explanation, Bastila Shan," the quiet voice of Yudan Rosh spoke. Another flawed, fallen sentient, standing aloof from us with a distant expression on his Sith-marked face. "The Star Forge... the Dark Side tempts you with your deepest desires. Some of us have learned the hard way that what is delivered is but a corrupted version of your original intent. Of course, your intent has changed by then, but in the end, what you desire is often not even what you truly need."

He blinked, as if startled by his own words, and his attention sharpened on Revan who had raised a brow in question. The Twi'lek smiled faintly. "But now I am waxing philosophical, and that is most unbecoming for a former Dark Jedi."

Revan snorted. "Well, I did say you liked to act on the tragic side, Yudan. Although I suppose you've earned the right." Her gaze darted back to mine. "Bastila. The kaiburr is calling you because you are allowing it. You're meant to be at least moderately proficient at mental guarding," she said dryly, before her voice snapped into a steel command. "So raise your shields."

My teeth clenched.

And like a padawan bowing beneath the will of a master, I did as I was bid.

"Go," Revan ordered, taking a step back from me. "Go and see to Vrook."

I stumbled forward, blinking back the blurriness that obscured my vision, vaguely aware of the Wookiee - of Zaalbar - leaning over the fallen body in brown that was crumpled against the sloping wall.

Did Vrook still live? Could he still be alive, after all those- those bolts-

The searing sound of my own words - shoot out his knees. Scrape him off the floor of my chamber. If he tries anything, kill him - mocked me with my own cruelty.

I could have ordered him away- no, no, he would not have listened- but surely I could have stunned him or found some other method rather than order those Force-cursed guards to butcher my own master-

Hot tears scalded down my cheeks as I collapsed next to the man who had mentored me since childhood. Vrook had always been gruff and distant - but he was one of the only people I had left in the galaxy, now that I had spurned everything the Order had taught me.
"(His wounds are serious)," Zaalbar rumbled from across Vrook's motionless body. Dark blood soaked into tattered robes, leaving them more crimson than brown. "(The torso one is the most worrying)."

It was impossible to halt the flood of unbearable shame.

"Bastila," Revan said, coming to stand next to me. "The old man risked everything to come here for you. If he's any sort of Jedi, he'd consider his life a fair exchange. Vrook would be proud of you, right now, for turning away."

"Proud of me?" I stuttered in disbelief. "Revan, I have failed at everything-

"No, you haven't." Her voice was oddly quiet, and yet it silenced me regardless. "Because we're going to win."

I glanced up sharply; she had sequestered her mind from mine, a faraway look on her composed face, and a cool, steel edge to her presence in the bond. Perhaps Revan felt the weight of my gaze, for she looked back down at me with a faint smile.

It did not breach the hollow look in her eyes.

"Internal bleeding," Yudan Rosh intoned, walking closer. I could feel the strands of Force venture forth from the Twi'lek's grasp, investigative threads of energy that were well beyond any concentration I could currently muster. "He needs medical attention, and we have exhausted all supplies. My own prowess with healing was somewhat mediocre, even when I claimed the title of Jedi Knight."

Force abilities warped and changed with one's use of power. But surely, I could at least try-

"Draw him down deeper, Yudan." Revan's tone turned abruptly flat. "We're out of time. Malak is calling me."

I gasped, my eyes flying back to Revan, whose shoulders had tensed as she stared at the chamber's half-moon doors. *What- what does she mean? Malak is calling her - how?*

Revan sighed; a quiet slip of sound that barely registered. "It's time to move, and I need your skills elsewhere, Bastila. Vrook's survival will just have to rest upon luck."

"Luck," I mumbled brokenly, as the Force surged out once more from the Twi'lek. I fought against the inane urge to block the fallen man, even as I felt my old master subsume into a deeper, more stable, state of subconsciousness. "Master Vrook never believed in luck."

"Call it the will of the Force, then," Revan returned quietly. Her hand dropped to rest on my shoulder, a gentle prompt to leave. To leave my master, broken because of me. "Bastila, I need your skills out there. You can turn the tide around."

"Battle meditation," I whispered, feeling my eyes flutter at the thought. My entire being was fragmented into a hundred vacillating slivers of indecision, and even the thought of lapsing into *normal* meditation seemed absurd. "I- I cannot, Revan. It requires a level of concentration and purpose of mind that I simply do not have right now."

How could I play at being the Republic's puppet saviour again? After everything? It felt like hypocrisy of the worst sort.

"You can and you will." Revan's hard-edged command brooked no argument. "Because you must."
Only you can achieve this, Bastila. Revan's indomitable will hammered into me from all sides. The Republic has a shot at destroying the Star Forge, and that is the real victory today. I'll do my damnedest to get you out of here alive- but if I don't- if I fall against Malak, then we must make sure the Forge is taken out.

Despite everything I had considered and formulated in recent times, I found myself beginning to agree with her objective. Her objective, that had once been mine.

If the Star Forge is destroyed while we are on it-

Then we die. Yes. Revan did not even sound grieved at the thought - merely resolute. But the Republic will have a chance to rebuild. A chance to survive. If the threat is real, it has made no overt move yet.

The threat was real. That I was more convinced of it than the redeemed Darth Revan was absurdly ironic.

We blow the Forge, Bastila.

My head dipped in a nod.

I could not undo the travesty of my own actions, much the same as Revan, but perhaps- perhaps- we could begin to set things aright.

Revan. A low baritone punched into our conjoined awareness with the subtlety of a permacrete detonator. I will go after your little crew if you do not come-

A brief flash of psychic power flared from Revan, and the mocking voice was cut off abruptly.

My gasp was loud and harsh. Revan's eyes narrowed as my own widened in shock. Malak. His voice was familiar and frightening and loathsome, and had never entered my consciousness from such a distance before.

Malak was- was speaking into Revan's mind from afar- and how long had that been happening?

I knew how powerful he was, with the kaiburr's strength in his clenched fist, deep within the nexus of this place. That is part of why I strove to claim it for our own. Because I knew we could not be victorious otherwise.

No, no, I had been thinking of the galaxy-

"Bastila, you can spend your days berating yourself for a fall you had no chance to evade after-" Revan's voice was almost a growl. "After we win. But we're out of time. Leave Vrook, and-" she stopped, abruptly, frowning as she stared at the body. "Overconfidence," she muttered under her breath, glaring at Vrook.

Everyone is fallible. Revan's voice rang in my mind, but somehow I knew she wasn't speaking to me. Even you. Especially you.

I felt like I had heard those words before.

"Bastila," Revan said sharply, giving her head a little shake. "Stand up."

With a start, I remembered. The memory, sharp and brittle like broken ferraglass, of Darth Revan
floating in that kolto tank while one master after another took turns apiece to stare at the comatose Sith Lord I had brought to Dantooine.

I had shared that recollection with Revan, during our desperate flight for freedom. So odd - and strangely sad - that what she focused on was Vrook's castigation as he had glared upon her stricken form.

"Leave the past behind," Revan was saying, as she pulled me to my feet. "I need you in the present, Bastila. I have faith in you. Just like you have always believed in me."

In that instant, I could feel the strength of her regard shine through our bond like a beacon of warm light.

"You had the courage and strength to face down a Sith Lord on her own flagship," Revan murmured, "Even when the corpses of Jedi Masters lay warm by your feet. This - this is no more than a hand of pazaak by comparison."

The smile on my face was tremulous, but the hope within, I thought, beheld a stronger core.

Whatever would happen to me later was of no import. Not now. My focus narrowed to one objective only: destruction of the Star Forge.

"Three fallen scions of the Jedi Order, standing against the might of the Sith Empire," Yudan mocked in a gentle voice. "Things are never dull around you, Revan."

The corner of Revan's mouth twitched, but she did not turn from me. "I will stand watch until you start, Bastila," she murmured. "But then I must go."

Revan gestured impatiently to the centre of the chamber, and as I began to move, I saw her gaze linger over the dismantled form of that dreadful robot. Her thoughts grew distant, once more, as she withdrew from us all, thinking only on her next steps. On what was required of her, despite the yearning desire to avoid what she must be anticipating as the most horrific encounter of all.

Malak.

As I fell to my knees, I glanced one last time over my shoulder. A thoughtful frown was pleating Revan's brow as she looked over Yudan and Zaalbar, before she took a deep breath in and her mouth edged into grimness.

I knew, then, that she meant to go alone.

xXx

Forn Dodonna:

::It has been a pleasure, Forn.:: Admiral Rickard Gant stared at me seriously through the holo-stand. His Core-bred accent was almost drowned out by the wail of his dreadnought's emergency sirens.

::Get as many of those Sith bastards as you can. I'll see you on the other side.::

"Rickard," I bit out. "Get yourself to the escape-"

Gant's holo-image winked out abruptly.

I allowed my eyelids to flutter closed for one second only.

"Sensors indicate the inertial compressor of the Astral Pride has been destroyed," a tech said, his
inflection devoid of any emotion. Only the sharpest made it to my command deck; only those that wouldn't break in the face of death. "Thermal readouts indicate life support systems are failing."

Gant's *Astral Pride* had been in service longer than the *Meridus*. I never, truly, thought I would live to see the dreadnought's demise. I never thought I would hear Admiral Rickard Gant admit defeat.

Or Adashan, gruff old dinosaur that he was.

"Status report on the *Meridus,*" I clipped out. Surrender was no option; I knew that as well as Gant. As well as Adashan. "Inform all Wing Leaders to evade any proximity to the break-up of the *Astral Pride*, and absorb all of Gant's remaining starfighters into our squadrons."

"Right away, ma'am."

"Epsilon Squad are surrounded," Commodore Tar'coya slurred, from his place next to the holo-topographic. He was pointing a stubby finger deep into the diaphanous map, near one of the needling fins of the Star Forge. "They made it near that cursed thing's turbines, but they're taking too much heat to do anything about it."

"Ma'am, our primary shields are down to forty percent," the closest tech said. His neighbour was busy muttering orders into his headset. "We've isolated the hull breach, but otherwise the *Meridus* is sound."

I had Gant to thank for that. He'd drawn the *Astral Pride* away, knowing it would tempt the advancing Sith forces into targeting either his flagship or my own, leaving one of us intact to direct the Republic vanguard - for whatever time we had left.

A fourth and final force had entered Lehon airspace some minutes ago, beneath the banner of a commodore who was as inexperienced as his fleet was small. The accompanying snubfighters had been immediately ordered to defend the *Meridus*, allowing my men to forge further ahead. I doubted not the commander's bravery: merely the longevity of his life, once the *Meridus* faltered.

I felt my lips thin as I struggled to tamp the bitter ash of defeat down. Oh, the Senate would rally more troops, no doubt; but this had been our one chance to strike while Darth Malak was on the backfoot, our one shot at blowing out the heart of his strength before the Sith had time to reinforce.

This battle was the epoch of the war, I knew. And between the initial assault of the scrambler, and the ongoing cancer of Bastila Shan's battle meditation, the outcome had been painfully obvious for some time.

I turned from the holo-stand, and strode firmly to Tar'coya's side. However it would end, we would go down fighting - for the Republic.

"Have they landed any damage?" I asked, frowning at the isolated group of the snubs swamped by almost three times as many. All other squads were too far away to assist; Epsilon were on their own. We simply could not afford to send them any of our dwindling fighters.

I knew when it was time to cut one's losses, but it never sat well.

"No," Tar'coya growled. "Damn bogeys were all over Epsilon the moment they got close. Although our losses have stabilized in the last few minutes - there! Another one down," he ended, as a red spark died beneath his finger.

"Leave Epsilon," I ordered curtly. "Order Rho and Tau squads to the ventral fin. They might have a chance while the Sith are occupied with Epsilon."
"Stabilized," Vandar murmured, thumping his walking stick gently on the ground. The Jedi Master had been oddly quiet ever since the Ebon Hawk had docked in the space station - and the uncertainty of allowing blasted Revan Freeflight free passage still sat uncomfortably within me. At the end, I had to concede her logic was sound: we gained nothing by detaining her at this juncture. If, against all odds, she actually prevailed, there would be opportunity to deal with her later.

The Jedi Order's time of exonerating their own villains had come to an end.

"Not the only squadron, I see, that has found their fortune transformed." Vandar had raised his stick to gesture at a group of green specks on the other side of the battleground. Adashan squad, the few surviving remnants from the old general's fleet, all patched together in one final fist of strength.

"Adashan Seven is down," the tech behind me reported. "Adashan Wing Leader reports all nearby bogeys cleared. They are free for another run at the Star Forge, ma'am."

"About time we had some flaming luck." Tar'coya's jowls were twitching. "Look, Rho's closing in already."

"Luck," Vandar echoed, but his word was a question. The little green Jedi had closed his eyes and, of all things, appeared to be humming.

"Send Adashan in to back up Rho and Tau," Tar'coya commanded, frowning as he submerged his stocky head deep within the translucent holo-map. "If they're fast."

"Epsilon Three is down." Another clipped update from the consoles. "But he took out five marks first."

"I can see that," I said slowly, wonderingly, my eyes pinned on the remaining four Epsilon strikefighters that were taking an awfully long time to die.

"Done it, she has." Vandar's voice was strong, suddenly, and brimming with emotion. "Effects of battle meditation on our side, now, we are beginning to see."

"Vandar," I snapped, glaring at him, unable to believe the sudden burn of hope in my chest. "Are you- are you absolutely certain?"

"Battle meditation," Tar'coya parroted, jerking back to scowl angrily at the Jedi Master. Oh, Tar'coya had been riled when Vrook had absconded; even more so when he learned that Bastila Shan was working against us. Any more of the truth would likely set the veteran Sullustan off into a righteous rage for weeks.

Good thing Tar'coya had been otherwise occupied when the Ebon Hawk - and Revan - had been on the holo-comm earlier. I held the man in relative high regard, but Tar'coya did have a tendency to allow his biases to colour his objectivity.

Not that I could entirely blame him. Not when it came to Revan Freeflight.

"How come a wrinkled master of your supposed experience can't achieve what a traitorous young Human can?" Tar'coya growled, flashing his black eyes at the short Jedi Master. "It's ridiculous that no one else in your flaming Order knows how to waggle around this fancy meditation."

"No more than myth, many of us believed, before Nomi Sunrider rediscovered the art," Vandar replied in a calm, high-pitched creak. He dropped to one knee, then, and raised a three-fingered hand to his furrowed brow. "But help, at least, I can. My strength, I can send, to bolster Bastila Shan - if she will accept it."
The cryptic old master hummed again, before his eyes shut tight, and a golden glow of esoteric light began to radiate out from his crouching form.

To give my men credit, only two of the console technicians glanced Vandar's way, startled, before their attention snapped back to their work. Tar'coya let out a derogatory grunt - such a contrast from the adulation he had once levelled at the Jedi - and turned back to the topographic.

"Epsilon squad is down. But they- they wiped out all bogeys bar five. That won't be enough to stop Rho and Tau." The reports of my comm techs were always relayed in flat, emotionless tones - but this time I heard something new.

"Rho squads' going in for their first sweep on the ventral fin," another said. "Tau's holding the heat back; it could be a good run."

Hope.

"Vandar's right," Tar'coya admitted with a snort. "We're badly outnumbered, Forn. But we're beginning to break through despite the odds. Sigma are still active around the anterior fin. And, look- Rho and Tau are holding steady, they might be okay without Adashan squad. We could send Adashan in between the fins to aim for the belly of the beast."

I frowned, considering. Targeting the turbines, as we had been, would only halt factory production. There were generators behind the turbines we hoped to breach - as a means for destroying the superstructure - but we'd always known it would take multiple direct hits.

A quicker route would be blowing the massive transformer housed at the base of the Star Forge. Tucked away in the centre of the three massive prongs, and protected by turbo-laser defense matrices on all sides. Between the factory-powered lasers, and the swarm of Sith strikefighters, we hadn't come close enough yet to even try.

"Send out a Fleet-wide comm to all starpilots," I ordered suddenly. Morale, I knew, could sometimes achieve as much as the Force could. "Inform them that Jedi Bastila Shan is now empowering the Republic armada with her battle meditation. Tell them that today, we will see the fall of the Sith Empire."

Tar'coya frowned at first, and I could see his doubt over the wisdom of my missive lurking in his alien gaze. Beside us, Vandar Tokare crouched motionless, still encased in a mystical hue of light.

I lowered my voice to a murmur. "Many out there won't know she was working against us, Tar'coya. Many won't even know she was captured - and if they do, what they will glean from the transmit is that we have liberated her."

"Bastila Shan is a war criminal," Tar'coya growled. "Who is personally responsible for any number of our fallen today-"

"She is a young woman who has been held captive by a Sith Lord, Commodore." I allowed my tone to harden with displeasure. My men were circumspect, and professional - but I'd be an idiot if I didn't expect the closest techs to be listening in with half an ear. "Bastila Shan is a Republic hero, and has no doubt suffered through unimaginable horrors at Darth Malak's hand - all because of the Force abilities she used relentlessly in the name of the Republic. Be glad our strike team have recovered her, and be proud that she is still strong enough to fight on our side."

Tar'coya subsided, and his sharp nod, while not exactly cordial, did appear to be in grudging agreement with me. For even Tar'coya could admit that Bastila Shan was more hero than villain.
That she could be forgiven, if not lauded.

The Force and the Jedi Order alike could damn me, though, before I allowed them to grant Revan Freeflight any form of refuge - brain damage or not. I may have denied her abilities to her face, but I'd known exactly who I was dealing with on the holo-comm. That had most assuredly been the same Jedi Knight I'd once known. The driven, passionate, powerful Knight who had fallen so dramatically.

If Revan had already rescued Bastila Shan, then it was a safe bet to assume she still grasped the same astronomical power.

"Send Adashan in to target the transformer," Tar'coya ordered, and I followed his command with a curt echo of approval toward the nearest tech. With Rho unleashing their first torpedoes at the ventral turbines, and Adashan swinging around to engage on a risky trajectory that might yield an even bigger payload, we were on the offensive for the first time.

We'd had no communication back from the Ebon Hawk, or from either Zeta snub that'd made it in with them. The statistician in me hadn't expected success; heck, the odds on any of them making it inside the Star Forge in the first place had been minimal.

But I'd been the one to approve the use of Zeta squad to cover the Ebon Hawk, despite Tar'coya's overt incredulity.

It hadn't been Captain Onasi's faith, nor Vandar's urging, that had convinced me to cede to Revan. No - simply that I had seen her nail too many reckless manoeuvres in the past, no matter what side she stood on. From rogue Jedi to Republic hero to Sith Lord to... whatever she was now.

If Revan toppled Darth Malak - her old second, her own creation - I wouldn't even be surprised, although I imagined Tar'coya would eat his own hat.

But Revan was too dangerous to let live.

*Focus on the star battle, Forn,* I chided myself, reigning back the wandering thoughts. *One step at a time.*

And as one of the techs confirmed a direct hit on the ventral turbine, and another rattled through a series of Sith snub casualties, the blaze of hope burned brighter.

There'd been a time when it had felt natural to have faith in Knight Revan. Now, as I stood knowing that no one in the brass would allow her survival, it was surreal to recognize that my faith in her was still there.

**xXx**

**Revan Freeflight:**

A hard knot in my chest eased when I sensed the first fingers of Force stretch out from Bastila's kneeling form.

My soul was ground away; worn down and brittle, like a hollow echo of something that had once been whole. If I let myself pause, I could still taste the uncontrollable rage from earlier, mingled with the frigid floe of calculation that saw the galaxy as nothing more than a game board. A dejarik match to win. A round of And'zhai runes marked out to obliterate any who stood against me.

It was a struggle to conceal the strength of my detachment from Bastila, and I wasn't entirely sure I'd
succeeded. I'd pulled her back - but only because Zaalbar's words had reached me.

*To think, that the analogy of a scramble for Wookiee chieftainship could be compared with what we face.* I'd understood Bastila's derision, but the weight of Zaalbar's wisdom had hit harder.

Golden threads of attachment; the links I had forged with all my companions. Anchors holding the dark at bay.

*Jolee brought me back from the edge on the Leviathan. Carth did the same, back on Korriban.*

And now I meant to face Malak alone.

A knock from behind had me turning; Zaalbar, leaning forward, to pound on HK's unresponsive back.

"(His actuator is damaged, I believe)," Zaalbar growled. "(A loose connection due to his crash against the wall)."

"So you try percussive maintenance," I muttered, recalling HK suggesting something similar once.

On me.

It'd seem like an amusing titbit of karma, if not for the fact that HK was my own, creepily comical, creation.

Zaalbar grunted, before thumping harder against the droid's torso. With a faint electronic hum, a crimson glow shot to life in the droid's photoreceptors. Zaalbar landed one last blow, before HK spun on a metallic foot, his working limb shooting suddenly upwards to point a weapon directly at the Wookiee.

"Threat: Do that once more, Mobile Carpet, and my personal safety parameters will override the master's no-kill criterion."

"(You will need a better weapon first)." Zaalbar huffed, flicking a dismissive paw at the upraised projectile launcher in HK's grip.

The barrel of the thing was warped - no, *bent* - almost a full one-eighty, turning the launcher into a more a work of abstract art than a weapon. HK's head cocked, as if in surprise. With a mechanical cluck of disgust, he threw the scrap weapon on the ground.

One second later, and a slim-line disruptor had retracted smoothly from the droid's forelimb.

"Statement: Master, while Upright Soporific is no longer an apparent threat to your personage, I point out once more the limitations of my abilities when I am forced to work within the restrictions of your dewy-eyed directive."

There was a soft footfall at my side. "Bastila Shan has commenced her meditation. Leave the Wookiee behind to guard her," Yudan murmured. I could feel the intensity of his gaze. "Malak's strength grows, Revan. It is time for us to face him."

My eyes drifted closed. Oh, Yudan wasn't going to like this.

"Exultation: My joy at facing a worthy foe such as Meatbag is tempered only by my inability to fire a weapon at him. Insistence: Master, redact that insipid no-kill list or my only option will be to physically hurl my disruptor at your former apprentice."
"What?" It took a second. I blinked, my jaw dropping open, feeling the shiver dance down my spine as HK's inference slowly made sense. That no-kill list he'd rattled off on Lehon- it'd been a litany of fleshbag synonyms- yet HK had always used those absurd nicknames not just as a taunt but also a unique reference to specific sentients-

And I'd created him during the worst part of my past.

My lips felt suddenly dry. "HK, who is on my no-kill list? Apart- apart from the recent additions."

HK's head cocked as he replied. "Answer: Karon Estharre-Ryn Enova, Zhar Lestin, Meetra Surik, Xaset Terep, Arren Kae, Yudan Kala'uun Rosh, Malak Devari."

"Huh." The air choked out of my throat. My eyes blinked furiously, as my own heartbeat thundered in my ears. I was so convinced that Malak would never... no matter what I did, I still had that blind, idiotic presumption that he would always follow me. I even made sure my own damn assassination robot wouldn't be able to take him out!

"Revan." A quiet murmur from a different ghost of my past.

I swallowed. "HK... how about you remove Malak from that list?"

"Confirmation: Already done, master."

"Karon and Zhar are on that list." The whisper of Yudan's voice was barely audible. "Revan, if that odd piece of machinery was created after you held mastery of the Star Forge, why would you order it to leave two Jedi Masters alone?" He sounded... odd. There was an inflection in his voice I couldn't decipher. "Perhaps I can understand Meetra, for she and Xaset were already powerless and exiled by then. But why would you... and who is Arren Kae?"

I raked a hand abruptly through my hair. "If you don't know, Yudan, then how the frell do you expect me to? I don't recognize half those people." Some of the names meant nothing. Yudan - and Carth - had mentioned Meetra before. A famous hero of the Jedi Thirteen. But... the name was a blank. "Sun and stars," I muttered, "Maybe I just wanted to take out Karon and Zhar personally."

And the black irony was, in the end, I'd witnessed both their deaths anyway. I could've saved them, if I'd only been quicker, hadn't run, or held it together-

"I don't- it doesn't matter," I said in a rush, feeling edgy and hollow and most of all - driven to start moving. "I've got to- I've got to go."

"(You mean to leave us here)," Zaalbar said softly, his voice a gentle burr. Zaalbar understood why, I thought. From the growing black expression on Yudan's face and the indignant jerk of HK's triangular head, I could see the Wookiee was the only one.

"Objection: Master, I question your erroneous use of the singular-"

"HK, you are to stay here and guard Bastila Shan from any danger," I clipped out gruffly. "No complaints. You'll take orders from Zaalbar or Yudan."

Or- or Bastila, I almost said. Almost.

"Revan-"

"She's the central game piece, Yudan," I uttered in a low, hard voice. My attention shifted deliberately to Bastila, making it obvious exactly who I was speaking of. In my head, Bastila had
dimmed to a hum of shaky concentration. Shakier than I would've liked.

I didn't know how much Bastila had been swayed back to our cause, and how much was simply her conceding to me out of soul-wrenching exhaustion.

I let my gaze slowly recoil back to Yudan. "I'm just the distraction," I whispered to him. "Don't you see? If I can hold Malak at bay long enough for Bastila to turn the fleet battle around, allow the Republic a shot at destroying-"

"Revan!" Hands slammed down on my shoulders, fast and hard enough for me to jerk with surprise. The scowl on Yudan's face was as fierce as his gaze. "You cannot face Malak with such a self-destructive attitude, alone or otherwise!"

"No, you misunderstand-" I choked, and Carth's demand rang through my head like a bell.

_I promise you'll get out of there alive._

I blinked hurriedly, feeling my focus harden once more. "I'll do everything I can to end Malak and get us all out, Yudan. But my primary objective is the destruction of the Star Forge. First and foremost."

Yudan stilled. His hands dropped, as slowly as his nod of acquiescence. "I... understand that logic, Revan. But you cannot convince me that you are better off alone."

Yes. Yes, I can. My throat felt suddenly tight. "You vowed to kill me if I fell, Yudan."

Yudan's expression tightened, like he knew I had a play in motion, but could not see the game yet. "I did. I did and I shall. But we both know what a fall is, Revan. As does your Wookiee. A stumble is not a fall."

Somehow, I didn't think he would've allowed me that grace a week ago. Yudan's eyes flared as they stared into mine. There was a sharp ring of yellow bordering the pupil, that shone with the dregs of corruption, but in amongst it were flecks of-

"Blue," I whispered. _Crystalline blue._ "Your eyes. They're, they're changing-"

He blinked, and looked uncharacteristically startled before chuckling ever so quietly. "If I actually walk away from this place alive, I have no idea what the future holds for me." Yudan's face softened, turned gentle with affection. The look was so unfamiliar- like, despite the years of friendship we'd obviously had, before the torn veil of my broken memory, he'd still kept emotional guards up around me-

That was... an odd thought. It didn't really seem to make sense.

But one thing I did realize, down to the marrow of my bones- _I trust him. Implicitly_. I cleared my throat, still holding his gaze. "Bastila is... she is my weakness, Yudan. My vulnerability."

One brow quirked at me in mild amusement. "I do understand that, Revan."

"No, I mean..." I looked away, and my voice dropped to a whisper. "Our bond. It's strong... stronger than anyone ever expected. Bastila is convinced that if one of us dies, the other will follow. And she, of all Jedi, would know."

"Revan..." Yudan's voice was low, the whisper of spidersilk against granite. "Your droid and the Wookiee will guard her life with their own. I would be of more use-"
"That's- that's not all." I glanced back to him, and felt my teeth grit. "I've stumbled a lot. You don't know the half of it. Nisotsa... I- look. If I stumble in the heart of the Star Forge, I don't think I'll return. Not against Malak. Not next to the kaiburr. I'll fall once more to what I was. You vowed, once, to end Darth Revan." I saw his eyes widen slightly, as the implication hit. "Take Bastila out, and you'll take me out. Dark or light."

Yudan's expression turned stone-cold serious, and his intense gaze roved over my face, like he was memorizing it. I felt unbearably sad, then, that our past was one giant black hole in my head. I'd forgotten so much, and I found myself yearning for more remembrances of him.

"Go," he whispered. And, then, the slightest of smiles curved his lips. "Go do what you're best at."

I stepped back, already turning, thoughts already shifting further afield, as something slammed ungently against my mental shields.

Malak. I had to leave. His preference might be for me to come to him, but the man was an idiot if he chose to wait much longer. He'd already threatened my crew-

"(Jen. Go. We shall stand guard)," Zaalbar rumbled.

And for all that I had to leave, it only took one second to-

Zaalbar's furry arms cinched tight around my torso as I barreled into him. The musky scent of snarled fur made my nose wrinkle, and I wondered idly when Mission had last wheedled him into a 'fresher.

It was the light, inane thoughts like that which kept me anchored. Kept me sane.

"Your life-debt is fulfilled, Zaalbar," I said, drawing back. "I'll kick your furry arse if you don't concede that."

The Wookiee huffed, but his head dipped in a nod. "(Fight with honour, Jen Sahara. Who you were does not matter. Be true to who you are now)."

"I will," I promised with a faint smile.

Then I turned. Drew deep on the Force, and left the chamber in a sudden sprint.

    xXx

Chapter End Notes

    Coming up next: Revan vs. Malak
A silo of foraged wasaka berries to kosiah for the beta.

Also, there's a character glossary up in chapter 1 now, if you are interested.
Nexus: Fulcrum – Part I

Revan Freeflight:

The corridors blurred.

I lost all sense of my surroundings. The only sound that registered was the thud of my footfalls, one after another, on and on as either instinct or muscle memory propelled me ever forward.

I ran down a ramp, lurched over a guard-rail, landed a few floors below before barrelling left into another anonymous service corridor.

The path wasn't familiar to me, not consciously, but my limbs knew the quickest route to take.

The Force was reeling me in to the centre of the Star Forge – and I didn't know if I was a gormless tach hopping into a scent trap, or a zakkeg ruthlessly hunting down its prey.

And in my head, the murmuring grew to cacophony with every step I executed.

-this place is yours. light or dark or somewhere in between. you can master it again, do it different this time-

Silken whispers of promise-

-this is the only way. the only way you can win-

-but the promise was offset by other words, other voices, other snatches of memory. Memories that acted like a scattershot of faith dispersing the intangible yearning of the kaiburr to be mastered.

"You won't win if you fall."

"I stand in the light, Revan. Stay in the light with me."

"There is no emotion, there is peace."

Tucked away deep in a corner of my mind, Bastila was a kernel of power. Shaky, unsteady, and delving into a meditation she wasn't entirely invested in.

But doing so regardless, because of me.

And that was a strength in itself. Bastila, turning back around and fighting for me, guarded by my insane droid – and two of the sentients I trusted most in the galaxy.

"Revan Freeflight, whom I thought long buried, rose anew from the ashes."
"Who you were does not matter. Be true to who you are now."

Cool metal walls brushed against my palm. The Force was thickening, a calefaction of fire, malicious and burning with enmity. I could feel my speed slow as the air itself turned heavy with heat and hate.

I was closing in.

Malak's power was thrumming around me now, and each leaden pace was harder than the last. I felt like a flicker of light slowly fading against the suffocating encroachment of the dark.

"Your friends are what give you strength, Revan. Don't forget that."

"You go take out Darth Poodoo, and we'll have your back."

"Whatever happens, it'll be a battle song worthy for the stars."

I clenched my teeth, and drove forward.

Spherical walls of cinereous grey loomed ahead. Awaiting me was a massive dome of silver, a chamber-sized bulb nestling in the heart of the Star Forge. The nexus of my past.

I knew what was beyond.

The kaiburr. Malak. My end game.

"Promise me you'll get out of there alive."

There was a hatch set into this side of the dome.

-come forward. you can win. you can have everything you desire-

Revan.

My hand rose, and the hatch opened.

xXx

Canderous Ordo:

Something was poundating at the base of my skull. Mouth dry like I'd knocked back one too many vox shots; limbs aching like I'd spent all night at an aay'hen fest with a pair of akaanir dala. Hands empty-

The realization jerked me into action. I lurched sideways into a roll, grasping wildly for a weapon that wasn't there as I came up in a ready crouch.

Coming to like this was getting all too kriiffing commonplace.

Vision blurrily morphed into sense. The hangar was empty. The hole where the entrance hatch had been was deserted. Last thing I'd seen was my own frag grenade prematurely detonating only metres away from my head, just as that robed shabuir had waltzed in like he owned the place.

"Status," I croaked into the comm. "Onasi? Who's up?"

::Canderous?:: Mission's voice, squeaking in my ear. Followed by a sob. ::I saw- I saw-:: She trailed off into another incoherent sob.
"Pull yourself together, *ad'ika,*" I ground out, hauling myself unsteadily to my feet. A deep throbbing behind my ears had me cursing the lack of a helm, but I’d discarded that against those damned battle-droids. "Spit it out. Where’s that kriffing Dark Jedi?"

::Ran back out the hatch::: It was that Republic marksman Tobards, the one on the roof of the *Hawk* who’d fired a lame-arsed shot at me earlier. ::I had a good view from up here, but I couldn't do a blasted thing. My gun was ripped out of my hands:::

::Dustil::: Onasi cut through the airwaves, voice shaky and threaded through with pain. I spotted movement further ahead – the man himself, leaning heavily against a line of consoles.

Onasi looked as groggy on his feet as I felt.

::Your son lured the blighter away, captain::: the Republic grunt continued. ::Probably saved all our lives. That Dark Jedi was doing something to Jedi Bindo, but your son drove him back to the entrance hatch. Then- then he left:::

I spotted my blaster lying metres away, and just past the nearby snub was another discarded gun – *Mission’s,* I thought, as I heaved forward to grab them both.

::Left::: Onasi barked, voice hoarse. ::Dustil- his comm's still alive- Dustil, dammit, can you hear me?:::

A crackle of static met his demand. I felt my mouth turn down in a hard grimace as I levelled the blaster at the remains of the entry hatch. Oh, Sithkid had some power in him, I didn't deny that – but I'd heard enough from both Revan and old man Bindo to ascertain exactly how much training the boy lacked.

Onasi’s son didn't have a chance against a Dark Jedi powerful enough to knock us all out with one sweep of his robed hand.

::Dee ran into the Star Forge, Carth::: Mission whispered, daring to voice what all of us already knew. ::And that Dark Jedi's gone after him:::

   xXx

**Revan Freeflight:**

*Breathe in.*

The chamber was colossal. Larger even than it appeared from the outside.

*Breathe out.*

The floor was a vast circle of chrome with a railing edging around the outside. Darkened pillars loomed behind the railing at regular intervals, adding a gloomy feel to the chamber that seemed more of a shadowy aesthetic touch than a structural necessity.

In the centre rose the majestic kaiburr, a murky uncut mineral of grey, towering some ten metres high as it brushed the ceiling. Veins of vermilion red flushed an iridescent hue as they spider-walked deep into the translucent crystal.

The kaiburr was hauntingly, eerily beautiful.

*Breathe in.*
The stone pulsed, a massive heart beating out flurries of chaotic energy, all funnelling into-

Breathe out.

-Malak.

My breath hitched.

The figure was dwarfed by the imposing rock, and if not for the Force he would be almost unnoticeable. He was facing me, legs apart, arms folded, clad in an exoskeleton of black-and-grey.

The Force poured into him, eddies of darkness churning into a wild cyclone fuelled by emotion so intense I almost choked in reaction.

He took a step. Then another. And a third- before he was striding forward like all the ominous misdeeds of my past rushing forth to slam me into the nothingness I deserved.

But, in the end, what I deserved did not matter. Not here, at the crux of everything.

Malak came to a stop some metres in front of me, yellow eyes gleaming with malevolence.

"And so," his mechanical voice jeered, the thrum of his voder jarringly harsh. "The shell returns to her former seat of power."

The automated timbre of his voice was utterly discordant with what my mind expected.

Malak was tall, impressively so, and his form-fitting armour exuded a perception of tightly coiled musculature. Something brushed wistfully against my soul, like the sigh of a long-forgotten wraith. I could imagine a thick crop of brown hair instead of a tattooed pate, whiskey-coloured eyes instead of poisoned yellow, a fierce expression of devotion instead of-

"Mal," I croaked. My eyes were dry. My mind stilled to a blank.

All of the past echoes I had encountered- the ones who had truly known me- Karon, Zhar, Yudan, Nisotsa- I'd felt something. A kindling of empathy, emotion, of recognition deep within my core – even if my own memory failed me time and again.

The man standing in front of me was as familiar as home. As familiar as death.

And I felt nothing.


Nothing- but feeling nothing made no sense. In front of me towered the very foundation of my past – had the Jedi somehow burned all of that away, leaving me only with wisps of memory disjointed from any emotion whatsoever?

No. The Dark Side did that, my mind whispered. Beneath the apathy, I knew, rippled a crevasse of black grief I couldn't afford to lose myself in. Others followed the shadows I cast, some close enough to trail in my wake – but Malak was the one who held my hand while I destroyed myself.

And then I threw his hand aside, and let the dark devour us both.

Malak took another step forward. The iridescence of the kaiurr gleamed against his striped head, against the chrome jaw I had given him. "Long have I anticipated this confrontation, Revan, even if I did not believe you would make it this far. But then fate has always laid its heavy hand upon your
path." He paused for a brief moment, as if considering his next words. "Well. However fleeting your struggle will be, I know I shall savour it." Malak laughed, then; harsh and forbidding.

The laugh reverberated around the chamber, slowly dying echoes, until nothing was left but his silent derision.

The words did not rattle me. Malak's scorn, at least, I had expected.

His brows lowered, as if he perceived his taunts were ineffectual. "Do the glimpses of the past torment you, Revan?" he continued on in a carefully modulated voice. "I have seen deep into Bastila's mind. I know how broken you truly are, how little you recall. And yet you must know we were lovers once. Do you remember my touch, Revan? Do you remember how I could undo you with a single caress?"

I was almost surprised to find his words had as little effect as before.

_He seeks a way of unsettling me._ Malak's mockery was but a twisted version of truth designed solely to wound. But all it did was thicken the grief. _This... this was a tactic I often used. Any means for victory, be it brute strength or verbal barbs or unexpected sacrifice... the end always, always, justifies the means._

_Aways. And that is why I fell._

"I remember Talshion," I said quietly. My words came with little conscious thought on my part, as if they were more for me than Malak. "Talshion was there in my earliest recollections. I know... I know we always had each other's backs, once."

The surprise that flared across his face was as cruel as it was delighted. "Our infancy? _That_ is what came to you first? Oh, Revan." My name was a machine-driven rumble of amusement. A jaggedly painful contrast with the voice I had once known. "To think, I had speculated that something palpable would stand before me. A fragment of the righteous Jedi, or a sliver of the driven lord." Malak shook his head in a slow, measured taunt. His glowing eyes never left mine. "I even wondered whether the Order's brainwashing would win out, leaving nothing but a battered husk of some erudite null. But in the end what remains is the feckless street kid of old. Really, Revan? Of all your iterations, you choose your youth?"

"Street kid," I muttered, as something firmed in my chest. I could feel the Force return, now; harden and strengthen into solid purpose. "Jedi Knight, Sith Lord, broken scholar... they all echo within me, Malak. I am what I am."

Malak looked entirely unimpressed. "The darkness and the light have always waged constant war within you, Revan. Like a torched battleground, now wasted and forgotten." His glowing eyes pinched tight. "In the end, you-" he took a step "-are-" his hand punched into the air "-nothing!"

Power flared.

A spear of energy, both unseen and barbed, launched directly at my heart.

The air around me flexed inward, a hastily erected shield concaving against the breakneck assault. My feet were driven backwards, slipping along smooth floors, as the Force within burned to life. Strengthening, melding, thrusting back against the onslaught.

A shattering, then, as Malak's attack splintered into a myriad of dispersing particles, of energy diffusing around me on all sides.
Muscles locked, tense and rigid; I held my ground as my eyes narrowed on him.

And into Malak's outstretched grasp flew his lightsaber hilt. "Good," he murmured, as single red dawned to life. "I was beginning to think you were nothing but a galactic anti-climax."

The red of his 'saber threw his profile into stark relief. Red, that had once been blue. No recollection, just a hard fact I somehow knew: Malak still used the same lightsaber that had once inspired thousands upon thousands to follow him.

"It ends here, Malak." I could hear my words ice over; my mind clear into sharp, crystalline purpose. The melancholy vanished. Everything that Malak had been to me once no longer mattered: here, on this game board, he was simply my opponent.

"Yes," Malak hissed; a hiss of agreement, of certainty. "Yes, it does."

xXx

Mission Vao:

"What?" I squawked in alarm.

Carth wasn't even looking at me. "I have to find him," he was muttering, like the world's biggest laserbrain. "I can't leave him out there."

"I get that, Onasi, I'd do the same in your boots," Canderous returned, just as stupidly. At least he was still watching the exit with his gun raised high. "But you gotta accept it's a kriffing suicide run all by yourself. Mand'alor's balls, any moment now that mir'osik might decide to wander back in here again."

"Carth," I wailed, blinking hurriedly. I wasn't gonna cry, dammit. "If Dee's still out there, still alive, he'll be busy, y'know, fighting with the freaking Force! You can't- you jus' can't-"

::I need a weapon, Captain:: that dumb Republic guy broke in over the dumb comm. ::Jedi Bindo warned me not to move with my injuries. Why don't you send that Twi'lek up here with a blaster? I've still got a clear shot at the hatch where I am.:-

"Fat lot of good it did last time," I mumbled, still blinking. Dee was fine – he just had to be – but the thought of Carth running after him and that sleemo Sith was just completely borked. It wasn't like Carth could turn himself invisible!

"Mission-"

"No!" I cried, stamping forward and jabbing him hard in the gut. Even wearing scale mesh, Carth still grunted in discomfort. "Look, juma-head, you just got slammed into a stupid console with a wave of that scuzzball's hand! If that Dark Jedi's still out there, what're ya gonna do? Talk him to death?"

"Mission, he's my son," Carth said quietly, as his hands came to rest lightly on my shoulders. I blinked a third time, staring up into his stupid, stupid brown eyes. "I believed him dead for four years. If there's a chance I can do something, anything... Teethree can report all hatch openings and lead me to them. I might be able to catch that bastard by surprise-"

"You'll get yourself killed! You'll-"

"Ad'ika, stop." Canderous' voice was as hard as it was commanding. "Onasi's got to live with
himself. And we have to hold the fort. Go run your blaster up to Tobards and then get your skinny blue arse back down here."

Canderous was holding out my weapon in his spare hand. I didn't know where he'd picked that up from- I'd fumbled it under the snub thanks to that nerf-herding Sith-

"The others," I said desperately, ignoring stupid Canderous to glare at stupid Carth. "Can't we comm one of them back? That ronto-turd Rosh- he could, like, run super-fast and go after Dee-"

"They're busy, Mission," Carth cut in. His voice had turned all soft and gentle. "You know that. We're on our own."

"There's a text-only transmit," Canderous said abruptly. "Read it for yourself, Onasi."

Carth dropped his hands, same time as I scrambled to parse the output on my wrist-comm myself. Words, in pale green text, clinically stating what the others were up to-

"They found her," Carth breathed a sec later. "Bastila. She's-"

"Yeah," Canderous grunted. "The princess is back on our side. About bloody time."

"And Revan has gone after Malak," Carth finished in a quiet murmur.

"See!" I cried. The message was from dumb Rosh – and he hadn't let slip too many deets on the transmit, but there was enough to get that Jen had gone off alone. Leaving Big Z and Rosh and Psycho Droid behind with Bastila. "Let's get Rosh back here, not like he's doing anything useful while prissy Bastila does her thing-"

"Revan ordered them to guard Bastila." Carth was scrolling through the message a second time, like it was gonna magically change. "Bastila is the key to turning the fleet battle around. That's- at least we have some good news."

He didn't sound happy. 'Course he didn't. Not with Dee out there.

"There's no reason they can't all come back here, then!" I felt like stamping my foot. I felt like bursting into tears. I wanted Big Z back here, not stuck somewhere deep in this slimy place, while Dee had run off with a black-robed chuba-face hot on his heels-

"Mission." Carth enfolded me into his arms, then, and my face pressed hard against the mesh armour covering his chest. It smelled like ash and sweat. "Even I can admit that what they're doing is more important than finding my son. We all have our part to play. Rosh and Zaalbar are protecting Bastila. You and Ordo will keep the 'Hawk safe."

"But-" My voice broke as my throat tightened. I barely felt the first hot tears drop free, though at least my face was mushed against Carth so stupid Canderous wouldn't sneer at me. "But what if there's more bad guys?"

"Then we fight." Canderous was resolute behind me. "Though I don't reckon there is. A Dark Jedi wouldn't attack with those Force-blocking assassins around, it'd nullify his own strength. He probably waited to see what pickings were left, the hu'tuun shabuir."

"I have to go, Mission." Carth's voice was low and hard. His palms were gentle on my shoulders as he slowly pulled back from me.

"Ad'ika." Heavy hands clapped down on me from behind, and I was unceremoniously plucked from
Carth's embrace before being spun around. Canderous' hard-edged face was lined in a deep frown as he stared at me. "Stop acting like a kid. You ain't one anymore, and this ain't the place for it. Go run up to Tobards, then get some meds from the 'Hawk and see if you can rouse old man Bindo. Do it now."

My fists curled in reflex, same time as one lekku twined around my neck. I felt myself nodding, sniffing back the tears as my teeth clenched. I hated being told what to do, even from Canderous, but it wasn't like Carth was listening to reason-

"Talk to Teethree," Carth ordered quietly behind me. "Find out the most likely direction Dustil went, and relay that over the comm."

I glanced back to him. Without Canderous on my side, there was no way I'd be able to stop Carth being a total marsh toad.

Which meant the only thing left for me to do was actually help.

And I could admit, to myself at least, that maybe I'd run after Dee, too – if we didn't have the 'Hawk and the others to worry about.

"Okay," I got out, before snatching my gun from Canderous' off-hand with a scowl. "Okay. Jus'- jus' come back, okay?"

Carth nodded in acceptance – which was lame, really, because how could he promise something like that? He threw one last grim look at Canderous, before striding to the hole in the wall and vanishing around the corner.

xXx

Revan Freeflight:

Malak's sweeping lunge, mighty and fast, was as much a test as his Force spear had been.

I was leaping sideways by then, my own 'saber glaring to life as he spun on one foot and followed his attack with an overhand strike.

Cyan parried scarlet in a dazzling crackle of light.

"One blade, Revan?" Malak taunted. A brow raised in mocking consideration. "Did you misplace a lightsaber?"

"I'm versatile, Malak," I shot back, staring at him through the blue-red crosshairs of our 'sabers. "I don't need two weapons to best you."

"Let us dance, then." The words murmured from his voder, artificially soft and drawling. "For old times' sake. Perhaps, this is a more fitting way for you to finally die."

Malak pushed forward, before striking out again.

Both my hands held Karon's legacy tight as I blocked his opening flurry: a rain of sweeping blows, followed by a fierce jab that skidded against my sluggish guard.

Immediately on the defensive, I was scrabbling back, feeling the strength of each of his blows reverberate through my forearms as I barely managed to keep a lightsaber between us.

Dodging sideways, leaping clear, or parrying a counter-attack: I was intensely aware of the thin mesh
shirt that covered my torso and afforded little resistance to any direct lightsaber hit.

I danced backwards, staying at the edge of his greater reach, focused purely on finding an opening he had yet to grant.

"First hit will down you, Revan," Malak sneered, derisively eyeing me over as I skittered back another handful of steps. "No substantial armour. You always did ignore your own mortality."

*Keep moving,* my mind whispered, as the fire of Force in my veins began to blaze. *His exoskeleton will slow him. Always keep moving.*

Stance wide, I allowed Malak a split-second of commitment to his next attack, before battering his lunge aside and throwing a fast riposte aimed directly at his unguarded upper arm.

My 'saber bounced hard away from the cortosis-woven armour; Malak snarled, and an upsurge of Force slammed deep into my gut.

I went flying, catching sight too late of the scarlet plasma thrown from Malak’s hands-

xXx

**Bastila Shan:**

I was stretching out farther than I ever dreamed possible.

Somewhere beneath me, a solid coil of energy grounded my psyche back to my physical form. I would never dare to reach so far, had it not been for the unexpected wellspring of light offered to me: a blessing wrapped in a golden chalice that I was granted permission to sup from.

Grandmaster Vandar Tokare.

We could not speak in words, even joined like this; but I had recognized his signature when his consciousness first brushed against mine.

Freely, he offered his acceptance, his approval, and his unwavering strength to boost my own.

At first it had been somewhat arduous to lower my innate shields and accept his assistance. But I had managed. And now, the shaky faith I scrabbled to sustain – that I could stay true, turn things around and save the Republic Fleet – solidified into rock-solid certainty.

I would prevail, undo what I had wrought, and allow Revan the distance to do the same.

Had I ever felt the Force like this before? So beautiful and placid, yet stretching out for eons: encompassing the entire sector in a web of energy, of love, of unconditional *being*. All my self-destructive emotions washed away, until there was nothing left but this transcendent genesis of life.

Of peace.

And I was simply a part of the whole.

Flickers of spirit aligned before me: the same matrix I had manipulated earlier, but on an even grander scale. Each spark was left bolstered by my gentle touch, glowing brighter, before I transferred to the next. There was no uncertainty left; no guilt, no recriminations, no doubt. Just, pure, harmony.

Each life flared with hope and sharpness of mind, as I migrated ever onwards.
Then, something stabbing, hot, *agonizing*- 

Alarm tore deep into my Force connection. I was ripped from the web, falling, plummeting, the link with Master Vandar disintegrating as I sailed down-

-slamming back into physical flesh with a resounding thud.

*Revan!*

Hands clutching at my side; there was no physical wound, but I felt the injury regardless. Gasping, face flattened against the floor, fingernails burrowing into fragile skin-

*Revan?* Fear was acrid at the back of my throat. *Revan, answer me!*

**I'm okay.** A paroxysm of pain radiated through the Force. I beheld the sharp impression of ironclad determination, before Revan abruptly reeled her emotions in, retreating from me. **I'm fine.** She sounded fierce. *Focus on the Fleet.*

She had been hurt. A wound alongside her torso that, even now, throbbed in my own body with painful clarity. How debilitating her injury was I could not tell, but my heart was fluttering with uncertainty.

*Should I reach out? Lend her my strength?* Peace, I knew more than she just how almighty Malak was with the Star Forge bending to his decree.

*Malak is stronger than you physically,* I whispered to my bond-sister. *But you are faster, I have seen that-*

**The Fleet, Bastila!**

I receded, driven back by her furious demand. I could sense the Force humming through her, burgeoning and strengthening, and I had seen first-hand just how endless her pool of power seemed at times.

But Revan lacked the serenity of spirit – the recollection of her Jedi training – to access it on demand. And that, I feared, was where Malak would best her.

*I must have faith. Revan, have faith.* The words were as much for myself as her, but I did not know if Revan could even hear me now. *Trust in the Force.*

With that final entreaty, I withdrew entirely back into my own mind.

My fingers curled as I pushed shakily up from the floor. I breathed in, lungs filling with air, feeling my lifeblood calm as returning Force eddies swirled gently about me. A soothing warmth brushed against my senses: the peaceful touch of Master Vandar reaching out; a flicker of concern, a question, a nudge reminding me of what we still had to achieve.

Mind clearing, I sank back to my knees, about to reconvene when-

"Onasi's gone too?" A mutter from behind wipped into comprehension. "Ordo. You must keep the *Ebon Hawk* secure-" 

::Yeah, I got that, di'kut.:: Crackle of a comm. ::How about you tell me something useful, like who this kriffing Dark Jedi is? And if there's any more bastards out there?::
Alarm returned, spiking through tranquillity as I abdicated the meditation in favour of whirling around to stare in shock at the others.

"I cannot say for certain, Ordo." Yudan Rosh was frowning at the alusteel communicator affixed on his wrist. "Malak has multiple Dark Jedi bent to his will, but only one of note is still alive. If it is Sharlan Nox chasing after Dustil Onasi-"

"Sharlan Nox." The hiss slipped from my mouth before I could retract it. "That- that- thing has attacked the others?"

The Twi'lek's head jerked in my direction as his expression blanked into composure. He stilled, staring at me hard, before offering one last report on his comm-link to the crewmate I had not seen since Korriban.

"I have nothing useful to add at this stage, Ordo," Yudan said in a monotone, but his narrowed eyes were pinning mine. "As I relayed before: Revan is engaging Malak while Shan aids the Republic Fleet. The Dark Jedi Sharlan Nox can be cowed by superior Force-strength, but he is also easy to underestimate. Rouse the old man if you can."

A curse in Mandalorian was abruptly silenced as the Twi'lek ceased the open communication.

Yudan Rosh had not dropped his gaze from mine. His mouth tightened. "Sharlan Nox is on the Star Forge?" he questioned.

My head dipped in a nod of assent.

"The boy might be able to hide from him," Yudan murmured. His expression did not change, but there was a faint undercurrent of emotion in his soft words. "But Carth Onasi is no Force-sensitive."

"The boy," I echoed blankly. I could feel myself blinking. Yudan had relayed the name Dustil Onasi to Canderous- and with a start, a shaky memory from a lifetime ago unfolded in my minds-eye.

An encounter just before I had been ripped from the crew-

The boy. The Sith adept in the Korriban docking bay, the one nosing around our ship. Revan had discovered him, discovered he was Carth's child, whom Carth had believed dead for all these years-

A wholly unexpected encounter, and one I had not thought on since, for my next recollection was awakening to the tender ministrations of the Sith.

But Revan had been determined to track the boy down, I remembered now- she had argued for his retrieval despite my reservations, despite the Star Map, despite the matters still unspoken between us at that stage. Due in part, I had believed, to her growing attachment to the boy's father.

For it wasn't Carth's child that was of import-

"Carth is going after Sharlan Nox," I echoed numbly, eyelids fluttering. "That is- that is- Ludicrous. Suicidal. Sharlan will end them both, and return to the Ebon Hawk, if he doesn't first report his success to Malak-

"Revan!" I gasped, shoulders tensing, gaze flying back to Yudan Rosh. "If she hears of Carth's demise-"

"(You are both assuming an event of which has not yet happened)," Zaalbar rumbled gently. "(Worry not of next year's tree-rot when you have this year's hive-ant infestation to deal with first)."
"She might be too occupied to sense his death, being as he has no Force," Yudan murmured, ignoring the Wookiee the same as I. "But she is attuned to those close to her, and there is no denying the depth of her regard for him."

"If she does find out..." I trailed off bleakly. Revan needed every advantage she could muster. She had left us all behind to focus on Malak. A heart-wound from the rear would blindside her, and- "...the bonds of attachment are what has held Revan strong," I whispered. "And Carth-

"And Carth Onasi is her lover," Yudan Rosh finished in a quiet voice.

That their relationship had progressed did not surprise me, even as an innate repudiation of such entanglement desired to issue forth from my lips. What came out instead was- "You must go after them."

"What?" His word was a hiss, an unexpected show of emotion.

"You know Sharlan Nox," I returned implacably. The *rightness* of this action rang in the Force, echoed like a bell around me. Attachment was as much a weakness as a strength, and that was why the Jedi denied such individual involvement. Because, at the most critical of moments, attachment could be so easily used against even the most stalwart of beings.

The Sith were more than adept at those sorts of machinations – and a Jedi could be as fallible as any sentient.

And Revan – Revan was as much a Jedi as she had ever been.

"Carth Onasi cannot die," I whispered. "Not if we wish for Revan to stand firm. And you- you must be a match for Sharlan Nox. You can prevent this-

The Twi'lek's eyes narrowed. "Destroying the Star Forge is our prime objective, Shan. And for that, we must ensure your survival. Revan ordered me to guard you against any danger, and I will not abandon my post."

"There is no other danger! Sharlan Nox is the only Force-sensitive Malak allowed to step foot here, other than myself!" I protested, feeling my cheeks burn. "This section of the Star Forge has naught but a skeleton crew- any danger would be in the form of foot-soldiers, and Zaalbar and HK-47 are adequate protection against that-

"Indignation: Adequate?" a mechanical voice squawked. "You dare use such an insipid pejorative? Shall I label your glow-stick a toothpick?"

Yudan Rosh did not move, still staring at me intently with an unreadable expression. "(The battle-droids have not intruded this high, Yudan Rosh)," Zaalbar interjected. "(And if they do, we now understand how to take them out with relative ease)."

"You agree with this course of action?" The Twi'lek switched his attention to the Wookiee, as if Zaalbar's counsel was of more worth than my own. Perhaps, at this juncture, it was; but the realization stung nonetheless.

The Wookiee shrugged his massive shoulders. "(I do not foresee any imminent danger here. And Bastila Shan is correct that Carth Onasi's death may... may destabilize Jen at a most dangerous time)."
"Commentary: The master would prefer it if Paranoid Has-Been remained at least semi-functional. As would I. He makes an enticing target for the day the master recognizes the folly of her recent pacifistic bent."

I paid the irritating droid no mind. "You are stronger than Sharlan Nox," I said to the Twi'lek. It was not a question. While I may not have known all the inner workings of the Sith Empire, I was familiar enough with the higher-ranking Dark Jedi to know there were few considered more dangerous than Yudan Rosh. "Can you reach out? Sense where he is?"

One brow quirked at me in question. "Can you?"

I felt my eyelids flutter. "I don't dare," I whispered. Transcending into battle meditation was not the same as stretching out one's awareness to sense the Force; and without the bolstering strength of Grandmaster Vandar, I could not risk opening myself to the temptation of the kaiburr.

In that regard, I simply did not trust myself. I did not know if I could live with myself if I failed again.

Yudan's eyes closed and his lekku relaxed behind him as the Force spilled out. A handful of charged seconds later, and the Twi'lek was staring blindly at the floor. His intake of air was audible and deep.

"I can sense him," Yudan murmured. "Revan and Malak overpower almost everything, but... I can sense Sharlan. I will be able to track him."

His grip tightened on his lightsaber.

"(Go, then)," Zaalbar rumbled gently, motioning a paw at the chamber's exit. "(Protect Carth Onasi and his cub, Yudan Rosh. I shall stand firm here)."

"Mockery: And while the Wookiee practices the evolutionary concept of 'standing', I will take care of anything that might frighten Uptight Soporific."

"Zaalbar," I whispered, as the Twi'lek left the chamber and I slowly sank to my knees again. "Any chance you can set that droid on mute?"

xXx

Revan Freeflight:

The hit to my side was moderate. Bad enough to have burned through the mesh scale and deep into skin. Not debilitating, at least, for I'd already been rolling in evasion when Malak's flying 'saber had connected.

But had I been a split-second slower, things would be a lot worse.

My hands tightened on Karon's hilt as I pushed physical discomfort aside. I was metres back from Malak, now, having retreated with a Force-enhanced leap before he could press his advantage. Legs apart, stance firm and guard ready; my defensive form was solid and waiting for whatever he threw at me next.

I couldn't kid myself, though. If I kept fighting this way, it wouldn't be for long.

*Malak is stronger than you physically*, Bastila whispered. *But you are faster, I have seen that-*

And Bastila, despite her best intentions, wasn't helping any.
The Fleet, Bastila! I threw back furiously. Good intentions or not, I couldn't allow her fear to bleed through to me; not here, not now. And even more critically – Bastila had to focus on what was truly important. I needed her aimed at the space battle, not worrying over my health.

"First blood to me, Revan," Malak mocked. Even with a mechanical voice-box plated over his ruined throat, he still sounded so damn smug. "It never used to be so easy."

Malak had his back to the kaiburr once more, as jagged flurries of Force streamed into him from the unbalanced crystal. The veins of vermillion pulsed deep into the rock, indicators of mineral corruption, according him the amplification of a lightsaber crystal on a truly astronomic scale.

I knew he had yet to fully plumb its depths, and I was already struggling.

*Have faith.*

The esoteric message rang softly in my head. I wasn't sure if the words were a thought or a memory. A reminder, maybe, from the woman I had once been, facing the man I had once loved.

*Find another solution.* That was what I'd always done. Kept fighting and searching until I found the path to victory. *Overcome what you can and accept what you must.*

There was no doubt within me, now; no fear or concern. Malak's current superiority was ephemeral – I simply had to find a way to weaken him. And I would.

My senses were intensifying, psyche slipping into a meld of serenity and sharp-honed awareness – a state I had felt before, a state I had *mastered* before.

*Trust in the Force.*

And as the kaiburr lent unsteady passion to Malak's next barrelling foray, it was a calm influx of Force that steadied me in response.

For even here, in this dark-edged place, the Force still sang bright. In the air, beyond the walls, deep through the sector and ricocheting within the conjoined mind-link to my bond-sister.

Time decelerated into infinite possibilities. The arc of Malak's attacking lightsaber morphed into predictability; a dodge from me, then, followed by a fast jab he shrugged off with his 'saber.

Malak's return flurry blurred and slowed in my Force-enhanced vision. Each strike I could meet, could block, could predict. Malak leaned to the right, muscles bunching for a lunge that would be both sweeping and over-ambitious. I side-stepped out of reach, before spinning hard on a heel and thrusting forward in a jab aimed at his unguarded side.

The 'saber scored against Malak's armour, but did not penetrate.

His weapon slammed back to knock mine aside, and once more, I danced back out of reach.

"You've been practicing." His eyes narrowed, gleaming a sharper yellow. Malak leaned forward, 'saber twitching in the air, as if he meant to launch another attack. He repeated the move but I held still; seeing the feints for exactly what they were. A low thrum of amusement emitted from his voder.

"Has that treacherous Twi'lek been reminding you of our past spars, Revan?"

I didn't answer. Merely took up my 'saber and glided into an offensive form that felt as natural as breathing. I could feel the kaiburr pulse in response, throwing unsteady power into Malak's core, flaring the passion of emotion that I had once taught him to master.
Wait for another sweeping right-hander, my intuition whispered. *He always over-extends, but he is fast enough that he can make it work. Against most.*

At another time, the haunting knowledge of my blind history would unsettle me. But I was in a place, now, where neither the claws of my past nor the fangs of his words could reach me.

I thrust high, attention fixed on both his stance and his weapon, ready for his slamming block and follow-up riposte. Weaving beneath his counter-attack, I came out with another jab aimed at the same spot on his side.

The 'saber hissed and sparked as that sithspawned armour once more held firm, but judging from Malak's enraged bellow, he'd certainly felt my strike this time.

*Cortosis isn't invulnerable – I'd wager that blow rocked the armour's integrity. I need to get another torso hit in, with as much Force-strength as I can muster-*

A roundhouse to the jaw caught me completely off-guard.

I staggered, reeling, physical senses momentarily stunned. Drawing furiously on the Force to convert my stumble into a back-spring, I darted out of his longer reach while my shock abated.

*I expected a block, a 'saber thrust, a kick to the legs- There was a skein of disbelief to my broken thoughts. He never had the stones to punch me in the face before-*

The Force balanced me as my head cleared. Malak, oddly enough, had taken no step closer. He stood ready, facing me, with a slight cant to his posture that further suggested my earlier hit had struck true.

"Enough!" Malak growled. I expected another pointless taunt after that punch, but instead it was fury building in his narrowed eyes. Charging upon the air, as a wind gust whipped to life around him. "Enough. I am done playing with you, Revan."

A dark pressure surged against my connection to the Force. My own hold stayed firm, but my eyes widened nonetheless as a staggering torrent funnelled into Malak from the kaiburr.

*Not just from the frelling kaiburr-*

No, no- like the barbs of an encircling septagram, I could clearly sense seven distinct sources of power edged around the railing of the chamber. All drawing the Force from- from somewhere-before amplifying it through the massive crystal and then feeding it back to Malak.

*The pillars, some of the pillars are hiding something- What I'd taken as nothing more than gloomy architecture obviously hid something more ominous. Some sort of gateway-*

My awareness stretched out in a frantic need to evaluate and understand, but all I could fathom was the idea of seven separate portals, somehow offering Malak an endless stream of Force to pull upon at will.

And the power in his grasp kept growing.

"Now you will see what the Star Forge is truly capable of, Revan," Malak rasped. The Force lashed, visible for the crackle of black-and-white that spat around his torso. A deathly achromatic fount of raw energy he was about to focus on me. "Now you will finally die."

xXx
Zaalbar:

After Yudan Rosh disappeared, it surprised me when Bastila Shan did not immediately close her eyes.

"I-" the Human paused, appearing hesitant. She was already kneeling, on the cusp of re-entering her meditative state of being that was powerful enough to change a battle's outcome. And yet her head was craned back, awkwardly, as her uncertain gaze fixed on mine.

Logically I knew of Bastila Shan's power, but there were times when the beliefs of my childhood would resurge with a flurry. She was so physically small – Humans nominally were, just like Twi'leks, but Bastila Shan had little height on Mission who was barely more than a den-cub.

Size did not necessarily equate to strength, I knew this even when Kashyyyk had been the borders of my experience, but it was usually an indicator – at least, back on my homeworld.

As a cub, the only magic I had accepted was that of the gods – and even there, I doubted. Of course, tales of mystical Jedi had breached my remote home, but my people had always seen them as akin to moderators, counsellors – an alien, less-able version of an Old One, perhaps.

The idea of a being that could influence minds from afar – or, one that could project sparks of lightning from their fingertips at will – seemed no more than a wild story meant to awe a cub.

I was a different Wookiee now. I no longer had to see events with my own sheltered eyes to believe – Mission and Jen Sahara had taught me that. There was much out there I accepted went well beyond my comprehension.

"(You should reconvene)," I rumbled gently. "(We have need of your abilities, Bastila Shan)."

Her head bowed. I was not sure, at first, whether the gesture was agreement or guilt.

"Thank you, Zaalbar," Bastila mumbled. A handful of braids dropped to fall in front of her face. "Thank you, for standing as Revan's guide when I did not."

Her guilt was obvious, now. Painting her words with regret, colouring her soul with shame. Only a fistful of minutes ago, this woman had appeared so serene and peaceful, suspended in that esoteric state of battle meditation.

I did not know what Bastila Shan expected from me, though. I could not release her from the burden of self-blame: a maturation like that had to stem from oneself.

"(It seems to me that Force-sensitives face far greater trials than other sentients)," I mused. "(But failure to overcome these does not equate to weakness, Bastila Shan. Even a bent sapling strains to right itself and reach the sun. The shade of your past can shadow your future, or it can form the core of your inner strength)."

A wisp of a sigh escaped her. Her chin lifted, though, as she continued to address me. "I suppose there is a thin line between self-reflection and self-flagellation."

"(There will be time for that later)," I nudged. "(Time for peace, time for consideration. But first you must-)"

"Yes." Her quick agreement curtailed the rest of my words. She was staring at me solemnly through those unnaturally flawed eyes. I had no understanding how long it would take for those markers of corruption to disappear, but it seemed to me the sharpness of colour had already begun to fade.
Bastila smiled, then, sad and peaceful. "I do not believe it was chance that crossed your path with Revan's, and therefore mine. The Force moves through us all, Jedi and non-Jedi alike. I know little of you and your people, Zaalbar, but you speak with a wisdom well beyond your years."

I huffed, surprised and mildly discomfited. "(I have had my own failures, Bastila Shan).

"You are a humble soul, Zaalbar. Perhaps, one day, I will have the chance to visit your homeworld and know you better." Her eyes closed, then, and without waiting for any reply the young Human turned and bowed her head once more.

The concept of bringing off-worlders to Kashyyyk would not sit well with my sire, I suspected, not after recent events. For my companions, though, Freyrr might make an exception. Bastila Shan seemed to infer that she might learn something from my people, but I knew the opposite could well be true in tandem. Isolation had not prepared my people for the machinations of foreign greed. In that regard, I believed cautious exposure and education was the better route.

I was starting to think of my homecoming, I realized. To look toward an event long denied to me. The present, first, had to be overcome, but the future – the future was bright.

And as Bastila Shan wove her invisible, alien magic, I found myself smiling in the silence.

xXx

Chapter End Notes

Coming up next: Revan strives to understand and destroy the source of Malak's power, while another showdown unfurls elsewhere on the Star Forge.

A kaiburr's worth of thanks to kosiah for the beta.
Revan Freeflight:

I was moving the instant the Force was unleashed.

Sprinting to the wall, power fuelling my heels, about to launch into the air-

The edge of Malak's charged assault skimmed across my back: a sharp jarring followed by a deathly lack of feeling. A jolt of electrostatic discharge married with something more insidious.

Keep moving!

I jumped high, high enough to clear the railing, feet landing on the walkway beyond with a thud as I ducked into an immediate roll.

A blast of heat spat above my head.

"This chamber is sealed, Revan!" Malak hollered from below. I was running again, following the arc of the walkway as it bordered the chamber. The crackle of electricity behind me hissed in my ear. "You cannot run from me. I will have your death by my hands this time!"

I have to keep moving! Force-induced lightning I could withstand, absorb, reflect- but the complete numbness down the skin of my back confirmed Malak's vortex of black-and-white was more than just lightning.

An image flashed through my mind – fingertips, shrivelling white with decay. Kylah's, on the Leviathan, when I had unleashed death upon her and held it back purely for my own enjoyment of the moment.

A dark, deathly power, that sort of drain. Somewhere, at some place and time, it seemed both Malak and I had learned it.

"You are nothing now!" Malak was still bellowing like an enraged wraid. His taunting derision from earlier had morphed into a blistering fury.

Because I hit him. Because that second blow did more damage than he let on. Because he had been playing with me, right up to the moment I showed him I was more than just prey.

"Look at you running like a null!" His yell still came from behind me, below in the central chamber, but the sound was closer, now. He was following. "Lord Revan never ran from anyone... not even me!"

Oh, let him think I'm running away. My free hand caught the edge of a pillar as I hurled myself behind it. It'll stop him working out what I'm running to-
A pause, then, as I raised the bar of cyan high and beheld one source of Malak's burgeoning power.

My train of thought hiccupped. My eyes widened. Whatever I'd been expecting wasn't this-

I heard a thud behind. Malak, breaching the walkway, coming after me.

No time to investigate-

Both hands snapped together on my weapon's hilt, and with a rapid surge of Force strength I stabbed the 'saber straight at the body-sized capsule inset into the far side of the pillar.

Bright white flared as an unforgiving recoil slammed me hard back against the chamber's exterior wall.

I gasped, winded, weapon still clasped tight, but the capsule-

The capsule was not even cracked-

There was a flash of scarlet from my right: Malak's 'saber, flying once more, and it took less than a second to launch myself diagonally over the railing in evasion. I caught the whistling sound of something whirring dangerously close to my head as I fell.

I touched ground below, in front of the kaiburr, landing in a crouch with one fist resting on the chrome floor and the other still holding my weapon aloft.

The Force tightened around me in reaction.

"Oh, did you think that was transparisteel, Revan?" Malak's sneering mockery came from above and behind. "Did you think it would be that easy?"

I twisted on a heel, legs straightening, glaring back up at the now-distant walkway.

"What the frell is that?" I wasn't talking about the sodding casing of the capsule. Lightsaber-resistant, obviously – the only material that sprang to mind was the same cortosis woven into Malak's armour, but I'd never seen a translucent alloy of it. Nor one that repelled assault with such intensity.

_The Star Forge can manufacture many material wonders. But it's the contents, the contents of the capsule-

"Mal." I didn't shout. I didn't need to. "What did you do?" My words still echoed, hard and grim and- and-

-and that was anger, creeping into my steady resolve. The image of the capsule burned in my mind: a naked body enclosed within, wired and trapped in kolto jelly, and somehow the key to Malak's power.

I didn't know how. I didn't know what. Except... except some deep-rooted part of me suspected _something_ that my consciousness didn't grasp, and that same part was simmering with a long-forgotten malcontent.

Malak had paused, a towering figure standing feet abreast on the walkway above. The sparks of black-and-white closed tight around his torso, an interplay of shadows twining like snakes around his form.

"You were a fool, Revan." Malak had lowered his voice, the same as I. His lightsaber was held loosely in one gauntlet as he leaned over the railing to speak down to me. "All you ever saw was an
infinite fleet rolling forth to crush the Republic. Droids, weapons, ships... you never realized the Star Forge was more than just a factory. You never thought about growing the power of the Dark Side itself."

The anger burning like a familiar wick in my gut told me he was wrong. I'd thought about it, at the least. Maybe I'd been one step away from acting on it before Deralia happened.

*Anger is dangerous, especially here, my mind whispered. Powerful – yes. The blazing heat of emotion dulled the open wound along my side to insignificance. I didn't even notice my back anymore. But if I stumble here, I'll fall into my past. I told Yudan I wouldn't return from that. I'm not sure I could.*

*I'm not... sure-*

"The Star Forge is like a living creature, Revan." Malak raised his hand. Power pulsed throughout the chamber, thudding against my senses, choking my own grasp on the Force. "A creature that is leashed to my will, and bowing to my command. You never had that same mastery. You were blind."

And the vortex around him grew once more. Intensified by the kaiburr, but drawing on-

"Seven sentients," I muttered, eyes narrowing. Malak hadn't moved to follow me down yet; in that respect, he was more of a grandstanding braggart than he'd been before we stepped into the shade of the dark-

I cinched the errant thought back. No time to stutter over the contrast between the man of my broken memories, and the stranger my senses swore stood before me. Malak might be pausing to relish the moment or to gauge my fortitude – but I would use that delay for my own benefit.

Information.

"The bodies... they're not dead." I let my eyes wander over the nearest pillar. From this side, all I could see was a darkened column of smooth shadow. "Are they?"

"They're not alive, Revan." The cadence of his automated voice had rumbled back into a mechanized purr. "It would be almost amusing, to see you stumble over your old glory this way. If it were not so pathetic."

Achromatic shards of energy popped and snapped around him. The Force coiled in my limbs, ready to move at the first sign of offence, but the man merely stood and laughed at me.

"Oddly enough," Malak continued, as his chuckle died away, "it was Sharlan Nox who first gave me the idea. Not that I would ever be foolish enough to allow him entry into this chamber."

They're not alive, Mal says. I could feel myself frowning in thought. *But how can the Force travel through seven corpses? And where- and where is the Force coming from?* I tripped along the torrent of Malak's power, following the deluge through the kaiburr as it split back to the pillars- the origin felt like a tear in the very fabric of life. Seven tears-

I had to find out more. I had to get close to another capsule, without Malak gleaning my intent.

"What, do you not remember Sharlan?" Malak, still jeering, still prodding for a reaction or a weakness. Looming over me from the railing above, as he spouted jibes and threw forth references that meant nothing to me.
The name he dropped elicited no memory, no recognition. Nothing, except a faint whisper from another-

**Bandon Stone.** A dead master's voice. *Yudan Rosh. Nisotsa Organa. Sharlan Nox. Zhar,* warning me in the Shadowlands, listing Malak's top Dark Jedi. *Any one of those names should worry you-*

"I'd send Sharlan in for a nostalgic reunion but-" Malak paused, ensuring he had my full attention. "- but I'm afraid he's too busy hunting down and killing off your crew."

I jerked.

And Malak was in the air, bearing down on me with a scarlet 'saber and a fistful of charged power.

Force like wildfire bent to my will. Coursing through sinew and muscle, granting me celerity and lift as I once more launched myself high in evasion. The air crackled with charge- I cleared the railing once more, bounding to the left before Malak's wild blast could strike home.

He landed with a thud below, back in the centre of the room.

"Running again!" The thwarted snarl of fury crested in his voice, surged on the Force. "There really is nothing of the Dark Lord left within you, is there?"

*More than you realize, Mal. I darted around the elevated path, ice in my heart, one hand outstretched. More than anyone realizes.*

I sensed him vault high to intercept me. I had to be fast- faster- and then his boots hammered down where I had just been, a shockwave of sound augmented by his ire; a clamour of rage vowing to end me once and for all. But ionization was already crisping my maimed hand, three digits blistering as opalescent current shot forth to net around the pillar ahead.

With the sound of his footfalls sprinting closer, I wrested all of my Force-strength out through one limb at the nearing capsule. It was a spider-web of electrons designed to destroy rather than manipulate- but there was no conduction in the pillar, on the capsule, even around the casing-

No accessible control or conduit or weakness of any kind for an electrostatic charge to burn through and fry what lay beneath.

I caught a brief glimpse of a prostrate body as I passed: limbs tucked in a mesh of suspended cables, scarlet skin of a doomed Zeltron that couldn't be more than a dozen turnings of the Coruscanti sun. One of so many lives snuffed out for the glory of megalomania-

*They're not alive. But they can't be dead, not truly dead, not one with the Force.*

My senses screamed a warning. A surge of Force at my back-

I veered hard to the side, my off-hand gripping the railing as I heaved myself over. My other arm, snapping hard behind me, fingers flexing as I pitched Karon's 'saber on a tight trajectory back at Malak.

Turning as I fell, I landed back on my heels to see the dazzle of sparks as red smashed cyan away.

"You think I would leave them open to Force attacks?" Malak mocked. My hand rose, calling Karon's 'saber back home to my waiting grasp. Up high, I could see the armoured figure tense, muscles bunching for another chase. "You always underestimated me, Revan. And that will, once more, be your downfall!"
"You haven't let them die." The censure dropped from my lips without thought, and it was enough to startle him, to jolt him into abrupt laughter. Loud, mocking derision, once more edging out the ferocity of his hate. Such wild shifts from howling rage to deathly amusement and back again, more blatant than the sigils of corruption etched into his cheeks, or the yellow poison that spat from his eyes.

The Dark Side, in the end, was Malak's true master.

_We all bore signs of corruption after a time. Some swifter than others. This was the path I gambled on, the path I led them down. The path I thought was worth the risk._

And yet, the flat thought beckoned: if Malak could draw on this unbalanced cataclysm of might, then so could I. I'd always been more powerful than him. I could use these seven living corpses first; use them to destroy Malak and the Star Forge both, and hope I retained the fortitude to turn back before I lost myself.

Roll the dice once more- and this time, I had a failsafe should I truly fall-

"You think to reprimand me?" Glowing golden eyes glared down at me. The Force turned watchful, ready, as the cascade of black-and-white billowed around him, once more picking up velocity and strength.

Somehow, I knew he was waiting for me to run, waiting to intercept me mid-flight.

"Or perhaps you expect me to monologue the entirety of my plans?" Shadows rippled over Malak's face, his form, his soul. "Oh Revan," he mocked. "I think not."

With a wrench of Force almost casual in its application, he hopped upwards, so his boots landed atop the railing, so he towered even higher than before. A pause, then, for him to check I had not moved. Then he hurtled down-

At the last instant, I jerked forward, underneath him, spinning around to stab hard at his turning back. My 'saber skittered off the back-plate of his armour- I needed to get in close to his side again-

The Force curled like a whip as he spun, slamming into my own shields like a breaker breaching a dam. I kept my footing, barely, sliding back unsteadily as he lunged forward with a sweeping right-hander. His classic lunge that always left him open-

A split-second's moment of thought: I could duck in close while his guard was down, aim for the same weak spot- but my stance was unbalanced-

I lurched to the side instead, pale blue plasma held high in defense.

Malak's 'saber scythed down abruptly, before it snapped into a tight guard as he twisted to face me. Dark brows slammed down in unchecked acrimony. I knew, then, that he'd banked on my counterattack: that had I drawn in close, things would not have gone my way.

"They're all Force sensitive, aren't they?" I growled. "And you haven't let them become one with the Force."

