Forget Me, Remember Voss

Summary

Rey'elle, formerly Cipher Nine, had thought all her trials behind her but is now haunted by a mission from her past. Her marriage to the Voss, Phi-Ton and the subsequent Rite of Ardor have unforeseen consequences and old enemies come forth to put her life and the lives of her crew in danger.

Notes

All disclaimers apply. My thanks to Bioware and EA for letting me expand upon their universe.
Phi-ton sat in a corner of the tea house deep in thought. He had the dream again last night and he could not get it out of his head. She was there again, she was always there and the image haunted him more than he could express.

"Why did you have to come to my world? Why did you have to make me love you? Why did you leave and where are you now?", he muttered under his breath.

He did not notice his sister Yana-ton walk over to his table until she reached out to refill his cup.

"What troubles you Phi-ton? Is it the dream again?"

He slowly nodded his head lowering his eyes as if he could not bear to look at her.

"The dream is not a Mystic's dream, Phi, nor is it a vision and it has no meaning. It cannot be interpreted and does not serve Voss. It is merely a remnant of something best forgotten. Can you not let it and her go?"

He raised his eyes finally to look at her. "I would rip this memory from my mind if I could, but it is not just of the mind. My hands remember, my lips remember, my whole body remembers. You know how this works with us, Yana. It was a feeling so profound and intense that I wanted to weep. It binds us forever, me to her and her to me and I fear that I will never feel that way again in my lifetime."

Phi-ton again lowered his gaze.

"We Voss, are taught responsibility first. Responsibility to Voss, to family to tradition and faith. We are taught to retain dignity in all situations and to suppress our passions until the ritual of Ardor after marriage. She released those passions in me as no woman of Voss ever could," he said almost bitterly.

Yana-ton asked carefully, "How can you be sure?" You have never been with a woman of Voss."

"I just know," he sighed. "I just know."

"You could request that the Mystics break the marriage. You could go to the shrine and ask for the healing and perhaps you would be free to have another wife and maybe children? Surely this is something you would desire, is it not, Phi?" Yana inquired.

Phi-ton countered, "and what? Lose the special dispensation given to the family by the Three? Upon her request, I might add. Uncle would no longer be able to teach, you would no longer be able to greet and converse with outsiders. Our family has been elevated to a better station due to our union and we would revert to lowly tea house owners again. I could never do that to you or Uncle Therod. Besides, there is no guarantee that the healing would even work. Not for her, not for me. I desire only her, always her so the battle is already lost."
He shoved himself up from the table, almost knocking over the tea cup. "I have to get some air. I feel like I am suffocating."

He turned to Yana-ton slowly as he walked toward the door, "It has already begun. The bond is there, she now dreams of me. I can feel it."

Rey’elle stood gazing out the front window of the cockpit, her back rigid and expression blank, deep in her own counsel. Vector Hyluss walked up behind her quietly and wrapped his arms around her waist, laying his chin on the top of her head. She briefly started then leaned back into his body with a heavy sigh.

“Where are your thoughts, my love? You seem so far away of late. Tell us what troubles you so that we may share your burden,” he said softly.

She turned to face him, never breaking the circle of his embrace and raised her face to place a soft kiss on his mouth. She pulled back slightly to stare into his eyes, his wonderfully bottomless eyes and suddenly saw a myriad of orange and red and yellow swirls whirling so fast it made her dizzy. She closed her eyes and felt his strength steady her until the spinning stopped and her hammering heart had time to slow. She breathed deeply and leaned against his chest.

“Your aura changes now, we notice a slight dimming around the edges and we are concerned. We have never seen you affected in this way and will stand with you no matter what but require understanding as to this odd malady. We know about the dreams that wake you up in the night and that they are coming more frequently and sometimes feel that we are losing some part of you that we will never get back. Please, let us help”, he implored.

Rey’elle’s thoughts churned in her head:

_How could she tell him that she had not been the same since sharing Ardor with Phi-ton on Voss? The marriage was necessary to complete the mission and Vector had even encouraged it. Seduction had been part of her training, sex was just another tool to be used until she met Vector. Love changed all that. She had not even looked at another man until that night on Voss._

_Vector knew she would use all the tools at her disposal and this was necessary because the mission was too important. She was the first outsider to bed a Voss as far as she knew and she had selfishly wanted the experience. She could have said no, but it was only one night, what was the harm? If anything, Vector had only seemed curious and jealousy was unheard of in the nest. But this was not something she could share with him, not now, not ever. It felt too much like a betrayal. This was a mistake she could never undo and it was tearing her apart._

“It is just the old nightmares about Watcher-X and all the mind control. Sometimes I can see Hunter’s face again, or hear Watcher-X’s voice. They will fade in time I am sure, do not concern yourself, this is a demon I must fight on my own,” she said softly.

“You will tell us when you are ready and we offer support and love until this passes. But we also know that the frost of your aura is less crisp now and the spices are slightly bitter. We are yours, always,” he whispered against her hair as he held her close.
She was talking to Vector about something and he suddenly swept her into his arms and carried her to their bed. He undressed her tenderly, fingers lingering deliciously, lips touching skin and then he slowly started to change. His hair faded away to become stripes of teal and blue, white and orange against a bare scalp. His eyes changed from deep black to multiple lenses of red, orange and yellow and the tongue licking his lips changed from pink to deep blue. Then the sound began and she felt the vibrations hammering against her flesh, surrounding her body, entering her, cradling her as she fell. She never wanted to stop falling.

Rey’elle awoke with such a jolt she sat upright in bed and shivered from the chill of the sweat against her skin. She glanced sideways at Vector who was still breathing deeply in sleep. She slipped on her robe and padded barefoot down the hallway to the cockpit, she wanted to see the stars, she had to see the stars and think and remember.

The mission had sent her to Voss as part of the ongoing hunt for the Star Cabal and her contact was the owner of a tea house in Voss-ka named Bas-ton. She discovered on the day of their meeting that he was an imperial agent surgically and genetically altered to insert into an unaware Voss society. The original Bas-ton’s body had likely turned to dust in an unmarked grave and his son Phi-ton and daughter Yana-ton were unaware of the imposter in their midst.

Bas-ton had assisted her in the investigation into the Shining Man and gave his life in this endeavor, thus diverting her mission toward entering the Nightmare Lands which necessitated the viewing of some sacred carvings. The rub? Only Voss could see the carvings and she had to become Voss and the only way was via marriage into a Voss family. Therod-ton offered his nephew Phi-ton as husband, and that is where it all started to go wrong.

She had not intended the marriage to go beyond the initial ceremony, but being a spy, her curiosity got the better of her judgement and she agreed to complete the ceremony with the Rite of Ardor. Voss passions are suppressed until marriage when passions are awakened and intensified. An understatement in hindsight.

The marriage ceremony had been quite simple. An exchange of vows, scrolls thrown into a sacred flame, the usual stuff. She remembered Vector was at the ceremony, standing like a sentinel, listening to the words. He seemed unaffected when she agreed to complete the Rite of Ardor and she had no idea what the outcome would be, and now it was too late.

As she and Phi-ton walked back to the tea house from the temple she recalled the wedding kiss and she had to bring up the problem of Voss breath. It truly was awful due to some spice they used for cooking, Bas-ton had been correct in that observation.

“Phi-ton, this is a bit embarrassing, but you really must sweeten your mouth before we continue. I find the odor overwhelming and unpleasant and want this night to be perfect for both of us,” she said.

Phi-ton appeared to take no offense and went briefly off the path and returned with a small sprig of
greenish gray leaves. “Many outsiders have said the same if they sit close to us. This is entat-
vameer,” he said. “Or in your language, wind sorrow. It is not appealing to Voss, but for your sake I will chew some of the leaves.” He put a couple of the leaves into his mouth and chewed thoughtfully as they continued walking. When he bent to kiss her just outside the tea house door, she could have drowned in that scent. It was rain washed breezes and clean clear brooks and just a hint of cinnamon.

“Better?” he asked.

“Oh yes,” she replied as she pulled his head down for another kiss.

The bedroom above the tea house was small and intimate with a single light flickering on a table set against the left wall. A small desk and chair took up the space to the right and in the middle of the room was a single narrow bed. It seemed small and somehow inadequate but the floor was littered with various throw rugs in case they needed more room.

She could tell that Phi-ton was nervous as she led him gently to the bed and removed his boots and then his shirt. Her fingers traced the blue, teal and orange stripes that adorned his chest and back, and he shivered slightly under each touch. She pulled him to his feet and undid the fasteners of his trousers and pulled them slowly down to his ankles lifting each leg so he could step out of them. He had worn no undergarments under his wedding attire and all she could do was marvel at the pure wonder of his body.

“You are beautiful,” she said breathlessly.

She started to undress herself until he took her hands in his and simply said, “please allow me. If this is our only night together, I want to enjoy every nuance, every movement, every touch, taste and smell.”

He was gentle, pausing to press his lips against her shoulders, the nape of her neck the swell of her thigh. They stood there for a time and simply explored each other and when he finally lowered her to the narrow bed and settled himself on top of her, the sound began.

It started as a soft rumble in his chest and a low humming in his throat. The edges of his body seemed to blur and the stripes began to ripple and move in time to the rhythmic thrumming. He was dispersing and coalescing, expanding and contracting perfectly timed with the primal music emanating from deep inside. His back arched, his muscles tightened and still he undulated to the sound.

His eyes turned into whirling kaleidoscopes of orange, red and yellow. He was holding her with his hands, lifting her with his arms, entering and surrounding her with his essence, melting into her. The vibrating sound engulfed her, filled her, caressed her, brought her to ecstasy, ebbed and flowed, crescendoed and when she thought she could endure no more, started over again. They gorged on each other through the night until there was no more to give or take and the sound ebbed and died and his body was still and whole and she was completely sated and at peace.

“It will be daybreak soon,” he said in a low, slightly hoarse voice.

“I know”, she replied.

“Do you love the black eyed man?”, he asked.

“Yes. He is my home.” she answered.

He remained silent after that and she lay quietly in his arms until dawn broke through the open
window. She watched him dress in the morning light. Watched sunbeams dance along the lines of his form and play along the colors of his skin. He was a prism of absolute beauty. When he was clothed he stood by the door and watched her, not saying a word, his face and eyes expressionless.

Vector was sitting downstairs talking with Yana-ton and Therod-ton as she and Phi-ton came down the stairs. He looked up at her quizzically but said nothing except “good morning.”

The good byes were genial, formal if not a bit strained but she shrugged it off until Phi-ton grabbed her and kissed her deeply and she felt the smallest of rumbles begin in his chest.

“Remember”, he whispered in her ear.

She never spoke of any of this with Vector or even Kaliyo who probably would have understood better than anyone.

What had that damnable Voss done to her? She was like a spice addict wanting the next fix. The dreams would not leave her alone, the memories would not leave her alone, the longing would not go away. What the hell was she going to do?

She sat, hugging her knees, staring out at the stars and reliving it all over and over again. She never knew that Vector had been standing in the doorway watching and finally going back to lie awake in their bed.

‘Perhaps Lokin will know what to do’, thought Vector.
Chapter 3

Star Wars: The Old Republic

Forget Me, Remember Voss

Dr. Eckard Lokin sat at his computer terminal totally engrossed by the readouts flowing across the screen. He was unaware that Vector had entered until he heard someone clear their throat behind him.

“We require a few moments of your time, Dr. Lokin. It is important.”

“Of course my boy, come in. I was just running some simulations and can check the data later. So, what can I do for you?”

Vector walked further into the med bay and closed the door behind him.

“It is about Rey’elle. We have noticed changes in her in the past few months and are concerned. She is distracted, she hardly eats and she has dreams that awaken her night after night. She is not being truthful with us and deflects our inquires. Something is going on that she refuses to share and we are at a loss as to what we can do.”

“Hmm, yes I see. I have noticed some changes as well, but attributed them to what she has been through. The mind control, the torture, the dissolution of Imperial Intelligence and becoming a free agent. None of us know for sure if she still works solely for the Empire or if her loyalties are divided. It can be a stressful lifestyle.”

Vector frowned. “Her loyalties are not in question here Dr. Lokin. No. This goes beyond the profession or the state secrets she keeps. There is something gnawing away at her very essence and we see subtle changes in her aura. The edges are fraying and it is less bright. She functions, she works, she goes about her daily routine but it is like she is sleepwalking much of the time.”

“I see. Not to be intrusive, but what about your intimate moments?”

Vector seemed hesitant to reply at first but finally responded with a resigned sigh, “she is, hmm, how can we say this, engaged when we make love. We…. I, have learned where she likes to be touched, kissed and know her moods whether playful, spontaneous or serious. Although, in truth, the playful or spontaneous encounters have become less frequent of late. Sometimes it is so intense, she is so intense it is like she is trying to devour us and always there is the feeling that she is waiting for something. We, do not know what it could be.”

Dr. Lokin rubbed his chin thoughtfully, “and when would you say this all began? Was it after Corellia and her capture and torture? That could explain some things. Or perhaps earlier when she discovered and finally broke the mind control? Perhaps some residual effect of having Watcher-X in her mind or maybe after she confronted that Jedi, Ardun Kothe? It could be some sort of new mind trick, I wouldn’t put it past a Jedi.”

Vector gave pause to think and finally said, “It was before Corellia and during the time of her mind control we were just starting to become close. We had only shared a kiss or two. We do not believe it was the confrontation with Ardun Kothe, although she let him live and we believe he does contact her from time to time. Hmph, loyalties indeed, now that we think on it, but that is beside the point,
we stand at her side no matter what. No, it was Voss, definitely Voss. She changed during the search there for information on the Shining Man.”

Vector continued, recounting what transpired on Voss. “We journeyed into the Nightmare Lands and into the Dark Heart where we confronted a Gormak, but it was before that.”

His eyes widened with the realization that it was after the marriage. “It was after she spent the night with that thrice damned Phi-ton! He did something to her, maybe drugged her. We don’t know.”

For the first time since the joining, Vector felt such a rush of anger and jealousy that he lost all sense of control. He slammed his fist down on one of the experiment tables so hard that he felt the pain reverberate up his arm. He heard the instruments metallic clank as they fell back into place. His chest was so tight he could hardly breathe, like he was drowning in some dark morass. He felt the hive recoil at this strong, new emotion and fought his way back to calmness for he could not lose the hive and he would not lose her.

“We are Dawn Herald”, he chanted over and over again until at last his vision cleared and he could breathe again. He reached out again to the hive and they were there with reassurance and comfort. His sense of relief and gratitude was immeasurable.

“So, now that you know, what do you intend to do about it?” Lokin queried.

“We are not sure, but it is a starting place and we need time to digest this revelation. We must move with care or run the risk of losing her entirely and that is something we could not bear, it would destroy us. For the first time… I consider murder but fear that would only fuel her destruction and mine. Thank you, my friend. Your counsel, as always, is invaluable and we can count on your discretion, yes?”

“Rest assured, my boy. And my assistance is at your disposal should you require it.”

The med bay door slid open and Kaliyo Djannis entered just as Vector rushed past her.

“Hey Vector. You look like you just swallowed a bug,” she jibed.

“Wow Lokie, I thought you were gonna have to go all rakghoul on his arse for a moment there. What’s with all the clatter and look at the size of that dent in your table.”

“What is it Kaliyo? I have some data to collate.”

“I just thought that you and bug boy would want to know that the Agent just got a private holo message and she is hell bent on something. Yep, we just jumped into hyperspace and I have no idea where we are going. Whatever is going on, she’s not sharing, with any of us, including her bed bug. She really has been off lately. Come on, spill what you know.”

“I wish I did know, Kaliyo. I truly wish I did.”
Chapter 4

Star Wars: The Old Republic

Forget Me, Remember Voss

Rey’ elle had been perusing information sent to her from what was left of imperial intelligence that also coincided with reports she had received from Ardun Kothe. There was a new player in town, remote worlds on the far edge of the outer rim were being attacked, but no one knew by whom. The attacks were few and random and the information was spotty at best. At last, some work she could throw herself into, something to keep her mind occupied.

She heard the chime of an incoming call on her private channel and opened up her handheld holo transmitter making sure the meeting room door was closed since it might be Ardun Kothe. Instead it was from Hoth and someone she had never expected to see again. “Aristocra Saganu, what a very pleasant surprise. It has been a long time. What warrants this communication?  Miss me or is this business?”

A familiar and handsome blue face became clearer, “Indeed I do miss you agent. Sadly this is business and not pleasure, more’s the pity. Do you know a Voss citizen by the name of Phi-ton by any chance? Voss is a bit off the beaten path, but evidently someone has linked you with this man. Are you feeling well, you look a bit….. tired.”

Her heart skipped a beat at the mention of Phi-ton’s name, and a dread started to grow in the pit of her stomach. “I am fine. Yes, I know him. We have had some, umm, dealings, so to speak. What is this all about, Saganu?”

Saganu’s voice took on a more foreboding tone, “Well, there is evidently a contract out on this Phi-ton. A well placed sniper, a single shot, does not bode well for your friend and it seems that someone wants you on Hoth. A Devaronian by the name of Fentis Kel has delivered, via holo, the information on the bounty as well as an ultimatum for you. Be at the travel beacon on Highmount road by noon in four days and come alone or the ‘blue boy’ dies. Rather cryptic and menacing to say the least. Oddly I thought that only Chiss were referred to as ‘blue boys’, I stand corrected.

“Whoever this is knows your present location since they are so exacting on travel time and also knows about your connection to me since I was the contact. Only someone high up in the imperial echelon would be privy to such information.

"Anyway, we have no leads on the sniper and no leads on who is behind this although I have contacts working on it. Personally, I would prefer this ‘blue boy’ die and let the threat be over, however, if you feel compelled to comply, do be careful. This reeks of a trap, Rey’ elle. I just hope you are close enough to make the jump in the allotted time or your friend may not see the fifth sunrise. Remember, they are using Hoth time so take that into account. Do take care, Saganu out.”

She felt like she was trudging through mud as she made her way to the cockpit. It was taking too long, too long. Her hands shook as she entered her personal nav lock code and the code for the Hoth hyperspace beacon and hit the jump button. She watched as the stars went from specks to streams of light as the Phantom burst into hyperspace. She set her chrono to Hoth time.

“Please don’t let me be too late, please keep him safe”, she prayed and didn’t even know who she
Vector strode into the cockpit like a man possessed. He grabbed her shoulders and spun her around to face him. He had never handled her this roughly before and he wanted to shake her but restrained himself. “Where are we going and why, Rey’elle? Answer us!”

She was so thin. The bones of her shoulders almost poked into his hands. He pulled her to him, “Please Rey’elle, let us in, let us help.”

She stiffened, “Don’t be so dramatic. This is imperial business, Vector. I have been summoned and I have to meet someone...important. The instructions are very exact. We are going to Hoth and when we arrive I will be taking a shuttle to the surface, alone. You knew what I was when you joined me and you cannot stand in the way of me fulfilling my obligations. Do not fight me on this, you will lose and do not think to follow me either, they would know and that could be bad for both of us.”

Vector stepped back as if he had been slapped and looked down into her face, she was hiding something. She had never been so curt with him but if it was indeed an imperial edict, he was duty bound not to interfere. Yet, there was something wrong about this. Why not Dromund Kaas? Why Hoth?

Rey’elle removed Vector’s hands from her shoulders and walked woodenly back to the meeting room where she sank into a chair. Vector followed at a distance but made no further attempt at contact. There was something more to this but he needed information so he turned to walk to the engine room that Scorpio had commandeered as her personal quarters.

Her back was turned to the door as he entered, “Yes Vector? Do you require something?”

He expected her to turn around, she did not. “We need to see the last communication Rey’elle received, Scorpio. Can you do that?”

“I am already working on it. She is very good at what she does and this may take some time. Leave now and let me work.”

The next three and a half days were both too long and too short and if Kaliyo said ‘brrr, it’s cold in here’ or ‘hey I think I can see my breath’ one more time when he and Rey’elle were in the same room, Vector swore he was going to wring her neck. He was usually very tolerant of Kaliyo, but his patience was drawing the short straw.

The ship he loved as home, their home, now felt derelict. He sometimes spoke with Lokin but mostly kept to himself. He communed with the nest for solace and only touched Rey’elle at night when she fell exhausted into bed and he held her close. She hardly spoke to anyone and there were the dreams, always the dreams.

Finally the ship dropped out of hyperspace in orbit around the stark, white planet of Hoth. A place he had once thought pure and beautiful was now barren and menacing. Raina was in the process of docking the ship in a hangar at the Adamas Spaceport and other than the comm chatter, the ship was deadly silent.

Rey’elle was in their room packing. She had hated to lie to Vector but he would have stopped her at any cost, even drugged her if he had to. She was finally starting to understand that there was something between her and Phi-ton so strong, so compelling that she would go to any lengths to save him. The thought of his dying was so unbearable she hurt down to her core. She did not love him, not like Vector, not in that sense, and if she made it out of this alive, she had to return to Voss. The
urge to return to him was undeniable and she had to know why.

She shouldered the backpack and started out the door looking down at her chrono. Ten hours to spare, good jump.

Vector stood in the doorway, his shoulders slumped, “Please reconsider and at least take Scorpio with you,“

She looked up at him and placed her hand on the side of his face. “We have already had this conversation and you know I can’t. When orders are given, I must follow them to the letter. I will be back soon and I do love you.”

She pushed past him and strode through the ship’s hallway and down the exit ramp, turning once to look at him before she headed to the shuttle to take her to whoever or whatever awaited on the frozen planet below.

Vector retreated back into the ship and headed to the meeting room and opened the intercom, “Scorpio, do you have that holo recording yet? Please tell us you have it and that it wasn’t deleted,“

The intercom light came on, “Just a little longer. I told you she is very good. Agent’s private channel should have been easier for me to break, but it is proving quite the challenge. If anything was deleted, there will be enough of an echo for me to reconstruct as nothing ever truly disappears on the holonet. I will let you know when I have it so do not interrupt me again. Note, the nav lock disengaged as soon as we arrived.“

It was getting close to noon, when the holo finally lit up with the recording and the image of Aristocra Saganu appeared. Kaliyo perked up, “Wow, he’s a looker.” Noting Vector’s face she shrugged, “Hey, I’ve had worse.”

Vector’s pulse quickened as the recorded holo from Saganu finished, his mind going to places he never wanted to imagine. ‘She is risking her life, she is risking us, she is risking it all, and for what? She lied to us. What hold does this Voss have on her? She is alone, we cannot protect her. Where is she now?’

He switched on the intercom, ”Raina, come to the meeting room please. You have had dealings with the Chiss here and we require your assistance. Hurry.”

Raina Temple entered the meeting room and sat down in front of the small holo terminal on the table, “So nice to finally be needed. Saganu, this is Raina Temple calling. Please answer. This is concerning your message to Cipher 9. Please respond.”

The Chiss’ face appeared and flashed a smile, “Ah, Ensign Temple, so good to see you again. So, this about my message to our favorite agent yes? How can I help you?”

“Saganu, this is Vector Hyluss. We have met before. Please tell us that Rey’ elle made it safely to Dorn Base and that you know where she is. Any information would be most welcome.”

“Ah, yes, Mr. Hyluss.” Saganu’s smile dissipated. “The agent arrived safely and promptly headed to Leth outpost shortly before dawn. She should make it to the Highmount road beacon sometime just before noon and has a good head start on you.”

“Please tell us you are having her followed.”

Saganu frowned, “Of course, however she is a clever one and she has disappeared from all surveillance. I do fear for her safety. I have already dispatched additional teams to find her, but so
far, nothing, not even at the beacon. I will let you know as soon as I hear anything at all. I hope she
finds shelter before nightfall. Saganu out.”

Everyone in the room jumped as Vectors fist slammed down on the table.

Kaliyo had reached automatically for her gun, “Dammit bug boy, stay out of my room if you are
going to start destroying every piece of furniture on the ship. I can’t believe she played the Imperial
card or that you fell for it. So what’s the plan?”

“We wait.”

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Rey’elle was at the meeting point crouched out of sight behind one of the huge pipes that fed heat
and power to bases all over this area from the nearby geothermal plant. Saganu’s men were good,
but she was better. A few miles back she had left the road, backtracked and then dropped below a
huge drift until she saw them go by then rode the speeder parallel to the road moving from drift to
drift. She had ditched the speeder some distance back. Hoth was an ice ball so she left no tracks
where she walked and she reached the beacon at fifteen til noon.

