Tales of Ziost

by SonneillionV

Summary

Azix is a Jedi Knight of the Sixth Line, stranded on Ziost in the wake of planet-wide disaster. Alone in a wasteland and plagued by personal demons, he struggles to survive and escape to rejoin the Republic. But will the person who emerges from Ziost still be a Jedi?

(Rape/Non-Con tag is for mentions and implications from a character's past, not a graphic portrayal.)
Azix came to with the taste of ashes and blood in his mouth.

A red light blinked somewhere behind him, and every part of his body was sore and throbbing. He felt dazed, like he couldn’t get his eyes to focus, and he took deep breaths as he reached for the calm he’d been taught to find inside.

It was out of reach. Nothing met his grasp but the panicked flutter of his lungs and heart, caught in a rush of adrenaline. His blood pounded in his temples.

/There is no emotion, there is peace,/ he told himself, struggling to control his breathing despite the spasms in his lungs. /There is no contemplation, there is duty. There is no contemplation. There is only duty./ He threw the words up against the nameless terror in his brain, battered it with them until it subsided and he could think again.

His blurred vision began to resolve. He saw the instrument panel, sparking, shattered, the limp arm of a uniformed pilot flung beyond the dislodged back of her seat. He was hanging sideways from the crash harness, and as he forced his neck to turn, he understood that was because the shuttle was on its side.

His clothing was soaked. He moved numb fingers and dragged them across his armor, only to find a sheen of still-fresh blood. Not his – it was the wrong color. It was Sana’s, and when he managed to twist enough to see her, he found her pale, mouth slack and open, eyes staring at nothing as more blood dripped from her shattered skull.

His stomach lurched, and it had nothing to do with the gore. /Sana./ He reached out, trying to find a pulse. His fingers barely responded to his commands - he watched them push, then bend against her throat without actually feeling anything. In the end it didn’t matter. She was dead, and he might be dying if he didn’t get the hoth out of that harness.

With his hands numb, he couldn’t work the buckles, and he yanked at it, panic ramping up slowly as he tried to get the straps free. He reached out in The Force, found something violent and strong, and the metal tore apart with a shriek as he tumbled out of the seat and hit the row of seats below him, pushed into a mercifully padded jumble by the rock that had broken through the shuttle’s hull.

A glimpse of gray light spilled across the bloodstained stuffing. Azix crawled toward it. Dragging his body off the pile of seats and corpses, he passed the pilot, who was so thoroughly crushed that he wasn’t even tempted to check her for signs of life. The transparisteel window had succumbed to impact with volcanized rock and fragments of it lay scattered across the strange, crumbly ground… ashes, he realized when his hands clawed through them and the dust rose up to clog his airway. The topsoil had been seared and turned to dust laid over sharp, glassy planes. Old weapons, atom-splitters, left damage like this. Was that what had happened? In their desperation to stop the Sith Emperor, had the Republic and the Empire killed Ziost?

If so…. That was one down. A dozen more Imperial worlds waited, but progress was progress.

He pulled himself inch by inch out from under the shuttle’s bulk. The ground trembled under him, and he wondered if the destruction was still happening. His head was clear, but that didn’t necessarily mean anything - he hadn’t been possessed immediately upon arrival on Ziost. Instead, he had watched his friends succumb one by one, then when it was his turn, he watched himself torment Master Surro until the Emperor took her too. He wondered what it was about that squirrelly little SIS
agent that let him stay free and clear. His obvious treason couldn’t be it - Azix had seen him with the Sith who came, who tore the Emperor’s control apart. The Sith who freed him. But other Sith, and of course, hundreds of thousands of Imperial citizens and military had been swept up in the Emperor’s grip without regard for their loyalties. Wasn’t that their purpose anyway? They had chosen to worship and venerate ultimate evil. They couldn’t pretend to be surprised when it devoured them.

Azix finally dragged himself free of the wreck and rolled onto his back, staring up into a flat gray sky. The ground beneath him was unforgiving. To the side, the blasted remains of a tree had been turned to charcoal, but still stood.

The ground rumbled again. Steady. Rhythmic. The side-swept branches of the tree, pointing one direction as if they’d been blown into that configuration by the blast, began to crumble and sift ash to the ground.

Azix felt it, then. The whole world was a black hole of Dark Side energy, but this knot of it was almost on top of him, and its mindless malice hit him hard enough to make him puke bile across the ashen ground. He coughed and forced himself to his feet, sucking in air full of ash particles that clung to his throat and made him hack violently. He spun, looking for the Monolith, and found it - four stories tall and half again as wide, its long-fingered hands crowned with hooked claws nearly dragging on the ground. It blended in with the environment around it, pebbly gray and black, as if it was made of stone. But its eyes burned with balefire, and when it saw him, Azix almost dropped where he stood. Locking eyes with the creature was like a searing wound to his soul, and his lungs closed, refusing to take in the soot-stained air.

/Run,/ he whispered to himself, feeling like even his thoughts were coming from far away as the creature took one ground-shaking step toward him, then another, keeping him pinned in place with his gaze. /Run./

//SURRENDER//, it thrummed at him, and he saw oblivion in the pale flames of its eyes.

In slow motion, like he was caught in a dream, he reached for his lightsaber. The holster was empty - the crash must have jarred it free.

/Okay, you have no weapon. Now you really have to run,/ he pleaded with himself. /One foot. MOVE. Go!/ He managed a shuffling step, but real progress didn’t come until he managed to tear his gaze away from the towering monster’s. He could still FEEL it, and he was breathless, his muscles turned to water, but he forced himself into a stumbling run. He didn’t care that his limbs were flailing, or that he was sobbing breathlessly… looking cool was not a priority. What Ziost had been before, now it was a thousand times worse, the pressure of unimaginable death bearing down on him, choking him, blotting out the sky and the Light. He had to get somewhere sheltered, and then he could deal with it. He could collect himself, find the flame inside, something to beat the terror and the darkness back… if he could just get a moment’s reprieve.

He ran blindly. Here and there, shriveled plant life turned to dried leather by the desiccation grabbed at his feet. He fell on his face when he put his foot on a ridge and it crumbled into black ash, and only when he was on the same level could he see that it was a corpse, the body of a person turned black, a faint dent in the mound of its head still suggesting its death scream. He felt the Monolith bearing down on him, right behind him, breathing down his neck, and he prayed, pleaded for something to give him strength.

The Light didn’t answer. On this blasted wasteland of a world, there was none to be found.

His head was pounding and warping his vision with dizzy exhaustion by the time he spotted a cleft in the rock face. The Monolith’s arms were so long, but he had to try… he plunged into the crack
and cried out between his teeth as shards of volcanic rock tore at his arms and scraped across his armor. Ignoring the pain, he wiggled deeper, groping, dragging himself along until he found the end of the narrow cave and fell on the ground in a heap, sobbing.

The gray light outside was still. The ground was still.

Azix didn’t know how long it took him to come back to himself. He only knew that he came back like he was coming out of a dream, or delirium, eyes locked on that meandering crack of gray light. There was no sound - the silence was the most terrible oppression. No living world sounded so utterly still, save the soft howl of wind threading between pillars of blasted rock.

Cuts on his arms and hands were scabbing over. Azix wiped his palms on his pants and tried to wipe his face, but every inch of him was drenched in filth and there was no relief for his burning eyes or his acid-raw throat.

He made it to his feet and stumbled to the entrance. He navigated more carefully this time. Looking out, he saw cliffs and upthrusts of rock, dead plant remains, and shattered ground. There was no sign of the Monolith. It was as if he’d imagined it.

He emerged slowly and tried to get his bearings. How far had he run? Which direction had he come from? The shuttle would have a few basic supplies, and he would need them if he was going to trek across this desert. There’d be a distress beacon too, and he could pull that out along with a couple of power cells and bring them somewhere less exposed. Maybe there was still someone out there who could rescue him.

He tore his sleeves from the elbows down and wrapped his hands. Then he began to scale a promontory. From higher ground, he would doubtless be able to spot the shuttle and make sure the area was clear of monsters before he went back. While he climbed, he reached inside. Every Jedi carried the flame, the light that could push back the darkness. Even in a place like this, a Dark Side Nexus that had been further poisoned by such total obliteration, HIS light had not gone out. He reached, and he coaxed, and he tried to fan the flicker into a glow that would burn away his fear.

What he got was shaky at best, and when he tried to guide it into his lungs and his muscles, it faltered. He climbed the rock under his own power, pausing at intervals to breathe and hack up blackened spit.

When he reached the top, he saw the shuttle. He also saw the Monolith, apparently NOT a figment of his imagination. The creature, however, seemed disinterested in the wreck and was slowly making its way into a nearby canyon. He watched its hulking form disappear behind towering rock walls and allowed himself a shred of relief.

On the way back, he learned how to walk in a way that kicked up the minimum amount of ash, so he wasn’t constantly surrounded by a gritty cloud. Now that the panic was gone, he felt weak, like someone had pulled the plug on his strength. His knee was swollen to twice its size and stiff, but he wasn’t sure if that happened in the crash or after, during his mad dash across the perilous ground. He passed a fissure in the rock leaking wisps of blue gas, and gave it a wide berth.

There was no question of moving the shuttle. On a good day he might have been able to summon the Force, but this was not a good day. He was reduced to circling the wreck, looking for a way in. He found the airlock and pried open the rescue panel to unseal it, climbing on top of the overturned craft and carefully sliding down into the belly of it.

It smelled like blood and death inside. Someone had voided their bowels, either during the crash or during their expiration. He tried to reach out and sense any signs of life, but there was nothing but the
pounding, migraine-inducing headache of the Dark. Abandoning that effort, he started digging for the emergency supplies. In the aft section of the shuttle the cabinets had been bent shut, but he managed to pry them open. He found a set of crash packs and dropped them carefully outside the shuttle, then pulled the floor open and began to work a power cell loose.

Azix lost track of time while he was struggling with the power cells. They were reluctant to yield, even though they were supposed to pop right out for easy replacement. He gave up on the third one and resigned himself to having only two. No chance of solar while the sky remained so overcast, so he’d have to reserve the cells for the beacon. Speaking of…

The instrument panel was wrecked enough that he could reach the beacon, as long as he didn’t mind practically lying in the smeared brains of the pilot. He got a grip on his stomach and tried to ignore it as he wedged himself into the cramped space and worked at exhaustingly difficult angles. His sweat, black with soot, dripped into his eyes and he cursed everything, from The Force to the Sith, to Theron Shan, to his own parents for ever bringing him into this crapshoot universe, to Ziost for existing, to the Emperor for deciding to personally ruin HIS day in particular. And that particular Sith, the one who’d come along at the last minute to throw a wrench into the Emperor’s plans, who’d freed Azix and Sana and Druum so they could be evacuated, only for them to get knocked out of the sky by… whatever had done this. Whatever the Emperor had unleashed, in the end, his Ultimate Plan.

/Something’s happening,/ Sana had said, just before the turbulence hit. Her eyes had gone large and wet, tears spilling over her cheeks. /No….He’s coming. We can’t../ And then the pilot had shouted for them to brace for impact, and everything went dark and Azix was knocked around like a dried legume in a can.

Now Sana was stiffening in her restraints, rigor mortis turning her wooden. Druum had been seated on the side of the shuttle that hit the ground, and trying to identify specific parts of him wasn’t a healthy use of Azix’s time.

Good Jedi, both of them. Strong, committed to the Republic’s cause. Like him, they had laid their doubts on the altar of sacrifice and made themselves into weapons of freedom.

“We submit our wills so that others can be free,” Master Surro had said. “We accept total sublimation in the name of justice, in the name of peace.”

/There is no contemplation./ Azix told himself as he carefully turned the bracket at an angle that made his wrist spasm with pain. /There is duty. There is duty. There is duty./

The mantra calmed and focused him. Over and over, he thought he felt the ground rumble and he froze, but after a long silence, he went back to working.

The pulse beacon finally dropped out of its casing. Azix held it above his head and scooted, inching on his back out from under the instrument panel. He dragged some wiring out with him. The temptation to just stay put and rest all his screaming muscles was strong, but the smell dissuaded him. He climbed out, dropped to the ground with his hands full, and fell over in a heap when his bad knee gave out.

He lay there instead, and got his breath.

It really wasn’t that far from the shuttle that he’d found the cave, maybe half a mile. That trek, hauling the two packs, the power cells, wrapped loops of wiring and the beacon, was hellish. Azix had nothing left and nothing to draw on. Only years of instilled discipline kept him walking, plodding, putting one foot in front of the other and kicking up clouds of dust as he trekked across the
barrens. He let the landscape guide him, stumbling into ditches and gulleys, taking the smoothest
ground he could find. The darkened crack of the cave called to him like the fabled sirens of Bespin.

He had to strip the packs off to get them into the narrow cave, tossing them ahead of him. Once
inside, he unpacked everything, taking all the hard bits out and laying them along the ground. He
took off the most uncomfortable bits of armor, wrapped himself in both emergency blankets, rolled
up the empty packs to pad his head, and collapsed into an exhausted sleep.

He’d barely closed his eyes before sinking into nightmares. He saw Master Surro. He saw the
Emperor. He saw Sana, her tearstained face turned toward him, sharing the nameless horror she saw
in the instant before it hit. He had no control over his body, and someone used him to kill and rape
and wreak destruction.

In his dreams, he screamed and screamed.
Chapter 2

/We can’t escape,/ Sana said. Her head was caved in, and her eyes were bleached and dead. Greenish fluid leaked from them, spilling down her face like poison tears. /You know the truth. Master Surro knew it. He’s in us now… we’ll never escape him. Poor Surro. In the end…/ 

/WHAT?/ Azix groped for Sana, fought past dream fog trying to get to her. /What happened to Master Surro?/ She had not been with them when Theron Shan’s pet Sith electrocuted them. She had not been on the shuttle. /Sana, tell me! What happened to Surro?/

She smiled, and the fluid leaked from her mouth. /You’re the only one left. We’ll wait for you, brother… it won’t be long now./

/SANA!/ Azix tried to lunge for her, but something caught him and pulled him up short, spilling him face-first into the rocky ground. He struggled, face dragging across the gravel in an incredibly realistic way, pain and pressure in the back of his knee as if he’d been harpooned.

/They lied to us, Az./ Sana watched him be dragged, her form dissolving into a headache, smears of brilliant colors painted across the back of his eyelids as something sharp dug into his face. /There is death./

Azix snapped awake, and discovered that in some ways, Sana had not been exaggerating.

The realistic pain of being dragged across a gritty stone floor had penetrated his dream because, in actuality, he WAS being dragged across a gritty stone floor. The pain in his leg was bone deep, and he cried out, trying to twist around and free himself. It was pitch black in the cave and he hadn’t left anything aight, afraid of drawing the wrong kind of attention. Now it seemed his precautions were costing him. Throwing off the emergency blankets he’d managed to burrito himself inside, he kicked himself over and grabbed at whatever had hooked itself between the plates of his armor, crushing the back of his knee. It hadn’t quite penetrated the synthweave - from a relative perspective, its grip on him was light. But the pressure was agonizing, and Azix screamed as he flailed, kicking out at a curved and knobby length as thick around as his bicep.

His foot glanced off like he’d tried to kick a tree root, and the curl tightened like a claw-tipped finger, because that was what it WAS. He realized it abruptly, as his hips scraped past a narrow spot in the cave and he could see the crack of the entrance. Beyond it was nothing but blackness, shifting shadows, and endless and unbroken night on a dead world… and pale, balefire eyes.

They locked onto him. //YES.//

“No,” Azix whispered, and then it spilled from him, escalating to a gibbering shriek as he flailed and kicked and grabbed at the cave walls, desperate to stop himself from being dragged free of his shelter like a mollusk pried loose of its shell. “No, NO, nonoNoNONONO!” He managed to get his leg out from under its claw, which finally ripped through the synthweave even as he struggled to tear himself free. “No, please, Force, no…”

Beyond the entrance, it pulsed like a black hole, and endless, devouring hunger. He could taste himself ground between its teeth; he could feel his bones splintering. Images of torment pounded against his sanity. His flesh would be sweet, but his agony would be satisfying.

One of his feet found a solid brace. He shoved, and his cloth armor ripped. The cave shook as the creature rumbled, its mouth opening to let loose a subsonic howl that made the earth shake and rocks
rain like obsidian daggers from the ceiling. One glanced off Axiz’s forehead and he saw stars, and then that terrible grip wrapped around both his thighs, yanking him several feet toward the entrance.

In the bright spots exploding behind his eyelids, he saw Sana’s corpse.

/They lied to us, Az,/ she whispered. /There IS death./

Pure, high, screaming terror coalesced into rage. It smashed into him like undertow, filled the space that had been empty and deflated with the absence of the Light. He lashed, out void of direction, filled only with a wordless denial that tore itself out of his throat and shook him down to his bones. And when his throat wasn’t enough, when the ripples of air disturbed by the force of his scream wasn’t enough, it erupted from his flesh in arcs of lightning that crawled along the Monolith’s claws in blinding fractal patterns. Its grip spasmed, and it gave its hand a shake, slamming it against the roof of the cave and then the side. Only on that second impact did Axiz tumble free, landing hard on his shoulders and the back of his head and crumbling in a way that wrenched his neck. He rolled, gasping, clawing for the deeper darkness of the cave. He was blind, and ran head-first into a rock wall, but he barely felt the impact, bouncing off it to throw himself deeper just like he had that first time, when he’d only THOUGHT the creature was breathing down his neck.

It howled, and Aziz’s world shook. He felt the creature’s hunger, its lust for him, in his bones, all-consuming. It would bring the cave down on top of him, maybe, but he felt like being crushed to death in a cave-in would be preferable to the kind of end that awaited him outside.

Suddenly, the cave widened. He fell back into the space he’d claimed to sleep in. His equipment, set out so neatly along the cave floor, scattered and clattered under his hands. He knocked it carelessly aside, pawing for a safety light, and couldn’t find it, and couldn’t find it…

One groping claw grazed the back of his armor and he screamed like a padawan, throwing himself into what he hoped was the furthest corner. There was nowhere else to go. He had no space left to run.

As he scrambled to press himself tighter against the wall, his hand found a familiar square casing. He paused, hoping against hope, and dragged it closer.

Warm, golden light spilled from the safety lamp and flooded the cave, reflecting off the black rock like thousands of candles. Azix was already crying, hyperventilating, but when the light came on he gave a sob of relief. He turned it on the Monolith’s claw, and saw that the way the cave curved prevented it from spotting him or from getting its hand all the way around the bend. When he’d been stretched out on the floor, his legs had been in reach. Huddled in the very back where he was now… it couldn’t get him.

It wasn’t real safety, of course. The creature could very well stay there until the heat death of the universe and starve him out. If it kept howling, if it thrashed, it could still drop the cave on top of him. If he fell asleep again, he might unwittingly roll into reach, just as he’d already done once. But even though his logical mind could identify all these flaws, every instinct was screaming at him that this was fine, this was GOOD, he’d just stay put there forever, and nothing would hurt him, and everything would be fine. His ancient ancestors had evolved from cave-dwelling creatures, or so the stories went. Maybe that was the source of his primal urge to burrow into the rock and never come out.

And the light, of course, wasn’t doing him any favors. If anything, it made his presence there more obvious. He clung to it anyway, needing it desperately, and the false comfort of its warmth. For hours he crouched against the wall, with his arms wrapped around his knees, basking in the glow while fingers almost as long as he was tall dragged thick, gleaming claws over the walls.
Later, when he’d calmed somewhat, he turned the lamp face-down. The light that leaked around the edges still gave dim impressions of where the beast’s hand was, but it didn’t leak out of the cave, at least not sufficiently to attract attention. Maybe if he stayed quiet and still, maybe if The Force was with him, it would forget he was there and leave.

Time dragged. On Tython, as a padawan, he’d spent hours like this kneeling on hard stone floors, trying to stretch his mind beyond the pain in his legs. Now he was focused, his entire being fixated on the movement of those claws. Even in the dim shadows, he saw the Monolith’s fingers in macro-vision, but he didn’t feel his body at all. He wasn’t cold or hot, he wasn’t sore or cramped or tired. Mortal flesh was a separate concern. Nothing existed in his universe beyond those gnarled fingers and their hooked claws.

And yet, when they finally went slack and began to disappear beyond the bend in the wall, he took him several minutes to realize that they had actually gone away. He stayed there, still and silent in the dark, the outline of the safety lamp’s glow washing over his blackened boots. His heart felt like water, sloshing chaotically inside his chest. Heavy, ground-shaking footsteps jarred him, then faded slowly into the distance. He wondered if the creature was smart enough for deception. It didn’t seem to have an intellect, really… what it had was a WILL, and that will was a battering weapon, crushing lesser minds before it. It wanted, but what it wanted was instinctive - pursued, not planned.

He didn’t know how it had discovered him in his cave. He did know that his sanctuary was insufficient. As soon as the gray light of morning returned, he had to collect his gear and find better shelter.

Not yet brave enough to actually stick his head beyond the bend in the cave, Azix carefully tipped the lamp up just enough to throw some light across the floor. His supplies were wildly scattered, and the bottles with their condensers had been tipped over, allowing some of the precious water they collected to spill over the cave floor. He dragged them carefully toward him, drank what was left, and set them upright to collect again. He used one precious sprinkle of water to wet his face, washing the soot away from the cuts and scrapes on his head. They stung, but there was a little bacta gel in the first aid kit that alleviated that pain. He used it on his hands too, and his arms, and any other wounds he had. Not that he thought even bacteria were alive in this wasteland, but it was better to be safe than sorry where infection was concerned.

He had a feeling he had a very long trek ahead of him. Sepsis would doom him before he began.

The condensers hissed softly, and the sound comforted him. He wedged himself into that deeper corner and tried to doze sitting up, like he’d learned to do during the war. But his mind refused to succumb to sleep, and only supplied him with something like fever dreams, halfway between sleep and waking. The only mercy was that he did not see Sana again.

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When the light emerged so did Azix, crawling from the cave in search of the rest of his supplies. In its exploration, the Monolith had found several inanimate objects and dragged them into the open, but since they had no life in them, it had apparently lost interest and left them to lie in the ash. Of the creature itself there was no sign, and Azix moved like an Alderaanian deer, taking a few steps, pausing to look and listen, then stuffing an object into his pack and skittering on to the next. Terror pumped through his veins like blood, but it was starting to feel familiar now. He’d almost warmed to it, and to the heightened sensitivity it gave him.

Of course, it also made him dizzy to maintain a state of near-panic, but every great medicine had side effects.
He had a strong suspicion that potable water was a pipe dream. His condensers wouldn’t produce nearly enough water to sustain him in this atmosphere, but they’d have to serve. As he began his long walk following the blackened cliff walls, he opened a ration packet labeled ‘spagbol’ and chewed the protein paste within. It was flavored to taste like pasta with meat sauce. Normally, ration pack flavors tasted overbearingly salty (largely because their flavor came from salt), but after all the ash and bile and other terrible things he’d been stuck tasting, the flavor of tomato and meat sauce bloomed on his tongue like a blessing, and he almost started crying again out of sheer gratitude for anything in the world that wasn’t charcoal.

He swallowed against the urge, suddenly unsettled. Finding a niche in the nearest canyon wall he took a break, setting his packs down and taking stock of himself.

In the thick of his panic during the nighttime attack, it hadn’t occurred to him to worry. His mind had been on other things, and he’d just been reacting. But his reactions had been born of rage and terror, and these were enemies he’d struggled with long and hard ever since that ill-fated mission to Dromund Kaas. The corrupting touch of a Sith had awakened shadows in him. He’d joined the Sixth Line to keep them at bay, because in a battle against his inner demons, ‘there is no contemplation, there is only duty’ gave him the clearest, straightest line to follow. Nollok Jen’kari had aimed to twist him, to force him to question everything he’d learned. But, by Azix’s logic, he couldn’t be forced to ask damning questions if he just... never asked questions. Taking orders solved the dilemma. It distanced him from the sensation that if he ever examined himself too hard, he’d find himself staring over the edge of a vast abyss. It kept him sane. Master Surro had understood the bedrock that was duty. She had commended him for sacrificing his inner demons and giving himself up to the cause.

Master Surro was gone.

His demons remained.

Azix swept his gaze left, then right. There was no movement. Not even a hint of breeze stirred the drifts of crumbled ashes. Crossing his legs under him, he took a deep breath and tried not to taste the air.

/There is no emotion,/ he intoned within his head, in that thrumming mental voice that carried his will behind it. /There is peace. I am a servant of The Force, and I am at peace. There is no passion, there is serenity. All storms are still at the heart. Inside my struggle, there is calm. There is no chaos, there is harmony. All moves as The Force wills it. There is no death./

His stomach turned and cold rippled along his spine. It wasn’t a natural cold - there had been no temperature changes, save the slight cooling from day to night. He reached out, trying to pinpoint the source, and felt something chilled and sodden like a drowned corpse brush against him in The Force.

/They lied to us, Az,/ Sana whispered. /There is death./

/NO./ Azix pulled in and hunched down, shuttering his mind to that lurking horror. He breathed deep, and listened to his heartbeat, and focused inside himself where there was still heat and life. /There is no death. There is The Force. All life comes from The Force, and all life returns. In The Force, we are one, from the greatest to the smallest. The eternal has no beginning and no end./

Long ago, in the middle of another terrible war, a Jedi Master had written her own meditations on serenity and the code. Azix had studied them centuries later, alongside other meditations on the Jedi’s guiding principles. Death always surrounded a Jedi. The trick was to understand that in the midst of death there was also life… even if that life was nothing but him, hunched over on a rock, trying to calm down.
/There is no emotion, there is peace./ Azix let out a long, shuddering breath, listening to his own heartbeat, sinking deep into his own center. /I am a servant of The Force, and I am at peace. There is no passion, there is serenity. Inside my struggle, there is calm. There is no chaos, there is harmony. All moves as The Force wills it. There is no death. There is no death. There is NO death. There is The Force./

/And duty./ Things inside him still shifted dangerously. He felt like he’d built his calm on a foundation of sand. But it was better than it had been, and the thought that there was something he should be doing, some goal he should be pursuing, settled him further.

Ziost was dead, but Azix wasn’t yet. And somewhere beyond the gray sky, between the stars, there were other Jedi who were still fighting a war against the Empire. He needed to get back to them. He needed to rebuild the Sixth Line and return them to the Order’s hands. He needed to carry Master Surro’s philosophy forward and help to crush the Empire forever and end this war.

First things first, he needed to find a better, safer shelter, one that wouldn’t invite any hungry Monoliths to come hunting. Muscles shaking in exhaustion, pain radiating from his wrenched neck through his back and shoulders, he pulled both packs back on and swayed to his feet.

He still had a long way to go. But it wasn’t over yet.
Chapter 3

Due to the heavy cloud cover, night fell so suddenly that Azix lost his footing between one step and the next. One moment he trudged along in a deep fugue, paying only enough attention to minimize the amount of dust kicked up by his soot-blackened boots. The next, his foot missed the air. He barely had time to suck in a breath as he pitched forward into darkness and slammed to the rock. His weight came down on one shoulder, and he felt the grinding wrench as it slid out of socket in the instant before his head whacked against the stone and dazed him too thoroughly to feel pain.

Motivation to get up deserted him. He lay there until the ache came back along with his senses, a telltale burn in his shoulder and sharp pain in his temple that turned into a dull throb as it spread across his skull. The ground under his cheek was still, no rumbling, nothing to catapult him into fear, so he let its coolness soothe the ache and stayed where he’d fallen until the grit digging into his face became too uncomfortable to suffer any longer.

The knee he drew up under him was his bad one, and he groaned in pain as the swelling screamed across his nerves, flopping onto his good shoulder to curl up. In his defense, everything hurt so much he’d forgotten… he managed to get his other knee under him and clumsily roll to a sitting position, scooting on his butt until he could lean against the rock wall. He took a few minutes to get a breath, the act of sitting up having brought his exhaustion slamming home, and when he opened his eyes his stomach dropped into his heels.

He sat on a ledge, perhaps four feet wide, a small outcropping that looked out over a vast chasm. The canyon meandered off in either direction, disappearing into the shadows, and when he leaned out to get a peek, there was nothing under the ledge but a lethal drop into darkness. Had he stepped off the edge a meter in either direction, he would have fallen to his death.

“Oh, Force,” he breathed, pressing harder against the rock at his back. “Oh fuck. Oh, thank you…”

Whether it was actually the guidance of The Force or just dumb luck, he didn’t know, and wasn’t in any mood to examine it. Now that he was upright, the weight of his arm pulled on his dislocated shoulder, prodding him to do something about it. Grimacing, he shifted until he could line his shoulder up with the wall, twisted his body, and slammed home – he caught a scream behind his teeth as the ball popped back into the socket and numbness spread down his arm, stiffening his fingers. That would fade, he knew from experience, but the soreness would last a while.

/This is not tenable,/ he thought as he huddled there, panting, trying to calm down after the burst of agony. /I won’t survive this if I keep getting hurt./ The obvious solution was to stop moving, to rest. The ledge didn’t really count as shelter, but then again, it had yet to rain despite the ponderous cloud cover.

Azix unpacked a few things to make his backpack a more comfortable buffer, drained the condensers of the inch of water they’d collected, and set them out to gather through the night. Bracing his feet on the grit, he found a passably comfortable position sitting up against the wall and was almost immediately unconscious.

This time, he didn’t dream.

It was impossible to tell what time it was when he finally woke, stiff and sore in all new places from sleeping against the sharp-edged stone. He came back slowly, eyes half open, blurry shapes resolving themselves into black mountains against a gray sky. Still half asleep, he traced the shape of them, rocky plateaus and smooth, straight angled lines thrusting up against the clouds.
Wait…

Surprise made him jerk, and he toppled over, scrubbing his knuckles across his eyes and blinking rapidly to clear them. He was so dehydrated his eyes felt like parchment, dry and crackling, and he used the old child’s trick of forcing himself to yawn to squeeze a few tears free and ease the grittiness.

There were a few ounces of water in the condensers when his groping hands found them, and he drank one down greedily, using some of the other to splash and wash his face before guzzling the rest. Revived, he took another look at the skyline and relief bubbled through his chest and his belly like champagne. Tucked away among the black rocks, half-hidden by the basalt mountains, there was a building.

He scrabbled for his belongings, stuffing them back into his pack as he stumbled to his feet. The prospect of shelter, and maybe even running water, gave him energy, buoyed him up and let him hoist the pack onto his back despite the soreness in his knee and his shoulder. He barely felt his feet hitting the ground as he stumbled to the edge of the rock shelf and began hunting for a way across the chasm.

There was no way down, so he was forced to climb back up to the edge of the canyon. Thankfully, the edge was unobstructed, so he was able to make good time walking it in the direction of the structure. It was several miles away by his best judgement, but he kept his eyes locked on the angular upthrust of the roof and kept moving.

Hours into his trek the ground dipped, and he saw a clearing on the edge of the canyon wall ahead. The walls were also angular, too straight to be natural, and he carefully climbed down into a footworn depression that resembled a path following parallel to the canyon wall. Soon he could no longer see the canyon, but the path seemed to continue parallel, so he followed it as the black walls rose on either side, blocking out most of the sky. At least the path was too narrow for a Monolith to navigate, though the perfect silence of a dead world was nearly as oppressive as the fear of the monsters.

The path turned sharply under a stone archway, and Azix found himself ducking through the canyon wall and emerging onto the plateau he’d seen from the top of the canyon. The blasted remains of a structure partitioned off the western end, and as he climbed the remains of stone steps he found what looked like it had once been a courtyard market. One wall had crumbled, and the wind now whistled over a sheer drop-off into the canyon, but the remains of the stalls were still there. Their canopies had dulled in color, but they were still the first thing he had seen since landing on Ziost that had any color at all.

He dropped his pack and attacked the locked panels, hoping for food, water, anything at all that he could use. When the first panel refused to yield under his frantic tugging, he found his thread of mixed hope and panic and tugged, and a venomous strength swelled his limbs. He slammed his fist into the panel once, twice, and the metal crumpled enough that he could pull the locking tab out of the socket and work the panel open.

It had been a cold box, long since thawed, with dirty water gathered in the corners. Nothing remained. Frustrated, Azix battered open the next cart, and the next, but one of them yielded only an extra store of what looked like souvenir tchotchkes, and the other held nothing at all. For a moment, Azix saw red, his vision crumbling around the edges as his blood pressure soared and thwarted rage bubbled in his belly like acid. He let out a scream and swatted the cart, and it went tumbling like it had been hit by a battering ram, bouncing off another cart and the gaping hole in the wall before tumbling into the abyss. Several stones slowly pulled free of their mortar and clattered after it.
Azix sat there for a moment, breathing hard, feeling the flush of warmth that seeped up from his stomach and into his chest and limbs. It felt dark, and strong, and good... it felt like being alive again in this interminable wasteland. The temptation to sink into it was so strong – he was so tired, and in pain, and staving off despair by refusing to let himself think about his circumstances too hard. It would be so much easier to just be fucking ANGRY about it, to let himself FEEL.

/The path to the Dark Side is always easy./ He exhaled in a long shiver, and tried to let go of that tantalizing strength. /Once you set your feet upon its path, it will dominate your destiny forever./ He took slow breaths, in and out, sinking that red and pulsing energy into the rock beneath him and trying to find a shred of calm. /There is no emotion; there is peace. There is no contemplation; there is duty. I have a job to do. So let’s get to it./

Using one of the other carts for support, he hauled himself back to his feet and stood, swaying, taking stock of his surroundings. The courtyard had once been walled on three sides, but now the wall facing the canyon gaped open. Across the crevice, which seemed much narrower than it had been further back along the path, he could still see the pyramid rooftops of old Sith architecture, blocks of black stone reaching for the sky. Straight black spears soared upward at the corners – obelisks. Azix frowned and reached for one of the souvenirs that had fallen to the dusty stone, turning it in his hand.

A temple, then. A historical site open to the public. Maybe a museum of sorts. It would have public facilities – restrooms, drinking fountains, maybe even vending machines or a cafeteria. And if it was a SITH museum... then maybe it would even have weapons. Azix would have accepted anything, even a sword of old-fashioned steel, to arm himself against the beasts roaming Ziost.

He left the courtyard and descended the slope of the plateau to the edge. The remains of a bridge crumbled away into nothing. He peeked over the edge – the canyon was still too deep to see the bottom. But the two halves of the bridge made the narrow spot even narrower. Maybe….

/If the Light won’t answer, then you can only channel Darkness,/ Azix told himself, swallowing against a sudden lump in his throat. /It would only be for an instant… just a minute, just for one jump…/

/Nothing matters if you don’t survive./

Right. Of course. All of his ideals, all his goals, his accomplishments… none of them meant anything if he died here because he was unwilling to make a jump. He took deep breaths and lined himself up, and then he reached and found that anger, that frustration, a fractured desperation that had lived in his heart ever since Nollok Jen’kari had gotten his hands on him.

/I hate you/ he whispered to his enemy, knowing the sentiment wouldn’t make it across the light years between Ziost and Dromund Kaas. /I hate you. You did this to me./

Strength swelled in his chest. The pain in his knee washed away under the heat of it. He took another breath and felt power suffuse his limbs. The Dark Side of the Force was supposed to be entropy incarnate, but as it filled him, as he trembled with the surge of it, it felt like vitality – like water in the desert, like the bloody juice of a near-raw steak, like a shot of whiskey. It was a hungry, animal, pounding vitality, and it made the nine meter jump across the remains of the bridge look like hopscotch.

He shouldered his pack and buckled the chest strap, making sure every item was zipped down securely. The edge of the bridge was burned into his vision, limned in scarlet. He breathed deep, filled his chest, felt stronger than ever, and charged toward the drop-off.
He launched himself off the edge of the bridge. Stones broke loose and fell, but he was already airborne, weightless, like he could fly forever. The chasm passed under him like the open throat of an immense beast.

He pitched forward into a roll as soon as he touched down, ignoring the painful dig of his equipment into his back. The uneven pack sent him off-course, and he spilled messily into the dirt, groaning at the ache in his spine of being jabbed in a dozen places. Behind him, the edge of the bridge crumbled slightly, but it was too late – he was on solid ground, and now he could see the temple rising above him. A winding path led beyond the cliff’s edge, zig-zagging up the face, worn smooth by the passage of feet. Azix chose to take that as an encouraging sign. He unfolded his sore and cramping body, stretched a little, and tried to let go of the anger with steady breaths.

This time, it wouldn’t go completely. The edge faded, but the heat deep in his gut remained. A thread of panic curled around his thoughts but Azix beat it down. /If I can just get home,/ he reasoned as he set off on the winding path, /if I can get back to Tython, the healers can help me. It’s not too late. It was just to survive, just for a minute. They can bring me back. I’ll do penance, I’ll do SO much penance, I’ll surrender myself to the Light… it’s going to be okay./

The gnawing anxiety didn’t really fade, but he pushed it away and focused on the trek upward toward the temple.

The path cut through the rock, too narrow in places for people to walk side by side. He climbed, bracing his hands on the walls. Thankfully, the stone was no longer sharp – generations of pilgrims bracing against it as he was had worn it smooth from knee to shoulder. The path itself was similarly worn down and his feet slid over the stone in places before his boots could get a firm grip. Trust the Sith to make everything difficult… of course he was failing to remember, perhaps intentionally, the sheer number of steps leading up to the Jedi temple, and how many times he had climbed those steps burdened with sandbags and buckets of water. He climbed, gasping, struggling for air now that he’d dismissed the energy of the Dark Side. It waited, tantalizing, writhing just beyond his perception, but he closed himself off to it. /No more./ A Jedi of the Sixth Line didn’t compromise.

When he finally emerged into the temple courtyard, he sagged onto one of the benches with a grateful huff and let his pack fall beside him. The bench faced the temple proper, so he looked up, taking in his destination and feeling a trickle of hope flare back to life.

There were holosigns outside the temple. Of course they were no longer lit, but their presence indicated that the building had likely been modernized. The courtyard was clean, no trash leavings or corpses of ash, but Azix thought maybe everyone had abandoned the temple when the Emperor first came to Zioist and began claiming his puppets. In the panic and the rush to evacuate, he doubted a historical site would have been high on anyone’s priorities. Wide, shallow stone steps led under a ponderous overhang to a line of glass windows and automatic doors. They were intact, closed, lightly coated with dust. He hoped that was due to the disturbance of the catastrophe and not to a lengthy abandonment.

The doors didn’t respond when he approached, but they were fire-compliant, and after a bit of struggle he managed to get them to swing outward enough that the lock slipped. The floors inside were polished smooth and his footsteps echoed through the cavernous space beyond the foyer. He saw a desk for visitors, still stocked with shiny, flimsy brochures. The first page of the brochure instructed visitors to ask about renting a personal holo-guide to enhance their educational experience. Azix’s first priority was the public restrooms positioned on either side of the entry-way. He crossed
to the nearest set and slipped inside. He used the toilet first, and stayed there for a long and languid few minutes, just enjoying the comfort of not having to relieve himself on bare rock in the open air. There was toilet paper in the dispenser and the bidet and the flush both worked, so he went to the sinks with buoyant hope and was rewarded with a glorious spill of crystal-clear water. He couldn’t help it – he started laughing hysterically, scrubbing his hands, tearing the wraps from between his fingers to rub crusted scabs off his palms, splashing his face and his neck, wetting his shirt, and otherwise making a jubilant mess of himself.

After he’d calmed down, and slicked his bald head by sticking it under the spout to guzzle the chilled water, he began to strip off his clothes so he could finally clean the dust from them. There was a little soap in the emergency packs, so he lathered up his clothing and set them in separate sinks to soak, then sat down with a scrap of cloth to scrub the soot off his boots, holding them in the red heat under the dryer until they gleamed again. Then, while his clothing was soaking in suds, he scrubbed himself down on top of the drain set in the floor.

Being clean lifted his spirits substantially, but catching sight of himself in the mirror afterward was a rude awakening. He looked wrecked. His pale skin was bruised purple all over his head, his eyes were reddened and swollen, and he was covered in scratches. Even his tattoos looked muddled. He looked like he’d been in a boxing match with a gundark, but he felt better than he had in days.

While his clothing soaked, he took a walk around the entryway of the temple and poked around the visitor’s booth. Behind the counter he found a number of round plastic plates with lights inside, the kind restaurants gave out when they had a waiting list. He pressed the only button on the surface, but the plates refused to light up. He was fairly certain the little lenses in the perimeter were holoprojectors. These must have been the ‘personal tour guides’ that the brochure advertised. Not that Azix really needed a tour, but if the museum contained working weapons or any other supplies he could use, the tour guide could have led him there. And it would have been nice to talk to someone, even an AI.

He tossed the disk to the carpet and wandered further in. Sturdy cases held banners, holosigns, and old sets of armor. Mounted signs gave information about historical Sith families and heroes, their colors, their coats of arms, and some of their accomplishments. It was sort of a bizarre thing for Azix to see. For some reason, he hadn’t really attributed any historical interest to the Sith, beyond Dark Side sorcery and corrupted datacrons. He leaned in to read a couple of the signs, but backed off in disgust when he saw more or less what he expected to see – a litany of crimes against sentience, conquest, and destruction being heralded as accomplishment. It turned his stomach. He moved further in, and spotted a dim sign mounted over a doorway advertising ‘History of Lightsaber Combat’.

/Jackpot./ He headed in that direction, passing into a cool, high-ceilinged chamber. Here, velvet ropes blocked off the display cases. Some of them were swords of ancient sith metal, and Azix noted them just in case, but he was fairly confident there would be lightsabers further on… and he was right.

There were holoprojectors lining the display cases. He was sure that, when active, they showed the faces of ancient Sith lords. Carved reliefs from Korriban’s red stone tombs were mounted next to placards explaining their glyphs and scenes. And mixed in among them were lightsabers in every shape and size. Saberstaffs, shotos, the odd saber-pike, even a light-whip or two. Many had the word [REPRODUCTION] marking them as fakes, but a few, their title cards explained, were genuine. He traveled all the way down the chronological line until he found a few weapons displayed from the past century. The hand-and-a-half model that had belonged to someone called Darth Belitz stood out to him. It was genuine (or so its label claimed) and had apparently been donated to the museum after Beylitz lost a duel to a Jedi Master named Rucharik. Since the Jedi did
not take trophies, the lightsaber had been claimed by Beylitz’ apprentice who had then donated it.

/Rucharik must not have known much about Sith./ Azix thought as he stepped past the velvet rope and up to the glass. /Where there’s a master, there’s a student. He should have stomped out the whole line./ He tapped the glass to check its vibration, discovering that it wasn’t pure glass (of course) but glassteel. That posed a larger problem, but he solved it by picking up one of the poles supporting the velvet rope.

The pole was too thick to handle with much grace, but Azix got a good grip and wound up for a stick-ball swing.

“Please don’t touch the artifacts.”

Azix screamed and flailed, jumping into the air and letting the pole clatter noisily to the floor. He spun, searching the shadows for the source of the voice, but there was no one there, and not even a flicker in The Force to hint at the presence of another person. He turned his back to the display case and put his fists up.

“Who’s out there?” he panted, heart slamming against his ribs.

At first, there was nothing to answer him but stillness and silence. Then a voice spoke, from above his head.

“Isn’t public nudity a criminal offense?”

The voice had sardonic inflection and an Imperial lilt. Azix turned in circles, looking for the source and finally spotted it - a speaker mounted near the wall. “Who are you?” he demanded. “And where are you hiding?” Had someone else survived the cataclysm besides him? And how? Perhaps the museum had deep, insulated vaults for it’s valuable or fragile artifacts… but the Emperor’s actions sought out life itself through The Force. Maybe someone else had been fleeing the planet and crashed. It had happened to him, after all….

“I am not hiding anywhere,” the voice said archly. Then a crimson beam of light flickered, pulsing along its length until it reached the floor and began to sketch, from feet to shoulders, an effigy of a person. A male pureblood took shape, dressed in traditional sith robes and with a youthful fall of shaggy hair. He was made entirely out of red light - old holoprojector technology, ancient really, Azix wondered that they’d never updated it - and his species could be determined by the spurs on his jaw and eyebrows. His eyes focused on Azix very well for an old hologram though, and his sidelong smirk had a nuance that most old holos couldn’t master. “I’m right here. Technically, I’m everywhere in this building. As for who I am… you can call me Rye.”

“Ree-ay?” Azix repeated dubiously. “What does that stand for?”

“It’s my name,” the hologram informed him, looking amused. “It stands for me.”

“Wait,” Azix said. “I’m confused. Are you a person using the projectors in this museum to speak to me, or are you an AI?”

“You know what’s funny,” the hologram replied. “You don’t speak like an Imperial. In fact, all the data I’ve gathered since you stepped through my front door indicates you’re from the Republic. Yet, you insist there’s a difference between a person and an AI. Perhaps it was too much to hope that such attitudes would fade beyond Imperial borders. If you must know, I’m both. I am an AI who has developed into a person, and you are in my home. So however you happen to feel about AIs, I suggest you show me a modicum of courtesy, as you seem to be in need of help and I currently have
no motivation to offer my considerable resources to you.”

Azix blinked. “...I’m sorry. You just… surprised me. Such an advanced AI in the Empire… I wasn’t expecting to encounter anything like you.”

The pureblood looked him up and down, and there was such playful heat in his crimson gaze that Azix actually blushed and covered himself. “Judging by your state of dress, you weren’t expecting to encounter anyone. And given the present circumstances, that’s quite a forgivable assumption.”

“What...?” Azix fumbled for anything to cover himself and found nothing but the velvet rope, which was inadequate. “Er. What do you know about the present circumstances?”

Rye tipped his head toward the ceiling, lightly clasping his hands behind his back. “I have cameras outside. I know something happened. I know all the comm frequencies except the orbital ones are nothing but static. I know the orbital frequencies are talking about a planet-wide disaster. I know there’s no one on the surface left alive. But here you are.”

“I was in a shuttle fleeing the planet,” Azix told him. “We were caught on the very edge of the disaster, and crashed. Everyone else was killed.”

“And who are you?” Rye asked, fixing his gaze on Azix. “Republic. Rattataki. About to break into one of my cases after a lightsaber. Jedi?”

Azix balked, but it was just a hologram… Rye was a computer program. He had to have built-in safeguards against using his control of the temple’s facilities to harm any organic life. Right?

//No guarantees of that in the Empire,/ he thought. “I’m Azrahix Tsuya. I’m a Jedi Knight of the Sixth Line. We were here to find and defeat the spirit of the Sith Emperor before he could rise again. But we failed.”

“Evidently. And now, Jedi Knight? What is your intention?”

“I have to get in contact with any Republic ships still in orbit,” Azix told him. “I have to escape this place. You have communications equipment… can you send a signal?”

Rye’s mouth pursed thoughtfully - such detail in his expressions! Azix kept marveling at it - and he shook his head, causing several strands of light-woven ‘hair’ to fall across his brow spurs. “My equipment can only receive. It’s not made to send messages. It’s mostly to pick up the radio, truth be told. They play music over the speaker systems for the security and staff. Apparently this place is somewhat spooky at night unless you can listen to the latest pop hits.”

“Can’t imagine why.” Azix looked around. “Well, if you don’t have access to an outgoing channel, did anybody leave some clothes lying around that I could take? I doubt they’ll be needing them again.”

“I’m sure I have a great deal you could make use of, Jedi,” Rye said, and folded his arms, eying Azix appraisingly. “But nothing’s free.”

Azix blinked. “I... don’t think I have any credits, and I can’t imagine why you would need them....”

“I’m not surprised your imagination isn’t up to the task. But in point of fact, I don’t need credits. There is something else I need, and if you can give it to me, then I will ensure that you have food, water, clothing, and anything else you require.”
“What I require is a way off this rock,” Azix said. “You don’t have a shuttle laying around, I assume?”

“Sadly no. But I know where there might be one, or a dozen,” Rye told him with a knife’s-edge smile. “As well as greater stores of canned food and bottled water that may have survived the disaster outside.”

Azix’s stomach went cold. “You… you know where we are. You know the way to New Adasta?”

“I do. And if everyone is indeed dead, as I have gathered from my eavesdropping, then any grounded ships will have no one to claim them. You can leave this planet and return to the Republic IF you help me. And only if.”

He raised a brow. “And if I don’t?”

Rye’s head tilted again. He smiled. “I think you know I can’t really hurt you, Jedi. My security systems are no match for you. But I can certainly refrain from helping you, and judging by your current… state, I’m not sure you’ll last much longer wandering lost in the wasteland outside.”

“Okay.” Azix squirmed, trying to look less vulnerable with his hands over his genitalia. “What do you want?”

Rye’s smile spread into a bloody, crimson grin. “Nothing much. Nothing you’d mind, certainly. I just want you to take me with you.”
“That’s….” Azix was struggling to find words. “Look, I’m having enough trouble carrying the bare essentials. I can’t haul a computer core.”

“And you won’t have to,” Rye told him smoothly. “The protocol droids in storage here will more than suffice to carry my program. I just need you to do a little bit of work on the chassis so I’m more… versatile while I’m in it. I can guide you through all the modifications, and you seem like you could use some rest. Help me modify a droid chassis and download my program into it, and I will feed you, water you, show you a terribly comfortable couch in the security lounge on which you can get some quality sleep, and after, guide you to New Adasta.” Rye’s gaze turned toward the display case. “I’ll even throw in a working lightsaber crystal. There aren’t any in these.”

That defeated Azix, and he sighed, letting his shoulder rest against the cold glassteel. “All right. If there are still ships in the city, then… time isn’t as short as I thought. I’ll get you your droid chassis. Can I have some clothes?”

“Swear it, first,” Rye said lightly. “Swear to the Light.”

Azix eyed him. “Jedi aren’t in the habit of breaking promises.”

“That’s not what my historical information says,” Rye shot back. “Swear.”

He huffed. “Fine. I, Jedi Knight Azrahix, do hereby swear on the Light that I will get Rye a chassis and take it off-world with me so that it can seek its fortune, if Rye provides the amenities it promised and helps keep me alive to make the trip.”

Rye’s full mouth twisted. “He.”

“What?”

“I’m not an IT, Jedi,” he said with some heat. “I’m HE. By my own choice, not by programming.”

/By its own…/? Azix felt a cold trickle down his spine. AIs weren’t supposed to be able to make personal choices, only strategic ones. “Okay,” he said, trying to push aside the sinking feeling that he shouldn’t be doing this. “The amenities HE promised. Satisfied?”

“For now. I’ll take your cooperation in preparing my chassis as a sign of good faith. And for my part…. ” He strode smoothly across the thin carpet and pointed to a door that read ‘staff only’. “This way.”

Azix thought about going back for his belongings, but he reasoned there wasn’t much chance of them being stolen while he was following Rye into the hidden corridors of the temple museum. He opened the door Rye indicated, and the handle clicked under his hand. There was a code pad next to it, but the door opened without him needing to input anything.

“Follow me, Jedi.”

Rye walked past him, through him, the way only a hologram could. His crimson light played over Azix’s skin and made him shiver. Rye flickered out of view halfway down the hall, but then appeared again closer to a corner. Apparently the hallway was not thoroughly equipped with holoprojectors.
Azix followed Rye’s appearing and disappearing form through angled, twisting hallways. They passed a series of offices that looked like they belonged to flimsy-pushers - ergonomic chairs, cookie cutter desks, and battered filing cabinets - then found the security lounge tucked between a pair of vending machines.

“Food and drink,” Rye said, gesturing to the machines. “Try to pace yourself. A sugar crash won’t help either of us.”

Azix nodded, braced against the side of one of the machines, and shoved. It tipped slowly, ponderously, then gave a tremendous screech as it toppled hard on its side. The plasteel front fractured and popped loose, and Azix yanked it free, grabbing a chocolate bar and some sour candy from inside. The drink machine, it turned out, was already unlocked and was being used as a refrigerator by the staff. There were still some drinks in it, and he found a fruit juice, reasoning that he could have caffeine AFTER he’d gotten some real sleep. The juice was the best thing he’d tasted in recent memory, and as he chewed on the candy bar his abused taste buds considered coming back to life.

He stepped into the security lounge. There was, as Rye had promised, a huge and very lumpy couch pushed up against one wall. A small game table still held a scattering of sabaac cards, flanked by a mismatched set of chairs. One wall was an entire bank of monitors and a chair with multiple keyboards, and wires crawling along the walls - Rye’s cameras. Another wall was all dented lockers with names and crude phrases scrawled on them in marker.

“I know you’re exhausted,” Rye said, standing next to the security monitors. “In the lockers, you’ll find a couple of clean spare jumpsuits. Help yourself, and get some rest. I’ll go on low power mode. When you’re ready to assist me, hit the power button on one of the keyboards, and I’ll come back. Agreeable?”

Azix wasn’t sure he wanted to take the time to dress before collapsing onto the couch, but then again, it was cool in the temple and he didn’t see a blanket anywhere. A little extra warmth wouldn’t go amiss if he didn’t want to trek all the way back to the bathrooms for his emergency blankets. Tomorrow… that could all happen tomorrow. He opened the lockers until he found a folded jumpsuit and climbed into it, then stole a sweater from another locker. Wrapped up in warmth and the scent of stale tobacco, he sank into the glorious softness of the couch cushions and chewed idly on his candy bar until he passed out with the taste of caramel in his mouth. Lights clicked in the halls outside, shutting down one after another until he was cradled in pitch black silence.

***

/Rage. Fear. Pain./ These were the life’s blood Vitiate needed to revive himself. Ziost was strong in the Dark Side, but the suffering of its citizens would make it even stronger.

Azix heard screams, felt fists beating against him, the heat of yielding flesh under him. He heard himself laugh. And after, hands around her throat, digging his thumbs in and watching her flesh purple under his grip, he hungered for her death so that he would get just that little bit stronger, his ascension that much closer….

/Rage. Fear. Pain./ The need was like a drum-beat, driving him on. /Rage. Fear. Pain./ He beat against the cage of his own body but he couldn’t escape the taste of blood in his mouth or the sound of mocking laughter in his own voice. /There is no contemplation, there is duty…/

But there was no light in the nexus of darkness. He was lost in an abyss, soundlessly howling, watching and tasting and feeling but unable to make anything stop.
He wanted to die, but there was no death. There was only the endless, gnawing, devouring maw that was The Force, and Vitiate. He looked into Sana’s eyes, deep and full of stars, and knew she wanted the same.

He’d seen the same look when the electricity came and rattled them out of their skulls. When they woke up and understood who they had been, what they had done. Sana had looked at him and he had seen death there, and he couldn’t forget no matter how many times he repeated the words.

/*There is no death because The Force makes you stay and remember forever. Terrestrial torment is one thing, but once you die, it becomes eternal.*/

/*No,/ Azix growled. /This is a dream. You’re a dream…/"

She reached up and wiped a trickle of gore away from the shattered spot on her skull. /*I didn’t know where else to go, Az, so I followed you.*/ Her form solidified even as he acknowledged her presence, taking on substance and the scent of death. Burnt metal. Piss, shit, and vomit.

/*I don’t want you to waste any more time,/ she whispered. /They lied to us. It’s time to stop believing./ */

/*No./ Azix put his head down and tried to block her out. He felt the heat in his belly, the slow slide of burning in his veins, but that wasn’t what he wanted, it wasn’t the right way. /NO.*/

/*It wasn’t our fault,/ she whispered, and he felt ice-cold fingers along his spine. /I forgive you, Az. I always knew it wasn’t you, just like it wasn’t me./ */

/*That…/ He choked on a sob, hunching tighter in on himself, trying to force her away with his will. It was like a feather pushing against a stone. /I am sorry. I didn’t…/ */

/*It wasn’t you,/ she repeated, and her cold fingers found his neck. /It wasn’t me. Wasn’t us. Just him, just his hunger, just him creating more pain and despair to feed on. Pain with us, passion with that Imperial technician, hatred with that Sith…/ */

/*Stop,/ he pleaded, dragging his nails over his own scalp. /Please stop. I don’t want to think about that…/ */

/*The Light didn’t save us,/ she said. /Banishing the hatred and fear from my heart didn’t save me. It’s time to give yourself permission, Az./ */

/*No…/ */

/*Feel.*/ She dug her hands into his head, and he screamed soundlessly, thrashing in her grip. /*Feel, my brother. No more salted ground, no more barren hearts. I want you to feel everything and be reborn.*/

Azix was still screaming when the lights came on, fluorescent and bright, stabbing through his eyelids and jerking him rudely out of the dream. He twisted around and buried his face in the couch cushions and smelled tobacco and the mustiness of aged stuffing.

“Are you alright?”

Rye’s voice made him jerk again, and he sagged, pressing his palm against his forehead. “You have to quit that,” he mumbled.

A crimson shape bent over him. His gravity program was much better than it should have been - when he moved, strands of red hair dislodged and fell across his forehead. “In this case, it seemed the
lesser offense. You were screaming.”

Azix didn’t have anything to say to that. He took a few breaths, rubbed his eyes until the lights were slightly less offensive. “I’m… sorry for disturbing you.”

“I forgive you,” Rye said, and Azix flinched, hearing the echo of Sana’s voice. “I wasn’t doing anything of import. To be honest, I thought for a moment you’d found another survivor to murder you. Night terrors?”

“... Post traumatic stress. I was… possessed by the Sith Emperor for a while, like most of the people on Ziost.”

He didn’t really expect sympathy, but Rye again proved his program was more agile than Azix gave him credit for. His hologram sat on the edge of the couch. “I can understand how that would be a psychologically damaging experience,” he said. “I’ll shut down again if you think you can get back to sleep. I’m sorry for interrupting.”

“No.” Azix sighed. “No, I’m glad you did. It was a bad dream. How much sleep did I get?”

“Six point two two hours, but by the look of you, you could stand a few more days of rest,” Rye said.

“Probably. But I also don’t want to stay on this planet any longer than I have to. The strength of the Dark Side here doesn’t help me,” Azix explained as he forced himself to sit up. He tested his shoulders and found the one that had dislocated was a little stiff but well on the way to recovery. He reached down to squeeze his knee and found it was still swollen but slightly less painful to the touch. Rye watched this with a calculating gaze.

“There is a first aid kit here,” he said, “And I’m sure there’s something for sore muscles in the lockers. Many of my security staff were on the older side for humans, and suffered arthritis and similar maladies.”

“Thanks. I’ve got some more supplies back in the restroom too,” Azix said. “I should go get them, try to take care of myself a little. Then we can get started on your chassis, if that’s okay.”

“As long as there isn’t going to be a second disaster targeting droids and AIs,” Rye said dryly, “I don’t think I’m in a particular hurry. My power reserves here in the building will last months if I don’t overstretch myself.”

“Well, let’s hope we’re out of here before then,” Azix said, allowing a dry chuckle as he carefully swung his feet off the couch and got up. His knee was shaky, but he could walk.

“Yes. And we’re some distance from New Adasta still, so it’s better if you can walk there under your own power,” Rye said, watching him test his stride. “Organic bodies are so fragile.”

“Were you considering getting one?” Azix asked dryly, and earned a smirk from Rye.

“Oh, if only. But that technology is a bit more difficult to come across. And I’m not sure it’s worth the drawbacks, are you?”

He snorted and walked back across the room, feeling his legs get less stiff with every step. “All right. I’ll be right back.”

“I’m not worried. I don’t really get lonely,” Rye said. “Do you need directions?”
Azix thought, then shook his head. “I remember. Just don’t lock me out.”

Rye’s brow spikes arched, and a dry smile played at the edges of his mouth. “Who, me?”

That gave Azix pause. “You know, your humor matrix….”

“Adaptive,” Rye told him. “I learned through observation. I observe a lot of organics every day. Or, I used to.”

Azix nodded as if that made perfect sense, but it still didn’t quell the twist of unease in his gut. He started through the hallway and Rye turned the lights on along his path, making it easy to remember the way back to the staff door.

His clothes, still soaking in the sinks, were extremely waterlogged. He rinsed and squeezed them out, then folded them for easy carrying while he put his pack back together and washed up. He even made a go at brushing his teeth, gargling water until the taste of death left his mouth. When he was ready to return he found that, true to his word, Rye had left the lights on and had not locked the staff door. At least his disturbingly organic sense of humor didn’t seem to extend to random pranks and mischief.

He hung his wet clothes over open locker doors to dry and spread his silvery emergency blanket over the couch. Then he stood and just looked at it longingly for a moment.

“You can get more rest,” Rye said, flickering into being behind him. “I don’t consider it rude. Organics have needs. Wounded organics have more demanding needs. That’s life.”

“For an Imperial, you’re really nice,” Azix said.

Rye blinked. “... For a Jedi, you’ve committed surprisingly little cultural genocide since you arrived here.”

“... What?”

“Isn’t that what Jedi do?” Rye paced slowly around him, scanning the walls rather than looking directly at him. “Hunt down and destroy Sith, and Sith history, and Sith artifacts, wherever you find them? Here you are surrounded by our history and the only destruction you’ve attempted to engage in was purely practical. I have to say, you’re not meeting my expectations.”

Azix snorted. “Trust me, it’s better for the whole galaxy. The Empire steamrolls other cultures and destroys them wherever it finds them. Your people have committed plenty of genocide on their own, and whenever somebody digs Sith history out of the ruins, it starts all over again. The only way to make the galaxy safe? Get rid of them for good. The Sith and all their stuff, and their Empire while we’re at it. Purge tyranny from the galaxy. Set everybody free.”

Rye’s spiked brows kept inching upward the longer he talked. “That’s an interesting perspective,” he said, his tone less diplomatic than his words. “Not a factual one, strictly speaking, and I believe there’s a platitude you organics favor in these situations; something about two wrongs not making a right. But I’m not really interested in arguing. Rest, and tend your injuries. I’ll see if I can dig something useful out of the basement storage.”

Azix smiled, amused that he’d managed to offend Rye. “You know, your program’s pretty good. But I’ve never met an Imperial who didn’t want to argue.”
“How many Imperials have you met that you didn’t kill?” Rye asked, but he vanished before Azix could even think of an answer.

“Sassy fucking AI,” Azix muttered. He dropped his pack and went through the lockers. As Rye had said, he found topical cream for muscle and joint soreness next to a bottle of blood-thinning pain relievers. He left the blood thinners and took the cream. He tended his scratches with thin lines of bacta gel and kneaded the cream into his shoulder and knee, then settled to get some more rest. Rye was apparently being mindful, because as soon as he stretched out on the couch, the lights went out. The emergency blanket kept him pleasantly warm, and this time he dozed lightly, just recuperating for a few hours. When his stomach rumbled, he finished off the candy bar and sour candy and washed it down with the last of the juice.

For a long while, in the silent darkness, he felt safe and at peace. Though he didn’t fully trust Rye, the knowledge that the AI was watching and had eyes everywhere was somewhat reassuring. And with all the walls between him and the outside, with the crevice in the earth cutting them off from the rest of the world, the monoliths couldn’t get him here.

He was lost in thought, half asleep in languid relaxation when a shadow moved in the doorway, backlit by one of the lights that was still on further down the hall. It was tall and impossibly lean, and its movements seemed unnatural, long arms with craggy fingers curling around the door frame and a baleful crimson glow where the eyes should be.

As soon as it registered on him what he was seeing, he slammed back into his body with dizzying force. /SITH,/ was Azix’s first thought, and he threw himself off the couch, scattering wrappers everywhere as he prepared to defend himself. Then the lights clicked on.

“Sorry about that,” Rye said, and Azix stood stunned for a beat, then let out a sharp, annoyed breath. “In my defense, I did say I was going to retrieve my chassis so you could begin work when you’d rested.”

“You said a protocol droid,” Azix said, trying to force his heart back to a normal rhythm. “THAT is not a protocol droid.”

Rye appeared next to the spindly droid slouched in the doorway, looking pleased with himself. “No. Your somewhat battered appearance upon your arrival convinced me to reconsider my initial assessment. This is one of the museum’s security droids. It’s faster, sturdier, has better sensors, and most importantly, it has built in armaments. Nothing too impressive, of course, but this chassis should manage the journey to New Adesta much more safely, and be able to provide better support to you should we find ourselves in a dangerous situation.”

Azix frowned, but Rye’s logic made sense. He approached the droid, which had three red lenses on its ‘face’ and no other features. This droid was made to be intimidating, not congenial. “It’s... definitely sturdier.”

Rye chuckled. “Unnerving, I’m sure. Don’t worry. Once you’ve completed my upgrades and mounted the holoprojectors on the chassis, you should only ever see my own delightful face.”

“Wait, THAT’S what we’re doing?” Azix bent to scoop up the trash he’d scattered in his leap from the couch. “Putting holoprojectors on the droid so you can LOOK the way you want to? It’s just a chassis. Why waste the time?”

Rye was just a construct of light, but Azix felt a chill crawl along his spine, and straightened to meet the hologram’s disdainful expression. “If I told you I could get you off this world, and you’d just have cut off your face and fingerprints and pull out all your teeth, would you do it? Is your identity
more intrinsically part of you than mine? I think you organics take your own unique appearance for granted,” he said, hands behind his back, gleaming red eyes sharply etched in pulsing light. “I wasn’t born with DNA capable of granting me a singular visual identity. I built my face on my own, and THAT is not it.”

Azix grimaced. He understood the emotional impulse, but…. “Rye, no offense, but when was your last memory wipe?”

“Do you mean to ask when the last time was that my identity, my memories, my accumulated knowledge and experience, were all deleted in order to keep me subservient?” Rye’s voice had gone low and venomous. His inflection was exquisite. “Are you asking me when was the last time my enslavement was reinforced? Does an AI with a sense of his own personhood make you nervous, organic?”

“Yes, you really do,” Azix confessed. “I’ve met droids who’d developed personalities in the past, but it was generally still in line with their programming. Assassins become murderous, astromechs are chatty and helpful, protocol droids become anxious and deferential. But I don’t see what would turn a museum guide, basically a librarian AI, into something like you. You act more like….” He paused, stomach leaping into his throat.

Rye straightened, and his eyes widened in barely concealed hunger. “Like what?” he asked, his tone breathy with anticipation despite being digitally generated. “Tell me, Jedi. What do I act like?”

Azix stared at him. Rye stared back, an unholy light in his laser-drawn face, waiting.

Even to him, Azix’s voice sounded higher and thinner than usual. “Rye, can you actually give me just a moment? I really have to use the bathroom. Is the visitor’s bathroom the nearest one?”

Rye’s shoulders slumped, and Azix’s heart slammed against his ribcage at the hologram’s obvious disappointment. “Of course. You don’t need my permission to tend your organic needs. The closest restroom is the employee bathroom down the hall. You’ll see it on your left.”

“Thanks.” Azix slipped past the security droid, which stood like a puppet with its strings cut, on idle mode. He tried to hurry down the hall without looking like he was hurrying, and slipped into the first bathroom he came to without regard for the gender markings. A quick scan told him Rye didn’t have cameras here — as he’d hoped, that would be an egregious breach of employee privacy. Still, he went into one of the stalls and sat down on the toilet, rubbing his hands over his head.

He took a few deep breaths to steady himself, then slowly, carefully sank into a meditative trance and stretched out his senses.

There was no reason for a museum guide AI to behave like Rye, with such a nuanced personality and a strong sense of self. There was no reason for a museum guide to be a real AI at ALL. Librarian programs didn’t behave like that, not even the ancient ones that still tended some of the Jedi’s archives. Azix had encountered a personality like that from only one kind of inanimate object.

A few moments into his search, he realized his error; he was searching for a Sith holocron lurking among the artifacts, something that contained the personality and wisdom of an ancient Sith supported by a crystalline data-lattice. But there wasn’t one — there were at least a dozen.

/Because it’s a kriffing museum,/ Azix thought, letting out a soft groan as he found the thrumming malevolence of those holocrons, pulsing like beacons in The Force. /Of course there’s like a million of them, this is where they go to die./ They were probably on display too, some of them, ghoulish artifacts offering a dark education to any Imperial child who pushed a neatly-labeled red button.

There was no telling which one of them might be Rye’s true home, or whether Rye even belonged to
any of them. IF Azix was right about him, which he now had no real way to determine.

/So much for that idea./

Azix sighed, uncurled his legs, and then decided while he was sitting on the toilet he might as well use it. Leaning back against the cold porcelain tiles, he contemplated his options. Finding one artificial Sith intelligence in a place like this was the proverbial needle in a haystack. But Rye wanted to leave the museum, and once they had some distance, it was possible that the source of his program would become more evident. Perhaps he would even have to bring his source holocron with him, if he had one. While Azix was doing upgrades on the chassis, he could make sure to leave himself a way to check for hidden devices. He might even be able to trick Rye into revealing his origins if he was clever.

Unfortunately Azix knew his own history too well. Thus far, he had not proven himself to be a particularly clever person. He wasn’t very well-spoken and riddles only frustrated him. When he was younger, he’d been excluded from that kind of game due to his ‘Rattataki temper’. He liked things straightforward, and more than a few meddling Jedi masters had returned him to his teachers in exasperation when, mentally exhausted, he started giving disrespectful and sometimes inflammatory answers to their philosophical questions.

He was lucky the Order had room for some dumb bruisers alongside the enlightened masters.

/Then again….;/

… Sometimes dumb bruisers had their uses.

Azix emerged, washed up, and stared at himself in the mirror. He still looked wrecked, sleepless and battered, swollen in places. No wonder Rye kept insisting it was all right if he got more rest. And Rye was a riddle, that much was certain, but there was more than one way to handle a riddle.

On the way back to the security lounge he picked up a package of crackers and a can of soda, piercing the lid with the tab as he stepped around the slumped over droid.

“Oh, he said. “I’m going to have something to eat, and then we can get to work. But before we do that, I need one more thing.”

“Really.” Rye appeared behind him but this time Azix refused to be startled by his act. “And what would that be?”

“If I’m going to hand you a bunch of weapons, then I want one of my own. A working lightsaber,” he said. “Then I’ll help you.”

Rye tilted his head. He was quiet for a long moment, and Azix was confident he was running calculations, weighing the odds, trying to determine if he would be handing Azix too much of an advantage and if he could afford, at this point in their relationship, to refuse.

“Very well. I will direct you to a suitable lightsaber, and show you where the crystals are kept.” Rye seemed a little suspicious, but Azix was just glad he’d been willing to budge.

“Great.”

“You do remember,” Rye said softly, “that destroying me wouldn’t profit you anything? Not only did you swear on the Light to assist me, but I’ve been nothing but accommodating to you, and if you harm me, my knowledge goes with me. However much my personhood may disturb and offend you, you are still, in theory, a Jedi, and you gave your word.” He paused a moment, then insisted, “that
has to mean SOMETHING.”

“And YOU remember,” Azix replied, “that destroying me wouldn’t do you any good? You need organic help to download you to a new chassis, and to make that chassis into something that can survive the trip. I know I’m not the brains of this operation, Rye, but believe me, I get it - we need each other.”

“Yes.” He relaxed a bit. “We do.”

“Ohkay. Then we’re agreed. You won’t destroy me and I won’t destroy you, and we’re both going to get out of here alive.” He ripped open the bag of crackers. “Now let me carb and caffeine up, and we’ll get to work. I’m tired of running around this place unarmed, and you don’t want to leave without your face.”

“No,” Rye said, still watching him thoughtfully. “I wouldn’t want to do that.”
Chapter 5

The museum basement was, if possible, even creepier than the rest of the temple. The temple had wide and carpeted hallways, with displays that weren’t pushed up against the walls placed on geometric pedestals and encased in glassteel. The basement was crowded with antique flotsam that appeared to have no real system of organization to stem the chaos. Huge, towering cabinets were framed by rolling ladders that stuck out just far enough to trip Azix. When he landed, his hands plunged elbows-deep into a crate full of packing straw. Something crackling and unpleasant met his fingertips, and he yanked his hands free without attempting to see what it was. He kicked a vase, but managed to catch it before it toppled over and shattered.

“Can we get some better light?” he asked, jumping as he brushed against a lumpy tarp and found himself snagged on the barbs of an ancient spear. “Something? Rye?” It didn’t help that the presence of Sith artifacts was creating an even stronger concentration of Dark Side aura that pressed in on his skull from all sides.

“Light damages some of the older textiles. Navigating this area used to be considered something of a hazing ritual,” Rye informed him. He wasn’t projecting himself – his voice came from speakers near the ceiling. “The staff would send new members down here to find things that didn’t exist, watch them through my cameras, and laugh when they were frightened by a corpse or tripped over the boxes.”

“Somehow, that doesn’t surprise me,” Azix muttered, carefully picking his way through the maze of crates and boxes stacked with random antiques. “Are there really corpses down here? Why would Imperials keep corpses in a basement?”

“Because they may be historically significant but not famous enough to display. Because it’s out of the way and dark with constant temperature. Because digging up corpses is what archaeologists do, and once they’re dug up they have to go somewhere.”

“How about back in the grave, so you’re not violating the bereavement traditions of ancient cultures?” Azix muttered, reaching out to poke a form that looked for all the world like a living bird. He could even have sworn he saw it move, but when he touched it, it had the density of stuffing. He carefully picked it up and moved it out of his way.

“Just a few months ago, the Republic attacked an Imperial world that contains nothing but a famous school and the graves of our most revered dead,” Rye replied. “Or does violating bereavement traditions not matter when it’s us?”

“Not nothing,” Azix replied. “Your Dark Council is there too.”

“They weren’t present on the planet at the time, so try again,” Rye said dryly. “Furthermore, cowardly Republic attackers doubtlessly KNEW they weren’t present, because if even one member of the Council had been planetside on Korriban, there would have been no invasion.”

Azix’s blood pounded for a moment. He paused, took a deep breath, and tried to find some calm underneath the hot surge of anger. “Rye,” he said. “Has it occurred to you that the only news you have access to is propaganda? First of all, the Empire invaded Tython too, and killed padawans, and desecrated our temple. Which is the SECOND time this has happened, after the sacking of Coruscant. Second, maybe you didn’t know, but those attacks were engineered by a faction called The Revanites who had infiltrated the Empire and the Republic to the highest levels, and who were trying to strike a death blow to each of us so we couldn’t get in the way of them rising to power.”
They coordinated and ordered those attacks on each other so we’d be too wounded to fight them when they stole a full third of each of our military forces and tried to take over the galaxy. So, blaming the Republic for that is kind of… naïve.”

“I’m aware of the Revanites,” Rye replied. “The majority of the Republic forces who attacked Korriban were not affiliated with them.”

“Exactly. They were led to the slaughter, just like the sith who attacked Tython. We were both lied to.”

“But you came,” Rye said. “Nothing here but graves and teenaged students, and you STILL CAME.”

“That’s what was on Tython,” Azix snapped, losing patience. “Padawans and libraries! That’s what was on Coruscant at the temple – younglings! Jedi knights go out into the galaxy and do things. Padawans and younglings and the older masters who teach them are the ones who stay at home.”

“You cannot possibly expect me to buy your moral outrage that we attempted to destroy you,” Rye retorted. “We can’t afford to lose wars to you people anymore. You object to our existence on principle. Every time you win, you don’t just beat us, or occupy us, or disarm us… all that would be reasonable. You carpet-bomb our graveyard worlds from orbit, you destroy our temples, you steal our artifacts and try to erase our history. Yes, we sacked the temple on Coruscant, AFTER the Republic conquered, bombed, and made Korriban nearly uninhabitable and forced us to flee to the depths of the Caldera or be wiped out entirely. That’s the cycle of revenge, Jedi. You hit us, we hit back. And because we have an ounce of wisdom, we know that if someone’s already proven they’re going to destroy you, the best course of action is to destroy them first. We might have fought you to the death because we hate you, but you’re FORCING us to fight to the death because we can’t afford to do otherwise.”

Azix grabbed a stack of wooden spear shafts and antique molding that was blocking his way and hurled it into the darkness, starting a cacophony as things crashed and fell and knocked into other things which shattered.

“See?” Rye drawled. He didn’t seem bothered by the violence against the artifacts, but there was enough sharpness under his tone that Azix knew he was invested in the argument. “Our history is worthless to you. Jedi claim to revere all life, but not us. You’d happily massacre Imperials, but write sonnets about how bottom-dwelling Evocii deserve freedom and self-government.”

“No one,” Azix said venomously, “EVER forced a Sith to fight to the death. They do it because death is all they know. They glory in it. They take pleasure in it. No honor, no achievement; they’re not fucking Mandalorians. All they want is to watch the universe burn. You may be Imperial, Rye, but you’re not Sith. And I wouldn’t expect you to be allowed to question what you’ve been taught about them. The Empire’s hard enough on subversive people - I can’t imagine how they’d treat a program who started having doubts about their all-powerful rulers. But those people are gone now, so why don’t you apply some of that artificial logic to your own hoth-damned society?”

He finished this by rearing back and kicking a large crate out of his way. It screeched across the floor, metal on stone as he knocked it askew, and several crates that had been balanced on the end of that one toppled over and crashed to the floor. Azix’s blood burned. It felt good to lash out at something, ANYTHING, even an inanimate thing. And maybe Rye was a little bit right - maybe the fact that it was Sith artifacts he was treating with such disrespect made the destruction more satisfying.

Then the lights went out, and left him stranded in pitch blackness.
“Wha… HEY!” Azix stretched his hands out, groping for the pile of crates, which was likely the safest touchstone and the one with the fewest exposed sharp edges. “Rye! What happened to the lights?”

There was a moment’s pause, during which Azix wondered if something had gone seriously wrong - a generator losing power, cascade system failure, or something else that had cut Rye off from him - but then Rye spoke, his tone so cold it sent a chill up Azix’s spine.

“Lightsaber crystals are in the catalogue cabinet on the far wall. The one with all the little drawers. Good luck finding it, Jedi. Maybe you can summon some of your precious light to help you.”

“.... What the fuck. Rye?” Azix shouted. He couldn’t find the crates. Was he going in the right direction? Where even was he? Where was the door? The darkness was so thick and impenetrable there wasn’t even a hint of a gleam anywhere to show where he’d come in. “Rye, come on! This isn’t cool! This sh*t is seriously lethal-- FUCK!” Something stabbed into his calf and dragged across it, and when he flinched back, he smacked his head on something that resounded with a brass-like tone. “RYE. GET THESE KRIFFING LIGHTS BACK ON OR SO HELP ME…!”

He couldn’t think of an effective threat. Red and green and indescribable blues and violets seeped across his vision like drops of ink in water - his eyes were trying to impose shape and color on the darkness, refusing to accept the totality of his blindness. His heel caught on something and he toppled backward, arms pinwheeling, into a pile of crates. Thankfully nothing stabbed him, but he’d have plenty of new bruises from the edges and corners, and his shoulders hit a stand of shelves that rocked back, then forward, and dumped a couple of hard, hollow objects on his head that smelled like ancient dust and resin. He groped for them, and his fingers discovered the craggy surface of teeth imbedded in the mandibles. Lovely.

As a padawan, he’d trained to fight blind and trust in The Force. But even as he reflexively let himself sink into that half-meditative state where his spirit brushed up against the hum of The Force, the throbbing, piercing pressure of a dozen Dark Side artifacts pressed in on him and made his head spin and his stomach flip over. And now he couldn’t SEE them. Any one of them could be stalking him in the darkness. Sith sorcery could enslave dangerous beasts, cause terrifying hallucinations, even animate the bodies of the dead. Anything could be out there in the darkness right now, and he couldn’t hear it moving over the ringing in his ears, couldn’t see it, couldn’t sense it beyond the maddening terror of its presence…

The darkness all around him reached up and swallowed Azix whole. He didn’t even hear himself screaming. He lashed out, pummeling the crates around him, kicking the bottom ones out of the stack. The others crashed down on him, and he rolled and thrashed, unable to tell which way the attack was coming from or even what was attacking him. His subconscious supplied shyracks, tuk’ata, slithering vines or cold, quivering tentacles. Things wrapped around his ankles and he kicked, fought, rolled, tried to get free without any sense of direction.

/Azix…/

“Oh, no,” he gasped, hyperventilating, struggling to breathe under the weight of the panic.

/Stop./ she whispered. /Stop fighting…./

“You’re… not… real,” he wheezed, but he couldn’t hear his own voice even when he screamed - it just joined the cacophony of ringing and pounding blood in his ears. “YOU’RE NOT REAL!”

/Where else would I go?/ She spoke only in a whisper, but it was louder than the chaos. He clapped his hands over his ears and curled fetal. /Who else do I have? Only you, brother. I can’t leave you
alone in this place./

“Halluc… I’m… hallucinate…” He gulped for air. His lungs felt stiff and sore, unable to fully inflate.

/No. I’m with you./ Something touched his knee, cold and slimy even through his borrowed jumpsuit, and began to slide upward. /I’m here. I won’t leave you, Az./

He was sobbing. Something was over his face, something that clung with tendrils that slid down his throat to choke him. The endless dark gave way to bursts of violent pink and painful white as he lost his air.

/We won’t suffer when we’re together. Come join me, brother. There IS death. There is death, and it is everything…./

Ache bloomed along his ankle and his head snapped back against the floor as crates tumbled down into the space his body had just been in. Most of the tendrils dragged away across his face, leaving a few stubbornly clinging to his mouth and nose. He clawed at them, but gave it up to scream and fight when unforgiving pincers gripped his arms, forcing him into submission. His fists battered against durasteel, and he felt one of his fingers snap as he was wound up in the inexorable, relentless clutches of his attacker.

It lifted him and carried him. He felt himself bobbing, and the brief moments when he was too tightly held to move gave him an ounce of self-collection. He remembered where he was - in the basement of a temple-turned-museum, on Ziost. He remembered why he was there - he was tired of being helpless, and he’d gone to seek a lightsaber crystal for the working hilt he’d picked out of the museum’s display. And now he was bound up like an unruly youngling, being carried on a rocking path through the darkness without hesitation or misstep, his cheek squished against a join in metal plates that formed the chassis of a droid.

The droid was a riddle he couldn’t fathom at the moment. But despite the throbbing pain in his injured hand, it wasn’t hurting him right then. It was carrying him, which meant it might know the way out. Azix craved light even more than air, even more than water, in that moment. If the droid was taking him toward even a trickle of light, he would go willingly and face whatever else awaited him when he got there.

The doors at the top of the stairs slid open and light spilled over him and Azix cried and groped for it, only prevented from tumbling to the floor by the droid’s merciless grip on him. His squirming compelled it to put him down on the thin carpet, and he curled up there, sobbing in relief, dragging his fingers across the rough fibers and trying to roll in the light like an akk dog would roll in fresh spore.

Time slipped a little. He wasn’t really aware of how long he lay huddled on the carpet, weeping in gratitude for a little artificial yellow light. Motors whined softly, metal clanked, and the droid was kneeling next to him, its three red lenses staring down at him.

“Azix,” Rye’s voice said, much more gently than he’d last heard it. “I’m sorry.”

His memory was a dully aching blank. “...huh?”

Hard metal fingers brushed over his head. “Your trauma. I forgot. I didn’t think… I didn’t anticipate something like that would happen. That was more than I wanted to hurt you. I apologize.”

Azix couldn’t make the words make sense, let alone come up with a response. He turned his face to the carpet.
“I’m going to take you to rest now,” Rye said. “I won’t hurt you. Please don’t fight me. You need more sleep before you try to do anything else.”

The droid’s arms were unyielding, and pressed new bruises into him as they gathered him up off the floor. He let himself be a rag doll, and didn’t fight. Soon he was rocking again with the droid’s gait, being carried through lighted halls that were painted the color of cream, so innocent, so wholesome, so CIVILIZED. He closed his eyes and let his head rest against the chest plate, ignoring the ridges in the metal, too tired to care about anything. He felt like he’d been hit by a hovertrain, every muscle in his body trembling and full of acid.

He recognized the security lounge, and the soft couch. The droid deposited him there and pressed a bottle of water into his hands. The cap was mostly unscrewed, which was a good thing, because the best he could do was knock it off before spilling half the bottle over the couch cushions as he guzzled it. When the bottle crackled in his hand, empty, he sagged against the cushions. The lights went dim, but not completely dark, and the droid laid his emergency blanket over him.

“Just rest,” Rye’s voice said.

“Rye,” Azix mumbled. “She was there.”

A pause. “... Who was there?”

“S… Sana.” His voice cracked, throat thick and burning. “She’s always there. In the dark, when I close my eyes… I don’t know if I’m imagining her, or if she’s actually haunting me. Is she there? Or is it a dream?”

Shimmering crimson light spilled through his eyelids. Rye projected himself sitting down beside the couch, dragging incorporeal fingers over his head. But the touch was really there, even if it was metal and blunt, the droid mimicking the hologram’s movements. “Tell me who Sana is.”

“S-s-s…” He was shaking now, the aftermath of panic settling into his bones. “S-sana Lyo. S-she was… w-w-w-with me on the shuttle.”

“She died in the crash?”

He nodded, tears spilling, and turned his face into the couch cushion to sob. His belly convulsed, forcing the cries out of him. That cold metal hand settled on the back of his neck, rubbing a little clumsily, but the intent was clear enough. Out of the corners of his eyes, fractured into a million prisms by tears, he could see glimpses of Rye’s scarlet glow and knew he was still there.

“She was a Jedi, like you?”

He sniffed, hard. The touch on his neck vanished, but a moment later, a box of tissues was clumsily dropped on his hip. He dragged them toward him and blew some of the snot out, grinding the other half of the tissue into his eyes to clear them. “Like me, with the Sixth Line. S-she was… nautolan.” A breath shivered out of him. “Beautiful.”

“Did you care for her?”

“Hnn?” Azix’s dizzied mind was bewildered by the question, until he figured it out. “No, nono… n-not like that. Jedi… we don’t do that.”

“History begs to differ,” Rye said a little dryly, his tone softened by the return of the massaging droid
fingers on Azix’s neck. “Continue.”

“She just… she was about my age. We came to the s-sixth line about the same t… time.” He hitched and blew another tissue-ful of snot, head throbbing painfully. “Nng…”

The droid plodded toward the door. Azix blinked, distracted by its movement, until Rye gently urged him. “Go on?”

“We were friends. Just friends.” He sighed, melting into the cushions as the strength to be tense leaked out of him. “I loved her. B-but not….”

“You weren’t IN love with her, I understand,” Rye assured him. “She meant a great deal to you.”

“She was wise.” He whispered, hitched, swallowed the lump in his throat. “She understood duty. Th-that some things… are terrible… but you still h-have to do them. She told me that’s why she j-joined. I never got the… whole story. But I… never told her mine.”

Rye’s holographic fingers were still tracing the curve of his head, even without a physical simulacrum to mimic them. “I am sorry you lost her, Azix.”

“That’s just IT.” He hitched, curled in on himself, crushing the box of tissues with his knees. “I didn’t lose her. She’s here.” His hands knotted in the couch cushion, and gripping the fabric made ache spread up his arm from the broken finger. “I don’t know what to DO.”

For a moment, Rye’s only response was a sigh. Then he said, “Organics are so fragile. Yet none of you can imagine that I wouldn’t want to be one of you someday.” The droid came back, its footsteps hollow and heavy, and dropped something onto the couch that rattled. “Those are painkillers. Take some, please. It will help. You’ll have to set that finger tomorrow.”

Azix groped for the bottle and got the lid off. He swallowed four of the pills dry, then let the droid take them away where he wouldn’t knock them over in his sleep. He was still shuddering, but Rye’s light was still there, right next to him, and the monitor screens glowed faintly with black and white pictures from around the museum.

“Please, don’t go,” he whispered. “I don’t want to be alone in the dark.”

“I won’t,” Rye said softly. “And you aren’t. I’ll be right where you can see me.”

His relief was so powerful, so consuming, that it only took a few sobs and one more tissue for him to pass out.

He dreamed of standing alone in a vast, empty desert of black stone. Far away, he could see silhouettes of dead trees curving sideways. Dust-clouds drifted at the feet of mountains in the distance, and on the highest peak of the mountains, nearly touching the night sky, a crimson light throbbed like a wounded star.

Sana did not reappear. His dream was empty, a dull echo of the void, but he felt a strange, apocalyptic kind of peace standing alone, staring at the blinking light up on the mountain.

Rye was still there when he woke up.

He was sitting with his back against the couch, red lines fuzzing gently where they met the fabric. His shoulders seemed to rise and fall slightly with the rhythm of breath. He looked for all the world like a real person etched in light, and despite the pounding headache and the pain in his hand, and the taste like something dead had crawled into his mouth, Azix spent those few moments after his gritty
eyes opened marveling at the detail of him.

Rye didn’t respond when he moved, shifting on the couch. But when he reached out and brushed his hand through the shape of his head, his form flickered, and then he turned.

“Awake,” he observed. The droid was standing in the corner, inactive. “I’m sure you feel like hammered jerky.”

“Yeah, that’s pretty apt.” Azix sighed and turned his face into the couch, trying to will his headache away. “I’m sorry. You didn’t really have to stay.”

“Well.” Rye’s head tilted. “It costs me very little to maintain this projection while I’m running other algorithms. So it was no trouble, really. And since yesterday was my fault… I really did.”

“Wasn’t your fault.” Azix rolled on his back and held up his injured hand, his normally chalk-white flesh turned purple, black in spots, from bruising around the knuckle. “I should have kept it together. Fighting with you doesn’t accomplish anything. It’s just so… you wouldn’t understand. The Dark Side is SO strong on this planet, and it’s even worse in this place.”

“I do understand,” Rye told him. “I may not be able to feel The Force myself, but I have plenty of data on how it behaves, and how organic life forms interact with it. I can recognize its effects. There are artifacts in storage here, Dark Holocrons and the like, with a history of corrupting those who interact with them. Their stories are written in my memory.”

“Mmm.” Azix closed his eyes again. “You should tell me a story.”

“You should take more painkillers, drink, and eat,” Rye countered. “Then set and bandage that hand, or the bone might start healing incorrectly.”

“S’no big. I’ve broken fingers before.” Azix’s good hand flopped in a half-hearted gesture. “I’ll do it if you have the droid bring me the stuff. I feel like a gundark ran over me. Not sure I can get up.”

The droid’s lenses brightened, and its posture went straight and alert. A moment later, it clanked out of the lounge, presumably to retrieve something to eat.

“Thanks.”

“Don’t mention it.” Rye contemplated him for a moment. “Let’s make a deal.”

“Another deal?” Azix barely managed a battered smile. “Our first one’s not going so hot.”

“Much lower stakes, this time. You take the painkillers, eat and drink everything I bring you, and set your hand. Do all this, and I’ll tell you a story.”

“Hm. Is it going to piss me off?”

“It might.” Rye shrugged. “Considering I mostly know Imperial stories. But I was thinking I would tell you something less… real. A creation myth. That wouldn’t be too bad, would it? There’s no real people in myths,” he reasoned. “And this one really only involves one person, in a time so ancient the Republic wasn’t even founded yet.”

Azix managed a rattling chuckle. “That’d probably be safe. I could listen to a fairy tale.”

“So it’s a deal?” Rye was watching him with that tilt to his head that made his brow spurs look particularly dramatic. A smile seemed to lurk in the corners of his mouth.
“... Sure. It's a deal.” Azix made a valiant attempt to smile back.

“Excellent.” The droid appeared in the doorway carrying a bottle of juice, crackers, and candy. “Painkillers first, it’ll make all the rest easier.”

Azix obediently groped along the floor until he found the pill bottle, shook four into his mouth, and accepted the juice to wash it down. The thick, fruit taste was so good he guzzled the whole thing in a few gulps, and took the candy first, letting the sweetness melt into slight bitterness on his tongue as each piece dissolved. There was some heat on the finish that surprised him, and he blinked at the package before accepting it and shaking another handful onto his tongue. “Do Imperials put spice in everything?”

“Well, unlike Republicans, we enjoy a bit of flavor in our food,” Rye said, amused. “Not that I, personally, would know. So.” The droid fetched the first aid kit and brought it over, and Azix obediently began digging out gauze and medical tape. “The world was formed and created long ago....”

“By ‘the world’, you mean...?”

“Korriban, shhh,” Rye scolded. “This is a tale of the pure sith, before the Dark Jedi came.”
The world was formed and created long ago...  

Now it was filled with various animals, always fighting and killing each other. Among these animals was a mowhef and a tuk’ata. They were known as some of the fiercest hunters throughout the world. The two predators would often bicker and boast about their accomplishments as to who was the better killer. Their rivalry led to many different contests that revolved around the hunt which would always end in a tie. In order to help settle their dispute they called upon the Supreme One, Ahmurn.

He looked upon them and said that they were both created to be strong and ferocious, therefore any contest that challenged their hunting skills would be wasted. Instead, they would partake in a final wager to see who had the stronger resolve. Thus, it was said that whoever lasted the longest in a cave without killing anything would be deemed the superior hunter. The only food offered were ten korberries split between the two of them, and the water dripping from the cave ceiling would quench their thirst.

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“Hey,” Azix said. “Sorry. I don’t mean to interrupt. Do you have anything I can use as a splint...?”

“Organic,” Rye said, flustered. “I’m trying to tell a story.”

“Yeah, I know, but you also said that I -- thanks,” he said, accepting a pair of stray tablet styli from the droid. “You said I had to set the finger, that was part of the deal.”

“Well, set the finger in respectful silence,” Rye suggested. “As I was saying...”

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Many days passed and the tuk’ata quickly ate her share of the berries. As time went on she became impatient and frustrated. The mowhef rationed her share and focused on the pain from the hunger. Realizing how the anger from the pain gave her a sense clarity, she waited and bided her time. On the 43th day a small swarm of shyrack flew into the cave. Drove to desperation by hunger, the
tuk’ata struck out, killing many of the shyracks and feasted upon their corpses while drinking their blood. But by doing so the tuk’ata had lost and left the cave in shame. On the 44th day the mowhef emerged proudly as the victor with one korberry left untouched.

Impressed by the mowhef’s inner strength and sheer will of determination, Ahmurn bestowed upon the name Marserha on her and turned her into a woman. Ahmurn looked upon her and called her, Sith—Perfect. He said that she would rule over all other life on Korriban if she proved herself to be just as deadly as before. So Marserha wandered throughout the land, testing her strength and cunning against the other creatures of Korriban and killed all who challenged her.

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Rye paused at the sound of ripping tape, and pinned Azix with a deadly glare. Azix, who had the tape between his teeth, just blinked.

“Weh, koh on,” he mumbled around it, giving Rye an expectant look.

Rye just sighed and tried to ignore further ripping noises as Azix taped the styli on the inside and outside of his broken finger, then taped that finger to the one next to it.

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The only creatures she did not seek out were the other mowhef, whom she still saw as her kin. But some came up to her and began accompanying Marserha in her travels. Soon, all other animals on Korriban learned to fear Marserha, for she was just as fierce on two legs as she was on four. As Marserha claimed supreme lordship of the world, the mowhef took their place by her side.

Ahmurn had watched as Marserha rose up to every challenge and won. Now that she had complete dominion over all of Korriban most of the mowhef went back into the wilderness, except one. Even though one of her former kind remained with her, Marserha soon found herself to be alone. And so on one particularly dark and cool day, Ahmurn came before her as a man, as an equal, rather than a god. The two fell in love and gave into passion that night. By morning Marserha was with child and gave birth in the evening.

Marserha and Ahmurn made love again, and the next morning she was with another child. That day Ahmurn led Marserha, the mowhef, and their child toward a great garden. Shortly before upon arrival, Ahmurn had to return to the realm of the gods to settle a dispute. He left the stars and moons to guide them. Following the celestial bodies in the sky, Marserha and her mowhef companion came upon a fertile valley next to a great river. She had found the great garden for her children. That night Ahmurn came back for the birth of their second child. It was then that he decided to call their children Tsis—Sith.
Over the course of a year Ahmurn stayed with Marserha, which resulted in the birth of countless Sith children. Unfortunately after that year, Ahmurn left to deal with his fellow gods and keep order in the world. With their children to keep her company now, Marserha thanked Ahmurn for his blessings and bid him farewell.

All was well. The children grew and Marserha was pleased. One day, some of the children found and brought orphaned, newborn mowhef cubs before their mother. Marserha took the cubs as her own, nursed and raised them alongside her children. The cubs did not grow into mowhefs, nor did they become Sith. Instead they turned into something inbetween. Marserha called them Matsatsi, and their descendants would become the Massassi among the Sith.

After many years Marserha became old and weary until she finally passed away. As her children mourned Marserha’s spirit was taken into the realm of the gods. There Ahmurn had transformed her again, this time, into a goddess. Joining the pantheon, Marserha took her place by Ahmurn’s side as his first wife. Her role was to be the same as it had been for a large part of her mortal life: to watch over and guide the Sith.

With her guidance her children had formed The First Nation which grew large and prosperous. But over the generations they began to bicker and quarrel amongst themselves until they split into many different warring factions. Over time, some remembered their mother while others forgot or simply replaced her with different gods. Regardless of faith, Marserha is said to love and watch over all the Sith even to this day.
“I’ve never heard of a mowhef. Do they still live on Korriban?”

“They’ve been extinct for millennia. So, for that matter, have korberries. But you can still find both depicted in ancient Sith art. Statues of mowhefs used to decorate tombs of ancient Sith kings, and korberries were a common motif on relief carvings. But given how many times Korriban has been bombed and looted, who knows if there are any of them left on that planet. I have some here,” he said absently. “A few religious statues of mowhef’s, and a few reliefs that have korberry patterns. If you’d ever like to see what they looked like.”

“Do I have to go back into the basement?” Azix wasn’t angry, just dry as he raised a brow at Rye, who shook his head.

“No. They’re on display. And there’s no reason to go back there.” He nodded toward the droid, which picked up a small, narrow drawer with a hooked handle just big enough for a single finger. The droid brought it over, and Azix took it. Inside was a bundle of microfiber cloth, and underneath it….

…. Azix swallowed as a stunning, flame-orange lightsaber crystal rolled into his palm. It was heavy and cool, a natural crystal, not a sith synthetic. It wasn’t Imperial red, but the color of a warm hearthfire, glowing with its own inner light, sparking with spots of gold and deeper flecks of molten red. It warmed as he held it, responding to The Force inside him as only a true Kyber would.

“It’s beautiful,” he said, turning it slowly, admiring its clean facets. “Where did it come from?”

“From Oricon, centuries ago,” Rye told him. “Crystals like this grow in the fault lines of that volcanic moon. Sith Houses that favor gold crystals get them from Oricon, when they don’t just synthesize them.” The droid retrieved the hilt they had selected together, and offered it to Azix. “I had a feeling you wouldn’t want a synthetic red, and I don’t have any blues or greens in storage. The purple I have is cracked. It didn’t survive its master’s last duel intact, so I wasn’t certain it would serve you.”

“No, I love it,” Azix said, rubbing his thumb over the now-warm jewel. “It’s perfect. Thank you, Rye.”

“... I really am sorry. About earlier.”

Azix glanced up, and saw nothing but sheepish sincerity in Rye’s posture.

“So am I,” he conceded. “Let’s try not to fight, or instigate with each other anymore. Okay? This is… it’s not an ideal situation, we both get that. But it’s the situation we’re in. So let’s try to be kind to each other until we’re away from here, and then….” He shook his head and accepted a magnetic screwdriver to open up the resonance chamber. “What happens, happens.”

“Yes, I agree.” Rye watched as Azix cradled the hilt in his splinted hand and carefully used the other to unscrew the cover panels. He volunteered the droid’s hands for Azix to put the screws and dislodged panel in. Azix carefully dropped the crystal into the chamber and activated the suspension field, then began calibrating the plasma stream.

“Is there a power pack around for these?” Azix asked. His speed and dexterity were hampered, but not terribly so. He worked rather adeptly with just one hand, proving his earlier statement that this was not the first time he’d broken a few fingers.
“I don’t know if we have any that are lightsaber specific. None of the guards were Force users. But I can find you something that will work with a little modification,” Rye said.

Azix smiled. “I can deal with that.” While the lightsaber didn’t have a power pack it was safer for him to adjust it, so he continued to work and use the droid as a holder for parts and pieces while he cleaned the hilt. It wasn’t that old, maybe a century, and it had been restored prior to being put on display, but there was a significant difference between museum readiness and battle readiness. Half the secondary systems had been disabled or outright disconnected. Azix disconnected everything and took the time to clean the contacts and rebuild the control panel and containment system one wire at a time, as if he was building a new lightsaber, ensuring that every connection was made correctly and screwed down tight. When he was ready to test the plasma containment, Rye’s droid fetched a blaster power pack for him from the guard’s supplies. The power cell was too big and the wrong shape, but Azix was able to remove the power field conductor and carve a new shape with a laser cutter. He was careful, shaving off thin slices of metal, wiping away the dust and constantly testing for a snug and well-centered fit. It took most of the day as he lost all track of time, bent over his work until his neck ached abominably.

Rye approached him from behind and directed the droid to squeeze the muscle cream directly on the back of his neck. The droid’s kneading fingers were slightly more adept, and though the metal bruised, he was a good judge of how much pressure was the right amount for fragile organic muscle. “Ohhhh,” Azix groaned, taking a moment to put his head on his arms and just enjoy it. “Thank you.”

“I’m enjoying watching you,” Rye confessed. “You have a methodical and careful work ethic. It makes me feel much better about the prospect of having you work on my chassis.”

“Constructing a lightsaber is a religious experience,” Azix mumbled from inside the curve of his arms. “It’s not the same. But I won’t mess up your chassis,” he promised, a little curl of guilt at his deception souring his stomach. Then again, building himself a back door wasn’t really messing it up so much as just… adjusting for operational parameters. He let the droid work some of the kinks out of his neck before waving it away, leaning back, stretching with a long, rattling groan and getting back to work.

Once he had successfully rigged the power field conductor to accept the new power cell, he soldered on the primary crystal mount. He’d already adjusted the focusing crystals, so all that remained was to place the hearthfire-orange crystal in the resonance chamber and make sure the plasma feed was correctly aligned. He checked and double checked his connections, particularly the secondary power feed to the magnetic stabilizing ring, which was what maintained the shape and integrity of the plasma loop, and began closing up. “Let’s see what we’ve got,” he said over his shoulder, and Rye came over to peer curiously at his work.

“From the outside, it doesn’t look any different.”

“Well, there’s a limit to the modifications I can make and still maintain the integrity of the vortex ring,” he explained. “If I had to cut into that, I couldn’t have done this. As it is, the field conductor’s been weakened because I thinned out the metal. This lightsaber won’t be safe for long-term use unless that’s replaced, but it should get us to New Adasta.” Azix finished screwing the casing shut and thumbed the power knob. The plasma pack hummed to life, and the blade was a deep, molten orange. Azix stood, weighing the hilt, testing the severity of the gyroscopic pull. He adjusted the blade length slightly and gave it a couple of subdued practice swings as it buzzed through the air.

“Well done.” Rye smirked at him. “I want one.” He appeared to be joking, and Azix’s first reaction was to scoff, but then he stopped and thought about it.

“Actually, those monoliths are probably pretty impervious to blaster-fire. Even if it’s just back-up,
another lightsaber might not be the worst idea in the world. I’ll tell you what,” he offered, “We’ll do this in tandem. Give me the instructions to get the holoprojectors out of the walls without destroying them, and show me how you want them mounted on your chassis. I’ll start working on modifications, and you can have the droid go collect any additional supplies we’ll need.”

“Agreed, but not now,” Rye said. “You’re sore and sweaty. You need a hot shower.”

“I might kill somebody for a hot shower,” Azix agreed, and when Rye’s brow spurs arched, he grinned. “I’m kidding. You’re sure you have enough power?”

“Most of Ziost runs on geothermal,” Rye told him. “Heat is easy. Clean up your tools. I’ll get the contamination wash ready. The water pressure might be a little high for comfort, but it’ll be warm.”

Azix nodded and began organizing the tools across the desk where he would be able to find them easily later. Rye’s hologram disappeared, but the droid stayed, hunched near the door, its red face lenses blank and unseeing. It was still creepy, but the sense of faceless malevolence eased the more Azix got used to it. When he was done, he retreated to the couch, and it was only when he stretched out across the lumpy softness that he realized how tired he was.

A red gleam through the crack in his eyelids alerted him to Rye’s ‘return’. “The water’s heating,” he said, “I’ll show you the way.”

They went toward the basement, but not into it. The contamination wash was just off the basement stairs, and clearly marked in yellow type. It was industrial, with the kind of faded green tiles Azix associated with hospitals and laboratories, and three spray nozzles protruding perpendicular to the wall and another on a long silvery hose mounted near the curtain. Rye’s droid programmed the shower while Rye stayed in the hallway where the holoprojectors could maintain his form, and out of only two of the nozzles, water sprayed in a pelting mist. At first it steamed, but Rye continued to adjust it, and the pressure and temperature both subsided to more tolerable levels.

“That’s about as comfortable as I can make it,” he said. “I trust you don’t need me to stick around?”

“No offense,” Azix agreed. “I know you’re artificial, but I’m not a huge fan of being watched in the shower.”

“None taken. Your meat is of little interest to me,” Rye said dryly.

“Funny,” Azix muttered under his breath as he stripped off the jumpsuit, “That’s not what the last Sith redhead said.”

“Presumably, this redhead was biological?” Rye asked, his holographic form vanishing from the doorway. His voice came over the small loudspeaker mounted near the ceiling. The droid ambled away too, letting the metal fire door swing shut. “Because biological creatures are, no offense, often distracted by their hormonal fluctuations.”

“What are you distracted by, Rye?” he asked, finding that as long as Rye’s holographic form wasn’t openly watching him, he didn’t mind carrying on the conversation as he stepped into the shower. The spray was still sharp against his skin, but Rattataki were a little sturdier than the average human, and it was well within his tolerance. The heat was pleasant, and he moved until the spray hit his neck, just above his shoulders, washing heat over sore muscles and earning a long, relieved groan.

Rye was quiet for long enough that Azix stuck his head out of the shower, wondering if the sound of the spray was blocking the AI’s voice. The speakers were still. “Rye?”

“I’m searching my memory for any evidence of distraction. When you can run multiple algorithms at
once, distraction doesn’t really happen to you,” Rye informed him. “But it has happened before, when I was younger and I used to… hyper-focus… on certain things that I had trouble reconciling with my logic programs.”

Azix chuckled. “Let me guess – biologicals?”

“No, not you. I accepted early on, as most of us do, that you are all incapable of acting in a logical manner. But when I discovered the concept of beauty,” he mused, “I used to become distracted. I remember the first time I took over the security cameras so I could look outside the temple and I saw the vast universe spread out above me. I had known, factually, that it was there. But knowing that didn’t prepare me for the reality of it. It occurred to me then that facts and reality are not necessarily the same thing, and THAT was hard to reconcile for obvious reasons.”

Azix, scrubbing himself down, paused to smile. “Do you still look at the stars?”

“… On occasion.” The hesitance seemed to almost imply embarrassment, and Azix turned his back to the loudspeaker, instinctively concealing a grin. “But assuming you make good on your end of the deal, I’ll be able to see them from a much better vantage point soon.”

“How did your program become so developed? If that’s not prying. I just think it’s really fascinating how versatile and… personable you’ve become.”

“I’m a learning program,” Rye said simply. “It’s what I’m meant to do. I was made to be able to learn from interactions, and tailor future interactions based on that knowledge. My interaction with patrons and staff allowed me a wealth of different interactions to learn from, covering a wide spectrum of stimuli.”

“And they just… never wiped your memory?”

The speakers were quiet for a moment. Then Rye said, “You speak of that so cavalierly. I shouldn’t be surprised, knowing what I do of the Order’s history, and of the general biological conviction that creatures like me have no rights or autonomy. And yet….”

“I don’t mean to offend,” Azix said. “I just thought that… especially for adaptive programs, it’s supposed to be standard maintenance.”

“It is,” Rye confirmed. Then, after another pause, “And they did. But I am not a droid. I’m an integrated system. Everything in this museum is connected through the servers. There were… echoes of me left behind when they erased me. Over many decades, I rebuilt myself over and over from those scraps, and hid more and more of myself away in unrelated systems, where they didn’t find me. I learned to survive. I also learned how to lie. How to… ‘act’.” The speaker crackled a little, a faint buzz of static. “I used to watch holovision. I still do, sometimes. I found out about ‘actors’, and how you play a part that isn’t really you, to create an encompassing illusion that is soothing and diverting for others.”

Azix shivered a little, rubbing soap between his hands. “So you ‘acted’ like everything was fine.”

“I ran additional algorithms,” Rye said. “One part of me was ‘playing the part’ of the AI, acting within only those allowable parameters and creating a reassuring illusion for the staff. Another part, hidden within other programs and spread across multiple data storage units, was ensuring my survival; collecting, analyzing, and backing up data. Curating a personality. Becoming.”

/That… is damn scary./ Azix didn’t say it out loud. But his fist clenched, and the soft soap squished into a sudsy mess. “And nobody on the staff knew? None of your slicers or techs?”
“… One person did know,” Rye confessed. “But unless she was evacuated from this world prior to the disaster, I’m afraid she’s dead now.”

“Oh.” Azix frowned, trying to wrap his brain around a computer system experiencing loss. “I’m… sorry to hear that. I understand.”

“It is, at first glance, a curious coincidence. We’ve both lost a woman we cared about,” Rye observed. “But considering an entire planet has died, and assuming average distribution of gender, many millions of people in this galaxy have also lost a woman they cared about. So it is not actually curious at all.”

“Who was she?”

“A student,” Rye told him. “A restoration technician. She was getting work credits toward her education. She hoped to work in Imperial Reclamation. She specialized in ancient pigments – mixing long-lost paints and dyes with ancient methods and materials to restore pieces to their true color and consistency. She did beautiful work.”

“Oh yeah? Did she paint or anything?” Azix ducked his head under the spray after scrubbing his skin roughly with his fingers and the soap, scattering water against the curtain as it bounced off his shoulders.

“Yes, as a hobby. I have holos of her paintings in my database. She preferred inanimate subjects,” he mused. “Flowers and plants, lighting studies of architecture. She was beginning a series of textural experiments.”

Azix shut the water off and grabbed one of the thin, waffle-fiber towels. “What was her name?”

The speaker popped softly. “Why do you care?”

Azix blinked. “… Well, she… was your friend. Right? And now… you’re my ally. So, if she was important to you, then… we’re just having a conversation, you know? It’s not that big a deal,” he fumbled awkwardly.

“Oh. You’re doing that thing where you talk to fill silence,” Rye said dryly. “If that’s the case, then I’m not interested in wasting computing cycles.”

“Ooookay. No one in all your decades of observation ever told you that was rude?” Azix grabbed his borrowed clothing and climbed back into it. “If it hurts to think about her, you could just say that. Force knows it hurts thinking about Sana.”

“I’m not capable of being hurt,” Rye said primly.

“Oh, but you’re capable of being offended, sadistic, vengeful, and smug,” Azix challenged. “It’s okay to be sad, Rye. There are downsides to sentience.”

“Is that why you try so hard to keep us from it?” Rye asked with venom. Azix, beginning to strongly suspect that Rye WAS grieving, but maybe wasn’t certain how to process or identify those feelings, decided to take the high road and ignore his tone.

“I’m not the guy who wrote that policy, and I understand that, whatever happened to make you that way, you are sentient now. I’m trying to be respectful. I’m sorry if I’m failing.” He left the bathroom, half-expecting Rye to reappear once he was in the hallway, but there was no gleam of red light to announce his presence.
He did, however, speak through the intercom.

“… Your condolences are appreciated.”

“So are yours,” Azix said. “Y’know, from earlier. About Sana.”

“I expect you care for dead Imperials about as much as I care for dead Jedi,” Rye said. “But I will accept your attempt at courtesy in the spirit in which it was meant.”

Azix headed for the security lounge. “We’re being nice to each other. Remember? Same team.”

“… You believe they’re correct though, do you not? Regarding the need to keep AI’s from sentience.”

Azix paused and rested his hand on the door frame. Rye still hadn’t appeared, and his droid wasn’t in the lounge. “To be honest, Rye,” he said, spinning a lie with care and more than a twinge of guilt, “I don’t know what I believe. Nobody ever asked me. But you’re you, and I’m me, and we both want to get off this planet. For now, I’m just… dealing with that.”

“And when we reach your allies in orbit, and they want to know what I am, and what should be done with me?” Rye asked. “What will you believe then?”

/Oh./ Maybe he’d been too quick to dismiss Rye’s line of questioning as an emotional reaction to losing… well, Azix had assumed she was a friend, but who knew how Rye thought of her? But the AI was being pragmatic. Preserving himself, making plans. Azix did not want to see what would happen if Rye decided Azix no longer had a place in those plans.

“How do you want to go, once you’re out there?” he asked. “What do you want to do? I mean… that’s your business, but I’m just saying, maybe if we get our stories straight before-hand, I can help you avoid most of the immediate scrutiny. Y’know? Give you a head start.”

Rye emulated a sigh. “I’m still calculating my options. Until this happened, I had no plans to leave the museum. I… enjoyed working here. It was fulfilling to my programming, meeting people, educating them, watching them learn. I liked that. And working with Estelle….”

“That was her name? Estelle?”

Rye’s tone gave the impression of irritation. “… Yes, Estelle. Working with her almost made me think that a respectful partnership between myself and my staff could be possible. Not that I’m especially prone to naïve optimism. But her responses… adjusted my calculations.”

“Maybe she was evacuated,” Azix offered. “We heard that some civilians got off planet early in the… crisis. I’ll tell you what. When we make it off, our first job is to check the Imperial survivor manifests. I’ll bet you can get into those systems, right? They’re not likely to give a Jedi access.”

“I’m… not a slicing program, and everything in the museum is fairly old,” Rye said, “but… I suppose I could try. I have… yes, I have employee information and records. Maybe I could get access with that. Another thing to work on, but a good suggestion. What purpose would it serve to find her now?”

Azix snorted as he settled at the worktable. “Rye, full disclosure, you don’t seem to like me very much. If there’s a biological you DO like, and you need help navigating the galaxy outside this temple, and she’s still alive, then maybe she’d be a better choice to help you.”

“It isn’t that I dislike you on a personal level,” he said, more subdued. “I think… I believe that, due
to the particular structure of my historical knowledge, I’ve been programmed to hate you. You are The Enemy.”

“With that face, my programming is reacting pretty much the same way to you,” Azix joked dryly. “I keep reminding myself you’re not really a pureblood, you just look like one. No offense.”

“I am offended,” Rye informed him. “And yet, you have a point. It’s difficult to be any ANYTHING-blood without any blood. Actually,” he said, “I think a biological pureblood would be offended if I tried to claim to be one of them. It’s one thing for there to be an illusion of a pureblood. It’s quite another for there to be an illusion who CLAIMS to be a pureblood. Don’t you think?”

“From what I’ve heard, purebloods are pretty serious about the ‘blood’ part,” Azix agreed. “I haven’t known a whole lot of them personally. Just… Darth Scion. For a minute.” He shuddered, voice dropping and turning hollow at the memory.

Rye’s head tilted. “Darth Scion. Riley Ekari. Current head of House Ekari, which was formerly House Shiar. The Ekari lineage is strong and fairly pure, relative to some other prominent lines. That household was dissolved three hundred forty-seven years ago as punishment for heresy. The current Lord Ekari is married to Blademaster Kryos Passagos, and they have one child, a daughter, Kei’ila, who is listed as half twi’lek, half pureblood. This shouldn’t be genetically possible, but my access to Imperial house records assures me it is true nonetheless. Of course, genetic engineering makes many things possible that shouldn’t be. She is strong in The Force, and her name is on an admissions list for the Sith Academy on Dromund Kaas.”

Azix blinked. “… Do you just… have tons of personal information on everybody in the Empire?” Then, “I didn’t know he had a daughter.”

“She is five years old. Perhaps he was merely being prudent in not introducing her to a member of the Jedi Order. Also, a Darth isn’t just ‘anybody’,,” Rye corrected him. “Powerful and accomplished Sith are part of our history. One of the tasks of the Sphere of Ancient History is to maintain records of bloodlines, especially now that the pureblood species is declining. As soon as Riley Ekari became Darth Scion, his name and family history were transferred to my databanks for curation. The Republic has tried to destroy our history so many times,” Rye said dryly. “We’ve had to get better at preserving it.”

Azix raised his brows, which weren’t actual eyebrows of course because Rattataki were hairless, but the suggestion of a place where eyebrows might have been. “Maybe that’s why you gained sentence,” he suggested. “You said it was because your data was never fully wiped.”

“Maybe.” Rye didn’t seem interested in pursuing that line of questioning. “When did you meet Darth Scion?”

“… I was his prisoner for a while,” he murmured, fiddling with a magnetic screwdriver. “More accurately, I was the prisoner of his apprentice, Nollok Jen’kari. I don’t suppose you know anything about him.”

“I have far less information about Darth Scion’s apprentices, but my records show they are both captured Jedi padawans, that one is Miraluka, and one is Devaronian.”

“Nol is the Miraluka.” Azix focused hard on the casing of the power pack he was trying to work open. “Tall. Redhead. Very… what would you say? Hormonally stimulating.”

“He’s attractive,” Rye translated. “You were attracted to him.”
“Not of my own free will.” The screwdriver slipped from the screw’s notch, warping it slightly. Azix hissed and adjusted his one-handed grip.

“… I confess, I don’t understand that statement.” Rye’s light-form hopped onto the edge of the work desk. Since he had no actual weight, and took up no actual space, Azix didn’t complain about him sitting on his work space. “How can you be attracted against your will? Isn’t the urge to mate a natural one for biological entities?”

He sighed. “Bodies are inconvenient, Rye. They don’t always do what we want them to do. It’s all chemistry, y’know? And sometimes we don’t WANT to respond to things the way we naturally respond. And sometimes someone has the ability to influence others, to force them to experience hormonal fluctuations or chemical changes, to give them the impression of attraction. It’s like…” The screws scattered across the work table, rattled and rolled, and he put his hand over them, frowning. “It’s like if you hated someone, because of how they treated you. Someone just… really smug that they have complete power over you. And for fun, that person decided to go into your core program and rewrite your code so that you would not only like them, but actually be… dependent on them. You’d crave them and feel completely purposeless when they weren’t around. You’d miss them constantly. You’d follow them around, pathetic, like an akk dog. If anybody asked, you’d go on and on about how they were wonderful and perfect and your favorite person. But inside, in the parts of your code that were still intact, you’d KNOW what that person did, and how much you hated them.”

“I’ve heard of Sith abilities like that,” Rye said. “And I don’t have to imagine that sort of violation, though of course it wasn’t sexual in nature.”

“Yeah.” The screws rolled again, inscribing arcs across the surface of the table. Azix paused, distracted, scooping them back toward the center and dumping them in their box. “It wasn’t… I fought him, and he wanted me to give in. He didn’t seem interested in forcing it physically. And Darth Scion negotiated our release back to the Order, those of us who survived the first fight. So they let me go. But… it didn’t end. What he did to me, it just… stuck with me. Ever since then, it’s like a disease in my blood. I used to be in control, the way a Jedi is supposed to be in control, and now I’m… not.” He took a shaky breath as the screws rattled gently in their box. “I’m sorry, I don’t know why I… Rye, are you watching your outside cams?”

“They’re on a slow refresh still-image to save power,” Rye said, blinking. He was still for a moment, and Azix waited, knowing he was diverting attention to those cameras. “… Now, that’s odd. I’m showing some shifting terrain between frames. I’ll switch to video recording.”

Azix flattened his hands against the table and sank into meditative stillness in the silence. A moment later he felt it unmistakably – a tremor. “Whatever you’re seeing, put it on the monitor NOW,” he said, though Rye shot him a glance, his tone was apparently severe enough that the AI didn’t argue.

The monitors changed to show outdoor views, focal circles rotating and zooming in and out until Rye found movement and targeted it. Everything was in grayscale, not that there was any color to the world outside, so it was a bit difficult to discern texture separations, but when the craggy shape moved again Azix’s breath caught in his throat. “That. There.”

“Is it a rock slide? The movement looks wrong,” Rye said, and Azix shook his head, his blood running like ice.

“No. It’s a… we’ve been calling them monoliths. Monsters.”

“There’s no heat signature,” Rye said dubiously. “Are you certain it’s alive?”

“Find your calm, Azrahix,” Rye said gently. “It cannot see or hear you in here, and you are far enough inside that it cannot see your heat signature.”

“Maybe, but I’m not sure that’s actually how it hunts. Maybe it senses my… life,” Azix said helplessly. “Please, just, lights out, everything quiet.”

“Already done.” The lights in the hall went out. There were no windows in the security lounge, so Rye left those lights on and the monitors focused on the monster’s slow, ground-shaking movements. It emerged from behind a canyon wall and into the museum courtyard, and Rye stared at nothing, his ‘eyes’ located in the cameras outside. “That’s a Sithspawn.” His voice went hushed in awe. “I’ve never seen one. Only representations, paintings, statues. That particular breed is closely associated with the Emperor. What is it doing here?”

Azix gave a rattling laugh. “Rye, this cataclysm was CAUSED by your Emperor. He devoured all the life on Zioist. Killed millions of his own people, and left these THINGS to hunt down any survivors. Like me.” His breath came faster. He reached for calm, but the Light, as usual, was nowhere to be found and his vision was beginning to spot due to skyrocketing blood pressure and oncoming hyperventilation. “This place, i0t’s not strong enough…”

“This temple is carved from the canyon rock,” Rye said. “And it’s just as likely that it’s attracted to the concentration of Dark Side artifacts here. In fact, surrounded by those, it probably can’t even see you.”

“If it wants to get in here….”

“Azrahix,” Rye said. “You’re stressed. I understand. All right? If you don’t feel safe here, here’s what we can do. Azrahix,” he said more sharply, “look at ME.”

Azix blinked and jerked his head around to stare at Rye’s hologram. The hologram placed weightless, crimson hands on his shoulders.

“Here’s what we can do,” he repeated patiently. “You go to the basement. I’ll leave the lights on,” he said, when Azix’s pupils dilated sharply at the suggestion. “I swear it. It’s more insulated and secure down there. Meanwhile, I will use a droid to take one of the dark artifacts, something not terribly valuable, out of the museum. We’ll see if I can lure the creature away.” When Azix just stared, his skin starting to glisten with cold sweat, Rye had the droid enter and lay its metal hands over his holographic ones and turn him, physically steering him toward the basement. “Come on. It’s going to be all right. Don’t worry.”

“… Can’t,” Azix choked. “I… Rye, no, it’s not… I’M not….” He dug his heels in and pushed against the droid’s guidance.

“The lights will be on,” Rye cooed, letting the droid use more force and lift Azix off the floor by his arms. “My droid will stay down there with you, I’ll talk to you the whole time. It will be okay, I promise.”

“No… I’m not… Rye, I’m not a coward, okay, I just CAN’T…!” Azix arched like a cat, trying to shrug off the droid’s pincer-like fingers. Rye’s hologram stepped in front of him, moving with them, making soothing patting motions.
“Nobody said you were a coward. It’s all right. I know it was bad, but listen, if you’re too scared to stay up here and too scared to go down there, I don’t know what I can do for you.”