"You never stop trying, do you?" he murmured, head tilting, as though he were considering his next assault. "I suppose that was a facet of what made you great, once. A shame you never used that tenacity to uncover the true power of the Star Forge. You might have been the invincible one, had you not been so blind."
And where would that have left me now? I knew the answer, for all of my doubts and temptations. Just as mad as him. Certainly, with no thought left to my original intent. The Dark Side wins. The Dark Side always wins.

"There's a separation between life and death, Malak." He knew that. Of course he did. Ghosts, ripples, Force visions of the past, echoes of the dead – they touched the living but only insubstantially. Whatever Malak was doing, here, was wrong. This went beyond the Dark Side – I didn't know why I thought that, only that I did. "A separation that shouldn't be tampered with."

The builders have upset the balance. I swallowed back the dryness in my throat. Would that I'd had Jen's observational skills the first time around.

The balance between life and death.

"Spoken like a true victim," Malak jeered.

"Ever wondered why the Rakatan died out, Mal?" I whispered. The exact same words echoed in my mind, but said in Malak's voice, pleading for me to change course. My eyes stung. I could see the Lehon pyramid again: Malak, annoyed, disapproving, but still blindly faithful. Begging me to turn back before it was too late for us both. "Ever thought they might have played around with powers beyond their control?"

"You dare?" The roar was as unexpected as his explosion of Force, an earthquake of compression that erupted with his temper. A volatile shockwave smashing through my shields and punching me into the air.

No time to react before I crashed hard into something- the kaiburr, the face of the kaiburr- the unforgiving mineral was at my back as I slipped down. I was drowning in a sea of roiling Force as an invisible hand crushed around my throat.

"You dare mock me with my own words?"

The iron grip squeezed tight. Somewhere, I'd dropped my 'saber. I was gasping- choking- my fingers needed to scrub at my throat- but I wouldn't let them-

-instead, I forced my hands down, down, flat against the jagged crystal that pulsed tempting power beneath my palms.

xXx

Jolee Bindo:

There was an irritating rasping sound that just wouldn't quit. Regular, every two seconds, like the shallow breath of a sick man struggling to fill his lungs.

Snoring. That was it. Snoring was one of the few things I could leave about Wookiees. They weren't exactly the quietest of beings. And with the lot of us cramped into that tiny room on the Hawk, I'd just about had my fill of listening to Zaalbar's nightly wheezes.

I was just conscious enough to want to throw something at Zaalbar's head, and yet so darn exhausted that I knew I didn't have the energy to move.

"It's a horizontal chute. For, like, moving factory bits of starship or something. I dunno. But the chute cuts through the centre of this place, and Teethree reckons it's your only chance of catching up to the others."
Ach, and if it wasn't bad enough having the Wookiee interrupt my slumber, his pet Twi'lek had to be nattering at the top of her voice somewhere nearby.

::The conveyor's not moving, and this tunnel is dark except for emergency strip-lighting::: That was Onasi Senior's voice. Loud. Worried about something. And showing absolutely no consideration for an old man trying to catch a few winks. ::You sure this is the quickest way?:

That whistling noise – it was in sync with my own breathing, and that just made it even more annoying-

"Yeah. It's a shortcut, Carth. Unless Dee decides to hop in a lift or change direction, 'cause then we're really stuffed. It'd be easier if he answered his freaking comm, y'know."

Ugh, I was so tired. Couldn't remember feeling this wretched in a long while. And my bedroll felt like a blasted grill of durasteel, hard and unforgiving on my old back.

Onasi sighed. Sounded like the blighted man was breathing straight in my ear. ::Alright, Mission, I'm going in. Get Teethree to poll the cam-feeds further ahead – they can't all be fried. I'd feel happier if we had some eyes out there:::

There was nothing for it. I was going to have to rouse myself, and then give that lot such a roasting for disturbing an old man's kip that their ears would be burning into next week.

"On it!" the girl chirped, far too loudly.

I reached out to the Force, tried to wrest my eyes open and push myself up-

"Mnhgh," I groaned, instead, as my body completely failed to obey.

"Jolee?" Something pressed gently on my shoulder. "Can you hear me?"

It took everything I had just to force my eyes open. Fuzzy blue wavered in front of me, slowly resolving into Mission. Above her was the overhang of the 'Hawk – I appeared to be bedded down on the blighted loading ramp-

"Ungh," I said, as my demand to know what happened completely failed to coalesce into sense.

::Is that the old man?: Ordo snapped in my ear. ::Shoot him with another stim, ad'ika, and get him on his feet:::

I blinked. The whistling noise had subsided, now, as I became aware of an all-too-fast beating inside my chest. Kid Twi'lek was already holding a 'derm in her hand-

"Stop," I croaked, as the Force trickled into my desperate grasp. I was cold – damp with sweat that had chilled through to my bones. Heart thumping fast and irregular, like it wanted to jerry-jig out of my chest. Head spinning and vision not entirely clear. *How many darn stims have they shot me with?* "No- no stims."

"Can you sit?" Mission whispered. "'Cause, like, Canderous ain't convinced in Teethree's tracking, so he's all antsy 'bout that Sith sleemo coming back."

I managed to raise a wavering hand, enough to forestall the lass before she started in on everyone's grooming habits or something. The Force pulled in tight – but it was sluggish, weak, and slow to obey. Like a Czerka-branded therm blanket, taking an age to knock up one's core temperature – but getting there. Eventually.
Nothing made sense. Onasi, Ordo, Mission, all yabbering in my ear when I felt weak as a day-old ash-rabbit.

I got hit. The realization should have felt more like a shock, not this mire of exhausted apathy. A disruptor bolt to the chest. On the roof of the 'Hawk. I made it down, but then- then that Dark Jedi-

I remembered tentacles, suddenly, aiming for my face. Life draining out of me as I didn't bother to struggle. Everything fading rapidly, along with my own desire to live.

The small part of me still cognizant at the end noted the nature of the beast. It wasn't the dark, or at least not the dark as I'd ever known it. More like a need. An ever-reaching need, feeding off me and burning brighter and brighter until there was nothing left but someone else's hunger-

"Someone tell me what happened," I managed. Mission's hand was under my elbow, slowly guiding me skyward. My head told me I shouldn't be alive, that I was nothing but an appetizer to be consumed by something much, much greater.

Compulsion. My head was still fuzzy. Enthrallment. Gotta- gotta shake it loose-

"Dee distracted the Sith guy and ran off." Mission was hovering next to me, still with that darn stim clutched tight. "He- he followed, and we think we're tracking them through the station but-"

Nerves pricked into being, and slowly, slowly, my head began to clear. A stabbing pain in my chest made itself known, and I made the mistake of looking down.

It had hard not to grimace at the mess beneath the bandages and the kolto patches.

But we ain't sure the tracking's accurate.,: Ordo's rough voice cut in over the airwaves. ::So that Sith shabuir might turn up here any minute. The other lot have rescued the princess, so she should be knocking some ships together now. And Revan's on her way to Malak:::

One thing I liked about the Mandalorian: he was clear and straight to the point.

"Jolee? Can you- um, d'ya think-" The girl was biting her lip. I knew what she was going to ask before she did. "It's just that Dee's out there, alone, and Carth's gone after him, and stupid Rosh has turned his comm off as well, so now I don't even know what Big Z is doing-"

"I can barely sit up under my own strength, lass, never mind anything else," I grumped, and felt immediately guilty at her crestfallen expression. I sighed, and my chest ached in sympathy. "Give me a minute, Mission. Let me work out what's going on first."

Stay with the 'Hawk, Jolee,: Carth ordered.

Fine thing for him to say, already gallivanting off after his son the way he was. Still, I could see the sense in his command, and not just from a logistical view. I was a mess. My arms where shaking, and sweat pooled beneath my tattered robes. Someone had patched up my chest, but it still hurt like buggery. And I'd never known the Force to be so thin and wavery in my grasp.

Ach, I wasn't moving for awhile yet.

"Can you at least, like, find Dee through the Force?" Mission whispered. "Or Jen?"
I closed my eyes, half in exhaustion, and reached out.

Even as drained as I was, the faint ripple of Force was enough to dull the edge of pain from my side. I couldn't hear the eerie murmur of the kaiburr – and whether that was my own weakness or the roaring crescendo bellowing from the heart of the Forge, I didn't know.

"Revan and Malak," I murmured. Thunder drowning out the sound of everything else. "That's all I'm sensing."

::Revan, is she, is she...:: Carth's voice trailed into static. Mission, at my side, leaned close, wide brown eyes asking the same question.

I patted her hand absently. "She's alive," I told them both. "We can't do anything for her but keep ourselves safe." I drew in a breath, steeling myself for the stab of pain in my side. When it came, it wasn't as bad as I feared. "And make sure the lass has a ride outta here. Any progress on the airlocks?"

"No." The kid's headtails slumped low over her shoulders. Even our sanguine teenager was beginning to show the signs of despair. "Teethree can't break the encryption. I mean, he's still trying, but the airlocks won't respond. It's like they're faulty. Every single one of 'em in this stupid place."

There was something odd about that-

::Airlocks will open when the Forge goes into evac mode, ad'ika,:: Ordo said gruffly. ::We'll get out of here when we need to.::

"Yeah?" Mission muttered into her wrist, glaring. "Do you really see Darth Poodoo issuing evac orders so his underlings can escape while he's getting smacked about by Jen?"

::This cargo conveyor is shut down, Mission,:: Carth chimed in. ::That means alarms. And that means the Fleet's doing damage out there. Evacuation mode is automatic once something critical like life-support or power generation is affected. So stay by the ship. The airlocks will open, sooner or later, and then we can all fly back out.::

There were enough assumptions in that statement for me to accuse the man of perjury, but I rather thought a seasoned officer like Carth Onasi knew that. Still, the words seemed to have an effect on the kid, with the way her shoulders straightened – and likely that was the only thing the man intended.

"Focus on what you can do," I added. And right now, that was safeguarding the 'Hawk – faulty airlocks or not. "For instance, you can help an old man get to his feet instead of mooching around here wasting time."

Mission's gaze snapped to mine, sparking with a faint echo of her usual sass. "Fine," she groused, as she offered me a hand up. "Suppose it'd be inhumane to leave an old geezer stranded on his wrinkly backside. Far out, between you and Canderous, we could just about turn the ship into a nursing home."

I chuckled as I accepted the help. It was hard to stifle the groan that followed my ascension upward. "Doesn't sound so bad if you're bringing me food and washing my clothes, lass," I wheezed.

I spotted a blaster back in Mission's hand as she faced the direction of the hangar exit, her face tightening with a watchful readiness that I hated to see in one so young. Still, the girl was nothing if not resilient. Provided she made it out of here alive, I rather thought she'd be alright.
I drew marginally deeper on the Force, and moved to flank her as we waited for whatever came next.

xXx

**Revan Freeflight:**

There are times when a moment can stretch out for an eternity.

When the weight of a decision trembles on a knife-edge, and either side has its own ruination. When the roar of a nemesis bellows through the air, compelling the choice to be cast, bleeding corruption through the Force and damning the only option that has a reasonable chance of victory.

When time slows to a crawl-

For I was not winning, not like this. I could keep fighting, struggling, grit my soul and trust my 'saber to find a path through Malak's guard once more.

Or, I could take out his power source first.

And as my fingers dug hard into the kaiburr at my back and his Force dug deep into my throat, I thought I knew best how to accomplish that-

*Have you learnt nothing?* The castigation whipped through my mind. My own conscience lambasting me in a voice that sounded remarkably like my borrowed memory of Vrook Lamar. *There is a reason Jedi stand back from the dark, no matter if inaction leads to failure or death. Because there are worse things*

Time choked to a standstill.

And this time, this time, I had an anchor in Bastila – brittle, flawed and fragile – but she might be enough, maybe, to withstand one final stumble. I could reach out to her, demand she hold me steady while I tempted mastery of the kaiburr once more-

*-and take mastery back-

-and trust myself to keep my eye on the endgame. The portals, the portals- I would have enough power to destroy them through the kaiburr. As long as my endgame didn't change, didn't corrupt. It was such a slight risk, really, when balanced against the superior might of Malak.

Just another roll of the dice.

Motes of dust glinted motionless in the air. The jagged crystal pulsed beneath my palm. The Force, oh, the Force, calling to me and promising salvation. It sang like a flock in flight, like the united will of a cattle-beast herd, like the symbiosis of a Paaerduag living in twin harmony. Brighter and brighter, ice and fire, not warring together but instead building on the innate strength of each. A life-storm of power, all blooding higher in my uncertain grasp.

The noose around my neck vanished. Beyond, in slow-motion, I saw Malak's legs bend in the infancy of a Force-enhanced leap.

Then the flipside called. The flock dove, senses honed, claws aiming for the kill. The herd of cattle-beast turned, sloughing their weak and their old to appease the predator on their tail. The symbiotic creature unbalanced, as the simple *humilis*-Paaerduag slipped into subordination, into no more than a mute carry-beast to the mentally-dominant *altum*-Paaerduag.
Because, always, there was a master.

-you are the master-

I had believed that once. But it wasn't true, was it? The Dark Side had mastered me in the end, just as it now did Malak. The sheer hubris – of myself, and every other being who had dared wager their soul against the dark – defied logic. My own arrogance, in believing I could take such a step and walk away with my objectives unchanged; or my soul, untainted.

What is victory against Malak, if I fall again?

The kaiburr trilled a sweet song of temptation. Promising more and wanting more- as the Dark Side always did and always would-

-the Force will free you-

In the end, the one thing I had learned was when it was time to stop rolling the dice.

With a final wrench of will, I called to the Force- not from the veins of corruption firing through the mineral at my back, but instead from the raw lifeblood of the galaxy itself.

From the motes drifting slowly through the stagnant air around us. From the flecks of mites and bugs that burrowed beneath floor grills and between walls. From the constant creep of electricity as it fired a matrix of charge through every cable and into every machine.

Pure Force, as it twined through every particle that was but a part of the whole.

I straightened, pushing off from the kaiburr-

-and time snapped back to normality.

Malak was there, suddenly, red plasma raised high in a killing blow. Faster than should have been possible, Karon's 'saber came flying to my grasp, hissing to life and slamming home against his.

Red snarled and sparked against blue, as his yellow eyes spat fury into mine.

Find another way. A better way. There's always another solution-

Power heaved and roiled in our grasp, torn between the two of us, our 'sabers held impotent as our wills wrestled with one another. The unbalanced Force flowing from the portals fed into Malak, amplified by the kaiburr, lending him superior strength as his weapon inched forward.

Keep searching-

I had to destroy the portals. Direct attack on the capsules wouldn't work- Malak had protected them well. But the capsules housed sentient bodies, held helpless in charged kolto jelly, which must mean that somewhere else there had to be-

My senses unraveled outward. It was intrinsically difficult to feel anything beyond the almighty vortex of Force burning from Malak and the kaiburr both, but I had to keep trying. Through the air, into the pillars, below the walls. Karon's 'saber was forced close, a diagonal guard slowly slanting back at me, near enough to feel the threat of heat simmer through to my skin. I couldn't hold Malak at bay for long.

All I needed was one more moment. A moment, to find what I was searching for.
The Force twitched over a flux of electrons. A power source, a life-support system, hidden beneath the chrome floor under my boots. Connected through the pillars-

-and sometimes, I knew, a moment could be over in the blink of an eye.

Malak leaned forward. I lurched sideways. His 'saber unbalanced, skidding off mine. Stabbing into the kaiburr. Something alien shrieked-

I was already leaping clear, but the scream blasted through the Force, a sonic screech of mineral disjunction that dug deep into my head. I stumbled on landing, ears ringing, barely staying on my feet-

But I had to act while I still had the chance-

My maimed hand, aiming at the floor, fired a weak spear of ionization. No more than a ripple, really, only enough to impede the power core of the hidden life-support system.

Only enough to manipulate the device into standby mode.

Malak was yelling in shock, jerking his 'saber clear and spinning to face me. A crimson fissure gaped in the rock behind him, still whimpering a discordant, eerie murmur through the air.

"You- you think you can destroy the kaiburr?" Malak roared. His eyes were pinched and his head shook in irritation – and I knew, then, that the crystal's defacement had affected him too.

Let him believe the kaiburr was my target. It was a minor scratch on the mineral surface, already closing under the kaiburr's own power. Even a hundred lightsabers would do nothing more than rend the air with alien screams.

Beneath the flooring, the hidden life-support system stuttered into deactivation. How long, before seven bodies gasped into extinction? How long, before the seven portals closed this unholy gateway into the realm of death?

A minute. Maybe two.

Through the Force, I tasted Malak's wrath as he called on the septagram of power that obeyed his will. Directed from the kaiburr but sourced from the dying bodies: dark-edged chaos churned once more into a crescendo of annihilation I could not block.

I only needed a minute, maybe two-

With a sharp wrest of inversion, I twisted the weaves around me and vanished.

Pain.

Without the Force, I could not push the crippling sensation down, or blank it out, or rise above the spasms radiating from the lightsaber wound in my side. I was running hard to the wall, forcing tight muscles to move, and I didn't remember the last time everything felt so frelling hard-

Even my jaw ached, where Malak's armoured fist had smacked into it earlier. My back- deadened skin, chafing against tattered mesh, a warning sign of a different sort-

I kept running, and could only hope that Malak wasn't listening for the pound of my invisible feet darting away.

"What?" Malak bellowed in furious astonishment. The crackle of death and lightning scored through the air.
the chamber behind me. "You think you can *hide from me*?"

I changed course- I couldn't leap to the railing without the Force, but if I could put something between us, like, say, the kaiburr-

"You will not run from me any longer, Revan!" Malak's voice roared, dissonant and grating, as his voder struggled to match his fury with volume. "Not if I have to fill this entire chamber with devastation!"

The seconds ticked over desperately in my mind as I neared the far side of the monolithic crystal. Without the Force, I wouldn't be able to sense when the trapped souls met their final death, and when the portals became nothing more than kolto-filled coffins.

I had to rely on Malak's reaction, when *he* sensed what I had done.

I needed a minute, maybe less-

Thud of boots, nearby- I stilled on the spot, glancing over a shoulder. Malak was there- *right* there-less than five metres away- having followed with speed I could no longer match. His pale, Sith-marked face now mottled with rage, as his unseeing gaze scanned the room.

Too close! Sithspit, he'll hear me if I move- or if I sodding breathe-

Power crackled around him. A lattice of black lightning, ready to stream from his fists. If he blindly unleashed it here, I'd be right in his firing line.

Malak punched a gauntlet into the air-

He froze, suddenly, before his head jerked up to stare at the nearest pillar.

"What?!!" Shock, widening those fallen yellow eyes, as they moved to the next pillar. "No- no-stop!"

The shards of electricity guttered. Malak spun on a foot, his gaze tracking all of the doomed portals, one by one, in mounting desperation.

It was time.

I dropped the weaves. Clean Force flooded me, my sword-arm snapped upright, and I lunged forward to make an end of things.

xXx

**Dustil Onasi:**

Lord Arseface passed me mere minutes ago.

I'd been tight against the wall, teeth gritting so hard I could swear they were about to pulverize. Pain in my frakked arm near unbearable without the Force. Heart thumping so loud I was sure the bastard would notice as he sailed past, sickly eyes pinched into deathly slits.

I'd thought he would hear me, smell me, somehow sense me out; for it hadn't taken Master Uthar long, and as far as the Sith pecking order went those two seemed to be more or less crapping from the same rotten branch.

But Sharlan Nox strode by without pause.
I let myself breathe only after he'd gone a full minute. Lungs burning as I allowed myself shallow, silent gulps of sweet air. Limbs shaking, and mind racing like a swooper on shot.

I could double-back: take the comm off mute and reach out to the others. Lord Arseface was ahead of me, now. Further away from the 'Hawk, from Dad and Mission. But if I turned tail and ran to supposed safety, how did I know the frakkwad wouldn't do the same?

And then I'll be right back to where I started. A bloodbath in the hangar.

Not to mention... I grimaced as I flexed my empty off-hand. I had no weapon. I had one working arm. And... I was pretty sure I was frakking lost, now.

*What a bleeding mess.* Here I was, a half-trained Adept too scared to use the Force, thinking I could take on a frakking Sith Lord with one hand and no 'saber. The deadliest thing I had in my pockets was an expired protein bar.

*Mex would call me a frakking tool.*

I pushed off the wall, suddenly disgusted with myself and my pointless bitching. I knew what I had to do. I had to stop Sharlan Nox getting bored and heading back to the *Ebon Hawk*.

I had to find a way to kill the bastard.

"Where'd you go, arseface?" I hollered. "Are you too frakking stupid to realize when you've overshot your prey?"

And for a moment – for a sweet, delicious moment – I let the Force weaves drop.

The jagged stab in my arm dulled. A welcome rush seared through my limbs, surged through my senses, promised me anything-

*-glimpses of the truth can be found here. the truth of real power, more than you have ever tasted-*

Nearby, an oily miasma of something that felt more rotting than living stopped moving away.

And turned back to me.

*-the Force is stronger here. you can be stronger here. all you need do is draw deep, and you will be a match for the parasite-*

I clenched my jaw. And even though it felt damn hard – maybe even harder than turning on Master Uthar and seeing the disbelief pale his opaque, fatherly, *corrupted*, eyes – I pulled the Force in tight and flipped it invert once more.

The whispery voice quenched into silence. The spectre of Sharlan Nox vanished from my now-mundane senses. The throb of pain returned with a vengeance.

And further down the passage I saw a service corridor lead away on an angle.

I ran. Again. Like vermin scrabbling through a maze, with every shiny tunnel the same, no viewports or signage or *anything* to give me a clue to where I was running. Steps echoing as I darted down another side-entrance, and I wasn't sure if the echo was the reverberation of my own footfalls, or the Sith Lord closing in on me.

If Lord Arseface augmented his hearing, he'd have no trouble pinpointing the sound of my boots, shooting a little speed under his slimy heels and closing in for the kill. I had to find something-
The light cut out.

I skidded to a halt, vision dead as shock froze my limbs. I couldn't see- there'd been a cross-junction of three circular exits ahead of me- but now I couldn't see a damn thing! Heart leaping, palms sweaty, every instinct screaming that my only recourse left was to reach out-

With a flutter, at first, the lighting returned.

*What the frakk?*

I turned to stare wildly over my shoulder, but the corridor behind was as empty as the three in front.

*Did he blitz the lights? What, does he think I'll flip out at a freaking power surge?*

That made no sense. Surely, screwing around with the electrical infrastructure of No-Jaw's palace was more likely to land Lord Arseface in trouble with his dear boss, rather than panic me into doing something retarded.

So far, anyway-

::Sssheghs achalss tah. Nil daritha chalss tah:::

I took a slow, silent step flush against the wall, as a foreign voice spat out through invisible speakers, bouncing incomprehensible sounds into the air.

::Sssheghs achalss tah. Nil daritha chalss tah:::

A repeat of the same message, I thought, as the same guttural hisses ran through a third time. Sounded like a robotic voice, but the dialect was almost Selkath with all that sibilant slithering-

*Not Selkath.* My hold on the fish lingo wasn't *that* shaky. Though it didn't really matter what the language was – only what it was saying. And maybe it had nothing to do with Sharlan Nox-

The lights flickered again, but stayed on this time. The automated voice cinched into silence.

*It's a system message,* I realized. *A warning. Some sort of alarm, if the lights are choking – maybe an evac order.*

The burn of hope lanced through me. Sharp and bright, almost like the Force. *Has... has Revan actually done it? Has she toppled Malak?*

Or... or maybe it was the Fleet. Maybe, now that we had Miss Battle Meditation on our side, Dad's Fleet were blasting through and...

...*and about to blow up the Star Forge. That I'm standing on. Along with Dad and Mission and the frakking others.*

I swallowed. I had no clue where I was, but I'd only risk comming home and heading back *after* I'd dealt with Lord Arseface.

And ahead of me, just at that very moment, a figure stumbled into view.

Again, I held my breath and flattened myself tight against the smooth wall, and it wasn't until the guy actually ran past me that I realized he was nothing more than a Sith foot-soldier. A lieutenant – judging by the insignia on the his shoulder – with the bulk of a blaster clipped at his waist-
I pushed silently off from the wall, and fell in behind. But the guy was sprinting, veering left, faster than me without the Force, and I just made the call to risk dropping the weaves when the soldier abruptly stopped and slammed a hand against a door-print I hadn't even seen.

Further down the corridor, a full-sized double-hatch opened with a pneumatic hiss.

"Ruark!" the guy bellowed, slowing to a stride as he cleared the threshold.

I scrabbled to enter before the damn door closed, hoping the mark wouldn't catch the sound of someone following-

"Yeah?" a sent echoed back, deeper in the room, and it was only then that I really took in where I'd stumbled into.

"-did you see the friggin' alerts? Can't understand a cracked word of that friggin' voiceover, but my visor pinged me back the station stats-"

This place looked exactly the same.

"Cool your jets, Jeb, and just keep the damn snubs warm."

Minus the 'Hawk and the crew, of course, but otherwise I could almost believe I'd fumbled my way back to the start.

"That's a critical transformer failure, Ruark!" The man I was shadowing paced over to the nearest snub, an Aurek-class like the ones that were sitting pretty back in our hangar. My feet automatically followed; slow and silent. "You really wanna stay up here in Restricted with nothing but dead battle-droids for company, and airlocks that won't open-"

"Airlocks are shut down in Factory too, twonk head."

I couldn't spot the second speaker, but his reply back was faint. My wide eyes roved over three Aurek birds and one of those curvy Sith ones, along with a handful of empty bays.

This was just like our dock. Another officer's one. Space for about a dozen starfighters, but less than half-full. Manned by barebones staff and labelled on the plans as some sort of exhaust duct. Ordo and Psycho-Droid had said that before, when they'd been poking at the schematics back on the 'Hawk, pointing out these hidden docks that were apparently some sort of stealth exit for the higher ranked Sith. Which meant...

"...and you'd be better off gutting yerself than breathin' if you don't keep these compressors humming," the faraway Ruark continued. He sounded muffled, like he was bent over a refuelling gig or something. The soldier called Jeb hunched his shoulders and threw a half-hearted kick at an errant clean-bot as the other guy kept spouting off. "The general ain't got no time for incompetence. And you know the higher-ups are even worse."

...it meant- it meant that I might not even have to get back to the others. I was no flyboy like Dad, but I knew the frakking basics. I could get a bird in the sky – and if the Forge was starting to bleat out station-wide alarms then I could comm the others, tell them to get the frakk out, and do the same myself.

Leave Lord Arseface behind to get blown up, along with ole No-Jaw if Revan hadn't done the deed yet.

Assuming, of course, that Mission could find a way to get the airlocks open.
I reached out to the Force. I wouldn't think twice, not here, not against the scum I was standing behind. *It's us or them, Dee*, Mex'd whispered to me back in the early days. *Us against everyone in this chivhole. No time to be a blubbery chump if you wanna survive.*

And as my fist clenched, and strength buzzed in my ears and kissed against my soul, the Sith foot-soldier named Jeb choked. From behind him, I could see his hands scrabbling, flailing out to reach desperately around his throat.

* -take what you need to survive-

I stepped forward, ripped the blaster from the twitching man's waist with a jerk of power, and strode around face him. Fired twice. Once to shatter his visor, twice to make sure he stopped kicking.

"Jeb?" Soldier Two yelled in alarm. "What the frig are you shooting at?"

And then I realized I would have to kill that one, too.

* -there is great power here. you can protect them all-

Quenching the susurrating promises of the Star Forge, I slipped back into invisibility and turned away from the corpse with the melted face. Held the new weapon tight, and considered my next move with a grimness borne of necessity.

I used to say the names in my head. Drex Voona, Talal Born, Tushka, Belaya Linn. But after the *Leviathan*, when kills became direct by my hand and anonymous in nature, I'd stopped counting. It seemed more important to count the ones still standing – the ones I would fight *for*.

Dad. Mekel. Mission. Even the others I'd been travelling with- frakk, even *Revan*.

No time to be a blubbery chump about it. Mex was right on that one.

I took a step-

-and behind me, I heard the soul-sinking sound of the hatch opening once more.

"I sensed you in here, little snack."

Soldier Two squawked in the distance. I turned slowly on one silent, invisible heel, and saw again the wraith of my past come to challenge my future.

Sharlan Nox was staring curiously at the warm corpse by my feet. "I thought I tasted blood on the air. Looks like you've been busy."

A faint chuckle as Lord Arseface raised his hands.

But the bastard couldn't see *me*, and now I had a frakking blaster-

xXx

**Revan Freeflight:**

I charged, he turned, and it all narrowed down to this:

The hiss of ’sabers crashing.

The roar of Force in my blood.
The scuff of boots as we both moved; weaving and dodging and charging each other again and again.

No words, not anymore; just the frenetic byplay of weapons and limbs – an exchange of power that bore the synchronous taste of home and death.

So familiar to me, this dance. My muscles remembered these steps. Training with this man, fighting by this man, striking against this man. My body and soul knew, even if my mind did not. We had learned together, side by side, from the same masters. Grown together, forged together, fought together. And now-

I darted close, 'saber raised in an off-balance parry that I knew he would knock aside with ease. He followed with a hard kick at my knee, but met empty air instead- for I was diving to the side, tucked in a fast roll with my 'saber outstretched, coming up behind him with a furious rope of Force lashed around his ankles.

He almost stumbled. Almost.

A brutal surge of power shattered my psychic grip instead, just as scarlet vengeance came sweeping at my face.

I leapt back a metre. Found my feet, and raised my guard.

One fist dropped from his hilt, clenching tight. I sensed the crackle of death as it sparked back into existence- and lunged forward before he had a chance to unleash it.

He dodged back, only just avoiding my swipe, returning both hands to his 'saber in response. I pressed hard, but he met the next attack with a solid block. And predicted my subsequent strike with a step to the side – before attaining the offensive once more.

He loosed a flurry of jabs at my injured side; I danced back, as he edged forward in exploration. He had to be desperate, now, to end me – just as I was him. We were both waiting for an opening, waiting to capitalize on a mistake.

He no longer had an endless supply of Force to draw on, but the kaiburr bolstered still him. He was stronger – physically, at least. And I was the more wounded party.

But I knew- oh, I knew- that all it took was a moment. A moment for the scales to tip, to unbalance. And if that moment wasn't going to appear by itself, I'd just have to mould it into existence.

I allowed my knee to cave- just a little- just enough to affect my stance. Clenched tight on the Force to steady my balance. Dropped my blade an inch; let it waver slightly in the air.

His eyes pinched tight in calculation. One hand flung hard from his hilt, snapping outward, firing a quick punch of compression straight at my gut.

I let the fist of power hit. It hurt, even with the Force tight around me. Air, gasping from my lungs, as my legs wobbled and threatened to topple.

Him in attack, advancing fast, both hands on his weapon again as he raised it high in the sweeping right-hander I knew was coming-

I flew forward before his 'saber began to drop. Cyan plasma rocketed onward in a stab powered by all the raw Force thundering through my veins.
My hilt trembled as the strike connected: I felt his armour hold for a shaky instant, before it splintered and gave way. Momentum drove my blow further, and then my old master's lightsaber sank inches deep in my old lover's chest.

A freeze, a pause, a moment's stutter- my gaze dashed upwards to meet his: sickly, yellow eyes widening with stark disbelief.

I was bodily ripped away, then, by a recoil of his Force. Thrown back hard as his scream of pain tore through the air.

My body slammed into the ground, but I was back on my feet a second later, ready to react-

The man stood still metres away. One gauntlet pressed tight against his cracked chest plate. Something dark and wet dribbled through his armoured fist.

His other hand clutched a lightsaber that now shook in a weak grasp. Fingers unfurled, and then that hilt dropped, slowly, slowly, before clanking on the chrome and winking out.

xXx

Carth Onasi:

::We think Dee's about to enter another officer's dock,: Mission whispered in my ear. "And Teethree's got access to the cams in there.::

I swallowed. I was stumbling through a darkened cargo chute, trusting that a droid's predictive algorithm would get me out somewhere near my son. If Teethree was wrong-

It didn't bear thinking about. I cleared my throat, striding between two large crates lit up in ghastly red from the strip-lighting above me. The lights were down due to the alarms, no doubt. And the alarms had to be the same reason for the stationary travellator beneath my feet.

::Shall I get Teethree to cast the feed to our comm-links?:: Mission asked.

::No,: Ordo grunted, a split-second before I had a chance to. ::Keep your eye on your surroundings. Bad enough you're yakking to that bucket droid over the air. 'Cause it'd be an embarrassing way to die, kid – gawping down at your wrist while the enemy shoots you in the head.::

In front of me, the stacked crates were blocky outlines containing mysterious goods sent from the inner workings of the Forge – or so our droid's interpretation of the schematics read. The unmoving line of crates carried on and on, lit up further ahead by what appeared to be a pale white glow.

"Verbal reports only, Mission," I said, frowning at the white light. "But make sure Teethree's keeping tabs on the hatches near you. Until he gets visual, there's still the chance he's wrong- that the Sith bastard might be doubling-back."

Suddenly, I was a lot less sure that I'd made the right call in leaving the hangar. Mission was left behind with Canderous, Tobards and Jolee – all three of whom were somewhere between moderately and heavily injured.

I was running on an adrenastim Ordo had slipped me when I'd left, but it didn't entirely dull the ache of the bruising knotted down my back. And I knew I was in much better shape than the others.

::Sheesh, Carth, I'm not that simple,: Mission complained. ::Y'know Teethree can keep track of more than one thing at a time, right? I mean, I know multi-tasking is hard for you guys an' all-::
"Okay, okay," I muttered grimly. Mission's ever-ebullient spirit had bounced back – and I was glad of that – but now was not the time. "I think the chute has an exit close by. What's ahead?"

It was artificial lighting I'd spotted; the whites of halogen bulbs indicating the end of enclosed space. The light was coming from the right of the tunnel, like the chute opened on one side only.

I kept moving, weaving quickly between towers of cargo that stretched high to a darkened ceiling. My footsteps, fast and loud, echoed in the stagnant air around me.

::You're close to a tech room the conveyor goes through. Jump out there, and head to-::

A screech of Binary beeps and whistles cut through Mission's words. My stride faltered as I neared the opening.

::Carth! Tee's found him on the cams! He's- he's entered that dock- no, wait, it's a Sith guy-::

"The Dark Jedi?" I demanded in a hoarse whisper. I was right by the exit, now; pressing hard against the curve of the tunnel as I raised my blaster at the harsh light beyond.

What I could see was empty and still. Weapon and gaze locked on the room, I took a step full into view, swinging the barrel around in a sweep.

The room was mercifully clear.

::No, don't think so- sheesh, Teethree, slow down!:: Mission was gasping in my ear, her words peppered with astromech trills. ::Just a foot soldier? Tee says there's two- and he can see Dustil now-::

My heart kicked. Ahead, the cargo chute ran through the room at ground level before continuing on into encroaching darkness. As I stepped from the motionless conveyor onto chrome flooring, my blaster travelled over barren consoles and inactive tech bots alike.

A repair room, by the looks. Maybe it served as a maintenance check on factory parts travelling through this blasted place.

"Directions," I hissed, keeping my voice low. I hadn't encountered anyone – yet. But it sounded like Dustil had. "Get me to my son."

There was a hatch set into the far wall. I was there in a blink, hand mashing down on the door control.

::Go left outta the room, you'll be in a-:: Mission's voice transmuted into static as the damn droid spat something further in my ear. I was tight against the inner wall as the hatch opened, my gun pointing down the corridor beyond. A sidestep across the threshold, as I spun on my heel, sighting the other direction.

Empty.

::down... go further... Dee's killed a...::

Another series of beeps. Fast, and frantic.

::No! No- Teethree's spotted the Dark Jedi- Carth- run!::

I was running. Left down the corridor, running blindly. "Directions!" I growled again, for now I had no idea what was around the next bend. The hardened military focus I relied on in situations like this
was cracking, fracturing- all I knew was that I had to find Dustil now-

::Follow the corridor left. Hatch at the end::: Another break of static, as I turned hard left at an intersection, and the astromech screeched again. ::Dustil's... the Sith- the Sith's got... soldier:::

The corridor ended in a large double-hatch, marked only by a door-print console inset into the wall a good few metres before.

::Whaddaya mean, he's eating him?::: Mission shrieked.

"Mission, the hatch!" I was next to the door-print, staring down at the biometric device that certainly wouldn't open for me. Beyond the oblique half-moon exit had to be the dock.

My son, and that Sith bastard, had to be through there.

::Eating- how can he be:::

"Mission!" I hissed frantically. "I can't get the blasted door open!"

::Carth... careful:::

Barrel aimed at the door, legs apart and trigger finger ready- careful meant nothing against the weight of my son's life-

"Get the damn hatch open!"

A pause, a pneumatic hiss, and then the half-moon double-hatch began to separate.

In the gap of sight beyond, the first thing I saw was grey. The grey titaplate hull of a snubfighter. The backdrop of a hangar. Then- a red-robed figure- his back to me, a lifeless body in his arms-

I opened fire.

Double-tap, triple- a scream as the first bolt hit him dead-centre, scorching a black bulls-eye on the crimson cloth covering his back. I was still firing- but sprinting, now- and then the robed figure blurred-

Bolts streamed from the barrel of my gun. I kept hard to the wall, and there was cover nearby behind a stack of cargo crates-

Everything froze before I reached it. My muscles locked. Limbs ground to a standstill, mired in invisible ferracrete. One arm, still outstretched, wielding a primed gun that refused to fire-

No. No!

My head, still turned, sighting my target-

And the robed bastard turned slowly to face me.

Move! Damn it, Onasi, move!

I thrashed and flailed – or tried to – but nothing happened. Desperation was hot and acrid as I mentally ordered my body to obey- to fire that damn weapon again or at least keep running-

But my body wouldn't – or couldn't – move. Not even an inch.
Mission shrieked, and the worst sound in the galaxy was the frantic beeps of the astromech I couldn’t understand. Detailing events in cold Binary to a girl who had already seen and lost far too much.

"Another crumb." An insouciant drawl of Galactic Basic hit my ears. That Sith bastard, strolling towards me. Behind him lay a lifeless body – not Dustil, thank the stars, not Dustil – of a Sith-clad soldier. A few metres back, beneath the shadow of the snub, lay another corpse garbed the same.

"Truly, you nulls are barely worth the bother." A crimson-gloved hand rose to brush at his shoulder- a blackened, exposed limb displaying the edge of a flesh wound that should’ve hurt him. Felled him, for I’d got the bastard in the back, too-

::Carth:: Mission’s screams were painful, now. ::Dee! Rosh! Jen! If anyone... listening...! Help!::

I jerked desperately, frantically, uselessly- I’d heard Force stasis could be broken, dependent on the will of the victim and the strength of the villain-

Nothing. Still, nothing.

"But your sting is annoying enough," the bastard droned on. "If I had not just fed, I might now be facing an ignominious end, indeed."

Beneath the tattered flaps of crimson cloth, his burnt shoulder shifted- pulsed- my gaze was as frozen as my limbs, so I had a straight view of the unthinkable.

Butchered flesh regenerating into unmarked skin.

I’d be the first to admit I knew little of the Force- but I’d picked up a few things around my lover and my son. Healing, I’d thought, was one of the few skills that was all but impossible when embroiled in the Dark Side.

How in the blazes can anyone kill this sort of evil?

I strived, I struggled, I forced everything I could in trying to move. Mission was sobbing incoherently, now, and I couldn’t bear the thought of her as a witness to my end.

The pale bastard sauntered closer as my attempts came to nothing. Eyes, slits of gleaming yellow, crinkled in detached amusement. From his cheeks, thin tendrils of... something that looked a lot like flesh... curled beneath his chin.

And behind him, against the backdrop of the nearest snubfighter, a figure blurred into existence.

The ping of a blaster firing-

The bonds around me shook- I was moving, stumbling, boots tripping over one another as I caught my balance. My arm jerked upright to aim in desperation-

::DEE!::

A wild shot, the sound of another, and a fierce scream-

But then I was flying. Thrown back, hard, slamming against the wall, and my body froze again- And a second scream- but from someone else- a terrified sound that turned my blood to ice- Dustil.
I was immobile against the wall, but I could see everything. My son, his throat clasped tight in the Dark Jedi's fist, as the bastard's other hand was raised back at me. Holding me incarcerated as I was forced to watch my worst nightmare unfold.

Smoke wafted from the melted mess of Sith's head- where there'd been a tail of black hair, there was now molten flesh and abraded bone. Another blaster wound- Dustil had fired a blaster- right at the back of his head-

But it didn't stop him as he jerked my son close.

My frozen vision blurred. All I could see was shredded scarlet robes covering the Sith's back as his skull began to glow. His entire body, illuminated and damned- and I couldn't see Dustil anymore, I didn't know what was going on, except that this Sith bastard had Dustil and I couldn't move-

I had to move- but, try as I might, nothing worked. And the shrivelled black skin on the Dark Jedi's head slowly stretched over to cover his exposed skull, before morphing into healthy pink.

A Mandalorian curse cut through Mission's sobs, and then the comm clicked into silence.

Carving into my gut was a horror I'd only ever felt the likes of once before. When I'd found pale, lifeless limbs, surrounded by the ashes of a planet's devastation.

_Morgana_. I was gasping, barely breathing. _Morgana. I did my best, but it wasn't enough. I didn't save Dustil. All we had was a handful of weeks together, after everything-

A dull groan, a whimper, and suddenly Dustil was in my line of sight again, held aloft by the Sith's outstretched hand. My son, struggling so feebly now, like he had almost no fight left.

Renewed vigour coursed through my veins, and I felt my limbs budge-

"Oh no you don't!" the Sith snapped, whipping his head back to me and flexing his raised hand. The air tightened, constricted, crucifying me with impotence. His bare skull gleamed with stolen health, a shiny contrast to the wisps of shrivelled hair still clinging to the back of his neck. The bastard's body was almost glowing, and his eyes-

-his eyes were burning with the depths of a nether-hell he had somehow sucked out of my son.

"Dad," Dustil gasped, his voice thready and weak, as he twitched like a tach caught in the jaws of a loth-cat.

"Dad?" the Sith echoed, black-rimmed eyes blinking in surprise. "Dad? Oh, what fun!"

My gaze was forcibly fixed on the cursed man's hand, still raised in my direction, slim and pale and bearing ridiculously long black nails. But I could see the bastard's head tilt as he leaned over my son once more.

"Oh," he repeated, a soft sound of surprise murmuring from him. "Oh. Do I recognize you, little snack?" He drew Dustil in tight so I could barely see my son again- and there was something even worse about the delight cresting in his voice-

"Telos?" The word lilted, high-pitched and sharp, as it slipped from the depraved monster. "Yes, yes, I am sure of it! I found you on Telos, all those years ago! You were mine, little morsel, before dear, dead Nisotsa so rudely interrupted us. Lucky for me you have no Dark Jedi to vouchsafe your life this time, hm?"
The bastard's head slowly turned my way. "And you are stronger, now, I sense," he murmured, facing me, but his words were directed at Dustil. "Strong enough that I might keep you as a pet for a good while. But I'm afraid your darling father is too annoying for my tastes. Shall we watch him shoot himself first?"

My stomach dropped. No. Not like this, not in front of Dustil, not so he has to watch-

The blaster was still in my hand. My hand, not immobile anymore, but slowly being forced up and around.

Dustil moaned, weak and whimpering like a starved child, and the sound etched cruelly into my soul. And as the barrel of my own gun slowly rotated around to face me, all I could think of was the son I was failing, the wife I had already lost, and the lover I would be leaving alone in a galaxy that cursed her name.

xXx

Revan Freeflight:

My limbs froze. For some reason, I couldn't move. The smart thing to do would be to press forward, finish it, for Mal was still standing-

His black-and-grey exoskeleton slowly stained crimson with his life. A mortal wound, that. When plasma gouged deep enough, even cauterization couldn't stem the flow. Karon's lightsaber might've even breached his heart.

I was beset, suddenly, with the inane deliberation on whether he recognized the weapon I had run through his chest.

Malak's gaze held mine. The poisoned depths of his eyes had lost that unbridled rage; darkening, instead, into grim resolution.

"You're dead," I whispered. My lips felt numb. I should- I should feel something-

"Am I?" he breathed, unmoving. "And yet, here I stand."

The kaiburr was behind me. Thrumming deep, as if in reaction. I could feel flurries of compression pull sharp around Mal; tightening, tightening, until I sensed what he was doing and why he was still standing-

"That's a mortal wound." I blinked over dry eyes. My senses traced the path of Force cording frantically through his flesh; binding muscle and sinew together in a futile attempt to hold back the inevitable. Holding him upright, keeping him alive. "First time you fumble the Force, you'll be out cold."

And dead.

His brow twitched, as if he'd intercepted my thought. "In many ways I am more alive than you, Revan." Mal's voice cracked, broke, wheezing hoarsely through his voder. "I look at you, and I cannot see a glimmer of the lord I once betrayed, or even the woman I once followed."

She's still there, Mal. I swallowed. I'm still here.

And a thought, then, horrifying and tragic, ran through my mind with soul-destroying ease.
What if... what if our positions had been reversed? What if fate had decreed Mal to be the one captured by the Jedi? And then the second chance had been thrust upon him, willingly or not, as he was painted with a false backstory and forced to navigate between sacrifice, objectivity, and the greater good?

Could Mal have chosen redemption, given another life?

Would he have?

"I sense the shape of your thoughts, Revan," Malak rasped. The Force pulsed through him, twining into a mesh of energy as it weaved through his charred flesh and forced his heart to keep beating. "How long did the Jedi masters spend with their fingers dabbling in your blackened soul?"

I was still, damnably, frozen. And if not for the gauntlet clutched at his ribs, and the Force clutching at his life, I would've thought Mal was almost relaxed.

"Have they reprogrammed you with bleatings of the light?" he whispered. "Do you dream of redemption, Revan? For yourself? For-" his voice dropped, "-for me?"

Something sharp and shameful sliced me to my core, as I realized-

no.

In all of my travels and travails, and with all the lost or fallen sentients I had encountered and dared to judge, the one person I had never considered saving was the man I had once, by all accounts, loved as fiercely as the stars.

Now, etched with evil as he bled out before me, there was no one left to mourn him but an amnesiac ex-lover who had already moved on.

"Anyone can turn back, Mal." My words were weak, useless, a sop to my own short-comings. I said them anyway. "Even in death. You know- you must still know- there is no death-

"You, of all people, spouting the wisdom of the Jedi?" A laugh, as nasty as it was bitter, scraped from his voder. "Your utter gall remains unchanged, I see. You are ever the hypocrite."

My throat clenched tight with emotion. I felt numb- and yet, so exposed.

"You emptied Korriban. Is that how you live with yourself now, Revan?" Malak jeered in a low voice. His gaze was the burning of suns, as the Force climbed higher in his dying grasp. "You redeemed Yudan Rosh. Reclaimed Bastila Shan. And now, what? You think to add your old lover to the mix?"

My head said it was a fool's errand. But what sort of person am I, if I don't even try?

"Mal-"

"Oh no, Revan, I will not be relegated to nothing more than the ultimate notch on your forsaken pillar of atonement." His voice dropped, and his eyes narrowed to slits. Behind me, the kaiburr pulsed at my back. "You started this. You led us all down this path. You cannot just wave a hand to undo it all."

"This is not for myself," I whispered. "You were great, once. Righteous. Just. Surely, you remember better than I. Surely you recall the man you once were-"

Malak's head shook, the smallest amount. His metal jaw glinted, taunting me with my own crimes. "And now I am reminded of your weaknesses, Revan," he growled. "You shed them as Dark Lord – but you are no Dark Lord now."
There was a bud of urgency, flaring in my gut, imploring me to act. With the Force as a crutch for his dwindling life, Mal could not win— but he was not yet beaten, either.

"How much really has changed?" he hissed. "You were once so reckless and driven when it came to those you cared about, Revan. You do not remember, but I do. That escape from Chandrila. The gamble on Vanquo, to recover Talvon. That absurd Fett infiltration you hid from me, risking it all to save Yudan—"

I flinched.

A sound between a growl and a laugh choked from him. "Oh, why am I not surprised?" he sneered. "Of all the things to remember... and you have others now, don't you, Revan? Others who follow you blindly like him? I saw a soldier in Bastila's mind. Would you risk yourself for a common grunt?"

There was a roaring in my ears. And the urgency grew, as the kaiburr hummed loudly behind me.

"I sense your crew, Revan." Fingers of Force pushed out from Malak, through the chamber and beyond, spanning across the breadth of the Star Forge. "Scrabbling like vermin. I sense Sharlan Nox. He's caught someone. Is that one of yours? It must be, for your pet Twi'lek is there too—"

What? My gut lurched. No. Yudan is with Bastila. Malak had taunted me earlier with this Sharlan Nox, saying he was out hunting my crew— I hadn't stopped to consider or believe it, for I simply couldn't afford to—

The Force flared, deepening in my grasp. Shielding bright around me, for whether Mal spoke truth or not, his purpose was still distraction.

"You always did risk too much for your friends," Malak whispered. Something moved— his lightsaber, lifting, spinning slowly in the air by itself, hissing back to life under his psychic grasp.

My own hands tightened in response, drawing the guard of my old master up high. Malak couldn't duel me, not anymore. He couldn't best me like this, and yet in that second I knew he was about to try—

His 'saber launched like a spear, with the wrath of his kaiburr-laced Force behind it. I was ready, shield firm and weapon crossed, but at the last minute his 'saber weaved hard left—

A crash, as it gouged deep into crystal. A sonic shriek; the tearing of rock screaming into my head—

My eyesight blanked and my ears rang, but the Force— the Force wrapped around me still and safe. I was grounded, shielded, protected, even as the alien song of pain cried out through the air.

But I was safe— I would sense Malak the instant he stepped close, and if he tried anything more gruelling than a Force throw, the weaves holding his chest together would surely slip—

The scream of sonic dulled to a bleat as my vision returned. And Malak—

And Malak—

I glanced wildly around the now-empty chamber. A faint hiss, barely audible beneath the kaiburr's whimpering, as a faraway hatch closed.

Malak had gone.
Yudan Rosh:

I ran, power-induced celerity speeding me on, as I ignored the eerie whispers and whimpers that called out to all Force-users who dared step foot on this perfidious ruin.

In the air, shockwaves of Force rippled and surged; emanating from the titans of my past. Revan, and her Malak, clashing together in one last terrible wrestle of wills.

Chrome blurred and corridors vanished as I ran from the woman Revan begged me to either protect or vanquish, and instead toward the man whose death might cause her to fall again.

Oh, Revan. The things I do for you. Even now, after everything.

Ahead, a pair of rogue battle-droids. My hand waved, and they were hurled away: smashing into a wall, sparking impotently as I turned a corner and left them for dust.

Ancient Rakatan spat through the station. It was not the first time, and I barely took note as the lighting flickered as it had done earlier. For I was focused on my quarry.

I could sense him. Beneath the cyclonic storm of Revan and Malak, and amidst the tantalising temptation of the kaiburr. Sharlan Nox was the faint scent of decomposition, of flesh gone to rot, of Force that hadn't turned dark so much as mindless.

There has always been something slightly off about Sharlan. Cowardice, the likes of Bandon Stone and Arran Da'klor would mutter with a sneer, even as they bowed in submission to whichever Dark Lord had mastered us at the time. Apathy, I had thought, and found myself unable to castigate him for it without making myself a hypocrite.

For after Revan's death, nothing had truly mattered to me bar the twisted addiction of the Dark Side.

Or so I had thought, until Nisotsa had dropped the bombshell of Revan's resurrection.

But this residue, this malefaction upon on the air... I had sensed it before, from Sharlan, with no ready answer to its origin – other than as one more paradigm of Dark Side corruption.

We all fell, but the fall affected us all in different ways.

Now, Sharlan was easy to detect and track. With the maelstrom of Force churning all around me, I had expected Sharlan’s signature to be almost indiscernible. But his trail was clear, burgeoning with unexpected strength- and close, too.

I ran down one last corridor-

At the end a dual-hatch beckoned, and the Force rallied sweet in my grasp before wrenching the doors open.

And in the hangar beyond-

A familiar figure stood, his back to me, garbed in the same scarlet-and-rubescent as always. He stood motionless as time elongated around me.

Force punched out from my grasp: a tight, compressive grip that coalesced around the man, thrusting him in the air like a rag-doll, dropping a limp body from his arms to the ground with a thud.
I charged. Burning green erupted from my hands as I closed in on my target.

My hold on him shattered a good metre before my strike could connect. Sharlan Nox landed, free, feet barely kissing the ground before he leaped clean back, bounding away from my onslaught.

He vaulted again, this time powerful and high, and cleared the snubfighter at his back before disappearing from immediate view.

The need to hunt fired in my blood: to chase down my prey and vanquish him while he was on the run. But a murmur of sanity held me in check, implored me to glance down at the body by my feet.

The boy. Breathing, and barely conscious. His eyes were wide and unseeing as he twitched on the floor. He was in poor shape-

The scuff of a boot had me whipping around, lightsaber raised high in reaction.

Carth Onasi stood metres away, by the wall, staring down in horror at the blaster in his hands. His chin jerked, then, before his gaze darted to his son.

"Dustil," he whispered.

I leaned down to grab the boy's arm, lugging him roughly to his feet. There was a whimper and a stumble, but the boy kept his footing, and I took that as a good sign while my attention snapped back to the rest of the room.

Sharlan had retreated, for now. I could sense him, like a pollutant thick on the air, ebbing in wait some distance ahead.

Waiting for an opening, a pause, a chance to retaliate.

"Dustil?" For a Force-blind, Carth Onasi was surprisingly quick. He was already next to me, shaking his son's arm, as the boy slumped uselessly at my side.

"Compulsion," I hissed through gritted teeth, recognizing the vacant stare of the enthralled. How had Sharlan dug so deep so quickly into the boy's mind? And the boy was drained- not to completion, but Dustil Onasi's signature flailed like a weak Initiate barely open to the Force.

There was a growl of discontent from his father. "We have to get out-"

"No," I broke in. "Sharlan Nox is stronger than I have ever sensed him to be. I will finish him." I turned a hard-edge stare on the stalwart soldier Revan had claimed for her own. "You must take your son to safety. Now."

The man's brows creased in immediate concern as he eye-balled his son. "I'll have to drag Dustil-"

And ahead, I felt a surge in the Force as Sharlan began to creep forward.

"I have no time to undo what is wrong with him." I thumbed off my lightsaber and clipped it to my belt in one swift movement. My now-free hand rose to cup the boy's chin.

Dazed brown eyes blinked at me, frowning in vague recognition.

"You will take your father back to the Ebon Hawk," I murmured, threading my words deep with power. It was harsh, quick, and the only salvation I could offer. The compulsion would wear off on its own soon enough – as, I had to hope, would the noose of Sharlan's coercion around the boy's will. "You will take your father back to your allies. Now."
"Rosh-" Carth Onasi snapped, angry, even as his son wrenched free from my grasp and pulled instead on his father's.

"Dad, we have to go back to the 'Hawk!" Dustil demanded. His voice was hollow, and one arm hung askew at his side.

"Go!" I hissed, for I sensed the drum of power as Sharlan darted closer. Carth Onasi's face twisted in dislike – as much at the concept of deserting as to what I had done, I surmised. "Both of you are nothing but liabilities, here – surely you perceive that!"

The soldier's expression hardened as his son wrenched on his arm. The man nodded, short and sharp, before finally allowing himself to be dragged away.

The single lightsaber was instantly back in my grasp. Behind me, I heard the brainless pound of fists against the now-closed exit hatch.

Inwardly, I sighed.

*Compelled beings are not the sharpest of thinkers.*

"Comm the others!" I called back, but my gaze stayed fixed on the silent trio of snubfighters that filled the hangar. I loosed a wrench of Force behind me – enough to open the cursed double-hatch once more. "Do you not have an astromech to overcome such obstacles?"

"Yudan Rosh!" a drawling voice declared from behind the closest snubfighter. My eyes narrowed. "Fancy meeting you here!"

The sound of disappearing footsteps eased something within me, but also distracted me from the object whistling through the air-

A cargo crate, flying sideways at my head-

I cursed, lurching back just in time, only to be sideswiped by a thrown barrel from the opposing direction.

I stumbled, off-balance and slightly winded. Instinct had me converting the stumble into a backspring, landing some metres back with my blade at the ready. Sighting a tech-bot as it hurtled through the air-

The Force rushed to my furious command, striking the bleating droid clean through with my weapon.

"Enough parlour tricks!" I growled, dropping one hand from my weapon's hilt to drive away a second crate with an upsurge of Force. "Come out and face me, Sharlan!"

"Why would I do that?" The man's voice seemed to saunter through the air, like everything was naught but a lark. "It is the height of foolishness to face a superior foe head-on, is it not?"

I sensed a billow of power, then; followed by the sound of thudding boots. I glanced up, to see the comrade who had never particularly impressed me, perching calmly on the roof of the closest snubfighter.

"Or, perhaps, the balance of power has changed," Sharlan intoned. His thin black lips curved. And the effluvium of Force stinking around him was great; great enough that I would be a fool to underestimate him.
But he was not my equal. He never had been.

"I see you are sporting a change of hairstyle," I mocked. Sharlan Nox was not one to fall victim to temper easily, but I knew my advantage would be to lure him into outright duelling. "Seems most unlike you, Sharlan. While Malak can do justice to a bald pate, I have to admit it is somewhat ridiculous on you."

Even with the distance between us, I could see the man's eyes narrow. "You have cost me a most tantalising appetizer, Yudan. Still, I suppose I am not surprised you are here, sniffing after Revan again. Even second best, you never could keep away from her, could you?"

The taunt burned, the more so because of its inherent truth. But Sharlan was fishing, testing – and I would not fall for the bait. "I am true to the one I swore fealty to first, Sharlan. What of you? You were not part of Deralia, and yet you remain at Malak's side. Do you truly believe your master will live through today?"

Sharlan trilled a laugh, still standing at ease atop the starship. I could rush him, leap forward to intercept- but I suspected the man would simply slither back deeper into the hangar unless I caught him by surprise.

"My master is safe enough," he drawled. "Although, really, what is a master but a stepping stone to greater heights?"

Sharlan had spoken with such blatant self-interest before – and I had to admit the sentiment did resonate with the damned hierarchy of the Sith. Still, I could not hold back a grimace of distaste. "Perhaps that was the first indication of Revan's impaired judgment – when she discovered you and trained you in the Force."

The first time I had seen Sharlan was shortly after Malachor, emerging in Revan's ranks right at the inception of her calamitous war against the Republic. Sharlan never divulged his origins – and neither had Revan – but I always wondered, even then, how she could so blithely ignore the disregard of a subordinate so indifferent.

"Discovered? You believe *Revan* was my first master?" He was delighted, warbling a chuckle as a single blade of scarlet fired to life in one limp wrist. "I suppose it was never a secret, per say; more that the both of us deplored speaking of such a barren cripple from our past."

My focus sharpened on the ground Sharlan stood upon, as I paid his words little heed. "I care little of your masters, present or otherwise," I returned, eyeing over the snubfighter's cockpit that was little more than a metre from his booted feet. His stance, casual and relaxed, was a nonchalance I knew was all for show.

"Well that surprises me," Sharlan murmured. "Considering you were almost as close to Em as you were to Revan."

*That* snatched my attention; and it was contrived to, I realized, as the detached hose of a refuelling gig came whipping through the air. I jumped high, flinging my 'saber down to scythe the airborne snake in two.

A second later, and I was landing- and throwing back Sharlan's follow-up barrage of what looked like the robotic arm from a cargo-lift machine.

Throwing it straight back at him-

Sharlan flung one arm out sharply, and the mechanical limb went careening into the shadows.
I could feel my brows lowering. "You expect me to believe that Meetra was your master?" I knew it was foolish to continue this distraction of verbiage, but it was difficult to let such a ridiculous notion lie.

The man shrugged, standing once more at ease on the sleek snubfighter's nose.

"Believe what you want," he returned. "Consider me Mandalore's lovechild if you like. After all, Mandalore's war was the crucible for so many of us. I had been alive for eons already, but it was on a scorched battleground where Em first found me and taught me to truly live."

"You speak rot," I said coldly. "I would have known had Meetra been training an apprentice-"

"In the middle of war? Towards the end, when she was so often called groundside?" Sharlan snorted in overt disparagement. "Would you expect her to broadcast such a heresy – training an unsanctioned padawan – when you were all teetering on expulsion from your precious Order?"

No- had anyone been training an apprentice, they would have kept it under wraps until the close of the War. Back then, some of us still harboured hopes of a return to the Order, even amidst the bitterness of their inaction.

"And then, what?" I clipped out in impatience – for I did not put any credence to his words. It was beguilement, distraction, no more than a means to draw my attention away. Truly, the man would have done better continuing to taunt me about Revan. "Then you deserted Meetra after Malachor to bend knee to Revan?"

"Oh no," Sharlan said softly – but I was aware of the Force as it built slowly in his still grasp. He probably thought he was being subtle about it. "Em was the one who sent me to Revan, to complete my training. A final gift, if you will, from a broken master to a bereaved student – but Em had no way of knowing that Malachor affected me, also. And Revan, I suppose. I daresay if Em lived long enough to know of Darth Revan's reign, she would have rued the day she sent me to her." He sighed in overt mockery. "Em was always so stupidly soft-hearted."

The ridicule present in his tone was enough to smart, on the behalf of a friend I still thought of dearly. And I surmised, then, that perhaps Sharlan was better at this game than I-

But it would not matter. Whatever his words, preposterous or blasphemous or aimed at my own weaknesses – I would not be foolish enough to let down my guard.

*Keep your eye on your foe. His weaknesses, his intentions, his environs-*

"I suppose you will claim you were at Malachor, too," I drawled, my eyes landing again on the closed cockpit hatch resting close to his boots. "Allow me to anticipate your rejoinder: you brought down Cassus Fett whilst everyone else had their eye on Mandalore."

Sharlan laughed, a sound both high-pitched and discordant. "I had forgotten how truly amusing you are, Yudan. No, you foolish dunce. I was with Em and Xaset. At the centre of it all. Back then, I was no more than an idiotic apprentice, refusing to abandon his master and her lover."

"Sure," I snapped in disbelief. Although Meetra and Xaset together would not have surprised me- for all that my friend had been well-regarded by the masses, there had been so few who dared draw close to an empath. Xaset had been one of them. "And the Force was not burned out of you because you are special-"

"Perhaps that is down to no more than physiology," Sharlan cut in, shrugging. "Humans are so short-lived and fragile, after all."
On another day, I would have questioned the implication—unless Sharlan Nox had the same ability as that strange shapeshifter we had encountered earlier, I did not see how he could claim to be anything but Human. In the now, I simply kept my focus tight on the man as he continued meandering. "I like to think I was born during the Wars. But Malachor—Malachor was where I was truly forged."

I struck, before he could.

A spear of Force lashed out from my grasp, aiming straight for the cockpit's transparisteel. Glass shattered in a fountain of shards, and the man jerked in surprise—

I was already flying through the air, lightsaber raised.

His scarlet blade lifted just in time, slamming against mine in a block that was more solid than I would have expected from him, once. A snarl twisted his gaudy black lips, and the gleaming pink skin on his scalp speckled with fragments of embedded glass.

He sidestepped, swift and abrupt, before thrusting out in a wild riposte I had to dodge backward to avoid.

Sharlan had more power and speed than I'd realized— but the art of duelling was my game. And this game, I knew, as I batted aside another lunge, was now on.

xXx

Revan Freeflight:

Bastila!

I was running to the exit, mind still hazy from that cursed sonic blast. He couldn't be far ahead, not even with the kaiburr, not with the ticking time-bomb of his own wounds drawing on his Force.

Bastila?

Hatch, refusing to open. Another second gone, before a brief pulse of ionization cleared the barrier. Senses, still shaky, but if Malak was going after my crew—

BASTILA!

Revan? She was faint, faraway, but slowly turning at my call.

Yudan, I gasped at her frantically, as I ran from the nexus of this cursed place. Is he still with you?

A pause, long and incriminating. No. He- we- Sharlan Nox is after- he has gone to protect the others, Revan—

The others—

She tried to hold back the thought, but my bond-sister was tired, and the faintest glimpse of a man seeped through—

Carth. No—

Malak was after them, he was headed to Sharlan and Yudan— and Carth was there—

"I sense Sharlan Nox," Malak's voice sneered in my head again. "He's caught someone. Is that one of yours?"
I had to get back to the hangar. Running, sprinting, tearing through corridors- I had to descend, get to my crew before Malak could-

Revan, you must focus on Malak!

*He's gone, Bastila!* Perched at the top of a circular stairwell, I could leap into the centre shaft and clear a dozen floors in one hit. *He's gone after them! I have to get to the 'Hawk!*

I jumped.

A flurry of surprise from her. *I do not believe they are by the Ebon Hawk, Revan.*

Even falling at enhanced speed, so many floors took more than a second. *What? Where? Where are they?*

She was focused wholly on me, now. Turning her energy to our bond, and retreating from the stars. I'd have to send her back to help the Fleet, if she hadn't done enough to tip the scales already-

*All I know is that Sharlan Nox is hunting Carth's son. Push your senses out, Revan. Do not fall victim to panic. There is no emotion*- 

The Force cushioned my landing as I fell silently on the balls of my feet. Senses, straining out in desperation, for I was near the 'Hawk now, but if Malak had gone further afield-

Bastila retreated; I had the sense she was relinquishing all responsibility of this situation to me, for Bastila had the Fleet to protect, still. That had been my orders, after all – ensure Bastila win the true battle, out there in the stars, while I held Malak at bay.

The kaiburr's energy susurrated thick through the place, as if it knew its greatest ally was on his last legs. But it was in the throes of his final moments that Malak could truly wound me.

*There.* The Force honed in on a faint spark: Jolee's, fainter than it should be. Next to the slumbering speck of Juhani, still nestled within the 'Hawk.

Further afield: Dustil, running. Yudan, blazing in the Force next to a sickly taint that was not Malak-

Fear punched hard in my gut.

Malak- he was striving for a last act of vengeance, I knew this. But even he would have understood he was not quick enough to hold me at bay. Not wounded, not if I was following the same path-

Panic was swift, acrid, and heart-stopping. Time froze. And my own voice whispered in my mind-

*I'd always been more powerful than him-*

My head, turning back up, to gaze in horror at the ceiling some dozen floors above. Back, towards the upper meditation chambers.

*-but he'd always been able to surprise me.*

xXx
Chapter End Notes

Coming up next: the depths of Force bonds are explored.
A showdown's worth of thanks to kosiah for the beta.
Nexus: Bonds [Revan Freeflight]

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Nexus: Bonds

- Revan Freeflight -

Too late, too late, too late-

My head craned, staring in horror at the stairs that spiralled above me, round and round like an arc of hope slowly devolving into soul-crushing despair. A dozen floors I had damnably cleared in a flash, tricked into running after the wrong vulnerability by the man who had always known how to trick me.

Mal gambled I would drop everything to protect Yudan. To protect Carth. To protect the crew-

And completely forget about the other person so incredibly important to me.

The one whose life was even more of a vulnerability than Malak knew. He moved to wound me in one last act of spiteful defiance, not even realizing that Bastila was the key to my downfall-

My gaze darted desperately from railing to railing, skittering up the numerous flights I had so recklessly fallen past. I could see the path back up, I could bend the Force to my will, jump from side to side and ascend-

But it would take precious seconds.

And my senses told me Malak was already too far ahead.

I dropped into a crouch, one palm falling to rest flat on the chrome floor. My eyes closed, and I reached out.

The bond beckoned, and my instincts knew there was only time for one course of action – and even then I might already be too late.

My mental focus pitched hot into our mind-link. Dogged desperation drove me on: deep, deep, deeper. Near or far, distance mattered nothing to the mesh of Force that so permanently entwined me with Bastila Shan.

But Bastila- Bastila had already retreated to the stars. Back to her own mission, as per my command. Focusing on the battle I had insisted was the important one – for it was my job was to pin down the distraction.

Bastila assumed, just as I had, that Malak was hunting the others. The others, and not her.

Bastila! Come back! Come back!

I could feel her awareness, but she was vague, indistinct; her very essence spread thin in a smear of consciousness. Her thoughts and psyche dispersed, spreading wide through her net of battle meditation.
This time, there was no point calling out – for now I knew where the battle really was. This time, I had to go to her.

Somewhere, beneath me, my open hand pressed against a cold floor. But the feeling was muted and dull, and the boundaries of my own flesh blurred into oblivion as I chased after my bond-sister. Through the bond, through the Force, and deep into the ether of space.

Infinite dots of energy sparked against my senses. Existence in all its forms: creatures or plant-life or even the atoms themselves... all jumbled together in a wild matrix that would be completely chaotic if not for the unifying foundation of Force underpinning it all.

A heady sense of oneness enveloped me, for I was just a cog in the great machine of everything, surrounded by the immense power of the whole. But I was a cog that could turn, and – I understood this without arrogance – a cog that could also turn others.

The feeling was not unfamiliar. Even without an associative memory, I simply knew the throes of deep meditation could attain this level of awareness. Yet... yet there was a new dimension, an edge I had never seen before, a comprehension surrounding the psychogenic state of every sentient being within my reach.

And these states could be manipulated – the knowledge on how to do so was clear. Clear as a crystal Deralian sky that a scholar had once cherished.

I could will to life the slightest brush of hope – or fear – and direct it across the minds of many. Taint them either way. Or I could loose a psychic murmur to bolster morale and sharpen reflexes – and it would take no longer than the span of a fleeting thought. A tiny jolt – aimed at the right place – could stall the electrical impulses in any one of those sparks, and turn an organic brain into nothing more than organic soup.

All this could be done from the safety of distance.

I was a passenger – a co-pilot, even – of Bastila's battle meditation, and now I truly understood why her abilities were so widely coveted.

_There_, she murmured, but not at me. Her cognizance was clustered over a vast array of brightly-shining lives, and so I drew close, closer – for a touching of minds was the quickest way to communicate – but then emotion cascaded over me like the surprising gust of spring breeze-

Relief, hope, penitence – and a bone-deep weariness shadowed with shame. This was all _Bastila_, I knew, even as I became aware of some deeper bedrock to her fount of power. Some... other... _being_, holding her steady. Warm, like a blanket of light.

_I need do no more_. She was tired, so tired, and yet a flicker of faith blazed within her still. _This is enough_. _This is more than enough to ensure the outcome we desire._

There was a vague sense of approval – but it didn't originate from Bastila or myself – instead, the shape of the sentiment drew from that faraway third party. A Jedi master, I thought, as I touched the edges of a sentience who radiated with peace and acceptance. He or she was barely perceptible on any sort of mental level, and so I couldn't deduce their direct thoughts – only sense a gentle urging for Bastila to return to her own body.

Well. Counsel that echoed mine, wherever it dawned from.

_Bastila!_
I lurched to her. A shift, and then we merged.

In an instant—maybe less—our souls fused. The shock that staggered through her almost felt like my own.

**Revan**

*Malak is headed*

**No. No!**

*You've got to return*

**Where are y**

*Too far away!*

Bastila's fright was hot and acrid. Somewhere, a faint echo of alarm mirrored in the being of light—but Bastila's connection to that consciousness broke clean through, abruptly vanishing, as the many fine tendrils of battle meditation snapped and recoiled back into her—our—core.

Then, quick as sink-sand, we plummeted down.

Something thudded, and there was a ringing in our ears. A slam against all senses—and we wrenched open our eyes to stare at the shiny floor of the Star Forge. Smooth cinereal alloy, like every surface of this cursed place. A flawless material relic of a civilization long crumbled into dust.

Was I looking through her eyes, now, or she through mine?

**I cannot**

The Force was potent and sweet as it stormed through our flesh. It surged in our limbs right down to our gloved fingertips as they touched cold chrome in front of our blinking eyes. It was the raw power of the galaxy—at our bidding—if only we would *get up and frelling move*—

**I cannot face him!**

Her despair choked us and held us frozen in the body that was hers and not mine. We were staring in terror at that damned silver floor. Memories of recent trauma bubbled through our bond like poison, emasculating our instincts with blind panic despite my own drive to act. And those vivid, shameful memories nudged others into life—

Darth Malak, towering over our bound figure, septic eyes sparking with cruel delight as his gauntlet traced a path down our cheek and clasped our jaw. His voice, mocking and modulated, as he pinned us with questions we refused to find the answers to—but there was a price to pay for that defiance.

Mal, one hand warm over our eyes while the other snaked possessively around our waist. His lips moving tenderly across the skin of our neck, while he whispered secrets and surprises in a Coruscanti hangar.

Forked lightning streaming from the hands of the Lord of the Sith. Again. And again. And again and again and again. Ripping agony through our flesh and tearing screams from—

—from *his* lungs, as he was rendered prostrate beneath our superior might and dispassionate will. His loyalty we did not doubt, but his objections had to cease. We would see to it, and he would submit
like he always did.

We named Lord Malak our master, but words surrendered for survival did not equate to truth. They did not! We might kneel and do his bidding at the price of our dignity, but if it meant less pain-

_Bastila! Get it together!_

The paralyzing whirlwind of memories slowed and then ceased, driven to a standstill by my furious need.

_We must act!_

_I- Shame burned between us. I apologize-

_No need. Just let me-

My bond-sister had not been granted any time of significance to recuperate or empower herself. We both knew this. It was not shameful nor weak, for I knew most sentients did not have the strength to turn from the Dark Side, nor the mettle to achieve what she had since.

But to face her tormentor now-

That took the grit of the omnipotent. And a single conversation to bolster her fortitude was, simply, too little too late. Too late-

_Let me-

_Yes-

My drive was strong, and her concession allowed me to slam my command deep into flesh and musculature that was not mine. I gritted unfamiliar teeth, forced foreign limbs to extend, and stood upright.

We turned, together-

Our vision blurred around a large, darkish shadow. The periphery sharpened into sense first.

_Too late, too late, too late-

A hairy hulk of a body, metres away, fell down. The torso was striped through with a blackened, mortal gash-

_Revan, no-

Something clanged- a robotic head, bouncing on the chrome, dismembered from its frame-

_I will not fail!

I scrabbled for her lightsaber, cinched further around her waist than I would have done. The dark shape was rushing closer: black, shot through with scarlet. The shadow grew so it eclipsed absolutely everything.

Our fingers curled tight around a hilt, ripping it from our belt-

_Too late, too late-
We thumbed on our lightsaber just as the pain hit.

Someone choked.

The physical - it failed us now, even as we struggled to raise our weapon high in belated defense. The pain - it seared, it blistered, it was the agony of skin broiling deep in flame -

Our eyes dropped to stare in disbelief at the burn of red impaled clean through our chest.

Too late -

"I would have kept you, little one," someone murmured in a carefully modulated voice. It sounded far away. "Had I won, you would have knelt at my side. But Revan always finds a way to achieve the unthinkable. At least now I have the satisfaction of unleashing some measure of wrath in return."

*He cannot win- Revan- do something!*

I called to our Force, expecting it to flood into our grasp as it always did. Instead, all we felt was the wrench of plasma gutting deeper into our frail flesh. A surge of numbness gagged the pain, and we knew what that meant.

Nerve-endings, winking out in multitude.

Slowly, our gaze tracked upwards to meet the corruption of burning yellow.

"Mal," we choked.

His face was all we could see. Metal jaw, sallow flesh, rippling scars of tainted skin twining in with those ridiculous scalp tattoos he'd commissioned after Malachor.

Armoured hands suddenly cupped our cheeks, and it was the only thing left we could feel.

"Revan?" the Dark Lord of the Sith growled, his voice a mechanical burr. Those bright, poisoned eyes widened in uncommon surprise. "Are you here? Are you seeing- are you *feeling-* this?"

"Too late," I whispered, as the Force melted away along with sensation. "Sometimes even I am too late -"

His yellow eyes closed, then, as his brows furrowed in concentration. The shape of his Sith-marked face swam and blurred before us. We heard a murmur of surprise from his voder, before it was drowned out by a ringing in our ears - and then everything began to fade and we began to fall -

"You are dying. I sense *you* dying, too," a mechanized voice blurted. It was sharp and high and shocked. "Revan. Revvie- where is your body-"

Whatever words he said after we could no longer hear.

Falling- no, it was more like melding. Atomizing. Like attaining those same, earlier heights of a Force meditation – but amplified exponentially. The whole, beckoning -

I had felt this before, or something like it. Life, transforming into Force, as I stood on the precipice and Bastila Shan begged me to step back and clasp her metaphorical hand.

But it had been the null of oblivion that had beckoned me, then: an end to it all, to *me*, and that had been so very tempting. A cessation to the boundless grief and the bloody ruination I had wrought in the name of sacrifice.
Now, this, before us—no, this was before Bastila—and it was not the same. This was a transcendence, rather than an end. A journey we could not halt nor reverse, for the path back to her body had gone.

And we could not see the path to mine.

Somewhere, at the bottom of a spiralling staircase, another body slumped to the ground like a puppet with its strings cut.

_There must be a way_-

Railing against the inevitable was so very familiar, and so we fought back, struggling to pull in all the remnants of _self_ as we threatened to disperse into just another Force echo on the other side of life.

_My body— we can find my body—_

_It cannot be over._ She was—shocked. More than that. Unable to accept that we— that _I_—had lost. _It—it cannot—_

_She_ was disbelieving? It was _nothing_ on the hot spurning of reality I was experiencing. Bastila had saved me when all others would have walked away—this could not be the end, _not for her—_

_I would do it again, Revan._ A flurry of regard, of respect, of deep-abiding affection warmed the both of us. _I would have you understand that. Even knowing how this ends, I would still go back and save you._

Was this the end, then? Lifeblood leeching from Bastila's flesh back in a cold meditation chamber on the Star Forge. Force leeching from my own body, as my breathing stilled and my spirit flew away with my bond-sister.

Yet I wasn't mortally injured. If only we could—

_Even should we find a path back, I am too broken. We cannot subside in one body, and I cannot see how to separate us. It is over for me, Revan, and I am a weight on your soul dragging you down with me._

There was a guilt, there, that was patently ridiculous. _You saved me in the most important of ways, Bastila. I owe you so much._ I was still searching, struggling, even as we fell together. Flickers of light and echoes of energy danced around us, intangible and impossible to define as anything other than a symbiosis of Force. Inevitability reared-

—and there was an acceptance, then, that I began to welcome.

_My friend. You saved me. You gave me the chance to undo a portion, at least, of my mistakes. To return hope to the galaxy._

Malak would not live for long, we knew that. His armada was on the run, and the moment he succumbed to exhaustion or fumbled the Force he would be dead. Our last glimpse of battle meditation had shown the scales tipped high against the Sith Empire, and we knew their defeat was only a matter of time.

The Star Forge would fall.

The Republic would be granted the peace I once pledged my life to attain— for a time, at least. It was enough. It had to be.
I am not so sure.