She was thankful that she had stopped long enough at Dorn Base to purchase the white, cold
weather gear she now wore. It offered camouflage as well as warmth. Her chrono said it was five
past noon and still nothing. She never heard the dart and only felt a slight sting on the back of her
neck before the world faded and she felt herself falling.

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Time passed with agonizing slowness and, at last, the ship’s holo fluttered to life. “Hello, are you
there? This is Saganu with a message for Vector Hyluss.”

Vector leaned forward in his chair, “We are here”

“Vector, I just got a message from that Fentis Krel fellow. No video. All he said was ’This
message is for Vector Hyluss, we have her. Bring the Voss to Hoth, be at the Highmount road
beacon in three and a half days or she dies, slowly. The two of you come alone.’ That was all he
said. Whoever orchestrated this is playing a sick game and she is the toy. I fear what she may suffer
before this is over and I will continue to search. Saganu out.”

Kaliyo’s voice seemed to come from a great distance. “Vector, snap out of it. Vector what do we do
now?”

He struggled to break through the fog in his brain, no time to shut down, no time to waste. He shook
his head and stood up. “This is not much of a plan, but it is all we have.”

“Kaliyo, Scorpio we need you to go to Hoth and find Saganu. Raina has coordinates for his base.
We expect you two to rescue her if possible or at least keep tabs on her whereabouts should she be
found. Scorpio you need to monitor communications, if anyone can find a hidden signal or anomaly
it is you and you are good in a fight. See if there are any clues to the identity of her abductor. Raina
and Lokin with us. We need to pick up a Voss and we have precious little time.”

“You are really leaving?” Kaliyo’s face had a look of disbelief. “What if this is a trick? Don’t you
want to just find her, kill things and bring her back?”

He exhaled slowly, “More than you can know Kaliyo but Phi-ton is a set target, and the message for
us left little to interpretation. This is personal against Rey’elle. The instructions are very specific and
it seems that Phi-ton and I have a part to play. We will not take the chance of calling a bluff that will likely get her killed. Thirty six hours there, thirty six back, expect us in 3 days. You all know what to do.”

He turned away from the crew and headed for the cockpit. Once Kaliyo and Scorpio had disembarked, he eased the Phantom out of the hanger and punched in the nav code for Voss, a planet he never wished to see again but held his life in its gravity nonetheless.
“Wake up Cipher. Time to wake up now.”

That voice, she knew that voice, but from where? Why did her head feel like she had just been butted by an angry reek and why was her mouth so dry and why was she so damned cold?

“Wake up Cipher. Open your eyes. It will hurt but just for a little while. Wake up….Now!”

Rey’ elle’s eyes fluttered open and she thought that the light would crack her skull. She immediately started to shut down again.

“Oh no you don’t. Stay awake. Open your eyes slowly, let them adjust, but lay still. They can’t know that you have come around yet.”

“Watcher X, is that you?” she murmured.

“Shh, I am in your head. No need to speak”

“Not thinking too straight yet. How are you here?”

“Spinal implants, remember? I was just hibernating but now you need me again. Aren’t you so very pleased?”

“Yeah, just what I needed. Voss dreams sending my life on a downward spiral and now a crazy ex watcher. Must be my lucky day.”

“No need to be insulting. How are the eyes?”

“Better, I can see shapes now and some sort of entrance. Bright light still hurts. Are those bars? Am I in some sort of cage? Hoth right? Yes, Hoth. Doesn’t hurt so much to think now.”

“Is she awake yet?” came a deep voice from across the room.

“He sounds imperial, maybe sith. Hard to tell. Do I know him?”

“Not yet, my Lord, I may have miscalculated her weight,” someone answered.

“Hmm, my lord. Definitely sith. This just keeps getting better.”

She heard the impatience in the voice, “Well wake her up then. It has been hours and it will be night soon. I really want to see the look on her face.”

She heard the second voice speak almost hesitantly, “Water should do the trick. A bucket full, if it don’t freeze before I get it over there.”

A tinge of anger in the first voice, “You idiot! I don’t want her to freeze to death. I need her alive. I would miss all the fun if she were to die now. Oh my, I almost forgot about the device. How silly of
me. Compliance and utility, such a handy tool. Ah, yes I sense….”

Her body convulsed uncontrollably. She tried to scream but couldn’t even manage a squeak and the pain could not be described. Thousands of tiny insects crawled along every nerve, biting and stinging as they went. She struggled to breathe and if she had ingested anything she would have been sick. It stopped as suddenly as it began.

He spoke almost cordially, “Are you awake yet, my dear? Please answer before I use this again, I really do not have much patience.”

“Y_yes,” she croaked.

The voice was thick as syrup, “Speak up, I can’t hear you.”

She clenched her teeth, “Yes, awake, what do you want?”

Her body convulsed again. Her vision swam and she felt like her spine would crack. It was over much quicker this time.

The clack of boot heels indicated he was pacing. “Tsk, tsk. Such attitude. I will ask the questions here, never forget who is in control. Oh, but where are my manners. You must be thirsty. Fentis, fetch Cipher 9 some water if you would.”

He knows me, how?

A small canteen was thrown through the bars of the cage. She managed to sit up and take a few sips hoping it was neither drugged or poisoned. Her body convulsed for the third time and she vomited the water back up again.

He chuckled, “Like I said, control. I think I have made my point. So good to see you again. I have some communications to attend to, enjoy the respite while it lasts.”

“Well, that was damned annoying and painful. Seems I have a slave collar on. You still there Watcher?”

“Yes Cipher. Just hope that collar doesn’t fry those implants. You will be truly alone if that happens. Do the exercise, scan the room, look for observation devices. Evaluate your prison, look for any weaknesses. Do you possess anything that can be used as a tool or weapon? How many people are in this room, could you disarm any of them? Are there any tricks to play that can get the collar removed. Can you survive the torture better than the elements? Rest now and preserve your strength, you will need it for what’s to come.”

It was almost too cold to rest. They had removed her outer coat and left only the thermal lining, which would hold in what little body heat she produced, but barely. It would keep her from freezing to death, but she would be far from comfortable and her hands were already numb even though they had left the thin thermal linings of the gloves. She would be lucky if she didn’t get frostbite or worse. After a time, her eyelids started to droop.

She did not know how long she dozed, it could not have been for long, but the dream had started, when the voice in her head interrupted.

“Cipher, you were dreaming. Such erotic imagery, if I may say so. Who is the blue striped man? Oh, your captor is returning.”

Rey’ elle heard the rustling of robes on the floor but he still stood back from the cage, “Well, Cipher
9. This day almost gone and where is your savior? Did he not get the message? Perhaps he is running late or we have you too well hidden. Perhaps he is not coming at all. Perhaps he is already dead. Ah, yes, some food. I hope dried tauntaun is alright. It is rather banal for my taste but should put some color back into those cheeks of yours. Were you able to keep some water down this time? A touchy stomach can be such a problem. Fentis, some repast for our guest, perhaps a little candlelight to set the mood?"

Suddenly her cell was awash with bright white light. She was blinded. She tried to shield her eyes with her hands.

“I will be leaving for the night. Hoth is so inhospitable after dark. Fentis throw her one of those vermin ridden bantha robes, I do want to be a proper host. Don’t forget, we have brunch plans tomorrow. Oh, and Fentis, I do not want her touched if you get my meaning. Good night Cipher, don’t let the bugs bite.”

His laughter was low and cruel. She heard the squeak of the cage door and something heavy was thrown atop her. It smelled musty and old, but it should be warm. The door creaked shut and the lock clicked into place. She searched around until she found the piece of tauntaun. It was salty and stringy but would keep her alive. She heard the taunting laughter of the guards, then she heard blast doors close in the distance. A bunker of some sort.

“What is that old saying Watcher? She who laughs last....”

“Eat what you can, Cipher, and drink. The body is the best place to store moisture. Turn your face from the light, sleep if you can and don’t dream, it drains you. One day down, how many more to go? You must survive, but, will he come for you in time? I wonder.”

“He will always come for me and he will kill them all.”

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Vector paced back and forth in the cockpit watching the chrono. He could swear that time was not moving at all and he hoped that one day someone would be brilliant enough to create instant travel between points in space. His mind raced back to her. She was still alive, he would know if she was dead, he would know. She had lied, never before had she spoken an untruth to him. Perhaps hidden things, but never right out...he started pacing again.

Raina looked up at him from her seat by the nav computer, “Vector, you are going to wear holes in the deck.”

He gazed down at her, “Then there will be holes. Standing still is worse.” He glanced back at the chrono and he could swear that time was laughing at him.

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“Cipher, he is back. Prepare, here he comes.”

Rey’elle rolled out from the center of the bantha hide she had doubled over to give her something to lay on as well as something to cover herself with. Thankfully the spotlight had been turned off. She was exhausted from the dreams as if she had not slept at all and it was so cold she shivered. Any body fat she had in reserve had long since melted away which made her feel that much colder and she could swear she felt things crawling through her hair. The blast doors were open, she could see light. It must be late morning.

She looked up to see a robed and hooded figure standing closer to the cage. He still wanted to stay
hidden. Why? What difference did it make now?

His tone was almost friendly, “Ah, my dear Cipher so glad to see you awake. Your night was pleasant? Were you comfortable? Warm? I assume you will need to use a refresher soon, yes? There is one here in the bunker, or should I just shove a bucket in there with you? Decisions, decisions. What, nothing to say? Should I give you some motivation?”, he raised the shock control. “But no, refresher first, shock later. Wouldn’t want to make a mess now would we?

“Fentis, come here and escort our guest to the refresher. Take two armed guards and if she makes a wrong move, shoot her in the leg, I don’t care which one, you choose. Oh, and leave the door open, wouldn’t want her to try and hurt herself now would we? I do worry for your safety, my dear girl.”

“What the hell did you do to this guy Cipher? He is not only trying to break you, but humiliate you too. Play his game, act cowed and wait your chance. He is having too much fun now to do anything drastic.”

“Like what, shoot me in the leg and show my naked arse to a bunch of goons? I can handle it, Watcher. It will take more than this to break me. But his voice is so familiar, he keeps his face hidden, why?”

The trip to the refresher was without incident, except for some leering eyes, well let them look. Nearing the cage on the return trip, Fentis pushed her so hard she lost her footing and then he tripped her. She fell face first into the bars and then to the ground dazed. Her body spasmed, snapping her head back onto the floor so hard she saw stars. The sizzle and snap of the collar loud in her ears, nerves on fire, she just lay there, unable to move when it stopped. Fentis took her by one arm and twisted then pulled so hard she heard her shoulder snap and she shrieked. He then threw her back inside the cage and she rolled to a stop by the bantha hide.

“Well, that was clumsy of you Cipher. You should be more careful or you will surely hurt yourself. I will leave you alone for a short time, but don’t worry I’ll be back. I wouldn’t want you to get lonely.”

Rey’ elle lay there stunned for what seemed like hours. Her face hurt and when she tried to lift her right hand to touch it, she cried out as a crushing pain rolled across her shoulder and down her arm. She used her left arm and hand to push herself up to a sitting position as her right arm was useless. She felt her face with her left hand, her right eye was already puffing up and her cheekbone was tender to the touch. She considered herself lucky that the fall had not broken her nose. She touched the back of her head and she had a nice bump, but no blood.

She looked around for the small canteen and finally spied it outside the cage, sitting just out of reach. “No water today then. So be it.”

“Watcher, I think might know him. Some sith from my past. It is not clear exactly, but he is definitely someone I know.”

“Cipher, don’t let him even think that you recognize him. He will hurt you more, it is his game after all. Play along for now. He will reveal it all before he is through with you.”

“Vector, I am here, find me please. Find me soon.” She pushed herself up onto her knees and using her one good arm, she crawled onto the bantha hide to wait.

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Vector stood in the cockpit. Watching the swirl of hyperspace rush past the window. His face was
Raina wrinkled her nose at him. “Vector, you really need some rest and a bath for my sake, if not for yours. I will let you know if anything happens.”

Lokin’s voice came from behind him, “You are becoming a bit ripe my boy and given my proclivities, it must be getting bad if even I notice. And you need rest. Whatever you need to do, get some sleep, you are no good for anyone this way.”

Vector inclined his head slightly to both of them and headed to the refresher. If the sonic could just remove all his fears as well as it scrubbed his body, he might consider it a miracle invention. He stepped out of the sonic and started to dress.

He had removed several items of clothing from his and Rey’elle’s cabin right before he left for Voss, then he had closed the door and not dared to enter since. He feared the memories would break him and he had no time to be broken.

He grabbed a blanket out of the crew quarters and headed to the cargo bay. There he opened his mind to the nest. They consoled him, quieted him and finally he lay down and let the song of the universe sing him into a deep but fitful sleep.

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Rey’elle must have dozed off. A metallic dragging sound woke her in the middle of the dream and she glanced up to see the robed and hooded figure sitting before her.

He leaned forward in the chair as if to get a closer look. ”My apologies for not returning sooner, I know how much you love my company. There is always something to attend to and a busy man never rests. Oh, but I did have such a wonderful lunch. Bantha steak covered with a delectable rodian pepper sauce, you should have been there.

“But, I know how much you must enjoy your free time. One can think so much better without distraction and imagination is such a wonderful thing. What can you imagine, Cipher? I can imagine such wonderful things where you are concerned, it almost makes me giddy with anticipation.

“What, no reply? You do have my permission to speak now. Huh, still nothing? Perhaps I can entice you to find your voice.”

Rey’elle’s body jerked, her eyes rolled back as she hit her head on the rear bars of the cage. She opened her mouth, but no sound came out. She sat there panting when it was over, her shoulder was on fire. She felt something warm trickle down the back of her neck.

The robed figure shook the controller, “Hmmm, still nothing, I wonder if this thing is defective somehow. Well never mind, we still have time. Not much though. Fentis, I need you to remove Cipher’s boots. I do worry after her tripping accident yesterday. Leave the socks though, if I want her to lose her feet, I will remove them myself. Don’t worry about being gentle.”

Reyelle watched as the door was unlocked and the huge Devaronian walked into the cage. She tried to back up but there was no where to go. Fentis reached down for one of her legs and she kicked out with her left foot barely grazing his chin. He smiled and rubbed his chin and seized her left ankle in a steel like grip and twisted so hard that she heard her knee pop as cartilage tore and separated and her knee cap shifted. She screamed.

She kicked out with her right leg and barely saw the fist coming toward her in time for her to turn her
head. She rocked backward and hit the bars again with the back of her head. She was so dazed she couldn’t move and she could feel her lips swelling and someone tugging on her feet.

She screamed again as her left boot was removed. Her vision swirled, she was all pain and she just sat there trying to clear her head and not move. Fentis kicked her leg as he got up to leave, she cried out and felt tears start to freeze on her face.

The laughter wafted to her, low and malicious, “Now there is the voice I wanted to hear. Absolutely beautiful. You have missed your calling, Cipher, you should have been a singer. Oh, goodness, do look at the time. I really have enjoyed the entertainment, but duty calls. Fentis, give her some water and food but cut the food ration in half. I do believe she has gained a few pounds since yesterday and we simply cannot let her get fat, now can we? Pleasant dreams, Cipher. Until tomorrow, then. And Fentis, lest you forget, no touching. Oh, and do remember to turn on the light, I believe Cipher is afraid of the dark.”

She heard the chair squeak and then the swishing of robes as he walked away. She heard the canteen hit the floor somewhere near but she could not move to reach it and heard the faint scrape of the dried tauntaun slide across the floor but didn’t care.

“Watcher? I don’t know if I will live through this. He is tearing my body apart by pieces, what do I do?”

“You survive, Cipher, if not for yourself, then for him. I can only keep you sane, you must do the rest. Night will be here soon, and over before you know it. Get some sleep if you can.”

The intercom burst to life with Raina’s voice. “We are almost there Vector. Wake up, only an hour now to Voss.”

He stood up slowly and stretched. He had to change into his armor before landing as he might need it before this day was through. He hoped not, and hoped so at the same time.
Chapter 6

Star Wars: The Old Republic

Forget Me, Remember Voss

It was the dream again and Phi-ton reached for her. He felt the silk of her skin, he tasted her lips he could see and feel his essence envelope and permeate every inch of her and like a replay of every dream before he saw the flames rise. They rose higher and engulfed both of them with a blaze so hot his blood boiled in his veins.

He burned and he wanted to burn forever with her, in her, around her. The rumble pounded in his chest, in his temples and he heard it all like an avalanche in the mountains. But this was wrong, something was wrong, the sound was all wrong. Where was that coming from? What was that voice? It was not her voice, it was too deep. The dream was ending too soon and his eyes opened to a world as empty as his life.

“Phi-ton, open this damned door before we break it down! Today, we are Dawn Herald and little else and you have put all that we hold dear in danger.”

Phi-ton wiped the sleep from his eyes, “Yes, Nal-cha, hold on, I am awake now and opening the door for you.”

Pulling on his trousers, Phi-ton walked calmly to the door and opened it to look down into the smoldering black depths of Vector Hyluss’ eyes.

Vector’s hand shot up to encircle Phi-ton’s neck and forced him back into the room.

“You defiled her, drugged her, poisoned her and you have the nerve to also insult us with one of your Voss profanities?”

Phi-ton’s arms swept upwards and broke Vector’s grip on his neck. “I was a commando, do not forget I know how to fight and Nal-cha simply means black eyes in the Voss language. Truth can never be an insult. What is this danger that you speak of, I would know. Where is Rey’ellle?”

“She is on Hoth,” said an aging, balding, grey haired man, who stood slightly behind Vector. “We know that she has been taken but we do not know by whom or why. There is much to discuss and using fisticuffs as the main discourse seems neither efficient nor productive.”

“Gather your belongs Phi-ton,” Vector practically spat his name at him. “You are leaving Voss with us and all the deities in the universe cannot help someone who tries to stop us.”

“I must get clearance from the Three to leave this place. It is not done, it has never been done except once with one known as the Bar’senthor. But Rey’elle is my wife and I will find a way.”

Vector bristled at his emphasis on the word my, as if she were property. “See that you do. Get dressed, we will accompany you. Somewhere a sniper lurks and she has sacrificed herself to save your miserable life. We would protect you as her fate rests with both of us returning to Hoth. Oh, and do not let the good doctor’s age fool you, he is far more dangerous than you know.”

Phi-ton pulled on his shirt and boots. “I hope my safety is important to you, for after we rescue her, if
I die, she will never be whole and that is something neither of us wants."

“We can discuss this on the ship so let’s not waste time with empty words. Now move.” Vector turned on his heel, strode down the steps and out of the tea house with Lokin flanking him and Phi-ton.

The three were not easily convinced but finally, after much deliberation, agreed to let Phi-ton leave Voss to intervene as protector of his wife. She was Voss, if only in name, and had left the planet some months ago. They found no cause to keep the husband bound from travel since she was his family and honor dictates that family should be protected at any cost except the security of Voss. The only caveat was that he must return to Voss because the fewer that encountered his race the better.

There was no sign of the sniper or any attempt made on Phi-ton’s life as they headed back to the tea house where Phi-ton packed his belongings. They made their way to the shuttle pad to return to the Space Station, again without incident.

Vector turned his head to look at Phi-ton as they walked to the hangar, “They have what they want and recalled the bounty. This is possibly a good sign for Rey’elle but we still fear for her life. Know this, Phi-ton, if she dies, so do you.”

“It would be a blessing Nal-cha. We must speak soon so that you fully understand.” Phi-ton replied as they entered the Phantom.

Vector glanced over his shoulder, “It is a thirty six hour trip back to Hoth so we will have plenty of time. Raina has been monitoring channels around the clock and has heard nothing so far from any of our contacts on Hoth. We...I would never have left, but our hand was forced. We have the feeling that both of us are very important to how this tragedy plays out. Follow me, you can stow your gear in the crew quarters and then we talk. Hopefully you have something worthwhile to say.”

“Hoth beacon locked in, Vector, prepare for jump. We are going to cut this close. We have wasted time here and if Dr. Lokin can spell me for a bit monitoring the channels, I could really use some sleep,” Raina called from the cockpit.

Vector walked into the meeting room with Phi-ton trailing. He lowered himself into a chair, and motioned to a chair across the table for Phi-ton to use. “Alright, Phi-ton, let’s hear it. Make us understand this hold you have on Rey’elle and this life or death bond that you share. It needs to be convincing.”

Phi-ton sank slowly into the seat and exhaled deeply. “You outsiders know nothing of Voss beyond tales of Mystic fortune tellers who see the future and are never wrong, you know nothing of our customs or rituals. Perhaps the Mystic’s foresight can be exploited or used, but nothing else has meaning or value.

“What did you think the marriage ceremony was all about? Did you think that sex with a Voss was just like sex with any other race or species? Seduction must be part of an agent's arsenal and curiosity can be a dangerous thing. Did you and she think that to marry a Voss, out of necessity, I might add, and then to bed a Voss would yield no consequences?

“You know how our healers heal, you have seen it. They syphon energy from other beings and hold this energy inside themselves to then dispense to the sick or wounded. Did you ever stop to think on this ritual in depth? It is the foundation of Ardor although healers are merely a vessel to hold and then channel the energy. They leave no residue of themselves behind.
The rite of Ardor releases all of our suppressed passions. All of the pent up energies suppressed, sometimes, for years. When Voss make love, as you call it, or partake of Ardor, as we call it, it creates a bond. We Voss essentially split during this rite. We are neither pure form nor pure energy. Our energy disperses around us and we enter each other as physical beings and also particles of what we are. There is a primal noise we create during this time, a sort of hum or rumble that also takes form as pure vibration and comes from the very depths of our being. It also enters and caresses, surrounds and titillates and is the center of our pleasure.

“Do you understand that I am in her blood as she is in mine? These minute traces of ourselves that we leave behind in each other go down to the cellular level and the dreams and cravings are enough to drive us mad with desire and longing. It is the two halves of ourselves calling out to each other, needing to be reunited.

“I thought she would decline the Ardor after the wedding and when she agreed I could not say no, because I already loved her. I had loved her from the moment she entered the tea house and desired her beyond reason. We are part of the very fiber of each other and I would not trade that night with her for any riches or status or even life itself.

“You see, Nal-cha, she loves you like no other, but she craves me, she is driven back to me always. It is as basic a need as air, food or water and is why she will forever be compelled to return to Voss and to me. These traces or particles of myself that are now in her cannot be denied any more than I can deny the particles of her that are in me. We must partake of Ardor and each other for the rest of our lives, to deny this would mean to wither and die over time.”

Vector sat for a long while, his eyes closed and fingers steepled under his chin. His struggle for self control almost a visible thing. Slowly his eyelids raised and his black, unreadable gaze locked with the orange, multi-faceted eyes staring back at him. He gripped the edge of the table like a vice.

“You selfish bastard! You knew and never warned her. You wanted to possess her, own her. We…..I could not do such a thing to her. She offered to become a joiner for us and we could never have asked that she expose herself to the pheromones. We love her for who she is and she never needed to change for us. You made her a joiner, for lack of a better term, without her knowledge or consent. Did you even know that she was already suffering? She was so thin, couldn’t sleep, barely ate and she was too ashamed to tell us of her need. We don’t think she even fully realized what was happening. Were you just going to let her fade away? Were you going to contact her at all before it was too late? And if you call us Nal-cha one more time we are going to strike you, very hard. The name is Vector, we are a warrior born of the Chrysalis and it might do us good to see you bleed.”

Phi-ton never flinched under the weight of Vector’s indictment, “She left so soon after the marriage that I did not even know if she had been affected and I only knew for sure when I felt the dreams had started for her. They are always the first sign and there is usually some time before the other symptoms manifest. I just did not know how far it had progressed. I had already started the communication thinking that I had time to word it correctly and didn’t realize that humans might have a lesser tolerance or feel the full effects sooner. Voss had never mingled with outsiders in that way before. I would never, knowingly, let her suffer so.”

Phi-ton dropped his gaze, “By the Mystics, what have I done? I do love her, Nal..., Vector. We must save her.”