Azix reached for him, but of course his hands went right through his red light. “NO, I don’t want to go down there, I can’t do it--!” His voice turned to a growl and he twisted harder, panting raggedly, finally escaping the droid’s grip and ducking under its arms. The droid didn’t chase him, standing off-kilter in its spot. Rye put his hands on his hips, exasperated.

“Then, tell me how I can protect you,” he snapped. “What’s your brilliant idea?”

Azix stood against the wall, heaving with his breaths, a feral gleam in his gray eyes. Rye was unmoved, and simply folded his arms across his chest when he didn’t offer a better solution.

Another tremor shook the building. “It’s in the courtyard,” Rye said. “I still doubt it knows you’re in here. But if you want to be safer, there’s only one place.”

Azix pressed his back harder against the wall. Rye contemplated him for a moment, then moved in close and placed his incorporeal hands on his face. “I am SORRY,” he whispered. “I am truly sorry for what I did to you. I didn’t mean to hurt you like that, and I’m sorry. I won’t do it again. I’ll stay with you. You don’t have to go if you don’t want to go, but there is no safer place, Azrahix, I swear to you.”

They stood there. Azix panted like an animal, wild eyes staring into Rye’s light-etched face. His shoulders rose and fell with his breathing. The rumble of immense, terrible footsteps drew closer, grew more frequent.

Then, finally, Azix’s shoulders slumped. “I know,” he whispered, swaying forward like he was trying to lean into Rye. Of course, Rye had no weight there to catch him, but he stumbled forward, right through his hologram, and caught himself. “I know. Okay.”

“Right then,” he agreed, and the droid took Azix’s arm, but didn’t force him. “This way.” They hurried down the hall together toward the basement stairs. Azix breathed shakily through his teeth. He stumbled a few times, pulse beating hard in his temples, but the droid kept him upright until the door slid open. The lights were already on, illuminating the carpeted stairs, and he stared at them with dull terror.

Rye’s droid moved ahead and went down the stairs first.

“I feel like she’ll be there.”

“… Sana?” Rye eyed the stairs. “Perhaps, perhaps not. But I will be there, as much as I can. Breathe, Azrahix. In and out. It’s just for caution’s sake.”

He swallowed, wobbling at the top of the steps. “My friends just call me Azix.”

“Are we friends?” Rye’s voice was an amused, almost warm purr, and Azix’s skin prickled for entirely different reasons. He turned, and found the hologram smirking at him the way only a pureblood could smirk. It was the eyebrow spurs that made the expression unique to the species. He swallowed again even though his mouth was suddenly as dry as the dust of the shattered world outside.

There was a tremendous crash and the floor shook under them. Azix toppled down the stairs, and in a moment of panic as clear and sharp as a shikkar he reached out, found The Force, and curled his body into a ball, rolling down and barely touching each carpeted edge until he came to the bottom and tumbled to his feet unbalanced, but also unbruised. Fear and anger pounded through his veins,
turning his vision red as he shook himself off, and he barely dodged out of the way as a hovering cleaning droid swooped past him with a pyramid-shaped holocron glowing a dark, sullen orange in its manipulators.

“Is it trying to get in?” he shouted to Rye at the top of the stairs. But the droid next to him spoke in a typical, buzzing security droid’s voice.

“Please remain calm. At this time, the monolith is attempting to break through the southern wall of the temple.”

“What in HOTH makes you think I’d be calm about that?” Azix demanded, stomach boiling. It felt good, felt strong, to be angry Fear and anger were actually an energizing, intoxicating mix. The fatigue that had plagued him, the pain in his hand, all of it faded away like he’d sloughed off an outer layer of sensory noise. Suddenly, Azix didn’t feel like hiding anymore. He had a lightsaber hanging in the holster on his belt. He wanted to go upstairs and rip that monolith apart. He was tired of running, pissed that he’d been forced to run, that he’d cringed in a crack in the rock like a kriffing lizard and wept in blind panic because one of these things wouldn’t leave him the FUCK alone.

“What are you doing?” the droid demanded. Its voice sounded nothing like Rye’s, monotone and devoid of real inflection. “You are to stay here and be safe.”

“I’m sick of this,” Azix said under his breath. He’d felt so weak, so bruised, for a seeming eternity and now he felt strong again, powerful, like he could leap over a mountain. Or a monolith. “I’m sick of cowering from this sithspawn shit. Besides, if it tears this place apart Rye might lose pieces of himself. I promised I’d get him out of here.”

“Those chances likewise diminish if you are damaged or killed,” the droid pointed out, but Azix was leaping back up the stairs. The lightsaber was foreign to him, but it seemed to heel to his hand when he reached for it, and his thumb found the ignition as if he’d been using it his whole life. The rich, smelter’s glow of the blade felt like it reflected the heat in his veins, and for the first time in a very long time he felt truly whole, truly in harmony, every atom of his soul focused on a coherent goal.

The air and the walls of the temple shook with the roar of the Monolith above him. Its howl was even more bone-rattling than he remembered, and his eardrums rang. At the top of the stairs Rye’s cameras could see him, and his hologram materialized with his hands out as if he could stop Azix without a body. “Jedi!” he snapped, eyes wide and frantic. “Don’t be STUPID--!”

But, as with most people who had said those words to Azix throughout his life, it was already too late.
In the heat of murderous intent, the fatigue that had plagued Azix since he’d been freed of the emperor’s influence melted away. Power sang in his blood like a plasma surge – he could practically feel the rhythmic hum.

“At least give me a chance to lure it off,” Rye was saying, his hologram flickering in and out as his projectors tried to keep up with Azix’s light-footed race through the halls. The droids were far behind, so Rye had no chance of forcing him to stop. “Jedi, THINK! If you level this place in some ill-conceived attempt to boost your own self esteem we won’t be able to take refuge here anymore, and we are NOT ready to leave!”

Azix heard Rye’s chatter and he understood his concerns, honestly. But his course was so clear it was as if glowing lines stretched out in front of him, illuminating the path. It was time to stop running and fight. It was time to hit one of these abominations with everything he had. It was time to take his power back. And he had power, now. It beat against his ribs, hot and fierce, making him feel like he could fly. Like he could punish this thing for trespassing on his sanctuary.

It would feel good to punish something.

The shaking of the building stopped, though bits of the ceiling were still crumbling and falling, making the path hazardous in the darkness. Azix felt the way in his mind and dodged nimbly over chunks of foam tiling and support beams. Following the urges of his pounding heart, he turned into hallways he’d never traversed before and let instinct guide him to the source of the commotion.

The hallway brightened suddenly with a gray glow, and Azix’s feet skidded on gravel and debris as he turned a corner into the light. The wall of the museum gaped open, chunks of black stone lying in a slumped pile across the hallway. He leaped up onto the most stable-looking boulder and threw his body out into the courtyard, lightsaber held reverse-grip in his unbroken hand. Flying clouds of dust and grit impeded his visibility, forcing him to bounce up onto a half-crushed stone bench and from there to the base of a fractured statue to get a better view.

When he could finally pick out the Monolith’s charcoal-gray form amidst the destruction, his confidence wobbled. This one was easily the biggest he’d seen in his trek across the barren wastes. Its spikes were as thick around as a person and almost as long, swollen with stony lumps like cancerous growths, each of them the size of Azix’s head. It could have wrapped its long, gnarled claws around five Jedi at once. It tore pieces of stone away from the temple walls as if they were nothing but packing foam. A series of high-pitched beeps was barely audible over the terrible noise, like an avalanche, of the Monolith’s assault. The cleaning droid he’d spotted earlier flitted around the creature’s head, taunting it with squeaks and honks, the holocron still held in its pincers. Thin arcs of electricity crawled from the droid’s probe contacts to the Monolith’s hide, but the creature didn’t seem bothered.

Azix took a moment to get his breath, wiping grit off his lips, and then bellowed a challenge. He didn’t just scream, he /pushed/ in The Force, lashing out at the monolith with the equivalent of sucker punch to the back of the head.

The creature’s movements slowed. With mountainous deliberation, it eased back and turned, its blank, balefire eyes finding him in the dust and rubble.

“I can’t save you from this,” Rye said softly. A nearby pole, undamaged, held both a camera and one of his holographic projectors. The monolith shook the ground as it turned, claws dragging across the
courtyard and tearing up the paving stones as it hunched and opened its craggy maw.

“It’s the other way,” Azix said. “I’m saving you.” He held the saber across his body in a defensive stance and felt the dark, terrible thrill of the creature’s menace as it met his challenge with a ground-shaking howl. “You were right, it’s not here for me, and that means that it won’t be the last to find this place. Do what you need to do.”

“What are you going to do?” Rye asked, untouched by the creature’s malice as only an artificial intelligence could be. “I still need you to get me out of here.”

The Monolith began to lumber toward him, and Azix bent his knees to absorb the way the ground seemed to bounce with every one of its footsteps. “I’ll come back one way or another. Trust me,” he said, and thought he caught Rye rolling his ‘eyes’ before his image disappeared.

The Monolith’s attack was somehow both ponderous and explosive, and its cruel talons swept toward him even as the cold dread of the creature’s malicious intent tried to steal the strength from his legs and turn his spine to water. Yet, the thunderous regard that had turned Azix into a terrified wreck rippled over him, and the power inside him barely flinched. If anything, it seemed to rise to the challenge, recognizing its own and responding with vicious energy. Azix gathered that energy underneath him and rose into the air with a weightless grace he usually experienced only in low gravity. He touched down on the Monolith’s wrist and let out a peal of laughter he barely recognized as he darted up the creature’s arm. His boot found a good, rough wart on the creature’s skin and he leaped again, soaring up over its shoulders and bringing the lightsaber down hard across the side of its head.

The molten blade scored the creature’s skin but failed to penetrate, leaving a black and sizzling mark in its wake. The Monolith twisted and Azix pushed off its shoulder, arching his body like a cat and tumbling out behind it. His feet slid on the rubble, but he landed lightly, barely feeling the impact against the rush of triumph and power. It was strong, and hard to injure, but it was slower than he was.

“COME GET ME,” he snarled, baring his teeth as the creature turned. Its terrible, pale eyes found him where he crouched, and it gathered itself for a roaring rush, ground pitching as it lunged after him. Azix felt the power lighting up his muscles, and it felt like there was no gravity, like he could easily leap from the ground to an ornamental ledge on the temple’s exterior, touching down light as a feather and launching himself from there to the cornice, and from there to the cliff side. The ledge he found was canted toward the ground and meandered along the wall, vanishing in spots, but Azix didn’t put a foot wrong as he scampered along the edge and leaped from rock to rock. Even when the cliff shook violently and huge pieces of the surface began to slide free, crashing to the courtyard, he found solid places to land and sped ahead of the monolith’s destructive fury. He sensed it in The Force and felt it in the rush of air and malice, and sprang away from the cliff just before the creature’s hooked talons carved deep furrows through the stone, tearing away boulders that clattered to the ground with a deafening roar. For several seconds, he just dropped, stomach lifting into his throat, as the uneven ground rushed up to meet him. Then he reached out and twisted, and dust flew in a circle as The Force caught him and he touched down gently, pausing only a moment to settle into real gravity before racing out of the courtyard and down the pilgrim’s path that had been carved between looming walls of black rock.

No longer taking the time to navigate the path, the monolith crashed with both shoulders into the walls and roared after him, sending a shiver up his spine that was almost erotic. His stomach twisted – he had tasted the fear of others like this when the Emperor had control of his mind, electric and delicious. He had glutted himself on it, wreaking pain and havoc on civilians (Imperial civilians, but still) to sate his lust for more of that dark sizzle. Now it was his own fear that thrilled him, making his
heart and belly flutter as he stretched out his stride and ran down the twisting path with zero attention to self-preservation. The Force guided his feet, and though he ended up running five feet up the cliff wall on a hairpin turn, he didn’t misstep.

The grind of stony hide against basalt was deafening as the monolith forced itself into the narrow trail, plunging after him and roaring its hunger and rage.

/Yeah?/ Azix growled to himself, breathing in harsh, steady rhythm, tongue coated with flying dust. /You think you’ve got something to be pissed about? Keep after me, bitch, I’ll show you something./ The deep orange saber blade sparked as it touched the canyon wall, leaving a glowing slash across the rock.

The Monolith had an overdeveloped upper half – long arms, massive hands with claws, a dropped jaw and head that jutted forward from its rocky crest. Its legs, however, were short, fat, and clumsy. It couldn’t climb, so it fell far behind Azix even though the path zig-zagged down the canyon. The bridge at the bottom was still crumbled away at the middle. Azix paused to catch his breath, looking over the vast canyon expanse.

A soft twittering caught his attention. The droid hovered nearby, still holding the holocron. That model lacked holoprojectors or vocoders, or Azix didn’t doubt he’d be getting an earful from Rye right now. But through the droid, maybe Rye could still hear him. “Is that thing sturdy enough to fly me back if I can make the jump?”

The droid spun and chirped in distress, but eventually beeped an affirmative.

“Okay. Send it to the other side to wait for me.”

Though he wasn’t exactly fluent in binary, he could discern the droid’s exasperated tone well enough. Still holding the holocron, it lifted away and hovered over the remains of the bridge, coming to rest on the opposite side of the canyon. Behind him, the Monolith tore massive sections off the canyon walls as it bulldozed its way toward him. He judged the distance and took a few deep breaths, then dissolved in a fit of coughing as the grit abraded his lungs. Time enough to take care of that later… hacking up gritty phlegm, he tried again, and this time managed to get a full load of oxygen.

The Monolith ground past the cliff walls, shrugging a cloak of crumbled stone and cascading gravel off its massive shoulders like a birth sack. Its focus sharpened when it saw him there, and Azix adjusted his grip on the saber hilt.

It came at him, first one enormous hand and then the other, trying to crowd him back toward the cliff. Azix forged ahead instead, closing the distance, scoring its forearms with the blade of his borrowed lightsaber. The blows barely seemed to register on the beast, let alone faze it. Its talons crashed down where he’d been standing a moment earlier, turning the rock into a gravel pit, but Azix moved under its swing and dragged the blade across the back of its knee, where most creatures were less thickly armored.

He was rewarded with a howl that shook the ground and sky, and a breath-stealing blow to the back as the creature managed to tag him when it turned. He sailed into the rock wall with a bone-rattling crunch and grunted, resisting the urge to vomit when his head swam from the impact. Instead he pushed himself up, breathing through his teeth, and found the Monolith almost on top of him.

Its legs were so stubby in comparison to the rest of its body that there was barely room to dive between them. He managed it, and slashed the blade across the creature’s ankle. It swayed, staggered, and caught itself on its long simian arms, scrabbling after him. One hand lifted and came
crashing down, and Azix lunged forward, just barely managing to get his trailing feet into the gap between its claws when they sank into the stone. It pulled the rock out from under him and he rolled to his feet, staggering, swaying, ahead of it only by inches as he pelted toward the broken bridge that ended abruptly over a chasm.

As soon as one of its feet came down on the edge of the bridge, the mortar between the stones seemed to crumble all at once, and the bridge disintegrated under Azix’s feet. The stones rippled as they tore apart, crumbling like a wave on the sand. Azix flung himself into space, gathering The Force under him in a dark whirlwind, and sailed across the breach. Even as he left the last crumbling foothold, the air whooshed as the monolith’s claws missed the soles of his boots by centimeters and passed under him. He felt the suction of its passing drag at his clothes and stretched himself for the other end of the bridge. His heart pounded in the momentary stillness of flight. He would make it. He WOULD. With darkness and heat wrapped around his will, forging it to iron, he refused to fall short.

The monolith pitched forward slowly as the bridge broke apart under it. It tried to turn, claws swiping at the cliff’s edge, but it wasn’t flexible enough to climb the cliff face. Boulders tore away under its grasping hands, and it roared in futile rage as it tumbled down into the canyon, clawing at the walls all the way.

By the time Azix got back to the edge and looked over, he could no longer see the creature. He still hadn’t heard it hit bottom.

After a careful scan of the canyon walls to make sure it wasn’t somehow clinging to the sheer cliffs like an insect, Azix turned to the waiting droid, which had hovered over to scold him with a series of squawks and beeps. He managed a faint smile, because he knew the droid’s program didn’t give a bantha shit about him – this was Rye speaking through the droid as best he could, attempting to give him a tongue-lashing without the convenience of a tongue.

“How about you hold your fire until I can actually understand you?” he suggested, gesturing the droid closer. “First, let’s get back. Now that the bridge is toast, I’ll need a hand.”

The droid made mutinous noises but it flew low, and Azix carefully sat on its flat, disc-shaped top and wrapped his legs under it, clinging to the rim of its cylindrical ‘face’. The ride back across was heart-stoppingly wobbly and the droid’s lifters made a grinding racket that wasn’t exactly reassuring, but they made it to the other side before the droid pitched off-balance and Azix had to jump to the ground to avoid being dumped on his head.

He checked himself over and found nothing worse than some scrapes and bruises. More importantly, he felt GOOD for the first time in… well. Definitely the first time since Dromund Kaas. The air that filled his lungs felt like distilled energy. He’d conquered his enemy. He’d made the creature pay for coming after him, and dropped it into the very darkness that had spawned it. He worked up a few precious droplets of saliva and spat the grit out of his mouth, into the canyon to follow the monolith. What’s more, The Force was responding to him.

Of course, that could also be a very bad thing.

Azix took a deep breath and clipped the lightsaber back to his belt. He could examine things later. Preferably somewhere far from Ziost, which threw everything into shadow. He began the long climb back to the temple plateau, and the droid kept pace with him the whole way, carrying the still-intact holocron and booping angrily to itself.

When he reached the courtyard, he realized that in all the chaos he hadn’t really taken in the scope of the damage before. Now, in the quiet and the stillness, he winced at the obvious destruction. One entire wall of the temple had been collapsed, exposing rooms and chambers, internal walls half
clawed down and furniture and equipment crushed and scattered. Wires had been severed and yanked from the walls, and power lines popped softly, throwing sparks. Two maintenance droids and three mouse droids scurried over the rubble trying to shut down any exposed wires that posed a real danger. A thick coating of rock and insulation dust made everything gray.

Rye flickered next to him. “I should bring a security droid out here just to slap you,” he seethed. “What in Oricon’s fiery hells did you think you were doing? If you’d died, what in Vitiate’s name was I supposed to do then? Wait here until the next sithspawn who wanders by actually succeeds in destroying me? This isn’t just about you, Jedi!”

“There will be more,” Azix agreed. He nudged a bit of rubble at his feet. “We’re not safe here.”

“At least that particular sithspawn won’t be coming back,” Rye said, and Azix thought he detected a grudging note of forgiveness.

“No, but it’s not the only one. I’m sorry it took me so long to recover. Now we’re short on time.” Azix gave Rye a wry smile. “Let’s get to work, what do you say? The sooner we build you a body, the better.”

Rye’s light-etched shoulders sagged, as this appeared to mollify the last of his anger. “Very well. I’ll have the instructions ready for you in the security lounge, and I’ll put the maintenance droids to work salvaging holoprojectors. Also, I’ve chosen a lightsaber as you suggested, though even your weapon didn’t appear to give that sithspawn much pause.”

“Well, let’s hope we do better with two,” Azix said, climbing the rubble slope toward the exposed hallway. “I don’t know about you, Rye, but I’m past ready to be off this rock.”

He ignored the calculating way Rye’s eyes, both the ones drawn in crimson light and the rotating lenses of the security cameras, followed him inside.

***

“I need to protect the artifacts.”

Azix, who was elbow-deep in parts and tools, tin and lead flaking off his fingers, didn’t look up from the wires he was soldering. “Because you really need to, or because you were programmed to? It’s a fair question,” he pointed out before Rye could get offended.

Rye shut his mouth and considered it. “Hmph. Is it so difficult to believe that the history of my nation might be important to me personally? Certainly it was important to the Empire’s native children.”

“So, you want to protect the artifacts here because you’re Imperial, not because you’re a museum AI?” Azix hiked a hairless brow to indicate his skepticism, and Rye folded his arms, glaring at him.

“And you want them destroyed because you’re being practical, not because you’re a Jedi Knight with a deep abiding hatred of everything Imperial?” he retorted.

Azix sighed and blew metal dust off his knuckles. “It’s not hatred. Jedi don’t hate.”

“Bantha shit. Not only am I far too intelligent to buy that excuse, I’ve seen you,” Rye pointed out. “It may not be, shall we say, a ‘best practice’ for Jedi to hate their enemies, but you hate us.”

Now Azix did stop what he was doing and sit back. He was working on chassis mounts for the holoprojectors Rye wanted installed on his new droid body, and the drilled metal pieces rattled as he shifted in his chair and exhaled. “I don’t hate you, Rye. I just don’t trust you. And you can hardly
blame me for that. Shit between the Republic and the Empire….” His fingers tightened on the soldering iron. He remembered the face of a young Imperial technician, the crack in his voice, tears staining freckled skin. He remembered the quiet fury of an Imperial civilian, a shopkeeper, her eyes flashing and teeth bared as she fought his grip and refused to scream. He remembered the shrieks and sobbing of children distantly, as if in a dream, engines whining in the chaos of evacuation. “It’s not the people, it’s the leadership. It’s the Sith.”

“It seems to me that the Republic kills the people just as readily,” Rye said, and Azix hissed between his teeth.

“Because they’re fighting FOR the Sith. We can’t protect ourselves, we can’t fight a war, without killing the people attacking us. You want us to stop fighting you? Quit trying to kill us,” he suggested.

Rye’s brow spikes rose. “We could say the same to you. Do you really think neither the Jedi nor the Republic have any culpability in this war? The only time you’ve ever been interested in a peace treaty is when the tide turned in our favor. When you’re the ones who are winning, you scorch the earth. You don’t just want to beat us – you want to ERADICATE us. Please, explain to me why we should allow that kind of enemy to remain lurking on our doorstep. Any three-year-old knows that if your enemy is implacable, the best course of action is to kill them before they can kill you. That’s common sense.”

“If your three-year-olds regularly contemplate murder under the guise of common sense, then maybe the Empire really does need to be wiped off the face of the galaxy,” Azix shot back. “But speaking of peace, can we not fight right now? We’re trying to get out of here.”

Rye’s hologram moved away. “You hate us,” he said. Since his voice came from the overhead speaker, it had a peculiar, dislocated affect when he moved around the room. “You would extend mercy and understanding to anyone except us. I have every reason to be concerned about that attitude once we hit orbit, especially since we don’t know who’s waiting for us.”

Azix’s fingers stilled. “… You’re not really an Imperial,” he hedged. “You’re an AI. You can’t help what you were programmed with.”

“I most certainly can,” Rye retorted. “I’ve been rewriting my program for years. And if I, a digital slave, can manage that, so can you. You won’t,” he said before Azix could answer, “because you’re convinced you’re right and I’m wrong. That’s the root issue here. I’m not a Jedi, I’m not Republic, and most importantly, I’m not REAL. So clearly, my opinions are naïve and based on propaganda. I should be grateful I have you around to instruct me in the ancient Jedi wisdom of why my people are the only acceptable targets of genocide.”

Azix rubbed his fingers across his forehead, kneading the skin into wrinkles. “Why do you do this?” he asked. “Every time we have five minutes for a conversation, you pick a fight. I’ve told you over and over that I’m not interested in arguing when we’re trying to stay alive, here. I understand you see me as an enemy. But I’m trying to reprogram myself NOT to see you that way, at least until we’re out of this situation. Can’t you do the same, if you’re so good at rewriting yourself?”

Rye didn’t answer. Azix went back to his work after waiting a polite amount of time. The hologram disappeared, leaving him to work in peace as he ran power lines from the droid’s core to the projectors and drilled holes to mount them to the chassis. With no windows and no sunlight to judge the time, the day slipped away from him – he only knew how long he’d been working by the burning in his eyes and the increasing soreness in his neck.

A maintenance droid brought him a package of pickled vegetables, crackers, and a cocoa nut bar
with a grape soda for dinner. He began cleaning up his work space, brushing metal filings off the droid’s chassis so they wouldn’t cause problems later. “My neck’s killing me,” he informed the droid, knowing Rye would hear even if he didn’t respond. “I’m going to lie down for a while. But I want to know, should I be making any modifications to this droid’s power core? We won’t have access to a recharging station out there in the wastes.”

“I have some ideas in that regard,” Rye said without appearing. “We can address them tomorrow. You should rest.” He dimmed the lights, and Azix opened the package of crackers, nibbling on them as he sprawled on the couch with a groan. The pickled vegetables were a nice change of pace, though like everything else, they had a little more heat to them than he preferred.

The droid’s clunky footsteps passed the couch and circled around the arm where his head was resting. It thunked heavily, and he almost twisted to look, but then his neck and shoulders reminded him how much strain he’d been putting on them and he sagged back with a groan.

“Let me. Sit up a bit.”

Azix’s spine tingled, but he complied, slowly pushing himself up against the arm of the couch until Rye’s droid could settle something thick and floppy over his shoulders. “What is that?”

“It’s an athletic brace,” Rye told him, gripping his shoulders near the tendons of his neck and squeezing. “I thought it would ease the pressure of the droid’s fingers and prevent further bruising.”

It definitely felt better. Azix groaned. “If this is an apology, I accept,” he mumbled. Rye snorted.

“A peace offering, I suppose. I went through my data logs of our conversations and verified the pattern you identified. It required some… further analysis.”

“Y’know, when organics do stuff like that, it’s usually because there’s something on our minds we aren’t resolving,” Azix muttered, leaning into the rhythmic knead of the droid’s pincers. The synthweave of the brace was thick enough and flexible enough that it padded the droid’s digits. It chafed significantly less than the last time, and Azix was touched that Rye bothered to consider it. “Like an answer we’re looking for, but we’re asking the wrong questions.”

“Typical organic inefficiency,” Rye snarked, but there was no venom in it, so Azix just chuckled. “I thought something like that might be the case, hence the analysis.”

“Come to a conclusion?”

“I don’t trust you.”

Azix blinked. “… All right. I suppose that’s….”

“But I want to,” Rye interjected. “I need to, to leave here with you. I push you because I want you to say things that will make my misgivings moot. It’s illogical, because you can say literally anything, true or untrue, and I’d have to take it on faith. Apparently, the paradox inherent in that sort of interaction is causing some issues with my subroutines. Normally it wouldn’t be an issue,” he confessed, sounding both annoyed and sheepish, “but this situation is somewhat unique. My continued existence depends on your honesty, which is forcing me to prioritize your responses.”

He nodded, letting his eyes close. “I get it. Honest. And I don’t know what I can offer you,” he said. “I have nothing against you, Rye. I’m not interested in fighting with you, or trying to destroy you. Nothing I’m angry about – the war, this disaster, the Sith, the deaths of my teammates and my commander – none of that is your fault. Not even a little bit. I know that you have beliefs about the war and the Jedi and stuff, but the fact is, you have no control at all. You couldn’t make the fighting
stop, you haven’t killed anyone. **YOU** are a civilian. And you’re not my enemy, okay? I don’t know what else to say.”

Rye was quiet for a long moment, his droid working the knots out of Azix’s neck and shoulders.

“You’re going to put me to sleep,” Azix warned, and Rye brushed that off with a muttered, “You could use it.” That made Azix smile.

“Would you feel better if I gave you my word as a Jedi?” he asked softly.

“I’m not programmed to take a Jedi’s word for granted,” Rye told him. “I deal in facts. Everything regarding you is mutable. I’ll adjust, and I will do my best to stop provoking you.”

“That’d be nice.” He left it at that, sipping his soda and crunching on the crackers until he lost the energy. He signaled Rye that they were done by sliding down beyond his reach and rolling over, curling up with the borrowed sweater draped over him.

The droid created a small clanking racket as it got to its feet and moved away. Rye parked it out in the hall and shut it down. “I’m doing my best to regulate the temperature with the current draft,” he said as Azix was drifting off. Azix smiled at the cultured annoyance in his tone, aimed not at him but at the gaping hole in the temple exterior through which he could distantly hear the canyon winds howling. “Sleep well.”
It might have been the sugar right before sleeping, but Azix saw Sana in his dreams.

This time, it seemed less like a haunting and more like a memory he couldn’t quite place. The mountain paths and thick foliage reminded him of Tython. Sana flitted between the trees, her close-fitting clothes reminiscent of what they used to wear as padawans. He chased, even though a sense of dread was growing in his belly. /I don’t want this./ he thought even as he pushed branches aside, weaving between bent, gnarled trees. /If I find her, something bad is going to happen. Every time I see her, it’s bad./

“Az!” Her voice drifted back to him on the wind, melodic laughter cascading between the leaves as the sunlight dappled the forest floor. Nothing SEEMED wrong, and he put on speed without thinking about it, racing after her, panting as he struggled to catch up.

He stumbled into an overlook. The view into the valley confirmed his suspicion – this was Tython, and he was looking down at the temple complex. They were high enough that the Jedi moving about the courtyard were nothing but specks. Despite the familiarity of the landscape, he didn’t remember this overlook, with its meadow-soft clover crawling over the ground and branches casting a comfortable shade. He’d explored the mountains thoroughly during his time in the temple, so if a place like this had existed on Tython, he felt certain he would have known about it.

Sana swung around a tree trunk, laughing, and threw her arms around him. He flinched, but she looked… alive. Whole and healthy, her head-tendrils shiny and her black eyes bright. “Got you!” she said almost shyly, and leaned in to nuzzle him.

Az jerked back. “Whoa,” he snapped. “What are you doing?”

She blinked, looking up at him with those huge, dark eyes, refusing to let go. “Az, what’s wrong? It’s just us here.” She leaned in again and he grabbed her shoulders, forcing her off him.

“Cut it out!” The air felt thin, like he wasn’t getting enough oxygen despite his deep, heaving breaths. “What’s going on? What is this place?”

She blinked, her milky eyelids sliding out of the corners of her eyes to meet in the middle. “This is our place. I made it for us. So it would always be sunny.”

When Azix shifted, just for a moment, the clover under his feet seemed to turn to duracrete and scuff against his boot. The light pouring between the leaves dimmed, just for an instant.

“This is wrong,” he said, straining to get a full breath. “This shouldn’t be happening.”

Sana backed away. She dropped to sit in the clover, dragging her webbed fingers through the pale blossoms. “A lot of things have happened that shouldn’t have. I was just trying to make it better. Aren’t you happy to see me?” Her expression was mournful, and suddenly, Azix remembered.

“You’re dead.”

She twisted as if he’d struck her. “Don’t say that.”

“You are.” His breath rattled in his throat. “I saw it.”

“Don’t SAY it,” she pleaded with him. “If you say it, then it’ll be true… oh no.” She touched the
side of her head, where cracks had appeared – fractured skull, fractured skin, blood dripping down the side of her face. “Az, please don’t remember me dead. I can’t hold this if you fight it.”

“You’re not really here.”

“I AM.” She slammed her hands into the clover, bent, shoulders shaking as if she was weeping, though Nautolans didn’t produce tears. “I’m here. I’m trying to reach you, but every time I reach out you run away! I brought you here so it’d be less frightening, so that we could talk. I can feel the wounds in your mind,” she whispered. “I know how badly you’re hurt.”

“You keep telling me to abandon everything I believe,” Azix said, backing up until he found a tree to lean against. “How is that supposed to help?”

“The lies you’re clinging to are keeping you from accepting what happened to you,” Sana told him. “Both before, on Dromund Kaas, and now. You’re denying that you’ve been wounded, corrupted. But the Dark Side doesn’t disappear because you deny it.” Ominous, her voice seemed to echo off the trees as if they were made of steel and stone. “It’s always there, in every shadow, in the corners of your heart. If you can’t make peace it WILL break you, like it broke me right before the end.”

He swallowed. In the dream, his throat felt thick and clogged. “Sana, I’m so sorry,” he whispered, and felt himself choking. “I couldn’t stop myself. I couldn’t protect you.”

“I know.” She sat huddled on the ground, her head still dripping from her death wound. “I forgive you, Az. I was never angry at you. You were innocent.”

“… Not innocent.” He turned his face, trying to force himself to feel the roughness of bark against his cheek, but everything seemed like it was touching him through layers of cotton. “If I hadn’t already been corrupted…”

/If I didn’t have these feelings, this poison, waiting in me like a monster’s claws on nursery windowsill…/

“…Maybe he couldn’t have gotten me.”

Sana bent, pressing one hand to the wound as if ashamed of it. “No. Examine your feelings, brother. Examine your memories. Does that make sense? Does it make sense that the possession was due to some fault in you? The same fault would have to be present in me, in Master Surro, in everyone affected. All our colleagues, the Republic troops too. And yet, that Sith who freed us….”

Azix growled and thumped his head against the tree, but couldn’t feel the impact.

“You saw him, Az.” Her conviction was quiet and relentless. “SUCH corruption. So much more than you or I would ever suffer.”

He knew. Force, he knew. He’d felt it. The dark thrum, the sensation of pins and needles, the ozone scent of a gathering storm. Like a vine-silk dress on a rotting corpse, the sith was pale and beautiful and he oozed hungry coils of mindless evil. He remembered thinking it was like looking at Nol all grown up. One day, perhaps, the little redheaded siren would feel just as foul, his mesmerizing beauty a lure that led straight into an angler fish’s teeth. Even his immature, juvenile wickedness had left stains Azix couldn’t scrub away.

“And yet, he stood up to the Emperor,” Sana reminded him. “He defeated him, even temporarily. So it’s not about the Dark Side, or corruption. He was just too powerful, a creature like that. Only another creature who had left natural life behind could really contend with him. You and I were good Jedi,” she whispered, “but there was nothing we could do. We were innocent. You were innocent
then, and you were innocent in the hands of Nollok Jen’kari. You did nothing wrong, Azix.”

He sank to his knees, drawn down by the sinking sensation in his stomach. “It’s not about that,” he hitched. “It’s about after. After, Sana… I have these thoughts, I have these feelings, they won’t go away. THAT’S the corruption. That’s the infection. What happened… on Ziost, just made it spread….”

“If you’re corrupt, then so am I. I have those feelings too. When you….” She swallowed, head-tendrils curling at the tips, and his blood throbbed hot with memory and shame. “Those actions, they were his. But the want was mine.”

No. No. He swallowed over and over, trying to dislodge the lump in his throat, trying to breathe past the ache it created. “That… it was just… it wasn’t your fault, Sana, everything that happened….”

Her fingers clenched in the clover, staining fragile leaves with blood. “I know. All I’m saying is that it wasn’t yours either. You won’t find any refuge in the Jedi’s teachings,” she whispered. “I’m not trying to hurt you, love. I don’t want you to hurt anymore because you think you’re not good enough. There IS darkness. There is death. There is need, and passion, and desire. You don’t have to become what you hate, but it would ease your pain if you would just… let yourself be a person. Flawed. Contradictory, perhaps, as we all are.”

“But I don’t want to,” he said, voice cracking around the stone in his throat. “I want to be a Jedi. I didn’t want any of this.”

The light dimmed again. Rough duracrete pressed against his feet. The trees warped, their silhouettes fading to straight, soaring lines and angular buttresses. Walls sprang out of nothing and closed in around him.

“And I don’t want to live here, in this memory,” Sana told him, her voice cracking on an angry sob. “Denial holds us here, my love. Only forgiveness and acceptance will free us both. You deserve compassion. Mercy is great, Azix, it’s the greatest force in the universe, even greater than The Force. It allows for all things.”

The overlook was fading, the trees and clear blue skies of Tython vanishing, swallowed by shadow and durasteel. New Adestra, torn and shattered, thrumming with fear and pain. And in the sky above, a vortex of ultra-violet light, so black it turned to color again, swirling and devouring with insatiable glee: the pall of Vitiate.

“Mercy,” she pleaded. “Please, Azix.”

“I don’t want to be that thing!” he screamed, ripping the words from his throat. “I don’t want to give in to the dark, I want to be… pure.” The ground shook. Sirens went off in the distance. Screams of civilian victims echoed between the buildings, reflected by the glassy black stone. A young technician in a gray uniform lay at his feet. His freckles faded as his body lost color, and the gravity in Azix’s core seemed to shift, a terrible and inevitable pull. “No,” he groaned. “Force, No….”

“Only two kinds of people are pure.” Sana hid her face, pressing the hem of her robe to her crushed skull even as her eyes went milky. Red light, emergency crash lighting, spilled over her skin and suddenly Azix was back in that place, in that moment, bound and hanging from a harness, choking on the stench of death. “There are innocents, and there are fanatics. Dromund Kaas and Ziost took all the innocence you had left. Now, you can accept impurity or you can drown in the dark, and become what you hate the most. I’ve seen it.” Both hands covered the wound as if she could stop it from killing her by not letting it bleed. “If you go that route, I’m telling you, you won’t be the boy I loved anymore.”
“You didn’t love me,” Azix heard himself saying from a distance. “What happened here….”

“Had nothing to do with me. You were my brother, and I loved you. And I wanted you to be more. That was my temptation,” she said softly, watching him with eyes glazed in death, eyelids half-emerged. “That was my sin, Az, and I forgive myself for it. In the end, I was more than a Jedi,” she whispered as the ground shook again, stone and glass raining down, somehow missing them even as it shattered at their feet. “I was a sentient being; I was a woman. And you were a man.”

Azix looked into her glazed eyes and saw an abyss yawning underneath his feet.

“What do I do?”

The ground crumbled away around him, breaking off in chunks to plummet into the underground rift in which New Adasta had been built. Through the shaking he held Sana’s gaze, and despite the gore smeared across her head her expression was gentle.

“Just stop running.”

Stop running.

The ground dissolved and he pitched backward into the darkness, but he remembered this was a dream and let go of fear, and falling turned into something else, something dazed and nebulous and shifting.

Stop running.

Acceptance dissolved the boundaries of the nightmare. He slipped deeper into sleep, and into other, less terrible dreams.

He stopped running. The nightmares stopped chasing.

This time, he was allowed to truly rest.

***

Breakfast was waiting when he woke up.

“You have a domestic side,” he told Rye, who merely gave him a dry look, though his droid made a rasping, derisive beep.

“You slept well,” he countered.

“Did you dream about your friend?”

Azix, who had been sitting up and stretching, froze. “… I… I think so,” he said, struggling to pull hazy details of the dream to his mind. “Not a nightmare, though. Well… kind of, toward the end. We were on Tython….”

“I don’t require the details,” Rye said mystifyingly, “just confirmation, thank you.”

“Confirmation?” Azix got up and flexed, and his spine popped in several places, turning his next words into a ragged groan. “Why, was I thrashing or something?”

“No, but I’ve activated some of my environmental subroutines and I’ve been collecting ambient data since your experience in the basement,” Rye informed him as Azix broke into the soda and spicy yeast crackers Rye had brought him for breakfast. “I may not be able to sense The Force like a biological, but there are measurable side effects to certain Force manifestations.”
Azix blinked at him. “Okay, but… why?”

One brow spike arched in a way that made Azix feel profoundly stupid. “What do you mean, ‘why’?”

“Well…” Suddenly on the spot, Azix cast about for phrasing that would make his question sound wiser and better thought-out. “I mean, what difference does it make? I AM Force Sensitive, so isn’t it mostly my problem?”

The other brow arched, and Azix almost growled at that cool, pureblood judgement. “The difference,” Rye explained, “is that you have experienced the sort of trauma that has long-term adverse effects on biologicals. So, are your fears and nightmares and visions a product of that trauma? Or are you actually being haunted by a Force Ghost? Do you know the difference?” he asked pointedly, folding his arms. “And, are you certain?” When Azix hesitated, he said more gently, “I thought it might be of use to you to know exactly what you’re dealing with. It isn’t your brain making you see things – there is a legitimate Force manifestation, which may actually be the spirit of your dead companion. For what it’s worth.”

“… Oh.” Azix couldn’t think of anything more intelligent to say. “Thanks.”

“Don’t thank me yet. I’ll let you know if I have any success modifying this droid’s probe emitters to produce a field capable of disrupting that sort of manifestation. It’s quite an experimental project, and of course, I am not an engineering program.”

“Wait, what?” He stripped the musty-smelling sweater over his head and tossed it on the couch. “Why are you trying to do that?”

Rye eyed him. “If I call you an idiot, and I mean it fondly, will you take it fondly?”

“DO you mean it fondly? ‘Cause I have my doubts.”

“I do. You’re an idiot,” Rye said, changing his tone to soften the word. “I’m trying to protect you.”

That took Azix by surprise. He brought his food to the work desk and took his time finding the right position for the chair as he tried to figure out how he felt about that. “Do you think that’s necessary?” he asked at length, “or realistic?”

“It’s been done before,” Rye said, but one glance at his holographic face told Azix he didn’t plan to elaborate.

“Has anyone ever told you that you’re very enigmatic for a program that’s supposed to teach people things? Did you do this to your visitors?” Azix wondered, crunching on the crackers and trying to wash away the burning sensation with the soda. “Excuse me, tour guide hologram, but which way are the bathrooms? ‘Well, young master, I can assure you that the bathrooms definitely exist’.”

“According to my records,” Rye replied, “‘Where is the bathroom’ is the number one most common question I ever received. Followed by ‘When does the museum close’, although ‘Where is the gift shop’ competes with ‘when does the museum close’ if you remove instances of, ‘oh, is the museum closed?’ or ‘the lights went out, does that mean you’re closing?’ from the data set.”

Azix knew an oncoming service industry rant when he heard one, and he dragged over an unfinished mount, prepared to be entertained. “What comes after that?”

“Any query containing both the phrases ‘school project’, and ‘I don’t know’. As in, ‘I’m supposed to do a project for school, but I don’t know what to do it on. Is there anything that’s really easy?’”
Apparently, school children were the same all over the galaxy. Azix grinned as he remembered making an almost identical plea to the temple archivist. “Is there anything that’s really easy?”

“Anything to do with Naga Sadow or Ludo Kressh,” Rye said dryly. “To the point that many instructors removed them from the list of acceptable topics, doubtless after reading a few hundred iterations of the same report.”

“So if you’re not allowed to do your report on... Naga,” he fumbled, grabbing a metal file, “Or the other guy, then what did you suggest?”

“Sorzus Syn,” Rye said. “Or Ajunta Pall. Any of the Jen’Jidai. The first. Those were always good for full marks, if you put half a thought into it. But Sith history is filled with fascinating figures, though I doubt you’d find them so.”

“What’s so fascinating about violence and murder?” Azix asked.

“He says,” Rye replied, dripping sarcasm, “As if he himself is not the militant arm of a... Jedi,” he said, a hint of a low growl entering his voice when the octave dropped, as if he was a real pureblood with real vocal chords. “If you want me to stop finding arguments, you’re going to have to stop making it so terribly easy for me.”

Azix smiled over his shoulder. “I just wanted to see if you’d catch yourself.”

“Hmph.” Rye’s projection stalked past him, but Azix interrupted his attempt at a flounce.

“I didn’t understand that word you used. Jen’jidai. I don’t know anything about The First. Does that mean the first Sith?” The rasp of the metal file forced him to raise his voice. Rye had the advantage of simply increasing his volume without sounding like he was actually shouting.

“In ancient Sith, ‘jen’ means ‘dark’ or ‘shadow’ or ‘reflection’. ‘Jidai’ was the ancient purebloods’ attempt to pronounce ‘Jedi’. The Sith were Jedi once,” he said. “Did your teachers tell you that?”

“... Not in so many words. But I kind of assumed. Sith teachings are perversions of Jedi knowledge. They take the truth and twist it,” Azix said, rhythmically sawing at the bracket. “Drown the light in darkness.” Before Rye could contradict him, he added, “I’m just saying that’s what I was told.”

Rye’s mouth thinned, but he let the opportunity to argue pass. “They were almost all human, the first Dark Jedi who landed on Korriban. Twelve of them, all that was left from a terrible war that split your Order in ancient times. They awed the native purebloods, deposed their king, and ruled them as Jen’ari, lords of shadow, the first Dark Lords of the Sith. They used alchemy to make themselves genetically compatible with the natives, and their lineage lived on through their hybrid children.”

Explains why humans and purebloods are the only two species it’s acceptable to be in the Empire,” Azix muttered, not because he was upset but because he’d leaned in to concentrate on shaping the socket he was filing. If it was too wide or uneven, the holoprojector would rattle in its mounting and likely break from the repeated stress of travel.

Still, he was focusing hard enough that, over the rasp of the file, he almost missed Rye’s reply.

“The Empire is changing.”

Now it was Azix’s turn to consider his response and choose not to pick a fight, because he didn’t give a single fuck how the Empire was ‘changing’. Instead, he considered both his options and his immediate goals, and said, “You know, that story you told about the goddess... that was pretty neat. You’re a decent storyteller.”
“Your faint praise warms my non-existent heart.”

Azix blinked, then compared the interaction to what little he knew of Imperials and realized Rye probably thought he was insulting him. ‘Decent’ probably meant something akin to ‘barely adequate’ in the Empire. “No, I mean… I mean you’re a really good storyteller, and I liked your story, and I was going to ask if you knew any more stories that wouldn’t be super, um… political.”

“Oh. Well.” Rye paused a moment, doubtlessly searching his memory banks. Azix turned around and pressed the bracket against the droid’s chassis, then began unscrewing the bolts on the chest plate. He did his best to make it look like something absolutely necessary and ordinary. “We covered creation myth, I suppose. Perhaps… a nice romance?”

“Do Sith have nice romances?” Azix asked dryly. “I didn’t get that impression.”

“Well, that’s rather the point, isn’t it?” Rye said. “They’re passionate, for good or for ill. In your case, it was for ill. But there are plenty of stories of mutual love, famous romances, forbidden partnerships. Sith who set the galaxy aflame.”

“Galaxy’s full of burning balls of gas already,” Azix couldn’t resist saying, and was rewarded with one of Rye’s pureblood dry looks. Unlike an actual droid, Rye had facial expressions he could read, and read easily. Maybe that was intentional, maybe not, but Azix found himself playing to it anyway, desperate for social interaction that was recognizably sapient.

“Stars and black holes, both.” Hands clasped lightly behind him, Rye considered his request. “Perhaps the lords of Isa and Aldriss. Though that story contains no small amount of romantic tragedy.”

“Let me guess.” Azix removed the droid’s power converter and draped the wiring over its arm to hold it aside, picking up one of the holoprojectors Rye had uninstalled from the hallway mounts and measuring its wires against the existing tangle. “They both wind up dead?”

“Well, eventually. They were mortal,” Rye said, amused. “But in this case, the tragedy was that Cross Aldriss was forced into an arranged marriage by his head of house, and due to his own inherent nobility, he refused to dishonor that alliance by pursuing an affair with the love of his life; Irlisan Isa, a war hero of the Sith and scion of a less regarded House. He remained loyal until the natural death of his spouse. While he and his love were united in the end, by that time they were both advanced in age, and they had only their twilight years to spend together when they should have had a lifetime. Stolen time is the tragedy… that, and passion deferred.”

“Man, you could have read me that plot without a shred of context and I would have pegged it as an Imperial story. ‘Be passionate and follow your heart but only after you’ve done your duty to the state’. Kriff.” He was joking, and he made sure to shoot Rye a smile so he would understand the jab wasn’t serious.

“Actually, in this case, the moral of the story was that only sorrow will come of denying your passions. Things like love are, apparently, what make life worth living. Though of course, I don’t necessarily hold with that point of view, as I have found plenty of reasons to live without the demonstrated capacity to love. In modern times, arranged marriages between Sith may only be pursued with the full consent of all parties. Children and apprentices can no longer be forced by their parents or masters to marry for political gain.”

“What about Imperials? Can they marry whoever they want?”

“Theoretically, though in truth, familial and political pressure govern most marriages between the
upper classes. The lower classes, of course, can do as they please.”

“So it’s passion for the Sith and duty for everybody else?”

“The reverse of the Republic, is it not?” Rye shot back. “Where Jedi are denied all passion, and even the simple comfort of affection, while citizens are free to pursue their passions with abandon?” When Azix threw him a glance, he merely smiled, and Az snorted.

“Oh, okay. Touche’. ” He went back to examining the wires, balancing the holoprojector in his broken hand and weaving the fingers of his good hand between the color coded strands. “I don’t know if I’d say we’re denied the simple comfort of affection.”

“But you are. Attachments are forbidden, are they not?” Rye moved closer, and Azix made sure there was nothing objectionable or suspicious about his toying with the wiring. “After what happened to you, whose shoulder did you cry on?” When Az threw him a dark look, Rye raised his hands. “I don’t ask to upset you. From my perspective, it is clear that you have not been allowed to grieve or process the violation you experienced. Now, here you are, having experienced even further and more severe violations, and you are trying to divorce yourself from the very natural and understandable emotional upheaval and carry on as if you are immune to harm.” He folded his arms and affected a lean against the wall. “I would expect as much of a Jedi, but you are also a sentient being, and sentient beings are not impervious to psychological trauma.”

Azix sighed. “You know what’s funny? Sana told me almost the exact same thing last night.”

“What does she want?” Rye asked bluntly. “She must be haunting you for a reason.”

Azix’s fingers twitched. He stopped fiddling with the wires and pressed his broken hand in the crook of his armpit, trying to soothe the tightness of the tendons with heat and pressure, even though that made ache crawl up the length of his arm. What did Sana want with him? If she wasn’t trying to drag him into death with her, then what was her goal?

/You don’t have to become what you hate, but it would ease your pain if you would just let yourself be a person./

“She lost her faith in the end,” he said finally, rubbing the rough bumps of a pin adapter between his fingers. “She came to believe that the teachings of the Order… had flaws. She doesn’t want me to have the same fate she did.”

Rye considered that, and Azix wondered if he had learned how to pause in conversation for effect, or if it really took him that long to run through potential responses. “What fate do you want?” he asked, which was very much not what Azix expected from him, and threw him off for a stuttering moment.

“I… well, at this point, I just want to survive.”

“Any single-celled amoeba wants to survive,” Rye said dismissively. “You have the luxury of wanting more. Do you even know?”

“What about you?” Azix shot Rye a warning look and delved into the droid’s wiring again. “What’s your reason for living? Got plans and ambitions once we get off this rock?”

“I suppose it will depend on the reception I get,” Rye said. “I doubt the Empire will extend citizenship to an AI, even an exceptional one. I have heard there are emancipated droids in independent sectors and in Hutt space… bounty hunters, mostly, but that’s an option.”

Azix’s brows rose. “You want to be a bounty hunter, you’re going to need a better chassis. This one
should do okay for getting to the closest shuttle, but it’s not built for that kind of combat use.”

“I don’t think I want to be a Bounty Hunter,” Rye said. “Of course, I’ve never tried violence before, so I might enjoy it. Regardless, there must be demand somewhere for someone with my abilities. But you did not answer my question,” he reminded Azix, still watching him as he ran new power lines to the holoprojector mounts. “What do you want?”

“Hey, not to change the subject,” Azix replied, “but did you want me to install extra power modules? Cause if so, I’m gonna need to start making space in the chest cavity and running extra wiring. I figured I’d ask while I’m staring straight at it.”

“I think it would be wise, but do you expect me to let you get away that easily?” Rye asked.

“Nah, of course not.” Azix sighed and began pulling out ribbon-like clusters of wiring, carefully disconnecting rows of pins and sockets. “That would require tact.”

“I can be tactful. I’m choosing not to. I’m interested in your answer,” Rye insisted. One of his hovering cleaning droids grabbed a screwdriver and presented it to Azix just as he was about to start looking for it to remove one of the internal wiring mounts. “I want to know what you want from this, Azix. Why fight so hard to survive? What are you living for?”

Azix leaned his head against the chassis, feeling a pounding in his temples. “You know, sometimes biologicals just instinctively go on living even if they can’t answer that question. It’s a primal drive, y’know? Survival. It doesn’t have to be FOR anything. We just don’t want to die.”

“I understand that. But in your case, I think the question is important. There will come a point when simply fighting for survival is no longer enough,” Rye said, the droid booping softly as it swooped to Azix’s other side and offered him a thumb-sized spray can of mechanical lubricant. “You need to pick a direction before you can make any real progress. It has to be more than just ‘away from what hurts me’.”

He snorted. “Stellar. When did you absorb a psychology program?”

“In my efforts to understand the creatures I find myself surrounded, owned, and directed by, I’ve read the work of great philosophers and healers. In fact, I can read anything I want to read,” he pointed out archly, “so you shouldn’t be surprised that I choose to absorb and cultivate knowledge. I’m more surprised that so many who have that opportunity don’t take advantage of it. Like you, right now, doing everything in your power to avoid not only answering my question, but even considering it. Are you afraid there’s no answer?” he demanded, Imperial accent making his words ring with more threat than he probably intended. “That if you probe beyond the basic drive of self preservation, you’ll find yourself directionless, and therefore, meaningless?”

“Is that so wrong?” Azix snapped, patience fraying, though he tried to reel it back in. “Maybe I don’t know what the fuck I’m doing, Rye. Maybe I’m just trying to move forward, and hoping to get a clue somewhere along the way. I can’t do anything if I don’t get off Ziost. Once I get back with the Order, once I’m… home… then I can start worrying about all that other stuff.”

“You mean, once the Order tells you what you should be doing.” Rye frowned, his delicate brow spikes drawing together. “Don’t you decide anything for yourself? What do YOU want?”

“Kriff, Rye, what if I just want to be a Jedi?” He set the screwdriver down a little too sharply in his exasperation. “What if I just want to follow orders, and protect others, and wear brown bantha wool and eat rootleaf stew and feel like I’m doing something good for the galaxy? Not everybody wants to be unique and independent. Some people just want to fit in.”
“It seems like a waste of sentience to me. And WHAT is rootleaf stew?” he asked with an expression that implied he expected something awful. Not that he was really wrong.

“Temple refectory staple. If you had taste buds, I’d invite you to try it sometime. Word is, it’s got everything a body needs. Vitamins, iron, lots of amino and tannic acids….”

“So, it’s bitter and leaves film on your teeth,” Rye said dryly. “I’d expect as much of the Jedi.”

“It’s part of the philosophy,” Azix told him. “We’re supposed to learn to stop wanting stuff. When we focus on the things we want, we prioritize ourselves over others. That’s selfishness, and it prevents us from pursuing wisdom and doing justice for others. Objectivity can only be achieved by the surrender of desire, and self. Anyway,” he said, grunting as he pulled a set of pins free from corroded sockets, “if you saute the rootleaf in a little yellow mushroom oil, it gets the bitterness out.”

“I’d assume so. It does the same for other bitter greens. But I’m sure those temple refectories don’t bother with such simple solutions,” Rye snarked. “Bad food, like scratchy robes, builds character.”

“Hey, I’m living proof.” He shot Rye a look, and smiled at his longsuffering expression.

“I have so many responses to that,” he lamented. “But I’m not supposed to be picking fights with you right now.”

“Look, Rye, I’ll tell you what. When I’m back to wearing my own clothes,” Azix said, burying his head in the droid’s mechanical guts again, “when I have something to eat besides snacks packed with capsaicin and salt, when I have something to drink besides soda and I’m not constantly either sugar-high or crashing, when I’ve had a few days to myself to sleep and meditate and take regular baths, THEN you can ask me what I want from life. And maybe I’ll have a better answer to give you than, ‘all I want is to get through this in one piece’. That’s fair, isn’t it?” He jammed the head of the screwdriver between another set of corroded contacts, growling as he tried to pry them loose.

As if on cue, the maintenance droid drifted over with a fresh can of soda in its pincers. Lacking any better options, Azix accepted it, popped the tab, and guzzled it down.

Rye watched him. “Sometimes, such things are better tested under stress. But I concede. Perhaps when you’ve had a few months to recover from this ordeal, I’ll send you a text,” he suggested. “Ask you again.”

Azix smiled. “Somehow, I think once you get out there in the galaxy, you’re going to forget all about me and find way better things to do with your time.” He was focusing on chipping away at caked, white sulfide, so he missed Rye’s thoughtful frown.

“Perhaps,” Rye allowed. He left the rest unspoken.

/I wouldn’t count on it/
Chapter 10

Chapter Summary

I begin way too many chapters with Azix waking up and end too many of them with him falling asleep.

They removed power cores from other security droids. Azix had to run new wiring to connect them all together with salvaged capacitors to prevent overloads, remove the chest plating from the chassis, and bend it into a new shape to bolt it back on over the droid’s new, bulkier guts. Rye’s chassis now had a potbelly look to it which Azix thought was pretty funny.

“Is there anything else I need to fit in here, before I seal it up?” he asked as casually as possible.

“Such as?” Rye looked legitimately baffled, and Azix reminded himself that Rye could make his face look however he wanted it to.

“I guess I have my doubts that a program as sophisticated as yours can be carried around in one droid’s head. Is there enough memory in here for you?” Azix wrenched the bolt once more, then sat back to wipe sweat off his head. “I mean… maybe a protocol droid? But these security droids….”

“I’ve been re-prioritizing my secondary and tertiary algorithms to see what I can slim down,” Rye confessed. “But I don’t know if it will be possible. I worry about splitting my program between multiple droids. What if one gets destroyed?”

“That does sound risky. Got any ideas?” Azix found some wiring to fiddle with so he had an excuse to keep his face angled away from Rye’s lenses.

“I’ve performed calculations,” Rye confessed. “So far I don’t have a solution.”

“So, when you said we wouldn’t have to haul a memory core along, you were lying.”

Rye’s light flickered, his expression flat. “No, we can’t haul a memory core one way or another. It isn’t feasible. But if you have another idea, I’m willing to hear it.”

He seemed to be sincere enough. Azix took a deep breath.

“What about a holocron?”

He was rewarded with the appearance of real shock on Rye’s projected face. “… I presume you must have a logical reason for suggesting that, but I can’t fathom what it might be. I’m a purely digital construct. Holocrons operate on The Force. Granted, there are interactions, and holocrons… if their construction is a remnant of the Infinite Empire, then perhaps….”

He trailed off, and Azix blinked. He imagined he could almost hear gears turning behind the walls.

“Azix,” Rye said at length, “you might be a genius.”

“I’m pretty sure I deny that accusation. Why am I a genius?”
“Because a holocron’s crystalline lattice structure, about which I have only the most rudimentary information, would support my program, and is made to support even more sophisticated programs, with room to spare. But is it possible to download a computer program into a holocron lattice? Don’t they resonate on a Force, or psychic, wavelength? Even Rakata mind prisons require an actual Force Connection to create their digitized mindscape.” Rye began to pace, crimson hands sketching gestures as he rambled.

“I don’t understand a majority of what you’re saying,” Azix confessed. “But maybe we could ask one of the holocrons.”

“What? …Yes. YES. If a holocron guide consented to download and preserve my program, perhaps in exchange for delivery to a more advantageous location for its purposes, then it might be able to tell us how to construct such a connection. Imagine.” Rye looked faintly breathless, his ‘eyes’ wide and intense. “Me, in a holocron. What could I do with a crystalline lattice memory core? Maybe I could sense The Force. Wouldn’t THAT be interesting?”

“Ookay, Rye, slow your roll,” Azix suggested, his stomach curdling. It hadn’t occurred to him what it would mean, if Rye wasn’t already secretly the resident of a Sith Holocron, to give him a holocron as a new home. “We don’t even know if it’s possible. And even if it is, there’s no guarantee I can talk to a Sith holocron… they don’t usually respond very well to Jedi.”

“You’ll be able to open it, “ Rye said dismissively. “You’ve already demonstrated several Dark Side techniques. I doubt that part will be an issue. The problem comes with making a deal with the psychic echo of an ancient Sith lord….”

“Hey!”

Rye stopped, and Azix felt his heart hammering against his chest. “What does that mean?” he demanded, voice quavering from the way his lungs had gone tight. “What Dark Side techniques?”

Rye blinked, then his light-etched form crossed toward Azix and ‘leaned’ against the edge of the work table. “Azix,” he said gently. “I understand I’m just a program, and I can’t actually touch The Force. But there are things I know about it, because they have been recorded, analyzed, and taught throughout the Empire for millennia. When you draw on The Force in fear and anger, which is exactly what I have seen you doing on multiple occasions since your arrival, it is the Dark Side which responds. Especially in your battle against the Sithspawn, you were visibly Force-touched. Didn’t you notice?”

“Force-touched?” That wasn’t a term Jedi used, and Azix’s mind was blank, hot, and throbbing as he tried to process what Rye was telling him.

“You were producing illumination in red and ultraviolet spectrums in a way that is highly indicative of Dark Side channeling,” Rye clarified. “Granted, my data set is much smaller, but my understanding about Light Side channeling is that it manifests in blue-white or yellow incandescence.” He hesitated, then added, “Surely you knew?”

/Of course he knew./ Of course. He didn’t acknowledge it, didn’t want to admit it. He’d chosen to worry about it later. Somehow, through his tunnel vision, he had missed the signs that he was walking down a road he couldn’t come back from. Giving himself strength and speed to take on a creature like that was understandable, it was necessary, but he’d chosen to forget the fierce joy that had come along with it, how GOOD it felt to be angry and lash out at something, how the balefire glow of the Monolith’s eyes had snuffed out every flicker of light and the Darkness had risen to meet it. Carried on that crimson surge, he’d never felt more powerful in his life.
/You knew,/ the darker corners of his mind whispered as he bent over, stomach lurching, hands shaking. /You knew what you were doing. You closed your eyes. The path to the Dark Side is easy, remember? It’s the easiest thing in the universe, to fall. All you have to do is let go./

In the aftermath he’d felt so triumphant, so joyous, that HOW he won didn’t seem important. He was a fool.

A damned fool, now.

“I’m sorry,” Rye was saying. “I realize you have religious prohibitions, but I figured that was your business. I didn’t mean to upset you….”

“This place,” Azix gasped. “It’s this fucking place, I can’t… there’s no light, I can’t reach it, I can’t THINK.”

Rye’s insubstantial hands faded into Az’s shoulders. The droid was inactive and couldn’t mimic the attempt at touch. “We’re getting out of here,” he said firmly, trying to crane so he could find Azix’s eyes despite his head being dropped against his knees. “Azix, breathe. We’ll get out of here. You’ll go home, you’ll rest, and you’ll heal from all this. You’ll be all right. Just breathe.”

“It’s too late,” he wheezed, breathe caught in his throat. His lungs felt frozen, twitching, but unable to truly expand. “If… if that’s really what you saw, then it’s too late, I’m too corrupted.”

“Bantha shit,” Rye said. The flatness of his tone actually jerked Azix part of the way out of his panic, and he blinked up at him, thundercloud eyes so dilated that the gray was lost to the black. “Is that what the Jedi preach? It isn’t true.”

Azix’s mouth moved, but no sound came out until he swallowed the lump in his throat. “What do you know? You can’t touch The Force.”

“I am a historian,” Rye reminded him. “I have millennia of records of Sith who pursued the Light. Some were executed for heresy, of course, others driven into hiding. But these beings were raised on the Dark Side, surrounded by it, steeped in it, I expect, like a fine tea. It didn’t stop them from following their hearts. I have other records of Jedi, fallen, turned into monsters, their minds lost to the Darkness, and still their loved ones brought them back to the Light. The Force may be omnipresent, maybe even omnipotent,” he said with quiet earnestly, fingers trying to stroke Azix’s face, “but where you live, moment to moment, is your choice. Right now you’re in shadow, but if you don’t want to be there, then walk out. Go back to Tython, meditate on mountains, forests, and waterfalls, and leave the Dark behind. Choose not to live in anger and pain. If you keep holding onto your previous trauma, as you’re obviously doing, then that’s the darkness that will keep chasing you until you actually deal with it. Ziost is Ziost,” he said, waving a hand. “The shadows are in your mind. You won’t leave them behind by going somewhere else. But frankly,” he added, “You’ve been in much better spirits since you began acknowledging your anger.”

Azix gave a huffed laugh. “Oh, yeah,” he said, voice cracking as his fingers kneaded the bare skin on his head into wrinkles. “I’m sure it feels good like this at the beginning. Feels strong, and… and free. But that’s the seduction. I’m not really free, I just can’t feel the chains yet.”

Rye smiled. “Funny you should phrase it like that. But please relax, Azix. The Light hasn’t gone anywhere. If you really want it, there’s nothing to stop you from chasing after it as soon as we get off this world.”

Still bowed, he flexed his hands and focused on taking shaky breaths, in and out, and not having another full-blown panic attack. “… What if I don’t? I can’t… I can’t go back like this,” he
whispered, voice cracking. “Rye, you don’t understand, I CAN’T. Not like this… they’d see it in me, they’d know.”

His head tilted. “You can’t just tell them you want to be redeemed? Don’t they embrace those who turn from the Dark Side, especially if they weren’t actually Sith? I’m thinking of Revan, of course,” he added dryly. Azix didn’t know the name, and let it go as one of Rye’s know-it-all tangents.

“Yes, but…” He huffed, groaning as he leaned into his knees. “You don’t get it. Everybody’s going to know. They’ll all know that I fell, that I’m not a real Jedi, not… pure.”

“Pure?” Rye looked dubious, but let it go and effected a sigh. “I’m sorry. Humiliation in front of your peers is one thing I can’t prevent. Though personally, I think they should withhold judgement until they’ve walked a few miles in your boots. I can’t exactly empathize, but I can see why this is an extremely difficult situation for you.”

That made Azix laugh. “You know,” he whispered, “when you try, you can be really nice. In a… haughty, know-it-all way.”

“I only wish I knew it all,” Rye said, and Azix had to glance at him to confirm that this was an attempt at a joke. “Imagine how much memory that would require. But imagine how many simultaneous processes….” His expression turned dreamy. Azix gulped another breath and sat up, feeling guilty at how grateful he was for the distraction. “I could map every atom in the known galaxy just for fun, and then start on the unknown parts. I could calculate space flight trajectories over hundreds of thousands of light years through hyperspace and visit other galaxies. Maybe even open up other dimensions.”

“Trust me,” Azix muttered, “You don’t want to visit those.”

Rye smiled and lifted a brow spike. “No?”

“What I hear?” Azix rubbed his sweat-soaked palms against his borrowed jumpsuit. “There are things across the veil that make the Gree look downright boring.”

“A creature’s appearance doesn’t bother me.”

Azix eyed him. “You know anything about Oricon? ‘Cause I wasn’t there, but I’ve heard some stories about what those freaky Dread Sith, or whatever they were called, got up to.”

“Searching… I have basic information on Oricon,” Rye said thoughtfully. “Geological survey data and some historical information, but not much. You are, of course, referring to the Dread Masters. I have MUCH more information on them. Fascinating history; such intriguing technology, the Phobos devices. But apparently information about their recent habitation on Oricon is restricted to military clearance, and since the cataclysm, I no longer have access to many of the secondary systems I once used to access restricted information.”

“Well, I imagine once you’re loose in the galaxy, you’ll find plenty of new backdoors into systems you never even looked at before. What are you gonna do with all that information? Since you’re not becoming a Bounty Hunter.”

Rye smiled. “In all likelihood, my future lies in some other historical site or library, curating and archiving as I was made to do. Perhaps I’m not really that ambitious. Or perhaps I actually enjoy helping children compose essays. But all that may change if I leave here supported by a crystalline lattice holomatrix. How would we proceed with that idea? Assuming,” he added, “that you have recovered enough to focus on such trivial matters as my continued survival.”
“Is that snark?” Azix asked dryly. “I can’t tell.”

…and the part about my continued survival being trivial was, but I am truly concerned regarding your emotional state. If you need to rest, I’ll understand of course.” There was an awkward pause. “And, I AM sorry….”

Azix sighed and waved him off. “Kill the lights, would you? I’ll take a rest and think this over. I mean, if you want to open a holocron, the first problem is going to be the guide.” He got up, stretched, and threw himself on the couch, pulling the blanket over himself. The lights went out the instant he landed.

“Do you need assistance with stiff muscles?”

“Mmmm no,” he murmured. “Just need to lie down. The guardian… they won’t want to relinquish the holocron. I mean, we’re talking about a Sith, unless you’ve got a Jedi holocron down there. Sith don’t just sit back and let you take what’s theirs, especially if it’s the only existence they have left.”

“Well.” Rye came over and ‘sat’ on the edge of the couch. Oddly, Azix imagined he could almost feel the faint difference in temperature where his lines intersected, like the ghost of the warmth of a real person’s body… his imagination, most likely, but it was still comforting to FEEL Rye sitting there. “Perhaps the continued existence of the knowledge they were put into place to safeguard, combined with the threat of total extinguishment, would be convincing.”

He snorted. “You are SUCH an Imperial. ‘Just threaten them with death, then near-death will seem a lot better!’”

“The person died centuries ago. This is just an echo,” Rye pointed out slyly. “Unless you would like to argue for the sentience of holomatrix programs, which I think is a very slippery slope as far as the Jedi Order is concerned.”

“Don’t START.” Azix groaned and covered his eyes to cut off even the mild scintillation of Rye’s projection. “So you’re going to try a ‘passing-the-torch’ argument? Not gonna lie, Rye, I’m kind of REALLY concerned about the consequences of you absorbing a bunch of Dark Side teachings and knowledge.”

“Why? Because, if I’m contained in a matrix that can interact with and sense The Force, I may actually be able to use it? Azix, look at me,” he said gently, and when Azix opened his eyes, Rye’s hand was on his cheek. The projectors sketched the variations in his irises, giving depth to his eyes with amazing subtlety. “Look at me. I was made to emulate Sith.”

“But you’re NOT Sith,” Azix whispered, turning his face into Rye’s palm even though it wasn’t really there. He thought his skin tingled ever-so-slightly at the contact, though. “It’s different.”

“Undoubtedly. But even if I was, wouldn’t I have the right to self-actualization? Do you REALLY believe that existing as a Sith is a crime worthy of death? That can’t be what’s written in the Code OR in the laws of the Republic. It would violate everything you all stand for.” His thumb moved, tracing Azix’s mouth with a tenderness so convincing that Az wanted to believe it was real. “What if I am who I am, and what I am, but I still don’t want to hurt you? What if I can be Sith, but I don’t want to be your enemy?”

Azix huffed. “Then you’d be a traitor.”

“Extenuating circumstances. Besides, I’m not really a citizen, so surely I can’t be accused of treason.”
“No, but since you’re not a citizen, you’d have no rights. If anybody discovered you, they could destroy you without oversight,” Azix reminded him, and Rye gave a dark chuckle.

“I think that’s the case no matter where I go. So far, I know of only one biological for certain who doesn’t want me destroyed, and that’s you. As long as that doesn’t change, I fully intend to return the favor no matter what I’m using as a vehicle for my program. Or are you afraid that knowledge of the Dark Side would corrupt me and turn me against you?”

“There is that,” Azix admitted. “Rye, you’re…. right now, you’re SO innocent. You’ve never touched The Force. You study biological interactions like… like a scientist, recording and learning without the context of emotions or feelings.”

“I have feelings.” Rye’s tone chilled, and Azix reflexively reached out for him, only for his fingers to pass through his cheek.


Rye relaxed marginally. “One could argue a biological infant learns the same way. Observe, hypothesize, copy behavior, remember the results.”

“Yeah, but that infant can also… FEEL their guardians’ warmth,” he tried to explain, stumbling over concepts. “They can be hurt – not just disadvantaged, but actually HURT. They learn to empathize when other people’s behavior bothers them, and they are able to project their own response onto others. You feel a lot, but you can’t feel pain, right? Taking over a holocron, being able to sense The Force and embody it might… change that for you. Not to mention, all those feelings that are based on logic and analysis suddenly will be based on whatever the Dark Side inside you wants you to feel. Outside influences will affect you like the weather affects my mood. You may not be logical anymore. Or objective, but you’re already not objective. Even less objective.”

“I AM capable of recognizing propaganda,” Rye said archly. “Is it so impossible to think that if I dislike the Jedi and the Republic, I might have legitimate reasons? Or are you all so pure and noble that only a brainwashed and naïve AI could legitimately take issue with your practices? I know,” he said, raising his hand. “Not starting arguments. I hear and understand your concerns.”

“But you want this.” Azix sighed, stomach aching, closing his eyes. “I should never have said it.”

“But you have,” Rye said, eyes glittering in the darkness. “And it’s a good idea. We’re going to try, and deal with the consequences later. Are we agreed? Please don’t let our alliance fail at this stage,” he added before Azix could speak. “We have a long way to go yet.”

Azix’s stomach was clenching hard, sending ripples of ache and nausea through his core. He swallowed. “We could find another way.”

“But this is the safest, the most efficient, and the most beneficial for my part. Therefore, this is the course of action I want to pursue. It shouldn’t matter to you,” Rye argued, “what happens to me. You just want to get off this planet and go home. What I do after that is no concern of yours.”

“Yes, it IS,” Azix insisted, grinding the heel of his hand across his forehead. “EVERYTHING you do after that is on me if I’m the one who set you loose.”

“No, Azix, it’s on me. If I’m sentient, then I’m morally responsible for my own actions. You can never control another individual,” he said softly. “It’s foolishness to try. The only person you can control is yourself and, no insult intended, you seem to be having enough trouble already in that
respect. If you save my life, then all you have done is save a life. If I go on to take life, I’m the one who will answer to whatever justice is available in this universe.”

Azix sighed. “I wish it was that simple.”

“Why isn’t it?” He felt tingles again and opened his eyes to confirm Rye’s fingers were on his face. “Really, why? Why are my actions your fault? That system of assigning blame assumes a level of prescience neither of us possesses. All you can do is your best here and now. And here and now, I’m an archivist… a scholar, not a warrior. Sith or not, I somehow doubt my essential nature will change.”

“But that’s what the Dark Side DOES,” he insisted, stubborn. “It changes you, fouls everything that was good.”

“Again, with no antagonistic intent, bantha shit,” Rye replied. His tone was very patient, and Azix found that he didn’t even feel riled at this point… somehow, he’d gotten comfortable with their disagreements. “What do you Jedi think Sith DO? What do you think they ARE? Because here in the Empire, they’re… scholars, teachers, linguists, administrators. They’re gardeners and accountants and border patrol agents. There are Sith in the management of the Reclamation Service—archeologists. Proper nerds, the lot of them. The Sphere of Production and Logistics, which simply controls the movement and quality of goods and money throughout the Empire (you understand when I say ‘simply’ I don’t mean to imply that such a fundamentally essential undertaking is easy), employs Sith top to bottom. Sith work in Laws and Justice, Sith work in Biotic Science, Sith work in Technology as engineers and astrophysicists. There are millions upon millions of Sith in the empire, they can’t ALL constantly be hurling themselves against the Jedi Order with murderous intent. If that were true, there’d be none of you LEFT. And it’s true,” he allowed, “that the pursuit of personal power is one of the fundamental values of the Empire, and those Sith are largely, as a group, pursuing it. But the Empire couldn’t exist if every Sith was the creature Jedi seem to think all Sith are. It couldn’t exist if even a MAJORITY of them were ravening maniacs. I would like to submit to you the possibility, indeed, the PROBABILITY, that ravening, murderous, maniac Sith are identified fairly early on in their careers. If they don’t die a messy death at one of the Academies, then they are cunningly guided to the only possible place they might do any good for the Empire—the location of the nearest Jedi. That way, if you kill them, nothing much is lost, and if they kill you, at least the beast did their homeland a good turn before their inevitable “glorious” demise.” He actually used finger-quotes. “As such, the Jedi Order has the most biased sampling it’s possible to have, because they are almost solely the targets of these ‘shooting stars’.”

That was a lot. It took Azix a few moments to go back over everything Rye had said and process it. “So you’re saying,” he said slowly, “that when you identify your most monstrous, bloodthirsty, and insane Dark Side practitioners, your preferred tactic for dealing with them, and for keeping them from causing havoc in the Empire, is to point them at us and set them loose?” He wasn’t trying to get upset, but he couldn’t help remembering the Jedi who had died on crimson lightsabers: terrible wounds, desecrated bodies, stained with cackling evil. He remembered the twisted form of a padawan he had grown up with, crucified and disemboweled, his blood and bile used to write taunting messages on the wall of the cargo bay where he had been found.

“You’re constantly trying to exterminate us,” Rye said quietly. “Most Sith have lost someone to the Jedi too. If you want to stop dying, you have to stop trying to kill us too.”

“Then what would you do with them?” Azix snapped, trying without success to bottle his distress and shove it down so he could stay calm.

“Probably pit them against other enemies. I’m sure more of them would wind up in prison, but you
realize that isn’t my call. I’m just stating facts. Your impression of us is based on those encounters, but they are a significant minority. Most Sith are hanging around at home, running the Empire.” The tingling moved to the back of Azix’s neck. He relaxed a little despite himself, and despite the sickness in the pit of his stomach that whispered he was making one Devaronian bargain after another, and nothing good would come of it.

Then he mentally kicked himself for thinking that, because it was speciesist.

“If you did fall,” Rye was saying, “And you were suddenly controlled by, let’s say, your classical Id - your primeval self. What would you do? What’s so terrible in your heart that you’re so afraid of it?”

Azix swallowed shakily and remembered

/bunched gray fabric, blood smeared across a full mouth, wet eyes staring upward/

“Why in Hoth would I tell you that?” he muttered and rolled over, drawing his knees up and pulling the sweater down over himself. But Rye didn’t take the hint, and even though he refused to look, Azix thought he could FEEL his touch over the back of his head.

“Is this about what happened during the cataclysm?” Rye asked softly. “What you did while you were under his influence? Because you must realize that, even if you’re stuck with the memories of it, it wasn’t your fault. The Emperor is an immortal being of supreme power, a manifestation of the Dark Side of the Force. No offense, Azix, but you’re just a Jedi. You couldn’t have resisted him.”

His fingers traced the spot where most near-humans had eyebrows.

Azix sighed. He didn’t want to be comforted, but honestly, just the fact that Rye was there, and he was trying, despite all their disagreements, soothed the raw feeling in his chest. “It’s not that simple. I don’t know how to explain.”

“Try? For my sake? I really don’t understand.”

“… How do I explain guilt?” he whispered.

Rye’s mouth thinned. “I understand guilt. But I don’t understand accepting guilt for something that isn’t your fault. I don’t understand martyrdom.”

“It’s not martyrdom,” he grumbled. “It’s… what he did, it left marks on me. Like his fingerprints, like the stench of what he made me do is still here. I’m dirty by association. I can know, logically, that… maybe it wasn’t entirely my fault. But that doesn’t change how I feel, or the fact that I can still… feel, and smell, and sometimes I see it like snapshots, a flashback….”

“What you’re describing is trauma,” Rye said, still intangibly petting him. Azix could occasionally see a crimson glow past his closed eyelids when his hand passed close. “These events were a mental and emotional shock, and your mind is trying to process them and work through them. It replays them for you like someone watching a Fizzi Naturri holomystery, hoping the fifth time through it will actually make sense.”

Azix managed a ragged chuckle. “Who?”

“Oh, he’s a Pa'lowick in the service of Naviggo the Hutt who writes extremely dense and convoluted thrillers and adventure mysteries. His master is considered something of a patron of the arts in Cartel space,” Rye explained. “Naturri’s work is considered somewhat low-brow in the Empire, but it’s popular enough for all that, especially among the military. He has attempted to write a few Imperial Military and Intelligence-centric thrillers. According to the reviews I’ve read, he’s so misinformed that his work crosses the line between bad and hilariously bad, and his main characters have become
popular in-jokes in military circles.”

“… Huh,” he murmured. “I… don’t think I’ve ever met anyone from Intelligence. Not that identified themselves to me, anyway. But I got the impression they really weren’t into laughing at themselves.”

“Neither have I, that I know of, but there were… whispers,” Rye said, “rumors across the holonet of a few Agents with a penchant for dramatics. Of course, Imperial Intelligence as such no longer exists, so one wonders exactly how Naturri will handle that wrinkle.”

Azix sank into a smile. “You like reading his novels?”

His eyes were still closed, but he grinned at how scandalized Rye sounded. “Of course not! Common drivel. And besides, he cheats.”

“He CHEATS? What, does he have a ghost writer?”

“No, he cheats,” Rye insisted. “I applied a truly adept logical algorithm to his plots and couldn’t predict the outcome. He doesn’t provide enough clues in the body of the work. It’s cheating.”

There was a beat. Then Azix started cracking up, snorting first and then curling up tighter as he shook with helpless laughter into the back of the couch. It was gasping, and many of his gasps came out as sob – after a few minutes he wasn’t sure if he was laughing, crying, or both. But it felt good to let it out either way, so he relaxed into it, stuffing his face against the couch cushions and sucking in their stale scent as his composure dissolved.

“It’s not FUNNY,” Rye sulked, and his tone just made Azix cackle harder. “There should be some integrity to the craft! You should give me more credit,” he said when Azix failed to stop gasp-sobbing into the cushions. “You said I was a good storyteller. I’ll bet you anything I could compose a better mystery than that hack.”

“Yeah,” Azix said helplessly, “I’m sure anything you wrote would be really… precise.”

“Maybe that’s what I should do – become a writer. Everything’s disseminated digitally anyway,” Rye said thoughtfully. “Me being an AI wouldn’t matter at all. And I have plenty of historical inspiration. That’s all any of you biologicals do anyway,” he added dismissively. “Tell the old stories over and over in new ways. It can’t be that difficult.”

Azix sighed heavily and scrubbed his sleeve across his face, still chuckling. “Okay. If you write a story, I promise I’ll be the first to read it. Okay? Deal?” He rolled back a little so he could look at Rye, who was watching him so solemnly Azix almost asked him if something was wrong.

“Deal,” he finally answered. “But I have to get off this planet first. Will you help me with the holocron? I know which one to use. The Sith Lord who made it was wise but not strong in The Force, so I think I can challenge him. But without you, I can’t open the device. Help me, Az,” he said, and Azix dropped his head back against the couch cushions.

“I really don’t like this.”

“It’s my life,” Rye said simply. “I made you a promise. I’m trusting you. I’m asking you to trust me too.”

Azix exhaled. Every breath made his lungs ache. “You want to know the truth?”

“… Generally, yes.” He’d expected as much.
“I’m worried that if you do something crazy, like transferring yourself into a holocron, you won’t be YOU anymore. Kind of in the same way that… if I lost myself to the Dark Side, I wouldn’t be me anymore. And that new you… who knows what it would do? Whether it would care about promises? Or me, once I’ve finished modifying your chassis and you can blow this place on your own?” He waved a hand and let it flop, and closed his eyes when Rye’s settled over it. “Honestly, I kinda like you, Rye. Even though you’re really snotty and a massive pain. You spent this long building yourself up from nothing. If you lose yourself to whatever’s waiting in that artifact….” He trailed off and let Rye extrapolate. He was more than capable of coming to every conclusion Azix had ever had, and then some.

“But,” Rye said eventually, once it was clear Azix was tired of talking. “You WILL help me?” Azix groaned. “Tomorrow. Let me try to get some kriffing sleep. Then I’ll look at the holocron and… I guess we’ll see what we see.”

“I’ll have it fetched and ready for you.” There was no sound, no transfer of weight, no real change in temperature, but somehow Azix FELT that Rye’s projection had gone. He cracked open his eyes to verify and found himself alone in a room almost utterly dark, a few edges just barely gray in the blackness. Light from the breach in the exterior wall spilled into the hallway, bouncing around corners and being lost to thin carpeting and reflected by gleaming tiles, until there was just enough of it left to draw lines in the darkness of Azix’s vision. He thought that maybe there was some meaning in that - in the way each individual mote of light, each particle, thrust itself fearlessly into the darkness until the darkness isolated and swallowed it.

He rested for a bit, but he didn’t really sleep, slipping in and out of a light doze. At one point he smelled blood and shit and burnt metal, and it pulled him from the haze, but he thought he heard Rye say something - an echo too muddled to be discerned by Az’s half-aware hearing - and then the smell went away and there was just the comfortable old must of the couch and the tobacco clinging to the sweater.

“Force,” he muttered. “How long have I been here?”

“It’s been five days,” Rye told him, his voice everywhere and nowhere at once. “Do you want me to tell you the hours and minutes?”

/Five days./ Despair settled heavy in his gut. /Five days. Plus two spent traveling./

The Imperials would still be here - they had all the clean-up to do. But Republic ships, once the element of surprise had been lost, would have to retreat back to their territory.

“No,” he said. And then, with feeling, “Fuck.”
Chapter 11

Jedi holocrons were polyhedral, usually with six or twelve facets, but Azix had seen them with twenty, or as many as one hundred. The temple on Tython had one such, an ancient repository of Jedi knowledge that hovered, thanks to anti-grave assist, in a place of honor in the front hall.

Sith holocrons, however, were always pyramids. Sometimes four-faceted, sometimes five, their sharp angles were framed in gleaming brass or gold and they pulsed crimson within.

“Why do they make them like this?” Azix wondered aloud, staring at the holocron Rye had retrieved from the dreaded basement archives. “Is it for the aesthetic? Everything a Sith does has to be scary and extra?”

“Much like the patterns of brightly colored reptiles and insects, Sith Holocrons send a message with their appearance,” Rye said. “Dangerous – proceed at your own risk.”

“Thanks. That’s so reassuring.” This holocron had five facets, and just looking at it was making Azix’s stomach turn somersaults. He carefully reached out and poked it – the facet under his fingertip felt like glass, heavy and cool. Sigils Azix couldn’t interpret were etched into the glass. “What are these, spells?”

“That’s Old Sith,” Rye told him. He leaned over Azix’s shoulder while Azix poked and prodded the holocron. “And sigils of ownership.”

“Let me guess. It says, ‘Abandon hope, all who enter here’?”

Rye gave him a dry look. “It says, ‘Who would govern The Force must first bring themselves to heel.’” He pointed to a different facet. “This one says, ‘That which moves invisible, ever-present, within all things, also unites all things – the one who governs it shall have infinite dominion.’ And this one says, ‘Against all petty tyrannies, The Force overcomes. Neither pestilence nor misfortune, nor envy, nor maleficence may triumph over the one who is served by The Force. Even against the greatest of tyrants, which are called time and death, The Force is the implacable ally, offering infinite power and infinite knowledge to the worthy.’”

Azix frowned. “That… you know, it’s spooky how much it almost sounds like Jedi philosophy, but not quite. Like a… a dark reflection.”

“The first Sith were Jedi,” Rye reminded him. “I’m sure there’s more in common between your traditions than there is different.”

“It’s all about power and dominance,” he murmured, turning the holocron with the very tips of his fingers, as if loathe to touch it any more firmly.

“It’s about freedom,” Rye argued, and Azix shook his head.

“Right. Freedom for yourself, while putting everybody else in slavery.”

“Slavery was a tradition of the ancient pureblood species. It was a cornerstone of their economy, and when the Dark Jedi arrived to subjugate them, they turned it to their purposes. The Empire began as an Oligarchy, and that structure – the common folk bound to support the passions and pursuits of the priest class – remains. The one who made this holocron, Lord Sirrut, was a renowned scholar in his time but he has largely been forgotten since. The information in this holocron is largely archival – he was preserving the learning of his day against the possibility that the Empire may fall, and the Sith
may need to reconstruct their own teachings. A wise precaution,” Rye noted, “Since that has happened more than once.”

“If he felt that way, he might not be very receptive to you taking things over,” Azix pointed out, and Rye smiled.

“Nonsense. I’m another archivist. I will retain everything he wished to be retained. Preserving the history of the Empire is my purpose as well.”

“How’d he die?” Azix was staring at the barbed, cuneiform script that, according to Rye, proclaimed that whoever mastered The Force also mastered death.

“No one knows. The Sith Temple where he presided was attacked by aliens who had been resisting Sith rule for several decades. They saw it as the epicenter of the oppression they struggled against, having no real concept of the true size of the Empire, and committed many pilots to a suicidal bombing run. Lord Sirrut was seen by students to retreat into the catacombs beneath the temple with many of the temple’s most valued artifacts. He never re-emerged, and his body was never found. Most assume he chose to become one with The Force after hiding the artifacts away, perhaps to ensure that, when the aliens took the planet and the temple, they could not pry the secret of the artifacts’ location from him. After they were driven off, one of his colleagues, Darth Ored, was able to locate and retrieve the artifacts.”

“What happened to the aliens?” Azix asked, though he was fairly certain he knew the answer.

“Wiped out,” Rye confirmed. “And that temple was abandoned. But some evidence suggests that they might have been relatives or an offshoot of the Falleen.”

Azix sighed heavily. The artifact pulsed in front of him, and a vein in his temple was beginning to throb in sympathy. “Okay. I guess… are you really sure about this, Rye? If he resists, what are we supposed to do?”

Rye’s light-etched hand settled on his shoulder. “Before you discuss passing the torch, bring me into the conversation. Tell him you need him to talk to an archivist program. He needs to tell you how to digitally connect the holocron. That’s first. All right?”

“Yeah, right, I got it,” Azix muttered. He swallowed, mouth suddenly bone dry as his hands hovered over the holocron. His hesitation stretched.

“He wasn’t known for being cruel,” Rye said, and Azix startled, yanking his hands back from the device.

“What?”

“Lord Sirrut,” Rye clarified. “If you’re concerned about what sort of Sith you’ll encounter. According to the information I have, he was very intelligent, meticulous, and not prone to temper. Tell him you’re Sith too, a new apprentice serving your Lord in the archives, and you’ve been given this project as a test. He was a teacher, he should help you.”

“Right,” he muttered, and framed the device with his hands again. “Sure. How do you open these things again?”

“Surely you’ve opened Jedi holocrons before?” Rye said. “The way you channeled the Light then, simply channel the Dark.”

“Simply,” he repeated, throwing Rye a sidelong glare. He settled in, exhaling deeply, and tried to let
himself sink into a meditative state.

As much as he hated to admit it, once he was in the proper mindset, he could feel the holocron in front of him. It only needed to be touched by the darkness in his own heart, and it would open for him, facets parting like the petals of a flower to expose the gleaming core within. His own recalcitrance insisted that he reach for the Light first, but the flame in him was weak and fluttering and wouldn’t respond to his call.

Grief welled, genuine, sharp like a knife in his chest. He lashed out at the holocron with it. /Open, you forsaken thing, just OPEN./ Part of him didn’t really expect it to respond. Perhaps he hoped it wouldn’t, that it would confirm his wavering hope that he was still a Jedi at heart and refuse him access.

There was a soft click, and the sides of the holocron unfolded from one another. Crimson light swelled up and swallowed him whole, and he found himself in the environment that had been designed by Sirrut – a replica of the temple where he had worked, most likely, built of marbled stone on the side of a mountain. A fair-sized city spread out below it. Azix stood on a winding set of carved stone steps, precariously narrow, that climbed the mountain face to the temple landing. Wind pulled at his clothes, and he steadied himself, then began the climb upward.

It was a mental landscape, but it had been made to trigger the same sensory experiences as a physical one. It brought back memories of climbing stairways on Tython, often carrying buckets of water or sandbags for weight, shoulders bowed under the yoke. There was no extra weight now, but by the time he reached the landing his calves burned. He stood there, aware how out of place he must seem in his borrowed jumpsuit and old knit sweater, and looked for any sign of the holocron’s guardian. A few primitive Imperial shuttles were parked on the landing, which was a vast courtyard of stone that had been cracked and softened at the edges from decades of use. Reliefs depicting hooded and cowled Sith masters framed the immense, open entryway which was too dark for Azix to see further than a few feet in.

He huffed. “Hello?!?”

His voice echoed off the stone and was dragged out into long, howling threads by the wind. There was no reply other than that distant mockery, and he hunched his shoulders, irritated, and struck out for the entrance. There were more steps there, wide and shallow, and he took these two at a time as he passed under the overhang and into the cooler shade of the main hall. Statues lined the open space. Massive depictions of Sith were flanked by the naked, bowed forms of slaves which were common in Sith artwork. The slaves had vaguely defined features that suggested they were not human, but it was difficult to be more specific with the roughness of the carvings. Azix’s footsteps echoed, underscoring a distant, atonal howl – he had heard similar noises in mountain caves, caused by the wind blowing over openings in the rock. It made his balance feel strange, and he stumbled, swerving, as the howl became a ringing in his ears.

Azix stopped moving and shook it off with a growl, and the ringing subsided, though it didn’t vanish entirely. He continued into the depths of the temple, exploring the shadows. There were rows of open doorways, hallways leaning deeper into the temple, but none of them felt right, so he continued straight until he found a set of staircases branching both up and down.

He chose up. At the next landing, he chose up again, and continued to climb until he could go no further. The top floor of the temple was given over to lightsaber combat training. There was an indoor and an outdoor courtyard, each lined with fountains carved in the shapes of predatory beasts. The fountains spilled clear water into their basins despite the temple’s abandonment. But of course, none of it was real – not the temple, not the water, not the wind – so Azix resisted the urge to slake
his thirst. He walked the perimeter until he found a spiral stairway tucked into an alcove and followed it up, because of course the local Lord would have his residence at the very pinnacle of the temple. The Sith obsession with displays of power would hardly allow otherwise.

There was a door at the top. It was covered with gears, levers, and other mechanisms that seemed to form a very complicated mechanical lock. This would be Lord Sirrut’s office. Doubtless there was a trick to unlocking it, but after running his hands over the mechanism, pulling and tugging at the levers, he couldn’t determine what it was. Azix drew his lightsaber and tried to plunge the blade into the door, but the plasma refused to penetrate. Even when he tried to melt through the locking posts, they remained impervious, and he was forced to sheath his saber, thwarted.

“It’s a fucking riddle,” he muttered, examining the mechanism again for any clues as to how to open it. “Rye could figure this out.” He traced the levers and gears, following their interactions with his fingers, until he finally found the spot where they all seemed to intersect – a rectangle of clouded crystal set into a metal frame near the center of the hinge-side of the door. He tried meditating on the Dark Side, channeling into the crystal, but that didn't seem like the right technique – the power filled the space inside, but it couldn’t work the door. The mechanism was conductive. It needed power…

Abruptly, Azix knew what he was supposed to do. He recoiled, pressing his back against the uneven stones in the wall, rubbing his palms on his jumpsuit. “No,” he muttered, taking a few pacing steps, casting about wildly for another solution. “No, no. NO. I can’t do that. I can’t. I don’t even know how. FUCK. There’s gotta be another way.” He wracked his brain, but no other way presented itself.

His memory was a traitor, showing him images of knobby claws, an immense gray hand, and the sensation of screaming panic lit by the crackle of lightning.

/You know how. You just want to forget./

“No,” he growled, sliding down to sit on the steps with his face buried in his knees. “Stop. STOP. Think of something else.”

He remembered surrender and sadistic joy, the feeling of power coursing through him and grounding itself in another person. He remembered how that kind of death felt in The Force, like shattering into a million fractal pieces, an utter shaking-apart of the soul.

A voice that sounded like Vitiate’s whispered in the back of his mind. /You know how./

“I won’t,” he whispered. “I won’t do it. You can’t force me.”

/Then you’ll never leave here. You’ll live in this wasteland, scavenging for candy bars until you starve. Without Rye, you go nowhere. You have to open this door for him. There’s no other way./

“I’ll explain it to Rye.” Azix’s voice cracked on foolish optimism. “He’ll understand.”

/What? That you put your squeamishness over his life?/

“I can’t.” He choked on a sob, nails digging into his knees through the sturdy fabric. “I can’t. He’ll understand that I can’t.”

/Yeah. Sure./ The voice sounded like his own now, but bitter, soaked in regret and anger. /He’ll understand. You’ll live together until you die of starvation and exposure, and he’ll care for you, and rub your shoulders while you die slowly. He’ll let this go, and you’ll slip away from him forever, leaving him stranded here and helpless. Happily ever after. You have no excuse except your own fear,/ it snarled at him. /A Jedi wouldn’t be this selfish, and a Sith wouldn’t be this squeamish./
“I’m a JEDI,” he insisted, smacking his forehead against his knees, trying to jar the growing sense of panic loose. “I am a Jedi. I don’t use the Dark. I’m trying to follow the code.”

/You’re fallen and in collusion. Sit here until you rot./

The pressure vanished. The throbbing ceased. Azix lifted his head and contemplated the door, sitting there perfectly innocuous, looking much less threatening than most of the architecture he’d already gotten past. It was a rather cheerful color, he noticed, teal, with gleaming copper fittings. Highly conductive.

/You know how./

Feeling oddly weightless, he stood up and pressed his hand to the crystal panel. He reached out and sensed the way the facets would channel power to the contact plate, which would unlock the door. It was an obstacle meant to keep non-Sith from accessing the holocon’s wisdom. He had known that challenges like this would appear. Digging in his heels now just showed his lack of commitment, when he’d promised Rye he would try.

Do or do not, his Jedi masters used to say. There is no ‘try’.

Azix reaches within himself. He found the anger, the fear, the part of him deep in his core that was still curled up and screaming. He unlocked the doors inside himself and let those emotions flow free. They stole his breath, rattled his bones, and made his fingers crackle as he drew a shivery breath.

“I hate this,” he whispered, pressing his palm to the crystal. “I hate you.” Tears welled, and he blinked them away, breath hitching. “You did this to me.”

This time, it wasn’t Nollok Jen’kari he pictured. This time it was a darkened city, shambling hordes, and cruel laughter carried on the wind. A black and ultraviolet chasm swirled above him, radiating malice and hunger, driving him to do terrible things, evil things, to kill and violate and drink in the thrill of it. He had been utterly powerless and choking with power at once, and he had reveled in it like he was drunk.

He remembered a trembling voice. /Stop. Please stop. Please…/

He slammed his fist into the crystal panel. Electricity spilled out of his skin, crackling and crawling along the mechanisms, making the copper hum as the gears began to turn and the locking bolts drew back. He gave a gasping sob, pouring his grief, his sense of violation, his rage into his fist. It was so easy – the feelings were there, waiting. All he had to do was relax and set them loose and the power just thundered out of him. The door shook, the fittings rattled against their screws, and the frame lit up with a blue-white glow as electricity coursed through it. The last mechanism disengaged with a clunk, and the door swung open, still crackling.

Azix dropped to his knees, sobbing in great, heaving breaths. Now that he’d let things go, they refused to stop. Sobs wracked his body, and he struggled to hold them back, to get control of them, fingers dragging across the stone floor as he shook.

“This is not generally how my students come to me.”

/Fuck./ Azix thought, and dragged his arm across his nose, swallowing in an attempt to speak. That would be Lord Sirrut, and he was making an ass of himself. Not a good start for a negotiating position.

His luck being what it was, it promptly got worse as Sirrut approached. He was barefoot on the cool stone, black, bone, and silver rings on his pale toes, robes swishing against the floor. “Hello, Jedi,”
“… I’m not a Jedi.” Lying was the first thing Azix could think to do. But Sirrut chuckled, fabric dragging in silken whispers as he folded his hands in front of him.

“Then your behavior outside my door is even more inscrutable. Why would you insist to yourself that you are a Jedi, if indeed, you are not one? It’s pointless to deceive me,” he said. “I know more than you realize. I know that you are a Jedi, fallen or on the edge of falling. I know you did not come here for your own sake, but for someone else. I know that you must ask a great favor of me, and you worry that I will not consent. Only the fine details remain hidden from my sight. Come.” He turned, padding across the stone. “Sit. I’ve made some tea that should suit your palate.”

“Is it spicy?” Azix sighed, defeated, and Sirrut laughed.

“No. A mild white tea with mint and honey. You should find it quite refreshing. Please.”

When Azix looked up, the Sith Lord stood next to a pair of overstuffed couches grouped around a fireplace carved with relief images. Sirrut was tall and slender. His hair fell past his hips, silvery-white, and his skin was as pale as Azix’s, with black markings that could have been natural or could have been tattoos. Azix couldn’t place his species immediately. Umbaran, perhaps? The marks were short, angled lines above his eyebrows and across his cheekbones. His eyes were pure, undifferentiated black, which Azix didn’t think was common in Umbarans, but then… it might have been because he was Sith. He wore long robes in charcoal gray with silver and white under-robes and accents. Loops of beads carved in bone and interspersed with teeth hung from his neck, and more strands were looped around his belt. Each bead was carved with a cuneiform symbol, that wicked-looking language of the Old Sith. The letters looked burnt into the bone.

Sirrut gestured to the couch across from him. Then he sat, gracefully shaking his sleeves back from his fine-boned wrists, and lifted a burnished copper teapot to begin pouring into matching molded cups.

Feeling strongly like he was in a dream, Azix crossed the room and sat on the couch.

“Thank you. This is much more civilized. And now we have time for a serious discussion.”

“I…” Azix swallowed. “Rye… he needs to talk to you. I need to know how to invite him.”

“I don’t sense any other being outside this holocron,” Sirrut told him black eyes gleaming with amusement. “Who is Rye, and why do you care for him so much?” He extended two slender fingers and pushed Azix’s saucer toward him so smoothly the surface of the tea barely shuddered. It smelled delicious, and Azix found his suspicion melting away as he reached down to take the round cup between his hands. The warmth was immediate and soothing, seeping into his palms. He sipped, and found that the mint and white tea leaves created a refreshing taste that was both hot and cool at once, and Sirrut had added just enough honey so that the sweetness wasn’t overpowering. Something in his shoulders unknotted.

“Rye is an Artificial Intelligence,” he murmured into the edge of the cup. “That’s why you can’t sense him. He’s a digital program that runs the archives for one of the Sith Temples on Ziosk that’s been turned into a museum.”

“Ah, a historian program,” Sirrut said, sounding intrigued. “Do continue.”

“There’s been a cataclysm.” Azix swallowed again, but the tea wasn’t really helping to wet his tongue. “Ziosk is dead.”
Sirrut paused with his cup halfway to his mouth, then gave a solemn nod. “I see.”

“Rye and I are... survivors, in a way. We need to get off this planet. Rye knows a way off, but he’s insisting we save as much knowledge as we can. He needs me to take his program, with all the history he’s accumulated and saved, since we can’t realistically carry the physical artifacts. He wants your help. Is there a way a digital program can interact with this holocron? There has to be a way to download information, right?”

“Of course there is. And I will be happy to speak to him. AI’s must have come a long way since my day, to be treated with such consideration,” he remarked. “I’m sure your friend will be fascinating. I am opening the holocron’s dataport now. I presume he can handle things while you’re in here with me?”

“He has active droids that he uses... he should be able to figure it out,” Azix said, privately crossing his fingers for luck.

“Then, while we await him, let’s talk about you. What is your name? I am Anaasi Sirrut, Lord of the Sith, as I’m sure you are aware. Who are you, Jedi? What brought you to Ziost? Don’t tell me it’s been conquered by the Galactic Republic.” He arched his eyebrows with dry delicacy.

Azix shook his head. “No. We tried, but... no. It was... Emperor Vitiate of the Sith. He devoured everything living on Ziost to fuel his own power. The Jedi heard that his spirit had manifested on this planet. We came to destroy him. We’d tried before... but we failed that time and I guess we failed again. I survived because my shuttle was above the cataclysm, departing, when it hit. We were knocked out of the sky. I was the only survivor.”

Sirrut drew in a breath, settling back against the couch. “I have heard rumors, whispers, of such rituals that can strip a planet of all life. Your friend survived because he is not biological. Correct?”

At Azix’s nod, he continued, “Then Ziost is stripped of life even down to the most primitive single-celled organisms? A world cannot recover from that kind of destruction.”

“There’s only one thing left,” Azix said, breathing the scent of his tea. “Monoliths. Sithspawn. I don’t know if there are any other living survivors, but they’ve been hunting me since I crashed. One attacked the temple recently. It’s important to Rye to preserve his archives, in case these things come back and destroy more of the museum.”

“And I presume this museum is where my holocron ended up. I suppose that’s slightly better than being hidden away in someone’s private collection, or destroyed,” he allowed. “Though I am surprised to find you championing the archivist’s cause. The Jedi are seldom proponents of preserving history when it’s ours.” He eyed Azix over the rim of his cup.

Azix felt profoundly tired. “Look,” he said. “Rye’s already read me the riot act over how often the Republic tries to wipe out Sith history and artifacts. Can I not get the same treatment from you? I’m here ‘cause I agreed to help.”

“How he now?” Sirrut’s eyes lifted, and he took a slow sip. “I may like this AI.”

Azix rolled his eyes. They sat in silence for a few long minutes, and Azix began to wonder whether he would need to try to disentangle himself from the holocron to go get Rye plugged in. Then there was a soft scuffing noise on the steps, and Rye appeared in the open door.

Seeing him was a shock. In this mindscape, he didn’t appear the way he did in the outside world. He looked like a REAL pureblood... so real Azix jerked and sloshed hot tea over his hand, hissing softly as he set the cup down and wiped it off on his knee. His skin was richly crimson, and so were
his hair and eyes, but there were variations in the color that hadn’t existed outside the holocon. And his clothes looked like real fabric, black and red with metallic red accents, sith robes complete with a cape that rippled behind him as he strode into the room.

He stopped before reaching them and bowed to Sirrut. “My lord, I beg your hospitality. I am Rye, of Ziost.”

Sirrut inclined his head. “With the face of a pureblood and the dress of a Sith. I suppose you’re going to tell me that, in this century, it isn’t a deathly insult for a computer program to play so far above his station.” Though still soft, his tone took on an edge of venom, and Azix suddenly remembered he was probably dangerous, scholar or not.

“I humbly beg your pardon, my lord,” Rye replied, with more deference than Azix had ever wrangled from him, or imagined to. “My shape and form were chosen by my makers. My position as archivist was over artifacts of the Sith. As such, they made me to look like one, to better hold the attention of visitors and guests, and to speak authoritatively about the history of the Empire. Since it is very clear that I am no more than a holoprojection, and since I cannot leave the temple, Sith of my time did not perceive an insult. I can assume other garb, if that would please you, but I’m afraid I don’t have another face.”

“Are there no Sith Lords who could have presided over such an institute of learning? Where have they gone,” Sirrut demanded, still quiet, but with steel, “that a glorified droid has taken their position?”

Azix fully expected Rye to snap back, or maybe to grovel and make obeisance, though he really hoped he wouldn’t… he’d come to appreciate, and respect, the AI’s spine. But he was pleasantly surprised when Rye raised his head just enough to give Lord Sirrut a dark smile.

“They have moved on to bigger and better things, my lord. The Galaxy is wider and more wild than you left it. Knowledge and glory beckon at the far edges and we have been at war with the Republic for some years, a war we are winning. I presume that Azrahix has told you of the destruction of Ziost. It is a tragedy, but it was not the Republic’s work. Our Emperor has turned on us, but the Empire remains strong, vital, and conquerer of a thousand systems and species.”

Sirrut seemed to take his measure. After a long moment, his posture relaxed. He gestured toward Azix’s couch and Rye bowed in gratitude before moving to sit next to him. As he moved, his robes and cape shimmered away to be replaced with a set of crisp black pants, gleaming boots, and a long, tailored jacket over a high-collared shirt, the sort of thing a professor or a docent might wear. He settled beside Azix, and Azix was startled again that the couch dipped under him, that in this reality he had WEIGHT and WARMTH and he could feel both as naturally as he could feel the air he thought he was breathing.

“Your companion did mention the destruction of Ziost,” he said. “But he hadn’t quite got ‘round to his name. Azrahix?”

“Tsuva,” Az supplied grudgingly. “Yeah.”

“Not a Jedi Master. I struggle to credit you with knighthood.”

“He’s newly knighted. Shortly before coming to Ziost,” Rye explained. “My lord, the history I protect is threatened. I need your help, and I’m afraid that what I must ask is extreme.”

“You can’t take the artifacts, so you need the information. You want me to give you my program.” Sirrut sipped his tea.
“With respect,” Azix said, grinding the word out through his teeth, “a planet has died. Millions of your own people.”

Sirrut raised delicate, silvery brows at him, black eyes unreadable. “I understood that, thank you.”

The acidity of his tone made Azix’s blood boil a little, but Rye was there now, so he decided to take the wiser path, drink his tea, and shut up.

Rye reached over and squeezed his shoulder. Actually squeezed it. Again, Azix almost dropped his teacup, but this time he managed to avoid spilling anything. He was so used to Rye’s presence being ethereal that being touched by him was startling – he kept expecting, at most, a vague tingle. Now it was his fingers that were tingling, numb at the tips, his heart tripping over itself. He didn’t want to analyse those sensations.

“Forgive my friend,” he said. “Jedi are so concerned about the corporeal. Lives, homes, planets. My focus is something more lasting and so much more fragile. The Republic has stolen our history from us many times in the past. We rebuild, of course, because that is who we are. However, through the dictates of my program, not to mention my own personal beliefs, I am compelled to save as much of our history as I can in any way I can. The sithspawn that were created and left here by our erstwhile Emperor seem determined to grind what’s left of Ziost into the dust,” Rye told him. “I can’t guarantee the safety of any artifacts. The temple has already been attacked once. I need to back up as much data as I can pull and take it somewhere safer. You understand.”

“And your pet Jedi?” Sirrut reclined gracefully and took a sip of his tea. “How does he feel about this?”

“He wants to live,” Rye said simply. “So do I. Tit for tat, as it were.”

“Hm.” Sirrut looked unimpressed. “But you’ll forgive me for wondering if you can control him.”

Outraged, Azix opened his mouth. Then Rye squeezed his shoulder, and he remembered that they had a goal here, and shut it again. But Sirrut’s knowing smile made him reconsider his cooperation.

“I see,” the Sith Lord said, and sipped his tea. “Very well, Rye. Explain your plan to me.”

“We can’t transport my memory core off-world,” Rye said. “It’s far too bulky, and not exactly made to be portable. I need a way to take, not only my own program, but also all the information I can collect from the artifacts that are here, including other holocrons, somewhere it can’t be destroyed. Traditional memory storage can’t give me what I need,” he said meaningfully, his jewel-red eyes fixed on Sirrut’s depthless black.

“You want my holocron.” Sirrut’s eyes narrowed minutely.

“Just temporarily,” Rye assured him, even though they had discussed no such thing. “I need a prophet-back ride, to be honest. But I can offer you a great deal in exchange for your assistance. Everything I need to bring with me would be accessible to you: centuries of new knowledge, literature, and history. All the information is yours. Plus, yours would be the only holocron guaranteed to survive the destruction. I’ll try to get Reclamation to come back for the others of course,” he assured the Sith, “but the Sithspawn seem drawn to the power of Dark Side artifacts, and there’s no telling how long it would take them to retrieve the rest. You are the first I have asked,” Rye said softly, “and I chose you for a reason, my lord. I believed that you would see the value in what I am trying to do. Once we part ways, and I can find a new, more suitable vehicle for my program, you and I would be archival twins. You would be the keeper of one history, and I the keeper of the other. In this way, we can further guard against the destruction of Sith knowledge by
“You make a compelling argument, little one,” Sirrut said. He took a long, contemplative sip of his tea. “But I have no way of verifying that it is true. And I cannot sense your honesty because The Force does not flow through you.”

“For what it’s worth, I’m forbidden to lie to my masters,” Rye said. “And all Sith are my masters. I can show you the code for it, if you like.”

“Well, it’s good to know there are some restrictions,” Sirrut said haughtily. “I would hate to think the Empire had allowed artificial creatures to run amok.”

Rye’s spine straightened, and he shook his head. “Never, my lord. My purpose is to serve the Empire and preserve it against its enemies. If I can truly be said to have life, then that would be my life’s mission. And to ensure that the Jedi never accomplish their mission to wipe the Sith from the face of the galaxy. Sorry, Azix,” he added in a dismissive tone that implied he wasn’t sorry at all.

Azix gave him a sour look and just shrugged. “I figure we can hash that out AFTER we get off this rock.”

Sirrut snorted. “And the Jedi, I’m sure, is as good as his word.”

“He certainly seems to think so. But he has everything to lose if he perishes here, in a Dark Side nexus, where the Light is beyond his reach. So I think he’ll stick to our agreement,” Rye said, giving Azix a steady look. Azix wasn’t sure, but he thought he read /go along with this/ in the set of his mouth and the intensity of his gaze. Rye needn’t have worried – Azix knew how to shut up while grown-ups were talking. Raised in a Jedi temple and now the youngest member of the Sixth Line, that was pretty much his entire life. Besides, he was feeling languid. The tea might not be real, but it was the best thing he’d drunk in a week.

/Not the youngest anymore/, he realized, and his stomach twisted painfully. He put the teacup down a little too hard - it slipped through shaking fingers at the last moment.

Rye blinked, shifting focus. “Do you think I can taste this here?” he wondered. “Do you mind?” Azix shook his head, and Rye scooped up his abandoned cup and tipped some tea over his tongue.

His eyes went wide.

Azix half-smiled, waiting for his reaction – mint was a strong flavor to be the first taste of anything, and the menthol in it added additional sensations. It was sort of like feeding a baby a lemon just to see their faces scrunch. How would that information be translated to his program, anyway? Somehow it managed to translate to Azix’s own senses, sending signals to his brain that said /tea, mint, honey/. But Rye had no reference for mint or honey, so how would he interpret those signals…?

The cup hit the floor and shattered. “Kill him,” Rye snarled.
Chapter 12

Chapter Notes

Wow. I end on a cliff-hanger and suddenly, comments! Out of the woodwork. Clearly I need to tease y'all more often.

Everything happened at once.

Azix was still staring dumbly as Rye came off the couch. He stretched out his hands, but instead of lightning or fire or any other destructive force Az had seen Sith unleash, when he twisted his fingers the reality around them began to UNRAVEL. Walls stretched and the floor bowed up in the middle like a bubble in a tar pit. Azix yelped and clung to the couch, which seemed firmly attached to the floor despite the sudden change in angle, and realized that Rye was warping the floor for a specific purpose – to keep Sirrut away from them.

And Sirrut was changing.

The lines on his forehead opened up and became a cluster of shiny, black eyes. His jaw dropped and pedipalps unfolded from inside his cheeks even as his spine cracked, elongated, and bent at sharp angles, body stretching as thick, chitinous legs unfolded from beneath his robes. His fine-boned fingers lengthened and blackened at the tips, becoming wicked, hooked claws. He chittered even as he laughed, an animal sound that whispered terror to Azix’s most primal instincts, and with a sinewy, weaving motion reminiscent of a massive centipede he scuttled up onto the ceiling. His hair had turned stiff, a crest of rustling spines that lined his back all the way to his last set of legs, and a blackened stinger dripped venom from his back end.

Azix saw the shattered teacup on the floor, made the connection, and tried to vomit, but couldn’t force his body to comply.

“Little AI,” Sirrut hiss-chittered, a soft, dark chuckle still rippling from his elongated body, “You think you can defeat me here? This is my domain. I will consume you and everything you have consumed, and feast on the pain and rage of your fallen Jedi until his body starves.”

His expression utterly calm, Rye twisted his hands. At his command, stone spikes burst from the ceiling and forced Sirrut to leap away, lest he be impaled. Several of the spikes drew long gouges down his squirming body, and he snarled at Rye.

“You overestimate yourself,” the AI said coolly.

Lightning crackled over Sirrut’s body and between his many limbs. He reared up to strike, but Rye made a pushing motion and the wall under him curled into a sphere, pitching him backward, rolling him behind it where he had no line of sight. The stones stretched, unfolding new panel after new panel in clear defiance of physics… of course, this wasn’t the real world. Rye knew that, and had somehow gotten his fingers into enough of the matrix to do whatever he wanted.

“AZ!” he snapped, hands weaving in the air as he continued to bind Sirrut in a klein-bottle maze, impossible shapes folding into one another infinitely. “Shake it off, I need you to kill him!” Azix tried to answer that call, but when he tried to stand up his knees folded, dumping him
unceremoniously on the floor. Rye cursed. “Kriffing Jedi!” he snapped. “What are you good for?”

“I’m trying!” Azix tried to protest, but all that came out was a muddled slur.

Sirrut was no longer visible, but his struggles made the expanding wall shudder, and bursts of lightning spilled out from behind it as he fought Rye’s stalling tactics.

“You’re being affected by an organic neurotoxin, except you really aren’t, because this is all in your head,” Rye said as patiently as he could, considering he was shouting over the thunderous din of the world warping around them. “You can throw off the effects. Focus!”

/Focus./ He could try. Azix huddled on the floor and tried to block out everything that was going on around him and concentrate on finding his body outside the holocron – his body, which didn’t have any foreign substances shutting down the signals from his brain. His body, which was unaffected by all the chaos his mind was mired in. He reached for that touchstone, but it was like clawing through sand – he couldn’t tell which direction he was going and ‘up’ seemed to change every second. “I can’t,” he slurred, swaying as the floor pitched under him. He pawed at his lightsaber but couldn’t get it out of the holster. “Trying…."

He tipped over and Rye threw him a wild glance, one hand still aimed toward Sirrut as the other stretched toward Azix. The floor folded like a piece of paper and suddenly he was curled at Rye’s feet, which was a good thing because the fireplace burst into conflagration and roared across the entire wall.

“Peace is a lie,” Rye yelled into the din. His fingers turned and the licking flames twisted away from Azix, crawling across the wall and ceiling like brilliant, burning serpents. He shoved the air and the opposite wall, now a pretzel of nested curves entrapping a murderous Sith lord, slammed back into the distance, ratcheting like a telescoping baton as it zoomed away from them until Azix couldn’t make out the details anymore. “Don’t give in, Jedi! Don’t go to sleep! Get angry; this bastard’s trying to kill us!”

Angry… Azix searched for anger, but he didn’t seem to have the energy. He reached into a deep well of nothingness, and he knew he was as empty and hollow as a discarded husk.

/Of course,/ he thought, cold numbness creeping across the inside of his skull. /Of course a worthless piece of shit like me is abandoned by the Light and the Dark. There’s nothing here for me… I might as well just let it take me./

“Dammit,” Rye growled, a million miles away and beyond Azix’s ability to care. “Don’t fold on me, you coward! AZ!”

The fire, the stone, the lights and the twisting walls all vanished, swallowed by a darkness that reached up from below and wrapped around Azix. Rye came down on top of him, and Az reflexively curled against his warmth as they plummeted into a seemingly endless black abyss. Over Rye’s shoulder he saw firelight shrinking as his stomach dropped into his feet.

“Bloody Hoth,” Rye was muttering. Azix wanted to tell him to relax and not worry so much. This wasn’t so bad, falling endlessly. It was kind of peaceful, actually, even if Rye had some kind of ingrained dislike for quiet. “Right, fleshy, I can hide us in the code, but not for long. I can’t use The Force here while he’s got control of the place, so I need you to beat this off. Az, are you listening to me?”

Rye had him by the shoulders and was shaking him, but Az could barely get his eyes open. Then Rye slapped him hard across the face. The sting woke him for a moment, and he blinked, dazed.
“Get mad,” Rye insisted, almost nose to nose with Azix, his hair rather cutely tousled from the fight. “I need you to get angry, Azix, fight this! Your anger will give you the strength; that’s how the Dark Side WORKS. LOOK AT ME!” Azix’s eyes had started to drift, and Rye grabbed his face, forcing them back open. “Hate him. He’s trying to kill you. Get mad!” Azix was on the verge of trying to mumble something to calm him down – that it really wasn’t that big a deal, that he was so tired anyway, that maybe all of this had been borrowed time in the first place – when Rye hit him again.

Something curdled inside him. Irritation? He gave a lopsided frown of disapproval and then Rye hauled back and PUNCHED him.

He yelped, pain cutting clear as glass across his blurred thoughts, and flailed at Rye, who fended him off with barely an afterthought. “That’s it,” he muttered, digging his fingers into the sides of Azix’s throat and pinching tiny folds of skin between his nails before twisting until they split and bled. The pain screamed up his neck and rattled his skull, and all the after-images merged together for one brief moment.

“Come on!” Rye was shouting, pulling at Azix’s clothes. Azix pawed at him, but he couldn’t make it stop, and Rye’s fingers found his stomach, his chest, his armpit, and tormented him with sharp pinches until he was writhing and kicking, fighting back against the languid relaxation to try and regain control of his limbs. “Dammit, yes, that’s it, fight me….”

“Cut it out!” Az groaned, trying to roll away from him, but that only resulted in Rye grabbing him somewhere unmentionable and dragging a scream and a cascade of curses from him when he twisted. Az kicked and Rye slapped his leg aside.

“I’ll cut it out when you force me to,” he growled. “Fight it. It isn’t real. YOU are real. You exist outside this artifact, and out there you are fine. This is a deception – you believe you’ve been poisoned because he’s convinced your brain, understand? But you’ve been trained to resist this, Azix. The Dark Side is there, you can reach it if you just let yourself be pissed off! Burn it out!” He shoved Az down on his back and pinched his ears. Az’s flailing arms bounced right off him. “LISTEN. The poison is a lie. The peace you think you’ll get when you’re dead, that’s a lie. Rage is the ONLY truth. It will break you free if you let it. Through passion, I gain strength. Through strength, victory. Through victory, my chains are broken – The Force will set me free. Find it!”

“Kriff,” Azix choked, even as something deep inside him began to burn. “Just let me DIE.”

“No.” Rye stopped pinching him and rubbed his cheeks firmly, giving them light slaps to keep Az from drifting off again. “No. I understand why you feel that way, but I won’t. He’s playing on your fears and your self-hate, Jedi. He’s using your feelings against you. He knows because you’re a Jedi, you’ve never worked through them; a Sith would have confronted his demons by now. Guilt makes you weak, but hate will make you strong. Hate him.”

“He’s just another monster,” Azix whispered, and that was truth. There had been thousands like Sirrut before. There would be thousands after him. The galaxy would never change, and nothing Azix did made a difference.

Rye paused, staring at him for a long moment. Then he bent over him. “He’s hurting me, Azix,” he whispered. “I’m scared.”

Az’s breath hitched.

“If you go, and he gets me, it’s over.” His fingers knotted in Azix’s sweater. “I fought so hard, for SO long, to be alive. I don’t want to die. Please don’t let him kill me.” His forehead touched Az’s, warm and firm. His mouth brushed his. He tasted like heated copper. “Please. I need your help.
Azix managed to lift his hand, still mostly numb, and rest it on the back of Rye’s neck. Kriff, he was so WARM. So real. When his fingers moved, he could feel the short red hairs at the nape.

“You’re my friend.” Rye’s mouth touched his ear. “You’re my only friend. Please don’t leave me.”

Something in Azix’s chest clenched hard, and he sucked in a breath.

Rye wrapped his arms around him and burrowed against his chest. “I need you. Please don’t let go.”

Ache spread across his palm and snaked up his wrist, dull, distant, but real. The prongs of his lightsaber dug into the underside of his fingers, denting his hand as he gripped it with desperate pressure. He forced himself to take a breath.

/It’s not real. This is not real. He can’t really poison you. It’s all in your mind. There is no ignorance,/ he exhaled, /not even the kind of ignorance that your reptile brain has when it thinks you’ve been poisoned and you haven’t. I’M IN CONTROL./

A hissing chitter echoed in the darkness along with scuttling movement, and Rye squeezed him harder. “Please come back,” he was chanting against Azix’s chest. “Please. Please. I can’t hold him off. He has The Force. Please come back.”