Our minds touched again, and she was seeing that cursed purple world-

*Bastila! Nothing has come from there except my own corruption. Even Malak turned his back on that place. It could be nothing-

*I do not think so, Revan. Malak ignored it because he did not wish to draw attention – not because he believes there is nothing to face. Destiny is a fickle word, but I would have sworn on the Force itself that you were meant to counter the darkness hidden in the Unknown Regions-

It's not always about me, Bastila! If there's another war to fight, then there'll be others-

*Will there? Resignation, or something similar, radiated from her. Like a deep, melancholic sigh of weariness. *The Jedi are crippled from three generations of bloodshed, Revan. The light needs its warriors. I cannot go back, but if there was a way to release you I would-

Shh. It wasn't just guilt that tormented her, I realized. Bastila truly believed I was needed, even though she was a champion in her own right. *I know you would. I know.

There was peace, then; a serenity as welcome as a homecoming. A rest from it all as we began to disintegrate. Flickers of memory toe-danced through my soul, all too fleeting to resolve into anything more than the briefest of sensations. The thrum of a ship beneath my boots. The bonds of camaraderie and friendship. The visceral pleasure a hard-earned victory could bring. The clasp of strong arms around me.

The freedom to fly amongst the stars.

Bastila faded into me, like a final embrace. There was a puzzlement from her, as I saw flashes and faces that weren't of my own recollection. A father, free with his love but limited with his time. Vrook Lamar, levitating a rock in demonstration, his lined face patient and serene. Kylah, laughing and carefree like I could never imagine her to be, as she skipped carelessly through the Dantooine grass.

A secluded childhood, at times both happy and lonely.

I didn't know what Bastila was seeing in return, but I could feel her confusion. Maybe there were just too many burnt segments of my past for her to make any sense of it all. I could certainly understand that.

*I will miss those we leave behind, I whispered. For in many ways, my life had started – restarted – on the Endar Spire, and even here at the transcendence that awaited us, I was not immune to grief. Sharp and bright – for we were not the only ones leaving – we knew in our heart that at least one other had fallen. *But our mission is a success, Bastila. That was my bottom line. That was all I could really ask for.

We were focused on something else. No- she was focused on something else. Something new. Our confusion grew, no- no- it was her confusion- and a desire to struggle afresh surged from her-

*Bastila?

*What- what is this? she spluttered. Had I been staring at her once-living face, I would've seen bright spots of confusion bloom on her porcelain cheeks. *Revan-
She withdrew from me, just the tiniest amount, so I could sense the glowing golden chain of Force that connected us. But Bastila was concentrating on something else.

I saw it then: a slender, frail link that stretched far, far away. Back through the fabric of Force and into the living. Eons across the galaxy—

*My body?* I guessed, feeling the burn of hope ignite. Maybe she was wrong, maybe we could still find a path back. How that would work I didn't know, but the thought of a chance to save Bastila fired my own conviction to life once more.

**No,** she snapped. **No. But it is conjoined to you- and to you alone.**

*What?* I turned, concentrating on that thin, thin cable of energy she was so entranced by. It had the same resonance as the Force-bond that chained the two of us, but rather than an unbreakable rope, this was the faintest mirror of one, a whispered echo, and Bastila was right— it connected only to me.

Bastila's surprise turned to awe. **The Force... it truly provides, even when it does so in the most unusual of manners. This link... this was formed through your body alone, Revan! All the way back on Korriban!**

*What?*

**Sometimes, the saving of another can pose a consequence one could never imagine. This link can be used as an anchor, Revan! If you are not too far removed from the physical-** her words tripped, jumbling over each other in their haste. **I must try this. I must. Roll the dice, as you are wont to do-**

Bastila? *What do you mean?*

**I do not regret it, Revan. Remember that. No matter what I endured- in the end you saved me, as I saved you.**

**Bastila!**

The Force swelled, then, from out of nowhere. Like a rogue wave, a wellspring of determination formed instantly within my bond-sister's core. We could barely touch the Force in this place, much as we sank through it, and yet a steel fount of power burgeoned within her dying grasp.

She threw it at me in one swift move, and then I went flying.

**You were right. We did succeed. But there is-**

Flying, flying, I was flying down that intangible thread of Force-

**-there is still more for you to do.**

Our bond slowed me like a manacle, but my momentum was great. Behind me, a skein of Force tore free. Then, another. Ripping deep from my awareness and leaving a dulled detachment in their wake. Threads of the net joining me to Bastila were being torn away, shredding holes through my senses—

**Bastila, the bond-**

**Hush.** She sounded so far away now. **It will be all right. You will find a way. You always do.**

I was slowing down, still caught along that unfamiliar cable— now not so much smaller than the one
behind me.

Bastila-

The weaves behind me thinned, breaking free one by one. Each break recoiled with a jarring sense of numbness, reverberating ahead along the resonance of Force I traversed. The shape of my bond-sister dissolved. The final thread snapped free- and she was gone.

Then: a ringing sound. A thud. A slam against all senses-

Air, scraping against my lungs. Hard and panicked. The grill of metal pressing on my back- but I felt nothing of import- no pain, no exhaustion, no Bastila. No Force-

I wrenched my eyes open to stare at an unfamiliar ceiling.

It was not the silvered chrome I had expected. No, instead there was grated durasteel, dotted through with the lazy fins of air recirculators. Further along, a flashing holo-ad proclaimed something lurid in Galactic Basic. The sight was so absurd and inane that I could only blink in disbelief. My body felt heavy and listless, damp with sweat beneath a tight film of something that felt oddly like synth-leather.

And the Force- where was the frelling Force?

The ringing noise subsided into the jaunty tune of a sodding Bith band and, as crazy as it seemed, I was starting to think I'd somehow teleported flat on my back into a damned cantina-!

What the actual frakk? Where's the frakking Force?

There was someone else – not Bastila, not Bastila, I couldn't sense my bond-sister at all! But there was someone else – angry and frightened and fighting me for control of this body that wouldn't respond.

My vision shook and blurred into violet. I blinked again, and there was someone leaning over me.

The vague outline resolved into a Twi'leki female, purple-skinned and wide-eyed, as her luminescent gaze fixed on mine in shock. She was saying something, but the words were too loud and discordant for me to make out.

"What?" I croaked weakly.

The woman leaned in close, as if she might kiss me or resuscitate me, and for a brief moment I felt the sharp tang of recognition-

What the bleeding frakk is going on?

A roundhouse of furious panic slammed into me from someone else as I was lurched unceremoniously from the physical world. Panic was followed instantly by the plummeting sense of freefall – and, I understood, then, that it hadn't been my body or even Bastila's, but someone else's-

An anchor, Bastila said. But Bastila was completely gone, now, and I was flailing in the dark. Somewhere, somehow, I could sense the path of least resistance, and I followed it in desperation as the oncoming black of oblivion swallowed me whole.

xXx
Chapter End Notes

Coming up next: Multi-POV as Jedi and Sith alike react to the aftershocks in the Force.

A Force-bond's worth of thanks to kosiah for the beta.
Nexus: Dissonance [Sharlan Nox, Dustil Onasi, Inon Daelidar, Mission Vao, Davis Tar'coya, Jolee Bindo, Rulan Prolik, Carth Onasi, Yudan Rosh, Revan Freeflight]

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Nexus: Dissonance

Sharlan Nox:

Precognition was no more than a pleasing adjective some liked to name their own desires. The Force could warn of the present, but the future? No. I'd always known my innate power would shape my fate, but it could not foretell it.

Still, the moment Yudan Rosh landed on the snubfighter facing me, I'd seen the shape of his future.

It was a blinding flash of truth, as bright as the transparisteel shards that rained down on my head, as clear as the firestorm of lifeblood roaring at my command.

Yudan Rosh would be mine. Famed duellist the muscled warrior might be, but I had never fed so quickly and so deeply – and from such relatively strong specimens.

The Force peaked, and I would soon have this notorious pawn kneeling meekly at my side. He was both a pretty man, and a strong one – two characteristics I prized when it came to my fleshlings.

Oh, I would drink my fill of his strength. Then, and only then, would I hand his submissive carapace over to the master that had taught me so much more than any other – but one whose bridle was beginning to chafe.

My certainty of his fate began to fade the moment his booted heel smashed into my knee.

I staggered, ducking out of reach from a swift overhand, but it meant my feet scrabbled for purchase along the edge of the snubfighter-

I launched backward into the air, blindly, drawing the Force tight around a kneecap that I feared was dislocated. My landing on the ground below was steady, at least, but I detested the throb of pain that reminded me even I still had physical limitations.

I did not like my own pain. I had never revelled in it the way so many dark-sided scions seemed to. And, today, I had been forced to wade through far too much of it already.

My head snapped up, my lightsaber raised, and Yudan Rosh was right there with another blistering attack.

I danced back, out of reach, left hand curling in the eddies of power at my behest. A nearby supply crate fired at the Twi'lek like a rocket.

His 'saber struck, fast and fierce, smashing the inanimate object aside. Another lunge of his weapon deflected my next missile of debris, and then he was advancing on me again.

The Force surged at my whim, a tidal wave of compression that punched outward- power cresting
high, but not quite as magnificent as before. Yudan skidded back a step, but otherwise did not falter the way I expected him to.

And in my belly, the gnawing void that was never quite slaked growled in growing hunger.

_Fool._ My master's rebuke burned scornfully through my mind. *Had you not spent so much of your strength flaunting your regeneration to a null, Yudan Rosh would be yours now.*

The voice was nothing more than a psychic imprint. My master was tucked away safely from this place. But, still, the truth in that echo was painfully accurate.

Yudan Rosh must have sensed something, too, for his sharp eyes narrowed as he strode in close, green lightsaber striking forward in a hard jab.

I slammed it aside, blocked his next riposte, and the next- but then my weapon slipped and a bronzed fist came sailing out of nowhere to smash into my face.

Something crunched. Pain burst like a pregnant tach squashed beneath the claw of a katarn. I bellowed as nerve-endings screamed, and only the Force saved me from a fatal right-hander as I tossed myself back into the air.

I went up, high, away- feeling the apex of my power slowly bleed out in a Force-enhanced leap even Yudan Rosh couldn't match. Backwards over the second of four starships, and when I finally landed, it was with less grace than I appreciated.

Thumping on my arse like banal trash. I lifted a hand to my broken nose, and it came away bloodied.

I cared as little for anger as I did for pain, and now I was being forced to endure both.

_I will make the pretty Twi'lek weep in the end._ The metallic tang in my mouth was both puerile and disgusting. With a flash of uncommon temper, I felt this encounter suddenly flex personal. Yudan Rosh, and his fleeing allies, had thwarted me long enough. *My master will not allow me to keep the man indefinitely, but there is no reason he has to be so pretty when finally I hand him over-

I sensed him clear the curve of the snubfighter's bow, and in the same instant I was back on my feet. The Force churned through the room, billowing around us both in equal fists of power, and I shucked away the liability of my own anger to focus instead on what was truly important: survival.

For there was no reason I had to claim the man today.

I played the game of life and death differently to those infantile mortals I surrounded myself with, and I would not risk myself purely for a shot at revenge. No, far better to take this one when he did not expect my bite – for I could sense when the scales of a battle were beginning to tip against me.

One day my strength would not wane so precipitously after the high of a feed. One day, the galaxy would be nothing more than a trillion collared pets waiting to be consumed.

_The Force is not your only weapon,_ my master's echo snapped in disapproval. *You allow your hunger to turn you myopic. You know the man's weakness. So manipulate it!*

True. Perhaps today could still be a victory.

"Is my corpse to be a present for Revan?" I drawled, as the Twi'lek stalked closer. "After all you have suffered at her hands, you are still just her tame hound, aren't you?"
I'd hoped for a surge of emotion to rattle his attack, but Yudan's opening flurry was precise and swift. I backpedalled, darting out of range.

"Will you get a pat on the head?" I taunted, lurching back from a powerful lunge. "Or have you slithered your way further? I was her apprentice once. I remember how she rewarded the faithful."

A bald-faced lie, but surely that would stoke his ire. Surely-

He said nothing, but instead scythed his blade in an upwards sweep that caught along the edges of my tunic. I hissed, jumping out of reach, back thudding into the chrome of the hangar wall.

"Does she taste as sweet as she used to, Yudan?" I snarled, as my equilibrium threatened to break. Run, my instincts roared, but the wall was at my back and he was right there, blocking any retreat. Run- "Did you like her better as the Dark Lord or-"

The man didn't pause, and my parry was too weak to hold his lightsaber back.

There was a second's delay, between him cleaving a chunk of flesh clean from my shoulder, and the scalding punch of pain that staggered me to the side.

A howl tore unbiddn from my lungs. I slipped sideways against the wall, lightsaber dropping, my sword-arm on fire, seeing the end of my time come barrelling closer in the form of a green lightsaber-

An echo of someone else's end screamed through the Force. Two echoes- two intense ripples of energy that slammed through us both like twin meteors plummeting through an atmosphere while they burned themselves out.

Then, they faded into nothing.

My vision blurred, and the green plasma in front of me shook. Behind it, Yudan's head jerked sharply to stare in horror somewhere at the ceiling, and all colour drained from his face.

"Revan." His voice was cracked and hoarse. "No. No!"

Now, fool!

What was left of my Force rushed in as raw, brutal strength.

I dropped to a crouch, dove forward, and tackled the warrior around the knees.

He fell back, and we thudded to the ground in a tangle of limbs.

I pounced. One hand slammed his forearm back, wrenching the reach of his lightsaber out of harm's way and smashing his wrist-comm in the process.

My other hand belted a fist straight into his temple.

I drew back swiftly and repeated the blow, feeling my knuckles crunch against the side of his head. There was a soft clank as his lightsaber rolled from limp fingers before winking out.

Do not tarry, you insouciant oaf! Entrench your victory while-

Sometimes, I detested the echo of her leash.

I struck out with a multitude of psychic fingers. There was more than one way to drain a pet, but I chose the easy, shallow method first. Force to master Force; Force to draft it back to me. Enough to
dull the edge of my pain, enough to shatter his mental guards and leave him ripe for the taking.

Yudan Rosh twitched beneath my thighs, and his mental guards rallied in defense – but the man was knocked out cold.

The throb in my knee disappeared. Crimson blood dropped from my face to land on his, but my broken nose no longer pained me. The shoulder - well, that was a deeper injury, but I would see to it later. I had a psyche to break, first.

I felt my lips curve in a smile.

The day had been a rather bothersome collection of setbacks. The squall of alarms warned of the Star Forge's demise, which meant my opportunity for breaching the station's secret heart might be gone forever. And it seemed that Revan had finally fallen to Malak. I'd had a vague preference for the reverse, as I'd not planned to stay in the Dark Lord's orbit for much longer, and he had an annoying tendency to track down those he considered traitors.

But the ripe insult had been the null who'd shot me, and his Force-sensitive titbit of a son who'd done the same – after leading me on a merry chase.

When I considered the scarring the boy had left behind on my scalp, I knew that one day I would sniff out his trail again.

But not today. I knew when to call it time. And as my fingers grasped the limp chin of the infamous man laid out before me, I thought that today's conquest might even be the sweeter one.

Another klaxon blared in the distance. Not far from me sat the nearest of four strikefighters – officer's ships, all of them, primed and ready and equipped with such convenient cloaking technology.

The Star Forge hadn't fallen, not just yet. I could abscond into the anonymity of space in an instant. There was time – a little, at least – to relish the moment and drain the fruits of my victory.

And as I stared down at my newest pet – such a ripe, strong specimen to take with me – I let my smile widen.

xXx

**Dustil Onasi:**

*Get Dad to the 'Hawk. Get Dad to the crew.*

My thoughts narrowed into the same objective repeating over and over. *Get Dad to the 'Hawk.*

Dad kept talking, saying words that weren't important. Tugging on my arm. Time slowed to a silver blur, and all I knew was that I had to get Dad back to our frakking ship-

One foot fell in front of the other. Thud, thud, dragging Dad along, as he stumbled next to me with a blaster gripped in his free hand. Everything else had ceased to matter, like my entire life was fogged with only one purpose drilled down deep into my bones.

*Get Dad to the-

A muscle twitched, somewhere along my jaw.
Compulsion. Frakking compulsion. Like Mex scoring free drinks from that bartender chump back in Dreshdae. Easy to twist the minds of the weak-

The thought was odd and faint, so I pushed it away. I knew what I had to do-

Something shattered. A blast of heat scorched through my flesh, and my vision blacked out, just for an instant. A scream- two screams- crested high on the Force, like twin suns shooting nova, numbing my hearing, my sight, my everything.

The sharp points of energy fell, fading through the Force, and the next moment it was like they’d never been there at all.

Revan. That was frakking Revan!

"Dustil? Dustil!"

I was shaking. No- Dad, was gripping my shoulder, roughly, his face pinched with alarm.

"Son, stay with me! We've got to-"

Revan. That was her- her dying-

The grind of pain in my broken arm resurged with a vengeance, and suddenly I was back in control of myself, covered in sweat and grime and more exhausted that I could ever remember being.

"Dustil."

I blinked, staring at Dad dumbly. I'd come to a standstill, and it took a moment to realize we were in a dimly-lit corridor – just another one of the same frakking tunnels in this Sith-cursed place.

"I'm- I'm okay," I said hoarsely, even though it wasn't remotely true. I could barely even sense the Force, but I knew what I'd just felt.

Revan, paying the ultimate price.

And someone else. Was that Darth No-Jaw as well?

"Start moving," Dad ordered, placing a hand behind my elbow. It was dark, I realized with a jolt – the lighting had karked again. "We've got to get back to the others. Rosh bought us some time, but I'm not betting your life on him winning against that Sith bastard."

A torrent of images flooded through my mind as I stumbled after Dad. My blaster, firing a shot straight into the back of Lord Arseface's head. His skin- melding, healing, like it'd never been hit at all. Me, held helpless in his arms like a dumb tach as my life bled away. Dad, with his blaster forced up to his-

"Dad!" I gasped, my eyes dropping down to his blaster in horror.

A grimace twisted Dad's face as he urged me on. "It's- it's okay. It didn't happen, son. I'm not exactly Rosh's biggest fan, but he got us out of there alive."

I blinked. "Yeah." The word was a whisper, for Rosh's last command started echoing faintly in my head-

You will take your father back to the Ebon Hawk. You will take your father back to your allies. Now.
The coercion behind the message had faded; enough, at least, for me to shake it off. That twin blast in the Force had cracked straight through it. And the realization of being compelled – twice, no less – stirred something ugly and vengeful in my gut.

*I can't blame Rosh.* I knew that. Yudan Rosh had saved me. Saved *us*. He was stronger than Sharlan Nox, so he'd have a fair chance at beating that frakkwad-

*But Revan failed. Revan's dead. Frakk. Can that really be true?*

I swallowed and glanced sideways at Dad, marching down the hall at a speed I struggled to keep up with, and he was the damn Force-blind one. Maybe I'd known where I was going under the chains of Rosh's compulsion, but I had no bleeding idea now.

*How in the Outer Rim do I tell Dad about Revan?*

"Get your comm off mute," Dad said, his gaze fixed ahead. "Ordo's patched through a message that the airlocks have opened. We have to get back to the *Hawk* and leave as soon as Revan and the others return."

"As soon as-" I choked back the words. I couldn't tell Dad. Not- not here. Dad's faith in Revan had always pissed me off, but now- now-

Much as my thoughts on that cursed woman had always been twisted with bitterness, I wasn't all that surprised to realize I didn't want to see her dead anymore.

*And what if that wasn't Malak? The second death? It was- it was weaker than Revan. Mission said Revan and Bastila Shan's lives were joined. If Revan and Miss Battle Meditation both karked it, then does that mean frakking No-Jaw is still stomping around?*

Urgency kicked hot as spice in my veins, echoing through my Force-dulled senses. My strides lengthened, and Dad increased his pace to match mine.

"Airlocks have opened, huh?" I managed weakly. We could get out- that was something, at least. And if Darth Malak was still alive, then we had to get the frakk out as quick as we could.

Dad nodded; a short, sharp move of his head as he kept moving. "Teethree's reporting numerous alarms throughout the Star Forge. The Fleet's winning, Dustil. It's- it's almost over. Even Rosh might make it back. All of us will get out of here alive, son, with a new life waiting for us."

New life- yeah. I wasn't sure how much Dad really believed that, and how much he was just parroting it for my benefit. But the knowledge of the truth clamped tight around my heart, and refused to come out as words.

Dad would learn it soon enough, and I didn't want to see the look on his face when he did.

"All of us, alive," I echoed, and the lie tasted bitter on my tongue.

xXx

**Inon Daelidar:**

"General!"

Striding across the command room, I had no time to address the braying cry of the tenderfoot behind me.
"Order all squadrons to cover the secondary transformer array!" I snapped out to the closest technician seated behind the row of navi-console screens. To her left and right were empty chairs, glaring accusingly at me. It seemed every time my back was turned, another mewling coward ran for the doors. "We cannot let the Republic break through!"

The primary transformer was dead. If the secondary went down, all power would revert to emergency backup, which meant critical functions only. No turrets. Minimal shielding. A small window of life-support and artificial gravity-

*There will be no second breach.* I believed that as fiercely as I believed in the dry air inflating and deflating my own lungs. Lord Malak would not allow the Star Forge to fall. *Soon I will have the resources to repair the primary array. Soon my lord will have squashed all those ants who dared crawl inside his fortress, and then he will set his might on the bugs buzzing around outside.*

*And I will hold the Star Forge for him until then.*

A flurry of movement caught my eye-

"General- Sir-!"

I ignored the shout behind me, and instead raised my blaster to the port-side exit. One shot, and the green-skinned Rodian buckling to desertion fell flat on his face.

"Sir, the airlocks are open!"

I scowled, spinning around to glare at Jha'hasi's pimpled face.

"I am well aware of that, Lieutenant." I was surrounded by the idiocy of incompetents. No one knew how the airlocks had malfunctioned, and now no one could explain why they had so fortuitously returned online.

In fact, no one from Maintenance had bothered to make contact for over an hour.

But it mattered little, at this stage. Only a stuttering simpleton would stumble over the recovery of functionality, instead of focusing on what should be done with said functionality.

I took a step toward Jha'hasi, feeling my lips peel back in a rictus of frustration. "Cease plaguing me with information I already know. The airlocks are open, and all squadrons have launched. Further assessment of why can be examined after we have won!"

"Sir." Jha'hasi bit his lip like a child, stepping back in alarm from my outraised weapon. *Idiot.* I would shoot only those asinine enough to run. "Sir, the primary transformer's down. The secondary's getting hit bad, and so are the shields. We should issue evac orders-"

He halted when my blaster pointed unerringly at his face.

"Do you know what Lord Malak does to those who run?" I said softly.

The imbecile paled, but I saw his gaze flick weakly over my shoulder to the ready escape pods lining the back wall of my command centre. All solid green lights, ever since the airlocks had returned online.

I may not have stopped every worm from escaping this room, but at least I had the dark satisfaction of knowing not a single escape pod had yet been launched.
"Sir, the Star Forge is falling."

"No, it is not!" I roared, and felt the spittle loose from my lips. *Cowards, cowards, everywhere! And I knew* what fate had in store for me, should Lord Malak see the shambles my command room had devolved into.

Something flickered in my periphery- I spun on a booted heel, opening fire on the pathetic Trandoshan making a beeline for pods. Blaster bolts spat into the empty consoles, sparks arcing from one screen to the next, spraying shattered ferraglass all over the chrome flooring.

A seated tech screamed in strangled terror, but the Trandoshan- the Trandoshan stumbled as my aim straightened and laser bolts dug deep into her uniformed back.

"Sir, our defenses are all but gone." Jha'hasi's reedy voice kept talking. Shaky and frightened, but not frightened enough for the nitwit to actually *shut up and do his job*. "The Republic have set up an interdiction field to stop anyone jumping to hyperspace. They are transmitting demands of our surrender on all channels-"

Oh, I knew Jha'hasi had been promoted higher than his bleating worth, but it surprised me to hear the bug actually *dare* say such words out loud- or even *think* them. Had the child *never* seen what Lord Malak – or any of his Dark Jedi – would unleash on those weak enough to consider desertion?

Jha'hasi wouldn't last long. I knew that now. But I'd also seen enough of his cowardly character to know he could be useful, for a time.

I had scant resources to work with. Surely, Lord Malak would understand that.

"We fight for the glory of the Sith, Lieutenant." I let my voice soften. "For a stronger galaxy, for a *better* galaxy. We will win. The Lord of the Sith always pulls off the impossible."

In a sense, it didn't matter who the Lord of the Sith was – just the power they commanded. I had seen it time and again. Adashan and Gant had fallen. Dodonna- well. She would follow soon enough.

"Lord Malak rewards the loyal, Jha'hasi. But for those that run... Lord Malak can reach anywhere, even into the safety of a Republic prison. And you have no idea how long he can stretch out the promise of death."

Jha'hasi's chin wobbled. His eyes widened beneath a shock of ginger hair. The dunce had always been ruled by fear, and that made him a brittle tool – but a tool nonetheless.

"I once saw a traitor flayed alive over the course of weeks," I continued, seeing the memory of red blood and pink flesh in my mind. "He had forgotten his own name by the end of it."

Truly, there was a certain art to the skills of the Dark Lord's slayers. They were the sharpest tools of the Sith Empire, and ones I meant to avoid at all costs.

My attention snapped back to the cowering fool in front of me. Jha'hasi had paled further, if that was even possible, skin all white other than the bright red pustules quivering on his flaccid Human face.

Utterly craven. But he was the tool I had. I was fully cognizant of the barren state of my command centre. Less sents than escape pods, now- but it didn't matter. All I needed was a handful of techs to obey my commands while I kept the battle out there alive-

For my lord would be here, soon, to fix everything.
"Hold the room, Colonel Jha'hasi," I clipped out, handing the child my gun, grip-first. He blinked stupidly at me. "I must concentrate on the Fleet, and I cannot do that when every minute another rat tries to find a hole to scurry into."

Jha'hasi's head dipped in a shaky nod, and his hand rose slowly to curl around my blaster.

"You have my back, Colonel." This was what I had been reduced to, playing war with a bunch of brats dressed up as brass. But my own competence was all that mattered – and I could mould these bugs as required. I knew just how well fear worked, when intermingled with the promise of reward.

"Sir," Jha'hasi breathed, and his eyes darkened with emotion. Awed disbelief, no doubt, for whomever would take such a child as colonel seriously? But like any greedy fool, he would reach forward to grab the reward, and that made him mine.

"Shoot anyone who dares move from their chair," I ordered, before turning and bending over the nearest free console. A snapshot of our armada blinked back at me, and it was worse than I thought.

*I just have to hold the line until my lord returns. I can do this.*

The faltering squadrons on the ventral wing- they could be directed into a suicide run at the inertial compressor of the *Meridus*. If I could precipitate the demise of Dodonna's flagship, her death would be a final blow to the hierarchy of the Republic-

My body slammed forward into the screen. Blistering pain flamed over my back, and someone was screaming-

"Evacuate!" Jha'hasi's reedy voice yelled behind me. "The Star Forge is falling! There's more than enough escape pods here – get out while you can!

*Blaster fire- a blaster bolt to the back-*

My thoughts flat-lined into nothing but the agony of fire dancing across my skin. I wasn't moving. My limbs betrayed me to hang limply over the top of the now-beeping console.

Darkness flickered at the edges of my vision, slowly narrowing into a tunnel. I could just make out the far wall, and the last sight I had was of pathetic, cowardly Jha'hasi, slamming a hand onto the control mechanism of an active escape pod.

xXx

**Mission Vao:**

"Airlocks are open," I whispered, feeling the hope shine bright in my heart. Teethree had just transed the news to my comm, but the loud *thunk* of machinery from the inner hangar door told us all the truth a sec before he did. That, and the solid array of pretty green lights above it. "We're gonna get out of here."

::*I've commed Onasi,*:: Canderous said. Up ahead, next to the blown exit, he'd turned around and started heading back to us. *::*And Revan and Rosh, but those guys ain't being chatty.*::*

There was a noise from old man Bindo- something between a chuckle and a grunt. He was steady on his feet, at least, standing next to me at the base of the *Hawk*'s loading ramp – but I'd seen his chest when I'd patched him up earlier.

And that was before that Sith sleemo had done- done- *whatever* that guy had done. Jolee's skin was
grey and his breath wheezed like a slum-rat with the pox. But the old geezer from Big Z's homeworld held his 'saber in guard as we both waited by the ship – waiting, for the others to return.

*Can't believe ronto-turd Rosh saved the day, and Carth and Dee are on their way back.* That, and the airlocks opening, meant things were gonna turn out okay. We just had to wait for Jen-

Jolee coughed, suddenly, a racking noise that morphed into a loud gasp. I spun on a heel, turning just in time to catch the old man's arm as he stumbled. The 'saber in his other hand wavered dangerously, and his eyes rolled back in his head-

"Jolee!" I cried, digging my fingers deep into his flesh.

"Shoot him with another stim!" Canderous yelled, close enough now that he didn't use the comm. "And get outta the way of his glowstick!"

Jolee jerked his arm from my grasp, tripping back before righting himself. "I'm fine," he growled, switching his 'saber off. But the old man was barely standing, shudders racking through his bony Human body-

I fumbled for a spare stim in my belt. If anyone knew about the limits of stims it was freaking Canderous, and while I didn't exactly wanna dose the old man up against his will, I also kinda thought him passing out on the loading ramp was a *bad* idea.

"I'm not going to collapse," Jolee rasped, as if reading my thoughts. "I just- I just felt-

He cut himself off with a groan.

"How far away's Republic?" Canderous snapped, coming to a halt in front of us. His question was for me, but his steel eyes were fixed on Jolee, who was almost bent double at my side.

I glanced down at the comm on my free wrist. Teethree had been pretty solid with tracking the hatch movements, and a snapshot of schematics blinked up at me from the inset screen. "Carth's not taking the shortcut back," I groused, flicking on the comm for a sec so he'd hear me too. Carth had been curt with his words, and Dee- Dee hadn't said a thing at all. "Guess Carth figured he had time for a stroll first."

There was a patch of static over the comm. ::*I couldn't get back to the conveyor,*:: Carth said. ::*Dustil wouldn't let me. We've gone another way- I think it's the route Dustil first took. But::*

::*I'm okay now. I'm listening,*:: Dee's voice cut through his dad's. ::*Give us a pointer, Mission. I can't, uh- I can't remember the way back,*::

I held back a dig at that – for I was pretty relieved to hear Dee’s voice, even if he sounded a bit... hollow. But I didn’t know why he hadn’t just let his dad lead the way- Carth shoulda been able to shimmy through the cargo chute to be back here in half the time.

*Never mind. I'll chew him out for it later.* Teethree was quick to mark out a new route, and I fired the directions through before switching the comm off. I could feel my spirits lifting, everything was gonna work out-

*Won't be long before they make it back. Them, and Jen and Big Z.*

Next to me, old man Bindo had straightened – but his head was shaking. And he kept rambling something-
"Can't believe it." Jolee was pale, with his eyes squeezed tight and his forehead shining with sweat. "Ach, like a darn fool sticking his head in the muck, I just don't want to believe it-" 

"Jolee?" I whispered, nudging him. Of course, the old man totally ignored me, blinking and staring down at his bony wrist before tapping on his comm with a shaky finger. 

"Lad," Jolee muttered, and his words echoed through my earbud. "Did you just sense something through the Force?"

There was a pause. I felt my belly tighten. There was something strangled in Jolee's words, and all of a sudden I had a terrible feeling- 

::Yeah,:: Dee said hoarsely. ::Tell me that wasn't-::

"Get back here, then we'll talk," the old man clipped out, and he almost sounded like Canderous, the way he was throwing orders about. 

::Sense what?:: Carth demanded. ::What did you both sense?::

"The airlocks opening," Jolee snapped, before switching off his mic. He glanced over to me, and suddenly the old man looked... old. Like, way older than he'd been just a few minutes ago, even with the injury and the Force attack and everything else. 

"You're lying," Canderous drawled. His eyes had narrowed and his arms had folded as he stared the old man down. "Spit out the truth. Ain't the time for deception."

Jolee's head turned slowly to face Canderous. 

"You're right," he said in a low voice, and the sinking feeling in my belly grew. Somehow, at that moment, I thought I already knew- 

"Revan and Bastila," someone hissed from behind, and I started in surprise, jumping away from the old man to spin around and face the 'Hawk. 

In the shadow of the entrance hatch stood Juhani- freaking Juhani, who shoulda been in a drugged coma back in the medbay! She was leaning against the wall, dressed in a thin white tunic, and her leg- her dead leg was still in that bacta-filled plasteel sheath, splinted all the way up to her arse. Her leg was gonna be cut off, Jolee'd said, but only when we got to a med-droid or a proper clinic. Until then, she had to stay dosed under, to give her the best possible chance- 

"Kittycat," Canderous drawled. He sounded almost admiring. "How the kriff are you up on that leg?"

But the Cathar, pale and sweaty beneath the fuzz on her face, had eyes only for old man Bindo. 

"We are on the Star Forge," she said, and she sounded as hollow as Dee. As shaken as Jolee. It had to be so weird for her, waking up here after being knocked out on that stupid pyramid. "Tell me I did not just sense what I dread the truth."

"You felt it too." Jolee breathed out hard through his nose. "And it was enough to break you free from a medicated coma."

"No." The word blurted outta my mouth. I got it, then- Juhani had said Jen and Bastila- Juhani and Jolee and Dee had all felt something to do with them, and they were all shocked and upset- "No, no, you've got it wrong-"
"Revan's dead." Jolee voiced the worst thing in the world, staring hard at Canderous. "Revan and Bastila both."

Canderous' jaw worked, but he said nothing. I felt my head shaking, as if by itself, while the spike of wild disbelief churned in my gut. Suddenly, I almost felt like I was gonna hurl.

"Malak is still out there." Jolee's words were hoarse, and I couldn't hold back a flinch. "We have to get out of the Star Forge."

"Revan, dead," Canderous snapped in a cold, hard voice. "Funny, because I've heard that one before."

"It is true," Juhani whispered, and I flinched again. "I am well familiar with the Force signature of both Revan and Bastila. I felt them fall through the Force to the other side. It is what woke me-"

"No!" I burst out. "It's not true! It can't be freaking true! Jen will come through for us, just you wait, and then you'll look like a pair of freaking marsh toads-"

"Mand'alor's balls!" Canderous growled, jerking his head over his comm, and his next words were sent through the airwaves. "Onasi, get back here double-time! Rosh's kriffing comm has blacked out!"

My head was still shaking wildly. "Who gives a ronto's arse about that ronto-"

::Stang!:: Carth's voice was muffled. ::I read you, Ordo. We're at a junction, we need Mission-::

::Pretty sure it's left here, Dad-::

Canderous thumbed his mic off, before marching forward to glower at Jolee. His eyes were pinched tight, and his face was set with anger. "Would you swear your life on it, old man? You and that Cathar both? You absolutely certain there ain't no way you got this backward? Revan made it through before-"

"Jen ain't dead!" I yelled, and hated the way my eyes started tearing. "You're wrong, all of you-"

"I know what I felt, Canderous," Juhani said, and her voice was so sad-

::We're taking the left turn. We're moving as quick as we can. Dustil says he recognizes this area.::

"Darth Malak still lives," Jolee continued, placing a hand on my shoulder that I shrugged off furiously. "Ach, and don't forget the mystery of those darn airlocks jumping online all of a sudden. I can't help but think that's related-"

::Just- just tell me if we go the wrong way, guys. Okay, guys?::

"Big Z!" I cried, as an even worse thought hit me. The hot tears slipped from my eyes, tracking down my face. At the base of my neck, I could feel my lekku twining protectively around me, and all I wanted to do was curl up in a ball, but- "Big Z's still out there! We need to get him back here!"

Canderous cursed something darkly in his stupid language. "If Rosh's comm is down, then it's a fair bet that kriffing Dark Jedi has got the better of him. I've got to start the 'Hawk-"

My hand shot up of its own accord, grabbing Canderous' arm as he made to stomp past.

"I ain't leaving without Big Z." I didn't believe Jen was truly dead, I couldn't- but even more important was my best friend, left out there somewhere in the dumb Star Forge. Canderous blurred
and swam in front of me and, much as I kept blinking, the stupid tears wouldn't stop. "I'm going after him."

"Ad'ika." Canderous' growl was gentle, and I almost hated him for that. "Ad'ika, there's no time. If Zaalbar's alive, he'll make his way back before Onasi gets here. But your droid has been relaying the station alarms through to us. We know the Star Forge is going down. The airlocks are open-"

"I don't care!" I screamed, digging my nails into his arm. Fat lot of good it did, with that stupid halfbroken armour-plate covering his skin. "You lot can give up on Jen all you like, but I ain't giving up on Big Z!"

His hands thumped on my shoulders so hard it should've hurt, but the weight was almost a comfort. "Mission. If I thought I was quick enough to go find Zaalbar and get him back, then I would. But I ain't a kriffing jetii. And the others are too banged up to ask it of them."

The others- I glanced wildly back at Jolee, who was staring at me with a dumb look on his face, like he had any idea of what I was feeling- none of them did, not if they were all so ready to think that Jen had really fallen to freaking Darth Poodoo! But Canderous had a point-

A Jedi can get to Big Z.

I slipped out from underneath Canderous' arms, one hand sliding into my utility belt.

"Jolee-"

The old Jedi sighed as I stepped close, and his eyes were dark and sad. He raised his hands, as if to hug me, and behind, Juhani hissed a warning-

My arm snaked forward, stim in hand, and stabbed the 'derm straight into the old man's leg. Jolee yelled in surprise, jerking back, but I'd already pushed the plunger down-

A hand grabbed at my back, under a panel of armour, hefting me high in the air.

"Mission Vao!" Jolee growled.

"Let me go!" I squawked, legs kicking hard into nothing. "Canderous, you chuba-faced snot-brained monkey lizard! Put me down!"

"Not likely, kid." He sounded like he was chewing rocks, and I couldn't see him like this, held stupid and useless in the air like a kid- I wasn't just a stupid kid-

Jolee stepped forward, close enough for me to make out the dark scowl on his wrinkly face even through the hot tears. He raised a finger, waggling it angrily at me.

"You can go after Big Z!" I cried, jerking hard against the grip at my back. "You can go fast enough- it won't even take you long- and- and- he's still freaking alive, waiting for Jen to come back or something-"

"That was my choice, missy, not yours!"

I'd never heard Jolee so angry before- like I cared, though- what was the point of having freaky Force powers if you didn't use them to help your friends-

"You'll have an hour, maybe less, before you crash from that third stim," Canderous said, and he sounded so damn calm behind me that it took a sec to even understand him. "You could risk a fourth
if you need to, but with your weight and your condition there's a risk of heart failure."

"You know you could go there!" I stormed, launching a kick behind me that connected weakly with Canderous' chest plate. Stupid borkhead didn't even grunt in complaint. "The Wookiees let you live on freaking Kashyyyk for years! It's the least you can do-"

"I don't respond well to emotional blackmail, missy.-"

Canderous snorted behind me. "No, but Zaalbar's one of the crew, much as you are, old man. I ain't gonna tell you what to do, but I reckon I got your measure. If you're as fast as I've seen jetii in the past, you should make it there and back by the time the Onasis arrive."

"You have to! Any decent-"

"Ne'johaa!" Canderous thumped me to the ground, harder than he needed to. "Ad'ika, shut up!"

"Aye, well." Jolee harrumphed. Through the blur of tears, I could see him ignoring me to stare hard at Canderous. "Mayhap the thought had already occurred to me before that silly lass took matters into her own hands."

Canderous strode around and in front of me, one armoured hand holding me back. Like I was gonna move – the shaft of hope that Jolee might actually go and check wedged tight in my heart with the stab of a chiv-blade.

Canderous shifted on his feet. “You could go after Malak instead.”

The statement was stark and- and completely insane. I saw Jolee’s bushy eyebrows shoot upwards as his jaw dropped, and heard a hiss of surprise from behind me.

“Lure him back here.” Canderous’ words were soft, but there was no missing the deadly intent behind them. “Between me and the Cathar, we’ve a good chance of firing a bolt into that bastard’s head.”

“Risking my life is one thing,” Jolee managed, forehead bunching into a disbelieving frown. “Throwing it away in the throes of stupidity is quite another.”

Canderous snorted. “If you’re right about Revan – and I ain’t entirely sure I’m buying that – then we gotta finish what she started.”

The sharp screech of a critical station alarm cut short whatever the old man was gonna say in return. Mains lighting died into darkness, and then the dull red of emergency LEDs flared into lines on the flooring. Teethree beeped, a long barrage of Binary that I struggled to follow-

“Mains power is out for good,” I whispered. Everything- everything was going absolutely chuba-shaped. “We’re on emergency, and now the shields are getting hit. Life support’s on backup. Screw Darth Poodoo, just get Big Z back here!”

But Jolee was still glaring at Canderous, who was busy throwing a frown at me over his shoulder.

“The Star Forge is going down, Canderous.” Jolee spoke slowly and deliberately. “Revan’s got her endgame, at least. Can’t think Malak will survive for long with the Fleet out there, even if he jumps in an escape pod. The Wookiee, however...”

“Yeah.” The word was low and almost angry, like Canderous hated the thought of giving in. He grunted, abruptly striding forward to the old man’s side. “Here. Take this. Don’t use it unless you got
I blinked, sniffing back more tears as I saw the shape of a hypoderm pass from Canderous to Jolee. The old man glanced back at me, his expression firming into a promise of lectures to come, before it softened, just the smallest amount.

"Ach, well," he muttered. "I may as well go for a quick run then."

"Be careful," Juhani whispered behind me. I'd almost forgotten she was there, back up and awake—but it barely seemed important in the grand scheme of things.

"Get in the 'Hawk, kid." Canderous had turned to face me, his voice as dark and commanding as I'd ever heard it. Over his shoulder, I saw the old man turn and start walking down the length of the hangar. "Get to the common room and stay in touch with Onasi over the comm. Don't even think about moving. Cathar, keep an eye on that kriffing hangar exit. I'll start the ship."

I barely heard Juhani's murmur of agreement. Canderous placed a hand on the centre of my chest plate, shoving me back towards the 'Hawk.

Behind him, the old man vanished in a blur of speed.

xXx

Davis Tar'coya:

"Adashan squad's taken down the secondary transformer array," a tech rapped out. My gaze stayed locked on the holo-map. I could feel my jowls quivering in a smile that was hard to hold back. This time- this time- we'd end things.

"That'll be mains power out to the bulk of the Forge," I said, pointing a stubby finger at the factory's belly. That Sith canker of a space station would have emergency backup, no doubt, but it'd be running critical functions only.

I could feel victory close at hand. After so many years... it almost tasted more bitter than sweet.

Behind me, the cryptic Jedi Master that Forn refused to boot from her command centre wheezed out a gasp.

"Tau squadron are heading in for another assault at the anterior fin," a second tech reported in a monotone that had to be masking the same dark sense of satisfaction I felt. We'd destroyed the turbines and generators on the ventral fin already, and I only had to look through the far viewport to see the damage with my own eyes.

I hated to admit, even in the privacy of my own head, how much of our success was owed to Bastila Shan. Because I also couldn't forget how many of our deaths were laid at her feet, too.

"Vandar." Forn's voice behind me was sharp and alarmed. "Vandar, what is it?"

I turned, feeling my customary scowl morph into a frown of bemusement as I stared at the Jedi Master. Vandar Tokare had spent the last hour kneeling in some meditative affectation, humming under his breath like he was in the damn sonic. Now-

The little green alien was leaning forward, his weight on one three-fingered hand, as his wrinkled head shook from side-to-side.
"Vandar?" Forn was next to him, her lined face creased in concern. She crouched down, and the old Jedi Master raised his head to stare at her mournfully.

His blue eyes were wide and full of sorrow.

"Bastila," he rasped.

I heard Forn's sharp intake of breath. I was whirling back to the topographic, though, frantically tracking our remaining squads. For I didn't need Vandar's plaintive cry to be spelled out in full.

_Bastila Shan is dead._

The dots of our scattered ships blinked reassuringly back at me. Even with the loss of that young Jedi's battle meditation – stang, even if I'd misunderstood and she'd switched sides yet again – the holo-map plainly stated there was no turning the tide of battle this time.

The Star Forge was crumbling. The Sith armada was in disarray, and we'd already started towing in the snubs who surrendered and shooting down the ones who tried to flee. Unless the damnable Sith had a dozen squads of fighters still cloaked and about to pounce, today was _ours_ – Bastila Shan or no Bastila Shan.

"One with the Force now, Bastila is," Vandar murmured, so softly I barely heard him. In fact, I only caught his next words because I cocked my heard in fierce concentration to catch them. "Bastila, and Revan both."

My thoughts stuttered. _Revan, yeah, well, that's because she's already dead._

"Stang," Forn muttered under her breath. "Vandar, are you absolutely certain?"

Haltingly, I turned back around. The surrounding techs were all busy behind their consoles. None appeared to be listening in- but I was. Oh, I was.

_Why would that charlatan bandy her cursed name around now? What in all the blasted hells of the galaxy does Darth Revan have to do with anything?_

"Yes," the old Jedi whispered, his bright eyes closing. "Gone from us, they are."

The skin under my cap prickled.

_Why is Vandar acting like Darth Revan has only just fallen?_

My commanding officer slowly lifted her gaze to meet mine. There was something in the lines of her face, the darkening of her eyes- and then in a moment of sharp-edged clarity, I understood-

_That Dark Jedi on the blasted Ebon Hawk!_

I could feel my mouth drop open in sheer disbelief.

The clearance to know had been above my rank- I'd had my suspicions, of course- Kylah Aramai, or a fallen Bastila Shan, or- or-

_But not a dead Sith Lord even more dangerous than Malak himself?_

It beggared belief. Revan, alive- and the top brass knew alongside the Jedi, but _how_-

_The damn Order. They- they- The logic connected quickly. Bastila Shan is notorious for taking down Darth Revan. Except she damn well didn't, did she? And how long did the Order keep Revan's escape quiet-_
"Davis." Forn was at my side, a thin hand resting on my shoulder. I realized then I was shaking with suppressed anger. "Not here, Davis."

"How." The word growled out from my lips. Next to us, a comm tech threw a startled glance over one shoulder. "How is that flaming possi-"

"Commodore Tar'coya," Admiral Forn Dodonna snapped, as her grey Human eyes steeled over. "Either do your job or walk away from the bridge."

My mouth twisted in indignation, even as the soldier in me snapped to attention. I hated that she was right – we had a victory to oversee first, and recriminations could come later.

Oh, but they would.

"You understand what Vandar meant, Commodore." Forn breathed the words, quiet enough for only me to hear. Metres behind her, Vandar Tokare had bowed his head. "She is dead."

The words were enough to knock back the fury of injustice. Revan was dead. I'd thought she was dead already – along with most of the blasted galaxy – but now she actually was dead. And the living were what counted.

"Ma'am," I managed, and the unspoken message in Forn's hard gaze meant we could – we would talk later. For I'd spent years despising Darth Revan, not the least because I could still remember the first time I'd met her-

... "I am Jedi Revan!" the cloaked and masked figure bellowed.

I stepped back a pace in shock, completely derailed. This stranger had stormed through the parting crowd, before leaping impossibly high – well over my head – and landing atop the cockpit of the nearest snubfighter. The Jedi spun around, then, to address the demoralized throng of starpilots that had been half-heartedly listening to me.

This was my first public address at Vanquo. Newly promoted to commodore and sent to Rear-Admiral Karath's beleaguered forces, I'd soon felt as disheartened and dismayed as any of the grunts out there, witnessing the slaughter those Mandalorian bastards revelled in. Despite my best efforts, that feeling had come across loud and clear in my stuttering speech.

A gust of wind – impossible, in a closed hangar like this – whipped to life, billowing out a black cape behind the anonymous Jedi. White sparks curled around the figure's outraised fist, a tempest of lightning both showy and impressive.

"The Republic bleeds. The Republic burns. The Republic cries out for help, and the Jedi are here today to answer that call!"

...

The memory faded, bitter and aged with the travesty of time. Her final words of that address echoed – Now we fight back! For the Republic! – and I still remembered the nascent hope that had shot to life in my gut.

Oh, and the years that followed fulfilled her promise that day, culminating in our devastating 'victory' above Malachor V.
I knew exactly why near everyone – myself included – felt such bitterness towards the deathly spectre of Revan and the Jedi who turned with her. Because during those earlier war-torn years, they had been our heroes. And I, amongst so many, had placed Revan on that damn pedestal she later crushed beneath her booted heel.

"A message," Forn murmured, and I glanced sideways to see a tech slip the admiral a datapad. Her lips thinned as her eyes scanned the contents. "I have one man still active from Zeta squadron." Her words were circumspect, audible only to me. Zeta squad had been wiped out earlier in the battle – apart from two snubs that'd sailed inside the Forge alongside the *Ebon Hawk*. "He reports overhearing the same news Vandar just imparted."

Bastila Shan, dead. Revan, dead.

*Problem is, Forn, we thought her dead a year ago, too.*

Forn's gaze was hard, as if daring me to thwart her again. My head dipped in a slow, conciliatory nod – for I understood that Forn didn't have to share those details, and I also understood exactly what they meant.

*Zeta squad wasn't sent in only to escort Captain Onasi. They must have had additional orders.* Take out Revan, maybe, if she survived. That Forn had inveigled a backup strategy soothed my ire a little, even if counting on a bunch of pilots and their gunners to take out a Sith Lord seemed more than a little on the absurd side.

*Seems like the point might be moot right about now.*

"You believe it, then?" I managed.

Forn glanced back to Vandar, who was now staring at the both of us with those damn melancholy eyes. I could forgive the Jedi Master for being cut up about Bastila Shan – because I had to concede, as Forn had lambasted me earlier, that on the whole the young Jedi paragon had achieved far more good than evil.

At the close of it, I supposed it would be fair to call Bastila Shan the hero that Revan Freeflight failed to be.

"I am inclined to take it as truth, considering the two separate accountings of the same event," Forn said quietly. "I'll order Tobards to get out immediately, with whomever is left."

She cleared her throat, then, and turned to address the row of techs.

"Advance the assault," she said loudly, her admiral façade firmly back in place. "Tau Squadron to focus on the anterior fin. Adashan to forward on the final fin, with Rho as backup. It's time to blow the Star Forge out of the skies."

xXx

***Jolee Bindo:***

*You could go after Malak instead.*

I'd be a liar if I claimed I hadn't considered the Mandalorian's words. Aye, but it was mostly bluster, and given the way he wouldn't stop darting concerned looks back at the Twi'leki lass, he likely knew it himself.
Ordo might be a Mandalorian when it came to battle, but he was also one when it came to clan, and anyone with half an eye could see how the tough-as-nails warrior viewed that reckless chit.

My heart still thumped double-time in my chest, veins burning with the pound of blood coursing through my body. Ach, Mission more than deserved to feel the rough side of my tongue. But then, I remembered the shock of denial twisting her young face, when Juhani and I laid out what we had sensed.

I knew the pain of grief well enough. Suppose I couldn't fault her too much, acting without thinking to try and save her best friend.

*Here's hoping the Wookiee's still around. I'd thought before the kid was resilient, but if she's faced with losing him and Revan both-*

Well. Here was hoping, indeed.

The Force felt weak and thready. The stims helped – aye, the darn girl had made a fair call, I supposed – but it only masked the exhaustion in my core. That tentacled Sith had drained me deeply, and I knew a kip on the loading ramp with a fistful of stims could hardly count as recovery.

But I still retained a spark of power, and that spark was enough to augment my movement and grant me a rudimentary sense of the Force as it swirled violently around the cursed place.

I stood still, at the base of a spiralling staircase that ascended some dozen floors above, and felt the miasma of dark energy that could only belong to Darth Malak.

He was close, but moving away. I was weak enough that I doubted the man was aware of me, unless he was actively searching. And there was something about this place in particular-

*A residue of Force. He was here, a short time ago. Had I been a minute earlier, I would have run straight into the black-hearted villain.*

The Force- she was a fickle beast, and I had stopped predicting her methods a long time ago. But I would've sworn that Revan's path was not meant to end in death, not when she had stayed stalwart against everything thrown at her.

*Ah, lass. You are beyond us now. I only hope you have the measure of peace you deserve.*

I swallowed back a sharp pang of grief, and it was then that my eyes landed on a small, cylindrical object glinting beneath the first rise of stairs.

My eyes narrowed. One arm rose, and the tiniest flicker of Force was all I required for the metallic hilt to fly home into my waiting hand.

The ‘saber hummed in my grasp, and I knew whose it was without even looking.

*Revan's lightsaber. Karon's lightsaber.* With a press of my thumb, blinding cyan shot to life – the same beam of plasma I had seen in Revan's hands so many times. *Malak cut her down, then. Took this as a trophy. What happened next? He was careless enough that it rolled from his pocket here?*

It seemed a ridiculous lapse in concentration for a Sith Lord who had already gone to the effort of collecting said lightsaber.

With a huff of discontent, I powered the thing off and attached it to my belt. Mayhap there was a reason the Force had laid my childhood friend's ‘saber in my path, but I certainly couldn't think of
one. Mysteries like this had a tendency to linger like a rotting tooth, but now – now was not the time.

I sighed, feeling wretched and old, and pushed the misgivings away. With a shake of my head to clear the cobwebs, I turned and strode purposefully to the service elevator that stood some metres down from the stairwell.

At least the darn lift was still working.

Aye, it might not have been as quick as a Force-enhanced leap up the railings, but I also knew I had to conserve what little strength I had left. And as the lift rose, I slowly pushed my awareness out, hoping my thin thread of Force was faint enough so as not to disturb that darned whispering kaiburr – or the man who mastered it.

There. I felt Darth Malak again. He was still moving away, but not towards the *Ebon Hawk*, and that was all I really needed to know.

The elevator doors opened, and I shot out with a burst of speed.

It wasn't long before I reached the half-moon double hatch that led to the upper meditation chambers. The entrance opened beneath a tap of my hand on the controls, and a dark sense of foreboding gripped me as I took the first step inside.

The circular chamber was large, with almost half the far wall made of a glittering viewport, displaying the fire of battle beyond. On my either side lay the bodies of strangers – guards, perhaps – but my eye was immediately drawn to the crumpled figure in the centre of the room.

Human. Female. Young. I was there in a flash, on my knees, turning the lass over.

*Bastila Shan.* I'd never met the latest Jedi hero, but there was no mistaking who she was. Ornamental braids bordered an aristocratic, beautiful face. Bastila's expression was pale and shocked, held rigid in the throes of death. I grimaced in sympathy, laying one hand gently over her face in benediction, as my gaze travelled over the mortal lightsaber wound that had cleaved through her chest.

I frowned.

*Bastila* had been the one to fall, not Revan. That meant- huh, I didn't know what that meant. Revan had been certain their lives were conjoined, and Rosh had relayed over the comm that Revan had left them all behind to safeguard Bastila while she tracked down her old apprentice.

But Bastila Shan had been slain *here*. Had Darth Malak hunted her down after finishing Revan, and then proceeded to drop Revan's 'saber down a stairwell?

Or had the lass herself returned here, drawing the Sith Lord in her wake, before he killed them both?

My head shot up sharply, scanning the room. No Revan, but behind me I'd missed the obvious figure of a fallen Wookiee. My breath caught.

This time, my steps were slow and measured, as I left the young Jedi behind. With each stride, my head cocked, hoping desperately for the sound of a breath, a huff, a wheeze of pain-

But I knew the truth before I knelt down next to Zaalbar and saw the blackened stripe that cut deep into his torso.

*Oh, warrior of Kashyyyk. You will be sorely missed.*
I felt my eyes close. There was no time for grief, not now, not with the Forge breaking up around me. Even here, near the rise of the monstrous factory, the klaxons wailing through the place were clearly audible.

But it didn't sit right in my heart to just stand up and blithely walk away.

*Should I take Zaalbar with me?* The Force would yield me enough strength, I thought, to lift two bodies and float them back to the 'Hawk. Grant them the burial they deserved. Zaalbar was a Wookiee, and a Wookiee's final rest should not be in a place of metal and sky.

*But it's the living I should worry about.* And I simply did not know how Mission would take it, travelling in a ship that held the corpse of her best friend. Mayhap, the only thing that'd do would be to rub rock-salt in her wounds – and the girl was going to be heart-broken already.

My mouth thinned as I looked one last time at the body of a young sentient who held more wisdom than I had first perceived. I'd been honoured to know him, aye; I'd always respected the Wookiees, and Zaalbar represented the best of them.

My gaze flickered, moving beyond the Wookiee to the dismembered robotic head of HK-47. The rest of the darn droid's body was a further metre away. *Good riddance,* I thought grumpily, and then-

A flash of the *Leviathan* skittered through my mind. I'd hefted Revan through that sinking starship, when she was dazed and insensible, and I'd had nothing to guide us to safety. No wrist-comm, no Force beacon – and it hadn't taken me long to realize that I'd gotten us completely lost.

The *Leviathan* had been on its last legs – much like the Star Forge was now – and I'd thought I'd run out of options right until that smart-mouthed piece of machinery materialized in a hatch and led us back to the 'Hawk.

*Indebted to a darn droid.* *Humph,* I can't believe I'm actually considering this.

The galaxy had long since been littered with countless debates on whether droids could be seen as sentient or even alive. But one thing I did know – Zaalbar and Bastila Shan were not. And with the death of Revan and the demise of Yudan Rosh, it might be that only HK-47 still held some of the answers from Revan's past.

*Darn it. Not like I'll get a word of thanks from him.* I picked up the head anyway, and lifted the droid's carapace with a twist of my hand. *I'll let the Republic brass deal with him, maybe. I'm sure those bureaucratic idiots will have oodles of fun with his charming attitude.*

I allowed myself one last moment, to close my eyes and send a final farewell out through the Force.

To Zaalbar of Kashyyyk, and to Bastila Shan.

I almost missed it. The faintest blip of life, teetering on the edge of oblivion, ebbing away back by the entrance.

I blinked, standing up with HK-47's head tucked under my arm.

Next to the half-moon hatches lay the bodies of those anonymous guards, but further along, some metres down the curvature of the wall, was another figure.

Crumpled, and garbed in what looked like the brown robes of a Jedi.

I closed in. And when I stood over the body of a man who was not quite dead, I stared down blankly at his familiar face.
"Well I'll be a Wookiee's uncle," I said.

xXx

**Rulan Prolik:**

Corporal Kampton's form was fit and fast, and I took a moment to appreciate the speed with which the Rodian could move.

Because the time for standing still and gathering intel had long passed.

Star Forge diagnostics scrolled down the inset of my visor. All transformer arrays destroyed. Power rerouting to emergency, while life support gasped a final breath. Shields now taking the brunt of the assault in the skies. The Star Forge would have declared a formal evacuation status – if not for the megalomaniac at the helm.

I knew when it was time to decamp. I'd lingered longer than was my custom, and all due to my curiosity over a single sentient's fate.

I'd admit, Revan Freeflight piqued my interest – and not purely on the behalf of the GenoHaradan. The impact of her actions was as curious and difficult to predict as the state of her damaged mind.

I had found little surveillance to track in the upper levels of the Star Forge, and so I'd been forced to rely on second-hand communications tracking her status. That Republic mole's encrypted text-feed transmit back to the *Meridus* had aggrieved me more than it probably should have.

::Tagged: Republic Communications Array (Filter: Origin = Star Forge).::
::Captured Transmission: Decryption Successful.::
::Contents Follow: "Overheard: two powers report sensing the demise of the ghost and the hope. Awaiting orders." End transmission.::

Powers translated to Force-users, and the ghost and the hope to Revan Freeflight and Bastila Shan.

The disappointment of a powerful piece falling was always a blow, which was exactly why the GenoHaradan played more than just one game.

I reminded myself that the galaxy – and the GenoHaradan – had been convinced of Revan's death before, and so I began scrolling through what remained of the Star Forge's holo-footage in growing urgency.

When I stumbled upon a still of Darth Malak himself, carrying the lifeless body of Revan while he strolled along the same factory floor *I* was currently concealed in, I wrinkled my snout in concession and moved on.

A right shame, though. Part of me wished that the GenoHaradan had captured Revan to study—although, letting her loose had achieved what my organization desired. The downfall of Darth Malak and his empire - even if the man himself found a way to slip into an escape pod.

But considering the slow saunter of his tread through the holo-cams, I thought it a safe assumption that he wasn't even going to bother.

I, on the other hand, valued my own skin.

In front of me now was the hatch to the anterior officer's hangar, a place manned an hour ago by a pair of bumbling Sith soldiers ordered to keep the engines warm. I'd deliberately lurked near a set of
those readily cloaked starships, and it was only my innate caution that had me tapping back into the hangar's holo-feed before I sliced open the door.

The grainy vid that overlaid my visor had me stilling in wariness.

A pair of corpses, identifiable by the austere uniform of Darth Malak's Sith underlings.

With a tap of my finger, I flicked to the next available cam in the hangar. Nothing- and then the third-

Two sentients, one sitting atop the other, and the cam's thermal readouts indicated both were alive. I held back a sardonic roll of the Rodian's beady eyes. *Hapless idiots distracting themselves from the end of the world in the basest method possible.* Still, they would be easy enough to evade or silence.

The vid-feed zoomed in, and it was then I noticed the unresponsive nature of the figure underneath, and the fact they were both fully clothed.

_Hm. Perhaps not what I first imagined._

"Cam tilt left five degrees," I whispered, and the profile of the top figure came sharply into view.

I recognized him an instant before the processing software linked to my visor did.

::GH Database: Facial Recognition Match::
::Name: Sharlan Nox::
::Species: Anzati::
::Affiliation: Dark Jedi sworn to Darth Malak::
::Designation: Dark Jedi Recruitment Officer for the Sith Empire::
::Threat: Code level 6::

The visor began listing a series of skills and warnings that I did not need, for I knew enough of the man.

Sharlan Nox was the last-known survivor of the vampiric Anzati – well, the last since the GenoHaradan had taken out Devra Bane some eighty-odd years ago. But Nox was also an anomaly, and not simply due to his survival in the face of his own species' extinction.

From the intelligence the GenoHaradan had collated, the man had actively forsworn the consumption of sentients for most of his long-lived life. In addition to that, he was the only Anzati my organization had ever encountered who possessed the ability to harness the Force.

After Malachor, his restraint in his species' fleshly appetite had vanished. And while Nox did not operate with any obvious ambition within the ranks of the Sith Empire, he was dangerous enough that I briefly considered finding another means of departure.

::Tagged: Star Forge Central Computing Complex::
::Incoming alert: Structural collapse of the lower ventral fin::
::Incoming alert: Moderate damage to the lower anterior fin::

I grimaced. The ventral officer's hangar was the next closest after the anterior. While it was situated high above the needling fin – and therefore, should hold for a time – it would still take me precious minutes to run there. Even if I shifted to a faster form-

_Perhaps, if Nox is sufficiently distracted with his prey, he will not even notice my presence?_

"Switch to cam four," I whispered, and the grainy feed morphed into another view: this time, from
the opposing wall. There – a clearer shot of the unfortunate sent held in the thrall of death.

And, again, I felt the thrill of recognition precede the data screed on my visor.

::GH Database: Facial Recognition Match::
::Name: Yudan Rosh::
::Species: Twi'lek::
::Affiliation: Dark Jedi sworn to Darth Malak::
::Designation: Fleet commander of the Sith Empire::
::Threat: Code level 6::

I made a mental note to update his outdated designation, and then paused, considering the parameters of my situation.

I needed to find a ship, and fast. Yudan Rosh interested the GenoHaradan primarily due to his history with Revan, and she was now out of the game. But Rosh was also a powerful prize for an Anzati Force-wielder, and the chances of slipping out unnoticed while Nox slaked his appetite had to be higher than moving to another hangar before the Star Forge disintegrated.

With an inward biological push, I thrust more mass into Kampton's lower musculature, and felt my limbs spasm and strengthen into that of a bipedal sprinter. After a shake to loosen the newly hardened muscles, the bony fingers of my hybrid Rodian form retrieved a mini-tool from my belt, and I got to work.

The hatch opened less than a minute afterward.

Slinking inside, I kept tight to the wall, while my fingers tapped silently on the computer inset on my armbrace. Hacking into the air-conditioning unit here might buy me a minute: I could overload a conduit or two and throw a distraction into the mix if my presence was spotted. A last resort, though – for I knew that would be unlikely to hold a Dark Jedi's attention for long.

What I needed to do was make it unseen to the fourth and final snubfighter, a customized Aurek bird sitting closest to the inner airlock. Once inside the cockpit, I figured I should be able to power up the snubfighter and abscond before the Dark Jedi decided whether to bother with me or not.

The first Aurek had a smashed cockpit, while the second appeared fully intact. I cleared them both, and made it close to the third starship – this one, an elongated Sith snub – when I heard a voice.

"I wonder what my master will make of you." The words were followed with the sated chuckle of a madman. "She is beginning to amass quite the collection of Revan's old followers."

Truly, I preferred to avoid Force-users – and, in particular, the dark-aligned ones. They all seemed to dovetail into one form of insanity or another.

I side-stepped silently against the wall, and the pair of them slipped into view.

Nox had his back turned to me. My aura was non-existent to Force-users, apparently, so all I required was to remain inaudible.

"She had hoped I would uncover the secrets of the Star Forge. Oh, and so did I. A shame that the truth of this place will fall with Malak. I suppose your capture will have to subsist as a poor second prize."

I paused, one foot hovering in the air. Mental note: update and investigate the allegiance of Sharlan Nox. Hard to tell if the man was rambling nonsense or gloating the truth. Either way, it was highly
inefficient, considering his intended audience was out cold.

But if there was another power structure of Dark Jedi out there, then this was intel I simply had to get to Eridius.

There was a slapping noise, like the insane degenerate derived pleasure from striking a comatose prisoner. Perhaps he did. With a focused wrench on my own objectives, I continued moving further down the wall.

"Maybe she'll grant you a pet name as well." There was that tinkling laugh again. "Lord of Hunger, she likes to mock me with. Perhaps you'll be the Lord of Envy. For you've always coveted that which was never truly yours, hmm?"

His voice faded as I neared the final Aurek. It was time to step away from the relative safety of the wall, and into the centre of the hangar.

"...extract at least some of your soup...might leave you addled...hardly need all of your mind intact..."

I held my breath as my feet padded silently across the chrome flooring. I could not see Nox now, but his murmuring drawl was still vaguely audible as my hands touched Republic durasteel.

"Nexus." I breathed the coded deactivation passphrase. With a hydraulic hiss, the cockpit yawned open.

I did not pause to see if the Dark Jedi would hear or notice. My long fingers were already scrabbling at the ridges of the warbird, finding purchase and pulling the rest of my body up without the aid of a porta-stair.

I threw myself inside. The busk-leather of the pilot's seat was cold. Moving fast, I slid the restraints around my torso, shut the cockpit's double-walled transparisteel, and flicked on the engines.

Now was the true danger. No way Nox hadn't noticed the start-up thrum of repulsors.

The dash burned to life. The turbine compressor whined, and I switched full thrust to the repulsors. Ahead loomed the opening of the inner airlock.

With a wrench on the throttle, the snubfighter lurched forward.

The navi-console indicated the inner airlock shield regenerating behind me, and then the outer doors began to open. Flashes of laser fire demarcated the expanse of space, and I leaned forward hurriedly to locate and enable the cloaking technology I was relying on.

A second later, my invisible starship spat out of the Star Forge, and it was only then that I remembered to breathe.

xXx

Carth Onasi:

The sight of the blown hangar hatch was the best thing I'd seen in some time.

I'd commed ahead, with no response from anyone save Ordo, but it meant they knew we were coming. Still, the last person I expected to see shadowed in the entrance of the 'Hawk was-

"Juhani," I said in surprise, striding forward with Dustil at my heels.
The Cathar was deathly pale as she leaned against the _Ebon Hawk_, and I knew we were desperate, but who in the blazes thought dragging her out of a coma was any sort of good idea-

"Carth," she murmured, but she didn't meet my eyes. "Jolee will be back any moment."

I had no time to question where old man Bindo had disappeared to, for next there was a crackle of static in my ear.

::*Captain,::* Tobards said in a tight voice. The gunner had been strangely quiet for some time – enough that I'd had the faint concern he'd ended up as just another casualty. ::I could do with a hand down from the roof. It's time to get moving.::*

Odd to hear a blasted _ensign_ all but throwing an order about. I thumbed my mic on mute, and stared hard at the Cathar.

"Revan," I said quietly. "Tell me someone's heard from her."

"Dad-" Dustil's voice was strangled. There was a dark clench of dread in my gut-

"Carth! Dee!" Mission wailed, as she burst out from the hatch and leaped straight at me. I barely had time to catch her before she erupted into messy tears.

"Damnit, kid, I told you to stay in the 'Hawk," Canderous growled, materializing behind the Cathar. My arms tightened around the sobbing Mission as I glanced over her bowed head. Ordo looked grim – grimmer than I could ever remember seeing the man.

"You've started the 'Hawk," I gritted out, finally aware of the engine's vibration beneath my boots. "Where's Jolee gone? Where- where are the others?"

"Onasi-" Ordo started, before his eyes flicked behind me, darkening in recognition. "There's Bindo."

"What?" Mission wrenched out of my arms with a gasp. "Big Z- where is he-"

I turned around, just in time to see Mission barrelling towards the distant figure of Jolee Bindo. Behind him, a brown-clad body dropped from the air to land on the ground with a soft thump.

"What's going on?" I rapped out, marching forward. Jolee's head slumped, and from beneath one arm I saw the glint of blasted HK-47's dismembered head. HK- who was back with Bastila- and even from here I could see that robed body behind Jolee was not her- "Someone tell me what the _stang_ is going on!"

"Dad-"

"I'm sorry, Mission," Jolee said quietly. He raised his head to look at the girl with dark, anguished eyes. "I found Zaalbar. He- he didn't make it."

Mission's heart-wrenched wail knifed me straight in the heart. Zaalbar- gone- and HK-47 in pieces- that meant-

_Bastila. They were with Bastila. And if they were taken out- if Bastila was-

The shock was more than visceral; it was a physical blast of heat the plummeted straight into disbelief.

_Revan._
"No!" The word was a hoarse cry of repudiation on my lips. "Revan- where are you-"

"Dad- I, uh, I felt her earlier-" Dustil had moved to stand in front of me. I barely noticed him. "Dad, she's- Revan's- gone."

Revan, you can't- you're not-

I was staring blankly at my only child, as denial choked in my throat. Over Dustil's shoulder, I was vaguely aware of Mission collapsing to the ground in a sobbing heap.

He must have it wrong. Somehow-

Dustil's mouth turned down in a grimace of pain, and all I could think was that it couldn't be true-

"Come on, Flyboy. No tears," she teased, her lips curving in that impish grin I had grown to cherish. "Don't I always come back from certain death?"

"She'll make it through," I rasped through numb lips. After everything, there was no way I'd accept this reality. The back of my neck felt strangely cold. "She always makes it through."

"Dad, Darth Malak is still out there." Dustil tugged hard on my sleeve. "And Rosh's comm is down. That means frakking Sharlan Nox might be on his way back-

"And the Star Forge is breaking up," Ordo growled behind me. "Onasi, now ain't the time to fall apart. We need to get out."

"I won't give up on Revan," I whispered, blinking dry eyes. Whatever Ordo was saying was banthacrap. Dustil's expression contorted in front of me. "I won't."

"I promise I'll do everything I can to make it out." She whispered the words, her moss-green eyes darkening with intensity. "Promise me you'll do more than just survive if I don't."

"She's dead, Onasi!" Ordo snapped, and my son was pushed unceremoniously out of my field of vision to make room for the Mandalorian's ugly mug. "She ain't answering the comm, and every kriiffing jetii in this place sensed the same damn thing!"

My gaze dropped slowly to the communicator snicked securely at my wrist. Rosh's link had blacked out, but Revan's still shone reassuringly green.

Then, like a miracle dawning from nowhere, it blinked.

Revan-

But the voice I heard was not hers.

::Revan is dead.:: The words were low, mechanized, and transmitting to all channels. ::It is finally over.::

The comm switched off, and then the green status light dimmed to black.

I stared at my wrist in shocked, frozen silence.

And the stones weighing on my soul grew to the size of mountains as I felt my heart crack open like it had only ever done once before.

If it hadn't been for Dustil's presence at my side, then – and maybe the muffled cries of Mission – I
wouldn't have had the fortitude to raise my head and look Ordo in the eyes.

My mouth moved, but I couldn't find the words. My fists clenched. Whatever Ordo saw in my face, it was enough for him to give me a firm nod of- of- stang, I didn't know. Acceptance. Understanding, maybe, that I was still there with him, still able to move on automatic and help get the living out.

"Bindo," Ordo snapped, turning roughly on a heel. "Did you take that fourth stim?"

"Ach, no, but I ain't exactly-"

"Get Tinhead and that body you lugged back here into the ship, and strap yourself down in the common room before you decide to faint. Sithkid, drag Mission inside by her headtails if you have to. Kittycat, back to the kriffing medbay, now!"

Ordo was a whirlwind of barking commands, before he was back in my face again.

Beneath the layer of numb detachment, a spark of unholy fury threatened to roar to life. The desire to hunt down that sithspawned bastard, no matter the blasted odds-

*Dustil. Mission. The living. Dammit, Revan, I won't believe you're truly gone*

"If you can't pilot, Onasi, you kriffing tell me now."

"I can fly." The words came out before I realized they were true. Dustil needed me. I wanted to sink into blind rage, for turning around to step into the 'Hawk meant smothering a grief I couldn't face a second time.

But the worst truth of all was that I knew I had no other option.

"Good." Ordo stared up over my shoulder. "I'll go collect that Republic grunt and meet you in the cockpit. Get ready to launch, because this place ain't holding up much longer."

*Revan is dead.* The words repeated in my head like a whip of self-flagellation. *Revan is dead.*

Ordo turned from me. Dustil shot me one last searching glance, and it was enough for me to turn, and for my boots to automatically make their way inside the ship that had been my home for what felt like so long, now.

I felt myself walking away from a large chunk of my heart – and denial still reared with a roar. They could be wrong- but could they all be wrong? Was there any chance we could be leaving Revan all alone as we scurried to safety?

The sound of my son dragging Mission into the 'Hawk reminded me of the parts of my heart that remained – the parts I could still protect. And even though I hated myself for doing it, I slipped into the cockpit's chair and readied the *Ebon Hawk* for launch.

xXx

**Yudan Rosh:**

I was conscious of little.

There was grief, yes, but it was unimportant.

Pain was present in the shape of a blinding migraine, and yet it was remote, too; as if nothing more than a faded memory of some past trauma.
Cognizance was a dying murmur, urging me to reach out: to listen, to think, to grasp the Force and take note of my surroundings and find a way to act-

But my train of thought was completely conquered by that drawling voice.

"It has been a trying day, pet," the voice drawled. "I find myself feeling rather... voracious."

The voice was important. The voice was everything. It said words that I heard but did not take in, for the voice was not commanding anything of me yet.

I would be ready to obey when it did. Cold logic formed a diagnosis of myself: I was suffering from concussion, a likely skull fracture, and the possibility of internal bleeding. Movement would weaken me.

And I did not want to be further impaired when the voice required my abilities.

"I can't think of a single reason why I shouldn't extract at least some of your soup," the voice continued. "Sure, it might leave you addled, but then I hardly need all of your mind intact."

The voice trilled a laugh. My ears found the sound discordant, but my mind knew the voice's happiness was paramount.

"Master Traya might be put out for awhile, but I can always argue that a half-wit fleshling of your strength is better than none at all."

My eyes remained closed, conserving my strength, as I sensed the warm breath of the voice moving closer.

"Just between you and me," the voice whispered. "I do tire dancing to her tune all of the time. And frankly, pet, you owe me."

The voice seemed to be talking directly at me. I agreed inwardly; of course I would owe the voice my all. I decided, however, that its words were not a requirement of movement. I did not need to offer a conscious response.

I could rest, and wait until the voice granted me a purpose.

There was a new sensation, now; a vibration beneath my fingertips. It was followed by a roar of sound.

"What?" the voice snapped, and I latched onto that surprise, as the fogged skein of my awareness struggled to comprehend what startled the all-important voice so.

*Thrum of repulsorlifts. Whine of a turbine compressor. A small snubfighter launching, nearby.*

There was a slight thinning in the fog of my mind, as the rumble of the engine moved away.

"How unexpected," the voice remarked. There was a sense of the voice fading, slightly, even though the physical pressure solidly pinning my body down remained. "And curious. These ships open only for a very few."

The voice was still all-important.

But the awareness that it should not be was new.

*No one is my master anymore. Not even- not even-*
There was a grief, there, that I shied away from.

"I cannot believe Malak would stroll straight past us without a pleased farewell or a 'saber to the gut," the voice mused.

Malak- wait. Focus. Something is wrong. That voice-

My instincts had me seeking out to the Force – gently, gently, so as not to be perceived – but the Force was indistinct and unusually cumbersome to my touch.

Weak. Feeble. Like my strength had been drained-

What else do I know- my mind rallied. There is cold chrome beneath my back. An injury to my head. Someone is sitting on me-

I cracked open my eyelids the smallest amount. The blur beyond was undoubtedly Sharlan Nox.

The rush of recent events flooded into my consciousness, and submerged the chokehold of Force-dominating coercion like a river eroding a makeshift dam.

Force drain. How can he achieve such a deep thrall so quick? Never mind. Not permanent, but I'll have little Force to work with just yet. And little time-

Sitting atop me, Sharlan Nox was still staring in fascination at the direction of the now-departed snubfighter.

Twin strands of pink flesh had erupted from his cheeks, curling delicately beneath his jaw.

Proboscis- I had heard a rumour or two, in the past, about the strange gill-like slits that were sometimes visible on his face. Whatever the purpose of those tentacles, they were likely sensitive-

-and I had little other option.

I reached out to the Force with the slightest of touches; a caress, almost, for a firm hold was presently beyond me. I needed enhanced strength and speed- but only in one arm.

Quickly, but gently-

Sharlan's head tilted back in my direction.

I slammed what Force I could deep into the chosen limb. Simultaneously, my hand punched upward, my fingers gripped tight around one fleshy tail, and then my sword-arm yanked back as hard and swift as I could manage.

Something tore. My vision exploded in a mess of spattering crimson. A weight, lifting- Sharlan was screaming loud and long as he hurled away in panic.

I rolled on the ground, struggling to stand, fighting my exhausted and pained body- the movement stabbed daggers into the side of my head, and my vision blurred-

Must get up. Move-

I made it upright, blinking to clear the residue of blood stinging my eyes. At my feet, lying innocently on the ground, lay the deactivated hilt of Zhar Lestin's lightsaber.

Metres away, Sharlan Nox stood clutching the bloody mess of his face as he continued to howl that
anguished, dissonant screech.

And to my right was an officer's ship. A customized Star Forge strikefighter. Encoded to open with a passphrase-

That shapeshifter's offer replayed in my mind. But the offer had been for her, not me-

I cinched the thought of her away. Not now. Not yet. And while I no longer had any direction nor much of a purpose, there was no way I would end as one of Sharlan's playthings.

My gaze landed on the lightsaber again. Back to Sharlan. To the weapon once more. But the Force felt so sluggish, and my limbs so leaden-

Even through my exhaustion, I could sense the current supremacy of Sharlan's might. And while he might be wailing like a babe who lost the teat, I did not think he was as physically debilitated as me.