“You had better pray that we do,” and Vector stormed out of the room.
Chapter 7

Star Wars: The Old Republic

Forget Me, Remember Voss

“Cipher. Can you hear me? Can you move?”

“I hurt all over. I don’t want to move. I’m not sure if I can move.”

“Cipher, you must try. You must see what strength remains in your body and soul. You are doomed if you do not. You must get up, now, move.”

Rey’elle gritted her teeth and started to inch her way out from under the bantha hide and could not recall how she got under the cover last night. Each tiny movement elicited a moan from her broken and swollen lips. She was panting and slick with sweat under the thermal liner by the time she made it to the cage bars, her hair stuck to her forehead and sides of her face. Her vision shifted back and forth from gray to black and her damaged knee and shoulder fluctuated from throbbing pain to agony.

“So cold, Watcher, so tired. Just want to sleep.”

“Yes, yes, Cipher. So sorry to hear. Go ahead and give up. Do you think anyone would care? Who could possibly care if they find your frozen corpse? Not anyone I know. Do you know anyone like that? Now get the hell up!”

She used her good hand to grasp onto the bars and with her right leg as leverage, she managed to scoot herself to a sitting position. It seemed to take hours and her energy was totally spent. She felt her hair start to freeze to her face.

“You happy now, you sadistic ass?”

“Not sure the term applies to me Cipher, considering the circumstances. Take a few minutes, then see if you can stand. Use the bars and your functioning leg to brace yourself.”

“I think I know how this is going to work, Mr. Obvious.”

“Then stop thinking about it and do it.”

Rey’elle let her breathing slow and her tired muscles relax. She looked around and saw the small piece of dried tauntaun she had not eaten the night before. She scooted over enough to grasp it quickly with her left hand and started to eat and felt some strength slowly return but the salt made her thirsty. She looked for the canteen but did not see it.

“No more delays Cipher.”

“Up yours, Watcher.”

Turning herself so that her injured leg was next to the bars, she attempted to pull herself up with her left arm enough to get her right leg under her in a kneeling position. She tried over and over again, with different positions, bracing herself with what working limbs she had, only to slump down time and again in failure.
“I don’t have the strength Watcher. This is futile.”

“Then you will face him sitting down instead of standing. It is better than on your knees, or on your belly.”

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Vector was sitting in the pilot’s seat when the communication came through. He had barred Phi-ton from entering the cockpit, the cargo hold and the room that he and Reyelle shared. It was safer for the Voss that way. He, personally, still avoided their cabin because he had no room for memories now, sentimentality was not his mission, distractions were not his purpose.

“Vector, Raina, come in please, this is Kaliyo. Come in please.”

Raina reached over to flip the two way button, “We hear you Kaliyo, what’s the news?”

A slightly staticy voice came through, “Scorpio seems to have found a hidden message on a carrier wave coming out of the Glacial Fissure. It was gone before she could triangulate, but if it opens again, she knows exactly what to listen for. We will have her location soon Vector. Hurry back. Kaliyo out.”

“How much longer Raina?”

“Approximately 24 hours and that is pushing the ship to the maximum, just in case you were going to ask for more speed. It is close to noon on Hoth and we will make it in time.”

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Reyelle was dreaming of Vector, except he had faceted orange eyes. Then Phi-ton appeared, but his eyes were solid black. Their faces began to melt and twist and meld into one until she could not tell one from the other. She jerked awake looking wildly around her.

She willed her heart to slow. She was so thirsty. She looked around for the canteen again finally spying the top sticking up from the other side of the bantha hide but did not think she could make it. Not yet anyway. Maybe later.

She watched the guards mill around the room. Some were moving crates, some standing by fire pits to warm themselves, a couple of them nearer her cage talking amongst themselves. About 15 total that she could see but no sign of Fentis.

For the first time she stopped to take stock of her surroundings. There were cameras in various areas around the bunker, including one very near her and aimed in her direction. There were blast doors at the far end, the door to the refresher to her right and two doors on the left wall, probably storage, galley and barracks. There was low lighting coming from the ceiling and the spotlight was slightly over to her left toward the front of her cage. Useless information, but it kept her mind occupied for a time.

“I told you to do this the first day you were here, Cipher.”

“You do not want to go there, Watcher.”

Judging by the light coming in the bunker doors, it was well past noon. Where was that Sith sonofabitch? He had never left her alone this long before. Maybe he had cut his own throat shaving with his lightsaber.
“At least your sense of humor is returning. A good sign.”

Vector walked toward the crew quarters. He needed to use the refresher and then he needed some caf and an energy bar. He never liked caf until he had moved onto the ship. It was her favorite beverage and he had often shared a cup with her in the mornings.

“Dammit Vector, stop it. You don’t have time for this. Mission first, snuggles later is what she used to say. He couldn’t believe he had just described her in past tense. Mission first, he had to stay focused, it was going to be a long trip.”

In the refresher he splashed water on his face and ran his fingers through his hair. He spied his reflection in the mirror. He needed a shave. No time, no time, what if Kaliyo called back.

As he passed by the galley on his way back to the cockpit he noticed Phi-ton inside evidently looking for something to eat. Vector crossed his arms and leaned against the door frame.

“We don’t have much to offer, no time for restock. Not sure how energy bars work with you people but that is about all we have. That and caf.”

Phi-ton turned around with a cup in his hand, “I will make due, I have not been able to eat much of late, with the dreams and all. Just looking for some hot water to make tea I brought with me.”

“Good for you.” Vector so very much wanted to jump across the counter and wipe the smugness off Phi-ton’s face.

Vector let a slight smile play across his face, seems like his human side was showing through a lot more of late. That was either going to be very good or very bad. He was even using more profanities than usual and rather liked it. Diplomacy be damned.

“So, tell us Phi-ton, this mysterious bond between Rey’elle and you, can it be broken at all and if so how?”

“There is nothing mysterious about it at all, Vector. It is simply the natural state of things, on Voss. Yes, it can be broken at the shrine of healing, but the ritual does not always work especially if that person’s deepest desire is opposed to what the ritual is trying to accomplish. It can actually block the cleansing. I suppose we’ll find out what her true desire is once she is safe, I already know what mine is.”

“Your desires count for nothing.”

Yes, this was definitely going to come to blows before everything was finished. He turned and walked back to the cockpit. No distractions, he reminded himself, he would get caf later, when the galley was empty.

She was still studying her surroundings when she saw two figures outlined in the light of the open blast door. As they came closer she could not mistake the tall robed and hooded figure or the devaronian, Fentis. They stopped just short of her cage.

“My dear Cipher, so good to see you up and about. I see the knee is swelling nicely, must be very uncomfortable. How’s the shoulder? Still nothing to say?” He raised the controller.
“No, wait. Who are you? Why am I here?”

He put his hand to his chest and leaned his upper body back as if in surprise. “She speaks, I feel so privileged. An unknown tormentor is so much more menacing don’t you think? The speculation and dread are powerful tools. As to the other, you will know soon enough, the time is almost here.”

“Time for what? Why don’t you just kill me and get it over with?”

“That was quite the display of determination I saw earlier.” He completely ignored her questions and nodded toward the camera aimed at her cage. “You are never out of my sight. I can savor every display of torment that crosses your face, when you move, when you crawl. To kill you would ruin the game and there are other pieces still in play that have not entered the arena yet. I am still waiting for them to return.”

“Vector and Phi-ton. But why?”

“To see your world crumble, Cipher, that is why. Surely you have made many enemies in your years in Intelligence, but which one am I? The suspense must be killing you, so to speak. Fentis, help our guest to the refresher if you will.”

She grabbed onto the cage bar with her left hand and braced herself. “I don’t need to…."

The cage door opened and Fentis slowly walked in. Looking down at her, he grabbed for her left ankle. She kicked out with her right foot knocking his hand away. He doubled up his fist and hit her in her injured and swollen knee and her entire leg exploded into such pure agony that she couldn’t find her voice to scream. Her vision whirled in eddies of red, gray and black.

She started to slump over and Fentis took hold of her right arm to pull her upright again. A soft hiss escaped her lips as she whipped her head to the side and bit into his gloved hand. He chuckled softly and grabbed a handful of her hair and slammed her skull back into the bars. She fell into the blackness and saw only Vector’s eyes before she saw nothing at all.

“Fentis, now my time with her is cut shorter than I wanted. She was just starting to show spirit and now you have ruined it. Oh, well I doubt she could have managed the refresher by herself anyway.”

One of the guards mumbled, “I would have helped her.” There was light laughter from his partner. Suddenly he seemed to levitate, legs dangling, feet kicking, fingers clawing at his throat as if trying to remove invisible hands. There was a faint snap and he was still, his body fell to the floor in a heap. There was no noise in the bunker except the sound of the wind from outside and the crackle of fire in the fire pits.

“Leave him there, Fentis as a warning to the others and leave some food and water for her. Tomorrow is a big day and I can watch her from more comfortable quarters. It is late and there are preparations to make. Do cover her up, I doubt she will have the strength to do it herself, and I would be most displeased if she should expire during the night.”

The robed figure turned to leave, sauntering slowly by the guards who gave him a clear path.

Fentis entered the cage to leave the food and water and threw the bantha hide over her. Almost like an afterthought, he turned and kicked her prone figure as he was leaving. He heard a satisfying crack, smiled and exited, locking the door behind him.

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Vector spent most of the last hours of the flight in the cargo bay communing with the nest. He tried
to make them understand that he might have to walk outside of the comfort of the joining for a time and his autonomy as Dawn Herald would permit this. The nest did not understand the emotions of heartbreak, rage, jealousy or fear. The hive could be vicious if called for but not cruel by intent. They felt loss as a lessening of the whole, like when Daizanna was killed, but not gut wrenching personal grief. He would need the strength of the nest in the days to come but he would also need to walk alone. The nest was concerned if not confused, but they would respect his wishes.

He looked at his vibrostaff leaning against the wall in the corner, the trident shaped blade at the top of the shaft gleamed dully in the light. The weapon had been forged for him by Killik craftsmen when he became Dawn Herald. It was perfectly balanced to his personal requirements with a vibrogenerator installed in the haft just below the blade and a counterweight in the opposite end of the shaft. The blade was durasteel covered with bonded cortosis weave and could repel blaster bolts and even lightsaber strikes and had saved him more than once. It was deadly and efficient if wielded by skilled hands. Armor, flesh and bone could do little to resist an onslaught.

He walked over and picked up the staff, feeling the familiar weight in his hands. Slowly he twirled the weapon in front of him, hearing the whoosh of the blade as it sliced the air. Still twirling the blade, he lifted it over his head and turned on his toes, extending the blade to one side, then the other.

He felt the ship drop out of hyperspace and his body almost jerked to a stop, the blade outstretched to one side, held by a single arm. He swung the blade over his shoulder and onto his back into the quick release clip on the special harness he wore.

It was time for retribution and blood.
Chapter 8

Star Wars: The Old Republic

Forget Me, Remember Voss

“Cipher, you have a visitor.”

“Leave me alone Watcher. I don’t care.”

Sometime during the night she had awakened and struggled to push the bantha hide off and was finally able to sit up, not only did her shoulder and knee ache, but her lower back was singing with pain also. Breathing was difficult and when she coughed there was blood in the spittle. She tried to take a deep breath but the stabbing sensation stopped her. She must have a broken rib.

She had found the canteen and taken a few sips then tried to look around but the spotlight prevented her from seeing anything even when she tried to shade her eyes. She crawled back under the bantha hide and wanted to get lost in the dreams. She secretly prayed she would never wake up.

“Cipher, he is close now.”

She heard the footsteps stop just outside the cage. She did not move, she could not move.

His voice was honey smooth, “Ah, Cipher. I am back as promised. It is a brand new day and what a glorious day it is. Did you miss me? I know you still live, I can sense it.”

He turned to the devaronian and then motioned toward one of the closest guards.. “Help Fentis get our dear agent to her feet and escort her outside the cage, I want to get a closer look at her.”

She heard the cage door unlock and felt the weight of the bantha hide lifted. She felt rough hands grasp her arms and yank her to her feet and cried out as her ruined shoulder and knee screamed. She felt bone grate in her lower back. Her vision clouded and she thought she was going to faint. They pulled her from the cage, legs dragging behind her, head hanging in front until she finally saw the bottom of the robes and the toes of black boots peeking out from underneath and they stopped.

“Fentis, she has one good leg, get it under her so that she can stand and look at me but support her so she does not fall. I have something to show her.”

Standing upright she looked into the face of her captor, her tormenter when he reached up and pushed the hood back from his face. Her eyes widened with recognition.

She was swaying slightly and she saw the red eyes follow her motion. “Darth Serevin? But why?”

He smiled amicably at her, “We meet again and I am so honored you remember me. You caused me a great deal of difficulty on Voss you know. I almost had them in the Empire’s pocket, almost had the Mystics and you had to interfere. Not only did you reveal the ancient ties of the Gormak and Voss, but you then requested a boon for your Voss family instead of asking for consideration for an Empire alliance. Did you not believe me when I said you had not heard the last of it? I warned you and evidently you did not take me seriously. Do you take me seriously now?

“In all my long service to the dark council this is the one stain, the one blight. You have humiliated
me, it seemed only fitting that I should return the favor. You almost cost me my closest ally, Darth Malgus, your blunder will cost you much more.”

He backhanded her so quickly across her left cheek that all she saw was a blur of motion. Her head snapped backwards and she felt a trickle of blood start down her face, if not for the guard and Fentis, she would have fallen.

He reached forward and grasped her by her chin, turning her face from side to side. “You do look lovely in black and purple Cipher and now both sides of your face will match. I do love symmetry. Don’t worry, the blood will freeze before a drop can reach the floor.

Your friends, or should I say lovers, will be here soon. I can hardly wait, I do enjoy giving parties, unfortunately, we won’t be here to greet them. Fentis, take the good agent to my shuttle please. We have places to be.”

Rey’elle forgot the pain and stood as upright as her body would allow. She felt on the brink of hysteria. “No! No! You cannot take me. He will look for me here. He will come for me here and won’t be able to find me and it will be torment for him. Please just kill me now, end this. Let him find my body and be done with it. Don’t be such a coward.”

“A coward you say? A coward? I will show you coward.” He motioned the guard and Fentis away.

Somehow she remained standing on her right leg balancing herself gingerly with her left when she smelled the air change. Just a hint of ozone and then the lightening struck her and she dropped instantly. Her back bent backward in an impossible angle, every muscle spasmed, her legs and arms jerked, her blood was scalding steam in her veins and the marrow was melting in her bones. Her jaws were locked too tight to scream. When at last it ended, she could only lay there unable to do anything.

“Fentis, I want her on my shuttle, now, and then get your men prepared. You have been well compensated and I want results. I will get the holo recording for you, make sure you leave it in plain sight.”

With that he spun around and walked back toward the bunker doors.

Rey’elle felt herself being lifted, almost gently. It was strange. She watched the overhead lights as if hypnotized, light, dark, light, dark like they had a pattern all their own. She felt bitter cold against her face and closed her eyes against the brightness of the sun. She felt the incline as she was carried up the ramp and the hard metal against her back as she was laid upon the floor. She felt something click around her ankle and heard the jangle of chains.

She turned her head slightly to see Darth Serevin hand Fentis a small round disk and watched as Fentis headed back down the ramp. She felt the shuttle lift and sank into despair.

“You there Watcher?”

Silence.
Vector contacted Kaliyo as soon as they landed in the hangar at Adamos Space Port. "Kaliyo, Scorpio, are you there? Vector calling, we need to talk."

"Kaliyo here. Scorpio has been unable to get any further information about our agent's location, but there has been an unexpected development. I will let you speak to Saganu. It's not good news."

Vectors heart nearly stopped, "She's not..."

"Nothing like that I assure you," the voice of Aristocra Saganu came through. "The disturbing news is that Darth Serevin has our agent. We just found this out minutes before your call. This is Sith business, Vector, and we have been directly forbidden to give aid or succor in any way. Serevin only used us as a mediary since he evidently knew that the agent and I have a...history and I could contact her without suspicion. I must obey in this, to do otherwise would jeopardize the alliance between the Empire and the Chiss Ascendancy, especially if there are any reprisals against me or my men. You know how this works. I am truly sorry I cannot give you more assistance."

Vector breathed a sigh of relief, "We thank you for the help you have given Kaliyo and Scorpio thus far. Kaliyo, we need you and Scorpio to meet us at the junction of Lower Pass and Highmount road. We are taking the shuttle to Dorn Base as soon as this call ends and then a shuttle from Dorn Base to Leth where we will procure speeders. It will take us about three hours to get there. Limit your exposure and stay warm, Vector out."

Vector turned to Phi-ton and Lokin, "We know this Serevin from Voss but we have no time to discuss it now. Get your weapons and anything else you may need, we leave for the shuttle to Dorn in five minutes. I have a few things to pick up from the cargo bay. Do not dally."

Vector, Phi-ton and Lokin wound their way through Dorn base making a quick stop for cold weather gear. Vector still had his from a previous visit but it was still in the closet in their cabin and he was not ready to open that door yet, in more ways than one. Phi-ton attracted some stares and whispers but no one interfered. On their way to the base exit they were stopped by a portly shop owner who ran up to them.

"Vector Hyluss?"

"Yes. We are Vector."

"I was paid to give this to you, with a message." He held out a small locator device.

Vector gripped the man’s shirt and drew him closer, “Who gave this to you? Where is he now?”

The man tried to pull away, “He was a devaronian. I don’t know his name. He just gave me your description and paid me to give this to you. He said that it would activate once you got to the assigned place. That’s all I know. Please just let me go.”

Vector released the man, snatched the device out of his hand and continued on his way, time was
getting shorter by the minute and he had wasted enough.

The elevator at Dorn Base lifted them into the bitter cold and blinding glare of Hoth. They could see their breath in tiny clouds of crystal vapor as they exhaled. Vector was walking slightly in front of Dr. Lokin and Phi-ton on their way to the shuttle pad, vaguely listening to their conversation.

“So, what do you think of Hoth, Phi-ton?”

“This cold is unlike anything I have experienced,” Phi-ton admitted. “We find it to be most uncomfortable.”

Vector found some small comfort in that and smiled slightly.

“This must all seem quite different to you, how are you coping?”

“The hyperspace jumps were a bit jarring and I did feel quite isolated on the ship sometimes but the dreams of her gave me some solace, however briefly.”

Vector stopped in his tracks. He planted his legs, slightly dropped his right shoulder and swung around with all his strength landing a perfect roundhouse. He felt the impact up to his elbow as his fist connected with Phi-ton’s face. The blow rocked Phi-ton’s head back and lifted the taller man off his feet sending him backward to lay spread-eagle in the snow. He watched as a trickle of blood dripped from the corner of Phi-tons mouth.

"You have taunted us one time too many. It truly does us good to see you bleed."

He rotated back around and continued toward the shuttles as he yelled over his shoulder, "Get up and follow. We have little time left."

Dr. Lokin extended his hand down to the Voss and helped him to his feet, then grabbed onto his coat sleeve when Phi-ton started to move toward Vector. “Stand down, Phi-ton. He owed you that one and soon you may have to fight shoulder to shoulder. Let it go. For her, let it go.”

Phi-ton looked down at the doctor and simply nodded. He wiped his mouth with the back of his glove and they both strode quickly to catch up.

The Shuttle ride was silent with Vector and Phi-ton refusing to look at each other. Their eyes were unreadable as they both stared straight ahead and Lokin felt like chastising them both as parents sometimes did with unruly children but he did not utter a word.

Vector disembarked the shuttle immediately upon landing and went to the speeder bay. With his diplomatic ties he was able to obtain three without issue. Like at the base, Phi-ton got some sideways glances but no one said anything or approached.

“Put your goggles and earmuffs on and keep your mouth and nose covered. Both of our staffs will be too long to use our jacket hoods so we will lose some body heat. Stay low and follow close.” With that he started the speeder and turned out of the base onto Lower Pass.

Kalliyo and Scorpio were standing on the road by their speeders when the three men arrived. Vector turned off his speeder, dismounted and walked toward them first, “Scorpio do you have those items we requested?”

“The task has been completed. Two tracking tabs and four earbud comlinks and I have adjusted my internal receiver to pick up signals from both.” Scorpio handed the items to Vector who dispensed them to everyone.
Kaliyo took her earbud and inserted it into her ear canal. “I didn’t hear that conversation in Saganu’s bunker. When did this happen?”

Vector looked at her, “I asked on the ship, before you and Scorpio left for Saganu’s base, no one else needed to know. We have to leave for the Highmount Road beacon soon and we were given a locator device at Dorn that will activate once we are at the beacon. Our comlinks should work for some distance, barring being jammed, same for the tracking tabs which we will hide in our jacket hoods under the lining.

We need for you to follow us but stay back as far as you can and ride behind the drifts and hills. The only thing you should come across are ice cats. Don’t shoot them Kaliyo, noise travels a great distance here. Phi-ton and we….I have to arrive first and alone so do not come to us until we call. Scorpio, can you overcome any jamming?”

“Yes, although it could take some time depending on the encryption. Be aware that we may not arrive exactly when required.”

“We will see you as fate allows. Come Phi-ton, we must go.”

Darth Serevin had gone further into the interior of the shuttle and Rey’elle took this opportunity to inspect her surroundings. Her extremities still felt numb after the force lightning but her head was clearer. She moved her right leg only to find that she had been shackled to one of the bulkhead braces, the attached chain jangled against the deck. A bit of overkill as far as she was concerned. They were evidently on some sort of small Imperial shuttle and could not have traveled far, probably still on Hoth hidden somewhere out of sight. She reached out again to Watcher X, still no response. She was trying to sit up when she heard footsteps coming toward her from the forward cabin and raised her head enough to see an officer in grey imperial colors, his holster devoid of any weapon. He was average height and average weight, even his face was average except for the blue eyes staring down at her from under the rim of his black cap. He reached down to her and she flinched.

“I do not mean to harm you Cipher 9. Darth Serevin sent me to assist you to the forward cabin. Please do not struggle.” He took hold of her uninjured arm and helped her sit up. Her head was spinning from the sudden change of position and she leaned against the bulkhead until it passed. The officer stepped behind her and placed his forearms under her armpits and slowly lifted her until she could get her right leg under her. She tottered a little but he supported her until she was able to stand on her own then steadied herself against the ship with her left arm while he bent down to remove the shackles. Testing weight on her left leg caused her to inhale sharply between her teeth and then exhale with a low moan.

“Lean on me and I will help you into the next room,” the officer said as he took her left arm and helped her hobble to the cabin where Darth Serevin was sitting before a panel of monitors.

Darth Serevin waved his hand dismissively to a drop seat lowered from the ship frame. “Put her there Captain, then leave us. Don’t worry about the chains, I doubt she is in any condition to try anything and she still wears the collar.”

Rey’elle looked up at the monitors and recognized the interior of the bunker that had been her prison. The monitor to the extreme left displayed a perfect view of the cage where she had been held. There appeared to be little or no movement in the bunker although she did notice durasteel crates lined up in various places as defensive barriers. She only saw one or two guards milling about with rifles slung across their shoulders, but where were the others? They were setting the place up for a
battle or a trap or both.

Darth Serevin ignored her for some minutes until he finally put down his data pad and turned to meet her gaze. “My dear Cipher, I am so pleased you are here to share this little play with me. It should prove to be most entertaining and we have the best seats in the house.”

He turned to pour a golden liquid into two glasses and offered one to her. “The finest Corellian Brandy. You must share a drink with me, it is not a request.”

He put the glass into her left hand and raised his own in a salute. She took a sip, coughed and felt her rib shift in her back. She winced slightly. “This has been a hell of a first date, Darth Serevin, and now you’re trying to get me drunk?”

He frowned, “Don’t be crass, Cipher, and do not test my patience. To spoil my good mood now would be unwise.”

“Why are you here instead of there? Surely you would want to be present to watch first hand and it is not like you are helpless in a fight. Why leave this to a band of ruffians who may cut and run at the first sign of trouble?”