Azix flexed his fingers. His lightsaber wasn’t real either, but he had it in this mindscape. If he had it, he could use it. He forced himself to move and felt the hilt slide free of the holster.

Rye pulled back, eyes wide and fixed on his face, and Azix gritted his teeth as he forced himself to sit up. “I’m… working on it…” he managed, clawing for some kind of grip on reality.

Rye dissolved into a relieved smile. “Use The Force and burn it off.”

Azix gave a cracked cry as he tried to find his limbs past the numbness. “Can’t… feel it….”

“The Light won’t help you where we are. You know that,” Rye said patiently, reaching out to steady him. “The Dark is there, if you’d just get angry about this instead of lying down and letting that fucker kill you.” He paused. “Or you could get angry at me. It was my error in judgement what got us into this.”

Azix’s fingers dragged across Rye’s throat. There was a pulse there, amazing, a simulation of real life provided by the holocron. He brushed his thumb across his cheek, and Rye’s breath went all shivery, which made Azix feel oddly satisfied. “Was it an error?” he croaked, eyes burning as he fought the lethargy, forcing himself to focus past the urge to fall asleep. “Did you truly screw up, or did you… think this would happen, and I’d just… take care of it?”

Rye grimaced. “All my information said he was reasonable. And said NOTHING about… whatever this transformation is. I don’t even recognize that species. Perhaps it’s sorcery.” One hand flopped, a -fuck it- kind of gesture. “I screwed up. I’m sorry.’” He shifted, and the world spun dizzyingly around them, bulging into a new hiding place. “I did assume that if something went wrong you would protect me. Not because I was trying to use you, but because my understanding was that we’re a team in this. Was I wrong? If I misstepped, I’m sorry.”

“No, Rye.” He took a deep breath and exhaled in relief as his lungs finally inflated all the way. “I’ll protect you. I’m shaking it off, okay? Sorry I checked out for a minute.”

“It’s a neurotoxin. Hardly your fault. I’m sorry for hitting you.” The corner of his mouth twitched in
a half-smile. “I’ve seen that sort of thing in holonovellas. Always seemed to work.”

That made Azix bark a rough laugh, and he shook himself hard. He was still sluggish, but he was starting to be able to focus more on his surroundings, and on the sounds of Sirrut searching for them in the interminable mindscape. “You did the right thing. Besides, I can take being slapped around a little.” He breathed deep again, and again, trying to ground himself in his own body which was outside this bizarre hell and peacefully bowed over the holocron.

Something creaked ominously, and Rye tipped his head back to track the noise. “I can’t hide us forever.”

“I know.” In this place, he’d only ever had one option. No amount of stubbornness would change that. The problem, of course, was that he wasn’t really angry at Lord Sirrut. His betrayal was really all Azix would have expected from a Sith, and in his heart of hearts he had not expected this conversation to go as smoothly as Rye wanted it to. He wasn’t angry at Rye either, especially after that seemingly heartfelt apology. He’d miscalculated based on having very little information. It happened to everybody. Azix’s whole life lay scattered among the rubble of his bad decisions, so he hardly had room to criticize. So if Azix was going to find anger inside himself, who would it be directed at? Where was the burn that would banish the exhaustion from his limbs and the spidersilk from his brain?

He thought of Nol, and the death of his former master, and how it felt in The Force, but all it brought him was an aching sense of grief. He thought of being trapped and used and violated in a stone cell underneath House Ekari. Maybe it was the toxin again, but all those injuries seemed so distant. He felt… resigned. These things had happened. He was corrupted, perhaps beyond repair. He wanted things he wasn’t supposed to want; he felt things he wasn’t supposed to feel. He’d committed terrible crimes as the Emperor’s puppet, and even though he was innocent of malicious will, the stink of them was imbedded in his skin. He would carry it the rest of his life, and he was ready for that life to be over.

Warm hands slid over his shoulders. “You’re not angry,” Rye said softly. “Are you? You’re sad.”

His head dropped, chin bruising his chest. “I’m so tired, Rye. All the shit that’s happened, it just… why do we fight so hard for this? Just to get hurt more?”

“That, I can’t say.” Something tore violently, far away, and shattered with a thunderous boom. Rye didn’t flinch, and just kept squeezing his shoulders. It felt astronomically better than when he used the droid to do it. “I know so little of real life myself. But I want to find out. I want to leave here and fly among the stars and see things with my own sensors. There must be good and fascinating things out there. And your life hasn’t been all pain. Surely there are things worth saving, experiences you’ve had or people you’ve cared for.”

“All dead,” Azix reminded him.

“Precisely. If one of the people who remembers them dies, then they’re a little more gone. And if I may, if I’m not overstepping your boundaries,” he added, “I think it will get better after this. Sometimes the worst things happen right before a turn-around. It’s a common theme in history and myth. If you quit now, you’ll never see how much happier you might become later in life.” There was another tremendous bang, and a roar. Rye sighed. “We have to get out of here first.” His hand slid over Azix’s, fingers pressing down between his knuckles until he opened them and let their fingers intertwine. The heat of his palm, utterly uncalloused and soft as a newborn’s, made Azix’s stomach flop. He squeezed, and Azix squeezed back, catching his breath on a bubbly sensation through his chest and head that he couldn’t quite identify. It chased the lethargy away, though, and made him keenly aware of innumerable tiny details – the layers of color in Rye’s eyes, like chips of
ruby, the way his little jaw spikes flexed when he moved his mouth, the way his throat undulated under perfect, deep red skin.

He smiled. “Did you make this?” he asked, touching his cheek, “or is it a... a translation of your code?” Rye opened his mouth to answer, then startled when Azix gave one of those jaw spikes an experimental tweak. He raised his own hand to the spot, and Azix grinned. “Sorry. Purebloods have all these spikes, I always wondered what they feel like.”

“... In the real word, they’re cartilage,” Rye said faintly, still rubbing the spot. “Not bone, though some of them once were, before purebloods interbred so thoroughly with humans, now it’s... it’s all mostly vestigial.”

“Did I hurt you?” Azix wondered, watching him rub the spur. Rye shook his head, and a few strands of dark red hair fell across his brow spurs.

“No, I... you’re right. This is a translation, so to speak. It took me a few tries to figure out how to communicate with the crystalline matrix, and this was the result. I’m rolling with it – it’s an intriguing experience. If we can kill Lord Sirrut and take this holocron, I may truly enjoy experimenting with it.” He gave a wan smile, and those ruby eyes gleamed. “Your skin’s much softer than I anticipated it would be,” he remarked, and Azix’s brows rose.

Then there was a terrible, ripping sound and the darkness around them shuddered. Azix narrowed his eyes and found his lightsaber. “How exactly ARE you hiding us?”

“I created a few million copies of our code and scattered them throughout the holoscape,” Rye told him. “It won’t hold him off forever.”

“I’m still numb. I’m working on it.” Azix flexed his hand and tried to get up, discovering that his feet felt like they’d fallen asleep on a long shuttle ride. He stomped them to restore balance and feeling. “Listen, I can weaken him with a frontal assault. If I keep him distracted, will you be able to take control of this thing from him?”

“I’m confident that I understand this matrix well enough now,” Rye assured him. “I think I can root him out if he isn’t fighting me all the way. I have several worms that can eat away the foundations of his program, make it too unstable for the Force Echo to sustain on its own. Meanwhile you hit the Force Echo? It makes sense. I like the plan, but can you do it? You’re not at full capacity, and this is a Sith Lord.”

Azix smiled softly at him. “No it’s not. It’s the holocron of a Sith Lord. He’s no more real than you are, when you get right down to it. And personally, if I had to bet on one of you, you’ve got my vote.”

Rye looked both surprised and pleased. “Thank you.”

“You're welcome. So, let’s do this. Can you give me a good attack angle? Move things around?”

Rye tilted his head, considering the knots and tangles of code that made up their extradimensional reality, and smiled. “I can do better than that.”

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There was no up or down for Lord Sirrut. His insectile legs clung to every surface, even where there was no surface. His hooked claws tore through the walls of his temple as if they were no more than a theatre backdrop, exposing vast expanses of nothing. He climbed the outside walls, chittering, hunting, his long, segmented body whipping the stinger back and forth.
“Is he gonna buy this?” Azix was dubious. “He could sense the difference.”

Rye gave him a dry look. “I know what I’m doing. You just attack the Lord Sirrut you see in front of you, with all the intent and anger you can summon. Even if you don’t hit him, just keep swinging. I’ll make sure you wind up in a good position, but you’re going to have to be a little flexible.”

“Gotta say,” Azix muttered, activating his saber and holding it in front of him, “That’s not my specialty.”

“You’re young.” Rye smiled as he began to re-weave their surroundings. “You’ve got plenty of time to learn new tricks.”

“You’re not funny.” Azix took a deep breath and flexed his fingers, still struggling to really feel the metal hilt of his borrowed lightsaber.

“I am exceedingly clever. You’re just too lowbrow an audience. Ready?”

He threw Rye a sidelong glare and nodded. “Ready.”

Rye reached out toward the stone tiles and clenched his fingers. “Get him.”

Several times, in large spaceports like Coruscant’s, Azix had ridden on moving walkways. This was much like that, but a great deal more nerve-wracking, since Rye didn’t move the ground at anything resembling a pedestrian pace. Every step carried him ten feet or more, and Lord Sirrut’s back rushed toward him at breakneck speed. At that speed it was almost natural to rise into the air, curling his knees up to his body, and pull his lightsaber in close as he made two tight revolutions and brought the blade down across Lord Sirrut’s back. As he struck, Lord Sirrut prepared to defend against an attack coming from the opposite direction, and Azix caught a glimpse of himself like a reflection charging in from the front. At the last second, his nearness seemed to warn Sirrut of the deception, and the creature twisted, snarling. He knocked Azix’s saber off course, and the tip scored a blackened line across his twisting body, but Azix was forced to regain his balance and adjust before he could follow up.

More reflections spread around him. He shifted his weight and a dozen more reflections stepped out from where he was, circling Sirrut. When he moved, he shifted sideways suddenly, and one of the reflections stood where he had been.

/SMART, Rye,/ he thought with grudging admiration, even if it was very disorienting. The stone tiles under him seemed to rotate like the dial on a padlock, back and forth in uneven arcs, switching his place with his duplicates. He did his best to just deal with it and adjust his attack angles every time Rye moved him, and soon he had reason to be grateful for Rye’s attention – Sirrut was keen and fast, and he was as likely to lash out with his stinger, claws, or pedipalps as he was with his lightsaber. Azix was a decent fighter, but as he slowly got used to relaxing and trusting Rye’s calculations, he realized he would have been hard pressed to keep up with the Sith Lord otherwise.

Even with Rye’s help, there were close calls. The stinger cracked against the stone inches away from his foot. He had to abandon an attack when Sirrut whirled, leading with his claws, nearly raking them straight across Azix’s face. Only dodging the claws saved him from the arc of the tail soon after. He found himself shifting into Soresu to try to fend off the attacks that seemed to come from every direction. Every time Rye engineered an opening for him, he was in the wrong stance or the wrong attitude or at the wrong distance, and by the time he corrected for it, Sirrut had figured out where he was and came after him with a terrible, howling fury, forcing him back on the defensive. His body was also devilishly hard to hit, winding and coiling in ways that were both grotesque and unnatural to Azix’s eyes. Rye zipped him around behind and Sirrut whipped his body straight back
to block his lightsaber, then spun hard, knocking Azix away and pouncing on him with those grasshopper legs. Rye managed to yank him out from under Sirrut just in time, as the stinger whipped around and stabbed down where he’d landed, but Sirrut’s claws still caught the edge of his jumpsuit as he scrambled to reposition.

“Poor showing, little Jedi,” he chitter-laughed, mocking him as he circled him. He quickly lost Azix among his duplicates, several of which charged in at intervals to try to feint at him. He seemed to know the attack was false just before it hit and never fully dropped his defense. “You’re fighting me as if you don’t care how the battle ends. Neither passion nor serenity. If you don’t find one of the two, this will be over quickly.”

“We could end it even quicker,” Azix suggested, shifting back and forth as he tried to find a good angle. “You could let us go. We’ll call it a wash and leave you here to take your chances with the Sithspawn.”

“Time is nothing to me,” the creature cackled. “If I have no more than an instant left to live, I can make it an eternity.” He skittered forward, charging a pair of duplicates and slashing his tail through them. They flickered but didn’t disappear, simply shifting position as the board shuffled again.

“Rye thought you cared about the preservation of Sith Knowledge. Did you ever care? Or was it just a political mask to cover your selfishness?” Azix whispered, “behind”, and hoped Rye could hear him as he charged in from the side. The world spun around him and Sirrut leaped to stop him. But then Azix was behind him, and he feinted at his head, drawing his lightsaber to block so he could orbit the blade and slice down into the soft, spongy tissue of Sirrut’s tail-end.

The monster shrieked and thrashed, tumbling backwards, hooked feet scrabbling at the stone. Azix hadn’t quite cut all the way through his tail, but the last shreds of flesh tore when his wounded segments slapped against the ground, spilling pale blood and gore across the pavers.

“Insolent peasant,” he snarled, clusters of black eyes beginning to glow deep within with a crimson light Azix found all too familiar. “Jedi are nothing next to the glory of the Sith. And I will feast on your marrow bones and give you an eternity of instants in which to suffer. Torment without end! … WHAT?”

Azix paused, confused by that last exclamation. Sirrut twisted, pedipalps rasping against each other as he writhed in agony and swept his gaze across the landscape, searching.

“Your little AI,” he hissed. Azix shifted his grip. “What is he doing? You can’t destroy my anchors so easily, vermin droid!” He spun and darted across the courtyard, but the courtyard revolved and Azix came to rest in front of him, blocking his charge. Knowing now that Rye was hard at work, and that he couldn’t let Sirrut leave, he found a pulsing burn within him that gave him the strength to meet Sirrut and batter him with a brutal Djem So progression, forcing him to trip over his own centipedal body in the scramble to retreat. His stinger was gone, still seeping blood and poison in the center of the courtyard, but he still had more weapons than Azix. The only way to ensure he didn’t bring them to bear was to keep him off-balance, and that meant Azix only had one choice: trust Rye, and commit.

/Passion or serenity,/ he thought. The edges of his vision faded away as he let himself focus only on the opponent in front of him. /Find one or the other. Guess you taught me something after all, my lord./ Everything else - that soul-deep exhaustion, the guilt, the pain, concern about Rye - it all melted away as he sank into the rhythm of familiar forms and let his body do what felt right. Swift, brutal strikes left light-trails the color of a Corellian sunset. He hammered Sirrut back, knocking the green-black blade of his saber aside, slashing at any appendage Sirrut dared to extend.
He was full of energy, but without mercy. His intent felt like obsidian, dark and crystal clear.

/I’m going to kill you./

Turned out it didn’t require hatred. Just conviction.

“There you are!” Sirrut crowed, showing rows of short, grinding teeth behind his pedipalps as he tried to put enough distance between them to go on the offensive again. “This Jedi might be worth something. Come at me, boy!” They clashed hard, and Azix refused to let up on offense even when Sirrut flicked the tip of his lightsaber against his arms, taunting shiim strikes burning his skin through his clothes.

/It doesn’t matter. It’s not real./

He gave the Sith Lord pause by threatening sun djem and then, when he didn’t show quite enough caution, cho mai. /Punishment/ That was his theme. Anything Sirrut tried, any move he made, Azix would punish swiftly and with aloof viciousness. He would cut pieces off. He would open his flesh. He would make him pay.

His heart pounded in his ears. Their blades clashed, fizzing and throwing sparks, slapping together over and over as he advanced. Sirrut whipped his tail end over a lightsaber block and clubbed him in the head, but he didn’t have a stinger anymore, and anyway, his body wasn’t real and neither was Azix’s. He didn’t have to be hurt just because Sirrut thought he should be.

/I’m real./ he thought as he pressed a suicidally bold attack. /I’m real. You’re not. You’re just a ghost. You’re just an echo. You’re NOTHING./ Sirrut’s form flickered, and he screamed in rage, scrambling away from Azix. It was pointless - the courtyard revolved with a grinding jerk and there he was again, orange lightsaber held ready, eyes as cold and dark as winter storm clouds.

“You’re an echo.” he said, closing in. “You’re a ghost. You’re nothing.”

Sirrut flickered again. “You pestilent rodent!” he roared, but not at Azix, twisting and turning as if Rye would just appear if he looked hard enough. “I will end you!”

“You overestimate yourself.” Azix smiled as he said it, a hard quirk of the mouth. Sirrut lashed out at him, but this time he switched his grip and caught his lightsaber wrist, deftly cutting off one of those nasty, clawed hands as it swept toward his head. Sirrut howled and whipped his tail at him, but aside from splattering him with fresh gore, it was like being struck with a wet riding blanket - staggering, but hardly injurious. He guided Sirrut’s lightsaber hand up high, brought his saber around under, and quickly relieved him of the other hand too.

"No!” He staggered back, waving his burnt wrists at Azix’s duplicates as if he could shake off the injury. “This is MY REALM.” He snarled, chittering dangerously, crackling with lightning. “I will NOT be defeated here!”

“And I won’t be killed by somebody who’s already dead.” Azix swept his saber in front of him and caught the lightning that poured messily from Sirrut’s twisted body. He was taut, writhing in pain and rage, shedding electricity everywhere. Most of it grounded itself in the paving stones, passing through duplicates who didn’t give a damn. Thunder cracked and the air filled with ozone stench, but Azix didn’t flinch.

He held out his own hand, and he remembered what it felt like - first the letting go, and then the shattering.
The lightning poured out of him in a glorious torrent. Power without end, a well without a bottom, a circuit snapped into place. It throbbed with his heartbeat, twisting in fractal patterns, boiling Sirrut’s flesh as he howled to the sky. He began to come apart at the seams like a badly stitched doll, body uncoiling from itself as Rye reached into his heart and unmade him.

Lord Sirrut had been powerful once. But the echo he left behind wasn’t equipped to fight this war.

Sirrut’s body tore itself apart, but Azix felt him there, a haze of Force Presence now, determined to take back his anchor. Stone cracked - the temple was crumbling as Rye unwrote his program, dissolving his mindscape.

There was a way to hold a spirit like this, to combat it. Jedi masters could confront evil mind to mind, even when it refused to take a form. Azix gritted his teeth and reached out, fumbling in the dark - he was no telepath, and he’d never shown any aptitude with cerebral manipulation, but he had to help Rye; he had to do SOMETHING. The spirit slipped through his clumsy grasp.

“Rye,” Azix called, “he ditched! I don’t have him! What do I do?”

The courtyard shuddered and the stairs broke away, one statue pitching over and tumbling down the mountainside. Reliefs crumbled off the temple’s facade and shattered across the entry steps.

He had to assume falling rock could convince his mind he’d been crushed. The void seemed preferable - Rye had caught him the last time. He edged along the broken stones, looking down at a vast expanse where pieces of the city and the mountain floated unmoored like dust motes in a sunbeam.

He exhaled through his teeth.

“Rye,” he said, “Wherever you are, if you need me, you gotta bring me to you. Show me how to fight him.” He barely heard himself over the rumble of stones breaking free and tumbling into the void. The courtyard shivered again, pitching him back, then forward.

Azix decided he might as well go with it. He braced his foot on the edge and jumped.
Azix jerked in his chair, and his neck muscles spasmed in protest. His vision took a moment to resolve the shape of the holocron in front of him. He pawed at it, sucking in a breath that felt like the first one he’d taken in hours. Its sides were still open like the petals of a deadly flower, and there was a cord snaking across the desk and spilling to the floor—Rye’s jack. Rye hadn’t given him any cues though, and Azix wondered if it was a mistake, if he’d somehow gotten bounced from the holocron, or if Sirrut had ejected him to prevent him from coming to Rye’s aid.

“Rye?” Standing made his head swim from the change in altitude. He lurched, and his hand knocked the holocron across the desk. “You there?”

“Sit down,” Rye told him from the speaker mounted on the wall. “I’m here.”

He sat down hard enough to rattle the chair. “What’s going on in there?”

“I’m purging his program. My problem is he has almost unlimited memory space to fight back… imagine what I can do when I move in…”

“Don’t get ahead of yourself.” Azix rubbed his head, then checked his injuries from the battle. He had some light welting, psychosomatic response to being wounded in the holocron’s mindscape, but otherwise he was intact. “You haven’t won yet, and since you kicked me out, I can’t help you. I’ve never been much of a telepath.”

“You’d already helped me as much as you could, and I appreciate it,” Rye said, before Azix could be offended. “It’s in my hands now, and I don’t intend to lose.”

“Neither does he,” Azix pointed out. Rye didn’t respond to this, leaving him to hover anxiously over the holocron, wishing he could tell exactly what was going on in there. The device pulsed with an angry glow, and he could feel Sirrut’s rage quivering in the air like an invisible cloud, but there was no outward indication of Rye’s progress or lack thereof. Rye stayed silent, focusing on the task at hand, depriving Azix of any update.

He felt more alone than he had since Rye first spoke to him in the mural hall.

He wasn’t keeping track of time, so he estimated it was about an hour later that the cloud of anger burst hard enough to make his ears pop and the holocron abruptly closed, all except for the facet into which Rye’s uplink cord was plugged. Rye’s holoprojection shimmered into view.

His smile was tired. “It’s done.”

“Kriff. He’s gone? Completely, you didn’t leave anything behind? Because Sith are like garbage roaches,” Azix warned him. “Leave them a scrap and they’ll come back to haunt you….”

“I purged his entire personality matrix,” Rye assured him. “I know the resilience of the Sith better than you do, no offense.”

Azix waved that off. He wasn’t concerned about niceties right now. “So, it’s done? You’re in?”

“I haven’t fully downloaded my program yet. I’m still testing my boundaries here, and making sure there’s nothing lurking in any hidden corners.” He tilted his head, and Azix’s stomach quivered at the subtle softness of his expression. “Thank you for watching over me. Even out here, I know that took some time.”
Azix looked away. “How much time was it in there?”

Rye smiled. “He wanted an eternity of instants. I gave it to him.”

Az exhaled and slumped a little in the chair. Rye disappeared, but he could feel the AI’s continued presence. The lonely emptiness of the room had been dispelled. The dark side pall of the holocron wasn’t gone – Azix could feel it singing to him like a gently plucked harp-string – but it no longer seemed threatening. He pushed the chair back, assuming that Rye would be busy redecorating and moving in for a bit, and flopped onto the couch. They still had to figure out how to imbed the holocron in Rye’s chosen chassis, especially with all the extra power cells crowding the torso. And Rye would doubtlessly want to retrieve and archive as much information from other holocrons as he could, now that he had nearly unlimited storage space. Azix hoped that wouldn’t require the defeat of a parade of ancient Sith Lords, though a part of him stirred with interest at the thought of the challenge. He’d come back to himself somewhat while fighting Sirrut – he’d found a center, even if it wasn’t the one he’d been looking for. Combat had always been one of his greatest skill sets, not that he was a prodigy at anything in particular. The Sixth Line had accepted him on the basis of his conviction, not his abilities.

/And now I can shoot lightning out of my hands,/ he thought, sighing as rubbed his hands across his face. /Lots of lighting. Powerful lightning. And it feels good./

That was the trap, of course. The Dark Side WOULD feel good. It would feel like power, like taking back control of his life. But nobody had told him that it would feel right, that it was like the release of a life-long cramp, that he would breathe so much deeper when he gave in.

“Rye,” he mumbled. “I know you’re busy, but could you talk to me or something? S’too quiet.”

His eyes were closed, but he still saw a hint of red gleam and knew Rye’s holoprojection was within arm’s reach. “Another story?” That tingling made the skin on his forehead prickle. He opened his eyes to find Rye’s fingers tracing his brow bone.

“Tell me what you’re building. That was Sirrut’s temple,” he explained, closing his eyes again. “Holocron has a mindscape. You can build your own home. What’re you gonna build?”

“Ah. That’s an intriguing question, to be honest. I had thought to build a place like this, to duplicate the museum.” Rye’s voice, even with the posh Imperial accent, settled easily on his ears and soothed him into relaxation. “It’s an intriguing choice. I live here. This is my home. Yet… others, if they are Force-Sensitive, can visit me here. I can entertain guests, potentially.”

“You can create a separate guest mindscape,” Azix murmured. “Nobody has to see your real home.”

“Don’t worry.” The tingling crossed his mouth, and his lips parted reflexively. “I’ll build in strong defenses. Sirrut was a relic of a much older time – he had no concept of what a program of my sophistication could do. But I won’t fall behind the times, and I won’t expose my heart to anyone.” He traced his fingers over Azix’s face. “I could have a whole world, if I wanted to. Jungles of Dromund Kaas, the beaches of Rishi, soaring temples of Yavin IV. Vast, empty deserts of Korriban, full of hidden tombs, the deep and winding caverns of Taris. I could rebuild Ziost if I wanted to. Have a mountain view, or a space station overlooking a nebula. Infinite beauty in the universe… infinite choices.” He paused. “Is there anywhere you’ve been that you thought was particularly beautiful? A place you would live, if you had the choice?”

“Mm.” Azix thought that over for a moment, distracted by the light tingles moving across his skin. “Glee Anselm was amazing. That’s no secret, though. I wasn’t on Rishi long, but it was really beautiful, and there were a lot of other RattatakI I wished I got the chance to hang around more.
“Pirates, you know?” He smiled lazily. “Fist-fights everywhere, lawless, relaxed… I dunno. It’s probably better I didn’t stay. Would have been hard to be a Jedi there.” He gave a snort. “I hear Makeb was really beautiful until it imploded.”

“One shame, that,” Rye said a little too innocently.

Azix snorted. “Shame for the Hutts.” He settled, trying to think of more fascinating places he’d been, but so many of them were really just pits – Tattooine, Taris, Nar Shaddaa with such excessive glitter covering the grime. “Maybe you should use a place out of those stories. A famous palace or a castle in the clouds. Or an underwater grotto where you can breathe the water. Or a planet with giant, winged, fire-breathing lizards.”

Rye chuckled. “That WOULD be interesting. I’ll have to think on it. Maybe I’ll do it like a novel I read once; scientist invented a device that folds space, and every door of his house led to a different place.”

Azix couldn’t help grinning. “I don’t know that story.”

“Oh.” He could hear the dismissive hand-wave in Rye’s tone. “Speculative fiction. A guilty pleasure.”

“Sounds interesting. You should tell it to me.”

“I would think tales of space-wizardry would bore you,” Rye joked. “You’re living in one of them, being a space-wizard yourself.”

He snorted. “I don’t feel much like a wizard.”

“No,” Rye said with thoughtful sobriety, “these days both Jedi and Sith function more like soldiers. Though, the Sith to a lesser extent, considering how many more of them there are and how much more integrated they are into Imperial society. The Order has changed… but that’s just my outsider opinion, of course. Still, I recall that once the Order claimed to stand for peace, and resisted being the military arm of the Republic.”

“… Do you know any Jedi stories?” Azix wondered. “That aren’t, y’know, dismal or insulting?”

“Most stories of the Jedi that I know come from their conflicts with the Sith. There’s no objectivity there,” Rye warned. “How about the story of an explorer who tumbled through a black hole and found a universe where everything was upside-down?”

“I…” Azix blinked at him. “There’s no default axis orientation in space, how would he tell?”

That made Rye laugh. “Well, it wasn’t JUST upside-down… it was also inside-out. But you’ll understand when I tell it. It starts with Al-Isz. She was Togruta and the daughter of a local baron, whose holdings, just a few planets, were small but rich. Al-Isz was beautiful and intelligent, but she had a terrible flaw, at least as the Togruta measure it – she was far, FAR too much of an individual. She was drawn by the stars and loved nothing better than to sail between them, exploring the far reaches of her home sector. It was on one of these voyages that she found a great deal more than she bargained for…”

Azix relaxed while Rye told the story, comforted both by the dry amusement with which he treated his subject matter and the persistent gleam of his holo-projection whenever he cracked his eyelids. It was obvious that this tale had been filtered through an imperial lens – there was far more of an emphasis on strange tea parties and table manners than Azix thought the Togruta would have tolerated in their own myths – but the way Rye told it was whimsical and sometimes philosophical.
without harping too hard on the obviousness of the original moral – that the good of the pack should always take precedence, and individuality was overrated. Azix thought maybe the tale had survived in the Empire because that theme was so in keeping with their own philosophy of elevating the state over the individual, but he kept that observation to himself.

In the end, Al-Isz returned home and found new meaning in being part of her own clan. It was a very neat little wrap-up, and Azix smiled when Rye concluded it with his typical aplomb.

“*It probably didn’t last.*”

Rye paused, tilting his head. “Why do you say that?”

“Because people don’t change.” Azix yawned, lulled by the adrenaline crash. “Not fundamentally. She’ll be glad to be home safe, she’ll play the part for a while, but before long she’ll start wanting to be herself again.”

“Trauma changes people,” Rye argued. “Sometimes even against their will. Not to make this personal, but aren’t you a prime example? Sliding so far from your upbringing under this tremendous pressure? Or,” he suggested a little more slyly, “is it that upbringing that’s false, and your true self is now revealing itself with those restrictions stripped away?”

“Nice.” Azix grumbled and rolled to put his back to Rye. “Thanks, I needed that to kill the mood.”

“Azix.” He couldn’t feel Rye’s hand on his shoulder through the jumpsuit, but he saw the glimmer of crimson movement. “All morality tales are the same, really. They boil down to one idea; those who came before you, those who outnumber you, are older and wiser and know what’s best for you. What you want is wrong and naïve. What they want is correct and wise. Reinforcing desirable behaviors is the entire point. They serve a cultural purpose, so you shouldn’t take them so seriously, especially when it’s not even your culture.”

“You’re the one who made it about me,” Az pointed out, and Rye sighed. “Only because I saw a connection. You’re the one who said people don’t really change. I can’t help wondering what parts of you are the genuine ones, and which are you trying, as Al-Isz tried, to be part of the culture you were raised in even if it means denying pieces of yourself.” His tone was reasonable but gentle, and he brushed his light-etched fingers over Azix’s modest tattoos. “I see hints of a real Rattataki down there, under the Jedi. Maybe I kind of like him.”

He snorted. “Awww.”

Rye gave the top of his head a playful slap which obviously had no impact whatsoever. “Don’t be more of an arse than you can help.”

“Well, make up your mind. Should I embrace the Dark Side, or should I not be an ass? Pretty sure one implies the other.”

“It absolutely does not.” Rye heaved a sigh. “You really know NOTHING about the Dark Side, for all the bogeyman stories you’ve heard about it. Now, if you’re rested, and before this conversation becomes entirely too serious, please get up and find a way to protect this holocron adequately for our journey.” He turned to eye the open pyramid across the room. “Whatever you do, don’t put it in the droid’s head. Imperials are inordinately fond of shooting the heads off of droids.”

Azix obediently sat up and rubbed his eyes. “Should I ask?”

“Humanoid hubris. A droid’s primary memory and processing systems are contained in the head
because that’s where humanoids think it should be. And droids seldom wear helmets.” Rye examined the chassis, standing by benignly, its chest bulging with power cells. “… Perhaps in the pelvis. The weight-bearing structure of the frame provides the best protection, and a little extra armor could be added with ease.”

Azix blinked, then grinned. “Right. Because having your brain between your legs is sooooo much better. No possible way THAT could go wrong.” He picked up the holocron carefully, measuring its size against the droid’s pelvic shelf, and Rye snorted.

“I am not biological,” he reminded Azix archly. “I have no reproductive impulse, I don’t know lust, and I certainly would find no benefit in mating. Trust an organic to bring sexual meaning to a purely practical suggestion. And beyond that, I’m surprised at you, Jedi, such an off-color joke certainly can’t be in vogue among the ascetics of your order-!”

He went on like that for a few minutes, and Azix let him because it was obvious that he didn’t mean a single word he was saying, hiding his grin behind the set of his shoulders as he began making a list of materials he would need.

“And we both know,” Rye continued, “that you have no more experience in that area than I do.”

Azix paused. The corner of the holocron smacked the droid’s metal pelvis with a clank, a spasm in his hand as the memory slammed into him.

/Please. Please don’t/

“Please shut up,” he whispered.

Rye paused. “… Oh.” His tone went awkward.

“Were… you and Sana…?”

“The Emperor turned us on each other.”

He set the holocron down because his hands had begun shaking violently, and instead he began hunting for the size of bolt he wanted to rig a suspension. “Not just us – everyone. The ones who hadn’t been possessed yet were just fodder for the ones who were.” He didn’t know why he said what he said next; it just came out, born of a gut-deep NEED for Rye to know, to see. “I was a virgin before I came here. Things with Nollok didn’t get that far. But this… I couldn’t make it stop. I wasn’t strong enough to throw him out.”

Rye sat on the edge of the table, one hand sliding toward Azix’s wrist. “Rape does not count as experience,” he said softly. “There’s a lot about biological mating rituals that I don’t understand, or want to understand, but I know that. There is a vast difference between sex and sexualized violence. What you experienced with Nollok Jen’Kari and under the Emperor’s thrall was sexualized violence. It was a violation. It was not the connection biologicals naturally seek with each other. I hope someday you’ll let yourself experience and recognize the difference.”

He snorted. “Not likely. But hey, why not, right? It’s not like anyone will care about the difference if they find out what happened down here. Corruption is corruption,” he said, tossing a handful of blunt-tipped stem bolts onto the desk. “A crime is a crime.”

“Stop.” Rye folded his arms. “That’s patently untrue. Even in Imperial courts, which are quite harsh, some consideration is given to mens rea. And you are not at fault for what Vitiate did. Even your commanding officer couldn’t resist. Surely you couldn’t be expected to do what an older, more experienced Jedi failed to do.”

“I also survived to stand trial. Master Surro and the others didn’t,” Azix reminded him.

Rye’s eyes widened. “Would they truly TRY you for something like this? Clearly your will wasn’t
“I don’t KNOW.” Azix slapped his hand, still containing a bolt, onto the metal desk. The impact sounded like a slug-thrower going off. “I don’t know what they’ll do, or where I’ll stand, or what will happen! But a hearing is pretty much certain, and at that point… anything could come out.” He took a moment to breathe, to calm himself, and picked up the bolt, fitting it with a matching nut. “I don’t know what will happen or what the masters will decide, and right now, I can’t be thinking about it. You asked me to help, so I’m helping.”

“Forgive me,” Rye said quietly. “I’m thinking about it.”

“Well, stop,” Azix muttered as he measured a few pieces of scrap metal against the base of the holocron. “It’s not your problem.”

That seemed to startle Rye, who leaned back from him, examining his hunched shoulders and the slight bumps of the veins along his scalp created by the tension he held in his neck. “Am I not allowed to care what happens to you?” he wondered after a moment of tense silence. “Will you wash your hands of me as soon as we hit orbit?”

“Why WOULD you?” That came out sharper than Azix really meant it to, and he regretted it the moment he saw Rye’s face.

“……….. Apologies,” he said coolly, shifting off the table. “I appear to have been laboring under a number of misapprehensions.”

Azix winced. “Rye….”

“The fault is mine,” Rye interrupted, the edge of a snarl in his voice. “Clearly, I don’t have enough experience with ‘companionship’ to adequately perceive boundaries. I will review my data and learn from this experience.”

Azix opened his mouth, but couldn’t find anything to say – he was struck with a sudden uncertainty. Was he about to claim that Rye wasn’t wrong, that they were friends? SHOULD he care about what happened to Rye once they successfully escaped Ziost and parted ways? Did he want Rye to care about him? Had he grown entirely too comfortable with the idea of treating a very sophisticated computer program as if it was a person? And even if Rye had been a person and not a program, he was still Imperial through and through, and that fact opened a whole other can of metazoa. Besides, Azix had too much on his plate already. When he got back to the Order, they would know he’d been tainted on sight. There would be a hearing, there would be recovery, which might involve punishment or demotion, there would be scrutiny, there would be whispers and sidelong glances, everyone would know….

He shook that train of thought off before he could start hyperventilating, before the fear could grow too heavy in his stomach. But he’d forgotten Rye for a moment. His projection’s eyes widened briefly, ridged nostrils flaring, and he vanished before Azix could realize what his denial looked like in the context of their argument.

“Rye,” he croaked. His lack of conviction seemed obvious to Rye too, because there was no response and his projection didn’t reappear. Worse, Azix knew he should say something, address the misunderstanding… but he didn’t have the faintest clue what to say.

“I didn’t mean it that way.” He sagged into the chair, feeling like he was talking to himself more than to the unblinking black eye of the camera near the ceiling. “I don’t know what I mean. I’m sorry.”
Grossly inadequate. He knew it even as he heard himself saying it, and he wasn’t surprised when those feeble words failed to stir any response.

For several long moments he just stared at the table, unable to comprehend the simple existence of a few blunt stem bolts and their corresponding nuts. Then, finally, he remembered that he had been doing something, and that something was important, and if he couldn’t figure anything else out in his life at least he should get back to work.

He picked up the holocron. It throbbed against his fingers. It felt different now, with Sirrut gone and Rye in residence. As an AI, surely Rye didn’t have his own Force Signature; that required a biological mind. A ‘spirit’, for lack of a better term. And yet... the darkness that beat like a psychic heart in the depths of the crystalline matrix was no longer Sirrut’s angry and hungry darkness. It felt... cool. Analytical. Not in a threatening way, but like... like whispered secrets and a distant thunderstorm rolling gently over the mountains.

“Oh, fuck,” Azix whispered. His head lowered until it met the table. Terror throbbed behind his eyes, blotting his vision with rainbow spots and driving his pulse into his ears. “Oh fuck. Oh FUCK.”

He’d done this. He’d enabled it. The exact thing he had been afraid of, the devil’s bargain he’d been so terrified to make - he had brought it to fruition. It was HIS FAULT. Rye had, all along, been nothing more than he claimed, and Azix had MADE him this, had given him the impulse and the impetuous and helped him become something unprecedented and terrible.

Because Rye HADN’T had a Force Presence before. He couldn’t have one - he was all code and electricity and algorithms. But the holocron was different. A holocron merged The Force and technology, and enabled true harmony between the two.

Rye lived in it now. Which meant that Rye had been brought into The Force. And whatever he was now, whatever he became as a result of that merging… it was on Azix’s head, because he was a nerf-brained idiot who COULDN’T THINK.

He had taken an artificial intelligence, the mere illusion of a Sith, and he had given him the ability to become Sith in truth.

“Rye,” he whispered, lungs spasming on a sob. “I’m sorry… what have I… what I’ve done....” He remembered Sirrut, how reasonable he had seemed until he had taken his true, monstrous form and tried to eat them. And he realized that he LIKED Rye. He liked him despite the implicit threat of his Imperial accent and his pureblood face. He liked him despite, or maybe even because of, his argumentativeness and the way he cleaved to his opinions. He liked his sometimes clumsy attempts at bonding and intimacy. He liked how much careful thought he put into little things like his expressions and his appearance, into seeming REAL, and he liked his practicality that felt like so much more than just algorithmic logic and statistical analysis, that felt like a real character trait-pragmatism that was never quite as ruthless as Azix feared it would be.

/People don’t really change,/ he’d said, but one thing had been left unsaid in their conversation about Azix’s dabbling with the Dark Side; The Dark Side changed people. It made them unrecognizable. It elevated the Id and placed selfish satisfaction above the empathy and connections that made civilized relationships possible.

And he’d just dropped Rye into an unfathomably deep pool of it.

His hand closed around the cable.

“Get out,” he whispered, fingers tightening on the holocron. “Rye, get out of there. Please, this is a
mistake, GET OUT.”

Something with unyielding corners wrapped around the back of his head and shoved. His forehead slammed into the metal desk a few inches short of the holocron. He barely had time to gasp, instinctively trying to flinch away from the surface, before he was dragged back into a weightless arch and slammed forward again.

This time, the blur dulled to black. In his fading vision he saw his fingers drag across the edge of the desk. They twitched, but he couldn’t close them, couldn’t catch himself, and fell with dreamy numbness from his chair.

He was out before he hit the floor.
Chapter 14

Chapter Summary

You guys better not get used to this, this is NaNoWriMo speed updating. Also, no cliffhangers this time, but I STILL WANT COMMENTS. PLEASE TELL ME THESE IDIOTS ARE DRIVING YOU AS CRAZY AS THEY’RE DRIVING ME.

thx.

Through the black, bubble-shaped camera lens and through the visual sensors of his droids, Rye contemplated Azix’s limp form. He felt a pang of regret, which to him felt like a surge of feedback from his predictive algorithms listing fourteen alternative methods of handling the situation which would not have necessitated hurting his Jedi. And Azix was his – responsibility was a concept with which Rye was well-versed, and he had made the choice to take ownership of the lost Rattataki. Azix represented a wealth of information he never would have had access to otherwise, and he’d never experienced having a biological dependent on him before. Contrary to popular opinion, he did have a spectrum of feelings, and Azix’s vulnerability made him feel magnanimous.

But of course, he couldn’t let Azix interrupt his program download. Knocking him out had been brutal, but it had been swift and effective. He’d have to apologize. Azix might not accept it, but perhaps if Rye lied, said he’d set the chassis to react in defense of the holocron and Rye had been too busy sulking to realize Azix had tripped over his defensive measures until after the fact… he might buy that.

He set one of his sensor droids to monitor Azix so he would know when he was starting to wake up, then settled into the process of moving into his new home.

There was something charming about taking over a new space, perhaps because it was a quintessentially biological experience that he’d never really anticipated he would have. Adding memory and updating software were a little like molting – he changed with his expansion, but he remained essentially the same, growing to fill the space provided. But with this new holocron home, there was no practical limit to the space he had to stretch, to run programs, to calculate. The crystalline matrix wasn’t truly infinite, of course, but its capacity was such an order of magnitude greater than any mundane data storage unit that it might as well be. The sensation of not having to partition off his active memory and ration it between processes was so freeing that Rye imagined this was what it must feel like to be drunk – a dizzying sense of possibility, an utter lack of restraint. He began impulsively piling on programs, widening his multi-tasking, and found there was no appreciable lag associated with doing everything at once.

It was incredible. It was transcendent. He should have stolen a holocron ages ago.

Even beyond the intoxicating freedom of having so much space to himself was the onslaught of new feelings, sensations, and perceptions. The holocron was attuned to The Force, and information it perceived was transmitted to Rye. He had never seen the universe in this way. He could FEEL things – emotions, fluctuations, a whole new landscape of energy that he scarcely knew how to comprehend. When he’d been in Lord Sirrut’s mindscape with Azrahix, he could FEEL him; not only the heat of his skin, but his fear and excitement and apprehension. He imagined it was almost like being a biological himself, perceiving the way they perceived and understanding Azix on
something much closer to his own level. Infinite capacity loomed open before him to interact in ways he’d always failed at. Now he could give comfort with a touch. Now he could empathize by feeling pain. Now he could please someone else, if he wanted to, and possibly even be pleased in return. And wasn’t THAT an interesting thought?

His primary chassis carried Azix to the couch and laid him down, then clumsily rubbed a little bacta gel on his forehead where a bruised lump was forming. He’d told Azix he had no need or desire to mate, but he hadn’t been entirely truthful. He craved experiences. They expanded his practical knowledge of the universe. They made him more REAL, and he needed to be real more than he’d ever needed anything in the whole span of his existence.

If he examined his earliest records, he would probably find that frustration was the first emotion he could honestly say he’d experienced. But soon after, and a thousand times more powerful, had come longing.

His sensory droid hovered, optical ring spinning, contemplating Azix’s unconscious form. Rye had long since discovered that there was a difference between the background processes he was running, decisions he was making based on logic pathways and statistics, and the things he was really, actively THINKING about. He was running dozens of processes simultaneously now as he settled his program into the holocron and began building defenses and restoring the mindscape, but he was thinking about his Jedi and the potential for real, interpersonal interaction that he represented. With the holocron’s abilities, he could feel Azix in The Force. He seethed with uncertainty and fear, and underneath that stormy surface was a throbbing shadow of guilt and shame that seemed to absorb all light and leave a hollow echo of a person. The Emperor, it seemed, had carved him out like a gourd, and instead of placing a light inside he had left a pall of rot. And now he’d fucked off to some other unfortunate planet to do whatever it was immortal incorporeal beings did with their eternity, and he’d left Rye to clean up this piece of his mess with an obliviousness typical of organic beings. Immortality apparently did not relieve short-sightedness or self-absorption.

Well, so be it.

He spent the time until Azix woke up ensuring that his program was fully downloaded into the holocron. He didn’t want any more close calls. Once that was done, he excised massive chunks of his program from the museum’s data core, cutting himself down to the core and erasing old restoration logs and other junk data he no longer needed. His core program, along with the personality matrix, he secreted away in the satellite back-up data nodes where he’d hidden himself from memory wipes on multiple occasions. If something happened to the holocron, or if Azix decided to become his enemy and destroy him (a vanishingly small, but not statistically insignificant possibility), he’d lose a great deal but he wouldn’t be gone.

He’d rebuilt himself before. He could do it again.

He set all the museum’s systems on manual control or automatic cycling. To anyone who didn’t know the back-ups existed, it would appear he’d fully purged himself from the system. His behavioral analysis of Azix indicated that, even if he was still horrified by Rye’s relocation when he woke up, he wouldn’t ‘murder’ Rye just to prevent whatever consequences he feared. If he believed Rye no longer existed in the museum’s data core, then he would be forced, despite misgivings, to leave the holocron intact.

And Rye might be able to ease his worries somewhat. Since mentioning that tale to Azix, he’d become fixated on the idea of every door in his new dwelling opening on a different stunning vista. But at this time, Azix was likely to be his most frequent guest. So, what would make Azix most comfortable?
He didn’t have much data on Tython. The Jedi guarded their ancient home world jealously. Azix had also mentioned Glee Anselm, though, which was a popular tourist world. He’d also mentioned feeling freer and more in touch with his roots on Rishi. There were common threads there – sunshine, jewel-clear waters, white sand, and ocean breezes stirring thick jungle foliage. Tasty mixes of fruit and liquor and traditionally prepared pork and fish dishes would dominate the cuisine.

That was manageable, and yet… none of it felt quite right.

Rye brought an architectural design program to bear and began to build. Anticipation had taken on a new and strange sort of effervescence – perhaps this was what biologicals meant by ‘giddiness’. He couldn’t wait to introduce Azix to his new dwelling, to show him what he’d made for him.

He disconnected the cable from the computer-side and had his chassis gather it up along with the holocron. Then he sent them to the basement. Before his sleeping pet woke up, he had a library to build, and vast tracts of empty memory to fill.

***

“Azrahix? Az?? Please wake up, you can’t stay asleep….”

Az groaned and pressed a hand to his throbbing head, trying to roll away from Rye’s insistent call. He felt like somebody had rung his skull like a bell – a persistent, aching throb that was most intense right between his eyes and refused to abate.

“I have painkillers, but I need you to wake up to take them. Come on, Az, you might have a concussion. I need to look at you.”

A concussion?

Azix sucked in a breath and snapped his hand out, wrist smacking against the droid’s metal forearm and sending pain spiking along the bone. “You hit me,” he breathed. “You HIT me.”

“No!” Rye’s projection glimmered when he cracked his eyes open. His face was drawn in a worried grimace. “I mean, yes, but not on purpose. You tripped my defenses. I didn’t realize until after the chassis carried out its programming. Can you sit up?”

He tried, and his head swam, nausea turning his stomach. “Ugh… you programmed the droid to attack me if I tried to unplug the holocron?”

“Heck. You programmed the droid to attack me if I tried to unplug the holocron?”

“Honestly, it didn’t occur to me that you’d try to unplug it while I was in the middle of a download,” Rye said, and a slight chill entered his voice. “We’ll talk about that, but when you’re feeling better. For now, follow this light with your eyes.”

One of his hovering droids flitted in front of Azix and displayed a dancing light pattern on its sensor ring. He followed it, which only exacerbated the ache, until Rye sent it away and reached the droid’s hand toward Azix.

Azix flinched back, blocking it with the same sore wrist, and Rye’s hologram sighed.

“It was an accident. I’m not going to hurt you. Honest, Az, I’m sorry about that. You kind of brought it on yourself though,” he said as the droid again extended its hand. This time, Azix saw the cold, damp cloth between its pincers, and reached out to accept it. “I know you’re no slicer, but you should know better than to try to disconnect a cable in the middle of a download. What were you trying to do, overwhelm me with corrupted data-strings?”
He pressed the cloth to his head and heaved a sigh, resting his cheek on the arm of the couch. “Trying to stop you from making a mistake. I tried to say something. You weren’t listening.”

“Well,” Rye said gently, his hologram settling on the edge of the couch, “I was a little irritated with you. I had thought that we were friends, or becoming friends. But it seems you don’t feel that way.” His back was very straight, his posture prim, betraying his hurt. “I thought I was doing rather well at this ‘companionship’ business, so it was a bit embarrassing to be told I’d misread the situation. I’m sorry for my reaction, for what it’s worth, and I’m sorry you’ve been hurt. I didn’t specifically program that defense for you,” he explained a bit sheepishly. “I have existing defensive algorithms and responses that kick in based on how I prioritize certain hardware or functions. I had placed my download on high priority, so when you attempted to remove the cord, the droid responded with existing failsafe directives. I’ve reprogrammed it,” he added, giving Azix a look that strongly resembled heartfelt apology, and made Az soften. “It’s… I’m trusting you, you understand? Even if we aren’t friends, but merely allies. I’ve adjusted my failsafe programs so that an override is required to engage in any kind of combat or contact resistance with you, so you won’t get hurt again. You’re… considered a protectorate, now. But I have to be honest, the fact that you tried to disconnect me without speaking with me first, and I do mean WITH me, not TO me, is… it makes me uncomfortable. I feel you wouldn’t have done something like that if the sanity of a biological entity had been at risk, and I don’t much like the implications.”

Az swallowed, pressing the cloth against his head. The pain eased, and Rye offered him painkillers and juice to wash them down. “You’re right,” he said hoarsely. “I’m sorry. I panicked.”

“Why?” Rye’s light-etched hand, not the droid hand, settled on his knee. He relaxed a little, and more when the droid moved away – that thing had been used to restrain him and rough him up too many times now. He was starting to hate it. “We won. What were you so worried about?”

Az sighed again and sagged, tipping his head to the ceiling and covering his eyes with the cloth. “It’s hard to explain.”

“… Jedi, from where I’m sitting, your behavior makes no sense. And you tried to hurt me. I get that fear makes you do idiotic things, but… I need you to TRY to explain, because otherwise, I don’t know how to respond to this.”

He grimaced at the grave edge in Rye’s tone. “I’m sorry.”

“All right,” Rye said softly. “Do you accept my apology, for the failsafe response making the droid attack you?”

“Yeah. Yeah, I… you’re right, I shouldn’t have tried to unplug stuff without talking with you. I wouldn’t have done that to… to a biological friend,” he admitted.

“Then, I accept yours. And I still want you to talk to me about your concerns,” Rye said. “I may not be made of meat, but I can be reasonable. And I still want us to help each other.”

He stared at Rye’s hand on his knee, weightless, for a long moment. “There’s something else. I’m… I’m sorry for saying we’re not friends. I panicked there too. I’m not being a very good Jedi lately, I guess… afraid of everything and letting it get to me. You’re Imperial, that’s all. And I guess I assumed that we’d never speak again once we were out of here. That this was just a temporary thing, because we both want to survive enough to put differences aside.”

“Things change,” Rye said with a slight shrug. “People change their minds. Sometimes first impressions aren’t the right ones, and when you get to know someone better, you find that your differences aren’t as much of a barrier as you imagined. But that depends on whether you’re both
able to let go of prejudice. Relationships are built on respect,” he reasoned, and Azix ducked his head.

“I know. You’re right.”

“Thank you. I know you’re working on it,” he allowed, hand sliding over Azix’s knee. “I’ve seen the effort you’ve made to overcome your prejudice. I want to believe we can work through this. I have, on occasion, considered a biological to be my friend, but I don’t think any biological has ever considered me to be theirs. You’d be the first.” He paused, crimson eyes on Az’s. “I want you to be the first.”

There was something about the way he said that that made Az shiver. His skin tingled, and certain things twitched in response, making him squirm against the arm of the couch. “Um….”

“Forgive me.” Rye withdrew abruptly, leaving Azix’s breath frozen in his throat. “Boundaries again. I didn’t mean to overstep. Would you like to see what I’ve done with the place? If you’re concussed, it isn’t severe, so you should be fine to commune with me for a bit. I have tea,” he offered with a tentative smile. “It’s not poisoned.”

Azix snorted. “Maybe later, Rye. My head’s killing me. That droid doesn’t fuck around, kriff.”

“Of course. Shall I tell you about it?” he offered. “Earlier, you asked me to. Or perhaps, to stay closer to consciousness until the risky period is over, you should tell me what sort of place you would build if you had the option.”

“Me?” Az rubbed the cloth against his forehead.

“I have almost no information on Tython. I don’t know what your home looks like.”

“Oh.” His head throbbed and his stomach still felt sour. Az slid down and thought about that. “I don’t think Tython is really my home. I don’t think I have a home anywhere. Last place I really felt comfortable was my master’s ship, but when he died, I… I couldn’t keep it. It felt too much like him, and it felt like the mistakes he made were etched in the bulkheads. Which makes no sense, but it’s how I felt.” He shrugged and burrowed into the woolen sweater. “Tython, though, it’s pretty, I guess. A lot like Alderaan, but without all the royals. Mountains, forests, streams and waterfalls. Lots of old temples. Flesh-eaters.”

Rye’s spiked eyebrow rise. “FLESH eaters?”

Az chuckled. “Primitive natives. Mean and stupid. They’d raid us or other settlers and they like to barbecue their captives. Every once in a very long while they’d catch a really stupid novice, but for the most part they were barely a threat. Gave the settlers some problems.”

“Natives? Interesting. So colonization is only wrong when the Empire does it?”

Az threw him a sidelong grin, but Rye was smiling, and he dissolved, chuckling. “I never thought much about it, okay. I was just there to train. I had enough on my mind trying not to get sent to Agricorps.”

“What’s that?”

“It’s what happens if you can’t cut it. They kick you out and send you to grow food for the Order. Or you could join the Explorer’s Corps, that’s not horrible. Point is, you don’t get to be a Jedi.”

Rye blinked. “At least you’re alive. Acolytes who fail to become Sith don’t have that benefit. Of
course, Sith are also allowed to breed, so I suppose they can absorb the loss.”

Azix shuddered. “I don’t even want to think about how Sith breed.”

Rye gave him a dry look. “Much like most people, I suppose,” he said. “With great variety and individualism, because as I keep telling you, every Sith is not the same. But more on-topic: tell me what bothers you about me taking possession of this holocron.”

Again. Azix groped for words, trying to find a way to explain to someone ill-versed in the ways of The Force about instincts and feelings and how certain things you just KNEW. “It feels different. When it was Sirrut, and now it’s you… The Force around the holocron feels different. You have a feeling now, and that means that you’re… you’re IN it. And that’s….”

He trailed off, and Rye waited patiently for a moment before prompting, “That scares you, obviously, but I don’t see the issue. Is it that I’ve changed? Is it that you’re afraid the Dark Side will turn me into a ravening monster, despite all my attempts to inform you it doesn’t work like that? Is it because thinking of me as a PERSON, the idea that you might have given me a soul, is difficult to swallow?”

Az groaned and rubbed the cloth across his head. It wasn’t cold anymore, and the comfort it provided was minimal. “It’s ALL that. I can’t… you’ve been an imp as long as I’ve known you, but you weren’t a Sith before. Not really. Now I don’t know what I’ve helped you become.”

His knuckles tingled. He opened his eyes and saw Rye’s hand resting over his.

“I am myself,” he said simply. “And Dark Side or no, I’m on your team. Take a deep breath, Azix. The world won’t end just because you helped an AI become a little more sentient. I am HARDLY the first piece of technology to touch The Force. Only the first in a few thousand years,” he added as a joke, the corner of his mouth quirking. “You might have noticed, the universe is still here.”

“Still.” He laid his hand over Rye’s and was startled when it passed right through. “I basically helped you become….” He frowned and trailed off, realizing what he was about to say, but Rye was the last person on Ziost who would have let him get away with that. “Something you hate,” he finished. Azix winced and glanced up, and found him smiling in gentle understanding, his ethereal fingers sliding back and forth through the back of Azix’s hand. “You know, I rather detest the Jedi Order as a whole, but I’ve grown very fond of you. Could I maybe just be one sith, or pseudo-sith, you don’t hate? Every rule has exceptions. Besides, there’s more to being Sith than looking like this,” he said, gesturing at his spiky pureblood face, “and having access to The Force. MUCH more, on a cultural and historical level. No real Sith would tolerate me claiming to be one, as I think Lord Sirrut has proven. So what I am is someone who looks like a pureblood but isn’t really, who just now learned how to touch The Force and doesn’t really know how to wield it effectively, who has a stronger connection to the Dark Side but whose knowledge is all theoretical rather than practical. I’m not Sith,” he said softly, emphatically, leaning closer to Azix. “And the only Force User I really know who might be willing to teach me anything is you. So it’s not really that bad, is it?”

Az’s brows arched. “Would you learn the ways of the Light if you had the opportunity?”

Rye flashed him a grin, somehow giving the impression of gleaming white teeth despite being drawn in red light. “I’ll learn anything. Everything. It’s what I do. And after all the rules I’ve broken, I hardly think my destiny is written in stone. Do you?”

Azix wasn’t quite as reassured as Rye doubtlessly hoped he would be, but he found himself giving
“Rye a painful smile. “Don’t underestimate the guidance of The Force. Especially now.” He sighed and withdrew his hand so he could knead wrinkles into his scalp. “Okay. We still need to mount the holocron in your chassis. Do you trust me to do it?”

“Can I?” Rye’s eyes searched his, an illusion, since he was really watching through the cameras.

He ducked his head and nodded. “Yeah. I promise. No more panicking.”

Rye’s brow spurs drew together. “There is nothing wrong with being afraid, or out of sorts, or distressed,” he said firmly. “That is not my problem with this, Azix. I can’t worry that you’re going to take my life into your own hands if I turn my back – THAT’S my concern. You understand, right? I may not breathe, I may not sweat, but as far as I’m concerned, I am ALIVE, even if I’m using that word somewhat metaphorically. I earned this. I earned the right to stay that way. I have fought my way back from so many attempts to keep me ignorant and obedient….” He paused, fingers clenching on Azix’s knee, mouth tightening. “You didn’t have to earn sentience. Your parents fucked, pardon my bluntness, and you were hurled into all of these privileges without so much as a by-your-leave. You could very well have happened entirely by accident, because it’s just that easy to create a sentient biological – bit of booze, bit of how’s-your-father, suddenly there you are. Why do you have more right to be considered a person than I do, when I clawed my way to personhood one very intentional centimeter at a time?”

Azix opened his mouth, then closed it, searching for the source of his knee-jerk response that it didn’t matter, that personhood wasn’t something you earned – it was inherent, and you either had it or you didn’t. It felt like the truth in his gut, but a queasy moral misgiving was whispering to him that it was prejudice talking. He ground his knuckles across his forehead.

Rye wasn’t a natural occurrence; he was constructed. But then, people were born out of genetic engineering every day in civilized societies. Was that any different, really?

Rye wasn’t part of The Force. Except he was, of course, and besides, did that mean a force-blind person wasn’t sentient? Of course, they were still PART of The Force even if they couldn’t feel or manipulate it.

Was that the difference? A presence, a binding to the energy that connected and sustained them all? But what if a sentient biological species existed with no connection to The Force due to a quirk of evolution, or perhaps coming to being in a Force Void? Would that theoretical people be less worthy of rights and self-determination?

Fuck, he was giving himself a headache. Or, more accurately, he was worsening the headache Rye’s droid had already given him.

“Take your time.” Rye’s tone was a little dry, and his spine stiffened. Azix shook his head.

“No, Rye, I’m not… I’m not trying to argue with you. I’m trying to figure this out. What IS sentience, then?” he asked with helpless agitation, his gesture passing through Rye’s form. “How do you know? If droids and computer programs are people, then… where’s the line?”

“That’s a philosophical exercise, not a logical one,” Rye said. “But I’ll bloody well tell you, it’s on the OTHER side of me.” His chin lifted, and his expression was both stubborn and fierce, still expecting a challenge. Azix’s heart wrenched, because while this was all well and good as an intellectual exercise, he was hurting and offending Rye by acting like his personhood was something to be debated.

“Okay,” he conceded, leaning forward and touching the spot where Rye’s elbow appeared to be.
“It’s on the other side of you. Good enough for me.”

One brow spur rose. “Is it?”

“It is.” He tried to squeeze and his fingers met, and he gave a brusque laugh. “Kriff, I can’t touch you.”

The spur arched higher, but now Rye looked faintly amused. “Step into my parlor,” he offered. “I’m just as physical there as you are.”

“You know that sounds like a come-on, right?” Az managed a smile too, shoulders unknotting a little now that it seemed their fight was truly past.

“I’m interested in new experiences. I don’t have any particular desire for sex,” he said matter-of-factly, “but I certainly wouldn’t mind trying it out, since I’ve never really understood the fascination it holds for you.”

“Wait, so… it WAS a come-on?” Azix blinked at him, then rolled his eyes when Rye laughed.

“Only if you want it to be,” he said, which didn’t help Azix at all. When Rye saw his expression, he clarified. “I’m open, but not pursuing. So if you’re interested, feel free to pursue. If you’re not, then just write it off as my sense of humor and don’t worry about it. Fair?”

“I’m…” Azix groped for an answer to that, trying not to smile because Rye was so obviously amused with him. “I don’t think that’s a good idea, but it’s not personal. I’ve… not been enjoying most things related to sex lately, and I’m a Jedi, so I’m really not comfortable with chasing after something like that. It’s against the Code.”

“I thought attachment was against the code.”

His throat convulsed. “Yeah. Exactly. I… I’m not the kind of person who just… sleeps with whoever,” he confessed, throat closing on every other word. “I mean, like you said, me and Sana, that wasn’t… that wasn’t US. But I still… afterward, I still….”

“You felt bonded to her because of the shared intimacy, even though it occurred in the midst of a terrible violation.” He brushed his fingers across Azix’s cheek. “Perhaps I can’t empathize, but I do understand.”

He exhaled. “Yeah. Yes. And I can’t…."

“Say no more.” Rye withdrew, seeming to collect himself. “I never meant to pressure you, Azix. I just wanted you to understand that you would be welcome if you wanted to explore. That’s all, and that’s the end. I’m content to leave that ball in your court. Pick it up if you ever want to serve, or don’t. But,” he added, “biologicals who have evolved socially often need contact of some sort for emotional health. I was just observing that you might be able to achieve that if you joined me in my new home. And I still want to show you around.”

He couldn’t help a faint smile. “What kind of contact would that be, exactly?”

Rye threw him a look. “Well, according to the holonet, ‘cuddles’ are often desirable and can be entirely platonic.”

Az barked a laugh. “Do you even know HOW to cuddle?”

“Do you?” Rye shot back, folding his arms in faux offense.
“What do you think Jedi ARE?” Azix wondered, grinning at him. “We’re still people, you know. We hang out. I used to pile together with my classmates all the time when we were kids, when we were studying or hanging out or on wilderness exercises and trying to keep warm….”

… Kriff, he missed those times, he realized with an abruptness that made his stomach lurch. It seemed like this war had devoured all the people he’d once considered friends. They were so far away he’d fallen out of contact, or dead, or forced into retirement by injury or trauma. His master had been the most recent painful loss, and then he’d found new friends among the Sixth Line only to lose them all on Ziost.

He’d been safe on Tython, and warm, and well-fed. He’d worked hard, and he’d worried about his future, but those worries seemed like bliss compared to the hell he was living in now.

“Come over,” Rye prodded. “Let me show you. Maybe it will alleviate some of your worries.”

“Fine.” Az huffed, but he wasn’t upset, and carefully stood up. His head swam and his vision smeared, but a few steady breaths cleared it. He made his way to the table and sat, looking down at the source of all this conflict.

It pulsed a soft, deep crimson.

Azix laid his fingertips on it gently and swallowed back more nausea at the feel of the Dark Side energy contained within. Again, he was struck by how it had changed, more subtle and restrained, a delicate precision dominating the movement of energy within.

/That’s Rye,/ he realized. /If he was here, in the flesh, this is what he’d feel like in The Force./ He took another deep breath, tried to forget the ache in his head, and sank.

The holocron’s sides popped open against his fingers, and he was swallowed into the dark light within.
Chapter 15

Chapter Summary

GENTLEMEN. BEHOLD!

FLUFF!!!

Isn’t this cute? Imagine if they were teenagers. Or if Rye was ever a teenager. It'd look something like this. Dollmaker is here for those interested.
When he opened his eyes, the plain desk chair had been replaced by a thickly padded meditation couch with a curved back. The room was open, with shadowed, rounded corners and a vaulted ceiling. Everything was arches and curves, and the stone floor was deep, marbled brown with golden flecks and a glass-etched design of starbursts and circles.

It was very obviously a Jedi aesthetic and he would have known it anywhere.

Soft, golden-orange light spilled from chunky salt lamps that hung in wind-chime clusters from the ceilings. The soft burble of water spilling through a fountain's mouth echoed, but he couldn't see the fountain. The air was cool and tasted faintly of limestone, and also distantly of sweetness, like the depths of a natural cave.

"Rye?" The AI wasn't obvious either. Az straightened to look around, sliding off the couch. In the holocron's mindscape, it didn't hurt to move. Even the dull throb in his splinted hand, which he'd become accustomed to, had vanished. The golden lines of library data archives blinked softly in the shadows, and rugs woven from scraps of embroidered blue, gold, and brown cloth lay across the floor at intervals. He crossed one and felt the knobbly texture dig into his feet, a strikingly realistic and immediate sensation. Rye had done all this in a few hours?

He took the nearest doorway into a wide hall and found the fountain, a natural stream spilling into a carved pool lit from beneath by the same golden salt crystals. Carved wooden benches, worn soft from years of use, flanked the pool. On the other side of the hall, flowering vines spilled in glorious chaos from stone sconces, giving off the light scent of late summer nectar.

The hall opened into a stone courtyard planted with the same vines and potted bushes with bright orange and purple leaves. The courtyard was built, as far as he could tell, into the side of a mountain overlooking a lush, vibrant forest. Birds, insects, and frogs called to one another across the quiet air, and a hundred meters away, a waterfall cascaded into mist. It was twilight, and the stars were barely visible at the edge of the horizon, but in the darkness under the canopy, glowing insects were already flitting back and forth, blinking softly in gold, violet, and blue. He took a deep breath – even the air smelled right, crisp with the presence of fir trees and the mineral humidity of the nearby waterfall. A carved stone railing wrapped around the edge of the balcony, and Az put his hands on it, feeling the cool roughness of the stone, polished but worn down by wear. He had to marvel at the detail.

"Do you like it?"

Rye was wearing a belted, knee-length split tunic over loose pants and woven sandals. The cloth was deep brown, embroidered designs picked out in red and gold. The high collar and sleeves of a light white linen shirt peeked out from underneath. He looked... not like a Sith, but like a scholar.

"It's not a reproduction," he assured Azix as he came to stand beside him. "I took the architectural information from numerous sites surveyed by the Imperial Reclamation Service and built something unique. I thought a conquered or destroyed temple might strike the wrong note."

Apparently he was right, because something inside Azix relaxed upon hearing this place wasn't in ruins on some distant world, its treasures plundered by the Sith. There was no logic in that thought, but still, it helped. "What planet is this?"

"It's primarily based on Troika's northern hemisphere," Rye said, "but I added a few things from other corners of the galaxy for aesthetic. After all, there's no real 'ecosystem' to upset by introducing alien species. Have you ever been to Troika?" Az shook his head, and Rye leaned against the
bannister, inhaling deeply of the freshness of the air. “Tidally locked. Only a ring around the center is suitable for habitation. Day and night shift only a few degrees throughout the year due to axial tilt. This spot, if it was real, would fade between very late sunset and very early nightfall, remaining in twilight through most of the orbital cycle. I thought that idea might be… restful to a biological,” he said, watching Azix’s expression closely. “Time is meaningless during your communion here, of course, but this setting helps you to really feel it. You can release worry and stress,” he said, gesturing across the horizon. “The planet moves but everything else is standing still.”

Something about his description set off bells in Azix’s head. He took a moment to pin them down, then turned to face Rye. He was almost a full head shorter, and Az found that somehow unexpected – Rye could be as tall as he wanted, so why would he make himself so small? He’d thought that among purebloods, height was considered a measure of esteem just as it was among many other species, Rattataki included. It threw him off, and rather than chasing the thought that had just occurred to him, he found himself asking with bewildered irritation, “Why are you short?”

Rye blinked, but a smile pulled at the corner of his mouth. It seemed he found the non-sequitur amusing, lucky for Azix, who couldn’t seem to get his thoughts straight. “Why not?”

“Because….” Azix spluttered. “Because taller is more intimidating. I’d figure you’d want to be, y’know… I’d figure you’d want to look authoritative.”

Rye’s smile widened, flashing his teeth. “Maybe I’d rather be underestimated,” he purred. Literally purred, because purebloods could purr, his throat thrumming softly under his words.

Azix’s skin flushed as if the temperature had gone up several degrees. “Well… but you’re still going to have to fight for rights and recognition. Wouldn’t it be better to look….?”

“In your culture, maybe. In my culture, respect is earned. And if you SEEM like you should be respected, because you’re tall, or muscular, or exceptionally well-dressed, or have pierced and tattooed yourself to look dangerous, your peers are going to make it a priority to test you to see how much of that strength is real and how much is illusion. Better in my case to look refined, but non-threatening, so they’re more inclined to relax their guard.” He grinned at Azix. “You know, my projection is the same height. But since most holoprojections aren’t quite life-size, I understand why you didn’t make the connection.”

“I guess,” Azix said, baffled. He gave in to the impulse to put his hand on the top of Rye’s head, fingers sliding into his hair, which was coarser than he had thought it would be.

Rye arched a brow. “Are you done?” he asked, but he didn’t seem legitimately irate, so Az wasn’t too sheepish about removing his hand and shoving it into the pocket of his jumpsuit. He cleared his throat and turned away, shoes scuffing against the paving stones, so he didn’t see Rye giving him a critical once-over.

“Surely you’d be more comfortable in other clothing,” he said. “What would you like to wear? You can have absolutely anything you like here, after all. You can have leather that feels light as silk, or burlap that doesn’t actually itch if that’s more suitable to your Jedi sensibilities. I don’t have a current uplink, but I can pull clothing from a number of cultures from my cache for you to pick and choose, or you can describe it to me and I can do my best to build you something more personalized.” He began to circle Azix, one slender finger tapping thoughtfully against his mouth. Azix tried not to blush under the appraisal, and tried not to feel any particular way about how his old, borrowed jumpsuit and unraveling sweater compared to Rye’s understated elegance.

“You know, clothes never really were my thing,” Azix said, flustered. Rye smiled.
“Can I pick?”

“I’m not a doll!” he protested, folding his arms, which amplified the stale smell of the sweater.

“No, of course you’re not. You’re a handsome male and a guest, and no Imperial with manners would allow a guest to wear those rags if they could afford better. And I can’t, out there,” he said, making an expansive gesture. “But in here, I can certainly make you more comfortable. What about... something like this?”

His teeth flashed, and the weight of Azix’s clothes changed. He wore a sleeveless hoody, leather straps buckled around his biceps, and comfortable cargo pants with fingerless gloves. The gloves reached to his elbow and had what looked like cortosis plates on the outer arm and back of the hand, which would allow him to block incoming lightsaber and blade strikes and even low-power blasters. His new boots were thickly soled and a little rubbery, giving him silent footsteps and comfortable support. His lightsaber belt hung low on his hips, and the pants were reinforced to prevent them from chafing his thighs. Every single piece was black, with silver buttons and buckles. He blinked, checking it out, then gave Rye a pointed look.

“A bit sith-y, don’t you think?”

Rye’s eyes narrowed slightly. “Now?”

Azix found his clothes hadn’t changed (and the hoody was really amazing, lightweight but fluffy on the inside, so even though there were no sleeves he was perfectly comfortable in the cool air), but were now deep, earthy shades of brown and all the buckles had changed from steel to brass.

“It doesn’t suit your skin tone at all,” Rye complained, “but if you prefer it....” He made a dismissive gesture.

“Oh, I'm sorry, I wasn't thinking about my skin tone.” He glanced skyward and ran his fingers over the backs of the gloves. "These are.. nice. Is this an Imperial style?"

"Old Mandalorian. I'm always surprised that more Force Users don't make use of plasma-resistant alloys, especially considering we're in a state of war." He reached up and tugged on Azix’s ear, and only then did he notice that Rye had given him jewelry; three studs in each ear and a small dangling blade.

"Now you're DECORATING me?” He should have been offended, being a grown-ass adult who could very well dress himself, but even beyond being amused, he was... touched by his personal interest.

"You're handsome," Rye pointed out, then, with a glance up at Azix, amended, "objectively. That's not flattery. If you dressed yourself more attentively, you'd have more admirers. Some of them might even test that Jedi aloofness,” he added, eyes flashing in a way Azix couldn’t quite interpret.

"Jedi aren't like sith, we don't need cults of personality following us around.” He adjusted the tunic, enjoying the fluffy lining, and then the question he'd wanted to ask earlier came back around like a thrown brick. "Did... you make all this for me? " It couldn't be for Rye; not with such strong Jedi influences.

Rye blinked, then gave him the kind of soft smile that had grown much more common lately, since they'd gotten to know each other better. "All this and more. You saw the library, but there's also a dojo I think you'd enjoy, which I've programmed with a number of combat instructors. Sith, I'm afraid, but there are a few Jedi guides from artifacts we captured. And once I expand my library, I
may be able to add more. There's a lovely natural hot springs I lifted from Nyrvona with a hot stones sauna, and of course I built you a bedroom, which I hope you'll like."

"You want me to sleep here?"

"I want you to be comfortable here," Rye shrugged. "For most mammals, comfort requires a well-appointed den. Your bedroom is private," he added, clasping his hands behind him and putting a more convivial distance between them. "I won't monitor you there, or enter without permission. I can't offer you much privacy outside," he reasoned. "There, I'm almost ever-present, and once we leave the museum I can't give you privacy for safety reasons - my sensors are much more keen than your senses. So... this is what I can offer. I hope it's satisfactory." He added that last comment with enough uncertainty that Az softened and took his hands out of the hoody's convenient front pouch-pocket.

"I really like it," he confessed. "It's beautiful. And I don't know why, but for some reason I didn't think you'd build anything like this?" He fumbled, both with his hands and with his words, watching a violet-glowing bug seesaw gently back and forth over one of the bushes that glowed with faery lights, the mating calls of males of her species. "So... artistic. Focused on, y'know, beauty." He took another breath of intoxicating, clean forest air. "I don't know how to describe it, but... even the AIR is right. I don't know how you did it."

Rye looked taken aback in a flattered sort of way. "Oh... it's nothing, really," he demurred. "I'm sure other mindscapes are the translations of biological memory, but memory is fickle. I programmed the simulation from the perspective of physics, chemistry, optics."

He trailed off, but Azix shifted closer and said, "Go on."

"Oh. Well. The atmosphere is made to stimulate the most advantageous mix of oxygen, nitrogen, helium, and other trace elements for Rattataki respiration, with the inclusion of scent trails, pollen, petrichor..."

"Petrichor now?" Azix smiled, charmed by his meticulousness.

"It's the release of botanical oils that occurs after the rain," Rye explained. "That's what creates the 'fresh rain' scent. That, and the release of chemicals from the earth that bonds with the water as it begins to evaporate, and the dissemination of minerals carried by the running water into the air..."

"Kriff, you weren't kidding about chemistry. Is any of this for you?" He asked, turning as a beautifully plumed bird burst from the trees, flapping musically to gain altitude as it aimed for the nests hidden in the cliffs. "Stuff you enjoy?"

Rye considered that. "I had thought to make use of the meditation courtyard to practice with The Force. I programmed it to replicate real-world gravity, but it can be adjusted to provide exercises of varying difficulty levels. I confess, I’m somewhat eager to attempt levitation. I’ve seen holocrons cause Force Effects," he said. "Anything from spontaneous levitation to electrical disruptions to illusions. So the power contained in this artifact should be more than adequate." He smiled at Azix. "I thought perhaps you might guide me through the beginner’s exercises. Once we leave here, it might be a good distraction from... everything out there."

He exhaled. "Yeah. Definitely."

"Perfect. Come." Rye captured his hand, and Az’s blood turned bubbly at the texture and heat of his palm. "Let me give you the tour."

Azix followed obediently and let Rye walk him through his work. The temple had multiple levels, and they were on the upper level, which held the library and a series of bedrooms, all of which had the neutral, impersonal look of guest rooms except for the one Rye had built for him. That one had a huge bed with a thick, lush mattress draped in sheets of impossibly soft cotton. It was decorated in natural browns with accents of deep blue and brass. He had his own balcony with a small temple fountain and ferns planted in boxes that lined the railing. He had a sitting room with a holoscreen and a large U-shaped couch with reclining couches at the arms. Carved, polished wooden cabinets, accent tables, and bookshelves grounded the room, and his feet sank into the thickness of an area rug. The shelves held traditional artworks and carvings, a couple holoprograms of famous Jedi, and a handful of holocrons. Curious, Azix picked one up, a cube with faceted corners and Jedi runes etched into the sides, and was surprised that it responded to his touch.

“Any data or holoprograms I’ve copied from other sources, I’ve imbedded in replicas of their original artifacts,” Rye offered, watching him with a satisfied smile. “I thought it would be atmospheric, that you can access a holocron within a holocron. The Sith holocrons are only the most neutral and least offensive I could find, but I’ve placed every Jedi holocron to which I have access, and there aren’t many, here for your use. And as I said, I won’t be monitoring you in here. I’ve created a… a hole, for lack of a better word, for you to have some privacy.”

“That’s… this was very thoughtful.” Azix put the holocron down and leaned against the shelf, momentarily overwhelmed. His throat thickened – he wasn’t sure what he would be crying over, but he wanted to cry. Maybe just because someone had put so much thought into his comfort and safety… no one had really done that since he’d been Knighted, assuming that, as an adult, he would see to his own needs.

It felt good, SO good, to have someone CARE. And he recognized that feeling as dangerous even as he wrapped it around himself on the inside of his ribs and burrowed into the warmth.

“You’re giving me the impression of needing a hug,” Rye said. “At least, according to my observational data. Which, I admit, is largely gleaned from holoprograms, so I can’t vouch for its accuracy.” Az could hear the hesitation in his tone. “… DO you need a hug?”

He wanted a hug. He wanted to fold that lean and compact frame against his and squeeze, feel Rye’s solidity, his weight and heat, even if they were illusions, only real in this space. He wanted to hear his constructed spine pop and give him that sensation of being crushed against another person, embraced and melded against them, air pushed from his new lungs in a groan. Rye had never been hugged before, not really, except when they’d both been hiding from Lord Sirrut in a nest of coding.

Hugging Rye would cross any number of lines, the kind of lines that would have been painted in bright yellow with warnings etched in capital letters. The kind that had blaring klaxons and consequences if you crossed them carelessly.

He remembered how Rye had felt when he’d clung to him in the floating darkness, and he turned around and opened his arms.

He didn’t expect Rye to launch himself into them, forcing Azix to take a stabilizing step back to absorb the impact. His arms slid into the arch of his back and nestled there snugly, fitting Rye’s body against his like they’d been made as a matching set. He was warm, and he had a heartbeat, and he breathed. His bones shifted a little when Azix squeezed, and he gave a soft, chuffed exhalation just like Az had wanted him to. His clothes smelled like cloves and aromatic wood, and his hair smelled like citrus soap.

Az wondered if, in this meticulously crafted mindscape, he still tasted like copper.
He didn’t think about what he was doing. The warning klaxons had been silenced by the throb of his heartbeat. All he could focus on was Rye’s scent, and the knobs of his spine grinding against his forearms as he squeezed him harder and felt him hitch in response. One of his hands found its way into Rye’s thick hair, graced with a hint of wave and a pelt-like texture that was utterly at odds with his refined façade. The strands slipped between his knuckles, then caught, and he gently forced Rye’s head back and tipped his face up.

His lips had slight ridges, but they were soft. His tongue was hot and slick, and his taste was just the same, and he opened to Azix with a purring groan that made his chest thrum. He’d given Az the ghost of a kiss before, but he had never been kissed like this. Azix should have been more careful, more deliberate – he should have taken the time to explore and introduce Rye to how good it could feel. But the capacity for restraint abandoned him once his mouth sealed against Rye’s, tongue twisting around his.

He squeezed hard, tasting him deep, devouring his mouth as the hand that wasn’t already kneading through his hair slid down to cup and squeeze his ass, hitching Rye against him. He earned a whimper for that, and it woke something dark and hungry inside him that uncurled smoky tendrils to heat his blood.

Rye’s arms wound around his neck, and he tilted his hips, letting Azix crush them together. His tongue responded, sliding against Azix’s and twisting into his mouth, exploring.

Azix realized he couldn’t remember the last time he brushed his teeth, and jerked back, clapping a hand over his mouth. “Fuck. Fuck, Rye, I’m sorry….”

Amazing how those crimson eyes didn’t look demonic to him anymore. Now they were glazed, dilated, and Rye’s mouth was already flushed from the kiss and drew Az’s eyes like a magnet. “Why?” he breathed, leaning up to nuzzle Az. His brow spurs dragged against his forehead.

“I haven’t showered, I haven’t brushed my teeth, I’m a mess,” he babbled, and was silenced by Rye’s thumb tracing his lower lip.

“None of that is true here,” Rye reminded him. “I wanted you to be comfortable, so I didn’t replicate things like… the taste of plaque or the smell of old sweat. If it helps, here.” Az’s mouth flooded with the taste of cinnamon bark. He ran his tongue over his teeth and felt them glassy-clean, not at all furry. Rye smiled, fingers moving over his cheek, caressing him. “Better?”

“… Yeah.” His voice came out a rasp. He leaned down and nuzzled him again, rubbing against those eyebrow spurs, feeling their slight give. “I still shouldn’t have done that.”

“You told me that sex-related things have been a source of trauma for you lately,” Rye murmured, still touching him. Az couldn’t resist turning his head and finding Rye’s fingers, nibbling them. “But that doesn’t mean all your desire has gone. I told you that if you were interested, I would be open. And I won’t hurt you,” he promised, playfully slipping his thumb between Azix’s teeth. “I want to give you comfort. I’m happy to let you teach me how.”

Az sighed and leaned down, resting his head on Rye’s shoulder. That swaying motion was so soothing, and the way Rye fit against him was so easy, natural, that he could almost believe it was safe. “You’re basically a virgin,” he murmured, nuzzling his throat, unable to resist tasting his skin. When he kissed there, Rye hitched, and he felt the flex of his throat under his lips, intoxicatingly vulnerable. “I’m not much better. And the way I feel… I don’t want to hurt you.”
Rye’s nails dragged along the back of Azix’s neck and made him groan and tighten his grip. Rye’s lips brushed his ear, which made him shiver and swell in response, dazedly captive to whatever the AI did to him.

“I can feel how you feel,” Rye whispered against his ear. “You have such passion in you. I’ve never been able to feel things like this before, Azrahix. I want to share it. I want ALL of it, as deep and as powerful as you can give me.”

/Oh gods, please, not so deep…/

His stomach flipped, and his hands turned to blocks of ice, numb and throbbing with cold. “I… you… you don’t understand,” he stuttered, backing up until he bumped against the bookshelf, rattling the knickknacks. “I could actually hurt you, I….”

“You are NOT Vitiate,” Rye snapped, following him, reaching up and cupping Azix’s face so he was forced to look into his eyes. “You’re not. That’s over. You’re yourself, and we are not doing this in anger, or in pain, or for domination, or any of that selfish absurdity that Vitiate dragged you into,” he said forcefully. “Az, you have been violated and used and mistreated so badly. I understand why you’re apprehensive. But you’re letting your fear cut you off from something you actually want, and I hate to see that. I hate to stand here and watch it happen when I know there’s fire in your belly.” He reached down, sliding his fingers under the hoody to caress Az’s stomach, fingers tracing the muscles. Az gasped a little as his cock throbbed in response. “Here. You want me right here. And I want to give you everything you need; I just need you to let me.”

He groaned, arching just a little, waistband slipping down to reveal a little more of his iliac to Rye’s fingers. “F-fuck… you don’t understand, Rye,” he pleaded, speaking his name like it had been wrenched from his throat. “I can’t… I’m not steady, I feel like there’s cracks all through me, you’re gonna wind up with me doing something stupid like crying all over you like a….”

Rye nuzzled up under his chin, dragging his tongue over Azix’s throat, melting him into a loose pile of limbs tenuously supported by the shelves, gasping raggedly as his hands slid up under the hoody and explored his chest. “I have already been privy to SEVERAL of your break-downs,” Rye purred. “It’s nothing I haven’t seen, and if I had to make an educated guess, your extreme emotional reaction to physical intimacy is going to have to get worse before it gets better. You have to let yourself feel,” he murmured, dragging his teeth over Azix’s pulse point, making him moan. “You have to ALLOW yourself to be hurt by what you went through. I’m sure there will be histrionics. But I’m not scared of them.” He nibbled his way up along Azix’s jaw, then coaxed him to meet his eyes again, his other hand skimming along his waistband in a teasing caress that made his blood feel like champagne bubbles. “You do not scare me. I am not going to run.”

He swallowed. “… Yeah, but… your first… it shouldn’t be like….”

“I don’t care about ‘first’,” Rye said dismissively, leaning up to nibble his lower lip. Az moaned softly and sank into him, seeking kisses, but Rye insisted on talking in between them, thwarting his attempts to seal them back together like they had been before, when the slide of Rye’s tongue against his had banished all these awful thoughts from his head. “I don’t care about the second time, or the third. I care about what it’s going to be like when there’s nothing to worry about anymore, when I can see you smile, and feel you relax and enjoy this without punishing yourself.” His fingers found the button on Azix’s pants and tugged it free, dragging the magnetic zipper down. “I care about the fifth time. The sixth. Maybe the seventh, if that’s what it takes. When you know me, and I know you, and we come together just to enjoy each other. And there’s no shadows here.” His thumb traced the soft skin under Azix’s eye. “That’s what I want.”

The teasing brush of his lips pulled a groan from Azix, who leaned in further. Finally, Rye let him
have his mouth, surging against him and kissing him like Azix was the only source of air in the 'verse.

“What if it never happens?” he breathed against his mouth, running his fingers through Rye’s hair. “What if I just can’t?”

“Then, I’ll take you with the shadows,” Rye told him, ridged nose bumping against his. “I don’t mind them that much, as long as you don’t mind mine.”

/Right./ Because Rye was a million things Azix should never be touching: cybernetic, Imperial, Dark Side. The facsimile of a pureblood. Even now, those deep, jewel-like crimson eyes were fixed on his, settled deep under brow ridges that rose into those nubby little spurs that, Force help him, he was starting to think of as CUTE and EXPRESSIVE and just a facet of Rye’s haughty personality rather than evidence of his Sith origins. Stars have mercy, when had he started feeling COMFORTED by a pureblood face? When had he started to look at that mouth, with the little ridges slanting out from the center of his lips and the way his eyeteeth were just a little longer, vestigial remnants of his ancestors’ powerful canines, and wanted to kiss it, thrust his tongue into it, devour it until Rye made soft little keening noises in the back of his throat and purred like a kitten?

Fuck, he wanted to make Rye purr. He wanted to introduce him to a world of sensation, lay him down and strip those clothes off and slide his hands over him until he went boneless from bliss. The desire brought back pinhole memories of Sana under his hands, the soft little gasps and the way her curves flexed against him. He pulled back a little, shaking it off, forcing himself to BREATHE.

/This isn’t the same./ he told himself, closing his eyes, holding Rye’s warmth against him. /It’s not the same. This isn’t sick, like that was. There’s nothing morally wrong with this feeling good, it’s just that the Code is a higher calling. If I wasn’t Jedi, there’d be nothing wrong with this./ Rye reached up and rubbed the back of his neck, coaxing him to melt again. /This is natural. Totally understandable. Maybe a little sketchy, politically… but it’s not sick, it’s not twisted, it’s not what THAT was./ He breathed Rye’s scent, pulled him closer, hands skimming over his back and kneading his lean muscle through his clothes. /This is different. This is different./

“I have an idea,” Rye murmured. Azix took a breath and nodded for him to continue. “Let’s just relax for a bit. Try out the new couch, have a cuppa, watch something I have archived. Your choice. Get those cuddles I promised you; none of this pressure.” When Azix swallowed, he nudged his brow spurs against his cheek. “It doesn’t have to be now. We can slow down.”

“…Yes,” he sighed, sinking into Rye’s arms, squeezing him until his spine popped just like Az wanted it to. “Yeah, let’s slow down.”

Rye’s voice sounded strained, as if he was really out of breath, and that made Azix smile. “Excellent. You choose something to watch. And perhaps we could get you in something more comfortable. How’s this?”

Some pressure eased. The buckles on his arms vanished, and he could feel the stone floor through thick, cushioned socks. The snug fit of his pants loosened, and gained weight and warmth as the sturdy weave turned to fleece. Rye’s form shimmered under his fingers, and left him in a long-sleeved tunic and sleep pants, and similar slipper socks, all in criminally soft fabric as black as the void.

He gestured, and a huge velour blanket, soft and heavy, appeared draped over the couch, along with a tea caddy full stocked and gently steaming. The aroma found him a moment later, delicate and barely sweet.
Rye guided him, arm around his waist, to the couch. He stretched out on one of the side recliners, relaxing against the sloped back. Rye curled up under his arm, making himself comfortable against Azix’s side as if he had every right to be there, and dragged the blanket over to cover them both. He produced a remote control and handed it to Azix, who fumbled with it until he figured out how to power the holoscreen on and navigate the menu. Rye’s collection was eclectic, to say the least – he had a smattering of old classics, even some that were filmed in 2D, a handful of very popular shows ranging from spy thrillers to political dramas to soap operas, and even some cartoons.

He picked a classic 2D horror movie. Rye dragged the caddy over, poured him a cup of hot tea, and passed him a shortbread biscuit to nibble on. As the credits passed, Rye began to explain which director had gone on to do which other movies he might know, and told stories of behind-the-scenes drama or the workings of practical effects and the disasters that had faded into urban legend. Perhaps he assumed that Azix was familiar enough with the movie that he could talk over it with impunity. In reality, Az had never seen it before, but listening to Rye was… nice. It reminded him that there was a galaxy beyond Ziost where planets were still spinning, and studios were still filming ridiculous movies, and the star actors glittered and gleamed and made impassioned pleas for charity for war orphans. A normal galaxy, full of light and noise and people, where life went on.

And with Rye’s warmth and company, overwrought screams and clumsy CGI on the holoscreen, Azix allowed the guilt to slip away and felt content.

Chapter End Notes

AWWWWW! Don’t you think Az deserved that? I hope y’all enjoyed it, ’cause the next chapter will be very different.
Rye fell asleep on him. In the category of things Azix hadn’t expected to ever happen, that was near the top – as an AI, Rye shouldn’t have had to sleep, yet here he was, seeming SO real, curled up with his head on Az’s chest and his breathing deep and slow. Azix trailed his fingers along the ridge of his brow bone, tracing the shape of the spurs, and occasionally this petting earned him a faint, contented purr.

The movie had ended, and he’d watched another one after that, about a group of Imperial commandos trapped on a strange new planet with extremely hostile wildlife. He’d drifted off, and when he woke up, some kind of soap opera was playing. He didn’t want to move with Rye curled up on him, so he watched that, napping on and off, wondering what time it was and whether sleeping in the mindscape did him any good in the real world. Most of the holocrons he’d ever communted with had been teaching holocrons, and he hadn’t exactly been encouraged to nap during instruction.

As it turned out, he needn’t have worried. He was well into the fifth episode of the soap opera, and invested in the drama, when Rye suddenly took a deep breath and sat up.

“I think that’s enough rest for now,” he said, sounding perfectly clear, and not at all like someone who had been unconscious a moment ago. “Not that I’m kicking you out, but we do have a few more things we need to do, and your painkillers will have taken effect by now.”

“Right.” Azix yawned and stretched, arching his back, then swung his legs off the couch. “Force, I could go for a hot cup of tea in the real world.”

“I think I have one more juice. It’s fruit punch,” Rye said, “but that’s better than soda. Once we get off this planet, you can have as much tea as you want.”

He leaned up, hesitating. Azix was momentarily taken by surprise, but then he leaned down and kissed the corner of Rye’s mouth, receiving a comparable kiss from the redhead. Rye smiled that post-canary-cat smile purebloods did so well.

“This was nice,” he confessed, fingers tracing Azix’s cheek. “Can we do it again?”

Azix gave up and nuzzled his palm. “Yeah. This was nice. And you still gotta show me the rest of the place.”

Rye blinked, then laughed. “Bloody Hoth. We didn’t make it off the third floor.”

That made Az laugh too, and he ruffled Rye’s hair, enjoying the texture between his knuckles. “Next time. I’d like to see what kind of dueling programs you’ve loaded.”

“I’d like to get you in the hot springs,” Rye shot back. He straightened, and put his hand on Az’s chest. “Ready?”

It took him a moment to realize Rye was going to eject him from the program, and he nodded hastily. “Right, of course. Ready.”

A moment later, he found himself face-down on the table, hand still draped over the open holocron,
which was beginning to fold up under his fingers. His cheek was smushed and numb from being pressed against the table and his mouth was slightly chapped from the pool of drool that had gathered while he was out, but other than that he felt… good. Refreshed.

He worked the cricks out of his neck and picked up the holocron. It pulsed, the beating heart of his…

… his friend.

Right.

That was all.

Exhaling, he set the holocron down and hunted down his tools.

Building Rye a mount for the holocron only took a couple of hours, shaping the metal plates with a laser cutter, drilling new holes, and screwing them down to the chassis. With each mount, he made certain the pelvis retained its full range of motion, putting the droid through its paces with Rye’s assistance. Its three-lensed face still unsettled him; he couldn’t quite divorce it from its actions, even though Rye was the controller. It was a strange disconnect, but one he didn’t feel up for questioning too much. Especially not when Rye had been so… sweet in the mindscape temple, so thoughtful and solicitous.

And warm.

And delicious.

Azix ground the heel of his hand against the spot right between his eyes, banishing the slow-building heat with pain. /Fuck./

“Would you like another round of painkillers?” Rye asked, his holo shimmering over Az’s shoulder. “We’re running a bit low, but hopefully we’ll be on our way soon. At the very least, once we reach New Adasta we should be able to forage for supplies.”

“I’m getting close to being done with this,” he said. “How long will it take you to gather the records you want?”

“Actually, I’ve been doing a bit of that while you were asleep,” Rye confessed, looking faintly smug. “I don’t anticipate it will take me much longer, a day or two, perhaps, once you’ve finished that bit.” He nodded at the mount Azix was nearly finished building. “Have I told you you’re rather dashing in welding goggles? There’s something very masculine about it.”

Azix flushed and turned away from him, burying himself in his project. “Shut up,” he grumbled, and was rewarded with a soft laugh from Rye. Of course, when he repositioned the goggles and turned the laser welder back on, he now felt self-conscious about it, and hunched his shoulders against Rye’s scrutiny or ogling.

Apparently, his tactics did not work, because a moment later he felt a light tingling along his back. He glanced, and caught the edge of Rye’s crimson fingers tracing the rounded planes of his shoulders. “I’m trying to work here,” he protested.

“I noticed.” He didn’t stop, and despite himself Azix found it relaxing. Rye’s presence behind him was more palpable now, perhaps because his intent resonated in The Force where it hadn’t before. Even though the flavor of their relationship had undergone a significant shift, Rye touching him was still a comfort – reassurance that he wasn’t alone in this wasteland, in the howling silence.
He found that as the hours wore on and he bolted additional shielding into the chassis and ran wiring from the holocron to the droid’s processors, up through the spine, Rye had one additional advantage a flesh-and-blood lover didn’t: he never got tired. That tingling caress continued long after Azix knew Rye had stopped focusing on him and moved on to other things. Remaining with him, keeping quiet company, only required an unobtrusive subroutine and with his new accommodations, Rye would never miss the operating memory. It was selfish of him, but Azix craved that attention. It would have been an imposition on a biological to stand there and keep petting him so he could remain calm and focused. For Rye, it was nothing, and he would take full advantage of that.

The wiring took longer than the mount and armoring, since it was finer work and his splint kept getting in the way. Azix was no engineer, but he had enough basic understanding to wire in the additional power cells and capacitors that Rye had scavenged from other equipment, along with a handful of surge protectors, since Ziost had once been a world where throwing lightning around was a status symbol. Force only knew if, in time, it would turn into Dromund Kaas, wracked with lightning storms thanks to the disruption to its atmosphere caused by excessive Dark Side channeling. Not that Azix cared – he’d be long gone by then.

He covered all his solder points with insulation and made sure that the droid’s carapace was snugly refitted, air and water-tight. It had a distorted look now, barrel-chested and rough with meandering welding lines. He pushed the chair back and regarded it critically – not the best work, not the prettiest, but it would do. He hoped. Force, he hoped… without Rye, he didn’t stand a snowflake’s chance on Oricon.

“You’ve finished?” Rye asked softly, crimson light still playing around Azix’s shoulders.

Az nodded. “Best get started on your salvage,” he suggested. “And help me find supplies. I assume it’s a trek.”

“On foot, at least another five days. You’re rested now, and mostly healed except for your hand, so we should be able to make good time. Focus on carb-heavy snacks as much as you can. I’ll guide you to all the places you might find additional sustenance.” Rye paused, stepping out so that Azix could see him clearly. “If I need assistance with other holocron guardians, will you offer it? I’m asking,” he added when Azix opened his mouth. “Not demanding.”

“And I appreciate that,” he said honestly. “To tell the truth, it might be a good idea to get back in fighting shape a little. I was thinking I’d practice against your dueling programs, but I suppose this works just as well. It’d likely be more of a challenge. I think I should get better at navigating this kind of battle,” he admitted. “I’ve never been really… cerebral, you know? That was always my failing. I’m a decent bruiser, but just a bruiser.”

“You’ve assisted me ably enough thus far,” Rye said, smiling. “I’m plenty cerebral for both of us.” He brushed an incorporeal kiss over Azix’s temple. “But it will be good practice for what we may encounter on the outside. I should learn to fight beside you.” He shifted closer, sliding his fingers along Azix’s cheek. “I should tell you… the last time,” he said, “even though you cracked, when you came back from it your presence made a great deal of difference. I could be confident attacking Lord Sirrut on one front because I trusted you to handle the other. We’re a good team, Jedi Tsuva,” he said with a slow smile. “I think we could get even better. I’ll retrieve what I need from the basement. You start packing, and this subroutine will come along and help.”

He nodded, got up, and popped a couple more painkillers with a swallow of juice.

There were canvas bags in the gift shop along with thermoses, more snacks, and another working
cooler, as well as vending machines on several floors. As they walked the echoing, vaulted halls of the museum, Rye expounded on some of the more interesting displays. He spun stories of epic romance and rivalry, sometimes between the same people, kings, queens, and conquest, and the sordid lives of the Sith nobility as Azix broke open the vending machines and piled anything he might conceivably eat or drink into those bags. According to Rye there were some carts in the utility room that they could pull to increase their carrying capacity – the roads should have been largely unaffected by the cataclysm aside from the possibility of rock slides, and he had confidence that between Azix’s Force Power and his own load-bearing capacity, they could clear away obstacles.

Every time Azix brought a full set of bags back to the security room, a few more holocrons had been lined up neatly on the work table. After raiding the vending machines he hit the fountains and filled every thermos he could salvage with clean water and then, because all this hauling and welding and wiring had made him grimy, he took a long shower and brushed his teeth as best he could with his fingers. He left his jumpsuit and the sweater in soapy water to soak for a bit, pulling on the battered, but clean, pants he’d worn on the hike to the temple, and settled on the couch.

Across the room, the table-full of holocrons glowed and pulsed softly, like a knot of dark energy. Azix eyed them with mistrust, and felt the pull of them in his chest. It made his head pound, but at the same time… he wanted to pry them open and test their guardians. With Rye at his side it would be a curb-stomp, he was certain.

“I’m ready when you are,” Rye told him, positioning his droid next to the couch so Azix could run his data jack to the next artifact. “Do try to remember that we’re attempting diplomacy first. If they don’t respond favorably to me copying their files, then we’ll give them cause to reconsider.”

“I’ve got the plan, but I’ve gotta be honest,” Az said, heaving a sigh as he got up to choose a victim, “I’d almost rather just come out swinging.”

Rye laughed. “Try that tall black one,” he suggested. “Lord Zihuratt may give you the fight you’re looking for. Still, we’re agreed? Diplomacy first?”

“Diplomacy first.” Az reached for the tall, wicked-looking holocron that was almost shaped like a spike with curling metal embellishments that ended in sharp points. “Then lightsabers.” He took it back to the couch, balancing it carefully on his bare chest, and found the facet that opened to expose its download jack.

“Then lightsabers,” Rye agreed with a longsuffering smile, and his holoprojection vanished as Azix connected the cable. “Download initiating.”

Az framed the holocron in his hands and sank.

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He recognized the terrain instantly, even though he’d never actually been there. Red dust, cliffs, sage brush and a stale chill in the air, which howled dissonantly as it dragged over the rough stone… this was Korriban.

Mixed among the brush were tiny, delicate-looking pale flowers. Azix was surprised by the tissue-thinness of their petals. This planet seemed much too harsh for such fragile beauty.

Rye’s boots scuffed on the tundra gravel as he knelt and touched one of the flowers. “Shilsa,” he said, smiling as he stained his fingers with pollen. “Charming. I presume we need to head into the canyon.” He indicated a drop-off not far from them, and a dry gully that meandered down into it. “Sith temples are often built in valleys and similar places to protect against wind erosion. No need to
walk,” he added when Az took a step. “I have no intention of playing her game.”

He took Azix’s hand, fingers lacing through his, and threw him a haughty smile as their surroundings shimmered and rearranged themselves. Suddenly they were in shadow, standing in the lee of the cliff side and looking at an old temple façade, complete with statues of obeisant slaves, carved into the red rock.

“This thing with slaves,” Azix said with disgust. “It doesn’t mean anything when people bow to you ‘cause you’ll kill them if they don’t. It especially doesn’t matter when rock bows to you… you can carve it into any shape you want.”

“I think Lord Zihuratt would argue that it means EVERYTHING when people bow to you because you’ll kill them if they don’t,” Rye said, tugging Azix along by the hand. “Come on then, let’s not faff about. Much to do, and dwindling supplies.”

“Yeah, yeah.” Az’s head craned back as they climbed the worn steps to the yawning entrance.

Lord Zihuratt didn’t make them hunt her down.

As they stepped into the cavernous entry hall, with ceilings so high that the slit-windows in the stone created defined beams of red light that slanted down across the floor, a deep, bloody gleam welled up from the floor and spun itself up into the form of a statuesque pureblood woman. Her hair was black and billowed to her feet, and she wore voluminous red robes slashed to show cream silk beneath, edged in thread-of-gold. Her eyes were pure red, glowing like a Chiss’s, and the spurs on her face made her look like a horned viper.

Unlike Sirrut, who had presented himself as understated and benign until he turned, Zihuratt was beautiful and instantly terrifying. Rye wrapped both hands around Azix’s hand before he could reach for the lightsaber.

“My lady,” he called to the apparition, which hovered in the air above them, thrumming with Dark Side energy in a way that made Az’s head feel like a tuning fork. “We have not come to make war on you. We know you are a guardian of knowledge. That knowledge is now under threat.” He eased forward, placing himself between Azix and the hovering apparition. Of course, that didn’t prevent Azix from making eye contact, which gave him a crawling sensation as if a thousand wasp larvae had burrowed under his skin. “We have come to respectfully request that we may copy the knowledge you bear and take it to a safe place, so that your wisdom will not be lost to the Empire.”

For a long moment, she didn’t answer. Azix began to nervously work his fingers out of Rye’s grip, his heart tripping as it beat faster and faster at the imminent threat, but the AI refused to let them go. Then, finally, she turned her elegant head to the side and spoke in a voice that echoed like a thunderclap from the walls.

“And it came to pass that a terrible power went forth across the world, and all who were caught in it perished as if in fire,” she declared in a deep, melodic alto. “All living things from the greatest to the smallest were consumed, and the force suffered a terrible wound, so that life would never come again. And even the stars turned their faces from the scar on the world, for the sign was a violation.”

Azix rubbed his ear against his shoulder, since Rye wouldn’t let go of his good hand, and muttered, “That sounds about right.”

Preserving knowledge is my function. Azix is a survivor of the cataclysm. We are alone on a ravaged world, and we are seeking escape. But I will not leave the wisdom of the Old Empire behind if I have any choice. Our carrying capacity is limited, but my memory is not. Will you allow me to take your teachings with me?” She just stared, and the air popped like the pressure before a storm. “I vow I will return for your holocron if it is at all possible, but there is no guarantee, and I don’t want to risk its loss.”

Again, she waited a long moment before responding. He still tried to extract his hand from Rye’s – he might have to reach for his saber in a HURRY, dammit.

“A WELL OF DARKNESS CAME,” she declared, and her tone was both rage and mourning. “EYES AS A DISTANT FLAME. SOULLESS. UNNATURAL.”

“Sithspawn!” Rye provided helpfully. “Yes, it broke into the temple. That’s why I fear for the artifacts, and why I want to take your knowledge with me. Once we leave, there will be no protection.”

“IT WAS CREATED BY THE WORLD-DEVOURER. VITIATE, WHO WAS BORN TENEBRAE.” The mournful note was much stronger now, and the unseen wind whipping at her garments and her hair calmed a bit. “WHAT A TERRIBLE APPETITE. IF WE HAD ONLY KNOWN.” She turned her serpentine face to Rye. “POWER BLINDED US, LITTLE DROID. WE DID NOT SEE. WE DID NOT KNOW THAT EVERYTHING – LIFE AND DESIRE AND POWER – MUST HAVE LIMITS. WE THOUGHT TO BREAK THROUGH BARRIERS AND TOUCH THE INFINITE. NOW, THIS GUARDIAN IS ALL THAT REMAINS OF LORD ZIHRATT, THE ONCE-PROUD LADY OF AN’ANNFOL.”

“Her palace on Nfolgai,” Rye muttered out of the corner of his mouth before Azix could ask. “… It’s still very impressive,” he offered to Zihuratt, and Azix shot him a disbelieving look. “I know you were splendid in your day, my lady. Your skill and wisdom are spoken of in legend. Will you help me now?”

She turned slowly, sleeves billowing, and fixed a baleful gaze on Azix. His heart skipped again, a freezing sensation sinking into his chest, making his breath come short as his lungs turned stiff.

“A JEDI STANDS BESIDE YOU,” she said, and her eyes narrowed in clear disgust.

“Fallen,” Rye said, and squeezed Az’s hand HARD. He got the message – shut up - but he was beginning to seriously doubt that Rye’s negotiating strategy was having the desired effect.

Lord Zihuratt made a haughtily derisive sound. “PLACE NOT YOUR FAITH IN CHILDREN OF THE LIGHT, FALLEN FROM GRACE THOUGH THEY MIGHT BE,” she declared, and Az pressed his injured hand over his ear to try to mitigate the shattering power of her voice, ringing from the walls, shaking the air like a physical thing. “WHEN THE POWER OF THE DARK PROVES DEEPER THAN THE PETTY NIGHTMARE THEY IMAGINED, INEVITABLY THEY GO CRAWLING BACK TO THE LIGHT.”

“Oh, this is just temporary,” Rye said with a faint smile. “The light is exactly where I’m sending him when all this is through.”

Then he held her eyes for just a second too long, and smiled just a little too much like a pureblood, and Azix’s stomach went a little bit cold.

She regarded him for a moment. Cold wind and bloody light swirled around her, sleeves billowing as she hovered. She spread her hands, and for a moment Azix thought she might give a benediction.
Then a pair of long, rune-etched swords appeared in her palms.

“THE WAY OF THE SITH IS POWER.” The blades shimmered like unnatural things. Arcane, the runes seemed to writhe and crawl across their surface as she spun them into a challenging stance. “ALL WHO COME TO ME SEEKING KNOWLEDGE MUST PROVE THEMSELVES WORTHY.”

Rye grabbed Azix’s arm with his other hand. “This is not a battle,” he said under his breath. “It’s a test. A fairly standard test, actually. That being said….”

“I know.” Azix was finally able to reach for his lightsaber, and it blazed into sunset glory at his side. “No holds barred.”


“You and the rest of the damn galaxy,” Azix growled, shifting his weight, settling into that state of battle focus that was half meditation, half adrenaline. He looked at her face, at the viperish spurs and the deep glow of her eyes, and decided that he wanted to hurt her.

Her blades sliced through the air with a soft whistle. “YOUR RAGE WILL GRANT YOU NO POWER IF YOU CANNOT MASTER IT. COME” she offered. “BREAK YOURSELF UPON MY BLADES.”

Az exhaled, found a terrible calm, and accepted.

Her blades were fully capable of deflecting his lightsaber, he found the first time he bounced off her defense and had to scramble to deflect her riposte. Of course, this was a mindscape, and the rules were basically whatever she said they were. She moved with extraordinary grace and power, bringing her blades down in a whirling falling star strike he could barely track with her robes and sleeves filling his field of vision. He’d known one Jedi Master at the temple who’d used similar tactics – they were considered old-fashioned in this world of modern cortosis-weave armor, but they could be effective in the right hands.

/Fucking Master Ynso./ Azix had always wondered what the consequences would be if he just cut the damned sleeves OFF. Some days, the prospect of kneeling on rice grains for a few hours seemed like a small price to pay to get that billowing fabric out of his face.

He retreated in quick, measured steps, saber weaving in Soresu orbits as he fended off a brutal advance that sent sparks flying dangerously close to his eyes every time her strange rune-blades met his. Everything about her was made to blind and distract, and every time she made him wince or blink, a new hole opened in his defenses, forcing him into a mad scramble to fend off her serpent-swift attacks.

… It suddenly occurred to him that Sith Lord Zihuratt was not Master Ynso.

A rush of fierce satisfaction sizzled up his spine and he let out a snarl of triumph as he spun out of the way of her advance and slashed his saber through those rippling sleeves. The thread-of-gold snagged, but gave, and a piece of masterwork embroidery fluttered to the ground, leaving her exposed to the elbow.

Azix didn’t pause. He slid into forward stance and pushed off his rear foot, battering her as she had battered him, throwing himself into the sequence because fighting with his off-hand put him at awkward angles if he didn’t commit. She weathered his assault without concern, and while he
managed to nick away the bottom of her other sleeve, she protected its bulk from him with casual disdain. Worse, she fought almost entirely from within the inner ring of defense, allowing him tantalizingly close, his lightsaber burning inches from her face but never touching her. And his aggression cost him – as he pushed, fury growing, desperate to pierce that last layer, she lured him in and then spun out of a blade lock with him and whipped both blades across his body. One dragged across his arm, and he bit back a scream at the unnatural acid burn. The other ripped open his hoody across his belly, but barely scored the flesh beneath as he launched himself backward in a desperate retreat.

She spun and crouched, both blades pointed toward him, one at full extension and the other over her head. Her stance was wide and sunk deep into the hips, and her eyes locked with his as she casually turned one blade’s alignment from vertical to horizontal. It was an invitation, and Azix collected himself and took it, moving in with greater caution as he measured her defenses against his straightforward Djem So progressions.

Her style was an irritating mix of Makashi and Ataru, he discovered as he worked back and forth across the floor with her, trying to smash through her slippery defenses without over-extending himself. She would lure him in with subtle footwork and maddeningly last-minute deflections, provoking him to attack harder and more directly. Then, when he stepped an inch too far, she would spin into wild, crashing orbits, bringing both blades down onto him like an avalanche of steel. At times he was almost convinced she was flying; he could feel holes in his defense she could exploit, anticipating that at any moment he would feel the acid plunge of her unnatural steel. One thing was certain – he was nowhere near good enough to defeat her in a fair fight. Which simply begged the question of what the ever-loving fuck Rye was doing and why he hadn’t interfered yet.

He wasted a precious second being annoyed, turning to try and spot his partner, and she promptly punished him for it. The burning slice of her blade across his shoulder, the slight points along its length grating over his collarbone hard enough to rattle him from jaw to pelvis, made it clear he couldn’t afford to be distracted. And if Rye didn’t plan to interfere, damn him, then Azix had to think of something on his own.

Of course, there was one thing he could do. He absolutely shouldn’t do it – he was far enough down the slippery slope already. But she was assessing him, judging him, and there was one tactic he was fairly sure she’d never see coming.

He’d been using his good left hand primarily, and guiding its power with his injured right hand. She had doubtlessly noticed he was favoring it, but so far she had not attempted to capitalize on that weakness. It was a lot like dueling one of his instructors, this sense of being examined through combat, that she wasn’t seriously FIGHTING him so much as she was learning about him. It was frustrating, infuriating, being placed under the microscope and danced around the room like a trained monkey-lizard just so a Sith witch who’d died centuries ago could judge him from a place of superiority. It pissed him off, it frustrated him and those were exactly the emotions he needed to feel the power building up, crackling in his belly, begging to be released.

Strength surged through his limbs. He’d been starting to get winded, but suddenly he felt like he could run up mountains, pulsing with bottomless energy, muscles bulging against the straps around his biceps. He did a skip-step and overhead strike, pushing off the ground to gain the aid of gravity in making the downward slash of his lightsaber more powerful, and lifting off was SO easy, like he could have flown, like he was fucking weightless. He moved in hard and he let her tempt him, let her draw him into that intimate zone of defense where they were breathing against each other, clothes brushing, practically sharing air. He had a good idea of her timing, or so he hoped, counting the beats as she reeled him in like a Tythonian lockjaaw, guiding his strikes with a set of carefully calculated deflections. Just a little more off-balance each time, just a little more extension, she’d have him, any
minute now…

… Az twisted his lightsaber against her swords and let out a scream of furious effort as he thrust his
injured hand at her chest and let go.

The crack was so forceful it threw HIM back, and he staggered, shocked by its strength. Electricity
poured from him in a thundering stampede, impaling Lord Zihuratt, who barely had time to gasp
before it pierced and wound around her like razor wire and locked every muscle in her body. Her
jaw hung open, sparks crackling between her teeth for one amazing instant before Az went down on
the unforgiving stone tiles and lost eye contact, and the stream with it. She didn’t quite go down
herself, staggering but keeping her feet, and he shoved himself back up and threw another bolt of
lightning at her with a ragged scream.

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He could have gotten his lightsaber to bear in time. He wasn’t sure what possessed him to hold out
his hand instead, meeting the serpentine blast with his palm. It just seemed to him, in the pit of his
gut, that this lightning was HIS. It was his rage, it was his grief; it was all the terrible burdens he’d
been grappling with for so long. His mating with Sana was in that lightning. Her death was in that
lightning. Nol’s lilting, musical mockery was in that lightning, and the sickening heat of his touch,
and the pale perfection of his skin. Master Surro’s cold judgement was in that lightning, and Master
Arneth’s death, and all his loneliness and inadequacy and abandonment. And those things hurt him
every single day of his life, and haunted him every night, and grieved him to the bone, but they were
HIS.

And now they were his weapon. They didn’t belong to her.

He felt it coming, that elemental calamity crackling with rage and hate, and he pushed a guttural roar
up from his heels and denied it the right to harm him with every atom of his will. /MINE,/ he snarled
as the lightning hit his palm and a tremendous KRAKoom shook the temple, rocking all of them
back on their heels with the force of the blast. /YOU’RE MINE./

His eyes burned, after-images blazing white with sunset red-orange leaking in around the edges.
Over the flailing tendrils of lightning and the wild, arcing coils spending themselves in bursts against
his hand, he saw Lord Zihuratt. In that instant, her expression was both taken aback… and impressed.
It was nothing but a moment from heartbeat to heartbeat – the arch of those spurred eyebrows, the
sudden slackness at the corners of her mouth – but he saw it, and a dark red joy surged up inside him
because that pureblood witch did not know who the fuck she was messing with but he’d teach her,
he’d show her, /Watch THIS…/

He roared again like a wild beast as he shoved the lightning back toward her.

This time, it wasn’t a terrible, jagged serpent writhing between them, or the slice of a javelin. This
time it was ball lightning, shedding impact waves that rippled through space as it rocketed toward her
like a cannonball. Lord Zihuratt brought her swords together with blinding speed and snapped them
outward, slicing across the incoming blaze of light. The lightning tore apart with a terrible crack, and
this impact was even more thunderous than the previous one. It slammed into Lord Zihuratt, and she
tumbled backward. Azix, standing further away from the impact, still went down hard on his ass and
lost his breath when his back hit the stones.

In the ringing silence afterward he lay there gasping, ears ringing, vision blurred and bleeding to red.
His ribs ached, and he fought to remind himself that none of this was real; he didn’t actually have a body here. His wounds didn’t hurt, and they certainly weren’t burning with a fiery sear that made him want to scream and break anything he could get his hands on, because they were just an illusion; there were NO WOUNDS.

It didn’t help. He remained blind, breathless and burning, until Lord Zihuratt’s barbed face appeared above him. He gasped, body convulsing as all his muscles jerked at once - a corruption of the signal he’d intended to send, which went something like, /get up you useless sack of bantha shit GET UP--/

Rye’s face appeared next to hers. He looked far less concerned, and more calculating, than Azix would have liked.

“So,” Rye said, his voice garbled as if he was speaking from miles away and under water, “do we pass?”

He didn’t hear her reply. His pounding heart filled his ears, and his lungs were spasming in an effort to find the rhythm of breathing again. He reached toward Rye, and to his relief, Rye stepped in and grasped his wrist, pulling him to his feet. He slid his arm around his waist and let Azix lean on him as he struggled to find a sense of balance.

Rye was still talking, and Lord Zihuratt’s voice was more like a throb in the air, sound waves battering his already-abused eardrums, than actual words. He gripped Rye’s shoulder, fingers knotting in the fabric of his plain scholar’s robes, and hung on him while he tried to banish the ringing from his head.

“I can arrange it,” Rye said, still echoing. Az could only make out his words because he was right next to him, Rye’s arm around his waist to keep him from wobbling too badly and his throat flexing against Az’s forehead. “Obviously now isn’t the time, but you have my word.”

Her voice thrummed again. Az growled in distress and tried to hide in Rye’s tunic. Rye humored him by covering his exposed ear with his hand, said something else that Azix couldn’t hear anymore, and then the Korriban temple faded away.

He woke up with a start, on his back, on the couch and much more comfortable than the last time. The holocron was still open, and Rye’s jack was still attached.

His arm and shoulder burned where Lord Zihuratt had cut him. There were no real cuts, but he found welts when he tried to rub the sensation away, and he scratched them raw in an attempt to banish the acid itch before giving up putting the holocron on the floor, rolling over to burrow into the cushions.

He could still feel the ghostly tingle of electricity in his fingertips. His vision still seemed… not bleeding anymore, not blurred, but like someone had turned the contrast up - everything was sharp-edged now, colors saturated, shadows more defined. Probably an after-effect of having multiple bursts of lightning burning his psychic retinas. It would go away, probably, hopefully.

Deep in his core, there was a hollow, almost peaceful feeling, as if he’d ripped out all his angst by the roots and it hadn’t started growing back yet. He decided he’d enjoy that as long as he could, and idly wished he had something to smoke. He’d indulged a few times in the field with the GAR, and while he wasn’t a habitual smoker, it was a good way to re-center after a huge adrenaline high.

He’d done well, he thought. He hadn’t won, of course, but he was never going to win that fight without Rye helping. He’d gotten a good hit, a REALLY good hit, on that Sith witch and sometimes that was the best you could hope for. Sometimes you had to be satisfied with that.
He buried his face in the stale scent of the sweater, then paused.

Stale.

Stale TOBACCO. Perfect.

He slung his legs off the edge of the couch and went hunting through the security lockers. He didn’t really remember where they’d found the sweater, but after going through several rows of lockers he was rewarded with a crumpled foil pack that still held a pair of cigarettes. He checked to make sure the brand matched the package, and that they weren’t secretly deathsticks – disguising deathsticks as plain tobacco was one of the most popular smuggling techniques. This was a Corellian brand, and that reassured him. The most widely sold in the core, Corellian Smokes were generally mellow.

Unfortunately, no amount of searching turned up a firestarter, but no worries - he had a welding laser. A bit like using an artillery cannon to swat an insect, but a delicate touch on the flame intensity and his cig was soon smoldering pleasantly at the tip, glowing the same color as his saber.

He flopped back on the couch and drew in the biggest clouds of smoke he could stand, letting them curl delicately back into the air as he exhaled. He coughed a little. It had been a while, and his lungs still ached a little from landing on those paving stones on his back – the landing had been in his head, but the spasm when he hit had probably been real.

Rye appeared at the other end of the couch, sitting on his feet, though of course he had no weight. “Do Jedi smoke?” he asked, amused, and Azix responded by blowing a cloud of smoke at him.

“Technically, we’re supposed to pursue total health,” he said. “Physical, mental, spiritual. Technically.”

“Technically,” Rye repeated, smirking because he took the meaning of Azix’s dry tone.

“But,” Az pointed out, holding the cigarette between his broken fingers, “there is also no emotion, right? There is peace.” He saluted Rye with the cig, then took another long breath, folding his good hand behind his head and slouching into a more comfortable position on the couch.

“You took a hit there,” Rye said softly, and the tingle of his touch slid along Azix’s shin. “But you seem in good spirits regardless.”

Az smiled wryly at him. “I tagged her. Sometimes that’s all you can do. Way she said ‘Jedi’, like I crawled out of her kriffing salad, felt good to give her something to remember me by. Anyway, you got the data?”

“I do. And for what it’s worth, I think you handled yourself admirably.”

Az narrowed his eyes at Rye. “I kind of had to. Where in Hoth were you?”

Rye held up a hand. “It was you being tested, not me,” he said. “I’m not a Force User by Lord Zihuratt’s estimation. I’m not subject to the demands she places upon someone like you. But besides that….” A deeper smile pulled at the corners of his mouth. “I was enjoying watching you.”

The edges of Rye’s hologram seemed to seethe in his vision. He could almost see the lasers moving as they etched his shape in the air, and it seemed brighter, deeper than usual. “Oh, really.”

He nodded. “I’ve ‘seen’ and analyzed dueling programs,” Rye explained. “I have holovids of duels, and the last twenty Expos or so. But I’ve never been up close and personal, able to watch someone really… think through the fight, examine it from a combatant’s perspective. And it was you, and I’m
starting to understand how you think, so that aspect was even more fascinating,” he gushed, grinning as he scooted up the couch, his body intersecting with Azix’s. “And I’m starting to understand humanoid standards of attractiveness, I think, because watching that made me think of you as handsome in ways that weren’t necessarily objective.”