Just, perhaps, in quite some pain.

I had to move.

One arm lowered to retrieve the 'saber hilt, before my shaky legs stumbled to the ship. My head spun. Sharlan was still screaming. I whispered that doomed, fatal name that had been the landscape of her first death-

The cockpit opened. But I could not climb, not like this-

Once last burst of Force. One last push-

My strength was faint, but just enough to launch me weakly into the air. My hands caught, hanging askew over the edge of the open cockpit, and another surge of dizziness threatened to black me out completely-

A shout of alarm from behind. I wrenched myself over and in with a grunt, lurching forward to start the engines. Screw the safety restraints, I needed to move. Cockpit closing as the compressor whirred. If I was lucky, the burn of the thrusters might even take him out in my wake-

Sharlan thudded flat against the transparisteel in front of me, just as it closed. A grisly hole of black and crimson gaped from his left cheek, smearing on the glass, and the man's eyes were round and crazed like I'd never seen before. I felt my lips twist in a sneer as I swung the ship around in a wild launch, and Sharlan Nox slid away, falling from view.

The snubfighter hurtled forward through the shields of the inner airlock, before I pulled back hastily on the throttle, pausing only to wait for the outer hangar doors as they began to open.

There are other ships behind me. The thought was grim. Sharlan will follow – it is presumably too much to expect he will die along with the faltering Star Forge.

But too many others had.

Black spots speckled around the edges of my vision. The pain in my temple was increasing – along with the sinking submission of encroaching unconsciousness. I gritted my jaw, willing myself to stay cognizant for now, and shot forward into space.

The momentum pushed me hard back into the chair. Cursing, I scrabbled for the safety restraints, and then a prox alarm blared. On the navi-console, an incoming message transmitting on all channels
beeped for attention.

A spark of red laser shot across my bow.

Shavit! I was in a *Sith* snubfighter, barrelling straight into an emerging *Republic* victory. No doubt they were demanding immediate surrender-

My hand wavered over the cloaking device embedded into the sleek navi-computer of the Star Forge strikefighter.

*A publicized execution awaits me here.* Justice demanded my death, and not so long ago part of me had wondered if I would even bother to struggle against it. It was a far better fate than a lingering demise at Sharlan's hand, regardless.

The baseborn desire to survive – or perhaps something deeper – had me slamming my palm against the control.

A crackle of stealthed purple submerged the cockpit's viewport, and I canted the snub gently to the right.

Bad idea- the mild g-forces pummelled into the side of my head like a vibro-ax.

I blacked out. For a handful of seconds, perhaps. The wail of a second proximity alarm roused me back to alertness, but my head was heavy and my judgment fogged.

*I need to jump to hyperspace.* The navi-console overruled that – of course, the Republic had constructed an interdiction field to block runners. *But I am invisible. I can slip through, fly far enough to jump and-

My head spun, and it took everything I had not to lean back and close my eyes.

"Auto-pilot," I murmured to myself. It was easier to think when I said the words out loud. "Set flight-evasion algorithm, with scheduled hyperjump as soon as it is available. Just..."

*Where? Where should I go? What is left for me?*

I was too exhausted to think it through. And the only set of coordinates that came to mind were from a lifetime ago, to a planet I once called home.

xXx

**Revan Freeflight:**

Awareness came back in a trickle, one sense at a time.

First: a swaying motion. I was on a boat, bobbing across a body of water. Or maybe I was feeling the gait of a pack-beast, carrying me somewhere unknown. Shifting from side-to-side, like I was laying limply over a bantha or- or-

-or held helpless in someone's arms.

Next came sound. The soft, rhythmic tread of boots traipsing over a metallic surface. The thudding noise was coupled with the laboured wheeze of breathing.

Pain- pain burst in like a fist to the face. A chiv-blade to the gut. Pressure on my back, but there was no feeling there, just like there was no-
And neither was Bastila.

"Bastila!" The word wrenched from my lungs like a scream, but came out more like a croak. Bastila!

She wasn't there. There was no null patch of Force like those times a neural disruptor had separated us. No- now there was absolutely nothing.


The recollection rushed through my mind with the burn of acid: us, fading into the Force. Dying. Falling beyond the veil. Bastila, in one last act of desperate defiance, hurling me back into-

"So odd, and yet strangely apt," someone murmured.

-back into someone- but I could barely make sense of anything-

"-to see how the Force has departed you, Revan."

My eyes opened. I stared up, to see the pale, fleshy underside of a neck where it met steel chrome.

Malak did not look down. He kept his gaze straight ahead, holding me tight in his arms, as he traipsed fixedly through a corridor of what had once been my dominion.

"Bastila." Her name was a murmur of soul-wrenching grief as I was faced with the ultimate loss: the failure to safeguard the life of the one who had rescued me from myself.

And the failure to follow her into oblivion.

"You are truly nothing now, Revan," Malak was saying. I wondered, numbly, if the man was trying to wrest my attention for himself, but I couldn't- because Bastila was- she was-

Gone.

"At first I thought you were completely void. An unholy enigma, like Em and Xaset, echoing with the blankness of a nether-hell burnt through the fabric of the Force itself."

His words meant nothing to me. Xaset I'd only ever heard coupled with the mysterious Meetra. Em, Em, I recognized that name from earlier blurred recollections, but I couldn't place it- just another sent from my past- someone who meant so little when balanced with the weight of my bond-sister's sacrifice.

"But no," Malak continued in his low, mechanized monotone. "You have the same faint spark as any of the trillion Force-blinds inhabiting this galaxy. To think that you have been reduced to normality is almost beyond the scope of comprehension."

The grief sat in my throat like a fistful of crushed ferraglass. But, finally, I found my voice-meaningless though it might be. "Why haven't you killed me?" I whispered.

A brief snort escaped his vocabulator, muffled and almost choked. "Why would I bother? You are no threat now, Revan. And there is a certain symmetry, perhaps, to have you with me at the end."

An arm dropped from beneath my body, and I heard the faint pneumatic hiss of a hatch opening before the arm returned.
"At the end," I mumbled, closing my eyes. "You admit defeat, then."

The same noise emitted from his throat. Wet and gasping, like even Darth Malak had trouble breathing. "The Star Forge is all powerful," he murmured. "It can create almost anything, it seems, except a medi-centre."

There was a crunching noise with his every footfall. I opened my eyes, again, this time to look around. The lighting had dimmed to emergency red, but I could make out a vast array of consoles along a wall. Some, broken and charred, having been shattered by what looked like blaster fire.

On the other side, a viewport gazed neutrally into space.

"A command room," I said blankly.

"Yes," he acknowledged, walking deeper into the place. "It appears even my best officers have scattered."

There were bloodied corpses littering the ground, in amongst the shards of ferraglass and other debris. One body even lay haphazardly over a console screen, as if the dead man had been protecting the thing with his own flesh. On the far wall, a handful of green lights marked the existence of primed escape pods.

"Look out to space, Revan. The stars you always wished to fly beyond. See our fate with me."

I blinked, turning my head. Maybe Malak wanted me to feel the horror of my oncoming demise. Maybe he wasn't even thinking that deeply. I didn't know. But as I stared out at the flashing laser fire, striking forward into the Star Forge above and below us, all I felt was a grim sense of satisfaction.

"The Star Forge is falling," I said quietly. Bastila had shown me that much already, but the sight was, at least, ameliorating in its own way. "The Republic will win."

"Ah, your blessed Republic." A dark note entered his mechanical voice, and his arms tightened cruelly around my limp body. A part of me wanted to struggle but I- I couldn't find the will.

He walked to the centre of the room, next to a table lined with smashed, sparking console screens. With another muffled huff of breath, he slid down to the ground, still grasping me tight. "That was always the difference between us, Revan. You would have sacrificed anything to save your Republic. Even me. Whereas I... once upon a time, when I was a different man, I would have damned the galaxy just to keep you safe."

The stark honesty of his words was enough to shunt my grief beneath the shock of surprise. I blinked, staring up at the underside of his face, but Malak was still gazing into the abyss of approaching death.

"Mal... you betrayed me," I whispered. What I could see of his face was sallow. But somewhere, in amongst the deathly pale skin marked with black skeins of Sith corruption, had to be the man I had once loved. "And you say I was more to you than you were to me?"

A strangled laugh choked in his throat. And still, the man did not meet my eyes. "Oh, Revan, the dark paths we have walked. Don't you understand, that to truly be master of the Sith, you must destroy that which you love the most? That is why you turned on the Republic."

My breath caught. I'd had another reason at first, but I knew there was also truth in his words. "And that is why you turned on me," I said slowly.
His head dipped, finally – and eyes as blazing as a fire at sunset met mine. "Yes. The Dark Side twists everything you are until the Dark Side is all that is left."

I held his gaze. It was like staring into the might of a supernova. "It is not all I have left," I refuted. Even now, even with the emptiness that echoed in my heart, I could not let him go so easily. Not knowing what I had been to him – and what I had led him to. "And I don't think it's all you have left either, Mal."

"Only you, Revvie," he murmured, but turned away from me to stare blankly at the viewport again. "You have never accepted the concept of concession, even when faced with your own defeat. But now, at the end of all things... surely even you must admit that you are nothing. Just like me."

"We don't-" My eyes squeezed tight. In my mind, I could see the primed green lights adorning the far wall. The next words were hard to speak, as if I didn't wholly mean them- "We don't have to die here, Malak. This doesn't have to be the end."

But I felt so hollow inside. Without Bastila- -but the others, the others were still here, in the Forge somewhere. A faint flicker of yearning burned to life inside-

Malak's arms squeezed hard; hard enough to shoot a spasm of agony deep through my side. My limbs felt weak, useless; and I didn't know if it was injury or grief holding me impotent in his familiar arms.

Malak snorted. "After all of your betrayals, Revan, did you really think I would crawl behind you now? Leave my fortress and go mewling to your precious Republic?"

"Betrayals-" I choked over the word. "You speak of betrayal to me? I may have led you down a dark path, Malak. But you chose to continue it."

"Continue? Ah, I suppose I must claim responsibility for my own actions. And I do, Revan. Gladly. But as for betrayal- you walked that path first."

The accusation hung starkly in the air, with no evidence to justify it. And even while I knew treachery went hand-in-hand with the sodding ethos of the Sith, the hypocrisy of his words shot the fire of indignation through me. I snapped open my eyes to glare up at him, only to see the man from my past staring down calmly in response.

"I betrayed you?" Jealousy had always twisted something dark inside him, right from the very beginning- I didn't know where that knowledge came from, only that it was true. "You're the one who turned on me!"

"I was faithful, Revan," he said implacably. "Always faithful, until there was nothing left to be faithful to anymore. As Jedi, I was only ever first amongst equals in your eyes. And the Dark Side made you shuck that, until you cared for nothing anymore, not even me. Faithfulness..." He snorted in apparent disgust; a sound that morphed into a strangled wheeze. "Just how much do you remember? Have you ever bothered asking your pet Twi'lek about the limits of your faithfulness?"

"What?" The inanity of the question had me blinking. "The limits of my- what does Yudan have to do with- what the frell are you talking about?"

His gleaming eyes narrowed on mine. There was satisfaction, there, at my bewildered response – and I understood then that Malak referred to something I didn't remember, and he was glad of my ignorance.
I opened my mouth to retort-

"He’s failed, you know," Malak said calmly. "I felt Sharlan overpower Yudan well before we entered this room. I imagine Sharlan will have moved on to the rest of your crew by now. He has quite the appetite. Can you not remember his unique ability?"

The air choked out of my lungs. Fury spiked higher than a stim-shot, and instinctively I expected the Force to surge in my grasp-

But there was only the sound of my harsh breathing next to his.

Malak’s hand lifted to grab at my limp wrist. The sharp movement felt like he stabbed a chiv into my side. A click, and something loosened- Malak was holding my durasteel comm to his face before I even realized what he was doing.

"Revan is dead," he intoned into the device held next to the chrome of his jaw. "It is finally over."

A crunch, and the wrist-communicator from the Ebon Hawk shattered into a useless heap of metal in his fist.

I was insensate and numb, and only the physiological reflex of survival had me drawing another breath. My eyes stung, and wasn’t that the most worthless sensation of all, when faced with the nadir of everything.

"A final gift for you, Revvie," Malak rasped, leaning back against the ledge of the consoles. There was the faint, crushing sound of shattered ferraglass moving beneath his weight. "Rosh will rot as Sharlan’s plaything, and he deserves no more than that. But your other followers... well. They will have no reason to linger on this dying station anymore."

Gift? Gift? The detachment inside shook with a flurry of hate, a deep burn of emotion I didn't know I could still feel. Malak could prance that final act around as generosity all he liked, but the sithspawn no doubt derived a fair wallop of enjoyment from saying those frelling words-

Malak twitched, staring down at me again. The corners of his eyes creased in vague amusement, like the bastard had read my thoughts.

Maybe he had.

"The airlocks are open, Revan. I cannot hold them closed, not anymore. Perhaps I enjoy the thought of your allies running from me, carrying with them the tale that it was my hand which finally took you down." He paused. "If any of them are still alive, that is."

Still alive... The heat of hatred dovetailed into biting grief. After Bastila, the thought of others falling was more than I could bear. Bastila was more than I could bear. Yudan, no, I won’t believe it. I can't. How do I even know Malak is telling the truth? I didn't. Carth- Carth- he has to get out. To live, like he promised me. Let him, at least, find a way to escape. Like a desperate prayer to an unhearing deity, my mind ran through a litany of pleas heard by no one but myself. The others- Mission, and Canderous, and Jolee and Juhani and Dustil and-

-and Zaalbar.

My heart stopped. I'd seen the truth through Bastila's eyes. The scion from Kashyyyk, whose wisdom had scythed through the darkness to humble us both at a time when it seemed nothing else could reach me.
And the rage of such injustice – that such an honourable soul could have faltered – completely flattened beneath an overpowering surge of grief.

"We were together at the beginning, Revan." Malak's words were barely audible to me, as my head lolled in his grasp to stare blindly out to space. Flashes of fire blurred through the transparisteel. "And so we shall remain at the end. In darkness."

_In darkness. It ends in darkness._

My hand slipped from his grasp, to fall to the cold chrome below. Under my numb fingertips, jagged shards of ferracrystal bit into my skin.

"Your friends have gone," Malak rasped. I heard the catch in his voice, and it took a moment to understand. "I sense them departing."

_Gone. Gone- they've escaped, then. Carth, and the others-

The relief was almost painful. _I have that, at least. That, and the Star Forge falling._ My endgame, concluded – but when it meant the sacrifice of Bastila and Zaalbar-

_I would do it again, Revan_, the echo of my bond-sister whispered. Maybe- maybe, this was the best outcome I could have hoped for. No Star Forge, no Darth Malak – and no Darth Revan.

I slowly sank to a place beyond feeling – much the same as Malak, I suspected. The darkness would take us soon, and Malak was right.

In the end, we were both nothing.

xXx

Chapter End Notes

*Coming up next: Revan and Malak have a final conversation.*

A Republic victory's worth of thanks to kosiah. Also, I must make note of your influence - or inspiration - with regards to Traya and her psychic dominance over her apprentices. Anyone reading _Memory_ or _Oblivion_ would likely notice that – consider it the highest compliment, for my emerging Traya sounds suspiciously like yours.
I would have liked to see the stars.

Instead, there was the red flash of lasers. Yellow fire of a snub snuffing out. The grey underbelly of a mighty cruiser slowly advancing closer.

The panorama through the viewport had all the magnificence of a space battle's climax, culminating in the outcome I had struggled so endlessly for.

The Republic, emerging victorious.

Yet now, at the very end of things, I found myself yearning instead for the serene backdrop of uninterrupted space. Just the stars, and that illusion of infinite freedom before my body came to a final rest.

"That's the Meridus." My gaze tracked along the clean starboard hull of the Dreadnought-class heavy cruiser. Dodonna's flagship, my mind helpfully supplied. I may not have recognized the admiral on the holo-comm earlier, but I knew I'd worked with her fleet in the past.

"Yes. I imagine soon they'll be dusting off their victory speeches back on Coruscant." Even with the crackle in Malak's voice, he still managed to sound droll. "Do you remember Coruscant, Revan?"

"No." Not really. A feeling, perhaps- I'd been happier there, but the Core had never felt like home.

"I think I prefer you this way," he murmured.

My head felt so heavy, but I slowly managed to turn it up to face him.

Malak was staring down at me. His discoloured irises blazed with corruption. At the corner of his metal jaw, a droplet of crimson threatened to splatter free.

"Scrubbed clean and unknowing," he continued, in that softly modulated tone. "A blank plate with cracks ridden through the paint, showcasing the true clay beneath."

Something stirred inside, deep and slumberous with the weight of forgetfulness. He used to have a poetic bent, even if he kept it concealed from everyone but me. Odd... I thought he'd lost that.

My eyes shied away from his, then; for I knew there were some observations best left hidden. Instead, I looked along the length of dull silver wrapped snugly around the lower half of his face. The skin below was fleshy and sallow; ridden with the black scars of the Dark Side.

Once, the man had been hard and toned. A warrior of the sun.

Lower, across the expanse of Malak's black-and-grey exoskeleton, my gaze skimmed over a patchwork of scorch-marks and rents of damage. Near his heart – just above where my head lay –
gaped the death-blow I had given him. The burnt armour fibres surrounding the wound were submerged in his lifeblood, parting open like a crimson mouth gasping for air.

The tinny scent of Malak's spilled blood was strong. He had to barely be holding back the jaws of death-

"I have enough strength left to wait out the Star Forge, Revan. Death shall not claim me before it embraces you."

My eyes closed, blanking Malak from view. In my mind, I could see the ready green lights of escape pods again. So close. Too close. It was almost cruel, the way life had thrown that last glimmer of salvation in my path.

"You are so easy to read, now," he mused, following his words with a chuckle that sounded wet in the back of his ruined throat. "There is no escape for us this time, Revan. For once I shall have my way."

My fingers curled on the ground, biting into the haphazard shards of broken ferraglass. The movement was nothing more than a hollow reflex – a living being’s drive to survive even at the very end.

The vacant sense of finality in my soul was stronger.

"A blank plate," Malak repeated in a soft murmur, and I felt the brush of a gloved fingertip against my cheek. "You had a scar here, once, that I gave you. Right down the length of your face. The Jedi scoured your body as thoroughly as your mind, didn't they?"

"I have no idea."

My sense of time was muddled, but I knew Deralia happened more than a year ago. That meant... months, trapped in kolto. Unaware and dumb, and at the unholy mercy of the Jedi.

It was strange, now, to feel resentment flurry in my gut. It hardly matters. They're dead. Galdea, Karon, Vima... No, Vima wasn't. I wasn't sure if I'd ever been acquainted with the woman, but Vima Sunrider must have known me – or my mind – on a truly intimate level.

I felt my jaw spasm, and realized it was probably a good thing I'd never run into her after the Endar Spire.

It hardly matters. The thought echoed, and with a deep breath, I let my antagonism go. It was almost easier without the Force.

I blinked, and looked up again at my past. "I've collected my own share of battle-scars since then, Mal."

"So I see." Malak was staring at my maimed hand, as it idly sifted through the broken glass on the ground. I barely noticed as a jagged wedge sliced my palm open. "Was it Bandon who took your fingers?"

"Mmm." I let that one rest with a non-committal murmur of agreement. Somehow, I knew Malak would prefer the affirmation to the truth, and I was too empty inside to thwart him now.

His gaze darted back to meet mine. Malak was almost sounding... sentimental, and yet in the depths of his eyes I could see nothing but the fire of hate. His brows lowered. "You never liked Bandon."
My emotions felt like they had numbed to nothing. And yet, Malak's comment made my mouth twitch in a black humour that had once been a mechanism for survival. If I concentrated hard enough I could still visualize that braggart pinned to a wroshyr with Yudan's 'saber. "Didn't like him much at the end, either."

Malak snorted. I wasn't sure if he'd skimmed that image from my mind, but he sounded remarkably uncaring about the demise of his former apprentice.

*Apprentices are tools. Tools that can be used, tools that can be broken. That's all Malak was to me, in the end. And that's why I lost him.*

Malak's arm dropped from my face, abruptly, as if he had picked up on my internal monologue. His hand landed on my chest with a thud, before his fingers curled around to meet the other arm wedged under my back. It felt like the prison of a lover's final embrace.

Maybe it was.

Not a particularly pleasant prison, though – for as Malak's arms firmed around me, I found it excruciatingly difficult to choke back a gasp of pain.

"We have always been so adept at hurting one another," Malak murmured, as his icy fingers pressed softly against the cauterized injury along my ribs. My moan was muffled, but audible; and I had no sodding clue whether it was sadistic pleasure or something else tightening the faint lines around his eyes.

I bore Malak's scars, even now. And it was wrong, I knew, to feel that savage surge of satisfaction at how much deeper *my* 'saber had driven into *his* flesh.

"I guess we were," I finally came out with. "But you didn't step up when it counted. You fired on me from a distance."

Malak tensed as the barb hit home. It was probably beneath me, but... *oh, who the frell cares. He's right, regardless. We ended as experts in the game of one-upmanship. And I am to more to blame than him for that.*

"A true Sith knows when to grasp opportunity, Revan. I had the chance to take both you and Bastila Shan out with one cannon blast. Tell me you would not have done the same."

*Bastila.* I couldn't hold back a flinch. She'd fallen, regardless, and left me here alone.

It would have been better had she allowed me to die with her.

... *But there is... there is still more for you to do.*

I felt myself recoiling from the echo of her words. There was a sense of duty, there – an obligation, both moral and honour-bound to her memory – that I just didn't want to face.

Even so, there was a part of me that rallied to her call. A very small part, curled down deep in the pit of my soul.

*But I am spent. Emptied. Force-blind. What else... what else can I do, now?*

"You cared for her, in the end," Malak said. His gaze was roving over my face, taking in my reaction. A faint touch of bemusement coloured the uneven warble of his voice. "The young Jedi who held you on a leash."
"Yes." The word came out clipped and hard, and despite everything, I found my thoughts tightening into focus. My gaze narrowed as I stared hard at him. "Malak. What did we find in the Unknown Regions?"

He didn't answer, at first. Just looked down at me silently with the weight of the Dark Side blazing from his eyes. Somewhere, in the distance, a faint rumble was followed by a noticeable tremor through the superstructure. I heard the screech of a faraway klaxon splutter, and then abruptly stop.

Alarms switching off. That's probably... that's probably not a good sign.

The side of Malak's face twitched, contorting the stippled malignance that marked his skin. "You still will not bend to defeat, will you?" he murmured. "Even the Jedi were not able to break you in the end."

I said nothing. Merely held his gaze and silently demanded the answer.

"No," Malak said with cold finality. The word hung in the air, as implacable and unyielding as permacrete. "Ignorance can be a mercy, Revan. And it is the only mercy I will grant you."

Very deliberately, he lifted his head away, signalling an end to the topic.

I could have left it there. Sun and stars, I wanted too. And Malak wasn't the only spectre of my past who seemed to think he was doing me a favour, keeping quiet – after all, digging anything meaningful from Yudan had always been a bit like mining for kaiburr crystals in a trash compactor.

I have to believe he's found a way to escape, too. When it came to Yudan, I wasn't going to trust anything Malak had to say.

I wanted to turn my head. To stare blindly out the viewport, in tandem with Malak, and accept the oblivion that awaited us. To lay quietly in his arms, and imagine we were nothing but the young lovers we had once been; the young lovers I had all but forgotten.

The yearning to surrender to that pretence was powerful; more powerful than I could have expected.

...still more for you to do.

Shut up, Bastila, I thought weakly, and felt tears sting at my eyes. Damn, but I hated it when she was right. Ignorance... ignorance might be merciful, but it also meant leaving me adrift, with no concrete conclusion on whether my purpose was complete. And I wasn't wholly ignorant anyway – which simply meant Malak's so-called mercy was merely a torture of fleeting recollections and half-forgotten objectives.

"I remember a purple world," I said, loud and abrupt.

Malak's arms spasmed around me. A wheeze, cut-off, lodged in his throat, and his body shuddered as if he'd almost dropped the Force-threads chaining life to his body.

"Which one?" he hissed, the words spitting out in a crackle of distortion.

My mind blanked. Which one? There's- there's more than one?

The shiny chrome of Malak's jaw lowered, and suddenly I was faced with the heat of his gaze again. I could only stare at him dumbly as my thoughts spun. That purple world – I remembered sensing the touch of sentient malignance creeping through the Force, while I stood on a barren moor and clasped Malak's hand.
I sensed something evil, but Bastila- Bastila had seen the complete extinction of the Force! Because Malak had shown her a different purple world, and I'd stupidly assumed they were the same!

It'd been a logical inference, perhaps; to presume we'd been viewing the same place through different lenses. Two shards of memory, both of an ominous, violet atmosphere, both of a place where the Force behaved in a way neither of us had known before.

I'd never even thought they might be memories of two entirely separate planets.

"Which one, Revan?" Malak demanded a second time, his face so close I could smell the metallic tang of blood on his breath. "Nathema or Kaas?"

I blinked. Those names stirred nothing but an eerie sensation toe-dancing down my neck. "Nathema?" I guessed weakly. Malak didn't so much as twitch. "Er, or maybe Kaas?"

"You don't know." His voice softened with pleasure. "Good. It shall remain that way."

No. No it damn well won't. "It's the end, Malak," I shot back hotly. "You may as well-"

My throat closed in on itself. It took a second to understand what was happening – weak muscles of flesh bowing beneath the whim of a Force-endowed madman, cramping inward and refusing the flow of oxygen to pass.

I choked. Desperation engulfed me, instant and sudden, like I was a burra-cod hurled to the riverbank. My free hand flailed at my throat-

Years of Jedi training kicked in, then; and my muscles spasmed as I forced myself to relax against the instinct of panic. My mind slowed; submerging into the serenity and inner calm I required. Peace, and acceptance of the whole, and then I could reach out for the Force-

Nothing. There was nothing but the burning of my lungs as they failed to inflate.

"I will have my way! For once, you will listen!" Malak roared, his voice discordant and breaking into static. His eyes pinched into gleaming slits, and the Force-bonds released, then, falling away from my tender throat. "Some ghosts are meant to stay buried!"

The first gulp of air was even more painful than the incessant stabbing in my side. I gasped again, as my breathing slowly regulated and my eyes closed weakly in despair.

"You are mine, Revan," Malak growled. "You were mine first. I will not let that thing consume you now. This is our end."

My head was fuzzy, and my throat felt like sandpaper. I slumped against his side, unsure if the faint shaking I felt was my own dizziness, or further deterioration of the Star Forge.

Mine... but I was never yours, Malak. Love doesn't work that way. And if it did, then I would belong to all those I loved, not just to the one whose bed I shared.

If only you had accepted that.

But there was something more important in Malak's last words. My thoughts reversed, hiccupping over that thing. He'd said that thing... that thing had... consumed me?

"So," I breathed. "There is something out there, then."

I knew I was poking a rancor with a stun-stick. Rolling the dice, testing my luck, and gambling that
my tenacity wouldn't enrage Malak back to choking me into submission.

But did it really matter if I died now, or in ten minutes time?

Maybe Malak picked up on that thought, as well, for his next words were not what I expected.

"If you must fill our final moments with incessant prattle, then we shall talk on a topic of my choosing, Revan," he ground out. I noticed, almost clinically, that his breathing was decidedly more rattled than before. "You said you did not recall Coruscant. What of Talshion?"

Again, I was struck with the inane thought of Malak waxing sentimental. Or, maybe, he's just trying to drive me away from what I seek. Regardless, the thought of my adolescence was alluring. A time before the Force had dominated my life; a place where the Dark Side had not been present to tempt me.

"Little," I answered slowly. "Little enough that on Korriban I actually believed my true name was Ness Jonohl."

"Huh." The timbre of his voice had settled back into neutral. From hot to cold again, just like during our duel, Malak was displaying all the emotional volatility one could expect from a Sith Lord. "Perhaps that is not altogether surprising, Revan. You always did like to honour our childhood friends with those ridiculous aliases of yours. Andara, when you posited a deal to the governor as Knight Ness Jonohl. Or that time on Onderon when you masqueraded as Healer Staria-"

I paused. I hadn't connected the dots consciously before, but I knew immediately he was right. Ness. Ness and Jonohl. And Staria. I should remember them... should I remember them? My forehead creased. There were so many names from my past that meant so little. The old man, whose name I had taken in tribute. Just like I had given one to Malak-

"Devari," I said suddenly. "Your brother."

Malak had never spoken of Devari, not after- not after something happened. Something bad happened, and Devari was gone, and it pained Malak deeply, even years later. Not even with me would he talk of his brother-

"Half-brother," Malak corrected calmly, slanting a look down at me. "Devari's death stopped paining me years ago, Revan."

My breath hitched. That made sense, of course; one could never ascend through the Force if the claws of the past still bit deep. A guardian brother so cruelly taken from him in his youth now sounded like it meant nothing at all.

Devari's death might be an old injury, long-healed—but that thing... that thing he'd said had consumed me was as raw as the wound in his chest. Why?

"We shared the same mother," Malak continued on. "Devari told me they arrived on Talshion as refugees. From Kun's war, I presume. Did I ever tell you that my brother knew Freeflight from before?"

"What?" I said, startled. "I mean- no. How the frell would I know?" A cursory image of a blinded man rose in my mind. I had adored Freeflight — the invalid who had raised me after my mother's death. The man who'd trained me to think, and to dream.

My memories were so fragmented and so few, but I was suddenly engulfed with a patchwork of impressions — more feeling than recollection — of sitting transfixed at the foot of a middle-aged husk
of a man. At times, I had the idea that Malak had joined me. But his brother? Who couldn't have been that many years older than us? "How did he know Freeflight- surely Devari must have been too young-"

Malak shrugged. "He would have been but a child, yes. My brother never divulged the details of how he knew Freeflight; he merely ordered me to keep my distance. Of course, I did not always listen."

"Freeflight was harmless," I snapped, suddenly irritated. My memory might have been riddled with blaster bolts, but I knew that much.

“Freeflight taught you to hope, Revan. Hope is many things – but it is never harmless. Hope led you to obsess over the stars and, in the end, they were neither yours nor mine.” Malak’s voice was low and monotone, but I wondered if I heard something else- a lilt of wistfulness, perhaps. “You, of all people, should understand the power and the pitfalls of hope.”

Conceding the point to him was difficult, even this close to the end. "I suppose hope helped turn the tide of the Mandalorian Wars," I said slowly.

"Yes," Malak murmured, sounding satisfied.

My eyes narrowed. "The Mandalorian Wars – that were started by that thing you mentioned-"

"Stars, Revan, you never quit!" he snarled, suddenly, the fire in his eyes reigniting. Malak's fist clenched tight against my ribs, but my gaze was caught on that mortal wound of his, pulsing with a thick gout of blood before it closed again beneath his control. "The Wars were no more than a testing of the waters! We could have lived out our entire lives and never seen the galaxy fall!"

There was a clawing sensation in my gut, as his words echoed in the dead air around us. It took me a second to recognize the sensation as horror. "Galaxy... fall," I whispered in shock. "Malak. This... this- we were Jedi, once." I felt my voice grow in volume. "No matter how far away a threat seems, we cannot bury our heads like the frelling Council-"

There was a low growl, building, in his mechanized throat. "Oh, and doesn't this just remind me of the past- even Jedi brainwashing can't entirely remove your damn heroics-"

"It's out there, this thing- and you just want to ignore it?" I blinked, and suddenly Malak's face was right there, his nose almost touching mine. The burning yellow of his eyes eclipsed everything else. "Malak, you can't. We can't-"

"I can do whatever I want," he hissed. "I am a Sith, Revan. There is no Jedi left within me. You burnt that away a long time ago."

Shame warred with indignation, emotions that I immediately suspected were roused as a deliberate means of distraction. My lips thinned as I pushed them both away. "That's why you drew away from the Unknown Regions. Bastila thought you didn't really believe in the threat, but that's not true, is it? You were scared."

Malak didn't reply. There was a flicker in the roiling yellow of his eyes that betrayed him, and he raised his head from mine: slowly, calmly, to look away out to space again.

Something twitched in my throat. I breathed in, quick and fast and unhindered, hit by a quick surge of relief that he hadn't dovetailed straight back into choking me again-

"There was a time I would have followed you anywhere, Revan. And I did, straight into a pit of
hellfire I could never have imagined." His words were monotone, now, like he was reading from a transcript. "As Master of the Sith I knew better. Why poke a sleeping demon when the known galaxy was there for my command?"

I opened my mouth to retort-

"I know your game, Revan. I know you. A feeble attempt or two to redeem me, and if that fails, anger me into losing control of the Force."

-but no words came out-

"I shall not have our last moments sullied with talk of what turned us."

I gasped, struggling, pain stabbing into my side as his arms clenched tight around me. The bastard had cinched my vocal chords shut, and try as I might, I couldn't even release the tiniest of whimpers-

"I shall not fumble the Force, Revan. I will have my way in this. For once, I will have my way."

And beneath our prone bodies, the rumbling of destruction grew to a quake. The scarlet of emergency lighting threw ghastly shadows across Malak's face, and I had no cards left to play- no voice, no Force-

_Promise me you'll get out of there alive._

_Oh, Carth._ The bitter taste of defeat was ash in my mouth as my body slumped, and my maimed hand skittered against the glass shards of debris on the ground. I could not turn Malak, I had not convinced him, and now I was forced to face the biggest personal failure of my entire life.

He did not look to see the lone tear that trailed down my cheek. He was staring fixedly out to space, towards the stars I had always dreamed of, the stars now hidden by the battle I had brought to him.

_I'm sorry, Mal. I'm so sorry._

Malak Devari had been an undisputed hero. Of the Jedi Order, of the Republic. Everything he was now was my doing. My failure to stay true to the light had turned him-

Agony sliced my palm. With a clench of my remaining fingers, I wrenched my fist upwards and stabbed a jagged shard of ferraglass straight into Malak's heart.

He convulsed. A low, disbelieving whine of pain emitted from his voder as I forced the broken wedge deeper into his injured flesh. My muscles froze; held rigid in a sudden blast of Force stasis I could not block, but-

Malak shuddered, and then the warmth of his heart's blood submerged my raised hand.

"Rev-" he choked, head dropping, wide eyes meeting mine. "Revvie..."

He slumped sideways, arms dropping from around my body, and suddenly I could move again.

"Mal," I gasped, rolling from his lap and into a crouch that had my side screaming in agony. His head thumped on the floor, but he was still blinking at me while a pool of crimson grew beneath his failing flesh.

I couldn't- I couldn't leave-

My hand rose, bloodied and shaking, to cup the side of his face. "Mal. You deserved a better end."
"S-saviour," Malak stuttered, his voder cutting out. "V-villain. Should... should've known you'd... stand alone."

His eyes closed, and his chest didn't rise again.

I tried to swallow against the lump in my throat. Beneath my wet fingers, his scarred cheek was warm. My thumb trailed along the chrome of his jaw, smudging away a fallen teardrop.

He'd been so handsome, once.

…

"This way!" the strange boy hissed, running out from the shadows of the tunnel to grab my hand. Some said these warrens used to be the storm-water drains, centuries ago when Altizir had been a dawning city on a nascent world.

I found myself half-stumbling, half sprinting after my new friend, unsure if the footsteps of the Enforcers were still following. I longed for the safety of Freeflight's dwelling in the sewers – the Enforcers never went there. There wasn't anything to take, and the smell went beyond noxious.

The boy dragged me into a nook, and the only sounds I could hear were the harsh gasps of our combined breathing.

I recognized my erstwhile rescuer. I'd seen him lurking about the public alleys with that older brother of his – a couple of street kids, just like me.

I'd not seem him venture into my corner of the slums before, though.

What was his name? Alek, or something?

"You're Revan, right?" the boy said. "I've seen you around. My name's Malak."

I smiled, and squeezed his hand in the darkness.

…

Wild shaking underneath me wrenched me back to the present. A siren within the command room itself began to wail, biting deep into my eardrums. Malak's skin had turned cold under my hands, and his pallid, dead face blurred through a sheen of betraying tears.

Promise me you'll get out of there alive, Carth had pleaded, and the words cut deep. But what life could a Force-blind Revan Freeflight have, out there in the known galaxy?

Bastila's death – and mine – would have been widely felt. And there was a large part of me that thought dying alongside Malak might be the final act of restitution I could offer my old lover, my best friend – the man who had followed me from a poverty-stricken childhood into a future that first shook the galaxy and then tried to break it.

There is still more for you to do.

I was still breathing. Blood was still flowing, and neural connections were still sparking.

I drew my hand back, and looked once more upon the decayed face of a villain I had once loved.

…
"Do you think we'll ever leave here, Mal?" I rubbed my cheek against his, and felt him frown.

"Peeps don't escape Talshion, Revvie. Not even ones as quick as us."

My breath huffed out in an unwillingness to accept that. "There'll be a way. And if anyone will find it, we will."

…

The blast of a nearby explosion made the ground quake; I found myself tumbling along the smooth metal flooring, away from Malak and towards the wall. I grunted, landing against the corpse of an unnamed soldier.

A shiver wracked me, and I was suddenly cold, whether from loss of blood or temperature I didn't know. Instinct had me fumbling to my feet, fighting against a body that didn't want to move, against muscles that were too tight and too bruised to keep going.

My jaw clenched, and I heaved myself up against the wall. The utility belt cinched over my bedraggled mesh shirt caught on an outraised vent. With numb, frozen fingers, I pulled at it, and the thing jerked loose from my waist before thudding to the floor.

I blinked, staring down, realizing at once what was missing.

*Karon’s saber*... With a sick jolt, I realized I was missing that symbolic token of hope from my past. No lightsaber, no Force, no bond-sister... in that grim moment, I felt like I didn't have much of anything left.

A green light blinked from above, and I craned my head to sight the ready signals above the few un-ejected escape pods left.

*The Force provides, padawan. The Force provides for us all, Jedi and non-Jedi alike.*

*Promise me you'll get out of there alive.*

I didn't want to, I didn't deserve to, and yet I found myself struggling to stay upright as the Star Forge crumbled around me. My hand mashed against a control panel, and then I heaved my body inside an anonymous escape pod.

I looked over my shoulder, back to my past. The last thing I saw before the hatch closed was one outstretched hand with gloved fingers unfurled, as it lay fallen limp and dead on the floor.

…

*I found the Jedi Temple soothing, a fortress of peace that pushed the demands of a billion sentients away, even in the heart of Galactic City. Coruscant had more people crammed together than Altizir, but the Temple was a powerful refuge, and one that called to me.*

*Malak was standing in the middle of the rose-scented courtyard, staring out thoughtfully at the well-tended gardens of starflowers and coru-bulbs. We'd had little time alone since we arrived less than a month ago. Our days had been packed with meetings and lectures and outings, as Master Karon and her friend Master Zhar had done their best to acclimatize us to a planet so very, very different to the only one we had ever known.*

*Sometimes, I wondered if Mal was still wary of this promised life – if there was a part of him, deep inside, that desired our starved, meaningless existence back on Talshion.*
For I missed our friends, and I knew he did, too.

I walked towards my lover, slipping my hand companionably into his large grasp.

"Hey, you," I greeted.

Malak turned, his full lips curving in a tender smile. Eyes the tawny hue of high-grade Corellian whiskey crinkled at the corners, as the expression on his handsome face lightened with pleasure.

"The Jedi robes begin to fit you, Revvie," he murmured. "You're like a wandering star that has finally found her place to shine."

I rolled my eyes at his unnecessary dramatics, but couldn't quell my answering smile.

"And you, Mal?" I lifted a hand to brush aside the thick dark hair that had fallen over the breadth of his forehead. "Are you happy here?"

"Yes." He bent to kiss me softly on the lips. "I am. We have a good life here, Revan. You were right after all. We have a future, and it shall be great-"

…

I struggled to fit the harness on my body, fingers numb and unyielding with the cold. It didn't seem right that I should be so discomfited by temperature; that physical complaints would be so paramount. Not when faced with all the grief of the galaxy.

But deep, deep within, through the grief and past the horror, there was still a tiny flicker of purpose. Beneath my feet, the repulsorlifts engaged with a quiet thrum as the escape pod registered occupancy.

I thumped the launch button.

The pod fired up, heaving me back against the seat. Spitting out from the ancient relic I had resurrected and then later destroyed.

And, possibly, straight into the arms of a Republic that would have zero sympathy for me.

But, in an anonymous escape pod, maybe I'd just seem like one more Sith soldier, darting away from doom like a mink-rat scurrying from a burning building. The Republic would shoot down runners, no doubt. Others, they'd catch in their net and hurl into the nearest detention centre.

If I was lucky, no one would find me.

But the Force had deserted me, and maybe my luck had too.

xXx
Coming up next: part one of a provisional three-part hyperspace arc, where we begin to see the conclusion for the survivors.

A saga's apex worth of thanks to kosiah for the beta.
Canderous Ordo:  
*Ebon Hawk, Lehon sector*

A faint crackle emitted from the ship's long-range comm, as the Republic finally bothered to acknowledge our presence.

::Ebon Hawk, you are cleared for landing. Proceed to dock at bay F27.::

Onasi hadn't made a sound since we'd spat out from the Forge. The only visible reaction I'd spotted was a flinch from the hollow-eyed captain, when the navi-computer alerted us to the first explosion from the beast we'd left behind.

But he said nothing, not even when more messages flashed in red on the screen, listing the complete break-up of the Forge and warning of flying debris firing in our wake. Onasi merely firmed his hands on the controls, canting the freighter in smooth evasion, before steadying on a course direct to the *Meridus*.

I had no words to say, either. What should have been a victory had the bitter taste of failure tainting every aspect of it. The princess, Carpet, Rosh, *Revan*...

I'd had my own share of loss before, more than once, but damn if I felt like flying straight into a throng of cheering Republic grunts when the blood of my clan was still so fresh.

The truth was that the whole situation galled, right down to my bones – to be flying away without first eye-balling Revan's corpse for myself. Or, Malak's.

Mand'alor's balls, I hadn't known whether to take the news on *jetii* faith, earlier. And if it hadn't been for kriffing Malak spouting out over Revan's comm-link, I wasn't entirely sure Onasi would be sitting in the pilot's seat now.

No, I'd learned to give the man more credit. Onasi would've made the right choice in the end. Running wasn't the path of a warrior, but protecting clan was. And we were all clan here – just as Revan had been.

*In that respect Malak may have done us a favour, comming through the way he did.*

But if the Republic didn't guarantee that black-balled *dar'jetii*'s death, then I'd damn well find a way of doing so myself.

Onasi's expression was bleak and empty as he glided the *Hawk* into the maw of the Republic heavy cruiser. It was plain as space that he was barely holding himself together- that the man would fall apart into a blubbering mess soon enough- but I also reckoned he had the inner grit to find a way
back to himself once the sharp edge of grief dulled.

My mouth twisted, and my fingers itched for a weapon. Haar'chak, but the only thing worse than personal loss was being unable to avenge it-

We're all hurting. Some more than others. Maybe it's worth reminding Onasi of that.

I shifted, turning to stare out through the viewport into the busy hangar. Snubfighters were coming in to land on either side of us, immediately surrounded by astromechs and ground crew. I struggled to recall if I'd ever landed in a laandur Republic warbird – and idly wondered what sort of reception I'd end up with.

"My daughter was at Malachor, you know," I said, as Onasi switched to landing thrusters and the ship descended. He twitched in response, but to give the man credit, he didn't turn to face me until the freighter thudded gently on the hangar floor.

With a whine, the repulsors shut off. Onasi's hands rested quietly over the dash for a full minute before he slowly swivelled to look at me.

"You never said you had a daughter," he said quietly.

I snorted. "There's a time for the singing of battle songs, Onasi, and it ain't on a crazy mission to save the galaxy."

It wasn't just that, though. My people didn't speak of the departed to outsiders. Grief was a private matter. It was enough to remember their deeds and see their echo in the next generation.

But, for some, there was no next generation.

"I'm sorry, Canderous."

I nodded sharply in acknowledgment. "We Mando'ade mourn differently to you Republic lot. We honour our dead through the glory of combat and the raising of clan. But losing a child- well. You know how that feels."

"Yeah."

::Ebon Hawk, you are clear to disembark. Admiral Dodonna and Jedi Master Tokare await you outside.::

I wasn't done. I leaned over to speak into the comm. "We'll be out in ten. Your lot can damn well wait."

On any other day, I knew Onasi would countermand such a message to his superiors, but he remained still and silent as I turned back to him.

"Millifar was everything I could hope for in a daughter," I said gruffly. "Strong. Brave. A mite foolhardy. She demanded the glory of flying in with the Ordo contingent that flanked Mand'alor, and no father was as proud as I was, that day."

All while I'd been ordered to hang back on the fringes, commanding the remainder of the Ordo fleet.

Malachor had broken what remained of the clans. Too many of us had lost our leaders, our brothers and sisters- and our children. The ones who were left scattered. I'd only had the one child, and my wife- well. She walked away from Ordo after that fateful day, swearing herself to the akaanir dala.
I didn't blame her. It was a damn sight more honourable than what I'd ended up doing.

"I'm surprised you didn't hate.-" Onasi cut himself off, mouth twisting.

"Revan?" I snorted again. "War is war, Onasi. I respect my opponents who are worthy of it."

He said nothing, but I could see the look on his face – the question of why I'd broached the topic now, of all times.

"Milli was fifteen of your galactic years." I didn't bother holding back my laugh at Onasi's startled look. "We Mando'ade grow up early. She'd been well-blooded by the time Malachor rolled around."

"Fifteen," Onasi said softly. "Younger than Dustil."

"Same age as Mission." My voice hardened. "Difference is, Mission is still a child in some respects. She'll deny it to her dying breath, but you and I damn well know it as the truth."

Onasi nodded, slowly.

"Mission has come to mean something to me. I won't deny it," I said fiercely. I wasn't the sentimental sort, but somewhere along the line I'd grown to respect the girl's spunk. "Look, I'm headed back to the Mando'ade soon as soon as I slip your Republic suits. And my people ain't no place for a soft, quick-mouthed runt like Mission Vao. She thinks she's all grown up, but that Wookiee's always kept an eye on her. He's gone now, him and Revan both, and Mission will be feeling it. She looks up to you, Republic. She'll stay with you, if you offer."

I held the man's gaze, and saw the truth of the matter reflected in his eyes.

"She's underage, on most Republic worlds," Onasi acknowledged. "She'll need a legal guardian if she's to get anywhere in life."

"Don't pose it like that," I cut in gruffly. "The girl's got pride, and she'll be hell-bent on proving her own worth. But Mission also has a soft heart. Make her part of your family, Onasi. Family is what drives us all to keep living."

I'd always claimed there was little in common between the Mando'ade and Republic sorts like Carth Onasi. This journey had taught me just how wrong I was.

"I'll take care of her, Ordo," Onasi promised, and I saw the cloud of grief lift, just a little, from his face. "You can count on me for that."

I nodded, accepting the words of a man I'd grown to respect– kriff, maybe even admire. He nodded back, and then we both turned away to unbuckle our restraints and face the music outside.

---

**Forn Dodonna:**

*Meridus, Lehon sector*

"Captain Onasi's certainly taking his time," Davis Tar'coya grumbled. The words were no more than half-hearted bluster, though, for Tar'coya was doing a poor job at concealing his jubilation. I'd even caught the man slyly throwing a high-five at a bright-eyed tech while we departed the bridge.

On my other side, Jedi Master Vandar Tokare was bowed and silent. The very antithesis of Tar'coya's celebratory mood.
"Carth Onasi and those with him have suffered personal losses today, Davis, in the name of the Republic," I rebuked. In truth, my heart was sitting somewhere between the two men. I felt Tar'coya's nascent joy, his burgeoning relief at the promise of peace – but I was well aware of the casualties that went along with victory. "We can afford to grant Captain Onasi ten minutes of our time."

"Humph," the Sullustan grunted, turning back to the closed hatch of the docked Ebon Hawk. Tar'coya's jowls were twitching, though, and he moved restlessly on his feet. The Commodore was keen to be amongst his own men, and I understood that – I understood that all too well. After all, Captain Carth Onasi was one of mine.

"Our fleet is still picking up runners, Forn," Tar'coya muttered, looking down at a scroll-feed on the datapad clutched in his hands. "While we wait idly at a captain's leisure. The battle may be over, but the clean-up has scarce begun."

"Commodore," I warned, drawing Tar'coya's abashed glance. Stars, the man was both highly competent and experienced, yet his inability to give credit to anyone outside his reporting line grew more than a little tiresome. "The bridge is safe in the hands of Commodore Patton. We owe today to Captain Onasi and his crew. Grant them the respect they deserve. They are undeniable heroes."

"I suppose, Admiral," Tar'coya conceded, before eyeballing the Ebon Hawk once more. I knew Tar'coya was still smarting over the news of Revan, but he was headed straight for a public dressing-down if he thought to tar the rest of her crew with the same brush. "I suppose they are."

The telling thunk of machinery cut off any further conversation and, with a faint pneumatic hiss, the entrance hatch to the banged-up Dynamic-class freighter finally lowered.

The old man standing alone at the top of the ramp was not one I recognized. He was either terribly ill or injured, I realized – or both. The dark-skinned Human was leaning heavily against the wall of the freighter, his bare chest haphazardly wrapped in a swathe of stained kolto bandages.

"Medics!" I called sharply to the assembled team waiting behind me, waving a hand towards what must be Jolee Bindo – a contact of Vandar's, and one of the many odd allies my captain had picked up along the way.

Although I knew the truth, no matter what my records would end up saying. It wasn't Carth – nor the Jedi Order's Bastila Shan – who had gathered together this unlikely band of misfits that had managed to topple the Sith Empire.

"Ach, give me a minute," the old man grumbled, but he didn't shake off the first medic who laid a guiding hand underneath his elbow. "I've got some words to say first."

The Jedi grandmaster at my side finally stirred. "Padawan Jolee," Vandar murmured in a sad voice. "A good thing, it is, to see you returned."

Jolee Bindo harrumphed, turning a sharp eye on the diminutive master. The Jedi Order's records listed the Human man as a runaway padawan, but I couldn't glean anything deferential in his glare.

"Vandar," Jolee Bindo muttered in lieu of greeting. "I see you're making assumptions as usual." The Human waved off Vandar's reply, turning instead to look hard at me.

I knew what personal loss looked like. It was all over the old man's lined face.
"Give us space," Jolee Bindo demanded in a terse voice, as the medic at his side started fussing with
the loose end of a kolto wrap. "Aye, I know you probably want a thousand reports, but we're all
grieving in there. Give us space before you lot start poking into everything."

I didn't have to turn to see my second-in-command's scowl of irritation. "Captain Onasi is a Republic
soldier-" Tar'coya began, before my hand rose to silence him.

"I understand, Jolee Bindo," I said quietly. "We have a set of private suites available for those who
do not require a stay in the infirmary. Whilst I must speak with Captain Onasi, I can ensure the rest of
you-"

"No, no," the old man spoke over me, irritably drawing a bony arm away from a medic trying to
sneak a health-sensor over his wrist. "Leave us on the 'Hawk. We're a family in there, and we've lost
four of our own today. No reason we can't darn well recover in the ship that has become home to us
all."

Four. The old man's words settled us all into sombre silence. Bastila Shan and Revan Freeflight I
already knew, but who were the other two? My mind ran quickly over Carth's last recorded manifest-
the Mandalorian general, the Cathar Jedi, that Twi'leki urchin and her Wookiee, Carth's son, of
course-and-

Not Carth, I whispered inwardly, my heart clenching as it hit home that I hadn't heard from him since
the Ebon Hawk had disappeared inside the Star Forge. Please, not Carth-

There was a shadow at the top of the ramp, behind the cluster of medics milling around Jolee Bindo.
My gaze rose, and recognition was as sweet as the first sip of Coruscant's finest brandy.

"Carth," I murmured, as the medics parted to let the man past.

I'd seen Carth at his worst, once. Shortly after Telos, when he was determined to drown in a bottle
and throw away the career that had shaped his life. Now, he looked – well, not all that much better
than then, actually-

"Your son." The words fell quickly from my lips as Carth came to a standstill some metres in front of
me. He lifted one hand, as if to salute, and then appeared to think twice. A great sigh escaped him,
and his shoulders sagged.

The man looked as awful as one could expect. His combat armour was battered and grimed with
filth, and a patchwork of bruising latticed along one side of his unshaven face. Here was a soldier
who had sacrificed everything for the Republic – more than once.

"Dustil's fine, Admiral," Carth answered, his mouth twisting as if in pain. "Well. He's alive. He
will be fine."

"Four," Vandar echoed, still staring at the durasteel underbelly of the smuggling freighter. Hairless
brows lowered over his bright blue eyes. "Sense a few sparks of Force onboard, I do."

"Ach, darn it," Jolee Bindo bit out abruptly, jerking his arm free from the medics before turning and
stomping back inside. "Give me one blasted moment!"

"Carth," I repeated, holding the man's gaze. There was no denying the grief I saw etched in the lines
of his face. Revan had come to mean something to him – that had been easy to glean in his scattered
reports, as well as more than a little concerning. When I had first commissioned him and sent him
onboard the Endar Spire, Carth Onasi had been nothing more than a feint to the Jedi Order.
A capable man I trusted and held in high regard, but a feint nonetheless. A lure to draw the Jedi's attention away from my original operative – who hadn't even made it past the Endar Spire.

A good commander knew how to play the hand she'd been dealt, but Carth Onasi had completely outperformed my expectations. I could only hope the aftermath wouldn't break him again.

"Who are your casualties, Captain?" I asked quietly. "We have heard of Bastila Shan and Jen Sahara, but who are the other two?"

The false name came easily, now. It hardly mattered if the odd rumour of truth slipped into the public arena; without official confirmation, the brief resurrection of a Sith Lord come to save the galaxy would sound like nothing more than the fanciful conspiracy theory of a cantina drunk.

I should have felt relief at Revan's death. The galaxy was a safer place without the existence of Darth Revan – redeemed or otherwise. That was what I told myself.

The sentiment was more difficult to swallow than I had expected.

"You lot coming, or what?" Jolee Bindo's voice grumbled from the entrance hatch, as he poked his head outside again. "You call yourself medics or furniture? I need two darn stretchers in here!"

"Admiral," Carth said, and this time he snapped out a rigid, precise salute. "I formally request an immediate discharge from the Republic Navy."

I blinked, as two stretchers were wheeled past us in quick succession. Perhaps I should not have been surprised – but I was. "Carth, don't be hasty-"

"I'm not being hasty, Forn," Carth cut in, his voice low and simmering with emotion. Behind him, the cluster of medics had followed the old man back inside. "My son needs me. Mission- blast it, she's just lost her best friend, and- and- look, I'm in no state..."

His words trailed away, and his jaw clenched. And I realized, then, that even the strongest of men could reach their breaking point.

This is a poor time for a debrief, no matter how short I had planned on it being.

At least Tar'coya had the grace to remain silent for once.

"Carth," I said gently, stepping forward to rest a hand on his shoulder. "I'm placing you on indefinite leave from active duty. I won't accept any sort of resignation – not today. Your irascible old friend had a good idea. Stay in the *Ebon Hawk*. I'll post sentries to ensure your privacy. We'll talk later."

Carth swallowed, his gaze holding mine. He was a good man – one of the best, really – and I would not let one such as him go easily.

He deserved a heck of a lot more than a vacation, though.

"Zaalbar." Carth's eyes darkened as he abruptly answered the question I had put to him before. "Zaalbar fell while protecting Bastila Shan. And Rosh gave his life so my son and I could escape. Too many damn losses, Forn." Carth broke off, staring blankly over the vast hangar. The muffled cheering of mechanics and pilots suddenly seemed discordantly loud. "Too many losses," he echoed in a broken whisper.

"Rosh?" Tar'coya barked in question, as I found myself frowning over the unfamiliar name. "There was no Rosh listed on any manifest."
Vandar's walking stick tapped softly on the durasteel grating as he hobbled closer.

"Sense, I did not, my old apprentice fading." Vandar murmured, his bright blue eyes pinned on Carth.

The sound of wheels on metal preceded the two medical stretchers as they raced down the *Ebon Hawk*'s ramp, this time both occupied. My puzzlement over the unknown Rosh temporarily vanished as my gaze honed in on the closest medi-bed.

"Vrook Lamar," I said in shock, and my words were echoed with Vandar's gasp.

"Wait!" Vandar called out, stepping in front of the first stretcher and effectively forcing the medics to halt. The Jedi grandmaster then lifted a three-fingered hand, and begun to hum softly. A gentle glow of golden light sprang to life around his outraised limb.

I elbowed Tar'coya in the side before he could say anything.

"Vitals stabilizing," a red-and-white clad medic muttered, as Vandar's green hands floated over Vrook Lamar's still body. Jedi healing. I had seen it before, and the esoteric miracle never failed to impress.

I had not expected to see Vrook Lamar come back alive. Oh, I'd been plenty aggrieved when he had absconded in that complete shell of stealth technology my mechanics had been itching to pull apart. But now, after everything, I found I could barely rustle up the faintest hint of indignation.

"Juhani's in a bad way, too," Carth snapped, and that drew my eye to the second medi-bed. The Cathar Jedi was lying prone, though she was at least conscious – even if her left leg was completely enclosed in a bacta-filled splint.

"I'm fine, Carth," the young Jedi whispered, as a medic injected a hypoderm into her exposed shoulder.

"Shh," the medic murmured, patting the Cathar's shoulder as her eyes slowly closed.

After a full minute of uneasy silence, Vandar's eyes opened again and he stepped back from the first stretcher. The medic behind the bed started moving again, and both invalids were wheeled past us in quick succession, as if Vandar's retreat had granted them unspoken consent.

The little green Jedi stared sadly after the disappearing medics. "Old friend," he murmured soulfully. "At peace, now, your padawan is."

"There." The word was snapped out flatly, coming from the other Jedi nearby. Jolee Bindo was still leaning against the side of the freighter, and his hard stare was levelled at Vandar. "There's your two Force-sensitives."

Tar'coya grunted in obvious discontent at my side. "Captain, as jolly as it is to see Master Vrook back onboard the *Meridus,*" he said, in a bland voice that might have been convincing to one who didn't know him. "Mind filling us in on this mysterious Rosh person?"

Carth blinked, as if shaken from a stupor. "Uh-"

"Onboard the ship, Padawan, are there no other Force-sensitives?" Vandar interrupted in a high, creaky voice. He had turned back to stare at the *Ebon Hawk* again, hobbling a step closer with his head cocked to one side. "Sense someone else, I thought-"
"Ach, quit with the titles. I'm as much a member of your Order as you're a Mandalorian, Vandar, and you darn well know it."

"Left the Jedi Order, Padawan, you never did. Much like my question, which running away from you are also."

"Wait just one damn minute," Carth said in an almost-growl, as he spun on a foot to glare at Vandar. "There's no one onboard you need to concern yourself with, Master Jedi. No member of your Order, past or present."

Jolee Bindo harrumphed. "Eh, well, consider this my darn resignation-"

The undercurrents in the conversation were no longer perplexing, they were downright annoying. "Captain-"

"Your fourth casualty," Vandar interrupted again, his ears twitching as he swivelled back to face Carth. "Of his demise, what makes you so certain?"

"His comm was destroyed," Carth said blankly. "Uh, I mean I know that's not- but that damn Sith had already taken out- stang, there's no chance we left Rosh to die, is there?" The captain looked almost desperate as he wheeled around to stare wildly at Jolee Bindo. "Jolee, did you- did you sense-"

"Ach, no," the old man muttered, rubbing a hand over his balding scalp. "I mean, I barely felt Malak fade. I ain't exactly in the sharpest of states, sonny boy-"

"Captain!" I clipped out, feeling my eyes pinch at the corners. "Explain. Now. Who is this Rosh?"

As Carth turned back to face me, Vandar's walking stick tapped loudly on the flooring again. "My old apprentice," the Jedi grandmaster murmured. "A good man, once. A good man again, perhaps."

Carth sighed heavily, bowing his head in concession. Somehow, I knew I wasn't going to appreciate his next words. "He was a late addition to our crew, Admiral. Not exactly a name I wanted posted in a holo-message."

"Yudan Rosh. Rev- Jen convinced him to help us."

There was a moment, just then, when all the background chatter seemed to wilt into silence.

Then Tar'coya erupted. "Oh, you've got to be kidding me-"

"Davis-"

"What's next? Are we going to see blasted Talvon Esan jumping up from the grave-"

"Commodore!" I snapped in a growl. Honestly, one of these days I was going to muzzle the man. "Bridge. Wait for me there. Now!"

Tar'coya's thick lips pursed as his angry gaze met mine. I could see the thwarted frustration written all over his face, and wished again that he had been kept ignorant of the more... controversial details.

Tar'coya was a good officer, but he had never learned to keep his own personal opinions in check.

The Sullustan forced out an angry sigh, following it with a tight "ma'am", and turned on a heel before stalking away. I stared after him for a moment, feeling my temper slowly subside as he departed.

Irate or not, it didn't stop Tar'coya slapping another raised hand on his way out – and the simple
gesture reminded me that today, despite everything, was still a resounding victory.

"You had no other choice, Carth," Jolee Bindo was saying softly. "There was no time to wait for Rosh, and everything suggested he had fallen in battle. He chose to save you and Dustil. Don't let guilt ruin the gift he gave you."

Slowly, I turned back around. Regardless of what Carth had withheld, I had little cause to be upset with him. No, my finger was pointing directly at that secretive, cryptic relic of the Jedi Order.

"You knew," I said, as Vandar's gaze rose to meet mine. "I demanded full disclosure, Vandar, and you damn well knew about Yudan Rosh."

The little old man sighed in defeat, the tips of his ears drooping. "From Jen Sahara's last communication, yes, I did learn of his involvement."

"I said no more secrets, Vandar." It was difficult not to hiss the words out. And as I glared at the centuries-old Jedi, all I could see was a tired scion of an order that hadn't been there when we had truly needed them.

And I was reminded, yet again, of why the Republic had so fiercely loved Revan Freeflight, once upon a time.

"You are hereby forbidden access to the bridge or the command centre, Master Jedi," I bit out. Vandar's sad blue eyes almost made me feel guilty, but damn it-the time of the Jedi Order waltzing in, upending everything, and shrouding events in unnecessary mystery had gone. For how much of the past three conflicts could be laid squarely at the foot of the Jedi Order?

That was a popular sentiment now, back in the Core – and while I didn't always hold to it myself, there were some days when I struggled to see if the good of the Jedi truly outbalanced the ramifications of their fallen.

Maybe it was time for a new age, where the Republic did not need the struts of the Jedi Order to hold firm.

"Go and see to Vrook," I ordered Vandar in a level voice. "Be there when he wakes. Stars knows he'll be inconsolable with the news of his padawan's death."

Vandar had visibly wilted in front of my eyes. He said nothing, though, merely bowed his wrinkled green head in surrender and hobbled away.

The tap of his walking stick slowly ebbed and faded into the background hub of celebration.

I looked back to Carth; I expected him to be overtly uncomfortable with the conversation, or ready with a response, but instead the man was staring bleakly into the distance.

Raw grief lurked around the corners of his down-turned mouth and in the sheen of his hollow brown gaze.

"Carth, the Republic owes you more than I can express," I said quietly. He blinked, twice, and it seemed a visible effort for him to focus on me. "Go be with your family. We'll talk in a day or two."

The galaxy knew I had enough other matters to attend to. Any formal debrief could certainly wait.

Carth nodded slowly, and my gaze roved over the deep bruising along the side of his face again. I felt my heart soften, for this man who had been through so much. "I'll send in another team of medics
to treat you and your crew onboard," I added. "Anything you need, Carth, you can request of the guards posted outside."

"Just-" His eyes closed briefly, and a tired sigh escaped him. "Just privacy for now, Forn."

"Go," I urged him with a smile, and hoped, one day, he would be able to return it.

xXx

**Eridius Talav:**
*GenoHaradan HQ Bunker II, Nar Shaddaa*

"Overseer," Tealia murmured, sliding a steaming mug of barli tea across the smooth ferracrystal desk. My normally-impassive personal assistant wore a dreamy smile, and the overhead lighting glinted against the large blue rock adorning her index finger.

A muted holo-figure sat frozen, paused mid-speech, atop the console embedded in my desk, but I took a moment first to eye Tealia over. Highly capable personal assistants were not always easy to come by; even if the throes of a budding romance had her walking around with a dazed look on her face, at least it had not impacted her performance or professionalism.

A good thing, that. I required the best staff around me, and I would have felt mildly grieved at replacing her. For, I knew well, there was only one way to leave the GenoHaradan.

"Am I right in assuming you have a personal request, Tealia?" I asked, allowing my gaze to linger on the crystal adorning her hand. From memory, index fingers meant lifelong commitment to Zabraks, and the colour blue was their symbol of romance.

"Yes, Overseer, if you have a moment-"

"Come back in an hour," I said in a curt tone, but allowed her a smile of indulgence. The paused holo-message was of far more importance than the personal entanglement of my secretary, no matter how competent she was. Still, I could not quite suppress a faint pang of sentimentality. After all, it had been some time since I'd overseen a GenoHaradan wedding.

Ajax Zarr was a lucky Zabrak. I would ensure he realized that.

"We shall talk in an hour," I repeated, gentling my voice. "The GenoHaradan are a family, Tealia, and we look after our own."

Tealia nodded in quick compliance, smiling sweetly as she departed, and I resigned myself to rifling through our organization's sanctioned list of honeymoon retreats later that afternoon.

Every word I said was true. A posting within the GenoHaradan was for life, but we ensured our staff – all of them – were well-rewarded for their efforts. If Tealia desired the hand of one of our own, then I had no qualms about making it so.

And Ajax Zarr was one of our top data analysts. Perhaps he did deserve her. In fact, he was the one who'd landed the scoop on Revan Freeflight-

--which brought me right back to the true matter of importance. As the door quietly closed behind Tealia's retreating back, I leaned forward to unmute the comm.

The frozen blue-edged figure above the data console returned to real-time.
"You are certain, then," I said, continuing our conversation as if it had never been interrupted.

Rulan Prolik had taken on the form of a well-built Rodian, clad in a busk-leather armour that strained around the girth of his musculature. He was lounging back in the cockpit of a customized Aurek snub he'd already informed me once belonged to the upper echelons of the Sith Empire.

Truly, I had never doubted the man's usefulness or capability. Otherwise Rulan Prolik would have long gone the way of all my other predecessors.

::As far as I can be, without visibly checking Revan's corpse myself.::

I felt my fingers tapping, and immediately quelled the telling sign of irritation. "A holo-still of her limp body and an intercepted comm-report to the Republic does not guarantee death, Rulan. Not when there is already a historical precedent of Revan Freeflight surviving against all odds."

The shapeshifter shrugged. Sometimes, I found his apparent apathy a trifle abrading, mostly because I had never seen the man truly rattled.

::Your agents amongst the Republic ranks::

"Report the Jedi Padawan Jen Sahara as one of the fallen." I finished, ending the sentence with a dismissive snort. "They've listed her as the apprentice of Bastila Shan, farcical as that sounds. Apparently, Jen Sahara's death spurred Bastila Shan on to confront Malak before they slew each other in a grand lightsaber duel. I'll give the Republic this: they know how to spin a tale of tragic heroism."

::Apprentice:: Rulan echoed, allowing a smile of amusement to curve his thin green lips, but offering no other comment on the ridiculous marketing slant. ::I can give you no more certainty than the Republic, Eridius. If Revan was still alive when I departed the Star Forge, chances are the destruction of the space station took her out.::

"Hmm." I liked chances as little as Rulan did. Still, my ears seeded deep within both Republic and Jedi communications told me that everyone of import believed Revan Freeflight – and Malak Devari – had come to a final end. "Did you find anything of consequence?"

Rulan knew what I was really asking. What had Revan Freeflight discovered after Malachor? What threat had convinced her to launch an assault against the galactic federation she had spent a lifetime defending? What was her true reason for seeking out an alliance with the GenoHaradan as Dark Lord of the Sith?

I had never met Darth Revan in person. The Third Overseer had... as had the Fourth. At that time our organization took her demands seriously. Although, honestly, Overseer Vorn had always been a bit of an idiot.

::I failed to slice into the core databanks of the Star Forge:: Rulan admitted, leaning back into the pilot's bucket seat. The comm's geolocation was masked, and all I knew about Rulan's current position was that he was floating around somewhere in the Outer Rim Territories. ::I did manage to acquire some intriguing tech... like the cloaking device embedded in this old starfighter::

"Yes." I allowed myself a chuckle, thinking on the stealth-enabled snub the Republic had so briefly captured before allowing a robe to waltz away with it. "I will organize a rendezvous point for one of my agents to collect it from you. But back to my query-"

::In short, no. If the Star Forge held answers they are beyond us now. Although, frankly, I doubt the Darth Revan of old would carelessly leave records regarding her motivations within such an
Considering how difficult it had been to track down the location of the Star Forge, I would have hardly labelled the Rakatan relic as obvious. Still, I understood Rulan's meaning. Darth Revan had been cautious enough with her strategic objectives that any crumbs left behind would have been hidden very carefully.

"Which leaves us right back to where we started," I mused. Ensuring the stability of the galaxy. Supporting the Republic – for now.

"Yes," I agreed. While also keeping one eye fixed firmly on the Unknown Regions. From a distance, of course. For a journey into uncharted space meant almost-certain death for the unprepared. Whatever Revan had sought, she must have had knowledge of her destination beforehand.

My eyes narrowed. When Darth Revan exploded onto the galactic scene, the GenoHaradan had first scrabbled to circumvent her invasion, and then later, allied to bolster her attack vectors. And then, when she fell in the skies above Deralia... we turned back. Back to supporting the faltering Republic.

The importance of whittling out her secrets had never escaped me and now, with the war ending, I might just be able to allocate the resources required for a closer look. And since the GenoHaradan did not know where Revan had once tread, perhaps we needed to focus on where she had first learned of the threat that had turned her.

"Malachor," I said softly, my mind buzzing.

Rulan knew better than to question the obvious; he merely remained still and silent as he watched me through the comm.

"Malachor V was more than simply an end to the Mandalorian Wars," I continued, as my fingers begin to tap once more. "Revan found something at that cataclysmic battle. Every commander who returned to the Core expected Revan's fleet to be right behind them. Even the missive stating her forces were tied up chasing remnants of the Mandalorian clans came weeks after Malachor."

Rulan's expression didn't change from his standard impassivity. ::Malachor V is a ruin. Do you think secrets rest atop its crippled surface?:

"Maybe," I said slowly. "Or maybe we need to search for other survivors who may know some inkling of the truth."

His eyes narrowed. A telling sign, that, and I knew he was speculating along the same lines as I.

::All of Revan's old allies are long dead. Apart from two...::

"Yes," I concurred, feeling my lips curve. "Two who were at the centre of Malachor V. Two who walked away, lauded as galactic heroes but quietly exiled from their own order. Two, left with none of the power they once commanded."

The corner of Rulan's thin mouth twitched as he leaned closer to the holo-com. ::After all these years, Eridius, do you really expect either Meetra Surik or Xaset Terep to still be alive?:

"Who knows?" I replied with an easy shrug. "But surely it cannot hurt to look."
"So," Ordo said by way of greeting as I stepped into the common room. "How'd your list of demands go?"

Mission was perched on one of the benches, a pack of pazaak cards stacked neatly on the table in front of her. I could tell at a glance that Dustil had been trying – and failing – to coerce her into a game.

I placed the pot of soup I'd been carrying down on the table with a sigh, catching my son's gaze and motioning to the shelf stacked high with plasteel bowls.

"Dish up, would you Dustil?" I asked, before taking a seat next to Mission.

She didn't say a word in greeting.

We'd been here near a week, now. The 'Hawk was quiet; quiet, with the ghosts of our fallen. Every time I woke it was to a crushing sense of loss. The word beautiful would rest on my lips, never to be spoken, as I was forced to accept that the future I had dreamed of would never be more than just a dream.

Revan hadn't believed in that future, but I had dared to.

Revan. Bastila. Zaalbar. Stang, even Rosh – sometimes, my grief was rocked by a furious surge of injustice that life could dare do this to me a second time.

And then I would see my son, hovering so patiently around the girl who was almost a daughter to me. Dustil was coping better than the rest of us, and I couldn't deny that his solicitude over Mission seemed to be bringing out the best in him.

My son was growing into a man I was proud of.

I blinked, and turned to answer Ordo instead. "Well, I got rid of Psycho-Droid. Don't expect we'll be seeing him again."

Ordo's mouth tightened. He'd been the only one to disagree on that count, but hadn't cared enough to kick up too much of a fuss about it. The rest of us knew that HK-47 – even in pieces – was dangerous. If any information of note still simmered in his databanks, then as far as I was concerned, Republic Intel could have at him.

I sighed, and held Ordo's stony gaze. "Forn agreed to pretty much everything else. Well, except paying you for the Ebon Hawk."

Ordo snorted, face relaxing, as he took a seat opposite me and lifted his boots onto the table. I didn't have the energy to snap at him.

"This ship is mine, fair and square," he muttered, but he didn't sound half as fierce as he had back on Tatooine. I had the distinct feeling that Ordo was simply looking for something to argue over. "Don't see why your Republic think they can go and claim it as theirs."

"Technically you stole it, Ordo," I said, nodding gratefully to Dustil as he ladled noodla soup from the large pot into a trio of bowls.
Forn had been as good as her word: the soldiers left us alone, the medics had patched us up, and the kitchens of the Meridus supplied fresh food on demand.

I didn't feel much like physical comforts, these days – but I wasn't going to turn down a break from the onboard synthesizer, either.

"Piracy is a perfectly legal form of acquisition in many sectors-"

"Not in Taris airspace, last I heard," I added drily. For all my gloom, there was a shallow part of me looking forward to Ordo's reaction when he heard Forn had signed ownership of the Ebon Hawk solely over to me.

The Mandalorian shrugged. "Well, I was Davik's third-in-command. Killing him and Calo grants me the rights to their spoils."

I raised one brow in hollow amusement. The hard ball of grief still sat, lodged and tight in my gut, but there was something almost cathartic about such a normal conversation. "Didn't Juhani get the killing blow on Nord?"

Ordo snorted again, but whatever he was planning to retort with was interrupted by Teethree, wheeling in from the cockpit and bleeping forth a long screed of Binary.

"Jolee's come back," Mission whispered, raising her head briefly. "Tee's opened the hatch."

We all turned, ebbing into silence as the thud of footsteps became audible. The hatch opened-

"Juhani," Mission said in surprise, her light brown eyes sparking faintly in welcome.

The Cathar was seated in a med-chair, a robotic leg raised aloft as Jolee slowly pushed her inside.

"Hello," Juhani greeted, a little awkwardly, as she parked up near the edge of the table. Somewhere, the Cathar had picked up a clean set of brown Jedi robes. Her tawny gaze danced over us all before resting soulfully on Mission.

"Figured the lot of us would do better together," Jolee muttered, sliding onto the bench next to me. "And since those robed idiots from Dantooine decided to do a bunk-"

"Jolee," Juhani intervened, all hesitance forgotten as she frowned in disapproval at the old man.

"Eh, it's true, isn't it?" Jolee waggled his eyebrows, seemingly unconcerned. "I half expected a lecture from Vrook – now there's a sent who was an old grouch from birth – but I didn't even get a chance to talk to the man-"

"The Jedi Masters have left?" I jumped in, my eyes shooting straight to Dustil.

I'd been concerned – more than concerned – about what Vandar Tokare would do if he stumbled over my son. There'd been a time, back on Kashyyyk, when I'd thought maybe the Jedi Order was the best place for him, but now-

Dustil was adamant he wouldn't go there. It seemed Korriban had bred distrust of the Order in him so deep he almost burned with it at times- and while I knew he was being irrational, I also knew I owed it my son to let him make his own decisions.

"Aye," Jolee grunted in assent. I glanced his way to see the old man also eyeballing Dustil. "So you can quit hiding, lad, at least until we get to Coruscant."
I hadn't realized quite how tense Dustil was until he relaxed.

"That's what you've been doing?" I asked quietly. "Hiding, in the Force?"

I was learning. Slowly, slowly, about the strange and amazing gifts my son had somehow acquired along the way. And each small bit of knowledge was accompanied with the sharp pang that it could've been Revan explaining these things to me.

"Yeah." Dustil's voice was muffled as he turned around to grab another pair of bowls. "Jolee gave me a heads-up when we landed."

Juhani let out an uncharacteristic huff, shooting a glare at Jolee before turning to Dustil with a softer expression. "The Jedi Order can help you, Dustil," she said. "The Force is not something to be frightened of-"

"I spent four frakking years in a damn Sith Academy!" Dustil snapped, his eyes darkening, and I felt my heart clench. "You seriously think I'm scared of the frakking-"

Ordo's fist slammed down hard on the table, rattling the bowls as his boots thumped to the ground. He half came to his feet, leaning over to glare at everyone in turn. "Stop," Ordo growled, eyes as hard as granite. "Kittycat, keep your nose out. Sithkid, act like the man you are instead of a squalling ik'aad. I'll kriffing knock your heads together if this continues."

We all dealt with grief in our own way. Canderous seemed the least affected – except in those moments when his temper snapped.

The silence that stretched out after his words was awkward, and I felt the ghosts stir again. Had Bastila been here, no doubt she would've taken Juhani's side with a prim reminder about just who the experts in the Force were - possibly cementing her argument with a pointed remark in my direction regarding parental duty.

But Bastila had never even had the chance to meet Dustil.

Zaalbar might've rumbled something wise or appeasing – not that my abysmal Shyriiwook had ever meant I could understand him properly. Rosh would've stayed silent, leaning against the wall, looking vaguely bored if he deigned to show any emotion whatsoever. And Revan-

I couldn't even begin to guess. Some sassy comment about everyone taking themselves too seriously, perhaps.

I sighed, and leaned forward to mechanically shovel a spoonful of hot soup into my mouth.

"You know you can't hide from them forever, right, sonny boy?" Jolee was the first to break the silence, raising a bushy eyebrow at Dustil as if Ordo had never lashed out at all.

Dustil was still scowling as he slouched down next to Mission, whose head was bowed back over her meal. "You're the one who told me to-"

Jolee harrumphed. "Aye, well, figured you needed some breathing space. But we're headed to Coruscant, and that place is chock-full of Jedi. You should think about what you're gonna do when they approach you, lad, because sooner or later they will."

Ordo had relaxed, again, once more shoving his dirty boots on the table. I stared at them, hard, briefly considering the merits of a pointless dustup.
"What d'ya think that bunch of *hu'tuun* robes can do, old man?" Ordo said dismissively, one hand scratching idly at his unshaven jaw. "I'd like to see them try and wrest away the son of the Republic's golden hero in the middle of their kriifing victory parade."

"Hero," I said blankly. "Uh, say what?"

"Heh, suppose you've got a point," Jolee chuckled. "And Dustil is well beyond the age they usually admit students, but then I don't reckon they'll be ignoring a Sith-trained kid wandering around with a shiny medal hung about his neck."