“Everything progresses as planned and it does not matter if they fight or die or run. You will soon understand it all and it will be glorious.”
Chapter 10

Vector and Phi-ton passed only a couple of ice cats and a band of wanderers far off in the distance, probably pirates of one group or another, but otherwise the landscape was barren of any life. The huge pipes of the geothermal plant could be seen as tiny dots on the horizon and progressively grew larger as they approached. Vector heard the locator in his pocket start to beep faintly and glanced down at his chrono, they had made it in time, but barely. They pulled up at the beacon and he removed the device from his pocket to look at the directional display screen. A tiny green arrow pointed east toward the Glacial Fissure, a huge canyon that almost split this region in two.

Vector struck the handles of his speeder, “Damn. More delays. We will never make it over Highmount Ridge. We will have to backtrack and go back around through Leth Outpost.”

He put his finger to the earbud, activating the speaker, “Lokin, do you hear me? Backtrack through Leth, and head toward Glacial Fissure. There should be a small Imperial outpost somewhere close to the fissure. Go there and wait.”

“We hear you, Lokin out.”

Vector turned to Phi-ton, “Keep up.”

He and Phi-ton headed their speeders back down Highmount road and turned toward Leth Outpost. Once they reached Leth, they rode straight through the base and emerged onto Snow Hills Pass, not stopping until they reached the incline of the Southern Crevasse that led down into the fissure. They could see minute eruptions of lava pushing up from the canyon floor and steam rise to fill the fissure like a fog. The locator was beeping faster now and they started their descent into whatever waited below.

Vector stopped and dismounted the speeder at the bottom of the incline and motioned for Phi-ton to do the same. He checked the location device again and the green arrow pointed to the left. The beeping continued to increase in tempo as both men removed their staves from their harnesses and staying low, jogged up the canyon keeping close to the left wall. About two hundred yards ahead a section of the canyon wall jutted outward obstructing the view of anything beyond. Their destination was just around that wall of rock and ice.

He and Phi-ton continued forward until they were at the jutting wall and Vector switched off the location device which now gave off an almost constant tone. He placed his back against the rock and sidled his way to the apex where he could peek around the corner. Just beyond was an open bunker door with two flanking blaster turrets.

Vector picked up a good sized rock and exposed himself long enough to throw it in the direction of the turrets. Nothing happened. He picked up another rock and tried again, still nothing. He removed a pulse grenade from his belt pack, flicked the activation switch and lobbed it toward the nearest turret. There was a slight bang and flash as the grenade exploded, sending fingers of electrical energy out that engulfed the turret, again nothing happened.

Phi-ton was standing just behind Vector, “They know we are here, now.”

“We think they already knew.” Vector reached up and activated the earbud. “Lokin, if you can hear us, come to the bottom of the southern crevasse incline. Stop and wait when you see our speeders.”

“This is Scorpio. I do not think the others can hear you but we will comply.”
Slowly Vector and Phi-ton made their way around the corner of the jutting wall to the entrance of the bunker. Vector leaned around the corner to take a quick look inside, it was dimly lit and he could see no movement.

Phi-ton, who was beginning to shed his coat, said to Vector, “I can not fight in this, it is too bulky.” Vector nodded in agreement and proceeded to do the same and then motioned Phi-ton to the other side of the entrance. Together, he and Phi-ton started into the entryway.

“Stop,” Phi-ton warned and pointed downward. Vector looked down and saw a trace of the thin laser beam stretched across the entrance at ankle height. Both he and Phi-ton stepped over the beam and continued until they were almost in the room and then blaster fire erupted out of the dimness.

Both Vector and Phi-ton tucked and rolled into the room each landing on one knee. Phi-ton clicked a button on his staff and two blades emerged, one from each end. In unison both men moved into the room, dodging blaster fire and twirling their blades in front of them deflecting most of the shots. Vector felt a slight sting as one blast grazed his left upper arm. Phi-ton stumbled slightly as he was hit in the leg, but he continued on.

They both reached the first durasteel crate barriers on their respective sides of the room and came face to face with the first line of attackers who stood up as they approached. Trying to use the men as shields against more incoming fire, Vector jabbed the counterweight of his staff into the nose of one, knocking him off balance. Ducking a blaster shot, he whirled around in the opposite direction and swung the blade to take the other across the midsection. The vibrogenerator activated on contact and sliced the assailants armor and midsection almost in half. The other one came at him again and he jabbed the points of the trident shaped blade into the man’s throat. Vector crouched and using the crates as a fulcrum lifted the man then removed the blade with a quick pull and twist, watching the head abandon the body.

Vector took a few seconds to stay behind the crates and activate the earbud, “Scorpio, now! Trap rigged in door.”

On the opposite side of the room, Phi-ton had his staff in one hand and his blaster in the other. He took one of the men in the gut and ripped the blade upward, hearing the sizzle of the vibrogenerator as it cut through armor and bone. With his other hand he took casual aim and watched the other man drop with a blaster burn between his eyes. He also ducked behind the crates for a second.

With a quick nod to each other, they rose from behind the crates to advance again, Phi-ton holstering his pistol as he rose. They both resembled dancers; ducking, weaving and dodging, with blades whirling in a blur. A thin line of blood appeared on Vector’s cheek as he narrowly dodged a blaster bolt. A trickle of blood flowed down the side of Phi-ton’s face from a blast he had barely ducked in time.

They were almost to the second barrier when two doors opened on their right and more men poured out, some with blasters, some with vibroswords. “Flash”, Phi-ton yelled and both he and Vector closed their eyes and crouched as Phi-ton tossed the flash-bang into the new groups midst. Radiant white light filled the room and then dissipated leaving most of the men stunned and blinded but not all.

Vector stood just in time to block the vibrosword arcing toward him. Twisting the staff around and under, he used the counterweight to knock the sword to the side, then shifted the angle of the blade and cut upward removing the man’s sword arm. The man screamed and went down. Glancing up, Vector saw more men dropping from the ceiling behind them using drop cables. They opened fire as they reached the floor.
Phi-ton was battling two more on his side of the room and as Vector moved to help him, he felt a hot
pain in his upper thigh and then saw one of the men drop to the floor as he heard a rifle blast from the
door. He glanced back briefly to see Kaliyo, Lokin and Scorpio’s silhouettes outlined in the light
with blasters and rifles drawn. He then turned his attention, once again, to the men behind the barrier
in front of him.

With renewed strength he descended on them, dodging and deflecting their blaster fire. Upon
reaching the barrier, he spun on his toes, brought the staff around to knock the rifle from one man’s
hand and then changing his grip, he swung the blade upward into his chin. The vibroblade engaged
and split the man’s face as Vector drew his staff back from the falling man. The other one was trying
to back away, firing wildly. Vector placed his hand on the barrier and leaped sideways over the top.
Using the momentum and a forward thrust, he impaled the other man with the trident driving him to
the ground, leaving a gaping hole as he withdrew the weapon.

Vector looked up as he was turning to go back to aid his companions and saw the cage at the end of
the room. Her beautiful face peered out at him from under some sort of covering. There was no
thought, no hesitation as he started to run. Everything else disappeared except her bruised and
battered face. There was no sound, no surroundings, no peripherals, everything contracted and
centered around her. He did not hear Lokin shout for him to wait. He used his blade to cut through
the lock and dropped his staff to enter, to hold her, comfort her, save her.

He saw her rise from the cover and reach for him. He never saw the vibroknife as it cut into his
upper torso where the seams of his armor joined. The blade was forced upward in quick successive
thrusts until the hilt stopped its advance just below his ribcage. He glanced down at the handle
protruding from his flesh as he stumbled backward out of the cage door. He tasted copper in his
mouth and struggled to breathe, the air gurgled in his throat as he saw her face ripple and transform
into the face of a grinning, horned creature. He started to fall and the last thing he saw was
something blue flash before him as he collapsed to the floor.

Rey’elle watched as Vector and Phi-ton entered the bunker. They were magnificent as they moved
across the room. Stabbing, parrying, slicing, dodging and weaving, they were almost hypnotic. She
held her breath when they had seemed surrounded from all sides and breathed again when she saw
Kaliyo, Lokin and Scorpio appear. Her attention shifted back to Vector and suddenly he was
running toward the back of the room. She watched in horror as the camera directed at her cage
displayed her face in the monitor and Vector cutting through the lock and moving toward her image.

“No, Vector! It’s not me! Stop! please stop,” her voice was a strident shriek. She tried to stand but
fell backward into the seat as the knife entered his precious body and he stumbled from the cage. She
observed Phi-ton slam into Fentis, knocking him to the floor and forcing his staff blade into the
devoranian’s chest. She watched bloody froth bubble out of Vector’s mouth and her world shattered
as he crumpled to the ground.

Darth Serevin was beside himself with glee. “He did exactly as I foresaw. The fool was so blinded
by love he didn’t even stop to question. Passion is strength, but love is so…predictable. His
expression was priceless, as was yours. You know, killing hope is an art form and I do love putting
my work on display. Your little band will return the Voss to his home and my plans are still in
motion. This is wonderful, don’t you agree Cipher?”

He turned to look into her blank stare. “One down….”
Chapter 11

Star Wars: The Old Republic
Forget Me, Remember Voss

As soon as Vector fell, the remainder of the assailing team turned to flee from the bunker giving Phiton the opportunity to reach Fentis who, evidently, assumed he could escape as well. He was mistaken. Kaliyo dropped two more of them at the door and Scorpio another one who had barely made it out of the entrance. Scorpio assumed a guard position at the doorway while Kaliyo made her way back to the others.

Dr. Lokin was kneeling over Vector watching the blood rush out of the hole in the armor once he had removed the vibroknife. He had already injected kolto into Vector’s neck but he needed to get to the naked flesh to see the extent of the damage.

“That bloody froth means that a lung has likely been punctured, he will suffocate in minutes unless I can relieve the pressure in his chest cavity. Phiton, lift his upper body so I can remove those two straps at his shoulder. Kaliyo, get a syringe out of my belt pack and remove the needle.”

Lokin removed the chestpiece and cut through the undershirt with a scalpel. He used his fingers to find two ribs as a guide then took the needle from Kaliyo and drove it down into Vectors chest in the space between the ribs. There was a slight hiss of air and then blood started to flow from the protruding end of the needle.

“I need to stop the bleeding and this kolto is not going to be enough. He will bleed out before I can get him back to the ship and the tank and he is showing signs of shock.”

“This may help,” Phiton reached into his pack and removed a pouch of dark green herbs with bright red veins and stems. “This is entat-saier, wind fire, and we Voss have carried it into battle for millennia. It cauterizes and staunches the flow of blood, something in the red veins I think, and it has saved many Voss from such grievous wounds as this. It may even help to raise his internal temperature a bit. Though the effects dissipate, it is initially very painful so be thankful he is not awake. I will crush it and pack it into the wound, I merely hope it is enough. Trust me, I want him to live.”

“It seems we have little choice,” said Lokin as he sat back on his heels and watched Phiton crush the leaves and push them into the gaping hole. Tendrils of smoke rose where the leaves touched the flesh and it almost seemed the leaves were smoldering within the wound itself.

Phiton sat back and removed his gloves and tossed them to the side. “It is not good to touch the plant with bare hands, do not touch the gloves.”

Lokin gently pushed down on Vector’s chest to clear any clots from the needle and watched the flow of blood resume. “I believe he breathes a bit easier now, but we must get back to the ship. We are a long way out and it will be night soon. Phiton can you fetch that hide from the cage so we can at least cover his lower extremities? It may help deter full blown shock.”

As Phiton moved to retrieve the bantha hide, Kaliyo looked around the room. Those cameras bothered her, a lot. She knelt down beside Lokin with her back toward the closest camera and said in a low voice, “I think someone wanted Vector dead. They are likely still watching and I say we
give them a convincing show, then I will go take care of that transport problem.”

Dr. Lokin nodded in agreement and used a few minutes to appear to apply dressings to the wound, administer more kolto and take Vector’s pulse via the carotid artery in the side of the neck. Phi-ton was placing the edge of the hide over the lower half of Vector’s body when Lokin suddenly sat bolt upright in panic as he yelled, “I am losing him. I thought I had him stabilized.”

He pretended to perform some sort of revival technique on Vector’s prone form. Kaliyo watched as Lokin checked the carotid again and then put his ear to Vector’s chest. He shook his head slowly as he sat back upright. Kaliyo rose to her feet, walked to the door and returned with both discarded coats handing one to the Voss and then gently laying the other one across Vector’s chest and face. She lowered her head, as did Lokin and Phi-ton and she even wiped the corners of her eyes to add to the deception. She then returned to the entrance and slipped out.

Dr. Lokin laid his hand gently on Vector’s chest to make sure he was still breathing. The rise and fall was very shallow but still there. Lokin hung his head and kept monitoring his patient the best he could. Phi-ton took this opportunity to inspect the devaronian’s corpse and found a device he had never seen before sown into a hidden pocket in the jacket. He also found what appeared to be a holodisk just outside the cage. He found nothing else of interest as he walked around the room and his search of the barracks and galley, likewise, yielded nothing.

A little under an hour had passed when they heard Kaliyo’s voice over their earbuds. “Incoming, with a shuttle. You don’t want to know how I got it. Canyon is too narrow for me to land, I will be at the top of the incline. It is getting dark and you need to hurry.”

“We have no stretcher or way to carry Vector and I refuse to leave him here. How will we get his body back to the ship?” asked Lokin.

Scorpio left her position by the door and approached them. “I will carry him. I am stronger, will not tire and it is the most efficient solution plus I can share the heat from my core to keep him warm.” She squatted down, placed her arms under Vector’s shoulders and knees, lifted as gently as she could and then turned to walk out into the gathering dusk. Lokin bent down to collect Vector’s armor and staff and followed with Phi-ton trailing behind.

Rey’elle watched silently as Dr. Lokin worked on Vector. She seemed to be observing from a great distance as if her inner being was trying to escape from what was happening but she could not look away. When she saw Kaliyo drape the coat over Vector’s face and wipe tears from her eyes, Rey’elle felt like she would break from the weight of her grief. Kaliyo never cried, not once in all their time together, not one single tear. Something in that gesture marked an end to it all, a finality that she would never recover from. Kaliyo wept, and Kaliyo never cries.

“Captain, take off please, I need to get to my cruiser and I have seen enough.” Serevin said as he switched off the monitors. He leaned back in his chair and took a sip of brandy. He then leaned over and switched on the holo comm, “Darth Serevin to Aristrocra Saganu. I have a message for our agent’s crew. Tell them to ‘go back to where it began, the agent and I will be waiting’. They will understand. Delay sending it to them for 12 hours. Serevin out.”

Lokin entered the meeting room on the Phantom and lowered himself into a chair. He spoke to the rest of the crew assembled around the table. “Vector is in the tank and we should see some improvement soon. We came very close to losing him and if not for Phi-ton’s miracle herb,
outcome would be very different. I also had a chance to look at that device that we retrieved from the bunker. It appears to be a holographic disguise matrix programed with our agent’s likeness. I have heard of such things but thought they were still in the design phase, it appears that I was mistaken. In any case, it served its purpose in luring at least one of us into harm's way.”

Phi-ton leaned forward, placing his elbows on the table. “Vector was purposefully herded to that cage. I was kept too busy to advance further into the room. Additional men appeared from side rooms and dropped from the ceiling to keep Lokin, Kaliyo and Scorpio similarly occupied and then they all turned to retreat once Vector had fallen. It would appear that the bunker incident was well planned from the onset. The matrix device had to be obtained at great difficulty and expense. I feel there is something more going on here beyond the obvious vendetta against Rey’elle.”

Kaliyo looked over at him, “If Vector was the target, why not just shoot him, it is not like the empire has a shortage of good snipers.”

“What if the shot missed or hit the wrong person or simply wounded him? It would put us all on heightened alert and the intended target could simply stay on the ship. Had I been the first to reach her cage, it would be me either in kolto or dead. Love makes us do heedless, stupid things and I could not have resisted rushing blindly to her side any more than Vector could. The outcome was all but guaranteed. Serevin understood this and I suspect he was forcing Rey’elle to watch everything unfold.”

Lokin placed the holodisk on the table. “There is also this, a very evident taunt if I read the intent properly.” He activated the holo and they all watched in silence as every moment of Rey’elle’s torment was displayed. Raina appeared to be transfixed, Kaliyo’s eyes were hooded and unreadable, Lokin displayed only clinical interest and Phi-ton leaned against the table with furrowed brows and clenched fists.

“At least you got to kill that son of a Hutt. To bad he didn’t die slower.” Kaliyo remarked as the holo finished. “So, what do we do now?”

Lokin rubbed at his eyes tiredly, “It seems the only thing we can do is wait. Rey’elle’s whereabouts is unknown, Vector requires time to heal, we all need rest and the ship needs a resupply. It would seem that our options are limited.”

Phi-ton rose from the table and turned to them as he was exiting the room. “I will find no rest until she is safe and Serevin lies cold at my feet.”

Kaliyo looked up at him and pointed with her thumb toward the med bay. “The line starts there.”

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Darth Serevin landed in the hangar of his star cruiser and had Rey’elle transported to the med bay then went to his office and immediately advised the Captain to prep the ship for the jump to Voss, he then leaned forward to initiate a holocall.

He watched as the visage of the Sith appeared. “It is all in hand, Darth Malgus. I return to Voss at this very moment with the proper tool in my control. It should not be long now.”

“I move toward Ilum as we speak, Darth Serevin. I know that you feel the Voss are instrumental to victory, but I still have my doubts. Do not tarry too long in this venture of yours, I will need you on Ilum soon.”

Serevin reached to switch off the holo communicator, “As you wish.”
Serevin scowled slightly and pushed the button on the intercom. A voice answered almost immediately. “Yes, my lord, what can I do for you?”

“I want the agent sedated and placed in a kolto tank for the duration of the trip. I require a fresh canvas for my work.”
Chapter 12

Star Wars: The Old Republic

Forget Me, Remember Voss

Dr. Lokin sat at his workstation tinkering with the holo matrix device that had been discovered on the body of the devaronian mercenary, Fentis. He was trying to pry open a cover without damaging the item, when he heard a tapping coming from behind. He turned around to see Vector tapping on the side of the kolto tank, his eyes intense above the breather that covered his nose and mouth.

Lokin walked over to activate the microphone that transmitted to speakers inside the tank lid. “Well, I see our patient is awake. You require at least 8 more hours.” to which Vector shook his head, no. “Five then.” Vector again shook his head.

“All right, three, and that is my last offer.” Vector kicked at the transparisteel and then began to bang on the tank interior with the flat of his fist.

Lokin raised his hands in surrender and pushed the controls that would release the kolto back into the ship’s storage tanks so that he could open the front hatch. As the liquid drained out, Vector was already attempting to remove the straps which had held him upright.

Lokin opened the front of the tank and angrily scolded Vector, “If you do not stop struggling, I will sedate you and force you to stay in there for the full eight hours you still need. Now hold still while I remove the breather and the straps. I doubt your legs will hold you yet, so hang onto me while I ease you out of there and onto the floor.”

Once he had Vector out of the tank, Lokin went to the cupboard, fetched a towel and returned to wrap it around Vector’s shoulders. Vector tried to speak but only a squeak emerged from his throat, so instead, he pointed to the crono on Lokin’s wrist.

“You will be able to speak in a short while and you have been in the tank for almost 10 and a half hours, but, you needed at least 18 and preferably 24. Do not push yourself beyond your current limits or I swear I will prove good on my threat of sedation. Do I make myself clear?”

Vector grudgingly nodded in agreement as Lokin helped him to his feet and over to a medical bed. Lying on his back, he watched the med scanner make its pass over his body and listened to the clicks and whirs of the machinery as it fed information to the readout screen that hung on the wall above the bed.

“We assume we are going to live?” Vector asked in a rasping voice.

“It would appear so, but that lung is not yet fully healed and you may notice difficulty breathing for some time. Also, the scar tissue over the wound is still quite thin and could break open again, so I would advise you to take it easy. There are valid reasons why I wanted you in the tank for at least another eight hours. The leg wound is minor and the scratch on your face will leave nothing but a slight scar.”

Vector felt the consciousness of the nest pressing him for assurances that he would survive. He answered them with a quick yes, then pushed them away again. He had more important matters to
“Where are we? Where is Rey’elle? We saw her in the cage and remember the knife and nothing else. Where is she?”

“Take is easy Vector, let your voice strengthen. We are still in the Hoth spaceport waiting for news. We know that Serevin has taken Rey’elle off world but we do not know where. Lie still and rest and I will tell you what I know.”

Vector stared up at the ceiling and listened to Lokin recount the events of the past hours. The outcome of the bunker fight, the holo matrix device, faking his death, Phi-ton’s miracle herb, Kaliyo basically stealing a shuttle and the holo recording of Rey’elle’s ordeal.

“We need our clothes and a little blue pouch we have stored in a crate in the cargo bay. Can you ask Raina or someone to fetch those things for us?”

Dr. Lokin helped Vector sit up and then used the intercom to contact Kaliyo who finally appeared in the med bay door with Vector’s requested items.

“Hey, bug boy, you look pretty good for a dead man. Doc fill you in?” Vector nodded and Kaliyo continued into the room to lay the clothes and pouch at the foot of the medical bed.

“Raina is getting supplies for the ship, we were getting low on food and caf, and we are still waiting on word from Darth Asshole. He will contact us, you know, we all agree that the Voss is likely his next target. I hate waiting, it annoys me and makes me twitchy. Well, I’ll leave you alone to get dressed, I have a rifle to clean; a girl’s best friend, next to credits.”

With assistance from Lokin, Vector was able to get his clothes on at last, except for his boots. He then reached for and opened the blue pouch removing a small orb. It was about two inches in diameter covered with a thin, white, opalescent membrane. Lokin watched as Vector peeled a portion of the skin back from the orb and commenced to sip the contents. Once the orb was drained, Vector took several deep breaths, wincing slightly as the scar tissue on his torso stretched and contracted.

“Membrosia, from the nest,” Vector explained. “It will do much to heal and strengthen us. It is a gift from the givers of the hive and has sustained the nest for millennia. It will do as much or more for us than time in the kolto tank since, as a joiner, it is well suited to our physiology and our needs.”

“You must allow me to do an analysis someday. Given my physical changes I am always interested in new methods of………..”, Lokin’s sentence was cut short by the sound of the holocommunicator in the common room. “Stay here, Vector, no one can see that you still live. I will attend to this.”

As Lokin left the med bay, Vector pushed himself from the medical bed he was leaning against and proceeded, hunched over and holding his side, down the hall of the ship. He stopped just outside the entrance to the room, taking care to remain hidden behind the wall.

“Saganu to Kaliyo or Scorpio, I have a message I think you will be eager to hear.”

“Eckard Lokin here, please continue. We have been awaiting any word at all.”

“Yes, Dr. Lokin. Darth Serevin has left a message for the ‘agent’s crew’ as he put it. He said to ‘go back to where it began. He and the agent would be waiting’. He was sure you would know what it means. I am sorry that there is no more information, Saganu out.”

“He means for us to return to Voss.” Vector heard Phi-ton’s voice and he felt a rage begin to burn in
the pit of his stomach like fanned embers. He stood rigid, letting the wall support him and fought the emotion, rage blinded him and he could not afford the luxury. He let the anger rise and peak then felt it ebb back into a tiny bright spark waiting for ignition. He leaned his head back against the wall, gulped air into his lungs and willed the spark into ice. He needed cold anger, cold vengeance and cold purpose, the heat would only serve to burn them all.

“As soon as Raina is back, we make the jump to Voss. She should not be long now,” Lokin said as he rounded the corner. He looked at Vector, standing against the wall. “I thought I told you to stay in the med bay. Does nobody on this ship ever do what is asked of them? Here, let me help you back to the bed.”

“Help us to the cargo bay please, we need quiet and time to heal. Please bring the membrosia to us when you can, we will require more before we get to that forsaken planet. We have debts to settle and the currency cannot be weak.” Vector placed his arm over Lokin’s shoulders and they both walked back toward the cargo bay.

Vector was communing with the hive when he felt the ship jump. Thirty six hours; he knew too well the amount of travel time between Hoth and Voss. Lokin had brought in the bag of membrosia earlier and he had used another orb before he settled down on the blanket and fell into a dreamless sleep.