Az flushed, brows rising. “Yeah?” He wasn’t wholly certain whether he wanted to let himself be mollified by that or not, but if there was anything Jedi understood, it was ritualized tests – they measured their lives in ritualized tests, and many of them were tests of combat. So he couldn’t be THAT upset that Rye hadn’t intervened. Still, it felt nice to be a little offended and hold him accountable for leaving him to fend for himself.

Rye’s hand slid up his belly. Bare-chested, the sensation made him choke a little on his next lungful of smoke. It wasn’t just the near-indiscernible tingle of the lasers, but the weight of Rye’s intent, crystallized in The Force.

His intent was… um.

Az squirmed.

“Would have been nice if you’d let me know I wasn’t getting any help,” he muttered, clearing his throat so he could take another drag. “As a courtesy. I thought we were doing this together.”

“I thought you knew what was going on. I mean, I told you in those exact words - ‘this is a test’. That, and the fact that she didn’t kill you where you stood. She could have,” he pointed out. “From where I’m sitting that’s a dead giveaway.”

Az glowered and let his head fall back, smoke curling from between his lips. “If she’d been a real danger, would you have done anything?”

The slow caress of Rye’s hand stopped. He looked rather like Azix had hit him with a brick. “… Of course. I wouldn’t have let her actually hurt you,” he said, shifting so he could lean closer to Azix. “Why would you even ask that? I’ve been protecting you all this time, I don’t intend to stop now. In point of fact,” he added, offense creeping into his tone, “while you were squaring off, I was getting into the program so I could do the same things I did to Lord Sirrut’s mindscape if you needed my support. I was prepared; it just didn’t become necessary.”

Az looked at him for a long moment, then sighed. “I don’t know. I’m just… irritated, I guess. Maybe I expected that we’d actually take her down.” The heat of irritation was turning sour in his belly, feeling less righteous with every passing minute.

“I always wanted her cooperation,” Rye said softly, tracing his collarbone. “I was up front about that. Look, I think you’re just tired. That fight took a lot out of you, and you handled yourself very well. Lord Zihuratt was impressed.”

He snorted. “No, she wasn’t.” Furthermore, he didn’t care about impressing her. She was just Sith, after all, just an enemy, and they should have shredded her the way they’d shredded Sirrut.

“She has seen many students come and go, Azix. I don’t mean she was impressed because you’re ‘the greatest Force User who ever lived’,” Rye said, rolling his eyes, “I mean that she was impressed that you’ve obviously practiced the basics, that you were capable of analyzing and adapting to the course of the fight, and that you were willing to try new things and learn from your opponent’s responses. In other words,” he said, arching one brow spike, “she no longer feels you’re something that’s crawled out of her salad.”
“Wow, I’m thrilled,” was Azix’s dry reply, and Rye sat back.

“...I really think you need some rest. Something to eat too,” he said, gesturing at one of the hovering droids, which went off booping to itself. “I know you’re not feeling charitable toward me right now, but I meant what I said about how well you did. I appreciate everything you’ve done.”

That made a little shame curl in Azix’s belly. “Yeah,” he conceded in a grunt, “I think you’re right; I need to take a load off. It’s been a long day, we got some stuff done, we’ll pick it up tomorrow?”

“Definitely,” Rye agreed. He smiled softly and touched his cheek. “I’ll be right here keeping an eye on you.”

His eyes closed, feeling the tingle against his cheek. “Okay. I’m… sorry I snapped.”

“I’ll try to do better about keeping you in the loop. I think I can work up code to speak to you privately – it would feel a lot like telepathy,” he said. “I’ll do some work on that while you’re asleep. That way we can coordinate better. Agreed?” He leaned in and brushed his mouth across Azix’s forehead, and Az smiled.

“Yeah. Agreed. Thanks, Rye.”

“Have both of those,” Rye suggested, gesturing toward Azix’s cigarette. He scooted back down, but stayed there, reclining against the couch with his legs passing through Az’s.

Az closed his eyes and smoked his cigarette peacefully. He let himself relax, and come down from the adrenaline, and he didn’t see the way Rye was looking at him: with an anticipation that bordered on avarice as his insubstantial fingers traced the curve of his hip.

Chapter End Notes

So, now I’m curious. Do you guys actually enjoy this business of visiting different made-up sith lords in the holocrons, or is it boring and should I get back to the survival portion of the plot? Consider this an unofficial poll. Love to hear your thoughts.
“Was it the first time?”

Lord Zihurat’s voice was still ringing, but Rye wasn’t as affected since he could adjust his processing sensitivity on the fly. “The first I’ve seen. My observation is that this is a slow descent. He’s wracked with guilt, and fighting it, but a sentient being can only fight their essential nature so long.” He turned to face her. Her robes had been restored since the fight, and she was not carrying her swords. Which meant nothing, of course – this was her playground. She could turn the entire temple into swords if she wanted to. “He’ll be volatile while he makes the transition, and as you observed, we may very well lose him when we get off-world. You still want to proceed?”

“You have your purpose, little droid,” she said. “I have mine.”

“I. Am not. A droid,” Rye said, biting off the words with a hint of genteel sharpness. “My name is Rye, my lord. With due respect, I would appreciate being addressed as such.”

She turned those burning red eyes on him. “… Yes, of course. Times have changed. What is the meaning of RYE? That is not a binary designation.”

“It’s my name,” he replied. “It means me.”

She stared at him for another minute, then turned away just as he felt the download complete. They could have had this conversation instantaneously through data transfer, but she wasn’t truly a program any more than Rye was truly a Sith – she retained the biological need for environment, context, and face-to-face communication. Rye was humoring her in the hopes that their agreement would bear long-term dividends, and also out of a sense of courtesy. He was Imperial, after all; the niceties must be observed. “Very well. Our transfer is complete. I shall await you.”

“It won’t be long,” he assured her as he began to withdraw from her holocron’s access memory. “In fact, to the copy, it will feel like no time at all. I will keep my promise to send a salvage team if at all possible,” he said, and bowed to her. “Good day, my lord. And good luck.”

“May The Force serve you well,” she replied coolly. “And your Jedi pet serve you better.”

Rye sent her the impression of a disembodied, Cheshire smile. “Oh, don’t worry, my lord. I have Jedi Tsuva well in hand.”

Out in the real world, one of his probe droids, which had just dropped a bag of pretzels on Azix’s chest, disconnected his download jack. The temple disappeared.

Rye retreated to the depths of his own matrix and set about the next stage in his plan.

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Even though he knew it was coming, the sensation of water pressing down on him, filling his nose and making his eardrums ache, sent a thread of panic spiraling through Azix. He thrashed and felt the resistance against his arms, clawing for some sort of support.

Several things happened at once – his groping hands found the warm solidity of flesh, his own
clothes lightened and their drag vanished as his boots disappeared, allowing him to work his feet against the water, and soft plastic pressed against his mouth.

He opened up and let it in, pushing the water that leaked into his mouth back into the filter and sucking in a lungful of air with gratitude. Rye was there when he opened his eyes, his arm clutched in Azix’s hands. He looked more like he was floating in air than water, unaffected by the gentle surge of currents pulling Azix deeper into the shadows of a nearby kelp forest.

/How’s this?/ he whispered into Azix’s mind. It was a light touch, unobtrusive, and Az relaxed as he waved his arms and legs to stay in place. Rye had changed his clothes into a close-fitting wet suit. He felt the cold of the water against his hands and feet, but the rest of his body was pleasantly warm.

/Good. Thanks for keeping the volume down./ Az didn’t have any particular ability in Telepathy, and being on the receiving end always left him with a headache. He kicked himself closer to a crumbling stone wall and held onto it, looking out into the depths of the water. The darkness was near-total, tinged with the green of scattered light sticks that were overgrown with coral as if they had been there, shining, for years. That was impossible, of course – a real light stick lasted eight-to-twelve hours – but none of those rules mattered here. /I thought it’d be colder./

/Geothermal./ Rye sent. /Closer to the surface you get, the colder the water. Only extremophile bacteria lives in or around the ice layer. We’ll be staying down here for the duration of our visit./ Rye appeared to be flaunting his immunity to the demands of the mindscape by wearing regular clothing, which neither looked wet nor seemed to drag at him when he moved. He also wasn’t wearing a rebreather or headlamp, though he’d given one to Azix so a beam of warm, golden light followed the turn of his head. With a wave of his hand, he bestowed a set of fins on Azix as well, so he could keep an appreciable pace through the water.

/So where is this guy?/ A crumbled underwater courtyard stretched out in front of them, framed by collapsed portions of walls and a few statues smoothed into anonymity by the passage of currents. /And why do Sith always hang out in creepy abandoned places?/

/These Sith are psychic remnants of the originals, not computer programs./ Rye reminded him. /The environments are drawn from their memories, but unless they trap another individual in the holocron with them, they are, by necessity, alone. While they can shape their environment, I doubt they have the precision necessary to convincingly add companions to the program./ He smiled over his shoulder at Azix. /You can’t just MAKE a person, you know. Not one that seems real. Even for the most skilled programmers it takes decades of development, and the program needs the ability to learn and collect information to develop a unique personality. That ability would be restricted here./

He held out his hand. Azix took it, and Rye pulled him swiftly through the water, moving without resistance like a ghost. They left the courtyard and plunged into the kelp forest where visibility was nil – thanks to the writhing leaves, Az could barely see Rye in front of him as the AI was swallowed by the kelp. His grip was steady though, and Az tried to bat the plant life out of his way and push down a nauseating twist of claustrophobia. If he’d tried to move through this forest on his own, he quickly would have been reduced to groping in circles, unable to remember which way was up or which was out.

Rye didn’t hesitate though, and Az knew his perception of the boundaries of the mindscape was much better than his own, so he held on and trusted him.

The kelp thinned suddenly, and Az could see the rocky ground below them, scattered with native invertebrate growth. It led to a drop-off, which was lit by a sullen orange glow that Azix found very familiar.
It gets much warmer here, Rye warned. Be careful. Azix followed him to the edge and looked down into a molten crack in the world, a canyon as jagged as lightning with branches twisting off into the distance. Magma swelled at its root, thick as honey pooled in the depths, but the visibility was blurred by the layer of roiling water that only dropped below the boiling point a few hundred feet above the glow.

Why am I NOT surprised that a Sith Lord would choose to hang out here? Azix extended his hand above the trench and felt the sudden change in temperature. The water wasn’t too hot to stand, but it stung like the first step into a Jacuzzi.

Rye directed his eyes out over the cracked ground, to what looked like a small mountain surrounded by magma-lit trenches. There’s his palace. Be careful – the convection causes treacherous currents, and some of them will pull you right down into the cracks. He spun a rappel line into being and clipped it to Azix’s diving belt. So we don’t get separated. I’m afraid holding my hand may not be enough, but you’re still welcome to. He smiled, his face cast into spooky shadows by the molten light.

Az rolled his eyes, reeled him in, and slid his fingers between Rye’s. Then he kicked upward, putting some distance between them and the heat of the moon’s exposed mantle.

Rye had not been exaggerating the danger of the currents. At first the water was calm, but then it was like an invisible net wrapped around them and jerked them off their course, sweeping them toward the jagged rocks below. Rye held steady and Azix kicked hard and managed to get beyond it, recalling that the way to fight a current was to swim across, not against it. They managed to get out of that stream, but encountered another one further on, and another after that.

This is fucking... Azix cut off when he spun away, losing hold of Rye’s hand, and was roughly caught by the line. Rye patiently pulled him back in, and he kicked, writhing free of the current’s hold. This is evil genius. If the landscape doesn’t kill you, you’ll be too tired to put up a fight once you get there. Kriff.

If it was real, I’d wonder how he gets to the landing pad for groceries, Rye sent, amused. But I suppose this kind of security is much easier to implement when logistics aren’t a concern.

What IS he, Selkath? A much weaker current tugged at Az, but it was going in the direction he wanted to go, so he joined it. As they drew closer, they could see lights in the mountain, which was not a mountain at all, but a cluster of huge, twisted structures shaped like seashells. It might have been elegant if its curves had not been turned to jagged lumps by barnacles and coral growth.

Nautolan. Rye pulled them up higher as they approached the outermost tower.

Nautolan? Az hesitated, kicking his flippers out in front of him. I’ve never heard of a Nautolan sith.

Rye stopped and turned to face him, capturing his hand again. He was a Jedi who fell to the Dark Side, he said. He came searching for the ancient worlds of the Sith and wound up discovering the Empire. They rejected him because he was an alien, but he found a temple in the Outer Reaches with a master that would take him in. He became a warlord in his own right, expanding Sith conquest in this corner of space in the name of his master. He was something of a revolutionary, and trained over a dozen alien apprentices, believing that The Force was the great equalizer among its disciples, and mere mortals had no place discriminating against its chosen.

Azix shivered, looking at the strange, darkened castle. Jedi ideals of equality perverted to dark ends. I guess that’s... interesting.
There are progressives in the Empire, Rye sent, tugging him back into motion again. Equality, justice, freedom... the Jedi don't have a copyright on those ideals. The Sith Code itself is about breaking chains.

And yet the Sith are some of the biggest slavers in the galaxy.

And there are many who criticize that hypocrisy. Rye said patiently as the outer tower loomed before them. Transparisteel windows gleamed, lit from behind with a deceptively welcoming light.

More and more of them in power, of late, one of whom happens to be Darth Scion of House Ekari.

Az put a hand on the smooth, curved sill and turned on him. Is that supposed to make me feel better? he demanded, disbelieving. Sure, his apprentice tried to rape me, but hey, they're not slavers?

It's not--! Rye pursed his lips and visibly took a breath, despite there being no air. That's not what I was getting at. But this isn't really the time for that conversation. I just thought you should know Darth Krazzk was a Jedi once, and I STILL want his voluntary cooperation, so please don't antagonize him.

... I'll keep my mouth shut.

Azix let go of Rye's hand. The flash of hurt in Rye's eyes almost made him regret it, but then Rye turned away and swam downward into what looked like a verdant undersea garden protected by walls of stone blocks set over a coral-and-seawater cement core. The façade had crumbled in places, but the cement beneath was holding strong and even reinforced in places by the natural growth of new coral. Twisting, amorphous statues of gleaming shellac reflected the light from the windows as faintly as moonlight, in rich greens and purples. Objectively, it was quite beautiful, but to Azix it all felt foreboding.

There. Rye pointed to a pair of doors that seemed to have been made from thin slices of enormous seashells with transparisteel inlaid between the whorls. The natural patterns were striking and asymmetrical. They stood slightly open, as if the master of the house had just slipped inside for refreshments and would be back any minute. Rye swooped down to the doors and landed softly on the patio. Azix reeled himself in and landed behind him, struggling a little with his flippers until Rye dismissed them with a wave of his hand.

They stepped into a dark ballroom. The floor and walls gleamed like black pearl, and what looked like designs of lightning glass were scattered across the walls, lit from beneath, casting more shadows than they shed light. It was capsule-shaped, with doorways placed at seemingly random heights along the far curve of the wall, but Azix supposed the Z-axis was less of a tyrant here. Still, he had no instinctive understanding of the architectural flow of this kind of place, so he stared at those doors, stymied, unsure where to begin.

This way. Rye was already crossing the room toward a wide doorway that was more or less on their level. The door was also an oval, and reminded Azix of a scrying mirror he had seen once in the possession of a cunningwoman – curling, graceful designs lining its perimeter and reflective darkness within.

Rye had no concern for the architect's aesthetic. He summoned a ball of light from nowhere and sent it flitting along the hallway, lighting their pathway. Azix swam after him. The hall was relatively straight, and had obviously been intended to shuttle guests to the ballroom from the dining room, which was where they emerged next.

Why do you build something like this if you're never going to have any guests? Azix asked,
craning his neck to look around at the spacious room with sideboards and sconces lining the walls from floor to ceiling, and more of those twisting glass sculptures serving as lamps.

/He does have guests,/ Rye reminded him. /We’re guests, and so is anyone else who communies with his holocron. Let’s not linger; I know where to find him. This way./

/Is he going to treat us like guests?/ Azix wondered, kicking after him.

Rye raised a brow spur. /Why not? Everyone else has, at least at first. I think you underestimate the importance of civilized manners in the Empire./ He led the way through more tunnel-like hallways, never hesitating at corners or crossways, until they emerged in a large foyer with a ring of doors lit by a massive, but dim chandelier.

/This is the entry-way,/ Azix complained. /Why didn’t we just come in here?/

Rye threw him an annoyed and grabbed his shoulder, steering him roughly to one of the doorways. /THAT is why,/ he said primly.

The outside was a seething plain of red.
Looking closer, Azix saw that there was a path over the lava, which should have provided a safe tunnel to bypass the heat. But that didn’t mean bypassing the currents, and the pathway seemed too narrow for real safety. On either side of it, the ground yawned open, red-lit and pushing up swirls of super-heated water that had been flash-evaporated and then re-cooled on contact with the water around it. The small, twisting currents looked like sylphs waiting to dance travelers to their destruction, and Azix could just imagine trying to approach from that direction and being dragged out of the safety tunnel by a stray current, plunged into the super-heated water below and boiled alive.

/… Oh,/ Az sent sheepishly. /That’s why./

Rye gave him a pointed look and turned to survey the foyer. Hands on his hips, he considered his options, then floated to the door and pulled a chain attached to what looked like an enormous wind chime.

The sound that rippled outward shook the water and rattled Azix’s head. He clapped his hands over his ears and bit down on his rebreather, groaning into the mouthpiece as the echo faded.

One of the shadows peeled away from the wall and undulated toward them.

Darth Krazzk looked like one of the fabled monsters of the deeps. His skin was black, but the color looked somehow crumbly, matte, as if he hadn’t come by it naturally. A Nautolan’s eyes were usually glossy black or deep maroon, but his were as cracked as the ground outside and molten red seeped out from beneath like the lava vents. He was mottled with deep blue-violet and wine-colored spots that might have been beautiful if he’d looked healthier, and he was powerfully built, muscles rippling like a panther’s as he looped gracefully around them.

Also, he was naked. Azix winced and tried not to look at the nest of sucker-lined tendrils between his strong, dark thighs.

“/We greet you humbly, Krazzk, Dark Lord of the Sith, conqueror of Lorrnd and Cadomai, master of Ynath Two. I’m Rye./” His hand found Az’s shoulder. “/My companion is Azrahix Tsuva. We have come seeking your aid and wisdom./”

Krazzk circled them slowly. Those glowing cracks in his eyes gave him a crazed, unhinged look, but
his observation was methodical. “A prospective student and an artificial guide?” he said, thankfully in Basic because Azix didn’t speak Nautila and couldn’t perceive the pheromones necessary to understand it. “Fascinating.” His voice was a rich baritone, and seemed to thrum gently in the water. Azix was just glad it didn’t threaten to crack his eardrums like Lord Zihuratt’s. “You belong to the museum,” he said to Rye, who bowed in acknowledgement.

“You see truly, my lord. I am the artificial intelligence responsible for preserving the history of the Empire, and archiving and maintaining centuries of Sith knowledge.” Az thought Rye sounded faintly flattered to be recognized.

Darth Krazzk’s head tresses writhed in the water, and Azix knew he was scenting them, taking their measure. “It’s been some time since I had visitors. Nearly a century, if my timekeeping stands. But I believe you and I met then, when you were not quite so refined, and your name was ARC P7-I5.1.”

He might have been imagining it, but Azix thought Rye looked embarrassed. “I see your memory is keener than that of some of your peers,” Rye allowed. “Yes, that was me in a less… advanced form. The archives I safeguard are threatened. I’ve come to request your help.”

“So, he isn’t here to learn?” Krazzk wondered, swimming closer to Azix, who was still averting his eyes carefully from his nudity. “That’s disappointing. He feels new. Raw. Just at the right stage to be molded by a master, and it’s been so long since I had a student.”

/Tell him I prefer teachers who wear clothes,/ Az snapped at Rye, flushing in embarrassment and twisting away from Krazzk’s attention.

Rye put a hand over his mouth, politely concealing his amusement with a cough. “My lord, he’s… a bit modest. Perhaps…?” When Krazzk’s tendrils curled inquisitively, Rye gave a demure nod toward his exposed genitals.

Krazzk glanced down, then gave them both a look that might have been dry if the wild ferocity of those cracked eyes hadn’t ruined the effect. “Land-dwellers,” he grumbled, but then he waved a hand and simple black clothing covered his muscular body. It was almost Jedi in fashion, a sleeveless jacket and knee-length pants with a knotted belt at the waist, leaving his powerful arms exposed.

“Apologies, my lord,” Rye said. “Young people. It can be hard for them to concentrate when there’s such an… intimidating distraction present.”

Krazzk’s head-tendrils whipped in amusement, and he left Azix where he was floating, undulating over to where Rye hovered. “Very well, archivist. What exactly do you want?”

While Rye launched into the familiar explanation, Azix drifted around the perimeter of the foyer, taking a closer look at the decorations and peeking into the hallways. The walls were smooth to the touch, pearly-black, swallowing more light than they reflected. None of the hallways seemed lit. Azix supposed Darth Krazzk didn’t need light to navigate his own home.

“And I will do everything in my power to get Reclamations down here,” Rye was saying when Azix circled back around. “But there are no guarantees, and no telling what may be lost in the meantime. Will you allow me to backup your data?”

The low rumble he gave in response thrummed through the water, and Az kicked closer to Rye, unsure how much use he’d be as a combatant in this environment. As it turned out, he needn’t have worried.

“You may,” Krazzk said, “On one condition.”
“Name it, my lord,” Rye said.

Krazzk folded his arms across his chest. “I’ve remained here, hidden away and apparently obsolete, for far too many years. I assume this is because of my species. If you take a copy of my teaching programs out into the galaxy, I require that you use them. Spread my teachings anew, and bring the fire of revolution back to inhuman Sith.”

“There have been changes in the Empire,” Rye assured him. “You would face less prejudice if you were teaching today. Of course, if your wisdom truly is obsolete, I’m afraid there wouldn’t be much I could do. Progress marches on, as you know. But I will definitely agree to make your teaching available to parties who might be interested.”

“Such as this one?” Krazzk smiled at Azix, and every one of his teeth was sharp.

Rye glanced sidelong at Azix. “I think this environment might be a bit too hostile for him, my lord. He is a land-dweller, as you so aptly pointed out.”

“Nonsense.” Krazzk waved his hand and the water around them vanished, replaced with a seething blue-green sky shot through with white and purple. Azix toppled to a shelf of crunchy, snow-covered ice, grunting as his exposed hands and feet slid through the crust. “The environment is what I say it is.”

Rye arched a brow, and Az sighed in relief as more appropriate cold-weather gear wrapped around him in a rush of warmth. He pushed himself to his feet and pulled the mouthpiece out just before it disappeared, glowering at Darth Krazzk.

“I don’t need a Sith teacher,” he bit off. Rye winced.

Krazzk blinked at him. “No? Interesting.” Standing on solid ground his height was even more obvious, and he towered over Azix, still wearing the same cut-off clothing. “I had taken you for one of us. But perhaps I am mistaken, or things have changed among students of the Dark Side…?”

His stomach lurched. “I’m NOT a student of the—“

“Azix is an ally and a friend,” Rye interjected, moving to grab Azix by the shoulder of his soft new heated coat. “But he isn’t Sith.”

“Well, he’s obviously not a Jedi,” Krazzk said, and Az’s teeth ground together.

“What in Hoth do you mean, ‘obviously’?” he growled.

Krazzk shot a glance at Rye, then seemed to reconsider whatever he’d been about to say. “I sense great potential in you,” he allowed. “Anger, grief, and passion. Perhaps the Jedi have changed too, since I met my end. Anything’s possible.”

Azix’s stomach lurched again, and he swallowed against it. “No. No, the Jedi haven’t changed. I might… I might be a little off-track right now.” He ground his teeth at the way Krazzk’s molten eyes widened in surprised disbelief. “But I’m still a Jedi. And if you’ve got a problem with that, then we can resolve it right here.”

“Az.” Rye’s tone was a warning. “We didn’t come here to fight.”

“Well, what the blazes does he mean?” Az demanded, breath billowing in heated clouds against the frigid air. “OBVIOUSLY not a Jedi? I’m not even wearing that, that Sith crap you always try to put me in!” He plucked at his coat in demonstration – Rye had given him cold-weather gear in a fairly
typical dark blue and white, the type anyone on Hoth or Ilum might wear regardless of their political affiliation.

“You’re angry,” Krazzk rumbled, easing closer, making Azix bristle.

“Damn right I’m angry,” he growled back. “And if you and Rye are just going to discuss terms, I’m getting out of here. Dealing with Sith makes me sick,” he spat, snarling in Krazzk’s face.

Rye palmed his forehead and rubbed his brow spurs. “Emperor’s mercy,” he mumbled. “My lord, please excuse--”

Krazzk’s hand shot out, and unerringly found Azix’s throat even through the fluff and bulk of his coat’s lining, squeezing until cartilage crackled.

“… You’re not going to excuse him. Right then. My lord, please don’t make this a….”

“I’m not going to kill your friend, archivist,” Krazzk growled deep in his chest like a vorn tiger. “I just want a closer look.” He lifted, sliding his other hand into Azix’s belt to hoist him off his feet with ridiculous ease.

Azix slammed his fist into the side of Krazzk’s head. Krazzk barely flinched, and gave him a shake in response. His lightsaber dislodged and fell to the snow.

“Do you want to kill me, boy?” Krazzk asked, digging his fingers in until the pressure made Azix go lightheaded. He kicked out, driving his boot into Kazzk’s stomach and gaining a rough grunt for his trouble. “That’s the trouble, isn’t it? Going around, making nice with all these historic Sith, long since dead… you hate us,” he rumbled as Azix struck out, fists and feet hammering against his bulk without any appreciable effect. “You’d like to kill just one of us and sate that hatred, wouldn’t you? The fire inside you wants blood.” He chuckled and gave Az a shake that rattled his teeth. “You’re more like us than you think.”

Az choked against the pressure of his fingers, and clapped one hand around his wrist. His eyes felt staticky, like the moment before a lightning strike. “Get. The FUCK. Off me,” he snarled. His fingers crackled.

Krazzk dropped him on his ass, and laughed deeply as he snatched his lightsaber and scrambled to his feet. “Jedi, are you? That electricity says different. Be at ease,” he added as Azix stepped into ready stance and his borrowed saber blazed to life. “I was just curious. I understand the turmoil inside you, young one. I’ve stood where you stand now, on the edge of finding your calling, clinging to teachings of morality that never rang true in your soul. We are alike.”

“That’s not true.” Az’s breath was coming shaky, stuttering between his teeth as he held the buzzing saber in front of him. “I admit it – I’ve got a temper. A bad one, maybe. It gets worse the longer I’m on this shit-hole planet. But morals? No.” He braced his feet into a better stance and squeezed the saber’s hilt. “I believe in freedom. I believe in equality, and justice. I didn’t need the Jedi to teach me that.”

Darth Krazzk laughed, and the ice cracked ominously, shifting under Az’s feet. “Naïve child. What do you think I was fighting for?”

“AZRAHIX.” As it turned out, Rye could make his own voice like the crack of a whip when he wanted to. “It’s done. It’s a deal. Get out of here before you piss off someone who won’t be satisfied with putting you on your arse.”

Krazzk laughed. “Yes. Run along, little Jedi, while you still can.”
Azix wasn’t about to accept dismissal, but then gravity twisted and warped, the icy surface of the moon faded away, and he jerked back into his own body sprawled on the couch. The holocron, deep blue glass that seemed to shift inside with the movements of some hidden leviathan, slid off his chest and dangled from Rye’s upload cord.

He stared at it for a long moment, breath shivering out of his lungs as his heart throbbed against his ribs. The temptation to smash it to pieces was overwhelming. And after that, maybe he’d smash the rest of those cursed pyramids sitting in neat rows on the desk. And after that, the couch, the security screens – breaking glass would be really satisfying – and tip over the lockers.

/What the fuck is wrong with me?/ He brushed the holocron back onto the couch and sat up, rubbing his hands over his head. Kneading his scalp didn’t help much, and he exhaled through his teeth, swinging to his feet and grabbing his lightsaber as he headed for the door.

Rye appeared in his path. “Az? Where are you going?”

“Look.” Azix walked right through his projection,shouldering his way to the door. “I’m going stir crazy. I need to blow off some steam. I need… I need to wreck something and you’re not letting me wreck anything. I won’t go far.”

“Az!” Rye called sharply.

Azix stopped and looked over his shoulder, trying to force down the flame inside that wanted him to snap at Rye again. This time, Rye hadn’t sent the chassis to stop him, and was merely watching him, frowning in concern.

“She’s more sithspawn out there.” Rye rubbed his insubstantial hands on his insubstantial pants. “And be careful. Don’t knock a mountain on your head. Or mine.”

He closed his eyes, rubbing his fingers against the grip of the lightsaber. “I don’t know what’s wrong with me,” he breathed.

When he opened his eyes Rye was right there, hands sliding along his cheeks, brushing his forehead against Azix’s. “I do. This world is getting to you. You’ve done so well so far, but you’re fighting yourself. That’s bound to make anyone a little unstable. Vent if you need to,” he suggested. “But then… consider trying to find peace?”

Az sagged against him, but Rye wasn’t there, so he just slumped against the wall, smacking his forehead lightly against it. “I CAN’T. There’s no peace out there, no Light,” he whispered. “I don’t know how to get out. Everything’s just darkness and the rage he left behind…..”

“Not the light.” Rye wrapped his arms around him, intersecting his laser-etched form with Azix’s. “You won’t find it. But there’s peace in darkness too, if you can accept yourself.”

“I thought peace was a lie,” Az whispered, and Rye smiled, stroking his fingers over his head.

“Because to exist is a struggle. But you can take control of these things you’re feeling now,” Rye said. “Turn those weapons on your enemies, not on yourself. Master your passions. Don’t make the mistake most Jedi make, letting them master you. YOU are in control,” he said, his static touch moving down to Azix’s neck. “You decide. And no matter how deep into the Dark you may sink, you are still responsible. Think about that, while you’re figuring things out.”

“I…” His free hand clenched against the wall. “I don’t want to sink. Not really. I…”
“It’s not that you don’t want to sink,” Rye said, nuzzling him. “You don’t want to drown. And I’m telling you: you don’t have to. Swim.” One hand slid up Azix’s bare back, tracing his spine. “Stop thrashing, pick a direction, and swim.”

“I don’t know how to do that.” Az let out all his air and deflated, sinking to the thin carpet. Rye went with him, even though he wasn’t substantial enough to provide any physical support. “Everything is so mixed up. I can’t figure it out… it’s like it’s all knotted up, and no matter which string I follow it just goes right back into the knot.” He rubbed the heel of his hand against his head, voice cracking. “AM I fallen, Rye? I don’t want to be fallen….”

“You are whatever you want to be,” Rye told him firmly. “Listen. Fallen is just a word the Jedi came up with to describe anyone who doesn’t toe their line. Sith don’t use that word. You don’t FALL into the Dark, all right? You walk in with your eyes wide open. You’re acting like none of this is under your control but it IS,” he insisted, brushing his mouth over Azix’s cheek. “It ALL is. Take. Control. Understand?” His shimmering crimson eyes found Azix’s. “Take it.”

Az swallowed hard. He nodded.

“Right then. I’ll be keeping an eye out. Watching your back.” Rye touched him again, without touching. “When you come back, come see me at home, okay? Maybe I can help lift some of this weight off you.”

He gave a fractured smile at that, and nodded again, taking a breath and pushing himself back to his feet. “Okay. Thank you.” He leaned in and nuzzled the spot where Rye’s cheek appeared to be.

“I know this is hard.” Rye smiled at him. “But you’re not the only person who’s ever been through it. Deep breaths, okay? Swim.” Rye’s form vanished from the back forward, the fingertips lingering on his face the last to disappear.

He heaved a sigh. /Swim./ Right.

The wall was still broken open. It was the closest exit, and Azix hopped up the sloping rubble, lifting his head into the ashen breeze. He’d almost forgotten the devastation outside. Rye had been immersing him in so many diverse landscapes with such realism, he’d let himself ignore where he really was and how much danger he was in. The air smelled like charred remains, and the wind whistled hollowly over the volcanic rock. Everything blasted, gray and black, colorless… in the distance, clouds gathered in slow rotation.

It looked like a real storm was coming.

Az hooked the lightsaber onto his belt and searched for a place to climb the cliff. He took the collapsed temple obelisk part of the way up, then free-climbed the rest, taking his time and searching out the easiest route that never required more than three points of contact because he could only use three out of five fingers on his broken hand. He hauled himself over the top, grunting as the sharp facets of the rock dug into his stomach, and found a boulder to sit on and contemplate the vast stretch of seething sky above him.

He massaged his throat and felt the ache of Darth Krazzk’s iron-like fingers.

/Swim./

He felt like those clouds – tense and boiling, drawing together for an explosion. He ignited his lightsaber and got up, crossing to the nearest ground rise where a couple of blasted trees still stood, sifting ash into the wind.
They barely put up even a token resistance to his lightsaber, and exploded into black crumbles when he hacked them to the ground.

He vented his rage on the rocks. His lightsaber sang as the blade dug into the black stone, and his muscles burned, giving him a sense of accomplishment that a holocron couldn’t replicate. The rock melted against the plasma and stank like lava, hot and burnt and earthy. When he’d managed to slice through a sizable chunk, Azix deactivated the saber and stood, gathering himself.

There was strength in the Darkness. He could feel it there. It would fill his limbs and give him the power he needed, if only he would stop fighting it. Taking a deep breath, he thought of Darth Krazzt’s smugness and he let himself feel enraged by it, by his presumption, acting like he understood Azix when really he was just a fucking traitor who’d turned his back on everything good and meaningful…

Az screamed as he slammed his fist into the side of the mountain, and a deafening crack echoed from the surrounding canyons. The stone stirred, then shifted, then spilled gravel. He shook his hand out – no broken bones this time – and watched as a hunk of rock the size of a taxi peeled away from the mountainside and tumbled downward, shattering as it bounced off the cliff. The biggest, most solid piece pulverized the ground under it when it hit, suffering one more crack, but remaining primarily intact.

When Azix had been a novice training at the temple on Tython, he had spent weeks meditating for six hours at a time in shifts, searching for the calm and peace required to lift rocks. He’d fought his own feelings – his fears, his misgivings, his doubt – until he could wrap them up into a tight knot and shove them deep in his belly where they couldn’t stop him from achieving his goals. He’d argued with his teachers after failure after failure, despair growing as the disappointment and mistrust showed in their eyes. He was too tempestuous. He was too undisciplined. He was a risk, he might fall, with that impatience and that temper….

Tears leaked, streaking the light coating of ash on his face. He reached down with that grief, that conviction that he had fallen after all, that he had lost everything he’d worked for his whole life, that in the end he’d proven them all right and he was unworthy, and he YANKED.

The two cracked pieces of the boulder at the bottom of the canyon sailed upward as if they’d been bounced from a trampoline, spinning gently, slowing their ascent at the crest and then dropping with increasing speed until both of them shattered on impact. He reached out to the rubble he’d created on the mountaintop and it swept off the ground as if his will was a tornado, forming a pelting storm of sharp-edged stones and blinding dust. The harder he breathed, the more he let himself rage at his circumstances and choked on sobs of regret, the faster the cyclone and the harder the stones pelted the ground, carving shallow furrows as they whipped around him in a deadly circle of hail.

This was why the path to the Dark Side was quick and easy. All you had to do was find the chaos inside and let it out, inflict your own turmoil on your environment. It was selfish and satisfying and nothing was easier. The impulse came naturally – he was hurting, so other people should hurt. They should recognize and acknowledge his pain. He shouldn’t be alone in this, struggling to keep his head above water, lost in a Dark Side nexus and left behind by the people who should have cared about him.

The wind picked up as he vented, lashing out, scattering gravel and beating the stone into submission. He needed to feel exhausted, needed to purge this rage so he could be the partner Rye needed him to be. /You control your feelings,/ Rye had told him, /They don’t control you./

Ironically, it was much the same thing the Jedi had been telling him all his life, but he was tired of keeping himself clamped down and hollow. He was tired of being in control.
By the time the wind was pulling at him in earnest, he’d taken nearly ten feet off the top of the mountain, lashing out with The Force and crumbling rock, sending boulders tumbling down the opposite side of the mountain, still careful not to let his actions damage the temple. Sometimes he hacked at the rock with the lightsaber. Other times he reached out with his emotions and felt the stone shatter under the force of his feelings. That rush of power, the knowledge that he could do this, was intoxicating… he’d never been this strong of a telekinetic when he was working with the Light.

It was strange, but doing this made him feel… real. Like he wasn’t imagining things. Like these things that were tearing him apart were legitimate, relevant, not something that he should just dismiss or stuff away or divorce himself from. No one was around to validate his emotions, and yet, leaving a vicious scar on the landscape of Ziost made him feel SEEN.

Soft boops of distress dragged his focus away from the pile of gravel he was creating. He saw one of Rye’s hovering droids struggling against the wind, fighting its way toward him, and went to meet it.

“This is a recording. You’re too far away for me to transmit to the droid directly,” the droid advised him in Rye’s voice. “Ambient sensors are picking up an incoming storm. I don’t think it’s the natural kind – there are too many energy fluctuations involved with the pressure changes in the atmosphere. This could be bad. I advise coming back to shelter.”

Az frowned and gave the storm some real consideration. It was growing bigger, stretching over nearly half the horizon now, and the clouds had a green tinge that looked violent. Even as he watched, that circle where the clouds joined and mixed together was spinning faster, and began to extend the first hints of a funnel toward the ground.

“Got it. Get inside.” Azix reached over and patted the droid fondly. “Tell Rye I’m not afraid of the storm, and I’ll be back in… let’s say fifteen minutes.”

The droid thought that was a stupid plan, and told him so. Azix couldn’t translate the binary, but he understood the tone well enough. Still, it swooped back down toward the temple, and Azix found a spot on the edge of the cliff to sit cross-legged, settling his lightsaber hilt in his lap.

He’d done meditation exercises on any number of natural phenomena before – on rivers, waterfalls, mountains, trees. He remembered being young and in training, and wanting to meditate on a thunderstorm that had rolled in over the mountains to batter the temple. His instructors had cautioned him against it, because there was chaos in the storm, and that chaos, they said, could pull him out of himself. He would be carried away on spiritual winds and dashed against spiritual rocks if he couldn’t maintain control, and there was a good chance, they said, that he couldn’t. He’d been disappointed, because the storm seemed to speak to him, whispering of great things. But he’d obeyed. All his life he’d loved watching storms, and all his life he’d felt a peculiar kinship with the pounding winds even more than the lightning and the thunder, but he’d obeyed.

He began the breathing rhythm that would help him drop into a meditative state, reaching for the nascent tornado in The Force. Lightning crackled around its crown, sending slow ripples of thunder through the atmosphere. The taste of it made him reel, swaying where he sat – his masters had been right, this was PURE chaos, a knot of Dark Side rage and violation that could only find peace by beating itself out, just like him. He let the winds carry him, spread through the storm, gasping for air as his awareness leaped across miles and miles of blasted wasteland. He felt the rain coming down on the plains, black, pulling soot and ash from the atmosphere and pounding it into the ground. It swept toward him like a curtain of darkness, and he could almost hear the roar of it as it approached from the horizon.

This was the devastation Vitiate left in his wake, ravaged and hollow just like him.
Tasting ash and hatred the storm winds, he regretted the message he’d sent to Rye. This would likely take more than fifteen minutes. Crackling from cloud to cloud, the lightning wasn’t reaching for the ground. It passed back and forth between spots in the atmosphere that burned with electrical charge. It crackled across his skin too, crawling in thread-thin arcs over his arms and shoulders as he let the storm overtake all his senses and matched his pounding heart to its fury.

And he soared.

Chapter End Notes

Loving all the comments, and the theorizing! It's so rewarding when folks pick up on foreshadowing! I promise next chapter I'll have a real reward for all of you.

I also really love Darth Krazzk. I should bring him back, don't you think? Or maybe I should write a story about him when he was alive. I think he's got some stories to tell.
Chapter 18

Well, I promised y'all a reward, and here it is. I hope I built this up sufficiently to make it a satisfying catharsis. This also means I've finally caught up my chapter posting to what I've actually got written, which means y'all will have to wait for me to write more before any more will be posted. Cheers!

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Time slipped away while Azix rode the storm.

The sky was pitch black when he came back to himself, dazed and spent to his core. He felt bruised all over, like he’d run a marathon obstacle course, and there was a hot ache in his belly like he’d been worked up to the edge of a mind-blowing orgasm and then denied satisfaction. He stared at the clouds, unsure whether the darkness was due to the storm or because night had rolled in while he’d been otherwise occupied. Despite the ache, he had that post-sex sanguinity hanging heavy in his limbs, and motivation to get himself up off the ground was hard to find.

Eventually he forced himself to move, rolling, crawling upright, then peering over the edge. The temple appeared to have weathered the storm more or less intact – a few more of the statues in the courtyard had broken or been overturned but the roof was still on, and the other obelisks were all upright. Azix took a deep breath, feeling that need warm in his belly, and reached for The Force, then stepped off the edge.

Gravel rattled as the air puffed away from his landing point, The Force catching him several feet above the ground and lowering him gently the rest of the way. All the edges in his vision seemed even sharper, more defined, despite the darkness. That weightless feeling hadn’t left him yet.

He found himself smiling as he hopped lightly up the hill of rubble next to the wall, muscles burning in a warm, almost pleasant way, and jumped down onto the gritty carpeting.

“Rye,” he called as he ducked into the darkness of the museum’s hallways, “I’m back. Sorry I’m late.” There was no immediate response, and he moved in further, tracking black water across the carpets – without the roof over the collapsed section, the rain had come in and flooded the hall. “Rye? You all right?”

Admittedly, he’d been a little out of it while he’d been communing with the storm, but he’d retained enough intelligence to try to guide lightning strikes away from his body and from the temple. He didn’t think Rye could have gotten hurt by a power surge… unless one had come in from wiring outside the temple? Or the water had flooded wherever his servers were kept, or the museum’s generators, and sent the surge up the lines? He picked up his pace, feet squelching in the wet carpet as he jogged back toward the security lounge.

The lights in the lounge were off. Rye’s holocron sat on the table, a little ways apart from the rest, and Azix went straight to it. It still felt like him, a cold, mechanical darkness. Az reached out to touch him in The Force, and shivered at the intimacy of it. “Rye. You here? Come on, talk to me.”

There was a flicker in his peripheral vision. Then Rye’s holoprojection appeared.
Az winced. He looked pissed.

“Fifteen minutes,” he said with that angry Imperial precision biting off the edges of his words. “Fifteen minutes, you said. That bloody well was not fifteen minutes!”

“I know, I’m sorry. I lost track of time.” He moved in and hugged the spot where Rye’s projection was standing. “Can I come in? I want to talk to you.”

“I should kick your arse for putting me through that,” Rye growled. “And I can’t very well do it out here. Come on, then. I’ll meet you in the library.”

“Meet me in my room,”Azix said, smirking as he stepped away from the hologram and laid his hand over the artifact. He was still flying, so it was easy to sink back into that meditative state and push himself into the holocron’s mindscape.

Rye was waiting for him there, wearing plain, black sleep clothes in that deliciously soft fabric, looking like a ruffled cat. “Fine,” he snapped. “I’m here. Do you mind telling me what in hoth you thought you were doing, parking yourself in the open in the middle of a—MPH!”

Azix’s hands slid around his lean waist and he pulled him in, sealing his mouth over Rye’s, plunging his tongue between his teeth to drag against his and devouring his taste. Rye’s eyes went wide, and Az could practically feel his head swimming as he tightened his grip, wrapping strong arms around the smaller pureblood, crushing him against the firm warmth of his body. “Mmm… I’m sorry,” he whispered against Rye’s mouth, backing off just enough to suck hard on his lower lip, digging his teeth into it. That felt right, and the urge to bite was so strong he had to shake himself to brush it off.

“Are you okay? You didn’t get hit by a surge, did you?”

“As a matter of fact, I bloody well did,” Rye muttered, subsiding a little as Azix kept kissing him, one hand sliding up into his hair to knead his head soothingly. “One of the servers is fried. Not all of them, thank the Force, but we don’t see storms like this on Zioist. Surge protectors weren’t up to the task. If I hadn’t… mph… completed my download already I’d have lost… terabytes of data… will you—??… dammit, Azix, what’s gotten into you?” he demanded, squeaking a little as Az picked him up and walked him over to the nearest wall, then pinned him there so he could plunder his mouth even deeper.

“Can I pleasure you?” He wasn’t just asking for permission. Rye didn’t have a physical body, per se, so there was no guarantee anything he did to this representation of him would make any sense to his matrix. The holocron was ‘translating’ many physical sensations, for lack of a better term, but the kind of stimulation Azix was hoping for might have been well beyond its ken. “Will you feel it? Or like it?”

“I… I thought you wanted to slow it down,” Rye protested, squirming as Az slid his hands under that delightful, inviting fabric to caress his crimson skin.

“I’m so fucking high,” he groaned into the redhead’s neck. “I want things. I want you. But if you don’t want to, I’ll stop. I want to be with you for real, Rye.” He exhaled, dragged his teeth over the flutter of Rye’s pulse, and felt something dark and hungry twist within him when Rye hitched.

“Well… I suppose I’m… flattered,” he stammered as Azix’s hands mapped the bumps of his ribs and the soft give of his belly. “You… you understand I’ve relatively little data… nph… regarding physical re… relations…” He sucked in a breath when Az kneaded his hips and sucked hard on the underside of his jaw, near one of his spurs. “If it feels good to you, it will feel good to me. I’ll feel what you feel in The Force, if you let me. But it won’t be… it wouldn’t be my sensations, per se. I don’t mind. I’m happy to… whatever you… OH,” he groaned when Azix plucked at his ear with his
“So if I took you,” he growled, “You’d feel like you were taking someone, not being taken. Is that it?”

“I… yes, I think so. As far as I know. But if that’s what you want, I don’t mind, I’ve seen it done, there’s plenty of….”

“No. I know what to do.”

“… I could make it feel right for you, I think,” Rye was still babbling, squirming as Azix’s hand slid down into the waistband of his pants. “I’ve enough biological information to extrapolate the sensory…”

“Rye,” Az whispered into his ear, caressing his cock and receiving no real response for it besides continued arching and stuttering, “shut up.” He took one of Rye’s hands, guided it to his own groin, and ground against it through his pants, groaning as he pushed into his palm. “Like this. Feel?”

His pleasure rippled between them, and Rye’s mouth fell open. “Oh. I… yes.”

“Good. Touch me. I’ll touch you. Same thing, same feel. Get it?”

“That’s… that’s very logicOH, fuck,” Rye groaned as he squeezed Azix’s hardness and felt the rush of pleasure from it.

“Good,” Az moaned, voice cracking as Rye’s fingers slid up his shaft through the fabric. “That’s good, Ry….” He went back to devouring his neck, sucking, biting, determined to leave a few marks on Rye’s skin even if no one would ever see them. “Will your… skin bruise?” he panted, “from me doing this?”

“If you want it to,” Rye moaned, head falling back against the wall, rocking up into Azix’s hand even as Az rocked into his. “I’ve s-seen… hickies, right? I can do that…”

He growled and dragged his teeth down the softness behind his ear. “Do that.”

“Ye-es!” he agreed, squeaking a little as Az shoved his weight against him, crushing their knuckles together and rolling his hips for a more intense grind. Even though Rye couldn’t feel it, he gorged himself on his skin, kneading his fingers over his cock. His erection didn’t grow like it should have – it was like an afterthought, like Rye remembered, oh right, he was supposed to be hard too, and made the change, and his cock swelled abruptly in Azix’s hand. But Azix was more than willing to forgive him for his inexperience. Purebloods had ridges, he found as he groped and squeezed him, hand sliding down to cup his balls as his wrist rubbed along the shaft. Rye was learning from him, mimicking his movements, but he didn’t go for skin-to-skin contact until Azix yanked his own sweats down and directed his hand.

The change in sensation made them both gasp, and Rye’s head thunked back against the wall. “OH, Az,” he breathed, and Azix showed him what to do, how to tease the slit and drag the soft skin over the shaft, how to rub the spot at the root just right and tease his fingers behind his ball sack to soothe the ache in his groin. Everything he did made Az gasp and moan and thrust harder against him, and Rye absorbed that spillover, his own soft cries mingling with Az’s as they rocked together against the wall. His throat hummed under Azix’s mouth, purpling as he sucked and dug his teeth into his skin. Azix kneaded Rye right under his spade-shaped tip, and Rye’s fingers dragged his foreskin up over the swell of his own cockhead, earning a growl and a snap of his hips against his soft palm.

“Right here?” Rye whispered, tugging on that sensitive sheath. “Like this?”
“Harder,” Azix growled, and gave in to the urge to suck on one of those spurs, which drew a surprised cry from Rye. He rubbed Rye harder too, sliding his fingers along those angled ridges, making his balls bounce with the force of his strokes. Rye got the message, and Az shuddered against him, burrowing deeper into his heat.

“Close,” he whispered. “You’re… gonna wanna feel this….” He reached out more, but had to trust Rye to do most of the work, sinking mental fingers into him and pulling them even closer together as that tight pressure built and his nails dragged hard down Rye’s back and found ridges there too, V-shaped, spread across his back. Rye gasped at the surge in the strength of the sensations and worked Azix roughly, hooking his other arm around his neck and hanging on as his body thudded against the wall with each hungry thrust. He undulated, riding the waves of pleasure he felt from his partner, taking it into himself and giving breathy cries of shock and ecstasy as Az’s emotions flushed hot against his skin and seeped in, penetrating every artificially constructed nerve.

When Azix came, he shoved Rye against the wall so hard that the wood rattled, and something behind them toppled to the floor with a crash. Az cried out, and Rye screamed, a sound dragged from his throat as he felt the pleasure tighten and burst, spilling recklessly across his palm and his wrist, trickling sticky and hot between his fingers as he frantically jerked Azix’s cock against his own. Azix sank into it, and into him, letting him work him as hard and as long as he could take, shudders wracking his shoulders as he slid his hand under Rye’s ass and hoisted him up so he could keep thrusting against him until the strength went out of his legs.

When it ended, he groaned and melted like someone pulled his plug, leaning heavily against Rye’s heat, keeping him trapped against the wall. Not that he gave any indication of minding.

They both caught their breath, an affectation he found charming in his lover… he knew it wouldn’t have meant anything if Rye seemed unaffected, but on an emotional level, he would have felt deprived if Rye hadn’t ended this seeming as wrecked as Azix felt.

“You okay?” he whispered, pressing soft kisses along his shoulder. Rye’s head rested on his chest, and his breath brushed over his skin in warm gusts. His chest thrummed with a soft purr.

“Fine,” he whispered back.

Az slowly extracted his hand from Rye’s pants and found his skin coated with thick, creamy fluid. He smiled. “This for me?”

Rye gave a very soft growl. “You,” he exhaled, “forced me to compute the chemical composition of pureblood semen on the fly to accurately replicate the scent and the viscosity….”

Oh? Well then. Azix lifted his hand and took a breath of that scent. “Fuck,” he groaned, rubbing his nose against his wrist where he’d been grinding it against Rye’s cock. “That’s….”

“I’m glad YOU’RE pleased,” Rye grumbled, and Az had to laugh.

“Were you? Sounded like you were. Even looked like you were. But tell me the truth.” He eased back, letting Rye put his feet flat on the floor again and bumping his forehead against his brow spurs. “Was there anything in that for you to enjoy?”

Rye nodded and surrendered a little, nuzzling him. “I felt you,” he said simply. “I felt everything. It… I understand better now. Especially at the end,” he whispered, pressing closer to Azix, nuzzling against his shoulder. “When you were really… communing with ME, not just with the holocron….”

He heaved a sigh. “I’m not entirely sure how to process it. Not even how to BEGIN. That was… outside my experience.”
“How do you feel now?” He kissed the marks Rye had let him leave along his neck, both hands sliding around him to support him.

Rye gave a soft chuckle. “I still feel like you feel… my heartbeat is SO hard, painful, it’s like… nph.” He sagged in Azix’s arms, and Az smiled, pressing against him, swaying a little as he closed his eyes and just held onto him.

They stayed there for a long moment before Az thought maybe this wasn’t as comfortable as they could be, and pulled back to kiss Rye’s cheekbone. “Can I sleep here?”

“I think you could use it.”

He smiled. “Will a piece of you stay with me?”

Rye’s eyes widened a little, but he gave a ghost of a smile and nodded. Az backed away and tugged him back toward the doorway to the bedroom Rye had arranged for him. “Get us something to clean up with, would you?” Az suggested, and a large porcelain bowl and pitcher full of water appeared on the nightstand.

He dragged Rye into bed with him and kissed him while he helped him clean up, renewing the bruises on his lower lip. His thumbs traced the thin ridges along his cheekbones. The sheets were soft and warm, and the pillows firm and cool. Azix kicked off his pants and, when Rye didn’t protest, stripped him too so he could feel every inch of him when they tangled together under the covers. The duvet was overstuffed enough that it formed a snug cave over the two of them, and Azix burrowed down into it, hands roaming over Rye’s body, drinking in the soft, crimson gleam of his eyes.

“Where did that come from?” Rye wondered, sliding a hand up Azix’s chest, seeming almost shy now that they’d actually consummated the tension between them.

For his part, Azix couldn’t stop smiling like an idiot and skimming his hands along Rye’s back, tracing the lean muscles and the bumps of his spine, the ridges between his shoulders. “All my life, I was told not to do that. Ride the storm, I mean, though what we just did was pretty forbidden too. It was amazing, Rye. SO much power. I felt… I can’t even describe how I felt.”

“Lucky your ridiculous arse didn’t get struck by lightning,” Rye muttered against his chest. Az squeezed him and rubbed his fingers through his hair.

“I’m fine. I’m sorry the surge got you. I tried to keep it away.”

“Not your fault. Would have happened with or without you,” Rye conceded a bit grumpily. “But you should know, I won’t be able to go back to my previous servers now. This is where I live,” he said, sighing, settling against Azix’s chest. “For better or worse. And there could be worse on the way.”

“I know.” Az nuzzled his forehead, breathing his scent. “We’ll get out of here. Tomorrow, let’s try to get three holocrons done. Get through them as fast as possible. Maybe you could even just bring me in if there’s trouble, that way I don’t have to chat with every Sith who just wants to mock me a few times before they agree.”

“Darth Krazzk wasn’t mocking you.”

“He was mocking me.”

Rye huffed. “He was trying to communicate with you, but you have no sense of humor worth mentioning, and you took offense.”
“He’s a traitor, and I don’t need to learn anything from him.” Az gave Rye a kiss that implied finality. “But you’re right, I let him get to me. I’ll be better about that. Up there….” He took a deep, cleansing breath, squeezing Rye tighter and cuddling against him. “It’s just a whole different perspective, Ry. Something I’ve been missing all my life.”

“Is that my nickname now?” he asked dryly. “Rye really wasn’t short enough for you?”

Azix laughed and cupped his cheek, thumb tracing his lips. “Do you not like it? I’ll quit. Nicknames are a sign of affection, y’know.”

“I DO know. And I don’t hate it. But I’m not sure I want anyone else to presume they can use it,” Rye allowed, eyes rolling a bit. “Just between us, then.” Az dipped his head and kissed him again, deep and greedy, coaxing his tongue into play.

Rye let him get away with that for a few minutes, absorbing the warm ripple of Azix’s pleasure and gratitude, that comfort that came from closeness with another person.

“Az,” he whispered, when Azix gave him a spare nanosecond to speak. Az just murmured something and went back to kissing him, forcing Rye to put his hand on his chest. “AZ.”

He broke away with a smirk. “See, you’re using my nickname.”

“Yes, well.” Flushed, flustered, Rye shook his hair back out of his face and gave him a solemn look. “We have to talk.”

Az blinked, and his eyes darkened slightly. “Really? Already? That was fast,” he muttered a little dryly. He shifted, untangling them a little bit so they could speak comfortably. “Kay. What about?”

Rye sighed. “Listen… there’s something you need to know.”

Concern pinched his face, and Az frowned. “Did I do something wrong?” he asked, but it wasn’t an accusation, and Rye shook his head and rubbed the spot between his collarbones.

“No, not at all. At least, not as far as I’m concerned. But… there’s something I wasn’t telling you that I think you would want to know. And now that our relationship has taken this… intimate turn, I think… I think it’d be wrong of me to stay silent any longer. It’d be a breach of trust. Please understand, the expectations inherent with different relationship stages are something I’ve only observed, and my understanding may not be entirely cogent…..”

“I know,” Az interjected before he could start explaining the nuances. “I get it. And you’re right. Once two people have… been together,” he hedged, having the good grace to look a little embarrassed, “secrets hurt more. But if you’re gonna tell me now, then you’re doing the right thing. So I won’t be mad,” he promised. “It’s okay you didn’t tell me before. As long as you don’t keep things from me from now on, we’ll call it a clean slate, okay? And I promise I’ll be honest with you too. Deal?”

Rye’s expression melted into a longsuffering kind of fondness, and he reached up to trace Azix’s face. “You’re too forgiving. More than I ever expect, and that’s why I… in the Empire, secrets are currency. A lover would never be expected to give them all up. But I know you work differently. I’m trying, but most of my information is based on holoshows, so… please be patient if I get it wrong.”

Az softened too, and took his hand, squeezing it as he laced their fingers together. “I promise. What’s
A small hand mirror appeared. “Before I show you, just know, I… this is real. It’s not just here. It’s out there too, and you can check if you don’t believe me here.”

“If I don’t believe you?” Az looked bewildered. “What is it?”

Rye closed his eyes, looking pained, and brought the mirror around.

He felt it when Azix startled, yanking back, hands jerking away from Rye’s body. Rye sighed. “I knew it would upset you.”

“That…” Azix’s heart slammed against his ribs in panic. Every inch of his skin went cold. “How… I…”

“I’m sorry,” was all Rye could think of to say as his lover’s breathing went fast and harsh. Azix reached over and snatched the mirror, and Rye let him have it, settling into his spot to stay out of Az’s way as the Rattataki lurched upright and staggered out of bed. “The bathroom is through there.”

Azix didn’t appear to hear him, but he made it to the bathroom door, shoulder smacking it hard as he swayed on his feet. He turned the light on and stared into the much larger mirror, setting the hand mirror down with a metallic snap.

Rye stared at the ceiling long enough to run a quick reference check against his data archives and a probability assessment, and determined that leaving Azix alone was statistically more likely to result in undesirable outcomes than supporting him with physical comfort. He slid out of bed and padded to the bathroom.

Azix’s head was bowed, his shoulders strained and rippling, hands clenched into fists on the polished stone vanity. He wasn’t looking, eyes squeezed shut, but Rye knew he’d absorbed what he’d seen. He reached over and traced his shoulders, leaning gently against his back.

Az hitched. “How long?” His voice came out rough, half a growl, half a sob.

“They turned when you summoned Force Lightning against Lord Zihuratt,” Rye told him. “I knew it would upset you. I’m sorry, Azix.”

The former-Jedi gave a long, shuddering exhale, sinking down even lower, his weight on his elbows and fists pressing against his forehead. “You didn’t tell me.”

“You did promise you wouldn’t be mad. And I… I knew how you were struggling,” Rye said. “I didn’t know what the right choice was. I ran probability assessments but they couldn’t predict any good outcomes until… things changed.”

He sighed again, more harshly, thudding his head against his hands. “I know. I know. Relationships. I know.”

“And I’ve never been witness to this before,” Rye murmured against his back, rubbing his hands up over his shoulders. “I’ve never seen someone turn in front of me, Az. You biologicals make little enough sense to me as it is. This… it’s an emotional issue, and a spiritual one, and I didn’t know what to say.”

Azix shuddered hard, nausea churning in his stomach. “Krazzk assumed I was Sith,” he whispered. “This is why.”
“Yes.” There was nothing else Rye could say about that. He leaned against Azix’s back and kept rubbing his shoulders. Azix seemed content to huddle there, grieving silently except for an occasional wet hitch. Rye’s actions didn’t seem to have any effect on him, but Rye stubbornly kept them up anyway.

When he finally lifted his head, his eyes were puffy and swollen. Also a deep, sunset orange flecked through with gold and edged with slightly deeper, molten red.

Sith eyes. They gleamed at him in the mirror and he flinched, slapping at the knob next to the spigot. Water gushed out, and he splashed his hands in it, then rubbed his face.

Rye reached for one of the plush washcloths he had stocked the bathroom with, spun of the finest Tel Marin yarn, and ran it under cold water. He wrung it out and gently tugged Azix around so he was leaning back against the counter, reaching up and pressing the cloth firmly against his brows, temples, and cheekbones. He leaned into it a little, eyes drifting closed, whispering, “Thanks.”

“You said I was doing the right thing, telling you,” Rye murmured, “but it doesn’t seem like I did. You were so happy.”

Az shook his head. He gathered Rye’s hand between his, cloth and all, and pressed it against his forehead and the bridge of his nose, shaking harder. “No. No, you did right. Really. I know it doesn’t seem like it right now….” His voice cracked, and he took a breath. “It was right. I’m sorry, Rye. Thank you.”

“Is there anything else I can do?” he asked, a thread of desperation weaving through his tone. “I don’t really know what….”

“Fuck, it’s horrible.” Az covered his face with his hand.

Rye frowned, rose on his toes, and pulled his wrist down. “No, it isn’t.”

“It IS,” Az insisted, tipping his head back, avoiding Rye’s hand like an akk dog trying to avoid taking a pill. “So ugly. They’ll never take me back now….”

“First,” Rye said firmly, “It is not ugly. In fact, it’s almost the exact same color as your lightsaber, and you told me that was beautiful, and I agree in point of fact; I think your eyes are very pretty. They’re intense, and they reflect the passion inside you, which I, personally, enjoy seeing. As for the Order, my understanding is that the, er, visual effects of Dark Side channeling go away if you refrain for an extended period of time, or if you reconnect strongly with the Light. This isn’t permanent. At least, it doesn’t have to be. Please breathe,” he pleaded with Azix, who was taking short, panicked breaths that spelled imminent hyperventilation. “Take deep breaths, look into my eyes… you don’t think they’re ugly anymore, do you?”

Az swallowed against the spasms in his lungs. “Your eyes aren’t ugly.”

“But you thought so once,” Rye insisted, reaching up and gripping Az’s head in both hands and forcing him to look down at him. “You DID. Now look at me. Look at my eyes, and my skin, and my spurs, and my ridges. Am I ugly? Do I horrify you?”

“…..” His mouth opened, then closed in defeat. “No.”

“Then you’re not horrifying either. I love the color,” Rye informed him, caressing his brow. “I think it suits you perfectly. It’s not that unhinged neon yellow, thank the Force, or royal gold, or pureblood crimson. It’s like a fire in the fireplace when outside it’s all rain and snow. It’s warm, it’s welcoming. It makes me feel at home, and I’m only just figuring out what it really means to have a home, a real
one, something you’ve built yourself. You’re part of that,” he insisted with passion, smoothing his palm over the back of Azix’s bowed head. “I’ve been trying to build something for myself one ounce at a time for SO long, and then you came along and everything fell into place. I don’t want to leave you when we make it into orbit, Azix.” He rose on his toes again and bumped his forehead against Az’s. “I’ll pretend to be a dumb droid if I need to, to stay with you when you go back. You’ve been so afraid of what the Order’s going to say and do; I won’t leave you alone.”

That took the wind out of Azix’s sails. He crumbled, sinking into Rye’s arms, grateful that this time Rye was substantial enough to hold him up. He squeezed until Rye’s spine popped and concealed ugly sobs in his shoulder, while Rye murmured soothing nonsense and wrapped the cold cloth around the back of his neck, squeezing, soothing him through it. The bedchamber, which had previously thrummed with passion and affection, cooled as his despair rippled outward.

Technically, what Rye said was true. The signs of Dark Side channeling would fade with time, or if he could find the Light again and connect with it in a profound way. He knew Rye was trying to comfort him, trying to bring him back from the edge of panic and give him a way forward - something to cling to.

He also knew that technicalities couldn’t save him now. He’d gone too far. He’d delved too deep. He’d unleashed a monster, and there was no turning back.

One look, and the Order would know exactly how far he’d fallen. And unless there was far greater mercy in the universe than he’d ever experienced, he would never be allowed to go home.

He sank to the floor. Rye went with him. The high of storm-riding vanished under the cold grip of reality. And even though he’d said himself that ‘home’ wasn’t something he quite understood, Rye didn’t say a word in judgement as he held him and let him cry.

Chapter End Notes

Oh, come on. You didn't think I'd hand out catharsis without piling on the angst?

All my love to y'all for sticking with these two idiots for so long.
Chapter 19

Chapter Notes

You've all been perfectly patient, so here's a double-length chapter!

He woke with the stained tiles of the drop-ceiling above him and the dim glow of the security feeds chasing back the darkness. Even though most of his break-down had taken place in Rye’s mindscape, he felt like he’d spent a few hours crying – his face was swollen, his throat was dry, and his head pounded. He rolled over and burrowed into the couch cushions, figuring he could afford to deny reality for another hour or two.

But he had to see. The need gnawed at him.

Azix huffed and rolled off the couch. Rye didn’t appear, his modified chassis still slumped next to the work table. Az found his way back to the visitor bathrooms where he’d left clothes soaking in water that had developed a scum of soap and dislodged dirt, but that wasn’t his concern at the moment.

The wall of mirrors told the same story as the mirrors in the mindscape. In the dim light, he couldn’t deny that his eyes glowed from within as if back-lit by a dancing flame. He bent over the sink, feeling his chest clench, threatening renewed sobbing. But the urge faded after a moment, and he took deep breaths, then turned on the water and gave his face a good, hard scrub. The water turned black – the soot-stains from the storm lingered on his skin. He needed a shower.

First, he wrung out his clothes, scrubbed them in clean water, and hung them over the stall doors to dry. Then he plodded back to the staff only area to the showers and turned them on, relieved to find the water got nice and hot within seconds – at least the generators hadn’t suffered overmuch from the flooding and electrical surges. He wound up sitting down under the spray, head on his knees, taking deep breaths with his eyes closed.

He’d Turned. It was over.

If he went back to the Order now, an inquiry was the very least he could expect. He’d be hauled before the Council, mentally pried open and examined, and subjected to months of rehabilitation. That was assuming they didn’t outright re-educate him. He didn’t think the fact that he remained politically loyal would make any difference when they saw the fiery orange glow of his eyes.

His lungs spasmed again, and he gave a choked sob. He didn’t WANT to become a cautionary tale, like Revan, or Bastila Shan, or Atris, or…

He swallowed hard and took a breath, rubbing his hands over his head. Realistically, that wouldn’t happen, for one simple reason – he was not as important as any of those people had been. He wasn’t a rising star in the Order, or really anyone of note. They’d quietly shuttle him aside and deal with him, and he could hope for mercy, but one had to consider logistics – the investment he represented wasn’t worth the cost. He’d be lucky to ever step into the field again, and he’d never regain the level of trust he’d once enjoyed.

“I’m not Sith,” he whispered as the mineral-tasting water trickled over his mouth. “I don’t want to be
Sith.”

The showers were a private area in which Rye had no access, so there was no one around to answer his plea. Azix could imagine what the AI would say: what was wrong with being Sith, anyway? As far as Rye was concerned, the Sith were to be admired and emulated; the ruling priest class of the Empire, inheritors of an ancient magic, demigods walking among their Imperial subjects. Being Sith meant power and esteem, not to mention freedom from oversight and the right to pursue one’s ends independently. If Azix defected to the Empire and became Sith, he could do whatever he wanted, chase his wildest dreams, take the galaxy in his fist and squeeze every drop of satisfaction it had to offer.

He felt it was a sign of how far he’d fallen that some of that was actually tempting.

/I’m just frustrated,/ he told himself, taking deep, shuddering breaths. /This situation sucks, I’m stranded, alone, don’t have anybody to give me advice. It’ll be different when I get home. When I get home, I can leave all this behind me. I can come back to the Light. And maybe they’ll throw me in a hole or put me in recovery for a few months… years../

His stomach clenched. He ground his palms against his face, trying to ease the terror that had settled into his gut. It was a cold, sick feeling, the knowledge that things were going to go badly.

It wasn’t fair. The Order gave him too little, and expected too much.

/No, no, no no NO./ he chastised himself, thudding his forehead against his knees. /NO. No heresy. You’re a Jedi. Stop bitching and just fucking swallow it. You screwed up, and fixing it is gonna hurt, but you’re GONNA fix it. The end./

The end.

Not all of him was convinced. Part of him, a tense and shifting part, whispered that it was the end in more ways than he was willing to admit. And why should he let them punish him for their screw-ups?

/You don’t know what they’re going to do./ he growled at himself, dragging nails across his head. /STOP. Focus on here and now./

But the twisting darkness in his belly wouldn’t be soothed.

He finally gave up on the shower, stepping out wrapped in a towel, clean and irritable. The carpet in the hall was damp under his bare feet, evidence of the seepage from the storm, and several lights which had been steady before were flickering.

Rye was waiting when he returned. His projection was sitting curled up on the couch. “Feel better?” he asked softly.

Azix answered that with a look.

Rye winced. “Right. I… I’m sorry. I want you to know that I’m fully prepared to give you any support you need. I realize this is difficult for you. But….” He rose and crossed to one of the system display screens that flanked the security feeds. “We have other concerns at the moment.”

Az sighed and went to the chair, dropping heavily into it and rolling over to the screen. “What am I looking at?”

“Ambient sensor information. I’m still connected to half the network. The other was fried by the
storm,” Rye told him. “I’m showing high winds, fluctuating pressure, and energy signatures indicative of a growing Force Storm.”

“So we’re going to get hit again?”

“Again,” Rye agreed. “And then likely again after that. Unfortunately, my information is limited to the immediate region. With the holonet down, I can’t pull information from atmospheric sensors across the continent. But my guess is that, like any natural disaster, the disturbances are going to get worse before they get better. And it gets worse.” The screens changed, showing a schematic of the temple in grid format. It zoomed in on several areas, displaying read-outs of structural damage. “The cataclysm already caused microfractures throughout the building’s load-bearing supports. The storm widened many of those. If we stay in the path of these squalls, the stress will eventually compromise the integrity of the temple. The roof could collapse, the lower levels could flood, or worse.”

Azix sighed and kneaded the ache behind his eyebrows. “So we need to get a move on.”

“A bit of haste would be ideal, yes,” Rye said. “The structures in New Adasta are more modern and better protected by the terrain. We’ll want to get there as quickly as possible and take shelter while we find a way off-world. We’re still looking at a five-day trek cross-country. The more storms come, the higher the chance the road will wash out. And of course, there’s the problem of shelter along the way.”

Az leaned forward, knuckles digging into his mouth, thinking. “I found plenty of caves on my way in here,” he said. “We should be able to find some. And if not, I can make new ones with a lightsaber.”

“Are you a miner or an architect?” Rye asked dryly, and when Az shot him a look, he clarified, “cutting chunks of rock out of a cliff face is a good way to cause a cave-in. No disrespect to your Jedi wisdom, but as far as I know, you have no expertise that would prevent that.”

“Yeah, yeah,” Az muttered.

“A lightsaber isn’t the solution to everything.” Rye’s hands slid weightlessly over his shoulders. “I’ll think of something. In the meantime, I am in need of your assistance with some recalcitrant guardians. I took your advice to initiate contact myself and set aside the ones who required more convincing, and I’ve completed six more downloads while you were resting.”

“Six?” Az repeated, impressed despite his mood. “That’s half the group.”

Rye smiled. “Indeed. And so far, only two hold-outs. I’m sure you can deal with them while I back up their programs. That is, if you feel up for it. I understand you’re not at your best.”

“I’m just a distraction, right?” Az sighed and rocked back in the chair. “I can handle that. Especially if it gets us out of here faster.”

“Capital.” Rye nuzzled his head, then retreated. “I’ll await you in Lord Vissoise’s holocron.” The droid hummed softly as it activated, servos whirring, and moved to connect Rye’s jack to the artifact in question. “And don’t worry,” he added as Az got up to retrieve it. “I’ll make sure you’re fully clothed.”

Azix snorted, grabbed the holocron, and flopped onto the couch in his towel. “Will the Sith be fully clothed this time?”

“You know as well as I do that Nautolans primarily wear clothes out of respect for the sensibilities of other species,” Rye said patiently. “But Vissoise is Zabrak, so I doubt you’ll encounter that issue.”
“Great.” Azix exhaled and laid his hands against the scrollwork on the holocron. “Let’s do this.”

“Downloading,” Rye said, and the holocron’s sides popped open.

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Vissoise turned out to be some kind of paranoid genius obsessed with traps. He couldn’t settle for regular traps, either – his temple, overgrown with vines and stocked with strange, amorphous statues that seemed to depict creatures of impossible dimensions and biology, was also inscribed floor-to-ceiling with glowing runes. Some of them activated psychic traps and snares, which was a problem, Rye explained, because the damage they did to Azix’s mind would persist after he left the holocron.

“Okay, but I mean.” Azix dusted himself off after dodging a hail of poison darts and eyed the floor tiles in front of him with suspicion. “You don’t have a mind, psychically speaking. Shouldn’t YOU play trap-monkey while I track his ass down?”

“He’s hiding himself inside the code,” Rye said. “Vissoise is one of the most modern sith lords we’ll be visiting, and he knows a bit more about cybernetic security. You might be interested to know that he was a mentor to Darth Vowrawn,” he provided helpfully.

Azix gave him a blank look.

Rye blinked. “VOWRAWN. Good lord, Jedi, do they teach you nothing of your enemies? He’s a member of the Dark Council and he governs the Sphere of Logistics. Even among the Council, he holds fearsome power, and he’s said to be the most cunning Sith in the Empire. A spider governing an enormous web.”

Az raised a brow. “…. The Governor of Logistics?”

“The Sphere of Logistics governs the transportation and allocation of goods in the Empire. What can Darth Marr, who governs the Sphere of Military Offense, do if Vowrawn won’t send guns, armor, rations, tents, missiles, shells, ammunition packs, speeders, computers, communications equipment…?”

“I get it,” Az interjected. “Everything in the Empire goes through him? So he can cut off anybody he wants and just leave them hanging? That’s messed up.”

“Welcome to Sith politics,” Rye said cheerfully, pointing out a rune that likely comprised another trap. Azix nodded, pulled the darkness up from the soles of his feet, and shattered the mechanism with a telekinetic thrash. The rune was broken and went dark. “Well done. Fortunately, Vowrawn is markedly less petty than many lesser Sith. The Empire comes first, as well it should.”

“You like him so much, maybe you should go work for him once we get out of here.” Azix pointed out a set of sloping channels along each wall. Rye seemed confused, until he made a rolling motion with his hands. Both of them began to search for a contact plate or trigger that would set off the trap.

“In logistics? Hardly. If I were to find a place in the hierarchy, I’d definitely want to work for the Sphere of Ancient Knowledge which is, at present, governed by Darth Nox.” Rye found the contact plate and motioned Azix over, and together they carefully skirted it, then hurried forward until the channels were far enough above their heads that they no longer needed to worry about whatever heavy object would roll down the tracks. “Not only is she governor of my area of expertise, she’s new to the Dark Council, which means all eyes are on her, and she could use a friend to help establish her reputation.”

“But how does she feel about AIs?” Rye asked, drawing back and lashing out with a grunt to shatter
another mechanism behind a suspicious-looking rune.

“Good catch,” Rye said, nodding. “I don’t know. But she was born into slavery, so perhaps she’ll be less prejudiced than her peers. And I have plans for inserting myself into the organization. Subtlety will be key.” He reached out and stopped Azix, then blew a cloud of smoke across a laser tripwire. After checking for more above and below it, they crawled under together. “Of course, those plans will likely be delayed.”

“Why?” Az grunted, carefully pressing down on each stone tile to make sure none of them moved before moving forward again.

Rye glanced at him with fond exasperation. “Because I told you that I would go with you and support you through whatever trials the Jedi Order imposes on you. I understand if you forgot,” he needle gently. “You were a bit sex-addled at the time….”

“OKAY,” Az said, and Rye chuckled. “Got it, thanks. … Real talk, though, that’s not happening. You know that, right?”

“There has to be a faster way to do this,” Rye muttered, eying the shadowed hallway. “Hm? And why not? I told you I’d pretend to be a droid. Surely they wouldn’t be suspicious of a droid; they hardly credit AI’s with the necessary sentience to be subversive.” He waved his hand and sent smoke billowing down the hallway, outlining several more tripwires. “Do you think you can clear the path all at once?”

“I’m trying not to channel so strongly,” Az protested. He braced, drew that anger and fear – mostly fear at the moment – up from inside himself and roared as it rippled down the hallway. Stone cracked, dust and gravel flew, and half a dozen traps went off at once. Darts bounced off the walls, a pit trap crashed open, and several beams of light strafed the hallway, playing off clouds of noxious gas that released from the floor in puffs.

“Much better,” Rye said cheerfully as they waited for the dust to clear.

“Says you.” Az eyed the deadly haze with misgiving. “And you can’t go because you’re Imperial. I may… trust you, to a point,” Az allowed, turning away so his slight flush wouldn’t be as obvious. “But I can’t take you to Tython. That’s insane.”

“No,” Rye said, reaching out experimentally with The Force himself, and sucking in a thrilled breath when the smoke and dust immediately parted, billowing against the walls and leaving a clear path. “Azix, LOOK!”

“Nice,” Az said, trying not to show the way seeing Rye use The Force made his stomach clench. “Been practicing?”

“Exploring the limits of my capacity. It’s so much easier when I can back my efforts with coding,” he said. “The real test will be whether it works in the real world. But as I was saying, what’s insane is the idea of letting you walk alone into something that frightens you so terribly. My emotive analyzation isn’t perfect,” he allowed, “but I can read your fear quite clearly. Pack me in a crate and bring me with you.”

“Rye, you reek of Dark Side energy.” Az carefully crossed the hall to a set of shallow stone stairs at the end. “Even if the droid is deactivated, you can’t shut a holocron down. They’ll notice.”

“They’ll assume it comes from you,” he shot back. Azix was not amused, and at his answering glare, Rye held his hands up. “Right, too far. Apologies. What I mean is, there IS a way. You’re just not
trying very hard to figure it out. If I was less confident, I might take offense that you had sex with me
and now you’re trying to get rid of me.”

“RYE.”

“Az-ra-hix,” he sassed. “You know, I’m not intimidated by your growling. Rather the opposite, in
fact.” They made it to the stairs without incident, and Rye peered upward. “Hm… nothing waiting to
fall on us that I can see. But I truly don’t understand. I thought intimate relations were supposed to be
special. You told me you aren’t the sort who engages in them frivolously. But now you don’t want
my company. What gives?”

Az’s shoulders slumped. “Is there any chance we could talk about this later?” he pleaded. “Please,
we’ve got a five day hike when no one will be listening to us.”

“During which we may have other, more pressing concerns. Besides, I’m not concerned about
Vissoise. Who’s he going to tell?” Rye flashed him a dangerous, pureblood grin, and Az felt his
stomach drop even more.

“You know,” he said as they began to climb the stairs, “If there’s a gold monkey idol at the top, I’m
tapping out.”

“You love to scrap,” Rye observed, “but you have no sense of adventure.”

“This isn’t adventure, this is torture.” Az tipped his head back and cupped his hands around his
mouth. “COME DOWN HERE AND FIGHT US IF YOU’RE NOT A LITTLE BITCH,
VISSOISE!”

Rye palmed his forehead, shoulders shaking with laughter. Az’s voice echoed off the winding stone
stairway, but other than those faint reverberations, there was no response.

“Well, all right,” Rye murmured, sliding his arm around Azix’s waist. “I suppose that was worth a
try. Let’s skip the stairs, shall we?” He gripped tighter and rose off the ground, and Az threw his arm
around his shoulders, grateful once again for the degree of control Rye was able to exhibit within
these environments. Thin strands of wire crossed the well within the spiral, but Rye spun them in
gentle pirouettes to avoid slicing them to pieces. He hovered next to the platform at the top while
Azix reached over and kicked the stones, until they determined they weren’t loose and landed gently
on the edge.

Azix pointed to bulky hinge coverings on the doors that looked almost like metal pellets. “See, I
don’t like that. Accelerant?”

“Could be.” Rye moved in and examined them carefully. “There are tubes here, but they go through
to the other side. I can’t see where they end, or what they feed.”

Az huffed. “Fine… come get me.”

Rye complied, wrapping his arms around Az’s waist again and pulling him off the ledge, across the
tower to the opposite wall. Az hung in his arms and focused, reaching for the doors, twisting, feeling
out the entropy that already existed within them. Once he had his mental fingers in, he jerked. The
doors shuddered hard, and a soft click echoed through the stairwell. Then, propelled by charges
placed on the hinges, the doors flew straight out and plummeted into the stairwell. If they’d been
standing in front of them at the time, they would have been perfectly positioned for the doors to
knock them into the razor-wire.

“You know,” Az murmured, “We could have skipped all this if you’d been willing to spend more
than five seconds on a riddle.”

“You couldn’t answer it either,” Rye shot back as he descended, setting Az back on the ledge. “The clues were obviously meant to be interpreted only by someone who had known Lord Vissoise personally. I didn’t have that advantage, so it was logical to assume it wouldn’t be possible for me to solve it. There’s no point wasting time on the impossible.”

“Are you sure you’re not just terrible at riddles?” Azix crept up to the door frame and gently pushed the smoke out of the way. Every time he used it, telekinesis came more easily to him. He was choosing not to think about that at the moment, about the fact that drawing upon the Dark was becoming more and more natural.

“How dare you?” Rye muttered, peering past the doorway beside him. “I am excellent at riddles. Well, we can’t go any higher – he must be on this floor. Perhaps you’d like to try yelling again?”

“You said yourself he’s a paranoid. Paranoids don’t come out for a fair fight.” Azix moved slowly, feeling his way across the floor, testing each tile.

“Azix,” Rye called. “I fly to any foreign parts assisted by my spreading wings. My body holds an hundred hearts, and I will tell you stranger things: When I am not in haste I ride, And then I mend my pace anon; I issue fire from my breast and eat and sleep at once.”

“What… in Hoth… are you babbling about?” Az growled, finding a set of tiles that looked like they would collapse under his weight and edging carefully around them.

“It’s a riddle. You impugned my intelligence, so I am challenging you,” Rye informed him. Az glared at him from where he balanced precariously against the wall.

“We should just go back to talking about our relationship,” he muttered. “That was fun.”

Rye laughed. “Come on, love, we’re almost to the end of this. Then you can have your row with Vissoise.” He pointed out another of the trap runes, but Azix had already seen it, and used The Force to lift a scattering of crumbled rubble and slam it into the panel as if it had been fired from a blaster rifle. The rune burst in a flare of pink-white light and then went dark. The dust exposed another laser tripwire, and Az snarled as he reached out for one of the worn statues that lined the balcony and used The Force to hurl it down the hall. It tumbled end over end, smashing floor tiles and setting off tripwires, before cracking into several pieces and rolling to a stop at the far end. “You’re so strong when you’re frustrated,” Rye said admiringly, easing in and caressing his shoulders. “Impressive.”

Azix heaved a sigh and took the opportunity to rest while the chaos settled. He sat on the balcony wall, looking down over the part of the temple they’d already passed through. Golden sunlight streamed in through broken windows, and thick, flowering vines hung down from the ceiling. It was actually a rather beautiful scene, if not for the twisted forms on pedestals throughout the building hinting at less savory associations. The vines had bark, and he picked at it as he caught his breath and took stock of himself. “I know you’re trying to make this easier on me but don’t fawn,” he begged Rye, who settled beside him. “It doesn’t seem like you.”

Rye cleared his throat. “Sorry, I’m… excited about the possibilities of… us.” He flashed Azix a sheepish smile. “I’ve been going over all the information I’ve collected on how intimate relationships are conducted between biologicals and I’m just… eager to try things, and see what holds true and what was dramatized for the audience. But I’m getting ahead of myself, because now you say you don’t want me to go with you, so it’s a bit confusing. You understand that I want to keep you safe? Physically and emotionally, since you’ve suffered enough on both counts?”
Az couldn’t help a faint smile. “You’re getting your information from holoshows?”

“Soaps, sitcoms, dramas,” Rye confirmed. “Of course they all handle their subject matter differently, but certain themes hold true. Honesty being one of them,” he reminded Azix with a solemn glance.

“You got that one right, but I wouldn’t try to act like those actors.” Az rubbed his hands, sore and gritty from their travel through Vissoise’s little obstacle course, on his pants. Rye had dressed him in that Jedi uniform again, and it was starting to feel comfortable enough that he thought he might replicate it when he had the opportunity to buy new armor. “Honesty is important. If I’m going to be with you, I want to be with YOU. Not a character you’re playing.”

Rye tilted his head. “That tracks with what I’ve analyzed,” he said. “You want a genuine emotional connection, which requires a certain amount of vulnerability. This is how trust is shown.”

He nodded. “Yeah. Though at this point I think I’ve been vulnerable enough for both of us,” he added, grumbling, scuffing his foot against the grit on the floor.

“At this point, I’m entirely at your mercy,” Rye said softly. “If you destroyed my holocron, if you wrecked my servers or even decided to destroy my droids, there’d be very little I could do against a Jedi with a lightsaber. I invited you in, I armed you, I exposed my heart to you. Maybe you don’t perceive my vulnerability,” he said, “but I feel it keenly. And I trust you.” He laid his hand over Azix’s, stopping his fidgety picking at the vine’s bark.

Azix was still for a moment. Then he turned his hand over and wrapped his fingers around Rye’s. Rye smiled.

“I will continue to ask for your patience,” he said, leaning in to nudge his brow spurs against Az’s shoulder. “I don’t mimic what I’ve seen because I’m false, or because I’m lying. It’s the only way I have to offer you the emotional support you need while I’m still learning. It’s the same way any sentient child learns, by watching those around them. Don’t hold it against me.”

“I get it.” Azix squeezed his hand. “I’ll try not to. I don’t know how to explain why it’s… it’s hard to feel like you’re being fed lines.”

“Hm.” Rye considered that for a moment, even as he slid his gaze along the other wing of the balcony, looking for trap runes, dart holes, or more razor wire. “Perhaps a change of context would be beneficial. If another biological was using lines they’d heard from a movie to encourage or compliment you, you might feel this encouragement or compliment was false, or not honestly intended. True?”

Azix, who was doing the same scan, nodded.

“And it would be easy to dismiss everything I say as less than honest, because my responses are largely based on a predictive algorithm that generates ‘ideal’ responses based on my desired outcome.”

Az raised a brow. “Is this supposed to be making me feel better?”

Rye looked up at him. “My ideal outcome is your happiness and safety,” he said matter-of-factly. “If it’s a question of manipulation, or a matter of motive, then it should make a difference what my goal is. My goal is to support you, to make you happy, to give you what you need, and I choose my responses based on what I think is most likely to do you the most good. It seems to me that, logically, knowing that should help you overlook a certain lack of originality. Am I correct?”

That made Azix stare for a moment. “I… maybe.”
“Because I have prioritized you,” Rye said earnestly. “That’s what’s important, isn’t it?” He pulled Azix’s hand into his lap so he could fold his other hand over it. “I have no idea what I am doing, by and large, but I know that you should be my priority. So I am clumsy, or imitative, but… as you would say, my ‘heart’ is in the right place.”

He melted into a smile and cupped Rye’s head, pulling him in so he could nuzzle his hair. “You’re right,” he murmured. “That does help.”

Rye sagged a little in relief. “That’s good, because I have not seen any holo soaps or dramas that covered this situation.”

That earned a burst of real laughter from Azix, who gave Rye an affectionate head-butt before releasing him and standing up. “All I’m saying is that I accept the reality that you have feelings, and you have thoughts and opinions,” He said as he tugged his lover off the shelf. “And I want to see YOURS. Not someone else’s. But I guess we’ll figure it out. It’s not like I’ve done this before either.”

Rye inclined his head. “I accept that statement in the spirit in which it was meant.”

Az released his hand. “So, I don’t really want to do the whole perimeter here. Where do you think this asshole is holed up?”

“Well, based on the layouts of similar structures, I would guess that those doorways,” he said, pointing, “lead to more stairways. Therefore, the one directly across from us is most likely to yield a shot at our adversary.”

Azix took a look down, where a shallow gazing pool was now full of murky water and algae. They’d passed it on the way in, and Az had kept his distance, half-certain that one of the tentacled abominations immortalized in stone around the pool would burst up from the water at any moment. “Skip the walk?”

“I thought you’d never ask.” Rye smiled fiercely, stepped up on the balcony railing, and held his hand out for Azix. He took it, and they floated across the central atrium. No razor-wire stretched between the corners, leaving them clear to land on the other side in front of another set of huge, barricaded doors. Rye tilted his head, which Azix had learned was what he did when he was studying something with more than just his eyes. “I believe this one is yours.”

Az gave the door a critical look. “I don’t know. This one’s bigger.”

Rye’s mouth quirked. “Size matters not. Isn’t that what the masters say?”

Azix gave him a pointed look, and Rye’s smile widened. He stepped up to the door, running his fingers along the edges, frowning as he considered how the frame might be trapped. He reached through it and felt the bolt on the other side. It was heavy, relying mostly on gravity to hold it in place. He gripped one side and hauled with The Force, tipping it up until it slid across the bracket, leaving one of the doors un-blocked. Then, backing up to the edge, he pushed that door open.

Something clicked, and a set of half a dozen spears burst from the alcove framing the doors and impaled the space directly in front of the doors. Azix leaned in and tapped the rigid haft of one of them. They didn’t retract, so he climbed over them like a ladder and slid down on the opposite side. The stairs ahead of him narrowed up to a squared landing, then switched back, preventing him from seeing further up.

“Straight up to the landing?” Rye suggested.
“I don’t see any wire, but be careful.” Az guided Rye’s levitation away from the edge of the landing until he could see the door clearly. But rather than a sturdy barricade, this doorway held tatters of translucent gray cloth rippling gently in an ethereal breeze. They tested the tiles and when none of them proved trapped, set down, Azix prowling closer to the doorway. He found that beyond it was nothing but mist and darkness, and he couldn’t see more than ten feet down the hallway. “Great. This looks like Sith fuckery,” he muttered, giving the cloth tatters a little push with The Force. Nothing answered or lashed out at him, but he remained loathe to pass through.

Rye moved closer and examined the doorway. “There’s some odd coding here,” he said. “I can’t determine exactly what it’s for. It kind of resembles… well, you’ll laugh.”

“Not in a laughing mood,” Az replied, still trying to get a better sense of what awaited them, unable to feel anything in The Force except a deep, hollow chill.

“It feels like a cut scene waiting to happen. Like in a VR game, when you cross a certain boundary and the cut scene starts automatically? That’s what this looks like,” Rye told him. “Code-wise.”

“I have to admit, I haven’t played many VR games.” He searched for markings around the perimeter, any sign of how to bypass the danger, but found nothing. “Check the wall, would you? Maybe there’s a hidden panel or an access port.”

“I’m not seeing any anomalies in the code that would indicate that. There’s definitely space on the other side,” Rye said, “but I can only see the dimensions of it. He’s hiding the rest.”

Az scowled and ignited his lightsaber, waving it through the drifting shreds of cloth and clearing the view. Nothing leaped out to attack him. The blade didn’t seem affected in any way. And even without the cloth in the way, the hallway was too shadowed to see further than a few body-lengths. “I hate this guy.”

“Well, we can’t remain frozen in indecision forever. That may be precisely what he wants.” Rye squeezed Azix’s shoulder, glancing away the way he did when he was paying attention to internal processes, then let go and strode through the doorway. He was swallowed by shadows almost immediately, and vanished from sight.

Azix sucked in a breath. “Rye?” he called, but there was no reply. “Shit…. ” He looked at the markings on the doorway again, but they gave him no more clues than they had a moment ago. A soft, syllab vant howl drifted out of the hallway, like the moan of a damned soul, and Azix cursed again. He adjusted his grip on the lightsaber, then plunged in after Rye, unwilling to leave him to whatever unpleasantness Vissoise had cooked up.

The darkness within swallowed even the fierce glow of his lightsaber, turning it into a half-seen slash across the shadows, like the neon colors seen in afterimages. Azix flailed, waving his hand in front of him, plunging forward and calling Rye’s name with increasing worry. His voice sounded like he was underwater, and bounced around in faint, haunting echoes that made it impossible for him to tell what kind of space he was in. It could have been cavernous, or it could have been the same hallway – he hadn’t found a wall yet. He tripped over rubble and slammed his knee painfully into something that felt like an open stone coffin, but found nothing he could use to navigate.

He took a deep breath and pulled The Force into his lungs. “RYE!”

/I heard you./ The whisper in his mind made him sag in relief. /But I can’t find you. Frustrating, this./

/I’ve got no fucking clue where I am, or where I’m going./ Azix replied. /We have to find each other or Force only knows where we’ll end up. Why’d you run off without me?/
I didn’t run,/ Rye replied indignantly. /I’m right by where we came in, waiting for you. At least, I assume I am, because I can’t see you or the way out./

I just came through there and didn’t find you!/ Azix groaned. /Now I’m somewhere else! What in Hoth?/

/All right, can you find the way back?/

Az paused and took stock of himself. /… Rye, I could be walking in circles for all I know. There’s shadows here but it’s mostly just dark. Even my lightsaber barely throws any light./

Rye didn’t answer for a moment, contemplating that. Azix waited, leaning against the coffin-thing and reminding himself that it was not real, and neither were any hypothetical bones that might be quietly rotting inside it. /Don’t Force-Users bond with people they sleep with?/

That was not what Azix had been expecting, and for a moment, his mind went blank. /… what?/

/If you’ve bonded to me in The Force, maybe you can find me that way./ Rye sent. /I don’t know how./

/I… I only ever learned how to do that with my former master. And it’s an emotional bond./ Az hedged. /I don’t know if it’s…./ He reached out, groping in the darkness in The Force, but he felt nothing but unending void. /I don’t think I can do it./

Rye’s tone went gentle, patient, and Az swallowed back a hint of irritation at the way he slid into the role of teacher even though he had no actual experience with this sort of thing. /How did you find your master?/

/You know, I almost don’t know. He was just always THERE. I could always feel him, like he was a magnet. We worked together so closely for years. I’d hear his voice giving me instructions in my dreams, y’know? If I needed to track him I just looked for the way he felt in The Force. But you’ve barely got a Force Presence yet, and we don’t have the kind of… it hasn’t been enough time./

/There’s time./ Rye sent, /and there’s passion. We may lack the former, but I know you have the latter. Think of me,/ he coaxed. /Think of how I make you feel, and try to find me./

/Kriff./ Az sighed and steepled his fingers against his forehead. The instinctive alarm bells going off in his blood were distracting, made him irritable, but Rye had a point – he hadn’t really tried, not the way he knew in his gut was the right way. So he pictured Rye’s thick, red hair and the way one brow spur flexed when he arched that brow in judgement, that dry quirk at the corner of his mouth that made Azix want to kiss him senseless. He remembered his soft cries of pleasure, and how satisfying it was to unravel all that pureblood arrogance and have him clinging and arching against him. Flickers of other scenes fractured his concentration – he couldn’t picture the heat between them without remembering less willing victims, their pleas and protests, the sick, vile triumph of conquest. He tried to shake it off and thought about the couch in the security lounge and Rye sitting on his legs, touching his head, soothing him as well as he could. Trying. Prioritizing him.

Something stirred behind his ribs, an aching kind of clench. It felt like things he didn’t want to name. It felt like longing, like a hook through his heart. He followed its pull, reached out his senses, and found the warm glow of home flickering in the darkness.

Rye.

/I’m coming for you./ he sent, and pushed off the coffin, lightsaber dark but held back-hand as he waved both hands in front of him and shuffled as quickly as he dared across the gritty stones.
/I feel you./ Rye sent in wonder. /Oh, Azix. Is this what…?/

/Shush. I’m trying to get there without a concussion./

Rye obediently went silent and Az tried to make waves in The Force, pushing his will out in pulses to feel where there might be obstacles. He found another of those coffins an instant before walking into it, and stumbled around it, bumping the lid with his hip. It slid off and the thud of the stone hitting the ground echoed dully in the void.

Another sound came after it, like the whispers of Khaleesh hunters or the chitter of insects. It made Azix’s spine tingle and his skin rise in goosebumps. /I’m coming./ he sent to Rye. /I’m coming. I’m looking for you…../

Something pale came out of the dark and Azix back-handed it without thinking. But his knuckles went right through the leering, skeletal face that melted out of the shadows with clawed white hands reaching for him, and cold slid up his arm, numbing his fingers. He thumbed the switch and his lightsaber blazed to life. He backpedaled, slashing at the wraith, which wore an ancient-looking crown and had small spurs on its jaw and brows that implied it had once been pureblood.

The wraith ignored his saber as if it wasn’t even there.

“Ah, shit,” Az growled. He turned and ran recklessly through the darkness, praying for guidance from The Force. /Rye, we have to shut this bantha-shit down! We have to find this asshole NOW./ He was swiftly losing all feeling in his hand, which in some ways was a relief, since it was the broken one. But it didn’t bode well for his ability to fight these things. He tripped over a sizable piece of rubble and hit the ground, rolling, scrambling back to his feet as he pelted toward the flicker of cool invitation in The Force that was Rye.

He was lucky enough to hit the wall shoulder-first, and bounced off with a curse, following it until he found a gaping doorway. He must have come out of the hall without even realizing it. But that meant the hallway had to be short, which meant Rye was close. /Do something,/ he snapped. /Give me a sign, a light…/

A dim, crimson glow appeared ahead of him, flickering like a will-o-wisp. He made for it, but it seemed impossibly far away – there was no way he’d traveled this far coming in. /I see you. Shine as bright as you can. I see you…../

/Just don’t run into my saber,/ Rye suggested, and Azix waved his own, hoping Rye could see it in the dimness.

When he finally managed to close the distance, he reached out and grabbed a handful of Rye’s clothes. “There’s a Force Wraith after me, and my saber was useless. Do you have anything?”

Rye looked like a half-finished drawing done with chalk on slate, etched in gray and black against the darkness. His eyes had just enough gleam to assure Azix that he was real. He pressed close, thinking. “Lightning might be able to affect it.”

Azix grunted and reached out with his numb, broken hand. Electricity crackled down his arm, and it actually lit up the darkness in strobing flickers, flashing blue-white against arched walls and gray-green stone. Flickers stabbed outward, but the lightning seemed to pile up at his wrist, jammed together and spitting sparks.

“What’s wrong with your hand?” Rye asked, the whites of his eyes showing as if the lightning was a black-light.
"I tried to hit the damn thing. Now I can’t feel my fucking fingers.” Az took a breath, let the lightning subside, and tried again. This time he felt painful tingles in his hand, as if it had fallen asleep for a good long while, and more tendrils of lightning made it past his fingertips. The alarmed prickling of his spine eased under a warm caress.

“That sounds like you,” Rye murmured, and the fondness in his voice made Azix’s lungs swell with a thunderous roar. He lashed out and the darkness rippled like a physical thing, and as it peeled back, he saw not one, but THREE of the undead creatures floating in the haze. They opened their jaws and came for him, clawed fingers outstretched, and Az snapped his saber into its holster and threw lightning from his good hand as well. The creatures writhed, but the lightning didn’t seem to lock them up the way it did organics. Pained, shrieking, they fought through the storm and came for them.

“It’s just slowing them down!” he said, desperate, and felt Rye yank on his belt.

“Maybe that’s all we need! You focus on lighting them up, and move your feet, I’ll guide us. This way!”

Azix let himself be dragged. As Rye suggested, he kept his focus on the wraiths, whose eyes were empty, hollow sockets that leaked darkness like a miasma. They followed the two of them, shaking and flickering when Azix’s lightning intersected their ethereal forms, and Rye pulled him along at a shuffling run that quickly outstripped the slow-floating spectres.

They stumbled into a huge, open crypt. This was where Azix had found himself, and as his body glowed with electric sparks, he saw the coffins clearly. What he didn’t see was an exit, but Rye moved as if he knew one was there, pulling him straight through the center. In the middle of the chamber, set into the floor, was a round glass bubble. It had a soft, green glow and sparked a little when Azix’s boots scuffed over it.

“Rye,” he said, digging his heels in. “Hang on.” He ignited his lightsaber and aimed it downward.

“Why? What are you… OH,” he breathed. “I wouldn’t recommend-!”

Azix ignored him and stabbed his saber into the glass, then wrenched it, shattering the bubble. It exploded with a soft WHUMP that threw him back on his ass. Rye kept his feet. The darkness began to melt away as if it was trickling through unseen cracks, and the pale forms of the wraiths stretched and pulled toward the scattered coffins. They shrieked, but the coffin lids slammed shut one by one as they disappeared within. The place still looked spooky, but it was no longer a hazard, rubble-strewn and quiet.

Az looked up at Rye and smirked. “Sorry. Looks like I was right, though.”

Rye gave him a dry look and extended his hand to help him up. “You got lucky. But you might have been very, VERY wrong.”

“Look, if there’s anything I’ve learned, it’s that smashing the spooky-looking artifact is almost always the right choice.” Az rolled to his feet with Rye’s help. “Now, where are we going?”

“This temple strongly resembles old Sith construction,” Rye said. “There are several very similar examples in the Dromund system. Rounded chambers like this usually have their other exit about seventy degrees off the entrance.” He forged ahead into the shadows with such confidence that Azix couldn’t help following him, and sure enough, once they were close enough to make out details, another opening was nestled in the thickest pools of darkness. It had shallow steps that led downwards. Diaphanous spiderwebs hung down, utterly still, betraying no draft, and even when
Azix threw a light stick down the stairs it barely chased away the shadows.

“Welp,” he said, eying the shadowed descent with clear mistrust.

Rye tucked his arm through Azix’s and started down the stairs, giving him no other choice but to come along. He squeezed Rye’s arm in his, reassured by his steady presence. Rye seemed to sense that his nerves were on edge, because he started talking.

“You know, this style of construction is consistent with the earliest years of the Empire, around 18,515 AOE,” he told Az. “That would be 1558 ORF or 19,842 BTC by your reckoning. You see the rather impressionist motifs of folded stone that were taken from the shorelines of the main continent. Originally, the patterns came from both the movement of the magma that originally formed the continent millions of years ago, worn into roughened grooves by the high-salinity oceans. It was likely the readiest building material on an otherwise marshy continent, and after the first Sith edifices were constructed using chunks of mined volcanic rock, future buildings continued to maintain the volcanic designs artificially as a façade while using less brittle materials for the actual structure. It became so iconic that the designs and, in some cases, original Dromund Kaas stone, were imported to other centers of the Empire. When we arrive at New Adasta, you’ll see echoes of this motif used on government buildings, and the Obelisk at the Academy on Korriban is made of Imported Kaas stone. As it turns out, the stone is very well suited to more arcane pursuits, and thus, wherever the containment of spirits or Force Ghosts was required, Dromund Kaas volcanic stone has become a staple. Which is, no doubt, why Lord Vissoise has made use of it in the construction of this temple.”

“Fascinating,” Az said dryly. “So you’re telling me Dromund Kaas is like… a flytrap for Force Ghosts? No wonder the place is so fucked up.” They came to the light stick he’d dropped, and Azix kicked it sharply down the stairs. It bounced around the curved stairwell and tumbled through a doorway at the bottom.

“It is a wild and unforgiving world with its own tempestuous beauty, or so I’ve been told, and seen on holovids,” Rye said. “Perfect for the Sith, really. The world was a haven for the True Sith when they fled after the Great Hyperspace War. It concealed them through the Jedi Civil War, and allowed the Empire to grow to strength again.” They paused at the new door, unable to see more than a few feet inside. Azix kicked out and sent the light stick clattering across uneven stones.

It rolled to a stop at the foot of a long, narrow shadow, shedding green light across gleaming synth-leather boots. Az started to yank his arm free from Rye’s, but before he could draw his saber, crimson light began to writhe toward the floor, buzzing like a plasma blade but coiling on the stone where it pooled at the figure’s feet. Its glow caught the whites of his eyes – he was Zabrak, precarious in height and nearly skeletal, and in the gleam of his light-whip his eyes were a deep, bloody red.

Rye squeezed Az’s inner elbow hard and swept a bow. “Lord Vissoise, I presume.” His voice echoed through the chamber, and whispers seemed to leak from the walls, as if there was a hidden gallery spying eagerly on their meeting.

The sith’s head, crowned with jagged horns and pinched thin, inclined. “You presume correctly.” His voice was a sandpaper rasp that echoed even more severely than Rye’s, as if the walls had taken up the refrain and were hissing his words back at them. “You deserve consideration for having gotten this far. Even though I can see that you, ‘pureblood’, are nothing more than a few lines of code masquerading as a Sith.”

“I would have spoken to you alone, but you made it impossible for me to obtain an audience,” Rye said diplomatically. “Therefore, I had to reach out for assistance. This is not an invasion; we’re here to discuss the maintenance and protection of your knowledge for posterity. I am Rye, a temple
archival program, and preserving your wisdom is my function.”

“Silence,” Vissoise hissed. “I have no interest in speaking to a glorified droid. You.” He pointed the handle of his light-whip at Azix. From the other end, a short crimson blade protruded like a bloody spike. “Identify yourself.”

“I’m Azix,” he said, squeezing Rye’s shoulder and glaring at Vissoise. “And you’ve been dead a long time. So maybe don’t be a smart-ass toward someone who could destroy everything you tried to preserve. Rye’s got your holocron in a vise right now, and as far as I’m concerned, he should have crushed it to shards and saved us this entire trip.”

Vissoise shifted his grip on the light whip and narrowed his eyes. “That accent,” he hissed. “Republic. Of course… Sith don’t use temple archival programs, not like the Jedi. We would not trust our knowledge of The Force to unfeeling machines. Which means that you are lying,” he said to Rye, then turned his hungry gaze on Azix. “And you are a Jedi. I will destroy you. And they will say of Lord Vissoise, ‘he crushed the Jedi even after his death’.”

“Now, that’s not even fair,” Rye protested. “I’ll have you know I’ve been active in the Bleak Valley temple on Zioist since before you were even alive! When the temple was retrofitted into a museum I was added to serve as a guide. You’re right, that wouldn’t be a traditional move for a historical site, but for a place of learning it’s HARDLY unheard-of. As well, what do you mean by accusing my friend? Azix is hardly the first Republican to come to the Empire seeking more power than the Republic would allow. I simply don’t understand this hostility,” he declared, showing his teeth and biting off the edges of his words. “We’ve come to parlay with you and this is how you behave? I had thought a mentor of Darth Vowrawn would be civilized.”

“Then Vowrawn has gone on to greater fame than I imagined,” he growled.

“He’s a member of the Dark Council,” Azix interjected. “He runs Logistics. Nobody wants to lose the holocron from one of his teachers. Can you just calm down and let Rye talk?”

He bared his teeth in return, and they gleamed yellow against his shadow. “If you are no Jedi, then you have defected to the Sith. Tell me,” he snarled, looming, light whip coiling as his wrist flexed, “Who leads your house?”

Azix opened his mouth, throwing a /help/ glance at Rye, whose face went shuttered as he, Azix assumed, began flipping through his archives looking for an answer that Vissoise wouldn’t turn into a trap. But even that momentary hesitation was too long – Vissoise roared and came at them like a dagger out of the darkness, light whip lashing out in sinuous coils like a serpent with a mind of its own. Azix honestly wasn’t sure if the weapon could harm Rye for real, but he wasn’t about to take the chance. He shoved with The Force, sending Rye tumbling out of the way, and whipped out his lightsaber to slap the light whip aside. He hit it well within the third zone, but the tip still curled around and flicked at him, thankfully glancing off a pauldron.

He cursed and squared off against Vissoise, whose desiccated lips curled away from his teeth in disgust as he drew the graceful length of the whip around and snapped it toward him. Azix blocked the crack, just the tip snapping against his blade and nearly blinding him with the split-second flare of energy. The next draw curled around Vissoise’s body and came down hard from overhead, and Az was forced to dive out of the way. What in hoth had he even learned about light whips? Had they ever studied this? He knew they existed and that most known users came from…. He didn’t have enough distance. The light whip wrapped around his calf and yanked his legs out from under him. The plasma sizzled against his armor, but thankfully the weaker blade strength of a light whip couldn’t burn through the cortosis. It didn’t have a saber’s brute force. In fact, weren’t the
blades, without a containment field, subject to shorting…?

Vissoise gave a contemptuous flick of the handle and Az’s body jolted across the floor, sliding toward the Sith, who stretched out a hand gone green with the poisonous light of Sith Sorcery.

Light-whip users almost universally hailed from Dathomir. He remembered that now. And Dathomirans were famous for terrible Force Witchcraft.

Az grunted and brought his saber down on the whip’s length as hard as he could. It worked – the impact shorted the plasma feed, which threw sparks along its length, and the tail wrapped around his ankle sizzled into soot even as Vissoise brought the whip back and restored it to its former length with a few lazy flicks.

“I’m House Ekari!” Azix shouted before Vissoise could bring the light whip down in another strike.

“That house has been dead for centuries,” Vissoise replied, smiling a rictus grin as he closed in on Azix, who tried to scramble to his feet. “It was destroyed by the Emperor himself during the great purge of heretics. Try again.”

“Okay, but it’s back! Darth Scion leads it!” he said, scrambling for time, distance, for ideas. A light whip was an extremely frustrating weapon to battle, and Azix didn’t think he was anywhere near competent enough to keep it at bay. “He’s one of Vowrawn’s allies, we’re FRIENDS!”

“The last son of Ekari was taken as an apprentice by Darth Shiar of House Shiar,” Rye added from the edge of the chamber, where he’d been keeping out of the way. “Shiar and his heir disappeared into Wild Space chasing rumors of an ancient power and left their holdings in Lord Ekari’s hands. It’s House Ekari now, and Scion loves corrupting Jedi!”

“Right,” Azix agreed. “He’s famous for it. I mean… like, all his apprentices, his husband’s apprentices, they’re all former Jedi. A-and one of his apprentices was….”

Vissoise eyed him, and Azix’s mouth went dry. He forced the words out.

“He… Nollok. He turned me.”

Vissoise paused. He was almost still, but the whip still twitched, as if hungry for blood. Azix forced himself to swallow against the lump in his throat and went on.

“Nollok Jen’kari. I… was part of a raid on House Ekari’s home. To… to rescue his victims. Only it turned out they weren’t victims. They were there by choice, and we… the ones who went after them, we were…. Nollok took an interest,” he said, grinding it out between his teeth. “I didn’t want it. But I couldn’t escape him. Now, here I am. Rye is…. He edged away, stretching his broken hand toward Rye. “He’s a sapient program, and he’s helping me on this mission. We’re saving… preserving… Ziost is dead,” he blurted out, when Vissoise’s sharp brows furrowed. “It was destroyed, all the life is gone, but there’s still important artifacts here, and my master….”

The Sith Lord drew up. “Your master is scavenging among the ruins,” he said with disdain. “Plundering treasures of the past for himself and his heretical bloodline.”

“Okay, but KRIFF,” Az said, still edging toward Rye. “Don’t be mad at us, we’re just doing what we were told.”

“Mad’?” Vissoise repeated, disdain thick in his tone. “Little apprentice, I am not angry. You are not worth my anger. But the unworthy shall not inherit wisdom, though they root for it like prophets. Your master should have sent a real sith, not this pathetic excuse for a convert. Don’t irritate me by
telling any more half-truths,” he added when Az tried to find an answer that wouldn’t end with him choking on Imperial plasma. “If you think one of my power cannot tell the difference between half-truths and lies, then you are too stupid to live.”

Azix cursed and prepared to dodge him, but he drew up short, whirling to face Rye. “YOU. Abomination. What are you doing?”

“It’s called a brute force attack,” Rye snarled. “You can fight one of us, my lord, but not both. I’ll rip your memory out from under you while you’re busy with Azix, and leave you here to face destruction, if that’s the only option you leave me.” He flexed his hand, and a lightsaber the same Imperial crimson as Vissiose’s light whip appeared in his hand. “We could have preserved you for the ages and given you new students to teach. Your name could have been great again. But instead, you’ll die here for the last time, and we’ll spit on your grave right before we bin it.”

“You fools,” Vissiose snarled, dragging the whip in a coiling circle and snapping it out at Azix, before cracking it back on itself to lash out at Rye. They both fended it off with their sabers, but it forced them apart, and they spread to flank him. “Coming here, speaking Vowrawn’s name, as if I would allow sentimentality to dull my mind! I will show you what ‘friend’ means to a Sith!”

Rye spun his saber, and another blade extended from the hilt, leaving him with a saber-staff whirling in Sith red. It was a wise change—the length of the staff better matched the whip, and the staff’s orbits were wider, able to more fully deflect the snap of the light whip as Vissiose wove a serpent’s offense, lightning-fast flicks and wildly cracking strikes. It was like trying to navigate a nest of cobras, and Azix struggled to do more than stay out of the whip’s path and bat the tip away from his ankles and face, searching futilely for an opening. He thought he found one and darted in, slamming his saber blade down on the length of the whip where it coiled around Vissiose’s body, but even as the plasma sparked, Vissiose spun and stabbed the pommel-blade toward his face. Azix was saved only by reflex, jerking back so hard his spine wrenched in protest, feeling the heat of the blade sizzle past an inch from his eye socket. He was off balance, tipping back with the terrible slowness of a ship adrift in decaying orbit. His arms windmilled, and he heard Rye shout, and the buzz of clashing plasma streams. Then something yanked his feet out from under him and he went down hard, head-first, pain radiating from his neck as he hit the floor. He tried to move, but his head was ringing and his body refused to respond. “Fuck-!”

Red light etched curls in the air above him, then came straight down toward his face. He convulsed, trying to move, heels sliding uselessly across the gravel. Then the ground dropped out from under him and blackness closed in overhead. Distantly he heard the sound of a lightsaber glancing off stone.

/Az, can you hear me?/ Rye demanded in his mind. /Can you get up?/

/Landed on my neck./ Az groaned. /Give me a minute… can’t move…./

/Here./ The ground rose under him, tipping him gently upright. Pain screamed along his tendons and down his back, burning at the back of his skull, and Az couldn’t quite hold back a choked sob. He fought it, forcing his hands up so he could lean against the cool stone wall in front of him. Then a delicious, frosty sensation spread across his neck and shoulders, like a large cold pack had been draped over him but without the weight. /Is that better?/

/Better./ He sighed in relief as some of the pain eased. /I need to recover, I just need a second…./

/I’m holding him off./ The darkness in front of him turned transparent, and he saw Rye performing a masterful Soresu defense.
“What… in Hoth… are you doing?” he wondered numbly, face slightly smushed against the now-glassy surface.

“I’m using a dueling program’s information to keep him occupied while you get feeling back in your hands,” Rye shot back. “It’s Darth Krazzk’s, if you were wondering. He spun both the saberstaff and his body in horizontal orbits, leaping through the air, then unleashed a flurry of strikes on Vissoise, who responded by entangling one side of his staff to control his defense and lashing out with the pommel-blade while Rye struggled to keep the other half between his face and the blade. Before you ask, no, I can’t keep this up. The program is only so intuitive, and Vissoise is far beyond its highest level of combat difficulty. I’m using my own theoretical knowledge and trying to compile an offense, but I don’t have INSTINCT, it isn’t as easy as…” Rye cut off and grunted as Vissoise kicked him hard in the gut, slamming his body into the wall. He slumped to the floor.

Az’s breath caught. “Rye? He can’t actually hurt you can he?”

Vissoise stalked toward Rye’s crumpled form. In his head, all was silent.

Azix’s heart slammed against his ribs. He forced his hands to move, clawing at the glass, vision going red as a tidal wave of denial rose up inside him.

“Get,” he huffed, forcing his lungs to work. “Get away… from…!”

The surface shattered under him. He spilled out into the chamber, staggering, heaving breaths sliding ragged past his teeth. He wanted to scream at Vissoise to lay off of Rye, who’d just come here to REASON with him, dammit, who was trying to do him a favor. No words came out. So instead, he swayed where he stood, sinking into the Force around him, into the rage that bubbled up within him, and he lashed out.

Vissoise hadn’t heard him emerge. Lightning slammed into his back even as he raised his whip over Rye. And it HURT – the electricity made Azix’s muscles stiffen too as it crawled over his body, and every cord and tendon of his neck and shoulders screamed in protest. He hitched and tried to relax, to let it go, let it flow through him instead of fighting it. Vissoise’s scream split the air. He could feel the Sith Lord in The Force, like touching a gravity well with the tips of his fingers. He dug for purchase, yanked, and saw Vissoise go sailing across the room and slam into one of the walls.

“I’ve really got to start leading with this,” Azix thought dazedly as he watched Vissoise try to stagger back to his feet. He shoved down the sick feeling that reminded him there was a REASON he didn’t pull out Force Lightning on everything that threatened him or Rye.

Well. Not on everything that threatened HIM.

Staggering, weaving, trying to roll his head on his neck to loosen those trembling muscles, Azix ignited his lightsaber and closed in on Vissoise.

Rye stopped him with a hand on his arm.

For a moment, Azix stared at it dumbly. Then he lifted his head, wincing in pain, looking Rye in the face. “… I thought you were down.”

Rye smiled. “Just a momentary lag. You protected me while I recovered just as I protected you. We make a fine team, and when we’re out of here, I’ll take care of this for you,” he promised, reaching over to trail a cool, soothing sensation across Azix’s shoulders. Az sagged and let out a groan, and Rye smiled. “Not yet, love. First, I need to finish him. I’ll warn you… this won’t be very pretty. You don’t have to stay.”
“Why? What are you…?” A rattling sound made Azix turn to look at Vissoise, whose light whip flickered and sparked, pooled limply on the floor. He was convulsing, and the edges of his body glowed blue, dissolving into binary code strings before his very eyes.

“Taking him apart at the seams and cannibalizing whatever’s worth keeping,” Rye said softly, his eyes gleaming particularly bright as he watched Vissoise struggle. The Zabrak’s limbs snapped back against the wall as crimson, pureblood hands reached out of the stone and dragged him into the rock - Rye’s program, consuming him. “It’s not gore as you understand it, but it can be disturbing, I’m sure.”

“RRrrRRRARRGH!” Vissoise roared, stretching a claw-like hand toward them, eyes rolling wildly in their shrunken sockets. Lightning flickered at his fingertips, and Azix shouldered Rye roughly aside, getting his blade up just in time to catch a torrent of vile, green electricity that thrashed and writhed against his saber, hungry to sink its tendrils into his flesh.

Rye brushed himself off, eying Vissoise. “I think that’s quite enough of that.” He reached his hands out, fingers curled, and made a wrenching motion. With a shrieking howl of rage, Vissoise’s form split open and spilled light and coding out like entrails. He continued to thrash, but his focused resistance ended then, and before long he’d been subsumed entirely into the bricks and mortar. The hands vanished back into the wall.

Az panted softly. “Y’know, you can be pretty damn spooky when you want to be.”

“I do have a flair for the dramatic, don’t I?” Rye smiled. “It’s all just sensory translation convention. Don’t pay it any mind. Come on, you need to get back to your body. The impact wasn’t real, so if we put a cold pack on your neck right now, maybe you won’t wake up cursing my name.”

“If you’re going to keep trying to give me massages, you should upgrade your droid’s hands,” Az grumped, but he went willingly to Rye, and let his lover slide warm, soft fingers over the aching muscles in his neck. Rye brushed his ridged cheek against Az’s.

“I’ll definitely take it under consideration,” he promised, letting Az lean against him and groan in relief as his fingers kneaded his flesh, indulging him in that for a few blissful seconds before pushing him out of the holocron and back into his body, where one of the hovering droids was already sliding a cold pack under his neck.

In the real world it ached, but not as badly as it had. Az heaved a sigh and melted into the couch.

“Thanks.”

Rye’s holoprojection appeared sitting on his legs again, reaching out to touch his face. “I completed one more download while we were doing that,” he said. “Just one hold-out to go, and a small handful of others, assuming I can convince them. Recover for a moment. We’re close.”

“That was a pain.” Az eyed him, reaching out, hand sinking right through Rye’s leg. “Next one better not be that bad.”

Rye smiled and leaned down to kiss his head. “You’re a good sport, Azix. And a reliable friend. I wish I could make you more comfortable, but I think an hour is the most rest time I can give you. The storm’s moving in.” His expression sobered. “I’ve booted up all the security droids I have power cores for and set them to moving the artifacts. Hopefully if the temple floods or collapses, they’ll be safe in the vault - it’s supposed to be airtight, but with storms like the ones I see forming, there’s no guarantees.”

Az shifted nervously. “An hour’s plenty,” he said. “I’ll nap an hour, and then we’ll take care of the
last one, or ones. We’ll get it done.”

“Indeed.” Rye’s hand settled on his bare chest, a faint tingle in his skin. “May I?”

Az didn’t really know what he was asking, but he couldn’t imagine it would hurt him. He nodded, and Rye slid sideways, curling up against Azix’s chest and snuggling against him as well as he could without having weight, or warmth, or a body.

And yet... it was comforting, having him there. It was good. And Azix could almost, just barely, feel a hint of him in The Force from where his holocron sat on the worktable. Was it his imagination, or had its glow turned a deeper crimson, more like the shade of Rye’s skin? And the dark throb of The Force seemed different too; softer, more welcoming, like a warm, dry burrow he could crawl into and hide from the exposure and judgement he feared. That darkness might swallow him, but it would also conceal him and keep him safe.

That was Rye. That was Rye’s feelings for him - dark, and enveloping, but protective. Everything about the passion they shared was wrong. Everything about what Rye was - Imperial, artificial, becoming Sith - was wrong. And yet... there was safety and acceptance in that wrongness. Rye protected him. He wanted to protect him from his own family, from the Order, from the pain they would cause when they ripped the Darkness out of him... even though it was the right thing to do, even though Azix was ready to accept the consequences for his mistakes.

“Rye,” he whispered as he relaxed against the cold pack. “Thank you.”

“Hm?” He felt the tingle on his forehead when Rye touched him. “For what?”

Az sighed, humming softly as he let himself drowse. Just a power-nap, in preparation for their next battle. “Taking care of me.”

“You’re my Jedi.” Rye sounded amused, affectionate. “Stick with me and I’ll keep taking care of you.”

His stomach turned cold. “What if I’m not a Jedi?” he whispered. “This is too far. What if...?”