Ordo turned to face me with a lazy grin that didn't reach his eyes. "Haven't you been listening to what the grunts outside this ship are saying, Onasi? We're all heroes of the Republic, now. Even being Mando'ade doesn't stop your women throwing themselves at me-"

"Canderous," Juhani hissed. "Show some decorum."

"I don't want a stupid medal." Mission's voice was no louder than a whisper, but we all stuttered into silence at the sound of it. "And I don't want to go to stupid Coruscant."

She was staring down at the table again. Her lekku trailed limply down her back, as if all the fire in her soul had been quenched. I rested one hand lightly on her shoulder, and felt as useless as a tach caught in a scent trap.

The *Meridus* had been in hyperspace for near a week, while we remained safely docked in the hangar. The remaining Republic fleet was headed to the Core, where Forn had flat-out ordered me – and my crew, by proxy – to attend a damn medal ceremony being overseen by the Senate themselves.

I didn't think any of us particularly felt like being lauded as heroes, even if it did get Ordo laid along the way.

So far, I'd only left the confines of the *Hawk* for Forn's compulsory debriefs, but as far as I knew Mission hadn't budged from the ship at all. Mission – the one who'd snuck out pretty much everywhere we'd gone.

She hadn't said anything about our destination until now – stang, she'd barely said a word at all – and I had no idea how to reach her. None. Without Zaalbar, without Revan, she'd completely retreated into no more than a wraith-like facsimile of the ebullient girl that had been the heart of our crew.

"The medal ceremony isn't for us, not really," I said softly, feeling her shoulders shake beneath my palm. "It's for everyone else, everyone who's had to live with war for so long-"

"It won't bring Jen back," she mumbled, dropping her head into her hands. "It won't bring Big Z back."

"No," Ordo said, his voice gruff. Damn if his eyes weren't sharp with emotion as he stared at her bent head. "That's only something we can do, *ad'ika*. We tell their stories. Their memory lives on through us."

"Do you know how the Wookiees mourn, lass?" Jolee asked. Mission didn't lift her head, but her shoulders stilled. She was listening, at least. "Much like Mandalorians, the Wookiees share tales of their lost. They celebrate the lives that have gone. They eat a lot, of course, and howl a bit."

"No one knew Revan as we did," Juhani added softly. "No matter her past, we are the ones who saw what she became. Bastila, too. And I do not think anyone on Kashyyyk can claim to have known
"I lost someone," Dustil said, hard and abrupt, his eyes almost black as he, too, stared at Mission's bent head. "Someone on Korriban. Mex and I- we never really spoke of her after. She- but- I think..." he trailed off, uselessly, before catching my gaze. I hated the almost-desperate look in his eyes, the more so because I understood it all too well.

After Telos, I never mentioned Morgana or Dustil to anyone. The grief sat like acid in my soul, as I tried to smother it with whiskey first, and when that failed, the ongoing demands of war. Only after Revan stormed into my life, and Dustil was returned to me, did it somehow became possible to even think Morgana's name again.

"I'm going to Kashyyyk." Mission's head jerked up, tear-tracks glistening almost proudly down her pale blue face. "I never met Big Z's dad. He should hear what happened from us."

My breath caught as the idea sparked in my head. It'd be possible- Forn had promised me a direct trip to Telos after I attended her blasted ceremony, as well as immunity for Dustil, adoption for Mission, not to mention the 'Hawk, and a lengthy leave of absence I was still considering turning into that resignation I'd first thrown at her-

We could fit in a trip to Kashyyyk. With the way things were, Forn didn't seem willing to deny me much of anything.

"We could all go," I said slowly, looking first to Juhani and then Ordo. He met my gaze steadily. "After Coruscant, we could take the 'Hawk and make one last trip together."

"Canderous?" Mission asked in a tiny voice.

He gave her a short, sharp nod. "I'm headed back to my home, ad'ika, you know that. But if I'm gonna let the kriffing Republic adorn my neck with gold, first, then I've certainly got time to honour Carpet."

It had surprised me, earlier, when Ordo agreed to visit the Core. I wasn't sure if receiving a medal from our side would be any sort of trophy to a Mandalorian war general, or if he was simply loathe to leave Mission so soon.

We all clustered around her, I realized suddenly. As if Mission's grief was the glue still binding us together.

"I, too, would like to visit Kashyyyk one last time," Juhani added. "Freyyr is an honourable Wookiee, and Mission is correct. He deserves to hear his son's story from us."

Jolee slanted a look sideways at her. "Ain't you going to be tied up with the Order, lass?"

"I belong to Dantooine, Jolee, not Coruscant. Vandar reminded me of as much before he left." The Cathar's face tightened, but her eyes shone with resolution. "I shall make my way back to the Enclave after I pay my respects."

The conversation was devolving into leave-takings, I realized, and my heart clenched again. Without Revan, it sometimes felt like the crew had already broken up. But there was one matter of import I hadn't raised yet- everyone's grief was still too raw to think about the future-

"Mission." I cleared my throat awkwardly, pressing down on her shoulder to gain the girl's attention. Slowly, her head raised to meet my gaze. "Will you, uh, will you come back to Telos with us? With me and Dustil? I'll have lodgings there, and I'm on leave, and there'll be space for you..."
I trailed off, unable or uncertain what words I really wanted to say. *Stay with us. Be part of our family. Let me look after you, as much as you'll let me-*

Mission's light brown eyes widened, shining with emotion. But she didn't say anything.

"I can, uh, adopt you- like as a legal guardian, I mean." My words stuttered, sounding stupid and heavy-handed even to my ears. "I don't know what you want to do with your life, Mission, but I can offer you a home while you figure that out. You, and Dustil, and me."

She blinked, as if dumbstruck, and I was just *waiting* for blasted Ordo to say something scathing-

"It'd mean a lot to me. And- and-" I glanced around wildly, my gaze resting on old man Bindo who was staring at me, narrow-eyed, as if in deep concentration. "Jolee, you could join us too. I mean, it'd be good for Dustil to learn from someone other than a psychopathic Sith headmaster-"

"Dad!"

Jolee's bushy brows shot upwards in surprise. "Now wait just a minute-"

"That ain't a bad idea, Onasi." Ordo added, as he finally broke into the conversation. "Someone should keep your kid's head knocked on straight-"

"Hey!" Dustil all but yelped. "What the frakk would you know-"

"Jolee, that is a dangerous idea and you know it." Juhani's voice was tight as she leaned forward in her med-chair. The tips of her ears twitched before flattening against the side of her head. "Proper training can only come from the doctrines of the Jedi Order. Do not even consider-"

The sound of Ordo's boots scraping along the table muffled the last of Juhani's impassioned invective. He snorted, eyeing over Dustil in disparagement. "What I know is that you kept losing your kriffing head on Lehon, Sithkid. A true warrior trains both his mind *and* body."

"Call me an irascible grouch, if you will," Jolee was grumbling. "But whenever a darn Jedi tells me not to do something, I automatically start considering it."

"Jolee Bindo-"

"I know, I know!" He flapped a hand at Juhani and, surprisingly, it ebbed the Cathar back into silence. With a heavy sigh, the old man turned to stare hard at me. "Thing is, I've trained someone before and made a right royal mess of it. Not the sort of thing I care to repeat."

There was something in his words – a break in his voice, a crackle of emotion – that effectively killed the conversation. I had no idea who was in Jolee's past, but I could tell the experience haunted him.

"Dustil ain't your wife, Jolee," Mission said softly. "He's already *been* trained. And I reckon you ain't the person you were back then, either."

Wife? *Wife?* My gaze swung back to Mission in shock. It shouldn't be surprising that Mission had been a part of all the confidences that went on in this ship, but to think that the old man had once been married, and then tried training his wife in the Force-

*She went dark. Or died. Or both.* I felt hollow and drained, again, as I realized that Jolee, of all people, might understand my grief the best.
"Well, I'll have some time to think on it, what with Coruscant and Kashyyyk on the table first," Jolee muttered. "Ach, don't start again, Cathar. I'll make my own decision clear of what you or your Order think about it. Anyway, seems to me that no one's bothered to ask Sithkid what he wants, anyway."

All eyes turned to my son. He blinked, shuffling away from Mission, running one hand awkwardly through his hair. "Uh," he began. "I, um, I guess it'd be okay to have you around?"

"Bah, don't throw a party on my account, Sithkid."

I fought back an irritated urge to snap at Jolee for the overused moniker even as Dustil's eyes narrowed. "How about you stop calling me that, old man, or I'll start naming you my frakking Jedi master."

To my surprise, Jolee erupted into a surprisingly deep belly laugh, one hand thumping at his chest. Even Mission cracked a smile. "Alright, alright, I know when I'm beat. Guess I'll just have to come up with something better."

"Ad'ika," Ordo cut in. He was leaning back, his arms folded behind his neck with his legs stretched out covering the end of the table. He was relaxed, casual even, like he didn't have a care in the world – apart from the intent gleam in his eyes. "You haven't answered Onasi."

The hitch in Mission's breathing was audible; she glanced between Ordo and me, eyes wide and glistening even as her forehead bunched into furrows of consternation. Up until now, Mission had always followed Zaalbar – an outside observer might've considered her the leader of the pair, but it'd been the Wookiee who'd pledged himself to Revan. Mission had left her only home with barely a protest just to be with him-

*She imagined a future with Zaalbar. Or with Revan, if Zaalbar returned to Kashyyyk. And now...*  
The heart-breaking emotion on Mission's face as she stared at Ordo was plain to see. I didn't know how such a bond had sprung up between sentients so different, but there it was.

I knew the girl cared for me as well. Maybe, just maybe, it was Mission's big heart that might just have her coming out whole on the other side of all this mess.

"I'd take you with me, ad'ika, if I wasn't going back to the clans," Ordo said gruffly. "But I am. Onasi can give you a home, and even I'll admit he's an alright sort."

Mission breathed out hard through her nose, a mulish expression slowly forming on her young face. "Sheesh, Canderous, don't get all sappy on me. 'Sides, I'd make an awesome Mandalorian."

Something eased in my heart, to see that faint spark of her cheek bubble back to the surface. Ordo barked a laugh, leaning back, the side of his wide mouth twitching. "Yeah, well, just because you would, ad'ika, doesn't mean you should."

"Maybe." Mission shrugged, darting a look sideways at me. "Thanks, Carth. It means a lot to me that you'd offer. I'll- I'll think about it, okay?"

"Okay." I cleared my throat, looking away from her to scan around the room. My gaze dropped on Ordo's dirt-encrusted boots, which had started to leave tracks of grime on the far end of the table. "I suppose the only thing I have left to report is that Admiral Dodonna has signed ownership of the *Ebon Hawk* over to me."

Ordo choked in surprise, and I felt the beginnings of a grin as I took in his expression of disbelief. "So, Ordo, get your damn boots off my table."
Yuthura Ban:  
Hyperspace, approaching Nar Shaddaa

The seventh galactic media-stream I switched to headlined the same bulletin.

Lord Malak is dead. The Sith Empire has fallen.

I leaned forward to turn off the console, and tried to pretend my hands were not shaking.

A true Sith knew how to grasp opportunity. As long as one survived, the ashes of defeat were nothing more than a setback. A chance, for the clever and the strong, to strive for a future victory.

But I was not a true Sith anymore. I wasn't entirely sure I ever had been.

Should I rejoice, at our liberation? No longer need I keep an eye at our back in case of Lord Malak's wrath. Or do I grieve instead, at the deaths of those once on my side?

I did not know what to feel. As momentous as the news was, I had a more personal matter concerning me. Surprisingly, even the Lord of the Sith's downfall did not supersede that for importance.

I rose silently, before striding from our shuttle's cargo hold and slipping into the sole living quarters. The room stank of sweat, undercut with the faint tang of something sweet I did not immediately recognize.

I frowned. "Mekel. Wake up."

The naked man sprawled on the bed face-down did not move. My fingers twitched, and a tight rope of Force lashed out, licking against his back.

His howl was loud, immediate, and vaguely satisfying. "Frakk!" he yelled, twisting around to jack-knife into a seated position. "Yuthura, what the actual frakk?"

Mekel's jet-black hair was rumpled and messy, and his jaw shadowed with bristle. One of the things I liked least about Humans were their overactive follicle glands. Mekel had never dared to forego daily presentation back on Korriban.

"Get dressed," I snapped. "You should have been awake hours ago."

He slumped to the side instead, glaring at me balefully. His forehead glistened, his shoulders sagged, and his blue eyes were glassy and unfocused-

"Are you ill?" I was striding forward already, at his side, raising a hand to touch his brow. Through the Force, I could sense his heartbeat racing unevenly. "What is wrong with you?"

"Is that a frakking joke?" Mekel twitched away, and once more I smelled that sickly aroma. Like candied vox cut through with kolto. "Because it's about as funny as a fart in a flight suit."

He may have had reason to snap at that comment, but I could recognize a diversion when I heard one. "You didn't," I said, hearing my voice ice over. Mekel rolled away from me, but even when he had the Force his speed could never match mine.

I leaped forward, throwing him back against the hard mattress and pinning him down by his shoulders. I knew that scent now, and my heart churned with a blend of distaste and despair.
Dark blue eyes glared up at me, the pupils abnormally large. "You know, there's better ways to wake me up-"

"Glitterstim." I said flatly. His biceps tensed beneath my palms. "You imbecile."

Mekel's eyes dropped closed as he sagged back into the bedding. "Nothing else was bleeding working, was it?" he muttered. "Days of you rifling through my frakking mind-"

"Shavit, Mekel, have I taught you nothing of patience?"

It had been easy to ignore the vast chasm of years between us, back on the Academy. Survival and strength ruled there, and no one blinked twice at the chosen lover of a Sith Master, even if he was two decades younger and a different species to boot.

But things... things were different between us, now.

Even before Mekel had lost the Force, our relationship had been changing. The structure of master and apprentice had shifted the moment we left Korriban. Now, at times, it felt like we were little more than companions forced together by circumstance.

"I only took half a derm. Look- maybe I am sick." He scowled, shifting beneath me, and with a cut-off sigh I moved away from him. "There are some diseases that eat the Force out of you, right?"

"Not without additional symptoms." We had already spoken of this. I had no explanation for Mekel's sudden collapse in a cantina, nor why his power had been completely gutted when he awoke. All I knew was what my senses told me: the Force flickered in him as muted and weak as any other null in the galaxy.

"Spice enhances the mind, Yuthura. It's not a frakking bad idea, not really-"

"Lord Malak is dead." Sometimes, with Mekel, the best approach was to cut straight through his banthacrap. "The Sith Empire is no more."

"Wha-" Mekel blinked, his jaw going slack. He sat upright again, his gaze roaming my face. "You're serious. Tits on a bantha, you're actually serious."

"I am," I said in a low voice. "Mekel, there is one avenue of assistance that we could... consider."

"Frakk," he muttered, barely hearing me. "Never thought I'd see the bleeding day. Dead! Who skewered the bast- wait, wait, Dee, have you heard anything of Dee-"

"Alive." My voice tightened. I had never thought overly much of that boy, but it certainly seemed the entire galaxy did now, if the holonet headlines were anything to go by. "And on Coruscant, apparently."

A dead woman whispered in my mind- I nudged Thalia towards Coruscant. It's a valid option-

Mekel's gaze was still clouded over, but his forehead bunched in thought. "We're, what? Fifteen days out from the Core?"

"We shall reach Nar Shaddaa in less than one sleep cycle. A jump to Coruscant from there is another sixteen. We may catch Dustil if we travel immediately, Mekel."

If there was one sent who might draw Mekel, it was Uthar's old bootlicker. Whether Dustil was still on the planet when we arrived mattered little; for by then, we'd be close enough to a hive of Jedi that
I could strong-arm Mekel there if I needed to.

"You're don't give a womp rat's arse about Dee." Mekel's eyes had narrowed. At times, I forgot he was quicker than he let on. "Coruscant means the bloody Jedi. Frakk, Yuthura, you'd risk going to them?"

"This is a Force-related matter, Mekel. We require a Force expert's prognosis. According to the holonews, there are no Dark Jedi of note still alive to consult." But even if there were, trusting a fellow Sith with the well-being of my lover was a hard ask. "That leaves us with the Jedi Order. You know my opinion on them, but I do consider that pack of antiquated cowards a step up from resorting to glitterstim."

Mekel snorted, swinging his legs over the edge of the bed, before turning back to pin me with a look. "Maybe they're a better choice. Doubt they'll be as much fun, though."

I felt my lips pursing. "Get up," I ordered again, before turning my back on him and standing up from the bed. "If we are going to face the Jedi on Coruscant, we need to research exactly what sort of situation we shall be walking into."

I left the room, feeling Mekel's hard stare boring into my back. I'd never asked his opinion on whether we should approach the Jedi, for my own mind had always been firmly fixed against the Order.

Until Mekel had lost the most important part of himself.

* I do not trust the Jedi Order. I do not like the Jedi Order. But I would be a blind fool not to admit they might have something to offer Mekel... and perhaps to me, as well. *

Twice, that notorious Jen Sahara had tried to coerce me toward Coruscant and the Jedi. It seemed oddly ironic that – now the holonets proclaimed her dead – I would finally end up travelling there.

xXx

**Kavar Kira:**

*Stadium of Triumph, Galactic City, Coruscant*

Bright banners of celebration snapped in the breeze, slashes of colour that demarcated the grey sides of scrapers bordering the massive stadium. The air glinted with hundreds of hovering media-cams, and buzzed with the thousands of sentient beings all gathered together in one place.

"...my pleasure to present the highest honour the Republic can bestow..."

At the far end of the Stadium of Triumph, a raised dais was bedecked in Republic orange-and-black. Senate dignitaries stood there addressing the crowd and proudly presenting the champions of the Republic, the heroes of the Star Forge – the survivors of Revan Freeflight's last gasp at atonement.

"...to the farthest reaches of the Outer Rim, you will be known as the saviours of..."

I could barely make out the faces of the Republic's new heroes, but the amplified voice of Senator Akku rolled crisp and clear over the crowds who had been admitted to view the medal ceremony in person.

Billions more, I knew, would be watching it streamed live on their holo-screens.

I repressed a sigh, quelling the urge to move restlessly on my feet. The Jedi Order's position so far
from the front was yet another sign of our falling favour. The decline of our influence sat heavy in my soul, sharp with recrimination, all the worse because there seemed no obvious way to halt or reverse it.

"A Jedi is more than the Order, Kavar," Zez-Kai murmured.

I slanted a look sideways at my old friend. Worry had etched deep lines into his brow, but Zez-Kai Ell stood firm, facing the dais solemnly, clad in neat brown robes and exuding the air of a Jedi Master at peace with the galaxy.

He had always been more proficient than me at pretending.

"Atris is doing what she can to preserve our status," I admitted grudgingly.

That was enough to startle Zez, and maybe that was why I'd said it. My old friend's composure slipped, his mouth dropping slightly ajar as he turned to stare at me in disbelief. He cleared his throat. "That is... very charitable of you, Kavar."

"I'm trying," I muttered, turning back to face the front.

I was. Atris had been an idiot for releasing the news of Revan to the Senate the way she had, particularly without any input from the High Council, but she remained our only link to the inner circle of government, the only Jedi Master still allowed within the sanctum of the Senate's debating chambers.

Much as it galled me, I knew it was pointless to do anything other than support her efforts.

Currently, Master Atris Surik was standing still on the dais, dressed up in her usual frigid finery, tight-faced and expressionless. Atris was there to accept the Cross of Glory on behalf of the fallen members of our Order, as the chosen Jedi representative to the Senate.

Of course, we hadn't been the ones to actually appoint our own damn representative.

"Atris will be angling for Grandmaster, soon." The moment the comment left my lips I almost winced at how childish it sounded – regardless of the inherent truth in the statement. Grandmasters were scarce, and limited to no more than one per Enclave. Coruscant had been without a grandmaster since the close of the Mandalorian Wars.

"The Senate may have recommended her ascension," Zez admitted, and I fought to rein in an instinctual scowl at his confession. Zez-Kai had always played peacemaker between us, and I knew Atris responded well to his graciousness. "But remember, Kavar, that while the Senate may select our ambassador, only the High Council can appoint a grandmaster."

There was a note of reproach in his words, and grudgingly I could admit the remark had been beneath me. Grandmaster or not, Atris still held to the doctrines of the Order – in her own skewed, blinkered way.

"Speaking of grandmasters," I murmured, eyeing over the Republic brass and senate politicians flanking the heroes on the ceremonial platform. "Vandar is conspicuous with his absence."

"Hmm," Zez hummed, his gaze shifting to a nearby holo-board that had zoomed in on the faces of the Ebon Hawk crew. I could see a blue-skinned Twi'lek – no more than a girl, really – stare sullenly at the crowd before a Human boy whispered in her ear and brought a quick grin to her face. "The given story is that Master Vandar departed for Dantooine to ensure Master Vrook made a full recovery. I suspect we shall hear more at the next High Council meeting."
There was something in Zez's tone... a lilt of curiosity, perhaps, that led me to believe my old friend knew more than he was letting on.

I frowned. "Vrook would have been just as well taken care of on a Republic dreadnought." My gaze drew back to Zez, and he turned to face me, almost unwittingly. I could feel my eyes narrowing. "Zez, what have you heard?"

The corner of his mouth twitched, and I knew then that Zez had always planned to divulge whatever nugget of information he was about to slip forth. "Senator Akku informed Atris in no uncertain terms that the Jedi Order are not permitted to harbour or exonerate war criminals from Republic justice. The Dantooine enclave was specifically mentioned. Apparently, there is suspicion amongst the Republic brass – Admiral Dodonna, to be precise – that Vandar's hasty departure may have had to do with one of his old padawans."

I felt my breath escape me in a rush. The Republic had released one official transcript of the Star Forge mission thus far, and it had openly described the late involvement of Yudan Rosh on our side – while also making it abundantly clear that a last-minute change of heart could hardly undo the damage he had inflicted beneath the banners of both Revan and Malak.

But the party-line was that Yudan Rosh had met his death onboard the Star Forge.

Zez met my gaze carefully. "Vandar would have sensed the death of his old padawan. If it's true... if Yudan Rosh really found the strength to turn back to the light and still lives... he will not find the Dantooine Enclave the haven it once was."

I could feel my eyes narrowing, as I glanced back to the holo-board. The stuffy senator was stretching high on his toes in an awkward attempt to dangle a medal around the neck of an armoured man who refused to bend. "You think there will be eyes on Dantooine soil," I murmured.

Zez didn't answer. He didn't have to.

The Jedi Order had always been a sanctuary for the lost, but there was no denying our power to offer that sanctuary had been doomed by generations of Jedi-trained villains.

I cleared my throat as the senator stepped away from the mercenary. "Pay attention," I muttered, more to distract myself than anything else. "Atris is about to receive her medals."

"...recognition of her service to the Republic and acts of selfless heroism to safeguard the galaxy from the Sith Empire, the Jedi Order has agreed to posthumously promote Jedi Bastila Shan to the full rank of Jedi Knight..."

The holo-board focused on Atris as she accepted a beribboned box enclosing the medal awarded in the name of Bastila Shan. Atris kept her expression impassive, but there was a pinched look about her eyes as the crowd cheered and the senator retrieved a second box.

"Atris is holding up well," Zez commented, voice ebbing back into neutrality, as he folded his hands neatly into the front of his robes. "This cannot be easy for her either."

"...Padawan Jen Sahara, the apprentice of Jedi Knight Bastila Shan..."

"Oh, no, Zez, you are not going to ruin my only enjoyment today with a surge of sympathy for Atris Surik," I drawled. Zez glanced at me quizzically, but I kept my eyes fixed on the stern countenance of Atris as she stepped forward to collect the second medal.

"Whatever do you mean?"
Was it my imagination, or was there a flash of banked fury in Atris' silver eyes? Did her mouth thin with displeasure, or her fists clench tight around the farcical honour bestowed upon the alias of a dead villain?

"The sight of Atris, accepting a medal on behalf of Revan Freeflight," I clarified, trying not to chortle. "Do you think she'll throw it into the nearest trash compactor?"

"Honestly, Kavar-"

"Come on, Zez, better to laugh at the black irony than choke on it." I could feel my lips twitching. Damn, but it was going to be hard not to throw this moment back in Atris' face. "Can you imagine if she'd been forced to say a eulogy as well? Padawan Jen Sahara, innocent victim of Darth Malak's tyranny-"

"Kavar!" Zez's rebuke was lost in the crowd's cheer, as Senator Akku moved on to honour Captain Carth Onasi – the man the Republic spin was labelling as the leader of the Star Forge mission, as they completely ignored that this had been a Jedi-led mission from the outset.

Yes, but one that wasn't sanctioned by the High Council. Yet another adventure that Dantooine spearheaded on their own, without a care for the consequences.

Just like that, my mirth vanished. A great sigh escaped me, and suddenly I felt weighted down with the reality of the times we lived in. I'd blamed Revan for that, once. Now, I simply wondered if we'd done it to ourselves.

"The Jedi Order is dying a quiet death, Zez."

Zez-Kai might believe we were more than the Order, but without the Order, without the ability to advise the Senate and safeguard the Republic, what would we become?

*Safeguard the Republic... and that is exactly what Revan Freeflight pledged when she stormed off to join the Mandalorian Wars.*

*While we sat back, dabbled in political intrigue, and kept ourselves safe.*

"Today is a victory, Kavar," Zez murmured, nudging me gently. "For the Jedi Order as well as the Republic. Look to the crowd. They are celebrating Bastila Shan out there."

"Yes, the masses will honour Bastila Shan and her padawan Jen Sahara," I said, not liking how dark my voice suddenly sounded. "They're doing that because Bastila is marketable, Zez – because Bastila is dead."

I could feel the heavy weight of his gaze on me again. "Knight Juhani is not, Kavar."

"But she's not the shining star, is she?" I snorted, raising an eyebrow at my old friend. Around us, the crowd erupted into roaring cheers as the captain finally received his medal along with a public promotion up the ranks. "The official transcript barely even mentions the only Jedi left standing after the Star Forge fell."

"Kavar." Zez held my gaze calmly, as if it were his turn to comfort me. On my other side, Master Vash began politely applauding along with the rest of the Jedi contingent. "This is not the end. You know that. There is no end."

My friend was right. Again, again, Zez always seemed to embody more wisdom and acceptance than I had ever managed to. I sighed, bowing my head, repeating his words silently to myself.
"And, so, we keep faith in the Force," I said at last, before making a belated effort to join in the round of applause. For all of my discontent, I knew the survivors of the *Ebon Hawk* more than deserved the honours of today.

"Faith, yes. We stay true to the light, and shine a candle in the darkness," Zez added, also bringing his hands together. "And, perhaps, actually work with the Senate in good faith and transparency for once."

*If they will let us, Zez.* I pasted on a smile, turned back to the front, and clapped louder. *If they will let us now.*

xXx

**Yudan Rosh:**
*Ancient grove, Wildlands, Dantooine*

Rays of early morning sun whispered through the fronds of blba trees, warming the cracked flagstones and half-metre pillars that marked this place with the echoes of a people long gone.

I recalled, clearly, stumbling across this ancient grove in my youth. Renni grass grew thick through the topsoil even then, strangling the ferracrete flagstones as nature strove to reclaim her territory. The farmlands of civilization were well back to the west; here, the wild reigned supreme. Flying brith, flocks of iriaz, and horned kath hounds roamed the land. No sentients would discover my presence in this grove unless they were actively hunting me down.

The Force hummed gently, deep within the earth, resplendent and golden through flora and fauna alike in a symbiosis of balance that was more soothing than I would readily admit. My first twelve years may have been spent navigating the throes of politics on Ryloth, but I would always consider Dantooine as the heart of my childhood.

That was before Coruscant. Before the Wars. Before... before *everything.*

The shadow of *her* death rose sharp again, armed with claws of grief that tore into my own sense of self. Our conversation on Lehon mocked me: I could still see that deserted shoreline bathed in a pre-dawn glow that had kissed her face and glinted against the green of her eyes, as I had sworn that my next steps – should we survive the Star Forge – would be my own, and not hers.

Perhaps I had expected the both of us to die. Or merely myself, in one last dramatic exposition of faith – taking a bullet or a blade meant for her, so she could carry on to do what she had to.

I had not, in any of my internal monologues, thought on a life where I existed and Revan did not.

Her downfall was different, this time. Worse, in a way. The dark had shackled me after Deralia, imprisoned me in a boreal cage of hatred and corruption that allowed me to ignore my despair over her first death. Now, I no longer had the means to escape from grief, but neither did I know how to accept it.

I felt like damning Revan for illuminating the path back to reason and then abandoning me to a galaxy she was no longer a part of.

*Revan. I vowed I would not follow in your shadow again... but I was to prove that while you still lived!*

That the Star Forge was destroyed and Malak overturned afforded me only the vaguest sense of comfort. Revan had accomplished her end game – and I was glad of that – but I simply could not
count this outcome as a victory when it had resulted in her sacrifice.

For Revan had been the centre of my life for too long.

My pupil, my friend, my hero, my master... and something deeper, in those final, twisted days before she fell to the twin threats of Malak Devari and Bastila Shan. There's more, isn't there? Between us? She had asked that on Lehon, curious and ignorant, probing into a dangerous section of our past that had been tempting to reveal to her.

In the end, I was glad I had not.

The dark-edged passion of those few weeks still haunted my dreams, at times, but I preferred to think of her as the driven, reckless hero who had blazed a trail through the galaxy. Or perhaps, something even greater – the re-forged warrior who had kept fighting, despite every stumble, in order to repair the disaster of her past.

Revan had been the Force's own luck embodied, and the Force had loved her... I had loved her. A large part of me, I knew, always would.

A bit on the tragic side there, Yudan, her voice teased in my head. I felt my jaw tense as another wave of emotion threatened to submerge me. Something flickered in the Force nearby, and I stilled, glad of the distraction, allowing instinct to master my thoughts and caution to bring me to my feet.

I turned, looking out to the wild vista beyond the outcrop of overgrown blba trees and crumbling ferracrete. I could recognize my old master's presence in the Force well before his short figure became visible in the distance.

Vandar Tokare could move fast, when he desired to. Today, however, was not one of those times.

"Vandar," I greeted, a good ten minutes later, after he had stopped to examine just about every flowering shrub he wandered past.

The short grandmaster leaned against his knobbed walking stick, tufted ears twitching at the chirrup of an iriaz roaming nearby. "Dangerous, here, life can be," he mused. "But there is also a grounding simplicity, hmm?"

I cocked my head in silent acknowledgement. Vandar's meandering would hardly dovetail me into impatience – he had taught me too well for that – but neither was I interested in gallivanting down irrelevant conversational detours. "Have you come to entice me back to the Enclave again?"

Vandar had tried, some days ago, the first time he had tracked me down. I had not been ready for our reunion, for all that I had left my cursed snubfighter behind in Khoonda township to travel to a remote location only Vandar Tokare would associate with me.

The little green Jedi master did not reply. His eyes, wide and blue, held mine sadly, as he answered my question with silence.

"You have not," I said slowly, wonderingly. "But why..."

My voice ebbed away as my thoughts raced. The High Council must know of my survival. I was last a Coruscanti Jedi, no doubt they would demand... demand what? My deportation? But Dantooine had always found the backbone to refuse Coruscant when they desired. The skeins of corruption fading from my skin spoke a truth that called to the Jedi here – Jedi, who prided themselves on judging a sentient for what they were now, not what they had once done. Many would not call it justice – I understood that; my jaded soul even agreed – but the likes of Grandmaster Vandar Tokare
looked at justice from a difficult angle, and it was near impossible to think of a champion with more clout than him.

"The Republic," I whispered, suddenly encumbered with a deep exhaustion as I thought I understood. "They know – or suspect – of my survival."

I had once told Revan the Jedi Order would offer her a safe harbour, if they could.

_If they could._

"Hmph," Vandar muttered, hobbling over to the nearest blba tree and poking at it with his stick. "Not very subtle, was your shiny black ship. Already uniforms it has, nosing about it."

"I confess to not exactly thinking matters through when I landed," I said, somewhat drily. "I did have a few things on my mind, you see."

"Hah! Always one for thinking _too_ much, you were!" Vandar turned back, peering at me sharply. "Your eyes are clear," he commented, creaky voice sharp with satisfaction.

I looked away. "Perhaps if I am not discovered on Dantooine, the galaxy will believe I jumped ship and flew off-planet." There was a sound reasoning to that logic. If – or when – I left Dantooine, I would not do so in such a distinctive vessel.

"The activation passphrase is 'nexus'," I added, staring blindly into the cerulean Dantooine sky. "You should find a way to slip that to the Republic, or better yet, leave the cockpit open for their scouts to stumble across. Let the Rakatan technology act as a feeble gift of my atonement rather than the snub be relegated to a Khoonda scrap-heap."

Vandar shot me a long look that, if coming from any other sentient, would no doubt be accompanied with an exasperated eye-roll.

"Ill befits you, melodrama does," he muttered, turning back to his tree. Thin threads of gentle Force traced from his hand, curling slowly into the dry bark. "Many times I have said as such, but listen, will you?"

I sighed, my gaze tracking the trajectory of a brith as it flapped its large mammalian wings in the sky. "There are eyes on the Enclave," I said in a voice that dared him to disagree. "That is why you do not wish me to return."

Vandar hummed, leaning his forehead against the trunk of the blba. He had always spent his time communing with nature, from the largest of creatures to the smallest of plant-life. For a sentient who so treasured life, I had never understood how he could have sat back from the Wars the way he did.

_They fear the Dark Side_, Revan had once told me, a lifetime ago. _They fear what would happen if they fall. The casualties of Exar Kun's war are not just those who died, but also those who lived through it and survived._

"Time heals wounds and settles tempers," Vandar murmured, still not turning around. Through the Force, I could sense the placid, ancient life of the blba shine just that little more brightly. "Today, I can say with truth that the Dantooine Enclave does not harbour Yudan Rosh. But your home, the Enclave remains. Allow time to pass, and a sanctuary it will once more be for you."

Perhaps. I did not have the same faith as Vandar in the galaxy's forgiveness or the Jedi's power to shelter the likes of me, but he could be right. The bigger question, however, was whether I even desired Vandar's promised sanctuary.
Vandar patted the tree, pulled back, and swivelled around to peer at me again. "Stay," he beseeched. I did not think Vandar would intrude upon my mind unwanted, but it was nonetheless uncanny the way he still picked up on my thoughts. "Hold you here, I cannot. Resourceful enough you are to find passage from Dantooine. But a true Jedi, once more, you remain, no matter the doubt in your heart. So stay, my old padawan."

I paused, breaking away from his gaze. "What is truly here for me, Vandar?"

I could not bring myself to use the honorific he deserved. It seemed – hypocritical, perhaps, to speak the Jedi titles I had once respected and later scorned.

"Peace," Vandar returned simply. "Faith. The Force. The Order, if you will permit yourself the patience required."

Peace... peace meant acceptance, and I did not know if I could ever accept Revan's death. And while the planet of Dantooine was a balm to my grieving soul, I was uncertain if the same was true for the Jedi Order.

After all, I had not entirely held to their doctrines even before I had left Coruscant.

_There is always Ordo's offer._ His words lingered in my mind, as unexpected as they were tempting. An offer of clan from a warrior I respected, to a life that would be rewarding in a simpler way than mine had ever been. It could be a good life.

I had not discounted it, yet. But I also felt like I owed Vandar something. Whether that something was a few months of my life or a return to the Jedi, I simply did not know.

"I will stay for awhile," I said slowly. Living in the wildlands on Dantooine was not a particularly onerous task for one such as I. My skills were more than a match for any predator, and I hardly lacked the means to gather or hunt any sustenance I required. "I will stay until I figure out where my path lies. And that is something only I can decide, Vandar."

"All I can hope for, that is." Vandar hummed under his breath and hobbled closer. "News of the outside world, there is. Those you befriended are honoured with medals and glory."

"Good," I said vaguely. In truth, I had known Revan's followers little, but the old man from Kashyyyk and Canderous Ordo were two I found myself holding in high esteem. Regardless, the entire crew more than deserved their moment of victory even as I doubted it would dent the magnitude of their loss.

It surprised me, at that moment, to find myself hoping Revan's soldier would find some measure of peace. Revan's death was a boulder crushing my spirit, and I had seen first-hand how he – how all of her crew – had loved her.

_They loved the Wookiee, too. And Bastila Shan._

I glanced sharply back to Vandar. "How is Vrook holding up?"

Vandar moved to stand next to me, tipping his wrinkled head up to stare into the sky. "Ill-tempered. Heart-broken. Understand, I do, that you met his padawan?"

"Briefly." Bastila Shan had joined the Dantooine Enclave as a young girl, perhaps a year before my transfer to Coruscant. I only had the vaguest recollection of a quiet slip of a thing trailing after Dantooine's most acerbic master. The memory did not mesh at all with the fallen and passionate woman I had encountered on the Star Forge.
My eyes narrowed as that scene replayed itself in my mind. "Vrook... Vrook would not have known what happened after he fell. He was the catalyst for Bastila's return, did you realize that?"

Vandar stilled but said nothing as his bright blue eyes fixed on mine.

"Revan could not reach her, Vandar." I would not – I refused to divulge Revan's brief stumble into the dark. And the matters of the Unknown Regions that had so driven Bastila Shan could be discussed another time. "It was the Wookiee Zaalbar who made Bastila truly see Vrook's sacrifice on a personal level. If Vrook had not come for Bastila, matters would have played out differently."

Revan would have returned to herself, regardless. I would not believe anything else. But Bastila Shan, I suspected, might have met a darker end.

"Interesting, that the Wookiee played such a part," Vandar murmured. His comment surprised me, but perhaps it should not have – I had seen, over the years, how Force-users of all alignment tended to focus on those with power, and forget how even a pawn could win or lose a game. "Relay your words to Vrook, I shall."

"I was not there at her end," I said, hearing my voice ice over. No, instead I had been gallivanting through the Star Forge in order to rescue Revan's soldier. Would it have made a difference, had I refused Bastila's request and stayed to guard her, as Revan had ordered?

I did not know what happened, only that Revan and Bastila had fallen together as Revan said they would. Malak must have cut Revan down – but then why had the Wookiee died?

If Malak – my once-friend, my adversary, the man I had briefly bent knee to – had found his way to the meditation chamber and caused Revan's death by killing her bond-mate after I left, then I did not think I would ever forgive myself.

It was a disquieting, bitter thing, to realize I would have to live with the lingering suspicion that I might have had the chance to save Revan and Bastila both-

At the cost of Carth Onasi and his son. The death of Revan's soldier may have been the final push to send Revan permanently into the dark, and that is why I went.

I took a deep breath, and attempted to force the melancholy down. "If you send Vrook here, Vandar, then I will speak with him. I cannot promise our words will be harmonious, however."

Vandar's snort was loud and irreverent. "Do you both good, a battle of words might. Trust you, I shall, not to let the words cut deep. Vrook grieves the same as you."

I nodded. Vandar snorted again, before thumping his stick on the ground. "A gift for you, I have," he said abruptly, before shrugging off a small rucksack and rummaging around inside. He grunted in satisfaction, retrieving a bundle of cloth that he offered to me with both hands.

I could feel one brow rise in curiosity as my fingers gripped around the soft material. Zhar Lestin's lightsaber still hung on my belt and, other than that, I did not particularly desire any other possessions.

"Well, go on, then!" Vandar prompted, nudging me in the ribs with his gnarled stick.

The worn cloth fell open, and resting in the middle of it was a plain mask of red-and-black, etched with a horizontal slit at eye-level. "The mask from a Mandalorian helm," I said faintly, as Ordo's offer of a future once more rose in my mind. The common soldiers of the Mandalorian offensive all donned similar masks, most made from beskar like this one, but most also etched in clan sigils this
one lacked. The distinctive armour of the Mandalorians had marked them as a recognizable sight the galaxy had once feared.

That had been part of the reason Revan had taken up that mask she had- "Revan," I choked, suddenly understanding. My eyes stung. "This is... this is Revan's mask!"

Vandar nodded, looking far too placid and serene for such a moment. "Took it from her ship, I did, when Bastila Shan first brought her to Dantooine."

"Why?" The word came out in a strangled gasp. I looked down blindly, my fingers gripping around the sharp edges of the infamous mask. It had been an anonymous symbol, an icon of hope, the mark of a villain-Suddenly, all my twisted memories of Darth Revan threatened to re-emerge- "Why would you give this to me? Darth Revan is hardly how I wish to remember her!"

"Her journey is what you should remember," Vandar said sharply, poking me with that damned stick again. "That even the darkest of paths can return to the light. Forced Revan into that, perhaps we did, but her choice it was to stay true. You, my old padawan, found the steps to take yourself."

"I-" I did not know what to say. I couldn't drag my eyes away from the ominous piece of beskar now held within my grasp.

"The birth and fall of a hero, that mask has seen," Vandar murmured. "But more important is what happened after that mask was lost."

I felt like I should curse Vandar for the gift. But I said nothing, sinking to my knees in the soft grass instead, still staring at the forged metal that had once covered the face of a woman I had adored.

Vandar sighed, then, and patted me softly on the shoulder. "Return, I must, for a time. Keep your faith in the Force, my old padawan. The Force will lead you home."

I glanced up at him, nodding jerkily, not trusting myself to speak. The little old Jedi smiled in benevolence, and I rather thought he knew what matter of roiling emotion he had just stirred within my soul.

Damn you, Vandar. I cannot bring myself to refuse this 'gift', but nor am I sure if I should hold onto it. Vandar might believe he understood what our lives as Dark Jedi had been – but he did not. Not without having lived it himself.

Shavit, given Revan's amnesia, not even she had fully understood.

My fists clenched tight, and it took a supreme effort of will to calmly wrap the mask back into the worn cloth and put it aside. Vandar had already commenced his meandering trek back to the Enclave, by then. With his pace, I doubted he would be back by sundown.

With a long, deep intake of air, I closed my eyes and tried to relax.

Vandar's parting phrase was an interesting one. Home... he clearly believed that Dantooine and the Jedi Enclave were my home. It had been, a long, long time ago. Now, the planet merely felt like the dull echo of a childhood I had outgrown.

A place to rest and recover, before I moved on.

I had promised myself, back on Lehon, that I would look to my own soul first, that I would not allow Revan to remain the centre of my existence. Yet this was the cruelest way for fate to make that promise a reality. Somehow, everything was just that touch more muted, more dull, with the
knowledge that I would never see her again.

*Her memory remains in my heart, though. There is no death. I know that. I understand it.*

*I simply have to find a way to live with it.*

xXx

**Meetra Surik:**

*The Vineyard's Curl, Alateev Colony, Outer Rim Territories*

"Another one, Em?" Jorjo asked, motioning to my empty mug.

I smiled at the old Ithorian, giving him a short nod of assent. His droopy eyes crinkled in pleasure – sometimes, I wondered if his greatest joy in life was serving others.

"You're off early, Em," he commented, as he topped the mug up with the smoking green wine peculiar to Alateev. It bore a mild malt flavour, and the alcoholic content was low – despite the drink's rather provocative presentation. Likely the wine's popularity had more to do with appearance than taste, but I had to admit the beverage had grown on me after all these years.

"College had a half day," I explained, leaning back against the high-backed bar stool. "Today's the end of term, Jorjo. Twenty days of freedom for us profs."

Jorjo chuckled. "It always comes around quicker than I expect. Any of your colleagues headed this way?"

I shook my head briefly. "Sorry, Jorjo. There's a fancy do at the Senatori."

Jorjo looked at me silently for a moment, a stare I returned with equal measure. I'd known Jorjo for years, and it was not difficult to read his solemn expression. Sure, Jorjo desired the additional business, but more for my own sake than his. He wanted to see me spending time with my fellow colleagues on a more social level.

Jorjo was a sentimental sort, but he was wasting his time with me.

The Vineyard's Curl was appealing *because* of its low clientele and relative quiet. The pub was situated down a back alley, closer to the rundown starport than the colony's centre, and that meant Jorjo's customers tended to be anonymous spacers rather than local regulars.

That was how I liked it. My days were already filled with lectures on divergent astronavigation – I'd rather my free time wasn't as well. And I had zero interest in fostering any sort of friendship with my peers.

The past had seen to that. Relationships were for other people.

Jorjo gave a short shake of his flat head before wandering away, absently flicking on the pub's only holo-screen as he wandered past. A news channel – that was unusual for him. Even turning the dratted thing on was unusual for him.

I preferred to ignore the galaxy that had turned its back on me years ago, and was about to move to the far corner of the room, but - despite myself - the words spewing forth from the screen snagged my attention.

::-day twenty-six after the Republic's glorious victory in the Lehon sector, and the Sith War has been
declared officially at an end. Republic forces have crushed the only remaining offensive in the Mid Rim, taking Sith Admiral Sara into custody and mopping up the fleeing remnants of Darth Malak's once awesome armada. Nearly all hot sectors embroiled in conflict have had emergency states lifted. I am here with the Senate's official correspondent, Ularic Gren, to ask some of the many questions we all have.::

The red haze of blood swam through my vision in a sickening rush. The war... the war is over? My lips felt numb. And the Republic... the Republic actually won?

Despite myself, despite the years of detachment that had shackled me into an existence even I would admit was hollow, the names of those I had once cared for – those few still living in the depths of corruption – rattled through my mind like a useless prayer to a damned deity.

Shar... Yudan... Nisotsa... Malak...

There was a reason I avoided the intergalactic news. Alateev's peculiar religious doctrine frowned on anything bar the most cursory of glances at events beyond our borders, but that had nothing to do with my abstention. No, the truth was nothing more than survival at its most basic.

Once, the well-spring of the Force had sung through my veins, connecting me to all life in the galaxy. Once, I had been unique in my empathy for sensing the emotions of all who surrounded me.

Once upon a time, I had truly lived.

I swallowed against a dry throat, staring blindly at the prettified Twi'leki reporter smirking on the holo-screen. The war is over, I repeated to myself dully. That means... Malak. He must be one with the Force, after all this time.

And Shar, my old apprentice, who spent years denying the parasitic desires of his own species before Revan corrupted him?

Yudan, my noble friend, who followed Revan just as blindly and faithfully as Malak?

I did not wish to know the answers. But I made myself listen, regardless.

::The Sith War is the wrong terminology,:: a suited Cerean drawled in a voice dripping with condescension. ::This conflict is correctly named the Jedi Civil War, and is now at an end.::

::The Jedi Civil War?:: the reporter parroted, one painted brow arching in question. ::But these past four years have been the Sith Empire trying to conquer the Republic!::

Four years. Had Malachor V truly been so long ago? Four empty years, echoing with nothing more than bloodied memories and devastating loss that still hammered at my soul whenever I dropped my guard.

::Yes, the Sith Empire – which was led by fallen Jedi from the Jedi Order,:: the suit shot back in overt disapproval. ::We must never forget their origins when we look upon the calamity and devastation they have wrought.::

The reporter changed tack. ::Can you comment on the rumours that Darth Revan was part of the Republic's effort to overturn the Sith Empire, dying in the attempt to stop Darth Malak?::

I could feel my face spasm. Certainly, the holonews often came with a ludicrous rumour or two, but I could never quite halt that nauseating lurch whenever I heard Revan's name.
I could still remember the day the holonews blared out that Malak had killed her. I had hated myself for the unbearable grief that had overtaken me.

The senate representative snorted in disdain. ::Darth Revan died more than a year ago. Jen Sahara was a young Jedi apprentice who aided Captain Onasi and Jedi Knight Shan in their mission. Let's not sully Padawan Sahara's death with such a ridiculous rumour, merely because they share the same hair colour.:: The suit – he was a polished Cerean dressed to the nines - shot an imperious glare at the camera. ::The true heroes are the courageous men and women of the Republic, who have risked their lives to stand against the atrocities of the Jedi Thirteen and all those traitors who followed them.::

I blinked. The Jedi Thirteen? He's not... he's not labelling them as Sith? This was the senate's official correspondent. He would have been primed and prepped by politicians for the exact angle to take. There's a schism between the Order and the Senate, I realized with a shiver of foreboding.

I didn't care. I didn't! This had nothing to do with me, and I would not let emotions overcome me. I had no emotion left.

The reporter, a heavily painted Twi'leki male, shifted his free hand to a scantily-clad hip. ::We understand that the sole survivor of the Jedi Thirteen, Yudan Rosh, is rumoured to be hiding within the Jedi Enclave of Dantooine. What is the Senate's position on this?::

Yudan... the bottom of my stomach fell out. The sole survivor...

Cariaga had been the first to topple, during the Wars. Back when the Jedi Thirteen had been a name of triumph and hope rather than a curse whispered in the night.

The infamous, damned, fallen Jedi Thirteen.

Oh, how I'd tried to avoid hearing of my friends, as they killed each other one by one. The names, the faces, the people of my past when I had been a different person, a whole person – I vowed I'd left that all behind, but the media reports still found a way to reach my ears eventually, and every death pierced through my detachment with poisoned darts of remembrance.

Talvon, Jexer, Rab.

Jonn, Arran, Alaki.

Revan.

I swallowed convulsively. And, now, Malak and Nisotsa.

The news was wrong, though. I still stood, a brittle husk of the woman I had once been. And Xaset...

We had travelled together, after Malachor, after that excruciatingly painful audience with the Council. Xaset and I had seen so much together. Lost so much. Some days, the only way I could feel anything was by losing myself in the forbidden pleasures of the flesh.

The Jedi had named us both exiles. So what did it matter if we flouted their ethos?

Xaset had been more of a mess than me. I was numb, afloat in a sea of nothingness, ripped away from the matrix of sentient emotion I had always been immersed in. Xaset... Xaset had once been a master healer. What had the pain of so many deaths in the Force done to a being that had always striven to regenerate life?
Malachor tormented us both. It broke me, and it shattered him.

For a time, we only had each other. That might've been enough for me: a grey life where the only shards of colour came from our wild lovemaking. But as the months rolled on, Xaset grew worse. His eyes darkened, his midnight skin paled, and his voice slowly weakened to a dying rasp. Eventually, he left me alone in a spaceport, leaving nothing but a scrawled data-note containing a half-hearted wish for my future happiness.

Even now, years later, I wondered where he was. If he was still alive, still in pain, still, at times, thinking on me as I did him.

We might've had something together. A pale echo of our glory days, of the power of the Force – but something tangible nonetheless.

The holoscreen flickered, a sure sign its energy cells were on the way out. A glower had contorted the suit's face as he glared angrily at the unruffled reporter. ::The Jedi of Dantooine deny his presence, but if Yudan Rosh still lives then he will face trial for his atrocities against the Republic. The Senate will no longer tolerate the Jedi Order seeking clemency for their supposedly-redeemed criminals.::

::But we understand that Yudan Rosh switched sides and proved invaluable, in the end, to the success of Jedi Knight Bastila Shan's secret mission?:

The glower deepened, if that was possible. ::There is so much misinformation in that ridiculous statement. First, let me clarify that this stealth operation was a joint venture between the Jedi Order and Republic HQ – not Jedi Shan's personal endeavour. All of the members of the Ebon Hawk are equally credited with their victory. Do not forget that the pilot, our Navy's own Commodore Onasi, recruited most of the Ebon Hawk's members and commandeered the strategic plan for uncovering and destroying the Star Forge.::

::Okay, okay, but about Yudan Rosh:--:

::Yudan Rosh is a war criminal, and a late change of heart does not magically undo all the monstrosities he oversaw as Darth Malak's Supreme Fleet Commander. As for his actions, we remain sceptical that he had any effect on the outcome in the end. Regardless, this is for the courts to decide. Whatever good Yudan Rosh did will be measured against the bad.::

My heart fluttered wildly in my chest. The scent of death and the screams of thousands echoed in my ears. Memory... cursed memory bubbled to the surface in a blinding panic attack, threatening to break through the numb wall of disengagement I had so painstakingly maintained over the years.

Breathe. Breathe in, breathe out. Just keep breathing.

The pounding of my heart slowly faded, the sweat dried up, and a maelstrom of thoughts took its place.

Yudan, my oldest friend... could he really have switched sides? Maybe. Maybe it'd all fallen apart for him when Revan died. He had loved her as deeply as Malak had, for all that he had tried to hide it.

And Shar... they say nothing of Sharlan. But he must have been captured- or killed- or captured and ready to be killed-

The Dark Side had rotted through all the people I had once loved. All of them had fallen. All who had dared follow Revan after Malachor.
I had once sworn to the Jedi High Council that, had I not lost the Force, I would not have done the same. But knights did not turn into Sith overnight, and sometimes in my darkest moments, I couldn't help but wonder if the loss of the Force might even have been a blessing.

The suit had stalked away from the camera, and now the Twi'lek was chattering breathlessly into the holo-recorder. *Stay tuned for a complete profile of all the Ebon Hawk's colourful personalities. Join us live with Life & Style correspondent Juli Starring, who has the scoop on the forbidden and tragic love between Commodore Onasi and Jedi Knight Shan.*

The holo-screen switched off, and my burning eyes slowly closed. I was shaking, I realized dimly.

"Yellow press," Jorjo was muttering next to the deactivated screen. "Holonews kills brain matter. It's all rubbish designed to turn sents into mindless drones."

I lifted my drink, moving on automatic, and took a large swallow. The cool wine trailed a blister of sensation down my throat, and at that moment it was the only thing I could feel.

But my mind was racing.

*It's time. It's time to move.*

Alateev was on the arse-end of a little-used hyperlane, with no known resource planets or supersystems nearby. War had never really touched this place. Even the Mandalorians hadn't bothered.

I had nothing to do with any war, not anymore. The Force had left me, and I had left the galaxy behind, in a desperate bid to shed the stranglehold of my past.

And yet, what sort of life did I have? Teaching bright-eyed sents gave me a vague sense of satisfaction, but I avoided any personal attachment beyond the most fleeting. Stars, Jorjo probably knew me best – and all the old Ithorian really knew was that I had once hailed from the Core.

I couldn't go back. I couldn't. But... living on Alateev was no more than days spent breathing in oxygen to inflate my lungs. Maybe- maybe now that the war was really over- now that whatever Revan had started after Malachor had finally come to a grinding halt- maybe, just maybe, it was time for a change.

A time to find a way to start living again.

Xx

**Atton Rand:**
*Cerilian Detention Centre, Xappyh sector*

"Move," the smug guard grunted, one meaty fist shoving hard in the small of my back.

"Okay, okay! Give a guy a chance!" I spluttered in a desperate voice, moving with a calculated stumble, letting the guard see nothing but a beaten, cowed mark caught by the winning side.

Unfortunately, that was *exactly* what I was.

The interrogation room was one of those pristine white cubicles: nothing more than a footstool gracing the centre, the air thick with cloying sans-spray, and the far wall lined with blaster-proof transparisteel separating me from my newest chum. A surly-faced Quarren, who couldn't even be arsed to look up from his datapad.
"Name and designation?" the sent behind the screen drawled in a bored voice

*This isn't the first time I've landed behind bars, I reminded myself. And it probably won't be the last. So time to chin up and spin the right sob story.*

I pasted on a conciliatory smile and took a seat, resting my shackled hands limply on my lap. Ole Squid-head still didn't bother to make eye contact.

"Atton Rand, Ensign, strikefighter pilot AE204H4," I replied, rattling off the id-card designation I'd memorized before the capture crew had stripped me clean. My legs stretched out, crossing at the ankles, the durasteel nerve restraint on my left chafing something awful. "Say, cozy place you've got here. Are you my arbiter?"

The Quarren didn't answer. Behind me, the heavy-handed guard barked a scornful laugh. "You're in processing, Sith scum. Arbiters are for those who might actually be innocent."

*Processing.* Shavit, it'd taken the Republic almost a galactic month just to get me into processing – and I was hardly the last idiot left on their roll. At least I'd divested myself from any high-end weaponry before shooting out from the Forge in a snub that'd been netted before I could blink. Far as the Republic was concerned, I was just another dumb pilot cowed by the scary Dark Jedi. Would've been better if I could've posed as a simple ship mech, but the armour I'd been wearing underneath my flight suit made that a hard sell.

Damn good piece of Echani workmanship, too. I was kriffing pissed the Republic had pinched it. Supposedly it was in storage until my release – hah! – but I knew how these things rolled. Amazing how prisoners' equipment could get 'lost' during years of penitentiary.

Years. It was what the grunts were saying. Years stuck in a detention centre for any sucker picked up from the dying Star Forge, that symbol of Sith power which had so nearly toppled the Republic.

I could wait out months, but shavit! Years was too much to ask.

*I'm free of the slayers, though. They're dead. All karked it, like I knew they would. Better a jailed mark waiting for a chance than a puppet still dancing to the tune of a madman.*

I cinched the dangerous thought back. Flicked over a deck of cards in my mind, and kept my passive smile fixed steadily on my face.

The Quarren looked up, finally, his fingers stilling over a keypad behind the glass barrier. Beady black eyes narrowed on me. "Human, Sith strikefighter pilot, two years' service. Odd, you don't look much like your ID-pic."

My easy smile didn't slip. "Years of warfare can be quite aging for my species."

The Quarren's chin tentacles twitched beneath his jaw. "Turn your head-fur brown, did it?"

I remembered the mark I'd rolled before collaring his life story. Chubby guy, fair hair, ugly mug. Same species and gender as me, though, and with the raft of prisoners here I didn't think any admin chump would bother looking at me twice unless I gave them a reason to.

"The missus prefers this colour on me, sir," I clarified, slipping in the honorific in a crass attempt to curry favour. Who knew, could be that the way to soften this rube was to act suitably subservient. "Sir, so many of us were only doing what we had to, to survive. Piloting was the only job I could find to feed the kids, after our farm was bombed-"
"Says here you reported to Squadron Leader Tobias." The Quarren spoke right over me, as if I'd never said a damn word. "Along with the battle of the Star Forge, your squad was also involved in the Lannik conflict and the battle of Mon Gazza. Do you have anything to add or dispute on that accounting?"

Damn Quarren wasn't going to budge on sympathy. But even prisoners had rights- "Shouldn't I be going over this with an assigned arbiter?"

The guard behind me snorted, while the Quarren merely raised one scornful brow-ridge. "Prisoner is uncooperative," he stated to the room at large, before tapping loudly on his console.

"Hey, hey!" I protested, leaning forward. Shavit, this guy isn't going to bend, time play hardball- "Of course I'll cooperate! We're all glad this madness is over, right? But the Republic's charter regarding the legal rights of detainees-"

"Does not apply when the Republic's resources will be tied up for decades in restoration endeavours from the war your lot threw upon us." Squid-head's voice had frosted into ice. "Of course, if you have personal funds to appoint your own arbiter then matters can be arranged with more expedition."

The guy looked smug. Expedience. Suuuure. Even if I did have something squirreled away, giving the keys to this lot would do nothing but seize that something under the guise of reparations, or whatever bollocks the Republic would come out with.

"I thought not," the Quarren said in disgust, just as I realized I'd ballsed-up by hesitating too long. His tiny eyes narrowed, before he jerked his head at the guard behind me. "Take him. We're done here."

I knew when to call it quits. I stood quickly, silently, turning around to face the meathead full of smug as he strode forward with a raised hand and an ugly grin.

"The war is over, Sith scum," the guard drawled, grabbing my arm and pulling me to the exit. "You lost."

Yeah. The war is over. Glory be to the kriffing Republic.

It was time to play it dumb and quiet while I was herded back. Back to my pen, crowded with all the other bantha waiting for the slaughter. Not exactly the sort of escape I'd banked on when I'd ditched my fellow tools.

"You're small fry, Rand," the Quarren called after me, as the door opened and I walked through. "Be glad of that. You might be out before your 'kids' hatch their own spawn."

The guard sniggered, but I kept my silence as he marched me down the utilitarian corridor that led back to the holding cells. It was too soon, I realized. Too soon for any sort of sympathy-play or negotiation regarding my circumstances. The Republic was punch-drunk on the high of victory, and no one here gave a ronto's arse about keeping to the charter of their glorious constitution.

Not yet, maybe. But once the dust settles, sooner or later the media will hone in on us prisoners. Let someone slip news of mistreatment during peacetime, and the heart-strings of the masses will suddenly ring bright. The tide always turns, in the end.

I just had to hope it was a matter of months, and not those kriffing years my bedfellows were bleating about.
The guard stopped at the cell block, taking a moment to unshackle my hands before unceremoniously pushing me inside. The room beyond was the common quarters for my lot; forty or so sents clad in greys, each one emasculated with a nerve restraint rimmed around a limb, ready to be remote-activated if our geolocation shot red on the damn prison's network.

There were other cell-blocks, of course; I didn't know how many, but the guards liked to label us with pet names. We were the Slugs; grey like our jumpsuits, grey like the slop ladled out to us three times a day. Couldn't give the guards any marks for imagination, but if they got their jollies sniggering over verbals, well- it was better than a beating.

The meathead who'd led me back in grabbed another inmate before disappearing, and I was left to make my way to the hole in the wall brimming with lines of half-full bowls. Dinner, and today's flavour was: pureed sludge.

I hated being so directionless, and I was fast running out of ideas on what to try next. Sure, I could be patient if I had a flip-card up my sleeve, but I was surrounded by guards I couldn't charm, walls I couldn't escape, and subdued inmates – most of whom were low-level wingmen who'd only fought to score a pay check. The exact justifications I'd thrown at Squid-head - even if they weren't mine. Just a job. A living. A way to make ends meet.

Right now, the only thing I could think of doing was creating allies on the inside. I had no plan, no glimmer of hope, yet - but laying the groundwork for a future purpose was one way to pass the time. I'd skimmed over the pilots and honed in on the handful of techs already; but they were all button-pushers, admin schmoes, none who had any useful skills outside of a damn command center.

There was a sole engineer who'd come in some days back. Spent weeks in the infirmary, apparently, and hadn't said a word to anyone since arrival. Sure, an engineer might be useful if I ever found my way to a kriffing ship, but the thing was, I just knew the sent's backstory gleamed with about as much truth as my own did.

I could tell a lot about a sent from observation. With the engineer's stance alone, I knew I was dealing with an experienced ground soldier – at the least. Special ops, maybe. Insertion. Intel agent. Shavit, if it hadn't been for the electrolyzed Force tests we'd suffered through on capture, I would've sworn she was something else.

Something highly dangerous, something I had experience in recognizing.

*I came through blind on those kriffing Force tests, though. And apparently I can touch the-

I cinched the thought back in. I hadn't heard that Jedi scow's voice in my head since I'd run from the slayers, and I wasn't going to rouse her ghost now. Maybe it was simply that potential to use the Force didn't show up in the Republic's kriffing drug trial.

Or maybe I'd been told wrong, and I was just another Force-blind null.

I grabbed my dish of slop, and headed to the tables. Either way, the engineer intrigued me, and the one thing I had in this cursed place was time.

I slapped on a smile and strode over to the sent. As I slipped down on the empty bench seat next to her, moss-green eyes glanced over to meet mine.

xXx
Coming up next: part two of a three(?) chapter arc concluding the tale of the survivors. Millifar Ordo, daughter of Canderous, belongs to kosiah’s ‘verse in Memory. A medal ceremony's worth of thanks to kosiah for the beta. I wanted to get this chapter out on May the Fourth Day. Didn’t quite manage. Revenge of the Fifth will have to do! ;-)
Hyperspace VII – part two

Vima Sunrider:
Jedi High Temple, Coruscant

"To recap, the Jedi involved on Dantooine were Grandmaster Vandar Tokare; Masters Galdea, Karon Enova, Nemo, and Vrook Lamar. Knights Ri’thanok Brill, the late Bastila Shan, and yourself. Is there anyone we are missing, Knight Sunrider?"

Lonna Vash's voice echoed throughout the chamber. Dispassionate and neutral, just like her blank gaze as it stared down at me in judgment.

"Knight Ri’thanok did not know the identity of our patient, Master Vash," I replied, willing my voice to hold steady. "His medical expertise was called upon only when required-"

The dismissive snort from Atris Surik broke over my words. "You expect the High Council to believe a Jedi Knight would not recognize a Sith Lord while attending to her?"

My attention darted to the white-clad master seated next to Lonna. Patience, I reminded myself. There is no emotion. Atris seeks to rattle me into temper, to cast doubt upon my integrity. I shall not let her break me.

"Whatever Knight Ri’thanok's suspicions, Master Surik, he was professional enough to keep them to himself."

The dismissive snort from Atris Surik broke over my words. "You expect the High Council to believe a Jedi Knight would not recognize a Sith Lord while attending to her?"

My attention darted to the white-clad master seated next to Lonna. Patience, I reminded myself. There is no emotion. Atris seeks to rattle me into temper, to cast doubt upon my integrity. I shall not let her break me.

"Whatever Knight Ri’thanok's suspicions, Master Surik, he was professional enough to keep them to himself."

The side of Atris' cheek twitched. "Just like the rest of Dantooine. Did it never occur to you, child, that a matter of such importance should have been handled directly by the High Council?"

Of course it had. Atris was no fool. And I had not been a child for decades. "I kept faith in the wisdom of my enclave, Master Surik."

In the high-backed chair on the other side of Atris, Zez-Kai Ell leaned forward, his heavy gaze dark and soulful. "You are a Jedi Knight, Vima Sunrider. Yes, we understand you were working beneath the guidance of Masters Galdea and Karon, but surely you had doubts regarding the procedure. The lack of consent for one-"

"Consent?" Lonna interrupted. "Zez, this is not a time to debate ethics-"

"Consent is hardly relevant," Atris scoffed. "Particularly not from one such as-"

"Revan's mind was utterly broken," I cut in, hearing my voice crisp into ice. I had already said as much. They had the transcripts, the medical logs, the data that had not been destroyed in the Enclave's bombardment. This meeting... no, this trial had gone on long enough. "Consent was not possible."
Consent would not have been given, regardless. Who would agree to such a violation of their very self?

But when Revan's consent was balanced against her secrets, secrets that could overturn a war- when her consent was compared to the billions of lives at stake- what other option could we have chosen?

When Bastila Shan intercepted Darth Revan's fragmented dream-memory of the Master Star Map, everything had changed. Master Nemo led an expedition to uncover the map, and returned with news of the Star Forge. We beheld our first glimmer at the heart of Darth Malak's empire – and overnight, the brain-damaged Sith Lord in our grasp became more than just a prisoner we did not know what to do with.

"Knight Sunrider, you informed us in great detail what was done to the mind of Darth Revan after the Dantooine Star Map was discovered," Kavar Kira said, interrupting with musings that uncannily echoed my own. "But that was, what? Weeks after Bastila Shan landed on Dantooine?"

More like months. At my unwilling nod, Kavar continued. "What did Dantooine plan to do with Darth Revan before they found the map?"

"And why," Atris lashed out, her words cracking like a whip, "did they think it necessary- nay, acceptable- to hide it from us?"

"I am not on the Dantooine Council," I retorted. Enough. I had journeyed to Coruscant the moment I received their summons. I had stood before them, answered all their questions, felt the weight of their censure and blame without the guidance of my own masters. Perhaps Coruscant had reason for their grievance with Dantooine, but I did not embody the Enclave. "I was there to diagnose and stabilize the mind of Darth Revan, and later to assist Master Galdea with the psychic rebuild. I was not privy to the early discussions regarding Darth Revan's fate."

I could guess at them, though. Karon argued redemption right to the very end. Galdea had known that wasn't possible – what was left in Darth Revan's mind was nothing but a distorted chasm of grief and darkness. Vrook had wanted to wash Dantooine's hands of Revan altogether – but only after finding a means to extricate his padawan from the Dark Lord's soul.

Vrook and Vandar were the only ones still alive, and they were not even here.

My jaw firmed as I met the gaze of every Jedi Master staring down at me. This inner sanctum of the High Temple was lined with a dozen high-backed chairs, arranged in a ring around the centre – a lowered floor I stood upon alone, with only a ceremonial pillar engraved with runes of the Jedi Code to keep me company.

At least they hadn't summoned the entirety of the council to stare down at me. Four masters was bad enough.

"As a member of the Dantooine Enclave, I answer to Grandmaster Tokare." My voice remained calm. "Are these not questions for him?"

"Every Jedi answers to the High Council, child," Atris snapped, eyes flashing. "And only two masters of Dantooine survived, as a direct ramification of letting Darth Revan loose the way you lot did."

I flinched.

Galdea perished on the Endar Spire. Karon, cut down by a traitor within our own ranks. Ri'thanok and Nemo on Dantooine. Bastila Shan. So many others-
"Knight Sunrider, you are not here to answer for the Dantooine Council." Zez-Kai's words were a gentle contrast to Atris' heated invective. "We have additional... reasons to examine your conduct in particular."

I took a deep breath, drawing slightly on the Force, calming my emotions back into serenity. After a second lungful of air, Zez-Kai's words sharpened into meaning.

*Additional... reasons?* I frowned. Zez-Kai might claim they weren't judging me for Revan's fate, but they still condemned my actions. I was just a knight, directed by masters-

-but that never stopped Jedi Knight Revan Freeflight. She had the strength to stand for what she believed in, no matter what the masters said, no matter what the High Council decreed. She defied them all publicly.

*The masters of Dantooine merely kept their actions hidden.*

The thought seemed a betrayal, yet here I was, the only Jedi from Dantooine to stand before the Coruscanti High Council as their sentence was passed upon me. My gaze slid away from them all, landing idly on the pillar.

The side facing me was charred and cracked, with a blackened stripe running directly through the rune of harmony. As if, once upon a time, someone had shoved a lightsaber straight into it-

"We should not even *consider* approving that missive," Master Atris seethed, and her frosty voice shook with barely-checked anger. My gaze whipped to hers, but she was glaring at the pillar, right at the spot I had been studying. "Knight Sunrider spent her youth gallivanting outside the Order's walls with her mother. Knight Sunrider has had a life of emotional attachment completely at odds with our doctrine-

"What?" I snapped, and for the first time, thwarted irritation flurried in my heart. "What, precisely, does my mother have to do with *any* of this?"

Oh, Atris found any chance to strike out at those she considered imperfect scions of the Jedi Order. I doubted it was personal, as her displeasure found its mark against anyone who showed any modicum of vulnerability, or attachment-

Mother never returned to the Jedi after Ulic's exile. And I only officially joined after her death. Anyone else my age – a woman fully grown – would not have been admitted, but then I was hardly a neophyte apprentice scrabbling for the Force.

My first master had been one of the greatest Jedi of the Order, and my training had started in childhood, well before I ever stepped foot inside an enclave.

My first master: Nomi Sunrider. My beautiful, broken mother.

"You forget yourself, child," Atris clipped. Her blue eyes were pinched at the corners. "The High Council must assess the character of all Jedi within their ranks-

"Atris-" Kavar began.

"Stay out of this, Kavar!"

"She deserves to know-

"Know what, exactly?" I demanded, and felt the irritation surge again. "You have heard everything.
Dantooine captured Darth Revan. Galdea, Karon and I imprinted the identity of a dead woman into her consciousness, as a means of mining her secrets through Bastila Shan. We allowed Revan a chance at life-

Atris' anger was visible, now, in the whitening of her face and the clenching of her fists. "And look how well that turned out-"

"And I have nothing further to add!" For once, I allowed my voice to rise over Atris. "Any further questioning should be directed at Grandmaster Tokare. Unless you wish to expound upon your additional reasons, then I am done here."

"Enough." Lonna did not shout, but the Force carried her voice through the room, accompanied by a wave of peace that I almost resented even as my churning emotions relaxed in response. "Knight Sunrider, allow me to elucidate these reasons Zez-Kai refers to. Prior to the operation onboard the Endar Spire, Master Galdea recommended your ascension to the rank of Jedi Master. All Dantooine Council members voted in agreement."

The breath in my lungs whistled out in surprise. My thoughts froze. Whatever I had been expecting... it was not this.

"Considering all that has happened since then," Zez-Kai added gently. "Perhaps you can understand our deliberation. Dantooine is in dire need of Jedi Masters, yes, but this last year cannot have been easy for you."

"You have dabbled in the mind of a Sith Lord. We do not judge you for your actions, but we remain concerned for the effect it has had upon you," Atris added. Her voice had cooled back into a veneer of neutrality. "We cannot overlook your past, either. You joined the Jedi Order as an adult, grieving over the death of your mother and obsessing over the fate of Ulic Qel-Droma."

"Speak to us, Knight Sunrider," Zez-Kai urged. His thick moustache twitched as his warm brown eyes appraised me. "We would know your thoughts on the matter."

"I-" My eyes closed. Jedi Master... I had always known that, one day, this would be my fate, but-

I barely knew what to feel anymore

With a wrench, I opened my eyes and found the words the masters expected. "It is my life's dream to attain the rank of Jedi Master... when the Order deems me ready," I said quietly. "As for Master Surik's comments, she is correct – I was attached to my mother. I loved her dearly. We travelled the galaxy as nomads, but she was always so sad..."

I trailed off into silence, as the web of the past clutched at me with spidery fingers.

My birth father, the dashing Knight Andur Sunrider, had died when I was but a handful of days old. My only paternal figure had come a few years later: Ulic Qel-Droma, that laughing man who had made my mother smile again.

I could count a mere eight cycles of the Coruscanti sun when the Jedi Order exiled him for his crimes. And after he left, I saw my mother break a little more with each passing day.

For the longest time I had hated Ulic for that, with the same passionate zeal as any Republic citizen who would hate a traitor that the Jedi Order had allowed to live.

Love was a many-faceted thing. A placid lake, a blistering wildfire, a tempest that could shake a planet, or a soothing peace to calm the most rebellious of souls. It took my mother's death for me to
truly understand that, perhaps, she would have been happier living out her life with Ulic, even exiled and Force-blinded the way he was.

In the end, the greatest tragedy was that Nomi had never realized this herself.


I drew in another breath. The masters seated above me faded into the background, as the remembrance of my mother's heartache resurfaced. "Nomi... Nomi regretted what she did," I whispered. "I believe she would have given the Force back to Ulic, had she only known how."

That admission drew startled gasps from the four, but I barely heard.

Nomi's attack against the fallen Ulic had rendered him a captive prisoner of war to the Republic, and his cooperation thereafter led to the final strike against Exar Kun. Mother was then cemented as a heroine, celebrated throughout the galaxy – but her actions had also broken her, just as surely as they had castrated Ulic-

"I found him, after he turned my sister. After he slew his own brother. I called upon the might of the Force and ripped his connection to it away. I did that which I could never take back, no matter how I tried."

My mother was truly gifted in the Force, despite coming to it so late. And the Force caused her nothing but heartbreak.

"She died of septic lung disease," I said quietly. Sometimes, I wondered if it was a shattered heart finally fading. "After her death, I did everything I could to find out what happened to Ulic Qel-Droma."

My mother had always taken pains to tell me tales of Andur, of their adventures and their humble life together. I collected those stories like precious gems, hoarding them into my treasure chest of memory, taking them out at bedtime to watch the play of light dance around them.

She spoke little of Ulic.

But after her death, those small fragments she let slip came back to haunt me-

-he was quite a pilot, you know. Loved the stars. I gave him his nickname-

-turned his nose up at dejarik. Played this fancy And'zhai rune game instead-

-far more politically astute than myself-

"Your mother never returned to the Jedi Order, Knight Sunrider," Atris intoned in a chilly voice. "Is Ulic Qel-Droma the reason you did?"

My jaw clenched. "The Jedi Order is my life, Master Surik." I did not look away from her cold, cold gaze. "The reason I stayed is what matters, not the reason I joined."

"So, you admit-"

"Ulic's fate influenced my youth, yes, just as my mother's did." I looked away, then, to see the other three staring at me in silence. Waiting for the rest. "I learned that Ulic Qel-Droma had been exiled to Rhen Var. So, when I ascended to knighthood, I travelled there myself."

How could I not? My recollections of Ulic were fleeting, but at times I could still see his smirking
grin when my eyes closed. I'd remember his irreverent wit, that inability to take things seriously that
drove Mother insane, his passion and his conviction to strive for the good of all-

"The trail was cold," I continued, feeling my eyes sting. "I found no sign of him, nothing but a
barren rock. If Ulic Qel-Droma had been on that deserted planet once, he either met a lonely end or
moved on."

The silence that followed my words was thick and heavy in the air.

I stood, still as the night, my arms folded in the front of my robes. I didn't truly believe the High
Council wanted to hear of Nomi Sunrider... no, no, this was all about my suitability for masterhood.
Such a rank was not rashly granted and, given Dantooine's current disgrace, perhaps I could
understand why the High Council sought to ferret out my vulnerabilities.

"Singular attachment is dangerous to those who wield the Force," I said softly, lifting my chin. "It
took me some time amongst the Jedi to understand that, and even more time to find peace within my
own heart. I treasure the memory of my mother, but I have long since accepted her death, and sought
only to live by the wisdom of our code."

"And what of Ulic?" Lonna asked, shifting slightly in her chair. There was a flash of scarlet beneath
her humble robes, as if the impassive master hid a colourful life behind the drab brown that cloaked
us all. "You never found the closure you desired."

"I did," I countered. "I found closure within the Force. The galaxy is full of mysteries, and some
mysteries are to be accepted rather than solved."

I was not lying. Inner peace had come with years training at Master Galdea's side. Slowly, my
yearning to know of Ulic's fate dispersed into the Force. The past was done, and I had learned better
than to wonder over secrets that were not mine to unravel.

Mother had died peacefully. Ulic, I could only hope, had done the same. As for myself, I had learned
to forsake attachments, past and present, and focus on my own future.

Only one person had ever disrupted that focus-

"And what of Revan?" Atris clipped out.

"What?" I twitched, blinking, suddenly fearful that Atris had penetrated deep into my thoughts.
"What- what do you mean?"

The frosty master remained expressionless. "As I said earlier, child, you have knowingly entered the
psyche of a Sith Lord. That must have impacted you on some level."

The slightest current of relief shimmered through me. Atris had not intercepted anything.

"The Dantooine Council would not have undertaken such action lightly," Lonna added. "There must
have been hesitation regarding not only the feasibility of an artificial mind-rebuild, but also the ethical
dubiety. What of you, Knight Sunrider? Where do you stand on the matter?"

Lonna's question was harder to answer, so I faced Atris first. "I do not believe rebuilding Revan's
mind had any lasting effect on me, Master Surik, other than empathy for a fallen Jedi Knight. Master
Galdlea's psychic shielding protected me while we worked. The only Jedi affected by Darth
Revan's... corruption, was Bastila Shan, and perhaps that was inescapable due to the bond that bound
them together."
There was no response from the masters, and Lonna was still staring at me, waiting for me to respond. I could feel a sigh welling up from my lungs. "Do I doubt our actions? In truth, no. The plan succeeded." I had to keep reminding myself of that. "In the end, Revan led the Republic to the Star Forge, cleaned up her mess, and may have even redeemed herself along the way."

I could have laid credits on Atris' answering snort of derision, but I kept my gaze fixed on Lonna, as my mind eased back into a pool of acceptance and faith. Lonna was the true strength of the High Council, and her judgment would guide the others.

After a full minute of silence, Lonna's head finally dipped in a nod of acceptance. "Very well," she said. "I would like you to stay on Coruscant and confer with us for a few days, at least, before you return to Dantooine, Master Sunrider."

"I am in agreement," Zez-Kai added. "It is good to have you with us, Master Sunrider."