He awoke some time later and reached for his chrono, its face showed the time to be 05:12. He sat up slowly and using the crates as support, he managed to get to his feet and start to the crew quarters and the refresher. He picked up a clean tunic and pants on his way out and, still barefoot, he made his way down the hall. He saw Phi-ton in the galley as he passed, but did not stop. In the refresher, he stripped down, entered the sonic and felt the tension in his muscles slowly relax. The timer went off signaling the end of the cycle and he exited to stand before the mirror. He hardly recognized the gaunt face peering back as he reached for the container of depil cream to remove the whiskers from his hollow cheeks. He rested his forehead against the mirror while the cream did its work.

He let his mind wander and recalled Rey’ elle joining him in the shower in their room, lifting her nakedness onto his own and…..he forced the memory aside. He rinsed and dried his face, used a disposable toothbrush, got dressed and returned to the cargo bay where he picked up the chestpiece of his armor to inspect the damage.

From his kit he retrieved a needle and thread, spun from the hive’s cocoon linings and sat down on one of the crates. He had just begun to repair the gash in his armor when he heard someone enter. He looked up to see Phi-ton standing in the doorway, with a steaming cup in his hands. Phi-ton took a step into the room and stopped.

Vector lowered his gaze back to his armor. “We have nothing to say to you at this time except, why? Why help to save our life?”

Phi-ton’s voice was flat as he replied, “It was a necessary thing. You were a fallen comrade and we Voss are honor bound to help if we have the means. More importantly, however, is if you had died, Rey’ elle would have returned to me broken of heart and spirit and I would prefer to have her whole. Perhaps, she would not have returned to me at all, in which case she would simply fade away. This means that I too would fade away from my need for her. Your death would have served no purpose. As you have said, I am a selfish bastard and it is better that you live, for her and for me.”

Vector kept his eyes on his work, “You should leave now.”
Rey’elle’s eyes opened slowly. She did not know where she was and took a minute to get her bearings. Peering out into a large room through some viscous liquid she noticed figures shifting and moving about. Her breathing echoed in her ears and she jerked when a voice emerged from the speakers above her. Turning her gaze to the right she spied a med tech standing next to the kolto tank pressing buttons.

“Darth Serevin requests the honor of your presence. I have given you a stimulant to counteract the sedative and will be removing you from the tank. My Lord would be most displeased if you should injure yourself so please do not struggle.”

Rey’elle heard a hiss from above her as the seal released on the top of the tank and then felt the tug of the straps wrapped around her chest and under her arms as she was lifted. She hung limply as the hydraulics removed her from the liquid and moved her to the side of the tank where she was slowly lowered until her toes touched the floor. She felt hands remove the breather and the straps and then felt herself fall heavily to the floor. There was a sharp pain in her arm as the IV needle ripped out of her vein and she tried to raise herself up, but was too weak to move.

Two guards lifted her roughly by the arms and she was drug across the room toward a transparisteel closure where she was dumped on the floor. The door was closed and she felt freezing cold water hit her body as she rolled into a ball trying to shield her face from the pressure of the spray. When the deluge finally stopped she could hear the drip from the nozzles hit the wet floor. She was shivering violently but at least the cold had revived her into full consciousness.

The guards entered and tugged her up again hauling her to a room adjoining the med bay. They released her and let her fall to the floor, someone threw a towel over her and she heard the door lock as she was left alone with her thoughts.

“My Vector is dead. My most beloved is gone. I watched it happen, I saw him fall and Kaliyo cried, they could not revive him. How can I go on? I do not want to go on.”

She wanted to cry, tried to cry but no tears came. The kolto probably, but her shoulders shook as she sobbed, tearlessly, into the towel. She did not know how much time had passed when she heard the door unlock and saw the legs and feet of two people entering the room. She felt hands grip her arms as she was lifted to her feet, they supported her until she could stand without falling. She looked at them and both were female, with short dark hair and stocky builds. They did not look at her face as they removed her undergarments and helped her into fresh ones, then slipped some sort of robe over her head. The fabric was soft and deep red, a sith color. They placed her feet into slippers and added a shock collar around her neck before one of them knocked on the door.

She was escorted out of the med lab and onto an elevator. Four guards walked with her, two beside and two behind. She placed one foot in front of the other as if she were on auto pilot. If she started to lose her balance or teeter, they would hold her upright between them until she was able to walk again on her own but they never stopped moving forward.
Finally they halted in front of a closed double door. One of the guards knocked and the doors slid open to reveal a meeting room of some sort. There was a long table in the middle of the room with chairs pushed in on both sides. Other chairs lined the walls and lights from the ceiling illuminated the table and one occupant seated at the far end. The only other people she could see were the officer who had opened the door and some sort of servant who stood just to the right of the seated man.

Darth Serevin wiped his mouth on a napkin and pushed his chair back to stand up. “Cipher, so glad you could make it. My, you do look lovely in red. I should have waited for your arrival but I was simply famished. You will forgive my bad manners, won’t you? Lieutenant, please escort my guest to her seat, I am sure she is hungry after all this time.” He never took his eyes from her as he sat back down.

Rey’elle was led to her chair and seated. The servant placed a covered plate before her and when he removed the lid, there was a single strip of dried tauntaun lying in the middle.

Darth Serevin lifted his glass in a toast, “Enjoy.”

Rey’elle started to giggle, she couldn’t help herself. She could feel the hysteria rising in her throat as her laughter pealed out across the room. She tried to stop but couldn’t until her body went rigid in the chair, legs splayed out in front and arms stiffened out to her sides. Her back arched and her eyes rolled back in their sockets. When it stopped, she could not feel anything except the tingling in her extremities as she fought to get her muscles under control. With visible effort, she righted herself and glared at the sith seated across from her.

“Now there is the look I was waiting for. Defiance and hatred. So gratifying to see. Perhaps we can have our conversation now. Besides, I don’t feel like eating alone today, it gets so tiresome.”

“What could we possibly have to discuss, Serevin? You have taken what I love most in this universe, nothing else matters to me. What can you say that would make me give a damn about your schemes or plans? I am merely a tool to help you achieve some twisted goal and tools are not generally consulted before they are used and discarded. Bring Vector back, you sonofabitch, and then maybe we can talk.”

She picked up the dried tauntaun from the plate and hurled it at him. “Oh, before I forget, thanks for the shower and the meal.”

“Cipher, you cut me to the quick. I thought spies loved secrets. I would hate for you to die ignorant. So, you will listen because that is what spies do and when you are a corpse what you know won’t matter anyway. As for the joiner, well, he is old news.” Serevin stood up. “Everyone out of the room, I want no interruptions.”

Serevin walked toward her and sat on the edge of the table, his red eyes staring at her like a snake watching a bird. “We return to Voss. I have very close ties to that planet and its people. I admire their culture, art, architecture and simple beliefs and they can be so easily led with the right impetus. But, most of all I admire the mystics and their abilities of foresight unmatched anywhere in the galaxy. One mystic’s vision can change the course of a world. The empire needs an alliance with the Voss, we need their commandos as well as their force users and you will be the instrument of attaining this.

“The insular lives of the Voss cannot stand any more than the Empire can stand in its current iteration. The constant in-fighting of the Sith, the subjugation of alien species diminishes the empire. We should be welcoming alliances with alien species, not looking down on them as inferior. Darth Malgus understands this, he has allies, myself among them.
“A new empire has been foreseen, dreamed of, planned for and the Voss are important to this new empire, but this treaty with the Gormak is making our stance very difficult. The Voss feel that all of their resources and energies should be directed toward this lasting peace they seek with their bestial brothers. Voss do not kill Voss, how deluded a concept is that?”

Rey’elle could not believe what she was hearing. “You plan to use me to reignite the conflict between Voss and Gormak? Are you insane? The corruption of the dark heart will completely envelope their planet. Sel-makor is only kept at bay by their peace efforts. That evil has nothing to feed on as long as there is no fighting.

“You plan to use Phi-ton to head a rescue effort and invade Gormak lands. It won’t work. The mystics and the Three won’t allow it to happen. You practically forced me to be the answer to their prophecy. A prophecy that brought them new insight and allowed them to find common ground with the Gormak. A small scale incursion will do nothing to change what has already been done, only a new vision can cause that kind of change.”

Darth Serevin smiled. “At last you understand. I have become extremely close with one of the mystics and she has foreseen that the Voss will join the Empire once the outcome at Ilum is concluded with Darth Malgus’ victory. She also saw you as the center of a conflict between Voss and Gormak and Phi-ton will stir that pot until it boils over. Old hatreds die hard and there are still many hard liners on both sides. Voss will be ours.”

Rey’elle stood up and moved toward the sith until her face was inches from his. “You will fail, your plan will fail and your New Empire will lie in ashes. How’s that for a vison?”

She felt a hand around her throat, felt her feet leave the ground but made no effort to resist. She simply hung there, staring at the sith, feeling her air passage constrict. She did not fear him or death any more. Images of Vector’s face swam before her eyes; stoic, smiling, laughing, as her world slipped away into nothing.

Darth Serevin released his force hold on her and let her fall to the floor then sent for a med tech who confirmed that she still lived. “My Lord, if I may speak?”

Serevin nodded his head.

“She will live, but for how long I cannot estimate. She is running a low grade fever that even the kolto could not cure. Her body is starting to break down at a cellular level and I can find no cause for this malady. Her fever will worsen, her organs will start to fail and eventually she will sink into a coma and die. I just thought you should know.”

“As long as she survives until my plans come to fruition, I do not care what happens to the agent. Just remove her from my sight, I do not wish to be sullied by her presence any longer. However, she must be awake when we reach Voss. You have about 8 hours to see that this happens, do not fail me.”

“Yes, my Lord, I understand. She should live for another few weeks, but after that, the damage will be too great.”

“No doctor, she will not live past her usefulness to me.”
The trip back to Voss seemed to be taking even longer than the last time. No one was getting much sleep and their routine never seemed to waiver from hour to hour. Raina and Kaliyo rotated shifts in the cockpit, working meals and some sleep into the schedule. Lokin spent most of his time in the med lab, tinkering with the holo matrix and running analysis on the membrosia that Vector had given to him. Phi-ton alternated between the galley and meeting room, mostly absorbed in thought wherever he happened to be. Vector isolated himself in the cargo bay. He spent time with the nest, sharpened his weapon with a refined spitcrete whetstone, oiled his armor and pushed his body to its limits.

Raina’s voice came over the intercom, “Only 10 hours to go.”

“Let us know when it is four, Raina. We should all convene in the meeting room at that time.”

“Will do Vector.”

Rey’elle was dreaming; Voss, Phi-ton, crushing, rising, reaching, rumbling, needing. Someone was clasping her shoulders, shaking her, “Wake up agent. You must wake up now.”

She forced herself up and out of the dream to open her eyes and look into the face of the med tech from earlier in the day. She felt a needle being inserted into a vein in her arm and watched as the tech removed blood. She saw him perform a scan with a portable med scanner and frown as he watched the data flow past.

“What’s going on? Why all the medical work at this stage of the game?”

The tech handed the phial of blood to his assistant and asked her to leave the room. He offered a glass of water to Rey’elle and helped her to sit up on the bed. They were in a small room with only the bed, a cabinet and metal chair.

“I need you to listen carefully and answer as best you can. I have discovered an illness in your body, one I cannot identify. When I examined you earlier I assumed you had a few weeks, now I see it progresses faster than the data first indicated. The fever is the catalyst and once it starts, your cells will start to degrade at an ever increasing rate. The additional stress put on your body plus the deprivation of food and fluids has not helped your condition. Perhaps with kinder treatment you would have longer, but I fear I have made a terrible miscalculation. The kolto has healed your leg and shoulder but had no effect on this disease. Can you tell me anything?”

Rey’elle looked at him as she would an insect. “And why should I help you? I do not care what happens to me or how quickly it comes. It would be wondrously ironic if I were to die before Serevin can use me for his plans. But to answer you, I don’t know. Perhaps on Corellia. Maybe I was exposed to some military pathogen. Honestly, I have no way to answer what you ask. Now a question for you. How will this progress? My head is already screaming like a Wookie Opera.”

The tech looked into her face with something akin to pity. “You will grow weaker. Your fever will
spike dangerously high, your organs will begin to fail and then it will be over. I thought you might have weeks, but your fever has already increased a half degree in the last three hours. It will go up then hold for a time, then go up again. I would say a week, maybe two at the most, no more. I can give you stims to keep you going, but their effect will wear off quickly. Darth Serevin will kill me if you die too soon.”

“Ah, so the truth comes out at last. Fearing for your own skin like any good little imperial. Tell me, do you have any family? A wife? Kids?”

“I have a wife and two children back on Dromund Kaas.”

She reached over and patted his cheek. “Give me the stims, make them strong, I will hold on as long as I can, but not for you. I do this for your children.”

“My own special brew,” he said as he injected the stim into her neck. “They will come for you soon. I am sorry agent, and thank you.”

The tech left and she got out of bed and began to pace, her thoughts milling around in her brain. One or two weeks, huh, one or two days was more likely. So be it. She heard the door open and one of the guards entered, “Follow us agent.”

Four guards again, two in back, two flanking. They walked to the elevator and emerged in a corridor that led to a hangar bay. As they walked toward the shuttle, she saw Darth Serevin waiting at the ramp. “Do hurry up agent. We have places to be.”

She was escorted up the ramp and forced to sit on the floor in the rear compartment as her leg was shackled to the frame. Two of the guards stayed with her and Serevin took his familiar place in the forward compartment. She felt the shuttle lift off as the first chills wriggled down her spine.

During the flight to the surface of Voss, Rey’elle let her mind drift back to Vector. She replayed again the scene in the bunker, she saw his perfect body fall, saw the blood on his lips, saw Kaliyo cry. Saw Kaliyo cry, but Kaliyo never cries. Kaliyo cried, Kaliyo cried.

“Oh Rey’elle, what a stupid, stupid woman you are. The image of Kaliyo crying had kept haunting her thoughts because it was so out of character. It was all a ruse, a trick for Serevin's benefit. Vector was alive and now she was dying. If she could measure laughter and tears at this moment, they would both weigh the same. I will see his face again. He will come for me and I will survive long enough to touch his wonderful, beautiful face.”

She sat silently, hugging her knees to her chest and shivering slightly, but was finally at peace.

Rey’elle could feel when the shuttle hit the atmosphere and heard the retros fire as they were landing. When the ramp was lowered, Darth Serevin walked past her and signaled the guards, with his hand, to bring her along. They unchained her and walked her out into the golden haze of Voss. The air was crisp and cool just like she remembered. The trees were shades of russet, bronze, crimson and amber and in the distance she could see a pride of nexu.

The guards directed her toward a cave entrance cut into the mountain range, but she had no idea where on Voss they were. It did not have the gloom of the nightmare lands so it must be somewhere around Gorma-koss, but how close she could not ascertain. She was led into a passageway that was lit at intervals by transparisteel globes and, in the distance, she could hear the steady hum of a generator. The sides were shored up, here and there, by girders indicating that this may be an unfinished bunker of some sort.
They had walked for some minutes when the passage emptied out into a large cavern with tributary tunnels branching off at various locations. Several tents and camp areas were scattered around and she saw imperial troops as well as Gormak walking about, although each group stayed to themselves.

As they neared the back of the cavern she noticed an alcove carved out of the rock. It was maybe six feet square and had rings and pulleys imbedded into the rock. Dark stains splattered the walls of the alcove and this is appeared to be the destination.

Darth Serevin and one of the Gormak stood to the side of the alcove talking but stopped their conversation as she and her entourage approached. “Cipher, welcome to your new and final home. I didn’t have time to decorate properly but it should serve well enough. I apologize for the lack of amenities but time is always a factor in such matters.

“I would like for you to meet Rotann Nor. He is a comrade, leader of this band of warriors and quite prepared to stave off any advances of Voss into Gormak territory. He does not believe in the peace initiative and will use any opportunity to break the treaty. Inspiring and convenient, don’t you think?”

Rey’elle looked calmly up into their faces and then stepped into the alcove. “Rotann Nor, this path will lead to ruin. In a thousand years this planet will be dust and decay. Voss and Gormak will fade into history and in ten thousand years, no one will remember you at all. Please do not do this.”

The Gormak snorted at her and replied in broken basic, “You are small and stupid, woman. We remain, Voss will bow or die. Gormak will go to stars, many worlds will be ours.”

Rey’elle merely shook her head and sat down on the hard ground while a guard locked the other end of her shackles to a ring in the wall.

Serevin looked down at her, his face intent like he was trying to solve a puzzle. “Something has changed in you Cipher. I can feel it. Ah well, just another mystery to solve as I peel away the layers.”

Raina’s voice interrupted Vector as he practiced with his staff. “Four hours to Voss, Vector. You said you wanted me to let you know. I will get the others and meet you in the conference room.”

He put his weapon in the corner and responded, “we will be right there. Thank you Raina.” He wiped the sweat from his face and chest and slipped on a clean shirt then made his way to the meeting room where the others had already started to gather.

When everyone was seated, Vector turned to Phi-ton first. “This is your planet and your people, so, given the unique circumstances what is our first step. We are going to assume that Serevin will give you some direction to where he has hidden Rey’elle and will probably contact us soon.”

Phi-ton glanced down at his hands. “Our first step will be to get an audience with the Three. The treaty with the Gormak is tenuous at best and we must see if anything has changed. Regardless of the outcome of the meeting, I still have friends in my commando unit that I may be able to sway to our aid. At this point, I feel we are going in blind and we are at a definite disadvantage where information is concerned.”

Scorpio interjected, “I have been trying to monitor planetary chatter but there is not much that hits the frequencies on Voss. There could be another player that we are unaware of, the only constant we know is Serevin. I will continue to monitor, but doubt there will be any further knowledge to glean
Vector sat quiet for a few moments and finally spoke, “Raina, we will need you to stay on the shuttle. We do not like leaving you behind, but Kaliyo, Scorpio and Lokin are our better fighters and we feel that we will need Dr. Lokin’s very special talents. It goes without saying that Phi-ton must be there and we...I must hide from all eyes until our plan is formed. No one can know that we are still alive which means that Phi-ton and Lokin must attend the meeting with the Three alone. We will require a disguise.”

“The agent has an old Jawa Cloak that was given to her on Tatooine. You could use that, Vector. Only a hood will hide those eyes of yours, and I will even go fetch it for you,” offered Kaliyo.

“No need Kaliyo, we will get the cloak, we know the one you mean. One way or another it will end here and we can no longer avoid the demons of our memories. Does anyone else have something to add?”

Dr. Lokin cleared his throat. “We cannot make a battle plan until we know her location. There are bound to be several guards and possibly choke points and we have to be sure of our final numbers before we attempt any rescue. This one will not be as simple as the bunker on Hoth. We need to be as clear as possible about what we are walking into.”

“Agreed. Does everyone still have their earbuds?” Vector looked from face to face as each one nodded in turn. “Good, we doubt there will be time for handhelds even though we should each take one. We need to get our gear together and prepare to disembark at a moment’s notice, but for now we wait for word from Serevin.”

As each of the crew went to their respective quarters, Vector walked down the hallway to face the closed door of the cabin he shared with Rey’elle. He placed his hands on either side of the door and stood there leaning forward against the frame with his eyes closed. He steeled himself for what lay beyond, opened his eyes and pressed the door control.

The panel slowly slid open and the scent of her hit him like a fist as though it were a physical thing. He swayed for a moment, then stepped into the room and reached for the light switch on the wall. The sheets were still crumpled from the last night they had spent together and he could taste her essence on his tongue but, her aura was gone. He quickened his steps over to the locker and found the cloak hanging in its place then turned and hastened back toward the entry, hitting the light switch as he exited and closing the door behind him.

He felt winded as if he had run a great distance and his heart pounded as he walked back to the cargo bay to gather his gear and he dreaded the thought of putting the cloak on, fearing any distraction. He reached down to that tiny ice shard lying in the depths of his being and pulled the cold around him like a shield.
Chapter 15

Star Wars: The Old Republic

Forget Me, Remember Voss

Rey’elle had sat for what seemed like hours watching the troops moving around in the cavern. They carried crates, set up barriers, a couple of the Gormak were sparring with each other, but mostly they just stood around in little groups talking. The two guards stationed at the entrance to the alcove had remained silent the entire time. She noticed Serevin and his new best friend, Rotann, advancing out of one of the side tunnel entrances and heading her way.

“And so it begins,” she said to herself.

When they arrived, Serevin dismissed the guards and looked down at her. “Don’t you know that it is common courtesy to stand when your superiors approach, Cipher? Were you taught nothing of manners? Low breeding will tell.”

“When I see a superior, I will stand. I am still waiting for one.”

“Why do you vex me so?” He nodded to Rotann who grabbed her wrist, lifted her to her feet and held her upright with her arm stretched above her head. She watched as Serevin took a dagger from a sheath at his waist and cut both sleeves from her garb, leaving her arms bare. He then sliced her garment from neck to navel, letting it gape open in the front, barely covering her breasts.

“Bring the restraints,” Serevin said to one of the guards who came forward carrying a long rope with a leather strap attached to one end. Rotann continued to hold her by the arm while the guard threaded the rope through the pulley system leaving the strap dangling against the wall. Rotann moved his grip further down her arm and the guard buckled the strap around her wrist and pulled the rope until she stood with one arm pulled tightly above her. He tied off the rope to a cleat imbedded in the wall and walked away.

Rey’elle batted her eyelashes at Serevin. “My, aren’t you getting kinky in your old age. All you had to do was ask.”

She felt her lip split against her teeth as he backhanded her. Her mouth filled with blood as she watched him struggle to gain control and just when he almost had it, she spit the blood at his face. She watched the globule hit the front of his robe and smiled. He raised his arm to strike her again, but stopped himself, with visible effort, and stepped back.

“I have a message to send, Cipher and you are causing a delay. As gratifying as it is to hit your very pretty mouth, the next bit will be much better.” Another guard walked forward with a holo recorder followed by a human male dressed in Jedi robes. Serevin handed his dagger to the Jedi and moved aside as Rotann stepped behind her.

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Scorpio’s voice came over the intercom while everyone was continuing their preparations. “Vector, we have a holo coming in. It is one way, not a call, so you can view it with the rest of us.”

He and Phi-ton almost collided in the hallway as they all made their way to the conference room.

Vector pushed on, leaving Phi-ton to bring up the rear. As he burst into the room he said, “show it to us.”

He dropped into a chair as her image became visible. She stood with one arm pulled high above her, the other dangling at her side. A Gormak towered behind her and a Jedi stood off to the side. Her face was pale with dark circles framing her eyes above cheekbones that jutted out over hollow cheeks. The stain of a bruise marred the side of her mouth and there was a split in her lower lip. The robe she wore was sleeveless and had been split down the center. He inhaled an involuntary gasp when he noticed how gaunt she was. He could see the skin pulled tight across her ribs and sternum where the robe separated and her collarbones protruded so much that they looked like a necklace of bone.

Phi-ton growled as the Gormak twisted her free arm behind her and grasped her hair to pull her head back. Vector leaned forward and held his breath as the Jedi approached her exposed throat, a dagger in his hand, and felt paralyzed as the knife was dragged down her collarbone from shoulder to chest. He heard her groan in pain and watched the wound open, forcing blood between her breasts and down her body to turn the crimson cloth to black.

He listened intently as the Jedi turned to the recorder to speak. “I am Master Argost with a message for the Voss. I have left a location device and instruction with your family at the tea house. I will bleed her every hour until you arrive. Bring whomever you please, it will change nothing. As you can see, I have powerful allies.” The recording ended at that point.

Vector’s thoughts tumbled and whirled together like a cyclone. He wanted to roar at the universe like a beast, wanted to let the rage have its way with him, use his sinew and muscle to hack these creatures out of existence and to carve her name into Serevin’s beating heart. But, more than any personal vengeance, he simply wanted to touch her.

The silence in the room broke through his turmoil and he looked into the questioning faces of everyone. Lokin spoke first. “That was no Jedi. We all know it, so what game does Serevin play at?”

Phi-ton answered. “Serevin’s goal has always been to win the Voss over to an alliance with the empire. If he were seen fraternizing with the Gormak, it would not serve him well. It is more prudent for him to promote the belief that it is the Jedi who provoke the Gormak against the Voss. He is using Rey’elle to those ends knowing full well that I will come for her.”