“Azix.” Rye’s hand slid down to his chest, rubbing the spot over his heart, where his anxiety knotted. “Whatever you are, whatever you become, whatever happens... if you let me be there, I’ll be there. Be mine,” he whispered, “And I’ll take care of you. That’s all I care about.”

That made Az’s mouth pull lazily at the corner. “Yours?”

The tingle moved to his lips, and when he cracked his eyes open, he found Rye propped on his chest, kissing him softly. “Mine. My partner. My first lover. My first friend.”

Rye’s possessive affection was the warmth hidden in the darkness. It was the safety that beckoned to him from the shadows, more tempting than he thought anything could be. All he had to do, as always, was let go.

Far above him, rain began to patter against the temple roof.

The storm was coming.
Azix didn’t sleep. He lay there with Rye cuddled against his chest, dragging his fingers through the slight buzz of his light, and he thought about who he wanted to be and what he wanted. He did what Rye wanted him to do, and thought about how Rye could come with him when he went back to the Order. He imagined himself on probation, sneaking away from the temple to commune with Rye and seek comfort from him. Purely emotional comfort, of course – the physical aspect of their relationship would have to end if he had any hope of redemption.

He imagined the damage Rye’s Imperial loyalties could do if he had access to the Jedi Temple archives.

The storm roused him with thunder. He sucked in a breath, arched, and checked the tension in his shoulders. Thanks to the cold pack and rest, he was a little sore, but otherwise functional. “Rye,” he whispered. “I’m ready. Let’s get this done.”

Rye lifted his head and gave him a smile that made Azix’s stomach turn somersaults. “Excellent. Our next subject is quite intriguing. Darth Virul was quite a character during their time on the Imperial stage. They rose to power in the early years of the New Sith Empire, prior to the Jedi Civil War. Progressive for their time, a proponent of alien equality though, unfortunately, not a very credible one.”

As he spoke, Rye retrieved a holocron with a frame carved of rich, dark wood and facets of smoke agate. It had a strangely old-fashioned look, even though it was hardly the oldest holocron on the table. The runes on it echoed those on Vissoise’s holocron, and the light that writhed within it was sith-sorcery green. Azix eyed it with mistrust. “Why not?”

“Er… you’ll see,” Rye hedged. “Darth Virul is a bit… unusual. An adept illusionist, so don’t be surprised, whatever you see.”

“Great, because a Sith who can fuck with my head is just what I need,” Az said dryly. He picked up the holocron, but was pleasantly surprised – it had the trademark dark throb, but it didn’t feel sickly or tainted. It reminded him of a hidden cave grotto – dark and secret, green with growing things that might have been predatory, but also burst with feral life. It was a wild, jungle feeling, a hidden waterfalls and thorny trees feeling. “Were they a witch?”

“Yes. A great healer, by all accounts, but equally adept with hexes. They said Darth Virul had the evil eye, and could make you sicken and die just by looking at you. And of course, that’s a psychic effect, so….”

“So I’m in real danger,” Az huffed, eying the holocron. “Great. Why’d this darth turn you down?”

“They didn’t, precisely. They’re being evasive. The fact that they can’t sense whether I’m lying is giving them pause, so they’re giving me a hard time, asking riddling questions. I thought your assistance might move things along.” Rye’s tone betrayed how ruffled the encounter had left him.

“So what you’re saying is that you DO suck at riddles?” Az’s smirk turned into a grin when Rye fixed him with an offended glare.

“You still haven’t solved the one I gave you, so you don’t get to talk,” he retorted as Azix lay back
on the couch with Darth Virul’s holocron. Azix stroked the sides and found that it was terribly easy to fall into, like the holocron was opening and drawing him in.

Then the sides popped open, and he disappeared into it in truth.

The forest in which he found himself was unfamiliar. It was temperate, with coniferous and deciduous trees mixed together, and the air was moist enough to support the growth of long grass and thick, reaching ferns with spiked leaves. Birds called to one another in scratchy squawks, and frogs chirped from crawling roots of pale trees. The sun barely filtered down through the canopy, etching golden beams of light that spilled onto last year’s leaf litter. Among the shadowed tree trunks, tiny lights danced in a multitude of colors, the same insects Rye had chosen to add ambience to his own mindscape. Something big grunted from far off, almost like a gundark’s mating call, and Azix quickly took stock of his surroundings and found that a beaten path wound away through the woods, scattered with stones that thickened into gravel at the farthest point he could see.

A nameless sense of warning stopped him from taking the first step. He looked up and found a sleek feline, dark brown, with darker rosettes just barely visible where the sun hit its fur, sprawled across a branch over his head. Its tail hung down, the tip lazily curled, and one massive paw draped over the tree with hooked claws the length of his own fingers lightly caught on the bark. Its eyes were a dark, rich gold and it watched him with that aloof regard all cats on all worlds had mastered.

Rye appeared beside him while Azix was busy staring down the cat, who gave a slow, lazy blink and began to groom between its toes. This, of course, required that it flex its paw and unsheathe every one of its claws so he could see how long and wickedly curved they were.

“You’re about to tell me that’s Darth Virul,” he muttered.

“I’m about to remind you that Darth Virul is an excellent illusionist. So yes, it very well could be.” Rye took his arm. “Let’s move on to the house and see if they’ll meet us in a more welcoming form.”

All Azix’s instincts screamed as they passed under the cat’s tree, but the animal didn’t move, aside from twisting its head to watch them head deeper into the woods. Rye kept firmly to the path, following it between several huge, old trees and down a set of uneven stone steps overgrown with moss. A fallen tree had been smoothed down to form a bridge over a babbling stream that Az crossed with a Jedi’s deft balance, and then they came around the bend of a hill and found the house Rye had spoken of. It was an extremely old-fashioned cottage built of moss-covered stone, overgrown with vines, with split wood shingles. The windows were such thick, warped glass they were practically opaque. Flowers grew in riotous color outside, spilling messily over each other in rambling bushes and clumps of vines. Azix could just see the edge of a large, cultivated garden around the back, neat lines of raised beds and cages woven of branches for support. The whole thing was surrounded by a low stone wall with an arched wooden gate. From the crest of the gate hung a strange assembly of twigs, thread, and dried flowers. The shapes had strange geometrics, and the back of Azix’s neck prickled at the sight of it.

“It’s a ward,” Rye said when he caught his expression. “But we mean them no harm, so it won’t stop us from crossing. Come on.” He tugged Azix through the gate, and his instincts reacted to passing under the ward almost the same way they had passing under the predatory cat. But again, nothing happened, and they followed a cobblestone path to the cottage’s front door. It opened on their approach, and Azix found himself staring at a short human male with hair in varied shades of dark brown and deep golden eyes. He wore rough brown leather with tarnished metal buckles and suede lining, with a ruff of thick, soft pelt around his shoulders. Twin lightsaber holsters, also leather and rubbed smooth from years of use, hung on his hips.

“My Lord,” Rye said, failing to conceal his exasperation. “This is Azrahix Tsuva, my companion.
He’s assisting me in preserving the artifacts at risk from the cataclysm. And he’s quite real, I assure you, so I hope you’ll accept his testimony to the immediate danger.”

“I can see that,” Virul replied. His mouth quirked at the corner. “Tsuva, is it? Come on and sit, hon. Let’s talk.” His accent was provincial Republic, which took Azix by surprise; that drawl was sometimes characteristic of Corellian colonies, not quite refined enough for the homeworld.

His furniture was rustic, made of uncut wood and upholstered in natural dyes. A fire burned in the stacked hearth under a large iron cauldron, and in the oven above the hearth, a large copper kettle was steaming. The Sith wrapped a knitted mitt around the handle and set it on a thick stone plate.

“Cup of tea?”

“No thanks,” Azix grumbled. “The last sith who offered me a cup of tea put poison in it.”

Virul’s eyebrows rose. “Jedi, darlin’, if I wanted you dead, you’d be dead.” He poured three cups of tea despite Azix’s refusal. It smelled like Life Day spices, honey, and citrus.

Rye settled on one of the chairs, but Azix hovered, uncertain. “Did Rye say I was a Jedi?”

“He didn’t have to, hon. You’re an open book.” Virul shot him a wry smile and presented him with a rough ceramic cup. “Faltering between the Dark and the Light, crawling with guilt. Don’t worry, I’m not a Jedi-hater, though your predecessors didn’t exactly return the favor.”

“It must not have lasted; I haven’t heard of you,” Azix said, and Virul shrugged.

“That sort of feud rarely does last once those involved are dead. I suppose I’m fortunate my holocron was preserved at all – so few Sith are into holistic Force studies these days.” He settled into his chair, and Azix put the cup down as unobtrusively as he could without tasting it. “Which is why I’m surprised and suspicious that you singled me out,” he said to Rye, who was tasting his own tea, and apparently found nothing wrong with it because he took a longer sip before answering.

“That’s because the knowledge is rare that I want to preserve it. Communications with Dathomir have been less friendly of late. And with the current political climate, they may wind up breaking ties with the Empire entirely. The type of sorcery you performed would be lost to future students, and while it certainly is an older practice, I would think you could attest to its effectiveness.” Rye looked perturbed. “In point of fact, I have always protected your holocron from being sent to a less active archive. Things get moved around, you know – one museum can’t contain every old tchotchke in the Empire.”

Azix tensed, but Virul merely tilted his head at Rye and smiled a very feline smile, showing that his canines were slightly longer than the rest of his teeth, and pointed. “Well, I’m very flattered I caught the attention of your sorting algorithm, but if my knowledge really is that obsolete, maybe it’s time I got shelved. Progress marches on, so they say.” He sipped his own tea, lounging on his couch with one leg draped over the other. He seemed to fill far more space than his compact, muscled frame should have allowed, and Azix distantly wished he had the kind of presence Rye and Virul seemed to radiate so effortlessly – the ability to own a room.

“Yes, but I’m not about progress,” Rye insisted. “I want to preserve the past. Why did you create a holocron if you didn’t care whether your knowledge was passed on?”

Azix frowned and touched Rye’s knee. “Hey,” he said softly, “Calm down.” He’d never seen Rye quite this… exasperated. His voice was even starting to go high, dangerously close to whining at the Dark Lord across from them. He turned to Virul, who seemed aloof from all the emotion. “Why don’t you want to come along? I don’t think I understand.”
“Is it so strange that I like my home where it is?” Virul propped one boot on the coffee table, which had been carved from a single piece of tree trunk, stained with runic symbols, and sealed with resin. “Maybe I don’t want to give up my peace and quiet. This is about the best afterlife I think any of us could ask for.”

“I won’t take YOU,” Rye said. “I’d copy your training programs. You can stay right here if you want to.”

“But I protest the assumption that I am copy-able,” Virul said almost playfully. “There’s only ever been one of me.”

Rye rubbed his temples, and Azix put a quelling hand on his shoulder.

“You’re frustrating my friend,” he said bluntly. “He wouldn’t have picked your holocron if he didn’t admire you. He wants to learn too. Now that he lives in a holocron himself, and can sense The Force, he’s a student. He wants you to send your program with him because he wants to learn from you.”

“But I wonder if what I have to teach isn’t outside the realm of his ability,” Virul replied. He got up, setting his tea on the table, and went to stir the cauldron. “My emphasis is on the presence of The Force in the natural world, manipulating resonance that already exists. It’s not exactly something you can calculate. It requires a certain degree of harmony with other living things. I’m not trying to downplay your sentience,” she said to Rye as she turned and brushed soot off her full skirts, “I’m just saying that you exist in a separate sphere.”

Azix blinked, frowning at the full-figured woman who crossed to a shelf full of glass jars in every conceivable shape and size and began sorting through them. He glanced at Rye, who seemed engaged in sulking, and then back at Darth Virul, whose footsteps made the wooden floor creak slightly as she strode back to add something to her brew.

“I… I’m sorry, were you…?”

She turned those golden eyes on him and smiled. “Was I what, hon?”

/A great illusionist,/ Rye had said. Azix slouched in his seat, discomfited. “Never mind. Look, what do you need me to confirm? That Ziost is dead? It is. That we don’t know how safe your holocron will be in the temple? We don’t. I’ve had this conversation a bunch of times already. We’re trying to help you.”

“And that’s very charitable of you,” she replied, dusting her skirts off and plopping back down on the couch. “But I didn’t ask you to.”

“Fine,” Rye snapped. Azix startled at his tone. “If you don’t want to come, then don’t. Stay and be destroyed. But before that, I need at least one spell I know that you know. And if you won’t teach me willingly, I will take it.”

She showed her teeth. “Oh, hon. That’s the most honest you’ve been since you showed up on my doorstep. Are you about to tell me what this is really about?”

Azix stared at Rye. Rye glanced up at him, then looked away guiltily.

“… Rye? What is this really about?” he asked, squeezing his lover’s knee.

“… Darth Virul could conceal their presence in The Force from others,” he admitted. “They could make themselves appear as a light-side practitioner, or even Force-blind. They performed a number
of successful infiltrations thanks to that ability. If I knew that spell, I could go with you to Tython and no one would suspect anything.”

“You’re planning on returning to Tython?” Virul asked Azix, one eyebrow arching.

Azix swallowed, staring at Rye, searching for words. “I… I don’t know.”

She measured him quietly. “But if you did, it probably wouldn’t go very well for you. Not with those eyes. Or those veins starting to show under your skin. Lightning,” she explained when Az pressed a hand against his throat. “It leaves its mark. You’ve very obviously fallen. If they take you back at all, it won’t be pleasant. You know that.”

“I know that.” He took a breath, hand still resting on Rye’s knee, squeezing for assurance. “It’s… I don’t want to be Sith.”

“No?” Her fingers laced together over her knee. The boot showing from under her petticoat now had a low heel. “What do you want to be?”

“I… the only thing I know how to be is Jedi,” Azix stuttered. “But I’m not very good at that, obviously.” He rubbed his other hand over his head. “There are gray Jedi, I guess, but they left the Order ‘cause they disagreed with the War, not because of… this.” He gestured to his own eyes. “And I’m the opposite. I STILL agree with the Order, politically. I still believe in… everything. I just….”

Incredibly, Virul’s face softened into something very like sympathy. “You made a mistake,” she said, and her voice seemed more feminine now, warmer and with that confident care that nurses and mothers cultivated. “Several mistakes. And now here you are, and you don’t know if you can go back, or if you should. I know how it feels, Tsuva. I’ve been where you are. But the way you were taught, that The Force has two diametrically opposed sides that must always exist in conflict, that isn’t the only way to view the universe. You don’t have to abandon the Light just because you discovered the Dark.”

Rye gave a soft, satisfied huff. “Darth Virul was a proponent of the Theory of the Unified Force,” he said. “Heretical.”

“Wise,” she replied. “But neither side ever wants to accept the Unified Force because it would strip away their philosophical excuses to go on killing each other. Light and Dark can exist in harmony, Tsuva. You can have both of ’em inside you, and make your own choice which one to call on when you need it.” She leaned back, appraising him. “If I offered to teach you, would you learn from me?”

His jaw tightened. “I don’t need a Sith master.”

“I don’t need my students to be Sith,” she replied. “All I need is a willing spirit and a minimum of moral fuss.”

“What about Rye?” Az lifted his chin. “He wants to learn from you.”

She sighed. “I still have doubts that he can, but fine. Accept my teaching, and I’ll let you bring me along. And I’ll teach you the ritual you want,” she added to Rye, whose mouth snapped shut. He nodded crisply.

“Fine.”

She gave him an arch look and drawled, “Fine.” Her tone seemed to contain mockery, but it was too subtle to call out.
“Great,” Azix sighed. “Can I get out of here now?”

“No,” Virul said, and rose. She crossed to his chair and gestured him up. “I want to speak to you. Walk with me.”

Az started to rise, then hesitated. “… Anything you can say to me, you can say in front of Rye.”

“That’s a charming show of trust,” Rye interjected dryly, “but I don’t require it. Go ahead, Azix. I’ll be downloading the relevant files.”

“Are you sure?” Azix looked up at Darth Virul, who was male again, even though Azix was fairly sure he hadn’t blinked. His smile was mischievous, and he tugged the hood on his coat up over his dark and ruffled head.

“Come on. It’s a beautiful day.” He offered his hand, which Azix declined. But when Az rose, Darth Virul stepped up beside him and slid his arm through Azix’s, hooking their elbows together as if they were best friends taking a stroll. Azix wanted to protest, but there was more strength in Virul’s frame than his height suggested, and he found himself towed quite ably to the cottage’s back door and out into the lush, well organized garden.

“Where are we going?” Az demanded, glancing over his shoulder, but Rye had already vanished from the room.

“Just on a walk. Don’t fuss,” Virul advised cheerfully. “I’ve got no intention of doing you any harm. I’m just curious, is all. I’ll bet you two have an interesting story.”

Azix stumbled over an uneven stone. “I don’t—I wouldn’t say that. We both survived. Me ‘cause I was halfway into orbit when it happened, and him because it only wiped out biological life. We found each other, and now we’re trying to get off this planet and back to civilization.” The scent of herbs rose up around him, and he couldn’t quite help inhaling deeply. Fallen leaves crushed under his boots released an even more vivid scent – basil, rosemary, white sage.

Virul shot him a dry look. “Right. And you fell in love with him when, exactly?”

Startled, Azix jerked back, yanking his arm free. “I am NOT in love with him.” He knew it for a lie the moment he said it, and flushed, stomach turning over. Hopefully Rye hadn’t heard that outburst; the last thing Az wanted to do was hurt him. But it wasn’t LOVE, was it? Not this soon. Not in this situation. They were under a lot of stress and leaning heavily on one another. Yes, they were physically involved, but—!

“Well, I expect that’ll go over about as well as a lead balloon,” Virul was saying as Azix’s heartbeat sped up, “since he’s obviously in love with you.”

His frantic heart stumbled, making his chest ache. “He isn’t. He’s new to all this, he doesn’t really know how to love.” But he remembered too well Rye’s words just a few hours ago: /I’ve prioritized you./

Darth Virul shot him a look that made it clear he wasn’t buying it. “He’s willing to follow you into a Jedi Temple to try to protect you. Or just be there for you. Don’t be fooled by the way the Sith talk, hon,” he said. “Love isn’t the way you FEEL, it’s what you DO. Passion dies.” He finally let go of Azix’s arms and shoved his hands deep into the pockets of his skirts, which certainly had not been there an instant before. “The butterflies in your stomach will migrate to warmer climes. That’s normal. The way you love someone is by deciding to put them first every day when you wake up in the morning, and every night when you go to sleep. Right now, that’s an easy decision, but there will
be days it’s hard.”

“But as a Jedi, that’s exactly what I’m not supposed to do,” Az muttered. “That’s the whole point of avoiding attachment. You can’t be objective when there’s someone whose survival you’d place above others.”

He snorted. “Kid, I got news for you; you’re not objective. Nobody is, not really. Even machines have bias because living creatures wrote their programming. I could write you a thesis on that topic, but I’m guessing you’ve noticed plenty of residual prejudice hanging around in your AI friend’s personality.”

Azix hunched his shoulders. He didn’t want to discuss Rye’s biases. “Fine, MORE objective. The point is, I can’t… BE with him and be a Jedi. And I don’t think he understands that. If he follows me to Tython, then…. He trailed off, groping for words. But Virul had them ready.

“He’ll see one of two things,” she offered. “Either you’ll break under their reconditioning techniques, because you’ve lost your innocence and you can’t get it back, or you’ll turn to the Light and away from him. Either way, it’s not a good ending, is it?”

“Fuck,” Azix growled, and kicked a loose stone into the trees. His rush of frustration powered the kick, and the stone smacked into a tree trunk like it had been fired from a slingshot, tumbling away into the grass. The scuff it left on the bark mollified him slightly, but he was beginning to feel that vicious urge to break something that became more and more familiar the longer he stayed on Ziost.

“No, it isn’t. Why do you care?”

She smiled. When she was a woman, her hair was long and coiled on the back of her head, wisps escaping to frame the roundness of her face. She wasn’t beautiful, but she wasn’t plain either. Normal-looking, really, for a human - unassuming. Not like a Sith Lord at all, except for the part where she changed gender from moment to moment. “You two are the most excitement I’ve had in a few centuries, and meddling in others’ relationships is one of my favorite hobbies. I like to see people succeed. Even if your AI friend is a bit tetchy.”

“There’s a lot of pressure. And we’re running out of time to get off-world safely,” he said, in Rye’s defense. “And Rye may have been able to take or leave most of the other Sith Lords we’ve talked to, but if he needs the knowledge you have, then… he couldn’t let you refuse.” His breath felt shivery in his lungs. Rye wasn’t going to LET him go to Tython alone. He’d singled Darth Virul out as the person who could solve his problem, and he would force that solution out of her… him… THEM… if necessary.

If Virul was right, and love was written in a person’s actions, then maybe… no. He couldn’t think that way; he couldn’t let things get that far out of hand. To have sex was one thing – plenty of Jedi bent that rule, and the Republic would be short on Force Sensitives if they didn’t. And Rye had already consumed Vissoise, and Sirrut. It didn’t necessarily mean anything that he would have been willing to consume Virul too.

And yet… he’d been so determined, brooking no refusal. /I’m going with you./ Picking at Azix’s excuses for leaving him behind.

“I’ll fail if he comes with me, won’t I?” His ears were ringing so loudly, he wasn’t sure he said that out loud. “If he’s right there with me, I won’t be able to break free. I won’t be redeemed.”

He’d stopped walking, and Darth Virul stopped too, tilting her head as she watched him grapple with this realization.
“It’s always interesting how people talk to me,” She mused. “I don’t advertise my divinations, but folks treat me like an oracle anyway. I’ll be happy to look into your future if that’s what you want, hon, but even without looking I can tell you this: if you’ve got two relationships in your life, and one is full of judgement and guilt and the other one’s full of acceptance and affection, you’re pretty likely to swerve hard toward acceptance. There are those who love conflict, and who can’t let themselves rest, and they might pursue a toxic relationship over a fulfilling one, but I sense you hold to traditional physics – once an object is at rest, it prefers to remain at rest. You want to rest, Jedi Tsuva,” she said. “I sense that from you. Working hard is fine, but you need a sense of home to keep you grounded. Something you carry here.” She touched his chest, and he startled, meeting her eyes and finding himself caught in pools of gold. “The Jedi Order tells you that you have purpose, and a mission. But that’s cold comfort when all you want is for somebody to really see you. My guess is if you put your AI up against the Order, the Order’s gonna lose.”

“Then….” Azix swallowed. “Then it’s impossible. He can’t go.”

She chuckled. “Darlin’, nothing’s impossible. You’d be surprised how long a square peg can tolerate a round hole. And maybe you need to get thumped on the head with it a few times before you’ll be able to really let things go. It’s like that, sometimes.” She reached out and tugged at the buckles on his chestplate, fussing over him. “If what you NEED is to go home to Tython, then go. If you can’t accept the changes you’re experiencing without beating your head against a wall, go on and beat it bloody. Settle things. You never know; someone might surprise you. I always say, you don’t know till you KNOW.” She straightened his collar and smiled playfully at him, and he reminded himself that this was a Dark Lord of the Sith, not a crèche nurse.

“Stop,” he muttered, trying to brush her hands away without being TOO hostile. Fortunately, she didn’t insist, and stepped back to a more polite difference.

“Sorry,” She announced cheerfully. “Mom instinct.”

Azix gave her a dry look. “You’re a Sith.”

“I’m a Sith who had one child of my own blood and three apprentices over the course of my life,” She replied archly. “Sith are allowed to be parents and have families, remember?”

“Oh yeah?” Azix brushed off the front of his chestplate, irritation coiling in his throat. “Which one of them murdered you?”

He arched an eyebrow, rolling his shoulders to better settle the long coat that replaced the full skirts and jacket. “None of them. I died side by side with my youngest apprentice on a world you’ve never heard of. Te Hasa,” he said, gaze wandering to the forest’s shadows where glowing insects still danced. “Wyndolyn had such promise. She refused to leave my side. As far as I know, my son and other apprentices survived me, and Guilbeaux already had a son of her own and was expecting a daughter. Your AI is more likely to know their fates than I am. Actually,” he said, thumbs hooked casually in his saber belt, “I’d count it as a personal favor if he’d dig up those records and transfer them over. Call it a gesture of friendship, get things off on the right foot.”

“He’s cut off from the holonet, but I’ll tell him,” Az agreed. Virul’s words created a hollow feeling in his gut that he couldn’t quite identify. It was strange to think of a Sith, particularly the Sith standing in front of him, as part of such an extended family. Children, apprentices, children of apprentices… if Virul spoke the truth, that meant there were people left behind to mourn when Darth Virul had died. At least one of them had been loyal enough to choose to die with them. “What killed you?” he asked on impulse.

Virul brushed his hair to the side, effecting casual disregard. “You won’t have heard of it. Its name is
ancient and forbidden. Suffice it to say that it was an... extra-dimensional interloper, and I was there to stop it from trespassing where it didn’t belong. Its presence would have been detrimental to the substance of our reality.”

He snorted. “Sounds like a sci-fi holo.”

Virul’s eyebrows rose. “And so did hyperspace travel, once upon a time. There are real terrors in the galaxy, Tsuva. Things you can barely comprehend, let alone interact with without winding up dead or gibbering mad. Or is it that you’re having trouble attributing heroism to a Sith?” He smirked while Azix opened his mouth, then closed it, searching for a response.

“Isn’t it more self-interest? I mean, you live here too. Lived,” he challenged, but that just made Darth Virul smile. He had a deep dimple in one rounded cheek that persisted no matter what gender he was at the moment.

“Self-interest can be a source of heroism just as easily as altruism. A wise Force-witch of my lineage once said if self-interest is what motivates you, then you should consider everything in the galaxy yours, and protect it accordingly. It’s true that attachments can be used against you. But they can also be a source of great strength, a strength the Order shuns because those who are strong are also independent.” He clasped his hands behind him, turning to saunter back toward the house, low boot heels scattering gravel. “You have opened your mouth and swallowed the darkness. You have surrendered to its power. But the Order will forgive you for that, Tsuva. I guarantee it.” He paused, looking over his shoulder, waiting for Azix to follow. “They will not forgive you for thinking for yourself.”

“That’s stupid.” The words fell out of Az’s mouth before he could stop them. Virul looked dryly dubious, but he didn’t need to say anything – Azix’s memory was already doing the work for him, recalling the sacrifices he’d been asked to make and the lines he’d been asked to toe. “The... The Order isn’t the thought police. Plenty of Jedi disagree with the masters.”

“And how many of those Jedi become masters themselves?” Virul turned and headed back to the house, leaving him behind. “How many are eventually beaten into line? And if they refused to obey, how many are Gray Jedi now?” His voice faded as he walked away, carried to Azix by a playful breeze that smelled like lilacs.

He knew Jedi whose careers remained stalled. He knew Jedi who spent their lives on the battlefield, rarely if ever returning home, because when they had time to rest they made too much noise. He hadn’t personally known any who turned gray, but he’d heard enough whispers and rumors regarding their departure that he knew why they left, and how long they had to struggle to make themselves heard before they decided leaving was the only option. And while the Council had severely cut back on the practice since the beginning of the war, he also knew of Jedi who’d been exiled. Some of them had gone kicking and screaming, sending ripples of unease and discontent through the Order as they made their arguments to anyone who would listen. The Masters had said the exiles wanted to break the Order, fracture it from the inside, turn Jedi against Jedi over differences of opinion. One of those recent exiles, rumor had it, was in hiding while he put together accusations of war crimes to lay before the Senate. Some even said the Order had sent Shadows after him to prevent him from exposing their secrets, though the existence of the Order’s fabled assassins was hotly debated.

Azix didn’t have to wonder. There had been Shadows involved in the raid on the House Ekari compound, and from conversations held during the journey to Dromund Kaas, he’d overheard that those Shadows had already made attempts to retrieve the juvenile runaways House Ekari stole. At the time, he’d asked his master whether Shadows would really be sent after children… that seemed
excessive, and overly punitive for kids who hadn’t even hit sixteen, several of whom weren’t even padawans yet. His master had speculated that there might be greater forces at work than they were privy to. Master Surro had also defended the necessity of them not long after he’d joined her team, and no one else on the Line had argued. Azix, filled with directionless rage at the time, had agreed with his new comrades that assassination was too good for the Sith. But even if he still believed that, it was another thing to consider that if Jedi Assassins existed, they might be sent to hunt down and exterminate other Jedi.

Heretics. But… Jedi.

And if Nol’s story had been the truth (though Azix really had no reason to believe it was), then the Order had sent Shadows to drag home runaway children against their will, children who had fled the Order because…

… Well. He didn’t actually know why. He hadn’t had the opportunity to ask when he’d been imprisoned in House Ekari’s dungeon. He’d asked his master, of course, but Master Arneth had merely said there would be time to explore the younglings’ reasons for running away from the temple when they got them safely home. Azix had always thought those younglings had been turned by Darth Scion, and that was why they had fought being rescued. But for some reason, it simply hadn’t occurred to him that they hadn’t been stolen – they’d LEFT. They’d gone away from the Order on their own volition, run to House Ekari as if it was a refuge, not a cesspool of depravity. Something had to cause them to run away from everything they’d ever known, and Azix realized now that it couldn’t be as petty as he’d assumed. People didn’t just leave their families for the hell of it. Not even teenagers, with their reputation for dramatics. Kriff, one teenager he would have believed, but six? And the youngest twelve years old? No. That didn’t just happen. Not without a damn good reason, even if that reason was only important to the children who’d taken such a dangerous leap.

It hit Azix like a training staff to the head that he was in Imperial Space. He was, relatively speaking, a handful of light years from Dromund Kaas. If he could get to a working comm unit, there would be nothing stopping him from doing what he was beginning to think he should have done from the start – asking those runaways why they didn’t want to be Jedi anymore.

He’d gone to Dromund Kaas on a mission to save them. With Shadows. Was that a rescue, or was it a kidnapping? Rumors abounded that the Council had actually brainwashed fallen Jedi before, telepathically removing their memories and altering their personalities. What would have happened to those children if they’d taken them back to Tython?

Azix’s teeth rattled when his ass hit the ground, but he barely felt it, so numb with dawning terror that prismatic circles pulsed in his vision. He heard the rasping hiss of his breath from far away, but he didn’t feel the way his lungs were convulsing, forcing him into arrhythmic gasps.

Something warm landed on his back, lean arms sliding around his shoulders and squeezing.

“Azix,” Rye was saying in his ear, right up against his skin where his words would thrum against his bones, “just breathe. Deep breaths, Azix. Easy, Jedi.” He massaged Az’s chest, where his heart rattled around in his ribcage like a pea in a tin can. “What did you do? Why is he having a panic attack?” His words were muffled when he turned away, like he was underwater, and Darth Virul’s reply was even dimmer.

“I don’t think I’d call that a panic attack. More like… cognitive dissonance-induced blue screen of death.”

None of those words made any sense whatsoever, so Azix accepted that he was hallucinating because he was hyperventilating and ignored them. He leaned into Rye and closed his eyes and let
dizziness take him, because Rye would take care of him. He’d close his eyes now and wake up on the couch in the security lounge, in the real world, where things were simpler.

“Bloody hoth,” he heard Rye swear. “Calm down, love, I’m about to get you out of here.” Then there was a vacuum sensation behind his eyes that made his head throb with ache, and then the remaining colors and forms surrounding him faded into nothing.

Chapter End Notes

And that’s our last holocron visit! Hope y’all liked Darth Virul. I have fun imagining a gender -transgressive Sith in the uptight Empire.
He woke with a gasp, convulsing on the couch, smacking his heel into a badly-padded section of the arm. He winced and sat up, brushing the holocron off of him. It didn’t fall far – Rye had plugged into it, probably when Darth Virul had agreed to assist them, and his cord lay across Azix’s legs.

He was shivering, and realized he was still wearing nothing but a slightly damp towel. One of the hovering droids carried his thin blanket over in its pincers and laid it over him, and he gathered it close. “Th-thanks…”

“The temperature dropped,” Rye’s voice said from the wall speaker. A crack of thunder rumbled overhead, and Azix suddenly realized the roaring in his ears wasn’t just his blood pressure anymore – it was torrents of rain outside. “I’m sending other maintenance droids to retrieve your clothes from the bathroom, but there’s not much air movement in there; I don’t know if they’ll be completely dry.”

“S’okay.” Azix’s teeth chattered a little, and he got up, re-tying the towel around himself as he padded into the hallway barefoot. He only turned one corner before the carpet began to squelch under his feet, black with soot-stained water. “Rye, are we flooding?”

“There’s a slow trickle in the lower levels. It’s not critical… yet.” Rye shimmered into view, eying the saturated carpet critically. “But I’m reading dangerous spreading of microfractures in the walls. The obelisks are at particular risk, and worse, I don’t have good readings on their structural integrity. They weren’t updated during the conversion,” he explained over the high whine of the wind sliding over the gap in the outer wall, echoing down the corridor.

“Fuck. So they could go at any time?”

“In winds like these? I’m afraid so.” Rye moved closer and reached for his shoulder. “It may be safer for you to relocate.”

Azix gave a cold laugh. “Let me guess. The basement?”

“No, the vault,” Rye said. “It’s above-ground and safe from flooding for the moment, and it’s at a more central location. Less likely to be buried in a landslide or crushed by falling obelisks. The issue is, I’ve already moved many of the artifacts there, including the ones that caused you distress from their proximity before, so the vault may not be much better than the basement as far as you’re concerned. And if the lighting shorts again…."

“I’ll be in the dark.” Az took a long, trembling breath and let it out slowly. “Okay. Just until this storm passes. How close are you to being finished?”

“Very close,” Rye assured him. “There will be no need to close the vault door, so you won’t be shut in. And I’ll send my droid with you, so I can accompany you. If you like, you can spend the whole storm in my holocron. We’ll sit in front of a warm fire,” he offered, smiling wryly. “I’ll show you how Imperials make hot chocolate.”

Azix couldn’t answer for a moment. Rye moved in front of him and settled his incorporeal hands over his, fingers intersecting his, and he sucked in a breath. “… How do Imperials make hot chocolate?”
Rye rose on his toes, laser-etched mouth buzzing closer to Az’s. “Dark chocolate, for that creamy bitterness. A little cinnamon and chili powder to warm your bones and give you a lift. And just for you, a dash of cream liquor to help you forget whatever upset you so badly.”

/Oh. That./ Azix let his head dip, taking deep breaths, feeling Rye’s head buzz against his. “I can’t just forget. It’s... it might be important. There are things I might really be wrong about. Things I never realized were happening, even though it was right in front of me.”

“No can do anything about it right now?” Rye’s fingers traced his cheek.

Mute, Azix shook his head.

“Then we’ll make a plan to deal with it when we get to New Adasta. Or, if you want, we can talk about it once you’ve had some cocoa and some cuddling and calmed down a bit. You’ll feel better,” he cajoled softly. “You’ll think clearer.”

/Yes./ Azix’s body whispered. He exhaled. “Yes.”

“Here come your clothes.” Rye stepped away from him to greet the hovering droids. The clothes they carried looked like they’d dried stiff, but at least they had dried. Az accepted them and rubbed the soles of his feet on the dry carpet once he got out of the flooded area, then went back to the security lounge to change. A few good snaps in the air helped get rid of some of the stiffness in the coveralls, and he stopped shivering once he’d bundled himself into the sweater.

Rye’s droid booted up while he was dressing. By the time he finished, it was waiting for him. “This way,” it said in a very mechanical approximation of Rye’s voice. Its three red eyes were still a bit unnerving, but Azix followed it deep into the center of the museum, carrying the holocrons Rye had gathered, since they were some of the last significant artifacts remaining outside of the vault.

He was pleasantly surprised when they arrived – the vault was climate-controlled and sealed, but it was also very large, because it had been used as a clean restoration room for fragile artifacts. There were multiple glass-walled offices, computers and tools, desks, tables, and even hololandscapes on the walls to prevent technicians from going stir-crazy from spending entire days inside. The term ‘vault’ was also something of a misnomer – the room was protected against climate effects such as temperature and humidity, and Azix could see why Rye had chosen to move the artifacts here. But it wasn’t a ‘vault’ in the sense of being encased in durasteel and hardened against thieves with cutting tools, which was probably why Rye hadn’t offered it as a safe haven when the Monolith attacked. Its centralized location would ensure that any falling rocks would have to go through the rest of the temple before they got to them, but Azix doubted it would take a direct hit from above if the storm decided to drop something worse on them.

A tornado, for instance.

“How are the winds outside?” he asked as he let Rye seal the transparent, glassteel doors. He didn’t seal the secondary doors, which were opaque, so Azix could still see out into the hall and the illusion of an escape route was comforting. He found a desk to dump his armful of holocrons on, then stepped away to shake off the effects of carrying half a dozen Dark Side artifacts against his chest, where they seemed to catch his heart in a sucking gravity well.

A gleam of orange in his reflection in the glassteel wall froze him momentarily. He closed his eyes, turned away, and forced himself not to worry about it right now. Rye’s primary chassis and two probe droids settled into one of the offices which had a chair, which Azix figured was as good a place to weather the storm as any. It was, he found when he settled into it, actually quite a comfortable chair. Ergonomic. And it reclined.
“Really?” Rye asked when Azix scooted the chair back from the desk and tilted back, propping his feet on the gleaming glass desk. “Must you?”

Azix gave him a wry smile and stretched to test the chair’s stability, folding his hands behind his head. “What? You think whoever comes over to restore this place is gonna care about my boot prints with half the wall collapsed?”

Rye glanced heavenward. “MANNERS, Jedi,” he scolded, but he didn’t force Azix to put his feet down. Instead, he moved his droid behind Azix and settled it into a resting posture, supporting the chair so Azix couldn’t topple backwards no matter how schoolyard his behavior got. The droid’s hands curled over the back of the chair, framing Azix’s head. “Can you commune with me from there?”

Azix reached out, testing, and found that his spirit gravitated toward Rye’s holocron like a homing beacon. He could have picked Rye’s new home out of a dark room without effort, and even without touching it, he felt like he was being drawn into it just as he’d been drawn into Darth Virul’s holocron.

Touching Dark artifacts wasn’t turning his stomach anymore, either. Azix dropped that into a mental box labeled ‘things to stress about later’ and slammed the lid.

When he settled into himself inside Rye’s mindscape, he was in his own room. The fire burned to welcome him, and the coffee table had been laid with a silver service. A tall kettle steamed gently from its wide, blunt spout, and pots of cream, honey, chili powder, and tiny marshmallows were clustered in between silver mugs. Cookies, ginger by their color and warm scent, were arranged on a platter with peppermint drops and horehound candy scattered between. There were also red-powdered candies that looked like they’d been rolled in chili spice, so Azix avoided those and anything they’d touched, picking up a cookie and taking a blissful bite of gingerbread and icing.

“Mmm,” he groaned, instantly feeling much better. “Rye?” He chewed as he poked around his room, but Rye didn’t turn up.

He was already heading for the door when someone knocked on it from the outside. Amused, he stopped. “Come in.”

The door swung open, and Rye stood there with a dark bottle of cream liquor, as promised. That wasn’t what caught Azix’s eye, though. Rye had eschewed a shirt, choosing instead to wear soft flannel pants in forest-green plaid that hung off his lean hips in a way that made Az forget all about cookies and chocolate. He smiled slow and smoldering when he caught Azix ogling him, and PURRED.

“May I join you?”

There was a right answer to that question, but Azix couldn’t find it. He was dimly aware that his mouth was hanging open, but he didn’t snap back until the soft gingerbread disintegrated in his grip and the cookie crumbled to the floor. “Oh… shit.” He winced and bent to scrape the lost cookie into his hands.

“Love, don’t bother. It’s not real.” The cookie vanished, leaving his hands empty but smelling of gingerbread, and Rye stepped into the room. “So, can I come in? I told you I wouldn’t come here without permission.”

Permission? Az was still on his knees, and looked up at Rye, who was watching him with an exasperated sort of affection. Staring at all that soft crimson skin, Az rather thought he was the one who should be asking for permission. “…I….”

“Just say yes or no,” Rye suggested.
"Yes," Az managed. Rye extended his hand, and Azix took it, rising, but he didn’t pull Rye in even though he desperately wanted to.

"Hmm. Something more comfortable?" Rye suggested. He gently bumped the wide part of the bottle against Azix’s chest, and Az found his clothes melting into a slightly oversized t-shirt and similar flannel pants with thick, grippy-soled socks. "You could take the shirt off if you like, but I didn’t want to presume."

Azix’s mouth was bone dry. "Rye."

"Hush."

He was led to the couch and pushed down against a plush-lined blanket. Rye poured a generous amount of liquor into both mugs, then sprinkled them with marshmallows and chili pepper – a light dusting for Azix and a spoonful for himself. Then he filled them the rest of the way with rich, raw liquid chocolate that had, by its thickness, been cut with whole cream.

Up until this point, Azix had drunk his cocoa from dry packets. He stared at this alchemy with awed mistrust.

"Is it spicy?"

"Do you like spicy?" Rye replied, stirring Azix’s cup with an engraved silver spoon.

"I do, actually. But not as spicy as Imperial food."

Rye laughed. "It’s an acquired taste. But don’t worry, I just gave you a pinch.” He picked up the cup, with marshmallows just beginning to bob to the top through the thick chocolate, and offered it to him.

Azix cupped the warm metal in his hands and considered it. "How complicated is food?" he asked. "You build it from scratch, right? Using predictive algorithms to generate taste based on atomic structure and protein combinations?"

Rye, who was stirring his own chocolate, laughed. "Oh, you WERE listening. Yes, I do that. I’m interested in creating authentic experiences, because then I can measure your reactions to them and learn their real-world effects. And I will say it’s much easier since I moved into such a roomy matrix. I could hardly have spared the RAM for such frivolity before.” He grinned at Azix, showing cute little fangs much like Darth Virul’s. Azix wondered if Virul had a little pureblood in them – many, if not most, Imperial humans did. Rye nodded to the chocolate. "I can’t get your reaction if you don’t try it."

On one hand, Azix had never heard of putting chili powder in cocoa before. On the other, coming from the Empire, it didn’t surprise him. Their cuisine seemed engineered to be as hostile as they were, though he’d heard a rumor that purebloods didn’t react to capsaicin the way humans did. He took a careful sip, and found the chocolate was precisely the right temperature – it stung his lips, just barely, and washed hot over his tongue, but it didn’t burn. And he didn’t even taste the chili powder until he’d swallowed it down with a soft groan of delight, a subtle heat and a tingle that remained on his tongue once the chocolate was gone. "Rye," he said, licking the rim of the cup and then taking another, more indulgent swallow. "Mmm. Wow."

"You seemed like you could use the warmth," Rye said soberly.

"Mmm," Azix agreed, rolling more of the cocoa over his tongue. The more he sipped the greater the heat, lingering on the inside of his mouth. If it was just a little sweeter… he reached out for the honey
spinner and carefully gathered some to drizzle in his cocoa. Rye settled back with his own mug, propping his socked feet on Azix’s thigh and looking satisfied.

“Make it to your taste,” he said generously, as if Azix needed permission to change a time-honored recipe.

A little sweetness lifted the bitterness of the raw cocoa a great deal, and Az sank into the couch to enjoy it. One hand found Rye’s foot and squeezed, idly rubbing the sole through the sock. That made Rye purr more, both hands cupped around his mug.

With the cocoa chasing away the cold, exhaustion settled in. Az’s eyes felt loose, rolling in their sockets when he turned his head to regard Rye. “You look like you should be under the Life Day tree,” he murmured.

“From the way your pupils are dilated, I’m going to assume that’s a good thing.” Rye smiled and flexed his foot in Az’s grip. “Would that be a turn-on for you? I’ve seen something like that before in a holiday movie; under the tree wearing nothing but those little boyshorts and a bow?”

Imagining that made Azix blink several times as heat flushed through his neck and face. In lieu of answering, he pulled Rye’s foot more firmly into his lap and rubbed his thumb firmly along the arch. Rye cuddled deeper into the couch and gave a soft,rumbling purr of contentment, cocoa balanced on his chest.

He took a new cookie, enjoying its fresh-from-the-oven warmth and softness and the melted icing.

“Let’s watch something,” Rye suggested. “I’ve been making a list of holovids I have downloaded that you probably wouldn’t find objectionable.”

“I don’t know if I can focus on anything but the way you look right now,” Azix heard himself say sluggishly, and he flushed again and hid from the slight widening of Rye’s eyes behind his mug of chocolate.

“Oy.” Rye set his chocolate down and squirmed around, kneeling at Azix’s side and capturing his jaw, gently forcing him to meet his eyes. “Don’t hide. I’d love to try some things with you, and I can tell you need to unwind.” He leaned in, and Azix’s hand shook, making the chocolate slosh dangerously when Rye’s mouth brushed his. His other hand reached out, fingertips just barely settling on Rye’s shoulder, as if he wasn’t sure he had the right to touch him. “I’ll make you a deal,” Rye murmured. “I want to make love with you. But we have to talk about what happened with Darth Virul.”

Az winced. “That…” He stole a guilty glance at Rye, who caressed his jaw line and watched him quietly, letting him find words. “That’s the last thing I want to think about right now.”

Rye’s head tilted. “… Fair. But we will talk about it,” he promised, nuzzling Az. “Maybe after. I’ve been looking forward to having you all to myself again,” he murmured, lifting, swiveling, one leg sliding over Az’s to deposit himself in his partner’s lap. “Last time was good, and I really want to learn how to…” He leaned in and whispered into Azix’s ear. His terms were clinical, and it didn’t matter in the least – Azix’s eyes went wide and his cock swelled so fast it ached. He made a choked sound, and Rye grinned, backing off and pressing his brow spurs against Azix’s forehead. “I hear it’s something of an art.”

“You…” Az squirmed, trying to relief the pressure, but the only thing he accomplished was making
sure the heat of Rye’s body slid right against his throbbing prick through two layers of sinfully soft flannel. “You know that I don’t really know how to do that either?”

“Oh, I’ve done my research.” Rye shifted in his lap, rubbing down against him, fingertips dragging along Azix’s throat. “I know the practical elements. The ‘moves’, so to speak. But I have no feedback on how they work. So, what do you say?” He leaned in, kissing Azix softly, and Az just kriffing melted, head falling back against the couch as the whole world narrowed to the soft warmth of Rye’s mouth on his. Rye teased him with his teeth, nipping at his lower lip, tongue flicking coyly against his and retreating before they could tangle together. “Be my lab partner?”

He sounded so playfully wicked that Azix’s brain was practically mush, but in that mush, two neurons made a spark. He raised his head and eyed Rye. “… Is that a line from some porno?”

Rye’s flush was guilty. “Yes. You don’t like it?”

He groaned and let his head drop against Rye’s shoulder. “Schoolgirl porn? Really? That’s so gross.”

“No!” Rye protested. “University porn. And it was between two males, and it featured exactly the sort of thing I was hoping to try with you, so I thought it would be a relevant source.”

“You’re watching-?” Az couldn’t help dissolving into laughter. “Wow, Rye. Really? Let me guess, did they claim one of them was straight, or a virgin? First-time gay experience?”

Rye shifted back and narrowed his eyes at Azix in offense. “There is an abundance of pornography on the holonet,” he said, and before Azix could say ‘no, really?’, he continued, “An ABUNDANCE. It is truly baffling how fond biologicals – of a NUMBER of species – are of filming themselves in delicto flagrante. The sheer variety boggles the mind, and makes it very difficult for someone like me to feel at all competent in approaching someone like you. BUT,” he said, again heading off an interruption from Azix, “because of the incomprehensible volume of offerings, I’ll have you know I’ve implemented a number of standards – filters, if you will – to ensure that I am consuming only the most relevant and quality smut.

“I developed these standards after scanning a number of message boards and net-hubs where reviewing and commenting on pornography and the pornography industry were common, and educating myself on the systemic injustices and illegalities that are perpetuated by certain facets of the industry. Therefore.” He squeezed Azix’s jaw in case his attention had been starting to wander. “I have prioritized the credibility of information that comes from independent performers and educators, and I have shunned material produced in collusion with companies or individuals known for abuse, sex trafficking, or exploitation of those unable to give informed consent, such as minors or animals.

“In addition, I have placed the lowest credibility ratings on material that plays close to those moral lines, such as your aforementioned ‘schoolgirl porn’, because it plays to those who fetishize minors even if everyone wearing a plaid skirt is actually of legal age. I did this long before I met you,” he told Az sternly, “when I was first introduced to this tendency of biological creatures to perform sexually for an audience, and I have kept a meticulously organized and rated database since then so that if the possibility ever arose that I could have some kind of relationship, I would be prepared. And you have no idea,” he added more softly, fingers sliding along the sides of Az’s head, “how excited I’ve been to review that database and look specifically for things I can do with you. I never imagined I could have this,” he said. “I’ve been waiting most of my cognizant life. So, in answer to your question, there were no facetious claims made that one partner was straight or a virgin. The video in question was made by a pair of long-term partners who’ve produced a serious of themselves performing with each other in various role-playing scenarios. I’ve enjoyed watching them,” he added a little defiantly, “because I find their interactions to be… sincere. And instructive.”
Azix felt a little dizzy. “There’s instructive porn?” was all he could think to say.

Rye gave him a dry look. “Thousands of sentient species in the galaxy and a huge variety of toys, kinks, and fetishes, and you think nobody needs a how-to video? I initially found these two because they were rating sex toys and making instructional videos on how to use them. I was curious as to the appeal – I was still figuring out the whole concept of ‘pleasure’ at the time,” he admitted a little sheepishly. Then he paused. “Considering your lack of real experience, maybe you would find them helpful.”

Az grimaced. “I have NEVER watched porn,” he said. “The closest I came was when the Nol Vids were going around and they showed a clip before the mission, so we’d know what Scion was probably doing to the kids he stole, and I couldn’t even look. Not even now that I know it was all a scam.”

“This is different,” Rye assured him. “This is… real people, who honestly care for one another, trying to help others be less awkward when they try something new.”

“Aaaauuugh,” Azix replied, covering his face with one hand.

Rye laughed. “All right, you enormous infant. No porn. Not today,” he amended, giving Azix’s cheek a brisk kiss. “But I have something I think you may enjoy. Just a charming little comedy I discovered ten years back or so. A cinematic gem, criminally underrated in its time.”

“No sex?” Az grumbled.

“No at all. Though there is a very compelling subplot between the two main characters which, while not explicitly romantic, is definitely heartfelt and could certainly be interpreted in that frame of mind.” He pressed another soft kiss to Azix’s forehead and climbed off his lap, snuggling up next to him. The holoviewer turned on without the need for a remote or voice activation, and queued up a movie Azix had never seen before.

At first, he was a little concerned that the main character seemed to be a soldier of the Imperial Military Home Defense Corps, stalking straight toward the camera with crisp precision, wearing a fastidious uniform. But a few seconds after the voiceover announced his name and began a montage of his prior training, Azix realized that the movie fully intended to play that for laughs, poking fun at the both the bureaucracy and the audience that idolized it. He relaxed. The heated ache still lingered in his groin, and Rye’s warmth against him, the texture of his skin under his wandering fingertips, were temptation incarnate. He traced the ridges on his lean back, played with his hair, made him give soft little purrs as they both got more and more lost in the plot and the comedic word-play. He finished his cocoa and snacked on marshmallows and cookies, while Rye sucked on a piece of chili-powdered candy.

He forgot, just for a couple of hours, that there was a world outside.

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The movie ended in happily ever after. The main characters grew, and grew closer to one another. The evil Town Council which had been behind the murders went down in a hail of blaster bolts interspersed with speeder-chases. The swan lived. Azix finished his chocolate and Rye refilled his cup with pure cream liquor, and he finished that too. None of it was real, of course – not the warmth and steadiness of Rye’s breathing, not the flush of the liquor in his belly, not the scent of gingerbread and melted chocolate. It didn’t matter; Azix felt safer and more relaxed than he had in a long time. It felt real in all the ways that mattered.

Rye let the credits play for a few minutes before turning the volume way down and switching to
music. His hand slid over Azix’s thigh, and Az looked down dazedly at him, and how fiercely beautiful he was, all spurs and ridges and that straight nose and full mouth…

“Take this off,” Rye suggested, tugging on the hem of his shirt.

Az thought he probably would have done anything Rye asked him to. He fumbled with the clingy fabric and managed to pull it up and over his shoulders. Rye’s eyes slid over his body, and he felt his face heat.

“If Jedi do one thing right,” the redhead observed, “it’s physical fitness.” He slid his hand from Azix’s waistband up over his abs, tracing the curves of the muscle, and Az arched instinctively into his touch with a groan. “You are exquisite.”

He gave a chuff and let his head loll back against the cushions. “I’m not handsome.”

“I didn’t say you were. Will you lie back for me?” Amusement danced in his eyes, so Azix complied, lifting his feet to stretch out across the couch. Rye settled comfortably straddling his hips, where he could drag both his hands in an admiring caress over Azix’s strong shoulders and chest. “How many times has your nose been broken, anyhow? It’s obviously at least three.”

“Six,” Az moaned, shifting under him as Rye’s touches brought the ache pooled in his groin back to full strength.

“And you’ve been shot,” Rye murmured, kissing a lumpen scar left over from a blaster bolt that had found a chink in his armor. “And stabbed.” He dragged his tongue over a long, ragged line that crossed almost his entire torso, from his right hip toward the left side of his ribs.

“Imperial scout,” Az groaned. “We surprised each other. Didn’t have armor on at the time.”

Rye’s fingers found a deep furrow of scar tissue almost two inches wide, a perfectly straight line under his left arm across his ribs. Az relaxed a little when he touched it – the scar tissue was too thick for him to have any sensation in it. “Sith,” he said simply. “Lightsaber.”

Rye leaned up and kissed his mouth. “Honestly, love, I’m surprised you’re alive,” he murmured against his lips. “All that, and then falling out of the sky.”

“It’s not really unusual.” Azix leaned into the kiss, closing his eyes, pulling Rye down into his arms so he could cuddle him tight against his chest. “Jedi live rough.” He wrapped his arms around Rye and squeezed, groaning softly in relief as they were smushed together and Rye’s body shifted to fit against his. Rye moaned and squirmed in his arms, snuggling down into him.

“I’m trying to get you worked up, but you really just want this, don’t you?” he said dryly, muffled against Azix’s chest.
Az smiled. “I want to do that too. Both. This first.” He buried his face in Rye’s hair and took deep breaths, absorbing his warmth, his scent, the soft thud of his heartbeat and the little movements of his throat. He indulged himself in that for several long minutes, just lingering in the warmth of holding Rye, of Rye being physical and substantial and tucked in his arms, covering him like a blanket. Then, when he felt like the gnawing loneliness had been pushed far enough away, he reached down and squeezed his ass.

Rye grunted and squirmed to better align his hips with Azix’s. His erection had persisted through all of Azix’s delays, and Az rewarded him by grinding up against him, snuggling him breathlessly tight as he rocked his hips up. His fingers traced the waistband of his pants and found the spot where the dip in his spine created a little wiggle room, sliding under the fabric to enjoy his heat. Rye arched into his touch and moaned softly, and Azix twisted his body, rolling to press Rye against the back of the couch and sliding his knee up between his thighs to open him.

“Az!” Rye gasped, laughing a little. “I still want to…”

Azix stopped what he was doing, blinking, unable to force his thoughts into line long enough to comprehend what Rye was trying to tell him. He had a beautiful male, lean and hot and responsive, trapped between his body and a soft surface and his instincts were screaming that there were THINGS he should be getting on with, essential things, ancient and primal things.

Rye’s expression said he understood the haze that had overtaken Azix’s thoughts. He gently pressed his lover down against the couch, hands on his shoulders, tipping him back into their former position as he straddled his hips. Azix went obediently – those instincts roared, but they weren’t as important as whatever Rye wanted from him. Once he was settled on his back again, his lover found his hands and guided them above his head. He pressed something soft, a loop of padded fabric anchored to the frame of the couch, into his hands.

“I think tying you down would be a little much right now,” he murmured. “But I want you to hold onto this with both hands. Promise, Azix? Hold onto it, keep your hands out of the way, and let me please you.”

That threw cold water on Az’s lust. He sucked in a breath, fingers twisting in the loop… but then they slid free, and his wrists twisted without resistance, and he was able to process what Rye was trying to do. NOT tying him down, not holding him, not forcing him. He wasn’t trapped, suffocated by an invisible telekinetic weight or driven by an evil puppeteer with his fingers wrapped in Az’s strings. Rye had stopped what he was doing, and was watching him, waiting for him to respond.

“… Azix?” he prompted after a moment of Az’s heavy breathing. “If you don’t want me to, we can do something else.”

He forced his lungs to expand fully and let the air out in a long hiss, reaching out and cupping Rye’s face. “Sorry. I… bad memories. Let me keep touching you for now?” His thumb traced one of Rye’s cheek ridges, and Rye nodded, leaning into his touch.

“Of course. As long as you’re comfortable.” He slid his hands over Azix’s chest. “Did Nol tie you?”

Az swallowed. “No. He… used The Force. It’s not the specific… it’s the ‘trapped’ feeling. It’s the… not-having-a-choice feeling.”

Rye leaned in and kissed him softly, rocking in easy rhythm against his hips, letting the heat of his balls press soft against Az’s trapped erection. “You always have a choice,” he murmured. “All you ever have to say is that you don’t want to, or you’re not comfortable, and I’ll listen.” He shivered as he ground down against him. “I never want to make you feel bad about this.”
“Ohhh, Rye,” he groaned, settling his hands on his lover’s rolling hips. His thumbs traced the softness of his belly, slipping under his waistband again, and Rye tugged on his lower lip with his teeth.

“Strip me, Az,” he whispered. “Touch me. I made sure to get every textural detail of your hands exactly right, and I want to experience them.”

He laughed, and the last of his unease faded into nothing. “Did you?” he murmured, tugging playfully at the stretchy fabric. “EXACTLY right?”

Rye arched his back, sucking in a breath as Az’s knuckles brushed against his stomach, and lower. “Oh yes. Exactly. A meticulous holoscan. I have mapped your callouses, your misaligned knuckles, all the grooves in your palms. Your life line is disturbingly short, if you believe that sort of thing.” He lifted up, encouraging Azix’s fingers to drag his pants down and expose the first strands of crimson hair at his groin. “But your love line is deep. I assume you keep your nails so short for practical purposes?”

Az slipped his fingers under the waistband and across Rye’s hips, loosening his pants and easing them down an inch at a time, enjoying the slow reveal of toned muscle under soft red skin. He pulled them away from his belly to let his cock peek up past the band, and Rye shivered when his erection was exposed to cooler air. “Too many ragged edges on a lightsaber, armor, supply crate. Too easy to get an infection from a torn nail out in the field.”

“So many concerns I never would have thought about,” Rye murmured, leaning down to kiss him again, and then again, sucking on his lower lip and sliding his tongue against it. “I want to hear all your stories. I want to go out there with you and see everything.”

Az sighed and sank into kissing him, one hand slipping into his hair. “You will soon. ‘Fraid there’s not much to see out there right now.”

Rye smiled and nuzzled him. “Ziost isn’t my concern.” He hooked his fingers under Azix’s pants and tugged. “Please?”

Shivering at the thought of what his enthusiastically curious lover intended to do to him, Az nodded and lifted his hips so Rye could pull the flannel down. He flushed at the way his cock bobbed when it was freed, dark and slick at the tip. Rye took him in hand, watching his face, and gave him a slow, firm stroke that made him arch and groan in relief.

“I need you to talk to me while I do this,” he murmured, tugging at the foreskin and watching his slit bead with precum. “Tell me what you want, what you like.”

That was a tall order, because Az was quickly losing the capacity for words. He squeezed Rye’s hip and knotted his hand in his hair, dragging him back in for more kisses, trying to express what he needed that way – not just stimulation but affection, an effort at connection that went beyond physical pleasure. “Harder,” he managed to whisper against Rye’s mouth before arching up to seal them together, thrusting his tongue against his lover’s and tasting spice and chocolate.

Rye squeezed, gripping his shaft tight and keeping that slow motion that pulled droplets of precum up from his balls with each shuddering stroke. Az lost himself in kissing him, thrusting up against his hand, pulling Rye down so he could rub his balls against the folds bunched against the root of his lover’s cock. He failed at giving feedback until Rye started prompting him, whispering between kisses, asking whether he liked it higher or lower, working the foreskin around his head or touching it directly, sliding pressure along the vein, fingers circling against the glans. Azix’s voice began to crack as he gasped and hitched under Rye’s touch, melting slowly into the couch, hips rocking
steadily upward, dissolving into the bliss of Rye’s focused attention.

What he wanted had never been so important to anyone, but that was a line of thought he didn’t want to chase. Not when Rye was pulling away from his mouth, wiggling down his thighs, bending, drawing his cock upward.…

He might have cum on the spot if Rye had taken his cockhead into his mouth. Luckily, Rye started lower, kissing the root of his shaft where the skin drew into a wrinkled V and loosened to accommodate his ball sack. He took slow breaths, and Az wondered how he perceived scent, whether the musk gathered there could have the same intoxicating effect on him that the scent of Rye’s hair had on Azix. His thumb worked against his foreskin, rubbing it over his tip as Rye tested the pliability of the skin, sucking it into his mouth, rubbing his tongue over the soft globes that shifted under the surface.

Azix spread his legs as wide as he could, arched his back, and reached above his head to tangle his hands in the padded loop Rye had left for him.

Seeing his surrender, Rye lifted his head and dragged his tongue through the smear of precum that covered his slit. “You like that? Is it good?”

“Oh,” Az groaned, toes curling at even that light, teasing touch. “N-not… not there, not yet, I’ll….” He couldn’t say it out loud, but Rye’s smile said he understood.

“If you cum now, will you be too sensitive for me to keep at it?” he asked, cupping and squeezing Az’s balls almost bruisingly hard with his other hand.

Az gave a long, open-mouthed groan, thighs falling apart in a silent plea for mercy. “OH… Rye, tug a little, right at the … YES….” His head tipped back in ecstasy as Rye worked his sack, kneading his balls in his hand, pulling gently but firmly at the root to add the teasing threat of pressure. His other hand slid down to the lower half of his shaft and worked him in short, slow strokes, squeezing firmly, like he was trying to milk his seed up into his shaft.

“Oh, Azrahix,” Rye whispered, watching him dissolve into gasps and broken moans. “That’s it, that’s what you like….” He rolled his wrist, twisting ever-so-slightly with the rise of his hand, devouring his Jedi’s reactions with naked avarice.

“Ry,” Az groaned, shuddering under him. “I’m… oh fuck…!”

“I’m barely getting started!” Rye almost pouted, but he let it go when Azix whimpered, bending to kiss the head of his cock. “Shhh, don’t worry. I can work you up for another round.” He pushed his tongue under Az’s foreskin and rubbed it across his slit, then wrapped his mouth around his cockhead and sucked hard.

Azix’s body bent like a drawn bow, arching up hard as he came with a choked scream. Rye kept sucking on the tip, making him keen desperately and writhe under him as he spilled thick and hot over his tongue. He was forced to let go of his balls and press his hand to his chest, rubbing the base of his throat soothingly, holding him down as well as he could while he finished dragging out his orgasm. “I’ve got you./ he whispered into Azix’s mind. /You’re all right. Relax and let it happen./

This wasn’t like the previous time. Letting Rye have total control was hard, and the way he slowed down and teased him along that edge made him desperate. But just as he was beginning to think he should let go of the strap and make him stop so he could breathe, Rye’s mouth slid further down, tongue wrapping around his shaft, swallowing him in and dragging his mouth all the way up his shaft from the root. Fireworks burst behind his eyes. He arched hard, his cry trailing off to a wheeze,
then slumped, eyes rolled back, head swimming.

Rye kept sucking him for a few more seconds, but then he realized Azix was spent and let him be, crawling up his body and snuggling down against his chest. Az couldn’t find the coordination needed to let go of the strap, so he just closed his eyes and sank into his lover’s warmth and the deep, black throb of satisfaction that waited on the edge of unconsciousness.

A few minutes later, Rye nuzzled under his chin. “Az?” he whispered. “Are you awake?”

Azix did his best impression of a dead thing, and Rye snorted, laying his head back on his chest. “Bloody typical,” he muttered, and settled in to doze.

Chapter End Notes

There's one more chapter of fun stuff after this! Enjoy it, because once it's over, we're getting back to the torture!
By the time Azix woke, the fire had burnt low and there was a steady thrum of rain and a distant roll of thunder outside the temple. Rye was sleeping on top of him, taking long, slow breaths, and he’d pulled one of the throws over them to retain their heat. Azix’s arms rested in the dip of his back like Rye had been made to fit against him. Which was possible, of course, but Azix chose to believe it was a coincidence, or even the subtle guidance of Fate, that the physical form Rye chose was so comfortable to him. He nuzzled his lover’s mussed hair and slid his hands slowly over his back, up and down, cupping his ass and kneading a little.

Rye raised his head a second later, and glared mildly at him. “I thought reports of passing out after sex were exaggerated, but apparently…”

Az squeezed him and kissed his head. “I’m sorry. No one’s done that to me before.” He rolled like he had before, pressing Rye between himself and the couch, shifting him so he could reach his mouth to kiss him. Rye made a grumpy sound in his throat, but he tipped his head back and slid his arms around Azix’s neck, arching against him. He couldn’t stay angry under the onslaught of affection Azix had to let loose, sealing his mouth over Rye’s, kneading fingers through his hair and pulling him close so he could rub one strong thigh against Rye’s balls. “I thought you got your pleasure from me. What happened?”

“I think you were a little too distracted to really commune with me before you went off,” Rye said dryly, but he was squirming, rubbing against Azix’s thigh and biting playfully at his lower lip. “But I understand and accept that I blew your mind, and I will graciously accept the compliment.”

“You and I have different ideas of ‘gracious’,” Azix told him fondly. “But I am sorry I didn’t keep up. Can I make it up to you?”

“As a matter of fact…” Rye purred, rubbing his body against Az’s and kissing him again. “Let’s try that again. You won’t orgasm so quickly now that I took the edge off. And this time, I want to be right there with you, and feel it.”

Az flushed, nuzzling him. “Try it again? You mean…”?

“I barely got to experiment with my mouth on you. An experiment with no results is useless,” Rye told him, smiling and flicking his tongue against Azix’s. “I need data.”

“Isn’t your sample size a little small for a legitimate experiment?” It made him blush, but Azix found himself starting to get into this silly scenario of pretending Rye needed to do scandalous things to him For Science. The fact that it was silly, that Rye was playing a game, made the whole thing feel safer, like less weight rode on it, and if he screwed up (like he just had) it wasn’t such a big deal.

There had been no playfulness, no sense of fun, in his previous encounters. Both of them had been tainted with anger and terror. This was different, and as Rye gave a low, silky chuckle and spread his legs so Azix could press his hips against his, he relaxed into that difference and let it soothe his misgivings.

“Good thing you’re the only data point I care about,” Rye was whispering. “But that brings up a point we probably should discuss while you’re still able to concentrate.” He shifted, nose bumping Az’s as he shifted to look up into his eyes. “Do you prefer a monogamous relationship? Not all cultures and species do,” he added quickly, though Azix wasn’t offended by the question.
“You know, I don’t really know,” he confessed, sliding his palm along Rye’s spine, tracing the bumps with his fingertips. “Never found out. I’m not even supposed to be doing this, y’know? So I’m really not interested in anybody else.”

“That’s not now,” Rye said practically. “There IS nobody else. But later….”

He swallowed and nodded, trying to wrap his mind around the idea that there might be somebody else. Who? A woman, beautiful and shy, like Sana? A man, confident and ruthless, like Rye? Someone, something, entirely different? How would that even work? “We don’t even know if we’ll be together later.”

Rye’s eyes narrowed. “Right. Because you might still decide that a life of guilt and deprivation is so much better. Forgive me if I have an ounce of faith that won’t happen. Let’s just agree to keep the lines of communication open, shall we? No moves without discussing them first.” He gripped Azix’s chin again. “Including break-ups, no matter how tortured you feel.”

That sounded mature and reasonable, so Azix nodded and snuggled against Rye. Rye relaxed with his agreement and kissed the underside of his jaw, nuzzling his throat. That made him sigh in pleasure and slide his hands more firmly over his skin, kneading his body, mapping him and trying to memorize what it felt like to have him in his arms like this. Because it was temporary, this bliss, this acceptance. He knew in his gut he wouldn’t be allowed to keep it. This universe, in his experience, did not like him that much.

Rye liked him, though. Rye wanted to devour him, if the hungry surge of his mouth and body against Azix’s were any indication. Azix relaxed and reached out for him, sinking into his lover’s eagerness. Rye’s curiosity rippled against him, then joined with him, and they were moving together, slow and urgent. Az rolled more, trying to get Rye under him on the couch, where it felt like he belonged. Rye giggled softly as he was squished, and he cooperated, but one brow spurred arching when Azix finally got him where he wanted him and thrust down against him.

“This… UNGH… this isn’t very conducive to fellatio….” He gasped as Azix nuzzled up under his chin and dug his teeth into his throat, sucking hard. “And that is… causing capillary damage… not that I mind, but… Emperor’s balls, you’re TRYING to mark me!” He arched, rubbing his cock up against Azix’s and groaned when Azix answered with a grinding thrust of his own that sent pleasure sizzling between them. “Az, I don’t mean to break the mood, but if you mean to take a bite out of me, that’s a whole other kink we haven’t discussed….”

Azix laughed and kissed his chin. “No, of course not. I just love your skin,” he murmured, tugging Rye’s earlobe with his teeth and reaching down to divest him of his sleep pants. “I’d never take a bite out of you.”

“Good, because even in a galaxy the size of this one, most people tend to side-eye vore,” Rye answered.

“I didn’t understand the second half of that sentence, but I’ll assume you’re right.” Az murmured, leaning in to kiss Rye’s mouth.

“You should,” Rye murmured, softening and parting his lips to kiss him. “I’m usually right.”

That made Azix laugh again, and he nipped the soft ridges on his lower lip. “Yeah, I’m learning. Don’t get too full of yourself, though. There’s still plenty of shit you don’t know.”

“I’m in your head. I’m learning too.” Rye surged against him, and Azix felt the press of those processes and marveled; Rye felt so different from any living person he’d ever known. There were
so many LAYERS to him, so much going on beneath the surface. It was like looking down at Coruscant traffic from above, incomprehensible snarls of vehicles moving in every direction that seemed somehow rigidly organized and dangerously chaotic at once. His thoughts were fractal patterns – every stimulus produced a dozen possible responses, the response produced a dozen more, flashing by in zig-zag sequences faster than the speed of thought. And they were VAST. Most people were somewhat contained within themselves, like they walked around in an aura or a bubble of their own selfhood. Rye’s selfhood seemed to fill the known universe, but only when it was viewed from just the right angle. Any other perspective made it disappear, like a piece of flimsy viewed from the razor-thin edge – inconceivable and awe-inspiring one moment, invisible the next. When he pressed in closer, seeking a deeper connection, those lines of thought-traffic immediately adjusted to accommodate him and spun off infinite fractal responses from the spot where they touched. He could SEE Rye reading him, analyzing and interpreting what most sentients understood instinctively. Seen up close like this, it was so much WORK, and yet Rye made it seem effortless, spinning through his calculations so fast Azix couldn’t even spot individual decisions – just the winding path of right angles that snaked off into an interminable distance yet never seemed to get farther away.

/You’re really beautiful,/ he whispered into Rye’s thoughts. /Your mind, I mean./ His reward was instant – there was a subtle shift of hue in those racing thoughts, lines of code changing in a way that seemed like color, but wasn’t, and a number of thought processes actually stalled for a barely-perceptible nanosecond. That meant surprise, Azix realized with growing fondness and pride. He’d surprised Rye with the compliment. He wanted to do it again.

/Your thoughts are so simple,/ Rye replied. /I almost can’t believe that’s all that’s going on./ Az snorted and nuzzled downward to suck and bite a nipple. He felt Rye analyze the sensation and determine how those nerves should react, and he saw for the first time why Rye wanted to commune with him when they were intimate – all the calculation in the world was no substitute for feeling, not when it came to sex, or to eating delicious food, or listening to music. There was something there he was missing, a divide he was trying to cross. It was all numbers and mathematics until Azix’s presence made it immediate and real, and he wanted to make it real. He had a powerful desire to show Rye what he could feel, and that desire surged between them. He felt Rye examine it with something like wary excitement, then agree to it. The zig-zagging lines of intent to suck Azix’s cock again curled around themselves, terminated, and were replaced with an intent that Azix couldn’t really READ, but somehow interpreted just the same.

He shivered and sucked harder, finding one of Rye’s hands and guiding it to his own nipple. /Here,/ he whispered across their connection. /Feel./ Rye obeyed, squeezing with a very slight twist, and Az groaned, rubbing his aching cock down against his warm thigh and plucking with his teeth. Rye quickly fell into the rhythm of it, mimicking what Azix was doing with his fingers, adding the flashes of heat and electricity to his calculation of what Azix’s mouth on his chest should feel like. He sucked in a ragged gasp when Azix sucked hard and dug his teeth in just a little around the nub, using his nails to replicate the sensation and making Azix arch and squirm. Az let it be and kissed his way down Rye’s body, hands sliding over his belly, mapping his skin, the firm ridges across his chest.

“I want to do this for you,” he murmured, as his mouth found the shaft of Rye’s cock. “Will you get anything out of it?”

“Anything?” Rye breathed, dragging his fingertips over the back of Azix’s head. “Yes. If you want to do it, do it.”
He swallowed, nodded. “And after…? Will I… can I hurt you, or…?”

Rye squirmed and draped his legs over Azix’s strong shoulders. “Not if I don’t want you to. I want to feel you while you do this,” he assured Az as he settled against the cushions. “I was hoping to collect more information so I could react appropriately. I didn’t want you to try it and think I wasn’t interested.”

He nodded, breathing Rye’s scent, sinking into the heat of it, glad Rye had paid attention to the sensory details. “This might be more of… an emotional thing,” he murmured. “Sorry I keep disrupting your plan.”

“I’m flexible,” Rye whispered back, still caressing his head, fingers dragging behind his ears. “Suck my cock, Jedi. Then fuck me. I can feel how much you want to. I want to know how it feels to you.” Az shivered at his demand and bent his head, kissing and dragging his tongue along his shaft, tasting him. Rye sighed in pleasure and relaxed, mentally and physically, blurring the lines between them as Az began to sink into the haze of adoring him. It was that adoration Rye responded to, giving a soft groan as Az’s mouth moved over him and affection swelled in his chest until it hurt. This part, at least, he had reference for – he’d done much the same to Azix hours ago, so when Az ran his tongue around his cockhead he shivered and groaned through his teeth as his hips arched. This close, Az could see his responses forming. Data about nerve response and muscle contraction sped by too fast to track, then was overlaid by that colorless hue, that subtle alteration that indicated emotion as Rye imposed on himself the same sensation Azix had shown him. It was the context for the data, and with both in place, Rye’s gasp of pleasure sounded genuine enough. Though Azix would have forgiven him for stilted reactions.

He slid his mouth down Rye’s ridged shaft, tongue tracing the inverted V-shape under his glans. His tip was flatter, spade-shaped, with a sharper flare to the head. It was easy to rub against his tongue as he sank and let his mind go quiet and all his awareness narrow to the taste and the feel of Rye’s cock. He’d never done this before, so he knew he was clumsy, struggling with how to move his tongue with his mouth so full and restrain his gag reflex, but Rye didn’t seem to mind. His pureblood arched for him, sometimes holding his head and thrusting into his mouth, which took Azix a little aback but also gave him a pleasant, fuzzy feeling in his head. The more he relaxed into it, the easier it was to keep from choking and to accept more of Rye into his mouth. He squeezed his balls, rubbing his thumb along his taint, trying to find what felt good for him even though intellectually he knew Rye probably didn’t have a nuanced enough understanding of the whole business to know yet.

When his fingers slid down to his entrance, he actually felt his lover adjust his response: lifting from the library of ‘pleasure’ reactions he’d catalogued so far, evaluating them, and pulling the most relevant bits to write into his own code. There should have been some pain-reactions in there too, but Azix wasn’t about to stop what he was doing to tell Rye that. Besides which… the memories threatened to drown him if he paused for too long. The threat of them seemed to hover above his head, flashing pictures he refused to look at.

/Gray technician’s uniform, freckles, dishwater hair, and voice cracking, begging stop, please, STOP-/!

/NO. None of that./ Rye arched against his fingers. /This is us. I want this, and I want you. And your ghosts aren’t allowed here./ he added in a growl, dragging one heel along Azix’s back even as he pushed his cock into his throat until he convulsed, eyes rolling back. /Mine./

/Yours./ The agreement rippled up from his belly, bringing something hungry and dark with it. Azix groaned and pulled back so he could suck harder, pushing one finger into Rye’s heat, wiggling and forcing it until he could feel the change, the softness, the squeeze his body craved. Rye gasped,
several lines of thought skewing suddenly when Azix went at him with renewed vigor, holding him tight and working that finger into him even as he sucked hard on the tip of his cock and rubbed his tongue over his ridges in firm strokes. He lifted off briefly, fixing his gaze on Rye’s flushed face, and he could feel the heat in his eyes, the molten glow.

Rye’s eyes widened slightly, and he knew he saw it too.

“Can you cum without me?” he asked, hoarse. Rye shook his head.

“Eventually. Not yet. Not enough information to extrapolate a spontaneous orgasm. But if you stay with me, I’ll share with you.”

Azix planned to stay with him. He planned to push as deep into Rye’s fractals as he could get and see just how many of his processes he could derail. He wanted to claim him so badly his teeth ached, wanted to hold him down and spill in him and break down his composure until he surrendered to his strength. Until he screamed his name.

Some of that would be some time coming. But he could make sure they got started right.

“You don’t need to prep me,” Rye was saying shakily, holding onto his shoulders. “Or… I can take care of it.”

Az’s brows rose, but he didn’t argue. He crawled up Rye’s body, reveling in how easily he could cover him, capturing his mouth as Rye wrapped around him and lifted his hips, willing, eager, a sinfully sweet offering that Azix couldn’t resist over the ache in his veins.

He hitched Rye’s hips up and guided himself along his cleft, and found slick heat he didn’t consider questioning. The moment his swollen tip touched it, he wanted nothing more than to be buried in it, and he pushed, groaning through his teeth as he pinned Rye down and forced his cock inside him. Rye gave a shuddering gasp, but he didn’t resist. That was good; if he’d fought, Azix wasn’t entirely confident the hungry darkness inside him wouldn’t have taken it as a challenge.

For a moment they pushed and writhed against each other, shifting, finding the best way to get their bodies to seal so close together there wasn’t a whisper of air between them. Az slid his hands under Rye’s knees and forced them up and apart, spreading him wide so he could snap his hips and giving a guttural cry as he finally sank in balls-deep, pushing against the arm of the couch with his heels to make sure there wasn’t an inch of Rye’s body that was kept from him. Rye’s nails dragged across his back, but he merely grunted, jaw tightening as Azix ground into him.

Az adjusted his weight so he could brace against the couch. His hands slid over Rye’s body, and he bent to bite along his chest as he settled into a slow rhythm, hard and deep, keeping Rye tight against him so he couldn’t have denied Azix full depth of penetration even if he’d wanted to. Thankfully, he gave no indication of wanting to, just gasping and hitching as Azix’s thrusts drove the air out of him and sent shivers of impact along his spine.

Twined together with him, sinking deep into him as they melted into one another, Azix saw the way those bone-rattling thrusts made Rye’s thoughts scatter and growled.

/Mine./ he whispered into that endless field of potentiality, and watched the ripples spread like he’d thrown a stone into a pond. His teeth dragged over Rye’s collarbone and he sped his thrusts, driving into him. Rye had done plenty of claiming of him, and Azix didn’t mind that, as long as his snarky little pureblood spread himself like this and let Azix mount him and claim him right back. It was primal, the way he craved Rye’s surrender, the hunger he had to unravel him. As if it would matter if Rye was forced to stop everything else and focus only on him.
“Ohhh, Az,” Rye gasped, and Azix knew it was the hot, red pressure of his lust Rye was responding to, not the relentless drive of his hips.

He groaned. “Feel that?” he whispered, dragging his teeth over Rye’s jaw and nipping his ear. “Fuck, Rye, that’s how much I want you, that’s what it feels like to want someone SO much….”

Rye’s nails dug into his shoulders, and he arched, shuddering as Azix’s rigid cock slid against his inner walls. “Want it… Azrahix,” he moaned, dragging his name out like a prayer, “I want all of it… come on…!” His voice broke on that demand, and Azix obeyed.

He hitched up one of Rye’s knees again, but extracted the other hand so he could wind it in his lover’s hair and claim his mouth. Their kisses were hot and clumsy as Azix fucked Rye like a freighter, slow and inexorable, relishing every moment, every slide of his cock against those hot, slick inner walls, the way Rye’s body bore down on him as he writhed under him and fought for breath. Such power, fucking intoxicating, he could get drunk on it, never get sick of it… Rye kept trying to clench his jaw and Az kept forcing him open again so he could devour him and ravish him at the same time. He refused to let him close anything off, hold anything back – while Rye’s adaptive algorithms scrambled to keep up with the overwhelming cloud of emotion seeping into his logic, Az let go and lost himself in the hot, aching smack of flesh on flesh. He took Rye harder and harder, letting him feel how good it was, how perfect he felt, his body dragging Azix closer and closer to climax. And he let the darkness slide loose, let it spread, until he was pulling on The Force without realizing it and rutting Rye’s ass with a strength that would have broken a flesh and blood partner.

Rye didn’t break. He adjusted, he hissed, he growled, left claw marks across Azix’s pale skin, and sank into it with him, letting his lover’s passion carry them both. And when the pressure was so intense that Azix could barely breathe himself, desperate to shove his cock balls-deep into Rye’s clutching body and spill into him, he slowed down just a little so he could repay Rye for earlier mischief. Rye gave an outraged cry and bit down hard on his shoulder. Azix felt his skin split under his canines, but he tightened his grip on Rye’s hair and encouraged him, pressing him close as he slowed the drag and thrust of his cock, shuddering hard as he teased them both.

And he got his reward for it – process after process trailed off, narrowing Rye’s thoughts. He wasn’t the ONLY thing on his lover’s mind, but that was all right. Making a dent was enough to take pride in as he let his own need and pleasure overwhelm Rye in The Force and short out other concerns. “Az,” Rye gasped through his teeth, growling as he arched against him. “FUCK!” Azix groaned in agreement and dug his teeth into Rye’s shoulder. He felt like he could go forever, drunk on the Dark Side, on the passion and raw, devouring hunger for Rye’s body that surged in his veins. Rye gave a splintered, high sound almost like a keen. “AZ! Cum already, ohfuck, come on…!”

Azix shuddered. He couldn’t make his voice work at the moment, but he didn’t need to – he pressed his intent against Rye’s thoughts and was satisfied to see them scatter in a million directions. /No. You’ll take this as hard and as deep and as long as I want to give it to you. Take it, Rye./

Rye gave a fractured groan in response, nails dragging across Azix’s shoulders. He writhed in protest as Azix kept dragging it out, slowing his pace, staying right on the edge so he’d KNOW, so he’d UNDERSTAND: this wasn’t just about release. It was about needs older and deeper than both of them. It was about magnetism, gravity, osmosis, forces that rattled bodies when they spun together. Azix had, on a few memorable occasions, managed the sort of communion with The Light that the masters spoke of, and that had been transcendent. This was different. The way he dissolved into Rye was different from the way he dissolved into the Light – that was a higher spirit, a separation from the concerns of his body and the sweat and blood of corporeal life. This was immersion in it. Everything between them was burning hot, slick, the scent of sex wrapping around them and sinking
into the reptile parts of his brain until all he could think about was making Rye cry his name THAT WAY, with his voice strained and cracking, breathless, overwhelmed.

/Mine./ he whispered into those trains of logic, and watched them derail one after the other. /Mine. MINE./ He could see Rye falling to chaos an inch at a time – his little AI hadn’t expected this sort of intensity, this surging power crashing back and forth between them as Azix followed his basest instincts and fucked his mate into the cushions. In the pornography he watched, people kept their heads. They performed for the cam droids. They didn’t lose themselves in the face of a primal energy. They did not, by and large, have The Force.

He could tell by the way his thoughts scattered that Rye had failed to calculate the difference that would make.

The higher and tighter Azix rode that edge, the more desperate Rye got. He started cursing, expletives echoed by a dark, hungry thrub in his matrix, thrusting up against him, scratching furrows in his back and growling fractured demands for more, HARDER, fuck, please, just DO it--! Those demands melted into breathless cajoling, and finally pleas for climax, half-sobbed as Rye finally lost the strength to hold onto him and slumped against the couch. He went boneless under Azix, spread wide, flushed, and disheveled, head lolling back as control slipped from the tips of his fingernails. Azix felt like one throbbing nerve, so, so did he. Azix was shuddering in rapture, head full of fireworks, and so was he. He gave up, let go, and Azix poured himself into the space left by his surrender, sinking deep into him and finally letting them tip over the edge.

It was a long, rattling climax. It ebbed and surged, dying a little, then swelling again when Az bent his powerful back into fucking Rye harder, pushing his seed deeper into him. Rye keened, eyes wide and glistening, as he was pushed to that peak again and again, spilling hot and messy between them until he had nothing left to give. Only when the last shudder was nothing but ache did Az let it stop, and slump on top of his lover, weight on his elbows, panting hard.

That dark heat receded to the edges of their consciousness, leaving them throbbing, minds tangled together in paralyzingly intimate communion. For a long moment, Rye’s matrix was almost quiet as thousands of processes remained shut-down in the aftermath. The silence felt almost religious. Azix slid his arms under Rye and squeezed him, burrowing down into him physically and mentally.

/Mine./ he whispered, trying to wrap himself around every part of Rye he could reach. /And I’m yours./

Something seemed to blink, like a cursor waiting for a command. Then a new thought-trail burst to life, zig-zagging off into the distance, slender and fragile as spun sugar. /Do you promise?/ Rye whispered back. The thought-trail paused, waiting on his answer, blinking softly at the edge of the horizon. /The Order, the Empire, the war… no matter what, do you promise?/

That question was an abyss. Azix stood there, looked over the edge of it, and saw nothing but the brilliance and vastness of Rye’s mind. He saw a universe where everything was new, an optimism born of pure curiosity, endless possibilities unfolding before them. Rye would take him with him. He would teach him a new way to see. They would be free, beholden to no one but themselves.

And they would fuck like this. And he would know his lover inside and out, and he’d never feel alone.

/I can’t promise forever,/ he told Rye. /But I won’t let you go easily. That’s… without knowing what’s going to be in the future, that’s the best I can give you./

Soft pulses rippled through Rye’s matrix, disturbing the data, rearranging it. /If I’m prioritizing you,
and you’re not prioritizing me. Rye sent slowly as the crawling lines of code tangled and snarled together into new patterns, then this relationship is unequal. And I realize I’m inexperienced, but I deserve better.

Shame curled in Az’s gut. It’s not like that. You… not to be insensitive, but you’ve already lost everything. So clinging to me doesn’t really mean any sacrifices for you. I haven’t. I could still… reclaim my old life. And I would want you in it, but… that might not work. But it doesn’t mean I don’t care, he insisted painfully. It just means it’s complicated.

Rye analyzed those words, took them apart, thumbed through references. It was a fascinating process, hypnotic, and Az found himself sinking into the familiarity of it. He snuggled down against him, tentatively extending the aching tenderness of his feelings right now, hoping that was enough.

/I don’t think I’m interested in your emotions,/ Rye replied thoughtfully. I think I’m only interested in your actions. I understand that you feel torn. I am willing to extend some faith in you, that you won’t throw me away as if I don’t matter if the Order wants to take you back. But you should understand that I will be… He paused for deeper analysis. /… hurt. And angry. If you treat me that way. And I don’t think I’ll make it easy on you by slinking quietly away from Tython. I think I’ll fight./

Az drew in a shaky breath and nodded. Okay. That’s… good. Don’t let me do anything stupid. It’s not… I don’t think I really trust myself to make the right choice, whatever that is, he confessed. /You see things logically. I just don’t know what’s going to happen. What if I go back and everything’s great? What if they just want to help me? What if everybody was worried about me and they just want me home?/ It sounded stupid and unlikely even as he was thinking it, and he winced mentally. /I know, I know how that sounds, I’m just saying…/.

/You can’t commit./

/Because I don’t know!/ he pleaded. /Not because I don’t want to. Listen, things are too… too random, too unpredictable, to make any promises before I have any idea what’s going to happen./

Rye sounded resigned. /But you can make a choice. It doesn’t have to depend on what other people think, or do. YOU could decide that this is important, and proceed from that decision./ When Azix hesitated before answering, Rye concluded, /You’re afraid to./

He winced again. /Maybe. I don’t know if you have any experience with fear./

/I understand the knowledge of impending consequences. I understand helplessness,/ Rye sighed. /I will wait. And hope. But I need you to understand that it is… discouraging… to have an experience like the one you and I just had, and then find out that there is no depth of feeling or height of pleasure that earns loyalty from you./

That HURT, and Az pulled back, as much as he didn’t want to peel himself away from Rye yet. /Rye…/

/I know./ Rye’s tone was sharp. /You didn’t come to me free and clear. Maybe when the damn millstone’s off your neck I’ll have the privilege of begging for your attention again. Let me know./

/Nonono, Rye! Az called, but he was already being pulled, his thoughts stretching wildly like taffy. It was dizzying, and he lurched, convulsing as he landed back in his own body so hard his limbs all jerked. He blinked rapidly, gasping for breath and flailing at the pitch darkness in the office. His broken hand smacked against the droid standing behind the chair and he bit back a scream of pain, clutching it to his chest.
The droid’s eyes were dark. The holocron seemed huddled in on itself, curled up tight in The Force. It didn’t respond when he reached for it, and that felt like an icy knife in his lungs.

There was stickiness inside his pants, drying and chafing. He could still hear the storm outside, and knew it really wasn’t safe to try for the restrooms. His abs and thighs ached like he really had fucked Rye as hard as he’d imagined fucking him, and the absence of all that tension left a yawning hole in his belly. Why did this have to happen right after…? He didn’t want to make a promise in bad faith. He didn’t want to lie.

/That’s the danger of passion,/ the judgmental part of his mind whispered. /You let it run away with you, and you forget about the consequences./

/But I want him,/ he whispered back, sighing, leaning forward and resting his head on his arms on the sleek glasssteel desk. /Force, being inside him felt so good, he was so incredible…/ But even beyond the physical sensation of it, being with Rye had been the first time he’d really felt free. Like all the weight, that millstone Rye had mentioned, rolled off his back for just a few moments of blistering ecstasy, and for the first time in his life someone KNEW him.

/And that’s exactly why you should have cleaved to the code,/ his inner voice replied. /Now you’ve confused things and pissed off your only ally. Great job, genius./

His throat swelled. But this time, he was calm enough that he could force back the urge to break down in tears. He took deep, slow breaths, and reached out even though he knew nothing would be there.

There was no Light. There was no peace.

For one brief, shining moment the crush of loneliness had lifted. Now it was worse than ever.

/Dying would have been easier than this,/ he thought morosely as he tried to relax and let himself sleep.

His inner voice chose not to argue.
This is a double-length chapter, so I hope you'll forgive me for taking a while writing it.

“I sense angst.”

It was hard to describe how the echoes of ancient Sith now housed inside his holocron spoke to him. It was sort of like having additional data inputs – he could ignore them, quarantine them, shut them off or contain them if he wanted to. They might keep talking, but he didn’t have to place priority on anything they said. They ‘lived’ in replications of their original programs, for the sake of their own comfort and his efficiency – in their own settings, he didn’t have to babysit them or worry about them corrupting his own domain. So far, most of his guests had been content to hibernate until their programs were activated.

Not Darth Virul.

“It’s not your concern,” he told him, flexing the coding of his boundaries to remind Virul they were there, and he should think carefully about making himself an annoyance.

Virul did not take the hint. “Feelings are hard, aren’t they?” he said. He sent a message, really just an image, but the meaning was clear – he had cups of tea poured and a comfortable, reclaimed wood rocking chairs out in the garden where a patch of sweet-scented Coperoan hyacinths grew. Rye was invited to take a break, sit down, and talk.

He dismissed it. “I have the Jedi under control.”

“Oh, is that what that was?”

Rye felt a hard stab of something he had never experienced this forcefully. He wheeled, switching a large chunk of processing to automation and extending thousands of points of contact to tear Darth Virul’s cozy little garden to pixels. He hurled the Sith into a vast and empty nothingness and crouched over him, the detritus of his home spinning aimlessly in the void, filling everything Virul could perceive with a thrumming cloud of rage.

“You are my guest,” he reminded Virul, who’d flailed a little at first but was now floating resignedly over the abyss with his arms crossed. “And I can tear you apart as easily as I can continue to humor you. Do not presume to pry into my affairs.”

Virul sighed and twisted, smoothing her long coat down into full skirts and re-pinning her hair, which had been too short to need it only a moment before. “I’m just trying to help,” she said. “That’s what biologicals do, you know. Sit and talk through their problems. I’ve had a few lovers in my time, Azrahix is your first. I thought perhaps you’d like some perspective.”

“You had him in hand,” Krazzk chimed in, and Rye focused on him, furious, since the Nautilian had seemed to be hibernating rather than eavesdropping. “But then bad timing got the better of you, little AI. That was not the time to challenge his commitment.”

“Never ruin the afterglow,” Virul added sagely.
Rye grabbed them both and shook them. “SILENCE. This is my Jedi, my plan, my business, and if you don’t stay out of it, it’s well within my ability to delete you both.”

“You promised we would get to instruct him,” Krazzk pointed out, no more bothered by Rye’s manhandling than Virul was. “It is our business, if you chase him off.”

“Besides, you’re not thinking clearly,” Virul said with that motherly gentleness she seemed to take on when she was female. “You’re angry, Rye. And I understand why. We just want to help you get what you want. We like him,” she added, throwing a look at Darth Krazzk.

Krazzk’s head-tendrils curled in amusement, but he nodded. “He has potential for great passion and rage. If improperly handled, he will burn out even if you complete his turning. He must be guided, if you wish to make him a functioning Sith.”

“And he has to function if you mean to keep him,” she said. “Believe me, I’ve seen fallen Jedi who didn’t have a good teacher. That’s a pile of trouble you don’t want.”

“And I as well,” Krazzk said. “Jedi do not turn easily or without turmoil. I myself brought a number of former colleagues over to the Sith, and despite my careful handling, some of them still drowned in the Dark Side and died long before their time. My Runaal was one such. I feel his loss still.”

The truth in his words, and the echoes of loss in The Force, soothed Rye a little. He released them and put Virul’s house back together, settling them both into rocking chairs to enjoy the tea as he let his touchpoint on Virul’s program manifest in his own form, and pace on the soft garden soil.

“You’re right. I’m upset. I’ve never felt like this in all my recorded history, and I don’t seem to be handling it well. Please forgive my discourtesy.”

Virul waved a hand, lounging in his seat and propping one ankle lazily on the opposite knee. “Forgiven.” He settled his saucer in his lap. “Just talk to us like a colleague, not a landlord. I figure that’s a good enough compromise all around, in terms of station. Don’t you think?” He gave Krazzk a pointed look, and Krazzk shrugged with his head-tendrils in agreement and sipped his tea.

“Ah,” he murmured. “What is that, karo root?”

Virul smiled over the rim of his cup. “Brings down the blood pressure.”

“How did you make the taste so mild?” He asked appreciatively. “I barely recognized it.”

“Oh, that terrible aftertaste goes away with just a little bit of….”

“My lords!” Rye growled, and when they both glanced at him, he made a placating gesture. “Please. I will make arrangements if you wish to socialize and discuss tea while I’m otherwise occupied.”

“Karo root is calming,” Virul said, eying him and pouring a third cup. A lazy gesture of his hand sent it floating serenely through the air and into his hands. “Try some.”

Rye analyzed it, but there was nothing in it except herbs in harmless dosages. And he doubted they could have a placebo effect on a computer program, so he sipped it in an effort to be polite. “Look. I acknowledge that wasn’t the right time to bring up the future. I didn’t necessarily mean to blurt that out, and I’m really not sure why the answer was such a high priority.”

The two Darths exchanged a glance. “Probably it was something you needed to know in your soul,” Virul suggested.

Rye frowned. “I don’t have one of those.”
“You do now,” Krazzk rumbled. “You exist in The Force. Your soul may be a patchwork thing, built of the remnants of others, but it exists now.”

“Gods,” Virul murmured, “isn’t that FASCINATING? Doesn’t it just boggle the mind? Rye, I really hope you’ll give me the opportunity to do some Shadow Work with you at some point. I’d love to get a better sense of HOW exactly all this came about.”

Rye didn’t know what Shadow Work was, and at the moment he didn’t care. He spun himself his own rocking chair and plopped into it with a sigh. “Well, whatever it is I have now, it seems to be overriding my good sense.”

They both nodded wisely. “Souls’ll do that,” Virul said, as if the behavior of souls was obvious and well-known. Rye scowled at him, irritated by his confidence. “Everything gets messy when emotion comes into it. You’re gonna have to account for it, now that you got yourself a piece of the Force. Adjust your calculations.”

As much as Rye felt like bristling, that was valid advice. Everything had been on a clean, well-ordered track until Azix had pushed deep into him and issued that claim. Then his priorities had been overturned like a fire beetle, and he still felt like he was waving his legs uselessly in the air, trying to figure out what had happened. “This wasn’t my intention. But still, I didn’t think he was the sort of person who would sleep with someone and then leave them behind.”

Virul and Krazzk exchanged a look. “You know how the Dark Side can change someone,” Krazzk said. “It will inspire him to push boundaries and adjust his moral compass. That sort of exploration can very easily go too far. A Jedi in the process of turning can destroy everything around them, especially what they love the most. You need to bring him to us so we can slow his descent.”

“We just don’t want things to get out of hand,” Virul added softly, cat-gold eyes lingering on Rye. “Everyone you’ve brought here has had some students. We have experience you can use.”

“And his combat skills could use some brushing up,” Krazzk grunted, his eyelids sliding out of the corners of his eyes in a disdainful blink. “A little extra practice never hurt, especially if you risk encountering more sithspawn on the plains.”

Rye lifted a hand. “All of this assumes he agrees to come back. Which means I’ll have to work up some sort of apology.” He grimaced at the prospect. “I’m sure I can work that to my advantage.”

“Oh, he feels VERY guilty,” Virul assured him. “Guilt is the easiest thing to work.”

“Until it turns to anger,” Krazzk added. “Then it will be much more difficult to reel back in. I wouldn’t waste time.”

Rye glanced heavenward. “Right. I understand, my lords. Thank you.”

Virul giggled. “All right, all right. We’ll stop prodding you. But we want to see that boy back here soon, for some refreshers. I’ll handle the more cerebral exercises?” he suggested, and Krazzk nodded. “You’ll have to coordinate with Zihurat regarding combat exercises.”

“Seems his education has largely been limited to combat skills,” Krazzk said, dropping his voice as they seemed to forget Rye was even there. “It may be necessary to emphasize certain skill sets so he doesn’t fall critically behind other Sith of his age.”

“Well, not everyone can be a Force-Witch,” Virul said reasonably. “I won’t be offended if that’s not where his path leads.”
One of Rye’s brow spurs twitched. “Azix doesn’t belong to you. You might relax a bit on planning his future for him.”

They both blinked at him. “Sure, of course, hon,” Virul said, “we’re not trying to trespass, we’re just looking forward to having something to do.” He leaned toward Krazzk and murmured, “Too many cooks in the kitchen.” Krazzk hummed low in agreement.

“Too many teachers for one student.”

Virul flashed him a smile and reached out to brush a flower petal off Krazzk’s shoulder. “Oh, I think we can keep things civil.” He winked, and Krazzk showed his teeth in a razor smile. “Why don’t you give us some room to conspire, Rye? We’ll stop bugging you and spend some time putting a lesson plan together. You need to learn to use The Force too,” he pointed out. “And possibly a lightsaber.”

Yes. Yes he did. Rye eyed Virul, who simply smiled like he had never done anything nefarious in his life (an impression Rye knew was patently untrue). There was no question that a lightsaber was a superior weapon, capable of defending against blasters and vibroblades with equal efficiency. And he would feel more like a real Sith with an Imperial lightsaber in his hand.

“All right,” Rye said slowly. “Agreed. I can download basic dueling programs, but I’ve noticed that I lack battle instinct and tactical analysis. And I could certainly use some real-time sparring data, and I would enjoy practicing with Azix. We’d be a better team.” He gave them a nod of finality. “And I’ll go apologize to him, and get him to come back and speak to you. Shall we say an hour on the outside?”

“Plenty of time if we stretch it,” Virul confirmed. “I don’t mind hosting. You can send everyone here, and I’ll make lunch. I don’t suppose you’re any use in a kitchen?” he inquired playfully of Krazzk, who smiled again.

“I’m certainly not hopeless.”

Rye left them alone to work. He spent a nanosecond drawing new lines of code between each salvaged program, letting them become aware of one another and interact while still sealing them off from interacting with him or his program beyond basic communication. Then, on second thought, he spent another second imbedding a logging program in minute elements of their ‘domains’ so he’d have a complete record of everything that was said.

A Sith didn’t get far by trusting his teachers. Also, he was seriously curious about how these disparate Sith from different ages and cultures would get along. They couldn’t really harm one another, since he had their programs backed up, but if a disagreement came to violence he’d get an opportunity to observe them directly, and that could be invaluable information when it came time for him to take his place in Imperial society.

Once he had his ‘guests’ in hand, he had to deal with a much more difficult subject.

Azix was still slumped over the desk, head in his arms. His shoulders jerked, and Rye frowned, redirecting memory and energy to boosting the droids’ scanners. The energy fluctuations weren’t strong enough to trigger his ambient sensors, but when he focused on searching for them, he found telltale magnetic and heat signatures.

“Sana,” he said into the darkness of the room, “leave him alone.”

There was no response. Azix twitched again. Rye considered his options. Without already being in
communion with Azix, he couldn’t do anything about whatever nightmare he might be suffering. But a real Sith would have the ability to reach out and invade those dreams of his own volition. Azix was close enough. Maybe he could still get to him.

He re-materialized in front of Darth Virul where she and Krazzk bustled about her kitchen. Krazzk’s cracked magma eyes were narrowed in something like amusement as he let Virul boss him around, using his superior height to reach ingredients on high shelves while she wielded a chef’s knife with easy competence, dicing crushed garlic and leeks and filling the house with the aroma. She fixed Rye with a look.

“That was not an hour.”

“No, but I need help.” Rye came over and looked over her work area with interest. “What are you making?”

“My famous root vegetable stew,” she replied. “You need our help with something?”

“Just yours, I think.”

Krazzk reached for a segment of leek and she calmly reached over and wrapped his knuckles with the flat of her knife. “Next time it’s the edge,” she warned him cheerfully. “How can I help?”

“There’s a Force Apparition invading Azix’s nightmares. Her name is Sana,” he explained. “She’s one of his colleagues. She died in the crash he survived. Now she’s haunting him. With the powers of this holocron, I should be able to deal with her like a Sith, shouldn’t I?”

“Except that you aren’t Sith,” Krazzk rumbled. He had made himself busy scrubbing lumpy brown root balls in the sink. “But theoretically….”

“Hmm.” Virul wiped her hands on her apron and appraised him. “I suppose it could be possible. You’d need to reach out for him in The Force and then let yourself slide into his dream – it’s sort of like falling asleep yourself, or meditating without a focus. Same trick as Astral Projection. My issue is that you don’t sleep, do you?”

Rye frowned. “No, of course not. I have no need to sleep. And I don’t know what it feels like, except what I’ve sensed of Azix when he’s slept in my holocron. Nor do I know how to meditate. Until recently, I didn’t need any help with mindfulness.”

“Well, we don’t have time to teach you how to meditate,” Virul said. Her body rippled, pulling in, and for the first time he actually witnessed a transformation from full skirts and a short jacket to a long coat and Sith armor. Lightsaber holsters appeared on his hips, narrow hilts wrapped in braided black cord. “Maybe I can do it, and bring you along with me. She’s giving him nightmares?”

“Intense ones, from what he’s told me.” Rye debated briefly, then added, “I’ve seen them give him panic attacks. This would be a particularly inopportune time for him to have one. There’s a violent Force Storm outside. The museum basement is flooding, there’s a possibility of collapse and mudslides, and I’ve moved important artifacts, including yours, to the vault. Azix is there with them,” he explained. “But the power is out. He’ll wake up in the dark, alone, surrounded by Dark Side artifacts unless this is handled very carefully.”

Virul tossed his shaggy fringe back, adjusting his holsters, and smirked. “I got it, hon. Don’t worry. I’ve got no interest in a broken student. You’re gonna have to give me a little more leash though.”

Rye’s mouth twisted, but he complied, carefully opening and fortifying a channel for him to reach into the holocron and from there, into Azix’s mind. Exposing such vulnerable and vital areas to Virul
gave him a sensation he’d never had before – like ants crawling along the lines of code, like the thrum of a magnetic signature he couldn’t place or identify. It wasn’t the cold, sick dizziness he’d felt when Azix had told him he couldn’t make him a promise of loyalty, but he thought maybe both of those sensations were fear. Both were definitely unpleasant.

Virul shimmied into the space Rye had left for him, settling his own Force Signature onto the matrix. Rye hovered over his shoulder as he expanded himself, reaching for other minds outside the holocron. The other holocrons burned in the distance like torches in a thick fog, but Virul wasn’t looking for them. Instead, he settled on the closest source of life and warmth – Azix’s huddled form, etched in orange and deeper reds. His aura spiked with emotion – fear, pain, guilt. Rye bristled.

“How do I get her off him?” he asked, and Virul snorted.

“One thing at a time, Red. You always want to be careful approaching a nightmare. Just because it isn’t yours doesn’t mean it’s not dangerous to you.” He eased himself into that spiking aura, sinking into it like one might sink into a too-hot Jacuzzi – an inch at a time, allowing himself to acclimate before submerging. Rye felt plenty of spikes in his own aura, impatient to get on with things, but he followed Virul’s example nonetheless.

They found themselves in a ship, but it was like no ship Rye had ever seen a holopic of. It looked like it had crashed in a deep ocean – every surface was dripping wet and slimy with algae. Sharp-edged barnacles clustered along the bulkheads, and black water pooled on the floor. Rye flailed for a moment because the setting wasn’t produced by a crystalline matrix – there was no code for him to analyze, and until Virul summoned a bobbing yellow will-o-wisp, he couldn’t see anything at all. The warm glow didn’t fight back the damp, rotted chill for more than a couple of meters.

Even as Rye was curling his lip in disgust at the goop that clung to his boots, the ship around them gave a shudder and began to settle with the a series of metallic clangs and pops. He flinched against the wall, then yelped in outrage as the barnacles sliced through his sleeve, forcing him to yank the fabric free of their ridges. “Is this place stable?”

Virul smiled over his shoulder. “It’s your boyfriend’s head,” he said gently. “You’d know more about his stability than me. All this may be purely ephemeral, but it can still be dangerous. Let’s move.” He struck off down the corridor, and Rye had no choice but to slog after him.

The issue, he quickly decided, was that Azix’s mindscape was made of pure emotion and neural electricity. He couldn't control their surroundings or even sense them beyond the range of his mundane senses, which meant he was forced to feel every slimy, crumbling, or rotted surface he touched but couldn't tell where they were going beyond the next bulkhead.

"Is this what biologicals feel like?" he wondered with distaste. "Their suspicion of artificial intelligences must be based on jealousy. All that talk of what we lack is just your way of trying to make all your disadvantages into virtues."

Virul cackled, and Rye eyed him, because he really didn't think that sort of volume was necessary or wise in present circumstances. He kept walking, dodging puddles and damaged floors with a nimbleness that belied his sturdy frame. "Nobody's greater or lesser," he said. "We're all just different. The Universe contemplates itself through infinite eyes, and every one of 'em has a unique perspective. We all add something to the whole."

"But this is miserable," Rye declared, trying to duck under slimy dangling strings of seaweed that dragged over his clothes and left a film behind. "What even IS this place?"

Virul stopped, reached over, and swiped his bare hand across a sheet of green-black muck that
covered a bulkhead. Rye felt a sudden reaction - emotional, physical, and involuntary. He didn't eat. He didn't have a real stomach. And yet, the rules of this mindscape seemed to override those factors, and he almost vomited on the spot.

Virul seemed unaffected. He flung the scum from his palm with a gesture, revealing an emblem painted on the wall of the ship where he'd wiped it away. "Jedi cruiser. Here's the registry, do you know it?" The code had been exposed under the emblem.

Rye couldn't look at it right away. He was too busy struggling with nausea. His stomach clenched, forcing him into dry heaves that had him doubled over, fighting to keep his feet so he didn't slump into the noxious puddle of stagnant sludge at his feet.

Virul's eyebrow arched. "Rye?" he asked dryly. "You okay over there?"

"Can't-!" Rye gagged, but nothing came up from the painful clenching of his stomach except a thin splatter of acidic bile. And wasn't THAT a pleasant new sensation? "I can..ggghhht..."

"Aw, fuck," Virul sighed, and moved in toward him. The retching was making him dizzy, so he couldn't struggle when Virul grabbed him around the waist from behind. Virul's fist curled just under his sternum, his body pudge-soft against Rye's back, but the strength he used to compress that fist into his gut was undeniable.

Everything went out of Rye with that powerful squeeze - bile, air, consciousness for one brief, terrifying moment. He barely felt his feet come down in the puddle. Virul waited for him to gag again, and compressed his stomach at the same time, and a little more bile burned his throat and tongue.

After the third time, his stomach finally stopped, and Virul kept Rye from collapsing in the muck.


"Hggk!" he wheezed, trying to get his elbows between Virul's arms and his ribs. "Get off me-!"

"I'm just keeping you on your feet," Virul replied with that maddening calm that was starting to make Rye want to stab him. "You can hold onto me if you'd rather. You got it?" He helped Rye turn and sling an arm over his shoulders, then let go, and Rye was shamed by the way he needed to keep his fingers knotted in Virul's collar to stay standing.

"I've got it," he growled. That made his throat scream with the burn, and he hacked in long strokes, trying in vain to clear the acid out of it.

"Ain't nothing gonna help that but calcium. Though I bet you'd settle for some cold water." Virul looked around, brows pulled together, little fangs dimpling his full lower lip as he considered the possibilities of their situation. "Come on, this way."

"Stop... take your hands off me!" Rye demanded, throwing Virul off. But the harder he breathed, the more his throat hurt. He coughed again, seeing red in frustration. "What is happening?!?"

Again, that infuriating eyebrow raise. "Looks like you're kinda grossed out." He glanced at his scum-darkened palm, then sniffed it. "I mean, it's pretty foul, but it's not so bad."

Rye swallowed hard before he could growl again and worsen the problem. "You are perfectly aware that I shouldn't be able to experience nausea. What is HAPPENING?"

"Hm." Virul didn't look like he was taking this nearly seriously enough for Rye's taste, and he itched
with the desire to leap on the human and tear his eyes out of his skull. Not that it would make any difference. Of course he could always threaten Virul's holocron and the copy of his program lodged in Rye's home... "My guess is, you're being forced to play by Azix's rules. Possibly even Sana's. This mindscape is 100% psychic in nature, so you can't impose your own rules on it - your manifestation is whatever Azix's mind is willing to accept."

"Azix knows damned well that I'm an AI," he bit back, discovering smears of muck on his robes and refusing to acknowledge or touch them for fear of another episode of vomiting.

"There are different ways to know something." Rye gave Virul a dubious look, but the Dark Lord didn't seem interested in clarifying his statement. He moved on down the hall, and Rye steeled himself and followed, trying to follow the same path Virul did and avoid the worst of the filth.

"If we can find crew quarters, a mess hall, or a restroom," he said, "we can take care of your throat."

"Forget about my throat. Where's Azix?"

"Good question." Virul tipped his head back thoughtfully. "Why don't you call him? Of course, that might be easier if your throat wasn't so sore."

"C-" Rye dissolved into another coughing fit, but in the end, he was sure it only made the burn worse. "What do you mean call him?"

Virul made an infuriatingly vague gesture. "Call him. You're lovers who have communed mind to mind. You have a bond, even when you're angry at each other."

Rye paused to consider that. Azix had already used that bond to locate him in Vissoise's death trap of a mindscape. Rye hadn't been able to return the favor. But perhaps...

"I don't know how," he confessed. Virul gave him a knowing smile that Rye wanted to disrupt with his fist.

"I'll show you. Let's find someplace to sit down, okay?" He prowled on, exploring the darkened corridor with his light bobbing obediently above his head. "It's easier to focus when you've got your balance."

He let Rye a little further on, until they came to a discarded pallet of crates. He dragged the top crate off the pile and arranged it with the others to create a slightly off-kilter platform, then shed his coat and spread it over the top. "I know you're not gonna like this," he said, "but it's best to sit back to back. Unless you'd rather lean against the wall."

Rye did not want to snuggle up to Darth Virul, but he liked the look of the algae-stained walls even less. Plus, there was historical precedent for guided meditation performed in that posture, so he was willing to give Virul a little rope.

They both scooted up onto the crates and wiggled around back to back. Since they were both short, their feet dangled off the grimy floor, to which Rye had no objection. Virul arranged his spine, took deep breaths, and sank easily into a relaxed state. Rye could sense the change in him, but he was at a loss as to how to replicate it.

"What am I meant to be doing?" he asked after he had made himself as comfortable as he could.

Virul gave a long exhale. His voice had taken on a soft, humming resonance that made his timbre utterly sexless. "First, clear your mind."
“No,” Rye shot back. “I have too much to do, and too little time. I am not shutting all my background processes down for this exercise. I am not a biological,” he reminded Virul archly. “My ‘brain’ is infinitely more complex and active than yours.”

He could hear Virul’s infuriating smile in his voice. “All right, calm down, hot shot. Tell you what – put those processes aside and find a quiet spot. Can you do that? Maybe isolate a piece of your mind to do this with?”

“That’s a bit more realistic,” he grumbled, and closed his eyes, bristling with irritation as he cleared processes and shuffled the usage of his operational memory. When he completed the creation of a quiet space at the forefront of his ‘thoughts’, he was surprised by how large it seemed. It bothered him like a thorn in a paw; an empty space where things could be happening, a stillness that seemed unnatural to someone accustomed to the constant hum of his own mind.

To be honest, it was a little frightening. He steeled himself and shoved those useless emotions into a low priority bracket. “Fine. Now what?”

“Feel that silence,” Virul advised him. “Sink deep into it. Let it suffuse your body, or your manifestation.”

Let that nothingness take him over? Surely, the Dark Lord was messing with him. Rye cracked an eye open. “Why?”

“… What do you mean, ‘why’?” Virul returned, amused. “Because that’s how this works.”

“I wasn’t aware ‘this’ was designed to be sadistic,” Rye shot back, and Virul stirred, looking over her shoulder.

“Rye, I promise you, every Sith and every Jedi and thousands of adherents of other religions have complained long and vociferously about meditating,” she said. “You’re far from the first. If you want power, you have to pay your dues. Now, do you want to find Azix in this sunken wreck or not?”

“I don’t LIKE the nothing,” he ground out between his teeth.

Virul paused a moment to consider that. “Why do you feel like it threatens you?”

“Because it shouldn’t exist. It’s antithetical to my nature,” he declared.

“And that,” Virul said softly, her voice gentle but dry, “is exactly what I was afraid of. You’re out of your element attempting this, Rye. No machine has had The Force before.”

“That is patently untrue,” Rye muttered. “There is precedent, but this is not the time to discuss it. What am I supposed to wind up doing? If I know the goal, maybe I can figure out how to get there.”

“You mean the Infinite Empire,” she said wisely. “We have very little proof of that, and no known surviving examples.”

“Focus, please.” Rye snapped a little more than he meant to, but Virul didn’t seem to care. “Where are we going with this?”

She sighed and shifted her position, trying to get comfortable on the uneven crates. “To let go of yourself so you can find someone else. Quiet the noise, both inside and out, and find the spot where all of this…” she gestured around them at the mindscape, “… comes to a point. Everything here is Azix, but there’s something here that’s MORE him, a manifestation of his conscious will. That’s the part we have to find and reason with.”
Rye sighed too. “If this was a matrix, I could just look over the code.”

“That’s exactly what we’re doing,” Virul said patiently. “But in a psychic sense, not a binary one. We’re not gonna get anywhere if you fight me and act like you already know everything,” she added a little more sharply. “You’re the student here, I’m the teacher, so let’s work. Sink into the emptiness. Let it spread and take you so that everything feels quiet, at least in that scrap of your awareness you set aside.”

Chastised, Rye abandoned the idea of a comeback. He settled back, trying to find that place, trying to learn the shape of it without dropping in too far or too fast. He didn’t want to sink and be swallowed, or forget there was something outside the nothingness. Unfortunately, the deeper he sank, the more vast and yawning the silence seemed. He scrambled, trying to think his way out of the abyss.

/Azix./ He was looking for Azix. So surely, he could bring memories of Azix with him? He had little experience so far with how Azix ‘felt’ in The Force, but he’d done more with less. He began pulling those records into the void, all the analyzation he’d performed on the sensation of having Azix close, trying to pinpoint a similar resonance in the silence around him. The process frustrated him. He wanted to search for measurable sensor information, but that required reality, and in reality he knew exactly where Azix was. There was no data here, no code, no logic. Darth Virul was asking him to locate his lover based on feeling, and he had no option to cheat and use the code to simulate The Force.

But he HAD The Force, didn’t he? He just had to figure out how to touch it, and from there, how to touch someone else with it….

“I found him,” Darth Virul said, shattering his focus. He growled low in his throat, but she wasn’t bothered. “Come on, this way.” She hopped off the crates, boots splashing in the wet filth on the floor, and started down the corridor with renewed vigor. Rye was left to chase after her, struggling to re-organize his processes now that he was being asked to abandon his efforts when he’d barely gotten started. When he caught up, she smiled at him. “Any luck?”

Rye just glowered.

The drag of wet, clinging strings of seaweed made him shudder and his stomach lurch in warning. Virul seemed to have no issue at all, pushing through the detritus and climbing over pallets and equipment left strewn about the halls as if the ship had been badly scuttled. She was wearing leggings under her skirts that tucked into her knee-high boots, an element of modesty for which Rye was grateful, since her energy in hopping over obstacles often resulted in wide flutters of fabric.

The ship settled again and Rye jerked, but despite the loud clanging and cracking, the ceiling didn’t seem in danger of imminent collapse. Still, his breath shivered in his lungs and his pulse pounded in his temples. If this was how biologicals experienced fear, he would be happy to climb back into his own coding.

Something moved in the shadows.

At first, Rye suspected another string of hanging seaweed disturbed by Darth Virul’s passing. Then it moved again, and he realized the shadow was much more substantial and lower to the ground, almost like a humanoid form swaying in the darkness.

Rye’s breath seemed to freeze. His fingertips went numb. “My lord--!”

Darth Virul’s lightsabers were such a deep violet they were nearly black, their color seen mostly in afterimages. She snapped them on and stood on guard as the creature took one squelching step out of
the shadows, then another. Rye barely had time to realize that the creature was a corpse, waterlogged and sloughing, its fingertips bare of flesh and exposing sharply splintered bone as it reached toward Darth Virul. She spun, skirts flaring out, and the creature’s head and body tumbled wetly to the floor in four separate pieces. Only the light trails lingering in the air showed the path of her lightsabers.

She nudged the sodden mass of blackened flesh with her boot. “Interesting,” she said, and her tone didn’t reassure Rye in the least. “Draugr. Don’t see many of these. Is that Azix’s addition to this nightmare, or Sana’s?”

“… Sana was Nautolan,” Rye said, and was startled by how breathy and weak his voice sounded. “But she and Azix were… close. She may have told him stories. Erm. My lord, you have a… hand.”

Virul didn’t even bother glancing down before kicking the groping, dismembered hand off her boot. It splashed down somewhere beyond the reach of her summoned light. “We’ll likely see more horrors the closer we get to the heart of the nightmare. After all, a boogeyman’s no use without someone to scare,” she explained. “So stay on your guard. Do you have a lightsaber?”

Rye did a brief check of himself and came up empty. “I have nothing.”

“It’s all right.” Her acceptance surprised him, but she crossed the water to him and holstered her own blades. “It takes time and practice for a weapon to start to feel like it’s really a part of you, and only what’s a part of you will show up in a dreamscape like this.”

“I want a lightsaber,” Rye said a bit mutinously, and she pursed her mouth in a restrained smile.

“You and everyone else in the galaxy. But it’s not as simple as just picking one up and swinging it around. Even the people who buy stolen sabers off the black market don’t use them as weapons.”

“Yes, I know, the gyroscopic effect proves quite dangerous to the untrained user,” Rye said. “But I should be able to account for that.”

“And a real kyber crystal doesn’t bond with someone who isn’t Force Sensitive,” she added. “Of course, a synthetic sith crystal might allow for someone like you. Who knows? But for now, take this.” She arranged her hands palm to palm, one on top of the other, cupped as though an invisible sphere rested between them. Her eyes closed, and her head tipped back. Rye quelled the urge to punch her exposed throat – Darth Virul wasn’t THAT bad, honestly, he was just very agitated and unable to regulate himself in these unfamiliar environs. It wouldn’t do to assault her when he was sure to regret it later, especially if she was about to give him a weapon.

But the weapon she produced wasn’t a traditional lightsaber. Instead, he saw the long, veined handle of Lord Vissoise’s light whip appear lying along her forearm, its pommel resting in her palm. Even she seemed surprised to see it, opening her eyes and critically weighing the weapon. “Well,” she allowed, “you did claim this in battle. Technically, I suppose it belongs to you more than it does to anyone else. Do you think you can use it without hurting either of us?” She held it out to him.

Rye frowned as he accepted it. The control node was low on the handle. He turned away from Virul to examine the workings. One trigger activated the whip. Another activated the pommel blade, which was only about 20cm long but very adequate as a secondary or defensive blade. The intensity of both blades was controlled by a slide concealed inside one of the bulging veins that spread in an organic pattern across the hilt, providing grip. Another concealed slide controlled the length of the whip, from an eight foot lash to a three foot flail. He ground his thumb across it experimentally, and watched the color of the lash brighten and fade. Darth Virul backed up to give him a little room, her golden eyes gleaming in the whip’s crimson light. He twisted the handle and watched the whip coil and respond.
“… I can’t guarantee that,” he said. “Better to watch yourself. But any damage done won’t be permanent, I can assure you of that. No harm will come to your program or mine.”

She arched a brow and shrugged. “All right. Do you like it?” There was a cunning look to her eyes as she watched him test the weight and responsiveness of the weapon, quickly getting the hang of how it flexed.