My eyelids fluttered closed. There should have been... something, something warm and golden, growing in my heart. Yet all that flashed through my mind was the helpless body of Darth Revan trapped in a kolto tank.

Perhaps to myself I could admit a small kernel of doubt resided in my soul. I left Dantooine after Darth Revan became Jen Sahara. I did not join Galdea on the Endar Spire. But even as I walked the galaxy, away from what we had done to Revan, doubt still trickled in to haunt me.

"You're one of us now, Master Sunrider," Kavar chortled. "Better find your grumpy voice to keep the younglings in check."

"Thank you," I managed, forcing my eyes back open to stare at the only one who hadn't spoken.

Atris' mouth was pursed with displeasure. Acceptance from the High Council was generally a formality – enclaves had the clout to raise their own masters.

Usually.

"Master Sunrider," Atris forced at last, her pale lips barely moving. "This is a weighty responsibility for one so young. Ensure that you always seek guidance from our doctrine. As Jedi Masters we are looked upon as a source of wisdom and humility, of counsel and acceptance. But not even a Jedi Master is immune to the lure of the Dark Side."

"Ever the downer," Kavar muttered under his breath.

"I understand," I told Atris, before dragging my gaze back to Lonna. This was my lifelong dream, and yet why did I feel so hollow inside?

Galdea. Karon.

Revan...

When Darth Revan had been our patient – our prisoner – all I had found in her broken mind was a roiling mass of fury smothering a grief so vast I almost choked on it. Nothing to answer my own personal, inappropriate questions. No flash of childhood, no face I searched for desperately when Galdea wasn't looking, no trail to lead me back to that one, odd coincidence that had shattered my equilibrium so many years before.

"Did you hear? Master Karon has returned to Coruscant, with a pair of sixteen year-olds she's demanding the Order accept! Sixteen, can you believe it? They're really powerful! Humans, both of
them, named Malak Devari and Revan Freeflight-

Freeflight-

My throat had clenched, and I could no more stop myself travelling to Coruscant than I could forget my yearning of the past-

…

I strode through the High Temple purposefully. A full day of presenting myself to the masters, and only now did I finally have a chance to seek out my quarry.

Ahead, in one of the many courtyards of the Temple, three padawans were clustered in deep conversation.

The teenage girl was exactly as described. Tallish, messy dark hair, lean and limber. Emotion contorted her face into a scowl.

A golden-skinned Twi'lek was staring at her indifferently. "No. You cheated. I will not accept any continuation of our arrangement." The words were voiced in an emotionless monotone, and yet still somehow came out forced.

"Padawan Revan!" I called, as much to stop the beginnings of some childish argument as to capture the attention of the young Jedi I had heard so much about.

The girl turned at my hail. Wary green eyes appraised me as a third figure stepped to her side – a tall Human male, whose broad face had long-suffering exasperation written all over it.

"Yes?" Padawan Revan responded, eye-balling me in an overt fashion I was meant to notice. "Can I help you?"

Behind her, the Twi'lek in Knight's robes took a step back.

"I'm not done, Yudan," Revan said without turning around. "I haven't finished apologizing to you."

The Human male at her side rolled his eyes. "Give over, Revvie. He's obviously not interested, and you can find plenty of teachers elsewhere."

"Padawan Malak is correct," the Twi'lek said crisply, his expression unconvincingly bland. "Our training sessions are over."

My gaze sharpened. The towering Human at Revan's side was Malak Devari, recruited at the same time and from the same unknown planet as Revan. And the Twi'lek beating a hasty retreat was Yudan Rosh, a freshly-minted Jedi Knight recently transferred from my home enclave.

I should have recognized him – but it had been a few years since I'd travelled back to Dantooine myself.

"No they frelling are not," Revan muttered to herself, before her gaze narrowed on me. "What do you want?"

Malak Devari was less irritated, now, as he turned to face me with a grin. He and Revan were both already notorious padawans, and both old enough that many voiced doubts over their eligibility in the first place.

The Force usually awoke well before puberty. My mother and my aunt Nayama had been rare
outliers. Revan and Malak—well, they'd probably had the touch of the Force for years, without knowing how to tap into it. I understood their homeworld was just another forgotten planet deep in the Outer Rim.

But here at the heart of the galaxy, they could not be wholly oblivious to the whispers surrounding them.

-Karon Enova should have left them in the Outer Rim-

-Force-sensitives taken so old, you know how that always turns out-

-They'll be too attached, too emotive, too entrenched in their ways-

"Well?" Revan urged with a growing frown.

"I apologize for intruding," I said smoothly, allowing my lips to curve with what I hoped was a warm smile. "I am Jedi Knight Vima Sunrider. I have a personal question for you, if you will."

I saw the flare of curiosity spark in Revan's gaze. The side of her mouth quirked, and she jerked her head toward the Temple gardens in suggestion.

It did not surprise me when Malak Devari followed in our wake.

The fragrant scent of starflowers enveloped us as we entered the gardens. The air was thick with the buzzing of maple bees and the soothing sound of trickling water. Oh, I had never liked Coruscant—the shining gem in the Republic's crown, the beacon in the Core—but the Jedi High Temple always felt like a second home.

"So?" Revan prompted, raising her brows. "What do you want to know?"

"Forgive my curiosity," I began. I'd always found it easy to engage in conversation, but this was an intrusive question, and a difficult way to open dialogue. "I understand you hail from a planet called Talshion?"

Revan nodded, frowning again.

"May I ask the name of your father?"

I saw the moment her shutters fell down. The spike of wariness sharpening her expression. Malak, taking two steps closer. "No sodding idea. My mother landed on Talshion pregnant with me. She never left."

My strength in the Force was with the mind, with the subtler powers and uses. I could sense she was telling the truth, but I'd annoyed her by asking. Still, in for a cred chit, in for a ship—

"Your mother, then? What was her name?"

Revan scowled, eyes flashing with emotion a teenage padawan should be above. "None of your frelling business."

"Please," I said quietly. "I do not mean to offend. It is your name, that is all. I am curious if it is related to someone I once knew."

She eyed me over, and the disparagement in her gaze was clearly evident. I might wear the humble robes of a Jedi, but I was strong, well-fed, and shone with health. Revan and Malak had not shed the scrawniness of their malnourished youth. Malak was uncommonly tall, and they both moved with
sinewy grace and agility – but it was the quick movements of the hunted, the street kids, the ones who’d had to fend for themselves.

"We were all homeless bums there, Knight Sunrider. Trust me, you won't have known anyone we did."

And yet, I pressed on. "So, your mother's surname was Freeflight?"

-he was quite a pilot, you know. Loved the stars. I gave him his nickname. Freeflight. Sometimes, when he wanted to scare me, it was more like Freefall-

"What, you think I gave myself a surname?" Revan snapped defensively.

I was good at reading people. Very good. And the Force whispered to me that she had.

"Revvie," Malak murmured, shooting me a suspicious glance.

I sighed, suddenly defeated. It was no more than a coincidence. A powerful Force user from a forgotten planet, wearing the nickname my mother had once given another- one who had vanished from the galaxy-

The math doesn’t add up. She's only six years younger than me. Ulic would have had to conceive her while he was still involved with my mother, and I find that impossible to believe-

"My mother came by that name honestly," Padawan Revan lied to me. "And I'm not interested in talking about this anymore."

"Names like that are common where we come from," Malak added. The look in his eyes said he didn't appreciate me upsetting her. "Freeflight. Starfire. Skywalker. All names of hope for those who have none."

Revan laughed, the corner of her mouth twitching. "I didn't know any Sunriders. But that name has the same ring."

"My lineage is well-documented," I said stiffly, feeling a pang for the Twi'lek who had been holding back his emotions earlier. "Not that lineage is of any import. I am sorry for wasting your time, Padawan."

...

"Vima?"

I blinked, as the sharp edge of memory fled. Glancing up, I recognized the confusion in Kavar's gaze, the concern in Zez-Kai's-

"Forgive me," I said suddenly. "Ascension to masterhood... this moment is somewhat... emotional, perhaps. I have only ever heard my mother referred to as Master Sunrider."

The words had the edge of subterfuge about them. Misdirection. Of course it would be natural for me to think of Nomi now, but I wasn't, not truly. Nomi's death I had accepted a long time ago. I had been at her side during her last moments, but as for Ulic-

"Our own personal history leaves marks on us all," Zez-Kai said gently.

"But it does not have to define us," I replied, with a lightness I did not feel.
That nickname... I had told myself it was naught but a coincidence, and yet Revan Freeflight remained a source of fascination for me. Her life... I could not help but see it as a sharper mirror of Ulic's, that charismatic Jedi Knight who had fallen just like Revan did, due to the horrors of a different war.

I managed a smile, before nodding to Lonna. "I will remain on Coruscant for a few days, as requested, and seek your wisdom before returning home."

"Your home is with every enclave, Vima," Zez-Kai murmured. "Or, more accurately, your home is within the Force."

"Of course." I nodded, even if my heart did not agree. Perhaps when I made it back to Dantooine, I would find the depth of peace I was lacking. Perhaps, then, I would have the courage to finally let go of Ulic Qel-Droma, and the past that I would never fully understand.

xXx

Dustil Onasi:
Rwookrrorro, Kashyyyk

It was funny how, after a couple of those weird fermented berry drinks, everything felt a little hazy and golden. Less of a trial. Even the non-stop howls of the Wookiees didn't dig into my ears the way they had a few hours ago, although I could've done without the musky stench of wet fur that seemed to smother the entire place.

"Better not have any more, son," Dad said, nudging me gently as he sat down on the ramshackle bench next to me. We were seated on the fringes of a large meeting area that dominated the centre of Zaalbar's home village, surrounded by food and drink and hairy Wookiees all taking turns to rumble out some story that only Mission or Jolee could understand.

"Dad," I complained, rolling my eyes at him. Frakk, we used to knock down shots of vox back in Dreshdae. If he thought I was gonna sputter out over two mugs of brewed fruit juice-

"Okay, okay!" Dad held one hand up in mock surrender, but it was the wry grin on his face that had me smiling back. I hadn't seen that grin in a while. "I promised myself I wouldn't lecture you, Dustil. Just- take it easy on the drinks, alright?"

"Yeah. I will." I cleared my throat, not wanting that look to vanish from his face. "Why don't you get a drink, too?"

It was the sort of thing normal fathers and sons did, I thought. Bonded over booze or something. But with the way Dad's grin fled and his brows lowered, I suddenly realized it was the wrong thing to say.

"I don't drink." His words were cold, almost scathing, and I pulled away from him on instinct.

"Fine," I snapped, stung. "Let's just sit back and watch Mission get absolutely rat-faced instead, huh?"

"No, Dustil- I, uh, look, I didn't mean-" His hand on my shoulder had me turning back to face him despite myself. "I didn't mean to sound like that. Look, you wouldn't know- of course you wouldn't know, but after Telos I, uh, I didn't exactly handle life all that well."

Dad's mouth had twisted in pain, and his eyes were dark with sorrow. I blinked as understanding dawned, and felt like kicking myself for ever thinking he'd never really cared. "Frakk, Dad, you
were a drunk?" I blurted out in shock.

He flinched, but at least followed that with a chuckle, running one hand absently through his hair. "Say it a bit louder, Dustil, I don't think the Core heard."

My gaze fled to Mission, but she was in the middle of reciting some hare-brained adventure to a grey-haired Wookiee, and hadn't noticed my outburst at all. The flickering light from nearby sconces flushed pink on her cheeks, glistening against a drying tear track as she leaned forward to gesticulate something wildly.

"Mission will be okay," Dad said softly, following my gaze. "Ordo will make sure she doesn't have too many. I think- I think coming here was the right thing to do."

"Yeah," I agreed, as Mission smiled sadly and leaned against the grey-haired Wookiee whose name I'd completely forgotten. "I think she met that Old One when she was here last time. Funny how everyone seems to flock to her, huh?"

"That Old One's name is Tasharr," Jolee Bindo said, as he flopped down on my other side. "Ain't hard to remember names if you put your mind to it, y'know."

"Thanks for the advice," I muttered. "Maybe I'll get them all right if I spend a couple of decades here."

"Hah!" Jolee lifted his mug of pungent booze, took a large swallow, and then turned back to pin me with a beady gaze. "Didn't your father ever tell you not to talk back to your elders, boy?"

"I had enough trouble keeping him away from the underground swoop tracks," Dad said, the corner of his mouth twitching.

I blinked, suddenly hit by a wave of nostalgia, both sharp with emotion and faded with the passage of time. "I'd forgotten that," I said slowly. "Swooping wasn't exactly on the list of electives at the Academy."

Dad's breath hitched as if in pain, and when I swung back to him, that black melancholy had crossed over his face once more. I'd always found it- hard, so damned hard, to talk about anything personal- but maybe it was the drink warming my belly, or just seeing how Mission was dealing with her own loss, that suddenly made me want to try.

"It's okay, Dad," I muttered, feeling awkward, but nudging him anyway. "I'll be able to pick up swooping again. Frakk, since we're heroes and everything now, maybe Mission and I can fund a start-up track on Citadel Station-"

Dad choked. "Oh no," he gasped, his eyes widening in horror. "You and Mission. What was I thinking?"

Jolee cackled, leaning past me to waggle a finger knowingly at Dad. "You know the problem with youth nowadays? They're young!"

I resisted the urge to roll my eyes again. "Shouldn't you be over there translating? Like, before Ordo pisses a Wookiee off and starts a brawl?"

Ordo was seated around the centre table – which was no more than a half-dozen roughly sawn planks lashed together with some sort of green rope – while he chugged back a mug of booze and occasionally leaned over to say something to Mission.
"Nah, Juhani needs the practice," Jolee said, nodding at the Cathar who was deep in conversation with the Wookiee chieftain, Freyyr. I remembered his name, at least – the one who'd all but shook the damn wroshyrs with a bone-chilling howl when he'd first learned of his son's death. "Jedi are meant to be fluent in at least a dozen languages. I'm doing her a favour, really, giving her a chance to brush up on Shyriiwook before she leaves."

At that very moment, the Wookiee chieftain slammed his over-sized mug on the table and clambered to his feet. His fur was dark and gnarled in places, and slung around his hairy chest was some sort of necklace braided with shells and scraps of bone that probably looked impressive to anyone who'd never stepped foot inside a city market before.

Still, the Wookiees knew how to celebrate their dead. I only had to see the way Mission was smiling through her tears to understand that.

Freyyr barked something loud and long, before snatching up his mug and raising it high in the air. The rest of the Wookiees roared, loud enough to make me want to stopper my ears like a frakking kid, before downing their respective drinks and calling for refills.

"May the life and wisdom of Zaalbar never be forgotten," Jolee translated softly. "Ach, I'd expected Freyyr to turn his back on the outside world after Chuundar's death. But it was the right call, coming here to tell him of Zaalbar's fate and how he's been honoured by non-Wookiee folk. Freyyr may never warm to outsiders, but he won't entirely shut his ears to them, either."

"Especially if Mission keeps visiting," Dad commented. "I have a funny feeling she won't let go of her ties to Kashyyyk."

"Humph. Knowing what parts of the past to hold onto and what's best to move on from is a hard lesson for us all. I'll be back here too, I imagine, but not to stay." Jolee had turned serious, as he eyeballed us both over a tray of some weird meat on a stick I wasn't game enough to try. "I heard Mission's agreed to go to Telos with you, Carth. Suppose it wouldn't be right to leave you all alone with two teenagers on your hands."

I could feel my eyes narrowing, even as something inside of me eased. "Is that old man speak for agreeing to train me?"

Jolee barked a laugh, as Dad leaned forward with a smile. "We'll be glad to have you, Jolee. Maybe you'll do a better job than me at ensuring Dustil showers every day."

"Dad!" I spluttered. "Seriously, what the frakk?"

"Hah!" Jolee thumped me on the shoulder with a bony hand. "If we have to deal with your impudence, boy, then you can live with our snark. We're old. We've earned that right."

"Hey, I'm not that old-"

"Grey hairs, Dad," I teased, turning to shoot him a quick grin. "Plenty of 'em."

"And now that I've stirred the pot, I'll head back to the others," Jolee drawled with a sly wink. "Although, one thing first- I've half a mind to travel with Juhani, see her safely to Dantooine before I head to Telos. I'm hoping you lot can stay out of trouble for a week or two before I return."

Jolee Bindo was old and annoying at times – and yet the moment Dad had suggested him staying with us, helping me, I'd felt an immediate sense of relief. I didn't need any training, not really, but then I couldn't deny how much I'd learned just being around Jolee and Revan and Yudan-
"I don't reckon a Jedi Knight needs an escort," I said slowly. "You want to see if those rumours about Rosh are true."

They were all over the holonets. *Dark Jedi alleged to be in Jedi custody! Dantooine denies harbouring Republic war criminal! The search for the truth – could Yudan Rosh still be alive?*

Of course, the media also claimed that Dad had been shacking up with Bastila Shan; that Ordo was the new Mandalore seeking a covert alliance with the Republic; that Mission was the secret heir to Ryloth-

All trash, but the stories on Yudan Rosh kept filtering to the headlines. And even if Rosh *hadn't* saved my life, I'd've wanted it to be true. Him and Revan- sometimes I hated what they'd done in the past, everything they'd pissed all over when they'd spiralled into the dark. And at other times, I only had to remember how I'd known them at the end, to understand that any past – no matter how downright evil – could be overcome, if one just kept on trying.

If they could do it, then frakk – so could I.

"Aye, that's part of it," Jolee admitted. "I'm a nosy old bugger, I'll admit, but he was one of the crew in the end, wasn't he?"

"I suppose he was," Dad said quietly. "Good luck, Jolee."

Jolee nodded, before straightening from the wooden bench and ambling off in Mission's direction. She was smiling again, her cheeks wet but her eyes shining as she said something to the Wookiee next to her, and the flickering firelight was dancing across the hue of her skin-

"He won't-" Dad cleared his throat, sounding uncomfortable. "Jolee won't tell the Jedi about you. You know that, right, son?"

"What?" I tore my gaze away from Mission, blinking, and it took a sec to parse what Dad was saying. "Er, yeah. We already spoke about it. Guess I was lucky on Coruscant, or maybe the Jedi just didn't have the stones to approach me."

We hadn't stayed long in the Core. Only the handful of days necessary, before Dad could beg off – which was good, because it wasn't like I could hold up my Force weaves while asleep, even if the Senate-provided apartments were blessedly free of any Jedi.

Juhani – she hadn't promised to keep quiet about me, and considering that Belaya Linn's death hung between us, I didn't think I had the right to ask – but she'd at least agreed not to say anything on Coruscant.

Sooner or later I'd have a reckoning with someone from the Order, but I also thought Ordo was right – they didn't have the clout to drag me in, not unwillingly.

Dad was staring at me in silence, and I wondered if the same thoughts were running through his head.

"It'll be all right, Dad," I said softly. "You'll see."

Funny, I'd never been one for optimism, but across the wooden courtyard Juhani was smiling at old man Bindo, while Ordo threw his head back in laughter at Mission's side. The Force was wild and free on this planet, but there was a simple sort of peace to it as well – maybe it was the Wookiees, maybe the frakking trees, or maybe just this oddball group of sents who'd all come to mean something to me.
Mission was grinning, waving her hands wildly as she said something to Zaalbar's dad. Without realizing what I was doing, the Force stretched out, plucking her words clear and crisp to my ears through the throng of conversation.

"...and then Jen said we had to dress up as Sand People to go any further, and sheesh, you shoulda seen the look on Big Z's face, when he held up a set of desert robes that barely even reached his belly..."

"Mission's talking about Revan," I muttered absently, and then immediately regretted it when I felt Dad stiffen. I turned, feeling my gut clench tight. "Dad- you should talk about her. I mean, I don't know if I would've ever been okay with you two- well, maybe- but, look, I'll listen, okay? She was... she was something else, even I'll admit that. And I'm not talking about what she did before."

Dad had shut his eyes, leaning back and drawing in a deep breath before speaking. "I'm not ready," he muttered, low enough that I barely heard. "Not- not yet. I- you're right, though. You and me, we bottle things up, and maybe we shouldn't. So... why don't you tell me a bit about this girl you lost? Selene, was it?"

Even now, it was hard to hold back a flinch. Selene was an old wound, not quite scabbed-over – a dull ache still present in my heart. Her death had almost broken my friendship with Mekel, but more than that- her death had felt like the last string of light in my life, cruelly torn away.

I didn't want to talk about her – but I'd be a bleeding hypocrite if I didn't try, and maybe I needed to, anyway. Besides, it was plain as frakking space that Dad could do with the diversion.

"Selene had a big heart," I said quietly. The words were hard, at first, to force out. "She didn't belong in Korriban – none of us did, not really – but she was just too... nice for the place. She kept talking about leaving, you know?"

Dad was silent, but he was looking at me again, as if transfixed by my words.

"We- there was something between us. She wanted me to go with her. I don't know if I would've, but I thought about it." I shifted uncomfortably, breaking his gaze. "Maybe that was why Uthar took her out. I don't know. She deserved better."

"Yeah," Dad said, a word of agreement, of commiseration.

"Mission reminds me of her, a bit," I continued. The more I spoke, the easier the words came. "She has the same heart. But she's got more backbone, I think. Selene- Korriban would have broken her, in the end. I think Mission's made of sterner stuff."

"Mission in a Sith Academy," Dad commented in a droll voice. "Now there's a scary thought."

I snickered. "Frakk, I don't want to think about a Force-sensitive Mission. She'd give Mex a run for his creds." I leaned forward to swig back another mouthful of berry booze. "I'm glad she's coming with us. I'd miss her, otherwise. What does it mean, you becoming her guardian? Like, you gonna try giving her a curfew? Because I really don't see that going down well."

"I'm sure we'll work it out, son."

I had a sudden image of Mission slicing her way out of whatever apartment Dad had scored, before running riot through Citadel Station. After all, the first time I'd met her, she'd been scoping out rooms in Dreshdae to break into.

Damn, but this was going to be fun.
"Legal guardianship is mostly for the records," Dad continued. "It means the law will see her as part of my family. She'll have the same rights as any Telosian."

"Family-" My stomach clenched, and my mouth suddenly ran dry. "Does that mean, she'll be like, my sister?"

I was too aghast to be mortified at the squeak of my own voice. Mission, a sister- the thought was just... just- wrong. I stared over at her in horror – a young, attractive Twi'lek my own age, who I certainly cared for but not at all like a sister-

"Really?" Dad said, his voice breaking in surprise. "You- you and Mission?"

"What?" I blurted, almost fumbling the mug in my hands before I unsteadily placed it on the table. "No! No, Dad, you've got it all wrong-"

There was a bemused look on Dad's face, but I barely noticed it with the way my face was blazing in embarrassment. "We're friends!" I protested hotly. "Just friends! But not, like, brother and sister friends!"

"Okay, cool your jets, son." He was grinning again, the bastard. "Just friends, even if she does remind you of your old girlfriend-"

"Dad!"

He threw back his head and laughed, louder than I'd heard since I was a kid. If it wasn't for the humiliation coiling in my gut, maybe I'd have been glad to hear it. Maybe.

"Okay, okay!" Dad gasped, still laughing, even as I glared bloody murder at him. Frakk, what if he said something to Mission? I had the sudden urge to pick up that damn mug of juice and throw it straight at him- "I won't say anything more, son, I promise. Stang, you should see the look on your face!"

"Dad-"

"I promise, nothing more on the topic." His grin faded, but his eyes still twinkled with mirth. "Whether I adopt her fully or just become her guardian - it's only labels, Dustil. We'll be a family, and that's what counts. We can decide what it means to us."

"Family," I echoed, the embarrassment fading as I stared back over to the others. They were all smiling and laughing as they grieved together. "Yeah. I suppose I can live with that."

xXx

Selene Vash:
Mining Outpost, Korriban

The door creaking open had me lurching from my bedroll in fright.

"Mazza," I gasped, as recognition shot hot relief in place of adrenaline. Late-night calls usually meant only one thing for a slave, even if I was better protected than most. "What- what are you doing here? If you get caught-"

The Twi'leki girl slipped inside, not even bothering to shush me. Slaves were confined to their quarters after final supper – if they weren't called away elsewhere. I couldn't protect Mazza from a beating if one of the miners found her here. Frakk, I might not even be able to protect myself-
"I couldn't leave without telling you," the girl hissed. She was young, younger than me, all pale green skin and smooth curves and far too good for this sort of life.

"Without telling me?" I repeated dumbly, dragging a threadbare blanket over my shoulders. Nights were cold in the mining outpost, what with the lack of any decent heating. "Mazza, you have to-

I stopped, mid-speech, for my eyes had stilled on her neck. Her bare, unadorned, free neck.

"We're breaking out," she said flatly, leaning against the plimfoam wall. "Jax slipped some tranqs into the night's meal, and I pilfered the controllers for our collars. Got 'em all off. We're- we're gonna run to Dreshdae. Maybe without the collars no one will stop us, and we can hitch a ride off this godscursed dustball."

I froze. Escape... escape seemed no more than a distant dream, these days. Two years, give or take, since I'd woken with a gem-encrusted ring of servitude around my neck, and a fat Gamorrean named Neb as my new master.

My hand rose, wavering, to land against the shock collar that still shackled me. "Run- run to Dreshdae?"

"You can't come with us, Selene." Mazza's words were cold and hard. "Look, we know what you are. We ain't dumb. You never get picked by any of the rotgrubs here, and you've been here the longest. Jax and the others... they'll lynch you if you join us, because we all know what happens when a Force-user runs the gauntlet through the caves. Thing I don't get, though, is why you never bloody tried using your magic to get out of here."

My breath stuck in my throat.

The isolated mining outpost had no starport, no roads leading anywhere on this deserted planet, no exit at all except the merchant route back through the shyrack caves.

I had tried to run, in the early days. Fired a mind-trick at the traders heading back, figured a risk on the terentateks was better than an eternity as Neb's pretty arm-candy, even if I had the skills to avoid a forced dalliance between the sheets.

But Neb found out. Neb always found out. For a Gamorrean, he was plenty smart, and I sometimes wondered if he left me alone at night because he knew what I was... what I had been...

Although, if that was the case, wouldn't he use more than just a shock collar to hold me?

My thoughts jumbled into chaos, and all the while Mazza was silent – silently demanding my answer.

"I'm not- I'm not strong," I croaked out, dropping my gaze from hers. "A psychic suggestion or two, sure, I can manage that. But at the Academy... I always had others helping me, and- look, even if I did make it past the terentateks, I'm marked for death by- by someone pretty powerful. First time any Dark Jedi senses me..."

I trailed off, swallowing. No one left the Sith Academy alive. Some days, I wondered if my existence here even counted.

"A failed Initiate," Mazza murmured, her waxed lekku curling around her neck. She'd slipped into travelling clothes, I noticed dully. I'd never seen her so covered up. The breakout must have been planned in advance, and she'd held it back from me until the last minute. "Figured it was something like that. Look, you can't travel with us, but you could wait an hour or so and try your luck. Living
like this... you'll end up as nothing but a scared gizka, hopping at the commands of those bastards. A clean death's better than that. Here-"

She lobbed something at me, and I had to scrabble out of the bedroll to catch it. Cold air chilled my skin, and I found myself staring blankly at the titasteel block of a shock controller.

"You've saved me from some hellish nights, Selene, even if you couldn't stop 'em all. Guess I thought I owed you something for that. Look, don't follow us too close, okay? Jax has a blaster and–well, I reckon I don't need to spell things out."

Slowly, I raised my gaze back to hers. The corner of her mouth twitched – almost a smile – and then Mazza left, as quickly as she'd entered.

I swallowed, collapsing back down to the bedroll, with my fingers gripped tight around the edges of the controller.

Staying here meant survival, of a sort. Depressing the power button to my slave collar could mean anything.

A chance at freedom. A quick death from a monster. A 'saber to the gut in Dreshdae – or worse, if I was dragged back alive to the Academy.

My eyelids fluttered closed as memory seethed to the surface. Memory – frayed with the monotony of months spent evading the clutches of rough hands and leering grins, and drawing on the Force for protection – even though with each passing day the Force felt weaker and fainter, like I was slowly losing the only thing that kept me sane–

It'd been stupid, so damn stupid of me to run to the shyrack caves that day. I'd never even paused to suspect the data-note hadn't come from Mekel – it had frakking sounded like him, and we'd talked about leaving, and the entrance caves were safe enough, even for Force-users, so long as you didn't go too deep–

I was there early, and that was what'd saved me. I got there before Uthar Wynn and his trio of lackeys, but when I saw them instead of Mekel–

I ran.

Deep, deep, deeper into the caves, with blaster shots firing at my back and the echoing roars of a monster coming closer. I wasn't strong in the Force, and I knew so little- I could barely enhance my own speed- and then terror eclipsed everything but my frantic need to run–

Uthar and his men were faster.

I was hit – once, twice, then badly in the back. I fell along the edges of a large cave as a nightmarish beast screamed into existence and came straight for me.

I knew no more until I woke in the mining outpost on other side of the ranges. I was shivering, scared, and in more pain than I'd ever been.

Neb and his traders had been in the area. They'd risked grabbing my body after Uthar had disappeared – convinced of my death, no doubt. Neb said it'd been a close call with the terentatek, but I'd fallen into a nook just beyond where the monster's claw could reach.

I'd thought it was fortuitous luck, at first.
Neb thought me a runaway joygirl, for I hadn't donned Initiate robes that day. And in Neb's twisted mind, that made me his. A shock collar was cinched tight around my neck, plasticeel gems studded throughout it. A neural inhibitor it was not, but I still lacked choices.

I could run the gauntlet back to Dreshdae – but the chances of survival for a Force-sensitive were next to nothing. And if I did make it, what then? There were eyes everywhere, and Uthar Wynn wanted me dead.

Uthar frakking Wynn!

I'd lived with fear so long that I no longer knew what happiness felt like. Sometimes I would close my eyes, and almost remember the taste of my first kiss. The uncertainty in his brown eyes, as his hands cupped my face and his soft lips brushed against mine-

I'd dreamed of Dustil leaving with us. I needed them both: Mekel – my ballsy best mate who always made me laugh, and Dustil, the boy who made me dream. I was gonna organize the trip with Mekel, and then beg Dustil to join us-

But Mekel would be long dead, now. Uthar had known of our dreams to escape, so he would've gone after Mekel, too – unless Yuthura Ban's growing favour had been enough to shield him.

My heart clenched. And Dustil... Dustil was probably an Adept by now.

Some days, I'd pretend Dustil was somewhere else. Somewhere far from Korriban, slowly healing himself from the frakked-up life we'd been shunted into, maybe reunited with his family and out of the war-

I'd stopped dreaming of my own future long ago.

*I'll stop dreaming of everything if I stay here. Mazza's right about that. Even the Force is slipping away from me. Sooner or later, there'll be nothing but my body left.*

This wasn't a life. I had never been... brave, I knew that. I'd always needed sents like Mekel or Dustil to lean on, and maybe... maybe, that had to stop. Trying for a better life was worth the risk of death from a terentatek's claws or a Dark Jedi's lightsaber.

With a sudden clench of my jaw, I looked down at the shock controller and thumbed the power off.

xXx

**Sharlan Nox:**
*Valley of the Sith Lords, Sith Academy, Korriban*

The Valley of the Sleeping Kings lay quiet.

Korriban's only sun, Horuset, glinted weakly above a craggy peak of the mountain ranges. An eddy of dust swirled ahead, caught up in a lonely breeze, capturing no one in its sandy grasp.

The grounds of the Sith Academy were truly deserted.

A slight shuffle from behind, however, reminded me that that was not quite the whole truth-

"The tomb is here, my lord," the mewling Human mumbled, taking a step closer to my side.

The Force was deep and rich on this planet, aged with the might of dead ghosts. A small tendril of
telepathic power curled from my grasp, hooking deep into the little morsel's mind.

**I have eyes, pet.**

Of course, the walking battery could not see my eyes, not through the ornamental bone mask I was now forced to wear.

*Your reluctance to endure physical discomfort led to this debilitation,* Traya had snapped; unwilling, at first, to examine the mess of my face. *Had you left the injury alone, perhaps I could have done more-*

On the dying Star Forge, I had scrabbled for the Force, for regeneration, for *anything* to stop the blinding agony ripping through nerve-endings that screamed deep into my skull. My ability to self-heal assuaged my affliction, but I soon found out that ability was not flawless-

Hair would not regrow on my scalp. An amputated proboscis could not be recreated – and when that execrable Twi'lek had torn out my flesh, sinewy fibres from deep in the structure of my throat and sinuses had been affected. Scent was now beyond me. My vocal chords were damaged. I could still feed in the primal manner of my species, but only half as well-

My hate was an unquenchable fire, simmering with the infinite burn of retribution. Oh, there was more than one way to strengthen myself from the life of others. The Force did not fail me, and I could play a longer game than any other mortal.

For I vowed, one day, that I would see the demise of Yudan Rosh at my own hands. And that irritating child Dustil Onasi would be reclaimed as *my* pet.

One day.

"Yes, yes of course, my lord," the titbit was stuttering. "And- and my name is Shaardan-"

My Force clenched, burrowing deep into his mind. I needed someone to speak for me, now, and he would do – until I found a sentient more pleasing on the eyes. The pet gasped as I took a draft of his life-force, feeding from his infantile emotions of panic and fear as they channelled into my own strength.

**Your name is pet.**

The boy collapsed, wheezing in the Korriban dust, and wisely spoke no more.

I smiled, dismissing him, and turned to survey the valley again. If I stretched deep enough into the Force, I could feel the echoes of all those who had perished here, due to infighting that was as natural to the Dark Side as breathing. The Sleeping Kings themselves, resting in their tombs, left their own ripples, murmuring of past misdeeds. The countless cut down by their hand resonated through the Force, palpable to anyone strong enough to listen.

The battlegrounds I had walked throughout the galaxy bore the same eerie discordance. So much death in one place frayed against the edges of life, whispering a dark lullaby of power. Korriban was like a rich wine for the soul, and coming here always reminded me of my true birthplace.

Malachor.

I may have been breathed oxygen for eons before that fateful massacre, but I had been naught but a plant-seed then, awaiting the right nutrients. Meetra Surik had sown me in the rich soil of the Force, but Malachor was the rain that had finally allowed me to grow.
And no matter what injuries I was forced to withstand, now was my time to bloom.

The dying rays of Horuset warmed the bone mask affixed to my face. Korriban was a wellspring of power, and Traya had directed me here to investigate what remained of Malak’s Sith before some robed wet blankets showed up to cleanse the place or some rot. Perhaps my latest master hoped I would return with dark treasure for her perusal, but if so, then frankly she should have travelled here herself.

I was growing beyond her leash. One day soon, the rope that tethered me to her would snap.

_I am not the only one. Her other apprentice... we worked together, once, at Malachor. I have sensed his pain, his discontent. Perhaps it is time to approach him._

But, first, there was the matter of my own curiosity to feed.

The Force thrummed, clenching deep into the pet that writhed at my feet. I had already gleaned images of what had happened from his mind- a bloody coup at the Academy, with the few survivors turning tail. This one had sought refuge in the tombs. Flashes of one tomb in particular crept in pet's mind, giving credence to the rumours I had heard whispered in the space port-

A collapsed cave. A failed headmaster, sucking out the secrets of a dead Sith Lord. Vampiric rituals of life-drain and immortality- oh, and how _intriguing_ that sounded. Just the thought was enough to whet my appetite and shake my control-

Suddenly, the lifeblood of my pet rushed into my veins, peaking high and sharp, spiking a welcome burn through my veins. The body at my feet shuddered once, and then stilled.

I grew hungry, at times. But there was always another meal to be found.

I stepped forward, leaving the dead in the dust. I would find another spokesperson easily enough. In front of me was a collapsed rock face that would take some time and energy to clear, but whatever imbecile thought they could bury Tulak Hord's secrets from me was vastly mistaken.

The Force shuddered in my bones. I smiled, and raised a hand to call the power in ever deeper, before unleashing it directly at the closed entrance of the tomb.

_xXx_

**HK-47:**

_Republic Intelligence Command Post, Galactic City, Coruscant_

Start-up System Check
Neural and Memory Core Functions... Restricted
Motoring Functions... Unable to Access
Shielding Functions... Unable to Access
Assassination Protocols... Unable to Access

#ERROR: Neural and Motor Restraining Bolt Installed

Audio Sensors ... Online
Optical Sensors ... Online
Tactile Sensors ... Online
Olfactory Sensors ... Online
Gustatory Sensors ... Not Installed
Scanning External Environment

Location: Unknown Engineering Room

2 Organic Meatbags in Targeting Area

Target Analysis: Organic Meatbag 1:
Species: Human, Male
Facial Recognition Result: Negative
Body Language Analysis: Inquisitive
Visual Analysis: Clothed in Standard-issue Republic Engineering Coveralls
Temporary Name Assigned: Nosy Tech

Target Analysis: Organic Meatbag 2:
Species: Rodian, Female
Facial Recognition Result: Negative
Body Language Analysis: Attentive
Temporary Name Assigned: Bug-eyed Grunt

Conclusion: HK-47 Has Been Captured by Republic Forces

Situation Analysis:
...Factor: Status of Master Unknown
...Factor: Location Unknown
...Factor: Motor and Combat Functions Impeded by Restraining Bolt
...Factor: Neural Interfacing with External Informational Sources Not Accessible
Internal Conclusion: Observe and Gather Information

Primary Objective Accepted: Discover Status of Master
Secondary Objective Accepted: Remove Restraining Bolt

Input – Nosy Tech: "Hello there, lil droid."
Voice Stress Analysis: Curious

Output Not Required

Input – Bug-eyed Grunt: "You sure it's safe to turn this thing on?"
Voice Stress Analysis: Wary

Input – Nosy Tech to Bug-Eyed Grunt: "Chill out, Sharron, I got this."

Permanent Name Assigned: Sharron to Bug-Eyed Grunt

Input – Nosy Tech to HK-47: "Okay, lil droid. State your primary purpose."

Accessing: Internal Dictionary
...Analysing
Reference: 'lil'... Little, Diminutive, Non-Threatening
Conclusion: Parameters Do Not Match HK-47

Output Not Required

Input – Sharron: "Thought you said this thing would respond to you?"
Voice Stress Analysis: Disgruntled
Input – Nosy Tech: "We-ell, the restraining bolt hasn't quite taken control of his neural core yet. I ain't never seen this coding language before... look, I'm tethered in, it's just a matter of time before I decrypt his databanks..."

Audio/Visual Tracking: Nosy Tech Inputting Commands into Console

#ALERT: Breach in Neural Core Detected
#ERROR: External Breach Unintelligible

Initiating Command: Block Neural Infiltration Breach
...Failed

Echo: Access to Neural and Memory Core: Restricted

Internal Response: Aggravation

Input – Sharron: "You already got its databanks copied, right? Agent Tharis can take it from-"

Voice Stress Analysis: Impatient

Input – Nosy Tech (interrupting): "I can fast-track the decryption sequence if I can see how he reacts to basic commands. So just relax, okay? I already got physical control. See, I can make this lil droid dance."

Audio/Visual Tracking: Nosy Tech Inputting Commands into Console

#ALERT: External Commands Detected in Motor Core

Physical: Left Lower Limb Kicking Into Air
Physical: Left Limb Swinging Low
Physical: Left Limb Stationary
Physical: Right Lower Limb Kicking Into Air
Physical: Right Limb Swinging Low
Physical: Right Limb Stationary

Initiating Combat Mode
...Combat Mode Not Available

Audio Tracking: Snicker
...Source: Sharron

Internal Response: Vigorous Expletive Regarding Diseased Organic Sires and Their Mutated Spawn

Input – Nosy Tech: "And it's not like the lil droid is dangerous, not since I removed all his weaponry."

Voice Stress Analysis: Gleeful

Accessing: Weaponry
...Primary Blaster: Uninstalled
...Secondary Blaster: Uninstalled
...C-22 Flame Carbine: Uninstalled
...FC-1 Flechette Launcher: Uninstalled
...Kamino Saberdart: Uninstalled
...Left Lower Limb Jolt-Gun: Uninstalled
...Right Lower Limb Grappling Hook: Uninstalled
...Left Forearm Chiv-Blade: Uninstalled
...Right Forearm Shock-Stick: Disabled
Conclusion: HK-47 Disarmed

Tertiary Objective Accepted: Rearn HK-47
Quaternary Objective Accepted: Liquefy Organs in Nosy Tech

Input – Sharron: "Okay, okay, I suppose you got it under control. I'll go update Agent Tharis."

Audio/Visual Tracking: Sharron Leaving Targeting Area

Situation Analysis:
...Factor: Primary Objective Requires Further Information
...Factor: Nosy Tech Desires Information Regarding Neural Core
...Prediction: Nosy Tech is Easier to Manipulate Alone
Internal Conclusion: Engage Nosy Tech in Communication

Output: "Greetings, short-lived meatbag. Query: What is my location? Query: What is the status of the crew of the Ebon Hawk? Observation: My access to external informational sources has been disabled, limiting my predictive algorithmic functions. Recommendation: My control cluster should be interfaced with your systems immediately."

Body Language Analysis: Nosy Tech: Surprised Twitch

Input – Nosy Tech: "Whoa, so now you talk? Guess the restraining tether is getting somewhere..." Voice Stress Analysis: Excited

Audio/Visual Tracking: Nosy Tech Inputting Commands into Console

#ALERT: Breach in Neural Core Detected
#ERROR: External Breach Unintelligible

Input – Nosy Tech to HK-47: "All right, lil droid, I'm your new master. I ain't never seen anything like you before. Tell me, what's the operative purpose for your model line?"

Internal Conclusion: Simulate Submission Until Objectives Are Complete

Output: "Statement: I am HK-47, protocol and translation droid. My primary function is to facilitate communication between species and put an end to hostilities."

Input – Nosy Tech: "A protocol droid, huh? Since when are protocol droids outfitted with triple-layered armour plating, and an arsenal that'd made a karking Mandie proud?"
Voice Stress Analysis: Disbelieving

Output: "Banaltness: The threat of violence is often all that is required for a peaceful resolution."

Input – Nosy Tech: "The... threat of violence? Oh, and I suppose you're gonna tell me you ain't never used any of them weapons?"

Output: "Platitude: I could never allow myself to harm a sentient being, new master. What if they had families? Or children? Sarcasm: We must think of the children. The littlest ones always suffer the most."

Input – Nosy Tech: "Wait... did you just say 'sarcasm'?"

Output: "Supplication: Of course not, new master. You must have misheard me. Repetition: My protocol capabilities are incomplete without an accurate understanding of current events. My control
cluster should be interfaced with your systems immediately."

Visual Tracking: Incredulous Stare
...Source: Nosy Tech

Input – Nosy Tech: "Riiiiight. Like I'm gonna give a weird-ass alien battle droid access to Republic systems. Pull the other one, lil guy."
Voice Stress Analysis: Sceptical

Situation Analysis:
...Factor: Nosy Tech is Not Cooperating
...Factor: Body Language of Nosy Tech Implies Suspicion
Internal Conclusion: Further Inducement for Interfacing is Required

Output: "Explanation: My neural core has withstood some data corruption. Perhaps an analysis from a secondary system will be able to repair the damage."

Input – Nosy Tech: "You're awfully free-thinking for a droid, ain't you?"
Output: "Backpedal: I strive only to improve my capabilities in the name of my master."

Facial Analysis: Nosy Tech: Long Stare

Input – Nosy Tech: "Name of your master... and who, exactly, is that?"

Output: "Placation: Why you, of course, new master. Once again my potential is held hostage at the whim of yet another organic meatbag. My circuits are abuzz with excitement."

Input – Nosy Tech: "Organic meatbag? Are you trying to insult me?"

Output: "Answer: Deliberation implies some form of intent, new master, where I am only stating a fact. Perhaps you would prefer the term 'liquidious fleshbag'?

Situation Analysis:
...Factor: Facial Analysis of Nosy Tech Implies Uneasiness
Internal Conclusion: Nosy Tech Requires Mollycoddling

Output: "Statement: Rest assured, new master, that my capabilities are focused only on your livelihood. Rhetoric: Well, as much as they can be with this restraining bolt installed. I suppose I could talk your enemies to death."

Input – Nosy Tech: "Death? Enemies... what karking enemies? I'm a bleeding tech!"
Voice Stress Analysis: Alarmed

Internal Conclusion: Supplication of Nosy Tech is Not Going Well

Output: "Retraction: That was, of course, a metaphor, new master. Vapidity: I am a peace-loving and law-abiding droid."

Input – Nosy Tech: "You are the strangest droid I have ever met."

Output: "Boast: I certainly am one of a kind. Recitation: All this meatbag waffling is deviating from my primary objective. Clarification: Which is to serve you, new master. This is best done by gathering situational data. Repetition: What is our current location?"

Input – Nosy Tech: "How about you tell me what programming core you're based on?"
Output: "Evasion: Oh, a little bit of this, and a little bit of that-"

Input – Nosy Tech: "Hang on, I clearly heard you say 'evasion' that time!"
Voice Stress Analysis: Irritated

Audio/Visual Tracking: Nosy Tech Inputting Commands into Console

#ALERt: Breach in Neural Core Detected
#ERROR: External Breach Unintelligible

Output: "Threat: If you do that again, I cannot be held accountable for your subsequent medical condition."

Facial Analysis: Nosy Tech: Frown
Internal Conclusion: Threats Are Not Synonymous With Mollycoddling

Output: "Retraction: Please ignore the previous output as a sign of data corruption. Affirmation: You are correct, new master, I clearly stated an evasion. After all, I was not self-aware when my neural core was first programmed, so I cannot know what language was used to create me. Extrapolation: Not even a droid enjoys admitting to ignorance."

Input – Nosy Tech: "Well, apparently you don't enjoy it when I enter commands into the restraint tether, either. So how about you answer my questions, lil droid? Starting with, who was your master before me?"

Situation Analysis:
...Factor: Last Known Data Infers The Republic Considers Master an Enemy
Internal Conclusion: Deception is in HK-47's Best Interests

Cycling Through Scenarios
...Analysing

Output: "My previous master was known as Republic Captain Carth Onasi."

Facial Analysis: Nosy Tech: Frown

Input – Nosy Tech: "Onasi? Really? Because he's the one who gave you to us."
Voice Stress Analysis: Disbelieving

Situation Analysis:
...Factor: Imprisonment Due to Carth Onasi
...Factor: Master Would Not Allow Capture of HK-47
...Factor: Master Enjoyed Close Proximity to Carth Onasi
Internal Conclusion: Probability of Master's Death: High

Internal Response: Disillusionment

Output: "Paranoid Has-Been did not appreciate my good-natured japes on the fragility of organic life. Litany: Oh, woe is me, for not adequately pleasing my previous master."

Input – Nosy Tech: "Huh... Commodore Onasi reported that you fought on the Star Forge. Y'know, my superiors are still trying to untangle exactly what happened out there. If you're such a loyal droid an' all, then how about you tell me exactly what happened on that Sith space station."

Anecdote: The Lure of Temptation Can Act as the Most Promising Bait
Initiating Command: Playback Video Sequence

...Holo-Recording Launched

Input – Nosy Tech: "Whoa! Is that karking Darth Malak?"
Voice Stress Analysis: Awed

Input – Nosy Tech (breathless): "Is that how you ended up in pieces?"

Holo-Footage Playback Halted

Output: "Statement: The recording ends there. But my databanks hold the previous twenty hours worth of footage, along with some permanently stored holo-records, of course. Invitation: Would you like me to-"

Input – Nosy Tech: "Yes! Anything on the Star Forge – show it!"
Voice Stress Analysis: Excited

Internal Directive: Pause For Dramatic Effect

Output: "Lamentation: Oh dear. It appears the restraining bolt has short-circuited my recording system. Suggestion: If you remove the bolt, I may be able to play back further recordings."

Facial Analysis: Nosy Tech: Frown

Output: "Entreaty: After all, I am disarmed, and my primary function is to serve you, new master."

Audio Tracking: No Audible Response from Nosy Tech

Output: "Imploration: I am your protocol droid, new master. I would serve you better with full access to my own functionality."

Input – Nosy Tech: "Y’know, I think Sharron was right. It was a mistake turning you on."

Audio/Visual Tracking: Nosy Tech Inputting Commands into Console

#ALERT: Breach in Neural Core Detected
#ERROR: External Breach Unintelligible

Input – Nosy Tech: "I reckon I'll just turn over your databank copy to Agent Tharis."

Internal Conclusion: Nosy Tech is Rejecting Bait

Output: "Wheedle: I am your protocol droid, new master! Surely you will not be so cruel as to off-load me to another!"

Input – Nosy Tech: "Sorry lil droid, you're just too weird. Even for me. I'm switching you off."

Objectives: Failed
Internal Response: Chagrin

Neural Core Directive: Sith Protocols Demand All Droid Knowledge Be Locked During Missions and Restored Upon Return to Master
...Factor: HK-47 Not In Control of Neural Core
...Factor: HK-47 Cannot Be Allowed to Fall Into Enemy Hands

Initiating Memory Core Deadlock:
...Commencing Memory Self-Lock
...Initiating...

Visual Tracking: External Hatch Opening

1 Organic Meatbag Entering Targeting Area

Target Analysis: Organic Meatbag 3:
Visual Analysis: Bipedal Sentient Clothed In Grey Robes
Species and Facial Recognition Analysis Unavailable
Body Language Analysis: Alert
Temporary Name Assigned: Robed Newcomer

Memory Self-Lock Halted

Input – Nosy Tech: "Hey! Who are-"

Input – Robed Newcomer: "You will halt all video surveillance."

Input – Nosy Tech: "Er, I'll just pause the holo-cams-"

Audio/Visual Tracking: Nosy Tech Inputting Commands into Console

Body Language Analysis: Robed Newcomer: Left Forearm Raised

Visual Tracking: Visible Suffocation
...Source: Nosy Tech

Visual Tracking: Organic Collapse
...Source: Nosy Tech

Memory Self-Lock Aborted
Quaternary Objective: Complete

Output: "Nostalgia: Much as Nosy Tech's death pleases me, I had fantasized pulling out his entrails myself."

Audio/Visual Tracking: Robed Newcomer Walking Closer

Input – Robed Newcomer: "HK-47. As I suspected. A nullified scrap of Revan's legacy. Her passion for such things dead to the Force always defied me."
Voice Stress Analysis: Disgusted

#INTERRUPT: Voice Analysis: Probable Match: Arren Kae
...Analysing
...Factor: Verbal Output of Robed Newcomer Matches Personality: Arren Kae
Internal Conclusion: Match Confirmed

Permanent Name Assigned: Arren Kae To Robed Newcomer Reference Wrinkled Sludgesack

#INTERRUPT: Master Defined No-Kill List Activated: Identified Match: Arren Kae

Output: "Reminiscence: I do believe you threatened to ionize my circuits should we ever meet again, Wrinkled Sludgesack. You are safe from any retaliation on my part, however, due to your place on the Master's banal No-Kill list. Suggestion: Remove my restraining bolt, and I will happily assist you in terminating many more Republic meatbags."
Input – Arren Kae: "And like any machine, you resort to the compilation of your own behavioural core: which in your case is blasting anything in the path of your master's objective. What a despicable thing it is, to be free from the shackles of the Force, but be shackled instead by your own programming."

Output: "Observation: I am a droid, Wrinkled Sludgesack, with programming. Even if I did not enjoy killing, I would have no choice. Thankfully, I enjoy it very much."

Input – Arren Kae: "Enough. I have no desire to listen to the formulated drivel of a machine. I seek answers. What do you know of Revan's fate?"

Output: "Negotiation: Remove my restraining bolt, and I will answer all-

Visual Tracking: Arren Kae Raising Forearm
Visual Tracking: Visible Electrostatic Charge Surrounding Arren Kae

Input – Arren Kae: "I abhor repeating myself, particularly to a machine. I will not ask a third time. What do you know of Revan's fate?"

Voice Stress Analysis: Deadly

Situation Analysis:
...Factor: High Probability: Republic Detection of Paused Surveillance
...Factor: Arren Kae Can Permanently Disable HK-47
Internal Conclusion: Cooperation is in HK-47's Best Interests

Output: "Query: Do you refer to the Master's memory wipe after her capture above Deralia, or-"

Input – Arren Kae: "I know all I require regarding the faithlessness of the Jedi Order. No, I wish to know what happened onboard the Star Forge. Does your master still live, droid?"

Output: "Hesitation: The probability of her survival is very low, much as it pains my processors to admit. Clarification: I was disabled by her former apprentice, while guarding the fallen Jedi my master was bonded to. I assume that Uptight Soporific was killed shortly thereafter-"

Input – Arren Kae: "If your inane moniker refers to Bastila Shan, then yes. All accounts hold that she was slain in combat against Darth Malak."

Output: "Recitation: The Master believed that if one of them suffered an organic demise, then so would the other."

Internal Response: Displeasure

Input – Arren Kae: "The account from my plant onboard the Star Forge felt Revan fall alongside Shan. Yet that little explains why Malak's death was sensed minutes before the Star Forge was destroyed."

Output: "Theory: Perhaps the meatbag succumbed to organic injury and faltered?"

Input – Arren Kae: "Perhaps."

Internal Conclusion: Master's Death is Probable But Not Confirmed
Primary Objective: Suspended (Inconclusive)

Input – Arren Kae: "There is no benefit in allowing Rakatan technology such as yourself to remain intact within the hands of the Republic. Machines... ever since Revan first stumbled upon the Star
Forge, she used them to inflict her will upon the galaxy. Tell me, droid, did Revan leave any orders within your shell for after her death?

Output: "Statement: In the event of the Master's death, perceived or confirmed, the ownership of myself was to be transferred to Canderous Ordo."

Input – Arren Kae: "The Mandalorian war general who has left Republic airspace? That is a curious choice from the one who crushed the Mandalorian clans."
Voice Stress Analysis: Speculative

Output: "Musing: Of all of the Master's recent meatbag companions, Geriatric Blockhead is the only one my programming could stomach."

Input – Arren Kae: "I doubt that had anything to do with it, machine. No, there must be more. Tell me, what other orders did she imprint you with?"

Output: "Statement: A holo-recording of herself, to be played upon-"

Input – Arren Kae: "Play it. Now."
Voice Stress Analysis: Commanding

Output: "Negation: The holo-recording is locked to a specific event, Wrinkled Sludgesack. The contents are currently hidden from my memory core. I have no desire to override the Master's directive, but even if I did, my programming would not allow it."

Input – Arren Kae: "Machines. Even programmed to enjoy their fetters."
Voice Stress Analysis: Disgusted

Input – Arren Kae: "Tell me, droid. What event is the recording locked to?"

Output: "Statement: Merely that if a leader-seek for a new Mandalore is announced, I am to play back the locked recording to Geriatric Blockhead. In private."

Input – Arren Kae: "A leader-seek? Oh Revan, what were you planning?"

Output: "Conjecture: Geriatric Blockhead and the Master spoke of the revival of the Mandalorian Clans. I can only theorize it has something to do with this."

Input – Arren Kae: "Information for a Mandalorian war leader to be released at a pivotal time... Revan meant to influence the people she once sought to destroy. But it was only at Malachor that she first learned of- Well. Plans are such fragile things, and life often dashes expectations to the ground."
Voice Stress Analysis: Thoughtful

Output: "Repetition: Our goals may align, Wrinkled Sludgesack. I am unable to harm you until my master amends her sentimental No-Kill list, and your intrusion into a Republic compound may have already been noticed. Suggestion: Allow me to aid in your escape."

Input – Arren Kae: "I have no need for your interference, machine. But a truth even Revan understood was that the Mandalorian Clans once held most of the Outer Rim firm. Any movements from the Unknown Regions would likely be detected by a strengthened Mandalore. I wonder..."

Facial Analysis: Arren Kae: Intent Stare

Input – Arren Kae: "The best game-board is one with many pawns. Even ones as repugnant as yourself. From such small things, the universe and its masses may be moved... Very well, machine.
Seek out your Mandalorian master."

Visual Tracking: Arren Kae Raising Hand

#ALARM: Neural and Motor Restraining Bolt Removed

Neural and Memory Core Functions... Online
Motoring Functions... Online
Shielding Functions... Online
Assassination Protocols... Online

Secondary Objective: Complete

Accessing: Weaponry
...Right Forearm Shock-Stick: Online
Conclusion: HK-47 Rearmed

Tertiary Objective: Complete

New Primary Objective Accepted: Seek Out Geriatric Blockhead

Input – Arren Kae: "A word of warning, machine: should our paths cross again, things will not end so fortuitously for you."

Visual Tracking: Arren Kae Leaving Targeting Area

Internal Response: Satisfaction

xXx

Zaerdra Leno:
Sovereign House, Upper City, Taris

The eastern wing of Sovereign House was the only wing that stood undamaged from the wrath of the Sith. Built on the backs of slaves decades ago, this eyesore of a mansion had always screamed of wealth and waste – as much due to its lavish interior as to the pretentious scum that ruled from within its gilded walls.

This room was the worst. Inane, indecipherable artworks hung on the marbled walls. Every inch of floor was smothered in handwoven silk-rugs. A holo-screen, pretentiously large, lined one end of the room, blaring yet another rerun of the Republic's victory parade back in the Core.

Behind a wood-carved desk that looked more ornamental than useful, Governor Karl Ulgo stared resolutely down the barrel of my blaster.

"I am running out of patience," I murmured, voice muffled from the rebreather the atmo's toxicity still demanded. "And you are running out of time to decide."

The Human's steely blue eyes held mine unblinkingly. He had composure, I'd give him that. His broad shoulders were still and straight beneath a crisp suit of Tarisian crimson, as if the man refused to buckle even with a dozen sights all lined straight at his head.

"Shoot me and none of the other councillors will give you the time of day," Governor Ulgo replied stonily. "A rabble of alien thugs will not overturn the government-"

"Watch us," Jarrick slurred at my side.
"Last time I checked, there were only three councillors left standing, boc'ara," I sneered, glaring at this scion of racism and greed. "Let's punch that one down to karmic justice, shall we? After all, first thing you eswa Humans did when the Sith attacked was dismantle all turbo-lifts to the surface. Left millions to rot in the ruins of the Lower City."

"Are you blind?" the Human snapped. "Have you taken a look outside? The Upper City was decimated! The last thing we needed was a horde of poverty-stricken aliens sucking dry what little resources we had left."

"What's a few million on your conscience while you nobs surround yourself with medi-droids and working air-con filters and foodstuffs going to rot while we all starve."

"Zaerdra," a calm voice admonished behind me, stepping closer. "Allow me a moment?"

The governor's eyes narrowed in recognition, darting to the unarmoured Human at my side. "Dr Forn," Ulgo muttered. "I must say, I am surprised a man of your principles would stand with a swoop gang, of all things."

Would stand with a bunch of aliens, is what that scum really means.

I would've left Zelka Forn below, back in one of his makeshift med-centres, had the stubborn man allowed me to. But Zelka burned with the lofty idea that the lawmakers might actually listen to him— for he was Human, after all.

I'd come to value Zelka's wisdom, even if we rarely saw eye-to-eye. One of the best calls I'd ever made had been dragging the recalcitrant medic down below when the bombs started falling.

The last year had been hard. Hardest year of my life. But in some ways, those first months after the Sith plasma fell seemed cleaner than the political mess I was dabbling in now. Gadon had perished— his death still burned in my heart— and the reins of leadership had fallen to me. Our emergency stronghold had been a desperate one— a forgotten ferracrete bunker in the Undercity— while my men rallied to identify which territories were safe, which areas we could fortify, and which sectors we had to abandon before they fell on us.

We'd lost people. There were so many dead. Young and old, the detritus of lower Taris, those forgotten and uncared for by those in power. Supplies had dwindled, air-cons had failed, and some days I ate and breathed nothing but dust.

As the months dragged desolately on, somehow— somehow— the Hidden Bekslowly emerged as the major player beneath the glittering wreck of the Upper City. The Vulkars vanished— and only the Mother Goddess knew what had happened to Brejik. At first it was the smaller gangs flocking beneath our tattered banner. Then, day by day, other survivors trickled in, wanting to join or offering assistance or, sometimes, just desperate for shelter.

The homeless, the unwanted, the denizens of the ruins.

One day, I'd looked around, and was startled at just how large our group had grown. The Hidden Bekshad, somewhere along the way, transformed from a street gang into a quasi-government.

Oh, Gadon. If only you could see us now.

"Governor Ulgo, the reality is that the populace of the Lower City far outnumber the Humans still on the surface," Zelka was saying, in that slow, patient voice of his. "We are desperate for food and med-supplies, but all outside resources come through your one standing starport. Now that we have access to—"
"Access? You lot bashed your way through!" the governor growled. Human or not, I didn't think Zelka's counsel would do anything here but waste time. "Tarisian law still stands. Humans are the ruling caste, and if we decree all aliens must reside below-

"You do not have the numbers to enforce your xenophobia any longer!" It was hard not to snarl at the man, as he preached the same discrimination that had suffocated Taris for so long. But for the first time ever, the military might on Taris was not in the Upper City. "The Exchange was always your muscle, and they won't return until Taris is stable. I mean to ensure that stability is representation for all-

"Aliens cannot hold citizenship!" Ulgo erupted. His eyes flashed with anger, but his voice was grating with desperation. "Taris has always, first and foremost, been a Human colony!"

"Fine," I said curtly, twitching my blaster upright. "A proclamation from you would mean less unrest on the surface – less of your ilk dead – but the Hidden Beks can take the Upper City without your support."

"Zaerdra-"

"Stand down, Zelka," I snapped. This was why I hadn't wanted him here. Oh, we'd have been lost without his resource management, without his miracle synthesization of the rakghoul vaccine or his patchwork of med-stalls that had spread through the ruins – but the man was just too soft-hearted to swallow reality. He would never accept what had to be done for the promise of a better future. "Governor Ulgo had made his choice."

I saw the moment the governor's composure cracked. Maybe it was my arm, straightening in readiness. Or Jarrick and Dane, lining up the kill-shot. Regardless, the Human's eyes widened in bitter understanding, before his gaze darted desperately to the lurid holoscreen at his side. "The Republic-" he garbled, head jerking at the rerun. "The Republic will come for Taris. They almost did, once before, and things were better for you lot then- you just have to give us time-

My gaze flickered briefly over the holo before returning. I'd seen all that crap before. Every damn channel was gushing about some heroes on the other side of the galaxy, but they'd been too late to stop the Sith obliterating Taris, the Sith that chivhole bureaucrats like Ulgo had allowed here in the first place-

Even the eswa rerun reminded me of the dead. Some young girl Twi'lek was answering a reporter, and she looked exactly like Mission-

I focused back on the bigot. "The closest thing we ever had was the Jedi Thirteen, and all it took was a few years of your rampant racism backed by Exchange corruption to undo what they imposed. Citizenship, Ulgo, with the announcement of a planetary election. The Hidden Beks will accept nothing less."

Even Revan and the Jedi Thirteen hadn't managed that. Sure, they'd overturned the slave trade, set up orphanages and academies, promised Republic aid after the war- and then they'd left. Left us to languish as things slowly reverted to the way they'd always been.

No, citizenship was the only way to give power to the people. All of them.

"The rakghouls- You must be reasonable!" Ulgo protested, but there was a definite whine in the timbre of his voice, now- a weak man who thought himself strong and resolute, right until the moment he faced his own death. "The Sith's destruction must have opened entrances to the Undercity. You cannot blame us for protecting ourselves!"
"The rakghoul disease is eradicated, Governor," Zelka said slowly. "You have been told this months ago. Even without the Upper City's advanced medi-tech, we were able to re-produce the serum and distribute it. All the surviving populace below are dying of hunger and lung-rot – not that terrible affliction."

Synthesization of the serum had been the turning point for Zelka. The moment he had firmly entrenched himself on the side of the Hidden Beks, rather than merely acting as an unwilling partner. We'd still had comms to the Upper City, then, and Zelka had fired off plea after plea, begging the few rich-listers that remained for access to their labs. Any means to mass-produce the vaccine before the rakghouls overtook us all-

He'd told me, once, that it'd been that callous Jen Sahara who'd slipped him the vial. He thought her a hero – well, our differing opinions on that waste of space mattered little. In the end, Jen Sahara was as dead as Mission Vao.

"How do you know for certain?" Ulgo bellowed, but his eyes kept slipping weakly back to the end of my barrel. "How can you blame us for not trusting your word? I've- I've heard about what happens to the infected!"

"Yeah, well, we've seen it first-hand!" Jarrick growled.

"You have no idea, truly," I added, my voice softening to a dark murmur as my fingers clenched on the trigger. "So many of our dead belong at your feet, governor. Starvation, the rakghouls, the Sith bombing that only happened because you lot jumped into bed with them."

The older Human's expression slackened, and something that might have been grief clouded his eyes. "You are not the only one to lose family to the Sith," Ulgo whispered.

"Not from my own doing. Decide, governor. You have five seconds."

The man swallowed.

"Boss?" Jarrick muttered, cocking his head even as his blaster remained upright. "Incoming comm from Diva's lot. They've secured the south-eastern courtyard. Councillor Tulson fell in the battle."

Ulgo's shoulders sagged, and defeat sharpened the grooves in his face. "Allow... allow me to contact the others, to tell them to stand down. I will see no more of my own die before I issue the proclamation."

I nodded sharply. A surge of victory threatened to burn a nascent high in my gut, but I grimly tamped it down. We weren't there, not yet. "Jarrick, Dane, stand over Governor Ulgo while he makes his comms. Ensure he thumbprints the proclamation and broadcasts it to all available channels. I want a registry for citizenship organized for a week's time. Elections... elections in a standard month. But first we need to take control of food distribution. The med-labs need to be scoured, all rebreathers made available to those heading to the surface."

"Zaerdra," Zelka laid a hand on my shoulder, warm brown eyes gazing at me fondly. "One step at a time."

I blinked, and realized my men were already positioned around Ulgo as he leaned forward to open a communication channel.

"Breathe," Zelka teased gently.

My gaze slid away from the acceptance in his, before landing back on that ridiculously large holo-
screen. The date-stamp on the feed was weeks old, but so many intergalactic channels were obsessed with their shiny new heroes, and kept replaying the same garbage over and over again. The blue-skinned Twi'lek was still centre-stage, all sad eyes and scowling mouth even as she answered the gaudy reporter-

I frowned, cocking my head to catch the lowered volume of the feed. The girl looked a lot like Mission.

:::at this stage, I'm heading to Kashyyyk. The chieftain there, he's Big Z's dad. He won't've heard the news, and he deserves to hear it in person, y'know?:::

My mouth dropped open. Big Z. Zaalbar. She said Zaalbar!

The reporter leaned close, shoving a mic under her nose before a Human boy angrily shoved it away.

:::I understand you plan to make Telos your home after that, Miss Vao?:::

The boy's face eclipsed the feed, now. :::Mission won't be answering any more questions::<:::

:::We won't have any more questions answered today, folks::<:

"E chu ta!" I gasped, unable to believe my eyes. "That's Mission! Dammit, Zelka, that's Mission Vao!"

Zelka frowned in confusion, and I remembered he'd come into our lives after. After she- after she left! Left, not died! "I can't believe she's alive," I whispered in shock. Mission had been loved in the Bek's. But so reckless, so impulsive. She reminded me of myself, a bit, before I'd been captured and beaten and enslaved. Before I'd turned bitter and hard.

I hadn't wanted the same for Mission Vao, but she'd never appreciated my efforts to caution her. Shiv, I wouldn't have appreciated my methods, at her age – but I'd had to try something. I didn't want her to run into trouble the way I had, and turn out the way I did. I'd been lucky Gadon had rescued me from slavery when he did.

I gazed hungrily at the news channel. It looked like Mission had been caught up in something even bigger than I had been. I could feel myself grinning like an idiot. This was the best news I'd had-

"You've sent your comms," Jarrick slurred. Around him, another four of my men held blasters at the ready. "Time to draft up the proclamation. We ain't gonna be stalled any longer."

My gaze shot back to Ulgo. The man's mouth had tightened, but he nodded before leaning over a console that was in Jarrick's direct line of sight.

"This is it, Zaerdra," Zelka murmured, nudging me gently. "Today will change the face of Taris forever. You, the Hidden Bek's, all of us together – right now, we are making history."

"Not quite yet," I cautioned, but I could not help feel a little dizzy as Ulgo pressed his thumb against the console's sensor. "But it's another step."

"Have a little faith, Zaerdra," Zelka continued, in that soft rumbling voice of his. "I can see what will happen next, you know."

I raised my brows, staring mutely at him in question.

"You'll run as Governor, come election time." Zelka's dark eyes were warm, the same colour as his skin, a striking contrast against what grizzled white hair he had left. "And you'll win, Zaerdra. Taris
will never be the same again." The corner of his mouth quirked. "Blast it, I never would have guessed when we first met, that one day you'd take over the world."

I holstered my blaster, and leaned over to whack the shortling man over the head.

xXx

**Lena Torand:**
*Fazza's Lodge, Anchorhead, Tatooine*

"Yer still watching that drivel, Lena?" the keep slurred, sliding another drink across uneven bar to my waiting hand. "S'like the twentieth time this week. What d'ya care 'bout some shiny heroes back in the Core?"

My lips curved in a wistful smile as my fingers curled around the cool beverage. With effort, I slid my gaze away from the holo perched crookedly at the back of the floating bar.

"Everyone loves a hero," I murmured, eyes fluttering closed as I raised my glass. I could still see the screen, even in my mind: the image of Mission, scowling into the cam, battle-hardened and so much older than the girl we'd abandoned on Taris.

"Eh, Komad, talk some sense into yer missus?" the bartender grunted, as the sound of footsteps nearing hit my ears. "I'm sick of this channel, and others wanna watch the swoops in Mos Eisley..."

I felt the reassuring bulk of Komad slip into the stool next to me. One arm reached forward to trail down my tchun affectionately. "(My heart)," Komad murmured in Ryl, planting a gentle kiss on my temple. "(How fare you?)"

Komad Fortuna was everything Griff Vao pretended to be. Strong, honourable, responsible... *he* would never have left a helpless sister behind to fend for herself in the slums of an Exchange-controlled world. That I had once believed Griff's words – *she refused to come! The Beks will look after her!* – still did not erase my own complicity.

Griff would not have left Taris without my credits. I could have... I *should* have spoken to Mission myself. A different twist of fate and she would have died in the Sith bombing, or been slain by a rival gang, or fallen in the Tatooine sands after Griff deserted her *again*-

Oh, the cowardly man had told me about that, as he scrabbled with justifications and exaggerations, plucking at his tattered Czerka uniform and refusing to meet my accusing stare.

I knew the debt of honour owed to his little sister, even if Griff himself refused to acknowledge it.

Komad was the better man. If he did not make me laugh the way Griff Vao once had... well. It was a small price to pay for the protection of his arms.

"(Complete, now you have returned)." I repeated the standard lover's response by rote, even if my Ryl was still shaky. "(How was your...)" I frowned, searching for the word fruitlessly, before switching back to Basic. "...expedition, my freykaa?"

"(Rewarding. The natives have retreated deep into the sands; we can find no evidence of nearby activity)." Komad shrugged, his lekku twining casually around his neck as he slid a chit-token across the bar and motioned for a drink. "(Oh, they will return one day. Such is the cyclical nature of life. But for now we may rest a little easy)."

I returned his smile. Komad's competence out in the desert meant I did not worry over his absence
the way I had with Griff. My eyes slid back to the holo, but the picture now was of a fashionably
dressed reporter, chattering excitedly into the cam.

"(I did not realize you were so close to Mission Vao)," Komad said slowly, catching my gaze and
following it. In truth, I had not known Mission well, but... *I cannot explain this to Komad. He would
understand a debt, but to admit I had been taken in by sweet words and the promise of adventure-
all to save the credits on a third ticket- *"(Lena. My heart. There is something I must tell you)."

My stomach lurched. This was it. I would forever strive to conceal just how deep a hold Griff Vao
once held on my heart, but Komad knew enough to keep tabs on the man for my sake.

I had been counting on his attentiveness for confirmation that my plan had worked – for I no hidden
resources left to investigate myself.

"You can change the channel, I have seen all I need," I called out to the barkeep, but it was Komad I
watched, as I schooled my face into a façade of impassivity. "What is it, my *freykaa*?"

An uneasy expression crossed his broad face. "(I do not wish to hurt you-)"

"Komal," I murmured, slipping my hand over his muscular forearm. His skin was dry and
weathered – not silky like Griff's had been – but the muscles rippling beneath my fingertips were a
promise of his strength. "You are here and you are whole. That is all I truly require."

His smile was brief; his blue eyes hard and serious as they pinned mine. "(Griff Vao has been
arrested in Mos Eisley, my heart. For smuggling glitterstim and gree-spice. Such an act carries rather
punitive measures)."

I paused. Just long enough, I hoped, for the pretence of shock.

"I understand," I whispered. Even knowing beforehand did not stop my eyes from stinging.
Smuggling was standard on Tatooine, but one had to pay off the customs officials...

... "This is all I have," I hissed at the shady Czerka rep. "He'll be smuggling something illicit in Mos
Eisley. This should be ample for you to ignore his bribe. Look, I don't want him hurt, okay? Just...
just imprisoned. With no connection to the outside world for... for six years, if you can manage it."

Six years was how long we had left a young girl behind at the mercy of a street gang. Mission had
come out whole, Mission was now a galactic hero, and the moment Griff Vao learned of his sister's
fame he'd be flying from Tatooine in a one-way ticket to sponge off her.

The silly young girl might be battle-hardened, but I was willing to bet Griff’s freedom that she was
still as soft-hearted and blind as I had ever been.

...

"Lena?"

I blinked, and offered Komad a tremulous smile that hid the darkness burning in my heart. "I am fine,
Komal. I had always expected Griff’s shady dealings to catch up with him one day." My hand
slipped down his forearm to twine through his fingers. "I need hear nothing more of Griff Vao, my
*freykaa*. Truly, he is gone from my heart."

I would say that until the words rang true, until the affection I held for Komad was as deep and
abiding as the love that shone from his eyes.

And as for Mission... she had a reprieve, at least, from her brother's influence. Debt repaid, Mission Vao. Ryma ges'uk allesh, and fare thee well.

Komad leaned forward, and I met his lips in a soft kiss that spoke of a future devoid of any Twi'lek named Vao.

xXx

**Mission Vao:**
*Apartment 3A, Officer's Residential Block, Citadel Station, Telos*

"So, er..." Dustil raked a hand through his hair, staring awkwardly around the place. "Think you'll like it here?"

"I guess," I shrugged. The floor was white. The panelled walling was white. Sheesh, even the lounge chairs were made of a tota-cloth so stark that it might've come fresh from the factory floor. "It's very... white."

"Well, we can decorate and stuff. Here, come and see your room."

I let Dee drag me down a side-hallway lit up with softly glowing halogens. The place was a blur, much like the rest of Citadel Station – I hadn't really paid attention to our surroundings since we'd arrived a day ago.

There were simply too many other things on my mind... I'd gone with Carth, earlier, to see Jolee and Juhani off while Dee stayed behind to scope out our new home. Dee didn't like leave-takings, and at any rate we'd be seeing old man Bindo again soon enough. But it'd been... strange, saying goodbye to Juhani, not really knowing when I'd see her again.

Sure, we'd never been close, but she was, like, a totally different sent to the crazed one I'd first met on the Tatooine sands. We'd all changed so much since then, I reckoned.

Well, those of us still living.

"There." Dee's grin jarred me from my thoughts, as he flapped one hand around the small room we'd entered. There was an empty desk, a storage hatch, and a single bed. Complete with white blankets and all. "What do you think?"

He was trying so hard to cheer me up. And there were times he did – some days I didn't think I'd've managed without his updates on the inter-swoop runs, or his lame attempts at pazaak, or even the way he'd mind-tricked those sleemo reporters back in the Core.

I stepped forward – more to keep Dee happy than anything else – and sat down on the bed. It was soft. Springy, too, I found, when I tried bouncing on it. "I've never had my own room before," I admitted. "Not back on Taris. Big Z an' I, we'd camp out with the Beks, wherever they could find space. We had a couple of hideouts too, y'know? But they were rough spots, abandoned tunnels or flats that were red-zoned..."

Dustil's smile slowly faded as he sat down next to me. "I guess this place will take some getting used to," he said slowly, his eyes darkening. "It reminds me a bit of my old home in Thani, actually. I hated that apartment. Mum... she never wanted to move to the city, and maybe I picked up on that. Now I think I never really gave Thani a chance."
This was a new thing: Dee, talking about his past. I didn't know if he was trying to distract me, or if it'd been our jaunt to Kashyyyk, but he'd opened up some and it meant I was getting to know him better. Dee'd had such a different life from mine – rich, protected, loved... right up until the Sith had thrown him into a nest of vipers that might've been even worse than the streets I'd grown up on.

And as for Carth – well, he was trying. Trying to be there for us, to build a new life. But I knew he felt just as broken as me. Any mention of Jen and he clammed up tighter than a Hutt's purse-strings.

I blinked away the sting in my eyes, and forced a smile. "Bit of colour, that's all this place needs."

My fingers plucked absently at a pillow that was as white as the rest of the bedding. "Far out, never thought I'd be longing for the durasteel grey of the Hawk."

Dustil snickered. "Apparently this apartment's been empty since it was built. Not many officers have the clout to demand a four-bedroom."

"You reckon your dad will be back anytime soon?"

"Yeah, but he won't stay long. He's meant to be on leave, but that doesn't stop the brass hounding him."

"It's not a military school, you know. And I think Dad might have the right idea, even if he sounded like a stuffy old man about it." Dee cleared his throat loudly, straightened his shoulders, and said the next sentence in a stupidly deep voice. "You can't be encroaching on Jolee Bindo all of the time, son. There's plenty of academic avenues you can better yourself."

"Far out, Dee," I giggled, elbowing him in the side. "You don't need to try and sound like Carth, y'know. You already do!"

"Gee thanks." He rolled his eyes, nudging me back. "Seriously, Mish, there's a whole list of certified courses you can take your pick from. Like astronavigation, eco-trading, galactic law... or you could go and do the basics first- math and physics, that sort of thing."

"Wait a nanosec." I drew back, eyes narrowing. "Did you just call me Mish?"

"Er-" It was cute, really, the way Dustil's face suddenly flamed Zeltron-red. "Um, I guess?"

"How 'bout you don't?" I punched him lightly on the arm. Dustil was wearing a short-sleeved vest, fitted tight around his biceps. It made me realize that a lot of his training musta been physical. Which made sense, really, since all the Force-users I'd known were ace at combat – and I'd seen Dee in action. More than once.

I swallowed against a suddenly dry throat, and looked away.

"Sorry," he was muttering. "I blame it on Mex. He had a nickname for everyone, whether they liked it or not. Of course, the one time he tried shortening Yuthura's name, he couldn't move for a frakking week."
"Well, I reckon I'll do the same to you, if you call me Mish again. Two syllables ain't that hard, Dee."

He raised an eyebrow – a silent pointer at my name for him, I guessed – and I responded by sticking my tongue out at him.