Vector raised his hand to silence them before anyone else could speak. “We care not what Serevin’s designs may be. We care for one thing, and only one. She has been in the hands of this madman for too long and, we swear, by every drop of her precious blood, that if we don’t find the means to free her, we will call every Killik hive in the galaxy down upon this world and turn it to ash. We all know what has to be done. We have a direction now and we will follow through no matter what may come. How soon to Voss, Raina?”

“About twenty minutes ‘til we drop out of hyperspace, another fifteen to dock at the orbital station and another half hour to take the shuttle to the surface. There is no way to prevent the Jedi from making good on his threat and I fear it may be more than once she will feel his blade before we can get to her. I will remain in the cockpit to make sure everything goes as smoothly as I can make it.”

“Vector, I require a word with you,” said Phi-ton as the others rose to leave.

“Make it quick, we still have much to do.”

“Please sit….or stand, as you will. Although I do not care for your threat against my world, I understand the reason and we can discuss or fight about those possibilities later. However, there is
something important you need to know. You would not have noticed this from the holo but I did. You know of Rey’elle’s and my connection, I have explained it to you. But, there is another condition that can occur, it is very rare, even among Voss. This sickness causes the very cells to degenerate and ardor becomes something more than rejoining, it becomes renewal. Did you notice those bright spots on her cheeks? The fever has already started and once it starts the sickness will progress faster and faster. Her body is essentially devouring itself and the fever is a sign of it fighting to survive. We are running out of time, in more ways than one. We must save her soon."

“How long have you known about this? How long does she have?”

“I did not know until I saw her face today. Like I said, it is very rare. We call it Anasan Fer, the assassin fever, because it comes out of nowhere and kills without mercy. If the fever has just started, it can be weeks, even months, but because she is human, I cannot even hazard a guess. We must find a way.”

When the ship dropped out of hyperspace, Vector was in the cargo bay finishing preparations to, again, set foot upon a world he wished he had never seen.

Rey’elle’s elevated hand and arm were starting to lose feeling and her collarbone fluctuated between a dull ache and seering pain. Her head throbbed with every heartbeat and she was unbelievably thirsty. Her body could not decide whether it wanted to be too hot or too cold and her back hurt like hell from standing in one position for so long.

“You know Watcher, now would be a good time for you to show up. I could use a friend right now. A spy and a psychopath, who would have thought. I guess that little lightning show back on Hoth finally did fry those implants, but having you around was a strange comfort. I truly wish you were here. This is going to be worse than Hoth, I think you would have enjoyed it.”

She saw her two guards snap to attention as Serevin and his little troupe returned. She started to giggle.

“Cipher, my sweet, so good to see you in such good humor. Time does fly, your hour is up, but pray tell, what do you find so humorous?”

“Nothing much, just an old joke I heard, ‘a Darth, a Gormak and a Jedi walk into a cantina…’” She started to giggle again.

Serevin frowned. “Very clever, but I doubt you will be laughing for long.” He motioned for the Jedi to get closer to her and moved aside.

The holo recorder was activated and the Jedi spoke. “One hour has passed. A Jedi always keeps his word.” Rotann moved to her side and held her free arm while the Jedi removed the knife from his belt and cut a gash into the side of her extended forearm that ran from her wrist almost to her elbow. She cried out as blood flowed out of the wound and down the length of her arm. The recorder was turned off.

Serevin walked over to her and leaned in closer. “You don’t seem to be laughing now, I wonder if the joke has gone sour.”

Vector, Kaliyo, Lokin, Scorpio and Phi-ton were on the shuttle from the orbital station to Voss-ka. Vector had donned the cloak on the Phantom before he left making sure his face was well hidden
under the hood. He left a few minutes before the rest and kept his head down, avoiding any people and boarded the shuttle. The rest boarded later and sat apart from him.

They had turned off their handheld holos for the trip, so as not to attract attention and Lokin carried Vector’s staff in case it might be recognized. Scorpio got some strange looks, but most would probably identify her as some new model of protocol droid.

Once they landed, they all disembarked and went separate ways. Vector arrived at the tea house first and sat at a table near the rear of the room with his back against the wall and a clear view of the door. He waved the waitress away and snuffed out the incense burning on the table. The others arrived a few minutes later and Yana-ton, Phi-ton’s sister ran to greet her brother. He said something to her and she ran out of the door on some mission he had given to her. He motioned for them all to follow him up the stairs and into a study to the right of his bedroom.

Once inside he closed the door and activated his handheld. It was beeping. “About damn time. There is a recording like last time, safe for all to watch. Raina out.” The holo was brief and not as clear as the one on the ship. It showed Rey’elle, they heard the message from the Jedi and watched in silence as he slashed her arm. They heard her cry out and watched the blood start to flow, then it went blank.

Vector began to pace in the small room. He folded his arms around his chest as if he did not know what to do with his hands. He had never felt so helpless in his life.

Kaliyo finally said, “I have met some sick people in my time, but this guy is really starting to piss me off.”

They heard the door downstairs open and close. Phi-ton motioned for them to stay put while he exited the room and closed the door. They heard talking and then the front door open and close again. Steps on the staircase and Phi-ton once again entered the room. “Uncle Therod has gone to make an appointment with the Three. I have impressed the urgency to him and he has the ear of the council since Rey’elle’s intercession on our behalf. The odds are very good that they will see us today. Dr. Lokin, we will go to the Towers of Prophecy and wait until we are called.”

Vector threw the hood back from his face. “And just exactly how long must we wait? She is hanging there like a piece of meat being carved into every hour. How long do you think she can wait?”

Phi-ton regarded Vector for a few seconds before he answered. “We will make the Three understand the problem. Rey’elle is well regarded by them. They will not refuse since the future of Voss is also at stake. If we rush in alone with insufficient numbers we will all die and she will die and then what is the reason for all of this?”

Lokin took Vector’s arm. “He is right, my boy. Do this right or not at all. We need the commandos to get this done and the Three may be the only way.”

Vector nodded his head in resignation as Phi-ton and Lokin left. Scorpio walked to the window and looked out at the city. “I do not like this place.”

Kaliyo went to stand beside her. “Me neither, sister, me neither.”

Rey’elle could not feel her left arm any more, even the tingling in the fingertips had stopped. She had almost dozed off earlier but the weight of her body pulling on the strap around her wrist was so
unbearable it woke her up. She was slick with sweat, the robe stuck to her skin and yet she shivered and her teeth chattered. She tried to lick her lips but there was no spit in her mouth to do so. Thirst had become a constant companion.

She heard the guards shuffle about and knew that the unholy triad had returned. What wonders did they have in store for her now? Serevin was the first to walk up to her. She noticed a stain on the front of his robe where she had spat on him and it gave her a small sense of satisfaction.

He smiled at her as he came closer. “We have returned to you Cipher but you are not as jovial as you were earlier. Was it something I said? I certainly hope not, I do try very hard not to offend my guests. Now, where were we, ah yes, the hour. You will be so happy to know that, time’s up.”

The holo recorder was still set up from the time before and the guard took his place behind it. It was almost an exact replay of the first time the dagger had been used on her. Rotann held her arm and forced her head back while the Jedi drew the blade down the opposite collarbone, again from shoulder to chest. He turned to the recorder. “We Jedi love balance as you can see. Two hours gone, two cuts. Do you not love this woman enough to save her? I am still waiting.” The recorder shut off, the Gormak released her and they moved away without a backward glance.

Phi-ton and Lokin were waiting outside the Towers of Prophecy when the next holo came in. Phi-ton already knew, before he played it, that more brutality awaited his viewing and yet he had to be sure she was still alive. He would find a way even if the Three denied his request.

Finally an acolyte walked up to them to usher them into the chambers where the Three held court. They entered the doorway to see a double staircase winding left and right up to a second story landing. A large chandelier hung from the ceiling above a huge azure crystal set in the floor between the stairs. Corridors branched off the central chamber likely leading to other rooms. They were led up the staircase to another door and as they entered, they saw three Voss standing upon a dais at the back of the chamber.

Phi-ton and Lokin both bowed as they faced the governing body of all Voss. The two men introduced themselves as Sonn-Vi and Gunta-Mer, the lone female was Nen-Ji.

Sonn-Vi was the first to speak. “Your uncle explained your need to see us. You wish for our aid in the rescue of your wife. We are caught in a dilemma of two conflicting visions, one says that your wife will start the war with the Gormak again, the other says that she will end the war that will be started by another outsider. And yet, Voss do not kill Voss and the Gormak are no more. All are Voss now. How do we go against our own?”

Gunta-Mer spoke next. “It is rare for such an occurrence and what are we to believe? We must consider all things before a decision can be made.”

Nen-Ji spoke last. “If we are to believe that she is to start this conflict is it not better to allow her death to avoid this outcome? And if she is to end the conflict, would this not also come to be with her death?”

Phi-ton responded. “Although I would never presume to be an interpreter, I have knowledge that you do not. Given what we know, this outsider is actually at the core of both visions. He uses those Gormak who refuse to become Voss. If they are not Voss then our tenets are not broken and we must answer this threat regardless. My wife is Voss, she is family, to do nothing is the greater crime.
“Her abductor conspires with these reticent Gormak to start the conflict again, in which case Rey’elle is just a means and not truly at fault even though it could be seen as such. If she is going to stop the conflict, as in the second vision, would it not be wise to save her life and let her deal with this outsider so that he never poses a threat to Voss again? Either case would suggest that it is best for her to survive to deal with a threat that we are ill equipped to circumvent.”

“You speak wisely for one so young, Phi-ton. We will grant you twenty of our commandos. End this now and save Voss.” said Sonn-Vi.

With some reservation, Gunta-Mer confirmed the decision. “I am not sure this is the wisest course, but it may be our only option. Take the commandos, put an end to this uprising and save Voss.”

Nen-Ji also agreed. “She is the one prophesied in the past and has proven her worth. She is the one prophesied in this new vision. Take the commandos and save her life which in turn will save Voss.”

The audience was over. Phi-ton and Lokin bowed to the Three again and left the chamber. Lokin activated his earbud as soon as they left the Tower of Prophecy. “Kaliyo, we have the commandos, twenty of them. We return to the tea house now.”

Vector had switched on his earbud as soon as it beeped. At last they had hope. He had witnessed the last holo recording and knew that she still lived. If she could withstand the torment then he would be a coward not to watch. She was alive and they were coming for her.

They would not reach her before another hour was up and she would suffer again but they would be dead before the fifth knife stroke fell. He vaguely recalled a conversation, after Hoth, when he spoke with Lokin about debt and payment. Well, a debt was due, the currency was blood and he was coming to collect.
Chapter 16

Vector thought that Lokin and Phi-ton would never return to the tea house, it seemed to take forever and his impatience swarmed around him like mites in the hive. He wondered what the holdup was and tapped on the earbud. “Lokin, where are you? Time is not our friend.”

His earbud beeped and Lokin’s voice vibrated in his ear. “We are gathering forces, Vector. We are at the commando barracks and Phi-ton is speaking with his old commander Telsin-Fal. The three of us will be there shortly.”

It was becoming hot in the study and Vector was sweating under his armor. A couple of stitches, from the chestpiece repair, were poking into his knife scar and that wasn’t helping his disposition any. He kept waiting for the next holo recording and dreading it at the same time.

At last he heard the tea shop door. The study door opened and Phi-ton and Lokin entered.

“I have the locator device. We are to go to Outpost Skyline and south into Western Watchlands. The instructions said that the locator will activate at some relay stations on our way. I have already told this to Telsin-Fal and he is on his way to Skyline as we speak. We must go now.”

“Just a second,” interrupted Lokin. “Scorpio do you have those tracker tabs I asked for?”

“Do not insult me with your doubt, doctor, of course I have them.” She opened up a small compartment in her body chassis, removed three tiny objects and handed them to Lokin.

Lokin took the devices and proceeded to explain. “Phi-ton, Kaliyo and I will each have one of these in our clothes. You must not ride with us, Vector, but stay back some ways. If Serevin knows that you live, he could kill her out of spite, I do not think he would appreciate being fooled. Here is the tracker I kept from Hoth, the frequency is the same. Also, if your handheld goes off, do not pick up. It could be a call and not a recording. That’s it for me. Anyone else?”

“Yes,” said Vector. “Can we go now? And doctor, we want our staff back as soon as we get to Skyline.”

All of them exited the study and went down the stairs toward the front door. Phi-ton stopped for a second to speak to his sister and uncle and then followed the rest out of the tea house. Vector hung back a little way from the group and noticed Phi-ton veer off the path and pick a couple of springs of a greenish-gray plant and place them into his pack. They reached the hopper pad and boarded the shuttle in silence. Vector glanced down at his chrono, they should receive the next message a little after they reach Skyline, about twenty minutes. He wanted time to stand still, but it mocked him as the next number ticked over.

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Serevin had been standing before her for some minutes, studying her like a lab animal. She stared back at him, but her eyes kept losing focus. She tried to remember how long a human could survive without water, three days?, five? Chills wracked her body and her legs kept buckling, but she did not fall. The arm, she could no longer feel, betrayed her and kept her on her feet. She was beyond exhaustion and all she could do was wait for the next assault that she knew was coming.

“You look unwell, Cipher. I hope it wasn’t something in the food or drink. I will have a word with the chef when I find the time. And speaking of time…..” Serevin motioned to Rotann and the Jedi who were descending on her.
Serevin was rubbing his chin as if in deep thought. “Hmm, I believe she is having trouble standing. I suggest you give her some help.”

The recorder was switched on as Rotann moved behind her and gripped her free arm, pulling her tightly against his chest. The Jedi placed his boot on her foot bearing down on it to hold her leg still as he raised the bottom of the robe to expose her leg. He took the dagger and with a quick stroke, split her leg from hip to knee. When she did not make a sound, he took his finger and dug into the wound until she cried out and then turned to the recorder. “I do not believe she can stand much more, excuse the pun. Do hurry, I tire of picking at the meat and want to get to the heart of the matter.” He let the robe fall, patted her on the thigh, which elicited another groan and walked away. Rotan released her and she swayed slightly. The recorder clicked off.

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The hopper landed at Skyline and everyone walked down the ramp toward Telsin-Fal who was waiting by the gate with his men. Vector still kept the cloak on with the hood covering his face, but he was thankful for the cooling breeze. He started toward the speeder pad when Dr. Lokin stopped him and handed his staff back and then continued on toward the others. He looked at his chrono, four minutes to go. He activated his earbud, “Lokin, have you explained your special abilities yet? We would not like to see our allies run the other way or shoot you.”

“Doing that now. They will not fully understand until they see it, but they will not run. Holo will be incoming soon.”

Vector was looking around the compound where several Imperial and Voss troops went about their routines. One of the Voss approached Telsin-Fal’s group, spoke for a moment, then moved away without incident. He got a sideward glance from time to time but no one came near. The holo began to beep and he glanced over to Lokin who nodded his head to indicate it was ok for his eyes. He moved behind a building to shield the handheld and switched it on. What they were putting her through was more than cruel, it was perverse. He switched off the holo, closed his eyes and waged the internal war between flame and frost. This day, he needed both and let it end in deadlock. He heard speeders start and watched as the group turned out of the compound and onto the road. He activated the tracker, waited a few minutes, and followed.

They were headed south and had gone some distance when the road passed between a rock face to the east and a grassy hill to the west, the locator device activated as they passed between the relay stations installed atop each rise. Phi-ton looked down at the display window and saw a small green arrow that pointed east.

They continued south for about a half mile to where the road forked, branching south and east. He turned onto the eastern road and continued on. They passed from the Western Watchlands into Gormak lands and could see huge retaining walls shoring up hillsides in the distance and roads splitting off into Gorma-koss. They attracted the attention of a few groups of crysfang but easily outran any that gave chase.

The sun was sinking lower in the sky when the locator device began to beep more insistenty and Phi-ton slowed their advance finally coming to a stop. Further on he could barely see the entrance into a ravine flanked by a sheer stone wall on the left and a lower stone rise on the right. He dismounted and gathered the group around him.

Telsin-Fal took quick stock of the area and said, “The rise to the right has good vantage for an ambush, there are likely snipers. I will take eight of my men and clear it.”

Scorpio stepped forward. “I will go with them and inform you when the task is complete.”
Phi-ton and those that remained watched Telsin-fal and his group disappear around a group of large boulders. A few minutes passed before they could hear blaster fire from the distance and everyone’s handheld indicated an incoming transmission.

“It’s a call, not a recording this time,” said Raina. “Putting it through now.”

Lokin immediately tapped his earbud, “Do not pick up, Vector. It is a call.”

The Jedi appeared on the holo in Phi-ton’s hand. “I hear you have finally arrived. I was debating on whether to end your dear agent’s life, but I would rather see all hope fade from her eyes as she watches you fall. Hope is such a vile emotion, I like to kill it where I can. My Gormak friend is especially eager to meet you. We will be waiting.”

The fighting on the ridge continued for some minutes before Scorpio’s voice came through their earbuds. “Threat eliminated. Two Voss injured, one will not survive. Heading back now.”

The sun had started to disappear behind the ridge of the ravine, elongating the shadows and throwing the chasm into ever deepening gloom. Scorpio and Telsin-Fal returned with four of the eight commandos in tow.

Telsin-Fal gave them his assessment. “As we thought, there is a cave entrance at the end of this canyon. There is little or no cover in the approach. It appears that there is some sort of lighting in the corridor, but we do not know how long it is, nor do we know the defenses or number of troops. It will be a choke point and kill zone if we do not approach carefully. I have left three of my men on the ridge as cover, one did not make it.”

Lokin activated his earbud. “Vector, you can join us now. It is time to go to work.”

When Vector arrived, they started to advance into the ravine until the could see the entrance of the cave then stopped. The sun was almost gone behind the cliff and night was fast approaching.

Lokin moved off to the side and began to undress. “I will not be able to speak in my new form, but I can still think and understand. Scorpio and I should enter first since she and I can withstand more blaster fire than the rest of you. She can take out lights and I can take out men as we go. Both she and I have excellent night vision which will help. Kaliyo and Phi-ton behind us then Vector and Telsin-Fal. The commandos follow and as soon as we reach any sort of cavern or larger room, pick a target and kill it. Fan out, don’t get cornered and stay alive. We don’t know what waits for us.”

Kaliyo watched Lokin undress with interest. “Whoa, Doc, I never knew a man your age could have a body like that. Yummy! I need to come to the med lab more often.”

Lokin winked at her as he stripped off his underwear. “Your company is always welcome, my dear, but I’m not sure you could handle it. Now excuse me while I slip into something more comfortable.” He stepped behind the nearest bush and after a few minutes of the horrifying sounds of ripping flesh, breaking bones and groans of intense pain, a pale monster emerged.

He moved forward toward the entrance with Scorpio at his side, the rest following a short distance behind. As Lokin and Scorpio entered the cave, a blaster shot echoed back to the group and the cave went dark. They heard growls and screams, then silence. The group moved forward to the entrance where Vector grabbed Kaliyo’s arm and pushed her behind him. He moved up beside Phi-ton and they both entered the darkness.

Moving forward was painfully slow. Blaster shot, glass shatter, growls and screams. Vector doubted that they would use explosives in the narrow corridor but he kept expecting some sort of toxin gas
which never came. Perhaps the Voss or Gormak did not use such devices but he knew that Imperial troops were not above such tactics.

Vector came around a turn in the passageway and saw Lokin and Scorpio’s shapes outlined in the light coming from a larger chamber beyond. Both he and Phi-ton quickened their pace until they stood behind the two. Vector removed the cloak and let it drop. There was no movement in the chamber but Lokin used his clawed hand to indicate Scorpio to move left while he moved right. They both burst into the room as Gormak and troopers seemed to come out of nowhere and everywhere. He and Phi-ton entered the room next with Kaliyo and Telsin-Fal right on their heels and the commandos fanned out as they entered.

Vector saw Rey’ elle in an alcove some distance from him and heard a lightsaber ignite somewhere to the right as the Jedi advanced toward her. He would never reach them in time.

“Kaliyo?” He yelled as he started to run.

“I see it.”

“You sure?”

“I’ve got this, Go!” Kaliyo took aim at the Jedi and was about to pull the trigger when her shot was blocked by someone who moved in front of him, she immediately switched targets to the rope holding Rey’ elle and fired.

Everything slowed down for Vector as he closed on the Jedi. He saw Rey’ elle fall as the lightsaber just missed the top of her head then the man reversed his hold on the saber to strike down at her prone form. Vector brought his staff under and up feeling his blade block the downward stroke and heard the sizzle as the lightsaber was deflected. Bringing the counterweight around, he knocked the Jedi sideways and then moved in front of the place where she lay. Lokin dragged one of the Gormak, who had tried to flank him, away in a flurry of claws and teeth as the Jedi came at him again. He briefly looked around for Serevin but did not see him anywhere.

Phi-ton saw Rey’ elle fall and Vector strike the Jedi and started to move toward them when he spied the Gormak leader leveling his rifle at Vector. He flung his staff like a javelin, knocking the barrel askew and causing the shot to go wild. Pulling his blaster from his belt, he took aim and fired again and again as he bore down on the Gormak driving him back step by step. Squatting down to scoop up his staff, he clicked the button that released the two retractable blades, and pressed on toward Rotann who had dropped his rifle in favor of the vibrosword clipped to his back. The heavier Gormak was slower than Phi-ton who dashed in and out, forward and back slicing and stabbing before dodging out of the way of Rotann’s blade.

The rest of the group was making headway in the battle with Lokin tipping the balance. His rakghoul form was all but impervious to blaster fire as he plunged, head long, into groups of troopers. The Gormak proved the more difficult opponents due to their size and strength and the fact that they had no fear of him. He was bleeding from a few open cuts and a sizeable wound that ran from his armpit, over his ribs, to his waist, but he gave no indication of slowing down. Scorpio had joined him to watch his back and waded into the fray at his side. She would have preferred to stand back and shoot with her rifle but incoming fire made that all but impossible, plus, Lokin was losing control to a form of bloodlust and she was the only one safe to be near him. Moving around the room, they were systematically clearing out each tunnel entrance as the commandos provided cover fire when they were not engaged in hand to hand combat.

Kaliyo was trying to get aim at the Jedi but was pinned down by blaster fire coming from one of the passages. She had shamelessly used the body of a fallen Voss as cover and was picking targets as
they became available and when she could raise her head to fire. She couldn’t even get a bead on Rotann because Phi-ton was in the way. “Hey, Fal, or whatever your name is, a little help over here would be nice.”

Blood flowed from several small cuts in Rotann’s armor but his own blade had connected twice, once with Phi-ton’s shoulder and once with his side, right below the waistline. The side wound had caused Phi-ton to stagger and Rotann decided to press the advantage. His blade whipped back and forth faster and faster, high, low, side to side, forcing Phi-ton back as he tried to counter each strike. Phi-ton fell backward over a body and as Rotann raised his blade for the killing blow, Kaliyo took her shot. The blaster bolt hit Rotann in the side of his face spinning him around as his hand automatically went up to the wound. Phi-ton rolled to his feet and cut across the back of Rotann’s knee. As the Gormak started to fall, Phi-ton kicked his chest knocking him to his back and plunged his blade down into the sternum apex, where the collar bones meet, then twisted the blade, severing the Gormak’s spine. He gave a quick nod to Kaliyo and headed toward Vector who still fought the Jedi or Sith or whatever he was.

The chrysalis had enhanced his strength and reflexes but Vector was hard pressed to keep up with the Jedi. The lightsaber was a blur of motion and he had not been able to deflect every blow. He was cut on his arm, his thigh, across his side and down his chest but he still held his place in front of her. He had done so little damage to the other man. He had managed to connect with the man’s forearm and slice down his chest with the trident blade but they were merely scratches. He was mostly on the defensive and not making headway.

The Jedi suddenly brought his hand up, “I tire of this.” Vector was hit by a wave of energy that lifted him off his feet and slammed him into the back wall of the alcove. Temporarily stunned, he could not block the thrown dagger, and barely moved his head in time to avoid the blade penetrating his eye. He could feel blood drip down his face where the knife had grazed his temple.

Vector had started to rise to his feet when the Jedi looked at him then down at Rey’elle and growled, “Now I finish this as my master wished.” Vector was propelling himself forward, he caught the sight of Phi-ton moving in from his right, saw the Jedi raising the lightsaber, and heard Kaliyo yell, “Not today, you prick!”