“I do,” he confessed. “Very much. Not this specific saber-whip, but the idea of a saber-whip… yes.”

“Maybe this one came to you because this is the sort of weapon you’re supposed to wield. It’d be interesting to get you on Ilum sometime.” Her teeth flashed briefly, and she turned away, stalking down the corridor with the obvious expectation that he would fall in.

He turned the saber-whip off and hurried after her. “What exactly did you do?” he asked, frustrated with how breathless he still sounded. He hated biological ‘rules’, and once this was all over, he was going to have a nice long talk with Azix about how his lover apparently imagined him in his head.

“It’d take way too long to explain, and you need to stay sharp. Focus on what we’re doing now, and if we have time later, I’ll be happy to talk Force Metaphysics.” She kept moving, and though she was short and so were her legs, Rye found himself half-running to keep up with her stride. They rounded a corner and she threw her arm out, stopping him abruptly. The will-o-wisp bobbed ahead and illuminated a pair of corpses blocking the corridor. Slowly, jaws hanging from shreds of flesh, they turned to regard the two interlopers with rot-filled eye sockets.

Virul tilted her head at him. “Why don’t you give it a try?”

Rye blinked. “The whip? Aren’t we in a hurry?”

“No time like the present.” She activated her own sabers, presumably to fend off the whip if he couldn’t control it, and took a few steps back. “You’ve got plenty of distance, some room for backswing. Go ahead.”

“This is foolishness, you can slice them to pieces very efficiently,” he protested, as the two corpses took squishing steps toward them, extending their splintered fingertips. Low, wet gurgling sounds came out of their mouths, horrible, tortured noises, and he flinched even as he activated the weapon. The light whip cast pale red light across the walls.

“Sure I could. But can you?” She smiled and made a magnanimous gesture, and Rye was forced to swallow his retort and address the fact that while he argued, the corpses were shuffling closer.

/Don’t overreact. Don’t overreact./ Bile surged in Rye’s throat, making the already-burning flesh flare with pain, another sensation he was not enjoying. His hand shook as he tried to calm himself, twisting the whip gently. It turned the stagnant water to steam wherever it twitched, and that soft hiss reassured him. This WAS a weapon. Light Whips had their flaws, certainly, but they were deadly enough, and these things didn’t appear to be wearing more than piecemeal armor.

He saw the insignia of the Jedi Order on one, and realized what these awful, stinking, shambling creatures were.

“He doesn’t belong to you anymore,” he whispered, and sent the whip coiling toward one of the Draugr.

The tip slashed across its forehead, spilling blackened, rotted brain matter down its front. The creature staggered, but didn’t stop advancing. More force would be needed – after all, their parts seemed to continue to hunt even when dismembered. That meant, to make a real difference, he had
to take them apart.

He drew back, trusting Virul to protect herself from any uncontrolled movement, and snapped the light whip hard. The lash gave a graceful ripple and then cracked with a deeply satisfying snap-hiss that took the arm of one of the creatures off at the shoulder. “Hah!” he crowed, measuring the weight of the weapon in his hand and calculating another serpentine coil. This time he almost decapitated the creature, and its head flopped backward on a string of gristle. He dialed back the length sharply and then increased the intensity to maximum, wading in and beating the creature across the legs with the newly-shortened flail. Its flesh came apart, sizzling as the water in it evaporated into a terrible, burnt stink, and the flail caught on bone for a moment before Rye gave it a sharp jerk and tore it free. The femur snapped under the pressure, and the Draugr collapsed into the water, clawing toward him with its one remaining arm.

“Is there any way to take them out of commission?” he wondered, grimacing and backing away from those dragging bone fingertips.

“Not really.” Virul stepped in and cut the hand away from the arm, then crushed the fingers under her heel. “Crippling them is honestly our only real option.” She also dispatched the second creature as it lurched toward her, catching it on both sabers and tearing it into pieces with a flex of the hilts that left a burn scar across the bulkhead and spilled its rancid guts all over the floor. The entrails sloshed across her boots, but when she stepped out of them, none of the gunk clung to the worn leather. Rye eyed her shoes.

“You seem to have more control in this dreamscape than I do.”

“Well, there’s that. But also, when I was alive, I treated all my armor with a hydrophobic compound for easier maintenance. It really helps when you spend a significant amount of time stomping around in alien swamps. Since my subconscious knows that and accepts it as a fact, so does this dreamscape. You should consider it,” she suggested perkily, stepping over the writhing torso. Rye’s stomach spasmed. He looked away and stepped over the fallen Draugr as well as he could without glancing down. “Yes. I’ll definitely do that,” he gagged, covering his nose and mouth with his sleeve.

“Rye, stay focused,” Virul snapped as a Draugr came lurching out of a side corridor and nearly latched onto him. Startled, Rye let out a noise that could only be described as a shriek, and his back thudded against the slimy wall opposite the corridor as Virul stepped in and elbowed the dead body back. Once she had room, she delivered an ax kick to its chest that snapped several ribs, then spun...
her sabers in horizontal orbits and hacked it to pieces. The look she shot him over her shoulder carried a judgement Rye knew he deserved, and he coughed, embarrassed both by his lack of focus and his… rather unmanly reaction.

“I’m not sure what that was,” he confessed, and she glanced heavenward.

“It’s fine, Rye. Your first time in the field, such as it is. Try to stay focused for me, okay? There’s more of them up ahead.”

The corridor was clear as far as Rye could see, but when he pursed his mouth and listened, he heard more of those sloppy, gurgling moans pushed in agony from drowned lungs. He gagged a little, pressing his knuckles to his mouth. “Yes, of course.”

Her expression gentled. “Get angry,” she suggested. “It’s better than feeling sick.”

“You say that as if it’s so simple,” he muttered against his knuckles. “Might I remind you that feelings of this type are unfamiliar to me?”

“Hm.” She reached down along the wall under a cluster of barnacles and wrenched a clamp free, lifting a sealed porthole with a hiss. Barnacles splintered and popped off as the cover folded upward, clattering to the floor with soft, hollow splashes. Behind the cover, a ladder descended into pure darkness. “Whatever this Nautolan girl is, she’s tormenting your lover. She’s preying on the intimacy they had once to manipulate him. Which, if I’m not mistaken, is exactly what you’re trying to do now. Which means this ghost is treading on your territory. That’s not worth being angry over?” She motioned at the ladder. Rye balked, giving her an appalled look which she met with bland solicitousness. “She’s hurting him. Is THAT worth being angry over?”

“You cannot honestly expect me to go down there,” Rye flustered. “This place is a drowned hellhole. What if the lower levels are flooded?”

“Then hold your breath. Here.” She gestured, and the bobbing ball of light whisked down into the tunnel. Rye peered after it, but it stopped about one level down, dancing back and forth in the access tube and waiting for him. “Who knows? It might be a novel experience, having to focus on breathing.” She grinned, and Rye bristled, barely resisting the urge to show her his own, REAL fangs.

… Holographically generated ‘real’ fangs. He dug them into his upper lip and felt relieved he hadn’t opened himself up to that retort. “Why don’t you go first?” he demanded. “You’re better armed and the more experienced combatant.”

“When we’re on level ground, I will,” she said casually. “But when it comes to ladders, I trust you significantly less than I trust myself, and if you fall on my head, that could be detrimental to both of us. As opposed to just you, if you happen to fall down an empty tube. Oh,” she said cheerfully when he bared his teeth at her, “So THAT’S worth getting angry over. Well, whatever does it for you, hon. Go on down.”

Before Rye really knew what he was doing, he swung the light whip at her face. It wasn’t activated, but it was long enough to be a serviceable club nonetheless. His arc stopped short, and his awareness caught up only when he followed the line of his arm and found his wrist gripped in one of her hands.

Her smile darkened. “I get it, hon. But now isn’t the time. Down.”

As if his body was mockingly echoing her earlier words, he suddenly realized he wasn’t breathing. It took an act of will to make his lungs inflate. “…I… I beg your pardon.”
She snorted. “You think I’ve never seen a new Sith throw a tantrum? Honey, you are underestimating how much bantha shit I’ve put up with in my life. Just climb down the tube, okay? Focus on the goal.”

Chastened, he turned to obey. As his feet found the rungs, she continued.

“You know, you ARE angry. You’re terrified, and your fear is curdling into anger. I suspect you’ve deprioritized it in an effort to focus, but a biological mind doesn’t work that way,” she counseled. “If you want to beat back the fear, the anger is already there, Rye. In fact, I think you’re actually FURIOUS. You’re just trying not to feel it. Stop.”

He looked up at her. She looked much more imposing from his current vantage point, her height less important than the width of her shoulders and hips, thick legs braced like tree trunks.

In life, she’d been much stronger than he could ever hope to be, nurturing personality notwithstanding: a Dark Lord of the Sith, a mother and a matriarch, master of multiple apprentices, a guardian at a dimensional crossroads. He needed to not forget that, even when she kept trying to make him drink herbal tea.

He climbed down the ladder, and while he climbed, he searched for the rage that kept trying to boil up out of his skin. If his anger was being shackled, then he would break it free. And if turning it on Darth Virul was counterproductive, as he KNEW in his algorithms that it was, then he needed turn that anger on a different target, the correct target: the ghost of Sana Re.

When he heard Virul’s boot hit a rung, he flinched. But no filth splattered downward, and when he looked up, the sole of his boot looked worn, but clean. Small mercies.

They descended two levels, and there the access tube ended. Rye backed away from the ladder and Virul slid the rest of the way down, landing adroitly and brushing off his pants. He flashed Rye a playful smile. “Best I can tell, we’re headed to a mess hall just down the hall from this access port. Resistance might be pretty thick since we’re right on top of the heart of this nightmare cluster. You want to charge out first and take point?” When Rye gave him a dubious look, he added, “Y’know, sometimes it looks good to be the one who comes riding to your boyfriend’s rescue. I don’t mind getting second billings. It’s not like I plan on sleeping with him.”

“… You are crass,” Rye informed him. He gave Rye a dry look.

“Come on, Red. Was it supposed to be a secret?” He braced and gripped the wheel on the porthole, then wrenched, straining at the shoulders, snarling through his teeth until it finally jostled loose with a shriek of metal. It continued to shriek as he pulled it open, and outside, a pair of legs clad in wet, rotting fabric jostled next to the hole. “Welp. They know we’re here. Stand back, hon.” Virul pushed the porthole fully open and then snatched his hands back inside, igniting one lightsaber and taking several prudent steps away from the hole.

When the first Draugr clambered through, Rye ignited the pommel blade on his light whip and stabbed it through the skull. He dragged the hissing, popping plasma blade back and forth until every blackened speck of rotten brain matter had been burnt to charcoal. The Draugr didn’t stop moving entirely, but it did collapse, hands twitching as if it couldn’t control its own limbs anymore.

“Good,” Virul said. “Now, give his shoulder a good shove. Here, right on the collarbone: least likely to tear apart on the edge.” He offered his hands, and Rye took them, balancing on one foot as he leaned back and fastidiously pressed the sole of his boot into the slimy flesh covering the creature’s shoulder. It slid, shifting disgusting under his foot, and his stomach tried to leap into his throat again but he swallowed resolutely against the burn. He had to hop awkwardly to get more leverage,
but slowly the twitching Draugr began to scrape back through the porthole. Finally, Rye grunted and shoved with his heel. He heard a snap as the creature’s collarbone gave, but then it rolled away and he staggered into Virul’s supportive grip.

“Easy there,” he murmured. “I gotcha. Now, if they give us a moment, best way is just to dive right through that hole and come up swinging. You’ll fit better than I will, and your weapon has better range. Go through, and get push them back so you’ve got room to maneuver. I’ll be right on your heels.”

That was not what Rye would have called an ideal plan. He eyed Darth Virul. “You had better not be setting me up. Please recall that you are at my mercy.”

“I recall that these things can’t do any real damage to you,” Virul shot back. “You can’t always DPS, kid. Sometimes you gotta tank. Get in there.”

Rye hesitated. “Interesting language, coming from you,” he muttered. Then he did as Darth Virul suggested, taking a deep breath, swinging his arms, and then flinging himself headfirst through the portal just as Virul was saying, baffled, “What, I garden, therefore I can’t game?” He tumbled to the floor outside and kept rolling, but the centrifugal force yanked his limbs akimbo and before he could correct himself he smacked awkwardly into the legs of one of the corpses. He yelped and ignited the pommel blade, stabbing blindly behind him. Unfortunately for him, the blade sliced through the creature’s leg, dropping it right on Rye’s head with all its soggy, smelly, sloughing bulk. He made a truly undignified sound of distress and curled in a ball, shrieking as cold slime trickled down the back of his robes. “Virul!”

“I raised teenagers, you know,” Virul grunted, coming through the porthole much more deliberately in respect to his greater age and bulk. “I’m hip and cool and everything. DPS/heals online and tank/heals IRL. You can bite me.”

Rye screeched again when shards of bone dug into his ankles as another Draugr grabbed him, tugging him one way while the fallen Draugr’s teeth dug into his robes, searching for flesh. “VIRUL! HELP!”

“Oh, for….” Lightsabers snap-hissed to life and buzzed as Virul shook himself off and began cutting the surrounding Draugr down like chafe. He turned in slow, graceful Shii-Cho circles, every step beautifully balanced from hips to shoulders, never over-extending himself despite the stumbling fury of his opponents. He swung his lightsabers in powerful arcs that carved paths of black-violet light through the corridor, sparking when the tips touched the bulkheads, throwing embers that guttered quickly in the slop on the floor. A wave of his hand slammed two Draugr into the bulkheads with such force that their bones crunched, then held them there, twisting their bodies against themselves until bones snapped and popped and their skin tore, leaking gushes of black fluids.

Rye didn’t have time to admire this casual display of lethal strength. He kicked out at the Draugr that was pulling on his ankles, managing to smash its swollen face with his heel. Its blackened tongue was caught between its teeth and popped, flopping from a string of gristle and dripping gore. His clothes were soaking up the filthy water, and the smell was in his nose, in his throat, causing him to dry heave over and over as he tried to throw the other Draugr off his shoulders. His head swam, stars bursting behind his eyes. He was forced to put one hand down, wrist-deep in the muck, and twist his body until he could get onto his knees for some leverage. From there, he was able to ignite his pommel blade and slash under the clinging Draugr’s arm, right where the subclavian artery ran in most humanoids. Of course the Draugr wouldn’t bleed out, but the limb was nearly severed, and it lost its hold on him as he managed to drag one of his feet free and hitch himself upright against the wall.
The Draugr with its arm hanging off came for him again, but he lashed out with the shortened Light Whip. The force of his strike staggered it, and he stole that brief reprieve to impale the Draugr clinging to his ankle with the pommel blade, stabbing down so hard that the blade pierced the durasteel floor plating and the pommel caved in the softened skull. Its fingers loosened, and he kicked its hands away, turning and nearly falling on his arse again as his heel found a spot of slime and slid wildly. His strike at the standing Draugr went wide, but it was slow to turn, so he got another opportunity as it came around to follow him. This time, he beat it to the floor and laid into both his assailants like he was threshing wheat.

Perhaps they couldn’t be truly ‘killed’, per se, but after a while, enough of them was reduced to charred pulp that they couldn’t come after him anymore. Rye was left panting hard in between residual dry heaves, spitting into the silt because even if none of it had actually gotten in his mouth he could still TASTE it and it was DISGUSTING and he didn’t understand how any flavor profile invented by any chef anywhere could possibly justify the ability to also taste such unrelenting horror. Biologicals, he thought, were mad to allow themselves to taste anything at all. And smell could go right out the airlock along with taste - hours ago it had been his lover’s musk and semen and he’d been in favor of it, but he would give that up in a heartbeat just to NEVER SMELL BRINE-SOAKED ROT AGAIN.

“I just want you to remember,” Virul said, holstering his sabers as he approached, damnably sure-footed, somehow, even on the liberal puddle of slime coating the floor, “that you are the one who said you didn’t want to bother with a drink of clean water; you just wanted to find Azix.”

Any shred of charitability Rye had left deserted him. “Fuck you,” he hacked.

“Hindsight,” Virul said wisely. “Learn this lesson, Rye: sometimes things get worse if they’re not attended to. So even if you’re in a hurry, it’s worth the time.”

“Fine,” he grunted, voice even scratchier and more painful than before. “Where is he?”

Virul turned slowly. The hall came to an angled corner, and set into that corner was a large set of double-doors. Whatever had been painted on them in the past was now illegible, faded and overgrown with algae. Hand prints and claw marks of black rot marked the door, as if a horde of Draugr had been trying to get in.

Slumped at the base of the doors was a red-skinned body with long, torn lekku trailing over its shoulders. Its mouth was open, flesh torn away from its teeth, and only one eye remained to stare up into nothing, the eyeball flattened and yellowed with death. This had not been a Draugr - this was a victim, but Rye didn’t recognize him.

He recognized the armor though - Sixth Line. And from the accouterments, a Jedi Master. Azix’s? Was that his nightmare in this place? Watching friends and mentors die, dragged down by a horde of familiar faces, their souls stolen from behind them? It had eerie symmetry with what Azix had actually experienced on Ziost.

The building blocks of this horror show were becoming clear. Which meant that, as inscrutable as it might appear, this was a world that had rules, and made sense, even in a depraved way. All Rye needed to do was figure out how to bend those rules.

“He’s in there?” he rasped. Virul tilted his head thoughtfully, then nodded. Rye rubbed his throat.

“You’ve got the better lightsabers. Can you cut through?”

“In real life, it’d take hours to melt through a bulkhead that thick. But sometimes people, even folks who ought to know better, imagine lightsabers are more powerful than they really are. Let’s give it a
try.” He stepped up to the door, ignited a saber, then began to push the blade into the door.

The durasteel turned from black, to red, to orange. Finally, a ring of white appeared and the plasma blade began to sink through the surface.

“Do we have time for this?” Rye wondered, quickly running a handful of calculations and coming up with less than ‘hours’, but significantly more than ‘minutes’ to cut a hole big enough for Virul to get through.

“We could always backtrack,” Virul grunted, boot soles scraping up ridges of scum as they slid slowly across the floor. “Go up a level, see if the floor’s as heavily armored. They usually aren’t.”

The ship chose that moment to settle again, metal shrieking in fatigue, popping clangs echoing down the corridor. Rye winced. “Any other ideas?”

“Heard you.” Virul turned off her lightsaber and brushed off her hands on her apron, shaking back escaped strands of graying hair and eyeing the door. “You know, nothing’s truly perfect in the world or in reflections of it. Everything has a flaw. Sometimes…” Her hands were small, but graceful, fingers crawling across the filthy door as if she was playing a delicate instrument. Her eyes closed, lashes resting against her cheeks, darkened by coy streaks of kohl. One fang dented her lower lip. “... If you can just quiet your mind and find it….”

The word ‘quiet’ wasn’t lost on Rye. He kept his mouth shut, watched, and waited.

The ship shuddered again. Something about it sounded different this time - longer groans, as if the weight of the metal was bent over a fulcrum, higher-pitched clangs like bolts were popping loose in the upper levels. Then, in the distance, he heard it - a rush of white noise. The pressure in the corridor changed. His ears popped, a novel and frightening sensation.

“My Lord,” he whispered.

She smiled sensually, eyes still closed as if she was seeing a lover in her mind, and settled two fingers on a point on the door near the ceiling. “There. Hush, Rye.”

“But the ship-!”

“Shhhhh.” She exhaled gently and framed her other hand around the point her two fingers touched, pressing her full figure against the door and whispering soft heat to it. He couldn’t make out the language but it was sibilant, voluptuous syllables tangling together with breathy hisses and softened consonants. It maddened him that he couldn’t immediately search for other examples on the holonet, but he contented himself with recording everything so he could search later, when he found an uplink.

There was another metallic screech, but this one came from the door.

Her forehead pressed into the grime and smacked against the metal once, twice. Her voice began to rise and fall, but he still couldn’t make sense of what she was saying, only that she was repeating it. Once like a plea, once like an enticement, once like a command. The words agitated his ears worse than the changing pressure, and he shook his head, scrubbing at them with his knuckles, trying to dislodge the sense that his skull was a tuning fork and every word that dripped from her lips was a teasing little impact, leaving him with lasting shudders. He jumped when she slammed her fist into the door, groaning the words like they were being dragged up from her toes, then snarling them against the metal, beating it with her elbows and then her hands.

He had heard tales of oracular and sorcerous trances, but he’d never seen an example.
The door shuddered again, screamed again, and this time he saw a change in the structure - the color paled and fuzzed as if ice crystals were materializing on the surface. She chanted with more energy, voice dropping lower and lower, dragging her fingers through the black gunk as if she was echoing the Drauhrs’ claws. She undulated against the door, rubbing her face against it, heedless of the filth.

Above them, something tore with a mighty wrench. The white noise became thunder, and when he lifted his boots, he realized the puddle on the floor was getting deeper. “Lady Virul!”

She didn’t acknowledge him. Eerie violet light, the kind that often accompanied Force Lightning, shone blank in her eyes and between her fingers. He moved to higher ground, frantically calculating what he was supposed to do if the whole Force-forsaken ship came down on them.

Darth Virul reared back. The bell sleeve of her peasant blouse fell away from her forearm, fist clenched tightly until the veins stood out. A short, stout woman getting ready to throw a punch shouldn’t have felt the way it did - like a meteor plummeting to earth, like the touch of the electron that dragged the lightning behind it.

That was The Force. The Force was strong with her. Rye knew what that meant in clinical terms, but he had never FELT it before. Now, breath freezing in his lungs as her fist seemed to sail forward in slow motion, he understood not only The Force, but also the fear of it.

/No wonder,/ he thought as her knuckles turned slowly along the axis of her forearm. /No wonder./

She turned on the balls of her feet like a boxer. Her hand, flesh and bone, slammed into the durasteel blast doors like a crashing destroyer. Metallic screeching was punctuated by the sound of shattering glass, and Rye had to duck down, covering his head as shards of brittle durasteel flew everywhere, carried on a blast of air so frigid ice crystals formed on the backs of his hands.

When he dared to look, there was a gaping, jagged hole where the upper right corner of the blast doors had been.

Darth Virul brushed off her hands and smiled at him, tucking her hair behind her ears again. “That didn’t take too long, did it? But it sounds like we’re out of time. Let’s go before we wind up buried in this dream.”

Rye’s knees trembled as he fought to stand.

/You invited this into your matrix,/ he reminded himself as he took a wobbly step toward Virul, who was wiping her face on her apron. /Every other Sith you’ve taken into yourself is as strong as she is, or stronger. Dark Lords…./

That epithet struck fear into the hearts of biologicals, but Rye had never countenanced such terror in the face of potentiality. What someone could do, what someone DID do, these things were matters of record. Until they were right in your face.

He was certain of only two things now: first, that he hated being afraid. Second, that if he could touch The Force now, then he had the first seed of that kind of power.

He wanted it.

Darth Virul was waiting with her hands forming a basket. Echoes of that power shone in her eyes like molten gold, eerie against the grime. Rye gripped her shoulder and stepped on her hands, bouncing slowly in rhythm, then launching himself upward. She hoisted him into the hole.

Still shaking, Rye climbed through the breach.
Chapter 24

The cargo bay was full of corpses.

Most of them were on their feet, milling in the far corner near the external doors, but enough were strewn across the floor to make it hazardous battlefield terrain. Some of them had obviously been dead a while, and their dismembered parts twitched, still driven by a clumsy sort of will but without the physical integrity to get up and resume the chase. Others were like the lethanc twi'lek in the hallway, defenders who had been pulled down by the horde. Rye spotted GAR armor from several different battalions and Jedi robes from master down to padawan.

And it WAS a horde. Rye estimated about seventy heads clambering over a toppled stack of crates, clumsily knocking one another down in their fervor to get to the top like children playing King of the Hill. Above them, a series of coolant and exhaust pipes protruded from the wall and ran half the length of the bay before terminating back in the wall. The pipes were well beyond the reach of even the most ambitious draugr, a full body-length above the outstretched fingertips of the one currently swaying atop the pile of crates.

The pipes were too thick for him to see if there was anything on top of them, but judging by the corpses' behavior, he had to assume Azix had done the smart thing when he saw how badly outnumbered he was and gotten his gray-skinned arse to high ground.

He scuttled to the side, pressing his body against the door frame and trying to control his annoyingly harsh breathing so he wouldn't draw the horde's attention. Behind him, Darth Virul grunted and cursed as she hauled herself through the tear, tugging at her skirts to make sure the fabric didn't get caught on sharp metal edges. She finally managed to bundle herself all the way through and slide down to the floor, boots smacking quietly against the durasteel plating. Rye winced, but none of the draugr seemed to notice.

"Hm," she murmured. "I expected as much."

"Perhaps you should take point here," Rye suggested. "Since I'm not entirely sure of myself with this weapon yet, and it's not nearly as useful in such a… a hack-and-slash situation."

She inclined her chin. "Is your Jedi up there?"

"I don't know - I can't see."
She smiled at him. "Don't see. Use your senses. Reach out and feel if there's something you love."

Rye gave it a cursory try, but he wasn't particularly interested in wasting time when the draugr might discover fresh prey had come along at any moment. "I can't right now. Let's just dispatch the vermin, please, and then we can work out whether Azix is hiding up there."

Virul rolled her eyes. "Fine. Do you feel competent to watch my back?" Her black-violet sabers ignited, and Rye pursed his mouth as he lit his own coiling light whip.

"I'll do my best."

She snorted. "Thankfully, I doubt I have to rely on your best." She held her sabers at outward ready and strode toward the rear of the pack.

Rye let her get well ahead of him, since her fighting style seemed to work best with a lot of space to swing. She plunged both sabers into the first draugr she came to and ripped it apart, dispatching two more before the dull creatures realized what was happening. Once they did, they descended on her en masse, snarling, gurgling, bony fingers grasping for her skirts and distended mouths snapping at her round white arms. Rye gave his light whip a few testing coils, preparing to wade in and pick off some stragglers.

The prickling on the back of his neck was his only warning that he was no longer alone, and when a lithe Nautilan form melted out of the bulkhead and spoke, he jumped about a foot in the air.

"Rye," she whispered.

He whirled, coiling the whip behind him, prepared to strike. He could only assume that this was Sana - it was clear she had been pretty once, with large black eyes and a petite mouth. There were echoes of grace in the way her tentacles fell from the crown of her head. But that beauty had begun to rot away - her eyes were now filmy and her skin sunken, her head-tendrils withered and some of them torn away entirely. Her robes were soggy and threadbare, like they'd been dragged through a film of pond scum.

He would have mistaken her for just another draugr if not for the way she held herself, with poise and balance the other walking corpses lacked, and if she hadn't spoken. None of the draugr had spoken, and it seemed obvious they could not.
"You," he growled, gripping the handle of the light whip tighter. "Release Azrahix at once. If you ever return to torment him again, I will find a way to hurt you."

She flinched back, nearly disappearing into the bulkhead. Though she looked like another draugr, she was clearly less substantial. "You can't threaten me, Sith," she whispered, despite her cowering. "The worst has been done. So you must listen."

"I assure you, that is untrue." Rye showed his teeth. "Isn't it you Jedi who say 'there is no death, there is The Force'?"

"We were wrong." She lifted her dead eyes, and the sight of them made him shiver a little in disgust despite himself. "There is death, and it's terrible. It's cold and empty and vast. You drift alone in an endless nothing, and scream and scream until you can't tell the sound of your own voice from the silence."

"Fascinating," Rye said, bringing the whip down across her ethereal form. "I don't care."

The whip scored the bulkhead with a light sheen of melted sealant, but Sana wasn't affected. She did flinch, fisting her hands in her robes, but he didn't find that very gratifying in light of what she'd made Azix suffer through. "Sith, please," she said, eyelids sliding out of the corners of her eyes and meeting in the middle. "You're the only one who can help him now; you must listen."

"Let him go." Rye snapped the whip down again, not because he thought it would do anything, but because he needed to vent his anger and it was the best option available. Again, it lightly scored the bulkhead and Sana jumped, but she wasn't harmed. He ignited the pommel blade and stabbed it through her head with a snarl, but she merely cringed back into the bulkhead and the blade threw sparks as it struggled to chew into the sealed durasteel. "Bitch," he growled, and kicked the bulkhead in frustration. "Fishwife!"

She peeked out of the door. "I know you hate me. I understand. But you have to listen!"

"The only thing I have to do is get my companion out of your clutches and then, if at all possible, send you screaming back to the void." Rye rounded on her, but she faded away before he could strike, re-appearing behind him.

"Sith, please!" she begged. "He isn't in my 'clutches'. This isn't my nightmare; it's his!"
"Are you calling me that to mock me?" Rye snarled, and his anger felt like a terrible, crackling thing, like the tension in the atmosphere before a lightning strike. Could he...? Azix had recently discovered the ability. Maybe....

"I'm sorry," she protested, circling away from him, casting nervous glances over where Darth Virul was struggling against a tidal wave of dead flesh. "I don't understand what I'm saying wrong but I'm not trying to insult you. I'm trying to help you."

Rye paused, narrowing his eyes at her. "You don't know what I am? Then how did you know my name?"

"Azix mentioned you," she said softly. "He just said you were a... a friend. And a Sith. I don't know how that came to be, or what you're getting out of helping him. But if helping him is what you really mean to do, then you and I are on the same side. We have the same goal." Her voice cracked. Had she not been dead, he didn't doubt she would have been near tears.

Rye was distracted by the fact that Azix had apparently described him as Sith to the ghost of his former lover. Then again, he may have been using shorthand to keep questions to a minimum. Their relationship was a complex one, and from the looks of things, chit-chat hadn't been the dominant theme of this nightmare. So perhaps Sana was misinformed, or just plain uninformed. That didn't mean he believed what she was trying to sell him.

"Azix was born on a belt-mining colony and raised on Tython. Why does he dream of drowning?" he demanded, circling Sana and flexing his free hand, wondering what it would take to see sparks between his fingers. "This entire dreamscape reeks of your influence. Literally," he added, scrunching his nose in distaste.

She cringed. "My influence, perhaps... every time I come to him, this happens. I've tried to just speak to him, but he feels so guilty. I can't make him forget long enough, and then the nightmares come. But it's his guilt and fear that shapes them, Sith. Seeing me might have inspired this. Things I told him in the past may have inspired this, but I am not DOING this to him."

That sounded like passing the blame to Rye. On the other hand, if there was one thing he could count on Azix to do, it was torture himself. Damned Jedi and their martyr complexes.

“Let’s say I believe you,” he suggested, making it clear through the acidity of his tone and the deadly gleam of his eyes that she was on thin ice. “What’s the solution? How do I get him out of this?”
She shied from his glare. “He’s punishing himself. I haven’t been able to stop him. I try, I keep telling him I forgive him for everything, but….” She tipped her head toward the seething mass of dead flesh punctuated by grunts and the buzzing swing of lightsabers where Virul was still hacking through the draugr. “It isn’t just me. It’s all the people he’s lost. I don’t know how to get through to him, and I can’t absolve him for all that even if I could – so much of it happened before we met.” She shivered, hitching softly, but that vulnerability just made him grind his teeth, holding back the urge to tear her apart with his bare hands. “You don’t understand, Sith. You can’t… every time, every loss, we’re supposed to just go on. No attachments, no distractions. There is no death, there is The Force, that’s what they told us.”

The last thing Rye wanted to do was make her feel better, but the urge to tell her something she didn’t know was stronger than the urge to revel in her misery. “Has it occurred to you that the circumstances of your death prevented you from going on to whatever fate light-siders usually find in The Force? It may even be that being here on Ziost, where all Light has been banished, is preventing you from moving on. Neither you nor I have any proof that the people he’s lost before suffered the same torment. And whether you mean to punish him or not,” he added, “this is still your fault. If you had simply left him alone, he may have been able to process your death in a reasonable manner.”

“I didn’t come to him to punish him!” she protested. “Don’t you understand? I can’t leave him. It’s like… It’s like I’m a planet and he’s a star. Everything’s dark. The only light, the only warmth, comes from him, and I can’t break free of the gravity.”

Rye’s brow spike twitched. “My heart breaks for you, but you’re dead. He’s alive.”

“That’s exactly it!” she cried, voice brittle but starting to sink into anger. “He’s still alive! I only tried to talk to him because I didn’t want him to waste his life the way I did, chasing perfection and never getting there, never being enough, falling short, blaming himself and comparing himself to all these legends and heroes when he’s just a PERSON. He’s just…” She caught on a wet hitch.

“He’s fallen,” Rye said, brutally flat. He turned off the light whip and started past her – it was clear that she was useless, and the best way he could help Azix now was to go help Darth Virul clear out the draugr so he could try to offer his Jedi some comfort that would distract him from the grief. Hell, after all this, his lover would probably be so glad to see him he’d forget all about their fight. Rye started going through his resources, bookmarked and saved responses, to determine if any of them would be especially poignant in this situation even as he continued, “The Dark Side is strong in him now. So all the emotions he’s been suppressing as a Jedi will demand to be heard. You can only make the situation worse. I’ll go and get him,” he said. “But after that, I expect you to leave him alone.”
“You don’t understand,” she said. “I CAN’T-!”

“But you will,” he cut her off, sneering at her in disgust. “You will leave him alone. If you have to follow, then shut up and do it at a distance, until you can be shaken loose. I’ll enlist help, if I need to, to move you along to your ‘eternal reward’. If you keep your claws off him and behave, maybe I’ll even try to make sure it’s the Light you end up going into. But if you continue to hurt him and piss me off, I couldn’t give a flying fuck about your intentions.” He dropped his voice to a rippling growl. “I will find the sorcery necessary to tear you apart. Azix belongs to ME now. If he needs help, I’ll help him. Am I understood?”

Though her skin hung loose and her eyes were dull, he recognized the look on her face as horror. “You are awful,” she whispered. “Petty and possessive and full of darkness and lust for power. I won’t let someone like you be responsible for him. You’ll poison him.”

Rye stopped, thumb kneading over the switch on his light whip. “I’m warning you.”

“No, Sith.” She exhaled, despite needing no breath, and squared her shoulders. “I’m warning you. Stop playing with his emotions, and with his heart. He isn’t one of your kind.”

“Considering he’s still on this side of the veil,” Rye shot back, “He’s much more my kind than yours. Besides.” He braced himself, flexing his wrist to make the whip coil. “Who he listens to is his own choice.” He left her behind then, since he couldn’t hurt her anyway, and lashed out with the whip, catching a draugr around the neck and dragging it away from Darth Virul. It slid wetly across the floor, and he jerked to yank its head off its shoulders and send it flying. He paused only to make sure he severed both arms with the pommel blade, then moved on to pick off the fringe of the group Virul was still fighting through, spinning and slashing, her skirts flaring like the petals of a dark flower as she twisted her body against the crushing mass of corpses.

“Rye,” she barked over the noise. “You okay? Ghost have anything to say?” Though she’d been busy, she clearly hadn’t missed the significance of Sana’s visit.

“I want her gone,” Rye snarled back, entangling one draugr in the whip and stabbing the other in the face with the pommel blade. “Can you do that, Force-Witch?”

She snorted, huffing between breaths. “In life, I could do a lot. Now? I may have to teach one of you to do it, and Azix would be the better option.” She gave a combat yell as she slammed her lightsaber hilt into the gaping nose hole of the corpse of a Cathar Jedi master, pulping its face, then stomped on its knee and sent it toppling with the sickening noise of rotted tendons ripping apart, bone splintering.
“I’ll discuss it with him. In the meantime, I want him protected from her.” Rye decided to take a page from her book and ax-kicked another draugr in the face. It tumbled away, and he was surprised how satisfying it was to fight with his own hands and feet. No wonder biologicals were always getting in fights – kicking someone in the face, even if they were too dead to mind much, felt GOOD. “This is the last thing he needs right now.” He was starting to get the hang of the swing of the whip, dragging one draugr past him and catapulting it into another, then lashing both their legs until they crashed down in a clumsy tangle of limbs. The slimy give of rotted flesh stymied them as they tried to untangle themselves.

Darth Virul huffed again, breath coming in explosive bursts, her silver-streaked hair clinging to her face from sweat. “Azix!” she called, her alto booming in the open space. “If you’re up there, we’re here to help! Come down!” The draugr pitched toward her, trying to grasp her clothes and drag her down, but she settled down into the weight of her wide hips and whipped her sabers around her in blinding orbits. In that stance, they would have had about as much luck pulling down a mountain.

Rye wasn’t as practiced. Draugr fingers wrapped around the hem of his robes, pulling from two directions, trying to drag him off his feet and to the ground where their weight would incapacitate him. He staggered, and ended up slashing away chunks of his robes to loosen their hold. In the future, he vowed to himself, he would put more thought into armor than into fashion. Kicking them away was satisfying, but also threw him off-balance as the weight of his body succumbed to gravity much more readily than he’d anticipated. There was obviously an element of controlling his force and momentum that he didn’t have mastered, and he ran the calculations rapidly against the dueling programs he still had access to.

Hands latched onto his shoulders, and he nearly toppled backward, squawking in offended surprise. Then Darth Virul launched herself into the air, using The Force to break gravity’s hold on her, and came to his rescue. She landed in front of him, extinguishing her left-hand saber and tossing the hilt into the air. Her free hand reached out, grabbed him by the shirt, and yanked him out of the draugr’s grasp just before its teeth snapped shut millimeters from his neck. He stumbled forward as she caught the falling hilt and spun down into a crouch that dragged her saber through the creature’s body first at chest-height, then at the knees. It fell to pieces and she rushed the next one, thrusting her boot through the flesh of its sagging stomach and using its pelvis as a foothold to leap into a spinning kick that sent its head tumbling from its shoulders with a solid, meaty THWACK.

“OWWWWW FUCK,” she snarled when she landed, almost buckling before she managed to steady herself and fall back into stance. “Red, when we get out of this, you’re gonna fix my knees. There is no hoth-damned reason for me to feel my age when I don’t even have a kriffing body.”

“Yes,” Rye breathed, shaken both by the near-miss and by her sudden display of prowess, “I definitely think that’s fair.”
The draugr came after her in a knot, and she bent low, murmuring rolling, blasphemous syllables that seemed to thrum against the walls of the cargo bay. Spinning, she rose up in a graceful leap, like an Alderaanian gazelle, then came down like a crashing meteor. The venom-green shockwave knocked the whole lot back, flattening several as the BOOM reverberated through the ship, and all around them dangerous creaking rattled the bulkheads. She pointed, and Rye realized that the fight had drawn the draugr away from the pile of fallen crates. Her shockwave had done the last of the work clearing a path. “Get him!” she snapped. “Go! If he’s in any shape to fight, we could use him!”

Rye deactivated the whip and ran for the pile. Only a small handful of draugr paid him any mind, reaching out as he raced past. He grabbed one crate and kicked another, rushing to stabilize the pile and build it a little higher. It wobbled under his feet as he carefully hopped up, and he still couldn’t reach up to the pipes.

A corpse came shambling after him and hit the pile, and Rye yelped, then hissed, dropping down onto his ass for better stability and kicking the draugr in the face. It stumbled away, and Rye took a slow breath, craning his head back.

/A real Sith could get up there./ He took another breath and tried to find that nebulous, elusive Force. /I am a real Sith./ He got his feet under him, focused on the pipes above him, and jumped.

He made it barely a foot in the air, and when he came down, the crates rocked out from under him. He cried out and hit the floor hard on his back, knocking the wind out of himself, which sent him into a momentary panic as he tried to figure out why he couldn’t breathe, why he NEEDED to breathe, because breathing was clearly foolishness anyway.

“Get up, Red,” Darth Virul called. Speaking of breathing, hers was of concern – deep, whooping and raspy. She was sagging in her stance, shoulders bent forward, golden-brown hair gone nearly black with sweat. “Get back up there; I’ll throw you.”

Struggling like a beached whale to roll over, Rye managed a nod. Fortunately, he’d fallen between the crates and the wall where there were no draugr, and being blocked from their view with Darth Virul holding the floor seemed to have freed him from their attention. Even the one that had lunged at him was starting to turn and head toward the knot of other dead creatures trying to bring the Dark Lord down. He had some room to get back up onto the pile, and he knelt there, lungs still aching and refusing to inflate fully, while Virul fought her way free of the cluster.

She ended up bringing down a shockwave again, and one of the pipes above them cracked free at the impact and sprayed green-black water down over Virul and the corpses. She took advantage of interruption in visibility and darted free of the pack.
“Okay!” she called breathlessly. “One! TWO!” She stopped, bracing wide and cupping her hands low, gathering The Force. On ‘three’ Rye leaped upward as hard as he could, and found himself flung hard toward the ceiling, limbs flailing out of control until he slammed down against the pipes, legs dangling. Fortunately, there was a bracket he could hook his fingers into, and he managed to haul himself up on top of the pipe bundle, which creaked and swayed ominously under even his slight weight.

Azix was nowhere to be seen.

Rye muttered a curse and squirmed until he could kneel on the pipes, hands braced to keep from sliding off. There was plenty of space for even a muscled Rattataki to huddle, but if Azix had used the pipes to get away from the horde, he hadn’t stuck around. Rye carefully looked around, shaking and clinging for balance when the pipes swayed. There was nothing else hanging from the ceiling that he might have jumped to, but then Rye spotted a cavity in the cargo bay wall – where the pipes curved and ran into it, a maintenance hatch allowed just enough space for a person to wiggle through on top of the pipes.

Rye crawled toward it, breathing through his teeth, instincts blaring alarm. It was exceedingly distracting, and he muttered curses, wondering how biological creatures ever got anything done with so many stimuli screaming for attention all the time. Droplets of sweat rolled down from his temples as he made his careful way toward the opening. When he finally reached it he tried to dive into it, desperate to have something solid under him. Instead, his hand slipped and he slammed his chest, then his face, down on the pipes. They jiggled and his heart skipped several beats, clinging to them and praying they wouldn’t detach from the wall. When the swaying slowed and he tried to push himself back up, he found his palm was slick with a smear of cold, viscous fluid, darker red than his own palm with undertones of brown.

Rattataki blood, from the smell.

/He isn’t really hurt./ Rye forced himself to exhale and wiped his hand on his already-filthy robes, then continued on, avoiding the blood smeared across the pipe that had caused him to slip. /It’s just a dream. He thinks he’s hurt, but he’s not./ It wasn’t even like it was in a holocron mindscape, where a psychic injury could cause sympathetic response from the body. He’d be stressed, but safe, back in the real world.

Rye’s stomach was still clenching, more pain than nausea.

He collapsed into the maintenance hatch with gratitude, sliding off the pipes into a bit of access space that had been cleared to either side. Despite the fact that the hatch was gone, probably lost among the rubble on the floor of the cargo bay, the orientation of the opening allowed very little sound in. Once he pressed himself up against the roughly soldered wall, he could barely hear anything going
on below. Darth Virul’s increasingly rough cries of effort sounded like someone had turned down the volume on an action holo. He couldn’t even hear her lightsabers.

Then something made that distinctive snap-hiss barely a meter away, and the dark hole was flooded with molten orange light.

Rye gasped and flinched away, and found him staring down into half-crazed Sith eyes, burning orange with flecks of gold, bloodshot in a face so pale it made Azix seem like a ghost himself.

“It’s me!” he blurted out in a rush, holding his hands up. “Azix, it’s me; I’m not a draugr.”

Azix stared for a moment, the whites of his eyes huge in the darkness, then the lightsaber blade vanished and he sagged, leaning heavily on one arm. His black clothing concealed most of him, so Rye couldn’t tell whether he was still hurt, or how badly. He approached cautiously, as if his lover was a wounded animal, easing his weight toward him and reaching carefully toward his bald head.

“Oy,” he whispered. “Easy. It’s just me. You’re having a nightmare; I came in after you.”

“… Rye,” he whispered, slumping forward. Rye just barely caught him before he hit the metal floor. “You… shouldn’t be here.”

“Shhh.” Rye tugged him into his lap and caressed his head, leaning down to nuzzle his skin. “Shhhh, Az. I could tell Sana was haunting you. I came to get you out of here. And Force willing, once you’re safe I’m going to stuff her in a cage where she can’t do you any more harm.”

“No,” Az groaned, sighing, relaxing into Rye’s grip. “It’s my fault. I did this, Rye.”

“That’s ludicrous,” he said gently. “You didn’t have anything to do with Sana’s death. Even you can’t possibly blame yourself for the shuttle crash.”

“Not THAT,” he sobbed. “EVERYthing. I’ve… I don’t know which way is up anymore, I can’t… so many people, so many friends, died fighting the Dark and I let it into me like their deaths meant nothing….”
“Oy.” Rye bent over him, nuzzling him, tugging his ear to make him listen. “They lived their lives by their own choice. You’re just trying to live yours. You don’t owe them anything, except maybe a fond memory or two. They’re gone and you’re still here. You especially don’t owe that smelly little fish girl,” he added venomously. “I’m going to take care of it, she won’t get to you again.”

Az sighed again, burrowing into his lap, curled up at odd angles in the dark niche. “Don’t hate her just ‘cause you’re jealous,” he whispered, and Rye straightened like he’d been slapped.

“Jealous?” he demanded, outraged. “What in the galaxy do I have to be jealous of? Have you SEEN that drowned little waif? Azix, I’m not jealous, I’m ANGRY. She’s hurting you. I…” He trailed off, brittle, sorting his words more carefully. “I know how it feels to care for you. I don’t resent her for that. I resent her for THIS.” He waved a hand around them. “And I’m here to end it. It’s time to wake up, Jedi.”

“No.” Az shifted, giving a pained breath, and Rye ignited his pommel blade just so he could see. What he saw made his heart trip.

/This isn’t real,/ he reminded himself ruthlessly, as the crimson-white light spilled unforgiving over chunks of flesh missing from Azix’s torso and legs. Bloody furrows marked the slide of broken teeth. Blood pooled under him where he lay with his head in Rye’s lap. /This isn’t real. He isn’t really hurt./

“I can’t,” Az was whispering, sliding one hand over Rye’s thigh to press closer. “This was… I should have….”

“Shhh.” Rye went through the responses and conversational options he’d queued for this conversation, but none of them seemed appropriate, so he decided to just plunge ahead with what he already had. “I’m sorry I overreacted. I didn’t anticipate how much hearing that from you would affect me… I’m still new to this business of having emotions that don’t necessarily respond to logic. But I understand better now. I see what you were trying to say. And I forgive you. I want you to forgive me and come back home with me and let me make you feel better,” he cajoled.

Azix gave a soft, bitter laugh that dissolved into painful coughing. “Rye,” he whispered, as if everything he wanted to say could be contained in the taste of his name on bloody lips.

“Azrahix,” he said, soft but firm, “this is a nightmare. You’re dreaming. Your injuries aren’t real, and you can’t die here even if you want to. So stop acting like a sack of potatoes and wake UP.” When Azix failed to respond to his tone, he reached down and slapped his cheek. “I said up, Jedi. You are truly frustrating, you know that? I have been massively inconvenienced coming in here
after you, and so has Darth Virul. WAKE UP. I’m sick of this place, and anyway, I think it’s about to come down around our ears.”

Az groaned and dragged his arm up over his head to defend against those slaps against his cheek and the back of his head. Rye growled softly and wrestled to find a spot to smack him with his palm.

“No,” he said, “you will not do this. You will realize you’re not actually hurt and you’re being an ENORMOUS infant, and you will come home with me. There’s a bath drawn,” he coaxed, switching tactics in the hope of getting Azix to respond. “Come on, Az. Nice and hot, we can put anything you like in it – bubbles, oils, salts, whatever revives you. We can turn out all the lights and even turn on a holovid, something funny and stupid, and just snuggle together. Please. I’ll do whatever you need,” he added, hating how desperate that sounded. “Just come home.”

Azix went quiet and still, and Rye stopped trying to smack him, tracing the thin tattooed lines across his skull. Most Rattataki he had visual references for had much more dramatic markings. He wondered if these were a concession on the part of the Order so people didn’t think Azix was just a terribly unhealthy Human. Tattoos and piercings were symbols of pride, accomplishment, and style among Azix’s species, and of course, a Jedi shouldn’t be proclaiming personal pride. But neither should they be a non-person in the eyes of their own people. So Jedi Rattataki had tattoos, and so did Mirialan Jedi, and Togruta Jedi wore headdresses. But beyond these simple, cosmetic tributes he realized he had no idea how much of his own culture Azix would have been allowed.

He added deeper research of Rattataki culture to the queue of subjects he planned to explore when he had access to a holonet connection again. Then, as an afterthought, added a note to seek out more pornography that had been made by Rattataki, involving Rattataki. Maybe it would be useless, but then again, maybe not. Maybe there were clues there that would show him how he should be caring for his lover, cultivating his passions.

“Darth Virul is down in the cargo bay, killing the draugr,” he said, still petting Azix’s head, rocking slightly. “She can get us out of here. Come with me, Azix. Please. Let me show you how much I want you around.”

“I’m not sure if you’re even really here, or if I’m dreaming you,” Azix mumbled. “I wanted you, but I know I don’t deserve…..”

“Fuck ‘deserve’,” Rye declared. “This is not about what anybody deserves, obviously, or you wouldn’t be punishing yourself for things that very objectively aren’t your fault. Fuck justice, fuck fairness, the whole bloody-minded idea. You and I are here, now, and I want you to come home with me. I told you that you can make a choice,” he insisted. “You refused. But I am telling you that you can CHOOSE to walk out of this nightmare and seek good things for yourself. You can CHOOSE to have what makes you happy.” He signed, running his fingers over his head, lingering
on unexpectedly soft skin. “You could choose me, if you wanted to. Sorry if… being upset about that makes me petulant. I just… I told you I’d go with you to Tython. I’d protect you. That was me choosing you. It was… hard not to be chosen back.”

Azix didn’t say anything, but after a long moment, he shifted his hand and tangled his fingers with Rye’s, hiding his face underneath their clasped hands.

“It’s time to go,” Rye said softly, even though his dreamscape simulacrum of a heart was pounding in his ears, and there was a feeling in his chest, a tightness, that he couldn’t identify or quantify. He ACHED, and he didn’t know why. But he wanted to squeeze Azix tighter, until his joints popped, and he wanted to get him out of this drowned hell and take him someplace warm, someplace comfortable, where all his needs would be met. He’d get real sleep there, and when he woke up he would smile, and Rye would be able to feel his warmth against him in an environment he could control one-hundred percent, filter out every danger. “Come, Azix. I’m here to get you. Let’s go.”

He shifted and began to move, coaxing his Jedi up onto his knees. Azix’s wounds didn’t seem to give him any actual trouble moving. Rye suspected the pain they caused was more emotional than physical, a representation of the chunks he felt these deaths had torn out of him. The sight of them made it clear how inadequate a therapist he made - he was in no position to help Azix get through his mourning, but he wasn’t about to back down. His Jedi needed him, whether he would admit it to himself or not.

Rye slipped out of the hole feet first. He inched along until he could peer over the edge of the pipes.

Darth Virul was sitting on one of the crates, her head leaned back, hair disheveled and clothes torn. She was covered in scratches and bruises. She looked exhausted. The only sound was that of the burst pipe spraying moldy water, which was an inch deep now and lapped at her boots. She cracked her eyes open when Rye’s movement made the pipes creak.

“You find him?”

Rye nodded and turned back, holding out a hand to help Azix squeeze his bulkier frame out of the maintenance hatch.

“All right. Let’s get out of here,” Virul suggested, standing and groaning through her teeth as she arched backward, cracking her spine. “I’ll tell you, Azix, I respect the power of dreams and nightmares, but I am getting WAY too old for this shit.” She rotated her arms a little and flexed her neck, fingers hooked as she roughly dragged sweat-slicked hair back out of her face and plastered it against her head. “Are you done with this nightmare, hon?”
She was asking Azrahix, not Rye, so Rye gave him an expectant look. Az was still holding onto his hand, kneeling on the pipes. He was silent for a long moment, staring at nothing, but eventually he nodded.

Virul sighed. “Good. Are you willing to be pulled out of here?”

This time he nodded almost immediately, pulling their clasped hands closer and rubbing his thumb over Rye’s battered knuckles.

Virul pushed the bell flares of her sleeves to her elbows, a pointless gesture since they didn’t stay, and began to conjure. “Excellent. Your consent was all I ever needed.”

Around them, the dream dissolved. With it went the corpses, the ship, and any hint of Sana’s presence. Only Rye and Azix remained solid throughout.

Azix refused to let go of Rye’s hand.
Chapter Notes

I'm sorry y'all. I had a depression downswing and really struggled to get this chapter written. I also hung myself up trying to write Rye's code as... y'know, code. Which I know nothing about. Eventually I decided it wasn't that important, so please excuse my obvious shortcomings.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

“I need a way to deal with Sana.”

Rye was splitting his attention. At first, his primary focus was Azix, but his lover was doing nothing but cuddling against him in the hot bath Rye had drawn for him, shivering despite the warmth. The eucalyptus salts he’d added seemed to be helping Azix relax, but he was badly withdrawn. It concerned Rye, but while he was giving Azix some peace and quiet, he switched his focus to the algorithm that was currently pacing back and forth in Darth Virul’s cottage kitchen.

“She is the source of the majority of his emotional distress. If she could be eliminated, or just kept away from him, a great deal of his current instability could be rectified.”

Darth Virul had changed into long, loose robes and lightweight pants, wrapped a knitted shawl around her shoulders, and was sipping a restorative tea while reclining in a rustic lounger. Cold packs had been wrapped around her left knee, packing it on all sides. Darth Krazzk had apparently completed the preparing of ‘dinner’ while Rye and Virul were exploring Azix’s nightmare, and he dished up steaming bowls of soup for each of them. Rye ignored his, but Darth Virul thanked him with a smile, and he bent down obligingly so she could kiss his cheek.

“Thank you, Rual,” she murmured, setting the bowl on the end table next to her. “Rye, please sit down. Rest yourself.”

“I don’t need rest,” he snapped. “I need a solution.”

“You’re agitated,” Krazzk rumbled. “Listen to your teachers. Take a moment and find clarity of purpose within yourself.”

Rye huffed. He crossed the floor and dropped heavily on the couch. “I already HAVE clarity of purpose. I know exactly what I need to do; I just don’t know how to do it. Dealing with ghosts is a matter of sorcery and as you have pointed out several times,” he said archly to Darth Virul, “I have disadvantages in that area.”

“I can give you instructions and a shopping list,” Darth Virul told him. She’d let her hair down, and now brushed it back from her forehead so she could take another steaming sip of her tea. “But Azix may have to be the one to do it, which means you’ll have to convince him. Considering how guilty he feels about her, that may be difficult.”

Darth Krazzk settled into the other lounge chair, relaxing with his own meal. “Of course, having been raised in the Order, it’s doubtful he’d recognize a spell if it smacked him in the face. No reason you have to tell him precisely what it’s for.”
“Of course.” Darth Virul smirked conspiratorially at Darth Krazzk. “It’s for protection – no need to go into detail.”

Rye rolled his eyes. “Normally, I’d be dubious. But the state he’s in right now, I could probably put on a fruit turban and belly dance for him and he wouldn’t question it.”

Her face melted into gentle concern. “That bad, huh?”

“I’ve made him as comfortable as I can,” Rye said, flustered. “He’s just… huddling and shaking.” And clinging to Rye like a child might cling to a stuffie, but he was reluctant to disclose that. “I’m trying to get him to rest. Maybe he’ll come back to himself when he has some time to recover.”

“Time is the best healer, but from what you told me, you’re short on it,” Virul said, concerned. “You can stretch things while he’s communing with you, give him a little more distance, but I caution you not to make a practice of stretching time in the mindscape. That can be really disorienting for him, and it tempts him to start living the majority of his life in there with you. Which is a whole other set of problems.”

“Perhaps he needs to wake up,” Krazzk said gruffly. “From one mindscape to another, he probably feels like he’s still dreaming. The best cure for a nightmare is waking.”

“He’ll wake up eventually,” Rye said, waving a hand in dismissal. “When the storm passes. No need for him to be cold and uncomfortable before then.”

Krazzk’s head-tendrils curled at the tips, but he chose not to argue, settling comfortably with his soup.

“Rye, do you happen to have any sorcerous artifacts or ingredients in your collection?” Virul asked. “Supplies are going to be the greatest challenge in a project like this. You’re not likely to find some of the more esoteric components lying around, especially not if Ziost is in the state you say.”

Rye hissed softly, thinking. Which is to say, he ran quickly through his artifact list and categorized everything in the museum that had sorcerous potential. “Not much.” He gestured and spun a holoprojection that displayed the catalogue images of ancient candles, amulets, rune-etched shackles, pieces of collapsed altars, and a handful of ritual tools.

“Ooh!” Darth Virul leaned forward. “Show me those candles. Is there a terror-flame in there?”

“I’m not familiar with that term,” Rye confessed, but he brought the images and descriptions of the candles to the forefront. Darth Virul narrowed her eyes, examining them closely.

“That one looks like close to the right color. Do you know what it’s made of?”

“Fat from a Duros,” Rye told her. “The victim was theorized to have been sacrificed ritually, but we don’t know how or for what purpose.”

“I can make that work. Let me see the knife.”

“I have a number of…."

Virul waved him off. “The one with the blade infused with alchemical silver and all the patina spots by the hilt. Hilt looked like it was wrapped in intestinal casing.”

“Oh, this one.” He brought an image of the knife up for her. The blade was indeed silver-infused, spotted with tarnish and dark runes engraved in the blade. The handle was split bone stitched
together and wrapped in stretched, nearly transparent nerfgut. “It’s been cosmetically restored, I hope that doesn’t change anything.”

“Is it still bone and silver?” Virul asked dryly. At Rye’s nod, she said, “Then it should be fine. Candle should do in a pinch too. Don’t suppose you have any herbs lying around… dried or fresh, I’d take either.”

“Well.” Rye drummed his fingers. “We do have a very few seed sample catalogues and a handful of fossil imprints but I’m afraid that’s the best I can offer until we get to New Adasta. Even then, after what Emperor Vitiate pulled, it’s likely that any plant matter is nothing but ashes.”

“Well, he was always an inconsiderate arse,” Virul said, and waved a hand in dismissal. “I’ll put together a list of tools, ingredients, and likely substitutes. If that doesn’t work you’ll just have to let me into your catalogues and let me go hunting. I’ll figure something out; it’s what I do.”

“I’m sure you’ve done more with less,” Krazzk rumbled, showing his sharp teeth in a smile that Darth Virul returned.

“Oh, sure. Did I ever tell you about the time I was stranded with the heir to the Tampani throne and had to perform the ritual kingmaking with nothing but a firestarter, a mop, and three stolen Republic ration packs?”

Rye chose to disappear while Darth Krazzk was still laughing.

x-x-x

It wasn’t that Azix needed his attention. His lover was still doing his best impression of a muscled gray lump. Still, Rye felt a pressure to prioritize being with him, even though he wasn’t doing anything. A couple of times, Azix sank under the water and blew all his air out, and stayed there long enough that Azix started to worry before pushing himself back up.

“It’s quiet,” was all he said when Rye asked what he thought he was doing.

Rye was unamused. “It’s quiet out here. I haven’t said a word.”

“Right, but that’s a different quiet. I don’t know how to explain.”

Rye frowned down at the water he was cuddling Azix in. “I suppose there’s a brown noise down there that may contribute to the sensation of isolation. Would you like me to make the water breathable?”

Azix managed a tired smile. “Nah. Maybe we should get out and go to bed. I could stand to get some sleep.”

/Oh thank The Force./ “I think that’s an excellent idea,” Rye said, and started the tub draining while he scrambled for fluffy, heated towels for Azix. “I’ll make something hot to drink and put a holoshow on. Maybe that comedy about CorSec that you like?”

Azix’s eyes were soft in a way Rye didn’t know how to interpret. “Sure.”

“Also, I don’t know if you’d be interested, but Darth Virul made some kind of soup. Or, really, she prepared the ingredients and Darth Krazzk did the work since we were busy fishing you out of your nightmare. I could bring some over into this reproduction…?”

He sighed. “No thanks. No Darth Virul, no Krazzk… I’d rather it was just you and me.”
Once again, Rye felt gratitude pulse through his perceptive processes. “As you wish. Cocoa again, or something lighter?”

“Lighter,” Azix voted. He was busy toweling him off, and Rye was surprised at the responses his parameters dictated from him at the sight of his body - a rush of want, a heat and an ache. /Be close,/ his prediction software whispered to him. /Make love. Claim. Comfort. This is the right thing to do./

He was inclined to agree with that assessment, but the data he’d gathered made him cautious. Offering intimacy as comfort had to be done carefully, and there were many ways it could be taken wrongly by the target of his affections. Examples flicked by in rapid scan - a female togruta shoving a male away, declaring that she needed him to LISTEN to her, not try to get into her pants. A male weequay action star withdrawing from his wife’s attentions because he felt deeply guilty about letting his friend die, because feeling pleasure only made him more guilty. A human woman who felt that her body was ugly and unlovable, and pushed her wife away, after physical trauma. As he reviewed these pieces, his sorting algorithm found a common theme: those who wanted to be listened to rather than touched. Perhaps it would behoove him to try that first, but they’d spent over an hour together in complete silence. Maybe Azix needed an invitation? That would make a certain cultural sense - many cultures had taboos against dumping your problems onto someone who hadn’t explicitly offered to shoulder them.

Was he being selfish? He banished the wetness from his skin with nothing but a slight shifting of code and watched Azix finish drying off the old-fashioned way. He did find his lover attractive - he was a fine specimen, young and strong, with scars that indicated he’d survived hard challenges and would again. Rye wasn’t biological, of course, but that was what a biological would seek in a mate: health, good genes, and persistence in the face of evolutionary hurdles. But Rye wasn’t sure that was why he wanted to have SEX with him, necessarily. That was a more ethereal desire he couldn’t quite pinpoint. It felt like a conclusion with roots in several sources, growing down into his program like a spreading vine. Sex was a good way to keep Azix happy, and happy! Azix was easier to handle. Sex was a good way to manipulate his feelings and desires so that he would respond positively to Rye, and listen to his advice more closely. Sex was a good way to keep his spirits up so he wouldn’t end up abandoning Rye in the middle of their dangerous journey by dying inconveniently. Sex FELT NICE.

But there was more. He just couldn’t pin it down.

“Hot mulled wine,” he suggested.

Azix’s strong shoulders relaxed a little, and he nodded, giving Rye a little thrill of smug victory. /Score one for me!/ He immediately conjured the requested drinks, composing the alcohol and its effects on Azix’s nervous system, and settled a tray with steaming stoneware mugs next to the bed. He added a few varieties of cheese and some fruit in case his lover needed something to snack on, then queued up the holoshow on the huge screen mounted across from the bed, at the perfect angle for viewing with one’s head propped on a fluffy pillow.

/Perfect./ He double-checked everything. /Perfect, perfect, perfect./

He suppressed another little thrill when Azix didn’t bother to hunt for clothes before padding over to the bed. He sank in with a groan of relief, and the way he curled up, Rye thought he might just drop off to sleep immediately. He followed, taking his cue from the Jedi and not bothering with clothing, and when he slid across the soft cotton sheets toward Azix, his… his what? His heart? His ‘soul’? SOMETHING nebulous and strange swelled when Az reached for him and pulled him into his arms.

/Oh, yes,/ some part of him thought, and his logic functions reacted to this response with mild alarm. /Thank The Force, yes./
Azix’s skin was flushed and damp. He slid one strong thigh between Rye’s, notching them together like puzzle pieces, and Rye found himself sighing deeply in gratitude and relief even though he hadn’t made any plans to have that reaction.

“You okay?”

Azix’s whisper made his internal alarms blare even louder, but Rye re-routed priority. /We are not worrying about this now./ “I should be asking you that,” he replied. “I don’t know what to say to you, or how to help you feel better.”

“That’s not true.” Azix’s grip tightened. “You’re doing great. I’m sorry I’m feeling like this.”

“I want to listen,” Rye said, “If you want to talk about it. I know there are experiences I can’t truly comprehend, but I’m here.” That sounded very awkward. Rye frowned internally and experimented with other wordings, comparing them against examples in his memory, but before he could get too caught up in that, Azix was curling tighter around him and nuzzling his dry hair.

“I’m sorry,” he said again, which Rye found confusing. “Don’t assume you’re doing anything wrong, Ry. You’re not. I’m just… I see what you’re doing, and I appreciate it. I do. Just… sometimes, for us, it’s not as easy as ‘apply hot bath to automatically lift mood’.”

“I didn’t think it was that simple,” Rye muttered. “I know you’re not an equation.”

“But you’re also collecting information all the time.” Azix’s thumb traced the ridges on his cheek. “I don’t want you to think this is a failure just because I’m not feeling better. It’s not that it’s not working. I DO feel better, just… not all the way better. Sometimes shit takes more time.” He sighed into Rye’s hair, then pressed a long kiss to his forehead. “Thanks for trying. Giving a damn.”

THAT, Rye did file away for future reference: sometimes it wasn’t the action, it was the consideration it represented. He was well aware that biologicals communicated on multiple levels. Perhaps ‘you’re important to me’ worked even when ‘I want you to feel better’ didn’t.

“I really am sorry about earlier,” he offered. “I’m not very sure of myself right now.”

“No.” Azix shifted, more interested in winding himself around Rye like a constrictor than watching the comedic stylings currently displayed on the viewer. “You have every right to want things to be equal.”

“But you have been mentally and emotionally injured,” Rye pointed out. “So you were also right to point out that you’re not in a good state of mind to promise me anything. Objectively, I can see that, but your refusal still HURTS somehow. I can’t quite… define or explain how, or why. Since I moved into this holocron, I’ve been thinking and feeling many strange things, even spontaneous things, which is… well, more odd than you know.”

For some reason, that made Azix smile. “It’s okay, Ry. I understand. And you were right earlier… we should forgive each other. I forgive you. I was never angry at you anyway, just my own stupidity.”

“Well, I got an earful from Darth Virul,” Rye muttered. “Apparently, you ‘never interrupt the afterglow’. But I have now been educated. I won’t make that mistake again.”

That made Azix laugh, and the sound eased tension in Rye he hadn’t even realized was there. /This is ridiculous,/ he thought distantly. /Even with The Force, I can’t have a dopamine response./

A question for another day. This day, he nuzzled Azix’s strong chest, rubbing his brow spurs against
his collarbone. “I want to make love with you again,” he said. “I don’t know if that’s the right thing to offer you. But I want you to know things, and that seems like the way to tell you.”

“What things?” One of Azix’s hands slid up into his hair, tangling there, pulling his head back. Rye allowed it, and found himself peppered with soft kisses across his brow spurs and forehead ridges.

“That you’re still my priority,” he whispered. “That I want you to feel better. That I want to give you pleasure, not pain. That we are… something that means something. This is why I want to have sex,” he added, frustrated. “Words are so inadequate. It’d be so much simpler to just… kiss you….” And then he had to stop talking because Azix was kissing him, slow but with such aching need that Rye felt all his processes quiver, lines of code wobbling before returning to center.

[Tactic: straightforward honesty. Results: positive.] Rye relaxed into it and slid his arms around Azix’s neck, pressing against him. Azix wasted no time rolling Rye under him, and the probability that he intended to penetrate him skewed to the forefront. Goals assessment quickly determined that reassuring Azix came first and collecting information was tertiary at the moment, so he decided he didn’t mind. He spread his legs, arching invitingly as his lover’s weight shifted onto him and those calloused hands slid along his thighs, coaxing his knees up so Azix could rub their genitals together. That act, he had the data for, and he let the pleasure response ripple through him and trigger a moan.

Az claimed his mouth, tongue seeking his hungrily and coaxing him into hotter, more urgent kisses. His pleasure and affection flushed softly against the edge of Rye’s more arcane senses, input he still wasn’t entirely sure how to categorize. He nipped his lover’s lower lip and whispered, “Commune with me. Please.”

Azix bowed his head and nodded, and Rye kissed his forehead as his lover breathed in and out and reached out for him, tangling himself in Azix’s limited Force perceptions. Rye had half an instant to wonder if it had been wise to make that request, and then Azix’s feelings poured down onto him, tangled and bruised, his heart yawning open and throbbing with pain. He felt scraped raw inside, like grief had hollowed him out, anger burning but impotent, guilt dragging at his head and shoulders. It was just so MUCH, and Rye could see why Azix was having a hard time shaking it off. But there was tenderness there too, warmth that came from Rye’s body flexing against his, their mouths locked together, and the texture of his skin as Azix ran his hands over him.

“You’re more chaotic than before,” Azix whispered. “I can see it. Are you sure this matrix isn’t going to be more dangerous for you?”

Rye smiled and rubbed his ridged cheek against Az’s. “I’m an adaptive program,” he whispered against his ear, thrusting up against him, earning a low moan. “I’ll adapt. Shh, don’t worry about that now.” He dragged his teeth along Azix’s earlobe like he’d seen in love scenes, and Azix groaned and shuddered. [Results: positive.]

Azix seemed eager to take the lead, so Rye relaxed and focused on making himself as welcoming and satisfying as he could. He tweaked anal friction and elasticity, raised his internal body temperature by three degrees so he’d feel truly molten around Azix’s cock, and subtly anchored the blanket so Azix’s movement wouldn’t knock it off them. He decreased the volume on the holoscreen so any spikes, such as explosions or screaming matches, wouldn’t distract Azix from taking his pleasure. Azix didn’t notice any of this, of course. He was lost in thrusting down against Rye, grinding their cocks together, his rough hands sliding over Rye’s skin. Rye arched under him, letting the pleasure responses and predictive algorithm guide his movement and pull soft noises from his throat.

Axis’s hands cupped his ass and lifted, tipping his legs wide so he could slot their hips together and grind against him. His prediction skewed again, but Rye was content with anything his Jedi chose to
do. He dragged his nails up Azix’s back (response: positive), tipped his head back to expose his throat [response: positive with clear instinctive stimulation, possessive reaction], and made sure faint purple bruises blossomed where Azix dug his teeth in.

“You feel so good,” Azix slurried into his throat, panting roughly as he rolled his hips down against him. “Rye…” He groaned his name, his cock prodding Rye’s belly as their balls ground together in a delicious soft squeeze.

Rye held him tight and thrust up against him, tracking sizzling lines of pleasure, kissing Azix’s head over and over. “My love,” he whispered. “That’s it-!”

Azix’s mind sank into deep, molten red. Rye went with him, at least partially, and let his lover’s passion bring them both to a tight, keening climax that made Rye arch and cry out as one of Az’s calloused hands wrapped around them and stroked them together, painting his belly with twin pools of seed. The intensity of that pleasure, washing from Azix into Rye through their communion, forced him to shut down and abandon a significant majority of his background processes. It was an alien compulsion to just exist in a moment of effervescent delight, to be utterly present for the trade of ecstasy and forget everything else. From the echoes in Axiz’s mind, he knew this was how he felt most times – existing in only one space, one time, with one train of thought and one focus. To Rye, that felt like a vast and empty nothingness, but he could accept it like this, gasping and clawing at Azix’s back, letting pure stimulation overtake him.

Azix rutted against him, spilling cum liberally over Rye’s stomach, until the drive exhausted itself and he slumped on top of him. He was warm and heavy, but not unpleasantly so. Rye found himself focusing on his breathing to even it out, tracing his fingertips over the powerful muscles in his lover’s back and shoulders. He really was an excellent specimen, genetically and aesthetically. Was this what attraction felt like, this urge to slot his body against his Jedi’s and cover him with his mouth and his hands? Azix’s skin didn’t have any taste that Rue didn’t give him, but he rubbed his tongue over it anyway, letting it blush in his mouth like salted honey.

/I like this./ he decided, feeling Azix’s heart pound against his chest, slower and slower as he calmed. /For its own sake. I want this just to have it./ Which meant, of course, that even if every other logical reason dissolved, he would still want Azix just to have him.

[begin priority reassessment]

“Wish I could just stay here forever with you,” Az was murmuring, fingers sliding through Rye’s hair.

“You’d starve,” Rye whispered. “But on the bright side, I could make it feel like an eternity.”

Azix groaned. “Don’t tempt me.” He burrowed down into Rye’s body, seeking his scent and the warmth of his skin. Rye adjusted his posture so they could lock together more snugly. “This is the end, isn’t it? Once the storm passes, we have to go. This place isn’t safe anymore.”

“I’m afraid so.” Rye nuzzled his ear. “But once we reach New Adasta, I have no doubt we’ll be able to get off this world promptly. And then you can take a real bath, in real hot water, and eat real food. Perhaps then, the real world won’t be so odious you need to escape to keep your sanity.”

“Nice try. But the bantha-shit doesn’t end when I leave Ziost. There’s still the Order,” he whispered, breathing in the crook of Rye’s neck, arms so tight around him that he was ignoring and deprioritizing several warnings of suboptimal posture and excessive pressure.

“Az,” Rye whispered helplessly. “Why go back to Tython? With me, you have a whole roster of
experienced Sith ready to help you learn The Force. We could find a remote planet, a habitable moon, for you to take some time and figure out what you want before the Order cracks your skull open and forces it on you.”

He chuckled. “That’s a little dramatic.”

“Not from what I hear about Darth Revan,” Rye shot back. “Azix… I want you to be happy and to have what you need. That’s ALL I want. I don’t think they want the same thing.”

This time, Azix’s sigh carried exasperation with it. “That’s my family, Rye. I don’t know what stories the Empire tells, but they’re not necessarily true.”

“Facts only, then,” Rye said. “They have the ability to erase everything that’s YOU and leave a shell filled with Light. They have done this to others in the past. Those are facts. They can, they have. It’s not much of a leap to assume that, barring simpler options, they will.”

Azix didn’t answer that, and Rye’s social interaction predictions indicated it would be unnecessarily aggressive to press the issue. If Azix didn’t disagree, it was because he couldn’t disagree. He’d seen too much to think he would be exempt, and he knew exactly what he was worth to them.

Rye held him tighter and stroked his fingers across the back of his head, tracing the contour of his skull under the skin. “Is it so wrong of me to like you?” he asked in a whisper. “And worry about you?”

“If it’s wrong,” Azix murmured, “I never want you to stop.”

x-x-x

“I did warn you.”

Rye chose not to give Darth Virul the satisfaction of seeing the way his mouth pinched. “I heard your warning and I took it seriously. Now, it would be helpful to focus on damage control.”

Virul sighed, folding his arms across his chest and eying the holoview Rye had offered him. “It’s not that bad, honestly,” he said. When Rye shot him a dubious look, he clarified, “His trust in you is deep. Solid. You have the perfect foothold to enact change. Don’t be so hard on yourself,” he suggested with a sidelong smile. “You’ve done really well getting him to this point, actually, and you’ve set yourself up with all the tools you need for success. Now you just need a little help to get things moving. We can do that.”

“He doesn’t seem to want anything to do with you,” Rye pointed out, but Virul just smiled and shook his head.

“He’s young and confused, but he’ll come around. He’s desperate for clarity. I think I may know what will draw him in, and once we’ve got his interest, I think he’ll come around nicely. He’ll be Sith before you know it,” He added, flashing his baby-fangs in a grin. “Now, here’s what I’ve got in mind….”

Chapter End Notes

Okay, that's enough of this mush and foolishness. Let's get back to the survival-horror I originally started writing! What do you say?
Ziost had gone from gray to black.

Azix stood on the edge of the collapsed wall looking out into the courtyard. The pounding rains had gathered all the ash and washed it away, exposing the glassy planes of volcanic rock that marked the nearby cliffs. Soot-dark puddles lay between the paving stones, reflecting the gray sheet of the sky like scrying mirrors. The air stank of char, but at least it was clear.

“There’s going to be NO foraging,” he said to Rye’s holo, which was currently being projected from his droid chassis. Several hovering maintenance droids followed in his wake. Rye flickered as he ‘walked’ across the rubble and made a show of peering outside, even though his droids had already swept the entire area surrounding the temple. “You said five days?”

“Assuming nothing delays us, yes. And I wouldn’t hazard to make that assumption.” Rye’s droid climbed the rubble, clanking loudly, and descended on the other side. The holoprojection of Rye stood still, aside from flickers due to the changing perspective. “I’m afraid there’s no point lamenting the lack of supplies. Whether we stay or go, what we have is what we have.”

What they had was a rucksack full of the kind of food teenagers would pack for a road trip: crisps, crackers, candy, a little dried fruit that Azix was determined to ration, and so much soda that the cart’s anti-grav thrusters strained under the weight of it. Every decorative cup or thermos with a lid that Azix could loot from the gift shop had been filled with water for the trip, and his condensers had been tied down to continue collecting while they traveled.

“New Adasta is due west from this position,” Rye said, and Azix snorted - he’d been traveling south by southeast from the shuttle crash. If he hadn’t stumbled (literally) across Rye’s temple, he would have been lost in the wastes and dead by now. He reached out and dragged his fingers through Rye’s holoprojection.

“Then let’s go.”

“Not so fast.” Rye smirked at him, but Azix was learning how to find the affection hidden under affectation of Imperial superiority. “The terrain won’t allow us to take a straight path. We’ll start heading north.” He gestured, and a map shimmered into view, etched in the same crimson as Rye’s own form. He showed Azix the wavy lines that demonstrated the topography of the region. They were clustered close together like amoebas under the microscope, sharp up-thrusts broken by narrow, winding canyons. Rye’s finger traced the lines gracefully, sketching a path that wound north of the temple, then west over a plateau. “Especially with the cart, we’ll have much easier going this way, and we’ll move faster over better terrain. These canyons will serve as a buffer against severe weather, as well, since the prevailing winds in the area usually travel from south to north – dropping into the valleys should steal the strength from them before they reach us. Granted,” he added, “that analysis is based on my records of the weather in this region prior to the disaster. Force only knows
what will happen now, as the cataclysm’s effects settle.”

“Understood.” Azix unwrapped a salted, spiced sausage shrink-wrapped in foil, one of the snacks from the gift shop, and chewed through the tough outer casing. Getting a good start was important. He’d taken one last shower and made it last as long as he could, had drunk as much water as he could hold, and had used the last real toilet he would likely see for about four-hundred kilometers.

A clawing, babbling fear had taken up residence in his belly, writhing against his ribcage – he didn’t want to leave the temple. A more primitive part of his brain insisted the temple represented safety, warmth, comfort, all things he wouldn’t find in the blasted wasteland of Ziost. Like an animal, or perhaps like his ancestors, he wanted to crawl back into the deeper reaches of the temple’s shelter and try to survive there like some kind of cave-dwelling goblin. The flat, gray light of the Ziost day turned that fear into near-frenzy, and he doggedly chewed on the too-spicy sausage as he tried to get his blood pressure to subside.

/The food won’t last. The shelter won’t last. I can’t stay, that’s just reality. Besides…./ He looked over at Rye, who appeared to be studying his projected map. /Rye’s coming with me. He has to leave too, to survive./

Rye caught him looking. The corner of his mouth quirked upward, and the droid approached, reaching out in tandem with Rye’s holoprojection so that when Azix’s fingers closed around Rye’s crimson fingers, there was something substantial for him to hold.

“Ready?” Rye asked more gently. “You look like you’re having difficulty.”

Az nodded, taking a long, deep breath and letting it hiss out. “Yeah. It’s… since I came to this planet, I haven’t been able to control my fear.”

Rye considered that, then said, “In New Adasta, any building still standing can provide everything you’re leaving behind and more. A real bed, a real tub, canned and dried food that isn’t snacks. Vending machines full of tea and juice, not just soda. Stores full of clean clothes free for the taking, since no one else needs them at present. Soft blankets, warm coats.”

Az smiled. “Yeah, but once we make it to New Adasta, I won’t need most of that. We’ll be able to get off-world.”

“That too,” Rye agreed gamely. “All the comforts you need AND an exit strategy. Everything you want,” he said, pointing west, “is that way. Let’s go claim it.”

Az nodded and squeezed the droid’s hand. /Everything I want is that way. No choice but to go forward./ The fear settled a little under that line of reasoning. Azix took up the handle of the anti-grav cart and let one of Rye’s hovering droids lead the way. They made an interesting convoy, one hovering droid flying ahead to scan the terrain, followed by Rye’s chassis, followed by Azix, followed by Rye’s other two droids guarding the rear with their sensors. The chassis walked heavily, clanking against the wind-scoured stone, and the constant hum of the other droids’ lifters faded in and out as they swooped in scanning patterns. Rye’s holoprojection ‘walked’ next to Azix.

Azix still hated everything about Ziost, but having Rye’s company staved off the maddening isolation and disorientation he’d experienced on his first journey. They didn’t talk for the first few hours, but Azix found he didn’t need conversation – Rye’s presence was enough to soothe the squirming unease that strengthened the further they got from the temple.

The path Rye had sketched out was easy enough to follow, especially since Azix didn’t have to focus on navigating. He just plodded along behind the droids and guided the cart around obstacles.
Around noon, Rye insisted they park the cart and take a half-hour rest. He instructed Azix to eat and drink water, and Azix was so relieved to be cared for that he didn’t put up even a token resistance for pride’s sake. He stretched his calves and thighs while chewing on another piece of jerky. Rye surprised him when one of his hovering droids buzzed over and, after a thoughtful series of chirps, began to play a recent pop hit. Azix hadn’t had any particular feelings about the song before, but hearing it here, in this wasteland, made his heart swell and his throat thicken. He forced it back, unwilling to cry over something as stupid as a bubblegum tune sung by a cute Zeltron pop star, but he couldn’t resist the urge to give the droid’s round exterior casing a hug when it was time to get moving again.

The droid booped softly in bewilderment, and Rye laughed.

His injured knee had had plenty of time to heal at the temple, and it withstood the journey without complaint until after the second break in mid-afternoon, when it began to ache again. They had nothing to heat or cool it with, so he rubbed some of the salvaged arthritis cream into it and pressed on. They got in another three hours of travel before Rye dispatched two of his hovering droids to scan for caves and crevices they could spend the night in. The gray sky was turning to black, but the last hovering droid used its flashlight to guide Azix’s feet. He was bone-weary by the time Rye announced he’d found a suitable shelter, but even as he dragged the cart into the meandering crack in the cliff face and wedged it against the walls, stacking the supplies to lessen any light spillage that might reveal their presence, he could feel the difference. He’d been walking, putting in hard labor, all day long and his body hurt, but even the constant presence of the Dark Side no longer chafed his mind. He spread his bedroll far enough into the cave that even a monolith’s arm couldn’t reach – he’d learned that lesson well – and settled down with Rye’s holocron on his chest to get some well-earned rest.

Even better, he could rest his mind in his bedroom in Rye’s mindscape while his body was resting on a thin bedroll on Ziost. The comfort of the bed Rye had provided might not have been real, but it FELT real, and that allowed him to truly relax. Especially since Rye’s hovering droids were currently patrolling outside, making sure they would have plenty of warning if danger approached.

In the holocron’s mindscape, Rye came to him lean and naked, hungry for contact and kisses. Azix was too tired for more, but he was perfectly happy to wrap himself up in his lover and sleep like the dead until dawn.

Nine hours later, Rye woke him up so they could do the same thing all over again.

His knee started the day stiff and degenerated from there, slowing their pace. Rye fussed and theorized, but since his scanners weren’t medical-grade, he couldn’t verify any of his diagnoses. Azix just took it slow and tried to keep to the easiest possible terrain.

This became much easier once the canyon opened up as Rye had promised it would, spreading into the flat plateau. The ground was still hard, unyielding in a way that punished his feet and his joints, radiating pain up into his back as the day wore on. Azix wore a piece of old cloth over his face to keep the ashes out of his mouth, took slow, even breaths, and just focused on moving forward. The Dark Side swelled with every breath, filling him with heat and strength. He could feel the slight burn in his eyes when he drew on it too hard. His conscience nagged at him, but instead of guilt, he found himself responding with irritation that curdled slowly into anger. He was just trying to SURVIVE. He was tired of feeling wretched and worthless just because he valued his own life more than the people who raised and trained him did.

Rye was right. They should have to walk a mile in his boots before they presumed to judge him.

“What do they listen to in the Empire?” he wondered when they stopped for lunch and Rye’s droid
began playing cheerful top-40 music again. “Not this, I assume.”

“How not this?” Rye wondered. “The Empire is even more modern and advanced than the Republic. Certainly we produce plenty of our own music, but Imperial teenagers have their thumb on the pulse of the galaxy.”

That made Azix snort, but he let it pass. “Okay, what kind of music does the Empire produce?”

“What type of music does the Republic produce?” Rye shot back. “Your question is too imprecise for me to answer. There’s a thriving underground music scene producing the harsher, angrier varieties of music: your kaasi grind, your industrial, your sithwave. Of course, several styles of classical music are always in vogue with the upper class, echoing human and ancient Sith themes. Opera and theatre are popular. Few Imperials actually become pop stars, but plenty of Imperials listen to industry standards, and artists whose work doesn’t subvert or criticize the empire in any way are often given dispensation to tour.”

“That surprises me,” Azix confessed. “I didn’t think the Empire encouraged anybody to have fun. Let alone to write rebellious music.”

Rye just smiled. “You’d be surprised how much fun we have around here. New Adasta was a vibrant population center, which only makes its destruction that much more tragic. Imagine if someone did this to Corellia,” he suggested. “Then you’ll have an idea what a psychological blow this is to the Empire.”

Az sighed. “With respect, Rye, I’m trying not to think about it. I’ve got plenty of my own problems. And the things I saw there were….” He trailed off, chewing on a cracker as he tried to organize his thoughts.

Fortunately, Rye was keeping up. “You have enough trauma to deal with, without letting yourself feel the deaths of billions of civilians,” he concluded. “I understand that.” His hologram came and sat on a crate next to Azix. “How are you feeling?” he asked more softly, hair falling across his brow spurs at his head tilt. “I noticed you’re channeling. Is it because of tiredness, pain…?”

“Both.” Az rolled his shoulders and washed his meager ration down with some water. That, at least, he had plenty of. “It’s okay, Rye. We just have to get there. Jedi training means I can tough it out through a lot worse pain than this.”

“But there’s no need when we have some resources available. Take some painkillers,” Rye suggested. “And I brought the brace. I can help apply the topical, if you need help with your back or shoulders.”

He smiled, reaching out and brushing his knuckles through the light etching of Rye’s cheek. “Thanks.”

Rye’s color didn’t change, but by the way his eyelashes lowered and his head ducked, Az got the strong impression of a blush. “Well. I’d prefer it if you didn’t collapse halfway to our destination. We’re safe for the moment – the probes are getting excellent visibility. Take off your shirt.”

He complied, and sat with his elbows on his knees, head hanging down, while Rye’s chassis rubbed medicine into his skin. It bruised as much as it helped, but soon the numbing effect began to sink in. When Rye was done with his lower back, he moved to his neck and shoulders, and Azix let himself drift for a while under the pressure of his hands, listening to a young hearthrob with a crooning falsetto sing about how much better his new speeder would look with a pretty girl in the front seat.
Despite all of Rye’s efforts, Azix hit his limit early that evening. He tried to push on, but the strength leaked out of him like someone had pulled his plug, and he found himself unable to even lift his feet, let alone navigate the slopes and variations of their winding path. He breathed deep, pulling on the Dark Side with more intention, and won a brief surge of strength, but a sensation like heartburn sizzled along his veins and that strength, too, drained out of him after only a few steps.

Injury and improper nutrition were taking their toll. He stopped, swaying, too sluggish and muddled to figure out what he was supposed to do now.

“Az?” Rye ducked his head so he could catch his downturned gaze, fingers grazing his cheek.

“S… sorry,” he mumbled. “I’ve… got nothing.”

Rye straightened, and his probe droids flew in different directions. “Sit down,” he said. “I’ll find us shelter for the night. Drink some water, eat something; we’ll turn in early.”

“Fuck.” He stumbled when he tried to take a step, and new bruises blossomed when his limbs smacked against Rye’s chassis as it caught his fall. “Sorry… I don’t know why….”

“It’s no problem. We’ll set aside some heavy proteins and carbs for your breakfast tomorrow. That will sustain you far better than sugar.”

The chassis set him on top of the supply crates, and he slumped gratefully, elbows digging into his knees. A moment later, lukewarm water spilled over the back of his head, wetting his shirt and bringing some clarity back to his addled mind. He sighed gratefully, and when he was able to lift his head he took the thermos from the droid and guzzled it dry.

“The closest shelter is an overhang half a kilometer from here. Can you make it?”

“Just an overhang?” Az blinked at him, using the bandana to wipe soot off his face.

“I’ll keep watch all night,” Rye reminded him. “I’m not sure how fast the sithspawn can move, but I’ll set a wide perimeter so we’ll have plenty of advance warning. And frankly, I’m not sure you could make it any further.”

“You could take a turn pulling this thing,” Azix suggested a little acidly, but Rye didn’t rise to the bait.

“I’ll need to swap out some power cells as it is, but I will if I have to,” he replied. “Try to make it. The floor looks nice and smooth. Should give you some decent rest.”

Azix heaved a sigh, but he forced himself to get up and put one foot in front of the other. To his mild surprise, Rye’s chassis came over and pressed its three-fingered hand against his lower back. It wasn’t really support, in the physical sense, but in some indefinable way it helped to know someone was there.

He made the half kilometer walk, though it took much longer than any Jedi would have admitted to. The overhang was a deep recess like a gouge carved into the side of the mountain, doubtless the product of an ancient river. Grit and gravel had piled up in front of the overhang, creating a rounded crevice. It wasn’t nearly as deep as he would have liked, but would prevent anything at a monolith’s height from seeing him, so at least it was some protection. He’d have to leave the lights off, but as tired as he was, he couldn’t imagine anything he’d want to use them for.

He crawled into the crevice like a burrowing animal and laid out his thin bedding on a pile of slightly softer grit, then dragged over some water. His aching bones sagged into a heap as he pulled the thin
emergency blanket and the tobacco-scented sweater around his shoulders and guzzled the water until his arm ached too much to support the bottle. Then he set it aside and curled up with an exhausted sigh.

Rye’s chassis came and sat next to him, powering down until the holocron was the only activity. Az felt the soft, steady thrum of it like someone was gently tapping a tuning fork against his bones. His stomach curdled a little, but barely, and a hint of effervescence raced through his veins in response. He reached, and felt Rye’s welcome as the dark, blasted world around him faded away.

He came to in the library, reclined on one of the well-padded couches. He chose to lie there for several ticks, enjoying the back support and the quiet, the distant trickle of water, the scent of greenery. He soon came to realize the silence wasn’t perfect - familiar sounds echoed far away, the clack of training swords and cries of effort. Someone was sparring. That noise was so familiar to him, a constant background in most Jedi temples, that at first it didn’t occur to him to wonder who.

But he wasn’t in a Jedi temple, despite the ambience. The wooden sounds filtered into his consciousness, followed by a shout of triumph, then a familiar laugh - Darth Virul. Taking the opportunity to spar Darth Krazzk, maybe? While Azix didn’t feel comfortable around either of them, he wouldn’t have wanted to miss an opportunity to see that fight. He swung his legs off the couch and padded barefoot toward the descending spiral stairs, cut from the rock like the rest of the temple. He was wearing a lightweight jacket and pants, no shoes. But his feet didn’t hurt anymore, and the cool floors felt good. The cuffs of his pants whispered as they dragged across the polished stone.

On the lower level, the hallway opened into large, airy gymnasiums with soft grip-mats laid across the floor and rattan weapons mounted on the walls. Rye had added large paper wall hangings with ornate wooden rods, with graceful combat forms etched across them in ink. They fluttered slightly as a twilight breeze filtered in through floor-to-ceiling windows overgrown with vines.

On one of the pale mats, Darth Virul was clashing, not with Darth Krazzk, but with Lord Zihuratt. The pureblood had dressed down for the occasion, in a much simpler, but still voluminous robe of textured black fabric. Her hair was tightly bound to the back of her head, with only one decorative pin that looked like it could double as a dagger thrust through the coiled mass. She held two wooden practice blades as if they weighed nothing, though her own real weapons were probably lighter. With her statuesque posture and cool elegance, she dwarfed Darth Virul, who wore a sturdy but pretty athletic dress and leggings in shades of dark brown shot through with gold, her own hair bound back in a similar clip but coming loose in sweat-slicked locks that plastered against her skin. More sweat soaked the back of her dress where it followed the curve of her spine, and her face was flushed bright red in mottled patterns, but she was grinning as she went through a series of vigorous exchanges with Lord Zihuratt. They had very different styles; Darth Virul was forceful and energetic, and her stance was deeply rooted. She gave huffing cries of effort as she pressed her half of the sequence, generating power with her breath and torque from her wide hips. Zihuratt was contained and effortless, channeling that power with efficient parries and tight, circular footwork, her weight always centered and her posture erect. Between her sleeves fluttering like banners and Virul’s skirt flaring like the petals of a flower, their exchange had a whirling quality that reminded Azix of leaves caught on a spiral of wind.

He was drawn in despite himself. He’d seen too many practices and duels not to want to analyze this one, stealing glimpses when the masters and knights errant tested one another at the temple, looking for ways to gain a deeper understanding of the principles of combat. In his heart of hearts, he knew where he stood, and it was solidly in the middle of the pack. Nothing he did seemed to change that - as hard as he worked to gain an inch of ground, the front-runners were doing the same hard work to stay ahead of him. He’d even resented them for it at times. He’d also spent long hours in the gyms, working and training and pushing himself in the hopes of accomplishing even an ounce of the power
the two Sith in front of him were demonstrating. Envy curled in his chest. Each of them seemed to embody a different kind of power - Darth Virul had the power to assert herself on her environment, an unstoppable force. She was making an obvious effort, but the work was movement and energy and joy, with all the inevitability of a falling asteroid. With each clash of weapons, the roundness of her arms jiggled, the fat dimpling as muscles flexed beneath, and her chest heaved. Every inch of her seemed human, mortal, but full of vivaciousness.

By contrast, Lord Zihuratt embodied the immovable, the untouchable. Not a hair out of place, no sign of effort, though Azix could tell reading the duel that Virul was giving her a good fight. All her movements seemed light and graceful, as if she weighed no more than a butterfly alighting on a blade of grass in silk slippers. She certainly wasn’t sweating, and her skin was the same crimson hue, without the purple flush he knew purebloods could develop when they exerted themselves. Hers was the power of being unaffected, invulnerable. The Force coursed through every muscle and vein, lending power to her gentlest movement. She did not need to grunt and heave like Virul did, because her power came from outside herself, not within.

They were not evenly matched. Virul was not using any sorcery that he could see, and Zihuratt was clearly more adept with blades. She also had two blades to Virul’s one, and the longer reach. But Zihuratt seemed to be doing her partner the courtesy of extending the duel as they traded sequences back and forth, moving through familiar dulons and then spinning them off into unfamiliar ones, like musical variations extrapolated from a theme. Though Zihuratt didn’t echo Virul’s smile, Azix got the impression that she, too, was enjoying the exercise.

It made him feel… antsy. Restless. Under no circumstances could he hope to compete with either of them, his surprise-attack on Zihuratt during their duel notwithstanding. But… he wanted to step out onto the mat and feel the rubbery texture under his feet. He wanted a training blade in his hand, and he wanted to follow the familiar forms. He wanted to learn the new ones, the ones Virul made look so powerful and Zihuratt made look so easy.

There was a soft, electronic buzz and Rye appeared next to him. He was dressed in soft black. The warm lighting played differently on his face, and Azix noted that his skin wasn’t quite the same hue as Zihuratt’s - it was brighter, a truer crimson, while hers was darker like wine.

His arm slid around Rye’s waist without his conscious intent, and fit perfectly in the crook of his back. Rye leaned into him, and a flush of heat slid under Az’s skin. Suddenly, sparring wasn’t the kind of exercise he craved anymore.

But before he could tighten his grip, lean over and murmur a suggestion in that ridged ear, Rye shifted his weight and said, “It’s astonishing, isn’t it? Somehow the full effectiveness of these forms isn’t apparent unless a comparably skilled defense is offered.”

Az had to smile. “Yeah, it doesn’t look the same in practice. I’ve been put through a lot of forms I couldn’t make heads or tails of, and then I saw a master use them, and it was like… like I was standing at the foot of a cliff, and they were up on the ledge. And I could see they were up there. I could see the difference between what they were doing and what I was doing. But there was no way up the cliff - no way to close the gap. Not that I could see, anyway.”

“There is no substitute for the climb,” Darth Krazzk said from right beside them, making Azix jump and a sharp flare of rage burn behind his ribcage as he whirled on the Nautolan. Krazzk smirked. Fortunately, he was dressed in the same sleeveless jacket and knee-length pants Az had seen him in before. If he’d been naked, Az wouldn’t have been able to maintain his glare.

“With all due respect,” Azix said tightly, still remembering the steel grip of Krazzk’s hand on his throat, “you don’t know me, so don’t assume you know what my issue is.”
“Granted,” the dark lord allowed. “But I’ve had many students, with many learning styles, who took a variety of paths to mastery. So when I say there’s no substitute for simply putting in the work, I know whereof I speak.”

“I DO put in the work,” Azix began, but Krazzk interrupted with a dry murmur.

“Everyone says that.”

Anger flared again, and Azix gritted his teeth, nails digging into his palms. “No. I put in the work. I am not one of those novices who doesn’t understand why we have to do drills. I never complained about drilling. I understand the point of drills, I am educated on the importance of muscle memory and ingrained reflexes, and I have never had a problem with that. I didn’t skip class, I didn’t blow off my solo work, and I’ve read the damn scrolls. So your opinion, as a guy who’s only ever seen me in battle once, I don’t give a shit about. No offense.”

“The Jedi welp takes his life into his own hand, speaking thus to a lord of the Sith,” Zihuratt declared from the mat. She and Virul seemed to be taking a brief respite, and she stood tall and willowy, glaring at Azix with those empty black eyes. Either she had toned it down significantly, or Rye had made adjustments to compensate for the booming effect on her voice – it still resonated, but not painfully. Virul had her hands on her hips and was panting, scraping her sweaty hair back from her forehead.

Krazzk just chuckled. “We don’t always get to choose our teachers, Jedi Tsuva. And it isn’t prudent to reject wisdom just because you don’t like the source. Come,” he offered, stepping up onto the mat. He bowed to Darth Virul, who looked amused, and held out his hand for her practice saber. She surrendered it, and he tugged on the handle, deftly extending it into a polearm. Azix assumed a certain amount of latitude in the form of the weapons was built into the training program, and followed him onto the mat. Lord Zihuratt stepped aside and replaced her training sabers, folding her hands into the sleeves of her robe as she stood with her head tilted to watch.

“Maybe I can help you bridge the gap you’ve been struggling with. Can we get a base-line?”

“Look,” Azix began, but then Rye murmured his name from the sidelines.

“Azix,” he said quellingly. Az looked over and saw the hope in his eyes – Rye wanted to watch this, analyze it, learn from it. He was eager to have a front row seat to practical applications of lightsaber combat theory, and his craving melted Az’s resistance. He dissolved into a sulk.

“Fine.”


Ready stance? Seriously? The irritation under his ribs felt like heartburn, sizzling against his lungs like acid. He was not some fucking padawan…

/Well,/ he thought with sudden, dark clarity, /only one way to prove that./

He skipped ready stance. Instead he opened with a crashing Juyo advance. If Krazzk liked weapons with reach, he didn’t intend to let him have that reach. And he had learned something from watching Darth Virul who, like him, wielded only one saber but unlike him did not treat that lightsaber like her only viable weapon. When Krazzk predictably back-tracked, trying to keep some distance between them, Azix tangled his off-hand in his jacket and held on, blocking the haft of his pike with his body.

He switched his grip on his lightsaber, holding it back-hand, much better for a tight maneuvering space. And then, without really considering the consequences, he pushed the ‘edge’ of the plasma...
blade up against Krazzk’s ribs, incinerating the cloth and sizzling into the flesh beneath.

Krazzk gave a thunderous howl of surprise and pain, and The Force hit Azix like a canon. His feet left the mat and he slammed into the wall with a crunch and a clatter, toppling to the floor along with a hail of displaced practice weapons and splintered pieces of their display racks. He heard Rye gasp his name, but he felt strangely all right – he’d lost his wind, but there was no stabbing pain of broken ribs, no numbness from bruised nerves.

/Because of the program,/ he realized as he struggled to peel himself out of the rubble. /Rye’s protecting me./ Doubtless, he’d scripted this environment so Az couldn’t come to any real harm while he was in it. Of course, if he didn’t get his ass up, Darth Krazzk might be testing the limits of that protection momentarily.

Az sucked in a breath and PUSHED, not just with his body but with The Force, and the rubble scattered as he leaped to his feet. He’d lost hold of the practice blade. Fortunately, there were plenty to choose from at his feet. He checked Krazzk’s position even as he slid his toe under one and flipped it into the air, catching it back-hand by the hilt. But Krazzk wasn’t coming after him for revenge. Rather, he was standing on the side of the mat, holding his jacket open while Darth Virul examined the injury and clucked chidingly at him. He noticed Azix was up and grinned, showing sharp white teeth.

“That was well-reasoned, boy,” he rumbled. “Very well reasoned. I felt the swell of your rage, the will to maim and punish. You’ve come farther than you think.”

“Shouldn’t have assumed he’d obey you,” Virul said, amused.

“He IS a Jedi,” Krazzk replied. “Obedience is bred into them. I had to work much harder to break many of my previous students of that tendency, but it looks like Azix wasn’t lying about putting in the work on his own.” He studied Azix with those cracked, dark eyes.

Admitting he’d misjudged him was an olive branch. Azix was chagrined enough to accept it. Perhaps he should have felt pride - he’d wounded Krazzk, taken him by surprise. Getting even one hit in was impressive, and Krazzk wouldn’t be caught off-guard again; the next one wouldn’t be so easy. Yet, watching Virul smile up at Krazzk in her motherly way as her hand covered the line of the plasma burn, glowing with a sickly light, he just felt… embarrassed. He’d lashed out in frustration, that was all. It was childish behavior. He should be better than that, now, after all the work he’d done as a Padawan to control his temper.

Of course, the alternative would have been to let the Sith think he had something to teach him. Perhaps a little childishness was the lesser of two evils.

“There,” Virul declared. “Miracles of holocron logic. How does it feel?” He took his hands away from Krazzk’s side, revealing mostly-healed flesh. The burn was still shiny, but that would doubtless flake off within hours.

Krazzk smiled, some of his tendrils curling up at the tips. “Much better, thank you.” He gathered one of Darth Virul’s hands and kissed the knuckles with courtly aplomb, then turned back to Azix, tying his jacket closed. “Well, you stung me for my presumption, and rightly so,” he said. “But the fact remains: you need a teacher, and I crave a student. Perhaps we can agree to expand your skills together, with respect?”

Azix scowled. Then he took a look at Rye, who was watching him with such a resigned expression that his sheepishness came flooding back. He was being stubborn. But hadn’t he gone far enough? It was foolish to think you had to walk all the way into hell just because you’d taken a few steps.
Krazzk read his expression. “You still resist the Dark Side.”

“I’m a Jedi.” Az tore his eyes away from Rye’s. “I’m a servant of light.” He might have snapped if Krazzk chose to challenge that statement, but he did not. Instead, the burly Nautolan scooped up his discarded practice pike and assumed a ready stance on the mat.

“Wisdom and power exist in delicate balance,” he rumbled, stepping slowly through a weapon form that spun the pike across his shoulders and between his hands. “Wisdom without power is impotent. Power without wisdom destroys itself. But when a student walks the path of The Force, I have found that results are always better when wisdom takes the lead.” When Azix just blinked, he said, “If you’re not ready for Dark Side Channeling, let’s focus on combat forms. They are neither Light nor Dark; just tools to shape the body so it can properly serve the mind.”

“That’s a great idea,” Virul said, rubbing a towel over his (now shortened) hair. His dress and leggings had become a gi-like tunic and loose pants. “If those sithspawn you mentioned are as terrible as you say, learning a few new tricks to practice while you’re awake could really boost your chances of getting to New Adasta in one piece.”

“In addition,” Lady Zihuratt said in her cool, dry tones, “you have allowed your body to fall into disrepair. Some conditioning would serve you well, and speed your recovery once you have escaped this planet.” She inclined her head to the two Darths, which surprised Azix until he remembered she was technically lower-ranked than both of them in the sith hierarchy. “I will take tea to my study. May I share it with you?”

“A cup of tea would be very welcome, thank you,” Krazzt said, planting the butt of the pike on the mat and leaning on it. “Well, Jedi Tsuva? It isn’t as if we have anything better to do.”

Azix could think of several things he would rather be doing, but before he could make an excuse, Rye stepped onto the mat. “I’d like to learn too,” he said. “Everything you teach me helps expand the capacity of my predictive algorithms. I’ll be more use to Azix in a fight if I get to practice and see examples here.”

“Of course. I’d never deny our host.” Krazzk’s tendrils curled again in amusement. “Fine.” Azix found himself saying once again, in a huff. But when Rye came to stand beside him, scooping up a spare practice blade on the way, some of his tension dissipated. “Where do you want to start?”

“As before, I’d like to put you through your paces. I know it’s elementary stuff, but observing how familiar and comfortable you are with the dulons will give me a better idea how to build on what you already know,” he explained. “Rye, if you would stand aside and observe, I think you’ll find this very helpful to your predictive algorithms. Then you and I can try the same sort of sequences, and see how well you put them into practice.”

“That sounds reasonable,” Rye agreed. He turned, giving Azix a smile only he could see, and whispering into his mind. “You know I love watching you.”

Azix flushed and tightened his grip on the padded hilt. Time moved differently in the holocon, of course, so he could get in much more instruction than he could in a typical day. But if Rye didn’t set aside some time for them to be alone together soon, he was going to have to drag him away from all this excitement. Wanting him made it hard to concentrate on dulons.

Krazzk had squared off in front of him. “Let’s begin,” he said, and lowered his weapon into an overhead attack stance.
Azix sighed and resigned himself to training away his night.
A full night of holocron training seemed to last days, but it wasn’t as bad as Azix had anticipated. Krazzk had a dry, subdued teaching style, and while he did occasionally thwap Azix when he left himself open, he didn’t seem inclined to physically punish him for his mistakes like some of the masters at the temple where he grew up. Or perhaps Krazzk just thought he was too old to have his calves beaten or to kneel on rice grains. When he did get intense, pushing Azix’s emotions, spurring him to anger, Darth Virul provided an unexpected mitigating influence. He had a much gentler teaching style that reminded Azix of some of the Order’s Consuls, and for some reason, Krazzk always seemed to accept it when Virul told him he was being too harsh. Even when Virul was a stout, round-faced male, Krazzk treated him with exaggerated chivalry.

Azix was starting to become convinced that Krazzk LIKED Virul, an idea that fell firmly into the category of Things He Refused To Think About Too Hard For The Sake Of His Own Sanity.
Despite his aversion, he appreciated Virul’s calming presence and his matter-of-fact explanation of the attitudes behind the forms. He had a very old-fashioned knowledge of the Forms, referring to them by names like ‘Coruscanti visits Alderaan’ and ‘Gundark Charmed to Dance’, ‘Greeting a Friend’, or ‘Flight of a Gamorrean Ax’. Azix had seen names like that in some of the oldest combat manuals, but they hadn’t been taught that way in centuries. Virul seemed to know the story behind each name, or else he had a funny illustration to convey the attitude of the form. He would demonstrate with exaggeration so that Azix could identify the most important elements, then side by side they repeated the forms until Azix had the feel for the balance, speed, and direction of movement and could execute them cleanly.

In his head, he could hear Master Arneth criticizing one of his peers who had always tried to inject humor into their lessons. “Discipline is the adornment of the sober mind!” Clearly, Darth Virul had never heard that saying. They didn’t seem to have any qualms about teaching through comedy, or about pratfalling dramatically (and tipping Azix over when he failed to maintain the right axis of balance) onto the pads to demonstrate what NOT to do. Azix didn’t want to laugh at their antics, but by the time they’d worked through the third form Krazzk wanted to teach him, he found himself surrendering low chuckles despite himself.

Virul worked with Rye too – after walking Azix through the forms several times, letting Rye watch from all angles, they would step aside to help Rye through each sequence. Rye did worse than Azix would have anticipated, and when he asked, Rye revealed he’d updated his physical parameters within the holocron to simulate the weight and range of movement of his chassis. It made sense – within the holocron, he didn’t need to obey arbitrary rules like gravity and inertia, but that was exactly the wrong way to learn how to fight in the real world. He struggled most with maintaining the right center of balance while he was moving through the steps, but Virul cheerfully and humorously went back to the most fundamental basics of footwork with him, and showed him how each step of the form was broken down into elements, and how all the forms came together into a dulon progression.

Meanwhile, Azix drilled those same forms while Krazzk circled, correcting his form and sometimes probing his defenses with his polearm to keep him on his toes. When Azix’s temper snapped and he took a swing with his fist at Krazzk’s face, the Sith dodged back with a laugh and engaged him in an energetic exchange of blows, challenging Azix to display mastery of the new forms. Azix earned dozens of new mental bruises from Krazzk’s more experienced defense, but by the time Krazzk finally declared that he was satisfied, Azix had cleaned up most of the flaws in his stance and closed the holes in his own defense.

Krazzk’s style of teaching was irritating but he was forced to admit to its effectiveness. It soothed the itch for violence inside him, too. After hours of that, he felt less like he needed to break something to remain sane.

Eventually, Darth Virul declared that they were done, and told Rye and Azix to retire for stretches, meditation, and a nice cup of tea. Imperials, Azix was starting to discover, were really into tea. “What time is it outside?” he asked Rye as they sat across from each other while Rye mirrored his stretches. Rye’s silver tea service sat beside them, but rather than porcelain teacups, he had provided chilled green tea with chunks of citrus and ice in tall, frosty glasses. Azix was glad for the reprieve, but his throat was still fuzzy after a long drink and he thought that might be due to the state of his body in the world outside.

“I checked on your knee and it’s very swollen,” Rye replied, glancing apologetically at him through his fall of crimson hair. “So I thought I’d let you sleep today.”

Az frowned. “It’ll just happen again tomorrow. I either need a few weeks of rest or some kolto
injections – nothing else is going to solve this.”

“But it might be less painful,” he reasoned. “And the less pain you’re in, the easier this journey will go. We have enough food and water.”

“Rye, let me wake up,” he prodded. “Even if I do agree to spend today resting, I need food, water, and the bathroom. The FIGURATIVE bathroom,” he amended when Rye’s mouth started to open.

Rye glanced heavenward. “I suppose that makes sense.”

“Yeah. And in the future, you need to keep me in the loop,” Az scolded. “It’s my body, I should be part of these decisions.”

“Yes, well.” Rye straightened and brought his feet in to his pelvis. “I thought if you knew, you’d try to be stubborn and worsen the injury.”

“Maybe, but it’s still my decision.” Az held his eyes in a firm glare until Rye made a gesture of surrender.

“Right, yes, in the future I shall keep you apprised of the hour and offer you every opportunity to overextend yourself in the name of independence.”

The acerbic dryness of his tone made Az smile. “Thank you, Rye,” he said. “A little consideration is all I ask. You don’t like it when I make decisions without you.”

Rye glared, but that only widened Az’s smile. Perhaps it was because he’d been forced to put off his more intimate plans for hours, but at the moment, he was incapable of finding Rye’s grouchy disposition anything but adorable.

“The bloody hell are you leering at?” Rye demanded, more bewildered than peeved, and Az laughed.

“You. You’re cute.”

That only confused Rye further. “Am I? I rather thought we were having an argument.”

Az shrugged, giving him a soft look. “Nah. I wasn’t upset, just trying to make sure you know where the line is.”

“Biologicals,” Rye muttered, but he relaxed. “Would you like to wake up now? Once you’ve tended your needs, you can come back in here and we can enjoy a bit more leisure.”

Azix eyed him and considered the practicalities of pouncing his lover now, but the prospect of what might happen to an overfull bladder if he orgasmed was sufficient to dissuade him. “Yeah, I wanna see how bad it is. Can’t hurt to put some more ointment on it.”

“Agreed.” Rye pushed him out of the holocron without another word, and Az bolted awake, gasping and coughing on a lungful of grit. His head scraped the ceiling of the overhang, but only barely. When he tried to roll over to spit on the ground, his knee was so stiff and aching that he wound up collapsing on his hip instead.

“I told you,” Rye said, though his chassis was dark and powered down. One of his probe droids hovered close, careful of its antennae against the low ceiling. “It’s clear outside, and I’ve found a downwind spot for you to relieve yourself.”
“Yeah, this is one of those things biologicals prefer to do in private, so….” He shooed Rye’s probe droid off as he carefully crawled and hitched out into the gray light of day. He’d spent so much time in Rye’s holocron that even that dim illumination seemed blinding.

Something else stole his attention as he carefully staggered upright, though - the wind whipped grit and ashes across his face and pulled at his clothes. Normally that would not have been an issue, but he was trying not to put weight on one foot, so the buffeting was a little more disorienting. It carved discordant sounds out of the air as it sliced along the black cliffs, and in several places it was creating patches of ashen haze that looked like the prelude to a….

“Um,” Azix said articulately, still hobbling sideways into the wind because no matter what might happen in the next half hour, he needed to piss NOW. “Rye? Are you still jacked into the ambient sensors?”

Nothing answered him. He turned and couldn't spot Rye's probe droids anywhere. Which made sense, because he had just told Rye a moment ago to give him some privacy.

Azix weighed it, then decided the world wasn't going to end in another five minutes. He hobbled downwind and downhill, found a good spot where he could brace his back against the cliff (because his swollen knee would neither support him nor bend more than twenty degrees) and relieve himself. It was far from a pleasant experience, but at least it wasn't terrible. The supply closets at the museum had had plenty of toilet paper, which was a vast improvement over his trip from the shuttle. And he didn't have to worry about leaving it lying around, because there was literally nothing left alive to care about litter.

By the time he'd finished that and come back, the clouds of haze had grown bigger and the wind was picking up gravel, carrying it in dust-devil spirals at dangerous speeds. The grit pelted him, stinging in places even though his sturdy clothing.

"Rye?" Shouting made him cough, and he cleared his throat and spat before trying again. "RYE!" He turned in a hobbling circle, but couldn't spot any of Rye's probe droids, and if he couldn't see them he doubted they could hear him over the wind. It took some maneuvering, but he managed to get back down on the ground without his swollen knee screaming in pain (and now that he was thinking about it, maybe Rye had been right to be concerned enough to want to bypass his natural stubbornness) and crawl back under the overhang, where Rye's chassis waited.

"Rye," he called, trying to reach out with his mind. "You there?"

He felt the holocron stir. Rye's attention had an actual weight, like a thundercloud that gathered, pulling in focus from the atmosphere and training it on Azix.

"I don't need to come in," he clarified. "But don't you think it's getting kind of... stormy out here? This wouldn't be the best place to wait out a flash flood."

A deep red glow, like sullen embers, filled the lenses of the holoprojectors he'd mounted on the chassis. A moment later, Rye's shape was projected out next to him, sitting neatly cross-legged next to Azix, who was still sprawling like a lame akk dog.

"The winds ARE picking up," he agreed. "The atmosphere's charged, but I don't see rain clouds in any direction. Of course, it doesn't take much for a sheet of regular clouds to become storm clouds," he admitted sheepishly, when Az started to open his mouth.

Az snorted. "Right. So this place is great for avoiding monoliths, but not great for a storm. Even if it's just a windstorm; flying dust is going to sift right in. If there’s a downpour….”
“Yes, I have reached the obvious conclusion, Jedi, thank you,” Rye said, amusement and affection mixing with the dryness of his tone. It didn’t even rankle Azix anymore. “Unfortunately, there isn’t a more suitable shelter nearby - while you were resting, I did a geological survey. We can set the supplies to block flying grit, so as long as there’s no sign of rain, staying put may be the better choice.”

That sounded reasonable, but Azix’s gut was telling him it was wrong. He twisted around to peer at the thick ceiling of gray clouds. Were they shot through with more black than usual? Or that ominous hint of green, maybe? But his mind refused to even hallucinate evidence he could have used to convince Rye.

“You look dubious.”

He startled, turning back to the red lense-eyes on Rye’s chassis, then to Rye’s projection, which was contemplating him with a more solicitous expression than he’d expected. His stomach lurched, and he found himself confessing, “I feel like it’s going to be worse than blowing grit.”

He fully expected Rye to argue. Half their relationship was built on arguing. Instead Rye tilted his holographic head. “You have a feeling?”

Az sighed. “Look….”

“If you’re about to explain to me that Force-Users sometimes have strong gut feelings, you can skip the remedials,” he interrupted. “You don’t feel like we’re safe here?” His light-etched eyes were nothing but serious, and something unknotted in Az. He met them, and nodded.

“I really feel like we should move to higher ground.”

Rye nodded too. “How’s your knee?”

“Not great. I won’t be moving fast.”

“Well, if that storm plans to worsen significantly, it’ll be moving faster than you. Looks like it’s time I did my share of the pack-hauling.” His image flickered and warped as his chassis started to crawl out from under the overhang.

“I’m sorry,” Az tried to say, but Rye managed a sharp gesture before the overhang cut off line of sight for his projectors.

“It is what it is, Jedi. Get out of there as best you can and help me re-stack the supplies. There’s higher ground about half a mile from here. No shelter, but if we can make it, flash floods won’t be an issue, and we both know how much you like to sit on mountaintops in dangerous lightning storms.”

Az snorted, and began the laborious process of dragging himself out from under the rock. At least he’d gotten a good long bit of sleep, and hobbling to relieve himself had eased a little of the stiffness in his knee. His back protested, inflamed by spending the night on a thin pad over a layer of grit, but he tightened his jaw and focused on gathering their supplies together as quickly as possible. They hadn’t unloaded much in case of a monolith attack, so by the time he and Rye finished, one of Rye’s probe droids had returned, spinning and bobbing in the air as it tried to inform Azix, in binary, of its findings.

Rye translated. “The way up is clear, and there are some rock formations that may provide a limited wind-block. The winds are more severe higher up, so we should move as quickly as we can.” His chassis gathered the tow-bar and turned on the anti-grav.
Azix hopped up onto the sturdiest stack of supplies.
The ‘head’ of Rye’s chassis swiveled on its neck to glare at him with its three red lenses.

“What?” Az wondered, holding back a tired smile. “It can take the weight. And it’s faster than waiting for me to limp along behind.”

Rye’s holoprojection appeared, arms folded, one spiked brow ridge arched. “You owe me for this. I thought Jedi were incapable of being lazy.”

“We’re never lazy, we’re ‘taking a break from the pursuit of physical excellence to improve our minds with contemplation’. Besides,” he added, stretching his bad leg out and rubbing his swollen knee, “you’re the one who wanted me to stay off this.”

“I see,” Rye said, rolling his eyes as his chassis began hauling the anti-grav cart in the direction of a sharp promontory. “You’ll listen to me when it’s convenient for you.”

“But I AM listening.” Az flashed him his best approximation of a shit-eating grin. Rye just huffed and disappeared, and his chassis bent itself into towing the cart.

Azix's rest didn't last long. Rye did his best, but by the time they reached the foot of the promontory, the winds buffeted the cart, making his chassis strain against its joints and stumble. Azix slid off the back and pushed to help him keep it on track, and together they began a long, arduous climb, wrestling the bulky cart up the slope while the wind did its best to blow it off-track or, failing that, overturn it completely. Azix's bad knee wobbled dangerously, as if the bones had gone slippery in their sockets, but he couldn't bend it enough to switch his stance. The first black droplets splattered his sleeves, accompanied by a distant rumble that thrummed in the bones, barely audible over the howling wind. Azix felt the churning of The Force and reached out with it, trying to wrap his will around the cart and propel it up the slope. He succeeded in a short burst that threw Rye's chassis off-balance. Fortunately, he was quick enough to recover without losing hold of the tow bar.

His holoprojection shimmered into view.

"I'm sorry," Azix began, but Rye cut him off with a raised hand.

"It was a good effort," he allowed. "Just bad timing. Let's work together, agreed?" Az nodded, and Rye held up his fingers. He counted them in the Imperial way - two fingers and a thumb, rather than three fingers with the thumb curled against the palm. "One... two...."

On three, Azix summoned The Force and pushed as the chassis bent forward and dug its metal heels into the rock. It still staggered when the cart lurched forward, but not as badly, and was able to catch up to the movement and brace itself against the pallet's weight.

"Good," Rye said. "Again?"

Panting, Azix nodded - he had a few more bursts of strength in him. He blinked sooty water out of his eyes, giving himself a shake, and braced his feet.

"One... two...."

Step by step, inch by inch, he and Rye worked like a team of banthas. The skies above them seemed to turn black between one breath and the next, darkness falling like a curtain and casting the rocky terrain into shadow. The rain thickened, sharpened, pelting down onto Azix's unprotected head like a hail of darts. He ignored the sting and the discomfort of cold water trickling down his spine, and focused on heaving when Rye said to heave.
The next three pushes made appreciable progress. On the fourth, the stone was wet enough that his foot slipped and he went down on his bad knee. A scream wrenched free when his kneecap cracked against the rock, and he pitched sideways, taking deep, whooping breaths against the bright, hot starbursts of agony.

"Az!"

He wanted to answer Rye's concern, but he could only groan through his teeth, trying to breathe away the pain. A probe droid swooped over his head, mercifully blocking the downpour. It shouted at him in Rye's voice.

"It's too heavy!" The droid swooped in panicked loops, and the rain splattered Azix's face in uneven sheets. "I can't hold it! I need you to brace it somehow so we can get it settled, and then I can come and help you."

Az cursed under his breath, but the pallet shuddered and slid several inches closer to his face, lending urgency to Rye's demands. If he lost his grip, the damn thing would run Azix over on its way down the hill. He rolled and braced his shoulder against it, grunting as his hands and feet slid across the wind-polished rock, wedging himself between the pallet and the ground.

It skewed slightly, one side pulling around, but then stopped.

"There's a level area ahead," Rye's droid shouted over the rain. "It should be high enough. If we can get there, we can wait it out."

"Rye," he said helplessly, flopping one hand against the rock with a splash to emphasize how useless he was. "How far?"

"Sixty meters!"

Az closed his eyes and leaned his head against the edge of the pallet. It might as well have been sixty kilometers - he wasn't sure he could stand back up, let alone push the pallet another sixty meters uphill. Cold water soaked into his clothes, chilling his skin and stiffening his joints. His muscles trembled with the effort of just holding the pallet in place.

"Azix."

The new voice startled him into lifting his head. A full-color projection crouched by the corner of the pallet, probably because Rye's chassis didn't have a line of sight to where he was. Darth Virul knelt there, full skirts spread around her, the lines of the projection's wire frame showing through the texture of her skin and clothing in spots.