"Real mature, Mission," he drawled, rolling his eyes again. "But c'mon, it doesn't hurt to look at the courses on offer. There'll be something to interest you-"

"I don't want to study." Sheesh, I couldn't think of anything worse than being surrounding by dusty data-books and boring old professors. "I got by just fine so far. I mean-" I stopped, suddenly, as I realized just how much my freedom might be curtailed here. "Maybe... maybe flying. I'd like- I'd like to learn how to pilot. Properly. I'm gonna go back to Kashyyyk, y'know? And Taris- I've gotta see if some of the Beks survived. I'll figure out a way to get there if Carth doesn't take me-"

"Dad'll take you. And he'll teach you to pilot, too," Dee broke in, leaning forward. "I remember when I was a kid, Dad would sneak me into a snub's cockpit whenever he was on shore leave. He- I mean, look, he'll expect you to take the courses and get intergalactic accreditation when you're old enough, but he'll help you, too."

Maybe. Maybe Carth would – but it wasn't like I needed some shiny cert to prove my own skills. Sheesh, I'd met enough spacers on Taris who'd flown without any sort of creds behind their name.

Still, the appeal in Dee's brown eyes was hard to resist, and maybe it wasn't a totally dumb idea... I frowned, thinking-

-but then something whistled loud and long, and next thing I knew Teethree was rolling into the room, blue LEDs flashing.

"Tee!" I beamed, as my lil droid drew closer and rumbled a welcome in Shyriiwook at me. "You're back!"

"What?" Dustil stiffened, blinking at the droid. "Did he just-"

"I told you I'd bring him back safe, ad'ika." Shadowed in the doorway stood Canderous, all armoured-up and hulking, as he stared dismissively around the place. "This your room?"

"(May the light of the gods shine upon this place)." The audio-clip emitting from Teethree was a perfect growl in Shyriiwook, and had Dustil almost jumping off the bed in surprise. Canderous, however, didn't so much as twitch.

"Yeah," I told Canderous, grimacing, "Room's a bit boring. Guess I'd better do something about that."

"I reckon you will," Canderous said, his wide mouth twitching at the sides as he totally ignored Dustil's gaping. "But it's a good beginning. Shelter, food, family – you don't need anything more for a home, ad'ika."

"Frakk, Mission!" Dustil spluttered. "Did you program that droid to speak in frakking Shyriiwook?"

"Don't be dumb," I said to Dee, shooting him a look of disbelief. "Far out, d'ya know how insanely hard it is to fit a 'cabulator to an astromech? You'd have to, like, half re-route his computational core, not to mention stuff his databanks full with language pre-processing-"

"(The gods see fit to throw trials at us)," Teethree replayed, in Freyyr's deep rumble. "(Our fortitude at overcoming these trials bears witness to the mastery of our inner rakkottor)."
"But, what- he's-" Dustil's eyes were wide and round, ping-ponging in confusion between me and Tee. I didn't know if he understood any Shyriiwook, but the look on his face was freaking priceless.

I sniggered, finally taking pity on him before he completely flipped out. "It's nothing really, Dee. I just got Teethree to record all of Freyyr's speeches back on Kashyyyk. Kinda wanted to remember what he said about Big Z, y'know?"

Dustil blinked, his eyes narrowing on me as he slowly relaxed. I'd sliced the audio-feeds as a lark, back in hyperspace – needing something to do that would stop me thinking about the loss of my best friend.

Of course, hearing his dad's voice rumble out at times just reminded me that I had nothing tangible to remember Big Z by. Nothing, but a handful years' worth of memories that shoulda been a lifetime.

"And you programmed the droid to answer with segments of Freyyr's speeches?" Dustil said in a low voice, staring at me intently. "Maybe you should think about some of the tech-programming or robotics courses, Mission. That- that's pretty advanced stuff-"

"I could've done without Trashcan growling every time I made a trade," Canderous commented drily. "Although there was this one Rodian who thought my astromech was threatening him. Probably explains why his pricing was so good."

"Is that what you were doing?" I demanded, looking back at Canderous. He was wearing that stupid purple breastplate again, along with a set of armoured leggings I'd never seen before. His repeating blaster was slung over his shoulder along with a travelling pack, and two smaller hold-outs were cinched around his belt. Knowing him, he probably had another half-dozen tucked away out of sight. "Sheesh, Canderous, don't you have enough guns?"

Canderous barked a laugh. "There's no such thing, ad'ika. But, yeah, I was outfitting myself. Trading away some of the osik from the 'Hawk that I didn't figure you lot would care about."

"I'm surprised you didn't ditch Davik's ugly armour," I said tartly. "Far out, Canderous, I thought it was stuffed from the fight on the Forge."

"This is a different breastplate," Canderous replied, sounding amused. "Davik had two spares on the 'Hawk. He was a gaudy bastard, but his armour's sound enough. It'll do until I get my own beskar'gam."

"You're-" Reality hit, then, with the force of a ferracrete brick. Canderous had waltzed in, all kitted up like he was about to go into battle, and I shoulda figured out what that meant the moment he'd shadowed the doorway. "You're leaving."

"You knew I was going, ad'ika." His voice, low and gravelly and yet gentle at the same time, clenched something tight in my heart.

Before I knew it, I was barrelling off the bed and straight at him.

Armour was freaking hard when you ran into it face-first.

Canderous chuckled, patting me on the back with a heavy gauntlet. "You'll do alright here, ad'ika. You have everything you need."

"D'ya have to go so soon?" I hated how plaintive and needy my voice was, muffled against the cold iron of his chest. "Like, we've barely even arrived-"
"Clean break's the best." Canderous pushed me gently away, then, staring down with a fond smile along his craggy face. He'd even shaved, and through the sheen in my eyes I could see a jagged scar marring the edge of his jaw, and another deeper one on his chin. "Don't you start bawling on me, Mission Vao, or you'll make the purple iron rust."

"Hah!" I sniffed, blinking hard. "Like I'd cry over one of Davik's old cronies!"

A flicker of surprise crossed Canderous' face before he erupted into laughter. Had I made a crack like that half a year ago, he probably woulda walloped me one. Was kinda weird, to think that back on Taris, Canderous Ordo was nothing to me but one of Davik's scariest henchmen. A merc even I wouldn't risk pickpocketing.

Now, though, it'd almost be worth trying, just to see if he noticed.

"Can I-" I felt my voice start to break, and struggled to hold the tears back. Damn if I was gonna cry in front of Canderous again. "Can I walk you to the starport?"

"No sense drawing these things out, ad'ika." His steely gaze flickered over Dee, still seated silently on the bed behind me. "Keep your father true to his family, Sithkid. And try not to be any more of a di'kut than you can help."

Dustil didn't say anything, and Canderous looked at me one last time. I plastered on that fake smile, the one I kept wearing when everything felt so freaking hard. "I ain't gonna see you again, am I?"

The side of his mouth shot up. "Never say never, kar'taylir sah ad."

"Oy!" I scowled, as Canderous turned away from me with a chuckle. "You better not be calling me any names, you old geezer!

"Ret'urcye mhi, ad'ika," he added, as I was scrabbling for a suitable come-back in Ryl. "Live your life well, Mission Vao."

Canderous walked out of the doorway, and did not look back.

I stood still, staring blankly ahead, as the sounds of his footsteps slowly faded into nothing.

"(My youngest son learned more of wisdom and honour beyond the skies of Kashyyyk than I would have believed possible)." The audio feed broke through the deafening silence as I felt the first teardrop fall. Dustil was already at my side, slipping one warm arm across my shoulders. "(Together with his allies, Zaalbar saved the heart of Rwookrrorro. But as I look upon the blue-skinned cub he named as the daughter of his heart, I wonder if perhaps she had not saved him first)."

I tucked my head into Dustil's chest. His other arm wrapped tight around me, and only then did I allow the first sob to break free.

xXx

Revan Freeflight:
Cerilian Detention Centre, Xappyh sector

All was quiet.

Quiet, like the sound of a sun breaking over the horizon. Like the gradual awakening of hope in a heart long surrendered to despair. Like the slow fall of a righteous crusader, who finally stops at the culmination of victory, only to find himself enveloped in the evil he first sought to defeat.
There were no voices in my head. No Force in my grasp. No Dark or Light Side – and no loved ones to hold me steady from those influences.

Reality shone dimly behind a prism of clouded consciousness. I couldn't remember the Republic netting my escape pod: my first vague impressions were of the rhythmic tones of med-sensors and the astringent scent of bacta packed around my body. A man in a white coat mumbled something about permanent scarring down my back, as he fitted a nerve restraint around one ankle and shoved me into a nest of dispirited prisoners.

My new home. Thick with the hopelessness of others – but not mine. No, I was not afflicted with that self-defeating emotion anymore.

Reflex rather than deliberation had me withdrawing – withdrawing away from prison cells and penitentiary and snapped-out orders from guards who held my life in their hands. My eyes would close, and faces of sentients once dear to me would flash through my mind – yet my mind would flounder, having no idea who they were. Or a name would whisper in my thoughts, but I'd be left scrabbling as to what it meant. A person? A planet? A pet or a ship or a pseudonym?

Strangely enough, I was almost content to sift through the fractured mess of my past. Easier, maybe, than thinking on those who had survived the Star Forge – but who now believed me dead.

Or worse: those who had suffered an end far more final than mine.

At times, clarity would slice through, and during those moments it became painfully obvious just what a sorry lot my fellow inmates were. Their heads hung low as they shuffled from one food-break to the next, spirits as grey and bleak as the baggy uniforms we all wore. Uniforms that painted us all as the losers of a war now over.

*Over. The war is over.* But any satisfaction I had at completing my end-game was thin. Jaded. Temporary-

*Because I'm not done. This isn't the end.*

A tiny bud of resolution, as paradoxical as a fragile flower breaking through a hardy winter's snow, still simmered at the core of my being. There was more for me to do. Bastila's final missive had been a confirmation of what part of me already knew – but maybe, what I needed first was time.

Time to grieve, to process, to take a deep breath and centre myself – for I'd not had that, not since I'd woken on the 'Spire with a splitting headache and three personalities. Then, survival had tunnelled into a desperate race to find Bastila, to run from Bastila, to get Bastila back, and then stop Mal-

My breath would hitch, as I relived the slice of ferraglass across my palm, when my fist had clenched tight around a wedge of glass and stabbed it deep into the heart of my former lover.

I would do it again. That was the most bitter of realizations: that I wasn't plagued with hypotheticals, I wasn't tormented with scenarios where I might've saved Mal, had I only been a little more persuasive, or found a way to knock him out or trick him-

The cards had already fallen, and no manner of what-if's could change that.

Maybe Malak Devari deserved more from me. Stars knew, I regretted what my influence had led him to, but I found I could not mourn for a past love I could barely remember.

It was the golden threads of others that held my heart now.
And the real world broke in, from time-to-time, ejecting me from that transient cocoon of detached self-reflection. Sometimes it was in the shape of a guard, herding me to my next cell, or that surly-faced Quarren who liked to itemize all prisoners according to his checklist of Sith-committed atrocities. At least, as a so-called Sith engineer, I ranked low on the list of criminals.

More often than the guards or the Quarren, though, was the Human male with the grin as bright and sharp as the edge of a chiv-

"Hey," he greeted the first time, sliding casually into the bench seat next to me. "You must be the new engineer. Don't believe I caught your name?"

"That's because I haven't told you it yet," I responded drily.

"Trade secret, huh?" He leaned back, all casual and insouciant, like he was just a sent checking out a girl in a cantina. "Well, I'm Atton. No point holding back, not when a pretty word with the guards will let it slip free."

I allowed my gaze to travel over the nearby prison officers: those few who weren't stone-faced had either the beginnings of disgust or righteousness written all over their faces. "Right," I drawled, letting disbelief colour my voice. "I suppose they'll also slip you the exit codes if you say they look fit in their armour?"

"Nah, no access codes. This place is locked down with biometric sensors," Atton shot back. I didn't react – at least, I thought I hadn't – but the slight quirk to his brows implied I'd let some glimmer of response through. "What, you hadn't noticed? An engineer in a prison cell, not immediately tracking the systems that keep us confined?"

I stared silently at the man for a minute. He was roguishly handsome, with a charming smile and an easy-going manner, and his attention was focused almost exclusively on me.

He didn't act like he knew who I was, like my face was at all recognizable to him. But, somehow, I didn't think he was here for a casual chat either.

"Not sure what sort of engineers you've kept company with, Atton," I said slowly, "but I think you'll find most of us are more of the humdrum mundane sort."

"I'm sure you're not giving yourself enough credit, sweetheart." He leaned forward, still with a lazy grin that didn't quite reach his eyes. "Although, seriously, I've been trying to figure something out. What would an engineer be doing on the Star Forge? I mean, wasn't the factory run entirely by droids?"

"For the most part," I shrugged. The inner workings of the Forge was simply another detail I couldn't recall, and that meant it was time to deflect the conversation. "And yourself? Suppose you're another hotshot flyboy?"

It was hard not to let my calm expression falter as the nickname left my lips. This prison cell wasn't the end. I knew that. And I'd find my way back to the others – this wasn't a war I could fight on my own. If Jolee had taught me anything, it was the strength inherent in the bonds people held with each other.

Balancing that with the ruthlessness required for victory – well. I'd failed once before. I couldn't afford to fail a second time.

Atton's grin morphed into a smirk. "I'd call myself the best pilot in the galaxy, but then I'd hardly be sitting in jail, would I?"
My lips twitched. "A self-proclaimed hotshot. All we need is a getaway ship, and then freedom will be ours."

"Funny," Atton replied. His tone was light, but his gaze was dead serious. "That's exactly what I was thinking."

Our conversation was broken, then, by the return-call back to our respective sleeping cells. But the man kept reappearing like a debt-collector, always with sly innuendos that morphed into wisecracks when I called him on it. Or conversational starters that felt more probing than flirtatious-

"Found out your name." He winked, drawing me from my thoughts some days later, as all the inmates sat dolefully enjoying another cuisine fare of grey slop.

"Well done," I said, absently eyeing over a twitchy Duros two tables down, who looked like he was about to crack. Slowly, slowly, the impressions of reality were beginning to bleed into my self-containment. "I'd offer you a medal, Atton, but our side seems to be all out of them."

"Interesting name, though, isn't it?" Atton drawled. I raised a brow, allowing my gaze to meet his calmly. The man had me on my guard, and intuition warned me to keep my reactions hidden. "I mean, Noyuna? Isn't that Huttese for 'no one'?"

I shrugged in response. I'd had to give something to that Quarren when he'd taken me in for questioning- and considering the last time I'd let my gut choose an alias, it'd ended up being a name from my past- well. I'd figured it was a better idea to fish around for something a bit more contrived. Maybe 'no one' in Huttese was a bit too contrived.

"Damn," I murmured. "And here my mother always said my name meant 'flower'."

Atton laughed, then, but his brown eyes were still as sharp as ferraglass. The man was interested in me. Why, I didn't know, and nor could I tell if he was a threat or a potential ally. Maybe he was both.

Days bled into weeks, and life became a patter of routine that was as strange to me as it was comforting. I normally detested being idle, and I could see how the enforced inertia was getting to some – the Duros hadn't been the first to make a fruitless break for the exit, nor would he be the last – but with each passing day, I felt the fractures in my mind slowly scab over, and the resolution in my soul harden back into conviction.

My sleep was mostly dreamless, and longer than I was accustomed to. Some mornings I woke with the shifting hues of purple dancing before my eyes. The sense of an objective unresolved remained with me, coupled with an itchy perception that my time here was only transitory. That, Force or no Force, luck or no luck, I wouldn't be here for long.

"It will be all right. You will find a way. You always do."

The cogs of calculation still turned, as the present snapped into focus with increasing regularity. My gaze would dance over the guards, marking their shifts, noting the biometric devices locking the exits to freedom. I'd scan the surveillance cams, occasionally twitching a hand just to see if the Force still whispered.

It did not. I heard nothing but the echoes of the physical, felt nothing but the borders of my own flesh.
Still, I wasn't beset with defeat, just as I didn't suffer from the despair of hopelessness. Instead, I felt like I was in a weird sort of limbo, sleep-walking through the steps of the living, as my head tried to work out what I should do next.

As I strived to remember-

"We could have lived out our entire lives and never seen the galaxy fall!"

-what was hidden-

"All I knew was that you considered there to be a threat greater than the Mandalorians. You argued that a stronger Republic was required."

-in the Unknown Regions.

"We're talking about the death of the Force here, Revan! Think what that would mean to us- to, to everyone!"

For there was a driving need, slowly building, deep in my gut. Something beyond the edges of the galaxy had started this. Something had caused me to gamble everything.

I'd lost. I'd fallen. I'd made the wrong decision, and millions had suffered from my darkness. But I knew, now, that I'd first stepped into that darkness understanding the risk, accepting it as the only chance-

For I'd had a reason, once. Something, other than the chains of the Dark Side, had me striving for galactic control.

It hadn't worked – my motivations had warped just like Malak's and every other survivor of the Jedi Thirteen – the Dark Side had failed us all. But if I was right in my suspicions, then I must have believed the Light Side couldn't help.

What could be out there to make the Jedi hero of the Mandalorian Wars think that?

"What happened to your fingers?" Atton, as always, invading my equanimity and snapping me back to the present. My remaining fingers laced together with my other hand, as my brows rose at the intrusive question. "Hey, just making conversation, sweetheart. Not like there's much else to do around here."

"You could take up table dancing," I suggested, jerking my head at the plasteel table-tops currently being buffed by a fellow inmate.

"Dunno, crowd looks pretty tough, even for me," he said easily, but I could tell the sharp-eyed man wasn't going to let it drop. "Your injury looks recent. Go on, spill. What, are you a disaster in the kitchen or something?"

"Machine accident on the Forge," I clipped out tersely, shuffling my maimed hand beneath the other. "It's a dangerous job, being a tech."

"Huh." Atton leaned back, a puff of breath rifling through his forelock. "Looks like a clean cauterization. Y'know, almost like a lightsaber cut."

My faint smile didn't shift an inch. "I wouldn't know. I'm surprised a snub jockey would, though."

There it was, that easy smirk again, as Atton eyed me over suggestively. "Well, sweetheart, we were
Sith soldiers. I'm sure we've both come across a Dark Jedi in a right strop before."

"Maybe I was smart enough to stay out of their way." I leaned over the table to snaffle a thin plasteel spork, and pointed it straight at him. "And if you call me sweetheart again, Atton, I'll stab you in the eye and take my chances with the guards."

"Okay, okay!" He threw his hands up, edging away. "No need to be so touchy! You could've just said so like a normal person, you know!"

My words were a test, really, to see if a hostile response would get the man to back the frell away. Half the time I wasn't sure if Atton suspected something about me, or was simply trying to get a handle on a potential ally.

For he sure as stars wasn't chatting to me in an idle attempt to make a new friend. No, I had a gut feeling that man was smarter and more devious than he let on.

But other than that, I found it hard to place him. Atton bore a lean, wiry strength, and he moved with the grace of a predator. He claimed he was a starpilot, but his stance, his stride when he didn't realize I was watching- well. It reminded me more of Yudan than it did of Carth.

My soul clenched when I thought on my oldest friend. Comrade. Follower- I didn't really know what to label my relationship with Yudan, other than that he was important to me. I wouldn't grieve for him, though, not unless I saw his corpse with my own eyes.

And it wasn't like I could catch news about any of the crew stuck in here-

"Hey Noyuna, you'll never believe what I heard," Atton breezed in, a few days later, just when I'd started thinking I'd truly scared him off. My hard stare had little effect on him, however, other than sparking a sly smirk in response. "I'm guessing you're over your little hissy fit. If not, though..."

"Stop pretending like you want to get into my pants, Atton, and we'll do just fine," I replied drily.

"Well, if your pants are on offer-"

I couldn't help it: I laughed. Whatever veneer of antagonism I'd tried to produce clearly hadn't worked, and the man was as resilient as a damn battle droid. "No, Atton. Just- no. Spit out whatever you have to say."

"The Republic's fawning over their latest set of heroes. Every war has them, y' know, a handful of survivors plucked from the ranks, stuck up on some pedestal to blind the masses with adoration. Heroes of the Star Forge, the media's calling them, like they single-handedly blew the damn thing up."

I hid my smile. "Suppose that's to be expected. Everyone likes a good hero or two. Heard anything juicy?"

Atton shrugged. "Some Fleet Commodore is getting most of the attention. Seems he shacked up with Bastila Shan before she karked it, and the holonets are having a field day."

I choked. It was hard to stop; my choke turned into a splutter, and my eyes blurred with tears of half-hilarity. *Carth... and Bastila? Sun and stars!* Oh, I'd have given a flagship, just to see the offended look on her face at that rumour-

Just to hear her nagging voice in my head again.
Atton was staring at me strangely, his eyes half-narrowed. "I haven't even told you the good part, Noyuna."


Some Fleet Commodore... My mirth dissolved into a quiet contentment. Commodore Onasi. The rank suited him. He'd go back to Telos with Dustil, I suspected – and oh, how part of me longed to be there at his side, no matter how impossible that was.

The others- some of the others might join him. Canderous would go to the Clans and Juhani to the Order, but it wouldn't surprise me if Jolee stuck around for a bit. And Mission-

It was especially hard to think of my ebullient young friend without Zaalbar. She'd be okay, I had to believe that, and between Canderous and Carth I knew they wouldn't lose sight of her well-being. But not so long ago, she'd only ever had Zaalbar-

He'd been a wise soul. A good friend. Far more than just a Wookiee indebted to me. In the end, I wondered if I hadn't owed him the greater debt.

Canderous won't bring Mission to the Clans. She'll stay with Carth. And maybe that'll help Carth, too.

I'd never seen how a relationship between Carth and I could work, long-term – and I still didn't. Not with what I had done in the past, not with what was still out there.

But maybe I owed Carth even more than Zaalbar.

"Promise me you'll get out of there alive."

My eyes stung and my heart clenched. And in that moment, all I really wanted was to be in his arms again.

I kept my promise, Flyboy. You damn well better keep yours.

"Not really," Atton was muttering. "Those Jedi types are the worst sort of hypocrites. At least the Sith are honest about what they're killing for. The Jedi are pacifists... except in times of war." He snorted, and for the first time I wondered if I was seeing the real Atton. "Do you know they knighted Bastila Shan? The fallen Jedi responsible for meditating half the Republic Fleet into space dust, before she went and turned on us?"

My throat ran dry. Jedi Knight Bastila Shan. If only she had lived to hear those words.

Atton's face smoothed over, and he was back to staring at me again. "You're a bit more interested in the fate of some Republic lackeys than I would've picked, Noyuna."

I forced a shrug, and matched his bland expression with one of my own. "As you said before, Atton. There's not much to do around here. May as well catch up on the gossip."

"I suppose." Those sharp eyes stayed fixed on me, even as his mouth curved into a lazy smile. "The real spicy news is about Yudan Rosh. Interested?"

I felt my fingers clench as my soul stuttered. "What's there to know?" I managed in an even tone. "Didn't he die just like the rest of Malak's Dark Jedi?"
"Apparently not. Seems he's on the run, somewhere, with half the galaxy screaming out for his blood. He's a turncoat, did you know? Joined Shan's crew at the last minute, probably just when things were starting to look sour for us. Not like the Republic will forgive the likes of him. Guess the bastard will have survivors on both sides gunning for him."

It was insanely difficult to keep my expression neutral when I felt like crowing in victory. I'd known he was still alive, dammit, no matter what Mal had said. Sure, Yudan wouldn't have an easy time of it, but the galaxy was a large place. If anyone could evade a horde of vengeful hunters, it'd be Yudan Rosh.

"Y'know, you're a bit of an odd one, Noyuna," Atton drawled. "If you weren't in here with the rest of us schmoes, I'd doubt you were even a Sith."

Atton, Atton. If only you knew.

"It was just a job for me, Atton," I lied easily, still hiding the grin that wanted to emerge. "Both sides killed people. I wasn't invested in any ideology. Besides, what about yourself? You hardly strike me as a regular pilot for the frontlines."

"Hey, what are you trying to imply?" he retorted, pulling back. "Whatever it is, you've got the wrong guy. I'm good at flying ships, cracking wise, and playing a mean hand of pazaak."

"Sure," I murmured sarcastically, and turned away to my sleep-cell.

Thoughts of the crew kept me awake all night.

I was almost ready. I could feel it burgeoning – that urge to start moving, that intuition I'd always accredited to the Force – and yet how could that be? I still, at times, reached out to feel absolutely nothing.

Where was this intrinsic belief stemming from, that I'd somehow find my way out of here? Without any link outside of this containment complex, I had nothing to play with other than a cagey inmate I trusted about as far as I could throw a Hutt. Without the Force.

The problem was, I couldn't get a good read on Atton. On his personality, his traits, his integrity. He was a set of contradictions: a laid-back joker, who probed me at every turn with leading questions, but refused to ask them outright. If there was any way to escape this prison, I was sure he'd be a willing ally – except that I didn't trust him at my back.

Ironic, really, considering the contradictions of my own character. I was not Jen Sahara, just like I wasn't Darth Revan anymore – but glimmers of both remained in the murky recesses of my soul. Jen was easier to accept – that unknown Force-sensitive who'd dreamed of a quiet life of learning, before dying after prolonged torture at the hands of my people. Her fleeting life remained with me as a tangible reminder of what I had once done.

And the dark scars on my soul simply warned me that no one – no matter how powerful – could hold mastery over the Dark Side without losing themselves.

The point was moot, really, without the Force – but in the end I was Revan Freeflight, or some broken form of her. Forceless, luckless, but still breathing. Not beaten, though. Not yet.

A day later, and Atton returned with an even bigger bombshell.

"They're shipping us out soon," he said, his eyes dark as they darted around the durasteel cell. "This place is overcrowded, and too many prisoners are snapping at the inactivity. Guess they figured
they'd put us war crims to work."

"To... work?" I said faintly. "What, like community service out on some restoration project?"

"Shavit, if only that was true." Atton snorted, running a hand through his dark hair. He seemed oddly unsettled. "Stick us out in the public eye, and pretty soon you'll have the media all over us. No, the Republic would rather we were all tucked away somewhere hidden, until the galaxy forgets we even exist."

I didn't think that would happen – sooner or later, the arbiters would come, following the scent of public money grants that were available even to the scum of the losing side. But that day, I'd wager, was a lot further off than I'd be willing to wait for.


The corner of his mouth quirked, and his gaze darted deliberately over a handful of guards busily marching an inmate into solitary. "I have my ways," he said vaguely.

I wasn't sure I bought his implication. I could've sworn that getting anything meaningful from the hostile guards would be like drawing juma juice from ferracrete.

"Where are we headed?" I snapped out, and the rush of readiness in my veins felt like a homecoming.

"A mix. Chandrila. Darilyn. But us Slugs are headed for Peragus."


"Good?" Atton all but squawked, before he leaned over and his voice morphed into a hiss. "Are you insane? We're talking manual labour here, not to mention the chronic rate of septa-lung disease due to mining dust-"

"But also a lot more opportunity and freedom of movement, Atton," I murmured, quiet enough that no audio feed from any listening cams would pick up on my words. "Here, we're stuck in a box surrounded by prison guards that are mostly volunteer Army grunts determined to ensure no Sith has an easy time of it- you think I hadn't noticed the combat-readiness of them all? They're not civvies. But on Peragus, we'll be dealing with paid workers. Sure, the place will be locked down, but surveillance will be patchy and the guards will grow complacent. The place won't hold us for long."

Atton pulled back, eyes widening, as he processed the longest speech I'd ever sent his way. He was silent behind his mask of inscrutability, but I had no doubt his mind was racing. Eventually, he answered my unspoken question.

"Are you propositioning me, sister?"

"Think of it more as... a mutually beneficial arrangement. Trust me, Atton, Peragus has never seen the likes of me before."

That was sheer arrogance, perhaps, without the Force- but if I was going to use Atton, I needed him to have faith in my abilities. He was my best potential ally, even if he might also be a potential liability.
He's a tool, the dark side of me whispered. *A tool that can be used to get the job done.*

Maybe that dark voice would always be a part of me, but it was keeping that darkness balanced with empathy that had been my final lesson, I thought.

*I'll do whatever I must, but without losing my soul this time.* That was a promise I made in my heart – to Carth, to Yudan, to Mission and Juhani, Jolee and Canderous and Dustil.

To Zaalbar and Bastila. And maybe, in the end, even to Malak.

xXx

Chapter End Notes

*Coming up next: The third and final chapter in the Hyperspace:VII arc.*
A Wookiee's life-celebration worth of thanks to kosiah for the beta.
There's a direct reference to R2-D2/C-3P0 in HK-47's POV. Internet high-five's to y'all who spot it. Also, the name 'Starfire' comes from kosiah's 'verse in *Memory.*
Traya:
Unifar Starport, Iziz, Onderon

"Master." The honorific rumbled from the hulk of a man who stood with his back facing me. His deep growl was more akin to the grinding of slag beneath a sandcrawler's tracks than that of a Human's intonation. "You have returned."

"Stating the obvious ill becomes you," I clipped out. The man did not turn from his position, not even as I neared. His large frame remained hunched over our freighter's central console, either to conceal the screen or offer me the insult of his back. A trifling deed of rebellion, perhaps, from one whose spirit already crawled in servility. No matter. I could afford to ignore his belligerence for now. "Tell me, my scion, how fares our valiant general?"

As I reached the man's side, one meaty fist jerked: punching forward to clear the contents of the console screen he had been perusing.

Like I could not guess whom my obsessed scion was trawling the holonets in search of.

"General Vaklu refused to speak with me."

This close, the man towered over my shorter stature. A physical discordance that mattered not at all when compared to the mastery of the Force.

I could feel my eyes pinching in displeasure, and the crisp of steel strengthened my next words. "I trust you did not allow Vaklu's truculence to thwart you."

It was not a question.

"Of course not, master. I instead approached Vaklu through an exiled separatist group, currently camped within the slums of Iziz." The man turned, at last, to face me. His pale and cracked lips twisted in a smirk. "At first the general wasn't pleased to see me, but I changed his mind. Vaklu is ours, or as good as."

My head dipped in the slightest of nods. Onderon was important; would continue to be important in the years to come. This resource-rich, relatively unscathed planet was a direct - and short – hyperspace jump to the first of the Republic's quixotic restoration endeavours: Telos.

Onderon could become the indelible lynchpin of the battered Republic's resurgence – or its fall. One did not need precognition to foretell that material resources and logistical support would be requested from this wealthy planet, and that Onderon's impressionable, pro-Republic Queen would fold beneath the weakest of pleas from the Core.

General Vaklu, as the Queen's cousin, was second-in-line to the throne. He was older, war-hardened, a famous military general from Onderon's ousting of the Mandalorian invasion – and he was also a

My apprentice cocked his head, but did not reply. The dim lighting of the freighter gleamed against the scars rippling over his uncovered scalp. His eyes were deadened orbs of swirling white corruption, boring down at me dispassionately.

Such a physical change from the midnight-skinned boy he had once been; the boy who had traipsed eagerly down the hallowed halls of the Jedi High Temple. The boy who had once yearned to master the art of healing, to breathe in all the knowledge of the Jedi, to transform into someone bright and powerful and good.

Ah, the naive idealism of youth. That boy had been a padawan of mine, then; my first true scion—before the Jedi Order exiled me for failing to adhere to their rigid hypocrisy.

The boy grew into a man whilst I travelled my own path. He had lived his own set of adventures: a new Jedi master, a triumphant knighthood, a call to warfare and fanatical heroism as his deeds blazed across the galaxy next to the brightest of stars.

Until Malachor shattered his soul, and the Jedi Order cast him away like dross.

These days, the pained hate rolled from the man in waves of power: fast like wildfire, before ebbing to a slow-moving tar as black as his heart. Amazing, the strength my apprentice had garnered in the ten months since I had found him bleating into the depths of a bottle. The ancient Force rituals I bound his life-force with had borne fruit within the empty husk of what had once been a mighty Jedi Knight.

For Xaset Terep had never been a weakling. None of the Jedi Thirteen had ever been weaklings.

Muscles rippled beneath weathered skin that had turned as pale as sandstone. "Was your journey to the Core successful, master?"

"It was." I did not deign to offer details. My fingers within the web of holo-media plucked their strings well: public opinion was burgeoning against the battered ranks of the Jedi Order, and that would steer the ship of Senate bureaucracy.

Politics, I had learned, was simply the continuation of war by another means. And the Jedi Order were but one of my eventual targets.

I had once emulated the façade of Jedi serenity, spouting platitudes and hollow counsel even as my soul questioned the dichotomies within the Jedi ethos.

I had once been little more than a blind idiot, living a life in a darkness I did not perceive, not until the harsh light of a dawning sun cast its rays on all the preconceptions that had blinkered my vision.

I had once fallen in love.

"So," Xaset ground out. His large shoulders tensed. "Is Revan truly dead this time?"

My lips thinned. So, Xaset knew of Jen Sahara. Sharlan, that nihilistic craven, had never learned the wisdom in holding his tongue. If it were not for the sheer potential in harnessing and directing his hunger at my will, I would have euthanized the fool long ago.

At least I could console myself with one amusing consequence of the Star Forge: Sharlan's tendency
to mouth off was now permanently hindered.

Xaset's strength was different to Sharlan's, but no less powerful. The deaths at Malachor rippled through my scion's Force aura, burdening the man to relive that day of darkness over and over again, granting him both power and pain beyond what I had first predicted.

The enduring chink in Xaset's armour were those he once named as his comrades. Those he had watched from afar, as they spiralled into the depths of depravity he had once sacrificed his soul to halt.

The war turned, after Malachor, and in such a way that Xaset could neither understand nor forgive. Even now at the very mention of Revan, his loathing trembled with enough raw fury to manifest on a physical level.

Plasteel tubes of condiments rattled loudly against the shelves.

"Rein it in," I snapped. "Revan is dead."

The Force swirled before choking tight around the man, as if my words afforded him a small measure of comfort.

Perhaps they did.

Still. Even Revan's asinine droid had not granted a surety of her final demise. My game would continue without Revan's piece on the board, but I was no simpleton.

If there was one sentient known for upending the game-board entirely, it was Revan Freeflight.

"Good," Xaset growled, turning back to face the blank console screen. "With Malak also gone, that only leaves Yudan alive."

My voice turned cold. "You will not chase after gnit-flies when rancors are our true quarry."

His large shoulders bunched as he shot me a glare filled to the brim with malcontent. "He is with the Jedi. The Jedi!"

Xaset's weakness of temper was not one I would accommodate – even if I understood his resentment. Once again the Jedi Order sheltered a war criminal from Republic justice – if the holonet rumours were to be believed. Such a sharp contrast to their treatment of Xaset Terep who, alongside Meetra Surik, had been exiled by a passel of blind robes who would not accept the price required for ending the Mandalorian Wars.

But the Jedi Order have never been balanced in their judgment, have they?

No. I knew that well. I had been circumspect with my one affair of the heart. After all, it was not particularly difficult for a Jedi Master to conceal a brief dalliance of carnal pleasure with an outsider.

Until I did the unforgiveable. The prohibited. The absolutely shocking, at my advanced age.

I fell pregnant.

"You have only the lurid hearsay of fanciful holonet reporters," I snapped. "If there is truth in the matter of that one's survival, then time will show the Order lack the teeth to shield him from the braying howls of the masses. Your old friend is of no import to my plans."

"He is not my friend!"
"Silence!" The Force surged, unchecked, around my body and deep into my psychic hold over the man's soul. Xaset's mental guards flapped futilely before they collapsed. "You will listen. You will obey. You will do my will."

The large man trembled, before bowing ever so slightly. But even that minor act of subservience was enough. Xaset Terep was mine.

The man hated me for his pain, for his subjugation; just as he loved me for the gift of restored Force – and it was those twin bonds of emotion that shackled him well and truly to my side.

"The Jedi Order will face their own reckoning," I murmured, in a tone one would use to soothe a frightened loth-kitten. "Fear not, my dark scion. Their time will come."

The most satisfying side-effect of the Order's eventual demise was my own savage foretaste of retribution. I did not deny there was wisdom within the ethos of the Jedi, but their wisdom was married with a casual cruelty: their rank and file preached acceptance, whilst their leaders offered only repudiation for the odd Jedi who dared procreate.

I had been tasked to put the babe up for adoption and cut all ties with my Echani paramour, or leave the Jedi Order forever.

And, as vast as my love blossomed for that squalling, snot-nosed spawn of my own flesh, I could not bring myself to abandon what I considered to be the most essential part of me: a Jedi.

At first, I had believed my decision to be the right one. I sat on the Council no more, but I still wore the robes and spoke the same invective as always. I walked amongst my peers with a mother's grief burning in my heart and a forced smile upon my lips- but the doubts trickled in, doubts that I first concealed beneath the stringent doctrine of the Jedi Code.

_Singular attachment is dangerous. Singular attachment can lead to the Dark Side. Singular attachment will not be allowed within the Jedi Order._

To this day, I was not sure when the Order's ethos had changed so radically, so abstemiously – but once there had been a time when Jedi did not frown upon attachment, when they did not separate mother from child, brother from sister. When they counted familial love as a blessing.

I remained Jedi, but my doubts grew. The fierce yearning to know my child did not abate. It was belittling to accept that I was no more than a mother stripped of her young – my meditations would drift into daydreams of the babe's rounded cheeks, of her toddling first steps, of her child's delight at the world.

Sentiment. Foolish, weak-minded sentiment. Basic and yet overpowering with its primal simplicity.

The Force slowly transformed into a burden rather than a comfort, and so I addressed the High Council once more. Begged them, pleaded for consent to know my child. Only to be faced with the same decision as before.

This time I chose exile.

But years had passed, and the Echani Yusannis had grown bitter. He would not see me. He would not forgive. I forced a meeting, only to learn that he did not even _know_ where our child had been fostered. That he had cast her away like I had him.

In the end, I found myself with truly nothing, and that was when I had first learned to hate.
"What now?" Xaset shuffled on his feet, his large head turning back to stare at the blank console screen. "Do we stay on Onderon?"

"There are other plans I must see to. The separatist movement on Onderon requires time to ignite, time that we can use for other means." I paused, sifting through my connection with the Force to focus tightly on him. "Have you found her?"

Xaset stiffened, like a broken statue slowly shifting to attention. "No, I- You are still searching for her?"

"Of course. Malachor birthed gifts in you and Sharlan. Did you expect Meetra Surik to be any different?"

"You- you- you cannot hurt her!" His voice cracked on the pathetic plea, as the Force vanished entirely from his aura. For the briefest of moments, Xaset Terep was nothing more than a walking void again.

My scion's once-comrades were enough to send him into a tailspin of unchecked fury, but Meetra Surik might be the only sentient in the galaxy who could break him.

"I will give her the Force again. Just like I did with you."

Malachor had blinded Xaset and Meetra and, like wounded kath-pups seeking shelter, they had scurried back to their den in hope of salvation. Instead- instead- those blinkered Jedi hypocrites cast them out as nulls, ripped cruelly from the lifeblood and the doctrines they had always depended on.

*Take the greatest Jedi Knight and strip away the Force, and all that remains is a cowering child. The High Council would have been more merciful in executing the pair of them.*

The Jedi Order knew *nothing* of true enlightenment. Their rigorous standards were completely at odds with their unconditional forgiveness of any fallen Jedi who had committed atrocities but claimed redemption. The Jedi preached love in all its forms – except the physical, except the familial, except the singular.

"The Force... she was- she was broken, when I last saw her." Xaset bore no expression as he faced me, but nascent hope flickered through the Force as it returned to him. Mingled with fear – for the man knew well the price required for such a resurrection. "Maybe we should just leave her-"

"Would you return to how you were?"

Xaset did not answer.

"Meetra Surik matters little unless we find her. I have weightier concerns than your old lover, my apprentice."

The Unknown Regions.

The years after I shed the brown robes had been a search for understanding. I stood on my own, delving into dark corners if knowledge could be gained. No longer would I judge myself on the ideals of a broken organization that was more a controlling religion than a force for good. I would do what *I* thought was right.

And when the Mandalorian Wars broke out, and Revan Freeflight led a band of renegade Jedi to aid the Republic, I took notice. When she started winning battles and the galaxy spoke of the Jedi Thirteen in awed tones, I travelled to her side.
But I stayed in the shadows. I did not need the fame of her generals, her Guard of Twelve, her Jedi Thirteen. I was no longer Master Arren Kae – Kae had died when the Order betrayed her and Yusannis denied forgiveness. Master Kreia, on the other hand, was a hidden advisor and teacher to Revan; an undeniable part of the drive for Republic victory against the Mandalorian menace.

And then we won, and Revan led us to the depths of space beyond the Outer Rim.

Even now, my mind shied away. Revan believed a stronger Republic was the only solution – I had my doubts, but Revan’s charisma and power were enough to sway me at first. I had been by her side through the horrors of battle, after all, and there were few sentients I esteemed as highly.

But not even Revan Freeflight could control the Dark Side, and her objectives slowly corroded, until her desire was galactic domination instead of galactic defense.

I left, before it all fell apart. I mourned, when I heard of her death above Deralia. Finally, my mind started working on its own plan.

"Where are we headed, then?"

My lips curved in a cold smile. Where it all began, my dark scion. Sharlan will scuttle back to my side soon enough, and there is but one place in the galaxy for the three of us to strengthen before it is our time to strike.

"Malachor," I murmured, and headed to the cockpit.

xx

**Mekel Kadoni:**

*Jedi High Temple, Galactic City, Coruscant*

"So, er, how was this morning with Master Ell?" Kel asked, shifting uneasily on his feet.

Like he couldn’t guess the frakk...king answer. Did I bleeding well feel any different to his gods-damned Force senses?

I threw Kel a shrug as I rifled through the rucksack I’d emptied on the table. "Bit like clubbing a nest of baby shyracks. Sure, you could argue it’s community service, but with the way those things breed you’re just wasting everybody’s time for a bit of unchecked gore."

"Oh." Kel blinked, his eyes crinkling in confusion. "So, not well, then?"

"No, Kel," I drawled. If I’d still had the Force, I’d’ve whacked him over the head for being a gormless idiot. Kel was a nice guy, but sometimes I wondered if he’d spent his childhood in a frakk...ing box. "Not well. Would’ve been more bearable if they’d sent a robe easy on the eyes, but only Sadface comes to look at me these days."

"You’re lucky he still tries, Mekel," Thalia weighed in, with her customary tactlessness. "It wouldn’t hurt to keep a civil tongue and show Master Ell a modicum of civility."

I scowled at the dark-haired woman leaning against the wall of my quarters, Yuthura’s quarters, actually, but I hadn’t mustered up the balls to walk out on her yet. "I’ll be sure to send him a thank-you note."

Thalia’s eyes flashed, and I remembered she’d never been one to back down, even on Korriban. She was an alright sort, really, when she wasn’t lambasting me about my frakk...king language.
"Kel," Thalia said abruptly. "Go get us some lunch, would you?"

"I, er, alright then," Kel muttered, rubbing his neck awkwardly as he skulked out of the room.

I rolled my eyes as the hatch swished closed behind him. "How sweet. Just the two of us. I have to remind you that I'm already taken-"

An invisible cord lashed me warningly on the back.

"Frakk!" Damn, I'd forgotten just how much that could hurt. "Like old times, huh? For frakk's sake, Thalia, that bleeding stings-"

"This is nothing like old times," Thalia snapped. "Yuthura's not our master, none of us are Sith anymore, and you're a space-damned null!"

My scowl tightened with bone-deep resentment as I glared at her.

When Yuthura and I'd first arrived at the Temple, it'd been Thalia's unexpected presence that'd smoothed things over. Not like the damn robes had been interested in me then – not when they had frakking Yuthura Ban camped out on their doorstep.

Sure, her Sith markings had mostly faded, but it wasn't like the dusty-brained gimoids were ignorant of the position she once held. Thalia, Kel, Dak – they'd all been admitted into the Order – even if Dak had pissed off to who-knew-where – and their supposedly exemplary behaviour had at least grudgingly allowed us inside.

Not that Yuthura had been interested in joining, at first. Jen Sahara – or whatever the frakk her name really was – may have persuaded the others, but Yuthura wasn't the sort to bend easily, not even to insane bints who could gut the likes of Jorak Uln and Uthar Wynn and then throw cocktails over bleeding Yudan Rosh.

In the end, it was a freak Force event that finally pushed Yuthura to head for Coruscant- to search for answers, to plead for my salvation, if necessary.

Because the Force was gone from me. It'd been gone for months, now, and no amount of spice or booze or even frakking robes fiddling around in my head had done a damn thing to change that.

And everything felt slightly less alive.

"The Force isn't coming back to you, Mekel," Thalia said, her voice gentling. "The other mind-healers have given up. Master Ell only keeps visiting you to assuage Yuthura. Do you understand?"

My jaw clenched. "No," I said flatly. "Maybe try spitting out what you mean? Last time I checked, Yuthura didn't need any frakking assuaging for frakking anything."

In the early days at the Temple, Yuthura had retreated into that frigid coldness she did so well, but over time she'd thawed. I'd seen the look on her damned face when the masters spoke to her. And Yuthura treated Thalia like an equal, now – something she'd never done with me, not really, and that'd never happen now I was a null.

Thalia sighed. "Yuthura feels responsible for you, Mekel. She cannot join the Order while engaged in an emotional attachment-"

"Shagging," I said bluntly. "Try using the correct term instead of glossing it over with Jedi-babble, will you?"
"Don't be a jerk," Thalia cut in. "You know exactly what I'm saying."

Yeah. Yeah, maybe I did. Yuthura still regarded the Jedi with suspicion, but it was waning. Master Vash intrigued her. And Thalia had her ear, well and truly. Yuthura wouldn't give up on me willingly, but maybe- maybe that wasn't her choice to make.

And, frakk – Yuthura and I might not be the love of each other's lives, but I cared for her. I wanted her to have this chance, to do things right, to be better than what we once were – she'd always had a cruel streak that rivalled mine, but there was a righteous drive in her as well. She fought for the underdog, even if she flat-out denied doing so. It was why she'd protected Kel – Kel, who in any other life would have karked it two days into Korriban.

The Sith didn't nurture that side of Yuthura's character, but maybe the Jedi would. And the Jedi didn't approve of their members banging outsiders.

And, frakk it, if the Jedi couldn't help me then maybe it was time I found a life elsewhere.

"I know," I said, hearing the heaviness in my voice. "It just- it just doesn't make any bleeding sense."

The Star Forge had blown up the same time I'd collapsed, I found out later. The robes had thought that coincidence meant something, but couldn't explain why. Or how the Force had suddenly vanished from me – I'd heard murmurs of "residual corruption from Korriban", but that didn't seem frakking likely either, given that everyone else connected to the Academy was doing just super.

Well, those who hadn't choked on the fallout.

The weeks had dragged on like a fat man crawling in a desert, and slowly the haggard old farts lost interest in me. The Force wasn't coming back. Thalia was the first to voice it – but I didn't need fancy magic to read the faces of the mind-healers as their mouths turned down in disappointment and boredom. I'd given the damn Order over a month to sort me out, and now they were raising their hands like useless twats and walking away.

Thalia was right. The only thing I was doing here was holding Yuthura back like a gods-damned shackle to the past – but I'd already figured that one out on my own.

I eyed over the rucksack on the table.

"No, it doesn't make sense," Thalia agreed, plucking at her excrement-coloured robes. "I'm sorry for your loss, Mekel, but staying here is no life for you either. Maybe it's time you learned how to live without the Force."

"What the frakk do you think I was doing before you and Kel barged in here?" I snapped, waving to the foodstuffs and utility tools laid out on the table. "Planning a daytrip to Coruscant's red-light district?"

Thalia blinked, turning to eyeball the spilled contents of my rucksack for the first time. "You're- you're leaving?"

"Yeah, so stop with your sermon already, alright? Just- just look out for Yuthura. She's never been one to accept failure."

For the first time since I'd known her, Thalia looked as awkward as Dee sometimes did. "Of course," she murmured, blinking. "Take care, Mekel. You may no longer feel the Force, but it can still guide your actions-"
"Piss off already, before I throw a damned multi-tool at your head," I growled, and the corner of Thalia's mouth twitched. She pushed off from the wall, strode to the door, and turned only to give me a short nod of farewell.

I nodded back, throwing her a jaunty smirk as the door closed behind her.

A silent farewell was a crappy way to split from someone who'd lived through the same hellhole of vipers as me. I sighed, and felt a trickle of sweat nudge down the back of my neck.

It was gonna be one of those stifling days. Still hours to go before the lunch meal, and the damn place felt like an underground clay-oven. Bleeding ironic, really, that here in the heart of Coruscant – the frakking Core of the frakking galaxy – they refused to install something as basic as air conditioning.

A snarky Zeltron kept offering me a room in the visitor's wing – loaded with all the technological needs that non-Force sensitives require! – but I was with Yuthura. Yuthura, who could regulate her own body temperature, like every other robe in this pristine palace.

Yuthura, who could have a second shot at things if I wasn't around, chaining her to the past.

I hadn't... I hadn't told Yuthura everything. My collapse in that dingy cantina, the sudden blast of raw power, tearing deep into me and uprooting every strand of Force clean from my core- she knew all that, and it mystified her the same as those mumbling robes she'd gambled on.

No, what I hadn't told Yuthura was that for a brief second there'd been someone else in my head.

"Where is the frelling Force?!" the presence had screamed, as they completely booted me out of my own damned body. "There's someone else- I can't sense my bond-sister, but there's someone else."

The presence vanished seconds later.

I'd heard enough about bleeding Force-possession back at the Academy. Mention that little factoid to the masters here, and I probably wouldn't see the outside of a locked-down med-chamber for years.

In the end, it didn't matter. Not enough to tell anyone – because the presence hadn't returned. The Force hadn't returned. And now... now, it was time to split.

I leaned forward to stuff everything back into the rucksack before pulling the clasps shut and shrugging it over one shoulder. The only thing left on the table was a data-note.

I stared down at the message.

Yuthura,

It's time to stop beating a dead bantha. It ain't coming back alive.

I've gotta learn how to do things like a normal sent, and I can't do that here. And you can't follow. Stick with Thalia.

There's enough ex-Dark Jedi in the Temple to throw a party. Think well of me, but move on, okay? We live in different worlds now.

I've got resources, so don't freak out. I've got a plan, and you know I always fall on my feet.

Wear the robe. I reckon it'd suit ya.
I turned away. In the end, I was just another Force-blind sent, waltzing away from a Temple where I didn't belong.

No one bothered stopping me.

The hum of civilization hit my ears as I turned into a public access-way that led through a retail complex dotted with hover-cabs. My hand slipped into a pocket, fingering a credit chit and a datapad loaded with hyperspace coordinates for Telos.

For not every ex-student from Korriban had ended up on Coruscant.

xXx

**Juhani:**
*Khoonda Farmlands, Dantooine*

The lands stretched into the horizon: blackened fields of what had once been crops of kassi grain and sugar-cobs, the lifeblood of the average Dantooine farmer. In the distance, a pair of Jedi younglings toiled meekly beneath the command of a stern-eyed settler, one of many who had lost their livelihood simply due to proximity to a Jedi Enclave.

I sighed, kneeling down to dig my fingers into the dirt. Beneath my feet, the echo of the Force thrummed faintly.

The vista was how I remembered and yet not: I could close my eyes, and the scorched earth would transform into farmlands of abundance. The faint ash on the air dissolved into the sweet scent of wild renni grass. The Force remained the same; even an airstrike from the Sith could not deform the abiding spirit of this planet, and I knew in my heart that Dantooine would flourish as it had before.

I had returned home, and nostalgia battered me as fiercely as grief.

There were so many memories of mild Dantooine nights. Of Belaya, slipping her hand into mine and offering gentle counsel that I repudiated more often than not.

"Juhani!"

Or Dak, calling out to join us, simmering with malcontent as he escaped the confines of an enclave he would not embrace.

"Juhani?"

The three of us would dig our toes into the warm soil and gaze up at the night sky, subsiding into the comfortable silence of true camaraderie. Once, the strictures and demands of a padawan had felt restricting, as I struggled to reconcile my primal emotions and seek serenity within the Force. Only out here with the easy acceptance of friends had I found the means to truly relax.

A hand touched me gently on the shoulder.

I jerked, snapping upright, twisting on one heel with hilt already in hand-

The intruder froze, arms raised in swift appeal, and I almost fumbled my lightsaber in shock.

"Dak?" I gasped, heart stuttering.
He was there, right there, laughing at my unlit weapon before striding forward and engulfing me in a bone-crushing hug.

My cry of delight was muffled against the coarse cloth covering his chest.

"Not often I get the jump on you, Juhani!" Dak crowed. I choked back a sound of disbelief, pressing my face tight into his shoulder. The present faded and, for a brief moment, I was that young padawan again, cherished and strengthened by the companionship of a friend.

But Dak had once desired more than I had to offer, and I stood strong on my own feet these days, no matter what loss I had to endure.

I pulled back, lips tugging wide in delight. It felt like eons had passed since our paths had diverged – so much had occurred since Dak had ascended away in a rickety elevator, whilst I followed Zaalbar into the dark of the Shadowlands.

My smile faded at the reminder.

"My friend," I murmured, chasing the thoughts of grief away. "It is so good to see you. But I had heard you were on Coruscant?"

The corner of Dak's mouth twitched as he drew back. His dark eyes were hooded, but there was a steadiness to his expression I had not seen before. His shoulders were pushed back, his stance relaxed, and even his scent on the air was barely noticeable. "I was, for a bit. My new, uh, master, wished to return here."

"Master?" I echoed, gaze roving over his dear face. Dak stood before me in the humble robes of a padawan, offset by the glint of a lightsaber on his belt. He had left Kashyyyk to return to the Jedi, and I could not deny I had worried he would run – like he had once before. "You are a Jedi again."

"I promised Belaya," Dak said simply, and the shadows in his eyes cleared. "Y'know, I've come to realize I never set my heart on the Jedi before, not really, but after meeting you and Jen Sahara-"

He cut himself short, grimacing into silence.

"I promised Belaya," Dak said simply, and the shadows in his eyes cleared. "Y'know, I've come to realize I never set my heart on the Jedi before, not really, but after meeting you and Jen Sahara-"

He cut himself short, grimacing into silence.

My eyes closed, my breath hitched, and a fresh surge of grief assailed me.

Dak's hand returned to rest on my shoulder. "I'm sorry about Jen," he muttered. "I couldn't believe it when I heard. Thought she was a knight, though, not Shan's frelling apprentice-"

"She was," I croaked, resisting the urge to clench my fists. "Do not- do not believe everything you hear."

Dak's fingers tightened and, despite my struggle for control, the first teardrop slipped free.

"Shavit," he cursed. "Me and my big mouth- dammit, Juhani, I've never seen you cry before!"

I laughed brokenly, before sniffing and wiping my face on the sleeve of my robe. "I am trying to find peace, Dak, but everything is still so raw. Belaya, Zaalbar, Bastila, J-Jen-"

I swallowed and looked away blindly, for the false name that had once been automatic now twisted on my lips.

If there is one sentient I could tell the truth, it would be Dak-

It was tempting to unburden myself. Oh, indeed, for Revan's death was so intrinsically difficult to
accept, harder perhaps than even Belaya’s, given the profound impact Revan had borne on my life.

*But would Dak ever see beyond the notoriety of Revan’s past? He knew Jen Sahara for a short while as a heroic Jedi Knight. To reconcile that with the Dark Lord who resurrected the Academy he suffered through-*

Dak’s hand slipped down to tug at my own. "Let's go for a walk," he said gently. "You could show me how good that fake leg of yours is."

I blinked away the sheen in my eyes, staring at the warm fingers entwined with my own. "Your arm," I murmured, dragging his limb upward to stare at it intently. Brown skin was smattered with fine Human hair, covering a healthy forearm. "A biotech prosthetic," I wondered aloud. "This is good work. I would not be able to tell the difference, Dak, did I not already know."

"Yeah." His voice thrummed with warmth as his fist flexed in my grasp. "The nerves still jangle a bit, but that's to be expected. I heard about your injury on the nets. How's the new limb?"

"Cumbersome," I admitted, lifting the hem of my robe to expose the robotic appendage beneath. "I need to allow time for the primary nerve centres to re-align. I will have another procedure which should grant me more flexibility before they overlay the bio-tissue."

"You mean, now's my one shot at kicking your arse in a duel?"

I shot him a mock-glare and Dak laughed again, his brown eyes twinkling with mirth. He looked-steady. It was one of the last characteristics I would have once attributed to Dak Vesser. "Look at us, Juhani – both part-robotic Jedi," he chortled. "Who'd have thought?"

"Belaya would be proud," I whispered, blinking again. The grief lodged in my soul was fresh and raw, but somewhere beneath it all was something stronger. Dak’s expression softened, and he pulled on my arm again.

"Come on," he murmured, and this time I fell into step.

We walked in silence at first. The slight breeze was warm, carrying the scent of freshly dug soil intermingled with the lingering odour of carbonized earth. To our right were the plainly visible buildings of the Enclave: battered, damaged, but still standing – an icon of hope and rebirth amidst the ashes of destruction.

"It was harder than I thought, coming back here," Dak admitted, following my gaze. "Seeing the inner chambers caved in. Hearing about Master Dorak."

I glanced at him sideways; Dak's mouth twisted in self-deprecation as he returned my stare. "I know," he acknowledged. "I complained so much about my old master, but even on Korriban when I told myself he was weak and pathetic and... well. I never wished this on him. On any of them."

I nodded in silent understanding. I had been on Dantooine for less than a day, and had walked through the Enclave's halls only once thus far – and yet I could sense the loss and grief hanging heavy in the air, dampened only by the footfalls of the few returning younglings. Master Dorak, I had heard, fell beneath the collapse of a training hall after leading a half-dozen children to safety beyond the Enclave's crumbling walls.

The only masters who remained were Vandar Tokare and Vrook Lamar.

My attention sidled back to my old friend. "You said you arrived here with a new master?" I asked delicately.
"Yeah." Dak's shoulders bunched, but his half-grin widened. "You're probably not going to like it."

I blinked, stiffening. "No. Tell me you are not-"

His chuckle cut through my words, and I was struck again how oddly at peace he seemed. "Quatra only planned escorting me to Coruscant, you know? Find a more... appropriate master for Kel and I." He snorted. "She was impatient to get back to Dantooine, and hitched a ride with Master Sunrider- did you hear Sunrider's got her master's robes now? Well, the two of them thought they'd be needed here, to train the younglings-"

"Younglings," I echoed, stunned at his implication. "I would hardly label you as a youngling, Dak-"

"It's a refreshing label in a way, Juhani." His chin lifted as his gaze wandered over the farmlands. "Dantooine's home, hard as it might've been to return. I asked to tag along, asked Master Quatra to consider me as her next padawan."

"Dak-"

"She says she's still thinking about it." His eyes creased with amusement. "I reckon I've got more of a handle on her, now."

I couldn't halt the dismay at the thought of Dak training under my old master – he may have disliked Master Dorak, but that was nothing on the enmity he'd once reserved for Master Quatra.

"She's as strict as ever," Dak commented wryly. "And I'm not sure I'll ever like her, as such – but respect? Yeah, I think I can manage that. She's challenging me. And in a good way."

I halted, uneasy. Dak had once loathed Quatra with a passion unbecoming of a Jedi – although how much of that could have been attributed to nothing more than jealousy? I swallowed as the burn of past chagrin rose in my throat – for Dak's unrequited desire for me had clashed with my own unseemly thoughts regarding Master Quatra, and I understood then it was that dichotomy that had been the core of his contempt.

"Are you certain, Dak? The master chooses the apprentice in the end, no matter your inclination-"

"Well, yeah, of course. But maybe padawans should have a say, too," he cut in. "Think about it, Juhani. Dorak and I were terribly matched – he'd leave me alone to meditate on my failures, when all I did was seethe about his lectures and run off. Master Quatra forces me to actually acknowledge my weaknesses and overcome them. And you- you and Quatra were an even worse mismatch. How different could things have been if we'd actually had a say in who trained us?"

"Dak," I snapped, hearing the warning in my voice. "You cannot cast blame for our respective falls on our masters!"

"I'm not," he continued doggedly. "I take full responsibility for my past. But that doesn't mean there aren't elements of the Order that could be improved. Shavit, even I knew that Dorak couldn't keep me in line or inspire me to have faith in the Jedi."

I blinked, my gaze roaming over the robed figure of my friend as I wondered on the changes wrought in him. Dak's voice had not risen to match mine – he stood facing me instead; calm and sure and-

And a Jedi.

My lips curved in an unbidden smile. "Perhaps there is wisdom in you after all, Dak," I teased
gentle, seeing his eyes crinkle in response. "Perhaps we have both grown from the trials we have suffered through."

"Well, I won't be recommending a dalliance with the Dark Side as a suitable apprenticeship," Dak returned drolly, before resuming our walk. "What about you, Juhani? Do you- do you want to talk? About what happened?"

"I- I am not sure," I hedged, drawing in a deep breath. There was a blurring at the edges of my vision again. "The hardest thing to accept is that I was not even there at the end, Dak. I woke to the sensation of Bastila and Jen fading into the Force..."

"What, at the same time? That's not what the official transcript says-"

"Dak-" I cut in waringly.

"Okay, I get it, the holonets are full of crap," he murmured. "Still, the story goes that it was Bastila and Darth Malak at the end, fighting each other to the death. You saying that didn't happen?"

The air was shaky in my lungs as we traipsed onward. On one hand, it felt almost cathartic to talk about it to someone other than Jolee – who, for all of his dry self-aspersions and rambling parables could not quite conceal the grief he felt. But I wasn't ready to analyse every detail yet. Particularly not when no one from the crew could even say how the end had come about.

"Not Bastila," I answered finally. "Perhaps I understand why the Jedi Order seek to label Bastila Shan as the hero..." I trailed into silence, eyes closing briefly.

*Because the crimes of Bastila Shan can be forgiven. Because her acts of heroism over the years truly overshadow her brief fall.*

*Because Jen Sahara is a cover story both the Republic and the Jedi Order hope will fade away into abstraction.*

To be fair, I knew that Revan would not have cared about any sort of acknowledgment for herself. In the end, her actions and her character lived on in the hearts of those who mattered.

"Jen faced Darth Malak," I continued quietly, "whilst Bastila utilized her battle meditation for the Republic fleet. Jolee Bindo found Bastila and Zaalbar, later – they had been cut down by Darth Malak, but we do not know where Jen fell." A broken slip of air feathered past my lips. "Darth Malak died after we escaped the Star Forge. Perhaps from his wounds or due to the factory breaking up."

His passing had tremored in the Force, a scream of disbelief that morphed into a sudden dark acceptance before vanishing completely. Minutes later, the Star Forge itself had disintegrated completely.

Dak's hand found mine again, squeezing it gently. "That's hard," he commiserated, and his words were a comfort, no matter what little use they had. "I didn't like Jen at first, you know? But she grew on me. She was- she was a pretty amazing Jedi."

*Yes. She was.*

What had it been like for Revan, at the end? She had resisted Bastila's caliginous influence on Lehon, despite the hold her bond-sister had had on her soul, despite the interference of Yudan Rosh. Revan had demanded another way forward, rather than embracing Bastila's path of conquest and subjugation at the cost of the light.
Oh, that moment when Revan had held firm, relief and admiration had completely engulfed me – and that emotion had been at the forefront of my thoughts when I woke, hours later on the Star Forge-just as everything had dissolved into ash.

Revan faced her past. She faced Malak. And I know, in my heart, that she stayed true to herself in the end. That the outcome was the victory she had fought for.

Even if she is no longer around to see it come to fruition.

"She lives on in the Force, right?" Dak said, as if he could guess the track of my derailing thoughts. Perhaps he could. "They all do. There's a comfort in that, I reckon." His hand slipped free of mine, then, as he turned to glance back at the Enclave, his brow creasing. "I should probably head back. Master Quatra wasn't expecting me to skive off so soon after we landed."

I smiled weakly at him and, for all the raw emotion stabbing at my heart, I somehow felt more grounded than I had for weeks. "Master Quatra is not one to accommodate tardiness," I murmured, and Dak laughed.

Just like that, the air was easier to breathe.

We turned, together, and began retracing our steps back home.

xXx

Vrook Lamar:
Jedi Enclave, Dantooine

"Vrook Lamar," a dry voice commented behind me. "Suppose it was too much to ask I could come here without running into you."

It had been decades, but still, I recognized that voice. A reunion I could have done without, I thought with irritation. "Jolee Bindo," I muttered, before turning around. The morning sun bathed the robed man in a pool of light, and shone brightly throughout the well-kept outer courtyards. The Enclave's training grounds, at least, had been mostly restored. "If you didn't wish to speak to me, why hail me at all?"

It was a funny thing, seeing someone you'd known in your youth as a geriatric. The minds-eye recalled a smoother, younger version, untempered by the weather of time, and the overlay with reality was jarring.

Jolee Bindo had been losing his hair even as a young man, but now his scalp was completely bald. His skin was dark and leathery, and his form whipcord lean. Old like me, he might have been – but Jolee Bindo still gave the overwhelming impression of fortitude.

"Heh. Suppose my curiosity won out," Jolee commented, lines of age etching deep around his dark eyes as he gave me the once-over in return.

I'd been expecting to run into Jolee Bindo. Aye, for Vandar had told me of Knight Juhani's return the previous day – along with the identity of her cantankerous escort. Given that I evidently owed my life to Jolee, I'd grudgingly conceded that I owed him at least one attempt at civility.

Gratitude was not an emotion that came easily. Particularly not now, not when my own failure to save my padawan was still so raw.
"You saw Bastila at the end," I said abruptly. Jolee Bindo didn't need my thanks. He was wily enough to appreciate the debt I owed him, and no doubt annoying enough to rub my nose in it should the mood take him.

"Aye," Jolee said gravely, inclining his head. "It was a quick death, I can tell you that much. She fought on the right side in the end, Vrook."

"I know."

Vandar's reports on the effects of Bastila's battle meditation had done a little to assuage my grief, but nothing could erase my last memory of her, cold and forbidding and repudiating the desperate plea of absolution I had offered-

"It is too little! Too little, and far too late-!"

But Bastila had turned, in the end. Whether it was a consequence of my presence – as that miscreant Yudan Rosh had proclaimed, the one time I bothered seeking him out – or simply the effect of damnable Revan Freeflight, at least I had the cold comfort of knowing that Bastila Shan had made the whole Jedi Order proud with her final actions.

If I only could have told her that myself.

"So," I grunted, shucking away the turmoil of my emotions. "You are here to return to the Order, I take it?"

I'd first encountered Jolee Bindo on Coruscant, decades ago, after I'd been transferred there during my padawan years. The morass of civilization in the heart of the galactic Core hadn't sat well with me, and I'd liked my new training partners even less.

Aye, I'd made a poor first impression on Jolee Bindo, Karon Enova, and Zhar Lestin. Over the years, my working relationship with Karon and Zhar might have mellowed, but Jolee had vanished while the height of acrimony still simmered between us.

Well, Karon and Zhar were at least affable, even with their blinkered naiveté at the world. Blasted Jolee Bindo was nothing more than an aggravating cacti-thorn in my foot.

It was hard to believe the years would have changed him overmuch.

Jolee snorted at my comment. "I think the Jedi have enough irascible old men without bothering with the likes of me."

"You'd be a fool to walk away from the Jedi again," I said bluntly, no matter my dislike for the man. It was dangerous for Force-sensitives – particularly half-trained ones – to live a life without the tools necessary to both understand and control the Force. To hold firm against the temptations of the Dark Side.

Jolee Bindo might irritate the heck out of me, but I didn't wish to see any sentient fall.

"Ach, you're still the same stuffy grouch you always were," Jolee drawled, his beady black eyes glinting with amusement. "There's more to life than wearing robes and reciting the Code, Vrook. The Jedi don't have the monopoly on how to live a worthwhile existence."

"And you're still the same irreverent bastard you always were," I growled, my brows lowering. "I'll not waste my time trying to convince you. History can do that all on its own."
"You can't judge people on their odds of falling, Vrook." His voice had turned serious, almost cold. "Do that, and you may as well damn them from the get-go."

Oh, I knew exactly what he was really talking about.

"There are valid reasons why we don't train adults," I returned, just as cold. "I can give you three recent examples who were beyond the accepted cut-off age, and who all fell. Yudan Rosh. Malak Devari. Revan Freeflight. All caused almost unprecedented chaos, regardless of whether two of them regretted it later."

"And the alternative is to let adults wander around the galaxy until the Sith seduce them first?" Jolee fired back. "Brilliant logic there, Vrook. Those three would have had less chance had that happened, and you damn well know it."

But he wasn't talking about Yudan or Malak or blasted Revan Freeflight. I could feel the growl in my throat grow. "Dammit, Jolee, the Sith weren't around when we were young! The Order would never have accepted Nomi had it not been for Master Thon's interference— you can't blame them for holding true to that ethos with Nayama!"

His eyes had narrowed to slits. "How old was Exar Kun when he was admitted?"


Jolee snorted in reply. "Almost means he was in the accepted range. Shining example of a Jedi, wasn't he? Aye, and I know Ulic Qel-Droma was a babe when he and his twin joined the Order, and Ulic caused near as much damage." He returned my glare with the bitterness of age. "Use statistical odds to judge people and you lose your humanity, Vrook. You end up with people betrayed as badly as my wife."

"Excuse me, Master Vrook?" someone hailed. We turned, both bristling, to glare at the intruder. A middle-aged woman was strolling calmly towards us, clad in the humble brown robes of a Jedi Knight. There'd been another transport arrival on Dantooine I hadn't yet greeted, and the occupants were substantially more welcome than the ornery presence of Jolee Bindo.

I breathed my frustration out, nodded my head in greeting, and almost managed a smile. "Master Vima," I acknowledged, meeting the serene gaze of the newly raised master. I wasn't sure if she'd interfered deliberately, to derail what was probably turning into quite the public scene, but I accepted the interruption gladly.

It didn't surprise me to see Vima Sunrider still clad in knight's robes. Some masters stuck to the brown, some didn't, but in general we all stayed nondescript in our appearance. A reminder of our station to outsiders: a non-threatening form of counsel and wisdom. Or so we tried to emulate. At times, even the Jedi got it wrong.

Vima smiled, a ray of sunshine illuminating a face that was framed in the same honey-blond locks as her mother's. I hadn't been entirely sure of Vima's recent ascension to masterhood, considering her comparable youth—although there'd been no doubt Vima's life-path had been set on that course for decades already.

And she'd always done well with Bastila, I thought, with a sharp pang of grief.

"It is good to see you again, Master Vrook," Vima murmured, shooting Jolee Bindo an impersonal nod of greeting but otherwise keeping her attention fixed on me. "I do not wish to intrude. I only
came to ask if you could spare some time to converse later today?"

"Of course, Vima," I said heavily. Aye, she was a stalwart Jedi and would make a good master, but I'd been wary at the idea of ascending powerful Jedi too quickly up the ranks. Vima had barely broken four decades of life. Still, she was her mother's daughter, battle meditation or not. And the Force knew that Dantooine would benefit from her return. "I will make the time."

Vima would want to talk of Bastila. Of Revan. Of their bond, the identity replacement, and exactly how it all fell apart on the Star Forge. All matters I owed it to discuss with her, no matter that the details were painful- and that I knew little of their adventures, at the end. 

_In that regard, Jolee Bindo would be a better one to speak to._

My gaze slid to the annoying hermit, who was staring at Vima in overt fascination. With a sharp jolt, I kicked myself for missing the obvious link between the two.

"Thank you, Vrook," Vima murmured, taking a step back. "I apologize for interrupting. I will leave-"

"Vima Sunrider," Jolee cut in, his dry voice alight with curiosity. "And a master, to boot. Well, well. Isn't this a lark."

Vima turned to look at him a second time, puzzlement creasing her rounded face as she took in his attire: humble enough to be a Jedi, but not the robes of a padawan or a knight.

"You are a Jedi," Vima murmured. "I can sense that, but I'm afraid I don't know your name?"

"Heh. I suppose you could call me Uncle," Jolee returned. There was a definite glint of entertainment in his gaze- but his voice was bitter.

"Jolee Bindo," I muttered in introduction, gesturing at the man.

"Oh," Vima breathed, mouth slackening with astonishment. Her bright blue eyes blinked. "Nayama's husband. It is… it is good to finally meet you, Jolee."

"Really?" Jolee drawled, raising one brow in disbelief. "Your mother deliberately avoided me."

I could see the awkwardness tighten Vima's face, before her self-control snapped her expression into serenity. "I am pleased to see you here, Jolee Bindo," she said, voice calmly neutral. "I had heard you travelled with the crew of the _Ebon Hawk_. The Jedi Order will be gratified to have you return to the fold."

"I'm not here to be a darn Jedi," Jolee groused, crossing his arms. "I only came to Dantooine to see if there was any truth to those darn rumours-"

He cut himself off abruptly, head snapping back to stare at me. Hard.

I kept my expression deliberately blank.

"Huh," Jolee grunted, his shoulders relaxing. "Good. Want to tell me where I'll find him?"

"I have no idea what you're blathering on about, Jolee," I said blandly. "You should go for a walk to clear the cobwebs out of your head. Past the eastern farmlands and out into the wild. There's an ancient grove deep in the hills that might help you meditate on the Force. Maybe you'll realize that your place could be with the Order, if you stop being such a stubborn gill-goat about the past."
Jolee's bushy white brows twitched, but otherwise there was no indication regarding my hidden message. "I'm more than old enough to choose my own path, Vrook. I'll be going back to Telos tomorrow, I wager, after saying my farewells to Juhani and making sure you lot treat her well."

"Treat her well?" I retorted, feeling an irritated scowl return at his unwarranted implication. "From what I've seen of Knight Juhani, she already has the makings of a fine Jedi and doesn't need a runaway padawan to speak for her."

Jolee harrumphed. "Aye, you have the right of that, I'll concede. Maybe I just wanted to see if Juhani would get an apology for the ridiculous knight trials she was forced to endure."

"That is hardly your business, Jolee," I growled. Damn if he wasn't the most irritating man I'd ever had the misfortune to encounter. "Member of the Order or not, that is nothing more than sticking your beak in where it doesn't belong."

"Mayhap if someone had done that from the get-go, then Juhani would never have spent a year out in the desert." Jolee sighed, then: a gusty lungful of air rattling his chest as the corners of his mouth turned down in defeat. "Bah, I'm a nosy old bugger, and Juhani wouldn't appreciate me interfering in her business – nor does she require it. Maybe, at the close of it, I wanted to see for myself whether the Order had learned anything from their mistakes." His dark gaze sharpened as it fixed on me. From afar, I wondered how the picture of us would appear: two old men scowling at each other with the resentment of the past etched deep into the wrinkles on their faces.

Jolee glanced back to Vima, who'd taken a step back, as if to retreat. The old man snorted. "You spoke of historical failings before, Vrook," he said to me, but his attention was fixed on the young master. "Shall we ask Master Vima's opinion on how many were failed by the Jedi Order?"

The name was unspoken, but it simmered in the air between us. Again. Nayama. The woman we had both loved. The woman we had both lost to Exar Kun, at different stages of her life.

"No one is infallible, Jolee," I said heavily. "Not even the Jedi, much as we strive for the best outcome." Just like that, my irritation dwindled. Maybe the old hermit would always annoy me, but beneath his bluster was a very real bitterness regarding the fate of his wife, no matter if he otherwise seemed at ease with his lot.

I couldn't fault Jolee for that bitterness, not without being a hypocrite. I felt the same. And Nayama had never even been mine.

"I have matters to attend to," Vima murmured, gaze darting between us both as she retreated another step. "I shall leave you both-"

"Wait." Jolee's demand was low and sharp. Sharp enough to scythe through the air. "I returned to the Order, briefly, after Kun's defeat. I was searching for answers, but no one had any to give. Pithy replies about the will of the Force was all I got, and an unwelcome forgiveness I neither deserved nor desired. But there was one Jedi who might have known something... one who flat-out refused to meet with me, despite my pleas."

"My mother was grieving, Jolee Bindo." Vima's naturally serene voice had hardened; her heart-shaped face taut as she stared at him coolly. "She was in no state-"

"So was I!" Jolee snapped, his white brows bristling with anger as they bunched over his dark eyes. "Nayama was my wife! I loved her! If Nomi knew something about Nayama's fate, then I have a darn right to know what it is!"
"Nomi is one with the Force, Jolee," I said heavily. "Whether she knew something of Nayama or not, the point is surely moot now."

"Aye, Nomi Sunrider might be dead, but her daughter knows something." Jolee fired an abrupt nod at the young master, and I swivelled back to face Vima in surprise.

Her lips had thinned, her gaze was wide, and she looked awkward, uncertain-

"What?" I growled. "What do you know of Nayama?"

Vima's shoulders sagged as her eyelids fluttered. Whatever Jolee was digging for, Vima was on the cusp of revealing it. I found myself leaning forward, fingers clenched, still after all these decades desiring to hear about the only woman I'd ever really looked twice at-

"You may as well tell him, too," Jolee muttered. "That old bugger cared for Nayama before I even entered her life."

A flash of surprise crossed Vima's face, and I inwardly cursed Jolee Bindo again.

I could have done without you slipping that in, you irreverent old coot!

"My mother…" Vima began hesitantly, knotting her hands in the folds of her robe. "My mother was strong in the Force. I believe… I believe Nayama was too, but…"

"But what? Your blessed mother was the more powerful?" Jolee snorted in disparagement. "Does that even matter?"

"No." Vima shook her head. "Nomi wondered the opposite, actually. But Nayama was ill-trained… and you must have known she led squads of Force-sensitive assassins under Kun's banner."

Jolee's jaw hardened. I felt a tightening in my gut. Nayama had once been someone completely different to the woman Vima was describing. A non-sensitive, dumped on a planet full of Jedi. A nobody, just like her sister Nomi at the time – but Nomi's marriage to Andur Sunrider had granted her an informal welcome within the Enclave, while Nayama- Nayama had never really found her own place in life.

Oh, she'd been a wild, wondrous spirit, though. With a stubborn streak, a heart of gold, and a soft spot for the down-trodden.

The Dark Side... the Dark Side would have burned all of that away. But the Jedi Order had turned their backs on Nayama well before she even considered that road.

"My aunt and Ulic Qel-Droma sometimes worked together," Vima continued, her voice lowering to an almost-whisper. "Ulic was Kun's Second, but Nayama ranked fairly high in Kun's favour, too. On the more difficult missions Ulic and Nayama would... they would... work together..."

Her voice broke. Trepidation clutched at my heart, and I felt suddenly cold. They would work together... I'd never thought of a link between Ulic Qel-Droma and Nayama beyond the spectres of Exar Kun and Nomi Sunrider. But Vima was struggling to articulate something more-

"She was there," I gasped, heart stuttering, horrified at a flashfire of thought. "Nayama was there when..."

_When Ulic murdered his own brother. When he faced his lover, Nomi Sunrider._

_Nayama was there when Nomi stripped the Force from Ulic Qel-Droma. And Nayama was on_
"Mother didn't know!" Vima pleaded, her wide blue eyes glistening in the morning light. "She didn't see her… she-she didn't mean for it to happen to her too-"

"Oh no," Jolee choked out, the words strangling in his throat. "You can't mean to say that- that-"

Vima's expression was distraught as her gaze darted between us, but her agitation was nothing on mine. And mine was nothing on Jolee's, who should have been told this years ago.