The rifle blast hit the Jedi in the upper torso, sending him backward. Vector and Phi-ton descended on him in unison, one striking while the other blocked the lightsaber attacks. Vector extended his arm, ducked and swept his staff under the man, knocking him off his feet. His lightsaber rolled away and extinguished. Phi-ton stepped back and Vector drove the point of the trident through the man’s chest and into his heart, turning the blade 180 degrees, snapping ribs and leaving a gaping hole when he finally disengaged.

Vector ran to Rey’elle, dropping to his knees beside her. He gently cradled her head and shoulders and rolled her into his arms, holding her as if she might break. He pushed her hair back from her face and kissed her forehead, her skin was hot and dry against his lips.

Her eyelids fluttered open and she thought she was in a dream, “Vector? Is that really you? Let me touch your face, I need to touch your face. I am so thirsty.”

He took her hand and held her palm against his cheek, then kissed her palm and placed it against his cheek again. “We are here, my love, we have come for you and you are safe now.”

Phi-ton stood close by but did not move to touch her, as much as he wanted to hold her, he did not interfere. Kaliyo walked over to them, “Vector, now is not a good time but you need to know. The fighting has stopped. Those that surrendered are being executed by Fal, orders of the Three he said. There is no sign of Serevin and they are going to close the entrance to this cave as soon as everyone
is out. Lokin is hurt and I need to go to him, he probably saved us all.”

Vector looked up a Phi-ton, “She is burning up. Can she make it back to Voss-ka?”

Phi-ton replied, “she may be too weak to survive the trip. She may be too weak to survive at all.”

Vector placed his other arm under her knees and stood up, lifting her as he rose. “We will never accept that. Bring every blanket you can find and water, she needs water, then follow me.”

Phi-ton went to every camp area that was close by. He took every blanket and four canteens of water and followed Vector into one of the side passages. They stopped when they reached the end.

“Lay out all but one of the blankets here. Make it as soft as possible. Cut the other blanket into strips, leave one of the canteens, then step aside.”

Phi-ton did as instructed and watched Vector gently lower her onto the blankets. Supporting her head, he brought the mouth of a canteen up to her lips and poured a trickle of water down her throat. Her eyes opened and she reached for the canteen wanting more. “Sips, take tiny sips or you will just vomit it back up.”

He gave her a few more sips of water, reached for one of the blanket strips, wet it then wiped her face. He removed the strap from around her wrist, the skin underneath was bruised, raw and bloody. He wet a strip of blanket and wound it around her wrist hoping it would provide some comfort, then carefully removed the tattered robe and her undergarments, kissed her lips and stood up leaving her naked body on the blankets.

As he stepped by Phi-ton, he grasped his arm, “Do what you must, we will be waiting.” Vector heard her calling his name as he walked out of the passageway.

Phi-ton chewed two leaves of wind sorrow as he slowly undressed and lay down beside her. She was so frail he was almost afraid to touch her but he took her face and turned it toward him, “Rey’elle? I am here and I know what must be done, it breaks my heart to have to touch you in this way. I will be as gentle as I can but I have no choice. I cannot lose you. Please come back to me, to us.”

She opened her eyes and looked into his face, “Phi-ton? Where is Vector?”

“Hush, beloved, he has what you want but I have what you need. Open yourself to me, take what you require and live.”

He placed his mouth on hers, pulled her to him, felt the rumble begin, moved against her and in her, began to dissipate into physical and essence. He lifted her to him, surrounded, entered and merged. She had nothing left to give, so he gave instead.

Vector stood at the entrance, stoic and resolute. Kaliyo walked over to him, “Let me check that head wound, it is still bleeding and I have kolto for the other wounds.”

Vector caught her hand. “The pain masks the misery, let it be.”
Chapter 17

Star Wars: The Old Republic

Forget Me, Remember Voss

Phi-ton lay, propped up on his elbow, by Rey’elle’s side watching her sleep. He had partially covered her by pulling in both sides of the top blanket around her. Her breathing was regular and some of her color had returned. The fever had mostly subsided and should disappear with rest. He finally rolled away from her and stood up to get dressed as quietly as he could.

He felt light headed as he stood up and a little off balance as he walked down the passageway to see Vector standing at the entrance like stone. He must have been there since he had left them hours ago. Vector turned around when he heard steps behind him and walked by Phi-ton, without a glance, as he headed back down the passageway.

Telsin-Fal and Kaliyo walked over. “You do not look well.” Said Telsin-Fal. “It must have taken much from you to bring her back from the brink. She has the fever, does she not?”

Phi-ton looked up at them and took the canteen that Kaliyo offered. “She will live, that is all that matters. Kaliyo, I wish to offer my gratitude. I would be dead if not for you. How is Dr. Lokin?”

Kaliyo replied. “Lokin will be fine, he heals very quickly and no thanks are necessary, I did what I had to. When can we leave this graveyard?”

Phi-ton shrugged. “When she is strong enough to travel.”

Vector walked quietly to the back of the passage and saw her sleeping peacefully. He sat down close to her with his back against the wall and watched the steady rise and fall of her breasts beneath the blanket. He reached out to smooth her hair and was serene as long as he could touch some part of her.

He awoke with a start at Rey’elle calling his name. He looked down into her eyes staring up at him. “We are here, love, are you alright?”

“Yes, can you help me sit up and can I have some more water?”

He lifted her and sat her up against the stone, then handed her a canteen and watched her take several small sips. When she was done, she set the canteen down and reached out to him with both arms. “Take me out of this place. I want to see the sky again.”

He bent over to pick up his staff and clip it to his harness, then, settling the blanket around her, he knelt down and picked her up, pulling her close. She linked her arms around his neck and laid her head on his shoulder as he carried her into the cavern. She shivered, involuntarily, as she spied the corpses of Rotann and the Jedi and turned her face into Vector’s shoulder so she could avoid seeing the alcove where she was held captive for so long.

Vector looked down at the floor as they passed the entrance to the cavern. “Kaliyo, can you pick up the cloak please? We will need it for the trip back to Voss-ka.” He continued down the passageway until they walked out into the dawn. He had never seen her face look more beautiful than at this moment as she looked up into the multi-colored sky.
When they reached the speeders, Vector held her while Kaliyo wrapped her in the cloak and then helped settle her on the seat in front of him. As, they rode away from the ravine toward Skyline, they heard the explosion behind them as the commandos sealed the dead and the cavern behind a wall of rock.

Lokin thought it a shame that the memories could not be so easily entombed, but supposed that they would fade in time. He then looked over at Kaliyo, riding beside him, and wondered what he might have started back in the canyon. Perhaps it was nothing but an old man’s musings, but if not…..she was trouble and the prospects were endless.

Phi-ton kept his own council walking from the cave and during the ride to Skyline. Watching her and Vector together, he began to understand that he had lost her, if she had ever been his to begin with. What he shared with her was physical or even metaphysical but what she and Vector shared was something deeper than he could ever reach. She would ask for the healing and he felt that the sorrow would suffocate him.

When all had boarded the shuttle, Lokin turned to Rey’elle. “I need to give you a shot of kolto and then get you back to the ship and into the tank. We must do the same for you Vector. I fear for infection and now that we have a moment to breathe, your medical needs are paramount.”

Rey’elle raised her hand to block the injection. “No. I will not take any other substance into my body. I have my reasons, doctor. The only thing I want right now is a bath. Not a sonic or a shower, but a nice, long soak. Do you have some place in Voss-ka where I can do this, Phi-ton?”

Phi-ton could not look at her but answered, “There is a hot spring near the back of the cantina on Seeker Hill. It is secluded and my people seldom visit, that should serve your needs.”

“Thank you. Can I borrow someone’s holo? I need to call Raina and…….damn! Did anyone call Raina and let her know that everyone is alright?”

“Yeah, I called her right after I saw to Eckard and while you and humming boy were in the back of that cave. Ouch!…..what did you do that for, doc?”

Rey’elle used Kaliyo’s holo to call Raina and requested she bring fresh clothes for her and Vector to the tea house. She reassured Raina that everyone was fine and to take her time, then laid her head back against Vector and closed her eyes.

When the hopper landed, Lokin, Kaliyo, Scorpio and Phi-ton headed toward the tea house. Phi-ton had told Vector to wait for Yana-ton, his sister, in front of the cantina and she would lead them to the spring. Vector asked Lokin to take his staff and strode away toward the cantina. The sun was approaching mid-day when Yana-ton approached and motioned for them to follow her.

Vector could see steam rising from the spring behind some bushes and rocks that hid the water itself. As they got closer he could see a narrow pathway between two boulders and carried her to the water’s edge. Yana-ton laid two towels on the rocks, bowed and went back the way they had come. Vector set Rey’elle down on the the towels and watched as she removed the cloak. He saw the cuts on her arm, leg and collar bones, caked with blood and still oozing. The bones of her spine and shoulder blades pushed against her skin and she looked like a strong breeze could carry her away.

Rey’elle’s voice broke through his thoughts. “Vector Hyluss, are you going to stand there all day or are you going to get naked and carry me into that delicious pool of water?”

“It would be better if we kept our clothes on.”
“Nonsense, I have seen all of your bits, many times, and all I want is your company and a warm bath.”

He bowed to her and stripped off his armor, picked her up and waded into the clear pool. They spent time just touching each other, washing each other's wounds, letting the warm waters relax their tired muscles and feeling the sun on their faces. It was evident that he wanted more and she wanted more, but they let the desire hover between them like a promise and allowed the simple joys of the spring and each other’s company to suffice.

The sun indicated it was mid afternoon when they exited the pool. They took the towels and while they dried each other, Rey’elle asked if Phi-ton had offered any information about a way to rid her of the effects of Ardor. He explained that there was a ritual at the Shrine of Healing, but it did not always have the desired outcome. Rey’elle seemed deep in thought as she wrapped the cloak around herself and Vector struggled into his pants and boots. He left the chestpiece off opting for just the undershirt and reached for her hand as they started back toward the tea house. Halfway there she started to limp so he gathered her up and carried her the remainder of the way.

Raina, Lokin and Kaliyo were sitting at one of the tables and Raina handed the fresh clothes to Rey’elle and Vector while Yana-ton indicated that they could use one of the storage rooms to change. Scorpio had returned to the ship, and Phi-ton was resting in his room.

When they were dressed, they returned to the main room and sat down with the others where they drank tea, sweetened with honey, in silence. A door opened above them and Phi-ton came down the stairs wearing the demeanor of a condemned man as he approached the table.

Rey’elle spoke first. “Please sit down Phi-ton, we have much to discuss.”

Once he was seated, she began. “I will be going to the Shrine of Healing tomorrow to ask for the ritual of cleansing. I cannot live like this, I will not live like this and I will not ask Vector to live like this. I cannot be forever torn between needing you for the survival of my body and needing Vector for the survival of my soul. Vector is my soul, that choice is already made.

“You, Phi-ton, should have warned me what would happen, but you said nothing about the effects or consequences. You had full knowledge but left me blind. Calling something love does not make it so. Lust, perhaps, curiosity, perhaps, but what you did to me is not love.

“I was the most selfish and foolish and cruel of all. Secrets and curiosity are tools of my trade and I was very, very curious. No outsider had bedded a Voss and I wanted a taste of what that was like. I never questioned, I just did it. That act was unfair to you, to me and especially to Vector. I have much to atone for, but listen well, I will be free of this, no matter the cost.”

Phi-ton cleared his throat. “Apologies are dead things now and best unspoken, but there is more involved here than just you and Vector and me. My family depends on the favor which our union provides. It has raised our status in Voss-ka. My uncle enjoys teaching the children and recording in the libraries, my sister enjoys being envoy between outsiders and Voss. It will ensure a good marriage for her. You may think us cold, but we love family above all. I will remain your husband, but in all else I release you. I think that might be love.”

The silence in the room was almost palpable when Kaliyo spoke up. “It is getting late, agent, and the doc and I are tired. What do you want us to do now?”

“You may all return to the ship. I will remain here on Voss, there should be a room somewhere. I will go to the Shrine early, please be back in the morning, I want you all with me. I am also tired and hungry. Vector, will you stay with me?”
“We are always with you.”

They gathered up the cloak and Vector’s staff and armor and as they exited through the door, Rey’ elle turned around to see Phi-ton sitting with his head down and his sister, Yana-ton, hugging his sagging shoulders and speaking to him. He was caught in a trap that he could never escape and for this, she felt compassion and shame.

She and Vector found a room at a hostel in the Imperial Quarter of Voss-Ka and was thankful to see that the bed was not of Voss design. They ordered a simple meal of mollusk stew with some sort of tuber resembling potatoes, onions and a creamy sauce. A carafe of chilled water was also on the tray. Rey’ elle’s stomach kept growling so loudly that they both laughed. It had been a long time since her last meal and they couldn’t tell if her tummy was happy or pissed off.

After their repast, Rey’ elle walked to the window and opened it to let in the evening breeze. She listened to the night sounds and watched people pass by in the light of the streetlamps. Vector walked up behind her and enfolded her in his arms, she leaned back into his strength and folded her arms across his. Neither said a word for a long time.

Vector broke the silence at last. “Come to bed, love, we do not know what tomorrow brings and we both need rest, you most of all.”

They both undressed and crawled between the sheets. She spooned herself into the curves of his body, pulling his arm around her like a protective cover and fell into the sleep of the blessed or the damned. Tomorrow would define which it would be.

They woke just as the sun was rising to the chime of a holo call. “Hey agent, we are on our way, anything you need before we head down? Oh, Scorpio refuses to ever set foot on Voss again, so she is staying on the ship.”

“Bring me a comb, Kaliyo, and my datapad, I need to pay the bill. We will meet you here in the lobby. It’s fine about Scorpio, I doubt she would be much moral support anyway.”

She and Vector finished their morning routine and finished dressing then walked down the stairs and into the small dining area where they each ordered a cup of caf. Eventually Kaliyo, Lokin and Raina entered and she and Vector walked over to meet them. Rey’ elle took the datapad and transferred enough credits to settle the bill and when they exited, they saw Phi-ton standing by the path.

“I must be there with you for this. Do not argue, I will follow anyway and I have sent word for others. You will understand. Amin-le will see you when we arrive.”

No one spoke on the trip to the Shrine and Rey’ elle had forgotten how beautiful the architecture was until they stood in front of the massive arches framing the entrance. Their footsteps echoed as they followed Phi-ton down two wide avenues and then up a flight of stairs to the second story landing. An acolyte approached them at the entrance to a side room, which Rey’ elle recognized as the Wellspring, and bade them to follow.

Amin-le stood in front of a large brazier near the back of the room and motioned Rey’ elle to step forward. She spoke loud enough for everyone to hear as her voice echoed around the room. “You are petitioning for the Ardor to be cleansed from your body and I must be certain of your intent. Please breathe deeply of the vapor as I look into your body and your heart.”

She threw some herb into the brazier and a mauve and golden mist swirled upward. As Rey’ elle breathed in deeply her head began to spin and she lost consciousness as a wave of energy from Amin-le engulfed her. Vector tried to run to her, but was stopped by the acolyte and Lokin and he
could only look on helplessly. For several minutes Rey’elle lay there, unmoving, then as the world returned to her, she rolled over and slowly got to her feet. She was swaying and hardly seemed aware of where she was. Amin-le motioned Vector forward, and he rushed to Rey’elle’s side to keep her from falling again.

The healer spoke after a few minutes. “What you ask is not impossible, but it is likely that you will not survive. For a Voss this rite cleanses but for you it will be an extraction. Your physiology is quite different and what we remove can collapse the cells one by one with nothing to fill the empty space. The ones who came with you can provide energy or life force to help, but I am not sure that it will be enough. The process will be painful for them, it will be agony for you and I cannot guarantee that you will live. Let me know your decision.”

Vector took her face in his hands and tipped it up to look into her eyes. “You must not do this. We can share you but we cannot lose you. Please say no to this madness.”

“When I broke the mental conditioning I vowed to never let it happen again and yet here I am, in thrall to a force I have no control over. The empire, sith, intelligence, star cabal; hell... even the SIS controlled me and I say no more. I will be free, but there is a price to pay for what I did. Please give me the strength to see this through. Love me enough to save me.”

“But what if you don’t survive?”

“Then you will still have saved me.” She turned to the others. “There is nothing that you owe me to try this ritual. It will cause you pain and I will think no less of you if you walk away, the choice is yours.”

“Hell, it will be a new experience and something I can mark off my ‘to do before I die’ list, I’m in.” Kaliyo offered.

Lokin raised his hand. “Me as well. If I can stand the pain of the transformation, this should be a walk in the park.”

Raina spoke up. “I just want our ship back to normal, I want our lives back to normal, so yes, I will also help.”

Rey’elle looked over toward the entrance as she heard footsteps to see Telsin-Fal enter with eight of his commandos. Phi-ton spoke. “I cannot be part of this because of our bond, so I have called in favors. Telsin-Fal and the others have consented to assist.”

Amin-le looked at everyone and said, “You may have a chance after all. This is a great gift that they give to you, do not squander it, decide to live before we begin.”

Vector lowered his face to hers and covered her lips with his. He pulled her body close as if he wanted to meld them together then lifted his mouth to her ear and whispered, “Live, for... me.”

Amin-le interrupted. “The decision has been made. Follow me.”

They walked into an adjoining room with a row of four beds down one wall and five down the opposite side. Amin-le motioned for Rey’elle to lie on the closest one as four acolytes or healers entered the room. Straps were buckled across Rey’elle’s chest, hips, thighs and ankles as a prevention to her falling, or worse.

“I will remove while my acolytes sustain. It will take time between each attempt for me to disperse Phi-ton’s energies back into the ether. Two of you have foreign substances in your bodies, one is very natural, one is very dark. We do not know how this will affect the ritual or if we can use those
energies at all. No one is to touch her until we are finished. Let us begin.”

A gold and purple glow formed around Amin-le that she funneled toward Rey’elle to create a link. This link began to pulse and a pale blue energy seemed to be pulled from her body and into the funnel. Rey’elle groaned and gripped the sides of the bed until her knuckles turned white then the link broke and she screamed. Two acolytes chose Kaliyo and Raina and created the same sort of link but theirs was pure gold. Golden energy was pulled from the two women and both went to their knees crying out in pain. By the time the link was broken, they were huddled on their sides on the floor. The acolytes created a link with Rey’elle and the energy flow was reversed, she screamed again.

Over and over the same process continued until she lay unconscious on the bed. She had gone into convulsions twice and Vector had felt the panic rise when she had stopped breathing for what felt like eternity. When the rise and fall of her chest began again, relief flooded him with such intensity he felt like his legs would fail.

Finally only he and Lokin were left. Amin-le started her part of the ritual as one of the acolytes moved to Vector. The energy pulled from him was a mixture of pale yellow and light tan. It drove him to one knee and then the other and he gritted his teeth against the pain as the acolyte disengaged, knocking him to the ground. He felt the nest reach out in concern and took their strength and comfort.

Lokin was the only one left and Amin-le was loathe for her acolytes to attempt to take any of his life force. His aura was black and red, like blood and midnight mixed together. She turned to the group and said, “We have done all we can. You will know in the next hours if she survives or not. We must rest now, it has taken much from us.”

Lokin seemed almost dejected and Amin-le spoke directly to him. “Your essence is tainted and I fear what it will do to her or my acolytes. There is a darkness that we dare not touch. It is your curse and we would have no part of it.” She then turned to Vector. “You may go to her now.”

Vector walked to the bed and carefully unfastened the straps. He placed his hand under her head and gently lifted until he could reach her face with his lips. He kissed her forehead, her eyelids, her cheeks and then her mouth, waiting for any response. There was nothing except the sound of her breathing.

He placed his arms under her shoulders and knees and lifted her to him. Her head lolled back across his arm and her arms hung limply as he walked to the steps that led up to the brazier. He sat down, holding her in his lap, and rocked her as he would a child.

He buried his face in her neck and whispered, “Do not leave us.”

He did not know how long he held her, time was lost in the waiting. He had closed his eyes against the world and wandered into memory when he felt her fingers comb through his hair. He was afraid he was dreaming or had imagined it until he looked into her soft brown eyes.

She was raising her hand to his face and he never felt the moisture until she brushed her hand against his cheek to catch the tears.

“You have never cried before.” she whispered.

“That is part of our humanity we had forgotten. It seems you have reminded us.”

“I want to go home, beloved. Take me home.”
Vector set Rey’elle on her feet making sure she was steady enough to walk. When they looked around, everyone was gone except for Phi-ton who stood at the entrance to the Wellspring. She hung onto Vector’s arm as they walked toward the Voss who seemed somehow diminished in stature and bearing.

“I am relieved that you are well after such an ordeal. The others of your crew have returned to your ship and Telsin-Fal and his commandos have also departed. With your permission, I would walk with you to the entrance of the Shrine. It is likely this will be the last time I shall see you and I would cherish these last few minutes.”

Vector stopped to retrieve his staff and chestpiece he had left outside the entry and putting his free arm around Rey’elle, they continued on.

Rey’elle looked over at Phi-ton. “Please extend my gratitude to Telsin-Fal and his commandos for their gift and thank you for asking them. You didn’t have to do that.”

“I had no choice, you had to survive. But I will give them your thanks.”

Too soon, and not soon enough, they exited through the archways to stand in the sunlight of Voss.

In the awkward moments that surrounded them, Phi-ton looked down at Rey’elle. “I would request one last kiss from you, a remembrance to keep. It is meant as no disrespect.”

Vector stiffened beside her as he waited for her answer. “One last kiss, then we say good-bye.”

She looked at Vector who inclined his head ever so slightly and growled low in his throat, “If we hear the least little rumble, we will gut him where he stands.”

Rey’elle left the circle of Vector’s arm and walked up to Phi-ton placing her arms around his neck as the Voss lowered his lips to hers. She smelled rain soaked breezes and a hint of cinnamon. Wind sorrow, he had called it and the name never seemed more appropriate. He wrapped his arms around her to pull her closer, then stopped as he felt her resistance, and with a sigh, released her.

He placed his hand across his heart and bowed to her. “Travel well, travel safe. Your memory lingers always.”

She returned to Vector’s side and together they walked toward the shuttle that would take them to the Space Station and the ship they called home.

When they entered the Phantom, Rey’elle had to stop and take it all in. The familiar sights, sounds and smells of home that she had thought she would never experience again. She had even missed the inane babble of the ship droid. She let her fingertips skim along the walls as she made her way toward the cabin she shared with Vector.

The crew said a quick hello, or welcome home as she passed each room; Raina from the cockpit,
Lokin from the med bay and Kaliyo from the galley, but they left her to her own thoughts. Vector moved behind her like a shadow and held his breath as she finally opened the door to their room. The lighting was dimmed, there were fresh sheets on the bed and instead of stale air, the faint aroma of alderaanian nectar greeted their senses.

Vector closed the door as they stepped over the threshold and reached to turn her toward him. He tangled his fingers in her hair and pulled her head back to lower his face to the pulse point fluttering at the side of her throat, then moved his mouth slowly up the side of her face to envelope her lips with his, pushing his tongue between her teeth to taste the spice of her.

He held her captive with the kiss while his hands worked to unbutton her shirt and slide it across her shoulders to fall to the floor, then pushed her slowly backward with his body, step by step until her thighs touched the edge of the mattress. His fingers deftly popped the single fastener of her bra which he cast aside with a flick of his wrist.

She could feel his desire pressed against her as she moved her hands under his shirt to feel the silk and heat of his skin. He inhaled sharply and moved her arms back by her sides as he sighed. “Be still. We hold the glass, it does not hold us, and we would drink our fill.”

He slid his hands over her ribs, letting his thumbs brush the sides of her breasts and move down to unbutton her pants. Hitching his thumbs under the waistband, he slid them down over her hips, catching her underwear in the same movement.

She softly groaned when his tongue traced down the front of her body as he went slowly to his knees. She held her breath as he rubbed his cheek against the fleecy softness and removed her boots and pants, tossing them away. She trembled under his hands when they skimmed her body as he stood to remove his own clothing, his eyes never leaving her face.