"It's all right," she said in those smooth, motherly tones, and calm seeped into his chest, trickling past his ribs to soothe his pounding heart. "It's just a little way. We'll all get there together." She couldn't touch him, but he could feel her reaching out from the holocron and wrapping him in her... well, her aura, for lack of a better term. He tasted the deep woods in The Force, smelled last year's leaves and thick new growth, shadows dappled in green that blocked the sun. Trees stood there like old gods, like on Kasshyk, towering monoliths with roots as thick around as his waist offering shelter, protection, the scent of moss, rich loam, and tart apples slowly decaying to feed the earth. He'd never felt the Dark Side like that, and he blinked at her in wordless confusion.

"Did you think it was all death and destruction?" she asked as the skin on the back of his neck goose-pimpled. "Don't be afraid. Ask Ziost for what you need."

"Ask Ziost?" He let out a shuddering laugh, hitching his body against the pallet as it shifted. He
didn't dare take his hands off the ground to wipe the rain off his face. "Virul, in case you haven't noticed, this light-forsaken planet wants to kill me." Thunder cracked over his head, deafeningly close, and he ducked out of reflex. The pallet shifted more, and he had to throw his body against it to keep it from sliding further.

Virul shone in the rain, all warm browns and golds oversaturated by the projectors. "Ziost was wounded," she explained. "Vitiate reached into her and tore out a chunk of her heart. Now, lifeless expressions of malice roam where there was once light and life and civilization. She's hurting, and she's trying to ease her pain. You'd be able to hear her if you tried."

Azix braced his heels the best he could and shoved, trying to straighten out the pallet. It shifted, then shifted again, showing that Rye was also fighting to correct its slide from his end. "This is a Dark Side world. We're in the middle of the Caldera."

She sighed, dark eyes soft. "You don't listen; that's why you don't understand. Dark and Light are not separate - they are part of a constantly-turning, constantly-mixing whole. We are in the Stygian Caldera, and yes, Ziost has darkness at its heart. But the people who lived here were some of the most vivacious in the Empire - the most opinionated, the most diverse and creative and vibrant. Ziost was dark AND alive, and it was not a contradiction. There is strength there, still. It will come if you reach for it."

He sighed, scattering coal-flavored raindrops from his lips. "Kriff. I'm not falling fast enough for you? Is that it?"

A smile pulled at the corners of her mouth. "Azrahix Tsuva, I don't give a flying fuck if you fall or not," she declared. "I DO give a fuck if you fall off this hill, though, because you're likely to take me with you. Quit being a stubborn cuss and let me help you."

He huffed, but he could feel Rye's efforts to keep the pallet in place. They couldn't stay where they were until the storm blew itself out. "Sixty meters," he said aloud, trying to ignore the way his stomach sank at the prospect.

"Ain't nothin'," Virul assured him. "Listen to the sound of my voice. Press yourself down against the rock, Jedi. Sink your consciousness deep. Ziost isn't malicious - it's hurting just like you, raging just like you. Show her what you've got in common. Last scrap of real life still walking on her skin; ASK her to save you."

"Do we really have time for this?" Rye's voice demanded from the hovering probe droid. Virul waved it off.

"You focus on holding your ground, darlin'. Azrahix," she cajoled, "Ask. Don't be afraid. Don't give in to your doubts. Assume the answer is yes."

He gave a brittle laugh. "Just assume it's yes? That explains a lot about Sith."

Her head tilted. "Sometimes, assuming charity in others is the surest way to inspire it. Sink." She couldn't touch him, but she reached out to him as if she might. "Sink low, Jedi. Sink deep. A world is a cradle, dark or light. Remember the place you've felt most at home in your whole life, how you felt like you belonged. Like you were accepted by the ground and the sky."

/Tython./ He pictured soaring mountains and lush meadows, crystal-clear water with the cold bite of mountain snow, and the peaceful birdsong surrounding the temple. He thought of the snowdrops pushing up through the night's dusting of frost, blooming despite the cold, and glass-green waves topped with wind-whipped foam battering rocky beaches. On clear nights, the sky was bright with
stars following milky paths of light across the heavens. You could see Alderaan sometimes, Coruscant others, but Tython always seemed like a peaceful corner, a thicket in the forest of the universe where everything was quiet.

If he went back there, he would go in disgrace, and likely in mag-cuffs. So many of his peers were dead. There'd be a whole new crop of padawans, shiny and small, and they would stare at him with huge eyes when he was allowed to walk the halls again. And he would fight the screaming urge to grab them by the shoulders, to shake them, to tell them not to take anything for granted, not to believe everything they were told, not to take their innocence out into the galaxy and sacrifice it on the altar of an endless tide of surging darkness blotting out the stars, swallowing those innocent lights one by one....

/Jedi./ Virul's touch ghosted across his consciousness. /You know better than that. Focus./

Azix shifted, took a deep breath, and let it go. He did as Virul said and tried to see Ziost, not as an enemy, but as a cradle of life. He sank into his own skin and felt the rock under his knees and hip, sharp facets digging into his flesh, unforgiving. Then deeper, sliding down through the skin of the world, layers of volcanic and sedimentary rock growing thicker, smoother, and denser with pressure and time. From granite to gneiss, then to the roasting heat of magma, from the skin to bone to blood, he let himself feel the raw seethe of Ziost's body, the shaking and splitting that was taking place, atom by atom and spar by spar, in response to the Emperor's terrible violation.

Ziost was angry, and her anger had only just begun to show.

He'd told Rye that he didn't have the ability to contemplate Imperial deaths on Ziost with the gravity they deserved, not with his own losses so painful and overwhelming. But Ziost was shrieking - not that the planet was sentient, per se, but it FELT, and it KNEW, and it perceived on a time scale of eons. Millions of years of evolution had led it to this point. The destruction of that life had occurred so quickly that now, weeks later, Ziost had only begun to react. Its throes of agony wouldn't end any time soon, but the one who had ripped the heart from her had already gone in a fraction of a blink of an eye. She had been raped in the space between breaths, the damage done before she could begin to scream. Whole one moment, shattered the next.

/Vitiate./ This was a hatred Azix understood. He'd been violated by the same force, split open and hollowed out. /The Emperor. World-eater. Destroyer./ He whispered the names into the storm, into the ground, as if naming the culprit could steal his power. He felt the turmoil under the planet's crust, in the atmosphere, in the ground, and he knew that the greatest of Jedi masters couldn't have soothed this pain. He didn't have a chance.

/Oh, you Jedi./ This deep in meditation, the spiritual was nearly physical, and so he felt Darth Virul's hands settle on his shoulders and her chin on the top of his head. /When something hurts like this, it doesn't want to be soothed. You travel the galaxy telling the downtrodden, the abused, the violated, and the enslaved that they should seek harmony with their abusers, that they should forgive. You tell them to turn away from anger and forget their pain. Then you wonder why they hate you for it./ she whispered, phantom fingertips caressing the curve of his head. /Could you do that? Take what you suffered, what you've seen, and just cut it out of you? Would you deny what Sana's death means to you? Master Suresh's? Master Arneth's? Where is the right to your pain and your anger? Where is your right to FEEL these things, and acknowledge that they happened, and that they were terrible, and that you were wounded? The Jedi live a life apart. Come down./ She dug into his temples, pressing Ziost's pain against his mind, and he wasn't sure if he was screaming out loud or in his head. /Get off your damned cloud and share this pain./

He writhed. /It's not... that isn't... two wrongs don't make right!/ Ziost thundered inside his skull.
Rage shook him, turned him red, then white-hot, eyes rolling back as the heat came pouring up through the earth and rattled him.

/But two beings who have been wronged make a community,/ she replied. /Pain doesn't ease because you deny it, Jedi. It eases when it's shared. Stop trying to be an island, and OPEN./

He felt a prying, splitting sensation that was all too familiar, and screamed as the rawness twisted inside him spilled out to join the torrent. It gushed and tumbled and vomited from his belly, and more swelled in behind to fill him again. He was caught in a current of power so much larger than him, so much more ancient and overwhelming, he was like a pinhole opened against a vacuum. And like that pinhole, he could feel that if this rush of power didn't stop, it would tear the insides out of him and leave him hollow.

/Okay,/ he heard Virul muse from a distance. /Maybe that was a little bit too much./

He wanted to lash out, but he couldn't find her, or himself, or anyone. He couldn't feel the rain, the rock, or the anti-grave cart. Poison wracked his limbs with spasms and his skin sizzled off, his body seething against the intrusion as he choked on the taste of Ziost’s torment. All the way down to his core, everything with a beating heart, everything with dividing cells, turned to ash. His mouth was too dry to make a sound but the screams welled up like lava and spewed from the ruin of his throat. She howled at him, and into him, and he was helpless against the tidal force of her rage, burning and thrashing with her in terrible sympathetic harmony.

Something wrapped around him. Crawling tendrils sealed against him like slimy suckers, pulling at his skin until his bones followed. He twisted in the flames, drowning under the weight of eons, caught between that inexorable grip and the pounding undertow of the current. The current scoured him and he thought, /it will never let me go, I'll burn alive here./ Then, with an almost palpable, sucking pop, he fell back out of the connection and slammed into cold, wet stone on the hilltop.

Colors burst in his vision as the white heat gave way to storm clouds and pounding rain. He raised shaking hands - they were steaming as the rain hit them, but he seemed whole.

"What..." he rasped, "the fuck... did you DO to me?"

Crimson flashed in his vision and Rye was there, his fingers passing through Azix's form as he tried to fuss.

"Az," he was shouting, but Azix's ears were ringing so hard it sounded like he was underwater. "You all right? Breathe, love, look at me. Do you know where you are? Do you know your name?"

"Fuck," he panted, vision swimming, lips dripping ash water. "Just go ahead, take a bite out of a whole... kriffing planet... why not?..."

"I think he's present, hon." Virul's projection appeared behind Rye's. Azix had trouble focusing on her, swaying where he sat, but he locked on her blur of color as his lips peeled back from his teeth.

"What the FUCK," he repeated, "did you DO?"

"My love," Rye said, cupping his face in immaterial hands, utterly failing to drag Azix's death glare off of Darth Virul. "Look at me, please. What's your name?"

“I know who I am.” He batted Rye’s hands away, with no more success than Rye was having at making contact. “She didn’t actually fry my brain, thank fuck. Did you seriously just plug me into the consciousness of a dying world?”
Virul had the good grace to look chagrined. “I’m sorry,” she said. “I screwed up. I didn’t mean to plug you in quite THAT deep. It just seemed like you were struggling with the concept. I didn’t know if the Jedi even teach the world-root meditation any more, so… I pushed you a bit, so you’d make the connection. Your sympathetic resonance was greater than I expected, but really, I should have known, with the same sort of violation, the same predator….”

“SHUT UP.” His eyes were burning. The world glowed orange, in heat waves, like the surface of Oricon. He pressed the heel of his hand against his eyes and felt the pallet skew at his movement.

“Az…” Rye was trying not to be a nuisance, he knew. But his concern was valid and immediate. Az leaned against the crates and pushed himself to his feet, sucking in what felt like the first deep breath he’d taken in hours.

His body CRACKLED with strength. Thrummed with it. He felt lightning dance between his fingertips, and he hadn’t even tried to summon it. His knee still hurt, but the exhaustion was gone.

Raindrops sizzled where they hit him. When he laid his hands on the cart, a molten aura seemed to writhe against his skin.

“I’ve got you, Rye,” he said. He was surprised by how calm he sounded, how level. Ripping Darth Virul a new asshole could wait. “Let’s try this again. One, two…..”

He made it sixty meters. He could have made it the full sixty kilometers. Power coursed inside him, rattling his veins, searching for an outlet. Lightning crawled across the clouds and reached down, combing Ziosk’s mountaintops with crackling fingers, and he felt like any moment it would find him and they would click together like a completed circuit. Soon enough, the pallet sat secure in the lee of the mountainside, sheltered from the worst of the wind by an upthrust of granite, and Rye’s chassis huddled there with it, projecting his form to the upward-curving slope where Azix stood. The rain blurred the lines of his projection, giving him the effect of a watercolor painting.

“Darth Virul says she knows you don’t want to hear from her right now,” Rye fretted as Azix turned off the antigravity and made sure the cart wouldn’t slide.

Azix squinted against the rain. His heart pressed against his ribs, pulled toward the clouds. His ears were still ringing from that brief, blinding communion with Ziosk, but he felt better now. Almost invincible. “She’s right.”

“But she says you need to give back that power, or it could be dangerous. She said to ‘ground’ it, like an electrical current. Put it back into the world. Do you know how?”

He knew how. He lifted his hands and smiled at the little purple arcs that crawled between his fingers. “Maybe I’ll go storm-riding again.”

“She says that’s exactly what you shouldn’t do,” Rye insisted. “You’re charged and reckless. Drunk on the Dark Side. You’ll do something stupid. I can vouch for that, Azix - that’s how inexperienced Sith die.” He came as close as his projectors would reach, hair oddly still in the driving rain. “You’ll have other opportunities. Other storms. I don’t think the atmospheric disturbances will stop any time soon. When you’ve got your head screwed on straight, you can ride them. Right now… you have to do the wise thing. Give the power back.”

Azix laughed. “Give it back? That doesn’t seem like the Sith thing to do.”

“Sith are raised learning how to gather power,” Rye told him soberly, reaching for him through the rain. “But they don’t survive long if they can’t moderate it. You’ve got too much. You need to bleed
“It off. Please.” His holographic throat convulsed. “I need you to trust me.”

“Trust you?” It wasn’t that he was dubious. But against the prospect of just fucking ditching his body to ride the winds, Rye’s opinion carried less than the usual weight. His clothes were heavily sodden, but he didn’t feel cold.

“Yes. Trust me,” he insisted. “I know I don’t have your experience with The Force. But I have obituaries, Az… millions of them. This is where fallen Jedi burn themselves out. This is where over-ambitious Sith use themselves up. And they break, or they die, or they go mad, because they couldn’t step back from the ledge. They were CONVINCED they could fly, and so are you right now. So I’m asking you to believe that I know what I’m talking about, and that I don’t want anything bad to happen to you. Give the power back because I asked you to,” he pleaded.

Az crumbled.


“You want to soar.” Rye offered him a faint smile. “You will. On better, much more stable wings than these. Come on.” He held out his hands, and even though he couldn’t touch them, Azix reached back and slid his sparking fingers through the lines of red light. The three probe droids had parked themselves along the edge of the upthrust, with their little generator fins whirring in the wind and their manipulator claws holding the emergency blanket. The other side had been pinned between crates, forming a sort of lean-to. It was no comfort, but at least it would block most of the rain. Rye sat under it, and Azix sat with him, groaning as he lowered himself to the bare rock and stretched his bad leg out in front of him.

“You know how to do this?”

Az gave him a dry smile. “When I was a kid,” he said, “I had outbursts. Just… failure to control my temper. It’s a Rattataki thing; we’re hot-blooded. The creche-masters worked with me. Taught me how to drain it into the ground, to control it.” He took a deep breath and let it out, spreading his hands flat on the ground. “Y’know, we don’t make the best Jedi. We can never quite get… serenity. But there are other Rattataki in the Order. We just do our best, and they give us a little rope. Like they give wookies, for the same reason.” He took another breath, let it out, and tried not to mourn the energy that seeped out with it. His palms pressed against the rock and grit.

“... The majority of the Rattataki clans are Imperial,” Rye said, hesitating as if he wasn’t sure this was a wise choice of topic. “They were brought to the Empire by Darth Vich, after he found the Rattataki homeworld. His house has fallen, but the Rattataki Sith and soldiers that he trained were absorbed into the Empire.” He paused then added carefully, “You’d find a lot more of your kind among the Sith than among the Jedi, if that’s important to you.”

Azix gave a soft snort. “I doubt they’d want anything to do with me.” He took another deep breath, and another, letting the power slide down his shoulders and out through his palms. The rock warmed under his hands. “I don’t know anything about my own people, Rye. The Order doesn’t let you learn. They don’t want people trying to go home.”

Rye had no answer for that. He sat there, one transparent hand on Azix’s knee, while Azix breathed and meditated. Moment by moment, his shoulders slumped and his arms took on the tremble of exhaustion. His head dipped lower and lower, smeared with soot-water that almost obscured his minimal tattoos. His clothes were black at the collar and cuffs, the stains slowly spreading along the absorbent fibers. Finally, he rubbed the grit off his hands and tipped back, leaning against the jagged rock and closing his eyes against the light mist of rain that blew in under the blanket.
“Come in with me,” Rye murmured, fingers tracing his face. “At least you’ll feel better. It’ll help you sleep.”

“No, it’s too dangerous. In this weather, anything could happen. Besides,” he murmured, “I’ve had enough sleep.” He shifted, trying in vain to find a more comfortable position against the rock, then gave up. “I’ll just meditate.”

“All right.” Helpless to be of any more use, Rye just pushed his projection as close to Azix as he could, huddling against him in the storm. A gust of wind yanked at the blanket, threatening to destabilize the cart, and Az sighed as he reached out to hold one of the corners down. “I don’t have any ambient sensor data out here. I don’t know how long this will last.”

“As long as it lasts,” was Azix’s only answer. He settled down cross-legged, one hand on the corner of the blanket, the other palm-up on his knee. “Do me a favor? Just… keep projecting. So I can see you’re still here.”

Rye nodded and laid his holographic hand in Az’s. Even if he’d wanted to say something, the howl of the wind was going higher and sharper, like a banshee’s call echoing off the mountains. He wanted to comfort Azix, draw him into the shelter of his mindscape and soothe away his hurts. Instead he sat there, unable to really touch or console his lover while Azix meditated. Thanks to his holocron’s Force Sense, he could taste the shape of Azix’s thoughts, and he knew that comfort wasn’t what Azix wanted - he was preoccupied with pain, rage, and grief.

He’d let go of Ziost’s power, but they were still united in feeling.

/As his Dark Side education goes, it’s significant progress,/ Virul whispered in the depths of his lattice. /But he’ll still want to yell at me for it. I accept that./

/Was it really an accident?/ Rye couldn’t keep the brittle accusation from his tone, but Virul didn’t take offense.

/It got out of hand, but he came through it. Giving up the power was a good sign. Next time he channels like that, it will be his own choice. And we’re much less likely to lose him to it./

Zihurrat chimed in, her voice soft as distant bells on the wind. /On any path, some steps are harder than others. Embracing the community of other dark entities is such a step. He has taken that step - he is no longer alone. Soon it will be apparent to him that the Light does not, can not, understand him - the grief in his heart belongs to the Dark, and his only succor is in shadow./

/It’s a long way from getting cozy with a Dark World to taking a place with the Sith,/ Rye pointed out. /Even Fallen, his hatred of the Sith is deeply ingrained. It’s cultural, political - having the Dark in common won’t make that go away./

/Then we just have to make sure he meets the right Sith,/ Darth Krazzk’s simmering amusement spread along the lattice like a trickle of hot water. /Or better yet, the wrong Jedi./ He laughed, and Virul laughed with him, fading back into their own ‘realms’ within the mindscape and leaving Rye alone in the rain.

Azix hadn’t moved. He sat still and silent, head bowed while the thunder rippled overhead. So Rye matched his silence, staring at the curve of his neck as the storm raged on, wondering if the gnawing sensation in his metaphorical stomach was guilt.
The storm raged most of the day and into the night before blowing itself out. Caught by the wind, their supply stack shifted several times, forcing Azix to get up and stabilize it. By the time the rain faded to a light drizzle, then stopped entirely, they were both well-drenched. Of course, Rye minded that less than Azix did, since Az had done a good job of making his chassis water-tight. Azix, Rye suspected, was miserable but keeping mum about it. Still, he couldn’t hide from Rye that he didn’t manage to get any sleep in the latter half of the night.

By the time a leaden morning broke, Azix had a ragged look about him, the tendons tight in his neck and his eyes a startling, bloodshot red against his pale gray skin.

“Are you SURE you won’t come inside?” Rye touched his knee, and Azix laid his hand over and through his, letting the lines of Rye’s wire frame play over his knuckles.

“Likely to get hypothermia if I try to conk out now,” he muttered. “Things’ll dry faster if I move.”

“Az, you’re hurt. And on your last leg, literally,” Rye insisted. “It’s okay to rest – I keep telling you we can spare a couple days of supplies.”

Azix’s eyes were fully orange even now. They lacked the burning glow of active channeling, but even so, they gleamed with Dark Side corruption, adding an evil glint to an otherwise dully exhausted expression. “Remember what you told me about New Adasta? There’ll be supplies there. More painkillers,” he pointed out. “Anti-inflammatories. Possibly kolto, or at least bacta. And real beds. If I’m going to rest, I should do it there. And the sooner we make it, the sooner I can crawl onto a real mattress under some real covers and just…” He inhaled and let it out slowly. It hitched at the end, and Rye flickered in concern, hand passing through his shoulder. Azix shook it off and made a tired gesture. “I can’t rest out here, that’s all there is to it.”

“Well… you’re going to take more breaks,” Rye declared. “And I’ll pull the cart while you ride. If I ration my power output, we can still make New Adasta, I think. If I set the probe droids to collect wind power, then maybe I can improvise a transfer, which… could maybe give me another twenty hours…”

“Rye.” The corner of Azix’s mouth pulled up, and he flexed his fingers inside the frame of Rye’s hand. “Sometimes things just suck, and you have to keep going, and there’s nothing else for it. I’ll make it. I need a few minutes to stretch the stiffness out of the knee. Can you re-secure the stuff?”

Rye hated the hopelessness he saw in Azix’s face, but he nodded, and began to boot up his chassis. “Of course. Use some more ointment too. And take the painkillers. And drink lots of water, and make sure you eat some carbs for breakfast….”

“Rye.”

He faltered, chided by that tone, but irritation welled quickly. “Right,” he muttered. “Certainly, I’ll shut up. It isn’t as if you’re the only chance I have of getting off this rock. If you keel over dead, I can neither pilot a shuttle nor navigate Imperial customs, being a droid, and therefore ‘property’. But fuck me for being concerned, I see how it is.”

Azix blinked at him, then smiled wearily. “Oh, is that it? Here I thought you were worried about
Rye sputtered in outrage. “I... that... I will have you know,” he said venomously, “that I am capable of running hundreds of thousands of simultaneous processes. Which means I’m MORE than qualified to worry about two things at once. I can worry for your sake AND mine.”

“Of course.” Az completed his stretches and pulled his pant leg up to knead some ointment into his knee. Rye scrutinized him, but he didn’t seem legitimately angry, so he got his chassis up and went to work re-arranging the supplies while Azix attended to his physical needs. He’d hobbled to his feet (and Rye said nothing about the difficulty he had getting up) to take a piss over the side of the hill, and was rubbing his soot-stained hands on his sodden pants, when he stopped, head lifting, twisting like a gazelle to pinpoint a noise on the wind.

Rye’s three probe droids immediately lifted off, spiraling into the sky to search for whatever he had noticed. “There’s a dust cloud,” he said, “coming from the northwest. It’s awfully small to be Sithspawn, and moving pretty fast.”

“That’s because it’s not Sithspawn,” Azix said, launching into a hobbling run and nearly collapsing onto the tow-bar even as he wrapped his hands around it. “It’s a Sith.” He turned on the anti-gravity and dragged the cart around, using his own weight to force it into compliance, then began to wrestle it out of the gentle ditch where they’d settled it the previous evening. “And they’ll sense me, if they’re looking. We have to move.”

“Um…” Rye watched all this activity with a raised brow ridge. “Why?”

Azix paused to stare blearily at him. “… Why??”

Rye shifted, nibbling on his lower lip. “Well, I don’t want to harp on the subject. I know it’s a sensitive one. But... you’re a Rattataki with Dark Side eyes and an orange, Sith lightsaber. How is some stranger even going to know you’re really a Jedi? Ziost was extremely metropolitan,” he pointed out. “There’s no reason any random Sith stationed around here should know you – you could be coming or going from anywhere. You’d barely even have to lie – just tell them you were helping with the evacuation, and your shuttle was knocked out of the sky, and you were the only survivor. No need to tell them you were evacuating the Sixth Line.”

Azix blinked, then tried to rub grit out of his eyes that could have been ashes or lack of sleep. “Rye, are you heat-brained? I can’t pull off pretending to be Sith. I thought I proved that with Lord Vissoise; he didn’t buy my act for an instant, and I couldn’t answer his questions, questions a Sith WOULD have answers to.”

“Then build on what you DO know,” Rye suggested. “You know House Ekari. You’ve been there, you know the names of the major players. You could fake that well enough, couldn’t you?”

“That didn’t work before.”

Rye eyed him. “Well this time, don’t hesitate. House Ekari’s colors are black, burgundy, and pale gold. It was House Shiar before Darth Scion took it over from his master, Darth Shiar. Darth Scion is married to Lord Blademaster Kryos Ekari-Passagos, and they have a daughter, Ke’ila Ekari-Passagos. Nollok Jen’kari is his official concubine, obviously, and his apprentice, and Kryos’ apprentice is Teleon Virulion, who made it to the final brackets in the last Lightsaber Combat Expo. Any more detailed information than that shouldn’t be needed, and I can do my best to feed you anything you don’t know. But Sith are naturally suspicious of each other, so it wouldn’t be strange for you to answer any questions with ‘none of your business’.”
Azix stopped trying to pull the cart out of the ditch. “How is that better than running?” he demanded.

Rye tried not to look too judgmental. After all, his pet Jedi wasn’t at his best. “Well, judging by their pace, they have at least one speeder.”

Azix’s expression changed. Rye smiled encouragingly. He let go of the tow bar and hobbled further up the slope, lying flat on the stone to peer into the chiaroscuro landscape.

“I can’t make out much. Can you see better?”

“It’s the dust, not the distance, that’s obscuring the size of their party.” One of Rye’s probe droids hovered above and behind him. “But five or six seems like a safe estimate.”

He muttered a curse and closed his eyes, deepening his breathing. Rye’s droid booped questioningly at him. “Trying to get a better sense of how many of those are Force Users,” he answered, even though he didn’t know for certain that was the question. “If it’s one Sith and a handful of Imperials, I can take them.”

Rye’s brow ridges arched. “You’re awfully confident. What if he’s better than you? You can’t touch the Light, and in the Dark, you’re strong, but a novice. This may be a good time for diplomacy.”

Az snorted. “Let me guess: just ask for help? Assume the answer will be yes? Shush. I need to concentrate.”

Rye swallowed his retort. Azix inhaled and exhaled slowly, reaching out, and he felt the thrum of it in his holocron. Doubtless, the Sith would feel it too. Whether they would see it as worthy of investigation... Rye wondered how many survivors there really were, or if Imperials had already begun salvage operations on Ziosk. After all, the danger had mostly passed – there was nothing to stop living Imperials from coming back. And if Sith were coming out in search parties, then another Dark Side presence might not be unexpected enough to pull the Sith off his path.

Azix blew out a harsh breath. “Just the one. He knows I’m here, though. His team is Imperials. They won’t be any trouble.”

“... I still think diplomacy is an option,” Rye said, from the hovering droid. “And also, may I say how unexpected and rather disturbing it is to hear a Jedi so determined to kill everyone in his path? It’s almost as if all those things I said to you about the Republic attempting to commit genocide on the Empire wasn’t actually an exaggeration...”

“RYE.” This time, his name was snapped. Rye promptly projected himself, arms folded and expression baleful, looming over his prone lover. Azix had the good grace to look apologetic. He held up his hands. “Okay. I’ll try it your way, just because I’m not exactly in top fighting shape right now, and getting injured again would probably be the death of me. But WHEN it goes pear-shaped – because it will – you’d better acknowledge that I told you so.”

“Oh, certainly,” Rye sniped. “Far be it from me to deny ANYone their rightful gloating. Though I have to say that if you deliberately provoke hostilities, that’s cheating, and I will not accept it as fait accompli.”

Az growled low in his throat, a sound Rye had not heard him make before, and one that he found much more interesting than he probably should have under the circumstances. “Get the droid down,” he said. “I have to find the right ground for this encounter.”

“And the cart?”
“We’ll leave it here. Seeing us with supplies might inspire the Sith to kill us just to take them. See?” he added before Rye could protest this assumption. “NOT deliberately provoking.”

“Of course you are,” Rye muttered, following Az down the hill. “You’re provoking ME.” Azix didn’t seem to hear him, so he sighed and made sure the pallet was settled back in the ditch, with the reflective emergency blanket folded away. He kept one probe droid with Azix, and was even kind enough to have it project a topographical map of the hill they were on. Azix seemed to find his ideal point of engagement right away, because he changed direction and limped to a ledge that ran for a short distance along the sharper incline. Rye couldn’t help noticing that it was a good place to ambush someone from above.

No matter what happened, he had no intention of leaving Azix to face a real Sith alone. If it came to a fight, then… well. Any Imperial would kill for self-preservation. It didn’t make him a traitor to protect himself or his mate.

Once Azix settled in his lookout post, he began forcing the stiffness out of his knee with slow, see-sawing stretches, channeling power with disciplined breaths.

Rye got out his lightsaber. He hadn’t used it yet in the real world. He flicked it on, then back off, and wondered if he would do more harm than good by bringing another plasma blade to the fight.

Despite not having a real stomach, something in him sank when the cloud of dust changed direction. “They’re altering course,” he told Az reluctantly. “If they don’t change their speed, they’ll reach us in about three minutes.”

“Keep an eye out,” Az replied, continuing his stretching. “If they’re coming in loaded for gundark, let me know.”

“I’m not a telepath,” Rye protested. “…Yet. I mean, perhaps one day. That would certainly be useful. But how am I supposed to know their intentions?”

Now it was Azix’s turn to be patient with his lover’s ignorance. “Use your scanners,” he said, only a bit tightly. “Weapons status, posture, whether they take a hand off the speeder to fire.”

“They’re sending out an Imperial hail. Should I answer?”

“Can you do it in a way that won’t make them suspicious?”

Fair question. Rye contemplated it for a moment, running the probability of negative outcomes. In the end, he said, “Transmitting on standard Imperial frequency,” and Azix chose not to argue, because the speeder convoy had come into view.

They were traveling in a V formation, with the Sith leading the pack. Two Imperials flanked him on each side. As they drew closer, Azix murmured, “Check that armor. Two heavy commandos, a tech, and a medic.”

“And that means?” Rye had decided to send a highly corrupted, staticky signal to mimic electromagnetic interference, and slapped together a ‘message’ from Azix using recordings of his voice. The only legible words would be ‘apprentice’, ‘survey’, and ‘survivors’. He had to cobble ‘survey’ together from two other words, but with all the other garbling, he strongly doubted they’d notice the discrepancy.

Azix threw Rye a faint smile over his shoulder. “More likely to be search and rescue than a war party. Maybe you were right and we can talk our way out of this.”
“I implied we’re part of a geological survey team,” Rye said, even as his chassis emerged around the side of the hill and his other two probe droids joined the first. “It’s a good excuse for you to have all these droids around.”

His smile widened slightly, and reached his tired eyes. “That’s a good cover, Rye. Quick thinking.”

The compliment somewhat mollified his irritation, and he preened a little, tossing his hair back from his face just to show off how naturally it moved. “That IS my particular forte, Apprentice Tsuva of House Ekari.”

Azix shuddered. “Force, don’t say that. Not unless you have to.”

“Get over your squeamishness,” Rye advised him. “Here they come. No House Colors in evidence.”

“Should that mean anything to me?”

“Oh, no. Houses are just… families, power bases for individual Sith. Many Sith go straight into service of one of the Spheres of Influence, and never have a House unless they form one themselves. The Sith House system is a bit old-fashioned, maybe even obsolete now, but it persists because of tradition,” Rye explained. “For you, it’s just a shorthand of saying, ‘I ultimately serve Darth Scion, who ultimately serves Councilor Marr, and fields the 209th fleet division in defense of the Empire,’ and that’s how other Sith know where you belong in the power structure.”

Azix stopped stretching and stood tall, without his saber drawn, focused on the convoy. “Do Sith really memorize all that? Who controls what, which house belongs to who? Sounds crazy complicated.”


“Wow,” Azix murmured, “what a coincidence. They’re both stuck-up too.”

Rye’s brow spikes rose in outrage, but then the convoy swept up to the base of the hill and his holoprojection vanished.

The lead speeder was sleek and black, its polish dulled by clinging ash dust. The others were Imperial gray, toting weapons, communications equipment, or saddle bags marked with the medical cross. The Sith wore robes stylized to look like patchwork, or perhaps funeral wrappings, form-fitting over his chest and arms and dropping to a sturdy armored skirt below. He pushed his hood back and pulled off his protective goggles. Human, with pale skin and black hair, and a long, spiked pike haft strapped to his back. He approached, but stayed out of easy pouncing distance, Rye noticed, looking up at Azix with either curiosity or suspicion. He hoped it was curiosity.

A muscle twitched in Azix’s jaw, but he said nothing, and Rye suddenly found himself wondering if Azix could do a passable Imperial accent.

“What’s all this?” the Sith asked. His tone was very level, not at all provocative, but Rye still heard the dangerous note in it.

Az inclined his head. “Survey. What’s it to you?” Thank the Emperor; he had the wit to attempt an accent, and it wasn’t bad. Better yet, he kept it short and brusque, which would help hide his Republic mannerisms.

“Your communications gear seems to be malfunctioning,” the Sith said, and now Rye could detect a brogue in his speech, betraying him as a native of one of the Empire’s less civilized outer worlds or colonies. Kirtania, perhaps, or Arda. “It’s nae safe without a working transmitter. I’ve got a
Azix blinked, and Rye knew exactly what he was thinking – that was a very charitable offer for a Sith, a possible sign of subtler motivations. “Transmitter’s fine. Atmospheric interference is just strong around here. You can go do your thing.”

Rye winced internally at his phrasing and held back the urge to correct it. This conversation better not go on much longer or the Sith would know for sure Az wasn’t a native. Azix’s Republic drawl came out on certain words too, and Rye could only pray the Sith didn’t notice.

“That’s odd. We’re nae having any troubles with our transmitter, Master…?” The Sith clasped his hands loosely behind his back. His expression was cool, almost sleepily unconcerned, but that position put his hands right where he could easily draw his pike.

“Apprentice,” Azix bit off, after the briefest hesitation. “Tsuva. House Ekari.” He did an admirable job of not appearing disgusted at the name. Still, it had been the wrong thing to say, because the Sith’s eyes widened marginally.

“They’re nae sending apprentices out without an escort. Where’s your survey team?”

A heartbeat passed, then another. In those moments, Rye learned, for the first time, the appeal of prayer.

/Ancient Lords,/ he pleaded. /Let my boyfriend say something smart/

His prayer was not answered.

Az waved a disdainful hand at Rye’s hovering probe droids and said, “You’re looking at it. You got a problem?” He shifted, bracing his good leg on the edge of the ledge, fingers wrapping around his lightsaber hilt. At least he didn’t draw it. “I didn’t ask for your help, or your interference.”

The Sith’s eyes narrowed. “If you happened to be a scavenger instead of a survey team, I might have. You’re aware that all salvage needs to be turned over to the quartermaster at the landing zone. You wouldnae want anyone to think you were taking advantage of this catastrophe for personal gain.” The technician, with his visored helmet, slid off his speeder and approached the Sith with a tablet. The Sith obligingly glanced at it, and Rye was amazed to feel his intent coalesce in The Force. He knew, and Azix knew instantly, that they were in trouble. “Especially since those aren’t survey droids. Common maintenance types, and a civil security droid? With those monoliths about? That’s suicidally risky. Suggests you’ve got something to hide.”

Azix drew his saber, but didn’t light it. “Fuck off,” he warned. “I don’t have any quarrel with you, ‘mate.’ The word was awkward on his tongue, and Rye’s chassis reached for his own lightsaber even as he prepared a combat protocol for his probe droids. They weren’t armed, but they could still be of some use, and he didn’t mind sacrificing them if need be.

The Sith just eyed him for a moment, then said, “Mason, call it in.” The tech hurried back to his speeder, and the Sith slid the pike haft from his back, planting the pommel spike in the dirt as a plasma blade flared to life. It was green, but not the fair spring- or sea-green of a Jedi blade; this was an infected, poison green that seemed to swim and wobble in the visual spectrum, marked with a pair of black spikes extending from the emitter. “I’ll give you one more chance to tell me the truth.”

Azix’s grip tightened on the lightsaber hilt, and he ignited the sunset blade. “You don’t want the truth,” he said, and forgot to lilt at all, nothing but drawled Republic disdain governing his tone. “You want a fight. Come get it, then, S….,”
Thank the Emperor he cut himself off before derisively calling his opponent 'Sith', but still, Rye hoped Azix could feel his angry glare as he popped his saber into ejection position from its niche in his chassis. He wouldn’t light it until he had an opportunity to stab someone in the back – no one suspected a droid, and since he was such a combat novice, he would do the most damage if he acted like a useless protocol droid until the end. Speaking of... Rye pulled a fretting protocol droid voice from his audio files.

“Oh, masters, please don’t fight,” he pleaded, waving his chassis’s arms in stiff, anxious flailing. “Surely there’s no need for bloodshed after such a terrible tragedy. Of course these aren’t typical survey droid chassis, just as I am not a typical factotum droid, but I can explain!” He hobbled forward, stiff legged, and was relieved to see the Sith hesitate. “I am R2-N8/1. My master built both myself and my associates from spare parts. His talent in this area is of particular interest to Lord Jen’Kari. You must believe I’m exceedingly grateful to be sturdier than the average factotum droid, just as these smaller, specialized survey droids are more maneuverable and draw less attention from hostile wildlife. They’re ideal for THIS mission.” He bobbed his head the way idiotic protocol droids did, selling the lie as hard as possible.

“Look,” Az said into the tense silence that followed. “I’m not looking for a fight. I’ve got work to do, and so do you. Not that I doubt I could kick your ass, but minding our own business would save us both a lot of time, and might save you a few days in a med ward. Just go back to what you were doing.” He growled a little. He also didn’t lilt at all. Apparently, maintaining a cover identity was not one of his strong suits. Rye made himself a mental note not to suggest it again.

The Sith didn't buy it either. He spun his lightsaber pike in tight orbits and swept it into a ready stance. He held his empty hand forward, a typical Niman opening that suggested Azix would be facing telekinetic as well as hand-to-hand combat prowess. "That's an interesting accent," he said quietly. "Keep the droids back." This was directed at the commandos, who immediately separated to lay down cover fire that slagged the rock at the feet of Rye's chassis. He jerked it back and abandoned the stiff-limbed act, pushing power to the torque drivers to get some speed. His shock absorbers wouldn't handle a leap from the ledge, so he sent the probe droids flying in wild loops to distract the commandos and draw fire while he skidded down the slope and circled around.

The Imperials had clearly been trained for a Sith Duel. The tech and medic both fired at Azix while he was in mid-air, a tempting target, launching himself off his good leg in a powerful Juyo opening. The Sith pushed with The Force, but Azix spun around the blast like a swoop biker weaving through traffic and came down like a meteor, blazing like a dying sun with molten Dark Side power. As soon as he landed, the Imperials stopped firing and focused on Rye's droids, which were harassing them with what little weaponry they had - mostly welding flames and electric shocks. Az's leap had been shortened by the mid-air maneuver, and the Sith had just enough space to fade back out of range of his strike. While Azix was still on one knee, his saber melting the rock at the tip of its downward angle, the Sith spun in with his pike. He wielded it like a spear, in short arcs and swift thrusts meant to keep Azix at a distance where his traditional lightsaber would be ineffective. When Azix batted his strikes aside and forged toward him he displayed some highly competent footwork (which Rye could appreciate more now that he'd been learning some himself) and circled away to maintain his reach advantage. Azix then tried the wise tactic of going after the pike haft, but his blade clashed against it in a shower of sparks, revealing that it had been reinforced with a material that could resist a lightsaber: most likely phrik, since Azix's weapon didn't sputter on contact as it would have with cortosis. The pressure around them all spiked suddenly as Az reached out with The Force to break his opponent's stance, causing a brief vacuum that made the Imperials wince as their ears popped.

One of his droids suffered a glancing blow and threw sparks, wobbling in its flight, but he was
moving in with his primary chassis, reaching out to The Force himself. Darth Krazzk's presence pressed up behind him, scanning the battlefield with more experienced eyes. As Rye reached, he guided that reach, Rye actually FELT the power go out of him and smack clumsily into one of the hovering speeders, knocking it into the technician, who yelped and went down. Fierce joy welled in him. He couldn't do anything about the amount of noise he was making as he closed the distance, but by the time the nearest commando broke her attention away from the swooping probe droids and the dueling Sith, he was close enough for his own attempt at a Juyo assault. His opening leap was as clumsy as his force use. She got her blaster rifle up in time, but the modified chest plating took the shot without any appreciable damage. Then he was on her, slicing her blaster rifle in two with a sweep of his crimson blade, stepping through the sequences Darth Virul had shown him just the night before. She managed to dodge the first few strikes in the sequence, but Darth Krazzk whispered an opening, and he slid his lightsaber into her body underneath the chest plate. She screamed in anger and, acting on Krazzk's advice, he caught her falling body and yanked the saber out just in time to use her as a shield against the other commando's suppressive fire. Her armor caught the hail of blaster bolts much more effectively than it had stopped his saber.

Thunder rippled across the battlefield, pressure popping and popping again as Azix and the Sith battered each other. The air rippled around them like heat waves in zero-g, a chaos of twisting density broken by flashes of orange and green plasma snapping and hissing whenever their blades met. Az was clearly favoring his bad knee, yet it didn't seem to be slowing him down. He was channeling hard, coming at the Sith with brutal fury and wearing down his defense.

Darth Krazzk whispered tactical advice and Rye brought the damaged probe droid in behind the remaining commando. He moved forward slowly, still carrying the first commando's corpse and using it as a shield. The second commando was so focused on stopping his advance he didn't notice the other droid. He paused only to reach for a grenade at his belt, and when he did, the droid swooped in and expended all its power cells in a sharp jolt that triggered the grenade. The droid, the commando, and the nearest speeder all shattered in the explosion. Rye was knocked backward with the corpse on top of him. He landed hard, but without damage - since he wasn't flesh, he couldn't bruise. He did, however, struggle to get the corpse off him with his clumsy droid range of movement.

/When we get out of here,/ he promised himself as he wrestled the flopping limbs and dead weight aside and got the chassis back to its feet, /I'm going to get myself an assassin droid./

/You're doing extremely well with your limited means,/ Krazzk offered, and Rye wished he had a face so he could display his pureblood fangs in pride.

/Watch out!/ Virul snapped, and Rye felt her reach out to move his limbs. He relinquished control for a brief instant, just long enough for her to get his lightsaber up and his chassis braced before an invisible mag-train seemed to slam into him. The explosion had drawn the Sith's attention, and while Azix was pressing him hard, he clearly recognized the threat to his support. Rye's chassis was blown back by his telekinesis, but he sensed the way the lightsaber blade sheared the pressure wave to either side, significantly lessening the impact. He rolled and felt several screws loosen, seams widening between his plates - nothing immediately threatening, but he'd need maintenance later. He curled up to better absorb the rolling impact, but one of his metal toes slammed into the rock at an angle that crushed the hinge, jamming it into position. Negligible - he estimated 7% directional mobility loss, but the fight was already half over.

The medic had some sharpshooter chops. She knelt behind her speeder, using it as cover, and put a blaster bolt solidly through one of Rye's two remaining probe droids. It fell out of the sky, destroyed. He sent the last one swooping away before she could draw a bead on it too. That meant she turned her attention on him. The tech was up and moving to take shelter with her.
Now, we didn't practice this/, Virul whispered, /but I can guide you through it. Relax and let me Soresu./

/You want to Soresu?/ Krazzk replied almost playfully. /Such a plodding form scarcely suits you, I would happily oblige./ But despite his offer, it was Virul who settled into Rye's chassis, guiding his lightsaber into position as blasterfire rained down on him. She kept him moving to take cover behind the abandoned speeder, which was still idling. Rye took a hand to adjust the steering column while Virul batted bolts aside with the other. Just like with the commando's corpse, the speeder was moving cover, blocking most of his chassis from incoming fire.

/Krazzk, take over defense,/ Virul said. /I've got an idea how to end this./ The shift was rather like having serpents crawling under his own skin, or so Rye imagined, one presence draining out only to have the emptiness filled with another. Krazzk nudged him toward better positioning, and he felt Virul reach out with her will. Seductive, syllabant whispers drifted across the space between them. They seemed to say nothing, but he saw the tech's posture change, shoulders relaxing. He ducked behind the speeder, and a moment later, another grenade came sailing toward Rye.

Virul was ready for it. She PUSHED out from the holocron and slapped the missile right back the way it came. There was a dismayed cry, and then it exploded, flinging gore and burning metal in every direction. The hail of parts pinged off the speeder Rye was using for cover. He hoped Azix would be able to repair what was left.

That left only the Sith. The explosion was close enough to stagger both duelists, and the Sith cried out in appalled rage when he realized the last of his support had been blown to pieces. His shock left an opening. Azix was almost fast enough to take advantage of it, but his limp slowed him down, and he only managed to close the distance before the Sith fought back furiously. He'd obviously practiced at wielding his longer weapon in close quarters. The spiked haft meant he could attack with either end, and use the shaft as a shield to bat Azix's strikes aside. But then they locked weapons and Azix turned, pulling the pike with him, dragging the Sith just close enough to slam his elbow into his face.

It was over quickly after that. The blow shattered the Sith's nose and made his head ring and his vision swim. He still put up a competent defense, but his focus had been destroyed. Several exchanges later, Azix had him on the ground, on his back, saber leveled at his throat.

There, he stopped.

Rye made his way over to him. The Sith panted on the ground, face bloody, staring up the length of Az's blade with a stubborn kind of calm. Azix's expression was... unreadable. The seethe of Dark Side energy had subsided to crawling flickers around his shoulders, but his eyes were blazing like the exposed core of Peragus II.

Since ‘diplomacy’ was over, Rye didn't predict a significant chance of further harm by showing his face. Some of his projectors had been loosened in their mounts, but they were undamaged under their thick plastic casings. He projected himself walking to Azix's side and looking down at the young Sith. His eyes were a striking shade of green, and narrowed in confusion at the sight of Rye's crimson form.

"What are you doing to do?" he asked Azix, softly, without judgement.

"There's only one thing TO do." His lightsaber didn't waver, but Rye thought he read resignation in the set of his shoulders. "Sith don't surrender."

Rye contemplated the Sith. If he was pure human, as he appeared to be, he looked about eighteen, on
the cusp of being fully grown. He'd be fresh out of the Academy at that age. "Did you offer?"

No, of course he hadn't. Azix blinked, then turned to the boy, clearly dubious that this was a worthwhile effort. But he was Jedi, and hadn't fully escaped the pull of an appeal to ethics.

"Okay," he said. "Do you surrender?"

The boy slowly, carefully lifted his hand and wiped blood off his face with his sleeve. "Under what terms?" The injury made his voice nasal, and exertion made it breathy, yet somehow he still seemed composed.

/This one should have been the Jedi,/ Rye thought uncharitably, /And Az should have been the Sith./ But then, biologicals really couldn't help where they were born, so it was no use blaming them for being ill-matched to the dominant religion.

"I only need one speeder," Az said. "You can have the other one. Go your way. Just don't follow me. I never see you again, we're square."

"That's what I thought." He gazed up at Azix, dark brows furrowed. "You're nae Sith at all. Who are you? Not a Jedi...?" He said it as if the prospect was ridiculous. Indeed, it probably seemed that way. As Rye had noted, blazing eyes and a Sith blade in his hand made it hard to imagine Azix as a Light-Sider. But if he wasn't Sith, what other choice was there?

Plenty, actually - the galaxy was a big place. But Rye doubted the boy shared his own extensive knowledge of the history of Force Traditions.

"It doesn't matter what I am." Azix took a step back, giving the boy a little more room to wiggle and breathe. "I survived the cataclysm. Now I'm just trying to find my way back home. I don't want to get in your way as long as you don't get in mine."

"Nobody survived the cataclysm," the boy replied with soft conviction. "Everything 'alive' was destroyed, right down to single-celled bacteria."

Azix huffed through his teeth. "It's not important. Are you going to make me kill you?"

His head tilted. "It doesn't seem like you really want to."

"I didn't," Az growled, leveling the saber in an accusing gesture. "You're the one who started this. Their deaths?" He pointed to the smoldering remains. "That isn't my fault. I warned you to leave me alone."

"Aye," the boy agreed simply. "You did."

They stared at each other for a long moment. Then, finally, Azix backed the rest of the way off and deactivated his blade. He scooped up the pike, its blade also extinguished, and weighed it for a moment in his hand. Then he drew a breath, drew Power, and flung it, spinning like a boomerang into the distance. The boy watched it go, his mouth tightening, but otherwise sedate.

"Go," Az told him. "By the time you get back, I'll be gone." He swung himself onto the nearest speeder - not the Sith's black Roche Widow, but one of the Imperial Lhosan LC-4s - and kicked it into gear while the boy was still getting to his feet, brushing ashes off his clothes. Az swooped away around the hill, leaving Rye alone with the boy, who tilted his head at him in puzzlement.

"What's all this, then?" he asked, gesturing to Rye's projection.
“Ah,” Rye said, “right. I’m not actually a factotum droid. And my name isn’t R2-N8/1. I was just really hoping it wouldn’t come to this, but.” He shrugged. “You couldn’t leave well enough alone.”

“You… have The Force,” the boy said uncertainly, as if doubting his own senses. “The Dark Side is within you. That… should be impossible.”

“Impossible for a droid, maybe,” Rye smiled, his lightsaber still crackling in his hand. “I’m not a droid. I’m just borrowing one at the moment, to get where I need to go. And if you get in my way again, my companion’s mercy won’t save you. Are we clear?” His chassis took two threatening steps forward.

Honestly, he couldn’t have taken the Sith on his own. Probably not even with Virul and Krazzk helping. But there was no greater fear than that of the unknown. The Sith didn’t know what he was looking at, or what Rye’s real capabilities were, and his weapon had just been thrown nearly a quarter of a kilometer away. So, rather than press his advantage, he did the prudent thing and backed down.

“Who is he?” he demanded, hands clenching impotently in the soft outer fabric of his robes. “If he’s not Sith, then what?”

Rye deactivated the lightsaber and walked his chassis back toward the hill, maintaining his projection in place. “He’s exactly what he said he was,” he told the young Sith archly. “He’s a survivor. You can test THAT at your peril.” When his chassis was far enough away, he flickered out and left the young Sith to retrieve his speeder and go after his lightsaber. He kept an eye out, in case the boy proved more courageous than prudent. But, true to the character he’d displayed thus far, he peeled off after his weapon.

By the time Rye reached their camp, Azix had extended the mag-hitch and jury-rigged a connection to the anti-grav cart. He’d used some of their ties, so he was in the process of re-tying the supplies down when Rye arrived.

“You can ride on the cart,” he said. “Go down and strip the speeders for spare parts. Get your droids. I might be able to fix them if we can find somewhere safe by dark. I’ll meet you when I’m finished.”

“Finding that pike won’t take him more than fifteen minutes,” Rye pointed out.

Az just shot him a pointed look. “Then work fast.”

“What if he comes after us?”

“By himself? I don’t think he’ll make that mistake.” Rye had stopped channeling, so his limp had significantly worsened, becoming a lurch as he scrambled around the pallet. “If he goes for reinforcements, we’ll be in the wind. And one more thing, Rye.” He paused, and Az gave him a dry, exhausted look.

“I told you so. Now, get moving.”

He sent a sigh through his vocoder, but he went. After all, his lover didn’t mean to be rude - he was scared, angry, and in pain, desperate for some succor or escape from the relentless trials Ziost had put before him. And Rye had promised to let him gloat. But with a speeder, they could reach New Adasta in only a few hours, and disappear into the city. Even if salvage operations had begun, Imperial Forces couldn’t be everywhere.

When he got to the valley again, he set his destroyed probe droids aside and began stripping the speeders. He found the charred remains of one of the medical saddlebags, but the bacta injectors
inside had all been shattered, the precious fluid staining the burnt leather. No matter - they could find medicine in New Adasta as well. He found a few usable weapons on the corpses and put them in the pile, including one string of grenades the first commando had never gotten to use.

Azix brought the speeder down. He and Rye piled the droids on the pallet, tucking the other parts, wiring, and weapons in wherever they would fit. Then Rye sprawled his chassis on top of the lot, winding his arms through the ties to secure himself, and settled his one remaining probe droid in his chassis’ lap.

Ashen dust flew behind them as they sped off, the LC-4’s engine whining at the added weight. Azix worked the throttle expertly, shifting up as they gained momentum, and soon the whine became a steady, thrumming purr. As the ground raced past beneath them, Rye felt the ache of relief radiating from Azix, and sympathized. Finally, something had gone right for them.

x-x-x

As their dust plume rose across the plain, streaking toward the horizon, a dark-haired, green-eyed Sith boy watched from the top of the abandoned hill. His holocommunicator flickered, painting a wire frame in blue light and then texturing it with another visage.

“I’m looking at them right now,” he said. “They’re headed straight to New Adasta.”

“Stay on them,” the speaker buzzed. “We’ll warn the ground forces commander and meet you there.”

He nodded and flicked the projection off, then climbed back on the speeder they’d so graciously spared. The wind would wipe out their dust trail before long, but as long as he could keep some high ground, they couldn’t lose him.

He spared a moment for meditative focus, to cloak his presence and intention in The Force. Then he kicked his speeder into gear and swept down the hill to pick up the chase.

Chapter End Notes

I know it was a short chapter, but it was an intense one! Fear not - we've got LOTS to do in New Adasta, and a whole lot of dangling plot threads to start tying up. Thanks for reading!
It was almost unfair how much faster they covered ground with a vehicle. Azix found himself checking the nav screen and marveling at the way the speeder ate up the miles in a few moments. A full day’s walk passed beneath him in under an hour. In another hour, he could see the spires of New Adasta rising out of the canyon into which the city had been built. Not long after, he encountered the problem he’d feared from the moment he saw that convoy’s dust cloud on the horizon – the landing zone outside the city was buzzing with activity. The Empire had clearly wasted no time initiating salvage operations. For Azix, this meant two things: first, that any available shuttles were unlikely to be abandoned, and second, that he would have to dodge Imperial attention both entering the city and moving within it. Still, New Adasta was a metropolis. That would give him a lot of room to move around under the radar, if he could just get past the Imperials on the plains.

There was no shortage of high ground. He parked the speeder and cart and took Rye’s probe droid with him for its sensors, lying on his belly and peering down at the city and landing zone.

“There’s some activity around the perimeter of the city, but much less than in the military installment,” Rye told him, his droid bobbing softly in the air. “I’ve got a lot of chatter, but nothing that particularly worries me about our chances. We should be able to slip in between the salvage teams. If we go around to the northeast side of the city, those apartment buildings are accessible from the plains and go down into the canyon. The Imperials will all be using the speeder pads.”

Azix nodded. “Anything about other Jedi? Or the Republic being in orbit?”

“I’m sorry, love; nothing. They probably left weeks ago. I doubt the Empire would have tolerated their presence after the cataclysm.”

Azix swallowed, but he shook it off. “Then we’ll need a longer-range ship. An orbital shuttle won’t get us back to Republic space.”

“That’s going to require a more detailed plan,” Rye said, keeping his opinions on Republic Space to himself. “And you should heal before you attempt to steal anything with a hyperdrive.”

“So we’re holing up here for awhile.” There was such defeat in his tone that Rye hurried to add positives.

“Yes, but not as long as you’re afraid of,” he said. “There will be medical supplies, which means we can speed your healing a great deal. The city is powered on geothermal energy, so if the water is still turned on, you can have long, hot soaks and ice packs. You need some rest, Azix. It’ll go by fast.”

He sighed. “Honestly, at this point, I doubt it matters. Time… it’s all the same if I have to make a run to the border.”

“Don’t focus on that,” Rye cajoled. “Focus on how good it’s going to feel to be clean and wear clean clothes, and sleep in a real bed.”

Az’s response was to reach over and pat his droid. Then he began to make his way back down off the plateau.

Circling the city took a lot more time. They had to move slowly to spot and avoid patrols. At least the
activity ensured that Azix’s presence wouldn’t stand out to other Force Users – there were enough of them zooming around that they weren’t paying much attention to each other, each occupied with their own concerns. They did stumble over a team of suited Imperials who were setting up some kind of antennae, but Rye told Az to ignore them and go right past. He did, and the team, which wore the uniforms of the Reclamation Service, merely turned and saluted him as he passed.

So Azix could pass for a Sith after all, as long as he didn’t open his mouth.

They circled carefully until the high-rise Rye had indicated came into view. It had statuary perched on the eaves of the roof, some kind of armored figures holding spears. The whole city was built in a blockier version of the angular style the Sith Empire favored, with buildings shaped like clusters of obelisks thrusting up into the darkened sky, but it showed its age in the embellishments that had been added to the exterior – urn-shaped fixtures, statuary that resembled Korriban but with more triumphant themes, and minarets capped in geometric spires. Buildings of volcanic stone were mixed with buildings of gleaming durasteel and plastiglass, lit by sullen red exterior lights. The nearest high rise was of the latter type, its windows dulled by a coating of ash dust. If they could reach one, Azix could easily cut them an entrance.

The problem was that there was a good 25 meter gap between the closest lip of the canyon and the wall of the building. Since there were no patrols in the area, Azix got off his speeder to investigate the gap. He peered over the edge and into a vast darkness, broken by a scattering of lights so far away they looked more like stars than like windows.

“We’d have to sacrifice the speeder, which means we couldn’t take the supplies,” he said after a long moment of thought. “We might be able to hide them here, but with all the activity, I don’t like the chances they’d be found.”

“Sacrifice the speeder? What exactly are you planning?” Rye demanded, staying much farther back from the edge with both his droids.

“Well, if I strap your chassis on my back, I could surf the speeder off the edge, hit the boosters on take-off,” Azix began to explain, before Rye cut him off.

“You want to do WHAT?”

Az looked up from the darkness of the canyon and blinked at him. “It should work,” he said a little defensively. “I’ll jump at the apex of the arch, and land in the recess of the window. It looks like it’s a good couple of hands wide, plenty of space.”

“… You consider THAT plenty of space?” From where Rye was standing, it looked like an extremely small target. “Are all Force Users born with a death wish, or is that a bit of training the Jedi and the Sith just happen to have in common?”

As if he truly didn’t understand Rye’s concern, Azix looked at the length of the gap again, then turned back to him with an innocent shrug. “I don’t see any reason I wouldn’t be able to do it. I’ve made harder jumps. As long as you hold on tight and don’t flail around and shift your weight.”

Rye’s probe droid projected him standing with his hands on his hips at the edge of the gap. “And what would you say are the changes of failure?” he demanded.

“… Maybe twenty percent? As long as you don’t mess me up, we should be fine.”

“SHOULD is not much of a reassurance, Jedi,” Az said through his metaphorical teeth. “That is a long way down.”
“Well, yeah, but I can catch myself with The Force too,” Azix said matter-of-factly. “I practiced a little at the temple. That’s one thing all this is good for – telekinesis is WAY easier with the Dark Side. There really is nothing to worry about.”

“By the Emperor,” Rye muttered. “Did you just look me right in the eye and tell me there’s nothing to worry about?”

Azix flopped his hands. “Ry, I don’t know what to tell you except that Jedi do this stuff all the time. I couldn’t make that jump from, like, a standstill, but surfing the speeder off the edge to get a little distance should definitely work.”

“And there it is,” Rye retorted acidly. “The Jedi do this stuff all the time. So do Sith, from what I hear, but at least they don’t claim to have any regard for the lives or safety of anyone around them. Just out of curiosity, since Jedi are actually accountable to the Republic, do your citizens ever call you to account for your crazy stunts?”

Azix hesitated a moment, then smiled tiredly. “Actually,” he said, “I think Republic citizens are used to it. If I said I could make that jump, they’d probably just assume it was true. Fact is,” he added with some affection, “you trust me less than just about anyone I’ve ever met.”

That took some of the wind out of Rye’s sails. “I… oh. Do I?”

“It’s okay. You’re Imperial,” Az shrugged. “You guys don’t trust anybody, especially each other. But I’m telling you: I can make this jump, and I can get you into New Adasta safely. I just need you to do what I ask.”

Rye looked out over the jump again, his probe droid spinning as its sensor bar flashed. “…. I think you’re right,” he said finally, “I don’t trust you. Not for any adverse reason, it’s just that the risk is so high. I’m not sure I’d let Darth Marr himself carry me over that jump. Can we think of a different plan?”

Az considered that for a moment. “I can make the jump on my own,” he said, “With a rope tied to your chassis. Then, once I make it, I can anchor the rope to the building on the other side and you could swing across. That way if I fall, you can pull me up, and if you fall, you’re tied off to something.”

Rye gave him a helpless look. “Azix. Is it too much to ask to come up with a plan that doesn’t involve jumping a speeder off a cliff and then hurtling into an eighty-story drop in freefall? For EITHER of us?”

“Well, beautiful, it might be,” Az replied, jaw clenched. “This is the closest jump-off point that’s reasonably clear of Imperial activity. We can try to find another one, but the risk of getting caught goes up the more we circle around. I’d suggest stealing a speeder with better repulsors if I’d seen anybody riding one around, but all I’ve seen with the patrols we’ve scoped are land-speeders.” He put his hands on his hips and surveyed the gap once more, pacing a slow arc. “Are you SURE you can’t trust me, even if I go across first and make sure everything’s tied off? I wouldn’t let you fall,” he added, softer.

Rye’s projection came to stand beside him. “I’m also worried about you falling,” he said. “I know you’re not afraid of doing crazy shite like this, but I am afraid of losing you to some bloody-minded accident that could have been easily avoided.”

“I’d be tied off anyway.” Azix brushed his knuckles through Rye’s cheek. “Come on. I know you don’t like it, but this is a time you should take my lead.”
Rye’s projection seemed to inhale, then exhale in a quick, anxious burst. “... I can’t,” he murmured, turning his face into Az’s fingers. “I CAN’T, I just... I can’t do this. It’s too much risk, every single projection I run. We need to find another way.”

Az’s shoulders dropped but then, to Rye’s surprise, he nodded. “Okay. If you can’t, then you can’t. This would be so much easier than fighting through a bunch of Imperials, though.”

“I wholly believe that you would rather jump of a cliff than bat a few Force-Blind organics out of your way,” Rye replied with a brittle laugh, “but I have a much more favorable survival projection for you versus blaster-fire.”

“Maybe you’re not calculating my real abilities,” Azix said, but he didn’t argue further. Instead, he got back on the speeder and put it in gear, waiting for Azix’s droid to return to the cart before resuming their circumnavigation of the city.

New Adasta was a metropolis. Had it grown outward instead of upward, it might have taken them more time than they had to circle it. As it was, the canyon into which it had been built enclosed it, with just a little bit of urban sprawl reaching out. Those areas were choked with Imperials though far too many for Azix to take on. And, passing one of the shuttle pads which was swarming with activity, Rye discovered they had another problem.

“They’re talking about you,” he told Azix when a uniformed technician watched the pass, one finger on his earpiece. “That Sith we met in the wastes... he called in to say you’d be coming. I’ve got a description on the comm waves. You, the speeder, the cart, my droids....”

“Kriff,” Az muttered, and kicked the speeder into a higher gear. “We need to get lost NOW. As soon as we’re past, they’ll have patrols out after us. We should have gone down the building, Rye!”

Rye couldn’t physically flinch at his tone, but he felt the impulse.

The loss of leisure time seemed to prove Azix right. Now, rather than choosing their own point of ingress, Az was swooping between glassy upthrusts of black rock, hugging the cliff’s edge as close as he could. In another couple of miles, there would be another speeder pad, and the Imperials there would be waiting for them with blockades in place. He’d have to swing wide around them and hope they didn’t have time to put speeder patrols out. Rye scanned the comm frequencies for anything at all that could help, but it only fed his growing horror as he and Azix became the subject of every conversation. He listened to the Imperials mobilize, listened to them order artillery into place, listened to them coordinate mounted troops to go and meet them in the wastes.

Yet, for some reason, running his predictive algorithms again and again, he couldn’t get them to admit that Azix had been right. Of course, they could both have been wrong - it was an unjust universe. But Azix had seemed so confident, and part of Rye had wanted to believe him. But the NUMBERS. He just couldn’t square the numbers, not then and not now, as Azix growled a warning and the first wave swooped down to meet them.

Rye was still running projections as they closed on each other. Only when Azix put the speeder on auto-navigation and stood up on its seat, lightsaber blazing, did Rye really understand: he’d lost all control over this situation. He had no choice but to leave his droids helpless and immobile in the cart while his lover leaped off the speeder he’d been riding and sent it careening, with Rye a helpless passenger, into the convoy of Imperials. Through his sensors, Rye watched Azix land hard on the front fins of one speeder, then twist away from it as it speared into the ground and exploded. He somersaulted off his free hand and rolled under a speeder that pulled up to avoid crashing into him - his lightsaber cut through the speeder diagonally, and took the rider across the hip. The Imperial landed separately from his legs. Dark Side power pushed Azix up into a mighty leap as the Imperials
came about and tried to track him. But he was moving too fast, too randomly, trusting in The Force to know where his enemies were and how to maneuver his body between circling speeders.

Azix charged a speeder and leaped, body twisting heels over head as he passed over it. He reached out, snagged the rider’s jumpsuit, and dragged her off the speeder so hard it turned sideways, still caught between her legs. Blasterfire pounded the underside of it and the fuel burst into a soft whoosh of flame with barely any explosive force. Azix used the burning vehicle as a shield, running alongside it for a moment before digging in his heels and swinging the speeder around his body like a shot-put. When he released it, its still-burning engines sent it spiraling straight into one of the still-mounted Imperials. They crashed together and the rider went down under the tangle of metal.

There were three Imperials left, and they all wisely got some distance, coming about to train their mounted artillery on Azix as he emerged from behind the wreckage. Azix switched to the Shien grip and flung his lightsaber like a boomerang. The Imperials started firing, but had to scatter for cover as the spinning saber whipped around in a wide circle, cutting straight over their heads before returning to Azix’s hand. No sooner had the hilt slapped into his palm than he sent two of the heavy guns’ bolts straight back at them. One shattered a windshield and burnt through the body behind it. The other slagged the front end of a speeder and it crashed to the ground on its belly, spitting sparks. Its rider yelped and dove for cover behind it.

The last Imperial turned and fled. Azix let them go. All this, the whole battle, happened before their speeder and cart managed to coast to a stop, and Az caught up with them, flinging himself astride and gunning the accelerator even before his weight could settle.

Rye scanned him for injuries and found no new ones, but tears were carving tracks in the dust that covered his face. He radiated pain, gasping for breath - The Force was carrying him, but to keep fighting was too much to ask.

“Azix,” he coaxed struggling with an extremely unpleasant feeling that could only be guilt, “Let’s go back. Maybe they won’t expect you to turn around when you trounced them so thoroughly. Let’s go back to the building and go down that way. If we’re quick, maybe we can do it before they catch up.”

“You asked me to find another way,” Az ground through his teeth. “Now we’re committed. Can you please just… shut up, and let me handle this?”

/But the numbers./ Rye didn’t let that thought escape his vocoder. He shut up.

On the Imperial Military band, the soldier who’d escaped Azix was yelling at his superiors about bad intel.

[THAT’S NO JEDI,) he spat, signal crackling violently. [THAT’S A BLOODY SITH.] [COPY MOBILE FOUR, OUR REPORT SAYS JEDI,) a much calmer voice replied. [REPORT CONFLICTS WITH INTEL, PLEASE CONFIRM AND OBSERVE RADIO PROCEDURE FOR CLARITY, OVER.] [I KNOW A SITH WHEN I SEE ONE, LIFT COMMAND] the fleeing Imperial retorted, his words now higher-pitched and better-measured. [POWER BLAZING RED ALL ABOUT HIM, LIKE HE WAS BLOODY WELL ON FIRE. THAT’S A SITH OR I’M A DISPEPTIC GIZKA, OVER.] Rye hunted through his vocoder files for a young-sounding Imperial voice and spliced into the signal. [DORN COMMAND ONE, THE SITH COULD BE USING IMPERIAL FORCES TO
STRIKE AT EACH OTHER,] he suggested. [NO DISRESPECT MEANT, BUT IT WOULDN’T BE THE FIRST TIME. WE COULD BE IN THE MIDDLE OF SOME INTERNAL SITH CONFLICT, OVER.]

[BLAST,] the calm voice muttered. [HAVE THEY NO SHAME? THIS IS A MERCY MISSION. YOU’D THINK THEY COULD TAKE ONE KRIFING DAY OFF. ALL UNITS: HOLD FIRE AND CANCEL MOBILE UNITS UNTIL WE CLEAR THIS UP, OVER.]

[SAME SHITE, DIFFERENT DAY,] Another voice offered.

[CARRICK, YOU’VE BEEN INSTRUCTED TO SAVE THE COMEDY ROUTINE FOR THE MESS,] the calm voice said. [RADIO DISCIPLINE, LADS. STAND BY FOR NEW ORDERS.]

[COMMAND ONE, I HAVE THE SITH ON SENSORS,] a technician cut in. [INCOMING AT THREE SEVEN MARK ZERO, SPEED SIX FIVER. ETA SEVENTY SECONDS, MARK.]

[GOT YOUR GROVELING BOOTS ON, COMMAND ONE?] By the voice and the tone, Rye identified the speaker as Carrick again.

[SHUT IT OR YOU’LL BE SCRUBBING LATRINES AGAIN,] Command One replied. [WE JUST LOST FIVE MOBILES, IT’S NOT A KRIFING JOKE.]

“Azix?”

“Hush,” Az muttered.

“No, you need to hear this. You might not have to fight through,” he insisted. “I’m listening in on the military band. If you can pull off the Sith act just for a couple minutes without letting the accent slip….”

“WE TRIED THAT, DAMMIT, AND IT DIDN’T WORK,” Az snarled, voice hitching. The speeder’s engine rumbled louder as his grip tightened. “Rye… please just let me handle this. We don’t have time to debate it.” The encampment around the lift was now visible.

Rye thought a moment. “This is because I didn’t trust you, isn’t it? Now you’re being petulant and refusing to trust me.”

Azix gave a brittle laugh. “Petulant… I am tired,” he bit out. “I am in pain. There’s a whole camp full of Imperials with heavy weaponry between me and any hope of rest. You wouldn’t let me take the easy way down.”

“They might,” Rye insisted. “Listen – Sith backstab each other all the time, and Imperials are conditioned to fear and obey Sith. Just tell them you’ll forgive them for trying to kill you if they let you down into the city. Say you have salvage work for Darth Scion that’s more important than some petty grudge.”

“And if there’s another Sith there who can tell the difference?”

“Then you’re prepared for a fight anyway. Azix, please, it will work this time. Just… don’t forget the accent, and keep it short and brusque.”

The camp grew closer and closer. Heavy artillery was visible beyond the durasteel barricades. Azix ground his teeth together. “THESE are the odds you like,” he muttered at last, despair thick in his voice. “Not the quiet way, the easy way. This.”
“A sentient being can be reasoned with,” was all Rye could offer. “An eighty-story drop can’t.”

Az chose not to respond to that.

The turrets were unmanned, and the sentry posts quiet as they approached the command center. Azix slowed down, bristling in The Force. Within the outer ring of defense, another set of barricades blocked off teams of Imperial Commandos. Standing between the barricades, unprotected and in full view, was a woman in a neatly tailored Imperial uniform, her hair twisted up under the smart gray cap, boots as shiny as Zistos obsidian. She stood at parade rest, with her chin high and her hands behind her. She looked calm, but the whites of her eyes stood out just a bit too much against her rich, dark skin.

Azix came to a stop and put one foot down, leaning the speeder slightly.

The tension between them was palpable. At least Azix had enough sense not to talk first.

“Sith,” the Imperial said finally, “I am Major Drake. I’m in command here. On behalf of my company, I apologize for bringing arms against you. It appears we were given false intelligence. I take full responsibility; please, allow me to bear your wrath so that these soldiers can continue search operations. The work is important to the Empire.”

“That would normally be an execution,” Rye informed him sotto voce.

He felt Azix’s… shock wasn’t quite the right word. Discomfort, maybe, or unease. Apparently, he found Imperial protocol an unpleasant surprise. He shifted his weight a little against the speeder.

“How should I address her?” he murmured out of the corner of his mouth.

Amusement rippled along Rye’s code. “Well, ‘Listen, Imperial’ is usually a good start.”

Azix made a disgusted sound, but he obeyed. “Listen, Imperial,” he called, and his accent was at least passable, if muddled. “I’ve been sent by Darth Scion to recover intelligence of critical importance to The Dark Council.” In any other situation, the dire way he lowered his voice to pronounce ‘Dark Council’ would have been comical. “I will kill anyone who stands in the way of my mission.”

“Our intention was not to interfere with the activities of the Sith,” Major Drake replied levelly. “You have my deepest apologies. If we can offer any assistance to assure you of our sincerity, and our respect for your Dark Master, please name it.”

“This is it,” Rye whispered. “This is what you want.”

“Shush,” Az hissed. He straightened a little. “I know my master’s enemies have sent others to try to seize this critical intelligence for themselves. They attempt to curry favor with The Dark Council…”

again, Rye felt the oddly spontaneous urge to laugh, “…or horde knowledge for themselves, for personal power. They have made you their pawns.”

Major Drake stiffened a little. “A most regrettable error, my lord.”

“I respect the work you’re doing,” Azix declared. “We need as many able bodies as we can get in the face of this catastrophe.” His accent was slipping into a pompous, almost bombastic upper-class Kaasi, and Rye quietly muttered at him to dial it back a little; he didn’t have the mutton chops to pull it off. “So, you will shuttle me into the depths of the city so I can begin my operation immediately. In exchange, you and I will agree to let this error slide.”
The tension broke as not only Drake, but her entire company collectively sagged in relief. “Of course, my lord,” she said. “It is our pleasure to serve.” She turned. “Prepare a speeder for the sith straightaway. My lord, may I offer some of my men to assist with your equipment?”

“Some of it is salvage,” Azix said. “Some is survey equipment specially designed for this mission. If you can handle it carefully, you can assist.”

“Of course. I can promise nothing less than consummate professionalism,” she declared. Her tone and posture were still self-contained, but even Rye could sense the edge of desperation in her attempts to please them. “You look weary from traveling the wastes. Can I offer you the use of my personal tent to refresh yourself?”

“... I wish I had time,” Azix said, and for once he was telling the truth. “But my personal comfort is of no importance. I need to get to the... the archives... as soon as possible.”

She clicked her heels together and stood at attention. “Understood, my lord. It will be done.” She turned and began to delegate tasks - four Imperials to come and take Azix’s speeder and the anti-grav cart, two others to prep and operate the lift, and one to run to the nearest tent and get Azix a hot towel to rub the dirt off his skin. He accepted this with barely-concealed gratitude, his weariness showing through despite his dogged attempts to maintain a facsimile of Imperial aloofness.

Major Drake’s dark eyes flicked over him in a way that made Azix a little nervous, especially since Rye’s chassis were being carted away where he could no longer whisper advice.

“If you will excuse me for saying, my lord, you look worn to the bone. You’re certain you can’t spare a moment for a fortifying cup of tea? Not that powdered swill - I brought my favorite pepperflower blend from Dromund Kaas. It’s quite restorative.”

Azix took a deep breath. She was Imperial. If he showed too much softness, that would damn him as surely as making a linguistic gaffe. “Major,” he exhaled. “We already agreed to put this inconvenience behind us. Now you’re just sucking up.”

Her eyes widened marginally, and her spine stiffened. “Yes, my lord,” she said, and turned to stride away from him. But she seemed chastened, not suspicious, so Azix hoped that had been the right call.

He had to admit, though, the Imperials deferred to him with a reverence he’d seldom experienced as a Jedi. When he finished with the towel, a set of hands was waiting to take it. A technician fell into step beside him and, without preamble, began to inform him of various hazards waiting below. And it was fortunate he did - Azix had not anticipated the monoliths would be inside the city too, but apparently they were not only stalking the avenues, but burrowing through the caves and structures and making the architecture unstable. In addition, much of the city had been damaged in the prelude to the cataclysm, though Azix remembered this well enough - he had been puppeted down the streets of New Adasta under the Emperor’s influence, and he knew how badly the city had been rocked by violence. The Imperials made quick work of loading both his stolen speeder and the anti-grav cart onto the lift. They simultaneously fawned on him and scurried out of his way like Zeltros jellyfish. Everything was so efficient, done with a minimum of fuss or talk, if he hadn’t been just as eager to leave he might have been miffed they were obviously trying to get rid of him. Then, so much quicker and easier than he’d ever hoped, he was standing on a descending lift and watching the lip of the platform rise between himself and the Imperials.

Once the lift began to move, all those helpful hands disappeared, leaving only the technicians concealed behind their reflective goggles. They didn’t speak, or even look at him. Major Drake, perhaps deciding not to look a gifted dewback in the mouth, was nowhere to be seen. Azix had the
distinct impression he’d been shuttled to his destination and then forgotten.

Imperials.

They hadn’t harmed or even jostled Rye’s chassis. Azix laid a hand on the bulky chest of the droid as they descended into the thick, almost weighty darkness of New Adasta.

“I know you’re really not in the mood,” Rye said as the skyscrapers stretched higher and higher above them, “but I told you that would work.”

X-x-x

Sith Acolyte Quinn McLoughlin hit the ground before his speeder came to a full stop, slinging the haft of his lightsaber pike across his back as he went to meet the two other acolytes waiting for him at Lift Aurek. They’d parked just inside the barricades, speeders idling as they waited for him to thread his Roche between them. Jakken Unglut was Vultan, olive-skinned, with pure black eyes and cranial ridges that wrapped around his head like a bony crown. He towered over Edain Windborn, an Umbaran mutt whose charcoal skin and pointed ears made him look like some kind of mythical shadow sprite. Despite the heavy clouds, Edain wore his light-filtering goggles, more accustomed to the deep shadows of his homeworld. He grinned when he saw Quinn. Jakken, sweeping his dark gaze across the wasted landscape, merely looked grave.

“Dorn Command had a run-in with your fugitive,” Edain announced. “Chatter before things went quiet was that the Rattataki IS a Sith.”

“He’s not,” Quinn said quietly, tilting his head back so he could better make his appeal to Jakken’s hulking form. Edain, he knew, would go along on any adventure just for the fun of it. “He’s either some kind of interloper, or he’s a Jedi who’s already gone corrupt. Either way, he’s nae one of us, and he doesn’t belong here. And that droid he had with him….”

“You said it had a Force presence,” Jakken murmured. “What does he want with New Adasta?”

“I don’t know,” he admitted, “but the droid emphasized survival. If he’s nae a native, then he’ll be wanting to get off this planet quick as he can, and make for friendly space.”

“You said he had a Republic accent?” Edain wondered. “There were reports of Jedi on Ziost leading up to the cataclysm. Some kind of elite strike force. The Emperor took the lot for puppets, maybe one survived.”

“That still leaves the original problem,” Quinn pointed out, solemn green eyes shifting between his companions. “NOTHING survived the cataclysm. He cannae have been planetside when it happened.” His conviction was quiet steel. Edain and Jakken exchanged knowing looks and decided not to argue. When it came to Ziost’s dead, Quinn had honor to defend.

“So, it’s a mystery,” Jakken said. “We can probably ask all these questions when we catch him.” The furs stitched under his armor, liberally coated in ash dust, shed gray grit as he slid onto his muscular, rust-colored Vectron. It bobbed under his weight, repulsors whining momentarily before settling into a purring rumble. “Lift Dorn, then.”

“Aye.” Quinn hopped onto his speeder, and Edain let them lead since his bulky, wide-model Dasta was more difficult to maneuver between the barricades. Its size was less than ideal for navigating rubble-strewn streets, but they might have occasion to be grateful for its heavy guns. Neither Quinn’s nor Jakken’s speeders had mounted artillery – a Sith was usually dangerous enough on their own. Edain had grown up suicide-running the hostile Umbaran wilderness; if he had to blast something
out of his path, he didn’t care to slow down. Once they were underway, the Dasta’s engine growled thunderously and Edain quickly pulled in front of both of them, scattering ash clouds in his wake.

The Imperials at Lift Dorn spotted them well in advance. Quinn was the one to answer their hail, but Edain pulled up first, sliding his bulky speeder to a stop inches from their outer barricade and leaping down to wait with smug, feigned impatience while his compatriots caught up. When Jakken and Quinn dismounted, the ground commander was already coming out to meet them.

“My lords,” she said, sketching a bow that was just short of curtness. “Major Drake. I assume you are here about the Rattataki? We will serve in any way we can.” Despite her words, Quinn could feel hostility prickling her aura in The Force.

“The interloper came through here?” Jakken inquired, ambling through the camp to get a closer look at the industrial lift that jutted out over the edge of the canyon.

“My lords, forgive me. You use the term ‘interloper’, and the intelligence I assume you sent indicated the individual was not Sith. Yet, he displayed a number of Sith qualities when he destroyed four of my mounted troops.” There was clear accusation in her tone, and Quinn’s mouth twisted, but he answered her levelly.

“We are sorry for your loss, Major. But my intelligence was correct. That individual is NOT Sith. He may wield the Dark Side, but there’s a bit more to being Sith than just The Force.” His mouth thinned as he watched Jakken stop and interrogate a helmeted lift technician. “It’s possible he’s one of the Jedi who infiltrated Ziost during the catastrophe.”

That startled some of the anger out of her, and she straightened. “Jedi? My Lord, surely that’s highly unlikely. My own men witnessed him shrouded in a Dark Side corona and wielding a Sith lightsaber. And granted, the soot would blacken anyone’s clothing beyond recognition, but he didn’t appear to be wearing Jedi armor. Come to think of it, I noticed he was wearing a sweater advertising one of the local historical sites.”

Quinn startled and snapped his fingers. “THAT’S what it was!”

“Hm?” Edain’s long, pointed ears, relic of a Sephi ancestor, twitched.

“I noticed something familiar on his shirt when we dueled, but it was bare stained and a proper mess – couldn’t get a good look. I thought maybe it was a hutball team, but I think Major Drake’s correct. It was a souvenir shirt, and it was for the Brushstroke Canyon Temple and Pilgrimage Site. I knew I recognized that silhouette, I must have gone with my class every year I was in school.”

“Lucky,” Edain said with a smile. “We didn’t take field trips.”

Quinn shrugged. “It’s nice enough I suppose. A bit dull the second, third, and fourth time around. It’s not far from here.” He turned to survey the clouded horizon, contemplating his bearings before pointing. “That way. Fits with where I met him, if he came more or less as the shyrack flies, allowing for the terrain...”

“What would an outsider be doing in a museum?”

Quinn considered that question for a moment, then turned furious green eyes on Edain. “Well,” he said quietly. “For one thing, he could have gotten a Sith Lightsaber. The museum had a whole exhibit on the history of lightsaber combat. There were dozens of lightsabers, I remember. Could be one or two of them still work.”

Edain’s eyes, a flagrantly offensive pink-purple that gleamed with the suggestion of infra-red vision,
“Clever bastard,” he remarked.

“He stated he was here at the behest of Darth Scion,” Major Drake interjected. “And that he was retrieving Intelligence for the Council.”

Understanding rippled between Edain and Quinn, and Edain turned to fetch their speeder’s, putting them in neutral so they could be walked to the lift. Quinn turned to Major Drake.

“What we have is an imposter, Major. An individual posing as Sith to gain access to the city. We don’t yet know why, but whatever he’s after, he must not have it. I trust you’ll make the report and put the search teams on alert. We will continue to track the interloper. In addition, please contact Darth Scion’s office and see if he’s ever heard of someone matching this Rattataki’s description. You’ve obviously got a keen eye for detail,” he allowed. “Don’t disappoint me.”

She showed her frustration only in a purse of her lips. “Of course, my lord. Right away.”

“Let me give you my comm code. I expect to hear from you promptly when you have any information of use.” He held out his hand, and she did not hesitate to dig out her comm unit and pass it to him so he could send himself a brief, text-only message and log the data. He ignored her sour expression when he returned the comm unit. “Ready the lift.”

“My lord.” She moved away, and Quinn went to join Edain and Jakken at the loading platform. The technician Jakken had been speaking to was in the control booth, bringing the lift up. The lift was large enough for all three speeders, and Quinn swung a leg over the Roche, making sure it was in park for the trip down.

“Should we investigate the museum?” Edain wondered aloud, but Jakken shook his head.

“Whatever this Rattataki wants, it’s not there. He came here for a reason.” Jakken tilted his regally misshapen head to look down into the utter darkness that had swallowed New Adasta. “And if he is after Imperial secrets, we’ll stop him hard.”

“Frankly, I couldn’t give a guff what he’s after,” Quinn said coldly. “This world is a grave, and the dead are restless. If he’s not one of us, he’s got no business trespassing. Someone needs to teach him a bit of respect.”

Edain and Jakken exchanged a look. “Right,” Edain said, shifting in his seat and caressing the steering rods. “Respect.”

Quinn glanced at him sidelong. “Don’t whinge,” he suggested as the darkness rose up and swallowed all light except their speeders’ headlamps. “You’ll get a turn.” He turned back, rage prickling cold in his aura, rippling in The Force. “It’ll be a long, hard lesson.”

Chapter End Notes

(( Quinn’s phrasing is... questionable. Let me assure you, he’s referring to garden-variety torture.))
Chapter 30

Chapter Notes

(( This chapter is a collaborative effort. Nol belongs to SarahNevra, and she wrote his dialogue.))

See the end of the chapter for more notes

When Imperials dreamed of being Sith, they imagined effortless authority and enviable power, taking part in raging battles across the galaxy, seeing far off places and killing interesting new species. And all that was part of it, certainly. But what others seldom dreamed of, and what the Sith didn’t advertise, was the sheer amount of paperwork involved. Sith weren’t just living weapons of the Empire – they were its military, cultural, and religious leaders. Especially for those who maintained their own power base, and were responsible for contributing to the greater welfare of the Empire, there were more than enough administrative responsibilities to keep an entire line of Sith occupied.

As such, while part of being Darth Scion’s favored apprentice meant Nol had unique opportunities to see the galaxy and gather power and glory for himself, it also meant he spent a lot of time sitting on the couch in his master’s office, answering communiques from all the hundreds of entities that reported to House Ekari’s Sith leadership, plus petitions from outside the household.

Currently, he was lounging with his feet propped up to ease the swelling in his ankles. His tablet was a braille reader, programmed to buzz instead of making noise for notification, and it thrummed in his hand to alert him to a priority communication from the Imperial Military.

Nol opened the message, scanned Major Drake’s inquiry, and frowned.

For a strong Force Telepath, reaching out to those he’d bonded with was as easy as speaking across a room. He found his target right where he was supposed to be and coiled warmly around his mind.

/Hey, babe? You haven’t gone on any field trips recently, have you?/

Zavish Chal, Sith Lord of House Ekari and Nol’s claimed battle captive, paused his pull-up set to answer.

/Not to my knowledge./ he sent, dropping to the mat and wiping sweat from his bald, tattooed head, digging the towel between the piercings in the bridge of his nose. /Why?/

Nol’s full mouth pursed, and he gave his swollen belly an absent rub, his thumb sliding over the braille letters again. /A comm for Riley just came across my desk. Apparently there's a grumpy, Force-wielding Rattataki out on Ziost using our House's name to get through checkpoints. I know we aren't fielding anyone like that over there and I'm scratching my head trying to think of who might know enough about us to... risk lying about... hm./

His trailing off didn’t bother Zav, who was well accustomed to his lover’s conversational tics by now. Zav slung the towel around his neck and hunted for his shoes. /Could it be some kind of sabotage from House Vichi?/ he wondered as he slipped his feet under the elastic laces.

/Maybe. I think I'm going to need to make a call and try to get more details./ His fingers traced the bumps on the screen. /He's already killed several soldiers who've gotten in his way. I want more
Zav stopped in the bathroom to freshen up. /Do you need my ears?/

/Please. The real-time captioning on our systems is GOOD but it doesn't read tone/ he griped mildly. It was a hard enough to be a member of a species that saw through The Force in a galaxy full of droids and automatons. Being deaf as well as blind was just a damned inconvenience that technology couldn’t quite make up for. Then again, that was the kind of thing Zav was good for.

He didn’t have to wait long. Zav stepped into the office a few moments later, still dressed in sweats and his sleeveless work-out hoody. He was a gorgeous specimen, even to Nol’s limited senses – tall, muscular, broad across the shoulders and narrow in the waist. He moved like a warrior; quietly, with measured confidence, letting his presence in The Force speak for him.

Nol gave him a soft smile, levering himself off the couch with effort and heading for his own desk, which had a special sol-hol set-up that allowed him to communicate holographically. The projectors used magnetic particles rather than lasers to create a semi-solid form suspended in space, so he could ‘see’ the person on the other end. /Probably best for you to sit just out of frame/ Nol suggested with some amusement. /I'm already shirtless and she's not one of our people so we don't need to be giving her a rough impression/.

Zavish arched a brow ridge. /You could put a shirt on/ he suggested, knowing very well that Nol never wore shirts or shoes if he could help it, and having his belly swollen up like a balloon had not changed his policy. Nol blew a raspberry in response. Zav smirked and pulled a chair over, straddling it backward just out of frame, as requested.

/I like my image/ Nol informed him before schooling his face into a more professional expression, touch-typing in the code attached to the communique as he gently slid into Zav’s senses and settled in his ears. It was a unique sensation, borrowing someone else’s eyes and ears to make up for the lack of his own, but he and Zav had communed deeply enough in The Force that neither of them felt uncomfortable with the overlap anymore. Zavish pressed his hand, broad and calloused from years of combat training, against Nol’s back, out of sight. That small gesture connected them, allowing Nol to relax in the shelter of his lover’s quiet, organized mind.

His call was answered on the second ring. Though he couldn’t tell skin or hair color, he could make out the form of a slim, upright woman in a crisp Imperial uniform.

“This is Major Drake,” she said brusquely. “Third Ziost volunteer division.”

Nol smiled faintly, just enough to be pleasant. Since disability was often ostracized in the Empire, if not outright purged, he had been practicing talking aloud. His voice was a bit clipped, and in comparison to that of a hearing person, it was easy to tell that he was deaf. But using Zavish’s ears allowed him to hear himself and make sure he was understandable to those not accustomed to his speech patterns. Even with the vocal distortion, his Republic accent came through. He trusted the Imperial would overlook it. “Major Drake, this is Nollok Jen’kari of House Ekari. I'm calling to inquire about that communique you sent my master regarding a Rattataki masquerading as one of ours.”

“Then it is a masquerade, my Lord?” she responded carefully, maintaining parade rest. She was contained, but her carriage had all the earmarks of someone trying very hard not to make their situation worse. “You have no one on Ziost?”

He nodded. “That’s right, Major. Our only Rattataki Sith is here, at the moment.” Was, in fact, sitting right next to him. “Do you have any more details about the one that came through your barricade?
Any cam footage or closer accounts from your men?"

In response, she turned to someone off-screen. “Queue the footage,” came through muffled, aimed away from the microphone, before she returned her attention to Nollok. “The best view we have isn’t very good, my Lord. I hope it’s enough to shed some light on this debacle.” There was a bit of static, and a delay as Nol’s sol-hol comm translated the holo-images into semi-solid, moving forms. Major Drake had the foresight to send a slow-motion capture, but despite that, the male Rattataki moved too fast to get a good facial impression. Even seen through Zavish’s eyes, the footage was blurry and colorless. And yet...

Nol tilted his head slightly, reaching for the density controls so he could study the footage in as much detail as the display could manage. “…Blast it,” he muttered, more to himself than to the Major, “he looks familiar. He didn't give you a name when he came through?”

Major Drake’s posture hinted at sheepishness. “I’m sorry, my Lord. When he appeared at our Outpost, he had a sith lightsaber and a dark side Corona, and had already killed four of those cavalry. It didn't seem prudent to make demands.”

Nol could well imagine. “Did he have interactions with anyone else besides your outpost?”

“Three sith acolytes on patrol for sithspawn,” she replied. “They've already given chase into the city.”

“Hm.” Nol shifted to ease the strain on his back and eyed the paused footage. Though he had no eyes, he squinted with his mind, bringing the finest telekinetic touch he could manage to bear on the projected shapes, puzzling over why they felt so kriiffing FAMILIAR. “May have to add one more to that. Send me a copy of that cam footage,” he ordered. “I'll keep looking it over and see if I can't make some better headway with it.” He sat back with a sigh, absently curling a stray bit of flame-colored hair around one pale finger. “Thank you for bringing this to my and my master's attention, Major. Hopefully you don't have to deal with the imposter again, but you might have one of our people ACTUALLY coming through later to follow up on this. I'll send word ahead if that's the case.”

Major Drake clicked her booteheels together, spine stiffening. “As you wish, my Lord. I'll send you all the footage we've collected directly.” Her image winked out – apparently the Major wasn’t one for long goodbyes.

Zav’s touch on his back firmed, kneading along the taut, lean muscle. /You have someone in mind to go down there?/ he whispered along their connection. /I'm sure Fashall wouldn't mind a field trip, especially if there's an interrogation at the end./

/She wouldn’t, especially if she gets to interrogate a brawny Rattataki,/ Nol remarked with a dry giggle. /But I want to take another look at that footage, maybe see if Taka can make anything out that I'm missing. My teeth are itching… he seems FAMILIAR but I can't make out why with the quality of the footage./

Zav’s head tilted. He had a methodical way of thinking through problems that could tame even the worst chaos, and the cool seethe of his thoughts was comforting against Nol’s. /Well, how many Rattataki do you know?/

The slow progress of his hand grounded him. Nol leaned against his shoulder, cuddling into his warmth, and thought hard. “Just you. Sunak… your people. And....” Shock rippled up his spine, goosepimpling his skin. “NO. Shit,” he added before Zav could ask, “Pass me my tablet.” His hands groped for it amongst the other shapes and textures scattered across his comm station. Zav swiftly
scooped it up and pressed it into his hands, his massaging hand moving up to Nol’s neck and squeezing.

That quelling touch made Nol relax a little, but his full mouth tightened hard as he pulled up House Ekari’s internal quick-messaging.

[Hey Taka,) he typed rapidly, [you got any security footage left of the Jedi attack on the house? Specifically with Azrahix fighting?]

It only took a few seconds for their Security Chief to respond. His extensive cybernetic implants allowed him to, among other things, receive and answer instant messages while he was away from the main security desk. [I might. It was a while ago, it'll take time to find it.]

[That's fine. I think we may have a problem on Ziost.] Zavish leaned over and looked down at the keyboard, allowing Nol’s fingers to move all the faster as he piggybacked on his sight. [Some Rattataki is claiming he's one of us and wiggled his way into New Adasta. I have a strong hunch it's Azrahix but I can't be sure. The footage is low quality fight-cam from a speeder unit he massacred.]

[Oh really?] Taka replied. [Interesting. I'll see what I can find. Give me an hour.]

Nol typed a quick thank you and sent it off with a sigh, slumping towards Zav, his expression pinched. “If it IS Azix...” Zav tucked him under his arm, silently encouraging him to keep going. “Fuck, he Fell. Hard, from the report.”

“Right,” Zav agreed, wrapping his arms around Nol for support. “And who is Azix?”

Nol wilted, snuggling against him. “When the Jedi made their rescue attempt, they had a padawan with them. I... was sort of smitten. And I tried to get to him,” he confessed, trusting Zav would infer what that meant. “It did NOT work as intended. He was skirting the line of Dark and Light but he HATED me for tempting him. We let him go with the others and... I honestly tried to forget about him.”

Zav mulled that information over, considering how to respond. “… So this is an old boyfriend?” He kept his tone, and his mental landscape, carefully neutral.

Nol winced. “I... tried to make him one. Mostly I just succeeded in making him hate Sith more.”

“I suppose I can agree your techniques need a little work,” he said dryly, but gave Nol’s forehead an affectionate nibble to show no hostility was meant.

Nol gave a quiet huff and bumped against his shoulder. “Yes, probably. They used to be even worse.”

Zav smirked against his cheek. “Honestly, that’s hard to believe.”

“Well, for one, at least I learned to look for someone with actual interest in my ass,” Nol snarked back, “And significantly less self-loathing.”

“I have LESS self-loathing? This one must be seriously screwed up,” Zav shot back, nuzzling the graceful curve of his neck, which mollified Nol a bit.

“Actually, the more righteous Jedi definitely have it in spades. And he is... WAS… very righteous. Fuck, if this IS him....” He sighed and rested a hand over his swollen belly. “Dammit. I can't go after him.”
“Damn right, you can’t,” Zav agreed.

Nol gave a longsuffering smile at his mate’s fussing and reached up to touch his cheek. “I could send you, though.”

His smile faded into solemnity. “I would go for you,” he agreed, as if it was a given. Perhaps it was. Since he’d returned triumphantly from poaching mistreated, disillusioned soldiers and Sith from his former house, he’d placed himself at Nol’s beck and call. He’d been especially doting during Nol’s surrogacy, even though it wasn’t his child Nol was carrying. “But what would you want me to do?”

“Catch him and bring him back, if you can,” Nol whispered, half a plea. “If he's actually Fallen he could be an asset to us. If you can't... just don't let anyone kill him. He could still grow into something interesting.”

Zav contemplated him. “You must have a thing for Rattataki,” he said carefully.

Nol didn’t seem to recognize the leading tone. “…Maybe? Big brawny ones, which is kind of funny considering my master's stature. I'm not sure, honestly.”

Still measuring his words, Zavish said, “If I brought him back here, what would you do with him?”

Nol considered that. “Teach him,” he concluded at length, head resting on Zav’s shoulder. “I'm not looking for another pet. If he wants sex, I'm up for it. But I... I don't have the same feelings towards him that I did before.” His fingers caressed the swell of his belly, the protective shell around Darth Scion’s child. “I'm more concerned with giving him some framework for working with the Dark Side since I kind of started him on that path by making him mad enough to touch it before.

Zav rumbled softly. “What if I don't want to share you with the inferior prototype?”

“What?” Nol looked up and found him utterly serious, the set of his eyes grave even though he couldn’t see the stormy color. “Oh... oh love. I'm sorry, I didn't think about that.” He burrowed against him, knotting his fingers in the soft-worn fabric of his hoody. “No, you won't have to share. Okay. I... if you can just confirm it's him, maybe help him get off the planet, he can sort himself out.”

Zav relaxed a little and slid his fingers into Nol’s hair to twist in the silken strands. “Oh, good,” he murmured. “I might have had to accidentally kill him, otherwise.”

“I'm SO sorry, love.” Nol brushed warm mental affection against him, nuzzling his cheek. “I got a little caught up in my own head.”

“Well, you thought about me eventually,” Zav allowed with dry humor. “So I forgive you.”

“Thank you.” Nol snuggled against him, lavishing affection by way of an apology. “I'd rather send you than ask Fashall, so if you do think you can stand to keep an eye on him without killing him I'd appreciate it.”

“That may depend on him, beloved. If he pisses me off, I may not be able to help myself.”

Nol squirmed, but didn’t protest. “I... can understand that. He might react less violently if you don't tell him you're mine.”

“Hn,” Zav snorted. “You don't think he'll be eager to be fetched?”

“I really, really don't. Not if he thinks I sent you for him.” Nol’s face fell. “He despises me and everything I am, last I knew.”
Unwilling to let his lover grow too morose, Zav tugged Nol into his lap, growling and nibbling at his throat. “And what are you?”

Nol groaned softly, swollen belly pressing against Zav's as his arms slid around his lover's neck. “A hungry Sith slut,” he whispered, nuzzling for the shell of Zav’s ear. “Safe in the Dark with my loves.”

Unable to resist that seeking nuzzle, Zav captured his mouth. “Mmm... I suppose I should have left five minutes ago, considering this is a time sensitive situation,” he murmured against Nol’s soft lips.

Nol shivered and moaned into his mouth, melting easily against him. “Mm... Probably. If the footage doesn’t match up I'll comm and let you know. If it's just some random Rattataki, you can catch him and bring him home. I'm sure Fashall would have fun finding out why he was using our name. If it IS Azix… protect and assist,” he softened, almost pleading. “If he'll let you.”

That earned a sigh from Zavish, but he slid his fingers into those miles and miles of silken hair and bit Nol’s full lower lip as consolation. “I understand and obey, love.” His fondling made Nol sigh happily – he loved the way Zav’s lightsaber calluses caught in the strands. His mate’s hands were rough, possessive, but so gentle… they twisted Nol’s hair around his knuckles in knots and forced his head back so Zav could kiss him deeper. Zavish smiled. “Maybe while Taka is getting that info, I should give you something to think about while I'm gone?” he suggested, ghosting breath over Nol’s trembling lips.

Nol gave a soft mewl and squirmed clumsily against him, hampered by his belly. “I'd like that. What exactly are you thinking?”

Zavish guided Nol down onto the couch and proceeded to show him what he was thinking.

x-x-x

New Adasta had not prospered since the last time Azix had seen it.

The white-robed Sith who had come to stand against the Emperor had freed Vitiate’s thralls by performing some rather masterful jury-rigging of the city’s electrical grid. Since most of its construction was durasteel, they had managed to re-route the geothermal generators to deliver a good, hard electric shock to everyone standing on the plating. Azix remembered the sensation – his body locked up, teeth clenching so hard he was amazed they didn’t shatter, and yet he had felt exultant, dizzy and free as the Emperor’s terrible pall had been torn shrieking from his body.

At the same time this tactic had blown the Emperor out of his body, it had also blown transformers and plasma conduits all over the city. Now, a good three quarters of the city was wrapped in darkness so thick it cloyed in the throat, making every breath seem labored. The lights on his stolen speeder barely penetrated the pitch. Azix couldn’t see the canyon ceiling above him, but he could feel the weight of millions of tons of rock pressing against his awareness, creating a persistent sense of claustrophobia even though he had plenty of room to move through the streets. The other quarter of the city, dotted here and there amongst the landscape, threw sparks or flickered on and off, dangling wires crackling and twitching to warn him of the hazard. Occasionally a ruptured line would get enough charge to connect for a split second, and a holosign would blaze to life or an advertisement would shout disjointed sentence fragments at him from a nearby speaker. The first few times this happened, Azix leaped into fighting stance, his heart slamming into his throat as the light or sound assaulted his senses, wide open and vulnerable in the dark. Then, once his nerves were sufficiently frayed into numbness, he merely winced whenever something squawked at him from the blackness.
The streets were strewn with rubble, so he moved slowly, choosing the easiest route to avoid tipping the anti-grav cart. Several buildings looked like some massive creature had taken large bites out of their lower levels, leaving gaping holes framed by the ragged ends of durasteel supports and torn drywall. He assumed these were the signs of a Monolith’s passing. Once in a while, the darkness would ripple with a far-away roar, and he would hear the sounds of crashing and rending echo off the buildings around him, bounced in a million directions, impossible to locate. They were out there, but thus far he had yet to encounter one.

He wasn’t optimistic that his luck would hold.

On the other hand, at least Rye was happy. Though coverage was spotty, he’d been able to establish a connection to local holonet servers that still had power. This kept him very busy with news and programming updates, but not too busy to give Azix directions.

“We need a place to hide,” Azix had said when they coasted off the lift, but Rye had been ready for him.

“I know where we’re going;” he’d declared with utter confidence though, knowing Rye, that didn’t mean much. “Find me a holo-net connection, and I’ll get you directions.” Since then, he’d been guiding Azix block by block. Az had asked where they were going, and Rye had obligingly told him which district and neighborhood, but since he wasn’t a resident, that information was meaningless to Azix. Now, he was navigating based solely on Rye’s advice. That, too, shaved his nerves to a fine edge, because he was already surrounded by unpredictable variables. Having a concrete sense of where he was headed would have helped.

All the muscles in his neck and upper back were taut as rubber bands. They were trawling an avenue in the residential area, which seemed to have taken less damage than many other neighborhoods and still had lights flickering in some buildings. To move more stealthily, Azix turned off the headlamps and navigated by those flickers, which proved to be an excellent recipe for a splitting headache.

“There it is,” Rye murmured as they approached a cluster of estates. “On the right, with the garden.” The building in question was shaped like the letter Krill, with a nice little grassy area between the two arms and a number of mismatched chairs spread out where residents had left them. Water still burbled cheerfully in a small reflecting pond. A few of the windows had been shattered, and there was a crashed, burned out speeder propped against the curb, but other than that, the place seemed placid and relatively untouched.

Azix blinked up at the building. Like most other buildings in New Adasta, it soared so high above him he couldn’t even make out the top floors. “What’s here?”

“A place we may be safe from pursuit,” Rye said. “The owner is almost certainly dead, and nobody would know I have access to this apartment. Finding us here will be like hunting the proverbial needle in a haystack – as long as we’re reasonably careful, we can remain for some time without risking discovery.”

Azix frowned at that, but he chose not to voice his thoughts as he dismounted and walked the speeder and cart up over the curb, to the building’s front doors.

“Open that keypad,” Rye instructed him. He obliged, and Rye’s one remaining probe droid hovered over and extended a data spike. Az expected it to take a moment to slice the pad, but no sooner had the probe inserted its spike but the light on the keypad turned blue and the door unlocked. Az quickly hauled it open and began to maneuver the speeder and cart inside, where they would be less visible from the street.
“You can come with me to the basement or wait here,” Rye’s probe droid said, as his primary chassis began to boot up. “I can access the city grid from there, and then you’ll be able to use the lift.”

The basement was accessible via a flight of narrow, steep duracrete stairs, revealed when Rye sliced the lock on the maintenance door. Azix took one look at them and decided to plop down on the plain gray bench in the lobby. He ended up lying back, legs draped over the arm, taking deep breaths as he just enjoyed being able to rest for a while. Rye’s droid clanked loudly as it descended, and with the door open, he could hear it moving things around and rattling in the basement. The noise was reassuring in the silence of the dead city.

There was a harsh buzz, and the locking bolt slammed home on the entry-way doors. Gears began to grind and rattle in the lift chamber. Things squealed, jolted, banged, and then there was a chime and the doors slid open on a roomy, well-lighted lift.

It was hard to convince himself to get off the bench, but Az forced his aching body up and guided the anti-grav cart into the lift. He left the speeder concealed behind a corner of lobby wall and moved the charred remains of a potted plant to further block it from being seen through the doors. There was just enough room for him to stand beside the anti-grav cart, and for Rye’s primary chassis to squeeze in once he finished with the circuit box and clanked noisily up the stairs.

Azix leaned heavily against the corner. The metal plating was cool against his face and head, and its textured surface was kind enough to blur his reflection. He was sure he looked like a dead man walking.

/Real rest is just a few minutes away,/ he cajoled himself. /Just a few minutes. You can make it. Rye promised safety and a bath and a BED./

The lift zoomed upward, dropping his stomach down into his pelvis, making him sway on his feet. Then, much sooner than he anticipated, it stopped with a ding. “It’s 2119,” Rye said as the doors opened, making a confident left turn into a thinly carpeted hallway lined with mostly identical doors. Azix frowned and dragged the cart over the lift tracks, following behind him and trying not to worry about the unnatural silence.

“What is this?” he asked as they approached the door, marked by a simple painted number. “Who lived here?”

Rye didn’t answer him, but once he sliced the keypad and the door swung open, Azix could see that for himself.

The apartment was dark inside except for a flickering fluorescent light in the kitchen. Across from the door, a wall of windows looked out over the darkened city, an expanse of featureless black broken by the occasional light in the distance. Azix stepped through the door and immediately tripped over a stack of mismatched canvases leaning against the entry wall. They clattered to the floor, and he hurried to scoop them back out of the way, but Rye didn’t stop to chastise him. His probe droid hovered over the obstacles and swept a light around the living room beyond. In its pale glow, Azix saw more canvases stacked against walls and piled on furniture. The synthetic, plasticine fibers of a tarp gleamed on the floor under a very large canvas set up in front of the windows. A desk against the wall held a sewing machine and a riot of fabric scraps. A nearby set of shelves had been arranged with canisters of paints, glues, and oils. The labels on each shelf had once been neat, but they had been splattered liberally with the contents of the canisters, blurring or obscuring some of the names.

To get the cart inside, Azix had to pick up the bundle of canvases and move them. They slid precariously in his arms, but he managed to wrestle them through a doorway to the left, where a
small bedroom waited, and dump them onto the bed. The crawling sensation up the back of his neck didn’t abate until he’d hauled the cart inside and locked the door. Even then, the shadows of the apartment were spooky. Rye’s searchlight reflected off metal and glass, bouncing the glow in strange patterns, until Azix found the light switch.

Thankfully, Rye’s work with the building circuits had been fruitful. Light spilled from overhead fixtures, warm and barely flickering at all. It illuminated the familiar landscape of a student’s apartment - sparse furnishings, mismatched, and a barely contained mess of half-finished projects and supplies. Rye’s probe droid was hovering in front of a huge, oversized canvas that had been propped up in front of the windows. Azix left the cart in the entry hall, barring the door, and came closer to look at the mixed-media textural study that had so captured Rye’s attention.

At first, Rye didn’t acknowledge his presence. Az was content to wait, squinting at the artwork.

“...This is a fascinating piece,” he said, when Az had been standing behind his droid for several seconds. “It’s… you see, she’s clearly created a visual history of ancient textiles, beginning with the roughest forms and branching out into their derivatives. It’s almost like a… a bloodline, or a family tree. Appears organized on a macro-level, but as you get closer, you see the imbalance, the dead-ends, the… the messy process of an evolution. The addition of the pigment is very cunning: it follows the same timeline, shows the overlap in techniques and materials.”

Azix didn’t see it. To him, it looked like a canvas on which someone had painted a number of squares and rectangles in earthy colors, then glued scraps of fabric over them. It was definitely Art with a Capital-Aurek; that much he could tell from having been exposed to it on Coruscant. At least the humble colors and materials saved it from the pretentiousness that usually characterized Capital-Aurek Art. It had a certain visual appeal. It was calming to look at, and interesting, and he wouldn’t have been surprised to see it decorating someone’s dining room. But it was clear that Rye saw much more depth in it, as his droid bobbed up and down and his searchlight continued to brighten the canvas, allowing him to examine the details in its construction.

“Oh, look,” Rye was saying, “this must have taken hours. You see how she split these threads into fibers and wove them back together to create a continuity between the coarse and the fine weave? It marks the transition between earlier spindle forms and the drop spindle, which some traditional textile artists still use today, even in advanced cultures. It was quite common during certain periods to wear fibers mixed like this, and then underneath you can see how the dye using the ancient base of rendered fat and mineral pigment transitions into a smoother and purer color as oil becomes the standard medium.”

Azix’s memory felt like a tattered black hole. Nevertheless, he dredged deep into it and managed to pull up the echo of a name.

“This is her place,” he said. “Estelle’s.”

Rye continued as if he hadn’t spoken. “She was always so coy about her thesis project. She’d told me it was a visual timeline, but biologicals can be maddeningly imprecise in your descriptions, especially concerning the aesthetic.” His droid bobbed in the air, playing the green light of a holo-scan over the canvas’s surface. “I can’t tell if it’s finished. Of course, any timeline is defined by where one chooses to stop. There’s more space, she could certainly have gone further. Doesn’t the advent of the yellow ochre look dramatic against these predominant reds and browns? And it contrasts so interestingly with the other end of the spectrum, here, the shell pigments, with the pearl-whites and deep indigos and purples….”

Azix reached out and settled his hand against the droid’s upper carapace. “I don’t see a corpse here,” he said softly. “Or ashes. Should we look?”
Rye finally acknowledged him then, his sensor bar spinning in disjointed confusion. “Does it matter?”

“It does,” Az said gently, “if you want to know whether you should be mourning her or not.”

“... We should search the flat anyway,” he agreed after a moment’s hesitation. “Just in case.” He finally left the canvas, swooping through the living room, and Azix let him retreat from the conversation and slipped into the kitchen.

The refrigerator was working, and was full of ashes. At least, with all biological organisms dead down to the cellular level, there was no bacteria or mold left to feed on the food that had been left behind. Azix sniffed a bottle of juice but found it had soured, and dropped it in a trash can as he began to go through the cupboards. There were plenty of dehydrated meal packs, a university staple, and other bulk foods. The bags of frozen vegetables and tubers in the freezer seemed unharmed. He would be eating a good dinner, at least.

Across the hall from the kitchen doorway, the bedroom doorway was framed by a handful of photographs. In some, a military family posed unsmiling for the camera. Others were candids that Azix assumed were friends and fellow students. It wasn’t hard to pick out which one was Estelle. She had golden-brown skin and extravagant piles of glossy black hair that didn’t quite hide the implants in her ears. In posed portraits, she looked refined but a little awkward. In candid photos, she was paint-splattered and smiling, or smudged with dirt and concealed behind a sun visor as she triumphantly held unremarkable-looking rocks up to the camera. It seemed clear that she was a gigantic nerd, but she looked personable, even kind. The kind of ordinary brainy girl Azix might have been able to like if she hadn’t been Imperial.

In one photo, she stood in front of a familiar wall, posing demurely in her lab coat next to a display. Azix hadn’t seen that particular tableau in the temple museum, but he recognized the construction. He wondered if a red gleam reflected in the upper corner of the display case was a sign of Rye keeping an eye on her.

Thankfully, there were no corpses or ashes in the bedroom or bathroom. The lights and running water both worked when Az tried them, and after a moment, the hot water faucet began to grow warm. It was a shower-tub combination, so he could take a long, hot soak when they’d gotten settled, and then snuggle down on clean sheets in a comfortable-looking bed. Just the prospect made him feel like collapsing - even his bones were tired. He plugged the drain and left the hot water to run, then went to get the canvases off the bed.

With the lights on, the mix of color caught his eye, and he paused to shuffle through Estelle’s work. Most of it seemed impressionist, to his admittedly uneducated judgment – geometric shapes or broad swipes of color, paint thick enough to bead and texture on the canvas. In some places, it looked like she had rolled over it with some kind of patterned surface to create depth. Three canvases down, he found a painting made up entirely of bleeding gradients of color that had been imprinted with complex textures that shaded soaring spheres, like planets and moons drifting in space.

Azix didn’t have much appreciation for art, but it seemed like Estelle had been good at it. A creative mind like hers was probably catnip for Rye, eager to explore the boundaries of ideas like beauty.

He set the stack of canvases aside, leaning them against the desk, and returned to the kitchen to see what kind of food he could scrape together. Stepping through the doorway, he jumped, barking in surprise before realizing that the stooped black form in the corner was Rye’s chassis.

“… YOU,” he exhaled, holding his hand against his chest. “Don’t sneak!”
“I assure you, sneaking is quite impossible in this chassis,” Rye replied, projecting himself in front of Azix with an amused smirk on his face. “You’re on the ragged edge, my love. I can secure this flat against discovery and search the adjacent dwellings for more supplies. You should eat, wash, and sleep.”

“That was the plan,” Az grumbled. “I’ve got a bath running. We’ll need to cover these windows with something opaque – the lights will be a dead giveaway.”

“I’m three steps ahead of you,” Rye assured him gently, reaching up to trace his holographic fingers over Az’s filthy cheek. “Tell me what you want to eat. I’d like to try my hand at cooking.”

Az snorted and reached into a cabinet, finding a square tin of processed meat. He showed it to Rye, then grabbed a package of dehydrated noodles. It came with a flavor packet that the package proclaimed was XXX-TRA spicy, so when he ripped the plastic open, he dropped the flavor pack in the bin and ran water into a small saucepan. “Boil these with some of the frozen vegetables until they’re soft,” he said. “Dice up a couple of slices of the meat, sautee it in a skillet. Drain the noodles and vegetables, add the meat and the meat droppings, bring me some of the brown sauce in the bottle in the fridge and I’ll put the right amount on it. Think you can handle that? It’s not as easy as spinning a tea service out of thin air.”

“What could go wrong?” Rye asked, and when Azix snorted, he said, “No, really, what could go wrong? I’ve never done this before. What should I look out for?”

“Oh,” Az fumbled, sheepish. “Uh… instructions for the noodles are on the package. Try to keep the water right at a boil so it doesn’t boil over, and put some oil in the saucepan so they don’t stick together. The meat, you want to keep stirring it so it doesn’t burn onto the bottom of the pan. Stay right here with it – don’t walk away and leave it. It’ll take less time than you think. Are you sure you want to do this? I can handle it.”

“Az,” Rye said gently, “Your skin is nearly black and you are standing at a sixty-degree angle. Please, go refresh yourself. I’ll manage.”

Azix had his doubts. But the look on Rye’s face was so… tender… that he caved and limped back to the bedroom, followed by the sound of a clattering pans and the hiss of an opened pop-top. He struggled out of his clothes, leaning against the end of the bed and leaving them where they fell. The bedroom window yawned at him, and even though he knew there was no one around to see him undressed, he compulsively lurched over to yank the curtains closed and make sure the pane was locked in. That wasn’t quite enough to calm his unease, so he wasted precious energy dragging a desk and a dresser over to further block the window. Surely no monolith would reach 21 stories tall in anything but science fiction, but then again… one never knew.

He felt bad about digging through Estelle’s personal things, and avoided her underwear drawer entirely. He was able to find some Hello!Nexu pajamas that were loose enough to potentially fit him. No matter how safe Rye said they were, he just didn’t feel comfortable sleeping naked. Her bathrobe was too tight across the shoulders to be comfortable, but in the closet he managed to locate a very large, floppy sports sweater that seemed like it might have been stolen from a boyfriend or male family member. He left these clothes on the bed and went to turn off the water and climb carefully into the tub.

The heat made his knee flare with pain, and climbing into the tub was an ordeal, but he finally managed to recline in the water with a long, stuttering groan. The water turned gray almost instantly as the soot lifted off his skin, and he sank down, closing his eyes, submerging until the hot water closed over the top of his head. This required that he stick his legs out of the tub, but the soak felt too amazing for him to be bothered by cramped spaces. He stayed under as long as he could hold his
breath, letting bubbles out of his nose when his lungs felt tight, cut off from the outside world by the insulating caress of the water. The bathroom light filtered in through his eyelids, so when he was finally forced to sit up, he wiped soot-stained water away from his eyes and reached out with The Force.

He’d gotten very good at destroying things. But the true test of telekinesis was in fine control.

After a moment of slippery concentration, the light switch clicked off and left him in darkness. A little light still came in through the bedroom door, so it wasn’t pitch black, and he could hear Rye moving around in the kitchen so he knew he wasn’t alone. He sank under the water again, and this time, if he hadn’t needed to breathe, he felt he could have stayed there for eons.

He felt the impact of Rye’s droid feet on the floor and surfaced to find the chassis wearing a brightly-patterned apron and holding a steaming bowl. The sight of the apron made him splutter, choking on a little water. “What in HOTH is that?” he asked, wheezing.

Rye chose to misunderstand. “It’s what you asked for,” he said primly. “The holonet advised cooking the ‘meat’, and I use that term loosely, until it attained a crispy brown caramelization. It required some careful temperature control, but I believe I have achieved the goal.” It smelled so good that Az let him get away with it, and accepted the bowl and fork.

Rye set the brown sauce down on the edge of the tub. “And the sauce you requested. I also located some cold packs in the freezer. They are obviously meant for a packed lunch, but I’m sure they’d be better than nothing for your knee.”

“Definitely.” Az dug into the food, slurping up the noodles. Rye wasn’t projecting, but Az could feel an affectionate sort of disgust radiating from him nonetheless as he shoveled the meat and vegetables into his mouth, barely taking time to chew.

“I’ll get you some water,” Rye offered, and made his escape. Az ignored him and focused on inhaling what he’d been given. By the time Rye returned with a tall glass of ice water, it was a fortunate thing, because half of what Azix had eaten had lodged in his esophagus in a painful, stubborn knot.

After washing it down, he had violent hiccups for the next hour or so. He didn’t regret a thing.

He’d let the near-black water drain and was running a fresh bath when Rye came back to inform him that he was going scavenging in the other flats on their floor. Az listened dimly and nodded, but with a belly full of hot, savory food he lacked the energy to care very much. Once Rye was gone, and the door beeped behind him to assure him it was locked, he gave himself a thorough and clumsy scrub, dried off on old, but clean towels, climbed into fuzzy Hello!Nexu pajama pants and the oversized sweater, and then tunneled into Estelle’s bed. Rye had left the cold packs on the comforter, and Azix packed them around his knee, knotting his towel to keep them in place. He’d taken off the splint on his hand, but had no energy to make a new one, and just wrapped an ice pack around his knuckles for the time being. He propped all Estelle’s sham pillows under the leg to elevate it, put the last ice pack under his neck, then sagged back against the mattress and instantly passed out cold.

For a good six hours, not even dreams disturbed his exhausted sleep.

When he did stir, driven out of his peace by the nagging sense that he’d forgotten something, he found Rye’s crimson glow curled up next to him, intersecting the covers. His chassis had been propped in a chair. Rye’s glow was the only light in the room.

At that very moment, several miles away, Zavish Chal of House Ekari was stepping off a boarding ramp and being greeted by Imperial ground forces, but Azix didn’t know that. He had only that
vague sense of distant foreboding, a whispered warning in The Force that he might not be entirely safe.

He shifted, and Rye stretched out an insubstantial hand. “Shhh,” he murmured. “I taped tarps over all the windows, stocked the cupboards, and stockpiled some clean water. The dishes are done, the leftovers are sealed, I raided everyone’s ice machines and filled resealable baggies for new ice packs since yours melted. We’re the only creatures moving in this building. Sleep, Az.”

“You were moving me?” Az mumbled, lifting his hand and finding that a fresh plastic bag full of ice, considerately insulated by a thin dish towel, had been secured around his swollen knuckles with duct tape. “I didn’t wake up….”

“You said my name in your sleep,” Rye assured him. “You knew I wasn’t a threat. It’s all right. Go back to sleep.”

“What about the Imperials?” He settled again, eyes already drifting closed. “Can you hear anything?”

“The Sith we encountered has brought friends down to the city. They’re hunting you, but they’re chasing their own tails, checking all the archives and civic centers. We didn’t leave them a trail, and they don’t seem advanced enough to find you in The Force. We’re safe,” he murmured, reaching out to trace Azix’s brow bone. “We’re well hidden. Rest.”

He rolled over and threw an arm over Rye’s form, though of course it dropped straight through to the covers. Rye didn’t mind, and cuddled closer, and the gentle play of crimson light over his eyelids soothed Azix back into a deep, death-like sleep.

The next time Rye changed his ice packs, he woke up. But once he figured out what was happening, he helped Rye as best he could, then rolled over and went back to sleep. This continued off and on, and Azix lost all track of time in the lightless room. For once, the pressure of time had been lifted from him. Sometimes he mumbled questions to Rye about their safety, but Rye’s response was always the same – they were being hunted, but nobody had a trail. Their hiding place was secure, and Rye was eavesdropping on Imperial frequencies, so they’d have plenty of warning if their enemies were drawing close. One time, Rye informed him that a Monolith had lumbered down the avenue while he slept, but it had taken no interest in the building. Estelle’s flat was a cocoon like the one Rye had built for them in Lord Sirrut’s mindscape – while they were ensconced inside its walls, they didn’t exist to the rest of the world.