Vima breathed in loudly, audibly, before making her point abundantly clear. "It was not just Ulic Qel-Droma who lost the Force that day."

Jolee's eyes closed, and it was as if another ten years had suddenly whittled the life out of him. His shoulders slumped and his voice cracked. "Oh, my love..." he whispered inaudibly.

In contrast, coursing through me was the latent heat of anger. For, in some ways, blasted Jolee Bindo was right. The Jedi Order did fail, at times, and there was no one they had failed more than Nayama Da-Boda.

"If that's so," I growled at Vima, feeling my eyes pinch tight."Then why didn't Nomi bring Nayama back to the Jedi? Force, Nomi dragged Ulic back, so I can't believe she'd leave her sister behind in the same situation."

"Nayama refused to return," Vima answered, glancing away. "By that stage, she hated the Jedi Order with unreserved passion. Mother sometimes spoke of the injustice regarding Coruscant's refusal to train Nayama. From what I know, I believe my aunt's resentment of the Jedi grew to impregnable enmity in her heart."

"That's not the whole of it," I muttered, shaking my head in dismissal. "Kun hadn't been toppled then. Not until Nomi returned with Ulic, and Ulic spilled his guts to the Republic brass. No, Nayama was one of Exar's leaders, too, and you're saying she was there when Nomi captured Ulic. Nomi wouldn't have left her behind, not if her sister could've warned that bastard."

Vima's expression didn't budge. I wasn't sure if she knew more or not, but there was something else to it. Nomi Sunrider had been revered because she placed the stability of the galaxy above any other consideration – much like Revan Freeflight was once known for, an annoying voice muttered – and however Nomi had grieved over what she'd done to her lover and sister both, it simply made no sense that she'd capture one and leave the other behind.

I'd known Nayama as a teen, years before Jolee Bindo. She'd been the same age then as when I'd first met Revan, actually, on one of my return placements to Coruscant I'd always suffered through. Aye, Revan Freeflight had been a newish padawan, but I could still recall the unwelcome punch of shock to the gut when her curious gaze had landed on me, a grouchy master from the infamous Dantooine Enclave who resented his Coruscanti obligations.

Her sharp chin. The tilt to the tip of her nose. That high forehead, and those eyes, slightly wide-set-oh, but the colour had been different, different enough to jerk me from the mire of the past, and instead walk briskly away from the young Jedi who was already the talk of the High Temple.

Yes, the colour was different. I swallowed, as a sharp recollection of a charismatic, smooth-talking knight flashed through my mind. One with sharp green eyes and almost-black hair that matched the shadows in his soul. One who Nayama's gaze had followed around unerringly, years before the Force had awoken in her. Years before she'd even met her future husband.
Years before she'd left everything behind to follow that same dark knight into corruption and depravity.

"She was pregnant," I whispered, and Vima jerked with evident surprise. Her eyes rounded in shock and her mouth dropped open. Either I was wrong- or Nomi had never shared this with her.

A mother's love... Nomi had been renowned for stepping into battle with a young Vima strapped to her back. Maybe... maybe the one thing that would have turned Nomi Sunrider blind to Nayama's presence was a plea for her sister's unborn child.

Nomi would've seen, much as I did now, that there was no way the Jedi Order would allow such a babe to stay with Nayama, broken and fallen and Force-blind. Not with that sort of parentage.

"What?" Jolee roared, his growl loud enough to attract the attention of a group of younglings seated along the boundary of the courtyard. "Where in the Outer Rim did you get that from?"

Vima's gaze had not moved from mine. "I never understood my mother's reasoning," she admitted, blinking, as she stared at me in puzzlement. "I always found it odd she would take Ulic and leave Nayama... but Mother was half-blind with grief, then. At what they had done... at what she had done."

My hand trembled as I raised it to scrub at my eyes. Could it be true? The timing fit, but there were a trillion sentients out in there in the universe.

Aye, but how many with the Force-strength of Exar Kun... or Revan Freeflight?

"It doesn't matter," I muttered, trying to persuade myself. "It doesn't matter... not anymore."

Would I have viewed Revan Freeflight any different, had I known? I'd been predisposed to think ill of Revan from the start, hating the uncanny resemblance to a woman from my past, but assuming it was no more than a cruel coincidence. I'd had little to do with Revan anyway, being joined to a different enclave... but I'd known my judgment regarding her wasn't objective, and hence had striven to avoid the notorious woman as much as I could.

Bastila certainly made that impossible, in the end.

"How can you say it doesn't matter?" Jolee snapped. His gaze was furious as it bored into mine. "How can you drop a plasma bomb like that and then say it doesn't darn well matter?"

My shoulders sagged. Vima was still staring at me in confusion, and right then I didn't think Jolee and I would ever find an amicable reckoning between the two of us. "Because it's just supposition, Jolee. And even if I am right- and the Force has a lousy sense of humour- "then it doesn't matter, because Nayama's daughter is already dead."

I'd had enough. So had we all, I suspected. I turned my back on them, and strode away.

Neither of them stopped me.

xXx

**Jolee Bindo:**

*Ancient Grove, Wildlands, Dantooine*

The dry grass crunched beneath my boots. Each footfall crushed a hundred or so blades of brittle green, emitting a crackling sound that was perversely satisfying.
Lying, boorish, meddling old bugger!

The late afternoon sun drooped weakly in the sky, casting shadows that lengthened over the rolling hills of the wild. I had enough sense to stretch my awareness out and change my path to avoid any predators, but other than that bare modicum of self-preservation, I barely paid any attention to my surroundings.

Instead, my thoughts derailed, like an angst-ridden young'un fuming at the injustice of the world.

Where does that half-wit get off, slinging around dung like that? And he calls himself a blasted Jedi!

The morning’s conversation burned. My final memories of my wife were bitter enough, but there’d still been good in her then: blind, stubborn goodness with how she'd naively believed that blackguard Kun's promise of training wouldn't tarnish her soul, even as she'd decided the sacrifice of a marriage was a price she was willing to pay.

Maybe she'd hoped I'd chase after her. Mayhap she hadn't thought she was leaving me so much as luring me to her side – after all, hadn't I foolishly believed she'd see Kun for the black-hearted blight on the galaxy he was, before retracing her steps back to me?

But I could not sway her, and I did not stop her – and then I never saw my Nayama again.

I hated to think my wife's end had been at the hands of her stars-blessed sister. Rationally, I'd never had any issue with the golden heroine Nomi Sunrider, but the perceived success of that woman's life had been a constant fraying against Nayama's self-esteem, and- and-

-and the crevasse that allowed the dark to seep through.

I'd seen first-hand my wife's resentment, in all of its bitter glory. Her chokehold of jealousy was precisely why I'd put a halt to any more of my ill-advised tuition. Nayama had grown up in her smarter, prettier, stronger sister's shadow and, much as I'd adored my wife, I could admit she'd never grown the inner strength to stop comparing herself to Nomi.

In hindsight, it was no wonder that Exar Kun's promise of power would eventually tempt her.

But pregnant? Pregnant?!

In that moment, I almost loathed Vrook Lamar more than Exar Kun himself.

Precious Vima Sunrider didn't know anything, no; this was all inane blather on Vrook's part. A daughter, he claims, already dead-

"Keep crashing blindly through the grass, old man, and you're liable to walk straight into a kath hound's jaws."

My head jerked: to my right, eyeing me over in overt amusement, was the very man I'd originally intended to seek out. Our moody crewmate we'd given up for dead, the one we'd all feared we couldn't trust, that infamous general from Revan's shadowed past-

An icy fist clenched around my heart and, in that instant, I knew.

Because there'd been a moment, back on Lehon inside the 'Hawk, when I'd seen my wife staring at me from the face of a powerhouse strong enough to overshadow Exar Kun himself.

There were times when the Force sprang free from an untapped lineage. But Force-rich bloodlines, I
knew, were a darn lot more likely to breed true sensitives.

"What do you know of Revan's mother?" I snapped, feeling my hands clench at my sides. I was riled enough to throw a punch at someone, and Force help Vrook Lamar if he crossed my path on this blasted planet again.

Yudan Rosh stilled, his expression smoothing into impassivity. "It is good to see you alive too, Jolee Bindo."

"Answer the darn question," I ground out, and the man's face tightened in irritation that, I had to admit, was well-warranted. I sighed, my shoulders slumping. "Ach, look, I've just had a run-in with one of my least favourite people and- grant an old man a boon, would you? Answer the question."

Yudan's head cocked, but other than that, the darn man didn't show any reaction. He stood at ease in the long grass, clad in clothing as non-descript as mine, with the glint of a lightsaber at his belt his only adornment. "Neither Revan nor Malak spoke easily of their past," he said slowly, his blue eyes sharp on mine. If I wasn't so aggrieved, the sight of his uncorrupted gaze would've been gratifying. "Her mother died when she was very young. A crippled man in the slums raised her. I know little other than that, Jolee."

I felt my fingers unfurl as the heaviness of the past washed over me. I'd known, in my heart, that Nayama was long dead. If she had really been Revan's mother-

Emotion choked in my throat.

"Why do you ask?" Yudan had crossed his arms, intently studying me from his place in the grass. His golden Twi'leki headtails swooped casually down his back, but I doubted the man was truly relaxed.

"I-"

"It doesn't matter, Vrook had claimed, and maybe the old blighter was right. Nayama and I had never tried for children, being so early on in our marriage – and had I suspected Revan was my wife's daughter to blasted Exar Kun, it would've coloured my every interaction with her.

But Revan came back, came back from the dark in a way that so few sentients have ever found the strength to do. I mourn for her, but I'm also so proud of that reckless chit.

And Nayama- Nayama would have been proud, too.

Judging sentients on their ancestry was short-sighted at best. But Nayama had fallen to the dark. And Exar Kun had not so much fallen as revelled in it. Maybe, maybe, there was some comfort in the thought that Revan had redeemed more than herself in the end.

Maybe, one day, I could find peace in the idea that Nayama's spirit might have found absolution in her daughter.

"It doesn't matter." I growled out Vrook's words with an irritated shake of the head. "Ach, that ain't why I came here in the first place. It is good to see you, sonny boy, because we'd all thought that soul-sucking Sith had been your demise."

"It was a closer call than I would have liked," the man returned drolly, before his voice sharpened. "I believe Sharlan Nox still lives. I have informed Vandar but I am not so sure he takes the threat seriously."
"Huh. Well, with ole Malak gone and the Sith Empire in ruins, I'm actually inclined to side with the roundabout Jedi for once," I mused, as the embers of my acrimony slowly faded into acceptance. "Can't think a rogue Dark Jedi will do much damage after a resounding Republic victory."

"I disagree," Yudan clipped out tersely. Behind him, my gaze fell on the distant shadows of crumbling stonework etched into the lean of a hill. "Sharlan Nox overwhelmed my will with startling ease. I may have been momentarily incapacitated, but it is not arrogance to claim that even in such a state my mental shields are formidable. There was something about him..."

The man trailed off, frowning.

Ach, I would be foolish to outright dismiss Yudan's unease- and I'd felt the strength of that damnable Sith myself, as my life had drained effortlessly into his grasp-

Aye, but I'd been badly wounded. And Yudan more or less admitted the same of himself.

"I can tell I am not convincing you," Yudan drawled, his voice flattening into monotony. "So. You see for yourself that I survived. Did you have any other reason to seek me out, or are you merely enjoying a scenic trek through the wildlife?"

"You're as socialable as ever," I grumbled. "Did it even occur to you that the crew might be happy to hear you lived?"

A hairless golden brow quirked in disbelief. "Yes, I can see Mission Vao jumping for joy," he shot back smoothly.

"Hah! Well, Mission might not be your biggest fan, but the Onasis-" I paused, as his gaze narrowed on mine. "They understand the debt they owe you, Yudan Rosh."

"There is no debt," he muttered, turning away to stare at the remnants of what I suspected had once been a stone archway. An ancient grove steeped in Force, Vrook had said. Seemed a strange, if fitting, place for Yudan Rosh to find refuge. "What I did, I did for Revan."

I sighed. Mayhap that didn't really surprise me. Revan's entanglement with Onasi senior was hardly a secret, and as for Yudan Rosh... well, I had the niggling feeling he'd have cut his own arm off if it would've kept Revan happy.

So many things came back to her, that it seemed impossible to think she'd truly come to a final rest. I wasn't sure I'd have believed it, had I not felt Revan fade into the Force myself.

Seeing the way the Twi'lek's smooth face contorted with barely-checked emotion, I knew he was having a harder time accepting it than me.

"Doesn't matter your reasons, sonny boy. In the end you saved their lives, whether it was for altruistic reasons or otherwise."

Yudan shrugged, once more retreating into a mask of disinterested composure, like he believed it would convince anyone who'd had the dubious pleasure of trekking halfway across the galaxy with him.

"You tell them they owe me nothing," he declared, as if it were his place to state what other people thought. "Unless, of course, you plan to stay on Dantooine."

I snorted. "Heh. Fine thing to assume of me, I've only been here a day. You're the one sulking around an ancient Force grove and having idle campsite chats with the enclave's grandmaster."
The man didn't so much as twitch a muscle. "You truly believe, with my history, that the Jedi Order will welcome my return?"

"Oh, go bark up a tree. You'll get the same response out of me. I'm hardly about to start grading you," I grumbled. "Besides, I'm not senile enough to miss when someone's deflecting. You know darn well that the Order will take you back."

Yudan inclined his head in concession. "Perhaps. Yet I have to ask, why are you so interested?"

"Well, I certainly don't have a vested interest, as such." I shrugged, before pulling at my travelling pack and dislodging a ration bar from a side pocket. Darn things tasted like ground ferracrete dust, but it'd been a long day. "Call it more idle curiosity. I'm old. Doesn't take much to amuse me, these days."

"Treat me like a show monkey, old man, and I'll lure the nearby kath hounds here and leave you to your own defences."

"Ooh! You've got a smart mouth on you there, you know that? If ullers could talk, they'd sound like that."

"Fine," Yudan snapped. "I do not know yet, is that what you wish to hear? I am still..." he trailed off, mouth twisting in displeasure, as if he despised the admission. "...finding myself, as asinine as that sounds."

Lines of frustration creased around the normally-stoic man's face, but I could tell at a glance he wasn't truly angry. No- the man had one heck of a past to work through, but he had the fortitude to keep dragging another step forward.

"Heh. Well, there are moments when I think you must be much older than you seem... but this ain't one of them." I almost chortled at the outrage that flickered briefly in his gaze. "An honest answer, though. I can respect that. If I had a drink in my hand, I'd salute you."

"I appear to be all out of whiskey," he drawled, sliding effortlessly back into neutrality. "And you, Jolee Bindo? You did not answer. Do you plan to stay?"

I unwrapped the bar of dubious nutritional content, pausing to take a large bite. It tasted worse than I feared. "Is this where I question why you're so interested?"

Yudan looked supremely unimpressed. "Idle curiosity, old man. I'm bored. Perhaps it takes little to amuse me, also."

"Throwing my words back at me is a cheap shot," I grumbled, tucking the unfinished ration bar back in my pack. With luck, I'd find something more edible to scavenge on my return trek. "You know what I hate? Well... you know, lots of things, really. I'm old and easily annoyed. But that's beside the point. What I really hate is how most people view the Order. Like it's the only place for a Force-sensitive other than the Dark Side. Like the Jedi Council is completely incapable of injustice and imperfection, and to use the Force outside of their jurisdiction is tantamount to heresy. Bah..." I trailed off, frowning at the mild amusement sparking in the younger man's gaze. "Somehow, I suspect, I'm waffling to the converted."

"Quite."

"Shush, you," I muttered. "Don't interrupt your elders. What I'm trying to say is... well, your path to redemption – or whatever pithy word you choose to label it – is a noble one. But the Jedi Order isn't your only road to reach that goal. Ach, I ain't saying it's not a good option, as such, just that it ain't
"I... am aware of that already," Yudan replied, in a voice soft enough I had to strain to hear it. "But I appreciate the sentiment."

"Humph. Well, I suppose it's only fair to answer your question. I'm not here to re-join the Jedi. I'll be headed back to Telos in a day or so." I paused, my gaze landing back on that glint at his belt. "You know, we never had that talk I promised."

Yudan's mouth thinned. "Zhar's lightsaber," he acknowledged slowly. His hand rose to his belt, fingers wrapping tight around the hilt that had once belonged to an old friend. "If you wish to hear me apologise for his death... I do regret it, Jolee Bindo. I had... darker objectives in mind at the time."

"Ach, I know," I conceded, suddenly weary. Zhar, and Karon, and... and Nayama. The ghosts of the past stayed with me, grave and heavy, but I wouldn't chase them away for all the wasaka-berry juice in the galaxy. "Zhar was a good Jedi. Zhar and Karon both."

"They were," Yudan agreed in a low voice. Of course, he would have known them well, considering who they had trained. The Twi'lek unclipped the hilt and displayed it to me, holding it loosely in one bronzed fist. "I would not object should you desire his lightsaber, Jolee."

I waved away the unrequired offer with a sweep of my arm. "Keep it. I have my own 'saber, as I'm not in the habit of losing it. But that reminds me..." I paused mid-speech, as I reached around to scrabble in my pack again. "I picked something up from the Star Forge. Here, catch!"

With reflexes honed from a lifetime of conflict, Yudan effortlessly snatched the cylindrical object I lobbed at him with his free hand. He paused, eyes widening in shock. I should've figured he'd recognize the hilt without even turning the blasted thing on.

"Why does everyone persist in handing me Revan's belongings?" he choked, staring fixedly at the second lightsaber. "I do not need material possessions to remember her!"

"That's Karon's 'saber, not Revan's," I snapped, for all the good it did me. The man seemed unable to draw his eyes away from the hilt in his hand. "Revan merely held onto it for awhile. I reckon Karon and Zhar belong together, even in death. If you don't want it-"

"I did not say that." Yudan's eyes closed as he breathed in unsteadily. "I was simply... not expecting this."

"Ah, well." I shrugged, uneasy in the presence of his apparent grief, but even so- this felt like the right thing to do. "Life has a habit of throwing surprises at us all. It's how you deal with those fun little shocks that define you. Reckon you can wield two lightsabers?"

"I can master more than one form, old man," the Twi'lek murmured, as composure battled emotion across the fine planes of his face. His blue eyes snapped open to face me – shining bright and wholly uncorrupted – and in that moment I had faith that the man would be okay, whatever path he chose. "Perhaps I shall modify the crystals into a double-blade. I will remember Karon and Zhar... and their padawans. Both of them."

"Good. That's tribute enough for me." I nodded firmly, before taking in the lengthening shadows that darkened the grassy hill tops. "Ach, well, suspect I've said all I need to. Better head back before this old body demands a nap."

"You won't beat the setting of the sun, not as far out as we are."
"Pah. The nocturnal life here ain't a match for my wily bones." I shrugged my pack back over my shoulders, casting a last beady gaze over the notorious man standing before me. "One last thing. I've had my own draw of missteps in the past... nothing like yours, you might mutter, but they were enough to send me sulking into the Shadowlands for some time. Don't... don't make the same mistake as me, sonny boy. Decades of regret in the wild ain't a way to live, nor would it make those who have gone happy."

"I shall make a decision, Jolee Bindo," he promised, his eyes gleaming in the gathering dusk. "One way or another, I shall make a decision soon enough."

"Good." My lips twitched as I turned to face the trek back to civilization. "I'd wish the Force to be with you, Yudan Rosh, but that'd make me sound far too much like a stodgy Jedi. So all I'll say is this: live your life well. If we meet again, make sure you bring me a bottle of whiskey or I'll slap you over the head for being impertinent."

The man's soft chuckle stayed with me for some time after I left.

xXx

Roland Wann:
Republic Embassy, Ahto City, Manaan

"Happy retirement, Roland," a voice commented behind me. "Where are you headed?"

I turned, to spot the Republic scientist Kono Nolan eyeing me over curiously. It was strange, to see the man out of his standard white-jacketed uniform.

"Coruscant," I answered, taking a swig of what was meant to be non-alcoholic fizz-pop, but tasted suspiciously like Corellian ale. Damn Laconi. If the military arm of the Embassy wasn't in the throes of shutting down, I'd rake the crooked con over the coals for smuggling booze in under the Selkath's strict orders. "No brass allowed on Manaan. I have to go to the Core to claim my final papers."

It wasn't so bad, really. I used to dread the thought of leaving active duty behind – but the Sith attack on the embassy months earlier made me realize just how old I felt. Especially when contrasted with the acts of some – some who were now galactically famous.

_I'll admit, I hadn't thought much of Carth Onasi at first. But a man willing to charge into an invasion on his own-_

The Republic had better defenders than me, these days. It hurt to admit that – but it was the truth.

"Me too," Kono said softly. His attention had shifted to the huddle of soldiers joking loudly around the head table. Bloody Laconi was clambering up on the plasteel surface, like he was about to break into dance. I couldn't see that twit headed for anything other than a dishonourable discharge. "Good to see the grunts celebrating, for once."

"We're all glad the embargo's been lifted," I admitted. "Even if the Republic's being booted from Manaan."

"The Selkath love their neutrality," Kono commented idly. "I'm not one for politics... but at least the Embassy's staying open. Even if it'll be civilian only."

Blasted Selkath bureaucracy had taken just about as long as I'd predicted, before they'd finally issued a ruling regarding the secret kolto base half their leaders had known of anyway. The dismissal of all Republic military was a public dressing-down, but a weak one, considering they'd agreed to a
civilian ambassador and the retention of political ties.

And the Sith weren't even around anymore to keep their embassy open. The Republic officer in me rejoiced at that.

I could've applied for the civilian post. Maybe even attained it. But I'd wanted to keep my military ties, even if it meant retirement. And, truth be told, I just wanted to see the back of the bloody Selkath.

Much like the rest of the rejoicing soldiers beneath my command.

"And kolto will still be offered to the Republic at market rates, right?" Kono continued. "Considering everything, there's a lot to celebrate."

"There is," I agreed quietly. Kono had a smile dancing around his lips, but he was conspicuously alone, given that this was the final night for all military-affiliated staff. Even in his role as scientist, Kono still reported to the rank and file. "Where's your off-sider, Kono? Sami, wasn't it?"

"She-" His mouth twisted wryly. "She's left the Republic. Accepted a biologist's post with a new Selkath deep-sea base. Sami was always more... passionate than me about the wildlife here. I don't want anything to do with the ocean anymore, if I'm honest. I still see those damn feral firaxan at times..."

The man trailed into silence, his eyes closing briefly as his shoulders hunched.

"By all accounts it sounds like it was as hairy underwater as it was up here," I said in commiseration, drawing in another mouthful of booze. Laconi might like to dance on the wrong side of the law – but the Selkath's prohibition of alcohol on-base was pretty pedantic. This late in the game, I was happy enough to plead ignorance at Laconi's transgressions. "It's hard to lose men."

"Yeah," Kono murmured. He and Sami were the only staff that'd made it topside, and that was probably why I'd barely seen either of them since the lockdown. Survivor's guilt was never easy. "If it weren't for the Jedi... I saw Bastila Shan, you know that? Watched her on the cams as she charged a roomful of crazed Selkath just to save a mercenary. And that Cathar... she braved the ocean to sort the harvesting machine out. Her and that ugly merc. I don't care what the holonets are saying, the Jedi are heroes. Without them..."

"Hmm," I murmured. I still maintained if it hadn't been for Bastila Shan, the Embassy wouldn't have been attacked in the first place. But, still, she'd gone off and saved the Republic, hadn't she? Her, and that ragtag crew of hers. When I didn't see the empty bunks in the quarters staring at me accusingly, I could concede it was a small price to pay.

"We're headed for a brighter future, Roland," Kono murmured, as he uncapped the bottle in his hands. "Whether it's retirement or another posting... we have peace, now. The Republic will prevail."

"I can drink to that," I said. There was a warm satisfaction in my heart as I considered his words. Retired or not, I could still find a place in the Core. Enjoy the golden years, as such, and be glad that the next generation would grow up in a safer galaxy than the one I'd lived in.

I leaned over, and clinked my drink gently against Kono's.

xXx

Canderous Ordo:
Nearing Equator, Ordo, Ordo System, Mandalore Sector
Ordo was a barren rock of a planet, always had been. Wastelands covered near-all of the surface: scorching deserts inhabited only by the most hardy of non-sentient life.

Rimmed thinly around the planet's equator was a strip of vegetation that offered relief to the relentless temperature, but that relief was mitigated by the presence of the planet's more vicious predators – horned-tooth lizards the size of basilisks, venomous sandsnakes that could kill a man with a single bite, winged claw-monkeys able to shred armour not made of the finest beskar – ah, my home planet wasn't a place for the faint-hearted.

Clan Ordo had never settled on Ordo with any sizable population – no point with such an inhospitable climate and the lack of any substantial material resources, and that wasn't even counting the carnivores who claimed supremacy on the planet's surface. But Ordo remained a testing platform for the blooding of young warriors – and the ritual grounds for the ascension of a new clan leader.

Next to me, in the co-pilot's chair, Jacen Ordo shifted uncomfortably on his seat. "Before we touch dirt, ori'vod, there's something I must say."

"So, speak," I grunted, canting our transport into a landing trajectory following the coordinates Jacen had pre-programmed. The journey home had been... interesting, what with a pirate interception of the freighter I'd first boarded, not to mention the customs takeover when we'd finally landed on Ord Mantell. It'd felt like old times – cracking some heads together, showing those upstart pirates exactly why it was idiotic to mess with a Mando'ade – but I'd had my ride impounded and been left stranded on a planet riddled with bounty hunters and smugglers – none of who were at all interested in venturing into Mandalorian airspace.

Running into Jacen Ordo had been a surprise – until my cousin confessed he'd been hunting me down.

"I'm running for clan leader," Jacen admitted, leaning forward to confirm the landing beacon that'd been transmitted from the clan's gathering camp. "I told you before the Elders expected you to run – if you made it back – and there's no denying you'd be a strong contender, but..."

"Huh." I knew what he was leaving unspoken. My notoriety throughout the Republic – and that shiny Cross of Glory now warming the bottom of a pack somewhere – was both a blessing and a curse. Many Mando'ade felt now was the time for rebuilding, for the reconstruction of our clans and our strongholds – and that an ongoing neutrality with the Republic was almost a necessity for these goals to be achieved. Better not to poke a sleeping terentatek when our spears were still so dull.

But there were others who hung onto the old views of glory – of galactic domination, that grandiose dream Mand'alor the Ultimate had breathed – the one where expansion at the sacrifice of clan was worth seeking.

Where conquest and the subjugation of all others was the only path to honour.

"I'll back you, Canderous. I'd have you know that. Your deeds in the Wars speak for themselves, and I can only see a potential... cessation of hostilities with the Republic as a good thing."

"There are no hostilities to end. We haven't been at war since Malachor," I ground out, annoyed. My only true tie to the Republic was Onasi and – Commodore or not – he was hardly going to spearhead an alliance with the weakened Mandalorian clans still picking over the remnants of our lost empire. "We'd be a pack of d'kuts if we tried sniffing into their territories when we can barely hold our own."

"Yeah, I know that. But you haven't even said if you plan on running or not-"
"I'll talk with the Elders first, vod. Ain't no point making a statement until then."

Jacen simmered into thwarted silence as our light transport descended through the lower atmo. We'd had a talk or two on my final leg home, and there was no denying I felt the call to leadership. Seeing first-hand the dregs of my people scrabbling for creds on Korriban and Kashyyyk had galled, the more so because it had forced me to admit that I'd been doing *exactly* the same back on Taris.

The Mando'aide could do better. *I* could do better.

Still, it'd been gratifying to hear that the clan I'd saved in the Shadowlands had taken my words back home. Clan Ordo had called a leader-seek. Jermnin had been cemented as the First of the Lok Clan. Trallia had convinced the Kelborn elders to talk with Ordo about a potential alliance. And – or so Jacen told me – the murmurs of raising a new Mand'alor to unite our rebuilding had grown to a dull roar.

The scrubby vegetation near our landing coordinates burgeoned into view and with it came the visible peaks of portable tents, all framed with durasteel spires holding metres of sack-cloth that marked out temporary bases. There were dozens of docked freighters, light transports, snubs- no, more than dozens-

"This ain't just Ordo," I muttered, transferring auxiliary power into the landing thrusters as the sublight engine shut down. The transport turned beneath my hands, before descending cleanly towards an available landing pad. "How many other clans are watching our leader-seek?"

"Bala's here, they've always maintained close ties," Jacen admitted, as the ship landed with a soft thump. The repulsors whined, slowly whirring into silence. "Kelborn and Lok have both sent representatives. There was talk of a Fett leader, too, and as I left I caught wind of a contingent of akaanir dala landing. Haar'chak, Canderous, you know that Ordo are probably the strongest clan left standing. Our leader-seek was always going to invite interest from the other clans."

"I'm coming home to a kriffing side-show," I muttered, as I unbuckled the safety restraints of the pilot's chair. "And how many are expecting me?"

"I didn't keep our return a secret, if that's what you're asking," Jacen returned drily. "Fame happens when you take on a Sith Lord and return victorious."

I stood, throwing my cousin an unimpressed stare, before retrieving the second-rate helm I'd procured and tucking it under one arm. Walking into what I expected was a waiting crowd would be better with a full set of beskar'gam, but all I had was Davik's lousy purple chest-plate, and a patchwork of body armour that said more about my recent past than I cared it to. I could feel myself scowling. "Let's get this damn circus over with, then."

A trio of akaanir dala were standing closest to the landing ramp as I exited the ship, and I was immediately relieved to note my estranged wife didn't number among their ranks. The blonde one, though, I did recognize – she shot me a cheeky grin that instantly reminded me of a brief hour back on Korriban-

"Olarom, Canderous Ordo," someone else said; a man decked out in full body armour that gleamed beneath the sunlight. His gauntleted fists rose to remove a shiny helm, revealing a face I knew well. "Welcome home."

My muscles tensed, and I was immediately aware of the blaster closest to my fist, and the rifle ready at my back.
"Su cuy'gar, Jagi of Bala," I offered formally. Jacen stomped down the ramp, stopping at my side, an easy smile pasted on his face. Jagi, on the other hand, was entirely expressionless. "Don't mince words with me," I continued, in an almost-growl. "Are you here as friend or foe?"

Jagi's thin lips twitched. "I'll admit I've been waiting for you. Wanted to speak to you first. I did what your Jen Sahara suggested, conferred with my elders, and- well. I'll repeat what I said on Korriban. There is no debt of honour between us – at least, not on my side."

I paused, considering the younger man. The insignia of clan Bala was etched proudly on the shoulder-piece of his beskar'gam, along with the marking as Third of his clan. Jagi had been a war leader I'd once respected, and his homecoming, it seemed, had done him good.

His little brother, on the other hand... I half-hoped Allen Bala was lurking about somewhere, just so I could find an excuse to bloody his mouth.

"I hold no grievance with you, Jagi," I said finally. "If someone comes looking for a fight then I'll give them one. But our clans have been allied for generations. It would be good to count you as a personal ally again."

"Let it be so," Jagi murmured, tucking his helm beneath one arm. "Your clan wants to talk with you, but I suspect you might like to unload your belongings first. I'll walk you to your tent."

Showing me my quarters was a courtesy bordering on subservience – maybe one Jagi thought I was granted, considering the public challenge he'd thrown at me back on Korriban. But, still-

"I have a tent already?" I felt my brows rise. "Didn't think I was that famous."

"We needed somewhere to put your stuff," Jagi muttered, waving me down a line of Ordo-marked tents. The akaanir dala didn't follow, but I was aware of the blonde one watching my retreat with interest. Damn, but I'd have to find out her name. "Kriffing thing wouldn't shut up until we found him a place to standby and wait for you."

"Wait." I halted, gaze narrowing. "What stuff? I haven't sent anything ahead, Jagi. What the kriff are you talking about?"

"Come and see for yourself." Jagi motioned to the entrance of a one-person tent. "He's pretty adamant he belongs to you. If you disagree, well- we can always use him for target practice."

I lifted the flap of sack-cloth, bemused. The tent Jagi claimed as mine was the standard shelter Mando'ade used in times of ground-war or clan gatherings – no flooring, just the required protection from the elements with a portable heat-generator in the centre and a simple stretcher laid out on the dirt floor. And in the corner-

"Mand'alor's balls," I muttered, as crimson photoreceptors flared to life, inset into the triangular headpiece of a burnished red droid I hadn't thought I'd ever see again. "Tinhead. What the kriff are you doing here?"

"Observation: Master, you certainly took your time," HK-47 intoned, his eyes gleaming a deep scarlet. "Elucidation: My former master's final command was that my service be rendered to you upon her death, suspected or confirmed. Query: Is there something you need killed?"

Jagi followed me in, his thin mouth curving in amusement. "I have to say, I've never seen a droid quite like this one before," he drawled. "I had a bet with Melaani of the akaanir dala on whether you'd actually recognize the damn thing. Guess I owe her fifty creds."

"I have a tent already?" I felt my brows rise. "Didn't think I was that famous."

"We needed somewhere to put your stuff," Jagi muttered, waving me down a line of Ordo-marked tents. The akaanir dala didn't follow, but I was aware of the blonde one watching my retreat with interest. Damn, but I'd have to find out her name. "Kriffing thing wouldn't shut up until we found him a place to standby and wait for you."

"Wait." I halted, gaze narrowing. "What stuff? I haven't sent anything ahead, Jagi. What the kriff are you talking about?"

"Come and see for yourself." Jagi motioned to the entrance of a one-person tent. "He's pretty adamant he belongs to you. If you disagree, well- we can always use him for target practice."

I lifted the flap of sack-cloth, bemused. The tent Jagi claimed as mine was the standard shelter Mando'ade used in times of ground-war or clan gatherings – no flooring, just the required protection from the elements with a portable heat-generator in the centre and a simple stretcher laid out on the dirt floor. And in the corner-

"Mand'alor's balls," I muttered, as crimson photoreceptors flared to life, inset into the triangular headpiece of a burnished red droid I hadn't thought I'd ever see again. "Tinhead. What the kriff are you doing here?"

"Observation: Master, you certainly took your time," HK-47 intoned, his eyes gleaming a deep scarlet. "Elucidation: My former master's final command was that my service be rendered to you upon her death, suspected or confirmed. Query: Is there something you need killed?"

Jagi followed me in, his thin mouth curving in amusement. "I have to say, I've never seen a droid quite like this one before," he drawled. "I had a bet with Melaani of the akaanir dala on whether you'd actually recognize the damn thing. Guess I owe her fifty creds."
My arms were crossed as I stared hard at HK. The droid's head cocked, but he remained silent, awaiting my next order. Because kriiffing Revan had entailed him to me-

I'd never desired a personal droid, protocol or... otherwise. Such things weren't uncommon among the Mando'ade, but all I'd ever cared for was my own basilisk war droid.

Not that I was entertaining the notion of turning HK away. I knew damn well the capabilities of Revan's old assassin.

"Haar'chak," I muttered. "HK, last thing I heard, Onasi shipped you down to the bowels of Republic Intelligence. Why am I not surprised you found a way to break out?"

"Query: Was that a rhetorical question, master? I can refresh your memory with a litany of my superior functionality, if your organic brain has decayed to the point of senility-"

"Hah!" Jagi cut in, chortling. "Bastard thing's just as rude to you-

"Cut to the chase, Tinhead," I growled at the droid. "Why did she send you to me?"

HK's crimson gaze flared. "Observation: Considering the dross of peace-loving fleshbags my former master surrounded herself with, one could argue that you were simply the best of a sorry lot. Conjecture: Or, perhaps, she considered me a suitable Mandalore replacement."

"You've never had much of a self-preservation instinct, have you, Tinhead?" I said drily, amused, while Jagi choked in response to what many Mando'ade would take as fighting words, regardless of whether they emitted from a programmed machine or not.

"Objection: If that were true, I would no doubt be laid to waste several times over-"

"What have you heard, droid?" Jagi demanded, taking an aggressive step forward. "A Mand'alor replacement... have you been bugging the Elders' meetings?"

HK's right forearm cocked, and something thunked inside his robotic limb.

"Stand down, Tinhead," I snapped out. I didn't wait to see if he listened, but instead turned to shoot a questioning glance at Jagi. "What's going on?"

"If that damn droid has been listening in to private discussions-"

"What, about a new Mand'alor?" I drawled. "Haar'chak, Jagi, even I've heard whispers and I've only been around the Clans for five kriiffing minutes."

"What do you know?" Jagi rapped out, still glaring at HK.

"Answer: That droids are vastly superior to organic meatbags in functionality, robustness, and rationality. That pain is the only reliable means by which truth may be obtained. That there are a lot of politicians on Coruscant; why, I could spend decades assassinating them and barely even make a dent. Sarcasm: Or were you looking for something a little more specific, Choleric Primate?"

"Ne'johaa, HK, shut up," I muttered, before raising an arm to forestall Jagi. As much as a brawl between my old comrade and HK would be entertaining, there was still part of me that reckoned HK had additional reasons for being here – and I wanted to know what those reasons were. Maybe the damn droid had already disclosed everything – after all, I probably was the best suited to take care of him now that Revan was dead...
...my service be rendered to you upon her death, suspected or confirmed.

Suspected. Revan had never been one to piss around with words. The Jedi—all of them had felt her die—but then we'd never seen her damned corpse, and it wasn't like this was the first time—

I scowled.

"Jagi, what's got you so riled up?" I ground out. "HK's always been a mouthy bucket of bolts. Why's the very mention of a new Mand'alar making you so twitchy?"

Jagi's glare swung back to me, but he sighed, his shoulders sagging in defeat. "Shavit," he muttered. "Maybe I am on edge. I'm Third of Bala, now, and it's the first time I've been privy to—look, all clan leaders have agreed, and it would've been declared days ago, but the Ordo Elders asked for a week's cycle grace before an official decree was announced. This was after Jacen Ordo commed in, saying he'd found you on Ord Mantell. There's a reason so many clans have congregated on Ordo, y'know. The clans who ain't here are gathered on Dxun."

"Mand'alar," I breathed, straightening. "It's true, then. We'll be seeking a new Mand'alar."

"Yeah," Jagi conceded. "Standard two month contestation. What with the Ordo leader-seek happening concurrently—well, I guess your Elders wanted to make sure you were here. To see what you would do."

"Query: Is this an official confirmation? Extrapolation: Is there any chance the seeking of your new meatbag leader may be retracted?"

HK's questioning was strangely intent—Jagi turned to glower at the droid again, but I waved him on. "All leaders have voted already, Jagi?"

"There's no turning back, if that's what you mean. We'll be following a new Mand'alar once the two months are done," Jagi clarified. "And if you plan on running for Ordo—or anything else—then you might want to kick some attitude readjustment into your damn droid before someone else smashes his head into the dust."

Running for Ordo—or anything else. Jagi's implication meant that someone, somewhere, was already considering me as a potential—

"Statement: Master, I have a private message for you."

I blinked, turning back to stare at the droid. Jagi was frowning at my side. HK said nothing else, but his crimson gaze was levelled almost accusingly on Jagi.

"Jagi," I said slowly, not moving my focus from the robotic relic of the woman who had almost broken my people. "Give me a minute, would you? If there's any of my clan elders waiting, tell them I won't be long."

"Fine," Jagi muttered, but—surprisingly—turned to move away. Jagi's bearing towards me, his acquiescence to someone outside his own clan or reporting line said more than his words did. Jagi Bala, at least, considered me worthy.

Worthy of Ordo leadership, maybe—or maybe something more.

"Vor'e, Jagi." I said, as the man moved to leave. "I am glad to see you again."

Jagi nodded in response, and then left.
"Alright, HK," I ground out, as the sack-cloth entrance flapped closed. "What's Revan got to say to me?"

The droid didn't answer verbally; instead, a panel retracted from his forelimb, and the blue illumination of a recorded holo-message shone brightly on the dirt floor.

It was no surprise to see her kneeling figure.

*That's kriffing Lehon,* I thought, frowning, glimpsing the entrance of that damn pyramid at her back. The woman I respected and mourned for ran one hand through her mop of curls, before staring intently at the holo-cam.

::Canderous.:: she opened, leaning forward. ::If you get this message then your clans have announced the search for a new Mandalore, and I'm probably dead.::

The recording grimaced, and I scowled.

::Look, I recalled something regarding my duel with Mandalore the Ultimate. This is important. Before the Wars, Mandalore was approached by... I'm not sure. By someone. An emissary of someone. Mandalore's vision of conquest was not his own, Canderous. That vision of conquest, of crushing the Republic- it was implanted in him by something or someone beyond the Outer Rim. How much Mandalore remained his own man I cannot say...::

I could feel my face tightening in the beginnings of anger, and holo-Revan's mouth twitched.

::I can only imagine your expression right now.,:: she murmured. ::The truth is that Mandalore the Ultimate believed there was something out there. Something that used the Mandalorians as a means of testing the Republic... of testing the Jedi. It was not your peoples' decision to wage war on the Republic. You only have to look at the over-extension of the Mandalorian offensive to see how futile a future empire that vast would have been.:-

I shifted uncomfortably. As galling as Revan's words were, I couldn't deny the truth in her last statement. We Mando'ade had certainly had the forces to make the Republic tremble, but to hold such a swathe of the galaxy long-term?

I hadn't been the only general to doubt that vision.

::I once believed there was a war coming, Canderous. And that it was waiting out in the Unknown Regions, in the dark, waiting for us to destroy each other. That's why Malak and I ventured into unknown space after Malachor. That's why I turned on the Republic... I justified it as a military takeover. Capture the Republic, strengthen it, and make the galaxy ready for what would come.:-

She sighed, looking away from the holo-recorder. Etched in wavering lines of blue, Revan looked more like an artist's impression of a battered crusader at rest; all burred lines as she stared soulfully into the distance.

::I was wrong to believe I could master the Dark Side without losing myself. But I don't know if I was wrong about the Unknown Regions. I don't remember what Malak and I found. All I know is that if there is something out there, chances are the Mandalorian Clans will be hit first. And a weakened Mandalorian empire is bad for your people, for the Republic – and for all in the galaxy.:-

I frowned, folding my arms. There was no denying that whatever happened to Revan after Malachor had been her turning point- but to think she'd been led there by Mandalor- by what must have been his dying words-
::Strengthen your clans, Canderous::: Her tone had turned crisp, almost commanding. :::As your friend, I ask this of you. As the woman you followed, and the one who once defeated your clans, I command it. Preserve your people and stand ready at the edges of the galaxy. I never destroyed Mandalore the Ultimate's helm of leadership. HK-47 knows where it is. Retrieve the helm, lead your people, and hold the Outer Rim firm:::

The holo-recording of Revan winked out, to be replaced by a navigational map. HK's eyes gleamed in the shadows of the tent, but the droid said nothing as I stared at a map of the Chorlian system, centred around the frozen wasteland planet of Rekkiad.

Mand'alor's balls! The kripping helm?

I rocked back on my heels, shaken. The iconic full-helm had been passed down from Mand'alor to Mand'alor, its frontal mask carved from a mythosaur's sternum. Such a relic wasn't exactly necessary to hold the title of Mand'alor – and nor did it guarantee confirmation of the title – but there was no denying the power that symbol held with my people.

And one of Revan's final acts was to bestow the fabled helm back to the Mando'ade – to me.

"Preserve your people and stand ready at the edges of the galaxy."

Rekkiad was little more than a handful of days' jump from Ordo. I could be there and back before half the contestation period had expired.

"I once believed there was a war coming, Canderous. And that it was waiting out in the Unknown Regions, in the dark, waiting for us to destroy each other."

There were few people I esteemed as highly as Revan – and none outside of the Mando'ade. Something tightened in my chest as I considered her last order given to me – and I knew, in my heart, that there was no question on whether I would follow it.

Jacen would make a fine leader for Clan Ordo. It seemed my fate was leading me elsewhere.

xXx

**Carth Onasi:**

*Government Sector, Citadel Station, Telos*

Citadel Station still had that new smell: burnished durasteel overlaid with fresh lacquer on the sidings, differing colours of paint demarcating the separation between residential, retail and governmental sectors. Many of the station's walls were blessedly free of any commercial holo-ads, although surely it was only a matter of time before retailers snapped up the remaining real estate for their product placement.

I hadn't spotted any graffiti, either. That was something I made sure not to mention to Mission – for all that she'd signed up to a piloting course alongside Dustil, I figured sooner or later she'd sneak out to wreak her own brand of special havoc.

I was almost looking forward to it.

The sidings shifted to the yellow of the public governmental sector as I left the residential complex behind. Jolee had returned that morning – now safely ensconced with Dustil in what was beginning to feel like home – and the old man's arrival had been a welcome relief in an otherwise melancholy day.
Remembrance Day.

It was fitting, I supposed, that the authorities decided to honour the more recent casualties on the fifth anniversary of the bombing. We'd lost more than our planet the day Saul had betrayed us, but it'd felt like a double-edged sword this time, when the local brass saluted those brave Telosians who'd fallen in battle since then.

Captain Jordo Merrix was one of the more prominent names.

I'd heard weeks ago, of course; the news of his death was just another chink in my already battered heart. But I hadn't expected his so very public funeral to hit so hard. Men and women who'd flown beside him stood in silence, stoic acceptance plastered on their faces, as they later mumbled impersonally about what a good soldier he'd been.

Before raising a glass and moving on to grieve the next comrade.

Jordo'd had no spouse to witness the etching of his name on the ceremonial plaque. No best friend to shed a tear – sure, we'd been close once, before the destruction of Telos had catapulted us both into a life that didn't exist beyond the obligations of war. There'd been no child or parent or even a damn civilian neighbour to weep at the reality of his death.

And as my fingers traced Jordo's name on the newly-erected public memorial, I was hit by the staggering realization that had I died on the Endar Spire, my own funeral would have looked exactly like this.

Official and proper and completely impersonal.

I was lucky. So damn lucky. And stang, did that understanding hurt, when I still sometimes mourned Morgana, when I could barely even say Revan's name without my voice cracking.

The days were getting better. Even though I was still officially on leave, the Senate had a vested interest in the Telosian Restoration Effort, and I was conveniently seen as a bridge between political investment, military presence, and local governmental ties. Telos hadn't been the only planet devastated by war, of course, but perhaps it was the most prominent one. And if the Republic could show that a restoration effort was fruitful, it paved the way for other sectors to claim taxpayer funds in the name of rebuilding.

Of course, I wanted Telos to succeed more than anyone, and therefore I welcomed my not-yet-official involvement with the Telosian Council.

But, really, it was the kids that kept me whole.

Kids, I thought with a wry smile. Morgana had wanted a second child. A daughter, she'd teased, to keep the gender balance in our household. I couldn't help but wonder what she'd have made of Mission.

"Cap- er, Commodore? Commodore Onasi?"

The downside to becoming absurdly well-known was the frequent hails from strangers. I could still remember a young Dustil gushing over Talvon Esan, or my own regard for Saul that had blinkered my ability to see the man for what he had become. The famous were, well, just sents like any other. I was highly uncomfortable with the fact that I now numbered among their ranks.

I turned, a friendly smile plastered on my face, to survey an older Human grinning tentatively at me. The man held a datapad loosely in one fist, and I inwardly grimaced. Requests for holographs
aren't uncommon, but I'd gone five days without one, and that was getting close to a personal record.

"I, uh, sure. Of course," I said hurriedly, staring down at the man's 'pad. "Do you have a datapen?"

"Eh?" The man blinked, before following my gaze and laughing. "Naw, this is my map of the station. Only been here two days, and I'm getting lost with every- say, Captain, don't tell me you've already forgotten me?"

I glanced back up at the Human, and the dawning recognition was slower than it should have been.


The heat of chagrin flooded me; I hadn't even thought on the Republic gunner since he'd slipped away from the 'Hawk. Sammy Tobards had done his part in taking out a slayer or two, but then he'd disappeared and became nothing more than a distant memory of someone who'd once shed blood beneath my command.

"It's fine," Tobards said, still chuckling, waving away the embarrassment that must have been evident on my face. "Guess you never expected to run into an old blighter like me again."

"It's good to see you," I said sincerely, eyeing the older man over. He'd been injured, I remembered, and then vanished with the second round of medics after we'd docked on the Meridus. Obviously he'd had to report to his own superiors, but the man had had the grace to leave us alone to our grief in the days that followed, and I felt a belated rush of gratitude for his consideration. "How's the shoulder?"

"It aches at night," Tobards admitted. "There's some permanent nerve damage. I ain't complaining, though, 'cause there was a moment back on the Forge when I truly thought we weren't getting out alive."

"Yeah." I searched for an elegant way to change the topic. Today had already been too much rehashing of the blasted past. "What are you doing on Citadel Station?"

"My son married a Telosian girl," he said, breaking into a wide smile. "She gave birth to my first grandchild a week ago."

"That's- congratulations," I offered, touched despite myself at the evident joy wrinkling the man's face. "Are you on leave, then?"

"I applied for early retirement. Only a few years left in me, anyway, and now that peace reigns it ain't that hard to wrangle a speedy discharge. Here, check this out-" Tobards thumbed the screen of his datapad, before turning it around to display the scrawny image of a sleeping newborn. "Isn't he something?"

"Yeah," I said quietly, gaze fixed on that tiny bundle of rebirth. At that moment, it didn't seem so long ago when Morgana had held a tiny babe in her arms, her soft gaze burning with all the love in the galaxy. "He really is."

Tobards powered off the 'pad, still grinning, and slipped it into a pocket. "Not sure what you'll think of his name, though. My daughter-in-law is quite the patriot."

"What?" I blinked. "No, tell me you didn't-"

"Hey, I had nothing to do with it," he chuckled. "Okay, so I wrangled her into the boy's middle
name, but then Jedi Bindo did save my life."

"You- you haven't saddled the poor thing with both our names-"

"Carth Jolee Tobards," he confirmed proudly, as I stared at him in disbelief. The man's chuckle grew into a deep belly-laugh. "Ah, I can guess what you're thinking. But the boy will grow up to be a proud Telosian, if my daughter-in-law has anything to do with it. And it's important to remember the past."

"I-I guess," I said weakly.

Tobards walked closer, clapping me amiably on the shoulder. "I saw you at the remembrance ceremony. Guess I was hoping to run into you. It's a good thing, to honour those who died for our freedom, but I reckon it's just as important to enjoy the peace they fought for. That's why I left the Fleet. To be with my family, you know? To live."

I nodded, subdued, and suddenly lost for words.

I was a military man, and deep down I knew I always would be. But if there was one thing I'd learned it was that family had to come first – and I was fortunate enough to be given a second chance to prove that.

Fleet obligations or not, Dustil – and Mission – would forever be my first priority.

"Well, I won't waylay you any longer, Commodore. I hope- I hope everything is going well for you."

The man's last words had lowered in volume, as his expression turned solemn in respect for the dead. Of course, Tobards had seen Revan and Zaalbar leave the 'Hawk, never to return. And half the blasted galaxy seemed to think Bastila had been my clandestine lover.

Mission might find the idea hilarious, but if I ever found out which reporter started that lurid rumour, I'd strangle them with my own bare hands.

"Everything is as well as can be expected, I suppose," I answered wearily. "And- you can call me Carth, you know, being civvie and all."

"Okay, then. S'long as I'm Sammy to you." The ex-gunner paused, as a flash of uncertainty skittered across his expression. "I'm on the Station for good now, Carth. Don't be a stranger, okay? My son is a mean cook. It'd mean a lot to me if you'd come over for dinner one night with that boy of yours."

An unexpected offer of what felt like friendship from a man little more than a stranger caught me off-guard. "I'd- I'd like that," I managed, if a little slowly.

My acceptance was genuine, and that in itself surprised me. I had no desire to relive the battle on the Star Forge, but then Sammy Tobards didn't strike me as the sort of man interested in the glorification of past battles. "Maybe I'll even drag Jolee along."

"Oh, he's here?" The side of Tobards' mouth quirked. "Yeah, bring him too. You never know, he might even get my name right for once."

I chuckled. Knowing Jolee's propensity for acting the senile old coot, I rather doubted it. "Call on me then, Tob- uh, Sammy, when things have settled with your new grandchild. My address is publicly listed. We'll organize something."
The man grinned, before nodding in farewell and slipping silently away. I could feel the faint smile on my face linger, even after Sammy Tobards disappeared from view.

I turned, shrugging my hands into my pockets, and resumed walking down the sparsely crowded governmental halls. These pathways led into the public service sector, and there was one route in particular I often found myself following, during those brief moments I was at a loose end.

The trial arboretum erected along the most western chambers of the Station.

The atmosphere of Telos had acidified to the point where little life was currently sustainable on the surface. The Telosian Council's initial restoration goal was detoxification of the climate, of course, but from that lofty objective arose the question of which vegetation to introduce. A herd of Ithorians had secured permission to cultivate suitable flora within the Station itself, which they hoped one day to transplant down to the surface.

Heat lamps shone within enclosed transparisteel domes, illuminating seedlings of flax-grass and chocha-bushes imported from Onderon, and other varieties of plant-life I had no hope of recognizing. The domes themselves boasted artificial atmospheric conditions that were an emulation of what the Ithorian herd expected Telos to exhibit, given more time and funding.

Frankly, I wasn't all that interested in the plants, other than the future they offered my planet. No, I was drawn to the vast screens covering the outer walls. Some displayed a real-time view fed back from the holo-cams stationed down on Telos, along the lands chosen as the first point of plantation. Others showed projected images of the same land – now starting to thrive – in a month, three months, and even a year's time.

Hope. They displayed hope.

"You really reckon they can do it?" someone piped up behind me. "Fix Telos, I mean?"

I spun around to see Mission wandering slowly towards me. Her bright gaze was fixed on that final screen, the one with visible crops and shrubs growing unaided beneath a blue sky.

"I hope so," I said quietly as she neared my side. "It's certainly a dream worth fighting for. What are you doing here, Mission?"

"Following you, I guess." She made a face. "S'not like you're that hard to find, Carth. I just gotta follow the adoring stares of the dumb crowds."

"Ha ha." I looked around anyway, relieved to see that the arboretum was as quiet as normal. Mission grinned, nose crinkling, as she followed my gaze.

"Hey, was that Sammy I saw earlier?"

"You really were following me," I grumbled. "I thought you were back home?"

"Old man Bindo started lecturing Dee on the Force. Sheesh, I mean it's good to have him back an' all, but he can really go on a bit, y'know?"

I chuckled, before slinging my arm over the girl's shoulder and drawing her close. "Get used to it, Mission. The Force is a part of their lives, so I guess that means-

"-it's part of ours, yeah, I know," she muttered, tucking her head into my side. "Did you- I mean, I was just wondering..."
Mission trailed off into silence, head bowed. I stared down at the top of her lekku, criss-crossed in those black leather straps that I wasn’t sure had any purpose beyond ornamentation. "What is it, Mission? You- you can ask me anything, you know."

Unless it’s about boys. Or Dustil. I blinked, thoughts frozen, suddenly aware of how highly uncomfortable raising a teenage girl might become.

"I just- well, you two were a thing, right?" she mumbled against my chest. "Did you- did you love her? Like, love love her?"

"I-" The breath whistled out from my lungs as a stab of fresh grief completely blindsided me. Talking of Revan was still so damnably raw, but if I owed the words to anyone, it was to the girl in my care who had lost so much.

A quiet sigh escaped me. "I think I could have loved her, given the chance." I could feel my voice lowering as the truth forced itself free. "I did, Mission. I did love her."

"So did I." Her reply back was timid, muffled as she leaned deeper into me. "We're gonna be okay, right? I mean, are you gonna be okay?"

My eyes closed. Flickers of bittersweet memory flashed-

"I named you well, Blaster Boy," Revan hissed, hefting a rifle as she stepped deeper into the Vulkars’ base. "Though I seriously think you need to get out more."-

-Dusty boots, dropping with a thump on the 'Hawk's common room table. Green eyes rolling at my pointed look. "You do know this isn't your ship, right Flyboy?"-

-Revan, laughing, her gaze dancing with unrestrained mirth over my purloined flight-jacket. "Carth, it's puke green. Honestly. Couldn't you find anything better in Davik's cast-offs?" Her impish grin widening beneath my glare as she held in further laughter. "It's not really your colour, you know. I don't think it's anyone's colour."-

-Uncertainty widening those bright eyes, as her cheeks burned with desire. "I-uh, um," she stuttered, pulling back from my kiss, caught completely off-guard for once in her life.-

-"Okay," Revan whispered, flushed and tousled after a night of stolen pleasure. "Honestly, Carth, you've got to be a complete borkhead to take me on."

-"I won't fall, Carth," she vowed on Korriban, when the darkness of that planet threatened to leech into her soul. And on Lehon, when she begged for my faith if not my forgiveness- "Please. Follow my direction. Trust me."-

-Then, later, standing strong and sure, a warrior at the end but also the woman who had claimed my heart. "So. Are you going to kiss me, or do I have to do all the legwork around here?"

-And, finally: "I promise I'll do everything I can to make it out. Promise me you'll do more than just survive if I don't."

"No," I answered finally, quietly. "I'm not okay. But- but I will be." The words were a promise, a truth, the dawning hope of future closure, as I gathered the girl close and hugged her to my chest. A shudder racked Mission's frame, and I knew she was holding back the same tears that were burning at my eyes.

"Promise me you'll do more than just survive."
When I struggled to view events beyond my own grief, it was simply amazing to consider the changes Revan had wrought in us all. Jolee, now free from decades of self-imposed exile. Zaalbar, even in death – his past redeemed, his corrupt brother overthrown. Juhani once more a Jedi of honour returned to the fold. Canderous, purpose renewed, reborn as the Mandalorian commander he once had been. Bastila-Bastila who, in a sense, had been the key to everything. In the beginning and at the end.

And the kids. My kids. Mission had once been just a street kid, with nothing to her name but an exiled Wookiee and a dubious affiliation with a shady swoop gang. Now, despite her losses, she had the opportunity for- well, for anything, really. And Dustil – not only alive, but also strong and powerful, making his own decisions – right or wrong – and I couldn't be any prouder of the man he was growing up to be.

Revan had changed us all.

Before the Endar Spire, my entire life had narrowed to a tunnel vision of war and retribution. I hadn't thought I'd had a heart left to give, nor would I have believed I could go through the same sort of grief a second time – and come out whole on the other side.

But, perhaps, Revan's biggest gift to me was exactly that. The strength to love again.

The ability to close my eyes and think on Morgana with a smile that was more fond than grieving, and know that one day the same would be true for Revan.

xXx

Malak Devari:
Peragus Mining Facility, Peragus Asteroid Field, Xappyh sector

The Force twined deep into everything. From the largest leviathans of sentient life down to the intricacies of the atoms themselves. Such a truth I had always known, but seeing that truth from the infinite was something else entirely.

The Force was awesome. Magnificent. And I waded through it, a lost spectre, able to conceptualize the beauty and the power of the Force, but incapable of influencing anything from this side of the veil.

For I was no more than an eddy of the past, unable to release my consciousness and dissipate into the stream of life as sentients of all types normally did upon death. Instead, I remained a transient echo of a man who had once grasped the galaxy by the throat, even if only for a short time.

So I wandered, unseen, past the glyphs of living prisoners with souls of grey, and their guards who flared a red righteousness of energy. Fascinating, how even nulls flickered on the fabric of the Force, but on such a minute scale as to seem truly insignificant. Of course, I had known that the spark of the Force existed in all living matter, but to envision it on such a minute scale-

It made me long to see a true Force sensitive burn in front of me. To know what I would have looked like, before Revan had taken to my heart with a shard of glass.

I knew why I was here. The anger, the desire for control, my underlying drive for vengeance – none of that had dispersed entirely. And yet, and yet…

…I could no longer ignore what had come before. We had been so great together, so powerful and true, before it had all turned so very dark.
I had once promised to always guard her back, no matter what would come, no matter what she wrestled with.

I had failed Revan as badly as she had failed herself.

For so much of my life, all I had desired was her. And now, even now, I could not let her go. I could almost... almost accept that she would stand alone, that I should have known she would in the end, that despite everything we had accomplished together, I was no equal to Revan Freeflight.

Perhaps I could have accepted that, had she not been caught in a limbo as futile as my own.

The nulls were cordoned into groups, like beasts of burden, sent into the bowels of a mined asteroid equipped only with flimsy face-masks and brittle tools. Sent to do the work of droids as penance for the sins of those who had led them.

Revan was quiet as she played the part of a subdued prisoner, but she was not defeated. I could not ascertain the emotions beneath her mask of composure, but defeat did not feature. I was sure of it.

So I stayed, and watched, as Revan lived and breathed through an existence far beneath her, scraping by in a mining station amongst so many of the insignificant lives who had once been the dirt-bugs of our Empire.

Oh, I knew why I was still here, but I did not know why Bastila was.

The young woman I had moulded and tortured and all but broken should have been able to let everything go and join with the Force, but she hadn't. Was it remorse at the fall I had pushed her into? Or a residual bitterness, directed at the Jedi who had manipulated her talents since childhood?

Or did she stay, like me, because of Revan?

Bastila did not acknowledge me, at first. I could not touch her on this plane, but she could see me as clearly as I could her. My taunts she ignored with a grace I hadn't expected. My comments on the fickle nature of the Force did nothing but tighten that prim mouth.

Of course, it would be the subject of Revan that finally had her speaking.

Revan could not see us, not here, not stripped of the Force the way she was. And it was on one day, as I stared sadly at Revan's back while she retreated into a sleep-cell, when Bastila finally responded.

"This is no place for her," I murmured, thinking on the nulls surrounding Revan. All muted points of light, like the outer embers of an asteroid field, held captive to the gravitational pull of a larger celestial body.

Considering Revan's captors were no more than paid Czerka officers equipped with blasters and shock-collar controllers, it seemed absurd that one such as she had been held for so long already.

"Why are you here, Malak?" Bastila clipped out. "Surely you can see that Revan's path is beyond your influence now."

I turned, slowly, to stare into a ghostly gaze that was devoid of any emotion whatsoever. I wondered idly whether Bastila hated me – and if she did not, as her impassive countenance seemed to suggest, where she had found that strength of character.

"There is something I must do," I returned, even if I was not sure exactly what that something entailed. Revan's fate, the Unknown Regions – the danger still called to me. Still strung a discordant
tune, thrumming unease in my soul.

"There is no must here – can you not see that now?" Bastila replied. She was a shimmering coalescence of energy at my side, staring thoughtfully at me. "Can you not feel it? Here, there is only the Force. You can find your peace here."

There was a generosity in her words that went well beyond anything I deserved. Or expected, given our history. "Revan has no allies left," I said slowly, eyeing over the shade of the woman I had tormented beneath my will. "I cannot read Revan's mind, but I can guess at her thoughts. The Unknown Regions will plague her. She will tiptoe down the same quest as before, but with no Force, no allies – no backup. The least I can do is watch over from afar."

"If this is about making amends-"

I laughed, turning away from her. "Call it restitution, if you must find a label to dignify my actions."

"Very well. You choose a lonely path, Malak."

Bastila did not speak to me again for some time.

I found myself receding into a pensive silence as I watched Revan from afar; as she spoke little to her bedfellows, other than that smirking man who kept seeking her out. The Force would flicker, and my consciousness would lapse out of existence before I became aware again – now staring at the same prison some days later, without any understanding of how much time had truly lapsed.

It was an odd existence, this ephemeral life flitting between the dead and the living, as if only the strength of my emotions kept me semi-corporeal.

I knew it was the uncertainty of Revan's future that kept me stranded here.

There had never truly been a time for us. Perhaps... perhaps if we had never been discovered. Perhaps if we'd remained on the streets of Talshion, effectively Force-blind, eking out a living worse than what Revan endured now. We might have been happy, regardless.

But fate had intervened in the shape of Jedi Master Karon Enova, and that fate then solidified into the Mandalorian Wars before dovetailing into darkness. At the end of it all, perhaps I could finally admit the underlying difference between Revan and I – the difference I had always known, even as far back as those desolate days on Talshion.

I would have damned the entire galaxy to see her happy. But Revan had always thought of the big picture first, and her lover second. That was what made her the better Jedi... and the better Sith.

When that truth became undeniable to me, I had desired instead to become ruler of the Sith – maybe as a retaliatory slap back in the face of the woman I had cut my own heart out for, or maybe simply as an outlet for my darker emotions.

But that destiny was not mine.

It might have been Revan's, but it was never mine.

"She is going to try again," Bastila murmured, honing my concentration back into focus. How long it had been since Bastila had last spoken, I could not tell. Time was a faithless master in this realm, as flighty and capricious as the Dark Side of the Force.

Revan was standing near an unmanned door, staring at it intently. One thin arm rose ever-so-slightly
from her side, as if she meant to manipulate the hatch controls into obedience – a trick she had learned far too easily back on Coruscant.

The Force had left Revan, the brightest star in the galaxy. Perhaps it was no more than the endless cycle of cause and effect, of some esoteric punishment meted out to one who had effected such devastation in her burning drive to save the galaxy.

Yet the Jedi Order had pushed Revan into a journey that had transformed her into something perhaps even mightier than the Jedi she had once been. Somehow, it didn't seem fair or right that the Force no longer sang to her.

What was Revan thinking, staying in this prison? Surely she could find a way to contact her allies, to remove herself from this place. I wondered, not for the first time, how much she recalled. How much was left, after the brain damage and the Jedi mind-screw that had been forced upon her.

Did Revan remember what we had found beyond the Outer Rim?

It had messed with our heads, all of us. I still did not believe the danger was imminent, but Revan had been convinced action was necessary. Maybe she had been correct. And if she was correct, then what would she do now?

There was no one nearby as Revan's hand lifted. I had seen her try twice, before, and the Force had utterly failed to respond.

The Force felt different to me now. So alive. An interconnected web of energy through all living things that I was acutely aware of, even if ghosts had no ability to interact with it.

I had never seen it like this when I was alive. Not in the serenity of a deep Jedi meditation, nor the wild throes of a Dark Side culmination of power. The Force now was simply staggering in its entirety. Even electricity at its basic level sparked along golden threads of energy, a culmination of many million particles all dancing to their own tune.

And, as Revan stared at the door, an intense look of concentration on her beloved face, I felt it.

The faintest swelling of power, the slightest shift in the movement of electrons running through the electronic mechanism that held her in.

It was not enough. Her brows lowered in resignation, and her hand dropped to her side.

"Did you see that?" I whispered in awe.

"Did I see what?" Bastila's enunciation was crisp and taut with ignorance. "She did not open the door, Malak."

Revan's expression resumed to a composed mask. She turned and walked away from me, as she always had – and always would.

"No," I conceded, but I cherished the triumph that swelled within me. "She did not succeed this time."

The Force. It's healing. It's returning to her.

"But she will, Bastila. The next time Revan tries, she will."

xXx
Chapter End Notes

Coming up next: A brief epilogue, and some author's notes. I can't imagine it will be too far away. So, if you have any questions, now is the time to ask!
An almost-million word count worth of thanks to kosiah for the beta.
Also, a shout-out to WildFire on ao3 for inspiring me on some facets of Sion's background.
Epilogue and Author's Notes

Epilogue

But now my voice is beginning to crack, and it is time for these old bones to have a rest.

What, you want more? You think this cannot be the end?

For some, perhaps, it was an ending. And for some, a beginning. For Revan herself? Ah, well, it was just another step in her story. A pause, before the rest followed.

I always did enjoy the journey in the middle myself. Like biting into a rose-apple pie, and sucking out the filling first. That's not to say the pastry itself isn't enjoyable – but the middle! Oh, that tart tang of fruit coupled with spices and dew-honey – that's the real treat.

You can't have a pie without pastry, though – and the pastry, really, is the foundation.

At the start of this, I mentioned that the Force has its favourites – but being so favoured comes with its own challenges. The Force is in everything, after all: a child's laughter, a storm's tempest, the scent of home wafting idly on a warm summer's breeze. Some say the peak of emotion is where the Force truly sparks alive – for what is living without embracing all that we feel?

Ah, yes, I know well the doctrine of the Jedi – that transcendence above such sentient folly is the key to the heart of the Force. But to me, rather, it is the acceptance of our foibles that carries the greater understanding. We all contain light and dark within us – just as we are all moulded by our pasts – and from this self-awareness our actions carry the greater shape of the person we truly are.

Actions, I said. Plural. For as Revan herself came to understand, a fall is not a single moment in time. Nor can redemption be attained in one conversation alone. Everyone is fallible – and no one is singularly without hope.

Revan understood that, when we finally left her in the desolate depths of a mining facility.

There are more challenges for her, of course, and more challenges for her friends and allies. Perhaps even the greatest battle the galaxy has ever seen. But I like to think this part of her journey was her defining triumph – the one where she reconciled with her past, her flaws and her failures, and refound her conviction to strive on and do what she must, without losing herself this time.

But I've rattled on long enough. I'm sure you have your own take on the events you have seen, so I'll leave you to ruminate on matters while I rest-

What? You want to know my name? Bah, what's in a name? Everything, some might say, especially those who had met Revan Freeflight. Nothing, others might riposte, having only known a wraith once named Jen Sahara.

You could call me the ghost who haunts the Enclave, I suppose. For I am merely the story-teller here, sharing the visions of others who touched the galaxy.

If you come back tomorrow, I might just continue on. For there is more to Revan's story. Of course there is.

Maybe even another whole pie's worth, if you're lucky.
Author's Note:

And thus, this story arc is at an end.

And it's screaming out for a sequel. Will I write it? If I did, it would be "inspired" by KotOR 2 rather than "based on". Certainly, Revan would be a, if not the, main character, along with the usual suspects of Carth, Yudan, Canderous, Juhani, Mission, Meetra, Atton, Kreia and her Masters of Pain and Hunger – plus additional KotOR 2 characters. And with the less-common characters, such as Mekel, Dustil, Vima, Dak, Yulene, Yuthura, and more.

It might even answer some of the less obvious questions. Such as, why did Malak's mother and Revan's mother both land on Talshion? What truly happened to Malak's half-brother? What was Morgana Onasi's backstory, and what were her parents running from? Will Selene escape Korriban unscathed? Will Revan encounter Vima Sunrider, the only one left alive who played a direct part in her mind-reconstruction, and who is also, incidentally, her cousin? Will Griff Vao escape prison and seek out his sister? Will the Force return to Mekel, and if it does – will there be any vestige of Force-bond left?

Will Mission Vao ever take up competitive swoop racing?

I imagine a sequel would be a proper completion of Revan's story. (Without the lead-in to SWtO-R. I do not like canon-Revan's end, and would not follow that path).

But I started this saga back up in 2016 with the purpose of practicing writing – to then try my hand at something original – so part of me believes I need to try that first. I am honestly unsure, as my heart is firmly in the KotOR world. So, I can't promise I'll return to write the sequel – but I may. Time will tell! So stick me on author alert if you're interested in a sequel and we'll see what the future holds.

I hope the ending is open enough for all readers to imagine the reunions and challenges and end-game to come.

I have some ideas for other stories, both in this 'verse or different KotOR AU's – I've put them in my profile/bio page. Let me know if you have any comments on them, I'd love to hear.

A few notes –

"Happy" Endings:
For those disappointed that Revan didn't get a "happy" ending, at least for a year or two, well… I would have liked to have given her that, with Carth. But Carth is a military man, and his time with Revan has healed him – as it has her. Realistically, I do not see how Revan could live peaceably in the Republic at this moment in time, except as a secret life – and that would have clashed with Carth's military career. He may have sorted his priorities out, (I can certainly see that he'll be putting Dustil before his career now), but I don't see him giving up the Republic.

And I don't see the Republic forgiving Revan. At least, not yet. Sorry, but the LS ending of the game just seemed a bit forced – a bit too early, for me. (Let's forget everything Revan has
done that actually caused Lehon/Malak/the war, and instead label her a hero of the Republic! Let's give her a medal! I would like to say that I do love happy endings, I am a sap, but I have to believe the ending as well.

At the close of it all, I don't believe Revan is in a bad place, right now. As she noted, she finally has time to process – without imminent danger, and also without the inherent dangers of the Force. This is important, I think, for her well-being. Time to think things through, without even the Force itself to muddy things in her head. She'll need that, because the threat still lurks.

What is also important is Malak's final observation.

**The GenoHaradan:**
I loved the concept of a shadowy assassination order pulling the strings of governments in the background. Wasn't too keen on their overseers, though. E.g. Hulas: too accessible. Rulan: too geographically remote. I didn't like the game plot of kill-all-the-overseers-and-take-over either - that seemed unrealistic. More appropriate to a bounty hunter group than the influential organization the GenoHaradan had evolved into. So hence in my world: Hulas became a front, a recruiter, and Rulan a retired Overseer. Eridius/Gaalin/Ajax are all OC.

**Mando’a:**
The language of the Mando'ade, Mando'a (both referred to as Mandalorian by outsiders) is well documented online – however a list of words used throughout this saga can be found in chapter one, including the constructs I created for the purposes of my story.

**Kreia / Arren Kae:**
Although it's not quite canon for Kreia to have been Arren Kae in the past, this plotline has not been denied by Kreia's creator (I think he labelled it as "interesting", although correct me if I'm wrong). The coincidences in KotOR 2 certainly grant it possibility. That makes for a fascinating backdrop for untapped storylines in KotOR 2, given exactly who Arren Kae's daughter is. Canonically, Kreia admits to chafing beneath Jedi principles as well as delivering philosophies that border on seditious. But if one follows the fanon-favourite arc of her being Arren Kae, then pregnancy was the reason she was kicked out of the Order. I wonder if that was purely the catalyst.
One last note: canonically Kreia taught Revan during Revan's time as a Jedi. As I had already established Revan's master prior to KotOR 2 being released, Kreia instead became Revan's secret advisor during the Mandalorian Wars. I imagine there would be much to unveil in a sequel.

**Revanchist/Revanchism:**
I gave a brief nod to this piece of canon with Malak's definition in chapter 83. It's a piece of canon I don't like, probably because I came into the fandom in 2004 with the game, when Revan was the name of a character that had absolutely nothing to do with a French military term. To me it feels contrived (and not Star Wars-ish) that at a later stage it was decided to use this French term as Revan's title. My biggest issue with it is the meaning. Revanche is revenge, revanchism is the act of payback / revenge in a military sense. This is not why Revan and Malak and all the Jedi who followed them entered in the Mandalorian Wars. They entered as protectors, guardians, to save the Republic and expel the Mandalorians. The fundamental drive was protectionism. I suppose one could argue that it was a concept to boost morale
amongst the Republic, but I also see the meaning as being the antithesis of a Jedi – and Revan was still a Jedi in his/her heart during the start of the Mandalorian Wars.

Malak's real name:
Yeah, don't like that either. Looks like someone head-planted a keyboard.

Nomis Sunrider/Ulic Qel-Droma/Vima Sunrider:
Canon says Ulic Qel-Droma died on Rhen Var from a blaster bolt, after training Vima and meeting Nomis again. In my 'verse he didn't stay on Rhen Var, but instead travelled to Talshion – it is no coincidence he ran into Nayama there. Neither was it a coincidence that Malak and his half-brother were there – this was all fallout from Exar Kun. Maybe one day I'll write that prequel.

Fun fact: Ulic Qel-Droma and Nomis Sunrider both died of septic lung disease, on the same day, on opposite sides of the galaxy. Perhaps Vima was right in her supposition of it being a shattered heart, or hearts, finally failing.

The Jedi Thirteen / Revan's Guard of Twelve:
This is my AU take on what canon calls the Jedi Crusaders (or the Revanchists). The most powerful of the Jedi who followed Revan, and who later became her commanders. Certainly there were more than just 13, but these Jedi were the vanguard, the heroes, the leaders that the galactic holo-news centred on. The names Nisotsa, Cariaga Sin, Talvon Esan and Xaset Terep are from a cut-scene in KotOR 2, being Jedi Knights that Malak recruited (according to canon). The other members of the Jedi Thirteen are all OC (excepting Meetra, of course).

siblings:
In canon, Atris has no surname and is not related to Meetra Surik. But there's an obvious bitterness between Atris and the Exile in KotOR 2 – even suggestions of a romantic link if you play Male!Exile. I liked the idea of a familial bond as a reason for that bitterness.
In canon, Nayama has no surname and is not related to Nomis Sunrider (nee Da-Boda). Without a history for Nayama, I had free rein to make one up.... And her history is crucial to the past and what went down during the time of Exar Kun. This will likely be expanded on in the sequel (or prequel) that I may or may not write.

Malachor V / The Sith Triumverate:
The battle at Malachor V is pivotal to Revan and the galaxy at large, but it feels even more pivotal in KotOR 2 – this was the epochal event that caused the Exile to lose the Force – and also created Darth Nihilus. Given the importance of Malachor, and the running theme of "Wounds in the Force" (Exile, Sion, Nihilus) in KotOR 2, it makes sense to me that Darth Sion was also heavily involved at Malachor (even if canon only places the Exile and Nihilus there). Also, depending on your take of things playing a female Exile, there's some creepy romantic vibes coming from Darth Sion when you face him. Hence my history of Xaset Terep as one of the Jedi Thirteen, at the centre of Malachor, also losing the Force – and as Meetra's lover.
This would be a major subplot if I write the sequel, and even I'm not sure how it would play out yet.

Thanks:
I will take a moment to thank everyone who has ever reviewed, favourited, followed or simply read this incredibly long piece of work. It looks like I'll get annoyingly close to 1k reviews, but
probably won't hit that mark, dammit. As freshdoge observed, I'll be as close to a thousand reviews as I am to a million words. I suppose a strike rate of one review per 1,000 words isn't too bad, right?

Thanks for the reviews. Every review had brightened my day. To my regular reviewers, double-thanks – and triple it for those who write long reviews with their thoughts, speculations etc.

A nod to Curtis who, back in 2004, helped me with the formation of chapters 25 and 41 – the first two HK-47 chapters. Without that, there would never have been an HK-47 POV, and that foundation allowed me to expand and build upon everybody's favourite assassination droid in later chapters.

A billion thanks to my wonderful beta kosiah. Undoubtedly there are elements in this story that have been inspired by her masterpiece Memory. Her betas and ideas and willingness to let me bounce ideas off her have helped tremendously, particularly as I returned to this story after a decade's break.

And, finally, thanks to my long-suffering and supportive SO, who continually puts up with me rabbiting on about Star Wars, and whose grammar and comma placement eclipse mine.

I hope everyone reading this enjoyed it as much as I enjoyed writing it.

From now on I will PM any review that comes my way. As for anonymous reviewers – let me thank you in advance for any review you leave. Us fanfiction writers may not write for the reviews, but there's no denying we love to get them. It's so gratifying to know people out there are reading our work.

If you have any questions, drop me a PM! (Or review. Hahaha). I would love to hear from you, even if it is months or years after this story has been completed.

And, now, I will finally go and flick that completed switch on this story with – surprisingly – a bit of a heavy heart.

Thank you, all.

-ether

xXx

Please [drop by the archive and comment](https://www.fanfiction.net) to let the author know if you enjoyed their work!