With a single flourish, he swept her up and laid her gently on the bed. She reached for him as he lowered himself into that embrace. Her breath came in small gasps and moans as he teased her to readiness with his hands and mouth. The need arced between their bodies, pulling them together like magnets and they merged like colliding stars. They rode the passion like fire, letting it kindle and spark, burning away all the pain and fear and longing of the past weeks. Their bodies spurred them to sensations so acute they thought they would break, and drove them to the apex of release so primal and raw, they roared in unison and fell, together, into the calm.

She lay in the crook of his arm drawing lazy infinity signs around his nipples and listening to his steady breathing. She watched the movement of his eyelids, the slight tick of a muscle along his jaw and the way the air circulator moved his hair against his brow. She was etching this memory deep into her brain when the intercom started to chime.

Maybe it could just be ignored. Nope, not going away. “Dammit!, just a few hours of peace would be nice,” she murmured while moving to get up.

“What is it now?” asked Vector, sleepily. He sounded as annoyed as she was.

“I guess we will find out soon enough,” she replied, pressing the intercom button.

“Agent. Scorpio here. You have an incoming transmission on the terminal and it appears to be persistent and urgent.”

“I’ll check into it, Scorpio. Thank you.”

She turned to Vector. “You know, becoming a ghost agent does not seem to have relieved me of
Imperial demands and, I smell sith all over this. I may have to spend the credits to get my ship ID changed and then leave no witnesses. Don’t go anywhere, my body has more to say to yours.” She put on a robe and blew him a kiss.

Padding out to the mission terminal, she punched in her codes. It was incoming from one Grand Moff Regus. Memorizing his frequency code, she walked over to the holo terminal and keyed it in.

“Ok, I’ll bite.”

Her cabin door opened and Vector emerged dressed only in his trousers. He moved to stand behind her and put his arms around her waist letting one of his hands drift under her robe to pull her close. The image of a semi-handsome, bearded, middle aged man appeared.

“Agent. Should I even call you that? I am Grand Moff Regus, leader of Operation Black Ice. I am stationed on Ilum and we have an important mission. There is someone here very interested in speaking with you.”

His image disappeared and was replaced with a woman. Long auburn hair, piercing eyes, curvy body enhanced by the revealing dress she wore, Darth Nox.

“Nine, I assume agent is no longer the correct moniker and ghost seems so... nondescript. I see you recognize me, good. My ship is orbiting Ilum as we speak and we have a situation best not discussed on this channel, there are ears everywhere. You will come to Ilum, best speed, and meet me alone. I think you will be very interested in what I have to say.”

“Darth Nox, a pleasure as always. Meet you? Yes. Alone? No. That situation has not ended well for me, given past experience.”

“Be thankful your insolence amuses me, I could kill you where you stand.”

“Probably, but then what would be the point?”

Darth Nox’s eyes narrowed slightly as she eyed the agent’s image noting the man behind her with his hand tucked inside the agent’s robe. “Very well. One companion. I assume yours will be that delicious man at your back? I seem to have interrupted something, please carry on. We will expect you in what, four or five days? Do not tarry.”

The holo went blank and she and Vector both breathed a sigh of relief. “Scorpio. How long to Ilum? I assume the coordinates have been uploaded?”

“Yes, we have the coordinates. It will be four days. Punching in codes now.”

They felt the ship jump to hyperspace as they walked back to their cabin and shut the door. Dropping the robe, she sauntered toward her private shower. Stepping under the streams of water, she heard the shower door open and Vector stepped in behind her.

The trip was mostly languid and lazy. Rey’elle and Vector spent most of their time in their quarters and the crew, pretty much, left them alone. With the exception of Scorpio, they would sometimes sit in the meeting room and have caf together but no one seemed to have much to say, although all agreed that getting involved with the Sith again did not bode well.

Rey’elle had noticed that Kaliyo and Lokin were spending a lot of time together in the med bay, often with the door locked, and couldn’t pass up the opportunity to ruffle Kaliyo’s feathers. She rapped lightly on the door as she and Vector were walking by one late afternoon.
“Everything alright in there?”

“Yes, go away.”

“What are you two doing that is such a secret you have to keep the door locked?”

“Conducting experiments.”

“Really? What kind of experiments?”

“I am testing the pleasure threshold of the female Rattataki and she is testing an old man’s stamina. Now, please remove yourself.”

Rey’ elle began to laugh, and when she saw Vector’s quizzical look, she laughed even harder. Tears rolled down her face and her sides hurt, but she felt that another weight had just lifted from her shoulders. She kissed her fingertips and laid them against the locked door. **Bless you Kaliyo and bless you doc.**

The night before they were due at Ilum, Rey’ elle awoke and Vector was not beside her. She quelled the intense panic that gripped her, got up and threw on her robe. She found him in the cargo bay repairing his armor.

“You need to replace that soon. Something with cortosis weave this time, I don’t ever want you to go through what happened on Hoth again.” she noted as she moved behind him and started to knead the tight muscles of his shoulders.

“It has been with us since the beginning, it will be difficult to let go and harder to replace. The hive made this for us, as well as our staff, around the time we became Dawn Herald. The Killiks are wonderful artisans.”

“Something else troubles you. You have been absorbed in your own thoughts since yesterday morning.”

“The night before, you were having a dream and it reminded us of when you were under the effects of …… him.”

“Phi-ton? No, darling, the dream was of the cave on Voss, nothing more. Truth be told, I pity Phi-ton.”

“After what he did to you? Why?”

“Think about it, Vector. He was a pawn of the empire his entire life. His father was likely murdered to be replaced by a genetically and surgically engineered agent. When I needed to become a Voss, he was manipulated into becoming my husband. The rite of Ardor was as much my fault as his, and now he cannot even have the marriage broken because of his family. He may go through the cleansing, but he will never be able to remarry, or have children or a normal life. He will be alone until the end of his days. We, at least, have each other.”

Vector closed his eyes and leaned his head back against her stomach then reached up and grabbed her arm, pulling her around, over his chest and into his lap. Her robe fell open and his hands seemed to take on a life of their own, caressing and exploring. She nipped his ear and pushed herself to her feet, letting her eyes drift down the front of his body. “Come back to bed, it is quite evident what you want and there are things we both need to forget.”
Morning came too soon and the holo call came in as soon as the ship dropped out of hyperspace. “So glad you could make it, Nine. My Fury is docked in hangar 15 at the orbital station. As soon as you and your companion are on board, we will assume orbit around Ilum so that we can talk. Dawdling is not encouraged.”

“I really hate that woman,” said Kaliyo. Lokin nodded in agreement.

Vector came down the hallway from the cargo bay. He had his armor on and his staff clipped to his harness. The repairs were hardly noticeable, he was talented with his hands. The corners of Rey’elle’s mouth turned up at the double entendre.

“We should not be long, but stay vigilant, Sith are never to be trusted. Ready Vector?”

“At your side, always.”

Rey’elle and Vector walked through the Imperial Orbital Station, ignoring the various troops and droids scurrying about, until they reached hangar 15. As they approached the Fury, two guards escorted them up the ramp and into the ship. Rey’elle felt a sudden chill as they entered.

Once inside, they were ushered to a small conference room where Darth Nox sat at the end of an oblong table. She was indeed lovely to look on, but her eyes were cruel and calculating as she assessed her guests.

“Please, have a seat, Nine. Your companion also.”

Vector pulled back a chair for Rey’elle and assumed his usual spot at her back, standing silent and straight.

“Is he always so stoic?”

“He has his moments.”

“I’m sure he does,” said Nox as she eyed Vector up and down like a piece of candy.

Nox licked her lips and turned her attention back to Rey’elle. “Well, on to business then. I assume you know of Darth Malgus?”

“I’ve heard of him.”

Nox leaned forward in her chair, watching Rey’elle like an ice stalker. “What about Darth Serevin?”

Vector tensed behind her as Nox’s eyes darted to him and then back to Rey’elle.

Careful not to betray any emotion, Rey’elle answered, “Him, I know.”

“I commend you on your control, Nine, but I have word that you know him quite well. Voss,
correct? And then Hoth and then Voss again. Not much escapes me, and Zhorrid is not as good at hiding secrets as she thinks.” Nox’s lip curled up in a sneer. “Intelligence indeed.”

“You knew and did nothing? Serevin was a bit more than an inconvenience to me and my crew.”

“Inconsequential. It all had to play out. You, above all, should understand.”

Rey’ elle’s composure lapsed for only a second. “Vector almost died.”

“The control slips at last, he must be very special indeed. Perhaps you will loan him to me sometime?”

“When gundarks fly!”

Nox licked her lips again, but her eyes were even more cold, if that was possible. “Do not test me, Nine. But, back to the problem at hand. Long story short, Darth Malgus seeks to create a ‘New Empire’ with himself on the throne. He plans to destroy the Empire, as we know it, and supplant us with his own people, Darth Serevin among them. With the Adegan crystals from this planet he can create a stealth armada which makes him a very real threat. He will destroy us all and we cannot allow that to happen.

“That fool, Malgus, traitor that he is, has cloistered himself on the emperor’s battle station and we must find the location of that station.

“Malgus has dispatched Serevin to Ilum to invade and push the republic back or destroy them, but, he also has a stealth ship with the nav code to Malgus. We need that ship.”

“So why do you need me? You are more than capable to deal with this. No?”

“Evidently, Serevin has a Voss mystic with him. I would like your insight into this relationship. Also, consider it a personal favor to you, I am sure you have fantasized about his death, why not make it a reality. It may take a sith to kill a sith or at least bring him to his knees, for your pleasure. I suggest you take the offer.”

“All right, but since I am technically no longer a member of intelligence, or at least not on the roster, there is a price for our services and it is not negotiable. I will send you the details when I am back on my ship.”

“Very well. We should prepare to leave tomorrow morning and I will also send you the name of my personal armorsmith on Dromund Kaas, it seems your Vector is in need.”

“It’s been a rough year, My Lord.”

Rey’ elle stood up and they left the conference room and then the ship. It wasn’t until they were out of the hangar that she felt she could breathe again. She had to get back to the Phantom, brief the rest of the crew and then take a shower, there was something about that woman’s presence that stuck to the skin like tainted oil.

Arriving at the meeting room, Rey’ elle summoned all of the crew. “We will be going to the planet tomorrow morning at 06:00. It is cold, like Hoth, so cold weather gear is a must. Serevin is there and he is my only target. No matter what that bitch, Nox wants, I won’t have us be drawn into more Sith intrigue.

“We need to stay together as much as possible and watch each other’s backs. Lokin, you must not take your rakghoul form. Nox does not miss anything and the Empire must not know what you can
become. They would hunt you down and take you apart molecule by molecule to unravel the secret. They may already know about failed research, let it remain that way. Any questions?”

Kaliyo raised her hand. “Why can’t you ever take us anyplace nice?”

Vector and Rey’elle lay awake for a long time, unable to sleep.

“Serevin, at last. Perhaps there is some justice in the universe after all. I don’t want to think anymore tonight, Vector.” He crushed his lips to hers, rolled into her warmth and all thoughts were seared away.

The next morning when they arrived at Imperial Base Camp, Darth Nox and her Togruta apprentice, who she introduced as Ashara Zavros, were waiting. She motioned for them to follow her into the base and onto an elevator that opened into a subterranean hangar.

“Nine, may I introduce General Hesker. He commands our forces here against Darth Serevin.”

“Agent. We have a temporary truce with the republic forces under Supreme Commander Rans for this operation against Darth Serevin. Darth Malgus’ threatens Republic and Empire alike. He must not be allowed to corrupt the Empire’s ideals of strength, respect and purity.” His eyes shifted quickly to Kaliyo and back again.

“How close can you get us to Serevin and this ship of his?”

“Our combined forces have opened a path close to an energy field protecting the entrance to Fort Barrow. We can drop you at that end of the combat zone, but the fighting is most intense there.”

Nox responded impatiently. “Intense fighting is not my concern, time is. If Serevin eludes us, heads will roll, I suggest we move, now.”

The shuttle dropped them at a location where they could see the entrance and shimmer of a force field. Nox and Ashara ignited their lightsabers, Vector unclipped his staff and the rest readied their pistols and rifles as they waded into the battle.

Rey’elle watched the force users drift across the ground in front of them, lightsabers twirling and lightning dancing. Her crew moved together, laying down cover and advancing forward.

Smoke was everywhere and growing thicker. Vector was deflecting as much blaster fire from her as he could, but was hit himself and she took a blast to the shoulder. No one went unscathed but they continued on.

Kaliyo grumbled as they approached the Fort Barrow entrance. “Fort, my tiny white ass. Just another farking bunker. Why can’t it be a citadel or castle just once.”

Republic and Empire soldiers moved in to clean up outliers and fanned out to flank them so that they would not get caught in a crossfire. As Rey’elle looked down at the fallen enemy, she noticed that there were Ongree, Kaleesh, Weequay and Gamorrean scattered among the dead. Malgus and Serevin had recruited alien species into this fight.

As they moved, the enemy forces thinned out and they could see the shimmer of a force field in front of what looked like a cave entrance.

Rey’elle turned to Scorpio. “See if you can get that force field down.”

“I see movement inside,” said Nox. “Seems there will be more killing.”
Lokin made the rounds with welcome kolto injections and packs. As the security field dropped, they were met by more blaster fire. Nox and Ashara advanced, deflecting and killing with their lightsabers as Rey’elle’s crew advanced behind, again, laying down cover fire. Bright greenish crystals were everywhere, protruding from all sides of the cave’s corridors. Rey’elle guessed that these were the prized Adegan crystals so coveted by Malgus. Again, aliens were among the fallen.

The fighting continued on through the cave and over a bridge to another entrance with the blast door down. Lokin again came up to check any new injuries and wrapped a fairly vicious wound on Ashara’s forearm.

Nox held up her hand for everyone to halt. “I sense a force user on the other side of this door. Neither dark nor light, it is nothing I recognize, but it is powerful. How interesting. I also sense Serevin within, we must hurry before they launch the shuttle.”

With a flourish of her lightsaber, she disabled the locking mechanism and the door slid upward into the pocket overhead. Just beyond a single Voss mystic knelt in the center of the hangar bay.

As Nox and Ashara entered, the Voss spoke, “I foresaw your arrival, my lord. Welcome.” She then rose to her feet to stand by Darth Serevin, who had just walked down the ramp from the ship.

Rey’elle and the crew entered the hangar and saw several Voss commandos around the room. She motioned for the others to spread out while she and Vector moved up to join Nox and Ashara.

Darth Serevin looked directly at Rey’elle, ignoring the others completely. “My dear Cipher, how I have missed you. Tea has just not been the same without your scintillating company, and you did supply me with such succulent entertainment. Those were good days, were they not?

“My, you do keep strange company of late. And I see that dear Vector has recovered, I am a bit disappointed, but he does seem to have put the bloom back into your cheeks. How is Phi-ton these days? Doing well and prospering?”

Nox could not hold her anger any longer. “Enough! Your banter and foul humor will not save you Serevin. You and your traitorous master will perish like the vermin you are.”

Rey’elle watched as Serevin moved the Mystic aside and ignited his lightsaber. “So, the slave speaks at last. Diplomacy has not afforded much opportunity for bloodshed, I will enjoy this.”

The Mystic spoke up. “They seek your stealth fighter.”

Serevin turned to the Voss “Thank you my dear.” He then turned his attention to Darth Nox. “This is Talsa-ko, a Voss Mystic who will soon have a vision of Voss prosperity under Emperor Malgus’s New Empire and then all of Voss will join us.”

“Your hubris still knows no bounds, Serevin,” Nox sneered.

Talsa-ko spoke again. “Only one vision is certain. You fought, I watched and bowed to the victor.”

“So be it.” said Nox as lightning started to play down her palms. She released a torrent of lightning at Serevin who pushed Talsa-Ko out of the way and caught the onslaught on the edge of his upraised lightsaber.

Rey’elle and her crew busied themselves with the other commandos in the room keeping them back from Nox and Ashara who were focused solely on Serevin. Back and forth the lightsabers clashed and lightning illuminated the room. Serevin used telekinesis to throw crystals from nearby mining carts and shards flew out like tiny knives as they exploded against the lightsabers and lightning.
One by one the commandos were felled with Scorpio and Kaliyo making the largest tally. Vector cut down at least two with his staff. Rey’elle ducked into cover behind a mining cart and sniped three who were further back in the room. She did not see the one who had slipped around the ship to tackle her to the ground with his blade at her throat. Vector froze, but Lokin did not. He raised his pistol and fired knocking the Voss backward while Kaliyo aimed and sent blast after blast into his prone body.

The fight was taking its toll on Serevin. Sweat and blood poured down his face and he was struggling to breathe. Ashara swiped her lightsaber against the back of his knee, severing the tendons and leaving him trying to balance on one leg. Nox quickly disarmed him and with her saber to his throat drove him to his knees. She stopped just short of killing him and glanced up at Rey’elle.

In turn, Rey’elle looked at Vector and nodded her head. As Vector bore down on him, Serevin, looked at the Mystic and murmured, “My Talso-Ko, how I’ve failed you. Forgive me.”

Vector snarled, driving Serevin to the ground as he plunged the trident points into his heart, mentally carving Rey’elle’s name as he twisted the blade.

Vector calmly walked over to Rey’elle and pulled her close, “It is finally over.”

She leaned into him, locking her arms around his back. “Not yet. There is one more thing.”

Nox looked at them as if she were amused. “I will have the Voss imprisoned on my ship for interrogation but first, we assault Malgus. Get your crew ready, Nine.”

Stepping away from Vector, Rey’elle turned to Darth Nox. “No. We will not be going with you. Malgus is your problem to solve and I have had enough of this place.”

Nox looked at her and laughed. “Are you mad? What right have you to deny me this?”

“Have you forgotten the black codex? All those secrets and plans and names. Thousands of years of them, surely members of the council would rather that information never reached the light of day or each other. All those conspiracies, tsk, tsk. Again, I say no.”

Darth Nox raised an eyebrow as she looked at Rey’elle. “You have my attention but, tell me why I should not end you here and now? You are the only one who has access”

“No. We will not be going with you. Malgus is your problem to solve and I have had enough of this place.”

Nox looked at her and laughed. “Are you mad? What right have you to deny me this?”

“Do you think me so addlebrained? If I fall, there will be another and another after that and so on and I doubt they will be as discreet as I have been or as restrained. Do not believe for one second that I keep all my treasures in one box. My crew knows nothing of the arrangements I made. What do you say now, Lord Nox?”

“You dare blackmail me? A member of the dark council?”

“I would dare this and much more. Do not underestimate me or the lengths to which I will go. My crew and I are off limits to your intrigues and games. I serve the empire, but on my terms. Talsa-Ko and the two surviving commandos go with me and I will return them to their world. Their people will deal with them as they choose. Do we have an agreement?”

“Under duress, it would seem so, but I won’t forget this.”

Looking down at Serevin’s corpse, Rey’elle countered. “You know, he said the same thing.”
Epilogue

A little over a month had passed since they returned Talsa-Ko and the commandos to Voss. Rey’elle did not know what would become of them, but at least whatever sentence or punishment was meted out, it would come from their own people.

She never tried to contact Phi-ton while there and left quickly after her meeting with the Three. She advised them that it might be wise for them to ban marriage between outsiders and Voss and presented this advice as a security risk for the future of the planet. The Three indicated that they would consider her words carefully, which is all she could hope for.

Things on the ship had returned to as close to normal as they would ever be, considering the temperaments of her crew. Kaliyo and Lokin remained close, and they seemed to be good for each other, for now at least. With Kaliyo, one never knew.

Scorpio had upgraded the sublight drives for more maneuverability and speed and was continually working toward her own iterations of improvement which kept her occupied. That was either good or bad, and where Scorpio was concerned, it was hard to tell the difference.

Raina continued her studies and training, keeping mostly to herself except when sparring with Kaliyo to maintain her edge and keep in shape, or so she said. Perhaps it was just her awkward way of staying in touch with the crew.

They had spent a week on Alderaan getting a new suit of armor made for Vector. Rey’elle had picked up a bolt of cortosis weave on Aiken which she insisted the Killik armorsmiths incorporate into their design. They had found a way to bond it to the leather they used and the armor looked magnificent on him, at least to her. It was as black as his eyes, hugged his frame like a second skin and was flexible, allowing him freedom of movement. The only metal was a durasteel chestplate that had been hammered until it was almost as thin and pliable as the leather but could still deflect a lightsaber strike. Vector had also resupplied his membrosia stock and had seemed to enjoy spending time with the hive again. It was nice to see him so relaxed.

They were still in orbit around Alderaan waiting for a mission to come in but had heard nothing yet. Rey’elle had briefly thought about contacting the Tenebrous, but then she had heard nothing from Shara, the former keeper, for quite some time, so maybe it was not such a good idea after all.

She went into the galley and poured herself a mug of caf and then to the meeting room where Vector sat looking at something on a datapad. She cleared her throat as she came through the door and pulled out a chair to sit beside him.

“Is that my datapad?”

“Yes. It would appear you have some unopened mail. One from Voss. Shall we open it for you?”

“I will look at it in a while. You can read it with me if you wish.”

Vector sighed and looked at her, concern wrinkling his brows. “They will come for us eventually. You made a very dangerous play on Ilum and we fear what wrath will befall us. We avoid speaking of this, but it is real.”

“Yes, they will come for us, but not today. They are plotting and scheming and trying to find a way around this, and some day they might just figure something out. I have covered every contingency I can think of and only I know the truth about my plan.”
“If they kill me, the codex will be released. If they kill you or anyone else in my crew, the codex will be released. I do not even know what information it holds. I never access it and only I know it’s location. At this point, their options are...well, they don’t really have any options, and that’s what scares the hell out of them but also keeps us safe.”

“We understand your reason and applaud your bravery but a frightened Sith is the most dangerous of creatures and we won’t see it coming.”

“Probably not, but that could be a blessing. Since we are playing the truth game, you and the others were not the only reason I used the codex as a bargaining tool. Did you realize that Serevin was bonded to Talsa-Ko? I knew it the moment I saw them together and heard it in his final words to her. Imagine a mighty Sith Lord in thrall to an alien, leashed by the very passions they claim gives them strength. I do love symmetry.”

“Are you sure? Do you suppose anyone else knew? Malgus maybe?”

“Serevin would never have revealed this. Malgus would have seen it as a sign of weakness and you know how the Council feels about aliens. Either would have killed him and her outright. After Serevin’s death I had to get the Voss away from Darth Nox. Her interrogations would have broken them and I don’t know how, but sooner or later, the Sith would have used the power of Ardor to undo or subjugate Voss. That is why I petitioned the Three to ban outsider marriage. I hope they see the wisdom in doing so.”

Vector took her hands in his and swept a kiss across her knuckles. “After all this time, your compassion still amazes us.”

“Compassion or idiocy, sometimes the lines blur.” Tears started to form at the edges of her eyes. “I am tired, Vector. So bone numbing tired. I look back on my life and I see one test of my strength after another, like a never ending string of beads. I look at the future and more beads disappear over the horizon.

“I don’t want to hold the fate of five other people or whole worlds in my hands. I hold secrets that could burn the galaxy and I am tired of looking through ash. Some days the marrow in my bones feels like lead and I am too burdened to move. I just want to live, with you, but life won’t leave me alone to do that. Tomorrow I will be fine, but today, I am tired.”

It was the quiet sobbing that broke Vectors heart as he pulled her to him. He held her head against his chest and let her weep until the front of his shirt was soaked with tears. He did not make a sound or utter a word but stood strong and still. Her rock. Because that is what she needed him to be.

Later that night, Rey’elle slipped out of bed, picked up her datapad and went to the cockpit to read the letter from Voss. She would show it to Vector tomorrow.

My wife,

I do not know if you hear my words, but I send this out of tradition.

The teahouse is different now and your place remains empty.

I have taken the cleansing and you are gone from my body, but not my heart.

Yana-ton will marry soon, and I remember you.

Your people walk Voss-Ka, and I remember you.
My world may need you before it’s time ends and I would not bring you pain.

Forget me. Remember Voss.

She stood looking out the window, rubbing her arms against the chill. Her ship hung in space like a life day ornament, so miniscule and vulnerable against the void. There was something out there, she could feel it. How far off in time and space she could not tell but it was something unknown and terrifying like a tiny seed of nightmare that invades the mind. Something other than Sith.

The song of the universe had changed, and she could hear it.

~The End~

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