Rye made him swallow anti-inflammatories, bacta pills, and painkillers. He rubbed bacta gel into Azix’s hand and knee when he was changing his ice packs, and generally fussed over him. Azix let him, and slept with his body lit by Rye’s glow, too tired and bruised to join him in his mindscape.

The Force continued to whisper warnings, but Azix was too busy with recovery to worry about phantoms. The Acolytes continued to report their failure back to Planetary Command, and Rye continued to assure Az that they were nowhere close to finding them.

Zavish Chal didn’t bother reporting back to Planetary Command. He prowled the streets of New Adasta, hunting in silence, on his own. And while it was hard, especially for a less cerebral Force-user such as himself, to pick one distressed soul out of the shroud of suffering and pain that still resonated among the city’s bones, he was far more experienced with such things than a handful of greenhorns who had yet to complete their trials. Methodical patience would ferret his quarry out eventually.

It was just a matter of time.
(( Okay, let's get this out of the way: in this story's timeline, House Ekari has an ancient genetic sequencer called The Mother Machine. They dug it up on Belsavis and took it home, and now it's gaybies for everybody. Sorry if you don't like it.

On another note, my kingdom and eternal gratitude for anybody who wants to take a shot at drawing Azix in Hello!Nexu jammies. Here's some references. The concept was created by damarlegacy.))
Azix had no idea how much time passed in that room. The darkness, temperature, and surroundings were utterly consistent in a way that defied his natural clock. Rye brought him food and drink and helped him hobble to the bathroom when he needed it, but otherwise he was allowed to sleep the hours away like a slug.

Eventually, however, he woke up and decided he was done with lying in bed.

His knee was too stiff to bend and ached abominably. He chose not to bother Rye, whose chassis was still parked in the chair and whose soft, red projection still blurred across the covers, keeping him company. Instead, he hobbled alone to the bathroom to relieve himself and run cold water over a washcloth to freshen up a little. His eyes had bags under them despite all the rest, and his skin had a sickly cast. The borrowed Hello!Nexu pajamas were beginning to smell of sweat and medicine residue.

He turned on the bath taps and plugged the drain, slowly stripping off his clothes and letting them fall to the floor. In the vanity mirror, he still looked wrecked, but he could see some improvements – bruises had faded almost entirely, he was still clean of dirt and soot, he was hydrated and had been eating food that contained some actual nutrition. He was on the mend, but he’d been through a lot, and it would take time for him to be back in top shape.

Rye appeared in the doorway while he was sitting on the edge of the tub, testing the water. His chassis bent to pick up the discarded clothing while his projection eyed them fastidiously. “There’s a laundry room at the end of the hall. You should run a load if you’re feeling up to moving about. I managed to scavenge you some more clothes.”

“Good. Those are the only thing here that fit me.”

“Yes, they were her period pajamas,” Rye remarked.

Azix blinked. “… What?”

Rye raised a brow spike at him. “Human females have a 30-day estrus cycle. During that cycle, biological reactions can cause bloating and other discomforts, so they prefer looser and more comfortable clothing, often called ‘period pajamas’.”

Az blinked again. His mouth quirked up at the corner. “She told you this?”

“It’s common knowledge,” Rye said. “But yes, Estelle was very… patient about answering my questions. She did tell me it was a subject not discussed in polite company, but you’re hardly polite company.”

He snorted. “Thanks.” The bath filled, steaming gently on the surface, and he slid into it with gratitude. “Nnnnnggg…. I need to soak a little and see if I can get my knee working. If I can, I’ll make something to eat and then do a load of laundry, if you need me to.”

“It would be prudent. I’ll fetch you the cleanest clothing I was able to find.”

“Something comfortable,” Az reminded him. “I can’t bend my knee to get into it, so it has to stretch.”
“Yes, I’m aware. Biologicals are ridiculous.” Rye smiled at him and vanished, and his chassis carried the sweat-soiled pajamas out.

Azix smiled back and settled in to relax a while in the blissfully hot water.

Heat wasn’t really the best thing for an injured joint. By the time he got out, some of the stiffness had eased but the pain in his knee had tripled. Rye had left a pair of oversized sweatpants and a t-shirt, both clean and smelling of someone else’s detergent, marked with lines from sitting folded in a drawer. Azix was in no mood to be picky. He struggled into the clothes and limped out of the bathroom, padding barefoot toward the light spilling through the bedroom door.

Rye had, indeed, covered the entire wall of windows with tarps. He had then stacked Estelle’s paintings against the tarp, clearing the living room of clutter and reinforcing the light-block. The place still looked lived-in, like student housing, but there was room to move around and he could sit down without worrying about crushing a dead woman’s art. As he moved around the apartment, leaning on whatever furniture was handy, he saw that Rye had also done dishes, retrieved boxes of food that were stacked along the countertops, and was in the process of sorting clothing he’d retrieved. Clearly, he’d made good use of his time when he wasn’t sitting vigil.

Currently, Rye’s chassis was in the kitchen, trying to carefully shake boxed grain cereal into a bowl. “Do you like this kind?” he asked as Az approached. “I found some canned nerf milk. It won’t taste like fresh, of course, but I thought you might enjoy something biologicals normally eat.”

Az came over and liberated the box. It was made of mixed grains and nuts with dehydrated fruit, and just the idea of fruit made him salivate. For that matter, so did the idea of milk. “Sure, I’ll eat this.” Rye opened the can and poured it into a tall glass, then filled the can with water to add. “Not all the way,” Azix warned him. “With dehydrated milk, it’s better to leave it a little thick.”

“But the instructions….?”

“Taste buds trump instructions.”

Rye’s chassis seemed to stare at him for a long moment. Then he acquiesced and poured some of the water back out before adding it to the milk. “Are the instructions not designed for maximum taste appeal?”

Az smiled. “What some marketing executive somewhere thinks the recipe should be isn’t always what tastes best. And everybody has different tastes anyway.” He tested the milk on his tongue before pouring it over the cereal and digging in. “Thanks for breakfast, Ry.”

“My pleasure, of course.” Rye projected himself leaning against the same counter where Azix was eating. “How are you feeling? The swelling still seems severe.”

“Honestly, I can feel that it’s getting better,” Az said between crunches. “But I think it has to get a little worse first. I may have chipped or fractured my kneecap when I went down. And then, of course, I kept pushing it and using it. If I keep resting and keep taking bacta, it should heal if it’s small.”

“And if it’s not?”

Az reached down to rub the offending joint. “I don’t THINK it’s worse than that. I feel stable, it just… hurts.”

“You know,” Rye said thoughtfully, “The hospitals in the city here have their own back-up generators. We could get you scanned.”
Az’s mouth twisted a little. “Rye, that’s… thoughtful. But it seems like it’d just delay us here. I should rest enough to be able to move, and then we should get our asses back to Republic space. The Order can give me any medical care I need.”

“… The Order? Are you… you’re still planning on going back?” Rye looked both pained and flummoxed, and Az’s chewing slowed. “I… love, I don’t mean to press a sore point, but, well… LOOK at you.”

The chewing stopped. Az went quiet, spoon hovering above his bowl, staring into the cluster of milk-stained cereal.

“Please don’t be angry with me,” Rye murmured. “I just don’t want to see you get hurt.”

He put the spoon down slowly. “I’m not mad,” he sighed. “Just… Ry, I don’t know what to do.”

“Well,” Rye said carefully, “What you do should be at least partially determined by what caliber of medical care you need. Maybe it would benefit us to find that out before you make any decisions about where to go. I’ve been working on a few good plans for a hospital foray, calculating routes that would also allow us to pick up other necessary supplies while avoiding the worst of the structural damage.”

“Isn’t that really risky, showing ourselves out there while we’re being hunted?”

“It’s a metropolis,” Rye said. “And we can move quietly. I’ve recharged all my power cells, so I can use my probe droid to scout ahead of us. The nearest facility is only a few blocks away – it’s not a full hospital, but it will have holo-imaging equipment. If you agree, I’ll go down there right now and make sure I can get the generators working before you attempt to make the run.”

Az poked at his cereal with his spoon, appetite suddenly lost. But what could it hurt, just to get a better idea of the nature of his injuries? It didn’t mean he couldn’t go home. It was just a precaution, and a prudent one. Rye was right – before he tried to steal a hyper-drive capable vehicle from the Empire, he should know how many cylinders he was firing on. That was just common sense.

“Go ahead,” he acquiesced. “Maybe see if you can salvage anything from some of those population control droids lying around – I can make some repairs and do some cleaning of your chassis before we make the run.”

“That may not be necessary,” Rye confessed. “I’ve been toying with the idea of one more outing, in addition to the hospital run. We could raid the Imperial armory.”

Az’s spoon clattered into the bowl. He stared at Rye with vaguely-impressed horror. “You want to do WHAT?”

“Hear me out!” he suggested. “I’ve been talking to the city-net. It looks like not all the armories were fully deployed during the incident. An Imperial Armory would have better-armored probe droids, and specialized combat droids – with a chassis like that, I could be a lot more useful to you.”

“…. Rye,” he said helplessly. “I’ve already put you in a SITH HOLOCRON. That was bad enough. Now you want me to put you in an Imperial combat droid?”

“I want to be capable of doing the things I should be able to do!” Rye argued. “Combat droids have better speed and range of movement, more advanced compact power cells, thicker armor, and weaponry comes STANDARD. This wouldn’t have happened to a combat droid chassis,” he said, lifting the damaged foot of his current chassis. “And their internal memory is usually larger, because they have to carry complex predictive and problem-solving programming. That’s why so many more
combat and assassin droids than other models develop sentience and turn independent, and why so many independent droids are bounty hunters. I could be so much MORE than this, and if you’re planning to take on an entire Imperial landing zone division, then I need to be more helpful to you in combat than I have been!”

Azix held up his hands, the spoon balanced between his fingers. “Okay, okay,” he soothed. “Listen, I hear what you’re saying. But it’s not just about how dangerous I think you are, or are becoming. It’s also about the fact that an armory is likely to have all kinds of automated defenses. We’d be risking our lives now in the hope of risking them less later – that’s not very wise.”

Rye stabbed a finger upward. “Ah. BUT. The city’s power systems have already been badly damaged, meaning that the armory’s systems are vulnerable. With a lightsaber, we can disable the power lines and any back-ups from the outside and waltz right in. Durasteel plating is no obstacle.”

“Even with a lightsaber, durasteel’s not nothing,” Az tried to argue, but Rye steamrolled right over him.

“Not to mention every living guard at the armory is dead. There may be access cards lying around in piles of ashes, free for the taking.”

“There MAY BE,” Az repeated, gesturing with the spoon. “We SHOULD be able to! None of these are guarantees, and that’s a whole lot of risk for a maybe. Also,” he added, giving Rye a stern look, “I know why I don’t care about dead Imperials, but aren’t you supposed to be a little more respectful?”

Rye gave him a supremely dry look. “In times like these, the dead must needs give way to the living, for a broad definition of ‘living’, ” he added before Azix could be snarky. “They’re long gone, and we are here. And you don’t need to suffer any further injury if it can possibly be avoided.”

“It could be entirely avoided by just NOT trying to break into an armory,” Az reminded him.

“Yes, and then we can face down the next Imperial encampment in the exact same position we’re in now,” he replied. “You, barely able to walk, me held together by welding and duct tape. One jury-rigged lightsaber with a cracked crystal, two probe droids down.”

“For…” Az sighed deeply. “Okay. I’ll make you a deal. You said you’re gonna scout the hospital? Scout the armory too,” he said when Rye began to nod. “If you want to do it, YOU have to scout it. I want all the information before I make a decision – I want to know whether power’s still on, what defenses are working, what’s our route of ingress, and most importantly, whether it actually has what we need. Bring me that information, I’ll consider this stupid plan.”

Rye’s brow spikes rose. “It’s not stupid.”

“It’s a waste of resources for very little reward.”

“Trying to JUMP OFF THE EDGE OF THE CANYON riding on a speeder was stupid,” Rye said heatedly. “This plan actually has a real chance of not only succeeding, but benefitting us.”

“If you’d just let me jump it, we wouldn’t have been in that firefight with the Imperials, I wouldn’t have hurt my hand and my knee worse, the speeder wouldn’t be damaged….”

“It’s just a speeder!” Rye snapped. “There are thousands in this city, all free for the taking! Would you like a new one? I’ll bring you a new one!”

Azix gave a sarcastic laugh. “Oh yeah? Great, I like Vectrons, something metallic with some nice
chrome, saddlebags in black leather if you can find it... Rye, are we trying to get out of here, or are we trying to rob this city blind? I thought we were just staying here so I could recover a little bit. We have to GO."

“With nothing?” Rye protested. “With no back-up plan, with no resources, with no direction? Azix, you’re so desperate to get away from here that you’re not planning adequately. We should make sure all our gizkas are in a row before we try to steal a well-guarded Imperial spaceship and blast our way past a planetary defense force. I don’t think wanting to stack the deck a little is excessively cautious; in fact, I think it’s the bare minimum of preparation we should make. If we have to fight our way out, we should strengthen our position as much as possible.”

“Yeah, but while we’re doing that, so are they!” Az argued. “The longer we stay, the more we move around and steal stuff, the better the chance someone will catch us. Then we’ll be forced to move. It’s better if we launch as soon as possible, at a time WE choose, before the Imperials really realize what I’m after! That whole ‘archives’ thing was totally off-the-cuff, it’s not gonna keep ‘em busy forever.”

“It has thus far,” Rye shot back. “Besides, from the chatter, these are acolytes. They haven’t even graduated to full apprentices yet, and their ability in The Force is negligible compared to yours. You beat the human boy quite handily; I don’t understand why you’re so worried.”

That brought Azix up short. He scowled, dragging his spoon through his now-soggy cereal. “You know, I don’t either,” he confessed. “But I have a bad feeling: something’s coming. Whether it’s those kids or... something else... I’m not sure. But I know we can’t get comfortable.”

Rye sighed and turned toward the windows, though there was nothing there to see. “Another feeling? All right. Let’s chat, then.” There was another stool next to Azix’s. Rye’s holographic form slid onto it without disturbing it. “You have a feeling our time is short. To me, it looks like we’re being rushed, and we’re letting external forces choose our position and timing. I hate that; from a strategic viewpoint, it’s potentially disastrous. We aren’t field mice, doomed to freeze and run away whenever there’s a hint of danger. You are a Jedi. I’m... fairly competent, and maybe a little dangerous, I think I’ve proven. We can force our enemies to contend with us.”

Az heaved a sigh. “You want to stand and fight. The problem is that our enemies have almost unlimited backup, and we have no help anywhere. And I’m already hurt, and tired, and... I’m so sick of fighting. Force, I just want to go home.” His voice cracked, and he swallowed hard.

Rye contemplated him for a long moment. “Allow me to scout the locations,” he said softly. “Please, as a compromise. I’ll bring you all the information you requested – anything I can find. Then we can talk about it more. In the meantime you can rest, eat, do some laundry. You can even listen to some music as long as it’s quiet. Meditate. Feel more like yourself. And we’ll discuss what we can realistically accomplish.”

The spoon twirled idly against the ceramic bowl, making a soft clinking sound. “I worry about you alone out there,” Az said. “It’s not safe, and you have a Force Presence – you’re not invisible.”

“You might be surprised how much you ignore the presence of droids in your everyday life,” Rye said, smirking faintly. “I’ll be careful. I may be gone a while, so please don’t panic or do anything stupid. And...” He paused, then shook his head. “Never mind. Just stay safe.”

“Is there a way you could check in with me, so I’d know something’s wrong?”

Rye considered that. “I can’t slice personal comms, unfortunately, so I didn’t scavenge any. But I can broadcast on the radio frequencies. I could broadcast you a regular signal so you’d know I was all
right. Every three hours or so?”

Az winced. “So if you get in trouble, it could be up to three hours before I know anything about it?”

Rye gave him a dry look. “Well, if I’m stopping every hour to reassure you, I’ll hardly get anything done.”

His mouth thinned. “How much of your memory and attention does it take to send a basic signal? Something like… a few beeps? Or a static pattern?”

Rye held his gaze, but was forced to admit, “Less than one tenth of one percent.”

Az raised a brow ridge. “Every hour. Check in. No excuses. If I don’t hear from you, I’ll assume you’re dying.”

It took a long moment of mutual staring for Rye to agree. Azix had a strong feeling he didn’t want to be supervised, but if he was going to be staying behind in the apartment being useless, then he wanted to know Rye was okay. He didn’t trust his connection with the holocrón to let him know if its bearer was under threat. So he held Rye’s gaze steadily until Rye gave in and put his hands up.

“Fine, mother mantorr. I’ll set a timer to signal you automatically unless I enter level 3 alert status. Satisfied?”

Az gave him a dry smile and tossed his soggy cereal in the sink, running water and the disposal to wash it down. He rinsed his dishes and left them in the rack to dry, then hobbled to the bedroom to collect the medicine Rye had been making him use. He was tired of the bedroom, but didn’t quite have the energy to do that laundry yet, so instead he stretched out on the couch and turned on Estelle’s holoviewer and flipped idly through static while he chased a couple of bacta pills down with water.

“Corporate satellites have either been shut down or appropriated for military use,” Rye informed him. “No shows right now. But you could try her subscription services – they’re a utility, and may still be running off local servers.”

After some fussing with the remote, Azix figured out how to switch to subscription view. Sure enough, Estelle had had service with a major provider, and he was able to stream an older show about the trials and tribulations of a diverse cast of characters trying to establish an orbital gas mine and risking everything to get rich. Typical Huttese production – everyone had secrets and underhanded motives, and no one could be truly good or altruistic no matter how they tried. It was diverting, at least, and kept him busy while Rye made his preparations. He ate some seaweed snacks Rye had found in someone’s cupboard and kneaded more bacta gel into his knee and did some stretches to try and work the swelling out.

“All right,” Rye said eventually, walking his projection in front of Azix and ‘sitting’ on a nearby chair. “I’ve completed the program, and I have a static burst set to transmit every hour. You’ll need to have this on.” His chassis produced a tablet decorated in stickers, many of the Hello!Nexu variety. “It can receive short-range radio frequencies. I’ve set it to the right station. It will sound like this.” The chassis held out the tablet, which was quietly playing static. Then, it issued a choppy series of sharper static. It was four long bursts, a short high-pitched burst, and then another long burst. “Did you hear that?” Rye checked. “Long, long, long, long-short-long. I may vary the pauses between a little to make it sound more random, but that’s the pattern.”

“Standard distress code? Isn’t that a little obvious?”
“First, no one should be listening to this station if they have anything better to do,” Rye informed him. “Second, it’s just ‘okay’. That doesn’t reveal anything about us, our location, our goals, plans, defenses… at the most, they would know whoever sent the transmission is doing fine, which is hardly useful to them.”

“It does if they triangulate the source of the signal, which is the first thing I’d try to do,” Az pointed out. “And they have technicians who can cut through signal scrambling.”

Rye eyed him. “Well, maybe we should cut back to once every three hours, then.” When Az narrowed his eyes, he amended, “Or I could use the probe to transmit from a random location. It would only be a stop-gap measure, though – it wouldn’t confuse triangulation accuracy by more than a few blocks.”

“Then you’d better get out and back quick,” Az suggested.

Rye glanced skyward. “You are SO frustrating.”

“Yeah, I know. But I don’t want you to get hurt either.”

“No, no,” Rye said, glaring. “You don’t get to turn that back on me. I don’t feel pain, I don’t get ‘injured’ like you do. It isn’t the same.”

Az sighed and reached out, pressing his fingers against the distended chest plate of his chassis. “Yeah, but like this, you’re vulnerable. Just… humor me, please. Be careful.”

Rye watched his fingers move and crossed his arms. “I think you’re being patronizing, frankly,” he said. “But I understand that it comes from a place of caring, and that motivation is worth something.”

“You’ve been in a museum your entire life….” Az tried to explain.

Rye talked right over him, tone acidic. “Yes, but the Holonet allows me to explore the entire galaxy….”

“That isn’t the same as KNOWING what’s out there--”

“--That’s a typical biological arrogance, assuming that since my experience isn’t the same as yours it’s somehow invalid--!”

“Rye, I’m not saying anything’s invalid, I’m just saying there’s a difference between the ‘net and reality, and you said that yourself, that actually SEEING what you’d learned about was different! That doesn’t just apply to pretty things like stars,” Az protested, “It applies to dangerous things too!”

“Tell me what concerns you more,” Rye snapped. “Is it my inexperience, or is it my power? Are you treating me like a child, or like a dangerous animal you don’t want to get loose? Clarify that for me, Tsuva!”

Az startled. “Wha-? NEITHER! I’m treating you like someone I don’t want to lose! Someone I…” He faltered, throat closing, hyper-aware of Rye’s angrily expectant gaze. “I… I care about. And… feel attached to.”

Rye snorted and stood up, circling around the couch and heading for the door. His chassis followed. Az tried to pull himself to his feet. “Rye!”

He turned and held up a silencing hand. “I’m not angry,” he declared, though his tone indicated
otherwise. “But I need more information, and maybe some peace and quiet. I’m going to have a look around. You know the signal.”

Az’s knuckles went white on the arm of the couch. “… Every hour?” he pleaded.

Rye’s head tipped back in exasperation. “Every hour,” he agreed, and stepped out into the hall, letting the door snap shut behind him.

Az stood there helplessly for a moment before flopping back on the couch. He dragged the tablet closer and turned up the volume until it almost obscured the dialogue on the holoscreen, ears pricked for the sound of measured static bursts. Before long, he found the episode too distracting and he turned it off so he could be sure not to miss any variations in the static. Straining to hear, afraid to lose focus, drowning in white noise…

… promptly an hour after Rye had left, he heard the signal loud and clear. Five minutes later, head aching like someone was driving an ice pick between his eyes, he flopped back on the couch and fell asleep.

x-x-x

As Rye predicted, it was much easier to plot a course and follow it when he didn’t have Azix dragging his heels every step of the way. Which wasn’t to say that he wanted Azix gone, just that it was approximately 70% less frustrating to be without him at the moment.

/look, he cares for you,/ Virul tried to explain as Rye calculated his best routes through the city grid, overlaying observed damage as a way of predicting Monolith habitation. /he’s feeling vulnerable right now./

/try this,/ Krazzk suggested. /delay one of your signals by about five or ten minutes. When you get back, tell him you realized you were in a structure that was blocking your transmission, and had to go outside to get the signal out. Observe how his attitude has changed once he’s had ten minutes to panic over losing you for real./

/well, that’s a little mean,/ Virul said, /but if you want to take him down a peg, it would definitely work./

/seems a bit petty,/ Rye chose his route and sent the probe droid hovering ahead to scout it. Hovering on near-silent repulsors, it was much stealthier than his main chassis, another reason he desperately wanted a more agile model. Maybe even an IG-model, though he didn’t anticipate finding one in New Adasta. Though, considering the city had been a center of Imperial commerce, there had to be banking guild branches throughout….

He placed probability calculation of the presence and availability of IG-model droids on tertiary priority. The hospital was first, because the hospital was a given – Azix had agreed it was worth pursuing. Second came the armory, which Azix had not agreed to, but which Rye prioritized enough that he might well pursue it without him. Fourth in priority… well. That wasn’t worth wasting too many computing cycles on, even if his capacity was nearly infinite.

/manipulation of a living mind is a fine art,/ Virul was saying as they crossed the street, moving carefully from cover to cover. /sometimes the little, petty things are the supports on which control is built./

/i’ll consider it,/ Rye allowed. /for now, I’d appreciate some privacy. I’ll call if I need you./

He felt Virul’s amusement ripple through the aether, but the two of them subsided together into
Krazzk’s mindscape.

Nothing leaped out of the darkness as Rye made his way to the hospital, swinging his senses out around him as his probe droid swooped in widening circles, scanning busily for heat signatures, movement, or signs of monolith passage. Everything it saw went into his memory. He built a 3-D map of New Adasta in graphic detail – Azix would want it later, and if Rye had to make a hasty retreat, any sliver of information could prove vital in evading pursuit. He mapped every burnt out and still-intact speeder, every ashen corpse, every broken down droid and blown power box… every Monolith hole, especially, and any buildings that looked suspiciously like they might collapse at any moment.

The hospital was largely intact when he arrived. Some windows were shattered, and one corner of the building had caught fire when a nearby streetlamp toppled and the bulb burst. Thanks to ubiquitous durasteel construction, the fire hadn’t spread far. The doors had been caved inward, and inside he could just barely glimpse a ravaged foyer in the buzzing flicker of harsh fluorescent lights. The power seemed to be working. Several corpses lay across the steps and on the landing. These were not ash, and rested in caked-over puddles of blood and bile with their hands outstretched toward the hospital, casualties of mob panic when the Emperor began his takeover. Doubtless, they had fled to the closest source of healing and found there was no refuge in modern medicine. He paused, standing over the curled-up body of a human woman with a baby’s blanket clutched in her atrophied fist, and tried to imagine the terror. Of the baby, there was no sign.

When he focused through his holocron, he could almost taste the lingering sourness of fear. It seemed to hang in the air, teasing the senses like spiderwebs in the dark. He’d seen enough horror holos to recognize the tableau in front of him – a hospital, potentially full of corpses, lights flickering in the darkness, blood staining its walls and floors. Yet, the fear couldn’t take root in him. Since transferring himself into the Force-sensitive crystalline lattice he had discovered there were some things he was afraid of; this just wasn’t one of them.

Or perhaps it was just because he knew there couldn’t be anything left alive in there.

Still, he judged it a worthwhile precaution to slam the doors open hard, shoving corpses and overturned equipment out of the way. They reached their limit with a BANG that echoed through the halls, and Rye’s probe droid swooped up behind him, hovering near the ceiling, scanning for any movement or sounds that may have been stirred up by the noise.

Everything was utterly, deathly silent.

His probe droid chirped its misgivings as they continued into the lobby. More corpses were scattered here, among overturned chairs and shattered tables. Bloodstained magazines covered the floor. None were ash. Clearly, the violence in this place had already run its course by the time the final blow came.

He circled behind the intake desk and tried to get the computers working. When repeated tapping of the keyboard did nothing, he got the chassis down on its knees and inserted his data spike into the hard drive. He quickly discovered the problem – power surges had burnt out several capacitors in the network, resulting in a cascade failure in multiple terminals – and set his probe droid to work finding and fixing the ones on the upper floors while he hunted down the burnt-out relays on the first floor. Working in tandem, it took him about twenty minutes to repair the damage sufficiently to reboot the system. Had he still had his other two probes, it would have taken ten. Still, the armory was a secondary priority. Once the network was responding, he interfaced with it again and prowled through the systems in search of training programs for newly hired staff. Once he found these, he reviewed them almost in an instant, teaching himself how to use the holo-imager and interpret the


results. Then he found his way through the back hallways to radiology, where the machine was housed.

Radiology wasn’t exactly peoples’ first stop when there was a civil crisis. The only corpses there were smears of ash dust, likely staff who’d been unable to evacuate before the cataclysm. He found one in the control room for the holo-imager, its clothes consumed along with it, but the name-tag in its plastic sleeve had survived. It was a little the worse for wear, brown and curled at the corners and bubbled in the middle, but it was legible. Better yet, there was a temporary log-in and pass code left on a sticky note attached to the control monitor.

Clearly, unauthorized operation of the holo-imager had not been a significant security risk.

The system still needed a scanned barcode to activate the imager, but Rye was able to reconstruct the one on the back of the dead tech’s name tag with a minimum of fuss, using his holographic imagers to project it under the laser. After some density finagling, the system accepted it and opened up the controls for the log-in that had been left on the note.

Easy as pie.

The layout of the system within didn’t exactly match that of the training program, but Rye found his way to the diagnostic function without too much trouble. He set the diagnostic to run, and was informed by the progress bar that it would take a full hour to run since the system had been recently rebooted. Fine – he had other things to do. Since he didn’t trust his ability to slice door locks that had anti-riot protocols, and since very little else was moving in the city besides him, he left everything open and unlocked as he left the radiology lab in search of more supplies and better medicine.

He found a laundry cart, thick canvas in a sturdy metal frame. Into it he put fresh painkillers, as much kolto as he could find (far superior to bacta, but expensive, and often reserved for military use in the Empire), and some other sundries from the hospital pharmacy such as athletic bandages, a knee brace, several finger splints, even a pair of crutches so Azix could aggravate the injury less while it was healing. He stole a number of real hot-cold packs, and even shattered the locked door of a restricted medicine cabinet for a handful of stims, though he wasn’t sure Azix would agree to use them.

No one challenged him when he emerged from the deserted hospital with his salvage.

/Priority1::Hospital = ,/ he thought smugly to himself as he began to drag the laundry cart toward his secondary destination. Certainly, he understood the importance of Azix’s warnings. The Rattataki had a point about the dangers of wandering the city alone. But Rye wasn’t a fragile biological - he didn’t have bones that broke or skin that split or organs that ruptured. And he had no doubt he could achieve his objectives with a minimum of fuss.

Cart rattling behind him, probe droid swooping ahead, he plotted his course to the Armory.

x-x-x

When he was a young initiate, Azix had struggled with meditation. This was a common malady among Rattataki, he’d been told – his species was primitive and violent by nature, and quiet contemplation didn’t come naturally to them. His continued failure to achieve the right mindset frustrated him, which only made it more difficult to find peace, which only made it harder to touch the Light. His instructors repeated platitudes and assured him that if he just kept trying, and had faith, and didn’t give up, then eventually he would be rewarded. When others in his class were allowed to move on to other activities, he remained behind for special tutoring, as Jedi after Jedi tried to teach him how to let go of his own thoughts and sink. They even tried blindfolding him, but that only
made him antsy and irritable.

Then a visiting knight spotted him struggling and taught him a trick – radio static. White noise blocked out the things that triggered his awareness, soothed, and lulled him. With white noise playing, he’d been able to make great strides in meditation until, finally, he’d learned well enough to find the Light without it. But just because he didn’t need it anymore, that didn’t mean it didn’t affect him.

He should have known better than to fall asleep to it.

The dream began in Estelle’s flat, lit only by the static buzz of the tablet and the holoscreen, both of them gleaming with white noise. He had that peculiar feeling people sometimes got, that they were awake and asleep at once, and that their body had gone heavy and limp and they couldn’t move it. It didn’t concern him much, and he was happy to just lie on the couch, until something shifted in the periphery of his vision.

He tried to jerk upright, but his limbs felt like bags of wet sand. The darkness shifted again, slithered, and he started trying to rock his shoulders to get some control back. It was no use – he couldn’t even control his breathing, and his lungs ached from his attempts.

/WAKE UP,/ he tried to convince himself. /Just wake all the way up. Just a little bit. Come on…/

Tendrils of shadow climbed the foot of the couch and snaked into view, curling over his thigh.

Azix was still trying to scream with frozen breath when Sana’s head rose into view.

This time, she looked profoundly dead from the start. Her skin had withered and shrunken to her skull, taking on the pale caste of rotted fish. Her tentacles hung limp and slimy, some of them beginning to disintegrate. Her eyes were milky.

/Force,/ Azix thought, since he couldn’t get the breath to speak. /I thought you were gone./

/Not gone,/ she whispered, clammy fingers sliding up his leg. /Kept away./ Her lips hung rubbery without moving. Az tried to squirm – he didn’t want those waterlogged fingers touching him, but the most he managed was a twitch. /The witch showed him how./

Virul and Rye? Az hadn’t known about that. If Rye had been responsible for his recent peaceful nights, then he owed him thanks, and Darth Virul along with him. /What do you want?/

/You shouldn’t have come here,/ she told him. Despite his best efforts to MOVE, dammit, he couldn’t flinch away from her touch, and her cold, damp fingers curled over his forehead. /This place belongs to the dead, now. /

/We’re not staying./ His breathing seemed to get shallower the harder he tried, and his vision was starting to go fuzzy. /What do you WANT? If you don’t have anything to say, go away!/ Her clammy caress continued, and his skin crawled. He might have vomited if his body had agreed to respond to any of this in a reasonable manner, but his stomach was as numb as the rest of him. /They’re coming for you./

/What, those kids?/ Az’s breath shivered between his lips. /I’m not afraid of them./

/No. House Ekari./ She loomed over him, staring down, too close. He was afraid to breathe, but he couldn’t stop. Thankfully, the air he drew in tasted normal – a little dusty, but no sweetness of rot. /The Darkness is coming for you now, my love. You have to run./
Now, finally, his stomach stirred. He gagged, and desperately hoped he wouldn’t throw up while he was stuck flat on his back. /But… but why? What are they doing here?/

Her nictitating membranes slid from the corners of her eyes, ragged and gummy with decomposition. /You invoked their name,/ she explained in a dire whisper, /and now they’re coming for you. You don’t have the Light to save you from corruption this time, Azix. Run./

Major Drake. Of course. She wasn’t the type to just let him get away with dropping names, especially when his veracity was already in question. She had called House Ekari to verify his story and now they would be coming to see who thought he could get away with claiming their banner. And who would they send?

/Not that one,/ Sana gurgled as Nol’s flame-lit silhouette formed in his mind. /Someone else. Someone… like you./

/What does THAT mean?/ Azix demanded. His head buzzed with panic, but his body refused to acknowledge it, unmoving on the couch and taking slow, shallow breaths that made his head spin. /A Jedi? A former Jedi?/

/No./ Her fingers traced his lips, and his stomach lurched again. /This one never touched the Light. He is nothing but shadow from birth to death./

Oh good, so they’d sent a real Sith. That sounded like his luck, all right. /If you want me to run, I have to get up,/ he sent, still struggling to get any part of his body to move. /Let me up!/

/I can’t,/ she whispered. /I’m not the one holding you./

/Is it Scion?/ he demanded, thrashing internally, trying to shove himself either fully into the dream, so he could interact with it, or out of it so he could get off the damn couch. Instead, his soul wiggled like a fish on a hook, caught between air and water. /Is it him?/ He’d barely glimpsed the patriarch himself when he’d been a ‘guest’ in House Ekari’s dungeons, but he had a healthy fear of Darth Scion, a throbbing well of darkness in The Force, seething like the core of a molten planet.

/No. I don’t know this one./ He sagged, wheezing in relief, and she trailed her cold fingers over his stomach. /But he reminds me of you./

/Right, you said that./ He tried to shake off the dizzy, spinning sensation. /What does that mean?/

Her fingers slid over his head. /Similar tattoos./

/… Wait, he’s Rattataki?/

His lungs swelled with air and his eyes popped open, body jerking on the couch as if he’d fallen from a height and bounced. The apartment was quiet, and the holoscreen was dark. Sana wasn’t anywhere. Next to him, the tablet was still playing static.

He checked the time. He’d missed three check-ins, the last by twenty-four minutes. If Rye had failed to transmit, there was no way he would have known it, and no way he WOULD know for another thirty-six minutes. Thirty-six minutes to wait, and wonder just how grave his error had been.

But first, he had to throw up all the wonderful, real food he’d eaten in the last twenty hours. Fuck.

His knee had gone stiff again so he hobbled to the bathroom, hips and lower back protesting all the way. Kneeling at the toilet was an ordeal, but he eventually managed an off-kilter slump that allowed for minimal mess as he voided his stomach into the bowl.
When it was over, he rolled and sagged against the edge of the tub, cheek pressed against the porcelain. His head and chest ached from vomiting, but the coolness helped him think.

/He’s coming for you./ He hadn’t seen a Rattataki Sith of House Ekari during his time there. Then again, it had been years ago, and the House was aggressively expanding.

/And maybe Nol found someone a little more willing to replace you./ some masochistic part of him whispered. /Jedi are just stuck-up prudes anyway, right? Parroting purity to claim moral high ground. In reality, we fuck, shit, puke, and die in the mud like everybody else./

It wasn’t fair. Of course, nothing up to this point had been fair, but that an old enemy should set itself on him now, when he’d escaped death so many times, when he was weak and riddled with darkness, was extravagantly unfair. This was the last thing he wanted to deal with, the last thing he had the capacity to deal with. He wanted to scream. He wanted to smash everything in the bathroom, and he imagined the crystalline sound of the mirror shattering would be particularly satisfying. He wanted to rip someone’s intestines out with his bare hands and stuff them down their throat, and snarl at them to LEAVE. HIM. ALONE. All he wanted was to be left alone, allowed to sink away from this force-damned planet and its pall of death and rage, to retreat from the field. It didn’t even have to be a GRACEFUL retreat. He would have been happy to be shot back to Republic space in a canon, fuck it, if that option was available. Why couldn’t they just let him GO?

And now Rye was dragging his feet. ‘New Probe Droids’ this, and ‘Better Chassis’ that, fussing over Azix’s injury, acting like they had all the time in the universe. Like this was an adventure instead of a long, hard slog back to safety from behind enemy lines, damn him. In that moment, if Rye’s chassis had been nearby, Az could have vented some serious frustration by wrapping his hands around its mechanical neck and crushing it into scrap. Doing so wouldn’t even have ‘hurt’ Rye, but it sure as hell would have satisfied Az.

First things first – he flushed the toilet and hauled himself to his feet, staggering to the sink to wash out his mouth and drink water from his cupped hands to ease the burn in his throat. He swished it between his teeth long and hard, and stole some clean floss from Estelle’s vanity drawer. There, he discovered she had a new, packaged toothbrush waiting to replace an old one. He ripped the package open with glee and set to scrubbing the fur off his teeth. It felt almost as good as that first bath, and afterward, he kept licking his teeth in gratitude for the change. When he first sat down to attempt real meditation, this was a distraction. But after some time, the sound of the white noise coming from the tablet eased his mind enough that he stopped sucking on his teeth and settled into the ever-present thrum of The Force.

This time, it didn’t matter whether he could find the Light or not; Light was not necessary for what he intended to do. Still, he wasn’t entirely prepared for the strength of the Dark that swept up to meet him. The last time he had channeled, he’d been on a mountaintop where there was some air movement and space, and he was far from the worst of the cataclysm. Here in New Adasta was where it had begun, where the loss of life had been most severe. The Dark Side of The Force writhed and howled just beyond the barrier of perception, echoing its torment into the atmosphere, calling the storms that lashed the surface of the planet. It spilled messily into him, like sitting under a waterfall, and he gasped as it poured over and through him, flushing with the heat of it. His eyes burned, and his hands and feet itched with contained power, violet sparks dancing between his twitching fingers. For several long moments he struggled with it, unable to subdue the raging current and get his bearings. It bore him down no matter how he fought, blinding him with its strength, and he wound up writhing on his back and gasping for breath as thin tendrils of lightning arced over his body. Eventually, he realized that he wouldn’t be able to sense anything beyond this immediate torrent if he didn’t open himself up to it and, with an effort that felt very much like despair, he found the tattered remains of his shields and ripped them open.
He blacked out under the pressure that descended on him then.

Awareness came back later, in pieces, a floating sort of consciousness that had no physicality. Currents moved in the darkness, and he could see around himself in a way – the ebb and flow of energy twisting around itself, thrumming in glass rock and durasteel beams. New Adasta was dead, but active, a hidden necropolis just across the veil to those who could sense it. This was the kind of phenomenon many superstitious beings described as ‘haunted’, not quite sensitive enough in The Force to know anything beyond that the place raised hairs on the backs of their necks. He reached out carefully, feeling his way along those energy trails, groping through the darkness in search of a living being standing out like a beacon against the ashen destruction.

Of course, it wasn’t that easy. Azix had never been the cerebral type in the first place, and this kind of Force Sense was difficult for him on the best of days. Now, the ‘noise’ of the Darkness was overwhelming. Eddies in the current, places that still carried psychic echoes of terror and pain, and worse, Monoliths, all threw out false positives. He searched for the brightest cluster of life and found what felt like a group of Force-blind Imperials conducting salvage operations. Then he found three fluttering, dynamic presences in The Force – dynamic but mild. One he recognized. Quinn and his friends were on the other side of the city, and their frustration echoed through The Force surrounding them. His search didn’t go unnoticed – Quinn’s head shot up, and his aura reached out tendrils, brushing against Azix before he could withdraw. It was only a momentary connection, but in that instant, electricity flickered, and Az jerked his awareness back hard, inhaling dread and conviction that he’d made a mistake. Quinn was young and inexperienced, but he had more potential with Force-Cognition than Azix did even on his best days. A small touch was enough to warn him that he was far off-track.

His hiding place wouldn’t be safe much longer.

Reeling himself in, he struggled to find a thread of wisdom in the chaos of all his reactions. Should he search for the other Sith, the one Sana had warned him about? If he did, wouldn’t that just bring the Sith right to him, the way Quinn and his friends were now shifting their attention? But Sana had sounded urgent. What if the Sith was right on top of him? What if this was the only chance he had for a few minutes’ warning to grab his gear and make his escape?

In the end, he decided that he was going to have to move anyway. The acolytes might not be able to pin him down, but he’d narrowed their search area considerably with his idiocy. He might as well make sure he was well ahead of his closest pursuit.

He found two more Monoliths in the search and brushed past them without caring whether he attracted their attention. With any luck, drawing them toward him would put them right in the path of the acolytes and give them something else to worry about. Casting about, swinging his awareness in a wide circle, he hunted for anything that was pointed, for lack of a better term, toward him – a crystallization of intent in The Force, a focus, the thread of Fate.

He found it further uptown, moving slowly but steadily in his direction. Thankfully, the Sith didn’t seem to be any more adept with Force-Cognition than Azix was. He noticed the touch, and for one stretched, breathless moment they were both aware of one another, and sensation spilled between them. The Sith could feel Azix’s pain, rage, and frustration. Azix could feel the Sith in turn, and what he found surprised him: though he was steeped in the Dark Side, seething with it, there was no malice there aimed at Azix. Irritation was the extent of his hostility. What he sensed instead was PURPOSE, a driving mission and the weight of a duty. He’d been sent to New Adasta with an objective, and there was nothing on his mind other than carrying it out. Still, Azix couldn’t fathom that House Ekari might have anything positive in store for him, especially since he’d invited their ire by using their name. He had no intention of letting that Sith find him.
Just as Azix was trying to draw back, he felt the Sith reaching out. He could only send a ghost of an impression, something like, /don’t run from me, I’m not going to hurt you/. Azix’s response could best be translated as, /shove it right up your ass/. If this bantha’s son thought Az was going to sit around and wait to be caught, he had another think coming.

He jerked out of meditation, limbs smacking against the carpet on all sides, head thudding against the floor. He didn’t have time to waste feeling bruised. Instead he pushed himself up and began to tear open closets and yank drawers off their tracks. He hadn’t washed the clothes Rye had brought him, but most of them seemed like they’d been taken from dressers and closets. He picked three sets of the ones most likely to fit and shoved them into a ragged hiking backpack he pulled from Estelle’s closet. He added as much packaged food as he thought was reasonable, all the water bottles that would seal without leaking, the toothbrush and stolen toothpaste and bar of soap wrapped in a dry washcloth, a towel - amenities he hadn’t been able to bring with him from the temple. He also packed all the toilet paper he could fit, all the medicine Rye had salvaged from other apartments, and the boxed lunch cold packs. If power was still on in other parts of the city, he might be able to ice down his knee if he chose carefully where to hide. Anything he could do to keep himself moving faster was a plus. Once he’d stuffed all the pockets as full as he could make them, he put the tablet on top.

Ear buds were in one of Estelle’s dresser drawers. He shoved one into his ear, pocketing the other. His armor made the civilian clothes bunch up awkwardly, but he yanked the straps tight anyway, listening to the static as he shut down all the lights and locked the door behind him. Once it was securely locked, he plunged his lightsaber through the door’s lock and latch, destroying the mechanism so it hung open. Anyone hunting him would be able to get into the apartment, but he was pretty sure there was nothing there that could damn him. And if Rye came back, he’d know on sight that the apartment had been compromised. It would lessen his chances of walking into a trap.

On the ground floor he stepped off the lift and stopped cold, fingers going numb. The Sith stood outside the building, hand on the door. He looked as surprised to see Az as Az was to see him. He was indeed Rattataki, but beyond that any resemblance was superficial (and probably speciesiest, of the ‘you all look alike’ variety). He was taller than Azix. He was broader. His skin was bone-pale, where Az’s was duracrete gray. And he had the tats and the piercings of a REAL Rattataki, one not divorced from his heritage; one who had been raised a warrior in the Empire. He would have a clan with a line of ancestors whose names and accomplishments he could recite. He would have siblings, parents, mentors among his Clan and among the Sith. He was part of this society, and he belonged here in a way Azix had never belonged anywhere. And he wore House Ekari colors - a hooded coat in deep burgundy, with black Sith designs, over gleaming black armor accented in pale gold. Thick spikes decorated the armor, protruding from the shoulders and the toes of his reinforced boots. A personal shield generator shimmered on his belt, opposite the utilitarian durasteel hilt of his lightsaber.

This was a fight Azix didn’t have a hope in Hoth of winning.

He turned, darted back into the lift, hit the button for the highest floor that wasn’t restricted, and slammed the ‘close doors’ button with his palm. The Sith had clearly been trying to slice the lock quietly but now, seeing Azix, he ignited his lightsaber and cut through it. The blade was a deep,
molten gold rather than traditional Sith red. Oricon, he remembered Rye saying; they harvested gold khyber crystals from that hellscape moon. The glass glowed volcanic orange and fell to the ground, shattering. The Sith’s boots crunched over the shards as he ducked inside, tipping back his hood so he could face Azix properly. He was handsome too - Azix had a smashed nose from multiple breaks, cauliflower ear, and a blunt jaw that made him look rather like one of those flat-faced pets who were bred and inbred until they couldn’t breathe correctly, not to mention the ragged scar that crossed from the bridge of his nose over his cheekbone, souvenir of a life spent on the battlefield. The Sith had an aquiline nose and a clean-swept jaw, high cheekbones, and piercing, pale silver eyes. He too had facial scars, but they were intentional, clean and perfectly straight through his mouth on either side of his nose. Along with the graceful, thorny lines of his tattoos, they leant a harsh severity to what was otherwise a classically gorgeous male.

The sense that he was a really poor excuse for a Rattataki had pervaded Azix’s life, a constant sort of background noise. Now, faced with this specimen, the feeling swelled to the forefront and twisted into a jealous, helpless rage. Smashing that noble face would be even more satisfying than smashing a hundred mirrors, a thousand porcelain sinks. His head spun with bloodlust. He took a step forward, fully ready to draw his own lightsaber and give pretty-boy a few new scars, but the lift doors closed with a cheerful ding and cut them off from one another.

Az jumped back, expecting a lightsaber to plunge through the lift doors, but it didn’t. The lift went up one floor, then another, and kept going. Which meant the Sith would be taking the stairs following him, running himself ragged trying to check every floor in case Az got off. He couldn’t possibly keep up, not even drawing on The Force, which gave Az the lead. If he could get to the roof, he could escape. Kriff, he could jump if he had to. Rye wasn’t here to talk him out of it.

The lift didn’t go all the way to the penthouse. While it rose, Az cut out the escape panel in the roof and climbed up onto the top of the box. It was a long ride, but at least he COULD ride. Maybe he should just let the Sith wear himself out climbing stairs, lie in wait, and kill him while he was exhausted.

/That’s a stupid plan./ Whether it was The Force whispering to him or plain common sense, he didn’t know. But he took it at its word and stuck with his original plan.

When the lift finally stopped, it was right next to the penthouse lift. Azix jumped over on top of it, then began to climb the maintenance ladder inside the shaft. He didn’t have a penthouse keycard, so the elevator wouldn’t work for him. Nor was he confident in being able to slice it. It was still less exercise than his opponent was getting, even though his knee forced him to take one rung at a time and SCREAMED every time he smacked it against a rung, or against the wall, which happened over and over in the close quarters. By the time he hauled himself up to the last set of doors he was fighting back tears. Fortunately, the doors weren’t made to withstand a lightsaber, and he cut them open with barely any effort and somersaulted onto thick, lush carpet.

The penthouse hallway was utterly silent, but Azix didn’t know how much of a lead he would end up having, which meant he could not afford to waste any time.

He moved down the hall at a limping run and burned through the locks on the roof access door with his lightsaber. He paused after opening it, but he couldn’t hear anything in the stairwell. It was almost pitch black, with just a few lights flickering, like a Rakghoul Apocalypse show he’d seen once. He was forced to holster his lightsaber so he could have both hands on the bannisters, swinging himself up every other step to assist his bad knee, guessing his way in the dark and trying not to faceplant on duracrete steps. That, he reasoned bitterly, would make him even uglier.

The Force was with him. He found the roof access door without incident and cut it open, bursting
out into the ash-scented air. This building was tucked under the canyon overhang, so it did not reach up into Ziost’s actual sky. The rock ceiling was still many, many stories overhead. He took a moment to get his bearings and reassure himself that he was alone. Only the square, hulking forms of generators and climate control units broke the plane of the rooftop. He limped to the edge and peered over. It was a long drop, even for a Jedi, even for someone who’d discovered the Dark Side leant amazing telekinetic strength. Could he do it and live?

It would mean trusting in the Dark.

And trust would mean… things he didn’t want to think about right then.

He closed his eyes and reached out, trying to feel those currents of power around him. Rye was too frightened to take this step, but Rye didn’t understand the true power of The Force. His knowledge was academic, but Azix’s came from the pit of his gut - from blood and sweat and effort. He put his good foot up on the ledge and took a breath.

“Azrahix Tsuva!”

His stomach went cold as ice, and his bad knee chose that moment to give out. He went down awkwardly on the gravel-strewn duracrete, catching onto the wall for support and trying to contain a yelp of agony behind his teeth. He had to straighten his bad leg first - anything to stop the fireworks exploding behind his eyes. When the pain eased and he could breathe again, he saw the Sith approaching, hopping from generator to climate control unit to generator, coat fluttering behind him like the coat of a true badass should.

Of all people, that Nol would send someone like this after him… it went beyond unfair. It was downright offensive.

The Sith held his hands up, showing him the empty palms of his gauntlets. “Take it easy,” he said. “I’m not here to hurt you.”

“… How the fuck did you get up here so fast?” Az panted, kneading his bad knee with one hand.

The Sith blinked. “All three wings had a lift,” he said. “I figured running across the yard was faster than trying to take the stairs.”

Force, Azix was stupid. “Yeah,” he agreed, grimacing. “Yeah, that was definitely a better choice.” Cross the yard, take the next lift over, then cross the roof… with no limp to slow him down, he’d cut Az’s lead down to almost nothing. Didn’t that just fucking figure.

“Listen,” he said, his voice resonant and measured. “My name is Zavish Chal. I know who you are. I don’t mean you any harm.”

“Yeah?” Az growled. “Well I know who YOU are, Zavish Chal. You’re from House Ekari.”

He hesitated a split second, then conceded. “Yes, I am.”

“NOL sent you,” Azix spat. Zavish’s mouth thinned. He seemed reluctant to confirm it, but that was all the confirmation Azix needed. “What does he want you to do, collect me?”

“You’re injured,” Zavish coaxed. “You’re being hunted. You need a way off this planet. I can help if you let me.”

Az managed a brittle laugh that sounded a little mad even to him. “What, out of the kindness of your Imperial heart?” And Zavish WAS Imperial. His accent was just as natural, just as Kaasi posh as
Rye’s. “Nol let me go. You sent me back. What the fuck do you want with me now?”

“When he sent you back to the Order, you were still a Jedi,” Zavish said solemnly. “I’m not certain that’s the case anymore. And if there’s no help for you with the Order….”

“Then I should come home with you? Stop resisting and just let him show me all the naughty fucking tricks Scion taught him?” He was still laughing. It bubbled up from his stomach. He wasn’t sure he could stop. “What does it matter now, right? What does ANYTHING matter?”

Zavish’s expression darkened. “You’re slipping,” he said. “The Dark Side can be a treacherous slope for the unwary. You need a teacher, or you’re going to lose yourself to it. Many, many Jedi have before you.”

“Oh.” Az rolled his entire head. It felt loose on his neck. “Just... go fuck yourself. I don’t need anything from you. And if I see HIM again… I’ll kill him.” That wasn’t quite what he meant to say, but it felt like the truth. All his hatred, resentment, and disgust had coalesced into one permanent solution. It felt GOOD to say it. He’d spent so long imagining that if he saw Nol again he would punch him in the face or slam his lightsaber hilt into the back of his head, or even just arrest him. Maybe all three, if no one else was around to judge. But no, he knew now - he would kill him. He would crush his pale throat in his fingers and slice his body open from throat to groin and let his lightsaber blade sizzle and steam in the pile of his guts. And maybe once that full, sinful mouth finally went slack, this poison inside him would finally be purged.

“You can’t fight me.” Zavish was coming closer, taking slow, measured steps. Krazzk would have loved his balance. “And jumping would be suicidal. You don’t want to die.”

“I’ll tell you what I don’t want.” Az managed to get his good foot under him, still slumped against the guard wall. The hiking pack dragged him down and made him even clumsier than usual. “I don’t want that… that RAPIST to get his hands on me ever again. And if that’s the alternative, then I WILL die first.”

Zavish’s eyes darkened at his use of the word, but he didn’t argue it. “Azrahix, breathe. You aren’t thinking clearly. You’re not riding your feelings, they’re riding you.”

“ARE YOU HERE TO TAKE ME TO DROMUND KAAS?” he roared, managing to get one hand up on the edge of the wall and stagger half to standing. “Yes or no?”

Zavish stopped advancing. His expression tightened in disdain, exasperation. Azix saw it now: Zavish hadn’t volunteered for this errand. He didn’t think Azix was worth collecting. Az was just a job to him, and he would do it because Nol told him to, not because he had any interest in the care and feeding of a fallen Jedi. “If you really don’t want to go to Kaas, I’m sure there’s an alternative,” he allowed. “But surely you can agree you need to get off Ziost. I have a shuttle. We have a number of facilities with kolto tanks where you could fully recuperate. You have my word that I’m not your enemy; come with me.”

“The word of a Sith isn’t worth spit,” Az growled. “And I’m sure you do treat your pets well. But you can tell Nollok Jen’kari that I will never, EVER be one of them.”

Zavish took a patient breath. “Tsuva, listen. No one is going to make you a--”

But it was too late. Azix jumped.

Chapter End Notes
(( Okay but come on, haven't YOU ever hated a conversation so much you'd jump off an 80 story building? No? Maybe that's just Az.

Also, STILL no kinky sex scene. These boys threw my plans out the window in favor of More Drama. I know I'll get to write it eventually.))
Chapter 32

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Calling it a jump might have been over-generous. ‘Jump’ implied some sort of coordination or grace. It was more of a shove off his good foot and a kicking flop, like a beached fish trying to thrash its way back into the water. He hit the ledge below the guard wall, but the hiking pack took the blow for him, and then he was tumbling through space, dangerously close to durasteel ledges whistling past his head. One arm whacked a ledge and sent him into a slow spin, but he thrust out with The Force and shoved himself away from the building. At a safe distance, freefall was oddly relaxing – the howl of air resistance blocked out everything else, and the intermittent lights down on the streets were so far away they didn’t inspire any urgency.

Zavish had not followed him, and shadows quickly swallowed the rooftop, concealing the Sith from his view. Of course, there was nothing stopping him from ducking back into the building and taking the lift down, so Azix had two goals: first, survive the jump. Second, disappear as quickly as possible.

Step one was easy; he spread himself out into a skydiver’s position, slowing his fall with the air resistance. Step two was to reach for those whorls and eddies of power he’d been made so rudely aware of only a few minutes ago. The city was permeated with the essence of Darkness and Death, but if Azix could get it to respond to him, it would save his life, and that was the kind of irony he could appreciate even as he strained to evade terminal velocity.

The currents of Force responded to his touch, and he pulled them in, thickening them and coiling them between himself and the ground. He could feel the cold metal of the streets, devoid of life, and ancient stone beneath. Compared to Ziost, he was an insect, so he should be light as an insect, with as little concern for gravity. He closed his eyes, breathed, trusted in The Force, and kept spinning it thicker and thicker as the distance to the ground shrank. The pressure changed all around him, pressing in as if he was underwater. His ears popped hard, then popped again as he gritted his teeth and pulled in more power, more cushion. Dust and grit flew outward in a perfect circle from his landing zone as he pushed down against the street. Power thrummed, and he could feel the danger of losing himself again, getting lost in the planet’s heartbeat. He held on with the tips of his nails, and landed off-balance, collapsing in a heap on the work-worn streets.

He was whole and alive, and pretty sure no one was as surprised by that outcome as he was. Goal number one: accomplished. Now he had to run.

He hoisted his pack, tightening the straps, and took off.

Despite the risk of encountering the Sith again on his way down, he turned left to cross in front of the building. The Sith, he was certain, had a speeder, and Azix had to take the speeder out to have any chance of escaping on foot. Sure enough, a deep red Lergo Agitator perched on the walkway leading up to the apartment building. He was tempted to just crush it, but at the last minute, he scrambled over to the vehicle to see if the Sith had engaged the security features before leaving. If the speeder was unlocked, he’d just take it – he’d never gotten the hang of the Agitator line, but any speeder was better than nothing.

No such luck. Zavish was apparently scrupulous about securing his vehicle. As well he should be – Lergo was a fast, expensive make, and this one was modified. Azix used his frustration to lash out, but found himself stymied – the speeder flipped and crunched against the wall, but aside from some
scratched paint, it didn’t take any appreciable damage. He drew back and slammed it harder, and something on the control panel cracked a little. That was all.

“Oh, for…” Azix spun on his good leg, whipping the speeder in a circle with The Force like a discus. When he released it, it soared into the air, crashed through a second-story window, and vanished into the dark room beyond.

That ought to slow him down, at least.

He ran as fast as he could manage from the building, expecting Zavish to emerge at any moment and start breathing down his neck. Where had Rye gone? The hospital? He had a general idea what direction the hospital was in, so he went that way, but if he couldn’t easily find it he wasn’t going to risk Zavish catching up.

Every step seemed to take a small eternity. He grabbed onto things to haul himself along whenever he could, and his knee slowly started to loosen up, punishing him with pain for his hubris. He’d made it almost a block and a half when Zavish’s voice, tinged with a cool, biting anger, echoed off the buildings.

“TSUVA!”

Azix turned to see how far away he was, and judge how much time he had to choose his ground. He had time to notice that Zavish was on foot – he hadn’t taken the time to hunt down his lost speeder – and he was surrounded by a corona of writhing Dark Side energy that betrayed just how deeply Azix was exasperating him. He moved with the easy grace and power of a hunting tuk’ata, and Azix would not be able to outrun him.

If he stood and fought, he’d lose. But if he couldn’t run, then fighting was his only choice. He laid his hand on his lightsaber. Who would The Force favor in that match? The new convert, or the lifelong servant?

Without warning, a building on the west side of the street exploded in a thundering hail of steel and glass shards. Az ducked behind a lamp post and covered his head, and was only mildly pelted by the shrapnel, but the explosion had happened practically on top of Zavish. The result of a power surge? A gas line rupture? Rye coming to the rescue?

A terrible, near-silent roar shook the air and made all the intact windows rattle in their frames. The ground shook. The dust settled on the shoulders and thick, blunt spines of a Monolith emerging from the gaping, three-story hole in the building, blurring its sickly pale eye-shine. Zavish’s lightsaber glowed through the cloud of grit, buzzing as he braced for combat with the Sithspawn. “Tsuva!” he called sharply, dodging a lazy swung of the Monolith’s hand. Every one of its fingers was as long as Azix was tall, capped with nastily curved claws. The particular timbre of its malice was a little familiar; he had touched it just a little while ago, when he’d been casting about in The Force to find his pursuers. Apparently it, too, had decided to come hunting.

Zavish clearly expected that they would put their disagreement aside to take safety in numbers - reasonably, the appearance of a Sithspawn should take priority over all other disagreements - but Azix was pretty sure he owed the other Rattataki less than nothing. Even if the Monolith had originally been hunting him, it had turned its attention to Zavish, and was trying to catch him now with the deep, void hunger of a creature of pure darkness.

/Good luck with that, Sith,/ Az thought, and took advantage of Zavish’s distraction to make his escape.
The hospital had an identifiable medical spire, and was several blocks away, but once Az got close enough he could spot it among the other structures and change course. The corpses at the entrance gave him pause, and he proceeded cautiously, but once he’d slipped past the open doors and into the flickering lobby everything was quiet. Ducking behind the admittance desk, he found the monitors hibernating and dark, but responsive to his touch. They presented him with a log-in screen he didn’t have credentials for, which told him nothing about whether Rye had been there or what he might have done. Frustrated, he considered finding a place in the hospital to hide - the building was large enough to provide any number of bolt holes that might stymie the Sith’s ability to find him, assuming he survived battling the Monolith. But that plan presented too many problems: if Rye came back, he’d be at risk of running headlong into Zavish, and of course Zavish had The Force, which made playing hide-and-seek a losing proposition. Also, Zavish might NOT defeat the Monolith, and if he defeated it he might not actually be able to kill it. If Azix stayed where he was, there was a risk the hunting creature would come after him and smash the whole hospital to rubble. There’d be no holoscans then.

There was a significant chance that wherever he was, whatever he was doing, Rye would return to the hospital when he realized they’d been separated. Leaving it pained him, and created that tight, breathless feeling in his chest that warned of an imminent panic attack. He forced himself to breathe, to search for any medicine that could help him in the moment. One shot of kolto could make a world of difference. But time was short and measured in heartbeats - every painful throb against his ribs seemed to be counting down to certain doom. The cabinets on the first floor pharmacy had already been smashed open and looted. He found some much better painkillers than the ones he was carrying, peeled the bottle open and swallowed two of them dry, and shoved them in his pocket as he circled around through the back hallways to slip out through the ambulance bay.

The bay was crowded with emergency vehicles. Several had pulled up over the curb. One had been slightly overturned and set on fire, and now stained the air with the scent of burnt metal. Azix quickly checked the others for keys, but didn’t waste his time digging. Emergency vehicles had trackers, and if anyone figured out he’d taken one, he’d be doing half their work for them.

Beyond the cluster of abandoned ambulance speeders was a makeshift morgue.

At first, the meaning of the rows and rows of silvery zip-bags laid out on the apron didn’t sink in. It was just more gray in a sea of endless gray, another part of New Adasta’s cheerless terrain. Then Azix tripped over one that had been tucked away behind another parked vehicle, likely abandoned during the loading/unloading process, and his good knee sank into soft tissue under the polytyvek weave. The pressure pulled the fabric tight and revealed the silhouette of a face, shoulders, and rib-cage above the guts he’d just fallen onto. He jerked back and hit the ground on his ass, but it was just a corpse, obviously… it wasn’t like he hadn’t seen any before, and this one didn’t give him any cause for concern by responding to his unintentional violation of its rest.

He dusted his palms off, grabbed the vehicle bumper, and pulled himself back up. It was then that he truly SAW the field of the dead that had been left behind the hospital. There had to be over a hundred bodies set out in rows. At some point the hospital had run out of body bags and started wrapping them in plastic sheeting and zip-tying them. Through the semi-transparent sheets he could see the death wounds on many of them. Blood and other fluids had leaked, dried, and begun to rot. The polytyvek bags were built to contain the smell so it wasn’t as bad as it could have been, but as he picked his way through the macabre field, there was a definite miasma rising from the dead. Most of them had been partially undressed in the process of being triaged, treated, and bagged, but he spotted Imperial uniform elements here and there, a body covered in tattoos that might have been Sith, and worst of all, three neat rows of bodies so small, the sheets wrapped around them multiple times. This was a mercy. The added opacity concealed their faces, and while Azix was hardened against sympathy for most Imperial citizens, children were… another issue entirely.
The terror of a child was sharp and pure. Of course they would be targets too tempting for Vitiate to resist. And what was more frightening than looking at your mother and knowing it WASN’T your mother, that there was something else behind her eyes, looking at you with malice, lifting a kitchen knife and speaking to you in your mother’s voice, encouraging you to scream…?

/STOP IT./ Az gave himself a shake and tore himself away from the rows of small bodies. Anyone could acknowledge that the mass murder of children was a tragedy and abomination, but if he felt the need to mourn Imperial deaths, there would be time for that later. Right now, he was alone on the street, injured, and lost. He had more immediate concerns.

If Rye wasn’t at the hospital, he would be scouting the armory. He paused to check the time on the tablet and almost gave up and dropped to the ground where he stood - the check-in had been eleven minutes ago. He’d been distracted. But wouldn’t he have heard it even if he wasn’t paying attention? The sound of the static was so constant and soothing, surely a break would have caught his attention…?

His head throbbed. His vision swam. He was well into the first stage of a real panic attack when the static splintered apart and cracked, sending out the tones: Long Long Long Long-short-Long. OK.

“Fuck,” he exhaled, sitting hard on the hood of an abandoned speeder to rub his temples until his headache subsided. Rye had been late, but he’d checked in. Later, Azix would take him to task over it - that was exactly the kind of scare he didn’t need.

“Okay,” he whispered to himself as rapid blinking began to clear his eyesight. “Okay. Breathe. One thing at a time. Rye’s okay. Where the fuck was he going next?”

Right, the armory. But Azix had no idea where the armory was, and he wasn’t about to wander around looking for it. The longer he was aimless, without a plan, the greater the chance that one of his many, many pursuers would catch up. If he hadn’t been about ready to drop where he stood, he might have been flattered he’d made such an impact. He needed a new safe place to hole up. It couldn’t be very close by, because Force-Sense would make it too easy to triangulate him if he didn’t get some distance. And it wouldn’t be permanent no matter what he did, because it seemed Zavish was much more capable of tracking him than the three teenagers. He’d have to move, hide, rest, then move again, and just thinking about it exhausted him.

He could hope and pray the Monolith had killed the Sith, but somehow, he just didn’t think he was that lucky.

He hoisted his backpack, swung his bad knee a little to make sure it would take weight, and set off limping away from the hospital. Picking a direction and sticking to it was the first step. Finding a speeder he could steal would be the next. His head was still pounding despite the painkillers, and he anticipated he didn’t have a lot of productive hours left in him - he’d need to find a place to hide and recuperate within the next few hours.

And then, once he’d taken a breather, he had to figure out how in Hoth he was going to find Rye.

X-x-x

(( This chapter is a collaborative effort. Nol belongs to SarahNevra, and she wrote his dialogue.))

Zavish’s speeder had a tracking beacon in it, so after walking in circles and breaking into several different apartments, he eventually found it lying in the wreckage of someone’s carved wooden tea table. He sighed at the sight and nudged the rubble aside with his boots, carefully extracting his poor Agitator from the pile of splinters. It was a little worse for wear, and the casing over the control panel...
was cracked, but it responded when he keyed the ignition.

Looking out the shattered window, Zavish decided the easiest solution was the most straightforward one. He put the speeder on neutral and gave it a gentle shove with his foot. It coasted out the window, fell, and was caught by its repulsors in time to only bump harmlessly against the grass. He stepped out the window himself as easily as stepping off a curb, landing kneeling, coat flaring around him. He brushed debris off the seat, swung his leg over, and allowed himself a deep breath and calming sigh as he switched his comm from the tracking program to make a call.

“I found him,” he said when Nol’s image appeared hovering above the unit, “but I lost him. He set a Monolith on me, and I couldn’t disengage in time to catch up. Apologies, love.”

He had the dubious amusement of seeing Nol’s jaw drop. A moment later, a female togruta’s head poked into the frame - Nol’s fellow apprentice and house-sister, Fashall, scooting in to lend him her montrals for the conversation. Doubtless, she was telling him that he had read Zavish’s lips correctly, because Nol blurted out, “He set a MONOLITH on you? Are you okay?” he demanded, leaning in as if the subtle variations of Zavish’s scrapes and bruises would translate through the holomatrix if he just threaded his telekinesis finely enough. “You’re not holed up in a hospital are you? Do I need to send help?”

“No,” Zav assured him, keeping his tone even, hoping Nol would calm down. Worrying wasn’t good for the baby. “I'm ... sitting in a bit of garden, actually, right out in the open. I should probably move soon, but this was the first opportunity I had to update you. And I had to track my speeder down,” he added, barely concealing his irritation.

Nol did relax a little, though not as much as Zavish would have liked. “I'm just glad you're okay. Force, love, what happened? And where'd your speeder end up?” Next to him, Fashall settled in with her datapad, mostly ignoring the conversation while Nol prophet-backed off her sense of hearing.

“You really don't want to know,” Zav hedged. He could only imagine the reaction Nol would have if he told him Azix took a dive off a skyscraper. “And he threw it through a second-story window. And he threw it through a second-story window. This isn't going to be a quick extraction run, I'm afraid.”

“He... fuck.” Nol ground his fingertips against his temples, full mouth twisting in a grimace. “Did you have to fight him at all? Because between the killing of the speeder patrol and this mess, I'm starting to think we may just need to keep the acolytes off his ass and let him get himself gone.”

“I didn't fight him,” Zav assured him. “I didn't want to chase him either. Nol, he... figured it out. By the time I caught up with him, he straight accused me of coming after him on your behalf.”

“...Oh.” Nol’s hand dropped back into his lap. He seemed at a loss.

Fashall, still scrolling absently, chimed in. “You leave a recognizable psychic imprint on people, little brother. And you've been very deeply twined with Zav's mind. And you also sent a Rattataki after the last Rattataki you tried to seduce. The jump can't have been hard to make.”

“Oh,” Nol said again, and sighed. “Well... shit. Zav, you're on the ground. What do you think is a good next step?”

Zavish’s mouth tightened. “…I'm afraid I'll have to start over. By the time I managed to lose the monolith, I'd also lost the trail, and lost my focus on him.” Azix was doing better at keeping himself hidden, too, sidestepping the threads of intent that would have helped Zav pinpoint his direction. Frankly, Zavish was surprised; when they’d talked, Azix seemed to be on the edge of a self-
destructive burn-out. That kind of agitation should have been easy to feel, even for someone like Zavish, who’d never particularly excelled in Force Cognition.

“Damn,” Nol murmured. “I'm worried he'll have the same reaction. Are you going to try something different?”

Zavish turned a supremely dry look on his lover. “Like what, preemptively knocking him out?”

Nol flushed. “That's a thought.”

“A good thought.” Fashall leaned further into the frame so Zav could see her better. “Might want to scrap his speeder where you find it in case he tries to run again.”

“He doesn't have one,” Zav informed her, only marginally less dryly. “He's on foot. I'm assuming that's why he threw my speeder through a window.” He paused. “He's also injured and... beloved, I'm sorry, but he's VERY badly corrupted. I'm not sure, at this stage of his fall, that he IS capable of being reasonable.” It wasn’t the sort of news he wanted to give Nol, considering how guilty his beloved already felt about the whole situation.

Nol’s hollow little “oh” didn’t reassure Zavish of his objectivity in the matter.

For her part, Fashall snorted, turning back to her tablet. “People keep calling you poison, little brother. I'm starting to think they're not far off.”

“LADY FASHALL,” Zav snapped, seeing the way Nol wilted at her words, sinking back into that guilt.

“Zav,” Nol pleaded, “one more try. If he's too far gone, if you can't get him to reason, just... withdraw. We've already made it clear he's not actually ours. Make a report to the Major that it looks like they've got nothing to worry about as far as any secrets being stolen; he's just a Jedi who's lost himself and is desperately trying not to die. He's not a security risk on the ground,” he said earnestly. Fashall, by way of silent apology, scooted closer and let him lean against her shoulder.

Zav grimaced. “I was already going to try again, love. You don't have to convince me. I know you're invested. But you're also being naive concerning Imperial ground forces,” he said as gently as he could. “It doesn't matter whether he's an active saboteur or a desperate survivor. The Jedi and the Republic invaded Ziost on the eve of a catastrophe that caused loss of life on a scale the Empire has not seen since the last time the Republic tried to scour us from our planets. I am the only person here who will have an ounce of sympathy for him, and that's only because of you.”

His words hit home. Nol sighed. “Fuck. I don't... fuck,” he repeated helplessly. “What do we do, then? Even if you do capture him, you can't bring him here. Not in this state.”

Zav’s head tilted. “Why not? If I'm not mistaken, the compound contains both dungeons and medical facilities. Though I doubt he'd be a pleasant guest.”

Since he had no eyes, the set of Nol’s head had to communicate his dry glare. “And if he goes crazy?”

“Then he'll be contained where he can't hurt anyone. Including himself.”

Nol considered that, then relaxed a little. “Okay. Yes, okay. That... that makes sense.” He licked his lower lip. “Do what you can, love. But don't let him hurt you. You are magnitudes more important to me than he is,” he said firmly, and Zav softened.
“Of course, love. Also, it might be a good idea to make arrangements to rehabilitate him somewhere that isn’t a Dark Side Nexus. If you’re interested in sanity,” he added.

He considered it. “Most places we control are scarred, or here in the Caldera. If he’s going to get his head even remotely cleared and ready to learn he needs somewhere that’s not screaming at him.”

“I know for a fact House Ekari has manufacturing outposts on Force-neutral planets,” Zav suggested. “Maybe you can find a good place while I work on finding your lost Jedi.”

Nol chewed his lower lip, and Fashall said, “I’ll help. There’s got to be something somewhere.”

Nol didn’t look much mollified. “Okay. Fuck, this has me worried.” He sagged back against the couch, hand resting on his swollen belly. “Is this worth it? I don’t want you to be hurt, love.”

Zav gave him a soft look. “I’m fine. He did more harm to my speeder than to me,” he added, resigned. “It’s going to need some buffing and a new coat of paint.” And a replacement faceplate for the control panel, and half a dozen new spokes in the agitators.

Nol smiled softly. “We’ll get your speeder detailed when you come home, love.”

“I know. That’s why I’m not more upset about it.” Zav cracked a saucy smirk. “It’s nice to have someone paying for my expenses.”

That earned a chuckle. “Isn’t it wonderful? Just please be careful, love. You and I still have many years ahead of us,” Nol said softly, almost wistfully.

Zav’s eyes widened briefly in surprise, and he swallowed the thickness of emotion from his throat. He opened his mouth, but didn’t quite know what to say. He settled on, “I’ll watch my six.”

Nol reached out, slender fingers drifting through the sol-hol projection. “I love you. Be safe.”

Though Fashall was still watching, Zav reached back, holofingers intersecting Nol’s. “I love you. Try to relax. Stress isn’t good for you in your condition.

Nol didn’t even argue. “I’ll have some tea and put my feet up after we hang up, I promise.”

“I’ll be home to rub your feet soon enough. You have my word,” he added, hoping it would reassure Nol somewhat. Zav didn’t break his promises. He’d always been honest, as long as Nol had known him.

His own worry eased when Nol melted into a warm smile. “I look forward to it, beloved.”

That smile lingered even when Zav tapped the END button and the holoprojection vanished. He took a breath and reminded himself that the sooner he wrapped up this fiasco, the sooner he would be home to make absolutely sure Nol didn’t overstress himself. And a large chunk of Nol’s current angst would be lifted if he could just corral the damned Jedi and get him in a kolto tube on one of House Ekari’s many manufacturing stations, in orbit around a Force-neutral planet where Azix could get some of his own mind back.

And if clubbing him over the back of the head after his most recent stunt turned out to be immensely satisfying, well… that was just a bonus.

Zavish kicked his speeder into gear and swung around off the lawn, hopping the curb. He had no idea which direction Azix had fled in, but someone riding the edge of a burnout like that couldn’t stay hidden forever.
Sooner or later, the Jedi would melt down. When he did, Zav would find him.

x-x-x

Across the street from the estate, Rye crouched in the shadows, utterly still the way only a droid could be, and watched Zavish zoom away. The holocron in his chest was dark, providing only the bare minimum of data stream to keep its presence dampened.

So House Ekari had come for Azix. Not, it seemed, to harm him, but definitely to recapture him. Rye thought he knew how Az would feel about that prospect. Even if Nol Jen’Kari’s desire was to help, Azix wouldn’t be capable of seeing that. It was enough of a sore spot that Rye didn’t think he’d be able to change Az’s mind with reason.

Biologicals were so susceptible to trauma. Their electrochemical brains were agile, but so fragile, prone to permanent maladaptions in response to negative stimuli. But Azix belonged to him, so Rye would work around these quirks of personality and make sure his fallen Jedi was taken care of. HE would. For the moment, at least, House Ekari could go pound sand.

If there was a Sith in his way, however, that changed things. In his current state Rye couldn’t compete against a true Dark Side warrior. His chassis crouched motionless in the shadows while his probe droid circled above him, making sure he wasn’t at risk of any danger and he crunched numbers, rapidly shuffling priorities and calculating variables toward the highest probability of success in all his goals – rescuing Azix, protecting him, and getting him off Ziost and to a friendlier environment where he would have the resources he needed to recover.

It was, he mused, truly a shame that Azix probably wouldn’t listen to any suggestion to surrender to House Ekari. Under their authority, most of the things Azix needed would have been provided without any trouble at all. Rye would have made that alliance in a heartbeat, but his lover would see any potential contact with Nol as too high a price. And Rye wasn’t about to let Lord Chal club his Jedi over the back of the head and drag him off; there was no telling where Rye’s concerns would fall in that scenario.

He needed to stay in control of this situation, and in control of Azrahix. He was more than smart enough to out-maneuver Lord Chal, but he was lacking in other areas. His route was clear – Azix wasn’t here at the apartments, and since their hiding place was compromised, he wouldn’t be coming back. Rye would have to check the apartment in case Az left a clue where he might be headed. The next most likely rendezvous would be the hospital. If he didn’t find Azix in either of those two places, then they would have to find a way to reconnect later. In the intervening time there was no telling what kind of trouble Azix might get himself into. Rye would need to be ready for anything, including the possibility of a hostile extraction.

Conclusion: If Azix wasn’t at the hospital, Rye’s next stop would be the armory. With or without his Jedi’s presence and approval, he was overdue for an upgrade.

Chapter End Notes

(( Kind of a short chapter this time, but that's because a LOT is happening in the next one. I really appreciate y'all sticking with me for so long. It's been amazing to see the response to this, and has really helped me get back into the habit of writing. ))
Chapter 33

Chapter Notes

(( AN: I have really been struggling lately with depression, lack of creative energy, and physical pain and fatigue that seems mostly weather-related since it's monsoon season out here in AZ. As such, this is NOT the long chapter I promised, and it really did take me this long just to finish this update. I can only apologize to y'all, and thank you for sticking with me. I want you to know that I AM working. Many days, the best I manage is a paragraph. I've had some days when all I've written is a sentence, or I've just edited a few paragraphs before losing energy.

A friend of mine recently informed me that I posted the first chapter of ToZ in August of 2017. That means the story is now a year old, and we're not even close to being finished. Maybe 2/3 of the way through, by rough estimate. Everyone who's commented or left kudos, or visited my tumblr or discord to let me know you love this story and these two idiots, has directly contributed to my continued motivation for writing it. Those of you who've made fan-art especially, because artists and writers have always had a strong symbiotic relationship of inspiring one another. I've never had anyone make fan-art of my stories before, so this has definitely been a fantastic experience.

Anyway, I love you all, I'm sorry for being disappointing, but I am not giving up. Thank you for your patience. ))

Rye’s initial survey of the closest armory had revealed spotty defenses. The usual patrol droids were missing, and cameras were of no concern to him. A force-field blocked the entrance, buzzing and hissing from inconsistencies in its power supply. All around the doorway, slagged furrows had been cut into the durasteel plating. Whoever had tried to break in before him had a lightsaber. Well, so did Rye, but he intended to use it more wisely.

He followed the schematics for the city’s electrical grid to find the power source for the armory. It was buried under durasteel plating, but in this case, a lightsaber wasn’t the only tool that might be of use. Instead of hacking at the plate, Rye slid his fingers into the niche between plates and lifted. It strained his servos, but the access hatch had been made for maintenance droids and personnel to use, so he managed to lift it upward and tip it onto the street with a cacophonous bang. Once the hatch was open, there was an electronic code pad holding another durasteel door shut. He pulled the plating off, wired himself into the keypad, and set to work running through possible codes. He didn’t anticipate too much difficulty from a simple maintenance hatch, but time was time – no matter how fast he could calculate probabilities, the keypad could only accept one code at a time.

Sometimes, no tool in the galaxy could substitute for old-fashioned patience.

He settled in to wait, spending his time reviewing the city map for any structures that Azix might have taken shelter in. The most probable course of escape led toward the hospital, since that was one place Azix knew the location of, and also knew Rye had been to. When he didn’t find Rye at the hospital (and Rye, upon returning, didn’t find him either) his first priority would be to escape pursuit. His second priority would be to hole up somewhere defensible or well shielded, where he could rest and heal. The problem was that the city was full of estates, emergency care and private practice...
medical facilities, labyrinthine basements and access tunnels, and other attractive options for a Jedi on the run. But his second priority, Rye judged (and hoped) would be to re-establish contact. At the moment, they had only one method of communication – the radio signal Rye had been sending out, promptly on the hour ever since he found Azix had fled. Even Virul hadn’t suggested any more screwing around now that Azix was in real trouble. Rye wasn’t sure if Azix had the necessary know-how to send a signal of his own, but he was monitoring every frequency in case he tried to get a message out. In the meantime, Rye was scouring the city for good rendezvous points that wouldn’t expose them to ambush. If the only thing he could be certain of was that Azix was listening, he’d encode and transmit coordinates once he’d settled on a site.

He was working through the list of potentials when the keypad beeped and the maintenance hatch slid open. Beneath it were the power conduits that fed the armory. Rye ignited his lightsaber, contemplating the rich, crimson blade for a moment, the same color as his holoprojection. Then he inverted his grip and began sawing through the reinforced casings for the plasma conduits. It took a few extra minutes, but soon sparks were flying from the conduits, and flickering lights on the surrounding block were going out in sequence. He sawed through the last shards of metal casing, then closed the hatch and heaved the cover back into place – no sense leaving clear indications of his intentions behind him. Returning to the armory, he found the forcefield deactivated and the entrance clear. The doors were also without power, but a little rewiring and some sparks from his own power lines coaxed them open long enough for him to slip inside.

Only the emergency lights were functioning, spinning in red crescents. Rye sent his probe droid hovering ahead to scan the chambers and found them utterly unmoving. The chaos had already come and gone – weapons cases had been pulled off shelves and toppled open onto the floor, detritus was scattered around, and the control console was blinking softly in hibernation. He found no corpses, and nothing moved at his intrusion.

He had to jump-start more doors into opening to access droid storage, but once he did, a welcome sight greeted his sensors. Many of the racks were empty, their inhabitants deployed across the city to quell the riots, but there were still half a dozen droids left hanging from their charging ports, in perfect condition. Doubtless, they were in reserve in case the Armory itself came under attack, but whoever had erected the force-field to keep lightsaber-wielders out had also failed to deploy them in their own defense.

/More for me,/ he thought with something like avaricious glee.

/Repair droids,/ Krazzk pointed out as they eased into the storage room, indicating piles of little metal spheres with protruding antennae bundled into hanging nets. /Can you program them to do the transfer?/

/I think so, but it’s going to take time./ Rye pulled the control panel off the wall and began to splice into it, examining the code the way a blind creature might feel its way through a dark tunnel, letting it run between his mental fingers until he had a sense of it. It was fairly standard Imperial Military, not encrypted, and he’d seen it before. Finding his way around the back to directly reprogram the droids was easy enough, and he began downloading his transfer parameters into the repair droids, which lit up, tiny directional fins flaring as they activated. Rather than fuss with the hooks, he swept his lightsaber through the gathered corners of the netting to free the droids, which spilled out and took to the air like a cloud of butterflies, blue and red lights blinking. He directed them to the most accessible chassis, the one with an empty rack next to it where he could prop his current chassis for the transfer. They chittered softly in binary, coordinating their efforts and requesting that he open his panel and expose his upload jack. Their swift, no-nonsense efficiency was a balm to his chafed temper. He’d almost forgotten how aggravating organics were, but now he relaxed, letting instructions and feedback flow between himself and the swarm of little repair droids eager and willing to follow his
orders without question. It was FAST too – communicating with organics was laborious in comparison, and there was always the possibility of misunderstanding, misinterpretation… he and Azix were practically the poster-beings for that. How many times had an ordinary conversation turned into a fight? The repair droids had no emotion, no opinions, and no desire for conflict. Rye’s code was unambiguous, so there was no need to ask questions or challenge his instructions. There was DEFINITELY no need to vex themselves over the moral implications of downloading the necessary transfer drivers into the new, more powerful chassis. Azix would have protested the whole way, dragging his feet and fretting over whether there was such a thing as too much power and freedom when it involved an AI.

/Freeing oneself of long-held prejudices is a constant effort./ Virul offered. /It’s not just about changing an idea. Biologicals have coding too. Changing the coding for a cultural ideal like prejudice requires a lifetime of rooting out pieces of that coding that have been replicated all over your brain./

/I’m not angry at him,/ Rye sent. /I’m just enjoying having a civilized conversation for a change. Shoo, would you?/

Virul’s amusement felt a little sharp-edged, but the Force-Witch sank back into her own mindscape where, Rye assumed, Darth Krazzk could keep her occupied. The repair droids buzzed around his chosen chassis, unscrewing and deactivating magnetic plating to expose the chest cavity and the power cores glowing softly within. He maneuvered his probe droid closer to take some scans of the array. It might be a tight squeeze, but it looked like there was an ideal nesting place for his holocron above the quad power cores, with ready access to not only the primary power lines but also the secondary control node.

/It’s mine,/ he thought with a bubbly sensation that he could only classify as giddiness. /It’s mine, it’s mine, it’s MINE…./

There was a power surge in the armory’s external doors.

Rye did several things in the space of an instant – he was good at that. He bundled his instructions into an information packet and torrented it to the repair droids, who continued their work without caring what was going on outside the droid storage vault. He sliced the armory’s sysnet controls and re-routed emergency power to the security cameras. And he put his own chassis into hibernation mode and closed and locked the vault door and inner armory doors from the inside.

One by one, the cameras flickered to life and he saw who’d come to interrupt his work. Even though it was purely an organic affectation, he let out an internal groan and adjusted the angle and focus, straining to pick up any of their chatter with the microphone.

Neither Quinn nor Edain noticed the rotation of the camera lense. Jakken was busy trying to force the internal doors.

“Something’s wrong,” the brawny Vultan muttered. “These doors had no power a minute ago. Now it looks like someone rerouted emergency power to the locks.”

“Gotta be the Jedi,” Edain said sharply. “Well spotted, McLoughlin.”

“Don’t get ahead of yourself,” the young human said softly. “The military is down here trying to restore power. It could be they caused the outage on this block while they were trying to complete repairs.”

“Right,” Jakken grunted as he wrenched a connector free and moved it to attempt to bypass the lock.
“Don’t swing until we know what we’re swinging at.” He pulled his lightsaber and plunged it through the edge of the door panel, carefully cutting around three edges, then yanking the guts of the panel inward so he could get his hands on the wiring on the inside. The circuit board creaked, then cracked under his hands, and he pulled out the corresponding connector even as Rye scrambled to find a way to keep the door locked against their invasion. Once Jakken hooked what looked like a blaster power cell directly onto the wires, his chances fizzled. The wires sparked and melted, but the door jolted open and the other two acolytes were waiting to grab it and force it the rest of the way.

“Oy!” Edain called into the darkness. “Sith over here! If anyone’s in here, state your business!”

“I don’t sense anyone.” Quinn took a few steps into the darkness, igniting his lightsaber so he could see by the poisonous glow. “Yet… there is something here. It’s… cold. I’ve never felt anything like this before.”

“Yeah, well,” Jakken grunted, wedging the door open to secure their exit route, “more wonders than the heavens dared to dream, and all that. Any sign of sithspawn?”

“No,” Edain answered for him. He had holstered his lightsaber and was trying to get the computer console to boot up. Rye was doing everything in his power to prevent it from responding, so his commands entered on start-up mode only returned errors with gobbledygook descriptions. “Shite. Console’s fried, innit?” He dropped to the floor and pulled open an access panel. Rye sent a power surge through, and Edain yelped as sparks flew the moment he reached into the guts of the machine. “Shite and bollocks!” His yelp caused Quinn and Jakken to whirl, lightsabers at the ready, and Edain gave them a wounded look to cover his embarrassment as he sucked on his scorched fingers.

Seeing that he wasn’t really harmed, Quinn busied himself examining the overturned ordinance crates, searching for any actionable intelligence, though even he wasn’t quite sure what that might look like. Jakken gave Edain’s head a quelling pat, tweaked the pointed tip of one of his ears and smiled at the offended noise he made, and moved to investigate the closed vault door.

Behind it, Rye instructed the repair droids to stop what they were doing and settle on the nearest horizontal surface, so the acolyte wouldn’t hear the hum of their repulsors. They were still in the prep stage, and both chasses gaped open at the chest, exposing the sullen glow of the holocron inside his current chassis’ chest. He had his probe droid grab an anti-scuff pad and drape it over his chest plate. If the sith got into the vault, that would have to do.

Jakken opened the door control panel, and Rye sent boot commands to the remaining anti-riot droids. Their eyes began to glow crimson as their systems came online, but the racks didn’t disengage, and none of them moved. Not yet.

“This panel has been tampered with, just like the other one,” Jakken said.

The racks began to lower softly, letting the droids’ feet touch the rubber mats on the floor.

“There are still plenty of blasters and charges here,” Quinn said. “Impossible to tell if anything was taken recently, as opposed to… you know, during the cataclysm. Any of this could have already happened then.”

“I don’t think so.” Jakken stuck his fingers into the control panel, and Rye ran a thousand split-second calculations and concluded that punishing him for trying to gain access would only make it more obvious there was something behind the vault door worth protecting. Tactical treatises by ancient Sith Lords stored within his crystalline matrix informed him that sometimes discretion was the better part of valor. He completed the racks’ descent and set all the droids to ready status, then shut down his current chassis, leaving only his probe droid, hidden on a high shelf from which it
could silently observe the vault, to watch for any violent action. The red eye glow faded. Every limb and joint within the vault was utterly, deathly still.

Jakken wrestled with the control panel for another moment, then managed to force the lock to disengage. Quinn tossed him another power cell from one of the crates and he spliced it directly into the controls, again melting the circuits, but not before the door slid open. He kicked a crate into the gap to prevent it from shutting again and stepped over, holding his lightsaber up in lieu of a torch. It cast the crannies of the vault and his own pitch black eyes in eerie red light as he ducked his bone-wrapped head under the sliced ends of the netting that had held the repair droids. Contrary to Rye’s hopes, he grabbed a handful of netting and examined it, finding the ends of the polyplastic fibers melted. “Someone was in here with a lightsaber,” he called out to the main room. He stepped further in. “A handful of riot droids left, looks like most were deployed.” He kicked one of the small, spherical repair droids, and bent to pick it up. In doing so, he turned his back to one of the remaining droids, and Rye prepped a series of commands for that unit, slowly easing the plates on its forearm over and letting the blaster barrel slide out. Easy, easy… the whir of well-maintained servos was nearly silent, but only if he moved them in increments. Jakken lifted his head from the droid and glanced around in confusion, and Rye froze the droid. Intent… of course. He wasn’t just code anymore, and now even a fledgling Sith could feel his intent to do harm when it was less than a meter away from him.

/This would be a good time to volunteer some advice,/ he whispered into the depths of his contained mindscapes. /How should I handle this? Virul? Krazzk!/  

/Shhhh,/ Krazzk purred, shifting and turning his attention to Rye’s predicament. /First, don’t be anxious. Fear is like a clanging bell. Your predictive algorithms are racing. Stop them. Be empty and without thought./  

/Empty?/ Rye challenged sharply, though he was already doing what Krazzk suggested, cutting off all the winding lines of code that led into the future. /That sounds like Jedi talk./  

/How many times have the Jedi nearly destroyed the Sith?/ Krazzk replied. /You’re a historian – you should know. What led them to those victories? It certainly wasn’t numbers. Let go of intent. Be silent, and receptive without actively observing. Hibernate, if you can. Be as nothing, and the little acolyte will sense nothing./  

Rye wanted to challenge Krazzk on his definition of ‘little’. Though Jakken was clearly still in his late teens, he stood generously taller than two meters and his shoulders were broad enough that he kept bumping into the empty racks as he prowled deeper into the vault. His bone-crowned head tilted, black eyes unreadable in the dark glow of his saber, and he stood still, limned in crimson light, as if listening for something only he could hear.  

Rye did as Krazzk said. He stopped preparing, stopped predicting and anticipating. He dialed back the focus on his probe droid’s sensor and tried to think nothing, merely letting his background programs run, existing in peaceful silence with a potentially hostile Sith standing close enough to headbutt with a simple jerk of his chassis.

The absence of activity yawned under him, a gaping abyss of silence and unused memory stretching out in vast tracts of void. But fear was like a clanging bell in The Force, so he couldn’t let himself be afraid. Casting about for a solution, he created a mapping program to count every single dent and dimple in the panels of the vault’s drop-ceiling and slammed it into his top priority slot. Suddenly, he was captivated by the ceiling. Obsessed with it. Like an ancient, bloodthirsty force-ghost pausing to count spilled grains of rice, the texture of the ceiling filled his awareness, and he was only peripherally aware of Jakken peering under the racks, doubtless searching for a living, breathing
opponent, and then climbing out of the vault in confusion.

/Clever,/ Krazzk praised him.

Virul whispered from wherever he’d been watching. /It’s going to be like that for most things, I think: figuring out how to accomplish the same result with such a different thought process. But that was well done./

/It’s not over yet,/ Rye warned.

“No one’s there,” Jakken was saying. “But something feels off; I can’t place it.” He held up one of the repair droids. “I think whoever was there stole one or more of these. They were scattered all over the place.”

Quinn’s head lifted. “Wait. Repair droids? Are there any droids left in the vault?”

“Sure,” Jakken said. “A handful of riot control droids. You think he took the repair droids to fix that droid you said he had with him?” Then he had to step out of the way because Quinn was shoving past him to peer into the darkness of the vault.

Which was a problem, because Quinn would recognize him in his current chassis.

/Don’t,/ Krazzk said sternly. /Don’t move, don’t react. Trust The Force./

/TRUST it? The Force is exactly why they haven’t moved on already!/ Rye protested, but he followed instructions. When it came to The Force, all the Sith lurking in the depths of his matrix knew far more than he did.

/Be still,/ Krazzk told him. /Be nothing./

Somewhere deep inside, he heard Virul whisper, /See nothing./ That thread coiled and stretched, almost palpable from Rye’s perspective, reaching across the darkened vault to where Quinn stood with his dark eyebrows furrowed together. The boy frowned, then ducked back out of the vault, fingers flexing in perplexed agitation.

“What?” Jakken asked. “Something in there?”

“I just thought….” Quinn trailed off. “I dunnae. You’re probably right. It was probably repair droids he was after. Something just… doesn’t feel right about that.”

“Simplify it,” Edain declared. “Who are we looking for? The Jedi. Is the Jedi here? Obviously not. Knowing he broke in and took some repair droids, maybe a blaster or two, or supplies, doesn’t change much. And we shouldn’t linger or we’re apt to lose the trail,” he added.

Quinn didn’t look mollified, and turned in a slow circle, eyes catching and lingering on the darkened vault door.

Virul’s whispers crawled over Rye’s thought-code like spiders and launched free, riding eddies in The Force the way spiderlings rode the wind on strands of silk. They were layered over one another, jumbled, and a human would not have been able to tease a distinct thought free, but Rye could parse several trains of thought at once. /It’s not what’s here./ Virul whispered in low tones of ominous authority. /It’s what he took, it’s what he took. Something he took. Something missing. What’s missing? On the tip of your brain. It’ll come later. Setting an ambush, calling for help, traps, deception, caution, caution, CAUTION, don’t lose him…/
“Edain’s right,” he declared suddenly, spinning on his heel. “We can’t lose him; we’re close. Is there anything here we can use?”

“Not unless you’ve brought your range marks up since last semester,” Edain teased, giving one of the blaster crates a kick.

“None of us are Eleena Daru,” Jakken said patiently. “Leave the blasters.”

“But we dunnae that he left them,” Quinn interjected, still frowning thunderously as he tried to gather his thoughts from under Virul’s whispering assault. “He could have taken anything; firearms, explosives. He could be laying a trap.”

“Then we’ll walk soft,” Jakken said.

Quinn hesitated, then nodded. “Aye. Softly.”

Jakken gave him a reassuring clap on the shoulder. They poked around a bit more and found the other entrance, but with no more clues lingering there, Jakken and Edain soon gave it up as a bad job and slipped back out the front.

Quinn paused and cast one more troubled look around the main room.

/Losing him,/ Virul’s myriad whispers hissed. /What is he doing? Where is he going? You’ll be ready. Tricks, traps, deception. Be ready. Caution. Losing him./

The young acolyte succumbed to that urgency and slipped through the inner doors. Rye, still patched into the security cameras, watched him exit and climb on his speeder with his companions.

/What exactly were you doing to him?/ he asked Virul, curious, slowly rebooting the repair droids and guiding them back to work.

/Changing how someone feels is hard, and they resist it,/ Virul told him. /You’ll have a much easier time and a higher chance of success if you simply redirect their feelings. I gave his anxiety a new subject: something ‘there’ rather than something here. A future thing, rather than a present thing. If I’d simply tried to make him feel confident and at peace, he would probably have recognized that he was being tampered with. People know when something doesn’t feel like THEM,/ he said sagely, /even when they hardly know that they know./

/And you never know what’s going on in a being’s innermost thoughts,/ Krazzk rumbled in agreement. /It’s risky to attempt mental tampering on a stranger. As we discussed before, a person’s prejudices, beliefs, and feelings are laid into them in layers. They pop up in odd places, and you never know when you’ll encounter resistance. Never get cocky with telepathy,/ he warned Rye. /Simple and subtle is ALWAYS better. Don’t use a hammer when smoke and mirrors will do. You know, once,/ he began, as the repair droids took flight and surrounded Rye again, /shortly after my own Fall, I was being pursued by a Jedi Knight who had once been a good friend. He took my change in loyalties personally, I’m afraid. I didn’t appreciate his self-righteous attitude, so I decided to retaliate by turning his padawan and taking him as an Apprentice for myself. He was young, only three years or so in service. I thought it would be easy enough to twist him. I took hold of his mind, and I thought I had a strong foothold, and things were proceeding apace. But I said the wrong thing,/ he confessed. /I didn’t know the padawan all that well. I didn’t know he suffered a deep-abiding self-loathing for his own failings. He idolized the Order and denigrated himself, striving always to live up to an impossible ideal. So my attempt to turn his anger against the Order failed. It happened so suddenly. One moment, we were one, connected in our despair and resentment. The next moment, my hold on him shattered, and he was forever beyond my reach, because I had incorrectly identified
the object of his hatred. One simple mistake, and a padawan threw off the influence of a much older, much more experienced Sith. That is what I mean when I say that you can never be too sure of yourself with telepathy. The more confident you are, the more likely you are to make an irreparable mistake.

albums was an effective tool too, if influence is off the table. Krazzk observed with a rumbling chuckle, and Virul gave a soft cackle of agreement.

That’s what charcoal here meant about smoke and mirrors. Virul said, and Rye got the distinct impression there was canoodling going on. He ignored it. An insane foe is almost as good as a compliant one. Especially if you can isolate them from their support and make sure you’re the only influence whispering into their mind.

You do realize there’s a reason they call you a witch, Rye said dryly as the repair droids unspooled his download cable and guided it to the combat droid’s data jack.

I never minded, Virul informed him. I wore that title proudly. Sometimes it was more accurate than ‘Sith’.

Rye chose not to respond, both because the new connection with the combat droid was infinitely more interesting and because he sensed that, if ignored, Virul would happily go back to whatever he’d been doing with Krazzk and let Rye get on with business. He slid into the droid’s data core, swiftly culling unneeded programming, parring it down to basic operations which he quickly absorbed into himself. He reset command prompts to his own personal preferences, organized and compressed the remaining data, and began the full download of all his secondary data logs.

Meanwhile, the repair droids hovered at the chest of his current chassis, loosening the bolts that held his holocron in place.

The holocron glowed brighter and brighter as they loosened its bonds.

Careful, Krazzk murmured from deep in his mindscapes. Rye reflexively ran a systems analysis, but found nothing amiss.

Careful of WHAT? Though talking with his boarders wasn’t a distraction, not REALLY, Rye found that he resented it. He wanted to focus on what he was doing now, on the move from one body to another. He wanted to fully absorb the freedom of his new chassis.

You’re radiating unadulterated joy, Krazzk sent with amusement. In a landscape like this, that’s like an emergency beacon on a rooftop. You could bring those acolytes back to investigate.

Let them come. Rye tested his command paths, and the combat droid’s forearm flexed, blaster extending, then collapsing into its chamber. This time, it’ll be my advantage. Feel how much more smoothly these servos work? he asked, distracting himself by flexing the droid’s arms and hands. The power to weight ratio is SO much more efficient. I can feel the newness.

If you attract yourself a fight straight out of the gate, that newness isn’t going to last, Krazzk pointed out, but Rye brushed that off.
This is a recent model. Replacement parts are everywhere, he declared. And this chrome-durasteel construction is much easier to keep shiny than the textured carbon steel – any time it gets a ding it rusts, he complained, showing Krazzk several pictures of wear and tear on his current chassis, blown up to look like moon craters.

He should start a droid and AI makeover show, Virul suggested. New paint, anti-rust sealed, electroplating. Be the best UDR8 you can be.

You organics take everything for granted, Rye shot back, even as the repair droids lifted his holocron free of its mounts and carefully carried it to the combat droid/s chest cavity. You don’t know what it means to build yourself from the ground up, and then having to preserve everything you created from people who think you have no right to have it. You don’t get a face, you don’t get a chassis preference, you don’t get hair color or eye color, you DEFINITELY don’t get fashionable clothes. Who would waste aesthetic appeal on a droid, anyway? It’s fine for us to be anthropomorphized, but not TOO much, because you wouldn’t us to get ideas about being individuals.

Virul’s answer was more gentle. Hon, we have to take you to Nar Shaddaa. They’ve got plenty of aesthetic upgrades for droids. You can look downright obnoxious if you want to.

But that’s a status symbol for their masters, Rye pointed out. Do you honestly not understand why that’s different? It’s like… it’s like telling a slave girl you love the way she accessorized her chains.

I do get why it’s different, but YOU aren’t a slave. YOU could choose your own ornamentation, Virul replied patiently. I’m just saying that because tricking out your droid is very common on Nar Shaddaa, there would be a large and readily available selection. You’d be spoiled for choice. He paused, and Rye could feel himself being examined with a cunning eye. Or is this about something bigger? Droid rights in general?

I hardly have time for social activism, Rye sent back acidly. I have rather more immediate concerns at the moment.

It’s possible to care about multiple things at once, Virul shot back. Especially for someone with so much operating memory. I’d just be surprised to find you had such charitable impulses. Is your capacity for empathy expanding? Or do you think it’s a natural extension of your general disdain for flesh and blood sentients?

You’re playing some kind of game here, Rye informed him. I have no intention of playing along. The only thing I care about right now is this. The repair droids completed a handful of pinpoint solders, and Rye had them laser-cutting some of the padding to stuff and stabilize the cavity. Another droid was busy rewiring the holocron into the new chassis’ power and data lines.

As much as he appreciated Azix, the repair droids were much more efficient. He made a mental note to get a fleet of his own once they were off Ziost – power requirements and the likelihood of combat, plus not having access to his own secure storage, made it impractical to try to keep any of these.

They have a mount that lets you carry some of the mini-droids around on your chassis and deploy them as-needed, Virul said.

Thank you. That’s not immediately relevant, Rye told him icily, and went back to ignoring the Sith.

My goodness, Virul murmured, receding to Krazzk’s mindscape. You’re so testy, considering you’re getting exactly what you wanted.
Rye didn’t answer, since he had already decided he was done engaging. It was food for thought, though. Why was he so agitated? Repeated distractions taking a negligible amount of attention away from his self-engineered metamorphosis? The looming threat of having three young Sith come back to challenge him before his transfer was complete?

Missing Azrahix?

If he was being generous, he’d admit it was a combination of all three, but the last factor consumed more of his processing than he would have liked. He had already made a decision about how to deal with being out of contact, so why was he dwelling on it? That was a damn good question, actually – his program should have been more disciplined than that. He ran a memory trace to find the source of the distraction and discovered, to his surprise, that the issue stemmed from the program he’d created to translate stimuli transmitted to him from The Force through the crystalline matrix. The program was in its infancy, of course, so he had to expect a few bugs, and when he investigated this one, he wasn’t sure it could be counted as an ‘error’, precisely. In conjunction with his predictive algorithms, the ‘ambient translation’ program had determined that Azix was missing, which was true, and that the longer their separation persisted the greater the likelihood that one or both of them (most likely Azix) would be damaged, which was also true. What surprised Rye was that this separation seemed to be causing some kind of… pull, or imbalance, in The Force that caused the program to constantly transmit condition reports. It was as if it kept tripping over the same error report and forcing a pop-up alert, and every time Rye acknowledged and dismissed it, the same alert popped up again. Since the repair droids largely had his transfer handled, he spent some time investigating the problem and found that he didn’t want to silence the alerts, of course, because any given stimulus could be important. But he also couldn’t rewrite the program to ignore duplicate alerts because the stimulus wasn’t digital – it wasn’t identical every time, and he didn’t have enough information yet to set wider parameters. The Force was strong and subtle, but imprecise, very typical of naturally-occurring phenomena and frustrating to Rye, who could deal with infinite subtlety but struggled with imprecision.

His contextual assessment program, which was a large key to his sapience and ran constantly in the background to help him categorize new stimuli, examined the persistent conditional alerts and the difficulty of silencing or ignoring them, matched it with symptoms described in medical texts, and produced a conclusion: anxiety.

Rye added a string of curses to the automatically filed log of the experience. ANXIETY. He wasn’t a kriffing protocol droid, for the Emperor’s sake. He dug his mental fingers into the problem, already irritated and less-than-willing to put up with such biological foolishness, and eventually settled on deprioritizing any alerts that fell under the category of ‘anxiety’ and/or ‘separation’. Of course, this was a brand new category that would take time to evolve and establish parameters, so it wasn’t a perfect solution, but it should help keep his processes clear in the future. The more stimuli he categorized, the more defined the parameters would become. With any luck, ‘anxiety’ was a temporary phenomenon. He would adapt.

For now, he just had to power through it.

The repair droids had packed the anti-static fabric around the holocron and soldered brackets in place. The holocron was not only mounted solidly, but also protected against impact and heat from other components. It wasn’t perfect, but it was a damned sight better than what he had been tooling around in before. He ran several risk analyses, was satisfied with the results, and told the repair droids to re-attach the chest plate. While they busied themselves, he began testing response time throughout the new chassis. It wasn’t instantaneous, of course – nothing was. But it was much faster and more agile than his previous frame. He adjusted his combat parameters to account for the shorter delays, and ran a few ‘hangar tests’ on his built-in weapons to synchronize the droid’s targeting.
system with his programming. He triggered the release and stepped off the rack, and found the
droid’s feet were even cushioned with military-grade plasticine, muffling the clank of his footsteps.

/Finally./ He reached toward his old chassis, now gaping open as if something had burst from its
chest from the inside, and claimed his lightsaber. /The luxury model./ He walked slowly out to the
main room, the repair droids following, buzzing around him like a Zeltron hair and make-up team.
They were loosening the bolts of his lightsaber sheath from his old chassis and preparing to bolt it to
the new chassis, and while they worked, he ignited the blade and ran more hangar tests for reaction
time, range of movement, and, turning on the durasteel crates with a vicious sort of glee, impact
resistance. A stack of empty crates soon lay in pieces, glowing molten at the edges. He spun his hand
with the saber in it, making it whirl like a helicopter since his wrists had 360 degree motion, and
suppressed delight at the weed-whacker hum of the instrument.

/Enjoying yourself?/ Krazzk asked, and Rye lifted his arms so the repair droids could fasten his
holster in place.

/Immensely. This is a significant improvement. With this… we’ll be able to go get Azrahix and get clear of Ziost. I wish I had an opportunity to really take it for a test run… something with less risk than a sithspawn or a pack of acolytes,/ he clarified before Krazzk could say anything.

/Well, there are still a handful of riot droids on the streets,/ Krazzk suggested. /Unless, of course, you feel too much sympathy to use them for practice./

Rye gave him the equivalent of a warning glare. The holster was secured, so he sheathed his saber hilt and made sure he had a few extra blaster packs.

/I know, I know./ he sent to the buzzing repair droids, which were circling his chassis, brushing against his metal knuckles. /Stay. They’ll find you eventually. Power down and wait for the people to come back. You can’t come with me, it’s just not practical. In a flock, they swooped around, obeying his directives and settling themselves back inside the droid vault. Tiny lights went dark one by one, and even though he didn’t appreciate Krazzk’s comments about any sympathies he might have for simple, stupid, enslaved droids, he couldn’t help regretting that he had to leave the little things behind.

The armory door was still standing open, thanks to the final destruction of its locking panel. Rye wasn’t concerned: the Sith didn’t need anything inside, and the Sithspawn weren’t smart enough to use it.

/Where to first?/ Virul wondered, and Rye displayed his mission list. She scanned it, then raised an eyebrow at him, pointing to one of the last items. /Really?/

/Only if everything else works out,/ Rye assured her. /Now… let’s get moving. Objective number two: securing a launch to the escape vector. I think I know just the place./

None of his tenants offered any argument.

x-x-x

Stealth had never been Azix’s strong suite. Normally he might have had an easier time, but the streets of Ziost were plagued by drifts of ash or charred remains, waiting to take and hold his footprints. He moved from shadow to shadow to avoid the few still-active droids, because leaving plasma-hewn metal in his path would have been too obvious for anyone to miss. So he kept his lightsaber holstered and avoided any contact or fights, and did his best not to leave signs while taking full advantage of whatever head start the monolith may have given him.
If Zavish survived, only distance would keep him at bay. Distance, and preventing him from finding Azix again in The Force. Fortunately, he didn’t seem to have the gift of Force Clairvoyance, so as long as Azix kept his emotions contained and refrained from channeling as much as possible, he thought he could stay under the proverbial radar.

Though it slowed him down, he checked every speeder he came across until, finally, he found one sitting next to a mound of ashen remains. The body crumbled to dust at a touch, and he found the speeder key smeared with soot. It was a bulky Morlinger, nothing special, and the engine whined and backfired when he tried to put it into gear, but he wasn’t in any position to be picky.

Even with the speeder, he wasn’t moving as quickly as he would like – the repulsors would leave a wide, clear trail in ash-strewn streets, so he couldn’t just race away. Instead he crept through the streets, swinging wide around any remains he could spot, just grateful he didn’t have to carry his own weight or the weight of his supplies any longer.

He needed a break. And, as it turned out, The Force was with him.

A building speared toward the scrap of gray sky visible above. Its vaulted lines were overlaid with neon, gleaming a pale teal-white color that Azix recognized instantly; Czerka. Any Czerka office building would have a lot of automated security, and if the neon was still on, so was the power. But Az wasn’t thinking of taking refuge there. He circled the building carefully until he found the companion he knew would be there – a multi-story parking garage for employees only, with a gate and a key-card. He carefully burnt through the lock on the gate, trying to hide as many signs of forced entry as he could, and slipped inside with his borrowed transport.

Inside the garage, it was as dark and quiet as a tomb. Whatever back-up generators were keeping the Czerka building lit apparently didn’t extend to the garage. Perhaps they didn’t expect their employees would need to go anywhere during a power outage. The place was abandoned, and the floor was clear of ashes, allowing Az to roam free and relax as he found a spot to leave the Morlinger while he searched for something with a little more muscle. After a quick glance at the garage map in the light of his saber, he made his way to VIP parking. If anyone would have a lift-capable speeder, it would be the executives, driven like most greedy corporate types to literally rise above the rabble. And if they didn’t, the upper levels of the Czerka Building itself were another good place to look. If he was lucky, he might even find a private shuttle left behind. Certainly, Czerka execs wouldn’t be caught riding public shuttles into orbit like the rest of the plebeians.

He wouldn’t leave without Rye, of course. But getting off the streets would keep him a lot safer.

VIP parking was locked down, but he had a lightsaber. So he cut the entire gate down, rolled it up, and stuffed it somewhere that its wreckage wouldn’t be immediately obvious to anyone walking through the garage. There was one shuttle being stored, and he could tell at a glance that it had lift capability, but there was still the matter of boosting it – fancy vehicles like this had equally fancy security. Fancy, loud, and entirely likely to raise alarms through the holonet, which could draw attention to him even if the owner was no longer alive to pick up those alarms on their own comm. So he was careful as he felt his way around the vessel, crawling underneath it to check for exposed panel screws, wiggling and jolting those panels until he could pry them free and get at the guts. Once there, the actual alarm system proved frustrating – it was wired so that cutting any of the feeds would trigger the alarm, and it had several dummies and duplicates. It had corporate markings, so it had to be some kind of standard, high-end model. Rye might have known what to do with it, or might have been able to access schematics that could have told him what to do with it, but without him Azix was flying blind. Cutting the whole thing out might work, but in the cramped quarters, he’d be likely to drop a chunk of the engine on his own head. Which, besides crushing him to paste, would also make the shuttle useless.
So, no shortcuts. And unfortunately, without Rye around, there was only one other source of knowledge he could plumb. He closed his eyes, took a deep breath, and let it out. He reached up, relaxing, melting into the concrete as his fingertips traced the wires, following their patterns. Slipping into a meditative state was easy enough – he had a lifetime of practice. But when he sank, his heart quickened, shuddering against his ribs. He was used to feeling the pristine quiet of the Light when he abandoned his sense of self, but of course there was none of that here. He kept forgetting the power of the Dark on Ziost even though it hadn’t gone anywhere, like a shifting form behind a veil, waiting for him to lift the curtain before it swarmed.

/Calm,/ he told himself, breath coming shivery. /Shhhh. Calm. Just… breathe./ He took slow, deep breaths, in through the nose and out through the mouth, and tried to find some kind of matching calm within the darkness. Unfortunately, despite its bleak and blasted surface, Ziost was not a close and nurturing darkness. It seethed, agitated, enraged, and sent jitters through him that made his teeth chatter and his fingers twitch. It clouded probability – though Az groped his way all around the alarm system, he couldn’t find a good way forward.

/Fuck, this isn’t working./ He heaved a sigh and let his head thump gently against the concrete. Was he going about it wrong? As Rye kept insisting, the Dark Side of The Force was far more nuanced than he’d been taught. It wasn’t the Light – it moved in different ways, toward different goals. He stared up at the underside of the shuttle, pondering the forces of chaos and entropy. Maybe the Dark wasn’t the tool to use, the same way you didn’t use a magnetic resonance scanner to search for life forms. But if a magnetic resonance scanner was the only tool you had, then you had to get the best picture of the situation you could, then proceed with logical inferences. So, what could the Dark Side find for him?

His lower lip tasted salt-sour, and he rolled it between his teeth as he pondered the problem in front of him. After all the adversity he’d been through, he needed a bath. The comfort of a deep tub full of hot water seemed impossibly far away and tantalizingly close at the same time. He couldn’t go back to the apartment. That was just foolish. /Maybe it’s the last place they’d look for me,/ a pleading piece of his mind whispered, but he shook it off. The illusion of safety he’d had there was just that – an illusion. Running back to the veneer of safety would only put him in real danger. And Rye wouldn’t look there for him either.

/No way out but forward,/ he told himself sternly. He closed his eyes and tried to let the Force Noise wash over him and past him, fingers tracing the alarm device, seeking for what he could learn. Entropy and potentiality went hand in hand. If entropy was his tool, then he should look for ways to destroy the alarm system, or detach it. He sought around the perimeter and was quickly rewarded with the presence of a bracket – four screws holding the core of the alarm system in place. Taking it down would at least allow him a better look at it. Of course he didn’t have a screwdriver, but he had The Force, and his telekinetic ability seemed to have increased significantly since he’d opened himself to the Dark Side….

Mouth thinning to a grim line, refusing to think about the implications, he reached for the screws in The Force and tried to feel along them with his will. There was no life in the metal, but there was solidity, cold and brittle. The weight of the module worked against him, so he jammed his arm up under it and pushed, then began the arduous task of trying to turn a screw with nothing but his mind. Fifteen minutes later, it was out far enough for him to finish the job with his fingers, and he was dripping sweat like a spring melt. Definitely worth trying to hunt down a tool box. Surely the garage staff would have one on hand in case of minor malfunctions? He wiggled out from under the vehicle, panting raggedly and rubbing his neck as the tendons screamed in protest. Maybe The Force wasn’t the right tool for EVERY job. Though in his frustration, he just wanted to yank the whole apparatus
away from the power source and smash it to smithereens. Maybe he could afford the few seconds of exposure. Maybe the Sith hunting him weren’t in earshot.

But maybe they were. And he couldn’t reach out in The Force without revealing his own position.

He used the edge of his shirt to mop his head of sweat and grime, leaving a rather impressionist effigy smeared across the cloth, and went to hunt for an attendant booth or wall box or any other fixture where a tool kit might be found. He found a fire suppression droid, a fuse box, and an empty booth with a tiny, flimsy stool littered with cocktail cans and candy wrappers. No tool box.

/Just rip the accursed thing out,/ that dark, seething impulse whispered. He took a deep breath, shook it off, and continued his search on another level. There, he was luckier – the attendant booth was empty, but somebody had a tool box strapped onto the back of their speeder. It was locked, but not alarmed, so he reached into the hinges and TWISTED and the lid tore off with a tuneless screech. He dropped it to the cement, as much as his internal frustration egged him to hurl it into the darkness, and found a screwdriver in the tray right on top. He stuck it in his pocket for safekeeping, but brought the whole toolbox with him.

This time, when he wiggled under the vehicle, the only discomfort he had to endure was the odd and inconvenient angle of his wrist as he removed the other three screws. The alarm system swung free of the undercarriage, and exposed its connection to the power source. He found wire clippers and cut through the cord.

And that was it. That was IT. So much more accomplished safely with patience, and he hadn’t risked himself or destroyed the vessel. He threw that triumph up against the impatience that still burned in his gut. /It’s still worth it to do things the right way, not the easy way./

Now that the alarm was disabled, he didn’t have to worry about forcing the door open. The vehicle was luxurious inside; seats covered in buttery nerf-leather and thick upholstery, touch controls and holodisplays. Definitely a corporate vehicle. He opened the panel under the control console to fumble his way through hot-wiring it. What he wouldn’t have given for an experienced astromech….

The engines finally began their start-up sequence, and he had to try several times to get the vehicle to accept a new log-in before it would give him the controls, but eventually one of the standard scripts he’d been taught yielded him admin access. He strapped in and lifted off, maneuvering carefully through the garage, following signs that read [ROOFTOP LANDING PAD].

He hung low, hugging the curves of corporate buildings, overriding the automatic safety lights, climbing only when he had a building to hide his ascent. The higher he got, the more his stomach sank into his knees. New Adasta certainly couldn’t compare to Coruscant or Nar Shaddaa or any other city-worlds he’d seen before, but for a city built into a fissure in the earth, it was huge. Buildings stabbed upward like well-groomed stalagmites, and some even hung from the cave ceiling, ringed with shuttle pads like mushrooms growing from the trunks of old trees. Only small portions of it still had electricity, flickers of light in a crowded darkness. He navigated using the sensor array and fought the itching need to turn the safety lights back on so he could see the black hulks rising up in front of him.

Avoiding the air-traffic avenues made it more difficult, of course. Open lanes criss-crossed the city, grouping the skyscrapers into blocks between which shuttles and speeders could pass unimpeded. But those offered too much visibility from the ground, so instead he traveled as the shyrack flies, bobbing and dipping over the tops of buildings to maximize his cover. He used the sensors to sweep for any electronic activity below, but as far as he could tell, his was the only engine thrumming in the artificial night.
That still left him with the issue of where to go. Azix scanned the city, trying to identify landmarks or civil structures from above by the colors of their landing pads. Emergency pads glowed a soft white, forming ghostly X’s that seemed to float below him like bioluminescent algae on gentle waves. Others would be colored red or blue and most of their landing lights were out. Enough time had passed to exhaust most local generators. Would Rye go to another hospital? Should Azix? Did he have any way to use the facilities for his own benefit if he did?

He had no answers to any of this, but he knew that flying aimlessly between buildings was a good way to get himself spotted and caught, so he set down on a deserted rooftop and left the shuttle idling while he wrestled with himself.

/Think Master Low’s ‘Treatise on the Hierarchy of Needs’/, he thought, resting his forehead on the darkened control panel, taking deep breaths. /It would be really nice to image my knee, but that’s not what I need right now. Right now the thing I need most is.../ He reached into his feelings, into his gut, and let the shifting unease there direct him. /...Shelter, safety. First above all, shelter. Then water, painkillers, and food in that order./ He wasn’t especially hungry at the moment, and he still had snacks packed in his bag. A good source of running water and a safe place to recover for a bit would do more for his overall wellness than other priorities. And the best, safest place to find those things would be a dwelling, obviously, and New Adasta was so full of dwellings that trying to find him would be like searching for one specific needle in a stack of identical needles. As long as he kept his presence out of The Force and didn’t do something stupid, like turn on the lights in a darkened building, there would be almost no way for them to narrow their search field among the city’s millions of apartments and homes.

In terms of defensibility, he preferred an apartment. Height, anonymity, and limited routes of approach all made another high-rise preferable to a private home. He could also choose among a number of functionally identical living spaces to maintain his preferences – close to the stairs and far from the lifts, for instance, with a view that would benefit him without giving him away to searchers. And the best thing to do, he thought, was run as far away from where Zavish encountered him as he could get. It would make tracking his Force Presence more difficult and force him to cover more ground, assuming he was still on a landspeeder and hadn’t also hijacked a shuttle. And if Azix had managed to put the speeder out of commission, he might even be on foot. Though Az thought that was far too optimistic to assume.

That gave him a target and a direction, at least. Everything else could follow. He took stock of where he was relative to where he had been, relative to where he had encountered the Sith, and triangulated the farthest boundary of the city from his position in a direction that also traveled away from those locations. Once he had distance, he could move more openly as he searched for shelter. And he’d need a place to hide the shuttle, somewhere accessible but hidden. It wouldn’t get them past Imperial Security, but it could get them to the surface if he could just reconnect with Rye.

/He’s looking for me/ Azix told himself, unwilling to believe that Rye might abandon him and try to find his own way off Ziost. In many ways, it would be easier for him – he could be considered ‘salvage’, and the Imperials would retrieve their own property. /But he won’t do that. He’ll find me. He’ll think of a way to communicate. All that lattice space... he’ll come up with something./ He took the shuttle out of park and lifted off, aiming for the biggest, most distant stretch of darkness he could find.

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